



Marriage Equality Now a Mainstream Value

Polls Confirm That a Majority of Americans Support the Freedom to Marry

Ben Harris and Crosby Burns July 10, 2012

Earlier this year President Barack Obama made history by becoming the first sitting president to endorse marriage equality for same-sex couples. Recent polls reveal that the president's position on the issue now falls squarely in line with the increasing majority of Americans who support the freedom to marry. These polls show increased support among nearly every single demographic group, including men, African Americans, Latinos, political independents, and generations young and old.

In short, marriage equality is now a mainstream American value. Just a decade ago, however, a majority of Americans opposed laws and policies that extended marital rights to same-sex couples. In the ensuing 10 years, the United States has come a long way with states passing marriage equality legislation, national leaders coming out in support of equal relationship recognition rights, and same-sex couples sharing their stories of love and commitment with their friends and family.

This column analyzes several polls released over the past two months. We break down the numbers to provide a clear picture of where the issue stands overall with the public, different demographic groups, and among voters in states with upcoming marriage referendums.

Polls confirm majority support

Four national polls released over the past two months confirm that an increasing majority of Americans support marriage equality for same-sex couples.

In May a Gallup poll found that 50 percent of voters back the freedom to marry.¹ The other three polls show similar results. A May ABC News/*Washington Post* poll reported support for marriage equality at 53 percent.² And a May NBC News/*Wall*

Street Journal poll as well as a June CNN/Opinion Research poll found support one point higher, with 54 percent of Americans favoring extending the rights and responsibilities of marriage to same-sex couples.^{3,4}

FIGURE 1
Recent polls on marriage equality

Pollster	Month	Support for marriage equality
Gallup	May 2012	50%
NBC News / Wall Street Journal	May 2012	54%
ABC News / Washington Post	May 2012	53%
CNN	June 2012	54%

These poll numbers confirm what we have known for at least the past year and a half: Those opposed to the freedom to marry now appear to be among the minority of Americans who believe we should continue to deny same-sex couples equal marital rights under the law.⁵

Beyond the freedom to marry, even more Americans support extending relationship recognition rights to same-sex couples, including through civil unions or domestic partnerships in addition to marriage equality. Sixty-two percent of voters support legal recognition for same-sex relationships in general, according to a March poll conducted by *The New York Times* and CBS News.⁶ Notably, only 33 percent want to deny all forms of legal recognition to same-sex couples.

Strength in numbers

In addition to overall majority support for marriage equality, these polls show that the intensity of that support has also substantially increased. In years past, support for marriage equality has suffered from the so-called “enthusiasm gap.” Opponents of equal marriage felt more strongly about the issue than its supporters. In 2004, for example, 52 percent strongly opposed marriage equality, with only 18 percent voicing strong support for marriage equality.⁷

Does the gap still exist today? Not at all. In fact, marriage equality supporters have not only closed the gap, but leaped over it.

The ABC News/*Washington Post* poll found that 39 percent of voters strongly support marriage equality, while only 32 percent strongly oppose. This stands in contrast to polling from just last summer, where the same poll found that 32 percent strongly supported

equality and 36 percent stood strongly opposed. A four-point deficit in enthusiasm has turned into a seven-point advantage in just 12 months—a strong sign buttressing the overall rise in support for marriage equality.

This dramatic reversal indicates that voters are not reluctantly agreeing that same-sex couples deserve the freedom to marry, but instead enthusiastically support initiatives to ensure equality for loving and committed same-sex couples.

How far we've come

Polls from the past two months clearly show stable and increasing majorities of Americans coming out in support of marriage equality. The United States has come a long way since the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996 when just 27 percent of respondents to a Gallup poll said they supported the freedom to marry for gay couples.⁸ In fact, just within the past few years, the number of voters favoring equality has risen dramatically. In 2009, 54 percent of respondents in a CNN poll said that they opposed marriage equality, the same number that support it today.

Just as more people are coming out in support of ending marriage discrimination, more people personally know someone who identifies as gay—and that's no coincidence. Polls find that roughly 75 percent of people today personally know someone who is gay, whether that is a friend, family member, or colleague.⁹ In 1992 that number was just 42 percent, marking more than a 30-point rise since then. Reports suggest that as more gay individuals live openly and tell their friends and family that they are gay, support for marriage equality will continue to rise.¹⁰ Those who know someone who identifies as gay are 20 points likelier to back marriage equality.¹¹

Not surprisingly, as more Americans support the freedom to marry, more states have extended the rights and responsibilities of marriage to same-sex couples. It is now legal for same-sex couples to wed in six states and the District of Columbia signifying substantial progress since 2004 when only Massachusetts recognized that right. Furthermore, a handful of other states recognize same-sex unions through civil unions and domestic partnerships. Today, nearly a majority (48 percent) of Americans live in states that have some form of relationship recognition (including marriage equality, civil unions, or domestic partnerships).¹²

Support by demographic group

Polls clearly show a substantial shift in public opinion revealing remarkably increased support for marriage equality over the past decade. Let's turn now to examine key

demographic groups that have embraced equal rights for same-sex couples along with those where progress still must be made.

