

**Religious Coalitions For and Against Gay Marriage: The Culture War Rages On**

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“We come here today for the audience of One,” proclaimed the president of the Family Research Council, Tony Perkins. He stood before a cheering crowd gathered for the Mayday for Marriage rally on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. “While our troops battle terrorists and tyrants abroad, a parallel battle rages here on our soil for the family and ultimately the future of our nation.”<sup>1</sup> On October 15, 2004, more than 200,000 people gathered in Washington, D.C. to defend what they see to be the traditional definition of marriage between one man and one woman. The Mayday for Marriage movement was organized in response to the rise of same-sex marriage on the national political agenda—on the west coast the mayor of San Francisco had authorized the marriage of same-sex couples, on the east coast the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts had issued a ruling mandating gay marriages in the Bay State, and in between gay marriages were being performed in a handful of jurisdictions. A number of conservative pro-family groups, such as the Family Research Council, have since mobilized to host rallies across the country, attracting defenders of traditional marriage from a variety of denominations and faiths. To foreshadow the argument of this chapter—namely, that opposition to gay marriage unites religious traditionalists across the denominational spectrum—it is interesting to note that while the Family Research Council’s constituency is predominantly white evangelicals, Mayday for Marriage was begun by an African-American pastor.<sup>2</sup>

At the rally in D.C, the speakers included Rabbi Daniel Lapin who encouraged attendees to “remember marriage at the voting booth.” A Catholic group, the American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property, waved banners and cheered following the Rabbi’s speech. An English-speaking Chinese pastor translated the message for members of his congregation who stood holding a sign that read “Marriage = 1 Man + 1 Woman” both in English and their native language. An Assemblies of God group joined hands to pray for the speakers. Members of a local African-American church served as volunteers helping to pass out programs, humming to the worship band playing “Great is Thy Faithfulness” in the background. Gary Bauer, a prominent spokesperson for the Christian Right, proclaimed to the attendees, “You are not some small special interest group. You are America. You are the heart of America.”

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Perkins, President of the Family Research Council, in remarks made to attendees at the Mayday for Marriage Rally in Washington, DC on October 15, 2004 and in the event’s program.

<sup>2</sup> Ken Hutcherson, senior pastor at Antioch Bible Church in Kirkland, Washington organized the first Mayday for Marriage Rally in Seattle that drew approximately 20,000 people.

The religious and racial diversity present at the Mayday for Marriage rally is significant. Any mention of welfare policy, the death penalty or the Iraq War and the coalition would have dissolved. Their theological disagreements run even deeper, as these groups are divided over fundamentals like the divinity of Jesus Christ, speaking in tongues or the after life. Groups with sharp disagreements over theology and in some cases a history of deep historical antagonism nonetheless stood side by side in opposition to same-sex marriage. Or, more accurately, people within these groups who hold traditional beliefs have found that they have more in common with other traditionalists, even those of other faiths, than members of their own religion who hold what are often called progressive beliefs.<sup>3</sup> For example, while many traditional Catholics attended the rally in DC, their progressive counterparts stayed home. A similar divide is apparent within Judaism. The Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America has joined white evangelical groups in calling for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution defining marriage as between a man and a woman. In contrast, the Union of Reform Judaism and the Central Conference of American Rabbis view gay marriage as a civil right and therefore support gay unions.

### *The American Religious Landscape*

The religious coalitions that have coalesced on the issue of gay marriage reflect a significant development in American religion and how it shapes our politics. Just a few decades ago, the salient religious divide in American politics was defined by the boundaries between religious traditions, as famously summarized in the title of a well-

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<sup>3</sup> Terms like “traditional” and “progressive” are contested. Since these are the terms Hunter uses in *Culture Wars*, we similarly adopt them here. We prefer them to “conservative” and “liberal,” since these terms confuse theology with political ideology.

known book by sociologist Will Herberg in 1955: *Protestant- Catholic - Jew*. Times have changed. Today, the salient divide is not *between* religious traditions, but *within* them—in virtually every major religion in America, a split has developed between traditionalist and progressive factions. While in each tradition the proximate sources of disagreement center on indigenous doctrinal disputes, at their roots these disputes all hinge on the source of ultimate authority. In the words of sociologist James Davison Hunter, traditionalists believe in an “external, definable, and transcendent authority,” while progressives are more willing to adapt their moral beliefs to “the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life” (1991, 44, 45). This fundamental division in the way moral questions are answered is not contained to arcane theological questions, but spills over into opinions on politically-relevant issues like gay marriage. Thus, traditionalists from within various branches of Protestantism have joined forces with like-minded Catholics, Mormons, Jews, and Muslims to oppose gay marriage, because they all share a common belief in a transcendent authority, namely God, that holds the institution of marriage as limited to relationships between men and women. While they have had a lower profile, some religious progressives have similarly allied with secularists in favor of same-sex marriages. Like the traditionalists, they too may appeal to God to justify their position, but in doing so are more likely to speak of justice, equality and inclusiveness than moral absolutes, having refracted their understanding of scripture through the prism of contemporary American society.

