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Paper 3

Introduction

On May 9th, 2012, President Barack Obama announced his support of same-sex marriage in an exclusive interview with ABC News, becoming the first sitting U.S. president to promote the legal right of gays and lesbians to marry. In the United States, same-sex marriage is an extremely divisive issue that ignites many different reactions from individuals, depending on their culture, religion, beliefs, and other values. However, in recent years, the overall public opinion on same-sex marriage in America appears to be shifting toward approval of allowing gay and lesbian couples the legal right to marry.

In this paper, I will examine how the changing public opinion on the issue of same-sex marriage influenced President Obama's decision to endorse gay marriage. I will examine the relationship between public opinion, political leadership, and the media. These three key components are intrinsically linked throughout modern society, each complementing and influencing the other one way or another. I will examine how they're linked when dealing with the issue of same-sex marriage, specifically in the timeframe of the 2012 election and the weeks surrounding the President's announcement of support for marriage equality.

In order to examine the public opinion surrounding the issue of same-sex marriage, we should first consider what factors cause the public to hold the opinion that they do. I will examine the influence of age and religion, as well as the role of the media and interest groups on how Americans think about the issue of same-sex marriage. We will be looking at how, over the past several years, and in the past four years specifically, have American's opinions on this issue

of gay marriage changed?

There are several factors to consider including how the media framed Vice President Joe Biden's seemingly off-the-cuff endorsement of same-sex marriage in an interview which took place just three days prior to the President's affirmation of marriage equality. I will also examine the media's coverage of the President's support, and how much of it was focused on the actual policy change, and how much was focused on the impact it could have on the then-upcoming 2012 presidential election.

Public Opinion

Before we begin to examine how public opinion and the media influenced President Obama's decision to support of same-sex marriage, we must first understand what public opinion is and what it's measuring. Though many definitions have been offered to describe "public opinion," political scientist V.O. Key offered a working view which says it can be thought of as "opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed" (Berinsky 2). This definition captures the essence of what public opinion is, as it expresses the idea of an aggregate collection of beliefs measured by government to capture an image of what their constituents believe at any given time. Of course, public opinion surrounding an issue can change, sometimes to the point where individuals do not express their opinions because they believe it is against the majority belief, resulting in what is known as the "spiral of silence" (Noelle-Neumann 18). Over time, it's possible the idea of a "spiral of silence" leads to gradual change of public opinion surrounding an issue, such as same-sex marriage. Some views are seen as more extreme while others are interpreted to be more mainstream.

Understanding public opinion in society is crucial to comprehending the policies and

positions taken by government officials. Public opinion often sways policy by influencing elected representatives to support certain causes because of the idea of popular sovereignty, so it's important to examine the public opinion surrounding policy issues when attempting to understand why policy makers hold certain positions on issues or beliefs (Berinsky 272). With this in mind, one might assume that public opinion surrounding same-sex marriage was becoming more progressive prior to the President's announcement of support. Considering the fact that 2012 was an election year, it was possibly a calculated decision by the President to support same-sex marriage at that time.

By measuring the collective beliefs of many individuals in the United States, candidates, policy makers, and the public are able to have a better understanding of where the public consensus is on any given issue. Measuring this assists the government in making policy decisions based off the will of the people, and often times public opinion polls drive the narrative in the media and in Washington. It's important to remember that public opinion polls are a snapshot of the opinion of individuals on an issue at any given moment, and that events can radically change the public's opinion.

History of Same-Sex Marriage in the United States

Understanding the history surrounding the issue of same-sex marriage in the United States is important, as it offers us a better insight into why the public has held certain opinions that may have shifted over time. As previously mentioned, the issue of same-sex marriage in the United States is extremely divisive, and ignites many different reactions and beliefs from the public. However, the history surrounding same-sex marriage, and gay and lesbian rights in America, is relatively recent. Prior to the 2003 Supreme Court ruling in *Lawrence v. Texas*, it was

illegal in fourteen states for consenting adults to engage in certain same-sex sexual activities (*LAWRENCE AND GARNER v. TEXAS*). Since that ruling, progress has been made in many fields, such as gay and lesbian representation in elected offices, but has still been met with deep opposition from some groups (Sherkat 168).