Age

Surveys have consistently found that younger generations are more supportive of marriage equality than older generations are. A June 2012 CNN poll found that a whopping 73 percent of 18-to-34-year-olds support allowing same-sex couples to wed, far above the average of 54 percent for all respondents.¹³ In 2009 support among young people was just 58 percent, marking a substantial shift in favor of marriage equality.¹⁴ Furthermore, there is clear majority support among 35-to-49-year-olds, with 54 percent backing marriage equality. Again, this stands in contrast to 2009 when just 42 percent favored the freedom to marry.

While younger generations support extending equal rights to same-sex couples, only 34 percent of respondents above the age of 64 are in favor of marriage equality indicating a clear disparity between younger and older generations. Yet even those above 64 have undergone a notable transition since 2009 when only 24 percent favored allowing same-sex couples to wed. In fact every single age group has seen a positive change in favor of marriage equality over the past two years, including older Americans.

People of color

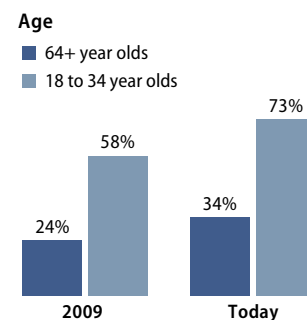
Support for marriage equality among people of color has also undergone an enormous shift—perhaps the largest of any demographic group. At the beginning of 2012, approval for the freedom to marry among African Americans hovered around 40 percent. Several recent polls, including one conducted by ABC News and *The Washington Post*, found that support has skyrocketed to 59 percent.¹⁵ This speaks both to the consistent growth of support for marriage equality as well as the power of President Obama’s statement in May that he personally supports marital recognition for same-sex couples.¹⁶

Approval among Hispanics is also high: A 2011 poll found that 54 percent favor marriage equality for same-sex couples, indicating that they are in line with the public as a whole on this issue.¹⁷ In 2008 and 2009 support among Latinos stood at just 39 percent.¹⁸

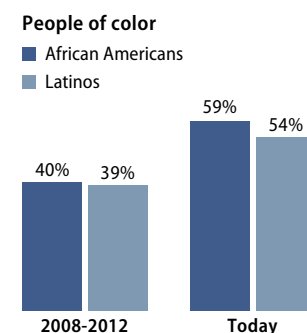
Gender

Another notable shift from just one year ago is support among men. Forty-five percent of male respondents to a CNN poll in April 2011 favored marriage equality, with 54 percent opposed.¹⁹ The same CNN poll conducted last month found that those numbers

FIGURE 2
Support for marriage equality by demographic



Source: CNN poll



Sources: ABC News/Washington Post poll, National Council of La Raza, Pew Research Center

have flipped.²⁰ Today, 52 percent of men support marriage equality, while 43 percent are opposed. While men have undergone a transition in their opinion, women have remained steadfast in their support with 56 percent rallying behind marriage equality.

Religious groups

Although media coverage depicts a wedge between religious believers and marriage equality advocates, polling data suggests that the “divide” is largely a mirage.²¹ A recent survey shows that 81 percent of Jewish people, 59 percent of Catholics, and 56 percent of white mainline Christians support the freedom to marry.²² This clearly contradicts the notion that religiosity and support for equality are mutually exclusive.

