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Presidential Communication About Marginalized Groups: Applying a New Analytic Framework in the Context of the LGBT Community

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Scholars have long observed that presidential communication about a marginalized group can help shape that group's reality. Yet most analyses of such communication focus on a relatively small number of texts, making it difficult to identify important changes over time and analyze factors that might explain those changes. The present study proposes an analytic framework that specifies 4 measurable parameters of presidential communication about marginalized groups, as well as 4 explanatory factors. We use this framework to analyze the census of presidents' formal communications about the LGBT community. Results highlight presidents' limited communicative engagement with the LGBT community and the roles that political party, rhetorical context, public opinion, and sociocultural touchstones play in explaining presidential communication about this important group.

Modern presidents have a range of options when considering how to communicatively engage the many marginalized groups in the United States.[1] For example, presidents might pair serious policy goals with soaring rhetoric in major public addresses, as Lyndon Johnson did on the issue of civil rights (Goldzwig, 2003). Alternatively, they might quietly introduce into the discourse a group that had not previously been featured, as Bill Clinton did with several religious minorities and George W. Bush did with atheists (Coe, Domke, & Sheets, 2016). Taking yet another tack, Ronald Reagan regularly held up individual members of a marginalized group (some real, some dramatized) as examples of what he believed was right or wrong with America (Jamieson, 1988). Even just the two most recent presidents provide a striking contrast along these

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lines. Whereas Barack Obama found new and varied ways to celebrate America's rich diversity (Petre & Langsdorf, 2010), Donald Trump was elected with talk of "bad hombres" and "nasty women"—and by a group of supporters in which, according to polls, a majority felt "the government has paid too much attention to the problems of blacks and other minorities" (Cox & Jones, 2016).

These varied approaches underscore a broader reality: Modern presidential communication occurs in the context of a rapidly diversifying U.S. populace, wherein attitudes about marginalized groups play a crucial role in structuring political attitudes (see Jones, 2016; Winter, 2008). Scacco and Coe (2016), theorizing a shift from the traditional "rhetorical presidency" to the current "ubiquitous presidency," point to America's growing pluralism as one of the three key forces dramatically reshaping the landscape of presidential communication. Amid these shifts, presidents are increasingly targeting their messages to narrow segments of the population (Cohen, 2010). This changing landscape thus provides fertile ground to examine how and why presidents talk about marginalized groups.

Scholars working in this area have offered important insight into how specific presidents have communicated about marginalized groups, with the context of race and ethnicity receiving the most attention of this kind (e.g., Aune & Rigsby, 2005; Pauley, 2001; Riggins, 1997). The norm in this body of research is to focus on just a few key texts as a means of highlighting "the unique rhetorical performances of American presidents" (Aune & Rigsby, 2005, p. 6). Such nuanced analyses have obvious value, but do not permit generalizations about communicative patterns across multiple presidents. With this in mind, the present research takes a broader approach. We begin by deriving from the extant literature a new analytic framework that specifies four measurable parameters of presidential communication about marginalized groups, as well as four possible explanatory factors. We then employ this framework to analyze the census of presidents' formal public communications about the LGBT community—more than 1,800 mentions across 553 texts.[2] We focus on the LGBT community for two reasons. First, presidential communication about this group has thus far received little scholarly attention. Scholars have trained their attention on media portrayals of LGBT people and issues (e.g., Alwood, 1996) and on the rhetoric and political tactics of the LGBT community (e.g., Bernstein, 2002), but not on presidential discourse. Second, over the past few decades, the sociocultural status of the LGBT community has changed dramatically (Dunn, 2016), providing an excellent opportunity to see whether and how presidents responded to this shifting context.

In focusing on the LGBT community to establish a broader analytic framework, we find that presidents other than Bill Clinton and Barack Obama have largely avoided explicit discussion of this group. This pattern helps illuminate the importance of party and rhetorical context (e.g., minor versus major speeches) in explaining presidential communication about marginalized groups. We also find that presidents can be prompted to talk about a given group by key sociocultural touchstones (e.g., policies and acts of violence) and that they appear to be more likely to respond to changes in mass attitudes than to generate them. This study thus complements

the growing body of research on various public discourses relevant to the LGBT community (e.g., Bonds-Raacke, Cady, Schlegel, Harris, & Firebaugh, 2007; Dunn, 2016) while also supporting scholars' long-standing interest in how presidents and other political figures communicate about marginalized groups (e.g., Coe & Schmidt, 2012; McIlwain & Caliendo, 2011; Pauley, 2001).

Presidential communication about marginalized groups: A framework

The new analytic framework we propose herein is both descriptive and explanatory. It draws from past research to offer measurable discursive parameters that describe general patterns in presidential discourse about marginalized groups and explanatory factors that provide insight into why variation might exist in these patterns.

