

Organizing for the 1996 elections

"Gay issues have exploded in the 1996 presidential campaign in an unprecedented way," said John D'Emilio, director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute. His was one of three groups that laid out their versions of the 1996 campaign season for the gay and lesbian community at an April 25 news conference in Washington, D.C.

D'Emilio has written a report, "Power at the Polls: The Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Vote," based upon exit polling data collected by Voter News Service in the 1992 and 1994 elections. It claims to be "the first statistically reliable portrait" of those "self-identified" voters.

"Because gays, lesbians and bisexuals cannot be easily identified—as can groups based on gender, race and religious affiliation—their role in the political process has been understudied and, too often, dismissed," he wrote.

According to D'Emilio's analysis, that "self-identified" vote is 3.2 percent of the U.S. total. It is concentrated in larger urban areas, is younger, and "leans heavily towards liberal positions on key issues."

D'Emilio concluded by saying, "The Republican Party can antagonize this vote—or try to neutralize it. The Democratic Party can effectively mobilize it, or watch it slip away by inaction."

Carmen Vazquez, director of public policy at the New York Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, announced "Promote the Vote." It is the first nationwide project of the National Association of Lesbian and Gay Community Centers.

"Promote the Vote" plans to register and mobilize 200,000 gay and lesbian voters by Election Day. Vazquez called that "a basement floor figure, not a ceiling." The program is a combined effort of community centers in 27 cities.

LGBT VOICES '96 (Voices Organized in Coalition for the Election) is a San Diego-based grass-roots effort of more than 30 local and national organizations. It is organizing a series of meetings and events in San Diego leading up to the Republican National Convention in that city in August.

"During the Republican Convention, VOICES '96 aims to expose the radical right for what it is—a threat to democracy, a threat to diversity, and the real threat to family values in this country," said co-chair Tony Valenzuela.

Melinda Paras, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, thinks "the Republican Party is at a threshold and has to make hard choices about pro-choice and women's issues, about gay issues. That is what is at stake in these elections, that is what we are battling over."

The group was asked why there were no similar efforts aimed at the Aug. 26-29 Democratic National Convention in Chicago in light of the fact that the gays in the military debacle happened under Democratic control of Congress.

NGLTF spokesman Robert Bray said, "There will be activities and actions at Chicago."

But he could offer no details.

"The radical right's main avenue of advancing its agenda into mainstream politics is through the Republican Party," Bray said.

Paras was dismissive of third-party alternatives, but D'Emilio, citing the self-identified gay

voter as "probably to the left of center of the Democratic Party," said the Clinton campaign has to worry about third-party candidates. He said that Ralph Nader running in California could take away votes, "unless the Democratic campaign really pays attention to it."

AIDS victories: Dornan out, dollars up

AIDS won big in the final budget provisions hammered out April 24 by Congress and the White House. The emotional and symbolic high point was in dropping the "Dornan provision," which would have expelled healthy HIV-positive service members from the military.

The bipartisan agreement also adds more than \$80 million in new money to support drug assistance and other AIDS programs through the end of September. This largesse comes in the face of Republican budget-cutting efforts that reduced discretionary spending by \$23 billion from last year.

Mark O. Hatfield (R-Ore.), chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, championed the fight against the Dornan provision. He called it "the right thing to do." It was a position echoed by the Pentagon, which did not seek the exclusion and fought it as unnecessary to the effective regulation of personnel.

Rep. Robert K. Dornan (R-Calif.) disagreed. He blamed the loss on "weak leadership," saying, "My leadership [the House] is getting rolled on this."

He told reporters he would include the same measure in the 1997 military budget now before his subcommittee.

The appropriations bill includes an additional \$52 million for AIDS Drug Assistance Programs run by the states. Gary Rose, treatment specialist with the AIDS Action Council, says the money is a good start toward meeting the cost of newly approved drugs. 3TC and the protease inhibitors were not yet approved by the Food and Drug Administration for broader medical use when the fiscal year began on Oct. 1.



Thirty million dollars was added to Ryan White CARE Act funding, to be spread across the four titles of that program. Reauthorization of the program itself remains stalled in conference, however, amid efforts to resolve differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill. The two principle issues in dispute are a House call for mandatory HIV testing of pregnant women and changes in the formula for distributing funds.

The present formula counts cumulative caseloads dating from the start of the epidemic, not just the current caseload of people living with AIDS. It is weighted in favor of the "first wave" cities, such as New York and San Francisco.

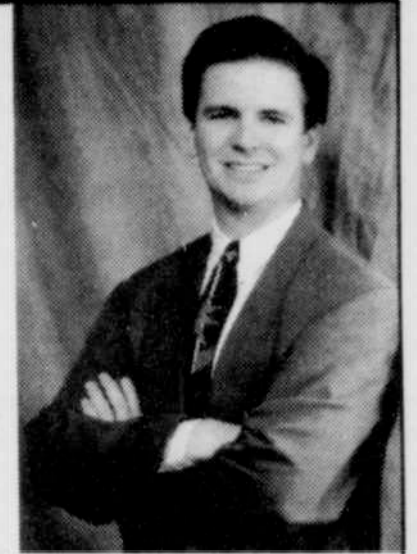
Earnest Hopkins, a lobbyist with the National Association of People with AIDS defined the argument as between those who believe the epidemic is spreading into new areas that need to establish services and others who "believe that essentially people are going to go to where the services are...the cities that have care in place."

Reported by Bob Roehr

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