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Ballot measures unlikely to change this year's tides

By **Brendan Sasso**
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Ballot measures are unlikely to impact candidates' elections around the country because voters are focused on the economy and the presidential race, according to experts who have studied the issue.

"People care more about the presidential election," said Daniel A. Smith, an associate professor of political science at the University of Florida. He said ballot measures on abortion and gay marriage are unlikely to draw people to the polls who would not have voted anyway.

"This is not shaping up to be a culture wars election — it's about the economy," said Joshua Dyck, assistant professor of political science in the State University of New York system's University at Buffalo.

Voters are set to decide on an unusually high number of social-issues measures this year.

In South Dakota, voters will decide whether to ban abortion except in cases of rape or incest. A Colorado measure goes further, including fertilized eggs in the legal definition of personhood. Arizona and California both have constitutional amendments on the ballot to ban gay marriage, while in Washington, a measure would allow for

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physician-assisted suicide for terminally ill patients.

In 2004, hot-button social-issue measures were seen as energizing evangelical voters, increasing Republican turnout and helping President Bush. Dyck said gay marriage bans in 11 states in 2004 "primed voters to think about marriage issues when they voted and made them more likely to vote for George Bush."

Dyck said that the increase in conservative turnout was especially pronounced in Ohio in 2004, which passed a gay marriage ban with 62 percent of the vote. He said, "When you compare districts in 2000 and 2004, red districts got redder."

But in 2008, the economy is the top concern for voters, a topic largely unaddressed in ballot measures. In an Oct. 13 *Washington Post*/ABC News poll, 53 percent of voters responded to an open-ended question that the economy is the most important issue facing the country; no other answer was above single digits.

According to Smith, ballot measures have more potential to affect congressional races during midterm elections, when turnout is lower and voters are not focused on a presidential race.

Still, Smith said some measures could shape congressional races. "Ballot measures can help frame the issues candidates talk about and set the agenda," he said.

But Smith and other experts agreed that it is unlikely that a ballot measure will be the deciding factor in any races this year.

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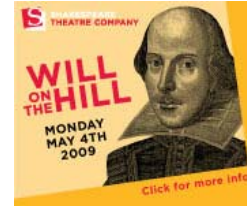
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