

# Group Empathy as a Driver of Pro-LGBTQ+ Attitudes in the United States

## Authors:

José D. Villalobos and Cigdem V. Sirin, The University of Texas at El Paso

## Abstract

The LGBTQ+ community in the U.S. has long suffered from collective stigmatization and discrimination. At the same time, there have been calls for increased social acceptance, more legal protections, and better political representation of LGBTQ+ people. An essential ingredient for such calls for change has been a rise in support from outgroup allies. However, what moves members of the public to support LGBTQ+ citizens? In this chapter, we explore how group empathy as a general disposition may serve as a primary driver of positive attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community. Employing 2020 American National Election Studies (ANES) data, we find individuals with high empathy for outgroups are more likely to stand in solidarity with the LGBTQ+ population. Specifically, group empathy translates into pro-LGBTQ+ stances, including support for: (1) permitting same-sex marriage and allowing LGBTQ+ couples to legally adopt children, (2) standing against businesses that deny service to LGBTQ+ customers, (3) allowing transgender people to use restrooms of their identified gender and serve in the U.S. Armed Forces, (4) having more lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people elected to political office, and (5) enacting laws that protect members of the LGBTQ+ community against job discrimination. Across all of these instances, our results demonstrate that the effect of group empathy on pro-LGBTQ+ attitudes is strong (and at times is *the strongest driver*) even after controlling for key political and socio-economic factors that have been linked to such attitudes. In light of these findings, we posit that attitudinal trends motivated by empathy for outgroups can help pave the way for more substantial sociopolitical changes in support of the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement.

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In 1985, the *Los Angeles Times* conducted a pivotal national survey to gauge public attitudes toward gays and lesbians. At that time, a large majority of the public was opposed to the gay and lesbian community. Nearly four decades later, in 2024, the *Los Angeles Times* commissioned the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) of the University of Chicago to conduct a new survey to assess attitudinal changes towards gays and lesbians after all those years, as well as to incorporate additional measures of opinion toward other LGBTQ+ groups (Malato and Benz 2024; Rector 2024). One major finding was that while 67% of adults in 1985 had believed that same-sex sexual relations were always wrong, a complete turnaround by 2024 showed that 64% of the public no longer had any issue with such relations. Likewise, while 64% of adults in 1985 reported they would be very upset to have a gay or lesbian child, only 14% feel that way today. The study also found that while 47% of people in 1985 felt they would be less likely to vote for a gay or lesbian person running for Congress, 73% today feel that a candidate's sexual orientation generally makes no difference to them at the ballot box. Other studies conducted by Gallup and *Newsweek's* Princeton Surveys have found, among other things, that support for hiring homosexuals as elementary school teachers grew from 42% in 1989 to about 70% by as early as 2007 (Adamczyk and Liao 2019, 409-10; see also Becker 2014).

Surveys focused on the pivotal issue of same-sex marriage have also seen major gains in public support. A Pew Research Center study found that support for same-sex marriage jumped from 50% among Democrats in 2008 to 65% by 2012, just as President Barack Obama had evolved on the issue to become the first president to support such nuptials (Pew Research Center 2012; Steinmetz 2015; see also Baunach 2011, 2012). By then only 23% of all Americans were strongly opposed to same-sex marriage, as calls for marriage equality grew louder across the political landscape. Three years later, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) that state-level bans on same-sex marriage were unconstitutional. By 2022, Gallup reported that a record-high 71% of Americans showed support for legal same-sex marriage, with the highest support among Democrats (83%) and Independents (74%), and even Republicans reaching their own high point of 55% majority support (see Brennan 2024). Along similar lines, acceptance of same-sex relations among unwed gay and lesbian couples hovered closely behind, most recently reaching 64% support according to Gallup (mirroring the NORC 2024 findings). In terms of their trajectories over time, the measures for same-sex marriage and same-sex relations have both consistently demonstrated solid majority support for over a decade now.

By comparison, NORC's (2024) questions covering the bisexual, transgender, and non-binary members of the LGBTQ+ community yield somewhat lower and mixed levels of support. For instance, while just a third of Americans would be very or somewhat upset about having a bisexual child, the number jumps to nearly half (48%) being upset about the prospect of having a transgender or non-binary child. Similarly, when it comes to candidates running for public office, only 33% of Americans would be less likely to vote for a transgender or non-binary candidate, while just 19% reported feeling the same way about gay and lesbian candidates. Furthermore, less than a third (31%) of Americans disapprove of transgender and non-binary adults living their lives as they wish and an even smaller 21% disapprove of bisexual adults along the same lines. Thus, despite some conspicuous levels of opposition, American dispositions about bisexual, transgender, and non-binary individuals are generally more positive than negative, and could continue to improve in time.

Given these trends over decades, it is clear that Americans have considerably shifted their views about the LGBTQ+ community in a more positive, supportive direction (see Baunach 2011, 2012; Loftus 2001). However, what accounts for these attitudinal changes and what might

further cultivate such positive trends moving forward? Previous studies have explained public dispositions about the LGBTQ+ community through the lens of individual-level attributes such as religion, race, gender, education, and partisanship (e.g., Adamczyk et al. 2016; Herek 2002; Lambert et al. 2006; Rhodebeck 2015) and shown that increased exposure to LGBTQ+ people via intergroup contact and parasocial media interactions can help improve perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community (Brewer 2003; Becker 2012; Calzo and Ward 2009; Garretson 2015, 2018; Schiappa et al. 2006). However, there is further ground to cover in terms of exploring the underlying motivational forces that shape views about the LGBTQ+ community. To help fill this gap, we posit that, in the context of the LGBTQ+ community's collective struggles, empathy for outgroups in distress may serve as a primary driver of pro-LGBTQ+ attitudes. Given that the LGBTQ+ community is a marginalized group comprised of about 7% self-identified members of the U.S. population (Jones 2023, 2024), outgroup empathy represents a potentially potent ingredient for cultivating a broad alliance in support of the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement.

