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Prop. 8 Exit Polling of African-Americans Way Off, Experts Say

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A new study on California's Proposition 8 voting trends released Tuesday found that far fewer African-Americans voted to pass the gay marriage ban than the 70% suggested by exit polling and concluded that race was not the most significant factor affecting people's vote for or against marriage equality.

After conducting in-depth analysis of election returns from five key California counties and using census data to estimate the racial makeup of the voters in those counties, researchers found that between 57% and 59% of African-Americans voted in favor of Proposition 8, which amended the state's constitution to prohibit same-sex marriage.

"This is a far cry from the [National Exit Poll] estimate," said Kenneth Sherrill of Hunter College, one of the lead authors of the study.

Sherrill also noted that four pre-election polls put black support for the antigay ballot initiative anywhere between 41% and 58%. "While that's quite a range, none venture above 58%," he said. "On this basis alone, the NEP estimate of 70% would appear to be an outlier."

A comparison of the Prop. 8 data with that of polling after the Knight Initiative, a 2000 measure that prohibited gay marriage in California by statute (rather than constitutional amendment), showed overall movement toward support of marriage equality across almost every demographic group "with the only holdouts being Republicans, conservatives, and those born before World War II," said Patrick Egan of New York University, another lead author of the report. "Although Proposition 8 was victorious, I think the real story is that California voters have nevertheless shifted dramatically toward support for same-sex marriage." In fact, the study found support for marriage equality increasing in nearly every demographic group by about one percent each year since 2000.

Egan and Sherrill also concluded that age, religiosity, party identification, and ideology had more of an effect on whether voters backed Prop. 8 than any other factors. For instance, the rate of support for the initiative among African Americans and whites was nearly the same for those who attended church services regularly.

Perhaps surprisingly, the study also revealed that partisanship and ideology trumped the fact of knowing someone who is openly LGBT. About two-thirds of the state's self-identified conservatives knew someone who was gay and about 4 out of five of them voted for the measure – the same exact ratio of conservatives who voted for Prop. 8 but didn't know an openly LGBT person. Republicans demonstrated a similar pattern, with about four out of five of them voting to pass the ban regardless of whether they knew anyone who was out or not.

"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," Sherrill said. Though he called the resistance among Republicans and conservatives "implacable," Sherrill added, "Mitigating that opposition is the fact that California is becoming less Republican and less conservative. In fact, hard-core opposition to such things as gay marriage may be costing Republicans the support of younger voters." (Kerry Eleveld, Advocate.com)