DOES SUPPORT FOR GAY RIGHTS SPELL POLITICAL SUICIDE?

A close look at some long-held myths

Sponsored by
The Gay Rights National Lobby
and
The National Gay Task Force
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This report will demonstrate that supporting civil rights for homosexuals is not generally a political liability for elected officials and, in some places, may even be a political plus. This is not to say that nowhere under any circumstances would it hurt candidates electorally; we wish we could state that with certainty, a certainty which will only come with widespread public acceptance. With this qualification, however, the evidence from around the nation shows that support for gay rights is not the "kiss of death."

Elected officials, both locally and nationally, who have taken supportive positions have not generally had their stand on gay civil rights used against them by opponents. Those who have, almost unanimously, have been successful in overcoming these challenges. There is also striking evidence that politicians are increasingly pursuing the gay vote and are reaping the benefits of their support for gay rights.

This report is written for the practical politician. The moral claims that can be made about granting civil rights protection to some 20 million Americans may fall on deaf ears if our leaders believe that the idea's time has not yet come and that to embrace it now would constitute political suicide. This report should help lay those concerns to rest.

The evidence that will be presented points to some underlying shifts in political realities in the United States over the past 5-10 years. Some of these changes are the growing and documentable political strength of gay and lesbian Americans, the higher degree of public tolerance on formerly taboo social issues, the distinctions voters make between their own support for elected officials and those officials' stands on controversial issues, and the apparently misunderstood power of single-issue politics and the connection of gay rights and gay politics to it. These all help to explain the political climate that has fostered the developments discussed in Chapter 2 and merit some attention before examining the evidence.

Growth of Gay Political Power

A December 13, 1979, issue of Campaigning Reports—a Washington-based practical politics newsletter—declared:

The gay vote is now so important in national politics, and in some local races, that no serious politician can afford to ignore or ridicule it.
Using the estimated figure of 15 million gay Americans of voting age, the newsletter stated “the assumption can be made that as many as 10-12 million can be activated on specific issues or to support specific candidates,” and concluded:

This vote bloc has a series of documented victories behind it, and it can be expected to push harder for access to the political system. Gays have demonstrated ability to generate votes and raise money. This represents a resource modern candidates are tapping at every turn.

These conclusions were echoed in a column by *Washington Star* political editors Jack Germond and Jules Witcover, who reported:

The gay community—which numbers by various estimates 10 to 20 million Americans—has proved to be a lode of political contributions now that it has become so much more socially acceptable for gays to surface and identify themselves individually and as a bona fide pressure group.

The legitimacy accorded gay political power by an establishment political newsletter and two respected political journalists needs no further elaboration.

### Increased Public Tolerance

One of the underlying themes of this report is that the public has progressed farther in its views on social issues—including civil rights for homosexuals—than its leaders realize. With regard to gay rights, one must observe that public awareness and even acceptance took a quantum leap during the course of the 1970s—as evidenced by the widespread and sympathetic portrayal of gays on television.

William Greider, *The Washington Post*’s assistant managing editor for national news, wrote a thought-provoking piece in that paper late in 1979 entitled: “We’re Becoming a More Tolerant Society.” He asserted:

In the last 10 or 15 years, without much leadership from the so-called leaders, America has become a much more tolerant society. This just plain happened, for diverse social reasons that lie far beyond the control of government. . . .

In short, the center of American politics—that complicated mix of mainstream attitudes and opinions—was gradually, undramatically, almost imperceptibly beginning to accept the unacceptable. Not because politicians told people to do so, but because people saw these changes in their own lives and neighborhoods and concluded, on experience, that they were not as threatening as they once supposed . . .

In crude political terms, the opinion polls show that Americans are much more ‘liberal’ today about divorce, pornography, dope, homosexuals, sex outside marriage, working women, abortion. But ‘liberal’ is the wrong word. A better word is tolerant.

One has only to examine some public opinion polls in recent years, at the national and the local levels, to find ample evidence to support Greider. The public still finds homosexuality to be “abnormal” and is not ready to accept such things as gay teachers (although Greider noted that even here the public has moved from near unanimous opposition to approximately even division). But on the fundamental goals of the gay rights movement—abolition of legal sanctions on sexual relations between consenting
adults in private and equal protection under the law in the areas of employment and housing—the public is already prepared to accept such measures.

In reviewing data, statistics are provided for the under-30 or -35 age category, in addition to the aggregate data, because of the significance of the greater degree of tolerance in the younger segments of the population. As Greider observed: “As the young get older, carrying those more tolerant views with them, we can safely anticipate that the society will continue to change in that direction.”

On the question of legality of homosexual relations between consenting adults, a July 1977 Gallup Poll found the public evenly divided—43 percent in favor and 43 percent opposed. In the under-30 group, the support jumped to 57 percent. And two local surveys found a much higher degree of approval. A 1978 Detroit News TelePoll found that 70 percent of respondents thought homosexual behavior should be permitted “if practiced privately and discreetly by consenting adults.” And a 1979 Fort Worth Star* Poll (a call-in poll) found 61 percent in favor of repealing the Texas law forbidding sexual relations in private between members of the same sex.

