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## Some key LGBT donors ho-hum about Dems despite exec order



President **Barack Obama** signed an executive order barring anti-LGBT workplace discrimination among federal contractors. (Washington Blade photo by Michael Key)

Two years ago, President Obama's announcement that he supported marriage rights for gay couples galvanized his progressive base and prompted donors to pump money into his coffers ahead of Election Day in November 2012. But two years later, after Obama signed an executive order barring LGBT discrimination among federal contractors, some key LGBT donors aren't having the same enthusiastic response.

Based on comments to the Washington Blade, the sense anecdotally is that some prominent LGBT donors who were motivated to contribute to Obama's re-election campaign after he came out for marriage equality aren't motivated to donate to the Democratic National Committee during the congressional mid-terms. Moreover, a Blade analysis of fundraising numbers in the three-day period after the order announcement shows no increase in the degree of contributions to the DNC, although the number of individual donors who gave money did increase.

Some donors expressed resentment over the fact that Obama withheld employment protections for LGBT workers until the sixth year of his administration.

Juan Ahonen-Jover, a gay donor and co-founder of eQualityGiving, said he and spouse Ken contributed \$10,000 "within minutes" of Obama coming out for marriage equality in 2012, but the executive order hasn't prompted him — or other donors he knows — to contribute money to the Democratic Party.

"While Ken and I appreciate the value of the executive order, it took lots of work from many donors, activists, insiders, and many others to get it signed," Ahonen-Jover said. "Actually, it took six years of pushing to get this done — much more effort than one would expect from a fierce advocate for our cause. There was no real justification for him to wait well past his first election much

less his re-election to issue an executive order which simply expanded an executive orders already signed by prior presidents.”

Lane Hudson, a D.C.-based Democratic activist, was among those who were critical of Obama for the timing of the executive order, saying he’s not motivated to give to the Democratic Party because of the delay.

“Given the amount of time, effort and resources that went into this instead of electing more Democrats, I’m not inclined to get excited enough to increase my giving or raising for the Democratic Party,” Hudson said. “I view this as a tardy fulfillment of a long ago promise. If the president had done this in a more timely manner, then it might be different.”

That stands in contrast to 2012, when Hudson, upon Obama’s endorsement of marriage equality, helped raise \$16,283 for Obama’s re-election via a page set up on the president’s campaign website.

The executive order was announced in June as Obama participated in a flurry of DNC fundraisers. Presumably, the White House announced plans to sign the executive order at that time to bolster fundraising efforts among gay donors as the Democrats try to hold the U.S. Senate in the 2014 mid-term elections.

Jonathan Lewis, a gay Miami-based philanthropist, last year said he wouldn’t donate more money to Democrats in part because of delays over the executive order. Now that Obama has signed the directive, he said he’s unsure whether he’ll contribute to the DNC.

“Today, it’s important to watch as the apologists who protected the president’s inaction by claiming the EO was weak or not needed, sing his praises and talk about how important and historic this

move is — something we knew and pushed for impatiently and unapologetically for years,” Lewis said.

Despite his pledge to withhold money, Lewis this cycle has contributed to individual Democrats who support LGBT rights, such as Rep. Scott Peters (D-Calif.), Rep. Ami Bera (D-Calif.) and U.S. House candidate in Pennsylvania Kevin Strouse.

Known for backing causes that push Democrats to act on LGBT rights, Lewis also indicated he plans to withhold donations to Hillary Clinton following her testy interview on National Public Radio in which she talked about a state-by-state approach to advancing marriage equality.

“Looking to the future, as much as I like Hillary, with her recent statements that marriage equality should be determined state-by-state, it might be wise to hold off until society’s progress on LGBT equality has made its way into Secretary Clinton’s campaign,” Lewis said.

According to an analysis from [National Public Radio](#), the amount of contributions to Obama’s re-election committee went up three-fold in the 72 hours after his marriage announcement. In the three days prior to the endorsement, he took in \$3.4 million, but afterward he saw a three-day spike to \$8.8 million in donations. In the next three days, his fundraising went back down to \$2.7 million. Those numbers reflected donations greater than \$200.

But a Blade analysis of numbers provided by the Federal Election Commission this time around on DNC fundraising yielded no similar spike. In the three-day period from June 15-June 17 prior to the announcement, the DNC raised \$510,005, but in the three-day period from June 18-20 after the announcement, the DNC

raised \$405,584, and in the subsequent three days from June 21-23, the DNC raised \$246,221.

