

# How America Thinks About LGBT Issues

LGBT Movement Communications Toolkit



- Mindset of the Moveable Middle
- Mindset of the Opposition
- Media Coverage of LGBT Issues



Authors



Contributing Editors

**Terminology note: Gay and transgender**

This section talks about how Americans think about LGBT issues. However, since moveable middle Americans, our opponents, and the media, typically think about “gay people” or “gay and transgender people” and not “LGBT people” the language in the documents that follow often use this shorthand to better put the reader in the shoes of our moveable middle audience. For more information see, “*Promote Inclusion, But Not Alphabet Soup*” in *Overall Guidelines for Talking About LGBT Issues*.

# Mindset of the Moveable Middle

How America Thinks About LGBT Issues



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# Mindset of the Moveable Middle

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*The moveable middle is that portion of the public who's not yet supportive of gay issues—but might be persuaded given the right messaging.*

## Defining the Moveable Middle

Before we describe the mindset of the moveable middle, let's quickly define who they are. The moveable middle is that portion of the public who's not yet supportive of LGBT equality ("LGBT issues")—but might be persuaded given the right messaging. They're not the third of Americans who *support* LGBT issues (our base) and they're not the third who strongly *oppose* LGBT issues (our opponents). They're that middle third—Americans who are uncertain or mildly to moderately unsupportive of LGBT issues. Don't interpret their uncertainty as neutrality, however. Until the moveable middle is convinced otherwise, they'll generally use their uncertainty to oppose, not support, LGBT issues.

The good news? The moveable middle genuinely wants to do the right thing. When it comes to LGBT issues, however, they just aren't sure what the right thing is. They have an enormous amount of inner conflict. They want to be fair, but worry that supporting LGBT issues may hurt society. They also don't really understand LGBT people, or the inequalities LGBT people face.

The moveable middle varies when it comes to how they think about LGBT issues. Some support certain protections but not other protections. Some resist LGBT issues across the board. Some are totally indifferent to LGBT issues, while others are simply uninformed (and, in the absence of information, go with the status quo). Most moveable middle Americans simply don't see LGBT issues as a priority. They have mortgages, jobs, and children in daycare, and they simply want LGBT issues to go away.

All moveable middle Americans have one thing in common, however: They hold a belief (or set of beliefs) that prevent them from fully supporting equality for LGBT people. But changing the way they think isn't enough. We also need to help them resolve their inner conflict and actively *support* equality. This document starts by examining the beliefs that create barriers to acceptance. It ends by suggesting how we can address these barriers and give Americans an incentive to do the right thing.

*The moveable middle wants to do the right thing—they're just not sure what that is in relation to gay issues.*

## DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE MOVEABLE MIDDLE

The moveable middle may differ by state or region. For example, a moveable middle audience in California will look different than one in Tennessee. Nationally however, the moveable middle includes:

- People with moderate political views
- People aged 35-55 (youth are generally supportive; older Americans are generally non-supportive)
- Women
- Democrats and independent voters
- Suburban dwellers
- Those with moderate education levels (highly educated people are generally supportive)
- Married people



## Conditions for Support

Suppose you're relaxing at home on a Saturday morning, sipping your latté, when you hear a knock on your door. One of three mayoral candidates is standing on your porch. He asks for your backing. Even if you're the type of person who actively supports political campaigns, you likely won't support them all. Whether you know it or not, before you pledge your time, vote, or money, at least three things have to happen.

1. **You must want to support this candidate.** There's a reason politicians are polite in public. It's because voters need to connect with candidates at some level before they pledge their support. What if our mayoral candidate stood on your porch and said, "You look like another stupid, uneducated voter. Why don't you just write me a check so we can elect someone smart enough to do your thinking for you?" Chances are you'd slam the door and go back to your latté. If you actively dislike a candidate, or think his values run contrary to yours, you'll never support him. You need to feel enough respect for, and connection with, a candidate to *want* to support him or her.
2. **You must believe your support will improve things, not make them worse.** If the candidate's policy platform reads like your worst nightmare, there's no way you'll support him. You need to believe your support will result in good, not harm. In fact, if you really believe the candidate will hurt society, you may decide to actively work against him.
3. **You must believe this candidate needs support.** You may decide the candidate is qualified and smart, but if he's the clear front-runner with a huge campaign chest, you won't write a check to buy him nicer office furniture. If you believe the candidate is doing just fine without your support, you'll be far less likely to donate to his campaign.

If the above example makes intuitive sense to you, then you've just understood the core communications challenge of the LGBT civil rights movement. To change social attitudes and unfair laws, LGBT people need to increase public and political support. To get

*If Americans believe that LGBT people are against most of the things they believe in, is it any wonder that it's hard to get their support?*

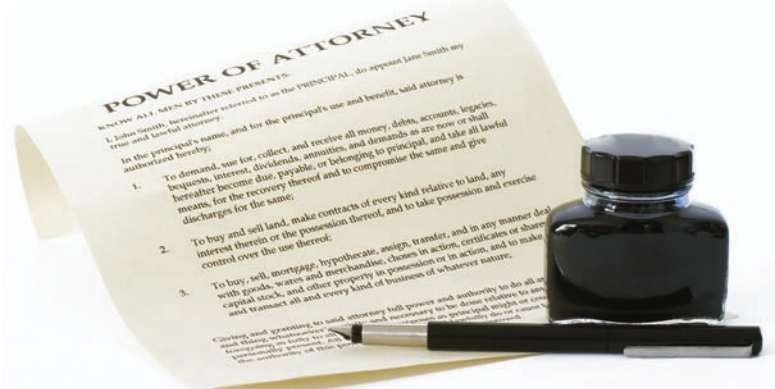
*If straight Americans can find common ground with LGBT Americans, it will go a long way to reducing their fears.*

this support, the same three things need to happen. Americans must *want* to support LGBT people in their fight for equal rights. They must understand that *good*, not *harm* (or the downfall of America), will come from equality. Finally, they must understand that the *need* for equality is real.

## Barriers to Support

Again, the moveable middle wants to do the right thing—they're just not sure what that is in relation to gay issues. The moveable middle is conflicted, and that conflict centers around three high-level beliefs that create barriers to support: (1) gay people aren't like me, (2) gay people are a threat to society, and (3) gay people don't need more rights.

That's not to say that the entire moveable middle thinks the same way. On the contrary, a moveable middle American may hold one, two, or all three of the beliefs above, and the way they express their beliefs may be very different. Some Americans hold these beliefs intensely and explicitly; others hold them unconsciously, or simply have vague feelings of discomfort about LGBT issues. However, at the deepest level, these three beliefs underpin people's inner conflict around LGBT issues.



**1. Gay people aren't like me (so I'm not sure I want to support them).** Many straight people see gay people as almost antithetical to “regular” Americans and mainstream American values. That is, they see gay people as almost antithetical to *themselves*. In its mildest form, this belief reflects a vague notion that gay people are different. In its harshest form, it reflects the belief that gay people are “bad”—unnatural, icky, sinful, selfish, promiscuous, etc. If Americans believe that LGBT people are “against” most of the things they believe in, is it any wonder that it's hard to get their support? Straight Americans need to realize that gay people aren't the enemy. Gay and straight people have similar hopes, dreams, and values—and live similar ordinary lives. This doesn't mean we should try to convince straight Americans that gay people are “just like them.” However, it does mean we should try to create a connection and find common ground.


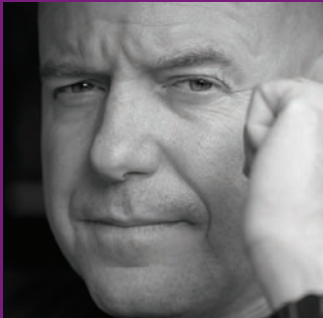


**2. Gay people are a threat to society (if I support them, bad things may happen).** The second thing that prevents good people from working for LGBT equality is fear. It doesn't matter that the fear (carefully fed by our opponents and reinforced by the media) is groundless. Like monsters in the closet, fear isn't easily reasoned away. The “slippery slope” argument and worries about the “moral decay of society” or greater acceptance being “bad for children” are the most commonly expressed fears that surround LGBT issues. In addition to worries about society unraveling, many Americans believe that gay people threaten religious freedoms. Finally, they worry that greater acceptance of gay people will increase the *number* of gay people, since children will “think it's okay to experiment.” In its mild form, this belief is expressed as vague uncertainty (e.g., “I'm just not sure what would happen if we allowed gay couples to marry”). In its harsher form, the fear turns to paranoia (e.g., “If we allow gay couples to marry, what's next? People marrying their dogs?”) If straight Americans can find common ground with LGBT Americans, it will go a long way to reducing their fears. Gay people only seem scary because straight people know so little about them.

**3. Gay people don't need more rights (I'm not sure they need support).** One of the most surprising findings from the market research is that Americans truly don't understand the legal and social inequalities faced by LGBT people. They don't know that in 37 states, transgender people don't have employment or housing protections. They don't know that many gay people have to hide their sexual orientation in public to avoid physical danger. They don't understand the legal protections of marriage and why it's important not only as a social institution, but as a *legal* institution that helps committed couples care for each other in sickness, and even in death. They don't know that financial, health, or end-of-life issues can't be overcome by a simple will or power of attorney. They haven't thought through how the lack of second-parent adoption harms children in the event of the death of a biological parent.

Much of the opposition to gay and transgender equality stems from sheer ignorance rather than malice. Expressions of the belief that gay people don't need more rights range from the uninformed (e.g., “I don't understand why gay couples need to marry”) to downright denial (e.g., “It simply can't be true that gay people can be fired just for being gay. You must not be interpreting the law correctly.”) Straight people need to be educated about the lack of equality for LGBT people and how it impacts LGBT people's lives. If they understand that LGBT people face real hardship, it will help them resolve their inner conflict in favor of equality.

Moveable Middle Beliefs Create Barriers to Acceptance		
Overall Beliefs	→	Resulting Barrier
1. Gay people aren't like me	→	I'm not sure I <u>want</u> to support gay people
2. Gay people are a threat	→	If I help gay people, <u>bad things</u> may happen
3. Gay people don't need more rights	→	I'm not sure gay people <u>need</u> support

Moveable Middle Profiles Vary, But Three Core Beliefs Are At Play

	Example Profile	Translation	Underlying Beliefs
	<p>"My cousin is gay and we get along just fine.</p>		<p>1. Gay people aren't like me</p>
	<p><i>However, the wedding invitation he sent out really upset my mom. Why does he have to keep pushing this?</i></p>	<p>Gay people cause conflict</p>	<p>2. Gay people are a threat</p>
	<p><i>I just don't understand why he needs to get married."</i></p>	<p>Unaware of legal protections of marriage</p>	<p>3. Gay people don't need more rights</p>
	<p><i>"I was raised that being gay is a sin.</i></p>	<p>Sinful</p>	<p>1. Gay people aren't like me</p>
	<p><i>If we accept this, where does it end?"</i></p>	<p>Slippery slope</p>	<p>2. Gay people are a threat</p>
			<p>3. Gay people don't need more rights</p>
	<p><i>"I admire the courage of gay couples, standing up to all that prejudice. I want to support them.</i></p>	<p>Gay couples need "explaining"</p>	<p>1. Gay people aren't like me</p>
	<p><i>But I think, how will I explain this to my daughter?"</i></p>	<p>Threat to children</p>	<p>2. Gay people are a threat</p>
			<p>3. Gay people don't need more rights</p>
	<p><i>"There's a gay man at my office and he drives a BMW.</i></p>		<p>1. Gay people aren't like me</p>
			<p>2. Gay people are a threat</p>
	<p><i>Why should he have special rights?"</i></p>	<p>Special rights</p>	<p>3. Gay people don't need more rights</p>

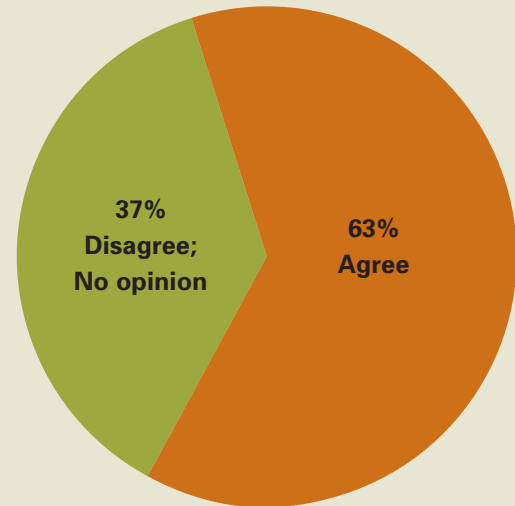
## Belief 1: Gay People Aren't Like Me (I'm Not Sure I Want to Support Them)

The belief that LGBT people aren't like "regular" Americans is supported by the core ideas described below. Again, most people won't espouse all of these ideas—in fact, only the most ardent opponents espouse even a majority of them. For many in the moveable middle, the ideas are subconscious and are never articulated outright. Nevertheless, these ideas all amount to the belief or feeling that gay people aren't like (and aren't quite as good as) straight people.

