



## **Topsy-Turvy Campaign: 'Liberal' GOP Presidential Candidates Backtrack on Gay Rights, 'Right-Wing' Candidates Stand Firm**

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Leading Republican candidates seem to have one thing in common: They're all eager to highlight their credentials as social conservatives. And the first item on that list almost always is that mysterious "gay agenda."

Although the first caucuses and primaries in Iowa and New Hampshire still loom more than four months away, observers maintain that the GOP White House hopefuls are falling all over themselves to establish--or re-establish--their conservative bona fides. In the case of at least a few of them, that means apparently backtracking from previous pro-gay stances that, they fear, are coming back to haunt them.

Primary among these former pro-gay politicians are former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney.

Of the two, Romney arguably has the most to lose. He continues to position himself as the leading conservative GOP candidate despite apparent flip-flops on the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" military ban, the federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act and especially same-sex nuptials, which roiled the state during his last years in office.

Log Cabin Republican president Patrick Sammon told EDGE in a recent interview from Boston that the GOP remains largely skeptical of Romney because of his flip-flops on gay rights, abortion and gun control. He added these arguably politically calculated strategy will ultimately fail.

"You can't trust what he says," Sammon said. "Mitt Romney is trying to use the Karl Rove playbook from 2004... and that's a strategy for defeat in the general election."

Romney has had a lot of explaining to do to the party's right. He described supporters of a Federal Marriage Amendment that would write a Constitutional ban on same-sex marriage as "extremists" during his failed campaign to unseat U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy in 1994. And Romney even famously proclaimed he would advocate for gay rights more than the long-time Democratic incumbent, who was and is one of the most pro-gay senators in Washington.

Romney heavily courted gay Republicans during both his Senate his gubernatorial campaigns. He handed out pro-gay fliers throughout Boston's Back Bay and South End neighborhoods during the city's 2002 Pride celebrations that read, "All citizens deserve equal rights regardless of their sexual preference."

Romney all but abandoned these public statements after the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court issued its landmark Goodridge ruling which extended marriage to same-sex couples in the

Commonwealth. He largely spearheaded Beacon Hill rallies and other efforts in support of a proposed Constitutional amendment to overturn the decision.

These efforts failed earlier this year after they did not garner sufficient legislative support. But that hasn't stopped him.

Romney has brought his message onto the Iowa campaign trail, where he launched a radio ad last week which highlights his support for the FMA. The spot further points out that Romney remains the only leading GOP candidate who supports the proposed amendment.

"As Republicans, we must oppose discrimination and defend traditional marriage: one man, one woman," he said in the ad.

The spot debuted just days after a Polk County judge found the Hawkeye State's ban on marriage for gays and lesbians unconstitutional (a decision that was quickly stayed, but not before one couple did, in fact, tie the knot). Former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, U.S. Sen. John McCain of Arizona and former U.S. Sen. Fred Thompson [R-Tenn.] all oppose the FMA.

Romney, who has campaigned heavily in Iowa, continues to court the state's influential conservative voting bloc ahead of its caucuses early next year.

The Log Cabin's Sammon said that his organization will not endorse any candidate until the caucuses and primaries are over. He did, however, applaud Giuliani's gay rights record.

The former federal prosecutor maintains his opposition to gay and lesbian nuptials on his campaign Web site but activists applauded Giuliani in 1998 after he signed the city's domestic partnership bill, which extended benefits to same-sex partners of city employees, into law. The former mayor's personal travails, however, remain New York tabloid fodder.

He moved into a wealthy Manhattan gay couple's apartment after he and his second wife Donna Hanover separated. Giuliani made even more colorful headlines after he tried to seduce real estate mogul Donald Trump while in drag during a 2000 charity event.

Social conservatives took note of the former mayor's gender-bending but Sammon once again defended his record.

"The tone of his campaign is one on focusing on core Republican issues and not divisive social issues," he said. "He's trying to unite all Republicans."

**Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, applauded Giuliani's gay overtures during an interview with the Washington Post last month. But he and other gay activists criticized him in April for his opposition to a New Hampshire bill which extended civil unions to same-sex couples.** Giuliani sparked further controversy in June after he appeared to back away from previous statements in support of the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" during a debate held at Saint Anselm College in Manchester.

Focus on the Family founder Dr. James Dobson remains highly critical of Giuliani and other GOP presidential hopefuls. He announced in an e-mail last week that he would not endorse Thompson's campaign because of his positions on marriage, campaign finance reform and other traditionally conservative issues. Dobson took a similar stance against McCain earlier this year because he opposes the FMA.

Dante Scala, associate professor of political science at the University of New Hampshire said marriage--and gay issues in general--will not receive much attention during the campaign. He added Romney and Giuliani's apparent shift to the right is a politically calculated strategy that

could potentially backfire.

"They don't need one more issue on which to cross the base," Scala said.

Human Rights Campaign spokesperson Brad Luna agreed. Social conservatives suffered a stinging defeat at the polls last November after former U.S. Sens. Rick Santorum [R-Penn.], George Allen [R-Va.] and other anti-gay incumbents lost their re-election bids. The gay rights movement quickly spun the results as a rejection of their anti-gay rhetoric. Luna further pointed to the FMA vote last June as an attempt to deflect attention from what he described as the Republican Party's own failures.

"Their stance on these issues is not guided on some held deeply held belief but rather political expediency," he said.

Evan Wolfson, executive director of Freedom to Marry, remained particularly critical of Romney and Giuliani. He also singled out Democratic candidates who fail to support marriage for same-sex couples on the campaign trail.

"Inauthenticity and evasion actually harm candidates," Wolfson said. "This is true whether they are a Democrat or a Republican."

Sammon remains optimistic. He maintained attempts to drive social conservatives out to the caucuses and primaries will fail.

"If James Dobson isn't happy; then that's definitely a good sign for our side," he said.