

More than 122,000 signatures submitted for marriage referendum

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The Maryland Marriage Alliance submitted 122,481 signatures to the Maryland Secretary of State's office May 29 – surpassing the nearly 57,000 needed to add a referendum on the state's new same-sex marriage law to the November ballot. The organization announced earlier in the day it had submitted more than 113,000 signatures and released the final total later in the day..

“(The petition) far exceeded our expectations, not only in the sheer number of signatures, but in the overwhelmingly positive response we’ve seen in the effort throughout the state,” said Mary Ellen Russell, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, which advocates for public policy on behalf of the state's bishops.

The MCC partnered with the Maryland Marriage Alliance for a petition drive to gather the signatures needed to bring the measure to popular vote.

Only a third of the nearly 57,000 signatures were due to the state by May 31. All signatures are due to the State Board of Elections by June 30.

Despite the number of signatures already collected, signature collection will continue through June, Russell said. The continued drive allows more people to add their voices to the cause, and ensures that enough valid signatures are collected, she said.

A Maryland court recently upheld the State Board of Elections' strict scrutiny of petition signatures in a case involving unrelated petitions. Although petition organizers are confident in the validity of the signatures trained volunteers collected

across the state, they want “to leave no stone unturned,” Russell said.

The State Board of Elections is expected to release a series of reports as they verify signatures. Russell expects petition organizers will learn in mid-June whether enough signatures were deemed valid to add the referendum.

The MCC will continue to work to keep voters engaged in the issue, and encourage them to reach others, Russell said.

A recent survey conducted by North Carolina-based Public Policy Polling found a “significant increase” in support for same-sex marriage among Maryland’s African American voters after President Barack Obama announced his support for same-sex marriage May 9. A previous poll showed 56 percent of Maryland’s African American voters opposed to the law, with 39 percent supporting it. Now poll results show 36 percent opposed to the law, with 55 percent supporting it.

According to the poll, 57 percent of overall Maryland voters say they are likely to support the same-sex marriage law this fall, while 39 percent say they are opposed. A March survey showed 52 percent supporting the law, and 44 percent opposing it. The polling company attributes the uptick in support for the same-sex marriage law “almost entirely” to the shift in African American opinion.

Russell called the polling numbers “completely questionable.”

“I expect that the other side on the issue will claim over and over and over again that opinion is shifting in favor of redefining marriage and trot out poll after poll to indicate that,” Russell said. “The reality remains that voters overwhelmingly support marriage between one man and one woman when they go to the polls.”

Public Policy Polling suggested the same disconnect between poll results and actual public opinion May 8, the day North Carolinians voted to amend the state’s constitution to define marriage as a union exclusively between one man and one woman.

“Hate to say it but I don’t believe polls showing majority support for gay marriage nationally. Any time there’s a vote it doesn’t back it up,” the polling company said via Twitter.

If approved for the ballot, the marriage referendum will join a referendum on the Maryland Dream Act, which has already gained State Board of Elections certification. Passed by the state legislature last year, the measure allows documented and undocumented immigrants to receive the in-state tuition rate if they meet certain stipulations. The MCC supports the Dream Act.

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