

Sexual Identities and the Role of Marriage in Social Movement Activism

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Abstract

Though marriage is seemingly attached to the private sphere and politics to the public sphere, marriage and politics operate as intertwined institutions. Political parties routinely pitch themselves as “the protector of family values” and getting married can shift a person’s political commitments. Studies generally agree that married people in different-sex marriages are more conservative than single or divorced individuals, but there is uncertainty as to whether same-sex marriages have the same political ramifications. This study examined data from the 2010–2102 American National Election Survey and found that sexual identity sometimes modifies the conservative elements of marriage (n = 3815). Same-sex marriages inspired greater participation in antiracist, queer, and feminist social movements while different-sex marriage showed an inverse relationship. Implications for how these findings require a rethinking of the marriage and politics are addressed as well.

Keywords

family structure, gays and lesbians, marital status, sexuality, social movement participation

Introduction

Marriage and social conservatism can go hand-in-hand. Families generally reinforce traditional gender roles (Greenlee 2010) and reactionary social movements often glorify traditional heterosexual marriages (Ayoub and Page 2020; Cravens 2021; Turnbull-Dugarte and Mc-Millan 2023). Marriage can shape the political engagement of individuals as well. When exploring social movement participation, married people were more inclined than single people to join prolife movements (Swank 2021) and they were less likely to attend the Women’s March (Heaney 2021) or “Black Lives Matter” protests (Drakulich et al., 2020). Studies on marriage and activism have mostly had a heterosexual focus while the patterns in queer partnerships have mostly been ignored. This queer omission means that studies have rarely determined if heterosexual, gay, or lesbian marriages function in similar political fashions, leaving a notable quandary in the existing literature.

A few studies have explored the role of civic unions and marriage on activism among lesbians and gay men (Rothblum, Balsam, and Solomon 2008; Sheehan, Maduro, and Derlega 2021) but these studies of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) communities often lack random samples (Philpot et al., 2016; Sheehan, Maduro,

and Derlega 2021) and have rarely compared patterns across sexual identities. To break with these conventions, this study addressed a three-way relationship between marital status, sexual identities, and political activism. Specifically, this study asked if marriage impacted the political activism of American heterosexuals and sexual minorities in similar or different ways.

Sexual Identities and Liberal Activism

Sexual identities and a desire for social change are often related. Political distinctiveness theories suggest (Egan 2012; Lewis, Rogers and Sherrill 2011) suggest exposure to heterosexism and connections to queer communities make lesbians and gay men more distrustful of social hierarchies than heterosexuals (Andersen and Jennings 2010; Guntermann and Beauvais 2022; Heaney 2021; Jones 2021; Schnabel 2018; Schaffner and Senic 2006;

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Turnbull-Dugarte and McMillan 2023; Worthen 2020a) and queer positivity studies suggest that sexual minorities consider activism a part of good gay identity (Rostosky, Black, Riggle, and Rosenkrantz 2015). Within LGB populations, some studies have found that LGB people are generally more liberal than heterosexuals (Schnabel 2018; Worthen 2020a), but other studies suggested that bisexual women might be politically left of lesbians (Guntermann and Beauvais 2022) or that bisexuals of all genders were more moderate than lesbian women and gay men (Herek et al. 2010; Jones 2021; Kowalski and Scheitle 2020; Lewis, Rogers and Sherrill 2011; Swank 2018b; Worthen, 2020b).

Research has also shown a sexuality gap in political activism. Gays and lesbians vote more often for Democrats and gay political candidates than heterosexuals (Haider-Markel, Miller, Flores, Lewis, Tadlock, and Taylor 2017) and sexual minorities embrace protest politics more often than heterosexuals. One study estimated that lesbians and gays are twice as likely to attend a protest in the last four years (Swank 2019) and another suggested that 49.4% of gay men had ever gone to a rally, march, or demonstration in their lifetime (Herek, Norton, Allen, and Sims 2010). Participation in liberal social movements was also patterned along sexual identities. Collective mobilizations for LGBT rights often drew higher percentages of lesbian women and gay men than heterosexuals (Fine, Torrea, Frost, and Cabana 2018; Swank 2018a). There might also be a LGB boost in joining feminist or antiracist social movements (Andersen and Jennings 2010; Conlin and Heesacker 2018; Fine, Torrea, Frost, and Cabana 2018; Fingerhut and Hardy 2020; Friedman and Ayres 2013; Heaney 2021; Radke, Hornsey, and Barlow 2018) but some authors warn that sexuality differences for joining these movements are pretty minimal (Harnois 2015; Swank 2018a).

Marriage and Political Engagement Among Heterosexuals

Narratives of the “normal” life-course typically include a marriage at some time in a person’s adult life (Byrne and Carr 2005). Theories of “hemophilia” and “assortative mating” suggest that people seek partners who match and affirm their deeply held values (Jennings and Stoker 2005), with people preferring partners who match their party affiliation (Easton and Holbein 2021; Huber and Malhotra 2017; Klofstad, McDermott, and Hatemi 2013). Some studies suggest that a person’s stance on LGB issues is crucial in their marriage decisions (Watson et al. 2004) and one study noted that having agreement on “gay issues” was as important as a potential partner’s stance on religion, monogamy, and feminism (Alford et al. 2011).

