



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 tackled this question directly. Research on other marginalized groups, however, finds that being represented by a minority legislator affects constituents’ approval, evaluations of government, knowledge about the incumbent, 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 constituents respond differently to LGB and straight MCs, in three ways. First, descriptive representation boosts approval ratings—LGBT constituents approve of LGB legislators at higher rates. On average, straight cisgender constituents do not rate LGB MCs differently from straight MCs, although this masks countervailing partisan reactions that cancel out in the aggregate. Second, LGB MCs have a higher profile among all voters. Regardless of their own sexuality, constituents are more likely to have information on, and be able to answer questions about, LGB MCs. Third, stereotypes of LGBTQ politicians as ideologically liberal are widespread. Even after controlling for their actual party and roll call record, LGB MCs are perceived to be significantly more liberal than straight MCs. Overall, these results show that LGB representatives are evaluated differently from their straight peers, with potential implications for their political careers.

Keywords LGBTQ politicians · Representation · Constituents' responses

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.

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2020). Although their overall numbers remain small (Kent 2025), being represented by an LGBTQ Member of Congress (MC) in the U.S. House is no longer the unusual experience it once was.¹ Evidence shows that electing LGBTQ officials has a substantive policy impact, with more pro-LGBTQ bills being introduced, sponsored, and passed into law (Bishin and Weller 2025; Haider-Markel 2010; Reynolds 2013). Does LGBTQ representation also shape how constituents respond to their MCs? Do voters hold different views of, and information about, LGBTQ representatives? Are LGBTQ legislators evaluated in different ways to their straight colleagues?

To date, political science has not weighed in directly on these questions. Several literatures on how constituents respond to legislators from *other* minoritized groups, however, suggest effects across a range of 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 government more broadly (e.g., Banducci et al. 2004; Costa and Schaffner 2018; Fowler et al. 2014). Another stream of research shows that constituents are more knowledgeable about minority legislators, either because of their shared identity (e.g., Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2003; Burns et al. 2001; Tate 2003), or because their “novelty” status makes them stand out (e.g., Wolak 2020). Finally, a related literature explores biases in how minority politicians are perceived, demonstrating that voters frequently stereotype them as more liberal than other politicians (e.g., Schneider and Bos 2011; McDermott 1997).

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 MCs in the U.S. House (constituents’ information about, and relationships with, U.S. senators are systematically different (e.g., Jacobson and Carson 2019, Ch. 4), and so for comparability I focus only on House members in this study). This has been challenging prior to now, due to two real world data constraints. 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 respondents’ sexuality or gender identities (Jones 2021). This project takes advantage of the increasing number of out MCs, and large-N Cooperative Election Study (CES) data from 2016 to 2023, to explore how constituents have responded to the rainbow wave.

The results show that constituents evaluate LGB MCs differently from their straight counterparts. The impact of LGB representation varies across three sets of dependent variables, in ways that reflect and extend the previous literatures. First, consistent with theories of minority empowerment, LGBT constituents approve of LGB MCs at higher rates. On average, straight cisgender constituents appear to evaluate LGB and straight MCs identically. This obscures countervailing differences by partisanship, however. Straight constituents who share a party with the MC (mostly Demo-

¹The data in this paper pre-date Sarah McBride’s election as the first out transgender MC, and so only include LGB MCs. 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.

crats, given the partisan lean of LGB MCs) hold more favorable views when the MC is LGB; those from the out-party (mostly Republicans) hold less favorable views. Being represented by an LGB MC, however, has no discernible impact on approval ratings of Congress as an institution—for LGBT or for 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 all constituents tend to engage more when presented with noteworthy LGB representatives. Finally, the data also show that stereotypes of LGBTQ candidates as liberals 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 colleagues. LGB identity remains a powerful heuristic for voters, even once politicians have an established record in Congress.

Overall, these results show that constituents respond to LGB and straight representatives in different ways, with implications for their political careers. I begin by outlining expectations drawn from multiple literatures on minority representation, before introducing the data and methods used in the paper, and then presenting the main results.

Responses to Minority Representatives

How should we expect constituents to respond to LGBTQ MCs? Although this question has not been directly tackled by previous work, several bodies of research explore how voters react to legislators from *other* marginalized groups. To be clear upfront, I do not see these literatures as offering competing hypotheses. Rather, they provide a framework for organizing expectations about how constituents respond to LGBTQ representation. Here, I briefly review findings organized around three main dependent variables. 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 et al. 2014). Originally developed with reference to Black voters' specific 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 et al. 2014).

These studies often find evidence of minority empowerment in increased approval ratings of incumbent legislators. For example, Black voters are more likely to approve of Black MCs (Tate 2003; Banducci et al. 2004; Brunell et al. 2008); women voters have (somewhat) more favorable attitudes towards women MCs (Lawless 2004; Costa and Schaffner 2018); and Latino/a constituents evaluate Latino/a MCs more positively (Fowler et al. 2014).

Some research argues that descriptive representation by an individual legislator may lead to more favorable attitudes towards collective institutions as well (Ramirez et al. 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 have more trust in the government (Ramirez et al. 2012) and are more likely to approve of Congress (Fowler et al. 2014). Whether descriptive representation by an individual MC changes attitudes towards Congress as a whole is thus an unsettled question in the literature.

