

**Same-Sex:  
Public Embraces Gay Rights, Opposes Gay Marriage,  
Advocates National Referendum**

**Findings from a National Survey for the  
National Post and Global Television**



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## Overview

Canadians are pro-gay rights and anti-gay marriage. They believe that the protection of gay rights is long overdue while traditional legal definitions of marriage as one man, one woman should nonetheless be left unchanged or possibly supplemented by a civil union provision for gays.

An overwhelming majority of the public favours resolution of the issue by national referendum rather than by a vote in Parliament.

A clear majority perceives criticisms of church involvement in the issue by public figures such as Hon. Pierre Pettigrew as a threat to free speech.

The issue of same-sex marriage has provoked a civilizational clash between the religious and the non-religious or anti-religious. Overwhelming majorities oppose gay marriage among those who define themselves as religious, oppose common law unions, worship at traditionalist churches, and report having had few rather than many sexual partners (4 or fewer). Support for gay marriage tends to be stronger among those who define themselves as non-religious, report having had five or more sexual partners, attend liberal rather than traditional congregations, and belong to the small minority who favour polygamy.

More moderate divisions of opinion separate men from women, who are marginally more favourable to gay marriage, Francophones, who are somewhat more supportive of gay marriage than Anglophones, the under-30 cohort from older cohorts, which tend to oppose gay marriage, immigrants such as Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs from non-generationals Canadians, who are more favourable to gay marriage rights, and the highly educated (two degrees or more), who are more sympathetic to gay marriage than are other educational strata.

Respondents were asked whether they agreed with a series of arguments presented for and against gay marriage rights. A long overdue need to protect homosexuals against discrimination was the argument that resonated most with Canadians, even among those who opposed gay marriage.



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Only one anti-gay marriage argument resonated with the public, albeit barely—the idea that gay marriage is an insult to religion. Most respondents did not agree that gay marriage insulted parenthood, offended common sense, or could lead to polygamy.

Among the political parties, the Conservatives have by far the most to gain from the issue for a series of reasons:

- ❑ The Liberal and NDP electorates are divided on the issue but the Conservative electorate is almost unanimous in its opposition to gay marriage;
- ❑ Among voters who are passionate on the issue—take firm positions or say that same-sex marriage is an important issue for government to address—those who oppose gay marriage are far more numerous than those who favour it;
- ❑ the proportion of the electorate opposed to gay marriage is larger than the Conservative share of the vote;
- ❑ a large majority, including most Liberals, favours resolving the marriage issue by referendum, a traditional Alliance/Conservative party form of deliberation; and
- ❑ normally Liberal-voting immigrants tend to embrace the Conservative party position on the issue.

The main opportunity for gain by the Liberals would depend on their ability to persuade the electorate that Conservative opposition to proposed legislation is rooted primarily in homophobic attitudes.

On the main issues, Canadians have remained virtually unchanged in their views since late 2003. Most still do not embrace gay marriage. There is a hint that the minority embracing the change may have increased, albeit only slightly if at all.

On the specific matter of polygamy, about a third of the public believes that same-sex marriage will hasten the arrival of plural marriage but most do not have such a perception. About an eighth actually favours polygamy for Canada.



## **The Ballot Issues**

### **Stable Majority Support for Limiting Marriage to Heterosexuals—Civil Union Desired by Plurality, Acceptable to Majority**

A clear, stable, but not overpowering majority favours the traditional notion of one man, one woman marriage. More than three-fifths favour keeping rather than modifying current law to incorporate same-sex provisions, as shown in table 1. Among those who feel strongly on the issue, advocates of the traditional legal formulation outnumber advocates of same-sex revisions by a margin of about 2.5:1.

When respondents are offered a three-fold choice of traditional marriage only, a civil union option for gays, and a reformulation of marriage to include same-sex relationships, Canadians are split three-ways. A plurality favours a civil union provision with marriage reserved for heterosexuals, as shown in table 2. Given the distribution of opinions, a reasonable inference is that most Canadians would find such a provision acceptable even if neither the heterosexual traditionalists nor the same-sex modernists would find it ideal.



