Constituents' Responses to LGB Representatives in Congress

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Abstract: How have voters responded to the increasing "rainbow wave" of LGBTQ representatives in Congress? To date, political science has not weighed in on this question directly. Research on legislators from *other* under-represented groups, however, shows that they can impact constituents in a variety of ways. Being represented by a minority legislator is linked to changes in job approval ratings, evaluations of the broader legislature, knowledge of the incumbent's record, and perceptions of their policy positions, among other variables. In this paper, I extend these findings to LGB Members of Congress (MCs) using pooled CES data from 2016 to 2023. The results show that LGB MCs are evaluated differently than straight MCs. Descriptive representation boosts approval ratings — LGBT constituents (but not straight cisgender ones) approve of LGB legislators at higher rates than straight legislators. Assessments of Congress as a collective institution, however, appear unaffected by dyadic LGB representation. When it comes to knowledge of the incumbent, LGB politicians appear more visible to *all* constituents. Regardless of their own sexuality, respondents are more likely to have information on, and be able to answer questions about, LGB MCs. Finally, the analyses show that widespread stereotypes of LGBTQ politicians as liberals continue to persist even after they are elected and have concrete records to defend. Overall, the results suggest that constituents respond to LGB and straight representatives in different ways, with implications for their political careers.

Draft as of May 11, 2025— comments are welcome, but please note that analyses and conclusions may change in future versions.

Recent years have seen a "rainbow wave" of LGBTQ candidates winning election in the U.S., including to Congress (Brant and Overby, 2023; Haider-Markel et al., 2020). Although their overall numbers remain small (Kent, 2025), being represented by an LGBTQ Member of Congress (MC) is no longer the unusual experience it once was.[1] How have constituents responded to these LGB representatives? Do they evaluate LGB and straight MCs differently?

To date, political science has not weighed in directly on these questions. Several literatures on legislators from *other* minoritized groups, however, suggest effects across multiple dependent variables. For example, theories of descriptive representation argue that sharing an identity with a representative can empower marginalized groups, leading to higher approval ratings of the incumbent and perhaps the broader institution (e.g., Banducci, Donovan and Karp, 2004; Costa and Schaffner, 2018; Fowler, Merolla and Sellers, 2014). Another research stream finds that constituents are more knowledgeable about minority legislators, either because of their shared identity (e.g., Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2003; Burns, Schlozman and Verba, 2001; Tate, 2003), or because their "novelty" status makes them stand out (e.g., Wolak, 2020). Finally, a third literature highlights voter stereotyping, suggesting constituents may perceive minority legislators to be more liberal than other MCs (e.g., Magni and Reynolds, 2021; Jones and Brewer, 2019).

These literatures have mostly developed with reference to the experiences of Black, Hispanic, Asian, and women legislators. In this paper, I use their insights to explore how constituents respond to LGB representatives in the U.S. House. This has been challenging prior to now, due to two data constraints imposed by the real world. First, openly queer elected officials are still a relative novelty, and the number of out MCs only reached double digits in recent years (Kent, 2025). Second, most surveys do not have sufficient sample sizes to capture the relatively small LGBTQ population, and until the past decade did not routinely measure

[1] The data in this paper include only LGB MCs, and pre-date Sarah McBride's election as the first out trans MC. When discussing the community in general, I use the inclusive "LGBTQ" acronym. When referring to the specific data and results in this paper, I use the more precise "LGB" label.

respondents' sexuality or gender identities (Jones, 2021). This project takes advantage of the increasing number of out MCs, and pooled large-N survey data from the Cooperative Election Study (CES), to explore how constituents have responded to increasing LGB representation.

The results show that constituents evaluate LGB MCs differently from their straight counterparts. The impact of LGB representation varies across dependent variables, in ways that reflect and extend the previous literature. First, in line with earlier work on descriptive representation, LGBT constituents approve of LGB MCs at higher rates, while straight cisgender constituents are unaffected. Being represented by an LGB MC, however, has no discernible impact on approval ratings of Congress as an institution — for LGBT or straight cisgender voters. Second, regardless of their own sexuality, constituents are more likely to know the party of LGB MCs, and are more able to answer questions about their record. This suggests that some of the impact of LGB representation is in its novelty value that leads all constituents to engage in more detail. Finally, the data also show that stereotypes of LGBTQ candidates as liberals (Jones and Brewer, 2019; Magni and Reynolds, 2021) follow them into office. Even after controlling for their actual voting record and party affiliation, constituents stereotype LGB MCs as more liberal than their straight counterparts. This indicates that LGB identity remains a powerful heuristic for voters, even once politicians have an established record in Congress.

Overall, the results suggest that constituents respond to LGB and straight representatives in different ways, with implications for their political careers. The paper proceeds as follows. First, I outline the expectations from the literatures on minority representation, before introducing the data and methods used in the paper, and then the main results.

Responses to minority representatives

How should we expect constituents to respond to LGB representatives? Although this question has not been directly tackled by previous work, several bodies of research explore how vot-

ers react to legislators from *other* marginalized groups. These investigate different dependent variables and propose different theoretical mechanisms, and should not be viewed as offering competing hypotheses. Here, I briefly review three main sets of findings, organized by dependent variable. Minority representation has been found to affect approval ratings, political engagement, and perceptions of legislators' records.

Empowerment and approval ratings

A long line of literature argues that descriptive representation — when a constituent shares a social identity with their representative — leads to greater feelings of empowerment among minoritized communities (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Fowler, Merolla and Sellers, 2014). Although originally developed with reference to Black voters' experiences with Black mayors, numerous studies find that trust, efficacy, and participation increase when racial, ethnic, or gender identities are shared with politicians (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Barreto, 2007; Sadhwani, 2022; Atkeson, 2003; Fowler, Merolla and Sellers, 2014).

