

MOVING MARRIAGE FORWARD

BUILDING MAJORITY SUPPORT FOR MARRIAGE



**F R E E D O M
T O M A R R Y**

A REPORT FROM FREEDOM TO MARRY

UPDATED NOVEMBER 2011

Our nation is engaged in a crucial conversation about why marriage matters. More than 11% of Americans now live in jurisdictions that provide the freedom to marry; over 40% (a total of 130 million) live in jurisdictions that provide some measure of recognition for same-sex couples and their loved ones. That's up from virtually zero in 2001. Public support for the freedom to marry continues to grow, with polls now consistently showing majority support nationwide.

Even though momentum is on the side of the freedom to marry, we know there is still much work to do. Only six states and the District of Columbia have ended exclusion from marriage. President Obama is still on his journey toward support of the freedom to marry. Congress is considering the Respect for Marriage Act, which would overturn the so-called Defense of Marriage Act, or DOMA. Historic hearings on the harms of DOMA were held by the Senate Judiciary Committee, which advanced the Respect for Marriage Act to the full Senate. Marriage will be on the ballot in at least two states in 2012, and in play in legislative assemblies and campaigns. The losses at the ballot (California in 2008 and Maine in 2009), however temporary, as well as the ongoing national debate, make it clear that many people are still wrestling with the idea of fairness for all families.

About 15-20 percent of Americans continue to waver in their position on marriage. These friends and neighbors—even family members—are good and fair people. They have deeply held beliefs, as well as some internal conflicts and real uncertainties, about gay people and marriage. Answering the sincere questions of this group of people—helping them push past discomfort and resolve their conflicts—is the key to meeting Freedom to Marry's goal of building majority support for marriage. How can we each personally and most effectively have the conversations that help more people embrace the Golden Rule when it comes to marriage?

Over the past two years, Freedom to Marry has drawn on our experience working with leading partner organizations and conducted expert analysis of over 75 studies from a half-dozen states, including polls and focus groups, campaign results, and academic research—assessing both the general population and culturally-specific demographics. We combined this research with our experience working with leading partner organizations and rigorous field-testing. The result is a data-driven approach that essentially cracks the code on how to help those who are conflicted or wavering to work through their questions and continue their journey toward support of the freedom to marry.

Here is what we found.

What is It About Marriage?

Why does marriage matter to you?

Americans have deeply held beliefs about what marriage means and why it matters to them. In order to address people's concerns about marriage for gay couples, we must keep in mind the potential internal conflicts they will face and that such conflicts can take time and engagement to resolve.

Many individuals are fair-minded—in fact they talk about “wanting to be fair to everyone”—yet the idea of same-sex couples getting married still doesn't seem right to them. At least not yet. They now generally support civil unions or domestic partnerships, and often wonder, “*Do they have to call it marriage?*”

Many of these Americans have ideas about gay people based on decades of stereotypes and misinformation. They may not know—or have much interaction with—gay and lesbian people. So they are trying to reconcile the idea of same-sex couples who want to get married with outdated ideas about who gay people really are.

How Can We Best Connect with People and Address Their Concerns?

For many still-conflicted people, talking about marriage as a collection of legal rights has two outcomes: first, it shores up the case for domestic partnership or civil unions. Second, it reinforces their concern that same-sex couples really don't understand, or share, their own values around marriage. For that reason, it's important for us to share our own **values**, and get to the heart of why marriage for same-sex couples is so important. The best way to do that is to **speak to the heart first, then the head**.

When talking about marriage, we need to think about the person we are addressing. What do they think of and feel when they think about marriage? Portray themes that they can identify with, that are common to us all—e.g. the idea of marriage and what it means, having your commitment publically witnessed, taking care of your family. Those are our shared values and **common ground** where a conversation can start.

This approach builds a bridge without asserting that “gay and lesbian couples are just like you” — which is difficult for those who are less familiar or comfortable with same-sex couples to accept. It's more effective to address **similarities** than sameness. *Marriage matters to gay*

people in similar ways that it matters to everyone. Gay and lesbian couples may seem different from straight couples, but we 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.

Emphasize Commitment & Other Shared Values

When asked what marriage means, most people immediately mention “commitment.” The best way to move people toward support for the freedom to marry is to show the **commitment** of gay couples who are **already doing the work of marriage in everyday life**. We can demonstrate the power of commitment by telling the stories of long-term couples, by highlighting acts that show such couples taking **responsibility** for each other, **taking care of each other**, putting their partner first, taking care of their children, their elderly parents, and their community.

Language that conveys the commitment of marriage includes *long-term, lifelong, stable, permanent, promise, in sickness and health, in good times and difficult times, responsibility, taking care of each other, and security*. Commitment to family and community, and honesty and fair dealing are important, too. Sharing examples of committed, long-term gay couples doing the same things that married couples do is also helpful: mowing the lawn, helping an elderly neighbor, and talking about their hopes and dreams.

