Representation in Municipal Government: Evidence from LGBTQ+ Policy

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Abstract

Recent research suggests that citizen preferences influence municipal policy in the United States, a striking contrast to foundational theoretical accounts portraying local governments as constrained, managerial, and largely unaffected by constituent demands. Yet these conclusions largely rest on analyses of government expenditures, which capture the scale of government activity but not the micro-level allocative decisions at the heart of local governance. In this research note, we extend this literature by testing whether changes in local public opinion affect a broad array of municipal LGBTQ+ policies across more than 500 cities observed between 2012 and 2023. We find that shifts in public opinion reliably predict shifts in policy: as cities become more Democratic (Republican), their LGBTQ+ policies become more (less) pro-equality. Our findings provide new evidence on local democratic responsiveness. At least in this policy domain, local partisanship and ideology appear to matter.

Keywords: representation, local politics, LGBTQ+ policy, public opinion

In democratic theory, public opinion is expected to shape government policy (Achen 1978; Dahl 1971). Canonical research on American municipal politics, however, portrays local policymaking as largely apolitical and insulated from constituent influence (Peterson 1981). One reason is that local policymakers often lack the capacity and autonomy to translate mass preferences into policy. Indeed, local governments in the U.S. face a range of legal and practical limits on their authority, including restrictions on how they may raise revenue and requirements governing how public funds can be allocated. Moreover, when state-level lawmakers disagree with local policies or ordinances, they can—and routinely do—override those policies (Barber and Dynes 2023). Finally, in many locales, policy is also heavily shaped by professional administrators (e.g., city managers) (Svara 1990). Because they never face voters, these officials have weak electoral incentives to respond to public opinion.

Nevertheless, a growing body of research suggests that citizen preferences *do* shape municipal policy (Warshaw 2019). More liberal, Democratic cities not only raise and spend more money (Einstein and Kogan 2016; Sances 2021), but also adopt more left-leaning policies in specific issue areas, such as the environment (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014). Others highlight partisan electoral selection, finding that Democratic mayors and county legislators are more fiscally liberal than their Republican counterparts (de Benedictis-Kessner and Warshaw 2016, 2020; but see Gerber and Hopkins 2011). All told, local elected officials appear to behave much like those in federal and state government: their policy decisions tend to reflect the prevailing partisan and ideological preferences of their constituents.

Anzia (2021) urges caution. She argues that broad claims about party and ideology in American local government are premature, in part because existing studies examine only a narrow slice of policy outcomes and miss much of what local governments actually do. As noted, scholars most frequently rely on expenditure data to measure local policy. Although these indicators are widely available and capture the scale of government activity, they reveal little about the micro-level allocative decisions that classical works view as the core of local

policymaking—that is, decisions about how resources, rights, protections, and services are distributed. When researchers have examined these kinds of policies, the evidence on the role of party and ideology is mixed. On one hand, partisan control of city government appears to shape the kinds of housing cities permit and build (de Benedictis-Kessner, Jones, and Warshaw 2025). On the other hand, sheriff partisanship appears to play little role in compliance with federal requests to detain unauthorized immigrants (Thompson 2020). Because both studies use regression discontinuity designs, they identify the effect of elite partisanship among electorates rather than the independent effect of constituent opinion. Still, together they underscore that conclusions about local responsiveness may depend on the policy domain under study. Scholars must expand the range of policy outcomes under study before drawing any conclusions about party and ideology in local government.

In this research note, we analyze the relationship between local public opinion and municipal lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) policy. In the U.S., municipalities set a variety of policies related to LGBTQ+ people. For instance, they can enact non-discrimination protections in employment, housing, and public accommodations; offer inclusive healthcare benefits to city employees; and develop social service programs for local LGBTQ+ youth and adults. We test whether local opinion impacts the choices cities make on these issues, among others.

Our analysis links information on local voting behavior to an annual, publicly-available index of municipal LGBTQ+ policies created by a national advocacy organization. The resulting city-year panel includes more than 500 municipalities—covering roughly 38% of the U.S. population—each observed more than once between 2012 and 2023. Our data structure allows us to track how *changes* in local opinion correspond to *changes* in policy over time, rather than whether public opinion explains why some cities have more liberal LGBTQ+ policies than others. In other words, we ask: when city residents become more liberal or conservative, does city policy follow? Across numerous specifications, we find consistent evidence that as local electorates become more Democratic (Republican), municipalities

subsequently adopt more (less) pro-LGBTQ+ policies. While the effect sizes are small, they are systematic and robust to the inclusion of time-varying controls for state-level policy and local demographics.

