

Talking to the Middle: A Quick Guide for Marriage Supporters



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With President Obama's announcement yesterday that he supports allowing gay couples to marry, it has become all the more important that we, as supporters of marriage, talk about the issue in a way that appeals to Americans in the middle—because now they are listening.

When talking about marriage to moderates and others in the middle, it is crucial to remember that for them—unlike the pro-marriage base—it's not about the 1,138 federal rights of marriage. Instead, there are two key lessons when speaking about marriage to the middle.

#1 Emphasize Commitment and Responsibility (not Rights and Benefits).

Most Americans think that marriage is about commitment and responsibility. Yet advocates have often focused on rights and benefits, not commitment, when talking about why gay couples want to marry. This mismatch may have exacerbated a disconnect in the minds of the middle.

When asked in our recent 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%).

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 a 0 to 10 comfort scale on marriage —most in the 0 or 1 category. 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 9 or 10 category.

Persuading the middle that gay couples want to marry for similar reasons that other couples do—to make a public promise of commitment—is key to solidifying the middle’s support. A solid 61% of respondents described this commitment message as convincing:

“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 & friends and make a lifetime promise to each other, it’s not for us to judge, or to deny them that opportunity.”

#2 Include robust Religious Liberty Protections in your Marriage Message.

In order to reassure the middle and allow them to resolve their conflicting feelings in favor of marriage, it is crucial to reaffirm religious liberty protections as a key part of supporters’ messages. The success in passing marriage in New York, Maryland, and Washington states serve as recent examples of the importance of including a strong reaffirmation of existing First Amendment protections of religious freedom, to reassure the middle that religious marriage, religious leaders, and churches will be protected.

For much of the middle, faith is important, but it is not the only internal compass in their lives. When asked whether

allowing gay couples to marry concerns them because of their religious beliefs, many in the middle were torn. But even among those in the middle who were concerned about religion, overwhelming majorities said “It is not for me to judge.” Sixty-four percent of Independents agreed, as did 76% of the 5s on the marriage comfort scale.

Reiterating that religious marriage will be protected reassures these groups. When religious liberty protections are explicitly incorporated into marriage advocates’ messages, support for marriage spikes—one study by Public Religion Research showed support jumping 14 points in a single poll. 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

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. If we can move the middle into the former category, and reassure them that religious liberty will be protected, we will be able to shore up soft supporters, persuade those still undecided, and ultimately build a strong and solid majority in favor of allowing gay couples to marry across the country.

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