The Lavender Vote

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Published by NYU Press

Hertzog, Mark.
The Lavender Vote: Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals in American Electoral Politics.
NYU Press, 1996.
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What It All Means and Why It Matters

This study was undertaken to find out whether we have overlooked a significant factor in determining whether, and how, Americans cast their votes: the factor of sexual identity. It has long been speculated that a “lavender vote” exists that leans strongly toward liberal and Democratic Party candidates. My aim was to see how many voters would identify themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; whether and to what extent they differed in their demographics, attitudes, and voting behavior from the rest of the American electorate; whether in fact they voted as a cohesive bloc; and what the underlying reasons were for any distinctive voting.

In answering these questions, I return to the nine hypotheses laid out at the end of chapter 2. I first present again each of these hypotheses, state whether the hypothesis was confirmed or not (or confirmed only to a limited extent), and discuss what we have learned. After this, I devote a few pages to findings of interest beyond those bearing on these hypotheses. At the end I attempt to answer the question, “So what does this mean and why does it matter?”

Hypothesis 1: Rate of Identification

Lesbians and gay men will self-identify in political surveys at rates equivalent to those found in previous random-sample research, about 1.0 to 1.5 percent of the population. When bisexuals are included, the share of self-identifiers will increase by an additional 2 to 3 percent. Confirmed in part.
The discussion that follows must be tempered by the simple fact that the share of the total electorate we are discussing is small. The national data bases and the pooled twenty-one-state data confirm that, in 1990, only one American voter in ninety identified her- or himself as gay or lesbian, and when we add in bisexuals, this confirmable share increases to about two voters in ninety.

These numbers confirm the initial hypothesis that, because of the severe legal and social penalties for self-identification, the number of those willing to call themselves gay or lesbian would be comparatively small. As noted above, the number of gay and lesbian self-identifiers, at 1.1 percent, is in the expected range (1.0–1.5 percent). Although there were variations based on region and size or type of locality, in no state did the total reach even 3 percent, and in the areas with the largest share of such voters, the urban centers of the West, the total self-identified lesbian and gay electorate remained in the single digits as a percentage of the whole.¹

When bisexuals are added as part of the self-identification category, one finds that their share is indeed smaller than predicted based on prior random-sample research: self-identified gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals added together accounted for just 2.2 percent of the 1992 electorate, well below the hypothesized figure between 3.0 and 4.5 percent. (We should make note again, however, of Edelman's estimation [1993] that the figure would reach 3 percent if we account for those respondents who "dropped off" the survey before answering the "grab bag" questions in which the LGB self-identifier was found.)

That said, the portion of the LGB population willing to identify as such is growing significantly. The single factor that correlated consistently with self-identification across all the surveys examined in this study was age. The very youngest voters did not self-identify at a much greater rate than that of the rest of the population; but people in their mid- to late twenties were more than four times as likely to identify themselves as LGB, and nearly ten times as likely to call themselves gay or lesbian as were those in the oldest age category. Indeed, they were two-thirds more likely to call themselves lesbian or gay, and twice as likely to call themselves LGB than were the fortieth members of the "baby boom" generation immediately preceding them.

The few studies on homosexuality and bisexuality available do not indicate that the rate of homosexuality or bisexuality is growing. They show, rather, that the rate of homosexual behavior is constant among age groups and races, and that among men the rate of admission to homosexual experimentation increased only among the well-educated (Fay et al. 1989). Although much more work needs to be done in this area, it appears from the evidence at hand that the increase in self-identification results from an increase in comfort with
LGB self-identification among the young, which appears to have resulted from the activity of the LGB movement, particularly in the past quarter century. More simply put, more young people "come out" not because there is any more homosexuality among the young, but because it is somewhat safer these days to be honest about it.

A corollary factor is the addition of bisexuality to the self-identification category. Not only did this double the overall number of self-identifiers, it also led to disproportionately large increases in the rate of self-identification among older respondents. I noted that there appear to be three distinct, age-determined "comfort levels" with self-identification. When "gay or lesbian" was the wording of the question in 1990, these "comfort levels" consisted of those aged eighteen to twenty-nine (2.5 percent self-identified), those thirty to forty-nine (1.5 percent self-identified), and those fifty and older (0.3 percent self-identified). With the addition of bisexuals in 1992, self-identification rates increased rather dramatically among thirtysomethings and among those aged fifty to sixty-four. The three "comfort levels," therefore, aged as well: eighteen to thirty-nine (3.0 percent), forty to sixty-four (1.7 percent), and sixty-five and older (0.8 percent).

Already the LGB vote is as large as the Latino vote and twice the size of the Asian vote. If the progress of the LGB movement continues, we can expect that the combined "lavender vote" will reach 4 to 5 percent of the total voting population within the next twenty years. At such a level, self-identified LGB voters will constitute a potential bloc of votes surpassing Jews (currently about 3.5 percent of the voters) and every racial minority other than African Americans.

**Hypothesis 2: Demographic Characteristics**

LGBs who do self-identify will be possessed of the equivalent of "group consciousness." Therefore, the demographic correlates of group consciousness found among women and African Americans—youth, high education levels, and strong partisanship—should be disproportionately great among self-identified LGBs. Also, given the results of prior sex surveys, men may significantly outnumber women among self-identifiers. Confirmed as to age and education. Mixed results as to sex. Not confirmed as to partisanship.

Our ability to examine the hypothesis that LGB self-identification was a valid substitute indicator for levels of group consciousness—that the fact of self-
identifying demonstrated that one was possessed of "gay consciousness"—was considerably limited. The sole indicators at hand are simply correlates with group consciousness, not direct measures of such concepts as perceptions of "polar power" or "internal political efficacy." The correlate variables available were age, education level, and partisanship. (An augmented level of political interest was assumed in 1990 from the mere fact of voting in an off-year congressional and/or gubernatorial election.) An attempt to make an initial assessment of the truth or falsity of the hypothesis, nonetheless, was undertaken.

