



'Change has come to America'

Obama's win represents 'historic milestone' for gays

By LOU CHIBBARO JR.
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Gay rights leaders called Tuesday's election of Democrat Barack Obama as the nation's 44th president a development of historic proportions for the advancement of gay and transgender civil rights.

Activists noted that gays played an unprecedented role in the Obama campaign, providing thousands of volunteers in states and towns across the country in an effort to help elect a candidate they believe to be the most gay-supportive presidential nominee in U.S. history.

"I think the election of Barack Obama, and what will potentially be the makeup of the House and the Senate, puts us in a position to achieve more in the next four years than we have in the last 40," said Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign.

"I think this is a milestone moment in American history and a milestone moment for the GLBT community," Solmonese said.

H. Alexander Robinson, executive director of the National Black Justice Coalition, which advocates on behalf of black gays, called Obama's election an "extraordinary development" for the black gay community as well as for all black Americans.

"There's been an outpouring of excitement, emotions and real optimism from many of our members and allied organizations that we work with," Robinson said. "This really marks a significant sea change, and I believe that we see in this an opportunity to have a more integrated conversation about our rights."

Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, expressed a sentiment shared by many gay and transgender leaders when she said gay groups would join Obama in working on ways to address the current economic crisis and other pressing national issues along with efforts to address civil rights for gay people.

"Like all people in America, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are concerned with how the economic downturn will impact our families," she said. "Like all people in America, we are worried about access to affordable health care."

Carey called Obama's election "the dawn of a new political era" in the country and said her organization would work closely with the new administration in moving gay and transgender rights initiatives.

She and other gay leaders, including Solmonese, noted that a Republican-controlled Congress blocked all pending gay rights legislation during President Bush's first term and the first half of his second term.

Although Democrats gained control of Congress in January 2007, activists have said threats by Bush to veto gay rights bills impeded efforts to pass the legislation.

HATE CRIMES BILL FIRST?

Gay U.S. Reps. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) and Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisc.) said that Obama's election as president and the election of more gay-supportive Democrats to the House and Senate would open the way for congressional action on at least two important gay rights bills in the early part of Obama's first term.

Both said a bill that would authorize federal officials to prosecute anti-gay hate crimes would likely emerge as the first gay rights measure to come up, possibly in 2009.

The two said the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which calls for banning employment discrimination against gays and transgender people, would likely be taken up next.

But Frank and Baldwin said they would leave it up to Obama to determine the best timetable for moving ahead with the two bills and other gay rights measures.

Among the other gay-related measures that have stalled in Congress and have Obama's strong support are a bill to provide domestic partnership benefits to partners of gay federal employees and legislation to repeal "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."

Obama also has expressed support for repealing the Defense of Marriage Act, which defines marriage under federal law as the exclusive union of one man and one woman. The law also allows states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states.

Another stalled bill deemed important by gay leaders calls for providing the same immigration rights to foreign nationals who are the domestic partners of U.S. citizens.

Under current immigration law, foreign nationals who marry heterosexual U.S. citizens have the right to become permanent U.S. residents and citizens, while same-sex partners who are foreign nationals are not recognized as spouses and refused similar immigration privileges.

Obama spoke in favor of all of these bills during his campaign for president and promised to push hard for their enactment by Congress.

Standing in line to vote Tuesday morning in Midtown Atlanta, Chip Drake cited DOMA as a reason he would cast his ballot for Obama.

"I'd like to see the federal Defense of Marriage Act repealed," Drake said. "Since Georgia is not likely to repeal their anti-gay marriage amendment anytime soon, that's going to be the first step — either a Supreme Court challenge to the Defense of Marriage Act or the Defense of Marriage Act being repealed."

Some gays involved with legislative efforts during the administration of President Clinton cautioned that gay groups should not demand that the more controversial measures be moved forward until the new Obama administration and gay advocacy groups put together a carefully crafted strategy to move those bills through the House and Senate.

Some pointed to what they called a "worst-case scenario" in early 1993, during Clinton's first year as president, when the issue of gays in the military exploded on the national scene as a highly contentious issue.

