

Everybody Wants Somebody to Love:
Emotion, Rationality, and Framing LGBT rights

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Abstract

Mass attitude change is a rare event, and numerous studies show that people tend to maintain the attitudes they currently have. Yet, recent years have seen a dramatic and rapid shift in attitudes about same-sex marriage—quite possibly one of the largest shifts in public opinion ever recorded. Advocacy organizations trying to change hearts and minds on the issue of same-sex marriage have used a variety of appeals in their campaign. Some campaigns have focused on rationality by highlighting the idea of equal rights for LGBT individuals; other campaigns have focused on emotion, showing loving lesbian and gay couples in committed long-term relationships. Are differences in the framing of advocacy campaign messages responsible for observed shifts in public opinion? To answer this question, we partnered with a nationally-recognized LGBT advocacy group to test the effect of exposure to a short video that described the desire of a same-sex couple to marry either to ensure their legal rights or because they love one another. We then further tested the affect and rationality frames with an online survey experiment. Overall, our findings suggest that framing marriage equality for lesbian and gay couples in terms of affect/love is no more effective at generating support than messages that frame the issue as about rights and equality.

KEYWORDS: Love, family, framing, LGBT rights, same-sex marriage, experiment

The last 30 years has seen unprecedented institutional changes toward LGBT Americans; most recently, the issue of same-sex marriage or marriage equality has dominated public discussion. Public opinion has also shifted rapidly, due in part to the rhetoric used by both sides of the debate. As Fetner (2001) suggests, the effect of the rhetoric used in contemporary campaigns supports the claim that opposing movements alter the political context in which the other side works but they also demonstrate that new opportunities produced by an opposing movement may be issue-specific rather than movement-wide. The message framing used by advocacy organizations both in support of and in opposition to marriage equality likely plays an important role in public opinion formation. To our knowledge, little or no empirical research tests the difference between two prominent frames used by real-world groups: affect and rationality. Further, few if any existing studies utilize experimental methods to investigate these questions, particularly in the realm of LGBT rights and same-sex marriage. Here, we present finding from research designed to fill these gaps in the literature, using randomized field experiments to test the effect of these frames on support for marriage equality.

We begin with a brief discussion of framing theory, followed by a characterization of recent marriage equality messaging campaigns and their emphasis on affect and rationality. We then turn to our experimental designs and results, finding that there is little difference between the choice to frame the freedom for gay and lesbian couples to marry as emotional/affective compared to a more abstract, rational appeal for rights. We then conclude with the implications of our findings and suggestions for future studies to further clarify and extend our results.

Framing and Framing Effects

Framing has been one of the most prolific and well-studied aspects of political communication over the last several decades (Chong & Druckman 2007). Over the past decade,

researchers have increasingly attempted to understand the psychological processes underlying framing effects (Iyengar 1991; Zaller 1992; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997; Chong and Druckman 2007). Druckman (2001: 1042) notes that “a framing effect is said to occur when, in the course of describing an issue or event, a speaker’s emphasis on a subset of potentially relevant considerations causes individuals to focus on these considerations when constructing their opinions.” In other words, framing effects occur when differences in the presentation of an issue or event changes one’s opinion about that issue or object; it is a process by which people orient their thinking (i.e. conceptualize) towards an object.

This conceptualization process can have a substantial impact of the expected effects of messaging. Chong and Druckman (2007) present frames in an expectancy model in which different considerations towards an object are weighted by different considerations about that object. This leads to the individuals’ *frame in thought*. Frames in thought are often influenced by *frames in communication*, which is information (generally but not exclusively in the mass media) that attempts to alter the emphasis on different considerations toward an object. Thus, a framing effect is produced when a frame in communication influences an individuals’ frame in thought and subsequently their evaluation toward the attitude object.

There is evidence from a variety of experiments, surveys and case studies that framing influences attitudes and behaviors across a wide variety of political and social issues. The seminal political framing study by Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997) shows that framing a KKK rally as a free speech event garnered significantly more support and tolerance for the rally compared to framing it as a public disruption. Similarly, Sniderman and Theriault (2004) show that 85% of respondents support allowing a hate-group rally when a free-speech frame is emphasized whereas support drops to 45% when the issue is framed in terms of the potential for

violence. Similarly, Rasinki (1989) shows that support for government expenditures on welfare drops markedly when framed as “assistance to the poor” versus “welfare.” Other work focuses on policy areas like affirmative action (Gamson and Modigliani 1987); war (Dimitrova, et al. 2005); and stem cell research (Nisbett et al. 2003).

Framing can also be an intentional endeavor; different groups can employ frames for mobilization and persuasion purposes (e.g., Snow & Benford 1992, Polletta & Ho 2006). Chong & Druckman (2007) underscore the importance of the issue framing because “discussion and debate over the appropriate frames for conceptualizing an issue lead ultimately to common perceptions and judgments about the consequences of a policy” (120). In other words, groups attempting to persuade or to advocate for a particular policy position often choose their frames carefully to dictate the terms and boundaries for a particular debate, with varying level of success. For example, Johnson (2012) finds that framing same-sex marriage in terms of equality drives opposition down, as does the degree to which equality frames are used in comparison to morality frames in the mass media. There are also important moderators of framing effects; Brewer (2003) shows that values moderate framing effects, finding that prior attitudes about gay rights shape evaluations and susceptibility to new frames.

