

BAND OF BELIEVERS HOW A PASSIONATE ISSUE MOBILIZED ORDINARY CITIZENS IN LISBON, AND A STRATEGIC FIGHT TO REPEAL GAY RIGHTS WAS WON IN RURAL MAINE.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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In fact, few Maine towns last Tuesday supported the "people's veto" as firmly as Lisbon. In a referendum decided by just 7,000 votes statewide (about 2 percentage points), the people of Lisbon voted 1,425 to 704 - better than a 2-to-1 margin - to repeal the gay-rights law easily passed by the state Legislature and signed by Gov. Angus King last year.

Still, experts say, this conclusion has emerged: The effort to repeal the gay-rights law won due to a textbook application of coalition-building. The "vote yes" campaign ably brought together Maine's religious right and mainstream political conservatives who were concerned about giving gays and lesbians "special rights" under the law.

FULL TEXT

Finished reciting the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Rev. Kenneth MacDonald leaned forward at his desk and repeated the moral one more time for the sake of clarity.

The Lord, he declared, would have left those cities alone if he had found but 10 virtuous men.

For the 61-year-old pastor of the Lisbon Free Baptist Church, the import of the story is all too clear: Sometimes the fate of a community - or a state - hinges on a small but committed band of believers.

"Just 10," MacDonald reiterated, in his soft voice. "That's all it takes."

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In fact, few Maine towns last Tuesday supported the "people's veto" as firmly as Lisbon. In a referendum decided by just 7,000 votes statewide (about 2 percentage points), the people of Lisbon voted 1,425 to 704 - better than a 2-to-1 margin - to repeal the gay-rights law easily passed by the state Legislature and signed by Gov. Angus King last year.

It was one of the state's most prominent political moments: Maine became the first state in the country to repeal a

gay-rights law. The New York Times, CNN and other national media splashed quotes from Mainers as they contradictorily described the election as proof of Maine's fine moral backbone, or as evidence of festering intolerance.

In fact, it's tough to make an ironclad case for either position. Only 30 percent of the state's registered voters took part in the one-issue election. That's less than half of the voter participation that Maine generated during the 1996 presidential election.

Still, experts say, this conclusion has emerged: The effort to repeal the gay-rights law won due to a textbook application of coalition-building. The "vote yes" campaign ably brought together Maine's religious right and mainstream political conservatives who were concerned about giving gays and lesbians "special rights" under the law.

"What we've seen nationally is the same thing - the coalescing of two distinct groups," said Georgetown University professor of politics Clyde Wilcox. "One is morally opposed to homosexuality. They think it's just wrong.

"The other group thinks it's wrong to discriminate, but doesn't want to extend 'special rights' to anyone," Wilcox continued. "The two groups don't agree a lot of the time, but they both oppose gay rights."

These two forces were clearly at work in Lisbon, an aging mill town of about 10,000 people that sits on Route 196, halfway between the Lewiston and Bath-Brunswick areas.

Local residents say the "vote yes" campaign won here thanks to a small band of self-organized volunteers who saw it as their religious and political duty to oppose homosexuality. It was an army of Lisbon irregulars - volunteers who had never before been active in political movements.

"At first, I didn't want anything to do with the referendum," said Bob Brewin, a member of MacDonald's church who got involved by putting leaflets on cars. "But then I figured if I got them the right information, people could make an informed choice."

Brewin and other members of Lisbon's newest political machine say they are ready to take up the cause again when - not if - Maine's 20-year struggle over gay rights resumes.

Law unneeded, some say

Lisbon's Main Street is part Mayberry RFD, part classic Maine. It's home to a post office, diner, barbershop and Frank Anicetti's "Kennebec Fruit Co." - the Moxie soft drink capital of the world.

The people who live here view themselves as tolerant people opposed to discrimination. That's why, they say, the gay-rights law was repealed: It wasn't needed, at least not here.

"There's no disharmony in this community, no hate crimes or hate talk," said Town Manager Curtis Lunt. "I think the feeling here was that we don't discriminate, but we don't see the need for special rights, either."

"The biggest thing was equal rights," agreed Pat Austin, who owns a beauty salon across from Town Hall. "They didn't want gays to have special rights."

