

# San Francisco Chronicle

## GOP split as gay marriage goes mainstream

By: Carolyn Lochhead - January 6, 2013

---

**Washington** -- Facing a tidal shift among voters embracing same-sex marriage, gay Republicans are offering their party a graceful retreat.

But religious conservatives warn that retreat will doom the GOP.

November's election brought historic gains for the gay rights movement, with the first voter approval of marriage for gay and lesbian couples in Maine, Maryland and Washington, and voter rejection of a ban on such marriages in Minnesota.

Defying predictions, President Obama suffered no backlash among African American and Latino voters.

Republican nominee Mitt Romney, who endorsed a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage, drew less support than the marriage ballot measure in GOP-dominated counties in Maryland, indicating a large crossover Republican vote for marriage, according to an analysis by Walter Olson, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

"Republicans have to be delusional to think they can take that position into a national campaign, that there ought to be a constitutional amendment against something that there is now majority support for," Olson said.

### **Conservatives stand ground**

But Brian Brown, president of the National Organization for Marriage, which opposes same-sex marriage, said social conservatives are the backbone of the GOP.

"Practically, the Republican Party dies if it abandons marriage," Brown said. "Social conservatives simply are not going to stand for themselves being read out of the conservative movement."

The latest sign of a party split came last week, when Pat Brady, the GOP chairman for Illinois, voiced his support for legalizing same-sex marriage, although the legislation failed. Former presidential contender Newt Gingrich recently urged his party to rethink its stance, and British Prime Minister David Cameron, telling conservatives to "be grown up," is battling his party's traditionalists and the Church of England to legalize same-sex marriage in Britain.

The Mormon church, which heavily funded the Proposition 8 campaign to ban same-sex marriage in California in 2008, quietly launched a website last month, www.gaysandmormons.org, that while far from embracing homosexuality, urges compassion.

"If ever there is an indication that the pendulum has swung, it's what the Mormons did in that new website," said Fred Karger, a gay former GOP presidential candidate. "They had refused to even mention that word, gay."

### **Public attitudes shift**

For two decades, Republicans boosted their fortunes by battling same-sex marriage. Former President George W. Bush endorsed a constitutional ban in 2004. Thirty-nine states have enacted bans, including North Carolina last year.

Last week, House Republicans continued their \$1.7 million court defense of the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act, or DOMA, after Obama's decision to stop defending the statute. "A lot of people thought they wouldn't do it, and they did," Brown said.

But public attitudes have shifted faster than in any other civil rights movement, said Marc Solomon, national campaign director of Freedom to Marry, a pro-gay group, with support for same-sex marriage rising from 27 percent in 1996 to 54 percent in 2012. An analysis by Third Way, a Democratic-leaning group, found the shift across the board, including not just youths, but also seniors, Latinos, African Americans and even evangelicals and Catholics, the groups historically most opposed. Although majorities of these groups are still opposed, the percentages have been steadily declining.

Olson said he thinks Republicans have a principled exit strategy, if they want one.

### **Leaving issue to states**

Conservatives have long sought to limit the power of the federal government by devolving authority to the states. Marriage was solidly a state domain until Republicans pushed through the Defense of Marriage Act, denying federal benefits to married same-sex couples. That statute is under review by the U.S. Supreme Court, along with a court decision overturning California's Prop. 8 ban on same-sex marriage.

Former Vice President Dick Cheney, whose daughter Mary is a lesbian, first used the federalism argument to support state choice in marriage in a 2000 debate. Olson, who is gay, said the GOP could quit a losing fight much as it abandoned Prohibition in 1933 - by allowing states to choose. "Let's come up with a solution that allows New York to go one way and Texas to go the other way," he said.

Until Prohibition's repeal, the "dry" forces were so strong in the GOP that no national Republican could oppose them. But after repeal, states and counties could choose to ban liquor or not. Some conservative counties have remained "dry" to this day.

Prohibitionist voters did not abandon Republicans, "because culturally it was still a better fit than to vote for these very, very wet Democrats who knew a lot of saloon keepers," Olson said. "Brian Brown's constituents are not going to start voting for the party of Nancy Pelosi because they don't get their way on everything. They will find other things to be upset about."

The advantage, he said, is that "we won't have a party tying itself in knots with a contradiction between the obvious direction of sentiment in the nation at large, and the demands of a minority of a minority."