Discursive parameters

Presence

Presence attends to the sheer quantity with which a marginalized group is discussed. If a president mentions a marginalized group, even in passing, that mention temporarily places the group in the audience's mind—a potentially consequential cognition (cf. Coe & Schmidt, 2012). As a parallel, consider that scholars have long been interested in tracking which social groups—particularly marginalized groups—are represented in entertainment media (e.g., Fejes & Petrich, 1993; Greenberg, Mastro, & Brand, 2002). The rationale for doing so is that the absence or denigration of a given group could damage that group—creating what is sometimes called "symbolic annihilation" (Tuchman, 1978). Conversely, encountering a positive media portrayal of a group that one does not often encounter in real life can facilitate positive attitudes through "parasocial contact" (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2006). Certainly, there are differences between the contexts of entertainment media and presidential discourse. But presidential attention to a marginalized group would nonetheless be a necessary first step in a president either denigrating that group or providing the kind of "affirmative visibility" that marginalized groups have often sought (Fejes & Petrich, 1993; see also Kapur, 2013).

Humanization

The language of humanization underscores that any given marginalized group is not just an amorphous cultural entity or potential voting bloc but rather a collection of real people, with varied attitudes, desires, and talents. Such humanization has traditionally been central to the movement toward greater equality for marginalized groups, in large part because *dehumanizing* rhetoric has so often been used as a strategy of marginalization (Riggins, 1997; Wolfson, 1991). Abundant evidence, much of it focusing on race and/or gender, shows just how devastating and potentially dangerous such dehumanization can be (see Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). Humanizing rhetoric flips this equation, stressing the full humanity of individuals within a given group. For example, in an early analysis of the gay rights movement, Brummett (1979) found

that those supportive of gay rights tended to privilege agents over acts, whereas opponents did the opposite. As Brummett explained: "[S]upporters of gay rights feature the *agent*: people are what they are and must be dealt with on their own grounds" (p. 252, emphasis original).

National definition

If there is one consistent theme that can be pulled out of the vast literature on presidential rhetoric, it is that presidents are central figures in the construction of U.S. national identity (e.g., Campbell & Jamieson, 2008; Domke & Coe, 2010; Zarefsky, 2004). Presidents hold a position of unique communicative privilege and speak often about the nation. In doing so, they define who and what matters in America—definitions that ultimately hold considerable weight in the national imagination. Indeed, even those who challenge the efficacy of presidential rhetoric in moving survey-measured public opinion (e.g., Edwards, 2003) concede the value that invoking national symbols can have for presidents. As Stuckey (2004) explains: The presidency is "a single site where articulations of national identity consistently appear backed by sufficient social and political power to render those articulations as matters of custom and law" (p. 10). Presidential definitions of the nation that include specific marginalized groups are logical complements to humanization. The latter recognizes the people who constitute the community; the former situates them squarely within the definition of America.

Opposition frames

Every marginalized group faces public opposition to their efforts to gain equal treatment. Typically, this opposition coalesces around a few communicative frames that animate much of the public discussion. Indeed, the extensive literature on emphasis frames in public discourse works from this premise, identifying and tracking frames that become dominant over time—and sometimes illustrating the effect such frames can have on attitudes (see D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2010; Entman, 2004; Winter, 2008). Foss (1979), for instance, analyzed frames surrounding the Equal Rights Amendment, finding that opponents framed the amendment as something that would force women outside of their proper role in the home. Notably, a president might invoke an opposition frame to challenge a marginalized group or as a means of support by acknowledging and then trying to refute a position circulating in public discussion.

Explanatory factors

Party

Presidential communication often varies by party (Cohen, 2010; Jarvis, 2005). It would seem especially likely to do so when the topic is marginalized groups because Democrats have historically garnered more support from such groups (e.g., women, racial minorities, the LGBT community) than have Republicans. On matters of race, for example, Democratic presidents have generally included more discussion in their major speeches than have Republicans (Coe & Schmidt, 2012). We therefore expect that Democrats will talk more, and more positively, about marginalized groups than will Republicans.

Rhetorical context

Presidents do not make formal statements in a vacuum, but rather in the context of expectations about genre and audience (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008; Zarefsky, 2004). For example, major addresses—Inaugurals, State of the Union addresses, and other speeches broadcast live to the entire nation—reach large audiences and are crafted with the whole country in mind (Coe & Neumann, 2011). In contrast, issue-specific speeches and other nonmajor presidential communications are often less formal and tailored to a specific audience (Cohen, 2010). The latter context carries less risk for presidents, so we expect that they will be more likely to talk about marginalized groups in front of narrower, more homogenous audiences.

Public opinion

Their obvious importance in shaping national identity notwithstanding, presidents typically have difficulty moving aggregate survey-measured public opinion via communication (Edwards, 2003; though see Rottinghaus, 2010). What is more common is that presidents follow the lead of the public, such that presidential communication on key issues is generally responsive to public opinion (Brace & Hinckley, 1992; Canes-Wrone, 2006). Given this, we expect that increasingly positive public attitudes about marginalized groups are more likely to predict presidential communication about those groups than vice versa.

Sociocultural touchstones

Marginalized groups often trace a path toward greater social equality in relation to sociocultural touchstones—specific well-known events that have serious implications for those within the group. Sometimes these are acts of oppression or violence (e.g., Bloody Sunday, the Trail of Tears), other times the passage or failure of legislation (e.g., the Civil Rights Act, the Equal Rights Amendment), yet other times a major court decision (e.g., *Obergefell v. Hodges*). In some of these cases, presidents might drive the discussion (e.g., promoting legislation). In others, they might have to decide whether and how to comment on these touchstones. Research has generally found that presidential communication is responsive to major events (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008; Canes-Wrone, 2006), so we expect sociocultural touchstones to be points of reference in presidential communication about marginalized groups.