On the question of legal guarantees for the civil rights of gays, a Time Magazine-Yankelovich poll published in 1977 found 56 percent saying they would vote for such legislation. A July 1977 Gallup Poll found the public favored by 56-33 percent equal rights in terms of job opportunities for gays, with 67 percent of those under 30 in favor. Similar results were reported in a July 1977 Harris poll, which found by a 54-28 percent margin, the American people favored laws banning job discrimination against gays. That same poll showed that by a 48-41 percent plurality, though Americans favored banning gays from holding certain jobs, 55 percent of those under 30 opposed any restrictions. A May 1978 Roper Poll commissioned by the Tobacco Institute reported 60 percent of those surveyed claimed an employer did not have the right to refuse to hire someone because he or she is homosexual; 28 percent said otherwise.

On fair employment and housing laws, a November 1977 NBC poll asked voters in three cities and found opinion was evenly divided in Cleveland (38 percent for and 41 percent against) and Houston (41 percent for and 42 percent against) and strongly in favor in New York (58-27 percent). A June 1978 Iowa Poll found Iowans evenly divided on the question of laws to guarantee equal rights to gays in employment and housing (41-41 percent). In three other local polls, there was strong sentiment in support of such laws or ideas. A June 1978 Minnesota Poll found 62 percent favored equal job opportunities for gays (35 percent were opposed) and 76 percent supported allowing gays to live where they wished (with 21 percent opposed). By a 52-42 percent, Californians surveyed by the Field Poll in 1977 favored laws to forbid discrimination in non-teaching jobs. And Chicago residents questioned by a Sun-Times MetroPoll in September 1979 supported equal job opportunities for gays by 79-14 percent (with 87 percent of those under 35 in agreement), and they favored by 52-31 percent a law to guarantee equal rights for gays in housing, employment, and other areas (64 percent of those under 35 agreed). 63 percent of Chicago residents said they would hire a gay person (the margin was 7-1 in the under-35 group), 63 percent said they would rent to a gay person, and 50 percent said they would vote for a gay person; 40 percent said they would not, but 2 out of 3 under the age of 35 said they would.
This data indicates that, while overall attitudes on homosexuality do not at this time point to widespread acceptance, there exists considerable evidence that the public is at least willing to guarantee equal rights in the areas of employment and housing and to abolish laws prohibiting homosexual conduct in private between consenting adults. These constitute the first steps marking the greater public tolerance Greider wrote about in 1979.

Distinction Between Support for Candidates Versus Issues

Several good examples exist of cases where voters who rejected the concept of civil rights for gays (i.e., in referenda) did not withhold their support from public officials who supported the issue. It appears that voters make a distinction between their vote for a candidate and the candidates’ stand on gay rights, and there is virtually no evidence that stand is used by voters—other than gays themselves—as a litmus test of a candidate’s overall compatibility with their own views. In many cases, voters appear to allow a significant degree of latitude to candidates they favor to adopt a position contrary to their own on gay rights. Indeed, there is evidence voters respect public officials who speak their mind on the issue without concern for political repercussions.

Gay Rights and Single-Issue Politics

The media has been filled in the last year or two with talk about single-issue politics and the tendency of voters to vote for or against candidates based solely on single, narrowly focused issues. There has also been talk linking gay rights with abortion as yet another divisive social issue. In a 1979 interview on the subject of gay rights, Senator Howard Baker said: “I think it’s one of those issues that has a high quotient of emotionalism but does not deeply divide this country.”

And gay rights is not abortion. Even if one believes there are significant numbers of single-issue voters, it is difficult to imagine gay rights as an issue which can mobilize opponents the way abortion does. There exist strong differences of opinion on gay rights, but it is highly unlikely that any significant number of voters would oppose a candidate solely because he or she supports it.

Only if an issue is perceived as crucial is an individual likely to cast a ballot solely on the basis of a candidate’s position on it. If there is one group to whom gay rights is a “life and death” issue, it is lesbians and gay men themselves—an estimated 20 million Americans, as well as other millions of supportive friends and relatives. This helps to explain much of the evidence compiled with regard to candidates actively courting the gay community for its money, its campaign help, and its votes. Many examples are provided of public officials who have decided there is far more to be gained by supporting gay rights than there is to be lost. Any political backlash directed at them because of such a position would likely be treated as an attack on gay people. For every voter who votes against a candidate because he or she supports gay rights, there are many, many more who will vote for that candidate because of that stance.
THE EVIDENCE

At the Presidential Level

Even the most cursory look at the gay rights issue in national politics indicates clearly it has evolved over the course of the 1970s from an issue that could be safely ignored (if not ridiculed) to one which is today a legitimate subject national candidates must address. One has only to review how the issue was treated in 1972, 1976 and now in 1980 to be aware of this progression.

