

**SEX & RELATIONSHIPS**

# The Bible Belt's Love Affair With (Gay and Straight) Porn

*The GOP presidential hopefuls keep vilifying porn. Odd that the very people they're trying to pander to consume massive amounts of it.*

By [Alex Henderson](#) / [AlterNet](#)

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The adult entertainment industry has long been one of the favorite whipping boys of social conservatives, who have argued that porn and other forms of adult entertainment (including strip clubs, swing clubs, phone sex and BDSM) are incompatible with the moral values of the Heartland and the Bible Belt. Porn, social conservatives claim, is for “godless liberals” in San Francisco, Greenwich Village and West Hollywood, not right-of-center voters in Republican-dominated “red states.” But the reality is that porn isn’t any less popular in so-called “red states” than it is in so-called “blue states,” and ironically, the places where the 2012 Republican presidential hopefuls are the most likely to be railing against porn are also places where an abundance of voters are likely to be consuming it.

GOP presidential hopefuls Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum and Newt Gingrich have not only been playing the abortion and gay marriage cards—they have also assured the Christian Right organization Morality in Media (MIM) that they would be tough on porn if elected president. Former Massachusetts governor Romney, in a written statement, told MIM he favors “strict enforcement of our nation’s obscenity laws”; serial adulterer and former House of Representatives speaker Gingrich met with MIM president Patrick Truemann in person and assured him that if elected president, he would appoint an attorney general who would make federal obscenity prosecutions a high priority.

Meanwhile, in Laurens County, South Carolina, the local Republican Party is asking possible candidates to swear off all porn consumption. In late February, the Laurens County GOP unanimously adopted a resolution asking local Republicans who want to get on the primary ballot to sign a 28-point pledge that includes opposition to abortion, gay marriage and same-sex civil unions as well

as vows to abstain from premarital sex and not view any porn. The pledge states: "You cannot now, from the moment you sign this pledge, look at pornography."

Of all the GOP presidential hopefuls, Santorum has been the most stridently anti-porn; the former Pennsylvania senator (who was voted out of office in 2006) has an entire page on his Web site that is devoted to his opposition to porn, and that attacks President Barack Obama for not being sufficiently anti-porn. Santorum writes: "The Obama Administration has turned a blind eye to those who wish to preserve our culture from the scourge of pornography and has refused to enforce obscenity laws. While the Obama Department of Justice seems to favor pornographers over children and families, that will change under a Santorum Administration."

Actually, Obama has never said anything in favor of adult entertainment. Very few Democratic politicians will openly embrace the adult entertainment industry in any way. And the more one examines the data, the more evident it becomes that Republican-dominated states with a heavy concentration of far-right culture warriors are also states where erotic entertainment is very much in demand. Adult industry advocate Bill Margold, who was one of the top adult film stars of the 1970s, has often described the United States as a place where people hypocritically condemn adult entertainment with one hand while pleasuring themselves to it with the other hand; recent data bears that out.

In 2009, Benjamin G. Edelman of the Harvard Business School published the results of a state-by-state study on the number of people who were subscribing to adult membership Web sites; Edelman found that eight of the 10 states that had the highest per capita consumption of online porn were states that Republican John McCain won in 2008's presidential election. Utah topped the list, and other red states in Edelman's top 10 included Oklahoma, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Alaska, North Dakota and West Virginia. The only states in Edelman's top 10 that Obama won in 2008 were Florida and Hawaii.

More recently, in December 2011, Rutgers University researcher/blogger Omar Haq published the results of his study on Google searches for gay porn. Haq found that between 2004-2011, the top 10 states that had the most Google searches for gay porn included five states that McCain won in 2008 (Texas, Mississippi, Kentucky, Louisiana, West Virginia) and five states that Obama won (New York, Ohio, New Mexico, Nevada and Florida). "People subscribe to a lot of porn in the southern Bible Belt states," Haq noted. "I really believe it is suppression. Freud himself said that the more you suppress people, the more they are going to want to do something. It might be due to conservatism; I think that definitely plays a role."

Even when the data on porn consumption doesn't show a significantly greater per capita demand for it in Republican-leaning states than in Democrat-leaning states, the data at least shows "red states" and "blue states" to be about equal in their consumption. Quentin Boyer, public relations director for Pink Visual (a major adult entertainment company), doesn't find that per capita consumption of Pink Visual's material is significantly higher in red states than it is in blue states, but he doesn't find it to be significantly lower either. Boyer said that per capita, Pink Visual's two biggest markets are California followed by Texas.

