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The attitudinal and organizational roots of LGB incorporation in the Democratic Party, 1980–2012

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ABSTRACT

LGB rights and inclusion have been a site of intense conflict in the Democratic Party since the 1970s. While Democrats have been embroiled in intraparty conflict, the Republican Party has opposed LGB rights. This asymmetrical conflict raises questions about the incorporation of LGB people into the party system. Who in the Democratic Party coalition supported their inclusion, and what explains their entrenched marginal position in the party? Using time series, cross-sectional data from the Convention Delegate Studies between 1980 and 2012, I demonstrate that LGB people's best allies were delegates with sympathetic attitudes about or membership in organizations representing marginalized groups. I also find that pro-LGB forces were less likely to support winning primary candidates, and that Democratic Party delegates with anti-LGB attitudes support downplaying issues and minimizing disagreements to win elections. The evidence also shows a divide between pro-LGB forces and labor. Finally, while ideology is associated with intraparty conflict, delegates' anti-gay attitudes also explain LGB people's marginal position in the Democratic Party over time.

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At the Democratic Party convention in 1980, party delegates endorsed a platform that included nondiscrimination based on sexual orientation for the first time. The party also added sexual orientation as a protected status in its Charter (Proctor 2022). Although 1980 was a watershed moment, LGB rights remained a site of intraparty conflict in the Democratic Party for decades. After the 1984 election, for example, the DNC chairman excluded LGB people from more than 150 committee appointments, arguably violating the party Charter banning discrimination. In the 1990s, President Bill Clinton broke his promise to end the ban on homosexuality in military service, implementing Don't Ask, Don't Tell instead, which required service members to remain in the closet. The Defense of Marriage Act was also passed by Congress in 1996 with support from two-thirds of Democrats and was signed by Bill Clinton. In

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2008, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama opposed same-sex marriage, and the party platform endorsed “traditional” marriage. Since then, LGB rights have been embraced by Democratic Party leaders. While intraparty conflict has long divided the Democratic Party, Republicans have remained opposed to LGB rights. The asymmetrical nature of party conflict raises questions about the intraparty politics of LGB incorporation. Who in the Democratic Party coalition supported their inclusion, and what explains their entrenched marginal position in the party?

Previous research has identified issue conversion (Bishin, Freebourn, and Teten 2021; Karol 2023) and alliance formation (Baylor 2017) as mechanisms that explain party positions on LGB rights. Unlike cases of position change in which parties co-evolve, the LGB case has been asymmetrical with Democrats becoming pro-LGB over time and the Republican Party maintaining its longstanding anti-LGB agenda (Karol 2023). A consequence of this asymmetrical position change is the absence of party competition for LGB votes, leading scholars to debate whether LGB people are a captured political constituency in the two-party system (Frymer 1999; Smith 2007; McThomas and Buchanan 2012; Bishin and Smith 2013). Although we have learned about the position of LGB issues and voters from these studies, we still know relatively little about the intraparty dynamics of LGB incorporation into the Democratic Party. This article addresses this gap by examining the organizational memberships and attitudes of delegates to party nominating conventions and their association with attitudes about LGB politics.

Party-focused scholarship argues that political parties are organized coalitions of interest groups that nominate candidates to advance their interests (Bawn et al. 2012; M. Cohen et al. 2008; Masket 2009). These coalitions include formal party actors, such as delegates to conventions, and an extended party network (EPN) that includes advocacy groups and other external actors (Koger, Masket, and Noel 2010). Existing research shows that LGB activists worked to influence interest groups within the Democratic Party coalition and EPN, particularly women’s groups such as the National Organization for Women (NOW) and unions (Baylor 2017; Heersink and Lacombe 2023). Yet, we still know relatively little about which Democratic Party constituencies facilitated LGB inclusion and whether pro-LGB forces were aligned with powerful constituencies on presidential candidate nominations. Since candidate selection is central to coalition maintenance, presidential nominating conventions are a key site to observe intraparty dynamics regarding the politics of sexuality.

Using time series, cross-sectional data from the Convention Delegate Studies, I demonstrate that between 1980 and 2012, Democratic Party delegates who are members of racial justice and women’s organizations, and who have warm attitudes about feminists and Black Americans, were the most pro-LGB in the party. There are few linkages between membership in and attitudes about unions and pro-gay attitudes. These patterns persist across time, reflecting LGB people’s marginal position in the party system. Second, pro-gay forces at nominating conventions were less likely to support candidates who became party nominees. This suggests that they were not aligned with dominant forces in the Democratic Party. Third, delegates with anti-LGB attitudes were more likely to support downplaying issues to win and minimizing disagreements in the party. Finally, I find that ideologically conservative Democrats were more likely to report anti-LGB attitudes and prefer party strategies that sideline issues and conflict. These findings demonstrate that LGB people’s closest allies were people from

and sympathetic to marginalized groups as well as liberals. Furthermore, the results reveal how party alignments forged at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class have contributed to LGB people's marginal position in the American party system.

American political parties and LGB politics

Contemporary party scholarship theorizes that interest groups form networks that constitute party organizations (Koger, Masket, and Noel 2010) and that candidate nominations are central to the development of parties (Bawn et al. 2012; M. Cohen et al. 2008). Rather than being controlled by ambitious politicians (Aldrich 1995), policy-demanding interest groups and social movements form coalitions to nominate candidates who will push their agendas and provide ideological patronage in exchange for support (Karol 2009; Schlozman 2015; Baylor 2017). This literature argues that mobilized groups exert power and influence by using parties to pull policy toward their interests, exploiting voters' inattentiveness to politics rather than converging on the preferences of the median voter in the electorate (Cohen et al. 2008). In this framework, parties are vehicles through which "the most energized" segments of the population are animated by demands (i.e., they have grievances), leading to mobilization in the party system (Cohen et al. 2006; See also Baylor 2017; Karol 2009). While these studies are informative about how groups shape parties, they have eschewed analysis of power relations that underlie the organization of coalitions and agendas in the party system. As a result, they tell us less about how power dynamics affect the processes through which disadvantaged groups influence parties.

Research about marginalized groups and political parties demonstrates why group-based theories of parties must account for power. In the case of Black Americans, for example, Paul Frymer (1999) shows how Black issues have been sidelined by parties in pursuit of White votes. Likewise, Kira Sanbonmatsu (2002) shows that, although the Democratic and Republican parties are polarized on abortion, they are less polarized on other gender issues and rarely make elections about them. Scholars have also shown that Black Americans and feminists formed alliances with labor unions, demonstrating how alliance with a powerful gatekeeper in the Democratic Party facilitated group incorporation (Frymer 1999; Wolbrecht 2002; Schlozman 2015; Schickler 2016; Baylor 2017). These studies reveal that the fortunes of marginalized constituencies are dependent on relationships to more powerful constituencies in the party system. Moreover, these studies raise questions about the process of LGB incorporation into the party system and whether it followed a similar or different path.

