OUT OF THE CLOSET, INTO THE VOTING BOOTH

Gay Power, Politics, and Visibility in Houston, Texas

1975-1985

by

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INTRODUCTION

On December 12, 2009, Houston, Texas became the most populous city in the United States to elect an openly gay mayor. The city of 2.2 million elected Annise Parker. "Tonight the voters of Houston have opened the door to history," Parker said on election night, standing next to her partner of more than 19 years. "This election has changed the world for the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered community." The election marked Parker's seventh consecutive victory in city politics. She first served three terms as city council member and then served three terms as city controller. Still, the outcome puzzled national observers. How could a city like Houston, in a deeply conservative state like Texas, elect an openly gay mayor before cities like New York City or San Francisco? The question revealed a historical blind spot.[1]

Although the nationwide struggle for gay freedom extended as far back as the early 20th century, historians typically trace the origins of the modern gay rights movement to the Stonewall Riots in New York City in 1969. On a Friday evening, June 27, 1969, the police raided the Stonewall Inn, a popular gay bar in Greenwich Village. A crowd of young, mostly non-white gay men, lesbians, and drag queens resisted the harassment and a full-scale, multi-day riot ensued. The uprising unleashed a nationwide gay "liberation" movement.[2] On the eve of the Stonewall Riots, there were roughly 50 gay and lesbian social change organizations in the United States. By the mid-1970s, there

[1] James C. McKinley Jr., "Houston Is Largest City to Elect Openly Gay Mayor," *New York Times*, December 12, 2009; James C. McKinley Jr., "A Fallen Barrier, but Little Fanfare," *New York Times*, December 14, 2009.

[2] John D'Emilio, "Stonewall: Myth and Meaning," in *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 147.

were more than 800. The organizations spread to cities and towns in every corner of the country, including Houston.[3]

In September 1975, the Houston Gay Political Caucus incorporated in the State of Texas with a mission "to promote human equality and freedom for all persons regardless of affectional or sexual preference or orientation."[4] The fledgling organization sought to influence public policy and reform laws so that gay men and lesbians in Houston enjoyed fair and equal treatment. The caucus focused primarily on electing gay-friendly candidates to local office, and by the early 1980s, it began to garner national acclaim for its accomplishments.

In 1981, the *New York Times* described the caucus as a "major political force," and the executive director of the National Gay Task Force deemed Houston's gay political organization as "right at the top of the list" in terms of influence and sophistication, right alongside San Francisco's.[5] In 1982, a columnist at the *New York Native*, a gay newspaper wrote, "Houston undoubtedly stands as the best organized gay political base between the two coasts and beats many cities on the east and west coasts that ought to have more to brag about."[6] The caucus operated as the city's largest and most influential gay rights organization.

The Houston Gay Political Caucus, just like the broader gay history of Houston, has never been the subject of careful historical study. This thesis covers the caucus' first decade, beginning in 1975 and ending in 1985, and challenges the historiographical

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[3] John D'Emilio, "Cycles of Change, Questions of Strategy: The Gay and Lesbian Movement After Fifty Years," in *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 83.

[4] "Articles of Incorporation of the Gay Political Caucus," September 9, 1975, Box 1, Folder 22, M. Robert Schwab Collection. MSS 344. Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

[5] William K. Stevens, "Houston Accepts New Political Force," *New York Times*, November 2, 1981.

[6] Larry Bush, "The Year Gone By," *New York Native*, January 3, 1983.

consensus that argues there was not a viable movement for gay rights in the South. Despite the clear expansion of the gay rights movement across the United States in the 1970s, most studies of the movement continue to focus on California and the northeast. Historians have overlooked the South, focusing instead on the rise of modern conservatism in the region.[7] Historian and activist James Sears chipped away at this blind spot with the publication of *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South.* His anthology of southern narratives remains an outlier in the historical study of the gay rights movement, and many histories still treat the South as a "vast desert" for gay men and lesbians.[8]

Houston in the 1960s and 1970s hosted a large and socially active gay population, with gay observers approvingly designating it the "homosexual playground of the South."[9] The lively social life of gay men and lesbians centered in Montrose, a gay neighborhood west of downtown Houston once called the "strangest neighborhood in Texas."[10] By 1975, Houston had upwards of 20 gay bars, four gay news publications, and a handful of gay churches and social organizations.[11] Before the founding of the caucus, the vast majority of homosexuals in Houston remained both closeted and apolitical. Gay

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[7] Gillian Frank, "'The Civil Rights of Parents': Race and Conservative Politics in Anita Bryant's Campaign against Gay Rights in 1970s Florida," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Volume 22, Number 1, January 2013,158; Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*: *Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (2007); Dan Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservativism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (1995); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (2002); Paul Boyer, "The Evangelical Resurgence in 1970s American Protestantism" in Schulman and Zelizer, *Rightward Bound;* Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism* (2008); Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Rightwing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (1995); Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, "Antiabortion, Antifeminism, and the Rise of the New Right," *Feminist Studies*, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 206-46.

[8] James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), ix.

[9] Ibid., 49

[10] Al Reinert and Thorne Dreyer, "Montrose Lives!," *Texas Monthly*, April 1973.

[11] The publications included the *Nuntius*, the *Pointblank Times*, *Contact*, and *This Week In Texas.* Ralph W. Davis, "Houston," *Ciao!*, December 1974.

men and lesbians in Houston did not view their sexuality in political terms. Instead, they focused on cultivating social communities and spaces of leisure. This changed with the founding of the caucus.

The Houston Gay Political Caucus channeled the city's expansive gay community into a political tour de force. It relied primarily on a voting-based strategy. As a sexual minority, gay men and lesbians commanded few votes in comparison to heterosexual residents. Still, the caucus realized that if the gay community voted in unison, it could swing low-turnout, closely contested elections toward gay-friendly candidates. The caucus vetted candidates and arrived at endorsements for the community to support. Working on the margins of elections, this unified "gay voting bloc" amplified the political power of Houston's gay community. In 1979, the caucus garnered public pledges of support from half of city council, and in 1981, the city elected a mayor that openly credited the gay community for the success of her political career.

The Houston Gay Political Caucus is important to the study of gay rights, in part, because it manipulated the political *visibility* of gay men and lesbians like few other movements at that time. Scholars of the gay rights movement generally focus on efforts that required gay men and lesbians to "come out." Historians argue that success in shaping public opinion and public policy followed from mass demonstrations of visibility: marches, picket-lines, rallies, and protests.[12] That type of organizing, however, failed to mobilize Houston's mass gay population in the 1970s.

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[12] Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney, *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America* (New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 1999); Nadine Smith, "Three Marches, Many Lessons," in *Creating Change: Sexuality, Public Policy, and Civil Rights*, 1st ed. (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000), 438–50; D'Emilio, "Cycles of Change, Questions of Strategy: The Gay and Lesbian Movement After Fifty Years," 78–98; Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 171–246; Timothy Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout: Chicago and the Rise of Gay*

The strategy of the Houston Gay Political Caucus was effective because it created an opportunity for *closeted* gay men and lesbians to participate in the gay rights movement without forcing them to come out. The secrecy of the voting booth allowed closeted individuals to exert their political power without facing the risks of leaving the closet. In addition to private meetings, the caucus maintained a confidential mailing list that permitted it to reach out to a vast number of gay men and lesbians. The strategy only required a handful of leaders to be out-of-the-closet. The rest could be closeted and still contribute to the gay rights cause in Houston simply by casting their ballots for the candidates endorsed by the caucus.

This strategy separated the caucus from a number of other gay rights movements in the 1970s and makes it particularly ripe for study. In 1978, for example, the San Francisco gay rights leader Harvey Milk famously declared, "Every gay person MUST come out" if the movement was to succeed.[13] In Houston, meanwhile, the caucus actively assured its constituents that the core of its political strategy did not require gay men and lesbians to come out.

My thesis is organized chronologically and separates a decade of caucus history into three main periods. The first chapter examines the first three years of the Houston Gay Political Caucus, from 1975 to 1978, and uncovers how the caucus built a politically conscious gay community. It tracks the origins of the caucus' voting-based strategy and respectability politics. The caucus succeeded during this period in building up both a significant membership base and a robust organizational infrastructure. The second chapter focuses on the period between 1979 and 1983, and demonstrates how the caucus

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Politics, Politics and Culture in Modern America (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 95–131.

[13] Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 390.

built on its early successes and transformed itself into a public presence in politics. During this period, it reached the height of its political power and influence. Dozens of political candidates vied for its endorsement. By 1979, seven city council members publicly declared their support for the caucus, and in 1981, the city elected a mayor openly supportive of the gay community. The final chapter explores the backlash to the insurgent power after the passage of a municipal non-discrimination ordinance. The chapter covers the years 1984 and 1985 and examines the seven-month long campaign leading up to a referendum, initiated by a virulently anti-gay opposition to repeal the non-discrimination ordinance during the HIV/AIDS crisis. Taken together, the three chapters offer a new interpretation of gay history by expanding the modern history of sexuality to include both those openly gay and those in the closet. My study captures the ideas and importance of thousands of more people than previous historical work focused solely on only out gay men and lesbians.

This thesis uses newspapers, personal papers, and institutional records to uncover the history of the gay rights movement in Houston. My study also draws on oral histories with leaders of the caucus that I conducted. In addition, I use interviews conducted in 1983 for a University of Houston Master's Thesis, which are an important resource for the study of the gay rights organization since many of the caucus leaders died during the HIV/AIDS crisis in the years following the interviews.[14] This thesis also draws on a collection of papers donated to the University of Houston in August 2017 that includes minutes of the caucus between 1979 and 1986.

[14] The master's thesis completed in 1983 covers the history of the gay community, both politically and socially, between 1969 and 1981. Bruce Remmington, "Twelve Fighting Years: Homosexuals In Houston, 1969-1981" (University of Houston, 1983).

In the late 1970s, a twenty-three-year-old Annise Parker wandered into her first meeting of the Houston Gay Political Caucus. She joined the caucus as a rank-and-file member, stuffing envelopes, volunteering on campaigns, screening candidates, recruiting members, and registering voters. In 1983, she took on an increased role, becoming the chair of the group's Board of Trustees. In 1986, the caucus elected Annise Parker as the president of the organization. The caucus profoundly affected Mayor Annise Parker's life and political career. "One of the reasons I became mayor is the political organizing skills I learned in the caucus," Parker recently recalled.[15] This thesis tells the story of that caucus.

[15] Annise Parker, interview with the author, November 3, 2017.

CHAPTER 1

Building a Gay Political Community

1975-1978

On the morning of Friday, August 1, 1975, Gary J. Van Ooteghem testified before Harris County's Commissioners Court. The mustachioed thirty-three year old was a familiar face to the county's five-person administrative council. The county recruited him from Chicago earlier that year to serve as comptroller of the treasury. A businessman with an understated demeanor, Van Ooteghem earned praise from his superiors as he rectified the county's disorganized finances. He appeared before the commissioners many times, but on this occasion, just before he began his speech in the crowded courtroom, Van Ooteghem requested to appear as a "private citizen" and not a "public representative." Van Ooteghem was a closeted gay man—until now.[1]

Sitting before the conservative county government, Van Ooteghem assailed the elected officials for their indifference toward civil rights and the lack of a policy prohibiting job discrimination against minorities. He proposed a sample job protection resolution to safeguard public employees from discrimination on the basis of, among other qualities, "sexual and affectional" preferences. "My interest in the matter is that I am a homosexual and have been for many years," Van Ooteghem declared, outing himself to his employers and the public. He told the commissioners he would not have

[1] Gary Van Ooteghem, "Presentation Concerning Civil Rights for Homosexuals," Statement to the Harris County Commissioners Court, No. 74.75, Houston, Texas, August 1, 1975; Pokey Anderson, "My Right to Be What I Am," *Pointblank Times*, September 1975.

"dreamed" of revealing this deep, personal secret "as recently as a year ago." Van Ooteghem drew inspiration from the public coming out of Leonard Matlovich.[2]

Five months earlier, on March 6, 1975, Leonard Matlovich, a round-faced Air Force Technical Sergeant, sauntered into his commander's office at the Langley Air Force Base in Virginia with a letter in hand. "After some years of uncertainty, I have arrived at the conclusion that my sexual preferences are homosexual as opposed to heterosexual," the letter read. "I have also concluded that my sexual preferences will in no way interfere with my Air Force duties." The military explicitly banned homosexuals from serving in the military. The letter confused the commander. "It means *Brown v The Board of Education*," Matlovich curtly explained.[3] From Houston, Gary Van Ooteghem watched admiringly as the presumptive "test case" ricocheted across the media, with Matlovich appearing on the front page of the *New York Times* on May 26, 1975.[4] Van Ooteghem, who had served in the U.S. Navy Reserve himself, respected Matlovich's courage.

Matlovich decided to write the letter with the urging and assistance of a relatively new force in gay politics, the National Gay Task Force. Founded in 1973 by veteran New York City gay activists, the NGTF fashioned a new path for the gay rights movement. Tired of the reactionary, chaotic politics and brash, hit-and-run tactics of the late 1960s, the founders of the new national civil-rights group envisioned a more professional organization, with a board of directors and full time staff.[5] Historian Lillian Faderman

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[2] Gary Van Ooteghem, interview with Bruce Remmington, April 14, 1983; Van Ooteghem, "Presentation Concerning Civil Rights for Homosexuals."

[3] Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 198.

[4] Lesley Oelsner, "Homosexual Is Fighting Military Ouster," *New York Times*, May 26, 1975.

[5] John D'Emilio, "Organizational Tales: Interpreting the NGLTF Story," in *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 103.

described its mantra as, "Off the street and into the boardrooms—and courthouses and Congress, too."[6] A challenge to the military's homosexual policy, headlined by an attractive thirty-one-year-old, decorated Vietnam War veteran, perfectly fit the strategy of this new organization.

Gary Van Ooteghem felt a kinship with the establishment-minded demeanor of the National Gay Task Force. After exchanging letters with Matlovich, in July 1975, he flew out to Washington D.C. and spent five "really great" days with Matlovich and Bruce Voeller, the executive director of the National Gay Task Force. The trip coincided with a lobbying sprint on Capitol Hill. At a press conference in March, twenty-four congressional representatives coordinated with the NGTF to introduce the "Civil Rights Amendment of 1975," a bill to extend protections under the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 to include sexual and affectional preferences. Van Ooteghem witnessed this new incarnation of gay politics first-hand. He shadowed Matlovich and Voeller through the halls of Congress as they worked to enlist cosponsors and drum up support for the bill. The bill never passed, but the trip "triggered" a reaction in Van Ooteghem. He had to come out.[7]

Though only a mid-level county employee, Van Ooteghem viewed his coming out as part of a national movement. He warned the commissioners of a "mass coming-out of the homosexual community," a rippling, domino effect of outings in various cities across the country. Matlovich inspired him to come out, and Van Ooteghem hoped to inspire somebody else. "The movement has gained momentum by having gay individuals, such as myself, realize that we no longer must suffer the intimidation and persecution placed

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6 Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 260.

7 Van Ooteghem, interview; Anderson, "My Right to Be What I Am."

on us by others," he told the commissioners. No amount of inspiration, however, could overcome the consequences faced by coming out in this moment, namely, the risk of losing one's job.[8]

On July 31, 1975, the day before Van Ooteghem planned to give his testimony, the Harris County Treasurer fired him. Van Ooteghem warned his boss of his intention to give the speech. His boss forbade him from attending the meeting, arguing that it constituted "politicking on county time." Privately, Van Ooteghem said his boss told him he would endanger the department's budget, fearing that the commissioners would not tolerate county funds being paid to a known homosexual in such an esteemed position. Van Ooteghem followed through with his original plan nonetheless. "I choose to step forward now only because of my own strong, personal convictions on the matter," he told the commissioners. "I do so, needless to say, at great personal risk and jeopardy." Van Ooteghem faced the fate of thousands of other career-minded gay men and lesbians before him.[9]

Following his speech, Van Ooteghem lost his $26,000 a year salary. He sold his $72,000 home. He gave up his two dogs. "Don't get me wrong. I love living comfortably," he said at the time. "But there are certain things I believe in more than money – my right to be what I am and be honest."[10] Like many gay men and lesbians before him, he could have slipped away, moved elsewhere, and started over. "Not Van

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[8] Van Ooteghem, "Presentation Concerning Civil Rights for Homosexuals;" "Gays 1, Harris County 0," *LXIX*, March 25, 1978."

[9] Van Ooteghem, Interview; Van Ooteghem, "Presentation Concerning Civil Rights for Homosexuals"; Anderson, "My Right to Be What I Am."

[10] Anderson.

Ooteghem," wrote an admiring friend years later. "For him the battle was joined."[11] On August 29, 1975, nearly a month after his speech, Van Ooteghem filed a lawsuit against the county, seeking $150,000 in damages and an injunction preventing similar actions by the county in the future.[12] The ACLU represented him in the case. Overnight, Van Ooteghem enlisted as an activist in a burgeoning gay rights movement. Locally, however, the movement barely existed.

In coming out, Van Ooteghem joined only a handful of other publicly open gay and lesbian activists in Houston, many of whom had tried and failed in decades past to establish and sustain successful political movements. Despite a vibrant gay social atmosphere, Houston's gay community hosted few politically oriented organizations. The gay population was not politically engaged. Inspired by the National Gay Task Force, however, Van Ooteghem concluded the city needed a gay rights organization. The organization that arose came to be called the Houston Gay Political Caucus.

Between 1975 and 1978, the Houston Gay Political Caucus transformed Houston's gay population into a politically aware, politically engaged community. The caucus learned from the failures of previous organizations and built a structure that allowed closeted gay men and lesbians to participate in the gay rights movement without facing the consequences of coming out. Over this period, the concept of a "gay community" changed from a geographical term, the gay bars and businesses where

[11] Robert Schwab, "Gary Van Ooteghem," n.d., Box 1, Folder 4, M. Robert Schwab Collection, MSS 344, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.
[12] "County Official Comes Out, Is Fired, and Files a Lawsuit," *Contact*, October 8, 1975.

homosexuals socialized, to a political term, a group of people with shared goals and aspirations in pursuit of freedoms and equality.[13]

Van Ooteghem brought his establishment know-how to the table and kick-started the formation of the Houston Gay Political Caucus. He drew on more than a decade of business and government experience in creating the group's political infrastructure, committees, and bureaucracy. The core political strategy of the caucus, however, did not originate with Van Ooteghem. Months before Van Ooteghem publicly came out, a separate group of Houston activists similarly moved to create a gay rights organization. After coming out, Van Ooteghem joined forces with these activists to officially form the caucus. The successful political strategy they formulated transformed the lives of gay men and lesbians in Houston for decades to come.

Creating A Gay Voting Bloc

A few days after the group of congress members proposed the "Civil Rights Amendment of 1975" in Washington D.C., a separate gay rights battle erupted in Austin, Texas. At 2 a.m. on May 29, 1975, in a last-resort effort near the end of a marathon legislative session in the Texas Legislature, Houston Representative Craig Washington introduced a one-line amendment to an omnibus legislative package to repeal the state's same-sex sodomy statute.[14]

Following a trend among state legislatures in the 1960s, Texas liberalized its long-standing sex laws, decriminalizing adultery, fornication, seduction, and bestiality. But the emerging visibility of the national gay liberation movement produced a backlash

[13] Ray Hill originally articulated this idea in response to the Anita Bryant protest, though it fits with the development of the caucus over this period in general. Ray Hill, interview with author, November 4, 2017.
[14] "Debate on the Criminalization of Private Homosexual Acts," May 29, 1975, Box 1, Folder 22, M. Robert Schwab Collection, MSS 344, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

among Texas lawmakers. In 1973, the legislature passed the Texas Homosexual Conduct Law, revising the sodomy statute to criminalize anal and oral sex among homosexuals. The new law specifically excluded criminalizing such conduct among heterosexuals—and animals. For the first time in Texas legal history, the law also criminalized female same-sex interactions. The statute—section 21.06—categorized this "homosexual conduct" as a misdemeanor, with a fine up to $200. Houston Representative Craig Washington moved to repeal it; his homophobic colleagues resisted.[15]

Interrupted by jeers and giggles, the fifty-minute debate over the repeal of the sodomy statute featured a slew of demagogic comments that mocked homosexuals. "I'm serious about this amendment—I know you're going to vote it down but I think you're doing something that's morally wrong for the people concerned," Washington pleaded, facing raucous laughter from his colleagues. One legislator snatched a purse from a secretary's desk and mockingly pranced around the chamber. Another yelled, "Only a homosexual would make such a proposal!" The vote ended against Washington, 117 nays to 14 ayes, and the House adjourned. The mere mention of homosexuality elicited laughter from the representatives. In 1975 Texas, homosexual rights were a joke.[16]

In Houston, the episode outraged Linda "Pokey" Anderson, a 26-year-old free-lance secretary reared in the oftentimes-adversarial politics of lesbianism and feminism. The 5'1" Midwestern transplant moved to Houston in 1972, and up until 1975, only dabbled in politics; she alternated between the women's movement—which she found to be homophobic—and the gay rights movement—which she found to be sexist. But the charade in the legislature focused her attention. "It's one thing to be a second class

[15] Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle*, 272–73.

[16] Bill Belvando, "House Vote Keeps Gay a Crime," *Contact*, August 13, 1975; Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 217–18."

citizen," Anderson later remembered. "It's another thing to be laughed at in a placed that is supposed to be, you know, dignified." It is unclear why, exactly, this particular outburst of homophobia, out of so many, moved Anderson to action. Regardless, the lopsided vote highlighted in clear terms the status of gay men and lesbians in eyes of state lawmakers. She invited three of her politically savvy, gay male friends to her apartment to discuss the creation of a gay political organization. She had an idea. "You know, I'm always willing to give society a chance to change in an orderly legal way," Anderson recalled of her thinking. "I figured let's try the electoral process." Her idea became the core political strategy of the Houston Gay Political Caucus.[17]

Pokey Anderson believed homosexuals needed to elect gay-friendly political candidates, but as a minority, gay men and lesbians controlled few votes. If the community voted in unison, however, homosexuals could swing low-turnout, closely contested elections toward candidates favorable to the gay community. Working on the margins of elections, this unified "gay voting bloc" could amplify the political power of the gay community. If the community influenced enough elections, and elected enough gay-friendly candidates, they might be able to secure laws friendlier to homosexuals.[18]

Anderson estimated the "gay voting bloc" needed to organize around five percent of Houston's voting population. Five percent of the vote could swing an election. The mayoral runoff in 1971, for example, came down to just 15,000 votes—a 5.63%

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[17] This thesis utilizes three separate interviews conducted with Anderson. For clarity, subsequent notes will include the full citation. Pokey Anderson, interview with James T. Sears, October 1, 1994; Pokey Anderson, interview with Erin Graham, July 25, 2006, Houston Oral History Project, University of Houston; Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle*, 272.

[18] Pokey Anderson, interview with James T. Sears, October 1, 1994; Pokey Anderson, interview with Erin Graham, July 25, 2006, Houston Oral History Project, University of Houston.

difference in a race that drew more than 265,000 voters.[19] The 1973 race two years later was even closer. Only 2,806 votes—just 1.15% of more than 244,000 votes—decided that race.[20] With a total population hovering around 1.4 million people, Anderson believed they could find a few thousand gay men and lesbians to vote in unison.

Most important, the bloc-voting strategy nullified the need for gay men and lesbians to come out, a barrier that had hampered years of political organizing among Houston's closeted population. The secrecy of the voting booth allowed closeted individuals to exert political power without facing the risks of leaving the closet. "Vote together and you don't have to come out of the closet if you don't want to," Anderson later recalled of the political strategy. "The whole iceberg could be underwater in the closet." A handful of "out-of-the-closet" gay men and women—like Anderson, or Van Ooteghem—could serve as spokespersons for the mass of closeted gay men and lesbians.[21]

To underscore this point, the closet previously inhibited thousands of gay men and lesbians from participating in the gay rights movement. They could not rally, march, picket, or protest, without fearing retribution. The bloc-voting strategy, however, gave them political agency. It gave them a way to connect their sexuality to the political movement. This was an important development for Houston's gay community.

On Monday, June 30, 1975, with newspaper reporters, television cameras, and radio correspondents before her, Pokey Anderson publicly put a name to her idea. "To be laughed at, is not something that is very pleasant," she began referencing the sodomy

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[19] "Houston Mayor – 1971 Runoff," Our Campaigns, accessed September 15, 2017, www.ourcampaigns.com/RaceDetail.html?RaceID=265661.

[20] "Houston Mayor – 1973 Runoff," Our Campaigns, accessed September 15, 2017, www.ourcampaigns.com/RaceDetail.html?RaceID=265655.

[21] Pokey Anderson, interview with James T. Sears, October 1, 1994.

debate. “So we’ve decided in Houston to form the Gay Political Caucus.” Anderson told reporters 100,000 gay men and lesbians lived in Houston.[22] The unverified, though oft-repeated statistic developed out of a claim made in 1948 by the sexologist Alfred Kinsey that 10 percent of males were “more or less exclusively homosexual.”[23] Regardless of the size of the gay population, the newly formed Houston Gay Political Caucus planned to register every last one of them to vote.

The preliminary “gay issues” the caucus planned to target included repealing the state sodomy statute, passing statewide legislation banning discrimination against homosexuals, pushing for the hiring of gay men and lesbians in the police force, and calling for the inclusion of homosexual perspectives in public school sex education classes.[24] The ambitious lineup of issues put Houston politicians on notice. However, in the weeks following the press conference, the Houston Gay Political Caucus remained just an idea; that is, until Gary Van Ooteghem went public.

The media frenzy following Van Ooteghem’s testimony—and firing—caught the attention of Pokey Anderson. Shortly thereafter, she interviewed Van Ooteghem for the local lesbian-feminist newspaper, *The Pointblank Times,* and simultaneously pitched to him the idea of a gay political organization that sought incremental change through the ballot box. The idea appealed to Van Ooteghem. It mirrored many of the same priorities of the National Gay Task Force. He joined the effort. “It was a nice matching of the

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[22] Pokey Anderson, interview with James T. Sears, October 1, 1994; “City’s Gays Seek to Gain Acceptance,” *Houston Post*, July 1, 1975; Fan Snodgrass, “Gays Form Political Caucus; Voter Registration Drive Set,” *Daily Cougar*, July 3, 1975.

[23] Alfred C. Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1998), 651; John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 33–37.

