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Mark DiIonno

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Both sides of N.J. gay marriage debate face bigger statewide issues

By [Mark DiIonno](#)

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The guy in the Gen. Washington get-up was a lone sentry, quietly pacing outside the Statehouse with a sign that said George and Martha believed marriage was between a man and woman. He was later relieved by a dozen of earnest looking people with "Protect Our Children" signs. The kind of people you see at PTA meetings, or church bake sales, or youth sports fundraisers.

In an overflow room where a crowd gathered to hear the debate over the marriage equality bill, a heavysset guy with a 5'o'clock shadow stood out in his faux leopard print dress. Other than that, there were no outlandish statements or garish costumes. The place was mostly filled with people wearing blue t-shirts that read "Equality: The American Dream." The kind of people you see at PTA meetings, or church bakes sales, or youth sports fundraisers.

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Matt Rainey/The Star-Ledger

The gallery was filled in Committee Room 4 today during the Senate Judiciary Hearing on gay marriage. Rey and Becky Redington of Montclair listen to opening statements.

If you took the 300 or so people who came to today's hearing to either support the gay marriage bill or argue against it and stripped them of their t-shirts and buttons, there would be no telling who was who. This was also true of the clergy. Most of the people in white collars, or wearing prayer shawls or yarmulkes were members of a group called "Clergy for Equality." Still others represented religions opposed to gay marriage.

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I think you see where I'm going with this.

The people who support gay marriage and argue against it probably agree on most other issues. They want safe streets, good schools, lower property taxes and a strong economy. A white-picket fence lifestyle, in which the friendly neighbors keep their noses on their side of the fence.

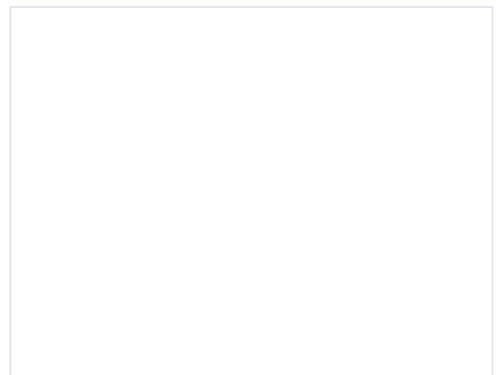
As today's debate unfolded into the night, the rhetoric on both sides was cordial to the point of plain vanilla.

The judiciary committee heard stories of gay couples being denied benefits or rights in times of crisis, like when their life partner was dying. They heard religious leaders say the culture of marriage in all world religions joins man and woman for the purpose of promulgation of the species. They heard testimony about the discriminatory legal differences between civil unions and marriage.

But what they did not hear was the question that is asked by millions of people on this issue. And that question is, "What's the big deal?"

In three polls before the November gubernatorial election -- by Monmouth and Quinnipiac universities and the Eagleton Institute at Rutgers -- only one or two percent of New Jerseyans saw gay marriage as an important issue. That means 98 or 99 percent didn't.

"It never surfaced as a major issue," said Patrick Murray, the director of the polling institute at Monmouth.



A summary of the Eagleton poll said gay marriage was met "with a shrug" by most people, especially the young.

And while recent polls show people are evenly divided on the subject, those polled are given only three options: "for," "against," or "don't know."

"Don't care" was not an option.

People against gay marriage say it has been voted down nationwide. People for it say popular vote shouldn't determine civil liberties.

People against gay marriage say laws that protect such civil liberties would be acceptable, as long as the word "marriage" was held in reserve for unions between a man and woman. Gay marriage proponents say they will not rest until "marriage" is redefined to include same sex couples.

In that word -- marriage -- lies the impasse. In that word could lie the solution. The new definition of marriage could carry the adjective civil or religious in front of it. That way, everyone gets what they want.

And then gay and religious lobbyists can turn their considerable muscle and attention to the problems we equally share in our white-picket fence worlds: exorbitant property taxes, a runaway pension system, underfunded higher education, and all the other issues New Jersey legislators should be spending their time on.



Matt Rainey/The Star-Ledger

Rev. Martin Lombardo of Jesus Cares Ministries of Princeton dresses as George Washington to "remind the state that our 1st President chose marriage God's way." Hundreds of people came today to the Statehouse Annex Building to attend a Senate Judiciary Hearing on gay marriage.