Rivalry, Respectability, and Co-optation: Lessons in Social Movements from the Clinton Presidency

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Abstract

Presidents and social movements have complex relationships that can go from constructive to corrosive in a matter of days, yet these ambivalent relationships are the basis for significant state change. Presidents, however, have the advantage of being a single actor while movements are an amalgamation of several different groups with distinct visions of what progress towards their cause looks like. Presidents can influence these intra-movement disputes by interacting with one faction or its leaders over another in service of their own political goals. Using the interactions between the Clinton presidency and the gay rights movement as an illustrative case, I show how presidents elevate moderate and ‘respectable’ factions of social movements through official negotiations and access to the administration. This ultimately forecloses on more transformative political change and opens movement organizations up to partisan co-optation.

Introduction:

Many scholars have written about the presidency as a fundamentally transformative office, the power of which presidents can use as an institutional "battering ram" to fundamentally alter the relationship between state and citizen (Skowronek 1997, 52). However, Sid Milkis and Daniel Tichenor's *Rivalry and Reform* challenges this account of presidents as unilateral reformist actors, noting that in addition to their personal desire to leave their mark on the country, presidents experience countervailing considerations related to institutional design and electoral pressures that make them "naturally inclined to oppose insurgency and contentious change" (Milkis and Tichenor 2019, 13). Social movements are the groups tasked with freeing presidents from their own ambivalence by providing extra-governmental pressure that makes inaction on movement demands untenable. This ambivalence means presidents often need to be pushed to make consequential changes in the relationship between government and citizen, and social movements are happy to fill that role as catalysts of reform. However, there are many different social movement organizations (SMOs) working on the same general cause, and these various organizations differ in their tactics, resources, and willingness to compromise with state actors. When presidents decide they need to engage with a social movement for political or electoral reasons, they are faced with a myriad of different movement organizations, many of whom claim to speak authoritatively for their cause. Thus, the decision about whom presidents will cooperate with is highly consequential for both the internal balance of power within movements and for the future of American political development as a whole.

The interactions between the Clinton White House and the gay rights lobby, particularly the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), offers an illustrative case study on how presidents choose which factions of a social movement to interact with and the downstream implications of that decision on social movement health and state change. In particular, the Clinton administration sought to negotiate with gay organizations that offered a desexed professional representation of homosexuality that highlighted gay Americans' commonality with their straight countrymen. These groups were more politically palatable for the ever-poll conscious Clinton, who wanted to benefit from the gay community's prolific financial resources and manpower without alienating social moderates ambivalent about the president's early push for gay inclusion. While this decision may have limited political liability on the President's part, their new privileged position with the administration offered the gay lobby few political advantages beyond increased access and ultimately limited their ability to act autonomously outside of party politics to pressure the federal government for needed reforms. Additionally, several reforms supported by less "respectable" members of the queer community were outright ignored by the HRC, which was only interested in advocating for a white, gender-conforming, and sexually restrained subset of the gay community that could more easily be assimilated into American culture norms. Given that the dominant gay rights organization was coopted into the Democratic Party and the grassroots base of the movement largely subsided without many concrete policy gains, the Clinton administration's interactions with the gay rights movement show that presidents' desire to work with the most agreeable moderate factions of "deviant" insurgent social movements can downplay the threat posed by incorporation of a new social group into the national fold, but it can also lead to movement cooptation, demobilize the movement's activist base, and foreclose on more radically transformative social progress.

Literature Review:

Before I examine the specific dynamics of President Clinton's interactions with the gay rights movement, I begin by discussing prior accounts of the presidency and social movements as agents of change and explain how these theories' inattention to internal contestation within movements between SMOs and the potential kingmaker role of the presidency in these disputes makes them ill-prepared to explain why the gay rights movement was largely coopted by the Democratic Party. Early scholars thought of presidents as fundamentally transformative actors who want to use the institutional power afforded to the presidency to "undertake extensive and arduous enterprises for the public benefit" (Milkis and Tichenor 2019, 3). The ambitious men and women who occupy the presidency are eager to use their power as a "battering ram" for social change, redefining the terms of constitutional government and reconstructing the relationship between the national state along the way (Skowronek 1997, 52; Milkis 2019, 2). Even the trailblazers of the field of political science, such as Woodrow Wilson, took this expansive view of presidential power, with Wilson arguing that the constitutional constraints on the office were "sufficiently broad and elastic to allow for the play of life and circumstance" (Wilson 1908, 57). Basically, the strength of the presidency allows presidents to manipulate institutional constraints in service of an ambitious reform agenda. Work by a number of scholars who study executive action seems to reinforce this account that the strategic advantages of the presidency allow them to prevail over more conservative actors and structural constraints that would seem to reinforce the status quo (Mayer 2001; Moe 1985, 1993).