This literature thus points towards two possible expectations about the impact of LGBTQ representation. First, LGBTQ constituents may feel empowered when represented by an LGBTQ legislator, leading to higher approval ratings of their MC. Second, the impact of this descriptive representation may also lead to increased approval of Congress as an institution, although empirical support for this idea has been weak to date.

Engagement and Knowledge

Building on theories of minority empowerment, numerous studies argue that descriptive representation can shape engagement, and in particular increase what voters know about politicians. Constituents who share a racial or ethnic identity with the incumbent are more likely to recognize the name of their MC (Banducci et al. 2004; Tate 2003), to recall their party affiliation (Bowen and Clark 2014; Wolak and Juenke 2021), and to offer opinions about the representative's job performance (Box-Steffensmeier et al. 2003). Similar effects appear for the descriptive representation of gender: women are more likely to know the name, party, and voting record of women senators (Verba et al. 1997; Fridkin and Kenney 2014; Jones 2014). These increases in knowledge are usually attributed to minority voters feeling empowered, and being more engaged with who represents them.

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 *all* constituents. For example, Wolak (2020) finds that both men and women are more 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, not just women (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 general interest that minority legislators' presence sparks among constituents at large.

These findings suggest that voters should have greater knowledge about LGBTQ politicians, but diverge in terms of which constituents should be most affected. On the one hand, we might expect LGBTQ (but not straight cisgender) constituents to learn more about LGBTQ lawmakers, if being descriptively represented leads to

greater engagement. On the other, perhaps LGBTQ legislators are more notable, leading to increased knowledge among all constituents, regardless of their sexuality.

Stereotypes and Perceptions of Incumbent Ideology

Given low and uneven levels of political knowledge, politicians' demographic characteristics are widely used heuristics by voters. In the absence of other information, voters frequently make inferences about the ideological and policy stances a candidate holds based on their race, ethnicity, gender, or other characteristics (e.g., Crowder-Meyer et al. 2019; Schneider and Bos 2011; McDermott 1997). Unlike the literatures above on approval ratings and engagement, here we have more direct evidence on how voters use LGBTQ identity as a cue.

One set of studies uses survey experiments to assess responses to hypothetical LGBTQ candidates for office, routinely finding they face 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; Loepf and Redman 2020; Harrison et al. 2023) and to be less representative of straight cisgender constituents' interests (Jones and Brewer 2019). This liberal stereotyping, in part, leads to the lower vote shares and approval ratings in experiments.

In contrast, 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), unlike the random assignment in survey experiments.

As such, it is unclear whether constituents will have biased views of incumbent LGBTQ MCs' ideological record. Further complicating expectations is the argument that voters may learn from the experience of being represented by a minority 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). In this vein, it is possible that the stereotypes of hypothetical LGBTQ candidates as liberals dissipate when voters consider actual LGBTQ incumbents with a concrete policy record to their name.

Research Questions

Taken collectively, these literatures on minority representatives cover numerous identity groups, dependent variables, and theoretical mechanisms. To reiterate, these are not competing research programs, nor do they propose mutually exclusive theo-

ries. Instead, they provide a series of dependent variables we might expect to be influenced by LGB representation. Given the lack of prior work on how constituents respond to LGB MCs, I do not offer directional hypotheses. Instead, based on their insights, I formulate several open research questions:

RQ1: Compared to those represented by straight MCs, do constituents 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) perceive the incumbent's ideology differently?

RQ1 looks for the general impact of LGB representation on constituents as a whole, based on dependent variables identified in previous research. The mechanisms proposed by the literature, however, suggest that constituents' responses to LGB representatives may vary by their own sexuality: descriptive representation would be expected to empower LGBT voters, but not straight cisgender ones, for example. As such, I also ask:

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

To answer these research questions, I rely on large-N survey data measuring constituents' attitudes, matched with information about MCs and their districts, which I introduce in the next section.

Data and Methods

I combine individual-level surveys from the annual Cooperative Election Study (CES) with MC- and district-level data from multiple sources. Pooling the CES surveys from 2016 through 2023 results in a total of 329,168 respondents, and 3,632 MC-district-year observations.² The large sample size of the pooled surveys allows me to assess subgroups that are hard to identify in most national samples: there are 560 LGBT respondents represented by an LGB MC, 4,469 straight cisgender respondents represented by an LGB MC, and 31,918 LGBT respondents represented by a straight MC, for example. Full descriptive statistics are shown in online Appendix A1. These cover a small number of unique LGB MCs, however—just 15 individual legislators, who collectively are represented in the CES surveys 60 times. Online Appendix A2 provides additional data on the MCs, the extent to which their districts and constituents differ from those represented by straight MC, and evidence that the results are not skewed by the over-representation of two long-serving LGB MCs.

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

²An 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.

and descriptive statistics). Approval ratings of the incumbent MC and of Congress are based on a standard job approval item, which ranges from 0 (the respondent strongly disapprove of the job their MC/Congress is doing) to 1 (they strongly approve).³

Three items tap how much information constituents have about their 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 variables measure whether respondents are able to rate the MC’s job, and are able to evaluate the MC’s ideology. “Don’t know” responses to each question are coded as 0; any substantive response is coded as 1. These do not capture the accuracy or depth of information respondents have, but serve as coarse measures of whether constituents were aware enough of the MC to respond to questions about them.