Without saying “we’re just like you,” this couple tells their story in a way that allows non-gay individuals to make that connection for themselves:



“Long ago we made a commitment to live together and care for each other. We’ve been together for thirty-one years of dedicated love and support. We have volunteered in the community, worked as social workers, psychotherapists and educators. And we’ve raised five kids.

We share the laundry, cooking, vacations and the happiness we wish for our children and grandchildren.

We’ve spent all these years as a family. But we are still waiting for the day when we can be recognized as a married couple.”

Basic Rights Oregon “Marriage Matters” Mailer

Model the Golden Rule

Americans organically and consistently name the **Golden Rule** as one of their basic values, and a tenet by which they live their lives. “*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*” —the

idea that we all believe in treating others as we would want to be treated ourselves—provides an opportunity to tap into a basic, deeply held guiding principle. People are most receptive when the concept is modeled instead of just talked about—so quoting a parent or family member talking about the Golden Rule would be better than just quoting those words themselves.

[DARRICK] *Where I grew up, you pretty much expected things to be a certain way. But over the years, we have met a number of gay and lesbian couples.*

[KATE] *We've been married over 10 years and can see that their commitment to each other is similar to our commitment to each other.*

[DARRICK] *Built around love and dreams that every individual has — just like any other relationship. It really made me think.*

[KATE] *I've really been thinking about it too because I have been talking to our 8 year-old son about not judging others, to treat other people the way we want to be treated.*

[DARRICK] *As a co-worker, a neighbor and especially as a parent, the Golden Rule is very important to us. You have to teach your children by example, by your attitude, not just words.*

[KATE] *Gay people may not seem the same as you and me, but in the end...*

[DARRICK] *...They just want to marry the person they love. I always felt allowing gay and lesbian couples to have a civil marriage was a complicated issue. But as I think more about it, it turns out to be pretty simple. Love, commitment, marriage.*

[KATE] *It's just human. I would absolutely not want anyone to tell me I couldn't get married.*

[DARRICK] *And we certainly wouldn't want to deny that for anyone else.*

Basic Rights Oregon “Marriage Matters” Mailer

Talk About Why Marriage Matters

Talk about how and **why marriage matters** to committed gay couples and their families, just as it does to committed non-gay couples. Why does marriage matter? For reasons like these:

*Marriage is more than a collection of legal rights; it tells the **community** that two people are **committed** to each other and are a **family**.*

*Because everyone understands this, being married is something **important**, something we **aspire** to, and something that **protects** us. This is something gay and lesbian couples **need** as much as opposite-sex couples do.*

*Marriage is **unique** and **special**. It says, “**we’re family**” in a way that no other word can. It’s the ultimate expression of **love, commitment and responsibility for taking care of each other**.*

*Everyone deserves to be able to **protect** the people they **love**—and an important way to do that is through marriage. In a crisis situation like an emergency room, critical decisions need to be made fast.*

*When a couple is married, everyone understands what rights they have. That difference can be lifesaving and every **family** should have that **security**.*

Joining, Not Changing Marriage

When talking about the freedom to marry, share the truth: gay couples want to join marriage, not “change” it, as opponents like to threaten. In fact, gay couples want to join in marriage precisely because they respect the institution and what it means in our society, and because they believe in the values of marriage and what it can bring: commitment, happiness, responsibility, companionship, family connectedness, and support and help in caring for those we love.

Short-hand terms such as “gay marriage” or “same-sex marriage” can reinforce a false perception that we’re seeking a new type of marriage, something other or lesser. In order to be clear about our intentions, we should talk about “marriage” or “the freedom to marry,” not “same-sex marriage” or “gay marriage”—the same rules, same responsibilities, and same respect for all committed couples.

Hitting the” Sweet Spot” Between Fairness & Equality



One Iowa “History in the Heartland” video image

There is a continuum in people’s minds between *fairness* and *equality*. Those who know gay and lesbian people well are supportive of equality for all. But remember, the folks who are not yet with us are struggling with these ideas. They want to treat all couples *fairly*—but they really may not yet be ready to embrace *equality*. When talking about marriage, emphasize *fairness* because most people are willing to give a fair shake to someone, even if they don’t feel they are truly equals. And building on the idea of fairness (the Golden Rule), again, connects in personal terms to why *marriage* matters.

Who Can Best Connect With People Who Are Undecided on Marriage?

Personal Conversations are the Most Effective

Few findings are more consistent across all modes of research than the positive effect that personal conversations have on people’s views toward marriage. The most effective engine of changing hearts and minds is when people, especially gay people, engage with the people in their lives in a conversation about why marriage matters to them, personally. These kinds of conversations can be the toughest ones to have, but they are the most needed.