Attachments to sexual/romantic partners can also sway a person’s political worldviews and activism (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 1997; Stoker and Jennings 1995). Transitions into marriage often demand that newlyweds prioritize the needs and values of their spouse at the expense of other social relationships (Stout, Kretschmer, and Ruppanner 2017). This break from the past means that married people often see their spouse as their main source of political information (Stoker and Jennings 1995) and can include fewer interactions with friends, fewer memberships in community groups, and a general retreat from political engagement (Daenekindt, Koster, and van der Waal 2020). Marriage can also create a need for more ideological symmetry among partners (Alford et al. 2011). That is, married people were often expected to become political replicas of each other, with wives often bending their outlooks more than husbands. This emphasis on converging worldviews can either encourage or discourage political engagement based on the expectations of a dominant partner (Iyengar, Konitzer, and Tedin 2018).

The gender traditionalism of marriage vows, plus the processes of partner selection and ideological symmetry, often means that married people are far more conservative than non-married people. Married women often endorsed traditional gender prescriptions more than divorced or never married women (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Fahs 2007; Harnois 2015; Stout, Kretschmer, and Ruppanner 2017) and heterosexual marriage also reinforced heterosexual assumptions. Smaller samples have found that married heterosexuals had fewer LGBT friends (Loehr, Doan, and Miller 2015), and were more homophobic than single or divorced heterosexuals (Elder and Greene 2012; Loehr, Doan, and Miller 2015).

Heterosexual marriages can suppress liberal activism in two ways. First, getting married can produce a general retreat from political activism as married people are less willing (Beyerlein and Hipp 2008) and less likely to protest than did single or divorced individuals (Caren, Ghoshal, and Ribas 2011; Corrigan-Brown, 2012; Dodson 2015; Stoker and Jennings 1995). Second, marriage can shift the political concerns of individuals (Plutzer and McBurnett, 1991). The Republican Party and conservative social movements often characterize themselves as the “protectors” of traditional family values. In turn, movements that supposedly protect America from gay marriage, adultery, and abortion often attract married participants at disproportionately high rates (Gest, Reny, and Mayer 2018; Perrin, Tepper, Caren, and Morris 2014; Swank 2021). When addressing heterosexism, some married people endorsed the Republican Party because of its opposition to same-sex marriages (Cravens 2021) just as and married individuals have voted more for referendums that outlawed same-sex marriage than have single people (Pizmony-Levy and Ponce 2013). However, the link of

marriage and conservative activism can be reversed when a person marries a partner who values civic engagement, feminist ideals, and social justice (Bhatti et al. 2019).

The connection of divorce to activism also presents a set of puzzling findings. Some studies suggest that divorce leads to a temporary decline in voting while other studies suggest that divorce can shift the political orientations of people dramatically (Kern 2010; Wolfinger and Wolfinger 2008). Moreover, gender can polarize the political effects of divorce. Divorce seems to increase the likelihood of women identifying with the Democratic Party and men identifying with the Republican Party compared other groups (Fahs 2007).

Marriage and Political Engagement Among Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals

Trends in heterosexual marriages may or may not apply to lesbian/gay marriages (Reczek, 2020). People of all sexualities often say that they get married to publicly express lifelong love, possibly gain the approval of their parents, have children, and gain material benefits on taxes, health care, and social security (Rostosky et al. 2015). However, a lifetime of enduring heteronormativity may create a unique queer understanding of marriage. Lesbian women and gay men have been more inclined than heterosexual people to enter marriages with the intent of changing the regressive practices of that institution. Qualitative studies often hear LGB partners saying that their same-sex marriage is a “statement for equality and GLBTQ rights” and “we wanted into that institution to transform it from the inside” (Fetner and Heath 2016; Lannutti 2018; Rostosky et al. 2015). Quantitative studies also found that up to 81% of married same-sex couples characterized their wedding as “acts of civil disobedience,” “a political statement,” “a civil rights movement,” and “a protest against discrimination” (Taylor et al. 2009).

Same-sex civil unions and marriages were recognized by some states and cities starting in the early 1990s. The first wave of legally recognized same-sex married people was very political. A study of early married lesbian/gay couples found that 96% were registered to vote (Rothblum, Balsam, and Solomon 2008), 94% had voted in the last national election (Rothblum, Balsam, and Solomon 2008), and 40% had given money to an elected official (Taylor et al. 2009). The majority of these early same-sex husbands and wives called themselves liberal or extremely liberal (Rothblum, Balsam, and Solomon 2008), and 38% had gone to a rally or protest for same-sex marriage (Taylor et al. 2009). This liberalism of initial same-sex marriages also led to high levels of feminist sympathies (Rothblum, Balsam, and Solomon 2008); between 42 to 48% of those in same-sex marriages

were also involved in pro-choice and women’s right movement actions (Taylor et al. 2009).

Later studies on the political impacts of lesbian/gay marriages are less conclusive. One study suggested that same-sex married people were more civic minded than different-sex couples when addressing volunteer projects (Beyerlein and Bergstrand 2016) but another study found that marriage did not alter the political liberalism of lesbian and bisexual Canadians (Guntermann and Beauvais 2022). A study from Australia found that gay men’s desire to marry had nothing to do with their involvement in LGBT communities (Philpot et al. 2016) and two U.S. studies concurred that LGBT marital status was not related to participation in LGBT cultural events, LGBT support groups, and rallies against LGBT hate crimes (Ocobock 2018; Sheehan, Maduro, and Derlega 2021). Finally, some studies suggest that lesbian and gay marriages may even suppress the liberalism and political activism of sexual minorities. Studies from Canada and Australia found that single gay men were ideologically more left-wing (Guntermann and Beauvais 2022) and more prone to voting for gay rights (Thai and Dellers 2020), while another study found that lower marriage rates helped to explain the protesting actions of gay and lesbian college students (Swank, Atteberry-Ash, Coulombe, and Woodford 2020).

