

Case Study of Media Coverage of Gay Candidates

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(Editor's Abstract): This historical and contemporary survey of media coverage of political races involving gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgender people demonstrates that there is a strong tendency to characterize such candidates as "gay candidates." This often misses the reality that such candidates have very different views, not only on gay issues, but the entire spectrum of public concerns. *"When discussing the political career of someone who is openly gay, reporters too often neglect the issues represented by the candidate...The alternative is to focus on the same issues any other politician would focus on- health care, taxes, etc. Nearly all of the politicians interviewed said that they did not focus on gay issues- their job was to work on the issues faced by their constituency."*

There is a continually growing number of gay and lesbians in elected office in America. So many gay politicians remain closeted, making it impossible to know an exact number, but by looking at those who have come out openly, it is clear that more and more gay men and women feel comfortable serving in the government.

America is more willing than ever to accept openly gay political candidates.

Whereas it was once unheard of to elect a gay mayor or congresswoman, there are now more than 200 open gays and lesbians in office, according to the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund. The Victory Fund is a national organization that raises money for openly gay political candidates. Ken Yeager's book, Trailblazers: Profiles of America's Gay and Lesbian Elected Officials includes a chronology of homosexuals in office. He counts only 10 openly gay officials in the 1970's. In the 80's, 32 more are elected. Between 1990 and 1997, 110 more gay politicians

are elected. The Victory Foundation says that the current count in 2002 is 223, the most in history. Most of those named in these two studies work at the state and local level; few are elected to federal office. However, the current count of 223 is only .05% of the total number of elected officials in America. Most analysts and experts believe that it will take a very long time for gays and lesbians to win a strong foothold in government. Jason Young is communications director for the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund. He says, "in order for there to be more open politicians, there need to be more open candidates." He adds that the pressure on most gay men and women to remain closeted from family, friends, and society forces politically active gays to remain out of the public eye. Since it is believed that there are so many people who are afraid to come out of the closet to the people close to them, it must be a herculean task to reveal one's sexuality to the public, and to open up one's private life to be challenged.

The first known openly gay politicians came out in the 1970's, at a time when homosexuality was still taboo. During the 1970's, there were only about 10 open candidates. Nearly all of them were elected prior to their coming out. The first openly gay person to be elected to public office was Elaine Noble, who was elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1974. The gay rights movement was just getting off the ground at this point, and Noble was a part of it. However, she would later be criticized by gay rights groups for not doing enough to bring about awareness of gay issues. Gerry Studds was elected to Congress from Massachusetts in 1972. Though he wouldn't reveal his sexual orientation until the early 1980's, he was one of the highest profile gay men in government.

Another notable gay politician from the 1970's was Harvey Milk. Elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977, Milk was a vocal supporter of gay rights. Unlike most gay candidates of the time, Milk's sexual orientation was publicized prior to his election. He was elected at the same time as the backlash against gays was growing- Anita Bryant had claimed only months ago that homosexuality was the cause of the recent drought in California. He also approached his homosexuality differently than many gay candidates. Milk believed the way to achieve gay rights was to get the entire nation to see and discuss homosexuality. In 1978, months after Miami passed a bill restricting gay rights, Milk spoke to a group of supporters, telling them, "the word "homosexual" or "gay" appeared in every single newspaper in this nation in articles both pro and con. Unless you open the walls of dialogue, you can never reach to change people's opinions."¹ Milk was killed shortly after making that speech by Daniel White, a fellow board member who was anti-gay. Milk was even known for once saying that, "If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door." His assassination, and the outrage over White's short jail sentence, inspired many future gay activists to seek office.

