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Experts Available To Discuss New Hampshire Civil Unions

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Two experts from the University of New Hampshire are available to discuss New Hampshire's proposed civil union's law, HB437. On Thursday, April 26, 2007, the New Hampshire Senate passed the bill 14-10, sending it to Gov. John Lynch who has said he will sign it. New Hampshire would become only the fourth state to permit civil unions and the second to do so voluntarily.

Marla Brettschneider is an associate professor of political science and women's studies, and coordinator of UNH's Queer Studies Program. She is available to discuss how New Hampshire's civil unions legislation might be interpreted in New Hampshire and nationally in the context of discussions regarding gay civil rights and justice. She can be reached at marlab@unh.edu and 917-856-1264 (cell).

According to Brettschenider, New Hampshire's civil unions effort is an interesting example of how a civil matter can be addressed at the state level and kept distinct from religious discussions.

"Just a few years ago, people would have commented about how a religious agenda drives much in New Hampshire politics. Like most areas of the country, New Hampshire has a large percentage of people who consider themselves religious, yet New Hampshire has a strong political tradition of independence. This is an excellent example of citizens at the state level not letting religious discourse interfere with a civil matter concerning justice and equality," Brettschenider says.

New Hampshire's decision to endorse civil unions also indicates that there is not one single American approach to gay rights issues, she says. "Clearly, this defies the notion that the country is not ready for civil unions. What this says is that the American people, in different locales, decide what they are ready for and what they consider a justice issue. New Hampshire is an example of what we are going to see elsewhere."

Andrew Smith, associate research professor of political science, is director of the UNH Survey Center. Smith can discuss changing public opinion in New Hampshire and nationally regarding civil unions and same-sex marriage. He also can discuss recent polling data the topic. Smith can be reached at 603-862-2226 (office), 603-868-3309 (home) or andrew.smith@unh.edu.

According to Smith, opposition to civil unions has diminished in recent years. "For most people, a large majority of the people, they just don't really care that much about this," Smith said. "It's just not an issue that directly affects them."

A February 2007 survey conducted by the UNH Survey Center indicated 74 percent of respondents said it would not bother them if gay couples could obtain marriage licenses from a justice of the peace.