[24] Jan Jarboe, “Homosexuals Seek to Win New Laws By Influencing Candidates Here,” *Houston Chronicle*, July 13, 1975.

activist with our fervor and the business people who had been in the closet," Anderson later said of Van Ooteghem, adding that he knew how to work in a way that "only people that are used to power know how to do."[25] The caucus moved from an idea to reality.

On September 9, 1975, a month-and-a-half after Van Ooteghem's outing, the Houston Gay Political Caucus incorporated with the State of Texas. It became the first non-profit in the state with "gay" in its title.[26] Its founding mission: "To promote human equality and freedom for all persons regardless of affectional or sexual preference or orientation."[27] The small gathering elected Gary Van Ooteghem to be their first president. Van Ooteghem's demeanor dramatically impacted the character of the fledgling gay rights organization.

Gay Respectability Politics

The caucus described itself as a respectable gathering of law-abiding, morally upright, rational people, who simply wanted to enjoy the same rights as everyone else. Its stated political style, outlined in a 1977 reflection, exemplified this outlook: "Our approach is that we are reasonable people making legitimate requests. We dress and speak like the people whose help we are seeking. Confrontation is avoided."[28] The caucus wanted to make the idea of working with gay activists palatable to straight candidates. It wanted to change the public's view of gay activism. "In the 60s if you were a gay activist you were a political radical," said one caucus leader at the June 1975 press

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[25] Pokey Anderson, interview with James T. Sears, October 12, 1994; Anderson, "My Right to Be What I Am."

[26] Kevin MacLaughlin, "Houston GPC at 3," *Upfront*, September 15, 1978.

[27] "Articles of Incorporation of the Gay Political Caucus," September 9, 1975, Box 1, Folder 22, M. Robert Schwab Collection. MSS 344. Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

[28] Gary Van Ooteghem, Mort Schwab, and Donald Hrachovy, "Local Political Organizations," 1977, Houston LGBT History, accessed October 1, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org./Houston80s/GPC/1977/77-GPC-Principles.pdf. Original source not given on website.

conference. “The community is more broad-based now.”[29] The caucus also wanted to change how the gay population *itself* viewed gay activism.

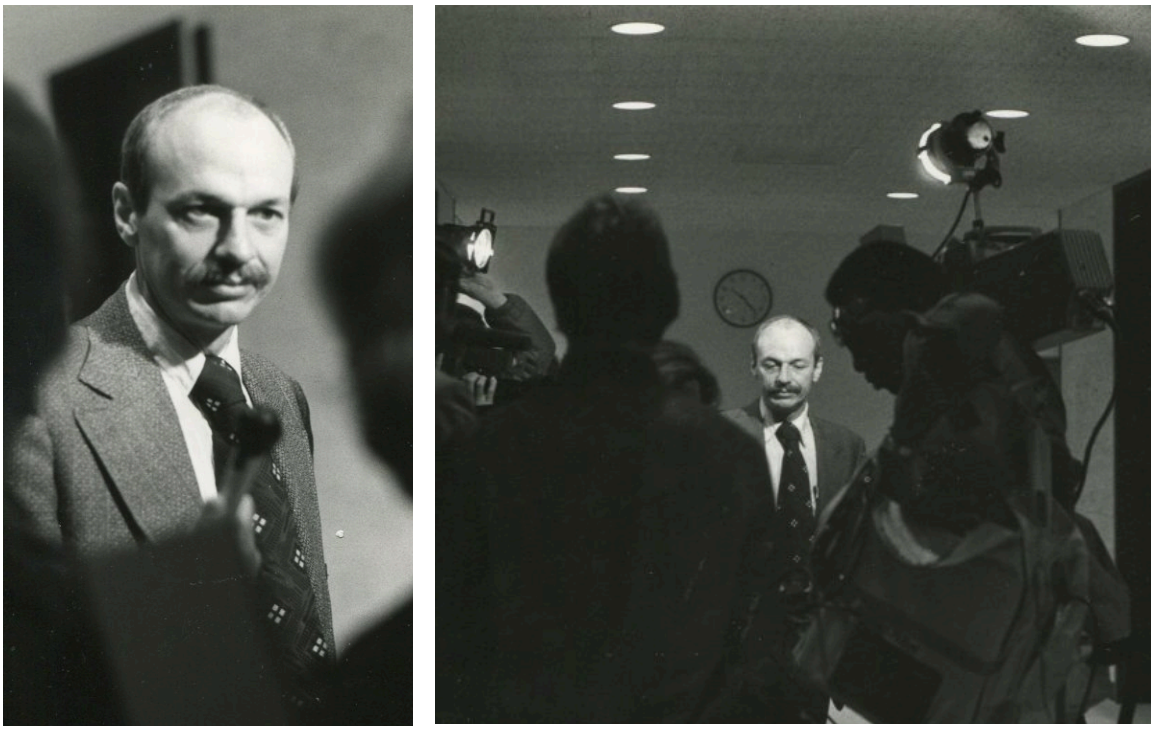

Figure 1: Gary Van Ooteghem, 1977, Courtesy of JD Doyle, Houston LGBT History, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/gpc1977.html. Original source not included on website.

In promotional flyers and internal documents meant for the gay population, the caucus flaunted its mainstream respectability, while deriding radical alternatives. “Isn’t [the caucus] just made up of a group of militant activists?” read a frequently asked questions portion of an early caucus pamphlet. It answered: “Members of the [the caucus] are interested in working within the system to bring about changes in the ways lesbians and gays are treated in this society.” The caucus wanted to reach “engineers, ranchers, architects, mathematicians, salesperson, computer programmers, and construction

[29] Jarboe, “Homosexuals Seek to Win New Laws By Influencing Candidates Here.”

workers," respectable, productive citizens, whom the caucus believed could help change the radical image of gay activism.[30]

The caucus' obsession with gay respectability stemmed, in part, from its first president. Gary Van Ooteghem carried his clean-cut, suit-and-tie past with him into his political activism with the caucus. He spent his career "working within system," and socialized with other wealthy, closeted businessmen. The certified public accountant viewed progress as an incremental project, obtained through the deliberate work of committee meetings and bureaucratic structures. Van Ooteghem mirrored a large subset of Houston's gay population in his political conservatism. Though the caucus remained non-partisan, and typically endorsed Democrats, Van Ooteghem was a Republican. The buttoned-up, deferential politics of the caucus, however, did not rest solely on the disposition of its founding president.

The strategy and demeanor of the caucus developed in direct reaction to the local gay rights organizations that preceded it. Though a handful of short-lived political groups existed before the caucus, two organizations, both founded in 1970, stand out for their influence on the caucus. The first group, called the Houston Gay Liberation Front, took on a radical, militant strategy. It attempted—and failed—to dramatically reshape society. The second group, dubbed Integrity/Houston, took on a relatively conservative approach, and made minor, though inconsequential, progress. An examination of these two organizations helps to understand why the caucus adopted its establishment-minded demeanor and voting-based strategy.

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[30] "Houston Gay Political Caucus Pamphlet," 1977, Box 9, Folder "GPC—Houston 1977," Botts Collection of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History.

The first organization, the Houston Gay Liberation Front, traces its origins to New York City. In July 1969, a month after the Stonewall Riots, a group of New York City activist created the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), a self-proclaimed revolutionary group drawing on the countercultural zeal of the 1960s. The group preached sexual liberation and the necessity of coming out. By 1970, dozens of GLF chapters sprung up across the country, including one at the University of Houston.[31]

The Houston Gay Liberation Front announced itself to the local gay community through an all-caps memo in the February 1971 edition of the *Nuntius,* a local gay magazine. The introduction outlined a platform of twenty individual demands, ranging from commonly understood desires for equality—"The right of the gay to be free anytime, anyplace" or "The right to free dress and adornment"—to ideological suggestions unfamiliar to most Houstonians—"that the judicial system be run by the people through the people's courts" and "that organized religions be condemned for aiding in the gonocide [sic] of gay people and enjoined from teaching hatred and superstition." Its ideology, however, appealed to only a small subset of homosexual Houstonians.[32]

Discussion of the Houston GLF within the gay press took on a mocking tone. The editorial pages chided the group for its fringe political goals, socialist orientation, and militant tactics. One writer deemed its demands as "the lunatic world-view of the naughty, the unproductive and the undisciplined." Another critic argued against the group's militancy, writing, "The homosexual has finally reached a level of tolerance that

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[31] D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 232–33; D'Emilio, "Cycles of Change, Questions of Strategy: The Gay and Lesbian Movement After Fifty Years," 83.

[32] "Houston GLF Statement of Purpose & Demands," *Nuntius*, February 1971.

radical action could destroy."[33] The editors at the *Nuntius* paired stories on the Houston GLF with a derisive, tongue-in-cheek icon, featuring a potpourri of radical symbolism—a swastika, hammer-and-sickle, surrounding a black power fist enclosed by a peace sign reading "All Power to the People." The magazine ridiculed the group's ideology. The GLF gained little support and folded by 1973.

The Houston Gay Political Caucus deliberately built into its organizational structure conservative safeguards to prevent GLF-like activists from taking over. The caucus' leadership consisted of a nine-member board of trustees and a slate of officers. Only one-third of the board stood election every year as opposed to all at once, "so any changes would be gradual and would reflect the current situation and the changing standards of the gay community," Van Ooteghem later said, adding that this prevented "the crazies" from taking over. Caucus meetings followed formal parliamentary procedure—Robert's Rules of Order—with motions and appeals, points of privilege and postponements.[34] The caucus' voting bloc strategy similarly reacted to the GLF.

The Houston GLF failed, in part, because its tactics relied on gay men and lesbians to come out.[35] The organization's mass public confrontations, picket lines, and sit-ins could not be accomplished from within the closet. The political strategy of the Houston GLF relied on garnering mass media attention; much of Houston's gay population feared such attention. In contrast, the Houston Gay Political Caucus built up an organization that did not require gay men and lesbians to come out. Caucus meetings

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[33] In fact, to avoid the criticism, the Houston Gay Liberation Front eventually dropped the "Front" label in its name to distance itself from "ultraleftism" of its past. "The Gay Guard," *Nuntius*, February 1971; "A View of the GLF," *Nuntius*, February 1971.

[34] Gary Van Ooteghem, interview with Bruce Remmington, April 13, 1983.

[35] The gay liberation movement left an important legacy, D'Emilio argues, "one in which the notions of coming out as the key to change and prides as a stance toward one's sexual identity were central." D'Emilio, "Stonewall: Myth and Meaning," 83.

remained closed to the mainstream press, and its main political activity—voting—was a private act, done in the secrecy of a voting booth. The caucus built itself in opposition to the strategy and approach of the Houston GLF. Comparatively, the caucus embraced and built upon the work of the second organization, Integrity/Houston.

Founded in 1970, Integrity/Houston primarily operated as a social organization, though it occasionally dabbled in politics. Once described as Houston's "responsible gay organization," Integrity/Houston followed a quieter, more subdued strategy than that of the Gay Liberation Front. It did not seek the radical restructuring of society and kept its political organizing hush-hush.[36] In June 1975, when Pokey Anderson called a meeting in her apartment to discuss the creation of the caucus, the three men she invited all had significant ties to Integrity/Houston. Naturally, the caucus drew heavily from the group's political sensibilities.

Similar to the caucus, Integrity/Houston cared deeply about gay respectability. It sought to combat promiscuous, oversexed images of homosexuals in the media, and instructed gay men and lesbians to be polite, well mannered, and law-abiding citizens when in public. "If you involve yourself in public drug trafficking or public sexual encounters, you are exposing all around you to arrest," read one statement from Integrity/Houston. "If you witness such activity and do not report it to the manager, you are not an innocent bystander."[37] The onus of community respectability fell on each and every man and woman.

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[36] "Because We Care," n.d., Houston LGBT History, accessed August 20, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/Houston80s/Misc/Integrity/Integrity%20Houston-Because%20We%20Care-history.compressed.pdf. Original source not given on website.

[37] "Report From: Integrity," *Contact*, June 1974.

Integrity/Houston mirrored homophile organizations of the 1950s in seeking acceptance through a softer, gentler accommodationist tone. In fact, it printed silk-screen posters with a message from one of the first homophile organization, the Mattachine Society—"What I do reflects on you. What you do reflects on me. What we do reflects on the entire gay community." It urged gay Houstonians to be consciousness of their actions and practice "enlightened self-interest" when in public.[38]

The caucus inherited Integrity/Houston's homophile conservatism. The public image the caucus desired to project—one of "reasonable people" who "dress and speak like the people whose help" they sought—can be traced directly back to Integrity/Houston.[39] The caucus also inherited a version of the group's political activity. Integrity/Houston created a gay speakers bureau, supported friendly political candidates, and occasionally spoke before City Council in support of gay causes. In 1973, with the sodomy statute undergoing revision, the group polled 183 state officials to gauge their views on homosexuality and private consensual sex. Fifteen officials responded, of which only nine were favorable, a disheartening, though expected, response.[40] None of its activism required a mass coming out.

Integrity/Houston viewed politics as a side project, and when the caucus formed, it announced a return to "its primary function, that of a social organization." Much of its political activity migrated over to the caucus.[41] The caucus, however, envisioned a much

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[38] Based in southern California, the Mattachine Society eventually grew to set up chapters across the country. However, a chapter never formed in Houston, Texas. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 170; D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 63–74.

[39] Van Ooteghem, Schwab, and Hrachovy, "Local Political Organizations."

[40] "Because We Care."

[41] Ibid,.

more expansive role for politics in the gay community. It built upon a strategy originally tested by Integrity/Houston.

Candidate Screenings and Discreet Endorsements

In the fall of 1973, Integrity/Houston invited each of the three leading mayoral candidates to privately speak to the group. Only one candidate made himself available: thirty-five-year-old Fred Hofheinz. During the hour and twenty minute meeting, the young, liberal candidate pledged to support equal opportunity in hiring for gay men and lesbians, the inclusion of minority sensitivity training for law enforcement, the creation of a liaison between police and the gay community, and an end to police harassment. The meeting occurred behind closed doors with only a small cohort of Integrity/Houston leaders. Hofheinz's promises did not leak out to mainstream press. Integrity/Houston subsequently endorsed the young candidate, and in a December runoff, Hofheinz won. He became Mayor of Houston by less than 3,000 votes. Integrity/Houston claimed victory for helping sway the election in his favor.[42]

Once in office, however, Mayor Fred Hofheinz failed to deliver on his promises. The private interview allowed Hofheinz to make spurious commitments at no risk. To Pokey Anderson, the solution seemed clear: bring the endorsement process out into the open, into large meetings with the gay community, and force the candidates to go on the record with their promises. This became the basis for the caucus' "screening" and endorsement process.[43]

The caucus' primary function involved endorsing candidates. The caucus determined endorsements through a "screening" process, wherein a committee of caucus

[42] "Integrity/Houston States Position," *The Nuntius*, February 1974.
[43] Pokey Anderson, interview with James T. Sears, October 1, 1994.

members graded candidates on their response to several pointed questions regarding policies affecting the gay community. The screening served as a litmus test for gay support. Based on the screening responses, the caucus at-large voted on who deserved an endorsement. The caucus then distributed its list of endorsements throughout the gay community. This guided the gay voting bloc on how to vote. During the first few years, however, the caucus had to "beg" politicians to answer its screening questions and appear before the organization.[44] Candidates feared a homophobic backlash from voters. The caucus adjusted accordingly.

Between 1975 and 1978, the caucus dulled the potential for backlash by issuing what it called "discreet" endorsements. It avoided, at all costs, releasing the endorsements to the mainstream press and broader public. Instead, it disseminated endorsements through pamphlets at gay bars and ads in select gay publications. It built a mailing list of thousands of names—a list once called the "backbone of the caucus"—where it sent endorsement cards and announcements.

The caucus carefully timed when to release its endorsement in an effort to maximize distribution within the gay community and minimize the time frame for a potential gay-bating backlash.[45] In just its first year, the caucus discreetly dispersed 10,000 pamphlets across the community.[46] "Equality? Seek it. Discrimination? End it," read the first such pamphlet. "It's your life and your lifestyle. Vote November 4th."[47] The caucus successfully avoided homophobic backlash.

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[44] Van Ooteghem, interview.

[45] Van Ooteghem, Schwab, and Hrachovy, "Local Political Organizations."

[46] Roger Ricklefs, "A New Constituency: Political Candidates Seek Out Votes," *Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 1976.

[47] "We Endorse," 1975, Houston LGBT History, accessed August 13, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/gpc1975.html. Original source not given on website.

The strategy pointed to a level of pragmatism within the early caucus. Though it wanted to be out-and-proud, the caucus also wanted to attract political allies. It lacked demonstrable political power, so it had to succumb to the weariness of candidates. The pragmatism carried over into the candidates the caucus chose to endorse. Two years after his first appearance, on October 1, 1975, Fred Hofheinz returned to court the gay vote. This time, he appeared before the newly formed Houston Gay Political Caucus. The candidates in 1975 faced five, carefully selected screening questions: Will you appoint a police chief who will not harass gays? Will you hire a gay individual for your staff? Will you support a city ordinance banning discrimination in housing, private employment, and city employment? The questions mirrored those asked by Integrity/Houston years earlier, partially, because they still required action.[48]

Fred Hofheinz responded to the caucus in a decidedly tepid tone. He agreed to appoint a liaison from the city to work with the gay community, but he refused to publicly pledge support for the gay community on non-discrimination issues. "My dealings with the prejudices against women and minorities have been well publicized," Hofheinz told the group in 1975. But homosexuals, in Hofheinz estimation, were unlike other minorities. "The institutional resistance against gays is greater than against minorities," he continued. "I'm a practical politician." In future screenings, the caucus would not accept such tepid answers. In 1975, however, the caucus had no demonstrable power. Hofheinz was the best the caucus could do. The newly formed caucus endorsed Hofheinz and five city council candidates.[49]

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[48] "We endorse."

[49] "Fred: News," *Pointblank Times*, November 1975; "GPC Ballot," *Pointblank Times*, November 1975.

By the end of October 1975, the caucus had registered over 3,100 new voters, assigned dozens of staffers to work the night shift answering phones at Hofheinz election headquarters, and dispatched hundreds of volunteers to canvas door-to-door. An event in September 1975—the first large-scale party sponsored by the group—attracted more than five hundred Houstonians and seven political candidates.[50] The organization's early efforts led a reporter at the *Advocate*, a national gay magazine, to call the group "the hottest organization of its kind in the nation."[51]

The success of the caucus' strategy, however, relied on building trust with the gay population. If gay men and lesbians did not trust the caucus, and did not agree with its endorsement, the "voting-bloc" would disintegrate. The caucus had to build up its credibility from nothing. Naturally, early on, it faced critics from within the community.

The endorsement of Hofheinz, for example, unnerved some members of the gay community who thought the caucus should be more aggressive. In a commentary published in the lesbian-feminist *Pointblank Times*, one critic eviscerated the caucus for fawning over Hofheinz. Confused how the caucus could be "so grateful after having been offered so little," the critic urged the community to be more direct with candidates and specifically point out where they falter. The caucus had "the responsibility to represent the gay community in a forceful and aggressive manner," wrote the critic, and with rights on the line, the gay vote should not be so easy to secure.[52]

The critique hinted at a conundrum that followed the caucus for nearly a decade: How could the caucus offer a singular voice for a community so diverse? The caucus

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[50] Virginia Galloway, "GPC Political Rally," *Update Texas Week*, October 26, 1975; Darryl Billiu, "Houston Gay Political Caucus Endorses Hofheinz," *The Barb*, October 1975; Ricklefs, "A New Constituency: Political Candidates Seek Out Votes."

[51] "GPC Ballot."

[52] Barbara Cigainero, "Fred: Commentary," *Pointblank Times*, November 1975.

intended to unite the gay community under one political voting bloc brought together by the common pretense of sexual oppression. But race, gender, class, politics, and more differentiated the gay population. Furthermore, the leadership of the caucus consisted primarily of white, conservative, and middle-class men. The caucus desperately wanted to present the image of unified gay community to the public. As it attempted to build a stable, long-lasting political organization, it continually had to adapt in order to represent the entirety of the community. More often than not during this period, it failed to do so. However, no figure tested the unified voice of the caucus more in its first few years than Ray Hill.

Challenges to a Unified Voice

Ray Hill walked out of prison on March 27, 1975. Born-and-raised in Houston, Texas, the suave, smooth-talking southerner spent four years, four months, and sixteen days locked in a Texas penitentiary for burglary. Police caught the self-described "Robin Hood" in February 1970, after a rash of high-dollar thefts. Before entering prison, however, Ray Hill was a fixture of Houston's gay community. One of the few openly gay activists of the 1960s, Hill cofounded Houston's first homophile organization, the "Promethean Society." The group dissolved rather quickly under infighting and power struggles, one cofounder blaming it on Hill's "pushy, blunt, and outspoken style."[53] The brash and opinionated thirty-five-year-old, culled in the militant politics of the 1960s, often polarized the community. Nevertheless, Ray Hill re-entered the political scene just before the founding of the caucus. During the group's first few years, he consistently challenged the caucus on its conservative, incremental strategy.

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[53] Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 57; Ray Hill, interview with author, November 4, 2017.

Once labeled the "Father of the Houston Gay Movement," Ray Hill's exact role in the founding of the caucus is unclear.[54] He helped to organize the June 1975 press conference where the caucus was announced, and he claims to have written the first bylaws of the caucus.[55] Pokey Anderson, however, disputes Hill's claim as a "founder" of the caucus.[56] Regardless, once the caucus formed, it is clear that it rejected both Ray Hill's political strategy and personal style.

Ray Hill's extensive criminal history did not fit in with the respectable, suit-and-tie image the caucus wanted to project. "We wanted the [the caucus] to be an organization respected with no flaws," said Gary Van Ooteghem. "In the early days, Ray's reputation did not enhance [the caucus] and we asked him to be restrictive of it."[57] On multiple occasions, caucus leadership pulled Hill aside and asked him to either be quiet or leave the organization. Hill frequently ignored these censures.

Not tied to the typical respectability politics of the caucus, Hill could speak forcefully to pressing issues that affected poor and working class gay men and lesbians. On July 21, 1976, for example, against the caucus' wishes, Ray Hill appeared before city council to protest the police department's treatment of the gay community. The long-time activist condemned the council for neglecting to pass a civil rights ordinance to protect gay Houstonians. He called for the creation of an independent board to monitor police

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[54] Charles Gillis, "A Brief History of the Gay Community of Houston, Texas," *Gay Pride Week Guide*, June 20, 1980.
[55] Ray Hill, interview with author, November 4, 2017.
[56] Pokey Anderson, interview with James T. Sears, October 1, 1994.
[57] Van Ooteghem, interview.

abuses. Hill's singular response came after the caucus failed to publicly respond to a rash of police harassment.[58]

Five days earlier, on Friday, July 16, 1976, the Houston Police Department raided the Exile Bar, a cowboy-themed cocktail lounge that served as a go-to hangout for gay men since the 1950s. The police arrested thirty-six people, most under the pretense of "public intoxication." The *Montrose Star*, a gay newspaper, dubbed the raid the "largest operation in memory involving a gay business," but the harassment was by no means an anomaly.[59] A few days earlier, the police hassled several patrons at two gay book stores, arrested and charged two men with lewd dancing at a club, and harassed customers at another bar. The weeks-long campaign by the Houston Police Department against the gay community sparked panic in the gay press. "Can police harassment of gays be beginning once again in Texas?" asked one woeful writer in the gay newspaper, the *Nuntius*.[60] In fact, the police served as a constant threat to gay communities across the nation.[61] Amidst this panic in Houston, however, a vacuum in public leadership emerged.

The caucus failed to offer a response, so Hill spoke out. "What has become apparent here is that our police establishment is too frequently a racist, sexist, homophobic mob of armed and dangerous amateurs," Hill told the city council, "and not frequently enough a professional investigative law enforcement arm of the people's government."[62] The caucus' carefully cultivated image as *the* reasoned political voice for Houston's community faced a competing character.

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[58] "Ray Hill Complains Before City Council," *Montrose Star*, July 23, 1976.
[59] "Police Accused of Harassing Gay Bars and Bookstores," *Montrose Star*, July 23, 1976.
[60] "Police Harassment Beginning," *The Nuntius*, July 23, 1976.
[61] D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 14–15.
[62] "Ray Hill Complains Before City Council."

Ray Hill's outspoken behavior rankled caucus leadership and, some thought, threatened the legitimacy of the organization. Caucus leaders thought that the success of the caucus relied on the gay community presenting a united front and argued that disputes should be litigated internally. By speaking out independently, Hill upset this configuration. No organization, however, is able to speak for the entirety of any community immediately, and by 1976, the caucus certainly had no claim as the "voice" of the community. Immediate tensions with the caucus eventually led Hill to found his own, small organization, dubbed the Houston Human Rights League, in May 1977. The group had no interest in competing with the caucus. It only had four or five members. But it gave Hill his platform—"Executive Director of the Houston Human Rights League"—to speak in the media on police relations with the community.[63]

The caucus, however, could not ignore outspoken figures like Hill if it wanted to represent the entire community. In fact, Van Ooteghem recognized Hill as an important component to the caucus. He represented a faction of the community the buttoned-up caucus leaders did not, the "street people," in Van Ooteghem's words. The future of the caucus, and gay political organizing in Houston, relied on the various factions within the community coming together. This reality became apparent just a few months later, in June 1977, when Anita Bryant came to town.[64]

1977: Houston's Stonewall Moment

Phyllis Randolph Frye arrived alongside her wife at the parking lot of the Depository II disco around 8 p.m. on June 16, 1977, joining a small crowd of anxious and uncertain Houstonians. "For one evening come out of your closet," read a flyer

[63] Ray Hill, interview with author, November 4, 2017; Remmington, "Twelve Fighting Years: Homosexuals In Houston, 1969-1981," 38.
[64] Van Ooteghem, interview.

advertising the June 1977 march, labeled the Houston Human Rights Rally. "You may never go back."[65] Fear and uncertainty colored the atmosphere around attending the event, and as a transgender woman, Frye debated with her partner about whether they should participate. Frye carried an umbrella, not for rain, but instead to deflect bottles, rocks, and bricks, in case anti-gay protestors became violent.[66]

Those who attended were afraid of getting harassed by the police. They were afraid of being photographed and possibly blackmailed. They were afraid of losing their jobs. They were afraid only a few others would show up. But as the sun began to set on the nascent gathering, the sticky, June heat let up, and the crowd grew larger. Comforted by the solidarity in numbers and the cover of darkness, others previously apprehensive about showing their faces emerged from nearby cars and side streets to join the crowd.[67] Houston homosexuals were coming out, en masse, for the first time in history.

