RALEIGH, N.C. -- Something unexpected happened on the way to North Carolina's vote on a gay marriage ban this May: Democratic Gov. Beverly Perdue decided not to run for re-election, meaning more voters who oppose the ban could turn out at the polls.

Before Thursday's development, mostly Republican voters were expected to show up to pick their nominees for governor and president, and likely make North Carolina the last state in the Southeast to block same-sex marriage.

Now gay rights supporters hope they have a better chance of shooting down the constitutional amendment with more Democrats showing up May 8 to pick a candidate for governor at the same time. Gay marriage opponents believe they have the votes sewn up anyway and it won't make much of a difference.

"I'm sure that supporters of the amendment thought that, strategically, putting the question on the May ballot was their best chance," said Michael Bitzer, a professor of politics and history at Catawba College. "That strategy just got blown out of the water."

People on both sides of the question see the referendum here as having significant national implications: Gay marriage will either be banned in a clean sweep of the South, or there will be a stunning Dixie rejection.

"Given the fact that this amendment won't be decided by such a narrow slice of voters as it would have been previously, it increases the optimism from our side," said Michael Cole-Schwartz, spokesman for the Human Rights Campaign, a national gay rights group. "It's something we have to consider carefully in light of all the other issues in other states around the country this year."

If Perdue's departure hurts the ban's chances, it would be ironic, given that her objections to its appearance on the November ballot helped convince lawmakers to move it back to spring.

Perdue opposes the amendment and said she didn't want to see it on any ballot, but she worried that Republicans wanted it in November to help their chances in the general election. Turnout for primary elections is historically lower than in November, and without a contested Democratic primary in either the gubernatorial or presidential races, there was little reason for Democratic voters to turn out in large numbers this spring.

"Democrats didn't want it on the November ballot because they feared it would be bad for them in the presidential and gubernatorial races," said John Dinan, a professor at Wake Forest University. "Nobody could have predicted at that point that the May primaries would be much more contested. Nobody planned it this way."

“A Democratic primary could bring out voters more likely to oppose bans on gay marriage,” said Richard Matland, a professor at Loyola University Chicago who co-authored a paper last year that analyzed every single state referendum on gay marriage.
All 34 of those votes were in favor of banning gay marriage, except for a 2006 referendum in Arizona where the measure was narrowly defeated, although Arizona would ban same-sex marriage in a subsequent vote.

Although the results are essentially uniform, Matland said there are important distinctions, especially regarding turnout. In general, higher turnout means closer elections featuring more "episodic" voters like young people, who tend to be more supportive of gay marriage.

"Turnout really does drive the process," he said. "If there does turn out to be a big campaign with a lot of candidates able to get up and running, it might make the North Carolina referendum a lot more interesting."

Supporters of same-sex marriage hope that's the case.

"Having a Democratic governor's race definitely helps our chances," said Jeremy Kennedy, campaign manager for the Coalition to Protect North Carolina Families, the group leading the opposition to the ballot measure.

Gay marriage opponents, though, say the issue cuts across party lines, and has significant support among Democrats and unaffiliated voters as well as Republicans.

"I don't think it'll have any effect," said the Rev. Ron Baity, president of Return America, one of the groups working to secure passage of the measure. "I'm sure the amendment is going to pass."

Tami Fitzgerald, co-chairwoman of the Vote FOR Marriage NC coalition, which supports the amendment, said she welcomes the prospect of a contested Democratic primary.

"The more folks that turn out on May 8, the better," she said.

Certainly, there are complexities among Democratic voters that may work in favor of amendment supporters like Fitzgerald.

The emergence of a black candidate such as Charlotte Mayor Anthony Foxx, who is considering a bid, could attract a disproportionate number of black voters, according to David McLennan, a political science professor at William Peace University, who tend to be more conservative on gay marriage.

The primary "creates some confusion to what's going to happen," he said. "It could go any number of ways."