This literature review highlights some certainties and debates within the literature. While it is well established that marriage generally dampened feminist and queer sensibilities among heterosexuals (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Elder and Greene 2012), the findings on politics and same-sex marriages were much less consistent. Same-sex marriages sometimes adhered to similar patterns of conservative heterosexual marriages (Thai and Dellers 2020). Alternatively, some studies suggest that the political ramifications of marriage are contingent upon a person’s place in sexual hierarchies. Some studies argue that marriage did not impact the activism of sexual minorities (Ocobock 2018) or that lesbian/gay married people were more politically engaged than the single and divorced sexual minorities (Rothblum, Balsam, and Solomon 2008; Taylor et al. 2009). Finally, the role of bisexual marriage adds another caveat into this discussion. Some studies have found that lesbians, gays, and bisexuals have similar political tendencies (Worthen 2020a), but other studies suggested that bisexuals were not as liberal as lesbians and gay men (Herek et al. 2010; Lewis, Rogers and Sherrill 2011; Swank 2018b). This study addressed the unresolved issue of marriage and political engagement among people of different sexual orientations. In doing so, the possible universal or sexuality specific effects are addressed by these research questions:

Is marriage a generally a conservative force that suppresses liberal activism in the general population?

Does marriage discourage liberal activism to same extent for sexual minorities as for heterosexuals?

These questions are answered through a “comparative relational analysis” (Proctor 2022) that determines if the relationship between marriage and social movement activism is mitigated by a person’s sexual identity.

Method

Sample

The sample comes from the 2010–2012 of the American National Election Study (ANES). ANES relied on Knowledge Networks for respondents. Knowledge Networks (KN) created and maintains a panel of possible respondents. When building a list of 40,000 U.S. households, KN recruited people through random-digit dialing and address-based approaches. To address issues of selection biases, the analysis was based on weighted data which accounted for a cross-classification of race/ethnicity and educational attainment, and a cross-classification of age and sex, metropolitan status, household internet access, income, marital status, and home ownership (ANES, 2015).

The study was confined to people who explicitly identified themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or heterosexual (N = 3815). As such, 95.5% of the sample preferred a heterosexual identity (N = 3642) while 2.5% called themselves lesbian/gay (N = 96) and 2.0% identified as bisexual (N = 75). The sample tilted older with the mean age being 51.6 years. Further, it skewed slightly toward cisgender males (50.8%). Along racial lines, 66% picked a White non-Hispanic lineage, while 14% identified as Black, and 14% selected Hispanic.

Instrument

Political Activism: In democratic societies, citizens can choose between a range of conventional and unconventional political behaviors. One channel is when citizens express their concerns to governmental leaders through the orthodox or “insider” avenues of electoral politics (e.g., testifying at legislative hearings, writing letters to Congress, or making political donations to favorite politicians). Compared to other tactics, these approaches are often done as an individual and require little risk. People can also draw the attention of authority figures through the “outsider” and confrontational means (e.g., engaging in protests, strikes, boycotts or civil disobedience). As a whole, outsider tactics require greater efforts to join and can be riskier than electoral activism (e.g., outsider tactics can lead to arrest, chastisement, ridicule).

ANES provided several measures for outsider tactics. A single item asked if a person “joined a protest march” in the last year. This item traced protest attendance but it did not

indicate whether the protest was for a liberal purpose or not. Answers were coded in a binary fashion (protested in the last four years = 1, no protest in that time span = 0). Several items addressed collaboration with liberal and conservative social movements. ANES had asked if people “were active” in a list of seven social movements. Five of these mobilizations were considered as liberal “new social movements” and two were deemed “conservative social movements.” In general, the distinction between a liberal and conservative movement was whether a movement demanded a redistribution of resources, ending discrimination against stigmatized groups, and expanding the rights of disenfranchised populations (Taylor et al. 2009).

Three variables were established with these measures. A single-item variable measured recent involvement in the LGB rights movement (active in the last year = 1, not active = 0). This LGB movement was kept separate from the others since the sexuality gap is most intense on these matters. A second variable tracked participation in liberal social movements around environmental degradation, peace, racial equality, and feminist issues ($\alpha = 0.714$). People were considered liberal activists if they said they were active in any of these four movements in the last year (active = 1, not active = 0). A third variable asked if a person was involved with conservative prolife or Tea Party social movements in the last year ($\alpha = 0.416$). People who were active in either of these two conservative movements were deemed conservative activists.

Sexual Identities: Sexual orientations can revolve around identities, actions, and attractions, but self-identifications have shown the biggest bearing on political attitudes (Schnabel 2018; Swank and Fahs 2019). Accordingly, I used the sexual identity measure. The responses of heterosexual, bisexual, and gay or lesbian were converted into three dichotomous variables (lesbian, gay men = 1, other = 0; bisexual = 1, other = 0; heterosexual = 1, other = 0).

Marital Status: One question asked about the person’s current relationship status. I analyzed the four dummy variables of currently being married, being widowed, being divorced or separated, and being never married. It should be noted that ANES did not ask about the gender of one’s current or former partners, which means that some marriages could be between people of different sexual orientations (i.e., self-defined lesbians, gays, and bisexuals marrying heterosexual people).

