

June 2014

Political Participation of LGBT Americans

by **Vanessa M. Perez, PhD.**

Until recently, little was known about the participation of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) people in American democracy. Historically, most of the national surveys and polls have failed to ask identifying questions on sexual orientation, making it difficult for researchers to track down participation trends among this population.

This situation, however, is beginning to change. More and more polling organizations are including questions on LGBT status, and others are specifically conducting national surveys on the political behavior of LGBT individuals.

Recent studies find that:

- LGBT respondents are younger and more highly educated than the population at large;
- LGBT people earn lower incomes and are more likely to fall into poverty; and
- LGBT individuals exhibit rates of political participation comparable to, or possibly higher than, those of the general population.

This memo summarizes the findings of recent research on this subject to identify important gaps in our knowledge. First, it describes the data available, and discusses what the research shows about the demographics of the LGBT¹ community. This is followed by a discussion of what is known about the political participation of LGBT people (i.e., voter registration, party identification), and concludes with questions for further research.²

¹ Most studies lack data on transgender individuals. For this reason, the term LGB is more widely used here.

² I thank Kenneth Sherrill and Andrew R. Flores for reading earlier drafts of this memo and for providing thoughtful comments and questions for further research. Any errors are my own.

I. Data

In the 1990s and early 2000s, most studies relied on data from the Voter News Service (VNS), the National Election Pool (NEP) exit polls, or the General Social Survey (GSS) (Egan, Edelman, and Sherrill 2008, Flores and Sherrill 2013).

While these data were based on nationally representative samples, there were some significant limitations. The VNS and NEP pertained only to voters, and the questions failed to differentiate between sexual behavior and identity.² They asked about sexual behavior or identity, but not about both.

To remedy these shortcomings, political scientists Patrick J. Egan, Murray S. Edelman, and Kenneth Sherrill designed the Hunter College Poll. Conducted in November of 2007, the Hunter College Poll was an online survey³ based on a nationally representative sample of 768 LGB individuals.⁴ This poll included questions on “sexual identity and behavior” and on the “political attitudes and participation” of LGB people (Egan, Edelman, and Sherrill. 2008). The Hunter College poll was among “the most comprehensive stud[ies] of LGB political attitudes and behavior to date,” and it remains the source of data for several ongoing studies.

The large scale survey of LGBT people conducted by the Pew Research Center in April of 2013 provides another rich source of data. The survey was “based on a nationally representative sample of 1,197 self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender adults 18 years of age or older,” including 398 gay men, 277 lesbians, 479 bisexuals, and 43 transgender adults.” Like the Hunter College Poll, it contained information on the demographics and political participation of LGBT people.

Some studies also used other reliable sources of information on LGBT individuals, including the 2012 LOGO TV Presidential Election survey by Harris Interactive (Flores and Sherrill 2013), the American Community Survey, and the National Survey of Family Growth. These surveys include some questions that allow researchers to identify some key characteristics of LGB people, but the information is less detailed than that found in the Hunter College Poll and the Pew Research Center survey.

² Ken Sherrill notes that there is a great difference between behavior and identity. Some people who engage in sexual behavior with others of the same sex do not necessarily identify as LGBT. For a discussion on measuring sexual orientation, see also, *Best Practices for Asking Questions about Sexual Orientation on Surveys*: The Williams Institute, 2009.

³ Knowledge Networks, Inc., which conducted the survey, recruited “its respondents via a random-digit dial (RDD) process over the telephone. Internet access and hardware are provided to households that do not already have it. This ensures that KN’s panel is truly representative of the entire U.S. population.” See Egan, Edelman, and Sherrill, 2008.

⁴ There was not enough information on transgendered individuals.

