

## **Skewed Perception: Religious Voices on President Obama and Marriage Equality**

### **SUMMARY**

In an extensive analysis of five days of print and television media following President Barack Obama's statement in support of marriage equality, GLAAD has found that the media once again painted an inaccurate and non-inclusive picture of where Americans of faith stand on the issue of marriage. This skewed perception of how marriage equality is perceived within faith communities, particularly minority people of faith, will almost certainly color the continuing conversation between now and the election in November.

### **BACKGROUND**

On May 9, 2012, President Barack Obama announced his support for full marriage equality for gay and lesbian couples. In an interview with Good Morning America's Robin Roberts, President Obama stated:

I have to tell you that over the course of several years as I have talked to friends and family and neighbors when I think about members of my own staff who are in incredibly committed monogamous relationships, same-sex relationships, who are raising kids together, when I think about those soldiers or airmen or marines or sailors who are out there fighting on my behalf and yet feel constrained, even now that Don't Ask Don't Tell is gone, because they are not able to commit themselves in a marriage, at a certain point I've just concluded that for me personally it is important for me to go ahead and affirm that I think same sex couples should be able to get married.



President Obama's decision to publically support marriage equality is rooted in his faith. In his historic announcement, he stated:

[In] the end the values that I care most deeply about and [Michelle] cares most deeply about is how we treat other people [...] [We] are both practicing Christians and obviously this position may be considered to put us at odds with the views of others but, you know, when we think about our faith, the thing at root that we think about is, not only Christ sacrificing himself on our behalf, but it's also the Golden

Rule, you know, treat others the way you would want to be treated. And I think that's what we try to impart to our kids and that's what motivates me as president and I figure the most consistent I can be in being true to those precepts, the better I'll be as a dad and a husband and, hopefully, the better I'll be as president.



In the days immediately following President Barack Obama's statement in support of marriage equality, most media coverage was focused on the political implications of the announcement. But news outlets also scrambled to address the president's use of religious language in explaining how he came to support marriage equality for every American.

In partnership with the University of Missouri Center on Religion & the Professions, GLAAD previously published "[Missing Voices](#)," analyzing messages presented in national news outlets by religious voices about issues affecting the LGBT community. The research, a three-year study of 316 news stories about LGBT issues, using 1,387 different religious sources on national television and print news media, shows a disproportionate reliance on anti-LGBT religious voices

commenting on LGBT people and issues. Three out of four religious messages came from people whose religions have formal policies opposing LGBT equality, despite the fact that acceptance of LGBT people is growing across faith traditions.

## FINDINGS

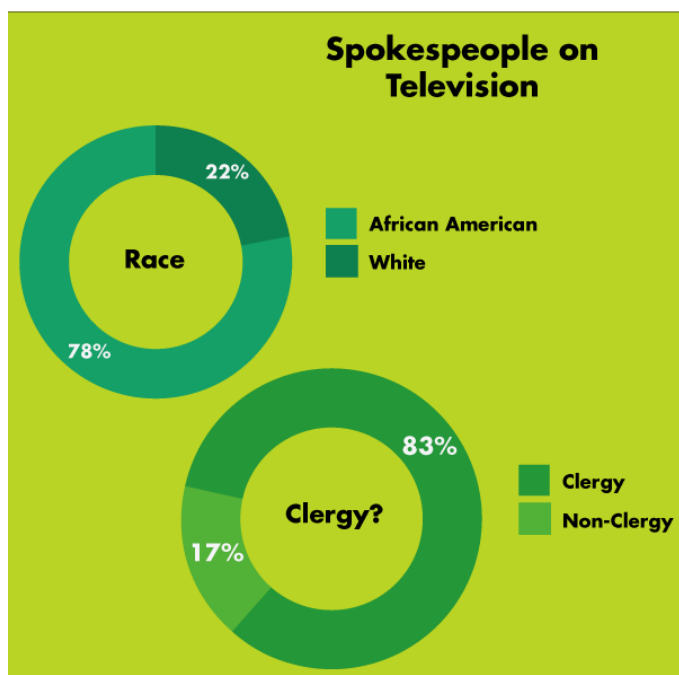
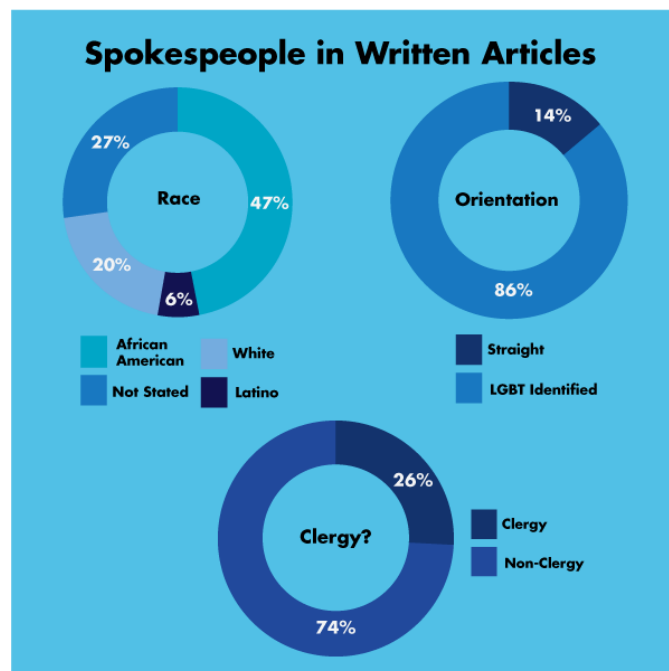
Using 'Missing Voices' as a guide, GLAAD analyzed both written and broadcast news coverage in the five days immediately following President Obama's endorsement of marriage equality, and his citation of his faith as a reason for his support. Written articles include both print media and online content, including stories that were featured exclusively on television news websites. The search produced 90 stories (58 written and 32 televised) that featured 145 religious spokespeople, both clergy and parishioners, speaking about the president's announcement from a faith perspective. A handful of the religious spokespeople were used more than once.