Thirteen blocks north of the Depository II parking lot, in the downtown Hyatt Regency ballroom, Anita Bryant readied herself to perform before the 95th Convention of the State Bar of Texas. The beauty queen turned celebrity singer and orange juice spokesperson headed the virulently anti-gay, Christian fundamentalist campaign "Save Our Children."[68] Her presence came at a particularly tense moment. Nine days earlier, the gay rights movement encountered a devastating defeat when voters in Dade County, Florida voted overwhelmingly to overturn an ordinance that banned discrimination based

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[65] "Houston Human Rights Rally Flyer," June 16, 1977, Folder "GPC-Houston 1979," Botts Collection of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History.

[66] Phyllis Randolph Frye, interview with David Goldstein, August 22, 2008, Houston Oral History Project.

[67] Annise Parker attended the rally and emphasized the importance of it occurring at night. It gave the crowd a certain level of anonymity without being completely closeted. Annise Parker, interview with author, November 4, 2017.

[68] Louis Moore, "Southern Baptists Back Anita Bryant's Drive against Gays," *Houston Chronicle*, June 16, 1977.

on sexual orientation in housing, employment, and public accommodation. Bryant headed the crusade against the ordinance.[69] In Houston, the gay community mobilized to repudiate her appearance.

With the news of Bryant's invitation coming just weeks in advance of her scheduled visit, the political infrastructure of the caucus, now just shy of two years old, kicked into full gear to plan a response. The caucus had developed a committee to respond quickly to needs in the community. It called every member on its mailing list through a phone tree.[70] Together, Ray Hill, executive director of the Houston Human Rights League, and Gary Van Ooteghem, the founding president of the Houston Gay Political Caucus, worked to assemble Houston's gay community for a peaceful rally. The grassroots activists and the establishment joined together to reject Anita Bryant.

The caucus continued to emphasize respectability in planning the mass demonstration. A week before the planned event, Gary Van Ooteghem met directly with two Houston Police Chiefs to develop a memorandum of understanding for the rally. Van Ooteghem listed in full detail to the officers what the caucus intended to do, stressing many times throughout the meeting his desire to avoid violence. The caucus wanted to ensure that Houston's gay community acted respectfully.[71] "A peaceful rally," read the flyer describing the event. "All national and local leaders are emphasizing the necessity

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[69] Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle*, 336–54.

[70] Van Ooteghem, Schwab, and Hrachovy, "Local Political Organizations."

[71] Charles E. Humphrey, Jr. to Gary Van Ooteghem, Chief McKeehan, Chief Finch, June 9, 1977, Houston LGBT History, accessed September 7, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/Houston80s/Misc/Anita%20Bryant%20Rally%20Program/bryant%20planning%20letters.pdf. Original source not given on website.

of a peaceful, non-violent rally. Anything to the contrary could do immense harm to the gay movement."[72]

The level of precaution extended beyond coordinating with the police. Organizers convinced gay bars to close between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. during the rally to encourage attendance and to mitigate drunken debauchery. The caucus also set up monitors inside and outside of the Hyatt Regency to make sure no one from the rally attempted to enter the hotel and cause a disturbance.[73] Control was tantamount to the organizers of the rally; violence would not be accepted. "If our crowd swells too large, like to 10,000, we might re-evaluate the situation and call off the rally," Van Ooteghem told a newspaper the day before the rally. "We will only walk if we have enough monitors. We're not looking for problems. We hope they're not either."[74] The pamphlet describing the schedule succinctly summed up instructions for the march: "Obey Traffic Laws; Be peaceful and Orderly."[75]

The corner parking lot at Depository II quickly overflowed, with hundreds turning to thousands, as homosexuals from across the city descended on the bar, many wearing black armbands with inverted pink triangles. "We are here to bear witness toward our humanity, our human rights," said David B. Goodstein, publisher of the national gay magazine, the *Advocate*, over a loudspeaker in the parking lot.[76] "We're gonna haunt that woman," followed Reverend Troy Perry, founder of the Universal Fellowship of

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[72] "For one evening," June 1977, Houston LGBT History, accessed September 7, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/misc-bryant.html. Original source not given on website.

[73] Charles E. Humphrey, Jr. to Gary Van Ooteghem, Chief McKeehan, Chief Finch.

[74] Carol Barnes, "Gays, Foes Plan Rallies for Bryant; Bailey Assails U.S. Court System," *Houston Post*, June 16, 1977.

[75] "Houston Human Rights Rally," June 16, 1977, Houston LGBT History, accessed September 7, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/Houston80s/Misc/Anita%20Bryant%20Rally%20Program/bryant%20planning%20letters.pdf. Original source not given on website.

[76] RMcQ, "First-Hand from Houston: Bear Witness to Our Humanity," *The Advocate*, July 27, 1977.

Metropolitan Community Churches.[77] Gary Van Ooteghem read telegrams sent from celebrities across the country in support of the march. The event gained national attention. With the speeches complete, the march toward Anita began.

Chanting "No, No Anita," the crowd of gay Houstonians began their march, two-by-two, shoulder-to-shoulder, walking in small groups along the sidewalk toward downtown Houston. The city did not provide parade permits at night, so they paused at intersections, and waited at traffic lights as not to impede the flow of traffic. Two hundred crowd monitors roved alongside the demonstration, preventing spillover into the streets and ushering the crowd in a well-organized manner along the planned walking route.[78] Carrying candles and picket signs, the crowd swelled to include several thousand people. Houston's gay community ascended out of obscurity and into the public eye.

Figure 2: Depository II Parking Lot, June 16, 1977, Courtesy of JD Doyle, Houston LGBT History, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/misc-bryant.html. Original source not given on website.

[77] "All Rallies Peaceful during Bryant Show," *Houston Post*, June 17, 1977.

[78] Charles E. Humphrey, Jr. to Gary Van Ooteghem, Chief McKeehan, Chief Finch.

The crowd grew unexpectedly large, with some estimates placing the gathering at 12,000 people. “Take the God damned streets,” crackled Houston Police Captain Pappy Bonds over a walkie-talkie, giving permission for Ray Hill to move the marchers into the streets after only a few blocks on the sidewalks. With the go-ahead, they flooded the streets, passing the Hyatt Regency, and continuing toward the Houston Public Library plaza near City Hall.[79]

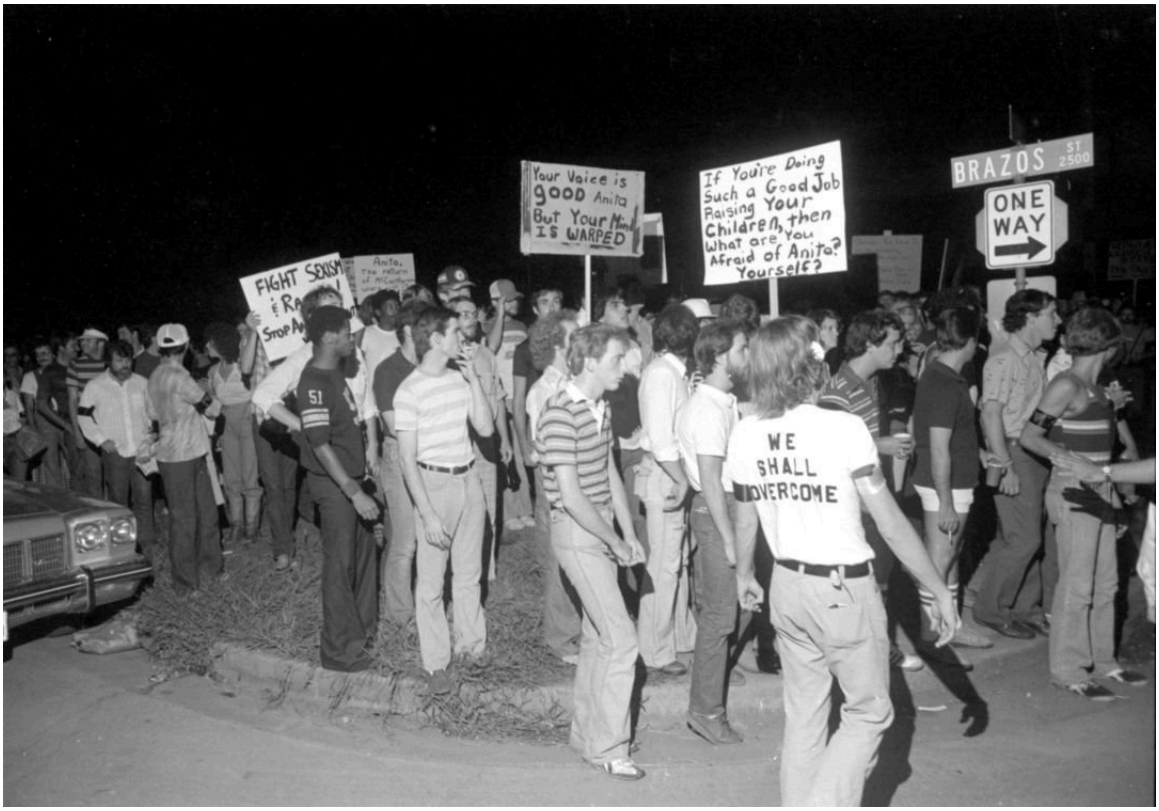

Figure 3: Anita Bryant March, June 16, 1977, Courtesy of JD Doyle, Houston LGBT History, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/misc-bryant.html. Original source not given on website.

Wearing a shimmering sequin dress and standing on stage before a big band, Anita Bryant, meanwhile, began her country, patriotic medley. Upon her entrance, ten lawyers in attendance stood and quietly exited the room. “As a lawyer, I have a duty to express my dissatisfaction with her views,” said one attorney who left in protest. “They

[79] Ray Hill, interview with Jim Barlow, November 8, 2007, Houston Oral History Project.

are analogous to those Hitler used to persecute the Jews."[80] Like the marchers outside, around her arm, the lawyer wore a black armband emblazoned with an inverted pink triangle—a callback to the armband required of homosexuals by Nazis during WWII, now appropriated as a "sign of hope and unity" to signify rally participant's "determination not to allow others to make gays third class citizens."[81]

The sounds of "We Shall Overcome," "God Bless America," "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know," and the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" filled the plaza just north of the Hyatt Regency as the crowd finished the march.[82] In unison, the crowd recited the preamble to the U.S. Declaration of Independence. "With all of its faults, America is still the best country," Bryant, meanwhile, told her ballroom audience, which gave her multiple standing ovations after her own rendition of "Battle Hymn of the Republic." "I don't believe even the world or America needs changing, it's people that need changing. And the only thing that changes people is almighty God."[83] The gay community did, in fact, change that evening.

For the first time in Houston's history, the gay population made visible to the general public—and itself—its sheer size. Never before had so many homosexuals in Houston physically come together in political solidarity. Overnight, Ray Hill argued, the term "gay community" gained actual resonance. It changed from a geographical term, where gay bars and clubs are located, to a political term, a group of people with shared goals and aspirations in pursuit of equality.[84] For decades to come, Houston's gay and

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[80] "No Bryant Violence Here; Gays March," *Houston Chronicle*, June 17, 1977.
[81] "Houston Human Rights Rally."
[82] RMcQ, "First-Hand from Houston: Bear Witness to Our Humanity."
[83] "No Bryant Violence Here; Gays March."
[84] Ray Hill, interview with author, November 4, 2017.

lesbian leaders remembered the march as "Houston's Stonewall," the dramatic tipping point that finally unleashed the nascent power of the gay community.

In fact, Anita Bryant's Dade County campaign catalyzed a number of gay rights movements across the South. Bryant's summer tour ignited gay rights protests in cities like New Orleans, Louisiana and Norfolk, Virginia, with ripple effects to cities like Birmingham, Alabama and Atlanta, Georgia. Historian James Sears referred to the moment as the "second American Stonewall," arguing that Bryant and the Dade County referendum "lit the fuse for mainstream political activism in the South and the country."[85] The march in Houston, however, would not have been possible without the caucus.

With only a few weeks notice, the caucus planned, publicized, and executed the peaceful protest. It utilized its mailing list, phone tree, and membership base to get the community to show up, and relied on the relationships it built with city officials to secure assurances of safety. The caucus' infrastructure made the rally possible. In the wake of the demonstration, the caucus also provided a forum for newly-politically-engaged gay men and lesbians to channel their energy. The caucus' new president, Steven Shiflett, inherited that task.

Town Meeting I: Creating a Proactive Agenda

The caucus did not initially impress Steven Shiflett. The twenty-three-year-old moved to Houston in 1975, shortly after the founding of the caucus, and attended a few meetings. He found the atmosphere boring: twenty or so people, sitting on the floor of a gay bar, talking about mailing lists. He stopped attending. Like many gay Houstonians,

[85] Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 3, 264–85.

however, the 1977 Anita Bryant rally renewed his interest in political activism. He returned to the caucus and joined the "Media Monitoring Committee," where he scrutinized local coverage of gay issues. But Shiflett's disillusionment with the direction of the caucus continued. Despite the successful Anita Bryant rally, the caucus after nearly three years seemed to be plateauing.[86]

The caucus' electoral strategy continued to return mixed results, indicative perhaps of the caucus' long-running struggle during this period to fully unify the community. The 1977 municipal elections, for example, returned few victories. The caucus' initial endorsement for mayor failed to make the runoff. The caucus made a second endorsement in the runoff for Jim McConn, and he ultimately won.[87] The win, however, was only a halfhearted success. The caucus only made the endorsement out of fear and disgust for McConn's opponent, Frank Briscoe, a tough-talking former district attorney who vociferously supported the police. "Do you like Anita Bryant?" asked a 1977-caucus run-off election flyer. "If you do, then you're gonna love Mayor Frank Briscoe!"[88] McConn offered only lukewarm encouragement to the gay community. "I don't intend to address the gay community, but I will say that no one in a McConn administration would last if they went and harassed the gay community," he told a local radio program in the lead up to the election.[89] McConn was the better of two evils.

Each of the caucus presidents up until 1978 served a distinct role in nurturing the growth of the organization. With Van Ooteghem, the caucus established its presence,

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[86] Steven Shiflett, interview with Bruce Remmington, April 14, 1983.

[87] James P. Sterba, "McConn Defeats Briscoe by 2 to 1 In Election for Mayor of Houston," *New York Times*, November 23, 1977.

[88] Jim Cagle and Jim Cotton to GPC Members, November 10, 1977, Houston LGBT History, accessed September 15, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/gpc1977.html. Original source not given on website.

[89] Remmington, "Twelve Fighting Years: Homosexuals In Houston, 1969-1981," 41.

gained name recognition, and articulated its purpose. When Van Ooteghem voluntarily stepped down in February 1977, Don Hrachovy, a barrel-chested 26-year-old, took over. The computer expert built up the technology for the caucus' mailing list—a significant source of power for the caucus—but stepped down before the end of the year for personal reasons.[90] Jim Cotton, a black motorcyclist, assumed the role of acting president shortly thereafter and, in Shiflett's opinion, squandered the caucus' potential. From his position on the Media Monitoring Committee, Shiflett solidified support and led a coup d'état of sorts, forcing a special election—likely in violation of the caucus bylaws—and winning the position of president of the caucus in March 1978.[91]

Shiflett's corporate-like mentality mirrored Van Ooteghem. The marketing agent likened the caucus to a business, moving from "gestation" to a "time of marketing and growth." He argued the caucus needed to "package a product, tell people who we are, what we're doing, and why we're worthy of support."[92] Shiflett dramatically expanded the scope of the caucus. He set-up a bureaucracy of coordinators, managing tasks like fundraising, public relations, political action, membership, and education. His most important project, however, effectively channeled the energy from the Anita Bryant rally into the development of a community infrastructure. Organized alongside Ray Hill, this unprecedented project, called Town Meeting I, brought together thousands of gay men and lesbians to map out the future of the community. The event helped to solidify the caucus' political base.[93]

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[90] William Marberry, "The GPC Mailing List: Probably Bigger than You Thought," *Montrose Voice*, February 26, 1982.
[91] Shiflett, interview.
[92] "Steve Shiflett Takes Office," *Upfront*, April 7, 1978.
[93] Shiflett, interview.

On June 25, 1978, more than 3,500 gay men and lesbians gathered in Houston's Astro Arena to chart out a proactive strategy for the future of the local community.[94] Dubbed Town Meeting I, the one-day event of debate and discussion set out to create a "master plan for community action," a consensus on what issues needed the most attention.[95] It was the first event of its kind in the history of the gay rights movement. With the motto "From Oppression, Toward Community," the gathering of gay men and lesbians deliberated and passed more than a dozen resolutions. The resolutions mapped out the aspirations of the community going forward.

The concept for Town Meeting I emerged among community leaders in April 1978—just two months before its scheduled date—with the purpose of channeling the energy from the Anita Bryant rally into viable initiatives and institutions.[96] The leadership configuration for the event was heavily bureaucratic, with over 300 volunteers across eight subcommittees, led by four directors.[97]

For weeks leading up to the event, organizers hosted brainstorming sessions and issues workshops in gay bars and bookstores across the city to solicit input on what resolutions should be debated. "This opportunity to send an idea directly from the closet to the podium is unparalleled in magnitude and power," wrote one observer in *Upfront*, a gay newspaper published by Van Ooteghem.[98] Participation from hundreds of people who invested thousands of hours of their time culminated in the creation of a participants'

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[94] "Town Meeting Proposed," *LXIX*, April 8, 1978.
[95] "Town Meeting I," *Upfront*, April 28, 1978.
[96] "Town Meeting Proposed," 15.
[97] "'Townmeeting' In The Works," *LXIX*, April 15, 1978, 4–5.
[98] "Town Meeting I."

workbook.[99] The 32-page document, printed for review two-weeks prior to the event, included 13 topics for resolutions.[100]

At the event, the community discussed and amended the resolutions through structured parliamentary debate. Participants who wished to speak in favor or against a particular resolution lined up in front of a microphone on the floor of the convention center. At the end of official debate, the audience voted with placards on whether to support the resolution. The gathering was a chance for Houston's gay community to confront both internal and external issues.[101]

Figure 4: Town Meeting I, June 25, 1978, Houston LGBT History, Courtesy of JD Doyle, Houston LGBT History, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/misc-town-meeting1.html, Botts Collection of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History.

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[99] Thomas Doyle, Marcia Livingston, and Robert Lockett, "Houston Town Meeting I Participants' Workbook," June 25, 1978, Botts Collection of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History.

[100] Tom Doyle, "Town Meeting I Comes out of Closet," *Upfront*, May 26, 1978.

[101] David Lee, "6,000 Gays Gather; Organizers Say It's the First Homosexual Political Meeting," *Houston Chronicle*, June 25, 1978.

The event gave a platform to a number of constituencies previously ignored in the gay community, including parents, women, minorities, and the handicapped. The resolutions touched on a number of issues, including the need to include women and racial minorities in gay organizations, the importance of securing a law enforcement civilian review board, the desire to pass an employment non-discrimination measure, and need to support the mental and physical health of the community. "For the first time in our history, we can move forward aggressively to secure our right to exist," read the event's handbook.[102]

The resolutions passed at the meeting led to the founding of a vast number of organizations that served the social, emotional, and physical needs of the gay community for generations to come. These arose out of action-oriented committees following Town Meeting I. The organizations included the Montrose Counseling Center, the Montrose Sports Association, the Gay Hispanic Caucus, the Gay and Lesbian Switchboard, the Montrose Clinic, and the Montrose Patrol, a community-based security force. Though they were not explicitly political, the historian John D'Emilio argues these types of institutions "constitute a foundation on which to build sustained political engagement." They foster stronger community bonds and build awareness of belonging to a sexual minority. "In other words, the relationship of the gay *movement* and the gay *community* is close and interdependent."[103]

Frances "Sissy" Farenthold, a trail-blazing feminist and two-time candidate for Texas Governor, gave the keynote address, paraphrasing Martin Luther King Jr. in a universal plea for human rights. "The question has already been put to me! What business

[102] Doyle, Livingston, and Lockett, "Houston Town Meeting I Participants' Workbook."
[103] D'Emilio, "Cycles of Change, Questions of Strategy: The Gay and Lesbian Movement After Fifty Years," 79.

does a married white woman with four grown children have addressing this convocation of gay men and women?" she began. "The answer should be self-evident. No one is free unless we are all free."[104] Her 13-minute speech was interrupted no less than 15 times by applause from an audience of marked diversity. "There were men and women; Caucasians, blacks and Chicanos," observed a *Houston Chronicle* reporter. "There were engineers and executives, secretaries and school teachers."[105]In reflecting on the legacy of Town Meeting I, Shiflett argued it "provided a base for a movement unlike any other." Shiflett contrasted it with other communities, which he argued grew "out of factionalism, street politics, confrontational politics, radical politics, I think, out of anger."[106] The overtures toward unity, however, overlooked a volatile confrontation that unraveled in the weeks following Town Meeting I.

Two-and-a-half weeks after the event, several dozen lesbian-feminists—calling themselves the "Ad Hoc Committee For Our Right to Privacy"—entered the Town Meeting I offices and stole a series of negatives, pictures, and video tapes they believe reneged on the event's promise for privacy.[107] The Town Meeting I workbook clearly stated there would be "Media Visible" seating and "Media Protected" seating for those who remained closeted.[108] However, during the event, a handful of roving photographers took pictures and video of all areas and all people. A few weeks later, *Upfront* published

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[104] Frances "Sissy" Farenthold, "...None Are Free Unless All Are Free," *Upfront*, July 7, 1978.
[105] David Lee, "Gay Political Strategy Charted as 3,500 Gather in AstroArena," *Houston Chronicle*, June 26, 1978.
[106] Shiflett, interview; Remmington, "Twelve Fighting Years: Homosexuals In Houston, 1969-1981," 49.
[107] "Radical Group Seizes TM1 Photos," *Upfront*, July 21, 1978.
[108] Doyle, Livingston, and Lockett, "Houston Town Meeting I Participants' Workbook."

a number of these photos, which the lesbian-feminist claimed contained recognizable pictures of at least four people who did not want to be photographed.[109]

The confrontation underscored the importance of personal privacy to the caucus' closeted constituency. In fact, Town Meeting I likely would not have attracted such a large crowd if not for the assurance of confidentiality. "We knew that some of us could lose our jobs or our children (or worse could happen) if those photos got into the hands of the wrong people," wrote the cadre of lesbian-feminists in a press release. Courts often arbitrarily relied on sexual orientation to make decisions in child custody cases, and many of these women feared losing their families. Furthermore, the photographs could be used to blackmail closeted individuals. "We exercised our right to protect our identities by taking temporary control of what pictures we could." After a series of negotiations and committee meetings, the controversy eventually faded.[110]

The fiasco highlighted long running tensions between gay men and lesbians within the gay rights movement broadly. Many lesbians viewed gay men as the embodiment of everything feminism rejected: sexism, domination, and the patriarchy.[111] By this time, Pokey Anderson, for example, had separated herself from the leadership of the caucus. She thought the men leading the caucus acted as though they were "heirs to money and power and influence," entitled and sexist.[112] In fact, the attendees at Town Meeting I acknowledged these issues, passing a resolution calling for an end to "sexism, personality conflicts, power struggles, and lack of consciousness and communication"

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[109] "Ad Hoc: Who We Are and Why We Took Action," Houston LGBT History, accessed October 1, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/Houston80s/Misc/Photos-TM1/clippings/TMI-photo%20theft.compressed.pdf. Original source not given on website.

[110] Ibid,.

[111] D'Emilio, "Cycles of Change, Questions of Strategy: The Gay and Lesbian Movement After Fifty Years"; Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout: Chicago and the Rise of Gay Politics*, 138–39.

[112] Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 269.

between gay men and lesbians. However, in the words of Pokey Anderson: "Resolutions are only words."[113] Sexism is not solved with a resolution. The immediate frustrations within the community died down, however, the animosities still festered.

The Caucus at Three Years Old

In September 1978, on its third anniversary, Gary Van Ooteghem published an essay reflecting on the adolescent years of the caucus. "The acceptance of the [caucus] from the majority of the gay community was never an easy accomplishment," Van Ooteghem wrote. "It has happened because [the caucus] throughout its existence, has never lost sight of its goals, purpose, or the people its serves."[114] Between 1975 and 1978, the caucus transformed Houston's expansive gay population into a politically cognizant community. It built a structure that allowed gay men and lesbians to participate in the gay rights movement without facing the consequences of coming out. Its membership grew to several hundred and it registered several thousand more to vote. Unifying the political community, however, remained a challenge.

The caucus faced challenges in representing the entirety of a diverse and fragmented community. As evidenced by Town Meeting I, a number of lesbians remained dissatisfied with the caucus. The caucus' underlying sexism and racism, so pervasive in the gay rights movement at-large, would reemerge in 1980 as a central issue for the caucus. The problems of unity connected to a larger issue for the caucus during this period, namely, its inability to secure electoral victories.

The slow process of gaining political power frustrated activists eager to see change. In a 1978 letter to caucus membership, Steven Shiflett, the president of the

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[113] Lee, "Gay Political Strategy Charted as 3,500 Gather in AstroArena."
[114] Gary Van Ooteghem, "Happy Birthday Houston GPC," *Upfront*, September 15, 1978.

caucus, admitted as much, writing about the caucus' "continuing problems with our lack of being able to influence any significant change with the City of Houston."[115] The candidates the caucus supported largely reneged on their promises once they entered political office, and few openly supported the community in public. Shiflett had a solution. Ditch the discreet endorsements. Make the candidates, during the campaign, publicly pledge support to the gay community. The new public-facing strategy was possible after three years of careful work building an engaged membership and persuading local politicians of the importance of gay voters.

[115] Steven Shiflett, "Mission Accomplished," 1978, Houston LGBT History, accessed October 1, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/gpc1978.html. Original source not given on website.

CHAPTER 2

Political Visibility, Political Power

1979-1983

Eleanor Tinsley stuck out in the crowd. The middle-aged, hair-sprayed, conservatively dressed white woman, joined by her professorial husband, and clean-cut family, stood front-and-center on a make-shift disco floor at the Montrose Activity Center.[1] In the background, eight television monitors set to local news networks blasted the incoming results of the 1979 municipal election. With a progressive agenda and establishment fundraising, this straight, fifty-two-year-old candidate for the At-Large #2 Position on City Council courted the gay vote like few candidates before her.[2] Wearing a "Freedom to Love" pin on her lapel, Eleanor Tinsley embraced the Houston Gay Political Caucus. Her support marked an extraordinary step forward for the organization.

