

Republicans' anti-gay marriage amendment: a cynical and reactionary maneuver

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The attempt to pass a constitutional amendment prohibiting same-sex marriage, which failed in the US Senate on Wednesday, was an exercise in political cynicism and reaction organized by the Bush administration and the Republican leadership in Congress. It was aimed at shoring up political support for the Republicans within the party's 'base,' i.e., the most backward elements of the American population.

In the end, the move to cut off debate in the Senate and bring the measure to a final vote, which required a two-thirds majority to pass, fell 11 votes short of the 60 needed. The outcome, give or take a vote or two, was a foregone conclusion.

The decision to bring the amendment before the Senate shows that the Bush administration hopes to alleviate its current political woes and avert a Republican debacle in the November mid-term elections by playing on the insecurity and prejudices of one section of the population at the expense of the basic rights of another.

Even sections of the American media acknowledged the anti-gay measure was a sop to social layers whose support for the current administration has cooled. Polls indicate declining support for Bush both among moderate Republicans (from 81 to 56 percent since December 2004) and conservatives (from 93 to 78 percent).

The *New York Times* spelled out the political calculations rather bluntly: "There are multiple reasons why Congress is taking up the issues now. The legislative calendar is relatively thin. The Senate majority leader, Bill Frist of Tennessee, who controls the Senate's schedule, has been trying to convince social conservatives that he is one of them in advance of a potential presidential bid. And while the leadership wants election-year votes on social issues, they do not want them too close to November in case they backfire."

The arguments of the right-wing Christian elements are largely delusional. In their version of things, homosexuals, by asking for equal treatment, are waging war on America's 'traditional family values,' with the help of the 'liberal media' and 'activist judges.'

"We have been left with no other choice for the defense of marriage than an amendment to the US Constitution," declared Tony Perkins, president of the ultra-right Family Research Council, at a recent press conference. "This is not about gay marriage, it is an assault on traditional marriage," claimed Bishop Harry R. Jackson, Jr., chairman of the High Impact Leadership Coalition, an organization of black clergy, at the same event. "Gays are aggressive, gays declared war, gays are attacking traditional marriage, and we're saying stop it now."

The debate over the gay marriage measure also served to divert

attention, at least for a few days, from the mounting crisis of the Bush administration in both domestic and foreign policy. The White House and the congressional Republican leadership welcomed a chance to change the subject from US atrocities in Iraq and the deteriorating condition of the American economy.

While the issue was brought before the Senate as a transparent political maneuver, the campaign for an anti-gay marriage amendment is itself deeply anti-democratic.

The amendment would add the following language to the Constitution: "Marriage in the United States shall consist only of the union of a man and a woman. Neither this Constitution, nor the constitution of any State, shall be construed to require that marriage or the legal incidents thereof be conferred upon any union other than the union of a man and a woman."

If this were implemented, it would alter the Constitution in an unprecedented manner to restrict, not expand, the rights of American citizens. A specific group, gay men and women, would be singled out for discriminatory treatment, in violation of the constitutional principle of "equal protection of the laws."

The "legal incidents thereof" language is intended, moreover, to bar not only same-sex marriages, but also civil unions, which might give gay couples equivalent rights to married heterosexuals in such areas as child custody and adoption, property distribution and healthcare benefits. According to one account, the amendment would strip gay married citizens of access to more than 1,138 federal rights, protections, and responsibilities automatically granted to married heterosexual couples.

The Constitution provides absolutely no basis for defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman. That is a religious definition. As one of the anti-gay bigots, the Rev. William Owens, founder of the Coalition of African-American Pastors, explained recently: "Our position is based on Scripture, not political parties or persuasion or opposition." The enshrinement of such a religious attitude in the Constitution would be a flagrant violation of the First Amendment, which prohibits Congress from making any law "respecting an establishment of religion."

The effort to prohibit same-sex marriages goes hand in hand with campaigns to enshrine school prayer in the Constitution, promote the public display of the Ten Commandments and similar measures which target the separation of church and state, a bulwark of democratic rights. These are part of a larger, ongoing effort to eviscerate the Bill of Rights.

