

Catholic leaders take stands on ballot issues

By Nancy Frazier O'Brien
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Much of the news about referendum questions on this year's state ballots has centered on California's anti-illegal immigration initiative and Oregon's proposal to permit physician-assisted suicide.

But Catholic leaders also have taken stands on issues that include abortion, gay rights, gambling, health care, crime and taxes.

A wide range of Christian and Jewish leaders have united with Catholic leaders to oppose both major West Coast initiatives.

In Oregon, proponents of Measure 16 — which would allow doctors to prescribe, but not administer, lethal drugs for terminally ill adults — have targeted the Catholic Church in their ads, which urge Oregon voters "not to buy the garbage the Catholic Church is putting out."

But the Rev. Rodney Page, executive director of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, called the ad campaign "a cynical, deliberate attempt to mislead voters" and said it was also designed to "manipulate religious prejudice." Ecumenical Ministries is an association of 17 Christian denominations.

Jewish, Muslim and some Buddhist leaders also have taken a stand against Measure 16, Page said.

In California, the most hotly debated ballot question is Proposition 187, which would deny public education, government-funded nonemergency health care and other services to illegal immigrants. The state's Catholic bishops have been among those leading opposition to the proposal.

At a press conference with Jewish and Protestant leaders, Bishop William K. Weigand of Sacramento said he opposes Proposition 187 because of his concern for "the human dignity and the sacredness of all our people, including those who happen to be illegal immigrants." He also said he was worried about the "financial and social costs" of the initiative.

Bishop R. Pierre DuMaine of San Jose, writing in the October issue of his diocesan newspaper, did not address Proposition 187 directly but said Catholics who criticize new immigrants to this country "are largely ignorant or forgetful of our own history."

The California Catholic bishops also opposed the state's other major initiative, Proposition 186, which would create a health insurance system paid for and run by the state. The bishops said

that they have long supported health care reform in the state, but Proposition 186 does not fit the bill.

"We believe it is better to delay temporarily the realization of values we have sought for 70 years than to put in place permanent constructs and difficulties that will be years in the undoing," they said.

The bishops specifically criticized Proposition 186's provision that the state "must pay for any abortion for a woman unable to pay for her own" and its failure to allow taxpayers to refuse to pay for abortions.

In Oregon, a second issue that drew Catholic reaction was Measure 13, the so-called anti-gay rights initiative.

Archbishop William J. Levada of Portland and Bishop Thomas J. Connolly of Baker said Measure 13 "is not a proper vehicle" to address the concerns expressed by many Oregonians about legal recognition of homosexual marriage and marriage benefits to homosexuals, inclusion of homosexuality in diversity programs at schools and the teaching of homosexuality as an acceptable alternative way of life.

"We remain convinced that the legitimate objectives which many supporters of Measure 13 seek to ensure should not be pursued through constitutional

amendments or legislation which would prevent society from protecting individuals like homosexuals from discrimination in regard to basic rights such as employment and housing," they said.

A similar proposal was before voters in Idaho, where Bishop Tod D. Brown of Boise said he could support neither Proposition 1 as written nor future efforts to enact legislation "to create a new protected class based on sexual orientation."

He said Proposition 1, if enacted, "would contribute to attitudes of intolerance and hostility in Idaho directed at homosexual citizens and is potentially discriminatory."

The issue arising on the highest number of state and local ballots Nov. 8 was gambling. Most Catholic leaders have opposed efforts to increase gambling opportunities in their states, although some have remained neutral on the specific ballot questions.

Gambling initiatives face voters locally or statewide in New Mexico, Colorado, South Dakota, Iowa, Missouri, Florida, South Carolina, Rhode Island, Wyoming and Massachusetts. The future of gambling in various other states — including Pennsylvania and Texas, two of the most populous in the country — may depend on who is voted into office this year.

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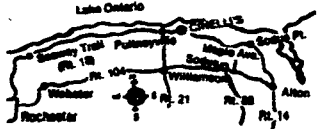
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Many causes, few solutions to problem of voter apathy

By Mark Pattison
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Anyone who's not going to vote in the Nov. 8 elections can skip this article.

That leaves only about a third of us, if the last midterm elections in 1990 are any indication. The prospects for 1994 don't look much better.

Although "running" may be too strong a term, voter apathy is running rampant. Clearly, adults are staying away from the political process in larger numbers with nearly every election.

How, in what is so often called the greatest democracy in the world, could such a malaise settle in?

The U.S. Catholic Conference Administrative Board tackled the issue in its 1991 paper, "Political Responsibility: Revitalizing American Democracy."

It saw "increasing public cynicism which too often dismisses the role of government and ridicules public officials in sometimes understandable but often misguided frustration with all politics."

John Carr, director of the USCC Department of Social Development and World Peace, sees a number of ills.

"There's a lot of cynicism about campaign financing," whose reform was stalled in the waning days of Congress this fall, Carr said, and about "the power of political money" that put health care and other issues in gridlock.

Nor is the media spotless in all this. "Scandal crowds out the substance," Carr said. "We know a lot more about White-water than welfare reform."

Prospective voters themselves bear some responsibility, too, Carr said. He cited a poll of Virginia voters who said they cared about the issues in the ballyhooed Senate race between Chuck Robb and Oliver North — but couldn't say where the candidates stood on them.

"I think there's enough blame to go around for everybody," Carr said.

Eugene R. Declercq, chair of the political science department at Augustinian-run Merrimack College in North Andover, Mass., said negative campaigns are a turnoff.

"I don't think we have decidedly worse candidates now than we did 20, 30 years ago," Declercq said. "Voters might think so because that's all they hear."

The belief that one voter can make a difference was frequently cited by sources interviewed by Catholic News Service.

"I look at two candidates, and I don't like either one of them, or they don't make that much difference," is a common voter sentiment, Declercq said, which reduces the incentive to vote.

The sense of alienation is most acutely felt by the old, the poor, and minorities. But it's their votes that make a difference, said David Bositis, senior research associate at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

Becky Cain, president of the League of Women Voters, is mindful that a few votes cast the other way in 1960, "and John Kennedy would not have been elected president."

In Texas, decreasing numbers at the polls were evident in last year's special election to fill the vacancy created by Lloyd Bentsen when he became secretary of the treasury. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchinson beat her Democratic challenger by a 2-to-1 margin but still got nearly 1 million fewer votes than did Beau Boulter in the 1988 election for the same Senate seat. And he was swamped by a 3-to-2 ratio by Bentsen.

Bositis sees the irony of a nation that sends monitors to virtually every controversial foreign election — with huge majorities swarming the polls — and then is so apathetic about its own elections.

"There are many illusions ... people have with the United States about their system of government," he said. The system as it currently practiced, Bositis added, is "fairly dysfunctional."

How to fix it?

Bositis is skeptical about the effect of suggested solutions.

Although the League of Women Voters' Cain says it's been a success in states that adopted it ahead of the federal government, "motor voter" registration, by which people can register as they're getting their driver's license, will have "barely an impact."

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