

Texas city won't define when human life begins

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CORPUS CHRISTI, Texas — The resounding defeat of a city-charter amendment declaring that "human life begins at conception" shows that Americans don't want City Hall interfering with personal beliefs, opponents said yesterday.

The "Human Family Amendment" had weighty support among abortion opponents in Corpus Christi, a heavily Hispanic city whose name is Latin for "body of Christ."

But 62 percent of the 30,007 residents who voted in Saturday's referendum opposed the measure. About 24 percent of the city's registered voters cast ballots.

"I think it's a very strong message to these people that they've got to stop trying to cram their religious beliefs down our throats via government," said Nan Pilling, president of the city's League of Women Voters.

"No one wants City Hall to be telling us what we believe," said Helen Wilk, the treasurer of Citizens United for Charter Integrity.

"We felt that this was a statement of personal belief based on religious interpretation, and while anyone has the right to hold that belief, it has no place in a document that governs the citizens of the community," Wilk said.

The proposed amendment would not have had the force of law, but opponents feared it would be used to promote ordinances regulating abortion.

Drawing on language from the Declaration of Independence, it spelled out rights that apply to "all members of the human family, regardless of age, development, physical or mental condition, race, or national origin." It concluded that "human life begins at conception and continues until natural death."

The referendum was placed on the ballot through a petition drive last summer organized by Tracy Cassidy, a 30-year-old lawyer and chairwoman of the Human Family Committee. She has said the amendment was meant to be merely a statement of principle.

Roman Catholic Bishop Rene Gracida was among the first to sign the petition, which obtained more than the required 6,500 signatures in less than two weeks. Gracida, who has excommunicated two abortion-clinic employees and a doctor

who performs abortions, urged Catholics to support the petition.

Some abortion-rights activists have said those who voted against the measure don't necessarily favor a woman's right to abortion.

"But I think it also speaks to the concern that difficult decisions about when life begins and ends be left to individuals, not governing bodies," said Amanda Stukenberg, president of South Texans For Choice.