

## N.H. gay-marriage debate puts 2012 hopefuls on spot

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New Hampshire's Legislature is likely to hold a vote to repeal the state's law permitting same-sex marriage next January, a development that would force the GOP presidential field to confront the issue on the eve of the first-in-the-nation primary.

It's a debate that so far has left [Republican](#) candidates squirming and could shatter any notion of a GOP "truce" on social issues designed to keep the primary focused on the economy.

The showdown is being shifted to early next year because fiscal hawks in the state GOP convinced the sponsors of same-sex marriage bills to put off the measures so lawmakers could focus on cutting spending in this session. One bill would prohibit same-sex marriage in [New Hampshire](#), and another would prevent the state from recognizing any union that's not between one man and one woman.

The move, made official Thursday, guarantees the gay marriage bills will come up for a vote in the state House in January. If either bill passes, it most likely would move to the Senate a few weeks later — close to or right on top of the scheduled Feb. 14 primary.

Social conservatives in the state hope to force the presidential hopefuls to take a stand in defense of the traditional family — and set the true believers apart from those who would prefer to mostly ignore gay issues in the face of rising popular support for [same-sex marriage](#).

Some conservative activists plan to ask candidates to sign a pledge saying they support marriage as between one man and one woman. They also plan to ask them to call state legislators and urge them to repeal the gay marriage law — right as state voters prepare to go to the polls amid the intense media spotlight on New Hampshire.

"Why not make this into a national issue and try to leverage the presidential candidates to try and garner support for it here in the state?" said Kevin Smith, an influential social conservative operative in New Hampshire and the president of Cornerstone Action.

Smith and his organization are urging the New Hampshire Legislature — both chambers newly Republican after four years of Democratic control — to repeal the state law allowing gay marriage and redefine marriage as between one man and one woman.

The most prominent Republican presidential prospects are hardly rushing to the defense of gay marriage, but during the most recent nationwide fights over the issue — the Obama administration's decision not to defend the [Defense of Marriage Act](#) (DOMA) in court and to repeal the military's ban on gays serving openly in the military — most of the field has refrained from seizing the issue.

Even former Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin hinted support for the "don't ask, don't tell" (DADT) repeal earlier this year, and she's one of a handful of top Republicans who have been reluctant to tackle the issue of gay rights or have sidestepped it entirely. It took Palin five days to issue a statement supporting DOMA and arguing that marriage should be "between

one man and one woman." She also made clear that she was willing to accept the gay Republican group GOProud's presence at the Conservative Political Action Conference, a position at odds with many in the party's socially conservative wing.

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Former Massachusetts GOP Gov. Mitt Romney didn't mention men or women in his statement about DOMA — he just lamented that Obama wasn't enforcing the nation's laws. Romney leaned on Sen. John McCain's (R-Ariz.) opposition to the DADT repeal. "Sen. McCain looked at the setting and said, 'look, the current policy is working, and in a time of war and conflict, this is not the time to make a change of that nature,' and I would concur with that view," Romney said on the "Tonight Show."

Other big names, including Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich and former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee were nowhere to be found during the DADT debate. Huckabee has been the only candidate to strongly and repeatedly denounce Obama's decision on DOMA, while Barbour put up a tweet, condemning Obama because of it. Former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty took a day to respond to the DOMA news.

For a party that once led the charge against gay rights and reaped political advantages from its place in opposition, it's a notable evolution — and one that perhaps reflects polling data showing increasing popular support for gay marriage, especially among young people.

"It's a funny thing about change, it moves slowly until it doesn't," said GOP strategist John Weaver. "Finely tuned politicians who are looking to the future may get that sooner than other people. We may be getting to that point where it is less and less of a litmus test in our party."

Both National Republican Senatorial Committee Chairman John Cornyn and National Republican Congressional Committee Chairman Pete Sessions attended the Log Cabin Republicans annual fundraising dinner in September, along with a handful of GOP House members.

"Even the most realpolitik strategists in the Republican Party saw there were diminishing returns in targeting the gay community," said R. Clarke Cooper, executive director of the Log Cabin Republicans.

"The pragmatic guidance for all of our campaigns was to do coalition building. Work with gay and lesbian conservatives, and if addressing individual liberties for gay voters is not particularly comfortable for the individual candidates, just don't say anything."