

Predicting electoral activism among gays and lesbians in the United States

Eric Swank¹, Breanne Fahs²

¹Department of Sociology, Social Work and Criminology, Morehead State University

²Women and Gender Studies Program, Arizona State University

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Eric Swank, 311 Rader Hall, Morehead, KY 40351, USA.
E-mail: e.swank@morehead-st.edu

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Abstract

Although battles over gay and lesbian rights have appeared prominently in political arenas, scholars have created few empirical studies on gay and lesbian activism. To address this absence, this quantitative study identified factors that inspired greater electoral engagement among gays and lesbians in the United States ($n = 285$). After integrating “resource,” “mobilizing,” and “framing” variables into regressions, this study found that electoral activism was inspired by many sorts of motivators. In sum, activist tendencies were swayed by educational levels, perceptions of political potency, a desire to conceal sexual orientations, surviving hate crimes, and joining certain political groups. Interestingly, this study supported “new social movement” theories that downplay economic factors as predictors of involvement in gay and lesbian rights campaigns.

Introduction

Discrimination against gays and lesbians takes many forms. In its crudest terms, homophobia manifests itself through instances of physical violence and a language that chastises and belittles both homosexuality and non-normative gender behavior. In slightly subtler terms, heteronormativity leads a long list of insidious practices that privileges heterosexuality. Whether via the lack of legal marital rights, or the assumption that everybody is and must be completely heterosexual, gays and lesbians often endure hostile environments that monitor and penalize homosexual behavior in the United States. To minimize negative social sanctions, some gays and lesbians may try to deny or hide their sexual identity to themselves and others. Some gays and lesbians may personally accept their sexual identity but resign themselves to quietly enduring social injustices. Others may try to minimize homophobia by presenting an image that pleases the expectations of heterosexual audiences. This assimilation approach argues that gays and lesbians can win acceptance from a skeptical majority if they downplay mannerisms that are considered “strange” and “peculiar” to heterosexual sensibilities. While social stigmas may be managed by hiding one’s sexual identity, being politically acquiescent, or offering “sensible” or “assuaging” personas, other gays and lesbians may contest the basis of their subordination. This may occur in several ways: Gays and les-

biens may enact hidden resistances that covertly defy heterosexual privilege; they may individually dispute heterosexist comments or use legal means to correct inequities; or they may initiate social movements that contest institutional practices (Scott, 1990).

Collective efforts at ending heterosexism can take many forms (Bernstein, 1997; Smith & Haider-Markel, 2002; Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Segments of the gay and lesbian rights movement focus on transforming the social customs and worldviews of others. In doing so, some sections of the gay and lesbian rights movement attempt to reinterpret cultural practices by normalizing same-sex relationships and deconstructing the justifications of heterosexism and compulsory heterosexuality (among other things). Other wings of the gay and lesbian rights movement focus on improving governmental laws, policies, and regulations. This “state-centered” approach emphasizes the expansion of rights and statutory protections through the use of “insider” and “outsider” political tactics. When choosing tactics in light of evolving political opportunities, “insider” and “electoral” tactics embody the more conventional and institutionalized modes of voting, lobbying, and campaign contributions. Alternatively, the “outsider” tactics of protests, strikes, and boycotts try to force concessions through more disruptive and less institutionalized ways (Jenkins & Klandermans, 1995).

With an individual unit of analysis, this paper investigates the use of insider tactics for gays and lesbians in the United States. By exploring the topic of electoral participation, we asked, how often, and in what circumstances, have gays and lesbians voted and lobbied politicians on the behalf of gay and lesbian rights? The explanatory scope of this study centers on the factors that inspire or hinder greater levels of political activism. Because there is a shortage of studies on this topic, we mostly utilized universal models of political participation when selecting our independent variables.

The much-cited “resource” model of political science guided this analysis (Brady, Verba, & Scholzman, 1995) as did the sociological theories of “mobilization structures” (McAdam & Paulsen, 1993; McCarthy, 1996; Passy, 2001) and “collective action frames” (Gamson, 1992; Klandermans, 1997; Snow & Benford, 1992). However, this work also used the initial empirical literature on voting activities among sexual minorities (Bailey, 1998; Egan, Edelman & Sherrill, 2008; Hertzog, 1996; Lewis, Rogers, & Sherrill, 2011; Swank & Fahs, 2011; Waldner, 2001), people who protest for gay or transgender rights (Friedman & Leaper, 2010; Lombardi, 1999; Simon et al., 1998; Taylor, Kimport, Van Dyke & Andersen, 2009) and individuals who joined AIDS advocacy groups (Elbaz, 1996; Jennings & Andersen, 2003; Rollins & Hirsch, 2003).

Literature review

To assemble our theoretical model, we began with the much-cited “resource-model” of political participation (Brady et al., 1995). Offering a succinct answer to why people refrain from politics, the resource model asserts “because they can’t, because they don’t want to, or because nobody asked” (Brady et al., 1995, p. 271). With regard to “they can’t,” many people refrain from politics because of a supposed dearth of necessary resources to be political. While crucial resources may come in many forms, these authors emphasize the importance of financial situations, free time, and civic skills. The predicament of “they don’t want to” deals with a lack of psychological interest in politics. An indifference to politics and policy is sometimes belied as stupidity or indolence, but the resource model assumes that blasé attitudes are a reaction to a lower sense of political efficacy or greater levels of individualism. For this study, politics may lack salience to gays and lesbians when they think that politicians ignore lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) communities or when gay and lesbian individuals do not think they share a common destiny with other sexual minorities. Finally, the “nobody asked” factor implies that people are isolated from the recruitment networks that move citizens into action. That is, lower levels of activism may be a result of existing in social contexts that fail to transmit the necessary values and information that make activism probable.

