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Rights Measures Expose Divisions in G.O.P.'s Ranks

By Jennifer Steinhauer

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In Indiana, the Republican mayor of Indianapolis argued against the law the Republican governor had signed. In Ohio, a group called the Young Conservatives for the Freedom to Marry tried to remove antigay language from the party platform. In Arkansas, the Republican governor faced a backlash from business and asked the Republican-led legislature to recall a bill seen as discriminatory to same-sex couples.

The [Republican Party](#) is in the middle of an argument with itself.

State laws seen as discriminatory against gay couples have laid bare and intensified longtime divisions in the party between social conservatives opposed to gay rights and the pro-business wing of the party that sees economic peril in the fight.

“This is a pro-business party with a gay exception, and that exception comes into play over and over again,” said Charles Francis, who was a founder of the [Republican Unity Coalition](#) during the George W. Bush administration, which failed in its effort to eliminate sexual orientation issues from the party’s agenda.

The divisions were on particular display Wednesday in Little Rock, Ark., where Asa Hutchinson, the Republican governor, called on state lawmakers to either recall or amend legislation billed as a religious freedom measure so that it mirrored a federal law approved in 1993.

Mr. Hutchinson, who was reacting to the anger in Indiana against the Republican governor, Mike Pence, and a similar law, said he understood the divide in Arkansas and across the nation over the question of [same-sex marriage](#) and its impact on people’s religious beliefs. His own son, Seth, he said, had asked him to veto the bill, which critics say could allow individuals and businesses to discriminate against gays and lesbians.

“This is a bill that in ordinary times would not be controversial,” Mr. Hutchinson said. “But these are not ordinary times.”

That was clear in California, where Jeb Bush, a likely Republican presidential candidate, took a strikingly different tone on Wednesday than he had on Monday in discussing the laws. On Monday Mr. Bush had wholeheartedly praised Mr. Pence, but speaking to a group of potential supporters at the Four Seasons Hotel in East Palo Alto on Wednesday, Mr. Bush [backed a change to the Indiana law](#) that would provide some level of protection to gays and lesbians, which Mr. Pence had endorsed after a firestorm of criticism.

“By the end of the week, I think Indiana will be in the right place, which is to say that we need in a big diverse country like America, we need to have space for people to act on their conscience, that it is a constitutional right that religious freedom is a core value of our country,” Mr. Bush said.

But in Iowa, Senator Ted Cruz, the Texas Republican who is running for president, strongly defended Mr. Pence.

“Religious liberty is not some cockamamie new theory that the Indiana legislature just figured out yesterday,” Mr. Cruz said to a standing-room-only crowd at Morningside College in Sioux City. “It was literally among the founding principles of our nation, and we have to be able to explain that cheerfully and with a smile.”

Most other likely Republican presidential candidates have supported the Indiana law, but some major business groups, nervous about a perception that the party is antigay, have criticized it. In another sign of the divisions, 11 Senate Republicans voted last week to assure the approval of a budget amendment providing [Social Security](#) and veterans benefits to gay couples.

Many others, especially Senate candidates up for re-election in swing states, are siding with groups that want to extend rights to gay couples.

“Life comes down to who you love and who loves you back, and government has no place in the middle,” said Senator Mark Kirk, Republican of Illinois, and one of the 11 Republicans to vote for the budget amendment. “Married same-sex couples deserve equal treatment under the law, including when it comes to their Social Security and veterans benefits.”

Mr. Kirk was the lead Republican sponsor of an employment Non-Discrimination Act, which passed the Senate in the 113th Congress. Others who voted for the measure, sponsored by Senator Brian Schatz, Democrat of Hawaii, were Senators Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire and Rob Portman of Ohio, Republicans who are expected to face tough re-election fights next year.

The United States Chamber of Commerce, the nation’s largest business organization, said in a statement: “The U.S. Chamber doesn’t condone discrimination of any kind, in any form. We support those legislative leaders in Indiana and Arkansas who seek to clarify the law to protect this same principle.”

Other Republican-dominated states have moved in a different direction from Indiana and Arkansas. In Utah, the Republican governor signed a bill that extends state antidiscrimination

protection to gays in the areas of housing and employment, a measure passed by a Republican legislature and supported by the Mormon Church.

The current battle in Indiana was presaged in 2014, when Gov. Jan Brewer, Republican of Arizona, came under intense pressure from the business community and the National Football League and vetoed Senate Bill 1062, which would have changed state law in ways similar to Indiana. Ms. Brewer cited “unintended and negative consequences” of the bill.

The tug of war between social and business-minded conservatives has been long simmering, and surfaced even when President Bush sought to privatize Social Security and some social conservatives feared the move would drive women into the work force.

The issue of abortion has provided another flash point. While there is more unity among Republicans in opposing abortion rights, many would prefer to instead steer the conversation toward the economy, health care and national security.

“There has always been this tension,” said Michael D. Tanner, a senior fellow at the [Cato Institute](#), a conservative think tank, “both in terms of tactics, because the economic conservatives wanted to talk about taxes and the economy, and on the electoral strategy,” because those social issues often alienated suburban moderates and cost Republicans elections, he said.

“There is no doubt that the continued opposition of gay rights is an electoral loser,” he added. “Younger Republicans are as pro-life as older Republicans, but gay rights is a huge generational shift and Republicans are going to have to find a way to deal with that issue.”

Support for [same-sex marriage](#) has steadily grown over the last decade, a startling turnaround from a period when Republicans used ballot measures opposing same-sex marriage to drive turnout in some states, including Ohio. Now, 52 percent of Americans support gay marriage, according to a Pew Research Center poll, compared with 40 percent who oppose it; in 2001, Americans opposed it by a 57 percent to 35 percent margin in the same poll.

But how the issue resonates with voters in 2016 remains unclear. “It is not going to be the kind of thing that 2016 candidates will put at the top of their agenda,” said Whit Ayres, a Republican political consultant. “The biggest issues among candidates will be the ones among voters, which are the economy, health care, education, ISIS, national security and so on.”

Mr. Francis, a management consultant, dropped his Republican affiliation after the battles in 2006 over the marriage issue and married a man. “We gave it our best effort and failed,” he said of his earlier efforts. “I think the jury is still out on whether the Republican Party will be able to resolve this chasm before the coming generation of millennials are completely gone.”