

Canada's Pulse

How the gays won

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Arguably no group has made more progress and won more public sympathy over the past decade than homosexuals.

It's taken only that long from the first mention of same-sex marriages in mainstream news media to the first marriage licence for a same-sex couple.

Time magazine's Canadian edition marked the change by naming gay newlyweds newsmakers of the year for 2003.

Considering there so few homosexuals, the change in public opinion has been astounding. Only 3% of Canadian adults tell pollsters they are lesbian or homosexual. (In the U.S. 7% selfidentify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered.)

Obviously homosexuals under-report in phone surveys. Even if 10% or 15% of Canadians are gay, a small minority has reversed the straight majority's mind in a short time.

**In 1975, 62% of Canadians told Gallup pollsters homosexuality is "always wrong."
As recently as 1990, 59% said always wrong. Only five years later the intolerant
share of the public shrank to under half – 45%**

In 2001 a 44% plurality approved of homosexuality while those disapproving fell to 37% (16% neither approved nor disapproved). The means a majority of people with opinions approves. The final third of the 20th century was the era of new rights. But few groups advanced as fast as homosexuals.

For example, persons with disabilities won major concessions from the non-disabled world. But wheelchair ramps, special parking spaces and closed-captioning required a lot less emotional adjustment than rethinking the definition of marriage. Everyone is going to become disabled just by aging, but no one is inevitably going to become homosexual.

The only cohort opposing gay rights is the senior segment, meaning demographic change is on the side of gays.

In an Environics poll in 2003, among 18-to-29-year-olds 65% would allow same-sex marriages compared with only 33% among people 60 and older.

Support for same-sex marriage fluctuates in the polls, which is typical when the public is forced to deal with a new issue. We begin weighing the options and sometimes change our opinions several times until our views firm up.

Before the courts ruled in favour of gays, the public opposed same-sex marriage by 61% to 24% in 1992 and by 56% to 36% in 1999 (in Gallup polls).

After the courts ruled gays can marry, Canadians supported same-sex marriages by 49% to 46% in the 2002 *Maclean's*-Strategic Counsel poll, by 54% to 44% in an Ipsos-Reid in early 2004, by 53% to 43% in an Environics poll in summer and by 47% to 44% in late 2003 in an SES Research survey. While many are still changing their mind, the polls confirm it's wrong to say that Canadians think spouses must have different genders.

Acceptance of same-sex marriage followed growing public support for other gay rights.

In 1988 only 25% said homosexuals should be allowed to adopt children, a share that rose to 31% in 1992, 42% in 1996 and 48% in 2002 (46% were opposed while 6% expressed no opinion in the *Maclean's* poll).

In 1988 only 45% said homosexuals should be allowed to teach in elementary schools compared with 69% in 2002.

There are still gay-rights foes, including some church leaders. The public, however, puts homosexual freedoms ahead of religious rights.

In a 2002 COMPAS poll respondents said by 63% to 30% that religious schools should not be allowed to ban same-sex couples from school dances.

By 71% to 23% people said a religious school should not be allowed to avoid hiring a homosexual “if the teacher is otherwise satisfactory.”

How homosexuals achieved so much so fast is a lesson in how to sway public opinion. But it’s not the conventional lesson.

Who needs leaders?

Political parties, big corporations and major interest groups obsess over how their leaders look on TV. But the gay rights movement has no chief executive, central coordinating committee or national convention.

There are openly gay performers and politicians, and popular network TV shows feature homosexuals. But the entertainment industry did not push a gay agenda; it followed. By the time mainstream movies and prime time TV became gay-friendly the war for homosexual rights was approaching armistice.

The personal isn’t political.

Lesbians and homosexuals eschewed typical political action. They did not take over riding associations or try to influence legislation through big donations and fund-raising dinners for prime ministers.

Except in a handful of electoral districts there is no gay vote to woo the way parties cater to seniors, working moms or small business. Homosexuals have political allies, but gay rights have advanced more rapidly through courts than ballot boxes. Lawyers, not lobbyists, won gay rights.

Interest groups work faster than coalitions.

Gays came out in many places: companies, unions, and political parties. But their laser-beam focus on gay rights meant their mission wasn't watered down in coalitions. They had specific, measurable objectives such as pensions, inheritances and employee health benefits for domestic partners. Many straight people support gay rights. But the straight population didn't bankroll the gay rights movement.

It doesn't pay to advertise.

Gay rights campaigners know advertising's hidden secret. You don't need it. Word of mouth – free advertising in other words – matters more. In the homosexual rights movement, the people were the ads.

As Adam Goodheart wrote in *The New York Times* recently, “Each person who comes out of the closet brings at least some of his friends and family over to the pro-gay camp, and this in turn makes it easier for others to live openly.”

By coming out, minorities appear to be more numerous than they are. How many people are homosexual? The average American guesses 21%.

If union members came out the way gays did, they would win equivalent advances. There would be more anti-scab laws. If the poor were as tactically savvy as homosexuals, politicians would sign pledges to cut poverty instead of taxes. The lesson for others seeking their rights or trying to change public opinion is clear. Engage your people.

Vector Research (www.vectorresearch.com) provides phone, mail and on-line polls and focus groups in Canada and the US.

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