The caucus made itself visible for the 1979 municipal elections. It stopped issuing discreet endorsements, and instead, required candidates to accept gay support publicly as a condition for its backing. For the first time, candidates listed "Endorsed by the Gay Political Caucus" on campaign literature, and both the *Houston Post* and the *Houston Chronicle* reported on caucus endorsements.[3] The caucus invited candidates "to come out in the light of day," to meet-and-greets at gay bars and businesses and "see what homosexuals [are] like in their own territory."[4] The 1979 election tested the feasibility of adding gay rights into the mix of campaign issues. Eleanor Tinsley's square-jawed

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[1] C.L. Forum, "Houston's Gays Help Unseat a Homophobe," *The Advocate*, February 7, 1980.

[2] "The Candidates Come Courting," *Upfront*, November 9, 1979.

[3] Forum, "Houston's Gays Help Unseat a Homophobe."

[4] This invitation occurred in 1978, but the tradition carried over for the 1979 municipal elections. "GPC Hosts Historic Event," *Upfront*, May 12, 1978.

curmudgeon of an opponent, Frank Mann happened to be the city's most prominent homophobe.

First elected to City Council in 1959, Frank Mann reveled in lobbing gay insults, both on the campaign trail and at City Hall. In 1973, a trio of gay activists asked city council to officially declare the last week of June Gay Pride Week, to which Frank Mann yelled, "You're abnormal. You need to see a psychiatrist instead of city council." In 1975, he labeled gay men and lesbians as "oddwads," later amending the pejorative epithet to "oddwads and queers." Just months before the 1979 election, he told Steven Shiflett, then-president of the caucus, police abuse against the gay community might stop if they left "some of these young people alone and quit trying to brainwash them."[5] Frank Mann recycled these insults for his campaign against Eleanor Tinsley. "Mann's the man the oddwads don't want," read one newspaper advertisement. He publicly questioned Tinsley's "morals, ethics, and character" for accepting the caucus endorsement.[6] He made the caucus endorsement a campaign issue.

The insults only strengthened the caucus's resolve to publicly address gay issues. The caucus doubled-down on its support for Tinsely; at least sixteen gay volunteers helped staff her campaign headquarters. The caucus coordinated get-out-the-vote efforts, distributed nearly 50,000 endorsement cards, and spent roughly $11,000 promoting her campaign. Wearing "I'm an Oddwad" t-shirts, hundreds of homosexuals fanned out across Houston to campaign for Tinsely.[7] "This election," wrote the caucus' election

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[5] "Mann, Homosexual Leader Class Over Committee," *The Houston Post*, June 7, 1979.

[6] Mann's questioning of Tinsley's morals caused a group of seventeen clergymen to release a statement calling for him to formally apologize. Mann responded, "Maybe they're a group of clergy at those homosexual churches." None, in fact, presided over the three churches that primarily served homosexuals. Jim Barlow, "Clergy Demand Mann Apologize to Tinsely," *Houston Chronicle*, November 3, 1979.

[7] Remmington, "Twelve Fighting Years: Homosexuals In Houston, 1969-1981," 60.

coordinator "puts our reputation, our clout, on the line." On November 6, Tinsely garnered 48.9% of the vote citywide, while Mann only received 44%, pushing the election to a runoff between the two. "The task of assuming responsibility for our own lives falls directly upon our shoulders," the caucus coordinator urged. "Gays are leading the way out of the baths and the bars and into the voting booths."[8]

Two weeks later, after hours of block walking and phone banking by caucus members, Eleanor Tinsley won, securing 54.6% of the vote citywide. The pro-gay, caucus-supporting councilwoman replaced the city's fiercest homophobe. The vote in the heavily gay Montrose precincts skewed 76.1% for Tinsley, accounting for 3,212 votes or 2% of the vote citywide. The exact measure of caucus influence, however, is difficult to measure. Regardless, the public's perception of gay power increased enormously.[9]

At election headquarters, Steve Shiflett channeled Martin Luther King, Jr. and declared that in Houston, Texas the power of the gay community would not be taken for granted. "Where riots are the voices of the unheard and where marches and demonstrations…are the voices of people newly emerging, let it be said tonight that our bloc of votes are the voices of the concerned, established, and highly organized," Shiflett declared. The election ushered in a new phase in the caucus' history. "We, as a community, tonight take pride in claiming our rightful position of influence in our great

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[8] Rick Graves to Gay Men and Lesbians of Houston, November 11, 1979, Houston LGBT History, accessed September 3, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/gpc1979.html. Original source not given on website.

[9] "Mann Loses; 2 Women Will Be on the Council," *Houston Post*, November 21, 1979; Remmington, "Twelve Fighting Years: Homosexuals In Houston, 1969-1981," 61–62.

city by playing a major role in defeating a symbol of incompetence and ignorance in city government."[10]

At a caucus victory celebration the next month, seven successful City Council candidates and the City Controller—all endorsed by the caucus—spoke in support of basic human rights to a crowd of 300 gay men and lesbians. "For the first time we have a majority of City Council members who are responsive to the needs of all Houstonians," Shiflett said. A disco rendition of "Happy Days Are Here Again" played in the background.[11]

Between 1979 and 1983, the Houston Gay Political Caucus engaged in a new era of institutional visibility, abandoning its old strategy of private endorsements. It took advantage of three-and-a-half years of community building and membership growth and flaunted its voting bloc and electoral victories to attract dozens of endorsement-seeking political candidates. It built up establishment credibility and expanded beyond elections to medical, legal, and education efforts. During this period, the *New York Times* described the caucus as a "major political force," and the executive director of the National Gay Task Force deemed Houston's gay political organization as "right at the top of the list" in terms of influence and sophistication, alongside San Francisco.[12]

The caucus endorsement lost its stigma. By 1983, the two major mayoral candidates pursued the caucus' endorsement, alongside a dozen other city council candidates. "The endorsement of the Houston Gay Political Caucus now is sought by

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[10] Steven Shiflett, "From This Day Forward," November 20, 1979, Houston LGBT History, accessed October 1, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/Houston80s/GPC/1979/79-Victory%20Speech-Eleanor%20Tinsley-Shifflet.pdf. Original source not given on website.

[11] The City Controller, Kathy Whitmire, could not attend. However, she vigorously supported the caucus and sent an aide in her place. Angela Glanton, "Gay-Endorsed Candidates Repeat Support for Rights at Victory Party by Caucus," *Houston Post*, December 17, 1979.

[12] Stevens, "Houston Accepts New Political Force."

many candidates and few, if any, officeholders or candidates risk public attacks on the homosexual lifestyle," wrote one *Houston Chronicle* reporter in the lead-up to the 1981 election.[13] Campaigns gradually lost the gay-baiting, "oddwads and queers" rhetoric of the past. But newfound power brought new, internal struggles over the direction of the caucus.

Between 1979 and 1983, the caucus experienced a series of polarizing disputes that contested the identity of the still nascent gay rights movement, what tactics it employed, what issues it prioritized, and whom it included. In 1980, shortly after Eleanor Tinsley's historic win, a debate erupted within the caucus over the exclusion of lesbians and minorities. The caucus' underlying sexism and racism, so pervasive in the gay rights movement at-large, boiled to the surface and faced a challenge from previously marginalized voices.

The bursts of disunity and internal disagreement often followed periods of success for the community. In 1983, for example, after a year of notable victories, another dispute arose after two candidates, both "friends of the gay community," sought the caucus endorsement for the same city council position. The decision marked both a milestone and a conundrum for the caucus. On the one hand, the caucus had gained so much power that multiple candidates wanted its endorsement. On the other hand, the caucus had to make more meticulous decisions about what made a candidate worthy of an endorsement. The endorsement challenged the caucus to think in a more nuanced way about what constituted a gay rights agenda.

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[13] Nene Foxhall, "Gays out of Closet, into Politics Here," *Houston Chronicle*, April 26, 1981.

Despite internal turmoil, the gay community during this period continued to unify around one issue in particular: the troubled relationship with the police. "I think if there was anything that really brought this community together it was just the unnecessary harassment from the Houston Police Department," one caucus leader later commented.[14] Harassment and abuse at the hands of the police affected all subsets of the gay population. In fact, the troubled relationship with the police set the caucus on its path toward the strategy of visibility that proved so successful in the 1979 election.

Confronting Police Brutality

On January 7, 1978—a year-and-a-half before Eleanor Tinsley's election—a half-dozen police raided the Old Planation, the largest gay club in Houston. The officers blocked exits and ordered the 500 bar-goers to drop their drinks and move to the front door. Bob Saulter obeyed, shuffling to an exit where an officer selected him and three others for arrest. "I didn't argue, but I couldn't figure out why," Saulter told the *Montrose Star*, the gay newspaper where he worked. At the police station, the police officer questioned if Saulter was gay. "I responded that I didn't see where it made any difference." The officer, in response, gripped Saulter's crotch, and asked, "How do you like this? Are you getting excited, huh, pretty boy?" The police charged Saulter—who only drank two Budweiser beers that night—with a public intoxication violation.[15]

Despite receiving promises from politicians for reform, the caucus failed in its first three-and-a-half years to curb police violence against the gay community. One of the first questions asked during the inaugural screening of political candidates in 1975 concerned police violence: "Will you appoint/support a police chief who will not harass

[14] Larry Bagneris, Jr., interview with Bruce Remmington, April 7, 1983.
[15] "Police Go Mad, Bust Gay Bars," *Montrose Star*, January 13, 1978.

gays congregating lawfully in gay establishments?" Mayor Fred Hofheinz, elected in 1975, answered this question favorably in his screening.[16] Upon election, he facilitated the first meetings between the caucus and the Houston Police Department and appointed an official liaison to the gay community, but the remedies were temporary. Bar raids continued unabated.[17]

Two years later in 1977, Mayor Jim McConn declared during his campaign "that no one in a McConn administration would last if they went and harassed the gay community."[18] After Saulter's arrest in January 1978, McConn—only one week into his term—agreed to investigate and chastise whoever ordered the raids.[19] Two months later, more raids occurred.[20] McConn met with Steve Shiflett and reiterated, "He, too, was committed to ending [gay] fear of persecution and bodily harm at the hands of the Houston Police."[21] In the months that followed, reports of police harassment increased, and the Mayor and Chief of Police refused additional meetings with gay leaders. Once again, police violence continued, followed by empty promises, ignored complaints and political frustration.

After repeated "lip service" from elected officials and unrelenting "hostility and abuse" from the police, the caucus under Steve Shiflett's leadership shifted towards a more expansive, public strategy. In a February 1979 speech before caucus members and

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16 "We Endorse," 1975, Houston LGBT History, accessed August 13, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/gpc1975.html. Original source not given on website.

17 "Gay Group Meets Bond; given Impartial Pledge," *Houston Post*, February 4, 1976.

18 Remmington, "Twelve Fighting Years: Homosexuals In Houston, 1969-1981," 41.

19 "Mayor Meets with Gay Leader, Promises to Investigate," *Montrose Star*, January 13, 1978.

20 "Another Bar Raided," *LXIX*, March 18.

21 Steven Shiflett, "Speech," February 19, 1979, Folder GPC-Houston-1979, Botts Collection of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History.

National Gay Task Force leadership, Shiflett bore down on this frustration and his vision for a path forward:

> We will no longer sit idle while our civil rights are violated. We will no longer stand for empty platitudes from the elected officials we helped put in office…the time has come when those elected officials must be committed to action either for or against civil rights for all citizens, including lesbians and gays…the gay community has a great number of resources at its disposal, economic, legal, and political, all of which will be brought to bear as we see fit in order to obtain our civil rights as citizens of the United States.[22]

The caucus could afford to make a more aggressive shift. With events like the Anita Bryant rally and Town Meeting I, the caucus by 1979 had successfully solidified a politically conscious base in the gay community. Its first initiative under this new public strategy took issues of police brutality all the way to Washington, D.C.

In 1978, after receiving an unexpectedly high volume of police conduct complaints from across the country, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights opened a nationwide investigation into urban police practices; Houston was one of two cities chosen for closer scrutiny. Established in 1957, the independent commission investigated serious charges of discrimination. Though it had no enforcement powers, its recommendations often led to congressional action.[23]

The Houston Police Department garnered a national reputation for being brutal. In 1977, the *Washington Post* singled Houston out on its front page for having the "most violent and unchecked" police force in the nation, operating under a "shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later" mentality. Between 1966 and 1979, grand juries in the city refused to return indictments in 155 fatal civilian police shootings. Of the ten largest police

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[22] Shiflett.

[23] Mary Frances Berry, *And Justice for All: The United States Commission on Civil Rights and the Continuing Struggle for Freedom in America*, 1st ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 4.

departments in the country, Houston was the only one not to have an internal investigative unit.[24] According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the FBI office in Houston during the 1970s routinely received more complaints of police abuse than any other office in the nation.[25] The brunt of this abuse bore down most visibly on the city's racial and sexual minorities. The brutality gained sustained public attention, most notably, with the death of a man named Jose Campos Torres.

In May 1977, a crowd of six Houston Police Department officers took Jose Campos Torres, a 23-year-old Chicano man, from a bar to a warehouse, where they beat him, his arms handcuffed behind him. At the jail, the booking officer refused to admit the bloodied and bruised Torres and ordered the officers take him to the county hospital. The officers instead threw the battered and drunk Torres over a 20-foot embankment along the Buffalo Bayou, yelling, "Let's see if the wetback can swim." Torres subsequently drowned. After news spread about the incident, Mayor Fred Hofheinz said of the police, "there is something loose in this city that is an illness."[26] Shortly thereafter, the city set up an internal investigative unit. Placing police officers in charge of investigating police officers proved ineffective. The federal government intervened.

Over a six-month period in 1979, the commission conducted an investigation into Houston's police practices, subpoenaing testimony from racial minority advocacy groups, the ACLU, city officials, and the Houston Gay Political Caucus. U.S. Congressman Mickey Leland, an ally of the caucus, proved instrumental in pressuring the commission to put gay leaders on the docket of testifying witnesses. On May 29, 1979, Steve Shiflett

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[24] Tom Curtis, "Police in Houston Pictured as Brutal and Unchecked," *The Washington Post*, June 13, 1977.
[25] John M. Crewdson, "Police in Houston Are Found Improved," *New York Times*, September 13, 1979.
[26] Curtis, "Police in Houston Pictured as Brutal and Unchecked."

appeared before the commission in Washington D.C. to offer testimony on the nature of police abuse against "lesbians, gay males, and transpeople" in Houston. He brought with him more than 100 individual complaints detailing excessive, inappropriate, and illegal force by the Houston Police Department against the gay community.[27]

The caucus spent months confidentially collecting and verifying the accounts alongside a staff of lawyers through a novel initiative dubbed "Operation Documentation."[28] The program balanced varying degrees of visibility; through randomized case numbers and pseudonyms, victims could maintain anonymity. Caucus leadership, however, maintained free reign to aggressively and openly confront city officials in testimony. This included directly criticizing Mayor McConn—a past recipient of a caucus endorsement—in the mainstream press.

The public record does not include details on individual cases. In testimony, however, Shiflett spoke in broad strokes about the tactics used by police against the gay community. The caucus documented police "birddogging," wherein law enforcement waited outside gay establishments to selectively arrest gay patrons. The police employed questionable search-and-seizure practices, looking through air conditioner vents or climbing over private booths at adult bookstores to arrest gay men for indecent exposure or public lewdness. Plain-clothes officers roamed Montrose, the gay neighborhood, attempting to solicit prostitution; agreeing to merely discuss the matter, per the law, warranted arrest. The police frequently added on assault charges to explain physical abuse of gay men and women in their custody. From bars and bookstores, to the streets of

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[27] "Internal Report for U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Hearing," May 29, 1979, Folder GPC-Houston-1979, Botts Collection of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History.

[28] The program kicked-off with "A Spring Rally" at City Hall, which drew nearly one thousand demonstrators. "A Spring Rally," *This Week In Texas*, April 6, 1979; "Rally at City Hall," *Upfront*, April 18, 1979.

Montrose, the police constituted a looming, ever-present danger to nearly every subset of the gay community.[29]

The investigation conducted by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights culminated in two days of public hearing in September 1979, wherein the Chief of Police Harry Caldwell reported policy changes to "place a higher priority on human life."[30] This included a restriction on the use of deadly force, a rule that gunshots could not be fired in high-speed chases, and a prohibition on entering a building in pursuit unless a supervisor is present.[31] "What [the commission] actually did was to slap the Houston Police Department on the wrist," said one caucus leader, dissatisfied with the inquiry.[32]

The reforms from the caucus' perspective were meager. Under pressure, McConn nominated an openly gay lawyer to an oversight position on a newly formed Police Advisory Commission, and the Chief of Police agreed to a largely symbolic, largely non-productive meeting with the gay political leaders, the first in nearly two years.[33] The caucus' participation in the inquiry, however, presaged a new kind of power for the gay rights movement in Houston.

The caucus turned itself into visible interest group in city politics. The federal government affirmed and acknowledged its grievances, and the Mayor and Chief of Police responded in public to its complaints. "Our continued visibility will demand more responsibility from the police, and eventually change the status of gays and lesbians from

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[29] U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, "Hearing Held in Houston, Texas," September 11, 1979, Document 87306-87308, National Criminal Justice Reference Service.

[30] In 1981, the commission published its findings from the hearings on police abuse in Houston and Philadelphia. United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Who Is Guarding the Guardians?: A Report on Police Practices : A Report* (Washington, D.C.: The Commission, 1981).

[31] Crewdson, "Police in Houston Are Found Improved."

[32] Bagneris, Jr., interview.

[33] "McConn Picks 6 for New Police Advisory Panel," *Houston Chronicle*, August 23, 1979; "A Non-Conversation With the Chief," October 12, 1979.

potential criminals to citizens," wrote one hopeful reporter at *Upfront,* Gary Van Ooteghem's gay publication.[34]

The caucus stopped hiding behind discreet endorsements. Instead, its leaders aired its grievances in public. Eleanor Tinsley's election two months later affirmed the caucus' shift toward visibility as a winning strategy. Following the 1979 election, however, the caucus briefly turned inward.

1980: Challenging White, Rich, Male Gay Rights

During his testimony to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Steven Shiflett—the white, 29-year-old caucus president—noted the similarities in police abuse faced by all minority communities, but he differentiated the difficulties faced by sexual minorities. "Our people," Shiflett argued, face more intense forms of reprisal for bringing forward claims of abuse. Coming forward could mean coming out, losing a job, and alienating friends and family. But Shiflett's conception of a gay "silent minority" hinted at a worldview that separated the concerns of white gay men from women and other minorities, gay or straight. This exclusionary worldview plagued the caucus from its founding.[35]

In its first few years, the caucus remained heavily white, in sharp contrast to the demographics of Houston as a whole. By 1980, 27 percent of Houston's population was black and 17 percent was Hispanic or Latino. The lack of diversity in the caucus reflected, to some extent, the racism and sexism endemic to Houston's gay culture at-large.

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[34] "Mean Streets," *UpFront*, September 14, 1979.

[35] "Internal Report for U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Hearing."

Through the 1970s, gay bars and businesses in Houston openly discriminated against minorities and lesbians in employment, admission, and treatment. In 1971, the ill-fated Houston Gay Liberation Front drew attention to this issue in one of its few acts of protests, picketing a gay bar for refusing to serve black patrons.[36] Prejudice clearly arose as a community-wide issue at Town Meeting I, as well. The attendees acknowledged internal oppression and resolved to implement "specific remedial strategies to benefit Lesbians, Blacks, Chicano and other minorities who are oppressed economically, socially and politically."[37] The caucus, however, made few efforts early on to reach out to minorities and lesbians. Accordingly, a number of minorities found social support outside of the caucus, in groups like Houston Committee, a black gay men's professional organization, or the Gay Hispanic Caucus.[38]

In the spring of 1980, however, the caucus' traditional, white establishment faced a challenge. Larry Bagneris, Jr., the caucus' creole vice president, ran to unseat Steven Shiflett as president of the caucus. The contest that ensued offered two very different visions for the future of the caucus, who it should include, and what it should prioritize. The bitter race brought to surface the caucus' racism and sexism, and focused just as much on the personalities of the two men as it did on their actual ideas for the agenda of the caucus going forward.

Larry Bagneris, Jr. understood the interplay between race and sexuality better than most. He frequently encountered a toxic mixture of homophobia and racism. "What's a nice Mexican boy like you doing with this bunch of filth," Bagneris

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[36] "GLF & Friends Picket Red Room," *Nuntius,* February 1971.

[37] Doyle, Livingston, and Lockett, "Houston Town Meeting I Participants' Workbook."

[38] First called the "Gay Chicano Caucus," the group later renamed itself the "Gay Hispanic Caucus." It formed in Larry Bagneris, Jr.'s living room in 1978. "Gay Chicano Caucus Forms," *Upfront*, June 23, 1978, 2.

remembers Assistant Police Chief Fred Bankston saying to him when he applied for a parade permit in 1979. "I'm not Mexican, I'm black," Bagneris responded, ribbing the officer. To which Bankston replied: "You mean to tell me I have a nigger, a wetback, and a queer in my office."[39]

Figure 5: Larry Bagneris, Jr., 1978, Houston LGBT History, Courtesy of JD Doyle, Houston LGBT History, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/misc-gpc79.html, Botts Collection of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History.

Larry Bagneris, Jr. grew up in the 1950s during the era of segregation in New Orleans, Louisiana. His multiethnic, Creole background endeared him to few categories. Bagneris recalled being forced to stand in the middle of public buses, too "colored" to sit with whites in the front and too light-skinned to sit with blacks in the back.[40] When Bagneris moved to Houston in 1970, he faced similar issues of belonging as a non-white gay man within a gay culture controlled largely by exclusionary white gay men.

[39] Bagneris, Jr., interview.

[40] "Bagneris Tapped for GPC Post," *Upfront*, August 18, 1978, 4.

When Bagneris ascended to the vice presidency of the caucus in August 1978, he made it clear he sought to build bridges between the caucus and minority sub-groups in the gay community. A year into his involvement, the caucus made headway in unveiling "Phase 2" of "Operation Documentation," this time to document harassment, discrimination, and abuse *within* the gay community. "It is for each of us to make certain that our community does not reflect the bigotry, prejudice, and discrimination we face daily in 'straight' society," said a caucus leader in announcing the program.[41] Bagneris expected to continue on this path toward inclusivity as president of the caucus, but some quarters of the caucus—led by Steven Shiflett—felt weary about a minority taking over.

During his first two years as president, Steven Shiflett found a base of support from a subset of wealthy, conservative figures in the gay community. The "mainstream, closeted, money people," as Shiflett described them, were older folks, in their forties and fifties, who stayed out of the day-to-day operations of the caucus. They held high-paying jobs and supported the caucus financially. They were also white and largely racist. Bagneris concerned them.[42]

Shiflett's supporters regarded Bagneris as a "back of the bus, Civil Rights, 1964, black political type."[43] They viewed the 33-year-old Bagneris as "immature" compared to the supposedly "mature, levelheaded, sensible, [and] qualified" 26-year-old Shiflett. And in their eyes, Bagneris failed to reflect an image commensurate with the serious political stature of the caucus. "The progress, the image, and the future of GPC are at

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[41] "GPC Documentation Begins 'Phase 2,'" *Upfront*, August 29, 1979.

[42] Steve Shiflett, interview with Bruce Remmington, April 14, 1983.

[43] Shiflett explained that some of this stigma came from the support Bagneris garnered from "radical" figures like Ray Hill. Shiflett, interview.

stake," wrote one Shiflett supporter to caucus members.[44] Shiflett knew his supporters were motivated by racism, but he found them too old and too entrenched to change. Shiflett instead exploited their bigotry for his personal gain.

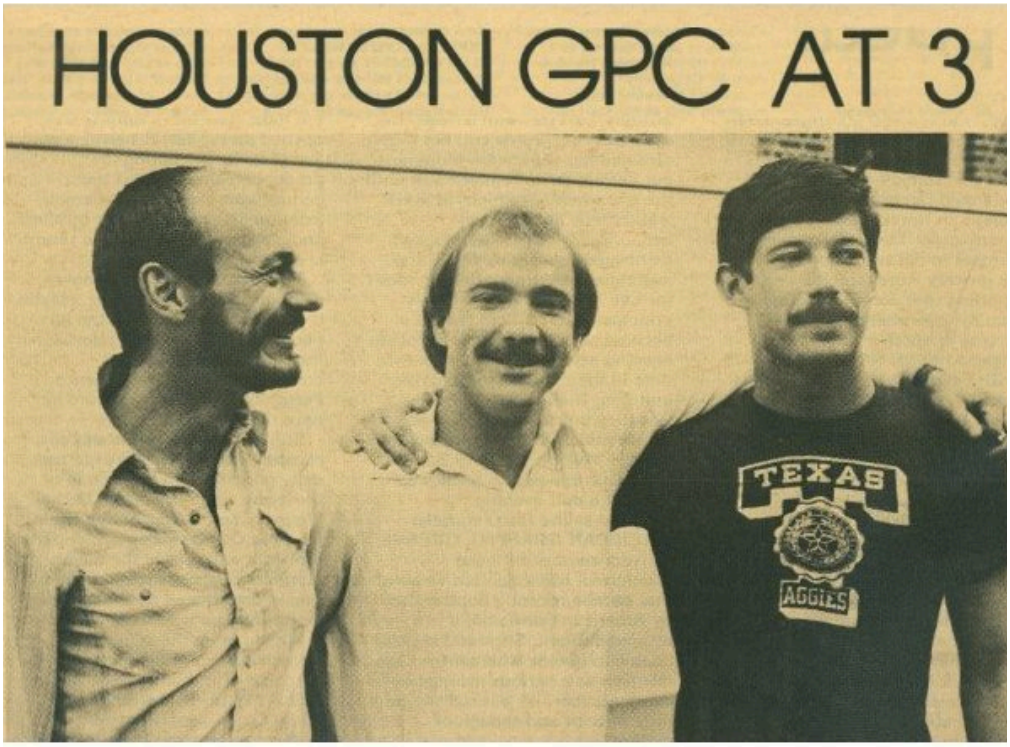

Figure 6: Gary Van Ooteghem, Steven Shiflett, Don Hrachovy (Left to Right), September 15 1978, Houston LGBT History, Courtesy of JD Doyle, Houston LGBT History, http://www.texasobituaryproject.org/050192shiflett.html, *Upfront,* Vol. 1, Issue 12.

