

French Lower House Backs Gay Marriage Bill

France's lower house of parliament backed **same-sex marriage** in a vote on Tuesday, paving the way for it to enter law after street marches rallied hundreds of thousands of demonstrators both for and against it.

The move is France's most important **social reform** since the abolition of the death penalty in 1981 but is opposed by social conservatives in the majority Catholic country, together with many French Muslims and evangelical Christians.

Assuming it is passed by the Senate upper house in an April 2 vote, **France** will join 11 other countries including Belgium, Portugal, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Norway and South Africa where same-sex marriage is legal.

A further nine U.S. states and Washington D.C. allow same-sex marriage while British lawmakers earlier this month backed it in an initial vote.

"We've waged a great and noble battle," Justice Minister Christiane Taubira, the bill's main promoter, told journalists ahead of the 329 vs 229 vote in favour of the bill.

President **Francois Hollande's** Socialists hold a majority in the National Assembly, which allowed them to overcome attempts by opponents to delay proceedings with around 5,000 amendments that took over 100 hours of acrimonious debate. The Socialists and their allies together hold a majority in the Senate.

Known in France as "marriage for all", the **gay marriage bill** has proven to be the most divisive social initiative undertaken by Hollande's government in his nine months in power.

On Jan. 13, a survey by pollster CSA showed it had split the population roughly in two, with a slim majority of 51 percent

in favour and 43 percent opposed.

Legislators dropped a plan to also allow lesbians access to artificial insemination that proved highly contentious among voters. A separate bill covering that is due for debate later this year.

Some two thirds of the French describe their religion as Roman Catholic, though church attendance has dwindled since the 1970s. France is home to large Muslim and Jewish populations, which number about 5 million and 500,000 respectively.

The centre-right UMP party, freshly emerged from a leadership crisis, rallied its troops for marathon filibustering sessions which spilled over into evenings and weekends.

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