These findings contribute to debates about democratic representation in local government. They show that changes in local electorates are systematically associated with changes in formal municipal LGBTQ+ policy. They also address a key limitation identified by Anzia (2021): much of what scholars know about local responsiveness comes from fiscal outcomes. By studying municipal LGBTQ+ policy, we push this literature beyond revenue and expenditure data and examine representation on a salient cultural and civil-rights issue. Our paper also complements place-specific urban studies scholarship in the U.S. and in other Anglosphere countries showing that local LGBTQ+ inclusion is shaped by an array of contextual factors, including advocacy networks and LGBTQ+ infrastructures (e.g., Browne and Bakshi 2013; Cooper and Monro 2003; Cravens 2015). We show that broad attitudinal shifts in local electorates correspond to changes in formal municipal policy.

Data

Answering our research question requires time-variant measures of both local opinion and policy. We describe these measures below.

The Municipal Equality Index

We measure municipal LGBTQ+ policy using the Human Rights Campaign's (HRC) Municipal Equality Index (MEI). First launched in 2012, the MEI is an annual scorecard that evaluates how inclusive municipal laws, policies, and services are of LGBTQ+ people. The index was created not only as a measurement tool, but also as an advocacy and accountability tool: cities are publicly scored, compared to one another, and encouraged to adopt policies associated with LGBTQ+ inclusion. For our purposes, the MEI is useful because it

provides a repeated, comparable measure of formal municipal policy across a large number of U.S. cities. At the same time, we emphasize that while the MEI allows us to study formal institutional recognition of LGBTQ+ residents, it cannot directly speak to local LGBTQ+ equality and inclusion more broadly—for example, to the broader day-to-day lived experiences of LGBTQ+ urban life.

The MEI started with a small scope—rating just 137 cities in 2012—and gradually added new cities in the years that followed. Since 2017, the HRC has rated the same 506 cities.[1] The 2023 MEI includes the following:

- 200 largest cities in the United States;
- 50 state capitals;
- five largest cities in each state;
- the cities that are home to the state's two largest public universities;
- 75 cities that have high proportions of same-sex couples;
- 98 cities selected by the HRC and the Equality Federation state groups members and supporters

Figure A1 shows the locations of the 2023 MEI cities. Combined, they account for about 38% of the U.S. population. Table 1 compares the current MEI cities to all cities using demographic information from the 2019-2023 American Community Survey (ACS). Relative to the rest of the country, cities included in the MEI sample are larger, more racially and ethnically diverse, wealthier, more educated, and younger. The ACS, of course, does not provide information on local voting behavior, nor does any such dataset exist for all cities. Given the demographic patterns we observe, we suspect that the MEI sample cities are also more Democratic than the average American municipality. In general, the MEI sample is quite representative of midsize American cities, particularly on race and ethnicity.

Table 1: **Representativeness of the Sample Cities in 2023**

	All	Midsize	Large	Sample
Population	7,819	38,997	1,201,915	196,414
% White	73.19	57.80	38.93	56.89
% Black	6.65	11.64	20.71	12.78
% Hispanic	11.68	19.62	27.03	18.72
% Unemployed	5.40	5.23	6.07	5.48
% College+	24.62	36.03	39.45	40.41
% 65+	21.38	16.74	13.61	15.34

Notes: Midsize cities have between 10,000 and 500,000 residents.

Large cities have more than 500,000 residents.

The MEI evaluates cities across 25 criteria in five broad areas: non-discrimination laws, municipal employment practices, municipal services, law enforcement, and leadership on LGBTQ+ equality. Figure A2 shows the 2023 scorecard. With the exception of the final category—leadership on LGBTQ+ equality, which awards points for policy proposals or other public stances taken by local officials—all areas focus on concrete laws, ordinances, or programs adopted by city governments. Importantly, in no category does the index capture the extent of a city's investment or activity; it simply records whether a given policy or program exists. For example, the MEI tallies, among other things, whether the city has non-discrimination protections in employment, housing, and public accommodations; provides transgender-inclusive healthcare benefits for municipal employees; enforces a non-discrimination ordinance for city contractors; staffs an LGBTQ+ liaison in the executive office; establishes a Human Rights Commission; offers services for LGBTQ+ youth, seniors, and people living with HIV/AIDS; and reports hate-crime statistics to the FBI. Cities receive full points for these items regardless of how well the policy is resourced or implemented.