State Same-Sex Marriage Laws: In 2010, the ability for same-sex couples to legally marry varied by governmental jurisdictions. I created a dummy variable for people who currently resided in a state that ever legally allowed same-sex marriages. This variable functioned as a control variable that structured the marital decision-making processes of sexual minorities.

Family Income: Family income also worked as a control variable since married people are more affluent

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Social Movement Engagement, Sexual Identities, and Marital Status.

	Number Yes	Percent Yes, %
Attended a protest in the last year	156	4.1
Active in any conservative movement in last year	142	3.7
Prolife	89	2.3
Tea party	76	2.0
Active in the LGBT rights movement in last year	60	1.6
Active in other liberal social movements in last year	152	4.0
Antiwar	47	1.2
Environmental degradation	72	1.9
Occupy wall street	56	1.4
Racial equality	50	1.3
Women's rights movement	57	1.5
Lesbian/Gay	96	2.5
Bisexual	75	2.0
Heterosexual	3642	95.5
Married	2080	54.6
Widowed	250	6.0
Divorced	544	14.4
Never married	827	21.7
Lesbian/Gay married	9	.2
Lesbian/Gay widowed	4	.1
Lesbian/Gay divorced	6	.1
Lesbian/Gay never married	68	1.8
Bisexual married	22	.6
Bisexual widowed	0	.0
Bisexual divorced	11	.3
Bisexual never married	35	.9
Heterosexual married	2049	53.7
Heterosexual widowed	246	6.5
Heterosexual divorced	527	13.8
Heterosexual never married	724	19.0

than not married people (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 1997) and social class is sometimes connected to social movement participation (Caren, Ghoshal, and Ribas 2011; Radke, Hornsey, and Barlow 2018). Responses to the question, "What is your current household income" were ranked in 19 intervals that started with less than 5000 USD a year and ended with more than 175,000 USD annually.

Analytical Plan

My analysis went through two phases. First, distributions and central tendencies were constructed for every variable in this study. Second, I looked for signs of how marital status was connected to the social movement engagement for all respondents. Lastly, I explored the link between activism and marriage in disaggregated subsamples of heterosexuals and sexual minorities. This comparative relational analysis has been used in sexuality studies estimates and compares the results of regressions across people of different sexual identities (Proctor, 2022). With dependent variables being

measured in dummy codes all associations between the variables were determined through a binary logistic regression. Odd Ratios (OR) in binary logistic regressions assessed the likelihood that someone would engage in a political act (yes or no). An OR of above 1.0 suggested a positive relationship and OR reveals the strength of the relationships. According to Chen, Cohen, and Chen (2010), an OR of above 4.94 was considered a large relationship while an OR of 4.93 to 2.84 was considered a medium relationship, while a small relationship was present in an OR of 2.83 to 1.54. Finally, missing data was handled through the listwise deletion or complete-case analysis.

Results

Descriptive Analysis

This analysis began with the univariate distributions of key variables (see Table 1). Recent participation in protest politics is pretty rare. Only 4.1% of the people had

Table 2. Logistic Regressions for Relationship Status or Sexual Identities and Social Movement Engagement.

Independent Variable	Attend a Protest	LGBT Rights	Liberal Movements	Conservative Movements
Marital Statuses Only				
Married	.83 (.29)	.13*** (.35)	.63* (.21)	1.41 (.22)
Widowed	1.47 (.44)	.10** (1.01)	.32* (.52)	1.52 (.34)
Separated/Divorced	1.71 (.32)	.47 (.33)	1.19 (.25)	1.13 (.27)
Sexual Identity Only				
Lesbian/Gay	3.22* (.43)	22.91*** (.31)	3.11** (.36)	1.12 (.51)
Bisexual	1.31 (.72)	6.72*** (.49)	2.02 (.47)	1.08 (.59)
Marital/Sexual Identity				
Married	1.00 (.33)	.26*** (.37)	.73 (.21)	1.45 (.22)
Widowed	1.71 (.45)	.16* (1.02)	.36* (.52)	1.56 (.34)
Separated/Divorced	1.94 (.33)	.44 (.35)	.92 (.25)	1.15 (.28)
Lesbian/Gay	3.46** (.46)	13.05*** (.34)	2.64* (.38)	1.39 (.53)
Bisexual	1.33 (.73)	4.73*** (.50)	1.82 (.47)	1.17 (.61)

Notes: Single never married is the reference group for the marital status variable. Heterosexuals were the reference group for sexual identity variable. Residing in a state that recognized same-sex marriages by 2010 and family income acted as control variables in the analysis. OR above 1.0 indicate that the relationship is positive and standard errors are in parenthesis.

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

protested in the last year and participation in non-LGBT liberal and conservative social movements were pretty equal (4.0% in the four liberal social movements and 3.7% in the two conservative movements). Participation in prolife movement was the most common among conservative concerns (2.3%) and environmentalism was the most popular liberal movement (1.9%). Being active in the LGBT rights movement garnered 1.6% of the sample

The sample was largely heterosexual (95.5%) and about half of the people were married (54.6%). Less than 2.5% of the sample embraced a lesbian/gay identity and 2.0% chose a bisexual classification. Being married was the norm for the entire sample with 54.5% having a current a marital spouse and 21% never being married. One's marital status also varied by sexual identity as the majority of heterosexuals were currently married and most lesbians, gays, and bisexuals were never married.

