



Pelosi signals fresh start on gay rights

Pelosi's rise to House speaker signals fresh start on gays

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"Madame Speaker." Nothing symbolizes the profound change ahead after Election Day 2006 more than the rise of a woman to lead the "people's House" and be second in line to assume the presidency.

Nancy Pelosi: San Francisco liberal. Friend of gay congressman Barney Frank. And supporter of same-sex marriage.

Republican mudslingers digging deep into their anti-gay mud buckets to try to use Pelosi's gay friendliness to scare voters got a very clear message back: What really would have been spooky was leaving the current crop of Republicans in charge of Congress. Two of the most anti-gay Republicans -- Sen. Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania, who compared gay sex to "man-on-dog" sex, and Rep. John Hostettler of Indiana, who tried to strip federal courts of authority over gay marriage -- got the voters' boot.

For those of us who are gay -- and for everyone who recognizes diversity is one of our nation's strengths -- Pelosi signals a fresh start: At a minimum, we will not see any more disgraceful votes in Congress to try to amend the U.S. Constitution to make gay Americans second-class citizens.

During the next two years, we can also expect to see a change in tax law so health benefits for gay and unmarried heterosexual partners are no longer treated as taxable income. But lifting the ban on out gays in the military, extending partner benefits to federal workers and outlawing anti-gay job discrimination can't realistically be expected to happen that soon.

The many other gains on Election Day serve as a reminder that the battle for full equality for gay citizens still largely needs to be focused at the state level. Gains include:

- **Ballot victory.** In an encouraging first, Arizona voters by 51-49 percent defeated a proposal to ban gay marriage in their state constitution. South Dakotans narrowly passed a similar measure, but by only 52-48 percent. In all, seven bans passed -- but with significantly less support than earlier ones. As the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force** notes, of the 11 anti-marriage measures that passed in 2004, opposition topped 40 percent only in Michigan and Oregon. This Nov. 7, opposition exceeded 40 percent in five of eight states (including Colorado, Virginia and Wisconsin).

- **Governors.** Voters elected the first governors who support gay marriage. Democrat Eliot Spitzer vows to sign a marriage bill in New York. Democrat Deval Patrick will lead Massachusetts, where more than 8,100 gay couples are legally married.
- **State legislatures.** The biggest engines of change for gay Americans will be state legislatures. The national Democratic sweep put Democrats in control of both chambers of legislatures in 23 states, Republicans in 15, with 10 split, including in Michigan after Democrats took the House. (Nebraska's legislature is non-partisan.) A recount in Pennsylvania could flip its House to Democrats.
- **Openly gay candidates.** Barney Frank of Massachusetts and Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin once again easily won re-election to the U.S. House. Alabama, Arkansas and Oklahoma elected their first-ever out state legislators.

This election didn't hand Nancy Pelosi or anyone else a magic wand to make anti-gay laws disappear. But it gave gay allies a fresh start to show Americans the value of inviting everyone to be part of the team.