Allan Spear, elected in 1972 as a State Senator for Minnesota, had a somewhat different experience than Milk. Since his election, he has won every reelection campaign. He came out two years after he was elected, yet the voters continued to support him. His announcement was major news, but he didn't receive the kind of backlash seen with other candidates. He did, however, experience strong prejudice every time he tried to repeal the state's sodomy laws or pass a gay rights bill. He says, "In 1997, no state had yet passed a gay civil rights law...I began to lose votes. It was really crushing."² Spear never made

gay rights the cornerstone of his campaign, but he did work towards it during his years of service. Spear says he, like many other gay politicians, lost a lot of ground during the 80's. "We made so much progress from 1971 to 1977," he says, "then we hit the backlash with Anita Bryant's crusade and the emergence of Jerry Falwell. It was then I realized how long term and tough it was going to be."³

The 80's saw a move to conservative values in American politics. Most studies on the topic put the number of gay politicians at the end of the 80's at 42. The beginning of the AIDS epidemic caused more negative stereotypes of homosexuals. At the same time, however, the 80's provided a degree of progress for gay politicians. In Public Lives, Private Conflicts, the AIDS outbreak is said to have, "pushed many homosexuals out of the closet, served to mobilize others, and ultimately thrust them into the political arena."⁴ AIDS forced many gays to make their voices heard, and it forced the mass population to address the issue of homosexuality for the first time. Some notable politicians elected in the 1980's include Congressmen Steve Gunderson, Barney Frank, and Jim Kolbe and Representative Tammy Baldwin from Wisconsin.

The 1990's saw an increased acceptance towards gays in society, and this is reflected in the number of gay politicians. Between 1990 and 1997, the number shot from 42 to more than 150. Most of the openly gay candidates who had success in the political realm did not make gay issues their top campaign priority. Currently, most groups believe there are 223 openly gay and lesbian political candidates in office. But, it is important to note that not all of mainstream America is ready to accept gay politicians.

American culture is anything but uniform. While gays are, for the most part, accepted in places such as New York and San Francisco, the more conservative areas of

the nation are still reluctant to acknowledge gays. According to Jason Young, Utah and many southern states have yet to elect a gay man or woman to any level of office. He says that there is a growing misconception in America that gays are finally being treated as equals. He says, "One has only to look at the military, or talk to any law enforcement group to realize that prejudice is just as strong a force as ever in our country." In his work at the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, Young found that nearly all of the gay candidates elected were concentrated in certain areas. Most states don't have an openly gay elected official, yet states such as California and New York have several. Young attributes this to the more liberal nature of these mostly urban areas. He also warns that even characterizing the gay and lesbian political movement as growing is dangerous. The results of the most recent election maintained the same number of gay candidates. In fact, the number has not increased since 2000. He says that the most recent campaign was the worst ever in terms of anti-gay attacks made by opposition candidates, and that these attacks will probably increase. Now that more and more gays feel comfortable discussing their sexuality in a public forum, opposition candidates feel that they can challenge their sexuality in public as well.

Another contributing factor to the lack of gay candidates is the nature of "gay politics." California State Senator Sheila Kuehl says that until very recently, gays and lesbians have pushed for political power through grassroots measures. Even though gay organizations have grown in number and size, they have traditionally worked by spreading their message to the media and to the people, rather than directly through the legislature. Kuehl points to organizations such as GLAAD and the National Stonewall Democratic Federation as examples of this. Gays and lesbians have been estranged from

the political stage because of the actions of many politicians in the 80's and 90's to restrict the rights of gays. Therefore, they found it more effective to band together and affect change, rather than joining the mainstream. In fact, there is sometimes a stigma faced by gay politicians who "abandon the movement" by working with other politicians who don't support gay rights. Mayor Gregory Pettis of Cathedral City, California says that he faced those opinions, too, but in the end realized that it was more important to have a gay man representing the gay community than to work from the outside. He says, "I can open so many more doors now...than when I was just on the sidelines." According to numbers from the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, their candidates win more elections than they lose- the reason for the small number in office is the lack of open candidates running.

Though I use the term "gay issues", in truth gays and lesbians in office differ strongly on most issues, as well. The number of gay Republicans is steadily growing, and even amongst the parties there are differences of opinion. According to Sheila Kuehl, "there's even a small group of gays in California who are working for the government who oppose gay rights." The stereotypes of a "gay agenda" are breaking down, as gays and lesbians decide their own stances on how immediate and sweeping gay rights laws should be. Even the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund doesn't support a specific agenda. Their primary goal is to get gays and lesbian in office, whether they are Democrat, Republican or Independent. They do, however, have some standards of selection before they support a candidate.