A common, although often misused, way to describe the intra-denominational fissure we observe over gay marriage is as an example of the *culture war* in American politics. We use this term advisedly, aware that it borders on hyperbolic. Nonetheless,

its original usage aptly describes the coalitions that have formed regarding gay marriage. The term itself was popularized by the aforementioned James Davison Hunter, who used it to describe coalitions among traditionalists and progressives across denominational lines, especially on issues of public policy like abortion and pornography. The same development had also been carefully chronicled by Robert Wuthnow in *The Restructuring of American Religion* (1998), but “restructuring” does not have the same ring as “culture war,” and so it is the latter term that has gained wide usage. In 1992, when failed presidential candidate Pat Buchanan reached for a phrase to rally the moral conservatives that were increasingly congregating in the Republican Party, he declared that America was embroiled in a culture war. Interestingly, Buchanan himself exemplified what Wuthnow meant by the restructuring of American religion, and Hunter described as the culture war. Buchanan is a devout Catholic but found the most enthusiastic audience for his brand of red-meat conservatism among evangelical Protestants.

Upon entering the public lexicon, the term “culture war” has morphed from the meaning Hunter assigned to it. While it originally described the historically unusual development of religious coalitions on public issues that supersede denominational borders, it has come to be used as a short-hand description for the prominence of hot-button social issues like abortion, gender roles, and homosexual rights. More recently, it has also been increasingly invoked as half-description/half-explanation of the perceived polarization within the American electorate. This latter usage has become so common among political pundits, in fact, that political scientist Morris Fiorina (2005) has recently published a book in which he repudiates it. However, his book only questions the term

“culture war” as it is used to describe a highly polarized electorate, rather than Hunter’s original definition of religious coalitions that transcend traditional denominational lines. Indeed, Fiorina’s thesis is quite consistent with Hunter’s original formulation. Fiorina argues, convincingly, that Americans appear closely divided politically because when they go to the polls their choices are increasingly limited to political extremists. The general public is not as polarized as political elites. Similarly, Hunter explicitly argues that the culture war he describes is most pronounced among social and political elites, particularly those within religious organizations.

In explaining how the culture war (or restructuring) framework illuminates the religious coalitions that have formed on the issue of gay marriage, we begin with the attitudes in the general public. Because we would expect the lines between traditionalists and progressives to be blurrier among the mass public than elites, public opinion data constitute a “hard case” for the culture war thesis. Nonetheless, we find patterns that reflect a divide between religious traditionalists and progressives on the subject of gay marriage that transcends denominational affiliation.

We then turn to detailing how leaders of religious groups with a political dimension and political groups with a religious dimension have formed coalitions on the issue of gay marriage, primarily in opposition to it. As we will explain in greater depth, the anti-gay marriage movement reflects previous coalitions on other cultural issues, like abortion and opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment. Not only did those previous campaigns establish the institutional infrastructure for a campaign against gay marriage by forging a sense of shared purpose among religious traditionalists across denominational lines, they also introduced culturally conservative groups to the strategies

and technologies of modern political campaigns. The campaign against gay marriage thus represents the second generation of cultural conservatism, and is far more politically sophisticated than the early stages of similar campaigns on other moral issues, like abortion. Additionally, this second generation is far more diverse than the first, both religiously and racially. While the early leaders of the “religious right” spoke of a big tent under which Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Mormons and others would unite, in reality the movement was predominantly composed of white evangelicals.<sup>4</sup> The coalition against gay marriage, in contrast, is much more ecumenical and, consequently, more ethnically diverse.

### *The Culture War in the Trenches*

Even though we would expect to see the greatest evidence of the culture war among the generals, the attitudes of the infantry are relevant also. Leaders must have someone to lead, and so political and religious elites cannot fall out of step with their constituencies. Is there evidence that the interfaith coalitions that characterize “culture war” politics describe attitudes on gay marriage? The strongest statement of the culture war hypothesis is that it predicts divisions on gay marriage should be greater *within* than *between* religious traditions. Within religious traditions, we should see that adherents with divergent degrees of traditionalism differ in their attitudes regarding gay marriage to a greater extent than people of different religious traditions. For example, a traditionalist

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the composition of the Christian Right, see Clyde Wilcox and Carin Larson (2006) *Onward Christian Soldiers? The Religious Right in American Politics*, chapter 2.

Catholic should have more in common with a traditionalist Evangelical Protestant than with a progressive Catholic.

To test whether this is the case, we turn to the 2004 National Election Study (NES), whose respondents were asked, “Should same-sex couples be allowed to marry, or do you think they should not be allowed to marry?” They were given the explicit options of indicating that gay marriage should or should not be allowed, and could volunteer other responses, like expressing support for civil unions. For simplicity of presentation, we will report the percentage of respondents who explicitly opposed any form of legal recognition for homosexual relationships. We divided NES respondents into four religious traditions based on a standard denominational classification system: White Evangelical Protestants, Mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Black Protestants (Steensland 2000; Kellstedt Green, Guth, and Smidt 1996). Note that Black Protestants consist of all Protestants, either evangelical or mainline, who are African American, while Catholics can be of any race. Obviously, this is not an exhaustive list of religious traditions in America, but other groups, like Jews, Mormons, and Muslims are too small to be adequately represented in a survey the size of the 2004 NES (roughly 1,200 people).

To distinguish between progressives and traditionalists within each religious tradition we rely on an index of four questions, each of which taps into moral traditionalism. Respondents were asked the extent to which they agree with each of the following four statements:

1. The world is always changing and we should adjust our view of moral behavior to those changes.
2. The newer lifestyles are contributing to the breakdown of our society
3. We should be more tolerant of people who choose to live according to their own moral standards, even if they are very different from our own.

