

## Once a major player, gay issues sent to back burner in 2008 campaign

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When it came time to vote in the D.C. presidential primary, Mark Riddle, 44, was not thinking about issues like same-sex marriage or the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

"As a gay man, [those issues] were secondary for me," he said. "I don't really know a lot of candidates' stances on things like gay marriage."

Voters like Riddle, a Kalorama resident, are not uncommon these days. In a race as tightly contested as any in recent memory, more voters are going to the polls to vote for the candidate, not the issues.

"It's not about an issue—it's about a person's ability to bring everyone together," Donna Crowl, 69, a retiree who lives in Dupont, said.

At Metropolitan Memorial United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C., many voters who came out for the District's primary election seemed to agree.

"Integrity, intelligence, judgment—I'm looking at the candidates, not the issues," said Peter Sherman, an adjunct faculty member at American University's Washington College of Law.

It's a marked contrast to the 2004 election when issues like gay marriage were front and center, often clarifying key differences between candidates and polarizing the American public.

"In 2004, there were a number of states banning marriage equality for gay people," said Jody M. Huckaby, executive director of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, a non-partisan, non-profit organization based in Washington. "And people did come out and vote and change their constitutions in '04."

But in 2008, he conceded, much of the focus is on the competitive races of the primaries and selecting each party's candidate.

"Once the parties are unified, a whole list of issues that affect the GLBT community will become more clear," Huckaby said. GLBT refers to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community.

For Democratic supporters, the choice between Sens. Barack Obama, D-Ill., and Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., is decidedly difficult when it comes to issues like gay rights.

"Between the two, they aren't that different," said Walter Burgin, 73, an Obama supporter living in Kalorama. "Those issues—they just didn't affect the way I voted" in the primary.

Their positions are virtually the same. Neither support gay marriage, but both support same-sex civil unions, reversing the “don’t ask, don’t tell policy” and working to pass a federal anti-discrimination law that protects gays and lesbians.

**“Both the candidates are fantastic on our issues,” said Dave Noble, the Director of Public Policy and Government Affairs at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.**

Republican candidates have not played up their positions on gay and lesbian issues, but Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., supports bans on gay marriage at the state level while former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee supports a federal constitutional ban defining marriage as a union between one man and one woman. Both agree that gays should not be allowed to serve openly in the military, but have remained otherwise relatively quiet on “hot button” issues in recent presidential elections.

It’s quite a change for Republican supporters, who had counted same-sex marriage and the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy as some of the most important questions facing the country in the last two elections. This year, the economy, the war in Iraq and illegal immigration all stand as larger issues than matters concerning the gay community.

“I voted for John McCain,” David Brent, 31, from Arlington, Va., said of his vote on Potomac Primary day. “But [gay issues] were not a deciding factor.”

He, like many voters, was more concerned with the personal attributes of the candidate than the issues.

“I like McCain because he is someone who reaches out and works with all sides,” said Brent, who works at an education consulting group.

“In the primaries, people are not necessarily choosing based on issues,” said Sultan Shakir, of the Human Rights Campaign, a gay civil rights organization that works around the country. “For the general election, you will see major GLBT mobilization efforts.”

Still, when it comes down to it, voters agree that they will vote for the character of the person, not their stance on issues. Obama supporter Sharon Ekdehl, 60, a retiree from Spring Valley, said that her ideal candidate had “a world view that could elevate us back to the respect we once had.”

“Sure, I care about gay marriage,” she said. “But my top priority is change—honorable change. We need a true leader.”