

Rhetoric, framing efforts have little influence in same-sex marriage debate

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A study by Indiana University researchers found that terminology and efforts to frame an issue -- often effective in influencing public opinion -- have no effect on public opinion concerning the ongoing debate in the U.S. over legalizing same-sex marriage.

Using an experimental approach involving a nationally representative sample, the researchers found that beliefs and values held sway, not rhetoric, such as the use of 'same-sex couple' instead of 'homosexual couple' or using the term 'civil rights' instead of 'gay rights.'

"Framing, wording doesn't matter," said Oren Pizmony-Levy, a doctoral student in IU's Department of Sociology. He discussed the study on Monday at the American Sociological Association 2010 Annual Meeting. "We need to stop trying to change the rhetoric and focus on the important issues, such as the benefits that children in same-sex families gain from the legalization of same-sex marriage."

About the study: The researchers embedded their unique experiment -- the first of its kind -- in the 2009 Survey of American Social Policy Attitudes, designed by IU sociology professor Clem Brooks. The survey, which involved more than 1,400 respondents, included one of six versions of the question: "Should homosexual couples have the right to marry one another?" To test for framing effects, they manipulated the question by using different words to describe supporters of legalized same-sex marriage, using 'civil rights activist,' 'gay rights activist' or 'some people.' They also varied the term used for describing the social

category of those who are subject of the debate, using 'homosexual couples' and 'same-sex couples.' Different versions of the question were randomly assigned to participants in the survey. A counter statement, "Family values activists argue that only [heterosexual couples](#) should have the right to marry," appeared before the question. Pizmony-Levy said this is the first academic study with a national representative sample that tests whether frames and terminology used by interest groups on both sides of the debate really influence [public opinion](#) on this issue. The results apply to the same-sex marriage debate, however, and cannot be generalized to other issues involving sexual minorities. In the debate about whether gays and lesbians should be able to serve in the military, for example, terminology and framing have been shown to be influential.

Co-author Aaron Ponce, also a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology, said the findings are particularly interesting in light of the recent Proposition 8 decision in California. While certain frames don't matter when it comes to public opinion about same-sex marriage, because beliefs and values tend to be strong, framing might matter when used in courts of law.

"Justice Walker framed the same-sex marriage issue as a failure of due process, that is, as the abridgment of a fundamental right for same-sex partners to marry," Ponce said. "The way this issue has been framed may have repercussions for how the case is heard on appeal in higher courts. The question then becomes whether same-sex marriage frames function differently in the context of law and justice than they do with public opinion."

Provided by Indiana University

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