



N F O C F g r o u p

PUBLIC DIVIDED ABOUT DEFINITION OF MARRIAGE

Report

September 5, 2003

A Public Opinion Poll Sponsored by NFO CFgroup

ã 2003

A. HIGHLIGHTS

Liberal Party Internal Debate Is A Microcosm Of Broader Society Debate

A Government of Canada plan to change the definition of marriage to include same-sex unions continues to divide Canadians. Opponents equal supporters, but opponents tend to be somewhat louder. The political debate is reflected in the positions held by the public, with a continuum between those who fully support the extension of marriage to same-sex couples to those who do not want any legal status given to these relationships. The latter group is relatively small.

Though a slim majority would endorse the extreme position of using the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms'* notwithstanding clause to maintain the current definition as one man and one woman, the fact is that few Canadians would go as far as to *not* recognize gay and lesbian unions in law. It is true, however, that the symbolism of the word *marriage* is providing some uncertainty or discomfort for a significant group of Canadians (especially older Canadians).

When later presented with three options for dealing with same-sex relationships, 37 per cent of Canadians would prefer extending marriage to gay and lesbian partnerships. An equal percentage would favour a union between same-sex couples that is not called a marriage. And only a small minority (19 per cent) would prefer that there be no legal status of same-sex relationships whatsoever.

At the same time, few Canadians would endorse the compromise positions as tested here. For example, there is little appetite for replacing civil marriage with civil unions (for both homosexual and heterosexual couples) or for only having religious institutions perform marriages. It appears that marriage is not synonymous with religion for many Canadians. Canadians want the state to continue to be involved in marriage.

In most respects, the majority of Canadians express tolerant views that suggest considerable openness among a majority for the recognition of same-sex unions.

- Fifty-two per cent say that there is nothing morally wrong with homosexuality.
- Fifty-seven per cent disagree with the statement that allowing gays and lesbians to marry is a threat to the institution of marriage (32% agree).
- Sixty-five per cent say that gay or lesbian couples who enter into committed relationships should be treated the same as heterosexual couples who do so (25% disagree).

The Declining Sway Of Tradition: How Youth Are Reshaping Canadian Values

Few policy issues in Canada divide the generations as significantly as same-sex marriage. The opinions of those Canadians under 35 do not look like those of their parents or their grandparents. While younger cohorts embrace the inclusion of same-sex couples in marriage

(61% support the proposed definition), older Canadians by the same margin reject it (62% of seniors oppose it).

This significant age-related difference in support for same-sex marriage is apparent across the arguments tested here. Younger Canadians place a higher emphasis on equality, are less concerned about using the word marriage, are less likely to want to leave marriage to religious institutions, and tend to be more accepting of homosexual relationships. For example, 60 per cent of those under 25 say there is nothing morally wrong with homosexuality. An aggregate snapshot of Canadian opinions blurs a fundamental difference in opinion.

Age is not the only characteristic that is associated with one's position on same-sex marriage and the related issues. Though some of these characteristics are related to age (e.g. post-graduate education is more likely among younger cohorts) other demographic differences are also important.

- Education is associated with higher tolerance of these relationships and support for policies consistent with allowing gay marriage.
- There is a significant gender gap, with women expressing more tolerant views of same-sex relationships and marriage than men.
- Rural (less than 10,000 residents) are less supportive of the federal approach than urban residents, which is, of course, partially age-related.
- The Prairie region as a whole, and Alberta specifically, is the least supportive of changing the definition, consistent with our expectations.

Liberal Party Internally Divided But Firmly Placed In Centre

It would come as little shock to observers of the political landscape that the Liberal Party has managed to occupy the centre of the political debate on this issue. Though Liberal MPs are quite divided about the approach suggested by the government, Liberal voters tend to be quite supportive of it (51% support the new definition). Few Liberal voters (12%) adopt the position that there should be no legal status. More importantly, the results indicate that the Liberals continue to dominate federal vote intentions at this time with almost half (46%) of decided voters leaning to the Liberal party. If the same-sex issue is hurting the party, it is not doing so at the national level.

- Conservative Party supporters stand out as preferring a non-marriage alternative (44%) to allowing same-sex couples to marry, in spite of the fact that they tend to agree that same-sex couples should be treated the same. There is, however, a significant group of Conservative voters (24%) who would prefer no legal status.
- Alliance supporters are the most opposed to a new federal definition of marriage (66%) and for these voters the preference is for either (1) a non-marriage alternative for same-sex couples (39%) or (2) no legal status of these unions (37%).
- Supporters of the Bloc Quebecois and the N.D.P. are the most likely to support the new federal definition and the extension of legal status to same-sex couples.

