

France Set to Unveil Gay Marriage Plans Despite Opposition

A plan to legalize **same-sex marriage** and allow gay couples to adopt was a liberal cornerstone of Francois Hollande's election manifesto earlier this year. It looked like a shoo-in for the French President, supported by a majority of the country, and an easy way to break with his conservative predecessor.

But that was then.

Now, as the Socialist government prepares to unveil its draft "marriage for everyone" law Wednesday, polls show wavering support for the idea and for the president amid increasingly vocal opposition in this traditionally Catholic country.

And it's not just religious and rural leaders speaking out; top figures within Hollande's own party also are at loggerheads. So the Socialists are dragging their feet, releasing the bill later than planned and delaying parliamentary debate on it until January.

A political hot potato, it has entrenched divisions between urban France, where homosexuality is widely accepted, and rural France, where conservative attitudes hold sway.

Unusually for this strictly secular country, it has also brought religious views to the foreground. Most French people identify as Catholic even if only a small minority attend church regularly, and Archbishop Andre Vingt-Trois made it a point to defend heterosexual parents Sunday in a homily at the pilgrimage site in Lourdes in southern France. The pope weighed in last month, urging French bishops to oppose the bill, and France's chief rabbi Gilles Bernheim joined other

religious leaders in his opposition.

France would be the 12th country in the world to legalize **same-sex marriage** if the bill passes. France has allowed civil unions since 1999, and while they were initially seen as for gay or lesbian couples, they have proved hugely popular among heterosexuals, too.

Right-wing opposition to full-fledged **gay marriage** in France has generally centered on the impact on the traditional family. But some have been more strident.

One prominent Paris official warned that recognizing **gay marriage** could lead to legalizing **polygamy**, pedophilia and incest. Francois Lebel's comments drew particular attention, and condemnation, because he oversees the neighborhood that includes the presidential palace and he officiated at former President Nicolas Sarkozy's marriage to ex-supermodel Carla Bruni.

Meanwhile, two prominent conservatives with presidential ambitions are railing against gay marriage as they compete for attention and the leadership of the main opposition party, the UMP. Jean-Francois Cope is calling for mass protests against the Socialists' plans, and Francois Fillon suggested reversing the law if he's elected leader.

All the noise appears to be eroding support for same-sex rights and suggests the bill will be diluted or modified before it reaches a vote. Polls generally still show a majority favor gay marriage, though to a declining degree. And a recent poll by Ifop showed less than half now favor gay adoption, down from more than half in previous polls.

Gay couples recognize that it's an issue that is bound to provoke controversy on the country's right, but they remain optimistic that a law will come to pass.

Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed, who married his live-in partner

Qiyaammudeen Jantjies in South Africa, where gay marriage is recognized, is already seeking instruction from his local town council to get his marriage recognized in France as soon as he can.

“The population’s already accepted that there are homo-parental families, that there are homosexual couples, and that in fact (France is) very late,” Zahed said. “I think that a large majority of the population has acknowledged that we are lagging in France on these issues.”

The proposed law is of huge symbolic importance for Hollande, whose personal popularity is in decline and who says legalizing gay marriage and adoption is one of the things he wants to accomplish in his first year in office. But it is escalating into a divisive issue even within his Socialist party’s ranks.

Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault has favored a minimalist law that would not include access to medically assisted procreation such as in vitro fertilization. Parliamentary leader Bruno Le Roux has criticized the premier’s cautious stance and will present an amendment allowing gay couples the right to such procedures.

Many have taken their protests to the streets.

“We’re against (this law) in the name of the rights of the children because we want to protect the children against missing out unfairly on a daddy or a mommy,” said Tugdual Derville, general director of Alliance Vita, an association of conservative groups, who staged demonstrations last week in cities around France.

Everyone, it seems, has an opinion. Even the politically neutral state child benefits agency has weighed in, criticizing the plan to scrap entries for “father” and “mother” in official records, replaced by “parent 1” and “parent 2”.

The most vocal opposition is coming from rural France, where leaders from right and left are campaigning for a “conscience clause,” which would allow mayors the right to refuse to perform **same-sex marriages**. Some 1,200 French mayors and their deputies have signed a petition protesting the law.

After the draft law is presented to Wednesday’s Cabinet meeting, it goes to the National Assembly for debate in January. Socialists hope that the majority they won in June’s parliamentary elections will be enough to push it through.