CAUTIOUS APPROACH?

Strong opposition by military leaders, plus congressional Democrats and Republicans forced Clinton to back down on his campaign promise to repeal the longstanding policy barring gays from serving in the military.

Instead, Clinton introduced the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, which Congress enacted into law over Clinton’s objections. Although most Democrats initially favored Clinton’s proposal to allow gays to serve openly, they acknowledged that the political pressure generated by opponents made it politically impossible for them to stop the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” bandwagon.

“I blame the community as much as maybe some naiveté on the part of the brand new Clinton administration,” said lesbian activist Elizabeth Birch, a former HRC president. “We weren’t strong. We weren’t broad and deep. We were not in any way ready to take on that issue.”

Birch and other activists this week said they were confident that Obama will have learned from Clinton’s mistakes on the issue of gays in the military.

“Barack Obama has been able to really learn, as a result of the Clinton years, how to move in an efficient but strategic way,” she said.

David Mixner, the gay Democratic Party activist who is credited with generating strong gay support for Bill Clinton’s election in 1992, said he believed that Obama would be prudent and cautious in pushing for the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”

But Mixner said he faults Clinton for not being decisive in his original plan to lift the military ban on gays. Mixner noted that Clinton delayed introducing his plan for lifting the ban after opposition surfaced rather than acting decisively.

“Many of us, including supportive military folks, told him to do it on Inauguration Day,” Mixner said. “Just like Harry Truman did in ending the military’s segregation policies for blacks.”

Added Mixner, “Let’s be honest here. Clinton wimped out. That’s the way I see it.”

Other gay leaders, including Rep. Barney Frank, noted that Obama would enter the White House 16 years after the issue of gays in the military blew up in Congress.

They said the country is now in a different place and that polling data show a majority of the American people support allowing gays to serve in the military openly.

“In a four-year term, we can get many of our issues passed,” Frank said. “I feel once Iraq is over, we can get rid of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.’”

He said he would caution, though, against trying to repeal the policy while the U.S. is still engaged in a war.

Frank said a repeal of DOMA would also likely take longer to bring about than it would to pass ENDA and the hate crimes bill.

He said that while the nation is focused on resolving the economic crisis, he doesn’t believe that issue should hold up congressional action on gay rights legislation.

“One doesn’t compete with the other,” he said. “We can do both.”

Atlanta gay Democratic activist Kyle Bailey, director of national and chapter development for the National Stonewall Democrats, said minutes after CNN called the presidential race for Obama that while he was thrilled, winning the election was only half the battle.

“I’m very excited to have a Democrat back in the White House ... Obama will unite our country and that includes LGBT people,” Bailey said during an Obama party at Midtown nightclub Halo.

Attendees at the gay event, hosted by the Stonewall Democrats, burst into prolonged applause at

Obama's win, with many hugging and some in tears.

"His entire life has been dedicated to fighting discrimination - and for the rights for LGBT people. But the election is half the fight. It's great to celebrate, but now brings the second round of fighting. It's our responsibility to hold our elected officials accountable, especially for young people," Bailey said.

MESSAGE TO GOP

Patrick Sammon, president of Log Cabin Republicans, a gay partisan group, noted that Obama's election came as exit polling data show that Republican presidential candidate John McCain received 27 percent of the gay vote.

The percentage represented the largest share of the gay vote from any Republican presidential candidate since a consortium of news media organizations began tracking the gay vote in exit polls.

Although McCain received support from gay Republicans, Sammon said his decisive defeat by Obama could result in a sharp decline in the Republican Party unless the party ends its close association with the nation's social conservative movement.

"If so-called social conservatives want to use gay and lesbian families to take the GOP further to the right, our party won't be able to compete in the Northeast or the West," Sammon said. "Young voters will continue to move left. An increasingly diverse population is going to be turned off by the GOP for years to come."

He said that in the aftermath of Tuesday's election, Log Cabin "is going to be in the middle of the fight for the GOP's future," and it would push for a party that embraces "inclusive and libertarian principles."