It bears noting that the preceding discussion has positioned presidential communication about marginalized groups as potentially both a cause and an effect. That is, a presidential invocation might be the partial result of a changing context (e.g., opinion swings) or a specific event (e.g., a sociocultural touchstone) while also contributing to some observable effect (e.g., an increase in a group's survey-measured favorability). This is consistent with current scholarship on presidential communication—and elite discourse more broadly—that demonstrates that discourse has the potential to move public attitudes if the conditions are just right, but that such discourse is also shaped by a host of factors, including news, policy shifts, and changes in public opinion (e.g., Campbell & Jamieson, 2008; Canes-Wrone, 2006; Entman, 2004; Rottinghaus, 2010).

Presidential communication about the LGBT community

The framework proposed above is broad enough that it should be applicable to presidential communication about any marginalized group. Still, different groups have different experiences and political realities. Accordingly, moving from the more conceptual to the more concrete, application of the framework should be tailored to the group in question. This process requires some familiarity with the group, though not necessarily with the specifics of presidential discourse about that group. Here, we demonstrate one example of this tailoring process by specifying each of the four discursive parameters in relation to the LGBT community.

In terms of the first discursive parameter, *presence*, two points should be made. First, this is the parameter on which we will test the four explanatory factors. Space constraints prevent us from testing each explanatory factor on each parameter, and presence provides the most data points and thus the most complete tests. Second, we are interested not only in the total quantity of presidential mentions, but also in the specific subgroups within the broader LGBT community that the president identifies. This issue warrants attention given the obvious diversity of the LGBT community. Indeed, this diversity is on display even in the acronym alone, which has grown in recent years to account for a broader range of subgroups within the community (i.e., LGBTQIA, where the additional letters indicate Queer, Intersex, and Asexual). So, for instance, a president could reference gays and lesbians and still leave a transgender person feeling as though their identity has not been adequately recognized.

We specify the second parameter, *humanization*, by suggesting three means through which presidents might humanize LGBT people. First, presidents could refer specifically to LGBT people as opposed to activities (e.g., sexual practices) or institutions (e.g., marriage). Consistent with the "people-first language" sometimes prescribed to avoid dehumanization (e.g., Broyles et al., 2014), this would be a simple way for presidents to remind their audience that the LGBT community is comprised of actual people. Second, presidents could refer to specific individuals within the LGBT community. Presidents often highlight individuals as exemplars within a certain group (e.g., praising specific gallery guests during the State of the Union address) or use a single case to illustrate a broader issue (e.g., discussing a family struggling to pay their bills). Research suggests that when such exemplars are positive, they can bolster perceptions of the group (Zillmann, 1999) — a potential opportunity for the LGBT community (Bonds-Raacke et al., 2007). Finally, presidents might discuss the LGBT community in relation to families. Familial relationships are fundamentally humanizing, but might have special significance within the LGBT community, given that much of the contested terrain in their struggle for equality has centered around family (e.g., adoption, marriage, parental support). Taken together, these approaches would move presidential discourse beyond simple recognition of the LGBT community and toward fuller appreciation of its humanity.

The third parameter, *national definition*, can also take three forms in this context. First, presidents could signal explicitly that members of the LGBT community

are Americans — citizens who contribute directly to the national community. Often, when minority groups are othered, as the LGBT community has often been, their status as "real" citizens is called into question (Riggins, 1997). Presidents can counter such messages by stressing the LGBT community as part of the American community. Second, presidents could discuss members of the LGBT community in relation to their military service. Few patriotic symbols carry as much cultural cachet in America as the military, so connecting a group to that symbol is a powerful way to embed it deeply within the national fabric. This may be a particularly powerful statement in the context of the LGBT community, given the stereotypes and tensions that circulate around homosexuality, masculinity, and military culture (see Britton & Williams, 1995). Third, presidents could situate the LGBT community within the metaphorical national family. Nations are "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983) bound together by shared narratives as much as anything else. Among the most powerful ways in which presidents imagine the American community is as a family. Explicitly including the LGBT community within this American family would be a strong signal of acceptance in the national definition. Furthermore, as with discussion of actual as opposed to metaphorical families, this language might have particular meaning for the LGBT community given the group's many efforts to broaden the definition of family to include LGBT relationships. In concert, these three approaches would clearly signal a president's desire to bring the LGBT community more fully into the national fold.

Finally, we identify three *opposition frames* that have animated much of the discourse about LGBT rights. The first is the most general: The LGBT community is a problem, something that should be opposed. This would seem to be a baseline assumption in all discourse opposing the LGBT community. Indeed, those who do not subscribe to this position have no reason to challenge full equality for LGBT people. The second frame holds that status as LGBT is a matter of choice. That is, opponents of LGBT rights reject the idea that someone can be born with anything other than a heterosexual orientation and a gender identity that aligns with one's assigned sex. Instead, opponents claim that members of the LGBT community adopt a certain "lifestyle." The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) puts it this way: "The phrase 'gay lifestyle' is used to denigrate lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals suggesting that their orientation is a choice and therefore can and should be 'cured.'"[3] Finally, we consider the frame of special rights. This frame holds that the LGBT community has been seeking not just equal rights, but privileges that go above and beyond what others receive. Referring again to GLAAD, they explain this frame thus: "Anti-gay extremists frequently characterize equal protection of the law for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people as 'special rights' to incite opposition to such things as relationship recognition and inclusive non-discrimination laws." These three frames, then, indicate common points of opposition to the LGBT community.

