

Ohio's Rob Portman is first GOP senator to support gay marriage

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Republican U.S. Sen. Rob Portman on Thursday (March 14) announced he has reversed his longtime opposition to same-sex marriage after reconsidering the issue because his 21-year-old son, Will, is gay.

Portman said his son, a junior at Yale University, told his wife, Jane, and him that he's gay and "it was not a choice, it was who he is and that he had been that way since he could remember."

"It allowed me to think of this issue from a new perspective, and that's of a Dad who loves his son a lot and wants him to have the same opportunities that his brother and sister would have -- to have a relationship like Jane and I have had for over 26 years," Portman told reporters in an interview at his office.

The conversation the Portmans had with their son two years ago led him to evolve on the issue after he consulted clergy members, friends -- including former Vice President Dick Cheney, whose daughter is gay -- and the Bible.

"The overriding message of love and compassion that I take from the Bible, and certainly the Golden Rule, and the fact that I believe we are all created by our maker, that has all influenced me in terms of my change on this issue," Portman said, adding that he feels that "in a way, this strengthens the institution of marriage."

Portman, 57, said his son didn't push him to make his announcement, though he "encouraged me."

Portman served 12 years in Congress before serving as U.S. trade representative and budget director for the George W. Bush administration. He won his first Senate

seat in 2010.

Portman, who as a House member backed the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act now under review by the U.S. Supreme Court, said he now thinks parts of that bill should be repealed, though he hasn't considered introducing such legislation himself because economic policy issues are his specialty.

Portman said he believes that same-sex couples who marry legally in states where it's allowed should get the federal benefits that are granted to heterosexual married couples but aren't currently extended to gay married couples because of DOMA, such as the ability to file joint tax returns.

Family law has traditionally been a state responsibility, Portman says, so the federal definition of marriage should not pre-empt state marriage laws.

If Ohio voters were to reconsider the gay marriage ban they adopted in 2004, Portman said he might support it, depending on its wording, though he would not be likely to take a leadership role on the issue just as he didn't take a leadership role in 2004. He stressed that he doesn't want to force his views on others, and that religious institutions shouldn't be forced to perform weddings or recognize marriages they don't condone.

He said his decision to announce his new stance was not motivated by its potential political impact, and he was not sure what the fallout would be. He noted that nine states and the District of Columbia have legalized same-sex marriage, and that the issue has more support among younger people.

"I believe in some respects that this is more generational than it is partisan," said Portman.

He said he does not know of other Republican U.S. senators who share his views on gay marriage, although Cheney agrees with them, and recently advised him to "do the right thing, follow your heart."