

## Decisions loom in presidential primaries

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For gays in states with the largest gay populations, such as California, it's decision time in the 2008 presidential race. From the evidence available – anecdotal and indirect – most gays are trying to choose between the top two Democratic candidates – Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. For those who will consider only a Republican, the choice appears to have also narrowed to two – John McCain, whose record has been relatively moderate on gay-related issues, and Rudy Giuliani, whose record has been relatively supportive but whose campaign is relying on a sort of "Hail, Mary" strategy that starts in Florida on January 29.

What's problematic for the LGBT community at this juncture in the presidential contest is that the gay vote – which has provided favored candidates with a significant and reliable voting bloc in the past – is the danger of being marginalized by record turnouts.

The *Las Vegas Sun* reported this week that more than 10 times the number of Democrats turned out for that party's caucuses Saturday than attended four years ago. As many as one-third of the crowd were newly registered Democrats. Records were broken similarly in Iowa and New Hampshire for the Democrats and are expected in South Carolina's Democratic primary Saturday.

Exit polls in the 2000 and 2004 general elections found about 4 percent of voters willing to self-identify as gay nationwide, and what few surveys that have been conducted, indicate that the vast majority of gays are already registered.

But while the gay vote may seem diminished with a large turnout in the general election, it gets magnified in primaries, said political poll analyst Murray Edelman. That's because most of that gay vote – 77 percent in the 2004 general election – goes Democratic.

The gay vote impact is also magnified in many of the upcoming primary states, like California, Massachusetts, and Illinois, because of the tendency for many gays to live in or near major metropolitan areas and in states and cities with laws that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation. A pre-election survey in 1996, for instance, found that about 8 percent of "likely voters" in California were gay. Census data shows that the states with the highest concentrations of same-sex partner households and the highest percentage of unmarried men and unmarried women include many of the February 5 primary states, including Massachusetts, California, Illinois, and Georgia.

And while history indicates that most LGBT people in the "Super Duper Tuesday" states will be voting for a Democrat, there are some indicators suggesting their choice is still not an easy decision. For some, the differences among the top-polling candidates – in both parties – are subtle distinctions.

But there are differences.

### **Blue comfort zone**

An early benchmark on gay issues for Democrats has been, as in 2004, gay marriage. The early voting states of New Hampshire and Iowa were facing their own fights over the issue during 2007, and marriage is an active battle now in California and Florida. So attention on the issue has been inevitable.

For this campaign, it started with John Edwards in December 2006 when, at his first campaign stop in New Hampshire, a gay man from Massachusetts stood up and asked where he stands on same-sex marriage. Edwards's response essentially tested the waters for other Democrats as to how comfortable Americans were with the issue.

"It's easy for me to say civil unions, yes; partner benefits, yes, but it is something I struggle with ... it's a jump for me to get to gay marriage," said Edwards.

It wasn't long before Clinton and Obama officially entered the race and they, too, struck similar positions. While Democrats Dennis Kucinich and Mike Gravel have said they support equal marriage rights for gay couples, neither has yet to earn a single delegate to the convention and are being left out of nationally televised debates.

Polls give a hint at the dilemma for the candidates. Most show a trend toward greater acceptance of equal benefits for gay couples, through civil unions or domestic partnerships, but not for legal recognition of marriage, per se. And the one poll that examined the difference in attitude between Democrats and Republicans – by CBS/*New York Times* in October 2006 – found that 68 percent of Democrats but only 41 percent of Republicans were for marriage or civil unions. That suggested Democratic candidates needed to show considerable willingness to support some legal recognition for gay relationships but still be able to temper that somewhat in the general election.

But there is a difference among the top three polling Democrats on marriage: Obama and Edwards have said they believe the federal Defense of Marriage Act should be repealed, while Clinton says she would repeal only Section 3. That section of the law denies gay partners and spouses more than 1,100 federal benefits enjoyed by married heterosexual spouses. She would retain Section 2, which says states don't have to recognize "relationships between persons of the same sex."

Obama also received some criticism last summer for his effort to brush off his refusal to support marriage for gay couples as being just a matter of "semantics." He said that, as president, he would "fight hard" to ensure that gay couples have the "legal rights that have consequences on an everyday basis," but he could not promise to fight for more than that. He flatly disagreed with the proposition that a civil union is "lesser" than marriage and he subtly suggested the gay community's concern that it is "separate but equal" at best and not equal at worst was not a concern that warranted extensive probing.

On the inclusion of information about gays in public school education, there is also some distinction. During a nationally televised debate in September, a reporter asked the candidates whether they would be "comfortable" having a story about same-sex marriage between two princes "read to your children as part of their school curriculum?" Edwards, who has two young children and was asked first, said he would "absolutely" be comfortable with it and added that he wants his children to understand "everything about the difficulty that gay and lesbian couples are faced with every day."

Obama, who has two young daughters, said he agreed with Edwards and added that "one of the things I want to communicate to my children is not to be afraid of people who are different."

"Because there have been times in our history where I was considered different, or Bill Richardson was considered different," said Obama, referring to the New Mexico governor, who is Latino but has since dropped out of the presidential race. "And one of the things the next president has to do is to stop fanning people's fears."

Clinton struck a starkly different chord. She said she believes it should be "a matter of parental discretion" but added she also thinks "it is better to try to work with children, to help your children to understand there are many differences that are in the world and to really respect other people and the choices that other people make and that goes far beyond sexual orientation."

#### **Other issues**

**All three, according to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, support an inclusive federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act.** They also support hate crimes legislation,

coverage for domestic partners under the Family and Medical Leave Act, equal treatment of gay couples under tax laws, and repeal of the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy.

Obama received considerable criticism from the LGBT community in October when he refused calls to remove an anti-gay performer, Donnie McClurkin, from his campaign's gospel campaign tour of South Carolina.

