

The myth of African American influence in Prop. 8's passage

by Jeff Epperly
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After all the back-and-forth gnashing of teeth over African Americans and California's Proposition 8, the answer turns out to be this simple: when controlled for other factors, including religiosity and party affiliation, the African American community is not the homophobic monolith it's been made out to be.

Much was made in the wake of our defeat on Prop. 8 of the allegedly outsized role that African American homophobia played in passing the measure. I'm no longer shocked when I hear LGBT people, educated or otherwise, express any number of biases against women, Jews, people of color or anyone else. We are raised under the same circumstances as our relatives, friends and co-workers, so none of us ought to be surprised when we internalize those biases.

A lot of us in this community like to think that because we have been targeted for irrational bias based on an immutable characteristic we are more sensitive to bias when it's directed at others. I think there is some truth to that. But as the debate over African Americans and Proposition 8 suggests, it doesn't take much to bring all of those old biases to the forefront.

Some high-profile bloggers were fast out of the gate with condemnations of the pro-8 African American vote - critiques that veered into territory that was questionable in both its accuracy and sensitivity. The brighter amongst those bloggers mostly backed off their most virulent anger in the days following the Prop. 8 vote. On the other hand, posts by many of the readers of these blogs might just as well have been lifted directly from the Aryan Nation web site.

I won't reprint any of those nutty posts here because they present arguments that all of us have heard before. Let it suffice to say that every tired stereotype about blacks being poor, lazy or uneducated was trotted out - and then some.

Now, thanks to the efforts of researchers affiliated with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force we know with much more clarity than before that all of this scapegoating of African Americans was just useless venting by hurt people who had no idea what they were talking about.

In a study authored by Patrick J. Egan, Ph.D., assistant professor of politics and public policy at New York University, and Kenneth Sherrill, Ph.D., professor of political science at Hunter College (CUNY), shows that when voting totals are adjusted for party affiliation, political ideology, frequency of attending worship services and age, everyone pretty much voted the same regardless of their race.

For example, the researchers noted that "as a whole, 43 percent of Californians attend religious services at least once per week. The share of African Americans attending services with this frequency is much higher: 57 percent."

This is important because, the report continues, "controlling for frequency of religious attendance

helps explain why African Americans supported Proposition 8 at higher levels than the population as a whole. Among Californians who attend worship at least weekly, support for Proposition 8 was nearly uniform across all racial and ethnic groups. Among those who attend worship less than weekly, majorities of every racial and ethnic group voted 'no' on Proposition 8."

In other words, if you're highly religious, your chances of voting for Proposition 8 went way up. African Americans were more likely to vote for Prop. 8 because they are more religious, and not because they are African American. Put another way: less religious African Americans were not more likely to vote for Prop. 8 when their demographics were controlled for other factors with similar non-African American groups.

Put another way, a Jan. 6 press release from the Task Force says, "The study found that four factors - party identification, ideology, frequency of religious service attendance and age - drove the 'yes' vote for Proposition 8. For example, more than 70 percent of voters who were Republican, identified themselves as conservative, or who attended religious services at least weekly supported Proposition 8. Conversely, 70 percent or more of voters who were Democrat, identified themselves as liberal, or who rarely attended religious services opposed the measure. More than two-thirds (67 percent) of voters 65 or older supported Proposition 8, while majorities under 65 opposed it."

"These figures point the way to winning marriage equality for same-sex couples sooner rather than later," said Jaime Grant, Ph.D., director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute. "Convincing the Republican Party that continued gay bashing will cripple its future is one; another is accelerating the already strong surge in support among young voters."

What this means finally is that if you're one of those people who is still harboring some lingering resentment toward African Americans, it's time to let it go and get back to our old nemeses: Republicans and right-wing religion.