



Gay Rights Groups Counting on Democrats to Deliver

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By Shawn Zeller, CQ Staff

Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign, is in high spirits — and with good cause. His colleagues are represented like never before in the Democratic delegate pool, and gay rights groups have partied hard during this week's convention. More important, Solmonese is confident that after eight years of a Bush administration that opposed his agenda, the gay rights community's alignment with the Democratic Party and Barack Obama will lead to policy victories in Washington.

Should the Democrats seize the White House this fall and expand their congressional majorities, gay rights groups expect a legislative windfall. "What we are expecting is a hate crimes bill, an employment non-discrimination act and a lifting of the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy" in the military, Solmonese said.

But like other gay rights activists attending the Democratic National Convention, Solmonese, who heads the largest gay rights group in the country, admits that memories linger of disappointment after President Bill Clinton took office in 1993. Clinton, who had promised to lift the ban on gays serving in the military, reversed himself and instead signed into law (PL 103-160) a codification of the don't ask, don't tell policy barring gays from serving openly. Three years later, Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act (PL 104-199), allowing states to disregard same-sex marriages that are legal in other states.

This time around, Solmonese wants to make clear that gays and lesbians expect something in return for the fundraising and grass-roots support they have provided the party. "It is a measure of our power that we don't speculate, that we have that common understanding and that it's universally understood" that the Democrats will move forward with a pro-gay agenda next year, he said.

Gay and lesbian activists reinforced that message as they wined and dined members of Congress and top party brass this week. At the same time, it is no secret that gay rights groups have nowhere else to turn politically if a cautious Democratic Party keeps them and their agenda at arm's length.

Clinton's legacy remains hotly debated in the gay community. Some gays and lesbians praise him as the first president to embrace their agenda openly. In 1988, by contrast, Democratic presidential nominee Michael S. Dukakis declined campaign contributions from gay donors. But Clinton also reneged on promises to the gay community, some say, out of political expediency.

"I think there are lessons to be learned," said Solmonese. "I suspect and hope that the sophistication and power of the community has changed and that we won't get into a situation like we did in 1993."

Things Are Looking Up: Gays and lesbians have reasons to celebrate at this year's convention.
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For the first time, the party platform opposes both don't ask, don't tell and the Defense of Marriage Act. The 2006 elections saw supportive legislators win elections to Congress and offices in dozens of states. The California Supreme Court approved same-sex marriage in May. And earlier this month, Jared Polis, a Boulder, Colo., entrepreneur, pulled out a 4 percentage point victory over former Democratic state Sen. Joan Fitz-Gerald in a Democratic congressional primary. Should Polis win in November in the 2nd District — one of the most liberal in the state — he would become the first man to begin his service in Congress while open about his homosexuality.

The National Stonewall Democrats, a gay and lesbian group, held their annual convention in Denver before the Democrats arrived and had a full roster of events this week, including a tea party Monday afternoon at the Grand Hyatt's Pinnacle Club honoring Andy Tobias, the treasurer of the Democratic National Committee, and Tobias Wolff, co-chairman of Obama's gay and lesbian policy committee.

The group says some 360 Democratic convention delegates and alternates are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered — a 27 percent increase from the 282 in 2004 and nearly triple the number in 1996, the first time their numbers were tallied.

The Human Rights Campaign's Aug. 25 event celebrating diversity drew several Democratic House members including Raúl M. Grijalva of Arizona and Californians Xavier Becerra, Michael M. Honda and Lois Capps. Honda pledged to defend the state Supreme Court decision legalizing same-sex marriage against a ballot initiative slated for November.

Denverite Tim Gill, a software tycoon believed to be the most generous gay political donor in the country, greeted friends and allies at a private event the evening of Aug. 26 at the Museum of Contemporary Art. His nonprofit political arm, the Gill Action Fund, also held an open house for its grantees.

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the leading organizer of grass-roots activism among gay groups, partied the evening of Aug. 24 at Lannie's Clocktower Cabaret.

Election Results Will Be Critical

Achievement of Solmonese's legislative goals will probably require a Democratic sweep in November — election of a Democratic president, an even more solid Democratic majority in the House and a Senate Democratic majority at or near 60 votes.

Last year, the Senate voted to define bias-motivated attacks against gays and lesbians as hate crimes subject to federal penalties. But the provision was left out of the final version of the defense authorization law (PL 110-181) because of resistance in the House. The House passed a bill (HR 3685) last November intended to prohibit workplace discrimination against gays and lesbians, but the measure floundered after a filibuster threat from Senate Republicans.

But as the lessons of Clinton's first term have taught, sure things can sometimes turn into political hot potatoes. The alignment between the Democratic Party and gay activists on the party platform "has grown and grown and so has the gay delegate count, but those are the easy things," said Dudley Clendinen, a historian of gay activism and former editorial writer for the New York Times. "But in terms of practical politics, it's a different question."