4. This country would have many fewer problems if there were more emphasis on traditional family ties.

We used factor analysis, a statistical technique that compresses the four questions into a single index, and then divided the resulting scores into four quartiles.<sup>5</sup>

Figure 1 displays the percentage within each religious tradition who oppose gay marriage,<sup>6</sup> dividing people within each tradition between those in the lowest and highest quartiles of the moral traditionalism index. If the strongest version of the culture war hypothesis were to hold, we should see no difference in attitudes regarding gay marriage across religious traditions—people with the same score on the traditionalism index should share the same level of opposition to gay marriage, regardless of their religious tradition.

The strong version of the culture war hypothesis finds considerable support in Figure 1. Among people in the lowest quartile of the moral traditionalism index, opposition to gay marriage is very similar regardless of religious tradition. Only 21 percent of both Catholics and Mainline Protestants, for example, oppose gay marriage. Evangelicals are only slightly higher, at 27 percent. The one group with noticeable stronger opposition to gay marriage is Black Protestants, at 44 percent. At the high end

<sup>5</sup>

<i>Factor loadings</i>	
World is always changing	-0.42 (reversed polarity)
Newer lifestyles	0.69
Tolerant	-0.52 (reversed polarity)
Family ties	0.66
Eigenvalue	1.36

We used varimax rotation, but other methods produce essentially identical results.

<sup>6</sup> Or, recall, any other type of legal recognition for homosexual relationships. To keep things simple, we will simply refer to “opposing gay marriage,” which should be understood as including opposition to civil unions.

of the traditionalism index, the similarities are even more apparent. The level of opposition to gay marriage among Evangelicals, Mainline Protestants, and Black Protestants is 94, 97, and 97 percent respectively. In this case, Catholics are slightly less likely to oppose gay marriage, as “only” 82 percent are against permitting homosexuals to marry. Even a quick glance at Figure 1 makes clear that moral traditionalism is a far better way to predict opposition to gay marriage than religious tradition—consistent with the culture war hypothesis.

These data on general public opinion data are suggestive, but can only reveal the *potential* for interfaith coalitions to form on the subject of gay marriage. The coalitions themselves are actually forged, or not as the case may be, among political and religious leaders. It is thus among the generals that culture war politics should be most evident, and so that is where we next turn our attention.

#### *Who Works With Whom? Why Do They Work Together?*

As we trace the coalitions that have formed on the subject of gay marriage, the key test of the culture war hypothesis is whether they fulfill two conditions. First, as with the public opinion data, we should see divisions on the subject defined more by tensions *within* rather than *between* religious traditions. Second, we should observe leaders of different religious traditions actually working together in the common cause of opposing gay marriage.

The story of the coalitions working against gay marriage begins long before this particular issue rose on the public agenda. The groups mobilized against gay marriage

have their roots in the New Christian Right movement, which began in the mid-1970s as white conservative Christians entered the political scene to speak out against the legalization of abortion, feminism and the general decay of what they considered to be “family values.” Originally the movement was ostensibly ecumenical, as evidenced by the names of two early organizations in the movement: the Religious Roundtable and the Moral Majority. These were groups with aspirations of assembling a broad, ecumenical membership, as their leaders sought to attract religious conservatives from Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism alike. However, notwithstanding a few notable Jewish and Catholic members, the awakening of religious conservatives in the 1970s and 1980s was largely an evangelical Protestant affair. In the early 1990s, the Christian Coalition arose from the ashes of Pat Robertson’s run for the presidency and inherited the institutional legacy of the Christian Right movement. Like its predecessors, it too sought to broaden its appeal beyond white evangelical Christians. And, also like its predecessors, the Christian Coalition was largely unsuccessful in trying to enlarge its tent (Larson 2004).

Today, the religious coalitions that have formed to oppose gay marriage have roots in these earlier incarnations of the Christian Right, but are far more ecumenical in their composition. With a narrow political focus, the range of participants has greater breadth than the original Christian Right, which was concerned with multiple issues. As was showcased at the Mayday for Marriage Rally, participants come from a wider array of religions and races than was the case for the Christian Right movement in the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, the presence of Jewish rabbis at the rally underscored that concern over gay marriage is not confined to Christianity. The old Christian Right laid the foundation, but the structure itself has taken a different shape.

Watching how the story is covered in the news media, it is easy to miss the inter-racial, trans-denominational nature of the coalition against gay marriage. Because much of the movement to oppose gay marriage is built upon the infrastructure that was first built in the 1980s and 1990s, it is tempting to assume that this is the Christian Coalition all over again. As a case in point, consider how coverage of the Mayday for Marriage rally fed that impression. Speakers at the rally included James Dobson, Gary Bauer, and Chuck Colson, all seminal figures in Christian Right circles. These are well-known, media-savvy figures and so the news media gravitated toward them in their coverage. Consequently, the media portrayed the rally, and thus opposition to gay marriage generally, as dominated by white evangelicals. Scratch the surface of the anti-gay marriage movement, however, and you will find evangelical and mainline Protestants, conservative Catholics, orthodox Jews, and even Muslims. Since many of the spokespeople for these groups are relatively new to the political stage, they do not get the airtime afforded the familiar faces. Notwithstanding the way it is portrayed in the news, however, the denominational diversity that characterizes the movement against gay marriage is evidence favoring one criterion for culture war politics—a coalition that transcends denominational boundaries.