### **Literature on American Public Perceptions of the LGBTQ+ Community**

As American public opinion about the LGBTQ+ community has evolved over decades, so too has research on the subject in the social sciences (for a comprehensive review, see Adamczyk and Liao 2019). The scholarship on LGBTQ+ opinion dynamics spans various fields and addresses countless topics from studies on racial attitudes toward homosexual males (e.g., Lewis 2003) to support for same-sex marriage and civil unions (e.g., Brewer and Wilcox 2005) to allowing military service for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals (e.g., Van Gilder 2019) to opposing discrimination of LGBTQ+ employees (e.g., Becker 2014). For our purposes here, we review a number of essential studies covering key individual-level attributes, factors related to education, and considerations tied to both general LGBTQ+ support and support for reforms. We then tie such insights into our research on the role empathy plays in shaping public attitudes and motivating support for pro-LGBTQ+ policies.

#### ***Individual-Level Attributes***

Scholars have long established a strong negative association between being religious and one's views toward LGBTQ+ people, most notably among Evangelical Protestants in the U.S. context (Herek 1988; Lewis 2003; Burdette et al. 2005; Olson et al. 2006; Sherkat et al. 2011). Sherkat et al. (2010) point out that religion can also impact racial differences in attitudes toward policies such as legalized same-sex marriage, such as Blacks with strong ties to sectarian Protestant denominations who are more intolerant than White Protestants (see also Adamczyk et al. 2016). Scholars have also found that despite the potential negative effects of religious teachings against homosexuals, people may nevertheless be more likely to support same-sex marriage if they have a close relationship with a gay person (e.g., Bramlett 2012). Other studies relying on measures of morality and conservative values rather than religion tend to produce comparable findings (Hillygus and Shields 2005; Brewer and Wilcox 2005; Brewer 2003).

Another well-documented influence on LGBTQ+ dispositions is that of gender, with women tending to be more accepting overall compared to men (see Larsen et al. 1980; Herek 1988). Women show high support particularly in the areas of employment protections and adoption rights for gays (Herek 2002). Studies also note that people who embrace traditional gender roles and stereotypes are more likely to oppose the LGBTQ+ community and its needs (Herek and Gonzalez-Rivera 2006; see also Gaines and Garand 2010). Other studies find that women tend to be more accepting of gay men and lesbians in terms of tolerance and morality

considerations, though women are relatively less accepting of lesbians than gay men when it comes to intergroup contact (e.g., see LaMar and Kite 2010).

The impact of partisanship on LGBTQ+ attitudes is also an important factor. Although its effect was somewhat limited in the 1980s amid widespread opposition to the gay community, the 1990s saw a clearer distinction between Democrats increasingly embracing gays and lesbians while Republicans remained much less accepting (Baunach 2011, 2012; Sherkat et al. 2011). As mentioned earlier, the turn of the century saw Republican views toward gay marriage shift in a more positive direction, eventually reaching 55% majority support by 2022 before dipping back down to 46% (NORC 2024). More broadly, the Democratic Party has continued moving—though not without tensions—toward greater LGBTQ+ inclusivity while the Republican Party has become less tolerant during the Trump era, particularly in opposing transgender and non-binary people (e.g., Brownworth 2021; Otten 2023).

Age is another distinct factor that ties into LGBTQ+ opinion dynamics, with key studies focusing on cohort succession and intracohort change (Baunach 2011). Early work on cohort succession suggested that as younger cohorts replace older ones, their life experiences in a new generational context account for shifts in mass opinion (Alwin and Krosnick 1991). However, subsequent studies on intracohort change find that both younger and older cohorts tend to become more liberal amid cultural changes they experience together (Andersen and Fetner 2008; Baunach 2012; see also Brewer 2003; Loftus 2001; Treas 2002). At the same time, Baunach (2012) finds that temporal changes and effects have been most impactful since the early 2000s than they were during the 1980s when opposition to issues like same-sex marriage was much higher and more widely persistent. What changed in cohort experiences between those periods resulting in higher LGBTQ+ support today?

### ***Socialization and Information Pathways***

Another part of the story behind changes in perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community appears to be tied to socialization pathways such as intergroup contact. The NORC (2024) survey found that nearly three quarters (72%) of adults know of someone who identifies as gay or lesbian, compared to only 40% reporting knowing a bisexual person and only 27% knowing a transgender or non-binary member of their community (NORC 2024, 3). These levels of familiarity line up closely with the levels of support observed for each LGBTQ+ subgroup (Herek and Capitano 1996; Walch et al. 2012). The higher number of people knowing gays and lesbians also correspond with the Coming Out movement in previous decades, for which people have self-disclosed their sexual orientation to close friends and family members who they perceived as potential allies of the LGBTQ+ community (Lewis 2011; Stotzer 2009; Cortese 2006). Other LGBTQ+ subgroups are increasingly following suit.

