

Hot button ballot issues back in election

By Ed Stoddard
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DALLAS (Reuters) - When Americans cast ballots on November 4 to elect a president, some states also will ask voters hot-button questions like whether or not to ban gay marriage.

Such "ballot initiatives" -- proposed amendments to state constitutions or legislation -- have become a staple of U.S. elections and have played a role in recent presidential races.

Two that have qualified for November's ballot stand out: one to ban gay marriage in the presidential battleground state of Florida -- where votes for Republican and Democratic candidates have been closely split in recent elections -- and another in Colorado to roll back affirmative-action policies aimed at helping minorities overcome discrimination.

Initiatives to ban gay marriage played a role in President George W. Bush's 2004 re-election as they propelled the Republican Party's conservative Christian base to the polls.

They may not have the same impact this time, as Republican John McCain is viewed by many religious conservatives as soft on core issues like gay marriage and stem cell research.

"I have a hard time envisioning social conservatives who want to ban gay marriage in Florida getting excited about John McCain at the polls," said Daniel Smith, a professor of political science at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

"McCain doesn't have the credibility on the issue that Bush had and so people who come out to vote on it may not vote for McCain," he said.

Still, such issues can energize activists on both sides of America's cultural divide, which often reflects the partisan one between conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats.

Evangelical Protestants, who account for one in four American adults, are especially keen to prohibit gay marriage, which they see as a threat to the traditional family.

To pass, the proposed Florida measure will require the support of at least 60 percent of those who cast ballots.

"Our strategy involves recruiting and training hundreds of volunteers to speak person to person with voters about the real harms that these measures cause to lesbian, gay and transgendered families," said Dan Hawes, a director at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in Washington.

BRUISING BATTLE

The amendment's supporters, who have coalesced around a group called florida4marriage.org, are also gearing up.

"I think it's going to be a very close race," said John Stemberger, the group's chairman.

He said he also saw the issue as bipartisan but most analysts see such battles as distinctly partisan.

"What has developed over the past 25 years is that issues are about obtaining power," said Dennis Goldford, a political science professor at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. "You use them to rally the troops ... You pick, highlight and inflame certain issues in order to win power."

He said for Republicans, such hot-button issues could be a way to mobilize voters who have not warmed to McCain.

In Colorado, voters will be asked to decide on a proposed amendment to the state constitution to prohibit "preferential treatment to any group or individual on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin in the operation of public employment, public contracting or public education."

Campaigns also are under way to get similar initiatives on the ballot in Nebraska, Oklahoma, Missouri and Arizona.

These campaigns could take a partisan edge as the Democrats are linked strongly to affirmative action while Republicans are generally opposed to it. In Colorado, this will matter because the White House race there is seen as being close.

The issue also could be thrust onto center stage in November as the Democratic nominee will be either a woman, Sen. Hillary Clinton, or a black man, Sen. Barack Obama.

"Obama's candidacy has tried to transcend race so it will be interesting to see how he handles attempts to end affirmative action," Smith said.

Most proposed ballot initiatives still are in the "qualifying" stage with activists gathering the required signatures.

These early drives also serve to get activists motivated well before Election Day.

In South Dakota, proponents of an initiative to restrict abortion except in cases of rape, incest or when the mother's health or life are endangered have until April 1 to gather the almost 17,000 signatures needed to get it on the ballot.