Fourteen criteria determine a city's base score, ranging from 0 to 100. The remaining 11 are 'flex' or bonus categories, awarding up to 22 additional points for highly resource-intensive programs, protections, and benefits. In this way, the MEI accommodates cities that go "above and beyond" for LGBTQ+ residents but also does not punish small, low-resource cities for not being able to provide certain benefits or protections. No city can score above

100; if bonus points push a score beyond this limit, the final score remains 100. For non-discrimination law categories, the MEI credits cities for protections provided at the state level but avoids double-counting when a city ordinance duplicates a state law. For example, if a state already bans housing discrimination, a city in that state receives the same points regardless of whether it has enacted its own parallel ordinance. In supplementary analyses, we also include state-year fixed effects, which absorb statewide policy changes and political shocks that affect all cities in a state simultaneously.

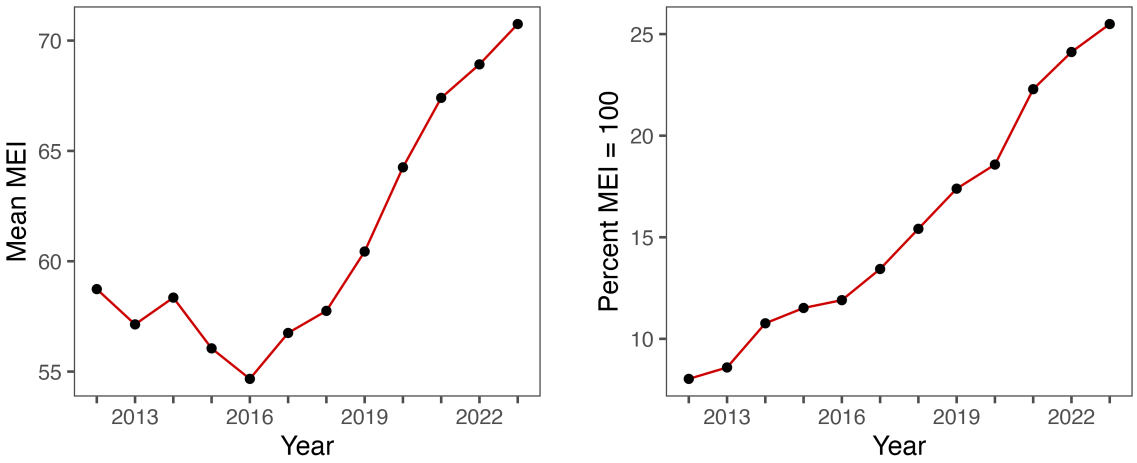
The MEI data come with two important shortcomings. The first is that category and criteria-level MEI scores are not publicly available for all years in our study. While the HRC provides overall city scores in every year from 2012 to 2023, they do not specify the number of points awarded per criterion until 2021. We therefore cannot assess whether local opinion matters more on some issues than on others. We view this as a substantive limitation of our paper: some components of the index may be more influenced by constituent opinion than others. For instance, local leaders' public positions likely reflect public attitudes, whereas non-discrimination laws in private employment may be shaped more by the strength and preferences of the business community. Likewise, laws governing public employment may depend more on the power and preferences of unions than on the preferences of the public.

The second limitation is that the scoring criteria have undergone some changes between 2012 and 2023. For example, prior to 2016, the MEI scored cities on 'Relationship Recognition' policy, evaluating the presence of marriage or jurisdiction-wide domestic partnership registries. Following the federal legalization of same-sex marriage via the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision, this category was removed from the index. Some categories have also shifted over time between flex and non-flex. In 2017, 'Inclusive Workplace' was included as a flex category before becoming a non-flex category, while 'City Employee Domestic Partner Benefits' was introduced as a flex criterion in the same category. The primary concern is that year-to-year changes in MEI scores could reflect revisions to the scoring rubric rather than real policy movement in response to changing public attitudes. However, because these

scoring adjustments occur uniformly across cities, we can account for them in the analysis with year fixed effects.

Figure 1 presents descriptive statistics of the MEI measure by year. The left panel displays the average MEI score for each year, while the right panel illustrates the percentage of MEI cities that achieved a perfect score of 100. In both panels, the trend is clear: municipal policies have become increasingly pro-LGBTQ+. In 2023, the average city in the MEI sample scored 71—an increase of roughly 11 points since 2012. The magnitude of this change is substantial: it represents nearly one-third of a standard deviation in the MEI. Notably, the gains are greatest after 2017, following several years of declines in the average score. Over the same 11-year period, the share of cities earning a perfect MEI has increased by 17 percentage points.

