

History Topic of the Month

Harvey Milk (1930-1978)

One of the first steps towards equality for any community is to get political representation. Harvey Milk was the first openly gay man to be elected to public office in California, and one of the first in the history of the United States. He came to office championing the rights of the LGBTQ+ community and determined to fight for better lives for everyone in his neighbourhood. He made a huge impact: he was passionate, articulate, and he spoke about "hope". But he paid a heavy price: murdered in November 1978 by another politician. However, he is an icon for the LGBTQ+ community in America and a symbol of how we are stronger together than apart.



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Harvey Milk

Harvey's early years

Harvey Milk was born in New York to Lithuanian Jewish parents. Harvey knew he was gay from an early age. But this was a time when being gay wasn't accepted, so he also knew he had to keep it a secret – he even hid his love of opera because he was worried it would look "queer". Most people didn't realise Harvey was gay because he didn't match up to the stereotypical ideas of the time about what a gay person was 'like' and how they behaved. He was funny and athletic, and he was an excellent American Football player.

In 1969, Harvey moved to San Francisco with his boyfriend, a stage manager on a touring musical. Milk loved the city so much, he decided to stay when his boyfriend returned to New York.

As a young man, Harvey didn't know what to do with his life. He was discharged from the US Navy (where he served as a diving instructor) rather than face a court-martial for having a relationship with another man. He returned to New York and worked on Wall Street. He kept his sexuality a secret, insisting all his boyfriends did the same.

A stereotype is an idea about what a person or group of people are like that is widely held. It can reflect prejudice or ignorance and it can be used by the majority to limit how people are seen and what opportunities they can have in life. Harmful stereotypes like the ones Harvey faced, frightened many people into believing if they acted "too gay" they would not be able to find jobs and would be threatened and bullied by people.



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San Francisco in the seventies

At this time, San Francisco was home to a very large LGBTQ+ community, one of the largest in America. It was a politically radical city, exciting and full of political protest against things like the Vietnam War. There were rock bands, hippies and an active nightlife. The LGBTQ+ community was based in the Castro District, one of the first gay neighbourhoods in the United States.

Despite this, gay men struggled daily against prejudice. Attacks against gay men were common, and many felt the police made little effort to find the culprits. Sex between consenting men was illegal, and the police persecuted gay men: in 1971, 2,800 gay men were arrested and registered as “sex offenders” for being part of consenting relationships.

Harvey finds a home

The city still completely changed Harvey's life. Suddenly, he was living in a community where he didn't need to hide who he was. Harvey started to feel the years he had spent “in the closet” were wasted and by forcing his boyfriends to keep things secret, all he had done was hurt the people he loved. He became much more politically radical. He was even fired from his office after he grew his hair long to protest the Vietnam War.

“In the closet” was a phrase used at the time, to describe someone who was hiding their sexuality, like hiding in a wardrobe. Campaigners hoped to encourage people to be brave and to “come out of the closet” and let everyone see who they really were.



Contributor: © Robert Clay / Alamy Stock Photo

Harvey Milk celebrates his election to City Supervisor in his camera shop on 8 November 1977



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Harvey opened a camera shop, Castro Cameras, in March 1973. The shop helped his growing interest in politics. He was annoyed when the local authorities billed him \$100 as a deposit against future tax (he managed to have it reduced to \$30). He was frustrated that local schools were reduced to borrowing equipment because they couldn't afford to buy it.

Above all, he felt the lack of rights for LGBTQ+ people and the lack of protection they got from the police was outrageous. Harvey said, "I finally reached the point where I knew I had to become involved or shut up".

Harvey's first campaign

Harvey decided to run for City Supervisor in 1973. This was an elected office where the candidate would be responsible for making local government decisions. Harvey's first campaign – entirely organised and run by himself and his friends – was chaotic. But it was also exciting and different. Harvey wanted to change things for people: to stop LGBTQ+ people feeling ashamed, to protect their rights and make life better in his neighbourhood.

