

Democrats tackle marriage in debate

Upcoming HRC forum offers chance to press candidates on gay issues

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A lesbian couple from New York and a North Carolina pastor brought gay issues to the forefront of Monday's much-hyped YouTube presidential debate.

Candidates at the first debate sanctioned by the Democratic National Committee were asked to state whether they would allow the couple, identified as Mary and Jen from Brooklyn, N.Y., to marry.

Rep. Dennis Kucinich of Ohio was the only respondent who supported the idea.

"Mary and Jen, the answer to your question is yes," he said. "Because if our Constitution really means what it says, that all are created equal, if it really means what it says, that there should be equality of opportunity before the law, then our brothers and sisters who happen to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered should have the same rights accorded to them as anyone else, and that includes the ability to have a civil marriage ceremony."

Monday's debate, which aired live on CNN, was the first to pose questions submitted by members of YouTube, a popular video sharing web site.

The couple's video drew applause from the audience, as did a video from Rev. Reggie Longcrier, the lead pastor of a nondenominational church in Hickory, N.C. He asked former Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina why it's acceptable to use religion to justify denying marriage rights to gay couples.

Edwards, who has repeatedly cited his religious beliefs in explaining why he does not support same-sex marriage, said he would not impose his personal beliefs on Americans.

"I think it is absolutely wrong, as president of the United States, for me to have used that faith basis as a basis for denying anybody their rights," he said, "and I will not do that when I'm president of the United States."

The responses from Kucinich, Edwards and others garnered mixed reviews from political observers.

Clyde Wilcox, a Georgetown University government professor and author of "The Politics of Gay Rights," said Edwards could lose his gay backers as other candidates eclipse him on the issues.

"He's confessing his reservations and hesitations," Wilcox said. "But he's the only guy out there who's signaling a whole lot of reservations. That could hurt him."

Dan Pinello, a City University of New York government professor and author of "Gay Rights & American Law," agreed. He said gay Americans want a strong, supportive leader in the White House, but see none among the eight Democratic candidates.

"There's absolutely no leadership here," Pinello said. "None whatsoever. This is the attack of the Republican clones."

Wilcox said the candidates must be careful, though, to espouse views that have strong public support. He said Kucinich and former Sen. Mike Gravel of Alaska, who back same-sex marriage, lack that support.

"You don't get elected if you go far beyond public opinion," he said. "You want to lead, but you want to have people who follow."

Sen. Joe Biden of Delaware, Sen. Hillary Clinton of New York and Gravel were not given an opportunity during the debate to address the issue.

Civil unions favored

Most candidates who addressed relationship recognition for gay couples during the debate did so by expressing support for civil unions.

Sen. Christopher Dodd of Connecticut said gay and lesbian couples should have the ability to work good jobs, retire securely and visit each other in hospitals.

"They ought to have that ability in civil unions," he said. "I don't go so far as to call for marriage. I believe marriage is between a man and a woman."

Gov. Bill Richardson of New Mexico, who opposes same-sex marriage, said he would help the lesbian couple by doing what he considered achievable.

"What I think is achievable is full civil unions with full marriage rights," he said. "I would also press for you a hate crimes act in the Congress. I would eliminate 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' in the military. If we're going to have in our military men and women that die for this country, we shouldn't give them a lecture on their sexual orientation."

Wilcox praised Richardson's multifaceted response to the couple's question.

"Richardson was pretty good," Wilcox said. "He said, 'Let's focus on what's possible here.' He didn't say what Dodd said. He said, 'In this political climate, this is what I can accomplish,' and that's a good and honest answer."

Edwards, in his response, said that marriage equality remains "a very, very difficult issue" for him.

"I feel enormous personal conflict about this issue," he said. "I want to end discrimination. I want to do some of the things that I just heard Bill Richardson talking about — standing up for equal rights, substantive rights, civil unions, the thing that Chris Dodd just talked about. But I think that's something everybody on this stage will commit themselves to as president of the United States."

Wilcox and Pinello said Edwards mishandled the topic Monday.

"Edwards is all, 'Woe is me,' and wringing his hands," Pinello said. "Being president means that you lead. You make tough choices. That's what the job is all about."

Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, like Richardson, said he backs civil unions that would give same-sex couples the same state and federal rights that marriage bestows.

“We’ve got to make sure that everybody’s equal under the law,” Obama said. “And the civil unions that I’ve proposed would be equivalent in terms of making sure that all the rights that are conferred by the state are equal for same-sex couples as well as for heterosexual couples.”

