

# Chicago Tribune

## Stumble over gay issue dogs Obama

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CHICAGO - Chicago lawyer Coco Soodek has given \$2,300 to Sen. Barack Obama's presidential primary campaign, the most allowed under federal law. But in recent days, she has questioned her contribution, just as she has questioned the candidate's commitment to gays and lesbians.

"His inability to make strong, declarative sentences in support of our issues is disheartening and sometimes makes me question my donation," she said last week. "I hope he shows a little bit more moral courage for his friends."

The subject of Soodek's anger: Obama's initial statements when asked whether he believed gay acts are immoral, a view asserted a few days earlier by Gen. Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, when asked by the Chicago Tribune about the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

Obama, like his chief rival for the Democratic presidential nomination, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., was criticized for initially dodging the question.

Although his campaign later issued a statement denouncing Pace's comments, and the senator went on to say on national television that he did not believe homosexuals are immoral, the damage already was done, with some Illinois gay activists voicing dismay over what they saw as their senator's vacillation.

The criticism highlights one of the major challenges confronting Obama, Clinton and other Democratic presidential hopefuls. They must keep their political base of activist, highly partisan supporters happy while not alienating other, more centrist voters they hope to woo in the general election.

Striking that balance is especially important as Democrats try to learn from the lessons of 2004, when Republicans successfully used the issue of gay marriage to boost conservative turnout and link some Democrats to a practice opposed by many Americans.

Clinton, like Obama, has been trying to shape her strong, liberal roots into something more moderate. The former first lady was asked about Pace's remarks the day before Obama was. She initially responded that it was a matter for "others to conclude." Her campaign subsequently issued a statement that squarely rejected Pace's views.

"I have heard from many of my friends in the gay community that my response yesterday to a question about homosexuality being immoral sounded evasive," Clinton said on her Web site. "Homosexuality is not immoral. ... That is what I believe."

The complexity of the political calculation, though, extends beyond gay and lesbian voters. Some black pastors in the last presidential campaign voiced their opposition to gay rights, and may have dampened turnout for Kerry among African-Americans.

For Obama, the recent campaign flare-up started the way many such incidents do: The senator was asked a question that he apparently was not prepared to answer - at least at that moment. It was the sort of challenge from reporters and voters that he will face many times on the campaign trail.

As Obama left a firefighters convention earlier this month, a Newsday reporter asked him whether he thought homosexuality was immoral.

Obama's first answer was: "I think traditionally the Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman has restricted his public comments to military matters. That's probably a good tradition to follow."

Asked a second time, he said: "I think the question here is whether somebody is willing to sacrifice for their country."

When asked a third time, the senator ignored the question, signed an autograph, posed for a photo and then jumped into a Lincoln Town Car, according to a report in Newsday.

The exchange left some gays and lesbians cold, shocked that someone they trusted would not immediately defend them.

Michael Bauer, a top Democratic fundraiser in Chicago and gay activist, considers himself one of Obama's top gay backers nationally. But the senator's initial responses to the morality question left him shaken and disappointed. Bauer declined to comment for the record on whether Obama's stance would hurt his fundraising among gays, lesbians and progressives.

"This is an educational opportunity and I hope that the senator would appoint a gay advisory group to provide advice to him and the campaign on (lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender) issues," he said.

Some gay and lesbian activists suggested that Obama needed to make a definitive statement on the question - in his own voice - by last Monday, or risk more vocal protests against his campaign.

On a fundraising committee conference call that day, former state Sen. Bill Marovitz asked how the campaign planned to address the matter because he had continued to hear complaints. "I said it needs to be something that is dealt with directly," he said.

But Marovitz, who is married to Playboy Enterprises CEO Christie Hefner, disputes that Obama was trying to dodge the initial question. He said he believes Obama was just trying to get into a car without launching into a full-blown discussion on gay and lesbian issues.

"He has repeatedly in speeches ... made his position clear on the importance of equality for everyone," Marovitz said. "I don't think anyone in the gay or lesbian community should have any doubt where Barack stands on this issue."

With the matter still lingering last Monday, Obama sought to make his views clear on national television.

"I don't think that homosexuals are immoral any more than I think heterosexuals are immoral," he told Larry King on CNN. "I think that people are people and to categorize one group of folks based on their sexual orientation that way I think is wrong."

That statement helped patch some feelings.

"It says to me that he's definitely listening and that's really good," said Soodek, the Obama donor. "But I would hope that he would continue to be as matter of fact and joyful in his friendship with us and our community."

With their hasty retreats from their ambiguous initial statements, Obama and Clinton showed they do not want to alienate a group whose political influence exceeds its numbers. National exit polls in 2004 showed self-identified gays, lesbians and bisexuals represented about 4 percent of the electorate and that roughly three-quarters went for Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass.

**But their influence is greater in Democratic primaries, where they represent up to 10 percent of the vote and a major source of campaign cash, said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "There's no question about the importance of gay dollars to the Democratic Party," he said.**

Ironically, Obama's diverse background makes him ideal presidential material in Soodek's eyes and puts him in a unique position to fight discrimination. "He might be the only one to be able to bridge that gap," she said. "That's a gift, but it comes with burdens."

Obama's campaign has begun to assemble an advisory group of lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender supporters who will help raise money and advise the campaign. Campaign spokesman Bill Burton declined to say anything further on the dust-up.

While they are courting Democratic primary votes, Obama and Clinton also are trying to avoid offending socially conservative Democrats, including some Christians who might be inclined to view homosexuality as immoral.

In Obama's own Chicago church, Trinity United Church of Christ, those views are more progressive, though he said during his 2004 campaign for the U.S. Senate that his religious beliefs lead him to the position that marriage should be reserved for a man and a woman.

Some members of Obama's church attribute his reluctance to answer the question to a belief that sexuality should not be framed as a moral issue.

"Maybe it is better to have no answer to the right question than the right answer to the wrong ones," said Iva Carruthers, a longtime member of Trinity United, where Obama found a spiritual home more than 20 years ago.

Carruthers said the church has always preached a message of inclusion regardless of gender, race, class or sexual orientation. For years, it has included gays and lesbians in its singles ministry.

"We are all equal at the foot of the cross," Carruthers said. "It permeates the church's consciousness. ... Understanding you are equal to anybody else in God's eyes, if we didn't take on that assumption, then we as black people wouldn't be where we are in this country today."

Trinity United's pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, speaks of a conversion experience when his mostly white denomination, the United Church of Christ, voted to ordain gay and lesbian clergy in

1975. At the national meeting that year, the church's gay caucus called black pastors together to appeal for support.

A personal plea from the leader of the gay caucus sparked a revelation for Wright, who said he then confronted his own "homophobia." He now speaks of sexuality as an issue of inclusion, not morality.

"He blew my mind so bad it took me four years to talk about it publicly," Wright said in a Tribune interview last fall. "We welcome to the cross of Jesus Christ: murderers, thieves, adulterers, liars. (Back then we welcomed) anybody to the cross except homosexuals."