- 1. Being gay is "bad."** There's a fairly widespread sentiment that being gay is somehow not as "good" as being straight. Religious opponents might express this in terms of sin or even abomination, while the moveable middle might say things like, "It just doesn't seem right." Regardless of how it's expressed, this feeling is held by a surprising number of Americans.
- 2. Gay sex—ick!** The "ick" response is shorthand for a well-documented response many straight people have when thinking or talking about gay issues. For some reason, gay issues often inherently trigger images of gay sex, which then in turn trigger the ick response. (The ick response isn't surprising when you think that many straight people have a hard time just dealing with straight sex.) For many in the moveable middle, gay sex is too much to contemplate. Strong opponents might use words like, "homosexuality is disgusting," while the moveable middle might say something like, "it makes me uncomfortable to think about it," but in both cases, the ick response is in play. The important thing to understand about the ick response is that once it's triggered, people generally close themselves off to any further rational discussion of gay issues. Unfortunately, the ick response is all too easy to trigger. Even innocuous pictures of two gay men sitting side by side can ick people out. Research shows that imagery of gay men is far more likely to trigger the ick response than imagery of lesbians. Also, imagery of couples will trigger it more than imagery of gay individuals.
- 3. Being gay isn't natural.** The concept of procreation lies at the heart of this idea. The premise is that the natural world is set up to propagate itself, and since gay people can't do so "naturally" within their relationships, it's "self-evident" that homosexuality is unnatural. Examples of naturally occurring homosexuality in the animal kingdom

### "It's Just Plain Wrong"

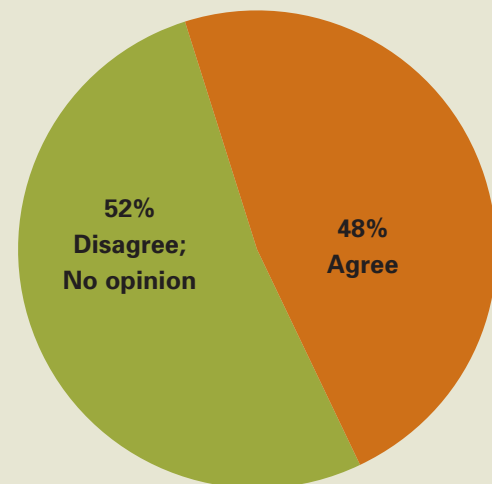
63% agree that men having sex with men is "just plain wrong."



Source: UC Davis Research, 2005.

### "It's Disgusting"

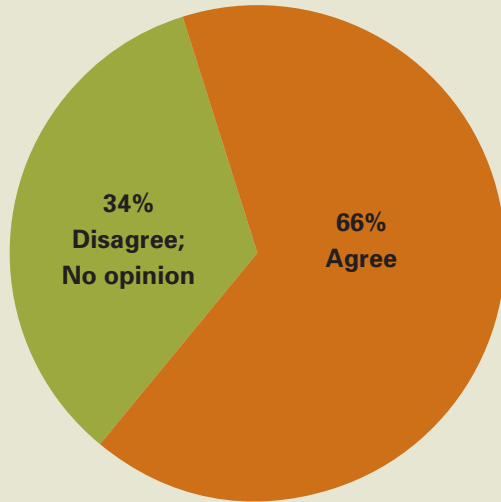
48% agree that men having sex with men is "disgusting."



Source: UC Davis Research, 2005.

**"It's Not Natural"**

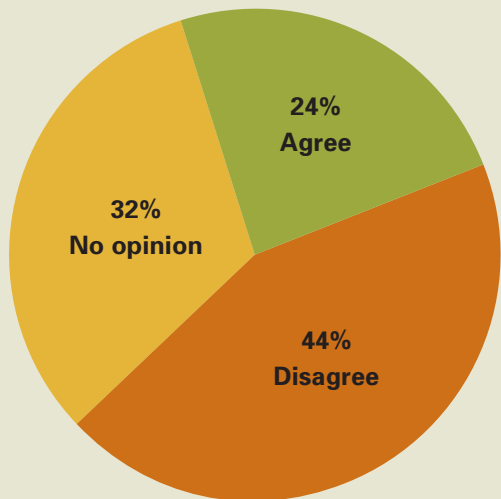
66% agree that men having sex with men is "not natural."



Source: UC Davis Research, 2005.

**"Different Values"**

Only 24% agree that gays and lesbians "share my values."



Source: UC Davis Research, 2005.

don't sway people who hold this belief. To them, gay rams are "an aberration" of nature, even though they occur within nature.

4. **Gay people are "other."** This is our catch-all phrase for the stereotypes many use to convince themselves that gay people are different than, and have values that run contrary to, ordinary Americans. Stereotypes in this category include gay people as promiscuous, unstable, unhappy, sexual predators, not religious, etc. Expressions of this belief range from the statement that gay people "are not like us," to suspicion of a "gay agenda," and criticism of "men with wigs, lipstick and high heeled shoes." One stereotype that warrants particular mention is the recurring idea that gay people are selfish because they're unwilling to sacrifice their "lifestyle" to do what's "best" for their children or society at large (e.g., "gay people are selfish because they're unwilling to act straight for the sake of their children"). Another recurring stereotype is that the children of gay couples will suffer because they won't have appropriate or stable role models. That said, familiarity erodes the overall view of gay people as "other." When Americans get to know gay people, they start to think about individuals as opposed to abstract stereotypes. That's why relatives and friends of gay people support gay and transgender equality more than those who don't know anyone gay.
5. **Gay people choose a "deviant lifestyle."** Research clearly shows that people who think sexual orientation is a choice are less likely to support gay people than those who think social orientation is innate. The good news is that more Americans are understanding that sexual orientation is innate. The bad news is that sexual orientation and choice may be a difficult issue to tackle head-on.
  - Many people define choice not in terms of the orientation itself, but in terms of the choice to act on the orientation. This is commonly expressed as "choosing to live the gay lifestyle." Note the wording. The choice lies in "living the lifestyle," not in being gay. In other words, gay people could choose to live unhappy heterosexual or celibate lives if they wanted to.
  - Another complication is the reality of bisexuality. While straight Americans almost never talk about bisexuality directly, it's common to hear

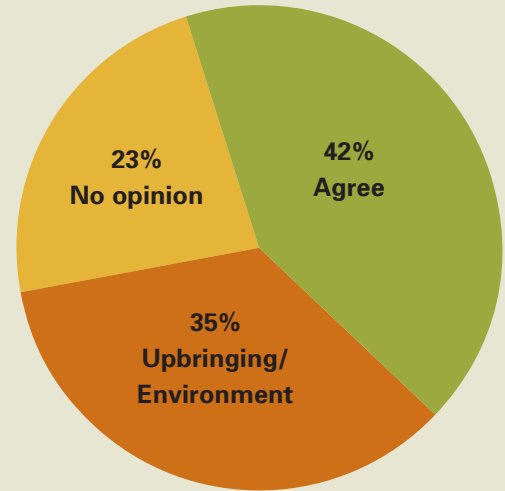
ideas such as, “Some people are born gay, but some people choose.” It’s also a commonly held belief that many people “experiment.”

- The fact that people can—and sometimes do—force themselves to live as heterosexuals before coming out as gay leads many to believe that people “choose to become gay” later in life. Even close relatives of gay people hold this belief. For example, focus group participants make comments such as, “My sister went that way in her mid-20’s,” and, “My friend got a divorce and became gay.”

Given the above, how is it that more Americans are coming to understand that sexual orientation is almost never a matter of choice? While there’s no clear research on this issue, we believe that more people are coming to understand sexuality is innate because they’re forming close relationships with gay people who tell them so. While moveable middle Americans might not trust this message coming from an LGBT organization, they will trust it coming from a close and trusted friend or relative.

### “Choice To Be Gay?”

42% of Americans believe people are “Born with their sexual orientation.”



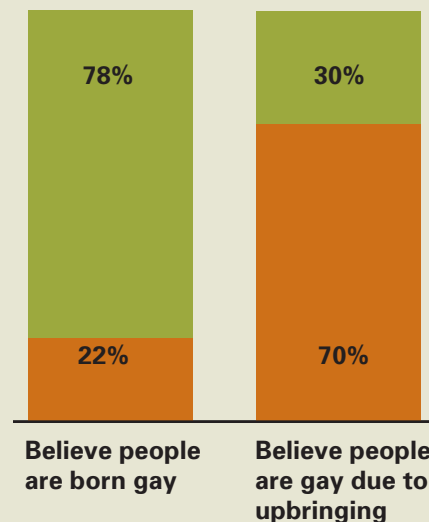
Source: Gallup Polling, 2007.

### Those Who Believe It’s Not a Choice Are More Supportive

Those who believe people are born gay are two and a half times more likely to believe being gay is an “acceptable alternative lifestyle” than those who believe being gay is a choice.

Believe being gay is:

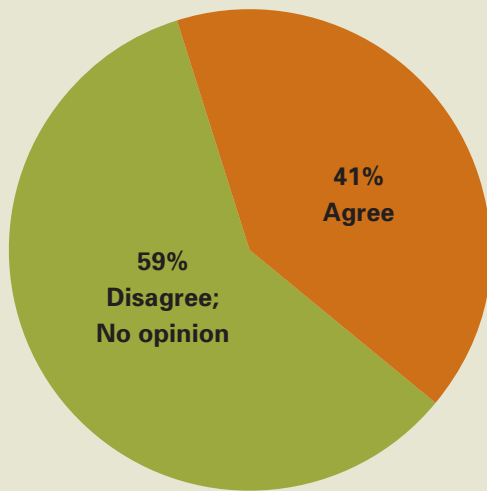
- Not acceptable; no opinion
- Acceptable Lifestyle



Source: Gallup Polling, 2007.

**"Too Flamboyant"**

41% have more negative opinions after hearing opponent message that, "Gays and lesbians sometimes shock and embarrass the rest of us by being too flamboyant, especially through public displays and parades."



Source: Greenberg, Quinlan & Rosner Research for HRC, 2005.

