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Marriage ruling not the end of debate in Conn.

By PAT EATON-ROBB Associated Press

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HARTFORD -- Now that the Connecticut Supreme Court has ruled same-sex couples have the right to wed, opponents of gay marriage are pinning their hopes on an infrequent ballot question in a long-shot bid to block the unions.

Every 20 years, voters can force a convention during which delegates can rewrite the entire constitution. It's a long, painstaking process that could cost millions and, by coincidence, it's on the ballot this November.

"This is our one opportunity for the people to have a voice, for the people to be heard, for them to decide whether marriage will be protected as between a man and a woman," said Peter Wolfgang, executive director of the Family Institute of Connecticut.

On Friday, the state Supreme Court ruled that Connecticut would be the third state, after California and Massachusetts, to allow gay marriage. The court said Connecticut's 2005 civil union law doesn't give same-sex couples the same status as married heterosexual couples.

Unlike California, where next month's ballot referendum will decide whether to outlaw gay marriage, Connecticut voters are being asked to consider only if they want a constitutional convention. If so, convention delegates would be appointed by the state General Assembly, which is largely comprised of Democrats who are sympathetic to same-sex issues.

State Rep. Mike Lawlor, co-chairman of the legislature's Judiciary Committee, said he's not sure everyone understands the constitutional

convention process.

"It is a very elaborate, months-long process in which a group of people basically rewrite the whole state constitution," he said. "It costs millions of dollars and requires a special statewide election. If you just want to make a specific amendment to it, which it sounds like they are talking about, then there is a lot easier way to do it."

That would be the legislative amendment process, which typically requires a three-quarters vote of both General Assembly houses to put a constitutional amendment on the ballot.

There have been 30 amendments passed since 1965, the last time the state held a constitutional convention.

Wolfgang said his group has not ruled out seeking an amendment from lawmakers, but is focusing on getting out the "yes" votes in November.

"The real battle will be Election Day," he said. "Even in a state with a legislature as liberal as ours, we have defeated

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our opponents year after year through the legislative process. They could never have gotten same-sex marriage through the democratic process. Democracy is gay marriage's worst enemy."

Republican Gov. M. Jodi Rell, a gay marriage opponent who also supports amending the Constitution to allow for initiatives and referendum, said she is "firmly convinced that attempts to reverse this decision either legislatively or by amending the state constitution will not meet with success."

Andrew McDonald, the Judiciary Committee's Senate co-chairman, said he expects the General Assembly to take up gay

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marriage next year -- but only to codify the Supreme Court's ruling, and not to attempt to change the state's constitution.

"I continue to expect a bipartisan effort to eradicate any remaining vestiges of discrimination," he said.

Lawmakers will have some issues to discuss, such as what to do with state's civil unions law, which remains in effect. More than 1,500 civil unions have been granted since the General Assembly approved them in 2005.

Attorney General Richard Blumenthal said new marriage forms eventually will be needed, but in the interim, clerks can make them more gender neutral by simply crossing out references to man and woman or husband and wife on current forms.

The ruling does not mean churches or synagogues must perform same-sex marriages, but some are expected to embrace the new law.

"I think there is great rejoicing, although we are aware that for some people this is troubling and difficult," said. Rev. David Foy Crabtree, Connecticut conference minister for the United Church of Christ. "People come out all over the map on it, but among our clergy there is a very, very high percentage who will respond very favorably to this."

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