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Coming out to Vote: The Construction of a Lesbian and Gay Electoral Constituency in the United States

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Using the formation of a lesbian and gay electoral constituency as a case, this article demonstrates how activists and party elites contest and construct collective identities and groups. Activist–party interactions produce identity-building feedback that recognizes some groups and identities and rejects others, creating conditions for people to see themselves as partisans. I call this process "constitutive group mobilization." I find that, when party actors affirmed civil rights and libertarian constructions of lesbian and gay people and politics, mobilization was relatively bipartisan. Republicans' emerging alliance with the Christian Right, however, brought activists to form the National Association of Lesbian and Gay Democratic Clubs, crystallizing civil rights as the dominant linkage to partisanship. These developments reveal how groups and identities form endogenously to parties rather than entering the party system as preformed entities with fixed interests and partisanship. Thus, the lesbian and gay case provides insights about group and identity formation previously overlooked in party and LGBT politics scholarship.

Using the formation of a lesbian and gay electoral constituency from 1972 to 1984 as a case study, this article demonstrates how activists and party elites constitute collective identities and groups. Gay men and lesbians represent a solidly Democratic voting bloc in contemporary American politics (Edelman 1993; Flores 2019; Lewis, Rogers, and Sherrill 2011). Behavioral accounts of the gay-Democratic alliance argue that people who "select" to identify as lesbian or gay are more likely to come from Democratic backgrounds (Egan 2012; 2020). Institutional accounts explain it as an outcome of overtly partisan advocacy (Baylor 2017; Karol 2012). Both perspectives cast the alliance as a natural, preformed reflection of group interests. In contrast, I demonstrate that the dynamic back-and-forth between activists and party elites constituted group boundaries and collective identities, laying the groundwork for the formation of a lesbian and gay Democratic voting bloc. To do so, I develop a theory of "constitutive group mobilization," which introduces a more complex view of party coalition formation to draw accurate inferences about group and identity formation (Hancock 2007). My findings reveal how groups and identities form endogenously to parties rather than entering the party system as preformed entities with fixed interests and partisanship.

Over the course of the last half century, lesbian and gay people went from invisible and demobilized to a mobilized constituency. Thus, they are an ideal case for examining processes of identity and group formation in the party system. By turning the lens to this understudied group, this article generates new insights into ongoing debates about the relationship between groups, parties, and identities. One perspective—the substantialist—argues that groups with preexisting interests form the party system, framing parties as responsive to groups, who are politically active, have policy demands, and are numerous enough to be influential (Bartels 2008; Bawn et al. 2012; Brubaker 2004; Cohen et al. 2008; Emirbayer 1997, 282–3; Haider-Markel 2010; Hansen and Treul 2015; Karol 2009; Schickler 2016). Another perspective—the constitutive—argues that parties shape how people think and act politically as party elites construct cleavages to win elections (Campbell 2005; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Erie 1990; Frymer 1999; Key 1966; Shefter 1994; Zaller 1992). This work frames constitutive processes as top-down, leaving little room for dynamic back-and-forth between activists and parties. Both perspectives center policy interests and material resources, not collective identities and group boundaries. Thus, previous research underspecifies how groups "derive their meaning, significance, and identity" through political parties (Emirbayer 1997, 287).

This article centers activist–party interactions to explain group and identity formation. The primary actors are activists from advocacy organizations and party elites, including politicians and party officials. These actors contest and construct identities and group boundaries when activists seek inclusion in parties. This contestation produces identity-building feedback that shapes which identities and groups receive recognition (and which do not), creating conditions for people to see themselves as partisans. In the lesbian and gay case, activists contested gay liberation, civil rights, and civil libertarian constructions of lesbian and gay people and politics. As activists contested these identities with party actors, civil rights and libertarian constructions were represented by Democrats and Republicans, leading to relatively bipartisan yet uncrystallized electoral mobilization. The Republican Party's alignment with the Christian Right, however, foreclosed the libertarian identity from the party system after a moment of representation. The emerging electoral dominance of this countermovement within the Republican Party also pushed the Democratic Party to downplay lesbian and gay visibility. In response, activists formed the

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National Association of Gay and Lesbian Democratic Clubs, crystallizing civil rights constructions of lesbian and gay people and politics as the dominant linkage between sexuality and partisanship.

To show generalizability, Appendix A (1–13) in the supplementary materials is a shadow case study tracing the construction of gun owners as an identity group.

AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTIES AND LESBIAN AND GAY POLITICS

Theories of political parties generally fall into one of two perspectives: politician-centered or group-centered. Over the course of the twentieth century, the politician-centered perspective came to dominate in research. Anthony Downs (1957) famously argued that politicians, motivated to win office, formed the basis of political parties and would appeal to the "median voter." Building on this work, scholars came to view politicians as single-minded seekers of election (Mayhew 1974), who develop a home style with constituents (Fenno 1978) and create institutions to maintain government control (Cox and McCubbins 1993). As party cohesion and polarization increased (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016), politician-centered theories revised the "median voter" theorem, arguing that politicians appeal to the "median voter" within their respective parties (Aldrich and Rhode 1998). Politicians are the primary actors who push new conflicts and issues to mobilize groups (Carmines and Stimson 1989). In sum, this perspective argues that parties provide benefits to ambitious politicians, who design institutions to win public office and power and to pass policy (Aldrich 1995).

Although we have learned a great deal about how politicians shape parties from these studies, other scholars argue that interest groups control parties (Bawn et al. 2012; Key 1942; Schattschneider 1942; Schickler 2016). Accordingly, politicians and parties respond to mobilized groups (Cohen et al. 2008), who form coalitions to select candidates and promote their interests (Baylor 2017). Party position change occurs when politicians adopt the issues of groups (Karol 2009), although others find replacement also shapes party change (Wolbrecht 2002). Parties use ideologies to bundle groups and issues and provide ideological patronage to social movements for votes and resources (Heaney and Rojas 2015; Noel 2014; Schlozman 2015). Although these studies show how groups shape parties, groups are framed as preexisting entities with discrete interests, leaving questions about group and identity formation unanswered.

