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Jack Lang, center, a former French culture minister, and Pierre Bergé, second from left, the longtime personal and business partner of Yves Saint Laurent, at a rally for a law allowing same-sex marriage. The sign reads, "Marriage for all!"

By ELAINE SCIOLINO<[http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/s/elaine\\_sciolino/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/s/elaine_sciolino/index.html)>  
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PARIS — The invitation-only soiree at the Rond-Point Theater on the Champs-Élysées last Sunday gathered 1,000 of this city's glitterati, among them government ministers, intellectuals, politicians, artists and even union leaders, to support the legalization of same-sex marriage<[http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/s/same\\_sex\\_marriage/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/s/same_sex_marriage/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier)> in France.

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Lesbian weddings are depicted on a magazine cover.

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Valerio Mezzanotti for The New York Times

Lesbian brides in the Chanel couture show.

The philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy waxed poetic on stage, warning of the “black tide of homophobia.” Lilian Thuram, the soccer hero who played on France’s World Cup-winning 1998 team, said he was supportive “because my grandfather was discriminated against because he is black and my grandmother because she is a woman.” Manuel Valls, the interior minister, opened his remarks with a letter of support from the president of Argentina, which he read in Catalanian-accented Spanish, his mother tongue.

Comedy and singing routines were performed, including one with a Lady Gaga impersonator as a lesbian bride in a long white wig and sunglasses. Texts by famous French intellectuals (Michel Foucault, Marguerite Duras) were read aloud. It was all part of the country’s reaction to a proposed law that would allow gay couples to marry and adopt children, a measure that has prompted mass demonstrations and long discussions in the news media. On Tuesday, the National Assembly opened a debate on the proposed law that is expected to last more than two weeks.

France is both a secular republic that champions the rights of the individual and a traditional, religiously rooted country that glorifies family life; demonstrating and debating are national pastimes.

But even some supporters of the law are ambivalent about “marriage for all,” as the initiative is called.

Pierre Bergé, the longtime personal and business partner of Yves Saint Laurent[http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/s/yves\\_saint\\_laurent/index.html?inline=nyt-per](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/s/yves_saint_laurent/index.html?inline=nyt-per), was the financial sponsor for the Rond-Point event, but even he had reservations.

Asked whether he and Mr. Saint Laurent would have married if same-sex marriage had been legal when the designer was alive, he seemed stunned into silence. Then he replied, “I don’t know.”

“Personally, I don’t like the word ‘marriage,’” he added. “I’d like it replaced in the civil code with the words ‘civil union.’ If people want a ‘marriage,’ they can have it — in a religious setting.”

Marriage, he said, had not been a burning personal issue for him.

“I’m 82,” he said. “And at my age, I’m not going to get married.”

(He and Mr. Saint Laurent had been joined in a civil solidarity pact, an initiative created in 1999 that offers couples regardless of sexual orientation some but not all of the rights of marriage.) At times, the debate has gotten personal.

When Valérie Trierweiler, the partner of France’s president, François Hollande[http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/h/francois\\_hollande/index.html?inline=nyt-per](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/h/francois_hollande/index.html?inline=nyt-per), announced that if the law came into effect she would attend the wedding of two gay friends, Bernard Debré, a center-right deputy, wrote on his blog that she had no right to enter the debate. “She’s just the mistress of the French president,” he said.

Undeterred, she turned up at Rond-Point to add her support. “This was one of the promises of François Hollande,” she told reporters. “I defend his proposals.”

Elle magazine made the same-sex marriage matter chic with a Jan. 18 cover featuring two longhaired young women in white joined in a chaste embrace. The 30-plus-page special report was bolstered by full-page ads for diamond rings by houses like Buccellati and Chaumet and 10 pages of bridal outfits.

Karl Lagerfeld<[http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/l/karl\\_lagerfeld/index.html?inline=nyt-per](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/l/karl_lagerfeld/index.html?inline=nyt-per)>, meanwhile, ended his haute couture show for Chanel a few days later with two brides (the Vogue cover girl Kati Nescher and a fellow model, Ashleigh Good) holding hands and wearing identical gowns. Their eyes were made up heavily in black.

Mr. Lagerfeld's views have evolved. In 2010 he told Vice magazine that he was opposed to same-sex marriage.

"I'm against it for a very simple reason: In the '60s they all said we had the right to the difference," he said. "And now, suddenly, they want a bourgeois life."

Asked by reporters after his recent show if his use of lesbian couture was a sign of support for gay marriage, Mr. Lagerfeld replied, "Of course it was." He added, "I don't even understand the debate." He pointed to the 1905 law that separates church and state in France. "Why can't people who live together have the same security as bourgeois marrieds?" he asked.

But he said he was "less enthusiastic" about male couples as parents.

"Two mothers seem to me better than two fathers," he said. "A child without a mother, that's a bit sad."

The campaign for legalizing same-sex marriage comes as the appeal of traditional heterosexual marriage is waning.

The sanctity of marriage was shaken forever by the social and sexual revolution of May 1968 that promoted equal rights between men and women and freedom from the tyranny of bourgeois institutions. That was especially true of institutions with strong ties to religion — like marriage.

"After May '68, if you were modern, you didn't get married," said Frédéric Martel, organizer of the Rond-Point event and author of the new book, "Global Gay: How the Gay Revolution is Changing the World." "Now we're at a moment when we are all a bit hysterical about marriage — gay marriage. But this is really a conservative movement, about stability in society and being good parents and protecting children and becoming rather ordinary."

Seventy percent of the French do not think it is important for couples living together to get married, according to an Insee poll in 2012. Fewer than four marriages for every 1,000 citizens were performed in France in 2011, compared with nearly eight in 1970.

The civil solidarity pact legislation, which was intended to give gay couples many of the rights of marriage, has been used overwhelmingly by straight couples as a kind of "marriage light." It is so popular as an alternative to marriage that in 2010, there were four civil unions for every five marriages.

Mr. Hollande, who made passage of the same-sex law a campaign promise, is a model for unmarrieds. He never married Ségolène Royal, the mother of his four children; she called herself "a free woman" and marriage a "bourgeois institution" when she ran unsuccessfully for president in 2007. There is no indication he intends to marry Ms. Trierweiler.

Carla Bruni, the singer and ex-model who became the third wife of Nicolas Sarkozy when he was president, has urged France's first couple to do the conventional thing and marry. In an interview with Elle last October, she said, "I think it is simpler to be the legitimate wife of the head of state rather than his partner," adding, "I felt a real easing of the general concern about me when I married Nicolas."

While 63 percent of the French favor same-sex marriage, according to a poll by the French Institute of Public Opinion released last Saturday, 49 percent favor the right of same-sex married couples to adopt. There is less support for legalizing artificially induced pregnancies for gay couples. And some liberals and feminists consider surrogate motherhood an exploitation of poor working women by the rich.

"It introduces the notion of the child as merchandise," the historian Max Gallo said on France Culture radio last Sunday.

"You rent a belly and buy the product."

Some feminist lesbians think a change in the law is retrograde. In Elle, the historian Marie-Josèphe Bonnet called marriage an "instrument of domination" and same-sex marriage a project of gay men, not lesbians.

"We want to be able to exist socially as women, without being a mother or 'the wife of,'" she said. Asked why she didn't mobilize lesbians against the law, she said, "No one can be opposed to equality."

A version of this article appeared in print on February 3, 2013, on page ST8 of the New York edition with the headline: The French Debate Gay Marriage, in Their Fashion.

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