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Two Models of Political Engagement

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The hard-fought campaign over Proposition 8, which in November 2008 rescinded the legal right to marriage for same-sex couples in California, is evidence of an important political success for religious conservative political groups who support and seek to advance traditional marriage. Unfortunately, it's a victory they can't appreciate and perhaps can't even entirely comprehend.

On the one hand, they won an electoral victory. Proposition 8 passed with a narrow 52 percent majority of the vote. But their true accomplishment doesn't turn on this particular outcome. Indeed, this narrow accomplishment required a tremendous drain on the limited resources of money, political capital, and good will. The construction of a majority coalition supporting Proposition 8 necessitated the deployment of a number of misleading arguments in which opponents were demonized and in which dubious claims about the legal ramifications of same-sex marriage for churches were made. Moreover, the vote took place at what appears to be very nearly the last possible moment such a coalition could be put together in California. The demographics and direction of existing public opinion suggest that a majority coalition against marriage for same-sex couples will soon be a thing of the past. While religious conservative opponents of marriage for same-sex couples have figured out how to mobilize existing opposition, fears, and concerns, they have not developed a successful strategy for halting or reversing the momentum that exists for marriage rights for same-sex couples.

But the real political victory here—the one that religious conservatives can't yet appreciate or comprehend—has little to do with the fact that Proposition 8 managed to put together a slim

majority coalition. The arguments they have been making for several decades now about the value of marriage have had some considerable success, as evidenced by the priority and value now being placed on marriage. As George Chauncey argues, in the early years of the modern gay rights movement, known as the gay liberation phase, marriage rights as a political goal occupied a marginal position.¹

While test cases were launched for same-sex marriage (same-sex couples applied for marriage licenses in Louisville and Minneapolis in 1970), a substantial portion of the leadership of gay and lesbian organizations found this avenue unappealing. Gay liberation was tied to sexual liberation and a radical critique of the existing social order, both of which were seen as having little to do with marriage. Lesbian feminists in the gay liberation movement often found marriage even less appealing as a political goal: It was a tool of the master, a patriarchal institution, something to be brought down rather than reformed. For many early activists, focusing on marriage rights gave too much value to marriage and served as an insufficiently radical and transformational goal for the gay liberation movement.

Obviously, less than forty years later, marriage has moved from the margins to the center of gay rights politics and activism. Chauncey suggests two important reasons for this shift, both occurring in the 1980s: the AIDS epidemic and a lesbian “baby boom.” In the former case, end-of-life decisions or property inheritance normally reserved for spouses fell legally into the hands of family members who had, in many cases, abandoned their sons and brothers in their time of illness and who now rejected the wishes or seized the homes of the partner who had cared for their dying relative. Without the legal rights and recognition that go along with marriage, the relationships and families that gays and lesbians had only recently found the space to live publicly and openly were vulnerable.

But Chauncey’s account is incomplete, I think. If practical matters regarding legal rights and privileges served as an impetus for the turn toward marriage rights, it has become something more than that. It has become a movement that seeks recognition for the families and lives that have been created on equal footing.

In formulating the demand for equal recognition, marriage has become something worth being equal to. If not, why not simply accept the civil union compromise? The recognition that marriage has a positive, stabilizing, even conservatizing influence has become part of the argument for marriage rights for same-sex couples. Some version of David Brooks's claim that "we should regard it as scandalous that two people could claim to love each other and not want to sanctify their love with marriage and fidelity"² has found support in the gay and lesbian community.

This "conservative case" for marriage rights for same-sex couples is not a new argument. It has been made by, among others, Jonathan Rauch, Andrew Sullivan, David Brooks, and the editors of *The Economist*.³ My purpose here is to consider why this argument has little or no purchase in conservative Christian circles. It seems to me there are two possible modes of culturally conservative and broadly traditionalist political engagement. I'll call these the influence model and the control model. In the influence model of traditionalist political engagement, the goal is first and foremost to make the case, through words or actions, that some traditional modes of living, habits, norms, and values have function, purpose, and beauty that are in jeopardy of being diminished, obscured, or lost. The goal of the influence model is to influence the course of social, political, and cultural change in a way that the value of the traditional is not dismissed but incorporated and transmitted into the futures we build together.