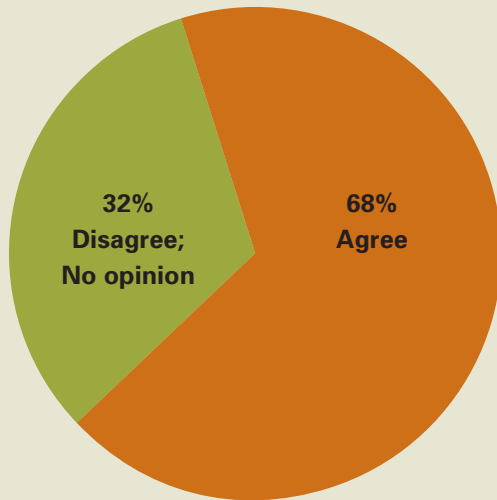
- 6. Gay people are disrespectful/flaunting/throwing it in our faces.** There's a lot of anger toward gay people for what's perceived to be disrespect and contempt for the sensibilities of others. The media's emphasis on certain colorful aspects of gay pride parades and celebrations reinforces this perception. Focus group participants often express frustration around "flaunting" and "shoving it down our throats." As one marketing professional stated, "People have a hard enough time with gay and lesbian issues, but throw in some bad attitude and a pair of leather chaps, and they're going to pack up their support and go home." What makes dealing with this perception tricky is that the least supportive members of the moveable middle appear to see any public display of affection between a gay couple as flaunting. When they object to gay people "flaunting," what they mean is, please don't hold hands on television.

*When the moveable middle objects to gay people "flaunting," what they mean is, please don't hold hands on television.*

Belief 1: Gay People Aren't Like Me		
Supporting Ideas	Translation: Gay people aren't like me because...	Sample focus group quotes
Being gay is "bad, immoral, sinful"	Gay relationships aren't as "good" as straight relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "It just doesn't seem right."</li> <li>• "I was raised that it's wrong."</li> <li>• "Ungodliness is going on."</li> </ul>
"Ick response"	Gay relationships are gross or icky	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Gay relationships are disgusting."</li> <li>• "It makes me think of something gross, like eating raw fish."</li> </ul>
Being gay is <b>not natural</b>	Gay relationships aren't part of the natural order and gay couples cannot naturally conceive children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Gay relationships are inherently abnormal." "It's against nature."</li> <li>• "They can't procreate. It's not natural."</li> <li>• "Being gay is bad, immoral, sinful."</li> <li>• "Being gay is a (bad/selfish) 'lifestyle choice;' don't validate it with marriage."</li> </ul>
Gay as "other" (promiscuous, unstable, etc.)	Gay people don't share the values of regular Americans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I have a cousin who is gay; we don't have many of the same values."</li> <li>• "Gays don't seem religious. They don't follow the same rules I do."</li> <li>• "Turbulent (is) how I think of gay relationships."</li> </ul>
Gay people choose a "deviant" lifestyle	Even if gay people are born with an orientation, they choose a certain type of (bad) lifestyle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "It's what you've chosen to do."</li> <li>• "Living the gay lifestyle."</li> <li>• "The lifestyle you've chosen."</li> </ul>
Gay people are <b>disruptive, disrespectful</b>	Gay people are aggressive and demanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "It shouldn't be shoved down our throats."</li> <li>• "As long as they don't try to force anything on me, that's fine."</li> <li>• "This is what really hurts the gay community—throwing it in your face."</li> </ul>

### “It’s All Changing Too Fast”

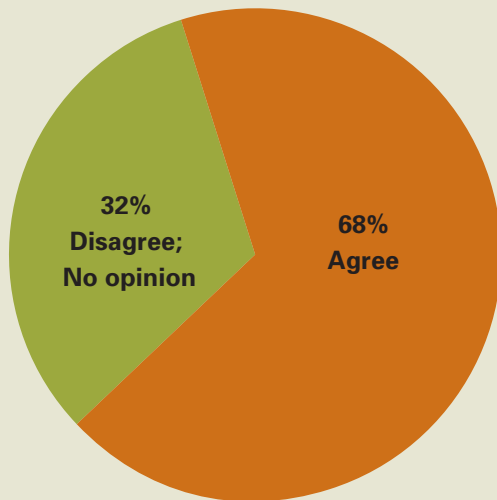
68% agree that: “Society is changing too fast and we should rely more on traditional values and ways of doing things.”



Source: Lauer Colorado Polling, 2005.

### “Moral Decline”

68% agree that: “Moral decline and breakdown of the family are two of the most important issues facing the country.”



Source: Lake Research Polling, 2005.

## Belief 2: Gay People Are a Threat (If I Support Them, Bad Things May Happen)

Religious opponents most strongly believe that LGBT people are a threat. However, even moderate Americans have a nagging worry that acceptance of gay and transgender equality might harm society. This fear exists primarily because many straight Americans see gay people as being so different from themselves. They worry about granting equality to a group of people who they see as “bad,” making “poor lifestyle choices,” or promoting values that run “contrary” to their own. This then creates a set of fears around what could happen if gay people are fully accepted. Again, most moveable middle Americans don’t hold every idea described below and they don’t express it in the same way. We simply grouped the basic set of ideas that make people afraid to support LGBT equality. These ideas are:

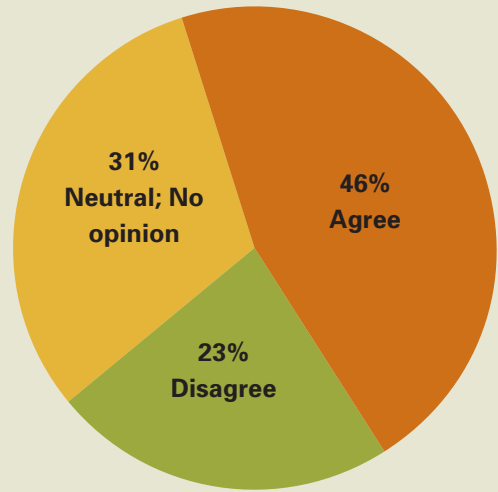
- 1. Supporting gay and transgender equality is a slippery slope.** The large majority of Americans feel that society is changing too fast, and that this change is mostly bad. They worry about the breakdown of the traditional family, including high rates of divorce and single parenting, and believe they must “draw the line somewhere” to prevent America from sliding into moral chaos. As one focus group respondent stated, “We have to keep accepting a lot of things; if we accept this, how much more will they demand?” They fear America will become an “anything goes” society with people “marrying their dogs” or “pushing for polygamy.” In other words, people don’t see LGBT issues in isolation, but as part of a larger agenda to erode American values.
- 2. Greater acceptance is bad for children.** Perhaps because so few straight people can separate gay people from gay sex, there’s a common belief that children should be shielded from all things gay. This idea manifests itself in three distinct ways. First, there’s the common refrain, “How do I explain this to my children?” People simply don’t want to talk to their kids about LGBT issues. Unconsciously, they believe that exposure to gay people will lead to age-inappropriate and uncomfortable conversations that will affect the innocence of their children. Second, there’s a fear that exposure to LGBT issues will “turn” children gay, or worse, that gay people will “recruit” children and force them to become gay. Others worry that acceptance of gay people will encourage their children to experiment. Third, some

fear that greater acceptance will lead to greater numbers of gay families, and that the children in these families will suffer (e.g., “If a boy is raised by two moms, how can he be normal?”).

3. **Gay people are infringing on straight Americans.** People who believe this essentially see gay and transgender equality as a zero-sum game. In other words, they believe gay people gain rights at the expense of everyone else. The most common expression of this belief is that marriage for gay couples would “cheapen” or “take away from” an institution that straight Americans hold sacred. Among religious opponents, the most common rhetoric is that gay people will “infringe on religious freedoms.”
4. **Gay people are causing conflict and chaos.** This view blames gay people for the conflict caused by the fight for equality. It’s not the lack of protections that creates the problem, but fighting for them. If only gay people would only stop “upsetting people,” everything would be alright.
5. **Gay people are why we have an HIV/AIDS crisis.** Because of the way the AIDS epidemic was initially understood (and, in many cases, continues to be misunderstood), there remains to this day an irrational phobia about gay and transgender people. In particular, discussions about gay sex and sexuality evoke stereotypes that gay people are unsafe, reckless, non-monogamous and “the cause” of HIV and AIDS.
6. **Acceptance will increase the number of gay people.** This surprisingly common view is based on the premise that others—especially children—will “turn gay” if gay people gain acceptance. The fear is that once society removes the stigma of homosexuality, gay sex will become more commonplace, and thus cause straight people to experiment and ultimately “turn gay.” As one focus group participant expressed it, “I would hate for something like a gay society to be so prevalent that it almost forces an unnatural decision on my children. Let’s say one of my children ends up being gay, and maybe it wasn’t totally what they wanted, but it’s so prevalent that they just kind of fell into that group.”
7. **Is he looking at my butt?** There’s a consistent minority of people who have a phobia about being “hit on” by a person of the same gender. This worry ranges from minor discomfort when thinking about how to handle this type of situation, to the irrational

**“Demanding Too Much”**

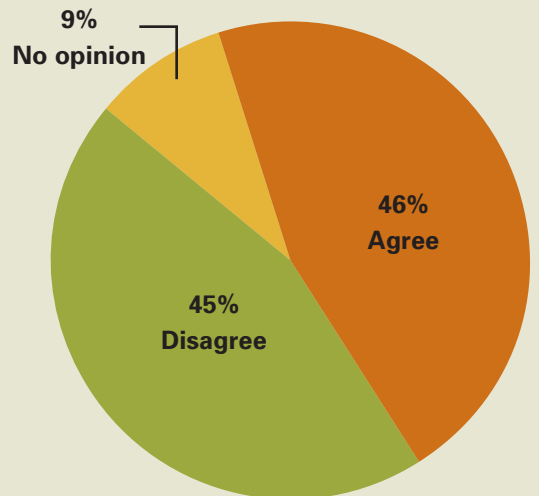
Only 23% disagree that: “Gays and lesbians are demanding too much.”



Source: UC Davis Research, 2005.

**“Children Will Experiment”**

46% agree that: “With homosexuality (increasing in visibility) I worry that children may think it’s okay to experiment.”



Source: Greenberg, Quinlan & Rosner Polling for HRC, 2005.

fear that gay people are attracted to every person of their gender and may “force themselves” on straight people.

Belief 2: Gay People Are A Threat		
Supporting Ideas	Translation: Gay people are a threat because...	Sample focus group quotes
Slippery slope	Acceptance of gay people will lead to decay of society, marriage, family, morality; "anything goes"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "If we accept this, how much more will they demand?"</li> <li>• "Marry your dog or a farm animal."</li> <li>• "No definition, no rules, no regulations. It's whatever you want. We're going to be messed up."</li> <li>• "We are headed for a downfall."</li> </ul>
Greater acceptance is <b>bad for children</b>	Children will be more exposed to gay issues, leading to age-inappropriate conversations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "It's okay by me, but how am I going to explain this to my daughter?"</li> <li>• "What do I tell my 5-year-old nephew?"</li> <li>• "I just worry about the children."</li> </ul>
Gay people are <b>infringing on straight Americans</b>	Gay people are trying to force people to accept them; they threaten America's deep values, sacred institutions and religious freedoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "It's a lack of respect for what marriage means to me."</li> <li>• "It's one more way to push religion out of the way."</li> </ul>
Gay people are causing <b>conflict and chaos</b>	Gay people are causing conflict with their fight; their push for rights (not lack thereof) is the problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "There's so much chaos and everyone is in conflict. It scares me to think about where we are headed."</li> <li>• "Their fight for rights just adds up to turmoil."</li> <li>• "It upsets a lot of people."</li> </ul>
Gay people are why we have an <b>HIV/AIDS crisis</b>	The sexual choices of gay people lead to deadly illnesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Their lifestyle is so unhealthy—just look at the AIDS crisis."</li> </ul>
Acceptance will <b>increase the number of gay people</b>	If gay people are accepted, more people (especially children) will experiment and "become gay"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "With homosexuality increasing in visibility, I worry that children may think it's okay to experiment."</li> <li>• "A try-it mentality."</li> </ul>
Fear of being <b>hit on</b> by person of the same gender	Someone of the same gender might make a pass at me	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I wonder, Jesus, is he staring at my ass?"</li> <li>• "They prey on your weakness."</li> <li>• "I wouldn't want to be within 10 feet of a lesbian. What if she hit on me? I am not that strong."</li> </ul>

