

# **Perceptions and Issues Related to Gays and Lesbians**

**By John Nienstedt**

In 1987 the *New York Times* changed its editorial policy. It would use the word “gay” instead of “homosexual.” Fifteen years later the *Times* reversed another policy and began running same-sex wedding notices. In 2004 “Queer Eye For The Straight Guy” is a hit show on cable-TV. There is no doubt that American attitudes and opinions have changed when it comes to how gays and lesbians are viewed. On the other hand, in March 2000 Californians passed Proposition 22, the Defense of Marriage Act, limiting marriage to between a man and a woman. But how does public opinion in San Diego stack up? The latest installment of the KPBS/Competitive Edge Research Poll of San Diego County residents shows that, like the nation, views are mixed.

Most San Diegans have positive impressions of gays and lesbians, with 60% viewing gays and lesbians favorably and 26% viewing them unfavorably. In the great debate surrounding same-sex marriages and civil unions it's a dead heat, with each supported by 38% of the County's population. Another 18% oppose both and 7% are unsure. When it comes to amending the US Constitution to do nationally what Proposition 22 did in California, residents are not so supportive. The results are close, but 51% oppose such an amendment while 44% would support it. The survey also finds that 86% know at least one gay person and about half know more than five. This compares to 69% nationally. When asked about their own sexual orientation, 1.7% say they are homosexual, 1.8% reported a bi-sexual orientation and 0.7% said “something else” for a total of 4.2% non-heterosexual. Another 2% refused to answer. Reliable estimates of the percentage of non-heterosexuals in the national population range from 3% to 8%, though Advertising Age magazine reports a figure of up to 10% for urban markets.

## **The Widening Gay Circle**

The percentage of Americans who say they know a gay person has gone from 46% in 1985 to 69% today. With 85% of San Diegans knowing someone who is gay or lesbian,

the concept of homosexuality has ceased to be an abstraction for a large majority of County residents. The survey shows that residents can significantly increase their chances of meeting more gay people by: earning more money, registering to vote and shifting their political ideology to the left. While only 8% of those earning over \$100,000 do not know any gays or lesbians, 22% who earn less than \$20,000 annually do not have at least one gay acquaintance. When it comes to voting, 74% of non-registrants know someone who is gay, but that figure jumps to 89% for registered voters. As for ideology, it is not so much a question of knowing or not knowing gays but how wide the circle of gay acquaintances can get. Half of the very liberal residents know more than 10 gays while only about one-quarter of moderates and conservatives know that many.

### **It's Who You Know: Impressions of Gays and Lesbians**

While 60% have a favorable impression of gays and lesbians (27.5% say very favorable), 26% hold an unfavorable opinion of them (12% say very unfavorable). Another 14% are unsure. In San Diego County, general impressions of gays and lesbians are largely a factor of how many each resident personally knows. The median number of gay people known to San Diegans is six. But, among residents who know more than 20 gays, 77% report favorable impressions (55% very). On the other hand, there are those who know no gays. Fifty-five percent of them have negative images of gays (32% very) and just 27% have positive impressions. Obviously in this case, familiarity breeds favorability.

A second factor is a person's ideology. Not surprisingly, liberals tend to have favorable impressions of gays and left-wing residents generally have very favorable impressions of them. On the other hand, while most moderate conservatives have a favorable image of gays, very conservative residents are evenly split in their evaluation. The stereotype that all arch-conservatives have a problem with gays is clearly wrong, but there is certainly a substantial element of intolerance among them.

Another factor driving impressions is church attendance. There is an interesting

dividing line between those who attend religious services once per week or more and those who visit church less than that. Less frequent attenders generally possess favorable impressions of gays and lesbians, with those who go only rarely or do not visit church at all harboring even more favorable impressions. However, like the observation made of very conservative residents, frequent church-goers are mixed in their impressions of gays. About 40% have unfavorable opinions while about 46% hold favorable impressions.

The survey also finds that women have significantly more positive impressions than do men. Just 21% of women hold negative opinions of gays, while 32% of men view them unfavorably.

