

## Presidential Hopefuls Sound Off on Gay Rights

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By Joel Wendland

**Democratic candidates have earned high marks for supporting LGBT equality, according to a report released last week by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, examining the positions of all the presidential candidates on LGBT issues.**

The report looked at the voting records and campaign statements of both Republican and Democratic candidates on issues such as a transgender inclusive anti-discrimination law, HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, lifting the anti-gay military ban, transgender inclusive hate crimes laws, civil unions, domestic partnerships, marriage equality, adoption, and the Federal Marriage Amendment.

The clearest result of the study is that while Democratic candidates have a mixed record on equality for LGBT people, they appear to be open to expanding civil rights for LGBT people.

All of the Democratic candidates scored well across the board in the study, but only Rep. Dennis Kucinich (OH) earned a perfect score for his views on the issues.

The only point where most Democratic candidates parted ways with the civil rights organization was on the question of same-sex marriage.

For example, Sen. Joe Biden voted for a federal law passed in 1996 known as the Defense of Marriage Act, which banned gay marriage in the US. But he opposes the Federal Marriage Amendment which would amend the Constitution to outlaw marriage equality. In public statements, he has stated his opposition to gay marriage but has also indicated that he believes it is inevitable.

Most of the candidates opted for civil unions as an alternative to same-sex marriage, with Gov. Bill Richardson adding that such decisions should be left up to states.

All of the Democratic candidates support or have voted for employment non-discrimination and hate crimes laws that include sexual orientation and gender identity as protected categories.

Sen. Barack Obama co-sponsored the Matthew Shepard Act (federal anti-hate crimes law) and the Employment Non-Discrimination Act. When asked if he supports transgender inclusion, Obama said, "Absolutely. The transgendered community has to be protected. I just don't have any tolerance for that sort of intolerance. And I think we need to legislate aggressively to protect them."

All the of the Democratic candidates favor lifting the anti-gay military ban. Sen. Hillary Clinton described the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy instituted by her husband as having "failed." In one statement, Sen. Clinton noted, "Gays and lesbians already serve with distinction in our nation's armed forces and should not face discrimination. Fitness to serve should be based on an individual's conduct, not their sexual orientation."

Most of the Democratic candidates also support increases in funding to prevent and treat

HIV/AIDS. (Mike Gravel's positions on this issue were unclear in his response to the NGLTF survey.)

Sen. John Edwards, for example, while in office supported reauthorization of the Ryan White Care Act, which provides benefits to low-income AIDS patients to help cover the costs of medications. He also strongly supports the Early Treatment for HIV Act, which would expand Medicaid to cover AIDS treatments for low-income patients.

Gov. Richardson fought for expanded funding in New Mexico for AIDS prevention and treatment programs.

Sen. Obama pushed for expansion of Medicaid as an Illinois legislator, has called for expanded scientific research in the Senate, and said, "On issues like AIDS funding, I see my job as not only getting more money and passing bills, but also changing and reframing the debate. I want to be able to reach out into the African American community, where there may still be resistance and homophobia, and talk as a U.S. Senator about the importance of funding."

On the other hand, Republican candidates appear to be overwhelmingly driven by divisive politics, homophobia, and anti-gay sentiment.

Republican candidates have a mixed record on supporting expanded funding for HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. For example, Sen. Brownback (KS) supported Bush administration policies to expand funding for global programs, but also backed the notoriously failed abstinence programs, while de-emphasizing condom use, which has been proven to be the best method for preventing the spread of the HIV virus through sexual contact.

Rudy Giuliani, on the other hand, appears to oppose increasing funding for HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. As mayor of New York, Giuliani cut millions in funding specifically designated for anti-AIDS programs in New York's communities of color.

Mitt Romney also vetoed or opposed HIV/AIDS treatment programs as the governor of Massachusetts. In his state's 2007 budget, Romney wrote "a list of vetoes and funding reductions that hit just about every LGBT and AIDS-related initiative receiving state funding," according to the Boston Globe.

Other Republican candidates like Sen. John McCain and Rep. Duncan Hunter opposed pending bills in Congress that would have allowed states to expand Medicaid to cover low-income AIDS patients.

On the issue of employment discrimination against LGBT people, most of the Republican candidates muddied their views on the matter or have records of voting against laws that would bar discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Special interests lobbyist/actor Fred Thompson voted against the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, and Tommy Thompson stated publicly that he finds discrimination acceptable. Mitt Romney says he believes that being able to fire someone simply because they are gay is acceptable because otherwise gays would have "special rights."

Only Rudy Giuliani described himself as a strong supporter of anti-discrimination and hate crimes laws that include sexual orientation or transgender as protected categories.