Method

Our analysis focuses on the entirety of presidents' formal public communication about the LGBT community from the first mention (Gerald Ford, 19 June 1975) to the end of

Donald Trump's sixth month in office (19 July 2017). Via the online interface available through the American Presidency Project at www.presidency.ucsb.edu, we accessed the *Public Papers of the Presidents*, the definitive record of the full range of formal presidential communications (e.g., major and minor speeches, press conferences, statements, proclamations, and executive orders). In a series of searches, we retrieved every text that employed any of the following terms, including all possible endings: homosexual, gay, lesbian, same sex, same gender, bisexual, trans, queer, and LGBT.[4] This procedure left us with 553 texts that together made 1,818 references to the LGBT community. Of these references, the president made 1,599, and other speakers included in presidential transcripts (usually journalists or citizens asking questions) made the rest.

Using the full single text as our unit of analysis, we tallied the number of references to each distinct term and then coded for the following categories.

Humanization

People

This category tracked language that explicitly referenced the LGBT community in terms of people (as opposed to actions or other nonhuman characterizations). Examples included "the gay activist" and "lesbian women."

Individual

This category tracked language that explicitly referenced specific individuals within the LGBT community. Examples included "Harvey Milk" and "Matthew Shepard."

Family

This category tracked language that explicitly referenced the LGBT community in relation to any component of a typical family structure (e.g., parents, children, siblings, husbands, wives). Examples included "homosexual families" and "Loving, supportive parents — and by the way, that's all kinds of parents … it includes gay or straight parents."

National definition

Citizen

This category tracked language that explicitly referenced the LGBT community as part of the American citizenry or community. Examples included "our gay and lesbian fellow citizens" and "patriotic LGBT Americans serving in our Federal Government."

Military

This category tracked language that explicitly referenced the LGBT community as part of the U.S. military, including policies pertaining to that status (e.g., Don't Ask, Don't Tell). Examples included "I do believe the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy is good policy" and "we were able to make sure that serving your country didn't depend on who you loved."

National family

This category tracked language that explicitly referenced the LGBT community as part of the metaphorical national family. Examples included "our gay brothers and sisters,

still taunted, still attacked" and "immigrants and gays and women. … You've got a place in the American family."

Opposition frames
Problem
This category tracked language that explicitly referenced the LGBT community as being or creating a problem. Examples included "I recognize that this is a very new and serious problem in our society" and "those who want to change the meaning of marriage will claim that this provision requires all states and cities to recognize same-sex marriages."

Choice
This category tracked language that explicitly referenced being part of the LGBT community as a choice or a lifestyle (as opposed to something based on innate characteristics). Examples included "demanding an acceptance of their particular lifestyle" and "they should be judged based on their behavior, not their lifestyle."

Special rights
This category tracked language that explicitly referenced the LGBT community in relation to the provision of additional rights beyond those provided to others. This category rarely occurred. All examples are presented in the "Results" section.

Other codes
Speech type
This category identified each text as one of the following: (a) "major presidential address" (Coe & Neumann, 2011); (b) press conference/interview; (c) written document (e.g., statement, proclamation); (d) campaign event (e.g., stump speech, fund-raiser); and (e) other remarks (i.e., issue-specific speeches to promote policies or mark occasions).

Partisan audience
This category identified whether the audience was likely to be composed primarily of people from the president's own political party.

Two people completed the content analysis. As a check of intercoder reliability, at least 10% of the texts were cross-coded. Krippendorff's alphas were as follows: people (.78), individual (.89), family (.87), citizen (.77), military (.96), national family (.79), problem (.80), choice (1.0), special rights (1.0), speech type (.78), and partisan audience (.76).

Results

Throughout this section, we report trends and relationships without accompanying statistical tests; working with the census renders inferential statistics unnecessary.

Presence

Presidential communication about the LGBT community has been limited overall and unsteady in its emergence. Of the nearly 50,000 public communications that presidents issued during our 4-decade period of analysis, just 553 mentioned the LGBT community. Figure 1 illustrates how this discourse emerged over time, showing the cumulative rise in yearly mentions overall and by presidents specifically (as opposed to questioners included in the presidential transcripts), situated within key sociocultural touchstones.[5] The figure's two parts illustrate two very different eras. Prior to 1993, presidential discussion of the LGBT community was rare, brief, and often broached by someone other than the president. Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush combined for just 11 of their own references over 18 years and were asked questions about the LGBT community an additional 11 times.

Things changed dramatically in 1993 when Bill Clinton took office. During his 8 years in office, Clinton referenced the LGBT community 435 times and was asked about it another 104 times. But this was not a permanent increase. George W. Bush made just 11 references during his two terms and was asked questions pertaining to the LGBT community another 23 times. Following Bush in office, Barack Obama substantially increased the presence of the LGBT community in presidential discourse, both in overall quantity and in the breadth of terms employed. In 8 years, Obama referenced the LGBT community 1,140 times and was asked about it another 81 times. To put this in context, Obama averaged 143 references per year compared to Clinton's 54. No other president averaged more than two references per year.