LGBT Advocacy Groups & Recent Framing

In 1996, only 27% of Americans supported marriage equality for same-sex couples; ten years later, support increased to 35%. More recent shifts have been more rapid, reaching majority support in various polls in 2013. The latest poll, from March 2015, pegs national support for same-sex marriage at 59 percent.² Many survey respondents openly admit to having changed their minds about marriage equality. For example, in a March 2013 Pew Research

² <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/03/09/support-for-gay-marriage-hits-all-time-high-wsjnbc-news-poll/>

Center poll, 49 percent of respondents said that they supported same-sex marriage, 14 percent of whom (28 percent of marriage equality supporters) said that they had recently changed their mind on the issue (Pew 2013).³

One possible driver of recent attitudinal shifts is the change in messaging by mainstream advocacy organizations. Earlier campaigns focused on rational, abstract legal rights—for example, the “No on 8” campaign against Proposition 8 in California—and traditionally, there has been more emphasis on rational, rights-based frames compared to emotional appeals (Tadlock, Gordon, & Popp 2007; Rimmerman & Wilcox 2007). Some organizations, however, have recently shifted their focus to love and commitment. The assumption of these more recent campaigns is that framing marriage equality as about love is most effective at generating support.

For example, outreach from the Freedom to Marry organization consistently notes that “love is love” and “all love is equal.” GLAAD launched a campaign targeting the South called Southern Stories which features individual couples speaking candidly and emotionally about their love and commitment to each other. The Human Rights Campaign focuses on campaign themes like “Love Conquers Hate” and “All Love is Equal.” They reported in December 2013 that their biggest accomplishment of the year was that thousands of individuals had joined their Love Conquers Hate campaign (Simon 2013). In a video recorded as part of the campaign, writer and director John Ridley, who took home the 2012 Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay for *12 Years a Slave*, says, “Gays and lesbians love just as hard, and care just as much as everybody else. And isn’t that what marriage is all about?” The video then displays the core argument of the campaign: “Marriage is love, family, commitment.”⁴ In other words, decisions have been made by several prominent advocacy organizations to frame marriage equality in terms of love,

³ <http://www.pewresearch.org/daily-number/support-for-same-sex-marriage-grows-as-more-americans-change-their-views/>. March 2013. Pew Research Center.

⁴ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_CSLp4HZ2k

families, and children in contrast to previous efforts that emphasized rational, rights-based appeals.

In sum, LGBT rights organizations fighting for support for marriage equality have recently added affective frames to their messaging just as support for marriage equality has increased dramatically. Are these concurrent shifts a coincidence, or are affective frames more effective than rational frames? Scholarship on the power of affect suggests that they are generally more effective; we turn now to a discussion of that scholarship.

Message Persuasiveness: Affect and Rationality

The use of emotional appeals by political elites and theorists is nothing new. Aristotle argued thousands of years ago in *The Rhetoric* that persuasive speech includes *ethos* (the speaker's character), *pathos* (stirring the audience's emotions), and *logos* (the logic of the argument). Brader (2006) quotes William James (1902):

Emotional occasions... are extremely potent in precipitating mental rearrangements. The sudden and explosive ways in which love, jealousy, guilt, fear, remorse, or anger can seize upon one are known to everybody.... And emotions that come in this explosive way seldom leave things as they found them.

Emotional messages dominate presidential television advertisements (Kaid and Johnston 2001) and have long been known to feature in political campaigns more generally (Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet 1944). Westen (2008) argues that the key to political success is to tug at voters' emotions, not to rely on rational arguments or issue positions. Ramage and Bean (1998: 82) note that emotional appeals fall into pathos, the second of the three means of persuasion identified by Aristotle:

An appeal to pathos causes an audience not just to respond emotionally but to identify with the writer's point of view—to feel what the writer feels.... Pathos thus refers to both the emotional and the imaginative impact of the message on an

audience, the power with which the writer's message moves the audience to decision or action.

Triadafilopoulos (1999) examines the powerful speakers of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., noting that King's rhetoric illustrates "the advantages of Aristotelian persuasion over rational deliberative and agnostic forms of public speech" (1999: 471). King succeeded because he recognized that "audiences judge claims to justice not only by their rationality, but also by their ability to touch the listener's soul" (1999: 753). Young (1996) argues that communication is necessarily linked to desire, that "persuasion is partly seduction" (1996: 130). Other scholars view emotional appeals as central to political communication (Kern 1989; Perloff and Kinsey 1992). Critics of emotional appeals also consider them effective, even as they denounce them as manipulative and counter to democratic decision-making, or as likely to subvert rational thinking (Kamber 1997; Arterton 1992; Damasio 1994; Kinder 1994; Marcus 2000).

Several scholars have recently employed field experiments to test the effectiveness of emotional appeals. Arceneaux (2012) finds that political messages that evoke loss aversion and fear are more likely to persuade. Brader (2005) uses experiments that demonstrate that cueing enthusiasm increases participation and activates partisan loyalties while cueing fear stimulates vigilance, increases reliance on contemporary evaluations, and facilitates persuasion (388). He notes that while existing work finds that citizens behave differently in different emotional states, it is less established whether political elites and persuasion campaigns can manipulate these emotions and change political attitudes and behavior as a result.

In sum, for thousands of years, scholars examining the art of persuasion have recognized the power of emotional appeals designed to evoke a sense of shared identity with a speaker or writer of a persuasive message. The use of emotional appeals by LGBT rights organizations, often designed specifically to tug at listener's heartstrings, are consistent with a long tradition of

using emotion to trigger shared in-group identities. On its face, there are reasons to think emotional appeals will be highly successful in persuading citizens and mobilizing equality-minded voters; however, few randomized field experiments have tested this theory, and none have tested the effect of such appeals on attitudes about marriage equality. We turn now to the randomized field experiments we conducted to provide that empirical test.

