

Election '86: One last analysis

by W.C. McRae

An important factor was ignored in all the hype visited upon last month's election. Forget how the Democrats or the Republicans fared: the gay and lesbian community did well. The gay vote in some elections contributed to strategic wins, and no openly gay candidate lost a re-election campaign. However, the real lesson of the election for gay people and their supporters is that mainstream straight politicians suffered not at all for being gay supportive. As Oregonians gear up for passage of a gay and lesbian rights bill this coming year, it will be wise to recall that supporters of gay and lesbian issues in national office did very well in the November 4 elections.

"We've gone from being targets to being players," claims Vic Basile, Executive Director of Human Rights Campaign Fund, a national political action committee for the lesbian and gay community. All 69 co-sponsors of the US House of Representatives and Senate bills guaranteeing gay civil rights were re-elected. New pro-gay senators and representatives were elected, particularly in the West.

The California LaRouche-sponsored AIDS quarantine initiative failed by a huge margin, and two anti-gay initiatives in Washington State didn't even make the ballot.

All three incumbent state governors who have signed executive orders forbidding discrimination against gays in state hiring were re-elected in Ohio, New York, and Rhode Island (the latter a Republican, proving, as did Norma Paulus, that our friends do not sit only on one side of the aisle). In Pennsylvania, the governor-elect has promised to sign a gay rights bill, as has Oregon's Governor-elect, Neil Goldschmidt.

"Active support for gay and lesbian civil rights is clearly not a negative as far as the majority of voters are concerned," claims Basile.

And it ought to make us think. In Washington State, gays and lesbians working for the state are protected against anti-gay discrimination. King County has anti-discrimination statutes, as does the City of Seattle. In Oregon, and in Portland, we have no such protection.

Next year the ACLU will promote an omnibus gay rights bill in Salem. And we will hear from some legislators that, even though they'd like to help, now is not the time, or that electoral considerations dictate caution. "Not now, not this time, and not you."

This past election, nationally and locally, ought to make us question what stand between us and equal rights, homophobia in the masses, or homophobia in legislators.

I have believed for some time that people are more prepared for instituting gay rights than we've been led to think. People are resigned to the expansion of civil rights. They may not like it, but rights are not a popularity contest, and most people realize it.

Political office is, however, a popularity contest. Politicians should not confound their electoral viability with the need for civil liberties. People elect politicians to make difficult decisions for them. At some point we have to believe, and make politicians believe, that we elect people to lead, not just to mirror our bigotry.

The November 4 election was keenly watched by many gays and lesbians. In Oregon, the make-up of the State Assembly will determine passage of a revision of civil rights statutes to include protection of Oregonians

regardless of sexual orientation. We also have a new governor who will (in the best of all possible scenarios) issue an executive order for protection of state employed gays and lesbians, lobby reluctant legislators, and sign the state-wide gay rights bill when it passes the legislature.

In Portland the replacement of City Commissioner Margaret Strachan with former police lieutenant Bob Koch, has realigned local politics into an all-male City Commission. Victories for Gladys McCoy and Polly Casterline have resulted in an all-female County Commission. No one, including either Commission members, knows how the election of new members will affect policy or organization.

We asked political observers from around the state to comment on the election and its implications.

Stevie Remington, Executive Director of the Oregon ACLU, has completed a preliminary head-count of the legislature regarding passage of gay rights legislation. In the Senate, Remington counts 13 "yes" votes, based on past voting history and responses to questionnaires. In the Senate, where 16 votes are needed to carry, one solid "yes" vote was lost, and there are two "unknowns" who have not been polled. In the House Remington estimates 25 positive votes, with 5 "maybes." Thirty-one votes are necessary to pass a measure in the House.

Remington claims that the totals are roughly the same as last spring, when the ACLU Commission on Gay and Lesbian Rights first convened. Whether or not the bill can pass depends on "just how effective the lobbying is." She is encouraged, however, by the recent endorsements and participation of churches.

