

February 2009



TO : Interested Parties

FR : Rachel Laser, Director of the Culture Program  
 Lanae Erickson, Policy Counsel  
 Jim Kessler, VP for Policy

RE : Moving the Middle on Equality for Gay and Lesbian Americans

This memo offers new insights and strategies to help governors and other elected officials better understand and move ahead on one of the nation's most important and challenging issues—making progress towards equality for gay and lesbian Americans, and in particular on same-sex relationship recognition. In our research, we found that over three-fourths of Americans support some form of legal recognition for same-sex couples. There is now a national consensus behind recognizing same-sex relationships. Crucially, we identified a plurality—46%—of Americans whom we describe as the “**moveable middle**.”<sup>1</sup> They are mostly moderate in ideology, often evolving on gay issues, geographically and ethnically diverse, and many are religiously observant.

Among this movable middle, their opposition to certain equality measures is not based on bigotry, hatred, or homophobia, but rather stems from more nuanced and answerable concerns about tradition and change. Most importantly, they respond to, or are repelled by, different arguments than those that appeal to or repel audiences that are considered the base on either side.

**76%** of the country favors some form of legal recognition for gay and lesbian couples. There is now a national consensus behind recognizing same-sex relationships.

The moveable middle has the potential to unlock the door to equality for gay and lesbian Americans—from employment nondiscrimination and hate crimes to same-sex relationship recognition.<sup>2</sup> On most, if not all, equality issues, the moveable middle is reasonable and persuadable with the right arguments.

This memo contains three sections:

- Defining the middle;
- Understanding the middle; and
- Moving the middle.

<sup>1</sup> We call them the “moveable” middle because there are numerous indications in our polls that they are capable of being moved, including their self-described increase in acceptance, their positive thermometer readings for gay and lesbian people, and their close relationships with gay and lesbian family members and friends.

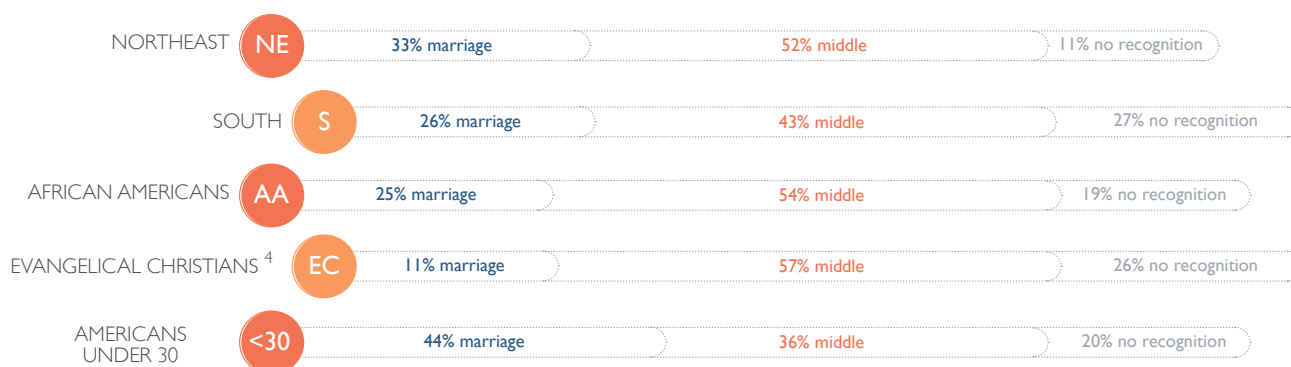
<sup>2</sup> On many equality issues, work also needs to be done to solidify and turn out the base. For example, in California, 79.4% of registered voters statewide turned out to vote in the November 2008 election which included Proposition 8. However, fewer than two-thirds of registered voters went to the polls in liberal San Francisco and Los Angeles counties. Clearly, there is a need to intensify and mobilize support among the pro-equality base.

While our memo focuses mostly on the issue of legal recognition for same-sex couples, these strategies and insights apply to equality issues across the board.<sup>3</sup> Many of the insights shared in this memo are based on research conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research—two statewide surveys in California and Arkansas conducted directly following the November 2008 election, and a national survey conducted in January 2009.

