

Language and LGBTQ politics: The effect of changing group labels on public attitudes

Forthcoming, *American Politics Research*

Philip Edward Jones
Department of Political Science and International Relations
University of Delaware
Smith Hall 347, Newark, DE 19716
pejones@udel.edu
www.pejones.org

Abstract: The labels used to describe sexual and gender minorities in the U.S. have shifted over time and become increasingly inclusive. Movement organizations have changed from describing the “lesbian, gay, and bisexual” (“LGB”) community to adding transgender (“LGBT”) and then also queer (“LGBTQ”) identities. Do these different labels affect public views of the group and support for their rights? I embedded a question wording experiment in a statewide survey, asking respondents about either LGB, LGBT, or LGBTQ people. The labels had no discernible effect on (1) support for requiring businesses to serve the group; nor (2) views of the group’s political leanings. There is no evidence that ideology and partisanship moderated these null effects: liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, were unaffected by the changing designations. This suggests public attitudes are not contingent on how the LGBTQ community is labelled, a finding with implications both for movement organizations and survey researchers.

Keywords: LGBTQ, question wording, survey experiment, group labels.

Acknowledgments: I am grateful to the University of Delaware’s Center for Political Communication for funding the survey this study is based on.

Language and LGBTQ politics: The effect of changing group labels on public attitudes

The labels used to describe sexual and gender minorities in the U.S. have shifted over time and become increasingly inclusive. Through the 1980s and 90s, movement organizations mostly described themselves as representing “lesbian, gay, and bisexual” people and fighting for “LGB” rights (Velasco and Paxton, 2022; Gamson, 1995). By the 2000s, groups were increasingly “adding the T” (Nownes, 2014) and using the “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender” (“LGBT”) label. More recently, groups have expanded their designation further and refer to the “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer” (“LGBTQ”) community (Velasco and Paxton, 2022). These changes have not been without controversy, however. Some critics decry what they see as “alphabet soup”, claiming that labels like “LGBTQ” will confuse or turn off potential supporters (e.g., Bruce, 2011).

But do the different labels actually affect how the public views the LGBTQ community and its rights?¹ Despite the changes in language used by movement organizations, we know little about how voters respond. In this research note, I present the results from a survey experiment that randomly manipulated whether respondents were asked about “LGB”, “LGBT”, or “LGBTQ” people and their rights. There is no evidence that the different labels changed how supportive respondents were of requiring businesses to serve LGBTQ people, nor how liberal they thought LGBTQ people were. In further exploratory analyses, neither respondent ideology or partisanship moderated these null effects: liberals and conservatives were equally unaffected by the changing designations. Put simply, the language used to describe the LGBTQ community had no effect on attitudes.

¹ Choosing how to refer to the group in a paper about its name is a challenge. When discussing the community generally, I use the full “LGBTQ” label for inclusivity. When referring to the experimental conditions specifically, I use “LGB”, “LGBT”, or “LGBTQ” as appropriate.

These findings are statistically null but substantively significant. From the perspective of current LGBTQ organizations, the results push back against calls to deprioritize transgender or queer interests, which tend to have less public support than LGB rights (Lewis et al., 2017; Burke et al., 2023). Expanding the group label does not have negative consequences, a finding with implications for the broader movement's strategies. From a social science point of view, this is a case where question wording does not seem to matter. Survey writers can and should word items with reference to the specific community of interest without risk of biasing estimates. I return to these points in the conclusion. First, I introduce expectations from previous research, before turning to the data and experimental design, and then the results.

Language and labels in LGBTQ politics

Why would using different labels for the LGBTQ community affect public opinion? The previous literature offers two possibilities: first, that some subgroups within the community are more popular than others; and second, that survey responses on LGBTQ rights can be sensitive to question wording. Either mechanism (or both) would lead us to expect views of the group and support for their rights to change with different labels.

The first explanation is that “LGB”, “LGBT”, and “LGBTQ” are not synonymous labels. They refer to different groups of people (e.g., straight transgender people are not included in an “LGB” label but are in “LGBT” or “LGBTQ”), which respondents might have different attitudes toward. Indeed, the public is often less supportive of transgender rights than LGB rights. Support for laws against anti-transgender discrimination is lower than for those against anti-LGB discrimination, and ratings of transgender people are colder than of LGB people (Burke et al., 2023; Lewis et al., 2017). Research on queer rights is less extensive, but surveys of LGBTQ Americans find that queer respondents face particularly intense discrimination (Worthen, 2023), and tend to hold more radical political views (Rollins and Hirsch, 2003). All

told, this suggests that adding transgender and queer groups to the “LGB” label could affect support for their rights and views of their politics.