Despite those numbers, there was a spike in the number of individual donations made to the DNC. In the first three-day period prior to the announcement, 1,336 people donated to the DNC, the second three-day period after the announcement, that number went up to 2,882 people, but in the next three days it went down to 914 people. Like with the marriage numbers, these numbers reflect donors who gave \$200 or more.

The fundraising numbers for the time period when Obama actually signed the executive order in July aren't yet available.

Dan Pinello, a political scientist at the City University of New York, accounted for the discrepancy between now and 2012 by saying discrimination in marriage is faced by LGBT people on a constant basis as opposed to discrimination in the workforce.

“There are a lot more LGBT people in the United States who are conspicuously being denied the right to marry than there are LGBT people who are blatantly being denied, or fired from, jobs,” Pinello said. “In other words, the sense of urgency surrounding the pursuit of marriage equality is, comparatively, enormous, while the same isn't true of a quest for job security as a nationwide policy issue.”

Still, there are other indications that the executive order was deeply appreciated within the LGBT community. At a New York City gala to raise money for the DNC that took place days after the White House announced Obama's intention to sign the executive order, attendees welcomed a reference to the planned order with sustained applause. Tickets for the high-dollar event,

which was attended by 550 people and sold out, ranged from \$1,200 to \$32,400.

Ian Sams, a spokesperson for the Democratic National Committee, pointed to the success of the fundraiser as evidence that the LGBT community is excited about the Democrats in the aftermath of the signing of the executive order.

“The Democratic Party continues to maintain deep ties to the LGBT community, and they’ve been strengthened in recent years as Democrats, led by President Obama, have secured victories in the fight for equality,” Sams said. “And for what it’s worth, just last month, more than 500 supporters helped the DNC sell out its annual LGBT Gala in New York, which was one of the most successful LGBT events that we’ve ever had.”

Hilary Rosen, a D.C.-based Democratic activist, said withholding donations to the Democratic Party in the aftermath of the executive order “makes no sense to me,” although she acknowledged the order hasn’t had an impact on her own donations.

“It’s not too little, too late,” Rosen said. “The president has done a lot and deserved our support even before this moment. Even though the EO took too long, this is an issue we really need Congress to pass ENDA for. From a donor perspective — and I am a donor — elections are about choices, not perfection. While I am glad some are bringing Republicans along, I still find Democrats a much better community investment. ”

Among small donors who spoke to the Blade, a split in opinions can be found in whether the executive order merits donations to the Democratic Party.

Tommy Rossman, a gay D.C. resident who made a donation to Obama of \$100 after he came out for marriage equality, acknowledged he hasn't yet made a contribution to political candidates this cycle, but would donate soon and called on others to donate in the aftermath of the executive order.

"We still need a federal non-discrimination law passed by Congress, and with the president's effort, he has helped inform and educate others that protections are truly needed," Rossman said. "Though I've previously given and have been inundated with emails seeking donations, I haven't yet given to an election campaign this year. However, I plan on donating soon to candidates that have publicly supported Obama on this issue."

Dan Ingram, a gay 24-year-old Chicago resident, donated \$30 to Obama after his marriage announcement, but said now the situation is "trickier" because the president isn't up for re-election.

"If a candidate was running on this as one of their major issues, and had championed the cause in the past, I'd be much more likely to donate to them, but I can't say for certain that I would," Ingram said. "Mid-terms make everything so much murkier, especially in this gerrymandered clusterfuck we've created over the past few decades."

A common theme among donors large and small is that Obama's move to sign the executive order won't impact donation decisions in no small part because Obama won't be on the ballot.

Ray Mulliner, political adviser for James Hormel, said his boss hasn't discussed the EO with other donors. Heir to the Hormel Foods empire, Hormel is a former U.S. ambassador to Luxembourg and has supported the Democratic Party with his wealth.

“President Obama’s signing of the executive order has not affected Mr. Hormel’s personal political giving at all,” Mulliner said. “What the president does or doesn’t do frankly will have little influence on funding decisions this election cycle. Neither of us have had conversations with other donors about the EO or their giving after the signing.”

Then again, Hormel has already maxed out on contributions this cycle prior to the announcement about the executive order. Last year, Hormel donated \$32,400 to the Democratic National Committee, \$32,400 to the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee and \$25,000 to the Ready for Hillary PAC.

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