There is a small but growing body of research about political parties and LGB politics. Christopher Baylor (2017) argues that national LGB interest groups, such as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and the Human Rights Campaign, formed alliances with organizations that represent Democratic constituency groups, including the NOW, the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and AFL-CIO. Although Baylor finds evidence that LGB incorporation fits in the group-centered perspective, his shadow case study provides less evidence about the role of party actors. Relatedly, David Karol (2023) shows that Democratic politicians changed their positions on LGB rights after activists from LGB organizations pressured the party for inclusion. A distinctive feature of the LGB case, as Karol notes, is

asymmetrical position change, whereby Democrats have slowly incorporated LGB rights in their agenda while Republicans have remained largely opposed to LGB inclusion. As a result, scholars have concluded that LGB people are an anchor group for the Democratic Party (Schlozman 2015), which is characterized as the pro-LGB rights party (Campbell and Davidson 2000). LGB people have been constructed as a civil rights constituency through alignment with the Democratic Party (Proctor 2022), and behavior research shows LGB people vote in large margins for Democrats (Egan, Edelman, and Sherrill 2008; Egan 2012; Strolovitch, Wong, and Proctor 2017). These studies indicate that LGB people are a reliable Democratic Party constituency because interest groups persuaded politicians to support their cause. Yet, we do not know much about the intraparty dynamics of LGB incorporation.

By overlooking intraparty dynamics among formal party actors, accounts of asymmetrical party change in the LGB case are incomplete (Karol 2023). The fact that many Democratic politicians held anti-gay positions, were slow to change them, and often unwilling to give LGB issues visibility suggests that interest groups were not the only party brokers (Proctor 2022). Party actors are also motivated to appeal to dominant majority groups who participate in both political parties (Frymer 1999). Frymer's shadow case study of LGB capture suggests that Democratic elites have sidelined LGB issues to appeal to straight voters. Studies also demonstrate that legislators are responsive to mobilized constituencies, such as Evangelicals and LGB people, as well as public opinion about LGB issues (Bishin and Smith 2013; Hansen and Treul 2015). Other research reveals that straight voters in the Democratic Party supported same-sex marriage bans in 2004 and that the party put limited effort into opposing them despite receiving substantial electoral support from LGB voters (Smith 2007). The LGB vote has also shifted in response to anti-LGB politics within the Democratic Party, such as in the 1994 midterms when the Republican Party won 40% of the LGB vote after Bill Clinton implemented Don't Ask, Don't Tell (McThomas and Buchanan 2012). In these studies, we are missing accounts about how presidential candidate nominations have shaped the incorporation of LGB people and politics into the two-party system.

Theory

LGB exclusion in the party system has been shaped by deeply entrenched power asymmetries. As Margot Canaday (2009) explains, over the course of the twentieth century, the state apparatus identified sexual and gender traits as grounds for exclusion from citizenship, constituting the category of "homosexual" in the process. In addition, LGB people have faced a matrix of social, political, medical, and legal oppression (D'Emilio 1998). Straight people have long held prejudiced attitudes about LGB people (Sherrill 1996; Proctor 2022), although those attitudes have shifted over time (Egan and Sherrill 2005). Some research finds that public support for LGB rights is less polarized than it is among party elites (Lindaman and Haider-Markel 2002). More recent studies have also found that Democratic voters are less supportive of LGB rights compared to Democratic elites (Smith 2007; Broockman and Malhotra 2020). The confluence of these factors reflects LGB people's marginal position in American political parties.

If interest groups use parties to form coalitions and nominate candidates, then delegates attending nominating conventions are power brokers and gatekeepers within

political parties. At conventions, delegates exert influence over candidate selection, coalition maintenance, platform development, and party rules and business. In other words, party convention delegates control access to party institutions and power. Accordingly, their attitudes about groups and how the party ought to conduct business can be important indicators of conflict and incorporation. Furthermore, if group-centered theories of parties are correct, then delegates should have linkages to interest groups and organizations that reflect the broader party network. Thus, delegates are not only gatekeepers in the formal party. Their organizational ties also link the formal party to external actors, such as labor unions and advocacy organizations. By virtue of this institutionalized status, the relationship between delegates' attitudes and organizational memberships can provide insight into intraparty conflict in the LGB case.¹

Delegate selection has been an important site of intraparty conflict since LGB activists pursued inclusion in the party system. Since 1980, activists have used the primary process to send delegates to party conventions – particularly the Democratic Party (Proctor 2022). The first LGB delegation included approximately 80 delegates from across the United States. These delegates flexed their limited power by securing the inclusion of sexual orientation in the Democratic Party's civil rights plank and nondiscrimination protections in the party Charter. There has been an LGB presence at the Democratic Party convention ever since.² To send delegates to the convention, activists had to engage in intraparty conflict with other groups, including Black people, unions, and feminists, who were also vying for representation and attempting to influence candidate nominations. In 1988, for example, activists in Washington D.C. contested whether to run on Jesse Jackson's delegate slate, which would all but guarantee that they would lose to straight Black elites who were better known, or whether to strategically align behind other candidates to increase the likelihood of becoming a convention delegate. This goal was so important for LGB activists pursuing party incorporation that, in some instances, they aligned with candidates based on the likelihood of winning rather than on pro-LGB record. In so doing, activists could push LGB inclusion and representation at conventions.

In the forthcoming analyses, I examine how delegates' attitudes about marginalized groups, their ideology, and their organizational memberships are associated with attitudes about LGB people, support for Democratic primary candidates, and preferences to sideline issues to win elections during the nominating convention between 1980 and 2012. I test four hypotheses that allow me to focus the lens on several mechanisms of LGB incorporation in the party system. My first hypothesis, which I call the disadvantaged group hypothesis, is that delegates with warmer attitudes about marginalized groups and delegates with membership in advocacy organizations representing marginalized groups will be more likely to have pro-LGB attitudes. My second hypothesis, the candidate support hypothesis, is that pro-LGB forces in the Democratic Party will be less likely to support candidates who win primaries, reflecting that they are not aligned with actors who have coalesced around the nominee. Third, the party business hypothesis states that delegates with anti-LGB attitudes will be more likely to support minimizing disagreements in the Democratic Party and downplaying issues to win elections. Finally, I hypothesize that conservative Democratic Party delegates will be more anti-LGB, more likely to align with winning candidates, and more likely to support minimizing issues than liberal delegates.

