

## Not Whether but How: Gay Marriage and the Revival of Burkean Conservatism

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**Abstract:** Is gay marriage conservative? This paper argues that the answer depends less on gay marriage itself than on how it is implemented—and what we mean by conservative.

In today's context, same-sex marriage poses unusual challenges for conservatism. It presents multiple identities: on the one hand egalitarian and radical, on the other hand communitarian and incremental, depending on who is proposing it and who is interpreting the proposal. And it appears on the scene at a moment when American conservatism is itself undergoing an identity crisis, with formerly allied traditionalists, libertarians, and Burkeans (incrementalists) all increasingly at odds.

For traditionalists, gay marriage poses no challenge; it is anti-traditional and so flatly unacceptable. For libertarians, it is puzzling but not particularly engaging, because it has no direct implications for the size or scope of government. The locus of conflict lies with Burkeans, who hold the "swing vote" on gay marriage and are experiencing something of a revival in American political life. They worry about leaping into the unknown but also understand the need for institutional adaptation to social change.

Activists of both left and right have worked hard to polarize the issue, with self-described conservatives adopting a stance that is far from conservative in any sense that Burke would recognize. Nonetheless, the United States, in actual practice, is steering an ingeniously Burkean course by restricting same-sex marriage to localized, contained experiments and by adopting temporizing alternatives, notably civil unions. This cautiously adaptive strategy has its flaws but is both sensible and more coherently conservative than the alternatives.

In theory, then, gay marriage can be read as quite conservative or quite radical. As implemented in America, however, it is an exemplar of practical Burkean conservatism.