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national news

Shift happens

*Political scientists report on the changing attitudes
of gay voters—and of straight voters on gay issues—
at an annual meeting*

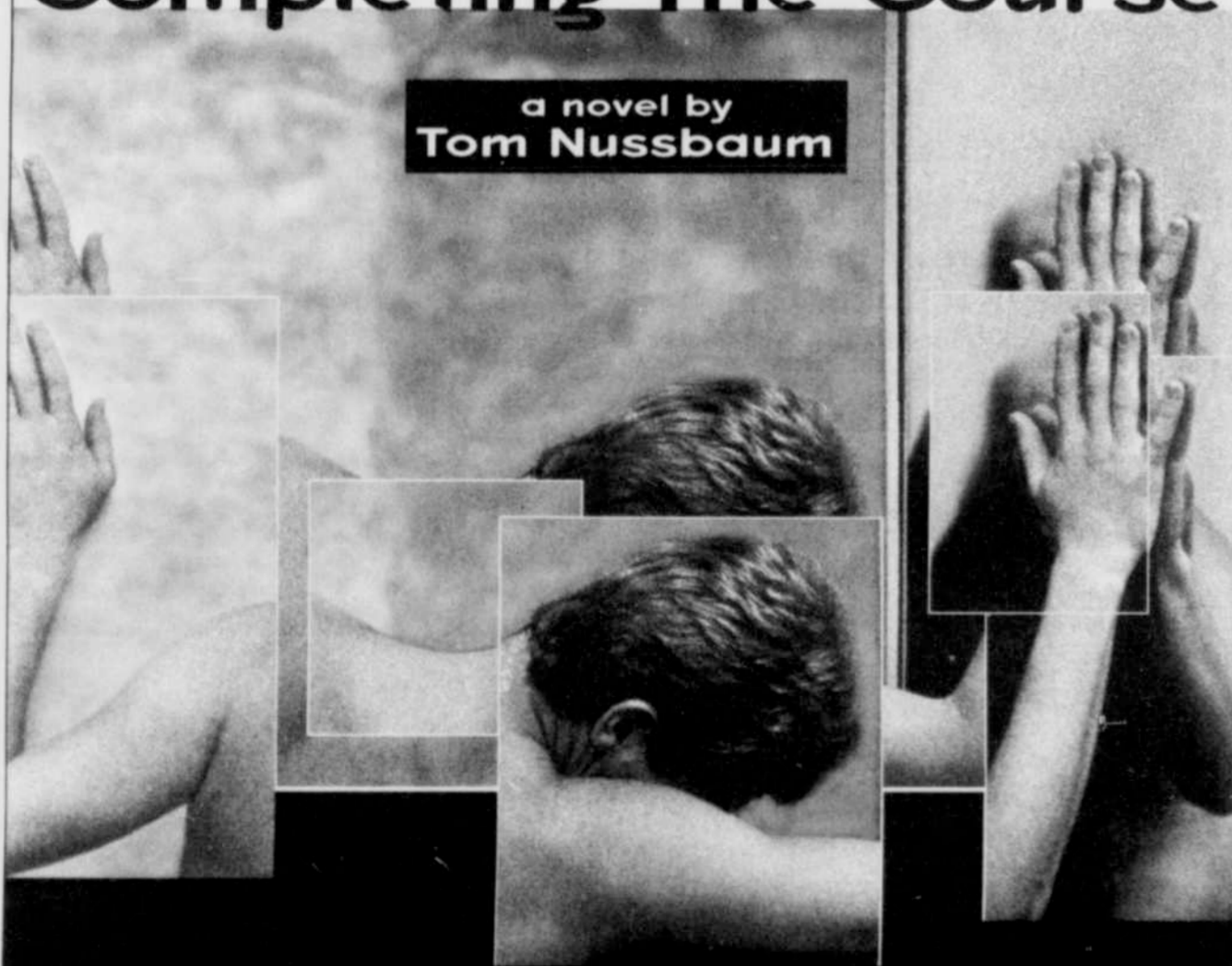
by Bob Roehr



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Political scientists poking and prodding the U.S. electorate have good and bad news for gay and lesbian community.

The bad news is that support for the rights of gay men and lesbians is "a mile wide and an inch deep," says Steven Haeberle, a professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

He says concerns about gay and lesbian rights are "conspicuously absent" from the list of priorities of traditional liberals.

The good news is that the same pattern is reflected among many conservatives.

These were among the conclusions presented in papers and discussions at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in Washington, D.C., at the end of August.

Haeberle probed data to see how attitudes toward gay men and lesbians have changed within various subgroups of the population.

He theorized that heightened visibility and discussion of gay and lesbian issues in the media would shift attitudes between the 1992 and 1996 elections.

The question of allowing openly gay people to serve in the military drew the most public attention and resulted in the greatest shift in attitude. Support jumped 10.2 percent, from 58.5 percent to 68.7 percent.

By contrast, support for federal employment nondiscrimination legislation grew only slightly, to 63.8 percent.

Haeberle says the disparity may have to do with the heightened visibility over the military issue. Employment nondiscrimination legislation, meanwhile, has not garnered as much attention.

Haeberle says one of the most surprising findings is that the apparent shift toward a more tolerant attitude on the military question was "greatest among those who were the staunchest opponents in 1992."

Conservatives, males and born-again Christians moved more than the average. Evangelical Christians shifted 20.3 percentage points.

This flies in the face of traditional political wisdom, which contends that it is the political center which shifts on issues, not the extremes. Haeberle offered no advice on what this means for practical politics.

Rutgers University professor Robert Bailey took a first look at self-identified gay and lesbian voters in congressional races in the 1990s.

He found that in urban areas gay people voted Democratic just as often as their straight neighbors in 1990.

But Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign and the homophobic overtones at the Republican National Convention had a polarizing effect that significantly boosted the allegiance of gay men and lesbians to the Democratic Party.

While the 1994 election—which brought GOP control of both houses of Congress—was viewed as a "repudiation of Clinton," Bailey says lesbian and gay voters maintained their percentage of allegiance to Democratic candidates that year and in 1996.

However, he noted a dramatic drop in both the numbers and percentages of self-identified gay and lesbian voters during nonpresidential elections.

He attributes some of that drop to technical problems with polling techniques. Gay-identified voters also tend to be younger than average, and younger people tend to vote at lower rates than their elders, particularly in off-year elections.

Bailey also believes that Republican-identified and older lesbians and gay men "stayed home" in disproportionate numbers during the 1994 election. He attributes this to an intense "conflict between voting on economic grounds or on identity grounds."