

ESSAY

The Marriage-Equality Fight Couldn't Have Been Won Without Conservatives

By framing the political debate and lobbying key legislators, the Log Cabin Republicans and other GOP activists helped make same-sex marriage a reality.



ILLUSTRATION: JUSTIN METZ

By Neil J. Young

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On Dec. 13, 2022, President [Joe Biden](#) signed the Respect for Marriage Act in front of more than 5,000 shivering guests gathered on the south lawn of the White House. The event, with the musical artists Cyndi Lauper and Sam Smith performing and a handful of drag queens in the crowd, was designed as a joyous celebration of a historic achievement—the federal recognition of legally performed same-sex marriages.

Before signing the law, Biden noted the bipartisan 61-36 Senate vote that had brought it to his desk. He also hailed the legislation for guaranteeing that Americans could make major personal choices “without...government interference.” Biden’s comments inadvertently hinted at the political and intellectual contributions LGBTQ conservatives had made to the marriage-equality fight. Framing the law as a curtailment of government power evoked one of their longstanding arguments.

Yet as Biden assembled activists, plaintiffs and politicians to stand beside him while he signed the act into law, LGBTQ conservatives were notably missing. The ceremony included no members of the Log Cabin Republicans, the largest gay GOP group, which counts 10,000 members in 34 states. Perhaps their absence was payback.



President Biden signs the Respect for Marriage Act on the South Lawn of the White House, Dec. 13, 2022. PHOTO: PATRICK SEMANSKY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Earlier that summer, Log Cabin had urged congressional Republicans to support the Respect for Marriage Act, and in the Senate, 12 Republicans had pushed the bill beyond the 60-vote threshold needed to prevent a filibuster. Yet the group had also chided Democrats for rushing the bill forward and accused them of stoking “election year fearmongering” that *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the 2015 Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage, could be overturned. Log Cabin maintained that Democrats were using the Respect for Marriage Act vote “to deflect from the disastrous leadership of the Biden-Harris Administration” and to “paint the GOP as out of step with the rest of the country.”

Log Cabin and other conservatives believed that the left’s support for the Respect for Marriage Act was driven by political alarmism. And it was true that much of the impetus for the act had been Democrats’ fear that the federal right to same-sex marriage might be newly vulnerable. When the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022, declaring there was no constitutional right to abortion, Justice Clarence Thomas had further written that justices “should reconsider” other court decisions, including *Obergefell*.

A few months later, the Respect for Marriage Act event morphed into a partisan rally as President Biden warned about the Supreme Court’s “extreme conservative majority” and the various state laws that were “targeting transgender children.” For the cheering, mostly left-leaning crowd, the interrelatedness of same-sex marriage, abortion rights and transgender issues was axiomatic.

But in more than 30 years of work on behalf of marriage equality, LGBTQ Republicans had positioned same-sex marriage much differently. They had emphasized the responsibilities of marriage rather than the right to it, and had argued that extending marriage to same-sex couples would stabilize society rather than dramatically remake it.

Also missing from the White House ceremony was Andrew Sullivan, one of the gay conservative thinkers responsible for leading the fight for same-sex marriage. Sullivan said later that the event had been about “rewarding the very, very tight circle between big-money gays and the Biden White House. It’s a completely closed circle, and there is no ideological diversity or political diversity allowed. And that is not the spirit of the marriage-equality movement; it never was.”



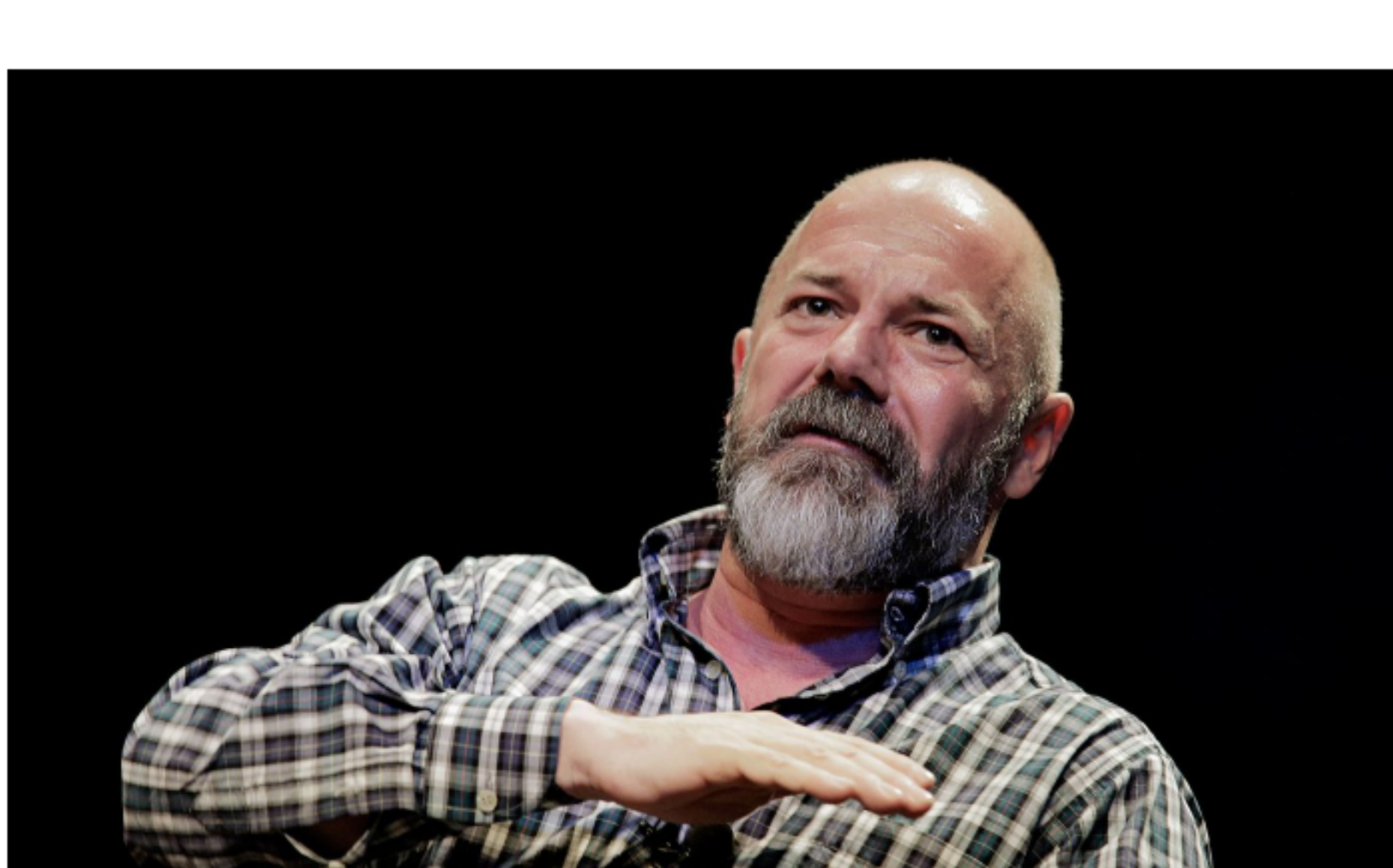
Members of the Log Cabin Republicans at the organization's national conference in Palm Springs, Calif., April 2004. PHOTO: DAVID MCNEW/GETTY IMAGES