B. DETAILED FINDINGS

Public Divided About Definition

The survey on same-sex marriage began with a reminder that several Canadian courts have ruled that the current definition of marriage is unconstitutional and invalid. Respondents were then asked whether they supported or opposed changing the definition to include same-sex marriages. Equal numbers (46%) of Canadians oppose and support the new definition but the strength of the opposition is higher; 34 per cent of the public provide the “strongly disagree” position.

- Attitudes about same-sex marriage are systematically related to a profound generational rift. While six in ten Canadians under the age of 35 support the definition, the same proportion of those older than 65 oppose it. The values of youth are fundamentally at odds with those of their parents and grandparents when it comes to same-sex relationships.
- Quebec residents are the most supportive (61%) and Prairie residents are the least supportive (33%) of changing the definition.
- Women (53%) are more supportive of changing the definition than men (39%).
- Opponents of the new definition are motivated by a number of considerations including beliefs about gays and, as we will show, about the use of the word “marriage.” For example, opponents are more likely to believe that gay marriage is a threat to the institution of marriage (58%). They are also more likely to disagree that there is nothing wrong with homosexuality (57%) and that gay relationships should be treated equally (47%).

The depth of the opposition to the changed definition and the desire to maintain the current definition as one man and one woman is further reflected in the interesting and somewhat counterintuitive plurality (49%) support for using the Notwithstanding clause to override the court decision. It is clear that there is some misunderstanding of the issue (9% refused or said, “don’t know,” and 9% said they neither agreed nor disagreed).

Tolerance Prevails

One of the common perceptions of Canada is its more tolerant attitude toward differences of various kinds, and this continues to be evident. Opposition to same-sex marriage is not for all Canadians a reflection of broader intolerance toward these relationships. This is, perhaps, indicative of the unique nature of marriage as opposed to more abstract human rights or other forms of discrimination.

- Fifty-two per cent of Canadians believe that there is nothing wrong with homosexuality compared with 33 per cent who disagree.

- Young Canadians agree (59%) that there is nothing morally wrong with homosexuality, but older Canadians disagree (48% of seniors disagree). Women, urban and higher socio-economic status Canadians are also more likely to agree with the statement, reflecting a higher level of tolerance with same-sex relations.
- Supporters of changing the definition endorse the statement (77%) and opponents reject it (69% disagree).

Two in three Canadians say that gay or lesbian couples who enter into committed relationships should be treated the same as heterosexual couples who do so. Interestingly, while supporters of the new definition are unanimous in their support for the equality principles, many of those who oppose the definition also endorse equal treatment (39%). Equal treatment resonates even with many of those who are uncomfortable with same-sex marriage.

- Equal treatment is also endorsed by many of those (37%) who disagreed with the statement that there is nothing morally wrong with homosexuality.
- Liberal voters, along with those who would vote NDP or BQ, are particularly supportive of equal treatment.
- Women, younger Canadians, urban-dwellers and those with household incomes over \$50,000 are also more likely to endorse the equal treatment view.

A majority (57%) of Canadians also disagree with the view that allowing gays and lesbians to marry is a threat to the institution of marriage. So, while 46 per cent oppose changing the definition of marriage, only 32 per cent actually see allowing marriage of this type as a threat to the institution.

The generational differences on questions of how to deal with same-sex relationships and with homosexuality in general have a number of implications. The first is that the values and attitudes of young Canadians foreshadow the kind of society we are likely to become. Second, we can therefore expect to continue to see inter-generational conflict on these issues as older Canadians become a smaller minority and continue to see their vision of Canada being replaced. This suggests that there is a danger that the traditional political system, which is often dominated by older generations, will continue to be seen as irrelevant by younger Canadians who do not see their perspective adequately represented.

There is no question that while a small minority is profoundly opposed to same-sex relationships, the majority is quite tolerant of them. Nevertheless, when asked about support for the new definition of marriage, a larger group is opposed to a change. Marriage, unlike other aspects of society, may produce emotional or symbolic considerations that are not as evident when we ask about other human rights issues associated with same-sex relationships.

“Marriage” In Effect If Not In Name

Recent attempts to find a compromise position that reconciles the court decisions and the opponents of gay marriage, highlights the significant cleavages in Canadian society and resonates with some important findings in the survey. Two of the suggestions that have been made include: (1) giving same-sex couples the same legal protections and recognition but with a different name for the union, and (2) having the federal government leave marriage to churches, in favour of a form of state-sanctioned civil union for all couples. Setting aside the constitutional and legal issues that might arise from adopting these approaches, the first option would fall somewhat short of complete equality and the second would mean abandoning a federal role.