“They can’t”: the role of income, education, and status hierarchies

Every society has an unequal distribution of wealth, prestige, and power. This unequal allocation of resources creates aggregates of people—social classes—who share similar amounts of income and life opportunities. The resource model assumes these class and status hierarchies are fundamental to political inclinations and activism (Brady et al., 1995; Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998; Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999; Lim, 2008; McClurg, 2003; Timpone, 1998). Socioeconomic standing is a universal variable that drives political participation tendencies for members of every social group in society (i.e., socioeconomic status works across race, gender, religious, or sexual orientation boundaries). In the simplest of terms, a person’s class location grants or impedes access to opportunities and financial resources that make political activism easier. Consequently, people in higher socioeconomic levels amass and retain the structural elicitors of activism, be it more money, wider educational opportunities, greater amounts of free time, or more chances to lead people in day-to-day scenarios. Conversely, Zipp, Landerman, and Luebke (1982) argues that economically disenfranchised individuals suffer the opposite plight: “Due to less education, more restricted occupation-related learning experiences, greater social isolation, and higher alienation, lower status persons are less interested in politics, are less aware of the need for or possible benefits of participation, feel less politically efficacious, less often possess those social and political skills, and have less time, money, and energy to expend in political participation” (p. 1141).

Studies of the general population often find greater affluence linked to greater electoral activism (Brady et al., 1995; Harder & Krosnick, 2008; Leighley & Vedlitz, 1999; Timpone, 1998). However, these results are less consistent in studies of gay and lesbian activism. One study found that transsexuals who were employed in professional occupations were more involved in political campaigns than their blue-collar counterparts (Lombardi, 1999) and other studies suggested that higher income gays and lesbians attended more demonstrations for the recognition of same-sex marriages (Taylor, Kimport, Van Dyke, & Andersen, 2009) and funding for AIDS issues (Jennings & Andersen, 2003). A more recent article added that richer lesbians and gays were more likely to vote for liberal presidential candidates than poorer sexual minorities (Lewis et al., 2011). Conversely, income did not predict voting tendencies (Bailey, 1998) nor the amount of involvement in gay and lesbian and AIDS rights groups (Elbaz, 1996; Sturmer & Simon, 2004). Finally, one study revealed an inverse relationship as it contended that it was poorer, rather than richer, gays and lesbians who joined Queer Nation and ACT UP (Rollins & Hirsch, 2003).

The role of education was also unclear. One study found that college educated sexual minorities gave more money to political candidates than lesbians and gays with high school degrees (Swank & Fahs, 2011) and two studies have suggested that ACT UP members were highly educated (Elbaz, 1996; Rollins & Hirsch, 2003). Conversely, four other studies claimed that educational attainment did not differentiate the amount of political activism among gays and lesbians (Lewis et al., 2011; Lombardi, 1999; Sturmer & Simon, 2004; Waldner, 2001).

The role of gender hierarchies for political participation is far from certain in studies of the U.S. populace. Older studies suggested that heterosexual women, from the beginning of enfranchisement to the 1950s, have been slightly less inclined than heterosexual men to be politically active. Conversely, newer studies have suggested that this gender gap disappeared or had even reversed in the years that followed the second wave of the women's movement (Harder & Krosnick, 2008; Hritzuk & Park, 2000; Leighley & Nagler, 1992; Timpone, 1998). To add to the confusion, a recent study suggested that women were more likely to vote in elections and sign petitions but were less likely to write a politician or join a protest (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010).

Inconsistent gender effects are mostly echoed in the studies of gay and lesbian political engagement. One study argued that lesbians voted more for lesbian political candidates (Hertzog, 1996) while another suggested that lesbians wore more political buttons (Herek, Norton, Allen, & Sims, 2010). Further, gay men wrote more letters to politicians (Herek et al., 2010) and made larger financial contributions to political candidates than lesbians (Herek et al., 2010; Swank & Fahs, 2011). Other studies contend that the frequency of political activism was roughly the same with gays and lesbians (Bailey, 1998; Jennings & Andersen, 2003; Lewis et al., 2011; Rollins & Hirsch, 2003; Taylor et al., 2009; Waldner, 2001).

"They don't want to": framing grievances, efficacy, and collective identities

Frames are generally conceived as cultural tools or schemas that provide "tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters" (Gitlin, 1980, p. 6). While frames help with the classification and organization of incoming stimuli, they also serve a political role of sanctioning or challenging the status quo. Conventional frames acquire the consent of the less powerful by portraying the social order as proper, normal, and inevitable. By seeking widespread conformity, mainstream narratives get people to subscribe to values, ideals, and self-definitions that bind them to their location in the prevailing power structure. While conservative frames prioritize deference to conventional standards, collective action frames do the exact opposite, as they motivate people into joining collective efforts that publicly seek social change. Doug McAdam (1999)

wrote: "Mediating between opportunity, organization, and action are the shared meanings and cultural understandings—including a shared collective identity—that people bring to an instance of incipient contention" (p. 5).

