Emphasizing similarities or differences: framing effects in LGBTQ movement mobilization

Philip Edward Jones

Published online: 30 Jun 2025.

Submit your article to this journal ⬈

View related articles ⬈

View Crossmark data ⬈

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Emphasizing similarities or differences: framing effects in LGBTQ movement mobilization

Philip Edward Jones

Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware, USA

ABSTRACT

Marginalized groups face major challenges in mobilizing the public, including how to frame their own identities. Should groups emphasize how similar they are to the dominant majority? Or can they focus on what makes them different without losing support? And do these frames affect internal communities and outsider allies in different ways? These questions have been particularly fraught for the LGBTQ movement, which has oscillated between presenting themselves as "just like" straight people and stressing the distinctiveness of LGBTQ identities. In this paper, I test the effectiveness of these identity frames with a unique survey experiment. Separate samples of LGBT and straight cisgender respondents were shown appeals from a (fictitious) LGBTQ interest group. The appeal emphasized either LGBTQ similarities with, or differences from, straight identities. Contrary to pre-registered expectations, how the group framed their identity had no effect on interest in joining the group's action, views of its politics, or beliefs about its effectiveness. This was true for LGBT and straight cisgender respondents alike. Although claims about the importance of identity framing are commonplace in the literature, this suggests that the choice between emphasizing similarities or differences may have fewer consequences for contemporary LGBTQ groups.

Marginalized groups face numerous challenges in mobilizing public support for their cause. Usually lacking resources, and with few political opportunities to challenge the status quo, social movements frequently turn to strategic messaging as a way to garner support (Bonilla and Tillery 2020; Snow and Benford 1988; Snow et al. 1986). In the language of framing theory, groups make choices about which considerations to emphasize when appealing to the public (Chong and Druckman 2007; Druckman 2001a, 2001b; Harrison and Michelson 2017b). By highlighting some aspects of their cause, and downplaying others, they can frame how audiences perceive the group and in turn how likely they are to participate on its behalf.

A key strategic choice is how minoritized groups should frame their own identities, and specifically whether to emphasize similarities or differences with dominant groups in society (Bernstein 1997; Einwohner, Reger, and Myers 2008; Ghaziani, Taylor, and Stone 2016). Should social movements highlight commonalities with the majority,

CONTACT Philip Edward Jones ✉ pejones@udel.edu

framing their identities as "just like" the audience's? Or can they adopt a frame of differences, emphasizing what sets them apart, without losing support? This choice is widely assumed to be consequential. The "framing perspective" within social movement research, for example, argues that the choice of identity frames can make the difference between successful mobilization and failure (Bonilla and Tillery 2020; Snow and Benford 1988; Snow et al. 1986).

These decisions have been particularly fraught for modern LGBTQ groups. The movement has "oscillate[d] between collective identities that alternately celebrate and suppress their differences from the straight majority" (Ghaziani, Taylor, and Stone 2016, 166; see also Bernstein 1997; D'Emilio 1983; Seidman 1993). Some groups have emphasized similarities, seeking out "straight-acting" figureheads (Godsoe 2015, 140) who will "drive home the message that gay people are essentially just like everybody else" (Carpenter 2012, 188). Others have encouraged LGBTQ people to "stop mimicking straights" (Wittman 1970, 4) and instead emphasize their "in-your-face difference" (Gamson 1995, 395). Whether to frame LGBTQ identity in terms of similarities or differences has been a recurring debate throughout the movement's history.

Further complicating these decisions is the need to speak to multiple audiences simultaneously. On one hand, groups must find ways to gain support from the dominant majority (as when LGBTQ organizations appeal to straight cisgender allies). On the other, they must also mobilize members of their own community. These choices – whether to appeal to outside allies or internal community members, and whether to emphasize similarities or differences – are the two "central dimensions" along which activists frame their appeals for support (Einwohner, Reger, and Myers 2008, 7).

We lack direct evidence on the causal effects of these LGBTQ identity frames on different audiences, however. Are groups that frame themselves as similar to straight cisgender people perceived differently than those that emphasize differences? Is one frame more mobilizing than another? And do LGBTQ people respond to these frames in the same way that straight cisgender audiences do?

To answer these questions, I designed an online survey experiment that is novel in two regards. First, it directly tests the effectiveness of different identity frames. Respondents were shown an ad from a (fictitious) LGBTQ interest group, manipulated to express the belief that LGBTQ identities are either similar to or different from straight cisgender identities. Questions probed respondents' willingness to participate in the group's political action, and their perceptions of the group. Second, the survey has a unique sample. Roughly equal numbers of LGBT[1] and straight cisgender respondents were interviewed, allowing me to assess with confidence how different frames affect different audiences.

The results do not support (pre-registered) expectations drawn from the literature. Whether the group framed LGBTQ identity as similar or different did not change respondents' interest in the group, willingness to participate on its behalf, perceptions of its politics, beliefs about its effectiveness, or views about how welcoming it was. Critically, this was the case for LGBT and straight cisgender respondents alike: whether part of the community or not, different identity frames did not affect likely mobilization. Exploratory analysis suggests that straight cisgender respondents' pre-existing attitudes toward LGBT people did not moderate the frames' effects, either. Framing LGBTQ identity in different ways simply did not shift people's views of the group or their participation in its political action.

Although we should be cautious in extrapolating from a single experiment, the potential implications of these "null" results are significant. For academic research, they counterbalance claims in the social movement literature that identify framing is the key to a group's success (Benford and Snow 2000; Bonilla and Tillery 2020; Polletta and Jasper 2001). The results also speak to real-world interest group strategies. Modern LGBTQ organizations have mostly adopted a similarities frame, centering those members seen as most like straight cisgender people (see, e.g., Jones 2022; Moscowitz 2013; Strolovitch and Crowder 2018). These results suggest that the benefits of doing so may be smaller than assumed, and that "celebrating" differences (Bernstein 1997) may not necessarily result in a loss of support. I return to all of these points in the conclusion.

First, however, I introduce the general concept of framing and its specific application to identity in the social movement literature. I then briefly summarize the debates over identity frames within the LGBTQ movement, before introducing the survey samples, experimental design, and main results.

Strategic framing by social movements

Theories of framing start from the idea that any issue "can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations" (Chong and Druckman 2007, 104). The issue of same-gender marriage, for example, could be viewed in terms of legal benefits, expressions of love, or religious scripture, among many other considerations (Harrison and Michelson 2017b). "Frames in communication" (Druckman 2001a) are constructed when some subset of these considerations are emphasized in a message, and thus "call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements" (Entman 1993, 55). For example, a group might choose to frame their support for marriage equality in terms of love by emphasizing commitment, or in terms of rights by highlighting legal considerations.