That kind of talk pains the leaders of Maine Won't Discriminate, the group that led the statewide opposition to the referendum. Maine Won't Discriminate spent tens of thousands of dollars on television and radio ads to dispel the notion that the new law gave gays and lesbians more rights than anyone else.

"We did our phone calls," said spokesman Joe Cooper. "We did our mailings, our TV ads. We got our signs up across the state. We were there (in Lisbon), but we just couldn't combat the fire and brimstone from the pulpit."

But in fact, Maine Won't Discriminate was waging a different type of war. It relied on TV ads featuring Gov. King, who said he wasn't telling voters what to do, but he would vote against repealing the law.

Maine Won't Discriminate's mass-media campaign didn't slow the street fighters of Lisbon, who came armed with a seemingly endless supply of palm cards, homemade signs and bright bumper stickers.

Neighbor to neighbor

Like Bob Brewin, Steve Connor had always shied away from politics.

Connor, a Topsham woodworker who regularly attends the Rev. MacDonald's church in Lisbon, made the jump to becoming a political activist shortly before the referendum.

"I was in church two weeks ago and was (convinced) by the Holy Spirit to make a sign and put it up in front of my house," said Connor, 46. "But something was gnawing at me, telling me I wasn't doing enough."

So, Connor put his woodworking skills to use and made about 100 "Vote Yes" campaign signs. He brought 30 signs to church and distributed the other 70 around the Topsham-Lisbon Falls area.

Then he kept going, and made 200 telephone calls to identified "vote yes" supporters in Richmond and Yarmouth, urging them to vote their beliefs.

Connor did all of this during the last two weeks of the campaign.

"I saw a lot of people just sitting back and not doing anything about this," he said. "This is the first time I ever did anything politically. It felt good. It felt like I helped."

Dale Crafts, who owns a Lisbon auto dealership with his brother, experienced a similar transformation.

Without any prompting, he called the Christian Civic League and the Christian Coalition of Maine and volunteered to help. When they sent him lists of telephone numbers, he recruited 13 of his friends from the Open Doors Baptist Church to lend a hand.

"Everybody was making calls, fitting them in whenever they had the time," said the 39-year-old Crafts. "We did this all in the last week and a half. We worked hard. We got through to a lot of people."

According to Georgetown University's Wilcox, who has written several books on Christian fundamentalism and American politics, the church-by-church approach used in Lisbon has proven itself effective in other parts of the country where debates over gay rights have been waged.

"It's more a social movement than a political movement in that it's chaotic, decentralized and person-to-person," Wilcox said.

It's an odd mix, too. Members of the Christian right and the more mainstream conservatives who oppose affirmative action could dislike one another, if they dug deeply enough.

"Remember," Wilcox said, "some of these churches think that other members of the (anti-gay rights) coalition aren't going to make it to heaven. So if the coalition leadership just hands out materials and raises funds, it avoids the interdenominational differences that exist."

Wilcox noted that churches are, in some ways, campaign offices from the very start.

"They have a great infrastructure already in place," he said. "They have weekly meetings, regular meeting spaces and people who are already of similar minds."

Cooper, of Maine Won't Discriminate, agreed that in some ways the "Vote Yes" side had an organizational advantage in Maine's small towns during the run-up to the referendum.

"We had to spend a lot of time establishing a presence in different parts of the state," Cooper said. "They had the churches already there. The offices and the audience were already there."

Despite the active role the churches played in the referendum, some Lisbon residents said, it would be a mistake to give the religious right too much responsibility for the outcome.

Most of the town's vote can be explained by the argument over special rights, they contend, not religious zeal.

King generates backlash

And no one, it seems, wanted Gov. Angus King to tell them how to vote.

"There was very little campaigning," said Frank Anicetti, who owns the Kennebec Fruit Co. on Main Street. "I think some of the people here just got tired of all the commercials on television, especially the one featuring our governor. That generated a lot of backlash."

"The governor was influential," the Rev. MacDonald agreed. "Some people in church told me they were voting yes simply because Gov. King told them to vote no."

"I just voted how I felt," said Warren Greim, who plays cribbage each morning at a local restaurant but hears little political banter. "I think most people knew how they were going to vote all along."

Another cribbage player, Gene Brown, disagreed.

"Whether people want to say it was religious or not, I think it was the churches that carried it," said Brown, a Main Street real estate agent. "I think you'll find it was a couple of ministers who got the people out."