Figure 1: **Trends in the MEI, 2012-2023**



We are interested in whether the pro-equality gains in local policy are most pronounced in places that have become more liberal or pro-equality in their preferences. We are not the first to explore the MEI's relationship with local public opinion. Most notably, Warshaw (2019) finds a positive correlation between city-level support for same-sex marriage and MEI scores: cities with greater support for same-sex marriage tend to have more inclusive local policies. As we have alluded to, our methodological approach differs significantly. Like

Einstein and Kogan (2016) and Sances (2021), we focus on what drives *changes* in local policy over time rather than why some cities adopt more liberal policies than others at any given point in time.[2] Instead of comparing MEI scores in more liberal and less liberal cities, we examine whether shifts in preferences lead to corresponding changes in local policy. By tracking how the same city evolves in its policy choices as its electorate becomes more or less liberal, we are better able to distinguish changes in local political preferences from the many persistent political, demographic, or institutional characteristics that otherwise confound cross-sectional comparisons. In doing so, we pose a more demanding test of representation by examining whether within-city shifts in the local electorate are associated with subsequent changes in local LGBTQ+ policy.

Local Public Opinion

As Anzia (2021) notes, studies of local representation should ideally rely on measures of policy-specific constituent preferences. The standard approach to measuring issue preferences within a geographic area (e.g., state, county, city, etc.) relies on multilevel regression and poststratification (MRP) (Lax and Phillips 2009; Park, Gelman, and Bafumi 2004). Using national surveys, MRP models individual preferences as a function of geographic and demographic characteristics and then extrapolates these estimates to infer local public opinion based on the population's demographic composition. It is particularly useful for estimating opinion with small samples and can even generate opinion estimates for cities without survey respondents. Because of its sheer size, scholars often apply these methods to the Cooperative Election Study (CES). Unfortunately, the CES is poorly suited for our research question because it does not consistently ask about LGBTQ+ issues. Indeed, the surveys ask about attitudes toward same-sex marriage in every year prior to 2016, but never after. As a result, we cannot create a reliable time-varying city-level measure of preferences on LGBTQ+ issues over our eleven year period of study.

We instead measure local public opinion using the Democratic share of the two-party vote

in the city from the most recent presidential election (Einstein and Kogan 2016; Hajnal and Trounstine 2010; Sances 2021). Because our MEI data span 2012–2023, we use presidential election returns from 2008, 2012, 2016, and 2020. For each city-year, we assign the vote share from the most recent non-concurrent election. Because presidential vote share is not a direct measure of LGBTQ+ policy preferences, our estimates should be interpreted as capturing the relationship between broad local political orientation and LGBTQ+ municipal policy rather than responsiveness to directly measured LGBTQ+ preferences. Reliance on presidential vote share may therefore overstate or understate responsiveness in cities where presidential voting is weakly aligned with residents' views on LGBTQ+ rights. Our assumption, however, is that presidential vote share is correlated with preferences on the local LGBTQ+ issues that form the MEI. Cities where constituents regularly vote for Democratic candidates should be more supportive of inclusive municipal laws, policies, and services for LGBTQ+ residents and workers.

Fortunately, partisanship is highly predictive of attitudes on several LGBTQ+ issues. Warshaw (2019)'s city-level data shows that local Democratic vote share in 2016 correlates with the share of city residents estimated to support same-sex marriage (Figure A3).[3] These patterns extend beyond same-sex marriage to areas more aligned with the components of the MEI, too. For example, support for non-discrimination protections for LGBTQ+ people stands at 89% among Democratic identifiers but just 59% among Republicans.[4] For these reasons, we see presidential vote share as a viable proxy for actual opinion on LGBTQ+ issues—cities that vote more Democratic in national elections should actually have different collective preferences on the issues we study than do those that vote less Democratic.

Additional Variables

Our modeling strategy holds constant many stable city-level traits. We control, however, for a number of time-variant factors that might predict changes in municipal LGBTQ+ policy—and may also covary with changes in support for the Democratic Party. First among them

are a set of basic city-level demographic and economic characteristics from the ACS; they are the same variables used above to assess the representativeness of the MEI sample. They include educational attainment, age, race/ethnicity, and unemployment, as measured in the 2013, 2018, and 2023 5-year surveys.