It is also important to note the strong discrepancy between gays in local office and those in national office. More than 80% of openly gay politicians are local officials.

Those who comprise the remaining 20% are nearly all state legislators, and only 3 serve in Congress. Jackie Goldberg, a California State Assemblywoman, says that gay rights issues are rarely brought about on a local stage. Most gay rights issues are fought on the national stage, before Congress. Mayor Pettis says, "On the local level, there are no gay issues. All I can do is try to make my community the safest possible for gays and lesbians who live here, but that's about it." Many gay politicians agree that the reason that there are so few open gays in Congress because candidates have to address gay and lesbian issues to be elected on a national level. Sexual orientation does not have much significance to how a city councilman decides on certain issues, but it might to a senator. There is still strong opposition to many gay rights issues in America, making it much more difficult for someone to be elected on a national level, where those issues come in to play.

Gay politicians, open or closeted, do not receive much news coverage. In the past six months, there have been many viable stories about gay politicians that were only briefly discussed. However, the coverage they have received has been nearly all positive. The small degree of coverage may be representative of the lack number of openly gay politicians- in fact; most articles are focused on the small, but growing number. However, it should be noted that most articles that deal with gay candidates focus on their sexual orientation, and leave out the candidates' platforms and key issues.

There have been several stories about gay political candidates that have caught the eyes of journalists in the past year: the assassination of Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, the attempted assassination of gay Paris mayor Bertrand Delanoë, British politician Alan Duncan coming out of the closet, and the future of candidates in the upcoming midterm

elections. However, the manner in which these stories are covered shows that the news media too often takes stories about gay politicians at face value and do not explore whether or not sexual preferences are even relevant to the story.

It is quickly apparent when reading the articles about Fortuyn's May assassination where the focus is being laid. Even though it is commonly held that Fortuyn was killed by an animal right activist, nearly all articles began by mentioning his sexual orientation. News reports that came out on the day of his death point out in the first paragraph that he was "a former academic and columnist who led an openly gay lifestyle,"⁴ but do not mention the criticism he drew over his comments about Islam until much later in the article. He had recently launched several verbal attacks against the Muslim population, and called Islam "backward."⁴ Since the common consensus was that the assassination was politically motivated, it was very telling of the attitude towards gay politicians that most journalists would characterize him as gay before addressing his political views on Islam- views that had garnered far more controversy than his sexual preferences. Not all news organization treated the Fortuyn story in this manner- NBC News focused the story on his right-wing issues, and only mentioned that Fortuyn himself was gay near the end of the story, and then only in passing. On the day of the assassination, Tom Brokaw reported, "Fortuyn, almost unheard of a year ago, running strong on an anti-immigration platform...over 2 million in the Netherlands are immigrants, most of them Muslims."⁵

It was later found out that his assassination had nothing to do with his homosexuality or his comments about Muslims. An animal rights activist was allegedly the one who ended Fortuyn's life. Only in articles written in the months following the attack did the focus turn to his radical right-wing comments. In America, journalists were

quick to criticize his anti-Islamic stance and they began to delegate his homosexuality to the back pages. In *The New Yorker*, an article with the headline, “What did the Dutch see in Pim Fortuyn?” reads, “Fortuyn arrived at a form of xenophobia ideally suited to a nation that prides itself on its tolerance. The problem with immigrants is that they are intolerant.”⁶ Nearly all of the articles written at this time echo this condemnation of his politics. Had any of these reporters researched more on Fortuyn’s background, it would certainly have been these xenophobic beliefs that they originally characterized him with, rather than his sexuality.

What this demonstrates is that news organizations were quick to latch onto the word “gay” when they heard about a political assassination. When they later learned that his homosexuality was relatively insignificant to his politics, they focused on his real defining characteristic- his platform. However, the shift in coverage occurred nearly four months after his assassination. At this point, the story was too old to be featured on the front page. The story was even less appealing to reporters because Fortuyn’s homosexual background was not as relevant.