These studies often locate evidence of minority empowerment in approval ratings of incumbent legislators. Several articles find that descriptive representation is associated with greater approval of an incumbent legislator. For example, Black voters are more likely to approve of Black than White MCs (Tate, 2003; Banducci, Donovan and Karp, 2004; Brunell, Anderson and Cremona, 2008); that women voters have (somewhat) more favorable attitudes towards women MCs (Lawless, 2004; Costa and Schaffner, 2018); and that Latino/a constituents evaluate Latino/a MCs more positively (Fowler, Merolla and Sellers, 2014).

Some research argues that descriptive representation may signal a more open political system in general, and thus lead to more favorable attitudes towards collective institutions (Ramirez, Sanchez and Sanchez-Youngmann, 2012; Pantoja and Segura, 2003). The empirical evidence on this front has been mixed. On the one hand, women represented by women

(Lawless, 2004) and Black voters represented by Black MCs (Gay, 2002; Tate, 2003) are no more likely to approve of Congress. On the other, there is some evidence that descriptively represented Latino/a respondents are more trusting of the government (Ramirez, Sanchez and Sanchez-Youngmann, 2012) and are more likely to approve of Congress (Fowler, Merolla and Sellers, 2014). Whether descriptive representation by an individual MC changes attitudes towards Congress as a whole is thus an unsettled question in the literature.

Engagement and knowledge

Building on theories of minority empowerment, numerous studies argue that descriptive representation can shape engagement, particularly by increasing what constituents know about their representatives. Constituents who share a racial or ethnic identity with the incumbent are more likely to recognize the name of their MC (Banducci, Donovan and Karp, 2004; Tate, 2003), to recall their party affiliation (Bowen and Clark, 2014; Wolak and Juenke, 2021), and to offer more opinions about the job the representative has been doing in office (Box-Steffensmeier et al., 2003). Similar effects appear for the descriptive representation of gender: women respondents are more likely to know the name, party, and voting record of women senators (Verba, Burns and Schlozman, 1997; Fridkin and Kenney, 2014; Jones, 2014).

At the same time, several studies suggest that these effects are not due (solely) to descriptive representation. Especially when minoritized representatives are uncommon, their presence in politics may be particularly noteworthy, leading to increases in engagement among constituents of all identities. For example, Wolak (2020) finds that both men *and* women are more likely to be informed about the incumbent when she is a woman. Similarly, several studies find that increasing numbers of women in politics lead to greater efficacy among voters of all genders (Stauffer, 2021; Atkeson and Carrillo, 2007; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler, 2005). In this vein, what might matter for voter engagement could be less a shared identity and more the signal

that minority legislators send to all constituents.

Stereotypes and perceptions of incumbent ideology

A long line of literature finds that voters infer political information from politicians' demographic traits. In the U.S. context, politicians of color and women are often assumed to be more liberal than their white and male counterparts (e.g., Schneider and Bos, 2011; Jones, 2013; McDermott, 1997). In this area, there is more research directly on LGBTQ politicians, which generally finds that voters stereotype them as liberals.

One research stream uses survey experiments to assess responses to hypothetical LGBTQ candidates for office, and routinely finds significant electoral penalties (Magni and Reynolds, 2021, 2023; Jones and Brewer, 2019; Rajan and Pao, 2022; Herrick and Thomas, 2002). LGBTQ candidates for office are assumed to hold more liberal policy positions (Magni and Reynolds, 2021; Jones and Brewer, 2019; Loepp and Redman, 2020; Harrison, Michelson and Perry, 2023) and to be less representative of straight cisgender constituents' interests (Jones and Brewer, 2019). This stereotyping, in part, leads to the lower vote shares and approval ratings that LGBTQ candidates face.

In contrast to these experimental results, studies of *actual* LGBTQ candidates for office generally find more muted or null effects. In an analysis of the 2018 state legislative elections, Haider-Markel et al. (2020) find that candidates' LGBTQ identity did not affect their vote share or odds of winning (see Magni and Reynolds, 2018, for similar findings in UK elections). In part, this may reflect the fact that LGBTQ candidates strategically choose to run in more favorable districts (Haider-Markel et al., 2020).

As such, it is unclear how we should expect constituents to evaluate LGB MCs' ideologies. Further complicating expectations is the argument that voters may learn from the experience of being represented by an LGBTQ legislator. In a different context, Hajnal (2001) finds that

White voters' racial animus is reduced when they experience representation by Black mayors — that they can "now base their assessments on an incumbent's record rather than on stereotypes, exaggerated fears, or the incendiary predictions of white opponents" (p604). Whether the liberal stereotypes that plague LGBTQ *candidates* follow them into office remains an open question.

Research questions

Taken collectively, these literatures on minority representatives cover numerous identity groups, dependent variables, theoretical mechanisms, and perspectives. These are not competing research programs, nor do they provide us with mutually exclusive hypotheses. Instead, they provide a series of frameworks within which to evaluate LGBTQ representatives. As such, I build on these literatures to formulate several research questions:

RQ1: Compared to those represented by straight MCs, do voters represented by LGB MCs

- **(a)** rate the incumbent's job differently?
- **(b)** rate Congress as an institution differently?
- **(c)** have different information about the incumbent?
- **(d)** hold different beliefs about the incumbent's ideology?

RQ2: Do straight cisgender and LGBT constituents differ in their responses to LGB MCs?

To answer these questions, I rely on survey data measuring constituents' attitudes, matched with information about MCs.

Data and methods

I combine individual-level survey data from the annual Cooperative Election Study (CES) surveys with district-level data on each Member of Congress (MC) whose constituents are sampled in the CES. Pooling the CES surveys from 2016 through 2023 results in a total of 329,168 respondents, with 3,632 MC-district-year observations (an MC appears in the dataset for each year that someone in their district was sampled by the CES. This means that MCs can and do appear multiple times in the dataset. I adjust for these correlated error terms in the models). This allows for analysis of LGB MCs (who are just under 2% of the total MC-year observations) and LGBT voters (who are around 10% of all respondents). Full descriptive statistics are shown in online appendix A1.