In 1972, George McGovern, Democratic nominee for President, was the object of ridicule in some quarters because of his identification with support for gay rights. Actually, McGovern made no clear statement which met the demands of the gay activists during his campaign, but his statements about opposing discrimination against anyone (in response to questions about gay rights) combined with the visible support he had in the gay community led to his being tagged as the “gay rights candidate.” The McGovern camp’s concern over this image led to their scheduling debate on a proposed gay rights plank to the Democratic platform at 3:00 a.m. so that it would have minimal exposure before the public, and the word went out at the convention that McGovern delegates were to oppose the plank lest it be an additional burden for McGovern in his campaign against Richard Nixon; the plank was defeated by voice vote. Nixon ignored the issue in his campaign. It should be noted that, despite McGovern’s concern over association with this controversial issue, the social issues which, in fact, gave him the most trouble were “acid, abortion, and amnesty” (the “triple A candidate”).

1976 appears in retrospect to have been a transitional election year with regard to gay rights. One major and two minor candidates for the Democratic nomination for President publicly courted the gay vote. Sen. Birch Bayh attended a reception in New York given by the Gay Political Union early that year; former Sen. Fred Harris and Pennsylvania Gov. Milton Shapp sent representatives. Bayh, according to a 1976 Wall Street Journal article, “thus probably became the first serious contender for a major party’s presidential nomination to campaign in a gay bar.” In the general election, President Gerald Ford had no substantive comments on gay rights, but the Democratic nominee and eventual winner, Jimmy Carter, made a statement specifically opposing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and held out hope he would sign a national gay rights bill if one were passed by Congress.
The 1980 election has already marked a milestone for 20 million gay Americans. Late in 1979 a fundraiser was held at a gay disco in Washington, D.C., in support of a campaign to elect gay delegates to the national conventions and to fight for inclusion of a gay rights plank in the party platforms. The significance of the event was underscored in a column by Jack Germond and Jules Witcover:

Only a few years ago, such an undertaking would have been snickered away. But such has been the growth in the influence of homosexuals in politics that one presidential candidate, Gov. Jerry Brown, was on the guest list along with representatives of two others, President Carter and Senator Edward M. Kennedy. What was especially significant was that, although the candidates differed in their levels of commitment—from Brown’s personal appearance to Kennedy’s strong statement and to recognition of legitimacy by the incumbent President—all three major candidates for President in the majority party thought enough of the gay vote either to attend or to send representatives. At that fundraiser Frank Kameny, billed as the grandfather of the gay rights movement by some, told the crowd how things had evolved politically for gays. As paraphrased in the *Washington Star*, Kameny said,

> at first... the politicians stayed away in droves. Then very minor and fringe candidates who were willing to take a chance because they had nothing to lose showed up. Then came low ranking staffers from major candidates with carefully worded statements that said nothing. Then came some stronger statements but they were still second hand. And finally one day there was a major candidate on their side.

When Brown, who had by then raised between $80,000 and $100,000 from the gay community, was asked the following day whether his visible support for this issue might hurt him politically, he noted that both Carter and Kennedy had expressed essentially the same concept. He commented, “So, whether it’s indirectly or directly, the three candidates of the Democratic Party have come out for gay rights,” and “I think that’s good, and I think that drives the dialogue even further. I’m all for it.”

The Republican hopefuls in 1980, with one real exception—Rep. John Anderson—have not made any substantive statements in support of gay rights. But even here, there is reason for some satisfaction on the part of gay Americans. All seven major candidates have responded to newspaper questionnaires and reporters’ questions on the topic, which in fact, have become standard, and all have stated that they oppose discrimination in law against homosexuals. Although most Republican candidates do not support the enactment of gay rights protection under law, the fact they are treating the issue as a legitimate one is at least an indication of progress.

### In Congressional Elections

Even as the list of co-sponsors to a national gay rights bill has grown since its introduction in 1972, there has been little evidence that these supporting Members of Congress have suffered electorally. By 1976, 30 members of the house were listed as co-sponsors. All 30 sought re-election, and all were successful. The gay rights issue was used by opponents in two contests: against incumbents Gerry Studds of Massachusetts and Les AuCoin of Oregon. The circumstances are noteworthy.
In the 1976 Democratic primary race in the Massachusetts 12th Congressional District, a strong attack was launched against Studds because of his support in Congress for the gay rights bill. His opponent, Ed Dinis, had described “homosexuals teaching school” as one of the major issues in the campaign, along with busing and abortion. Dinis placed advertisements in the New Bedford Standard Times and the Quincy Patriot Ledger stating: “HOMOSEXUAL TEACHERS: DENIS SAYS NO!” Massachusetts is widely regarded as a liberal state, and the 12th District was the only one carried by Nixon in 1972. McGovern carried the state. Dinis’ vigorous anti-gay campaign did not pay off; Studds won the primary by a margin of 6-1, carrying every precinct in the district. Boston Herald-American columnist Dave O’Brien characterized the “cheap attempt by . . . Dinis to smear . . . Studds” as an “utter failure.”

In the general election in the Oregon 1st Congressional District, AuCoin was attacked in the press for his co-sponsorship of the gay rights bill by those sympathetic to his opponent, Phil Bladine. AuCoin, who in 1974 had become the first Democrat ever elected to Congress from that district, managed to win re-election with 58.7 percent of the vote, a higher margin than he received in 1974, and carried every county in his district.

