



U.S. gay-rights groups heartened by political gains in the states

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NEW YORK: The U.S. gay marriage debate has created an oddly divided America, with only the country's Northeast corner and Pacific Coast recognizing same-sex unions. But gay-rights leaders are encouraged by progress on other parts of their agenda across the American heartland.

Three states — Oregon, Iowa and Colorado — have enacted laws this year outlawing anti-gay discrimination, raising the total to 20 states that account for more than half the U.S. population. Twelve of those states extend those protections to transgender people.

Elsewhere, politicians who became the first openly gay members of their state legislatures have had an impact, helping pass gay-rights bills or thwarting measures they viewed as anti-gay. In Arkansas, in the conservative southern U.S., for example, state Rep. Kathy Webb's heartfelt arguments played a role in the rejection of a bill to bar gays from adopting or foster-parenting.

"It makes a difference when it's personal," Webb said in a telephone interview. "It's harder to ignore the evidence when it's a friend and colleague who's talking."

In Dallas, openly gay city councilman Ed Oakley emerged from an 11-candidate field to reach Saturday's runoff election for mayor. Though he lost, activists were pleased by his 42 percent support in what traditionally has been considered a conservative city.

Other trends have buoyed gay-rights leaders, including:

Bright prospects for congressional passage of two gay-rights bills: a hate-crimes bill that would cover offenses motivated by anti-gay bias, and a measure that would outlaw workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Intensifying demands for repeal of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy that bars openly gay people from serving in the military. The Bush administration supports the policy; all the Democratic presidential candidates oppose it.

The broad repudiation of anti-gay remarks by several national figures, notably TV actor Isaiah Washington, commentator Ann Coulter and the outgoing chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine Gen. Peter Pace.

Gay marriage, however, remains the highest-profile issue.

Activists have been elated by some recent developments, including New Hampshire's approval of civil unions and the 151-45 vote by Massachusetts lawmakers last week blocking a proposed ballot measure to ban gay marriage.

Massachusetts is the only state where gay marriage is legal, but nine other states have approved spousal rights in some form for same-sex couples — Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Maine, California, Oregon, Washington and Hawaii.

California, which now has a domestic partnership law, will probably be the next major battleground. Its legislature is expected to pass a bill this year allowing gay couples to marry, although Republican Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has said he would veto it. A separate legal challenge to California's one man-one woman marriage law is headed to the state Supreme Court.

In response, some conservative groups hope to place a constitutional amendment on the ballot in 2008 that would ban gay marriage. Such a campaign would trigger massive spending from both sides.

"The outcome of that race will have a huge impact on how quickly we'll be able to move forward in other states," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "If we lose in California, marriage equality is going to be limited to just a handful of states for the foreseeable future."

A similar ban is expected to be on Florida's ballot next year, although under state law it would need at least 60 percent support to prevail.

"There's no question that's a challenge, but we're definitely up for it," said John Stemberger, president of the conservative Florida Family Policy Council.

With Democrats controlling Congress, conservative leaders have scaled back their campaign for a federal constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, and acknowledge that recent political momentum has, in many cases, not been with them.

"The homosexual lobby is receiving some payback for putting their time and resources into electing liberals to office," said Matt Barber, cultural issues policy director for Concerned Women for America. "That lobby has managed to label anyone who'd defend marriage as bigots and homophobes."

Looking ahead, both sides are aware of opinion polls showing that while a majority of older Americans oppose same-sex marriage, half or more of young Americans support it. Barber blames this on gay-rights "propaganda" in the public schools and on television — resulting in what he called the "'Will and Grace'-ification of America," referring to the TV comedy about a gay man and a straight woman who are best friends.

Evan Wolfson, who heads the advocacy group Freedom to Marry, says public opinion is shifting inexorably toward recognition of same-sex couples as Americans observe the experiences of Massachusetts and states with civil unions.

"When people push past the politics and look at the reality, they realize families were helped and no one was hurt," he said. "The other side may continue to score a few points, but I think most of them now understand they are going to lose."

The president of the largest national gay-rights group, Joe Solmonese of the Human Rights Campaign, attributed much of the momentum on his side to the results of the 2006 election — when liberal gains led directly to the passage of gay-rights legislation in states such as New Hampshire, Iowa and Colorado. "Fear has given way to fairness in terms of how people view these issues," he said.