

Could new moderate Senate group threaten LGBT bills?

Group might 'splinter' the Democratic majority'

By CHRIS JOHNSON

The formation of a moderate Democratic working group in the U.S. Senate is raising questions about whether the group could obstruct the advancement of pro-LGBT legislation.

Dan Pinello, who's gay and a government professor at the City University of New York, said he doesn't think the group's formation is "a good sign for LGBT rights."

"Anything ... that splinters the Democratic majority, however it happens, is not helpful," he said. "You want the Democratic leaders speaking with one voice, especially when the Republicans seem to be doing that same thing in opposition."

The establishment of the 16-member group, led by Sen. Evan Bayh (D-Ind.), was announced last month. Bayh, along with Sens. Tom Carper (D-Del.) and Blanche Lincoln (D-Ark.), articulated the purpose of their group March 25 in an op-ed piece in the Washington Post.

The senators say in the piece that "many worthwhile policy solutions can be found in the practical center — ideas that also have the benefit of appealing to vast segments of the American electorate." The piece also suggests that some members of the group may join with Republican senators in voting against cloture for White House-backed legislation.

"The stakes are too high for Democrats to fear a policy debate," the senators say. "Such debates produce better legislation. On nearly all important votes, a supermajority of 60 senators will be needed to pass legislation. Without Democratic moderates working to find common ground with reasonable Republicans, the

president's agenda could well be filibustered into oblivion."

The senators recall how in 1993, then-President Clinton began his first year in the White House "with big plans, a head of steam and a Democratic Congress ready to begin a new progressive era." But the senators say "it all came crashing down" in 1994 when moderate voters, disillusioned with Democratic-control over the federal government, handed the GOP broad victories in Congress.

Pinello said the new group could benefit pro-LGBT legislation if it included moderate Republicans like Sens. Susan Collins (R-Maine) and Olympia Snowe (R-Maine), but without the GOP members, "there isn't the added bonus ... in terms of what they might achieve."

Brian Weiss, a Bayh spokesperson, said the working group will focus on "pragmatic, fiscally sustainable policies" that are "across a range of issues like deficit containment, the housing crisis, education reform, energy policy [and] climate change."

Weiss said "each member's going to vote their conscience" when pro-LGBT legislation comes before the Senate.

Allison Herwitz, legislative director for the Human Rights Campaign, said she didn't think the formation of a moderate Democratic working group "necessarily changes anything for us."

"We've always had to court and work with the moderates," she said. "So for us, I don't think it really changes anything."

Becky Dansky, federal legislative director for the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, said she didn't think the working group's

role was yet clear.

But she recalled how in the past few years moderate groups had a tremendous impact on issues before the Senate, such as in 2005, when the "Gang of 14" in 2005 ended the filibuster over judicial nominees proposed by then-President George W. Bush.

"This group does have the potential for that, but where they're going to focus this energy is not clear to me," she said.

Dansky said supporters of pro-LGBT bills are "fortunate" because members of the new group have in the past supported pro-LGBT legislation.

"These are folks who have traditionally supported our legislation and we would hope," Dansky said, "that they would continue to do so regardless of this caucus, and perhaps even use the influence of this caucus to avoid obstructionist tactics on votes on hate crimes and [the Employment Non-Discrimination Act]."

Dansky said support for pro-LGBT legislation among senators who identify as moderates shows that "you can be a political moderate and support LGBT rights."

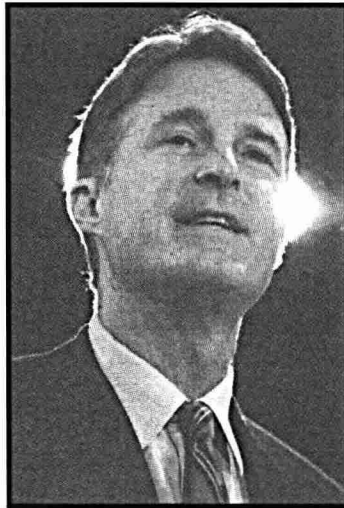
Besides Bayh, Carper and Lincoln, other Democrats in the moderate working group include veteran Sens. Herb Kohl (D-Wis.), Mary Landrieu (D-La.), Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.), Ben Nelson (D-Neb.), Bill Nelson (D-Fla.), and Mark Pryor (D-Ark.).

The group also includes freshman Democratic Sens. Mark Begich (D-Alaska), Michael Bennet (D-Colo.), Kay Hagan (D-N.C.), Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.), Mark Udall (D-Colo.) and Mark Warner (D-Va.).

Sen. Joe Lieberman (I-Conn.) is also a member of the group.



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A spokesperson for Sen. **Evan Bayh** of Indiana, one of 16 moderate congressional Democrats that have banded together, said the members would "vote their conscience" on LGBT issues. (Photo by Alex Brandon/AP)