

REPORT 🗋

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Moving the Middle on Marriage: Lessons from Maine and Washington

By Rachel Laser, Lanae Erickson, and Jim Kessler

In November 2009, gay equality advocates faced two state ballot initiatives intended to roll back recent gains made in state legislatures on relationship recognition. Question 1 in Maine asked voters whether to reject a law allowing gay couples to marry, and Referendum 71 in Washington State asked voters to approve or reject an expansion of the state's domestic partnership law. On election day, Maine's Question 1 passed 53% to 47%, overturning the marriage law in that state, while Washington's Referendum 71 was approved 53% to 47%, granting domestic partners "rights, responsibilities, and obligations... equivalent to those of married spouses" under state law.

Working with Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, Third Way conducted two polls, one in Washington and one in Maine, immediately following the elections. This memo offers Third Way's analysis of the key findings from that research and lays out our thoughts and initial insights about what may be the best way forward towards achieving relationship recognition and marriage in the future.

As evidenced by drastically narrowing margins on ballot initiatives in the last decade, our country is already evolving on relationship recognition and marriage. But we believe that there is a group of people in the middle that has the ability to either speed or slow our journey.² In order to reach the middle, we must not only identify and emphasize the values that we share with them, like equality and human dignity, but we must also address their concerns head on.

The equality argument which advocates have focused on thus far has taken us a long way, but it does not sufficiently address the underlying fears that are keeping the middle from taking that final step to support marriage. We need something in addition to equality—we'll call it "Equality Plus"—in order to bring the middle along faster.

In this memo, we'll discuss four things:

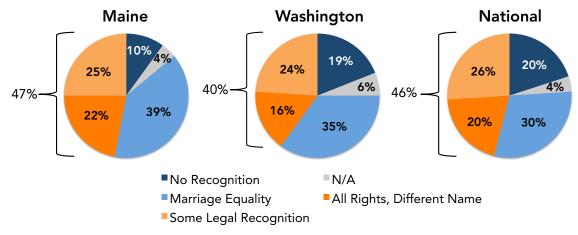
- 1. Who is the Middle?
- 2. What is the Middle's Mindset?
- 3. Why is Equality Insufficient to get the Middle to Marriage?
- 4. What does "Equality Plus" Mean?

WHO IS THE MIDDLE?

We believe that there is a group of people who don't yet support marriage, but who are fundamentally easier to reach than other marriage opponents even if their movement may need to happen over a few months or years, rather than the weeks or days of a typical campaign.

How is the Middle Defined?

We define the middle through asking a four-part question on relationship recognition: "Which of the following statements do you most agree with when it comes to the issue of gay and lesbian couples?" Those who support marriage (39% in Maine and 35% in Washington) are the pro-equality base. Those who support no legal recognition for gay and lesbian couples (10% in Maine and 19% in Washington) are the anti-equality base—we put that group aside as unreachable for the purposes of this memo.



We combine the other two answers on the four-part question to form the middle, which makes up nearly half of the population. Twenty-two percent of people in Maine and 16% in Washington said they supported giving gay and lesbian couples all the legal rights of marriage but without calling it marriage, and a quarter of Mainers and 24% of Washingtonians supported some form of domestic partnerships or other legal recognition for gay and lesbian couples. Together, that means 47% of people in Maine and 40% in Washington fell into the middle—supporting legal recognition for gay and lesbian couples but not marriage.3

How did the Middle Vote?

In the November 2009 election, the middle voted differently on the initiatives in Maine and Washington. In Washington, nearly half of the middle (45%) voted to preserve the expanded domestic partnership law. But in Maine, the middle

> overwhelming voted to repeal the marriage law passed by the legislature, with 79% voting yes on Question 1.

In both states, the primary argument used to support the relationship recognition measure was equality.⁴ And although the equality argument was successful in Washington, it did not carry the day in Maine. During the course of the campaign in Maine, equality likely worked to move people along the spectrum of support for relationship recognition (as evidenced by the fact that only 10% supported no legal recognition after the election), but for the middle, it did not get them to marriage. They needed something in addition to equality to get them over that last hurdle.

WHAT IS THE MIDDLE'S MINDSET?

The middle⁵ is different from the anti-equality base in one essential way: they are not fundamentally anti-gay.

They Know Gay People

Two-thirds of people in the middle reported having a close friend or family member who is gay.

They are on a Journey towards Acceptance

Thirty-seven percent of the middle reported that their views towards gay and lesbian people had become more accepting over the past 5-10 years, and only 8% said they had grown less accepting over the same time period.

