

Acceptance of gay rights is an indication that USA is secularising

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By Adrian Tippetts

This weekend the US media pundits have been asking to what extent [LGBT people swung the vote for Obama](#) in the 2012 elections. It's a difficult call to say any one particular social group might be responsible for stopping the Republicans, whose party platform seemed all about protecting the privileges of mainly white, older, religious, affluent voters. Three-quarters of LGBT people rejected Romney but as the election demographics show — Obama won 71 percent of the Hispanic vote, 55 percent of women, 93 percent of blacks — there are millions of offended parties.

The demographics of diversity and declining religiosity will force the GOP to embrace inclusiveness or die. Pandering to a white evangelical base won't work because the USA is becoming ethnically diverse at a fast pace: collectively, ethnic, religious and sexual minorities make a third of the population and growing; of the 0 to 18 age group, whites make up less than 50 percent.

Some Republicans think a winning strategy is to be more inclusive of ethnic minorities, while remaining opposed to LGBT equality; after all, opponents of marriage equality went 74–25 for Romney. Frank Schubert, the public affairs mastermind who devised several successful anti-marriage referenda, including Proposition 8, [sees the failure of the marriage amendment propositions](#) as a mere setback in blue states. But a simple look at the [statistics for acceptance of LGBT equality over the last decade](#), by social group and by region, should tell him that the tide is turning. The younger generation is overwhelmingly accepting. This year, polls show that there are more supporters than opponents of marriage equality among black and Hispanic, as well as among white voters. Moreover, acceptance is growing in all regions of the USA by 15 percentage points per decade. In the least accepting region of America — including the south eastern states like Mississippi and Oklahoma — 35 percent of the population supports equal marriage. That's where the US national average was in 2004.

Studies show that support for equal rights is higher [when people know someone personally who is LGBT](#) (pdf). By simply coming out to friends, family and colleagues, the prejudices that are used to justify discrimination are blown away. The testimony of real people outweighs the multi-million dollar anti-marriage campaigns waged on fear, as the marriage votes of Maine, Washington, Maryland and Minnesota have shown.

Others are concerned that backing LGBT equality may alienate the conservative base. But what could be more conservative than encouraging gay people to make a lifetime commitment to the person they love? What value could be more traditional than protecting everyone's right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, as guaranteed in the Constitution? For that matter, what could be more anti-patriotic, than [jeering at a soldier](#) serving in Iraq, putting his life on the line, in a televised presidential candidates' debate — an unforgivable outrage that none of the candidates had the decency to condemn?

If ethical principles won't encourage the Republicans to decouple conservatism from fundamentalist religion, maybe the numbers will. As religious commentator [John Shook](#) noted, church attendance

has been falling. In March 2012, a Gallup poll found 32 percent non-religious; fewer than 25 percent go to a religious service more than twice a month. Fox News' [exit poll of religious voters](#) sends a warning: weekly churchgoers favoured Romney 59–39, while occasional congregants went 55–43 for Obama. But the latter outnumber the former, and the gap is set to widen.

Surveys repeatedly show religious allegiance is increasingly detached from behaviour and attitudes. Lay Christians do not share the reactionary views on social issues espoused by their religious leaders. While Catholic priests and bishops broke the law by telling their followers how to vote from the pulpit, more than [four out of five Catholic voters feel no obligation to heed their instruction at the ballot box](#) (pdf). The same Fox survey shows that only 16 percent of Catholic voters think gay marriage is an important issue. And even among evangelicals, the one voting category to whom the Republicans have focused their efforts in appealing to, Obama's share of the vote has actually risen, [from 27 to 30 percent since 2008](#).

Equality is a vote-winner and homophobic bigotry is a vote-loser, because the population abhors such cruelty, and in any case, the same politicians that rail against gay marriage are more likely to get Creationism taught in schools, ban contraception and abortion even in the case of rape, pretend global warming doesn't exist, and so on. After the disaster of the 2012 elections, the Republicans are looking like an offshoot of the Westboro Baptist Church. If the party is to remain a serious force, a secular leadership capable of sidelining the extremist loons and offering rational, reasonable, constructive alternatives is urgently needed.

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