

Gay Marriage Clears Maryland Senate

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Same-sex couples in Maryland would have the same full marriage rights as heterosexuals under a bill that cleared the Senate Thursday. If the House of Delegates approves it and the governor signs it, Maryland would be the sixth U.S. state to approve gay marriage.

Opponents, including Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller, D-Calvert, promised that if it does become law that a referendum question would be on the 2012 ballot so voters have the final decision.

One Republican, Sen. Allan Kittleman of Howard, joined 24 Democrats to give the bill the 25 votes it needed to pass, with 21 opposing. Senators amended the bill to include protections for religious groups and institutions to keep them from being forced to participate in gay weddings. The bill would grant the same title and rights to same-sex couples as married straight couples.

If the measure passes the House, Democratic Gov. Martin O'Malley has said he would sign it into law.

Activists watching from the balcony cheered after the Senate voted.

Lisa Polyak, who lost a legal challenge to the Maryland law which defines marriage as between one man and one woman, wiped away tears from her eyes and hugged supporters, including First Lady Katie O'Malley.

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