The disadvantaged group hypothesis posits that delegates with warm attitudes about disadvantaged groups and membership in organizations representing them will be more pro-LGB. If pro-gay forces are aligned with less powerful groups, then entrenched party actors can more easily ignore them. Regarding the Democratic Party, labor organizations have been powerful gatekeepers who have shaped the incorporation of marginalized groups (Schickler 2016; Baylor 2017). Historically, unions have formed coalitions with marginalized groups when political entrepreneurs use opportunity structures, such as having common opponents and converging interests, to forge alliances (Baylor 2022; Heersink and Lacombe 2023). While LGB people have formed alliances with labor unions, their agendas are not always aligned. For example, labor unions refused to endorse George McGovern in 1972 over LGB inclusion in the Democratic Party (Faderman 2015). LGB organizations have also been criticized for promoting pro-LGB corporations who are anti-union (Proctor et al. 2025). These dynamics suggest that pro-LGB and labor forces may not be aligned in the Democratic Party.

Compared to labor's powerful influence in the Democratic Party, Black Americans and feminists have occupied more marginal positions. I argue that they are more likely to be aligned with LGB people because these groups have constructed themselves as civil rights political constituencies in the party system (Proctor 2022). As a result, I expect that convention delegates with memberships in women's and racial justice organizations and warm attitudes about Black people and feminists will be more likely to be pro-LGB. If that is the case, then pro-LGB forces will be aligned with constituencies who have also been kept off the agenda. Under such conditions, it is more difficult for these actors to push dominant party forces to represent LGB issues because they are pushing their agendas, which do not always include LGB issues (C. J. Cohen 1999; Strolovitch 2007). As a result, LGB issues remain at the margins of the party system.

Next, the candidate support hypothesis allows me to examine whether pro-LGB forces in the Democratic Party supported the candidate who won the primary. I expect that pro-LGB forces will be less likely to align with winning candidates, which reflects their marginal position within the party since the 1980s. By not aligning with winning candidates, pro-LGB forces are not aligned with the interest groups that coalesced to select the winner. Parties have fewer incentives to represent a constituency outside their coalition. Since the Republican Party firmly opposes LGB rights, LGB people are unable to punish the Democratic Party by switching sides, contributing to their marginal position within the two-party system.

The Party Business Hypothesis states that party actors with anti-LGB attitudes will be more likely to prefer sidelining or minimizing issues to win elections. This evidence would demonstrate a linkage between anti-gay attitudes and the formation of the party agenda. One explanation is that anti-gay delegates do not want to address LGB issues because they perceive it as an issue that will lose straight voters and cost the party the White House. Relatedly, delegates may perceive LGB people as having too much influence in the party because their mobilization in the party system has been a longstanding source of political conflict.

Data and research design

I test these hypotheses using seven surveys of delegates to presidential nominating conventions between 1980 and 2012. The data are from the Convention Delegate Study

(CDS), which has been used to examine party incorporation (Wolbrecht 2002). The CDS was conducted after the conventions in presidential election years except 1996 and 2008.³ The CDS data are ideal for examining processes of incorporation because they include measures of membership in organizations, attitudes about politically mobilized groups, candidate support, and preferences for how to conduct party business.

I test the disadvantaged group hypothesis by examining the association between attitudes about party constituencies, delegates' organizational memberships, ideology, and anti-LGB attitudes. This test demonstrates who in the Democratic Party's coalition had pro-LGB and anti-LGB attitudes, which I use as proxies for how receptive dominant and marginalized actors might be about LGB inclusion. I regress ratings of gay men and lesbians on feeling thermometer ratings of Black Americans, labor, and feminists. However, due to changes in the CDS, the 2004 and 2012 models do not include feeling thermometer ratings of Black Americans. Second, I regress ratings of lesbians and gay men on delegates' membership in labor unions, teachers unions, racial justice, and women's organizations. There is also no measure of membership in women's organizations in 2004 and 2012. I overcome this limitation by using a question about membership in liberal advocacy groups, which listed the NOW in the survey protocol. These differences make cross-year comparisons more difficult. Ideology is measured based on delegates' self-placement on a seven-point scale from very liberal to very conservative. I control for delegates' race, a dichotomous measure identifying White and non-White delegates, gender, education, church attendance, and age. The 2000 CDS does not include a measure of age, which was removed for confidentiality. Table A8 in Supplementary Appendix reports the proportion of delegates who are members of unions, racial justice organizations, women's organizations, liberal organizations, and socio-demographic groups. I use ordinary least squares regression for all analysis and all variables are scaled between 0 and 1.

Next, I examine whether pro-LGB forces are aligned with presidential nominees in party primaries. A central claim of contemporary party scholarship is that interest groups use parties to form coalitions that select candidates to advance their interests. Therefore, if pro-LGB forces are "party insiders," they should prefer winning primary candidates. Conversely, if pro-LGB forces are marginal actors or outsiders, then they should be less likely to align with the candidate who won the party primary. I test these expectations by using feeling thermometer ratings of lesbians and gay men to construct a measure of pro-LGB and anti-LGB forces. Following Christina Wolbrecht's (2002) analyses of feminists and anti-feminists using CDS data, I code delegates who reported ratings of 0.7 or higher for gay men and lesbians as 1 and respondents less than 0.7 as 0. Although not a perfect indicator, the variable is a useful proxy for identifying delegates who are plausibly more likely to push for LGB inclusion in the party. I regress support for winning primary candidates on indicators for pro-LGB, feminist, labor, and Black American constituencies as well as ideology, while controlling for race, gender, and age. I then replicate the analysis with measures of membership in women's organizations, unions, racial justice organizations, and liberal advocacy organizations. For 2012, I ran models that include measures of LGBT organization membership.

Finally, the CDS asks delegates about how their political party should conduct party business. Two questions ask about whether the party should downplay issues if it

increases the chances of winning an election and whether the party should minimize disagreements. I use these questions to test the Party Business Hypothesis. I regress support for minimizing disagreements and downplaying issues to win on attitudes about gay men and lesbians and groups in the Democratic Party coalition. The regression models include the same covariates as the previous analyses. If anti-LGB attitudes are associated with support for these strategies, then I can plausibly infer that LGB politics are among the issues that delegates may want to sideline. Since Republicans are steadfast in their opposition to LGB rights, I restrict my analysis to Democratic Party delegates.

Pro-LGB attitudes and representation at Democratic Party conventions

Before proceeding to regression analyses of the CDS, I focus on descriptive dynamics of party change among Democratic Party convention delegates. [Figure 1](#) reports the distribution of lesbian and gay feeling thermometer ratings for each wave of the CDS. From 1980 to 1988, Democratic Party delegates had cold-to-neutral attitudes about gay men and lesbians, as shown by the bimodal distribution of the feeling thermometer scale at 0 and 0.5. Between 1992 and 2004, the average Democratic Party convention delegate had neutral feelings about gay men and lesbians. By 2012, Democratic Party delegates had warmer attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, which is reflected in the emerging left skew of the feeling thermometer distribution in more recent waves of the CDS. These data show a significant shift in pro-LGB attitudes among Democratic delegates over time.

