

Marriage Equality

A focused initiative of the LGBTQ agenda, this social movement culminated in the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States in 2015.

During the course of a focused effort of less than two decades, the number of states in the US legalizing marriage for same-sex couples grew from zero to all of them, and the public's approval of marriage equality moved from 27 percent to more than 60 percent. How did this happen?

Although the marriage equality movement has roots in the 1970s and built some momentum during the 1990s, the majority of progress occurred after 2000. In 2003 activist lawyer Evan Wolfson launched the nonprofit Freedom to Marry (FTM), with major financial support from the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund. The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) movement adopted the objective of freedom for same-sex couples to marry as its primary strategic focus, and FTM coordinated the movement's action using the civil rights movement's methods as a model. FTM's "[roadmap to victory](#)" first helped movement supporters build public approval, then win over individual states. An initial breakthrough came late in 2003 with a Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruling allowing same-sex couples to marry in that state.

The next step, logically, would be to challenge nationwide discrimination in court, yet FTM's gathering momentum failed to prevent a major setback in the 2004 general election, when 11 states passed amendments banning same-sex marriage by an average split of 70 percent in favor of the bans and 30 percent against. This led major funders, the Gill Foundation and the Haas, Jr. Fund, to host a meeting for 26 of the top LGBTQ leaders in early 2005 to come up with a common shared strategy. What emerged from this gathering became

This case study is part of a series that accompanies The Bridgespan Group article "[Audacious Philanthropy: Lessons from 15 World-Changing Initiatives](#)" (*Harvard Business Review*, Sept/Oct 2017). See below for [15 stories of social movements](#) that defied the odds and learn how philanthropy played a role in achieving their life-changing results.

- [The Anti-Apartheid Movement](#)
- [Aravind Eye Hospital](#)
- [Car Seats](#)
- [CPR Training](#)
- [The Fair Food Program](#)
- [Hospice and Palliative Care](#)
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known as the “roadmap to victory,” and all of the movement’s leaders rallied around it. A deeply engaged LGBTQ funder group that formed in the run-up to the national election, the Civil Marriage Collaborative (CMC), then stepped to the fore to support the movement’s aligned plan.

Over the next five years the movement developed a robust electoral and public opinion infrastructure. Through extensive message testing and polling, movement leaders also led a shift in public discourse from talking about gay couple’s rights to talking about their love for each other. Public opinion tipped in 2010; political leadership in 2012; and in 2013 the Supreme Court overturned the Defense of Marriage Act, defining marriage as the union of a man and a woman. Finally, in 2015 the US Supreme Court ruled same-sex marriage was a constitutional right.

Philanthropy’s Approach to Large-Scale Change

Our research shows that breakthrough social initiatives share a set of [five practical approaches to large-scale change](#). In the case of Marriage Equality, philanthropy played a pivotal role in two of them:

- **Set a winnable milestone and hone a compelling message:** LGBTQ funders like the Gill Foundation and the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund convened movement leaders to discuss and agree to narrowing their goal from an initial one of “equal protection for LGBTQ Americans,” zeroing in on marriage equality as the new target. The movement diligently focused on winning and holding marriage equality rights, one state at a time. On the messaging side, after political setbacks in California and Maine in 2008 and 2009, a poll (by a CMC-funded group in Oregon) revealed that a more compelling message of “love is love” was a winning strategy.
- **Drive (rather than assume) demand:** CMC-funded groups engaged in a wide range of public awareness and opinion-shaping activities, including door-to-door campaigning, advertising, and advanced social media work. Activists also enlisted networks developed during the struggle against HIV/AIDS and Democratic and progressive political organizations typically mobilized for elections. In addition, more favorable media portrayals of gay characters and pop culture figures, and a broad coming-out movement, helped to normalize gay relationships for some Americans.

Researched and written by consultants Phil Dearing and Andrew Flamang of The Bridgespan Group, based on Bridgespan interviews with Evan Wolfson, founder and president of Freedom to Marry, and Matt Foreman, senior program director for gay and lesbian rights, the Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund and former co-chair of the Civil Marriage Collaborative, as well as selected secondary sources.

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THE BRIDGESPAN GROUP

BOSTON 2 Copley Place, 7th Floor, Suite 3700B, Boston, MA 02116 USA. Tel: +1 617 572 2833

NEW YORK 112 West 34th St., Ste. 1510, New York, NY 10120 USA. Tel: +1 646 562 8900

SAN FRANCISCO 465 California St., 11th Floor, San Francisco, CA 94104 USA. Tel: +1 415 627 1100

MUMBAI Bridgespan India Private Limited Company, 1086, Regus, Level 1, Trade Centre, Bandra Kurla Complex, Bandra East, Mumbai, 400051 Maharashtra, India. Tel: +91 2266289639



www.bridgespan.org

contact@bridgespan.org