



## Gay rights advocates forced to adjust agenda

Shift focus away from marriage to key civil rights

By Andrea Stone  
November 21, 2008

Gay rights advocates are rethinking their political strategy after losing the right to marry in California.

"There will be some hard questions asked about where marriage ranks on the list of possibilities and priorities" gays should focus on, says Steve Ralls of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).

Votes in California, Florida and Arizona that bring to 29 the number of states whose constitutions ban same-sex marriage are likely to prompt more focus on passing legislation to include gays in laws covering hate crimes and discrimination, advocates say.

"Marriage is just an issue where the public is not there yet," says Clyde Wilcox, co-editor of *The Politics of Gay Rights*.

Many gays welcomed Barack Obama's victory. An Edison-Mitofsky survey at polling places found that 70% of gay voters chose Obama, compared with 53% of voters overall.

"We are very much a part of (Obama's) plan when he looks at the diverse patchwork that is America," says Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign, a gay advocacy group.

Obama has voiced support for civil unions and repealing the Defense of Marriage Act so gays could enjoy the federal benefits, such as Social Security survivor payments, that married couples do. He opposes same-sex marriage but does not favor amending the Constitution to ban it. He has said he would work with the military to repeal the policy that bars gays from serving openly.

Amy Balliett, whose website, [jointheimpact.wetpaint.com](http://jointheimpact.wetpaint.com), mobilized thousands Saturday to protest the reversal of gay marriage in California, plans more demonstrations, but she says the economy must come first. "Barack Obama can't put his initial focus" on gay marriage, says Balliett, who wed her partner in California last month. "That is just not fair to our nation."

Gay rights advocates predict swift action on a federal hate-crimes bill that would allow federal aid to investigate crimes committed because of sexual orientation or gender identity. The measure, which then-senator Obama co-sponsored, passed Congress last year but was dropped from a defense bill after President Bush threatened a veto.

**The Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which would extend workplace protections to gays, also could resurface for an early vote, says Rea Carey of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.** Obama has favored the bill.

As for marriage, advocates say they will focus on education to sway not only lawmakers but the public. PFLAG plans programs in January in California, New York and Iowa in which parents of gays will talk to members of their churches, especially in minority communities where opposition to same-sex marriage is strong.

Most attention is on the Northeast, though. Massachusetts and Connecticut are the only two states where same-sex couples may marry. New York could be the next gay-marriage arena: The Human Rights Campaign spent \$120,000 to help Democrats take control of the state Senate, whose Republican leaders have blocked gay marriage bills passed in the majority Democratic Assembly.

"The strategy," says Ken Sherrill, who teaches a course on gay politics at Hunter College in New York City, "is to get marriage equality on a state-by-state basis and demonstrate that each time it happens, the world doesn't come to an end."