



2008 Democrats in milestone gay issues forum

LOS ANGELES (AFP) - Democratic front-runner Hillary Clinton and her 2008 Democratic rivals will Thursday scramble for votes at an unprecedented presidential campaign debate devoted to gay and lesbian issues.

Six of eight Democratic hopefuls will gather in Hollywood, for a forum to be broadcast live and online by Logo, a gay and lesbian network spun off from MTV.

The event will highlight the fault line between Democrats who largely back broader gay and lesbian rights, and Republicans, who prefer to seek support of traditional 'family values' conservatives.

Clinton, her top challenger Barack Obama, former senator John Edwards, New Mexico governor Bill Richardson, long-shot Mike Gravel, and congressman Dennis Kucinich are expected to attend.

Republicans have no plans for a similar event.

Candidates can expect a grilling on gay marriage, HIV/AIDS treatment, hate crimes legislation, benefits for same sex couples and efforts to repeal the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy on gays and lesbians serving in the military.

Despite support for most gay rights among Democratic candidates, some activists feel politicians have given them short shrift.

"Time and again, we've been thrown under the political bus by politicians either in the White House, or those who want to get there," wrote Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) on his blog.

One famous let-down came when President Bill Clinton failed to live up to his pledge to lift the ban on gays in the military under Pentagon pressure.

Even his wife now brands his "don't ask, don't tell" compromise, which allowed gays and lesbians to serve if they keep their orientation secret, a "failed policy."

Clinton has courted gays and lesbians, vowing to end "leadership that has politicized the most personal and intimate issues."

"You will always have an open door to the White House," Clinton said in a speech to the Human Rights Campaign, a co-sponsor of Thursday's debate, in March.

Like other Democrats, Clinton however, has stopped short of backing gay marriage, favoring civil unions. So has her chief challenger Obama.

"I do believe that marriage is between a man and a woman," Obama said in a Senate speech last year.

Exit polls after 2006 congressional elections found three percent of voters identified themselves as lesbian or gay.

While that is a tiny fraction of the overall electorate, the community votes overwhelmingly Democratic, giving it added sway in a tight nominating race.

In 2004, defeated Democratic nominee Senator John Kerry won 77 percent of the gay and lesbian vote, compared to 23 percent for President George W. Bush, according to exit polls.

Scorecards compiled by lesbian and gay advocacy groups suggest Democrats will run the table again in 2008.

According to the NGLTF, Democratic candidates broadly support seven of eight hot-button issues important to the gay community.

But only Gravel and Kucinich back same sex marriage.

Republicans get black marks in almost every category, but for them, the scorn of gays and lesbians might be welcomed, as they woo Christian conservatives for whom "family" issues are paramount.

One conservative group, Liberty Counsel, said last week the debate would "provide information for the majority of Americans who reject the homosexual agenda and support traditional family values."

Even Democrats must weigh national political implications of support for gay groups.

In battleground states like Ohio and Pennsylvania, social issues take on extra prominence.

Democrats accused Republicans in 2004 of deliberately pushing anti-gay marriage ballot initiatives, to boost numbers of conservatives at the polls.

A survey by Quinnipiac University published Wednesday found independent voters, a key demographic in close US elections, were less likely to back a candidate endorsed by gay rights groups.