

Show 'Em Whatcha Got

Conscious of their community's financial clout, gay activists want action on equality issues, not just talk.

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By Jonathan Darman

Gay men and lesbians have always had a soft spot for Hillary Clinton. In the mid-'90s, when "homosexual" was still a dirty word in much of the country, Bill Clinton and his wife socialized in the White House with a broad circle of gay friends. In the dark days of Whitewater and Monica, gays leaped to Hillary's defense, needing no convincing that a "right-wing conspiracy" was vast and real. At the annual gay-pride parade in Manhattan, drag queens and go-go boys compete for prominence with New York's political elite, but Clinton is always the star of the show.

Lately, Clinton has been eager to bask in the gay love. Her young presidential campaign has already held two fund-raisers with major gay and lesbian donors. This week, after a scheduled appearance with the other Democratic contenders at a forum in L.A. on gay issues, she'll head to a fund-raiser at the West Hollywood gay hangout the Abbey. The attention may be paying off. According to gay journalist Lisa Keen's analysis of fund-raising to date in 2007, Clinton has earned 48 percent of the contributions from heavily gay ZIP codes nationally, compared with 39 percent for Barack Obama and 13 percent for John Edwards.

But for all her gay support, what has Clinton really done for gay rights? Not much, some gay activists say, but neither has Obama or Edwards. In the six and a half years since the Clintons left the White House, the landscape has altered dramatically for gays. Same-sex couples have the legal right to marry in one state and the right to civil unions or domestic partnerships in three others, with several other states contemplating extending partnership rights. And yet the Democratic front runners' positions on major gay issues—for repealing "Don't ask, don't tell," for a federal ban on employment discrimination, for domestic partnerships but against gay marriage—are identical to those taken by Al Gore and Bill Bradley eight years ago. Clinton's campaign points out that, as a senator, she has cosponsored bills that, among other things, sought to extend benefits to the domestic partners of federal employees and provide resources for local prosecution of hate crimes. Still, mindful of their community's financial clout, some activists are telling Clinton and the other candidates that they're tired of happy talk about equality and they want to see results.

In her personal life, accepting gays has always seemed to come easy to Clinton. As First Lady, she encouraged gay White House staffers to serve openly. Shortly after being offered a job as Clinton's press secretary, Neel Lattimore approached her in the Map Room. "I want you to know that I'm gay," Lattimore told her. "I don't want you and the president to get attacked because of me." Clinton told him not to worry; she and Bill could handle it. From then on, Clinton took the same active interest in Lattimore's love life as she did with female staffers. "She would always tell me, 'So-and-so is coming to dinner tonight—I don't think he has a partner,'" he says.

Outside the White House, Clinton has had a harder time proving her gay bona fides. She disappointed many gay activists when she kept a low profile as the Federal Marriage Amendment, which she voted against, was being debated on the Senate floor in 2004. "Some of us held her to a higher standard," says Alan Van Capelle, executive director of the Empire State Pride Agenda, a gay group in New York state. "We expected that if you're the senator from New

York, it's not acceptable to talk about LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] issues only in front of LGBT people."

Recently, Clinton has more eagerly sought a spotlight on gay issues, condemning her husband's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy. In a primary field where the most prominent candidate supporting same-sex marriage is Dennis Kucinich, she may well retain rock-star status with gay voters. Pragmatic activists say they don't expect a conversion from Clinton, Obama or Edwards on marriage soon; they'd simply like to see candidates talk about gays outside of fund-raisers and gay-themed debates. **"It's the emotional disconnect that's frustrating," says Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "Hillary Clinton is totally comfortable around gay people ... All of the candidates are. Yet when they talk about us, they freeze."**

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