

## Americans defend traditional marriage

### Legislators won't feel fallout from putting gay marriage amendment on the Idaho ballot, political analyst says

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When Idahoans decide Nov. 7 about banning same-sex marriages, they'll vote on a defense of marriage amendment that has passed in all 20 states where it's been on the ballot since the 1990s.

The reason: Defending traditional marriage is vital to many Americans. It trumps their support for other gay civil rights, say some who follow voting and social patterns.

Even among people who balk at amending constitutions, it's difficult to resist voting yes. "It's one of those things they'd rather be safe than sorry," said Donald Haider-Markel, a University of Kansas political science professor who has tracked voting rights on gay issues.

Idaho and seven other states including Virginia, Wisconsin and Arizona, will vote on same-sex marriage constitutional amendments next month.

Haider-Markel expects a continuation of the clean sweep, putting the number of states with constitutional amendments at 28. And more votes, including California, could come in 2008.

Most of the amendments were adopted since 2004, a year after Massachusetts courts ruled that banning gays from civil marriages was unconstitutional, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Marriage amendments get voter approval with the kinds of margins that politicians would call a mandate if they could get the same numbers. For example:

Mississippi, 86 percent.

Texas, 76 percent.

Montana and Utah, 66 percent.

And the state with the closest margin? Oregon, 57 percent.

In states like Idaho, where the Legislature put the amendment on the ballot, lawmakers feel no repercussions from voters, said Christine Nelson, a policy associate with the Conference of Legislatures. "It is not an issue that is causing legislators to lose elections."

This year's crop of amendments aren't all the same. Voters in Colorado, for example, will vote to limit marriage to that of a man and a woman.

They also will vote on a separate initiative to allow some benefits for same-sex partners.

Idaho voters will decide one of the most stringent amendments. It prohibits same-sex marriage, domestic partnerships and civil unions.

With such overwhelming numbers facing them in amendment votes, supporters of same-sex marriage should "not let the amendment end the discussion," said Matt Coles, director of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and AIDS Project for the American Civil Liberties Union. In a state like Idaho, there could be a push in a few years to modify a constitutional amendment — if it passes — to include domestic partnerships.

Finding a single, simple reason for the popularity of these amendments is difficult. They are adopted in conservative and liberal states.

The number of people voting for marriage amendments suggests support goes beyond conservative Christian groups who have championed initiatives that limit gay rights, such as the 1994 vote in Idaho to prohibit state and local governments from extending civil rights protections to gays. The initiative lost by 3,098 votes out 408,000 votes cast.

Tom and Briana LeClaire are an example. The Meridian couple and their three children are Catholic. They'll be voting for Idaho's amendment because they want clarity on a marriage definition that won't be altered by the courts.

They believe marriage between a man and a woman — with all its problems — promotes social stability and is a generator of economic wealth. "The basic concept has been successful," Tom LeClaire said.

The LeClaires want assurance that the traditional view of marriage continues for their children. "As we raise the next generation, the rules of society around them will affect their choices," Tom LeClaire said.

Briana LeClaire also sees a self-evident logic in marriage between a man and a woman.

"From the way our bodies are made, we can infer certain realities, namely that the opposite sexes are intended to fit together sexually," she said. "That truth is reflected in marriage."

For many Americans, marriage is seen as a good part of the culture. Many people put aside the realities of marriage, such as a high divorce rate.

"Marriage becomes a repository of our hopes and our desires — a sense of the sacred," said Virginia Husting, a Boise State University sociology professor who focuses on gender studies. "This (is) the dream life of the culture."

And for many, changes to a traditional view of marriage leads to "fears about dirtying something that is pure," Husting said.

Gay marriage has its supporters. Especially among young people who don't feel the passion against same-sex relationships that many of their grandparents do.

In a survey conducted last July, 53 percent of people 18 to 29 approved of gay marriage and 38 percent opposed it, according to the Pew Research Center for People and the Press. Among those 65 and older, 73 percent opposed gay marriage and 16 percent supported it. "Polling suggests for many young people, it is not an issue that brings out the same level of intensity," said Carroll Doherty, Pew Center associate director.

Boisean Meg Roberts is among those who support gay marriage. Between now and election day, she'll be talking to as many people as she can to tell them that there is room under the marriage tent for same-sex couples.

"The idea of marriage is that it brings people together in committed relationships," Roberts said. "(It) should be open to anyone who wants that kind of committed relationship."

Keeping gays out of the marriage ceremony is a "subtle and insidious form of discrimination," she said. "I think if people could see it as that, it would make a difference."

And she's not worried that allowing gays to wed will change marriage in the time when her daughter grows up.

"My child will be in a position to make her own decision," Roberts said.

**Additional Information – Gay rights activists eye four key states**

Wisconsin, Arizona, Colorado and Virginia are viewed by gay-rights strategists as having closely contested campaigns this fall over proposed constitutional amendments that would ban gay marriage and civil unions.

- ARIZONA: If this election is close, it will be because of a section of the proposed amendment which would bar local governments and state-run schools from recognizing any relationship similar to marriage, such as civil unions or domestic partnerships.

Phoenix Mayor Phil Gordon, among others, has criticized the measure, saying a ban on domestic partnerships could hurt the city's ability to recruit skilled employees.

Bruce Merrill, a pollster and political scientist at Arizona State University, says roughly two-thirds of Arizonans favor limiting marriage to one man, one woman, while an almost equally large majority support domestic partnerships.

- COLORADO: This campaign is unprecedented because, in addition to the ban-gay-marriage ban, there is a separate measure put on the ballot by gay-rights supporters that would establish the legality of domestic partnerships, providing same-sex couples with many of the rights of married couples.

Both measures could be approved, both could lose, or one could prevail but not the other.

- VIRGINIA: Recent polls show Virginia's ban likely to win approval, but opponents have mounted a strong campaign, raising more than twice as much money through August as the ban supporters.

Opponents of the measure include Democratic Gov. Timothy Kaine, who says some of its provisions might impede legislators if they wanted to extend legal recognition to unmarried couples in the future.

**Dave Fleischer, a political organizer for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, commended the activists running anti-amendment campaigns in all these states, but said they remain underdogs.**

- WISCONSIN: Activists believe that support from unions, college students and church leaders — coupled with hoped-for conservative apathy — could enable them to overcome the string of losses. Top Democratic officials — including Gov. Jim Doyle — have spoken out against the measure.

There have been no major opinion polls since mid-August, when a survey showed 48 percent support for the amendment, compared to 40 percent against.

Opponents say the gap is narrowing as undecided voters tilt against the measure; proponents believe the final result will be roughly 60 percent.

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