Stephen Skowronek deviates from these accounts by centering the political opportunity structure as a limitation that impedes presidents' reformist impulses. By nature, presidents are hostile to the existing constitutional order and resent the restrictions it imposes on their ability to enact lasting change. They are intent on shattering the status quo, however whether they can is closely tied to the "political time" they find themselves in (Skowronek 1997, 55). The periodic cycles of status quo entrenchment and radical state change ultimately structure the opportunities presidents have to enact substantial reforms. Although all of these accounts differ in the specific constraints they think act upon the presidency, they all agree that presidents are THE critical actor who controls the development of the American state.

While this literature presents presidents as transformative actors eager to reshape the state in their image, these scholars may be too quick to write off the countervailing pressures pushing the president towards continuity. Indeed, Jeffrey Tulis (1987) argues that the presidents' progressive ambitions are stymied because their proposed reforms were incapable of dislodging the old constitutional structures that had "supported the politics of the past" (Skowronek 2002, 4). Even Richard Neustadt (1960), a scholar who was a notable proponent of president-centered accounts of social change, acknowledged that constitutional constraints created barriers to presidents' reform agendas. Institutions, therefore, have the potential to keep presidents from acting as idealized agents of reform.

However, institutions can also change the incentives presidents face in a way that encourages them to preserve existing institutions. As a strategic actor whose power comes from his or her position in government, presidents are "naturally inclined to oppose insurgency and contentious change" (Milkis and Tichenor 2019, 13). Radical change could uproot the norms and values that inform existing institutional arrangements and, by extension, pose a destabilizing threat to the government. The president, whose power comes from her position in the government, has a vested interest in maintaining existing institutional arrangements, and because of this, in the absence of any other considerations she will adopt a conservative approach to statecraft that forgoes meaningful change in the name of stability.

Presidents also have obvious electoral incentives to resist sweeping policy changes. Mayhew (1974) finds that reelection is the proximate goal for most legislators, including presidents; if a president cannot secure reelection, then they will be unable to achieve any of their policy goals, and a contra-partisan administration may undue whatever policy reforms they made in their first term. If presidents make sweeping changes to the status quo that don't have widespread political support, then voters may enact their electoral retribution at the next election, potentially undoing all policy advances that president has made. Indeed, the Clinton and Obama administrations' pushes for healthcare reform, while supported by the public in the abstract, quickly became political albatrosses that contributed to anti-incumbent wave elections because Americans were confused and intimidated by the size and scope of the reforms (Blendon et. al 1995,). If presidents push too hard and too fast with reforms it could harm their party's electoral fortunes and diminish the longevity of their other policies, so they need to balance their desire to "leave their mark" on the country with the inherent conservatism of the American electorate.

If presidents are torn between their dual roles as reformers and institutional maintainers, then social movements are the necessary catalyst that compels presidents to reform the state despite their reservations. Social movements leverage grassroots discontent with the status quo into political muscle that forces a response from political elites. This often means either mass-scale protest action or coordinated efforts to punish incumbents electorally, both of which reflect poorly on the government and force a response. Milkis and Tichenor (2019) create a two-dimensional categorization of movement types that predicts the expected government response to movement demands. One dimension focuses on the scale of movement demands and how profound a challenge they pose to the status quo. The other dimension focuses on the resources movements bring to bear, both in terms of finances and popular support, that give movements power in their interactions with the state. Radical movements with few resources are stamped out through oppression, while moderate movements with substantial resources are typically incorporated into political parties because their goals are not transformative enough to pose a threat. The most interesting case, however, is movements that are a huge challenge to the status quo with prolific human and financial resources to promote their agenda. Presidents must keep movements like this at arm's length; wholesale submission to their agenda could jeopardize state stability and lead to chaos, while ignoring them outright could spark similarly destabilizing mass protest activity or, even worse, threaten the president’s reelection chances by alienating an electorally important constituency. Because both extremes of cooperation and noncooperation are undesirable, presidents build an ambivalent relationship with these so-called “formative” movements wherein both parties vie for power over each other so they can control the scope and pace of state change (Milkis and Tichenor 2019, 19). Therefore, the impetus for expanding the scope/powers of the national state is not unilaterally handed down by any one actor, but rather it is the result of sustained contestation between presidents and social movements over how much an unacceptable status quo needs to be changed.

