

# MORE THAN REPRESENT

LGB STATE LAWMAKERS INFLUENCE  
MARRIAGE EQUALITY LAWS

JUNE 2016



# INTRODUCTION

**T**he Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund and Institute has worked for the past 25 years to make sure LGBT people have a direct voice in the halls of power where decisions that determine our legal equality are being made. That's Victory's theory of change: We know that LGBT equality advances when LGBT people are part of the lawmaking bodies—including Congress, state legislatures, and city councils—that make decisions about the policies that impact us and our families. Over the past 25 years, Victory has recruited, trained, and supported hundreds of LGBT people who have served in all levels of government and contributed to the rapid increase in LGBT equality we have seen in the past decade.

This brief is the third in a series that shows the impact out LGBT public officials have on moving LGBT equality forward. [The first brief](#) showed the relationship between the number of openly LGBT public officials in a state and the state's overall level of LGBT equality, while [the second](#) showed that one of the best ways to deter or stop anti-LGBT legislation from moving in a state is to have openly LGBT lawmakers serving in the legislature.

The analysis in this brief summarizes the findings from a forthcoming paper that the UNC LGBTQ Representation and Rights Research Initiative prepared in partnership with Victory to better understand the influence LGBT lawmakers have on their non-LGBT colleagues (“LGBT State Legislators and Same-Sex Marriage in the United States,” Alissandra Stoyan and Andrew Reynolds [UNC LGBTQ Representation and Rights Research Initiative, 2016]).

The paper's analysis is based on an original survey of about 2,400 state lawmakers, and examines the impact that LGB<sup>1</sup> representatives had on passing marriage equality legislation—specifically whether and how they influenced their straight colleagues to vote on marriage bills. Its findings provide clear evidence of the positive impact out LGB lawmakers have, and makes the case why we need more of them in office to help secure full LGBT equality.

<sup>1</sup> At the time of the analysis there were no openly transgender state legislators serving in the states studied, so we use “LGB” and not “LGBT”.

# Findings

Definitively understanding why a lawmaker votes yes or no on a particular piece of legislation requires doing more than just reading a newspaper account of what happened. In most situations, many different factors are at play, and lawmakers have to weigh them as they make their decisions. Some factors may not even be part of the mainstream account of what happened, but had the biggest impact on the lawmaker.

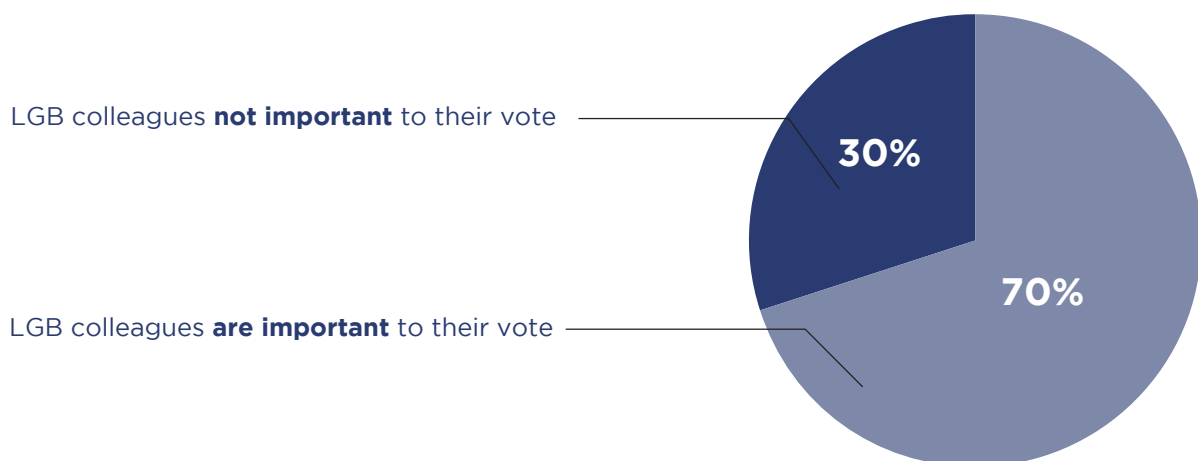
Because of this reality, Victory commissioned research to better understand the impact of openly LGB lawmakers on their straight colleagues during the recent wave of state debates on marriage equality. The findings show a positive, consistent, and powerful impact, and demonstrate clearly why maintaining and expanding current levels of LGBT legal equality will hinge in no small part on our ability to elect openly LGBT lawmakers. We focus here on the three most salient findings from the analysis.

