

# Commitment: The Answer to the Middle's Questions on Marriage for Gay Couples



**Lanae Erickson  
Hatafsky**

Vice President for the  
Social Policy & Politics  
Program

[@LanaeErickson](https://twitter.com/LanaeErickson)

For the first time, national polls indicate that a majority of Americans now support allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry. Our country has undergone an unprecedented shift on the issue, with support doubling in just a decade and a half. This evolution has been bolstered by a parallel transformation in Americans' underlying attitudes towards gay people and couples, who were once seen as outsiders but are now increasingly accepted as part of the community. But despite the seismic shift in support for marriage, these gains are not yet locked in—a sizable chunk of the support is still susceptible to the arguments of marriage opponents. Solidifying these supporters is crucial because, among other reasons, several court cases on marriage are working their way up to the Supreme Court level and could be decided in the next handful of years, and the Justices will pay attention to public opinion in making their decisions. In this report, we unravel the mysteries of the middle and set out a series of lessons gleaned from our qualitative and quantitative research—all aimed at moving the middle from supporters to solid and sustained allies on the path to marriage. And the most important lesson is that advocating for marriage in terms of *commitment*, not *rights*, is paramount.

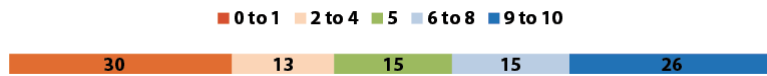
## Lesson #1

### Support is growing but not solidified.

When asked to rate their comfort level with allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry, respondents in our latest poll conducted by Grove Insight averaged a tepid 4.76 on a scale of 0 to 10.<sup>1</sup> A full 15% rated themselves exactly in the middle at a 5, while another 15% of those on the supportive side ranked themselves a relatively soft 6 to 8. Only 26% labeled

themselves a 9 or 10, compared to about 30% who said they were a 0 or 1. That means 44% were somewhere in the middle.

### Comfort with Marriage for Gay Couples



When asked how they would *feel*: 32% said they would be glad if gay couples could marry, 23% said they would not like it but it would be acceptable to them, and 37% said it would not be acceptable.

These two questions illustrate the challenges facing supporters of marriage. One in four Americans would grudgingly accept it, and four in ten put themselves in the gray zone—not completely for it, not decidedly against it.

Can we move 4s, 5s, and 6s to 8s, 9s, and 10s? Can we change people from grudging approval to gladly accepting? We are certain the answer is yes.

We learned after three years of exhaustive qualitative and quantitative research that those in the middle are grappling with a series of unresolved, conflicting internal values and complex beliefs when it comes to marriage.

They are struggling to understand the motivations of gay couples who wish to marry. Are they seeking to change the institution of marriage or join it? Are they marrying for similar reasons as other couples or for different reasons—like benefits, rights, or to make a political statement?

These are legitimate and understandable questions. But we need to help them resolve these internal dilemmas in order to move the middle and pave the way for a faster and smoother journey to marriage across the country.

## Lesson #2

### For the middle, marriage=commitment.

Most Americans think that marriage is about commitment, obligation, and responsibility. That is why the solemnity of

the ceremony and vows are so important—because they represent a one-of-a-kind promise of lifetime commitment and fidelity, made publicly in front of family and friends.

Throughout our extensive research on the middle, we have consistently seen that Americans in the middle place commitment at the heart of how they see marriage:

- In a 2009 national poll with Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research (GQRR), we asked participants to answer this question in their own words: “What does marriage mean to you?” Some of the most common words they volunteered were “commitment,” “responsibility,” “fidelity,” and “a big step.” <sup>2</sup>
- In another poll with GQRR in Maine later that same year, the description of marriage that participants most frequently cited was “a lifetime commitment between two people through good times and bad.” <sup>3</sup>
- When asked to think about what marriage means in our one-on-one interviews with psychologists from Apter Research in 2010, people thought that a wedding was the preferred and proper way for couples to publicly express their genuine commitment to each other. One participant said “eye to eye, heart to heart, hand to hand, ring to ring—whatever it is, it’s a ritual.” Another noted the importance of the “ceremony and acknowledgement, in terms of their love and sharing their lives with each other.” <sup>4</sup>
- And in qualitative interviews with Grove Insight in 2011, we asked “What is the point of a wedding?” Respondents answered in terms of public commitment, saying, “I think there’s accountability when you invite your friends and family into that.” Another said, “It was about the celebration and honoring the commitment...I just want people to be there to witness the union of us.” <sup>5</sup>

The importance of lifetime commitment and fidelity to the middle’s idea of marriage cannot be overstated. It is the

central way they view the tradition of marriage—a tradition which they see as very important in organizing their own lives and society at large.

