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## Stands on social issues tear at the two main conservative bases

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The ideological rifts breaking apart the Republican Party have moved into the states, where business leaders and evangelicals who have long coexisted in the GOP are suddenly at war over social issues such as gay rights and religious freedom.

The escalating feud has been evident in recent days in Georgia and North Carolina, where Republican governors have taken opposite approaches to dealing with these two vocal constituencies.

Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal, facing pressure from corporate heavyweights such as Delta Air Lines and Disney, vetoed a bill that would have allowed pastors and faith-based groups to deny services to same-sex couples. The decision by Deal, who is not running for reelection, has drawn fire from leading evangelical activists, who have accused him of being a traitor to their cause.

North Carolina's Pat McCrory, meanwhile, who is up for reelection in November, is facing criticism from corporate interests and praise from social conservatives following his decision to sign a bill enacting broad limits to prevent municipalities from creating new LGBT protections.

The legislative battles, which have played out in state capitals across the country, underscore the unusual level of disarray in a party that traditionally strives for order. Rather than unifying around a message and strategy to win back the White House and retain congressional majorities, the GOP is largely collapsing amid factional warfare. There is seemingly no issue where Republicans agree — with bitter disputes raging over trade, foreign policy, entitlements and social issues.

Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal announced he will veto a religious freedom bill passed by the state legislature that has drawn national criticism for discriminating against same-sex couples. (Reuters)

The focal point of the struggle is the GOP's presidential front-runner, Donald Trump, the populist billionaire who has amassed a wide delegate lead despite opposition from all corners of the party establishment and a string of policy views that run counter to GOP orthodoxy.

Trump's rise has muddied the ideological waters for the camps that have long made up the bulk of the GOP coalition — the three-legged stool built by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s consisting of fiscal conservatives, national security hawks and social conservatives. He has railed against free-

trade deals backed by big business and blasted an interventionist foreign policy embraced by GOP hawks.

But the state-level battles between businesses and evangelicals demonstrate that the Republican Party's troubles go beyond the concerns over Trump — pointing to a potentially irreconcilable divide between core elements of the GOP base.

Each side remains influential. Evangelical leaders can mobilize large numbers of activists and voters in key states and congressional districts. Corporations, meanwhile, operating in a post-Citizens United world of unlimited political spending, have the ability to put enormous pressure on policymakers.

“You are talking about two portions of the Republican Party who don't fundamentally understand one another. That's the bad news,” said Gregg Keller, the former executive director of the American Conservative Union. “The worse news is that they think that they do. What that leads to is further misunderstanding on top of disagreement.”

The anger among evangelicals was especially raw this week after Deal's veto.

“The devil has gone down to Georgia again, but this time it was in the form of big business and cowardly politicians,” said Tony Perkins, president of the evangelical Family Research Council.

Billionaire Donald Trump has amassed a wide delegate lead despite opposition from all corners of the party establishment and a string of policy views that run counter to GOP orthodoxy. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

The state fights gained momentum in response to deep anger among social conservatives over the Supreme Court's decision last June to legalize gay marriage nationwide. Evangelical activists began pushing measures they describe as promoting “religious liberty” — aimed at protecting people such as wedding cake bakers or photographers who object to same-sex marriage from being legally compelled to participate in ceremonies. But these protections are often written broadly, with critics arguing they allow discrimination against the LGBT community in other ways, such as in employment and providing charitable services.

The focus on gay marriage ran counter to recommendations in a post-2012 election autopsy report published by the Republican National Committee. The report urged the party to move away from social issues as a way to expand the GOP's reach beyond core conservatives.

Many Republican elites, including executives at big companies, feel like gay marriage is settled law and do not think special measures are needed to protect religious conservatives.

“Generally, in the past, big business wanted to keep out of social issues,” said David Boaz, a longtime leader at the libertarian Cato Institute. “The corporate world has moved more to the cultural left. The religious right is feeling more and more embattled, isolated, and that makes them even angrier about things like this veto in Georgia.”

Corporate leaders have found success on a number of fronts.

Exactly one year ago, Indiana Gov. Mike Pence (R) signed into law a controversial religious freedom bill. Then, under pressure from businesses and the NCAA, which was holding the Final

Four last year in Indianapolis, he pushed the legislature a week later to pass an amendment in order to clarify that businesses and service providers could not use the legislation as a justification to discriminate based on a client's sexual orientation.

In Arizona, then-Gov. Jan Brewer (R) vetoed a religious liberty bill in 2014 under pressure from the business community. Her move angered social conservatives, but it ensured that the state could continue to host last year's Super Bowl.

In Arkansas, Republican Gov. Asa Hutchinson refused to sign a religious freedom bill that passed the legislature last year after Walmart publicly opposed it. He later signed a watered-down compromise bill, which basically reiterates existing federal law.

South Dakota Gov. Dennis Daugaard (R) recently vetoed legislation that would require students to use the bathroom or locker room of their biological sex at birth.

Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam, very much from the business wing of the party, expressed concern about a bill similar to what passed in North Carolina, and has pigeonholed it — at least for now.

Ralph Reed, the chairman of the Faith & Freedom Coalition, argued that there does not need to be an "inherent conflict" between the faith community and the business community.

"The notion that this is a Manichean choice between money and morality is largely a myth," he said. "The faith community needs to be clearer about what its objectives are, and some in the business community need to stop mischaracterizing what the legislation actually does."

The new North Carolina law showed how, in some places, evangelicals have found a way to win, at least in the short term.

The law was passed quickly during a special legislative session, reversing civil rights protections for gay and transgender people that had been enacted in the city of Charlotte. The measure made North Carolina the first state to require transgender individuals to use the restroom that corresponds with the gender on their birth certificate. But the language also included broad limits on local anti-discrimination ordinances.

The new law has drawn loud protests from the business community and editorial pages. The National Basketball Association has threatened to move next year's all-star game, scheduled to take place in Charlotte.

But the law has fired up evangelicals McCrory will need to boost his reelection chances this November.

"We can't bow down to economic threats that risk the protection of our citizens and go against common sense and morality," said the Rev. Franklin Graham, son of renowned evangelist Billy Graham.

The campaign in North Carolina could hinge on how evangelicals and business leaders respond.

The state's attorney general, Roy Cooper, a Democrat vying to unseat McCrory, on Tuesday called the law a "national embarrassment" and said he would not defend it in court.

The feuding will likely unfold in additional states over the coming weeks and months.

In Mississippi, the legislature could vote as early as this week on a “First Amendment Defense Act,” which is aimed at undercutting same-sex marriage.

Missouri’s legislature will likely vote soon to put a religious freedom measure on the ballot later this year, either in the general election or a special election. The Republicans are trying to craft something that will not draw the ire of the business lobby.

Gregg Keller, the Missouri-based GOP operative who was tasked with outreach to conservative activists on Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker’s presidential campaign last year, said the business wing should recognize that religious conservatives will not go away.

“One of the largest cultural imperatives that helped lead to the rise of Christianity was the view of the sexually licentious nature of the Roman Empire,” he said. “This is not a bug of evangelical Christianity; this is a feature. This is a hill on which evangelical Christians are going to be willing to die.”

He added: “The business community has caught the bull by the horns on this one.”