Dependent variables

All dependent variables are measured at the respondent level, and recoded to a 0–1 scale for consistency across models (see online appendix A1 for question wording and details). Approval ratings of (a) the incumbent MC and (b) Congress are based on a standard job approval item, which ranges from 0 (strongly disapprove of the job their MC/Congress is doing) to 1 (strongly approve).[2]

Several items tap information about respondents' MC. A dichotomous variable captures whether respondents can correctly identify the party of their MC (correct answers are coded as 1; incorrect or "don't know" responses as 0). Two other dichotomous variables measure whether respondents are able to rate the MC's job, and to evaluate the MC's ideology. In both cases, "don't know" responses to these items are coded as 0; any other response as 1.

Finally, I also assess constituents' perceptions of the incumbent's ideological stance. The

[2] In 2017 and 2019, the CES asked about approval of the House of Representatives and the Senate separately. In those years, I use evaluations of the House in place of the broader "U.S. Congress" asked about in other years.

CES asks respondents to rate each representative's ideology, recoded to range from 0 (they thought their MC was "very liberal") to 1 ("very conservative").

Respondent-level independent variables

The key respondent-level independent variable is LGBT identity, which is coded as 1 for respondents who said they were lesbian, gay, or bisexual and/or transgender.[3] Respondents who said they were straight and not transgender are coded as 0.

Prior research shows that partisanship is a dominant source of constituents' evaluations, conditioning or overriding the impact of MCs' social identities (Costa and Schaffner, 2018; Lawless, 2004; Reingold and Harrell, 2010). All of the analyses control for a variable that measures the congruence between each respondent's party and their MC's party. This takes on the values of "same party" when both respondent and MC share a party; "other party" when they are from opposing parties; and "Independent" (the excluded category) when the respondent does not identify as a Democrat or Republican.

Other respondent characteristics that are likely to affect political engagement, and possibly approval ratings, are also included. Respondents' education ranges from no high school degree (coded as 0) to a post-graduate degree (1). Age is measured in decades (i.e., the actual age of the respondent divided by 10), to aid interpretation of the coefficients. Respondents' family income is a numeric scale of the CES' income categories, ranging from those making less than $10,000 (0) to those making over $500,000 (1) a year. Respondents who declined to answer this question are assigned the mean value of the scale for their survey year. Religiosity is based on how important religion is to the respondent's life, ranging from not at all (0) to very

[3] How to include transgender respondents is complicated. All of the MCs in this study are cisgender, and so the effects of descriptive representation could plausibly be limited to LGB respondents only. At the same time, the broader "LGBT" label is a meaningful identity for many voters. I err on the side of inclusion here and show the impact on LGBT vs. straight cisgender constituents. Online appendix A2 replicates the analyses for LGB vs. straight respondents only.

important (1). Respondents' self-reported interest in politics is based on how often they say they follow government and public affairs, ranging from hardly at all (0) to most of the time (1). Racial and ethnic identities are coded as White (the excluded category in the models), Asian, Black, Hispanic, or another race. A dichotomous variable measures gender, with women coded as 1 and all others as 0.

MC- and district-level independent variables

Several independent variables measure features of the MC. A dichotomous variable captures whether the MC is LGB (1) or not (0). Similar variables are used for Asian, Black, Hispanic, White MCs and women MCs (in the models, White is used as the excluded level). The MC's party affiliation is included as a dichotomous variable indicating Democratic Party affiliation (1) or not (0). Since the length of time the incumbent has been in office may affect constituent knowledge of their record, I also control for the MC's decades in office, which is based on the number of years since they were first elected, at the time of the survey.

The model predicting respondents' perceptions of the MC's ideology also controls for the MC's *actual* voting record in Congress. I use each MC's first dimension NOMINATE score from the previous Congress (Lewis et al., 2024). This ranges from -1 (most liberal) to $+1$ (most conservative). Evaluations of MCs serving in their first term in office are thus dropped from these models, which reduces statistical power somewhat. The alternative — specifying a model without controlling for the incumbent's actual record — would lead to biased estimates of constituents' perceptions however, since LGB MCs have tended to have more liberal voting patterns in Congress.

Since LGBTQ candidates choose which districts to run in strategically (Haider-Markel et al., 2020), two variables control for political attributes of the congressional district that the MC represents. Both are based on the two-party vote for president in the election prior to the

survey being completed, as collated by *The Downballot*.[4] First, the district's partisan leanings are captured by the proportion of the two-party vote received by the Democratic nominee in the previous presidential election. This ranges from .17 (a heavily Republican district) to .97 (an overwhelmingly Democratic one). Second, electoral competition is measured as the absolute difference between the Democratic and Republican nominees' proportion of the vote. This ranges from 0 (an evenly split district) to .94 (an extremely uncompetitive one).

To ease computation and interpretation of the multi-level models, all of the continuous MC- and district-level variables (the MC's tenure in office, NOMINATE score, the Democratic vote share in the district, and the district competitiveness) are centered around their mean values.

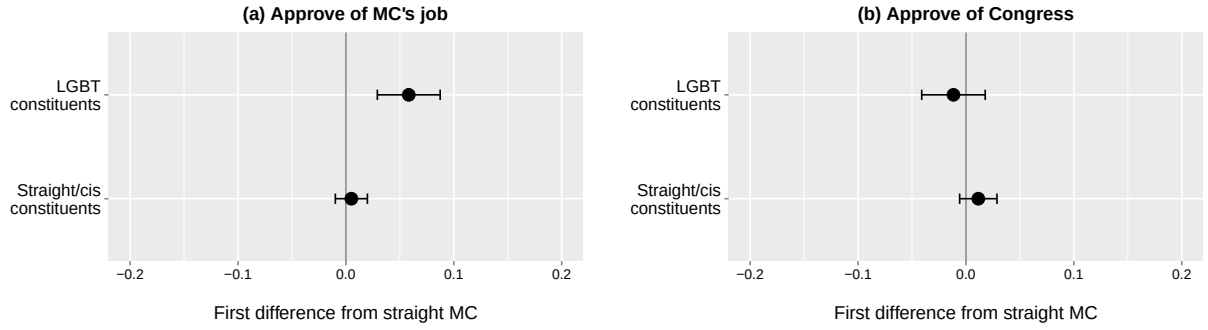
Models and analytical plan

Since the data are measured at multiple levels — some for the individual respondent, some for the MC and district — ordinary linear regression models are inappropriate. Instead, I fit multi-level regression models that account for variation among respondents, MCs, and districts (see Wolak, 2020, 345–7). The analyses are unweighted due to technical limitations. The models were estimated using the `lme4` package in R, which does not currently allow for sampling weights. Replicating the linear models in SPSS with weighted data led to the same substantive conclusions as those reported here.