### Belief 3: Gay People Don't Need More Rights (I'm Not Sure They Need Support)

Most Americans don't realize the inequities LGBT people face. This statement from a 2007 focus group report says it all: "Virtually every participant ... did not know that it's legal to fire someone from a job, and evict someone from their housing, because they are gay or lesbian."<sup>1</sup> Another report<sup>2</sup> found that "most voters are unaware of the protections and legal mechanisms afforded to straight married couples that gay couples don't share." The majority of Americans don't understand that gay people have a problem. The following ideas reinforce the belief that gay people are doing "just fine":

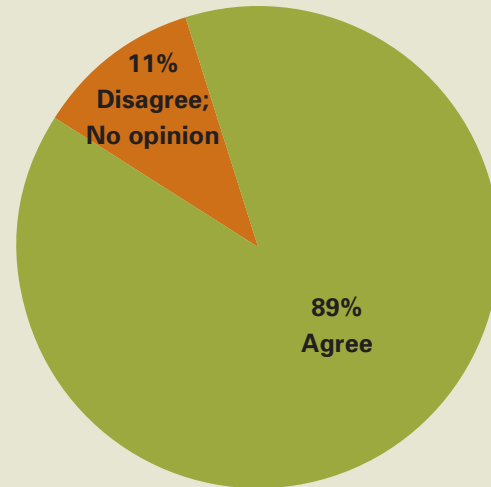
- 1. Existing laws cover gay people.** There's widespread support for employment and housing protection. The problem is, most people believe LGBT people already have this. That's why communications campaigns that generically focus on "equal rights" or "equality" are so problematic. Americans believe that gay people are already equal, so any new demands must be for "special rights" or, worse yet, "the gay agenda." It's similarly problematic to talk about the 1,138 federal rights and protections of marriage. People don't understand what those 1,138 rights are, so they assume that those rights must not be very important. Good communications focus on a few key issues faced by gay people, and spell those out in clear and concrete terms. Don't focus on every issue. Focus on a few that are memorable and compelling.
- 2. Gay people want "special rights."** The opposition has attempted to frame LGBT issues as special rights. This concept comes up most often in discussions that require enumeration of gay people as a protected class (e.g., employment legislation, hate crimes legislation). Many Americans can't articulate **how** the protections that gay people seek are "special," but they can articulate that they believe this to be the case. A lack of understanding of the inequality LGBT people face, coupled with imagery of white, affluent gay couples living in Hollywood, has all contributed to the erroneous idea that gay people already have it better than most Americans. The perception is that granting "additional" rights will only make gay people even *more* better off than the average American.

<sup>1</sup> Gill Foundation focus groups, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Gill Foundation focus groups, 2006.

#### Strong Support for Employment Protections

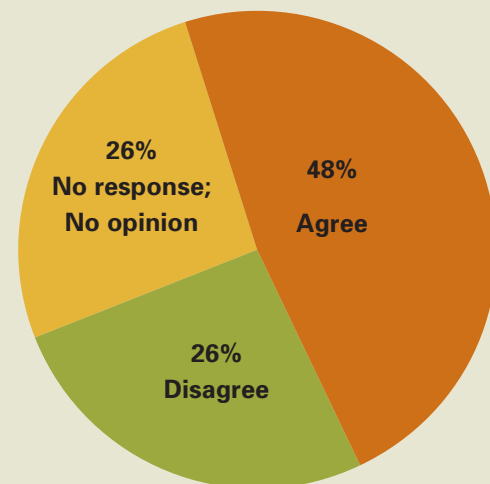
89% of Americans support "Equal rights in terms of job opportunities."



Source: Gallup Polling, 2007.

#### "Special Rights"

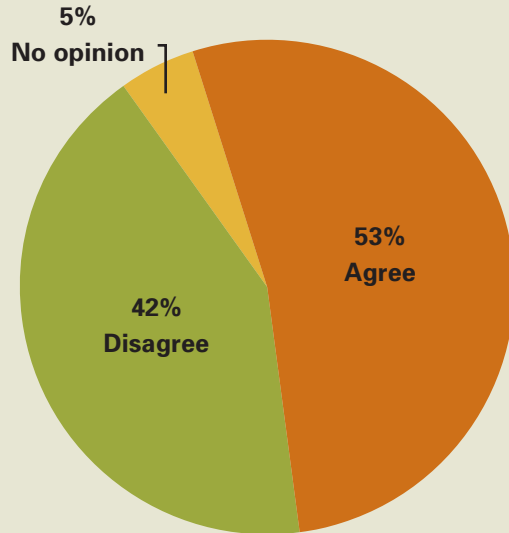
26% disagree that gay people want "special rights."



Source: UC Davis Research, 2005.

### “Get Rights Other Ways”

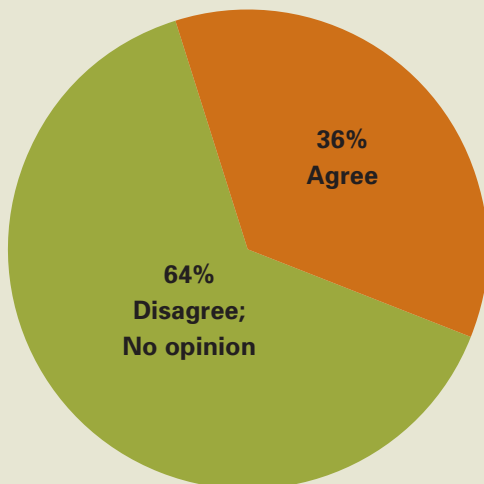
53% believe, “Rights can be assured by an attorney, will, or power of attorney, so state laws on civil unions are not important.”



Source: American Viewpoint Colorado Polling, 2006.

### “It’s Not Discrimination”

Only 36% of people see denial of marriage as discrimination.



Source: Lake Research Polling, 2006.

- 3. Rights can be obtained through other means.** For issues where it’s clear that gay people don’t have the same rights as straight people (e.g., the ability to marry), there’s a widespread belief that gay people can achieve equality with fancy paperwork. The moveable middle usually believes it’s unnecessary to pass laws and legislation to correct the situation. For example, most people believe that hospital visitation rights and financial caretaking can be solved by a simple power of attorney or a will. They don’t understand the subtleties of tax, financial, and relationship laws, and that no power of attorney will ever allow a gay person to transfer their pension to their significant other.
- 4. Discrimination is isolated.** LGBT advocates sometimes assume that straight people understand their plight. They don’t. While straight people understand that gay people face social stigma, most straight people often have no concept that discrimination against LGBT people happens on a daily basis. They don’t consider to what lengths LGBT people often have to go to hide their identity. And they have the mistaken idea that “everything would be fine” if LGBT people just didn’t talk about their sex lives. Even when presented with the facts of legal discrimination (e.g., LGBT workers have no employment protections in 30 states), most Americans show widespread disbelief. Focus group participants make comments such as, “If discrimination really happened, it would be all over the papers and have to stop right away.” Americans who recognize that gay people are unequal under the law often believe that it’s easy to get around these inequities. For example, why don’t gay people just get into the hospital by saying they’re the sick person’s brother? Or why don’t transgender people just “dress appropriately” and keep their jobs?
- 5. Gay people don’t face prejudice.** Few people in the moveable middle see themselves as prejudiced against gay people. They justify their lack of support for equality by saying they aren’t against gay people, but rather, they’re against some of the “things gay people do” or some of the “things gay people want.” For example, as one focus group attendee succinctly put it, “I don’t want to discriminate and I don’t discriminate—I just don’t support gay marriage.” This is similar to the types of logic used for other social issues (e.g., “I’m not against poor people; I’m just against more government handouts.”)

### Belief 3: Gay People Don't Need More Rights

Supporting Ideas	Translation: Gay people don't need more rights because...	Sample focus group quotes
Existing laws cover gay people	Gay people already have legal protections (note: there's a broad lack of understanding about existing inequalities)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I'm not sure if they are denied rights."</li> <li>• "My cousin had perfect (hospital) visitation rights. He just had to say it was his life partner."</li> <li>• "Do gays really have problems in the scheme of things? I'm not hearing a problem."</li> <li>• "As individuals, they basically have all the rights."</li> </ul>
Gay people want <b>special rights</b>	Gay people are seeking protections beyond what the average citizen has; they want more than just equality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "They should have the same rights, not special rights."</li> <li>• "I support equal rights, but I don't support special rights."</li> </ul>
Gay people can get rights through <b>other means</b>	Issues faced by gay people can easily be solved through a simple power of attorney, will, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Most companies offer employee plus one health insurance, so marriage isn't needed for insurance."</li> <li>• "Divorce can be handled through an arbitrator."</li> <li>• "Sign a prenuptial contract."</li> <li>• "Use a living will."</li> </ul>
<b>Discrimination is isolated</b>	Even if legal protections are in place, gay people still have very few problems"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "What are we talking about? What is the problem?"</li> <li>• "Companies don't care if people are gay. It's all about job performance."</li> </ul>
Gay people <b>don't face prejudice</b>	Society accepts gay people, just not some of their actions and demands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I'm against gay marriage and I don't feel the least bit prejudiced. ...I just don't agree with certain things they want to do. But I am NOT prejudiced."</li> <li>• "I don't want to discriminate and I don't discriminate, I just don't support certain legal rights."</li> <li>• "There is inequality, but I don't think it's a prejudice."</li> </ul>

## Basic Approaches to Positively Changing the Moveable Middle Mindset

Until now, this document has focused on the three core beliefs that create barriers to greater support for LGBT issues. However, it's important to remember that despite holding some or all of these beliefs, most moveable middle Americans want to do the right thing—they're just not sure what the right thing is. Often, their negative beliefs stem from ignorance, not malice. So, how do we move the moveable middle?

We recommend two basic ways to use communications to overcome the negative beliefs of the moveable middle—and to turn well-meaning Americans into supporters. These two approaches are: 1) emphasize common ground and 2) illustrate concrete harms. The first approach helps Americans accept LGBT people. The second shows Americans the need for equality. The best long-term communications plan uses a blend of both. If we only help straight Americans accept LGBT people, society will become more tolerant, but our laws won't change. If we only help straight people understand the inequalities that LGBT people face, the laws might change, but society will remain intolerant. Blending both approaches—working toward both acceptance and legal change—creates a self-reinforcing social, political, and legal climate that will help speed equality for LGBT people.

We can help positively impact the mindset of the moveable middle when our communications:

- 1. Emphasize common ground.** Don't misinterpret this recommendation. It's not meant to suggest gay people are "just like" straight people—or that we should use messages to this effect. In fact, explicit messages of this sort may ring untrue and can potentially alienate the moveable middle. After all,

*We simply need to focus on the ways we're similar instead of the ways we're dissimilar.*



LGBT people don't need to be the same as straight people (or claim to be the same) in order to establish common ground. We simply need to focus on the ways we're similar instead of the ways we're dissimilar. Gay and straight people share many of the same values, beliefs, hopes, dreams—even daily routines. We all want the chance to earn a living, take care of those we love, or to feel safe on our streets. Despite media stereotypes, LGBT people live ordinary working, tax-paying, lawn-mowing, dog-walking, car-washing lives. We take in the mail for our neighbors. We believe in hard work, community and responsibility.

We need to eliminate the mentality that sees gay people as scary and alien. Helping Americans understand that LGBT people aren't so different after all will simultaneously overcome the belief that gay

people are different and the belief that gay people are a threat. If straight people understand that gay people are just another part of the American fold, they'll no longer fear that bad things will happen if gay people achieve equality. For a much more detailed explanation of how to emphasize common ground, see *Overall Messaging Guidelines for Talking About LGBT Issues*.