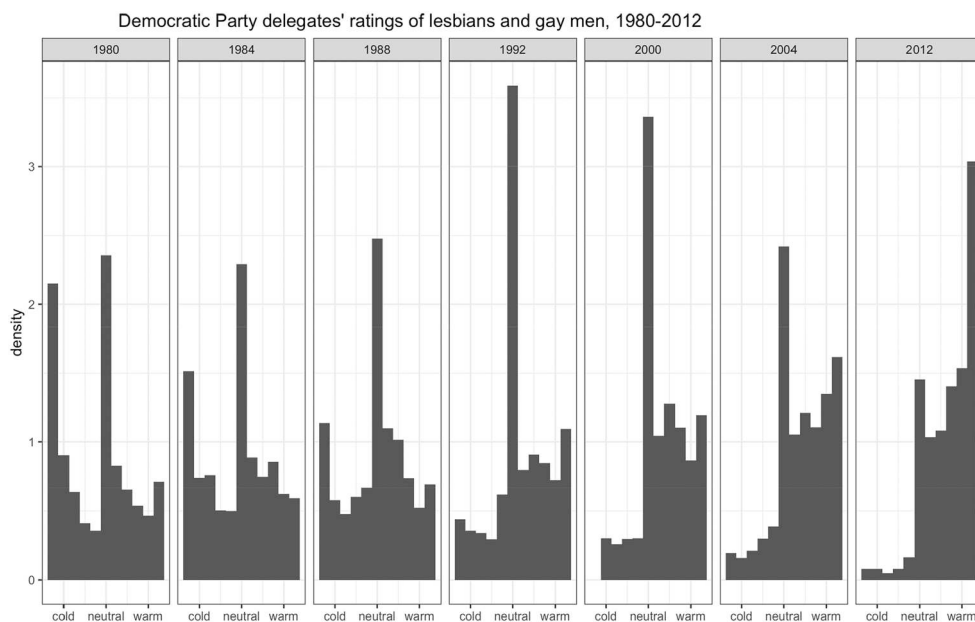


Figure 1. Plot shows the distribution of the feeling thermometer for gay men and lesbians among Democratic Party convention delegates for each survey year in CDS. The y-axis plots the density to facilitate cross-party and year comparisons.

Table 1. Openly LGB delegates to Democratic Party conventions, 1976–2024.

	LGB Delegates
1976	4
1980	76
1984	70
1988	100
1992	91
1996	127
2000	212
2004	255
2008	370
2012	550
2016	633
2020	635
2024	800+

Table 1 reports estimates of openly LGB delegations to Democratic conventions that were reported in LGB media sources. In some years there were conflicting reports about the size of the delegation. Regardless, the estimated delegation size shows substantial change in LGB representation over time. Estimates for more recent delegations are for “LGBT” rather than “LGB” delegates. I use the term LGB for consistency in the manuscript.

In addition to shifting pro-LGB attitudes among Democratic delegates, LGB representation has increased dramatically since the 1970s. **Table 1** reports the number of openly LGB delegates who were reported to have attended Democratic Party conventions from 1976 to 2024. These numbers reflect estimates that were reported in archival materials, particularly LGB newspapers.⁴ The first major shift in representation occurred between 1976 and 1980, when LGB representation increased from 4 to 76 delegates. These changes can be attributed to activist mobilization that pushed the parties to include gay men and lesbians in a campaign called the National Convention Project (Proctor 2022). In the 1980s and 1990s, LGB representation fluctuated between 70 and 127 delegates, reflecting LGB people’s marginal position in the party despite some advances. The LGB delegation approximately doubled in size from 127 to 212 between 1996 and 2000 and more than doubled to 550 between 2000 and 2012. There were more than 600 openly LGB delegates at the 2016 and 2020 conventions and more than 800 in 2024. While the descriptive data extends beyond the years of the CDS data that I will analyze (1980–2012), they reflect the substantial gains in LGB representation over time that have coincided with shifting attitudes among Democratic Party delegates.

Democratic constituencies and anti-LGB attitudes

While descriptive data show a change in attitudes over time, they do not provide insight into variation in anti-LGB attitudes among Democratic Party delegates. In this section, I report results for analyses testing the disadvantaged group hypothesis, which states that delegates with warm attitudes about disadvantaged groups and membership in organizations representing them will be more pro-LGB. **Figure 2** reports coefficients for models that regress ratings of gay men and lesbians on Democratic delegates’ attitudes about party constituencies for each wave of the CDS. It reveals support for the disadvantaged group hypothesis. Among Democratic Party delegates, warm ratings of Black Americans

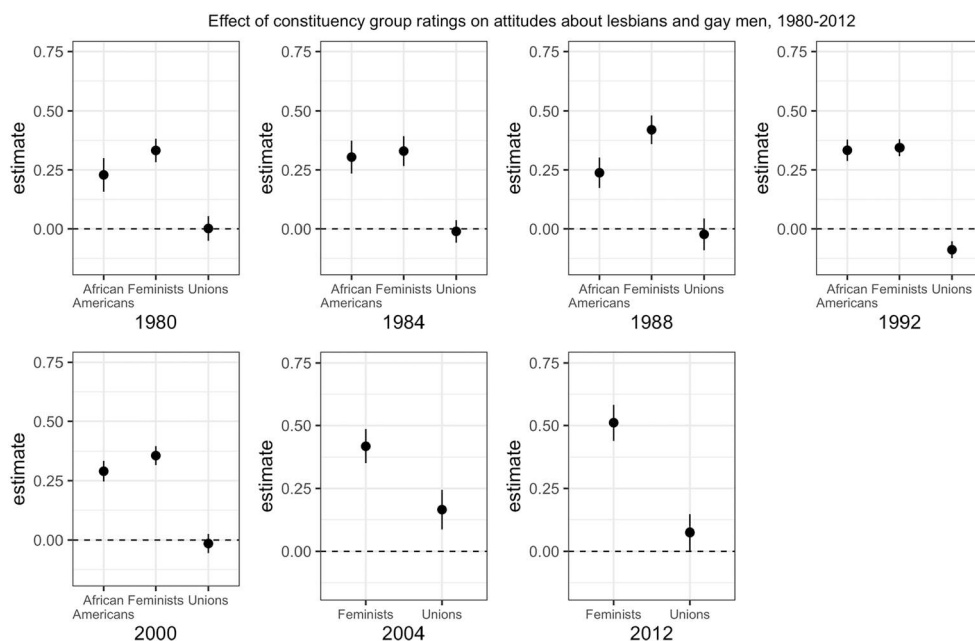


Figure 2. Plots show the association between feeling thermometer ratings for groups in the Democratic Party coalition and gay men and lesbians for each year of CDS data. The point estimates come from an OLS regression that controls for socio-demographics and ideology. The line through each point estimate represents the 90% confidence interval. All variables in the analysis are scaled from 0 to 1.

and feminists are associated with warm ratings of gay men and lesbians. Across all years, the coefficients are positive, large in magnitude, and statistically significant. The association between ratings of Black Americans and ratings of gay men and lesbians ranges from 23 percentage points in 1980 to 33 percentage points in 1992. The results are similar for the association between ratings of feminists and ratings of gay men and lesbians. For a one-unit change on the feminist feeling thermometer, the associated change in ratings of gay men and lesbians ranges from 33 percentage points in 1980 and 1984 to 51 percentage points in 2012. This finding aligns with Christopher Baylor's evidence that feminists were important coalition partners when LGB people sought inclusion in the party. Moreover, it demonstrates how delegates' attitudes about gay men and lesbians were linked to attitudes about other disadvantaged groups.

