



## Liberal activists have long legislative wish list

By DAVID CRARY – Nov 7, 2008  
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NEW YORK (AP) — Gays serving openly in the military. Voting rights for more ex-convicts. Paid sick days and family leave for most American workers.

Those are part of a long wish list that liberal advocacy groups hope will become reality as Barack Obama and his fellow Democrats take full control in Washington. Activists concede that political pragmatism — and the economic crisis — may force them to be patient, but they also don't want to let this opportunity pass without pressing hard for their agenda.

"We've been waiting a long time, and we've got a long list," said Kim Gandy, president of the National Organization for Women. "Since 1994, we've been losing over and over on legislation related to equality and fair treatment for women."

NOW, after backing Hillary Rodham Clinton in the Democratic primaries, threw its support behind Obama in his race against John McCain and Sarah Palin.

Feminist leaders now want Obama and the new Congress to address pay inequity for women, require most employers to offer paid sick days and paid family leave, and pass the Freedom of Choice Act, which would overrule many state-level restrictions on access to abortion.

The gay-rights movement also campaigned vigorously for Obama. It hopes for swift action on two bills previously debated in Congress — a measure that would outlaw workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation, and a hate-crimes bill that would cover offenses motivated by anti-gay bias.

Beyond that, gay activists hope for some sort of federal recognition of same-sex partnerships and for repeal of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy that prohibits active-duty service members from openly acknowledging they are gay.

However, the extent of congressional support for those two potentially divisive steps remains in question. Activists are braced for the possibility that Obama — as he seeks broad political support early in his term — won't tackle them immediately.

**"We know the next administration will have a lot on its plate, facing the biggest economic crisis in a generation," said Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "Those are our issues, too."**

Regarding "don't ask, don't tell," Obama recently said he wants to work with military leaders to build a consensus on removing the ban so gays can serve openly.

A leader of the campaign against the ban, Aubrey Sarvis of the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, said such a deliberate approach seemed sensible — as long as it produced an end to "don't ask, don't tell" before the next congressional elections in 2010.

"There's a very full agenda ... so I know we're going to have to get in line," Sarvis said. "Hopefully, we see a partnership with the White House, the Defense Department and the Joint Chiefs of Staff that results in a recommendation for repeal."

Elaine Donnelly, who as president of the Center for Military Readiness opposes any role for gays in the armed forces, said Congress might not be as eager as Obama to let gays serve openly.

"If the Democrats do push it through, there will be political consequences," she said.

Many constituencies, including feminists, ethnic minorities and gays, will be looking closely at the new administration's high-level appointments. The head of the largest gay-rights group, Joe Solmonese of the Human Rights Campaign, said he expected gays to receive major appointments, not just to "symbolic" posts related to AIDS or gay issues.

Among Obama's staunchest campaign backers was the abortion-rights movement, which is no longer worried that Supreme Court vacancies over the next four years might be filled by anti-abortion judges.

Now, groups such as NARAL Pro-Choice America and the Planned Parenthood Federation of America want Obama and Congress to move aggressively on several initiatives that were thwarted during the Bush administration. Priorities include expanded access to birth control and family-planning services, and a shift from Bush-supported abstinence-only sex education to comprehensive programs that include teaching about contraception.

"There's been a lack of information and health care services for teens," said Planned Parenthood president Cecile Richards. "No one's really talking to them honestly."

NARAL's president, Nancy Keenan, said a push for passage of the Freedom of Choice Act might be deferred while advocacy groups assess how abortion issues will fare in the new Congress. The proposed act, which Obama supports, has been assailed by conservatives as a threat to many state laws, including those requiring parental notification before a minor can have an abortion.

An array of other advocacy groups are stepping forward with their priorities for the new Congress.

A coalition of groups favoring criminal-justice reforms wants to eliminate the sentencing disparity that produces longer prison terms related to crack cocaine, which is prevalent in inner cities, than for powder cocaine. The coalition also is calling for federal voting rights to be extended to more people leaving prison.

The National Council of La Raza, representing a nationwide Latino community that tilted heavily in Obama's favor, wants Congress to tackle immigration reform in way that would provide supportive options for immigrants working in this country illegally.

"We start out with expectation we'll be able to work closely together on this," said Cecilia Munoz, a La Raza vice president. "Where we need to push, we intend to push."

Kenneth Sherrill, a Hunter College political scientist, predicted that advocacy groups would understand — but only to an extent — if the economy takes precedence over their pet priorities.

"Are the brakes applied equally and fairly across constituencies, or are certain constituencies told to wait longer than others?" he wondered. "Some people will be very unhappy if they're told to wait at the back of the line."

Some of the left-of-center movements have been comparing notes, and discussing the value of letting Obama get his presidency started without a clamor for swift action on their agendas.

"There will be disappointments — that's expected," said Winnie Stachelberg of the Center for American Progress. "But there's a larger sense of needing to be sure this work is done well and carefully. It took eight years to get into this mess, and we will not get out of it in one year."