As expected in the hypothesis, the LGB samples, as noted above, were skewed heavily toward the younger end of the age scale. An additional factor was the exceedingly high education level of the gay/lesbian respondents in the 1990 national data base: an absolute majority were college graduates and a very large share had some postgraduate education. Although these extreme levels were not replicated in 1992, the LGB sample remained significantly better educated than the non-LGB sample. Again, these data appeared to support the hypothesis. Partisanship was more questionable; although the national data showed a partisan tilt toward the Democrats and away from the Republicans, the degree of partisanship per se was no greater, and the rate of independent self-identification no smaller, among the LGB voters than among the rest.

The 1990 state and local-level data, however, seem to shred the hypothesis of uniformly high education levels among the self-identifiers. In Texas, where the legal and social climate for gay men and lesbians is considerably harsher by objective measures than in California and Massachusetts, education levels did not differ significantly between the gay and nongay groups. Further, in two of the three state-level polls examined in depth, there were no significant differences between the gay and nongay groups either in degree of partisanship or even in party affiliation. (In the Glick poll, of course, all respondents were registered Democrats voting in their party's primary.)

Finally, there is the first-time voting factor. In 1990 there was no significant difference in the rate of first-time voting between the gay and nongay samples. In 1992, however, LGB self-identifiers were more than twice as likely as non-LGBs to be voting for the first time, and this trend was found in all age groups, from the youngest to the oldest. This indicates that the level of political interest among the LGBs in 1992 was relatively low and that their participation had been triggered by the high salience of LGB issues during the presidential campaign.

Therefore, there is no uniform confirmation that the demographic correlates of group consciousness can be found among LGB self-identifiers. Additional
work on this line of research, employing indicators of actual elements of
group consciousness on presumptive self-identifiers, is being undertaken by the
present author.

The data do show that gay men consistently make up a disproportionate
share of lesbian and gay self-identifiers, nationally and in all regions, and that
this disproportion, in which men make up three-fifths to two-thirds of the gay
and lesbian samples, is consistent with the findings of sex research with
regard to both sexual self-identification and continuing or frequent homosexual
activity. However, in the 1992 data, there is no discernible “gender gap” in
LGB self-identification rates. Men still outnumber women slightly, but the
difference is small and not statistically significant. A clue to the possible reason
for this disparity, “lesbian bisexuality,” was found in the Glick poll and will be
discussed later in this chapter.

Hypothesis 3: Political Attitudes

The general political orientation of LGB voters will be liberal or leftist
and Democratic, in keeping with the pattern found among African
Americans, feminists, and non-Cuban Latinos, and will be highly distinc-
tive from that of non-LGB identifiers. Confirmed, with qualifications.

The issue attitudes of most LGB self-identifiers were distinctively liberal; a
majority of self-identifiers both called themselves liberal and held liberal
attitudes on specific issues. In addition, an absolute majority of lesbians in
1990 called themselves strong feminists. Logistic regression analysis showed
that, indeed, when the factors of liberalism and feminism were controlled for,
there was no independent effect of self-identification as gay or lesbian on
attitudes toward economic or defense/foreign policy issues.

However, on domestic social issues, the self-identified LGBs were signifi-
cantly more liberal or libertarian than were liberal and feminist heterosexuals.
Indeed, otherwise conservative and Republican LGBs tended to take liberal
stands on domestic social issues other than the death penalty, and to call
themselves moderates rather than conservatives. There is, therefore, a "sexuality
gap" on these issues that cannot be accounted for otherwise.

Partisan affiliation, as noted above, was not nearly as distinctive as this
augmented liberalism and feminism would predict. Neither, in 1990, was
voting behavior in the aggregated results on the national level. Although a
disproportion of lesbian and gay straight-ticket voters supported the Demo-
crats, versus a near-even split among nongay identifiers in this category, two-
thirds of voters, straight and gay alike, split their tickets in states with simultaneous contests for the Senate, the House, and the governor's mansion. In the House races, indeed, one self-identifier in six voted for a third candidate. Although these voters were profoundly liberal, they were not apparently voting against Democratic incumbents any more often than Republican incumbents, nor were they motivated by any particular issue concern.

This changed dramatically in 1992. Whereas independents and Republican LGBs still split their tickets as frequently as did the rest of the population, the one-half of LGBs who identified as Democrats were in the main straight-ticket voters, and a large disproportion of the LGB independents who did vote a straight ticket went with the Democrats. This cohesion among LGB Democrats was as great as that among black Democrats. It remains to be seen whether this is a one-time phenomenon or the start of a long-term trend.

**Hypothesis 4: Gender and Feminism**

Lesbians and bisexual women, whether feminists or not, will be more opposed to the use of force in politics, and therefore will be more likely to vote for Democrats than are gay and bisexual men. In addition, lesbian feminists will hold different issue priorities from LGB men and women who do not identify with feminism, and thus are far more likely to hold liberal positions on abortion and other feminist issues; they will be more inclined to vote for Democrats than will other women. *Confirmed as to the "feminism gap." Limited confirmation as to the "gender gap."*

Because of the absence of feminism and use-of-force indicators in the 1992 data base, this discussion is confined to the data from 1990.

I proposed that actual differences in candidate selection and issue stands between lesbians and gay men would be minimal, other than in the area of defense and foreign policy, but that issue emphasis would differ. With respect to the national sample, this hypothesis was confirmed in large part, although the variations from the predicted pattern should be noted. As predicted, the greatest differences were found in the two questions relating to the Persian Gulf deployment, which strong majorities of men supported and equally strong majorities of women opposed. Again, as predicted, women were three times as likely as men in the VRS data to name abortion as one top issue; men were more likely to name the environment and the deficit. Interestingly, however, the lesbians were significantly more skeptical about the economy and the
overall direction of the country, and were far less inclined to approve of the
deficit compromise than were the gay men. This was not predicted based on

Many more significant differences in attitudes and voting behavior, however,
were found based on identification as a strong feminist, a categorization that
included five of every eight lesbians in the national sample. Approval of George
Bush was in the single digits among this group, and five of six said they
probably would vote for the Democrat in 1992, as against 41 percent of the
nonfeminists. 78.5 percent voted for the Democrat for the Senate in 1990,
versus just over half of the nonfeminist gay folk, and three-quarters of feminists
(as against just under half of nonfeminists) called themselves liberals. Even
personal economic evaluations were far worse among the feminist identifiers
than among the nonfeminists. Nearly all lesbian feminists supported abortion
on demand, and fully half named it as one of the top two issues in the
congressional race.