Boyer explained: "Texas is the second largest state by population, and in terms of our overall traffic, that's where it ranks as well: #2, right behind California. Interestingly, if you adjust the query to cover only mobile traffic, Texas surpasses California very slightly—they actually swap back and forth in the #1 spot, depending on the time frame selected—and moves into the #1 spot."

Colin Rowntree, founder/president of the BDSM-oriented adult membership Web site Wasteland.com, said that red states have some of his most loyal and enthusiastic customers. "Retention of porn membership in Wasteland is significantly longer for red states and the amount of content viewed, and the length of sessions in the member area is also significantly longer for red state members."

Texas, Rowntree added, has "double retention from any other state." Other states at the top of Wasteland's list when it comes to loyal subscribers, he said, include Georgia, Ohio and Illinois. The state with the lowest membership retention for Wasteland, according to Rowntree, is Democrat-leaning Vermont.

Diane C. Duke, executive director of the Free Speech Coalition, a Los Angeles-based trade organization for the adult entertainment industry, said that it is problematic to automatically equate conservatism with an opposition to porn and liberalism with being tolerant of it. Duke, who pointed out that some of porn's most vocal critics have come from the left (including Catharine MacKinnon and the late Andrea Dworkin), asserted: "I would argue that Ron Paul would not be bad for the porn industry."

Duke added that being religious isn't necessarily synonymous with hardcore social conservatism; she has often described herself as a church-going Lutheran, but she doesn't consider herself a Christian fundamentalist. And it is Christian fundamentalists rather than more moderate Christians, Duke said, who are so obsessed with attacking porn. "I think that with this country being in the state that it is in right now, fear-mongering around the adult entertainment industry is

absolutely ridiculous,” Duke emphasized. “Even if I were a fundamentalist, I would argue that adult entertainment is minute compared to other things.”

Whether they're liberal/progressives or right-of-center libertarians, one thing that supporters of the adult industry—whatever their political differences—generally agree on is that of all the GOP presidential candidates, Santorum is the most vehemently anti-porn. Santorum has been quite critical of various U.S. Supreme Court decisions that he believes have proved helpful to the adult industry, including 1969's *Stanley v. Georgia* (which said that mere possession of sexually explicit adult material is not a crime, even if it is obscene) and 2003's *Lawrence v. Texas* (which struck down a Texas sodomy law). *Stanley v. Georgia* and *Lawrence v. Texas* were both right-to-privacy decisions, and Santorum has said that there is no right to privacy in the U.S. Constitution. In his book *It Takes a Family*, Santorum wrote: “Privacy. Neutrality. Free Expression. None of these terms is in the Constitution.”

Santorum, clearly, would like to see a lot more federal obscenity prosecutions—and in obscenity cases, the standard that jurors use to determine obscenity is the Miller test, which was outlined in the Supreme Court's *Miller v. California* decision of 1973. According to the Miller test, sexually explicit material is legal as long as it isn't obscene. In order for something to be obscene, it must: 1) appeal to a prurient interest when contemporary community standards are applied; 2) be patently offensive; and 3) lack serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value when taken as a whole (the so-called “SLAPS test”). In American obscenity cases, prosecutors typically hope the juries will be in the most socially conservative parts of the country. But if the data shows that a great deal of erotica is being consumed in those places, it becomes harder to make the case that the material in question is out of step with “contemporary community standards.”

Nonetheless, many Republican politicians will continue to make the false claim that porn is strictly for “blue state liberals.” And the more they push a socially conservative agenda, the more “red state” voters will consume porn—even if they are in the closet about it.

Chauntelle Tibbals, a sociologist who has spent 10 years studying the adult entertainment industry and publishes the industry-oriented blog PVVonline.com (the PVV stands for “Porn Valley Vantage”), asserted: “If you teach people about sex and if people have access to information about sex, they're more likely to regard it in a measured way and make informed decisions. In a place where the lockdown on porn is so tight, it's not surprising to me that the interest in it and the searching for it is so high. In a place where you have more access to information about sex, there isn't this frantic panic to see what's going on and

delve in. The stricter the regulations, the higher the interest.”

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*Alex Henderson's work has appeared in the L.A. Weekly, Billboard, Spin, Creem, the Pasadena Weekly and many other publications.*

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