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Voters have say on 'personhood,' labor rights

Nancy Frazier O'Brien Catholic News Service | Nov. 9, 2011

WASHINGTON -- Voters in Mississippi and Ohio confronted such traditional Catholic issues as abortion and labor rights on Election Day, but the Catholic bishops in those states remained neutral on the specific ballot questions raised.

In Mississippi, Proposition 26, known as the Personhood Amendment, was defeated, with 42 percent of voters supporting the measure and 58 percent opposed. It would have defined life as beginning at the moment of conception.

But Bishop Joseph N. Latino of Jackson, Miss., said that although he and other Catholic leaders "admire the goals" of the proposed amendment, "we do not believe a Mississippi Personhood Amendment is the best means to pursue an end to abortion in Mississippi and our nation."

In Ohio, more than 60 percent of voters supported an effort to repeal a law that limited the right of public employee unions to collective bargaining and prohibited them from striking. The state's Catholic bishops had taken a neutral stand, saying the issue "involves a prudential judgment where people of good will may differ as to their vote."

The two ballot questions were among 34 that went before voters in nine states in October or November -- most of them on Election Day 2011, Nov. 8.

The Mississippi proposal was similar to one defeated in Colorado in 2008 and 2010. It would have amended the state constitution to define a person "to include every human being from the moment of fertilization, cloning, or the functional equivalent thereof."

Opponents of the measure had contended that, if passed, it would prohibit in vitro fertilization, some forms of contraception and embryonic stem-cell research in the state. Even some proponents acknowledged that it could result in lawsuits that would, in the end, affirm Roe v. Wade, the U.S. Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in nearly all circumstances.

"After studying the initiative and in prayerful reflection and coupled with the fact (that) the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is working diligently on the federal level for the overturning of Roe v. Wade, I find the unintended consequences of this particular initiative deeply concerning," Bishop Latino said in a Nov. 4 letter to Catholics in his diocese.

"While the church respects those promoting Proposition 26, we do not believe it provides a realistic opportunity for ending or even reducing abortions in Mississippi," he added. "Constructive alternatives to reduce abortions and advance the ultimate objective of ending abortion, however, currently exist at the state level."

Episcopal and Methodist leaders in Mississippi had opposed Proposition 26, while local Baptist clergy had supported it.

Representatives of Personhood USA, a Colorado-based group, said efforts would continue to get the question on the 2012 ballots in Florida, Montana, Ohio, Oregon, Nevada and California.

In a commentary on the pros and cons of repealing Ohio's collective bargaining law, the Catholic Conference of Ohio noted that Catholic social teaching "has a long history of supporting worker rights" and said that during the original debate on the legislation, church leaders had "challenged both unions and management to work for the common good, to make sacrifices when required, and to adjust to new economic realities."

The conference also summarized arguments made by each side in the debate.

Supporters of the law said it "provides reasonable and overdue reforms" that will allow the state "to allocate resources based on market conditions, provide maximum value to the taxpayer and, ultimately, grow jobs." Those backing repeal said the law was "an unfair attack on employee rights, worker safety and middle-class workers" that would especially hurt "those that provide vital public services: police officers, firefighters and teachers."

The Catholic conference called on voters to make "a prudential judgment" on the ballot question "in light of our church's historic support for worker rights and our continued call for fair and balanced worker benefits."

"Such benefits should reflect current economic realities and support the needs of both public employers (citizens) and workers within the framework of the common good of the whole of society," it added.

The final vote on the collective bargaining law was 38 percent against repeal and 62 percent for repeal.

The Catholic bishops also took a neutral stand on two other proposed constitutional amendments in Ohio -- one that would have raised the age at which judges could continue to serve to 81 and another that prohibits federal and state requirements that Ohioans participate in a particular health plan.

The proposal on judges was defeated, with 62 percent of voters against it, while the health care proposal passed, with approval from 66 percent of voters.

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