Movement theorists have identified four dimensions of collective action frames (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Gamson, 1992; Klandermans, 1997; Lavine et al., 1999; Miller, Gurin, Gurin, & Malanchuk, 1981; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). First, collective action frames initially render some societal norms as wrong, unacceptable and unjust. By naming the injustice, Snow and Benford (1992) suggested these frames serve as "accenting devices that either underscore or embellish the seriousness and injustice of a social condition or redefines it as unjust immoral" (p. 137). These injustice frames can highlight many sorts of maltreatments but they often generate greater salience when they focus on violations of fairness or equity norms. Injustices seem worse or viler when dominant groups seem to benefit at the expense of innocent victims. Second, frames identify the causes of the injustice. By providing a diagnostic function, frames are etiologies that explain why problems exist and assign levels of blame or capability to different entities. By making these attributions, frames draw attention to the sources of social ills and highlight the practices that should be modified, transformed, or eliminated.

Third, frames also convince bystanders that they should use political tactics to stop these violations. These prognostic aspects of frames usually emphasize the urgency of political action and a sense that challenges from less powerful constituencies can force concessions from a reluctant target (this confidence in movement tactics is sometimes called "agency" or a "sense of collective efficacy"). In short, in order to be effective, collective action frames must assure gays and lesbians that electoral or protest movements are a proper and viable response to their grievances. Finally, frames must provide a collective identity among the aggrieved. In doing so, collective identities establish social boundaries of "us" and "them" by specifying who belongs to the righteous in-group of the mistreated and who exemplifies the antagonistic wrongdoers who must be challenged. These collective identities often contest and refute societal claims that members of their group are inferior, worthless, sick, or maladjusted. Instead, collective action frames offer narratives about the virtues of similar people and they suggest that their group is illegitimately threatened, deprived, or treated badly. These collective identities enhance a sense of solidarity and loyalty for the people who share the same problems, while simultaneously fostering some distrust or contempt for the people or institutions that maintain these problems. It is the goal of this paper to ascertain the sort of injustice, attributional, prognostic, and collective identity frames that precede electoral efforts at social change.

Perceptions of injustices may or may not be related to personal experiences of discrimination and prejudice. In many cases, gay and lesbians may become aware of heterosexism by observing or hearing about the mistreatment of other LGB people (Evans & Herriott, 2004; Hartman, 2005; Russell & McGuire, 2008). In other cases, enduring personal experiences of discrimination can delegitimize conventional norms and lead to an oppositional consciousness that challenges the status quo. The circumscribed, face-to-face nature of experienced discrimination makes it more proximal and salient than institutionalized forms of biases. This immediacy may create impulses to challenge this hardship, yet these impulses may be curbed or suppressed since heterosexism insists that gays and lesbians should be passive, accommodating, silent, or self-hating. This combination of suppression and discrimination can foster a number of detrimental coping mechanisms such as disengagement (Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004), withdrawal or avoidance (Thompson, 2006), greater suicide and drug risk (Mays & Cochran, 2001), dangerous sexual practices (Wilson & Yoshikawa, 2004), and stigmatizing others (Swim & Thomas, 2006).

Although surviving discrimination can lead to negative consequences, cases of first-hand discrimination seem equally important to gay and lesbian activism (Duncan, 1999; Hyers, 2007; Jennings & Andersen, 2003; Taylor et al., 2009; Waldner, 2001). Two studies on AIDS activism found that gay men were more likely to protest governmental policies when they were demeaned by the medical professionals (Jennings & Andersen, 2003; Tester, 2004). Gays and lesbians who dealt with sexual and verbal harassment, or discrimination in housing and employment, were more likely to accept the sort of queer identity that leads to joining radical gay and lesbian rights groups (Friedman & Leaper, 2010; Rollins & Hirsch, 2003; Simon et al., 1998; Waldner, 2001). Moreover, the act of surviving deliberate and overt forms of homophobia remained statistically significant even when researchers controlled for contextual and framing influences (Simon et al., 1998; Waldner, 2001).

Efficacy perceptions are sometimes related to the protesting inclinations of gays and lesbians (Hertzog, 1996; Jennings & Andersen, 2003; Jones, 2002; Swank & Fahs, 2011). For example, Jennings and Andersen (2003) suggested that gay men were more likely to join AIDS advocacy groups when they thought they had a good understanding of political issues. However, perceptions of political efficacy were irrelevant to how often married gays and lesbians joined gay and lesbian right groups or attended a political demonstration (Taylor et al., 2009) and the only quantitative study of gay and lesbian electoral activism noted that "power expectancies" worked in the exact opposite ways as predicted (Waldner, 2001). That is, gays and lesbians were more likely to join a gay and lesbian political campaign when they thought the government was unresponsive to gay or lesbian demands. As

such, confidence in one's political competencies might have different effects than confidence in a groups' ability to change institutional practices.

Issues of concealing one's identity and "passing-as-straight" are inevitably linked to gay and lesbian rights activism. Within a movement that tries to "gain the recognition for new social identities," the very act of being "out" challenges the veracity of compulsorily heterosexuality (Bernstein, 1997). For individuals, public acknowledgments of sexual identities are often crafted through a complicated set of disclosures practices. Some sexual minorities may feel comfortable revealing their sexual identity in most settings while others may only hint at their sexual identity to a few confidants or nobody at all. Disclosures of sexuality are often strategic, and the explicit assertion of a gay or lesbian identity implies that some aspects of the internalized heteronormativity have been ignored. Finally, the person who willingly discloses a stigmatized identity in potentially risky situations often feels more entitled to demand more rights for gays and lesbians.

