

WASHINGTON — A record majority of Americans approve of same-sex marriage in the wake of two landmark Supreme Court decisions, a USA TODAY poll finds. But the high court's rulings that struck down provisions of the Voting Rights Act and tightened the rules on affirmative action aren't in sync with the public's views.

Overall, views of the court soured after a term that ended last week with high-profile decisions over who can marry, how college admissions are judged and whether the nation is ready to move on from some civil rights protections on voting.

The court's decisions that opened the door to gay marriage in California and struck down a law that barred federal benefits for same-sex couples may well have boosted support in a country that was already moving in favor of same-sex marriage.

"Neither one of those decisions is as a legal matter a huge gay rights victory," says Tom Goldstein, a Harvard Law School professor and publisher of SCOTUSblog, which analyzes the high court. "But it's the moral message from the court that these unions are entitled to equal respect ... that is probably the lasting legacy of the decisions and is probably going to play a significant role in public opinion."

The poll by Princeton Survey Research Associates questioned 1,003 adults from Thursday through Sunday. It has a margin of error of +/-3.6 percentage points.



Gay rights activists react outside the Supreme Court on June 26.

(Photo: Mladen Antonov, AFP/Getty Images)

Among the findings:

- By an unprecedented 55%-40%, Americans say marriages between same-sex couples should be recognized by law as valid, with the same rights of traditional marriage. That's the highest level of support since Gallup began asking the question in 1996. Then, fewer than half that number, 27%, backed the idea.

Last year was the first time a majority of Americans had backed gay marriage.

The only major demographic groups in which a majority oppose same-sex marriage are Republicans (68%) and seniors 65 and older (51%). Even in the South, which continues to be the only region that doesn't show majority support for gay marriage, opposition has slipped below 50%.

- By a narrower margin, 48%-43%, those surveyed favor the Supreme Court's decision declaring unconstitutional part of the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act, which barred the federal government from providing benefits to same-sex spouses. Views on the issue are intense. Those who feel strongly about the issue split 29%-29% in favor and against the ruling.

- By 53%-37%. Americans say affirmative action programs are still needed to counteract the effects

of discrimination against minorities. That reflects a rebound in support after the court's ruling. In an *NBC/Wall Street Journal* poll taken a few weeks before the court's decision, the nation split 45%-45% over whether such programs were needed or had gone too far.

In a case involving the University of Texas, the Supreme Court ruled that affirmative action program in college admissions were permissible but set a tough legal standard the programs have to meet.

- By 49%-40%, those surveyed oppose the decision by the court to strike down the provision in the Voting Rights Act that required some states, mostly in the South, to get federal approval to change election laws. Two-thirds of African Americans oppose the decision.

The country divides 43%-44% in approval-disapproval over the way the Supreme Court is doing its job. That's the lowest level of approval in eight years and nearly 20 percentage points lower than it was as recently as 2001.

There's no clear consensus about the court's ideological slant. In the poll, 31% say the court is too liberal, 21% say it's too conservative, and 37% say it's "about right." That's the lowest percentage saying the court is "about right" in the two decades that Gallup has asked the question.

Two-thirds of Republicans say the court is too liberal. About half of Democrats say the court is "about right," though those with other views are much more likely to say it is too conservative.