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Gay Republicans Fight Perceived Oxymoron

By DAVID CRARY

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-- They are members of an increasingly exclusive club - a district attorney and a mayor from southern California, a legislator from Minnesota, a handful of others scattered across the country. They are elected officials who are Republican and openly gay.

"People think it's an oxymoron," said the Minnesota state senator, Paul Koering. "How can you be gay and be in the Republican Party?"

Never more than a tiny fraction of GOP politicians, openly gay Republicans are about to disappear from Congress with the retirement of Rep. Jim Kolbe of Arizona, and Koering is the lone openly gay GOP state legislator - out of 7,382 seats nationwide. The Democrats, by contrast, have 56 openly gay legislators and embrace an array of gay-rights causes.

Against that backdrop is the scandal involving Republican Mark Foley. The former Florida congressman who abruptly quit because of sexually explicit messages he sent to male pages, and later acknowledged he is gay. Some conservatives cite the scandal as reason for the GOP to further distance itself from gays; others think that's a long-term losing strategy.

According to the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, which supports gay candidates, there are about 350 openly gay elected officials nationwide - up from about 50 in 1990. Of those elected on party tickets, 140 are Democrats and 11 are Republicans, the fund said.

Victory Fund president Chuck Wolfe said the ranks of openly gay GOP candidates have dwindled in recent years as religious conservatives have expanded their influence and made opposition to same-sex marriage a high-profile issue in the 2004 election.

Instead of an all-welcoming "big tent," the GOP "is more of a revival tent," Wolfe said. "It has chased out more and more gay Republicans."

Among those determined to stay is [Peter Hankwitz](#), a TV producer and talent manager who is the GOP nominee challenging incumbent Democrat Brad Sherman for a congressional seat in California's San Fernando Valley.

Hankwitz is a heavy underdog, without funding from national GOP committees. Yet state Republican officials have been supportive, even posing for pictures with Hankwitz and Julian Trevino, his domestic partner since 1997.

Hankwitz resents what he calls "single-issue social politics" - such as the ban-gay-marriage campaign - and wishes he could get to Congress to help moderate his party.

"Unfortunately, we're influenced by the people on the extreme right and extreme left," he said.

Southern California already has openly gay Republicans in office - including San Diego District Attorney Bonnie Dumanis and Redondo Beach Mayor Mike Gin.

Gin says he has no qualms about remaining Republican.

"I believe in the basic tenets - limited government, individual rights, a strong economy and national defense," he said. "It's important to me to provide a more moderate voice."

Likewise, Koering - who opposes abortion and gun control - wants to keep working within the GOP. He recently won a primary over a conservative whose campaign stressed "moral values."

"It would be easy for me to go to the Democrats - they court me on a daily basis," Koering said. "But my home is in the Republican Party. I'm not going to let the people with a radical agenda kick me out."

Nationally, GOP officials have voiced no concern about the scarcity of openly gay officeholders. Tara Wall of the Republican National Committee and Alex Johnson of the Republican Legislative Campaign Committee said it wasn't a priority.

"We look for good candidates who believe in our message," said Johnson. "If they happen to be gay, it's their prerogative."

Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, said the issue is not a candidate's sexual orientation in and of itself. "It's whether they support pro-family policies," he said.

Democratic politicians generally seek gay support and encourage gay candidacies.

Gay Democrats have won legislative seats even in seemingly inhospitable territory, scoring breakthroughs recently in Oklahoma, Alabama, Arkansas, North Carolina and Georgia.

Perkins said the GOP shouldn't worry about losing votes of gays because their numbers are dwarfed by Christian conservatives. He predicted that any GOP presidential hopeful deemed a gay-rights supporter would be denied the 2008 nomination.

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The Rev. Louis Sheldon of the Traditional Values Coalition urged the GOP to reject the concept of a "big tent" welcoming gays.

"What happens is not a happy tent like the Barnum and Bailey circus," he said. "You end up with a lot of mush in it."

Sheldon predicted that Republican organizers, because of the Foley scandal, would be more aggressive in asking if prospective candidates are gay.

The president of the largest national gay rights group, Joe Solmonese of the Human Rights Campaign, said the GOP was at a significant crossroads.

"Most Americans believe both parties ought to be open and inclusive," he said. "So you've got the Republican leadership in a quandary: how do you balance that public sentiment ... with the powerful voting bloc of the radical right?"

For nearly 30 years, a group called Log Cabin Republicans has lobbied to make the GOP more open to gays. Its executive vice president, Patrick Sammon, is optimistic.

"Anti-gay Republicans want a narrow agenda that only 25 to 30 percent of Americans actually agree with," Sammon said. "Republican officeholders are shrewd enough to understand that's a losing strategy, that the party risks being on the wrong side of history."

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