Obama was also the first president to reference the LGBT community using a fuller range of terms, thus explicitly recognizing various subgroups within that diverse community. In fact, apart from G. W. Bush making the presidency's lone reference to "queer" (a joke about the popular television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*), Obama was the only president to mention the LGBT community using a term other than gay, lesbian, homosexual, or same sex/same gender. Obama spoke of both bisexual and transgender people and on numerous occasions used the acronym LGBT, often directly referring to "the LGBT community."

As mentioned above, the parameter of presence provides the best opportunity in this dataset to test the four explanatory factors specified in our framework. We began with *party*, which played a major role in explaining presidential communication about the LGBT community. It has already been demonstrated that two Democrats—Clinton and Obama—far outpaced their peers. But even when we remove them from the analysis, it is the remaining Democrat who leads the way. Carter averaged 2 mentions per year compared to 1.5 for G. W. Bush, .4 for Ford, .3 for Reagan, and 0 for G. H. W Bush. It remains to be seen whether Donald Trump, who had only one mention during his first 6 months in office, will alter this trend (a point to which we return in the "Discussion" section).

We also expected *rhetorical context* to help explain presidential communication, in that presidents would be likely to talk about marginalized groups in speaking

a 1968-1992

b 1993-2017
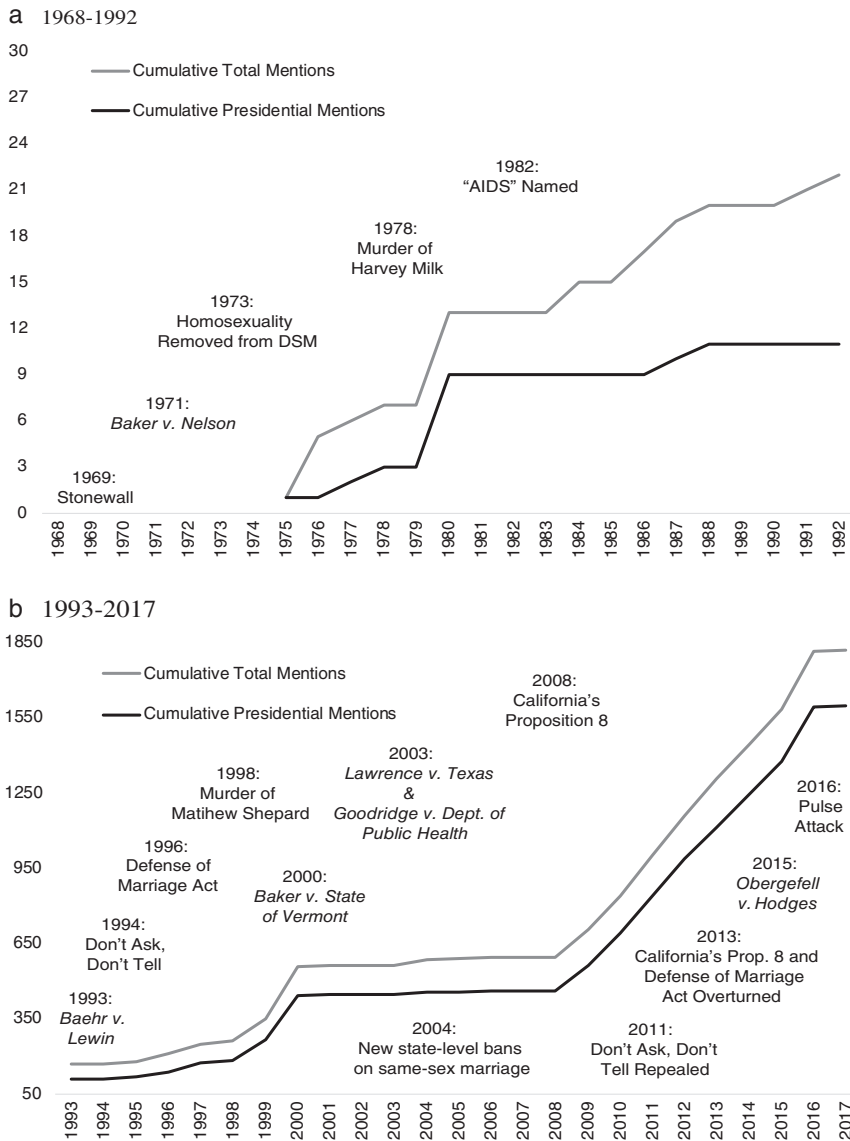
Figure 1 Cumulative presidential communication about the LGBT community.

contexts with narrower, more homogenous audiences. It turns out that this is in fact what they did. By far the least common venue for speaking about the LGBT community was the one with the largest and most heterogeneous audience: the major address. Just eight texts (less than 2% of the total) were major addresses. Clinton accounted for one of these and Obama the rest. Press conferences (16%) and written documents (17%)—which often become quotation prompts for the press and thus have a somewhat unpredictable ultimate audience—were also relatively rare. Most

common were campaign events (30%) and issue-specific remarks (35%), both of which typically have audiences that are identifiable by some key characteristic (e.g., party, issue interest, age group).