Opposition to same-sex marriage, and gay rights in general are rooted in strongly-held political and religious beliefs. Since 1992, the Republican Party Platform has strictly opposed recognizing any sort of civil union between same-sex couples, and has offered no platform to further the civil liberties of gays and lesbians in the United States. Conservative Christian groups have staunchly opposed the idea of same-sex marriage, and championed the passage of the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act, and they have consistently campaigned against gay and lesbian rights in general (Sherkat 167).

In the 2004 elections, eleven states had “marriage protection” referendums on their ballots, all of which passed with strong majorities. Karl Rove, one of President George W. Bush’s top advisers, said that including ballot measures to ban gay marriage “tends to help us” in winning elections (Smith 78). Many columnists and strategists believed that these measures, which saw strong support from the Christian right, may have been a critical part of George W. Bush’s reelection (Smith 79). However, the Democratic party in recent years has started to become more vocal in their support for gay and lesbian rights, including same-sex marriage.

In 2008, then-Senator Barack Obama campaigned on repealing the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy instituted in the U.S. military. In 2012, he “evolved” on the issue of gay marriage and openly supported and advocated for the right for same-sex couples to marry. These two steps were leaps, considering less than 10 years earlier some same-sex couples could’ve been arrested

for engaging in consensual sexual activities. Over the past decade, there has been a steady trend of increase in support for same-sex marriage in the United States.

Public Opinion Surrounding Same-sex Marriage

President Obama's evolution toward supporting gay rights, including not only his support of same-sex marriage, but also his administration's successful efforts to overturn the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy in the U.S. military, may have been influenced by America's changing public opinion surrounding the issue. By examining various polls from different polling agencies, we can examine how public opinion surrounding the issue of same-sex marriage has changed over time. Similarly, we can examine how specific support for policies have changed; for example, support for a constitutional amendment specifying marriage as between a man and a woman.

Over the past ten years, multiple polls have shown that support for same-sex marriage is on the rise. Public opinion polls conducted by Gallup/USA Today, ABC News/Washington Post, Pew Research Center, and Quinnipiac University in the past 5-10 years have all shown a swap—previously having more opposition than support—in their results (Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4). The polls conducted by Gallup and ABC News show drastic changes in America's public opinion on the issue of gay marriage. In 2006, both polls had above 55% of those surveyed responding that they were opposed to same-sex marriage. By 2012, both agencies had support for same-sex marriage above 50% while opposition fell to a new low for both individual polls.

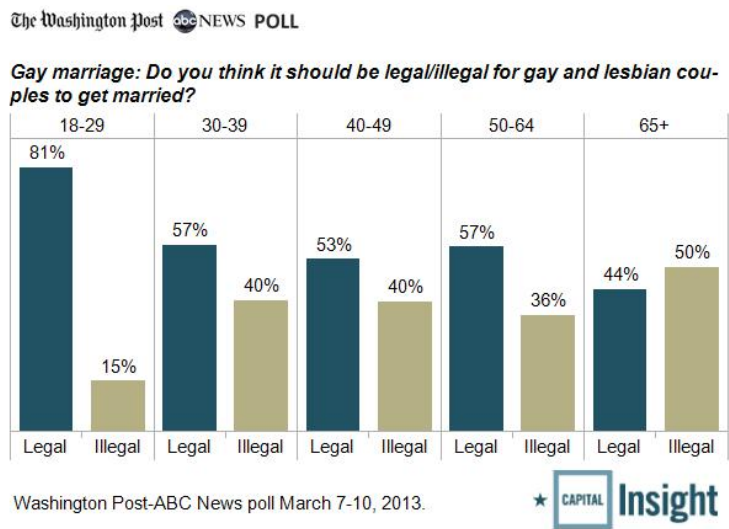
Meanwhile, Pew Research Center and Quinnipiac showed similar trends in regards to a paradigm shift in America's public opinion on the issue of same-sex marriage, however to a lesser extent. In each of these polls opposition fell to a new low, support for same-sex marriage remained below just slightly 50%. The discrepancies between these polls are likely related to the

margin of error and how the question was asked. Both ABC News and Gallup asked the question with the word “should,” possibly allowing the respondent to give a less-than-personal response, while Pew and Quinnipiac asked the question with words like “favor” and “support,” prompting a more personal answer.