In the lesbian and gay case, scholars treat the gay-Democratic alliance as a reflection of group interest. Christopher Baylor (2017), for example, calls the Democratic Party a "better fit" for a lesbian and gay constituency, even though lesbian and gay people might think about their sexuality in civil libertarian terms (206). David Karol (2012, 8) explains party change on gay rights as an outcome of overtly partisan activism. Scholars have also examined whether gay men and lesbians are a captured group in the party system, reaching varying conclusions (Bishin and Smith 2013; Frymer 1999; McThomas and Buchanan 2012; Smith 2007). Recent work finds that conversion and replacement in Congress explain inaction on gay rights (Bishin, Freebourn, and Teten 2021). Although these studies demonstrate the marginal position of lesbians and gay men in parties, they underappreciate how activists and politicians and party leadership (party actors) constitute identities and group boundaries. This omission is critical because, as I will show, activists were not initially overtly partisan and, when civil rights and libertarian constructions of lesbian and gay politics were affirmed, mobilization was relatively bipartisan. Thus, the party system did not reflect a preformed group's interests. Activist–party dynamics constituted lesbian and gay identities and group boundaries, as well as who is recognized as a Democrat or a Republican.

In contrast to party scholarship, research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) politics does not treat groups as preexisting but rather explains how institutions constitute them (Proctor 2020; Vallely 2012). Studies have shown, for example, how the heterosexual–homosexual binary was politically constructed and not preexisting (Chauncey 1994) and how the state identified sexual behaviors and gender traits as grounds for exclusion from citizenship, catalyzing the formation of a political identity (Canaday 2009; D'Emilio 1998; Johnson 2004). Scholars have also highlighted how advocacy organizations construct identities and group boundaries that center white gay men and lesbians at the expense of bisexual, nonbinary, and transgender people and LGBT BIPOC (Cohen 1999; Hindman 2019; Murib 2016; Vaid 1995). The movement's collective identity has also been constituted by the Christian Right (Fetner 2008), and activists use identities strategically across institutions (Bernstein 1997; Engel 2007). While this literature takes seriously the construction of groups and identities, the two-party system remains underspecified.

THEORY: CONSTITUTIVE GROUP MOBILIZATION

Constitutive group mobilization explains how collective identities (identities) and group boundaries (groups) are constituted through activist–party interactions. They are fluctuating variables constructed in relation to "the structures in virtue of which they exist" (Wendt 1998, 105). Collective identities are the shared definition of a group that people construct to assert "who we are." They are constructed through contestation, boundaries, and consciousness (Taylor and Whittier 1992). Group boundaries are social markers that link people to a collective. They are contested internally as activists construct competing visions of who they are and externally against other groups, an external *them* (Cohen 1999; Gamson 1995; Ghaziani 2011). These processes interact to constitute a collective "us," providing recognition to some collective identities and group boundaries over others. Partisanship is a collective identity that identifies a political group. Its

boundaries are contested when activists seek recognition in parties. Constitutive group mobilization centers these dynamics to explain how activists and party actors engage in identity-building projects that shape partisan mobilization—bracketing the study of consciousness at the individual level for future research.

This model of identity and group formation draws on theories of constitutive representation (Celis et al. 2014). As Lisa Disch (2011) explains, political representation creates demands and cleavages (see Pitkin 1967), constituting political groups and identities (Urbinati 2006). Representation is, therefore, a process of subjective claims making in which activists, politicians, and party leaders construct groups and identities that can be accepted or rejected by each other and mass publics (Saward 2010). Identities and group boundaries form in relation to categories of identification, discursive frames, and institutions (Brubaker 2004). Political actors use discursive frames to construct groups through "cultural characterizations or popular images of the persons or groups" affected by policy (Schneider and Ingram 1993, 334). In the case of HIV/AIDS policies, for example, gay men were constructed as "deviant" and women and children as "innocent victims," which shaped policy distribution (Donovan 1997). Constitutive group mobilization extends this feedback logic to explain group and identity formation as outcomes "constructed through the interplay of state structures and institutions, political actions and communication flows, mobilization and demobilization, and the density and patterning of political organizations" (Mettler and Soss 2004, 58).

Constitutive group mobilization traces how activists and party actors use their institutional status within advocacy organizations and parties to contest and construct identities and groups. It identifies three interrelated processes: internal contestation among activists, external contestation between party actors and activists, and feedback and institutionalization. Internal contestation is when activists contest who they are and what they want, constructing competing collective identities and group boundaries. External contestation is when activists contest identities and groups with party actors, whose behavior is shaped by their interactions with activists and interparty competition to define what politics is about. Party actors engage in what I call affirming and disaffirming representation, which produces identity-building feedback in which some collective identities and groups are legitimated within the party system and others are rejected. This representation process links identities and group boundaries to partisanship (or does not), constituting what it means to be and who is recognized as a Democrat or a Republican. These dynamics feed back to activists and party elites through ongoing contestation at the institutional level, creating conditions for voters to see themselves as partisans.

Internal contestation is measured by identifying and tracing competing identity and group constructions among activists—who are typically embedded within advocacy organizations. While the forthcoming analysis discusses advocacy organizations, it is the activists within them who exercise agency to construct identities and groups. Organizations do not "do things" as unitary actors, they are institutions that provide agency to activists. When activists engage in contestation, they constitute "relations of power" that define fields of collective action and social boundaries (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Digeser 1992; Foucault 1990; Hayward 1998). Relations of power are at work when activists exclude people from representation. Activists who interact with party actors are often embedded within advocacy organizations that construct agendas representing advantaged subgroups (Strolovitch 2007). As a result, intersectionally marginalized subgroups are typically excluded from representation within major American political parties. Constitutive group mobilization is, therefore, most likely generalizable to white gay men and lesbians in the LGBT case. These boundary conditions are, in part, outcomes of the ontological choice to examine mobilization within the two-party system. Thus, this study—by its design—is unlikely to capture the identities of intersectionally marginalized groups, indicating more generally how activist–party dynamics contribute to intersectional marginalization.[1]

External contestation is captured by identifying and tracing how party actors affirm or disaffirm the constructions put forth by activists. Because parties are made up of independent but interrelated institutions, party actors can have varying goals or incentives when engaging in external contestation (Key 1942). They exercise agency by contesting the constitutive representation of groups and identities with activists and other party elites. I classify constitutive representation as affirming and disaffirming to measure external contestation. Affirming and disaffirming representation are not dichotomous or mutually exclusive. They can vary in degree and an individual party actor can engage in behaviors that both affirm and disaffirm identities and groups.

Affirming representation is when party actors align their constitutive representation of a group and identity with activists' constructions. Party actors can affirm groups and identities by taking policy positions; making public statements that provide legitimacy and visibility to a group; and through formal inclusion in party institutions, campaigns, and platforms. Thus, affirming representation can be identified through examination of party actors' interactions with activists. The recognition provided through affirming representation creates a collective identity and boundary feedback in the party system, constituting groups as particular types of people. When party actors do not align their constitutive representation with activists', they engage in disaffirming representation. Party actors disaffirm identities and groups by ignoring, opposing, or delegitimizing activists' claims about their group and collective identity. In doing so, a collective identity and group is deemed unworthy of recognition in politics, limiting pathways for mobilization and institutionalization.