Both Shiflett and Bagneris wanted to expand the caucus to include fresh voices, but their ideas of new constituents varied greatly. Shiflett sought to capitalize on the caucus' newfound establishment clout by bringing in more of the rich, respectability-minded white men who had supported him. They offered to provide financial support and could potentially fund a full-time staff, Shiflett argued. His supporters prioritized electing a gay-friendly mayor, who in turn, could nominate a sympathetic police chief. The police continued to be the greatest threat to his supporter's affluent lifestyle; no amount of

[44] Johnny Peden to Charles Botts, 1980, Houston LGBT History, accessed August 1, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/gpc1980.html. Original source not given on website.

money could insulate them from arrest in a bar raid, search-and-seizure, or public intoxication charge.[45]

Shiflett argued the caucus should primarily concentrate on "gay issues" and only align with minority groups when political interests overlapped. He avoided taking stands on abortion, women's rights, or minority issues because, as he told the *Houston Post*, he wanted to keep the caucus "focused only on gay rights."[46] Presumably, white, gay male rights. His ad hoc style of "coalition politics" worked across racial lines only when he found it expedient.

For example, in June 1979, the U.S. Justice Department's Civil Rights Division ruled that the structure of Houston's City Council violated the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The government argued the 8-seat structure, elected at-large by the entire city, diluted the voting strength of the city's racial minorities. Despite more than one-third of Houston being black or Hispanic, only one minority representative—Judson Robinson, Jr., a moderate, middle-class black real estate broker—had served on the council since the structure was put in place in 1955.[47] The federal government ordered the city to revamp the system, or risk postponement of the election.

Sensing the potential to secure a gay-friendly single-member district, the caucus under Shiflett's leadership aligned with racial minority advocacy groups in support of a

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[45] Shiflett, interview.

[46] Barbara Canetti, "Break in Tradition Cited in Shiflett's Resignation," *Houston Post*, May 4, 1980.

[47] In 1977 and 1978, the city annexed 14 predominantly white tracts of land, adding 140,000 people to the city, and further weakening the city's minority communities. This led to the Justice Department ruling. Bruce Cory, "Houston Held to Violate Civil Rights In Annexations; Elections Are in Doubt," *The Washington Post*, June 12, 1979; Remmington, "Twelve Fighting Years: Homosexuals In Houston, 1969-1981," 53–54.

plan with the fewest at-large seats and most single-member district seats.[48] The coalition opposed a suggested plan to expand the council to only 14 members, with 9 from single-member districts and 5 elected at-large. They all wanted more single-member districts. On August 11, 1979, however, the city voted, by a 2-1 margin along racial lines, for the "9-5" plan, and the federal government approved the plan in time for the November 6 municipal elections.[49] The caucus only joined the coalition because it benefited the interests of homosexuals, not because it benefited minorities in general.

Bagneris contended Shiflett's narrow definition of "gay issues" worked to exclude women and minorities. Shiflett could freely pick and choose issues which minority issues fit the gay rights narrative; for gay minorities, every minority issue was a gay rights issue. When first elected vice president, Bagneris told *Upfront* he believed "all minority groups are fighting the same conservative viewpoint."[50] Accordingly, he emphasized the need for the caucus to engage in a more active version of "coalition politics" with other minorities.[51] He specifically campaigned on increasing the caucus' sensitivity to women's issues and coined an inclusive campaign slogan: "positive change for all of us!"[52]

The heated caucus campaign culminated on February 20, 1980, and attracted more than four hundred gay and lesbian Houstonians—larger than any other previous caucus meeting. In a sign of dissension from women in the caucus, moments prior to the election, a cohort of 80 women—many wearing yellow cards that read, "I voted the

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[48] Bruce Cory, "Coalition Fights Change in Houston City Council," *The Washington Post*, August 10, 1979.
[49] Bruce Cory, "Houston Revamps Council Selection," *The Washington Post*, August 13, 1979.
[50] "Bagneris Tapped for GPC Post."
[51] Craig P. Rowland, "GPC Election: Larry Bagneris," *Upfront America*, February 15, 1980.
[52] Larry Bagneris, Jr.. "Campaign Flyer," 1980, Houston LGBT History, accessed August 12, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/gpc1980.html. Original source not given on website.

feminist bloc"—confronted both Shiflett and Bagneris with a list of demands to gain their support. Both candidates signed off on the statement, offering commitments to actively recruit women, create a feminist assembly within the caucus, and establish a standing committee to investigate discrimination, particularly complaints of "racist, sexist, classist, and ageist discrimination" against gay men and lesbians by gay organizations and businesses. The group unfurled a banner reading "We have a feminist bloc on our shoulders" as voting began.[53]

Steve Shiflett defeated Larry Bagneris Jr. by a vote of 254 to 200.[54] Following the election, Shiflett made overtures towards reconciliation and unity. "There are only so many of us fighting for the goals that we're fighting for and we need everyone's help," Shiflett conceded. He pledged to reach out to those who disagreed with him, appoint a few as committee coordinators, and foster the creation of feminist, conservative, and minority interest groups within the caucus.[55] But the appeasement came too little too late. The infighting had demonstrably damaged the unity of the caucus. In fact, the caucus was so divided in the aftermath of the election that it failed to organize against the nomination of an explicitly homophobic police chief.

The day after the caucus election, on February 21, Mayor McConn nominated B.K. Johnson to become the next Chief of the Houston Police Department.[56] A week later, shortly before an hour-long meeting with Shiflett and other gay community leaders,

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[53] Rue Starr II, "Shiflett Win Is Heated Campaign Climax," February 29, 1980.
[54] Ibid,.
[55] Craig P. Rowland, "Shiflett Outlines Plan For Unity," *Upfront America*, March 14, 1980.
[56] Steve Shiflett to B.K. Johnson, February 27, 1980, Annise Parker Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston.

Johnson told a radio host he was personally "violently against homosexual acts."[57] The caucus' board voted later that night to officially oppose Johnson's nomination and hold a rally against his confirmation.[58]

The demonstration on the steps of City Hall drew a paltry crowd of about one hundred gay protestors, and a few days later, city council narrowly voted to confirm Johnson.[59] Exasperated and divided by the election, caucus-members failed to mobilize despite the clear importance of securing a sympathetic police chief for their cause. B.K. Johnson, a man who said he was "violently against homosexual acts," took charge of the police with only a whimper from the homosexual community. The lingering tension within the caucus continued to fester. Shiflett wouldn't last.

The Perils of a Powerful President

Steve Shiflett liked to be in control. He gained an autocratic reputation as president, dictating duties and alienating the rank-and-file caucus members. "You work *for* Steve Shiflett; you work *with* Larry Bagneris," Bagneris later said.[60] Those who disagreed with Shiflett were simply obstacles. Detractors nicknamed Shiflett "The Little Dictator." He reveled in the title.[61]

The president of the caucus, by structure, carried a significant amount of power, and early on, Shiflett's style proved effective. As Shiflett put it himself, "I brought [the caucus] out of the closet and into the mainstream of politics." By the start of his third term, the caucus expanded to more than 600 members and a handful of committees. The

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[57] Craig P. Rowland, "B.K. Johnson on the Line," *Upfront America*, February 29, 1980.
[58] "Agenda: Meeting with Chief B.K. Johnson," February 27, 1980, Annise Parker Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston.
[59] "New Houston Police Chief Confirmed," *Upfront America*, March 15, 1980.
[60] Bagneris, Jr., interview.
[61] Shiflett, interview.

mailing list alone reached more than 8000 names.[62] But with this growth, it became increasingly clear that the movement in Houston revolved less around a group of people agreeing on shared goals, and more around Shiflett's personality and personal ambitions.

Shortly before the caucus' internal elections in February 1980, a vacancy opened for the Montrose-area 79th District seat in the Texas House of Representatives. Steve Shiflett eyed the seat for a number of months, but decided against running; the district's demographics could easily elect an openly gay candidate, and the seat essentially belonged to the caucus.[63] Without warning Shiflett, the incumbent's legislative assistant, Debra Danburg, decided to run.

The abrupt filing by Debra Danburg—an active member of the caucus since it's founding—irked Shiflett. He believed she should have consulted with the caucus before filing for the seat. "I knew the very next moment after announcing, she would be coming to [the caucus] expecting our endorsement, and our resources, and our money," Shiflett later said. "I felt like we were being used and manipulated." He grew to personally dislike Danburg, who he saw as abrasive, manipulative, and high-handed—a "bitch." He set out on a one-man personal vendetta to prevent her from getting a caucus endorsement.[64]

A few weeks later, ahead of the screening and official endorsement proceedings, eight caucus board members published a campaign advertisement in the *Montrose Voice* expressing support for Danburg. Shiflett believed the show of support undermined the

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[62] Canetti, "Break in Tradition Cited in Shiflett's Resignation."

[63] In fact, the incumbent, Ron Waters, had been an early supporter of the caucus and gay community. In 1973 he told Texas Monthly, "To say in an official capacity that there's nothing wrong with gay love. To admit that I have gay friends, gay people on my staff, and to introduce them as such, should have a radicalizing influence." Reinert and Dreyer, "Montrose Lives!"; "Shiflett Will Not Run For State Rep Post," *Upfront America*, February 15, 1980.

[64] Shiflett, interview; Morris Edelson, "District 79," *Houston Breakthrough*, May 1980.

integrity of the caucus' screening process. He called an emergency board meeting. Amidst yelling and screaming, fists flying up into the air, the board and Shiflett decided to scrap the traditional screening procedure and place the 79th District race directly before the floor of the caucus.[65]

Two days later, in a crowded, dimly lit conference room, the caucus gathered to vote on a string of endorsements for the upcoming primary. Shiflett was ready to fight. From the chair, he made lecturing comments and attempted to swing the endorsement away from Danburg. The crowd attempted to unseat Shiflett as chair, and slew of accusations of unfairness ensued. Debra Danburg, escorted to the meeting by Council Member Eleanor Tinsley and City Controller Kathy Whitmire, received significant support from a bloc of feminist voters. After repeated attempts by Shiflett to produce a no endorsement or joint endorsement, the caucus finally voted to support Danburg by a margin of 162 to 38.[66] Shiflett had failed.

Following the meeting, the GPC Board of Trustees voted to publicly censure Shiflett, arguing he fostered a confrontational tone and violated caucus by-laws.[67] Two days later, on April 2, Steven Shiflett resigned as President.

Shiflett lost the support of his board, alienated nearly half the caucus, and exhausted his personal political clout. "As a necessary first step toward re-establishing [caucus] unity and solidarity, I resign the presidency of [caucus] effective immediately," Shiflett wrote. "We must all continue to pull together if we are to realize a just and

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[65] One board member passed around 10 milligram Valium pills to quell the tears and anger. "It was probably the lowest period in the political history of the community," Shiflett later recalled. Minutes of Caucus Board Meeting, March 24, 1980, Annise Parker Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston.

[66] Minutes of Caucus General Meeting, March 26, 1980, Annise Parker Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston.

[67] "Statement by the GPC Board of Trustees," *Upfront America*, March 30, 1980.

honorable conclusion in the struggle for freedom to be unfettered, full-time participants in a democratically free society."[68] He solidified his separation from the caucus by joining the unendorsed campaign of Danburg's opponent. In an ironic sign of how far the caucus had come, news of Shiflett's resignation made it on the front page of the *Houston Post*.[69]

The caucus, however, had grown away from representing the interests of the entire community, and instead, moved toward pleasing the ego of its president. Shiflett departed alongside his cohort of white, rich loyalists and founded the group Citizens for Human Equality to provide funding to fledgling community groups. Bagneris refused to refer to it as anything but an unproductive "cocktail group."[70] The caucus moved on to rebuild.

Lee Harrington, the vice president at the time, took over upon Shiflett's resignation and immediately began the work of repairing the divided caucus. "These past six months have been the most emotion-filled [the caucus] has ever experienced, directly related, I believe to the rapid emergence of power the Houston gay community now enjoys," Harrington wrote to the caucus. "It's sort of like we skipped a stage or two in growing up."[71] Harrington moved to Houston shortly before Town Meeting I to live openly as a gay man, "to be free." An adopted father of two Hispanic sons and one black son, Harrington, a white thirty-seven-year-old, felt out-of-place running alongside Shiflett's racist slate of candidates. "The Harrington home is a living example that blacks,

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[68] Steven Shiflett to Supporters, April 9, 1980, Houston LGBT History, accessed September 12, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/gpc1980.html. Original source not given on website.
[69] Canetti, "Break in Tradition Cited in Shiflett's Resignation."
[70] Bagneris, Jr., interview.
[71] Lee Harrington, "Statement," April 7, 1980, Houston LGBT History, accessed September 12, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/gpc1980.html. Original source not given on website.

Hispanics and gays can be compatible," wrote a *Houston Post* reporter, somewhat awkwardly.[72] He set out to reunite the caucus. "Pain ain't worth a damn if we don't learn something from experiencing it," Harrington wrote.[73]

Harrington first announced the creation of a "community advisory committee," a diverse, forty-member group to help him stay up-to-date on the "pulse of our large community."[74] He underscored his desire to follow-through on the inclusion of women. "Someone said, 'several of them are so outspoken…' Hell, you might be a little outspoken at times, too, if you felt like you had been forced to take a back seat for so long," Harrington wrote in his letter to the caucus.[75]

In the following years, lesbians grew to play an increasingly important role in the direction and day-to-day operation of the caucus. The inclusion of women became especially important with the onset of the AIDS crisis. During the crisis, lesbians served as caretakers, nurses, and guardians for their gay male friends.[76] Women slowly began to fill leadership positions. The screening questionnaire began to include a "Women's Concerns" section, with questions concerning the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion access, rape prevention, and job discrimination.[77] By 1984, both the president of the caucus and the chair of the board were women.

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[72] Lee Harrington, interview with Bruce Remmington, April 14, 1983; Barbara Canetti, "New Leader Came Here so He Could Live Openly," *Houston Post*, May 5, 1980.

[73] Harrington, "Statement."

[74] Lee Harrington to Community Leader, April 17, 1980, Houston LGBT History, accessed September 12, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/gpc1980.html. Original source not given on website.

[75] Harrington, "Statement."

[76] Sue Lovell, who later became president of the caucus, emphasized this point in reflecting on this dramatic few months. Sue Lovell, interview with author, November 4, 2017.

[77] Houston Gay Political Caucus Screening Questionnaire, 1980, Houston LGBT History, accessed September 15, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/gpc1980.html. Original source not given on website.

The question of minorities within the caucus, however, remained much bleaker. When Harrington stepped down after two-terms as president in 1982, he openly admitted, "We have not succeeded in opening the caucus to minorities."[78] The caucus unanimously elected Larry Bagneris, Jr. in 1982 on a platform stressing unity within organization: "Whether you be lesbian or gay male, rich or poor, black, brown or anglo, we are all still one...and my pledge to you is to deliver this oneness against the enemy!"[79]

The immediate attempts at reunion, however, were put on hold. A few weeks after Shiflett's resignation, in late June 1980 the gay community faced a crisis. The crisis carried eerie parallels to the past and displayed how far the political power of the caucus had come.

Two Deaths, Four Years, Two Responses

Gary Wayne Stock, a thin 31-year-old bartender, poured his last drink at the Inside/Outside on Monday, December 20, 1976. He left the country western gay bar in his black Cadillac at 2:47 in the morning. Eight minutes later—at 2:55 a.m.—gunshots rang out across Montrose. Houston Police Officer C.V. Hudson fatally shot Gary Wayne Stock, killing him instantly.[80]

A preliminary police report claimed Stock ran a red light, and then fled the police at 80 miles per hour. After his car spun out-of-control, he drove toward C.V Hudson, forcing the officer on-foot to jump on the hood of the moving car. Hudson drew his .357-caliber pistol and allegedly fired one gunshot through the windshield.[81]

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[78] William Marberry, "Election of Bagneris No Surprise at GPC Meeting; Presence of ABC Was," *Montrose Voice*, February 19, 1982.
[79] "New GPC Prez Stresses Oneness," *This Week In Texas*, February 26, 1982.
[80] "Houston Bartender Killed by Police," *Montrose Star*, December 31, 1976, 3; "Comment," *This Week In Texas*, February 5, 1977, 35–39.
[81] "31-Year-Old Shot to Death," *Houston Post*, December 21, 1976.

But the police report did not satisfy Fred Paez, the chief investigator for Ray Hill's Houston Human Rights Foundation. The *Montrose Star*—a gay newspaper—reported one witness saw the windshield undamaged; another heard two gunshots, not one. During the spring of 1977, Paez compiled notarized witness statements, collected signatures for a petition calling for an investigation, and scrutinized police records for inconsistencies. The community's resident "police buff," Paez submitted complaints to the FBI, Harris County District Attorney's Office, and the Chief of Police. But with only the police report, a grand jury returned a "no bill," refusing to indict the officer.[82]

In 1977, the political clout of the gay community remained too weak to warrant significant action from public officials. Political leaders showed little interest in reopening an investigation, and Stock's family did not want the matter pursued; they rather he be seen as a criminal who tried to kill a police officer than a homosexual. Two years later, Shiflett told the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights that the Houston Police Department covered up the young bartenders murder. Nevertheless, Gary Wayne Stock faded into the background.[83]

Four years later, in the early morning hours of Saturday, June 28, 1980—the last day of Gay Pride Week 1980—another ominous gunshot rang out across Houston. Kevin McCoy, an off-duty HPD officer, fatally shot Fred Paez, a beloved 27-year-old fixture of the city's gay political scene, part-time office secretary of the caucus, and the lead community investigator on Gary Wayne Stock's death four years earlier.[84]

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[82] Ray Hill, interview with author, November 4, 2017.

[83] "Houston Bartender Killed by Police"; "Comment."

[84] Craig P. Rowland, "FBI Investigates Paez Killing," *Upfront*, July 4, 1980.

A preliminary police report claimed that around 2:30 a.m., Paez made a sexual advance on McCoy, who was working security in a warehouse parking lot. McCoy claimed to have identified himself as a law enforcement officer and attempted to arrest Paez for public lewdness. Paez allegedly resisted, and in an ensuing struggle, reached behind his head and knocked McCoy's .45 pistol, causing it to accidentally discharge and strike him.[85]

The police report outraged Ray Hill. Fred Paez was not the type to resist arrest. Paez once authored a caucus pamphlet advising total cooperation with law enforcement, no matter the charges.[86] He briefly worked as a deputy constable, aspired to become a full-fledged police officer, and compiled the paperwork sent to the Justice Department for the "Operation Documentation" program.[87] He led the investigation into Gary Wayne Stock's death. "Houston's gay and lesbian community is handicapped in its ability to investigate this or any other matter involving the Houston Police Department, because Fred Paez was *the* person who did that," Hill wrote in the months after the incident.[88] The gay community, however, had much more power in 1980 than it did in 1977.

A series of politicians endorsed by the caucus rushed to publicly respond to Paez' death. City Councilman Lance Lalor called on federal government to conduct a thorough, impartial investigation.[89] Council members Eleanor Tinsely and Dale Gorczynksi, as well as City Comptroller Kathy Whitmire, also called for an investigation. The exhortations

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[85] "GPC Secretary Fred Paez Shot and Killed," *This Week In Texas*, July 4, 1980.

[86] Hill, interview; Fred King, "Gay Caucus Worker's Death Ruled Accidental," *The Houston Post*, August 29, 1980.

[87] William Marberry, "The Fred Paez Incident: Two Years Later," *Montrose Voice*, June 25, 1982.

[88] Ray Hill, "Special Report Update on Paez Death," *This Week in Texas*, September 19, 1980.

[89] "U.S. Probe Asked in Slaying of Gay Political Worker," *Houston Chronicle*, June 30, 1980.

followed similar display of support from Congressman Mickey Leland earlier in the week.

Eight days before Paez' death, on an early Friday morning, the police raided Mary's Bar and Lounge—the "mother house of all gay bars in Houston"—and arrested 61 people for public intoxication.[90] In a clear sign of support for the Houston Gay Political Caucus, Congressman Mickey Leland, a progressive, black representative, sent a letter to Chief of Police B.K. Johnson eviscerating the Houston Police Department for so obviously attempting to harass and intimidate the gay community. "The Gay Community in Houston has grown from a much maligned minority, to a highly respected, cohesive civic and political force," Leland wrote, adding that these sort of actions will not be tolerated by those who have come to view the gay community as friends.[91]

The gay community also had a more robust infrastructure in 1980 to deal with the fallout from Paez' death. More than one hundred gay community members gathered the Monday following Paez' death to elect a five-person task force—including Hill, Danburg, and Harrington—to oversee the investigation and public portray of the alleged murder. The next day, the committee held a press conference, where a firearms expert argued the incident displayed a high-degree of negligence on the part of the officer. The coroner deemed the incident "accidental," but the uproar from the community helped persuade at least five government bodies to begin investigations into the murder: the

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[90] Ed Martinez, "Mary's: A Houston Institution," *Out in Texas*, March 31, 1983.

[91] "Washington Watches Houston," *Upfront America*, July 18, 1980; Art Tomaszewski, "61 Feted in 3rd Annual Mary's Bust," *Upfront America*, n.d.; "61 Arrested At Mary's," *This Week In Texas*, July 27, 1980.

Houston Police Department Homicide Division, the HPD Internal Affairs Division, the Harris County District Attorney, the city's Police Advisory Board, and the FBI.[92]

In October 1980, a grand jury indicted Officer McCoy under the charge of criminally negligent homicide—the same misdemeanor offense brought against the officers in the Torres murder.[93] Evidence arose showing McCoy had been drinking the night of the shooting.[94] At trial, the next September, a jury found the officer not guilty.[95]

The verdict outraged the gay community, but the process showed signs of a significant growth in power in the years since Gary Wayne Stock's death in late 1976. This time, politicians called for remedies, law enforcement conducted investigations, and the gay community organized into a cohesive, unified voice. The boundaries of that power, however, were just as stark. The police chief continued to harbor resentment for homosexuals, and the rank-and-file police force did not cease to harass and intimidate the community.

Paez' death magnified the need for the gay community to elect a gay-friendly Mayor. The caucus had made some headway in changing its relationship with the Houston Police Department, but without a support from a sympathetic Chief of Police, nominated by a gay-friendly Mayor, the same problems continued to resurface. The hope for a sympathetic Mayor came the following election in the form of a five-foot tall darling of the Houston Gay Political Caucus.

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[92] Debra Danburg, "Task Force Tackles Paez Killing," *Upfront America*, August 29, 1980; "Coroner Says Paez Death 'Accidental,'" *This Week In Texas*, September 5, 1980.

[93] "Policeman Indicted in Paez Killing," *This Week In Texas*, October 24, 1980, 13–14.

[94] Fred King and Barbara Canetti, "Source Says Officer Was Drinking before Shooting," *Houston Post*, July 8, 1980.

[95] "Jury Finds McCoy Not Guilty," *This Week In Texas*, September 11, 1981.

Election 1981: Mayor Kathy Whitmire

On November 17, 1981, the city voted overwhelming to elect Kathryn Whitmire—a 35-year-old two-term city controller—the first female mayor of Houston. The unassuming, "little lady," as her opponent called her, campaigned on a conservative message of sound, business-like management and a "progressive" platform of equality for all citizens. "We have put together a campaign that unifies this city," the mayor-elect said to a throng of supporters at her election night headquarters.[96]

Whitmire's landslide winning coalition included the gay community, a constituency she unapologetically courted during the campaign. "This is our finest hour," Lee Harrington, then-president of the caucus told the *Houston Chronicle* on election night. "Today Houston voters have elected to the city's highest office a person who publicly takes a stand that no citizen will be denied their basic human rights. This is all the gay community has ever demanded."[97] In Montrose, crowds of bar-goers joyfully wept at Whitmire's win.[98]

Kathy Whitmire's devotion to the gay community extended long before she became Houston's chief executive. In 1975, she accompanied her late-husband, a candidate at-the-time for City Council, to the caucus' first screening, a moment Gary Van Ooteghem believes convinced Whitmire of the caucus' professionalism.[99] In 1977, in her successful bid for city controller, Whitmire openly sought the caucus endorsement. "The gay community worked hard for me, and I got more votes as a result of their support than I lost," Whitmire said in 1978, admitting to the political power of the community in the

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[96] Fred Harper, "Whitmire Stampedes Heard," *Houston Post*, November 18, 1981.
[97] Harper.
[98] Lee Harrington, interview with author, November 4, 2017.
[99] Gary Van Ooteghem, interview with Bruce Remmington, April 13, 1983.

previous election.[100] In September 1981, she beat out three other mayoral candidates in a 60-question screening survey to secure an endorsement from the caucus.[101]

Whitmire won the run-off election by such a wide margin—62.5 percent to 37.4 percent—that no specific interest group could claim decisive credit. The gay community's marginal vote proved largely inconsequential in the broad coalition Whitmire had assembled. Perception, however, proved more potent than reality. The caucus spun the 1981 election into a public relations triumph.

Figure 7: Kathryn Whitmire, December 1978, Houston LGBT History, Courtesy of JD Doyle, Houston LGBT History, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/misc-gpc79.html, Botts Collection of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History.

In the months leading up to the election, the caucus effectively marketed itself in the press as a political tour de force not to be messed with. News outlets across the country, including the *New York Times,* wrote features hyping up the political clout of

[100] Rick Barbs, "Gays Gaining Political Clout Here," *Houston Post*, June 25, 1978.
[101] "GPC Picks Whitmire, Greanias, Lalor," *Montrose Voice*, September 18, 1981.

Houston's gay community. "The outcome of this year's mayoral race in Houston—the nation's fifth largest city—may well depend on the blessing of [a] single, anomalous group: the Houston Gay Political Caucus," read an article in the August 1981 issue of *Newsweek*.[102] In fact, in cross-checking news account with caucus minutes, it appears the caucus strategically exaggerated its membership and mailing list numbers in the press to project more power than it actually had. The press portrayed the caucus as untouchable.