Expectations and Hypotheses

To maximize external validity, we compare the differences between emotional/affective frames and reason-based/rational frames because as previously mentioned, these frames and persuasive cues are commonly used by some of the most prominent and influential LGBT advocacy organizations such as Freedom to Marry and the Human Rights Campaign in their efforts around the country. Specifically, these groups have recently focused their advocacy efforts on messages about love, commitment and family. Similarly, opponents of LGBT rights have employed emotional campaigns that trigger feelings of disgust and fear, e.g. fear that children will become gays and lesbians if they are forced to learn about marriage equality in schools (Casey, Lupia and Skovron 2013).

Strategies used by LGBT rights organizations that they believe are effective, however, may not be working as well as hypothesized, as demonstrated by a fundraising experiment conducted by Harrison and Michelson (2012). In that experiment, coming out to potential financial supporters dampened the willingness of contacted individuals to provide a donation, suggesting that their recent messaging campaigns may not have been as effective as they had hoped. That large marriage equality organizations like Freedom to Marry and Human Rights Campaign are using love as their core message is not *necessarily* evidence that such a campaign is ideal or effective. Further, these strategies may not be effective with every demographic

receiving the message. It may be that individuals on the cusp of support for marriage equality—perhaps those who already support civil unions or who are questioning their beliefs about the issue—can be pushed over the line by an emotional appeal. Other individuals—perhaps those whose emotional responses to LGBT individuals tend towards disgust or whose anti-marriage equality opinions are more deeply held—will not be influenced by any change in framing.

An alternative possibility is that prompting heterosexual Americans to think about love between LGBT people may prompt them to think about gay sex, which can trigger negative responses (the “ick” factor). Those opposed to same-sex marriage tend to maintain their beliefs primarily because they have an underlying, subconscious feeling of disgust at the thought of the sexual behavior between people of the same sex. Some research even suggests there are physiological changes when individuals view images they find disgusting, including exposure to LGBT individuals and pro-LGBT messages (Oxley, et al. 2008). In essence, rather than thinking of lesbian and gay individuals as people who love, it can be too personal, undermining the purpose of the messages (Rofes 1998; Mucciaroni 2008). In addition, highly salient, “easy” social issues should be the most resistant to attitude change, because attitudes are more clearly formed, limiting framing effects (Druckman & Leeper 2012). For all of these reasons, more rigorous empirical data are necessary to understand the effects of these appeals.

In sum, there are several prominent examples of the choice to frame gay and lesbians’ ability to marry in terms of love and emotion *and* as an abstract and rational attempt to gain rights; however, an empirical test of framing effects has not been done. Is the recent shift to framing marriage equality in terms of love and family really more effective? Individuals may be more supportive of marriage equality when the issue is presented as about love, commitment and

family because that frame evokes a positive emotional response⁵, compared to when the issue is presented as about the dispassionate values of rights and equality. On the other hand, the “ick” factor may mean that a focus on love and family may have a backlash effect, causing decreased support for same-sex marriage.

Given the demonstrated power of issue framing *and* the prevalence of existing frames in the battle over same-sex marriage in the real world, additional empirical evidence is needed to unpack the impact of these frames. Specifically, what are the effects of rational frames compared to emotional frames? Are the presently popular affective frames (which focus on love) more persuasive than rationality frames (which focus on rights)? Here, we leverage the unique properties of randomized experiments to contribute to the framing effects of the messages commonly used by advocacy organizations, with a specific focus on frames focusing on affect compared to those geared toward rationality.⁶ We focus on the effectiveness of those messages in order to evaluate the persuasiveness of these real-world, contemporary discussions occurring in American politics and issue campaigns.

Experimental Design and Results

Over the last decade, randomized experiments have experienced a renaissance in the social sciences and are considered the gold standard for impact assessment and program evaluation (Rossi, Freeman, and Lipsey 2003; Gerber and Green 2012). Generally, experiments in political science randomly assign individuals to receive a treatment expected to generate a change in attitude or behavior while others are randomly assigned to receive a placebo treatment

⁵ Parallel work has found that evoking feelings of disgust reduces support for marriage equality (see Adams, Stewart, and Blanchar 2014).

⁶ Note that we chose these messages based on what advocacy organizations are using in their campaigns, not because of any underlying assumption about the appropriateness of messaging in the debate over LGBT rights. Our intent is to maximize external validity while maintaining a high level of internal validity.

or to no treatment whatsoever. Political science field experiments have most frequently focused on voter mobilization but can be extended to many different aspects of political science, public policy, and attitude change scholarship (see Druckman et al. 2011). Here, we extend our current knowledge with the use of randomized experiments, applied to the understudied area of individual-level persuasion and attitudes about same-sex marriage.

We turn now to two randomized experiments that investigated the power of love as operationalized by advocacy organizations. We test the hypothesis that messages highlighting loving relationships are more effective than those that are more dispassionate and that focus on rights or legal protections. The first experiment, conducted in cooperation with Lambda Legal and using short videos produced by that group for use in their work, finds suggestive but inconclusive evidence that love is a more powerful message. In a second experiment conducted using an online survey, we find that messages priming love rather than rights are no more effective and may in fact trigger negative responses among some individuals. In short, the conventional wisdom among some advocacy groups to focus on love and family in persuasion campaigns may not have the desired effect and in some cases, may have the opposite effect.

