

Marriage for Gay Couples

**Third Way**

Takeaways

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The morning after 2008's historic election night, advocates of marriage for gay couples woke up to a grim reality. The heartbreaking passage of Proposition 8 in California the night before had brought their record at the ballot to an even 0 for 30, and this unexpected loss in a blue state seemed to beg the question: will marriage for gay couples ever be able to win a popular vote?

In the soul-searching that followed, Third Way began to work closely with a handful of key organizations in the LGBT movement to understand what had gone wrong, and why it seemed impossible to convince swing voters to pull the lever for marriage, no matter how much money was spent on trying to persuade them to do so. The first clues came from a poll Third Way had in the field in California the day after the election. We posed this question to voters: do you believe that gay couples who want to get married are trying to change the institution of marriage or join it? Those who supported domestic partnerships or civil unions for gay couples, but opposed allowing those couples to marry, split down the middle on that question. And when we looked more deeply at the data, we discovered why that was so significant—those who answered “join” were exponentially more likely to support marriage for gay couples. Those who answered “change” were overwhelmingly opposed. We needed to convince voters in the middle who were wrestling with this

issue that gay couples were trying to join the institution of marriage, not change it.

But we still needed to understand what Americans in the middle believed it meant to “join” marriage. So we conducted several rounds of deep psychological research, asking voters about what marriage meant to them. Over and over again, they used words that connoted responsibility, like obligation, fidelity, and commitment, and they even invoked language from the traditional wedding vows, like taking care of each other through better or worse. Not a single person said anything about rights. That revealed a huge disconnect from the arguments being made by marriage advocates, who emphasized repeatedly the 1,138 federal rights tied to marriage. We conducted another poll to better understand this disconnect and asked Americans in the middle why “couples like them” get married. Overwhelmingly, they said it was to make a public promise of love and commitment. Then we asked, “Why do you think gay couples want to get married?” Commitment plummeted by 20 points, and an equal number said it was “for rights and benefits, like tax advantages, hospital visitation, or sharing a spouse’s pension.” Of people who said gay couples marry for commitment, 6 in 10 supported allowing them to do so. But the numbers flipped for those who thought those couples were motivated by rights.

We realized that in order to move the needle, we needed to convince Americans in the middle that gay couples want to marry for the same reason any other couple does—not to get a tax break, but to make a promise of lifetime commitment and fidelity to the person they love and ask their family and friends to support them in that vow. That’s what it means to “join” marriage. And advocates needed to change the conversation from one about rights and benefits to one about commitment. We launched the Commitment Campaign to do just that, recruiting a bipartisan group of leaders to embrace this commitment framework. Working with organizations like Freedom to Marry and the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), we made the case that advocates in the four states

with ballot initiative votes on marriage in November 2012 needed to talk about marriage in terms of commitment, not rights, in order to persuade voters in the middle. All four states fully embraced this new values-based message, and on election night, marriage went 4 for 4 at the ballot box. Post-election press coverage credited the pivot from rights to commitment for the historic victories. The Los Angeles Times noted, “Instead of asking voters for equal rights, [the campaigns] emphasized that gays, like heterosexuals, wanted to formalize their commitment and protect their children.” HRC head Chad Griffin explained the wins by saying “We turned this into a conversation about love, family, and commitment.”

A wave of victories soon followed. A *Washington Post* poll showed a record high 58% support for marriage within a matter of months. Three more states passed marriage legislatively before summer arrived. The first Republican Senator announced his support for marriage and was followed by an avalanche of moderate colleagues from both sides of the aisle—all emphasizing the importance of the fact that gay couples want to marry to make a promise of lifetime commitment. By June, the Supreme Court had struck down the *Defense of Marriage Act*, allowing those couples married in states that recognized their unions to also have their marriages respected by the federal government. And that same day, the Court also swept Proposition 8 into the dustbin of history, allowing gay couples to once again make a lifetime commitment under the law in the state of California.

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