But Obama, like Richardson, has not yet explained how he would bring about such equality in federal law. Wilcox said that’s an increasingly glaring omission.

“I think somebody’s going to have to ask the question,” he said, “and then we’re going to see how the candidates answer.”

High hopes for HRC forum

Candidates could tackle that issue and a broader range of topics Aug. 9, during a forum organized by Human Rights Campaign and the Logo TV network.

The event, which begins at 9 p.m. Eastern and lasts for 90 minutes, includes all leading Democratic contenders except Biden, who has told organizers he has a scheduling conflict.

Activists expressed high hopes that the forum will yield new insights into the candidates and their attitudes toward gay issues.

Gay activists and allies told the Blade they want the forum’s panelists — HRC President Joe Solmonese, lesbian singer Melissa Etheridge and gay Washington Post editorial page writer Jonathan Capehart, along with moderator Margaret Carlson, a Bloomberg News columnist — to cover a wide range of topics.

But they said the group must first push the candidates to better explain their thoughts on marriage equality.

Evan Wolfson, executive director of Freedom to Marry, said each contender should be asked whether they would trade their marriage for “some lesser legal mechanism” that has limited legal weight.

“And if not,” he said, “why should same-sex, committed couples not have the same freedom to marry under the law as you and your spouse did?”

Malcolm Lazin, executive director of Equality Forum, said he’d also ask Clinton whether she supports New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer’s proposal to legalize gay marriage in the Empire State.

David Fishback, a board member of Metro D.C. PFLAG who has two gay sons, said he wants to know what message the candidates have for young gays who hope to one day marry and raise families.

“What would each of you say to our nation’s gay youth, some as young as 10, as to why the future they envision should not include marriage, but rather some lesser category?”

Geoff Kors, executive director of Equality California, said he’d ask the candidates if they believe that denying same-sex couples marriage licenses violates the Constitution.

“If you believe it does not,” he said, “what other government-issued licenses do you believe people can be denied based on their sexual orientation or gender without violating the Constitution?”

Beyond marriage

Although a key issue, marriage equality wasn't the only topic to generate interest among activists.

Wayne Besen, founder of Truth Wins Out, said he'd ask the candidates whether they think sexuality is innate, or is something that can be changed with therapy and prayer.

Given that choice, he said, all candidates likely would respond that sexual orientation is innate.

"The question is whether they're clear cut or equivocate on the issue," Besen said. "And that will tell us a lot about the candidates."

Aaron Belkin, director of the Palm Center at the University of California in Santa Barbara, said he wants to know how each candidate would work toward allowing gays to serve openly in the military.

H. Alexander Robinson, CEO of National Black Justice Coalition, said he also would ask whether the candidates support survival benefits for the partners of gay and lesbian soldiers.

Matt Foreman, executive director of National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, said he also wants to know how Democrats will counter Republicans who use gay topics as wedge issues.

"Given that the GOP and its surrogates have used attacks on gay people as a leading wedge issue to defeat Democrats, why don't you fight back and address this outrage head-on in your stump speech?"

The activists and commentators polled by the Blade this week also posed questions with international ramifications. Ali Hili, a gay Iraqi living in London, said he wants to know how the candidates will protect Iraqi minorities.

"Would your new government support programs or groups that advocate human rights," he said, "and would you advocate on behalf of the new Iraqi Constitution or lobby for changes to the new Iraqi government to make room for minority groups such as gays, women, Sunnis, Christians and other minority groups so that we can all live in peace?"

Rachel Tiven, executive director of Immigration Equality, said she'd pose a hypothetical question that reflects the experiences of many gay Americans.

"I'm a U.S. citizen who has fallen in love with someone from another country. If I were straight, I would be able to sponsor my partner to come to the U.S. and we could live together here. As a gay citizen, however, that option's not available to me, so I am forced to choose between my country and the person I love. How would you remedy this unfair and unequal treatment?"

Gay author and commentator Andrew Sullivan said he'd ask the candidates whether they believe it's right that HIV is a bar to American citizenship.

Ronald Johnson, deputy executive director of AIDS Action Council, said he wants the candidates to explain their plan to fight HIV/AIDS.

"HIV has infected approximately 40,000 people in the United States each year for more than a decade," he said. "How will you use the office of the presidency to prevent HIV in the United States?"