In my thirty years as an elected official, the evolution of the gay and lesbian civil rights issue has touched my notion of fairness and government policy in very profound ways.

In fact the first time someone acknowledged to me that he was gay was in 1973, when I chaired the Oregon Legislature's first hearing on a non-discrimination bill. After the hearing, a young man I had known in high school told me how urgent and important issues of employment, housing, and even personal safety were to gays and lesbians.

Since that day, I have observed the ebb and flow of the debate on gay rights, attending hearings, learning the stories of people -- like my former classmate -- who were harassed and living in fear. I also have developed a wide circle of friends and many colleagues who are gay and in committed relationships. I have come to understand that equality for gays and lesbians is an issue of justice for us all, regardless of our sexual orientation or political philosophy.

Along the way, I've experienced two extraordinarily painful episodes that help define my thinking.

When I was a Multnomah County Commissioner in the 1980s, we enacted one of the first and most comprehensive non-discrimination ordinances in the country. The backlash, however, was brutal. Faced with an opposing referendum that threatened to divide the community, leaders in the local gay and lesbian movement urged the commission to repeal the ordinance. Although we already had non-discrimination administrative policies in place and I was strongly in favor of the ordinance, I joined with my fellow commissioners to repeal it, hoping to spare our community an ugly campaign. Politicians and leaders of the gay and lesbian community agreed on the action, but that did not make it any easier to explain to the gay citizens sitting in the front rows, some crying with disbelief and anger.

That experience framed my thinking twelve years later when I was confronted with the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in Congress. DOMA created a federal definition for marriage as the union between a man and a woman, preventing the federal government from recognizing marriages at the state level. In addition, it provided that states do not have to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states. Until DOMA, marriage issues hadn't been a priority for the gay and lesbian movement; their national agenda focused on non-discrimination policies in employment and housing, while in Oregon, we were busy fighting

the destructive and hateful anti-gay initiatives of extreme right- wing organizations.

The introduction of DOMA in 1996, however, changed all that. It quickly became clear that people like Ralph Reed and Jesse Helms were pushing the hot-button issue of banning same-sex marriages to ensure the political failure of the gay and lesbian civil rights agenda. Focusing on DOMA instead of issues such as employment non-discrimination and civil rights put supporters of gays and lesbians at a severe disadvantage; the country was simply not ready to discuss same-sex marriage in any rational way. Hoping to deny the more extreme right-wing elements the opportunity to further exploit the issue of gay and lesbian civil rights, I cast my vote in favor of DOMA.

Looking back eight years later, I now feel that my vote was wrong. While my analysis may have been accurate and my vote may have even been the best political move, it remains one of the few votes I've made in Congress that I would change. Sadly, people who choose to exploit fear and bigotry based on sexual orientation continue to do so regardless of any efforts to diffuse the issue. In fact, the passage of DOMA only made some gay bashers even bolder in their hypocrisy.

My vote on DOMA caused political confusion and serious personal pain for people who knew of my commitment to equality for gays and lesbians. Voting on the basis of political tactics rather than my own personal beliefs also muddied my message about the critical need for anti-discrimination protections for gays and lesbians. Most troubling for me was the implication that my vote might be interpreted as a direct attack on people's ability to make their own choices about their personal relationships and their dignity as human beings.

Recently, civil rights victories in the U.S. Supreme Court, Vermont, and Canada have created a resurgence of the controversy surrounding gay and lesbian marriages. These successes do not have to lead to more anti-gay proposals and rhetoric; most Americans today have friends or relatives who are involved with same-sex relationships based on the same deep emotional commitment and affection found in the heterosexual community. Unfortunately, despite their increasing acceptance by commercial media, by the marketplace, by almost all thoughtful employers, and even by the Supreme Court, same-sex relationships remain the target of discrimination.

It is now time for Congress to play a constructive role in affirming civil rights for gays and lesbians. After eight years of refusing to grant even a hearing on the Employment

Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), the House should now make it a priority to enact this important legislation. Non-discrimination in employment should be one of the bedrocks of a society that claims to value self-reliance and the opportunity for individuals to reach their full potential.

Congress should also forcefully reject H.J. Res.56, which proposes a Constitutional Amendment that would define marriage solely as the union between a man and a woman. Tragically, this same legislation would also prohibit states, local governments and the courts from conferring legal rights or civil unions to gay or lesbian couples. It simply makes no sense to deny the benefits, legal rights and opportunities afforded to married couples to others who want to commit to a long term, loving relationship - and it is particularly galling to do so when the administration proposes to spend hundreds of millions of dollars in a curious exercise to "promote marriage".

This attempt to pre-empt decisions at the state level is not just stunningly hypocritical; it will fuel fear and prejudice, creating further divisions in our communities and intolerance throughout our society.

It's time for Congress to recognize gays and lesbians as people who deserve the same basic and civil rights afforded to every other person, whether in the work place or at home. Disagreement with a person's religion, sexual orientation, or cultural background does not entitle the US Congress - or anyone - the right to suppress them. Instead of pitting citizen against citizen over questions of identity, sexuality, and private behavior, Congress should model the behavior it expects from others: fairness, tolerance, and a basic respect for human dignity.

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