AT THE CROSSROADS:

African-American Attitudes, Perceptions, and Beliefs toward Marriage Equality

A Report by the National Black Justice Coalition in Partnership with Freedom to Marry



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Foreward

Shortly before I became Mayor of San Francisco then-Supervisor Carole Migden passed local legislation officially recognizing domestic partnerships. During these early days, I allowed my office to be used by couples to secure their union. For me, it was a concrete sign of my support and affirmation of their sacred partnership. However, in my gut, I always believed it wasn't enough. While domestic partnership was a step in the right direction, Gays and Lesbians still could not legally marry and lost the benefit of over 1,100 rights and privileges that my wife and I and so many other couples enjoy.

As a civil rights leader and activist for many years, I strongly believe in equality for all individuals and groups regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. My support and involvement in the movement to end legal discrimination in our marriage laws is shaped by my strong belief in the humanity of all of our citizens and their rights to be full and equal participants in society.

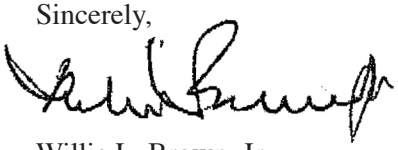
Many believe that allowing Gays and Lesbians to marry is radical or that marriage is a sacred union between a man and a woman. To those, I would like them to consider that it was not until 1967 that blacks and whites were allowed to marry. One courageous couple took on the nation to fight against laws that prevented them from marrying because they were of different races. Rights and laws that we now understand as a given or seem so obvious today, were not viewed as such forty years ago.

While the nation has moved in terms of its support of civil unions and domestic partnership for Gays and Lesbians, statistics and public opinion polls continue to show that as a whole, we are still reluctant to support marriage equality. To be sure, our history as a country has shown us that separate, but equal does not work. In order for us to thrive as a county and in communities, we must all have the same rights, opportunities, options, and privileges.

The African-American community has been at the forefront of many struggles to secure rights for disenfranchised groups and communities. On the issue of marriage equality, however, we have not used our voices or resources to mobilize affirmatively. For the most part, we have been silent. It is my belief that this is our fight too. We must stand for equality and dignity for all of our brothers and sisters. The right to marry whomever you choose is a right that should be enjoyed by everyone.

It is true; we are all entitled to our personal and moral beliefs. However, to use those beliefs as a sword or to stand in the way of the exercise of freedom and rights of some groups and individuals is unjust. We must stand in solidarity and raise our voices in support of marriage equality.
In my many years of public service, I have met committed lesbian and gay couples, many of whom are raising children, caring for their elderly parents and contributing to their communities in ways large and small. I have come to understand that the meaning of commitment, the definition of family, and building community is broad and all encompassing. That is why I have pledged to use whatever political influence I have to create an environment where everyone is able enjoy the same rights and privileges in this country regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Sincerely,



Willie L. Brown, Jr.

INTRODUCTION

> **"Constitutional amendments have always been used to enhance and expand the rights of citizens, not to restrict them. Now we are being asked to amend the Constitution again, to single out a single group and to say to them for all time, you cannot even attempt to win the right to marry"**
>
> —Representative Gwen Moore (WI) on why she voted no on the proposed Constitutional Amendment that would prohibit gays and lesbians from marrying.

> **"[T]here was a time when black people in this country couldn't marry the person of their choice either. That's why when I am asked, 'Are gay rights civil rights?' my answer is always, 'Of course they are.'"**
>
> — Julian Bond, Chair of the NAACP November 20, 2005

Over the last two decades, winning marriage equality and equal protection under the law have been top priorities for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) movement. Major victories like the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruling which declared that the commonwealth had failed to identify any constitutionally adequate reason for denying civil marriages to same-sex couples are mitigated by battles in other states which continue to deny the right to marry to gays and lesbians through constitutional amendments and ballot initiatives. In fact, in the 2004 presidential election and following the Massachusetts ruling, 11 states placed anti-gay marriage questions on the ballot. All of the ballot measures passed easily receiving on average 70 percent support.[1]

In 2008 and beyond, the issue of marriage equality will continue to be an issue decided at the state level by individual voters, communities, and legislatures. In order to win marriage equality, the LGBT movement will have to mobilize diverse constituencies, craft messages that are reflective of the historic experiences and understanding of marriage by different groups, and employ strategies that reach across racial, gender, identity, and class boundaries. As a starting point, this report aims to shed light on the attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs toward marriage equality among African-Americans in hopes that the LGBT movement and allies will be able to use the information gathered to mobilize Blacks affirmatively on the issue of marriage equality.

The report, a joint project of the National Black Justice Coalition and Freedom to Marry examines available public opinion poll data to better understand the attitudes of African-Americans towards marriage equality and gay rights; identify some reasons for low support of the issue among African-Americans in the United States; and explore the current framing of marriage equality in the African-American community. We also recommend strategies for reframing the issue of marriage equality within the community that includes a thorough understanding of the impact of the intersections of race, class, gender identity, and sexuality on the struggle to achieve rights and equality in the United States to create a climate of support.