These frames in communication "tell people how to weight the often conflicting considerations that enter into everyday political deliberations" (Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson 1997, 226) and thus shape public opinion. As a result, groups invest considerable effort in choosing a frame. This may be particularly necessary for marginalized groups, who have few other resources or opportunities to change public opinion. Indeed, as Chong and Druckman (2007, 117-8) note, "[p]erhaps the most advanced research in this area comes out of the social movement literature that explores how different groups employ frames for mobilization purposes". Within this literature, scholars argue that views of a movement, and people's willingness to participate in it, are determined by how it frames its appeals (Benford and Snow 2000; Bonilla and Tillery 2020; Snow and Benford 1988; Snow et al. 1986). Ultimately, this "framing perspective" suggests, the frames that groups adopt can be "the difference between successful and unsuccessful movements" (Bonilla and Tillery 2020, 948; see also Benford and Snow 2000; Polletta and Jasper 2001).

Framing identity

Perhaps the most important framing choice for marginalized groups is what considerations to emphasize when discussing their own identities (Bernstein 1997; Einwohner,

Reger, and Myers 2008; Hunt, Benford, and Snow 1994). One review of the literature sees identity framing as determinative of a movement's success in multiple realms:

> How successfully groups frame their identities for the public thus affects their ability to recruit members and supporters, gain a public hearing, make alliances with other groups, and defuse opposition. (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 295).

Choosing an identity frame that emphasizes the right considerations is thus of critical importance to organizations trying to mobilize the public (Bernstein 1997; Dugan 2008; Polletta and Jasper 2001).

What identity frames are available to marginalized groups? Collective identities raise a range of relevant considerations, among which are whether they are seen as similar to, or different from, the rest of society (Bernstein 1997; Einwohner, Reger, and Myers 2008; Ghaziani, Taylor, and Stone 2016). Different scholars describe this in different ways: whether groups should "celebrate or suppress differences from the majority" (Bernstein 1997, 532); choose "to play up or down the differences on which their disadvantages rest" (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 295); and "whether the focus is on sameness or difference" (Einwohner, Reger, and Myers 2008, 7); among others (see Ghaziani, Taylor, and Stone 2016, 166 for more examples). Despite the differences in terminology, the literature agrees: most marginalized groups must choose whether to frame their identities as either *similar to* or *different from* the mainstream when appealing for support.

This choice is further complicated by the fact that most groups seek to mobilize multiple audiences. Organizations usually appeal both to the dominant majority in society *and* their own community simultaneously. Crucially, different identity frames may have disparate effects on different audiences. Framing identity as distinct from the rest of society may successfully appeal to community members but deter potential outside allies; emphasizing similarities may increase outside support at the cost of internal mobilization (Einwohner, Reger, and Myers 2008; Myers 2008).[2]

In short, finding a successful identity frame is not straightforward. Most marginalized groups struggle with how to present their identity when appealing to internal and external audiences. These debates have surfaced repeatedly within the LGBTQ movement, which has "oscillated" between emphasizing similarities and highlighting differences as it made appeals to community members and straight cisgender allies (Ghaziani, Taylor, and Stone 2016).

Identity framing in the LGBTQ movement

Within the modern LGBTQ movement, activists have faced "internal political struggle over agendas of assimilation (emphasizing sameness) and separation (emphasizing difference)… since the inception of these movements" (Gamson 1995, 395; see also Bernstein 1997; D'Emilio 1983; Seidman 1993). In this section, I briefly sketch some of the recurring themes from these debates. I do not claim that proponents of each frame were a united front, consistent in their logics, or facing the same constraints. Rather, this brief overview is provided to indicate the long-running debates over LGBTQ identity framing, and to contextualize the appeals used in this paper's experiment.

Emphasizing similarities with straight cisgender people

The early homophile groups of the 1950s and 60s made similarities between LGBTQ and straight identities central to their messaging. Organizations like the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society "emphasized conformity and attempted to minimize any differences between heterosexuality and homosexuality" (D'Emilio 1983; Rimmerman 2014, 18). Activists framed LGBTQ identities as indistinguishable from straight cisgender ones. As Marilyn Rieger, a Mattachine member, argued in 1953, "We know we are the same, no different than anyone else. Our difference is an unimportant one to heterosexual society, unless we make it important" (quoted in D'Emilio 1983, 79).

This framing outlived the homophile groups. Decades later, influential activists continued to argue that straight Americans could be won over by framing LGBTQ people as just like them. In their self-described "gay manifesto for the 1990s," Kirk and Madsen advocated for a PR campaign built on emphasizing similarities:

> When you're very different, and people hate you for it, this is what you do: first you get your foot in the door, by being as *similar* as possible; then, and only then – when your one little difference is finally accepted – can you start dragging in your other peculiarities, one by one (Kirk and Madsen 1989, 146, italics in original).

Since then, emphasizing similarities has become the core communication strategy of most modern LGBTQ groups (Jones 2022; Strolovitch and Crowder 2018). Messaging during the push to repeal sodomy laws and enact marriage equality was dominated by how similar LGBTQ people were to straight people. Lawyers for the ACLU described their strategy in *Lawrence v. Texas* as trying to "drive home the message that gay people are essentially just like everybody else" (quoted in Carpenter 2012, 188). Groups sought out "straight-acting plaintiffs" who would "seem 'just like us'" to win over straight allies (Godsoe 2015). And marriage equality activists issued strategy memos telling activists to highlight "similarities" and their "share[d] similar values" (Freedom to Marry 2011, 4).

The arguments made for adopting this frame are often relatively instrumental. Emphasizing similarities with straight cisgender audiences, the logic went, would make them view LGBTQ people more favorably and be more supportive of LGBTQ rights (Jones 2022; Moscowitz 2013). As such, groups were encouraged to frame LGBTQ identity as similar to "mainstream" society if they wanted to win over straight cisgender voters In contrast, others in the movement have pushed a competing frame that emphasizes LGBTQ *differences* from straight people.

Emphasizing differences from straight cisgender people

Framing LGBTQ identity in terms of difference is most associated with gay liberation thinkers in the 1960s and 70s, and later queer politics groups. Carl Wittman's 1970 "Gay Manifesto," for example, called on LGBTQ people to "stop mimicking straights, stop censoring ourselves," and argued that the strategy of "showing the world that 'we're just the same as you' is avoiding the real issue, and is an expression of self-hatred" (Wittman 1970, 4). In this way, activists advocated for "celebrating" rather than "suppressing" what made them different (see Bernstein 1997).

Arguments in favor of highlighting difference re-appear throughout the movement's history (Ghaziani, Taylor, and Stone 2016; Murib 2018; Proctor 2022; Rimmerman 2014). In early debates about marriage equality, for example, prominent voices argued that "looking to our sameness and de-emphasizing our differences" would "undermine the very purpose of our movement and begin the dangerous process of silencing our different voices" (Ettelbrick 1989-2016, 37, 36)

Later queer politics groups took a similar approach. Their identity framing "asserts in-your-face difference, with an edge of defiant separatism" and announced that "We are different" (Gamson 1995, 395). Although the similarities frame has dominated main-stream groups' messaging, plenty of activists continued to argue that differences should be emphasized instead.

Unlike those advocating for emphasizing similarities, the intended audiences for these appeals highlighting differences is more ambiguous. Liberationist groups may have wanted to celebrate difference sincerely, rather than as a strategic frame designed to win over a given audience. Those emphasizing differences appeared far less concerned with how audiences would react than their assimilationist counterparts, and more on what activists saw as the right goals for society.