Explanatory Analysis

Table 2 explored the link of marriage and sexual identities protesting and social movement engagement. The top regressions connected marital statuses and sexual identities to liberal activism without controlling for the effect of each other. The bottom rows estimated the links of liberal activism to relationship commitments and sexual identities when holding the impact of the other independent variables constant. Living in a state that allowed same-sex marriage and family income acted as control variables for all regressions.

My first set of regressions highlighted the association of relationship statuses on political activism. Married people were significantly less likely to join the LGBT Rights

movement (OR = 0.13, $p < 0.001$) and other liberal social movements (OR = 0.63, $p < 0.05$) than single people. Married people did not significantly differ from single people on protesting tendencies or joining conservative social movements. The other marital statuses were mostly inconsequential to political tendencies but widowed people were significantly less inclined to become a part of both the LGBT Rights (OR = 0.10, $p < 0.01$) and liberal non-LGBT rights movements (OR = 0.32, $p < 0.05$). Finally, being divorced or separated did not significantly shape political activism in any discernable fashion.

The second batch of regressions, which explore sexual identities and the controls, suggested that sexual identities often swayed political activism. Sexual identities had an enormous impact on embracing the LGBT rights movement. Lesbian and gay individuals were *22 times more likely* to join queer liberation struggles than heterosexuals (OR = 22.91, $p < 0.001$). Lesbians and gays distinguished themselves from heterosexuals in protesting and joining other liberal non-LGBT social movements but the magnitude of the sexuality difference was less striking (OR = 3.22 and 3.11, $p < 0.01$ and $p < 0.05$). Bisexual and heterosexual people had similar activist tendencies in some instances but bisexual people joined the LGBT rights movement more than heterosexual people did (OR = 6.72, $p < 0.001$).

The last series of regressions entered every marital and sexual identity variable into the equation. This combination erased the previously significant links of marital statuses to participation in liberal non-LGBT rights movements. Conversely, marriage was still connected to less participation in LGBT social movements (OR = 0.26, $p < 0.001$) and widowed individuals were disinclined to any sort of liberal activism (OR = 0.16 and 0.36, $p < 0.05$). Sexual identities

Table 3. Logistic Regressions for Relationship Status and Social Movement Engagement for Lesbian/Gay, Bisexual, and Heterosexual Subsamples.

	Lesbian and Gay		Bisexual		Heterosexual	
	Attend a protest	Conserve movement	Attend a protest	Conserve movement	Attend a protest	Conserve movement
Married	9.42* (1.06)	3.49 (1.47)	1.04 (1.07)	1.22 (1.23)	.88 (.32)	1.39 (.23)
Widowed	1.10 (1.87)	1.00 (1.81)	—	—	1.58 (.46)	1.54 (.35)
Separated/ Divorced	1.95 (1.22)	1.00 (1.17)	1.00 (6.71)	1.00 (9.36)	1.62 (.35)	1.02 (.29)
Pseudo R ²	.225	.27	.00	.00	.00	.00
Social movement	LGBT rights	Liberal movement	LGBT rights	Liberal movement	LGBT rights	Liberal movement
Married	3.54* (.84)	9.78* (.91)	.35 (1.23)	.30* (1.22)	.17*** (.43)	.68 (.23)
Widowed	1.68 (1.22)	1.00 (2.00)	—	—	1.00 (2.52)	.36 (.53)
Separated/ Divorced	.93 (.88)	5.34 (1.31)	.54 (1.26)	1.00 (9.39)	.55 (.40)	.94 (.26)
Pseudo R ²	.10	.18	.15	.16	.08	.01

Notes: Single never married is the reference group. Residing in a state that recognized same-sex marriages by 2010 and family income acted as control variables in the analysis. OR above 1.0 indicate that that the relationship is positive and standard errors are in parenthesis. ****p* < 0.001, ***p* < 0.01, **p* < 0.05.

retained their significant links to liberal activism even when holding marital status constant. Lesbians and gay men were significantly more likely to protest (OR = 3.46, *p* < 0.01), join the LGBT rights movement (OR = 13.05, *p* < 0.001), and embrace liberal social movements (OR = 2.64, *p* < 0.05) than were heterosexuals. Bisexuals also significantly rallied more for LGBT rights than heterosexuals when addressing relationship statuses (OR = 4.73, *p* < 0.001).

This last regression offered some interesting insights on the interplay between marital statuses, sexual identities, and social movement involvement. First, neither sexual identities nor marital statuses were connected to conservative social movement participation in the last year. Second, sexual identities had a stronger direct association with liberalism activism than a person’s marital status. Third, marriage suppressed LGBT activism even when controlling for a person’s sexual identity. Fourth, significant link of marriage to participation in non-LGBT liberal social movements ended when attending to person’s sexual identities.

Table 3 estimated the relationships of marital statuses to liberal activism for people of different sexual identities. This splitting the sample into lesbians/gay men, bisexuals, and heterosexuals reinforced the idea of distinct marital associations (the farthest right columns in the table). Marriage generally decreased liberal activism and increased conservative activism for heterosexuals. In the heterosexual-only sample, married people were significantly less likely to join the LGBT movement (OR = 0.17, *p* < 0.001) than were single heterosexuals. Conversely, getting married did not significantly change the tendency

of heterosexuals to go to a protest or join other social movements.

