

Gay Voters Finding G.O.P. Newly Receptive to Support

By KATHARINE Q. SEELYE

WASHINGTON, Aug. 10 — Prominent Republican candidates for President are creating an atmosphere that is subtly but fundamentally more inviting to gay and lesbian voters than party leaders have been in recent memory.

Gov. George W. Bush of Texas, Senator John McCain of Arizona and Elizabeth Dole, former president of the American Red Cross — who combined have the lion's share of support among Republicans in early polls — have all signaled an openness to gay supporters, including a willingness to appoint them to positions like ambassadorships in their Administrations.

The new receptivity toward gay voters follows a similar nonantagonist approach by leading Republicans on abortion. While they still oppose abortion and are by no means converts on other gay rights issues like same-sex marriage, the most prominent candidates are offering a lower-key, more inclusive approach designed to appeal beyond the conservative base of the party to independent and Democratic voters. It also reflects the continued growing political influence of gay donors and gay voters across party lines.

The new message on gay supporters is a far cry from 1996, when Bob Dole, the Republican nominee, returned a \$1,000 donation from the Log Cabin Republicans, a group of gay party members, and from 1992, when the dominant voice on the issue from Republicans was that of Patrick J. Buchanan, whose declaration of a "culture war" was aimed squarely at homosexuals.

Many of the more conservative candidates have not changed their views, and even Mr. Bush, Senator McCain and Mrs. Dole have not embraced a broader agenda that includes adoptions by gay people and a less punitive approach toward homosexuals in the military. But gay political leaders say the difference in

attitude is striking nonetheless.

"The tone has totally changed," said Rich Tafel, executive director of the Log Cabin Republicans. "What I hear is gay Republicans enthusiastic about the tone being set by the leading candidates. It looks like Republicans for the first time are saying, 'This is a community I'm not going to alienate and maybe I want to reach out to it.' That's kind of a shocking revelation."

Democrats, of course, have courted gay voters for years, and this year both Vice President Al Gore and former Senator Bill Bradley, the two rivals for the Democratic nomination, are competing for their support. Both campaigns have fund-raisers working expressly with gay donors, who tend to be generous financially and active politically.

On the Republican side, though, this rapprochement is new. Mr. Bush, so far the run-away favorite in the Republican field, has said he would have no qualms about hiring homosexuals. "If someone can do a job, and a job that he's qualified for, that person ought to be allowed to do his job," he said earlier this year.

Senator McCain, who has appointed Representative Jim Kolbe of Arizona, the only openly gay Republican in the House, to his national steering committee, has similarly said he would hire on merit alone. He has supported anti-hate-crimes legislation that would protect victims of crime not only because of their race but their "sexual orientation." He has said that someday he could envision a gay President.

Mrs. Dole has said she would appoint to her Administration anyone who was qualified, emphasizing in an NBC interview last month that "all people are welcome" and adding: "I'm inclusive." Of the contribution her husband spurned in 1996, Mrs. Dole said that if she received a check from the same group, "I would not turn it away."

William Kristol, who was chief of staff to Vice President Dan Quayle and now is editor of the conservative Weekly Standard, said that the mainstream Republican candidates this year were unhappy under the banner of strident, anti-gay language.

"The Republican establishment does not want to fight the conservative culture war," Mr. Kristol said, "partly because they think it's a losing fight but more importantly, they don't believe in it."

Outside the party establishment, some conservatives remain adamantly opposed to gay rights. Gary Bauer and Alan Keyes, make their rejection of homosexuality a major plank of their platforms. Mr. Bauer said recently that when he heard Senator McCain say the party should be "a big tent that admits everybody," the phrase sounded to him "like fingernails on a chalkboard."

Steve Forbes, the wealthy publisher and candidate, flatly opposes any concessions to gay voters. He frequently says he wants "equal rights for all, special rights for none." Asked if Mr. Forbes would appoint an openly gay person to his Administration, his campaign manager, Bill Dal Col, said: "If the person is qualified for the job, that's fine as long as it is not a statement on a life style or promoting a life style." As for gay adoptions, Mr. Dal Col said: "There are plenty of heterosexual couples out there," and existing laws against hate crimes are enough.

The Rev. Louis P. Sheldon, a staunch conservative who heads a national group called the Traditional Values Coalition and who has denounced homosexuals often in his career, denied that there was an effort among Republicans to reach out to gay voters.

Noting that the Republican Presidential candidates oppose homosexuals in the military and same-sex marriages, Mr. Sheldon said that "there aren't that many Log Cabin voters out there." He added: "There is nothing immutable about sexual behavior — it is chosen."