Though Milkis and Tichenor make a compelling case for why interactions between movements and presidents merit more attention from APD scholars, their account could be augmented with a deeper examination of internal divisions within movements and how the presidency can play kingmaker in these internal disputes by conferring legitimacy to one faction through official negotiations. Though Milkis and Tichenor’s typology of movements along two axes is a helpful way of conceptualizing movements as a whole, there is actually great diversity within movements about how radical of a change they are proposing and how many organizational resources they have. Movements are not political monoliths, but rather an amalgamation of several different groups with broadly related values and political goals. These different groups can differ in terms of resources, tactical approaches to political change, willingness to negotiate with state actors, and the size and scope of their reform ambitions. With such varied interests and visions of what constitutes movement progress, different SMOs develop complicated tactical repertoires that govern their interactions with each other, with each group vying for influence to set the agenda for a fractious and often disorganized movement. This leads to an uneasy cooperation where groups balance their commitment to movement progress with their individual SMOs preferences, which means that depending on the political context SMOs may find themselves "competing for resources and symbolic leadership, sharing facilities and resources at other times, developing stable and many times differentiated functions, occasionally merging into unified ad hoc coalitions, and occasionally engaging In all-out war" in order to further their individual goals (Zald and McCarthy 1979, 1)

These internal splits within movements are the natural outcome of heterogeneous interests among different members of social movements. Even though members of a social-movement typically have some unifying interest or identity group in common, there are cross-cutting identities that give social movement activists different tactical preferences and policy priorities. A 50-year-old gay New York stock broker and a 25-year-old homeless lesbian mother may have a shard desire for queer progress, though what that term means to them and the institutional approaches conducive to realizing their reform agenda will be wildly different. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s saw vastly different visions of black progress between, for example, the ever-litigious and predominantly upper-class leadership of the NAACP and the poor urban youth who rioted for systemic upheaval at the end of the decade (Ransford 1968).

One cleavage that is especially relevant for so-called “deviant” social movements trying to incorporate a marginalized group into the national fold is the idea of respectability. Respectability is defined as “the state or quality of being proper, correct, or socially acceptable” (OID 2005, 1442; Joshi 2011, 418). Respectability politics involves the conscious construction of ‘respectable’ identity for one’s group through deliberate action to undermine negative stereotypes about in-group deviance or, alternatively, a “conviction that marginalized groups must demonstrate that they adhere to normative values before they will be accepted or granted rights by dominant groups” (Strolovitch & Crowder 2018, 340). By exemplifying traits that are seen as desirable by society at large, members of marginal social groups can soften their group’s image, making them more palatable for majority populations. The tactical implications are clear: movements that subscribe to respectability politics try to minimize any distinctive traits that would alienate them from the majority population in hopes of endearing themselves to politically consequential actors otherwise wary of their incorporation. For social movements these types of considerations are important because increasing positive affect towards marginalized groups may lead to greater acceptance and eventual policy concessions. Indeed, while Japanese Americans were seen as “treacherous, sly, and warlike” in the immediate lead up to the second World War, their subsequent reappraisal as a ‘model minority’ in the coming decades led to innumerable policy reforms that culminated with the federal government issuing an apology and cash reparations for surviving internment victims in 1988 (DiAlto 2005, 82). The construction of a respectable self that is supposedly ‘deserving’ of acceptance and incorporation has the potential to thaw negative public sentiments towards unpopular groups by showing that their supposed deviance is not inconsistent with America’s dominant cultural identity.

While respectability politics has the potential to undermine negative stereotypes about minority social groups, many of its detractors contend that its focus on deservingness as a litmus test for whether or not marginal populations deserve political rights may only work in service of a narrow subset of groups, while relegating many policy debates that draw attention to the so-called deviant elements of a social group to the periphery of movement demands. In her account of media response to the Tasty Raids, Emma Russell notes that the primary reason media portrayals of the Tasty Raids were so sympathetic to queer victims of police harassment was because they came from a well-to-do upper crust of gay society who occupied white-collar jobs. Sympathy for them was predicated on the fact that they adhered to norms of respectable conduct that were associated with class, race, gender, and ability-based privileges (Russel 2015, 127). Benjamin Shepard (2001) establishes dichotomizes the divisions between respectable and non-respectable queerness as the split between ‘the suits and the sluts’, arguing that class and racial cleavages between queer subcommunities lead white wealthy gay activists to campaign for incorporation and assimilation into straight society, while poor and racial minority queers’ dual marginalization precludes them from easily assimilating. Additionally, these intersectionally marginalized communities often face the worst challenges of the existing social order, so incorporation without any meaningful effort to address systemic inequalities would leave many of their concerns unaddressed.

