



Poor Initiative

November 13, 2006

Tuesday's results should put to rest once and for all the myth that anti-gay marriage initiatives exert a significant effect on other political races.

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Web Exclusive

Among the more initially puzzling results to emerge from Tuesday was the case of the anti-gay marriage ballot initiatives. On the one hand, progressives had plenty of reason to be depressed -- they passed in all but one state, including moderate swing states, like Wisconsin, where a serious opposition movement had been active. On the other hand, there was the remarkable exception of Arizona, which became the first state in the union to reject an anti-gay marriage referendum. But there's a larger silver lining to appreciate: the initiatives appeared to have no detrimental electoral effect on Democratic candidates.

States that passed anti-gay marriage initiatives showed no more tendency to swing Republican than the nation as a whole. Blue-leaning swing state Wisconsin and red-leaning swing state Colorado both passed anti-gay marriage initiatives, but the Democrats swept the races for senator and governor and won a close key House race in each. In red Virginia, incumbent Senator George Allen was narrowly knocked off despite a successful anti-gay marriage initiative on the ballot there. Meanwhile, in Arizona, where Democrats had hoped to take out Senator Jon Kyl, the party fell short by nine points while a gay marriage ban *was defeated* at the polls.

What gives? Wasn't the conventional wisdom after the 2004 elections that Karl Rove's brilliant strategy of encouraging marriage referenda on state ballots had succeeded in bringing out the extra white evangelicals that provided Bush's margin of popular victory? Wasn't the anti-gay marriage initiative in Ohio credited with delivering that close crucial state for Bush? In the immediate aftermath of the election, major pundits agreed that the ballot initiatives were key. Andrew Sullivan, in late November 2004, described "[w]hat appears to be the enormous success the Republicans had in using gay couples' rights to gain critical votes in key states."

Although more thorough scholarly investigations soon enough revealed this effect to be largely a mirage, the media focus had moved on, and they were little noticed outside of seriously wonky circles. As Hunter College political scientist Kenneth Sherrill noted in a study for the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**, "the election returns indicate that President Bush did *less* well in these battleground states with anti-same-sex marriage ballot initiatives than in battleground states that did not have referenda on same-sex marriage [emphasis in original]." Moreover, upon closer examination, the rise in evangelical turnout merely reflected the higher turnout of the population as a whole. As Sherrill put it, "evangelicals comprised only 17 percent of the total electorate in the 2004 presidential election -- the same percentage of total voters as in 2000."

Sherrill also demonstrated that gay marriage bans do not switch votes to the Republicans en masse. Sherrill produced fourteen categories of voters in which a majority opposed legal recognition of same-sex partnerships (this means opposing civil unions for gays as well as gay marriages -- many of the referenda do indeed go that far.) The majorities were largest among groups with markers of a hardcore religious right identity: 74 percent of people who believe that

abortion should be illegal in all cases opposed all legal recognition of gay unions, as did 68 percent of those who attend religious services more than once a week and 64 percent of white Protestant conservatives. But the numbers trail off when it comes down to party affiliation or voting patterns; only 51 percent of people who “usually think of themselves as Republicans” and only 51 percent of those who voted for Bush in 2004 supported banning gay marriage and gay civil unions. In the 2004 election among the population as a whole, only 37 percent opposed any form of legal recognition for gay relationships. This is all to say that support for these referenda is clearly strongest among Republicans' core supporters, and thus does not tend to provoke many voters to switch their other votes at the polls on account of such a referendum appearing on the same ballot.

But the major political reporters and analysts, at least on television (where most Americans get their news), never got the memo. In 2006 they wondered aloud whether the anti-gay marriage referenda would cost the Democrats key states or districts. On November 2, to take one example, Wolf Blitzer did a segment on CNN describing how, “[i]n some critical battlegrounds, a vote on gay marriage could turn the battle for Congress one way or another.”

If anti-gay marriage referenda really did boost conservative turnout, then Republican candidates in states with them on the ballot would have presumably outperformed their poll numbers due to higher turnout among the measures' supporters. But in the end, Webb squeaked out a victory that the polls did not clearly predict, while in staunchly Republican Tennessee, black Democrat Harold Ford Jr. lost to Republican Bob Corker by only three points, when most polls in the final week of the campaign had him losing by several more.

All in all, gay marriage policies, including not only anti-marriage referenda but also the New Jersey Supreme Court's pro-gay marriage decision, proved to be an electoral dog that didn't bark this year. Although the claim that ballot initiatives were Karl Rove's secret WMD had actually already been debunked, the Republican victory in 2004 served to obscure that fact. (It was especially easy for lazy commentators to point out that Bush carried nine of the 11 states with referenda on their ballots, never mind they were almost all decidedly red states anyway.) Hopefully, now that the Democrats have both won handily in states that passed anti-gay marriage initiatives and lost in the one that didn't, the myth of the initiatives' political potency can be put to rest. It's a small victory at a moment of big ones for progressives, but it's important nonetheless.