"The margin might be whether Neil will go out and call in chips," says Remington, referring to Governor-elect Goldschmidt. Remington questioned the priority of a controversial issue such as gay rights in Goldschmidt's agenda; "Neil's agenda is primarily economic." She suggests that Goldschmidt might be well advised to support the bill this legislative session, rather than allow the bill to re-surface next session, immediately before the next gubernatorial election. State legislators, elected every two years, have no such buffer, and may be less likely to back a controversial bill after such close elections as last month's.

Remington expects that Norma Paulus will support the bill. "Norma has never failed us yet," she said.

Barbara McGuire, ACLU commissioner from Eugene, is guarded about optimism over recent elections. "Within the Lane County [Eugene] delegation, supporters didn't gain, didn't lose." The Eugene City Commission has become more conservative, though McGuire doesn't expect the new commission to shift the policies of the previous, more liberal commission.

"Overall, looking at the House, we may have lost ground," for the gay rights bill. "The House will be tougher, and we'll have to go through the Senate first." However, McGuire stresses that gay rights is a non-partisan issue. "There are good Republican women in the legislature who support gay rights." She's equally hopeful that Paulus will continue to actively support the bill.

McGuire is hopeful about an executive order from Goldschmidt, but wonders how high a legislative priority the bill will be for him. "I wish I knew if Neil will push."

Keeston Lowery, Commission member from Portland, claims the Senate "looks very good," but the House is "rather dismal," regarding prospective passage of gay rights legislation next session. "We have to rely on ourselves to pull it through," he says. The ACLU is spearheading the effort, but the

community has to mobilize behind the bill. "It's incumbent on us to find help in the Republican caucus." Lowery assumes "It's full steam ahead, and if we only make it through one house, then so be it."

Lowery expects an executive order from Goldschmidt by early summer guaranteeing non-discrimination in state hiring.

In city government, City Commissioner-elect Bob Koch is a "wild card, but we shouldn't assume he's against our community until he's proved against us. If he turns out to be another Shadburne, he'll be very isolated on the Commission," Lowery said.

Election night November 4 was "one of the most exciting nights in my life." Besides the local and state victories, "We can claim an even greater victory because of what was happening across the nation." Lowery expects the Democratic congressional realignment in Washington to "reset budget priorities."

Kathi Bogan, Commission member from Portland, claims to be "encouraged" by the recent election. Although both gubernatorial candidates "were good friends" the decision to vote for either Goldschmidt or Paulus was difficult for many. However, Bogan expects "pretty significant support" from Goldschmidt for a gay rights bill, since Goldschmidt should acknowledge that he "received lots of support in his campaign from gay people. Neil can't help but add energy," claims Bogan, adding that "the governor's office can make a difference with the assembly."

Bogan expects more Senate support for a gay rights bill than there was in 1983, when gay rights last came to a vote in Oregon. She worries more about the House, where some gay-supportive legislators lost or moved to the Senate. Also, close races in Southern Oregon might make sympathetic legislators less likely to go out on a limb for gay rights.

Much depends on Goldschmidt's lead. "We've got to ask for an executive order, but we've got to be careful when."

Bogan is less encouraged by local elections. "City Commission is going to flounder without Margaret Strachan, and lack compassion without Margaret. There's talk of presenting a women's agenda [to the City Commission] to support progress made in the past, to keep the human service agenda on track."

All in all, Bogan is encouraged by three things. First, the ACLU gay rights initiative is progressing according to schedule. Also, the American Friends Service Committee Gay and Lesbian Task Force is doing valuable work with churches to advocate gay issues. Lastly, the Lesbian Community Project is successfully organizing the women's community in Portland. "These three things would be enough to encourage me, but with a new governor, we have it all."

Billy Russo, Commission member from Roseburg, says politicians in Southern Oregon have tried to make homophobia an election issue, but largely failed. "Joe Lutz built support using homophobia, but it didn't work for Bruce Long," who was defeated by Peter DeFazio in Congressional District 4. DeFazio is gay-supportive. Russo, and other community members from Southern Oregon, were assured by State Senate President John Kitzhaber of Roseburg that he would do everything he could to push the gay rights bill in the next legislative session.

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