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POLITICO

Gay groups grow impatient with Obama

By: Ben Smith and Jonathan Martin
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President Barack Obama's promises of change are falling short for one core Democratic constituency: gays and lesbians, whose leaders say Obama's administration isn't keeping up with the times.

Gay rights campaigners, most of them Democrats who supported Obama in November, have begun to voice their public frustration with Obama's inaction, small jokes at their community's expense and deafening silence on what they see as the signal civil rights issue of this era.

His most important campaign promises repealing the Defense of Marriage Act and the military ban on openly gay and lesbian service-members have not been fulfilled.

And the news, which emerged quietly earlier this year, that he'd supported same-sex marriage back in 1996, then changed his mind, especially rankles. As mainstream Democratic politicians such as Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) move to support same-sex marriage, gay rights advocates say that the barrier-breaking president looks increasingly odd for opposing what they see as full equality.

"Obama is out of step with his party, which is overwhelmingly in favor of marriage at this stage," said David Mixner, a veteran gay rights activist who is among the organizers of a march on Washington for same-sex marriage scheduled for this fall. "He's out of step with the next generation."

Gay rights issues have been moving at breakneck speed, none faster than same-sex marriage. Most public opinion polls now show more than 40 percent of Americans support same-sex marriage, seen as a fringe issue just a few years earlier. Already, five New England states and Iowa have same-sex marriage laws on the books.

"Politicians are finding out that their voters are moving faster than they anticipated," said Democratic pollster Celinda Lake, who called Obama's place behind that curve

“surprising, because he is the next-generational candidate.”

She noted that Obama could be concerned about alienating older voters in the Midwest who would be turned off if he came out in support of same-sex marriage.

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The White House has been reluctant to spend its political capital pushing Obama’s highest-profile pro-gay positions believing, White House allies say, that it could detract from priorities like health care. And it may be even less likely to do next year, with midterms approaching.

But officials have told restive gays and lesbians to give them until the end of this month to show movement on a number of lower-profile issues they support, including restrictions on visas for people with HIV. The Pentagon also has toned down public opposition to reversing the gay ban, and the new secretary of the Army’s job will be, in part, to smooth the way for that move.

“The president remains fully committed to advancing LGBT rights. His positions on all of these issues are well-established and well-known. His staff continues to work with Congress on a variety of LGBT issues,” said Jim Messina, the deputy White House chief of staff who is the point man on gay and lesbian issues, citing White House efforts to move hate crimes legislation through the Senate. “While we recognize that some in the community are anxious, the president’s commitment has not wavered.”

Meanwhile, however, marriage equality has emerged as the movement’s central issue, a question that’s seen as a simple matter of justice and fairness by a growing number of Democrats.

“There’s going to come a point where’s he going have to deal with it,” former Democratic National Committee Chairman [Howard Dean](#), who now supports same-sex marriage, said of Obama. “I’m in favor of giving him a little more time. He’s got an awful lot on his plate.”

“But he is a politician like everybody else, and he’s going to respond to pressure. And I don’t blame the LGBT community for trying to push,” Dean said.

Rep. [Jared Polis](#) (D-Colo.), who is openly gay and was a major Democratic donor before being elected last year, said he was “very hopeful [Obama’s] position will evolve.”

But Polis warned, “If his position doesn’t evolve, it could turn off some strong supporters.”

Gay leaders in Washington, though, have been loath to publicly criticize the president. They say they still view Obama as an ally and think private talks are more promising than public pressure.

Still, it was especially frustrating for some left-leaning gay figures to see the otherwise dreaded former Vice President Dick Cheney publicly express his support this week for letting states allow gay marriage -- a position that puts him to the left of Obama.

"I think that freedom means freedom for everyone," Cheney said in an appearance Monday at the National Press Club.

Obama also has been criticized for a joke at the expense of same-sex marriage. After the White House Correspondents Association dinner, columnist Dan Savage fumed that Obama's only reference since being sworn in to the high-profile drive toward same-sex marriage in Iowa had been a joke about going to the state with longtime friend and adviser David Axelrod to "make it official."

"The best he can do — all he's willing to do — is toss off an Adam Sandler-level joke," Savage wrote.

Another Obama ally, writer Andrew Sullivan, recently referred to Obama's stance on gays as "the fierce urgency of whenever."

And on the front line, in the states, gay rights advocates are also growing increasingly impatient with Washington.

"His position has been causing some problems for those of us working in the states, those who are against it are using him for cover," said Alan Van Capelle, the executive director of New York's Empire State Pride Agenda, who called on Obama to fulfill another neglected campaign promise and back the full repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act, which blocks the federal government from extending benefits to married same-sex couples.

Gay activists cringed recently when reminded by Donald Trump, of all people, that Miss California Carrie Prejean shared the same position on gay marriage as the progressive president.

"I'm still optimistic that the president is going to be good on his word," said Aubrey Sarvis, the executive director of the Servicemembers Legal Defense Networks, which opposes the military ban.

"No one believes that [anti-gay federal policies] will be miraculously changed overnight," said Human Rights Campaign president Joe Solmonese, who added nevertheless that his group is "frustrated at the pace of progress."

Behind the scenes, patience is wearing thin.

"People are far angrier than they're saying publicly, because they don't want to jeopardize [White House] relationships with the groups," said John Aravosis, an openly gay blogger who speaks to gay leaders. "But everyone is feeling like we've entered a danger zone where the administration is backing away from us fast, and I can tell you that the professional gay crowd in Washington, D.C., to a person, feels a sense of impending betrayal."

The most heated battle is in California, where some of the same voters who overwhelmingly elected Obama also passed a referendum barring same-sex marriage. Proposition 8 has since energized the state's gay rights movement.

The Army linguist, Dan Choi, spoke at a rally across the street from the Beverly Hills Hilton while Obama spoke inside at a high-dollar fundraiser late last month. The group organizing the rally, the Courage Campaign, has gathered 140,000 signatures on a letter to Obama asking him to rescind the ban.

Back at the fundraiser, Messina had the same message delivered in a somewhat more intimate setting.

He was walking through the men's room at the Beverly Hilton when Mike Bonin, an activist and former Obama campaign staffer who loves the president "the way Walt Whitman loved Abe Lincoln," confronted him.

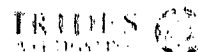
"I told him I was disappointed that [Obama] talked about justice and equal opportunity and across the street stands Dan Choi, who's about to be booted out of the Army," he recalled of the faucet-side chat.

Messina, Bonin said, responded that the White House hadn't forgotten, and complained that the administration hasn't gotten enough credit for pushing to outlaw hate crimes against gays and lesbians, but was ultimately "noncommittal." Bonin, who said he kept Messina standing by the sinks for about ten minutes before letting him proceed to his destination, said marriage advocates in California have been using Obama campaign tools and strategies to push the White House.

"All the people who signed this petition for Choi, all the people who are outside across the street at this rally, all the people who are coming to these [political training camps] are Obama people who love and support our president," he said. "But he didn't stand up for us, and until he does we're going to love him enough to be tough on him."

Correction: Hate crimes legislation has passed the House, but not the Senate; an earlier version of this story wrongly reported that it had become law.

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