

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Republicans Must Evolve on Gay Rights and Marriage, Just as Democrats Did

By: David Lampo – November 16th, 2012

This election was a watershed day for gay rights with the successful passage of three state initiatives in Maryland, Washington, and Maine to legalize same-sex marriage. We also saw the defeat of a constitutional amendment in Minnesota that would have inserted a prohibition on same-sex marriage into its constitution, a measure long sought by Rep. Michele Bachmann, making its defeat all the sweeter. The eight-year-long string of defeats in statewide votes on gay marriage is finally over.

But even though gay rights issues rarely came up during the general election campaign, the country remains deeply divided on gay rights and same-sex marriage. President Obama won only narrowly after a bitter and divisive campaign. Although Democrats retain a majority in the Senate, Republicans remain fully in control of the House and actually picked up a governorship, giving them a total of 30. Since the states will be the primary battleground for same-sex marriage and other gay rights measures, these governors will play a very important role in those fights.

Consequently, one fact about the future of gay rights and marriage equality remains crystal clear: full equality for gay and lesbian Americans will not come without the support of more elected Republicans, at every level of government. The widely held premise that only the support of Democrats is needed to bring us full legal equality is ludicrous, and any movement built on such a premise is destined to fail.

The challenges ahead are huge: Even after the Democratic sweep in 2008 of both houses of Congress and the presidency, the Employment Nondiscrimination Act failed to pass the Senate. The Defense of Marriage Act is still the law of the land. Only nine states and

D.C. have marriage equality, and 30 states have constitutional amendments prohibiting gay marriage that will be difficult to undo. Most states don't have even civil unions for gay and lesbian couples, and two-parent adoption by gay couples is prohibited in most states.

The only real bright spot during the past four years was the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT), made possible only with the votes of eight Republican senators, but with the House still firmly under Republican control, any further legislative progress on gay rights at the federal level will require a new strategy.

That strategy must begin with the acknowledgement that support for gay rights within the Republican Party rank and file is far greater than what conventional wisdom tells us. The fact that even most Republicans are not aware of this support is understandable given the very visible role that the Religious Right has played in the Republican Party, but there is in fact a huge disconnect between rank and file Republicans and elected Republicans on gay issues.

Recent polls show that

- 66 percent of Republicans support employment nondiscrimination legislation (Greenberg Quinlan poll).
- A majority of Republicans are satisfied with the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (*National Journal* poll).
- 57 percent of Republicans support either same sex marriage or civil unions (Fox News poll).
- Only 37 percent of Republicans support a federal marriage amendment (*National Journal* poll).
- 49 percent of young Republicans (18-29) support marriage equality (Public Religion Research Institute poll).

If gay rights supporters are interested in building a lasting and effective coalition to build on this year's victories, it is time for them, especially their allies in the Democratic Party, to stop demonizing Republicans and start crafting a strategy and message that can help increase the support for gay rights among both rank and file Republicans and their leaders in Congress and the state legislatures.

It would behoove those Democrats who demonize Republicans to remember their own party's many recent shortcomings on gay rights. While we are still celebrating the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell two years ago, it was just 20 years ago that President Clinton signed it into law. Intended as a compromise with those who opposed open service by gays and lesbians, it soon became a tool to throw thousands of gay and lesbian service members out of the military. President Clinton also gave us the Defense of Marriage Act, supported by most Democrats as well as Republicans; we can only hope that the Supreme Court declares it unconstitutional next year.

Just eight years ago, a majority of Democrats opposed marriage equality: 52 percent in a Time/CNN poll and 54 percent in a University of Pennsylvania poll. According to a CBS News poll that same year, 57 percent of Democrats supported a federal marriage amendment. And it was only within the past couple of years that major Democratic figures such as the Clintons and congressional leaders declared their support for gay marriage.

The point of this history is merely to point out that just as the Democratic Party can and did change, so too can (and will) the Republican Party. Democrats changed only because supporters of gay rights within the party embarked on a mission to change the minds of both rank and file and party leaders. That is precisely the task we now face with Republicans, not just those of us in the party but gay rights supporters everywhere. We must stop letting the religious right control the terms of debate about what makes a good Republican, and what doesn't. Gay rights proponents must begin to aggressively court Republican leaders, driving a wedge between them and the anti-gay right by taking the message of equal rights for gays and lesbians directly to them. We must not allow anti-gay conservatives to frame these issues for their fellow Republicans through the lens of bigotry and intolerance.

It is time for gay rights leaders and supporters both to embrace pro-gay Republicans and work with them to develop a long-term strategy that brings the message of freedom and social tolerance to every Republican leader and candidate so that a strong, truly bipartisan movement for gay rights can blossom. Only then will full legal equality for gays and lesbians become a possibility.