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Two Perspectives on Gay Marriage

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The debate over same-sex marriage in the United States is a contentious one, with vocal advocates on both sides. To explore the issues raised by gay marriage, the Pew Forum interviewed the authors of two books on the subject: former Sen. Rick Santorum, who opposes gay marriage and, in a following interview, journalist Jonathan Rauch, who argues in its favor.

Interviewer:

David Masci, Senior Research Fellow, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, conducted both interviews.

Arguments Against Same-Sex Marriage: An Interview with Rick Santorum



*Rick Santorum, a former U.S. senator from Pennsylvania, is now a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. Sen. Santorum is also the author of the 2005 book *It Takes a Family: Conservatism and the Common Good*, in which he makes the case for promoting families anchored by a married mother and father.*

Gay rights advocates and others say that gay and lesbian people want to get married for the same reasons that straight people do -- they want to be in caring, stable relationships, they want to build a life and even start a family with someone else. Why shouldn't they be able to do this?

See, I think that's the foundational flaw with this whole debate. The law is as it has been for 200-plus years, and so the burden is on them to make the persuasive case as to why they should be married, not just for their benefit but for what the impact is on society and marriage as a whole, and on children.

I would argue that the gay community has not made the argument. They may have made the argument as to why they want it, but they have not made any arguments as to why this is beneficial for society. They have not made any argument -- convincing or otherwise, that I'm aware of -- as to what the impact would be on heterosexual marriages and what the impact would be on children.

They have no studies. They have no information whatsoever about what it would do to the moral ecology of the country, what it would do to religious liberty, what it would do to the mental and physical health of children -- nothing. They've made no case. Basically the case they've made is, "We want what you want, and therefore you should give it to us."

So you're saying that advocates of same-sex marriage are not seeing the big picture?

Yes. I have a book that was written a few years ago called *It Takes a Family*. In that book I have a chapter on moral ecology, and I explain that if you go to the National Archives, you will come to a section that has, as far as the eye can see, rows and rows and rows of environmental impact statements, because we have laws in this country that say before you go out and you put in a bridge across a creek, you have to go out and see whether what you're doing is disturbing the landscape there.

Yet when it comes to something that I happen to believe is actually more important than a particular plot of land -- the entire moral ecology of our country, who we are as a people, what we stand for, what we teach our children, what our values and ethics are -- people argue that we can build the equivalent of a strip mall without even thinking about what those consequences are.

Some people in favor of gay marriage have argued for a "go-slow" approach, acknowledging that we're in largely unknown territory and that a majority of Americans are not yet comfortable with same-sex marriage. Does that attitude allay any of your fears?

No. They want the convenient accelerator of the courts to put this in play, and then they want the judicious temperament of the American democratic system to govern it. I don't think you can have your cake and eat it too. Same-sex marriage advocates are not going to state legislatures, except in some cases for civil unions. They are using the courts.

If the courts are going to be your accelerator, then get ready for a ride. And if the courts ultimately say, "Marriage must be allowed between anybody and anybody," the gay rights advocates are not going to say, "Well, you've gone too far." No, I think the go-slow argument is there to make us feel better, but it doesn't hold water.

Another argument made by gay rights advocates is that with or without marriage, gay families are already a widespread reality. They point out that

we already have gay couples living together, some with children. And they ask: Isn't it better that they be legally married to each other, if for no other reason than for the benefit and the welfare of the children?

The answer is no -- because of the consequences to society as a whole. And again, those are consequences that they choose to ignore. What society should be about is encouraging what's best for children. What's best for children, we know, is a mother and a father who are the parents of that child, raising that child in a stable, married relationship, and we should have laws that encourage that, that support that.

What you're talking about with same-sex marriage is completely deconstructing marriage and taking away a privilege that is given to two people, a man and a woman who are married, who have a child or adopt a child. We know it's best for children and for society that men and women get married. We know it's healthier. We know it's better for men. We know it's better for women. We know it's better for communities.

