



AP

GOV. DAVID PATERSON is joined by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and City Council Speaker Christine Quinn last week during a news conference announcing Paterson's same-sex marriage initiative

Opponents of gay marriage insist that extending one of civilization's basic organizing principles to include homosexuals will weaken traditional marriage.

The National Organization for Marriage says the best argument against gay marriage is that "gays and lesbians have a right to live as they choose; they don't have the right to redefine marriage for all of us."

That reasoning has many happily married heterosexuals scratching their heads. How, exactly, would granting gays the right to marry adversely affect heterosexual couples? How would it weaken families?

Arguments against gay marriage tend to be based on religious beliefs that marriage is a sacred rite intended solely for a man and a woman. But the legislation proposed by Gov. David Paterson would legalize gay and lesbian participation in civil marriages, not religious ceremonies. The bill specifically states that "no member of the clergy may be compelled to perform any marriage ceremony."

New York and other states already recognize sexual orientation as a civil rights issue. Gov. George Pataki signed the Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act in 2002, and that same year, the state extended workers' compensation benefits to gay people who lost their partners on 9/11. Why shouldn't equal rights be extended into the realm of civil marriage?

Legalizing gay marriage -- moreso than the halfway measure of civil unions -- would strengthen and affirm the long-term commitments same-sex couples make to each other. That doesn't weaken families; it bolsters them. The argument put forward by the National Organization for Marriage that gay marriage should remain outlawed because "children need a mother and a father" is also a red herring. Gay couples will continue to raise children whether they are allowed to marry or not. Wouldn't those children be better off if their gay parents solidified their relationship through marriage?

Likewise, the organization declares on its Web site that gay marriage would result in children being taught that "one-half of humanity -- either mothers or fathers -- are dispensable, unimportant. ... Children are confused enough right now with sexual messages. Let's not confuse them further."

The argument is a shameless scare tactic. If anything, legalizing same-sex marriage would provide children with a clearer understanding of -- and a greater tolerance for -- the immutable fact that some people have different sexual orientations than others.

Indeed, as gay relationships have become more open and better understood, they have become more accepted, particularly among young people. A Siena College poll released Monday found that 53 percent of New York voters support gay marriage, with 39 percent opposed. Among those between 18 and 34, a whopping 71 percent said they support gay marriage. Among those 55 and above, only 42 percent did.

Given those demographics, it is inevitable that same-sex marriage rights will eventually spread across the country. New York has no reason to wait. The Legislature should move swiftly to affirm a civil right and legalize same-sex marriage.

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