- 2. Illustrate concrete harms.** Americans need to understand that LGBT people aren't already equal. As mentioned earlier, talking generically about "equality" and "rights" does nothing to advance this understanding. Effective communications focus on specific, concrete injustices that Americans can relate to and easily internalize. Instead of talking about the 1,138 federal benefits of marriage (nobody knows what those are), talk about hospital visitation and personal leave to take care of a sick partner. Instead of talking generically about employment protections, talk about living with the fear of being fired, even with positive job performance. Talk about how, in many parts of America, transgender people risk their personal safety every time they go outside. Again, for a much more detailed

explanation of how to go about helping Americans understand the issues faced by gay citizens, see *Guidelines for Talking to the Moveable Middle About LGBT Issues*.

These two approaches—emphasizing common ground and illustrating concrete harms—do two things simultaneously. First, they help overcome the negative beliefs that create barriers to acceptance. Second, they provide incentive for Americans to become *supporters* of LGBT issues. How? Because both approaches tie into Americans' desire to do the right thing. When we "emphasize common ground," we tie into mainstream values and beliefs, and show how supporting equality *is* the right thing. When we "illustrate concrete harms," we create a greater awareness of the existing injustices, which makes it harder for the moveable middle to turn a blind eye. The more Americans understand the degree of injustice, the greater their desire to make it right.

Note that while emphasizing common ground and illustrating concrete harms are effective approaches, they're not the *only* approaches that

## Moving the Moveable Middle on LGBT Issues

Overall Beliefs	Two Approaches for Overcoming the Moveable Middle Mindset
	<b>Emphasize common ground</b>
1. Gay people aren't like me  2. Gay people are a threat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where possible, emphasize common values, belief, hopes, and dreams that gay people share with straight, moveable middle Americans.</li> <li>• This is why knowing gay people has such an impact on acceptance; it reduces the sense of "otherness."</li> <li>• Gay people are only perceived as threatening because they are perceived to be so different; if gay people are seen more as everyday Americans, the sense of threat will diminish on its own.</li> </ul>
	<b>Illustrate concrete harms</b>
3. Gay people don't need more rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highlight specific injustices people care about as opposed to using general language around "equal rights." Pick a few concrete examples and repeat them until the public understands the issues.</li> </ul>

will ever work. Specific issues, target audiences, geographies, and situations may require very different and tailored messaging. For example, groups working to repeal Don't Ask, Don't Tell have found it effective to remind audiences that the ban is negatively affecting national security (e.g., emphasizing the fact that it compromises national security to fire competent Arabic linguists in a time of war just because they are gay). If you do choose to tailor messages, hire a professional firm and make sure they test the messages (see *Communications Campaign Best Practices*). However, even tailored messages shouldn't need to violate the principles outlined under "*Harmful and Ineffective Approaches*" in *Overall Messaging Guidelines for Gay Issues*.

## How to Avoid Reinforcing Negative Beliefs

Our opponents can say horrible, mean-spirited, and grossly untrue things about LGBT people. The media can unwittingly (or deliberately) pick up on these comments and repeat them as truth. Meanwhile, the lack of equality for LGBT people in America can create situations that range from frustrating (e.g., stereotyped portrayals of gay people on TV) to downright cruel, (e.g., not being able to see a loved one in the hospital). It's natural and normal to feel outrage and anger—and it's good to find healthy outlets for expressing that anger. However, if we want to advance public support for LGBT issues, it's best to express that outrage and



anger to colleagues, friends, relatives, and perhaps the base—but not in communications to the general public.

It's easy to let (justifiable) anger drive what we say to the public. Remember, however, that our opponents gain ground when they goad us into reacting to their attacks, and distract us from sticking to messages that work. It takes real discipline not to let opponents goad us into an exchange of verbal and media fire. Instead, stay focused on moving public opinion so that all LGBT people can be protected under the law. We have reason to be angry, but shouting at people is unlikely to make anyone support us.

This doesn't mean we have to set aside our convictions. It also doesn't mean we have to agree with the moveable middle or our opponents. However, we do need to be selective and deliberate in how we talk to, and about, the moveable middle and our opponents. There's a difference between being firm and being shrill. There's a difference between standing our ground and getting drawn into an exchange of insults. In everyday life, people rarely engage in public shouting matches. The best way to beat opponents is to keep our cool. We need to be calm and reasonable while *they* appear shrill and hysterical. Help Americans relate to us more than they relate to our opponents.

Certain communications strengthen the negative beliefs that cause barriers to acceptance. The two most common ways we can accidentally strengthen a harmful belief are:

1. **Directly combating it.** As described more fully in *The Art and Science of Framing an Issue*, the most effective way to change a belief is simply to stick with our core message points, not to argue directly against it. Any time we use opposition language, even when countering it, we'll inadvertently reinforce the opposition's arguments in the mind of the target audience. When we use opponents' language (e.g., "It's not true that gay people are promiscuous"), it will get "stuck" in the heads of those listening. Instead, use affirmative messages to change views and beliefs, (e.g., "Thousands of gay couples in Massachusetts have made life-long commitments to each other. Many thousands more are simply waiting to have this chance.")
2. **Inadvertently reinforcing it.** Certain tones, language, and imagery reinforce negative stereotypes. For example, while anger at those who stereotype gay

people is understandable, shrill displays of such anger reinforce stereotypes of gay people as disruptive and conflict-oriented.

To avoid reinforcing negative beliefs about gay people, apply the following communications principles:

**Avoid Reinforcing Belief 1: “Gay people aren’t like me.”**

- Shrill communications that reinforce an “us vs. them” mentality provide fodder for perceptions of gay people as disruptive, disrespectful, and threatening. Likewise, calling the general public names is a poor way to win their support.
- Avoid publicizing or emphasizing values, actions, or images that run contrary to mainstream values. You certainly don’t have to abandon your values, but to move public opinion, you’ll be more effective if you emphasize common ground in our external communications.
- Certain images and phrases are still very difficult and scary for many moveable middle Americans and can prevent them from hearing more about gay issues. For example, research shows that pictures of two men kissing are *not* an effective way of reaching the moveable middle.

**Avoid Reinforcing Belief 2: “Gay people are a threat.”**

- It’s not advisable to directly address the “threat” frame head on. For example, saying that gay marriage will not lead to polygamy only reinforces the worry that gay marriage *will* lead to polygamy. Gay people will only seem less threatening when they’re perceived to be more like everyday Americans. That’s accomplished by emphasizing common ground with ordinary Americans—not by using language that repeats (and unwittingly reinforces) their fears.
- Angry messages (e.g., about “right-wing lies,” “preaching hate,” “hypocrisy,” “bigotry,” “prejudice”) don’t effectively increase moveable middle support for gay issues. These messages reinforce the belief that gay people are a threat because they showcase gay people as attacking and hostile. Additionally, many moveable middle Americans will feel personally attacked by such messages, even when the negative comments are directed at opponents. The best way to move public opinion is to keep your cool and stick to your core messages.

*Our opponents gain ground when they goad us into reacting to their antics and distract us from sticking to messages that work.*



- While it can be appropriate to call out an opponent for a bigoted or prejudiced action or comment (e.g., sanctioning Ann Coulter for her use of the “f” word), accusing the American public (and ergo, your target audience, the moveable middle) of prejudice or bigotry makes them defensive and hostile. If you must engage an opponent, you’ll get more traction by keeping your messages focused and your tone reasonable. A firm response is different from a shrill response. It’s difficult to establish the extremism of our opponents if we sound extreme ourselves. At the end of the day, we want the public to identify with us—the reasonable ones—not our opponents. If you want an outlet for your anger, keep your communications internal or strictly targeted to the base. Remember, anything you say or release publicly can be used against us by opponents in the future. Once again, you’ll move the public more effectively by sticking to your core messages, and ignoring opponents’ attempts to bait you.

**Avoid Reinforcing Belief 3: “Gay people don’t need more rights.”**

- Avoid generically framing an issue as being “about equal rights.” Since straight people believe LGBT people already have equality, phrasing the fight as being “about” equality raises suspicions about a hidden agenda. Instead of talking about equality, identify and focus on a few specific injustices that people can relate to, and understand.

Read *Guidelines for Talking to the Moveable Middle About LGBT Issues* for more information on how to effectively move public opinion—overall and by issue.



# Mindset of the Opposition

How America Thinks About LGBT Issues



Authors

Contributing Editors

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# Mindset of the Opposition

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*It takes discipline not to let opponents provoke us into an exchange of verbal and media fire, and instead stay focused on moving public opinion.*

## Defining Our Opponents

Before we describe the mindset of our opponents, let's quickly define who they are. For the purposes of this toolkit, our opponents are those on the extreme right who actively organize or speak out against equality for LGBT people. They're groups like the American Family Association, Focus on the Family, and Americans for Truth. They're individuals like Tony Perkins, Ann Coulter, and James Dobson. Average American citizens who happen to strongly oppose gay and transgender equality aren't included in this definition. Why? Because unlike our organized opponents, average anti-gay Americans have limited influence. They may not be supportive, but they don't actively work against gay people from a position of power.

## Understanding Our Opponents

Since this section examines the mindset of our most ardent opponents, it describes some pretty extreme beliefs. Remember: The mindset of our opponents differs from that of the general public. Our opponents spend their lives trying to keep LGBT people relegated to second-class citizens. Nothing can be said or done to change their minds. Messages created to address these radical views often only end up giving them more airtime.

If we can't change our opponents' minds, why bother understanding how they think? If we can anticipate what they might say or do, it helps us handle public face-offs *without* falling into the trap of responding to their attacks in kind. In other words, it's important to



understand opponents *not* so we can combat them, but so we can stick to our messages *in the midst* of their attacks.

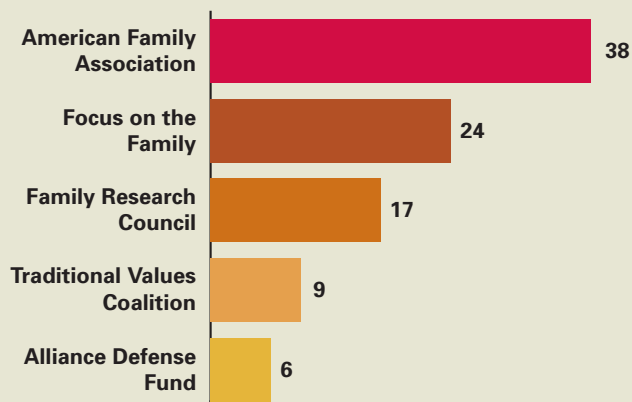
It's easy to let (justifiable) anger drive what we say to the public. However, our opponents gain ground when they goad us into reacting to their antics and distract us from sticking to messages we know work. They win if they get us to engage in the discussion on their terms. They win if they succeed in making us lose our tempers or in making us look shrill and unsympathetic.

The best way to beat opponents is to keep our cool. We create separation between LGBT people and the moveable middle when we engage in proverbial shouting matches. Real people simply don't yell at each other in this way in public. It takes discipline not to let opponents provoke us into an exchange of verbal and media fire, and instead, stay focused on moving public opinion so that all gay and transgender people can be protected under the law.

This doesn't mean we have to agree with our opponents. It just means we should drive the discussion on our terms, not theirs. It means we need to be selective and deliberate in how we talk about the issues. Our opponents are losing ground. The public is becoming tired of their confrontational approach. All we need to do is to be reasonable and relatable while *they* appear shrill and hysterical. Make Americans feel like we're the kind of people they'd have over for dinner, while our opponents make them slightly embarrassed to watch the news. Talk about all the great reasons to support gay people; try not to engage in a debate of all the crazy reasons not to.



