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Celebration of Devotion

A Strategic Initiative for Transforming the “Gay Marriage” Debate

November 12, 2008

Overview ¹

Passage of legislation that bans gay marriage (with California's Prop 8 being the most well known) offers us an opportunity to ponder how we might approach things differently in the days ahead. At Cognitive Policy Works, we develop strategies based on a nuanced understanding of political cognition that offer a road map of the conceptual landscape.

Our concern about the manipulative practices employed by supporters of Prop 8 has lead us to realize that a deeper strategy is needed if we are to break out of the gridlock of controversy surrounding gay marriage and start advancing a progressive vision of healthy relationships in the world. We would like to share with you a strategic initiative that could have sweeping effects across the nation if it were fully implemented.

Strategic Issues

The principal obstacles we've faced in our efforts to get society-at-large to acknowledge the basic dignity of gay and lesbian couples are grounded in strongly held beliefs. Care must be taken to avoid putting people on the defensive when they feel their beliefs are threatened. We need to first recognize what people feel strongly about so that we can find a way to get them on our side.² The three obstacles we see as being central to blocking progress are:

1. The deep and emotionally potent association of marriage to religion for many people of faith.
2. The prototypical cultural model of the traditional family with husband, wife, and children that springs to mind when we hear the word "marriage".
3. The categories that shape how people are grouped together, especially those categories that divide us: gay vs. straight, secular vs. religious, mainstream vs. marginal, etc.

¹ This report was prepared by Joe Brewer, Director of Cognitive Policy Works. Joe can be reached at brewer@cognitivepolicyworks.com.

² Roy Eidelson's work on "Dangerous Ideas" helps draw attention to the concerns that motivate behavior. Learn more at <http://www.eidelsonconsulting.com/framework.php>

These issues suggest ways to move forward that can lead to success. Here are some guiding principles to consider:

The Principle of Inclusion

Categories that divide us are an obstacle to cooperation. We need to create a new category that allows everyone to feel like they can be a part of it. More importantly, this new category needs to be understood in a way that cannot exclude any groups of people.

The Principle of the Implicit Good

When selecting our inclusive category, we should look for one that is inherently good. It needs to be something that no one wants to stand against because it would make them look like a bad person.

The Principle of Strategic Focus

As we figure out what our category should be, we need to get at the heart of our concern about the situation to figure out what the real issue is. This core element will be the strategic focus of our thinking.

The Principle of Transcendence

Every time we talk about gay rights, the distinction between gays and straights is made prominent. Each comment about gay marriage activates a concept of traditional families and the prototype for marriage. Merely reacting to the arguments of our opposition is not enough. Indeed, we must avoid the frames they use so that we don't reinforce their legitimacy. It is vital that we transcend their issues and rise above the fray.

Applying these principles to the current situation, reveals a pathway to success. We call it the Celebration of Devotion.

The Celebration of Devotion - A Strategic Initiative

Imagine a world where people celebrate the commitment of loving relationships. In this world we know that we are all in it together, that there are people we can depend on when times are tough. Through common cause we build a stable economic foundation with affordable, quality health care and secure jobs that pay living wages. The value of commitment resounds in our families where we want the best for our children through quality education and opportunities in life. And it starts with a basic emotional security that emerges when we find stable, supportive relationships with people who know how to love

each other, express their commitments to one another, and demonstrate the kind of devotion we can trust through the best of times and the worst of times.

These relationships can be found in committed families across the nation. They are also found in the “extended family” of people we hold most dear though they are not blood relations. In the bonds that hold friendships together across a lifetime. Or the support we trust from our co-workers. These relationships are based in the bonds of humanity.³

A key element of this approach is that it creates an inclusive category that no one is against and that includes gay couples as equals in good standing because of their bonds of devotion. The category is people who value relationships based on love and commitment.

This approach allows us to (1) stake the moral high ground, (2) advance the progressive vision of humanity, (3) evoke empathy toward others who share important features of humanity with us, and (4) transcend the controversial issues around the “gay marriage” frame.

Another feature of this approach is that it gets at the heart of marriage in the progressive view of relationships. The progressive view has to do with connecting with others and growing a strong bond as a kind of negotiated contract. This challenges the conservative notion of family obligation, where you stay in a relationship because it is your obligation... regardless of the quality of your bonds with your partner.⁴

We don't live in a world where it makes sense for our families to choose who we enter commitments with and who we don't. The era of arranged marriages is over. People find devotion across ethnic lines, economic classes, and even languages. It is found in romantic relationships, business partnerships, and long-standing friendships. Everywhere that devotion is found is cause for celebration.

³ Sue Kerbel's observations of the gay rights movement lead to the realization that the element of relationships needs to be front and center. Focusing on the bonds in the devotion theme will help draw attention to this vital component of a successful strategy.

⁴ Thanks to Sara Robinson for drawing attention to this distinction. Her work on authoritarianism informs the process of figuring out how different cultures think about societal roles.

Rather than debating the constitutionality of gay marriage (and remaining in the rut we're in today), let's go on the offensive and advocate for our view of relationships. We can celebrate the importance of devotion in our lives and win the hearts of social conservatives who fear the degradation of family values in society. At the same time, we can urge religious groups to join us in promoting the importance of trust and commitment in relationships. This is something we can all agree upon.

And, if we're successful, it will change the way we view all commitments - including marriage.

About Cognitive Policy Works



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Cognitive Policy Works is both an educational center that provides professional training to people in politics and a research/consulting firm that analyzes the workings of the political mind for non-profits and social businesses. We're a team of experts in political behavior and social change with a powerful combination of skills ranging from psychology and linguistics to media studies and strategic planning.

At the heart of our work is an understanding of human thought and behavior. We analyze cognitive frames, conceptual metaphors, moral worldviews, cultural narratives, and other aspects of political thought to demonstrate the significance of understanding how the mind works in social and political contexts. Unlike other organizations that work in this area, we seek to share our knowledge in the form of practical steps taken by practitioners to incorporate these insights into their daily work. In other words, we focus on the process (how to change what you're doing) instead of merely providing products (in the form of reports and articles). This sets us apart from the standard think tank or consulting firm.

We seek to empower non-profit leaders and grassroots activists alike, through innovative marketing models inspired by the open source software movement. Our goal is to develop new "best practices" and make them widely available to advocates of progressive social change as they face the major challenges of the 21st Century.

Find us online at <http://www.cognitivepolicyworks.com>.