

San Diego Democratic Club's Impact on LGBTQ Politics in San Diego

By Douglas N. Case and Craig Roberts

The San Diego Democratic Club (SDDC) was formed in 1975 during challenging times for the LGBTQ¹ community. The activism generated from the Stonewall uprising in New York City in 1969 had only just begun to impact San Diego yet the community was ready for change. Three major LGBTQ organizations were established in quick succession: the Metropolitan Community Church, the Imperial Court de San Diego and the Gay Center (officially known as the Center for Social Services) in 1970, 1972 and 1973, respectively.

The first Gay Pride March was held downtown in 1974 with only about 25 brave activists. However the following year 400 San Diegans participated in the first official Pride march with a city permit. Some of these marchers, perhaps risking their employment, family estrangement or religious affiliations, wore paper bags over their heads to conceal their identity. In Sacramento that year a bill narrowly passed the legislature decriminalizing homosexual activity between consenting adults. It was signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown and was an historic step in our LGBTQ history.

Pete Wilson was in his second term as mayor, epitomizing San Diego politics' domination by the downtown, primarily Republican, business establishment. The local LGBTQ community had no mechanism to exercise political influence, so a local attorney, Robert "Bob" H. Lynn decided to form an LGBTQ Democratic Club. He gathered 20 individuals², primarily

¹ This article will use the current acronym used by the community – LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/questioning). Over the years different terms and acronyms have been used to identify the community. At the time of the founding of the San Diego Democratic Club, "gay" was the most common identifier.

² The members who signed the charter petition were Robert Lynn, Douglas Simpson, Jerry White, Charles Mace, Richard Hunt, Al Smithson, Margaret Reynolds, David Farrell, Ken Miller, George Murphy, John Eberly, Frank Balisi, James Nolan, Robert

lawyers, staffers from political offices, medical professionals, religious leaders, business owners and political activists to sign a chartering petition for the San Diego County Democratic Central Committee's approval. Given the conservative nature of San Diego at the time, the founders decided not to include an LGBTQ reference in the club name, instead going with the generic "San Diego Democratic Club."

Meetings were held in members' homes with the club's early goals focused on creating visibility for the LGBTQ community and exercising political action locally and statewide. The club sent representatives to community organizations and submitted articles for publication in community newspapers and newsletters.

The club's first endorsements in 1976 included Lucille Moore, Jack Walsh and Roger Hedgecock for seats on the San Diego County Board of Supervisors and Larry Kapiloff for State Assembly. Walsh lost his race but the others were successful.

The following year the club endorsed Evonne Schulze and incumbents Floyd Morrow and Ed Millikan for the San Diego City Council in the Seventh, Fifth and Third Districts respectively. Schulze came in first in the primary, but was subsequently targeted by the religious right. Three days before the election, the *Church News* printed an article with the headline "Homosexual Groups Endorse Schulze." She lost to Larry Stirling by less than 800 votes. Morrow and Millikan were also unsuccessful in their races. Many pundits attributed Schulze's loss to the club's support. Fear about backlash may have caused Supervisors Jim Bates and Roger Hedgecock to renege on their private commitments to the club to support a county ordinance to prohibit employment discrimination based on sexual orientation. Only Lucille Moore supported the proposal and she was defeated for re-election in 1980.

Weighing the political fallout from endorsements by the Club and candidates' support of LGBTQ equality was a pressing concern for more

Smith, Andrew Mattison, David McWhirter, Lee Sandy, Marvin Bush, Jerry Tharaldson and Gil Coldwell.

than a decade both for the club membership and the candidates themselves.

A crucial moment in California's LGBTQ political history was the campaign against Proposition 6 in November 1978. Sponsored by ultra-conservative Orange County State Senator John Briggs, the measure would have prohibited homosexuals, as well as those who encouraged or promoted homosexual activity, from teaching in public schools. Club member Rev. David Farrell (pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church) and future club presidents Jeri Dilno and Larry Baza were among those leading the local campaign against the Briggs Initiative. The proposition failed by 58% - 42%; it even failed in Orange County. San Diego County outperformed the expectations of the statewide No on 6 campaign. The defeat of Prop. 6 campaign was a pivotal political win for the community.

Also in 1978, club member Gloria Johnson became the first openly LGBTQ candidate to be elected to the San Diego County Democratic Party Central Committee. Johnson appointed Charles McKain as her alternate. The club also started making its presence known in statewide politics by joining the California Democratic Council, a federation of primarily liberal Democratic Clubs. The club hosted the 1978 CDC convention, which incidentally was attended by Harvey Milk.