Bertrand Delanoë’s story, however, was much easier to tie to homosexuality. The Parisian mayor was stabbed by a man who immediately told authorities that “I don’t like politicians and I don’t like homosexuals”⁷. Again, the day the story happened, Delanoë’s status as an openly gay politician was mentioned in the first line in every single article concerning the story. This could be justified by the nature of the crime- it was obviously committed because Delanoë was gay.

Strangely enough, in the weeks following the attack, journalists pushed the word “gay” to the end of the story, just as in the case of Fortuyn. The Associated Press wrote

about Delanoe's release from the hospital, and described the attack and injuries in detail, yet don't mention his sexual orientation until the last three words of the piece. Even then, the mention is brief: "Delanoe is gay."⁸ Even those articles which do discuss homosexuality, it is not given the importance that it was in the earlier articles.

When top British politician Alan Duncan revealed his homosexuality earlier this year, he received entirely favorable coverage in nearly all publications. The Associated Press introduces Duncan as a politician "battling to ditch the Conservative's prudish image"⁹. Smith is the first member of the Conservative Tory party to come out. The AP story later tries to convince the readers that the Conservative party is having trouble appealing to the mainstream. The article says they "have struggled to regain their popularity"⁹. *The Times* headline reads "Senior Tory's gay revelation to test party". There is an overwhelmingly supportive attitude in these articles towards Duncan's homosexuality. Ten years ago, the coverage not might have been as favorable. Earlier still, it might not have even suitable for print.

American coverage of the recent midterm elections was similarly positive for the most part, but very limited in scope. Any issues of these candidates, beyond their party affiliation, are almost impossible to find. Furthermore, these articles are few in number and are almost indiscernible when compared to the numerous articles about blacks, Hispanics, and other minority candidates.

Between April and May, there are only 5 articles. Most of them deal with a new exhibit opening which features openly gay politicians. Some articles are favorable, such as one in the *Chapel Hill Herald*, which tried to emphasize the difficulties faced by gay political candidates by quoting numerous supporters of the gay movement. However, just

as many are unfavorable. One says that “being gay has become a useful political tool to confuse and silence opponents.”¹⁰ Titled “The Advantages of Being Gay”, it contends that by coming out, candidates can immunize themselves from criticism by counterattacking with accusations of homophobia.

In the months leading up to the election, more stories about gay political candidates surface. About twenty stories were written in June, July, and early August. A recurring theme in these articles is the “changing face of American politics”. In *The Portland Herald Press*, a State Senate candidate’s 2 campaigns are compared- one in 1990 and one in 2002. As a Republican in 1990, he was originally attacked by his own party, but now he is “not only being supported by his party, but he was recruited to run in heavily Democratic Senate District 28.”¹¹ Some Republican groups see gay candidates as a good way to reach out to liberals.

The news media also begins to rely on the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund as a source of information for stories. There are several profile pieces on the group and workshops they run for their candidates, and the Associated Press uses them as sources for factual data. They write that there are 223 openly gay federal, states, and local elected officials in America. AP uses the Victory Fund’s numbers in numerous stories, including one about the lack of gay politicians. David Crary, an Associated Press writer who will later write numerous articles on the subject, says, “Decisions can be difficult when...an inexperienced gay candidate challenges a straight incumbent with a strong record supporting gay rights.”¹² Crary is perhaps one of the only reporters who repeatedly covers the issue of gay politicians in the midterm elections. He alone writes 6 articles on the subject over a six month period.

As the primaries begin, so do more articles about gay candidates. The number remains only slightly higher than the previous months, however. Many articles profile gay first-time candidates, but completely neglect the candidate's platform. Any success of these candidates is attributed to increased support for gay and lesbian issues, not to their abilities as their candidates. An article about community leaders in New York reads, "The support for Dromm and Van Bramer is a measure of the power of the boroughs growing gay and lesbian population..."¹³ The article's headline reads, "Gays Gain Political Support." While most articles do seem to be favorable towards, or at least ambivalent to, the idea of homosexuals in public office, they remove their value as real candidates by only presenting one fact about them- their orientation. Despite numerous searches, it is almost impossible to find a story explaining what any of these gay candidates are running for, or what they support.

