



Gay Rights Movement, U. S.

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Movements advocating the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and/or queer people in the U. S. developed after World War II and have grown in size, diversity, and visibility since the Stonewall Riots of 1969. Central to these movements has been "identity politics," by which individuals adopt the very category used to deny them equality and organize as members of a minority group around that category.

Like women of all races or nonwhites of both sexes, homosexuals have routinely experienced legal discrimination in such areas as employment, housing, and health care, and have been victims of harassment and violence. The homophile movements of the 1950s and 1960s laid important foundations for addressing this situation by forming the first groups and publications to last, and by devising ideas and strategies that have been used since that time in the struggle for glbtq equality.

Stonewall and Its Aftermath

In 1969, after a routine police raid on a gay bar turned into riots lasting for days, "gay rights" activism gained vitality and new directions. Over the next thirty years advocates addressed a remarkable range of issues, withstood setbacks from opponents and challenges from within, and gradually became more inclusive in defending the diversity of human sexuality and gender expression.

Within a month after the Stonewall riots in Greenwich Village, activists in New York City founded the Gay Liberation Front, and adopted a more radical stance than the rights movement had theretofore done, at least in its call for a politics of coalition with other oppressed groups. There was also a new emphasis on coming out and on "Gay Pride" and "Gay Power" and an impatience with the more assimilationist goals embraced by homophile groups in the previous decades.

However, by the time Stonewall was commemorated in the first Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade (June 28, 1970), some GLF members had formed the Gay Activists Alliance in order to work only on gay rights and did so through both traditional methods (voting, lobbying) and newer strategies, like "zapping" officials in public to confront them on their stance on gay rights.

To some degree, "gay rights" and "gay liberation" were both complementary and contradictory: rights could be viewed as a step to liberation, but many liberationists saw equal rights as a limited goal that did not address the fundamental problems in American society, such as homophobia, sexism, racism, and poverty.

Among the critics of gay rights were lesbian feminists, who not only insisted on the inclusion of lesbians in any movement but also developed significant political theory that targeted patriarchy as the basis of both sexism and homophobia. Lesbian feminists of the 1970s formed groups such as Lavender Menace and Radicalesbians and some, such as the Furies in Washington, D. C., lived their politics in cooperatives.

The differing directions of thought and activity in the decade after Stonewall seemed only to strengthen efforts for gay and lesbian rights. Within a few years the movement developed in conjunction with thriving

and open gay and lesbian communities, stimulated an explosion of organizing, and could claim many victories.

In 1973 Bruce Voeller, Nathalie Rockhill, and others founded the National Gay Task Force ("Lesbian" was later added to the title), the first national gay rights group in the U. S. Its agenda was a combination of older and newer goals: it continued the struggle begun in the 1950s to change psychiatry's view of homosexuality as an illness while working for anti-discrimination laws at all levels of government.

The former goal was accomplished in 1973, when the American Psychiatric Association finally removed homosexuality from its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*. In the same year the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund was founded and has been an important legal advocacy group for glbtq people ever since. By the end of the 1970s activists began to see progress in the form of ordinances protecting gay men and lesbians from discrimination in about forty communities across the country.

Openly lesbian and gay candidates were also winning elections in some areas and at least four new organizations emerged: the Gay Rights National Lobby (1976), the National Gay Rights Advocates (1976), the Lesbian Rights Project (1977; later, National Center for Lesbian Rights), and the Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (1978).

Backlash

However, at the very time activists had reason to celebrate their progress a growing backlash was developing. The New Right, new in its fusion of fundamentalist Christian values with conservative politics, fought back against not only "the gay agenda" for equality but sought to turn back the clock on issues such as affirmative action and reproductive rights.

One of the most famous attacks on gay and lesbian rights occurred in Florida in 1977 when conservative Christian Anita Bryant spearheaded the Save Our Children campaign, arguing that the pro-gay ordinance passed in Dade County should be overturned because homosexuals represented a danger to young people by seeking to "recruit" them to the ranks of the gay.