In 1978, only one co-sponsor out of the 37 who sought re-election to the House was defeated (5 others had either retired or resigned). Robert Nix lost his bid for renomination in Pennsylvania’s 2nd Congressional District to the Rev. William Gray III. Gray, who subsequently was elected, had the active support of the gay community in that race, and he too became a co-sponsor.

The gay rights issue also surfaced in the Illinois 16th District where Republican incumbent John Anderson faced a challenge from Don Lyon. Lyon ran his campaign on a laundry list of highly emotional social issues, yet Anderson managed to beat back this challenge and received 58 percent of the vote. In view of the many other emotionally charged issues used by Lyon against Anderson, it is virtually impossible to gauge the impact, if any, that support for gay rights had.

The gay rights issue appeared not to have come up in the general elections in 1978. Even in the Illinois 10th District, a political weathervane district brought to national attention for its breathtakingly close liberal vs. conservative contests involving Abner Mikva, Mikva’s co-sponsorship of the gay rights legislation did not even surface as a campaign issue.

Entering 1980, H.R. 2074, the national gay rights bill, has 54-co-sponsors in the House. While many members represent districts in New York and California, where large gay populations make such support hardly surprising, other states represented by co-sponsors include Maryland, Missouri, Oregon, Minnesota, Michigan, Pennsylvania, the District of Columbia, Florida, Texas, Ohio, Washington, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Colorado, Illinois, and New Jersey.

In addition, on December 5, 1979, the first gay civil rights bill in U.S. Senate history—S. 2081—was introduced by Senators Tsongas (D, MA), Moynihan (D, NY), and Weicker (R, CT).
In State Elections

For purposes of this report, four states were selected for examination, because of their experiences with the gay civil rights issue at the state level. The legislatures of all four—Minnesota, Oregon, California, and Massachusetts—have voted on gay rights bills, thus providing us with evidence on political consequences for the legislators.

**Minnesota**—Despite the fact that the state’s majority party—Democratic-Farm-Labor—included a gay rights plank in its platform in 1972, 1974, and in 1976, the state legislature failed to pass a gay rights statute in its 1973, 1975, and 1977 sessions. Many legislators expressed concern that support for this issue could lead to their defeat in the next election.

The 1976 elections clearly proved this to be a false fear. In most cases, the issue of civil rights for gay people was not even raised. This was the case both in the metropolitan area and outstate. For instance, State Rep. Russell Stanton, who represented the rural 20B District and who had supported the gay rights plank in the DFL platform, was re-elected with 60.1 percent of the vote. The gay rights issue was not even raised. As one Farm leader in his district said, most rural voters did not see the issue “as any big deal” and did not really think it would affect their lives.

In several races, however, the issue was used against gay rights supporters. John Tomlinson had been the chief sponsor of the House gay rights bill in 1975, and his opponent in the 1975 DFL primary raised the issue of gay teachers in his speeches and in campaign literature. Tomlinson’s district—67-B—has a heavy blue-collar population which is not only known to be strongly against abortion but which, in 1978, was to vote 4-1 to repeal St. Paul’s gay rights ordinance. Nevertheless, Tomlinson emerged victorious from the grueling 5-way primary battle with 39 percent of the vote, and went on to win re-election with 59.8 percent.

State Sen. Allan Spear (District 57) had to contend with the gay rights issue in both the primary and general elections in 1976. Spear, first elected in 1972, received national and local media attention when he announced that he was gay. Early in the campaign, literature was circulated to remind people of this fact. Spear won his primary race with 81 percent and his general election with 68.9 percent of the vote. While his victory was expected because of the district’s liberal nature, the overwhelming margins in the more conservative precincts of northeast Minneapolis and in senior citizen precincts was a surprise to many. His totals in these areas approached 80 percent.

State Sen. Robert Lewis (District 41) had been specifically targeted for defeat by the Republicans, yet he won his race for re-election by a margin of 54-46 percent, despite his support for gay rights, an issue raised by the opposition. State Rep. John Clawson of rural Anoka and Chicago Counties 19A District won re-election with 64.1 percent of the vote, despite his support for the 1975 gay rights bill and his opponent’s use of the gay teacher issue in speeches and campaign literature.

The gay rights issue was also used to no avail by the opponent of State Rep. Janet Clark, who won with 66 percent of the vote in the Minneapolis blue-collar 60-A District.

Voters around the state in 1976 appeared to be far more concerned about bread-and-butter issue and with how well a legislator stayed in touch with his or her constituents than with a stand on gay rights.
Oregon—Oregon is an example of a state where the gay rights issue not only did not hurt supportive state officials but where, in some cases, it had helped them. In 1976, 18 of the 21 state legislators who had co-sponsored the 1975 gay rights bill were up for re-election. One chose not to run again, two successfully sought higher office, and 15 were re-elected.

In the 1976 primary, only in State Senate District 7 was the gay rights issue raised by a supporter’s opposition. State Rep. Stephen Kafoury was challenging the conservative 22-year incumbent, Norm Howard, for renomination. Despite Howard’s efforts to make an issue of Kafoury’s co-sponsorship of the 1975 gay rights bill, Kafoury ousted Howard by a 54.5-35.5 percent margin.