Media exposure can similarly, if somewhat less directly, help generate positive views of the LGBTQ+ community (Bonds-Raacke et al. 2007; Calzo and Ward 2009). Schiappa et al. (2006) posit that the media can serve as a conduit for parasocial interactions, providing people who otherwise have little or no in-person contact with LGBTQ+ individuals the opportunity to become virtually acquainted with LGBTQ+ characters and images through television and other mediums. However, depending on context and preexisting beliefs, simply knowing or becoming aware of an LGBTQ+ individual may not be enough to affect perceptions in a meaningful way (Skipworth et al. 2010). Other scholars point to higher education as an effective means of gaining a deeper understanding of the LGBTQ+ community, dispelling stereotypes, and fostering greater social tolerance and moral acceptance (Kozloski 2010; Lambert et al. 2006). Relatedly,

people with higher levels of political sophistication are less likely to fall prey to stereotypes and misinformation and tend to demonstrate more consistency across attitudes and within specific issue domains (Jennings 1992; Goren 2004; but see Hartman and Newmark 2012), which can be especially helpful in understanding and keeping up with the nuanced intricacies of the numerous LGBTQ+ subgroups and their varying needs within the broader LGBTQ+ movement.

### ***Considerations for both Overall LGBTQ+ Support and Support for Reforms***

One should also consider not just how key factors affect overall attitudes about the LGBTQ+ community, but also how they may translate into support for reforms for protecting and expanding LGBTQ+ rights (e.g., Garretson 2015; Lewis 2009; Loftus 2001). Studies have found that people can separate their considerations between overall views of acceptance versus more action-oriented views about privileges and rights (Loftus 2001; Lewis 2003; Schwartz 2010; see also Lewis et al. 2017). In some cases, Americans have seemed more willing to expand legal rights as a matter of equal justice under the law while support for extending informal privileges (such as approving of a same-sex couple's public displays of affection) has been more limited (Doan et al. 2014; Loftus 2001). However, we think empathy for stigmatized groups can supersede motivations underlying prejudice toward the LGBTQ+ (which may be rooted in moral/religious objections and intergroup competition between sexual identity groups) and help cultivate broader support for LGBTQ+ civil rights. As previously mentioned, since the LGBTQ+ community is comprised of just a small portion of the population (about 7% self-identify as such), empathy from outgroup allies is essential to increasing strength in numbers towards achieving more substantive sociopolitical changes.

### ***The Role of Empathy as a Motivational Force***

A major gap in the literature is the dearth of studies that incorporate empathy as a chief motivational factor with the potential to move the public to stand in the shoes of marginalized LGBTQ+ people. Among the few studies that explore how empathy relates to the LGBTQ+ community, key research by Worthen (2020a, 2020b) flips the causal arrow in the opposite direction to examine the extent to which LGBTQ+ individuals empathize with others (see also Worthen et al. 2012).<sup>1</sup> Worthen (2020a) introduces a social justice/empathic concern theoretical framework, which posits that LGBTQ+ people hold mostly liberal perspectives due to deep personal experiences with stigma stemming from hostile treatment imposed by prejudiced religious conservatives. She tests this framework by employing a nationally representative survey and her findings corroborate the presence of "luminous lavender liberalism" among the LGBTQ+ community, though she also finds some areas of tension between transgender people and liberalism (Worthen 2020b).

Very few works examine how empathy shapes general public attitudes towards the LGBTQ+, and do so generally without a standalone theory of empathy or a direct, empirical measurement of the concept. For instance, in their study on transgender and gender diverse individuals, Lewis et al. (2024) employ a national survey to test the effects of cultural threat and

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<sup>1</sup> Worthen et al. (2012) conduct an exploratory analysis using the 2002 and 2004 General Social Surveys to examine whether gender differences in empathic concern affect death penalty attitudes among gay and lesbian individuals. They find gays and lesbians generally support the death penalty at similar levels to heterosexuals and that empathic concern and political beliefs mediate gender and sexual orientation effects on perceptions of the death penalty.

outgroup discrimination on attitudes specific to transgender rights. However, their framework focuses more on sympathy than directly measuring empathy, and their key relevant measure is transgender discrimination, for which they do not find a significant effect on public attitudes. They surmise that the null findings may be due to their specific issue tests—gender-segregated public bathrooms, school sports, and medical transition care—being less likely to connect as shared experiences among non-LGBTQ+ respondents. Given these limitations, they note future studies should consider more directly how group empathy may condition the effects of discrimination on attitudes about LGBTQ+ outgroup members. In an earlier study, Stotzer (2009) employs a convenience sample of 50 female and 18 male heterosexual college students to conduct semi-structured interviews exploring how LGB attitudes are shaped by early childhood normalizing experiences, interaction with LGB peers in high school and college, and experiences of feeling empathy for LGB peers and/or resistance to LGB hatred expressed by others. She finds instances in student narratives where feelings relating to empathy occur even in the absence of normalizing experiences or knowing LGB individuals directly as well as other instances where certain students also empathized with, rather than showed resistance to, those who opposed the way LGB individuals experience their lives. Though an insightful study with a more direct focus on empathy, it constitutes a case analysis of young students from a Midwestern University and is not representative of mass public opinion dynamics.