These two competing frames – presenting LGBTQ people as either similar to or different from straight cisgender people – have repeatedly surfaced in the movement's discussions about how to mobilize supporters. Although they disagreed about which frame to adopt, both camps put LGBTQ identity and its relationship to straight society at the center of their messaging. In this, they are supported by academic research which shows that identity can be a powerful force for mobilizing support for LGBTQ rights.

Using identity to mobilize

The focus of this paper is on how different ways of framing LGBTQ identity change mobilization for LGBTQ rights. No previous work that I am aware of assesses these effects. Related research does, however, show that framing appeals in terms of shared or favorable identities can shape attitudes on a range of social issues.

Harrison and Michelson (2017a)'s Theory of Dissonant Identity Priming (TDIP) argues that people's views can be altered when provided with unexpected cues from someone with whom they share a social identity. For example, exposure to messages from religious leaders in favor of LGBTQ rights leads religious people to be more supportive of marriage equality (Harrison and Michelson 2015, 2017a). Emphasizing common identities shared by the speaker and the audience may make respondents more open to changing their minds. Similarly, messaging that bolsters respondents' sense of self identity may make them more accepting of others (Michelson and Harrison 2020).

Other research suggests that appeals from likable sources – who are presumably seen as most similar to the audience – may be most effective. Han (2009) manipulated a group's fundraising appeal by inserting a brief reference to the canvasser's own child-hood. Doing so increased how likable participants thought the canvasser was, and their willingness to donate to the group. In contrast, Harrison and Michelson (2012) find that personalizing marriage equality appeals had no mobilizing effect, and in fact

decreased donations. They speculate this could be due to respondents seeing the group as less credible, or individualizing the issue. Finding a source and a frame that connects with audiences and mobilizes them to action is clearly not straightforward.

This prior research shows that identity can help mobilize support for LGBTQ rights, among other issues. The current study diverges somewhat, even as it builds on the point that identity is a powerful force in shaping public attitudes. In terms of independent variables, I focus on how LGBTQ organizations frame identity, rather than whether audiences themselves share an identity with the speaker (as in TDIP). In terms of dependent variables, I focus on how these frames affect audiences' perceptions of organizations and their willingness to participate politically on their behalf, rather than on their views of LGBTQ rights.[3] In this way, my study builds on this previous work showing the myriad ways identity can mobilize support for LGBTQ rights.

Hypotheses

To capture the argument that emphasizing similarities will increase positive views of LGBTQ groups and mobilize supporters, I formulate the following hypothesis:

H1: Compared to interest group appeals that emphasize similarities between LGBTQ and straight cisgender people, appeals that emphasize LGBTQ differences will lead to

(a)Lower levels of mobilization by straight cisgender people on behalf of the group

(b)More negative perceptions of the group by straight cisgender people

Largely unexamined has been how LGBTQ audiences themselves respond to different identity frames: surveys of LGBTQ respondents are rare (Jones 2021). Accordingly, I formulate expectations about responses as a research question rather than a directional hypothesis:

RQ1: How do these different appeals affect LGBT people's mobilization and perceptions of the group?

H1 and RQ1 were pre-registered before data collection, along with the analytical plan described shortly.[4] To test them, I designed an original survey experiment fielded on separate samples of straight cisgender and LGBT respondents, as described in the next section.

Data and experimental design

I embedded an experiment in an online survey conducted in early 2021. Survey firm Dynata provided two separate samples of respondents from their panel. The first was of respondents who had identified as straight and cisgender in earlier surveys; the second those who had previously identified as LGBT. Screener questions asked for respondents' sexual orientation and gender identity to confirm eligibility for each sample. Quotas based on U.S. Census parameters were originally set for respondent

gender, race, ethnicity, and education. These were later relaxed for LGBT respondents to increase sample size. This is not a random sample, but respondents were demographically diverse in ways similar to the U.S. population (see online appendix A1.1). In total, 1,200 straight cisgender respondents and 1,141 LGBT respondents completed the surveys. The two samples are analyzed separately throughout, but completed identical surveys, except as noted below.

Experimental conditions. Respondents were shown an "online ad" from an organization called the Equality Foundation (EF), which they were told was a "new interest group that lobbies for LGBT rights." EF is fictional, but the ad was based on appeals made by real groups.[5] Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three versions of the ad, summarized in Table 1 and shown in full in online appendix A1.2. The ads manipulated how the group framed LGBTQ identities. One emphasized similarities between LGBTQ and straight cisgender identities (for example, the headline reads "LGBTQ people are just like straight people. And we should have the same rights"), one emphasized differences ("LGBTQ people aren't just like straight people. But we should have the same rights"), and one did not discuss identity explicitly ("LGBTQ people should have the same rights as straight people"); this serves as a control condition.

Besides their identity framing, the ads were almost identical across conditions. All used the same images, formatting, highlighted the same policy issues, and made the same calls to action. Except where necessary to maintain grammatical coherence, the text was held constant across conditions. The only differences were their identity frames, representing a rigorous test of H1 and RQ1.[6]

Earlier versions of the ads were pre-tested on convenience samples of LGBT and straight cisgender respondents recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and Prolific, as discussed in online appendix A2.

Table 1. Text of experimental stimuli.

	Control condition	Emphasizing similarities condition	Emphasizing differences condition
Headline	LGBTQ people should have the same rights as straight people.	LGBTQ people are just like straight people. And we should have the same rights.	LGBTQ people aren't just like straight people. But we should have the same rights.
Text	LGBTQ people should have the same rights as everyone else.	Society shouldn't expect LGBTQ people to be any different from straight people. We're a regular community with our own families, jobs, and culture. And we should have the same rights as everyone else.	Society shouldn't expect LGBTQ people to be just like straight people. We're a unique community with our own families, jobs, and culture. But we should have the same rights as everyone else.
	Discrimination is still legal in most states, though. LGBTQ people can legally be denied service in stores, harassed in public, and kicked out by their landlords. That's wrong, and the Equality Foundation is making sure it changes.	Discrimination is still legal in most states, though. LGBTQ people can legally be denied service in stores, harassed in public, and kicked out by their landlords. That's wrong, and the Equality Foundation is making sure it changes.	Discrimination is still legal in most states, though. LGBTQ people can legally be denied service in stores, harassed in public, and kicked out by their landlords. That's wrong, and the Equality Foundation is making sure it changes.
	Join us to fight discrimination and ensure equal treatment for everyone!	Let's be proud of what we have in common. We're the same as straight people and we should get the same rights. Join us to fight discrimination and ensure equal treatment for everyone!	Let's be proud of what makes us different. We shouldn't have to be the same as straight people to get the same rights. Join us to fight discrimination and ensure equal treatment for everyone!

Note: See online appendix A1.2 for full stimuli, including visual images.