As noted in the chapter on the national polls, feminism was one of three
indicators that appear to explain most of the differences in issue attitudes
between LGB and non-LGB samples. This is a testament in hard numbers to
the continuing vitality of lesbian feminism as a movement within the broader
feminist and LGB communities.

Hypothesis 5: Voting Blocs within the Community

Given the divergent concepts of group identity among LGBs, and their
differing notions of what the goals of the LGB movement should be and
the best means for achieving them, LGB voters will not be monolithic;
although the large majority will vote for Democrats, significant minorit-
ies will support Republicans or leftist third candidates. Confirmed.

A small but significant minority of the self-identified LGB respondents voted
Republican. Half of the LGB Republicans even voted for George Bush after the
antigay GOP campaign of 1992. Although sharing the cultural liberalism of
the Democrats and independents on abortion, drugs, and the environment,
they were considerably more conservative on economic issues, the death penalty,
and defense and foreign policy, and strongly supported President Reagan in
1984 and President Bush in 1988, before the Republican “family values”
campaign of 1992 drove them into exile. In 1990 they tended to stick with
their party in the congressional contests, but about half split away in guberna-
torial contests. In 1992, about two in five split from their Senate candidates,
although a large majority stuck with GOP nominees for the House. (Too few LGB Republicans voted in the small number of 1992 governor's races to draw any conclusions.)

Independent self-identifiers were only marginally less liberal in philosophy and issue positions than were self-identified Democrats. They were, nonetheless, authentic ticket-splitters relative to their Democratic counterparts, strongly supporting Democrats for state governors in 1990 but in many cases looking to other candidates for Congress. (We should at this point distinguish voters who identified with neither major party from those referred to above who sided with third candidates in the contests for the House of Representatives. As many Democrats as independents [and a few Republicans!] were found among the latter group.) In the Clinton-Bush-Perot contest, however, pro-Democratic sentiment was much stronger: five in eight LGB independents voted for Clinton, and between 70 and 75 percent of them voted for Democrats for statehouses and for both houses of Congress.

**Hypothesis 6: The “Sexuality Gap”**

LGB voting will be sufficiently distinctive to have an independent effect on vote choice after controlling for attitudes, partisanship, incumbency, and demographic factors significantly correlated with LGB self-identification. Thus, there will be an authentic “sexuality gap,” meaning that self-identified LGBs will be more liberal and Democratic in voting than will their liberal, Democratic cohorts who do not identify as lesbian, bisexual, or gay. *Confirmed with respect to high-salience elections.*

**Hypothesis 7: Results in Specific Contests**

LGB voting will remain highly distinctive in particular individual contests, not merely in aggregated national partisan results for governorships and seats in Congress, and will be particularly distinctive in high-salience contests. *Confirmed with respect to high-salience elections.*

The simple crosstabular results make clear that self-identified LGBs think and vote differently from the rest of the population. What was in question, however, was the extent to which sexual self-identification had an independent effect on political attitudes and voting behavior. The 1990 gay and lesbian sample was more liberal and more feminist than was the rest of the sample in 1990. It therefore could be postulated that those lesbians and gay men who
were “out of the closet” were those who started off with less conventional opinions and practices, and that when compared to heterosexuals of the same description, the differences would disappear. This seemed to be borne out by the aggregated national results in chapter 3.

But the state-level results reported in chapter 4 put the lie to this. Sexual self-identification had an independent effect on vote choice in the five specific high-salience gubernatorial and Senate contests we examined, even after we had controlled for demographics, party affiliation, ideology, and feminism. The perceived closeness of each contest did not appear to affect these findings: Ben Parmer clearly was believed to have no chance against Senator Phil Gramm in Texas, but a “sexuality gap” was found just as strongly in that high-visibility contest as in the three hotly contested governor’s races examined here. Indeed, in a retrospective voting model, self-identification had an independent effect on vote choice for governors and senators in all five of these contests, above and beyond its influence on the retrospective indicators.

There is no need to repeat oneself too much concerning the Clinton election of 1992. In this most salient election for LGB people, the effect of sexual self-identification not only remained significant, but strongly so, after controlling for the demographic, partisan, and attitudinal variables.

It must be noted that, in lower-salience elections in 1990, the solidity of the gay and lesbian vote dissipated. Although the trend in favor of Democratic nominees held up, considerable splitting of votes to Republicans and, in the case of the House races, to third candidates appeared. Indeed, in one of the two lower-salience Texas contests, even sexual self-identification standing alone had no significant effect on vote choice. In this respect, the gay and lesbian vote was not nearly as cohesive as, say, the African American vote; the same flexibility that allowed gay/lesbian voters to switch parties en masse in a high-salience election also inhibited party loyalty in lower-salience contests.

This was not true in 1992. As noted earlier, LGB Democrats were nearly monolithic in their support for their party’s ticket across the board, and LGB independents were considerably more likely to vote a straight Democratic ticket than they were in 1990. Because individual-level results were not available in state-level contests, one cannot draw any conclusions from the 1992 numbers with respect to Hypothesis 7, but certainly if anything these numbers give a firmer confirmation to Hypothesis 6 than do those from 1990.

Interestingly, in the Glick contest, the independent effect of sexual self-identification was supplanted by the effect of the desire for a gay or lesbian representative.

