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NATIONAL news

POLL POSITION

Auspicious poll results reflect social and political trends that make gay and lesbian candidates serious contenders by Gip Plaster

About 77 percent of voters—including a majority of Republican primary voters and fundamentalist Christians—would consider voting for a gay or lesbian candidate for state Legislature or U.S. Congress based on the issues the candidate supports, according to findings from a new poll.

The research also finds broad-based support for employment nondiscrimination measures and hate crime laws that cover sexual orientation.

Brian Bond, executive director of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Foundation, which commissioned the study, says the findings will encourage more gay men and lesbians to run for elected positions and will provide candidates with details on the most successful way to run their campaigns.

The foundation, which is associated with the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, seeks to provide training and information to gay and lesbian candidates, campaign personnel and community leaders.

"Out of the discussions of the polls we will hopefully find more candidates," he says.

The research found that 65 percent of Republicans, 85 percent of Democrats and 81 percent of independent voters—77 percent overall—would consider voting for a queer candidate. Across religious denominations, 64 percent of fundamentalist Christians, 81 percent of mainline Protestants and 87 percent of Catholics would consider voting for a gay or lesbian candidate.

Of the 77 percent who would consider voting for a gay candidate, 3 percent said they "probably" would. For the presidential race, 67 percent of voters surveyed would consider supporting a gay or lesbian candidate based on issues, but only 2 percent probably would.

The study also found that 77 percent of voters believe it should be illegal to fire people from their jobs because of their sexual orientation. The cohort includes 67 percent of Republican primary voters and 70 percent of fundamentalist Christians. (Job discrimination is now prohibited in only 11 states.)

Regarding hate crime, 75 percent of voters—including 61 percent of Republican primary voters and 70 percent of fundamentalist Christians—said that crimes motivated by sexual orientation bias should be considered hate crimes.

Additionally, 56 percent of voters said gay and lesbian people should have the right to health care benefits for their partners, and 55 percent said service members should not be discharged from the military for acknowledging their homosexuality.

"We see that—despite their differences—voters are coming together around some very important issues," explains Lynn Greer, chair and founding board member of the foundation. "It doesn't normally make headlines, but it is terribly important that we see these areas of common ground at this time when so many Americans are longing for an end to the bitter partisanship of the past."

Some trends emerged from the research, says pollster Dianne Feldman of the Feldman Group, the organization that conducted the study.

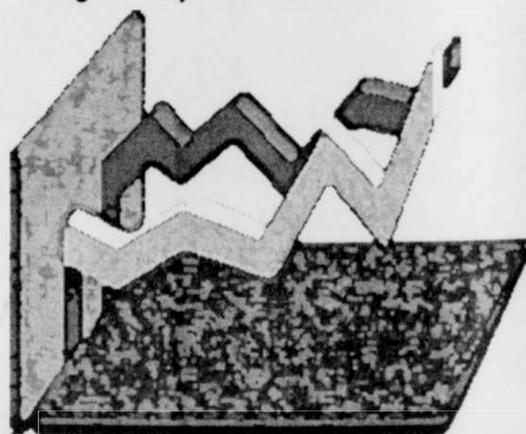
According to Feldman, the U.S. public has a diminishing faith in politicians—who are often perceived as dishonest, partisan and indebted to special interest groups—and are looking for candidates who are not typical. Gay and lesbian candidates are considered to be more honest and less typical, she says. People have also reached a point at which discrimination is no longer tolerated.

"Opposition to discrimination has become an 'apple pie' value for Americans," Feldman remarks, adding that the public has shown it wants a return to civility in public life and sees support for nontraditional candidates as one way to help accomplish that.

She concludes: "I think this is actually an important moment for electing more gays and lesbians to office."

Still, those polled were less likely to identify with a gay candidate versus a heterosexual one. Forty percent said they felt a straight candidate would understand their values, versus 13 per-

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cent who said a gay candidate would. In addition, 26 percent said that the straight candidates "care about people like me," while 11 percent thought the same of a gay or lesbian candidate.

Feldman's advice for gay and lesbian candidates? Run a strong campaign that focuses on a clear set of priorities rather than sexual orientation. She adds that candidates should be open and honest about their sexuality but not be defensive or dwell on it.

David Smith, communications director for the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest gay and lesbian organization, says the findings seem in line with HRC research, although he concedes HRC has not specifically examined attitudes toward gay and lesbian elected officials.

"It's consistent with our polling that found that most Americans don't believe gay people should be discriminated against," he said.

The GLVF research, conducted between March 29 and April 2, consisted of a poll of 1,000 voters across the nation who are likely to participate in the 2000 elections. The project included focus group research in three markets: Madison, Wis.; Tucson, Ariz.; and Encino, Calif. The poll's overall margin of error is plus or minus 3.1 percent.

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