In the second, or control model, of conservative political engagement, attention fixates on a particular mode of being which is seen to best embody the values and norms they seek to protect. Those employing this model attempt to control social and political outcomes to fit their image of life in that particular fashion. They undertake political engagement, not to influence the shape of future change, but to prevent it to the extent that such change might take us further away from the ideal-historical mode of living, which is usually a highly idealized version of a time in the recent past.

A prominent example of this approach can be found in David Blankenhorn's *The Future of Marriage* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007), a book heavily promoted by the Family Research Council, a prominent conservative group working against same-sex marriage rights. On the first page, Blankenhorn recounts his

first serious attempt, as a long-standing advocate of marriage's value, to grapple with the issue of same-sex marriage. He explicitly rejects the idea that his role is merely to influence future developments in the meaning and practice of marriage. While his tone is measured and he makes a conscious effort to consider the potential benefits of same-sex marriage, he nevertheless concludes that failure to control this particular feature of marriage will have substantial deleterious consequences: the social devaluation of marriage, higher divorce rates, more children growing up without fathers, a loss of religious freedom, and possibly polygamy and group marriage, among many others.

Christian conservatives have had some notable success in their arguments about marriage as viewed from the influence model. But as demonstrated by Proposition 8 and the high priority placed on resisting and turning back the right for same-sex couples to marry (and in many other states, though not in California, civil unions as well), Christian conservatives are stuck in the control mode of political engagement. One of the many problems with this mode of political engagement is that it is inevitably quixotic. It's based on a sociology that's entirely too static for modernity; outcomes such as the future of marriage can be influenced but cannot be controlled.

The only victories such a mode of political engagement can produce are like the electoral victory of Proposition 8: sure to be fleeting in content, alienating, and divisive. It provokes bad arguments. Tying the case against same-sex marriage to complementarian theories of gender will be unpersuasive to the increasing number of opposite-sex partners whose marriages are based on egalitarianism, but the argument is required by the nature of the idealized historical moment in the history of marriage which they've made the focus of their political vision.

But the inevitable political failures of the control mode of engagement have another consequence: They reinforce a sense of distinction and separation between the Christian community and the secular world. This attitude, however, leads to a retreat from the world, from political engagement, and from democratic politics. Whatever the reason Christian conservatives are stuck in control mode, it is unfortunate, as it undervalues their contributions

and commits them to an oppositional politics that all too often and too quickly turns ugly. Moreover, the influence model is a form of political engagement best suited for pluralism: It allows success at influencing those who do not share all elements of your comprehensive worldview.

I've often said that one of the most compelling reasons that marriage rights for same-sex couples should be legally and socially recognized is exceedingly simple: They do what married couples do, and live as married couples live. They have built lives together, cared and sacrificed for each other, and raised children together. In these substantive ways, in the ways that make up the social practices of marriage, their commitment to the values of marriage is as strong as that of legally married couples. But it's not the same: Their commitment is, in an important sense, greater. Opposite-sex couples often stumble into marriage; it is, for many, just doing what's expected and taking the path of least resistance. Same-sex couples don't have that luxury; the project of building a life together as married couples do—emotionally, socially, financially, and within a religious community—faces far more substantial obstacles. That so many choose to overcome those barriers and build these relationships can just as plausibly be taken as a sign of health and staying power for the institution of marriage.

It is an odd consequence of the control model of political engagement that, even as it makes the case for marriage, it presents marriage as a weak institution, able to thrive only if buttressed by a specific set of gender norms and roles. In defending marriage, they end up vastly underselling it.

This is why the concern that same-sex marriage amounts to a "forced redefinition" of a venerable social institution, thus potentially weakening it and reducing its appeal, is misplaced. To the extent that marriage is being redefined, that redefinition is not taking place exclusively in the legal and political realm. It has been going on for decades now, long before any state court or legislature considered the issue. Same-sex couples have been building lives together as members of communities, families, and churches. These changes are social and cultural as well as legal and are no more "forced" than social change normally is. This change has been influenced positively by the conservative, traditional case for mar-