The key estimates from each model are (1) whether respondents evaluated LGB MCs and straight MCs differently, and (2) whether those differences vary by respondents' own LGBT identity. To assess these, I interact the indicator for LGBT respondents with that for LGB MCs. In addition to presenting the full model coefficients, I simulate the results to estimate the substantive impact of LGB representation. For each dependent variable, I calculate the first differ-

[4] See `https://www.the-downballot.com/p/data`. Due to mid-session district boundary changes, these measures cannot be calculated for 107 of the 3,632 district observations. See online appendix A1 for descriptive statistics including missing data.

Figure 1: Differences in approval ratings of LGB MCs



Note: First differences in approval ratings among constituents represented by an LGB, rather than straight, MC, with 95% confidence intervals. Predicted values simulated from models (a) and (b) in Table 1, holding all other variables constant at their mean or modal values.

ences in evaluations of an LGB MC as compared to a straight MC, holding all other variables at their mean or modal values by level. These first differences are calculated separately for LGBT and straight cisgender respondents, to assess whether LGB representation has a unique impact on LGBT constituents.

Constituents' responses to LGB representatives

Table 1 presents the coefficients for each of the models. Constituents do evaluate LGB MCs differently from their straight counterparts, although the pattern of results vary across the dependent variables, in nuanced ways.

Approval ratings

Figure 1 shows simulated differences in approval ratings between respondents represented by an LGB MC and those represented by a straight MC, with 95% confidence intervals. Plot (a) presents the difference in approval of the MC themselves; plot (b) the differences in approval

Table 1: Multilevel regression models predicting evaluations of MCs

	(a) Approve of MC's job	(b) Approve of Congress	(c) Know MC's party	(d) Can rate MC's job	(e) Can rate MC's ideology	(f) Perceived MC ideology
Intercept	0.31 (0.00)***	0.32 (0.00)***	−3.19 (0.03)***	−2.00 (0.03)***	−2.54 (0.03)***	0.68 (0.01)***
LGBT respondent	0.01 (0.00)***	0.00 (0.00)	−0.01 (0.02)	0.14 (0.02)***	0.18 (0.02)***	0.03 (0.00)***
LGB MC	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.42 (0.08)***	0.47 (0.10)***	0.39 (0.08)***	−0.05 (0.01)***
LGBT respondent × LGB MC	0.05 (0.01)***	−0.02 (0.01)†	0.10 (0.12)	−0.01 (0.13)	−0.13 (0.13)	−0.01 (0.01)
Respondent-level controls						
Other party	−0.18 (0.00)***	0.10 (0.00)***	0.27 (0.01)***	0.21 (0.01)***	0.34 (0.01)***	0.02 (0.00)***
Same party	0.28 (0.00)***	0.11 (0.00)***	0.57 (0.01)***	0.37 (0.01)***	0.50 (0.01)***	0.03 (0.00)***
Asian	0.01 (0.00)***	0.04 (0.00)***	−0.21 (0.03)***	−0.26 (0.03)***	−0.21 (0.03)***	0.01 (0.00)**
Black	0.03 (0.00)***	0.03 (0.00)***	−0.05 (0.02)**	0.00 (0.02)	−0.06 (0.02)***	0.05 (0.00)***
Hispanic	−0.00 (0.00)	0.02 (0.00)***	−0.18 (0.02)***	−0.09 (0.02)***	−0.03 (0.02)	0.03 (0.00)***
Other race	−0.02 (0.00)***	−0.03 (0.00)***	0.00 (0.02)	−0.08 (0.02)**	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.00)*
Women	0.01 (0.00)***	0.02 (0.00)***	−0.30 (0.01)***	−0.45 (0.01)***	−0.47 (0.01)***	0.02 (0.00)***
Education	0.00 (0.00)†	−0.04 (0.00)***	1.01 (0.02)***	0.54 (0.02)***	0.74 (0.02)***	0.03 (0.00)***
Religiosity	0.05 (0.00)***	0.06 (0.00)***	−0.20 (0.01)***	0.21 (0.01)***	0.17 (0.01)***	−0.06 (0.00)***
Age	0.01 (0.00)***	−0.02 (0.00)***	0.34 (0.00)***	0.29 (0.00)***	0.23 (0.00)***	−0.00 (0.00)***
Interest in politics	0.01 (0.00)***	−0.07 (0.00)***	1.99 (0.02)***	1.76 (0.02)***	2.11 (0.02)***	0.02 (0.00)***
Income	0.01 (0.00)***	−0.02 (0.00)***	0.81 (0.02)***	0.46 (0.03)***	0.69 (0.03)***	−0.02 (0.00)***
MC/district-level controls						
Democrat MC	0.04 (0.00)***	0.01 (0.00)**	−0.04 (0.03)	0.03 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.03)	−0.34 (0.01)***
Black MC	−0.01 (0.00)***	0.00 (0.00)	0.28 (0.04)***	0.08 (0.05)†	0.13 (0.04)***	0.01 (0.00)**
Asian MC	0.01 (0.01)*	0.02 (0.01)*	0.22 (0.07)***	−0.05 (0.08)	0.08 (0.06)	−0.00 (0.01)
Hispanic MC	−0.01 (0.00)*	0.02 (0.00)***	0.21 (0.04)***	0.08 (0.05)	0.12 (0.04)**	0.02 (0.00)***
Woman MC	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)**	0.27 (0.03)***	0.20 (0.03)***	0.24 (0.02)***	−0.02 (0.00)***
Decades in office	−0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)†	0.11 (0.01)***	0.15 (0.02)***	0.13 (0.01)***	0.01 (0.00)***
NOMINATE score						0.18 (0.01)***
District competitiveness	0.02 (0.01)**	0.01 (0.01)†	−0.26 (0.06)***	−0.25 (0.08)**	−0.26 (0.06)***	0.01 (0.01)*
Democratic vote share	−0.02 (0.01)	0.03 (0.01)*	−0.11 (0.11)	−0.18 (0.14)	−0.03 (0.10)	−0.00 (0.01)
N respondents	216,516	261,852	290,932	291,200	262,969	154,290
N MCs/districts	3,519	3,521	3,524	3,523	3,378	2,811