Figure 2 also reveals limited evidence of an association between ratings of labor unions and ratings of gay men and lesbians. In 1980, 1984, 1988, and 2000, feeling thermometer ratings of unions did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. In 1992, delegates with warm attitudes about unions were more likely to report negative attitudes about gay men and lesbians. However, by 2004, delegates' attitudes about unions and gay men and lesbians were more aligned. In 2004 and 2012, warm ratings of unions were positively associated with warm ratings of gay men and lesbians. A one-unit increase in ratings of unions was associated with a 17-percentage point increase in ratings of gay men and lesbians in 2004 and an 8-percentage point increase in 2012. These findings suggest that pro-LGB attitudes among delegates with favorable attitudes

about unions developed slowly compared to delegates with favorable attitudes about disadvantaged groups.

I find additional support for the disadvantaged group hypothesis in models that regress LGB feeling thermometer ratings on delegates' organizational memberships, ideology, and socio-demographics. Figure 3 plots the regression coefficients for membership in labor unions, teachers' unions, racial justice organizations, and women's organizations. Due to changes in CDS questions in 2004 and 2012, I use liberal group membership rather than membership in a women's organization. Between 1980 and 2000, delegates who were members of racial justice and women's organizations were more likely to have pro-LGB attitudes. In 2004, membership in a liberal or racial justice organization was positively associated with ratings of gay men and lesbians. Figure 3 also reveals that union membership was not associated with pro-LGB attitudes. In 1980, 1984, 2004, and 2012, there was no statistically significant association between union membership and pro-LGB attitudes. In 1988, 1992, and 2000, labor union membership was negatively associated with ratings of gay men and lesbians. In 1988 and 2000, the coefficient for teachers' union membership did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. In 1992, the members of teachers' unions were more likely to give lower ratings to gay men and lesbians. This evidence supports the disadvantaged group hypothesis, demonstrating that delegates with ties to advocacy organizations representing women and racial and ethnic minority groups were more likely to have pro-LGB attitudes, while delegates with ties to powerful party gatekeepers such as unions did not.

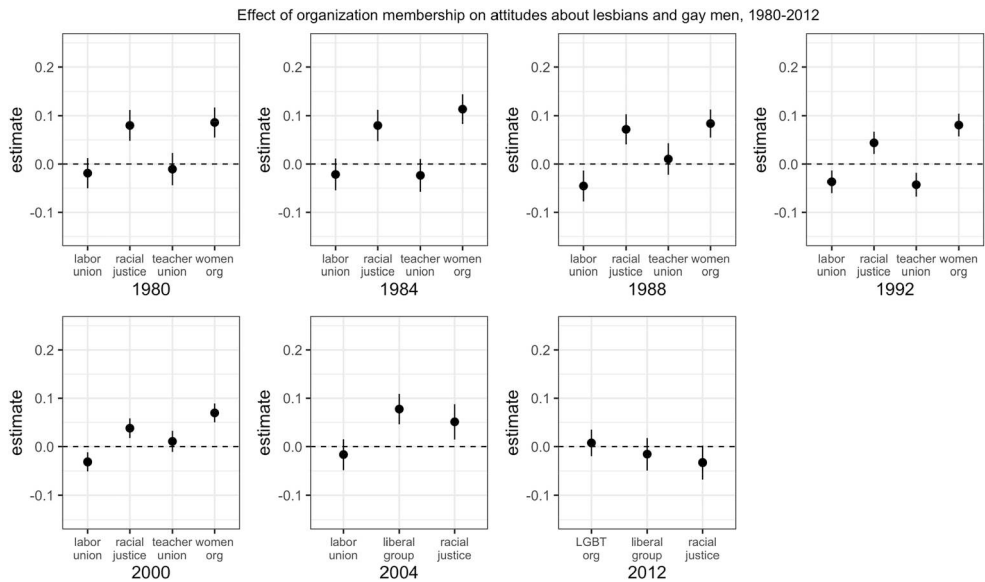


Figure 3. Plots show the association between organizational membership and feeling thermometer ratings among Democratic Party delegates in each year of the CDS. Each variable is a dummy variable representing the difference between delegates who were in an organization (1) and those who were not (0). The point estimates come are from an OLS regression that controls for socio-demographics and ideology. The line through each point estimate represents the 90% confidence interval. All variables in the analysis are scaled from 0 to 1.

Support for primary candidates

Next, I test the candidate support hypothesis by examining whether pro-LGB forces are aligned with dominant party forces on candidate nominations. Scholars argue that parties are coalitions of interest groups that decide to nominate candidates who will advance their agenda. Therefore, it is possible to assess LGB incorporation by examining whether pro-LGB forces in the party supported the primary candidate who became the nominee. If pro-LGB forces preferred losing candidates, then this suggests they are marginal actors in the party coalition relative to those who aligned with the winner.

Figure 4 reports the results for models that regress support for winning primary candidates on attitudinal measures of Democratic constituency groups, ideology, and socio-demographics (see Table A3). Following Wolbrecht (2002), I categorize delegates as pro-LGB, pro-Black, pro-feminist, and pro-union if they rated a group at 0.7 out of 1.0 on the rescaled feeling thermometer. Figure 4 reveals two patterns of intraparty conflict. First, pro-LGB delegates were less likely to support primary winners in 1980, 1984, 1988, and 2000. The measure for pro-LGB forces has a negative, statistically significant association with support for the winning primary candidate. I also calculated the predicted probability of supporting the Democratic primary winner for pro-LGB and anti-LGB forces (see Table A5). The predicted probability that pro-LGB delegates supported the primary winner is less than 50 percent in 1980, 1984, 1988, and 2004. The probability exceeded 50 percent in 1992, 2000, and 2012. Notably, pro-LGB forces were more likely to support winning candidates in election years when Democrats won the White House. In addition, pro-LGB forces were never more likely than anti-LGB forces to

