

The Gay Agenda

Leveraging the influence of a small minority

The survey on American sexual behavior released last month by a group of researchers at the University of Chicago contained information of considerable interest to the Gay community. This includes estimates of the number of Gay men and Lesbians in the U.S. population and data on the sexual habits of heterosexuals. Both topics have a bearing on Gay political strategy.

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On the number of Gay men and Lesbians in this country, the survey found that only 2.8 percent of men and 1.4 percent of women identify themselves as Gay. Asked if they had ever had sex with another person of the same sex since reaching the age of 18, the numbers rose to 4.9 percent and 4.1 percent, respectively.

The numbers were higher than last year's Battelle study, which found only about one percent of men considered themselves Gay. Nevertheless, the surveys suggest that a considerably smaller number of men and women are homosexual than the 10 percent indicated by the famous Kinsey report of the 1950s.

We can, of course, doubt these numbers on the grounds that, given the stigma still attached to being Gay, many men and women are unwilling to reveal such a fact to a stranger. Moreover, I'm told some 20 percent of prospects initially contacted by the Chicago researchers declined to participate in the survey. It is possible homosexuals were over-represented in that 20 percent — and under-represented in the final results.

But the researchers were affiliated with the Graduate School of Public Policy Studies of the University of Chicago, one of the nation's premier universities, and took great pains to get honest answers, including having respondents answer some questions in writing and submit them anonymously in a sealed envelope. Moreover, the survey, involving in-depth interviews with more than 3,400 people age 18 to 59, is widely held to be the most authoritative study in this field. So we need to consider the possibility that the survey is accurate and that Gay men and Lesbians comprise a smaller share of the population than we had previously thought.

On the downside, that means we have to argue that it isn't good for the nation to oppress three percent — instead of 10 percent — of its population on the basis of sexual orientation. Our answer, however, is obvious: The moral imperative to treat Lesbians and Gay men equitably is as compelling if we comprise one in 33 as if we comprise one in 10.

Another downside is that we may account for a smaller share of the voting public than we previously thought. Presumably, a three percent minority has less clout at the ballot box than a 10 percent group.

There are several ways, however, we can compensate for a lack of numbers. Jews account for about the same share of the U.S. population as Gay men and women — if the Chicago study is correct — yet through higher voter turn-out and extensive political activity, the Jewish community is able to ensure that its concerns, such as U.S. policy toward Israel, get a respectful hearing in Washington.

Similarly, even as a small minority, Gay male and Lesbian voters can organize and increase their political leverage. One way is to mobilize the community at the time and place that will do the most good. For example, the Chicago survey found that Gays comprise nine percent of the population of some major U.S. cities. That's enough to be a significant voter bloc in contests for mayor, city council, Congress, and convention delegates. Moreover, most — not all, but most — Gay men and Lesbians are Democrats. So the Gay community, especially if it's well-organized, can comprise a much larger portion of the vote in Democratic primaries where important nominations are often made.

Another way to parlay our small numbers into more political influence is to continue the Gay community's strong record of making campaign contributions. In the 1992 presidential campaign, the Gay community gave an estimated \$4 million to \$6 million to Bill Clinton's campaign, probably ranking among the top four or five groups contributing to Clinton. Without taking away from the president's commitment to human rights, I'm sure our community's generosity was a factor in this administration's generally positive record on Gay issues.

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The Chicago study also examined sexual behavior of U.S. adults. The results indicate that the sexual habits of heterosexuals and homosexuals — especially among males — are significantly different. For example, the study reported the median number of sexual partners of straight men since they were 18 is six. While the number seems low, I can't think of a plausible reason why the straight men in the survey would under-report the number of women they've been to bed with. If anything, men are supposed to exaggerate their conquests, not reduce the number to impress others with their virtue.

Based on what the statisticians call anecdotal evidence, my guess is that Gay men would report a substantially greater number than six sexual partners — the bell curves for the median numbers of partners would look very different for Gay men and straight men. (The researchers did not separately analyze the behavior patterns of Gay men and Lesbians in this area because of the survey's small sample size.) I don't have enough information to comment on any comparable differences in behavior between straight women and Lesbians.

In addition to reporting on the number of partners, the Chicago study also provided information on sexual behavior. In sum, the report indicates that straights are conservative in bed and seldom engage in the sexual practices that are necessarily

commonplace among Gay men and Lesbians. Thus, those T-shirts proclaiming that "so-do-my" neighbors, et. al., engage in behavior that is illegal in most states simply may not be correct. From a political standpoint, the Chicago study suggests that the argument that anti-sodomy laws also oppress heterosexuals isn't likely to be persuasive to many straight voters.

There are, of course, a number of ways in which straight and Gay people are alike. Gay male and Lesbian couples in long-standing relationships — even without the benefits of marriage laws or other legal recognition — probably don't live too differently from married heterosexuals. But the Chicago study confirms that most straight people have a sex life that is much more confined to conventional behavior within marriage than is true for Gays, especially Gay men, for whom sex occurs more often and is more varied. These differences are undoubtedly part of the sub-text of the conservative opposition to Gay civil rights.

A recent *New Yorker* magazine cover summed up the differences in sensibilities about sex in the Gay and straight worlds. Entitled "Brief Encounter," the illustration portrays a bus-stop poster featuring a study male torso wearing bikini briefs that bulge provocatively. Standing nearby, a pudgy, older woman, wearing matching hat, coat, and pocket book — middle-America personified — steals a nervous glance at the graphic, homoerotic advertisement, her expression a mixture of curiosity and fear, desire and disapproval.

In sum, the Chicago study — rightly or wrongly — suggests Gays comprise less than three percent of the population, Lesbians about half that. We can, however, learn to leverage the influence of even this small a minority.

The study also paints a picture of heterosexual habits that suggest some significant differences in behavior between the straight and Gay communities. The political implications of these differences aren't entirely clear. Gay political strategists, however, should keep in mind *The New Yorker's* little old lady. We need her vote.

Hastings Wyman Jr.'s column on Gay issues in American politics appears monthly in the Blade.