***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$; †$p < 0.1$

Note: Models (a), (b), and (f) are linear regressions predicting continuous dependent variables; models (c)–(e) are logistic regressions predicting binary dependent variables.

of Congress as a whole.

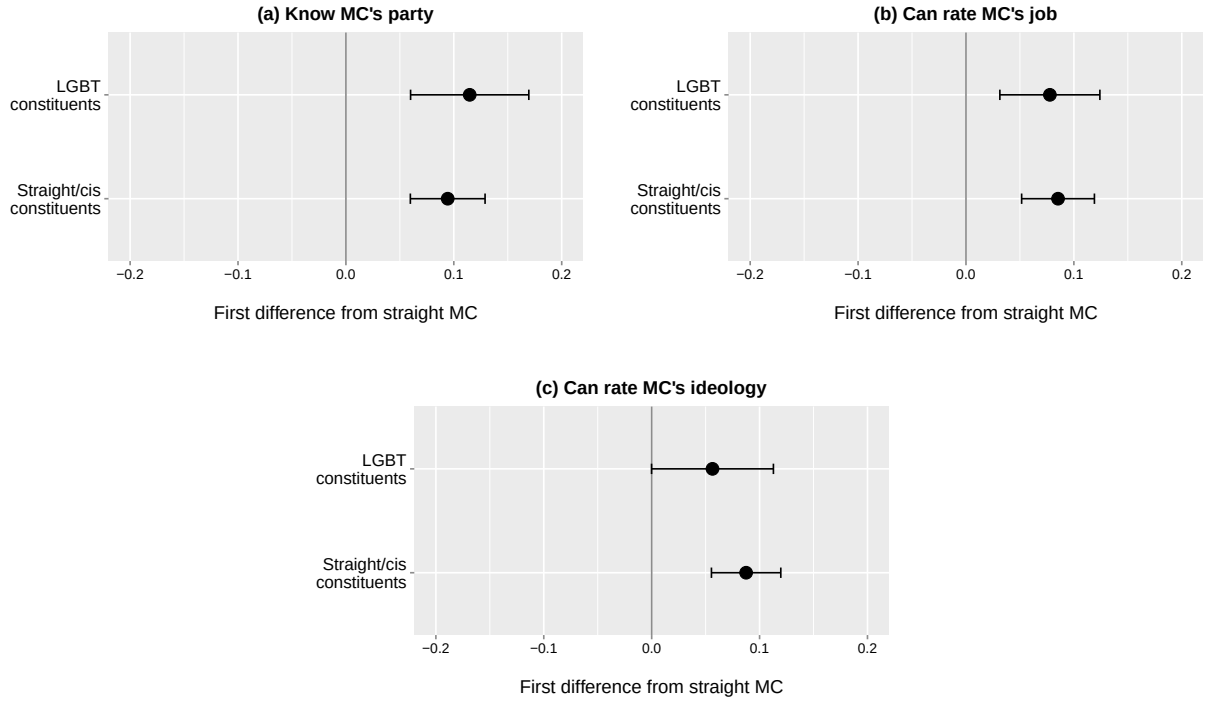
Consistent with other studies of descriptive representation, LGBT constituents are more likely to approve of LGB MCs than straight MCs. As shown in Figure 1(a), approval ratings among LGBT voters are on average .06 [95% confidence intervals = .03, .09] higher for LGB MCs than straight MCs. These estimates are taken from model (a) in Table 1, which controls for partisan congruence between the MC and respondent as well as a host of other variables. Over and above partisanship, LGB representation is associated with higher approval from LGBT constituents.

In contrast, the data indicate no difference between approval of straight and LGB MCs among straight cisgender constituents. The first difference is a non-significant .01 [−.01, .02]. This suggests that the higher approval ratings from LGBT constituents are due to a shared identity being descriptively represented, rather than any "novelty" of having an out MC. The lack of any effect among straight cisgender constituents is also of interest in itself, since it runs counter to previous research that shows substantially *lower* support for LGBTQ candidates among straight voters (e.g., Magni and Reynolds, 2021; Jones and Brewer, 2019). These data suggest that MC sexuality does not affect straight constituents' approval ratings, a point I return to later in the conclusions.

The estimates for approval of Congress as an institution reveal no discernible impact of LGB representation for either set of constituents. As Figure 1(b) shows, constituents have the same evaluations of Congress no matter the identity of their MC. For LGBT constituents, being represented by an LGB MC does not change views of the institution (the first difference from those represented by a straight MC is −.01 [−.04, .02]). The same is true for straight cisgender constituents, for whom the first difference between LGB and straight MCs is .01 [−.01, .03].

These results align with previous research suggesting that being descriptively represented by a single MC is unlikely to affect views of the collective institution (e.g., Lawless, 2004; Gay, 2002; Tate, 2003). It remains possible that *perceptions* of descriptive representation help shape

Figure 2: Differences in constituents' information about LGB MCs



Note: First differences in constituents' information about LGB MCs, compared to straight MCs, with 95% confidence intervals. Predicted values simulated from models (c)–(e) in Table 1, holding all other variables constant at their mean or modal values.

assessments of Congress as a whole (e.g., Tate, 2003, Ch. 8). These data on the actual dyadic relationship between MCs and their constituents suggest little effect for LGB or straight voters, however.

