



Mass. lawmakers kill bid for gay marriage referendum

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BOSTON -- Same-sex marriage will continue to be legal in Massachusetts, after proponents on Thursday won a months-long battle to defeat a proposed constitutional amendment to define marriage as between a man and a woman.

"In Massachusetts today, the freedom to marry is secure," Gov. Deval Patrick said after the legislature voted 151-45 against the amendment. It needed 50 favorable votes to come before voters in a referendum in November 2008.

The vote means opponents would have to start from square one to sponsor a new amendment, which could not get on the ballot before 2012. Massachusetts is the only state where same-sex marriage is legal, although five states allow civil unions or the equivalent.

Thursday's victory for same-sex marriage was not a foregone conclusion, especially after the amendment won first-round approval from the previous legislature in January, with 62 lawmakers supporting it. It needed 50 votes in consecutive sessions of the legislature.

House and Senate leaders and the governor lobbied intensively to stop the amendment.

Patrick said he tried to persuade lawmakers not only that same-sex marriage should be allowed but also that a 2008 referendum would be divisive and distract from important issues.

About 8,500 same-sex couples have married in Massachusetts since the unions became legal in May 2004. In December 2005, opponents, led by the Massachusetts Family Institute, gathered a record 170,000 signatures for an amendment banning same-sex marriage. Patrick's predecessor, Gov. Mitt Romney, supported that effort.

Romney, campaigning in Chicago on Thursday, said he was "disappointed that the legislature did not allow the people to have their voice heard."

The Republican presidential hopeful also spoke in favor of a federal marriage amendment "to assure marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman."

Kris Mineau, president of the Massachusetts Family Institute, did not indicate whether opponents would start a new petition drive but said, "We're not going away."

The vote reflected lobbying by gay-rights groups.

"This was the focus of our national community," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "Frankly, a loss today would have been very demoralizing."

