

How to Change Your Public Position on Marriage



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Our country is nearing a tipping point on the issue of marriage for gay couples, with polls now consistently showing majority support for marriage, and state legislatures voting to add three new states to the list of those allowing gay couples to marry in just the past few months. The politics of the issue are moving incredibly quickly, and policymakers on both sides of the aisle are rapidly beginning to evolve from support for civil unions, once a safe compromise position, to full support for marriage. Just this week, President Obama added his name to the list, announcing that he now supports allowing gay couples to marry.

Americans have undergone a dramatic shift on this question—in fact, when the Defense of Marriage Act was passed in 1996, support for marriage was half of current levels at 27%. So it is not surprising that politicians and other public figures have begun to change their views on the issue as well. As policymakers continue to publicly announce their evolution on marriage for gay couples, this memo lays out three rules to heed for those who are changing their public position on marriage.

#1 The journey is as important as the destination.

On many issues in politics, changing your publicly stated position is viewed as weakness or evidence of a lack of principles, and those who do it are often derisively labeled “flip-floppers.” But on marriage for gay couples, nearly all Americans already see our country as being on a journey on the issue. Telling a sincere story about how your perceptions have changed and talking about the experiences or people who influenced your decision can make your evolution a strength—not a weakness—and transform it into an opportunity to connect with others who are on a similar

journey. Whether it was an experience meeting or talking to a gay couple you know and hearing that they want to marry to make a lifetime commitment just like any other couple, or listening to your own children talk about how differently they view the issue, the details about why and how you came to believe that gay couples should be able to marry make the story of change on this issue a positive, rather than a negative, attribute.

The truth is this journey is occurring among countless Americans every year. When they listen to the story of someone's journey who they can identify with that has changed their mind, those Americans feel shored up in their own progression on the issue. In that way, an honest and genuine journey story can not only help a new marriage supporter in the public eye explain his or her change in view but can also help bring others along and persuade them to embrace marriage for gay couples as well.

#2 Marriage is about commitment, not rights.

Most Americans think marriage is about one thing: lifetime commitment. But all too often, proponents of marriage for gay couples frame the issue as one of rights and benefits. This mismatch may have exacerbated a misperception in the minds of the Americans who are struggling with this issue, implying that gay couples want to marry for different reasons than other couples.

When asked in our recent poll why "couples like you" might want to get married, 58% of the country said "to publicly acknowledge their love and commitment to each other." But when asked why *gay couples* might want to get married, acknowledging love and commitment lost 20 points, and that response was evenly split with "for rights and benefits, like tax advantages, hospital visitation, or sharing a spouse's pension."

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 said they were “uncomfortable” with allowing them to do so—mostly very uncomfortable. But 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 extremely comfortable category. Emphasizing the fact that gay couples want to marry for similar reasons as any couple—to make a public promise of fidelity and commitment and take care of their partner for life—goes much further toward helping Americans who are still struggling with the issue move toward support than does a focus on the 1,138 rights of marriage.

#3 Don't inadvertently belittle others who have not evolved as quickly.

Keep in mind that most marriage supporters started out supporting civil unions or some other kind of relationship recognition for gay couples. Our entire country is evolving on this issue, perhaps more quickly than on any major policy issue in recent memory. Although some are moving faster than others, it behooves all of us to allow some space for those whose views are changing at a slightly slower pace, and to acknowledge that many who currently oppose allowing gay couples to marry are not bigots—in fact, they may soon become supporters.

Saying things like “Allowing gay couples to marry doesn't threaten your marriage” isn't very helpful because it can come across as mocking the concerns of those who are still struggling with the issue, and it doesn't really address what is at the heart of their objections. Offering to talk about and share your own evolution is a much better strategy. And for those who have a serious religious objection to marriage for gay couples, be sure to emphasize that laws allowing gay couples to marry are carefully crafted to protect religious liberty, and no law could ever force a religious leader or church to recognize a marriage of which they did not approve.

As we continue to make historic gains in support for marriage, it is important to acknowledge that we're all on a journey on this issue, and we shouldn't throw stones at those who stand where we recently stood.

Final Tips

- Don't say "gay marriage" or even "same-sex marriage." These terms can reinforce the notion that gay couples are seeking a different kind of marriage, rather than simply trying to join the tradition that is already a fundamental building block of our society. Terms like "marriage for gay couples," "allowing gay couples to marry," or giving gay couples "the freedom to marry" are all good options—and all avoid using an adjective modifying the word marriage.
- Exercise caution in explicitly comparing marriage and our country's journey on this issue to the civil rights movement, or saying that not allowing gay couples to marry is comparable to anti-miscegenation laws. This direct comparison can hurt more than it helps, by causing people to think about the differences between the experiences of African Americans and LGBT people, not the similarities.

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