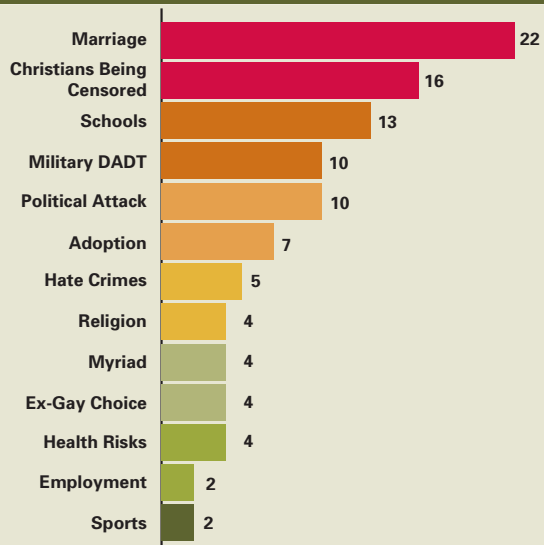
### Number of Press Releases by Group



Source: MAP review of press releases January 30 - March 15, 2007.

### Opponent Anti-Gay Press Releases Cover Wide Variety of Topics

#### Number of Press Releases by Topic



Source: MAP review of press releases January 30 - March 15, 2007.

## Opponents Obsess About LGBT Issues

The authors of this toolkit examined the press releases, writings, and websites of five leading groups that are strongly opposed to LGBT equality: the American Family Association, Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council, the Traditional Values Coalition, and the Alliance Defense Fund. Over the 45-day period in which the authors examined them, these five groups produced an astounding amount of anti-gay material, averaging almost three anti-gay press releases per week. The American Family Association was by far the most active opponent, issuing an average of one anti-gay release per weekday. Its dedication to anti-gay messaging bordered on obsessive.

## Opponents Focus on Creating Fear

The sheer breadth of our opponents' press releases opposing gay equality was shocking. Rather than sticking to core issues like marriage or adoption, our opponents condemned anything and everything that even hinted of public acceptance of LGBT people. A second surprise was that while many of us believe our opponents have unprecedented influence and power in American politics, opponents' press releases indicated that they consider themselves as victims—silenced, humiliated, and censored. The frequency of the "Christians under attack" message was second only to messages opposing marriage:

- "Gay groups would like to silence anyone they perceive as opposing the gay agenda. It's called Christophobia."—Focus on the Family
- "Their idea of civil rights is that we can't voice our moral beliefs about homosexuality."—American Family Association
- "They want to control our speech in the public square, embarrass us, and try to belittle us. It is really a form of fascism."—Focus on the Family

While the above messages seem paranoid at best, fear-based messages are *the* staple of our opponents' messaging. The vast majority of our opponents' press releases portray gay people as a threat. Often, this fear-based messaging was couched in terms of a so-called "gay agenda." In fact, fear-based messages appeared two and a half times more often than messages that negatively judged gay people or "the gay lifestyle." Despite successfully establishing the term "special rights," few press releases made use of it.

## Opponent Mindset

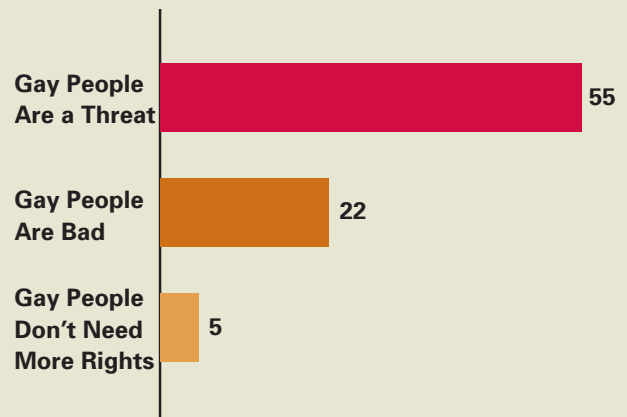
The mindset of our opponents resembles that of the moveable middle with a very important distinction: The beliefs of our opponents are much more extreme. Both groups worry about what might happen if LGBT people were treated equally under the law, but for our opponents, this scenario evokes doomsday predictions. Whereas the moveable middle may sometimes find it difficult to relate to gay people (“gay people are different”), our opponents see gay people as “bad and sinful.” Whereas the moveable middle operates under the misconception that gay people are already equal, our opponents know this isn’t the case and use misleading arguments, (e.g., special rights) to combat any progress toward equality. In fact, our opponents often make claims that are patently false. For example, opponents talk about hate crimes protection as leading to prosecution of “thought crimes” without any sort of logic as to how or why this would take place. While we won’t increase public support by engaging in hostile debates, it *can* be necessary to firmly but calmly correct outright distortions of the truth.

### Opponent Belief 1: Gay People Are a Threat (Gay Agenda)

Unlike the moveable middle, which struggles with their connection to LGBT people, our opponents promote a Chicken Little mentality. They say the sky is falling and LGBT people are to blame.

Our opponents are somewhat disconnected from the real world. Rather than talk about the world as it is, they talk about an idealized vision of the world “as it should be.” In the world they describe (if only they were in charge), couples meet, fall in love, marry, and *then* have sex for the purposes of procreation. These couples remain happily married forever. Divorce and STDs don’t exist, and kids always have a mother and a father. This idealized future of reality gives our opponents a leg up when it comes to proselytizing. While progressives offer “divorce and broken homes,” our opponents offer “strong, stable families and happy children.” The problem? When we use messaging that inserts a dose of reality, (e.g., “Over half of marriages end up in divorce”), it feels like a slap in the face and tends to make people defensive. Very few people like having their bubble burst.

### Most Opponent Messaging is Fear-Based Number of Press Releases With Following Theme



Source: MAP review of press releases January 30 - March 15, 2006.

Given our opponents’ vision of the world, it’s not surprising that LGBT people can be positioned as a threat. According to our opponents, gay people have an agenda, and this agenda is to tear down everything conservative Christians care about. Gay people supposedly threaten religious freedoms, marriage, families, parents, school children, military effectiveness, the democratic process, and of course, society itself. Opponents preach that gay equality will cause pastors to be arrested, conservative Christians to be persecuted, families to fall apart, marriages to crumble, pedophiles to stake out schools, and ultimately, bring the wrath of God on America.

Our opponents use these “threats” to mobilize their far-right followers against LGBT issues. The chart on the following page captures the key ideas that make up the belief that gay people are a threat.

**Belief 1: Gay People Are a Threat (Gay Agenda)**

Supporting Ideas	Translation: Gay People Are a Threat Because...	Sample Opposition Quotes
Gay people <b>infringe on Christian freedom of speech</b>	Christians will be persecuted for expressing their beliefs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “You could lose your job for expressing moral reservations about homosexuality.” Family Research Council (FRC)</li> <li>• “Last year’s prayer rally ...was interrupted by homosexual protesters.” American Family Association (AFA)</li> </ul>
<b>Slippery slope</b>	Acceptance leads to erosion of moral values and family unit; “anything goes,” polygamy, marrying of farm animals; aka “the gay agenda.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “(Acceptance) will lead to the normalization of even more deviant behavior.” (AFA)</li> </ul>
Nothing less than full <b>acceptance and cultural dominance</b>	Gay people don’t just want tolerance, they want full acceptance and a society that reflects “the gay agenda.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The goal is not legal benefits, but forced approval by society of homosexual behavior itself.” FRC</li> <li>• “Clearly the movement seeks not only tolerance for their lifestyle, but endorsement.” AFA</li> </ul>
Gay people threaten <b>parents’ rights</b>	Gay activists are “pushing their agenda” in public schools; parents often are unaware of what is happening.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “If you put your child in public education, you have no ability to determine what your child is going to be taught regarding morals or anything else.” Focus on the Family (FOF)</li> </ul>
Gay people threaten <b>school children</b>	Children in public schools are being brain-washed and lied to with the “gay agenda.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Schools have become a channel for gay activists to spread their influence on the next generation.” FOF</li> </ul>
Gay people threaten <b>military effectiveness</b>	Military cohesion and the morality of the military will fall apart if gay people can serve.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The ban is there to guard good order and discipline in the Armed Forces.” AFA</li> <li>• “This is a ploy by members of Congress ...who’d like to see the military used for other than war purposes.” FOF</li> </ul>
Gay people threaten <b>the democratic process</b>	Gay activists can’t win rights democratically so are overriding the will of the people through judicial activism, lobbying, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Having failed to achieve their agenda through the democratic process, homosexual activists are now focusing on advancing their agenda through the courts and civil disobedience.” FRC</li> </ul>
Gay people are <b>bad for children</b>	Children do best with a mother and a father and all the research “proves” this.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Just because gay marriage is in vogue, doesn’t mean it’s best for children. In fact, generations of research plainly prove it isn’t.” FOF</li> </ul>
Gay people are <b>sexual predators</b>	Gay people are more likely to be pedophiles.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Pedophile themes abound in gay literature.” FRC</li> </ul>

### Opponent Belief 2: Gay People Are Bad (Gay Lifestyle)

Our opponents place a surprising lack of communications emphasis on homosexuality being “sinful.” The word “sin” is used infrequently in their press releases, and is often replaced by more secular condemnations of homosexuality as immoral or wrong. As opposed to objecting to homosexual sex, opponents appear to object to how gay people “behave” by stereotyping gay people as making poor lifestyle choices (e.g., being

unstable). In other words, our opponents focus more on character assassination (“gay people are the type of people who...”) than on condemning homosexuality in its own right.

Once again, it’s important to make a distinction between the mindset of our opponents and that of the average anti-gay American. A “regular” anti-gay religious American might talk about loving the sinner, but hating the sin—an idea which often simply provides a socially acceptable way to mask homophobia. Or they

Belief 2: Gay People Are Bad (Gay Lifestyle)		
Supporting Ideas	Translation: Gay People Are Bad Because...	Sample Focus Group Quotes
Gay people are <b>immoral and unnatural</b>	Gay people are immoral, sinful, against God, and against nature.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Gay marriage does not correspond with ... the laws of nature and of nature’s God.” Family Research Council (FRC)</li> <li>• “Homosexuality is unnatural and sinful ...a sin grievous to God and repulsive to Christians.” American Family Association (AFA)</li> </ul>
Gay people as <b>“other”</b>	Gay people are hateful, promiscuous, unfaithful, sexually deviant, diseased, against cultural norms, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “There can be no doubt that most Americans would be repulsed if they could see the decadence within the homosexual community.” AFA</li> </ul>
Being gay is a <b>choice</b>	There is “no evidence” that being gay is biological. Regardless, gay people should resist temptation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “No reputable scientist can claim with any certainty that homosexuality is genetic.” Traditional Values Coalition (TVC)</li> <li>• “There is no convincing evidence to show that homosexuality is determined by either genetics or biology.” FRC</li> </ul>
Gay people are <b>combative and hostile</b>	Gay people threaten, insult, and shut down any opposition; they do not display the tolerance they demand.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Our opposition is a reaction to the homosexual movement’s aggressive strategies.” AFA</li> </ul>
Gay people are <b>diseased; a public health risk</b>	Gay people die early, have more STDs, drink more, do more drugs, are mentally imbalanced, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Active homosexuals are vulnerable to dozens of sexually transmitted diseases.” AFA</li> <li>• “Lesbian relationships are equally unhealthy and just as life-threatening as gay male relationships.” AFA</li> </ul>
Gay people <b>don’t have public support</b>	The majority of Americans don’t support gay people; they are “pushing their views” on the majority.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “A clear majority of Americans believe that homosexual behavior is morally wrong.” FRC</li> <li>• “There is overwhelming opposition for change among servicemen.” FRC</li> </ul>
Gay people are <b>unhappy</b>	Gay people are depressed, suicidal, alcoholic, etc. Deep inside, “they’re unhappy and know it’s wrong.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Studies have found that while homosexuals may be trying to convince themselves that what they are doing is acceptable, they have serious doubts in their hearts.” AFA</li> </ul>

might say they're "fine" with gay people, but they just can't accept "the gay lifestyle." Our opponents on the other hand rarely express such ideas.

