

## Rights And Regulations

Candidates face social issues as election nears

By **Erica R. Hendry** Special Projects Manager | October 30th, 2008

### Healthcare

Nearly 47 million Americans don't have health insurance.

That's a number that continues to grow, according to Public Agenda, a nonpartisan, nonprofit political research group, as more people take part-time jobs in small businesses or work for themselves. Students or those between jobs often find themselves without insurance, too.

"One of the most interesting aspects of this election is how focused the candidates are on the economy," said Pat Schoeni, executive director of the National Coalition on Health Care, a nonpartisan alliance that works to improve American health care. "The public is aware of the problem but not focused on the fact that health care is very closely tied to the economy."

Health care costs have increased at a faster rate than inflation for decades. They went up 6.7 percent in 2006, according to the 2006 U.S. Census on Health Insurance, and Schoeni said the percentage will probably get worse. Public Agenda also reported that government experts predicted health spending could double in the next 10 years.

Schoeni said flaws exist in each candidate's plan: McCain's \$5,000 tax credit and the room in Obama's plan for people to opt out of insurance.

She said even with McCain's credit, there will still be a significant cost difference — about \$6,000 — most people cannot afford without the help of their employers. Under Obama's plan, she said, the country runs the risk of having more uninsured citizens.

There is no structure in place to regulate what kind of care Americans pay for and how they pay for it, Schoeni said.

Until there is, costs will continue to rise.

"We've seen what happens when we let our banks go unregulated," Schoeni said. "If we don't act soon, we're going to see what happens when our health care system goes unregulated. No developed country has been able to keep their health care system going without some kind of government regulation."

### Abortion

Abortion is one of the most visibly divisive issues in this election, with polls showing voters insecure and inconsistent in their survey responses.

In Gallup Polls and also those conducted by CNN and USA Today, a majority of voters said they favored restricting abortion — yet nearly two-thirds of them also said the government shouldn't interfere with a woman's right to choose.

Jessica Arons, director of the Women's Health and Rights Program for the Center for American Progress Action Fund, said the central abortion issue in this election is *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 court decision that made abortion legal.

Arons said current Supreme Court justices are fairly even, with four justices supporting free choice and four justices opposing it. She said Justice Anthony Kennedy votes both ways, depending on the specific part of the 1973 decision in question.

"[Still], there have been a lot of restrictions upheld by the Supreme Court and that has translated to making it harder for a lot of women in this country to get an abortion," she said.

They include laws that mandate minors in many states seek parental consent before they get an abortion and also those that close funding to women who can't afford an abortion. Eighty-six percent of U.S. counties are without abortion providers, Arons said.

Arons said students should keep an eye on a regulation pursued by the Bush administration this fall through the health and human services department that would allow any doctors, nurses or other practitioners to refuse to provide abortions, birth control or fertility treatment if those practices are against what they believe.

Depending on how quickly that regulation moves through Congress, the next president could choose whether to uphold or discontinue the regulation.

"There's no doubt that changes will be made [to abortion laws and restrictions]," Arons said. "But it's hard to tell right now. You never know."

## **Gay Rights**

There are 779,867 same-sex couples in the country, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's most recent American Community survey.

Surveys from the Pew Institute show while the majority of respondents supported equal rights for gay couples, they were not as confident in allowing homosexuals to baby-sit their children or to adopt a child of their own.

This divide becomes clearer when looking at several state-level amendments both for and against gay marriage on ballots in next week's election.

Gay marriage has been legal in Massachusetts since 2003 and was just legalized in California and Connecticut this year, though the Connecticut amendment won't take effect until Nov. 7. Civil unions or domestic partnerships are recognized in New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, New Jersey, Washington and California.

**Sue Hyde, a staff member at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, said questions involving same-sex rights will appear on the ballots of five states on Tuesday: California, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida and Connecticut.**

Questions on the Arizona and Florida ballots seek to ban recognition of same-sex marriages, Hyde said. The question on Florida's ballot will pass if it earns 60 percent of the votes.

In Arkansas, the question on the ballot seeks to ban the state from approving foster placement and adoptions by openly gay or lesbian couples. In Connecticut the question asks for residents to vote for or against a constitutional convention, which would allow lawmakers to present the state's recently passed law recognizing gay marriage.

**But California's ballot is receiving the most attention, Hyde said. Proposition 8, "Eliminate Right of Same-Sex Couples to Marry," would alter the state's constitution to eliminate the right of same-sex couples to marry. It would also add a new section that would specifically state "only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California."**

**“[This outcome] can really set cultural and political boundaries,” Hyde said. “It will answer the question of whether continuing to take these questions to the ballot in any other state is worth it. If they lose, the answer is probably no. If they win, it is certainly possible that we will be seeing an [increase] in this kind of political action going forward.”**