We have thus far focused on the Mayday for Marriage rally as an exemplar of the anti-gay marriage coalition. But is it truly representative of the groups working against marriage for homosexuals? Far from an isolated example, the rally fully reflects the cooperation across multiple denominations and religious traditions among gay marriage opponents. Other examples abound. Consider one of the earliest ballot initiatives against gay marriage, Proposition 22 in California, which was held in 2000. The campaign in

favor of Proposition 22 featured cooperation among Catholics, evangelical Protestants, and Mormons, groups that had worked together on previous issues, notably in opposition to pornography. Given the sharp theological disputes between these groups, especially the tensions between evangelicals and Mormons, this ecumenical partnership is remarkable (Campbell and Monson 2002).

Another case in point is the Marriage Amendment Project (MAP), an organization that serves as the nexus for groups working to pass an amendment to the federal constitution that would define marriage as between one man and one woman. While MAP is housed in the Family Research Council's facility in Washington D.C. and is associated with Christian Right groups like Focus on the Family and the Christian Coalition, more than 50 religious or political organizations are members and the list of participating organization is anything but homogeneous. From denominational groups, like the Southern Baptist Convention and the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church, to interest groups like the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute and the Coalition of African-American Pastors, to state organizations such as Family First of Nebraska and the Center for Arizona Policy, MAP represents the breadth of the movement.

The groups under the MAP umbrella are actually a conservative estimate of the religious groups that oppose gay marriage, as not all gay marriage opponents are in favor of a constitutional amendment, and thus choose not to affiliate with MAP. Moreover, the Islam Society for North America, once part of MAP, voluntarily left the group out of concern that any direct association with Muslims might tarnish MAP's public image, owing to anti-Muslim sentiment following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Also, according to MAP staff, the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America

has worked with MAP to pass the amendment, but is not listed as a participating organization (Slatter 2004). Therefore, while MAP's supporters are not an exhaustive list of the religious and political groups opposed to gay marriage, they are nonetheless evidence of the cooperation taking place across denominations. MAP is on the front line of the culture war.

A similarly broad coalition characterizes the Alliance for Marriage, another group that opposes gay marriage but also seeks to defend traditional marriage more broadly by addressing issues such as divorce and social welfare policies that discourage marriage. While calling for an amendment to the Constitution to ban gay marriage, the Alliance for Marriage has worked less with interest groups associated with the Christian Right and more with individual leaders within denominations. For example, the Alliance's board of directors includes a rabbi, a Muslim, a minister from the African Methodist Episcopal church, a Hispanic pastor and Chinese minister, as well as a number of professors from Catholic universities.

Both the Marriage Amendment Project and the Alliance for Marriage are evidence that opposition to gay marriage has brought together religious conservatives of varied religious backgrounds, fulfilling one criterion for culture war politics. The second criterion is evidence of tension within a given religious tradition between opponents and supporters of gay marriage. Nowhere has such tension been more apparent than within the Black Church. Owing to its unique evolutionary path through the slavery, Jim Crow, and civil rights eras, most scholars of religion consider predominantly African American denominations as a separate religious tradition within America (Harris 1999; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Steensland 2000). And within this tradition, there has been a pitched

battle over gay marriage. Many African American clergy are theologically conservative and therefore oppose gay marriage. A number of conservative black ministers have aligned with white evangelicals in the fight against gay marriage. For example, the Traditional Values Coalition, a non-denominational grassroots church lobby that represents over 43,000 congregations, has hosted a number of events specifically targeting the black churches within their constituency. “We're looking for African-American clergy members who have local authority, and we're getting them to hold a summit on marriage, just one issue,” the chairman of the Traditional Values Coalition, Rev. Louis Sheldon said in one media report (quoted in Banerjee 2005). A number of black leaders spoke at the Mayday for Marriage Rally, including Bishop Harry R. Jackson Jr., the pastor of the Hope Christian Church in College Park, Maryland, who gave the opening prayer. Jackson has said that blacks are especially attuned to the hardship of broken marriages, single parenting, and babies being born out of wedlock. Jackson said, “The bottom line is not about being anti-homosexual – it is about family reconstruction” (quoted in Chang 2005). Jackson and other African American clergy have joined with MAP, the Alliance for Marriage and/or the Traditional Values Coalition to work against gay marriage.

Not all black clergy oppose gay marriage, however. Within the Black Church, we observe the now-familiar split between traditionalists and progressives. In contrast to clergy like Harry Jackson, a number of the most prominent African American religious leaders have defined gay marriage as a civil rights issue and thus support the notion of granting marriage benefits to homosexuals. A common line of reasoning among African American proponents of gay marriage is to draw a parallel with the bans on inter-racial

marriage, which the civil rights movement worked successfully to end (Williams 2004). Former Democratic presidential candidate Al Sharpton shares these sentiments and has publicly endorsed same-sex marriage, going to great lengths to criticize the Republican Party for using the issue to target the religious black community (Finnegan 2004). After giving a sermon to Atlanta's Butler Street CME Church, Sharpton said, "George Bush manipulated a lot of religious feelings about marriage" and used gay marriage to draw attention away from Iraq and his other policy positions that might not be as popular with the African-American community (quoted in Plummer 2005). Perhaps the divide within the Black Church over gay marriage is best exemplified by the public split within the family of Martin Luther King, Jr. King's widow, Coretta Scott King, favors same-sex marriage, while King's daughter, Bernice King opposes it. Coretta Scott King has repeatedly compared homophobia with racism and is convinced her husband would support granting rights to homosexuals if he were alive today. In contrast, King's daughter says homosexuality is a sin and is an elder at an Atlanta church that organized a march in opposition to gay marriage in December 2004. She led the march which began at her father's grave (Barry 2004).