The central question for practical politicians is whether there is a “lavender
vote" that can be mobilized in favor of candidates supportive of LGB issues, or in opposition to candidates who take antigay positions. The answer clearly is yes. In the 1990 governor's races in California, Massachusetts, and Texas and the Glick primary race in New York City, the candidate in a high-salience contest who was perceived to be the most progay took a remarkably similar 77 to 78 percent of the votes of the lesbian and gay communities. In the three-way presidential contest of 1992, when bisexuals were added to the exit polls' self-identification item, Bill Clinton won 72 percent of the homosexual and bisexual self-identifiers (George Bush and Ross Perot won 14 percent apiece), as against a split of 43, 38, and 19 percent for Clinton, Bush, and Perot, respectively, in the rest of the sample.

The most remarkable fact, perhaps, about this LGB vote is that it can be mobilized against a Democratic nominee, as seen in the case of John Silber's ill-fated gubernatorial campaign in Massachusetts—at least provided that the Republican nominee makes the sort of strong and direct appeal to the LGB community that William Weld did. The LGB vote, although inclined toward the Democrats, was by no means uniformly Democratic or guaranteed to the Democratic nominee in the same way as were the votes of most African Americans. Despite the strong Democratic tide in voting behavior in 1992, the presidential contest did nothing to alter the basic partisan alignment and issue attitudes of LGB voters compared with those in 1990. Those Republicans who write off the LGB vote as hopelessly lost, therefore, appear to be making a serious strategic mistake in close contests.

Hypothesis 8: Symbolic versus Substantive Voting

LGB voters will seek both substantive and symbolic gains. Therefore, in a high-salience contest between a "progay" and an "antigay" candidate, they will vote for the "progay" candidate; and in a contest in which there is little difference between the candidates on LGB issues, substantive issue differences will be of greater concern. Confirmed, except that in the instance of an LGB candidate, the desire for a seat at the table tends to outweigh substantive issue concerns.

There is no question from the results that, in contests between a "progay" and an "antigay" candidate, regardless of party or political philosophy, the voters will unite around the "progay" candidate. The question before us is how self-identified LGBs will vote in an election in which there is no such clear bifurcation.
There is only one individual contest we could examine in which the public attitudes of both major candidates were positive toward their gay and lesbian constituents, the race for governor of California. In that contest, partisan cohesion was at its highest: a huge majority of lesbian and gay Republicans supported their party's nominee, as did a huge majority of lesbian and gay Democrats. It was the numerical superiority of the Democrats, combined with the liberal issue stands of California lesbian and gay independents, that led to the large majority for Dianne Feinstein among self-identifiers.

I note as well that the self-reporting of presidential voting in 1988, in which neither major candidate took antigay stands, found a third of lesbian and gay self-identifiers, and a plurality of those in Texas, reporting they voted for George Bush. In the event that a relatively "progay" Republican, or at least one with neutral feelings on LGB issues, were nominated for high office in Texas, with its large number of conservative and Republican lesbian and gay self-identifiers, it is possible that a real cleavage would occur within the community in that state.

These indicate that in contests in which there is no visible cleavage among candidates on LGB issues, substantive issue concerns and party loyalties will be the basis of voting decisions, rather than membership in the LGB community. This is not, however, to discount the independent effect of LGB self-identification on liberalism and (among women) feminism, which in turn directly affect issue stands and party affiliation.

The one exception to this rule appears to be the instance in which an open LGB is seeking election; in that case, the "symbolic" desire for a seat at the table of power and the respect it brings with it appears to override issue concerns. All candidates in the New York primary contest we examined supported lesbian and gay rights, were pro-choice on abortion, and wanted the state to do more about AIDS. However, given a viable lesbian candidate, the logistic regression showed that these substantive concerns were overridden utterly by a desire for a lesbian or gay elected representative in Albany.

Hypothesis 9: Role of Political Leadership

The extent of LGB voting cohesion in any given contest will depend on the unity of LGB political leaders, who, if united, should be able to mobilize LGB voters independently of any outside political force. Not confirmed.

Because of the presumption that group identification among LGBs would correlate strongly with group consciousness, I opined that the LGB vote would
be mobilized by LGB political actors, without reference to the endorsements (or lack thereof) of heterosexuals. If the Glick poll can be generalized, in no respect was I more wrong. Certainly in the case of a district with a very large open lesbian and gay population, encompassing the neighborhood that is the LGB "Mecca" of eastern North America, with an extremely well educated, well-off population and some of the longest, most well established LGB-oriented publications and political organizations in the world, it is surprising indeed to see the extent to which the endorsement of the New York Times was deemed essential to the voting decisions of lesbian and gay voters. The Times served as a badge of "legitimacy," legitimacy in this case being defined as sufficient support from a major heterosexual-oriented source either to make Glick a serious contender or to affirm a previously uncertain predilection to vote for her.

At the same time, the failure of an LGB-oriented club (albeit one formed largely out of personal opposition to Glick and her friends) to endorse "the gay candidate" and the perception that she was a "one-issue" candidate took support away from her in her own lesbian and gay community. The former indicates that there is some importance, even within the core community, to unanimity; the near unanimity of the LGB endorsers was not enough for a small number of respondents. The latter indicates, again, the extent to which legitimacy in the eyes of the heterosexual majority is viewed as important within the homosexual and bisexual community. As noted in the Glick chapter, of the gay and lesbian respondents who indicated that at least one endorsement was important, just one in five cited only LGB-oriented political clubs or publications; and a majority cited only predominately heterosexual clubs or publications.

In each of the governor's races we have examined, as well as in the Glick primary, there was considerable doubt as to who the winner would be, and a perception that the pro-LGB candidate could win—bestowed in the latter case by non-LGB endorsements.

This raises an interesting question. Earlier we saw that a considerable share of the LGB voters appeared to be acting for reasons more symbolic than substantive, some supporting Glick in her high-salience contest in order to get the seat at the table, others supporting third candidates with no hope of winning in lower-salience congressional races. Yet in the Glick race we also see the vital importance of outside legitimation. Was it the outside endorsements, particularly by the Times, that in fact made the Glick race a high-salience election in the LGB community, bringing out voters who otherwise might not have voted? We cannot know at present, but this may be an explanation for the anomaly.
Additional Findings

Beyond the specific hypotheses, three unexpected findings are of interest and should be pursued in greater depth by political science, sociology, and psychology.

