

Utah ranks 2nd in nation for supporting laws that protect LGBTQ community

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The states with the most support for laws that protect the LGBTQ community fall in two expected liberal strongholds — New Hampshire and Vermont — as well as one not-so-expected conservative outlier: Utah.

A new poll released Monday by the Public Religion Research Institute showed that more than three-quarters of Utahns, surprisingly, favor laws that protect LGBTQ residents from discrimination. That support puts it second highest in the rankings nationwide, behind New Hampshire and tied with Vermont. In fact, it's the only Republican state in the top five. "I'm just super proud that we continue to defy expectations and stereotypes," said Troy Williams, executive director of Equality Utah. "I'm gushing. This is not happening in other conservative states."

Utah is a deeply red and highly religious place. But the state has also embraced measures to improve equity.

In 2015, the Utah Legislature passed and Gov. Gary Herbert signed bipartisan legislation to bar discrimination against LGBTQ residents in housing and jobs. It was a landmark compromise that also safeguarded religious freedoms for churches and other religious groups.

Additionally, the state passed a strong hate crimes law during the past legislative session and is working toward banning conversion therapy, a widely discredited practice that seeks to change a person's sexual orientation and/or gender identity, for children.

"This poll reveals that Utah can model for the rest of the nation how to work together," Williams added.

Advocates and allies across the state cheered at the numbers. Former state Sen. Steve Urquhart, who pushed gay-rights legislation during his tenure, said, "We're headed in a great direction." Misty Snow, a Utah transgender woman who made history in winning a U.S. Senate nomination, believes the poll shows a larger, positive societal shift. Salt Lake City Mayor Jackie Biskupski, the first openly gay mayor of Utah's capital, added that she's "very pleased and grateful."

"We should embrace this support and continue to make even more progress," she said.

The survey showed 77% of Utahns favor and 19% oppose protecting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transexual and queer residents from discrimination. That's 8 percentage points higher than the national average.

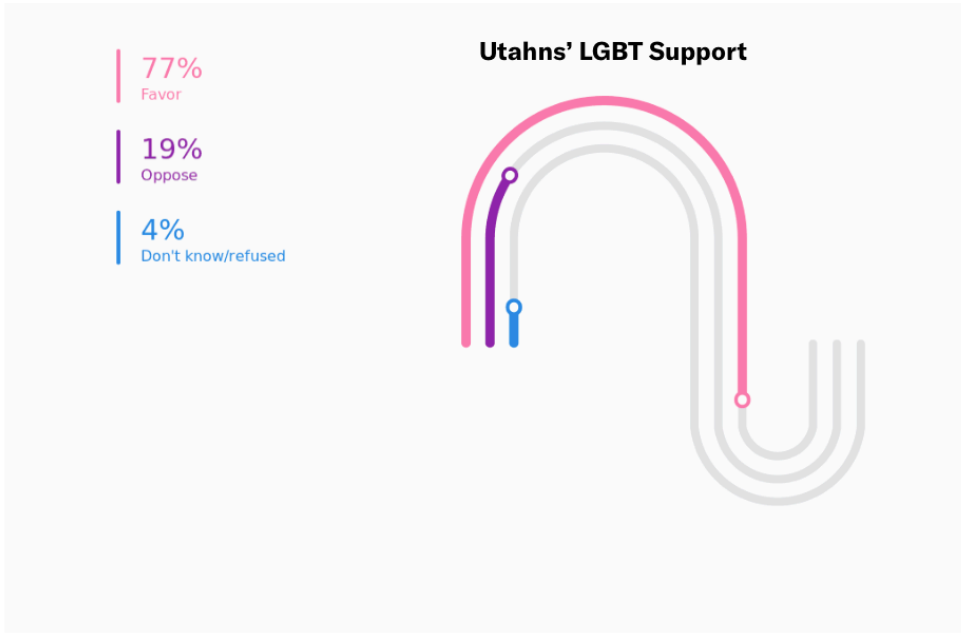
New Hampshire came in on top at 81% support and 11% opposed. And Vermont had 77% in favor and 17% against — slightly lower than Utah for opposition. Meanwhile, Arkansans were the least likely — 56% — to support protecting the rights of LGBTQ citizens. And Wyoming residents expressed the highest level of opposition at 37% against. But, overall, the support was broad and deep. A majority of those polled in every state favored anti-discrimination laws, as do majorities in all age groups and every political party.

In Utah, all religious affiliations also supported legal statutes for the LGBTQ community. That includes the dominant faith, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose members were 70% in favor.

In response, the church put out a statement: “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has long advocated for a balanced approach to protecting religious freedoms while extending protections to LGBT people. This fairness for all approach was implemented in Utah in 2015, and along with many other religious and LGBT groups, we believe Utah’s approach would be a good model at the federal level.”

That comes as the faith has voiced opposition to the Equality Act, national legislation that would expand the Civil Rights Act to bar discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Some believe the church, as well as other religions, has been the biggest obstacle in passing laws to protect the community. Biskupski said, “You certainly shouldn’t stand behind your religion to not serve someone who is a lesbian like me.”



Public Religion Research Institute survey question: All in all, do you strongly favor, favor, oppose or strongly oppose laws that would protect gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people against discrimination in jobs, public accommodations and housing?

Biskupski has long supported LGBTQ residents, and in 2016 banned any city-sponsored travel to states that had passed anti-LGBTQ laws. Urquhart, too, during his time in the Legislature, worked to pass the 2015 anti-discrimination bill and for years carried the draft of the hate crimes proposal.

"We're having some conversations that are difficult for a baseline conservative, religiously fundamentalist state," the Republican said. "But Utahns are awfully, awfully good people." The LDS Church, he acknowledged, put its support behind the measure four years ago and was a huge reason why it became a law. Even still, many in the community said there's more that can be done both by the faith and the state, as a whole.

Leah Farrell was one of the original plaintiffs who sued East High School and Salt Lake City School District after students there submitted a club application to form a gay-straight alliance in 1995. They were banned from meeting on campus, but they fought and won. Farrell now works for the ACLU of Utah and said, "This is a really good moment to recognize the progress that's been made."

Still, she continues to work with clients in the state who have, despite the law, been discriminated against in job and housing applications. A federal statute, she believes, would offer more protection.

Snow, the transgender political candidate, would like to see more safeguards, such as for medical care. Doctors throughout the state, Snow said, may improperly deny help to LGBTQ patients.

What has improved, however, is that LGBTQ individuals in general are more visible now than they were in the past, Snow added. That helps everyone to better understand and respect the community, she said. And she hopes support will continue to rise from 77% to 100%.