Being Out is Not Enough

Many gay people assume that being out at work, at home, and in social situations is enough to convince the people they know to support LGBT issues. In fact, non-gay people can interpret a lack of talking about an issue as a lack of urgency—or even a lack of caring. It turns out that our friends, relatives, and neighbors are waiting for the gay and lesbian people in their lives to bring up the subject of marriage. And non-gay people, too, can be important voices and helpful validators in the many conversations needed, talking from their own experience about why marriage matters and why they support fairness and the freedom to marry. The news that a friend or acquaintance is getting married, media coverage about the freedom to marry, or even mentioning an anniversary can provide opportunities to raise a broader conversation about the importance for all committed couples to have the opportunity to marry.

Who Should Speak Up About Marriage?

“ I cry thinking about the day you finally let our daughter Lauren marry. It will be the happiest day of our lives. My husband and I just want to dance at her wedding. He wants to walk her down the aisle. You can relate to that. **You would want your child to have the same dreams as everyone else.** What you'll be doing for our family is indescribable.”

Clarice Zieja of Pompton Lakes



Lauren, Clarice and Pete Zieja

Garden State Equality Legislator Guide

Most Americans do not want to hear from politicians on this issue. They want to hear directly from those affected. Older couples with long-term relationships are important messengers for struggling people to hear from. We should take advantage of opportunities to introduce families in which same-sex couples are raising children so others can see how similar such a family's lives are to their own. Parents of gay people with compelling, heartfelt stories to tell also make excellent messengers. Faith leaders can also be persuasive—especially to members of that particular faith—and to show just how many religious leaders support marriage for gay couples. Non-gay friends, neighbors and siblings all have powerful perspectives to share.

How Can We Address Concerns in Communities of Color?

Research on marriage shows that communities of color have far more commonalities with, than differences from, other demographic groups when it comes to the topic of marriage. Still, each community has specific experiences and its own nuanced concerns about the freedom to marry, and should be addressed in ways which are authentic and culturally competent.

The Importance of Family in the Latino Community



According to a 2010 poll, 74% of Latinos surveyed support either marriage or marriage-like legal recognition for gay and lesbian couples. However, some Latino families are still struggling to break the silence around gay issues. Bringing up marriage for same-sex couples may provide the first opportunity to acknowledge someone who is gay within their extended family or community.

Since family is such an important aspect of Latino culture, it can help to frame a conversation around the experience of family members, or acknowledge the pain that being ostracized from family and community causes gay Latinos. Gradual discussions on marriage, emphasizing themes of commitment, courage, love, and family will be important.

Let California Ring Print Ad

Research on talking with Latinos about marriage identified two key elements for these discussions.

First, focus on **shared values of family and fairness**. *“Every gay or lesbian person is part of someone’s family—someone’s son or daughter, brother or sister, cousin, aunt or uncle. No member of anyone’s family—gay or straight—should have to face discrimination when they hope to marry the person they love.”*

Second, illustrate the **harms of denying marriage** to gay couples. *“Think about how you would feel if your spouse got really sick, and you couldn’t take time off work to help take care of them because your employer didn’t treat you as married. This is one of the many ways that excluding gay couples from marriage makes it harder for them to take care of each other.”*

Effective Conversations within Latino Communities: Focusing on Shared Values

Family: Emphasize the importance of accepting LGBT family members by affirming cultural values. “As Latinos, we don’t turn our backs on family.”

Respect: Latinos often view respect as a community value linked to the ideas of unity, happiness and harmony within and among the family.

Faith: 79% of Latino Catholics said a person could express support for gay equality and still be a good Catholic. Avoid attacks on religious beliefs or faith leaders.

Opposition to Discrimination: Avoid comparing Latino and LGBT experiences of discrimination or referencing discrimination in the abstract; instead, share emotionally resonant examples or stories that illustrate the effects of discrimination on individuals and their families.

Source: www.lgbtmap.org/talking-about-lgbt-equality-with-latinos-and-hispanics

Listening to Leaders in the African-American Community



Marriage has had a complex history and has a social context in the African-American experience. Those who attend church on a regular basis often struggle with religious opposition to homosexuality—although they also state that, it is “not for me to judge” gays and lesbians. Authentic use of the positive language of faith can be important, and can promote love, tolerance, and the humanity of all.

African-American women, in particular, are interested in hearing on marriage from community leaders and respected institutions like the NAACP.

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“Just as God’s love is all-encompassing, we too must show compassion to our lesbian and gay sisters and brothers.” ([Let California Ring African American Toolkit](#))

Surveys show that African Americans clearly recognize that LGBT people face a lot of discrimination. In addressing that discrimination, the term “equal rights” will resonate better than inartful analogies to the Civil Rights Movement.