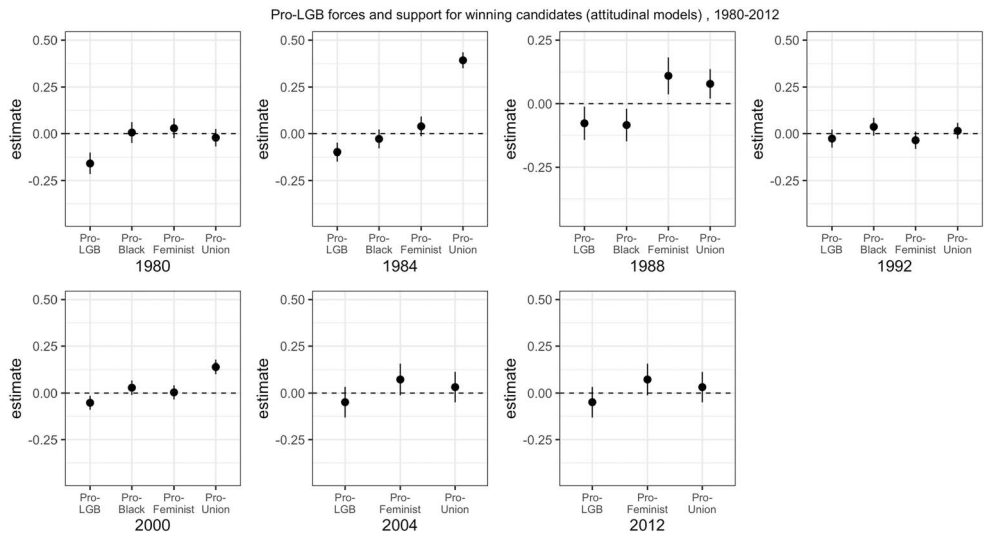


Figure 4. Plots show the association between supporting the winner of the Democratic Party primary constituency factions in each year of the CDS. The independent variables are coded such that delegates who rate a group at 0.7 or greater on the feeling thermometer scale were coded as a 1 and people less than 0.7 were coded as a 0. The point estimates are from an OLS regression that controls for socio-demographics and ideology. The line through each point estimate represents the 90% confidence interval. All variables in the analysis are scaled from 0 to 1.

align with the winning candidate. These results demonstrate LGB people's marginal status within the Democratic Party coalition but also their potential importance in elections that Democrats won.

Second, [Figure 4](#) shows a disjuncture in candidate support between pro-LGB and pro-union forces in the Democratic Party. The pro-union measure is positively associated with supporting the primary winner in 1984, 1988, and 2000. In all other years, the coefficient does not reach statistical significance. Thus, pro-LGB delegates appear to be at odds with a powerful party gatekeeper over candidate alignment. This pattern is also notable because pro-LGB forces were the only constituency who were more likely to align with losing primary candidates. Pro-Black and pro-feminist forces were not less (or more) likely to align with winning candidates. The only exception is the 1988 primary when pro-feminist delegates were more likely to support the winning candidate and pro-Black delegates were less likely to support the winning candidate, likely due to Jesse Jackson's candidacy. Thus, when it comes to candidate nominations, pro-LGB forces were generally not aligned with the preferred candidates of the Democratic Party coalition.

I also tested the candidate support hypothesis with models that include delegates' organizational ties. The results are reported in Table A4 in the supplementary materials. Since there is no measure of involvement in LGB organizations, I use the attitudinal measure identifying pro-LGB delegates alongside membership in unions, racial justice, and women's organizations, except in 2012 which includes a measure of LGB organization membership. I find that pro-LGB forces were less likely to support winning candidates in 1980, 1984, and 1988. In 1992, 2000, 2004, and 2012, the coefficient is negatively associated with candidate support but does not reach statistical significance. On the other hand, delegates from labor unions were more likely to support the winning candidate in 1984, 1988, 2000, and 2004. In 1980 and 1992, labor union members were less likely to support the winning candidate, which differs from the attitudinal analyses. The results are similar for delegates from teachers' unions, who were more likely to support the primary winner in 1980, 1984, 1992, 2000, and 2004. Thus, the organizational models reveal a similar cleavage between union and pro-LGB Democrats.

In sum, I find support for the Candidate Support Hypothesis. Pro-LGB forces in the Democratic Party were less likely to support winning primary candidates and were often at odds with delegates from labor and teachers' unions. This consistent finding demonstrates that LGB people's marginal position within the two-party system was deeply entrenched. Party delegates typically supported candidates who were not preferred by pro-LGB delegates. This evidence reveals that, although LGB groups and labor unions have formed alliances at times ([Baylor 2017](#); [Heersink and Lacombe 2023](#)), it has not translated into rank-and-file organization members aligning with Democratic Party presidential candidates.

Party business and the politics of sexuality

One way that dominant groups maintain power over marginalized groups is through agenda setting that minimizes conflict among the dominant majority. Party elites are incentivized to appeal to dominant groups through the design of American electoral institutions and to use their power to exclude marginalized groups. For example, Democratic Party elites changed delegate selection and other rules in the wake of LGB

mobilization and claims that the party focused too much on the issues of marginalized groups, a stereotype of the Democratic Party that Republicans have promoted since the 1970s (Proctor 2022). These interparty dynamics created intraparty conflict about LGB inclusion and whether to downplay controversial issues in the party. Therefore, I hypothesize that delegates with anti-LGB attitudes will be more likely to support downplaying issues to win elections and minimizing intraparty disagreements. I test the party business hypothesis by regressing delegates' preferences for downplaying issues and minimizing conflict on attitudinal and organizational measures of Democratic constituency groups, ideology, and socio-demographics. As noted previously, some variables change across surveys due to changes in questions.

I find support for the Party Business Hypothesis. Democratic Party delegates with anti-LGB attitudes are more likely to prefer minimizing conflict and downplaying issues. Tables 2 and 3 report the results for attitudinal and organizational models explaining delegates' preferences to downplay issues to win elections. The coefficient for ratings of gay men and lesbians is statistically significant and negatively associated with downplaying issues to win in 1980, 1988, 2004, and 2012 in the attitudinal model and in 1980, 1988, 2000, and 2004 in the organizational model (Tables 2 and 3). In 2012, membership in an LGBT organization was negatively associated with support for downplaying issues to win. Table 2 also shows that attitudes about Black people were negatively associated with support for downplaying issues, which is consistent with previous research (Frymer 1999). In addition, ratings of feminists and labor unions are generally not associated with strategy preferences, although there are some exceptions over time. I find similar evidence in the analysis of minimizing disagreements (Supplementary Appendix

Table 2. Anti-LGB attitudes and support for downplaying issues (attitudinal models).

