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Fun with numbers: Proposition 8 edition

By John Wildermuth
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A press release the other day from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force referred to "the slim passage of Proposition 8" in the Nov. 4 election.

That's been pretty much a theme for many of the groups that opposed the measure, which banned same-sex marriage in California. Prop. 8 just squeaked by, they argue, suggesting that the win was some fluke, an aberration that can be quickly remedied the next time California voters go to the polls.

Maybe so, maybe no. The final statement of the vote, released by Secretary of State Debra Bowen last Saturday, shows that Prop. 8 won with 52.3 percent of the vote in an election where just under 80 percent of California's registered voters cast ballots. The mammoth turnout gave the measure almost a 600,000-vote margin, which can be a pretty steep political mountain to climb.

Prop. 8 wasn't even the tightest race on the November ballot, which featured a surprising number of close contests. That title falls to Prop. 11, the redistricting reform measure, which finished with 50.9 percent of the vote, a 197,378 margin. Prop. 1A, the high-speed rail bond, collected 52.7 percent of the vote, only slightly more than the same-sex marriage ban.

But many of the same groups disparaging Prop. 8's margin were slapping high-fives over the defeat of Prop. 4, which would have required notification of a parent, guardian or adult relative before a minor could receive an abortion.

The result proved once and for all that California voters weren't willing to fall for a thinly disguised effort to limit abortions in the state, jubilant opponents of the measure proclaimed.

Prop. 4 lost by 503,000 votes, a 52 percent to 48 margin in a race that was tighter than the Prop. 8 same-sex marriage battle.

Still, though, the Prop. 8 opponents aren't completely wrong. Taken historically, the percentages were unusually close, since California proposition races are more typically blowouts than nail-biters. Since 1998, 120 measures have appeared on the state ballot and only seven, including the two last month, have been tighter than Prop. 8.

A number of those featured the type of liberal vs. conservative face-offs that marked Prop. 8. Prop. 37 in November 2000, which would have required a two-thirds vote for many state and local fees, lost by a 52.1 to 47.9 margin. March 2000's Prop. 26, which would have allowed a simple majority of voters to approve school bonds, failed 51.3 to 48.7. Prop. 86 in March 2004 was a \$12.3 billion school construction bond that passed with 50.9 percent of the vote.

The other two were cigarette measures. In November 2006, a tsunami of Big Tobacco cash helped defeat of \$2.60-a-pack tax hike for health care services. But that opposition wasn't enough to block another cigarette tax in November 1998, when Rob Reiner's Prop. 10 passed, 50.5 percent to 49.5 percent, and created the First 5 program for children's services, to the dismay of most California Republican leaders.

Still, in California ballot battles, a one-vote squeaker is as good as a million-vote landslide. As long as you're on the winning side.