[1] Readers should keep these boundary conditions in mind as they engage with the evidence presented. The consequences for intersectionally marginalized groups are further addressed in the conclusion.

Identities and groups are constituted through this process.

Relations of power are at work in external contestation when party actors use their entrenched status to represent less powerful groups in ways that are at odds with their collective identities. For example, when straight party actors disaffirm lesbians and gay men as a legitimate political group, they constitute heterosexist boundaries around partisanship.[2] These dynamics are part of a process that constitutes a group as a cognizable constituency of a party (or does not), shaping who is recognized as a Democrat or a Republican. These processes encompass interparty conflict and countermovements that shape power relations. Interparty conflicts are consequential because they create competition between Democrats and Republicans, who want to win elections by defining what politics is about. Thus, interactions between parties importantly shape activist–party interactions, constituting identities and groups and their linkages to partisanship. These institutional dynamics create conditions for people to see themselves as partisans.

The lesbian and gay case is well suited for examining group and identity formation. Over the last half century, gay men and lesbians went from invisible and demobilized to visible and mobilized. Through this process, activists contested collective identities and group boundaries, shaping who is recognized and mobilized as an electoral constituency. In addition, shifts in collective action and visibility make it possible to identify how activists interact with political parties to shape partisan electoral dynamics and constitutive representation. Thus, this case elucidates that groups do not enter politics with fixed interests and partisanship but rather construct identities and group boundaries through dynamic interactions with parties.

Although constitutive group mobilization recognizes that examining these dynamics is complex, its main theoretical contribution is quite simple: collective identities and group boundaries are constituted through dynamic back-and-forth between activists and party actors. Although it centers activists–party interactions, party elites are also influenced by interparty competition. Constitutive group mobilization can be distinguished from other constitutive theories because it does not articulate a unidirectional process from parties to groups. The mobilization and countermobilization of activists shapes parties and partisan identities as much as parties shape groups and their identities. Constitutive group mobilization is distinguishable from substantialist theories because groups are not treated as discretely bound or preexisting with respect to politics.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

As a theory of political process, constitutive group mobilization fits into the American Political Development tradition (Engel 2007; Hindman 2019; Murib 2016; Vallely 2012). I therefore use a historical institutionalist approach to trace how a lesbian and gay electoral constituency formed and mobilized over time. The primary outcome is the institutionalization (or lack thereof) of group boundaries and identities and the construction of a group as a cognizable constituency of a party. Because I focus on one group, I use a within-case research design. Appendix A (1–13) in the supplementary materials shows the generalizability of constitutive group mobilization through a shadow case study of the construction of gun owners.

I rely on qualitative materials and methods, namely archival materials from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force at Cornell University, the Frank Ricchiazzi Papers in the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities, the Catherine Shipe East Papers at the Radcliffe Institute of Harvard University, the GALE Sexuality and Gender online archive, and articles from the *Washington Blade*, one of the oldest LGBT newspapers in the United States (Proctor 2021). These records identify important actors who engaged in the construction and mobilization of a lesbian and gay constituency and consist of communications with party actors, news clippings, press releases, organizational newsletters, and internal organization documents. As already noted, the activists in this study are generally from organizations that represent advantaged LGBT subgroups. Thus, the identities observed are likely most generalizable to white gay men and lesbians.

INTERNAL CONTESTATION: LIBERATION, CIVIL LIBERTIES, AND CIVIL RIGHTS

During early LGBT organizing during the 1940s–1960s, activists contested who they were as sexual and gender minorities and how, if at all, to politically mobilize. Their political ideologies ranged from Communist to Republican to apolitical (D'Emilio 1998; Faderman 2016). These debates demonstrate that LGBT people and identities were not politically preformed as a group or to the Democratic or Republican parties. Three contested constructions of lesbians and gay people and politics emerged among activists: liberation, civil libertarian, and civil rights.

The liberation collective identity, while mythologized as an outcome of the Stonewall rebellion in 1969, was contested by activists in the 1950s (Armstrong and Crage 2006; D'Emilio 1998). As LGBT people came to understand their marginalization, activists debated whether they should assimilate into dominant institutions and whether respectability would win support from dominant society. Liberationists favored dismantling institutions over assimilation. These activists were typically younger and contested their identities with older, conservative activists who were reticent to publicly mobilize (D'Emilio 1998; Murib 2016). Liberationists centered contentious politics over electoral participation and "coming out" was a political strategy to increase visibility. Publicly identifying as LGBT, however, was life threatening during

[2] Party actors do not have to be straight to engage in this type of representation, although they are the focus in this analysis.

this period because of state-led oppression and surveillance by the federal government and local police. This lived experience constituted the basis for a politically meaningful civil libertarian identity. LGBT people came to view themselves as people whose civil liberties—especially their right to privacy—were violated by the state. In addition, the success of the Black civil rights and women's rights movements, including their integration into the two-party system, provided new models for political organizing. Thus, activists also started to construct gay men and lesbians as a group committed to civil rights.

Activists' civil rights construction of gay men and lesbians emerged as they formed national advocacy organizations, such as the National Gay Task Force (NGTF) and Gay Rights National Lobby (GRNL).[3] The NGTF was among the first national organizations to construct gay men and lesbians as a civil rights group in 1973; the founding by-laws stated it had formed "to achieve the full civil and human rights and full equality for gay people, by elimination of existing discriminatory laws and policies and by creation of affirmative laws and policies" (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000a, Box 2, Folder 53). Thus, activists constructed lesbians and gay men as a group who needed civil rights through affirmative laws. NGTF formed as a nonpartisan organization, reflecting the fact that there was not a preformed political group.

Activists formed GRNL in 1976, with bipartisan intentions to lobby Democrats and Republicans in Congress. They contested a party-focused agenda with liberationists by not inviting "gay obstructionists and spoilers" to GRNL's founding conference, where activists voted on resolutions to disassociate from those "unwilling or uninterested in working with the present form of government or economics system" (*Washington Blade* 1976a). Although many of the resolutions failed to pass, party-focused activists constructed group boundaries to exclude liberationists. Activists also excluded bisexual and transgender people by defeating resolutions that would have explicitly protected sexual and gender minorities who were not "gay" or "lesbian." Thus, activists constituted a gay and lesbian constituency, not a LGBT one. This internal contestation demonstrates how identities and group boundaries emerged through contested political processes rather than reflecting a preformed group.

