



Elected Officials

by Donald P. Haider-Markel

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In any representative democracy a vital issue is how officials are elected and who is chosen to hold office and represent citizens. One way we can evaluate the glbtq political movement is by its ability to achieve representation through the election of government officials who belong to or identify with the movement.

The glbtq rights movement has clearly recognized the importance of descriptive representation. Since the 1960s it has increasingly focused on the election of openly glbtq officials. However, gay men and lesbians seeking public office are often hesitant to be open about their sexual orientation.

Openness, or being "out," often means revealing for the first time one's sexual orientation to family, friends, and co-workers. For candidates and public officials, being out means publicly stating or acknowledging one's sexual orientation or gender variance. Doing so may lead to discrimination, lack of support, and even the threat of physical violence.

Despite these very real fears that have to be faced by any potential candidate who is openly glbtq, the public is increasingly receptive to openly glbtq people holding public office. As more public officials come out in office and are elected after coming out, opposition appears to be decreasing. Nevertheless, religious conservatives in many parts of the country continue to use anti-gay rhetoric and warn of a "gay takeover" in government in local, state, and national elections where glbtq candidates run.

Why glbtq Officials?

From dogcatcher to President, there are over 511,000 elective offices in the United States. Few glbtq persons hold these positions, but their number has significantly increased since the 1970s.

The first openly gay person to run for public office was José Sarria, who ran for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1961. Sarria lost his race, but he helped to encourage gay men and lesbians to become involved in politics and to run for public office.

The first openly gay member of San Francisco's Board of Supervisors was Harvey Milk, who was elected in 1977. The election made him one of the most visible activists in the country. Before his tragic assassination in 1978, by which he became one of the American gay and lesbian movement's first martyrs, he goaded the city into adopting a policy forbidding discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Research shows that the presence of openly glbtq officials in local government increases the likelihood that localities will adopt policies favoring glbtq people, including benefits for domestic partners. Thus, the election of openly gay and lesbian officials not only offers symbolic recognition of the acceptability of



Three pioneering members of the U. S. House of Representatives:
Top: Tammy Baldwin.
Center: Barney Frank.
Above: Jim Kolbe (left) with President George Bush in Tucson, Arizona.

homosexuality in American life, but it also concretely furthers policy goals of the glbtq community and political movement.

In addition, breaking barriers tends to open doors for others. For example, since Milk's assassination, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors has never been without at least one gay or lesbian member.

Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund

The Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund (GLVF), a glbtq Political Action Committee that supports only openly glbtq candidates, had 40 candidates request funds during the 1991-1992 election cycle. During the 1995-1996 election cycle, however, 277 candidates sought assistance.

GLVF does not fund all candidates who request assistance, and in 1996 they endorsed only 72 openly glbtq candidates. That number dropped to 63 for the 1998 midterm elections, but in 2000 it increased to 114. In 2003 the Fund endorsed 37 candidates, a record for an off-year election.

The GLVF remains an important source of funding for glbtq candidates at all levels.

Local Officials

At the local level glbtq persons have most often served on city and county councils and legislatures, but have also held a variety of executive positions, including mayor and sheriff. Susan Leal, who was elected as San Francisco City Treasurer in 1997, used that position as a springboard to run (unsuccessfully) for mayor in 2003. Since 1983, at least 21 glbtq individuals have served at least one term as mayor of American cities. In 2003, Ron Oden became the first openly gay African American to be elected mayor of an American city when he was elected mayor of Palm Springs, California.

At least 130 openly glbtq persons have occupied seats on local councils and legislatures. Representation has increased over time, especially during the 1990s.

The first openly gay elected official for any local office was Kathy Kozachenko, who was elected to the Ann Arbor, Michigan City Council in April 1974. Most of the largest American cities, including New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, have at least one glbtq individual on their councils. Some cities have even had glbtq majorities on their councils. When Ron Oden was elected Mayor, Palm Springs achieved a glbtq majority on its city council for the first time.

