

# What the gay rights movement learned from the civil rights movement

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00:00 Election night 2008 was a night that tore me in half. It was the night that Barack Obama was elected. [One hundred and forty-three] years after the end of slavery, and [43] years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, an African-American was elected president. Many of us never thought that this was possible until the moment that it happened. And in many ways, it was the climax of the black civil rights movement in the United States.

00:37 I was in California that night, which was ground zero at the time for another movement: the marriage equality movement. Gay marriage was on the ballot in the form of Proposition 8, and as the election returns started to come in, it became clear that the right for same sex couples to marry, which had recently been granted by the California courts, was going to be taken away. So on the same night that Barack Obama won his historic presidency, the lesbian and gay community suffered one of our most painful defeats.

02:42 Now, I'm a documentary filmmaker, so after going through my pissed off stage and yelling at the television and radio, my next instinct was to make a movie. And what guided me in making this film was, how was this happening? How was it that the gay rights movement was being pitted against the civil rights movement? And this wasn't just an abstract question. I'm a beneficiary of both movements, so this was actually personal. But then something else happened after that election in 2008. The march towards gay equality accelerated at a pace that surprised and shocked everyone, and is still reshaping our laws and our policies, our institutions and our entire country. And so it started to become increasingly clear to me that this pitting of the two movements against each other actually didn't make sense, and that they were in fact much,

much more interconnected, and that, in fact, some of the way that the gay rights movement has been able to make such incredible gains so quickly is that it's used some of the same tactics and strategies that were first laid down by the civil rights movement. Let's just look at a few of these strategies.

05:02 So gays and lesbians have been in society since societies began, but up until the mid-20th century, homosexual acts were still illegal in most states. So just 14 years after the Montgomery bus boycott, a group of LGBT folks took that same strategy. It's known as Stonewall, in 1969, and it's where a group of LGBT patrons fought back against police beatings at a Greenwich Village bar that sparked three days of rioting. Incidentally, black and latino LGBT folks were at the forefront of this rebellion, and it's a really interesting example of the intersection of our struggles against racism, homophobia, gender identity and police brutality. After Stonewall happened, gay liberation groups sprang up all over the country, and the modern gay rights movement as we know it took off.

07:08 Some early gay activists were actually directly inspired by the march, and some had taken part. Gay pioneer Jack Nichols said, "We marched with Martin Luther King, seven of us from the Mattachine Society" -- which was an early gay rights organization -- "and from that moment on, we had our own dream about a gay rights march of similar proportions." Several years later, a series of marches took place, each one gaining the momentum of the gay freedom struggle. The first one was in 1979, and the second one took place in 1987. The third one was held in 1993. Almost a million people showed up, and people were so energized and excited by what had taken place, they went back to their own communities and started their own political and social organizations, further increasing the visibility of the movement. The day of that march, October 11, was then declared National Coming Out Day, and is still celebrated all over the world. These marches set the groundwork for the historic changes that we see happening today in the United States.

08:25 And lastly, the "Loving" strategy. The name speaks for itself. In 1967, the Supreme Court ruled in *Loving v. Virginia*, and invalidated all laws that prohibited interracial marriage. This is considered one of the Supreme Court's landmark civil rights cases. In 1996, President Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act, known as DOMA, and that made the federal government only have to recognize marriages between a man and a woman. In *United States v. Windsor*, a 79-year-old lesbian named Edith Windsor sued the federal government when she was forced to pay estate taxes on her deceased wife's property, something that heterosexual

couples don't have to do. And as the case wound its way through the lower courts, the Loving case was repeatedly cited as precedent. When it got to the Supreme Court in 2013, the Supreme Court agreed, and DOMA was thrown out. It was incredible. But the gay marriage movement has been making gains for years now. To date, 17 states have passed laws allowing marriage equality. It's become the de facto battle for gay equality, and it seems like daily, laws prohibiting it are being challenged in the courts, even in places like Texas and Utah, which no one saw coming.

14:17 Now we know that everything is not perfect, especially when you look at what's happening with the LGBT rights issue internationally, but it says something about how far we've come when our president puts the gay freedom struggle in the context of the other great freedom struggles of our time: the women's rights movement and the civil rights movement. His statement demonstrates not only the interconnectedness of those movements, but how each one borrowed and was inspired by the other. So just as Martin Luther King learned from and borrowed from Gandhi's tactics of civil disobedience and nonviolence, which became a bedrock of the civil rights movement, the gay rights movement saw what worked in the civil rights movement, and they used some of those same strategies and tactics to make gains at an even quicker pace.

15:12 Maybe one more other reason for the relative quick progress of the gay rights movement. Whereas a lot of us continue to still live in racially segregated spaces, LGBT folks, we are everywhere. We are in urban communities and rural communities, communities of color, immigrant communities, churches and mosques and synagogues. We are your mothers and brothers and sisters and sons. And when someone that you love or a family member comes out, it may be easier to support their quest for equality. And in fact, the gay rights movement asks us to support justice and equality from a space of love. That may be the biggest, greatest gift that the movement has given us. It calls on us to access that which is most universal and most intimate: a love of our brother and our sister and our neighbor.