What we don't know is what happens with other options. And once you get away from the model of "what we know is best" and you get into the other options, from my perspective, there's no stopping it. And also from my perspective, you devalue what you want to value, which is a man and woman in marriage with a child or children. And when you devalue that, you get less of it. When you get less of it, society as a whole suffers.

Do you feel confident that if same-sex marriage became the norm in our society that we would get less traditional marriage?

The answer is yes, because marriage then becomes, to some degree, meaningless. I mean, if anybody can get married for any reason, then it loses its special place. And, you know, it's already lost its special place, in many respects, because of divorce. The institution of marriage is already under assault. So why should we do more to discredit it and harm it?

Stanley Kurtz of the Ethics and Public Policy Center has written extensively about this, about what the impact is in countries that have adopted same-sex marriage. We have, in fact, seen a decline in the number of marriages, a delay in people getting married, more children being born out of wedlock and higher rates of divorce. None of those things are good for society. None of those things are good for children.

But can you lay these changes at the feet of same-sex marriage?

Yes, I think you can lay them at its feet. Kurtz notes that the marriage rate in the Netherlands was always actually one of the lowest in the EU. And once same-sex marriage was put in place, it broke below the line.

As a person who has positioned himself as a defender of Christian values, why is gay marriage particularly opposed to those values?

Well, the laws in this country are built upon a certain worldview, and it is the Judeo-Christian worldview. And that worldview has been expressed in our laws on marriage for 200-plus years. Up until 25 years ago, we would never have sat here and done this interview. It would have been beyond the pale. And so it is clearly a dramatic departure from the Judeo-Christian ethic that is reflected in our laws that say marriage is a sacred union between a man and a woman.

When you look ahead, do you feel optimistic that your side in this debate will ultimately prevail?

What I've noticed about this debate is that fewer and fewer people are stepping up and taking the position I'm taking because they see the consequences of doing so. I don't think there is an issue that is a tougher issue for people to stand up against in American culture today than this one, both from the standpoint of the mainstream media and the popular culture condemning you for your -- they can use all sorts of words to describe you -- intolerant, bigot, homophobe, hater. The other side takes it personally. And so it makes it very difficult for folks to stand up and argue public policy when the other side views it as a personal, direct assault on them. So it's very, very hard for me to be optimistic when we have a battle of ideas and one side is universally hammered for being intolerant bigots and the other side is enlightened and tolerant -- which I think is false, but it is the pervasive attitude.

We know that the American public doesn't approve of same-sex marriage, but they are uncomfortable about it because, again, the public perception is if you feel that way, you're a bigot or a hater. And if the culture continues to send that message, if our educational system sends that message, which it does, you know, eventually the culture will change and people's opinions will change.

The push back is what most people know: that mothers and fathers bring something unique. I mean, I have six children. I know that two mothers would not be able to give to my children what a mother and a father can give to my children. For instance, my daughter's relationship with men is, in many respects, formed by her relationship with me. There are volumes of evidence showing that if little girls don't have a father, it impacts their ability as adults to bond with men in healthy relationships.

What do we know, really, about children raised by same-sex couples? We're into, in many respects, an unknown territory. There is already a difficult environment for children in America today, at least from the traditional Judeo-Christian perspective. So I think this is a fight worth fighting, even if it's not a popular fight.

Arguments For Same-Sex Marriage: An Interview with Jonathan Rauch



To explore the case in favor of gay marriage, the Pew Forum turned to Jonathan Rauch, a columnist at The National Journal and guest scholar at The Brookings Institution. Rauch, who is openly gay, also authored the 2004 book Gay Marriage: Why It Is Good for Gays, Good for Straights, and Good for

America.

Why is marriage -- I'm sorry, why is same-sex marriage good for America?

Well, you got the question right the first time. It's "why is marriage good for America?" Same-sex marriage is good for all the same reasons. It's good for gay people. I think if you asked straight people who have been married or hope to get married to imagine life without marriage, it's very hard to imagine. It's a much lonelier, much more vulnerable life.

