

Dem Presidential candidates go a courtin'

Our votes count among Democratic Presidential candidates

by John Wagner

ATLANTA — On the Presidential campaign trail, former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean touts a law he signed allowing civil unions for gays and lesbians. US Sen. John Kerry of Massachusetts, a decorated Vietnam veteran, makes it known that he thinks gays should be allowed to serve in the military.

And Sen. John Edwards voiced his support for adoptions by gay parents during a keynote address at a black-tie dinner that drew 1300 people to a downtown Atlanta hotel.

"I was raised to believe...in an America that embraces everybody," the North Carolina Democrat said at the Human Rights Campaign dinner. His speech also included calls for greater workplace protections and stepped-up efforts to find an AIDS vaccine.

With nine Democrats seeking their party's Presidential nomination, the courting of the gay voter is under way as never before. It is partly a reflection of a changing American culture and partly an acknowledgment of political reality.

Exit polls from the 2000 Presidential election showed 4 percent of voters were gay and close to three-quarters of them voted for Al Gore, the Democratic candidate. In the 2004 Democratic primaries, their influence could prove pivotal, activists say.

"In a crowded race or a close race, an energized and mobilized constituency can make a real difference," said Dave Noble, executive director of the National Stonewall Democrats, a group promoting the gay agen-

da within the party. "Right now, we've got so many different candidates going after the community, and there's not one candidate the community has settled upon."

President Bill Clinton made history in 1992 by openly courting gay voters and the two major Democratic candidates followed suit in 2000, despite concerns that doing so could alienate swing voters in the general election, particularly in the South.

This cycle, several candidates including Edwards, already have hired staff members to advise them on gay issues. And US Rep. Richard Gephardt of Missouri has said his daughter, Chrissy, will be an ambassador to gay groups. She is a lesbian.

"The gay community has become one of the constituencies you have to meet to be a viable Democrat," said Steve Elmendorf, a top adviser to Gephardt's campaign. The jockeying for position was evident earlier this month in South Carolina when the nine candidates met for a debate in Columbia.

The candidates tried to one-up each other on their gay-rights credentials, universally condemning anti-sodomy laws as an invasion of privacy.

The latter issue also offered Democrats a chance to contrast their views with those of Republican US Sen. Rick Santorum, who recently equated gay sex to bigamy and incest.

When Kerry's record on gay rights was questioned during the debate, he rattled off several gay-friendly positions he'd taken in recent years, including support for gays serving in the military and sponsorship of hate-crimes legislation.

"My position in fact is stronger than Governor Dean's," he said.

Dean's signing of Vermont's civil-unions

law is among the reasons gay issues are getting so much attention in the race's early stages.

The law was prompted by a 1999 decision by the Vermont Supreme Court declaring unconstitutional the state's denial of marriage benefits to gay and lesbian couples. After a highly emotional battle, the legislature created a parallel system of civil unions, conferring many of the marriage benefits to gay couples without the religious overtones of marriage.

Though Dean did not champion the law at the time, his decision to sign it in 2000 has allowed him to cast himself as a path-breaker on gay rights on the Presidential campaign trail.

It also has prompted other Democrats to spell out their views.

Six of the nine candidates have endorsed the idea of civil unions, though most won't go as far as to say they support gay marriage.

During his speech in Atlanta, Edwards did not explicitly address civil unions, though he apparently was referred to the subject when he said "not every one of us will agree on every single issue."

During his 1998 Senate race, Edwards said he was opposed to gay marriage. Although he does not object to states' recognizing civil unions, he continues to have reservations about both gay marriage and civil unions, said Edwards' campaign spokeswoman Jennifer Palmieri.

"It's an issue he thinks the country — and North Carolina — is not ready for," Palmieri said.

Pushing for the establishment of civil unions now could undercut efforts to fight workplace discrimination and expand other rights for gays, she said.

Among the rights Edwards strongly backs: allowing gay couples to adopt children.



NC Sen. John Edwards voiced his support for gay adoptions at Atlanta's Annual HRC Dinner.

"In a world where far too many children are neglected or unwanted, we need to encourage responsible, loving adults to raise children, which is why I support the rights of gays and lesbians to adopt children," he said to great applause.

Earlier, Edwards mentioned that his two youngest children often play in Washington with the toddlers of Elizabeth Birch, the Human Rights Campaign's executive director, and her partner, Hillary Rosen, a lobbyist for the recording industry.

"It's given me a chance at a very personal level to see what extraordinary parents they are and what a terrific family they are," Edwards said.



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