Finally, I also assess constituents’ perceptions of the incumbent’s ideology. The 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

LGBT identity is coded as 1 for respondents who said they were lesbian, gay, or bisexual and/or transgender. Respondents who said they were straight and not transgender are coded as 0. How to include straight transgender constituents is complicated. Existing research suggests that lesbian/gay citizens hold different attitudes than bisexual or transgender voters (Smith et al. 2017; Jones 2021). Further, the “LGBTQ” movement has historically failed to represent all members of the community equally, usually prioritizing lesbian/gay concerns over those of bisexual or transgender Americans (Murib 2023). At the same time, the MCs in this study have organized around a combined group identity. The House Equality Caucus focuses on “LGBTQI+ issues” (<https://equality.house.gov/about-cec/mission>) and there are no separate caucuses for bisexual or transgender MCs. This suggests that the legislators themselves believe the unified community label is the appropriate approach. On a practical level, the data are underpowered to analyze each sub-group within the community separately. Only one of the MCs in the study identifies as bisexual, none as transgender, and splitting the survey sample by identity reduces power significantly. As such, I combine all LGBT respondents and legislators, even though this risks obscuring meaningful differences within the community, a point I return to in the conclusion.⁴

Prior research shows that partisanship is a dominant source of constituents’ evaluations, conditioning or overriding the impact of MCs’ demographic characteristics (Costa and Schaffner 2018; Lawless 2004; Reingold and Harrell 2010). All of the analyses thus control for a measure of partisan congruence with the MC. 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 cat-

³ In 2017 and 2019, the CES asked about approval of the House of Representatives and the Senate separately. In those two years, I use evaluations of the House in place of evaluations of Congress.

⁴ Online appendix A3 shows that the substantive conclusions in the paper remain unchanged when limiting the analysis to LGB respondents only.

egory in the models) when the respondent does not identify as a Democrat or Republican. Throughout, those leaning towards a party are coded as partisans.

Other characteristics that are likely to affect political engagement, and possibly approval ratings, are also included in the models. Respondents' education is recoded to range continuously 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 continuous scale of the CES' income categories, ranging from those making less than \$10,000 (coded as 0) to those making over \$500,000 (coded as 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, coded as a continuous variable ranging from not at all (coded as 0) to very important (coded as 1). Respondents' self-reported interest in politics is based on how often they say they follow government and public affairs, coded as a continuous variable 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-Level Independent Variables

A dichotomous variable captures whether the MC is LGB (1) or not (0). Table A1 in the online Appendix shows the specific MCs included in each CES survey, and the number of their constituents sampled each year, by LGBT identity. Similar variables identify Asian, Black, Hispanic, White, and women MCs (in the models, White is used as the excluded level for MC race/ethnicity). 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 information or approval, 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 perceptions of MCs' ideology also controls for their *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. 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 are on average more liberal.

District-Level Independent Variables

Since LGBTQ candidates choose where to run strategically (Haider-Markel et al. 2020), I control for two political attributes of the congressional district. Both are based on the two-party vote for President in the election prior to the survey being

completed, as collated by *The Downballot*.⁵ First, the district's partisan leanings are captured by the proportion of the two-party vote received by the Democratic nominee for President in the previous 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 presidential nominees' proportion of the two-party 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 described below, 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's 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 and among MCs/districts. The analyses are unweighted due to technical limitations. Models were estimated using the `lme4` package in R, which does not currently allow for sampling weights. Replicating the linear models in SPSS with weights applied led to the same substantive conclusions as those reported here, however.

Assessing RQ1 and RQ2 requires two estimates for each dependent variable: (1) whether constituents evaluate LGB and straight MCs differently; and (2) whether those differences in evaluations vary for LGBT and straight cisgender constituents. Each model thus includes an interaction between the indicators for LGBT respondents and 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 differences in responses among those represented by an LGB MC and those represented by 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' Approval of LGB Representatives

Does a legislator's sexuality affect how constituents rate their job, as proposed by RQ1(a)? Coefficients for the model predicting approval of MCs are shown in column (a) of Table 1; Fig. 1a shows the simulated differences in approval ratings between respondents represented by an LGB MC and those represented by a straight MC, with 95% confidence intervals. To assess RQ2, the figure presents the differences for LGBT and straight cisgender constituents separately.

⁵ See <https://www.the-downballot.com/p/data>. Due to mid-session redistricting, these data are not available for 107 of the 3,632 district-year observations.

Table 1 Multilevel regression models predicting constituents' approval of MCs and Congress