Second, attitudes on LGBTQ issues are sometimes sensitive to question wording effects, although most of this work has focused exclusively on LGB rights. Most frequently cited is a 2010 CBS News poll which found respondents about ten points more supportive of “gay men and lesbians” serving in the military than “homosexuals” (Hechtkopf, 2010). Elsewhere, Husser and Fernandez (2016) report that support for “gay marriage” was higher than for “same-sex marriage” across a series of nine experiments. Other research reaches more mixed conclusions, however. McCabe and Heerwig (2012) show few differences when asking about “gay and lesbian”, “same-sex”, or “homosexual” couples’ rights to marry. Others argue that any treatment effects are likely heterogeneous: Rios (2013), for example, finds the term “homosexual” (rather than “gay”) is particularly likely to prime negative considerations among right-wing authoritarians. However, these results have failed to replicate across multiple samples (Crawford et al., 2015) and any effect may be conditional on both authoritarianism and a born-again identity or lack of contact with LGB people (Smith et al., 2018).

Are public attitudes shaped by the label used to refer to the LGBTQ community? To date, no research that I am aware of has directly tested whether changing the LGBTQ label changes support for the group’s rights or views of its members. To correct this, I designed a survey experiment that measures the causal effects of different group labels.

Data and experimental design

The experiment was fielded as part of a September 2022 phone survey of registered voters in [state name removed to preserve anonymity].² The survey was fielded by Issues and Answers

² The experiment and analytical plan were pre-registered; see https://aspredicted.org/JQG_9WF. Due to a scarcity of research on how Americans viewed queer identities, I formulated expectations in terms of absolute

Network, who randomly sampled from the state’s voter registration file. Quotas were applied based on Census benchmarks for race, ethnicity, gender, age, and county of residence. In total, 904 registered voters completed the survey. Since the sampling frame is a single state’s voter registration file, the survey should not be considered representative of the country. The sample is however diverse across a range of measures, while skewing older than the target population as we would expect for a phone survey (see Table A1 in the online appendix for summary statistics). The analyses are conducted on unweighted data, and differences between conditions should be interpreted as sample average treatment effects (SATEs; see Miratrix et al. 2018). Estimating population ATEs using vendor-provided weights resulted in substantively identical conclusions to those reported here.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three conditions, each of which used different group labels. Within each condition, respondents were asked questions about either:

- “lesbian, gay, and bisexual, or LGB, people”;
- “lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, or LGBT, people”; or
- “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer, or LGBTQ, people”.

These labels were inserted into two questions, designed to measure policy attitudes and political stereotypes of LGBTQ people. Respondents were assigned to the same label for each (i.e., those in the LGB condition were asked about “LGB people” in both questions). First, the survey asked, “How strongly do you favor or oppose laws that require private businesses to serve [group label] people?” Responses were coded to range from 0 (strongly oppose) to 1 (strongly favor). This was chosen as a high-profile issue on which public opinion was divided, to guard against floor or ceiling effects. Second, views of LGBTQ people were measured with

differences between conditions, rather than directional hypotheses. Worthen (2023) has since documented the additional discrimination queer Americans face. As such, readers might justifiably expect that adding “Q” to the “LGBT” acronym would negatively affect support.

“In general, how liberal or conservative would you say most [group label] people are?”. This was coded to range from 0 (very liberal) to 1 (very conservative). This was designed to assess stereotypes of the group as politically liberal — a largely inoffensive view that nonetheless may be consequential for political reactions.

Two potential moderators (discussed below) were measured pre-treatment. Respondents’ ideology ranges from 0 (very liberal) to 1 (very conservative), and their party identity from Strong Democrat (0) to Strong Republican (1).

Results

Figure 1 shows mean responses to each item with 95% confidence intervals, by the label used in the question wording. There are no significant differences across conditions. Respondents were equally supportive of requiring businesses to serve LGB (mean=.66 on the 0–1 scale where higher values indicate greater support), LGBT (.71), or LGBTQ (.66) people (none of the differences between conditions are significant at the $p < .05$ level). On average, support for sexual and gender minorities’ rights were unaffected by the label used to denote them.³

The same is true for views of LGBTQ people’s politics. Respondents saw the group as predominantly liberal no matter the label. LGB people were rated on average as .24 (on the 0–1 scale where higher values indicate more conservative), LGBT people as .24, and LGBTQ people as .21. Again, none of the differences are significant at the $p < .05$ level. Changing the group’s label did not affect respondents’ views of their political leanings in any significant way.