These debates about respectability as a tactic are not purely theoretical; movements regularly have to navigate tactical concerns that pit a privileged core against a disorganized periphery, both with a distinct conception of what constitutes group advancement. Who wins out has huge implications on what movement issues are brought to the political fore, and by extension the issues debated in negotiations with elected officials. Thus, I contend that respectability is a necessary consideration for movements that structures both the types of issues movement actors focus on and the incentives they have to cooperate with political leadership. The experience of the Clinton administration provides ample proof that respectability concerns are consequential in shaping the content and tenor of movement-president negotiations, and ultimately have an outsized influence on the scope and direction of state-change. The two issues that predominated queer discourse during the Clinton presidency, open military service for gays and a more aggressive anti-AIDS response, were taken up by the institutionalized gay rights movement and supporters of a more radical queer liberation respectively as the defining struggle of the 1990s. These issues fit nicely in the respectable v. non-respectable dichotomization, as gay inclusion in the military focuses public attention on gays' admirable desire to serve their country, while AIDS research (rightly or wrongly) focuses public attention on gay deviancy re: sexual promiscuity. Given the strategic position of the gay rights lobby in the Clinton administration, they largely set the agenda for what queer rights issues the administration would tackle, which had lasting implications on the development of LGBTQ rights and the state more generally.

History:

Now I turn to a descriptive account of Clinton's interactions with the gay rights movement during his campaign and subsequent presidency. The Clinton campaign was notable for being the first major party presidential campaign to openly court gay voters. Though gay voters were often regarded as a Democratic constituency, given the Republican Party's wholehearted embrace of the reactionary social policies of the religious right during the Reagan administration, gay voters rationalized their support for the party on pragmatic grounds of harm avoidance rather than affirmative support for the party's gay rights agenda. Indeed, when conservative firebrands like Pat Buchanan are given the Republican National Convention (RNC) stage as a platform to claim that the Republicans stand united "against the amoral idea that gay and lesbian couples should have the same standing in law as married men and women," it shows gay voters that one party is undoubtedly more hostile to their interests than the other (Garretson 2019, 115).

However, this does not mean that Democrats were uniformly supportive of the gay rights agenda. If anything, most Democratic officials were either silent or outright hostile when it came to addressing the issue in the pre-Clinton years. For example, in his only meeting with gay rights activists during the 1988 presidential campaign, Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis reaffirmed his opposition to federal antidiscrimination protections for gay workers and declared his support for preferential treatment towards heterosexual couples in adoption proceedings on the grounds that it was "best for a youngster to grow up in a household with a mother, a father and other children" (Jehl 1988). This response elicited boos and jeers within the room, with one attendee shouting that Dukakis was an "anti-gay bigot." Additionally, Dukakis rejected queer donors' offer to raise $1 million for his 1988 presidential campaign on the grounds that, in gay activist and future Clinton ally David Mixner's words, it was "gay money" (O'Connor 2006, 83). On the whole Dukakis did much to alienate gay voters, but despite this apparent antipathy towards gays many LGBT leaders continued to endorse Dukakis' candidacy on the grounds that failure to endorse the Democratic presidential candidate was effectively backing their Republican alternative. Indeed, Jean O'Leary, a former nun turned lesbian activist and one of the co-founders of National Coming Out Day, noted that when gay voters are faced with the binary choice between a Republican and a Democrat with a murky record on gay equality, they can either "hold out for a litmus-test proof of a supportive candidate's loyalty to our community" or "deal with the political realities" of a two-party system (Jehl 1988). Far from an enthused affirmation of Dukakis' leadership on gay rights, O'Leary's comments suggest a sort of resigned pragmatism; he was the best gays could hope for in a majoritarian election with a culturally conservative electorate, so they had to hold their nose and vote for the lesser of two evils.

In contrast, the Clinton candidacy opened up the possibility of actual pro-gay policy reform. While past politicians had thought it taboo to openly vie for the gay community's support, during the Democratic primary Clinton actively campaigned for the queer vote. In a late-campaign rally in Jersey City, Clinton referred to AIDS as "one of the most fundamental questions facing our people in the healthcare field," and promised the immediate appointment of an AIDS czar with near universal authority to coordinate an effective response to the disease (Abramson 1992, A16). He also voiced his support for sweeping employment nondiscrimination protections, and was among the first mainstream Democratic politicians to call for the admission of gays into the military, arguing that homosexuality "alone should not be enough to kick someone out of the military who has otherwise served well" (Schmalz 1992, A1). At least on the surface Clinton seemed to be a new breed of Democrat who was willing to go out on a limb for gay inclusion.