Accordingly, identities can be tools of political empowerment. Several studies have discovered greater political involvement among gays and lesbians who are more public about their sexual identity (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Lewis et al., 2011; Waldner, 2001). However, one study warned that the significant relationship between joining a gay and lesbian rights demonstration and disguising a gay or lesbian orientation disappeared when they moved from a bivariate to multivariate analysis (Simon et al., 1998). To address activist identities, a study of college students revealed that lesbians were more inclined to assertively challenge homophobic comments when they embraced the activists norms of "standing up for what's right" and defending the rights of subordinated groups (Hyers, 2007). When addressing activist inclinations, gays and lesbians were more interested in political activism after they fully committed to their sexual identity (Konik & Stewart, 2004), paid attention to policies that effect lesbians and gays (Lewis et al., 2011), or felt solidarity with other sexual minorities (Friedman & Leaper, 2010). In terms of political behaviors, Herek et al. (2010) discovered that sexual minorities who were convinced of their sexuality were more likely to contact a government official or give money to a political candidate, while Rollins and Hirsch (2003) found that people who called themselves "queer" were more likely to join AIDS advocacy groups.

"Nobody asked": belonging to straight and gay civic groups

Theories about "mobilizing structures" suggest that residing in certain social environments fostered greater political activism (Lim, 2008; McAdam & Paulsen, 1993; McCarthy, 1996; Passy, 2001; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Timpone, 1998). Social

networks, which represent webs of recurring interactions between people and groups, always conveys some sort of beliefs, values, norms, and identities. While the content of networks is filtered through a complicated interpretive process, most people derive their worldviews and identities from their immersion in contexts that praise prevailing social orders and dismiss the worth of minority groups. However, some networks transmit collective action frames that contest conventional social scripts and suggest political challenges are necessary, important, and worthwhile. While the communication between network partners can inspire activist inclinations, such exchanges can also draw people into specific political mobilizations (Harder & Krosnick, 2008; Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998; McClurg, 2003). Political parties, committed partisans, and movement activists often try to motivate activism through different persuasive techniques (e.g., face-to-face conversations, phone calls, email, direct mail, etc.). While each of these recruitment mediums transforms some sympathetic bystanders into activists, budding activists are more likely to act on their political predispositions when encouraged or asked to be active by someone who they personally know (Hritzuk & Park, 2000; Lim, 2008; McClurg, 2003). As such, social networks seem to play the dual purpose of pushing and pulling people into political activism. In effect, social networks boost political engagement since they often convey the attitudes that make people prone or receptive to activism and they also disseminate the logistical information that makes activism possible.

For studies of gay and lesbian activism the concept of social network immersion works has been measured via network size, network density, and types of group affiliations (Elbaz, 1996; Lombardi, 1999; Waldner, 2001). Some studies have found that gays and lesbians who routinely talked with other gays and lesbians were more politically active (Lombardi, 1999; Tester, 2004). Similarly being active in the lesbian and gay community lead to greater voting for liberal political candidates (Lewis et al., 2011) and being contacted by the Democratic political party increased the likelihood of voting for a lesbian candidate (Hertzog, 1996). Other studies suggest that membership in specific voluntary groups matters even more (Duncan, 1999). This is based on the premise that civic groups inspire more activism since they provide wider access to relevant information and have a higher concentration of friends who expect high levels of community engagement (Hritzuk & Park, 2000; Lim, 2008; Timpone, 1998). While joining a gay athletic club or a gay friendly church may sensitize participants about shared grievances and enhance group solidarity, theorists have often argued that the gay and lesbian community centers are the strongest engines of cognitive liberation (Bernstein, 1997). While LGB centers provide access to psychological and educational resources, they also introduce political rookies to explicitly political networks (e.g., consciousness-raising groups and national gay and lesbian

rights groups that block recruit at their functions). In turn, this integration into LGB centers seems to translate into greater political activism (Elbaz, 1996; Lombardi, 1999; Waldner, 2001). In fact, the best predictor of gay and lesbian activism is membership in LGB groups (Lombardi, 1999; Swank & Fahs, 2011; Waldner, 2001).

To turn this literature into a testable theoretical model, this study examined how resource, framing, and mobilizing variables predicted an individual's use of electoral tactics to further gay and lesbian rights. By applying the seven variables of family income, education, gender, hate crime victimization, gay or lesbian identities, perceptions of efficacy, and group membership to the data from an online survey, the following analysis identified factors that distinguished gays and lesbians who were more or less active in electoral processes.