The Role of Religion

The relative secularism of the LGB self-identifiers is apparent throughout, and given the negative attitude of the Western religions toward homosexuality, this is hardly surprising. What is notable, and cause for study, is that there was in 1990 a significantly lower rate of lesbian and gay self-identification among those raised in the predominant religious tradition in a particular community—Protestantism in California and Texas, Catholicism in Massachusetts.

A similar finding with respect to Judaism in the Glick contest was ruled out, as lesbians, who tended to be long-term residents of the district, were just as Jewish as their nongay neighbors; it was gay male immigrants who were responsible for the disproportionately small Jewish share of the LGB sample. It is possible, therefore, that in the cases we have examined, especially those of California and Massachusetts, a considerable share of the religious disparity is attributable to interstate migration.

However, this cannot explain the finding on the national level; there is certainly no evidence that LGBs raised in the Protestant faiths are emigrating from the United States, and no reason to believe that they refrain from voting more than do self-identifiers of other backgrounds. The reasons a significantly smaller share of Protestants self-identify as LGB are deserving, therefore, of greater study.

Coalition Formation and Political Culture

Elazar's theory (1965) of "political culture" differences among the states, as discussed in chapter 5, appeared to be validated with respect to gay and lesbian voting behavior in California and Massachusetts, but not in Texas. In California, with its structural factors and political mores that encourage statewide coalition politics, white and nonfeminist lesbians and gays voted very much like nongay blacks, Latinos, and feminists. In Massachusetts, however, with a relatively permeable political structure and mores supporting group competition, there was a significant split even between gay and nongay feminists in the governor's race. (Only one gay respondent was not of European descent.) In Texas, however, where the political climate for coalition building and even internal cohesion among lesbians and gay men would seem to be the
worst, "Anglo" and nonfeminist self-identifiers voted Democratic in the high-salience contests at rates equivalent to those of nongay Latinos and feminists.

Adam (1987) enunciated the theory that LGBs make up an essential part of the leftist coalition of "new social movements," in which are included feminists, "New Left" intellectuals, and group-conscious members of the labor movement and of previously disinherited racial and ethnic minorities. This postulated coalition crosses boundaries of race and class and has its theoretical basis in neo-Marxian notions of resistance to a dominant coalition comprising (1) capitalists seeking to maintain economic dominance through exploitation, and (2) traditionalist forces, particularly white Christian ultraconservatives, which seek to maintain the existing social order (see Adam 1987; Young 1990). That most feminists, union members, African Americans, and non-Cuban Latinos voted in most cases for the Democrats in 1990, as did most self-identified lesbians and gay men, is not surprising. This, however, tests the theory only in the most superficial way.

First, merely voting alike is not equivalent to belonging to a coalition. The existence of a coalition can be tested by the extent to which the members of each group in the purported coalition support the general aims and goals of the other groups. In this case, if a coalition exists, we would expect that heterosexual union members, feminists, and people of color would give some significant degree of support to LGB issues and candidates, and that LGB voters would likewise give support to campaigns for labor, racial justice, and women's rights. Based on the evidence at hand, we cannot be certain such a coalition exists.

We see that LGB voters are strongly pro-choice and that a huge share of lesbians are feminists, but we have no indicators with regard to race-related issues, and on labor issues we find mixed results: a somewhat larger share of lesbian and gay voters believed unemployment was the most significant economic problem in 1990, but by a tremendous margin they also said preserving the environment was much more important than preserving jobs; even after two years of economic stagnation, a three-to-two majority agreed with the latter proposition. Then we find in the Glick poll no stronger support for the winning candidate among union members, blacks, or Hispanics than among white, nonunion heterosexuals, and utterly minimal citation of LGB rights as an important issue by nongay members of these groups (data not shown). No indicator of feminism was available in the Glick poll.

Second, even if a coalition did exist, can we tell whether it was a liberal, integrationist coalition or a leftist, cultural-pluralist coalition as Adam postulates? One indicator is the degree of support given by voters with liberal or leftist views to third candidates as opposed to "mainstream" major party
nominees. As previously noted, one lesbian or gay voter in six supported a non-major party candidate in the 1990 House elections, and this group was very liberal and almost unanimous in its support of Democratic nominees for governors. Yet we do not find such divergences among the other postulated coalition partners (data not shown). Further, perhaps more to the point, five gay/lesbian voters in six voted for the "mainstream" candidates. We further have seen the extent to which LGB voters, even in Deborah Glick's district, looked for validation of their LGB candidate by the "straight" media. This evidence is too scanty to reach any firm conclusions, but it indicates the likelihood that, whatever may be said by intellectuals and theorists, the large majority of LGB voters—and the other postulated coalition members—are pragmatic liberals rather than neoleftists.

Lesbian Bisexuality and the Gay Male Disproportion

Finally, the nineteen lesbian respondents to the Glick poll give us an interesting question to ponder with respect to the reasons for the relatively small number of lesbians compared to gay men, both in these political surveys and in sex research. Half of the lesbian self-identifiers, as against 20 percent of the self-identified gay men, reported in the second self-identification question that they were not exclusively homosexual. This interesting point is reinforced in the 1992 national data, in which the male-female gap in sexual self-identification was largely eliminated and—at the least coincidentally—bisexuals were included in the self-identification item.

The factors I cited earlier as possible reasons for the relative absence of lesbian respondents were (1) actual physiological differences that result in fewer women than men having same-sex attractions, (2) different social rules regarding acceptable same-gender intimacy between women and men, which make men more likely to recognize their desire for closeness to other men as sexual in nature, and (3) the fact that in the 1990 polls a disproportion of self-identified lesbians reported having children at home, which if generally true might inhibit lesbians disproportionately from reporting their sexual orientation on surveys completed anonymously but not in absolute privacy. What this "lesbian bisexuality" gives us is a fourth possible explanation that requires research: women with same-sex attractions may be more inclined to bisexuality, for reasons either physiological or sociological (or both), whereas men with same-sex attractions may be more inclined to exclusive homosexuality.