Perhaps the most obvious factor shaping whether local LGBTQ+ policies become more or less pro-equality is the size and visibility of the local LGBTQ+ community. Cities with larger LGBTQ+ populations may have greater demand for inclusive policy. Cities with more developed LGBTQ+ community infrastructure may also have stronger advocacy networks and more capacity to push local officials toward policy change (Cravens 2015). Ideally, we would measure both directly. The ACS, however, does not record the sexual orientation of respondents. In 2019, it did begin differentiating between opposite-sex and same-sex couple households, but this measure is unavailable for most of our study period. In any case, any variable in our analysis must vary over time and be measured repeatedly between 2012 and 2023.

As an alternative measure, we leverage data from Mattson (2023) on the number of LGBTQ+ bars in each city for 2012, 2013, 2017, 2019, and 2021. For all years except 2021, the data come from the Damron Gay Men's Guide. Started in 1964, the Damron Guide provides information about LGBTQ+-friendly businesses, bars, hotels, restaurants, and other establishments across the United States and beyond. Over the years, it became an important resource for LGBTQ+ travelers seeking safe and welcoming destinations. The 2021 data were created by Mattson (2023) and his research assistants using internet searches, including Yelp, Google, and social media. We tally the number of LGBTQ+ bars in each city, standardize the measure per 10,000 residents, and then log-transform that value. Because we are uncertain how cities were selected for inclusion in the Damron Guide or in the hand-coded 2021 dataset, we do not assume that cities absent from the dataset have no LGBTQ+ bars. This choice substantially reduces the number of cities included in the analysis. We therefore estimate our models with and without this variable.

We use this measure as one historically available, time-varying proxy for the size and strength of the local LGBTQ+ community. Bars and nightlife establishments have long served as important sites of LGBTQ+ social life, community formation, and information sharing (Campkin 2023; Ghaziani 2014). In this sense, cities with more LGBTQ+ bars may have larger, more visible, or more organized LGBTQ+ communities.[5] At the same time, the measure is limited. Bars and nightlife establishments are only one part of LGBTQ+ community life. They do not capture forms of LGBTQ+ life less centered on nightlife, such as community centers, nonprofit organizations, advocacy groups, online networks, and other informal or non-commercial forms of social organization. They may also be less informative in cities where LGBTQ+ social life is less spatially concentrated or where LGBTQ+ residents are better integrated into broader urban spaces. We therefore interpret the measure cautiously: it is a proxy for visible LGBTQ+ community presence and infrastructure, not a direct measure of LGBTQ+ population size, community power, or advocacy capacity.

Methods and Results

Figure 2: **Bivariate Correlation Between Local Democratic Vote Share and the MEI**

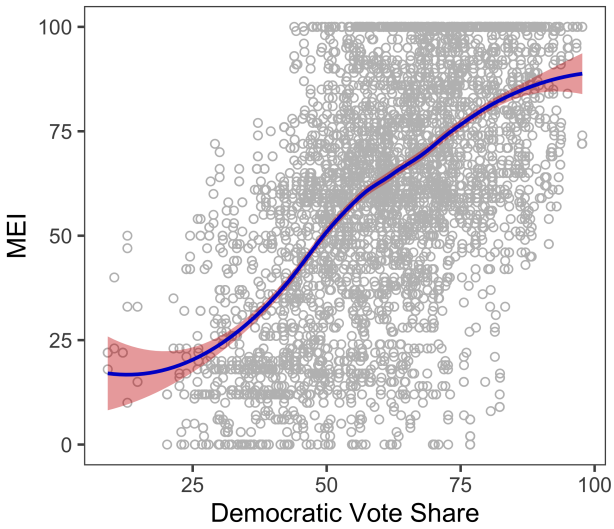


Figure 2 shows the bivariate correlation between Democratic vote share and the MEI. Like Warshaw (2019), we find a strong positive correlation between the two.