The divide between traditionalists and progressives is also apparent within Judaism. In 1996, when gay marriage had only begun to emerge on the nation's political agenda, the Reform movement within Judaism took a liberal position on this issue. The Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) within the movement passed a resolution opposing any government action that would prohibit same-sex couples from marrying. The congregational arm of Reform Judaism echoed this resolution a year later, saying they would support legislation allowing same-sex marriage. Even within the

Conservative Rabbinical Assembly, there is an endorsement for gay rights coupled with an intentional silence on the issue of gay marriage. In fact, a small number of Conservative rabbis have performed same-sex Jewish weddings. These groups are in contrast to those Orthodox Jews who participated in the Mayday for Marriage Rally and support the Marriage Amendment Project's agenda.

Many Catholic groups – but, pointedly, not all – have also joined with Jews and evangelical Protestants to oppose gay marriage. As a telling example of the fracture within Catholicism over the issue, we point to the divide between the two dioceses in the state of Virginia:<sup>7</sup> the Diocese of Arlington and the Diocese of Richmond. In 2004, the two dioceses jointly adopted a legislative agenda but then individually chose to place priorities on various aspects of that agenda. The Arlington Diocese tends to focus on abortion and the traditional family structure while the Richmond group focuses on issues relating to poverty and social justice. The Richmond Diocese has not come out in favor of same-sex marriage, but to our knowledge, has not taken great strides in speaking out against the issue either. Moreover, the diocese has taken more liberal positions when the issue of homosexuality was addressed by the Virginia State Legislature. For instance, it supported amending the state's hate crimes law to include homosexuals. In contrast, the Arlington Diocese opposed the measure. The Arlington Bishop has been vocal about his opposition to same-sex marriage, addressing the subject in a homily to his congregants prior to the 2004 election. The differing orientation of the two dioceses is reflected in the religious coalitions they participate in at the state level. The Richmond Diocese tends to cooperate with more progressive groups in the state, such as the Virginia Interfaith Center

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of religious lobbying activity in Virginia, including a summary of the two Catholic dioceses mentioned here, see Larson, Madland and Wilcox (2006).

for Public Policy. The Arlington Diocese has worked closely with Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council's state affiliates to defend traditional marriage and other social conservative policy.

The tension over homosexuality within a number of mainline Protestant denominations echoes, and even amplifies, the debate within Catholicism, the Black Church and Judaism. For example, the United Methodist Church has been driven by an internal debate over gay marriage—not only as a matter of public policy, but also church policy. In 1999, sixty-eight Methodist ministers presided over a lesbian couple's wedding as an act of protest of church law which prohibits such ceremonies. The case brought against them was eventually dismissed, suggesting there is substantial support for same-sex marriage within the church body. This support, though, was not enough to rescind the policy prohibiting same-sex marriage at the 2004 General Conference, where a spirited debate on the subject was conducted. The intensity of debate is unsurprising; in a case that drew national attention, in March 2004, a jury of Methodist clergy members in Washington state acquitted a fellow minister of violating church law by being in a lesbian relationship. But then a few months later, a similar trial in Pennsylvania resulted in a guilty verdict issued against another lesbian minister, and as a result she was defrocked but was allowed to serve as a lay person in the church (Banerjee 2004). The lesbian minister appealed the ruling, and in May 2005, a committee reversed the decision made by the lower clergy court citing technical grounds. (The church had never defined the term "practicing homosexual" which was the basis of the charges brought against the minister). The case is now likely to be heard before the Judicial Council, the highest court in the Methodist church (Goodstein 2005). The Episcopal Church has been similarly

divided over homosexuality, with the ordination of an openly gay bishop leading some Episcopal conservatives to threaten a schism within the church over the issue. Even though there is obvious sympathy for gay marriage among some of the Episcopal hierarchy (Newman 2005), the Episcopal church does not officially perform same-sex marriage ceremonies.

While there are numerous examples of organizations that have united traditionalist denominations in opposition to gay marriage, examples of religious progressives who have banded together to support homosexual unions are few. The body of religious progressives who are in favor of allowing same-sex marriage are not mobilized to the degree of religious traditionalists. They are smaller in number than the traditionalists, and either as a cause or consequence, they do not have an infrastructure comparable to the Christian Right to translate their convictions into the political realm. The group Clergy for Fairness is the exception that proves the rule. The interfaith group of religious leaders came together in 2006 to oppose a federal amendment to the Constitution that would ban same-sex marriage. In the summer of that year, the group maintained a regular presence in Washington, D.C. as both houses of Congress debated the amendment. Representatives for Clergy for Fairness from numerous states visited Congressional offices and hosted press conferences. The organization's web site is perhaps the most sophisticated of its kind, providing links to sample sermons from various religious traditions and talking points on religious liberty and discrimination. Although united in their opposition to a federal amendment, the clergy do not necessarily agree on all issues related to homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Nor does the group

take a position on state constitutional amendments regarding same-sex marriage or civil unions.

