

news

Election Results Mixed on Civil Unions



Photo: Barb Dozetos

Governor Howard Dean was declared winner of the Vermont gubernatorial race just a few hours after the polls closed on November 7. The final tally gave him just over 50 percent of the vote.

BY BARBARA DOZETOS

Many were looking at this year's Vermont election as a referendum on the civil union law. If, as pundits say, voters made their decisions based primarily on how they felt about that legislation, the message they sent is unclear.

The incumbent kept the governor's office, and pro-gay candidates won the state constitutional offices. House and Senate races offered both good and bad news for the law's supporters, while the first openly gay candidate to be nominated to the US Senate by a major party was unable to unseat his opponent.

Democratic Governor Howard Dean was easily re-elected in spite of the virulently anti-civil union "Take Back Vermont" positions espoused by Republican candidate Ruth Dwyer. Belying this year's noisier and better-financed campaign, Dwyer fared only slightly better than in her 1998 run against Dean. Progressive Party candidate Anthony Pollina picked up 10 percent of

the total vote and considered that a victory for his fledgling party. Combining the Dean and Pollina numbers, 60 percent of Vermonters voted for a pro-civil union candidate. "Vermonters have said that this state should continue to be a place where we judge people by who they are, not what they are," Dean said in his address to supporters.

The races for Lieutenant Governor, Auditor of Accounts, Secretary of State, and Attorney General were won by vocal civil union supporters from the Democratic Party. Returning Lt. Governor Doug Racine spoke out in favor of same-sex marriage early in 1999, before the state's supreme court issued its decision in the case that led to the civil union law. As a state senator, Auditor-elect Elizabeth Ready voted in favor of the law and also advocates full marriage rights for same-sex couples. Secretary of State Deborah Markowitz and Attorney General William Sorrell, both supporters of the legislation legally acknowl-

edging gay and lesbian couples, retained their offices with little trouble.

Current auditor Democrat Edward Flanagan, the first openly gay person in the country ever elected to a statewide office, lost his bid to become the first openly gay US Senator. "Obviously, the civil union controversy was not what the political doctor would have ordered for my campaign," said Flanagan after his concession speech. "But there's no real way to tell how much impact that one issue had on my race." Flanagan invoked his campaign's canine mascot when he told the crowd, "The bulldog will be back!"

For civil union supporters, the news is both good and bad in the state legislature. Democrats have retained a one-vote majority in the Senate, but Republicans will lead the House of Representatives in January.

Support of the controversial new law seems to have cost some people their seats in the house and senate, but others may have won because of it. In the Sept. primary, Mark Larson, D-Burlington, defeated one of the few Democrats who voted against civil unions in the House. Larson spoke openly about his support for the law and defeated his Republican opponent in the general election.

Bill Lippert, D-Hinesburg, kept his seat, winning an almost identical level of support as in his last run, but he will be giving up the title of Vermont's only openly gay

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Westboro Baptist Church Tours New England

BY BARBARA DOZETOS

A dozen members of the Rev. Fred Phelps' venomous anti-gay Westboro Baptist Church have completed a 'picketing ministry' tour of New England.

On stops in Kennebunk, Maine; Montpelier, Vt.; and Exeter, N.H. members of the congregation made up largely of the Phelps family brandished signs reading "Thank God for AIDS," "Fags Die God Laughs," and the infamous catch phrase for the group, "God Hates Fags."

The reverend's 13-year-old granddaughter, Rebecca Phelps-Roper, and her 11-year-old brother Isaiah helped their mother, Shirley, wave signs and hurl verbal slurs at counter-protestors at each site. "There are fags in the U.S., here and everywhere else, and it's an abomination," the younger child told reporters in Montpelier.

A group of barely a dozen counter protestors were on hand in Montpelier. Discussions on Mountain Pride Media's VTPridentet listserv reflected the GLBT community's unwillingness to give Phelps' message credibility by even showing up.

Several expressed dismay at involving children in the so-called ministry. "This is nothing short of child abuse," said one Vermonter, "It's criminal."

Barbara Emerson of Burlington made trips to Montpelier and Kennebunk. "I needed to tell people we're not going to put up with this," she said. "People need to see that most people of faith do not agree with what these people are saying."

The Topeka, Kan. based group targeted a church in Maine for its support of the state's ballot measure that would have made discrimination based upon sexual orientation illegal, had it passed. The Vermont stop was to demonstrate disapproval of the state's civil union law.

In New Hampshire, it was Phillips Exeter Academy under fire from the Westboro representatives. The preparatory school changed its policies this summer to allow gay and lesbian faculty and staff to serve as dorm parents.

In no location was the group joined by locals supporting their message. ▼



Photo: Barb Dozetos

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