

Conservatives would bolt GOP over Rudy

By: **David Paul Kuhn**

June 11, 2007 04:53 PM EST

A growing number of influential social conservatives are speaking out against Rudy Giuliani, with some threatening that they will take flight from the Republican Party in 2008 if the former New York mayor is the GOP nominee.

Giuliani's support for abortion rights and gay rights has not to date prevented him from winning the support of a sizable number of socially conservative voters, according to polls. But the continued strength of his candidacy is causing alarm among leaders of conservative advocacy groups, many of which have been major players in Republican politics.

"Speaking as a private citizen, no, no, I could not support (Giuliani)," said Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, which has about a half-million members. "The 20 years I've been involved in politics, the life issue has been at the very top. How could I turn my back on that?"

Perkins said that should Giuliani win the nomination, he would vote for a third-party candidate who reflected his values. "It wouldn't be the first time," Perkins added in an interview last week.

Other prominent cultural conservatives to signal public opposition to Giuliani in recent weeks included James Dobson of Focus on the Family, Louis Sheldon of the Traditional Values Coalition, veteran activist and former presidential candidate Gary Bauer, and Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Like Perkins, Land has warned that he would not vote for a Republican ticket in 2008 if it were led by Giuliani. Others did not go that far, even as they made plain their wish that Giuliani be weeded out in the primaries.

"When I give my support for a candidate, I am giving the green light, if he wins, all the way down the line in terms of so many moral and social issues," said Sheldon, chairman of the Traditional Values Coalition, which represents 43,000 churches. "I'm personally not supporting Giuliani," he added. Sheldon is backing former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney in the primaries.

Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, was even more definitive in an interview last month. "I'm not going to vote for a pro-choice candidate, period," said Land, whose organization reports to have 16 million members.

He and other social conservative leaders emphasized that they were speaking for themselves, not on behalf of the organizations they represent. But given the leaders' willingness to make their views known in interviews and other public forums, such disclaimers may be beside the point if their groups decide to follow their lead.

In mid-May, Dobson also stated he would not support Giuliani. "It is an irrevocable decision," he wrote on the website WorldNetDaily. His radio program alone earns more

than 3.4 million weekly listeners, according to Focus on the Family, which Dobson founded.

"Many social conservative leaders are looking at the possibility that you could have three candidates running in November of 2008 and that all three of them could be New Yorkers who are liberal on social issues," said Bauer, who once headed the Family Research Council and now serves as president of American Values.

"That would be a disaster for millions and millions and millions of voters in this country for whom social and values issues are what motivates them, what they care about."

Bauer was referring to the possibility that the 2008 general election would feature Giuliani, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (N.Y.) as the Democratic nominee and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg as an independent. But there is scant evidence so far that social conservatives fear Giuliani as much as Bauer and other leaders do.

An analysis of recent polls by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that Giuliani enjoys 30 percent support among white Republican or Republican-leaning Christians who attend church at least weekly -- a category designed to gauge social conservatives -- compared with the 22 percent garnered by the runner-up, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.).

Forty-four percent of respondents said they believe Giuliani has the best chance among Republicans in 2008.

Social conservatives are the largest bloc within the Republican coalition, representing roughly four out of 10 GOP voters.

The Giuliani campaign is trying to bring social conservatives on board by suggesting a President Giuliani would appoint judges who will please them.

The campaign's director of policy, Bill Simon, said that he believes many social conservatives will in the end, "draw comfort from his approach to picking judges, judges who are strict constructionists."

He also downplayed the number of voters who would make their choice on a single issue like abortion:

"There are voters who have one issue that is important for them and that tends to be their litmus test. But there are many more that really look at other factors," Simon continued, citing Giuliani's fiscal conservatism and national security credentials.

Several social conservative leaders are leaving a narrow window open to supporting Giuliani in the general election if the New Yorker wins the GOP nomination.

"Where Mayor Giuliani is today, I absolutely could not support him. However, I would not completely rule it out," said Pat Mahoney, executive director of the Christian Defense Coalition. "There's two words that change the whole dynamic, and those two words are Hillary Clinton."

Mahoney, like Sheldon, said that if Giuliani pledges to support conservative "strict constructionist" jurists -- who do not believe the Constitution mandates a federal right to

constructionist jurists -- who do not believe the Constitution mandates a federal right to abortion -- to the Supreme Court, the prominent social conservatives could vote Republican in the 2008 election. Sheldon added that support for a third-party candidate is a "wasted vote."

Prominent Christian conservatives have enjoyed unprecedented access within the White House policy and political wings under President Bush, participating in weekly calls with senior officials. They expect the next Republican standard-bearer to emulate President Bush's Supreme Court nominees, while also standing against legalized gay marriage and taxpayer funding for abortion, as well as supporting funding for abstinence education.

Seeking to reassure cultural conservatives, Giuliani has said he would support the Hyde Amendment, which excludes abortion from Medicaid coverage, as well as appoint "strict constructionist" jurists to the federal bench. Even so, Perkins called his views "anathema."

However, Perkins recognizes why many grass-roots social conservatives disagree with him. Social conservatives are historically hawks on national security, and they remain overwhelmingly supportive of the war in Iraq and President Bush, Pew has found.

But prominent leaders within the religious right hope that social conservatives fear that some of their followers may be willing to forgo core principles, such as opposition to abortion rights, in the heat of the 2008 competition.

"I have talked to many Christian leaders privately, and I don't know of any faith-based evangelical or Catholic organization, pro-family, pro-life, that could support Rudy Giuliani and stand with him," Mahoney said. "But on a personal level," he added, should Giuliani face a Democrat in the general election, "then what are you faced with? You are faced with appointments to the Supreme Court that could be two or three. It is a moral and spiritual dilemma."

Editor's Note: *This story was updated to include a comment from the Giuliani campaign's director of policy, Bill Simon.*