



The Republican case for same-sex marriage

A party that believes in individual liberties should support marriage equality

By David Lampo - October 16, 2012

Marylanders have an important decision to make this Election Day: whether or not to affirm their belief in the traditional American principle of equal rights for all, or instead to continue a system of special rights for some. A "yes" vote on Question 6 would sustain the Maryland legislature's recent historic vote that gave gay and lesbian couples the same right to marry as heterosexuals. A "no" vote would repeal marriage equality, perpetuating the unequal system of granting all the legal privileges and perks of marriage to heterosexual couples only.

National polls today show a modest majority of Americans in favor of marriage equality, but Republicans have traditionally opposed it. As a Republican myself, I find it troubling that many in my party seem so willing to let their private religious values trump the most important political value of all: the value of personal and religious liberty that all Republicans supposedly share. There is no clearer violation of the traditional Republican belief in equal rights before the law than when we relegate gays and lesbians to second-class citizenship simply because of their sexual orientation.

There is no doubt that we have seen rapid and not always welcome cultural changes in America. Where once Americans were almost all deeply religious, today nearly one in five professes no religious faith at all, and Americans in general are much more secular. Where once most Americans got married, now fewer than half do so. Many Republicans have simply had enough, and they want to help preserve a past that seems to be slipping further and further away.

By fighting to continue our current discriminatory system that gives special legal rights and economic privileges only to heterosexual couples, however, Republicans effectively repudiate the very principles of limited government and individual freedom they supposedly believe in. Moreover, they tarnish those principles in the eyes of younger voters, who overwhelmingly favor marriage equality.

Freedom is our most cherished political legacy. As Republicans, we believe in freedom of choice in both our economic and personal lives because it's the right thing to do, and because we believe those values are consistent with our nature as rational beings who can make their own choices. Freedom for some, however, should mean freedom for all, as Dick Cheney has poignantly reminded us.

Many conservative opponents of marriage equality also fail to make the critical distinction between the civil and religious parts of marriage, two very different things. People of faith, of course, vary widely in their beliefs about homosexuality and gay rights. While many conservative Christians believe unequivocally that the Bible condemns homosexuality and same-sex unions, other Christians, including many mainstream Protestants, do not. That is why churches, whether pro-gay or anti-gay, should be free to define marriage however they like and sanction only those marriages they believe are consistent with their own religious values.

It's for that very same reason that the civil part of marriage — the marriage license — also needs to be walled off from any particular set of religious beliefs. If we truly value religious freedom, Republicans cannot allow the government to impose one particular interpretation of the Bible on everyone else. It is simply wrong to claim the right of religious freedom and conscience for oneself but deny it to those who disagree with you.

Contrary to the claims of some opponents of Question 6, nothing in the law would force any church or religious institution to sanction same-sex marriage or perform same-sex ceremonies. Nor would the free speech rights of clergy who oppose same-sex unions be abridged in any way. That would also be a gross violation of religious liberty that the proponents of Question 6 do not propose or support.

Question 6 simply recognizes Maryland's great diversity of religious values and faiths by saying that one's sexual orientation should not be a barrier to enjoying all the legal benefits and responsibilities of marriage. By voting yes on Question 6, Republicans can reaffirm their commitment to both religious tolerance and the individual liberty that forms the philosophical basis of our party.