## **Lesson #3**

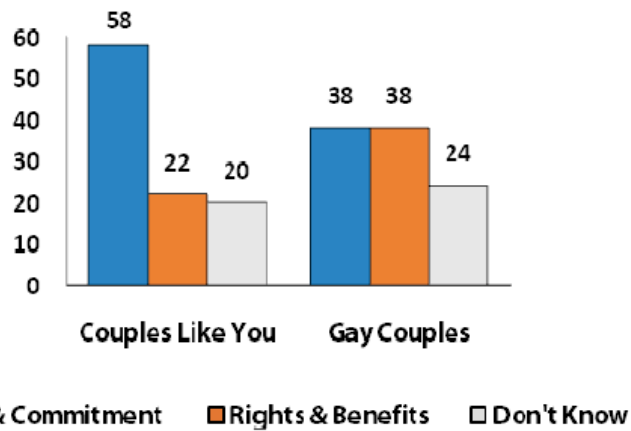
### **The middle isn't yet clear on why gay couples want to marry.**

Extending marriage to gay couples is in some ways about rights, and there are myriad legal protections that arise from marriage. But as we've explored in the previous section, that is not how people see their own marriages.

For years, advocates have often focused on rights and benefits, not commitment, when talking about why gay couples want to marry. This mismatch may have exacerbated an existing disconnect in the minds of the middle, perpetuating the notion that gay couples want to marry for different reasons than other couples, or worse, implying that gay couples don't truly understand what marriage is about.

When asked in our poll why “couples like you” might want to get married, 58% said “to publicly acknowledge their love and commitment to each other.” Only 22% chose “for rights and benefits, like tax advantages, hospital visitation, or sharing a spouse's pension.” But when asked why gay couples might want to get married, publicly acknowledging love and commitment lost 20 points, and respondents were split down the middle between commitment and rights (38% to 38%).

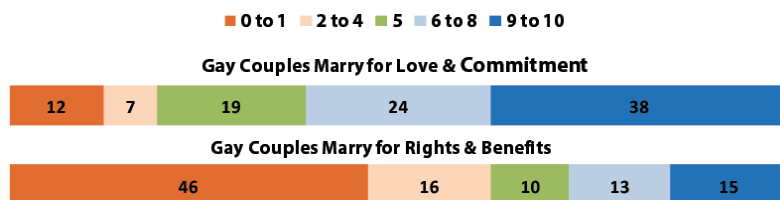
#### **Most Important Reason to Marry**



This disconnect was even more stark within certain key demographic groups: those who attend church once a week (26 point gap) or more than once a week (33 point gap), Midwesterners under the age of 50 (31 point gap), and white voters without a college degree (25 point gap), among others.

There is a direct line between how people answered this question and whether they were supportive of marriage. More than three-fifths of those who thought gay couples wanted to marry for rights and benefits put themselves on the “uncomfortable” side of our 0 to 10 comfort scale—most in the 0 or 1 categories. By contrast, more than three-fifths of those who thought gay couples wanted to marry for reasons of love and commitment placed themselves on the comfortable side of the scale—most in the 9 or 10 categories.

#### Comfort with Marriage for Gay Couples



## Lesson #4

### The middle needs to hear a message of commitment, not rights.

The rights frame appeals to our base supporters, but at this point in the evolution of public opinion, we can already count on them. To move the middle, we must convince them that

gay couples want to marry for similar reasons that other couples do—to make a public promise of love and commitment.

As noted in the section above, people who believe gay couples want to marry for commitment overwhelmingly support allowing them to do so. But people who believe gay couples want to marry to obtain a set of rights largely oppose allowing those couples to marry.