We also examined rhetorical context in terms of audience, to determine whether speaking to a partisan audience changed a president's willingness to discuss the LGBT community. Here, we focused on just Clinton and Obama, the two presidents with enough issue-specific remarks to allow for a useful comparison (issue-specific remarks being the only speech type that varied meaningfully on our measure of partisan audience). Clinton's average LGBT mentions did increase when delivering a speech to a partisan audience, but only slightly (from 2.25 per speech to 2.57). Obama, however, included more than one full additional LGBT mention per speech when addressing a partisan audience (from 3.29 per speech to 4.38).

The third explanatory factor we examined was *public opinion*. Prior research led us to expect that presidential communication about the LGBT community would be more likely to follow than to lead public opinion, and that was indeed the case. Figure 2 shows presidential communication charted in relation to the two most complete, continuous national-level survey measures of public opinion that are available on this topic: Gallup's question asking whether LGBT relations are "morally acceptable" and their question asking about support for the legalization of same-sex marriage.[6] All three trends in Figure 2 represent yearly averages that have been converted to z-scores so that they can be viewed on a common scale. The figure again makes clear that the two presidents considered here—G. W. Bush and Obama—differed markedly from each other in the extent to which they discussed the LGBT community. It is also evident that their relationship to public opinion during this time varied considerably. Bush's communication was negatively correlated with moral acceptability (−.33) and marriage support (−.44), whereas Obama's was positively correlated (.42 for acceptability and .65 for support).

To determine the direction of these relationships, we assessed Granger causality—a common method for determining the reciprocal influence of two correlated variables over time (Granger, 1969). For both the acceptability measure (opinion → president $t = 1.44$; president → opinion $t = .95$) and the marriage measure (opinion → president $t = 2.46$; president → opinion $t = 1.60$), the causal relationship was stronger when predicting presidential communication with opinion than when predicting opinion with presidential communication. What we can therefore cautiously conclude, given the limits of the available data, is that the overall relationship between presidential communication and survey-measured opinion about the LGBT community is modest; but, to the extent that it exists, the president tends to follow rather than lead.

Finally, we considered *sociocultural touchstones*. A look back at Figure 1 begins to reveal that the impact of sociocultural touchstones on presidential communication about the LGBT community is evident but inconsistent. More than two-thirds of the 18 touchstones presented in the figure were referred to by the president in some fashion. But some, such as Stonewall and *Baehr v. Lewin*, were ignored entirely. George W.
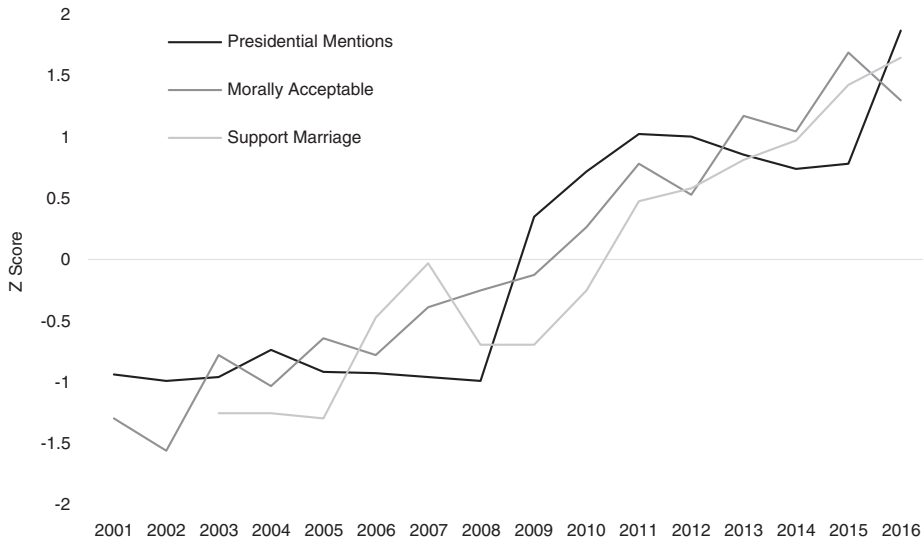
Figure 2 Presidential communication and public opinion about the LGBT community.

Bush offers an interesting case along these lines, because one might justifiably wonder how he was able to so rarely discuss the LGBT community, given that several key events pertaining to this group occurred during his time in office. The answer is that he carefully addressed the relevant issue (marriage) without addressing the group. Virtually all of Bush's LGBT references were made in the context of his opposition to same-sex marriage. Marriage became a central campaign issue in 2004, when many states had measures on the ballot that sought to restrict the legal definition to one man and one woman. Bush made nearly two-thirds of his total scripted mentions during that year. But Bush was roughly twice as likely to mention "traditional marriage" or to chastise those who would "redefine marriage" as to talk about the LGBT community per se. Bush thus illustrates how sociocultural touchstones can prompt issue discussion even while excluding the marginalized group most central to that issue.