As the liberationists were rejected in national organizations, lesbian and gay activists formed Democratic and Republican clubs at the local level. On the Democratic side, local clubs had formed in Washington DC, San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles by 1976 (Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin, and the Daughters of Bilitis n.d., Box 151, Folder 4; *Washington Blade* 1976b). On the Republican side, clubs were slower to form but they existed in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Washington DC by 1978 (*CRIR Update* 1978; Muzzy 2005; Frank Richiazzi Papers 1977–2008). The fact that there were so few clubs demonstrates that activists faced significant barriers to mobilizing rank-and-file lesbians and gay men. Many were unwilling to publicly identify with their sexuality or did not view it as political. Therefore, activists had to build *visibility* by constituting and mobilizing gay men and lesbians as a group through local partisan organizations (*Alice B. Toklas Memorial Democratic Club Newsletter* 1972; *Washington Blade* 1976b).

Democratic activists typically constituted lesbians and gay men as a civil rights group by linking them to other marginalized groups. Activists in the Alice B. Toklas Club (Alice) in San Francisco, for example, constructed lesbians and gay men as people who are committed to "equality, dignity, and justice for all people" and part of "a coalition of minorities" working for equality (*Alice Speaks* 1973). In doing so, they linked their Democratic partisanship to a civil rights agenda. Leaders of the Gertrude Stein Democratic Club (GSDC) in Washington DC similarly constructed lesbians and gay men as a civil rights group, stating that "the Black civil rights movement showed us the way to go" (*Washington Blade* 1976b). By turning their focus to parties, lesbians and gay men could, according to GSDC activists, push back on the perception that they only worked outside the system, never donated time or money to political campaigns, and were apathetic about politics. Thus, the civil rights construction emerged through a linkage to the Democratic Party.

But a civil rights collective identity was not the only identity linked to the two-party system. Republican activists constructed a civil libertarian identity that constituted lesbian and gay people in relation to individual rights and privacy from the state (*CRIR Update* 1978). When opposing the Briggs Initiative to ban lesbian and gay teachers in California schools in 1977, for example, activists from the Lincoln Republican Club of Southern California (LRCSC) constructed their opposition around the "unprecedented governmental intrusion into the private life" of teachers (Frank Ricchiazzi Papers 1977–2008). Thus, individual freedom and protection from the state, rather than group-based discrimination, constituted the basis for opposing the ban. Like a previous generation of activists, gay conservatives centered civil liberties when constructing their political identity. In a document titled "Gay and Republican?," they articulate this identity, claiming that "in all that people individually can do as well for themselves, government ought not to interfere. Certainly, having sex is one of those things that people can do as well for themselves!" (Frank Ricchiazzi Papers 1977–2008). It continues: "Republicans believe that it is the individuals' right to determine and live his own life style, to practice his own sexual preference, and to work to secure the benefits of society for himself, for his loved ones, and for those who are unable to care for themselves." Thus, archival materials demonstrate that the civil rights and civil libertarian constructions of lesbian and gay politics had distinct alignments within the two-party system when activists linked them to partisanship.

[3] The NGTF became the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) in the 1980s and the National LGBTQ Task Force in 2014. While I refer to the NGTF in my analyses, the records cited say NGLTF because that is the organization name in the archive collection's suggested citation. The GRNL eventually became the Human Rights Campaign.

Gay Republicans also contested civil libertarian and civil rights constructions, stating, for example, that "Democrats are more willing to subordinate individual rights to the assumed needs of the group" (Frank Ricchiazzi Papers 1977–2008). Activists rejected the civil rights construction because "*individual* [emphasis added] gays do not share much in common with each other," and they "run the gamut from gay militants, flaming queens, bull-dykes, and closet queens to the overwhelming majority who fit no stereotype at all." They conclude that "what we have in common is very little but it is very important. It is our belief that we *individually* [emphasis added] have the right to determine our own sexual preference and the right to live our own lifestyles as we choose." As gay and lesbian activists moved toward the party system, they contested liberationist, civil rights, and civil libertarian constructions of lesbian and gay people and politics.

Although activists contested these identities and their partisan linkages, they were also malleable categories. For example, activists called their party-focused advocacy liberationist when testifying before Republicans in 1976 (detailed evidence in Appendix B, 14–16). Relatedly, in 1948 activist Harry Hay, a liberationist heavily influenced by Marxism, organized a group called "Bachelor's for Wallace" to support the Democratic-turned-Progressive Party nominee (Faderman 2016). Moreover, these findings align with contemporary research that shows how liberation and civil rights political orientations are dynamic, malleable, and overlapping (Olsen 2013; Rollins and Hirsch 2003). In sum, this evidence further demonstrates that the gay-Democratic alliance was not preformed as activists engaged in identity building through internal contestation and formed partisan clubs at the local level.

THE NATIONAL CONVENTION PROJECT, 1980

In 1980, activists coordinated a national campaign to identify and mobilize lesbian and gay voters, a shift from mobilizing without them in previous elections. In 1972 and 1976, activists gained limited access to party actors but were disaffirmed over the threat they posed to each party's coalition (Appendix B, 14–16; Baylor 2017). Activists called their 1980 campaign the National Convention Project (NCP) and it was coordinated through NGTF, GRNL, and local organizations. Activists initially constructed all lesbians and gay men as potential constituency members rather than encouraging particular identity-based constructions of who they are. Ideally, both parties would compete for their vote, so it was strategic to frame them as bipartisan. When surveying presidential candidates, for example, activists framed lesbians and gay men as "among the most politically active" with "leaders of both political parties" competing for their votes (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000i, Box 171, Folder 3). The letter also stated that a mobilized group was active in cities nationwide. In press releases about candidates' survey responses, NCP leaders said gay people should evaluate them for their performance and rhetoric. This shows that activists were initially open to inclusion in either party and a partisan constituency was not preformed.

Because activists constructed all lesbians and gay men as a potential constituency, party actors had agency to construct gay men and lesbians in ways that aligned with their campaigns' ideologies. As a result, party actors used varying identity-based constructions, if they did so at all. On the Democratic side, Senator Edward "Ted" Kennedy and Jimmy Carter constituted lesbians and gay men in different ways.[4] Kennedy affirmed gay men and lesbians as a group committed to civil rights. In a campaign letter to the NCP, he committed to nominating officials "who are sensitive to those groups … victimized by arbitrary discrimination" and expressed support for a platform endorsing "equal rights … without regard to race or sex or sexual orientation" (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000i, Box 171, Folder 3). These statements constituted lesbian and gay people in relation to other civil rights groups in the Democratic Party. Kennedy also supported lesbian and gay civil rights legislation and conducted the most outreach to lesbian and gay voters among Democratic candidates (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000h, Box 171, Folder 2). As a result, he had endorsements from organizations nationwide including the Gay Coalition of Iowa, the New York Village Independent Democrats, Lesbian and Gay Democrats of Texas, the GSDC, Alice, and the Harvey Milk Democratic Club in San Francisco (*Alice Reports* 1980; Chibbaro 1980a; Martz 1980). Kennedy—as a straight party actor—engaged in affirming representation that legitimated lesbian and gay participation as a civil rights group, thereby opening a pathway for institutionalization in the party system.

