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Race and Ethnicity in American Politics
October 8, 2010

Protest Politics in the LGBT Community

Keywords: LGBT, protest, military eligibility, same sex marriage

Description: A growing minority group in the United States, the LGBT community increasingly advocates for political rights through protest movements. While some results have been attained, the group is still not fully accepted in the United States' traditional society

Key Facts:

- The gay rights movement was largely inspired by the United States civil rights era.
- The LGBT community has been historically marginalized in American society.
- The United States military adheres to an anti-homosexuality policy.
- Gay marriage is not legal or recognized in all 50 states

LGBT is a relatively new acronym used to refer to individuals who identify themselves as either Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender. Though accurate total population estimates have yet to be obtained, it is socially evident that this group has acquired significant minority status in the United States. Over the last four decades, tensions between this now widely recognized community and the country's heterosexual population have arisen, leading to a full-fledged and ongoing social movement for LGBT rights. This movement, which adheres to its protest inspired beginnings in 1969, attempts to influence public opinion and government policies in many areas, the two most controversial being military eligibility and same sex marriage.

Launching the LGBT rights movement was the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969. In response to a police raid of New York City's Stonewall Inn that aimed to harass and arrest homosexual individuals, "gay and lesbian patrons spontaneously fought back, tossing beer cans, bricks, and anything else in reach at the police officers..." (Stonewall Rebellion). This event has been said to mark the birth of gay pride and since then, such recognition of self importance within this community has carried over into the realm of United States politics. Though generally less violent than the Stonewall riot, the fight for political rights among LGBT individuals is no less passionate.



As noted above, one policy area in which rights of the LGBT community are protested is that of military eligibility. Since 1950, Article 125 of the United States' Uniform Code of Military Justice reinforced a long standing ban on homosexuality in the armed forces. In 1993 former President Bill Clinton proposed the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy to Congress, which attempted to allow homosexuals to serve in the military as long as their sexual orientation remained unknown. Congress refused to pass this bill and instead codified the law *Section 654, Title 10* in the same year, which strengthened the previous ban on homosexuality in the military. At present, this law is still regarded as Clinton's initial Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy (Lesbians and Gay Men...).

The year 2010 has seen a significant number of protests against this discriminatory procedure, largely in response to President Obama's expressed campaign objective of having it repealed. On March 20th for example, two Iraq veterans who were dismissed from the military under the policy were arrested for chaining themselves to the front gate of the White House. The pair, Dan Choi and James Pietrangelo was backed by "some 150 protesters...chanting 'hey hey ho ho 'Don't Ask Don't Tell has got to go,' which attracted some 30 Washington Police officers who lined up in a show of force." This bold act of protest was accompanied by general feelings of lack of action toward repeal on the side of the White House (Portnoy and Miller).



Another area in which the LGBT movement aims to influence public opinion and government policies is that of same sex marriage. At present, same sex marriage licenses are granted to couples in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont, New Hampshire, and the District of Columbia, while New York, Rhode Island, and Maryland recognize same sex marriages from other states. Civil unions are allowed in New Jersey, while some state level spousal rights are granted to domestic partnerships in California, Oregon, Nevada, Washington and Maine (National Conference of State Legislatures).



While it appears that state policies are making progress toward marriage rights for same sex couples, the issue is still a hot ground for protest. In 2008, the California Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in California. However, Proposition 8 was passed later in that same year, which amended the California constitution to define marriage as between a man and woman. According to The Los Angeles Times, “thousands of gay-rights advocates marched across the state and nation...in largely peaceful protests” against the initiative. In 2010, a federal district judge decided that the same sex marriage ban in Proposition 8 violated the equal protection provisions in the U.S Constitution. However, “enforcement of that decision has been stayed pending appeal” and California presently does not allow same sex marriages to be performed (National Conference of State Legislatures).

Through the examples of military eligibility and same sex marriage, one can get the sense that the fight for LGBT rights in United States politics is far from over. Perhaps in the near future, other aspects of LGBT protest politics will emerge on a more center stage, such as employment discrimination. Until then, members of the LGBT community will gain momentum and increased support in the movement for social rights.



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