



## **Prop 8: Let's Not Make the Same Mistake Next Time**

February 26, 2009  
Matt Coles

After losing an election, it's important to look back and figure out why. That's the only way to make sure that you don't keep making the same mistakes.

There has been a lot of discussion about what the No On 8 campaign did, and whether it was right or wrong. Unfortunately, there hasn't been nearly enough focus on what is likely the single most important factor in our loss: that we needed to get the votes of people deeply conflicted about marriage to win. As I'll explain, we'll always be vulnerable in an election where we need conflicted voters to win.

If we have to go back to the voters—and we will have to do that, if not in California, in other states that have passed constitutional amendments—we need to make sure we have more committed support before we begin an election campaign. The good news is, we know how to do that, and we have the capacity to do it. The catch is that this isn't something we can push off onto campaign managers and media experts. All of us—gay people and our allies—are going to have to talk to our friends and family. If we don't, we could run the best campaigns imaginable and still lose.

### **Conflicted Voters: The Reason We Lost**

The polls and other research show that when the campaign on Prop 8 began in earnest, around Labor Day, voters in California fell roughly into three groups: 1) those who supported marriage for same-sex couples (about 40 percent); 2) those who opposed marriage for same-sex couples (also about 40 percent); and 3) voters who were seriously conflicted (about 15 to 20 percent).

That group of "conflicted" voters was mostly made up of people deeply uncomfortable with marriage for gay couples, but who were also uncomfortable with the idea of taking something positive away from other people.

On Labor Day, a large majority of the conflicted voters were telling pollsters that they planned to vote against Proposition 8. That likely reflected the fact that pro-marriage forces had been effectively defining the debate. Up to that point, almost all of the public conversation about marriage had been positive, from the first gay wedding of Phyllis Lyon and Del Martin, who'd been together over 50 years, through countless stories in smaller media about local couples tying the knot.

Gay marriage was a "feel good" story and, to use today's jargon, that "feel good" story set the frame of the public conversation from May to September. Most conflicted voters seemed to think it would be small and mean to take marriage away. Even if they didn't support gay marriage, they were beginning to think they could live with it.

Conflicted voters started to change their minds when the Yes on 8 forces successfully figured out how to inject children into the debate. They did that with the "prince/princess" ad and others that

followed it. In that ad, a very young girl comes home with a book in her hand and says to her mother, “Mommy, guess what I learned in school today, a prince can marry a prince, and I can marry a princess.”

It was a devastatingly effective piece. This ad finally provided an answer to the question that we’ve put at the heart of our framing of the issue: how does my marriage hurt your family? The ad’s message was that same-sex marriage would mean that small children would be taught (“guess what I learned”) what being gay is, and that they can be gay (“and I can marry a princess”). That’s a prospect unacceptable to many Americans, people who think of themselves as fair minded, who generally oppose discrimination but who still don’t think a seven-year-old should be exposed to conversations about anything having to do with LGBT people. Some think it will take away their children’s innocence, because they still think of anything gay as “inappropriate” for the young. Others think greater acceptance will give children more “options” and lead to more children becoming gay when they grow older.

The idea that school-age children might be taught that they could be gay gave those conflicted voters a way to decide to vote “Yes” without feeling mean about it. They could tell themselves that if gay marriage meant teaching second graders they could be gay, maybe we weren’t yet ready for gay marriage. It was too much too soon.

We can (and probably will) debate forever whether No on 8 could have had a better response, should have had a different field campaign, should have had a different campaign structure, etc., etc. Our greatest challenge, however, is that too many Americans continue to view LGBT people, and same-sex relationships in particular, as not entirely legitimate.

If we want to win, we have to change that.

Research has shown that the single most effective way to change people’s minds on LGBT issues is through one-to-one conversations, between either gay people or solid allies and their friends and family. Knowing someone gay, it turns out, is not enough. People have to talk with someone they trust about what it is like to be gay—ways in which it poses special challenges, ways in which it is quite ordinary.

People have to hear about discrimination from a personal perspective, not as an abstract principle. No one does that better than gay people, but straight allies, particularly straight women talking to the men in their lives, do it quite well also. And when people hear about what it’s like to be gay from friends and family members, they change their thinking. People who’ve been supportive get personally involved. And people who were conflicted become supporters.

Early in January, the ACLU approached Join the Impact, one of the grassroots groups that grew up in the wake of Prop 8, about trying to create a campaign to get people to talk to friends and family. They liked the idea. So we wrote explanations of why the conversations are important and who to talk to, we got resources on how to have the conversations, we wrote snappy answers to people’s excuses, we created a theme (Tell 3) and we built a website. To see it, go to [www.tell-three.org](http://www.tell-three.org).

Join the Impact launched the site, and at the same time, other LGBT organizations either endorsed it to their own members or launched their own versions. If you are in California, you probably heard about Tell 3 from Equality California. **If you were at Creating Change, it was the Task Force that pushed it.** If you get Freedom to Marry’s emails, you heard about it from them. There are no copyrights on Tell 3 and it will likely evolve in scores of directions. Tell 3 is owned by the community.

Tell 3 is only going to work if each and every one of us does it—if we tell 3. And only if we do that will we cease to be political hostages to people who doubt our legitimacy. Only if we do that, will we start to win enduring political victories.