

## Hot-Button Political Issue Sparks Pioneering Research

Unraveling voter emotions toward gay marriage

**How do you know what people *really* feel about an emotionally-charged issue, especially when what they say in polls doesn't match how they vote?**

**The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) wanted to know more about the values and emotions driving voting on the issue of gay marriage. Insights from the research would then serve as springboards for the development of advertising and public relations messages used in key elections.**

### Here's what happened...

HRC, one of America's largest civil rights organizations (see box), has been working for over a decade to secure marriage equality for gays and lesbians. But, as their senior strategy consultant Doug Hattaway explained:

*"There was a big disconnect with voters between their stated position and their voting behavior. Our polling and focus group research was mainly wasted ... it was not giving us the answers. We needed new methods for probing deeper into the underlying psychology of the 'movable middle.'"*

HRC wanted a better handle on the values that shape opinion and drive political behavior, including the aspirations and emotions behind the "dark" and "light" side of voter behavior. HRC planned to use the insights to adapt what they say about gay marriage and how they say it, with the goal of influencing public opinion.

### Getting the Research into Focus

Uncovering emotions and values is notoriously difficult using traditional techniques and mindsets. How do Apter do it?

The approach had four phases, all based on the 8 lenses of **Reversal Theory** (see box below):

- ❶ **Psychological Probes:** In-depth, 1-on-1 interviews lasting 60-75 minutes. Techniques delve ever-deeper for richer, more meaningful responses.
- ❷ **Thematic Analysis:** Interpretation of voter responses to reveal clear, specific emotional themes.
- ❸ **Motivational Combing:** Because people are changeable, the inconsistencies and inner contradictions from each interview are untangled.
- ❹ **Strategic Choices:** Clients are given clear options and recommendations for how they can make the biggest impact.



What drives the choices voters make, especially on emotionally-charged issues?

**"We needed a whole new approach ... one that would enable us to understand the emotional and values issues."**

Doug Hattaway  
Senior Strategy Consultant  
Hattaway Communications

### Case notes:



#### Human Rights Campaign (HRC)

is a non-profit social advocacy group representing the interests of gay, lesbian, bisexual & transgender (GLBT) rights in the USA.

HRC works to end discrimination against GLBT citizens and to achieve a nation which is characterized by "fundamental fairness and equality for all."

### Psychological Probes among the “Movable Middle”

HRC’s strategy was not about “energizing the base” of current supporters. Instead, they targeted voters in battleground states who were described as the “movable middle” – voters who were neither strongly opposed nor strongly supportive of gay marriage.

These voters were least entrenched in their views and could become supporters if they were given the right message. If HRC were able to convert enough of this “swing” group, they would have enough votes to win upcoming ballot elections.

### What the Research Revealed

We unearthed several new and exciting themes – real “gold dust” that included:

- **Skepticism about the authenticity of gay relationships** and questions about the motives behind gay marriage. Many voters think of gay relationships as inherently less genuine than heterosexual relationships. Even more telling was how they felt about this. Many saw themselves as having “seen through” the attempted manipulation by the GLBT community. The emotions they expressed were both pride and feelings of superiority at not having been “duped.”
- **Internal conflict between values of tolerance versus traditional moral teachings.** They often reported some mild level of self-loathing, even to the point of branding themselves “hypocrites” for their closed-mindedness.
- **Concern for the children of gay couples** was widespread and had been reported in previous research. Unlike other research, the Apter research uncovered a **complex mix of emotions around bullying.** Many felt personal guilt at having bullied others when they were children. They also felt anger and resentment at their own parents for not protecting them from bullies. The unspoken assumption was that gay parents fail to recognize the pressures their children face and do not protect their children as they should.
- **Admiration** for courage and commitment of gay couples, who face more obstacles and stressors than non-gay couples. They “must really love each other” to want to be married and show courage in the face of opposition.

### Putting the Findings into Practice...

Prior ad campaigns by HRC used logic to reason people out of strongly held views. These efforts had not been especially productive.

In contrast, the themes identified through our research demonstrated the ability to move public opinion and some **surprising converts.** Tests showed an **11-point net improvement**, one of the largest ever seen. In particular, senior women, who had never moved on this issue, became more supportive.

### Reversal Theory

A powerful theory of motivation, which provides a framework for understanding individual and group behavior patterns.

Developed by Dr. Michael Apter in the 1970’s, it is based on four pairs of alternating motivational states:



This approach recognizes and focuses on the paradoxes of human behavior.

*For more information about RT see contact details on last page.*

***The themes “give our messaging a certain texture and emotional resonance it was lacking heretofore.”***

***“The themes also seem to move voters toward a warmer opinion of gays and lesbians as a whole.”***

Report by client’s third-party research vendor

Around this time, MassEquality.org (see box) had been battling to retain marriage rights in Massachusetts. They were on the lookout for messages to sway both public opinion and votes in the state legislature. They tested a wide range of ideas, including those identified in the research sponsored by HRC.

The winning idea was based on the theme of **tolerance** developed through our research for HRC. MassEquality planned a multi-media campaign, emphasizing it's wrong to put anyone's rights up for a vote.

The campaign prompted voters to ask themselves, **"Who are we to judge other people and vote on their rights?"**

**"It's Wrong to Vote on Rights" Helps Defeat Amendment**

Opponents of gay marriage needed only 50 of Massachusetts' 200 legislators to vote their way. A preliminary vote revealed they had 62. MassEquality's campaign went into high gear. Five months later, the deciding vote was taken. The opposition managed only 45 votes. Marriage equality rights were secured in Massachusetts.

The July 5<sup>th</sup> editorial in the Washington Post described the shifting mood of political opinion, calling to mind many of the Apter themes:

*"As hysteria gives way to real-life experience, more people will realize that the loving and committed relationships of homosexuals should be recognized."*

**A Final Word**

While elections in other states are still on the horizon, HRC is optimistic that the insights from the Apter research will change the direction of the debate on marriage equality across the nation.

Says Seth Kilbourn, formerly Vice President for the Marriage Project at the Human Rights Campaign, now Political and Policy Director at Equality California:

*"Apter International added a new and fresh perspective to our traditional political research approach. Their methodology and insights have been invaluable in helping us create an effective framework to change public opinion on a very challenging issue."*



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