To date, no work we know of on LGBTQ+ attitudes has systematically explored how empathy for outgroups may serve as the key driver of public support for the LGBTQ+ community, nor fully explicated empathy as an underlying motivational force for pro-LGBTQ+ reactions. However, in our initial tests as part of a broader book project, we derived preliminary empirical support for the notion that people with high levels of outgroup empathy are more likely to demonstrate support for LGBTQ+ people’s rights and protections (Sirin et al. 2021, 197-207). Employing data from a 2018 ANES Pilot Study (YouGov) and our 2018 U.S. Group Empathy Study (YouGov), our initial findings demonstrated a positive, significant relationship between group empathy and general support for LGBTQ+ rights as well as support for allowing LGBTQ+ individuals to serve in the military (see Sirin et al. 2021, 200-2, Table 8.6 and Figure 8.1). We collected the relevant survey data for these analyses during the Trump administration’s rollback of various LGBTQ+ rights and protections.<sup>2</sup>

When considered alongside the key individual-level attributes and factors applied in previous studies, we believe empathy provides an underlying motivational force that corresponds with the mass attitudinal changes seen over previous decades leading to more supportive public dispositions toward LGBTQ+ people. For instance, as researchers have documented that increased intergroup contact and media exposure have helped Americans become more familiarized with LGBTQ+ people and their struggles, it makes sense that those high in empathic concern for outgroups might be increasingly motivated to care and express heightened support for the LGBTQ+ movement. Likewise, even though large portions of the population identify as very conservative and continue following traditional religious teachings that view LGBTQ+ policies to be immoral, those with high empathy for outgroups in distress may nevertheless experience a strong empathic response when learning about or observing LGBTQ+ individuals

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<sup>2</sup> This occurred alongside other regressive policies enacted against immigrants, Muslims, Native Americans, Black Lives Matter and #MeToo activists, and even Puerto Rican hurricane victims. We ran similar tests and obtained comparable findings of empathic reactions for each of these other stigmatized groups (see Sirin et al. 2021, 202-6, Figures 8.1-8.5).

being mistreated and marginalized. To fully explore and test these suppositions, we next discuss our theoretical framework as it applies to the LGBTQ+ community and then formulate our key hypotheses.

### **Group Empathy Theory and Hypotheses**

To better understand what drives pro-LGBTQ+ public attitudes, we apply our theoretical framework that centers on empathy for outgroups. Group Empathy Theory, developed by Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos (2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2021), posits that one's general predisposition to empathize with the perspectives and emotions of an outgroup in distress can help shape one's political attitudes and behavior in a manner that can reduce intergroup conflict, boost opposition to punitive policies, and elevate support for civil-rights protections for the outgroup. Group empathy can counteract or even supersede the effects of perceived outgroup threats and competition, as well as factors such as partisanship, ideology, and other influential belief systems such as authoritarianism. We have systematically tested the theory cross-nationally, in different policy spheres, and across various administrations using a multitude of nationally representative survey and experimental studies.

When we first set out to develop Group Empathy Theory, our focus was on how different racial/ethnic groups might empathize with each other when observing instances of racial profiling for an outgroup in the context of immigration and national security settings. In this study, we test our theory anew in the context of the LGBTQ+ community as another marginalized group in distress, and explore the impact of outgroup empathy across an array of sexual/gender orientation-based issues. This is in concert with other scholars who have extended beyond racial/ethnic minorities to explore outgroup empathic reactions for other stigmatized groups such as AIDS patients, drug addicts, religious minorities, and women (e.g., Batson et al. 1997; Shih et al. 2013; Tarrant and Hadert 2010; Sirin and Villalobos forthcoming). We believe the reason for this is that group empathy functions as a powerful *general disposition* that motivates support for any marginalized groups (see Sirin and Villalobos forthcoming). As a multidimensional construct, empathy encompasses affective (emotional response), cognitive (capacity), and motivational (action-oriented) components that set it apart from other emotions like sympathy or pity (see Sirin et al. 2016a, 2017, 2021). Therein, the motivational component of empathy is what moves people to care about the welfare of others, and thus may serve as a key underlying force that explains how and why sentiments toward stigmatized outgroups—in this case the LGBTQ+ community—shift towards support and advocacy when an empathic reaction is triggered. In this chapter, we dig directly into these nuanced considerations as they apply to LGBTQ+ people and look to expand on our previous findings by incorporating new outcome measures relating to same-sex marriage and adoption, discrimination against LGBTQ+ customers, transgender access to restrooms and military service, greater LGBTQ+ political representation, and protections against job discrimination.

In the case of same-sex marriage and the adoption of children by same-sex couples, non-LGBTQ+ people with high empathy for outgroups should be able to better internalize cognitively and affectively how they might feel if they had their own rights to marriage and adoption options restricted. Even individuals who might not have any personal, direct experiences with marriage and/or adoption may still be more likely to imagine scenarios where people are restricted from such life options and thus be more likely support LGBTQ+ marriage and adoption rights if they are highly empathic. Even for those who have notable religious and ideological objections to the LGBTQ+ lifestyle, we expect that the main positive effect of group

empathy is significant and independent of such factors, and that empathy should offset and perhaps overpower such countervailing forces. Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

*H1. Those with higher levels of group empathy are likely to display stronger support for same-sex marriage and adoption by same-sex couples.*

When it comes to discrimination and the mistreatment of LGBTQ+ people, we expect those high in group empathy can imagine how outraged they would be if, say, a business denied them service just for being themselves. Such feelings of outgroup empathy may be reminiscent of to empathy displayed by non-black activists who risked their lives by participating in protests and sit-ins when blacks were mistreated and denied services during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. Even among people who have never personally experienced such discrimination or are generally unfamiliar with the marginalization of the LGBTQ+, those who hold the capacity to feel empathic concern for outgroups in distress are more likely to sense the injustice of denying LGBTQ+ individuals the same services afforded to any other customer.

