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They believe Alito's views mirror theirs; secular conservatives and liberal groups also taking sides

**BYLINE:** MATTHEW HAY BROWN, SUN REPORTER

**BODY:**

The first press release from Colorado Springs came within hours.

While television was airing the initial images of Supreme Court nominee Samuel A. Alito Jr., the powerful Christian resource center Focus on the Family flashed an e-mail to reporters signaling founder James C. Dobson's satisfaction.

"We are extremely pleased," said Dobson, considered one of the most influential evangelical leaders in the country.

Within a day, he was calling on his radio listeners to contact their senators; cassettes and CDs of the broadcast were listed for sale on the Focus on the Family Web site.

Other groups quickly joined him. Soon after Dobson's first e-mail, Coral Ridge Ministries President D. James Kennedy began promoting Alito's "impeccable qualifications" for the court as his Florida-based Center for Reclaiming America for Christ was organizing an online petition drive. Carl A. Anderson, leader of the Knights of Columbus, called Alito "a truly excellent choice" and planned to spread the word at a convention of state deputies this weekend in Dallas.

Energized by the possibility of replacing the moderate Justice Sandra Day O'Connor with a judge whose views on abortion and other issues they believe more closely resemble their own, the national network of socially conservative and politically active Christians that was key to the re-election of President Bush is again rumbling to life.

After staying mostly on the sidelines after Harriet E. Miers' nomination, Christian activists are lobbying to see Alito's nomination through.

Religious groups aren't the only interests taking sides. Secular conservative groups such as Progress for America are buying television time to back Alito, while liberal groups such as People for the American Way and NARAL Pro-Choice America are lining up to oppose him.

Nor are Christians unanimous in their support.

A new Associated Press/Ipsos poll says about half of evangelicals support Alito, compared with the two-thirds who backed Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. in the days after he was nominated.

C. **Welton Gaddy**, the Baptist president of the Interfaith Alliance, has said his group will examine Alito's record on "freedom of religion and freedom from religion" and is calling on all sides to refrain from "allowing religion to become a weapon" in the debate.

But organized efforts by tens of millions of politically active, socially conservative Christians - motivated by the rare opportunity to shift the balance of the court - may again prove decisive.

'Tremendous effect'

"It's going to have a tremendous effect," said Widener University law professor Robert J. Lipkin, author of *Constitutional Revolutions: Pragmatism and the Role of Judicial Review in the American Constitutional Process*. "The religious right has been organized for at least a decade, and they are single-minded in wanting to promote the values that they're dedicated to."

The focal point for many is *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision that protects abortion rights.

The belief that Alito will help reverse, or at least limit, abortion rights, is helping propel the rush to endorse him.

Activists on all sides of the debate are trying to figure Alito's legal position on abortion and how it might factor into rulings by the court.

"Of course he's against abortion," his 90-year-old mother told the AP this week.

As a judge on the Philadelphia-based 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, he disagreed with the majority that in 1991 struck down a Pennsylvania law requiring a married woman to notify her husband before having an abortion.

But Alito also voted in 2000 to overturn a New Jersey law banning a type of late-term abortion.

"It's unclear whether he would vote to overturn *Roe* if given the chance," said Melissa Deckman, assistant professor of political science at Washington College in Chestertown. "He's indicated that precedent and established law are very important, which can mean he's conservative in the sense of legal thought but not always conservative when it comes to social issues."

In this regard, she said, he may depart from Justice Antonin Scalia, who has been willing to reject precedent in favor of advancing ideological goals.

Still, many are trusting that Bush has made good on his promise to nominate justices in the mold of social conservatives Scalia and Clarence Thomas.

Urging support

"We think that President Bush has given us a nominee that's worthy of our support," said Gary Cass, executive director of the Center for Reclaiming America for Christ. "We pledged our support to him if

he would give us a strict constructionist, and that seems to be what he has given us."

Dobson's broadcast reaches 8 million listeners a week, Focus on the Family spokeswoman Carrie Gordon Earll said.

"As you listen, you'll hear what our major action will be, and that is informing our constituents of our views in support of Judge Alito and encouraging them to call their two U.S. senators and asking senators to support him in a fair up-or-down vote," Earll said. "Through all our media outlets, we will be communicating that same message."

Dobson biographer Dale Buss, a former Wall Street Journal reporter, said such campaigns have proved powerful.

"When he asks people to call and contact their senators and representatives, he really has an unequaled record of being able to get people who listen to him to do exactly that," said Buss, author of Family Man.

"There's not anybody in Washington at work on social issues on either side of the divide that doesn't realize the power that he has."

Some observers are warning that a high-profile, faith-based campaign could backfire, however.

"Their influence will depend on their effectiveness in getting their message out and on their ability to avoid being too heavy-handed with that message," said Jane Donovan, professor of religious studies at West Virginia University.

"Americans are becoming increasingly unhappy with the profound polarization in our national political conversation."

Buss discounts the risks.

"This is really about a battle between the base of the Republican Party, which are social conservatives, and the base of the Democratic Party, which are liberals, and I think Focus and Dobson and all these folks are going to be content with having that be the battle and not really worrying too much about the middle," he said.

"They want to make sure that they win on their terms, that this is clearly a conservative appointment to the court, and that this nomination process ends up endorsing the conservative values that are the reason that they supported President Bush and all these conservative people on Capitol Hill in the first place."

matthew.brown@baltsun.com

**GRAPHIC:** Photo(s)

James C. Dobson of Focus on the Family said he was "extremely pleased" with Samuel A. Alito Jr.'s nomination.

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