



Stop damning Republicans and start talking to them

By DAVID LAMPO - November 14, 2012

This election was a watershed for gay rights with the successful passage of three state initiatives (in Maryland, Washington and Maine) to legalize same-sex marriage and the defeat of a constitutional amendment in Minnesota that would have inserted a prohibition on same-sex marriage into its constitution. The eight-year-long string of 31 defeats in state votes on gay marriage is finally over.

But as glorious as these victories are, the country remains deeply divided on gay rights. President Obama only narrowly won reelection after a bitter and divisive campaign. Although the 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.

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 both the state and federal levels. The premise that the support of just Democrats can bring us full 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, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act failed to advance. The Defense of Marriage Act is still the law of the land. Only nine states and D.C. have marriage equality, and 31 states have constitutional amendments prohibiting gay marriage that will be difficult to undo. Most states do not have even civil unions, and adoption by gay couples is prohibited in some states. Further progress on gay rights 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 most people believe. Recent polls, for example, show that:

- 66 percent of Republicans support employment non-discrimination 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 38 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. Republican attitudes are already changing very quickly.

Last year, for example, New York passed same-sex marriage only after the Republican-controlled state Senate allowed a vote on the measure: four Republicans then put it over the top. The overwhelmingly Republican state legislature in New Hampshire voted in February to keep that state’s marriage equality in the face of a rightwing campaign to repeal it. And when North Carolina added the anti-gay Amendment One to its constitution earlier this year, the state’s Tea Party Congresswoman Renee Elmers came out against it, as did David Blankenhorn, a popular evangelical leader who supported Proposition 8 in California but who now supports same-sex marriage rights.

It is time for gay rights leaders and supporters 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 and does not allow the religious right to frame these issues to their fellow Republicans through the lens of bigotry and intolerance. Only then can a strong, truly bipartisan movement for gay rights blossom.