In 1979, Dr. Al Best, founder of the San Diego Gay Alliance for Equal Rights, became the first openly LGBTQ person to run for public office in San Diego County, vying for San Diego City Council District Two. Part of his motivation to run was to oppose police raids on gay business establishments. He finished fifth out of eleven candidates in the primary (Republican Bill Cleator would eventually win the runoff with Democrat Joyce Beers). Best received death threats during the campaign but his respectable showing demonstrated someone identified as LGBTQ could be a credible candidate in future San Diego races. In another 1979 City Council election, club-backed Mike Gotch won an upset victory against Steve Wittmen by a little over 200 votes in District Six. That same year, the club sent many members to participate in the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Washington, DC.

In 1980, the club organized a successful campaign to elect delegates to the Democratic National Convention. The successful effort to get club members and friends to attend local delegate caucuses resulted in the election of five delegates (Gloria Johnson, Brad Truax, Yvonne King, Charles McKain and Gilda Yazzle), edging out several longtime Democratic activists. Since then, the club has been successful in having multiple club members elected or appointed as delegates to every national convention, often with more delegates than any other Democratic club in the county and more than LGBTQ Democratic clubs in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Also in 1980, Bob Lynn stepped down as president to focus on other activities, including working with club member Dr. A. Brad Traux on establishment of the LGBTQ nonpartisan United San Diego Elections Committee (USDEC), modeled after the Metropolitan Elections Committee of Los Angeles (MECLA). One of USDEC's first events was a lunch with Governor Jerry Brown that raised over \$7,500 – equivalent to over \$23K in 2020 dollars.

Gloria Johnson became the club's second president and served one term. Few women, other than Gloria and Jeri Dilno, were active in the club at the time.

On Lincoln's Birthday in 1981 the Log Cabin Club of San Diego was formed with Meyers Jacobsen as president and James Walsh as vice president. This was a successor to the short-lived Teddy Roosevelt Republican Club formed by activist Nicole Murray (now known as Murray Ramirez) in 1977. The Log Cabin Republican Club remains active today, although it has never had the membership or the influence as the San Diego Democratic Club.

Truax became president of SDDC in 1981 and served until 1984. He had served as a physician in the Navy but was honorably discharged when his sexual orientation became known. Truax was also the founder of San Diego Physicians for Human Rights. A charismatic leader, he worked hard to expand the club, including bringing in more women, and to make the club more visible within the San Diego community. Truax worked to register LGBTQ voters and oversaw the club's purchase of its first computer

to build and manage its "Gay Vote List." The innovative "Gay Vote List" became a hallmark of the club and the club's endorsement as a candidate or ballot measure was sought by many local campaigns.

Around this time the club grew too large to continue meeting in private homes and moved its monthly meetings to a community room of a Hillcrest bank.

Club vice president, and Truax's successor as president, Doug Scott, was responsible for developing a database of potential supportive voters. After each election he would research the results from the Registrar of Voters for any campaign that involved progressive issues. Even if the candidate or issue did not prevail, he identified precincts that had a pattern of voting progressively and this formed the basis of the "Gay Vote List." In addition the club distributed petitions for various progressive causes and candidates at various community events (including the LGBT Pride Festival, Adams Avenue Street Fair and the CityFest in Hillcrest) and added the names gathered to the "Gay Vote List."

After Pete Wilson was elected as a United States Senator in 1982, the ensuing special mayoral race was significant for the club. Truax was a strong supporter of Roger Hedgecock, but Dilno, McKain and others supported Maureen O'Connor. Hedgecock fell a little short of the required 60% for the club's endorsement, but many club members were active in and contributed financially to his campaign. Hedgecock publicly courted LGBTQ support and won with 52% of the vote. This sent a message to politicians that the LGBTQ community was an important voting bloc despite community division in this election. After the election, Hedgecock created a Mayor's Task Force on AIDS and appointed Truax to the task force. Ironically, after Hedgecock was forced to resign from office in 1985 due to campaign finance violations, he became a homophobic right-wing local radio talk show host. (For example, he organized the "Normal People Contingent" which unsuccessfully sued to be allowed to participate in the

1994 Pride Parade.) Maureen O'Connor, who was elected in 1986 to succeed him, became the first mayor to participate in the Pride Parade.

