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For Gay Democrats, a Primary Where Rights Are Not an Issue, This Time

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The impromptu debate, over light beers and dirty martinis, was at once mundane and remarkable. Provoked by a reporter, four middle-aged men at a Greenwich Village gay bar made fiery pitches for the Democratic presidential front-runners. Two backed Senator [Barack Obama](#), one argued for Senator [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), and the fourth made an emotional plea for the cause of [John Edwards](#), the former senator from North Carolina.

“Edwards is the only one who really cares about the underdog,” one of the men, Farid Martinez, 41, a clothing designer from Brooklyn, shouted above the din at the bar, the Monster, across from Sheridan Square. His friend Edmund Taylor, 37, disagreed, and nearly sputtered with rage: “The guy is a millionaire lawyer obsessed with his hair. Obama is the only one who can really transform this country.”

What was notable about the exchange last week was what was not mentioned: the word “gay.”

For the first time in two decades, gay voters find themselves in an unusual, if happy, predicament. The three leading Democrats have staked out similar positions on issues that resonate with gay men and lesbians. Although none of the three candidates back gay marriage, they all support same-sex civil unions and say they would fight to repeal the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. And each of them says he or she would champion a federal anti-discrimination law that would protect lesbians and gay men.

“You would need a magnifying glass to see any real or substantive differences between the three candidates,” said Alan Van Capelle, the executive director of the Empire State Pride Agenda, a gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender civil rights group in New York.

The Republican field is a different story. All of the candidates hold opposite positions from the Democrats on those matters, and although gay rights have not dominated the Republican contest so far, if past elections are any guide, they will become an issue after the primaries, political strategists say.

For the moment, however, gay voters in New York are looking past the issues that have long guided them toward a candidate. They are talking about the conflict in Iraq, universal health care and whether it is more important to have a president with experience or exuberance.

“I think there’s also a lot of excitement over having someone other than George Bush in the White House,” said Matthew W. Carlin, president of the Stonewall Democratic Club, a gay political group that endorsed Senator Clinton in September. “And there’s a feeling that people could be happy with any of the Democrats.”

In what many gay leaders described as a fairly momentous occasion, Mrs. Clinton, Mr. Obama and Mr. Edwards showed up at a forum in August sponsored by the gay cable channel Logo and

talked about the bravery of gay soldiers, adoption rights for same-sex couples and the problems faced by homeless gay teenagers. All three candidates employ gay strategists at the national and state levels, and in the two weeks leading up to the New York primary on Feb. 5, representatives from each campaign said, they planned to concentrate on the state's gay vote through mailings and rallies.

"We're going to get the word out best we can to show that Hillary has done more for the community than any other political figure in America," said Ethan Geto, a veteran Democratic consultant who is the Clinton campaign's senior policy adviser on gay and lesbian concerns.

Although an exact count is elusive, pollsters estimate that lesbians and gay men make up between 5 and 13 percent of the Democratic vote in New York; even if the lower figure is accepted, it is a voting bloc worth courting. Ken Sherrill, a political scientist at [Hunter College](#) who studies the gay electorate, said lesbians and gay men are far more likely to be interested in politics than are mainstream voters. "This is a group of people whose lives are intimately affected by government policy," he said.

With about a week left before the primary, the gay vote appears to be mirroring the statewide electorate, which is leaning toward Senator Clinton but has yet to coalesce around one candidate. As one of the state's most powerful politicians, Mrs. Clinton enjoys widespread institutional support in the gay community; most of the city's gay Democratic groups have endorsed her, as have the state's highest-ranking openly gay officials, including the speaker of the New York City Council, [Christine C. Quinn](#), and State [Senator Thomas K. Duane](#) of Manhattan. Last week, The New York Blade, a local gay newspaper, endorsed Mrs. Clinton as well.

But the campaigns of Mr. Edwards and Mr. Obama have been eagerly courting — and raising money from — gay men and lesbians, and both have put together lists of prominent gay supporters.

"Hillary has an advantage, but she certainly does not have a lock on the gay vote," said Matt Foreman, the executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, who has remained neutral.

The Democratic field stands in contrast to the Republican contenders. [Mike Huckabee](#), the former Arkansas governor, has not repudiated his suggestion, made in 1992, that people with AIDS be isolated from the general population. He and the other leading candidates — Senator [John McCain](#) of Arizona, former Mayor [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#) of New York and [Mitt Romney](#), the former Massachusetts governor — are opposed to same-sex civil unions and any compromise that would allow gays to serve openly in the military.

Still, compared with the last two presidential elections, when gay rights were a call to arms among conservatives and an issue to be avoided by Democrats, many political experts agreed that this year, gay-related themes had been overshadowed by the economy, the war in Iraq and illegal [immigration](#).

Much seems to have changed since 1988, when the Democratic nominee, [Michael S. Dukakis](#), turned down an offer of a gay fund-raising campaign. Four years later, gay delegates threatened to storm out of the Democratic convention unless [Bill Clinton](#) mentioned gays in his acceptance speech. (He did.)

In an address last week honoring the Rev. Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) at a black church in Atlanta, Senator Obama made waves by lecturing the audience about homophobia. "We have scorned our gay brothers and sisters instead of embracing them," he said during the speech at Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Dr. King served as co-pastor with his father.

Joe Solmonese, the president of the Human Rights Campaign, a gay lobbying group, said he thought Mr. Obama's speech was the first time a presidential candidate had brought up gay issues in front of a nongay audience without being prompted to do so. "This is dramatically refreshing," he said. "It's a great day when we can look at a field of candidates and determine that we are comfortable with all of them on gay rights and move on to other issues."

Still, many gay leaders said they are unhappy that none of the Democrats have embraced the cause of gay marriage, even if they understood the political calculus at play.

"There's a feeling that supporting gay marriage would be politically unacceptable," said Mr. Geto, the Clinton strategist. "Still, we've come a long way. Four years ago, civil unions created such a huge firestorm. I think things will be different one or two election cycles from now."