

# Study: Knowing a gay person impacts marriage beliefs

By Maura Dolan and Jessica Garrison, Los Angeles Times

SAN FRANCISCO – For Ohio Sen. Rob Portman, knowing that his son was gay helped change his mind.

For President Obama, talking with gay White House staffers and learning that his daughters' friends had same-sex parents proved influential.

Today, Jean Podrasky, a 48-year-old accountant from San Francisco, will be sitting in a courtroom, where her first cousin – Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. – and the rest of the U.S. Supreme Court are hearing a challenge to California's ban on gay marriage. It's a ban that prevents her from marrying her partner of four years.

Podrasky said she does not pretend to know her cousin's views on gay marriage. But her decision to publicly disclose her relationship with Roberts reflected a growing conviction in the gay rights movement that the way to win support for gay marriage is to put a personal face on the issue.

Attitudes on same-sex marriage have shifted rapidly, and polling data consistently shows that knowing a gay person is a strong factor.

A poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, released last week and conducted in mid-March, found that 14 percent of Americans say they have changed their minds about same-sex marriage. Roughly a third of them told pollsters it was because they know someone – a friend or family member or other acquaintance – who is gay.

The poll also found that more Americans now say they support

gay marriage than oppose it. Roughly 49 percent of Americans now say they support gay marriage, with 44 percent opposed. By contrast, 10 years ago, 58 percent of Americans opposed gay marriage, and just 33% were in favor.

“It kind of puts a name to a face,” said Erik Schott, a USC clinical assistant professor of social work. “So it makes it a relatable issue.”

Though having gay friends and relatives may influence views, opponents of same-sex marriage balk at the notion that the issue boils down to whether you know someone who is gay.

Frank Schubert, who ran the campaign for Proposition 8 and whose sister is a lesbian, estimated that 75 percent of people in California have a member of the family or an acquaintance who is gay. Being in favor of barring same-sex couples from marrying does not indicate antipathy for gay relatives or other gays, he said.

“The premise is, if you oppose redefining marriage you must be anti-gay, and that premise is false,” said Schubert, who believes the high court will uphold Proposition 8.

Indeed, several prominent activists in favor of restricting gay rights have had gay relatives, including former state Sen. William J. “Pete” Knight and the conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly, both of whom had gay sons.

The late Justice Lewis F. Powell, while considering *Bowers vs. Hardwick*, a 5-4 decision in 1986 that upheld sodomy laws, told his then closeted clerk that he knew no one who was gay. The clerk later regretted that he had not revealed his sexual orientation during that conversation. “There is no doubt that knowing his clerk was gay could have shifted the balance,” said Kate Kendell, executive director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights.

Emma Tate, 67, the daughter of a Baptist minister, said her

views on same-sex marriage changed after getting to know her friend's lesbian daughter. The daughter told Tate that she wanted to marry because otherwise her benefits and pension might not be transferred to her partner if she died, said Tate, a resident of View Park, north of Inglewood.

"It made good sense to me," Tate said. "If you're there and you love them, and they're supporting and taking care of you when you're ill, they should be entitled to the benefits."

Tate said she also was moved when she saw the care her friend's daughter received from her partner when she became sick and bedridden. "I really saw their love, their connection. I just felt that it was beautiful to have someone love you that much," Tate said.

Susan Russell, a pastor at All Saints Church in Pasadena, recalled that the late gay rights activist Harvey Milk urged gays to make their sexual orientation known to others to help defeat unflattering stereotypes. "And that was when it was not safe to be out," she said.

Over the last few years, the gay rights movement has emphasized the importance of relationships in obtaining rights. Major public figures, including CNN's Anderson Cooper, have publicly talked about their sexual orientation.

"People have not just stood in the street with signs or lit candles," said Russell, a lesbian.

Scott Barclay, a senior scholar in public policy at the Williams Institute, a think tank at UCLA Law School that studies sexual orientation, said Americans' views on same sex marriage have shifted "phenomenally" quickly.

"As far as we can tell, these seem to be the fastest shifts that have gone on for major social movements," he said, citing public opinion polls showing that support for gay marriage is gaining 1.75 to 2 percentage points a year.

But being supportive of gay marriage rights does not always mean embracing the full gay-rights agenda. Portman, who was on Mitt Romney's short list of potential running mates in 2012, told CNN that he favored letting states decide their marriage laws.

Still, no matter how the arguments go, Podrasky said she hopes to introduce her partner to her cousin the chief justice after the hearing.