

The 2006 Midterm Elections: Are we celebrating too soon?

by Scott Kaplan

The Democrats have won both houses! Finally! Many members of the LGBTIQ community probably jumped for joy when hearing this news. But are we celebrating too soon?

Many new Democratic candidates were able to beat their incumbent opponents by showing that they were moderately conservative. While the Democrats focused primarily on Iraq, many socially liberal issues were kept under the radar. For example, Heath Shuler of North Carolina, a moderate Democrat, beat out Republican incumbent Charles Taylor for the 11th congressional district. He was the first Democrat to represent the district in 15 years. Nevertheless, many of his opinions are socially conservative and Republicans tried to recruit him before he announced he was running as a Democrat. Other Democratic Congressmen who are new to their offices, such as Brad Ellsworth and Baron Hill from Indiana, follow a similar pattern.

Eight states also had same-sex marriage bans as initiatives on the ballot. Seven of the states - Colorado, Idaho, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wisconsin - were able to pass these initiatives into state law. Most passed quite easily and Virginia's initiative on the state ballot was only passed to solidify the gay marriage ban already in place.

However, Arizona became the first state to reject an amendment banning domestic partnerships. The amendment, had it succeeded, would have taken away domestic partnership benefits that are currently being offered in places such as Phoenix, Tucson, Scottsdale, and Tempe. The situation in Colorado was unique. Their ballot included an amendment to outlaw gay marriage as well as a law to allow

domestic partnerships. Colorado narrowly passed the gay marriage ban (55%) and rejected the partnership law (53%). These narrow margins illustrate the confusion and mixed feelings many Americans have about same-sex marriage.

Nevertheless, the controversy remains over whether the midterm elections were, overall, beneficial for the LGBTIQ community or not. While some see Arizona's failed marriage ban - the first out of twenty-one such bans to fail on a state ballot - as a huge success, suggesting a change in the air, others see it as just a small lull in a very long, arduous battle for equal rights for LGBTIQ people.

As of now, 45 states have amendments or laws against same-sex marriage. Vermont, Connecticut, and most recently New Jersey have instituted civil unions, while domestic partnerships are available in California, Maine, Hawaii, and the District of Columbia. So whether the results are bleak or not, many are optimistic and believe that equal rights for LGBTIQ people are gaining support around the country. There were many more campaigners working for LGBTIQ-friendly candidates during the midterm election than ever before. Deval Patrick of Massachusetts and Eliot Spitzer of New York are also the first candidates publicly in favor of gay marriage to have won an election in any state.

So what lies ahead? Issues expected to be raised by the next Congress are the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender expression in hate-crime legislation and the repeal of the ban on openly LGB military recruits. The 2006 midterm election may give more hope to the Democrats as they try to take the White House in 2008. Nevertheless, it is still impossible to say whether same-sex marriage will become an important issue in the 2008 presidential election for Democratic candidates or if the subject will be avoided in order to give candidates a better chance at success.