Information about the MC

Models (b) through (d) in Table 1, and the associated plots in Figure 2, show a consistent pattern across measures. On average, both LGBT *and* straight cisgender constituents have more information about LGB MCs than their straight counterparts.

Take constituents' knowledge of which party their MC belongs to (model (b) in Table 1 and

plot (a) in Figure 2). LGBT constituents are .11 [.06, .17] more likely to correctly identify their MC's party when the MC is LGB. Straight cisgender constituents have an equally large boost in their knowledge of the MC's party (the first difference is .09 [.06, .13], not statistically distinguishable from that for LGBT constituents). Regardless of their own sexuality, constituents are more likely to correctly identify the party of LGB MCs than straight MCs.[5]

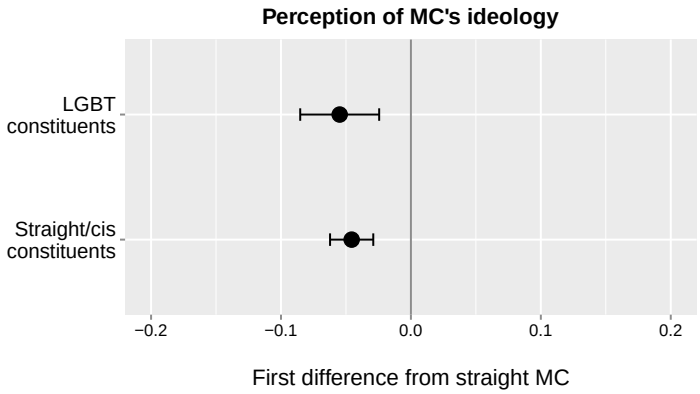
The other two items measure how able respondents are to answer questions about the MC, and serve as a proxy for general information about the incumbent. They point to the same conclusions. Constituents are more likely to offer opinions about the job that LGB MCs have done, and their ideological record, than they are for straight MCs. For example, LGBT constituents are .08 [.03, .12] more likely to respond to the job approval question, and .06 [.00, .11] more likely to answer the ideology question, when represented by an LGB MC. This is also the case for straight cisgender constituents, who also answer questions about LGB MCs at higher rates.[6]

Overall, these results indicate that constituents have more information about LGB MCs than straight MCs. They are more likely to know their party affiliation, to rate their job in office, and to offer a substantive evaluation of their ideology. Crucially, this is true for both LGBT *and* straight cisgender constituents, suggesting it is due to the increased visibility of LGB MCs, rather than the empowering effects of shared identity among LGBT voters.

[5] One concern is that this "knowledge" may just reflect constituents' assuming that all LGB MCs are Democrats (see Wolak 2020, 352-3 for a similar logic applied to women officeholders). All but one of the MCs in these data are Democrats, which precludes an analysis by party. The other information items, analyzed in plots (b) and (c), are les likely to be the result of heuristic reasoning.

[6] The first differences for straight cisgender respondents are .08 [.05, .12] and .09 [.06, .12] respectively. These are not significantly different from the impact on LGBT constituents.

Figure 3: Differences in perceptions of LGB MCs' ideology



Note: First differences in constituents' perceptions of LGB MCs' ideology, compared to straight MCs, with 95% confidence intervals. Predicted values simulated from model (f) in Table 1, holding all other variables constant at their mean or modal values.

Perceptions of MC ideology

Model (f) in Table 1 and Figure 3 show the estimated impact of LGB representation on perceptions of the MC's ideology. Recall that the dependent variable in this analysis is coded from 0 to 1, such that higher values indicate the MC was perceived as more conservative. The models also control for the MC's actual voting record from the previous Congress, and for their party affiliation, both of which are held constant in the simulations.

Over and above their party and actual ideological record, constituents stereotype LGB MCs as more liberal than straight MCs. The first differences in Figure 3 show that LGB MCs were perceived as around five points more liberal than straight MCs by both LGBT and straight cisgender constituents (the first differences are −.05 [−.02, −.09] and −.05 [−.03, −.06], respectively). Although we might have expected constituents to update their perceptions of an MC's ideology once they cast votes in Congress (e.g., Hajnal, 2001), it appears the stereotype of LGB MCs as liberals persists into office.

This is not to say that constituents' perceptions are divorced from reality. Model (f) shows

that Democratic MCs are seen as substantially more liberal than Republican MCs (the coefficient is −0.34 (0.01)), and that more progressive voting records are associated with more liberal perceptions (the coefficient for NOMINATE scores is 0.18 (0.01)). Even controlling for these objective measures of ideology, however, LGB MCs are seen as around five points more liberal than their straight counterparts.

Conclusions

How have constituents responded to the "rainbow wave" of out LGB Members of Congress? In keeping with the mixed findings in the literature on how other minoritized representatives are evaluated, these analyses suggest at least four conclusions.

First, there is evidence to support the argument that descriptive representation can lead to feelings of empowerment among marginalized communities (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Fowler, Merolla and Sellers, 2014; Sadhwani, 2022). LGBT constituents approve of LGB MCs at higher rates than they did of straight MCs. In contrast, straight constituents' ratings of their MCs' job were unaffected by the MC's sexuality. Whether straight or LGB, MCs were rated equally by straight cisgender voters. Dyadic LGB representation has no discernible impact on views of Congress as a collective institution, however. Earlier research suggested being represented by descriptive representatives does not affect overall assessments of Congress (Gay, 2002; Tate, 2003; Lawless, 2004). The results indicate the same is true for LGB representation. Evaluations of Congress remained the same regardless of whether the MC was LGB or straight, for both LGBT and straight cisgender voters.

Second, the measures of how much constituents knew about their MC suggest that LGB representatives may be a novelty for voters, increasing attention to politics, as found for other groups (Wolak, 2020). Constituents are more likely to know their MC's party affiliation, to be able to rate their job, and to evaluate their ideology, when their MC is LGB. Crucially, this

is true for both LGBT and straight cisgender constituents — suggesting that "novel" LGB MCs lead all voters to pay more attention, not just those who are descriptively represented.

