



EQUALITY CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE'S FIELD EDUCATION CAMPAIGN:

## What We've Learned About Messaging

At the heart of the Equality California Institute's marriage education work is our on-the-ground field effort focused on face-to-face conversations to move Californians who do not yet support the freedom to marry. We presently have 15 field staff (and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has contributed two field leaders to the effort) and opened 10 field offices—two offices in Los Angeles; and one each in Orange County, San Diego, the Inland Empire, Fresno, Sacramento, the Coachella Valley, Silicon Valley and the San Francisco Bay Area.

Our program brings together best practices in voter contact and persuasion. It draws from a sophisticated canvass model developed by the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center and also integrates canvassing approaches used by MassEquality and the Task Force.

Our program has been fully operational since the summer of 2009, and we've now had a total of 160 canvasses and tens of thousands of conversations with those not supportive of marriage equality. We now have had enough conversations to evaluate trends and patterns including which groups move the most and which approaches are most effective. Our findings include the following:

Overall, 25 percent of people who are undecided or who oppose marriage equality will, after an in-depth conversation, shift to either support marriage equality, or be undecided (if they were opposed). We are testing the degree to which those shifts in position hold over time.

Communities of color have shown the greatest movement—29 percent of African-Americans and 30 percent of Latinos. Anecdotally, members of both groups point to the fact that few people on our side have engaged them on the issue. We've focused our field work in these communities. In Los Angeles, a full 80 percent of the field work is in people of color communities.

Our focus in the canvass is not to deliver a specific message, per se. Instead, it emphasizes asking open-ended questions whose purpose is to engage people in real conversations about their real concerns about marriage for same-sex couples. While nearly everyone with whom we speak is clear on where they stand on the subject of marriage equality, many are not able to pinpoint precisely why they hold those views or have not examined carefully their own internal conflicts. They will cite religion, or tradition, or "that's the way marriage has always been" but often we find that's not the precise reason for their opposition—or that it's much more complex than they think, and that there are competing values that they hold. Our goal in the canvass is to get below surface explanations and truly engage them in respectful, probing discussions in which people really do examine why they hold their viewpoint. At the core of this engagement is encouraging volunteers to share, at every door, their personal reasons for supporting the right of same-sex couples to marry. We've learned that personalizing, making a heartfelt case, and responding to people's concerns through personal example, is most effective.

### WHAT'S BEEN WORKING SO FAR

**Relating to what people already believe about marriage:** Volunteers ask people at the door about their feelings about marriage. People most often respond that marriage is about

love, commitment, companionship or choosing to raise a family together. Explaining that same-sex couples feel the same way about marriage (and even better, when we personalize and say that's why I want to marry, or why my sister got married to her partner of ten years) helps convey the commonality, that same-sex couples want to get married for the same reasons that straight couples do.

**Relating the freedom to marry to the core tenets of faith the person already holds:**

Approximately 80 percent of people who do not support marriage equality offer faith as the most pressing reason. When we ask about their faith, there is usually the opportunity to find some points of commonality and areas of internal conflict in the points of view of those with whom we are speaking. Often we hear that their religion teaches that marriage for same-sex couples, or homosexuality, is wrong. But we also learn that, almost always, what's most important to them is some variation on the "Golden Rule," treat others as you would want to be treated. This opens an avenue for people to understand marriage equality as consistent with beliefs they already hold—in fact fundamental beliefs they hold about their faith.

**Acknowledging conflicted people's internal dilemma:** Allowing volunteers to recognize that people have conflicting feelings between their desire to be fair and the beliefs that are keeping them from supporting the freedom to marry. Helping people recognize the conflict and asking them how they will make a decision to reconcile it allows us to help them find a resolution in support of marriage equality. For example, as noted above, we can point out that people may have a dilemma, where their faith or tradition guides them in one direction on the specific question of homosexuality and marriage equality, yet it also guides them towards the Golden Rule. Asking them how they will decide is a great way to engage people in conversation.

**Addressing the issue of children and schools:** At the door, people are actually unlikely to bring up this issue themselves (fewer than 20 percent of conversations). However, when volunteer canvassers bring the issues up proactively (because we know our opponents raise the issue), individuals are more likely to understand the irrationality of concerns about the link between allowing same-sex couples to marry and inappropriate content in schools. Engaging them on this subject, and about what they want their kids to know about lesbian and gay people, has proven fruitful and has helped walk them through some concerns and fear that they have about protecting their kids.

## WHAT WE ARE STILL LEARNING MORE ABOUT

**Addressing the issue of sexuality as choice:** Often our conversations about children and schools lead to conversations about the nature of sexuality – whether it is an inherent characteristic or a choice. We have seen strong correlation (though we don't know if it is causal) between people who believe sexuality is a choice and their not supporting marriage equality. Thus far, we are emphasizing the personal stories of volunteers. Our LGBT volunteers, and those who have close friends and family members who are LGBT, talk about their own experience of coming to recognize their own sexuality (or the struggles of their loved ones in recognizing their sexuality). These conversations are often very illuminating to those with whom we are speaking, as they often have never had a discussion about how a gay person came to know she/he is gay. And many hear from conservative religious denominations that LGBT people can simply change their sexuality if they choose to. We are still experimenting with responses to people who believe sexuality is a choice.