A similar example of this concept was illustrated by another query in the poll: whether gay couples who want to get married are trying to change the institution of marriage or join it. Those who chose “join” were much more likely to support marriage for gay couples, and those who chose “change” were much more likely to oppose it. A full 64% of the changers rated themselves a 0 or 1 on the comfort scale (compared to 30% of all respondents), while only 9% of joiners called themselves a 0 or 1 and only 6% rated themselves a 2 through 4 to indicate even soft opposition. \*

\* It is worth noting that the country as a whole is evolving quickly on this “join versus change” question in a positive direction. We asked the same question on a national poll in January 2009, and when you compare those numbers to our July 2011 poll, the joiners have gained 4 points and the changers have lost 7 points in the span of only two years. Third Way – Greenberg Quinlan Rosner National Poll, January 13–18, 2009, 917 likely voters.

Leading with commitment will show the middle that gay people want to join the institution of marriage, not change it. There were also several other commitment-related messages and statements that demonstrated the framework’s effectiveness, for example:

- 60% of respondents in our poll agreed that allowing gay couples to marry would “help committed couples take care of each other and their families.”
- That included 63% of Independents, 78% of those who rated themselves 5s on the comfort scale, and the same number of grudging acceptors.

- And 61% of all respondents thought the following statement described the issue of marriage for gay couples very well or pretty well: “I believe gay couples want to marry for similar reasons as anyone—to make a public promise of love and commitment.”
- That group included 80% of grudging acceptors, 77% of those who were 5s on the comfort scale, and 93% of soft supporters—those who had ranked themselves a 6 through 8.

In our testing, we found that a message entirely based on the commitment framework was extremely effective. A solid 61% described it as convincing, including 37% who said it was very convincing:

*“Some people say that gay and lesbian couples who are truly committed to each other want similar things as the rest of us—to build a life together based on love and commitment, staying together through thick and thin. The Golden Rule is one of the most important values we teach our children—to treat others as we want to be treated. So if a couple is willing to stand up in front of family and friends and make a lifetime promise to each other, it’s not for us to judge, or to deny them that opportunity.”*

Those who thought that statement was convincing included 64% of Independents, 79% of those who rated themselves a 5 on the comfort scale, and 80% of those who said marriage would be acceptable but they wouldn’t like it (the grudging acceptors).

By contrast, only a bare majority agreed that “marriage is a basic human right that should not be denied to gay people” (52%) and only slightly more thought that “not allowing gay people to marry is discrimination.” Based on these data, and bolstered by our previous qualitative findings, we believe this

rights-based message has run its course and should be retired in favor of commitment when speaking to the middle.

## Lesson #5

### **The middle is looking for permission to change their minds about why gay couples marry.**

From the beginning, our research showed that Americans are on a journey when it comes to acceptance of gay people, gay couples, and ultimately, marriage.

Using a third party testimonial to model that journey resonates with the middle and helps to further their own journey—especially when that journey speaks directly to why gay couples want to marry. Marriage supporters can use a messenger with whom the middle can identify to deliver the information that we know changes their minds: gay couples want to marry for commitment, not rights.

The following message incorporates the commitment framework, but the distinction here is that the supporter was once a skeptic:

*“My name is Bill Stevens. I was brought up thinking that marriage was between a man and a woman. I came to realize that gays and lesbians are born that way. After all, who would choose that harder path? I also know the value of my marriage and the vows and one-of-a-kind promises we made. So I understand why gay couples want to get married—because it is such a unique and important commitment.”*

Sixty percent of all respondents found this convincing, and further analysis shows that agreement with this message drove support for marriage throughout the survey. Those who found it convincing included 72% of grudging accepters and 77% of those who were 5s on the comfort scale.

The journey message also resonated in our qualitative research, bolstering those who felt that their feelings had evolved on the issue and providing a sense of community for those who had changed their mind. One participant said, “It makes me feel more confident in my decision because this person feels the same way I do therefore I feel like I have more support on my views.”

Using a messenger who could describe changing his own opinion on why gay couples want to marry modeled this positive evolution on the very issue that is most crucial to gaining support. It reinforced soft marriage supporters by mirroring their own evolution and gave those in the middle permission to reconsider their own beliefs about gay couples’ motivations for wanting to marry.

## **Lesson #6**

### **Religion is a hurdle, not a wall.**

Another crucial reassurance marriage supporters must provide to the middle is the notion that allowing gay couples to marry is about making a commitment—not changing religious institutions.

