

# Franklin & Marshall College Poll

## *An Analysis of Same-Sex Marriage and Civil Unions*

The politics of polarization and partisanship, often at the expense of moderation and compromise, has driven much legislative behavior since the 1980s. No issue exemplifies this way of conducting legislative business better than same-sex marriage. A 2004 decision by the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that the state's ban on same sex marriage was unconstitutional, returning the issue of gay marriage to prominence and encouraging other states to take action, mostly by efforts to ban gay and lesbian marriages. Thirteen states have amended their constitutions to make the bans permanent since 2004. State legislative action on gay marriage is at its highest since the mid 1990s when Congressional approval of the Defense of Marriage Act encouraged 41 states to pass their own versions of the law. Governor Tom Ridge signed Pennsylvania's defense of marriage bill in 1996. Republican strategists have successfully used this issue to motivate their voters and, concomitantly, increase voter turnout among their partisans.

Pennsylvania's legislature is poised to re-enter the debate about gay marriage with two equally polarizing proposals. State Representative Daylin Leach (D–Montgomery County) has proposed legislation that would provide marriage rights for same-sex couples, while State Senator John Eichelberger (R–Blair County) has introduced a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage, preventing any court in the state from merely establishing a legal right to marry by judicial action.

The June 2009 Franklin and Marshall College Poll finds that neither legislative proposal has significant support among Pennsylvania residents. A majority of state residents opposes a constitutional amendment that allows homosexual couples to marry, while state residents are evenly divided on having a constitutional amendment that defines marriage as being between a man and a woman. Perhaps what is most interesting is that civil unions, an option not currently under consideration by legislators, are supported by a sizable majority of Pennsylvania adults. Nearly three in five citizens' indicate they favor civil unions, a much larger proportion than favored civil unions five years ago (see Table 1). Civil unions are a middle ground that merits little attention in the state, but that many Pennsylvania residents support.

**Table 1. Pennsylvanians' Attitudes toward Civil Unions and State Constitutional Amendments Related to Same-Sex Marriage, June 2009**

	<b>Favor</b>	<b>Oppose</b>
Would you favor or oppose a state law that would allow homosexual couples to legally form civil unions, giving them some of the legal rights of married couples?	58% (42%)	37% (50%)
Would you favor or oppose a state constitutional amendment that would define marriage as being between a man and a woman, thus barring marriages between gay and lesbian couples?	48% (49%)	46% (43%)
Would you favor or oppose a constitutional amendment that would allow homosexual couples to get legally married?	42% (NA)	52% (NA)

Note: the numbers in parentheses are the responses to the same question asked in a February 2004 Franklin and Marshall College Poll. The February 2004 poll included interviews with 532 adult Pennsylvanians and was conducted February 19 – 22, 2004.

Support for these measures shows similar and predictable patterns by region, age, party affiliation, and religion (see Table 2). One look at the support for these different measures by party reveals how tempting the issue must be for legislators—it provides a great opportunity for them to appeal to their core supporters. Democrats and Independents are more likely than Republicans to support civil unions and same-sex marriage. What is most striking about the support for civil unions is the change in attitudes that have taken place within various demographic subgroups; in fact, support for civil unions has increased within most demographic subgroups since 2004. For instance, only half of Democrats in 2004 said they supported civil unions, but that proportion has risen to two-thirds today.

**Table 2. Attitudes toward Civil Unions and State Constitutional Amendments Related to Same-Sex Marriage by Selected Demographics, June 2009**

	Civil unions	Favor	
		Defining marriage as between a man and a woman	Allowing same-sex marriage
<b>Region</b>			
Philadelphia	61%	36%	52%
Northeast	76%	41%	53%
Allegheny	55%	41%	34%
Southwest	49%	46%	39%
Northwest	41%	50%	31%
Central	47%	64%	29%
Southeast	73%	38%	52%
<b>Age</b>			
Under 35	70%	40%	53%
35-54	58%	44%	46%
Over 55	47%	59%	26%
<b>Party Registration</b>			
Republican	40%	68%	20%
Democrat	68%	36%	54%
Independent	69%	45%	44%
<b>Born Again Christian</b>			
Yes	41%	65%	26%
No	66%	40%	49%

June 2009 Franklin & Marshall College Poll (n=580)

Pennsylvania legislators might take a far less polarizing position on same-sex marriage than the options currently before the state legislature. Most Pennsylvanians, often best described for their political moderation, would support civil unions. The question is whether at the end of the day partisanship and ideology will prevail over the views of Pennsylvanians.

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