

# UNDERSTANDING THE GAY AND LESBIAN VOTE IN '92

By Murray Edelman

The 1992 presidential election was the first time that the major candidates took clear and differing positions on the issue of gay rights. This focus has raised questions about the size and nature of the gay vote. Through examining recent exit polls by Voter Research and Surveys (VRS), I've sought to answer these questions and, incidentally, add information to the debate over allowing homosexuals to serve in the military.

Perhaps the clearest sign of the lack of reliable polling data on homosexuals is that the 1948 Kinsey estimated incidence of 10% has remained the standard. It is a testament to the skill of the gay leadership that an unscientific measure of sexual behavior in 1948 (when the word gay did not refer to homosexuality) has been repeatedly reported by the media as the standard estimate of the incidence of people who define themselves as gay or lesbian. The exit polls provide a rare opportunity to study this population using current methods of scientific polling.

The VRS study includes 300 precincts or voting places from the national survey, supplemented by 50 additional precincts from state surveys in California and New York where the question of sexual orientation was asked. The combined sample is weighted to reflect the proper share of Californians and New Yorkers in the national vote. Supplementary evidence comes from the *Los Angeles Times* exit poll of 200 national precincts.

On the back of the VRS exit poll questionnaire, as the last choice after the question "Do any of the following apply to you?", is the response, "Gay/lesbian/bisexual," with a "yes" and "no" box to the right. "Bisexual" was included so that the category would be interpreted to mean that one did not have to be exclusively of one preference to answer in the affirmative. My analysis is based on the 260 gay

men and 206 lesbians checking the "yes" box to this item.

## Numbers

About 2.4% of all people turning the questionnaire over checked the box. This is a likely understatement of the size of the gay vote, since for operational efficiency, VRS only took input on this item when the "yes" box was checked (which means there is no way to distinguish "no" from "no response"). The denominator is thus the number of people answering any question on the back side of the questionnaire. Our studies have shown that up to 10 to 20% may omit the last item. After correcting for the likely omits, the VRS estimate rises to 3%. The *Los Angeles Times* went about things somewhat differently. Their categories were "Gay or lesbian" and "Not gay or lesbian". Using as a base only respondents answering this question, they estimated the gay vote at 3%. This is an unusually close agreement for two completely independent surveys.

It still could be that both estimates understate the proportion of homosexual voters. Each survey emphasized confidentiality and asked respondents to put their questionnaires in a box. Still, given the sensitive nature of the item and the negative attitudes of society towards lesbians and gays, some respondents might have failed to answer the question accurately.

While 3% is far below the 10% Kinsey estimate, it is consistent with other recent surveys. Rogers and Turner concluded from a review of five probability studies conducted between 1970 through 1990 that "estimated minimums of 5 to 7% of U.S. men report some same-gender sexual contact during adulthood" and that one-quarter to one-half of this total also report having had such contacts during the preceding 12 months.<sup>1</sup>

## The Demographics

The exit poll data provide a rare glimpse of the demographics of homosexual voters. Because of the cost of getting a large enough sample to adequately measure self-defined homosexuals, the only prior attempts have been by non-probability methods. While the VRS demographics are limited to voters, as opposed to the general population, they are based on probability methods. Age is the most striking demographic: 71% of gay men and 69% of gay women are under 45, as compared to 56% of all men and 58% of all women in the 1992 electorate, with most of the difference occurring in the 18-29 age range. Self-identifying homosexuals now represent 5% of the 18-29 age group. The modern-day gay liberation movement marks its inception in June, 1969 (with the "Stonewall" rebellion). An 18-year old then would be 41 today. The younger age group would thus have had a more supportive environment for self-expression and self-identification.

