

43: Supporters revel in double victory MARRIAGE, GAY RIGHTS

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As late-arriving returns Wednesday confirmed the previous night's trend, supporters of an amendment to effectively ban gay marriage celebrated a double-barreled victory.

Not only did Amendment 43, which defines marriage in the state constitution as only between one man and one woman, pass by a double-digit margin, but a measure that would have created domestic partnerships for same-sex couples suffered a sound defeat.

"I think this confirms what we've been saying all along," said Jim Pfaff, who headed Colorado Family Action, a political arm of Focus on the Family that backed the marriage amendment and opposed domestic partnerships. "Coloradans are fair, but they have no intention of installing gay marriage or any counterfeit to marriage. This vote makes that clear."

With nearly all the votes counted, Amendment 43 enjoyed an advantage of 56 percent to 44 percent, while Referendum I, the domestic partnership measure, lost 53 percent to 47 percent.

"Amendment 43 was something easy for Coloradans to understand, and they passed it with a sizeable margin," Pfaff said. "With Referendum I, once we got our message out that it was really much more than basic legal rights, that's the place Coloradans said, 'No, that's going too far.'"

Although Gov.-elect Bill Ritter supported Referendum I, he threw cold water on the notion that a domestic partnership measure could find its way into state law next year through the Democratic-controlled legislature.

"I think the people have spoken on both those issues," Ritter said Wednesday. "I'll have discussions again with leadership about that. Of course, you know, legislation can be very nuanced, but really, as it related to both (Referendum) I and Amendment 43, the voice of the people is fairly clear here."

Pfaff also cautioned against such a tactic - especially in light of the broader view of the midterm elections.

"The great lesson of the election this year," he said, "was that if elected representatives ignore the desire of their constituents and move in their own direction, then voters respond."

As backers of Referendum I absorbed the defeat, they also took solace in the fact that the first domestic partnership measure in the nation ever put to voters earned nearly 650,000 votes.

For gay-rights advocates, that stood in sharp contrast to the political landscape 14 years ago, when the anti-gay Amendment 2 passed easily before eventually being overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court.

"As we went around Colorado, we found people more open to hearing stories and understanding gaps in the law," said Sean Duffy, executive director of Coloradans for Fairness, which

spearheaded Referendum I. "We're grateful that hundreds of thousands of Coloradans voted for basic legal rights for committed same-sex couples."

One unexpected bright spot for gay- rights advocates emerged in Arizona, where an measure similar to Amendment 43 lost, 51 percent to 49 percent.

That marked the first defeat for such measures in 28 tries, although seven of them passed Tuesday.

National gay-rights groups sought to cast the defeats in a positive light.

While 31 percent of voters opposed measures attempting to ban gay marriage in the 2004 election, that figure jumped to 37 percent this year, according to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

"One thing we know without doubt, public opinion on marriage and partner rights is moving rapidly," said Matt Foreman, the task force's executive director. "What may be true today will not be true two or three years from now."

But Amendment 43 supporters disagreed - particularly in light of the copious resources gay-rights advocates poured into the statewide race largely through the funding of Denver entrepreneur Tim Gill.

"In Colorado, the epicenter of the opposition to marriage amendments around the country, we got 56 percent," said Jon Paul, whose Coloradans for Marriage drafted and pushed Amendment 43. "When you're looking at more battlegrounds as we move along in this process, people are standing up and voicing support for marriage and the family."