Manipulation and attention checks. Respondents were asked to place the group's beliefs on a scale from 0 ("LGBTQ people are completely different from straight people") to 100 ("LGBTQ people are completely the same as straight people"). The mean score in the control condition was 69.8. In the condition emphasizing similarities, this was 73.4 (a difference from the control of 3.6, $p<.05$); in the condition emphasizing differences, 58.1 (a difference of -11.7, $p<.001$).[7] Respondents were more likely to say the group believed LGBTQ people to be similar to straight people if shown the similarities ad than the differences ad.

Two questions assessed attention to the ad. One asked respondents to identify the Foundation's highest priority issue from a list of four; 64.2% correctly said protecting LGBTQ people from discrimination. The second concerned what the group had asked readers to do. This was a tougher question, since the ad only briefly said "join us" in the final sentence. Most respondents selected "not sure"; only 24.6% chose "join the group." However, there were no significant differences across conditions (see online appendix A3.1), indicating that each ad was equally engaging to respondents. Excluding those who did not correctly answer the checks would bias the estimates, and so I calculate intention to treat (ITT) effects of being assigned to one condition rather than another (Montgomery, Nyhan, and Torres 2018).

Debriefing. By design, the experiment included deceptive information. A debriefing at the end told respondents the group was fictitious and explained the reasons for the manipulation.

Dependent variables. Following the ads, respondents were asked a battery of questions about the group. For analytical clarity, all are rescaled to range from 0 to 1. Potential mobilization by the group was measured in several ways. Respondents rated how interested they were in learning more about the group, from 0 (not at all) to 1 (extremely interested). Their likelihood of donating money, attending a protest, and writing to their Member of Congress, if asked by the group, ranges from 0 (not at all likely) to 1 (extremely likely). I average these three (Cronbach's alpha = .89) to create a measure of likely participation.

Views of the group included perceptions of its ideology, ranging from 0 (very liberal) to 1 (very conservative). Respondents rated how well the words "effective," "trustworthy," and "aggressive" described the group, each ranging from 0 (not at all well) to 1 (extremely well). How welcoming the group was to respondents ranges from 0 (not at all) to 1 (extremely).

Covariates. For the straight cisgender sample only, two variables measure pre-stimuli attitudes toward LGBT people. Feeling thermometer ratings of LGB people and of transgender people are coded to range from 0 (feeling very cold/negative towards) to 1 (feeling very warm/positive towards). The two ratings were highly correlated ($r = .89$) and so I average them together. Respondents were also asked whether they had LGB and transgender friends, family members, or acquaintances. I code these from 0 (no contact with LGB [transgender] people) to 1 (some contact), and include both measures in the models.

Analytical plan. As in the pre-registered plan, the straight cisgender and LGBT samples are analyzed separately. Since neither sample is intended to be representative of a given population, I do not construct survey weights. Linear regression models are fitted for each dependent variable and sample in turn. For straight cisgender respondents,

these models control for (pre-treatment) attitudes toward LGBT people and interpersonal contact with LGBT people. Estimates are simulated from these models with covariates set to their average values.

H1 and RQ1 are written in terms of comparing the "same" and "different" conditions. To provide readers with full information about these frames' impact, I estimate (1) the average response for those assigned to each condition; (2) the average treatment effect of both the differences and similarities conditions, relative to the control condition; and (3) the average treatment effect of the differences condition relative to the similarities condition.

On the limits of experimental designs. Although this design allows us to precisely estimate the causal effects of identity frames, the methodology is limited in ways that readers should consider before moving forward. Most importantly, unlike the long-running debate about how to present LGBTQ identity, this experiment is necessarily timebound. It cannot tell us, for example, what the effects of Mattachine's framing in the 1950s were. Rather, it provides an estimate of how *contemporary* audiences respond to such frames. The experiment also only captures the effect of a single brief appeal, similar to how most interest group appeals are evaluated (see, e.g., Bonilla and Tillery 2020; Harrison and Michelson 2017a; Michelson and Harrison 2020). As such, it cannot capture the effects of long-term, repeated exposure to ongoing communication. I return to these and other related points in the conclusions.

Results

I present the results in two ways. Figure 1 shows the predicted values for each dependent variable, for straight cisgender respondents in plot (a) and for LGBT respondents in plot (b). Average estimates are shown for the control (C), emphasizing differences (D), and emphasizing similarities (S) conditions, with 95% confidence intervals. These are predicted from regression models shown in online appendix A4, which control for pre-treatment affect toward LGBT people and interpersonal contact in the straight cisgender data.

Figure 2 presents Average Treatment Effects (ATEs) of being assigned to a given ad condition, calculated from the same models. ATEs are calculated relative to two different baselines. Plots (a) and (b) show the ATE of being assigned to the differences (D) or similarities (S) condition, relative to being assigned to the control condition. Plots (c) and (d) show the ATE of being assigned to the differences condition, relative to being assigned to the similarities condition.

All three sets of estimates tell a consistent story. How the ad framed LGBTQ identity did not systematically alter perceptions of the group or mobilization on its behalf. This is the case across dependent variables, and respondent sexuality/gender identity.

Start by taking straight cisgender respondents, as shown in Figures 1(a) and 2(a). H1 predicted that emphasizing LGBTQ differences would decrease mobilization and increase negative perceptions of the group among this audience. That is not the case. Respondents' likelihood of taking political action on behalf of the group was unaffected by the identity frame used, as can be seen in the first row of Figure 1(a). In the control condition, straight cisgender respondents scored .30 on the 0–1 scale [95% confidence intervals = .28, .33]. When shown the ad emphasizing differences, the score was .31 [.28,.33]; for emphasizing similarities, .30 [.27, .32]. As the ATEs in
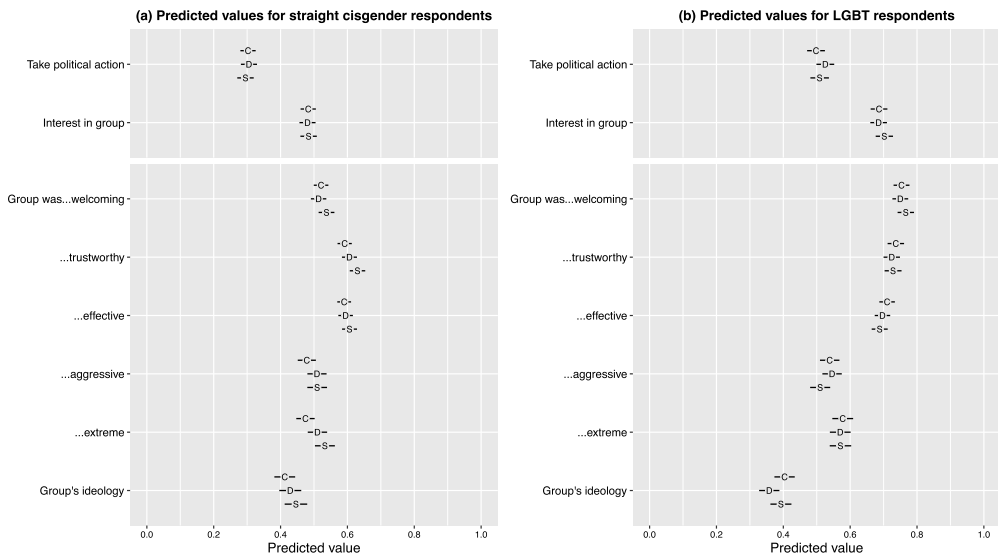
Figure 1. Predicted mobilization and views of group, by identity frame used in ad.