Experiment #1: Lambda Legal Videos

In 2012, we partnered with the Lambda Legal Defense Fund to conduct an Internet-based experiment. Lambda Legal produced videos of actual gay and lesbian couples and families prior to our involvement. Our role in the partnership was to run randomized controlled experiments to determine whether these videos had a persuasive effect on marriage equality and whether stronger effects were observed for love frames than rights frames.⁷ Participants for the

⁷ The authors were not remunerated in any way for this study. We were given license to pursue our research agenda using the information provided by the organization and a confidentiality agreement was signed prior to data

experiment were recruited using Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk.⁸ Participants were compensated \$.25 for their participation in the experiment, consistent with MTurk market rates. Participants in the experiment were assigned to watch one of five short videos, each about a minute and a half long. One video was about recycling, serving as the baseline for the four treatment videos. In other words, we assume that individuals who were randomly assigned to watch the video about recycling are not persuaded by that video to change their attitude about marriage equality. The rate of support for marriage equality among that group can thus be compared to rates of support among individuals randomly assigned to watch one of the Lambda Legal videos. Because viewers are assigned randomly to the videos, any observed differences in rates of support for marriage equality can then be attributed to the viewing of the Lambda Legal video.

The initial survey question asked respondents to choose a response (of A through E) to be randomly assigned a public policy video to view. While no such randomization took place, the question was designed to lessen social desirability and issue priming so respondents did not assume it was a survey about same-sex marriage.⁹ Respondents were randomized, however, to one of five videos: the control (a video about the importance of recycling) and four treatment videos depicting a same-sex couple speaking about the importance of marriage equality: (1) a lesbian couple without children; (2) a gay male couple including children; (3) a gay male couple without children; and (4) a lesbian couple including children.¹⁰

collection. Final results were sent to the organization as a courtesy but our findings were not altered in any way. The studies were also approved by the Institutional Review Boards at the authors' home institutions.

⁸ Others have noted the limitations and challenges associated with using MTurk workers for social science research (see Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012; Casler, Bickel, and Hackett 2013).

⁹ Arceneaux and Johnson (2013) also utilize this type of design not to control for social desirability but to gain leverage on selection bias and effects.

¹⁰ Recall that the videos were produced by Lambda Legal prior to the planning for this research and thus the real families depicted sometimes have children included and sometimes do not. This sets up two embedded manipulations in the videos aside from the focus on affect or rationality: the gender of the same-sex couple, and the

After watching their randomly assigned video, participants were asked about their attitudes about several public policy issues like smoking and energy conservation. Within this battery, we included two questions about their position on LGBT rights: their support for same-sex marriage and their likelihood of voting for a hypothetical ballot initiative allowing same-sex marriage. No manipulation check was included, although the videos played automatically and the survey could not be advanced until enough time elapsed for the video to play in its entirety; thus, responses are most accurately considered intent-to-treat effects rather than average treatment effects.

The videos differed in terms of the genders of the featured couples and whether or not they had children, but the crucial difference for our purposes was the degree to which the appeals were emotional. Two of the videos, #3 (the gay male couple with no children) and #4 (the lesbian couple with children), are more dispassionate. In Video #3, Tim and Ken mention their love for each other, but the bulk of the video is about their love for their home and about the legal protections they've put in place to support their relationship. Tim notes, "It's important that our relationship is given the same respect, given the same privilege, given the same honor." There is little visible love in the video, aside from one man's hand on his partner's thigh, although they are clearly a committed couple. Video #4, depicting the lesbian couple with children, is similar in its approach. Karen complains that the intake form at her new dentist's office, where it asks for marital status, doesn't include a box for civil unions. Later in the video, her partner Marcye notes, "When you have a little kid and you're trying to explain to them why you're not allowed to get married, that conversation is about injustice." Again, as in Video #3, the couple is clearly in a committed long-term relationship and they care for each other very

presence or absence of children. We test for effects of these manipulations in the analyses below but find that the presence or absence of children does not affect support for marriage equality. Screenshots and transcripts of the videos are in Figure 3.

much. But the underlying message of the clip is that the fight for marriage equality is about equality and justice, about a box on a medical form, not about love.

In contrast, in Video #1, of the lesbian couple with no children, the women talk about their wedding, and share photos where they are embracing and kissing. Delia mentions how important it was for them to get married because “I am traditional in that sense.” They don’t talk about being married so much as being important because of the legal protections it will bring but because of how it allowed them to express their love for each other. Love is also a big part of Video #2, which introduces a gay male couple with two adopted daughters who want to get married. Tom notes, “It’s time to show people that what defines family is real love.” At one point, while his partner Keith is speaking, the video shows a drawing by one of their daughters of her and Tom, with “I love you” written in large red letters across the top. Later, another child’s drawing labeled “My parents,” with both “Papa” and “Daddy” is shown just as Tom is noting that what defines family is love. That this is a loving couple is very clear from this short clip. Again, the focus is not on rights or equality, but on love. Given these very clear differences in the videos, we hypothesized that Videos #1 and #2 would be more compelling, while Videos #3 and #4 would be less compelling.

