

Who voted for Prop 8

by Bob Roehr
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Party identification, ideology, religiosity and age were the factors most likely to determine how a person voted on Proposition 8, California's initiative that banned gay marriage. The report by political scientists Patrick Egan and Kenneth Sherrill was released Jan. 6.

It also called into question an election day exit poll which said that about 70 percent of African Americans had voted in favor of the ban. The report found that Black support for the measure was 57 to 59 percent.

The report was based upon a new survey of 1,066 California voters soon after the November election, precinct vote totals, and demographic data on those precincts.

"The main story is that California voters have shifted dramatically toward support for same sex marriage," said Egan, a professor at New York University. Compared with the Knight Initiative in 2000, "the movement toward marriage equality was across just about all demographic groups, with the only holdouts being Republicans, conservatives, and those born before World War II. This shift is the most important story coming out of Proposition 8."

Women outnumbered men among voters (54 percent to 46 percent) and opposed the amendment by a slim margin (51 percent to 49 percent) but support was stronger among men (54 percent) , who provided the margin of victory.

A strong majority of those 65 and older (67 percent) voter for Prop 8, while it lost among other age groups (45 percent to 48 percent) with the differences between the groups within the margin of error of the survey.

Fewer than half of Asians (48 percent) and whites (49 percent) voted for the measure, while Blacks (57 percent) and Latinos (59 percent) supported it.

Voters who identified as conservative (82 percent) and Republican (81 percent) were most likely to have voted for Prop 8, compared with Democrats (30 percent) and liberals (22 percent) . Independents (53 percent) and moderates (51 percent) also were more likely to support it.

Those who attended religious services weekly (70 percent) supported the measure, while those who "hardly ever" attended services did not (30 percent) . Intermittent attendees (46 percent) were less likely to support it.

Egan concluded, "Holding all variables constant, age, religiosity, party identification, and political ideology have strong, significant, and independent effects on how Californians voted on Proposition 8."

The Black vote

Hunter College professor Ken Sherrill said the exit poll conducted by NEP indicating that 70 percent of African Americans voted for Prop 8 “was an outlier unsupported by any other poll, and more importantly, not supported by the actual election returns.” Four other polls around election day found estimates of black support that ranged from 41 percent to 58 percent.

He looked at precinct returns from counties representing two-thirds of California's black voters and merged that with census data. “We came to the conclusion that between 57 and 59 percent of African-American voters supported Proposition 8 ... a far cry from the NEP estimate.”

Higher rates of participation in religious activities appears to explain the higher rates of support for Prop 8 among African Americans and Latinos. “Once we held the effect of attending religious services constant, the effect of race and ethnicity were reduced to statistical insignificance,” said Sherrill.

Knowing someone gay

One surprise is that knowing someone who is gay did not appear to have a significant effect on how the person voted. “This factor appears to have been trumped by voter's party identification and ideology,” said Egan.

Sherrill added, “About two-thirds of California conservatives said they knew or were related to someone who is LGBT. About four out of five of them voted for the referendum,” the same proportion of those who said they didn't know someone LGBT.

“This leads us to the conclusion that, at least in terms of marriage equality, opposition to our rights isn't personal, it's ideological and partisan.”

Looking at broader trends over time Sherrill said, “Support for marriage equality has increased by about 1 percent a year since 2000, and virtually every demographic trend is on our side. This is very good news. The second is that we face hard core, generally implacable opposition among Republicans and conservatives.”

“Mitigating that is the fact that California is becoming less Republican and less conservative. In fact, hard core opposition to such things as marriage equality may be costing Republicans the support of younger voters.”

Changing minds

“We need to redouble our work with people of faith to overcome the notion that civil marriage of same sex couples somehow threatens their religious liberties,” said Rev. Mark Wilson, coordinator with the African American Minister Outreach. “We have to convince them that protecting all families equally is just, moral, and within their own religious realities the moral thing to do.”

He spoke the power of personal stories, of empowering “gays and lesbians within the churches to hold their churches accountable.” How can they preach love and goodness while practicing injustice and inequality at the same time, he asked rhetorically.

Egan said there has been movement towards marriage equality among religious groups since 2000. “There has been a 9 point movement among Protestants, a 4-point movement among Catholics, and a 7-point movement among Jews. It suggests that not all people of faith are not necessarily out of contention.”

Sherrill said, "What we find is that knowing gay people doesn't make much of a difference ... It's another thing to sit down and talk with them about everyday life and what marriage equality really means." He said that rich and layered understanding of gay people can come through direct contact and through the media.

Scott Davenport, managing director of Freedom to Marry, said, "It is the sustained, ongoing set of conversations that happen one-on-one, among the culture, and in the media over a long period of time that has created the shift that we see. It is not the flashpoint in the heat of a campaign that moves people along. That sustained work will help us set up a win the next time out."

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