



Gay activists discuss failures at the ballot box

Group worries about setbacks at state level

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DENVER — There's a party mood at the nation's largest gathering of gay activists after the inauguration of President Barack Obama. But amid the cheers is plenty of talk about what went wrong last year, when anti-gay ballot measures passed in California and three other states, and concern the economy has overshadowed gay-rights questions.

Some 2,000 members of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force here for a five-day conference that ends today erupted in whoops and applause whenever the president was mentioned, with the group's head quipping that the name Obama will make an easy applause line before gay crowds for months to come.

But conference members also hunkered down to talk about their failures last year: four anti-gay ballot measures that passed even as the nation voted for what organizers call the most gay-friendly president in history.

Rea Carey, president of the Task Force, said the top priorities of gay activists – passage of a federal nondiscrimination employment law for sexual identity and repeal of the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, among others – will have to wait until Obama and ruling Democrats deal with an economy in shambles.

"We're not worried we'll be left behind by the economy because we're affected by this, too," Carey said.

If the group struck an optimistic tone about prospects in Washington, however, there was hand-wringing about setbacks at the state level. In California, voters passed Proposition 8 and overturned a state Supreme Court ruling allowing gay marriage. Arkansas, Arizona and Florida also adopted measures banning either gay marriage or gay adoption.

Conference attendees hashed out a long list of mistakes they made last fall. Not picking the right television ads in California. Relying too heavily on pollsters in Florida. Disagreement over whether campaign tactics were "too gay" in Arkansas. In all states, activists conceded they weren't sure how to fight religious arguments made by their opponents.

"Marriage is a hard issue. It's not an academic question for most people, especially when they're standing at the ballot box," said Barbara McCullough-Jones, executive director of Equality Arizona.

One session at the conference featured a psychologist from the University of Colorado talking about how to recover from political gay-bashing during divisive ballot debates.

Carey tried to rally the activists, telling them marriage equality is inevitable, though it'll take work. She urged activists not to give up fighting or turn against each other. She particularly called for an end to gay complaints in California that black voters were to blame for Proposition 8's approval.

"The blaming of African-American voters was wrong, despicable and inexcusable," said Carey, who called on gay activists to "confront our own racism."

Meanwhile, Mormon church officials reported Friday that they spent \$190,000 more supporting the Proposition 8 gay marriage ban than they previously reported. They previously listed just \$2,078 in support of the ban.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is being investigated by the state Fair Political Practices Commission.