This trend doesn't seem to be as prevalent when journalists write about incumbents, such as the three standing gay members of Congress. There are no articles about them that focus on their homosexuality. This might be because their election to office has elevated them to a status of legitimacy that removes the "gay" label from them in the eyes of many journalists. In other words, they are no longer "the gay candidate" but are instead "the incumbent Congressman/ Congresswoman".

Furthermore, the articles written by national news media about gay candidates are few. Most of the articles found are written by local media groups covering gay candidates in their area. It should be noted, however, that most gay candidates are seeking local office- very few are running for national positions.

After the elections, there were only two articles about gay political candidates, not including results on elections in which a candidate's sexual orientation is mentioned. This can partially be attributed to the lack of change in the number of gay political candidates. Washington City Councilman Jim Moeller says, "The media will give us airtime...if there is a story. If nothing new is happening with the gay movement, you won't see it on the news." Even still, there are many articles about growing numbers of Latinos, African-Americans, and other minority groups in the government.

Gay and lesbian politics is a subject of growing interest in literature. In fact, nearly all books and journals on the topic have been written in the last 10 years. Gay authors themselves, however, have written nearly all of these books. As a result, the views expressed in these books are fairly the same- they focus on the difficulties gay politicians have in keeping their orientation a secret, and the stigma associated with it once they are outed. The number of gay politicians has risen exponentially since the 1970's, and the manner in which they are treated by voters has changed as well. However, the number of gay elected officials is still just a fraction of the total number of politicians in the government.

Many authors also try to justify the lack of openly gay political candidates. Most present the argument that there are far more gay politicians than we realize, but they are forced to stay closeted. One such person is Marvin Liebman, a conservative leader, who came out in 1991. Just before coming out publicly, he told a friend in a letter, "...it does matter to many "movement" conservatives- this question of who is, who is not gay; and they wonder whether homosexuals are a menace to society."¹⁴ Furthermore, those who do come out are labeled as "gay activists"- many got into politics for reasons other than gay

rights. In his book Party Crashers, Richard Tafel says that those within the gay movement with differing opinions than the majority aren't given the opportunity to voice their beliefs. He writes, "Gay men and women with a desire to participate in the political process were confined to following the orders of the few gays with political clout."¹⁵ As a Log Cabin Republican, he feels that he is branded as a traitor by other gays because he is associated with a party that has not been receptive to gay rights issues.

Though the concept of a gay elected official is certainly less taboo than it was 10 years ago, the news media still cheapens the campaigns of these candidates by making them appear solely as representatives of homosexuality. Their supporters are described as "gay rights supporters" instead of supporters of the candidate's beliefs. Their platforms are not well presented to the public, or in some cases not presented at all. This is partially because many homosexual candidates do indeed run on platforms of gay rights, but that is rarely the entirety of their campaigns. The media is very receptive to homosexuals in elected office, but more as a novelty than commonplace. By presenting the information about gay politicians in this manner, the media shows only one side of gay politicians to the public.

There are certain questions reporters and news directors need to ask before pursuing a "gay angle" on a story. The one that seems to be neglected the most is, "Does sexual orientation have any relevance to the story?" As seen in the example of Pim Fortuyn, the media jumped on the chance to report on a gay political assassination, only to later change their focus on the actual reasons for which he was targeted.

When discussing the political career of someone who is openly gay, reporters too often neglect the issues represented by the candidate. All gay politicians choose whether

or not to run on a platform of gay issues. The alternative is to focus on the same issues any other politician would focus on- health care, taxes, etc. Nearly all of the politicians interviewed said that they did not focus on gay issues- their job was to work on the issues faced by their constituency. Jim Moeller, a Washington City Councilman says, "I have gays in my constituency, and I listen to the gays in my constituency. But I also listen to the community as a whole." Most of the open politicians interviewed said that they did not enter politics to gain support for the gay movement. They became interested in politics to help their communities. None of them said that their primary goal was gay rights. Jason Young also adds that there is no community in the nation with a clear gay majority, so gay issues alone will not win an election. Like most politicians, openly gay politicians were originally interested in improving their city's economy, or helping lower crime rates. However, by reading the articles on campaigning gays and lesbians, you would never know that. Articles that describe these men and women as "lesbian candidate" immediately tell the reader what to focus on. Even though most of these candidates hardly ever mention their sexual orientation, anyone who followed this story would have only homosexuality to associate with the candidates.