2. Demographics

Studies estimate that LGBT people make up approximately 3.4 percent of the total adult U.S. population (Gates and Newport 2012). The number of Americans identifying as LGBT is growing, and the proportion of LGBT people in the electorate is expanding. Social science research shows that the LGB population has a lower socioeconomic status than the population at large, and that it consists of younger and more highly educated individuals (Edelman 1992; Egan, Edelman, and Sherrill 2008; Badgett, Durso, and Schneebaum 2013; Flores and Sherrill 2013). Most gays and lesbians identify as White, but a larger percentage identify as racial or ethnic minorities relative to the minority composition of the general population.

Table 1, on the following page, presents findings from the Hunter College Poll. It shows that the LGB sample consists of 51.2 percent females and 48 percent males, compared to 51.7 percent women and 48.3 percent men in the general population. Of those identifying as LGB, a relatively larger share of respondents fell in the 18- to 34-year-old category compared to the general population. The data also show that LGB individuals are more likely to have advanced degrees compared to the general population, but higher education does not indicate higher incomes.⁵

In the Pew Research Center survey, 50 percent of LGBT respondents were male and 49 percent were female. Most respondents were in the 18-29 (30 percent) and 30-49 (39 percent) age categories. The race and ethnicity breakdown was as follows: White (66 percent) Black (10 percent) Hispanic (7 percent) and Other (7 percent). 33 percent of respondents noted their educational attainment consisted of a high school diploma or less, 36 percent reported having some college education, and 32 percent said they had a Bachelor's degree or more. 39 percent reported earning family incomes of less than \$30,000, 39 percent fell in the \$ 30,000 to \$ 74,999 income brackets, and 20 percent noted earning incomes of \$75,000 or higher.

⁵ The authors note that this is likely due to the fact that most LGB people are a younger cohort of the population and young people tend to have lower incomes than older individuals.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF LGBT AMERICANS

Table I: Demographic Characteristics of LGB People and the American Population

		LGBs (%)	American Adults (%)
GENDER	Female	51.2	51.7
	Male	48.8	48.3
AGE	18–24	10.2	13.8
	25–34	27.3	17.9
	35–44	23.8	18.9
	45–54	19.2	19.6
	55–64	14.8	14.8
	65 or over	3.5	16.4
EDUCATION	Less than High School	10.2	13.8
	High School	23.7	31.8
	Some College	32.4	27.8
	Bachelor’s Degree or Higher	33.7	26.7
HOUSEHOLD INCOME	Less than \$10,000	14.9	5.9
	\$10,000–24,999	19.1	15.8
	\$25,000–49,999	29.8	27.0
	\$50,000–74,999	17.5	20.2
	\$75,000 or Higher	19.6	31.1
RACE/ ETHNICITY	White, not Hispanic	68.7	68.8
	Black, not Hispanic	9.8	11.3
	Other, not Hispanic	1.8	5.4
	Hispanic	15.6	13.5
	Two or more races indicated	4.1	0.9
RESIDENCE: REGION	East	24.5	18.6
	Midwest	17.6	22.0
	South	28.6	36.4
	West	29.3	23.0
RESIDENCE: PARTY STRENGTH IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS	Strong Democratic State	43.3	35.0
	Strong Republican State	26.9	37.9
	Swing State	29.8	27.1
RESIDENCE: STATE RECOGNITION OF SAME-SEX COUPLES	Civil Union/Domestic Partnership	30.0	21.3
	No Legal Recognition	67.1	76.5

Reproduced from Egan, Patrick J., Murray S. Edelman, and Kenneth Sherrill. “Findings from the Hunger College Poll: New Discoveries About the Political Attitudes of Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals.” Hunter College, The City University of New York, 2008.

2.1. Income and Race and Ethnicity

In 2013, the Williams Institute⁶ conducted a study on the income status and racial (among other) characteristics of LGB individuals and same-sex couples (Badgett, Durso, and Schneebaum 2013). Based on data from the American Community Survey, the National Survey of Family Growth, and the California Health Interview Survey, the findings showed that LGB households were more likely to live in poverty (at or below the Federal Poverty Line) relative to the general population.