*H2. Those with higher levels of group empathy are likely to display stronger opposition to allowing businesses to deny service to LGBTQ+ customers.*

There are also highly salient issues to consider pertaining to transgender people. As mentioned at the outset, public support for transgender people lags notably behind that of gays and lesbians, which is due in part to lower levels of familiarity with the subgroup coupled with transphobic rhetoric employed by political elites to promote and justify anti-trans discriminatory policies. One issue concerns not allowing transgender people to use public bathrooms of their identified gender, which proponents have defended using threat frames based on debunked myths about the risk of sexual predators going into bathrooms of the opposite sex under the guise of being transgender (Steinmetz 2016; Moreau 2018). Another issue revolves around transgender people serving in the military, which came to the forefront of public debate following Donald Trump's transgender military ban officially enacted in April 2019 (see Thompson 2019; Jackson and Kube 2019). We surmise that even among people who have some uncertainty or reservations about transgender access to public bathrooms or transgender service in the military, those high in group empathy will still be more likely to resist incendiary rhetoric and support nondiscriminatory treatment of transgender individuals.

*H3. Those with higher levels of group empathy are likely to display stronger support for transgender people to use bathrooms of their identified gender and to serve in the military.*

Another vital issue to consider is the democratic representation of the LGBTQ+ community. Since LGBTQ+ people constitute only a small 7% documented portion of the population, having a voice in government to be responsive to the community's needs is essential for making sure LGBTQ+ civil rights are upheld. This can be achieved through increased descriptive and substantive representation, which includes having more openly LGBTQ+ representatives hold office along with other non-LGBTQ+ representatives who can operate as empathic allies on issues vital to the LGBTQ+ movement. For the general public, even though LGBTQ+ issues may not affect them directly, those high in outgroup empathy should stand in solidarity with LGBTQ+ citizens on the issue of equitable electoral representation.

*H4. Those with higher levels of group empathy are likely to display stronger support for equitable electoral representation of the LGBTQ+ community.*

Lastly, just as we posit that highly empathic individuals would oppose discrimination against LGBTQ+ customers, we likewise expect them to support LGBTQ+ protections from job discrimination so that all citizens have the opportunity to achieve socioeconomic mobility. Even among those who are morally opposed to the way LGBTQ+ people live their lives, those high in



outgroup empathy should be able to look past those views and not be hypocritical about the unethical nature of job discrimination displayed against a group of Americans just because of their sexual orientation.

*H5. Those with higher levels of group empathy are likely to display stronger support for legal protections from job discrimination for the LGBTQ+ community.*

### **Data and Research Design**

We test our hypotheses using the 2020 American National Election Studies (ANES) survey data. The 2020 ANES interviewed respondents in a pre-election survey fielded between August 18, 2020 and November 3, 2020. Following the presidential Election Day of November 3, 2020, the study re-interviewed as many of the same respondents as possible in a post-election survey fielded from November 8, 2020 to January 4, 2021. Out of a total of 8,280 respondents who were interviewed during the pre-election period, 7,449 took part in the post-election re-interviews.<sup>3</sup>

Our main independent variable is the Group Empathy Index (GEI), developed by Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos (2016a, 2017, 2021). The GEI adapted Davis’s (1980) Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) to tap empathy at the group level through key modifications to the item wordings. The 2020 ANES includes the four-item version of the GEI that consists of two perspective-taking items and two empathic concern items with motivation to care embedded in each item (as displayed in Table 1).

**Table 1.** Four-Item Group Empathy Index (GEI)

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<i>Perspective Taking</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How often would you say you try to better understand people of other racial or ethnic groups by imagining how things look from their perspective?</li><li>• Before criticizing somebody from another racial or ethnic group, how often do you try to imagine how you would feel if you were in their place?</li></ul>
<i>Empathic Concern</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How often would you say that you have tender, concerned feelings for people from another racial or ethnic group who are less fortunate than you?</li><li>• When you see someone being taken advantage of due to their race or ethnicity, how often do you feel protective towards them?</li></ul>

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*Note.* Response options: (1) Not often at all; (2) Not too often; (3) Somewhat often; (4) Very often; (5) Extremely often.

The GEI uses the wording “other racial or ethnic groups” as an anchor point to measure one’s general predisposition to be empathic toward other groups. Racial/ethnic groups are generally the most salient (and often the most contentious) category of social divisions in society. Such reference thus provides a concrete ground for respondents to position themselves,

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<sup>3</sup> The 2020 ANES employed a sequential mixed-mode design that included self-administered online surveys, live video interviews, and telephone interviews. As reported in the ANES (2021) study documentation, the response rate on the pre-election interviews, based on the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) formula for the minimum response rate (a.k.a. AAPOR Response Rate 1) was 36.7 percent overall (for the web-only, mixed web, and mixed video groups combined). Post-election re-interviews were completed with 90 percent of pre-election respondents overall.

which could otherwise be an abstract and likely inflated measure of empathy if the wording was simply “other groups in general.” In its current form, the GEI also eliminates potential endogeneity concerns since it allows for measuring the effect of group empathy on political attitudes about the LGBTQ+ community exogenously. As mentioned, previous studies find that the GEI as a general measure of group empathy correlates highly and very similarly with context-specific empathy expressed not just for racial/ethnic groups, but other marginalized groups as well (Sirin et al. 2021; see also Sirin and Villalobos forthcoming). Table 2 displays the correlation of the GEI with feeling thermometers for an array of groups the 2020 ANES survey inquired about. The correlation coefficients of the GEI and feeling thermometers for different groups—including for transgender people, gays and lesbians, Muslims, and undocumented immigrants—are essentially equivalent with r-values ranging between .35 and .39. The only exception is the pairwise correlation between the GEI and feeling thermometer for Whites with an r-value of .03. These results show that group empathy is applied generally to key groups in society but particularly those that are in distress rather than in dominant status.