Most reporters also do not realize that there is no "gay agenda". Gays and lesbians have differing opinions on nearly every issue, just as blacks and Hispanics differ on issues. The media is often quick to assign beliefs to a large group, because a vocal majority expresses one viewpoint.

Another theme found in analyzing these articles is that hard news stories tend to be more inaccurate than feature pieces. When a story about a gay politician breaks, you will often find the word "gay" in the headline or the story lead, making the person's

sexual preferences the focus. Long term stories and features will often move the word to the end of the article, or sometimes not include it at all.

While the number of openly gay political candidates remains small, the positions they hold are of increased importance, and their power of issues beyond the scope of gay rights is greater than before. There are no estimates of how many gay candidates are hiding their sexual orientation, but it is clear that even in recent times, many candidates keep their private life hidden until forced to bring it to light. Of the need for more gay politicians, Harvey Milk said, “we must give people the chance to judge us by our leaders and legislators. A gay person in office can set a tone, can command respect not only from the larger community, but from the young people in our own community who need both examples and hope.”¹⁶

¹ Bull, Chris(ed.) Come Out Fighting: A Century of Essential Writing on Gay and Lesbian Liberation, Speech by Harvey Milk, Mar. 10, 1978, Pg. 164, 2001

² Yeager, Ken. Trailblazers: Profiles of America's Gay and Lesbian Elected Officials, Pg. 22, 1999

³ Yeager, Ken. Trailblazers: Profiles of America's Gay and Lesbian Elected Officials, Pg. 28, 1999

⁴ Van De Hoff, Marcel. “Politician Pim Fortuyn Reportedly Shot and Killed Outside Radio Station.” 6 May 2002

⁵ NBC News. “Right-Wing Dutch Politician Assassinated” 7 May 2002

⁶ Kolbert, Elizabeth. “Beyond Tolerance: What Did the Dutch See in Fortuyn.” 9 Sep 2002

⁷ Ray, Joe. “New Flash for a Paris Light Night, and Attack, Add to Mayor's Flair.” 13 Oct 2002

⁸ Associated Press. “Paris Mayor Leaves Hospital Following Stabbing at City Hall.” 17 Oct 2002

⁹ Associated Press. “Conservative Party Leader Backs Gay Lawmaker.” Associated Press Worldstream. 29 Jul. 2002

¹⁰ Rankin, Aidan. “The Advantages of Being Gay.” The Spectator. 25 May 2002

¹¹ Murphy, Grace. “Gay Candidate Returns for More Unified GOP.” Portland Press Herald. 19 Jun. 2002

¹² Crary, David. “Openly Gay Politicians Remain Rare.” Associated Press Online. 23 Jun. 2002

¹³ Shifrel, Scott. “Gays Gain Political Support.” Daily News (New York). 3 Jun. 2002, p.3.

¹⁴ Bull, Chris(ed.) Come Out Fighting: A Century of Essential Writing on Gay and Lesbian Liberation, Written by Marvin Liebman, Pg. 265, 2001

¹⁵ Tafel, Richard Party Crashers: A Gay Republican Challenges Politics as Usual, Pg. 65, 1999

¹⁶ Bull, Chris(ed.) Come Out Fighting: A Century of Essential Writing on Gay and Lesbian Liberation, Speech by Harvey Milk, Mar. 10, 1978, Pg. 166, 2001

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Interviews Conducted

1. Gregory Pettis, Mayor pro tempore, Cathedral City, California
2. Jason Young, Communications Director, Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund
3. Jim Moeller, City Councilman, Washington City Councilman, 49th District
4. Jackie Goldberg, Assemblywoman, California State Assembly 45th District
5. Sheila Kuehl, State Senator, California State Senate, 23rd District