

Gay Agenda Takes Beating

— Even in San Francisco

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SAN FRANCISCO—The issues were not the same and the communities involved could hardly have been more different. From conservative Orange County to liberal San Francisco, the legislative agenda of gay men and lesbians took a beating on Election Day.

In Irvine, voters approved a measure to exclude homosexuals from the protection of the city's human rights law. In Concord, suburban voters repealed an ordinance barring discrimination against people with AIDS.

But the most surprising result came in San Francisco, by reputation the most tolerant of American cities. Voters there narrowly rejected a law that would have permitted unmarried "domestic partners" to register their relationships at City Hall.

There were common threads in Tuesday's results. All three measures had been approved by local legislatures—and all three were placed on the ballot by petition drives organized by fundamentalist Christians supported by the Rev. Louis P. Sheldon, head of the Anaheim-based Traditional Values Coalition.

At a news conference in Anaheim, Sheldon cited the California results as evidence that voters do not believe gays and lesbians deserve the same protection given to women and racial and ethnic minority groups. He predicted that politicians who have been sympathetic to gays will re-examine their positions.

"I believe what has happened is that people are saying, 'We want equal rights,' but to give special rights to an insular, distinct minority is pushing voters too far. They are saying, 'Enough is enough, we don't want special rights,'" he said.

Advocates of gay rights were stunned by their electoral shutout but rejected any sweeping conclusions about the future of the gay movement. "It is a sad and depressing day," said Carol Anderson, co-president of Lawyers for Human Rights in Los Angeles. She blamed "complacency" among gay voters after three statewide electoral victories over repressive AIDS initiatives.

Robert Bray, communications director for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, noted that the setbacks in California came the same week that the Massachusetts Legislature approved civil rights protections for gay men and lesbians in a bill that Gov. Michael S. Dukakis has pledged to sign.

The post-election mood in the three affected cities:

- As gays in San Francisco pondered their losses Wednesday, San Francisco businessman Jack Bellingham said he was "serving notice that there is an entity as strong as or stronger than the gay voting block in San Francisco: conservatives and religious people who believe in traditional family values."

The Domestic Partners law, which was unanimously approved by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors earlier this year and signed by Mayor Art Agnos, was defeated by a razor-thin margin of fewer than 2,000 votes, 50.5% to 49.5%.

'False Perception'

Agnos vowed to "come back again and again" with similar legislation. Harry Britt, the city's openly gay president of the Board of Supervisors and the measure's principal sponsor, said it is "a false perception" that gay power is waning in the city.

Dick Pabich, the political consultant who engineered the campaign in favor of the law, blamed the relatively low turnout of voters in an off-year election for the defeat. He also noted that the AIDS epidemic has diverted the attention of gays and killed thousands of sympathetic voters.

"Nearly 5,000 San Franciscans have died of AIDS—certainly more than the margin of defeat," he said.

Thomas F. Coleman, a Los Angeles attorney who heads the Family Diversity Project, said the San Francisco election "is a signal that gay advocates of domestic partnership should try to build coalitions with other groups who would benefit from such measures."

- In Concord, voters of the San Francisco suburb, in the first such referendum in the nation, repealed the AIDS-bias ordinance by 56% to 44%.

Local public health officials who had campaigned hard to preserve the measure said they were surprised by the results.

"It's a hard lesson when fear and hate prevail, but I'm afraid that's the lesson we've learned," said Francie Wise, director of communicable disease control for Contra Costa County.

She noted that everyone from President Bush to former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop had embraced civil rights protection for people with AIDS and those infected with the human immunodeficiency virus.

The Rev. Lloyd Mashore, who helped lead the repeal campaign and rode it to a seat on Concord's council, had attacked the law as "a homosexual agenda presented in camouflaged, palatable, anti-discrimination language."

- In Irvine, Measure N was approved by voters 53% to 47%, separated by about 1,150 votes.

Sheldon, who advocates that gays and lesbians get special therapy to change their "sexual behavior," said he played a role in helping the Irvine Values Coalition pass the measure.

Gays Excluded

Measure N excludes gays from the city's human rights ordinance. The ordinance was passed unanimously by the City Council in 1988 to ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, as well as on the basis of marital status, sex, religion, race or handicap. The coalition focused on portraying homosexuals as child molesters and "recruiters" to the gay community.

Gay rights advocates who opposed Measure N, however, accused the Irvine group of pursuing a "vile," negative campaign that confused voters.

"The passage of Measure N was not, as our opponents have claimed, a victory for family values. It was a victory for intolerance," said the Rev. Fred Plumer, a member of Citizens United, the group opposing the measure. "It was a victory for fear and hatred, and a temporary setback for compassion and human concern."

Times staff writer Lily Eng contributed to this story.

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