

Republican Candidates Divided Over Jailed Kentucky Clerk

Republican presidential candidates were split over whether a county clerk in Kentucky, who was jailed on Thursday, should be forced to issue same-sex marriage licenses despite her religious objections.

The U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in June that gay couples have a constitutional right to marry upset many conservatives, who believe marriage should be restricted to heterosexual couples.

Rowan County Clerk Kim Davis became a cultural flashpoint for refusing to issue marriage licenses after the ruling, citing her faith. On Thursday, a federal judge sent Davis to jail for contempt of court.

Her case has caused a rift among the candidates seeking the Republican nomination in the November 2016 election, showing there is a difficult path to attract religious conservatives and other wings of the party that are less focused on social issues.

Several of the 17 Republican presidential hopefuls said on Thursday that Davis should not have been punished.

"I think it's absurd to put someone in jail for exercising their religious liberty," U.S. Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky told CNN on Thursday. "I think this is a real mistake."

Mike Huckabee, the former governor of Arkansas, said on Twitter he would travel to Kentucky to support Davis. On Facebook, he wrote, "The Supreme Court is not the supreme branch and it's certainly not the supreme being."

Other candidates said they shared Davis's religious convictions but that she was bound to uphold the law.

“This clerk, I understand her concerns. I believe in traditional marriage, but she’s a public official,” Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina told MSNBC.

Former business executive Carly Fiorina has made similar arguments, but indicated on Twitter that sending Davis to jail was too harsh a punishment.

Some Republicans, namely front-runner Donald Trump, did not weigh in, while Jeb Bush, the former governor of Florida, said “there ought to be a way to figure this out.”

“We shouldn’t be pushing people out of the public square if they have deeply held views, nor should we discriminate against people, particularly, after this court ruling as it relates to sexual orientation,” he said.

Democrats, meanwhile, have largely been united since the Supreme Court’s ruling in supporting same-sex marriage.

“Marriage equality is the law of the land,” tweeted Hillary Clinton, the Democratic presidential front-runner. “Officials should be held to their duty to uphold the law – end of story.”

(Reporting by Emily Stephenson in Washington and Alana Wise in New York; Additional reporting by Steve Holland in New Hampshire; Editing by Lisa Shumaker)

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