Fourth and finally, these results show that ideological stereotypes of LGBTQ candidates as liberals continue to follow them into office. Even though they have concrete policy records as incumbents, LGB MCs are perceived as significantly more liberal than their straight colleagues. This stereotyping appears among both LGBT and straight cisgender constituents, suggesting that LGBTQ identity continues to serve as a powerful informational cue to voters about their politicians' records (Jones and Brewer, 2019).

As the simulated first differences make clear, these effects are often statistically significant but could be seen as substantively minor. The average first difference across all the significant estimates in Figures 1–3 is around .08 on the 0–1 scale. At the same time, a six percent boost in approval (the estimated first difference for LGBT constituents evaluating LGB, rather than straight, MCs) is something most incumbents would gladly take. And the substantive impact of an LGB MC is often around the same size as other central variables in political behavior research. Model (c) in Table 1, for example, suggests that the impact of an LGB MC on knowledge of the incumbent's party is larger than the impact of a respondent's race, ethnicity, or gender, and about one-third the size of education's effects. Although these are small effects, they are still substantively meaningful in both absolute and relative terms.

As with any study, this research comes with several important limitations that also suggest fruitful avenues for future research. The analyses are limited by both survey data constraints and real-world politics. Although the large sample size of the CES allows for the analysis of a relatively small population, the Common Content questionnaires lack several items used in previous research. The surveys do not consistently ask respondents about their levels of efficacy or trust, or whether they had contacted their MC — all dependent variables in previous literature. Nor do the surveys ask whether respondents know that their MC was LGB. Although we can make inferences from the dependent variables we do have access to, the mechanisms

behind these findings are unclear.

The real world politics of the "rainbow wave" also put limits on what these analyses can tell us. All but one of the LGB MCs in the study were Democrats.[7] Although the models all control for shared partisan affiliation between constituents and MCs, this precludes any analysis of whether constituents respond differently to LGB Democrats and Republicans. The relatively small number of out LGB MCs also mean that more fine-grained analyses of their identities are impossible. We cannot, for example, explore how the intersection of race/ethnicity and sexuality affects respondents, or whether lesbian MCs and gay men MCs are treated differently by constituents (see Montoya et al., 2022). Nor can we assess how constituents react to transgender MCs. Sarah McBride (D-DE), who took office in 2025, is not captured by these survey waves. As the number of LGBTQ candidates for office increases, such analyses may eventually become feasible. For now, the results in this paper stand as a first cut.

Despite these limitations, the results suggest both opportunities and challenges for LGB representatives in Congress. On the positive side, they receive higher approval ratings from LGBT constituents — and no negative response from straight cisgender constituents. This suggests that, all else equal, LGB MCs have a slight advantage in approval over their straight counterparts. On the negative side, the evidence suggests that constituents continue to stereotype LGB MCs as more liberal than their straight colleagues. While this may be advantageous among liberal electorates, it also has the potential to harm these incumbents as they appeal to more moderate voters. Finally, the results regarding constituent knowledge may be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, constituents appear more aware of LGB MCs, which could boost their fortunes. On the other hand, if LGB MCs incur greater scrutiny than straight MCs, this may also mean they have less "room for error" in office (Rajan and Pao, 2022).

[7] Rep. George Santos (R-NY) resigned from the House in Fall 2023 after serving for a year, but was included in the CES that year.

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Constituents' Responses to LGB Representatives in Congress

Online appendix

A1 Details of CES surveys

A1.1 Descriptive statistics

Individual-level continuous variables

	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Valid N
MC approval	0.51	0.36	0	1	237,431
Congress approval	0.31	0.30	0	1	290,539
MC ideology	0.54	0.34	0	1	202,822
Education	0.52	0.30	0	1	329,168
Religiosity	0.59	0.39	0	1	328,748
Age (decades)	4.88	1.74	1.8	10	329,168
Income	0.35	0.22	0	1	329,168
Interest in politics	0.72	0.34	0	1	328,579

Individual-level categorical variables

	%	Valid N
Know MC's party	64.7	328,518
Can rate MC approval	72.2	328,962
Can rate MC ideology	68.3	297,058
LGBT identity	10.6	307,169
Woman	55.7	329,168
Race		
White	70.5	
Asian	3.1	
Black	11.8	
Hispanic	9.7	
Other race	4.9	
Total	100.0	329,168
Partisan congruence		
Same party as MC	50.1	
Opposite party to MC	34.0	
Independent	15.9	
Total	100.0	318,113

District-level continuous variables

	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.	Valid N
Decades in office	1.01	0.88	0	5.30	3,632
Democratic vote share	0.52	0.17	0.17	0.97	3,525
District competitiveness	0.28	0.19	0.00	0.94	3,525
MC ideology	0.06	0.46	−0.80	0.85	3,040

Note: Means and standard deviations based on district-level data. In regression models, these variables are centered around the district-level means.

District-level categorical variables

	%	Valid N
LGB MC	1.6	3,632
Woman MC	23.8	3,632
MC race		
Asian	2.7	3,632
Black	12.1	3,632
Hispanic	8.6	3,632

Note: Percentages based on district-level data. MCs can be multiple races.

Total number of LGBTQ respondents and representatives

	LGB MC	Straight MC
LGBT respondent	560	31,918
Straight/cis respondent	4,469	270,222

Note: All CES years combined.

A1.2 Question wording

Question wording and response options for the dependent variables are shown below. Notes on the coding are *italicized*. All variables are coded to range between 0 and 1.