While Republican leaders like Rep. Tom DeLay of Texas have ignorantly denied that the separation of church and state was a principle of the framers of the Constitution, the more brazen of the religious fanatics openly call for a repudiation of the Constitution's secular and humanist underpinnings. One of them, according to a sympathetic commentator, "points a finger at the framers of the Constitution of the United States, who self-consciously broke with 1000 + years of Western heritage by not referring to the Trinity and to Christ as King. This was the hole in the dike... through which modern secularism has poured."

The goal of these types, with the open or tacit encouragement of the leadership of the Republican Party, is to transform the US into a theocratic state, in which the principles of the 13th century would prevail.

Such views run counter to the democratic instincts and history of the American people. This is not to deny that, under conditions of growing economic insecurity for tens of millions and the political confusion that prevails in the US, appeals to 'traditional values' and the need to prevent the 'moral ruin of the nation' have had their impact. The Democratic Party, including its liberal wing, has shown itself unwilling and unable to seriously oppose such reactionary appeals.

Nonetheless, the clear trend is for increased popular tolerance about sexual orientation. While 58 percent of the population opposes gay marriage, according to recent polls, only 42 percent supports a constitutional amendment prohibiting it.

As columnist Margaret Carlson notes: "Every year millions of people watch "Will & Grace" and Ellen DeGeneres with no effect on their morals, and slowly make friends with the gay couple who moved in next door. For every homophobe who passes on, a young person grows up comfortable with the lesbians at work fussing over bridesmaids and wedding cakes. And then they register to vote.

"In 1977, a third of Americans opposed equal employment rights for homosexuals. That's down to 9 percent. On gays in the military, that explosive precursor to gay marriage that almost derailed the infant Clinton administration, the Pew Research Center finds that by 2-to-1 people now believe gays should serve openly."

According to Pew, opposition to gay marriage has dropped from 65 percent to 51 percent in 2006. One commentator (religioustolerance.org) observes, "The most recent three surveys show a fairly constant trend towards greater acceptance of same-sex marriage [SSM]. By extrapolating the data forwards in time, one might predict that equal numbers of American adults will support and oppose SSM by February of 2007. After that, one might predict that more adults will support than oppose SSM."

The Bush administration and Republicans like Frist are openly seeking to deprive a considerable portion of the American population of its basic rights. The Urban Institute estimates the gay and lesbian population at 5 percent of the total US population over 18 years old, or some 10.5 million people. It calculates that some 3.1 million gay or lesbian people are living in "committed relationships in the same residence."

The US is a massively complex and diverse society of nearly 300 million people whose demographics have undergone a dramatic

transformation. The attempt by the Christian right to squeeze the American population into some largely mythical 'traditional' framework is as reactionary as it is doomed.

A few statistics will suffice. Some 11 million people are currently living with an unmarried partner, a figure that is probably an undercount. Forty-one percent of American women ages 15-44 have "cohabited" (lived with an unmarried different-sex partner) at some point, 33 percent of all births are to unmarried women, and the number of unmarried couples living together increased 72 percent between 1990 and 2000—that number has increased tenfold since 1960.

As of 2000, the most typical household in the US was an individual living alone. Twenty-seven million American households consisted of one person, compared to 25 million with a husband, wife and child. Only a quarter of households in the US now conform to the "traditional family" notion, a married couple and their children.

The average American now spends the majority of his or her life unmarried. In 2000, 44 percent of US adults were single, compared to 36 percent in 1970. There are 100 million single and unmarried adults in the US (some living alone, some living with partners, families, roommates, etc.).

In any event, the professions of concern for 'family values' and the sanctity of marriage on the part of the American political and media establishment are utterly hypocritical. The social policies of both parties are making life intolerable for millions, tearing families and marriages apart, guaranteeing increases in divorce or separation, domestic violence and child abuse.

In many cases in the US, partners—married or unmarried, same- or opposite sex—hardly see one another, as millions are forced to work longer and longer hours, often in two or three jobs, simply to make ends meet. The absence of affordable daycare, the high cost of medical insurance (entirely out of the reach of some 50 million people), increasing attacks on reproductive rights, the slashing of social programs for working class women and families, the soaring cost of housing—this is the actual program, as opposed to the fantasized version offered up by campaign advertisements, that the Republicans and Democrats alike carry out on behalf of America's families.

The social fabric of the country is being torn apart primarily so that a disproportionate share of society's wealth will continue to flow to the 0.1 percent of the population that has enriched itself beyond imagination over the past several decades.



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