Nearly 20% of all spokespeople were a product of CNN's coverage, which produced a total of 19 stories and segments featuring people of faith reacting to President Obama's support for marriage equality. The spokespeople used by CNN were 80% African American and 80% identified themselves as members of the clergy. Almost half were unsupportive of the president's statement, while less than one third were supportive. Another 15% were mixed in their support; primarily, this indicated that the individual disagreed with the president's statement on a personal level, but still supported his presidency. The remaining 5% did not indicate how they felt about the statement.

In contrast to CNN, Fox News published just two articles on their website that addressed the issue with religious voices and appears to have not produced a single television segment addressing the president's announcement from a faith perspective. All of the religious voices quoted in the articles published by Fox News were identified as clergy and all but one was Christian. The one Jewish spokesperson was also the only person who supported President Obama's statement. His was the lone dissenting voice in an article in which five Christian pastors spoke against the president's announcement.

Overall, written articles used more diverse religious spokespersons than television segments, but there are certain names that appear frequently in both media.

Joel Hunter, Jamal Bryant, Tony Perkins, and Harry Jackson were the most commonly quoted spokespersons who indicated that they disagree with the president's support for marriage equality. (The latter two have profiles on GLAAD's Commentator Accountability Project.) Each was quoted in five individual articles or segments. Among those who support the president's announcement, Delman Coates, Al Sharpton, and Carlton Pearson were quoted most frequently, but each had about half as many mentions as their anti-marriage equality counterparts. All of the most frequently quoted spokespersons are Christian males and are ordained clergy.



Television segments were more likely to use bigger names, while written articles often spoke to people who lived in the communities served by the individual publications. Both television segments and written articles overwhelmingly spoke to clergy over lay people (83% clergy on television and 74% clergy in written articles) and the voices used in both were overwhelmingly Christian (100% on television and 91% in written articles).