In 1983, the first cases of AIDS were diagnosed in San Diego. Over the next few years, the epidemic would have a devastating effect on the club. Brad Truax and his successor as club president, Doug Scott, would succumb to the disease, as would two club vice presidents, Mike Lloyd and Steven Pope, as well as many club members. The SDDC Women's Caucus, led by Barbara Vick, organized "Blood Sisters." This community initiative opened an account at the San Diego Blood Bank and organized numerous blood drives to assure that there was enough blood available for treatment of gay men and to supplant the loss of blood from gay male donors who were not allowed to donate blood.

Because of its tragic human toll, the AIDS pandemic focused the political aims of the LGBTQ movement and empowered greater political organizing at the local, state and national levels. The community was forced to mobilize to defeat extreme discriminatory initiatives sponsored by Lyndon LaRouche (Proposition 64 in 1986 and Proposition 69 in 1988) that would have effectively quarantined AIDS patients. The flurry of state legislation regarding AIDS and LGBTQ issues led in 1986 to the creation of the LIFE (Lobby for Individual Freedom and Equality) Lobby, a statewide coalition of organizations and individuals, including the San Diego Democratic Club as a charter member. The community also mobilized in 1987 with another National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in Washington, DC and a March on Sacramento for Lesbian and Gay Rights in 1988, both well attended by club members. (SDDC members also participated in subsequent DC marches in 1993 and 2000.)

In 1987, openly gay Neil Good ran for City Council in District Eight. Good had served as an aide to State Senator Jim Mills and County Supervisor Leon Williams and had been chair of the Central Committee in 1976-78. The club endorsed and strongly supported Good, but he fell less than 400 votes short of making it into the runoff election (Bob Filner beat Mike

Aguirre in the general election). Christine Kehoe served as Good's campaign manager. Neil Good's defeat was a surprise to some activists who then saw that community apathy could have severe consequences and that future campaigns had to be tightly organized.

One of the most successful local milestones was the passage of Measure E in 1988 which brought district elections to the city. SDDC volunteers were heavily involved in the campaign. Previous attempts had failed in 1969, 1973, 1980 and 1981. Prior to passage of Measure E, the top two candidates in the primary election were required to run citywide in the general election. Often, the first-place candidate in the district-only primary lost in the citywide runoff. District elections made it easier for grassroots and minority candidates to be successful. Future councilmembers would reflect the diversity of San Diego's neighborhoods. The first election under the new system was in 1989 when John Hartley (a leader in the district elections campaigns) knocked off incumbent Gloria McColl in the primary election by a mere 27 votes, shocking the political establishment. The club was very active in Hartley's campaign. After his election he appointed Christine Kehoe to his staff.

The passage of district elections was the first of a three-part strategy by the club. Step two was to redraw post-1990 census boundaries to create districts where LGBTQ candidates could more easily be elected. Step three was to identify viable LGBTQ candidates and work for their election. The opportunity for the next step occurred in 1990 when the San Diego City Council redrew its districts for the next decade. The club, led by McKain and Mel Merrill, gathered data to determine the precincts where significant numbers LGBTQ voters resided. The data included the club's 4,000 member "Gay Vote List" along with membership lists (with names redacted) from several local organizations and a subscriber list to *The Advocate*, a national LGBTQ magazine. The club proposed a revised District Three that included the neighborhoods of Hillcrest, North Park, University Heights, Bankers Hill, Normal Heights, Kensington and Talmadge. After

lobbying by the club, the City Council approved a map whose new District Three closely tracking the club's proposed "gay district."

Beginning in 1984, the Democratic-controlled state legislature sent bills prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment, housing and public accommodations every session. And every session, these bills were vetoed by Republican Governor George Deukmejian and his GOP successor, Wilson. Because of this Republican barricade against state legislation, a bipartisan coalition of local advocates decided to push for a local nondiscrimination measure, called the Human Dignity Ordinance. Doug Case represented SDDC on the HDO task force. After months of lobbying Mayor Maureen O'Connor and City Councilmembers, the ordinance passed in April 1990 with Bruce Henderson the lone dissenter. That vote would come back to haunt him.

In 1990 club volunteers focused their energies on Democrat Dede Alpert's challenge to incumbent Republican Assemblymember Sunny Mojonier in the 75th District. The district was 52% Republican and 32% Democratic and Mojonier was a four-term incumbent, so few expected Alpert to win. After the club endorsed her, club members Dilno, Lloyd and McKain became regulars in her campaign office. Alpert had an upset win (46% - 41%) and went on to serve a combined fourteen years in the State Assembly and Senate as a strong LGBGTQ advocate. Alpert notes: "The strength of the club was its large, active membership; strong leadership; active support with volunteers and money for SDDC-endorsed candidates; and the development of good candidates for the future ... The club actually 'got' politics and made a huge difference."

