1984 ELECTION ROUND-UP

It is common to look at the results of an election the same way we might look at a scoreboard. Who won? Who lost?

There is no doubt that the results of the election are a victory for the efforts of the Human Rights Campaign Fund. Nearly $80,000 was contributed to 64 candidates in House and Senate races. This level of support helped return every voting supporter of the Gay Rights Bill, and produced victories in 44 of the races in which we were involved.

But beyond the final tallies lie more significant results. In analyzing this election, the victory goes far beyond the election of men and women who will continue to speak out in the Congress for human and civil rights. A more important underlying result is that support for the issue of human rights is spreading. Voters demonstrated in this election that whatever our perceptions of them might be, they will support our efforts and can accept gay women and men on equal terms.

This is most clearly demonstrated in the historic re-election of Gerry Studds to Congress. The Campaign Fund contributed the maximum possible—$10,000—to Gerry’s campaign. As the only openly gay member of the House of Representatives, Gerry faced a tremendous challenge in his re-election bid.

Studd’s district is the most Republican in a Democratic-dominated state. Although Massachusetts was the only state to support McGovern over Nixon in 1972, the 10th district went for Nixon. It supported Reagan over Carter by a wide margin in 1980. The district is spotted with small towns and its largest city, New Bedford, is predominantly working class, Roman Catholic Portuguese fishermen and their families. In short, it is an area populated by very traditional people who most of us would probably not expect to support an openly gay candidate.

These stereotypes were washed away in the election. Because Gerry spoke openly and honestly about his views, and because he has been an outstanding member of Congress, he won with an overwhelming 56 percent of the vote. New Bedford gave him 72 percent of the vote.

The lesson of this election is not only that people will accept the views of others, but that we should reconsider our own stereotypes of straight people just as we encourage straights not to stereotype gays. This race proved beyond any doubt that the support of people of all stripes can be won.

This concept is underscored by the defeat of Rep. Daniel Crane of Illinois. Crane is a political conservative from a strongly conservative, Republican district. He faced a similar challenge in his re-election bid because of his censure by the House for an affair with a young woman.

Unlike Gerry Studds, Crane chose to accept conventional stereotypes and refused to speak openly about his alleged indiscretion. Instead, he tried to hide behind a mask that distorts human rights and manipulates peoples’ ideas about morality.

His constituents saw through this pretense and penalized him for attempting to deceive them. They did not return him to office. The voters who re-elected Gerry Studds and defeated Daniel Crane demonstrated that Americans—given the chance—can respond to honesty and genuineness unhindered by prejudice based on sexual orientation.

The results of other races where the Campaign Fund participated reinforce this essential truth. Those Representatives who have outspokenly supported gay rights won their races.

Among these is Cong. Henry Waxman (D-CA), who has been one of the leading advocates for AIDS funding and chairs a committee that has jurisdiction over AIDS.

Another important victory was the re-election of Cong. Bruce Morrison (D-CT), a strong supporter of basic human rights for gay men and women. Morrison faced one of the toughest re-election fights in the nation.

Rep. Bill Green (R-NY) also won re-election in an expensive race in New York. Green vigorously opposed the McDonald amendments, which prevent Legal Service attorneys from taking cases that involve gay rights.

Other important supporters who were re-elected include Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA), who is increasingly taking a leadership role in the fight in Congress for justice for lesbians and gay men, and fellow Massachusetts Con-
gressman, Silvio Conte (R-MA), another important voice in the battle for federal funding for AIDS research.

Of course there were defeats. But in this election the deciding factor in most races seemed to be whether or not the candidate was an incumbent—not whether the candidate supported equal rights for gay people. Incumbents who supported gay rights were not penalized for that support; challengers who supported gay rights did not lose because of that support, but because they couldn't overcome the power of the incumbency.

For example, Jane Wells-Schooley—a strong supporter of gay rights—was not defeated in her bid specifically for her pro-gay rights views, but because she was simply too liberal to win against a conservative incumbent in a conservative district in the midst of a Reagan landslide.

And even in the North Carolina Senate race, popular Governor Jim Hunt could not overcome the powerful incumbency of Jesse Helms. While Helms tried to make an issue of gay support for Hunt, the race was decided much more on the basis of Helms' conservative record and on his support for President Reagan than Hunt's alleged support for gay rights.

While lesbians and gay men have come a long way in the political world, we still have a very long way to go. There are candidates who support our legislative goals, but refuse to accept campaign contributions from us for fear of negative repercussions. They must be educated. We must help them realize that support for gay and lesbian rights simply does not spell political suicide. There are other political groups that support us secretly, but refuse to stand up publicly. They must be convinced to do so.

But taken as a whole, the 1984 election was a solid victory for gay rights. For the first time, people who live and work in all areas of the country demonstrated their support for equal rights for gay people. As we move toward 1986 and develop a plan to broaden our grassroots base, we should recognize our ability to expand our support, educate potential allies, build new coalitions and take even greater steps toward a just and fair future.