Instead, they portray gay people as "choosing" to live in a way that is "antithetical" to mainstream and conservative values.

Our opponents also like to portray gay people as unhappy and unhealthy (an idea very rarely articulated by the moveable middle). Our opponents paint gay people as mentally and physically tormented by their sexuality, insinuating that homosexuality is the source of all their woes. They suggest that the high incidence of depression among gay people stems from a secret desire to be straight, not from living in a culture that shuns gay people. Our opponents claim that gay people have higher rates of drug and alcohol abuse, presumably using substances as a coping mechanism for being gay. Finally, our opponents paint gay people as "diseased" and dying much earlier than straight people. Again, the insinuation is that gay people bring "misery and disease" upon themselves for going against the will of God.

The chart on the previous page provides a more complete picture of the various ideas that make up the belief that "gay people are bad."

### Opponent Belief 3: Gay People Don't Need More Rights (Special Rights)

Our opponents argue that LGBT people want special rights. Unlike the moveable middle, however, they understand that gay people face inequality and discrimination. They simply choose to ignore this inequality, positioning any gains by gay people as losses to Christians.

They do this by painting gay people as advantaged, using language such as the "rich and powerful gay lobby." They also use out-of-context "proof" to suggest that gay people are more affluent than straight people (which they aren't).<sup>1</sup> They like to throw around the term "special rights" without offering any explanation as to how legal protections for gay

<sup>1</sup>In fact, data from the Williams Institute shows that gay and lesbian couples have lower per-capita income and education than straight couples.

### Belief 3: Gay People Don't Need More Rights (Special Rights)

Supporting Ideas	Translation: Gay People Don't Need More Rights	Sample Opposition Quotes
Gay people are <b>advantaged</b>	Gay people are affluent, well-educated, politically powerful, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "The powerful and well-funded homosexual lobby." Family Research Council (FRC)</li> <li>• "Records compiled by the Wall Street Journal show that homosexuals are one of the most affluent groups in America." American Family Association (AFA)</li> </ul>
" <b>Special rights</b> "	Gay people seek protections beyond what the average citizen has, aka "special rights."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "The hate crimes bill would give special protection." FRC</li> <li>• "A homosexual 'anti-discrimination' job bill will provide special rights." Traditional Values Coalition (TVC)</li> </ul>
<b>Existing laws cover</b> gay people	Gay people have the same rights as any other citizen in terms of voting, violence, etc.—they simply don't have laws to promote "their special behaviors."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Same sex marriage is not a civil rights issue. Every adult ...already has the right to marry." FRC</li> <li>• "Homosexuals already do have all of the same rights to vote, the right of free speech, the right to trial by jury." FRC</li> </ul>
Being anti-gay is <b>not a prejudice</b>	Being anti-gay isn't equivalent to racial discrimination because homosexuality isn't immutable, unchangeable, and innocuous—it's a "behavior."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Homosexuality cannot be treated the same way as race" because homosexuality is a behavior." AFA Web</li> <li>• "Homosexuals are not an oppressed minority." AFA Web</li> </ul>

people are special. Our opponents argue that gay people have all the rights straight people have—of course, the only catch is, they just have to pretend to be straight to get them (e.g., “Gay people aren’t banned from marrying; they’re just not able to marry someone of the same sex”).

Finally, our opponents spend a fair amount of effort justifying why homosexuality isn’t equivalent to race (and by correlation, why it’s okay to be against equality for gay people). They argue that race is inborn, while homosexuality is a “behavior.” Since no one else asks the law to protect them based on their “behavior” (and a sexual one at that), what gay people really want is “special rights.” For a more complete view of the belief that “gay people don’t need more rights,” see the chart on the previous page.

## Overcoming the Mindset of Opponents

How do we overcome the mindset of people who hold the beliefs described above? It’s simple: We don’t. Of course it’s theoretically possible to reach these arch opponents, but it’s a costly, long-term, and primarily futile endeavor. We’re better off spending our time and money pursuing the moveable middle—those Americans who may not yet support LGBT issues, but who won’t need sedatives if a gay couple moves in next door.

Based on market research, the few hard-core opponents of LGBT equality who’ve changed their minds on LGBT issues have primarily done so after a close friend or relative came out to them. As the epidemic of homeless LGBT youth suggests, even having someone’s own child come out doesn’t necessarily soften hardened hearts. In other words, it’s helpful to understand the mindset of opponents, but it’s not helpful to argue against it. That doesn’t mean we can’t engage an opponent, it just means we engage them on our terms—not theirs.

Remember that while there’s reason to be angry, shouting at people isn’t a very effective way to win public support. We can inadvertently reinforce the idea that the public should be afraid of gay people when we engage in proverbial shouting matches.

## STICKING TO YOUR CORE MESSAGES

Our opponents tried to throw the Arizona Together campaign (formed to fight an anti-gay Super DOMA ballot initiative) off message numerous times. For example, opponents called a press conference to accuse Arizona Together of being bigoted against stay-at-home mothers. Their hope was that Arizona Together would respond in kind by saying it was conservative stay-at-home mothers who were bigoted, and thereby “prove” their point. When the campaign refused to engage in the shouting match, opponents looked petty, shrill, and intolerant. Another example? Media outlets called to ask Arizona Together what they thought about the sex scandal unfolding around Pastor Ted Haggard, head of the National Association of Evangelicals. The campaign refused to be sidetracked or taken off message. Instead, they reiterated that their campaign was focused on ensuring Arizona didn’t take away legal protections for domestic partners.

*As the epidemic of homeless LGBT youth suggests, even having someone’s own child come out doesn’t necessarily soften hardened hearts.*

## BE WARY OF ALIGNING WITH OPPOSITION GROUPS

While establishing common ground with the moveable middle is critical, be very careful about trying to establish common ground with our opponents. Well-meaning people of good intentions have seen their attempts to reach out exploited by far-right opponents in ways that hurt gay and transgender people. In several cases, far-right opponents have grossly and publicly distorted the agreements reached in these types of joint efforts (e.g., a joint ground-rules statement that each side agrees to listen while the other side speaks becomes a press release that gay organizations agree that far-right organizations have a right to distribute ex-gay literature in high schools).

We shouldn't play into our opponents' hands by losing our temper. Our opponents are already losing ground. The best way to beat them is to keep our cool. Be calm, reasonable and sympathetic while *they* appear shrill and hysterical. Help Americans relate to us more than they relate to our opponents.

Generally speaking, the only time we should stray from our core messages is to succinctly, and calmly, correct factual inaccuracies. Otherwise, the main reason to understand how our opponents think is to ensure we can stay on message—regardless of what's thrown at us.



# Media Coverage of LGBT Issues

How America Thinks About LGBT Issues



Authors



Contributing Editors

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# Media Coverage of LGBT Issues

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*Partisan spitting matches might make for good entertainment, but they rarely make for an informed, engaged citizenry*

## Media Influence on Public Opinion

Most of us spend our time thinking about work, family, and what we want to eat for dinner. We don't spend much time thinking about public policy issues, but we do form opinions about them. How? Instead of reading stacks of policy briefs on a Sunday afternoon, we catch the evening news or scan the newspaper headlines. In fact, the news media constitute the main source of our information about public affairs.

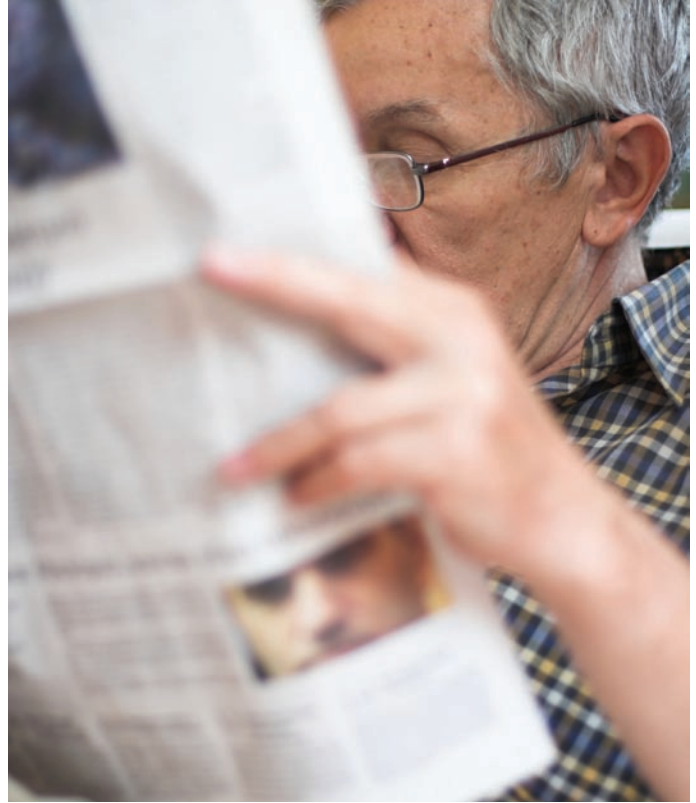
The media tell us what issues are important and how we should think about them. When we understand how the media present LGBT issues, we also gain insight into how the public interprets these issues. Additionally, we understand what changes are needed to make the media's coverage as fair, accurate, and inclusive as possible.

## How the Media Cover Social and Political Issues

When Americans rely on the media to form opinions about public issues, two problems arise. The first is media bias. Even the best, most professional media outlets aren't totally impartial. The second relates to depth of coverage—or more accurately, the lack of it. Stories increasingly skim the surface of issues, often opting for sensationalistic coverage.

Media outlets now operate on a 24-hour news cycle. They cater to people with busy lives and short attention spans. To get ratings or readership, news stories must captivate us. As a result, the media frame most social issues in one of two ways: as a human interest story or as a conflict.

**The human interest frame.** Human interest frames introduce us to a sympathetic individual or family (“Let's turn now to Juan, father of four, whose wife



*Media coverage of gay issues almost exclusively uses a conflict frame.*

Maria was recently deported as an illegal alien”). On the plus side, the human interest frame creates sympathy for the person or family in the spotlight. However, the coverage usually lacks a larger context. It doesn't describe the extent of the problem, the systemic issues that contributed to it, or provide an analysis of possible solutions. The net result: We feel bad for the spotlighted individual or family, but powerless to do anything about their situation. (“Poor Juan. It's sad Maria was deported, but there's not much I can do about it. I think I'll change the channel.”)

**The conflict frame.** If you've ever watched television, this ought to sound familiar: “Next up: Democrats and Republicans lock horns in a heated battle over the issue of immigration.” This typifies the conflict frame, in which the newscaster tries to infuse an issue or situation with drama. Unless you're a news outlet focused on ratings, the conflict frame has few redeeming qualities.



## How Media Portrayal of a Social Issue Affects Public Understanding

	Issue: Homelessness	Issue: Gay Issues
Media Portrayal of Issue	Human interest	Conflict
Example	"Joe, Sally, and their two children are sleeping in their station wagon tonight after Joe lost his job in the most recent wave of manufacturing layoffs..."	"There's an intense battle beginning over a new ballot initiative that would allow gay couples to register as domestic partners..."
Creates empathy?	Yes.	No. (Media portray issue as disruptive.)
Is the problem clear?	Yes. (This family is sleeping in their car; it would clearly be better if they had a home.)	No. (Doesn't explain why gay people need domestic partnerships; why can't they just live together?)
Is the solution clear?	No. (Things get tough and then people become homeless. Not sure we can do much about it.)	Yes. (There's a referendum on the ballot to allow domestic partnerships. Vote for—or against—it.)