While her efforts were successful, resulting in the law's repeal, a movement the next year to pass the anti-gay Proposition 6 (the Briggs Amendment) in California was not, thanks in part to the efforts of openly gay San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk, who debated the proposition's sponsor across the state, puncturing Briggs's fear-mongering with common sense and humor.

In 1978, gay rights laws were rescinded in three other states. And when Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor George Moscone were murdered in San Francisco that November, activists responded first with outrage and then with even more conviction that action on the national level was needed.

One response to the gathering clouds of anti-gay forces was the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, held on October 14, 1979, the first of four national marches so far. Another was the founding of the Human Rights Campaign Fund in 1980, a political action committee that grew into the country's largest national glbtq rights group.

The HRC(F)--the "Fund" was later dropped--worked to elect pro-gay candidates and support pro-gay legislation, adding to the political strategies already developed by the National Gay Task Force and the Gay Rights National Lobby. Activist Steve Endean headed both HRC(F) and GRNL for a few years, in fact, and became probably the most consistent advocate for a national gay and lesbian rights bill.

In the following decades, the national groups alternately cooperated and competed with one another,

sometimes in unfortunate "family" battles for members, funds, and recognition.

The 1980s

As the 1980s opened, there were both fear and renewed energy among movement workers, a pattern that defines the decade in many ways. In that election year, though it resulted in the election of New Right darling Ronald Reagan as President of the United States, the Democratic Party platform included "sexual orientation" in its anti-discrimination plank and openly gay African American Mel Boozer spoke at the Democrats' national convention as the vice-presidential nominee of the party's gay and lesbian caucus.

Then halfway through 1981 national media began reporting on pneumonia and cancer in gay men, and the template was set for the condition later called AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome), caused by HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) to be associated with sexual practices.

Gay and lesbian rights intersected with the AIDS crisis in a number of ways, and stimulated important conversations and methods. The main issues confronting lesbian and gay communities were the portrayal of AIDS as a "gay plague" and government inaction--which seemed to be cause and effect due to continuing homophobia. To some degree the energies directed at legal reform were now channeled into responding to the emergency, especially providing basic services for the ill and "safe sex" information and protecting the rights of those affected.

A debate erupted over closing the gay bathhouses that had been so important in creating communities and a symbol to many not only of hard won sexual freedom, but of the very right to exist as homosexuals. In the end, the houses were closed but a division lingered between gay men who supported the baths and those who agreed with closing them.

The Gay Men's Health Crisis was founded in 1982 and the People with AIDS Coalition was well underway by 1985, the year Rock Hudson died of AIDS and gave the disease a well-known face. Treatments for HIV still proceeded slowly and were expensive when attainable at all, causing Larry Kramer and others to found the direct action group ACT UP in 1987.

ACT UP staged dramatic demonstrations at such places as the Food and Drug Administration, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Centers for Disease Control, and New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral. By 1990, thanks to movement activists (now reclaiming the term *queer*), more Americans were aware of discrimination against homosexuals, especially in health care and partnership rights, including some of the 1000+ rights enjoyed by legally married couples, such as health insurance and health care decisions, inheritance rights, and adoption of children, for example.

While AIDS was a primary focus for the movements in the 1980s other causes continued. Media portrayals, for example, had long been a concern, and in 1985 the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation was formed in New York City and became a national organization nine years later.

In 1986 the gay rights movement suffered one of its biggest setbacks when the U. S. Supreme Court upheld Georgia's sodomy law in its *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision, dealing a bitter blow to those who thought that legal reform might come quickly. The bitterly divided Court not only found that the Constitution afforded no right to consensual homosexual activity in the privacy of one's bedroom, but dismissed arguments to the contrary as "facetious," as it freely quoted the Bible to deny equal protection under the law to homosexuals.