At the onset, we would like to affirm our belief that homophobia and heterosexism cut across communities and racial, class, and ethnic lines. No one group is more or less

homophobic or heterosexist than any other. We would also like to acknowledge that the attitudes and perceptions of African-American towards marriage equality is sometimes contradictory or at odds with the community's long history of working to secure rights on the behalf of disenfranchised or marginalized groups. Connectedly, we recognize the experiences, opinions, and beliefs of African-Americans are very diverse and influenced by factors such as geographic location, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender, and other markers of difference. Our goal in creating the report is not to deny these contradictions, but to paint a fuller and more accurate picture on African-American attitudes towards marriage equality that will allow us mobilize in communities in meaningful and impactful ways.

Our findings suggest that in addition to religious and moral beliefs, African-American attitudes toward marriage equality are influenced by specific cultural beliefs and values rooted in ideas of Black masculinity and sexuality in the dominant culture; the historic discrimination experienced by African-Americans in the United States and its impact on the Black family unit; and the role of the Black religious institutions in shaping the political agenda of the community. Other dominant beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes include:

- the idea that marriage equality and gay rights are issues that do not directly impact the African-American community or that they are "majority" race issues;

- the prioritization of race over gender by the Black Civil Rights organizations and institutions, the Black LGBT community and the larger African-American community;

- the belief that the LGBT rights movement has appropriated historic civil rights messages and wrongly equating racial oppression with oppression based on sexual orientation or gender identity; and

- the perception that homosexuality further contributes to the stigmatization and demonization of Black sexuality and the fragmentation of the Black family.

Attempts to craft campaigns to move attitudes and to create a climate of support for marriage equality among African-Americans must begin with the understanding that the opinions and attitudes of African-Americans toward marriage equality is shaped by the aforementioned experiences, beliefs, and perceptions. While most racial and ethnic groups use cultural and moral values as a way of justifying non-support of marriage equality, there is a great need to understand the nuances and depth of these cultural differences to allow us to get to the root of the causes of non-support. In other words, how can we interpret the polls in a way that is consistent with what we know about the experience of African-Americans in the United States?

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- African-Americans with higher levels of education and income, and who do not attend church regularly are more likely to support marriage equality and gay rights.

- 65% of African-Americans are opposed to marriage equality compared to 53% of Whites. African-Americans are virtually the only constituency in the country that has not become more supportive over the last dozen years, falling from a high of 65% support for gay rights in 1996 to only 40% in 2004;

- Among African-American youth, 55% believed that homosexuality is always wrong, compared to 36% of Latino youth and 35% of White youth. Forty-eight percent of all Black male youth and 29% of Black female youth surveyed agreed that homosexuality is always wrong. 10% more males than females opposed the legalization of marriage equality (50% v 39%);

- Compared to other racial and ethnic minorities, African-American are more likely than Asian and Latinos to vote against marriage equality by nearly 10%;

- The political agenda and priorities of African-Americans tend to focus on quality of life issues such as health, education, and the economy. Among Blacks, the Economy (46%), Education (19%), Health Care (14%), and the War in Iraq (14%) were identified as priorities.[2] Less than 1% of African-American identified the issue of gay marriage as a top policy priority.

- Of the five mainstream African-American civil rights organizations and Institutions, none of them have taken an active position for or against marriage equality or gay rights. None of them have issued a policy brief, a fact sheet, or included the issue of marriage equality or gay rights on their "core" organizational agenda;

- A majority of African-American legislators at the state and federal levels have taken positions that either support or do not limit the rights and liberties of LGBT individuals;

- Attitudes and perceptions around masculinity, Black male sexuality, and the fragility of the Black family influence African-American attitudes and beliefs on marriage equality;

- Black Churches have played an influential role in shaping the attitudes and beliefs of African-American toward marriage equality; and

- While there are parallels to the gay rights movement and the historic struggle for Blacks to achieve civil rights, there is resistance by the larger African-American community to the link the two struggles to achieve rights for gays and lesbians.