Note that there is much more going on in these videos besides emotional vs. dispassionate appeals. The depicted couples differ in gender and in terms of whether or not they have children and they have important phenotypic differences. For example, one of the women in Video #1 is more androgynous in her appearance while her partner has a more traditionally feminine appearance and both are Latina; the two women in Video #4, in contrast, are both white and are more similar in appearance. The individuals in all four videos are simply very different people, presenting different faces, speaking different words, and interacting with their partners in

different ways. Not all of these differences (variables) are controlled for in this experiment and couldn't possibly be; the videos accurately test the sorts of messages being used by real-world advocacy organizations and how they are using true-life stories to fight for marriage equality but do not allow for rigorous testing of the hypothesis that a love frame is more persuasive than a rights frame.

A total of 770 completed surveys were collected over a period of 17 days, from May 21 to June 4, 2012, with 146-169 individuals viewing each of the five videos (Table 1). Participants in each of the five conditions were relatively similar but as with all Mechanical Turk samples participants were not a representative sample of the U.S. adult population, with oversamples of Democrats, youth, and white non-Hispanics (see Table 1A in the Appendix for a randomization check).¹¹

[Table 1 and Figure 1 about here]

For both dependent variables, support for marriage equality and willingness to vote yes on a marriage equality ballot initiative, support is consistently stronger among those cued with a Lambda Legal video, compared to the recycling video, confirming that individuals watched the videos and that they were influenced by the content. The most compelling are Videos #1 and #2, the videos that focus on love and commitment. Less compelling are Videos #3 and #4, which focus more on rights and being treated equally. These results suggest that framing marriage equality as an issue of love and commitment, rather than in a legal, dispassionate way, is somewhat more compelling.

[Table 2 and Figure 2 about here]

¹¹ Of those 770 respondents, 75 identified as a member of the LGBT community. However, while our LGBT respondents were more supportive of LGBT rights than the larger pool, they were not universally supportive: 75 percent said that they supported same-sex marriage and 80 percent said that they would vote in favor of a state ballot initiative allowing same-sex marriage. Thus, we retain them in the results presented here. Analysis excluding those 75 individuals generates very similar results, albeit with smaller Ns for each condition.

We then collapsed observations for Videos #1 and #2 into one category, and Videos #3 and #4 into another (Table 2). Support for marriage equality is strongest among those viewing the videos cueing love, by a difference of more than 7 percentage points compared to the other treatment videos—a large and statistically significant difference. Smaller differences, but in the hypothesized direction, are generated for the dependent variable item asking about a hypothetical ballot measure.

[Figures 1 and 2 about here]

These differences persist in a multivariate analysis controlling for other characteristics of the MTurk workers, including age, gender, education, partisanship, voter registration (reported), and race. Respondents shown the videos focusing on affect/love were more likely to say that they supported marriage equality than respondents shown the videos focusing on rights. In addition, support for marriage equality was stronger among younger respondents, women, Democrats, and white respondents (Table 3).

[Table 3 about here]

While the differences from the MTurk experiment are large and statistically significant, the many moving parts in these videos mean that we cannot be certain that the differences are driven by the affect vs. rationality frames. To complement these videos with more controlled and internally valid experimental designs, we conducted a second experiment to more robustly test our theory.

Experiment #2: Survey Experiment

In order to better focus on the effect of shifting the frame from rights to love, in September 2014 we conducted a randomized survey experiment on the Google Consumer Survey platform. Participants were exposed to a sentence that either described marriage equality as about

love or about rights, paired with a photo of a lesbian couple, a gay male couple, or a heterosexual couple (Figure 2). The heterosexual couple serves as the baseline; we hypothesized that photos of same-sex couples would lead respondents to be more supportive of marriage equality regardless of whether they were exposed to the affect frame (love) or the rational (rights) frame. We hypothesized that those exposed to the love frame would be more supportive than those exposed to the rights frame. We also randomized the presence or absence of children in the photos (keeping the adults as constant as possible), to mirror the test of the Lambda Legal videos. Each respondent was exposed to just one of the following sentences:

“Gay and lesbian couples should be able to marry the person they love. Marriage is all about love.” Do you agree?

“Gay and lesbian couples should have equal rights. They should have the right to get married.” Do you agree?

For this experiment, the dependent variable is the response to the “Do you agree?” prompt.

[Figure 4 about here]

To conduct the experiment, we fielded a series of 12 Internet surveys using the Google Consumer Survey (GCS) product.¹² Each survey included about 250 respondents for each question; overall we sought responses from about 3,000 individuals. Questions were in the field September 15-19, 2014.

¹² This relatively new survey tool allows users to ask a single question to a representative sample of the U.S. Internet population or to a group filtered by one of their demographic variables (age, income or region) or by a user-defined filter question. By asking different single questions of multiple samples, researchers can conduct a survey experiment. The U.S. Internet population is not quite representative of the U.S. public: it includes about 78 percent of U.S. adults; Internet users tend to be younger, more educated, and have higher incomes (Pew 2013b). GCS respondents mirror the U.S. Internet-using adult population (McDonald, Mohebbi & Slatkin, n.d.). Additional constraints include the character limit of the question wordings (125 characters, including spaces) and the lack of additional information about respondents beyond the GCS base demographics. The tool is ideal for survey experiments, however, because randomized assignment to different questions holds unobserved variables constant (Green and Gerber 2003).

