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Republicans cautiously approach abortion, homosexuality, other controversial issues

WASHINGTON (AP) — Mindful of the damage President Clinton suffered in the gays-in-the-military debate, Republican leaders are determined not to wander far from their budget and government reform agenda into fights over abortion and other divisive social issues.

Their caution reflects a desire to solidify the GOP's newfound support among white women, to avoid overreaching the mandate of their midterm gains, and to deny Democrats an early opening to re-energize their despondent base.

Much of this approach stems from the GOP's analysis of Clinton's early efforts to allow homosexuals to serve openly in the military. The effort sent

Clinton's support among white men, and across the South, into a tailspin from which the president has yet to recover.

And it invigorated conservative groups, particularly the Christian Coalition and other religious conservative groups, and these organizations were significant players in the Republican midterm sweep.

Now, if Republicans rush forward with a controversial social agenda, "it could excite our forces and help us organize for the next elections," said Ann Lewis, a veteran Democratic strategist and a senior official at Planned Parenthood.

So far, Rep. Newt Gingrich, who will become House speaker in January, has kept his focus mostly on economic and reform

issues. Gingrich has offered vague criticisms of liberal housing and education programs but with the exception of school prayer and welfare reform, two popular ideas, has spoken sparingly about social issues.

"We cannot replace the social engineering by the left with a social engineering of the right," Gingrich said Tuesday night.

The House GOP agenda does include social policies certain to prove controversial. But in picking these battles, Gingrich and his allies were careful to put reform items first and then choose social issues that enjoy substantial if not overwhelming support in public opinion polls — though vehemently opposed by liberals.

Gingrich, for example, wants the House to vote by

early July on a constitutional amendment allowing organized school prayer. Like groups oppose the amendment but President Clinton on Tuesday he is open to the suggestion there will be a unified Democratic opposition.

Another provision in House GOP's 100-day blueprint that is opposed by some liberal groups would allow parents to exclude schoolchildren from federal surveys they find objectionable because of questions about sexual behavior.

As for abortion, Republicans expect some conservative push for restoration of a "gag rule" prohibiting doctors that receive federal funds from advising pregnant women about abortion.

Tropical storm Gordon leaves Florida, Haiti in ruin

BAREFOOT BAY, Fla. (AP) — Pink insulation hung from broken branches like strips of confetti. The crumpled remains of mobile homes littered the streets. Drenched furniture lay buried under crushed metal and wooden beams.

"I said, 'What is that noise?' and everything blew," Seline Harrod recalled Wednesday. "I laid my face down on the floor and my husband laid on top of me."

Harrod and her neighbors told tales of terror the morning after Tropical Storm Gordon sent a tornado through this tight-knit retirement community, where people socialize over shuffleboard and fire auxiliary chicken dinners.

The storm generated other tornadoes and thunderstorms on a 200-mile path across Florida after devastating Haiti. Radio reports put the death toll in Haiti at up to 400.

In Florida, which has gotten 20 inches of rain Sunday, five people died, more were injured and dozens of homes destroyed. The storm zigzagged south of the Florida Keys, churned into the Gulf of Mexico and circled

back to come ashore on the state's west coast between Naples and Fort Myers.

The weakened storm was expected to dump more rain that could lead to more flooding. Some Orlando residents were advised to evacuate because of heavy flooding.

Gov. Lawton Chiles declared a state of emergency for southern and central Florida, allowing the National Guard to be called in if needed.

In Barefoot Bay and Snug Harbor Lakes, an adjacent mobile home retirement community along the Atlantic Coast, the tornado destroyed 68 mobile homes, damaged more than 380, killed one man and injured 40, including two critically.

Rescuers used trained dogs in driving rain to pull apart pieces of mangled aluminum and insulation and make sure no one was trapped. No others were found.

After the tornado damaged the Harrods' trailer home, Mrs. Harrod's husband, Doug, pried open the door, sat his wife in their car and went to check on neighbors. He forced open 71-year-old Eileen Sheehan's door and

got her out.

"I was going out to the kitchen and all sudden the lights went off, the ceiling started falling in and the windows blew out. It was glass all over the floor," Sheehan said.

A small motor boat named Our Lady was tossed upside down and stood among the debris of its owner's home.

Down the street, George Gerstner's "Rhapsody in Blue" album was buried in James Fuller's driveway.

Fuller, 74, was killed and his wife, who was critically injured when their mobile home was lifted up, carried across the driveway and crashed on top of him. A car parked in the driveway was barely scratched.

Ruth Flanagan, 64, was at home on the street, but her house was virtually untouched. "It was a great big boom, and it was gone," she said.

Emergency crews worked to restore power to homes that escaped severe damage. The Red Cross opened two shelters for people left homeless, but many were taken

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