MC approval: Do you approve of the way each is doing their job...[Name of current House Representative]? Strongly approve; Somewhat approve; Somewhat disapprove; Strongly disapprove; Not sure. *Recoded to range from 1 to 0; "Not sure" responses coded as missing.*

Can rate MC approval: *Recodes MC approval to 0 (for "Not sure" responses) or 1 (all other responses.*

Know MC's party: Please indicate whether you've heard of this person and if so which party he or she is affiliated with...[Name of current House Representative]? Republican; Democrat; Other Party/Independent; Never heard of person. *Correct responses coded as 1, all others as 0.*

MC ideology: How would you rate each of the following individuals and groups...[Name of current House Representative]? Very liberal; Liberal; Somewhat liberal; Middle of the road; Somewhat conservative; Conservative; Very conservative; Not sure. *Recoded to range from 1 to 0; "Not sure" responses coded as missing.*

Can rate MC ideology: *Recodes MC ideology to 0 (for "Not sure" responses) or 1 (all other responses.*

Congress approval: Do you approve of the way each is doing their job...The U.S. Congress? Strongly approve; Somewhat approve; Somewhat disapprove; Strongly disapprove; Not sure. *Recoded to range from 1 to 0; "Not sure" responses coded as missing. In 2017 and 2019, "The U.S. Congress" was replaced by "The U.S. House of Representatives".*

A2 Replicating results for LGB respondents

The main text provides estimates for how LGBT constituents view LGB MCs. In this section, I briefly replicate the results looking only at how LGB constituents view LGB MCs. Table A1 replicates Table 1 in the main text.

Table A1: Replicating Table 1 with LGB identity

	(a) Approve of MC's job	(b) Approve of Congress	(c) Know MC's party	(d) Can rate MC's job	(e) Can rate MC's ideology	(f) Perceived MC ideology
Intercept	0.32 (0.00)***	0.33 (0.00)***	−3.23 (0.03)***	−1.97 (0.03)***	−2.50 (0.03)***	0.71 (0.05)***
LGB respondent	−0.01 (0.00)**	−0.02 (0.00)***	0.10 (0.02)***	0.05 (0.02)**	0.07 (0.02)***	0.21 (0.03)***
LGB MC	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.43 (0.08)***	0.46 (0.10)***	0.38 (0.08)***	−0.24 (0.08)**
LGB respondent × LGB MC	0.07 (0.02)***	−0.02 (0.01)	0.10 (0.13)	0.04 (0.13)	−0.02 (0.14)	−0.07 (0.22)
Respondent-level controls						
Other party	−0.18 (0.00)***	0.10 (0.00)***	0.27 (0.01)***	0.21 (0.01)***	0.35 (0.01)***	0.20 (0.02)***
Same party	0.28 (0.00)***	0.11 (0.00)***	0.57 (0.01)***	0.37 (0.01)***	0.51 (0.01)***	0.13 (0.02)***
Asian	0.01 (0.00)***	0.04 (0.00)***	−0.21 (0.03)***	−0.26 (0.03)***	−0.21 (0.03)***	−0.17 (0.05)***
Black	0.03 (0.00)***	0.03 (0.00)***	−0.04 (0.02)**	0.00 (0.02)	−0.06 (0.02)***	0.13 (0.03)***
Hispanic	−0.00 (0.00)	0.02 (0.00)***	−0.18 (0.02)***	−0.09 (0.02)***	−0.03 (0.02)	0.25 (0.03)***
Other race	−0.02 (0.00)***	−0.03 (0.00)***	0.01 (0.02)	−0.07 (0.02)**	−0.02 (0.02)	−0.06 (0.04)†
Women	0.01 (0.00)***	0.02 (0.00)***	−0.30 (0.01)***	−0.45 (0.01)***	−0.47 (0.01)***	0.06 (0.01)***
Education	0.00 (0.00)†	−0.04 (0.00)***	1.01 (0.02)***	0.54 (0.02)***	0.74 (0.02)***	0.23 (0.03)***
Religiosity	0.05 (0.00)***	0.06 (0.00)***	−0.18 (0.01)***	0.20 (0.01)***	0.16 (0.01)***	−0.15 (0.02)***
Age	0.01 (0.00)***	−0.02 (0.00)***	0.34 (0.00)***	0.28 (0.00)***	0.22 (0.00)***	−0.00 (0.00)
Interest in politics	0.01 (0.00)***	−0.07 (0.00)***	1.99 (0.02)***	1.76 (0.02)***	2.12 (0.02)***	0.23 (0.03)***
Income	0.01 (0.00)***	−0.02 (0.00)***	0.82 (0.02)***	0.45 (0.03)***	0.68 (0.03)***	−0.03 (0.04)
MC/district-level controls						
Democrat MC	0.04 (0.00)***	0.01 (0.00)**	−0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.03)	−2.94 (0.05)***
Black MC	−0.01 (0.00)***	0.00 (0.00)	0.28 (0.04)***	0.08 (0.05)†	0.13 (0.04)***	0.21 (0.03)***
Asian MC	0.01 (0.01)*	0.02 (0.01)*	0.22 (0.07)***	−0.05 (0.08)	0.08 (0.06)	−0.06 (0.06)
Hispanic MC	−0.01 (0.00)*	0.02 (0.00)***	0.21 (0.04)***	0.08 (0.05)†	0.12 (0.04)**	0.13 (0.03)***
Woman MC	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)**	0.27 (0.03)***	0.20 (0.03)***	0.24 (0.02)***	−0.17 (0.02)***
Decades in office	−0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)†	0.11 (0.01)***	0.15 (0.02)***	0.13 (0.01)***	0.06 (0.01)***
Democratic vote share	−0.02 (0.01)	0.03 (0.01)**	−0.10 (0.11)	−0.19 (0.14)	−0.02 (0.10)	0.36 (0.09)***
District competitiveness	0.02 (0.01)**	0.01 (0.01)*	−0.26 (0.06)***	−0.25 (0.08)**	−0.26 (0.06)***	0.04 (0.04)
NOMINATE score						0.96 (0.06)***
N respondents	215,971	261,129	290,116	290,382	262,239	153,879
N MCs/districts	3,519	3,520	3,523	3,522	3,377	2,810

***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$; †$p < 0.1$

Note: Models (a), (b), and (f) are linear regressions predicting continuous dependent variables; models (c)–(e) are logistic regressions predicting binary dependent variables.