Note: Predicted values for those assigned to the control (C) condition, to the ad emphasizing similarities (S), and to the ad emphasizing differences (D), with 95% confidence intervals. Estimates simulated from regression models shown in online appendix A4. For straight cisgender respondents in plot (a), models control for pre-treatment feelings toward, and interpersonal contact with, LGBT people.

Figure 2 make clear, the differences between these estimates are not significant. Relative to the control condition, the effect of exposure to the differences ad on political activity is −.01 [−.05, .03] while the effect of the similarities ad is .00 [−.04, .04]. Likewise, the effect of exposure to the differences ad relative to the similarities ad (shown in plot 2(c)) is also insignificant, .01 [−.03, .05]. Interest in the group is similarly unaffected: relative to the control, the ATEs for both emphasizing similarities and differences are .00 [−.04, .04]. Straight cisgender respondents were equally likely to mobilize on behalf of the group no matter the identity frames it used.

Perceptions of the group were likewise unchanged by the group's framing. When shown ads that emphasized differences, straight cisgender respondents were no more or less likely to say the group was welcoming, trustworthy, effective, aggressive, extreme, or liberal. Counter to H1 and previous work that suggests appeals from more "likable" groups are more effective (Han 2009), framing identity in terms of differences or similarities did not make a difference to perceptions of the group.

There is one exception. Relative to the control condition, emphasizing similarities made respondents see the group as more extreme (ATE = .06 [.01, .11] in Figure 2(a)).[8] Since this is the only significant ATE among the 24 calculated for straight cisgender respondents, I interpret it as representing statistical noise across the repeated measures rather than a systematic effect.

The other potential audience for these appeals – LGBT people – was also unmoved by the ad's framing. Take perceptions of the group, shown in the bottom section of each plot. LGBT respondents perceived the group as equally effective (the predicted values shown in Figure 1(b) are .71 [.68, .74] for the control condition, .70 [.67, .72] for the differences condition, and .69 [.66, .72] for the similarities condition) and equally
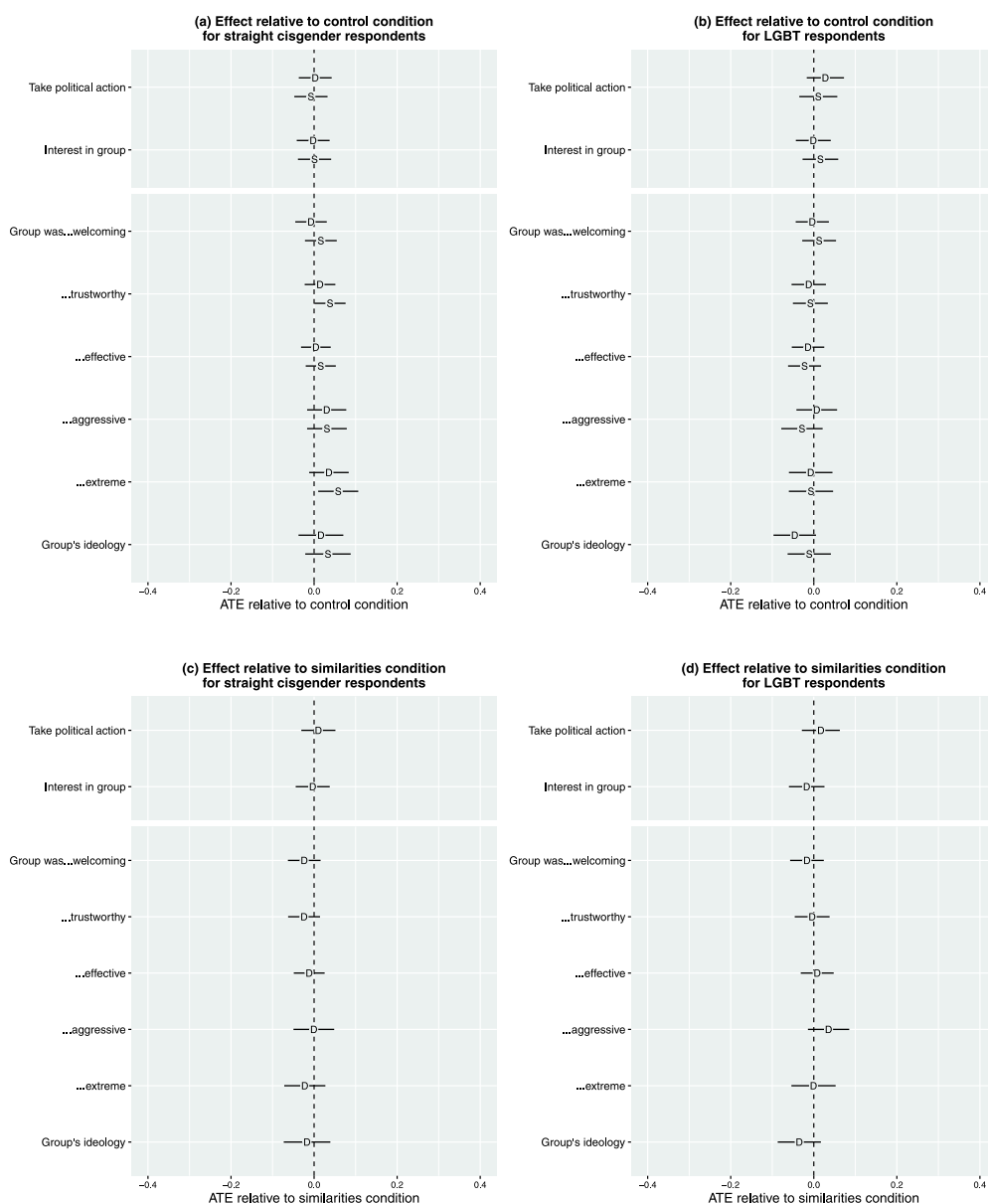
Figure 2. Average Treatment Effects (ATEs) of emphasizing identity similarities or differences.

Note: Plots (a) and (b) show ATEs of emphasizing differences (D) or similarities (S), relative to the control condition. Plots (c) and (d) show ATEs of emphasizing differences relative to emphasizing similarities. All estimates and 95% confidence intervals simulated from regression models shown in online appendix A4. For straight cisgender respondents in plots (a) and (c), models control for pre-treatment feelings toward, and interpersonal contact with, LGBT people.

trustworthy (.74 [.71, .77] for the control, .72 [.70, .75] for the differences condition, and .73 [.70, .76] for the similarities ad). Views of how welcoming, aggressive, extreme, or liberal likewise did not vary across conditions.

