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Gay-marriage votes get diverse spins from activists

Arizona defeats a ban on the unions, but seven states pass them. Supporters on both sides see progress

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By Elizabeth Mehren, Times Staff Writer

After seven states affirmed traditional marriage — and an eighth rebuffed the declaration that marriage should be confined to a union between one man and one woman — activists for and against same-sex marriage disagreed Wednesday on the impact of Tuesday's election.

Arizona became the first of 20 states that have taken up constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage to defeat such a measure — an "extraordinary" development, according to Christine Nelson of the National Conference of State Legislatures.

In separate ballot initiatives, Colorado on Tuesday voted to ban same-sex marriage and defeated a separate bill to permit domestic partnerships.

Carrie Gordon Earll, a spokeswoman for Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs, said Wednesday that the national results on the subject showed that "especially in light of the shifting of the House of Representatives and potentially the Senate ... voters are motivated by social issues. They want their issues to be represented, and when they are clearly offered in terms of amendments, people turn out."

Nelson, a policy associate who studies marriage for the National Conference of State Legislatures, said Colorado voters might have been influenced by the recent scandal involving a Colorado minister who resigned from a leadership post with the National Assn. of Evangelicals after admitting he contacted a male prostitute and purchased methamphetamine.

"Ted Haggard was one of the chief architects of Amendment 43," Nelson said, referring to the amendment to preserve the traditional definition of marriage. News about Haggard dominated the state in the days preceding the election, she said.

"The words 'gay sex' made many people say, 'No, no, no, we'll have none of that going on here,'" Nelson said.

The Haggard scandal built on negative publicity over admissions by now-resigned Rep. Mark Foley (R-Fla.) that he engaged in inappropriate communication with male congressional pages, said Sean Duffy, who led the campaign in Colorado to oppose a ban on same-sex marriage.

Duffy said the recent New Jersey Supreme Court decision requiring that state's Legislature to extend marriage to — or craft marriage-like benefits for — same-sex couples also kept the topic on the public radar.

"Our whole campaign was about explaining the commitment of same-sex couples who spend 15, 30 years together in a monogamous relationship, and the media here was wall-to-wall with stuff that was decidedly the opposite.... We had a tough sell," Duffy said.

But Duffy said he was optimistic, because more than 40% of Colorado voters did not support the same-sex marriage ban. "I think it bodes well for future strategy," he said. "Clearly the needle has moved."

Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in Washington, saw progress even in the defeats because the percentage of voters who opposed banning same-sex marriage was growing.

Wisconsin, South Dakota and Virginia joined Colorado as states that voted to limit marriage to a union between one man and one woman where the percentage voting no was more than 40%.

"The same-sex-marriage glass is becoming progressively more full," Foreman said Wednesday. "It's not just public opinion. Voter support for same-sex marriage continues to grow significantly."

Opposition to same-sex marriage was more decisive in three other states that took up marriage amendments Tuesday: In Idaho, 63% of voters supported the ban on same-sex unions; in South Carolina, 78% voted in favor of a traditional definition of marriage; and in Tennessee, 81% opposed same-sex marriage.

Robert Knight, director of the conservative Culture and Media Institute think tank in Alexandria, Va., said Wednesday that Arizona was "out there on the edge" in its defeat of the traditional-marriage amendment.

"Look at the rest of these states," Knight said. "Wisconsin had a good healthy vote in support of marriage. The gays threw everything but the kitchen sink into the battle, but they couldn't win even in liberal Wisconsin. So Arizona really is on its own."

Kyrsten Sinema, who chaired the campaign to defeat Arizona's proposed ban, said Wednesday that opponents of the amendment focused on how the initiative would take benefits away from all unmarried couples — not just gays and lesbians.

"When the proponents would try to connect it to other parts of the country, we just said 'This has nothing to do with Arizona,'" said Sinema, a Democratic state legislator who was reelected Tuesday. "I think it was a very good strategy."

But Maggie Gallagher, president of the Institute for Marriage and Public Policy in Manassas, Va., said Wednesday: "The good news for gay-marriage advocates is that they finally defeated a state marriage amendment. The bad news is that the vote had almost nothing to do with increasing public support for gay marriage."