

The anti-gay Federal Marriage Amendment fell short Sept. 30 of the two-thirds majority required for passage in the U.S. House. The vote saw 227 representatives support the measure and 186 oppose it, while 20 did not vote.

The House has been highly polarized along party lines throughout most of this session of Congress, but this vote showed an unusual degree of crossing the aisle in both directions. Black and Hispanic members of both parties were disproportionately among those who simply skipped the vote, while many voted for it.

A total of 27 Republicans opposed the amendment. They generally represent districts from the Northeast or West Coast. But 36 Democrats crossed the other way and voted for the amendment. Among the more troubling votes was that of Harold Ford, 34, a dynamic African American representative from Tennessee who many believe has a greater political future ahead of him.

The 2 1/2 hours of debate that preceded the vote had all of the freshness of a Nick at Nite rerun of a decades-old sitcom, but none of the entertainment value. Social conservatives trotted out their old bromides of the horrors that same-sex marriage would unleash upon the nation.

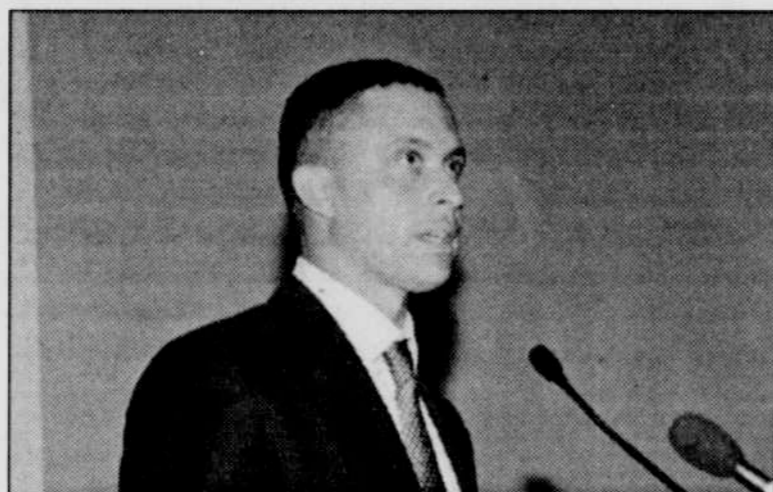
"We are here today to protect marriage" that is "ordained by God," claimed Mike Pence, R-Ind. He declared that in last year's decision striking down state sodomy laws, the U.S. Supreme Court "strongly signaled" the right to same-sex marriage, which is why the amendment is necessary.

Todd Aiken, R-Mo., asserted that "whole cities have suffered decline and crime" because of a weakening of the traditional family. He said

A HOUSE DIVIDED

Federal Marriage Amendment vote exposes irreconcilable differences

by Bob Roehr



U.S. Rep. Harold Ford of Tennessee was among the Democrats who crossed the aisle to vote for the Federal Marriage Amendment

that this amendment was "brought on by activist judges" and that not adopting it would "deny children a mom and a dad."

U.S. Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., noted that the speakers highlighted at prime time during the Republican National Convention in New York were all opposed to amending the Constitution. He cited Vice President Dick Cheney's comments that people should be free to enter into relationships and that states may differ on how to handle those relationships.

Openly gay U.S. Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., called the amendment "an undemocratic act that says that no state can differ from

your view" when it comes to marriage and families.

"I'm sorry that Rush Limbaugh has been divorced three times, but it ain't my fault," he said. "We feel [love] with someone of the same sex, male or female, and we look at your institution of marriage, and we see the joy it brings, we see the stability it brings to society. How do we hurt you if we share in it?" This amendment "plays to the worst fears of the electorate," said John

Conyers, D-Mich. "Everybody knows it is going nowhere" because the Senate refused to pass it, and it is only being brought forward to mobilize the social conservative base on Election Day.

Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., offered a spirited defense of gay and lesbian Americans, saying they are members of our families in every single congressional district. "They deserve to be treated fairly."

Cheryl Jacques, president of the Human Rights Campaign, called the debate and vote

"a pathetic attempt to distract voters from the issues that matter."

The Republican leadership seemed to recognize the double-edged nature of the issue and perhaps took that into account in scheduling the vote for the same day as the first presidential debate. It assured that social conservatives would trumpet the news among their flock even while the mainstream media limited coverage to a smaller story buried deep inside the paper.

"Republican leaders have shamelessly admitted that they pushed this amendment so that they could create a wedge issue to benefit their candidates in this election," said Dave Noble, executive

director of National Stonewall Democrats. "The small minority of Democrats who could not understand that fact, and who voted for this amendment, do not deserve the support of our community."

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United, added: "This amendment posed a grave threat to the separation of church and state, and I'm delighted that it failed. Some religious traditions perform

same-sex unions, and some do not. It's wrong for the government to favor the religious rituals of the majority over the minority." □

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—Barney Frank

BOB ROEHR is a free-lance reporter based in Washington, D.C.

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