The different frames did not change LGBT mobilization, either. Relative to the control condition, taking action on behalf of the group was unchanged when the ad emphasized

differences (ATE relative to control condition = .03 [−.02, .07]) or when it emphasized similarities (.01 [−.03, .06]). Similarly, interest in the group held constant across conditions: the ATE for emphasizing differences relative to the control was .00 [−.04, .04]; for emphasizing similarities .02 [−.03, .06]. Just like with straight cisgender respondents, how the group framed LGBTQ identity had no statistically significant effect on LGBT respondents.[9]

Overall, neither LGBT nor straight cisgender respondents were consistently affected by these different identity frames. The predicted values in Figure 1 are similar across conditions, a point emphasized by the ATEs in Figure 2 that are almost all indistinguishable from zero. Audiences were not significantly (de)mobilized by emphasizing similarities or differences, and perceptions of the group did not vary systematically by its use of identity framing.

No evidence for substantively meaningful effects

Figure 2 shows that the ATEs' confidence intervals almost always encompass zero. This is not proof that the actual effect is zero, however, since the confidence intervals also encompass other values, some of which may be considered substantively meaningful (Rainey 2014). I adopt the approach recommended by Rainey (2014), and compare the largest possible effects implied by the confidence intervals to three benchmarks: (1) the difference in attitudes between straight cisgender and LGBT respondents; (2) the effect of interpersonal contact (for straight cisgender respondents); and (3) the effect of affect towards LGBT people (for straight cisgender respondents).

All three of these factors are associated with large effects.[10] LGBT respondents were .19 points more likely to take action for the group than straight cisgender respondents. Among straight cisgender people, those with interpersonal contact were .16 points more likely, while those with warmer views of LGBT people were .22 points more likely than those with cool views (see online appendix A6 for more details).

These are greater than even the largest possible effects implied by the confidence intervals in Figure 2. In absolute terms, the largest bound is the upper limit for the ATE of emphasizing differences on taking action among LGBT respondents. It is .06, substantially smaller than the effects of sexuality and gender identity, interpersonal contact, or affect towards LGBT people. The largest plausible effect of the experimental treatments on mobilization is at most a third the size of effects of factors considered meaningful in the literature. Not only are the effects of these identity frames not significantly different from zero, they do not rise to the level of other substantively meaningful effect sizes.

Exploring potential heterogeneous treatment effects

Are the null results due to heterogeneous reactions among respondents with different predispositions?[11] If, say, the treatments affected respondents with positive feelings towards LGBT people differently from those with negative feelings, then the two countervailing effects could cancel out on average.

To assess this, I take advantage of the fact that straight cisgender respondents' predispositions toward LGBT people were measured *prior* to the experiment (LGBT respondents were not asked these questions). I fit models that interact the experimental
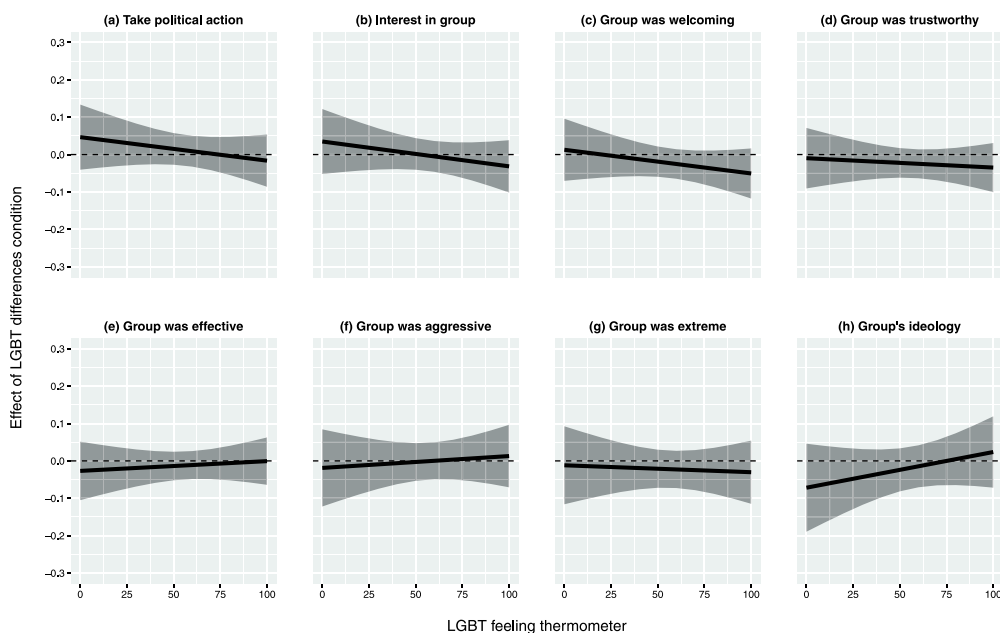
Figure 3. Effects of emphasizing differences, by pre-treatment rating of LGBT people (straight cisgender respondents only).

Note: Effects of emphasizing differences, relative to emphasizing similarities, by pre-treatment thermometer ratings of LGBT people. Straight cisgender respondents only. Estimates and 95% confidence intervals simulated from regression models shown in online appendix A7, which also control for interpersonal contact with LGBT people.

conditions with the LGBT feeling thermometer rating and interpersonal contact, previously used as covariates. This allows me to estimate the effects of different ads, given different values of these predispositions.

Figure 3 shows the effect of assignment to the ad emphasizing differences (rather than the ad emphasizing similarities), across the range of affect toward LGBT people. These are equivalent to the effects in Figure 2(c), this time estimated for respondents at different levels of LGBT affect. Model coefficients, and equivalent plots for interpersonal contact, are in online appendix A7.

The effect of the ad did not vary with straight cisgender respondents' prior attitudes. This can be seen visually by the essentially flat lines in Figure 3 and the confidence intervals that consistently overlap zero. As a concrete example, take respondents' beliefs that the group was trustworthy, shown in plot 3(d). Among those with the coldest views of LGBT people prior to the experiment, the effect of the ad emphasizing identity differences was non-significant, just −.01 [−.09, .07]. Among those with the *warmest* views, the estimated effect is indistinguishable: −.03 [−.10, .03]. Whether respondents felt positively or negatively toward LGBT people did not moderate the effect of the ad on perceptions of the group's trustworthiness.

This is true for all eight dependent variables. Additional analyses, presented in online appendix A7, show a similar lack of effects for interpersonal contact with LGBT people. The average null effects of these identity frames are not masking heterogeneous responses. Straight respondents with no LGBT friends and negative views of LGBT

people were just as unaffected by identity framing as those with warm views and extensive LGBT contact. Across the range of these predispositions, there is no evidence the different identity frames did anything to shift respondents' views.

Conclusions

How should marginalized groups frame their identities when trying to mobilize support? Is it best for movements to emphasize their similarities with the rest of society, or to highlight differences? And are different identity frames needed when mobilizing their own community than when appealing to outside allies? These questions have been particularly challenging for the LGBTQ movement, which has cycled between framing themselves as "just like" straight people and highlighting their unique differences.