The *Bowers* decision, combined with the AIDS crisis, led to the second National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, held October 11, 1987. The lack of media coverage that day in turn helped create

National Coming Out Day, first observed October 11, 1988, as a reminder of both the march and the importance of coming out as a political act.

The 1980s concluded with some significant developments: an insistence on the visibility of bisexuals, trans people, and nonwhite people within the movement and corresponding groups founded to address their interests; an increase in lawsuits challenging the U. S. military's policy of excluding homosexuals from service; and a turn to state legislatures and courts in an attempt to repeal sodomy laws, which functioned less as a serious threat to send homosexuals to prison than it did to heighten the stigma against homosexuality. The sodomy laws were regularly invoked to argue against equal rights for homosexuals in areas ranging from child custody cases to job discrimination.

The 1990s

The elections of 1992 continued the typical mixed results for glbtq rights. Voters in Oregon rejected an anti-gay measure (and did so again in 1994, as did Idaho's voters), but in Colorado anti-gay Amendment 2, which proposed to strip homosexuals from any right to protection from discrimination, passed.

Effective organizing on the state level and the hard work of thousands of unsung glbtq rights workers were responsible for the advances; and Colorado activists successfully brought Amendment 2 to the U. S. Supreme Court in 1996. In *Romer v. Evans*, the Court declared Amendment 2 unconstitutional because it served no legitimate purpose and was designed simply to rob homosexuals of equal protection under the law. This was the first ruling by the Court that recognized lesbians and gay men as worthy of equal protection under the law.

Also in 1992 Bill Clinton was elected President. He was the first candidate so openly to court queer voters. Consequently, enormous expectations arose in the glbtq community as 1993 began in a celebratory mood.

By fall of 1993, however, the gay rights movement had endured one of its most public setbacks and national leaders were pointing fingers at themselves and each other. That September, Congress passed the measure known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue, Don't Harass" ("Don't Ask, Don't Tell" or DADT) as a compromise between lifting the ban on homosexuals in the armed services (as Clinton had promised) and continuing the policy of automatic dismissal of gay and lesbian soldiers.

The expulsion of homosexuals (as they were still called by the Department of Defense) had been an issue since World War II, and was challenged repeatedly in the 1970s and 1980s. Gay and lesbian veterans had been among the first to organize for their rights after World War II, and a new group, the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (SLDN) arose amid the DADT debates and continues its advocacy work today.

Also, just as anti-gay initiatives of the late 1970s spurred the 1979 march, and AIDS inaction and the *Bowers* decision led to the 1987 march, the military debate and efforts of states to pass discriminatory laws (or rescind pro-gay ones) helped create the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation, held April 25.

The addition of "Bi" in the title of the march was an important victory for bisexuals, who had felt as invisible in the 1980s (and organized on their own) as lesbians had felt in the 1970s. Trans people, however, were excluded from the title (though not from march literature), despite decades of significant activity for themselves and for queer rights generally.

Also notable about the 1993 march are the words "Rights" and "Liberation" in the title (symbolizing either unity or a confusion of goals), and the numbers claimed: organizers tallied more than one million participants, which would make the march the largest rights demonstration in the nation's history though it

did not receive a commensurate amount of coverage in the mainstream media.

The paradoxes of queer rights were exhibited in the later 1990s, and make it difficult to generalize about progress: in 1996 the Senate nearly passed the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (it went down in a 49-50 vote) while Congress easily passed the Defense of Marriage Act; in 1997 both Ellen DeGeneres and her television sitcom character Ellen Morgan came out nationally, but her series lasted only one further season.

In 1998 Rep. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) became the first open lesbian elected to Congress, and there were more than 120 openly gay men and lesbians serving in government, including Representative Barney Frank (D-MA) and Representative Gerry Studds (D-MA), but most were on the local level and there was not (and is not yet, in 2008) an openly queer Senator.