Still, anti-gay sentiment is less strident this year. Many Republicans avoid the matter. Brian Kennedy, the national political director for former

Gov. Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, said: "He neither brings up those issues in his stump speech nor do we ever recall him being asked about it. It doesn't seem to be on the radar screen for the '99 cycle."

Bob Adams, spokesman for Mr. Buchanan, said that although the candidate "has certainly not abandoned the culture war," the anti-gay sentiment of past campaigns had changed. "It hasn't come up, and we haven't been making it an issue," he said.

Even Mr. Quayle, a social conservative who has aggressively promoted "family values," has shown mod-

Changing the tone from the '96 Presidential campaigns.

eration toward homosexuals. Asked on a radio program last month what he would do if one of his children were homosexual, he said he would support them "whatever they are."

While he avoided answering specific questions about homosexuals in the military and gay adoptions, Mr. Quayle also said: "Life-style orientation really makes no difference to me at all. Believe me, I don't inquire what one's sexual preference may or may not be." He repeated his view that homosexuality is a choice but did not say, as he did in 1992, that it was "a wrong choice."

Mr. Kristol said most Republicans were still being careful in their statements because they did not want to alienate the grass-roots conservatives who believe homosexuality is a sin. But the candidates' tempered tone, he said, poses a dilemma for conservative voters. "The question is, Do conservatives want to win so badly that they will accept this kind of establishment leadership?" he asked. "Or have they, too, given up on the culture war? Do they want a

political champion for their views?"

Since gay voters emerged several years ago as a significant voting bloc, Republicans ceded them to the Democrats. About 5 percent of voters in 1996 identified themselves in polls of people leaving voting booths as homosexual — "about the same percentage as Hispanics and larger than the Jewish vote," said Elizabeth Birch, executive director of the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest gay and lesbian lobbying group.

Mr. Tafel, who is organizing gay Republican voters to participate in the Iowa straw poll on Saturday and is seeking a slot for an openly gay speaker at the Republican national convention next year, said that the party was finally recognizing the influence of the gay electorate. "It's the first time we haven't been taken for granted" as likely Democrats, he said. His group has yet to make an endorsement or give any money to any candidate, but it plans to do so closer to next year's convention.

Also making the gay vote more available to Republicans this year is the fact that liberal Democrats have not been entirely happy with the Clinton Administration's record on gay issues. They have complained about the level of financing for the treatment of AIDS, the opposition to gay marriage and the murky "don't ask, don't tell" policy that has allowed a record number of discharges of homosexuals from the military. Such discharges increased 86 percent over the last five years.

Alert to the potential appeal of Republicans who refrain from broad cultural attacks, Democrats are warning that the Republicans are not as tolerant as they may appear. Pat Ewing, a senior adviser at the Democratic National Committee, said of Mr. Bush: "He is purposefully vague, not moderate. Bush denied Texans protection from hate crimes and let it be known that he opposed any provision to protect gays and lesbians from these crimes. His platitudes are meant to obscure."

Karen Hughes, a spokeswoman for Mr. Bush, said he objected to the hate-crimes legislation because "all

violent crime is motivated by hate" and Texas already has a law that covers such crimes. But, she said, he also did not believe that sexual orientation should be singled out for special rights. "He doesn't believe in granting legal rights based on sexual orientation," she said.

Mr. Gore has made an extra effort to appeal to homosexuals. In one of his rare departures from Clinton orthodoxy, he has called for a more "compassionate" — though unspecified — approach to homosexuals in the military.

In California, which is likely to have a ballot initiative next year to outlaw same-sex marriage, Mr. Gore said he favored legal protections for same-sex partners, like health benefits and hospital visitation rights, but he opposed "a change in the institution of marriage as we now know it between men and women."

The Vice President would leave gay adoptions up to adoption professionals on an individual basis, his spokesman, Chris Lahane, said.

Democrats acknowledge that Mr. Gore and Mr. Bradley have virtually identical records on gay issues. Eric Hauser, a spokesman for Mr. Bradley, said he supported a review of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy on gays in the military. He also supports gay adoptions and extending legal rights, including health benefits and hospital visitation, to same-sex partners as "common sense" measures.

When Mr. Bradley was in the Senate, he voted for the so-called defense of marriage act, which said no state had to recognize the same-sex laws of another state. Likewise, President Clinton signed the bill into law, and Mr. Gore "stood beside him" in supporting it, Ms. Birch said.

Although Mr. Gore has been outspoken in favor of gay issues, he has also been subjected to gay demonstrators. AIDS activists have turned up, noisily, at several campaign events, accusing him of siding with drug companies and trying to block South Africa's access to cheaper generic drugs to fight H.I.V. His staff says this is an international patent issue and he is trying to work it out.