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Tug of war in the GOP

Social conservatives are positioning to control the Republican Party's direction — even if McCain wins.

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REPORTING FROM WASHINGTON

The social conservatives and moderates who together boosted the Republican Party to dominance have begun a tense battle over the future of the GOP, with social conservatives already moving to seize control of the party's machinery and some vowing to limit John McCain's influence, even if he wins the presidency.

In skirmishes around the country in recent months, evangelicals and others who believe Republicans have been too timid in fighting abortion, gay marriage and illegal immigration have won election to the party's national committee, in preparation for a fight over the direction and leadership of the party.

The growing power of religious conservatives is alarming some moderate Republicans who believe that the party's main problem is that it has narrowed its appeal and alienated too many voters. They cite the aggressive tone of the McCain campaign in challenging Barack Obama, who has close to universal support from African American voters; as well as the push by many Republican leaders to clamp down on illegal immigration using rhetoric that has driven away Latinos.

Some moderates argue that the party's top priority must be to broaden its outreach, a caution laid down by retired Gen. Colin L. Powell on national television this month when he broke from the party and endorsed Obama. Surveys show McCain beating Obama among white men but losing with almost every other demographic group.

The fight within the party has been building since voters [See Republicans, Page A12]

GOP moderates push for broad

[Republicans, from Page A1] stripped Republicans of their House and Senate majorities in 2006. It has become especially tense recently, because many Republicans are bracing for McCain to lose the election, leaving the party with no obvious leader with broad public appeal at a time when President Bush is exiting the national stage as a depleted figure.

Bush, now widely unpopular, held his final fundraiser of the campaign season last week and has no additional campaign events for McCain or GOP candidates scheduled in the final days before the election.

A focal point of the GOP fight is the selection of the next chairman of the Republican National Committee — the party's power center for fundraising and strategic thinking. With various factions already trying to build support for their favored candidates, some conservatives are warning that McCain cannot serve as the party's spiritual guide even if he becomes president. The Arizona senator, after all, has a history of breaking with the party's mainstream on such issues as immigration and campaign financing.

"Committee members want to see our party move forward and be part of a branding process, as opposed to just simply supporting and putting a rubber stamp on the policies of a sitting president," said Robin Smith, chairwoman of the Tennessee state GOP and a supporter of turning the party to the right.

Conservative champion Rush Limbaugh, who often provides the rallying cry to the party's most ardent supporters via his radio program, last week laid out a similar warning, suggesting that a McCain win would do little to deter conservatives from pushing for major changes.

"One step at a time," Limbaugh told his listeners. "We're going to drag McCain across the finish line — then we start rebuilding the conservative movement. It's going to happen whether he wins or loses, but especially if he wins too."

Stripping a president of the ability to name the party's top leader would mark a dramatic break from tradition. Bush, for example, has handpicked the party chairman since his election in 2000.

One moderate contender for party chairman, Jim Greer, is pushing a theme of ethnic

outreach. Greer is chief of the state party in Florida and is a close ally of the state's governor, Charlie Crist, who some in the party say is laying the groundwork to spread his brand of centrist Republicanism to the national stage.

The Florida GOP recently mailed a brochure to members of the party's national committee nationwide featuring photos of Greer and Crist courting Latinos. One page focused on a black Republican candidate for the state Legislature.

Greer and Crist have also moved to distance the Florida party from some of the more aggressive tactics of the McCain campaign. In recent weeks, the state party declined to pay for direct-mail pieces linking Obama to 1960s domestic terrorist-turned education professor William Ayers, a connection that the McCain campaign has tried to highlight.

Two other potential candidates for chairman, both considered more conservative than Greer, plan meetings shortly after the presidential election.

One gathering, in Myrtle Beach, S.C., will be hosted by South Carolina GOP Chairman Katon Dawson. In an in-

terview, Dawson said that "moderating our party is what caused us to lose power" in the 2006 elections. He said the party must speak more forcefully against excessive government spending and illegal immigration.

Some party insiders are pushing for the party to name Michael Steele, the African American former lieutenant governor of Maryland, as its chairman to help the GOP broaden its appeal. They argue that Steele, who now heads the conservative group GOPAC, would be an especially strong pick to counter the sensation over what might be the country's first black president.

Steele's group will host a postelection gathering in Palm Beach, Fla. It is expected to draw members of the party's national committee, as well as state and local GOP elected officials who hope to have a role in shaping the party's future.

Both meetings are precursors to the Republican National Committee's winter meeting in January, when the new chairman will be elected by the committee's approximately 160 members.

Some of Bush's top political hands, including his former RNC political director, are now

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guiding McCain's campaign. The current chairman, Mike Duncan, has not ruled out running for reelection in January.

A party official cautioned Sunday that people plotting their own ascension at this stage were acting prematurely, when they should be fully devoted to electing McCain and other GOP candidates.

"These state chairmen would be wise to focus on the task at hand rather than focus on what their next move might be," said the official, who requested anonymity when discussing internal party tension. "This race is tightening. . . . It won't be looked upon favorably if they're putting their own interests ahead of the interests of the race."

It was frustration with the Bush-led Republican National Committee that prompted a number of conservatives this year to try to upend the system. Conservatives won seats representing California, Iowa, Alaska, Texas, North Carolina, South Carolina and Michigan. One new member is a popular black preacher from Detroit, Keith Butler, who presides over a mega-church.

"There is a new blood in the party that is interested in communicating the message of the

party — the conservative message," said Kim Lehman, executive director of the antiabortion group Iowa Right to Life, who in July defeated a state legislator for one of the state's seats on the national committee.

Former California GOP Chairman Shawn Steel, a newly elected committeeman, described his colleagues as "mostly dynamic and frustrated conservatives that really want to see a dramatic change for the RNC in the way that it communicates to Americans."

Some conservatives argue privately that an Obama victory would clear out strategists and policy thinkers from the Bush era and the McCain campaign, leaving the party in a better position to rebuild itself as a contrast to the Democrats, who would have control of Congress as well as the White House.

They also note that, even in a year of Democratic strength, there are some positive signs for conservatives. Gay marriage bans, for example, stand a chance of being approved by the voters in two big states, California and Florida.

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