

[Amanda Terkel](#)

Freedom To Marry Aims Campaign At Young Conservatives

Posted: 07/10/2012 8:02 am Updated: 07/10/2012 8:22 am

WASHINGTON -- As support for marriage equality [continues to grow](#), a significant number of conservative hold-outs still insist that marriage must remain between one man and one woman. But instead of simply writing off Republicans, the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights group Freedom to Marry today begins a campaign to spread the message that support for marriage equality is consistent with conservative principles. To do so, Freedom to Marry is tapping a group on the right already trending away from the GOP traditional position: young conservatives.

Freedom to Marry on Tuesday launches ["Young Conservatives for the Freedom to Marry"](#) to highlight the demographic's growing support for marriage equality. While 61 percent of all Republicans said they believe same-sex marriage should be illegal in a recent Washington Post-ABC News poll, [Republicans ages 18 to 44 were evenly split](#). The campaign begins with a reception this evening on Capitol Hill, and there are plans to host a brunch at the Republican National Convention.

Central to the effort is a [leadership committee](#) of nine young conservatives, both gay and straight. Three told The Huffington Post a major focus will be on getting conservatives to understand why support for same-sex marriage is in line with their ideological beliefs.

Torrey Shearer is a lifelong Republican and currently works in Washington as a government relations executive. He said that while Republicans support issues of equal rights and civil rights, they're not the terms that will sway party members to support of gay marriage.

"It's the same type of argument, but it's crafted differently," Shearer said. "We need to emphasize the Republican Party's history with limited government and personal responsibility and personal freedom, as opposed to talking points that are pretty typical in the Democratic Party and on the left on equal rights and things like that."

"For me, it's very conservative to support the freedom to marry for same-sex couples, because at the core of this argument is marriage," added Tyler Deaton, another leadership committee member. "And when two people want to join together for life and build a family, that's an attitude conservatives should embrace."

Deaton is a lobbyist and political consultant who is active in New Hampshire Young Republicans, New Hampshire Republicans for Freedom and Equality and Standing Up for New Hampshire Families.

The idea for the campaign arose from a series of salons on marriage equality Freedom to Marry hosted last year. Two of these gatherings were with conservatives and libertarians, explained Marc Solomon, political director of the group, who said the new effort is the first by Freedom to Marry to dedicated to conservatives.

"The one thing we found in the Republican salon is there were a lot of young people who came, and they pretty much all supported the freedom to marry," said Solomon, adding, "They felt there wasn't really a place for them -- an organized place for them to be both conservative and support gay and lesbian couples' freedom to marry. So this was an outgrowth of that."

Nicole Neily is president of Dezenhall Resources and previously worked at the libertarian Cato Institute. She also hosted one of the libertarian salons for Freedom to Marry. She said that if the Republican Party does not shift its views to accomodate young conservatives, it could lose support over time.

"I think it's going to be tremendously hurtful," Neily said when asked the effect of failing to embrace the freedom to marry. "What I liken this to is the 1967 Loving v. Virginia case. I'm an interracial child, and up until 1967, I would have been illegal in the state of Virginia. ... It's unbelievable to think that public opinion in the country was so against [interracial marriage]. I really think in 10 or 15 years, people are going to feel the same way about same-sex marriage." Shearer said he disagreed with the House GOP leadership's decision to defend the Defense of Marriage Act in federal court, after the U.S. Department of Justice decided the law is unconstitutional and would no longer do so.

"It's a little out of touch," Shearer said, adding that young Republicans were more interested in the economy than the social battles that dominated the '90s.

Even among the older, more established ranks of the Republican Party, there are voices of support. Former Vice President [Dick Cheney](#) publicly supports same-sex marriage, and his daughter recently [married](#) her longtime female partner, Mary Poe. Former Republican National Committee chair [Ken Mehlman](#) came out as gay last year. Similar personal connections are common among young people, who may have LGBT friends or family members.

The biggest fights for marriage equality this year are likely to be in the states, where there are ballot measures to roll back rights for same-sex couples or fights in legislatures to legalize the freedom to marry. Gaining bipartisan support will be critical to advancing the cause. In New York, for example, marriage equality legislation passed the state Senate after [four Republicans joined with Democrats](#) and voted for it. And in New Hampshire in March, Republican and Democratic lawmakers [joined together](#) to stop a group of GOP lawmakers from repealing the state's same-sex marriage law.

"There are a lot of people in the Republican Party right now who are trying to decide what the next step will be," said Deaton. Young people are saying, "This is our next step: The Republican Party should embrace personal freedom, should embrace the freedom to marry."