Part of this was no doubt political strategy: gays had proven a highly politically engaged in the late 1980s given the uptick in gay visibility and social movement activism, and many wealthy Democratic donors were open homosexuals who contributed liberally to their preferred campaigns, making the gay community "a potent political force, indeed" in the words of Clinton aid and future Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel (Garretson 2018, 112). However, Clinton also lacked the principled opposition to gay rights of prior presidential contenders like Mike Dukakis, and his status as an otherwise moderate Southern governor made him a palatable messenger who could help bring gay rights issues into the political mainstream. He also seemed open to learning about the gay rights struggle, accepting an invitation from his personal friend David Mixner to meet with him and a cadre of dedicated gay activists in late 1991 to discuss anti-discrimination laws and a more aggressive federal commitment to combat AIDS. Reflecting on the conversation, lesbian activist Diane Abbitt noted that candidate Clinton "mostly just listened, but intently," and Clinton himself admitted that he "needed to learn" and that the discussion "brought home the fact that running for President would require me to think about things that I just didn't have to deal with as governor" (Schmalz 1992, 3). This apparent openness to gay rights encouraged energetic participation in the 1992 election by various gay rights organizations. The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) alone donated more than $1 million to the Clinton campaign and sent 21 staffers to coordinate get-out-the-vote drives for Clinton in battleground states like California, Illinois, and Michigan (Abramson 1992, A16). Ultimately Clinton won the 1992 general election in part because of his sizeable electoral support among gay voters. An election night telephone poll by Overlooked Opinions, a research firm specializing in opinion research among queer individuals, found that 89 percent of the gay voters they surveyed on election night had supported Clinton (Griffin 1992, D18).

Upon his actual assent into office, Clinton's actions on gay rights deviated considerably from his lofty rhetoric on the campaign trail. One of the first issues Clinton was set to address in the White House was the inclusion of gays in the military. A key campaign promise, many of Clinton's contacts within the gay rights lobby pressured him to put this issue at the top of his agenda. Clinton obliged, but was met with hostility from military leaders like Colin Powell and powerful Senatorial moderate Sam Nunn, who insisted that gay military service was a nonstarter. This led Clinton to walk back his promise to allow gays to serve openly in the military, saying that he would “consult with a lot of people about what our options are” on the issue (Gellman 1992, A1). The compromise this consultation ultimately yielded was the much-reviled Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy, which forbade military officials from asking applicants about their sexual orientation but kept the absolute ban on gay servicemembers on the books (Aspin 1993, 9). With only finite time and political capital it makes sense that Clinton would prefer to focus his attentions on his ongoing healthcare reform push, though his actions were seen as a hurtful betrayal by the institutionalized gay rights lobby who enthusiastically backed Clinton because of his progressivism on the issue (Berke 1993, A1).

Similarly, Clinton’s efforts on the AIDS epidemic during his early presidency seemed perfunctory at best. Clinton promised during the campaign that he was profoundly sympathetic for AIDS PWAs and would initiate a ‘Manhattan Project’ on AIDS and endow a new cabinet post with the powers to combat the disease. When Clinton took office, he did appoint this AIDS czar, Kristine Gebbie, but she did little to create a coordinated AIDS strategy. More than anything the AIDS czar provided Clinton political cover to punt the issue to an appointed surrogate, allowing Clinton to claim his administration had "done far more on research and care and raising visibility” than anyone ever had without having to devote time and resources to it (Elwood 2009, 83). In contrast to the military service issue, however, Clinton seemed completely unwilling to bring up the AIDS issue independent of explicit questions from reporters or activists. During his first term as president, Clinton only devoted 2 speeches to AIDS, both on World AIDS Day and both to predominantly gay audiences (Elwood 2009, 79).

The final concrete policy I will touch on is Clinton’s decision to sign the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). This legislation, passed after the Republican Revolution of 1994 ushered in a decisive Republican majority in both chambers of Congress, defined marriage for the purposes of federal legislation as the union between a man and a woman and gave states the right not to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other jurisdictions (Koppelman 1997, 1) Clinton later claimed that he signed this legislation in the face of a veto-proof Congressional majority in favor of the legislation in hopes that his cooperation would preclude a Congressional push for an amendment to the Constitution banning same-sex marriage, though give this reflection came almost two decades later in advance of his wife's presidential campaign, so one couldn't be blamed for questioning his sincerity (Baker 2013, A1).