Other positions held by open glbtq persons at the local level include seats on special commissions, neighborhood committees, planning boards, local party organizations, school boards, community college districts, and courts.

State Officials

A number of glbtq persons have been elected to state legislatures and even executive branch positions. The first openly gay state legislators were Elaine Noble (Massachusetts House) and Allan Spear (Minnesota Senate). Noble came out first in 1974 as an open lesbian after being elected and went on to serve two terms. Spear was first elected to the state senate in 1972 and came out in 1974, continuing to serve until he retired in 2000. The first transgender state legislator in the country was Althea Garrison, elected in 1992, who served one term in the Massachusetts House of Representatives.

There have been only a few glbtq public officials in executive positions at the state level. Ed Flanagan, Vermont Auditor of Accounts, is still the only openly gay person to be elected to a statewide office by a vote of the people. Flanagan was elected in 1992, but he did not come out as openly gay until 1995. After coming out Flanagan was reelected in 1996 and 1998.

Congressmen

By 2003, there were three openly glbtq serving in Congress, including Rep. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), the first open lesbian elected to Congress, and the first non-incumbent openly glbtq person elected to Congress.

The first openly gay member of Congress was Rep. Gerry Studds (D-MA). Studds was not openly gay when he was first elected, but he revealed that he was gay in July 1983. After coming out he was reelected every election cycle through 1994 and retired in 1996.

Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA) was the second openly gay member of Congress after he came out in May 1987. He continues to win reelection easily.

Following Frank, two incumbent Republican members of Congress came out in the 1990s. Both were in effect outed.

As he faced reelection in 1994, after gay activists threatened to out him for not having been supportive of glbtq issues, Rep. Steve Gunderson (R-WI) revealed his sexual orientation. He thus became the first openly gay Republican member of Congress. He was reelected in 1994, but retired in 1996.

Rep. Jim Kolbe (R-AZ) was confronted with a difficult decision in 1996, either publicly announce that he was gay, or wait and answer questions following the publication in the *Advocate* of an article outing him. Rep. Kolbe chose to make a public announcement himself and has been reelected ever since.

Significantly, following their outing, both Gunderson and Kolbe became more supportive of the glbtq community than they had been when they were still closeted.

Finally, although no openly glbtq person has yet been elected to the U. S. Senate, the number of openly glbtq candidates for both the House and the Senate has been on the increase since 1996.

There have been a number of closeted members of Congress, some of whom were outed as a result of sexual indiscretions or by activists because they failed to support glbtq issues.

Increasing Numbers

In 1987 the glbtq movement could claim 20 openly glbtq elected officials in the country. In 1991 that number had risen to 52. By April 1998 there were at least 146 openly glbtq elected officials in 27 states and the District of Columbia, and by 2002 that number had risen to 205 and increased to 245 by November 2003.

In 2000, there were a number of notable glbtq candidates, including the first openly glbtq major party nominee for the U.S. Senate (Ed Flanagan, Vermont Democrat), the first transgendered person to be a major party nominee for the U.S. House (Karen Kerin, Vermont Republican), three incumbent members of Congress, and six additional challengers for congressional seats, a third-party presidential nominee (David McReynolds, Socialist Party USA), 32 state legislators seeking re-election, and 31 challengers for state legislative seats.

During the 2001-2002 election cycle, there were at least 135 glbtq candidates on the ballot, and that number increased to more than 160 in the 2003-2004 cycle.

Over 90 percent of these officials and candidates are Democrats, but there are notable glbtq Republicans at every level of government. One figure is Dan Stewart, who was elected mayor of Plattsburgh, New York in 1999, and has gained significant status in the state Republican Party. Likewise, Republican Neil Giuliano,

mayor of Tempe, Arizona, received considerable attention after coming out in 1997. He was easily reelected in 1998 and 2000. Giuliano even survived a recall election in September 2001, which he won handily with 68 percent of the vote.

Glbtc candidates have achieved some significant successes at the ballot box, running for and winning local, state, and national elections. These successes are a barometer of the progress of the glbtq movement for equality.

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