Overall, of the 3,034 individuals in our survey, 62.5 percent (1,896/3,034) said that they support same-sex marriage, a higher percentage than that obtained in most public opinion surveys. However, support did vary widely. Respondents viewing a heterosexual couple were the least likely to voice support for marriage equality (60.18%); respondents viewing the same-sex couples were more supportive (63.18% for those shown a gay male couple, 64.14% for those shown a lesbian couple). Here, we examine changes in support between matched pairs of sets of photos—those with an affective (love) prime and those with a rationality (rights) prime.¹³

[Table 4 about here]

In these studies, we find little evidence that the frame matters. Comparing responses to identical photos of lesbian and gay male couples but varying only the wording accompanying those photos generates negligible differences in support for marriage equality, as shown in Table 4. Approximately equal proportions of respondents in all treatment groups support marriage equality, with the notable exception of individuals exposed to the love frame and a photo of a heterosexual couple. In this condition, support is significantly lower, by 6-7 percentage points. This difference persists when controlling for other variables available in the Google Consumer Survey data, including the age group, income group, gender, and type of residence (urban, suburban or rural) of respondents. In other words, while shifting the framing of the issue from a focus on rights to a focus on affect does not increase support for marriage equality, but using an affective frame (love) with a visual cue of a heterosexual couple reduces support. Below, we speculate as to what may be driving this result. Overall, the set of experiments finds scant evidence that framing the marriage equality issue as about love is more effective.

¹³ Differences in responses to those shown photos with and without children were negligible; thus, we collapse those categories in our analysis.

Discussion and Conclusion

Marketing experts have known for years that appeals to emotion are more effective at generating sales of a product than are appeals to logic, and emotional appeals dominate television advertisements used in political campaigns. In a similar vein, recent campaigns by advocacy organizations including Human Rights Campaign and Freedom to Marry have focused on love and commitment, shifting away from an earlier focus on the legal rights of lesbian and gay individuals, in hopes that such a shift would increase the persuasiveness of their messages.

Our experimental data provide little evidence of the effectiveness of that framing shift. Videos that emphasize love may be more effective at generating support for marriage equality than those that emphasize rights and equality, but those videos differ in many ways, and the persuasiveness of the love frame videos in our national MTurk experiment may be due to some other aspect of those videos that also varies, such as the attractiveness of the individuals or their conformity to expectations about lesbian and gay couples. Our survey experiments that varied only the frame and kept constant the presentation of the lesbian or gay couple found no evidence that the love frame was more effective.

In fact, there may be a *downside* to humanizing lesbian and gay relationships as about love. It is possible that frames about loving same-sex couples may generate backlash against rather than support for marriage equality. There's a so-called "ick" factor. If emphasizing the love and commitment of same-sex couples reminds heterosexual couples of their aversion to same-sex displays of affection (if not sex), then affective appeals may in fact reduce support for marriage equality and instead reinforce a more traditional and heteronormative conception of relationships. Further research is needed to better understand when and for whom affective appeals are more effective, or if advocacy organizations would be better served by a return to

more rational, rights-based messaging.

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Table 1: Response Rates, Lambda Legal Defense Fund Video Experiment

Subject of Video	N	%	Support Marriage Equality (%)	Would Vote Yes on Ballot Measure (%)
Video #1: Lesbian couple, no kids	146	19.0	70.55	71.23
Video #2: Gay couple with kids	167	21.7	65.87	73.05
Video #3: Gay couple, no kids	149	19.4	59.06	68.46
Video #4: Lesbian couple with kids	153	19.9	61.44	69.93
Video #5: Importance of Recycling	153	19.9	51.63	59.48
ALL	768	100	61.72	68.49

Table 2: Lambda Legal Defense Fund Video Experiment, Attitudinal Support for Marriage Equality, Collapsed Video Categories

Subject of Video	Support Marriage Equality (%)	Would Vote Yes on Ballot Measure (%)
Focus on Love (Videos #1 & #2)	67.62	72.06
Focus on Rights/Justice (Videos #3 & #4)	60.26	69.21
Recycle (Video #5)	51.63	59.48

Table 3. Lambda Legal Defense Fund Video Experiment, Multivariate Logit Models (Standard Errors in Parentheses)

	All Respondents/Categories (N=766)	
	Support for Marriage Equality	Support for Ballot Measure
Love	.540* (.168)	.347* (.172)
Age	-.024* (.007)	-.021* (.007)
Female	.448* (.168)	.269 (.173)
Party ID	-.432* (.046)	-.393* (.047)
Registered Voter	.259 (.195)	.346 (.199)
Not White	-.678* (.192)	-.878* (.196)
Education	.049 (.063)	.083 (.066)
Constant	2.132* (.374)	2.299* (.383)
	Love vs. Recycle (N=465)	
Love	.791* (.219)	.668* (.224)
Age	-.025* (.009)	-.024* (.009)
Female	.483* (.220)	.264 (.224)
Party ID	-.405* (.060)	-.383* (.060)
Registered Voter	.109 (.248)	.335 (.250)
Not White	-.593* (.248)	-.731* (.253)
Education	.090 (.082)	.137 (.085)
Constant	1.808* (.481)	1.874* (.490)
	Rights vs. Recycle (N=454)	
Rights	.404 (.219)	.503* (.225)
Age	-.027* (.009)	-.018* (.009)
Female	.366 (.217)	.306 (.225)
Party ID	-.430* (.059)	-.411* (.060)
Registered Voter	.314 (.253)	.314 (.260)
Not White	-.828* (.249)	-1.016* (.256)
Education	.035 (.083)	.050 (.086)
Constant	2.033* (.488)	2.096* (.499)

Notes: Party ID is coded from 1=strong Democrat to 7=strong Republican. Education is coded 0=less than high school to 5=graduate degree. * = $p \leq .05$ (two-tailed).

