

Both sides gear up for costly Calif. fight over gay marriage

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LOS ANGELES -- The election-year fallout from last week's ruling by the California Supreme Court to allow same-sex marriage has both sides of the religious and political landscape building their barricades.

Gay marriage advocates are jubilant but cautious as they hold onto their landmark court victory, while the opponents hope to make it a major issue in the November elections.

"A lot of people are very angry about the court's decision, calling up, e-mailing, asking what they can do to help," said Andrew Pugno, the attorney for backers of a proposed constitutional amendment that would ban same-sex marriage and, if approved by voters, trump the court's decision.

With funding from Focus on the Family and other groups, the "Protect Marriage" measure has gathered more than 1.1 million signatures to qualify for the November ballot.

"An anchor of the coalition has been the churches that gathered these signatures. They provided the bulk of the manpower to make this happen," Pugno said. "In some ways, the arrogance of the court has really ignited the anger of the voters and given a boost to the marriage amendment."

Pugno said his group will petition the state supreme court to stay its decision "until the voters have a chance to have a final say on this issue." Without a stay, same-sex marriages would begin June 15.

The decision could prove difficult for the presidential campaign of Sen. Barack Obama, who appears likely to become the Democratic nominee. Obama has said he opposes gay marriage but supports equal rights for gay couples.

May 16, one day after the ruling, the California Republican Party Web site said "it will be interesting to see how Barack Obama tip-toes around this issue."

The United Church of Christ, of which Obama is a member, applauded the decision. The UCC voted to support civil marriage for same-sex couples at its General Synod in 2004.

"Until all couples are able to marry, their separate status will never be equal status," said the Rev. John Thomas, the UCC's general minister and president.