**Nearly 70 percent of lawmakers said their LGB colleagues had a strong impact on the way they voted.**

First, the data show that LGB lawmakers had a clear and positive impact on how straight lawmakers ultimately voted. Among the straight lawmakers who voted in favor of marriage equality, nearly 70 percent said their LGB colleagues had a strong impact on the way they voted, as Figure 1 shows.

Straight lawmakers rated LGB colleagues as very important to their votes on marriage more often than the impact of friends, family, party leaders or lobbyists.

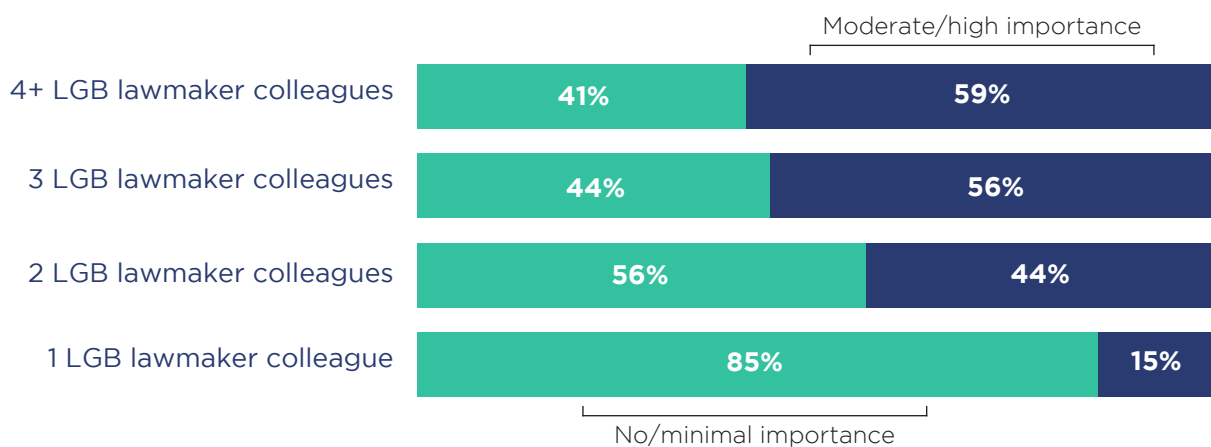
**Figure 1: Seven out of 10 straight lawmakers said LGB colleagues were important to their vote in favor of marriage.**



**The impact that openly LGB lawmakers have on their straight colleagues increases as the number of openly LGB lawmakers increases.**

Second, the impact that openly LGB lawmakers have on their straight colleagues increases as the number of openly LGB lawmakers increases. For example, in states where only one LGB legislator held office at the time of the marriage vote, only 15 percent of straight respondents noted a moderate or very important impact of their LGB colleagues. In states where there were four or more openly LGB legislators, nearly 60 percent of these respondents reported a moderate or highly important influence of LGB colleagues. See Figure 2.

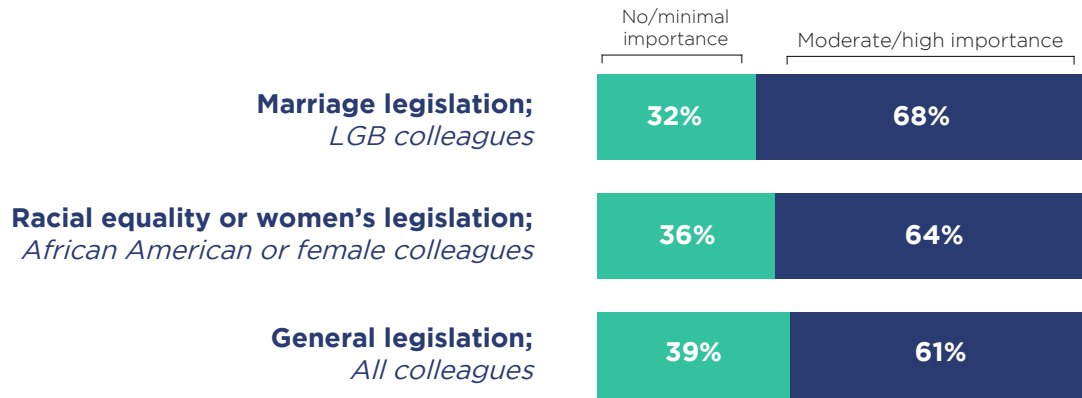
**Figure 2: Influence of LGB lawmakers on straight colleagues' marriage votes increases with the number of LGB lawmakers present.**



