



BIG ISSUE FOR EVANGELICALS

Gay marriage gained Bush black votes

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November 14, 2004

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. -- To eyes attuned to political patterns, Laverne Davis looks like a Democrat.



She's African-American, a woman and a divorced single mom. She voted for Al Gore in 2000 and for Bill Clinton before him.

But Davis, who lives in a state that could have delivered the presidency to either John Kerry or George W. Bush, drew the line at gay marriage and determinedly cast her vote for Bush.

Although blacks have provided a loyal base for the Democratic Party, black evangelicals such as Davis say the Republican Party's steady drumbeat against gay marriage helped erode black support for Kerry in key states and deliver the White House to Bush.

"All the days of my life, I've been a Democrat," said Davis, 49, a Florida social worker, as she left Sunday services at Evangel Temple in Jacksonville. "But I voted for Bush because I believe he is a Christian. I admire him because he's not for gay marriage and he's pro-life. He's strong in his morals."

Exit polling showed that 27 percent of black voters in northern Florida, a Bible belt region stretching from coastal Jacksonville west across the panhandle, said they voted for Bush, according to data compiled for the Chicago Tribune by Edison Media Research/Mitofsky International.

That was in strong contrast with the stated preferences of black voters in Miami, where only 4 percent said they supported Bush.

Though at far lower levels, the preferences of black voters in north Florida vaguely paralleled the preferences of white evangelicals, who voted for Bush with an almost messianic fervor. Bush got 95 percent of their support.

"Moral issues" have long struck a chord among African-Americans, who often express liberal views on social policy but pull to the right on issues involving sexuality.

The Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, once one of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s closest allies, said although he supported Kerry's candidacy, he is an outspoken opponent of homosexual behavior.

"I've spoken out against gay marriage from the pulpit and everywhere else," said Shuttlesworth, a co-

founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Council and pastor of the Greater New Light Baptist Church in Cincinnati. "The Bible says it is an abomination before God."

While both Kerry and Bush said they believe marriage should be between a woman and a man, Bush called for a federal ban on gay marriage. Kerry said states should be free to make their own laws.

To be sure, Democrat Kerry gained the lion's share of the black vote in most of America, topping Bush by an 88 percent to 11 percent edge, according to exit polling reported by CNN.

At Shiloh AME Church, in the cotton country south of Columbia, S.C., James Reese said he voted for Kerry because he felt ignored by the Bush campaign.

"I don't think the Republicans ever worry about coming here to get our vote," said Reese, who owns a tombstone company.

But Kerry did not do quite as well among blacks this year as Al Gore did in 2000, when Gore garnered 90 percent of the black vote nationwide.

This year, in neck-and-neck contests in the battleground states of Ohio and Florida, Bush's ability to turn larger numbers of black voters his way drained critical support from Kerry.

Combined with stronger-than-expected support from Hispanics and women, conservative black voters helped put Bush on the road to victory.

Donnie McClurkin, pastor of Perfecting Faith Church, in Freeport, said Kerry's failure to craft a message that excited black voters on other issues, such as jobs or school funding, provided an opening on morals that Bush exploited.

"There is a moral aspect that was overwhelmingly a part of Bush's appeal," said McClurkin, who appeared in Michigan with Bush during the campaign and sang at the Republican Convention last summer.

"There is no way that black religious people are going to lay aside their convictions for the economy," McClurkin said. "It can't be a decision of the economy over abortion."

In Ohio, several prominent black churches, including the Columbus Christian Center, in Columbus, helped register conservative black voters, then get them to the polls.

"I think Karl Rove was able to mobilize this constituency with the issues of abortion and gay rights," said Ron Walters, a University of Maryland political scientist. "Those issues I think spoke to black Christians. We have a lot of people in the black community who are fundamentalists when it comes to the Bible, and that makes them conservatives on so many of these issues and vulnerable to Rove's appeal."

The Rev. David Forbes, pastor of the Columbus Christian Center, credited Rove, Bush's political guru, with identifying gay marriage as a wedge that would cleave some black voters to the Republican fold.

"When same-sex marriage became an issue, that really began to mobilize people in my coalition," Forbes, who was an alternate delegate at this year's Republican Convention, said to USA Today in September.

Pollster David Bositis, of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a Washington-based think tank that examines black issues, said strong opposition to gay marriage helped boost black support for Bush in Ohio from 9 percent in 2000 to 16 percent in this election. Six in 10 of Ohio's black voters voted for a ballot initiative that would ban same-sex marriages, Bositis said.

"Kerry and the Democrats thought they would just sweep gay marriage under the table, be opposed to it but not say much about it," Bositis said. "That left people who were very much against gay marriage with the impression that it was not important to him, even though it was very important to them.

"The fact is, I don't think the Kerry campaign appreciated the significance of the gay marriage issue and frankly neither did I," Bositis said. "I'm a secular person, so I said, 'Who does gay marriage really affect?' I thought people would be responding to something tangible, like the economy or Iraq."

But Bositis said the support Bush received from black evangelicals hardly spells the end of the Democratic Party's traditional base of African-Americans.

He said Kerry actually did better among blacks nationwide than Bill Clinton did in 1996, pulling 88 percent of black votes this year, versus Clinton's 86 percent eight years ago.

But Bush did 18 percent better among black voters in Florida than he did in the rest of the country, mostly by turning out black evangelical voters.

Derrick Boston, a black Jacksonville resident who attends church regularly and voted for Bush, says he knows why.

"What appeals to me about Bush is that he is not quiet about his beliefs," said Boston, as he walked out of services at Potter's House Christian Fellowship Church. "His response to gay marriage was, 'I'm against it.' He was firm about it."

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