Until now, however, we have lacked direct evidence on how these different identity frames affect straight cisgender audiences – or the LGBT community itself. This paper presented an original survey experiment that tests two key elements of identity framing. A group's appeal was manipulated to frame LGBTQ identities as either similar to or different from straight cisgender ones. The ad was tested on large samples of both LGBT and straight cisgender respondents. This design allows us to assess with confidence the causal impact of different frames on different audiences.

The results do not support the idea that LGBTQ identity frames affect mobilization. Whether the ad emphasized similarities or differences had no significant effects on interest in the group, participation on its behalf, perceptions of its politics, or assessments of its effectiveness. Framing LGBTQ people as different did not turn off straight cisgender respondents. Nor did it mobilize LGBT people. How identity was described had no effect on either group. Exploratory analyses found no evidence of heterogeneous treatment effects, either. Straight cisgender respondents with warm or cold views of LGBT people were equally unmoved, as were those with differing degrees of interpersonal contact. Contrary to expectations, how LGBTQ identity was framed did not matter to respondents.

These null results are *not* due to the experimental manipulations failing. In both samples, respondents were more likely to say the group believed LGBTQ identities to be similar to straight cisgender ones when assigned to the ad that emphasized similarities than the ad that emphasized differences. And attention to the ad was equal across conditions. The results do not appear to be due to respondents ignoring the treatment or failing to get the message. Rather, whether the ad framed LGBTQ identity in terms of similarities or differences just had no discernible impact.

As with any study, these conclusions come with several important limitations. First, the study shows the (lack of) effect of a present day ad. I do not take this to mean that LGBTQ identity framing has *never* affected audiences. It is possible that emphasizing similarities or differences had greater consequences earlier in the LGBTQ movement's history, when public opinion was less favorable.[12] Certainly, emphasizing similarities may have been effective in the past – perhaps to the point that any backlash to emphasizing differences has already been mitigated.

Second, and relatedly, the treatment consists of just one short ad. Although "single dose" studies like this one are common (e.g., Druckman 2001b; Harrison and Michelson 2017a; Michelson and Harrison 2020), it is possible that repeated messaging about

identity would have a cumulative effect not captured here. Assessing multiple exposures to framed appeals is resource intensive, but an important avenue to research.

Third, the appeal itself is limited in important ways. Its messaging is pitched at an abstract level, asserting that identities are similar or different, without providing concrete examples. This was a deliberate choice, to isolate the causal effect of identity framing in and of itself, without simultaneously varying the policy content of the appeal. Still, future scholars should investigate whether emphasizing actual differences in values or status would be met with more negativity (although see Jones 2022). Similarly, the appeal held visual aspects of the ad constant across conditions. It is possible that highlighting different messengers, or using different images in the appeal, would moderate the (null) effects of this framing.

Despite their limitations, the results speak to both research and real-world politics. Academic work frequently holds up identity framing as key to social movement success. In their reviews of the literature, scholars note that "activists' efforts to strategically "frame" identities are critical in recruiting participants" (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 291); that framing processes are "a central dynamic in understanding the character and course of social movements" (Benford and Snow 2000, 612); and that "the difference between successful and unsuccessful movements hinge on the ability of their core activists" to frame effectively (Bonilla and Tillery 2020). The results here suggest that identity framing is not *always* central to a movement's success. In the contemporary LGBTQ case, framing identities along the "central dimensions" identified in the literature (Einwohner, Reger, and Myers 2008, 7) did not affect mobilization at all.

In terms of real-world organizing, the results from this study suggest that the choice of identity frame does not necessarily carry significant (dis)advantages. As such, groups may be freer to express their identity sincerely than they have tended to assume. Nor is there any apparent trade-off between appealing to inside and outside supporters via identity frames. LGBT and straight cisgender people were equally unaffected by the way LGBTQ identity was presented. LGBTQ groups do not have to worry about turning off one constituency as they mobilize another, at least when it comes to framing their identities.

As Strolovitch (2007) has documented, even groups that seek to represent marginalized communities tend to focus on the interests of their relatively more advantaged members. The focus on external audiences and desire to win their approval has often led to a respectability politics strategy, where less "normal" members of a community are shifted out of the spotlight (Jones 2022; Murib 2018; Strolovitch and Crowder 2018). This strategy is driven by a (perceived) need to present the group as "just like" the dominant majority. But the results in this paper indicate that this approach does not come with any significant mobilization benefits. Describing LGBTQ people as highly similar to straight cisgender people doesn't mobilize straight cisgender *or* LGBTQ audiences to action. As such, the strategy of centering those members who are most like the dominant majority may not pay off for groups. Weighed against the costs of marginalizing people perceived as out of the norm, the benefits of emphasizing similarities with straight cisgender people seem even more slight.

At their broadest, these findings signal the need to interrogate further the costs and benefits of identity framing by social movements. There is no evidence here that emphasizing similarities or differences affects either LGBT or straight cisgender

audiences' reactions to mobilization appeals. This is, of course, only one study, and we need a larger body of work to amass before reaching any definitive conclusions. But it indicates a need to more critically assess the effects of appeals rooted in identity, rather than assuming that such framing strongly affects both internal communities and outside allies.

Notes

1. Other queer identities were not measured in the survey vendor's profiling and are not in the sampling frame. For precision, I use "LGBT" to refer to respondents in the sample, but "LGBTQ" for the community in general.
2. For ease of exposition I present these as discrete choices. In reality, the focus on similarities/differences and on internal/external audiences exist along spectrums (Einwohner, Reger, and Myers 2008).
3. Prior research tends to focus on attitudes towards LGBTQ rights, rather than views of the organizations themselves or political participation, although some of the studies in Harrison and Michelson (2017a) and Michelson and Harrison (2020) also examine donating money, signing petitions to Congress, and signing up for email lists.
4. See https://aspredicted.org/36Q_ZN7.
5. Using a fictional group comes with pros and cons. On the plus side, respondents cannot have prior attitudes towards the organization: any differences are solely due to the stimuli. A downside is that source credibility or likability cannot be estimated. There also is no "pure" control condition without an appeal, since all respondents must receive some information about the group in order to answer questions about it.
6. Other potentially manipulable factors are therefore held constant. The visual appearance of LGBTQ people is the same in all three conditions, and references to "our own families, jobs, and culture" appear in the similarities and differences ads. This has the potential to dampen any message effects, although manipulation checks provide evidence that respondents received the intended treatments (as discussed below).
7. These averages pool together the two samples, but LGBT and straight cisgender respondents showed the same patterns; see online appendix A3.1.
8. There was no significant difference between the similarities and differences conditions, however (ATE = $-.02$ [$-.07$, .03]), nor between the differences condition and the control condition (ATE = .04 [$-.01$, .08]).
9. Since the ATEs are all indistinguishable from zero, I do not report here on the pre-registered mediation analyses, which were likewise statistically insignificant.
10. Here, I discuss just the impact on political participation, but the conclusions are the same across dependent variables.
11. The analyses in this section were not pre-registered, and are intended as exploratory.
12. Although note that there were no effects among those respondents with cool views toward LGBT people, which cuts against this possibility.