In contrast to Kennedy, Jimmy Carter refused to take a position on whether the Democratic Party should endorse lesbian and gay civil rights. When responding to activists, the Carter campaign said he would decide "as the [platform] process evolves" but would not commit his support (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000i, Box 171, Folder 3). Carter also claimed he could not consider supporting gay rights legislation because it was not scheduled for a Congressional hearing. His refusal to support gay rights is disaffirming representation that rejects the civil rights construction of lesbians and gay men. Carter also disaffirmed lesbians and gay men when he argued that they were protected from discrimination in the Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) of 1978. The legislation prohibited discrimination based on "private, non-job-related behavior," which Carter argued prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation. I classify this conflict as disaffirming representation because the CSRA does not provide visible recognition to lesbians and gay men, an outcome Rick Vallely (2018) attributes to the Christian Right's countermobilization. Regardless of the reasons why, however, Carter's representation reflected a "do it but don't talk

[4] There were other candidates, but I restrict the analysis to Kennedy to show variation in how candidates could represent gay rights in the Democratic Party.

about it" approach (Kurtz 2002; Strolovitch 2007), meaning that his administration used coded language and under-the-radar bureaucratic reforms to limit lesbian and gay visibility (Proctor 2019). Thus, while affirming in some ways, Carter's behavior constituted relations of power that kept sexual minorities invisible. In addition, these acts were not isolated. They were part of broader dynamics in which Carter's campaign and other Democratic party actors worked to limit lesbian and gay visibility during national elections (see Appendix B).

Additional evidence from 1980 further demonstrates Carter's disaffirming representation. On the campaign trail, for example, Carter disaffirmed the notion that two men or two women can be a family (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000i, Box 171, Folder 3). When activists asked for a White House liaison and an "active and personal" campaign, Carter did neither. Activists also suggested extending CSRA protections to foreign service personnel, researching sexual orientation discrimination through the Labor department, and reviewing military discharge policies (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000h, Box 171, Folder 2). In making these suggestions, activists stated that they relied on the administration's preferred strategy, which was "to avoid joining the issues as a civil rights debate" (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000i, Box 171, Folder 3). Thus, archival materials reveal how Carter disaffirmed lesbians and gay men by rejecting their visible recognition as a civil rights group.

On the Republican side, Illinois Congressman John Anderson, who ran as an independent after losing the primary to Ronald Reagan, engaged in affirming representation of lesbians and gay men. For example, he released a position paper on civil rights that stated, "I believe the constitution applies to all Americans regardless of race, color, sex, creed, or affectional preferences. I will support efforts as president to ensure that these rights are upheld" (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000c, Box 141, Folder 15). In addition, he had a pro-gay record in Congress, where he voted against the McDonald Amendment in 1977, which prohibited the Legal Services Corporation from handling cases concerning lesbian and gay rights. Anderson publicly defended that vote, cosponsored gay civil rights legislation in 1980, pledged to ban discrimination in federal agencies, and stated he would have an administration open to lesbians and gay men. In all these ways, he engaged in affirming representation that legitimated lesbian and gay political participation.

Anderson also constituted lesbian and gay people as a civil libertarian political constituency. In a letter to activists, he affirmed that "I regard such questions as sexual preference as a personal and private matter among adults, and I will continue to do everything I can to keep the government's intrusive hand from interfering in the lives of our citizens" (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000c, Box 141, Folder 15). He also supported reforming immigration laws that "excluded *individuals* [emphasis added] from immigrating solely on the ground of sexual orientation" and pledged to "extend to the [Civil Rights Commission] the power to investigate acts of discrimination against *individuals* [emphasis added] based upon their sexual orientation" (Catherine Shipe East Papers 1941–1955b, Box 26, Folder 44). Anderson also constituted gay rights as individual rights, telling NOW activists "I know that the issue of 'gay rights' is also of great interest … I believe strongly in individual rights" (Catherine Shipe East Papers 1941–1955a, Box 26, Folder 4). Thus, Anderson constituted lesbians and gay men as a civil libertarian group that was "consistent with Republican philosophy of the right to privacy and less government intervention in private lives" (*Gaze* 1980a).

Anderson's representation of a civil libertarian identity suggests a possible pathway for its institutionalization in the two-party system. The problem, however, was that conservatism was being reconstituted through the countermobilization of the Christian Right and by other Republicans (Baylor 2017; Schlozman 2015). In addition, gay men and lesbians entered electoral politics as a powerless group, whereas capitalism and Christianity were linked through "Christian Libertarianism" as part of a decades-long conservative project to oppose New Deal liberalism (Kruse 2015). Therefore, the Christian Right mobilized as a dominant opposition group in a political and social system practically built for them, despite being "new" to electoral politics. These differences in relations of power meant that lesbian and gay people were more likely to be disaffirmed by dominant party actors. As a result, the civil libertarian identity was not affirmed by other Republicans including Ronald Reagan, who was increasingly aligned with the Christian Right. Activists tried to reach Reagan's campaign through allies in Congress, state-level Republican Party officials, and requests for a secret campaign liaison (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000g, Box 171, Folder 1). They were unsuccessful.

In sum, when activists framed all lesbians and gay men as a potential group, outsider candidates constituted them using identity-based constructions, whereas Reagan ignored them and Carter rejected gay issues as civil rights. Although both major candidates disaffirmed lesbians and gay men, they varied in severity, and over the course of the 1980s Republicans became increasingly heterosexist (see Appendix C). These differences in severity facilitated the formation of a solidly Democratic voting bloc, despite the struggle for inclusion in both parties.

