

Gays in the voting booth

by Vic Basile, Executive Director
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Few of us would argue with the proposition that the men and women of the gay community are very often viewed by the "straight" world as nothing more than a huddled mass of clones. So, in light of the 1984 election, the question arises: if we act, dress, look and sound alike, why is it that gay people don't all vote alike?

That's an interesting question, for both gays and non-gays alike. While each of us would dispute the assumptions of typical stereotyping by ignorant observers of our community, perhaps the one consistency it *would* be reasonable to assume that we as a community *do* share is the tendency to flex our political muscle as a unit on Election Day.

In the privacy of the voting booth, we can all come out.

You're thinking, "What is he talking about? What about the gay voting block in San Francisco? What about the solidarity of the gay community in other cities in the country?" What about them? It's true that, at least on a local, municipal level, gay people have been known to stand together when their freedoms are at stake.

But that is by no means a given truth. If it were, there would be a lot more gay civil rights bills passed by city councils in the United States, and a lot less threatening legislation being enacted into law in some of our largest cities.

The Human Rights Campaign Fund represents the interests of the gay/lesbian community in federal races. And what we have witnessed in congressional, senatorial and presidential elections for the past four years is an apparent absence of a reliable, consistent coalition of lesbian and gay voters.

A large number of men and women in the gay community would argue that a second Reagan administration will not help the cause of gay civil rights in this country. And many would argue that a second term will in fact see ground lost, primarily as an increasingly conservative federal judiciary — particularly the Supreme Court — hears important human rights cases. Yet a substantial number of these same gay men and women voted for the re-election of President Reagan, while in the same breath they acknowledged that their vote might contribute to further repression of our personal liberties.

The same syndrome is evident in races for the House and Senate. In Texas, where the issue of gay civil rights provided some of the

most emotional (and disturbing) rhetoric in the campaign between Democrat Lloyd Doggett and Republican Phil Gramm, precinct returns from Houston indicate that, while a majority of gays voted for Lloyd Doggett, who supported gay civil rights, an alarming number of us voted for Phil Gramm, who campaigned as being openly homophobic.

Gay people should be proud of the fact that our involvement in all spectrums of life, including politics, reflects the diversity of opinion, thought and preference of a community as eclectic as ours. Therefore, the fact that no one political party can take our allegiance for granted is a very positive one. But partisanship aside, it is a very frightening fact that gays cannot be expected to band together in support of a candidate — of either party — who has espoused a commitment to protecting our rights to live, work and express ourselves free from the threat of legal or social discrimination.

Less than three weeks into this new year, a devastating defeat was suffered by the gay community in Houston. This defeat was, in large part, self-induced. A January 19 referendum on two anti-discrimination measures passed last year by the Houston City Council saw the defeat of those measures by a margin of 82%-18% — more than four to one!

Where was the gay community? The estimated number of lesbian and gay men who are registered to vote in that city is 120,000. Yet in 10 predominantly gay precincts, less than 6,000 votes were cast in support of the measures. And less than 45,000 votes were cast in support citywide. In a campaign which was painted by our detractors as a virtual referendum on our civil rights, fewer than one-third of the gay community even bothered to vote.

The same phenomenon has been taking place all over the country for the past several years. And while not all of the votes were on referenda, many of them involved the election of politicians openly opposed to any sort of gay civil rights protections. The gay communities involved either failed to recognize the threats facing them or were simply too apathetic to respond.

The result has been a growing opinion by right-wing, anti-gay groups that the gay community is an easy target. They believe we're unwilling to do more than just roll over and play dead when our rights are at stake — we'll even go so far as to *vote* for candidates who vehemently oppose gay civil rights.

No one is advocating that the millions of gay voters in the United States should get up each election day and respond to every judgement we're asked to make strictly as members of the gay community. We all have minds of our own. Yet as the efforts of the "Moral Majorities" of the world grow increasingly aggressive, sophisticated and successful, gay people must respond in kind.

Politicians who oppose our basic civil rights must learn that, in the privacy of the voting booth where we can all come out, their can-

didacies will feel the strength of our votes. And those politicians courageous enough to support us must know that we will reward their courage with our votes.

The issues of the 1980s grow increasingly complex. They are more than economic. They go beyond war and peace. They touch our very lives. The ideal that civil rights battles have passed into history is false. The smug determination of the grown-up "baby boom" generation that all they need do as adults is share the spoils of the victories won by their parents threatens each and every one of us. Mainstream America doesn't care enough about human rights anymore to prevent groups like the Moral Majority from ad-

vancing their cause. Are we to accept having the same said about gay and lesbian America?

In the coming weeks and months, the Human Rights Campaign Fund will attempt to learn more about the national gay community to determine just what motivates each of us to vote as we do. Our hope is to gain a better understanding of the priorities each of us sets for ourselves. We await the results of that effort with some trepidation. The numbers may reveal that our priorities as gay individuals are self-destructive inasmuch as they ignore the very protection of our freedom to pursue those priorities.

This is a proposition with which we as a community must deal — now.



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