



Race not deciding factor in Prop. 8 vote, study shows

By Josh Richman
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Neither African-Americans nor any other ethnicity were disproportionately in support of Proposition 8, which changed California's constitution to ban same-sex marriage, according to a study of election results and post-vote surveys released Tuesday.

Rather, whether someone voted yes or no on the ballot measure was influenced mostly by the person's age, religiosity, party affiliation and general political ideology, the study's authors say.

Although support for Prop. 8 in the African-American community had been pegged as high as 70 percent by one previous postelection survey, this study — which not only reviewed pre- and postelection polls, but also crunched precinct-level election results and census data from Alameda, San Francisco, Sacramento, Los Angeles and San Diego counties, in which two-thirds of the state's African-Americans reside — found the number was between 57 percent and 59 percent.

And that number is more about religiosity than race, study co-author and New York University assistant professor of politics Patrick Egan said. While higher than the level of support among white and Asian-American voters, it's due to the higher rates of African-American church attendance: Fifty-seven percent of African-Americans attend church at least once a week, compared with 42 percent of whites and 40 percent of Asian-Americans, he said.

The study found that more than 70 percent of voters who were Republican, identified themselves as conservative, or who attended religious services at least once a week supported Prop. 8. Conversely, 70 percent or more of voters who were Democrat, identified themselves as liberal, or who rarely attended religious services opposed the measure. More than two-thirds of voters 65 and older supported Prop. 8, while majorities younger than 65 opposed it.

Even personal relationships with lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people paled in comparison to these factors, said study co-author Kenneth Sherrill, a political-science professor at Hunter College in New York City. Although two-thirds of California conservatives said they know or are related to LGBT people, four of five conservatives supported Prop. 8.

"At least in terms of marriage equality, opposition to our rights isn't personal, it's ideological and partisan," Sherrill told reporters on a conference call Tuesday, adding that while Democrats, Asian-Americans and people younger than 30 have moved significantly toward supporting same-sex marriage since the issue was on the ballot in 2000, there remains "hard-core, seemingly implacable opposition among Republicans and conservatives."

The study was commissioned by the San Francisco-based Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, a private family foundation established by the former president, CEO and chairman of Levi Strauss & Co. and his wife.

Jaime Grant, director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute, called it "a wake-up call to the LGBT community on a couple of fronts" first and foremost, that same-sex marriage supporters must do more outreach to the faith-based community,

probably via LGBT people already active within faiths. Organizing within mainstream religious denominations will be crucial in order to make serious inroads, she said.

The Rev. Mark Wilson, of Oakland, former pastor of Berkeley's McGee Avenue Baptist Church and now outreach coordinator for the African-American activist group And Marriage for All, agreed it's time to "redouble our work with people of faith."

That means convincing people that supporting marriage equality is not at odds with their religious framework, and that to do otherwise conflicts with their faiths' concepts of freedom and justice, he said. It would mean building long-term relationships between African-American churches and the LGBT community, he added.

Overall, "support for marriage equality in California has increased by about 1 percent per year since 2000," Sherrill said the study found.

Voters in 2000 approved Proposition 22, which added another statutory ban on same-sex marriage; Prop. 8 was a constitutional ban, pursued by proponents after the California Supreme Court ruled the statutory bans unconstitutional.

Sherrill noted that the growth in support since has come even as Republicans and conservatives haven't moved at all on the issue, indicating a shrinking Republican and conservative populace during these years.