Science & Technology

Face-to-Face Dialogues Seen as Key to Breaking Down Bigotry

Spring/Summer 2015

On May 19, the Columbia professor involved in the below study, Donald P. Green, announced that he had requested a retraction of the paper, originally published in the journal *Science*, because of the unavailability of raw data and other irregularities that have emerged in the published paper. *Science* has issued an Expression of Concern.



Gay-rights activists rally in California. Photo: Karin Hildebrand Lau / Shutterstock

If all gay people came out of the closet, Harvey Milk once said, there would be far less homophobia in the world.

This idea, that prejudice can be defeated by giving its victims names and faces, has been a guiding light of the LGBT-rights movement. But is it true? Is it really likely that someone who is opposed to, say, same-sex marriage will change his or her mind simply for having met a gay person?

Indeed, this appears to be the case, according to a new study by Columbia political scientist Donald P. Green and UCLA doctoral student Michael LaCour. In 2013, the researchers sent two groups of canvassers into Los Angeles neighborhoods that had strongly supported Proposition 8 — the 2008 ballot measure that banned same-sex marriage in California — to knock on doors and try to convince people to reverse their stance. One group of canvassers consisted of gays and lesbians who told residents that they wanted to marry but couldn't. Another group consisted of straight canvassers who made the case for gay marriage by describing the plight of a gay friend or relative. In conversations that lasted an average of about twenty minutes, the canvassers all attempted to have candid, two-way exchanges with the people they met.

"This wasn't the type of quick-hit conversation typical of political canvassing, but a genuine dialogue," says Green, who was recently named an inaugural recipient of an Andrew Carnegie Fellowship for innovative research in the social sciences and humanities.

Follow-up surveys conducted a few days later suggested that the gay and straight canvassers had been equally persuasive, as support for same-sex marriage increased evenly across the board. (Whereas the interview subjects had initially expressed views in line with the population of Nebraska, they subsequently mirrored Massachusetts residents in their outlook.) Over the next year, though, something remarkable happened: the boost in support for gay marriage disappeared among people who had met a straight canvasser, while it persisted among those who had met a gay canvasser. The effect of the gay canvassers' message even seemed to spread within households; people who simply lived with someone who had met a gay canvasser also became more supportive of same-sex marriage.

"It seems that people who spoke to a gay person were so affected by the meeting that they discussed the issue with family and friends," says Green, who has written

extensively on voting, political campaigns, public-opinion polling, and prejudice.

The results of the study startled Green and his colleagues, he says, because social scientists have long thought that people's views on hot-button issues like homosexuality, race, or abortion are too entrenched to be permanently altered by exchanges with activists.

"Conventional wisdom was that a canvasser might prompt you to rethink your stance on a controversial issue for a few days at most, but that once you went back into your social milieu, your opinion would snap back into accordance with your pre-existing views," he says.

There is reason to believe these findings are applicable to other issues; Green's collaborator at UCLA just finished a study showing that people express more support for abortion rights after meeting a woman who has had an abortion. Green says the implications for outreach campaigns of all sorts could be profound.

"In the gay-rights movement, for instance, there has long been an assumption that face-to-face canvassing is unlikely to have any enduring impact," he says. "The trend in the last few years has been to instead put straight celebrities on TV and have them talk about how much they accept and admire gay people. Our study suggests that this may not be the best approach."

Donald P. Green is a Columbia professor of political science. He is the author of several books on voting behavior, partisanship, campaign finance, and research methods, including Partisan Hearts and Minds*, written with Bradley Palmquist and Eric Schickler.*



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