

Anti-gay incumbents struggling Activists hope for change in tone, as Santorum, others face tough challenges

Oct. 27, 2006

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With the mid-term elections less than two weeks away, some of the most stridently anti-gay members of Congress are struggling to retain their House and Senate seats.

Several outspoken supporters of a federal constitutional ban on gay marriage, including Sens. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) and George Allen (R-Va.) and Rep. Marilyn Musgrave (R-Colo.) are locked in tough campaigns against their Democratic opponents.

Pennsylvania State Treasurer Bob Casey Jr. (D) leads Santorum 51-39 percent, according to a Mason-Dixon poll released this week.

In Virginia, Allen holds a narrow lead over former Navy Secretary Jim Webb (D). Mason-Dixon last week found Allen had 47 percent to Webb's 43 percent, a difference within the poll's 4 percent margin of error.

Musgrave, meanwhile, leads her challenger, Colorado state Rep. Angie Paccione, 46 percent to 36 percent in a Mason-Dixon poll released Oct. 10. But political analysts still consider the race competitive.

Leading gay activists said some incumbents are struggling to win voters in part because they attacked gays at a time when they should have been addressing a myriad of more pressing issues.

"They all went out there and said, 'My God, the world is coming to an end. And so the most important thing that we could do is amend the constitution to take away gay peoples' rights,'" said Human Rights Campaign President Joe Solmonese in an interview with the Blade this week.

He and Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, said many voters consequently are abandoning Santorum, Allen and Musgrave.

"I think those are three people who can always be relied on to use our community as a wedge issue," Solmonese said. "And I think this year, if there is one thing that contributes to their demise, it would be that the American people weren't having any part of it."

Foreman said that shift could fundamentally alter the congressional dialogue about gay issues.

"Every time an extremist on any position loses re-election," he said, "number one, it tempers the debates, and number two, it communicates pretty effectively to other

members that there's not a lot to be gained and there is a lot to lose by taking extreme positions, including those on LGBT equality."

Santorum most vulnerable

Santorum, described by gay activists as the Senate's most homophobic member, also is the chamber's most endangered member.

"He is the most vulnerable senator in the country right now," said Nathan Gonzales, political editor of the non-partisan Rothenberg Political Report. "He's been the most vulnerable for over a year now."

Santorum trails Casey in dozens of polls dating back to February 2005. Although the margins have varied, the most recent polls show Casey maintaining a commanding lead.

Activists said Santorum's anti-gay ravings — in which he famously equated homosexuality with incest, polygamy and adultery — conveyed an extremist image.

"I think that certainly in Santorum's case," Foreman said, "his homophobia, which has been so blatant and gratuitous, has helped reinforce his image as an extremist that's really out of touch with moderate Pennsylvanians."

John Marble, spokesperson for the gay partisan group National Stonewall Democrats, agreed.

"I think that he has consistently demonstrated his allegiance to a narrow agenda shared by the special interests that fund his campaign," Marble said. "And he has done that at the expense of paying attention to the issues that people in Pennsylvania care about."

HRC is supporting Casey in his efforts to defeat Santorum, a man Solmonese called dangerous, hateful and bigoted.

"I think it's safe to say that Rick Santorum gets out of bed every morning and thinks, 'What can I do to be destructive to gay people today?'" he said.

Solmonese said Santorum's defeat could mark a turning point in the Senate, and help enable discussion of pro-gay bills.

"I think things would change drastically because it is so much more than switching a seat," he said. "It is that the energy and the obstruction that Rick Santorum puts up around these things will also be gone, and I think that the air in the Senate will be completely different when Rick Santorum's gone."

Webb a mixed bag

Although not as outspoken as Santorum on gay issues, Allen also has a record opposing gay rights initiatives.

Just this week, he drew criticism for a new radio ad that suggests his Democratic challenger, an opponent of gay marriage, would "weaken marriage" and violate the "sacred bond" that exists exclusively for "one man and one woman."

Crafted to motivate conservative voters, the ad brought new attention to Webb's positions on gay issues.

Webb, who opposes equal marriage rights yet favors civil unions, supports "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," the military's ban on openly gay service members.

Foreman said this combination makes Webb something of a mixed bag for gay voters, but a potential ally nonetheless.

"Politics is all about making choices," he said. "It's very rare that you come across a candidate that agrees with you on everything, or prioritizes issues the way that you would like them prioritized. That's just the reality of politics."

Solmonese and Marble said Webb remains an easy choice for gay voters because he's willing to discuss the issues. Allen, they said, isn't listening.

"With Allen, we don't even have the opportunity to have the conversation," Marble said. "I think that's a key difference."

Political observers also noted the Virginia race is among the handful of competitive races that could be crucial to determining Senate control.

Dan Pinello, a City University of New York government professor who is gay, said gay voters unsure of Webb should consider that his election could score the Democrats that additional win.

"Let me put it this way," he said, "any Democrat is better than any Republican. It's as simple as that because of how Congress is organized."

'A whole lot of hatred'

Activists are also pushing for the defeat of Musgrave, who is widely considered the House's leading anti-gay voice.

Musgrave, the lead sponsor of the Marriage Protection Amendment in the House, last month said gay marriage "is the most important issue that we face today," and that "the future is grim" if gay marriage is not banned.

Analysts said Musgrave still enjoys strong support from Colorado voters.

"It's going to be more difficult for Democrats to defeat her because her district is more conservative than a state like Pennsylvania," Gonzales said. "But it's still certainly a competitive race."

Foreman said Musgrave's opponent, Paccione, appeals to moderate and religiously minded voters.

"Angie is an exceptional candidate who is an evangelical Christian," he said, "and is able to say why, as an evangelical Christian, she supports LGBT issues."

Solmonese said if Musgrave were to lose her House seat, the benefits to gays would resemble the gains that could be had if Santorum loses his Senate seat.

“When that element is out of the mix,” he said, “when Marilyn Musgrave’s out of the House, a whole lot of hatred is gone from the House as well, and that’s a heck of a lot more important than just her vote.”

Other races to watch

Gay activists are involved in other congressional races to help defeat anti-gay candidates.

Solmonese and Marble said their organizations are working to defeat Marriage Protection Amendment supporter Sen. Mike DeWine (R-Ohio), and upset outspoken anti-gay Republican House candidate Michele Bachmann in Minnesota.

During a 2004 radio broadcast, Bachmann said that if Minnesota fails to ban same-sex marriage that public school students “will be required to learn that homosexuality is normal, equal and perhaps you should try it.”

A Mason-Dixon poll last month put DeWine just two points behind his opponent, U.S. Rep. Sherrod Brown. Poll results in Bachmann’s race are mixed and show no clear favorite.

And the race to succeed majority leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), who has led the charge to amend the U.S. Constitution to ban gay marriage, is also tight. Republican Bob Corker leads Democrat Harold Ford Jr. 45-43 percent, according to a Mason-Dixon poll released Tuesday.

Solmonese and Foreman agreed gays likely will score some important political victories on Election Day, but cautioned against any premature celebrations.

“The thought that this climate might change is very exciting,” Foreman said. “But we’re still many days away, and anything can happen.”