

Religious conservatives cheer ballot wins: Some observers find outcomes mixed

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Results of off-year state elections this November suggest that reports of the religious right's demise are greatly exaggerated, but some observers found the movement's influence on election outcomes rather mixed.

Religious right-backed candidates won Virginia's top statewide offices by wide margins; an opponent of same-sex marriage won the New Jersey governorship; and Maine voters upended a law, passed earlier this year by legislators, that legalized gay marriage. But simultaneously, Washington state voters approved an "everything-but-marriage" law that offers civil unions—with statewide rights identical to marriage—to same-sex couples.

Voters in the Michigan city of Kalamazoo overwhelmingly approved an ordinance that would expand the city's nondiscrimination laws to prevent people from being denied employment, housing or public accommodations on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity.

"Many factors played a role in the outcome of [the November 3] elections, so it's important not to exaggerate the religious right's influence," said Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "But at the same time, Americans need to know that this movement's leaders are still influential in American politics. They haven't given up on their crusade to impose their fundamentalist beliefs on everyone through government action."

Many religious conservatives, meanwhile, portrayed the results as a victory for their cause. "Those who were ready to inscribe 'RIP' on the tombstone of conservative and pro-family values following the 2008 elections got a jolting wakeup call at the polls," said Mathew Staver, founder of the conservative group Liberty Counsel and dean of the law school at Liberty University.

But the day's results were a bit more complicated for social conservatives.

Exit polls in the Virginia and New Jersey gubernatorial contests suggest that abortion, marriage and other issues were not nearly as important to voters as state-government subjects such as transportation, taxes and job creation.

The victorious Republican candidate in Virginia, former state attorney general Bob McDonnell, bested Democratic state senator Creigh Deeds by a big margin. A social moderate, Deeds was widely viewed as having run a weaker campaign than his rival. McDonnell focused his rhetoric on economic and education issues, although he has a long record of opposing abortion and gay rights.

Conservatives welcomed two new Republican governors with ties to conservative Christian organizations: McDonnell, an alumnus of Pat Robertson's Regent University, and Christopher Christie in New Jersey, who was endorsed by the political action committee of the Family Research Council.

In Maine, gay-rights activists admitted their "deep and bitter disappointment" after losing a fight against the state's same-sex marriage law. Earlier this year, the state's legislators and governor made Maine the fifth in the nation—and the fourth in New England—to legalize same-sex marriage.

Opponents of gay marriage used a process that allows balloting on a "people's veto" of laws approved by the Maine legislature. The effort set up a national proxy battle over marriage equality. While the National Organization for Marriage and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland, Maine, poured funds into the anti-gay-marriage effort, national gay-rights groups raised cash and recruited volunteers from across the country to defend the law.

In the 30 states that had previously cast ballots on same-sex marriage, majorities always opposed the practice. But gay-rights advocates had hoped that Maine—in one of the most secular and socially liberal regions of the country— would be more amenable. In the end, however, the state's liberal, urban voters who supported gay marriage by wide margins weren't enough to defeat voters from its heavily rural and Catholic western and northern regions, who voted against gay marriage in large numbers. The repeal effort won with a 53 to 47 percent margin. *-Associated Baptist Press, Religion News Service*