

# Most Democratic presidential candidates oppose gay marriage

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WASHINGTON — Most of the Democrats running for the White House said yesterday that gay couples should have the same legal rights as husbands and wives, but the leading candidates stopped short of saying homosexuals should be allowed to marry.

The only three candidates who say federal law should allow same-sex marriages are Al Sharpton, former Illinois Sen. Carol Moseley Braun and Rep. Dennis Kucinich of Ohio. Most of the others at a presidential forum sponsored by the Human Rights Campaign back the less controversial notion of same-sex civil unions.

The audience hissed when Sens. Joe Lieberman of Connecticut and John Kerry of Massachusetts said marriage is a right reserved in America for men and women.

"Marriage has a special status in our culture, our society, our history," Lieberman said.

Vermont is the only state that has a civil-unions law giving homosexual couples the full legal rights as married couples — a law signed by former Gov. Howard Dean, one of the presi-

dential contenders to address the forum. Dean said civil unions give homosexuals legal rights, such as health benefits, inheritance, child custody and hospital visitation, in the absence of marriage.

Under tough questioning from moderator Sam Donaldson, Dean said the distinction of the word "marriage" is the hang-up in the states "because marriage has a long, long history as a religious institution."

But Sharpton said simply granting civil unions is a form of discrimination against homosexuals, "like saying we'll give blacks or whites or Latinos the rights to shack up, but not marry."

Despite the differences over gay marriage, the Democratic presidential candidates agree with most of the policy positions of the Human Rights Campaign, including support for anti-discrimination laws, hate crimes legislation, increased funding for HIV/AIDS research and treatment, and federal domestic partnership benefits.

But the issue of same-sex marriage is sure to dog the candidates — both the Democrats and Republican President Bush — in next year's election.

Elizabeth Birch, executive director of the Human Rights Campaign, said the group also would invite Bush and

other Republicans to future forums, which elicited laughter that suggested the crowd didn't believe the president would appear before the group.

Several congressional Republicans, led by Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., have called for a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriages. Bush has said "marriage is between a man and a woman," but he has sidestepped the constitutional amendment issue.

Same-sex marriages are legal in Belgium and the Netherlands, and Canada's Liberal government announced last month that it would enact similar legislation soon. Dean and Rep. Dick Gephardt of Missouri were asked if they would recognize those marriages if the couples immigrated to the United States. Both candidates said they should be recognized.

"I think the federal government should conform its laws as quickly as we can to recognize whatever relationship — civil relationship, civil union, gay marriage — whatever is accepted and put into law in states or foreign countries," he said.

Two of the nine presidential candidates did not appear at the forum, Sens. Bob Graham of Florida and John Edwards of North Carolina.