



## THE ANSWER TO THE MIDDLE'S QUESTIONS ON MARRIAGE FOR GAY COUPLES

National polls now indicate that a majority of Americans support allowing gay couples to marry. Our country has undergone an unprecedented shift on the issue, with support doubling in just 15 years. But these gains are not yet locked in—a sizable chunk of the support is still susceptible to the arguments of marriage opponents. There are six lessons for talking to the middle which you can find in our full report, but if you know only three things about advocating for marriage to the middle, they are the following lessons:

### **Lesson #1** For the middle, marriage = commitment.

Most Americans think that marriage is about commitment and responsibility. That is why the solemnity of the ceremony and vows are so important—because they represent a one-of-a-kind promise of lifetime commitment and fidelity, made publicly in front of family and friends. Throughout our extensive research on the middle, we have consistently seen that Americans in the middle place commitment at the heart of how they see marriage:

- In a 2009 national poll with Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research (GQRR), we asked participants to answer this question in their own words: “What does marriage mean to you?” Some of the most common words they volunteered were “commitment,” “responsibility,” “fidelity,” and “a big step.”
- In another poll with GQRR in Maine later that same year, the description of marriage that participants most frequently cited was “a lifetime commitment between two people through good times and bad.”
- When asked to think about what marriage means in our one-on-one interviews with psychologists from Apter Research in 2010, one participant said “eye to eye, heart to heart, hand to hand, ring to ring—whatever it is, it’s a ritual.” Another noted the importance of the “ceremony and acknowledgement, in terms of their love and sharing their lives with each other.”
- And in qualitative interviews with Grove Insight in 2011, we asked “What is the point of a wedding?” Respondents 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.”

### **Lesson #2** The middle isn’t yet clear on why gay couples want to marry.

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, implying that gay couples want to marry for different reasons than other couples.

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.

### **Lesson #3** The middle needs to hear a message of commitment, not rights.

The rights frame appeals to our base supporters, but at this point in the evolution of public opinion, we can already count on them. To move the middle, we must convince them that gay couples want to marry for similar reasons that other couples do—to make a public promise of love and commitment. 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.*

There were also several other commitment-related messages and statements that demonstrated the framework’s effectiveness, for example, 60% of respondents in our poll agreed that allowing gay couples to marry would “help committed couples take care of each other and their families.” And 61% thought the following statement described the issue of marriage for gay couples very well or pretty well: “I believe gay couples want to marry for similar reasons as anyone—to make a public promise of love and commitment.”

By contrast, only a bare majority agreed that “marriage is a basic human right that should not be denied to gay people” and only slightly more thought that “not allowing gay people to marry is discrimination.”

### **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 advocates of allowing gay couples to marry can move the middle into the former category, they will be able to shore up soft supporters, persuade those still in the middle, and ultimately build a strong and solid majority in favor of allowing gay couples to marry across the country.

