

Issues of Morality, Conscience Divide U.S. Voters in Recent Ballot Initiatives

On Election Day in November, pro-family voters won—and lost—key decisions over drugs, gambling and gay rights

The nation's fractured psyche in the aftermath of the presidential brouhaha parallels a lower-profile division in the moral arena. On Nov. 7, pro-family forces claimed key victories in such issues as drugs, gambling and gay rights. But nationwide, state ballot initiatives resulted in a nearly equal number of defeats.

"I think we're seeing the polarization of America into two camps," said Michael Bowman of the Family Research Council in Washington, D.C. "We have to move away from partisanship and move toward leadership."

One of the biggest shocks of the Nov. 7 election was the defeat of Sen. John Ashcroft of Missouri, a Republican who is also a pro-life Pentecostal. In what was viewed as a sympathy vote, Missourians chose the late Mel Carnahan over Ashcroft. Carnahan was killed in a plane crash a few weeks before the election, and his widow agreed to serve his term.

The past has proven that when Christians get involved in moral issues, they can play a vital role. Former United States Attorney Wev Shea credited the participation of various faiths for helping the grassroots campaign that rejected the legalization of marijuana in Alaska.

However, while Alaskans voted down marijuana, Colorado and Nevada became the seventh and eighth states to approve its medicinal use. Californians approved treatment instead of jail for low-level drug offenders, while Mendocino County, Calif., became the first place in the nation to approve growing up to 25 pot plants for personal use.

The same mixed results occurred with gambling, where four state or local initiatives failed. But four other states sided with the gambling industry, including South Carolina, the newest lottery player.

By huge margins, Nebraska and Nevada banned same-sex marriage, and Maine turned down an attempt to add sexual orientation to its discrimination laws. The state also rebuffed legalization of physician-assisted suicide.

On the minus side, Coloradans voted down a 24-hour abortion waiting period. "N Oregon," a measure to regulate the location of

X-rated businesses through zoning failed. So did an attempt to ban public school instruction promoting homosexual behavior.

Bowman believes the leading election lesson for Christians is to pick their issues carefully. What voters in one state adopt won't necessarily fly in another.

"We saw a lot of places where people wanted to do good for the pro-family

side, but if they lacked money, and the people didn't think it was an issue, they lost," he said.

In the future, they also need to remember the crucial difference political leaders make, said Tom Grey, executive director of the National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling.

The former United Methodist minister pointed to how pro-family forces won Nov. 7 in states where governors like Arkansas' Mike Huckabee sided with them. But if a governor was pro-gambling, they lost.

"This is a predatory product, and if government decides to use it to hurt the citizens, people who try to stop that are outspent and outmuscled," said the Illinois activist. "I'm a realist. Citizen groups without responsible political leadership [siding] with them can't stop it."

Unity is another key for the moral battles that are sure to be contested in various states next year, observed Ron Reno of Focus on the Family.

Even where well-run campaigns had strong church leadership, the laity didn't necessarily join in, he said. Others reflected moral confusion, like the woman in South Carolina who said she knew voting in a new lottery was wrong but wanted to do something good for education.

"Traditional Christian morality continues to ebb in many areas," said Focus' senior policy analyst.

Pearson said the church needs to be "involved."

“Christians need to be involved in the public debate. They need to be present and forceful—but not arrogant,” he said.

They also must be in the forefront of educating the public, said spokesmen for two anti-drug initiatives.

Shea, who worked with Alaska’s campaign to defeat legalization of marijuana, estimated his group was outspent by at least 6-1. Similar lopsided money margins fueled pro-drug movements in other states, which the Anchorage attorney said makes the church that much more important.

“[Public] schools are just not doing the job” of educating students about drugs, he said. “That’s why private and Christian schools make a difference, because of the stands they can take.”

Denver physician Frank Sargent, a Methodist layman who was part of the steering committee for Coloradans Against Legalized Marijuana, noted that the group was able to greatly reduce the pro-pot advocates’ huge lead in opinion polls since last summer through grass-roots efforts such as distributing brochures and speaking in churches.