A reflection on the gay policy successes under the Clinton administration shows that the president was repeatedly unwilling to make good on his campaign promises, though many still argue that Clinton's willingness to speak about gays in a more tolerant and inclusive way legitimated them as equal democratic citizens and helped destigmatize homosexuality among the straight public. Indeed, one of Jeremiah Garretson's (2018) central arguments in his The Path to Gay Rights is that elite political cues from mainstream Democrats like Clinton catalyzed attitude liberalization on gay rights issues. When Democrats who are on the fence about gay rights see revered politicians talk about the plight of queer Americans, they shift their personal views to be consistent with elite messaging. This has the effect of both changing gay policy opinions and increasing positive affect towards gay folks. However, while Clinton did encourage more toleration of gay Americans than had his predecessors, this toleration was often conditional on gay Americans being effectively indistinguishable from their straight counterparts aside from their private sexual preferences, and even then stressing his toleration for gays over full-fledged acceptance. The few speeches Clinton does give to gay groups after his inauguration as president support this view, presenting Clinton as the champion of a narrow subset of the gay community he saw as politically palatable. For instance, during his keynote remarks at the 1997 HRC annual gala, he voiced his support for the Employment Nondiscrimination Act (ENDA) because he thought that "being gay, the last time I thought about it, seemed to have nothing to do with the ability to balance a book, fix a broken bone, or change a spark plug" (Clinton 1997, 1759). This comment distills many of the recurring themes about respectability I have touched on thus far; gays are not inherently different from straight people except for their private sexual preference, which has no bearing on their character or their ability, so they should be incorporated into straight society because they're no different than straight Americans. It's reminiscent of the pseudo-progressive discourse around color-blindness that predominated racial discussions in the 1980s and 1990s, insofar as sexuality is presented as an irrelevant factor that distracts us from the content of gays' character and the quality of their work. Again, this perspective downplays the importance of many unique issues facing the queer community, such as the AIDS epidemic, that focus attention on queer deviance rather than the ways they are similar to their straight counterparts.

Movement Politics:

Having established the actual policy and messaging out of the Clinton campaign and administration on gay rights, I now turn to gay political activists and how internal disputes between them influenced Clinton's approach to gay issues. Clinton's interactions with the gay rights movement were primarily through institutionalized gay lobbying groups like the Human Rights Campaign. Highly organized, hierarchical, and pragmatic, the HRC exerted its political influence by devoting financial resources and staff to gay-friendly politicians, hoping that these benefits would help get gay rights on the Congressional docket and give them some agenda-setting control over which queer rights issues saw a public debate. This approach gave them unprecedented access to the (largely Democratic) politicians who accepted their aid, but it came with a number of strings attached. Going into the 1990s queers were still seen as a deviant and unpopular social group whose behavior was inconsistent with the conservative sexual mores of the day. The American National Election Study's (ANES's) 1988 feeling thermometer measure of pro-gay affect, which asks respondents to self-report how positive their feelings towards a group are on a scale of 0-100, with 0 being extremely cold/unfavorable and 100 being extremely warm/favorable, found that gays' average rating was a 28, indicating that the American public's feelings towards gays were decidedly negative (Garretson 2019, 15). Social scientific findings suggest that perceptions of gay promiscuity may have been partially to blame for these negative perceptions. Pinsof and Haselton (2016) find that subjects who were exposed to a faux-scientific article confirming the stereotype of gay male promiscuity were more polarized in their support of gay rights on the basis of their "short-term mating orientation": subjects with more partners, later marriages, and non-traditional family structures became more supportive of gay rights, while subjects with fewer partners, earlier marriages, and traditional families became less supportive. When negative stereotypes that portray homosexuality as hypersexual and deviant are salient, individuals whose personal sexual proclivities are restrained and conservative become less supportive of gay rights. This finding is highly relevant when talking about the gay rights climate of the early 1990s and provides insight into the Clinton administration's approach of allying itself with the organized gay rights lobby over more grassroots activist groups. The conservative social norms of the 1980s were thawing as Bill Clinton ran his first national campaign, though the American public was still far off from wholesale acceptance of anything resembling queer sexual liberation: most Americans still lived in nuclear families, married in their early to mid-20s, and . With a broadly sexually conservative public, Pinsof and Haselton's findings suggest that the American electorate of the 1990s would only be open to the expansion of gay rights if the messengers were chaste, sanitized, and easily assimilated into the restrained sexual norms typical of the late 1980s.

The combative activism and increased queer visibility post-Stonewall put an unprecedented spotlight on gay Americans as political agents, but its focus on a defiant in-your-face breed of queerness highlighted gays' deviance from rather than their commonality with the prototypical American. Many straight Americans saw this proud defiance of sexual norms as threatening, a sort of 'unacceptable difference,' and their affect towards the newly visible gay community soured accordingly (Joshi 2011, 425). The HRC and similar gay rights organizations whose strategy relied on their access to politicians saw this as unacceptable, because politicians' electoral incentives would prevent them from affiliating themselves too closely with a broadly unpopular interest group. Because of this, the HRC coalesced around a narrow agenda of gay incorporation that sought to portray homosexuals generally as upstanding typical Americans who were indistinguishable from their straight peers aside from their private sexual preferences. This entailed the promotion of a respectable brand of queerness that was innocuous to prevailing heterosexist norms. Part of this involved how the HRC presented itself to the public; most HRC events were highly formal suit-and-tie proceedings, a stark contrast to the flamboyance and ostentation of many pride or ACT UP events. Indeed, one of the HRC's first high-profile events was a 1982 $150-a-plate gala in the Grand Ballroom of the Astoria Hotel with former vice President Walter Mondale, then an early contender for the Democrat's 1984 presidential nomination (Clendinen & Nagourney 2001, 472). The presentation of the gay rights movement as domesticated, formal, and upper-class worked to undercut popular perceptions of gays as subversive underclass radicals that had persisted since Stonewall.