The notion of a compromise resonates to some degree with Canadians, since only a minority of the public is opposed to some sort of legal recognition. Those who oppose changing the definition of marriage are more supportive of avoiding the language of “marriage” but the desire to maintain a state role in marriage and a preference to treat gay and lesbian couples equally remains important.

i) Non-Marriage Alternative Sways Some Opponents Of Changing Definition

When faced with three options for dealing with same-sex couples, 37 per cent (almost all of those who support the current government position) prefer to have same-sex couples marry like heterosexual couples. A significant group (also 37%) would prefer a union between same-sex couples that is not called a marriage, and only a minority opposes giving any legal status to these relationships.

- Younger Canadians tend to adopt the view that same-sex couples should be able to marry like heterosexual couples. Older Canadians are less supportive of this position and more supportive of the non-marriage but legal status and the no legal status options. For example, 18 per cent of those under 25 take the position that there should be no legal status, compared with one in three seniors (35%).
- The prairie region has the highest level (29%) of preference for no legal status of these relationships.

The key communication challenge facing the government is to convince those who oppose using “marriage” as the term for a same-sex union since in principle these people are not opposed to these relationships. Consider that, of those who prefer the option that same-sex couples be able to enter a legal union that is not called a marriage:

- Half (48%) say that there is nothing morally wrong with homosexuality.
- Forty-six per cent say that allowing gay marriage is not a threat to the institution.
- Seventy per cent say that same-sex couples that enter a committed relationship should be treated the same as heterosexual ones.

It may be that those who oppose giving same-sex couples legal status are firmly rooted in their position, but many of those who occupy the middle remain potential converts because their other value-based attitudes have led them to accept same-sex marriage in all but name.

ii) State Should Retain Role In Marriage

Consistent with the significant decline in church attendance over the past two decades, Canadians reject (58%) the idea that marriage should be left to the churches. This is an indication that for many, marriage is not synonymous with a religious ceremony for most Canadians. In fact, we also tested the idea that civil marriage (current non-church marriage) should be replaced with a civil union that would apply to all partnerships regardless of sexual orientation. In effect, this would leave marriage to religious institutions. Again, though the public is quite divided, only 35 per cent see this as an attractive approach compared with 42 per cent who oppose it.

- According to Statistics Canada, between 1986 and 1991 the proportion of Canadians 15 years and older who have not attended religious services in the past 12 months has increased from 26 per cent to 43 per cent.
- The idea of replacing civil marriage with civil union is supported by those who support changing the definition and rejected by those who are opposed to gay marriage. To the extent that it is understood, it is not a compromise that Canadians would accept.
- Only allowing religious institutions to conduct marriages is more supported by opponents than supporters of changing the definition (46% compared with 23%), but even among opponents, 45 per cent are opposed to this course of action.

At this point, there is no evidence that Canadians would accept either of the two proposals currently being put forward. The only alternative that would resonate is the idea of having a “special” legal union for same-sex partnerships.

Institutional Power: Churches, Courts And Same-Sex Marriage

i) Separation Of Church And State

Few Canadians have reacted positively to the recent political activity of some churches in Canada who have actively campaigned against the recognition of same-sex marriage. Sixty-seven per cent of Canadians agree (strongly or somewhat) that “churches and other houses of worship should stay out of political matters,” with almost half of Canadians taking the “strongly agree” position.

- Disagreement is more likely to be expressed by those who side with the church on this matter. For example, 33 per cent of those who think that gay marriage is a threat to the institution of marriage disagree, compared with only 23 per cent of those who don’t see a threat.
- Canadians of all walks of life tend to feel uncomfortable about the role of the church in this case, and this is likely to have an impact on the receptivity of the message.

ii) “*Charter Canadians*”

One of the most profound implications of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* is that courts, by deciding about violations of minority rights, are shaping public policy. At present, Ontario and B.C. court decisions have effectively expanded the definition of marriage by their rulings. In this context and within a survey about same-sex marriage, Canadians were asked about whether courts have too much power.

If churches are widely rejected as appropriate participants in the political debate, the public has quite mixed judgments about the power of the courts. There is a clear lean in the direction of saying courts have too much power (48% agree).

- For opponents of the new definition and for gay marriage generally, the decisions by the courts are likely to be related to perceptions that the court has too much power. For example, 54 per cent of those who oppose the new definition agree with this proposition compared with only 44 per cent of those who support the new definition. Nevertheless, the plurality position, even among those who support gay marriage, is to say that courts have too much power.
- Rural residents, those with lower socio-economic status (education and household income) and those living in the prairies or Quebec are more likely to agree that courts have too much power.

C. METHODOLOGY

The telephone survey was conducted between August 25 and 31, 2003 with a random sample of 1,015 Canadians. With a sample of this size, the results can be considered accurate within plus or minus 3.2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Data were weighted by household composition, age, gender and region.

For more information on this release please contact:

Richard Jenkins

Corporate Director of Public Opinion Research

rjenkins@nfocfgroup.com

(613) 230-4799

or

David Stark

Public Affairs Director

(416) 924-5751 x237

dstark@nfocfgroup.com