Political affiliation

Approval among Democrats for ending marriage discrimination currently stands at 70 percent.²³ Given the upcoming election in November and President Obama’s support for equality, it is worth noting that independents back marriage equality by an overwhelming margin as well. CNN’s June poll found 60 percent of independent voters in favor and just 36 percent opposed—a 24-point gap.²⁴ This falls in line with Gallup’s May poll, which found that 57 percent of independents back marriage equality.²⁵

Republicans lag far behind Democrats and independents. Only 28 percent of Republicans support the freedom to marry suggesting that the party is stuck in the past with the same mindset that the American population had in 1996 regarding marriage equality.²⁶

Upcoming battles for equality

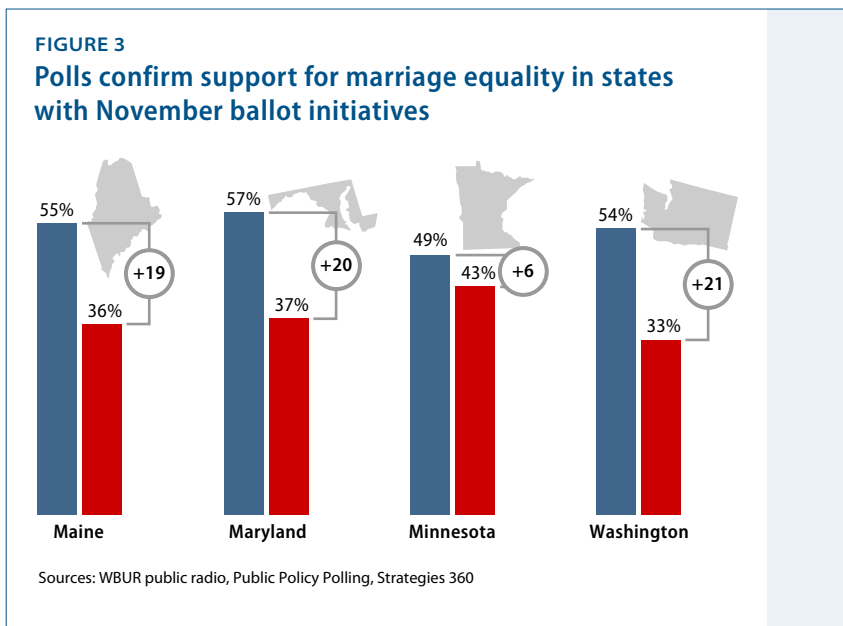
Growing national support for marriage equality will be put to the test in four states come election day, November 6—Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, and Washington. Both Maryland and Washington have passed marriage equality legislation into law but same-sex couples will not be allowed to wed until the question is put to and approved by the voters. Voters in Minnesota will consider an antigay ballot initiative that would write discrimination into the state constitution, specifically by defining marriage as a union between one man and one woman. In Maine voters will decide whether to allow same-sex couples to marry.

The stakes couldn’t be higher for same-sex couples and their families in these four states. The good news, however, is that recent polling shows that victory is within reach for advocates of marriage equality. The polls in these states match—and even exceed in some cases—the national trend.

A Public Policy Polling survey in Maryland from the end of May found that 57 percent of Maryland voters say they will vote to uphold the state’s legislation allowing marriages between same-sex couples.²⁷ Notably, African American voters in Maryland have undergone a significant shift in opinion since President Obama announced his support for marriage equality in early May. In March African Americans there opposed marriage equality 56 percent to 39 percent. Now 55 percent of blacks support the law with only 36 percent opposed—a 180-degree turn.

Support for the freedom to marry is strong in other states as well. A recent Maine poll conducted in June found that 55 percent of voters back marriage equality.²⁸ In Minnesota 49 percent of voters stand opposed to an amendment to the state’s constitution, which would define marriage as being between one man and one woman, while 43 percent support the initiative.²⁹ In Washington a poll at the end of May found that 54 percent of voters favor maintaining the state legislature’s action to embrace the freedom to marry.³⁰

Based on these polls, Maine, Maryland, and Washington seem poised to secure marriage equality for same-sex couples, while Minnesota is positioned to successfully prevent efforts to radically write discrimination into its constitution come this November.



Bright future for same-sex couples

Support for marriage equality has risen significantly over the past decade and it will likely continue to rise in coming years as well. As more gay individuals come out of the closet, as more national leaders finally embrace equality for same-sex couples, and as younger, supportive generations grow older, significant opposition to marriage equality will become a thing of the past.

President Obama in May became the first sitting president to support the freedom to marry. Meanwhile, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, continues to support an antigay federal marriage amendment that would write discrimination into the U.S. Constitution. The difference between these two men could not be starker. Given the polls over the past two months, President Obama’s position falls squarely in line with American voters, while Romney’s position is increasingly out of touch.

With strong majority support nationwide, state initiatives sponsoring marriage equality on stable footing, and an enthusiasm gap that clearly favors proponents of equality, the future is looking bright for gay Americans eager to finally achieve full marriage rights under the law. The direction of the nation is clear: Support for marriage equality is now—and will continue to be—a mainstream value.

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Endnotes

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