Table 4. Support for Marriage Equality by Frame, Raw Differences, Google Survey Experiment

	% Yes Rights Frame (N)	% Yes Love Frame (N)	Difference (Standard Error)
Female couple	64.67 (324/501)	63.62 (320/503)	-1.05 (3.03)
Male couple	61.42 (312/508)	64.95 (328/505)	3.53 (3.03)
Straight couple	62.77 (322/513)	57.54 (290/504)	-5.23 (3.07)

Table 5. Support for Marriage Equality by Frame, Multivariate Logit Models, Google Survey Experiment

	Love Frame Coefficient Estimate	Standard Error ($P > z $)
Female couple, no kids (N=500)	.095	.197 (.630)
Female couple, with kids (N=502)	-.140	.192 (.466)
Male couple, no kids (N=504)	.155	.193 (.424)
Male couple, with kids (N=509)	.107	.189 (.571)
ALL Lesbian & Gay (N=2,015)	.051	.096 (.595)
Hetero, no kids (N=510)	-.403*	.187 (.031)
Hetero, with kids (N=504)	.015	.190 (.939)
ALL Hetero (N=1,014)	-.192	1.32 (.145)
ALL (N=3,029)	-3.19	.077 (.680)

Note: Models include controls for age, income, and urban location. * = $p < .05$, two-tailed.

Figure 1: Support for Marriage Equality by video (Lambda Legal experiment)

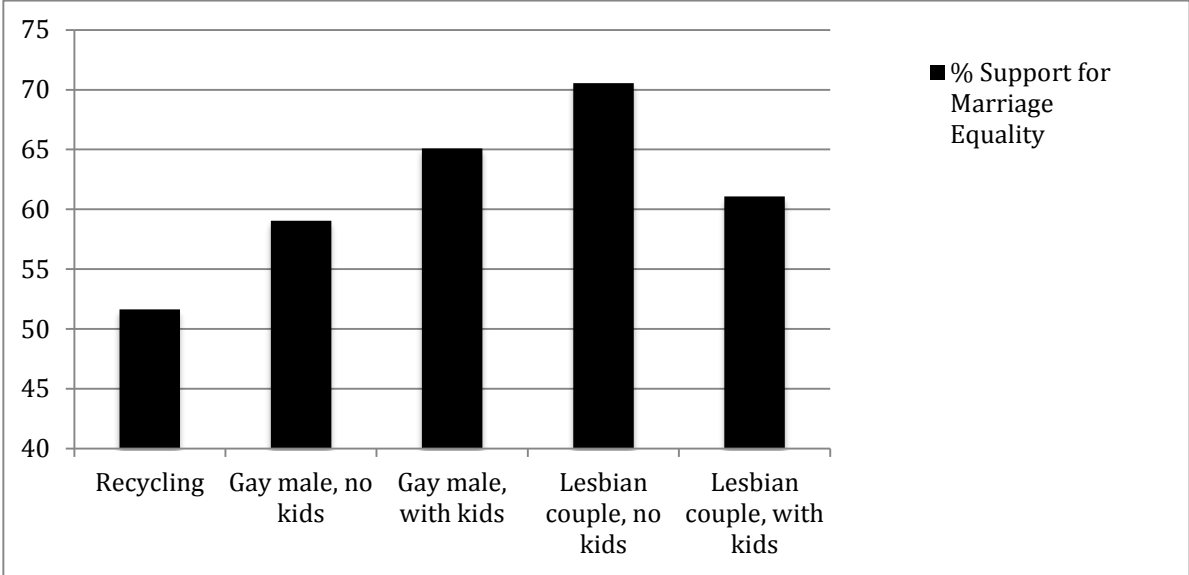


Figure 2: Support for Marriage Equality by video framing (Lambda Legal experiment)

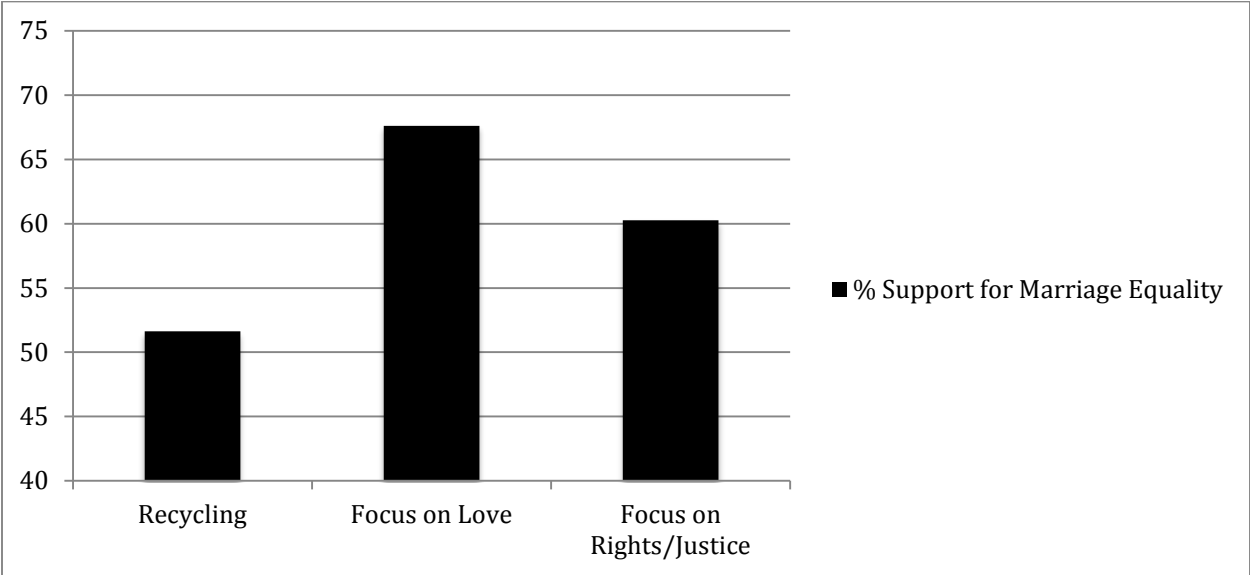


Figure 3: Screen Shots and Transcripts for Lambda Legal Defense Fund Experiment

Video 1: Lesbian Couple, no children (1:43)



