



MEMORANDUM

TO: WPA RESEARCH CLIENTS AND FRIENDS
FROM: CHRIS WILSON, CHRIS PERKINS, BRYON ALLEN
SUBJECT: GAY MARRIAGE POSITIONING
DATE: MAY 14, 2012

Recently a Republican pollster released an analysis suggesting that Republicans should not only stop using gay marriage as a campaign issue, but went so far as to argue conservatives should change sides and favor gay marriage. Simply put, we couldn't disagree more.

This memo summarizes current data on the issue and shows how, at this time, opposition to gay marriage and a pro-family position is still a winning argument for Republican candidates and leaders.

First, a few caveats:

- This election is unlikely to be about gay marriage, regardless of the position a Republican candidate takes on the issue.
 - With a majority of Americans identifying the economy and jobs as the most important issue in deciding their votes and unemployment still above eight percent nationally, and much higher in many places, this election will be about who voters trust more on the economy and job creation.
- It is true that the long-term trend in public opinion seems to be moving in favor of gay marriage.
 - This may matter in future elections if the trend continues. However, trends in public opinion are not linear and reverse almost as often as they continue, so assuming we are headed for a world with super-majority support for gay marriage seems unwise at this point.

Now the facts:

- Support for gay marriage is a 50/50 issue in the American electorate.
 - A May 3-6 Gallup poll of American adults found that 50% said that "marriage between same-sex couples should be recognized by the law as valid with the same rights as traditional marriages."
 - Comparatively, almost half (48%) of Americans said that gay marriage should not be recognized by the law.
 - When Americans are offered the option of civil unions, support for gay marriage drops to just a plurality.
 - In a *CBS/New York Times* poll from February, 40% of Americans supported gay marriage, 23% supported civil unions but not gay marriage and 31% said gay couples should have no legal recognition at all.
 - The electoral implications of gay marriage are similarly mixed.
 - A *NBC News/Wall Street Journal* poll from March found that most Americans (54%) say that a candidate's position on gay marriage won't make much difference in their vote.

- One-quarter (25%) said they would be more likely to vote for a pro-gay marriage candidate and one in five (20%) say they would be more likely to vote against such a candidate.
- Obama's decision to come out in favor of gay marriage does appear to have hurt him and may matter, in some way, come November.
 - While a majority (51%) of Americans approve of Obama's decision to support gay marriage, according to a *USA Today/Gallup* poll taken on May 10th, 45% disapprove including 44% of Independents and even 25% of Democrats.
 - Perhaps more importantly, the same poll shows that 26% of Americans are less likely to vote for Obama because of the decision while just 13% are more likely to vote for him.
 - The vast majority (60%) says the issue makes no difference in their vote.
- One problem with looking at overall national data is that it over-represents electorally less important states in the Northeast and on the West Coast (states Obama will almost certainly win). Looking at swing states alone shows even more sharply the danger this issue may pose to Obama's chances.
 - Since 2004 seven of the nine "toss up" states identified on realclearpolitics.com's electoral map have passed gay marriage bans.
 - The voters of Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, and Virginia have all voted against gay marriage in the recent past and Obama may face additional challenges in some or all of these states as he attempts to defend the opposite position.

What does it mean?

The majority of voters aren't going to make their decision in this year's elections based on gay marriage, but among those who will this remains a 50/50 issue.

In the battleground of this, and many elections, voters have clearly expressed their preference that gay marriage not be recognized in law.

Republican candidates would be wise to note that many swing voters and the Republican base are opposed to gay marriage and avoid falling into the trap that seems to have captured Obama—taking positions that appeal to the echo chamber of the two coasts and not to the middle of the country where elections are decided.