

provide opportunities for the media-savvy groups to push their agendas. Some more mainstream activists believe that the threat of aggressive demonstrations may make the Democratic Party structure more receptive to lesbian, gay and AIDS concerns, while others fret that they may turnoff party leaders or voters at large.

But whatever one thinks of them, the activist groups represent a new and undeniable expression of lesbian/gay and AIDS politics. While in 1988 the new groups managed to achieve some visibility at the national conventions (in the Democrats' Atlanta gathering that year, virtually every convention delegate wore a "Silence=Death" lapel sticker), the intervening four years have produced an even larger and angrier protest movement. From continuing federal inaction on AIDS to the veto of the California gay rights bill, a new, radicalized generation of activists has emerged.

Both Clinton and George Bush have had well publicized confrontations with these groups, and it seems inevitable that things will heat up even more as the general election moves on. Protests, sit-ins, disruptions and arrests probably guarantee that lesbian/gay and AIDS issues will receive more media attention than ever during the fall campaign.

The Republicans

While the Democratic candidates could be measured on a scale of how strong or lukewarm their support for lesbian/gay and AIDS issues, the Republicans can only be measured on a scale of relative hostility. Patrick Buchanan and David Duke ran right wing insurgent campaigns against Bush, and offered anti-gay and AIDS-phobic positions.

Indeed, by some measures the most significant gay-related campaign development this year was Buchanan's television ad attacking NEA funding for "Tongues Untied," the critically acclaimed documentary of African-American gay men's lives. The ads, which ran during the Georgia primary, received widespread criticism and were perceived as failing to ignite a homophobic backlash vote.

Yet lesbian and gay Republicans have seen their hopes for a moderate, "kinder, gentler" Bush presidency evaporate. Despite initial encouraging signs (largely involving Barbara Bush's letter of support to a PFLAG leader and statements of concern about AIDS), even conservative gay Republicans are expressing disappointment that Bush appears so frightened of the party's right wing that he has abandoned them. Immediately after the Buchanan ad ran, he sacked the head of the NEA and denounced the ad as racist only, not homophobic. The failure to exercise any leadership on AIDS, continuation of exclusionary U.S. immigration policies, criticism of safer sex efforts, and silence on civil rights issues have made it clear that Bush is so frightened of Jesse Helms and his crew that there is no hope for gay-positive actions from his administration. Several prominent gay Republicans have announced plans to vote against Bush in November.

November Shapes Up

It appears lesbian and gay voters will be faced with unenthusiastic desultory choices in the general election: a moderate Democrat with little history on our issues, and a Republican incumbent of proven anti-gay policies. Most of us, it is assumed, will cast a necessary "lesser of two evils" vote, without any joy or energy, while some will cast protest votes

or boycott the election entirely. Many more will vote for president with far less conviction than the votes they cast for feminist and gay-positive congressional and senate candidates.

The wild card may be the candidacy of Ross Perot, the Texas billionaire who has surprised many recently with public support of pro-choice policies, lesbian and gay civil rights, and increased AIDS funding. Perot's nonideological candidacy may attract many votes from disaffected and alienated lesbians and gay men, especially if the Clinton campaign soft-pedals our issues.

In the final analysis, lesbian and gay voters may not be that different from other voters. While some issues, like civil rights and AIDS, hold particular importance, we are affected by every other issue that will play prominently in this election. Health care, jobs, interest rates, urban policy, race relations, abortion, housing, education, foreign policy and similar issues are all very much "gay issues." And like most Americans, we'll probably vote in November with a sense of disappointment that this is the best we can do. ▼

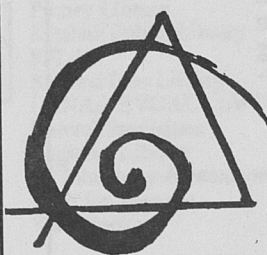
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