Other religious groups that support civil marriage rights for same-sex couples are regionally based. The Religious Coalition of the Freedom to Marry (RCFM), a small interfaith group of clergy, is limited to the New England states and thus a bit player at best in the national drama that has played out over the issue of gay marriage. Similarly, the Colorado Clergy for Equality in Marriage (CCEM) is a group of 104 clergy, from across denominations, working in support of gay unions in the state. Again, there appears to be little coordination with CCEM and any groups on the national stage. The mobilization amongst religious progressives in support of same-sex marriage rights is hardly an analog to the inter-faith organizations which oppose gay marriage.

It seems that the liberal mainline denominations, like the Episcopalians and Methodists, are too consumed with the issue of homosexuality within the church to expend much energy on the issue beyond the church. And while there are individual denominations that support same-sex marriages, they represent a miniscule portion of the overall religious landscape. The Universalist Unitarian Association (UUA), a representative body of UU churches, has showed support for same-sex marriage since 1970. Similarly, the United Church of Christ (UCC) officially came out in favor of gay marriage in a 1975 resolution. In an attempt to show their inclusiveness, in 2004 the UCC ran a television ad showing a same-sex couple being turned away by an unidentified church only to be welcomed by a UCC church.<sup>8</sup>

Even the UCC, one of America's most liberal denominations, is not immune from the traditionalist-progressive divide. Because the UCC is composed of autonomous local

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<sup>8</sup> NBC and CBS refused to air the advertisement, deeming it too controversial.

churches, the General Synod has little authority over individual church practices. So, for example, when the Western North Carolina Association of local UCC churches banned the ordination of openly gay clergy members in 2003, the General Synod had no authority to overrule the act. Other UCC churches have been critical of the governing body's support of same-sex marriage. The First Church of Christ in Wethersfield, Connecticut, the largest UCC church in New England, voted to become independent of the UCC denomination in 2004, explaining their decision largely due to the denomination's position on gay marriage and other social issues. ("Largest UCC Church in New England votes to become independent" 2004).

In reviewing the above evidence, can we say that the religious coalitions surrounding gay marriage support the culture war thesis? Recall the two criteria for observing a culture war among elites: (1) cooperation among leaders of different religious traditions; (2) greater divisions within than between religious traditions. We have seen that both criteria are met, although perhaps the first to a greater extent than the second. Among gay marriage opponents we find a historically remarkable degree of ecumenism, exceeding the breadth of coalitions on other cultural issues like abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment. Traditionalist Protestants, Catholics, and Jews alike have united in their opposition to gay marriage. On the other hand, even though religious progressives are more naturally inclined toward interfaith cooperation, there are few examples of ecumenical action among gay marriage proponents. In this conflict, one side significantly outnumbers the other.

We also see some evidence for the other criterion, namely divisions within religious traditions. Within Catholicism and various strains of Protestantism religious

leaders are split over the question of gay marriage. However, one should not exaggerate the trans-denominational nature of opinions on gay marriage. Certainly, the traditionalist-progressive split is salient, but this does not mean denominations have ceased to matter. A Southern Baptist, regardless of her traditionalism, is more likely to oppose gay marriage than an Episcopalian, notwithstanding the Episcopalian's degree of orthodoxy. It would appear that when we look within denominations, the biggest fights over gay marriage occur inside liberal churches—whose congregants appear less unified in their progressivism than conservative church members are cohesively committed to traditionalism.

#### *What Strategies Have They Employed?*

The breadth of the coalition against gay marriage is interesting as an example of the faultlines that have formed on cultural issues in American politics. However, its significance is more than merely academic, as the trans-denominational nature of the movement is an important element in its political success. The efforts to build a diverse coalition—both in terms of race and religion—underscore the political sophistication of the religious activists who oppose gay marriage. They understand the fundamental rule in a participatory political system: numbers matter. Elected officials are more likely to listen to a large group representing more voters than a smaller group representing fewer voters; all else equal, a broad coalition beats a narrow one every time. And for the battle over gay marriage, the coalition of opponents has been broad indeed.

Why is there such a broad coalition opposing gay marriage? Given the widespread opposition to gay marriage, as illustrated in Figure 1, it may seem inevitable that the

opposition to gay marriage would have a wide base. But there is nothing inevitable about the institutions that have been developed to lead the charge against gay marriage.

While the widespread opposition to gay marriage is a necessary condition for a broad coalition, it is not sufficient. The breadth of the coalition is also the result of political experience gained over the previous generation of cultural battles, and the political infrastructure that has been built to fight those battles. The religious coalitions that have coalesced in opposition to same-sex marriage are in large part the result of a deliberate strategy employed by evangelical conservatives since the issue first gained national prominence in the mid 1990s, when the Defense of Marriage Act was passed in Congress and signed by Bill Clinton. The specific strategy in play consists of diversifying the coalition opposed to gay marriage, amending state constitutions to ban gay marriage, and finally, creating the “perfect storm” so that the conditions will be right to pass an amendment to the U.S. Constitution defining marriage as between a man and a woman.