Black and Gay in America: A Snapshot

Black gays and lesbians live at the nexus of the intersections of race, class, gender identity and sexuality. Black LGBT individuals not only experience discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, but because of their race as well. According to the U.S. Census, there are an estimated 85,000 same-sex African-American[3] couples in the United States.[4] Of the 25 states with at least 1000 reported couples, New York, Georgia, and California have the highest percentage of African-American same-sex couples per 10,000 adult.[5]

Income and Education:

Same-sex African-American couples have roughly the same mean income as their heterosexual counterparts ($31,538 v. $31,482).[6] These numbers are slightly lower than incomes reported for White same-sex ($42,553) or heterosexual couples ($38,219).[7] African-American female same-sex couples report a median income of $10,000.00 less than married African-American married couples, while Black male same-sex couples report a median income equal to Black married opposite-sex couples.[8]

With regard to educational attainment, African-American same-sex couples are less likely to have a college degree than individuals of other races in same-sex couples (28% v. 38%). However, as individuals, not part of a couple African-American LGBT people are significantly more likely to have a college degree than their different-sex counterparts (26% v 20%).[9]

Employment Rate:

The employment rate of Black partners in same-sex couples is the same as their heterosexual counterparts (66% v. 64%), a rate lower than that of individuals of other races in same-sex couples (71%).[10]

Familial Structure:

Black same-sex households are almost twice as likely as White same-sex households to include children. Black male same-sex households are twice as likely as White male same-sex households to include at least one child under 18, 36% versus 18% respectively. Fifty-two percent of Black female same-sex households are comprised of parents living with at least one child under 18, compared with 32% of White female same-sex households.[11]

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The African-American community has a long legacy of working to secure and protect the rights of disenfranchised groups and oppressed minorities. Over the last several decades, the community has stood up against Jim Crow laws, marched along side allies to end segregation to create a more equal and just society, fought for access to quality education and job opportunities, and rallied against racial profiling and police brutality. African-Americans have been consistent in their rejection of policies and practices that discriminates against others, including lesbians and gays.

The issue of marriage equality, however, has proven to be a highly divisive topic for the African-American community.[12] During the 2004, presidential election, many American-American religious and faith leaders took an active position against marriage equality. In fact, more than two dozen Black pastors and thousands of others rallied in Atlanta, Georgia in the spring of 2004 to protest attempts to link the struggle for gays and lesbians to achieve equality to the Black civil rights struggle of the 1960s.[13]

AFRICAN-AMERICAN ATTITUDES AND OPINIONS TOWARD MARRIAGE EQUALITY AND CIVIL UNIONS

As a group, African-Americans have been less supportive of rights for gays and lesbians than Whites, Latinos, and Asians. In a 2007 Washington Post-Kaiser Family Foundation-Harvard University poll, Blacks were less than half as likely to support marriage equality and legal recognition of same-sex civil unions as Whites.[14] Similarly, a 2006 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center found 65% of African-Americans are opposed to marriage equality compared to 53% of Whites.[15] African-Americans are virtually the only constituency in the country that has not become more supportive over the last dozen years, falling from a high of 65% support for gay rights in 1996 to only 40% in 2004.[16]

Compared to Latinos and Asians, African-Americans are least likely to support marriage equality or civil unions by nearly 10%.[17] In recent surveys, Asian-Pacific Islanders showed the highest support level based on race or ethnicity at 55%. White non-Hispanics at 46% followed this, then Latinos at 35% and Blacks at 23%. There were strong gains in each of these groups except for Blacks.[18] A 2005 poll by Public Opinion Pros at the University of California Berkeley found African-Americans to be the only group to have shown no significant increase in warmth toward gays and lesbians over a ten-year period.[19]

Lastly, there is a solid connection between African-American beliefs about homosexuality and their attitudes toward marriage equality or civil unions. A recent study that examined 31 surveys stretching back more than three decades found that "nearly three- quarters of Blacks say that homosexual relations are always wrong, and over one-third say that AIDS might be God's punishment for immoral sexual behavior. Overall, Blacks are fourteen percentage points more likely to hold both positions than are Whites."[20] Connectedly, African-Americans are also more likely than other groups to believe that homosexuality is wrong, that sexual orientation is a choice, and that sexual orientation can be changed.[21]

In this report, we attempt to understand the reasons and influences for lower support among African-Americans for marriage equality compared to other racial and ethnic groups by examining the opinions and attitudes of sub-groups within the African-American communities (black youth, women, and men) and the role of Black Churches and Civil Rights institutions in shaping attitudes toward marriage equality.

SUPPORT FOR MARRIAGE-EQUALITY IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

African-American Youth and Marriage Equality

Polls show that youth are more likely to be supportive of marriage equality and civil unions than older people at 53%.[22] Among those 65 and older, three-quarters of those surveyed opposed marriage equality, while more than half (53%) of adults under 30 favored marriage equality. According to the Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture at the University of Chicago in a survey of African-American youth, 55% believed that homosexuality is always wrong, compared to 36% of Latino youth and 35% of White youth. 48% of all Black male youth and 29% of Black female youth surveyed agreed that homosexuality is always wrong. 10% more males than females opposed the legalization of marriage equality (50% v 39%).[23]

African-American Men and Women and Marriage Equality

Among African-American women, education, income, geographic location, and religious attendance is likely to determine their attitudes or perceptions towards gays and lesbians.[24] African-American women with high levels of education and income who attend church infrequently are more likely to support marriage equality. This is not true for African-American men who remain constant in their acceptance or rejection across education, income, geographic location, or religious attendance.[25]

