

Hawaii Senate Passes Bill to Legalize Gay Marriage

Hawaii's state Senate approved legislation on Wednesday to legalize same-sex marriage in a state long popular as a wedding and honeymoon destination, voting overwhelmingly to repeal a voter-approved constitutional amendment banning gay matrimony.

The 20-4 vote in favor of the bill, with three Democrats joining the state Senate's lone Republican to oppose the measure, came two days after the start of a special session called by Democratic Governor Neil Abercrombie to take up the legislation. One senator was absent for the vote.

If the bill is approved, as expected, by the state House of Representatives—where Democrats outnumber Republicans 44-7—Hawaii would become the 15th state to make it legal for gay and lesbian couples to wed.

A House committee is expected to hold a hearing on the measure on Thursday. No floor action in the lower chamber has been scheduled.

Abercrombie has said the proposal was crafted to address opponents' concerns that legalizing **gay marriage** would infringe on religious freedom. The proposal exempts clergy and churches from having to perform same-sex marriages.

Abercrombie, who served more than two decades in the U.S. House of Representatives before running for governor in 2010, signed a same-sex civil unions bill into law two years ago and has since been a vocal proponent of gay marriage.

His predecessor, Republican Linda Lingle, vetoed a **civil unions** bill in 2010.

The special session in Hawaii comes at a time of increasing momentum for gay marriage in the courts, at the ballot box and statehouses across the country.

Only six states and the District of Columbia recognized **same-sex marriage** a year ago, but the number has since more than doubled, due in most cases to litigation over the issue.

Three states—Maine, Maryland and Washington—became the first to extend marriage rights to same-sex couples by popular vote with passage of ballot initiatives last November.

Last week, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie dropped his legal opposition to gay marriage, making his state the 14th to legalize **same-sex weddings**.

The debate has long divided the “Aloha State.”

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

The ruling prompted a conservative backlash. In 1998, Hawaiian voters approved a state constitutional amendment that limited the right to marry to heterosexual couples.

Gay marriage opponents have opposed action in the Legislature and instead argued that the matter should be left to the voters. Gay marriage supporters counter that questions of basic civil liberties should not be left to popular vote.

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