Marriage was a political force for some sexual minorities (see left and middle columns). Marriage bolstered the tendency of lesbian women and gay men to protest (OR = 9.42, *p* < 0.05), join the LGBT rights movement (OR = 3.54, *p* < 0.05), and support other liberal social movements (OR = 9.78, *p* < 0.05). Thus, married lesbian women and gay men did not abandon their liberal activism at all. However, marriage was an obstacle to liberal activism among bisexuals (OR = 0.30, *p* < 0.05), indicating that bisexuals who remain in marital relationships are more reluctant to join liberal causes than bisexuals who are single.

The apparent conditional effect of marriage on activism inspired a new batch of tests. With marriage presenting an inverse relationship in Table 3, I created a set of regressions and graphs with interaction terms between a person’s sexual identities and their marital status. To lessen concerns over multicollinearity, all of the variables in the regressions were centered before computing the product and interaction terms (Aiken and West 1991).

Table 4 presents the interaction effects between being married and being a sexual minority. In echoing the findings of Table 2, marriage generally dampens liberal activism but it most significantly decreases participation in the LGBT rights movement (OR = 0.18, *p* < .001). Being a lesbian/gay significantly increases the likelihood of going to a protest (OR = 6.47, *p* < .01), joining the LGBT rights movement (OR = 40.13, *p* < .001), or joining other liberal social movements (OR = 6.18, *p* < .001). Being a bisexual was most relevant to LGBT activism (OR = 7.00, *p* < .001). The

Table 4. Logistic Regressions for Interactions Between Relationship Status and Sexual Identities and Social Movement Engagement.

Independent Variable	Attend a Protest	LGBT Rights	Liberal Movements
Married	.66 (1.68)	.18*** (.21)	.69 (.41)
Widowed	1.51 (.45)	.14* (.52)	.34* (1.02)
Separated/Divorced	1.79 (.32)	.65 (.25)	.85 (.35)
Lesbian/Gay	6.47** (.51)	40.13*** (.44)	6.18*** (.46)
Bisexual	1.03 (4.66)	7.00*** (.61)	1.70 (.64)
Married*Lesbian/Gay	6.46* (1.01)	14.76*** (.86)	10.46*** (.88)
Married*Bisexual	1.00 (8.54)	3.15 (1.16)	.882 (1.22)

Notes: Single never married is the reference group for the marital status variable. Heterosexuals were the reference group for sexual identity variable. Residing in a state that recognized same-sex marriages by 2010 and family income acted as control variables in the analysis. OR above 1.0 indicate that the relationship is positive and standard errors are in parenthesis. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

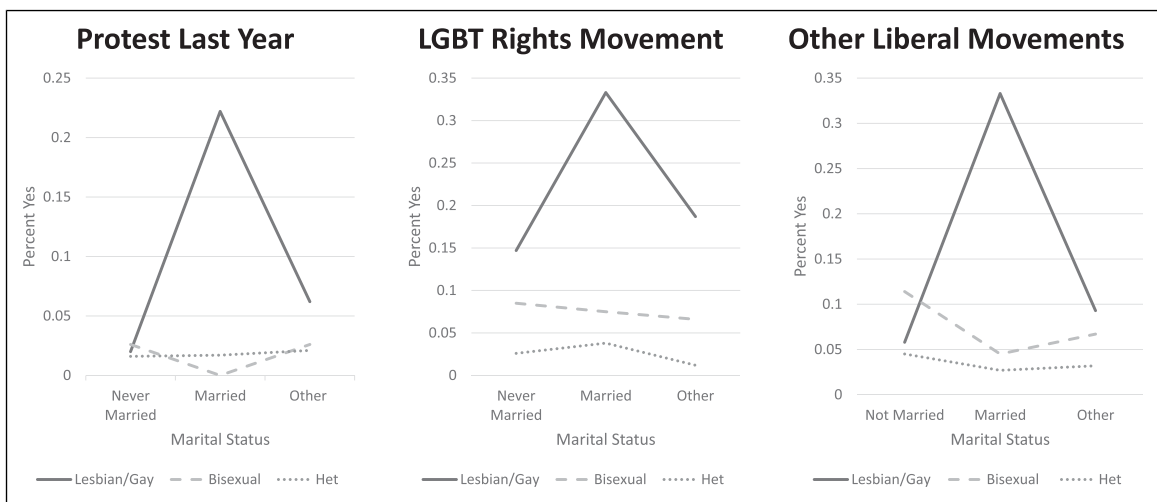


Figure 1. Interaction of Marital Status/Sexual Identities for Social Movement Activism

interactional products also highlight the unique effects of marriage on lesbians and gay men (similar to Table 3). The positive ratios for married lesbians/gay men in protesting (OR = 6.46, $p < .05$), entering LGBT social movements (OR = 14.76, $p < .001$), or taking part in other liberal movements (OR = 10.46, $p < 0.001$) suggests marriage reverses the conservative and apoliticalizing tendencies of marriage for people who are other sexual identities.

Figure 1 visually illustrates the sexually specific aspects of marriage. Regardless of marital status, lesbians and gay men are more active in liberal causes than heterosexuals. However, the sexuality gap for liberal activism is small among the unmarried while it expands dramatically among married populations. Thus, the plots and lines lack signs parallelism because of the bifurcated influence of marriage.

Discussion

Marriage has often been seen as a conservative force that grants more power to husbands and makes no space for

lesbian and gay couples. Progressive social movements have tried to make families more equitable and supportive but changes in this direction have been slow and uneven (England 2010). Traditional marriage practices are durable and resistant to change, as many heterosexual married wives still lack full autonomy, are financially dependent on men, do most of the familial care-taking or household chores, experience domestic violence, and have low sexual satisfaction (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Some egalitarian marriages buck these trends but they are often the exception to the rule.