Some ministers apparently did more than others.

The Rev. George Darling, of Lisbon United Methodist Church, said he wished he had tried harder, given the results of the election.

"My position was the other side," he said. "I tried to encourage support for the bill that had been enacted by the Legislature."

Darling's church, for instance, tried to hold a series of public seminars on the problems gay and lesbian people face in towns like Lisbon.

"I even put up fliers in the stores," Darling said. "Trouble was, once I got the fliers up, they didn't stay there very long. Someone would come in and ask, 'Why do you got that in your window?' It was down the next day."

That kind of pressure worries Darling, who fears the town's landslide vote will further embolden persecutors to target people thought to be gay. While he said he's unaware of any hate crimes in Lisbon, Darling senses "a climate of fear and unfriendliness" in town.

"I'm really concerned about our gay and lesbian teen-agers who may feel now that they've got no place to turn to or talk," Darling said. "I wish it had turned out differently."

Meanwhile, the new activists, fresh off their victory, look forward to more challenges - on gay rights, or other issues.

"This has motivated me," said Crafts, the local car dealer. "This has motivated a lot of people."

Connor, the woodworker, predicted his sign-making talents will come in handy again.

"If the need comes and I'm called again, I am ready," he said. "I have been energized. And I think this will come up again." ----- FOR MORE on both sides of the gay-rights issue, see Press Herald Online: www.portland.com "I think the feeling here was that we don't discriminate, but we don't see the need for special rights, either." Town Manager Curtis Lunt

Illustration

PHOTO: 4 color MAP: Lisbon Falls; Maine; Caption: Staff photos by Doug Jones The Rev. Kenneth MacDonald of the Lisbon Free Baptist Church used his pulpit to get out the "yes" vote to repeal the state's gay-rights law. Steve Connor, a Topsham woodworker, put his skills to use by making about 100 "Vote Yes" campaign signs and distributing them around the Topsham-Lisbon Falls area. p.16A Dale Crafts, who owns a Lisbon auto dealership with his brother, displays "Vote Yes" bumper stickers. He also helped mobilize the "yes" vote through a telephone network he recruited from church members. p.16A "There was very little campaigning. . . . I think some of the people here just got tired of all the commercials on television, especially the one featuring our governor. That generated a lot of backlash." Frank Anicetti, owner Kennebec Fruit Co. on Main Street, Lisbon Falls p.16A Staff art Lisbon Falls p.16A Staff art How they voted Here is how each of Maine's 16 counties, and some of its largest communities voted Tuesday on the ballot question asking voters whether they wanted to repeal the state's gay rights law. Yes No % of voters who voted Androscoggin 14,084 8,742 30.5% Auburn 2,786 2,295 31.1% Lewiston 4,766 3,119 29.2% Aroostook 9,888 3,552 23.4% Presque Isle 1,119 618 21.6% Cumberland 26,878 42,088 34.0% Brunswick 1,663 3,390 37% Portland 4,963 12,232 30.6% So.Portland 2,486 3,704 35.2% Westbrook 1,891 1,838 33.6% Topsham 969 1,061 33% Franklin 3,502 2,470 25.5% Farmington 611 704 21.1% Hancock 5,253 7,271 30.2% Ellsworth 669 769 26.8% Kennebec 12,847 12,453 29.2% Augusta 1,810 2,015 25% Waterville 811 1,579 27% Knox

4,738 5,524 34.3% Rockland 793 772 27.2% Lincoln 4,994 4,880 36.4% Wiscasset 622 463 36.5% Oxford 6,700 4,339 29.5% Rumford 418 789 NA Penobscot 17,314 11,619 26.5% Bangor 2,568 3,167 27.6% Piscataquis 2,405 1,385 27.5% Dover-Foxcroft 512 428 28.4% Sagadahoc 4,270 4,622 35.9% Bath 868 1,279 37.2% Somerset 5,707 3,458 23.5% Skowhegan 747 649 19.1% Waldo 4,877 4,010 31.5% Belfast 736 842 28.2% Washington 4,065 2,051 22.1% Calais 345 154 16% York 16,956 19,146 27.7% Biddeford 1,740 1,765 24.1% Saco 1,445 1,983 27% Sanford 1,747 1,675 29.8% Statewide 144,478 137,610 29.6%* *Based on Nov. 1997 voter registration p.16A

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