



## Backers of Calif. gay marriage ban ready to submit petitions

By Lisa Leff  
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SAN FRANCISCO – The sponsors of a proposed constitutional amendment to outlaw same-sex marriage in California said Monday they have gathered enough signatures to qualify the measure for the November ballot.

A coalition of religious groups called Protect Marriage collected more than 1.1 million signatures in support of the amendment, said Brian Brown, executive director of the California office of the National Organization for Marriage.

The initiative needs 694,354 signatures, or 8 percent of the votes cast in the last governor's race, to make it onto the ballot.

“We have gone against tremendous odds to do this, and now the voters in California will have the chance to protect marriage,” Brown said.

Supporters of the Limit on Marriage initiative plan to deliver their signed petitions to county registrars this week, ahead of the April 28 submission deadline set by the California Secretary of State's Office. The signatures must be verified before the amendment can be approved for the election.

Although gay men and lesbians cannot legally wed in California, opponents of same-sex unions want the ban written into the state Constitution. In that way, neither the Legislature nor the California Supreme Court can legalize gay marriage without approval from voters.

They were especially anxious to put the question before voters this fall because the state Supreme Court is scheduled to rule by early June on a series of lawsuits seeking to toss out California's existing one man-one woman marriage laws.

If passed by a majority of voters, the constitutional amendment would overturn a court ruling in favor of gay marriage advocates. They hope California will become the second state after Massachusetts to legalize same-sex marriage.

“We shouldn't have to be guessing. This shouldn't be something left to the court either now or in the future,” Brown said. “The idea that California voters should be the ones to decide this is an idea that resonates with people.”

If it qualifies for the ballot, the measure promises to be the center of a hard-fought campaign.

Protect Marriage raised more than \$1.5 million in contributions to support its petition drive, money that allowed the group to hire paid signature collectors to supplement the volunteers it recruited from churches, Brown said.

A coalition of gay rights groups called Equality for All launched an aggressive counter-campaign to persuade people not to sign the qualifying petitions.

Its "Decline to Sign" volunteers approached patrons outside the shopping centers where the signature gatherers were working and asked them instead to sign pledges supporting same-sex marriage.

Representatives from the two sides have accused each other of trying to squelch free speech. There were reports of heated debates and even fisticuffs in some locations.

**Dan Hawes, an organizer with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force who has spent two months on the effort to keep the initiative from qualifying, said he had never seen such a coordinated attempt to prevent a marriage amendment from making it to the ballot.**

**"There is a real sense of hope and possibility here because of the court ruling that is coming down in June," he said. "The fact that could be taken away in five months is really painful for people who want to marry."**

Earlier this month, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger upset the amendment's backers when he told a gathering of gay Republicans he thought the measure was unnecessary and that he would actively oppose it. He has twice vetoed bills seeking to make gay marriage legal.

"When Governor Schwarzenegger publicly opposed this constitutional amendment, he said the people of California are much further along on this issue, and the governor is right. The voters have moved on," said Seth Kilbourn, political director of Equality California, the state's largest gay-rights lobbying group.

Kilbourn said the amount of money the initiative's sponsors spent and their use of paid petition circulators showed that California voters may be reluctant to write a same-sex marriage ban into the state Constitution.

"We are confident we will be able to defeat this measure, when and if it appears on the ballot," he said.

The National Organization for Marriage, headquartered in New Jersey, and the Colorado-based Focus on the Family have contributed heavily to the Protect Marriage campaign. It also has received significant backing from the Knights of Columbus.