Methods

Participants

This online study drew on a sample of 285 women and men from throughout the United States (December 2007), though centering primarily in the Mid-South and Midwestern states. Online surveys are often the best option when studying gay and lesbian populations (Koch & Emrey, 2002; Riggle, Rostosky & Reedy, 2005) for several reasons: First, national random samples often fail to ask questions about sexual orientation. Second, the Internet offers a national scope of potential respondents. This is important since the qualities of mobilizing structures vary dramatically throughout the United States. Third, online surveys offer research designs that have a quasi-experimental flavor.¹ By using political and apolitical listervs to find respondents, we were able to create comparison groups of gays and lesbians who were involved in activist and non-activist social circles. This use of nonequivalent comparison groups has never been done before in studies on gay and lesbian political participation. Previous studies of gay activism collected their data through snowball samples of activists (Jones, 2002; Tester, 2004; Waldner, 2001), convenience samples of women in college (Friedman & Leaper, 2010; Hyers, 2007), mailing surveys to members of gay and lesbian organizations (Rollins & Hirsch, 2003; Simon et al., 1998; Sturmer & Simon, 2004; Taylor et al., 2009) or distributing surveys at political events (Elbaz, 1996; Lombardi, 1999; Waldner, 2001). Fourth, random phone or mail samples were impossible to complete, in part because researchers vary in the definition of who qualifies as "homosexual," and complete lists of every gay and lesbian person in the United States do not exist. Fifth, snowball samples are often less representative

¹Technically, Earl Babbie (2008) calls it a "case-control" design in which cross-sectional studies start with nonequivalent comparison on the dependent variable and collect retrospective data on the independent variables.

since they attract participants that are too homogeneous (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997). Snowball techniques disproportionately select those who are already “out” and located solidly within the gay community (Farquhar, 1999; Rhoads, 1997), or they rely upon “tokenism” in order to achieve proper representation for groups outside of the sample’s social network (Brown, 2005). Finally, in-person recruitment at lesbian or gay establishments like bars or clubs would be too selective as well (Riggle et al., 2005), as it would likely oversample those who are younger or more active in the gay community, while excluding people with disability (Butler, 1999) and encouraging racial homogeneity (Bassi, 2002).

Respondents were selected through a purposive stratified sample of several email listservs. The first stratum included two listservs of members in gay and lesbian rights organizations. These political listservs were run by umbrella “Fairness Alliances.” These coalitions of political and human service organizations seek equality for LGB individuals by encouraging leadership development, public education, and participation in the democratic process. Memberships in these email groups were free and most of its participants resided in Midwestern and Mid-Atlantic states, with the largest contingencies from Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Tennessee and West Virginia. It was assumed that these lists would guarantee access to people who were already embedded in a politically energized social network.

The second stratum served as a comparison group of gays and lesbians who were involved in less politically engaged networks. The researchers selected Yahoo Groups that met three criteria. First, the group had to exist for explicitly social purposes (i.e., they did not mention anything political in the description of their listserv). Some of these groups concentrated on hobbies (i.e., “Dykes on Bykes,” “Gay Square Dancers,” or “GLBT Horselovers”) while others displayed support group qualities (i.e., “Lavender Mothers” or “Kentucky Pride”). Second, we excluded groups that seemed to serve as romantic or sexual matchmaking sites. Finally, we looked for groups that mentioned the regions that were most common in the political listservs (i.e., Queer Kentucky, Rural Pride of Tennessee, or Gay in Ohio).

The cover letters sent via the listservs asked potential respondents to click over to a SurveyMonkey web site. The letter solicited the involvement of adults who self-identified as gays or lesbians. In addition to the standard discussion of anonymity, voluntarism, and informed consent, we tried to build some trust and rapport by describing the educational and professional backgrounds of the primary investigators.² The response rate to this letter was impossible to calculate since we cannot estimate the number of people who belonged to each listserv.

²Sociologist Bernadette Barton of Morehead State University was another primary investigator during these stages of data collection.

The sample of 285 participants had a preponderance of males (58% male) and a mainly Euro-American racial composition (79% European American, 7% Native American, 2% African American, 1% Asian American, 1% Latino/a, and 10% “refuse to answer”). Ages in the sample spanned a wide range, from age 18–75, with 24% under age 30, 54% ages 30–50, and 22% ages 51–75. The sample included a diverse array of incomes, including 10% below \$20,000 per year, 27% \$20,000–50,000 per year, 25% 50,000–80,000 per year, and 31% over \$80,000 per year, with 8% being missing data. Similar to most samples of “out” lesbian and gay participants, our sample was highly educated, with 3% having earned a high school degree, 58% having some college or a bachelor’s degree, and 32% having a graduate degree. Participants tended to be distributed in many types of urban and rural spaces, with 26% residing in a large urban center, 18% residing in a suburb of a large city, 18% residing in a mid-sized city, and 32% residing in smaller towns or rural areas. Because the majority of recruitment took place in the geographic South of the United States, 65.2% of participants lived in the South, 15.7% lived in the Midwest, 6.2% lived in the West, and 4% lived in the East, with Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Tennessee, and West Virginia representing the most respondents.

Measures

The anonymous online survey contained 88 close-ended items. The items on self-perceptions or perceptions of the gay and lesbian community were mostly measured via a 5-point scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). Demographics and experiences of discrimination were handled through binary or 3-point scales. For example, respondents were offered the responses of never, once, or twice or more to the item of “Because of your sexual orientation, have you ever had verbal insults directed your way since you were 16-years-old?”