In conclusion, then, here is what practical politicians and the media who cover them ought to know:
There is a "lavender vote" in America, as opposed merely to gay, lesbian, and bisexual voters. It is characterized mainly by strong liberalism on domestic social issues among those who openly identify themselves as bisexual, lesbian, or gay. Although most self-identified LGBs are generally far more liberal and (among women) feminist than the rest of the population, some of their greater liberalism on social issues can be attributed solely to sexual identity. That is, regardless of their stands on other issues, LGB-identified people are more liberal than the rest of the population on cultural issues—including abortion rights, the environment, and drug policy—because of the experience of being lesbian, bisexual, or gay and facing the hostility of cultural conservatives.

The LGB vote is remarkable for its partisan fluidity. Although, all other things being equal, they tend to vote for Democrats in high-salience elections in which one candidate is clearly more "progay" than the other, LGB voters can be counted on to support the progay candidate, regardless of party, by margins of about three to one. Absent a high-salience contest, the vote splinters: two-thirds of self-identified LGBs split their tickets in 1990, exactly the same proportion as the rest of the population. About one in six LGB voters in lower-salience contests may support liberal or leftist independents as opposed to Democratic nominees. About one in four LGB voters appear to support Republicans, at least in contests in which the economy or foreign policy issues are paramount as opposed to social issues, and in a traditionalistic Southern state such as Texas many more LGBs may vote Republican.

Therefore, the lavender vote is up for grabs. Its social liberalism does not equate with voting for the Democrats. Democrats who take LGB voters for granted and Republicans who write off or deliberately alienate them both are making a serious mistake.

When we consider voters who identify themselves as gay or lesbian, the proportion of the gay and lesbian vote is small, just over 1 percent of the national voting population in 1990. When self-identified bisexuals are included this figure doubles, and equals the share of Latino voters in the United States. The rate of identification by age group tells us that its size may grow to about 4 or 5 percent of the total in the next twenty years.

Although LGB-oriented political activists do appear to have some effect in drawing attention to certain important contests, in a race in which an openly LGB candidate is seeking election, a majority of LGB voters appear to require the validation of that person's candidacy by non-LGB-oriented media and/or organizations in order to consider the candidate "serious."
What We Do Not Know

The most essential question left in the air is precisely how many homosexual and bisexual voters there actually are in the United States, and whether those who do not self-identify on the survey forms in fact vote the same as, or differently from, the self-identifiers. Therefore, there is no factual basis for claims such as the one bandied about after the 1992 election that one in six Clinton supporters were gay or lesbian and that this group was responsible for Clinton's election.

We can ascertain differences between objective membership in the working class and working-class/middle-class self-identification because survey respondents willingly tell us their incomes and job status. It is exceedingly unlikely that a survey on political attitudes and voting behavior will include questions about the respondents' hidden sexual attractions or behavior; or that, in the unlikely event such questions were asked, they would be answered. Our dilemma therefore appears likely to remain fixed. Existing sex research, indeed, has failed to probe this fundamental question sufficiently to draw any firm conclusions, although the Chicago study (Laumann et al. 1994) has made a welcome start. We are left to look only at the self-identifiers.

A second, related question is the extent to which those who do self-identify are possessed of the psychological mobilizing force called group consciousness. One correlate variable (high political interest) was assumed from the fact of voting in 1990, but the reverse appeared to be found in 1992 from the extremely large share of LGB first-time voters that year. A second correlate, relative youth, was consistently found in the data. A third correlate variable, education, was found in the national data, but found only inconsistently at the state level. The fourth, an augmented level of partisanship, was not found, even though the partisan tilt of the LGB voters was distinctive. Although these spotty effects may have resulted principally from small sample sizes, we cannot be certain. With no direct elements other than group identification available in the data sets examined, further exposition must await studies that specifically probe group consciousness among LGB self-identifiers.

We can make no certain claims, either, regarding the share of the LGB vote represented by the various theoretical strains we have discussed; nor can we say whether, and to what extent, a true electoral coalition has been established between LGB voters and other groups in the population. These too must be left to future research.
Prospects for 1996

At this writing no data were yet available from the 1994 general election exit polls, so we cannot say whether the trends found in 1990 and 1992 held up in the recent Republican sweep. However, it is possible to reach some conclusions about the lavender vote and for whom it is likely to go in 1996.

The Clinton Record on LGB Issues

Bill Clinton's strong appeals to LGB voters in the 1992 election were rewarded with strong support. In his first six months in office, however, he squandered much of the goodwill of the LGB community by vacillating on his pledge to lift the military ban and finally retreating into the "don't ask, don't tell" compromise, which, by the president's own account, may have left no one happy on any side of the issue.

The military issue was emblematic of Clinton's mixed record. He did appoint more open lesbians and gay men to influential posts than all previous presidents combined, including the first out-of-the-closet federal judge and the first two assistant cabinet secretaries. Yet after the midterm elections he withdrew or canceled the appointments of a gay man to an ambassadorship and of a progay heterosexual man as an assistant attorney general, and when he deemed an openly gay White House staffer too outspoken, the aide was sent into exile in a midlevel post in the Interior Department.

He did achieve substantial increases in AIDS research spending. He also appointed a national AIDS policy coordinator; but the post was ill-defined, access to the president was limited, and the initial coordinator's statements on safe sex were toned down after political pressure from her superiors. It was not the "AIDS czar" Clinton had promised. He also fired his outspoken surgeon general, Dr. Joycelyn Elders, who had encouraged frank discussion of sexuality and advocated condom distribution in high schools.

He did meet with national LGB leaders and, after intervening with the National Park Service to allow the demonstrators to use the Mall, sent a welcoming message to the April 1993 LGB march on Washington—the first president ever to embrace the gay rights cause even in part—although he hastily arranged an out-of-town speaking engagement for the Sunday on which the march took place.

