

Maine repeals gay rights law

AUGUSTA, Maine (AP) — Voters on Tuesday made Maine the first state to repeal its gay rights law.

Unofficial returns from 588 of 663 precincts, or 89 percent, showed 131,372 or 52 percent voting for repeal and 121,958 — 48 percent — voting to retain the gay rights law.

State officials predicted a low turnout for the single-issue election, and both sides were counting on their field organizations to deliver friendly voters to the polls.

Maine lawmakers enacted a bill last spring adding sexual orientation to the protected classifications in Maine's 25-year-old human rights act.

As signed by Gov. Angus King, the measure would bar discrimination against gays and lesbians in employment, housing, public accommodations and credit.

But a successful people's veto drive, as provided for in the state constitution, blocked implementation of the new law.

Repeal advocates led by conservative Christian groups collected more than 58,000 signatures to put the issue on state ballots.

The campaign leading up to Tuesday's vote was relatively low key, with limited media advertising and only scattered debates between representatives of the two sides.

January ice storms that disrupted utility service in most of the state also effectively muffled political activity for weeks.

Just over two years ago, Maine voters turned down a proposal by anti-gay-rights activists to freeze existing protections in the state human rights act. The proposal lost by 53 percent to 47 percent.

Independent opinion surveys in recent months have found that close to a two-thirds statewide majority now favors gay rights in Maine.

The survey results, however, were dismissed by repeal proponents in this winter's campaign. And defenders of the gay rights measure urged their allies not to be lulled into complacency by the survey numbers.

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