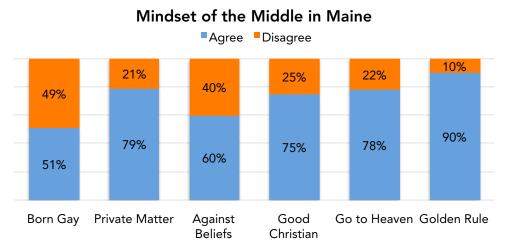
They Support Relationship Recognition

Importantly, and by definition, every single person in the middle supports some form of relationship recognition for gay and lesbian couples. To advocates, that position may not seem particularly groundbreaking, but put into historical context, support for relationship recognition would have been a radical position even ten years ago, when no state offered civil unions to gay couples.

They hold some Shared Values

The middle also shares certain values with the pro-equality base. In our poll, 51% of the middle said that most gay people "are born that way," and 79% agreed that "The government should stay out of the private personal matters of adults, including gay and lesbian adults." Sixty percent of those in the middle still say that homosexuality is against their religious beliefs, which is a significant hurdle. But at the same time, 78% said a gay person can go to heaven, and 75% said a gay person can be a good Christian. Nine out of ten people in the middle agreed that "We should all follow the Golden Rule and treat others as we'd like to be treated, including gay and lesbian people." These shared values make

> the middle more reachable than people in the anti-base, especially if advocates can tap into those values when making the case for relationship recognition measures.

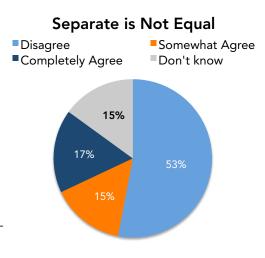


WHY IS EQUALITY INSUFFICIENT TO GET THE MIDDLE TO MARRIAGE?

If people in the middle are not anti-gay, how do we know that the equality argument alone is insufficient when it comes to marriage? The most obvious answer is that it hasn't yet worked. Marriage advocates have been using the equality message as their main argument across the country, and although we

have made significant progress on support for some forms of relationship recognition, we have been unable to break through to the middle on marriage.

This disconnect was evident in our poll. We asked whether people agreed with a statement that was one of the key messages used by the No on 1 campaign in Maine: "Separate is not equal; everyone, including gay and lesbian couples, should be treated equally under the law, including laws governing marriage." Even though this argument



was offered by No voters in Maine as one of the best reasons for their vote, only 32% of the middle agreed with this "separate is not equal" statement.

We think there is one major reason that the equality argument hasn't yet worked to move the middle on marriage:

The middle sees marriage as an ideal as opposed to a legal construct, and they have yet to be persuaded that gay couples fit into this ideal.

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For the middle, marriage is fundamentally different than other forms of relationship recognition; it is an ideal imbued with tradition, religion, and responsibility. It is a special status and a model relationship that society holds in high esteem. For the middle, the ideal of marriage is about lifetime commitment and responsibility, and people in the middle are not yet convinced that allowing gay couples to marry wouldn't change or tarnish this ideal. They are not yet convinced that gay couples see marriage the way they do: as a weighty responsibility of making a lifetime commitment to another person.

We asked the following open-ended question in our national poll⁶ in January 2009: "What does the term marriage mean to you?" We recorded answers in the respondents' own words, in order to get a better picture of how people understand and think about marriage. The answers were teeming with language of lifetime commitment and responsibility:

- "[Marriage] is a commitment between two people for life that is publicly made and declared between parents, peers and the community."
- "It is not a game nor a decision that should be taken lightly because its vow is sacred "
- "It means people in a committed public relationship."
- "It is not just a social union."
- "[Marriage] is what stabilizes the society."
- "It should be a commitment and a lasting relationship. It is to institutionalize within the society and to create a bond until death parts them."

Equality alone misses an Opportunity to tap into the True Spirit of Marriage

As evident in these descriptions, most Americans see marriage as an ideal full of responsibility and commitment, not a right. In fact, in our Maine poll, only 22% of the middle agreed that "denying gay and lesbian couples the right to marry is discrimination." This means that when we are advocating for allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry, equality can be part of the message, but it is only sufficient to move people who fundamentally agree with us or are well on their way on that journey.

Equality alone only works with people who already see gay relationships as fundamentally the same as straight ones, and thus equally worthy of being held up as an ideal. The middle still has concerns about equating gay and straight relationships, and the equality argument doesn't address those concerns. At best, it says there's another value that is more important than those concerns; at worst, it dismisses the concerns altogether.

Further, using the language of equality and rights to describe marriage feels

> legalistic to the middle and misses the true spirit of how they envision marriage. The equality argument works when it comes to civil unions or domestic partnerships (as evident in Washington's Referendum 71 victory) because these are, at their core, legal constructs. But when it comes to marriage, the middle doesn't think equality applies. In order to move them on marriage, we need to address the middle's two remaining concerns, both of which are exacerbated by the current disconnect between how advocates describe the institution of marriage and how the middle sees it.

