

The stunning defeat of the landmark domestic partners law this week brought into question San Francisco's reputation as an international haven for gays and lesbians.

The city's gay neighborhoods are still trying to recover from their anger and disappointment over the outcome, and they are concerned that the vote could damage San Francisco's image as a nucleus of gay power and the most tolerant of American cities.

"Nationally, the gay and lesbian community look to San Francisco as a safe haven, they look to San Francisco for leadership as a political model," said Thomas Coleman, executive director of the Los Angeles-based Family Diversity Project. "People will think the gay community is not as strong as we thought it was."

Second Try Expected

But political observers on both sides of the issue say that although the vote exposed the limits of the local gay community's strength, it in no way represents a reversal of the gains of the past 20 years. In fact, the community is virtually unanimous in its resolve to expand its base of support and get a domestic partners law approved next year.

"I don't want one person in Kansas or Texas or Mississippi to think that San Francisco is not the great city it was before," said Supervisor Harry Britt, who wrote the partners law. "San Francisco is not gone. The lesbian and gay community is not gone. Human rights are alive and well in this town."

Britt's opinion was echoed across the country in Washington, D.C. "We are extremely disappointed but we're not defeated," said Urvasi Vaid, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "This is a temporary setback for the gay and lesbian community. I have the utmost confidence that we will revisit this issue again and again and again until we realize a recognition of our rights."

Proponents of a law recognizing gay relationships deny that the defeat portends a new intolerance among San Franciscans. "Not at all," Mayor Art Agnos said. "When you take a look at the history of civil rights issues that have been put on the ballot, they're always a struggle."

50 Percent Gay Turnout

Local gay leaders say they will put the measure on the ballot next year and are confident that it will pass. Tuesday's election brought out as many gay voters as the gay community had hoped for — more than 50 percent in gay neighborhoods — and either the June primaries or the November elections next year will attract more liberal voters, they say.

Still, they face a formidable task. An analysis of the vote suggests that San Franciscans, though generally tolerant of gay civil rights issues, were not ready to acknowledge that homosexual relationships are equal to heterosexual marriage.

Although an overwhelming 81 percent of voters approved an advisory measure asking that the city continue AIDS programs — Proposition U, on the same ballot — only 49 percent were in favor of allowing gays and unmarried straight people to legally register their relationships with the city.

Even the most conservative precincts, such as those in the Sunset and Richmond districts, supported Proposition U while trouncing the domestic partners law, pollster David Binder said.

Resistance to 'Gay Marriage'

"It's one thing to take care of the sick or the vulnerable, but it's quite another to endorse or support the notion of legitimizing gay relationships," said Carole Migden, fund-raiser for the measure and chairwoman of the Democratic Central Committee.

"You can't say these people are outright bigots against gay people, but they're not willing to go along with gay marriage," said Paul Melbostad, a commissioner with the Board of Permit Appeals, who had been planning to register at City Hall with his partner of six years.

The gay community had hoped that its alliance with minorities and heterosexual liberal voters would carry the measure. Instead, the vote, closely watched around the country, encouraged conservatives and fundamentalist churches to redouble their efforts against gay rights.

Conservative View

"I think its going to do a lot for the city of San Francisco," said Leslie Dutton, chairwoman of the Santa Monica-based California Pro-Family Women's Coalition. "People have this picture conjured up of the gay pride parade, and the whole city filled with those people marching down the street. Now they'll see that there are ordinary citizens involved in the process."

Jack Bellingham, who campaigned against the law, said the victory has encouraged him to consider a run for San Francisco supervisor. "The gay bloc has reached its zenith," he said. "We were up against Art Agnos, the Board of Supervisors, the whole political process, and we won. We want a voice in City Hall."

But Agar Jaicks, former chairman of the Democratic Central Committee, said that in some ways the defeat diminishes San Francisco's reputation as "an island of civility," as it was called by the late Representative Phillip Burton.

"It's a sad, sad day when the rest of the community can't grasp the feelings of tenderness (gay people) have for one another," said Jaicks, who is not gay. "I'm sorry, and I apologize for the rest of my community for their lack of enlightenment."

The San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed the domestic partners bill in May by a vote of 10 to 0, and the law was to take effect in July. But a petition circulated by opponents containing more than 27,000 signatures suspended the law and placed the matter before the voters.

Reasons for Defeat

The election went contrary to all the major opinion polls, which indicated that the majority of voters support domestic partners. Analysts say the measure was defeated because two weeks of campaigning were lost after the October 17 earthquake and because off-year elections attract the most conservative voters.

Many of those voters were convinced that the law would eventually cost taxpayers money. Aside from allowing partners to register, it would have given cohabiting city employees bereavement leave and hospital visitation rights. The city is considering separate legislation extending health benefits to partners of city workers.

The defeat in San Francisco may hamper the efforts of other communities that are currently considering domestic partner laws of their own, including Philadelphia, Minneapolis and Washington, D.C.

Coleman of the Family Diversity Project, who teaches a class on domestic partners at the University of Southern California Law Center, said the public may be willing to extend certain employment benefits to unmarried partners but may not be ready to condone anything that appears to be "gay marriage."

Domestic Partners Defeat Upsets S.F.'s Image as Gay Mecca

San Francisco Chronicle

Saturday, November 11, 1989

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