

# Why Marriage Matters: The Research Behind the Message



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The *Why Marriage Matters* campaign is a groundbreaking new national effort to share stories and foster conversation about the love and commitment that forms the basis for marriage. Through coordination by Freedom to Marry, *Why Marriage Matters* brings together research and messaging conducted by many partner organizations nationwide.

This campaign is crucial not only because it comes at a pivotal time in our country, when support for marriage is hovering at the majority mark, but also because its messages and focus are based on extensive public opinion research that led to a breakthrough conclusion: if we want to build support for marriage, we need to emphasize that *gay and lesbian couples want to take on the commitment and responsibility that marriage brings*.

This fact sheet lays out some key points from the research behind that message and demonstrates why it should be the primary focus for advocates of allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry. Its recommendations were drawn from an extensive review of existing research by Freedom to Marry and Grove Insight in 2010 and bolstered by ongoing research from Third Way and Basic Rights Oregon.

- **Most Americans think that marriage is about commitment, love, and responsibility.** Many polls and focus groups have borne out this fact in recent years. For example, in 2009, Third Way conducted a national poll with Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research (GQRR) that asked participants, “What does marriage mean to you?” Respondents used words like “commitment,” “responsibility,” “fidelity,” and “a big step.” In that same year, Basic Rights Oregon and Grove Insight asked four sets of focus group participants, “What words and phrases come to mind when I say the word marriage?” The answers overwhelmingly focused on “lifetime commitment” and “partnership.” And in another Third Way poll with GQRR in Maine that year, the most frequently cited description of marriage was “a lifetime commitment between two people through good times and bad.”
- **Emphasizing legal rights can exacerbate a divide between how Americans in the middle see marriage and what they are hearing about why gay couples want to marry.** When asked by Basic Rights Oregon and Grove Insight why “couples like you” get married, 72% of Oregonians said “to publicly acknowledge their love and commitment to each other.” But when asked why same-sex couples might want to get married, the plurality (42%) said “for rights and benefits, like tax advantages, hospital visitation, or sharing a spouse’s pension.” Further, another 22% simply didn’t know why gay and lesbian couples would want to marry. Many recent focus groups and one-on-one qualitative interviews across the country have verified this perception: people in the middle think gay couples want to get married for rights.

- **The “rights” argument left many in the middle stuck on domestic partnerships or civil unions.** In Third Way’s 2009 Maine poll, only 22% of the middle agreed that “denying gay and lesbian couples the right to marry is discrimination.” Most saw civil unions or domestic partnerships as granting sufficient legal rights, and they also didn’t see legal rights as having anything to do with marriage, as discussed above. In a national poll by Third Way and GQRR, when asked to identify the best reason to allow gay couples to marry, only 9% of the middle chose “marriage is a basic human right which should not be denied to gay and lesbian couples.” And only 10% described marriage as “a legal contract.” When the conversation focused on rights, those in the middle were stuck on civil unions.

- **It is more effective to talk about gay couples wanting to make a public promise in front of family and friends to take care of each other for the rest of their lives.**

Research shows that this public promise is a big part of the marriage tradition in the minds of the middle. For example, those interviewed by Grove Insight for Third Way in 2011 were asked, “What is the point of a wedding?” They 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.”

- **Demonstrating that gay and lesbian couples take marriage seriously and respect the solemnity of the ceremony and the vows can help build support for the freedom to marry.** This opportunity for progress is illustrated by recent one-on-one psychological interviews by Third Way and Apter Research, among other places. One interviewee expressed it as “eye to eye, heart to heart, hand to hand, ring to ring—whatever it is, it’s a ritual,” another said “the verbiage throughout the ceremony is the same,” and a third said, “I think they would like to have the same sort of ceremony and acknowledgement, in terms of their love and sharing their lives with each other.”
- **Telling stories of committed gay and lesbian couples who are already doing the hard work of marriage in their everyday life is a great way to convey those similar values.** Polls have repeatedly found that although approximately three-quarters of Americans know a gay person, only about a third had talked to that person about marriage. For example, 74% of Oregonians in the 2009 Basic Rights Oregon and Grove Insight poll knew a gay person, but only 35% had talked to their gay friend or family member about marriage. *Yet those who have talked to a gay person about marriage are significantly more likely to support marriage for gay couples.* In Third Way’s Maine poll, for example, people who had talked to a gay person about marriage voted to retain marriage for gay and lesbian couples—63% to 37%.

Based on this research, and much more that verified these conclusions, the *Why Marriage Matters* campaign developed the following messages for advocates of allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry:

- *Marriage matters to gay people in similar ways that it matters to everyone. Gay and lesbian couples want to get married to make a lifetime commitment to the person they love and to protect their families.*

- *Marriage is one of the few times where people make a public promise of love and responsibility for each other and ask our friends and family to hold us accountable.*
- *Gay and lesbian couples may seem different from straight couples, but we all share similar values—like the importance of family and helping out our neighbors; worries—like making ends meet or the possibility of losing a job; and hopes and dreams—like finding that special someone to grow old with, and standing in front of friends and family to make a lifetime commitment.*
- *Treating others as one would want to be treated includes allowing marriage for gay couples who are truly committed to each other. That's as basic as the Golden Rule.*

In short, when we speak to the values we all hold in common around marriage, we can help more Americans see that gay and lesbian couples understand what marriage is truly about: love, commitment, and the human desire to care for one's family.