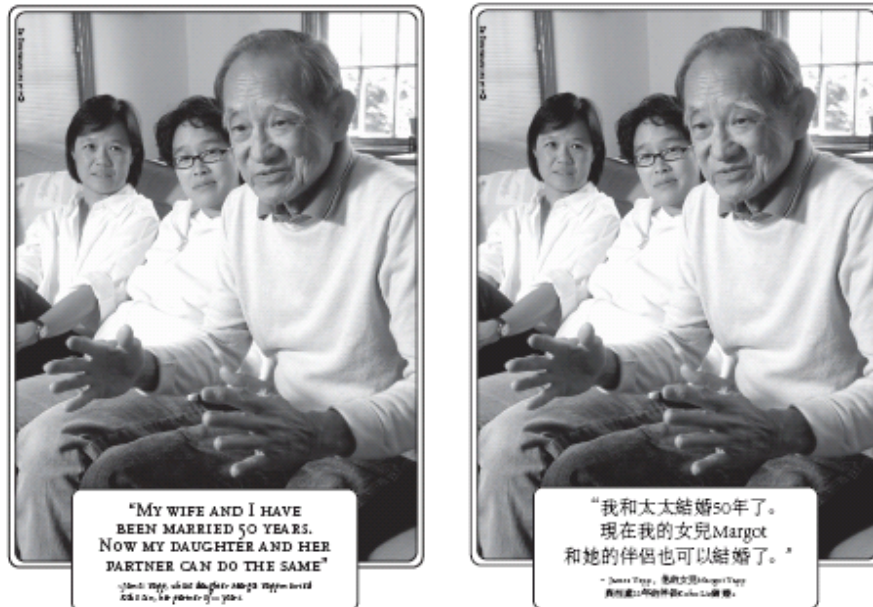
Language Matters in Asian Pacific Islander Communities

Tradition and family are important among many Asian and Pacific Islander communities; therefore our ability to show how marriage for same-sex couples also connects to family—and tradition—will be a key factor in helping foster conversations.

Many people in API communities avoid overt conversation about gay and lesbian people (as well as other related topics), so raising visibility of same-sex couples within the community will be important, as well.

“Traditions keep our families strong from one generation to the next. That’s why we must make all members of our community, including gay and lesbian couples, part of our family traditions.” ([Let California Ring Asian Pacific Islander Toolkit](#))

In Asian Pacific Islander communities, as in others, our challenge may not be what to say, but simply the need to speak to people in their language of choice.



Let California Ring Print Ads in English and Chinese

Let's Get Started

While these guidelines about how to talk about marriage for same-sex couples can be helpful, our ability to gain support is directly linked to actually going to the people in our lives and **engaging in conversations**.

Among every community and demographic group, experience and research show that when we reach out and talk with people, they become more supportive over time. And while there are unique approaches that are culturally appropriate for each community and demographic groups, the overall lessons are the same—information and personal engagement over a period of time is how each one of us helps people rise to fairness.

Case Study: Let California Ring in Santa Barbara

In early 2008, Let California Ring conducted a measured field experiment, taking their program to scale in the Santa Barbara media market, with the Monterey media market (where no similar effort took place) as a control. Santa Barbara efforts included television ads, an on-line component, earned media, faith and college campus events, and other grassroots organizing work. People in Santa Barbara responded by volunteering to help speak with others, work on advocacy, and contribute time and money.

The most important demonstration of success in moving people: **On Election Day, Santa Barbara defeated Prop 8 by ten points. It was the only county in Southern California to vote No on 8.**

There are lots of ways to stimulate discussion—one-on-one conversations are crucial, house-party efforts can be a great way to bring a familiar group of people together for a discussion, a speakers-bureau effort can reach individuals who may not personally know someone who is gay or lesbian, and placing the stories of couples who are married—or want to get married—in a local newspaper or organizational newsletter can help, as well.

Repeated exposure to personal stories, and opportunities to ask questions and get answers, bring new supporters to our cause over time. Every person we interact with may not become a supporter during their first conversation, but that conversation will help them see marriage in a new light, and open up to information from multiple sources over time.

Love. Commitment. Family.
WHY MARRIAGE MATTERS



WhyMarriageMatters.org

Freedom to Marry has created a full set of talking points, videos, print materials, and tool kits to support conversations about marriage. Over 30 state and national organizations have signed on to use this research-based approach to effective communications on the issue.

The best time to do this work is outside the context of a divisive political debate in which our opponents deflect attention from the real issues through diversions and scare tactics. As we enter the 2012 election season, it's critical that we remember the concepts that resonate best with those who remain undecided on the issue. The more supporters reach out and talk with the people they know using language of love and commitment, the faster we will increase the majority for marriage.