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NEWS ANALYSIS

By Backing a Gay Marriage Ban, Bush Keeps Faith With His Base

By ROBIN TONER

WASHINGTON, Feb. 24 — It is a cardinal rule of politics, all the more so for a president who saw his father defeated largely because he failed to heed it fully: Pay attention to the party's base.

In recent weeks, on a variety of fronts, President Bush has done just that, trying to allay the concerns and stoke the spirits of his restive conservative base. His impassioned endorsement on Tuesday of a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage, after weeks of intensive lobbying by social conservatives, was the culmination of this rapprochement.

But will he pay a price with the centrist voters who so often decide presidential elections, as the Democrats hope? Or is the country at such an ideologically polarized point that the middle simply matters less?

Almost no one suggests that Mr. Bush is operating solely on the basis of political calculations. In his remarks on Tuesday, he emphasized that "an amendment to the Constitution is never to be undertaken lightly," and closed his remarks with a plea to "conduct this difficult debate in a manner worthy of our country, without bitterness or anger."

But as David A. Keene, chairman of the American Conservative Union, put it, "neither is it fair to say that the politics of it aren't important."

The administration clearly recognized in recent weeks that it faced political unrest on its right, after what Mr. Keene described as "a short period of denying the problem existed." The soaring deficits, the growth in government, and most particularly the passage of a Medicare bill that amounted to the biggest expansion of that entitlement program in 38 years, all led to growing discontent among economic conservatives. Other conservatives were dismayed by the administration's immigration proposal, granting temporary work permits to illegal immigrants.

At the same time, in the wake of a Massachusetts court ruling declaring marriage a basic right that could not be denied to gay people, social conservatives were pushing hard for the president to embrace a constitutional amendment limiting marriage to heterosexuals. Still others were frustrated in the face of Senate filibusters of some conservative judicial nominees.

Mr. Bush began to respond. In a classic exercise of presidential muscle, he bypassed the Senate and installed two conservatives in federal judgeships, positions long denied them by Democrats on Capitol Hill. He issued a veto threat against a $318 billion highway and mass transit bill, cheering economic conservatives who have long demanded a harder line on spending.

Finally, after a long period of edging up to the amendment with qualifications and reservations, and after days of news dominated by gay couples getting marriage licenses in San Francisco, Mr. Bush made his intentions clear on Tuesday.

Conservatives hailed all these steps, but social conservatives, who have been alarmed over the events of recent months, were euphoric over the endorsement of the gay marriage amendment. Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, said: "The risk we were running with this cultural crisis is that fear tends to incapacitate people, they get paralyzed. And there was a danger that this would spill into the election." Instead, Mr. Perkins added, "with the president stepping forward, this will energize people in a very powerful way."

In fact, Republican strategists close to Mr. Bush said they had no fear that conservatives would defect from their candidate. Rather, the strategists say, what they worry about is keeping their core voters, particularly evangelicals, energized and eager to vote on Election Day, given the high level of fervor against Mr. Bush among Democrats.

Mr. Bush can ill afford any problems among his base. His approval ratings in some polls have been sagging in recent weeks and his likely Democratic opponents have been surging forward. His support for a constitutional amendment allows his supporters to heighten the contrast with the Democratic front-runner, Senator John Kerry, who opposes gay marriage but also opposes a constitutional amendment. Republicans have been portraying Mr. Kerry as a man of shifting stands and a classic Massachusetts liberal.
Democrats say that Mr. Bush's gains among his base will come at a cost. While a majority of Americans may oppose the idea of same-sex marriage, these Democratic strategists say, many are also uneasy with the idea of amending the Constitution, fearful that the country will edge into intolerance and distrustful of the administration's priorities at a time of war abroad and economic distress at home.

"This is clearly a step to placate his base," said Geoffrey Garin, a Democratic pollster who also polls for the Human Rights Campaign, a gay rights group. "All the research we've done suggests that voters are extremely cynical about the president's motives for doing this."

But Republican strategists say that the same-sex marriage amendment, while essential to conservatives, has much broader appeal. "This gets you Reagan Democrats, pro-life Democrats, churchgoing Democrats," said a House Republican leadership aide. "This gets you a lot of Democrats who are not happy with Bush on economic policy but not happy with Kerry on being from Massachusetts."

Glen Bolger, a Republican pollster whose firm does some work for the Bush campaign, said, "We've tested this issue six ways to Sunday, and given that the president is seen as compassionate, I don't think there's going to be the kind of backlash as there was with Dan Quayle and Murphy Brown, for instance."

In fact, many Democrats harken hopefully back to the 1992 election, when Republicans ran a "family values" campaign to help re-elect President George Bush. It was widely believed that the values campaign, which reached its apotheosis at the party's convention in Houston, badly backfired, sending a signal of intolerance rather than shared values.

It was a painfully difficult time for President George Bush, who had faced a series of humiliating rebellions from conservatives after breaking his pledge not to raise taxes.

From the start, President Bush signaled that he would not make the same mistakes, keeping movement conservatives in the loop, heeding their concerns.

Conservatives are also confident that their current causes are part of a new broadly appealing cultural populism. Unlike previous "cultural battles," said Gary L. Bauer, a longtime conservative strategist, "this one is not much of a battle." He added, "The public overwhelmingly embraces what would be considered the conservative side."

But both parties seem consumed with rousing their core constituents for what is shaping up to be a fiercely polarized election. Just as Mr. Kerry is rousing his party's faithful with a challenge to "Bring it on," so is Mr. Bush taking pains to remind his constituents that while he has pledged to be compassionate, he is very definitely conservative.