The study also found that African American LGB couples “have poverty rates at least twice the rate for different-sex married African Americans,” and children in African American LGB households are more likely to live in poverty than their counterparts in different-sex parent households. Females in same-sex couples also exhibited higher poverty rates than those in the general population.

Consistent with other studies, the authors found that LGB people have lower incomes than the general population. The authors noted:

“Young men (under 25) in same-sex couples are about ten times more likely to be in poverty than men in gay male couples aged 55 and over. Women in same-sex couples who are less than 25 years old have the highest poverty rates for any age group and couple type (25.3%), [...] While people in different-sex married couples see lower poverty rates once they are 65 or older, both men and women in same-sex couples have higher rates of poverty when they are 65 and over compared to when they are 55-64 (1.8% versus 2.3% for men; 3.9% versus 6.0% for women)” (Badgett, Durso, and Schneebaum 2013).

In a statistical analysis that took into account other factors influencing poverty rates, the authors found that LGB people are significantly more likely to live in poverty than the general population. They also noted that LGB people are more likely to receive cash assistance (TANF) and SNAP from the government than are families composed of different-sex couples.

In sum, the research shows that:

- LGB people are younger and more educated than the general population;
- LGB people are more likely to report earning lower incomes than the population at large, and that poverty rates are higher for this population; and
- that being African American or female and LGB increases the likelihood of living in poverty.

⁶ A UCLA School of Law think tank “conducting rigorous, independent research on sexual orientation and gender identity law and public policy.” <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/mission>

3. Political Participation

Studies demonstrate that LGBT people are as likely, or perhaps even more likely, to register and to vote than the general population. They may be more politically engaged, and many tend to have Democratic and liberal partisan and ideological preferences (Egan 2008; Egan, Edelman and Sherrill 2008; Flores and Sherrill 2013). Furthermore, LGB individuals are more participant than the general population in 7 out of 9 measures of participation (Sherrill and Flores 2013). See Table 2 for more details on other forms of political participation in which LGBT people engage in to a greater extent than the general public.

Table 2: Political Participation and the LGBT Population

	General Population (%)	LGBTs (%)	Difference (%)
Writing or calling a politician	19.1	26.8	-7.7
Attending a political rally, speech or organized protest	7.9	13.0	-5.1
Attending a public meeting on town or school affairs	12.4	10.8	1.7
Serving on a committee or as an officer for a local organization	7.3	7.2	0.01
Writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper or magazine	5.4	11.3	-5.9
Calling a live radio or television show to express an opinion	3.6	3.3	0.24
Working for a political party or candidate	4.2	5.5	-1.4
Serving as an active member of any group that tries to influence public policy	10.4	13.3	-2.9
Regularly reading local and national publications	35.5	44.6	-9.1
Regularly consuming other news media	33.5	44.6	-9.1
Authoring blogs	3.3	6.1	-2.8
Communicating through social media on a political topic	25.1	33.4	-8.3

Political participation measures and percentages responding “Yes” by sample. A negative difference between the two samples indicates that the LGBT sample is more likely to participate.

Reproduced from Sherrill, Kenneth, and Andrew R. Flores. “Consciousness, Identity, and Political Participation: The LGBT Voter in the 2012 Election.” Working paper, 2014.

The Pew Research Center survey (see Table 3) noted that “the LGBT population is as politically active as the general public.” The voter registration rates among LGBT people are “77% [...] nearly identical to the rate among the general public (74%).” But, a year prior, registration rates among LGBT individuals were a bit lower than those of the general population. A Gallup report by Gary J. Gates noted that, in 2012, about 74 percent of LGBT people were registered or planned to register to vote, compared with 80 percent of non-LGBT individuals.

