
New Jersey legislature revives same-sex marriage push

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By [Edith Honan](#)

NEW YORK (Reuters) - New Jersey's Democrat-controlled state legislature revived its push to legalize same-sex marriage on Tuesday, putting Governor Chris Christie under pressure as speculation mounts that he could be a Republican vice presidential contender.

Christie, who decided against entering the 2012 presidential race despite a high-profile courtship from top Republican donors, has said he opposes marriage for same-sex couples but supports civil unions, which New Jersey has allowed since 2007.

A similar bid to approve marriage for same-sex couples was defeated by the New Jersey State Senate two years ago, just weeks before Christie took office. Christie has repeatedly said he would veto any such legislation on gay marriage.

Supporters of gay marriage in the state, who would need a two-thirds majority to override a governor's veto, face a considerable hurdle, and did not appear to have the votes in hand despite strong support from Senate President Steve Sweeney and Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver.

On Tuesday, hearings were being held before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Meanwhile, at a town hall appearance, Christie said his position had not changed and that the issue should be put to voters in a referendum, local media reported.

"I think this is not an issue that should rest solely in my hands, or the hands of the Senate President or the Speaker or the other 118 members of the legislature," Christie said, according to reports. "Let's let the people of New Jersey decide what is right for the state."

Polls show growing popular support for gay marriage in New Jersey, including a Quinnipiac University poll last week that found voters support gay marriage by a margin of 52 to 42 percent. The effort comes at the heels of New York approving a gay marriage bill this summer.

Steven Goldstein, head of Garden State Equality, said he hoped that could translate into legislative success for gay marriage.

"Over-ride is a long shot that seems to be less of a long shot every day," he said.

COURT BACKED CIVIL UNIONS

New Jersey's Supreme Court ruled in 2006 that same-sex couples have equal rights under the law and backed civil unions. But the court stopped short of endorsing gay marriage, saying that issue should be decided by the legislature.

Gay-marriage supporters say that civil unions are inadequate because many employers do not recognize them.

More than 40 states ban or refuse to recognize gay marriage, but six states, as well as the District of Columbia, allow it. In addition to New York, gay marriage is legal in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire and Iowa.

A bill to legalize same-sex marriage has been introduced in Washington state, and gay rights activists in Maine say they plan to bring the issue to voters in a referendum.

The National Organization for Marriage, a national group advocating that marriage be defined as a union between a man and a woman, has pledged to spend \$500,000 supporting legislators who vote against the measure as part of an "all-out effort" to defeat the bill in New Jersey.

Nationally there is still strong opposition to gay marriage, especially among Republicans. Presidential candidate and former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney has seen his past comments on gay rights come back to haunt him on the campaign trail.

Christie, mentioned as a possible vice presidential running mate for Romney, has been actively campaigning for the former Massachusetts governor.

On Monday, Christie won praise from gay rights leaders, including Goldstein, for nominating Bruce Harris, an openly gay man, to the state Supreme Court. Christie said his feelings about gay marriage had not changed, but some questioned the timing of his appointment.

"The judicial appointment itself is a way to inoculate himself on the gay marriage bill," said David Redlawsk, director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

He said New Jersey voters were unlikely to punish Christie if he does in fact veto the bill. While a majority of New Jersey voters support gay marriage.

"For the vast majority of people, it's not high on their agenda," Redlawsk said.

(Reporting By Edith Honan)
