

San Francisco Chronicle

Both sides make last-minute Prop. 8 push

John Wildermuth, Chronicle Staff Writer
Sunday, November 2, 2008

Proposition 8 is a California ballot measure, but ripples from the high-priced, high-profile effort to ban same-sex marriage are extending way beyond its borders.

Checks of \$500,000 or more are arriving from places like Cleveland; Brooklyn, N.Y.; Linden, Utah; and Bryn Mawr, Pa.

A Kansas City minister brings thousands of evangelical Christians to San Diego's Qualcomm Stadium for a religious/political rally.

The New York Times writes an editorial endorsing a "no" vote on Prop. 8, even though Sacramento is 2,800 miles from the paper's Manhattan headquarters.

"Both sides agree that what happens here will have a major impact on the same-sex marriage debate across the nation," said David Cruz, a constitutional law expert at the University of Southern California School of Law. "It's not only California's size, but the influence it has on other states and other courts."

With many polls suggesting that the race is a tossup as election day closes in, both sides are using the final weekend to make one last push for victory.

The biggest event Saturday was in San Diego, where Missouri minister Lou Engle and other pastors brought out thousands for a 12-hour prayer meeting to push for traditional marriage. While the gathering was religious rather than overtly political, the election was never far from anyone's mind.

Challenge to religious view

Tuesday's vote represents a challenge to the religious view of marriage, James Dobson of the Focus on the Family ministry, told the crowd.

"This is not about hate, this is about love," he said.

At the Christian Community Church in San Jose, about 50 Prop. 8 supporters renewed their wedding vows to highlight the importance of the measure they back.

"I think there's a surge of support for Prop. 8 this weekend," said Michael Dowling, who runs the House of Prayer ministry in San Francisco. He was in San Jose because "There's more favor for our worldview here than there is in the city."

The Prop. 8 opposition had its own religious meetings across the state Saturday, with San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom joining an interfaith gathering at Glide Memorial United Methodist Church.

Later in the day, Newsom and Assemblyman Mark Leno braved a driving rainstorm to walk through the Castro district and remind people to vote against Prop. 8.

The pair didn't run into many supporters of the same-sex marriage ban in the heart of the city's gay community, "but if 90 percent of San Francisco votes against Prop. 8, those are votes we don't have to get somewhere else," Leno said as he and Newsom greeted people in the Edge bar.

On Tuesday, two other states will vote on California-like constitutional amendments to ban same-sex marriage: Arizona, with Proposition 102, and Florida, with Amendment 2.

But neither of those campaigns has attracted nearly as many contributions as Prop. 8. About \$11 million was raised for the initiatives in Florida and Arizona, compared with \$67 million for the battle in California.

Prop. 8 was guaranteed its place in the national spotlight in May when the state Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriage is a constitutional right, overturning a ban of such marriages approved by 61 percent of voters in 2000.

That court decision meant supporters of same-sex marriage could fight from a moral high ground using the argument that Prop. 8 would legitimize discrimination against one group of Californians.

"It's no secret that in recent years we have suffered a string of defeats on relationship issues," said Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Action Fund in Washington. "But a victory in California would signify that Americans are increasingly uncomfortable at taking away anyone's rights."

After the court ruling, California quickly became the prime destination for same-sex couples from other parts of the country to come and legally wed. And as they returned home, wedding licenses in hand, the pressure began to grow on states in which they live to deal with them as newlyweds. But then came Prop. 8.

"The ballot measure is a political matter, but it's also intensely personal to the many people from across the country who went there to get married," said Carey, who herself was married in a Northern California ceremony.

A big series of wins

Those wedding photos of gays and lesbians from California had a very different impact on the supporters of traditional marriage, who were riding a nationwide winning streak. Twenty-eight state elections in recent years resulted in 27 bans on same-sex marriage, with their only loss a 2006 measure to ban same-sex marriage - and many domestic partnership benefits - in Arizona.

"California is a cultural leader, and a win (by same-sex marriage supporters) will embolden other state efforts to legalize gay marriage," said Carrie Gordon Earll, senior director of public policy for the Colorado-based Focus on the Family, which has given more than \$500,000 to the Yes on Prop. 8 campaign.

For many Christian groups and other supporters of traditional marriage, Prop. 8 is a desperately needed firewall that will keep same-sex marriage from spreading to the rest of the country.

Tuesday's election is spoken of in apocalyptic terms by many backers of the marriage ban.

If Prop. 8 is beaten, "I'm afraid the culture war is over and Christians have lost," Donald Wildmon, founder of the Tupelo, Miss.-based American Family Association, said in a speech in July. "California is a big dam, holding back the flood and if you take down the dam in California, it's going to flood 49 other states."

Wildmon's group has donated \$500,000 to the Yes on Prop. 8 campaign.

Opposition gears up

On the other side, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender groups have joined with progressives and mainstream Democratic organizations and donors to oppose Prop. 8.

"Both sides have jumped in with both feet and made California the battleground for same-sex marriage," said Steve Smith, political consultant to the No on Prop. 8 campaign. "This is California, and right now equality in marriage is the law of the land. If voters reject Prop. 8, the final decision has been made and there's no appeal."

When the polls close Tuesday, voters on both sides of the issue in many other states will turn their eyes nervously toward California, anxiously waiting to see what happens next in a social melee that has stretched across the years.

Newsom has taken his lumps for the euphoric, over-the-top speech he gave after the state Supreme Court opened the way for same-sex marriage in May, but he knew even then just how important that ruling would be for the rest of the country.

"As goes California, so goes the nation," he said.