Two other state legislative candidates benefitted from gay community support in their successful primary races. State Sen. Bill McCoy (District 8) won renomination by 10 votes, with gay support. And in State Representative District 12, challenger Rod Monroe used gay support in his race against Grace Peck, who had been in office since 1949. In a 6-way contest, Monroe was nominated with 44.3 percent; Peck received 33.9 percent.

In the general election that year, Kafoury again was attacked for his support of gay rights in the 7th State Senate District. Rosalie Huss, his Republican opponent, and her husband went door-to-door with a flyer showing Kafoury at a “drag” ball. Kafoury won by over 2-1.

That same flyer was circulated in the 8th State Representative District where incumbent Vera Katz, also in the picture with Kafoury, was seeking re-election. Katz, a 1975 co-sponsor, was undaunted by this effort, which was not coordinated by her opponent, and she won with 62.6 percent of the vote.

In all the campaign literature circulated by State Rep. Gretchen Kafoury in the 13th District in 1976, gay rights was mentioned as a legislative priority for her. She won re-election with 68.9 percent of the vote.

Three state legislators were attacked for their support of gay rights in the 1978 general election but emerged victorious nonetheless. In State Representative District 13, Gretchen Kafoury’s position was strongly attacked by Fran Annello, her chief opponent; Kafoury was re-elected by a 2-1 margin. In State Representative District 39, which includes Eugene where a gay rights ordinance was repealed in a 1978 referendum, incumbent Gratten Kearns’ support of gay rights was used against him in leaflets. Kearns won with 58.5 percent of the vote. And in the rural 22nd State Senatorial District, incumbent Ted Kulongski came under attack for his support of gay rights; Kulongski received 57.5 percent in the November election.

Perhaps Oregon state officials can find increasing sympathy with the stance of State Rep. Vera Katz, an active supporter of gay rights, a stance that has reportedly drawn criticism from only one small group. Katz asserts that the rest of her constituents are “proud of me for not running away from the issue.” Furthermore, in Oregon, as in many other places, the few voters who would vote against a candidate solely because of his or her support for gay rights are more than outnumbered by gay voters who will rally around a candidate under such attack.
Homosexuals have become a political force in California society, with politicians seeking and benefitting from their support. In all parts of California, politicians now regularly visit gay bars and drag shows seeking votes.

In the same vein, the Wall Street Journal published an article a year later which described the efforts of politicians across the nation—and particularly in California—to court the gay community. “If their heterosexual constituents are bothered by such campaigning, the California politicians seldom hear about it,” said the Journal article. And a California Journal article on gay political power, written in October 1975, reported:

This growing political minority counts among its members not only homosexuals but a number of presumably ‘straight’ legislators. The latter may be acknowledging that the homosexual vote can be valuable, or they may consider simply that a person’s sexual behavior is a private matter in which the government has no right to intrude. But whatever the politician’s motive, the political emergence of homosexuals is forcing many legislators to reconsider the boundary between morality and politics.

Since those articles were written, events have only underscored the widespread acceptance of the gay community as a political force in California.

In 1975, the state legislature passed, and the Governor signed, AB 489, Assemblyman Willie Brown’s consensual sex law which removed legal sanctions against sexual acts between consenting adults in private. In 1976, the legislature seriously considered but failed to enact AB 633, Assemblyman John Foran’s bill to prohibit discrimination in employment based on sexual orientation. Two repeal referenda that were threatened following the enactment of the Brown bill never got off the ground. And an even more crucial fact for politicians to note is that not one member of either house of the legislature who voted in favor of the Brown and/or the Foran bills was subsequently defeated for re-election, in 1976 or in 1978. Several were elected to higher office, such as Anthony Beilenson and Julian Dixon, who won Congressional seats.

A 1977 gay rights bill introduced by Assemblyman Art Agnos—AB 1302—failed to win enough votes for passage by the legislature, although it was the subject of debate. In the 1978 state legislative elections, the bill did not become an issue in any campaign.

In 1978, California became the first and, to date, the only state to vote on a gay rights-related question at the ballot box. By a vote of 58-42 percent, with a margin of over 1 million votes, California voters rejected Proposition 6, the Briggs Initiative, which would have allowed the dismissal of teachers who are gay or who expressed support for the gay lifestyle. The huge vote was a major victory in light of the earlier signs that Proposition 6 would pass. The impressive array of community, religious, and political leaders who came out against Proposition 6 was also significant: From President Carter to former President Ford, from Governor Brown to former Governor Ronald Reagan, and from Senator Alan Cranston to San Diego Mayor Pete Wilson, politicians across party and ideological lines united on an issue of civil rights and civil liberties concerning gay people.

When the political situations in Los Angeles and San Francisco are added, combined
with the fact that nine other California cities and counties have enacted gay rights ordinances, California appears to be a place where gay rights has been used as a positive issue by its supporters far more often, and with far more success, than it has as a negative issue by its opponents. Numbers, political organization, and widespread public tolerance have created this climate. The words of an assistant to Assembly Speaker Leo McCarthy on the subject of gay political power are no less true today than they were when he spoke them in 1975: "We know for damn sure in local, city, county and assembly races they have an awful lot of effect." These words are even more true in 1980.