**Table 2.** Pairwise Correlation of the Group Empathy Index (GEI) with Feeling Thermometers for Specific Groups

	GEI	FT Trans.	FT Gay	FT Muslim	FT Latinx	FT Black	FT Undoc.	FT White
GEI	1.00							
FT Trans.	0.39	1.00						
FT GayLes	0.36	0.85	1.00					
FT Muslim	0.35	0.61	0.58	1.00				
FT Latinx	0.35	0.37	0.39	0.41	1.00			
FT Black	0.37	0.39	0.38	0.43	0.77	1.00		
FT Undoc.	0.37	0.46	0.41	0.47	0.43	0.41	1.00	
FT White	0.03	0.05	0.08	0.07	0.52	0.47	0.07	1.00

*Note.* Data are weighted.

*Source:* 2020 American National Election Study

In addition to the GEI as our main independent variable, we also account for a number of factors that the literature has shown to influence attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community as discussed earlier. Specifically, the statistical models include key political controls: namely party identification, ideology, authoritarianism, and political sophistication. We also control for a variety of socio-economic and demographic variables including race/ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, education, income, urban residence, household size, employment status, marital status, religious affiliation (Evangelical dummy variable), and church attendance.<sup>4</sup>

For our dependent variables, we use an array of ANES questions to contextualize LGBTQ+ rights in social, political, and economic spheres. Specifically, respondents were asked their views on same-sex marriage and adoption rights, as well as on laws requiring private businesses to provide service to same-sex couples. The ANES survey also asked about respondents’ support for transgender people’s right to use the bathroom of their matched gender identity and to serve in the military. Our models also include measures of support for the

<sup>4</sup> Sensitivity analyses show that the results are robust to different model specifications.

equitable electoral representation of the LGBTQ+ citizens and support for legal protections to shield LGBTQ+ individuals from job discrimination.

## Results

The results of our statistical analyses corroborate strongly our theoretical expectations on the link between group empathy and support for LGBTQ+ rights. We begin with one's support for same-sex marriage. Respondents were asked their views on whether (1) there should be no legal recognition of a gay or lesbian couples' relationship, (2) gay or lesbian couples should be allowed to form civil unions but not legally marry, or (3) they should be allowed to legally marry. The ordered logistic regression analysis yields a statistically significant coefficient for the GEI ( $p < .01$ ; see Table 3). The predicted probability of supporting same-sex marriage increases from .62 to .73 as the GEI moves from its minimum to maximum value. We then conducted a binary logistic regression analysis to test the effect of group empathy on support for same-sex couples' adoption rights (also presented in Table 3). Respondents were asked in a binary format: "Do you think gay or lesbian couples should be legally permitted to adopt children?" The results indicate that when the GEI is at its maximum value, the predicted probability for supporting same-sex adoption rights is .84 as compared to .76 with the GEI set to its minimum value ( $p < .05$ ). These statistics indicate that while general public support for gay marriage and adoption rights are already very high (in line with recent public opinion trends discussed earlier), the effect of group empathy is still statistically and substantively significant even with controls for major factors that have been shown to shape such attitudes. This is in line with Hypothesis 1.

**Table 3.** Group Empathy and Support for the Rights of Same-Sex Couples

	<u>Support for Same-Sex Marriage</u>		<u>Support for Adoption by Same-Sex Couples</u>		<u>Support for Required Service to Same-Sex Couples</u>	
	$\beta$	S.E.	$\beta$	S.E.	$\beta$	S.E.
Group Empathy	.70**	.23	.64*	.30	.87***	.18
Party ID (Dem.-Repub.)	-.85***	.20	-.77**	.23	-1.36***	.15
Ideology (Lib.-Cons.)	-2.31***	.27	-2.07***	.32	-1.89***	.20
Authoritarianism	-.97***	.14	-1.06***	.20	-.10	.11
Political Sophistication	.50*	.25	.51†	.29	-.79***	.15
Race/Ethnicity						
<i>Blacks</i>	-1.01***	.19	-.87***	.25	-.14	.13
<i>Latinos</i>	-.37*	.17	-.78***	.21	.12	.12
<i>Asians/Native Hawaiian</i>	-.81***	.20	-.34	.32	-.04	.16
<i>Native Americans</i>	.01	.42	-.36	.24	-.18	.27
<i>Multiple Races</i>	-.27	.26	-.14	.31	.02	.18
Age	-.88***	.23	-.54†	.28	-.07	.19
Female	.21*	.09	.53***	.11	.23***	.06
Heterosexual	-.40	.29	-.51	.32	-.36**	.15
Education	.02	.16	.07	.23	.05	.15
Income	.66**	.20	.79**	.24	-.11	.14
Urban	.21†	.11	.21	.17	.13	.11

Household Size	-.42*	.21	.06	.19	.20	.13
Employed	.28*	.11	.20	.13	-.002	.09
Married	.03	.12	.06	.13	.01	.09
Evangelical	-.62***	.11	-.68***	.13	-.54***	.07
Church Attendance	-1.32***	.10	-1.09***	.13	-.88***	.09
Constant			3.57***	.45		
<i>N</i>	6,441		6,424		6,430	

*Note.* Coefficients for same-sex marriage and required service estimated via ordered logistic regression. Coefficients for adoption by same-sex couples estimated via binary logistic regression. Data are weighted. Whites are the baseline comparison category for race/ethnicity. All variables in the models are linearized to run from 0 to 1. † $p \leq .10$ , \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , and \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ , two-tailed.