    Bill Clinton provides a revealing counterpoint, in that the majority of his references to the LGBT community were focused directly on key sociocultural touchstones. As Clinton campaigned for the presidency in 1992, he promised that he would lift the ban on gays serving in the military. Within days of taking office, journalists were asking Clinton whether he intended to keep that promise. In discussing this issue during his first year, Clinton made 99 references to the LGBT community (which amounted to nearly a quarter of the total mentions he would make over the course of his presidency) and was asked about it another 48 times. Once Don't Ask, Don't Tell took effect in early 1994, Clinton's LGBT references dropped sharply. In 1994, he made just one reference; in 1995, just seven. It would not be until late in his presidency that Clinton would return to, and eventually exceed, his early norm. Once again, it was policy pertaining to the LGBT community that formed the centerpiece of his discourse—in this case, hate crimes legislation prompted by the killing of Matthew

Shepard in what many believed to be an antigay crime. During his last 2 years in office, Clinton made 257 LGBT references (nearly 60% of his total). And he became the first president to mention the LGBT community in a major address, when he referred to Shepard during his 2000 State of the Union address.

Humanization

Our second discursive parameter explored three ways that presidents can humanize the LGBT community: by talking about people, by identifying specific individuals within the community, and by drawing connections to family.[7] The first of these approaches was the most common. It may seem obvious that presidents would talk about the LGBT community primarily in terms of people, but in fact, this was a dominant discourse for only Clinton and Obama, both of whom employed this language in more than 90% of their LGBT texts. Donald Trump's single mention also focused on people, as he noted in a Holocaust remembrance proclamation that "gays" were among the people the Nazis "targeted." Rather than discussing people, early presidential discourse mentioned "homosexuality" generally and on occasion "homosexual practices" or "homosexual rapes." In George W. Bush's case, it was not people but rather an institution (marriage) that became his focus.

References to specific LGBT individuals were almost entirely absent in the presidency prior to Bill Clinton beginning to invoke Matthew Shepard. Ultimately, however, Clinton referenced an individual in 32% of his LGBT texts, and Obama did so 13% of the time. Consistent with what we observed above, George W. Bush *never once* mentioned a specific LGBT individual during his time in office (at least not one who was identifiable as such within the context of the speech).

Family references followed a similar pattern, with Clinton and Obama even more central in creating this trend. Apart from those two leaders, only Jimmy Carter referenced LGBT families—and did so just once, as he assured his audience that the Equal Rights Amendment did not pertain to such families. In contrast, Clinton (15% of texts) and Obama (18%) spoke often of LGBT families and did so in supportive terms. Clinton, for instance, speaking at Georgetown University in 1995, reminded his audience that "gay people who have AIDS are still our sons, our brothers, our cousins." Obama stressed similar themes and, as he moved closer to his eventual support for gay marriage, sometimes spoke in quite personal terms. In a 2011 interview with ABC News, for example, Obama said: "I think that there's no doubt that as I see friends, families, you know, children of gay couples who are thriving—you know, that … has an impact on how I think about these issues."

National definition

The third parameter in our framework moves from humanizing the LGBT community to defining those who make up that community as central to the nation. One way that presidents do this is to explicitly recognize LGBT people as part of the American citizenry. As with much of this discourse, Bill Clinton was the first president to do this—and he did so often, with just over one quarter of his LGBT texts employing

this pattern. George W. Bush made just one such reference before Obama accelerated the trend. Obama defined LGBT people this way in more than one-third of his texts, often doing so in very direct terms. For example, speaking to the Human Rights Campaign (a prominent LGBT advocacy group) in 2011, Obama declared: "Every single American — gay, straight, lesbian, bisexual, transgender — every single American deserves to be treated equally in the eyes of the law and in the eyes of our society."

Presidential references to LGBT service in the military followed a similar pattern. Clinton (24% of texts) and Obama (28%) were the only presidents to discuss the LGBT community in these terms. Clinton's and Obama's military references did vary noticeably in tone, however. Clinton's references, consistent with our observations above, centered largely around Don't Ask, Don't Tell. In a typical example, Clinton, during a 1993 question-and-answer session, said: "[T]he Pentagon has said, there have been many, many thousands of homosexuals [who] serve our country and serve it well with distinction." Obama went further than Clinton with this theme, speaking in more glowing and intimate terms about LGBT service — and sometimes doing so in major addresses. For instance, in his 2011 State of the Union address, Obama referred to his decision to overturn Don't Ask, Don't Tell thus: "Our troops come from every corner of this country. ... And yes, we know that some of them are gay. Starting this year, no American will be forbidden from serving the country they love because of who they love."

The military is a powerful image in the national psyche, but one that necessarily includes only a small segment of the public. In contrast, the idea of a metaphorical national family has the potential to paint all Americans as connected by an especially powerful bond. Most presidents avoided drawing such a powerful connection in the context of the LGBT community. In fact, prior to Obama taking office, this image was used just four times, all by Clinton. But Obama made the metaphorical national family a meaningful part of his discourse: Ten percent of his texts portrayed the LGBT community in this fashion. Notably, Obama's use of this theme grew steadily over the course of his 8 years in office. After using it in just two texts per year during his first 3 years, he increased his usage nearly every year thereafter. It appears that as the public grew more supportive of the LGBT community, Obama became more comfortable invoking such a powerfully pro-LGBT theme.

