

Gay rights abandoned on sidelines after election

By Valerie Richardson, THE WASHINGTON TIMES
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The 2008 election was a success for nearly every segment of the Democratic coalition, with one stark exception: gay rights advocates.

The same voters who backed Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama and defeated conservative ballot measures on issues such as abortion, assisted suicide and marijuana legalization suddenly veered from the script when it came to advancing rights for gays.

In three states - Arizona, California and Florida - voters approved amendments that defined marriage as between a man and a woman. Two of those states, California and Florida, went Democratic in the presidential vote.

In Arkansas, voters approved a ballot measure prohibiting unmarried couples - and thus gay couples - from adopting children. In Hamtramck, Mich., a liberal Detroit suburb that went overwhelmingly Democratic, voters overturned a city ordinance that gave protected civil rights status to gay and transgendered residents.

But the highest-profile defeat for gay rights supporters was the passage of California's Proposition 8, which overturned a state Supreme Court ruling earlier in the year that legalized same-sex marriage.

Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Action Fund, called this year's outcome "incredibly disappointing" but added that the long-term trend on the issue was encouraging.

"One way we're looking at this issue is that even though it's heartbreaking that we lost in those states, the progress we've made in eight years is astounding," she said.

Gay rights supporters were quick to notice the impact of the black and Hispanic vote during this election cycle. In California and Florida, black voters came out to the polls in record numbers to support Mr. Obama, then turned around and voted in favor of traditional marriage by a margin of 70 percent to 30 percent.

"You can make the argument that Barack Obama passed Proposition 8," said Dan Schnur, director of the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at the University of Southern California. "Had turnout among African-American voters been along more traditional lines, Proposition 8 probably would have failed."

In Florida, supporters of gay marriage were lulled into a false sense of security by surveys that showed Amendment 2 going down to defeat. A Mason-Dixon poll released Nov. 1 showed Florida voters backing the measure by 55 percent to 35 percent, not enough to clear the 60 percent needed to amend the state constitution.

Instead, the measure passed with 62 percent of the vote, leading to speculation that pollsters were duped by a hybrid of the so-called Bradley effect, in which voters had refused to admit that they opposed against gay marriage.

However, remove gay issues from the scorecard and social conservatives were left with little reason to be happy following Election Day.

In California, voters rejected Proposition 4, a pro-life measure that would have required parental notification for abortions involving minors, by 52 percent to 48 percent. That was the same margin by which voters approved Proposition 8, the traditional-marriage initiative.

The pro-life movement suffered other defeats in Colorado, where voters shot down a measure to define "personhood" as beginning at the moment of conception, and in South Dakota, where voters nixed an initiative that would have banned abortion except in cases of rape or incest or to save the life of the mother.

Analysts pointed to several possible reasons for the split, including fundraising, the minority vote and voters who said one thing to pollsters but did the opposite upon entering the voting booth.

When pro-life initiatives succeed, it's usually in spite of being heavily outspent by the opposition. Not so with the traditional-marriage issue, said Connie Mackey, a senior vice president with the conservative Family Research Council.

"The marriage issue was the one area in which we were able to match the kind of money the left puts into these issues," Mrs. Mackey said. "In California, we were able to match the opposition's funding almost dollar for dollar. That's not usually the case with our issues."

Indeed, the pro-Proposition 8 camp raised \$35.8 million, nearly as much as the opposition's \$37.6 million. Such fundraising enabled the Yes on 8 campaign to even the playing field with the more visible, star-studded anti-8 effort.

By comparison, the campaign backing Proposition 4, the parental-notification measure, was outspent by a margin of nearly 3-1.

Conservatives lost another ballot battle in Washington state, where voters approved 58 percent to 44 percent the Death With Dignity Act, a measure allowing doctors to help terminally ill patients commit suicide.

Washington joins Oregon as the only state to approve an assisted-suicide measure. Since 1994, 21 states have introduced similar proposals, but none had passed until this year, according to Christian Broadcasting News.

Supporters of marijuana legalization celebrated a banner year at the ballot box, triumphing in 10 out of 11 state and local contests. The biggest wins were in Massachusetts, where voters agreed to replace jail time for marijuana possession with a \$100 fine, and Michigan, which passed a medical-marijuana proposal.

Both measures, which were approved overwhelmingly, benefited from well-organized and well-funded campaigns. In Michigan, for example, the Marijuana Policy Project alone sank more than \$1.5 million into Proposal 1, while the opposition raised only about \$125,000.

Michigan voters also passed Proposal 2, a measure allowing the use of embryonic stem cells for research, overturning a state law that prohibits the destruction of embryos.