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*Table 1: Attitude to Current (Heterosexual) Legal Definition<sup>1</sup>*

|                               | cda | Lib | con | ndp | bloc | Nov03<br>n=1000,<br>CDA |
|-------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|------|-------------------------|
| Strongly support keeping      | 50  | 44  | 74  | 25  | 29   | 51                      |
| Somewhat support              | 16  | 16  | 9   | 21  | 19   | 16                      |
| Somewhat oppose               | 12  | 12  | 8   | 16  | 24   | 14                      |
| Strongly oppose keeping       | 22  | 28  | 9   | 37  | 29   | 19                      |
| DNK Excluded From Calculation | 8   | 9   | 3   | 7   | 10   | 6                       |

*Table 2: Traditional Marriage Only vs. Civil Union Option vs.  
Same-Sex Marriage Revision<sup>2</sup>*

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | feb05 |     |     |     |      | NOv03<br>N=1000 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-----|-----|-----|------|-----------------|
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | CDA   | LIB | CON | NDP | BLOC |                 |
| (1) Parliament should keep the existing definition of marriage as the union of one woman and one man and should not pass any law recognizing same sex unions.                                                          | 29    | 24  | 41  | 21  | 14   | 30              |
| (2) Parliament should keep the existing legal definition of marriage as the union of one woman and one man and should set up a separate legal category that includes same-sex unions but would not be called marriage. | 36    | 36  | 50  | 28  | 22   | 37              |
| (3) Parliament should change the legal definition of marriage to the union of any two persons, regardless of their gender.                                                                                             | 35    | 41  | 9   | 51  | 64   | 31              |
| DNK Excluded From Calculation                                                                                                                                                                                          | 3     | 3   | 1   | 4   | 0    | 2               |

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<sup>1</sup> Q2. Do you support strongly, support somewhat, oppose somewhat, or oppose strongly [ROTATE POLES] keeping the definition of marriage as a union of one woman and one man to the exclusion of all others? [ROTATE THIS QUESTION WITH THE ENSUING AND KEEP TRACK OF ORDER OF THE TWO QUESTIONS]

<sup>2</sup> "Suppose you had the following three options. Which would you prefer? [RANDOMIZE]."



## **Large Majority for National Referendum**

A very clear majority of Canadians, including most Liberals, want the marriage issue to be determined by referendum rather than Parliament, as shown in table 3.

*Table 3: Decision by Free Vote in Parliament vs. by Referendum  
"Q8. Should decisions about same-sex marriage be made by...  
"[RANDOMIZE]*

|                                                       | cda | lib | cons | ndp | bloc |
|-------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----|------|-----|------|
| A national referendum among all Canadians             | 67  | 66  | 78   | 50  | 52   |
| A free vote among all MPs including cabinet ministers | 29  | 27  | 19   | 44  | 45   |
| A free vote among MPs but no cabinet ministers        | 5   | 7   | 3    | 6   | 4    |
| DNK Excluded From Calculation                         | 8   | 9   | 3    | 4   | 7    |



## **Pettigrew-Type Comments about Religious Organizations Perceived as Threat to Free Speech**

By a very strong majority, Canadians perceive as a threat to free speech when public figures call upon religious organizations to remain silent on moral issues such as same-sex marriage, as shown in table 4.

*Table 4: Pettigrew-Type Comment and Free Speech<sup>3</sup>*

|                               | cda | lib | cons | ndp | bloc |
|-------------------------------|-----|-----|------|-----|------|
| Definitely a threat           | 38  | 32  | 52   | 33  | 36   |
| Probably                      | 25  | 30  | 20   | 29  | 25   |
| Probably Not                  | 17  | 19  | 12   | 19  | 10   |
| Definitely not a threat       | 21  | 20  | 16   | 19  | 29   |
| DNK Excluded From Calculation | 4   | 5   | 1    | 5   | 2    |

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<sup>3</sup> “Q7. When a politician says that religious organizations have no right to express opinions about moral issues, is this a threat to freedom of speech? [ROTATE]”





## Fault Lines

### Civilizational Clashes—Religion, Culture, and Education

The issue of same-sex marriage has provoked a civilizational clash. Some of the more passionate differences are across a religious divide:

- ❑ Among the more than a third of Canadians who say that religion is “very important” to them as opposed to somewhat, not really or not at all, 80% (69% “strongly”) favour keeping the present definition (see table 1) compared to 35% of those for whom religion is not at all important (25% strongly);
- ❑ Among those who perceive common law unions as undesirable, scoring their desirability as 1-2 on a 7 point scale, 80% favour keeping the present definition compared to 30% among those who deem such relationships desirable, scoring them 6-7 on the 7 point desirability scale;
- ❑ Among those who report having had four or fewer sexual partners, 80% favour retaining (61% strongly) the present definition compared to 57% (38% strongly) among those reporting 5 or more partners; and
- ❑ Among those who believe that any society that believes in equality cannot allow polygamy, 70% favour retaining the traditional definition (55% strongly) compared to 45% (23% strongly) among those who believe that any tolerant society must allow polygamy.

A difference of opinion over definitions of marriage also emerges in the case of cultural differences:

- ❑ 74% of Canadians whose mother tongue is other than an official language favour keeping the current legal



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definition (table 1) compared to 66% of Canadians as whole;

- ❑ 70% of first or second generation Canadians favour keeping the current legal definition (56% strongly) compared to 62% of Nth generation Canadians (46% strongly);
- ❑ 46% of Canadians with two or more university degrees favour retaining the current definition compared to 66% of Canadians as a whole.

Francophone attitudes involve some complexity. On the one hand, Francophones opt strong to protect the current definition when asked specifically about retain or modifying the current definition (see table 1). Thus, 67% of francophones<sup>4</sup> favoured retaining the existing definition (47% strongly) compared to 65% of Anglophones (50% strongly). On the other hand, Francophones opt more strongly than Anglophones for a socially liberal position when offered the trio of options listed in table 2. In response to this particular question, 44% of Francophones choose a redefinition of marriage to include a same-sex provision compared to 33% with that position among Anglophones.

Francophone respondents, particularly those in Quebec, are intriguing because of sharp differences between Bloc and Liberal voters. French Quebec Liberals resemble Conservative voters insofar as they favour retaining the current definition by a large margin while Bloc voters resemble NDPers. Thus, French Quebec Liberal support for retaining the traditional definition is high—78% (52% strongly) vs. 48% (29% strongly) among Bloc voters.

A modest gender difference emerges: 62% (46% strongly) of women favour retaining the traditional definition compared to 69% of men (54% strongly).

### **Party Dynamics—Unified Conservatives vs. Divided Others**

The Liberals may ultimately benefit from the issue if they are able to put the issue behind them and also succeed in portraying the Conservative opposition to same-sex as motivated by bigotry. But, short of such achievements, the Liberals stand to lose and the Conservatives, to gain. A substantial element of

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<sup>4</sup> Defined as respondents interviewed in the French language.



the Conservatives' strength lies in relative unity, as shown in tables 1 and 2. Other sources of strength stem from public support for a referendum, a traditional rightwing policy plank, and public concern that Pettigrew-type criticisms of religious organizations amount to threats on free speech, as shown in table 4. Furthermore, opponents of same-sex are more energized than supporters as evidenced by (a) a higher disposition to feel strongly and (b) an apparently greater inclination to feel that the same-sex issue ought to be a priority of government.

## **The Setting**

### **Messages and Counter-Messages—Concern about the Persecution of Gays vs. Concern about the Oppression of Religious Freedom**

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they agree or disagree with various arguments for and against same-sex marriage. Few of the arguments resonated among a majority of the public, as shown in tables 5 and 6. The most persuasive argument was that Canada was long overdue in taking action to protect gays against persecution. The second most persuasive argument was that same-sex marriage was an insult to religion.

To the extent that the Liberals succeed in highlighting the fair play theme, they may achieve some popular approbation. However, they stand to lose in public esteem to the extent that Pettigrew-like comments on the rights of churches to be involved in moral issues are interpreted as a threat to free speech or an insult to religion.