The campaign did feature a number of last-minute gay-baiting smear attacks, but few came from actual candidates, and none gained significant traction. A Western Union Mailgram, sent to 107,000 households by an anonymous political action committee, alleged that homosexuals from San Francisco orchestrated Whitmire's campaign. A conservative student group at the University of Houston distributed 300,000 tabloid newspapers titled "Straight Talk," urging voters to vote against Whitmire "and her liberal followers…unless you want City Hall moved to Montrose."[103] At a town hall event, an anonymous audience member berated Whitmire for accepting the endorsement of "perverts." To which Whitmire simply replied, "I'm pleased to have that endorsement."[104] A reporter at the *Houston Post* speculated the last-minute attacks meant to hurt the gay community did the exact opposite.[105]

The caucus had successfully anesthetized the "queers and oddwads" image used in the past, and candidates no longer found it politically viable to attack the homosexual

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[102] Melinda Beck and Stryker McGuire, "Gay Power in Macho Houston," *Newsweek*, August 10, 1981.
[103] "Interview Attempt Ends At Gunpoint," *Houston Chronicle*, November 18, 1981; "Straight Talk," November 1981, Botts Collection of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History.
[104] "Houston Gay Political Caucus Newsletter," October 1981, Houston LGBT History, accessed July 15, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/Houston80s/GPC/Newsletters/New/81-jun-oct.pdf. Original source not given on website.
[105] Rick Barbs and Margaret Downing, "Well-Organized Gays Gaining Political Clout," *Houston Post*, November 22, 1981.

community. As one Whitmire supporter put it after the election, "Who the hell cares in 1981 what happens when you go in your own home?"[106]

The greatest display of the caucus' shrewd political senses came in how it turned a few thousand votes in the District C City Council race into a front page *Houston Post* story on gay political clout in Houston. On election night, the caucus convinced the Montrose precinct captains to hold off on submitting vote totals until the very last minute. While they waited, the city council race for District C—which includes Montrose—grew tighter and tighter. At the very last minute, the Montrose votes were submitted to the city, swaying the outcome of the election. "It's the strangest election I ever saw," said the non-caucus endorsed candidate in that race. "I was declared the winner by three media outlets and then all of the sudden, I'm a loser after two Montrose boxes come in." In a 40,000-vote race, the two Montrose boxes contained only 1,979 votes. The boxes secured an 825-vote margin of victory for the caucus-endorsed candidate, George Greanias.[107] A few days later, the *Houston Post* reported the turn-of-events on its front-page: "Well-organized gays gaining political clout."[108]

The caucus entered 1982 with the full support of six city council members, the city controller, and, for the first time in its history, the Mayor of Houston. It solidified its image as powerful constituency. "It's like a dream come true," said Gary Van Ooteghem of the 1981 election. "With this election, gays will finally have a receptive ear at City Hall. No longer will we be ridiculed when we go before the council on something like a

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[106] Mary Flood and Diane Freeman, "Supporters Cheer Whitmire's Win," *Houston Post*, November 18, 1981.
[107] Lovell, interview; Remmington, "Twelve Fighting Years: Homosexuals In Houston, 1969-1981," 85.
[108] Barbs and Downing, "Well-Organized Gays Gaining Political Clout."

police brutality issue."[109] The following year proved to be the most successful period for the caucus since its founding.

A Sympathetic Police Chief

The first major move of the Whitmire administration paid off for Houston's gay community. On March 23, 1982, Houston's city council voted 11 to 3 to approve the appointment of Lee P. Brown, a 44-year-old Public Safety Commissioner from Atlanta, Georgia, as the chief of the Houston Police Department. Whitmire's pick disrupted the status quo of the troubled department. Brown became the first chief since 1941 recruited from outside the department, and the first black police chief in Houston's history. In fact, only 256 officers of the 3,130 person-police force were black, and none served above the rank of sergeant.[110] "It's important for the entire citizenship of the city, including its minority citizens, to come to respect and support its police," Brown said on his appointment. Brown's tenure marked a momentous shift in relations between the police and the gay community. A shift directly linked to the election of Kathy Whitmire.[111]

Brown opened up a direct line of dialogue with the caucus leadership absent among previous police chiefs. An eight-person task force comprised of gay community members met regularly with Brown, and the department invited the caucus to participate in the Police Advisory Committee.[112] On June 22, 1982, two months after his appointment, Chief Brown made a surprise guest appearance at a Gay Pride Week event commemorating the Stonewall Riots. "I have a firm belief about law enforcement,"

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[109] Barbs and Downing, "Well-Organized Gays Gaining Political Clout."

[110] "Lee Brown to Head Houston Police Dept," *The Baltimore Afro-American*, March 20, 1982.

[111] Tom Kennedy, "Brown Confirmed As Houston's Police Chief," *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 24, 1982.

[112] After hearing about harassment in June 1983, Bagneris complained to the department, and Lee Brown returned from an out-of-town trip to personally censure the "homophobic officers." Bagneris, interview; Hollis Hood, "GPC Seeks to Overcome Summit Event Losses," *Montrose Voice*, July 8, 1983.

Brown told the crowd. "It can't be successful in carrying out its mission of law enforcement without cooperation of the people it serves."[113] The cooperation of Brown's rank-and-file police force, however, proved harder to win over.

The vast majority of the police force—2500 officers in total—belonged to the Houston Police Officers Association, an all-white union that openly derided the reforms sought by Whitmire and Brown. Opposed to the recruitment of an outsider, the union distributed a 14-page dossier after Brown's nomination slamming him as an incompetent law enforcement manager.[114] The union resented Whitmire's fiscal policies, which targeted their benefits and take-home pay. During the 1981 campaign the attacks from the police unions centered largely on Whitmire's support for the gay community.

In the lead up to the November 1981 election, the president of the Houston Police Officers Association alleged in the media that Whitmire, if elected, planned to hire a San Francisco police captain, sympathetic to homosexuals, as a police chief.[115] Another group, the Houston Police Patrolmen's Union, mailed out 540 letters to churches to inform the ministers that Whitmire, in her screening with the Union, had stated that homosexuals should not be discriminated against in any way in the police recruitment process. The union's president said, "Somebody should stand up and tell these people it is not alternative lifestyle, but deviant and abnormal behavior."[116] The rank-and-file did not favor Whitmire or Brown's approach, and, subsequently, retaliated with bar raids, harassment, and abuse against the gay community

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[113] "Police Chief Speaks at 'Day of Remembrance,'" *Montrose Voice*, July 2, 1982.

[114] "Houston City Council Confirms Brown 11-3," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 25, 1982.

[115] Juan Palomo, "Whitmire Denies Rumor Police Chief to Be Replaced," *Houston Post*, November 7, 1981.

[116] It also did not help that Whitmire's opponent, Jack Heard, was the Harris County Sheriff and former Houston Police Department Chief. Remmington, "Twelve Fighting Years: Homosexuals In Houston, 1969-1981," 83.

The existence of hostility between the police and the gay community infuriated and confused some quarters of the caucus. How could abuse continue under both a sympathetic police chief and mayor? "The unfortunate situation is that most Houston police officers, from sergeant down, think they work for their redneck unions," Ray Hill wrote in *This Week In Texas* in an attempt to placate angry quarters of the gay community.[117]

The continued antagonism with the police highlighted the limits of the caucus' electoral strategy. Not all reforms could come from electing a gay-friendly mayor, and the culture of a police department does not change with a new police chief. Negative attitudes against the gay community would take years to correct. In the meantime, the caucus embraced the open communication with Brown. During the 1983 election, the caucus-screening questionnaire explicitly asked: "Do you pledge to retain Lee Brown as Police Chief."[118]

Statewide Successes

In August 1982, a federal judge ruled Texas' sodomy statute unconstitutional for violating guarantees of privacy and equal protection under the law. At the end of his 53-page opinion, United States District Judge Jerry Buchmeyer wrote, "The right of privacy does extend to private sexual conduct between consenting adults—whether husband and wife, unmarried males and females, or homosexuals—and the right of equal protection condemns a state statute which prohibits homosexual sodomy, without any rational

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[117] Ray Hill, "Police and Election," *This Week In Texas*, October 21, 1983.

[118] Houston Gay Political Caucus Screening Questionnaire, 1983, Houston LGBT History, accessed September 15, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/gpc1980.html. Original source not given on website.

basis."[119] The law that sparked Pokey Anderson to organize the caucus finally reached its end.[120] The origins of its downfall originated with the caucus.

In 1976, the caucus formed a non-profit, litigation arm called the Houston Human Rights Defense Fund to advocate civil rights and civil liberties for the gay community.[121] In June 1978, the organization renamed itself the Texas Human Rights Foundation, Inc. and initiated a challenge against Texas' sodomy statute.[122] The group operated as a separate entity from the caucus, but it maintained close ties with its leadership. Though law enforcement rarely enforced the sodomy statute, it still served as cornerstone for all discrimination against gays in Texas, preventing gay men and lesbians from holding positions that required state licenses, including at police departments. The ruling impacted the Houston Police Department.

In February 1983, on the urging of Kathy Whitmire, the Houston Police Department ruled homosexuals could become members of the police force. Complying with the federal ruling, the department removed nine questions regarding sexuality from its polygraph hiring examinations.[123] The police union responded disapprovingly, claiming the move would create "chaos, controversy and conflict" in the police force. The union circulated a petition seeking to prohibit homosexuals from joining the force.[124] Larry Bagneris, Jr. welcomed the changes, noting that a number of closeted gay men and

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[119] "Texas Ban on Homosexual Conduct Struck Down," *New York Times*, August 18, 1982.

[120] On August 26, 1985, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals voted to reverse the decision that struck down the sodomy statute. The sodomy statute would remain law until the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional in Lawrence v. Texas in 2001.

[121] Mort Schwab, "Comment," *This Week In Texas*, September 28, 1976.

[122] "Texas Human Rights Foundation Articles of Amendment," June 6, 1978, UNT Libraries Special Collections, texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc967416/.

[123] "Sexual History Removed from Job Application," *McKinney Courier Gazette*, February 4, 1983.

[124] John Gravois, "Police Petition Seeks Ban on Gay Recruits," *Houston Post*, September 3, 1982.

lesbians already served in the police force.[125] The statewide success continued into the next election.

In November 1982, Mark White, the state's governor-elect, met with thirteen members of the caucus in a closed-door, hour-and-a-half long meeting. The former attorney general specifically sought out the caucus' endorsement during the campaign, noting the political power the group wielded in the city. The meeting marked the first time in the history of the state that a governor met with a gay group. In May 1983, the relationship paid off when White selected Marion Coleman, the lesbian vice president of the caucus, to serve on his Commission on Women's Affairs.[126]

The year concluded with an article in the *New York Native*, a gay newspaper, listing Larry Bagneris, Jr., the president of the caucus, as one of the ten gay activists who made the most difference in 1982. "Houston undoubtedly stands as the best organized gay political base between the two coasts and beats many cities on the east and west coasts that ought to have more to brag about," the article concluded.[127] The slew of successes, however, came with new challenges.

Election 1983: Too Many Choices

In 1983, the caucus faced a conundrum when two candidates, both demonstrable "friends" of the community, sought the caucus' endorsement for the same at-large city council seat. The contest pit Nikki Van Hightower, a feminist leader who once served as the official "Women's Advocate" at City Hall, against Anthony Hall, an African-

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[125] "Houston Police Can Hire Gays," *This Week In Texas*, February 11, 1983.

[126] Minutes of Caucus General Meeting, May 4, 1983, Annise Parker Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston; Ira Perry, "White Makes Peace with Gays on Appeal of Ruling," *Houston Post*, November 19, 1982; Nene Foxhall, "White's Meeting with Gays a Demonstration of Savvy," *Houston Chronicle*, November 21, 1982.

[127] Bush, "The Year Gone By."

American lawyer and former state representative. To some extent, it was a good problem to have. The caucus had grown so powerful that multiple gay-friendly candidates jockeyed for support. By policy, however, the caucus could only issue one endorsement. The screening committee recommended Anthony Hall, but the caucus voted by a 3-to-1 margin to support Nikki Van Hightower. The contest ignited latent factions within the caucus.[128]

The fallout from the endorsement created a small, yet noteworthy fissure in the gay community. Roughly two-thirds of the caucus continued to support Nikki Van Hightower, with a significant amount of support coming from lesbian-feminists within the caucus. The other third of the caucus branched off to support Anthony Hall. Against the caucus' wishes, Mayor Kathy Whitmire endorsed Hall as well. The most significant split with the caucus, however, came from a cohort of gay businessmen and bar-owners, who spun off their own organization called "Community Political Action Committee," or C-PAC. They campaigned vigorously against the caucus in support of Hall, who they saw as a friendlier ally for the gay business community. The divisions sent the race to a run-off, where rifts only intensified.[129]

The tensions, in part, spoke to how far the caucus had come. The organization no longer needed to beg candidates to show up. It did not need to ask candidates about their basic support for the gay community and could instead focus on more nuanced issues. Rudimentary questions asked in 1975, like, "Would you be willing to hire a gay for your staff if that person was qualified for the job," were replaced in 1983 by more complex questions, like, "What is your understanding of the current status of the national Equal

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[128] Jim Simmon, "Gay Political Caucus Endorses Mayor Whitmire," *Houston Post*, September 1, 1983.
[129] "Who's Voting for Whom and Why," *This Week In Texas*, November 25, 1983.

Rights Amendment and the Texas Equal Legal Rights Amendment?"[130] Some argued the caucus should have endorsed both candidates, while others argued it should have endorsed neither.[131] The caucus' endorsement and bloc-voting strategy, however, relied on all-or-nothing support, and did not accommodate this distinction.

On election night, Anthony Hall beat Nikki Van Hightower by a landslide. In Montrose, Hall secured 36% of the vote, a margin that led *This Week in Texas* to conclude that that roughly one out of three voters bucked the caucus' bloc strategy. "Perhaps the [caucus] is no longer truly representative of the gay community as a whole," the reporter concluded.[132] The rifts, particularly with the splinter group C-PAC, would haunt the caucus in the year to come. Despite the handwringing, however, the caucus undoubtedly remained the largest, most influential, and most representative gay rights organization in the city.

The caucus' public-facing strategy earned the caucus establishment credibility and historic levels of political clout. The allure of its voting-bloc attracted dozens of endorsement-seeking candidates. The caucus garnered allies in city hall and the governor's mansion, and the community benefited from a gay-friendly mayor and a sympathetic police chief. The insurgent power, however, came with consequences. A homophobic backlash was on the horizon.

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[130] Houston Gay Political Caucus Screening Questionnaire, 1980, Houston LGBT History, accessed September 15, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/gpc1980.html. Original source not given on website.

[131] Though some community members made these arguments, neither Hall nor Hightower wanted a duel or no endorsement. They both vied for the single endorsement. Chuck Patrick, "Houston GPC Prez Inquiry," *This Week In Texas*, February 10, 1984.

[132] "Hall's Landslide Over Van Hightower," *This Week In Texas*, December 9, 1983.

CHAPTER 3

Backlash to Gay Power

1984-1985

On the evening of January 7, 1984, Mayor Kathy Whitmire, three council members, and a well-heeled entourage of 35, boarded a chartered double-decker bus to begin a four-hour Montrose bar crawl in appreciation of Houston's gay community. The ten-bar tour began with a cocktail reception at Union Jack, then proceeded onto Mary's, JR's, Just Marion and Lynn's, Miss Charlotte's—where the *Houston Post* intercepted the tour—Al's, Brazos River Bottom, Venture-N, Rich's, and finally, at the 1:30 a.m. "last call," the Galleon. "The *who* is here?" shouted one gay man over ear-wrenching disco music at Rich's. "This is definitely a first for our place."[1]

Over hundreds of handshakes and dozens of speeches, Whitmire commended gay men and lesbians gay for helping reelect her during the previous election. "I want thank each and every one of you for the support you've given me in the last two years," Whitmire said, speaking beneath a neon "Get Hot or Get Out" sign at the Brazos River Bottom Club. "I really look forward to working with you in the future." Both Whitmire and the gay organizers meant for the outing to be a private, "hush-hush" affair, but news broke anyway.[2]

The following Monday, the *Houston Post* printed a front-page, four-column wide color photograph of Mayor Whitmire speaking into a microphone behind the bar at Venture-N. The tour, somewhat surprisingly, received a muted response from the broader public. Besides a few complaints here and there, constituents largely reacted with an

[1] "Houston Mayor Tours Gay Bars," *This Week In Texas*, January 13, 1984; Mark Carreau, "Montrose Bar Trip Stirs Up Criticism," *Houston Post*, January 19, 1984.

[2] Robert Hyde, "Whitmire and Group Make Surprise Gay Bar Tour," *Montrose Voice*, January 13, 1984.

apathetic "so what?" to the image of Whitmire thanking gay supporters at a gay bar. Asked by the *Post* if she'd do it again, Whitmire responded, "I probably will."[3]

The gay community appeared politically powerful, and its clout carried over into City Hall. Five months after the bar tour, on June 19, 1984, Houston's City Council narrowly voted to add "sexual orientation" to the list of groups—including race, color, religion, age, disability, sex and national origin—protected against discrimination in the city's civil service program. The council separately voted to prohibit asking about sexuality in the city's affirmative action program.[4] The measures codified into law a longstanding unwritten policy in the Whitmire administration of neither inquiring nor discriminating against city employees or contractors on the basis of sexual orientation. The law did not extend to private employers or housing, and did not offer preferential treatment for homosexuals. The non-discrimination ordinance, however limited in substance, offered a symbol of the power of the gay community in Houston.

After months of post-election politicking and nearly a decade of advocacy from the caucus, Houston's gay community finally secured official protections from the city. With the onset of the AIDS crisis, the protections carried even more significance. The passage of the ordinance—a policy objective of the early gay rights movement—affirmed the influence of gay politics at city hall. Houston joined four states and more than forty

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[3] Mark Obbie, "Gay Bars Get Surprise Visitor," *Houston Post*, January 9, 1984; Jim Simmon and Mark Carreau, "Mayor's Night out Gets Little Reaction," *Houston Post*, January 11, 1984.

[4] Houston's City Council, in actuality, passed two, separate ordinances, but for the purposes of this chapter, I will refer to them together in the singular tense, as the "ordinance." John Gravois, "Gay Rights Ordinances OK'd," *Houston Post*, June 20, 1984.

municipalities across the country in guaranteeing basic protection against discrimination for gay men and lesbians in public employment.[5]

The surge in gay power did not last. A day before the non-discrimination vote at City Council, an unexpected, inflammatory political advertisement appeared in the *Houston Chronicle* reviving the sort of homophobic language absent from City Hall for years. "City Council May Make 'Homosexuality' Equal to Race, Religion, and Color," read the headline. The copy continued: "Do we want Houston to be known nationwide as a standard bearer city of homosexuality?" Hundreds of angry phone calls poured into City Hall after the ad exhorted citizens to call the offices of Whitmire and the seven council members expected to support the ordinance.[6]

The next day, during the city council vote, the lingering resentment boiled over into an unprecedented spectacle of homophobia, hatred, and bigotry. More than 400 anti-gay demonstrators converged on city hall in protest against the ordinance. Some sang "God Bless America" and "Onward Christian Soldiers," while others shouted, "Kill the Queers." One sign read, "Did the city of Sodom pass a similar ordinance?" A hysterical chant of "Gas fags; impeach the mayor" and "death to homosexuals" from eight Ku Klux Klan members filled the halls outside the chamber. The display stunned gay community leaders and council members alike. "In all my years on council I've never seen such a sad and dangerous outpouring of hatred and venom," said council member Eleanor

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[5] "Gay Rights Protections: United States and Canada" (National Gay Task Force, May 1982), Annise Parker Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

[6] "Much Ado About Very Little," *Texas Monthly*, September 1984; Pete Brewton, "Gay-Rights Foes Flood City Hall with Phone Calls," *Houston Chronicle*, June 19, 1984.

Tinsely. The rhetoric of "oddwads and queers" Tinsely helped quell in 1979 returned in full force; so long to Houstonians saying "so what?" about gay power in politics.[7]

The protest spurred the formation of the first, large-scale, organized opposition to the gay rights movement in Houston. Less than two weeks after the vote, a newly formed anti-gay rights group led by ultra-rich conservative donors, Republican party operatives, and four city council members—dubbed the Committee for Public Awareness—capitalized on the anti-gay anger and collected more than 63,000 petition signatures to force a citywide referendum on the non-discrimination measures.[8]

The referendum put the fate of the newly passed non-discrimination ordinance, the landmark legislation of Houston's gay rights movement, up to a popular vote. A vitriolic seven-month-long campaign ensued. The anti-gay opposition used the referendum as a vehicle to spread falsehoods about the gay community, reviving long-standing anti-gay rhetoric that painted homosexuals as child molesters, pedophiles, and hedonists. The gay community, to some extent, expected this "oddwads and queers" messaging. But in the eleventh hour of the campaign, the opposition seized on a relatively new source of fear, the HIV/AIDS crisis, to shift the public's opinion on homosexuality. The messaging worked.

On January 19, 1985, the Houston electorate turned out in astonishing numbers to reject, by a 4 to 1 margin, the gay rights non-discrimination ordinances. The gay community lost. Approximately 240,000 people—an estimated 28.9% of all registered

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[7] "Hysteria over Job Ordinance Passage," *This Week In Texas*, June 22, 1984; Bill Mintz, "No Vote on Gay Issue, Council Says," *Houston Chronicle*, June 27, 1984; Gravois, "Gay Rights Ordinances OK'd."

[8] The successful petition drive compelled city council to either repeal the ordinances or schedule a referendum. The council voted to approve the latter. John Gravois, "Group Opens Petition Drive for Gay Rights Referendum," *Houston Post*, July 4, 1984; Emily Grotta, "Petition Signatures Validated," *Houston Post*, July 26, 1984.

voters in the city—cast a ballot on the gay right's issue. The record-breaking double-digit turnout far outweighed any previous single-issue elections and nearly matched the turnout of the general election two years earlier.[9]

The loss in Houston tracked with a retrenchment of gay rights in municipalities across the country through 1985 and 1986, a period one pair of historians described as "the most barren legislative record" for the gay rights movement since the crusade of Anita Bryant and the resurgence of the Religious Right in the late 1970s.[10] The seven-month long campaign of vitriol, misinformation, and misdirection effectively ended the public's acceptance of homosexuality in Houston. In March 1984, before the introduction of the ordinances, 50 percent of adults in Harris County approved of "efforts to guarantee equal civil rights for homosexual men and women," while 41 percent disapproved. In March 1985, two months after the referendum, 59 percent disapproved and only 27 approved.[11]

The Houston Gay Political Caucus faced an identity crisis. The strategy of respectable visibility it cultivated in the 1970s failed to adapt to the fearful anti-gay rhetoric of the 1980s. The caucus successfully fended off gay-baiting rhetoric in the past, but the anti-gay opposition's use of AIDS fear mongering energized a new base of anti-gay resentment and caught the gay community off guard. The opposition portrayed homosexuals as threats to public health. The responsible image the caucus spent a decade cultivating crumbled underneath this rhetoric.

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[9] Jane Ely, "City Turns Out to Repudiate Gay Lifestyle," *Houston Post*, January 20, 1985; Mike Snyder, "Gay Job Measures Lose by 4-1 Margin," *Houston Chronicle*, January 20, 1985.

[10] Clendinen and Nagourney, *Out for Good*, 526.

[11] "Reversal of View on Gay Rights," *Houston Post*, March 25, 1985.

To some extent, however, the results of the referendum only affirmed the caucus' relatively cautious, conservative political strategy. The caucus always intended to work the margins of electoral victories. It never thought it had the voting power to win as a single-issue. It is notable, therefore, that the ordinances did not originate within the caucus, but instead resulted from the political maneuvering of a handful of rogue gay activists. The caucus, at least initially, did not want the ordinance. It feared a referendum.

An Unwanted Ordinance

The caucus always dreamed of passing a non-discrimination ordinance. Gary Van Ooteghem lost his county job—and founded the caucus—over such a proposal. During the first screening in 1975, two out of the five questions gauged candidate support for a civil rights measure banning discrimination in housing, private employment, and public employment.[12] In fact, the caucus asked a question about a non-discrimination policy in every municipal screening it conducted. But across eight years, the caucus made no effort to secure such an ordinance.

The caucus' reluctance to push for an ordinance stemmed from a fear of backlash—the fear of a referendum. Even Ray Hill, known for pushing up against the restrained demeanor of the caucus, realized the potential blowback such an ordinance could provoke if introduced at the wrong moment. On the eve of Town Meeting I, in 1979, he summed up why the caucus remained so cautious:

> "All over the country a handful of homosexual leaders dream up things to do and they yell 'follow me.' That hasn't worked. Those militant homosexuals are getting us gay folks in a lot of trouble by moving ahead of the realities of political expedience. For example, I don't want a city

[12] "We Endorse," 1975, Houston LGBT History, accessed August 13, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/gpc1975.html. Original source not given on website.

> ordinance protecting the civil rights of gay people until it can stand up against a referendum."[13]

For years, the caucus chose this cautious approach in lieu of pushing for an ordinance. With the support of Mayor Whitmire, it also seemed politically unnecessary. In a March 1983 meeting, Mayor Whitmire assured the caucus that a city non-discrimination ordinance would only be symbolic given that she already prohibited the discrimination against homosexuals in her administration.[14]

Naturally, therefore, when Gregg Russell, a clean-cut 27-year-old caucus-member, introduced his self-styled non-discrimination ordinance draft to the caucus in July 1983, the group responded with curt skepticism.[15] Does the community have the money to fight a possible referendum? Why introduce the measure six months before an election? What if the media comes down against us? Has documentation of job discrimination been gathered?[16] The always-cautious caucus, as expected, voted against supporting the measure.[17] But Russell, a maverick within the caucus, did not give up. He believed the policy to be both long overdue and increasingly necessary given the burgeoning potential of AIDS-related discrimination.[18] He turned elsewhere in the gay community for backing.

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[13] Lee, "6,000 Gays Gather; Organizers Say It's the First Homosexual Political Meeting."

[14] Minutes of Caucus General Meeting, March 16, 1983, Annise Parker Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston.

[15] Gregg Russell apparently used a number of names, including "Gregg Stanger," "Gregg R. Stanger," "Russell Stanger," and, most commonly during this period, "Gregg Russell." For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the most common name. Terry Harris, "Comment," *This Week In Texas*, October 29, 1982.

[16] Minutes of Caucus Board Meeting, July 19, 1983, Annise Parker Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston; Minutes of Caucus General Meeting, July 20, 1983, Annise Parker Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries; "New Domestic Privacy Ordinance," *This Week In Texas*, July 22, 1983.

[17] Hollis Hood, "GPC Elects Questionaire Committee, Hears Summit Report," *Montrose Voice*, July 22, 1983.

[18] Gregg Russell, "The Ordinance," *This Week In Texas*, February 8, 1985.

Russell found a range of other gay groups in Houston that disagreed with the caucus' opposition. Steven Shiflett, then-president of Citizens for Human Equality, said politicians failed to deliver on the promise of a non-discrimination ordinance for at least the past five years. His group voted unanimously to support Russell's proposal.[19] The Houston ACLU chapter similarly pledged support for the effort.[20] Russell slowly circumvented the caucus to build support for his proposal.