He did publicly condemn the antigay ballot initiative efforts that proliferated in 1994, and Attorney General Janet Reno sent federal mediators to Ovett, Mississippi, to try to stop the violent harassment of a lesbian couple who had opened a women's retreat center there. Yet Reno's Justice Department
continued its vigorous appeals of federal trial court decisions holding the military ban unconstitutional and failed to file a supporting brief when the Amendment 2 case went to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Taken together, the president's reputation as a "waffler," which appeared to play a significant part in the Democrats' midterm disaster, was manifested in his ambivalent support for the LGB cause. Early in the administration, ACT UP founder Larry Kramer bluntly asked the crowd at the march on Washington, "Why are we kissing this president's ass? He may be saying all the right things, but he isn't doing anything!" Yet many LGBs who were disappointed and angry about the policy defeats still appreciated the fact that Clinton's words and some of his deeds came down on their side; few doubted he was personally pro-gay. One comic reportedly commented thus on Clinton after the gays-in-the-military defeat, "For the first time we got kissed before we got f—ed."

Alternatives to Clinton

LGB voters who are turned off by Clinton's substantive record have relatively few alternatives. The president's only somewhat serious challenger in his own party, who withdrew early on, was former Pennsylvania Governor Robert Casey, a devout Roman Catholic and social conservative best known for his unyielding opposition to abortion. Given the apparent conservative ascendancy in the country and the perception of Clinton among many voters as a "big-government liberal"—which also contributed to the Republican sweep—no serious candidate has emerged to challenge Clinton from the left; nor, if one should emerge, is that candidate likely to harm in the general election.

Among the likely Republican challengers, most were unsympathetic, if not downright homophobic. Columnist Pat Buchanan, for instance, has asserted that a "visceral recoil from homosexuality is the sign of a healthy society trying to preserve itself." The most moderate Republican on LGB issues, California Governor Pete Wilson, withdrew from the contest in late 1995. Wilson had signed a bill banning employment discrimination, but only after vetoing a more comprehensive nondiscrimination measure; he later vetoed a state domestic partnership bill. Another potential moderate on LGB issues, Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter, campaigned openly against "the intolerant right" as a pro-choice, libertarian conservative, although he is anathema to many women's rights supporters after his aggressive grilling of Anita Hill during the Clarence Thomas hearings, Specter too withdrew early.

Many LGB Republicans could comfortably have supported Specter in the
primaries. But he was never likely to win the party's presidential nomination, given the preponderance of Religious Right activists and other cultural conservatives in the GOP nominating process. (Wilson was widely thought in 1995 to be a plausible nominee for vice president; Specter was not.) The prospective nominee, Senate Majority Leader Robert Dole of Kansas, is a social conservative with a record generally opposing LGB rights, despite waffling over acceptance of a campaign contribution from LGB republicans; he is not identified personally with the Religious Right but who has its confidence and support.3

The alternatives for the socially liberal majority of LGB self-identifiers in the fall of 1996, therefore, seem to be confined to (1) voting to reelect Clinton, (2) casting protest votes for leftist third party candidates who have no chance of winning, (3) staying home on election day, or (4) voting for a centrist independent with a chance of winning, à la Ross Perot, provided it is one who tends to support LGB civil rights. There is no indication at this point that the fourth option will emerge—but then, through the early part of the 1992 election cycle, Perot was not even thought of as a contender. (If Perot himself should run again, LGB Republicans may take refuge under his wing if they cannot countenance either Clinton or their own party's choice.)

The Democrats: How Far Can We Go?

Among the socially liberal activists who predominate in the Democrats' nominating process, the debate is less about what public policy toward LGB people ought to be—they are agreed on the need for and desirability of basic antidiscrimination laws, an end to the military ban, and some protection or benefits for same-sex couples—than about how far they can go in enacting these policies without alienating their more socially conservative copartisans and the moderate independents they need to win elections. After the gays-in-the-military flap of 1993 and the results of the 1994 elections, LGB rights supporters expect no legislative progress at the federal level until at least after the next elections, and the president certainly will propose no new LGB rights initiatives. The question for the Clinton campaign in 1996 is whether it should again make a strong appeal for LGB support, as one way of energizing the Democrats' base of progressive activists, or whether in appealing to the center Clinton should backtrack from his previous stands.

There is danger in both strategies, and not just as they apply to LGB voters. As noted previously, Clinton's main problem with the American public is the perception that he is a big-government, socially permissive liberal at heart (a "counterculture McGovernick," in House Speaker Newt Gingrich's colorful phrase), who nonetheless has a weak personal character, lacking the courage of
What It All Means and Why It Matters

his convictions and retreating at the first sign of opposition. If he reaches out to his LGB constituency and other social progressives as he did in 1992, albeit then as a "new Democrat," he will reinforce the perception that he is a permissive liberal. If he backs away from them, he will reinforce the perception that he is spineless. The record of his administration on LGB issues indicates that Clinton is trying to split the difference in order to help hold a dissatisfied left flank and a dissatisfied center together behind him.

The Republicans: Divided over LGB Issues

An interesting battle over homosexuality and gay rights has emerged within the GOP among three distinct groups of Republicans, somewhat reflective of the battle over cultural issues taking place in American society as a whole. Which group gets the upper hand in this intraparty battle probably will determine the extent to which the movement of more conservative and moderate LGBs to the Democrats in 1992 was a onetime phenomenon or the first manifestation of a long-term trend.

At one end of the scale, the Religious Right and its allies characterize homosexuality as an "abomination" and a threat to society, and advocate strong governmental action to clamp down on open homosexuals. This includes retaining or reinstituting criminal sodomy laws, repealing all gay rights and domestic partnership legislation, expelling all LGBs (open or closeted) from the military, denying permits for LGB-oriented restaurants, bookstores, and bars, banning public display of "homoerotic" art and defunding artists who create it, removing books and periodicals with positive or neutral depictions of homosexuality from libraries, denying LGB groups access to meeting space in public buildings and permits for parades and marches, banning or defunding LGB college and youth support groups and programs, forbidding discussion of homosexuality or "safer sex" in public school curricula, firing LGB teachers, and banning open LGBs from either conceiving or keeping custody of children—including their own.