	Dependent variable					
	1980	1984	1988	2000	2004	2012
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
LG Ratings	−0.08** (0.04)	−0.05 (0.03)	−0.11*** (0.04)	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.13*** (0.04)	−0.09* (0.05)
Feminist Ratings	0.03 (0.04)	0.06 (0.05)	−0.07 (0.05)	−0.03 (0.03)	0.08* (0.04)	0.07 (0.06)
Union Ratings	0.06 (0.04)	0.05 (0.03)	0.002 (0.05)	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.05)	−0.11** (0.05)
African American Ratings	−0.01 (0.06)	−0.13*** (0.05)	0.02 (0.05)	−0.05* (0.03)		
Ideology	0.28*** (0.06)	0.16*** (0.06)	0.12* (0.06)	0.10*** (0.03)	0.30*** (0.06)	0.13** (0.06)
People of Color	−0.06*** (0.02)	−0.08*** (0.02)	−0.18*** (0.02)	−0.04*** (0.01)	−0.02 (0.02)	−0.05*** (0.02)
Age	−0.03 (0.05)	0.01 (0.01)	0.001 (0.01)		0.001 (0.001)	−0.001 (0.001)
Women	−0.07*** (0.02)	−0.07*** (0.02)	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.04*** (0.01)	−0.07*** (0.02)	−0.06*** (0.02)
Constant	0.47*** (0.07)	0.65*** (0.06)	0.72*** (0.07)	0.74*** (0.03)	0.60*** (0.07)	0.79*** (0.07)
Observations	1,222	1,329	1,129	1,704	548	529
R ²	0.06	0.06	0.10	0.06	0.13	0.08
Adjusted R ²	0.05	0.05	0.09	0.06	0.11	0.06

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 3. Anti-LGB attitudes and support for downplaying issues (organizational models).

	Dependent variable					
	1980	1984	1988	2000	2004	2012
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
LG Ratings	-0.11*** (0.04)	-0.04 (0.03)	-0.15*** (0.04)	-0.06*** (0.02)	-0.09** (0.04)	
Women's Org	0.01 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)		
Labor Union	-0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.02 (0.02)	
LGBT Org						-0.06*** (0.02)
Teacher Union	0.02 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	0.002 (0.01)		-0.01 (0.02)
Racial Justice	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Liberal Org					-0.01 (0.02)	0.0004 (0.02)
Ideology	0.20*** (0.06)	0.18*** (0.06)	0.11* (0.06)	0.11*** (0.03)	0.27*** (0.06)	0.16*** (0.05)
People of Color	-0.08*** (0.03)	-0.08*** (0.03)	-0.18*** (0.03)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.06*** (0.02)
Age	-0.03 (0.05)	0.01* (0.01)	0.001 (0.01)		0.0005 (0.001)	-0.001* (0.001)
Women	-0.07*** (0.02)	-0.08*** (0.02)	-0.04** (0.02)	-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.02)	-0.06*** (0.01)
Constant	0.57*** (0.05)	0.58*** (0.04)	0.71*** (0.05)	0.69*** (0.02)	0.66*** (0.05)	0.71*** (0.04)
Observations	1,078	1,165	1,081	1,636	551	615
R ²	0.06	0.05	0.10	0.06	0.12	0.09
Adjusted R ²	0.06	0.04	0.09	0.06	0.11	0.07

Note: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Tables A6 and A7). These analyses show that Democratic delegates with anti-LGB and anti-Black attitudes were more likely to support downplaying issues to win.

Although the party business measures do not mention lesbian and gay issues, negative attitudes about gay men and lesbians and Black people were the only measures consistently associated with support for minimizing disagreements. Thus, the marginal position of LGB and Black people in the two-party system can be linked to the correlation between delegates' negative group attitudes and their preferences for how to conduct party business. On the other hand, Tables A6 and A7 show that delegates who give warm ratings to entrenched constituencies, such as labor, prefer minimizing disagreements. Thus, the results demonstrate that the divisions between pro-LGB and pro-union forces extend beyond candidate alignment to preferences about how the Democratic Party should conduct party business.

Ideology and LGB incorporation

Finally, I examine the role of ideology as an explanation for LGB people's marginal position in the Democratic Party. The Republican Party's electoral dominance after the 1980 election led to conservatism supplanting liberalism as a dominant political order (Skowronek 2008). The Republican Party has also effectively constructed LGB people as a liberal "special interest group," shaping the Democratic Party's slow embrace of LGB issues (Proctor 2022). Existing work classifies cultural liberals as a distinct faction

among Democratic delegates, who give warmer attitudes to feminists and gay men and lesbians (Conger et al. 2019). These interparty dynamics create incentives for conservative and moderate Democratic delegates to align with different candidates than liberals and to prefer downplaying issues to win elections. In addition, conservative delegates should be less pro-LGB.

Across all the hypotheses that I tested, the results reveal that ideology is an important covariate associated with the dynamics of intraparty conflict regarding LGB incorporation into the Democratic Party. First, Tables A1 and A2 show that ideology is negatively associated with ratings of gay men and lesbians in all attitudinal and organizational models between 1980 and 2012. Since ideology is coded from very liberal (0) to very conservative (1), the negative association means that conservative Democratic delegates are more likely to have anti-LGB attitudes. Thus, the analyses show a robust, enduring relationship between the ideology of Democratic Party delegates' and anti-LGB attitudes.

The relationship between ideology and support for winning candidates is less robust. In attitudinal models of candidate support, ideology is positively associated with support for Jimmy Carter in 1980, Bill Clinton in 1992, and Al Gore in 2000 (see Table A3). This means that conservative Democratic delegates were more likely to align behind Carter, Clinton, and Gore than liberal delegates. The coefficient is not statistically significant in 1984, 1988, 2004, or 2012 and the direction of the coefficient varies by year. The organizational models are substantively similar (see Table A4). Conservatives were more likely to support Carter and Clinton. In 1988, conservatives were less likely than liberals to support Michael Dukakis. Thus, pro-LGB forces were less likely to support winning candidates between 1980 and 2012 independent of delegate ideology.

Tables 2 and 3 also show that ideology has a positive association with support for downplaying issues to win and that this relationship endures across time. Conservative Democratic Party delegates are more likely than liberal delegates to support downplaying issues to win. The results for minimizing disagreements in the party are statistically and substantively similar (see Tables A6 and A7). In sum, ideology is an important covariate that explains variation in anti-LGB attitudes among Democratic Party delegates and structures their attitudes about how the party should conduct business. At the same time, however, the CDS demonstrates that anti-LGB attitudes are independently associated with support for winning candidates and strategy preferences. These differences reveal that ideology is not the only measure that explains the slow incorporation of LGB people into the Democratic.