## DEFINING THE MIDDLE

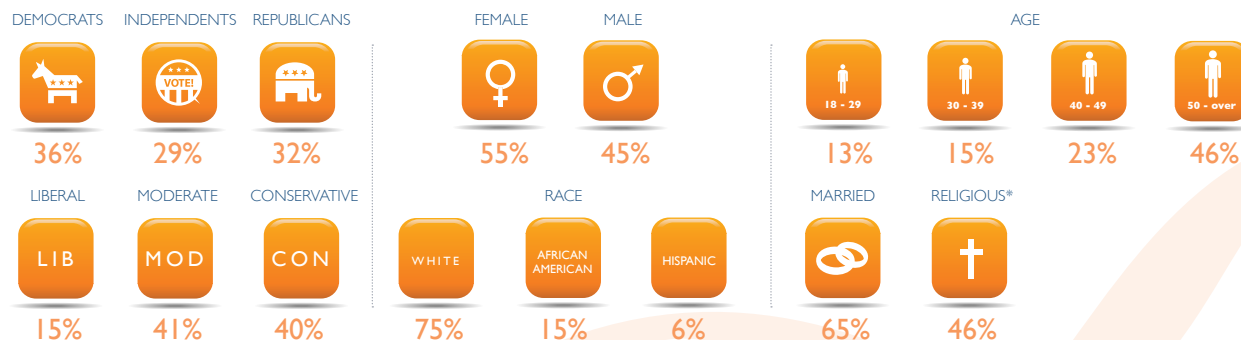
We defined the middle by asking poll respondents to place themselves on a continuum in a four-part question about relationship recognition. When given a choice, 30% of the country favored allowing same-sex couples to marry—they are the pro-equality base. Twenty percent opposed any legal recognition for same-sex couples—they are the anti-equality base.

The middle was comprised of the 46% in between: the 20% who favored full legal marriage rights but prefer that the term marriage not be used, as well as the 26% who favored legal recognition with rights that stop short of marriage. In different regions of the country and among different groups of people, the base vote levels change, but the size of the middle barely moves—with a few exceptions.



### Who makes up the moveable middle?

The moveable middle is 46% of Americans. They lean moderate to conservative on the ideological spectrum, but they are split between the political parties. They are slightly more likely to be older, married, and religious.



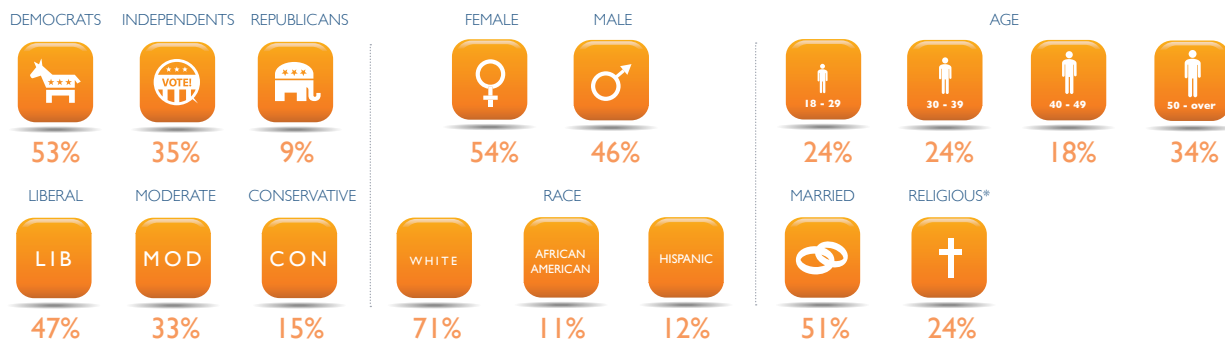
<sup>3</sup> We will also be preparing a separate memo on adoption by gay individuals and couples.

<sup>4</sup> Those who identified themselves as Protestant and a "born-again or Evangelical Christian."

\*Attend church once a week or more.

## Who makes up the pro-equality base?

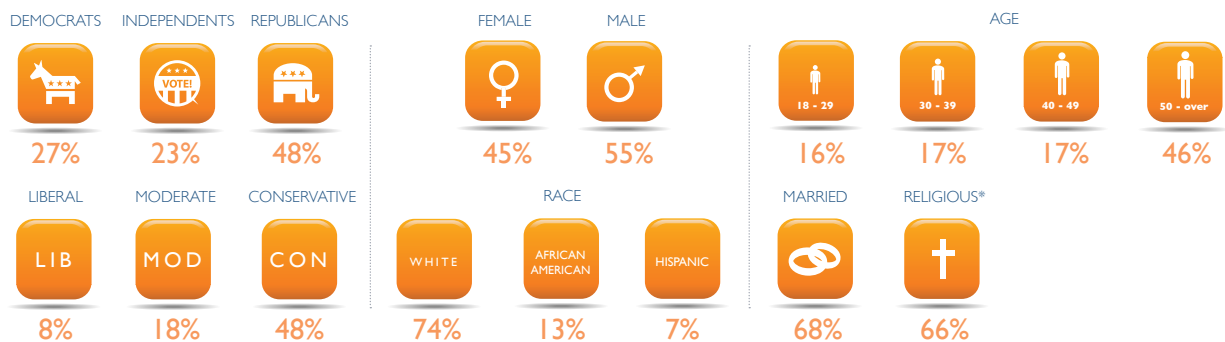
Those who make up the 30% of the country that supports full marriage equality are more likely to be young and liberal. Nearly half are under the age of 40. They are also less likely to be married or attend church.



