

Poll: Majority Supports US Benefits for Same-Sex Couples

As the **Supreme Court** prepares to decide whether the federal government may deny benefits to same-sex married couples that it allows their heterosexual counterparts, Americans seem to have already made up their minds.

Fifty-five percent of those surveyed said married gay and lesbian couples should be able to qualify for Social Security survivor payments and other benefits provided to married heterosexual couples, according to Reuters/Ipsos polling of 2,886 people between March 5 and March 14.

Majority support for such benefits was seen across all regions of the United States, even in the traditionally more conservative South.

That widespread support emerges just before the Supreme Court takes up a pair of momentous **gay rights** cases next week, one testing whether the U.S. government may deny benefits to same-sex married couples without violating the U.S. Constitution's guarantee of equality. In the other case, the nine justices will review a California law that defines marriage as only between a man and a woman.

A more extensive Reuters/Ipsos poll of 24,455 people between Jan. 1 and March 14 found only a quarter of Americans opposed **same-sex marriage** or civil unions, although there were deep regional differences of opinion. Overall, that Reuters poll found 63 percent supported gay marriage or civil unions, with 41 percent of people saying same-sex couples should be permitted to marry.

The greatest support was in the Northeast, with 69 percent of adults favoring a gay marriage or civil-union right. The lowest support was in the South, at 57 percent.

Overall, surveys have shown a drop in endorsement of civil

unions simultaneous to a rise in support of same-sex marriage.

Long-Term Trend

“While there is some divergence between those who support legalizing civil unions versus marriage, these groups are both likely to sit on the same side of the fence on the issue if pushed to a decision,” said Julia Clark, Ipsos vice-president. “The long-term trend shows steady movement toward a majority of Americans supporting the legalization of same-sex marriage.”

The support for equal federal benefits in the Reuters/Ipsos poll suggests a majority of people, regardless of their views on the marriage question, believe the federal government should not discriminate among couples based on sexual orientation.

Those views were not tied to respondents’ own sexual preferences. The overwhelming majority of people who took part in the poll, 93 percent, described themselves as heterosexual or straight.

Currently, nine states and the District of Columbia permit same-sex marriage. Eight other states allow civil unions or domestic partnerships with virtually all state marriage benefits, but do not allow couples to marry.

In oral arguments on March 26 and 27, the Supreme Court will address for the first time a possible right to same-sex marriage. The issue for the nine justices on the first day is the constitutionality of California’s **Proposition 8**, the 2008 voter referendum that declared marriage a right only for a man and woman.

In their appeal, Proposition 8 proponents argue that the law advances the state’s interest in procreation and child-rearing. Challengers have asked the court not only to reject Proposition 8 for Californians but to declare a fundamental right to same-sex marriage nationwide.

On March 27, the justices will take up a provision of the

federal 1996 **Defense of Marriage Act**, or DOMA, that allows only heterosexual married couples to claim federal benefits, such as tax exemptions for a surviving spouse's inheritance. Edith Windsor of New York, legally wed to Thea Clara Spyer, who died in 2009, is challenging that provision in the case of *United States v. Windsor*.

Obama Reversal

The Obama administration, which two years ago reversed its position on the validity of DOMA, agrees with Windsor that the law violates the constitutional guarantee of equality. Defending DOMA is a Republican party-dominated group from the U.S. House of Representatives.

The California case, *Hollingsworth v. Perry*, tests who at the state or federal level should have the authority to decide whether gay men and lesbians may marry. Defenders of Proposition 8 say that question should be left to the people in the states. Opponents insist marriage is a fundamental right for all, irrespective of sexual orientation, and should be protected by the Supreme Court through a constitutional ruling.

In the Reuters/Ipsos poll, 31 percent of the people said same-sex marriage laws should be made by the Supreme Court. More respondents said they believed such laws should be set at the state level: 25 percent said through a voter referendum, 12 percent said by state legislatures. Ten percent said same-sex marriage laws should be generated by Congress. A full 23 percent said they did not know where same-sex marriage laws should be made.

When people responding to the poll were asked to describe themselves, 93 percent said heterosexual/straight; 3 percent said gay/lesbian; 3 percent said bisexual; and 2 percent said other.

The accuracy of the Reuter/Ipsos poll is measured using a credibility interval. The questions regarding federal benefits and what institution of government should be responsible for the legality of same-sex marriage, each with a sample of 2,886

people, had a credibility interval of plus or minus 2.1 percentage points.

The question regarding how people feel about same sex marriage and civil unions, with a sample of 24,455 people, had a credibility interval of 0.7 of a percentage point.

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