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Making the Same-Sex Case

Legalizing marriage for gay couples will cultivate community stability and foster family values.

By: KEN MEHLMAN – November 20th, 2012

They say demography is destiny, and in American politics destiny has belonged to those who best aligned their core beliefs with the rapidly changing and ever-improving citizenry.

Conservatives—and I count myself as one—succeed when we attract new supporters to timeless traditions. The Republican Party's loss in this month's presidential election resulted partly from a failure to embrace some of America's fastest-growing constituencies. One area of significant change is in attitudes toward legal equality for gay Americans.

Some misperceive the issue of marriage equality as exclusively progressive. Yet what could be more conservative than support for more freedom and less government? And what freedom is more basic than the right to marry the person you love? Smaller, less intrusive government surely includes an individual deciding whom to marry. Allowing civil marriage for same-sex couples will cultivate community stability, encourage fidelity and commitment, and foster family values.

Same-sex couples today lack the estate-tax protections, Social Security spousal benefits, and joint-filing options available to heterosexual couples. This can mean the difference between staying in the family home or losing it when a partner dies. In 29 states, individuals can be fired based on their sexual orientation. Conservatives believe that individuals should be judged at work based on performance, so shouldn't we fix this?

Conservatives don't need to change core convictions to embrace the growing support for equal rights for gay Americans. It is sufficient to recognize the inherent conservatism in citizens' desire to marry, to be judged on their work, and not to be singled out for higher taxes or bullying at school. These objectives can be achieved while also protecting religious liberty, as demonstrated by states enacting civil marriage with exemptions for religious institutions.

To help Republicans appreciate this changing environment, I helped establish Project Right Side, which commissioned leading GOP polling firm Target Point to survey 16,000 voters over the past year, over-sampling Republican and swing voters in battleground states, including 2,000 such voters on Election Night. Thanks to this and other polling, we know that:

- *A majority of Americans favor civil marriage for same-sex couples.* Election Day exit polls showed that Americans support marriage equality by 49% to 46%. Majorities of voters in Maine (53%-47%), Maryland (52%-48%), and Washington state (52%-48%) legalized same-sex marriage at the polls, and a majority in Minnesota (51%-49%) voted down a ban on same-sex marriage.

Walter Olson of the Cato Institute analyzed the Maryland data and found majority support for marriage equality in strong GOP precincts that voted for Mitt Romney. Our Election Night exit poll of 2,000 voters in battleground states (of whom 32% were Republican, 36% Democratic and 32% independent) showed a majority opposing the federal Defense of Marriage Act of 1996: 62% believe that if states recognize same-sex marriage, the federal government should grant same-sex couples the same benefits as heterosexual couples.

- *These trends are growing quickly and across all demographics.* According to Jan van Lohuizen, a former pollster for President George W. Bush, public support for civil-marriage rights for same-sex couples increased by 1% each year from 1993 through 2009, and by 5% per year in 2010 and 2011. Other polls over the past year show majority support for civil marriage among African-Americans (51%, according to Edison Research), Hispanics (52%, according to Pew) and voters between the ages of 18 and 39 (66%, according to the Washington Post/ABC News). The NBC/Wall Street Journal poll shows a 41% increase in support among Republicans over the past three years, to 31% from 22%.

- *The marriage-equality issue is more important to supporters than to opponents.* While this election focused on the economy, President Obama's support for marriage equality was a positive motivator for nearly three out of four Obama voters in battleground states, according to exit polls. Almost half of his voters (45%) said it made them "much more" likely to support him. Only 35% of Romney supporters said that the former governor's opposition made them "much more" likely to support him.

- *A majority of independents favor marriage equality.* Project Right Side's survey found that 58% of independents in target states support allowing gay couples to marry, with 22% calling it a very high or somewhat high priority. Eighty percent of independents agree that "the government should stay out of the private lives of adults, including gays and lesbians."

- *Republicans are increasingly supportive of legal protections for gay Americans.* Of the 7,000 Republicans we surveyed, 73% support employment nondiscrimination protections for gays and lesbians, 61% support safe-schools protections (such as those signed into law by New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie) and 46% support allowing same-sex couples to jointly file tax returns.

- *Voters under 45 strongly favor marriage equality.* In our Election Night survey, 60% of such voters said that the law should recognize the marriages of gay and lesbian couples as valid, with the same rights as traditional marriage. This is consistent with the shares of younger voters who, according to exit polls, supported marriage equality in Maine (60%) and Washington state (58%).

These trends are accelerating, not going away. And I hope and trust that they will accelerate even faster as conservatives, and all Americans who cherish freedom, commitment and stability, support equal rights under the law for all citizens.

Mr. Mehlman, a businessman in New York, served as chairman of the Republican National Committee from 2005-07. More polling information can be found at www.ProjectRightSide.com.