

Indiana, Arkansas Retreat on Religious Freedom Bills Could Spark Wider Trend

Oklahoma lawmakers have put the brakes on a religion bill similar to ones in Indiana and Arkansas that were overhauled last week after facing a storm of criticism for being seen as discriminatory against gays.

Oklahoma's decision on Friday to shelve a bill that would have expanded its religious freedom law to allow people to deny services to same-sex couples made it the latest state to back away from proposed legislation that critics say targets the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community.

Sixteen states have introduced legislation this year to create or alter their religious freedom bills, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Analysts said lawmakers may scrap a number of those bills over concerns about backlash from powerful U.S. businesses and civil rights advocates. In Georgia, a religion bill died last week when the legislative session ended before it was put to a vote.

"This is where the LGBT community has been very effective because they have raised the costs substantially to passing this sort of legislation," said Mark Jones, the chair of the political science department at Rice University in Houston.

Indiana and Arkansas last Thursday revised new religious freedom acts, offering fixes to language that critics said would have allowed people to invoke the laws to deny services to gay and lesbian customers.

Support is still strong among social conservatives for the

measures like those originally passed in Indiana and Arkansas, with groups such as the Family Research Council saying the government should not punish people for living their faiths.

“Religious freedom should not be held hostage by Big Business,” Family Research Council President Tony Perkins said in a statement last week.

Many of the proposals were drafted after U.S. judges ruled against bans in same-sex marriages in the states, and have wide support among socially conservative lawmakers and their constituents.

But Republican lawmakers, having seen what happened in Indiana and Arkansas, may want to avoid a strong response from LGBT activists and powerful U.S. companies that could hurt them as they battle other states for jobs and industry, analysts said.

“Republican legislatures where the bills have been filed will see those bills buried in committee and kept from coming to the floor,” Jones said.

Texas, a Republican stronghold, has about 20 pieces of proposed legislation ranging from blocks to same-sex marriage to a proposal to punish anyone who uses a public restroom that is different from the gender they have in state records.

In Texas and elsewhere, the bills are pitting pro-business elements of the Republican Party against social conservatives and showing generational divisions over attitudes toward same-sex marriage.

Republican strategist Bill Miller believes the bottom line will win out in Texas.

“Texas plays hosts to more major events than any other state, so it’s radar is finely tuned to issues that might trigger loss of economic development opportunities,” he said.