A good example of a Christian Right activist who has recognized the political advantage of a diverse coalition working against gay marriage is Matt Daniels of the Alliance for Marriage. Recognizing the limits of the pro-life movement, which largely consists of white evangelicals and Catholics,<sup>9</sup> Daniels sought to create a multiracial movement in defense of heterosexual marriage. A Chinese pastor serving on the advisory board of the Alliance notes that Daniels selected advisors and board members with the idea of bringing together people of diverse faiths and races (Wong 2004). As noted above, the Marriage Amendment Project is another example where Christian Right leaders organized an infrastructure composed of diverse religions and denominations to

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<sup>9</sup> For an overview of the composition of the pro-life movement, see Kristen Luker (1985) and Carol Maxwell (2002).

respond to gay marriage. By first linking groups at the national level, the local and state affiliates came to coordinate with one another, an important development since the battle over traditional marriage has primarily been waged at the state and local level.<sup>10</sup>

Examining one state in particular illustrates the political strategy of gay marriage opponents. On November 2, 2004, Ohioans voted to ban the recognition of same-sex marriage by amending the state constitution. The success of this ballot initiative was largely a result of coordination between Ohio affiliates of socially conservative advocacy groups and their national parent organizations. The leading figure in Ohio, Phil Burress, was a familiar face in local Christian Right circles, having run an anti-pornography group since the early 1990s.<sup>11</sup> When Hawaii's state Supreme Court issued a ruling in favor of allowing same-sex marriage in 1993, Burress began committing most of his time to fighting gay marriage in his own state. He started the Ohio Campaign to Protect Marriage, now a state affiliate of Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council. To assist Burress and his supporters, these and other national groups contacted their members in Ohio to mobilize them around the issue. The American Family Association, for example, sent out mass emails to 60,000 supporters that live in Ohio to encourage them to sign the petition needed to get the issue on the ballot, and then turn out to vote in November. Representatives from the Ohio group met with national leaders regularly. Part of the strategy discussed involved how to conduct outreach to leaders within other religious traditions in the state. As a result, staffers from the Ohio Campaign to Protect Marriage visited a large mosque in the greater Cincinnati area to encourage them to

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<sup>10</sup> To understand the strategy, requires some understanding of the structural organization of Christian Right groups. Many national level groups, such as the Family Research Council, Focus on the Family and the Christian Coalition have state affiliates which share the policy platform of the national body. When cooperation is taking place on the national scale, cooperation between state affiliates is likely to follow.

<sup>11</sup> For a profile of Phil Burress and his work in defense of traditional marriage, see Dao (2004).

support the state's ban on gay marriage (Miller 2005). The Ohio group also worked closely with African-American churches to gather signatures for the petition as well. Further broadening the coalition, all twelve Catholic Bishops in Ohio made a public statement in support of the state's marriage amendment. With these inter-faith relationships in place, the Ohio Campaign to Protect Marriage was able to gather 575,000 signatures in fewer than 90 days to put a measure on the Ohio ballot. As noted, it passed (62 percent voted in favor), and thus a ban on same-sex marriage was written into the state constitution.<sup>12</sup>

The example of Ohio, like that of California mentioned earlier, demonstrates that the religious diversity amongst groups opposed to gay marriage is not restricted to the national level. While evangelical groups appear to be spearheading the cause, they depend upon a larger community of religious believers to achieve political success. And we expect to see further inter-religious cooperation, as the success of the Ohio campaign now serves as a template for anti-gay marriage campaigns in other states. Soon after the 2004 election season, which resulted in bans on same-sex marriage added to the constitutions of twelve states,<sup>13</sup> Burress and other religious leaders met in Washington,

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<sup>12</sup> In 2004, the wording of state amendments went largely uncontested amongst the religious groups opposed to gay marriage. Burress, a staunch social conservative, was the original architect of the Ohio amendment and put forth a conservative text that banned same-sex contracts in addition to same-sex marriage. Activists from other states chose to pursue a ban on same-sex marriage that did not include a ban on civil unions, possibly thinking this additional stipulation might decrease the chances of the amendment's passage. In Oregon, for example, an amendment banning same-sex civil unions would have been asking too much from a liberal leaning state. Oregon voters did pass an amendment banning gay marriage but by only 58 percent, the smallest margin of any marriage amendment proposed in 2004. To date, the text of state amendments has been left up to the discretion or conviction of local evangelical activists and evangelical groups.

<sup>13</sup> Two states voted to amend their constitutions prior to Election Day. Missouri citizens voted to amend the state constitution in August 2004 to define marriage as between a man and woman. Louisiana voted in September to amend the constitution, outlawing gay marriage as well as civil unions. However, in November, a Louisiana lower court judge overturned the state amendment saying it was flawed because it included two purposes, banning gay marriage and civil unions, within one amendment. At this point, it

D.C. to discuss the following year's constitutional amendment battles in other states. By igniting support for traditional marriage at the grassroots, leaders at the national level hope constituents will then pressure their representatives and senators to support the amendment to the U.S. Constitution. To that end, they remain focused on the states.