Harvey discovered he was a natural political speaker. He was passionate, informed, and entertaining. He won the Castro District by a huge number of votes. But at this time, local districts didn't choose their own winners: instead, all the votes across the city were added together and only the top candidates were elected (even if they all came from the same district). Harvey missed out.



Contributor: © Robert Clay / Alamy Stock Photo

Harvey Milk during his campaign for San California State Assembly in 1976



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The Mayor of Castro Street

The election taught Harvey important lessons. Most importantly, if he was serious about becoming a politician, he needed to be something more than a single-issue radical. LGBTQ+ rights would always be his main mission in politics – but he wanted to represent everyone. He cut his hair and some of his radical policies (like legalising drugs) and reached out to firefighter and construction unions.

He became a leader in the Castro District. He worked closely with the beer delivery drivers, supporting their strike for better pay and encouraging local gay bars to not stock the beer companies' products. In return, he won union support, who agreed to support hiring gay men as drivers. He formed the Castro Village Association of Small Businesses who worked together to promote LGBTQ+-owned businesses and worked with non-LGBTQ+ businesses in the area. He became known as "The Mayor of Castro Street".

Harvey's runs again... and again

Harvey ran again for City Supervisor in 1975. This time he had union support and, along with LGBTQ+ rights, championed small businesses and local investment. Again, he narrowly missed out on being elected. But he won an important ally in future Mayor George Moscone (elected in 1976) who offered Harvey a government job. Moscone had also campaigned to improve LGBTQ+ rights.

Harvey had grown frustrated with LGBTQ+ groups in San Francisco. He thought they were too timid, afraid of looking "too gay" and frightening people. They usually supported "closeted" or heterosexual supporters. He founded the San Francisco Gay Democratic Club to campaign for equal rights for LGBTQ+ people. Harvey's new group helped pressure the city to change its election policy, so districts could vote directly for the person they wanted to represent them. In 1977, this was successful.

Harvey finally gets elected

In 1977 he ran again for City Supervisor. Harvey was now the front runner in the Castro district. His Castro Village Association had become a huge partnership of ninety businesses. He had a lot of support from the unions. Harvey ran on a wide platform of issues. As well as LGBTQ+ rights, he supported improved childcare, free public transportation, lower taxes for businesses, low-income housing and several other community issues. He won by a landslide.

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City Supervisor Harvey Milk

Harvey had made history: the first openly gay man to be elected to office in California. Harvey worked with his close ally, Mayor Moscone, and used his office to promote the rights of the LGBTQ+ community.

One of his first acts was writing a bill, making it illegal to discriminate against a person based on their sexuality. Harvey was determined that people should not have to struggle, as he had, for equal opportunities. It was made law and made a huge difference to the LGBTQ+ community in San Francisco.

Harvey continued to focus on laws to improve the community: his famous "pooper scooper law," made it a criminal offence for dog owners not to clean up after their pets.



Contributor: © Everett Collection / Alamy Photo Library

Harvey Milk with Mayor George Moscone
in 1978



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Proposition 6

Harvey's biggest campaign was crucial for protecting LGBTQ+ rights in America. Proposition 6 was a law proposed for California which would have made it illegal to employ a teacher who identified as gay. Harvey led a campaign across the state against the bill. In a famous Gay Pride speech, Harvey said "we will not win our rights by staying quietly in our closets ... We are coming out to fight the lies, the myths, the distortions. We are coming out to tell the truths... I am tired of the conspiracy of silence, so I'm going to talk about it. And I want you to talk about it!"

Proposition 6 was terrifying for the LGBTQ+ community. There had been a series of successful campaigns against LGBTQ+ rights across America. Proposition 6 would have given the state of California the right to investigate people's personal lives and then decide what jobs they could or could not have. Millions of people were terrified about what could come next.

Harvey was one of its most public opponents. He had a series of public debates with the Proposition's inventor, right-wing Republican Joe Briggs, where Harvey argued against Briggs' ridiculous claims that gay teachers were trying to "influence" children to try and destroy the American family.