In 1989, Sullivan helped bring the idea of same-sex marriage into mainstream political debate in a cover essay he wrote for *The New Republic* magazine, “Here Comes the Groom: A (Conservative) Case for Gay Marriage.” His argument that same-sex marriage “is not a radical step...it is conservative in the best sense of the word” had a profound effect on the LGBTQ community, and particularly on gay rights organizations.

While gay and lesbian couples had been solemnizing their relationships for decades in private and religious commitment ceremonies, only a small number had tried to pursue recognition legally. None of the major gay rights organizations were calling for the legalization of same-sex marriage. At most, it remained a subject of internal debate, with most typically deciding it was not yet politically feasible and therefore not worth taking up.

One rare and ardent advocate, Evan Wolfson, who as student at Harvard Law School in 1983 had written a paper on homosexuals’ “right to marry,” found it impossible to convince his colleagues at the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund of that position a decade later. The liberal Wolfson soon joined with the conservative Sullivan as the leading voices for same-sex marriage, along with the lesbian activist Lorri Jean, who in 1995 created the Los Angeles Freedom to Marry Coalition. Wolfson recognized the value of having a conservative advocate for same-sex marriage who could “reach people I wouldn’t have been able to reach.”

Gay conservatives continued to play a crucial role in the struggle for same-sex marriage right up to the passage of the Respect for Marriage Act. When Congress was considering the bill, Ken Mehlman, George W. Bush’s 2004 campaign manager and a leading Republican voice on gay rights, commissioned surveys in nine states with Republican senators who seemed like they might back the Respect for Marriage Act. The results showed that a large share of voters—as high as 76% in Iowa—said they would be “more likely to support” senators who voted for the act.



Journalist Andrew Sullivan, seen here in 2014, wrote the influential 1989 essay “Here Comes the Groom: A (Conservative) Case for Gay Marriage.” PHOTO: T.J. KIRKPATRICK/GETTY IMAGES



Evan Wolfson, a longtime liberal advocate for same-sex marriage (seen here in 2015), said that as a conservative Sullivan was able to “reach people I wouldn’t have been able to reach.” PHOTO: DAVE KOTINISKY/GETTY IMAGES

Mehlman presented the results to all of the targeted lawmakers, and at least one Republican senator from each of the nine states ended up voting for the legislation. Maine’s Susan Collins, the lead Republican sponsor of the act in the Senate and a longtime friend to Log Cabin Republicans, said these efforts had been vital. “It gave Republicans who were on the bubble a sense of comfort,” she said.

The legislation’s strong religious liberty protections had also been crucial in securing Republicans’ backing. The bill stipulated that “nonprofit religious organizations” could not be compelled to perform or celebrate a same-sex marriage. A number of critics on the left considered the provision to be an accommodation of religious bigotry. Supporters, which included the LDS Church, hailed it as a fair compromise in a pluralistic nation. LGBTQ conservatives, including Log Cabin Republicans, had especially touted the religious freedom language, knowing how important it was on Capitol Hill and in conservative media.

It also reflected their own views. Gay conservatives of faith had spent decades carefully challenging religious arguments against homosexuality while also affirming the right of religious institutions not to solemnize same-sex unions, and they had always endorsed religious freedom carve-outs. When lawsuits erupted in recent years over cake bakers for same-sex weddings, Log Cabin sided with the business owners.

Thanks in large part to these efforts, 55% of Republicans now support same-sex marriage. LGBTQ conservatives may have been left out of Biden’s bill-signing ceremony, but they see this sea-change in voter opinion as a sign of their acceptance within the GOP. In 2021, the Republican National Convention announced the creation of a new RNC Pride Coalition, which partnered with Log Cabin to organize LGBTQ voters. The announcement drew favorable coverage from Fox News, where Log Cabin president Charles Moran said, “when LGBTQ conservatives are included in Republican campaigns, we win.”

This essay is adapted from Neil J. Young’s new book, “Coming Out Republican: A History of the Gay Right,” published by University of Chicago Press.

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