

An Italian-American Governor Signs Same-Sex Marriage into Law. The split among Italian-American Senators crucial to the passage.

Ottorino Cappelli (June 27, 2011)



Pop star Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta a.k.a. Lady Gaga, celebrating the passage of the bill with her friends. The picture was posted on Lady Gaga's Twitter account via Blackberry on Saturday, June 25, and was seen 243,695 times in the first 24 hours. The caption says: "The revolution is ours to fight for love, justice+equality. Rejoice NY, and propose. We did it!!!" (twitpic.com/5gehdu)

In an historical turn of events, on Friday, June 24, the New York State Senate approved 33 to 29 a bill that will allow gay couples to marry. Governor Andrew Cuomo, who acted as the eminence grise skillfully steering the legislative process toward this end, promptly signed it into law.



Cuomo, who is a Roman Catholic, demonstrated a remarkable autonomy of judgment from the Church hierarchy's entrenched values. His position was somehow reminiscent of the famous 1960 statement by then presidential candidate John F. Kennedy, a Catholic Irish-American, when he rejected insinuations that he would act at the pleasure of the Pope: "I am not the Catholic candidate for President," Kennedy said. "I am the Democratic Party candidate for President who also happens to be a Catholic. I do not speak for my Church on public matters – and the Church does not speak for me."

Andrew Cuomo's "liberal spirit" today recalls that of his father Mario, who as Governor stayed firmly in opposition to the death penalty (although in that case he was attuned with the Church's position and had to distance himself from conservative Democratic circles). But Mario Cuomo was not known for his pro-gay sentiments and was actually accused of having circulated homophobic posters aimed at Edward I. Koch in his unsuccessful 1977 bid for mayor of New York; Andrew, then 20 years old, worked on his father's campaign. Thirty years later, however, Andrew championed same-sex marriage in his gubernatorial campaign and he got the vote of the New York gay community.

As for the Senators, the Italian American caucus was split on the measure: 6 voted in favor of the bill and 8 voted against (see table below). The division ran mainly along party lines but, while all nay-voters were Republicans and all Democrats voted yes, two Republicans from upstate – veteran senator James Alesi and freshman Mark Grisanti – joined the majority in supporting the law. This split among the Italian-American Republican legislators was crucial for the passage of the law: had they all been united, a 31-31 result would have ensued.

According to the [New York Times](#) [2], James Alesi (Monroe County) whose 2009 opposition to same-sex marriage was admittedly due less to moral conviction than to "political discipline," was subject to several pressures from pro-gay campaigners and donors in his district. In the end Mr. Alesi, who has been in the Senate since 1996, was publicly praised by Mr. Cuomo as "the first Republican to support marriage equality."

The other Republican dissident, **Mark Grisanti** (Buffalo), who has just been elected in 2010 for the first time, said he struggled with his decision because he didn't want to be "the deciding vote as a freshman senator." However, he added, after much research he found that he could not deny a "human being ... the same rights that" he has with his wife ([see video here](#) [3]).

Things have been shifting in the Italian-American Democratic field too. Conservative Democrats who had previously opposed the measure, such as **George Onorato** from Queens, are not in office any longer. And Senator **Joseph Addabbo, jr**, also from Queens, who had voted 'no' in an effort to mirror his constituents' opinion, was persuaded to switch sides by last-minute polls and pro-gay mobilization in his district. In this case too, Mr. Cuomo is said to have been behind the scenes.

Reached by i-Italy via email, Senator **Diane Savino** – a co-founder of the Working Families Party and today a Democratic Senator from Brooklyn and Staten Island – commented on the changing orientation of the Italian-American Legislators: "it can best be explained as a generational shift among italian-americans in general. The members of the italian-american conference are getting younger each year, and with that generational shift is coming a shift in tolerance for ideas that were considered unacceptable to our parents and grandparents."

At the national level, the gay community is becoming ever more relevant in view of the 2012 presidential elections. President Obama, who had the support of the gay community in 2008 and needs it ever more now, praised the vote of the New York Senate. i-Italy will monitor the process to understand where the Italian-American community will be leaning.

Here is how the Italian American Senators voted on the same-sex marriage bill:

YES (6 Italian-American Senators / 33 total):

Downstate



Joseph Addabbo (D, District 15)

Tony Avella (D, District 11)

Diane Savino (D, IP, WF, District 23)

Upstate

David Carlucci (D, 38)

James Alesi (R, IP, District 55)

Mark Grisanti (R, C, IP, District 60)

NO (8 Italian-American Senators / 29):

Downstate

Kenneth LaValle (R, C, IP, District 1)

Carl Marcellino (R, District 5)

Charles Fuschillo (R, 8)

Andrew Lanza (R, District 24)

Upstate

Joseph Griffo (R, C, IP, District 47)

John DeFrancisco (R, C, IP, District 50)

Michael Nozzolio (R, C, IP, District 54)

Joseph Robach (R, C, IP, District 56)

New York State Comptroller Tom DiNapoli celebrating the passage of the gay-marriage bill

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[2] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/nyregion/the-road-to-gay-marriage-in-new-york.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1

[3] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEfN26t5yk8>