Discussion and conclusion

I have shown how dynamics at presidential nominating conventions have contributed to the marginal of LGB people in American political parties between 1980 and 2012. The evidence demonstrated that delegates with positive attitudes about Black people and feminists and membership in racial justice and women's organizations were more likely to be pro-LGB, reflecting the development of a civil rights cleavage within the Democratic Party. The development of a civil rights cleavage extends to contemporary politics with studies showing that LGB, Black, and Asian Members of Congress are gender identity inclusive policy entrepreneurs advocating for transgender rights (Angevine and Garcia 2025). Conversely, I find limited evidence that pro-union attitudes or union

membership are associated with pro-LGB attitudes, which suggests that LGB incorporation was not driven by support from labor. These findings diverge from studies that show alliances with labor are critical to gaining access to the Democratic Party (Wolbrecht 2002; Schickler 2016; Baylor 2017). Moreover, like David Karol (2023), I conclude that party incorporation in the LGB case is distinctive. Since LGB people depend on less powerful allies, the party system operates as a power structure in which marginalized constituencies must support each other while also fighting for representation. The constellation of alignment in the party system – especially the absence of a sexuality-class alignment – pushes LGB people to the margins of the party system.

Second, I found support for the candidate support hypothesis. Pro-LGB forces were less likely to support winning Democratic primary candidates. By aligning with losing candidates, LGB issues are less likely to be represented by party nominees, who might be less willing to represent constituencies that do not support them. These findings depart from previous explanations of LGB incorporation, which identify linkages to labor unions and refer to lesbians and gay men as an anchor group (Schlozman 2015; Baylor 2017). One possible explanation for these differences is that the positions taken by organizations differ from the attitudes of rank-and-file members who wield influence at conventions. As a result, despite support from union organizations, pro-LGB forces and labor often supported different primary candidates. These findings are in productive conversation with studies that show alliance between unions and feminists and unions and LGB people have been motivated by a “strategic need to defeat common enemies” (Baylor 2022, 75) rather than shared ideological commitments (Heersink and Lacombe 2023). While Baylor (2022) shows that teachers’ unions emerged as allies of LGB people via feminists, this research demonstrates that LGB-labor alignments, including with teachers’ unions, are more tenuous when it comes to candidate nominations. These differences emerge despite the fact that teachers’ and services unions, which are more inclusive of LGB issues, have emerged as powerful actors while the influence of manufacturing unions has declined (Baylor 2022; Proctor et al. 2025). Future research should further examine the contours of alignment between LGB and labor politics.

Third, I found support for the party business hypothesis. Democratic Party delegates with anti-LGB attitudes are more likely to support downplaying issues and minimizing disagreements to win. The association between these measures was deeply entrenched between 1980 and 2012. In addition, the association between negative group attitudes and downplaying issues to win is only observed for anti-LGB attitudes. On the other hand, pro-labor attitudes are positively associated with support for minimizing disagreements. Thus, although the strategy questions do not specify which issues to downplay or minimize, cross-group differences suggest that the politics of sexuality are likely central considerations. These findings demonstrate that LGB and labor forces were often working in opposition, reflecting the absence of a sexuality-class alignment. I speculate that these differences are outcomes of incentives to avoid conflict, which are created by the design of American electoral institutions.

A major limitation of this study is that the CDS surveys end in 2012. Since then, the Democratic Party’s representation of LGB people has significantly improved. Democratic presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden were instrumental in improving LGB representation and inclusion in the Democratic Party. Presidents Clinton, Obama, and Biden were responsible for appointing sympathetic judges who have ruled in favor of LGB

issues. Democrats in Congress also passed legislation to repeal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” which was signed by Barack Obama. Relatedly, the Obama administration did not defend the Defense of Marriage Act, which was eventually ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 2013. In 2022, Democrats – with the support of several Republicans – codified gay marriage through the Respect for Marriage Act. The legislation was signed by Joe Biden. Democrats have also been instrumental in passing pro-LGB legislation at the state level, which has been especially important due to ongoing attacks from Republicans. One exception to these trends is the absence of federal nondiscrimination legislation, which has failed to pass Congress since the 1970s – including when Democrats have held Congress and the White House. In addition, Donald Trump’s and Republicans’ attacks on LGB people – as well as transgender people – may lead Democrats to abandon the LGBT community and downplay their visibility. As a result, future research must examine how the Democratic Party responds to rising authoritarianism and its connection to anti-LGBT politics.

Notes

1. Intraparty conflict regarding conventions extends beyond the formal convention to delegate selection processes during primaries. Since the 1970s, the selection of presidential nominees has shifted from convention halls to state-level primaries. Although this is the case, delegates are still linked to primary candidates and must be selected by the candidate and/or voters. The candidates’ performances determine which delegates are selected to attend the convention, which shapes the composition of the delegates who decide on party business beyond the candidate nomination. For these reasons, interest groups attempt to influence delegate selection.
2. There were a few openly lesbian and gay delegates at the 1972 and 1976 conventions. Activist coordination, however, started with the 1980 primary as part of the National Convention Project – a bipartisan campaign for inclusion in the party system.
3. Data are publicly available through the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan.
4. Recent estimates include transgender delegates. I use the term LGB for consistency, although counts include transgender people. See: “Biden Hailed as Proven and Effective.” *Gay and Lesbian Times*, no. 1079, August 28, 2008, pp. 16+. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, link.gale.com/apps/doc/ZTNTJO397140623/AHSI?u=chicrbw&sid=bookmark-AHSI. Accessed April 15, 2025.; Wockner, Rex. “Democratic Convention Abounds with Gay Leaders, Themes.” *Gay and Lesbian Times*, no. 661, August 24, 2000, pp. 24+. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, link.gale.com/apps/doc/JINZDB755097379/AHSI?u=chicrbw&sid=bookmark-AHSI. Accessed April 15, 2025.; Dahir, Mubarak. “Gay Democrats Want Visibility and Representation.” *Update*, August 10, 2000, p. 12. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, link.gale.com/apps/doc/KXHRPG926645350/AHSI?u=chicrbw&sid=bookmark-AHSI. Accessed April 15, 2025.; “Election 88.” *Gaze*, vol. 9, no. 7, July–August, 1988, p. 6. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, link.gale.com/apps/doc/MTHUQK743397667/AHSI?u=chicrbw&sid=bookmark-AHSI. Accessed 15 Apr. 2025.; “100 Gay Delegates to Demo Convention.” *Update*, July 13, 1988, p. 3. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, link.gale.com/apps/doc/BKFLPO405099246/AHSI?u=chicrbw&sid=bookmark-AHSI. Accessed April 15, 2025.; “100 Gay Delegates to Demo Convention.” *Update*, July 13, 1988, p. 3. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, link.gale.com/apps/doc/BKFLPO405099246/AHSI?u=chicrbw&sid=bookmark-AHSI. Accessed April 15, 2025. <https://www.washingtonblade.com/2020/08/19/lgbtq-delegates-at-democratic-convention-want-to-do-more-than-beat-trump/>; <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2024/08/21/lgbtq-delegates-talk-about-election-stakes-amidst-dnc/>

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