As evidenced by the decision to build support for a gay marriage ban state-by-state, leaders in the movement against gay marriage have displayed a considerable degree of political sophistication (not to mention patience). This is nowhere more apparent than in their negotiations over the federal marriage amendment. While it is certain to fail in the short-term, it will be repeatedly introduced in the years to come. Conservative religious leaders do not expect success immediately. Years ago, prior to the first introduction of the amendment, leaders of the Christian Right met with members of Congress to determine a realistic strategy for enacting a constitutional amendment. They realized the limitations they faced in a contentious Congress and chose to work within those constraints, as illustrated by the wording selected for the amendment. A ban on civil unions, they were told, would never happen. And so instead of an amendment that would explicitly ban civil unions and gay marriage, they opted for one that would prohibit homosexual marriages only. While the majority of groups represented by the movement to defend traditional marriage also oppose civil unions, many of them were willing to focus their efforts on marriage as a political compromise. According to Slatter at the Marriage Amendment Project, trying to outlaw civil unions would have been political suicide. Using a metaphor that resonates with our discussion of the culture war, she said, "Civil unions require a nuke and nuking is not popular. Restricting marriage to man and woman,

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seems likely that the ban will eventually be reinstated, however, if only because Louisiana's state supreme court is an elected body, and Louisiana voters voted overwhelmingly in favor of the ban (78 percent).

would require circular strikes, and those are acceptable. We pin point the area most troublesome and we stop that.” Focus on the Family, while equally opposed to civil unions, also agreed that pushing for an amendment to address civil unions would not be politically expedient. Instead, Focus on the Family believes they must defend traditional marriage before attempting to outlaw civil unions as well. “Being an incrementalist is not an unprincipled approach,” said Peter Brandt, Vice President of Public Policy at the Focus on the Family (Brandt, 2004). Brandt thinks at this point it is wiser to turn to the states to adopt the language necessary to ban civil unions.<sup>14</sup>

Contrast this flexibility with earlier incarnations of the Christian Right movement, which was characterized by absolutism on moral issues. As it has become a more politically sophisticated movement, it has recognized the value of getting half a loaf when the whole loaf is out of reach. The evolving strategy of abortion opponents illustrates this change. When the Christian Right first appeared on the national political landscape, its leaders and organizations took a hardline stand against abortion, supporting nothing less than an absolute ban on all abortions. However, in more recent years, abortion opponents have adopted an “incremental” strategy by working to enact a prohibition on “partial birth abortion” (known to abortion rights advocates as “intact dilation and extraction”), supporting parental notification laws, and the like (Saletan 2003). As applied to abortion, the incremental strategy appears to be working. Not only have numerous limitations and restrictions on abortion been successfully enacted, but recent years have seen a small shift toward pro-life attitudes among the general public (two developments that are clearly related, although the direction of causality is unclear) (Wilcox and Norrander 2002).

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<sup>14</sup> Not all social conservative advocacy groups have been happy with this compromise. Concerned Women for America, for example, was so displeased with the failure of the amendment to address civil unions that they have decided not to directly partner with the coalitions opposing gay marriage as of April 2005.

Incrementalism on abortion has undoubtedly served as a template for the strategy to oppose gay marriage. The half loaf of a gay marriage ban while civil unions are permitted is better than trying and failing to obtain the whole loaf of banning both.

### *Conclusion*

We have seen that the religious coalitions that have formed around the issue of gay marriage—especially in opposition to it—are evidence of what James Davison Hunter memorably labeled culture war politics. The term is incendiary and perhaps even misleading, but the interfaith cooperation it is meant to describe nonetheless applies to the groups working to thwart gay marriage in the United States. In its current configuration, the debate over gay marriage pits gay marriage opponents comprised largely of traditionalists spanning the religious spectrum against advocates who are predominantly secular, but joined by a small number of religious progressives. We stress that we are not saying religious traditions are irrelevant in shaping opinions regarding gay marriage. To the contrary, members of different religious traditions vary systematically in their opposition to gay marriage. But the differences among religious traditions are surpassed by the differences within them. Your level of traditionalism within your church matters more than which church you go to.

At the moment, the opponents of gay marriage have the upper hand. Supporters of marriage among homosexuals are in the minority, as evidenced by both public opinion polls and the overwhelming margins of victory for ballot initiatives to ban marriage between homosexual couples. As we look toward the future, however, should we expect to see the “culture war” continue? There are two ways to read the tea leaves. On the one

hand, attitudes toward homosexuality are becoming increasingly liberal, largely because young people are more accepting of homosexuals, and gay marriage, than their elders. Young people are also less likely than their elders to endorse morally traditionalist opinions. For example, 36 percent of Americans over fifty-five are in the bottom half of the moral traditionalism index introduced earlier, compared to 72 percent of people under thirty. As time marches on, those young people will come to occupy an ever-larger share of the population. It is thus tempting to say that we should expect to see a cessation of hostilities in the culture war—at least along the frontline of gay marriage—in much the same way that racial attitudes changed dramatically over the course of a generation. However, it is also portentous that the gap in attitudes on gay marriage between young people at the bottom versus the top of the moral traditionalism index mirrors what we see among their elders. The gap in opposition to gay marriage between young people in the bottom versus the top half of the traditionalism index is 28 percentage points. Among people over fifty-five, the gap is 32 points. In other words we see that young people, taken as a whole, have more liberal attitudes on gay marriage than their elders. Yet among young people, there remains a clear distinction between traditionalists and progressives. This sharp divide suggests that the most apt analogy for attitudes on gay marriage may be not public opinion on civil rights. Rather, perhaps a better comparison is with attitudes on abortion, which have remained sharply polarized for decades. If so, we can expect the battle over gay marriage to be with us for a long time.

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**Figure 1. Opposition to Gay Marriage by Religious Tradition**