	(a)	(b)	(c)
	Approve of MC's job	Approve of MC's job	Approve of Congress
Intercept	0.31(0.00)***	0.32(0.00)***	0.32(0.00)***
LGBT respondent	0.01(0.00)***	-0.03(0.01)***	0.00(0.00)
LGB MC	0.01(0.01)	-0.04(0.01)***	0.01(0.01)
LGBT respondent×LGB MC	0.05(0.01)***	0.18(0.04)***	-0.02(0.01)†
LGBT respondent×Other party		0.06(0.01)***	
LGBT respondent×Same party		0.03(0.01)***	
LGB MC×Other party		0.01(0.01)	
LGB MC×Same party		0.09(0.01)***	
LGBT respondent×LGB MC×Other party		-0.03(0.06)	
LGBT respondent×LGB MC×Same party		-0.17(0.04)***	
<i>Respondent-level controls</i>			
Same party as MC	0.28(0.00)***	0.28(0.00)***	0.11(0.00)***
Other party from MC	-0.18(0.00)***	-0.19(0.00)***	0.10(0.00)***
Asian	0.01(0.00)***	0.01(0.00)***	0.04(0.00)***
Black	0.03(0.00)***	0.03(0.00)***	0.03(0.00)***
Hispanic	-0.00(0.00)	-0.00(0.00)	0.02(0.00)***
Other race	-0.02(0.00)***	-0.02(0.00)***	-0.03(0.00)***
Women	0.01(0.00)***	0.01(0.00)***	0.02(0.00)***
Education	0.00(0.00)†	0.00(0.00)	-0.04(0.00)***
Religiosity	0.05(0.00)***	0.05(0.00)***	0.06(0.00)***
Age	0.01(0.00)***	0.01(0.00)***	-0.02(0.00)***
Interest in politics	0.01(0.00)***	0.01(0.00)***	-0.07(0.00)***
Income	0.01(0.00)***	0.01(0.00)***	-0.02(0.00)***
<i>MC/district-level controls</i>			
Democrat MC	0.04(0.00)***	0.04(0.00)***	0.01(0.00)**
Black MC	-0.01(0.00)***	-0.01(0.00)***	0.00(0.00)
Asian MC	0.01(0.01)*	0.01(0.01)*	0.02(0.01)*
Hispanic MC	-0.01(0.00)*	-0.01(0.00)*	0.02(0.00)***
Woman MC	0.00(0.00)	0.00(0.00)	0.01(0.00)**
Decades in office	-0.00(0.00)	-0.00(0.00)	0.00(0.00)†
District competition	0.02(0.01)**	0.02(0.01)**	0.01(0.01)†
Democratic vote share	-0.02(0.01)	-0.02(0.01)	0.03(0.01)*
N respondents	216,516	216,516	261,852
N MC/district observations	3,519	3,519	3,521

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

Models are linear regressions predicting continuous dependent variables, all coded to range from 0 to 1. Independent respondents are the omitted category for partisan congruence with the MC

Consistent with earlier studies of descriptive representation, LGBT voters with LGB MCs rate the incumbent's job more highly, by a predicted .06 [95% confidence intervals = .03,.09] on the 0–1 scale. This estimated first difference from model (a) controls for partisan congruence as well as a host of other variables. Over and above

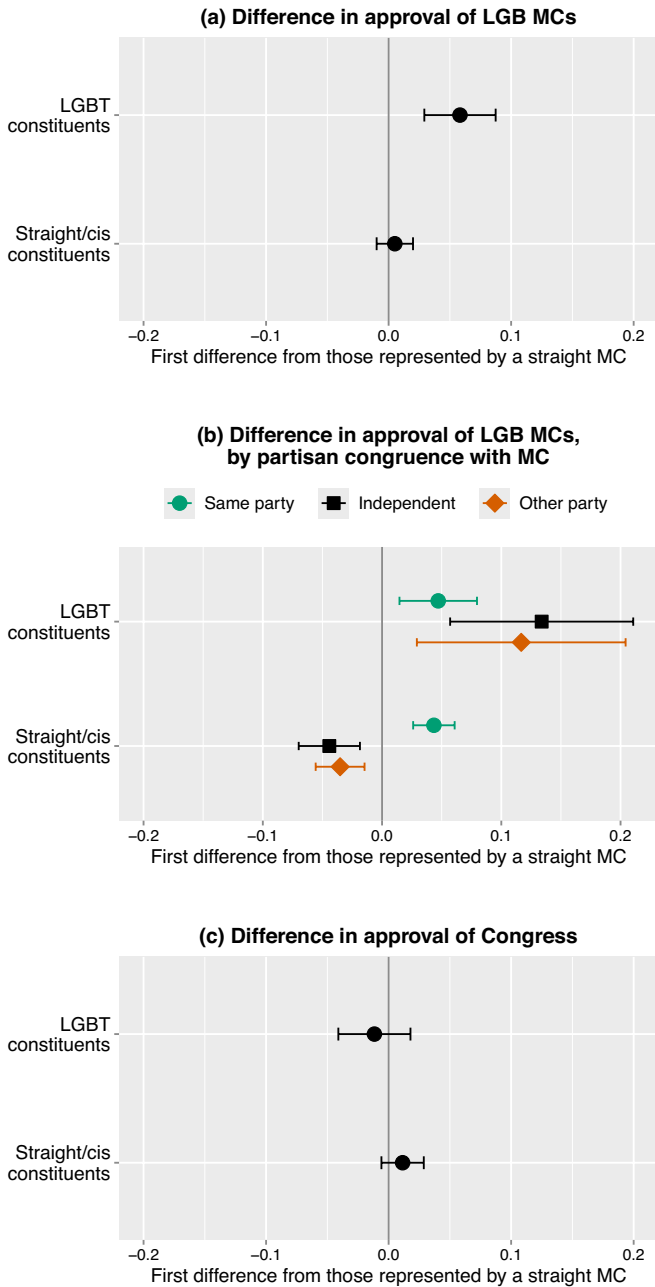


Fig. 1 Differences in approval ratings among constituents represented by an LGB MC. First differences in approval ratings between constituents represented by an LGB MC and those represented by a straight MC, with 95% confidence intervals. Predicted values simulated from models in Table 1, holding all other variables constant at their mean or modal values by level

a shared partisan identity, being represented by an LGB MC is associated with higher approval ratings among LGBT constituents.