Do these average null results mask heterogeneous treatment effects? We might expect respondents’ ideology or partisanship to moderate responses to different labels, much as they predict differences in support for groups within the LGBTQ community (Burke et al., 2023). If,

³ The pre-registration did not include a power analysis. However, given an average treatment group size of 260 respondents, there was 93% power to detect a small effect of $d = .3$ or more between two of the groups.

Figure 1: Mean responses by group label condition



Note: Bullets show means on the 0–1 scale, with 95% confidence intervals.

for example, liberals responded more positively toward the “LGBTQ” label but conservatives more negatively, we might see overall results close to zero on average. To assess this possibility, I fit regression models predicting each item as a function of the experimental conditions and their interactions with respondents’ party identity and ideology in turn (these analyses were not pre-registered and are intended as exploratory).⁴ The coefficients are shown in Table 1.

There is no evidence that ideology or partisanship moderates the impact of group labels. In every model, the interaction between experimental condition and ideology or party is not significant. To be clear, these predispositions *did* affect attitudes overall – as we’d expect, conservatives and Republicans were more opposed to requiring businesses to serve LGBTQ people than liberals and Democrats. But they did not alter responses to the different group labels. Liberals and Democrats were largely supportive of LGBTQ rights no matter how the

⁴ Smith et al. (2018) report a significant three-way interaction between labels (“gays and lesbians” vs. “homosexuals”), authoritarianism, and born-again Christianity. Unfortunately, these items were not measured in this survey and so I cannot test for similar localized treatment effects here.

Table 1: Regression models interacting ideology and party with experimental conditions

	Requiring businesses to serve LGBTQ people		Views of LGBTQ people's politics	
Intercept	0.92 (0.04) ^{***}	0.91 (0.03) ^{***}	0.21 (0.03) ^{***}	0.23 (0.03) ^{***}
Ideology	−0.49 (0.06) ^{***}		0.07 (0.06)	
Party identity	−0.07 (0.01) ^{***}		0.00 (0.01)	
LGBT label	−0.01 (0.05)	−0.01 (0.05)	0.04 (0.05)	0.05 (0.04)
× Ideology	0.09 (0.09)		−0.10 (0.07)	
× Party identity	0.02 (0.01)		−0.02 (0.01)	
LGBTQ label	0.01 (0.06)	−0.03 (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)	−0.01 (0.05)
× Ideology	0.02 (0.09)		−0.10 (0.08)	
× Party identity	0.01 (0.01)		−0.01 (0.01)	
Adjusted R ²	0.18	0.18	0.00	0.00
N	730	774	575	598

^{***} $p < 0.001$; ^{**} $p < 0.01$; ^{*} $p < 0.05$; [†] $p < 0.1$

Note: Excluded level for experiment is the “LGB” label condition. Differences between “LGBT” and “LGBTQ” label conditions are not significant at the $p < .10$ level either.

group was named; conservatives and Republicans more opposed, regardless of label. The null results shown in Figure 1 are not due to heterogeneous responses from different subsets of voters. Responses simply did not change depending on the group label, something that was true no matter the respondents’ partisan or ideological predispositions.

Conclusions

This experiment finds no evidence that changing the labels used to describe the LGBTQ community affects public attitudes. There were no observable differences in support for civil rights for LGB, LGBT, or LGBTQ people. And views of LGB, LGBT, and LGBTQ people’s politics were indistinguishable. Respondents’ predispositions did not moderate these null effects. Liberals and conservatives, and Democrats and Republicans, were similarly unmoved by changing labels for the community. There is no support here for the idea that public attitudes shift with

the labels used to denote LGBTQ groups.

As with any study, there are important limitations to these conclusions. First, this experiment is based on two items on one statewide survey. Although the sample is diverse on many characteristics (see Table A1 in the online appendix), we should be careful about extrapolating from it to the nation as a whole. Second, the treatment conditions are limited: they do not test responses to additional communities that are included in more extensive labels beyond “LGBTQ”. How respondents react to the inclusion of intersex, asexual, questioning, pansexual, Two Spirit, and other identities is not tested here. Third, we should interpret these results carefully. They do not mean that all members of the LGBTQ community are viewed equally by respondents: there is abundant evidence elsewhere that transgender and queer people face greater prejudice and dislike (Burke et al., 2023; Lewis et al., 2017; Worthen, 2023). Rather, the take home is that including these groups in the LGBTQ label does not appear to affect overall views of the community’s politics or support for their rights.

