

Boy Scouts to Vote This Week on Lifting Ban on Gay Youth

Leaders of Boy Scout groups across the country will vote this week on a controversial proposal that would remove the organization's ban on gay scouts but not gay adult leaders.

Hundreds of champions and opponents of the proposed change are expected to rally in Grapevine, a suburb of Dallas, during the National Annual Meeting, which begins on Wednesday. About 1,400 delegates are expected to vote on Thursday on whether to lift the ban on gay youth.

The proposed policy change has become a divisive issue that has triggered strong reaction from supporters of gay rights who want to see the ban lifted for adults as well as youths, and conservative organizations that oppose change.

The Boy Scouts ban is at the center of a national debate over gay rights in the United States, where polls show public opinion is shifting toward greater acceptance. The Supreme Court is expected to rule soon whether to strike down parts of a federal law that define marriage as between a man and a woman. The military has lifted a ban on openly gay soldiers.

The Supreme Court ruled 5-4 in 2000 that the Boy Scouts, as a private organization, has the right to exclude gay people. After a two-year study of the ban, the Boy Scouts reaffirmed its commitment to the ban a year ago.

Momentum toward a turnaround within the 103-year-old organization began earlier this year when the Boy Scouts announced it might consider allowing local units to decide whether to admit gay members. A vote in February by the Boy Scouts leadership delayed the decision to give officials more time to survey membership.

The proposal is based on the results of an unprecedented survey of scouts, parents, leaders and the general public on the issue of gay membership, according to Deron Smith, spokesman of the Irving, Texas-based organization.

"Our review confirmed that this remains among the most complex and challenging issues facing the BSA and society today and regardless of the results of the vote, the membership policy will not match everyone's personal preference," Smith said in an e-mail.

"However, Scouting is bigger than this single issue, and good people can disagree and still work together to accomplish great things for youth," Smith said.

Top Boy Scouts leaders endorsed the policy change in a recent webcast and asked voting delegates for their support.

"Our membership standards have always been about leadership," Wayne Perry, president of the national board, said in the webcast. "It was never our intent to prevent young people from being a part of this organization. Kids belong in scouting and are better off in the scouting program."

But an online survey of more than 200,000 Boy Scouts members and leaders indicates that 61 percent support the current policy of excluding gays while 34 percent oppose it.

More than 2.6 million youth and 1 million adults participate in scouting.

Gay rights groups support the change but want to see the ban lifted for adults as well so that gay scouts can continue in the organization after becoming adults.

"We see this as a step forward but our campaign will continue until the ban is lifted for everyone," said Rich Ferraro, a spokesman for GLAAD, an organization that promotes lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans gender rights.

Conservative groups such as Texas Values will lobby to maintain the ban, said Jonathan Saenz, president of that

Austin-based organization.

“We need to keep sexuality and politics out of the Boy Scouts,” Saenz said. “The Boy Scouts have the right as a private organization to run it however they wish without the selfish interests of corporate America or the homosexual lobby.”