Table 3: Voting and the LGBT Population

		All LGBTs (%)	General Population (%)
REGISTERED TO VOTE?	Yes, Certain	77	74
	No/Less than certain	22	25
VOTE HOW OFTEN?	Always	49	50
	Nearly always	26	21
	Part of the time	8	10
	Seldom/Never	16	18
HOW CLOSELY FOLLOW GOV'T AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS?	Most of the time	31	51
	Some of the time	40	27
	Only now and then	19	13
	Hardly at all	9	9
HOUSEHOLD INCOME	Less than \$10,000	14.9	5.9
	\$10,000–24,999	19.1	15.8
	\$25,000–49,999	29.8	27.0
	\$50,000–74,999	17.5	20.2
	\$75,000 or Higher	19.6	31.1
Notes: Based on all LGBT (N=1,197). Those who didn't answer not shown. "Never" was a voluntary option in general public survey and not an option on LGBT survey.			

Reproduced from Pew Research Center (2013). *A Survey of LGTB Americans: Attitudes, Experiences, and Values in Changing Times*, p. 112.

Registration and turnout rates may vary, however, for the different categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals, depending on ongoing changes in state voting laws. For example, according to Jody L. Herman, of the Williams Institute, voter identification laws could negatively influence electoral participation among transgender individuals, as these citizens may lack identification consistent with their gender. Herman notes that “twenty-seven percent of transgender citizens who have transitioned reported they had no identification documents or records that list their correct gender.” Because obtaining identification is costly, it presents an additional barrier to voting for this group. The situation is worse for “transgender people of color, youth, students, those with low incomes, and those with disabilities [who] were more likely than the average respondent to have no updated identification documents or records.”⁷

⁷ Based on the National Transgender Discrimination Survey.

Voter turnout among LGBTs also compares favorably to that of the general public (see Table 3, on the previous page). There is some evidence that electoral participation might be even higher among LGBT individuals than in the general public. Ken Sherrill and Andrew Flores (2013) showed that, taking into account other factors affecting political participation, “the average LGBT person is more likely to participate in politics than the average member of the general public.”⁸

The reason why participation differs among LGBT people from that of the general population seems to be related to the particular political interests of this demographic. Sherrill and Flores argue that greater political participation among LGBT individuals resulted from a sense of shared fate with others in the LGBT community. During the coming-out years, LGBT people experience a shift in political outlook that differs from that of the mass public. LGBT people tend to move to the left on the ideological spectrum, away from religion, and become closer to people of other races and ethnicities. This sense of consciousness and identity results in a stronger commitment to politics than would otherwise be the case.

When it comes to ideology and partisanship, LGBT individuals identify more strongly with the Democratic Party and liberal ideology than the general population. Sherrill and Flores show that “among 18-29 year olds, 66% of LGBTs identified as Democrats while only 51% of those who were 18-29 in the national sample identified as Democrats.” In 1992, Edelman noted “both gay men and lesbians gave Clinton 70% of the vote.” This pattern persisted over time. In 2004, 77 percent of LGBT voters favored Kerry. And in 2008 and 2012, 70 percent and 77 percent of LGBT people voted for Obama, respectively. See Table 4 for a breakdown of the vote since 2004.

Table 4: Exit Polls of LGB Voters, 2004-2012

	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012
% OF ELECTORATE	4	3	4	3	5
VOTE	Kerry: 77% Bush: 23%	Dem: 75% Rep: 24%	Obama: 70% McCain: 27%	Dem: 69% Rep: 31%	Obama: 77% Romney: 23%

Reproduced from Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research’s exit poll conducted on November 7, 2012. <http://www.washingtonblade.com/2012/11/07/exit-poll-gay-voters-made-up-5-percent-of-2012-electorate/>

However, there is some evidence in the recent literature that partisanship varies for the different categories of LGBT people, particularly for bisexuals. Sherrill and Flores (2013) find that “bisexual women are equally likely to identify as strong Democrats and weak Democrats. Bisexual men have no significant differences in the proportion identifying as weak Democrats or weak Republicans, and bisexual men only have a plurality attachment to the Democratic Party while majorities of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual women are Democrats.”