At their broadest, these findings speak directly to concerns among both survey researchers and LGBTQ interest groups. There is no evidence here for question wording effects of the kind researchers strive to avoid. Based on these results, questionnaires should ask specifically about the community they are interested in (whether that be LGB, LGBT, or LGBTQ people) without fear of biasing results. These results also cast light on potential interest group strategies, who have put language decisions at the “top of mind” according to interviews with leaders, who note it “comes up every couple months” (Velasco and Paxton, 2022, p1295). Some have criticized the “alphabet soup” of more inclusive group labelling (e.g., Bruce, 2011). Given the sustained current attack on transgender rights, groups might wonder if they should reverse course and “drop the T” to sustain public support. This study finds no evidence for this kind of retreat being effective or necessary. Including transgender and queer people with LGB people in an inclusive group label did not discernibly reduce support for rights or change views of the community.

Indeed, these results indicate that activists can use the full LGBTQ label without losing support among the public or changing views of the community.

References

- Bruce, C. T. (2011). 'LGBT' transforming into alphabet soup? Huffington Post. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/lgbt-acronym_b_1159004.
- Burke, K., Kazyak, E., Oliver, M., and Valkr, P. (2023). LG but not T: Opposition to transgender rights amidst gay and lesbian acceptance. *The Sociological Quarterly*.
- Crawford, J. T., Brandt, M. J., Inbar, Y., and Mallinas, S. R. (2015). Right-wing authoritarianism predicts prejudice equally toward “gay men and lesbians” and “homosexuals”. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 111(2):e31–e45.
- Gamson, J. (1995). Must identity movements self-destruct? A queer dilemma. *Social Problems*, 42(3):390–407.
- Hechtkopf, K. (2010). Support for gays in the military depends on the question. CBS News. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/support-for-gays-in-the-military-depends-on-the-question/>.
- Husser, J. A. and Fernandez, K. E. (2016). Gay marriage tends to be more popular than same-sex marriage. *Survey Practice*, 9(4).
- Lewis, D. C., Flores, A. R., Haider-Markel, D. P., Miller, P. R., Tadlock, B. L., and Taylor, J. K. (2017). Degrees of acceptance: Variation in public attitudes toward segments of the LGBT community. *Political Research Quarterly*, 70(4):861–875.

- McCabe, B. J. and Heerwig, J. A. (2012). Reframing the marriage debate: Wording, context, and intensity of support for marriage and civil unions. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 24(4):429–449.
- Miratrix, L. W., Sekhon, J. S., Theodoridis, A. G., and Campos, L. F. (2018). Worth weighting? How to think about and use weights in survey experiments. *Political Analysis*, 26(3):275–291.
- Nownes, A. J. (2014). “Interest groups and transgender politics”. In Taylor, J. K. and Haider-Markel, D. P., editors, *Transgender rights and politics*. University of Michigan Press.
- Rios, K. (2013). Right-wing authoritarianism predicts prejudice against “homosexuals” but not “gay men and lesbians”. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 49:1177–1183.
- Rollins, J. and Hirsch, H. N. (2003). Sexual Identities and Political Engagements: A Queer Survey. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 10(3):290–313.
- Smith, B. A., Murib, Z., Motta, M., Callaghan, T. H., and Theys, M. (2018). “Gay” or “homosexual”? The implications of social category labels for the structure of mass attitudes. *American Politics Research*, 46(2):336–372.
- Velasco, K. and Paxton, P. (2022). Deconstructed and constructive logics: Explaining inclusive language change in queer nonprofits, 1998–2016. *American Journal of Sociology*, 127(4):1267–1310.
- Worthen, M. G. (2023). Queer identities in the 21st century: Reclamation and stigma. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 49(101512).

Language and LGBTQ politics: The effect of changing group labels on public attitudes

Supplementary online appendix

Table A1: Descriptive statistics of sample

Gender	
Women	51.3%
Men	48.7%
Age	
18-29	3.3%
30-39	6.9%
40-49	12.8%
50-59	24.9%
60-64	16.6%
65+	35.6%
Hispanic ethnicity	
Hispanic	4.6%
Non-Hispanic	95.4%
Race	
White	77.8%
Black	14.1%
Asian	1.8%
Mixed race	2.3%
Native American	1.6%
Other	2.4%
Highest level of education	
No HS	3.2%
HS diploma	18.6%
Some college	24.9%
4-year degree	29.7%
Graduate degree	23.6%
Party identity	
Democrat	51.7%
Independent	6.5%
Republican	41.8%
Ideology	
Very liberal	11.9%
Somewhat liberal	18.0%
Moderate	31.0%
Somewhat conservative	21.8%
Very conservative	17.3%

Note: Statistics from unweighted data.