

Civil union law leaves much to be desired for both sides

N.J. neither allows nor prohibits gay marriages

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In the national fight over legalizing gay marriage, New Jersey is a battleground state.

It's the last state standing with a civil union law that has not explicitly prohibited or allowed gay marriage. Other states with civil union laws have already moved on, calling that union "marriage" or defining marriage as only between a man and a woman.

In New Jersey, battle lines are being drawn in the issue that is so contentious it even pits political party members against each other.

"I think, by and large, its religious beliefs that come into play here," professor Joe Marbach, who teaches political science at Seton Hall University, said last week. "It's one that's very divisive in the state. We're seeing the groups already lined up."

Hundreds of people — holding signs that read "Let the people decide" and "Marriage = one man and one woman" — gathered in front of the Statehouse in Trenton yesterday to protest gay marriage. The crowd applauded as politicians and representatives from the Catholic Church, as well as other religious groups, vowed to defeat gay marriage.

"That word 'marriage' means an awful lot to us, and we don't want to see it radically redefined," said Len Deo of the New Jersey Family Policy Council. "You cannot redefine what you did not create."

Gil Santos, 40, of Perth Amboy, said he attended the rally because he felt he needed to support traditional marriage in the legislative tussle.

"It doesn't look easy, and it looks like it'll be a hard battle," Santos said. "But I'll be attending rallies, making phone calls and praying hard."

But religious groups in the state are divided on the issue.

The Rev. Charlie Ortman of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Montclair last week said he and his church — along with 17 other religious groups across the state — actively support gay marriage.

"Religion has made such a mess of this matter that it's religion that now must step into the fray so that religions can stand on the side of love rather than the side of discrimination," Ortman said.

The next governor will "have a tremendous impact" on whether gay couples are allowed to marry, Marbach said. "I think all the candidates have been pretty clear on their stance. If it's Jon Corzine, the governor will sign it, but Chris Christie has already stated he won't be" signing it.

In the meantime, the gubernatorial race has kept lawmakers from holding committee meetings and advancing legislation (S1967/A2978) that would allow gay couples to marry.

"The unfortunate thing about New Jersey is that we're just not in session right now," said Assemblyman Reed Gusciora (D-Mercer), who is sponsoring the Assembly version.

But lawmakers pushing for the bill to become law still say it could happen during a lameduck session this year.

"It's something I hope will pass in the very near future," said Sen. Loretta Weinberg (D-Bergen), a candidate for lieutenant governor who also is sponsoring the "Freedom of Religion and Equality in Civil Marriage Act."

"If it happens in lame duck that will be fine," she said. "If it doesn't, I think it will happen in the next Legislature."

Opponents of gay marriage said voters should decide how the state legally defines marriage.

"We're not going to let you pull a scam in the lame duck," Assemblyman Michael Doherty (R-Warren) said at yesterday's rally. "If (the bill) is sent to the voters of New Jersey, the people of New Jersey may vote for traditional marriage."

National advocates for gay marriage said New Jersey was poised to pass the bill because it already allows civil unions and it has a history of leaning left politically.

Connecticut, Vermont and New Hampshire had civil union laws before they legalized marriage for gay couples, said Sarah Warbelow, State Legislative Director for the Human Rights Council, a Washington D.C.-based group that advocates for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality.

Meanwhile, Maryland and California allow gay couples some rights through domestic partnerships, but reserve the meaning of "marriage" for heterosexual couples through an amendment to their state

constitution or a law passed by their legislature.

"There's clearly a patchwork of rights for same-sex couples in our country," said Marty Rouse, National Field Director for the Human Rights Council.

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JENNIFER BROWN/THE STAR-LEDGER

Members of religious and civic groups opposed to gay marriage gather in front of the Statehouse in Trenton for a rally yesterday.