*Source:* 2020 American National Election Study

The next dependent variable is about a much more contentious public opinion issue as compared to strong majority support for same-sex marriage and adoption rights. Respondents were asked on a 6-point scale: “Do you think business owners who provide wedding-related services should be allowed to refuse services to same-sex couples if same-sex marriage violates their religious beliefs, or do you think business owners should be required to provide services regardless of a couple’s sexual orientation?” The summary statistics show that ANES respondents were interestingly divided exactly at 50/50 with half of the respondents feeling at least “a little,” (5.66 percent), “moderately” (16.09 percent), or “very strongly” (28.25 percent) that businesses should be required to provide services to same-sex couples and the other half siding with business owners’ right to deny service on religious grounds. Here group empathy tips the scales in favor of the LGBTQ+ rights when we switch from descriptive raw data to an ordered logistic regression analysis with statistical controls (presented in the third set of columns in Table 3). With the GEI set from its minimum to maximum value, the predicted probability of “very strongly” supporting the requirement for businesses to provide services to same-sex couples ascends from .19 to .33 while “very strongly” supporting businesses to be allowed to refuse such service drops from .34 to .21 ( $p < .001$ ). These results corroborate Hypothesis 2.

The next set of analyses test the proposed positive link between group empathy and support for transgender rights as formulated in Hypothesis 3 (see Table 4). Respondents were asked: “Should transgender people—that is, people who identify themselves as the sex or gender different from the one they were born as—have to use the bathrooms of the gender they were born as, or should they be allowed to use the bathrooms of their identified gender?” We employ the ordinal form of this measure that ranges on a 6-point scale from “very strongly” opposing transgender people to use the bathrooms of their identified gender to “very strongly” supporting them. The GEI increases the predicted probability of full support for this issue by 11 percentage points (from .14 to .25) while decreasing the likelihood to fully deny such right by 15 percentage points (from .40 to .25). Respondents were also asked on a 7-point scale: “Do you favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose allowing transgender people to serve in the United States Armed Forces?” For this dependent variable, the coefficient size of the GEI is the second largest in the statistical model (1.76), only surpassed by ideology (-1.99). In terms of the marginal effects, the predicted probability of strong support for transgender people’s right to serve in the military

triples (an increase from .12 to .36) as the GEI moves from its minimum to maximum value. The results of both analyses are thus consistent with Hypothesis 3.

**Table 4.** Group Empathy and Support for Transgender Rights

	<u>Support for Transgender People to Use Bathrooms of Identified Gender</u>		<u>Support for Transgender People to Serve in the U.S. Military</u>	
	$\beta$	S.E.	B	S.E.
Group Empathy	.92***	.20	1.76***	.16
Party ID (Democrat-Republican)	-1.10***	.16	-.90***	.13
Ideology (Liberal-Conservative)	-2.52***	.20	-1.99***	.20
Authoritarianism	-.93***	.13	-.78***	.14
Political Sophistication	-.08	.15	-.01	.18
Race/Ethnicity				
<i>Blacks</i>	-.57***	.14	-.43**	.14
<i>Latinos</i>	-.20	.13	-.09	.15
<i>Asians/Native Hawaiian</i>	-.07	.16	-.31†	.18
<i>Native Americans</i>	-.32	.27	-.84***	.22
<i>Multiple Races</i>	.05	.23	-.15	.14
Age	.11	.18	-.62***	.18
Female	.32***	.07	.36***	.07
Heterosexual	-1.13***	.17	-.57***	.17
Education	.22	.15	.09	.15
Income	.20	.16	.50***	.13
Urban	.35**	.11	.26**	.09
Household Size	-.17	.13	.19	.13
Employed	.10	.09	.04	.08
Married	-.10	.08	-.14†	.08
Evangelical	-.44***	.10	-.25*	.11
Church Attendance	-.53***	.09	-.55***	.10
<i>N</i>	6,336		6,452	

*Note.* Coefficients estimated via ordered logistic regression. Data are weighted. Whites are the baseline comparison category for race/ethnicity. All variables in the models are linearized to run from 0 to 1. † $p \leq .10$ , \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , and \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ , two-tailed.

*Source:* 2020 American National Election Study

We test our fourth hypothesis on the association between group empathy and support for LGBTQ+ rights using the following ANES survey question (measured on a 5-point scale): “How important is it that more lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people be elected to political office?” The results of our ordered logistic regression analysis (presented in Table 5) demonstrate that the GEI has the largest coefficient size in the model (2.29;  $p < .001$ ), trailed by ideology (-1.80), party identification (-1.20), and authoritarianism (-.59). The predicted probability of viewing LGBTQ+ electoral representation as “not at all important” plunges from

.54 down to .16 when the GEI is set from its minimum to maximum value. Meanwhile, the likelihood of affirming equitable political representation of the LGBTQ+ as “extremely important” moves from .03 to .18 with the GEI’s value set to its minimum versus maximum. We thus find strong support for Hypothesis 4.