In contrast, the model estimates reveal no differences in how straight cisgender constituents evaluate LGB and straight MCs. As shown in Fig. 1a, the first difference is a non-significant .01 [-0.01, .02]. Straight cisgender constituents do not evaluate LGB MCs any more or less favorably than straight MCs, a finding that runs counter to previous research showing substantially *lower* support for LGBTQ candidates among straight voters (e.g., Magni and Reynolds 2021); Jones and Brewer 2019). On average, MC sexuality does not affect straight constituents' approval ratings.

Averages can be deceptive, however. Previous work emphasizes that shared partisan identities may moderate or override the impact of shared descriptive characteristics (e.g., Costa and Schaffner 2018; Lawless 2004; Reingold and Harrell 2010). Although model (a) controls for partisan congruence between constituent and MC, it does not allow the impact of LGB representation to vary by party. Model (b) in Table 1 thus interacts partisan congruence, constituent sexuality, and MC sexuality. Estimated first differences for each combination are shown in Fig. 1b.

For LGBT constituents, LGB representation is associated with higher approval ratings regardless of partisan congruence with the MC. Note that, since most LGB MCs are Democrats, "same party" constituents are mostly Democratic voters, "other party" constituents mostly Republicans. Given the liberal lean of most LGBT voters, there are few Independent or out-partisan LGBT respondents with an LGB MC, resulting in the less precise estimates for these groups. Nonetheless, the first differences suggest that LGBT constituents of *all* parties approve of LGB incumbents at higher rates: by .05 [.01, .08] for in-partisans, .12 [.03, .20] for out-partisans, and .13 [.06, .21] for Independents. Descriptive representation for LGBT voters is associated with higher approval ratings, regardless of partisan congruence.

The same is not true for straight cisgender constituents. Among these voters, evaluations of LGB MCs vary by partisanship, with countervailing effects producing the null result shown in Fig. 1a. Among straight respondents who share a party with their MC, approval ratings for LGB MCs are higher than for straight MCs, an increase of .04 [.03, .06]. In contrast, Independents and those who are from the opposing party approve of LGB MCs significantly less than straight MCs, decreases of $-.04$ [-0.07, -0.02] and $-.04$ [-0.06, -0.01], respectively. These differences likely reflect party identities as much as partisan congruence with an MC, since most of the out-partisan constituents with LGB MCs are Republicans evaluating a Democratic MC.⁶ All but one of the MCs in these data are Democrats, however, and so distinguishing between the effect of being represented by an out-partisan and that of the respondent holding conservative views is not feasible. Certainly, the results here are in line with previous research that shows much of LGBTQ candidates' electoral penalty stems from greater disapproval among Republican voters (e.g., Magni and Reynolds 2021).

While LGBT constituents approve of LGB MCs at higher rates regardless of whether their parties align, straight cisgender respondents are more polarized by party. Those from the same party as their MC (predominantly Democrats) tend to

⁶ See online appendix A4 for estimates from a re-specified version of model (b) that uses respondent party rather than partisan congruence, and reaches largely the same conclusions.

approve of LGB MCs at higher rates than straight MCs, while those from the opposing party (predominantly Republicans) and Independents, tend to approve of them at lower rates.

What about RQ1(b), which asks whether representation by an LGB MC changes how voters view Congress as an institution? Here, the estimates suggest no discernible impact of LGB representation for either group of constituents. As Fig. 1c 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 echo 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 could shape assessments of Congress as a whole (see e.g., Tate 2003, Ch. 8), although the CES does not include such items. The actual dyadic relationship between MCs and their constituents appears to have little effect on LGBT or straight cisgender voters' views of Congress overall, however.

Constituents' Information About LGB Representatives

To explore how aware constituents are of their MC, I use three items: whether respondents know the MC's party, can rate their job, and can rate their ideology. The models in Table 2, and the associated plots in Fig. 2, show a consistent pattern across each dependent variable. Both LGBT *and* straight cisgender constituents have more information about LGB MCs than straight MCs.

Take constituents' knowledge of which party their MC belongs to (model (a) in Table 2 and plot (a) in Fig. 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 knowledge (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.⁷

The other two items measure how able respondents are to answer questions about the MC, and serve as proxies for general information about the incumbent. Constituents are more likely to offer opinions about the job that LGB MCs have done, and about 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

⁷One 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). The lack of Republican LGB MCs mean we cannot conduct separate analyses by MC party. The other information items, analyzed in plots (b) and (c), are presumably less likely to be the result of heuristic reasoning, but show the same increases in information about LGB MCs.

