

A growing divide among conservatives over same-sex marriage

By: [Chris Moody](#) – March 20, 2013

The official platform of the Republican Party calls for a constitutional amendment to overturn state laws permitting same-sex marriage, but within the party—and the conservative movement—there is growing pressure to change the message.

The stakes are high. After last year's bruising election in which Republicans suffered a string of national defeats, the party is picking up the pieces to determine how to regain its edge in upcoming elections. Virtually every strategy of the past is facing intense scrutiny, including how the party addresses the marriage issue.

A new report from the Republican National Committee about last year's election suggests that Republicans were not "welcoming and inclusive" enough to gay Americans and other minority groups. The report, written by a team of veteran Republican strategists, did not recommend an official change in policy, but it did call on Republicans to find a way to show they "care" about that voting demographic.

In recent years, Republicans seem to have found it easier to come out as supporters of gay marriage rights. On Friday, Ohio's Rob Portman, whose son is gay, became the first sitting Republican senator to declare his support for same-sex marriage. In February, former Republican presidential candidate and Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman argued that "marriage equality is a conservative cause."

Huntsman later joined more than 70 prominent Republicans in signing a legal brief urging the Supreme Court to overrule a California ballot measure that banned same-sex marriage in the state. Since Barack Obama was first elected president, former first lady Laura Bush, former Republican Vice President Dick Cheney and former Secretary of State Colin Powell have all said they support marriage rights for same-sex couples.

Their decision to express a position counter to the official party line comes at a time when there could be some major changes to how the law views same-sex marriage. In November, four states—Washington, Maryland, Maine and Minnesota—held elections on the issue. Minnesota voters rejected a measure that would ban same-sex marriage, and citizens from the other three approved measures to legalize it in their states. Next week, the Supreme Court will hear arguments to two challenges to marriage law: One is a voter-approved ballot measure in California that banned same-sex marriage in the state, and the other questions the constitutionality of the Defense of Marriage Act.

But Republicans know they must tread carefully as their position leaves them open to blowback from social conservatives—arguably the party's most engaged and active group—who are threatening to abandon the GOP if it strays from its opposition to same-sex marriage.

"If a significant number of Republican politicians support the redefinition of marriage, they're going to lose a lot of support, including the people who are most likely to be out walking precincts and providing the ground game," said Jennifer Roback Morse, the president and founder of the Ruth Institute, a project of the National Organization for Marriage. "Your social conservatives are the people who have enthusiasm and will do that type of stuff. You're kicking them out of the party if you turncoat on this issue."

Indeed, after the RNC report was released, Family Research Council President Tony Perkins accused the party of throwing "social conservatives overboard" and warned that changing its policies on the issue "would place the Republican Party on path to permanent minority."

"The vast majority of the GOP base believes that marriage is a non-negotiable plank of the national platform," Perkins said in a statement.

Perkins' argument, ironically, is the same one made by conservatives who are actively urging Republicans to embrace gay marriage. They point to poll after poll that suggests a sea change of opinion among the American populace. A new Washington Post-ABC News national poll released this week showed that 58 percent of Americans now think same-sex marriage should be legal, a record high. Among voters aged 18-29, support rises to a staggering 81 percent, according to the poll. A recent poll from the Pew Research Center also shows growing support for gay marriage. Some Republicans look at those numbers and see a party that could suffer irrelevancy if it refuses to, as Obama might say, "evolve."

At the Conservative Political Action Conference last week near Washington, D.C.—the largest annual gathering of right-wing activists—the fierce, internal debate was on full display. For more than an hour last Thursday, five conservatives participated in a panel conspicuously titled "A Rainbow on the Right: Growing the Coalition, Bringing Tolerance Out of the Closet," in which they argued that the Republican Party must embrace same-sex marriage in order to save itself.

"We cannot be at war with Americans on issues of fairness, on issues of equality," said Jennifer Rubin, a conservative blogger for The Washington Post. "In 10 years or so, no one is going to be talking about this. In 10 years, I don't know if there will be a Republican Party. There's nothing that says a party has to last forever."

And this week, two think tanks, the libertarian Cato Institute and the conservative Heritage Foundation, held competing policy forums on the same day at the same time about the issue. Heritage's panel argued against same-sex marriage; Cato's guests made the case for it.

There even exists a debate within the same-sex marriage debate over whether the federal government should be dictating the policy at all from Washington. While the official platform calls for a one-size-fits-all marriage policy, advocates both for and against same-sex marriage disagree over whether the issue should be left to the states.

Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, who is seen as a possible Republican presidential candidate in 2016, chose his words carefully when he addressed the issue during his CPAC speech last week

"Just because I believe that states should have the right to define marriage in a traditional way does not make me a bigot," Rubio told the conservative activists.

The fact that Rubio emphasized states' rights plants his flag firmly in the camp of the federalists. (For the record, Rubio personally believes marriage should be exclusively available to straight couples, a position he has made clear.) But for all practical purposes, Rubio has the same view as Obama's: That marriage is and should remain a state issue.

Regardless, debate over same-sex marriage is not going away. Republicans must make a determination about whether it's worth the risk of losing a traditionally passionate bloc of supporters in exchange for a new one. If their numbers don't turn around soon, it's a gamble they may be forced to take.