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Campaign Frustrates Some Gay Activists

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NEW YORK -- Few constituencies are as eager for the Republican Party to falter this political season as gay-rights activists. Yet as they observe the Democratic presidential campaign and the rest of the electoral landscape, their high hopes often are mixed with frustration.

Even as they expect to support whichever Democrat gets the presidential nomination, many activists are disappointed that the three leading contenders rarely mention gay-rights topics unless responding to a question.

"They don't want to broach civil unions, marriage, equalizing benefits for same-sex couples," said Jennifer Chrisler, head of the Family Equality Council, which supports gay and lesbian families. "The vast majority of politicians don't lead, they follow."

There are other frustrations as well. Activists were dismayed that the Democratic-led Congress failed to approve two much-anticipated bills late last year _ one defining anti-gay assaults as a federal hate crime, the other prohibiting anti-gay job discrimination.

And at a time when they hoped to be making advances, gays and lesbians are on the defensive in at least two states _ facing a likely ballot item in Florida that would ban same-sex marriage and a measure in Arkansas aimed at banning them from adopting children or serving as foster parents.

Prior to the New Hampshire primary, the Boston-based gay newspaper Bay Windows _ which circulates across New England _ was approached by representatives of several Democratic candidates seeking an endorsement, editor Susan Ryan-Vollmar said.

Instead, Ryan-Vollmar wrote a biting column asserting that none of the front-runners _ [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), [Barack Obama](#) or John Edwards _ had shown enough courage on gay issues to deserve the customarily generous financial support of gay donors.

"They've merely settled on what the Democrats have staked out as a safe, consensus position, just far enough ahead of where the party was in 2004 to give a sense of progress but not so far as to threaten Middle America," Ryan-Vollmar wrote. "That's not leadership, it's poll-tested and party-approved pandering, pure and simple."

Rather than donating to any presidential candidate, gays and lesbians should give money to state and local candidates who support marriage rights, she wrote.

Debra Chasnoff, a San Francisco filmmaker whose documentaries often explore gay-rights themes, said the gay community's votes are up for grabs _ to any candidate who seeks them boldly.

"They're all saying they're the ones for change _ and one thing this country needs change on is having a

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president who's for marriage equality," Chasnoff said. "Instead, there's silence."

Kerry Eleveld, news editor of *The Advocate*, a prominent gay-oriented news magazine, drew a distinction between activists with major national gay-rights groups and local activists without ties to Washington powerbrokers.

"The grass-roots activists are upset that the candidates haven't been more out there, especially on the issue of same-sex marriage," she said. "The lobbyist activists think in terms of electability. They're always going to be a little more practical and give more leeway to the candidates."

The president of the largest national gay-rights organization, Joe Solmonese of the Human Rights Campaign, is upbeat about the campaign. His group co-sponsored a televised forum last August in which the Democratic candidates addressed gay-rights topics, and he believes most gays and lesbians remain enthusiastic about the Democratic field despite some impatience.

Solmonese also sees an easing of anti-gay rhetoric across the political scene _ a contrast to 2004 and 2006 when voters in more than 20 states approved measures to ban gay marriage.

"Among those people who use the politics of fear, there's typically an element of American society that's put forward as a wedge issue, and in this election it's illegal immigrants," Solmonese said. "It doesn't seem to be us."

Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, noted that the campaign rhetoric is dominated by overarching issues _ the economy, Iraq, health care _ that virtually all voters, including gays, agree are paramount.

"These campaigns are driven by polling data," he said.

Beyond presidential politics and the Florida ballot measure, some activists point to other developments as reasons for optimism.

For example, a grass-roots group, the National Stonewall Democrats, is working to boost the number of gay and lesbian delegates at the Democratic National Convention. Spokesman John Marble said the goal is to have more than 320 such delegates out of a total of 4,049; that would be up from 282 gay delegates in 2004.

The long-term hope is that these gay delegates stay active in politics.

"In four or eight years, when the Democrats are competing again, we're hoping to present them with infrastructure we built this year," Marble said. "They'll have to interact with our community in much deeper ways."

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