⁸ Interestingly, there is some evidence that participation among LGBT people could vary by race and ethnicity. Sherrill and Flores note that while ideology and church attendance are positive predictors of political participation for LGBTs, the same is not true for African-American LGBTs, who “are less likely to participate in politics.” The authors note that perhaps “there are attributes of being both black and LGBT that affect participation.”

On marriage equality, studies show that LGBT support for same-sex marriage has increased since 2004. That year, exit poll data showed that a “bare majority of self-identified gay, lesbian, and bisexual voters said they preferred marriage to civil unions or no legal recognition whatsoever.” That study found that support for gay marriage was highest among the youngest, more educated cohort of LGBT people (Egan and Sherrill 2005). In 2013, the Pew Research Center reports “nearly universal support for same-sex marriage among LGBT adults,” but notes “a significant minority of that population—39 %—say that the issue has drawn too much attention away from other issues important to people who are LGBT.”⁹

One of the most interesting findings in this research is that party attachments for the LGB population develop in a different pattern than for the rest of the population. Whereas there is a general consensus in the political science literature showing that the party identification of individuals is strongly associated with their parents’ party identification, the same is not necessarily true for LGB people. LGB individuals are increasingly liberal and Democratic after “coming out.” “Among those LGBs who are raised in non-Democratic homes, the overwhelming majority abandon the party identification of their parents” (Egan, Edelman, and Sherrill 2008).

This is important because it has implications for election outcomes. As the number of people identifying as LGBT expands, the composition of the electorate might reflect this. Changes in the aggregate partisanship of the electorate can alter election outcomes that may ultimately shift the direction of policy.

⁹ For a discussion on the central role same-sex marriages continues to play in LGBT politics, see Flores, Andrew R., and Kenneth Sherrill. “From Freedom to Equality: Marriage and the Shifted Priorities of Lesbians, Gay Men, Bisexuals, and Transgender People.” *InsPIRES Conference on Marriage Equality at Stanford University*. 2013.

3. Further Research

Studies show that, of the 2.9¹⁰ to 3.4 percent of Americans identifying as LGBT, most are likely to be young, more highly educated, and poor relative to the rest of the population. LGBT individuals are also as likely to register to vote and cast ballots as the general public, and might be more likely to engage more strongly in other political activities (campaign activities, contacting officials, etc.) (Flores and Sherrill 2013).

The literature suggests there are several ways in which the political behavior of LGBT peoples differs from that of most Americans. Low income is typically negatively associated with electoral participation, yet LGBT persons have relatively high participation rates and may be more likely to engage in other forms of political participation. Ken Sherrill argues that, even with increased obstacles to voting (i.e. stricter voting laws), LGBT people would likely still participate at higher rates than the general population because this demographic is especially motivated to participate. But, there is some evidence that obstacles to voting could prove especially burdensome for transgender individuals and that voting restrictions are very likely to suppress participation rates among transgendered people.

The studies discussed here reveal rich information on the political behavior of LGBT people, but there are many areas ripe for further research. Some questions that future studies could address include:

- How does electoral participation vary for different categories of LGBT people by race/ethnicity and income levels?
- What explains differences in the political participation of African-American LGBT individuals when compared to other LGBT people?
- What are the levels of political participation of the parents of LGBT individuals? What are the parents' levels of education? ¹¹
- We know voter identification laws are likely to negatively influence participation among transgender people (Herman 2012). What are the potential effects of voter identification laws for lesbians, gays, and bisexuals? Given the low income rates among the LGBT population (and thus the increased costs to obtaining voter identification), are LGBT people more likely affected by changes in voting laws? Do other factors (i.e. sense of shared fate) mitigate the potential negative impact of these changes?
- Are voter registration rates among LGBT persons increasing, decreasing, or consistently in line with those of the general public?