Clinton was criticized for attempting, in response to a debate question, to rewrite history when she claimed that her husband, former President Bill Clinton, had signed DADT into law as a "transition policy."

Both Obama and Clinton were criticized last spring for initially ducking a question about whether they agreed with then-Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Peter Pace that homosexuality is immoral. They both eventually said they disagreed.

### **Voting records**

In the U.S. Senate, the Human Rights Campaign gave identical grades to Clinton and Obama in the most recently completed 109th session of Congress (2005-2006). The 89 score, on a scale in which 100 is perfect, reflected the failure of both to co-sponsor a bill to provide the partners of U.S. gay citizens with the same immigration benefits available to the legal spouses of heterosexual citizens. Clinton earned an 88 in the previous session and a 100 in her first session. When he was in the U.S. Senate, Edwards earned a 100 during his first congressional session, then fell to a 66. Like the others, he declined to co-sponsor a pro-gay immigration bill and he also declined to adopt a non-discrimination policy covering sexual orientation and gender identity for his own office.

### **Endorsements**

Clinton has received the lion's share of high profile endorsements in the LGBT community, among them Representatives Barney Frank (Massachusetts) and Tammy Baldwin (Wisconsin); former Housing and Urban Development Assistant Secretary Roberta Achtenberg, tennis legend Billie Jean King, and California state Senator Sheila Kuehl (Santa Monica). She has openly gay staff heading up her outreach to the LGBT community and spoke before an HRC gathering, albeit without any prior notice to the press. She gave a reporter for the *Advocate* a 15-minute interview but her campaign has refused to respond to any other requests for interviews from the gay press.

Obama has the backing of film producer David Geffen, Equality Illinois Director Rick Garcia, and Colorado activist Donna Red Wing. He has openly gay liaisons to the gay community and met in person, albeit without press notice, with a Freedom to Marry group in New Hampshire. He gave a reporter for the *Advocate* a 15-minute interview by phone in regards to the McClurkin controversy, but his campaign has not responded to any other requests for interviews from the gay press.

Edwards has the support of longtime Democratic activist David Mixner and youth advocate Kevin Jennings. He has an openly gay person as his deputy campaign manager and met in person with a Freedom to Marry group in New Hampshire, with no restrictions on, but no notice to, the press, at its office. His campaign has not responded to requests for interviews from the gay press.

The most recent reports from the Federal Elections Commission show that of contributions to the top three Democrats from the 33 precincts around the country with the heaviest concentration of gays, 51 percent has gone to Clinton, 38 percent to Obama, and 11 percent has gone to Edwards.

### **The red rip tide**

About one in four gay voters cast their ballots for Republican presidential candidate George Bush in 2000 and 2004. Patrick Sammon, president of the national gay Republican group, Log Cab Republicans, said the national group hasn't endorsed a candidate yet and that its bylaws prevent local clubs from doing so, even in the primaries. He declined to comment on which candidates gay Republicans seem to be favoring.

The most gay-supportive candidate among the GOP candidates going into the race, Giuliani, has backed off some of that support and has executed an unusual campaign strategy that has left him

at the bottom of that six-man field. At the top of that heap, going into the January 29 primary in Florida and the February 5 primaries and caucuses in almost two dozen states is former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney. Romney not only backed off his one-time support for equal rights for gays but also has come to tout his opposition to them, especially in the area of marriage licensing.

Like most of the Democratic candidates, all the Republicans have been against legal recognition for gay marriage. One possible exception is Texas Congressman Ron Paul. Early on, Paul stated he believes "all voluntary associations, whether they're economic or social, should be protected by the law." More recently, when an ABC interviewer asked him, "Should gays be allowed to marry?" he replied, "Sure." But then he added that, while gay couples "can do whatever they want," they "can't make me, personally, accept what they do" and he thinks "all governments" should simply be out of the marriage licensing business.

All the Republican candidates oppose civil unions. At one point, Giuliani was the sole Republican to support them, but then, last spring, in reaction to passage of civil union legislation in New Hampshire, his campaign told the *New York Sun* that Giuliani thinks civil unions "go too far" and that "domestic partnerships are the appropriate way to ensure that people are treated fairly." Giuliani's complaint, according to the statement, was that the New Hampshire law identifies same-sex civil unions as "the equivalent of marriage and recognizes same sex unions from outside states."

Early on, Giuliani, Paul, McCain, and former Tennessee Senator Fred Thompson, who dropped out of the race Tuesday, were the only Republican candidates to oppose amending the U.S. Constitution to ban same-sex marriage. Now, only McCain and Paul stick to that view. McCain has consistently spoken out against and voted against the Federal Marriage Amendment. Paul has opposed it as a matter of his belief that marriage is strictly a state issue. And Giuliani, who previously indicated he would not support a constitutional amendment, changed his tune, saying that, "If a lot of states start to do that – three, four, five, six states – where we have that kind of judicial activism ... then we should have a constitutional amendment."

Presidential candidate Rudy Giuliani shakes the hand of longtime gay Republican activist Chris Bowman, left, during a campaign stop in San Francisco last month. Photo: Rick

### **Other issues**

None of the Republican candidates have expressed support for ENDA or for repealing DADT.

### **Voting records**

In the past three congressional sessions, McCain has earned failing marks from HRC's congressional scorecard – between 14 and 33, on a scale of zero to 100. Paul has earned between zero and 38.

### **Endorsements**

No gay groups or prominent gay leaders have endorsed Republican candidates for president during this campaign. The most recent FEC reports show that 54 percent of contributions to the top three Republicans from the 33 precincts around the country with the heaviest concentration of gays has gone to Giuliani, 27 percent to McCain, and 20 percent to Romney.