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Marches on Washington

The lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) rights movement in the United States grew tremendously during the last quarter of the 20th century, a phenomenon perhaps best demonstrated by the success of the first three national marches held in Washington, DC. Each march was much larger and more diverse than the previous one, as greater numbers of people came out about their sexual and gender identities and created a wide array of LGBTQ+ subcommunities. A less flattering trend was reflected in the march held at the cusp of the new millennium: the increasing corporatization of the movement, with grassroots activists having less of a role in setting its goals and priorities.

The 1979 March

Marking the 10th anniversary of the Stonewall riots and coming in the wake of the lenient jail sentence given to Dan White for the assassination of openly gay San Francisco city supervisor Harvey Milk, the First National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, on October 14, 1979, was a historic event that drew more than 100,000 people from across the United States and 10 other countries. National lesbian and gay groups were initially reluctant to support the 1979 march, fearing that such a public event would not attract many people or, if it did, would generate a right-wing backlash similar to Anita Bryant's 1977 "Save Our Children" campaign. But these concerns proved to be unwarranted, because the march helped solidify a national lesbian and gay rights movement. The march also featured the first National Third World Gay and Lesbian Conference, which was attended by hundreds of people of color and sparked the formation of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays.

The 1987 March

On October 11, 1987, more than a half million people (between 500,000–650,000 according to organizers) descended on the capital to participate in the second national March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. Many of the marchers were angry over the government's slow and inadequate response to the AIDS crisis, as well as the U.S. Supreme Court's 1986 decision to uphold sodomy laws in *Bowers v. Hardwick*. With the first display of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, the 1987 march succeeded in bringing national attention to the impact of AIDS on gay communities. In the shadow of the U.S. Capitol, a tapestry of nearly 2,000 fabric panels offered a powerful tribute to the lives of some of those who had been lost in the pandemic. The march also called attention to anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination, because approximately 800 people were ar-

rested in front of the Supreme Court two days later in the largest civil disobedience action ever held in support of LGBTQ+ rights.

The 1987 March on Washington also sparked the creation of what became known as BiNet U.S.A. and the National Latina/o Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Organization (LLEGÓ), the first national groups for bisexuals and LGBTQ+ Latinx people, respectively. Along with the formation of new national groups, the most lasting effects of the weekend's events were felt on the local level. Energized and inspired by the march, many activists returned home and established social and political groups in their own communities, providing even greater visibility and strength to the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights. The date of the march, October 11, has been celebrated internationally ever since as National Coming Out Day to inspire members of the LGBTQ+ community to continue to show, as one of the common march slogans proclaimed, "we are everywhere."

The 1993 March

The growing strength of the movement was evident 6 years later, on April 25, 1993, when close to 1 million people attended the March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation. It was the largest demonstration in U.S. history to that time. The failure of the government to respond adequately to the AIDS crisis continued to be a major focus of the march, but other LGBTQ+ issues were also prominent, particularly the ongoing prohibition on LGB people serving in the military, because President Bill Clinton had failed to carry through on a campaign promise to repeal the ban.

The march was groundbreaking for receiving the unanimous endorsement of the board of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)—the first time that direct institutional ties had been made between the LGBTQ+ rights movement and the Civil Rights movement—and for explicitly including bisexuals in its name (although the march steering committee voted to add just "bi," fearing that the word "bisexual" would overly sexualize the event). Although attempts to add the word "transgender" to the march title failed, the rights of trans people were included in its list of demands.

The 2000 March

While the first three Marches on Washington were largely grassroots efforts with broad sections of the LGBTQ+ community represented on the organizing committees, the Millennium March on Washington for Equality in 2000 was called for and directed by the Human Rights Campaign and the Universal Fellowship

of Metropolitan Community Churches, with little initial consultation of other national, state, and local groups. Many LGBTQ+ activists criticized the closed nature of the planning process and the lack of a coherent political agenda and sense of purpose as compared to previous marches. Many LGBTQ+ organizations, including the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (now the National LGBTQ Task Force) and the National Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum, either came out against the march or declined to endorse it.

The disputes resulted in the Millennium March being smaller and less diverse than the 1987 and 1993 marches. A festival connected to the march was supposed to raise money for local LGBTQ+ groups, but it lost money and led to allegations of inappropriate expenditures and the theft of hundreds of thousands of dollars. The Millennium March thus ended the same way it began: in controversy.

Despite the relative failure of the Millennium March, the marches on Washington have been an important part of the movement for LGBTQ+ equality. They have mobilized and empowered countless LGBTQ+ people and greatly increased mainstream media attention to the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights.

See also [Bisexual Inclusion in the LGBTQ Rights Movement](#); [Gay Exclusion in the U.S. Military: Evolution and Demise of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”](#); [Laws Banning Homosexuality and Sodomy](#); [Politics, LGBTQ](#); [Trans Inclusion in the LGBTQ Rights Movement](#)

Further Readings

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