

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

## The American Debate | Democrats toil over gay unions

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For The Inquirer

The 2008 Democratic presidential candidates would rather swallow their tongues than say anything nice about gay marriage, and no wonder. As political issues go, this one is still a loser.

This might seem like heresy to the gay activists and liberal Democrats who support gay marriage, but the truth is, these candidates want to win. They don't want to endorse a hot-button issue that still spooks most Americans. They don't want to spend their precious time fending off hyperbolic Republican attempts to paint them as decadent destroyers of the American family.

So they're treating the issue as if it were a live grenade, diving for cover with elaborate wordplay.

At an Aug. 9 gay forum, Hillary Rodham Clinton said marriage laws should be left to the states. John Edwards said he was still personally "struggling" with the issue. Barack Obama said we should "disentangle" the word *marriage* from what is really a civil-rights debate, and Bill Richardson said gay marriage is not politically "achievable" and that, besides, being gay is a "choice," although hours later he renounced the latter.

None of these remarks constitute profiles in courage - arguably, prospective leaders should have the guts to shape public opinion, not merely reflect it - but the Democrats' reluctance to embrace gay marriage is understandable, given the ignominies they have suffered in recent decades.

Fairly or not, they have been stuck with the permissiveness label since the late '60s, a catch-all that includes gay rights; in 1984, they were successfully tagged by the GOP as "San Francisco Democrats," and we all know what dastardly behavior transpires in San Francisco; and they were bludgeoned by the gay-marriage issue in 2004, when Republicans put anti-marriage referendums on the ballots in 11 states, thereby stoking religious conservative turnout and arguably putting President Bush over the top in pivotal Ohio.

But gay activists insist that the current Democratic candidates are needlessly worried. And they're right, up to a point. Americans are generally far more tolerant of gays than they used to be. Back in 1966, Time magazine, a barometer of centrist opinion, argued in an essay that homosexuality was "a pathetic little second-rate substitute for reality, a pitiable flight from life" - and the tolerance trend is accelerating among young people.

Gay characters and gay themes are ubiquitous on television; advertisers such as Chili's and Volvo routinely target gay people. Two male composers kissed at the televised Tony awards without the world imploding. Massachusetts recognizes gay marriage, and nine other states recognize legal unions that confer many of the same benefits.

Elsewhere on the policy front, public opinion has shifted leftward. Landslide majorities - ranging from 80 percent to 90 percent - now believe that job bias against gays should be illegal under federal law; that violence against gays should be deemed a hate crime under federal law; and that gays should be able to serve openly in the U.S. military. (The Democratic candidates support all three.)

Indeed, regarding the latter issue, today's Republicans seem to be woefully out of step with the cultural mainstream; a plank in the GOP platform, inserted in 1996 and reaffirmed in 2000 and 2004, states that "homosexuality is incompatible with military service." (By the way, organizers of the Aug. 9 event say they invited all the GOP candidates, but none showed up.)

The problem for Democrats, however, is that most Americans still view homosexuality as incompatible with the institution of marriage. Culturally and politically, that issue is still the line in the sand. There isn't a single poll that shows majority support for gay marriage. The latest survey, conducted by CNN/Opinion Research Corp., puts support at 40 percent; back in January, the Pew Research Center pegged support, among independent swing voters, at only 39 percent.

Perhaps it's hypocritical that most Americans refuse to accept the idea of gay marriage; after all, scholars report that the heterosexual marriage rate has dropped nearly 30 percent over the last 25 years, and that the number of unmarried couples has jumped tenfold since 1960. Maybe their visceral impulse to protect the traditional sanctity of marriage is unfair, given the fact that so many "straight" people honor it in the breach.

But fairness is not always a factor on Election Day. What matters to a politician is the vote tally - and it's noteworthy that even voters in two heavily Democratic states, Hawaii and California, have decisively rejected gay marriage when the issue was on the ballot. Moreover, a gay-marriage endorsement would make it tougher for the Democrats to achieve something they haven't managed to do since 1996: win a Southern state. The fact is, according to a 2004 Pew survey, only 26 percent of southern Democrats favor gay marriage.

Mindful of all these caveats, the '08 Democratic candidates have a somewhat awkward relationship with the gay community. They want to curry favor with this slice of the liberal base, because gay donors give a lot of money (Clinton has already held three fund-raisers), because gay voters are reliably Democratic (77 percent of self-identified gays voted for John Kerry in 2004), and because they sincerely share the gay community's civil-rights concerns.

But their reluctance to lead on gay marriage, or even to put gay issues front and center, is ticking off gay leaders.

**Earlier this month, Matt Foreman, who directs the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, circulated an e-mail complaining that the Democrats remain all too willing to "parse our dreams as a matter of misguided political calculation. . . . Time and again, we've been thrown under the political bus. . . . We need leadership. We need strength of vision."**

But parsing dreams is what politics is all about. Vision generally yields to the art of the possible. Democrats in particular are cautious by nature, skittish about crusading for more social change than people are willing to tolerate, and fearful of being caricatured as decadent lefties. And that reminds me of a story:

Back in February 2004, I was in Boston, visiting a Democratic strategist named Mary Anne Marsh. She was spinning me about the Democrats' bullish '04 prospects when she stopped in midsentence, scanned her computer, and visibly blanched. She murmured, "This just came in." The state Supreme Court had just decreed that gay marriages would become legal in Massachusetts that spring - a mere nine weeks before the Democrats were scheduled to hold their national convention in Boston. Marsh shared the news. Then she leaned forward, ever so slowly, until her forehead was on the desk.

Regarding gay marriage, that's still the Democratic posture.