

# The Washington Post

## Democrats Cautious on Gay Rights Issues

But Candidates Have Taken Positions Exceeding Mainstream of a Few Years Ago

Sunday, June 24, 2007

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After Marine Gen. [Peter Pace](#), chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, publicly declared in March that homosexuality was immoral, gay supporters of [Sens. Barack Obama](#) of [Illinois](#) and [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) of [New York](#) were furious when neither presidential candidate was very critical of Pace.

They let both campaigns know it, and the next day Clinton and Obama said they do not consider homosexuality immoral.

The tentative reactions suggest the caution with which the two leading Democratic contenders approach gay rights issues when they are publicly debated. "The antenna goes up," acknowledges Ethan Geto, an informal adviser to Clinton on gay rights issues. "It's a measure of how volatile gay rights issues are in national politics."

Yet, however skittish they can sometimes be -- especially on same-sex marriage -- Democratic candidates as a group have taken stances in the 2008 campaign that only a few years ago would have been far out of the party's mainstream.

On two major issues, Clinton has rejected two policies of her husband, former president [Bill Clinton](#): the "don't ask, don't tell" approach to gay people in the military and a provision in the Defense of Marriage Act, which could prevent the federal government from offering equal benefits to same-sex couples.

Other Democratic candidates have adopted the same positions and have looked for ways for the government to offer gay couples in civil unions the same tax benefits that married men and women receive.

They have also backed adoption rights for gay couples.

These issues highlight one of the starkest differences between the two parties. While every Democratic candidate wants to overturn the "don't ask, don't tell" policy, no Republican presidential candidate has said he plans to do the same. Several of the [GOP](#) candidates opposed a measure recently enacted by [New Hampshire](#) -- site of the first presidential primary -- allowing civil unions, which the Democrats supported.

The one issue that almost all Republican and Democratic contenders -- except for long-shots [Rep. Dennis J. Kucinich](#) ([Ohio](#)) and former senator [Mike Gravel](#) ([Alaska](#)) -- agree on is same-sex marriage: They're opposed to it. For Democrats, this is a particularly tricky issue, given the

increasingly powerful gay constituency within the party. Exit polls in 2004 showed that only 4 percent of voters were gay, but 77 percent voted for Democrats.

Former senator [John Edwards](#)'s careful positioning is typical. "I haven't yet got across that bridge," he says about same-sex marriage. But the North Carolina Democrat likes to say that his daughter Cate, a 25 year-old-law student, supports it. And, like other candidates, he courts support from gays -- his wife, Elizabeth, will speak today to the Alice B. Toklas LGBT Democratic Club in [San Francisco](#).

The caution on same-sex marriage is understandable, with polls showing that a big majority of Americans oppose it.

Bans on same-sex marriage passed in 13 states in 2004. And though Democratic strategists have rejected the idea that people specifically turned out to vote for those initiatives in states such as Ohio, tipping the election to [President Bush](#), the issue remains a complicated one for Democrats.

Black voters are heavily Democratic, but exit polls in last year's elections found that only 46 percent of African Americans favored allowing same-sex marriage or civil unions, compared with 61 percent of the overall population who did, a figure that included Republicans.

In 2004, aides to [Sen. John F. Kerry \(Mass.\)](#), the Democratic presidential nominee, were so worried about black voters' feelings about same-sex marriage that they put Bill Clinton on a conference call with 3,000 black pastors so the former president could reassure the pastors that Kerry truly did oppose same-sex marriage.

In 2006, eight more states passed same-sex marriage bans, and one could be on the ballot next year in [Florida](#), likely to be a key swing state again.

According to several gay rights activists, Hillary Clinton and Obama give largely similar statements in private meetings on their opposition to same-sex marriage, citing religious concerns and the fact that older generations of Americans view the term "marriage" as a commitment between a man and a woman.

The activists say they trust the candidates' opposition as heartfelt, while at the same time acknowledging that the candidates' staffers have told them that taking a stand in favor of same-sex marriage is too risky politically. Few national political figures support same-sex marriage, although that could change if [New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg](#), who has long said he supports it, decides to run for president as an independent.

Activists are more divided about whether the Democratic candidates' opposition is appropriate.

"I don't think the majority of the GLBT community thinks that gay marriage will or should be an issue in the next presidential election," Washington-based consultant Peter Rosenstein said, referring to gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people.

**But Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, disagrees.**

**"We think every candidate should and is morally compelled to support marriage," he said. "I think there's a very mistaken notion that supporting same-sex marriage is some kind of third rail in American politics. It's a myth."**

