

Debate Over Same-Sex Marriage Divides 'Aloha State'

Hawaii, which had a pioneering role in the acceptance of same-sex marriage in the United States two decades ago, could become the 15th state to extend marriage rights to gay couples when state lawmakers meet this week for a special session.

Gov. Neil Abercrombie, a Democrat, has called the session to start on Monday to debate a bill that would legalize **same-sex marriage**.

"I think Hawaii has always celebrated its sense of Aloha for one another," Abercrombie said in a telephone interview. "This is a question of equity."

In 1993, the Hawaii Supreme Court ruled it was discriminatory to deny marriage rights to same-sex couples.

But rather than pave the way for a **gay marriage** law, the ruling prompted a conservative backlash. In 1998, Hawaiian voters approved a constitutional amendment that limited the right to marry to heterosexual couples.

The tide has begun to turn under Abercrombie, who was elected in 2010. He signed a same-sex civil unions bill into law in 2011, and has been a vocal proponent of gay marriage since then.

"To win now through the political process in Hawaii would show just how far public opinion in our nation has evolved, and how quickly," said Jon Davidson, legal director at Lambda Legal, which promotes gay civil rights. "It would demonstrate that ... allowing same-sex couples the same right to marry that different-sex couples cherish only provides greater joy and security to more families, and harms no one."

Just one year ago, only six states and the District of Columbia recognized same-sex marriage.

In June, the U.S. Supreme Court delivered a landmark victory for **gay rights** by forcing the federal government to recognize same-sex marriages in states where it is legal and paving the way for gay marriage in California.

But the court did not endorse a fundamental right for gay people to marry, leaving the issue to the states, at least for now. Same-sex couples and gay rights organizations now have 36 lawsuits pending in 20 states, according to Davidson.

Last week, same-sex weddings started in New Jersey, and the high court in New Mexico heard arguments on whether same-sex couples should be allowed to marry.

Lawmakers in Illinois are also considering the issue.

"This is an issue where we've hit a tipping point," said James Esseks, who oversees gay rights advocacy for the American Civil Liberties Union. "The momentum we have is striking."

The debate over same-sex matrimony has long divided the "Aloha State," and the special session will be greeted by rival demonstrations. On Sunday, proponents plan an "All You Need is Love" rally in Honolulu and opponents will follow with a "Let the People Decide" gathering on Monday.

In recent days, opponents of the bill have gathered on the sides of volcanic mountain highways and dense urban streets with signs saying "Let the People Vote on Marriage."

"They're starting House hearings on Halloween, when many of those opposed will be busy with their families, so we're telling people to bring their kids trick-or-treating at the state capitol," said Jim Hochberg, president of Hawaii Family Advocates, the leading group opposing the governor's bill.

Donald Bentz, head of the gay rights group Equality Hawaii,

said he was hopeful the bill would pass and said it was bad policy to allow voters—rather than lawmakers or the courts—to decide civil rights questions.

“Whenever you leave the rights of a minority up to the majority, that’s a bad day,” he said.

He rejected the idea the issue required further debate.

“Hawaii has been discussing this issue for 20 years now,” Bentz said. “These couples have been waiting 20 years.”

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