

TIME

Why Dems Stayed Silent on Craig

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By JAY NEWTON-SMALL

Mitt Romney was the first of the Republican presidential candidates to denounce Larry Craig's indiscretion in an airport men's room. "It's disgusting," Romney said of the man who used to be his Senate liaison. Senator John McCain, a Romney rival, echoed those sentiments, saying: "He should resign. My opinion is that when you plead guilty to a crime you shouldn't serve." Many of Craig's Republican colleagues in the Senate, meanwhile, are clamoring to get him to step down.

But one group of politicians has been strangely silent on this latest Republican scandal. Not a single one of the Democratic candidates for President has made a public comment on it.

In the past, Democratic candidates have been quick to use GOP corruption scandals, such as the revelations about lobbyist Jack Abramoff and the investigation into Senator Ted Stevens, as evidence that there needs to be change in Washington. They even have cited former Florida representative Mark Foley, the victim of another sex scandal, for his abuse of power. But they seem to have drawn the line at politicizing Craig's scandal.

The political calculation seems to be that the issue will do more for the party if it is simply left alone. Thus far the Republican knee-jerk reaction — to reassure the conservative base — has had the side effect of energizing gay groups. Why attack him and risk the ire of gay-rights groups when Democrats can sit back and watch the GOP eat their own?

The silence is being welcomed by gay activists. "I'll never complain about Democrats actually staying on message," said John Marble, communications director for Stonewall Democrats, a national gay, lesbian bi-sexual and transgender umbrella group for Democratic activists, in a telephone interview. "If anything, we'd like to see them use this opportunity to speak positively about gay families and gay Americans and be very clear that they support equal rights for the gay community."

Craig, a three-term Republican senator from Idaho, pled guilty to a misdemeanor charge of disorderly conduct August 8 after he allegedly tried to solicit sex from an undercover police officer in a men's bathroom at the Minneapolis Airport. Craig, who has a long voting record against gay rights, this week denied any wrongdoing and denied being gay.

Republicans, meanwhile, are tripping over themselves to get away from Craig as yet another scandal risks further depressing their base. **The effect of the Craig scandal "will be to intensify their anti-gay rhetoric," said Becky Dansky, federal legislative director at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, pointing to the contrast between the treatment of Craig and that of Louisiana Senator David Vitter, who admitted to being involved with the infamous D.C. Madam. "Vitter received a standing ovation from his party caucus; Senator Craig is immediately forced out of his committee positions just because of the gender involved in the scandal," Dansky said. "I never thought I'd start to feel a little bit sorry for Senator Craig."**

Romney's reaction, meanwhile, shows "the danger of legislating morality, and hypocrisy is revealed," said Patrick Sammon, president of the Log Cabin Republicans, a gay Republican

group. "Mitt Romney is basing his whole campaign on quote-unquote 'family values,' so it's an embarrassment for Mitt Romney and he tried to get away from him as fast as he can." Log Cabin Republicans are also calling on Craig to resign, though for different reasons, Sammon said. "Innocent people don't plead guilty. The time to contest these allegations is before and not after," he said.

Not all of the Republican candidates have weighed in on the scandal. Rudy Giuliani's campaign declined to comment, as did the exploratory committee for former Tennessee Senator Fred Thompson, who is weighing a run. Meanwhile, two conservative GOP presidential hopefuls, former Mike Huckabee and Kansas Senator Sam Brownback, have, ironically, taken a more moderate stance on Craig. Brownback told MSNBC that "we ought to look and see what the facts actually are and then build and move forward off of that... Larry's a colleague. He is somebody that I know. I want to hear what he has to say." And when asked if he thought Craig should resign, Huckabee told CNN, "[It] depends on what turns out to be the facts, and I don't want to prejudge until they're established."