Electoral activism

In democratic societies, citizens can choose between a range of conventional political behaviors. Electoral activism refers to the institutionalized practices “by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of government personal and/or the actions they take” (Verba & Nie, 1972, p. 2). The options of voting, making campaign contributions, and contacting elected officials embody the electoral or insider mode of political participation. To match these electoral options to the gay and lesbian rights movement, we asked respondents if they had ever voted, signed a petition, or wrote a letter to a politician on the behalf of gay and lesbian rights. After each item was answered in a yes or no format, we then created a composite scale of that ranged from 0 (*none of these behaviors*) to 3 (*all of these behaviors*). In doing so, we hoped to capture the overall levels of electoral activism

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Electoral Participation Among Gays and Lesbians

Item	Frequency yes	Percent yes	Standard deviation
Have you ever done any of these actions in support of gay rights?			
Voted	237	83%	.37
Signed a petition	68	24%	.42
Wrote a letter	142	50%	.50

among gay and lesbian populations. See Table 1 for the distribution of responses to these items.

Family income

Participants' economic resources were assessed through a current family income scale ranging from 1 (under \$20,000) to 5 (above \$151,001).

Education level

Academic achievement was measured by a five-item scale that focused on the highest status achieved. Responses ranged from 1 (*some high school*) to 5 (*graduate or professional degree*).

Gender

Answers to "What is your gender" were coded in a binary fashion, from 0 (*female*) to 1 (*male*).

Hate crime experiences

Herek's victimization scales (Herek, 2009) established the extent of hate crime violence in the respondents' lifetimes (similar to Waldner, 2001). Respondents were asked three questions about the frequency in which they have been physically or verbally attacked because of their perceived sexual identity. When focusing on being targeted because of their sexual identity, one item asked if they have been "punched, hit, kicked or beaten" while other items asked if they were "chased or followed" or "had objects thrown at them." Individual items had scores ranging from 0 (*never*) to 2 (*two times or more*), while the composite scale went from 0 to 6, with higher scores indicating a greater degree of victimization (Cronbach's $\alpha = .785$).

Public disclosure of gay or lesbian identities

To see how people managed the public disclosure of gay and lesbian identities, we chose an item from the public identification subscale of the Lesbian Internalized Homophobia Scale (Szymanski & Chung, 2001). Our item focused on issues of disclosure, or the willingness to publicly express a person's gay or lesbian identity: "I try not to give any signs that I am gay or lesbian." Note that the cover letter asked for

volunteers who were self-identified gays and lesbians, so the question itself was not a form of disclosure to the researchers. Responses ranged from 0 (*strongly agree*) to 4 (*strongly disagree*).

Sense of collective efficacy

Collective efficacy judgments are future-oriented expectancies about the likelihood of a group achieving its intended goals. To focus on group potency, our measure addresses the perceived collective capacities of the gay and lesbian community: "When gays and lesbians work together, they can solve the problems facing them" (see Yeich & Levine, 1994). Responses ranged from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*).

Gay and lesbian group membership

To trace the role of enabling social networks, we asked if respondents had ever joined a gay or lesbian athletic team, professional group, support group (similar to Lombardi, 1999). By creating a composite measure, we combined the yes or no items into a final score. Participants responses ranged from 0 (*none of these activities*) to 3 (*all of these activities*).

Results

Descriptive statistics

Table 1 addresses the extent of political activism among our sample. While 83% of the sample indicated that they had cast a ballot for gay and lesbian rights, it was clear that voting was the most common act by far. Another half of the sample suggested that they had written a letter for gay and lesbian rights, and 24% indicated that they had signed a petition for gay and lesbian rights.

Although we had a stratified sample, the amount of electoral activism was comparable to other national samples. A random sample of sexual minorities in 2007 found that 23% of respondents had communicated with a politician in the last year and 10% had written a letter to the news paper in that time (Egan et al., 2008). After averaging 20 years of Roper Political Participation questions, Henry Brady (1999) noted that roughly 86% of the nation had ever voted, while another 33% had signed petitions and 14% had written a senator or district representative. However, because our sample was far from random, we would caution that readers should not take any strong conclusions from this comparison.

Explanatory statistics

This study ran three ordinary least squares regressions. When deploying a hierarchical approach, the first regression limited itself to only the resource predictors. After estimating the

Table 2 Ordinary Least Squares Regressions of Electoral Activism and Resource, Framing, and Social Network Variables

Independent variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Resource variables			
Family income	.00 (.05)	.02 (.05)	.04 (.04)
Educational attainment	.31*** (.07)	.22*** (.06)	.16** (.06)
Gender (male = 1)	.03 (.12)	.03 (.11)	.07 (.10)
Framing			
Experienced a hate crime		.21*** (.03)	.16** (.02)
Public gay or lesbian identity		.23*** (.05)	.14* (.05)
Gay and lesbian collective efficacy		.17** (.06)	.11* (.06)
Mobilizing structure			
LGB group membership			.36*** (.11)
Adjusted R^2	.08	.23	.33
F	8.80***	12.97***	18.31***
R^2 change		.149	.105
F change		15.53***	37.98***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Standard error (r).

resource model, the ensuing regressions added batches of framing and mobilizing structure variables. As with any regression, this technique deciphered the direct association for each variable when controlling for the influence of the other independent variables (standardized coefficients), and it discerned the cumulative amount of variance explained by all of the variables included in the step (R^2). Additionally, this technique illuminated the additional explanatory power of the new set of predictors (R^2 change and F change identified the improvement in R^2 when the latest variables were placed into the regression). Finally, our data met the requirements for this analysis since the dependent variable had an interval level of measurement and the sample lacked multicollinearity and heteroskedasticity.