Partisan spitting matches between Democrats and Republicans might make for good entertainment, but they rarely make for an informed, engaged citizenry. Conflict stories leave us angry, frustrated, and defensive, (e.g., "Why can't Democrats and Republicans ever put aside petty politics and get something done?!? What's the use in even voting for these yahoos?").

Generally speaking, the media use human interest stories to frame social issues that affect entire classes of people. That is, the story would feature a homeless

family as opposed to politicians arguing about homelessness. It certainly wouldn't examine the factors contributing to homelessness. Alternatively, the story might cover a person of color "surviving in the inner city," but it wouldn't invite white supremacists to comment just to create a conflict. Nor would it provide a race policy analysis of what could be done to improve conditions in the inner city. In brief, media coverage of most social issues establishes the problem and creates empathy for those affected, but it doesn't help

## CONFLICT FRAME IN ACTION

“Churches are facing a rift over homosexuality that is proving more intractable than any social issue since slavery. It is not an explosion, but a slow burn that has been smoldering in some denominations for about 30 years—longer than the battle over women’s ordination.

Passions run so high that on the more than 150 Anglican blogging sites, the name-calling is vicious. The conservatives call their liberal colleagues ‘Episcopagans,’ ‘apostates’ and ‘revisionists,’ and refer to themselves as the ‘guardians of the faith.’ Liberal bloggers hurl epithets like ‘ChristiaNazis’ and ‘Neo-con Anglicans.’”

—excerpted from the New York Times, *A Divide, and Maybe a Divorce*, February 25, 2007

to solve the problem. The challenge facing most social advocates? Get the media to cover the causes of the problem, and what might be done to alleviate it.

## How the Media Cover LGBT Issues

The media seem to use human interest stories to frame every social issue—except LGBT issues. Instead of using a human interest frame to create empathy for LGBT people, media coverage of LGBT issues almost exclusively uses a conflict frame. The conflict often centers on a proposed policy (e.g., ENDA). This makes the solution clear: If we want to avoid unjust firings, we need to pass ENDA. However, the need for a solution remains unclear since the media fails to describe existing injustices or what these injustices mean to LGBT people (e.g., the media will rarely cover the unjust firing of an LGBT individual).

### Media Coverage Frames LGBT Issues as a Fight

The media use the conflict frame across the spectrum of LGBT issues. For example, the media cover marriage equality as “ballot initiative fights.” It describes the Anglican Church as “fracturing” over gay ordination. Pundits warn prominent Republicans to distance themselves from gay issues or join the ranks of political untouchables. Fervent right-wing opponents pronounce that supporters of LGBT issues place “tradi-

tional values under attack.” News articles increase the conflict by consistently quoting both opponents and supporters of gay equality. Opponents are usually religious and identified as such, implying that all people of faith oppose equality for gay people. (You can be either religious or a supporter of gay equality, but apparently not both.)

Notice what the media don’t say when they frame LGBT issues as a source of conflict. They don’t say *why* LGBT people consider marriage and faith important issues. They don’t say *why* advocates are trying to pass non-discrimination laws. Instead, the media’s framing of LGBT issues inadvertently positions LGBT people as the *source* of the conflict. Many Americans hear this as, “If only gay people would stop pushing their issues, everything would be peaceful.”

### Media Coverage Takes the Humanity Out of LGBT Issues

The media rarely portray LGBT people as living, breathing human beings. That is, stories seldom focus on LGBT individuals, families, or even communities. Only about one in five articles on LGBT issues describe an LGBT individual, couple, or family.<sup>1</sup> Fewer than one in twenty are true human interest stories. Instead, the media portray LGBT people as an issue (e.g., the issue of gay marriage), or as an abstract interest group (e.g., “gay activists”).<sup>2</sup>

A typical article on an upcoming anti-gay marriage ballot initiative might describe the groups “fighting for and against” the initiative, and throw in some polling data for good measure. What it won’t typically do is personalize the issue by portraying the gay people who’ll be affected by the ballot initiative. It won’t interview a gay family without health insurance coverage because one partner is a legal stranger to their breadwinning spouse. It won’t interview a gay seminary student to understand how acceptance or rejection by the Anglican Church affects them personally, spiritually, and professionally.

What the media won’t do is give people a reason to care or a way to connect. It won’t show LGBT people struggling to live ordinary, everyday lives like other Americans. And it won’t in any way help Americans overcome the mindset that “gay people are not like

<sup>1</sup> These figures are based on a Movement Advancement Project analysis of over 100 newspaper articles across the Associated Press and 10 additional leading national and local newspapers over an eight-week period in 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Based on media analysis by the Movement Advancement Project. See footnote 1.

*What the media won't do is give people a reason to care or a way to connect. It won't show gay people struggling to live the same ordinary lives as other Americans.*

me.” The media simply frame LGBT issues as a source of conflict, reinforcing the belief that LGBT people are a threat.

### Media Coverage Ignores the Consequences of Inequality

When the media remove human interest from their coverage of LGBT issues, it robs the audience of the chance to know what a given issue may mean to LGBT people. Only about 15% of news coverage explains why gay people find an issue important, or describes the hardships a lack of equality poses for gay people. A news story may cover a marriage ballot initiative, but it won't analyze the five most important legal protections provided by marriage—and how not having them makes it harder for committed gay couples to take care of each other. The story may report on proposed non-discrimination legislation, but fails to mention that non-discrimination protections don't exist for gay people in more than 30 states. The story may describe the “outraged parents” arguing against comprehensive sex education at the local school board meeting, but remain silent about how safe-sex campaigns on high school campuses lower the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV), let alone what abstinence-only education means for a gay teenager who can't legally marry.

It's clear that media do little to counter the mainstream belief that “gay people don't need more rights.” The media make it clear that gay people want legal protections, but they leave the most important questions on the table: Why are these protections important and how will they impact gay people?

### How You Can Influence the Media

You can't control the media, but you can help influence it. When you next write or sponsor an op-ed, place an article, or do a broad-based press release, try to ensure you don't play into

the default media frame. A good relationship with a local reporter also goes a long way. You can meet with them, or even just give them this fact sheet to let them know how typical media coverage impacts public perceptions about LGBT people.

You won't get perfect coverage, but you can strive for better coverage. The following seven suggestions will help you improve media coverage of gay and transgender issues:

- 1. Include human interest.** You can create empathy by featuring a gay or transgender person, couple, or family and having them share their personal experiences or stories. Use spokespeople whose experiences and values resonate with those of the moveable middle. Try to find spokespeople who hold respected or non-stereotypical positions (e.g., firefighters, police officers, doctors, forklift drivers). You'll reach more of the moveable middle if the stories your spokespeople tell are stories that matter to straight people. Talk about volunteering, working, providing for children, being a good neighbor. Include simple aspects of everyday life like mowing the lawn and walking the dog to help counter the moveable middle's belief that gay people are “different” from other Americans (see *Mindset of the Moveable Middle*).
- 2. Make the harms real.** Show how the issue in question impacts the lives of gay people. You can help the moveable middle relate by telling personal stories and providing details. It's one thing to talk about being fired from your job. It's another to help your audience visualize the situation. For example:





*The boss called Jane into his office over the intercom. He made her wait while he finished a phone call. Then he gave her five minutes to clean out her desk. Security escorted her out of the office while her coworkers watched. Distraught, Jane drove to her daughter's school and sat down on a bench by the playground, waiting for the bell. She wondered how she'd tell her daughter that they couldn't go on their vacation to Florida. She wondered how she'd pay the rent.*

When you show how existing injustices hurt gay people, you also help counter the moveable middle belief that “gay people don't need more rights.”

3. **Explain the breadth of the injustice.** Show how an issue affects the broader LGBT community—and straight people if applicable. For example, adoption bans not only<sup>3</sup> hurt tens of thousands of children with gay parents, they also hurt 100,000 foster children waiting to be adopted.
4. **Provide a solution.** Show how the policy or cultural solution solves the injustice. For example, ENDA would prevent companies from firing employees for reasons not related to qualifications and job performance. ENDA would have protected Jane.
5. **Challenge how a journalist plans to cover opponents.** When a journalist contacts you about a story, ask them if and how they're planning to cover our opponents. Unfortunately, while the media feels the need to “present both sides,” the quick-fire news cycle means they don't always have time to do the necessary fact-checking on our opponents and their claims. For example, even large national outlets like Time Magazine have been challenged for presenting

unchecked and inaccurate “facts” from organizations like Focus on the Family. Many opponents also cite research done by the thoroughly discredited Paul Cameron of the so-called “Family Research Institute.” This research is repeated in the media as “fact,” even though Paul Cameron was expelled from the American Psychological Association for misrepresentations and ethics violations. Encourage the journalist to research opponents' credentials—and most importantly, to independently verify opponents' claims, facts and sources.

6. **Minimize the conflict frame.** Avoid the conflict frame when possible; it reinforces the moveable middle's belief that “gay people are a threat.” That said, we recognize that the conflict frame “sells,” and that some outlets simply aren't interested in human interest stories. If the story or coverage has to include a conflict frame, at least try to make sure it's not the *only* frame. Supplement the story with human interest elements. Illustrate concrete harms, or explain the breadth of the injustice and provide a solution.
7. **Feature LGBT people in everyday media contexts.** Pitch reporters to include LGBT people in their everyday stories. For example, ask them to include

### How to Write a Great Op-Ed

Let's say that you ask a supportive child adoption worker to write an op-ed on second-parent adoption. She could start by describing a lesbian couple she knows, giving a short vignette of the hardships they faced. (“Nancy came to me for advice. Her life-partner, Rachel, had been diagnosed with a rare and fatal cancer. In addition to the devastating emotional turmoil, Nancy was worried sick about what would happen to Rachel's son, Joshua. Nancy had cared for Joshua since infancy, but can't legally adopt him.”) She could then draw parallels to how the inability of gay parents to adopt affects the broader community. (“Nancy and Rachel are not unique. In fact, thousands of gay parents in this state have children, not to mention the more than 100,000 foster children nationally waiting for their forever home.”) Finally, the child adoption worker could describe how the policy solution solves the injustice. (“This bill makes it possible for...”).

a lesbian or gay family in their coverage of Mother's Day or Father's Day. Gay people travel, attend sporting events, buy Valentine's Day gifts, send their kids off to school, and shop at the local supermarket. Any story that includes vignettes of "ordinary people" also offers an opportunity to include an LGBT person or couple as one of those ordinary people.

Incorporate the suggestions above if working with a reporter on a news article or television segment—or even if writing an organizational press release. Enhance the human interest angle with quotes from a gay person with a gripping story to tell, rather than quotes from your executive director. Don't talk generically about "equal rights" or "the benefits of marriage." Instead be concrete: "Just yesterday we got a frantic call from Ben Smith. He was seeking legal advice because a hospital barred him from seeing his partner of 18 years, who was in a car crash. That's just plain wrong."

You can also improve media coverage of LGBT issues when reporters ask your organization for a quote. Put the media in contact with a handful of carefully chosen people whose compelling stories will add human interest. Talk to board members, staff, key volunteers, and broader community members to find articulate spokespeople with compelling stories to tell. Don't reflexively put the media in contact with your board chair or executive director—unless their personal story is the best fit for the story and message. Finding and training people willing to provide personal quotes takes effort, but in the long run, helps Americans connect with LGBT people and understand how current policies impact LGBT people's lives.

Keep in mind that you don't *have* to get media coverage. You can turn down stories that won't result in positive coverage. One well-placed feature story will provide better and more effective coverage of an issue than several polarizing quotes in political articles. You can also choose to target certain communications to your base instead of the moveable middle. For example, if you want to use strong or polarizing language to condemn the latest political sex scandal, limit the distribution of your press release to only outlets whose stories you know will not reach the moveable middle.