\*Attend church once a week or more.

## Who makes up the anti-equality base?

The 20% of Americans who support no legal recognition are more likely to be conservative, older, and male. Nearly half are age 50 or over. They are more religious than the general population and more likely to be married.



\*Attend church once a week or more.

# UNDERSTANDING THE MIDDLE

We have five major insights about the moveable middle that we feel can help elected leaders and advocacy organizations make progress along the continuum of equality issues.

### I The middle's opposition to marriage is not necessarily rooted in bigotry, homophobia, or fear of a "gay agenda."

- By definition, those in the middle all support some form of legal recognition for same-sex couples. Some people support giving gay and lesbian couples all the rights of marriage, without calling it marriage, and others support legal recognition but with fewer rights. As recently as ten years ago, those positions were on the outer limits of the debate. Now they occupy the middle of America.

- They have friends, family members, and colleagues who are gay. Seventy-nine percent know a gay person, and 62% have a close gay or lesbian friend or family member.
- When asked why they opposed allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry, they did not ascribe nefarious motives to gay and lesbian couples.
  - In a Third Way poll conducted immediately after the passage of Proposition 8, only 17% of Californians said that gay and lesbian couples want to get married in order to “force Americans to accept their lifestyle,” and only 5% said “they want to make a political statement.”
  - Even while a narrow majority voted to pass Proposition 8, an overwhelming proportion of Californians thought that gay couples wanted to get married for good reasons like “to demonstrate their love and commitment for each other” or to obtain “the same legal rights as everyone else.” In Arkansas, 66% of people agreed that gay couples can love each other and establish committed, long-term relationships.

## 2 Their feelings towards gay and lesbian people are trending warmer.

# 83%

percent of those in the middle who said their feelings towards gays and lesbians had changed over the last 5 or 10 years have become **more** accepting. Only 17% said they had become **less** accepting of gay and lesbian people in that time frame.<sup>5</sup>

- Their attitudes are moving quickly, and, we suspect, will travel farther along the continuum toward the pro-equality base.
- Significant change has occurred over time. In 1985, 75% of the country agreed with the statement: “Sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are always wrong.”<sup>6</sup> In 2006, 56% of the country agreed.<sup>7</sup> In 2009, that number dropped to 40%—and only 34% among the moveable middle. We expect this number to continue to shrink over time.
- Overwhelming majorities now say they feel comfortable around gay people—in Arkansas, only 25% disagreed with that sentiment. These numbers represent enormous progress, considering that in 1994, only 58% of Americans felt comfortable around gays and lesbians.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> 54% of the middle reported no change in their views. 38% reported becoming more accepting toward gay and lesbian people, and 8% reported feeling less accepting.

<sup>6</sup> National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, 1985.


<sup>7</sup> National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Yankelovich/CNN/Time, 1994.

### 3 The middle is torn between supporting equality and maintaining societal traditions.

- They believe the institution of marriage is in trouble. Whether it is because of high divorce rates or general concerns about the American family and culture, 83% of the moveable middle thinks that the institution of marriage is facing problems, with 50% labeling those problems as major.
- They are believers in traditional institutions. Forty-six percent are regular churchgoers (once a week or more), with an additional 15% attending church once or twice a month, and 65% are married.
- When asked to describe in their own words what marriage means to them, 53% of the moveable middle used the phrase “between a man and a woman.” Thirty-two percent mentioned the word commitment—a concept that connotes responsibility and longevity. And 9% talked about love—a clear benefit of relationships. When asked which arguments presented the most convincing reasons to oppose marriage for same-sex couples, 45% of the moveable middle chose: “Marriage should be between a man and a woman.”
- **When asked whether gay and lesbian couples who want to get married are trying to change the institution of marriage or join it, the moveable middle was split in half: 45% to 45%.** And the more likely they are to believe the answer is “join,” the more likely they are to support marriage equality. Eighty-five percent of those who support marriage equality answered “join it,” and conversely, 77% of those who oppose any legal recognition answered “change it.”