Educational Attainment, Socioeconomic status, African-Americans and Marriage Equality

African-Americans with higher levels of education and income, and who do not attend church regularly are more likely to support marriage equality and gay rights.[26] With respect to marriage equality and civil unions, African-American college graduates are more supportive at 64%, followed by some college at 41%, and high school or less being at 34%.[27] Similarly, African-Americans who reported that they support marriage equality do not attend religious services regularly.[28]

Familiarity, Acquaintance, Marriage Equality and African-Americans

African-Americans who know a gay or lesbian person or have a gay or lesbian family member are more likely to oppose laws that ban marriage equality or deny rights to gays and lesbians. They are also less likely to believe LGBT individuals are immoral. A poll conducted by Public Policy Polling of African-Americans in Baltimore, Maryland found that of the individuals surveyed who had a friend or family member who is gay or lesbian, 35% disagreed with the statement that lesbians and gay individuals are immoral.[29]

BLACK CHURCHES AND ATTITUDES TOWARD MARRIAGE EQUALITY

Polls continue to show that African-American attitudes and opinions on marriage equality and gay rights tend to be closely linked to religion. In a 2006 national poll conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 74% of Black Protestants overwhelmingly oppose marriage equality.[30] This is significant because in the United States 8 out of 10 African-Americans identify as Protestants[31] and as a group, attend religious services more frequently than Whites and are less supportive of gay rights.[32]

Connectedly, nearly 50% of all Black churchgoers reported that their clergy regularly addressed issues related to homosexuality and these messages tend to be overwhelmingly negative.[33] In a public opinion poll of African-Americans in the city of Baltimore, Maryland, 68% of those surveyed reported that their minister or pastor had "preached" the message that homosexuality was a sin or immoral.[34] Because of the pivotal role of Black Churches[35] in the community and the willingness of religious leaders to take a vocal stance against marriage equality, many would be allies or civil rights advocates are silenced in the debate.[36]

Historically, Black Churches have always served as sites of organizing for African-Americans and as a hub for community life. Many African-American civil rights leaders, such as the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. used the pulpit to mobilize people and to speak about important issues of the day. The issue of marriage equality and gay rights is no different. In the 2004 Presidential Election, George W. Bush nearly doubled his share of the Black vote in Ohio by appealing to Black churchgoers on the issue of marriage equality. In Ohio, Bush got 16% of the Black vote, up from 9% in 2000; of those Blacks who said they attended church more than once a week, Bush got 69% of those votes in 2004, up from 52% in 2000.[37]

BLACK CIVIL RIGHT AND GAY RIGHTS: A COMPARABLE STRUGGLE?

Within the African-American community, the debate for equality for gays and lesbians is at odds with the history of the community and Black Church in helping to protect and advance the rights of oppressed groups and minorities. Black Churches led the march for civil rights in the '50s and the '60s, and many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered advocates see the struggle for gay rights and marriage equality as a logical extension of that movement.[38]

Civil Rights leaders such as Coretta Scott King, Representative John Lewis, NAACP Chair Julian Bond, and Reverend Al Sharpton have long supported equal protection under the law for LGBT individuals and communities. In fact, John Lewis filed a friend-of-the court brief in the Massachusetts case that led to the state becoming the first in the country to legalize marriage equality. In the State of California, the California State NAACP filed an amicus brief as did the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in New York City.

Others, however, have not been so eager to realize the parallels and struggle to secure rights between African-Americans and LGBT individuals. In 2004, Reverend Jesse Jackson in a talk at Harvard University Law School rejected comparisons to the struggle of Black to achieve civil rights to that of gays and lesbians to achieve equality.[39] Further, Jackson said that while he supported rights for gays and lesbians, his community continues to define marriage as a union

between a man and a woman.[40]

For many in the African-American community, the history of the community in helping to protect and advance the rights of oppressed minorities stands in direct conflict with the moral values and beliefs held by many specifically as it relates to the issue of marriage equality.

Anti-gay groups and moral conservatives have fueled this conflict by arguing that the LGBT movement has wrongly appropriated civil rights messages, tactics, and rhetoric to advance its own agenda. These groups have been able to successfully exploit this cleavage because there have been very few conversations in the larger Black community and Gay rights community about the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Further, there is very little understanding of the unique position of Black LGBT individuals who are often situated within both communities.

THE BLACK AGENDA AND MARRIAGE EQUALITY

Although African-Americans strongly oppose marriage equality and some other hot-button moral issues, when asked which issues are important, African-Americans rank these issues far below issues relating to the economy—job opportunities, minimum wage, education, and health-care.[41] In a poll conducted by Black Entertainment Television (BET) and CBS, Black respondents identified the Economy (46%), Education (19%), Health Care (14%), and the War in Iraq (14%) as priorities.[42] Less than 1% of African-American surveyed mentioned the issue of gay marriage as a top policy priority.