The Middle's First Concern: Redefinition of Marriage

People in the middle are believers in traditional institutions. In Maine, seventy percent of people in the middle are married, and 34% attend church once a week or more (a number that is ten points higher nationally). And across the board, Americans in the middle are worried that the traditional institutions they value so highly are in trouble. When asked how they would describe the state of marriage in this country, only 10% of the middle said marriage was in good shape: 86% said marriage is in trouble, with 49% saying its problems were major.

Already concerned about the health of this institution they hold dear, the middle also wonders what else about marriage will change if gay couples are allowed to participate in the tradition. When asked whether gay and lesbian couples were trying to join or change the institution of marriage, 55% of the middle said change, and only 34% said join. And the changes they are envisioning are not good. We asked those "changers" in the middle how they thought gay couples would change marriage. They said allowing gay couples to marry would undermine the sanctity of marriage before God (34%), change the way children perceive marriage (20%), and "cheapen" traditional marriage (13%).

This concern was glaringly evident in Maine. When we asked in our poll what the best reason was to vote yes (to repeal marriage), the most frequently cited reason was "Gay and lesbian couples have a right to live as they choose, but they do not have the right to redefine marriage for the rest of us." That message was cited even more frequently by the middle—ten points more than by the general population (34% of the middle picked it as the best reason to vote yes). Although the Yes on 1 campaign in Maine did not even articulate this message in most of their ads, it still came through as the primary reason to vote yes.

The Middle's Second Concern: What Marriage means for Kids

Among the middle, concern about what allowing gay couples to marry would mean for kids was substantially higher than it was among the general population. Sixty-three percent of the middle in Maine thought it was likely that schools would teach about homosexuality if marriage was upheld. And 74% of the

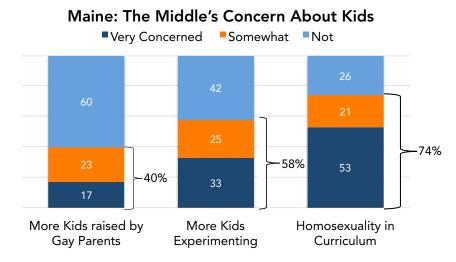
> middle said they were concerned about schools teaching homosexuality, with 53% saying they were very concerned about that issue.

The Yes on 1 campaign in Maine relied almost exclusively on this school curriculum argument in their ads. We think that the issue is actually broader than schools—it's about kids more generally. When opponents run the school curriculum ads, we suspect that they are trying to evoke a more fundamental and broader concern about what marriage means for kids. They are trying to make people feel uncomfortable about the consequences for kids of allowing gay couples to marry and stoke fears that kids will not value marriage in the same way if gay and lesbian couples are allowed to participate in the tradition.

This means that responding directly to the schools argument isn't necessarily enough. While it might deal with the literal concern raised by the ad, it does not address the underlying, deeper concern that people have about how their kids will be affected if society holds gay couples up as part of the ideal of marriage.

When we asked them about some of these broader concerns, 40% of the middle thought kids would be more likely to experiment with homosexuality if marriage was upheld, and 58% said they were concerned about that issue. And, as noted above, many of the people who worried that allowing gay couples to marry would change that institution said it would do so by changing the way children perceive marriage.

Although we've often focused on how people feel about kids being raised by gay parents, in our polls that was not the primary concern, at least for people in the middle. The middle did think that more kids would be raised by gay parents if gay couples could marry—58% of the middle thought that was likely—but only 40% of the middle voiced concern about that fact (compared to 58% concerned about experimentation and 74% concerned about curriculum).



In fact, 65% of the middle agreed that "Children raised in households with same-sex parents are better off than children in orphanages or passed around from foster home to foster home." Overall, in our poll, people were less worried about kids in gay families than they were about their own kids.

WHAT DOES "EQUALITY PLUS" MEAN?: TAPPING INTO THE TRUE SPIRIT OF MARRIAGE

In order to make way for the equality argument to connect with the middle on marriage, advocates must first tap into the true spirit of marriage. By showing that gay couples fit into the ideal of marriage as the middle sees it and demonstrating that allowing gay couples to join the tradition will not erode or undermine it, advocates can directly respond to both concerns still harbored by the middle. We see three key ways that advocates can tap into the true spirit of marriage:

1. Show that gay couples will honor and respect the tradition of marriage.

Marriage advocates must find ways to convince the middle that gay couples will honor and respect the tradition of marriage, not change it. We can do that by talking about the value of marriage as the middle sees it, articulating how important the institution of marriage is to society, and focusing on the sacrifices and responsibilities it entails, instead of the rights and benefits. We think there was a great example of this message in one of the No on 1 ads in Maine, where a Catholic grandmother stood alongside her gay son, his partner, and their child and said, "Marriage to me is a great institution—it works, and it's what I want for my children, too."7

In our poll, we found that if people thought gay and lesbian couples were trying to "join" the institution of marriage, they largely supported allowing them to do so-but if people thought those couples were trying to "change" marriage, they did not support allowing them to marry. As noted above, 55% of people in the middle picked "change." Showing the middle that gay couples will honor and respect the tradition of marriage and take it seriously can help combat this lingering concern.