Table 2 Multilevel regression models predicting constituents' information about MCs

	(a)	(b)	(c)
	Know MC's party	Can rate MC's job	Can rate MC's ideology
Intercept	-3.19(0.03)***	-2.00(0.03)***	-2.54(0.03)***
LGBT respondent	-0.01 (0.02)	0.14(0.02)***	0.18(0.02)***
LGB MC	0.42(0.08)***	0.47(0.10)***	0.39(0.08)***
LGBT respondent×LGB MC	0.10 (0.12)	-0.01 (0.13)	-0.13 (0.13)
<i>Respondent-level controls</i>			
Same party as MC	0.57(0.01)***	0.37(0.01)***	0.50(0.01)***
Other party from MC	0.27(0.01)***	0.21(0.01)***	0.34(0.01)***
Asian	-0.21(0.03)***	-0.26(0.03)***	-0.21(0.03)***
Black	-0.05(0.02)**	0.00 (0.02)	-0.06(0.02)***
Hispanic	-0.18(0.02)***	-0.09(0.02)***	-0.03 (0.02)
Other race	0.00 (0.02)	-0.08(0.02)**	-0.03 (0.02)
Women	-0.30(0.01)***	-0.45(0.01)***	-0.47(0.01)***
Education	1.01(0.02)***	0.54(0.02)***	0.74(0.02)***
Religiosity	-0.20(0.01)***	0.21(0.01)***	0.17(0.01)***
Age	0.34(0.00)***	0.29(0.00)***	0.23(0.00)***
Interest in politics	1.99(0.02)***	1.76(0.02)***	2.11(0.02)***
Income	0.81(0.02)***	0.46(0.03)***	0.69(0.03)***
<i>MC/district-level controls</i>			
Democrat MC	-0.04 (0.03)	0.03 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.03)
Black MC	0.28(0.04)***	0.08(0.05)†	0.13(0.04)***
Asian MC	0.22(0.07)***	-0.05 (0.08)	0.08 (0.06)
Hispanic MC	0.21(0.04)***	0.08 (0.05)	0.12(0.04)**
Woman MC	0.27(0.03)***	0.20(0.03)***	0.24(0.02)***
Decades in office	0.11(0.01)***	0.15(0.02)***	0.13(0.01)***
District competition	-0.26(0.06)***	-0.25(0.08)**	-0.26(0.06)***
Democratic vote share	-0.11 (0.11)	-0.18 (0.14)	-0.03 (0.10)
N respondents	290,932	291,200	262,969
N MC/district observations	3,524	3,523	3,378

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

Models are logistic regressions predicting dichotomous dependent variables

an LGB MC. This is also the case for straight cisgender constituents, who similarly answer questions about LGB MCs at higher rates.⁸

Overall, these results speak directly to RQ1(c): 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 in general, rather than the empowering effects of shared identity among LGBT voters specifically. Unlike the

⁸The first differences for straight cisgender respondents are .08 [.05, .12] and .09 [.06, .12] respectively. These are not significantly different from those for LGBT constituents.