There have been very few state or national level organizing or mobilization efforts in the African-American community on the issue marriage equality. As a result, African-Americans may not feel as connected to the issue or it may reinforce their biases and beliefs about who the issue is affecting or who stand to benefit from marriage equality.

There is a strong belief among African-Americans that marriage equality or gay rights is a "White issue" or an issue that does not directly impact their community. This belief is supported by the disproportionate representation of Whites as heads of LGBT civil rights organizations and mobilization efforts. Of the many LGBT civil rights organizations in the United States, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the Human Rights Campaign, Stonewall Democrats, and Freedom to Marry among others, the leadership has been overwhelmingly and consistently White. In the landmark marriage equality cases in both Massachusetts and Vermont, the plaintiffs were almost all White. Currently, there is only one national LGBT civil rights organizations in the country led by or focused on African-American LGBT individuals, families, and communities--the National Black Justice Coalition (NBJC).

Civil Rights Organizations and Marriage Equality

The issues and concerns identified by the BET/CBS polls are echoed in the legislative agendas and priorities of five of the major African-American civil rights organizations—the National Urban League, the NAACP, the Congressional Black Caucus Policy Institute, the National Council for Negro Women, and Southern Baptist Leadership Conference.

Although some of the organizations have supported pro-LGBT equality legislation, in a comprehensive survey of the legislative agendas and priorities of each of these organizations, none have identified LGBT equality as a priority or area of focus.

Many of these organizations have adopted a "no-harm, no foul" position on the issue of marriage equality and gay rights. The "no harm, no foul" position is when key stakeholders or opinion leaders do not engage in activities that work to actively harm mobilization efforts or campaigns led by LGBT groups or activists, but they also do not speak out in support of the issue or dedicate resources to efforts.

	Issues and Identified Priorities							
NAACP	Housing	Education	Economy Poverty	Crime	Employment	Health Care, Wellness, disparities	Youth Children	Black Family
National Urban League	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
National Council for Negro Women (NCNW)		X	X			X	X	X
Congressional Black Caucus Policy Institute	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)			X	X		X	X	X

African-American Elected Officials and Marriage Equality

For the most part, African-American legislators have been unanimously opposed to measures that deny rights to LGBT individuals. The Black Legislative Caucus' in the states of Georgia and Alabama have both lobbied against anti-gay legislation. Further, among the 130 supporters of the federal marriage amendment, none of them were African-American representatives or legislators. Exceptions include Harold Ford of Tennessee who was very vocal in his support of a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage[43] and Senator Anthony Muse of Maryland who is credited with halting civil unions in the state with his vote[44]; Senator Barack Obama cited political reasons for his support of civil unions over marriage equality for gays and lesbians.[45]

Marriage Equality and African-Americans in the States

State by state analysis of the attitudes and perceptions among African-Americans on marriage equality are consistent with national polls and findings. In a poll conducted by Greenberg, Quinlan, and Rosner in California of likely voters, 61% of African-Americans surveyed said that they would vote for a ban on marriage equality compared to 49% of White voters.[46] Among all racial and ethnic groups included in the poll, African-Americans were more likely than Asians and Latinos to vote against marriage equality by nearly 10%.[47]

In the state of Maryland, a poll by the Washington Post indicates that 51% of Marylanders oppose marriage equality and 44% said they would support changing the law to allow civil unions. Among African-Americans, 59% oppose marriage equality and 46% support civil unions. White Marylanders favor civil unions at 59% and 50% support marriage equality.[48]

In the state of New Jersey, in a poll of likely voters conducted August 2007, 51% of African-Americans surveyed agreed that the state should not give gay couples the same freedom to marry as heterosexual couples, compared 40% of Whites, 42% of Latinos, and 58% of Asian-Pacific Islanders. Of the African-Americans surveyed, 16% said that allowing gay couples to marry will hurt the institution of marriage and close to 36% said that gay couples should not be able to marry or enter into civil unions.[49]

Gaps in our Knowledge and Understanding of the Attitudes, Perceptions and Beliefs of African-Americans on the issue of marriage equality

There are very few polls and/or focus groups that have been conducted to gauge the attitudes and beliefs of African-Americans on the issue of marriage equality. Most of the current and available data on African-American attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about marriage equality have been derived from large general surveys or from small samples in communities in particular states. Many of the surveys fail to ask qualitative questions that could provide for a deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and political influences that help to shape attitudes and beliefs of African-Americans. For example, we have very little information on how we might craft messages that target heterosexual African-American women between the ages of 21-35 that are linked to their specific cultural beliefs and values. This creates a knowledge gap and prevents organizations and campaigns from being able to gauge success, identify targets, or to shape effective messages.