In a similar fashion to the previous four polls, a CNN/ORC Poll conducted in 2008 showed that less half of those surveyed believed that gays and lesbians should be allowed to marry, but in 2012, nearly 55% of those surveyed supported the legal right for same-sex couples to marry (Figure 5). Additionally, other specific policy areas seem to be affected as well. In 2004, a FOXNews Poll showed that 52% of those surveyed supported a constitutional amendment that defined marriage as between a man and a woman, but in 2012, just days after President Obama’s announcement of support for same-sex marriage, 53% of those surveyed were opposed to such an amendment (Figure 6). These trends show overwhelmingly that support for same-sex marriage has steadily increased over the past decade, while opposition has decreased.

The polling data also offers some insight into what generational divides there are in America’s public opinion. A recent Washington Post/ABC News poll showed how different age groups viewed the issue of same-sex

marriage. As you can see in the chart to the right, American’s between 18-29 strongly favor the legal right for gay and lesbian couples to get married. There is a steady support between 30-64, with a staunch opposition among Americans who are 65



and older.

These generational divides make political and social sense, as younger individuals tend to be more progressive in nature. In addition, older Americans tend to base their opinions on personal values and tradition, and the issue of “protecting” marriage is a deeply traditional and personal issue for many older Americans. However, age is not necessarily the determining factor in support or opposition of same-sex marriage. In fact, Sherkat et. al. found that religion tends to be one of the driving factors in structuring views on the issue of same-sex marriage, while age takes a backseat (178). These religious beliefs are key to understanding why individuals support or oppose same-sex marriage, as individuals with strong religious ties are more likely to see issues with the notion of the “sanctity of marriage.”

Influences on Public Opinion

In order to understand how the public opinion, the media, and interest groups interact with each other, we must first understand the influence that the media – and public interest groups – have over public opinion and political leadership. There are several different ways in which these organizations can affect the beliefs of individuals all across America and play a role in shifting the overall public opinion on an issue over time. Interest groups work directly with political leaders to shape policy, while the media works to frame issues in a certain perspective to influence how Americans think about different issues.

Interest Groups

Interest groups are organizations that have access to the government in ways that many Americans do not, and they often play a large role over the formation of policy. In most cases, the power of an interest group is determined by a few factors: money, age, level of membership,

level of involvement, and prominence (Grossmann 4).

The amount of money an organization has, according to Grossmann, is a high indicator of the level of prominence an interest group may have. Another measurement or indicator of prominence is the total amount of membership of an advocacy group. An organization like the National Rifle Association (NRA) – which has a large membership base – is much more prominent than a group like the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence (BCPGV). Therefore, according to Grossmann, the NRA is likely to have much greater influence on policy than BCPGV.

Jeffrey Berry and Clyde Wilcox believe that there is an inherent bias linked to interest groups. They state that, “the resources available to business are so immense that it is easy to conclude that corporations can dominate any policy issue if they use those resources” (Berry and Wilcox 178). While Berry and Wilcox ultimately conclude differently, this is a strong argument as to why interest groups often become too powerful. Average citizens don’t have access to the same kind of resources that large corporations do, and are therefore unable to directly compete with the powerful lobbying agencies. Because this is the case, corporations, some would argue, dictate more policy changes than the public at large does. Lobbying groups have direct access to political leadership, giving them an advantage when it comes to communicating policy preferences.