Table 2 presents the three models that explain electoral participation of gays and lesbians. Model 1 included only the resource variables while Model 2 adds the framing factors. The last model included all of the independent variables.

When exploring the calculations, some clear patterns emerged. First, the entire model provided somewhat robust effect sizes. In the final regression, the cumulative effects of every variable accounted for 33.5% of the variance in electoral activism ($p < .001$). Second, each set variables made a unique contribution to the analysis, indicated through the R^2 changed in the second and third regressions. In the first regression, all of the resource variables accounted for 8% of variance for electoral activism ($p < .001$). Next, the framing variables, net the effects of the resource variables, contributed another 15% to R^2 ($p < .001$). Lastly, the mobilizing structures contributed another 10% of predictive powers beyond the influence of the resource and framing variables ($p < .001$).

Specific variables also made unique contributions. Educational attainment was statistically significant across all models (although the beta coefficient slipped from .31 to .16

in the three different regressions the probability was always less than .001). The framing variables remained important as well. Before adding the networking variable in model 3, the factors of hate crime victimization, being out publicly, and the sense of collective efficacy had significant standardized coefficients between .23 and .17 ($p < .001$ or $p < .01$). After adding the LGB membership variable, the framing variables remained significant but saw their strength of association drop a bit ($p < .05$ or $p < .01$). Hate crime victimization fell to .16 while public identities and collective efficacy impressions dipped to .14 and .11. In the last regression, the membership variable netted the largest association (beta = .36, $p < .001$). Finally, the resource variables of family income and gender never rejected the null.

Discussion

By trying to discover the factors that inspired electoral activism among gays and lesbians, this study offers a unique look into a retrospective sample of activists and non-activists. The study also offers a more theoretically comprehensive analysis than previous studies because this quantitative study synthesizes the insights of “resource,” “framing,” and “mobilization” theories of political participation. While researchers have tested similar models among heterosexual populations, this is not true among studies of gay and lesbian activists (LGB studies rarely go beyond a handful of variables at a single time). By taking an integrated approach, we hoped that the final regression model would be especially robust. Likewise, by embracing theoretical breadth and interdisciplinary eclecticism, we intended to eliminate or minimize the presence of spurious or confounding relationships. Finally, the coefficients in a study that combines alternative theories allows for a better understanding of the relative importance of each type of variable.

Our results highlighted two primary findings: First, gays and lesbians showed clear electoral participation; and second, resource, framing, and mobilization theories were all relevant to gay and lesbian activism.³ The mobilizing factor of membership in a LGB organization provided the strongest association.⁴ While involvement in gay and lesbian social groups seemed to beget greater electoral activism, future research may want to explore the mechanisms that drive this association. Movement scholars suggest that membership in any civic associations increases the chance of being asked to join political event (Lim, 2008). Moreover, integration into LGB groups probably fosters some aspects of collective action frames that we failed to study. Qualitative works by Taylor and Whittier (1992) and Masequesmay (2003) suggested that extended conversations in gay-only settings fostered more in-group camaraderie and sharper distinctions between heterosexual and sexual minority communities. Future research may want to see if these claims are accurate and if additional qualities of LGB groups enabled political activism. Perhaps being ensconced in other types of political groups inspires greater electoral activism (e.g., belonging to college Democrats, feminist organizations, or unions). Similarly, informal socialization processes in primary groups may predispose people to activism. Gays and lesbians may show greater inclinations to political activism if their families debate politics, they took a gender studies classes in college, or they routinely sat through religious sermons that chastised homosexuality. Of course, the list of possible socializing agents is quite vast and future researchers can explore the impact of communicative acts in many different types of settings.

Our data also suggests that framing variables are important as well. There are political consequences of being “closeted” or “out.” Respondents who routinely concealed their sexual orientation were less politically engaged than those who did not. (Bernstein, 1997; Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Taylor & Whittier, 1992). This may be partially a development of self-interest—it seems wise to protect gay or lesbian rights when one fully embraces such identities. However, electoral activism can be related to definitions of a liberated self. After years of being ignored or vilified, silenced peoples are often relieved or excited when they feel safe enough to advocate for greater rights. Similar satisfactions may also come from the breaking of demeaning social roles and for doing the “right thing” of

protecting more vulnerable gays and lesbians who are too afraid to do so themselves.

The importance of other frames was revealed as well. Presumably to the chagrin of homophobic bullies, hate crimes did not seem to intimidate gays and lesbians into submission. Instead, surviving violent homophobic attacks seemed to generate resilient gays and lesbians who were more resolved in their political efforts. It could be that violence of this sort shatters illusions of a fair or acceptable status quo, or it could highlight a sense of urgency when seeking social change. Regardless, ensuing rounds of research should determine if other forms of experienced discrimination propel activism. Greater activism may be connected to blocked opportunities in schools, housing, workplaces, court proceedings, hospitals, etc. The topic of collective efficacy seems important as well. Gays and lesbians were more resigned to stay out of electoral politics when they thought the government was unresponsive to gay and lesbian demands. Conversely, involvement in politics was much higher for the respondents who envisioned that a gay and lesbian rights movement could force concessions from a sometimes hostile and recalcitrant government.

Finally, the resource model had mixed results. The factor of educational attainment moved people to activism, while issues of social class and gender did not. It appears as if education prompted greater electoral activism. It could be that the resource theorists are correct in claiming that colleges foster the sort of analytical skills that are necessary for activism. It is also possible that content of college curriculums inspires greater liberalism among students and that college settings often grant access to a wider scope of gay and lesbian social circles.