This memo summarized the extant political science research on the political participation of LGBT people. The growing literature provides significant insight on this subject and reveals interesting aspects that are unique to this group. It also prompts questions for much-needed research on this key political demographic, which is “roughly equivalent to the population of New Jersey,” totaling about 9 million people (Gates 2011). Generating greater understanding of the forces influencing the electoral behavior of LGBT people can help promote egalitarian public policy, and in this manner advance the goals of American democracy.

¹⁰ This is the percentage of LGB people according to the Hunter College Poll.

¹¹ Thanks to Ken Sherrill for suggesting this question.

References

- A Survey of LGBT Americans: Attitudes, Experiences, and Values in Changing Times*. Pew Research Center, 2013. <<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/06/13/a-survey-of-lgbt-americans/>>
- Badgett, M.V. Lee, Laura E. Durso, and Alyssa Schneebaum. *New Patterns of Poverty in the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community*. The Williams Institute, 2013.
- Best Practices for Asking Questions about Sexual Orientation on Surveys*: The Williams Institute, 2009.
- Edelman, Murray. "Understanding the Gay and Lesbian Vote in '92." *Public Perspective* 4 (1992): 32-33.
- Egan, Patrick J. "Group Cohesion without Group Mobilization: The Case of Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals." *British Journal of Political Science* 42.03 (2012): 597-616.
- Egan, Patrick J., Murray S. Edelman, and Kenneth Sherrill. "Findings from the Hunger College Poll: New Discoveries About the Political Attitudes of Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals." Hunter College, The City University of New York, 2008.
- Egan, Patrick J., and Kenneth Sherrill. "Marriage and the Shifting Priorities of a New Generation of Lesbians and Gays." *Political Science and Politics* 38 2 (2005).
- Johnson, Chris. "Exit Poll: Gay Voters Made up 5 Percent of 2012 Electorate." *Washington Blade* 2012.
- Sherrill, Kenneth, and Andrew R. Flores. "The Political Realities of Lgbt Consciousness." *Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association*. 2013a.
- — — "From Freedom to Equality: Marriage and the Shifted Priorities of Lesbians, Gay Men, Bisexuals, and Transgender People." *InsPIRES Conference on Marriage Equality at Stanford University*. 2013b.
- — — "Consciousness, Identity, and Political Participation: The LGBT Voter in the 2012 Election." Working paper, 2014.
- Gates, Gary J. *How Many People Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender?* The Williams Institute, 2011.
- Gates, Gary J., and Frank Newport. *Gallup Special Report: The U.S. Adult LGTB Population*, 2012.
- Herman, Jody L. *The Potential Impact of Voter Identification Laws on Transgender Voters*. The Williams Institute, 2012.



850 15th Street NW
Suite 250
Washington, DC 20005
www.projectvote.org

About the Author

Vanessa M. Perez is a political scientist at Project Vote. She holds a B.A., M.Phil, and Ph.D. in Political Science from Columbia University.

About Project Vote

Project Vote is a national nonpartisan, non-profit organization that promotes voting in historically underrepresented communities. Project Vote takes a leadership role in nationwide voting rights and election administration issues, working through research, litigation, and advocacy to ensure that our constituencies can register, vote, and cast ballots that count.

Disclaimer

The information contained in this document is for general guidance only. It should not be used as a substitute for consultation with professional legal or other competent advisers. Project Vote is not responsible for any errors or omissions, or for the results obtained from the use of this information.

Follow Project Vote:

facebook.com/projectvote

twitter.com/projectvote

pinterest.com/projectvote

©2014 by Project Vote.

This paper is covered by Creative Commons "Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike" license. (See <http://creativecommons.org>.) This work may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial use. Reproduction or adaptation must attribute Project Vote, and must bear the Creative Commons "Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike" license. Please notify Project Vote if reproducing or adapting this work.

"Project Vote" is a trademark of Project Vote, and registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. The Project Vote logo is a trademark or common law mark of Project Vote.