Framing

The media plays an important role in forming public opinion, as they drive the narrative of news stories published and aired through the different mediums of communication. This is a powerful tool that influences the public and political leadership alike. The media, as I’ll explore

in the rest of this paper, can change the scope of coverage focusing on one issue or another, and presenting it in the way they believe will be more informative or interesting (Druckman 225).

Framing is one of the most important aspects of the media to consider. Framing is when a news agency presents a story in a certain way in order to get the audience to think about an issue in a certain way. Examples of framing can often be seen during presidential elections; a story about an action President Obama makes will be put in the context of the election, in that it will be framed in such a way that the election becomes the main focus of the article rather than the action itself.

A side effect of framing is that certain news stories will be highlighted, while others will fall below the fold (Graber 4). This draws focus to the issues that the media wants to be covered, while smaller stories are overlooked. The media does this in order to set the agenda of the public arena. For example, during an election cycle, the media is more likely to cover a story about a major development in the presidential election than it is a local car accident. If the presidential election was not occurring, the car accident may be more likely to be covered.

Hypothesis

I believe that following Vice President Joe Biden's announcement that he was "comfortable" with gay marriage, a large percentage of the news stories published were focused on either the impact such an endorsement may have on the 2012 election rather than focusing on the substantive policy value of the announcement itself. In addition, I believe there would be coverage calling for President Obama to consider also endorsing marriage equality. This reaffirms the idea of agenda setting, as the media would be forcing the President's hand on an issue while he may still be deliberating.

Following the President's affirmation of support for same-sex marriage, I believe that the media would focus once again on the impact such a policy shift would have on the 2012 election. While it was truly historic for a sitting American president to come out in favor of the legalization of marriage for gay and lesbian couples, the media at the time was largely focused on the 2012 presidential election. Because of this, I think that they would likely look into the impact that the Obama administration's evolution on the issue of marriage equality would have on swing states, which are an important factor in winning a presidential election. Furthermore, I believe that snap polls would have been taken asking individuals if the President's new stance on same-sex marriage would affect their vote in November 2012.

Methodology

In order to test the hypothesis that the media would focus on the 2012 presidential election rather than the evolution of President Obama's stance on same-sex marriage, I used *LexisNexis* to examine news stories in top publications in the days surrounding these announcements. First, I looked at Joe Biden's announcement of support. I examined the headlines, as well as the articles themselves, to determine whether or not the election was considered in large part. I also examined whether or not the media "pressured" President Obama into endorsing same-sex marriage in their coverage of Joe Biden's announcement.

Second, I examined President Obama's announcement, and once again examined the headlines and articles to determine whether the election was mentioned in the article. Third, I looked for articles discussing public opinion surrounding President Obama's endorsement of gay marriage. In order to do this, I searched for any articles involving "Biden, Joe" and "Obama, Barack" and searched for the phrase "same-sex" and/or "gay marriage." Once I had those results,

I further narrowed it down by looking for “election” or “pressure,” depending on the result I was seeking.

Findings (Collected Through *LexisNexis*)

In examining the news coverage surrounding Joe Biden’s announcement that he was “comfortable” with gay marriage, I used a sample of 38 news articles written between May 6th, 2012 to May 8th, 2012 which is the period between the Vice President’s interview and the President’s affirmation. The sample consisted of 33 newspapers, five web-based sources, and one industry trade press source. Almost 35% of the headlines I examined painted Vice President Biden’s announcement of support as an off-the-cuff remark, in a somewhat negative manner. Many of the headlines used phrases such as “jumps the gun,” “rocks the boat,” and “stirs the pot.”

Of these 38 news articles, only seven mentioned the 2012 presidential election directly in the headline. However, 84% of the articles I examined mentioned “election” within the article. That means only 16% of the articles were purely about the Vice President’s stance on same-sex marriage without considering the impact on the election. Over 33% of the articles mentioned the word “pressure,” indicating the Vice President’s comment was forcing the hand of President Obama. Two of the articles specifically mentioned North Carolina as being a potential loss for the campaign following the Vice President’s announcement of support.