In 1991, the club provided strong support to Henderson's challenger Valerie Stallings, who won easily in the general election. Thus, the club had targeted and helped oust two Republican council incumbents in two successive council elections. Stallings appointed former club vice president Stan Lewis as her chief of staff.

The club implemented step three of their plan to elect local LGBTQ candidates when Hartley decided not to seek election in 1993. The LGBTQ community quickly coalesced around Kehoe as its candidate. In addition to having served on Hartley's staff, she had been the Executive Director of the Hillcrest Business Association and editor of the San Diego *Gayzette*. Her primary opponent was Schulze, a San Diego Community College District Trustee and a former mayoral staff member for Hedgecock. In addition, Kehoe possessed a steady, competent, non-threatening demeanor that belied the right wing's hysterical characterizations of the LGBTQ community as radical family- and country-hating hedonists. Moreover, because of the on-going AIDS crisis, savvy political leaders of both genders in the San Diego LGBTQ community recognized that a lesbian would have an easier time of breaking the "Lavender Ceiling" than a gay man, due to the dominant culture's incessant linking gay men with the disease.

Volunteers flocked to Kehoe's campaign in record numbers and LGBTQ people who had never given more than a token amount to a candidate contributed the maximum amount to her campaign (thanks to the tireless efforts of her finance chair, SDDC member Dr. Bill Beck). Kehoe placed first out of eleven candidates in the primary with 28% of the vote and went on to defeat Schulze by 55% - 44% in the general.

Schulze later said in a post-election letter to her supporters that it became virtually impossible to win against a crusade. The "crusade" was successful in ways no one could have foreseen in 1993. For instance, since that year, San Diego's Third Council District has been represented by an LGBTQ person (Toni Atkins: 2000-2008; Todd Gloria: 2008-2016; Chris Ward: 2016-2020; Stephen Whitburn: 2020-present). Regionally, Kehoe's 1993 victory as San Diego County's first openly LGBTQ elected official paved the way for LGBTQ people to be elected in all parts of the county.

Kehoe ran for Congress in the 49th District against incumbent Brian Bilbray in 1998, falling a little short (49% - 47%). But in 2000, she would go on to serve in the State Assembly (76th District) for four years and the State

Senate (39th District) for eight years. In 2012, at the conclusion of her final Senate term, Kehoe retired from political life after nineteen years of elected service.

Kehoe's narrow loss to Bilbray showed that his hold on the 49th Congressional District was tenuous. This encouraged Assemblymember Susan Davis to take on and defeat Bilbray in 2000, with strong club backing.

Also in 2000, Kehoe staffer and mentee Atkins (a former club vice president) replaced her as the Third District Councilmember. During Atkins' eight years on the San Diego City Council, she served in 2005 as Acting Mayor after Mayor Dick Murphy's surprising mid-term resignation. In 2010, she followed in Kehoe's footsteps once again, winning a seat in the California State Assembly.

But Atkins went even further. In 2014, she was elected by her fellow Assemblymembers to serve as Speaker in 2014 (the first lesbian Speaker and the first Speaker from San Diego). In 2016, Atkins was termed out of the Assembly but was elected to the State Senate seat formerly held by Kehoe. In recognition of her leadership skills, her Senate colleagues elected her as the President pro Tempore in 2018 (the first woman and first LGBTQ person to lead the Senate ... and the first person in 150 years to have led both houses of the legislature).

While Kehoe cracked the "Lavender Ceiling" in San Diego politics with her historic victory, Atkins has demolished the "Ceiling" at the state level.

When Atkins was termed out of the District Three council seat in 2008, she was replaced by Todd Gloria, a former Davis staffer. Gloria became the first openly gay man and first LGBTQ person of color to serve as councilmember. During his tenure, he became the city's first LGBTQ Council President. In an echo of Atkins' council tenure, Gloria also became San Diego's Acting Mayor in 2013 upon the resignation of Mayor Bob Filner. Both Atkins and Gloria received bipartisan accolades for how they

led the city through difficult transitions. With Atkins forced to leave her Assembly seat in 2016, Gloria ran to replace her and won – the first time in San Diego County history when one LGBTQ person replaced another in the state legislative delegation.