Our primary analysis, however, relies on a within-city regression estimated using ordinary least squares.[6] The equation is as follows:

$$MEI_{it} = \beta_1 \% \ Democratic_{it} + \beta_2 X_{it} + \theta_i + \alpha_t + \epsilon_{it} \tag{1}$$

where MEI_{it} is the MEI score for city i in year t, $\%\ Democratic_{it}$ is the Democratic share of the two-party presidential vote in the most recent non-concurrent election prior to year t, and X_{it} contains the time-varying socioeconomic covariates described above. θ_i are city fixed effects. α_t are year fixed effects.[7]

City fixed effects absorb all stable, time-invariant differences across cities, while year fixed effects capture any nationwide shocks or common trends affecting all municipalities in a given year (including, for instance, changes in MEI components or scoring criteria). As a result, the coefficient β_1 is identified entirely from within-city changes over time: it captures how shifts in local Democratic support from election to election are associated with subsequent changes in a city's MEI score, holding constant any stable city characteristics and any period-specific factors shared across cities. Implicitly, it restricts the analysis to municipalities that exhibit meaningful variation over time in both political opinion and the MEI itself. For example, cities whose MEI scores never change—such as Los Angeles or New York City, which receive a perfect score in every year—contribute no identifying variation and thus drop out of the effective estimation sample. Because the data follow the same cities repeatedly over time, the regression errors are likely correlated within cities across years. For this reason, we cluster standard errors by city.

We also estimate a version of this model that replaces year fixed effects with state-year fixed effects. State-year fixed effects help to account for the fact that municipal LGBTQ+ policy is embedded in state political and legal environments. State law may enable or

constrain municipal action, state political conflict may place LGBTQ+ issues on the local agenda, and state preemption may limit the range of policies cities can adopt. More broadly, cities in the same state and year may be exposed to common political shocks, legal changes, advocacy campaigns, partisan environments, or media attention that affect both local opinion and municipal policy. State-year fixed effects absorb these shared state-level influences, whether observed or unobserved. As a result, the model identifies the association between local opinion and policy by comparing cities within the same state and year. It enables us to evaluate whether local opinion matters even after accounting for the broader state contexts in which municipalities operate.[8]

Table 2 reports the results.[9] Columns (1)-(3) include year fixed effects, while Columns (4)-(6) replace them with state-year fixed effects. Within each set of models, the first column reports the bivariate relationship between local Democratic support and the MEI, net of city and year or state-year fixed effects. The second column adds time-varying demographic and economic controls. The third column additionally controls for the number of LGBTQ+ bars in the city; because this measure is missing for a nontrivial share of city-years, the number of observations falls by roughly 30% in these models.

Across the three specifications with year fixed effects, we find a positive and significant association between Democratic vote share and the MEI. That is, we find that when cities become more (less) Democratic, the MEI increases (decreases). As Mummolo and Peterson (2018) point out, fixed effects regressions must be interpreted with care. Because these models rely only on within-unit changes, the effective variation in the key explanatory variable is often far smaller than its raw, across-unit variation. Such is the case in our data, where the standard deviation in local Democratic support drops from 15.06 to 2.48 once city and year fixed effects are applied. Substantive effects calculated using the former would therefore severely exaggerate the magnitude of the relationship. Using the estimates in Column (3), we find that a one-standard-deviation shift in the within-city range of Democratic support increases the MEI by 0.78 points. Similarly, a shift the size of the 95th percentile—an in-

crease in Democratic vote share of 12 percentage points—produces a 3.79-point increase in the MEI. Overall, then, the effect of changes in constituent opinion on the MEI is quite small—but real.

Table 2: **Local Public Opinion and the MEI**

	DV: MEI (0-100)					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
% Democratic	0.240*	0.257*	0.315*	0.212	0.195	0.227
	(0.116)	(0.114)	(0.150)	(0.135)	(0.135)	(0.180)
% White		0.132	0.252		-0.185	-0.326
		(0.348)	(0.534)		(0.332)	(0.550)
% Black		-0.171	0.355		-0.272	0.346
		(0.428)	(0.590)		(0.410)	(0.581)
% Hispanic		0.475	0.632		0.129	-0.027
		(0.390)	(0.599)		(0.353)	(0.596)
% Unemployed		-0.023	-0.316		0.185	-0.442
		(0.339)	(0.435)		(0.309)	(0.442)
% College+		-0.030	-0.087		0.185	0.278
		(0.218)	(0.321)		(0.210)	(0.320)
% 65+		0.234	1.018		0.603	1.348*
		(0.395)	(0.674)		(0.383)	(0.601)
log(LGBTQ+ Bars)			3.653			6.114
			(4.664)			(5.687)
City FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year FE	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✗
State-Year FE	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓
Observations	4,841	4,823	3,352	4,841	4,823	3,352
R^2	0.876	0.877	0.864	0.915	0.915	0.909

