



New York needs public debate on same-sex marriage

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Same-sex marriage is no ordinary political issue. It's complicated by visceral concerns like individual rights, religious beliefs and even notions about the underpinnings of civilization. It isn't partisan. It's personal.

The New York Court of Appeals has ruled that same-sex marriage is an issue for the Legislature. The Assembly has passed marriage equality legislation - twice. Gov. David Paterson is an ardent supporter. So the Senate is where the issue will be decided. With the Legislature gathering in Albany this week, the time has come for New York's senators to publicly debate their views and vote on marriage equality. That's called leadership. It's how legislating should work.

Unfortunately, that's not how it works in Albany, where votes on tough issues are routinely delayed until party leaders are sure of the outcome. That won't do here. If this debate is kept behind closed doors, the public will be cut out of any meaningful deliberations. Voters usually don't much care. On this, they will.

New Yorkers need to work through this together. The public shouldn't just wake up one morning to discover that gay marriage has been legalized or rejected. There are important questions to be answered. Supporters of the bill say it protects religious groups from being compelled to perform the rite. That crucial provision should be vetted carefully in the debate. There are also concerns about how legalizing same-sex marriage will affect public funding for social services delivered by churches that don't recognize the marriages.

Same-sex marriage is contentious. But in most states, officials have found the courage to make a decision, whether by legislation, referendum or judicial fiat. Marriage equality has been accepted in five states and rejected in more than 30 others. In Maine, the legislature voted to allow it, only to be overruled last week by voters. However messy the process, democracy demands up or down votes. New York's senators should stop ducking their responsibility.