The lack of significance for salary can mean two different things. Class backgrounds may in fact fail to predict electoral gay and lesbian rights activism. This would nullify the familiar patterns of older left movements mostly drawing from the working and poorer social classes (e.g., labor and socialist movements). This interpretation would confirm “New Social Movement” theories that claim that gay and lesbian rights activism is more concerned with challenging cultural codes than with the unequal distribution of financial resources (Johnston, Larana, & Gusfield, 1994; Van Dyke, Soule, & Taylor, 2004). On the other hand, the proponents of the “resource” theories of participation could argue that our research methodologies probably underestimated the effects of family income. Using an online survey perhaps distorts the impact of salaries in that people who use the internet may have higher class standings than people who do not. However, some methodological papers have found that the demographic characteristics of online and mail samples of gays and lesbians were “practically indistinguishable” and “equivalent” (Koch & Emrey, 2002; Riggall et al., 2005). Income could have also presented a stronger impact if we included different measures of electoral activism. Matters of wealth and salaries

³While our data finds that gays and lesbians are involved in electoral activism, our measures are not perfect. With our measures, it is impossible to know how many times a respondent engaged in each political action, as the act of voting for gay cause can mean several things (be it voting on a referendum or selecting a candidate that promotes greater rights for sexual minorities).

⁴Because access to LGBT organizations and exposure to discrimination could vary by location (Tewksbury, Grossi, Suresh, & Helms, 1999), it is possible that these findings may not fully reflect the activism of gays and lesbians who reside outside of Midwestern and Southern states.

could have been more important if we asked questions about the financial methods of swaying electoral campaigns (e.g., making a donation to a political candidate, a political party, or a gay or lesbian Political Action Committee).

Because our entire model accounted for roughly one third of the variance in electoral activism, future research should insert new variables into their studies. Scholars might see if the demographic variables of race, age, or residential mobility influences political participation (Bailey, 1998; Harder & Krosnick, 2008). Other studies might explore the role of other framing and social-psychological processes. Activism may be connected to general impressions of discrimination, attributions of system blame, perceived salience of sexuality, certainty about sexual orientation, favorable impressions or solidarity with other gays and lesbians, a sense of interdependence and mutual fate among gays and lesbians, a dislike for heterosexuals, or perceptions of civic duties (Ashmore et al., 2004; Hertzog, 1996; Swank & Fahs, 2011; Van Zomeren et al., 2008). To measure such topics, researchers might look at recent versions of modern heterosexist and internalized homophobia scales (Mayfield, 2001; Morrison & Morrison, 2002). Changes in governmental actions or political opportunity structures could alter the electoral activism of sexual minorities as well. A study by Swank and Fahs (2011) found increases in contributions to political candidates when gay right initiatives were on the ballot and Riggle, Rostosky, and Horne (2009) discovered an increase in gay and lesbian activism for sexual minorities who lived in the 13 states that held referendum votes on banning "same-sex marriages" in 2004. However, preliminary bivariate calculations could not detect significant relationships between our measures of electoral activism and any sorts of state-wide policies (this included public votes on same-sex marriages as well as laws on whether sexual orientation was included in antidiscrimination and hate crime laws).

Understanding the impact of different mobilizing structures could also be illuminating. Befriending straight activists, living in liberal neighborhoods, or going to "gay-friendly" colleges could foster greater activism. Conversely, living in isolated rural communities or being raised in socially conservative families or orthodox religious institutions could

dampen any inclinations to gay and lesbian activism. Researchers may also see how contact with movement activists and access to different recruiting apparatuses shape the actions of the politically committed. Further, measuring the ways that electronic networks such as listservs, Facebook and Twitter affect activism may prove especially important to online surveys like the one used in this study, as "weak tie" versus "strong tie" activism can be explored.

Future researchers may also improve on our research methods. First, when designing studies, it would be better to have longitudinal studies because cross-sectional studies often have temporal ordering problems. It is possible that engaging in gay and lesbian rights activism can alter people's attitudes and/or their awareness of gay and lesbian groups. Second, measurement errors regularly haunt survey data. Critics might argue that the threshold of what constitutes an activist is too low (e.g., greater specificity about the frequencies of voting would be better). Single-item measures for the framing variables might miss some key dimensions as well. Shortcomings with item wording can also undermine the reliability of measures. Perhaps the phrase "giving signs that they are gay or lesbian" is vague as the item of "gays and lesbians" working together deals more with cooperation between the genders than the collective power of this cooperation. Questions of social desirability may be especially relevant to our activist identity measures, as participants may want to sound good to themselves by overstating the amount that they fight for social justice. Finally, our binary coding of gender would not be exhaustive if some transgendered or intersexed respondents decided to complete our survey.

Overall, this study provides evidence for the centrality of framing with regard to gay and lesbian activism, and it suggests that, despite the intensity of heteronormativity experienced by the gay and lesbian communities in this country, gay and lesbian populations have found a variety of ways to make their voices heard and combat homophobia through electoral means. These findings especially point to directions for future research, which could ideally explore whether these variables predict joining protests for gay and lesbian rights in tandem with activism for other social causes as well (e.g., women's rights, environmentalism, racial prejudice, or antiwar activism).

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