

# Letter from America (december 2008)

by [Sarah Schulman](#)

In the shadow of Obama's fantastic election things went wrong for gay marriage in California and in Florida ! We got these thoughts from our brilliant NY correspondent Sarah Schulman



I had the opportunity to visit California and Florida within the week after Obama's election. Both states went for Obama and against gay rights. While marriage is NOT my issue, the success of anti-gay marriage propositions 8 (in California) and 2 (in Florida) is very bad news for gays and lesbians. Ironically, the film MILK about San Francisco gay leader Harvey Milk documents how he led a successful campaign against a similar anti-gay measure in the 1970's when Proposition Six attempted to make it illegal for gay people to teach in the public schools. Why gays won in the 1970's and lost in 2008 is the question on many people's minds.

One thing that is quite clear is that gay politics has changed enormously. Instead of grass roots, it is now top-down. Organizations that ran the gay campaign against Prop 8 were rooted in national organizations that are not direct action nor mass. They are funded advocacy organizations with small full time staffs that have no constituency involved in actions aside from giving money. Because of this the masses were never activated. The campaign spent 40 million dollars but it was mostly spent on television ads which were disturbingly closeted. Instead of putting gays and lesbians on television to talk about their experiences, the campaign made costly ads with straight people talking about how much they wanted to live in a state where "everyone has equal marriage rights" - in some cases the word "gay" was not mentioned. In Florida, the gay anti-Prop 2 campaign had two different sets of propaganda - one that mentioned the word "gay" and one that did not.

Obama's opposition to gay marriage (even though he also opposed Prop 8) really hurt the gay campaigns because they could not be in coalition with the Obama campaign. Obama said that "marriage is ordained by God to be between one man and one woman" and the Christians played this tape over and over again in automated phone calls to black voters. At the same time the Gay campaign had very little outreach to non-white and non-English speaking constituents.

So a combination of the deterioration of gay politics and Obama's anti-gay marriage position created the current result. Now the 36,000 gay people who got legally married in California are facing the invalidation of their marriages.

Since then Obama has not reached out to gays. He has not appointed any openly gay people to the cabinet. And, most recently, he invited a vile anti-gay and anti-abortion fundamentalist preacher named Rick Warren to pray at the inauguration. Warren has sold 30 million copies of his book. He is very powerful. Warren's church does not allow gay people to belong, and he believes that gays should have discipline and not follow their impulses, in the way that he does not follow his impulse to have "sex with every beautiful woman I see." After wide-spread protests, Obama asked a gay Episcopalian leader to give a benediction at the pre-inaugural concert at the Lincoln Memorial. But when gay Americans turned on the television to see him speak before a concert featuring Beyonce, Pete Seeger, Bono, Mary J Blige etc – he was nowhere to be found. Later it was revealed that the Obama campaign had asked HBO, the broadcaster, to omit his section from the television special. After more outcry the Obama camp said this decision was a mistake. Straight women are doing much better with Obama than gays and lesbians. On his first day in office he set-aside a Bush policy restricting international birth control programs from providing abortion with US funds.