

POLITICS & POLICY

Despite Clinton's Support, Gay-Rights Movement Is Facing Backlash Campaigns at the State Level

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 WASHINGTON—If gay-rights activists thought the arrival of a sympathetic president would significantly ease their political battles, they now have been disabused of that notion.

At the outset of President Clinton's second year, the gay-and-lesbian-rights movement finds itself fighting a significant backlash. In eight states, stretching from Florida to Washington, opponents are pushing to put initiatives designed to curb gay and lesbian rights on the fall ballot.

More such state initiatives still could pop up in this election year, and some state legislatures and cities are likely to take up legislation with similar goals. And in response, the gay rights movement has geared up an extensive national campaign to fight back.

All told, 1994 is shaping up as a more crucial year in determining the status of the gay-rights movement than was 1992, the year Mr. Clinton was elected, or 1993, the year of the much-celebrated debate over gays in the military. And the important battles won't be fought inside Washington, but in the state skirmishes that are pitting gay-rights activists against religious conservatives.

"The real struggle for gay and lesbian rights isn't going to happen inside the Beltway," says Sue Hyde, an organizer for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's "Fight the Right" program. "I think it'll be a very important year." Her forces have just won the year's first big battle in Maine, where a petition drive to put an initiative limiting gay rights on this year's ballot fell short of the number of signatures required by the Jan. 31 deadline.

Important Juncture

For their part, opponents of gay rights agree the struggle is at an important juncture. "We know that our people and the majority of the populace in America will not endorse homosexuality as a special lifestyle," says Rev. Lou Sheldon, head of the California-based Traditional Values Coalition, which has been active in pushing state ballot initiatives. "There's a clear message in America that people are saying no."

A Gay-Rights Backlash?

Gay-rights initiatives voted on by localities in 1993:

CITY	PROPOSAL	OUTCOME
Cincinnati	Amendment repealing gay-rights protections in a human-rights statute	Approved, 62%-38%
Lewiston, Me.	Referendum repealing ordinance extending human-rights protections to cover sexual orientation	Approved, 68%-32%
Portsmouth, N.H.	Non-binding referendum to extend anti-discrimination ordinance to include sexual orientation	Defeated, 59%-41%
Oregon City, Ore.	Charter amendment blocking special civil-rights protections for gays and lesbians	Approved, 53%-47%
Kelzer, Ore.	Charter amendment blocking special civil-rights protections for gays and lesbians	Approved, 55%-45%

Source: People for the American Way

In narrow terms, the main fight at the moment is over whether gays and lesbians will be granted specific legal protections against discrimination. The seminal battle in this war was fought in Colorado two years ago, when voters approved a constitutional amendment prohibiting anti-discrimination laws for gays and lesbians. That amendment has been knocked down in the courts, though, and its fate hangs in judicial limbo.

But in the meantime, similar state initiatives are sprouting. Groups in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Arizona, Michigan, Nevada and Missouri are mounting drives to put Colorado-style initiatives on their state ballots. A proposed constitutional amendment in Florida, and the initiative that fell short in Maine, would take a different tack. They would strictly limit the scope of anti-discrimination laws to a specific list of groups, which pointedly excludes gays and lesbians.

The backers of those initiatives say they are simply trying to stop gays and lesbians from getting special legal rights that would represent a public endorsement of their lifestyle. "Homosexuals are covered under the same rights as everybody else is covered," says the Rev. Don Wildmon, head of the American Family Association, which has state and local affiliates active on ballot initiatives. "Simply because they want to go to bed with somebody from the same sex doesn't mean they are entitled to special rights. . . . Homo-

sexuals, as you well know, have a high profile right now. But it's beginning to backfire."

Gay-rights advocates, though, see the local initiatives as part of a much wider effort by the religious right to push its broader social agenda. "People who look for hot-button issues around which they can organize their people and build their base look for issues with high emotional content," says Ann Lewis, a longtime Democratic Party activist and a gay-rights supporter. "They have tried and failed on other [issues]. . . . They've now moved on" to gay rights.

But the nation's most powerful conservative Christian political organization, Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, says that while it supported the Colorado initiative in 1992, it isn't driving the current crop of initiatives. "We're not really pushing them," says Ralph Reed, the coalition's

executive director. "They're just out there happening."

Whatever the forces driving the state and local initiatives, the gay and lesbian community is mounting an increasingly sophisticated counter-attack. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has launched its Fight the Right Project to train local activists and do grass-roots campaigning. Project leaders conducted a six-month tour at the end of last year in which they covered 100,000 miles and 15 states, training some 3,000 community activists. At the same time, a new national organization, the Gay and Lesbian Americans, is just forming here to link grass-roots activists around the nation and push a federal gay-and-lesbian-rights bill that would head off some of the state-level efforts.

Key Florida Fight

In the meantime, the most important of the 1994 state fights is likely to occur in Florida. There, leaders of the state's American Family Values organization are struggling to gather 429,000 signatures by the end of July to put on the state's November ballot the initiative excluding gay and lesbian rights from the state's anti-discrimination statutes. "It's not an impossible task, but it's an extreme uphill battle," says David Caton, chairman of the American Family Political Committee of Florida.

Mr. Caton says the initiative is designed to "head off" new attempts to expand the state's civil rights law to include language on sexual orientation. "We think there's a new style of behavior-oriented groups that are trying to empower themselves by inclusion in discrimination laws," he says.

Ms. Hyde of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force terms Florida "an extremely important, pivotal state. As it plays a big and important role in national and presidential politics, so it will play a bellwether role in assessing the state of gay and lesbian rights in the country."