At the other end of the scale, libertarian Republicans, mostly moderates and liberals from the Northeast but including "Mr. Conservative" Barry Goldwater of Arizona (who has an openly gay grandson), support gay rights legislation to varying degrees. Republican governors Wilson, Weld, Arne Carlson of Minnesota, and Lincoln Almond of Rhode Island all have signed statewide gay rights laws, and they and Christine Whitman of New Jersey have appointed open lesbians and gay men to significant positions in state government and in their campaigns, as have New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan.
Midway between the two stand the “tolerant” (but not accepting) conservatives. This preponderant stream in the GOP appears to include both old-style “Main Street” Republicans such as Dole and Bush, and those “New Right” conservatives who emphasize economic opportunity, such as Quayle and Gingrich (the latter has an openly lesbian sister). In Gingrich’s words, “Our position should be toleration; it shouldn’t be condemnation and it shouldn’t be promotion.” Tolerating as this group defines it does not include antidiscrimination laws, open LGBs in the military, or government funding for LGB artists; these are viewed as government action that “promotes” homosexuality or its acceptance.

The mainstream of Republican thought holds that heterosexuality is the natural and moral norm; that the causes of sexual orientation are unclear; and that society and government therefore should seek to push those who may be on the fence toward heterosexuality and “normal” marriage and family life. It also holds, however, that people who do become lesbian, gay, or bisexual should not be persecuted or cast out, rather allowed to live their lives, albeit with limitations. For example, “tolerant” social conservatives would not allow same-sex marriage or domestic partnership, and would not permit open LGBs to adopt or provide foster care for children, or to conceive them through artificial insemination or surrogacy. Yet they would not take LGB parents’ own children away from them, and they appear to hold to a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy with regard to schoolteachers and others who work closely with children.

The Lavender Vote in ’96: Where Will It Go?

Perhaps the most important finding of this study for the average reader is that a significant share of the LGB vote is up for grabs between the two major parties. That this was true in 1990 is clear; it was less clear in 1992. What about after 1996, when LGB rights will likely be a major issue dwarfing 1992 and with the Religious Right holding a dominant position in the Republican nominating process?

The Republicans can maintain their substantial foothold of LGB support only if they do not cater to the demands of the Religious Right for the public condemnation of homosexuals. Postconvention and postelection surveys indicated that the 1992 Bush-Quayle campaign was tarnished, even among middle-of-the-road heterosexuals, by the perception of intolerance and narrow-mindedness as a result of the hard-right tone of that year’s Republican convention. In this context, the ability of more gay-sympathetic congressional Republicans to keep conservative and moderate LGB voters in their electoral coalitions will depend largely on two factors: the extent to which the 1996
congressional elections become national rather than local in nature, and the extent to which the GOP national ticket plays up or plays down LGB and other "family values" issues.

In all likelihood, the 1996 congressional election will be nationalized. It will offer not merely a referendum on the president's performance, which usually does not significantly affect local congressional contests, but a direct choice between Bill Clinton's record and that of the Republican Congress, which codified its promises in unprecedented detail in its 1994 "Contract with America."

The remaining question, then, is whether the Republican nominee—unlikely in the extreme to embrace the libertarian position of public acceptance and civil rights advocated by Barry Goldwater and William Weld—will seek to energize his Religious Right supporters with antigay rhetoric, follow the path of "tolerance" most appealing to mainstream conservatives, or attempt, as Bush and Quayle did with questionable success, to split the difference. The GOP nominee will have far more flexibility in this regard than does the Democratic president, owing to the strong desire among Republicans to consolidate their newfound dominance of Congress and regain the White House to top off their success.

Therefore, whether Republicans maintain a significant share of the lavender vote will depend greatly on the personal feelings, expressions, and actions of one individual in one time frame: the 1996 presidential nominee. Given the likelihood of an uncommonly nationalized election, a GOP nominee who goes too far in alienating moderate and conservative LGBs may drive these voters permanently into the arms of the Democrats, just as (ironically) Barry Goldwater's opposition to federal civil rights laws in 1964 drove all but a smidgeon of the remaining black Republicans into the Democratic Party. In like manner, a Republican nominee who shows personal respect for LGB voters and speaks against intolerance, even if he also praises "family values" and sees no need for federal nondiscrimination laws, probably will regain the LGB voters George Bush won in 1988 and lost in 1992, and regain them not just for the national nominees but for gay-sympathetic Republicans further down the ticket.

This study could not have been done a mere half-dozen years ago. We had no usable data on LGB voters, because no one would ask the essential self-identification question. Even today, standard national political surveys, and even the National Election Studies, do not include a self-identifier question. There was until the last few years a practical reason for this, other than mere concern about respondent objections: it was not certain that enough respon-
dent would indicate a homosexual or bisexual identity to make the question worth asking. It is likely that some pollster reticence will continue until, within the next five to ten years, it becomes clear that roughly as many American voters will identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual as will identify as Latino or Jewish.

Political surveys with samples of 1,000 or more—certainly those with samples of 1,500 or more—should include a self-identifier question, for this study has shown us beyond doubt that we have found a relatively small but potentially important force in American electoral politics. The addition of sexual identity to the repertory of standard demographic variables in political polls will give everyone interested in U.S. politics a greater ability to explain American elections, especially the voters' stands on important domestic social issues, and to predict who will vote for whom and why.

This study presents not "the truth" about the lavender vote, but a first draft of a few truths. Study in this field must continue, and each new random-sample survey will tell us more. I commend this topic strongly to all whose interest lies in general voting behavior and in the study of minority politics.

Even more, I commend the study of this topic to all who wish to advance this country's understanding of its gay, lesbian, and bisexual citizens. The same ancient prejudices, the same preference not to think about this group, and the same fears of being tainted by association with gay people that exist in the larger society, manifested in both law and custom, have worked their way hard into the breast of American political science. Such fear, if we allow it to rule us, will condemn us to being second-rate scholars and citizens. In spelling out the philosophy of the university he founded, Jefferson proclaimed what we should honor and live by as the scholar's credo: "Here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it."