Funding

ORCID

Philip Edward Jones 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1945-4080

References

Benford, Robert D., and David A. Snow. 2000. "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment." *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (1): 611–639. https://doi.org/10.1146/soc.2000.26.issue-1.

Bernstein, Mary. 1997. "Celebration and Suppression: The Strategic Uses of Identity by the Lesbian and Gay Movement." *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (3): 531–565. https://doi.org/10.1086/231250.

Bonilla, Tabitha, and Alvin B. Tillery. 2020. "Which Identity Frames Boost Support for and Mobilization in the #BlackLivesMatter Movement? An Experimental Test." *American Political Science Review* 114 (4): 947–962. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000544.

Carpenter, Dale. 2012. *Flagrant Conduct: The Story of Lawrence V. Texas*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

Chong, Dennis, and James N. Druckman. 2007. "Framing Theory." *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (1): 103–126. https://doi.org/10.1146/polisci.2007.10.issue-1.

D'Emilio, John. 1983. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940–1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Druckman, James N. 2001a. "The Implications of Framing Effects for Citizen Competence." *Political Behavior* 23 (3): 225–256. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1015006907312.

Druckman, James N. 2001b. "On the Limits of Framing Effects: Who Can Frame?" *Journal of Politics* 63 (4): 1041–1066. https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-3816.00100.

Dugan, Kimberly B. 2008. "Just Like You: The Dimensions of Identity Presentations in an Antigay Contested Context." In *Identity Work in Social Movements*, edited by J. Reger, D. J. Myers and R. L. Einwohner. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Einwohner, Rachel L., Jo Reger, and Daniel J. Myers. 2008. "Introduction." In *Identity Work in Social Movements*, edited by J. Reger, D. J. Myers and R. L. Einwohner. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Entman, Robert M. 1993. "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm." *Journal of Communication* 43 (4): 51–58. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x.

Ettelbrick, Paula L. 1989-2016. "Since When Is Marriage a Path to Liberation?" Rprt. In *Love Unites Us: Winning the Freedom to Marry in America*, edited by K. M. Cathcart and L. J. Gabel-Brett. New York: The New Press.

Freedom to Marry. 2011. "Moving Marriage Forward: Building Majority Support for Marriage." https://www.freedomtomarry.org/pages/Messaging-Messengers-and-Public-Support

Gamson, Joshua. 1995. "Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma." *Social Problems* 42 (3): 390–407. https://doi.org/10.2307/3096854.

Ghaziani, Amin, Verta Taylor, and Amy Stone. 2016. "Cycles of Sameness and Difference in LGBT Social Movements." *Annual Review of Sociology* 42 (1): 165–183. https://doi.org/10.1146/soc.2016.42.issue-1.

Godsoe, Cynthia. 2015. "Perfect Plaintiffs." *The Yale Law Journal Forum* 125: 136.

Han, Hahrie C. 2009. "Does the Content of Political Appeals Matter in Motivating Participation? A Field Experiment on Self-disclosure in Political Appeals." *Political Behavior* 31 (1): 103–116. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-008-9066-9.

Harrison, Brian F., and Melissa R. Michelson. 2012. "Not That There's Anything Wrong with That: The Effect of Personalized Appeals on Marriage Equality Campaigns." *Political Behavior* 34 (2): 325–344. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-011-9169-6.

Harrison, Brian F., and Melissa R. Michelson. 2015. "God and Marriage: The Impact of Religious Identity Priming on Attitudes toward Same-Sex Marriage." *Social Science Quarterly* 96 (5): 1411–1423. https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.2015.96.issue-5.

Harrison, Brian F., and Melissa R. Michelson. 2017a. *Listen, We Need to Talk: How to Change Attitudes about LGBT Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harrison, Brian F., and Melissa R. Michelson. 2017b. "What's Love Got to Do with It?: Emotion, Rationality, and Framing LGBT Rights." *New Political Science* 39 (2): 177–197. https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2017.1301311.

Hunt, Scott A., Robert D. Benford, and David A. Snow. 1994. "Identity Fields: Framing Processes and the Social Construction of Movement Identities." In *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity*, edited by E. Laraña, H. Johnston and J. R. Gusfield. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Jones, Philip Edward. 2021. "Political Distinctiveness and Diversity among LGBT Americans." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 85 (2): 594–622. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfab030.

Jones, Philip Edward. 2022. "Respectability Politics and Straight Support for LGB Rights." *Political Research Quarterly* 75 (4): 935–949. https://doi.org/10.1177/10659129211035834.

Kirk, Marshall, and Hunter Madsen. 1989. *After the Ball: How America Will Conquer Its Fear and Hatred of Gays in the '90s*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Michelson, Melissa R., and Brian F. Harrison. 2020. *Transforming Prejudice: Identity, Fear, and Transgender Rights*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Montgomery, Jacob M., Brendan Nyhan, and Michelle Torres. 2018. "How Conditioning on Posttreatment Variables Can Ruin Your Experiment and What to Do about It." *American Journal of Political Science* 62 (3): 760–775. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.2018.62.issue-3.

Moscowitz, Leigh. 2013. *The Battle over Marriage: Gay Rights Activism through the Media*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Murib, Zein. 2018. "Trumpism, Citizenship, and the Future of the LGBTQ Movement." *Politics & Gender* 14 (4): 649–672. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X18000740.

Myers, Daniel J. 2008. "Ally Identity: The Politically Gay." In *Identity Work in Social Movements*, edited by J. Reger, D. J. Myers and R. L. Einwohner. University of Minnesota Press.

Nelson, Thomas E., Zoe M. Oxley, and Rosalee A. Clawson. 1997. "Toward a Psychology of Framing Effects." *Political Behavior* 19 (3): 221–246. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1024834831093.

Polletta, Francesca, and James M. Jasper. 2001. "Collective Identity and Social Movements." *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (1): 283–305. https://doi.org/10.1146/soc.2001.27.issue-1.

Proctor, Andrew. 2022. "Coming out to Vote: The Construction of a Lesbian and Gay Electoral Constituency in the United States." *American Political Science Review* 116 (3): 777–790. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001465.

Rainey, Carlisle. 2014. "Arguing for a Negligible Effect." *American Journal of Political Science* 58 (4): 1083–1091. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.2014.58.issue-4.

Rimmerman, Craig A. 2014. *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation?* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Seidman, Steven. 1993. "Identity and Politics in a "Postmodern" Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes." In *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, edited by M. Warner. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Snow, David A., and Robert D. Benford. 1988. "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization." *International Social Movement Research* 1:197–217.

Snow, David A., E. Burke Rochford, Steven K. Worden, and Robert D. Benford. 1986. "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation." *American Sociological Review* 51 (4): 464–481. https://doi.org/10.2307/2095581.

Strolovitch, Dara Z. 2007. *Affirmative Advocacy: Race, Class, and Gender in Interest Group Politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Strolovitch, Dara Z., and Chaya Y. Crowder. 2018. "Respectability, Anti-Respectability, and Intersectionally Responsible Representation." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 51 (2): 340–344.

Wittman, Carl. 1970. *A Gay Manifesto*. New York: Red Butterfly.