Studies also suggest that social conservatism also appeared in the political behaviors of married people. Marriage can lessen participation in feminist or queer social movements (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004; Rostosky, Black, Riggles, and Rosenkrantz 2015) and can boost participation in conservative social movements (Gest, Reny, and Mayer 2018; Perrin, Tepper, Caren, and Morris 2014; Swank 2021).

Studies on marriage and politics have often ignored the role of a person’s sexual identity. This oversight may

distort our understandings of the links between marriage and activism. Queer theorists sometime warn that same-sex marriages were just as conservative as heterosexual marriages. In fact, some queer theorists (Duggan 2003) and many single sexual minorities (Drabble et al. 2020) worry that young LGBT rebels became complacent moderates after they got married. Other LGBT activists concede that same-sex marriage valorizes domesticity and the nuclear family, but they argued that same-sex marriage brings many financial and legal protections along with greater commitments to LGBT rights (Bernstein and Taylor 2013)

A few studies have quantified the link between marriage and activism among sexual minorities. Some studies suggest that gay and lesbian marriages increased participation in civic groups and liberal social movements (Beyerlein and Bergstrand 2016; Lannutti 2018; Rostosky et al. 2015; Rothblum, Balsam, and Solomon 2008; Taylor et al. 2009), other studies found that marriage stunts the liberal activism of lesbians and gays (Ocobock 2018; Swank, Atteberry-Ash, Coulombe, and Woodford 2020; Swank and Fahs 2019; Thai and Dellers 2020).

The divided and inconclusive literature is partially due incompatible research methods. Studies generally limited their analysis to only heterosexual or lesbian/gay populations and did not compare the effects of marriage across sexual identities. Studies also neglected the possibility that marriage for bisexuals might present its own unique dynamics. Lastly, most studies looked at how marriage is related to participation in a single social movement while neglecting the possibility that marriage can have different effects on either liberal or conservative social movements.

This study turned to the American National Election Survey (ANES) to avoid these problems. By offering a large random sample, ANES improved upon studies that used convenience samples of college students (Swank, Atteberry-Ash, Coulombe, and Woodford 2020) or people at political events (Heaney 2021; Taylor et al. 2009). With adequate numbers of people from different sexual identities, this study compared the relationship of marriage to political activism within and between sexual identities. In fact, there are no published papers that have explored the links of marriage to political activism among people in lesbian/gay, bisexual, and heterosexual populations.

My analysis started with a conventional approach that overlooks sexual identities. This technique produced familiar and well-established findings. Around 4% of Americans had joined a liberal or conservative social movement in the last year. Marriage also patterned a person's liberal political engagements. Married people were people were less inclined to join LGBT, environmental, feminist, antiracist, and labor social movements than single people (Montgomery and Stewart 2012; Rostosky et al. 2015; Voorpostel and Coffé 2012). The

impact of other relationship statuses on activism was mostly minor and insignificant.

Next, I estimated the bivariate relationships between sexual identities and social movement participation. There was a noticeable "sexuality gap" in liberal activism. Compared to heterosexuals, lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals were significantly more active in social justice movements (Andersen and Jennings 2010; Conlin and Heesacker 2018; Fine, Torrea, Frost, and Cabana 2018; Fingerhut and Hardy 2020; Friedman and Ayres 2013; Radke, Hornsey, and Barlow 2018). On the other hand, bisexuals were less likely to join liberal social movements than gay men and lesbians (Jones 2021) and a tendency to join conservative social movements was not governed by a person's sexual identity.

I then tested the three-way relationship of marriage, sexual identities, and social movement participation. Initially, the study compared the links of marriage and political activism when controlling for a person's sexual identity. The multivariate regression discovered three patterns. First, the significant link between marriage and participation in LGBT social movements stayed significant when controlling for sexual identities. Second, the significant relationship of marriage to participation in non-LGBT liberal movements disappeared when accounting for sexual identities. Third, a lesbian/gay identity increased protesting and liberal activism even after controlling for marital arrangements. The significance of a bisexual identity was confined to LGBT rights activism under these conditions. These findings suggested that the sexuality gap in queer activism might be impervious to marital relationships and that marriage might display distinct political trajectories for people of different sexual identities.

To address the sexuality specific aspects of marriage, I took several additional steps. I first separated the sample into people of different sexual identities. This disaggregation highlighted the ways marital effects are conditioned and moderated by a person's sexual identity. In presenting a version of the "Simpson's paradox," marriage had an inverse relationship to protesting and liberal social movement participation for heterosexuals and lesbians/gay men. Marriage boosted social movement participation among lesbians and gay men (Beyerlein and Bergstrand 2016; Rothblum, Balsam, and Solomon 2008; Taylor et al. 2009). The LG marriage bump applied to social movements that promoted LGBT rights as well as collective efforts at world peace, healthy environments, and an abolition of racial/gender biases. Marriage never increased heterosexual ties to liberal social movements (Caren, Ghoshal, and Ribas 2011; Stoker and Jennings 1995). For heterosexual people, marriage significantly diminished the tendency to become LGBT allies (Montgomery and Stewart 2012; Rostosky et al. 2015)

and discouraged heterosexual participation in antiracist, environmental, and feminist social movements (Park and Einwohner 2019). Lastly, I completed some regressions and line plots with interaction terms. These equations and graphs confirmed that the effect of marriage on political activism is altered by a person's sexual identity. Thus, marriage does not have consistent and universal associations across sexual identities. Marriage amplified the tendency for gay men and lesbian women to join liberal social movements, just as it reinforced a heterosexual avoidance of liberal social movements. Finally, this study also suggested that political differences between single people, widowers, and divorced people were pretty minimal.