Gloria's 2016 move to the state legislature allowed openly LGBTQ (and former club treasurer) Chris Ward to replace him as the Third District Councilmember.

The LGBTQ community had another significant political victory in 2016, when community activist (and former club vice president) Georgette Gómez was elected to represent San Diego's Ninth District. Gómez became the first lesbian of color to be elected to office in San Diego County. More significantly, her victory demonstrated that San Diego had progressed to the point where a district without a sizeable LGBTQ population would elect an openly LGBTQ person to office.

This dynamic would repeat itself in 2018, with Dr. Jen Campbell winning the Second District council office. Campbell ousted incumbent Councilmember Lori Zapf, the first time a council incumbent had lost a bid for reelection since the club's hand in replacing Bruce Henderson with Valerie Stallings in 1991. Both Gómez and Campbell were considered underdogs in their races, and the club contributed substantially to their victories. Gómez became Council President in 2018 as one third of the San Diego City Council was LGBTQ (including Ward and Campbell).

In 2020, Gloria ran for mayor and won with 56% of the vote, making him the first LGBTQ individual and first person of color to become mayor. San Diego became the largest U.S. city to have elected a gay man as mayor. Gómez ran for an open congressional seat. She made the runoff, but lost in the general. She was succeeded as Council President by Campbell – the third LGBTQ Council president.

Gloria's decision to run for San Diego Mayor in 2020 opened up his Assembly seat to Ward, who ran for it and ran. All four candidates running

in 2020 for the San Diego Third District to replace Ward were LGBTQ (a first in San Diego political history). The runoff featured two LGBTQ club members, Toni Duran (an Atkins staff member) and Stephen Whitburn (a former club president), with Whitburn prevailing. Thus, as of 2024, the San Diego Third Council District will have been represented for 31 years by an openly LGBTQ person. This may be a record streak in US politics. In addition, beginning with Atkins' Assembly victory in 2010, California's 78th Assembly District has been represented by an LGBTQ person for six consecutive terms (so far).

When the club was founded it would have been inconceivable that a third of the San Diego City Council would be LGBTQ or that a gay man would be elected as mayor. Not only that, but as of 2020, most areas of the city's "gayborhood" (Hillcrest, North Park, Normal Heights, etc.) are completely represented by LGBTQ elected officials both at the city level (Mayor Gloria and Councilmember Whitburn) and the state level (Senate President pro Tempore Atkins and Assemblymember Ward). The 45-year arc of the club's work reflects the dynamic growth of the political power of the LGBTQ community from an ultra grassroots organization to a political powerhouse that aligns with progressive organizations throughout the region.

Times have also changed dramatically since Johnson became the first openly LGBTQ person elected to the Central Committee in 1980. The club has continued its tradition of involvement at the local, state and national level. Club members Maureen Steiner, Jess Durfee, and Will Rodriguez-Kennedy were elected as Central Committee Chairs, in 1995, 2004 and 2019 respectively. Both Durfee and Rodriguez-Kennedy had served as SDDC president prior to their election and Steiner had served as president of the Coronado Democratic Club. Durfee was elected as a member of the Democratic National Committee in (DNC) 2008, the first openly LGBTQ person from San Diego to serve on the DNC, and in 2017 he was elected as Chair of Western DNC States. Rodriguez-Kennedy was elected to the DNC in 2020. Within the California Democratic Party Johnson, Case, Durfee and Craig Roberts have served as officers of the LGBT Caucus, with

Roberts also serving two terms as the first LGBTQ CDP Regional Director representing the San Diego area (replaced in 2019 in this position by another LGBTQ person and club member, Michelle Krug). The club was also involved in the 1998 founding of the National Stonewall Democrats, a federation of LGBTQ Democratic Clubs, with Roberts elected Chair of the organization in 2011.

At the time the club was founded, the founders deliberately chose a name without an LGBTQ reference because an LGBTQ political organization in that era was viewed by many, even within the Democratic Party, as radical. Today the club is the largest and most influential of the over sixty Democratic clubs chartered by the San Diego Democratic Party. During his second stint as club president, Case (who was also president in 1991-92) led the effort in 2011 for the club to step out of the closet with a new identity as the San Diego Democrats for Equality.

Today the club's mission remains to advocate for LGBTQ equality and to expand LGBTQ visibility and influence within the party and the electorate. The club's story is filled with many important victories over the years but the work continues and the fight for full equality is the goal.