**Table 5.** Group Empathy and Support for LGBTQ+ Rights

	Support for LGBTQ+ Electoral Representation		Support for Legal Protections from Job Discrimination	
	$\beta$	S.E.	B	S.E.
Group Empathy	2.29***	.22	1.93***	.24
Party ID (Democrat-Republican)	-1.20***	.13	-.63**	.19
Ideology (Liberal-Conservative)	-1.80***	.24	-1.53***	.26
Authoritarianism	-.59***	.13	-.41*	.18
Political Sophistication	-.13	.16	.49*	.20
Race/Ethnicity				
<i>Blacks</i>	.18	.16	-.29†	.17
<i>Latinos</i>	.75***	.12	-.33*	.16
<i>Asians/Native Hawaiian</i>	-.19	.20	-.25	.25
<i>Native Americans</i>	-.09	.17	-.49†	.26
<i>Multiple Races</i>	.01	.16	-.07	.20
Age	-.52**	.18	.22	.18
Female	.18*	.08	.30**	.10
Heterosexual	-.41**	.15	-.65*	.25
Education	.36**	.14	.36†	.19
Income	-.15	.14	.57**	.18
Urban	.18	.12	.36**	.13
Household Size	.08	.13	-.04	.18
Employed	.11	.08	.30**	.10
Married	.07	.08	.01	.11
Evangelical	-.33**	.11	-.41***	.11
Church Attendance	-.52***	.11	-.44***	.12
<i>N</i>	6,446		6,435	

*Note.* Coefficients estimated via ordered logistic regression. Data are weighted. Whites are the baseline comparison category for race/ethnicity. All variables in the models are linearized to run from 0 to 1. † $p \leq .10$ , \* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , and \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ , two-tailed.

*Source:* 2020 American National Election Study

For our final analysis of the association between group empathy and support for LGBTQ+ rights, we use the following ANES question: “Do you favor or oppose laws to protect gays and lesbians against job discrimination?” Responses ranged on a 4-point scale from “oppose strongly” to “favor strongly.” A comparison of the coefficient sizes obtained by the ordered logistic regression analysis points to the GEI as the primary predictor of this dependent variable (also displayed in Table 5). The association of the GEI with support for laws to protect

the LGBTQ+ against job discrimination is substantively larger (1.93;  $p < .001$ ) than ideology (-1.52), party identification (-.63), and authoritarianism (-.41), as well as political sophistication (.49). When the GEI is set from its minimum to its maximum value, the predicted probability of strongly favoring legal protections surges from .49 to .83 while predictive margins for strongly opposing such protections drops from .17 to only .03. These results corroborate Hypothesis 5 powerfully.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have found that amidst the LGBTQ+ community's ongoing struggles in the U.S. political landscape, empathy for outgroups may serve as a primary driver of pro-LGBTQ+ attitudes. Our findings here demonstrate how potent group empathy can be as a general disposition, working powerfully even in contexts where highly empathic people might not have had similar marginalization experiences to draw from. Because the LGBTQ+ community represents a relatively small portion of the general population, outgroup empathy represents a vital ingredient for cultivating broad-based coalition building that can move empathic non-LGBTQ+ allies to support the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement.

While our findings here are quite promising and as public support for the LGBTQ+ community continues to move in an overall positive direction, much remains to be done to have LGBTQ+ needs heard and addressed. Grave acts of discrimination and mistreatment persist against LGBTQ+ subgroups such as transgender and non-binary individuals. In fact, the current political environment has recently witnessed an uptick in potential threats to LGBTQ+ rights, with the potential to reverse prior advances and stall the movement's progress. For instance, in June 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court sided with an evangelical Christian website designer's refusal of services to LGBTQ+ customers despite her violation of a Colorado anti-discrimination law (Yang and Wilde 2023). By a 6-3 vote, the conservative majority of justices ruled that the business owner's First Amendment rights relating to freedom of religion protected her from having to create web content for same-sex weddings. More recently, with the *Department of Education v. Louisiana* (2024) ruling, SCOTUS abandoned its previous landmark decision in *Bostock v. Clayton County* (2020), which had allowed the Biden administration to create rules forbidding discrimination in schools against gay and transgender students (Millhiser 2024). Additional judicial threats to LGBTQ+ rights in education and health care seem to be on the horizon (Pappy 2024), which seems odd given the rise of public LGBTQ+ support over the last few decades. Nevertheless, just as the Court eschewed strong majority support for women's abortion rights upon overturning *Roe v. Wade* (1973) with its *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022) decision, so too might the highly conservative-leaning SCOTUS eschew existing widespread support for same-sex marriage if it were to revisit the merits of *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) down the road.

Despite growing public support, LGBTQ+ people continue to be victims of various forms of discrimination and hate crimes in society. Amid the vitriol and continuing legal threats, high suicide rates, especially among LGBTQ+ youth—with 39% considering suicide and another 12% attempting suicide in 2023—is extremely concerning (Breen 2024). The number considering suicide was even worse for transgender and nonbinary youth at 46%. As horrifying as such numbers are, they are not so surprising when one considers the data showing hate crimes against LGBTQ+ students quadrupled in states where laws targeting LGBTQ+ issues were passed (Meckler et al. 2024). Greater public awareness is necessary to help combat the misinformation and fearmongering that put innocent LGBTQ+ lives at risk. Group empathy is a preeminent

factor for cultivating such awareness and may be vital in motivating public pressure to safeguard and expand crucial legal protections. For the mainstream of Americans who value democratic principles and the pursuit of happiness for all, outgroup empathy serves a powerful driver to stand in solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community in their endeavors towards a better, more equitable future.



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