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# Divisions on the Right Over Gays in Its Ranks

By ERIK ECKHOLM

A bitter dispute over whether a gay conservative group should co-sponsor the conservative movement's largest gathering of the year has led some prominent supporters to withdraw from the event next month.

Riding the winds of success in November's midterm elections, this year's Conservative Political Action Conference, which is set to begin Feb. 10 in Washington, is expected to draw Republican presidential aspirants like Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich and Ron Paul, as well as thousands of activists.

But some conservative pillars, including church-based groups like the Family Research Council, Concerned Women for America and Liberty University and others like the Heritage Foundation, are refusing to participate. They are angry that the gay organization, GOProud, has been given a seat at the planning table. These groups are implacable opponents of same-sex marriage, which they say GOProud implicitly endorses by saying that the question should be left to the states.

At least one reputed presidential hopeful, Senator Jim DeMint, Republican of South Carolina, has also declined to attend, expressing support for the boycotters.

"GOProud is working to undermine one of our core values," said Mathew D. Staver, dean of the Liberty University School of Law. Letting gay men and lesbians attend the conference is one thing, he said, "but they shouldn't be allowed to be co-sponsors."

Every winter since 1973, an A-list of conservative and libertarian interest groups has gathered for CPAC, as the conference is known, to hear luminaries like Ronald Reagan and Glenn Beck and to plan strategies for cutting government, strengthening defense and protecting traditional values. The meeting attracts throngs of young people who greet favored leaders as if they were rock stars, and its annual straw poll can give a boost to future national candidates.

It was at CPAC, in 1994, that Paula Jones first publicized her accusation that Bill Clinton had sexually harassed her while he was governor of Arkansas.

Planners expect some 10,000 people to attend this year's conclave.

Long-simmering tensions concerning the importance of family issues erupted a year ago when the American Conservative Union, the organizer of the event, allowed GOProud to take an active role as one of dozens of co-sponsors. The dispute boiled over as preparations began for next month's meeting, sharply splitting the union's board of directors.

GO Proud, founded in 2009, claims to have 10,000 members and holds conservative views on taxes, gun control and national security, although it favored repeal of the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy. And while it does not formally endorse same-sex marriage, it opposes any federal standard as well as the federal Defense of Marriage Act, a sacred text for social conservatives.

The clash reflects a fissure within conservative circles that deepened with the rise of the religious right in the 1980s, pitting those with a libertarian bent, who are most concerned with limiting government, against those, mainly led by evangelical Christians, who see same-sex marriage and abortion as acid tests.

A host of large and small church-based groups is boycotting the conference because of GOProud's role. Its status was also cited by some secular groups,

including the Heritage Foundation and the Media Research Center, when they dropped out this year.

Similar differences may bubble up as Republicans vie for the presidential nomination, although nearly all the hopefuls say they oppose same-sex marriage and abortion. Many of the likely candidates, including self-identified evangelicals like Tim Pawlenty, the former governor of Minnesota, and Rick Santorum, the former senator from Pennsylvania, have steered clear of the dispute and are speaking at the conference next month.

But Mr. DeMint, who attended last year, has refused an invitation this year. “With leading conservative organizations not participating this year, Senator DeMint will not be attending,” his spokesman, Wesley Denton, said in an e-mail. “He hopes to attend a unified CPAC next year.”

Former Gov. Sarah Palin of Alaska has not responded to an invitation to speak. Mike Huckabee, the former Arkansas governor, has in the past criticized CPAC for being too “libertarian.” He declined to comment for this article but will also not attend. The Tea Party movement has focused on fiscal rather than social concerns, and several of its leaders, including Representative Michele Bachmann of Minnesota and Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky, are scheduled to speak at the conference.

David A. Keene, the longtime chairman of the American Conservative Union and its annual conference, said that the conservative movement’s different strands had always argued but had come together when they needed to.

“We try to give an umbrella for all the groups that are legitimately conservative on most issues,” Mr. Keene said. This year’s conference has more co-sponsors and vendors attending than ever, he said, about 130 of them. The label for those making contributions and aiding in planning was changed this year from co-sponsor to “participating organization,” but their status remains the same.

Mr. Keene, in remarks that could further inflame his opponents, said that he would not oppose participation by a group that shared conservative views on free enterprise and defense but favored abortion rights. When the first CPAC meetings were held in the 1970s, he said, many conservatives supported abortion rights, in the tradition of Barry Goldwater.

“We figure that the debates and the discussions of issues are worthwhile,” he said, up to a point. He added, “If you’re for socializing the country or stripping our national defense, you’re probably not a conservative.”

Mickey Edwards, a former Republican congressman from Oklahoma and former chairman of the Conservative Union, has urged conservatives to steer clear of prescribing personal behavior. “I’ve been proud of David Keene for not letting them hijack the conservative movement, making the definition of conservatism narrower and narrower,” he said. “If independents are driven away, conservatives aren’t going to win elections.”

But Cleta Mitchell, a Republican lawyer on the union’s board who opposes the inclusion of GOProud, said that Defense of Marriage was “not an issue for debate, but a fundamental principle.” She said the fight would resume before next year’s conference.

GOProud was founded by Christopher R. Barron, a public relations consultant, and Jimmy LaSalvia, now its executive director, to “give a voice to gay conservatives.”

Mr. LaSalvia said the group, which is financed by private donors, consistently opposes federal interference on matters that should be left to states and localities. He noted that some prominent conservatives share this philosophy and had opposed the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, for example, without being attacked.

“The reason the boycotters applied a litmus test to us is because we were born gay,” he said.

Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, described GOProud as trying to “force public affirmation of homosexual conduct.” His organization quietly stopped attending CPAC a few years ago, he said, because it allowed participants with nonconservative values. But recently, he publicly castigated the conference for the GOProud decision in particular.

The decision by the Heritage Foundation, the conservative policy group, to drop out of CPAC surprised some. “GOProud was one element in the decision,” said James Weidman, a foundation spokesman.

The most prominent evangelical group to remain is Focus on the Family, which said it would reconsider its participation next year if CPAC continued to allow GOProud to participate in the planning.

Mr. Keene is scheduled to step down as chairman of the Conservative Union in April to become president of the National Rifle Association, and his critics are hoping that his successor will draw a tighter circle.

But Mr. Barron, the GOProud chairman, said he was confident that the Conservative Union would not reverse course. “I think 10 years from now,” he said, “people will forget there was ever a discussion over whether a truly conservative gay group should participate.”