Limitations and Future Directions

The links of marriage to activism were often altered by a person's sexuality. This means that studies on politics and family structures should be attentive to the role of sexual identities in their sampling, measurements, and analysis. While this suggestion could potentially improve other studies, this study is not without methodological limitations. The small number of sexual minorities reflects social trends but it also hinders the possibility of rejecting the null (cell sizes are under 10 cases for married, divorced, and widowed lesbian/gays, and bisexuals were never widowed). The cross-sectional design presents some temporal ordering concerns (i.e., conservative heterosexuals may marry more often than liberal heterosexuals). Also, we cannot know if a person's marital status came before their political activism in the last year. The definitions of variables and item wording were also not perfect. Some respondents may restrict social movement participation to joining a protest or an advocacy group while others may have a more expansive definition of social movement participation (e.g., making subversive art, critiquing racist/sexist/homophobic comments, kissing their partners in public, etc.). The categorization and measure of sexualities was equally complicated. Though a person's sexuality can be determined by a person's attractions, behaviors, and identities, this study took the identity approach rather than focusing on sexual interests or actions (which might produce different results). For example, there is a line of bud sex studies, which suggests that men who have sex with men embrace hegemonic masculinity more than men who call themselves gay (Schnabel 2018; Silva and Whaley 2018). The measure of current sexual identity also ignores the ideas of sexual histories and sexual fluidity. Many people may have precise and stable sexual identities but some people experience changes or ambiguities in their sexual identity before, during, and after marriages (Katz-Wise 2015).

Further, intersectional studies also suggest that there are gender and race divisions within each sexual identity (Heaney 2021). As such, scholars could see if gender or race factors mitigate the findings in this study (Guntermann and Beauvais 2022; Jones 2021; Swank 2019). Gender could be especially important because the scripts of house-bound, deferential, and rule-abiding wives and mothers often undercuts women's participation in strike, boycotts, and feminist activism (Stout, Kretschmer, and Ruppner 2017; Voorpostel and Coffé 2012). Finally, the responses for sexual identities were not totally exhaustive. Some people identify as asexual while other people prefer a queer or pansexual label. Such labels might alter our findings because queer individuals often displayed more radical understandings of gender and sexuality practices than did people who called themselves lesbian or gay (Worthen 2020b).

The measurement of marital status could also be enhanced. This survey did not ask the gender or sexual identity of one's current spouse or partner. There are probably a few cases of people who call themselves lesbian and gay but are still married to a different gender heterosexual. It is also possible that a heterosexually identified person could be married to a person who privately identifies as a lesbian or gay. Moreover, we have no idea if married bisexuals are presenting a heterosexual, lesbian/gay, or bisexual partnership to themselves or the broader social world. A current marital status does not trace a person's marital history. It is impossible to know how often a person was married and if the person had ever been in a different-sex marriage at an earlier time.

Marriage generally lessens liberal activism. But, this maxim needs a sexual identity caveat. This relationship holds for heterosexuals but, as this study showed, was often reversed for lesbian women and gay men. That is, marriage often boosted liberal activism for lesbians and gay men. Thus, scholars who study marriage and families need to be attuned to the ways sexual identities can neutralize or counteract the conservative tendencies of marriage. At the very least, quantitative studies of marriage and politics should have sexual identities as a control variable but studies should also partition their study into heterosexual and sexual minority subsamples (Proctor 2022). We also need research about why marriage can increase liberal activism among sexual minorities. Same-sex marriage might be inherently more progressive than heterosexual marriages as review of 66 studies concluded that LGB couples are often more egalitarian, tender, and emotionally intimate than heterosexual couples (Rostosky, and Riggie 2017). However, essentialist arguments are often oversimplifications and researchers need to explore the mechanisms behind greater LG liberalism. Exposure to

heterosexist discrimination may alter the marriage dynamics (Egan 2012; Proctor 2022) while specific socio-political factors can also be behind these results (Lewis, Rogers, and Sherrill 2011; Swank 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte, and McMillan 2023). Also, being pregnant and having children can lessen political participation (Naurin, Stolle, and Markstedt 2023). The effect of pregnancy on engagement with politics toward a model of the political consequences of the earliest stages of parenthood (Naurin, Stolle, and Markstedt 2023) and same-sex couples have less children than heterosexual couples. The data was collected during the height of LGBT activism around marriage rights, and the level of activism among same-sex married couples might lessen when LGB marriages become more normalized throughout society. A person's age is related to people's sexual identities, their political activism, and when the likelihood of being married (Egan 2012; Lewis, Rogers, and Sherrill 2011). Heterosexual couples also birth more children than people in other sorts of relationships and the presence of offspring might increase conservatism of heterosexual parents (Bhatti et al. 2019; Greenlee 2010). Marriage can also alter the friendship networks for sexual minorities (Ducharme and Kollar 2012), just as it can often improve the mental and economic well-being lesbians and gay men (Rostosky and Riggle 2017). Thus, I hope that future studies will build and test theoretical models about why marriage can have such divergent political impacts for people across different sexual identity groups.

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Data Availability

The data and codebook for the 2012 ANES survey can be accessed at <https://electionstudies.org/data-center/2012-time-series-study/>

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