Third, the effect of openly LGB legislators was greater than the comparative effect of other identities. Female legislators on gender-oriented bills and African American legislators on bills especially relevant to African American communities had less impact on their colleagues than LGB legislators did on straight colleagues' marriage votes. As Figure 3 shows, 68 percent of straight lawmakers said that LGB colleagues had a "moderately or very important" impact on their votes on marriage, compared to 64 percent of lawmakers saying that women and/or African American colleagues had a moderately or very important impact on their voting decisions on bills related to those identities. At the same time, the impacts of all three identities analyzed were more significant than the influence of colleagues generally on nonidentity related legislation.

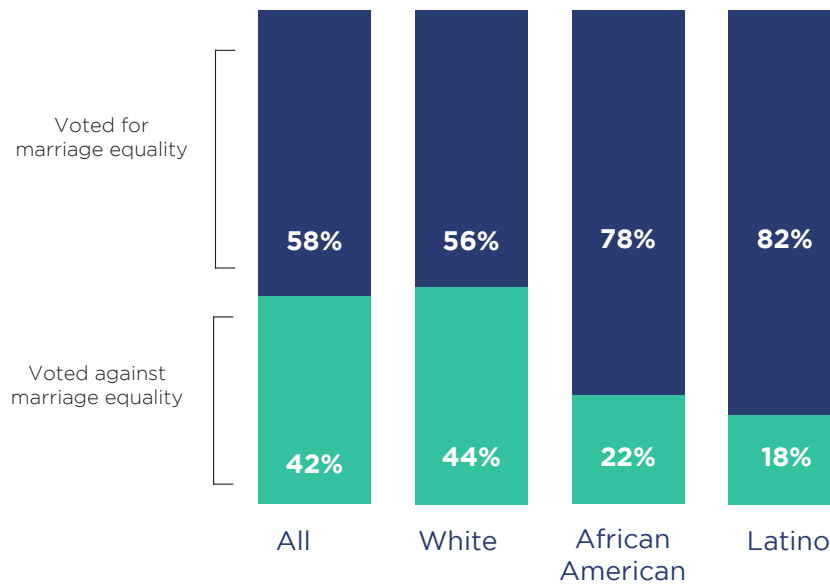
**LGB colleagues have more impact on "identity" legislation than other groups.**

**Figure 3: LGB colleagues have more impact on “identity” legislation than others.**



Finally, although not directly germane to this brief’s analysis, the data collected provided yet another piece of evidence that counters the myth that African Americans and/or Latinos are less supportive of LGBT equality generally compared to white people. Figure 4 shows that in this sample of 2,400 state legislators, overall 58 percent voted in favor of marriage equality, with Latinos voting favorably at the highest rate, at 82 percent. They were followed by African Americans at 78 percent, and white lawmakers came in at 56 percent.

**Figure 4: Lawmakers voting for marriage equality legislation.**





# Conclusion

Generally speaking, electorates that are more accepting of electing out LGBT candidates are also more likely to support marriage equality—this acceptance makes it “easier” for lawmakers to vote in favor of LGBT rights. But this new data from Victory shows that LGB lawmakers’ impact on their straight colleagues goes beyond this simple correlation. Past research, which is cited in the longer forthcoming report, also affirms this conclusion.

At Victory, we are especially encouraged by the finding that as the number of LGB lawmakers increases, their impact on their straight colleagues grows. This is affirmation of our goal of recruiting, training, and supporting LGBT candidates for public office, and helping them excel once elected.

We know that changing people’s minds about LGBT equality hinges on having meaningful personal relationships and conversations with people who are LGBT. This adage is especially true for the people who hold LGBT equality in their hands—those who are elected to make the laws we all must live under and abide by. Making sure they have the opportunity to know LGBT people and their experiences personally is a critical factor in making sure all LGBT people are ultimately able to live as fully equal citizens of this country.



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