There is also gap in the data regarding whether or not there is a difference in attitudes and opinions between heterosexual African-American women and men toward the marriage equality and gay rights. We also know very little about attitudes and perceptions of African-American youth on the issue of marriage equality and equality.

Lastly, there is a gap in the data and polls concerning the reasons why African-Americans oppose marriage equality or civil unions in numbers disproportionate to other groups.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that religious beliefs play a critical role in shaping African-American attitudes towards marriage equality and civil unions, but very little is known about other key influences and factors.

Changing Hearts and Influencing Minds on the issue of Marriage Equality in the African-American Community

- **The Need for an Intersectional Approach to Marriage Equality**

As stated previously, Black LGBT individuals not only experience discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity, but because of their race as well. In a survey of 2,645 Black LGBT individuals across the country conducted by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 53% of those surveyed reported that they had experienced racial discrimination; and 42% reported that they had experienced discrimination because of their sexual orientation.[50] Respondents also reported that "they experienced racism at mostly White gay events and venues; and experienced homophobia in Black heterosexual organizations, from their families of origin, from straight friends, and also in churches and religious organizations."[51]

The particular issues faced by Black LGBT individuals, families, and communities are often excluded from the agendas of Black mainstream civil rights organizations and gay rights organizations. Agendas focused on racial justice tend to ignore issues of homophobia or discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity and agendas focused on securing rights for LGBT individuals often lack a race or class analysis. As a result, Black LGBT individuals and communities are often invisible or fall through the cracks in discussions of racial justice and LGBT rights.

An Intersectional approach would broaden frameworks for racial justice and LGBT rights to include simultaneous analyses of the impact of race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other markers of difference on social justice movements and policy change at the local, state, and federal levels. Using an intersectional approach, the agendas for racial justice and LGBT rights movements would become more inclusive and representative of the needs and concerns of all of its members.

With regard to marriage equality, an intersectional approach to the issue in the African-American community would include a discussion of the diversity of African-American families and communities, which would incorporate sexual orientation and gender identity.

Re-framing the Issue of Marriage Equality and Gay Rights in the African-American Community

For the most part, marriage equality has been framed as a religious or moral issue within the African-American community. Black religious institutions and churches have played

a significant role in defining African-American's beliefs and opinions toward marriage equality and civil rights. It has only been in the last few years, that Black leaders have begun to frame the marriage equality as a civil rights issue.

Moreover, marriage equality has also been framed as in issue benefiting or affecting White gays and lesbians in the African-American community. Heterosexism within the community and the priorities of mainstream African-American civil rights organizations perpetuate and support this framing. To create a climate of support for marriage equality in African-American communities, there needs to be a shift in the way the issue is talked about or framed in the community away from morality and religion and more toward civil rights and equality.

Current framing of marriage equality in African-American Communities

- Marriage equality is amoral and against religious teachings
- Homosexuality is a choice;
- Marriage is defined as the union between a man and a woman;
- Marriage is primarily a religious institution established by God and condemned by scripture;
- Homosexuality is unnatural and unholy;
- Discrimination against LGBT people is not the same as discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities; and
- Same-sex relationships are not equal to heterosexual marriages thereby exclusion from marriage is not discrimination.

Re-framing of the issue of marriage equality to increase support among African-Americans

The right and anti-gay religious leaders have been very effective in framing marriage equality as religious or moral issue in the Black community. They have asserted that equal rights for gay and lesbians is a threat to the civil rights of African-Americans and other "legitimate minorities."[52] They have also argued that the comparisons made by LGBT advocates and organizations to the struggle of Blacks to achieve equality are misplaced and disrespectful to the historic experiences of African-Americans in the United States. In order to diffuse and shift the conversation, reframing the issue might focus on the following messages:

- Discrimination is wrong no matter who it affects or is against;
- The history and legacy of African-Americans has been to uplift and defend the most vulnerable segments of society, and this includes gays and lesbians;
- Marriage is a right that should not be denied because of gender;
- The denial of equal rights to anyone is wrong across the board regardless of sexual orientation of gender;
- "Love Thy Neighbor" and Collective Responsibility; and
- **Anti-miscegenation laws (Loving v. Virginia) and marriage equality.**

It is important to note that some of these messages have been attempted in the African-American community, but there have been no tests or focus groups to determine whether or not they resonate with African-Americans.

- **Outreach to African-American opinion and thought leaders**

In order to move African-Americans on the issue of marriage equality, it will be important to recruit and engage thought and opinion leaders respected by the larger Black community. Anecdotal evidence suggest that individual community members and thought leaders are reluctant to speak out on the issue of marriage equality because of the fear that they will be perceived as gay or as detracting attention away from issues of racial justice and equality. In order to move African-Americans on the issue of marriage equality and begin to change perceptions and attitudes, African-American opinion and thought leaders need to be engaged.