Examining the media’s reaction following President Obama’s endorsement of gay marriage, I used a sample size of 325 articles written between May 9th, 2012 (the day of the president’s announcement) and May 11th, 2012. This sample size is representative of the increase in coverage between the Vice President’s endorsement and the President’s endorsement.

Of the 325 news articles, 245 were from newspapers, 73 from web-based publications, five from news transcripts, three from industry trade press sources, and two from newsletters. Over 64% of the 325 articles examined contained some sort of coverage of the 2012 election, meaning only 36% of the articles were purely about the President's evolving stance on marriage equality. Just under half of the articles mentioned Presidential candidate Mitt Romney. Over 31% of the articles contained information about the state of North Carolina, which the day prior to the President's announcement voted to constitutionally ban gay marriage in that state. North Carolina was also an important swing state in the 2012 election. Out of the 325 articles in the sample, 28 mentioned the President was "pressured" into the decision.

Analysis of Coverage

The media coverage of both Vice President Biden's and President Obama's announcements of support for marriage equality was generally framed by the media to include some aspect of the 2012 presidential election. It was in the best interest of the media to frame the issue of same-sex marriage in the context of the presidential election, as that was the most appealing way to present the story. In many of the articles, there was a discussion of the importance of North Carolina as a swing state, showing the perceived closeness of the election between President Obama and Mitt Romney.

Some of the the news articles that followed the Vice President's interview, in which he indicated he was in favor of same-sex marriage, used phrases like "rocked the boat" and "jumped the gun." In reality, many people think the Veep's endorsement of same-sex marriage was a trial balloon to see how the media, and the public, would react to a high level official supporting marriage equality (Yellen). This hypothetical test balloon would allow the administration to

monitor coverage and ultimately decide whether President Obama should also endorse marriage equality.

After the Vice President said he was “comfortable” with same-sex marriage, a third of the news articles I examined mentioned that his decision pressured the President in one way or another. Ultimately, assuming the test balloon theory to be incorrect, the President may have been influenced by many different factors leading to his decision to change his stance on same-sex marriage. Leading up to his announcement, he had stated that he was evolving on the issue. Public opinion, as I showed in the first paper, had been moving in a favorable direction. This alone may have been enough to convince the President to come out in favor of marriage equality. In addition to a shift in public opinion, many states began passing legislation legalizing same-sex marriage, putting more and more pressure on President Obama to switch his views on the matter.

Regardless of whether or not the President was “pressured” into a decision to support same-sex marriage or not, he was scheduled to endorse it before the Democratic National Convention in September 2012 (Thrush). According to a Gallup poll following the President’s announcement, 60% of Americans said President Obama’s decision to endorse marriage equality would not influence their vote in the 2012 election. Public opinion surrounding the issue of gay and lesbian marriage in America has been shifting over the past few years, and American political leadership is following close behind.

Conclusion

Following Joe Biden’s announcement of support for same-sex marriage, the media immediately began to hound President Obama on the issue of gay marriage. The Gallup poll

shows that a majority of Americans were not swayed by the President's decision to support same-sex marriage. The Obama campaign likely conducted internal polls measuring the same type of question and monitored the public's trend toward support for same-sex marriage. When the President made his announcement that he was in favor of same-sex marriage, support for gay and lesbian marriage had never been higher.

It's clear that a general change is occurring in America when it comes to the issue of same-sex marriage. Over the past several years, not only have multiple states legalized same-sex marriage, but the public opinion surrounding the issue has consistently increased. Polling agencies are constantly measuring the public's opinion surrounding this issue, as it is one of the most heated topics in American politics today. The ever-growing public support for same-sex marriage is making it easier for elected officials to support the issue, and it almost certainly played a role in President Obama's decision to evolve on the issue.

Figure 1. Washington Post-ABC News

ABC News/Washington Post Poll. March 7-10, 2013. N=1,001 adults nationwide. Margin of error \pm 3.5.

"Do you think it should be legal or illegal for gay and lesbian couples to get married?"

2005 & 2010-2012: "gay and lesbian." 2009: "gay and lesbian" asked of half the sample, "homosexual" asked of half the sample. Other years: "homosexual."