Very religious voters are a long way from supporting marriage. However, for much of the middle faith is important, but it is not the only internal compass in their lives. Forty-two percent of the grudging acceptors attend church once a week or more, along with 39% of Independents, 35% of the 5s on the comfort scale, and the same number of those who identified as 6 through 8s on the comfort scale. By contrast, 69% of the 0s and 1s on the comfort scale attend church once a week or more, and 38% describe themselves as Evangelical Christians (compared to 15% of the 5s).

When asked whether allowing gay couples to marry concerns them because of their religious beliefs, many of the groups in the middle were torn. By a margin of 53% to 37%, the grudging acceptors were concerned. But Independents were tied at 47% to 47%, and a plurality of those who were 5s on

the comfort scale were not concerned, 44% to 39%. Soft supporters (6 through 8s) were even less concerned about conflicts with their religious beliefs, with only 22% saying they were concerned.

But even among those groups in the middle who were more concerned about religion, overwhelming majorities said “It is not for me to judge.” Sixty-four percent of Independents agreed with that statement, as did 76% of 5s on the comfort scale and 81% of grudging acceptors.

In order to reassure these groups and allow them to resolve their conflicting feelings in favor of marriage, it is crucial to include reaffirmation of religious liberty protections as a significant part of supporters’ message framework. The success in passing marriage legislation in New York State serves as one recent example of the importance of including a strong reaffirmation of existing First Amendment protections of religious freedom, to reassure lawmakers and voters that religious leaders and churches will be protected. And when those protections are explicitly incorporated into marriage advocates’ messages, support for marriage spikes. A 2008 study by Public Religion Research showed support jumping 14 points in a single poll with the inclusion of a religious liberty assurance.<sup>6</sup>

Again, the commitment framework is deeply intertwined with this reassurance. If those in the middle believe that gay couples want to marry to make a lifetime commitment of fidelity—not to use marriage as a political statement to change the precepts of religious institutions—they will be more open to support for marriage. And if gay couples can show they are as committed to protecting religious liberty as they are to making a lifetime promise to each other in marriage, many in the middle with religious concerns can be swayed.

## **Conclusion**

Our country is moving in a supportive direction on the issue of allowing gay couples to marry—a direction we believe

should and will inevitably lead to marriage for these couples. But based on our comprehensive and groundbreaking research, it is crucial that advocates and champions of marriage—families, policymakers, organizational spokespeople, and many others—make a lasting shift to a framework and message of commitment. Heeding this and the other lessons in this report will substantially help us to speed that journey.

After hearing the commitment message during the course of our poll, respondents moved in favor of support for marriage. In fact, 15% of those who had put their comfort level at a 5 after hearing opponents' attacks moved into the 6 through 8 category by the end of the survey. And nearly 1 in 10 of those who were soft supporters (6 through 8) moved to solid 9s or 10s by the end of the poll.

The messages of love, commitment, and responsibility are effective strategies for moving and bolstering the middle on marriage. If marriage advocates utilize this framework, they will be able to shore up soft supporters, persuade those in the middle, and ultimately build a strong and sustainable majority in favor of allowing gay couples to marry across the country.

#### TOPICS

**LGBT EQUALITY** 84

### END NOTES

- 1.** Most of the quantitative findings in this paper come from our latest collaborative research with Grove Insight, who conducted a national poll completed July 12-17, 2011, of 1000 likely voters.
- 2.** Third Way – Greenberg Quinlan Rosner National Poll, January 13-18, 2009, 917 likely voters.

- 3.** Third Way – Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Maine Poll, November 4–8, 2009, 602 likely voters.
- 4.** Verbatim answers from 21 one-on-one psychological interviews with people in the middle in Minnesota, Apter Research, September 2010.
- 5.** Verbatim answers from 4 small group ethnographic discussions with women in the middle in suburban Portland, Oregon, and suburban Denver, Colorado, Grove Insight, January–February 2011.
- 6.** Support for marriage went from 29% to 43% after adding the phrase “if the law guaranteed that no church or congregation would be required to perform marriages for gay couples.” Robert P. Jones and Daniel Cox, “American Attitudes on Marriage Equality: Findings from the 2008 Faith and American Politics Study,” Public Religion Research, February 2008. Accessed September 5, 2011. Available at:  
<http://www.publicreligion.org/objects/uploads/fck/file/HRC%20Final%20Draft%281%29.pdf>.