Delia: Part of the celebration of our 10 years together is the purchase of an old Victorian, which we hope to restore. It's a historical monument in the city of L.A., in the San Pedro Harbor district and we need to restore it from the foundation up so right now, in addition to structural stuff, we also need to research the history behind it. Persephone is good at the interior design and colors and...

Persephone: Actually, I'm good at the stripping of the wood and the heavy-duty stuff. Renovating the houses and working on the houses forces you to grow together or apart so it's forced us in this

case to grow together because even though it's painful, sometimes, you know, because you have to agree on everything- how much money do you spend, and what can I do? And then you have to know each other's limitations. It's weird because you realize the person that you're with knows you so well.

Delia: We got married in San Francisco. We stood in line from 3 in the morning, pouring rain, pouring rain, and then to get into San Francisco City Hall.

Persephone: We didn't get out until 5 in the evening the next day.

Delia: Getting married unfortunately didn't provide us with any extra benefits or rights because a month later, it was rescinded through the legislation. I think the reason why it was important for us to be married is for me personally, and Persephone might answer in different way, is I am traditional in that sense. It's like marriage and that partnership is a big part of how you're raised.

Persephone: Like when you say initially what made you fall in love, and that was like to see there was something made for me because I mean, I didn't realize that, you know how your desire creeps up on you, you don't realize, 'Oh my god, that's what I want,' right?

Video 2: Gay Male couple, with children (1:28)

Keith: We've been together for 25 years. We met actually in Red Bank at an art gallery opening. A mutual friend had invited both of us.

Tom: Keith is a true Texan. I think that everything is just a little bit bigger, a little bit higher, a little bit closer to God with Keith. And he's just incredibly kind. Finding someone who I saw just treating other people so beautifully and so kindly. And I found that very attractive.

Keith: In 2010, the state decided to do an audit of all people who are on state health insurance benefits. The company that was hired to do the audit demanded that I produce a marriage license. I said, 'I'm happy to provide you with a California license but I cannot provide you with a New Jersey license because I am denied that ability.' I produced birth certificates, I produced domestic partnership, I produced civil union and none of that was considered sufficient.



Keith: One day we were in the backyard and Marie fell down over a chair and hit bricks and as we were rushing over to them, the first thing that flashed through my mind was, 'We don't have healthcare insurance. I gotta get this kid to the emergency room.' It was a real moment of fear and none of this would have happened if we could have produced a marriage license.

Tom: It is important to demonstrate to our children that it is right to stand up for yourself and what you believe in. It's time to show people that what defines family is really love.

Keith: I don't know that there's ever not a time to demand equal rights. There's never a good time, there's never a bad time. It's just always has to be that people are treated equally.

Video 3: Gay Male Couple, no children (1:32)

Tim: Ken is the love of my life. He can finish my sentences for me. He would prefer that I not know that I could finish his for him.

Ken: We've lived in Cobden for 15 years, going on 16. Fell in love with it; fell in love with the country and the beauty that was out here.

Tim: We love far Southern Illinois; we love the terrain, we love the hills; here we are, in this old beat-up farmhouse.

Ken: We've gone to great expense to make sure that we have legal protections.

Tim: We have a living will. What automatically comes to me, you know, doesn't go to him. So it's important that our relationship is given the same respect, given the same



privilege, given the same honor. We are very caring, very interested people in being a part of the community. And what we've done in our lives is to try to be a part of and not be set apart from.

Video 4: Lesbian couple, with children (1:25)



Karen: Marcye and I met at work, across a crowded meeting room and I'm getting my little buffet breakfast and this one walks up to me, right, I'll never forget and, 'Hello, I'm Marcye Nicholson.' Her hand, it just fit, absolutely fit in my hand.

Marcye: There was something in what she brought out in me and continues to bring out in me that just, you know, just, she's the right person for me.

Karen: Most people in the state still, they don't know what civil unions are, at all, and they have no idea that they're supposed to be the equivalent of marriage and it's been four years. I was at a new dentist and so had to fill out the whole patient intake form and right at the top, where they're looking for your marital status, there's no box whatsoever to fill in for civil union.

Marcye: The language is so clumsy. It does matter what you call it. If it didn't matter, then everybody just get civil unioned. Our commitment to marriage equality started because we were parents, and we could not imagine raising, first Casey and then later Maya as well, with the notion that we were a second-class family. When you have a little kid and you're trying to explain to them why you're not allowed to get married, that conversation is about injustice.

Karen: It is inconceivable to both of them why this is an issue. They're really passionate about it; it's really important to them now.

Figure 4. Google Consumer Survey Photos



Lesbian couple: Jill Goldstein and Nikki Weiss-Goldstein



Gay male couple: Tony and Barrie Drewitt-Barlow



Straight couples

Appendix

Table 1A. Randomization Check, MTurk Respondents

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