Gay people need all the same safety. They need the same caregiving anybody else does. A society with successful marriages -- and a lot of them -- is a more stable, safer, more successful society. America's problem is not too many marriages, it's too few. Gay people are asking to be part of this social contract -- to care for each other so society doesn't have to.

What do you think drives the opposition to same-sex marriage? Does it ultimately boil down in many cases to discrimination? Is it that people are just unused to or uncomfortable with the idea of gay people marrying?

All of the above and much more. I've given a lot of talks on gay marriage in a lot of cities since writing a book about it in 2004 called *Gay Marriage: Why It Is Good for Gays, Good for Straights, and Good for America*. I did a lot of traveling with it and talked to a lot of different kinds of audiences. And it runs the gamut. You get religious people who will say, God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. You get very sympathetic people who say, I really want to do something for gay people, but changing the fundamental boundaries of our most ancient, important institution just goes too far, so let's do civil unions or something else. And then, you get a lot of people in between.

So it's a whole variety of reasons. And I'm the first to agree, gay marriage is a significant change; it's a big change. It's not something you necessarily expect people to jump into.

You mentioned religious people. They will say things like, look, both the Old and New Testaments in the Bible are very clear about this: God intended marriage to be between a man and a woman.

If you do biblical marriage, then you're talking about polygamy. It's there in black-and-white. Or, you're talking about, for heaven's sake, no divorce. Jesus himself had nothing to say about homosexuality, but he's very clear on divorce. You can't do it. And what I don't understand is why gay people are the only people in America who have to follow biblical law. I don't think that's fair. We could also have other debates about what the Bible does and doesn't mean, but I think what it boils down to is that gay people should deal with the same standards as straight people. And when straight people start upholding biblical law in civic culture, then maybe gay people should consider it, but not until then.

Opponents of same-sex marriage, particularly social conservatives, will argue that same-sex marriage could or would hurt traditional marriage because by broadening the definition of marriage, you make it less special -- less sacred in a sense. And then, eventually, marriage will lose its special place in society -- lose its meaning. Why do you think this logic is incorrect?

It depends on what exactly they're saying. But I think society is at a turning point. We've got all these gay couples out there. They're already acting married in many cases. We've got a generation growing up now, which takes for granted that they'll be able to live a lifestyle that is very much like marriage, even if in most states it's not called marriage. To have those people set up a married kind of lifestyle -- often raising kids, by the way; many gay couples are raising kids -- outside of marriage sends all the wrong cultural signals.

The signal we need to send now is that everybody should be getting married. The big cultural problem with the family in America is not that gay people want to get married -- it's that straight people are not getting married or not staying married. And to me, one of the important cultural effects of gay marriage will be to send a very strong signal that marriage is something that is available to and expected of everybody, not just a few.

Now, there are lots of arguments on the other side about people who think that gay marriage will hurt straight marriage. I've never really understood why admitting gay couples -- fairly small in number -- into the institution of marriage and having them uphold those ideals would make marriage less likely or successful for anyone else. I'm probably not the best person to ask for those arguments.

What about the argument that when you make marriage about rights and equal treatment you ultimately open up the field to other sorts of relationships -- like polygamous or incestuous relationships -- as well? Is that likely, first of all, and, if it is likely, is that a problem?

It would be a problem if it were likely. I think there are a lot of important and good social reasons to be against polygamy and incestuous marriage. We can talk about those if you're interested. But, fundamentally, it's not directly relevant. I guess there's this political argument: Once you have one change, you're going to get every change.

First of all, I don't think the American public is that indiscriminating. Second of all, there is no logical connection between gay marriage and all of these other things. I often say, you know, when straight people get the right to marry two or three people or their mother or a toaster, then gay people should have the same right.