However, the issues the organization chose to prioritize in its outreach also reflect these respectability concerns. Allowing gay service members into the military was one of the HRC's pet causes in the early 1990s (Cockburn 1993, 162). Military service is seen as a normatively desirable activity by many Americans; people putting their lives on the line out of dutiful patriotism is quintessentially respectable and American, especially given the precipitous drop in voluntary enrollment during the 1990s (Coleman 2014). Making an issue like military service the cornerstone of the organization's gay rights appeals meant that the HRC would focus public attention on gays as average red-blooded Americans who were being unfairly discriminated against on the basis of their sexuality. They hoped that such a strategy would soften public opposition to homosexuality and lead to gradual political accommodation.

The gay rights lobby's demands on the Democratic Party were tempered by a political pragmatism that compelled them to accept conservative incremental reforms towards gay incorporation in the polity, such as the right to military service, on the grounds that they were more attainable and a 'win' on these issues would cement these so-called 'homocrats' as consequential power-brokers within the party, positioning them well to further influence its policy positions and, potentially, to run for office themselves under its name (Schulman 2019, 13). Military service had the added benefit of being an issue that centered public attention on 'deserving gays' who wanted to devote their life to service of country. These worthy victims of government discrimination had the potential to undermine negative stereotypes about gays and, by extension, make the public more open to the idea of gay Americans holding public office.

Less well-positioned gay rights activists, often lower or middle-class without the prolific social connections of the respectable homocrats, were wary of this alliance with the Democratic Party. Though it was clear Clinton was willing to 'talk the talk' on gay rights in a way his predecessors had not, many worried that the incorporation of gays as a constituent part of the Democratic Party would lead to cooptation of the movement, with agenda-setting power over what queer issues can and should be discussed in the mainstream discourse determined entirely by pragmatic party leaders with an incentive to avoid controversy and the discussion of politically unpopular stances. Clinton's first term proved that the president was willing to modulate his policy stances and rhetorical appeals to match the apparent conservative zeitgeist of post-1994 American politics, and putting all their proverbial eggs in the Democratic Party's basket would mean the gay rights movement had a vested interest in the party's electoral success that encouraged restraint in its public criticisms of the administration. Even paltry pro-gay reforms undertaken in an environment of general presidential apathy would be praised as groundbreaking by the institutionalized gay rights movement, because anything less could fray their relationship with the Democratic Party and diminish their limited influence over its policies. Effectively, such a strategy could take gay rights out of gay hands and allow party elites to coopt the movement.

As I alluded to in the previous section, there were a number of internal tactical and ideological fissures about what gay political advancement meant and how to achieve it that divided the institutionalized core of the gay rights movement from its marginalized periphery. These outsiders were often dually marginalized on the grounds of class, race, and gender, and many concerns that seemed completely foreign to the institutionalized gay rights lobby like healthcare, AIDS research, and the preservation of the welfare state were matters of life and death for them. The Gay Liberation Front, one of the many queer radical groups created in the wake of the Stonewall riots, was founded to address the inadequacies of the early homophile movement's "apologist perspective" on gay rights that sought conditional queer incorporation into society, instead proposing an energetic strategy of confrontation with the state that recognized sexual oppression “took place in a broad social context” of intersecting dimensions of political marginalization (Shepard 2001, 51). Poverty, homophobia, transphobia, and racism must be combated jointly, and any strategy that focused on one would fail to address the plight of many queer Americans. When the HRC narrowly tailors its messaging and pet issues to present a middle-class, white, and de-sexualized version of what it means to be gay, they implicitly cast all queers who do not fit into that mold aside. Poor gay PWAs without insurance, for example, undermine the HRC’s chaste queer respectability; reliance on the social safety net and sexual immodesty run contrary to the all-American brand of gay the HRC has reasoned is most palatable to straight audiences and, by extension, more likely to result in pro-gay policy reform. We see this in their willingness to endorse candidates like Al D’Amato, Republican Senator from New York, for reelection in 1998 because of his support for gays in the military and employment nondiscrimination protections, despite his support for gutting the welfare state and his unwillingness to devote sufficient funds to combat the AIDS epidemic (Nagourney 1998, B1).

