

In 2008 election, ballot questions also draw Catholic support, ire

WASHINGTON – When Americans cast their ballots Nov. 4, it won't be just for the candidates. Depending on what state they live in, they might also be deciding how to define marriage, whether to allow assisted suicide or fund embryonic stem-cell research, who can adopt and other matters big and small.

Voters in three states face very different abortion-related questions, while three other states have proposals on the ballot to allow or expand government-run gambling operations. Church leaders have spoken out against moves to require English only at all government meetings in Missouri and to overhaul the criminal justice system in California, while in Ohio they are working to keep the cap on interest for so-called "payday loans" at 28 percent.

Those proposals are among 152 ballot propositions before voters in 36 states this year, according to the Initiative and Referendum Institute at the University of Southern California's Gould School of Law. Another 21 ballot propositions in eight states were voted up or down in elections held earlier this year.

One hot-button ballot issue this year – as it has been in several U.S. elections this decade – is same-sex marriage. In California, where an estimated 11,000 same-sex marriages were performed in the first three months after they became legal there in June, the state's bishops are urging a "yes" vote on Proposition 8, which would define marriage under the state constitution as the union of a man and a woman.

The amendment language "simply affirms the historic, logical and reasonable definition of marriage – and does not remove any benefits from other contractual arrangements" such as civil unions and domestic partnerships, the California bishops said in a statement supporting Proposition 8.

In Arizona, Bishops Thomas J. Olmsted of Phoenix and Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson urged Catholics to vote "yes" on Proposition 102, which would amend the state constitution to read: "Only a union of one man and one woman shall be valid or

recognized as a marriage in this state.”

“Some aspects of Catholic teaching require the use of prudential judgment, as to which course of action may be the most desirable,” said Bishop Olmsted in a video message shown at all Masses Sept. 13-14. “Other parts of Catholic teaching involve issues that are nonnegotiable, ones on which Catholics cannot legitimately disagree. The definition of marriage as the union of a man and a woman is one such issue.”

The nine Catholic bishops of Florida also spoke out on Amendment 2, which would define marriage in their state. “The common good and the future of our society are best served through the natural order of a union of a man and a woman,” they said.

A top ballot issue in Washington state is assisted suicide. The Catholic Church has launched a major educational campaign against Initiative 1000, which would legalize physician-assisted suicide in the state.

A similar initiative failed in the state in 1991, but neighboring Oregon has permitted physician-assisted suicide since 1998.

At the other end of the life spectrum, the Michigan bishops are battling a ballot proposal that would expand embryonic stem-cell research and “prohibit state and local laws that prevent, restrict or discourage stem-cell research, future therapies and cures.”

“Embryonic stem-cell research is intrinsically evil and morally unacceptable as it necessitates the willful destruction of the earliest stage of human life,” said the heads of Michigan’s seven Catholic dioceses in a joint letter.

Criticizing the proposal’s immense potential for abuse in an unregulated environment, the bishops said approval of Proposal 2 also would threaten Michigan’s statutory ban on human cloning.

Three abortion-related ballot questions are before voters in Colorado, South Dakota and California. The most complex is the Colorado Personhood Amendment, which would define “any human being from the moment of fertilization” as a person under the state constitution.

The Colorado Catholic bishops have remained neutral on the proposal, saying it “does not provide a realistic opportunity for ending or even reducing abortions in Colorado” because it would be interpreted under the federal court system in light of Roe v. Wade and could result in the reaffirmation of that 1973 decision legalizing abortion.

In South Dakota, Bishop Paul J. Swain of Sioux Falls said he would vote for Initiated Measure 11 to ban abortions in the state, despite the proposal’s exceptions for victims of rape and incest.

The California bishops have wholeheartedly endorsed the abortion-related proposal in their state, which would require parental notification, or a judicial bypass, 48 hours before an abortion is performed on a minor.

Among the other ballot questions before voters this year are:

- Arkansas voters will be asked whether they want to ban adoptions by cohabiting couples. Bishop Anthony B. Taylor of Little Rock has not announced a stand on the matter.
- All government meetings in Missouri would have to be conducted in English under a proposal that Bishop Robert W. Finn of Kansas City-St. Joseph has opposed as anti-immigrant and too inflexible.
- Voters in Maryland, Arkansas and Ohio face proposals that would expand gambling options in their states. Church leaders have opposed the moves.