2. Demonstrate that gay couples see marriage as a lifetime commitment.

The most frequently cited description of marriage in our poll was "a lifetime commitment between two people through good times and bad"—of the five choices offered, it garnered 31% of all respondents8 (and 26% among the middle). Advocates should focus on these "lifetime commitment" people, because they are reachable. In Maine, they voted for marriage by 62% to 38%. And we think this lifetime commitment language resonates even beyond the people who

picked that phrase as the best definition in our poll, because as we discussed above, it lies at the heart of how the middle sees the ideal of marriage. Instead of trying to convince Americans that they need to define marriage differently, by saying it is a legal contract or a civil right that shouldn't be denied to gay people, we need to show people that gay couples fit into the definition of marriage that they already hold.

We can capture the true spirit of marriage by highlighting gay couples who are talking about why they want to get married, demonstrating that they take the institution very seriously, and showing that they want to make the major life decision to honor and cherish it. By emphasizing these values of lifetime commitment and responsibility, we can also undermine unfair stereotypes the middle may harbor about gay people as promiscuous or self-interested. If we can convince the middle that gay couples see marriage the same way that they do, we will have addressed their "redefinition of marriage" concern head on, and also demonstrated that allowing gay couples to marry won't change the importance and value behind how kids perceive that institution.

3. Encourage gay people and allies to talk to others about why they support marriage.

In Maine, people who had talked to a gay person about marriage voted No on 1 by 63% to 37%. In our poll, 35% of Mainers had talked to a gay person about the initiative. Also, interestingly, people who said they had talked to their own kids about the issue voted for marriage 55% to 45%. And among parents, 70% who had talked to anyone about the issue had talked to their own children.

These conversations work to generate support because they naturally convey those shared values that the middle needs to hear. Talking to a gay person helps to convince the middle that gay couples want to get married for the same reasons straight couples do-and that those couples will do their best to honor the lifetime commitment, sacrifices, and responsibilities that marriage entails. Spotlighting these shared values taps into the true spirit of marriage and addresses the middle's concerns by showing that allowing gay couples to marry won't change the tradition, or how their kids perceive it.

Conclusion

If advocates can successfully tap into the true spirit of marriage and convince the middle that gay couples want to get married for the same reasons that straight couples do, we think we will be able to address the middle's remaining concerns and help move that group, and the country, more quickly towards support for marriage.

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ABOUT THIRD WAY

Third Way is the leading think tank of the moderate wing of the progressive movement. We work with elected officials, candidates, and advocates to develop and advance the next generation of moderate policy ideas.

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Endnotes

- 1 This memo is based on Third Way's analysis of two statewide polls fielded by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research. The first was conducted November 3-5, 2009, and surveyed 617 voters in Washington State. The second was conducted November 4-8, 2009, and surveyed 602 voters in Maine.
- 2 We do not mean to imply that in the context of a ballot initiative campaign, advocates should target only swing voters and abandon efforts to energize the base. This memo is focused on identifying ways to reach voters who are not yet convinced—not on laying out a strategy for winning a ballot measure. As such, it is intended to offer forward-looking insights, not criticism of any past campaign.
- 3 Ideally, these people would be identified at the beginning of a campaign and tracked throughout to determine whether they had moved.
- 4 When asked an open-ended question about what they recalled hearing from the campaigns, people in both Maine and Washington overwhelmingly remembered this equality message. Sixty percent of Washingtonians and 48% of Mainers who recalled hearing anything gave this answer—no other answer garnered more than 13%.
- 5 Unless otherwise noted, the statistics on the middle are taken from the Maine poll for the remainder of the memo, for simplicity's sake. The numbers in Washington did not differ substantially.
- 6 A national poll by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research for Third Way, conducted January 13-18, 2009, of 917 likely voters.
 - 7 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKBkVF6aexA.
- 8 22% chose "a sacred bond between two people and God," 14% chose "a union between two people who love each other," 8% picked "an institution in which to have children and raise a family," and 7% described marriage as "a civic institution that provides legal rights and responsibilities."