The caucus no longer had a monopoly on the community's agenda. Following the November 1983 election, the Community Political Action Committee (C-PAC) took the proposal to council member Anthony Hall, the black, progressive lawmaker the caucus had snubbed of an endorsement in the previous election. In December 1983, Hall formally referred the proposal to the city's legal department for study.[21] "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty," Hall said at the time. "And this is just another form of struggle for human rights."[22] Without input from the caucus, the non-discrimination ordinance was officially set on a path toward passage.

The caucus still believed the proposal was a fool's errand, but as the city's largest and most influential gay political organization, it could not ignore—or oppose—the non-discrimination ordinance. The caucus constantly feared the perception of disunity in the gay community. Challenging the ordinance could erode the gay voting bloc, making the caucus appear weak. The caucus, instead, looped itself into the lobbying effort, reached

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[19] Hollis Hood, "Latest CHE Meeting Discusses Discrimination," *Montrose Voice*, July 15, 1983.
[20] Stefan Presser to Gregg Russell, July 12, 1983, Annise Parker Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston.
[21] Hollis Hood, "Hall's Proposal Sent to City Legal Dept. for Study," *Montrose Voice*, December 9, 1983.
[22] Hollis Hood, "Equal Employment Ordinance Finally Off to City Legal Dept.," *Montrose Voice*, December 23, 1983, 1.

out to Mayor Whitmire and council members to discuss the proposal, and created a special committee to manage the rollout.[23]

The ensuing backlash confirmed the caucus' long-running fears. Less than a month after the passage of the non-discrimination ordinance, an unprecedented coalition of anti-gay forces pushed the city into a referendum. The city scheduled the vote seven months out, for January 19, 1985. The various gay political organizations, however, decided to lay low. Instead of publicly fighting back against the homophobic slurs and misrepresentations, they allowed a group of heterosexuals to defend the gay rights measure. This decision marked a shift in the caucus' strategy of visibility.

A Heterosexual Defense for a Homosexual Ordinance

On July 30, 1984, Diane Berg, a blonde-haired, conservatively dressed heterosexual housewife, called a press conference to announce the creation of Citizens for United Houston. She told reporters the group formed to support the ordinance and counteract those "waging a campaign of hatred, fear, and prejudice" against the gay community. Noticeably absent at the press conference, however, in both presence and substance: gay people. The only other person appearing at the event, a straight lawyer, told reporters he was "one of thousands of straight people who believe no one is free unless everyone is free." Berg refused to name any organization that stood behind the group, and no gay leaders appeared at the event. The gay community made the conscious decision to hide from public exposure.[24]

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[23] Minutes of Caucus Board Meeting, December 6, 1983, Annise Parker Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston; Larry Bagneris, Jr. and Annise Parker to Mayor Kathryn Whitmire, December 7, 1983, Annise Parker Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston; Minutes of Caucus General Meeting, December 7, 1983, Annise Parker Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston.

[24] John Gravois, "Public to Decide Gay Rights Issue," *Houston Post*, July 31, 1984.

The "self-imposed gag-order" arose out of a community-wide meeting following the raucous vote at City Hall.[25] With the opposition's signature-drive underway, a referendum loomed and the gay community needed to chart a strategy. They settled on laying low and letting heterosexual allies take the lead. "It is essential that all spokespersons be from the non-gay community," read the minutes from the meeting. The gay community created a 15-member steering committee to work behind the scenes to advise the heterosexual representatives of Citizens for United Houston.[26] Gay men and lesbians would not be seen.

It is unclear why exactly the caucus decided to make such a dramatic shift toward political invisibility. The organizational records and minutes from this period are sparse.[27] The unexpected, anti-gay demonstration at City Hall, however, made it clear that the stigma of associating with the gay community had returned. Retreating from the limelight, therefore, appeared to be a politically pragmatic decision in the moment.[28]

Citizens for United Houston distanced itself from the gay community in selecting Bill Oliver—a white, heterosexual pastor—as the public face and campaign manager for the pro-ordinance effort.[29] Oliver offered a publicly digestible image. "As a pastor who takes seriously his faith," Oliver called on his spiritual bonafides to counteract the

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[25] George F. Barnhart, "Bitter Lessons in Houston Referendum," *Montrose Voice*, January 25, 1985.

[26] Dale Carpenter's book on the *Lawrence v. Texas* Supreme Court Case offers a detailed introduction with a number of resources relevant to this chapter. Dale Carpenter, *Flagrant Conduct* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 29.

[27] The minutes on the Houston Gay Political Caucus available in the Annise Parker Papers at the University of Houston do not include as expansive a record on 1984 as it does the other years. It is unclear why.

[28] The caucus' president Sue Lovell claimed the decision on the strategy came from Mayor Whitmire, however, the documentation of this decision remains sparse. Sue Lovell, interview with author, November 4, 2017.

[29] Following in the trend of respectable, mainstream leadership, shortly thereafter, Citizens for United Houston named State Senator Craig Washington as Treasurer. "CUH Hires Pastor For Gay Job Bill," *This Week In Texas*, August 31, 1984; "Senator Named CUH Treasurer," *This Week in Texas*, October 19, 1984.

rhetoric of the religious right.[30] He presided over a predominantly black church and participated in the Civil Rights Movement; he referenced both when campaigning in black communities.[31] But perhaps most important to the campaign, Oliver had no connections to the gay community. He did not have to personally contend with the negative baggage associated with homosexuals. His image extended into his campaign strategy.

The pro-ordinance campaign excised the existence of homosexuals. Oliver crafted a message that attempted to distract voters from thinking about gay men and lesbians. "The key to winning this referendum is to diffuse the gay issue," Oliver privately explained to a crowd of gay bar owners. Instead of referring to the ordinance as a "gay rights" struggle in the media, he pushed the supposedly less controversial, all-encompassing language of "non-discrimination."[32] African-American voters and businessmen, Oliver argued, would feel nervous lining up with the likes of "Sister Boom-Boom"—a countercultural drag-nun performer from San Francisco—to support the ordinance.[33] Oliver endeavored to sanitize the issue by ignoring gay men and lesbians.

By focusing on the language of "non-discrimination," Oliver attempted to make the ordinance relatable to all marginalized audiences that may have at one point faced discrimination. "Discrimination breeds more discrimination," Oliver argued. The loss of this referendum could mean a "retrenchment of civil rights" with ripple effects to other

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[30] Bill Oliver, "The Referendum," *This Week In Texas*, November 16.

[31] Eliot Baker, "Bill Oliver Remembers Being a White Man Fighting for Equality in the South," *The Inquirer and Mirror*, February 19, 2009.

[32] "Referendum Vote Needs $100,000," *This Week In Texas*, November 23, 1984.

[33] Nene Foxhall, "Gay Rights Referendum Seen as a Fight against City Job Discrimination," *Houston Chronicle*, December 2, 1984.

minority groups.[34] The gay press similarly caught on to this rhetoric: "The common thread woven through [Citizens for United Houston's] rainbow of diversity is that it is united in its total disapproval of any kind of discrimination whether it be against women, blacks, gays, Jews, Hispanics, etc."[35] Leaders in the gay community maintained the party line in the few public comments they made the press. Shortly before the referendum, a reporter asked Sue Lovell, then-president of the caucus, why gay activists maintained such a low profile during the campaign. Her response: "We don't see this as a gay rights referendum' but rather as a referendum for equal rights for all persons." The supposed "voice for the gay community" took on the deflective language of Bill Oliver's campaign.[36]

This rhetoric failed largely because it was so obviously disingenuous; the ordinance was, very clearly, a gay rights issue. Oliver frequently scolded reporters for calling the measure a gay rights referendum. "That might be because the ordinances are about the rights of gays to have jobs in the city government," wrote one typically sympathetic political columnist in the *Houston Chronicle*.[37] On the day of the vote, the *Houston Post* headline read, "It's gay referendum decision day."[38] The only Houstonian who seemed to believe Bill Oliver's rhetoric was Bill Oliver himself. The messaging strategy, however, carried a much more insidious consequence.

By choosing a strategy that ignored gay men and lesbians, the pro-ordinance campaign allowed the opposition's anti-gay rhetoric to go unchecked. The respectable

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[34] "Bill Oliver," *This Week In Texas*, December 14, 1984.

[35] Chuck Patrick, "Houstonians Choose Sides Over Gay Rights Referendum," *This Week In Texas*, August 10, 1984.

[36] Nene Foxhall and Tom Moran, "Distortion Charges Fly at Gay Job Rights Forum," *Houston Chronicle*, January 16, 1985.

[37] Foxhall, "Gay Rights Referendum Seen as a Fight against City Job Discrimination."

[38] John Gravois, "It's Gay Referendum Decision Day," *Houston Post*, January 19, 1985.

gay image the caucus spent so long cultivating crumbled under hate-filled, homophobic, smears from the opposition, and the pro-ordinance campaign did nothing to counteract that messaging. That messaging began at City Hall, shortly before the vote, from a council member once allied with the caucus.

John Goodner's Anti-Gay Coalition

Two weeks before the vote at city hall, council member John Goodner announced his opposition: "I just don't want homosexuals working in city jobs where they could be role models for our children."[39] One week before the vote, Goodner spoke out again: "Although I can't prove scientifically what it is I don't like about this gay issue, I also can't prove scientifically why I don't like squash."[40] Four days before the vote, Goodner founded the Committee for Public Awareness, and one day before the vote, he published the newspaper ad urging Houstonians to protest city council. Three weeks after the vote, he delivered more than 60,000 petition signatures to City Hall, officially triggering the referendum. "Had it not been for John Goodner striking the first match to light the fire of anti-gay hatred," opined a *This Week in Texas* writer, "the matter would not now be a boiling point public issue."[41] John Goodner, a three-term city council member, offered the opening salvo in the seven-month onslaught of homophobic hate.

John Goodner's anti-gay opposition, however, arose somewhat unexpectedly. The Houston Gay Political Caucus endorsed John Goodner in his successful bid for city council in 1979. He stood side-by-side with Eleanor Tinsely and Steven Shiflett at the

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[39] John Gravois, "Gay Hiring Vote Delayed by Council," *Houston Post*, June 6, 1984.
[40] "Job Ordinance Vote Delayed Again," *This Week In Texas*, June 15, 1984.
[41] Chuck Patrick, "Squash Goodner," *This Week In Texas*, July 13, 1984.

historic, post-election celebration.[42] At the time, Goodner "showed no such erroneous prejudices" toward the gay community, Ray Hill told the *Houston Chronicle*.[43] What motivated him in 1984 to crusade against homosexual rights remains unclear. He almost certainly resented Mayor Whitmire, and some speculated he had mayoral ambitions, though he never did run. Regardless, Goodner took advantage of a clear wave of anti-gay resentment in formulating an opposition to the ordinance.

The non-discrimination ordinance gave anti-gay opponents a tangible and isolated issue to fight against. Previous "gay victories" were fleeting or diffuse. Eleanor Tinsley's 1979 election, for example, touched on more issues than just caucus support, and Lee Brown's selection as Chief of Police benefited more neighborhoods than just Montrose. The ordinance, on the other hand, clearly benefited the gay community, and gave the opposition a vehicle to directly challenge the influence of "gay power" in Houston. They argued this ordinance was only the start, and pointed to a quote from Annise Parker, then-chair of the caucus' board of trustees, in a *Houston Digest* piece to prove their point. "A victory, [Parker] said, would be a signal that it is time to press ahead for other goals," the magazine paraphrased Parker saying.[44] The opposition's rhetoric expanded far beyond the limited job protections the ordinance might make.

The opposition's messaging focused on the wide-array of perceived dangers homosexuals posed to society. Goodner built his broad, sometimes-bizarre coalition by playing to the potential "victims" of gay power. Among this varied coalition, three

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[42] Glanton, "Gay-Endorsed Candidates Repeat Support for Rights at Victory Party by Caucus."
[43] Mike Snyder, "Goodner to Fight New Job Policy on Gays," *Houston Chronicle*, IMG_4698.
[44] Martin Burch, "Tolerate, Not Legislate, Says Goodner on Gay Rights," *Houston Digest*, July 16, 1984.

constituencies emerged as particularly potent in the anti-gay campaign: the religious right, African-Americans, and the business establishment.

Opposition from the Religious Right

Imagine for a moment a young boy—six, seven, maybe older—eager for his swimming lesson. He excitedly arrives at the public pool to meet up with his swim instructor, an older, wiser, man from the city's Parks and Recreation Department. He looks up to his instructor. The lesson goes wonderfully, but afterward, when they are departing ways, something peculiar happens. A friend of some sort—another adult man—approaches the child's swim instructor. The two men embrace one another; then they kiss on the lips. The undeveloped, formative mind of the child is thrown into a spiral of sexual uncertainty, confusion, and intrigue. The boy *chooses* to become a homosexual.[45]

This is the scenario council member John Goodner wanted voters to fear, at least initially, with the passage of the city non-discrimination ordinances. The newspaper ad printed before the council vote stirred these fears: "Do we want our children, always susceptible in their search for role models, to be influenced by a city government that openly condones, all but encourages, homosexuality."[46] The anti-gay coalition portrayed homosexuals as child molesters, perverts, and pedophiles. Goodner publicly claimed Ray Hill only adopted his late sister's children to recruit them to homosexuality. "Gay people resent not being able to bear their own children," Goodner said. "Therefore they adopt

[45] "I just don't want homosexuals working in city jobs where they could be role models for our children," Goodner more directly told the *Houston Post*. "Burch; Gravois, "Gay Hiring Vote Delayed by Council."
[46] "Committee for Public Awareness Political Advertisement," *Houston Chronicle*, June 18, 1984.

other people's children to perpetuate their group."[47] The gay community, however, recognized these attacks. They drew from a long-running history of anti-gay language from the religious right.

The rhetoric of the Houston referendum mirrored that used by Anita Bryant in the infamous 1977 "Save Our Children" campaign to overturn a similar non-discrimination ordinance in Dade County, Florida. In 1977, for example, Anita Bryant argued, "Homosexuals will recruit our children. They will use money drugs, alcohol, any means to get what they want."[48] In 1984, a Houston referendum pamphlet included the caption, "Homosexuals don't procreate, they recruit—our children." The pamphlet also contained a picture of a young boy being yanked into a bathroom stall, presumably by a homosexual.[49]

The anti-gay opposition extended beyond mirroring rhetoric the Bryant's campaign. Goodner's Committee for Public Awareness hired Judy Wilson, the head of Anita Bryant's anti-homosexual battles in Florida, as the campaign coordinator in Houston.[50] Wilson wrote in a letter that Houston "has been selected [by national gay rights organizations] as the site of what amounts to the critical battleground in the national war on traditional family values."[51] Anita Bryant's message had returned to Houston. This time, however, the gay community did not protest en mass.

The pro-ordinance response to the slanderous rhetoric remained remarkably quiet; offering a response, of course, would force Oliver to admit the ordinance was in fact a

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[47] "'Gay Ordinance' to Finally Come before City Council," *Montrose Voice*, June 8, 1984.
[48] Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle*, 333.
[49] Paul Taylor, "Houston Divided by Gay Rights Ordinance," *Washington Post*, January 19, 1985.
[50] John Gravois, "Anti-Gay Rights Group Denies Bryant Involved," *Houston Post*, December 29, 1984.
[51] Dale Carpenter, "The 30-Year Fight for Equality in Houston," *Outsmart*, October 1, 2014, accessed October 1, 2017, www.outsmartmagazine.com/2014/10/30-year-fight-equality-houston/.

gay rights issue. Eleanor Tinsely, for one, offered one of the few rebuttals. "I've checked with the city, and most sexual assaults against children are committed by heterosexuals," Tinsely said in a debate against Goodner. "Homosexuals account for less than 5%. In fact, it is so low the city doesn't even keep records on it."[52] The broader pro-ordinance response, however, failed to counteract this messaging.

Opposition from African-Americans

To win any at-large election in Houston, a coalition must appeal to the city's sizeable black minority. John Goodner, in a politically astute move, made early entreaties to the black community. He warned the passage of the ordinance would weaken affirmative action by "pitting born minorities against minorities by choice," and further predicted gay men and lesbians would win that battle, leading toward increased discrimination against minorities.[53] The ordinance offered no special privileges or quotas for homosexuals. Still, Goodner's messaging worked. During the petition drive, Goodner garnered the support of nearly 60 black ministers. "To be black, we don't have a choice," said Reverend C. Anderson Davis, a leader among the ministers. "Homosexuals have a choice. We resent very much the equating of homosexuals with blacks as a minority."[54] The anti-ordinance campaign continued to seize on this distinction—between "born" minorities and "chosen" minorities"—to split any potential solidarity with the gay community.

The messaging extended beyond the black community. "I was born Jewish. I was born Black. I was born Hispanic," read one anti-gay ad in the *Houston Post* featuring the

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[52] "Highlights of the Debate on the Gay Rights Referendum," *This Week In Texas*, November 23, 1984.
[53] John Gravois, "Gay Rights Debate Flares on Council; Vote Postponed," *Houston Post*, June 13, 1984.
[54] Foxhall and Moran, "Distortion Charges Fly at Gay Job Rights Forum."

images of three Houstonians. "Homosexuals choose their behavior—and should not be rewarded for endangering public health," premising the statement on HIV/AIDS fears.[55] Just as Goodner warned shortly before the council vote, the rhetoric highlighted the potentially negative consequences the measure could have on other minority communities. "I ain't ready to make no more minorities till my people get a fair share of promotions," said the Reverend Floyd Williams in conversation with other ministers. "We don't need no more [minorities] and the minorities they are creating is practically all white."[56]

The pro-ordinance campaign, meanwhile, attempted to gain the support from other minority groups by emphasizing the shared struggle against discrimination. At one point Oliver predicted 30% of the pro-ordinance support would come from the black community.[57] Citizens for United Houston did acquire the support of the Houston chapter of the American Jewish Committee, the League of Women Voters, and U.S. Representative Barbara Jordan, a trailblazing Houston-area black politician.[58] But the efforts proved largely ineffective. In fact, in the aftermath of the vote, some gay leaders expressed dismay that the "coalition" they thought they built with the black community did not hold up.

The anti-gay opposition more vociferously pursued the black vote. On the day of the referendum, January 19—which coincided with Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday—Goodner's Committee for Public Awareness ran an ad in *The Informer and Texas Freeman*, the city's black newspaper, warning readers that the ordinance was "the FIRST

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55 "Committee for Public Awareness Political Advertisement," *Houston Post*, January 13, 1985.
56 Carpenter, *Flagrant Conduct*, 33.
57 "Referendum Vote Needs $100,000."
58 John Gravois, "Ex-Rep. Jordan Makes Gay Rights Endorsement," *Houston Post*, January 16, 1985.

STEP in a calculated scheme by homosexuals to gain political power and to force their dangerous lifestyle on our city and nation." The ad, endorsed by black Baptist Ministers Association of Houston, closed with a warning: "We must not create an artificial minority, one that will steal the hard won rights from our born minorities; Females, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, the disabled and aged. We don't want to make homosexuality something to be proud of!!"[59] The anti-gay opposition continued to peddle unwarranted fear around the ordinance to expand its coalition. As one political analyst put it: "When the black ministers and the Ku Klux Klan line up against you, you've got a problem"[60]

Opposition from Business Interests

Houston's business community took an unusual leading role in opposing the ordinance. The executive committee of the Chamber of Commerce, which typically confined its attention to sewers and roads, voted unanimously to oppose the gay-rights ordinance.[61] The Chamber claimed the measures would tarnish Houston's public image and economic climate. Louie Welch, president of the Chamber and former five-term Mayor of Houston, told reporters he feared the "negative reaction of people who read about special bills being passed to protect unnatural minorities," adding that he did not want Houston to become another San Francisco.[62] In actuality, San Francisco's economy boomed during the mid-1980s; so much so the city placed restrictions on new development.[63] The decision by the Houston's business elites, however, hinted at an

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[59] Carpenter, *Flagrant Conduct*, 33–34.

[60] "It's Still Our Turf," *Houston Post*, January 24, 1985.

[61] Dianna Solis, "Business Community Has Leading Role In Houston's Ballot Fight on Gay Rights," *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 1985.

[62] Olive Talley and Bill Mintz, "Chamber Seeks Repeal of Measures Protecting Homosexual Job Rights," *Houston Chronicle*, December 19, 1984.

[63] David Myers, "San Francisco's Limit Gets Cheers, Jeers," *Los Angeles Times*, August 3, 1986.

alternative reason opposition materialized against the ordinance. The referendum offered an opportunity to rebuke the reforms of Mayor Kathy Whitmire.

The relationship between the white, business elite and city hall had shifted dramatically in the years leading up to 1985 referendum. The 1979 election expanded city council to fourteen seats, and included, for the first time, two women, one Mexican-American, and three African-Americans.[64] With Whitmire's election in 1981, the "good ol' boy," business elite officially lost control of a City Hall that had traditionally been susceptible to cronyism and favoritism. The sixty-six year old Louie Welch, who served as mayor between 1964 and 1973 and president of the chamber since, operated in this pre-Whitmire era of deal making and favors.

Mayor Whitmire and council members Eleanor Tinsely, Anthony Hall, and George Greanias initially attempted to sway the Chamber of Commerce to their side. That, not surprisingly failed, observed one *Houston Chronicle* columnist. "The business leaders weren't meeting with fellow business leaders, as they would have been in meetings with past councils." Instead, they met with two women, a black man, and a Montrose progressive.[65] The "bigotry is bad for business" line so often repeated by the pro-ordinance campaign failed to stick.[66] Whitmire subsequently chastised the Chamber

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[64] William K. Stevens, "Houston Council Expected to Assert Independence," *New York Times*, November 24, 1979.
[65] Nene Foxhall, "Neither Side Budged an Inch before Colliding on Gay Issue," *Houston Chronicle*, December 23, 1984.
[66] Rad Sallee, "New Support Reported For Houston's Gay-Rights Laws," *Houston Chronicle*, December 12, 1984.

of Commerce for aligning themselves with "bigotry and intolerance," a comment that only heightened the animosity between the mayor and the chamber.[67]

The fray between the pro-ordinance campaign and the business elite proved to be especially detrimental in fundraising. The Chamber of Commerce spent more than any anti-ordinance group—$241,219 in total—on the repeal effort.[68] As the campaign heated up, however, the chamber largely stayed away from what emerged as the most extreme, hate-filled, anti-gay rhetoric: fear-mongering over the AIDS crisis.

HIV/AIDS Fear

An unusual pamphlet, unlike anything seen in the campaign thus far, appeared in the weeks before the referendum. The pamphlet's cover panel featured a cartoon drawing, the emaciated, limp-wrist of so-called "AIDS Carrier." Traveling through IV tubes, the carrier's blood cascaded down to more cartoon images, spouses, blood banks, hemophiliacs, and infants. The final, apocalyptic end-point in this cartoon depicted the skyline of Houston, dripping in a pool of AIDS-infected blood. "AIDS, still carrying a 100% death rate, is being transmitted to a public that can't defend itself," read the pamphlet, financed by Goodner's Committee for Public Awareness. The solution to this epidemic: "Vote 'Against' Both Homosexual Propositions." Homosexuals, according to the opposition, now posed a threat to public health.[69]

In a last minute, "eleventh hour" sprint, the anti-gay opposition shifted away from traditional attacks on homosexuality, and instead turned toward a relatively new line

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[67] Chuck Patrick, "Has Not Hatred and Bigotry Awakened the Sleeping Giant?," *This Week In Texas*, January 18, 1985; Foxhall, "Neither Side Budged an Inch before Colliding on Gay Issue"; Nene Foxhall, "Council, Chamber Debate Measure on Gay Job Bias," *Houston Chronicle*, December 21, 1984.
[68] Emily Grotta, "Gay Rights Vote Tab Exceeded $1.1 Million," *Houston Post*, February 23, 1985.
[69] Pamphlet from Committee for Public Awareness, 1984, Subject Folder H-Homosexuals-1984, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.

of fear-mongering—HIV/AIDS rhetoric—to defeat the gay rights ordinances. The rhetoric at the start of the campaign largely fell to the wayside and AIDS, the mysterious "gay plague," became the centerpiece. The messaging gave the general public a new reason to fear homosexuals and oppose the ordinance.

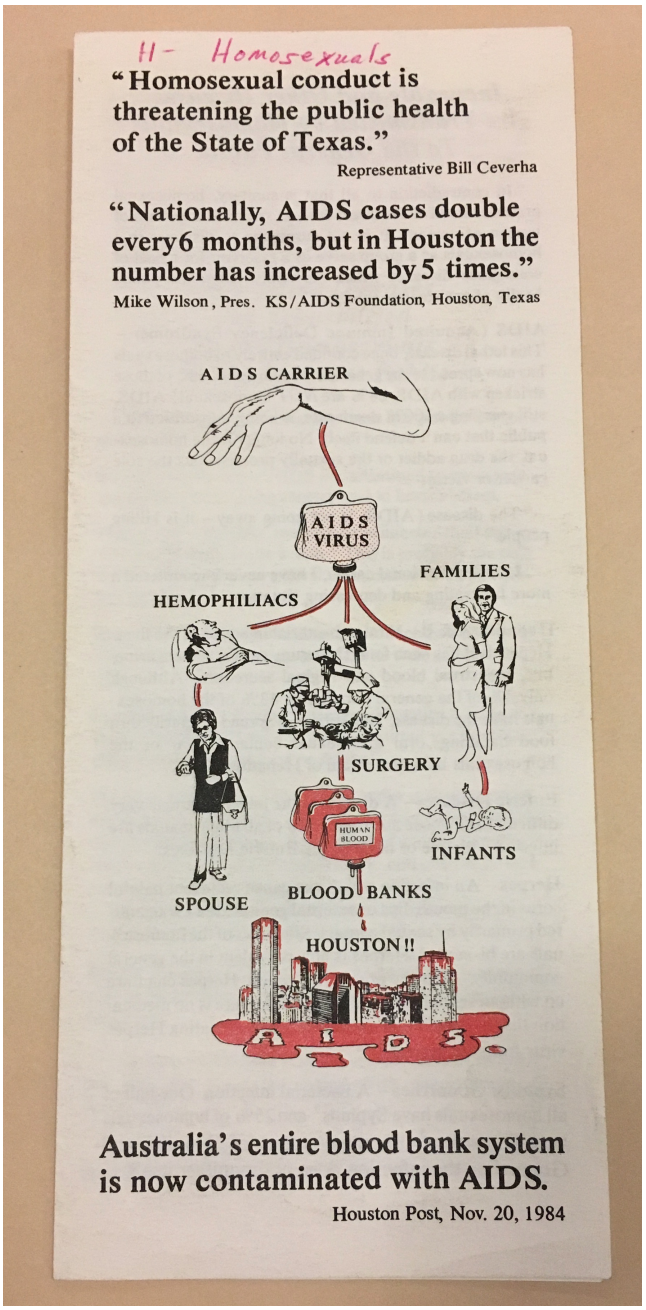

Figure 8: Pamphlet from Committee for Public Awareness, 1984, Subject Folder H-Homosexuals-1984, Houston Metropolitan Research Center.