Debate has centered recently around permitting homosexuals to serve in the military, and the public is split. Of particular relevance to this issue is the proportion of gays in the military. Since "military veteran" was asked in the same list as "gay/lesbian/bisexual," we can make some inferences about the military even though the sample sizes, given in parenthesis, may be small. VRS found that gay men are 3% of the 18-44 age group of male veteran voters (729); lesbians are 8% of female veterans 18-44 (152). In the youngest age group of 18-29, gay men are 8% of veteran men (174); lesbians are an even larger proportion of female veterans in the youngest age group, but the sample is too small. Since the youngest age group of veterans more closely resembles the ages of the active military, the proportion of gays in today's armed forces could be considerably higher than the proportion in the public at large.

## THE GAY AND LESBIAN VOTE IN 1992

	Gay Men	All Men	Lesbians	All Women
Presidential Vote	%	%	%	%
Clinton	70	41	70	46
Bush	14	38	17	37
Perot	16	21	13	17
Age				
18-29	33	21	28	21
30-44	38	35	41	37
45-49	20	23	18	23
60+	10	21	12	19
Race				
White	86	88	81	86
Black	7	7	13	9
Hispanic	5	3	3	3
Other	2	2	2	2
Party ID				
Democrat	54	34	46	41
Republican	18	36	17	34
Independent	20	25	26	21
Something else	9	4	11	4
Ideology				
Liberal	49	19	53	24
Moderate	43	47	40	50
Conservative	8	33	7	27
Education				
No HS	5	7	3	6
HS grad	26	24	15	27
Some college	28	28	35	30
College grad	20	24	22	22
Post grad	21	17	25	14
Family Income				
Less 15K	18	12	26	16
15-30K	26	23	26	25
30-50K	28	30	29	29
50-75K	16	20	12	19
Over 75K	12	14	6	11
Born Again Christian	23	19	18	19
Military Veteran	26	34	10	3
Household Member in Labor Union	29	21	26	19
Once Thought I Would Vote for Ross Perot	44	44	48	39
Sample Sizes	260	7802	206	8884

Source: 1992 VRS exit poll.

Among men, there is not much difference in educational level between gay men and all respondents. Twenty-five percent of lesbians, however, have had post-graduate training, as compared to 14% of all women. The educational difference does not translate into household income: 30% of all women have a family income over \$50,000, but only 18% of lesbians do. Similarly, 34% of all men but just 18% of gay men, have incomes over \$50,000. These findings may reflect the age differences—gay men being a relatively younger group, and younger people having lower income on average. They may also reflect a difference in living arrangements (or how family is defined).

There are considerably fewer Protestants among gay men and lesbians than among all voters, and considerably more choosing "something else" or no religion. But the proportion of gays describing themselves as born-again Christians is the

same as that of all voters. (There are no significant differences between homosexuals and all voters on a different question, "What religion were you brought up in?", asked in the *Los Angeles Times* exit poll.)

### Electoral Preferences

Both gay men and lesbians gave Clinton 70% of their vote. This overwhelming show of support is surpassed only slightly by the Democrat's strength among blacks and Jews. Fifty-four percent of gay men and 46% of lesbians identified as Democrats, compared with 34% for all men and 41% for all women. The difference is even greater for self-described ideology: Forty-nine percent of gay men and 53% of lesbians said they are liberal, compared with only 19% and 24%, respectively, for all men and women.

There is evidence that homosexuals were relatively active politically in the campaign. They were three times as likely to wear a campaign button as all voters, and they were twice as likely to have been contacted by a campaign. The Human Rights Campaign Fund, a leading gay lobbying and political action group, raised \$5 million in 1992—double the amount raised two years earlier.

Thus, in general, it appears that 1992 marked the arrival of homosexuals on the national electoral scene.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Susan M. Rogers and Charles F. Turner, "Male-Male Sexual Contact in the U.S.A.: Findings from Five Sample Surveys, 1970-1990," *Journal of Sex Research*, Vol 28, No. 4, November, 1991, pp. 491-519.

*Murray Edelman, is director,  
Voter Research & Surveys.*