### 4 The “rights” argument falls flat.

- Much of the rhetoric around relationship recognition has focused on messages involving “rights.” While relationship recognition is undeniably about providing same-sex couples with legal rights, the “rights” message does not resonate with the moveable middle.
  - When asked which arguments were most persuasive for allowing same-sex couples to marry, only 9% of the moveable middle chose “marriage is a basic human right that should not be denied to gay and lesbian couples.” Only 10% of the middle described marriage as a legal contract, and only 37% agreed that “denying gay couples the right to marry is discrimination.”
  - In fact, not only does the “rights” argument not capture the moveable middle, it can also do harm with some Americans who are offended by the comparison to the civil rights movement.
- 

## 5 They have religious concerns.

- Although the moveable middle is not monolithic, among the more observant in the middle, religious objections remain a hurdle.
- Sixty percent of the moveable middle agreed with the statement: “Homosexuality goes against my religious beliefs.” When asked what arguments presented the most convincing reasons to oppose marriage for same-sex couples, 29% picked the same statement—making it the second most popular answer after “Marriage should be between a man and a woman” (45%). Forty-six percent of the middle attend church regularly.

## MOVING THE MIDDLE

We believe there are four arguments and strategies that must be engaged to solidify the middle on same-sex relationship recognition and a myriad of other equality issues.

### 1 Win the “join” versus “change” argument.

The middle is torn between fairness and equality for gay men and women and long-held societal norms regarding marriage, the workforce, and other institutions like the military. When people felt that legal recognition for same-sex couples would change the definition of marriage, they were almost universally opposed. When they felt it allowed gay people to join in the institution, they were almost universally supportive. The moveable middle was decidedly split.

Advocates must win the “join v. change” argument. That means that messages to frame support for relationship recognition, as well as employment nondiscrimination and repeal of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, must demonstrate that new laws are needed to allow gay people to join and take part in important societal institutions. That also means avoiding words like “strengthen” when describing equality efforts around long held institutions, because strengthening is just another form of change.

### 2 Don’t make it all about “rights”—make it more about “responsibility.”

Much of the rhetoric meant to promote relationship recognition has focused on messages like “equal rights.” While relationship recognition is undeniably about providing same-sex couples with legal rights, the “rights” message does not resonate with the moveable middle. The middle sees marriage as a collection of sacred commitments and responsibilities, not a series of rights and benefits. They define it as something less legalistic and more monumental. When we asked them to describe marriage in their own words, they used language such as: “a big step,” “the most important decision of one’s life,” “responsibility,” and the word used the most, “commitment.”

Advocates for legal recognition for same-sex couples must use the same terms—gay and lesbian couples want legal recognition to join in an institution that allows them to share both the joys and responsibilities that come from this lifetime commitment.

### 3 Find and own shared values.

Relationship recognition for gay and lesbian couples has reached a national consensus. Utilize the fact that public opinion, the policies of our overwhelmingly popular President, and the arc of history are all on your side. Speak about your support for legal recognition for same-sex couples as a common ground position.

Advocates should also invoke other shared values like human dignity, monogamy in marriage, creating loving homes for children, and allowing people to grow old together.

“Too often, the issue of LGBT rights is exploited by those seeking to divide us. But at its core, this issue is about who we are as Americans. It’s about whether this nation is going to live up to its founding promise of equality by treating all its citizens with dignity and respect.”

- Barack Obama, June 1, 2007

- Source: [http://www.whitehouse.gov/agenda/civil\\_rights/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/agenda/civil_rights/)

### 4 Court religious leaders and Americans.

There may be an opportunity to turn faith into an asset rather than a roadblock on equality issues. Employ language that speaks to the middle’s faith, including invoking the Golden Rule, and cultivate and magnify the voices of religious leaders who are articulating a positive message around equality issues.

In our research, the middle’s faith also led them to positive conclusions about gay and lesbian people. Seventy-four percent of the moveable middle said that a gay person could be a good Christian, and 71% believes a gay person can go to heaven.

93%

of the moveable middle agreed with the statement: “We should all follow the Golden Rule and treat others as we’d like to be treated, including gay people.”

## CONCLUSION

On most issues, particularly hot-button culture issues, the opinions of people rarely change by large degrees over time. Equality for gay and lesbian Americans is the exception. There has been a longstanding warming trend that began slowly in the 1980s and has gained momentum over the past 10 years. Positions that as recently as ten years ago were held by only the strongest and most vocal advocates have become common ground positions today. And while in the past, politicians who supported equality had reason to fear political reprisals, today it is just the opposite. In fact, according to one organization that tracks legislative progress on equality issues, in the four states where the issue has arisen, every elected official who has voted for marriage equality has been reelected.<sup>9</sup> That is why while high-profile equality ballot measures may have fared poorly in recent years, thousands of cities, counties, and states have adopted protections for gay and lesbian Americans in the past ten years, from anti-discrimination to hate crimes laws.

We do not mean to say that equality issues are not tricky. But the combination of a general warming trend mixed with the right framing can lead to tremendous progress.

<sup>9</sup> Freedom to Marry, *Pro-Marriage Legislators Win Elections*, January 2009.