The anti-gay opposition relied on the uncertainty surrounding HIV/AIDS to fuel their campaign. By the start of 1985, the Centers for Disease Control reported that a total of 7,699 individuals had contracted AIDS, and nearly 3,665 had already died. Houston, the four-largest city in the nation, ranked sixth in the total number of cases reported, with 199 cases and 95 deaths.[70] Researchers by this time had largely honed in on the retrovirus HTLV-III—later renamed the Human Immunodeficiency Virus—as the primary cause of AIDS, and concluded that it could only be spread through intimate sexual interaction or contact with the bloodstream. A successful treatment, however, still remained elusive. To stir up hysteria against the ordinance, the opposition enlisted a cohort of fringe, demagogic medical professionals to spread myths and misinformation.

The public relied on the expertise of medical professionals to make sense of the uncertainties surrounding HIV/AIDS, but a handful of politically motivated doctors exploited this power-dynamic to spread an anti-gay message. Steven Hotze, an allergist and founder of the right-wing Campaign for Houston, paraded his medical expertise to this effect. Hotze referred to homosexuals as "walking time bombs," and spearheaded the creation of "Doctors for Houston," a loose consortium of medical professionals who touted their medical degrees to spread fear of AIDS. The group's spokesperson warned that the passage of the non-discrimination ordinance would lead to a far-reaching, deadly AIDS epidemic in Houston. He argued that people with AIDS "should be put away in a sanitarium." The statements came at a press conference outside MD Anderson Hospital. Inside, people with HIV/AIDS were being treated.[71]

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[70] Rosalind Jackler, "AIDS Mainly Confined to 4 High-Risk Groups," *Houston Post*, January 6, 1985.

[71] "Doctors Form Anti-Gay Group," *Houston Post*, January 11, 1985; Nene Foxhall and Sorelle Ruth, "Referendum Foes Issue AIDS Warning," *Houston Chronicle*, January 11, 1985; Nene Foxhall, "Gay Rights — a Question of Lifestyle," *Houston Chronicle*, January 12, 1985.

The fear-mongering rhetoric further distracted the public away from the real discussion of non-discrimination and toward irrelevant, radical proposals, like quarantining homosexuals.[72] Three weeks before the referendum, for example, Paul Cameron, a disgraced Nebraskan psychologist, appeared before Houston's City Council to argue that the city should quarantine all homosexuals "as long as it takes" until medical professionals found a cure for AIDS. "Homosexuals pose a threat to public health," Cameron said. "What gays do in public is disgusting; what they do in private is deadly."[73] Councilman Goodner's Committee for Public Awareness hired the fringe anti-gay evangelist, who, a year earlier, had been expelled from the American Psychological Association for his high-profile anti-homosexual statements.[74] Pamphlets from Cameron's Institute for the Scientific Study of Sexuality circulated widely before the vote.

One such pamphlet, titled "Murder, Violence and Homosexuality," depicted a young girl, cowering in a corner, her hands attempting to shield her from an axe-wielding maniac. "You are 15 times more likely to be murdered by a gay than a heterosexual during a sexual murder spree," the pamphlet read. "Among police departments, this belief is so pervasive that particularly gory murders are assumed to be homosexual until proven otherwise."[75] The pamphlet further suggested that crimes associated with homosexuality rose in states that decriminalized sodomy.

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[72] In fact, by the end of the year, a majority of Americans favored quarantining people with AIDS. "Poll Indicates Majority Favor Quarantine for AIDS Victims," *New York Times*, December 20, 1985.

[73] Cameron also received support from the Austin-based Foundation for Traditional Morality. "Doctors Form Anti-Gay Group," *Houston Post*, January 11, 1985; Nene Foxhall and Sorelle Ruth, "Referendum Foes Issue AIDS Warning," *Houston Chronicle*, January 11, 1985; Foxhall, "Gay Rights — a Question of Lifestyle."

[74] Chuck Patrick, "The Quarantining of Houston Homosexuals," *This Week in Texas*, January 11, 1985.

[75] Carpenter, *Flagrant Conduct*, 34–35; Taylor, "Houston Divided by Gay Rights Ordinance."

Another pamphlet from Cameron's headquarters, titled "The Blood Supply and Homosexuality," referred to gay men as "disease-machines," and played up the connection between passage of the ordinance and public safety. "Being granted 'tolerance,' the filthy sexual practices of gays have proliferated, and now *your* life is on the line."[76] The use of HIV/AIDS fear mongering effectively shifted the debate away from non-discrimination and towards public health. Again, the pro-ordinance campaign offered an insignificant rebuttal. The anti-gay opposition further stigmatized the gay community and struck to the core of voter's fears.

The Vote and Its Aftermath

On January 19, 1985, the city voted overwhelmingly to reject, by a 4 to 1 margin, the non-discrimination measure. Approximately 240,000 people—an estimated 28.9% of all registered voters in the city—cast a ballot on the gay right's ordinance. The record-breaking double-digit turnout far outweighed any previous single-issue elections and nearly matched the turnout of the general election two years earlier. The opposition singled out the gay community, derided them as child-molesters, perverts, murderers, disease machines, and, against a decade of carefully controlled gay progress, won.[77] Together, the anti-gay opposition spent $525,938 on the campaign, almost twice as much as the $266,080 spent by the single pro-gay group, Citizens for United Houston.[78] The anti-gay opposition successfully steered the seven-month long narrative toward a victory.

The outcome of the referendum, however, validated the caucus' initial reluctance to push for an ordinance. In the flurry of post-mortems, one caucus member estimated

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[76] "What They're Saying About Us," *This Week In Texas*, January 18, 1985.
[77] Ely, "City Turns Out to Repudiate Gay Lifestyle"; Snyder, "Gay Job Measures Lose by 4-1 Margin."
[78] Grotta, "Gay Rights Vote Tab Exceeded $1.1 Million."

success could have only been possible with a minimum four-year educational effort. If the caucus had control, "the ordinance would have been pushed back until a time when we could *document* its need, *afford* to fight a referendum, and when the Houston-wide educational effort was *completed*," wrote the critic.[79] The community was ill prepared.

Following the loss, some critics argued the vote proved that "gay power" was simply an illusion. This is a misguided interpretation. The caucus never claimed to command a majority of Houston voters. The caucus always recognized homosexuals as a minority and always knew that "gay power" resulted from electing gay-friendly candidates by working on the margins. The caucus never intended to put gay rights—the "gay lifestyle"—up for a popular vote. The outcome of the election only affirmed the wisdom in the marginal strategy. The longer lasting impact of the vote, however, concerned the damage done to image of gay Houstonians.

The seven-month long campaign of vitriol, misinformation, and misdirection effectively shifted the broader public's acceptance of homosexuality. In March 1984, before the introduction of the ordinance, 50 percent of adults in Harris County approved of "efforts to guarantee equal civil rights for homosexual men and women," while 41 percent disapproved. In March 1985, two months after the referendum, 59 percent disapproved and only 27 approved.[80]

The decades-long work of making gay men and lesbians palatable to the public disintegrated under the slanderous attacks. The pro-ordinance campaign failed to offer a significant rebuttal. "It was an election of one-sided stridency, with horror stories abounding of gays molesting children, of the whole-scale spread of AIDS to the city's

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[79] Anthony Ferrara, "The Last Letter," *This Week In Texas*, March 15, 1985.
[80] "Reversal of View on Gay Rights."

population, of the projected takeover of Houston by gays," wrote one *Houston Post* reporter the day after the vote.[81] In fact, the pro-ordinance campaign's messaging failed to do much at all.

The narrow non-discrimination message offered by Bill Oliver and Citizens for United failed to confront the visceral, emotional rhetoric of the opposition. Mayor Kathy Whitmire remained "convinced that the majority of the people of Houston do not believe in discrimination." Council member Anthony Hall argued that the "issue that was debated was not the issue that was on the ballot." Council member Eleanor Tinsely attributed the loss to "fear" and "misunderstanding."[82]

Signaling that perhaps the anti-gay rhetoric may cease, leaders from both sides of the referendum made reconciliatory remarks in the aftermath of the vote. John Goodner said he hoped the tension would not linger. Kathy Whitmire agreed, hoping the city would pull together in reunion. "This is a good city and people on both sides are now in the task of building bridges, healing wounds and moving forward," said Bill Oliver.[83]

Steven Hotze, however, offered no such conciliatory message. The founder of the anti-gay Campaign for Houston intended to ride the wave of resentment all the way to the November 1985 election. "There's one way we can avoid doing this again, and that's by electing godly, righteous people to office," Hotze told reporters on election night. "We need a slate of candidates from the mayor on down so we can sleep well at night."[84] The anti-gay rhetoric continued into the next municipal election.

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[81] Ely, "City Turns Out to Repudiate Gay Lifestyle."
[82] Snyder, "Gay Job Measures Lose by 4-1 Margin."
[83] John Gravois and Emily Grotta, "Gay Measures Rejected 4-to-1," *Houston Post*, January 20, 1985.
[84] Snyder, "Gay Job Measures Lose by 4-1 Margin."

1985 Election: The Straight Slate

Steven Hotze's voice roared over a hotel ballroom loud speaker: "Attack, Attack, Attack." Just weeks before the November 1985 election, a crowd of five hundred mostly white, mostly religious Houstonians gathered to hear from Hotze, their fast-talking political prophet. Hotze peppered his speech with military metaphors and fundamentalist imagery, battle lines and family values; a holy war was afoot. "If we move all our forces into one area of the front, we can break through and break the morale of our enemy," Hotze's voice boomed. The vulnerable "area of the front," in Hotze's words, is "the issue of homosexuality and the diseases they bring on society and the plagues they bring." The enemy in this war: Mayor Kathy Whitmire and her eight "pro-homosexual supporters" on City Council. Hotze organized a so-called "Straight Slate" of nine candidates to challenge the city's pro-gay incumbents and rid Houston of gay "riff-raff." Hotze tested the whether one could win a municipal election on *only* anti-gay rhetoric.[85]

Steven Hotze's personal politics are representative of the rise of religious fundamentalism within the Republican Party. The 35-year-old father-of-eight entered the political ring through anti-abortion activism, founding the Texan Physicians for Life. Hotze recalled feeling isolated in party politics, but with Ronald Reagan's 1980 election, he finally found a haven for his ideology in the GOP.[86]

In 1982, three years prior to the Houston referendum, Hotze merged his "family values" credo with anti-gay efforts as a leader in an Austin, Texas referendum to legalize housing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The campaign's message of

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[85] Jim Simmon, "Straight Slate Troops Waging Holy War," *Houston Post*, October 20, 1985.

[86] In 1968, a 17-year-old Hotze asked then-Mayor Louie Welch and the City Council for permission to hold a rally and parade to project a wholesome image of youth in the community. Bill Mintz, "Straight Slate Stand Called 'pro-Family,'" *Houston Chronicle*, October 20, 1985.

property rights quickly devolved into familiar attacks on the "deviant, perverted lifestyle" of homosexuals. "We organized to protect our children," Hotze said at the time. A liberal haven in a conservative state, Austin rejected the discriminatory amendment by a 2 to 1 margin.[87]

The addition of AIDS fear mongering allowed Hotze's firebrand campaign in Houston to gain more traction than his prior efforts. Hotze's Campaign for Houston spent a whopping $171,250 during the anti-gay campaign.[88] Unlike other groups, after the win, Campaign for Houston did not disband. Instead, Hotze continued to campaign against homosexuals in hopes that he could channel the referendum energy into a general election sweep at city hall. Hotze sent out flyers with Whitmire's face to remind voters which side of the referendum she was on, and in July, he delivered 6,000 signatures to City Hall urging the Mayor and council members not to participate in the gay pride parade.[89]

The Hotze-led "Straight Slate" tried to repeat the results of the referendum by isolating voter's fear and angst over gay men and lesbians. The slate included eight self-professed political amateurs—a civil engineer, pastor, real estate agent, daycare owner, pension advisor, salesman, hotel consultant, and housewife—all united by a twisted, demagogic conception of homosexuality and family values. "When people think of Houston, we want them to think of it as a wholesome, family city," Hotze told reporters

[87] Hotze led the effort through a group named Austin Citizens for Decency. "Austin Voters Reject Amendment Allowing Housing Discrimination," *New York Times*, January 18, 1982; Ken Herman, "Austin Voters Defeating Anti-Gay Housing Bill," *The Hartford Courant*, January 17, 1982.

[88] Grotta, "Gay Rights Vote Tab Exceeded $1.1 Million."

[89] Hope Paasch, "Gay Group Gets Death Threats," *Houston Post*, July 3, 1985.

at a July rollout.[90] This involved a platform of shutting down bathhouses, "porno houses," and "nude dance studios," along with a promise to take whatever measures necessary to prevent AIDS from becoming an epidemic.[91]

Similarly emboldened by the January win, Louie Welch, the sixty-six-year-old president of the Chamber of Commerce, announced a bid to unseat Mayor Kathy Whitmire. Welch accepted an endorsement from the Straight Slate, yet the former five-term mayor, at least initially, focused his candidacy on leadership and economic development. Together, the nine Straight Slate candidates put pressure on the caucus' election strategy in an unprecedented fashion.

No Endorsements, No Support

In March 1984, three months before City Council passed the controversial non-discrimination ordinance, the Houston Gay Political Caucus held its usual candidate endorsement meeting in anticipation of the upcoming primary. The meeting lasted five-hours, with approximately 60 candidates, Republicans and Democrats, present seeking caucus backing. The magazine *This Week In Texas* published some of the flattering statements overheard from candidates in the meeting: "[The caucus] is doing a hell of a job," "If you elect me, you'll be treated with dignity in my courtroom," and "I'll hire one of you gays to work on my staff so you won't have to guess what's going on in my office." The caucus issued 29 endorsements that night.[92]

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[90] Stephanie McGrath, "Anti-Gay Organization Names 'Straight Slate,'" *Houston Chronicle*, July 19, 1985.

[91] Straight Slate Campaign Booklet, 1985, Annise Parker Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston.

[92] Robert Hyde, "GPC Endorses Candidates for May Primary," *Montrose Voice*, March 23, 1984; Chuck Patrick, "Gay Political Caucus Candidates Night," *This Week In Texas*, March 30, 1984.

The endorsement meeting on September 18, 1985, after the referendum loss, struck a gloomier tone. "Tonight we face a very serious decision," Sue Lovell, the president, told the caucus. "Not one council or mayoral candidate sought our endorsement this year." With the Straight Slate directly opposing the caucus, the major gay-friendly candidates decided in unison to forgo pursuing a caucus endorsement. Kathy Whitmire did not seek a caucus endorsement. Eleanor Tinsely did not seek a caucus endorsement. No major candidates sought the caucus endorsement. Against pleas made by three previous presidents—Van Ooteghem, Harrington, and Bagneris—the caucus voted against a proposal to issue simple "recommendations." On the tenth anniversary of the its founding, the caucus issued zero endorsements.[93]

The candidate's willingness to rebuff the caucus highlighted the limits of the gay community's influence. Support from politicians only lasted while it remained politically expedient. During a televised campaign appearance, Whitmire openly regretted her role in introducing the anti-discrimination ordinance. "I think if any of us had it all to do over again, we never would have brought the item to council," she said, adding that she heard the voter's message loud and clear.[94] Annise Parker, then-chair of the caucus' board, said the candidate's treatment of the caucus post-referendum revealed to her how shallow and self-interested most politicians could be.[95]

The no-endorsement decision complicated the caucus' conception of visibility and "the closet." Gary Van Ooteghem publicly argued in *This Week in Texas* that the no-endorsement meant the caucus itself had "gone back into the closet," and referred to the

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[93] "HGPC Not to Endorse Candidates," *This Week In Texas*, September 27, 1985; Tom Kennedy, "GPC's 'Strength' Not Even a Myth," *Houston Post*, October 31, 1985.

[94] Mark Carreau, "Whitmire Says She and Council Erred on Gay Job Bias Measure," *Houston Chronicle*, October 13, 1985.

[95] Annise Parker, interview with author, November 3, 2017.

leadership as spineless "wimps" and "cowards."[96] Sue Lovell and other caucus leaders, however, argued the no endorsement move served pragmatic purposes. Giving an endorsement away freely would set a bad precedent. Besides, Ray Hill noted, "telling people how to vote would be redundant." The ballot included the "straight slate" label next to candidates.[97] Despite Van Ooteghem's claims, the caucus did not retreat into the closet. In fact, the caucus made itself highly visible.

The caucus recognized that the low visibility during the referendum did nothing to help the gay community, and internal minutes from 1985 show that the caucus made a concerted effort to regain a visible presence in the public sphere. "Our issues are visible. We are not," said one caucus leader at the time. "We have to change that." The caucus floated the idea of monthly bar tours, and a media committee began to hold regular press conferences with the non-gay media. The caucus also exerted its economic power.[98]

One benefit of the referendum was that it brought out into the open the enemies of the gay community. The caucus seized on this opportunity. Two months after the referendum, the caucus began to release weekly lists of "anti-gay" doctors, attorneys, realtors, gas companies, banks, and construction firms.[99] Led by Ray Hill, a newly formed "Economic Response Committee" within the caucus compiled the "hate list" by sifting through public fundraising records from the anti-gay groups. The pseudo-boycott

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[96] Van Ooteghem was subsequently censored by the caucus for his decision to speak out. Gary Van Ooteghem, "The Death Knell?," *This Week In Texas*, September 27, 1985.

[97] Jim Simmon, "Candidates Keeping Gay Caucus at Arm's Length," *Houston Post*, September 29, 1985; "HGPC Not to Endorse Candidates."

[98] Minutes of Caucus Board Meeting, June 4, 1985, Annise Parker Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston; Hollis Hood, "GPC Continues to Scrutiny Referendum Contributors," *Montrose Voice*, March 22, 1985.

[99] Here is a full copy of the list compiled by the caucus. "Discrimination Contributor's List," 1985, Box 1, Folder 22, M. Robert Schwab Collection. MSS 344. Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

encouraged the community to be conscientious of where they spent their money. "I think for the first time in my long career, gay people are seriously ready to talk about where they deposit their money, where they buy their clothes and what kind of gasoline they put in their cars," Hill said on referendum night.[100] During the process, one caucus leader jokingly suggested the community purchase "GAY MONEY" stamps to label cash and checks. "If your bank appears on the following list," one release read. "The public record shows some of your money was used to help defeat us."[101]

The referendum similarly failed to dampen the annual pride celebration. In June 1985, a crowd estimated at more than 40,000 attended the city's seventh annual gay pride parade, the culmination of a 10-day blitz of bar crawls, softball scrimmages, and theater productions. The caucus capped off the event with a 10th anniversary "After Dark in the Park" dance celebration. The theme of the week, "Alive with Pride," however, served as a grim reminder of AIDS, violence, and persecution. The reminder reemerged in the final weeks of the election.[102]

On October 24, 1985, two weeks before the election, Louie Welch, candidate for mayor, arrived at the KTRK Channel 13 studios. The broadcast showed tape of Welch at a restaurant earlier that day, with a voiceover: "Mayoral candidate Louie Welch has announced his plan for dealing with AIDS in Houston. We'll talk live with the candidate about his four-part answer to combatting the spread of the disease." The reporter then moved on to a story about a helicopter crash, but a hot microphone broadcast Louie

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[100] Chuck Patrick, "Post Referendum Analysis," *This Week In Texas*, January 25, 1985.

[101] Minutes of Caucus General Meeting, February 20, 1985, Annise Parker Papers, Special Collections, University of Houston; Ray Hill et al., "Houston Banks Anti-Gay List," *This Week In Texas*, April 5, 1985; John Gravois, "Gay Political Caucus Targets 'Enemies,'" *Houston Post*, April 7, 1985.

[102] Steve Friedman, "Gay Pride March Here Not Traditional Parade," *Houston Chronicle*, July 1, 1985; Mike Snyder, "Gay Community Unswayed by Referendum Defeat," *Houston Chronicle*, July 1, 1985.

Welch making a quip about his multi-part AIDS plan: "One of them is to shoot the queers." The gaffe was broadcast over television to nearly 140,000 Houstonians.[103] The gay community swiftly responded in the most visible way. They immediately printed thousands of shirts with the phrase, "Louie, Don't Shoot!"[104] Two weeks later, after the election, they printed another shirt: "You Missed, Louie!"[105]

Louie Welch lost in a landside to Kathy Whitmire, and none of the Straight Slate candidates won. All nine "pro-gay" candidates returned to City Hall.[106] The anti-gay opposition failed to channel the momentum from the referendum into electoral success at City Hall. The single-issue fire-and-brimstone platform offered by the anti-homosexual Straight Slate failed to resonate with voters, and failed to answer to issues like taxation, crime, traffic, and city services.[107] The city's rejection of the Straight Slate candidates provided a tepid victory for the caucus.

The 1985 election capped off two years of unprecedented homophobic demagoguery in Houston, and temporarily stemmed the potential for a more dramatic retrenchment of gay rights at city hall. The unanimous decision by the candidates to forgo an endorsement undoubtedly damaged the caucus' relationship with allies like Whitmire and Tinsely. The caucus, however, remained resilient in the face of such intense antagonism. It did not fold. It did not hide. It did not give up on the fight to secure equal rights for gay men and lesbians in Houston.

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[103] "Houston Candidate's RX for AIDS Sparks Furor," *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 1985.

[104] *Montrose Voice*, November 1, 1985.

[105] J.D. Doyle, "Louie Welch Would Shoot the Queers," *Houston LGBT History*, accessed October 1, 2017, www.houstonlgbthistory.org/banner1985a.html.

[106] Nene Foxhall, "Robinson, Hall Keep Council Posts," *Houston Chronicle*, November 27, 1985; Nene Foxhall, "Campaign That Began with a Bang Is Ending with a Whimper," *Houston Chronicle*, November 24, 1985.

[107] Bill Mintz, "Rise, Fall of Straight Slate Keyed by No Money, Issue," *Houston Chronicle*, December 8, 1985.

The caucus did not lose its status as a powerful organization. The following year, in 1986, the caucus issued 23 state and local endorsements.[108] During the next municipal election, in 1987, a dozen more candidates vied for the caucus' support, including four mayoral candidates.[109] The caucus no longer allowed itself to be silenced or suppressed by bigotry or hatred.

A Decade of Activism

Before the founding of the caucus, Houston's gay population had no political voice. Thousands of gay men and lesbians lived in fear, solely based on their sexual orientation. They feared losing their jobs, losing their children, and losing their lives. The vast majority remained closeted. The network of gay bars and businesses, clubs and baths, provided the foundation for the community. The shared spaces of leisure offered gay men and lesbians a semblance of solidarity, but it did little to change the political status of homosexuals in society. Homosexuals were simply "oddwads and queers," threats to our children and our safety. The community faced harassment from the police, derision from politicians, and contempt from the public, all without an organized response. That began to change in 1975.

Across a decade of political activism, the Houston Gay Political Caucus provided a political voice for tens of thousands of gay men and lesbians in Houston. The caucus gradually transformed Houston's expansive gay population into a politically conscious community. It united the community across difficult boundaries. It provided the organizational savvy and the institutional infrastructure necessary to channel the

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[108] Linda Wyche, "GPC Endorses 23 Candidates for November Election," *Montrose Voice*, September 19, 1986.
[109] Linda Wyche, "Political Caucus Votes Yea and Nay to Gay Candidates," *Montrose Voice*, October 9, 1987.

population's fears, worries, and aspirations into political power. Through the Anita Bryant rally and the Town Meeting I event, the caucus gradually shifted the meaning of a "gay community" from a geographical term, the social spaces where homosexuals gathered, to a political term, a group of people with shared goals and aspirations in pursuit of freedoms and equality.[110]

Working on the margins of elections with its voting-bloc strategy, the caucus channeled this unified political community into dozens of electoral victories. Its strategy created an opportunity for closeted gay men and lesbians to participate in the gay rights movement without forcing them to come out. The secrecy of the voting booth allowed closeted individuals to exert their political power without facing the risks of leaving the closet. The caucus tapped into the political aspirations of thousands more voices than if it simply relied on gay men and lesbians to come out. The caucus issued dozens of endorsements, and, 1985 aside, candidates actively vied for support from the gay community.

The story of the Houston Gay Political Caucus proves the vibrancy and success of the gay rights movement in the South. The caucus' accomplishments, in electing gay-friendly candidates, changing homophobic city policy, and supporting the lives of gay men and lesbians across Houston, challenges decades of research that overlooked the nation's fourth largest city.

On January 15, 1986, the Houston Gay Political Caucus voted to elect Annise Parker as president. The 29-year-old beat both Sue Lovell and Ray Hill to lead the 370-member caucus. Parker vowed to move the caucus away from the defensive posture of

[110] Ray Hill originally articulated this idea in response to the Anita Bryant protest, though it fits with the development of the caucus over this period in general. Ray Hill, interview with author, November 4, 2017.

the referendum, toward an offensive public strategy. Within a year, candidates returned in droves to seek out the caucus' support.[111]

Nearly a quarter-century later, on January 4, 2010, Annise Parker took the oath of office to become the 61st Mayor of Houston. Her victory validated decade's worth of work on behalf of the Houston Gay Political Caucus. "To those who are gay, or lesbian, or bisexual, or transgendered. I understand how much this day means to you. I can feel your excitement and your joy, but I can also feel your apprehension and your longing for acceptance," Parker said. "Your bravery in the face of threats, your grace in the face of insults, sustains me. We will support each other. Do not fear to dream big dreams."[112]

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[111] Connie Woods, "GPC President Gears Up for New Year," *Montrose Voice*, January 31, 1986; "Parker Wins GPC Presidency," *This Week In Texas*, January 24, 1986.

[112] Annise Parker, "Houston Mayoral Inauguration." (Speech, Houston, Texas, January 4, 2010), C-SPAN, www.c-span.org/video/?291036-1/houston-mayoral-inauguration&start=2739.

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