- **Identification of Clear Target Groups**

Polls continue to show that 74% of Black Protestants and African-Americans who attend church frequently are less likely to support marriage equality and gay rights. They also show that African-American youth (compared to older African-Americans), highly educated African-American women, and African-Americans who do not attend church regularly are more likely to support marriage equality and gay rights. To increase support for marriage equality in the African-American community and create a positive climate to move legislations, outreach efforts might focus on the following groups:

- Black youth between the ages of 18-21;
- Heterosexual, African-American women with high levels of education and income;
- African-Americans in urban areas; and
- Democratic African-Americans who attend church rarely or less than once a month

RECOMMENDATIONS

Message Development Research

- Through our research we have identified possible targets for outreach and messaging to increase support for marriage equality in the African-American community. However, because of the limited data available on these groups, there is a need for in-depth message development research to discern the core values and beliefs of the target groups; understand their attitudes and perceptions toward marriage equality; get a handle on their interests and habits; and identify what messages would move them to support the issue of marriage equality.

National Polling and Focus Group Research

- Much of our understanding of the attitudes and beliefs of African-Americans toward marriage equality has come from sample surveys or surveys which focus on specific states. The surveys and polling instruments are not uniform and do not ask questions that are able to get at the root causes of the reasons why African-Americans disproportionately oppose marriage equality compared to Whites and other racial and ethnic minorities.

There is a need for a national, standardized survey of the opinions and attitudes of African-Americans on marriage equality and other issues such as homophobia, masculinity, and the Black family. To supplement the national poll, focus groups should be held with identified target groups to paint a fuller picture of the challenges, gaps, and opportunities.

Development of *Changing Hearts and Influencing Minds* 2-3 year strategic awareness campaign in key states

- The battle to win marriage equality will depend on state-level mobilization and outreach efforts. There are key ballot initiatives coming in 2008 in the states of California and Florida that will help to determine what happens in the rest of the nation. As a result, NBJC in partnership with state level African-American civil rights and LGBT rights organizations should develop a strategic awareness campaign in key states focused on newly identified target populations.

Provide training and technical assistance to LGBT and African-American Civil Rights organizations on the Intersectional Approach to issue framing and policy change

- In order to bridge communities and movements, LGBT and African-American civil rights organizations will need training and technical assistance in integrating an intersectional framework and analysis into their agendas for social and political change. The development of case studies and other related publications on the importance of the intersections of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class to building representative and inclusive social movements will be critical to this effort.

CONCLUSION

The issue of marriage equality has been a highly divisive topic for the African-American community. Polls have consistently shown that 65% of African-Americans are opposed to marriage equality and that they are the only constituency that has not become more supportive over the last dozen years, falling from a high of 65% support for gay rights in 1996 to only 40% in 2004.[53]

Many have conjectured that the attitudes and perceptions of African-Americans toward marriage equality and gay rights are highly influenced by their religious and moral beliefs. Our findings show that in addition to religious beliefs, African-Americans attitudes toward marriage equality are shaped by cultural beliefs and values, the historic discrimination experienced by African-Americans in the United States, and the prioritization of racial justice issues by Black Civil rights organizations.

Using available public opinion poll data, this report benchmarks the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of African-Americans on the issue of marriage equality. Our findings show that African-Americans with higher levels of education and income, and who do not attend church regularly are more likely to support marriage equality and gay rights.

Among African-American Women, education, income, geographic location, and religious attendance is likely to determine their attitudes or perceptions towards gays and lesbians. African-Americans who know a gay or lesbian person or have a gay or lesbian family member are more likely to oppose laws that ban marriage equality or deny rights to gays and lesbians.

There are also significant gaps in our understanding of the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of African-Americans on the issue of marriage equality. All of the current and available data on African-American attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about marriage equality has been derived from large general surveys. We also have very little information on the effectiveness of current messages and campaigns targeting African-Americans. This report provides a starting point for the creation of knowledge and understanding to galvanize African-Americans on the issue of marriage equality and gay rights.

[1] Same-Sex Measures on the 2004 Ballot. National Conference of State Legislators. 17 Nov 2004.

[2] Jones, Robert and Cox, Dan. (2006) African American and the Progressive Movement: A Background Report for Strategic Communications. Center for American Values in Public Life. April 2006. See Also, CBS/BET 2004 News Poll

[3] Of the couples surveyed, 21% were a part of an inter-racial couple.

[4] This number may be higher because the US Census most likely undercounts the population of same-sex couples because of concerns related to revealing their sexual orientation or the terms/categories used to describe their relationship. Estimates suggest that the true counts are 10 to [5]0 percent higher than the Census figures.