BIPARTISAN MOBILIZATION IN 1980

Candidates' varying representation in 1980 led to relatively bipartisan mobilization and conflict in the primary and general election (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000h, Box 171, Folder 2). In Florida, members of the Dade County Coalition for Human Rights were elected as convention delegates for Ted Kennedy; they endorsed Anderson in the Republican primary (*Update* 1980). In Illinois, activist Tim Drake was elected as an Anderson delegate to the Republican convention (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000h, Box 171, Folder 2). In the general

election, activists from nonpartisan clubs, such as the Southeastern Conference of Lesbians and Gay Men, the Tennessee Gay Coalition for Human Rights, and the Sacramento Lesbian/Gay Political Caucus, supported Anderson (*Gaze* 1980b; *Mom Guess What* 1980). Members of the Gay Atheist League of America were split between support for Carter (30%) and Anderson (26%), but just 16% of NGTF members planned to support Carter after the primary (Chibbaro 1980b; *GALA Review* 1980). The New York Political Action Council, a lesbian and gay group in New York City, "preferred" Carter and Anderson and rated Reagan "unacceptable" (*The New York City News* 1980). These archival materials demonstrate that lesbians and gay men were not a preformed partisan group when activists coordinated the NCP.

Additionally, activists from partisan organizations were conflicted over Anderson's candidacy. Among Republicans, the LRCSC was split between Reagan and Anderson. They formally endorsed Reagan (Frank Ricchiazzi Papers 1977–2008). Another organization, Concerned Republicans for Individual Rights, endorsed Anderson (*CRIR Update* 1980). On the Democratic side, organizations supported Kennedy in the primary and, in some cases, endorsed Anderson over Carter. The GSDC endorsed Kennedy but voted two to one to withhold endorsing Carter in the general (*Gaze* 1980b; Martz 1980). The GSDC also coordinated nationwide protests against Carter because he disaffirmed gay visibility and civil rights. The San Francisco Stonewall Democratic Club endorsed Anderson (*Gaze* 1980b). Relatedly, in a letter to the Carter campaign, Tom Bastow of the NCP praised Anderson's affirming representation that promised "gay people changes for the better," recognized them as voters, and provided a visible campaign (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000b, Box 141, Folder 14). Activists speculated that Anderson might gain 1.5 to 3.5 million votes from gay men and lesbians. This evidence demonstrates that the gay-Democratic alliance was not politically preformed.

In the same letter, Bastow told the Carter campaign that lesbian and gay voters were "up for grabs" after conducting fieldwork with voters in 15 states (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000b, Box 141, Folder 14). The memo stated that gay and lesbian voters "did not perceive Ronald Reagan as a threat" and he was appreciated for opposing the Briggs Initiative. They also viewed Reagan as "about the same" as Carter. According to the memo, if Reagan won, voters thought that "libertarians rather than liberals—would make headway against discrimination." These materials show that a civil libertarian identity could have formed the basis for lesbian and gay partisan mobilization if it was affirmed by the Republican Party. It also demonstrates how party actors wield power by affirming or disaffirming identities and group boundaries when interacting with activists. This constitutive process creates background conditions in which individuals come to see themselves as types of people, a critical component of identity and group formation.

Although the NCP led to bipartisan mobilization, it also produced partisan developments that moved voters toward the Democratic Party. Activists elected more than 70 openly lesbian and gay delegates to the party's convention. These delegates successfully pushed the Democratic Party to include sexual orientation in their civil rights platform plank and as a protected status in the party Charter. As a result, national activists tried to move voters to Carter over Anderson, despite dissent among activists in local organizations during the general election. Leaders of the NCP and NGTF, for example, published op-eds in gay media asking voters to support Carter. NGTF's board also passed a resolution endorsing Carter and asked voters to support him regardless of partisanship. Activists took this position because Anderson could not beat Reagan as a third-party candidate and the Christian Right was a growing threat. Thus, despite initial receptivity to any candidate or party, national activists pleaded with gay men and lesbians to vote for the Democratic Party in 1980. The NCP was a turning point in the formation of a partisan electoral constituency, consolidating civil rights as the dominant linkage to partisanship.

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF GAY AND LESBIAN DEMOCRATIC CLUBS

As the Republican Party emerged victorious through alliance with the Christian Right in 1980, lesbian and gay activists formed the National Association of Gay and Lesbian Democratic Clubs (NAGLDC) to explicitly pressure the Democratic Party (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000e, Box 167, Folder 41). The NAGLDC was a new party-focused institution that shifted mobilization from what was initially bipartisan during the NCP to specifically Democratic after Reagan's election (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000h, Box 171, Folder 2). NAGLDC's steering committee included all lesbian and gay convention delegates, national and local organization leaders, and one member of the DNC (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000e, Box 167, Folder 41). These developments reveal how NAGLDC's formation was an outcome of constitutive dynamics. Activists formed it *after* rejection from both parties in the 1970s and a moment of bipartisan mobilization in 1980. Thus, the gay-Democratic alliance was neither natural nor preformed but, rather, an outcome of dynamics in the two-party system.

Activists formed NAGLDC, not only because Republicans were in power but also because the Democratic Party excluded them (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000d, Box 166, Folder 13). Despite the protected status of sexual orientation in the party Charter, the DNC excluded gay men and lesbians in party affairs by not informing them about new committees, limiting the size and delegate selection process for the 1982 mid-term conference, and stacking committees with high-ranking officials. In addition, the DNC increased the signature requirement to form a party caucus. In a letter to lesbian and gay Americans, the GSDC president Tom Chorlton—who was also the first president of NAGLDC—described this behavior from the DNC as evidence that gay men

and lesbians must establish a permanent institution to exert pressure on the party (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000d, Box 166, Folder 13). The NAGLDC was that institution and activists mobilized through it, securing appointments on the Task Force on Citizens Rights and Personal Security and the Compliance Review Commission. They also obtained four delegates to the midterm conference and the required signatures to establish a gay caucus in the DNC (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000f, Box 167, Folder 42). By forming a caucus, they were also guaranteed seats on the Rules, Platforms, and Credentials committees. These developments show how NAGLDC's formation helped gay men and lesbians secure positions in the Democratic Party organization that they were otherwise excluded from. In so doing, activists could more effectively contest their inclusion in the party.

Constituting a Civil Rights Group

Activists also used the NAGLDC to construct lesbians and gay men as a civil rights group by linking them to other marginalized groups in the Democratic Party. To highlight these constitutive dynamics, I draw attention to the 1982 midterm elections and the 1984 platform process. In a press release summarizing lesbian and gay mobilization in 1982, activists stated that gay men and lesbians were "fitting in well as part of an evolving Democratic coalition" of "women, minorities, and environmental groups" (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000e, Box 167, Folder 41). By "fitting in" with marginalized groups, activists were signaling to the Democratic Party that they also deserve recognition as a civil rights group. NAGLDC activists selected 35 Congressional races in 27 states to demonstrate that gay men and lesbians could contribute to Democratic electoral success nationwide (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000e, Box 167, Folder 41). In addition, a majority of the candidates they supported were women and people of color, further linking their partisan mobilization to candidates and groups who constructed themselves in relation to civil rights. As activists stated, this showed that lesbians and gay men were committed to equal rights for all Americans (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000e, Box 167, Folder 41). In response, the DNC chairman recognized them as an integral part of the Democratic Party's success in the midterms, further institutionalizing a civil rights construction of gay men and lesbians.