	Legal %	Illegal %	Unsure %
3/7-10/13	58	36	6
7/25 - 8/5/12	53	42	5
5/17-20/12	53	39	8
3/7-10/12	52	43	5
7/14-17/11	51	45	4
3/10-13/11	53	44	3
2/4-8/10	47	50	3
4/21-24/09	49	46	5
5/31 - 6/4/06	36	58	5
8/25-28/05	39	58	3
3/4-7/04	38	59	3
2/18-22/04	39	55	6
1/15-18/04	41	55	4
9/03	37	55	7

Figure 2. Gallup

USA Today/Gallup Poll. Nov. 26-29, 2012. N=1,015 adults nationwide. Margin of error \pm 4.

"Do you think marriages between same-sex couples should or should not be recognized by the law as valid, with the same rights as traditional marriages?"

	Should %	Should not %	Unsure %
11/26-29/12	53	46	2
5/3-6/12	50	48	2
12/15-18/11	48	48	4
5/5-8/11	53	45	3
5/3-6/10	44	53	3
5/7-10/09	40	57	3
5/8-11/08	40	56	4
5/10-13/07	46	53	1
5/8-11/06	42	56	2

Figure 3. Pew Research Center

Pew Research Center. March 13-17, 2013. N=1,501 adults nationwide. Margin of error \pm 3.

"Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry legally?"
 EXCEPT for 5/08, 6/08, 8/09, 4/12: "Do you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally?"

	Strongly favor/Favor	Oppose/Strongly oppose	Unsure
	%	%	%
3/13-17/13	49	44	8
10/24-28/12	49	40	11
6/28 - 7/9/12	48	44	8
6/7-17/12	48	44	9
4/4-15/12	47	43	11
2/22 - 3/1/11	45	46	9
8/25 - 9/6/10	43	47	10
7/21 - 8/5/10	41	48	10
8/11-17/09	39	53	8
4/09	35	54	11
8/08	39	52	9
6/18-29/08	40	52	8
5/21-25/08	38	49	13

Figure 4. Quinnipiac University

Quinnipiac University Poll. Feb. 27-March 4, 2013. N=1,944 registered voters nationwide. Margin of error \pm 2.2.

"In general, do you support or oppose same-sex marriage?"

	Support	Oppose	Unsure
	%	%	%
ALL	47	43	10
Republicans	23	69	8
Democrats	65	29	6
Independents	50	38	12
11/28 - 12/3/12	48	46	7
7/8-13/08	36	55	9

Figure 5. CNN/ORC

CNN/ORC Poll. March 15-17, 2013. N=1,021 adults nationwide. Margin of error \pm 3.

"Do you think marriages between gay and lesbian couples should or should not be recognized by the law as valid, with the same rights as traditional marriages?"

	Should %	Should not %	Unsure %
3/15-17/13	53	44	3
Men	49	48	3
Women	56	40	4
Under age 50	61	36	3
50 & older	42	53	4
Democrats	70	28	2
Independents	55	41	4
Republicans	25	71	4
5/29-31/12	54	42	3
Men	52	43	5
Women	56	42	2
Democrats	70	28	2
Independents	60	37	4
Republicans	23	72	5
9/9-11/11	53	46	1
4/9-10/11	51	47	2
4/23-26/09	44	54	2
12/19-21/08	44	55	1
6/26-29/08	44	53	3

Figure 6. Fox News

Fox News Poll conducted by Anderson Robbins Research (D) and Shaw & Company Research (R). May 13-15, 2012. N=913 registered voters nationwide. Margin of error \pm 3.

2010 & earlier: Conducted by Opinion Dynamics Corp. LV = likely voters. Except where noted, results are among registered voters.

"Would you favor or oppose amending the U.S. Constitution to define marriage as being between a man and a woman?"

	Favor %	Oppose %	Depends (vol.) %	Unsure %
5/13-15/12	38	53	2	7
3/3-4/04	52	40	3	5

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