In any case, these activists had a much more expansive view of what the gay rights struggle was, and they were prepared to act on it. Though they lacked the financial resources and social connections to advocate for their interests through institutions, they made frequent use of mass protest and heated confrontations with politicians to attract visibility to their pet cause. The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was a grassroots political organization founded in 1987 to pressure a recalcitrant Republican administration to acknowledge and respond to the AIDS crisis through highly visible dramatic protests, most notably their “die-ins,” wherein protestors would drop to the ground on cue while others drew chalk lines around their ‘dead’ body to bring attention to the disease’s mass casualties (Graf 1992, 54). Five years after ACT

UP/Los Angeles held the group's first die-in, they directed their firebrand AIDS advocacy at the Clinton campaign. Their activists distributed fliers titled "We Can't Trust Slick Willie on AIDS" in advance of a campaign speech, which excoriated the governor for his unwillingness to combat the disease in Arkansas, charging that Clinton was "deliberately misleading" gay activists with empty promises and that his unwillingness to address his record "scorned the concerns of people living with HIV and AIDS everywhere" (ACT UP Los Angeles 1992). However, despite protests like this, Clinton never had to pay much attention to these outsider activists. The media often presented their protests as needless provocation; Clinton was already cooperating with the gay rights lobby, so these ACT UP activists were just being recalcitrant and unwilling to play the political game. Because these grassroots queer activists were typically at the outskirts of the political culture and lacked the extensive access the gay rights lobby had to Clinton and Democratic party elites, they had little control over the types of policies the Clinton administration would pursue.

Ultimately, the Clinton administration was happy to put its foot on the scale to support the gay rights lobby's claim to speak authoritatively for the queer movement. Their sanitized version of queerness was less objectionable to the public than the combative subversion of groups like ACT UP, so Clinton was able to reap the political benefits of the gay community's prolific resources and organization without risking as much political pushback from potential straight supporters who were ambivalent about gay rights (Garretson 2018). Groups like the HRC saw this as a symbiotic relationship as well; social movements can yield transformative policy reforms through cooperation with government elites, and interacting directly with the president confers a sort of legitimacy that allowed the HRC to claim they were the authoritative organization on gay rights. However, to maintain their privileged position as advisors and negotiators they often have to moderate their positions and make concessions to make their demands more palatable to wary politicians who have electoral incentives that discourage them from supporting radical changes to the status quo (Holdo 2019, 445). A recalcitrant group that is unwilling to come to the negotiating table may alienate politicians and parties, causing them to either reach out to other movement actors more amenable to compromise or cut off formal interactions with members of the offending social movement altogether. Both of these options were unappealing to the HRC, which enjoyed unprecedented access to a major political party after decades of gay issues being an unspoken taboo in mainstream political discourse, so their willingness to accept gay rights stasis while continuing to support Democratic candidates is understandable. It nonetheless made the HRC a composite piece of the Democratic Party rather than an effective external agent of change, and effectively tamed the group's already modest reform requests because they now had a vested interest in the Democratic Party's health.

Conclusion:

The Clinton administration rode into office partly on his strength among gay voters, no doubt a product of his progressive rhetoric of incorporation and tolerance during the campaign. Clinton spoke often about allowing gays in the military, passing ambitious anti-discrimination legislation, and, to a lesser extent, creating a federal AIDS czar to more effectively combat the disease. His promises were shaped by a political calculus that gays were a consequential and politically active constituency that could be brought squarely into the Democrat's coalition, though the exact content of the pro-gay promises Clinton made during the campaign were a product of queer intra-movement discourse about whether gays should campaign for assimilation into straight society or a much more radically egalitarian queer liberation. Proponents of respectability politics, represented by the Human Rights Campaign and other highly institutionalized gay interest groups, adopted the former approach, and encouraged Clinton to pursue military reform and anti-discrimination protections that would incorporate an upstanding respectable subset of the gay community into the national fold. These activists, typically from the middle and upper class with white-collar connections to political and business elites, had the resources and contacts to forge a working relationship with the Democratic Party that gave them unprecedented access to President Clinton. Their foot in the door of administration politics, the HRC may not have been able to get Clinton to expend too much political capital to accomplish their goals, though they were given a disproportionate amount of agenda-setting power on queer rights issues, and largely shaped the types of gay issues Clinton was willing to discuss. This came at the detriment of grassroots activists on the periphery of the gay political movement, who saw this narrow focus on queer assimilation into straight society as both normatively undesirable because of the value they saw in their distinct queer identity and practically a distraction from pressing issues like AIDS that disproportionately affected the gay community but did not fit neatly into the HRC's respectability strategy. In the end, the Clinton administration's alliance with the HRC and the latter's partial co-optation disappointed the majority of gay rights activists who felt spurned by the President's repeated unwillingness to expend political capital on their behalf, though his administration's choice gay-related policies to address showcases how debates about respectability structure the outcome of movement-president interactions.

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