Congress almost passed hate crimes legislation that included sexual orientation, and awareness of the problem was heightened when Matthew Shepard was murdered in 1998, though even then Congress failed to act. Moreover, attacks on people nonwhite, non-middle-class, and/or transgendered continued to seem more tolerable, when noted at all.

The New Millennium

As the new millennium opened, older activists in general were astonished at the progress toward queer rights that had been accomplished in just a few decades. If nothing else, the visibility at the core of the movement was greater than they might have predicted, and it seemed that queer rights, if not guaranteed, would no longer be avoidable as an issue.

Although conservative Christians continued to dominate the government, particularly with the election of George W. Bush in 2000, and continued to resist civil rights for homosexuals, many mainstream Christian denominations (or significant voices within them) became more openly supportive of glbtq rights.

Anti-discrimination legislation continued to be adopted into the 2000s; by 2008 twenty states had laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment (and some on the basis of gender identity also). In addition, some states had granted rights to gay and lesbian couples: civil unions in Vermont, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and New Jersey; domestic partnerships in California and Oregon; and marriage in Massachusetts (2005) and California (2008), even as many other states passed statutes and constitutional amendments defining marriage as a union of one man and one woman and, in some cases, prohibiting recognition of civil unions and domestic partnerships.

Although a majority of U.S. states offered little or no protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, and the federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act continued to be stymied largely by Republicans in Congress, a large majority of Fortune 500 companies did adopt such protection, and polls indicated that a majority of Americans were opposed to discrimination against homosexuals in employment and accommodations.

Amid a controversial Millennium March on Washington for Equality in 2000, advocates of both rights and liberation continued to debate goals and strategies. Symbolic of continuing differences is the topic of same-sex marriage. Raised at the very beginning of organized lesbian and gay rights in the 1950s, same-sex marriage has resurfaced periodically and has divided Americans not just along lines of pro- and anti-gay, but according to movement objectives as well.

For many (especially, but by no means only, those in committed couples), marriage is the ultimate acknowledgement of equal rights, not to mention a practical goal with significant economic consequences. To other activists, though, it represents the height of accommodation to a mainstream culture--what is more patriarchal, middle-class, and ultimately supportive of the *status quo* than marriage? Still, most glbtq people--even those who have no interest in marriage for themselves--believe it should be an option for all.

Perhaps vindicating those activists who have prioritized same-sex marriage as a movement priority, the historic decision by the California Supreme Court ruling unconstitutional laws that barred gay and lesbian couples from marriage also established unequivocally the right of homosexuals to be free of discrimination across the board, calling for "strict scrutiny" of any legislation that treated people differently on the basis of sexual orientation. However, even as the Court opened marriage to gay and lesbian couples, foes of equal marriage succeeded in placing on the ballot an amendment to the California constitution that would define marriage as a union between one man and one woman.

Significantly, the California Supreme Court, though basing its ruling in favor of equal marriage on the California state constitution, relied heavily on the most important federal ruling ever made in favor of glbtq rights: the 2003 decision of *Texas v. Lawrence*, which stunningly reversed the 1986 decision in *Bowers v. Hardwick*. Boldly declaring that "Bowers was not correct when it was decided, and it is not correct today," the majority on the Court asserted that homosexuals are "entitled to respect for their private lives. . . . The state cannot demean their existence or control their destiny by making their private sexual conduct a crime."

This decision promises to continue to yield results in the quest of glbtq individuals and families for fairness and equality under the law.

Undoubtedly, the debate over glbtq rights will continue nationally as part of the cultural wars in a sometimes bitterly divided country. Within the glbtq community discussions will also continue over the movement's future directions and most appropriate strategies.

Finally, the passing in recent years of so many movement pioneers should be acknowledged, people who worked for change at all levels, often for most of their lives, and sometimes simply by living openly as glbtq Americans. They have left an important legacy that needs to be built upon by the current and future generations.

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