The campaign was successful and Proposition 6 was defeated by over a million votes on 7 November 1978. 75% of San Franciscans voted against it.

Tragedy

At the height of his success, tragedy struck. Harvey fell out with another City Supervisor, Dan White, over the building of a Mental Health clinic in White's district (Harvey supported it, White was opposed). White never forgave Harvey – he was the only Supervisor to vote against his Gay Rights bill. White resigned, but then tried to take back his resignation. Mayor Moscone refused and White blamed Harvey and Moscone for ruining his career.

On 27 November 1978, White entered City Hall and shot and killed both Moscone and Harvey. In court, his lawyer argued that, because White had binged on junk food the night before, it had made his depression worse and he was not in control of his actions. Outraged people called this "the twinkie defense" (a twinkie was a sugary junk food snack) but it worked: White was jailed for five years for manslaughter.

Harvey's legacy

Harvey Milk fought for LGBTQ+ rights in America, helped make discrimination illegal in San Francisco, and played a huge role in preventing Proposition 6 becoming law. He believed people shouldn't have to live in a world where they were ashamed of who they were.



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But he was also influential because he showed “gay politicians” were for everyone. He campaigned on issues affecting everyone and made alliances with unions and schoolteachers. While his passion was LGBTQ+ rights, he also worked against potholes and dog’s poop. On his death, the city was united in grief.

His legacy continues today, with streets, schools, buildings and US Navy ships all named after him. An Oscar-winning film starring Sean Penn, *Milk* (2008), celebrated his life and President Barack Obama posthumously awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2009. Obama said Harvey “fought discrimination with visionary courage and conviction”. He was right.

Discussion points

- Harvey Milk strongly believed that it was a duty to “come out of the closet” and be proud of who you were. Why do you think this was so important to him?
- Why do you think it is important not to stereotype people? How did stereotypes in America at this time make LGBTQ+ people worried about how others might react to them?
- Why do you think it was important to the LGBTQ+ community in America that they had a district they could call their own?
- Why do you think Harvey felt it was important that he engaged with other issues in the community?
- Many people in the LGBTQ+ community were terrified about the impact Proposition 6 could have. What do you think they were worried could happen in the future? How would you feel if the Government suddenly decided you couldn’t have certain jobs because of who you were?
- What else can you find out about Proposition 6 and the campaign against gay right across America in the 1970s?
- If Proposition 6 had passed, how different do you think life might have become for the LGBTQ+ community?
- There was a similar controversial bill proposed against same-sex marriage, called Proposition 8, in 2008. What can you find out about this?
- Harvey Milk always believed there was a strong possibility he could be assassinated. Why do you think he felt like this? Do you think he would feel he was a success?

About the author

This article was written by Alistair Nunn, Pearson’s Senior Product Manager for Humanities Teaching and Learning resources. Alistair has a degree in History from Cambridge.



Further reading and resources

Books



The Mayor of Castro Street: The Life and Times of Harvey Milk (2008) by Randy Shilts

An Archive of Hope: Harvey Milk's Speeches (2013)

Harvey Milk: His Lives and Death (2019) by Lilian Feldman

Films, videos and links



The Times of Harvey Milk (1984) – an Oscar-winning documentary, directed by Rob Epstein

Milk (2008) – an Oscar-winning biopic, directed by Gus van Sant and starring Sean Penn as Harvey Milk

[A TV news report of Harvey Milk's appointment as City Supervisor](#)

[News report of Harvey Milk's assassination](#)

Articles



<https://milkfoundation.org/>

<https://www.history.com/topics/gay-rights/harvey-milk>

[40 Years After The Assassination Of Harvey Milk, LGBTQ Candidates Find Success – NPR](#)

[Transcript: Hear Harvey Milk's The Hope Speech – mfa.org](#)

Take a look at [Pearson's Diversity and Inclusion in History](#) webpages for more great content.