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## Portman's call for marriage equality, CPAC 'rainbow' panel mark GOP shift

*With GOProud barred from the booths at CPAC, gay marriage hardly seemed on the Republican agenda. It's all changed now*

By: Heather Long – March 15, 2013

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I sure hope Republican Senator Rob Portman of Ohio and his gay son, Will, get the credit they deserve in American history for changing the tide on gay marriage.

"If two people are prepared to make a lifetime commitment to love and care for each other in good times and in bad, the government shouldn't deny them the opportunity to get married," wrote Portman in a Friday op-ed in the Columbus Dispatch.

What you need to know is that Ohio is part of the "Bible belt". When you drive across the state, you hit a point where almost all the radio stations are either Christian or country music.

This wasn't some politically calculated election move to come out in favor of gay marriage. Portman was motivated largely by his gay son, who came out to his parents two years ago:

"I wrestled with how to reconcile my Christian faith with my desire for Will to have the same opportunities to pursue happiness and fulfillment as his brother and sister. Ultimately, it came down to the Bible's overarching themes of love and compassion and my belief that we are all children of God."

The reason this day is so significant is that Portman is the first sitting Republican senator to come out in favor of gay marriage. Last month, a number of prominent *former* Republican governors, congressmen and Bush administration officials voiced their support for gay marriage – but they weren't facing re-election.

Keep in mind that the 2012 Republican platform included a defense of traditional marriage. GOP rising star Marco Rubio is an outspoken proponent of marriage solely between a man and a woman. It was a risk for Portman to do this, and his timing is particularly bold since American conservatives are gathered today at their annual CPAC gathering.

But Portman is not alone, and I strongly believe he will start a chain of prominent GOP officials "coming out" on the gay marriage issue (or at least, gay civil unions).

One of the big stories at CPAC this year is what happened with GOProud, the lobby group for gay Republicans. Once again, CPAC denied GOProud a chance to have an

official booth at the conference. It seemed as though gay rights were still unmentionable for conservatives.

Then, something extraordinary happened: CPAC allowed GOProud and a group called the Competitive Enterprise Institute to hold a panel entitled "A Rainbow on the Right: Growing the Coalition, Bringing Tolerance Out of the Closet." It was in a side room at the hotel and took place at 6pm, not exactly prime time, but it was on the official agenda.

The room was packed – well over 100 people. About half were from the media, but there were also people like the young woman who stood up and told the crowd that she's a Christian and in favor of gay marriage. She wanted to know how she could help convince her friends.

Her attitude is reflective of many young people's views. According to Pew Research, 64% of young Americans support gay marriage.

I spoke to the organizer of the "Rainbow on the Right" panel, Fred Smith. He told me that yes, he did get a few emails calling him a Nazi, anti-Christ, etc for holding this panel. But the bigger shock is that he got a lot more emails and phone calls praising him for doing this.

"Even some people who disagree with gay marriage told me they were glad we were talking about this issue."

The last few weeks have been a watershed for the GOP on marriage equality. There are several reasons this is happening. One is what UK conservative leader David Cameron did in Britain last month, when he got gay marriage rights passed in the House of Commons. That did not go unnoticed in America: in fact, Senator Portman cited it in his op-ed.

Another motivator is demographics. The GOP knows it has to do better appealing to young people. It's not blind to the fact that many twenty- and thirtysomethings, who are coming of age during a recession, are somewhat fiscally conservative, but the problem is they aren't giving Republicans the time of day because the GOP sounds backward or bigoted on gay marriage.

The final aspect at stake here is liberty. Republicans cast themselves as defenders of individual freedoms. At CPAC, every speaker has invoke the US constitution and freedom. So how can the party that champions individual freedom and government staying out of people's homes dictate whom people can love? Conservatives are having a hard time with that one. In fact, the Cato Institute, the leading libertarian thinktank, authored one of the best arguments in favor of gay marriage.

There's still a long way to go before America joins Britain in legalizing gay marriage – or even gay civil unions. Numerous speakers at CPAC, including the Jimmy LaSalvia, executive director of GOProud, have gone out of their way to say that supporting traditional marriage doesn't make someone a bigot. But the past few hours have

demonstrated how quickly the barriers to marriage equality are falling, even in the most conservative parts of America.