[5] See Appendix of geographic breakdown of African-American same-sex couples

[6] Dang, Alain and Frazer, Somjen. (2005) Black Same-Sex Households in the United States: A Report from the 2000 Census. Second Edition: December 2005. National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute

[7] Gates, Gary, Lau, Honing, and Sears, R. (2006) Race And Ethnicity Of Same-Sex Couples In California: Data From Census 2000. The Williams Project on Sexual Orientation Law and Public Policy, UCLA School of Law

[8] Dang, Alain and Frazer, Somjen. (2005) Black Same-Sex Households in the United States: A Report from the 2000 Census. Second Edition: December 2005. National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute

[9] ibid

[10] Gates, Gary, Lau, Honing, and Sears, R. (2006) Race And Ethnicity Of Same-Sex Couples In California: Data From Census 2000. The Williams Project on Sexual Orientation Law and Public Policy, UCLA School of Law

[11] Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2006) Pragmatic Americans Liberal and Conservative on Social Issues. August 6, 2006.

[12] Deggans, Eric. (2004) "Gay rights and civil rights." St. Petersburg Times 18 January 2004

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[15] ibid

[16] See Attitudes about Marriage equality in San Antonio Texas. Firestone, Harris, and Vega. University of Texas, San Antonio. The Culture and Policy Institute. 2005 and Pew Research Center Report

[17] Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, Inc., (2003) National Public Radio, Public Opinion Strategies, Gay Marriage and Civil Unions

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[19] Egan, Patrick and Sherrill. (2005) Neither an In-Law Nor an Outlaw Be: Trends in Americans' Attitudes Toward Gay People. Public Opinion Pros: University of California, Berkeley February 2005

[20] Jones, Robert and Cox, Dan. (2006) African American and the Progressive Movement: A Background Report for Strategic Communications. Center for American Values in Public

Life. April 2006.

[21] ibid

[22] Cohen, Cathy. (2007). Report and Findings from the Black Youth Project. Center for the Study of Race, Politics, and Culture, University of Chicago.

[23] ibid

[24] Lewis Gregory. (2003) Black-White Differences in Attitudes toward Homosexuality. Public Opinion Quarterly, 67:59-78

[25] Battle, Juan and Bennett, Michael (2000) Research on Lesbian and Gay Populations within African-American Communities: What have we learned. Perspectives. See also, Lemelle, Anthony and Battle, Juan. Black Masculinity Matters in Attitudes Toward Gay Males Journal of Homosexuality, Vol. 47(1) 2004

[26] ibid

[27] ibid

[28] Lewis Gregory. (2003) Black-White Differences in Attitudes toward Homosexuality. Public Opinion Quarterly, 67:59-78

[29] Debnam, Dean. Religion and Sexuality survey of African-Americans in Baltimore, Maryland. (2006) Public Policy Polling. Survey of 298 African-Americans was conducted May 3-4, 2006.

[30] Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2006) Pragmatic Americans Liberal and Conservative on Social Issues. August 6, 2006.

[31] ibid

[32] ibid

[33] ibid

[34] Debnam, Dean. Religion and Sexuality survey of African-Americans in Baltimore, Maryland. (2006) Public Policy Polling. Survey of 298 African-Americans was conducted May 3-4, 2006.

[35] There are seven major historic black denominations: the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church; the National Baptist Convention, USA., Incorporated (NBC); the National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated (NBCA); the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC); and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC).

[36] Jones, Robert and Cox, Dan. (2006) African American and the Progressive Movement: A Background Report for Strategic Communications. Center for American Values in Public Life. April 2006.

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[42] ibid

[43] Zeller, Shawn. (2007) Harold Ford's New Gay Marriage Problem. New York Times. 22 January 2007

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[45] Wilson, John. (2007) This Improbable Quest. Colorado: Paradigm Publishers. ParadigmIn the Senate, Obama opposed the Federal Marriage Amendment to ban gay marriage nationally and said: "I agree with most Americans, with Democrats and Republicans, with Vice President Cheney, with over 2,000 religious leaders of all different beliefs that decisions about marriage, as they always have, should be left to the states." However, Obama also declared, "Personally, I do believe that marriage is between a man and a woman." At the same time, Obama has strongly supported civil unions, arguing that it is a way to protect equal rights without taking the politically risky approach of gay marriage.

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[48] Wagner, John and Cohen, John. Marylanders lean left on gay marriage, death penalty. Washington Post. 26 October 2007

[49] Garden State Equality. (2007) Poll of New Jersey Likely Voters 8/8/07 thru 8/10/07 MOE +/- 3.5 percentage points

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[51] ibid

[52] Turnbull, Lornet. Is same-sex marriage a civil rights issue." Seattle Times 19 April 2004

[53] Loving v. Virginia, was a landmark civil rights case in which the United States Supreme Court declared Virginia's anti-miscegenation statute, the "Racial Integrity Act of 1924", unconstitutional, thereby overturning Pace v. Alabama (1883) and ending all race-based legal restrictions on marriage in the United States.

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