



Sweet Night, Solid Gains

11/08/2006

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In an election day that saw the Democratic Party nationally wrest control of the U.S. House, and perhaps the Senate as well, from staunchly anti-gay Republican leadership, the LGBT community was successful in defeating some key opponents, electing many of its own, and finally winning a battle against a state's effort to enshrine an anti-gay definition of marriage in its Constitution.

With nearly all the votes counted in Arizona, a constitutional amendment that would have banned marriage for gay and lesbian couples and any legal status "similar" to marriage for such unions was opposed by 51.4 percent of the total. The Arizona win comes in the face of 26 defeats on similar constitutional amendments in other states-seven of them passed on Tuesday and the remaining 19 adopted in recent years in response to the first signs of potential marriage equality gains in Hawai'i in the mid-'90s.

"The victory in Arizona is symbolic of a new phase in the long struggle for marriage-and I mean a decade of struggle from the victory in Massachusetts," Joe Solmonese, president of the Washington-based Human Rights Campaign, told Gay City News by telephone. "Arizona represents a rejection of divisive language and politics."

Solmonese, looking both to the marriage amendment victory and to the routing of Republicans and some of their best-known anti-gay politicians-most prominently Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum, Indiana Congressman John Hostettler, and Ohio Secretary of State and gubernatorial candidate Kenneth Blackwell-added, "I am thrilled. I think it was a huge night for GLBT Americans."

Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, was equally upbeat about Tuesday results.

"The headline for us is that exploiting gay families for political gain is fizzling out," he said in a phone interview. "Growing numbers of voters are supporting marriage equality. The next most encouraging thing about Tuesday was how many pro-LGBT candidates defeated ones aligned with the far Christian right."

Foreman's reference to growing support for marriage rights for gay and lesbian couples reflects the fact that even in the seven states where amendment battles were lost, the margins were better than in 2004. That year, the pro-gay side had its high-water mark in Oregon, where an amendment was opposed by 43 percent of voters. This week, the same margin was achieved in Virginia, with 44 percent opposed in Colorado, and 48 percent in South Dakota. In Wisconsin, 41 percent opposed a marriage amendment. In Idaho, only 37 percent of voters opposed an anti-gay measure, and the tallies in South Carolina and Tennessee reflected routs-only 22 and 20 percent, respectively, standing with the LGBT community.

Solmonese said that activists in Virginia have been looking all year to the long run as well as the November 7 vote, "to see how do we build infrastructure for change, how do we build a database of supporters?"

As is increasingly the case with such amendments, however, this year's crop for the most part

went beyond limiting marriage, and also barred other similar legal statuses, including civil unions and domestic partnerships. In fact, the Arizona measure was defeated largely because opponents focused their campaign on emphasizing the dangers faced by unmarried heterosexual couples.

In Virginia, the amendment is so broad-reaching that it could bar any private contractual arrangement between members of a gay or lesbian couple.

In a separate Colorado ballot question, voters rejected by a 53-47 margin-virtually the same that supported the marriage ban-a constitutional amendment that would have created a domestic partnership status for gay and lesbian couples with most of the benefits, rights, and responsibilities of marriage.

Despite the joy over the defeats of anti-gay zealots including Hostettler, Blackwell, and Santorum-the Pennsylvanian best known for his 2003 critique of the Supreme Court sodomy ruling in which he likened gay sex to bestiality in front of a stunned Associated Press reporter-other opponents proved more intractable. Marilyn Musgrave, the Colorado Republican who has championed the effort in the House to pass a federal constitutional amendment barring marriage equality, beat back a tough challenge from Democrat Angie Paccione by three percentage points. In New Mexico, in a tight race yet too close to call, Democrat Patsy Madrid looks as though she is falling short in her effort to unseat Congresswoman Heather Wilson.

Perhaps most discouragingly, in a Minnesota congressional district just north of the Twin Cities metro area, Republican Michele Bachmann bested her Democratic opponent Patty Wetterling by eight points. Bachmann maintains that homosexuality represents "sexual dysfunction" and rejects calling LGBT people "gay," saying that coinage is "part of Satan."

HRC's Solmonese acknowledged that "we may have a new Marilyn Musgrave in Michele Bachmann," but the Task Force's Foreman noted that the Colorado race included a third party candidate who pulled 11 percent of the vote and robbed Musgrave's Democratic opponent of victory. He added that after two tough re-election fights, Musgrave is chilling a bit on her homophobic rhetoric.

"Since 2004, she has been much less vociferous in her anti gay language and efforts," Foreman said.

Solmonese and Foreman agreed that the change in control of the House and potentially the Senate would both relieve pressure on the LGBT community to defend itself and open up opportunities.

"One of the most important aspects of the face of the new leadership is that we will never again have to debate a federal marriage amendment," Solmonese said.

He also said he is "absolutely" confident that the community has a "commitment" from Democratic leaders to move on long-stalled efforts at employment nondiscrimination and hate crimes legislation. Solmonese said action will proceed "next year," while Foreman would say only that he was "comfortable" Democrats would keep their promises, "but nobody knows the timetable." It was up to the community as well, Foreman said, to determine how to "prioritize" its agenda.

Another bright spot in the elections were the successes achieved by out gay and lesbian candidates. Every state legislative candidate supported by the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, a Washington group aimed at electing out gay officials, won on Tuesday-for a total of 34 nationwide, including 11 newcomers. Wisconsin Democrat Tammy Baldwin won re-election to Congress with two-thirds of the vote, and in Massachusetts Barney Frank ran unopposed. Arizona's Jim Kolbe, Congress' only gay Republican, retired this year.

In Oregon, Virginia Linder won statewide election as the second openly LGBT member of the state Supreme Court.

In New York, Democrat William Hanauer won election to the open seat as mayor in upstate Ossining, while Matt Titone, a Staten Island Democrat, lost a state Senate race that could have made him the first openly gay member of the Legislature elected from outside Manhattan.

"This is the tipping point election for openly gay candidates," said Chuck Wolfe, president of the Victory Fund, in a written statement. "We're proving that qualified, well-prepared candidates matched with committed donors mean gays and lesbians can move from having a stake in policy to actually making policy. There's no reason to sit on the sidelines with our fingers crossed anymore."