Massachusetts—Writing in the Boston Herald American on May 25, 1977, at the height of the Anita Bryant anti-gay campaign in Dade County, Florida, columnist Dave O'Brien declared that:

    Here there has been no organized, or even noticeable opposition and, indeed, there is evidence that a simple vote against discrimination on the basis of sexual preference is not a political liability at all.

There was good reason for O'Brien to make that statement then, and events since that time have added to its accuracy.

In 1974, Massachusetts witnessed a dramatic instance of a public official meeting the gay rights issue directly and leaving his political career unscathed.

Republican State Sen. Robert Hall had first been elected in 1972 by about 100 votes in the Third Worcester District. In his 1974 race, Hall was running in the newly redistricted Second Worcester District, a largely Catholic, blue-collar, middle-class district with a 2-1 Democratic registration. In addition to these formidable obstacles to Hall's re-election, he anticipated that his opponent might attempt to hurt him for his public support of gay rights. Hall, an ex-Marine, decided to address the issue in a rather unconventional manner. He took out eye-catching advertisements in the Fitchburg Daily Sentinel Enterprise and the Gardner Daily News which declared: "BOB HALL IS FOR HOMOSEXUALS." The ad proceeded to explain why Hall supported gay rights. Despite innuendoes in the speeches of his opponent, Bernard Chartrand, and whispering campaigns by those sympathetic to Chartrand, Hall scored a convincing victory in the general election, winning 28,039 votes—61.9 percent—to Chartrand's 17,282. Hall carried every town, including Chartrand's own. Hall has not backed away from support of gay rights since.

That Massachusetts elected the first openly gay person to its state legislature is another indication of a general attitude of tolerance on the part of its citizens. Elaine Noble, who in her two terms in the state House of Representatives achieved national prominence as an openly gay, highly regarded legislator, was elected in 1974 to represent the heavily elderly, ethnic, and student-populated 6th Suffolk District. Noble did not run as a "gay candidate," but rather addressed a range of neighborhood issues such as rent control, crime, etc. She was unopposed in the primary, but faced a late-starting though well-financed all-out challenge (according to an August 1975 Ms. Magazine article) from Independent Joseph Cimino. Her opponent attempted to get mileage out of Noble's gay status, but his efforts backfired, and Noble carried every precinct in the November election, winning by a vote of 1730-1201, or 59 percent.
In 1976, when Noble sought re-election, she was unopposed in the primary election and in effect unopposed in the general as well. Her only challenge was from perennial candidate Victor Themo, who received 867 votes. Noble was re-elected with 3443 votes, and the gay issue was not even raised.

In the 1978 primary elections, the Massachusetts Caucus for Gay Legislation monitored seven bellweather races in which state legislators were running who had taken supportive positions and who had been attacked for these views by strong opponents. Six of the seven won their primary contests.

Most prominent among the seven races monitored was the one involving House Minority Leader Frank Hatch and his opponent for the Republican gubernatorial nomination. Hatch was steadily attacked for having co-sponsored the gay rights bill in the State legislature. Hatch won the primary by a margin of 56-44 percent. In the general election, Hatch actively sought and received gay support. Hatch lost, but afterwards thanked the gay community for the help it had given him.

State Sen. Sam Rotundi (D, 4th Middlesex District) was opposed by James Lyons, who publicized Rotundi’s support of gay rights in advertisements, statements, and campaign literature. Rotundi won renomination with 56.1 percent, commenting that Lyons had run on negative issues whereas he had run on positive ones.

A similar effort was waged by the opponent of State Rep. Nick Paleologos (D-33rd Middlesex District). Nonetheless, Paleologos turned back the challenge by Corrine Mernin, winning by over 2:1.

In the 3rd Essex District, Democratic State Sen. Sharon Pollard, co-sponsor of three gay rights bills in the previous session of the legislature, defeated former State Sen. James Rurak by 56-44 percent. Rurak had been listed by the Boston Globe as publicly on record against the “civil rights of homosexuals.”

In the Worcester District, State Sen. Gerald D’Amico defeated Eva Hester for the Democratic nomination by a vote of 58-42 percent. Hester had expressed her doubts during the campaign about civil rights for gay teachers.


Rotundi, Paleologos, Pollard, D’Amico, and DeNucci all went on to win in the general election, not surprising in view of the fact that the tougher contests for Massachusetts Democrats are usually in the primaries.

Only in the 19th Middlesex District did one of the seven gay rights supporters chosen by MCGL go down to defeat. Democratic State Representative Bob Kennedy, who had voted for the gay rights bill in 1977, narrowly lost renomination to fellow Rep. Phil Shea.

In the words of one Massachusetts activist, gay rights has increasingly become a “ho-hum” issue in that state’s politics. The evidence to support this view, from election contests for State officers, from the 1976 race of Congressman Gerry Studds, and from the 1979 mayoralty campaign in Boston, is there.
At the Local Level

The focal point in this section is on cities, towns, and counties which have enacted some form of gay rights protection. Since 1972, 47 localities have adopted such protection either by executive order or city council ordinance, although in five of these areas, the measures were later repealed by voter referendum. About half of these jurisdictions were selected for purposes of this study, based primarily on availability of data. The main objective was to determine what effects, if any, the adoption of such measures may have had on the public officials who supported them. Only two of the localities discussed in this section—Houston and Philadelphia—have never had any form of specific gay rights protection on the books.