Finally, as other research has shown, younger residents view gays much more favorably than older folks. In San Diego those under 65 tend to view gays positively. Impressions become noticeably less positive after that. This age-based differential in how gays are viewed has caused some to comment that acceptance of the gay community will be inevitable as time passes. While our results support the trend data, it appears that acceptance is already here.

### **Same Sex Marriage vs. Civil Unions vs. Neither**

With same-sex marriages being performed on both coasts, the issue of how to officially recognize gay couples has moved to the political forefront. A recent national poll showed that 24% believe same-sex couples should be allowed to marry while 38% favor civil unions and 34% believe same-sex couples should not be allowed to do either. Our research shows that San Diegans generally are less traditional than the nation as a whole.

But here, where the intersection of politics and morality is strongest, we see large differences based on ideology and voter registration. In the case of ideology, there is a very tight relationship between one's political views and their support for gay marriage.

Forty-six percent of very conservative residents oppose it – as well as civil unions – while 70% of very liberal residents favor same-sex marriage. Going further, moderate conservatives tend to favor civil unions while moderate liberals lean toward recognizing gay marriage. This is the definition of a “wedge issue.”

When it comes to voting, gay activists may have a problem in San Diego. Voters, as compared to non-voters, appear more reluctant to embrace gay marriage, preferring, on balance, civil unions instead.

How many gay people one knows is another big indicator of whether someone will support or oppose gay marriage. Not surprisingly, those who know a large number of gays tend to strongly support same-sex marriage. But as the number of gay acquaintances drops below 20, support shifts from mainly marriage to civil unions. Among the 15% who do not know any gays support for same-sex marriage evaporates and more in this group oppose even civil unions.

Other factors that play into this complex issue are church attendance (few regular attenders support same-sex marriage while infrequent attenders tend to favor it); metro vs. suburban (San Diego City residents are much more supportive of gay marriage than those in other areas); gender (women are more sympathetic to gay marriage than men) and sexual orientation (non-heterosexuals overwhelmingly and strongly support legalizing same-sex marriages).

### **Amending the US Constitution to Bar Same-Sex Marriage**

President Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) into law in 1996. Now President Bush has gone a step further, saying he would back an amendment to the US Constitution which would define marriage as only between a man and a woman. As mentioned above, California already has such a law on the books. Proposition 22 actually passed in San Diego County by a 62.6% to 37.4% margin. However, County residents now sing a different tune when amending the Constitution is proposed.

San Diegans narrowly oppose an amendment by a margin of 7%. This comes close to mirroring the recent results for California as a whole found by *The Field Poll* where 53% opposed and 43% supported amending the Constitution.

The debate over a DOMA-style Constitutional amendment energizes most of the same groups we discussed earlier. Generally, the religiously observant, conservatives and older folks are on one side supporting an amendment and those who know more gay people, urban residents and non-heterosexuals tend to oppose. However, one key group that seems to tip the balance against an amendment are those who are single and never married. Single adults comprise just under one-quarter of the County's residents and overwhelmingly oppose a Constitutional amendment which would ban same-sex marriages.

## **Conclusions**

In reviewing the data I am struck by how much our stereotypes are both supported and countered by the data. On the one hand, ideological conservatives, the religiously observant and old folks seem to line up against gay rights, while liberals, those who don't go to church and young people support gay marriage. But such a simple social equation eludes us because the data shows that these groups are generally not monolithic in their attitudes and opinions. For instance, most church attenders know more than two gay people. Furthermore, most of those who make it to services at least once a week or more do not have an unfavorable opinion of gays and lesbians. Therefore, the differences are mainly in the margins.

The survey clearly shows that as the circle of acquaintances widens, tolerance, acceptance and positive feelings increase dramatically. As gays and lesbians achieve higher profiles in the community, negative images, such as they still exist, should dissipate further.

As for the notion that same-sex marriages are inevitable based on the differing attitudes

between young and old, that is likely a stretch. While younger people are clearly more accepting of the idea, even they do not embrace same-sex marriage to the point where adoption is a fait-accomplis.