NAGLDC activists also used the platform process in 1984 to construct gay men and lesbians as a civil rights group, challenging their construction as a "special interest group." The Republican Party and its conservative coalition constructed the Democratic Party as a party of special interests because they recognized marginalized groups. As Republicans assumed electoral dominance, they used this discourse to create conflict within the Democratic Party, pitting party elites who wanted to win elections against lesbian and gay activists who wanted visibility and inclusion. During the platform process, Geraldine Ferraro, the vice-presidential candidate and chair of the platform committee, told the press that she preferred taking a "thematic" approach to recognizing group civil rights. A "thematic" platform would distance the party from this "special interest" construction.

Activists pushed back by constituting themselves as a civil rights group. As one activist stated, "a thematic statement is 'the land of the free and the home of the brave.' It doesn't mean us [gay men and lesbians], it never has" (Allan Berube Papers 1984). Virginia Apuzzo of the NGTF told the platform committee that the Democratic Party needed to "come out of the closet," because lesbians and gay men—like other minority groups—were not special interests (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000j, Box 171, Folder 8). She further called for "specific and unequivocal commitments" from the party that has "always stood with minorities in their fight against discrimination." Apuzzo demanded that the platform "avoid vague [meaningless] rhetoric" and provide explicit recognition to lesbian and gay civil rights in ways similar to that provided to other recognized civil rights groups. In another platform hearing, a NAGLDC leader constituted lesbians and gay men as a civil rights group through immigration policy (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Records 1973–2000k, Box 175, Folder 49). The activist stated that immigration law provided "a basis for exclusion of gays and lesbians as a group" and that a new policy could eliminate discrimination that they and other minority groups faced. Activists also linked their exclusion in the military to racial discrimination in the military, which was outlawed by Democratic president Harry Truman. Thus, activists from NAGLDC constructed lesbian and gay discrimination in relation to the civil rights of other marginalized groups in the Democratic Party.

This evidence shows how activists used the platform process to constitute lesbians and gay men as a civil rights group by constructing linkages to other civil rights groups. Activists drew on idealized constructions of the Democratic Party as the party of civil rights, even though it had not always stood with marginalized groups (Frymer 1999). They were successful. The Democratic Party ratified a platform that supported increased funding for AIDS research and services, the prohibition of employment discrimination, an end to antigay violence, an end to the military service ban, and the elimination discriminatory immigration laws (Democratic Party Platform 1984). The platform plank on hate crimes mentioned "gays and lesbians" by name for the first time. By fighting for recognition in the Democratic Party, activists engaged in an identity-building project that created conditions for gay men and lesbians to see themselves as members of a civil rights political group and the Democratic Party. Activist–party interactions provided visibility that sowed the seeds for the eventual development of a solidly Democratic voting bloc.

Gay men's and lesbians' recognition in the Democratic Party, however, was short-lived. After Ronald Reagan won 49 states in 1984, the Democratic Party targeted the representation of marginalized groups—

especially lesbians and gay men (Proctor 2019). The DNC disbanded all caucuses and excluded lesbians and gay men from more than 150 party committee appointments, and Democratic Party Chairman Paul Kirk called them a "fringe constituency" and "special interest" group, emulating Republican discourse. The party also limited lesbian and gay visibility by ratifying a "thematic" platform and threatening to punish activists if they tried to battle over it at the convention in 1988. These Democratic Party developments also intersected with the Supreme Court ruling that lesbians and gay men did not have a right to privacy in *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986) and the HIV/AIDS crisis threatening civil rights and liberties. Although these events are beyond the scope of this article, their timing and sequencing pushed activists and rank-and-file gay men and lesbians across the ideological spectrum to turn to protest. These dynamics demonstrate how activist–party interactions constitute groups and identities rather than reflect a group's prepolitical interests.

CONSTITUTING HETEROSEXIST PARTISAN BOUNDARIES

The effects of constitutive group mobilization were not unidirectional from the party system to lesbians and gay men. Collective partisan boundaries—that is who is recognized as a Democrat or Republican—were also constituted. The countermobilization of the Christian Right was especially consequential in this process. Whereas lesbian and gay exclusion had previously meant invisibility, the Republican Party became increasingly explicit in its rejection of gay men and lesbians. The evolution of "traditional family values" language in Republican Party platforms demonstrates how party actors constructed heterosexist boundaries around partisanship (Schlozman 2015, 88). In 1976, the term "family values" appears twice in the platform in relation to economic uncertainty, unemployment, divorce, changes in gender roles, and neighborhood and school issues, none of which was linked to "homosexuality." In 1980, however, the platform supported "legislation protecting and defending the traditional American family," accusing the Carter administration of trying to redefine the family through events such as the White House Conference on Families (Republican Party Platform 1980). On its face, the language does not seem different, but media reporting about the conference reveals that Christian Right activists wanted to define "the family only as persons who are related (thereby excluding possible definition of the family to include homosexual couples)" and to ban the "public employment of homosexuals" (Rich 1980). By linking the conference to a heterosexual definition of the family, the Republican Party constructed itself as a party of straight people. This explicit heterosexism intensified over the course of the 1980s, part of which can be attributed to the party's response to the HIV/AIDS crisis (see Appendix C, 18–25).

As the mobilization and countermobilization of lesbian and gay and Christian right activists unfolded (Fetner 2008), conservatism supplanted liberalism as the dominant political orthodoxy (Skowronek 2008). The Republican Party's electoral success shaped Democratic Party conflict over lesbian and gay inclusion. The Democratic Party was caught between lesbian and gay people constituting themselves as a civil rights group and a Republican Party constituting Democrats as a "special interest" party. In a presidential debate in 1984, for example, Ronald Reagan constituted the Democratic Party agenda as "a collection of old and tired ideas held together by paralyzing commitments to special interests" (Clines 1984). Similarly, during the DNC leadership race in 1985, (eventual) Chairman Paul Kirk said, "We really have to project ourselves as a national party. You can't do that if you're tied to some of these various groups" (Raines 1985). According to Raines, the Democratic Party was searching for "new ideas," clustering around concepts including "traditional values" that were preempted by Republicans. Likewise, in a postelection speech in 1985, Senator Ted Kennedy said, the party must "cease being the captive of special interest groups" and "must be a party that cares about minorities without being a minority party. We are citizens first and constituencies second" (Eichel 1985). In putting "citizens before constituencies," Kennedy constructs the Democratic Party as straight. Lesbians and gay men were mobilizing because they were not recognized as legitimate, equal citizens. Thus, it was not possible for them to be "citizens first" and a "constituency second." They were excluded from the former through institutionalized heterosexism. These dynamics reveal how party actors constituted heterosexist partisan boundaries and how the electoral success of the Republican Party shaped the constitutive representation of lesbians and gay men in the Democratic Party.

