

Phila.'s gay Democrats emerge as a voting force

By Gail Shister

Inquirer Staff Writer

You don't see many women at Woody's, but Chelsea Clinton popped in last week.

To a packed house of screaming supporters, the 28-year-old former first child led a presidential pep rally for her mother at one of the oldest gay bars in Philadelphia.

"We love your highlights!" a man yelled from the crowd, referring to Chelsea's tresses. "Wow," she said, temporarily bumped off message, "that's something I never heard before."

At the end of an exhausting day of nonstop events, Chelsea was supposed to leave after 10 minutes. She ended up staying 25.

A few years ago, such a scene would have been unthinkable. But with an eye on the April 22 Pennsylvania Democratic primary, Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama are fervently courting the gay vote.

In Philadelphia, gays constitute an estimated 5 percent of voters, according to Malcolm Lazin, president of Equality Forum. That is not an inconsequential percentage in a race as tight as this one.

Obviously, the candidates know that, too.

"It's important for the coalition of people supporting [Obama] to be representative of America, and that proudly includes gays and lesbians," says Tobias Wolff, 38, chair of Obama's national gay policy committee and a law professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

The gay vote is equally significant to the Clinton campaign. "That's why we've been doing such a proactive outreach to the community," says Jin Chon, 30, a Clinton press secretary who focuses on gay issues. "She knows this is a very close election. Every vote matters."

For gay Philadelphians, Clinton-Obama is a win-win.

The candidates are so closely - and positively - aligned on key gay and lesbian issues, either would make a strong presidential nominee, say numerous members of the community.

Leading up to the primary, there doesn't appear to be a clear front-runner among gay voters in what is affectionately known as the City of Brotherly and Sisterly Love.

One feeling, however, is unanimous: It's a great year to be a gay Democrat.

"Whoever ends up being our nominee, and hopefully our president, will do amazing things for our community," says Rue Landau, cochair of the powerful Liberty City LGBT Democratic Club. "We are in a very lucky position."

Landau, 39, a lawyer and a new mother, is running as an Obama delegate in the First District "because I like his vision for the country." Liberty City last week endorsed Clinton.

Tami Sortman, 45, an executive at Altus Group, a marketing and communications firm, says both candidates "seem so strong and committed to the gay community. I've never seen anything like it. It's crazy."

Sortman backs Clinton because "she is such a strong woman, which resonates for me as a lesbian. I think a lot of lesbians see that in her. To see a strong woman get this far is just amazing. I look up to her."

Equally amazing is the similitude in the candidates' positions on lesbian and gay concerns.

Clinton and Obama both favor repealing the military's "Don't ask, don't tell" policy, reviled by gays and lesbians for having forced out many dedicated service members.

Both are against the Defense of Marriage Act, but to differing degrees. Obama wants it fully repealed. Clinton would repeal only the third section, which prohibits the federal government from recognizing same-sex marriages.

Because former President Bill Clinton signed both bills into law during his administration, some in the community hold a grudge against both Clintons, according to lawyer Landau. "We all felt betrayed."

But during the campaign, Sen. Clinton "has definitely not seen a lot of ill will" from the gay community in that regard, press secretary Chon says.

Both candidates want to include transgender individuals in the proposed Employment Non-Discrimination Act. As written, protection is provided to gays, lesbians and bisexuals.

Clinton and Obama support equal rights for same-sex couples, but they are against gay marriage.

Interestingly, Wolff doesn't share his candidate's views on gay marriage. "When I joined the campaign, I told him that I disagreed with him on this one issue," he says.

With gay and lesbian issues not in play with many gay voters, they have "the luxury" of judging Clinton and Obama on other criteria, says Andrew Chirls, 51, the first openly gay chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association.

"I get to be like the average Democrat, who evaluates these two people based on all the issues," says Chirls, a partner at Wolf, Block, Schorr & Solis-Cohen. "I don't have to exclude one because of a bad position on gay issues. It feels better to be a multiple-issue voter."

Larry Felzer, board member and former chair of Gay and Lesbian Lawyers of Philadelphia, seconds that motion.

"It's scary to make a decision on a candidate based on a single issue, no matter what that issue is," says Felzer, 45, a lawyer at a nonprofit legal services organization.

Initially undecided, Felzer and Chirls say they are leaning strongly toward Obama. "I like the way he's motivating people, getting them excited about the system," Felzer says.

Jonathan Oriole, 32, a Clinton volunteer who works at a Center City law firm, says many gay men support her "because she's definitely a diva, which is like a goddess to us."

"Every time you knock her down, she gets back up and fights harder. She's strong, powerful, smart and poised, with a sophisticated attitude."

Regardless of who gets more votes April 22, the gay community will win.

"The conversation on gay rights has finally been elevated to a more important level in the Democratic candidates' policies," Liberty City's Landau says.

"They can't campaign without answering our questions and, so far, they have."

Local Appearance


Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton is scheduled to appear at an economic rally at 7:30 p.m. today at Keystone Industrial Port Complex, T3,

One Ben Fairless Drive, Fairless Hills.

Contact staff writer Gail Shister at 215-854-2224 or gshister@phillynews.com. Read her recent work at <http://go.philly.com/gailshister>.

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