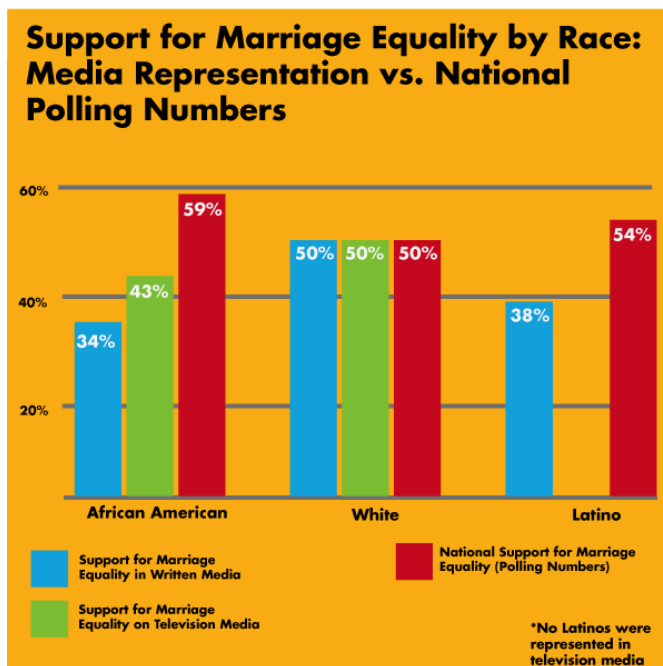
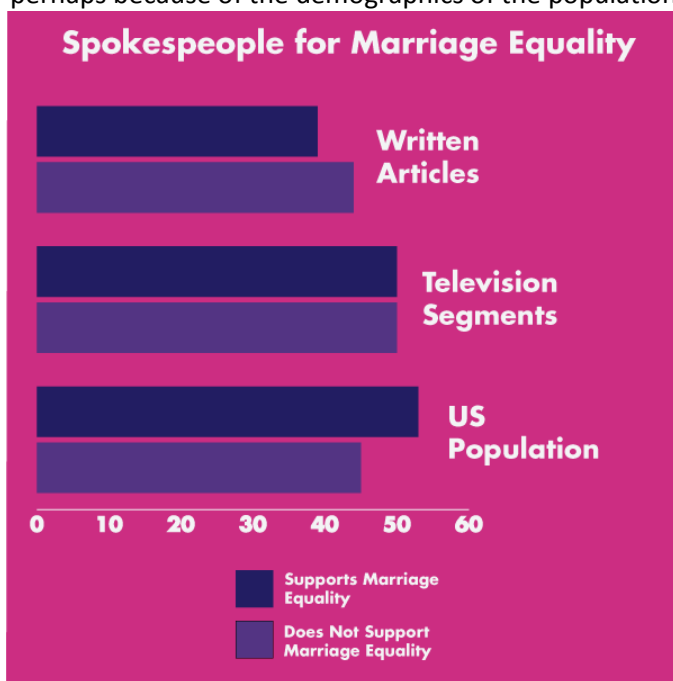
Even within Christian-identified spokespersons, there was little denominational balance: although fewer than one in five Americans identify as Baptist, nearly one third of Christian spokespersons used in the articles and segments identified as such. As indicated using both CNN and Fox News as examples, a vast majority of spokespersons were men (100% on television and 75% in written articles).

Only 11% of spokespeople in written articles identified as a part of the LGBT community; not one LGBT-identified religious spokesperson was used on television. By not including any religious LGBT-identified voices, the media has once again reinforced a “gay versus religion” frame, which gives media consumers a distorted view of the relationship between LGBT people and religion.

### Race

The overall narrative around the president’s endorsement of marriage equality focused heavily on the reaction of African-American Christians. Historically Black Churches are typically (and inaccurately) presented by the media as universally unsupportive of the LGBT community. But LGBT-affirming pastors and parishioners are not an anomaly in Black Churches.

Because written articles tended to highlight the reaction of local religious spokespeople, there was a more even distribution of voices of different races. Even so, many stories made sure to include the reaction of African-American faith leaders (47%), connecting the president’s race and church membership to the reaction of local pastors who may share that same affiliation. Only 6% of religious spokespeople were Latino, and around a quarter (27%) were unidentified. The “unidentified” segment could be a result of local media’s assumption that the local population would already know the race of the spokesperson, and it would not need to be stated, perhaps because of the demographics of the population, or because of the established reputation of the spokesperson.



Television focused even more exclusively on African-American Christians, with nearly 80% of religious spokespeople being African-American. No Latino religious spokespeople were quoted on the television stories in the sample.

Overall, the spokespeople used in both written articles and television segments do not reflect the American people’s views on marriage equality. The total number of Christians in the United States who support marriage equality is closing in on half (the numbers for all Catholics and white Protestants are both well into majority territory) but fewer than 40% of spokespeople used in the media were supportive. Using better known names attached to large mega

churches gives the false impression that Christians uniformly do not support marriage equality, even though this is not the case.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The lack of LGBT-identified religious voices is one of the most glaring problems with the coverage of the president's endorsement. Despite the growing number of LGBT-identified clergy, and the consistently strong number of LGBT churchgoers, there were no LGBT religious voices on television, and very few in written media. The conversation was nearly exclusively straight, male clergy speaking about marriage equality for LGBT people, but not hearing from those voices directly.

The top anti-LGBT activists were quoted double the number of times that the top pro-LGBT voices were quoted. Currently, there are no centralized LGBT religious experts that hold the same media authority as anti-gay activists like Tony Perkins and Harry Jackson. Overall, it is difficult to identify predominant LGBT religious spokespeople. The LGBT community in general, and specifically in the religion sphere, has few nationally recognized experts that embody spirituality and faith from an LGBT perspective. The media must make more consistent use of LGBT leaders who can speak from a religious perspective.

GLAAD urges the media to highlight the voices of LGBT people of faith, as well as supportive African-American and Latino clergy who feel that all loving couples should be able to marry, regardless of sexual orientation.

### Notes:

1. *Data on support for marriage equality among African Americans comes from a poll conducted for ABC News/The Washington Post by Langer Research Associates and released on May 23, 2012. A PDF of the full results can be found [here](#).*
2. *Data on support for marriage equality among Latinos in the United States comes from a report co-released by National Council of La Raza (NCLR) and Social Science Research Solutions in April 2012. A PDF of the full report can be found [here](#).*