The construction of the Democratic Party as a party of special interests continued throughout the 1980s. In 1985, Chairman Kirk called the "special interest" construction a GOP "tattoo" (*Seattle Times* 1985), reflecting its lasting effect. Similar characterizations can be found in newspaper articles, as one editorial in the *Chicago Sun-Times* stated, the "homosexuals" had succeeded in turning HIV/AIDS "into the most politically urgent affliction" by getting Democratic candidates to support funding for research and prevention. The editorial concluded that "the principal affliction of the Democratic Party … has been its addiction" to special interest groups (Coffey 1988). And so, when presidential candidate Michael Dukakis distanced himself from "special interests," gay men and lesbians had "the most lasting wound" because Dukakis had ignored them and "gone out of his way to be obstinate" (Jehl 1988). This evidence shows how straight people, including Democrats, constructed lesbians and gay men as "special interests" alongside other marginalized groups, particularly Black people and feminists. Furthermore, it demonstrates how boundaries were constituted around partisanship to center heterosexuality as the basis for visible inclusion in the two-party system. The Republican Party constituted itself as a party of straight people and the Democratic Party as out of touch with the "straight majority." Thus, interparty conflict constituted heterosexist boundaries around

partisanship that shaped who was recognized as a Democrat or a Republican.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As lesbian and gay activists identified and mobilized voters, they engaged in contestation over their construction as liberationists, people committed to civil rights, and civil libertarians. Because liberationists generally viewed the major parties with skepticism and sometimes preferred minor parties (such as when Harry Hay organized Bachelor's for Wallace in the Progressive Party), they were largely absent in interactions with Democrats and Republicans. Liberationists were less likely to view the major parties as able to address liberation aspirations. Civil rights and civil libertarian constructions of gay and lesbian people and politics, on the other hand, were represented by straight party actors with varying success. When these constructions were affirmed, lesbian and gay mobilization was relatively bipartisan but uncrystallized. The sequencing of the formation of the National Association of Gay and Lesbian Democratic Clubs after a moment of bipartisan mobilization demonstrates that the gay-Democratic alliance was neither natural nor preformed. Nonetheless, differences in affirming and disaffirming representation created conditions for lesbians and gay men to see themselves as Democratic partisans (see Appendix C). Activists' struggle for inclusion, however, extended well beyond the foundational period examined in this article.

By turning the lens to the formation of a lesbian and gay electoral constituency, this article demonstrates how the structure and organization of the American party system shapes group and identity formation. This case is well suited for examining these dynamics because lesbian and gay collective action shifted from invisible and demobilized to visible and mobilized. Thus, it is a useful case to identify and trace how activists and party actors contest and construct group boundaries and identities, which has been previously overlooked in studies of political parties and accounts of the gay-Democratic alliance. The alliance was not politically preformed or natural. It was set in motion through constitutive group mobilization, demonstrating the importance of examining LGBT politics in the study of American political parties.

The findings also reveal that the study of parties should extend beyond a focus on policy. Although policy matters for substantive representation, constitutive representation is a broader process in which groups are legitimated and constructed through identity recognition. Parties and politicians can share policy positions but affirm different identities. Research must denaturalize groups as bounded entities with prepolitical policy interests because emphasizing policy overlooks other important explanations about the "things parties do." Attention to these dynamics can help political scientists unravel why identities, not policy interests, shape political behavior (Achen and Bartels 2016). In doing so, party scholarship would be in conversation with behavioral research. These literatures are currently bypassing each other.

This study also demonstrates that political parties are important to the study of LGBT politics. For example, LGBT politics scholars' conceptualization of liberation-assimilation politics has obscured explanations about how the two-party system shapes identities and group boundaries. Some activists pursued recognition as civil rights Democrats and libertarian Republicans but were ultimately only successful in the Democratic Party. Liberationists, on the other hand, took up third-party activism and nonelectoral politics. Likewise, this study is in conversation with research that shows how partisanship and ideology lead some people to "identity switch" regarding sexual orientation (Egan 2020). My findings that activist–party interactions make identities and group boundaries politically meaningful suggest an institutional mechanism that can explain why people "identity switch" in relation to partisanship. Future research should measure identification with liberationist, civil rights, and civil libertarian constructions at the individual level to further disentangle identity and group formation and institutional dynamics.

Appendix A shows generalizability of constitutive group mobilization through a shadow case detailing how the National Rifle Association constituted gun owner identities that eventually institutionalized in the Republican Party (1–13). Additionally, Patrick Egan's (2020) evidence of "identity switching" for ethnicity, religion, and class also suggests generalizability beyond the case examined in this article. Likewise, other research traces how feminist and traditionalist women's constituencies have institutionalized in the party system (Mansbridge 1986; Wolbrecht 2000). Although these cases differ politically, they suggest that activist–party interactions influence patterns of mobilization and that these patterns are tied to constructed collective identities. Thus, far from reflecting overt partisan interests (Karol 2012), the party system is a constitutive structure that gives meaning to group boundaries and collective identities. Future research should further examine these constitutive dynamics and their effects.

Finally, the findings in this study are most generalizable to white gay men and lesbians because the activists examined are embedded within powerful advocacy organizations. As previous studies show, powerful LGBT political organizations have privileged whiteness and sexuality in the process of identity formation at the expense of LGB BIPOC, transgender, and nonbinary people (Murib 2016). I found similar evidence when activists formed GRNL and excluded sexual and gender minorities who were not gay or lesbian, showing that intersectional marginalization was tied to activists' motivations to join the major parties. One implication is that the party system is central to intersectional marginalization (Cohen 1999) because disadvantaged subgroups are excluded from representation in dominant interest groups and parties (Strolovitch 2007). This resonates with other work that shows how interest groups and activists form identities in relation to institutions (Bernstein 1997; Engel 2007). If party actors interact with activists from elite advocacy organizations

across marginalized groups, the two-party system will inadequately represent intersectionally marginalized people, unless activists center them in their agendas.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421001465.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Limitations on data availability and archive descriptions are openly available at the American Political Science Review Dataverse: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/DVWV0O.

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The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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