Notes: OLS estimates. Standard errors clustered by city. *p<0.05

The findings with state-year fixed effects are weaker but point toward the same substan-

tive conclusion. The coefficient remains positive and similar in magnitude across Columns (4)-(6), but it is no longer statistically significant at conventional levels (e.g., $p = 0.208$ in Column 6). Still, comparing the most saturated specifications, the estimated effect in Column (6) is roughly 72% as large as the estimate in Column (3). We therefore interpret the state-year fixed effects results optimistically but carefully: they provide suggestive evidence that the relationship between local opinion and LGBTQ+ policy is not driven entirely by cross-state differences, but the estimates are too imprecise to support a strong conclusion. In lieu of state-year fixed effects, we also estimate models with direct controls for the state-level political and policy landscape. Namely, we control for partisan control of state government in each year as well as the state policy environment on LGBTQ+ issues using the HRC's State Equality Index (SEI). Results including these variables are in Table A4. Most importantly, the association between local public opinion and the MEI holds in the face of these controls: no matter the state context, city leaders appear responsive to changes in local attitudes.

We report several additional analyses in the Supplementary Appendix. Most notably, we examine the mechanisms behind these results. As Caughey and Warshaw (2018) articulate, changes in public opinion may shape policy through two pathways. First, they may produce electoral selection, as voters replace local officials with candidates whose positions better align with their own. Alternatively, they may produce incumbent adaptation, as sitting officials adjust their positions in response to changing constituent demands. To provide suggestive evidence on these mechanisms, we merge our MEI panel with the American Local Elections Database (ALED) (de Benedictis-Kessner et al. 2023), which records the timing and results of mayoral and city council elections from 1989 through 2021. We then re-estimate our main models interacting city Democratic presidential vote share with an indicator for whether a local election occurred in the previous year. The results are in Table A5. If selection is the dominant mechanism, the association between Democratic vote share and MEI scores should be larger following local elections, when changes in office-holding are most likely to occur. The interaction term is positive, indicating that the association is somewhat larger after

election years, but it is not statistically distinguishable from zero. Thus, while the point estimates are consistent with some role for electoral selection, the evidence is imprecise. We therefore cannot distinguish cleanly between selection and adaptation as mechanisms of local responsiveness on LGBTQ+ policy.[10]

We also assess whether the effect of Democratic vote share on the MEI varies by region—specifically, whether it differs between Southern and non-Southern cities. Table A6 reports these results. In models without controls for the number of LGBTQ+ bars, the estimated effect is roughly twice as large in non-Southern cities. However, these regional differences are not statistically distinguishable. Following others (e.g., Dynes, Hartney, and Hayes 2021; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2014), we also examine whether the relationship between local public opinion and the MEI varies across different local institutional arrangements. Table A7 interacts % Democratic with several time-invariant indicators measured at the start of the panel. Because these characteristics do not change over time, their main effects are absorbed by the city fixed effects; the interaction terms therefore capture how each feature conditions the responsiveness of policy to public opinion. With one exception, we find little evidence that local institutions moderate responsiveness. The lone exception is that cities with an elected mayor appear less responsive to changes in constituent opinion—a surprising pattern that warrants further investigation. Finally, Table A8 interacts % Democratic with the number of LGBTQ+ bars in the city—our proxy for the size and influence of the LGBTQ+ community in each city. Here, we find some suggestive evidence that pro-equality shifts in the MEI are most pronounced in cities that are becoming more Democratic *and* home to larger LGBTQ+ communities. However, we hesitate to put too much stock in this finding, as the estimate is very noisy.

Conclusion

Our paper offers new evidence that public opinion can shape municipal policymaking. By examining within-city changes in LGBTQ+ laws, protections, and services, we show that policy shifts tend to move in the same direction as changes in the local electorate—even after accounting for state political contexts and other potential local socioeconomic confounders. The effects we document are modest but consistent. We interpret their size as a feature of the design—and a substantive finding in its own right. As noted earlier, the estimated relationship between Democratic vote share and MEI scores is roughly three to four times larger in a cross-sectional model than in our preferred within-city specification. Similar patterns appear in prior work. Einstein and Kogan (2016), for example, find that moving from a typical Republican city to a typical Democratic city is associated with a 12% increase in local government spending in cross-sectional models, but only a 3% increase in panel models. These cross-sectional estimates likely capture durable differences across cities that are correlated with both public opinion and policy. Our within-city models ask a stricter question: when the same city becomes more Democratic or Republican over time, does its LGBTQ+ policy change as well? Our results ultimately suggest that municipal LGBTQ+ policy does respond to shifts in local opinion, but that change is gradual and constrained by systemic features of local political environments.