Following a study of the political situations in the jurisdictions selected, they were grouped into one of the following four categories: where support of gay rights did hurt public officials; where support of gay rights did not hurt public officials, despite recent repeals of gay rights ordinances by voters; other localities in which support of gay rights did not hurt public officials; and where support of gay rights has been a help to public officials at election time. These categories are somewhat arbitrary, and, in any given grouping, one can find elements of other categories.

Where Support of Gay Rights Did Hurt Public Officials

Boulder—In any study of the electoral ramifications of the gay rights issue, the case of Boulder, Colorado, stands out as the prime and only significant example of a place where elected officials did suffer as a result of their support for this issue. As much as supporters would like to ignore what happened in Boulder, to avoid discussion of it would be both misleading to readers and unfair to those in the gay community who can learn some important lessons from it.

The 1973 municipal elections left Boulder with a liberal-dominated city council and a liberal, Black Mayor, Pennfield Tate. Tate and Councilman Tim Fuller sponsored a gay rights ordinance that overwhelmingly passed its first test on the nine-member council, and was not considered at that time to be controversial. Between the first and second council votes—two are necessary to enact a statute in Boulder—the Boulder Daily Camera became aware of the issue and ran inflammatory editorials in opposition. Subsequently, the ordinance was enacted by the council, but by a closer margin than in its first vote. Public pressure began to build in Boulder’s large but quiet Baptist community, and petitions were circulated for repeal by initiative of the gay rights ordinance. The city council decided to allow the issue to be aired publicly and called for a referendum. The voters overturned the ordinance by a 2-1 margin in May 1974.

Opponents of gay rights continued their efforts by circulating petitions to recall Tate and Fuller and managed to get those matters on the ballot in September, when many of Boulder’s sizable college student population would be disenfranchised, having just returned to school or being new to the city. Fuller was recalled, but Tate survived his recall election. Tate, however, also proved to be a casualty of the gay rights issue, as he lost his next bid for the city council and a 1976 bid for the state legislature. Although it is said by gay activists that Tate’s liberalism and his race were prominent factors in his
electoral problems, no one seriously doubts that Tate was a victim of public attitudes on gay rights.

It is important, however, to note some mitigating factors for the cause of gay rights in 1980. First, this event occurred in 1974, six years back in a decade which witnessed enormous changes in both public attitudes and political realities. Second, Boulder was the first place in the United States to vote on the gay rights issue, and there was no organized gay community or outside support to fight the repeal and recall efforts. Third, the gays themselves bear much responsibility for the defeats of Fuller and Tate by not rallying to their aid when it was needed. There is virtually no chance that a politician who takes a stand in support of gay rights today would be left to "hang there and twist slowly . . . in the wind." On the contrary, he or she would be rewarded with gay votes, gay dollars, and gay volunteers.

Both of the other council members in Boulder in 1974 who had supported the gay rights ordinance on the second vote and who sought re-election to the council were victorious. In 1977, when Councilwoman Ruth Correll sought re-election, her support of the ordinance was not used against her. This time, the gay community actively supported her. And Correll received more votes than any other council candidate, thus making her mayor. She is mayor of Boulder today.

Where Gay Rights Ordinances Have Been Repealed

Voters can and do distinguish between their attitudes on the issue of gay rights and their support of public officials who take positive stands on this issue. There are no better places to look for evidence of this phenomenon than in those localities where electorates voted against specific legal protection for homosexuals. The repeal of gay rights ordinances through referendum in Dade County, Florida, in 1977, and in Eugene, Oregon, Wichita, Kansas, and St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1978, was a painful disappointment to 20 million gay Americans and their friends and families. But in terms of practical politics, there is little or no evidence that voters followed up their negation of the ordinances with any retribution against those elected officials who had supported those ordinances and opposed repeal of them.

Dade County—Nowhere has the gay rights question been the cause of such intense and much-publicized controversy as in Dade County, Florida. An ordinance enacted by the County Commission to prohibit discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations was the object of an attempt to repeal it by referendum in June 1977. The campaign for repeal was led by entertainer Anita Bryant, who became a national symbol of anti-gay backlash and who was successful in arousing the fears of local citizens over this much-misunderstood subject. The ordinance was repealed by a vote of 2-1.

If there was one person who represented the forces against repeal, it was County Commissioner Ruth Shack, who had sponsored the ordinance and campaigned for it in the referendum battle. As a result of her identification with this issue, Shack found herself in a very hotly contested primary in her next re-election campaign—September 1978. Indeed, one of her two opponents in that race was Bob Skidell, a leader of "Save
Our Children”—the Bryant organization which had successfully fought for repeal of
the gay rights ordinance the previous year. Skidell made gay rights the major issue in
his campaign, using television endorsements by Anita Bryant and sending out letters
documenting Shack’s support of the issue. All of Skidell’s efforts to tie gay rights as an
albatross around Shack’s neck were to no avail. Shack won the primary on September
12 with 79,623 votes (51 percent) against Skidell’s 63,162, and 13,324 for a third
candidate, thus avoiding the necessity of a runoff. No clearer testimony to the lack of
success of Skidell’s campaign is to be found than in an editorial by the Miami Herald
on September 14, 1978. In it, the paper credited voters because “they brushed aside
attempts to exploit issues such as ‘gay rights’.”