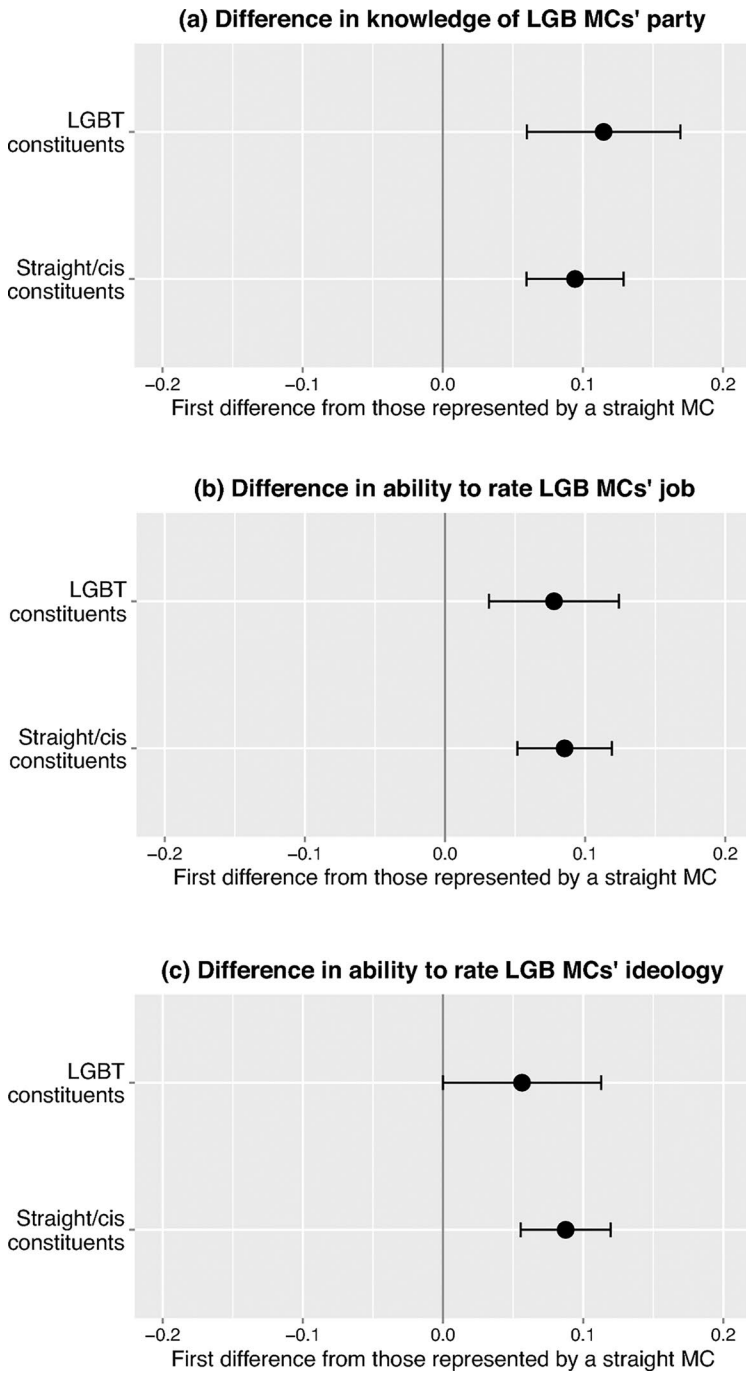


Fig. 2 Differences in information among constituents represented by an LGB MC. First differences in information about the MC between constituents represented by an LGB MC and those represented by a straight MC, with 95% confidence intervals. Predicted values simulated from models in Table 2, holding all other variables constant at their mean or modal values by level

differences suggested by RQ2, straight cisgender and LGBT constituents do not differ in the information they hold about LGB MCs.

Additional analyses, included in online Appendix A5, show that these increases in knowledge about LGB MCs are not moderated by partisanship. Replicating the models from Table 2, but interacting MC sexuality, respondent sexuality, and partisan congruence (as in Table 1, model (b)) reveals no significant differences based on party. The estimates for non-Democratic LGBT respondents are noisy, given their low numbers in the data. But overall there is no evidence that the greater knowledge of LGB MCs is conditional on partisan congruence between them and constituents. Rather, constituents of all parties and sexualities tend to be more aware of LGB than straight MCs.

Constituents' Perceptions of LGB Representatives' Ideology

Experimental evidence shows that voters stereotype hypothetical LGBTQ candidates as liberals. Does this heuristic apply to actual LGBTQ politicians, and does it persist once they are in office and have a roll call record to defend? RQ1(d) asks whether voters perceive the incumbent's ideology differently when s/he is LGB. Table 3 and the predicted values in Fig. 3 show the 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. Negative first differences thus indicate respondents saw LGB MCs as more liberal than straight MCs; positive first differences that they were seen as more conservative. The model also controls 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 voting record, constituents stereotype LGB MCs as more liberal than straight MCs. The first differences in Fig. 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 (in line with Hajnal (2001)), it appears the stereotype of LGBTQ candidates as liberals follows them into office. This finding also contradicts experimental evidence that suggests voters apply ideological stereotypes to LGB Republicans, but not Democrats (Loepp and Redman 2020). The LGB MCs captured in these data—almost all of whom were Democrats—were perceived as more liberal than otherwise similar straight Democrats.

This is *not* to say that constituents' perceptions are divorced from reality. Democratic MCs are seen as substantially more liberal than Republican MCs (the coefficient for Democratic affiliation is -0.34 (0.01)), and more rightwing voting records are associated with more conservative perceptions (the coefficient for prior 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. Coupled with the fact that both LGBT and straight cisgender

Table 3 Multilevel regression model predicting constituents' perceptions of MCs' ideology

Intercept	0.68(0.01)***
LGBT respondent	0.03(0.00)***
LGB MC	-0.05(0.01)***
LGBT respondent×LGB MC	-0.01 (0.01)
<i>Respondent-level controls</i>	
Same party as MC	0.03(0.00)***
Other party from MC	0.02(0.00)***
Asian	0.01(0.00)**
Black	0.05(0.00)***
Hispanic	0.03(0.00)***
Other race	-0.01(0.00)*
Women	0.02(0.00)***
Education	0.03(0.00)***
Religiosity	-0.06(0.00)***
Age	-0.00(0.00)***
Interest in politics	0.02(0.00)***
Income	-0.02(0.00)***
<i>MC/district-level controls</i>	
Democrat MC	-0.34(0.01)***
Black MC	0.01(0.00)**
Asian MC	-0.00 (0.01)
Hispanic MC	0.02(0.00)***
Woman MC	-0.02(0.00)***
Decades in office	0.01(0.00)***
NOMINATE score	0.18(0.01)***
District competition	0.01(0.01)*
Democratic vote share	-0.00 (0.01)
N respondents	154,290
N MC/district observations	2,811

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$

; $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.1$

Note: Linear regression model predicting perceptions of MC's ideology, ranging from 0 (very liberal) to 1 (very conservative)

constituents hold the same biased perceptions, this suggests that a politician's sexuality remains a potent cue for voters.

Conclusions

The “rainbow wave” of out LGB MCs has changed the face of Congress in recent years, but until now we have known little about how constituents have responded. By combining large-N CES data with information about legislators and their districts, this paper presents some of the first insights into how voters have evaluated the new wave of LGB MCs. The results suggest at least three conclusions, that generally echo and extend previous work on how voters respond to minoritized representatives.