To be clear, we do not view our contribution as making a broad or conclusive statement about local democratic responsiveness writ large. Rather, our paper extends the local representation literature beyond fiscal policy and into one of the most salient social policy domains on the contemporary political agenda: LGBTQ+ rights. As such, ours should be viewed as one piece of a growing effort to evaluate how local leaders govern. We do, however, view our paper as an example of the kind of data local representation scholars should be hunting for. Indeed, the field's longstanding reliance on expenditure data reflects a simple fact: the Census makes it possible to easily observe what cities raise and spend (and how they raise and spend it), and to do so consistently over time. To advance this literature, scholars must

expand the universe of policy outcomes, particularly toward those capturing the nitty-gritty details of local policy—that is, policy indicators that represent not how much cities spend, but how, when, where, and for whom they spend it. As Anzia (2021, 144) points out, "these types of policies are much more difficult to measure and collect data on than spending, but they are extremely important" to local governance.

Some research demonstrates what is possible. In recent years, scholars have assembled fine-grained datasets on neighborhood police deployment (Verrilli et al. 2025), the district schools targeted for capital investment (Hamel 2025), the neighborhoods municipalities prioritize for public goods provision (Hamel and Holliday 2024; Wichowsky, Shah, and Heideman 2022), and the racial composition of school leadership (Kogan, Lavertu, and Peskowitz 2021). Whether the choices municipalities make in policy areas like these can be traced back to public opinion remains an open—and empirical—question. To answer it, scholars must carefully measure local preferences on these specific issues or be confident that surrogate indicators—such as local presidential voting patterns—meaningfully capture them.

Much more work is needed to fully understand when and why local leaders translate public sentiment into concrete policy. Only once scholars accumulate evidence across many policy domains and types will we be able to draw firm conclusions about the nature and limits of democratic responsiveness in American local government. Our paper represents one step in this direction.

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Data Availability

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

[1]Table A1 reestimates our main models on 2017–2023, the years for which we observe a balanced panel of cities.

[2]A similar design is used in the state politics literature on dynamic responsiveness (e.g., Caughey and Warshaw 2018).

[3]The correlation is 0.62. The correlation is weaker in the South (0.45). In a supplementary analysis, we allow the effect of local opinion to vary by South vs. non-South. These results are in Table A6.

[4]https://www.prri.org/research/views-on-lgbtq-rights-in-all-50-states/

[5]Our measure parallels Anzia (2019)'s use of senior centers as an indicator of senior citizens' collective activism and organizational capacity.

[6]Table A2 underscores the value of a within-city approach. In a purely cross-sectional (i.e., across-city) regression, the estimated effect of Democratic vote share is nearly three to four times larger.

[7]Recent methodological work has highlighted challenges in interpreting two-way fixed-effects estimates with both staggered binary treatments and continuous treatments when treatment effects are heterogeneous (e.g., Callaway, Goodman-Bacon, and Sant'Anna 2024; Goodman-Bacon 2021). Our design does not involve staggered adoption or comparisons between early- and late-treated units: Democratic vote share is continuously measured for every city in every period. Nevertheless, the coefficient should be interpreted as a within-city association between changes in local Democratic vote share and subsequent changes in MEI scores, conditional on city and year fixed effects, rather than as a design-based estimate of a uniform causal dose-response effect.

[8]State-year fixed effects absorb statewide changes in nondiscrimination law that affect all cities in a state simultaneously. Because state-level LGBTQ protections apply uniformly to all municipalities in a state-year, their influence on MEI scores is captured by the state-year fixed effects.

[9]Table A3 provides a descriptive look at the city-level changes underlying our national panel estimates. It reports the ten cities with the largest increases and the ten with the largest decreases in MEI scores during the study period, showing each city's first and last observed MEI score alongside the corresponding change in Democratic presidential vote share. The raw patterns are consistent with the regression results: nine of the ten cities also became more Democratic over the same period. These examples make the aggregate relationship more concrete by showing that the national estimates reflect public and policy movement within particular municipalities. They also highlight cases that may warrant detailed city-specific study of the political processes and contextual factors behind those changes.

[10]Interestingly, the election indicator is negative in some specifications, suggesting that MEI scores may rise more slowly in the year following elections among otherwise similar cities. We interpret this cautiously, however, because in the interaction model it represents the estimated association with elections when Democratic vote share equals zero— a value outside the observed range of the data.

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