Title
Understanding Post-Prop 8 Conflicts

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5fr8z3t3

Author
Ghavami, Negin

Publication Date
2010
On November 4, 2008, voters in the state of California narrowly passed Proposition 8, a measure to amend the state constitution to define marriage as between a man and a woman. This amendment revoked the right of same-sex couples to legally marry, which had been in effect in California since June 16, 2008. Not surprisingly, the reaction of opponents to Prop 8 ranged from disappointment to dismay to outrage. Many such individuals were searching for simple answers to the complex question: Why did Proposition 8 pass? To that end, a small but identifiable part of the electorate has been blamed for the outcome of the measure — the Black community. A widely publicized finding from a CNN exit poll (November, 2008) revealed that although constituting only 10% of the electorate, 70% of Black voters supported Prop 8. Even though the results of this poll was contested (by Egan & Sherrill, 2009, for example), many White gay men and lesbians adopted an anti-Black stance, often directing hostile and sometimes overtly
racist rhetoric at the Black community. This situation put Black gay men and lesbians, who simultaneously hold both identities, at risk for experiencing alienation from both communities.

The events that have transpired in the wake of the passage of Prop 8 have raised several important questions that could shed light not only on the current circumstances in California but also on social psychological theory about intersecting social identities (for example, being gay and Black) and social judgments. I have recently begun a line comprised of three studies. Study 1, Comparing Sexual and Ethnic Minority Perspectives on Same-Sex Marriage, examines how “naïve realism” (Robinson et al., 1995) led opponents of Prop 8 to draw erroneous inferences about the rationale underlying the votes cast by the Black voters, thereby fueling hatred and hostility. Study 2 investigates how the events surrounding the passage of Prop 8 have affected Black gay men and lesbians whose Black identity and gay/lesbian identity were challenged. Study 3 looks at how motivation guides an individual’s social perception and categorization of individuals with multiple identities. For instance, what determines whether a White gay man will categorize a Black gay man as an in-group (part of the gay/lesbian community) or an out-group member (part of the Black community)?

Study 1 considers why so many opponents of Prop 8 reacted so negatively to the votes of Blacks Californians. Other ethnic voting blocks were largely spared from such derogatory rhetoric, in spite of support for Prop 8. For example, Latino and White voters who supported Prop 8 were not blamed for the outcome. The outrage directed at the Black community was unique.

The concept of naïve realism suggests possible reasons. According to this concept (for example, Robinson et al., 1995), individuals believe that they perceive and respond to the world objectively or “as it really is.” Consequently, individuals expect other people to share their attitude toward an object or event and the underlying cognitions that support the attitude. When other people respond to the world differently than oneself, they are perceived to hold views that distort objective reality, because of ideological bias, lack of information, and so on. Researchers have noted the intergroup consequences that follow from such naïveté. For example, obliviousness to construal differences can lead to such outcomes as the tendency to misattribute the other side’s words and deeds, to blame the other side exclusively for shared problems (Blumenthal, Kahn, Andrews, & Head, 1972; Eldridge, 1979), and to doubt their sincerity (Deutsch, 1973), all of which can result in conflict (Sherman, Nelson, & Ross, 2003).

These descriptions of naïve realism bear a striking similarity to the events that transpired in the aftermath of the Prop 8 vote. Specifically, many opponents of Prop 8 viewed the measure as denying gay men and lesbians a central civil right, the right to marry. From this perspective, the struggle against Prop 8 was seen as analogous to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which sought to rectify injustices against Blacks and other ethnic minorities. Lesbians and gay men presumed that Blacks would also view gay marriage as a civil rights issue and thus strongly oppose Prop 8. Analyses of exit polls told a different story. The majority of the Black constituents who voted in favor of Prop 8 cited religious convictions about marriage as the basis for their vote (for example, Egan & Sherrill, 2009). This finding suggests that contrary to what opponents of Prop 8 assumed, Blacks viewed gay marriage as a moral issue rather than a civil rights issue. This failure to recognize differences in values,
beliefs, and perspectives may have led the opponents of Prop 8 to view the Black vote as illogical, selfish, and/or ideologically driven, thus fueling hostility toward them.

In the current study, we use the theoretical framework of naïve realism to address three main questions. First, to what extent do gay men and lesbians perceive same-sex marriage as a civil rights versus a moral issue? Second, how do gay men and lesbians perceive other groups (for example, Blacks and Latinos) to view same-sex marriage? Third, how do other groups (for example, Blacks and Latinos) actually view same-sex marriage? Preliminary analysis supported our three main predictions. First, as expected, gay men and lesbians viewed same-sex marriage as a civil rights issue analogous to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, not a moral issue. Second, gay men and lesbians expected African Americans to view same-sex marriage as a civil rights issue and to draw an analogy between gay marriage and the civil rights movement of the 1960s. In reality, however, Black respondents were more likely to view gay marriage as a moral issue involving religious convictions, not a civil rights issue. Few endorsed the analogy with the civil rights movement. These results suggest that Blacks and gay men and lesbians are framing the issue of same-sex marriage differently.

Other analyses compare the attitudes and perceptions of gay/lesbian respondents versus each ethnic group included in the study. In addition, other analyses will examine the possible association of gender, ethnicity, ethnic identification, political ideology, and party affiliation with attitudes and perceptions. These results shed light not only on the disparate voting patterns among Californians but also on the unforeseen eruption of hostility between visible blocks of constituents. These data highlight the importance of assessing, rather than presuming, the framework through which various groups view societal issues. Doing so may inform future efforts to change attitudes and gain support for same-sex marriage. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said, “Everything that we see is a shadow cast by that which we do not see.” Our results suggest that as advocates of gay marriage move forward in their efforts to secure the right to marry for lesbians and gay men, they should be mindful that the perspective of others lies in the shadows.

REFERENCES
Sherman, D. K., Nelson, L. D., & Ross, L. D.  

Negin Ghavami received her B.A. from UCLA and her M.A. from CSU, Northridge. She is currently a doctoral candidate in Social Psychology at UCLA. Broadly, her research focuses on intergroup relations. She examines minority/majority relations from the perspective of the minority as well as the majority group members. After completing her Ph.D. she plans to teach and conduct research. She is grateful to the UCLA Institute for Social Research for support of this project. Negin received a CSW Travel Grant to support her research.