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 et al. 2014; Sadhwani 2022). To answer RQ1(a) and RQ2,

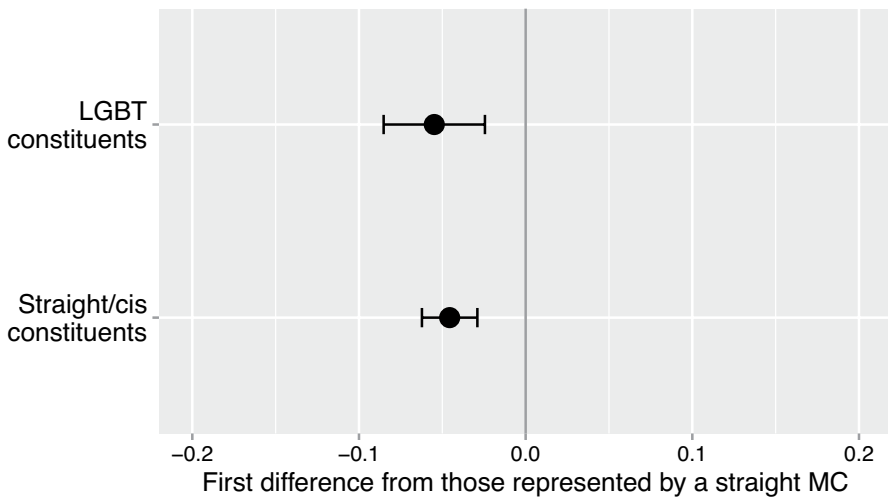


Fig. 3 Differences in perceptions of LGBT MCs' ideology. Note: First differences in perceptions of MC ideology between constituents represented by an LGBT MC and those represented by a straight MC, with 95% confidence intervals. Perceived ideology is coded from 0 (very liberal) to 1 (very conservative); negative first differences indicate respondents perceived LGBT MCs as more liberal than straight ones. Predicted values simulated from Table 3, holding all other variables constant at their mean or modal values by level.

LGBT constituents approve of LGBT MCs at higher rates than they do of straight MCs. This finding holds for in-partisans, out-partisans, and Independents alike. In contrast, straight constituents' assessments of LGBT MCs are heavily moderated by partisanship. In-partisans (mostly Democrats, given the Democratic lean of LGBT politicians) approve of LGBT MCs at higher rates than straight MCs. Out-partisans (mostly Republicans) and Independents, however, approve of LGBT MCs significantly less, consistent with other research showing the largest electoral penalties for LGBTQ candidates come from Republican voters (Magni and Reynolds 2021; Jones and Brewer 2019). Dyadic LGBT representation has no discernible impact on views of Congress as a collective institution, however. Earlier research suggested that being represented by an MC of the same race or gender did not affect overall assessments of Congress (Gay 2002; Tate 2003; Lawless 2004). The results indicate the same is true for LGBT representation. Unlike the potential differences suggested by RQ1(b), evaluations of Congress remained the same regardless of whether the MC was LGBT or straight, for both LGBT and straight cisgender voters.

Second, the analyses of constituents' information about their MC suggest that LGBT representatives may be particularly noteworthy for voters, as found for other minoritized groups (Wolak 2020). In line with RQ1(b), 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 LGBT. Crucially, this is true for both LGBT and straight cisgender constituents—suggesting that “novel” LGBT MCs lead all voters to pay more attention, not just those who are being descriptively represented. Contrary to the suggestion in RQ2, straight cisgender and LGBT constituents seem to have similar increases in awareness of their MC when s/he is LGBT.

Third, these results show that ideological stereotypes of LGBTQ candidates as liberals continue to follow them into office (see RQ1(d)). Even though they have concrete policy records as incumbents, LGB MCs are still perceived as significantly more liberal than their straight colleagues. This stereotyping occurs among both LGBT and straight cisgender constituents, suggesting that LGBTQ identity continues to serve as a powerful informational cue to voters about politicians' records (Jones and Brewer 2019).

As the simulated first differences in Figs. 1–3 make clear, these effects are statistically significant but could be seen as substantively minor. The average absolute first difference across all the significant estimates is around .07 on the 0–1 scale. A seven percent shift in approval, knowledge, or perceptions of ideology, while small, is not something most incumbents would ignore. And the substantive impact of an LGB MC is often similar in size to other variables central to political behavior research. Model (a) in Table 2, 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 differences, 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 survey data constraints. Although the large sample size of the CES allows for the analysis of the relatively small LGBT population, the Common Content questionnaires lack several items used in previous research. The surveys do not consistently ask respondents about efficacy or trust, or whether they had contacted their MC—all dependent variables in previous literature (e.g., Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Gay 2002; Lawless 2004). Nor do the surveys ask whether respondents know that their MC was LGB. The analyses in this paper assume that LGB identity is what constituents are responding to, but direct evidence of that link is lacking. In short, although we can make inferences from the dependent variables we do have access to, the mechanisms behind these findings remain ambiguous.

The real world politics of the “rainbow wave” also put significant limits on the data. All but one of the LGB MCs in the study were Democrats.⁹ Although the models control for shared partisan affiliation between constituents and MCs, this precludes any analysis of whether constituents respond differently to LGB Democrats and Republicans. The overall small number of out LGB MCs also limits the analyses. 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 in these survey waves. Finally, the data are underpowered to explore whether descriptive representation varies based on identities *within* the LGBTQ community—whether bisexual constituents feel more represented by bisexual MCs than gay MCs,

⁹Rep. George Santos (R-NY) resigned from the House in Fall 2023 after serving for less than a year, but was included in the CES that year.

for example. 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 backlash from straight cisgender constituents on average. 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). Regardless, the results here show that voters respond to LGB MCs differently than their straight peers—a conclusion that underlines the need for more research into sexuality’s impact on politics.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-026-10144-9>.

Data Availability Data files to replicate these analyses are available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/PMSMVW>

Declarations

Conflict of interest statement The author declares they have no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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