But all gay people are asking for now is the one thing that we lack but that all straight people already have -- they don't need to give themselves anything more. And that's the opportunity to marry some person -- one person -- that we love. Right now, we can't marry anybody. The set is the null set for us. That's not true of straight people who want multiple husbands or multiple wives. That's not true of people who want to marry their mother; they can have 4 billion marriage partners except their mother. So, ultimately, I think those arguments, although well intended, are primarily a red herring.

You said that you don't think same-sex marriage would hurt traditional marriage. In fact, it sounds like you're saying it might actually help marriage in general -- the idea of marriage. But what if you were convinced otherwise?

I've often said, if I believed that gay marriage would wreck straight marriage then I'd be against it just as if I thought that giving women the vote would wreck democracy so that no one's vote mattered, I'd be against that, too.

On the other hand, if gay marriage was to have a very small, sort of incremental bad effect on the divorce rate for straight people, I'd say that's not enough to stop it because you've got 10, 12, 15 million Americans not only without marriage, but without even the prospect of marriage. You've got them growing up assuming that they'll be legal strangers to the people that mean the most to them -- that they're committed to care about. And that's just a scalding deprivation.

When *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*, the 2003 Massachusetts decision legalizing same-sex marriage, was handed down, there was a prediction that there was going to be a domino effect and that within five or 10 years we were going to see a lot of other states follow suit. But, at least so far, that hasn't happened. Are we in the lull before the storm, or do you think that widespread legalization of gay marriage is still a long way off, if it happens at all?

I think it'll take a while, and I think it should take a while. I see the reaction as going through a few stages. The first was panic after the Supreme Court knocked down the Texas ban on sodomy. And then after *Goodridge* mandated same-sex marriage in Massachusetts, you had some of the gay marriage advocates saying, we need to get the court to impose this around the country as fast as possible. And then you had conservatives saying, we need to rush through a constitutional amendment at the federal level to ban gay marriage on every inch of American soil forever.

But to my great gratitude -- and I think it's almost inspirational how right the country has gotten this -- the public has refused to be rushed. The public has come to understand that we can take our time with this. And the way to do this is let different states do different things. Let's find out how gay marriage works in a few states. Let's find out how civil unions work. In the meantime, let the other states hold back.

Marriage is not like voting, something the government just gives you at the stroke of a pen by fiat. Marriage must be a community institution to have its full power, which is to make couples actually closer. It actually fortifies and not just ratifies relationships. Your marriage has to be recognized by your community, your friends, your family, your kids' teachers, your co-workers, all of the people around you as a marriage with all of the expectations and social support that goes with that. The law can't give you that. That comes from community and that's something gay couples are going to have to build by showing, as I think we are in Massachusetts, that we can be good marital citizens, that we're not hurting anybody else's marriage.

From your point of view, is it better to legalize same-sex marriage by passing a law in the legislature, or are courts a better venue for this?

I think now in 2008, clearly, the legislatures are a better way to do it. To everything its season. When this issue first came up in 1970 -- the first gay couple tried to get married in 1970, filed a lawsuit and lost -- the courts were the only place you could go. There was no chance that any legislature would ever even hear you out if you were gay and wanted to get married.

But I think the court strategy has basically exhausted its utility. In fact, it may have overreached. And what we're seeing now is that, in any case, the number of court venues where you can even use a judicial strategy are very, very sharply diminished. They are almost all gone because of the state constitutional amendments and because a lot of courts have acted already. So that means we're now turning to the next stage. And I think it's the proper stage. That's the democratic process. I think it is qualitatively different and better if you get married with the consent of your community, which, in America, means your state legislature, among other things. And that's where we need to go.

Let's assume that same-sex marriage eventually becomes the norm in America. Are there any downsides for gays and lesbians?

No. No, I see none at all. For gays and lesbians, I see only an upside. I see an opportunity to join in the most healthgiving, beneficial social institution that's ever been invented by humanity. I see the prospect for young people to grow up assuming that they will have families and connections to their community that have been denied to gay people for thousands of years. I see no downside at all for gay people.