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*Table 5: Reasons to Oppose Gay Marriage  
“Q5. Please tell me if you agree or disagree with each of the  
following reasons for opposing gay marriage [RANDOMIZE]”*

|                               | cda                                                                                                           | lib | cons | ndp | bloc |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------|-----|------|
|                               | <b>It insults religion</b>                                                                                    |     |      |     |      |
| Agree                         | 48                                                                                                            | 45  | 69   | 38  | 18   |
| Disagree                      | 52                                                                                                            | 55  | 31   | 62  | 82   |
| DNK Excluded From Calculation | 5                                                                                                             | 6   | 3    | 3   | 0    |
|                               | <b>It insults common sense</b>                                                                                |     |      |     |      |
| Agree                         | 40                                                                                                            | 42  | 51   | 23  | 20   |
| Disagree                      | 60                                                                                                            | 58  | 49   | 77  | 80   |
| DNK Excluded From Calculation | 6                                                                                                             | 6   | 5    | 5   | 7    |
|                               | <b>Gay marriage insults parents, who need encouragement to carry out the hard work of caring for children</b> |     |      |     |      |
| Agree                         | 33                                                                                                            | 30  | 47   | 21  | 23   |
| Disagree                      | 67                                                                                                            | 70  | 53   | 79  | 78   |
| DNK Excluded From Calculation | 10                                                                                                            | 8   | 10   | 5   | 3    |
|                               | <b>It could lead to polygamy</b>                                                                              |     |      |     |      |
| Agree                         | 24                                                                                                            | 20  | 37   | 13  | 10   |
| Disagree                      | 76                                                                                                            | 80  | 63   | 87  | 90   |
| DNK Excluded From Calculation | 8                                                                                                             | 9   | 7    | 4   | 10   |



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*Table 6: Reasons to Support Gay Marriage  
“Q6. Please tell me if you agree or disagree with each of the following reasons for supporting gay marriage [RANDOMIZE]”*

|                               | cda                                                            | lib | cons | ndp | bloc |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------|-----|------|
|                               | Protecting gays against discrimination is long overdue         |     |      |     |      |
| Agree                         | 69                                                             | 74  | 60   | 77  | 77   |
| Disagree                      | 31                                                             | 26  | 41   | 23  | 23   |
| DNK Excluded From Calculation | 6                                                              | 6   | 6    | 1   | 7    |
|                               | Gay marriage would bring stability to the lives of homosexuals |     |      |     |      |
| Agree                         | 48                                                             | 54  | 30   | 66  | 62   |
| Disagree                      | 52                                                             | 46  | 70   | 34  | 38   |
| DNK Excluded From Calculation | 11                                                             | 11  | 8    | 10  | 8    |
|                               | Traditional marriage can be harmful and needs to be weakened   |     |      |     |      |
| Agree                         | 12                                                             | 14  | 9    | 15  | 12   |
| Disagree                      | 88                                                             | 86  | 92   | 85  | 88   |
| DNK Excluded From Calculation | 7                                                              | 6   | 5    | 7   | 8    |



## Same-Sex—A Low Priority Policy Issue

As shown in table 7, Canadians see same-sex marriage as a very low priority. Ironically, those who favour keeping the current definition may be slightly more inclined to see it as a priority issue than those who advocate revision of the definition to include same-sex marriages.

*Table 7: Policy Priorities  
"Q1. Which of the following policy priorities should receive the most attention from the federal government today?"*

|                                                  | CDA | KEEP ONE<br>MAN, ONE<br>WOMAN<br>ADVOCATE<br>S | SAME SEX<br>MARRIAG<br>E<br>ADVOCAT<br>ES |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Healthcare                                       | 48  | 45                                             | 47                                        |
| Economy And Taxes                                | 17  | 17                                             | 12                                        |
| Honesty In Government Spending                   | 16  | 18                                             | 15                                        |
| Environment                                      | 10  | 8                                              | 17                                        |
| Same-Sex Marriage                                | 6   | 10                                             | 5                                         |
| Foreign Policy And Security Against<br>Terrorism | 2   | 3                                              | 3                                         |
| Volunteered: Other                               | *   | 1                                              | 1                                         |
| DNK Excluded From Calculation                    | 2   | 2                                              | 2                                         |

## Methodology

The principal investigators were Dr. Conrad Winn and Tamara Gottlieb. The national representative sample of n=885 can be deemed accurate to within 3.4



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percentage points 19 times out of 20. Interviewing by professional interviewers using CATI was undertaken January 28-31, 2005.