**St. Paul**—St. Paul voters repealed an all-encompassing gay rights ordinance on April
25, 1978. But just as there was no backlash against supportive city officials after it was
enacted in 1974, there is little evidence that any public official was hurt by association
with the issue during the referendum battle in 1978.

In July 1974, the St. Paul city council enacted the statute by a vote of 5-1, with 1
abstention. Only one of the 5 supporters—Jack Christensen—lost his bid for re-
election in the next campaign, and the gay rights issue did not even come up in
Christensen’s race. And only Councilman Bob Sylvester had his support of the statute
used against him—in his opponents’ billboards, for example—yet Sylvester won
overwhelmingly.

In 1978, citizens of St. Paul became embroiled in the controversy concerning the gay
rights statute as opponents fought for its repeal. Most public officials in the city (and the
State of Minnesota—Sen. Muriel Humphrey and Sen. Wendell Anderson, for
example) opposed repeal. Mayor George Latimer even held press conferences, made
radio advertisements, and engaged in door-to-door campaigning against its repeal.
Even as it was going down to defeat by a vote of nearly 2-1, St. Paul residents were
re-electing Latimer with 70 percent of the vote (although some observers felt he should
have done even better). Furthermore, all city council incumbents who opposed repeal
were re-elected.

**Wichita**—In September 1977, the Wichita City Council passed an ordinance barring
discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodations based on sexual
orientation. The vote was 3-2. A group calling itself “Concerned Citizens for
Community Standards” managed to get the ordinance on a referendum ballot on May
9, 1978, whereby voters repealed it by nearly 5-1, despite support for its retention by
public officials and the major newspaper in the city. Although the Concerned Citizens
group made innuendos about a recall effort aimed at Mayor Connie Peters and
Councilman Gary Porter, nothing came of this talk. Rather, it appeared that after the
intense public battle was ended by the referendum vote, there was no strong desire on
the part of citizens to rehash the whole controversy through attacks on public officials
who were identified with it. As of this writing, however, no municipal election has been
held since the April 1978 referendum.

**Eugene**—The Eugene City Council passed an ordinance similar to Wichita’s in
October 1977. On May 23, 1978, the voters repealed it by a vote of 2-1. Eric Haws, a
City Councillor who had supported the gay rights ordinance, found that it was a major issue in his 1978 re-election campaign. Despite the raising of the issue by his opponent in leaflets and speeches and the attacks made on him in some churches prior to the November election, Haws won his race by almost 2-1. This result was particularly striking because Haws represented the most conservative district in Eugene, a district that had voted over 6-1 for repeal of the gay rights ordinance. One interesting sidelight in the Haws race is that 85-90 percent of his campaign funds came from gay individuals. What this indicates is that, unlike in 1974 when Boulder’s gay community watched as one of its key supporters went down in defeat, today an attack on a public official who has supported gay rights is likely to be met by an outpouring of support from a grateful gay community. This support takes the form of money, volunteers, and votes, and it is increasingly more than enough to offset any harm inflicted on supportive officials.

Summary

The foregoing examples have demonstrated that even after highly publicized and controversial debates on gay rights—ones which culminate in a rejection of the concept by voters—there is little, if any, evidence that elected officials who take positive stands on the issue are themselves punished by those same voters. If the official runs on a good record of public service, voters are likely to overlook stands on issues contrary to their own, unless those issues are perceived as crucial determinants of overall issue compatibility or are themselves vital to the voter in his or her everyday life. Finally, if no fallout occurred in Dade County, St. Paul, or Eugene, it was certainly not because voters had not been exposed to a discussion of the gay rights issue.

Other Localities Where No Backlash Has Developed

Most jurisdictions studied for this report fall into this category. They will each be discussed briefly in this section, but the underlying message here is greater than the particular circumstances in each city or town, the message being that in most places support of gay rights does not come back to haunt public officials at election time.

The Portland, Oregon, city council passed a resolution banning discrimination against gays in municipal employment in December 1974. The vote was 3-2, with Mayor Neal Goldschmidt, Connie McCready (the resolution sponsor), and Charles Jordan casting the affirmative votes. Goldschmidt sought re-election in 1976, and, although he was opposed by one of the two dissenting councilpersons, the gay rights issue did not arise; Goldschmidt won handily, and in 1977 he issued a Gay Pride Day resolution in the city. Charles Jordan also won re-election in 1976 and, again, his support of the gay rights resolution did not come up in his campaign. Only in Connie McCready’s race that year did an opponent attempt to use McCready’s pro-gay rights vote against her. However, with the strong help of the gay community, McCready withstood the challenge and defeated John Lorenz. She has gone on to become Mayor of Portland.