Opposition frames

Finally, we explored three common opposition frames. Unless otherwise noted, we are referring to instances where presidents only invoked, rather than invoked and refuted, the specified frame. The most general of the three frames is that the LGBT community poses a problem of some kind. This turned out to be a common frame in the small number of early instances in which presidents mentioned the LGBT community. Specifically, 45% of the pre-Clinton LGBT texts employed this frame. George W. Bush also commonly relied on the problem frame, invoking it in half of his LGBT texts. Clinton and Obama were once again outliers, however. Clinton used this frame just once, and Obama never did. Here again, it seems that party considerations and

improving public attitudes kept Clinton and Obama from using a frame more common among other presidents.

A second familiar opposition frame is that being part of the LGBT community is a choice. Presidents rarely used this frame. Clinton, the first to do so, used the choice frame just a handful of times. These instances came in the context of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, when Clinton sometimes assured his audience that the policy was not about accepting any particular "lifestyle." As he put it during a town hall in 1993, the "issue to me is not that Americans agree with the lifestyle but that they accept the fact that there are citizens in the United States who are homosexual … who ought to have a chance to serve." George W. Bush used this frame just once, setting up an argument against same-sex marriage by saying in a 2006 radio address: "In our free society, people have the right to choose how they live their lives." Obama's only use of this frame was to offer a humorous refutation of it, joking in a 2011 Democratic National Committee fund-raiser that he had believed in equality all his life: "I had no choice; I was born that way."

The third opposition frame we examined proved to be the least common. In only two of presidents' LGBT texts did they discuss special rights; in both cases, they did so to challenge the idea that the LGBT community was garnering such rights. Clinton, speaking to the Human Rights Campaign in 1997, said: "Equal opportunity for all, special privileges for none." And Obama, in a 2011 statement memorializing the late human rights activist David Kato, declared: "LGBT rights are not special rights; they are human rights."

Discussion

This study provides a needed platform for future research focusing on presidential communication about marginalized groups, an area of scholarly inquiry that has taken on heightened importance in America's ever more pluralist democracy (see Jones, 2016; Scacco & Coe, 2016). Applying a new analytic framework to the census of presidents' formal public communications about the LGBT community, our findings provide initial insight into a body of discourse that scholars have heretofore largely ignored. Several points warrant discussion.

Thus far, presidents have paid remarkably little attention to the LGBT community. This is consistent with previous research showing that presidents often miss opportunities to talk about marginalized groups (Coe & Schmidt, 2012). In the present case, only two presidents—Bill Clinton and Barack Obama—engaged the LGBT community to a meaningful degree. Not only did these presidents talk about the LGBT community far more than did their peers, they also dramatically shifted the manner in which that community was discussed. Specifically, they took steps toward greater humanization of LGBT people and more fully embedded the LGBT community within the national definition. Obama also broadened the range of subgroups included within the community. These are noteworthy shifts. After all, it is one thing to simply mention the LGBT community in passing; it is quite

another to discuss those in the community as peoples citizens, family members, and soldiers. This more intimate and inclusive approach is consistent with the modern "ubiquitous presidency" (Scacco & Coe, 2016). In making these moves, Clinton and Obama helped "break the conspiracy of silence" that has long surrounded the LGBT community (Wolfson, 1991, p. 38). Breaking this silence could have tremendous value. Consider that when Obama became the first president to mention this group in an Inaugural address, the Human Rights Campaign issued a statement saying that in "lifting up the lives of LGBT families for the very first time in an inaugural address" Obama had shown "LGBT young people from the Gulf Coast to the Rocky Mountains that this country's leaders will fight for them until equality is the law of the land" (Kapur, 2013, para. 4). Put simply, presidential recognition of a marginalized community is often deeply appreciated within that community.

By observing the presence and absence of presidential communication about the LGBT community, we can also gain insight into factors that might facilitate presidential attention to a marginalized group. Party is one such factor. Clinton and Obama were the primary drivers of the partisan differences observed here, but recall that George W. Bush averaged fewer mentions of the LGBT community per term than did Jimmy Carter, who took office more than two decades prior to Bush. And Donald Trump made just one passing mention of the LGBT community during his first six months in office. It appears that Democrats' greater electoral engagement with the LGBT community also translates into greater communicative engagement.

The significance of such a disparity can be better grasped by considering Entman's (2004) cascading activation model. In this model, frames generated in the discourse of a presidential administration are thought to cascade down and influence other political elites (and, under the right circumstances, the news media and ultimately the public). Given this, we might expect that a president talking openly about the LGBT community could encourage other party elites to do the same, whereas a president maintaining silence could potentially limit the discourse from like-minded elites. That possibility might help explain why, in the aftermath of the 2016 massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, a *Washington Post* analysis found that more than six times as many Democratic members of Congress as Republican members referenced the LGBT community in their responses (Berkowitz, Cai, Lu, & Gamio, 2016). Apparently, the "symbolic annihilation" (Tuchman, 1978) of the LGBT community in political discourse spreads beyond the presidency. But, if the cascading activation model is correct, the presidency is a site that could help change that pattern.

Rhetorical context also matters. Presidents were more likely to discuss the LGBT community in "safer" venues—issue-specific speeches or campaign events, where their message was likely to find a narrower and friendlier audience. This pattern is consistent with Cohen's (2010) context theory, which holds in part that the national leadership strategy typical of the presidency decades ago has increasingly given way to a localized strategy in which presidents seek venues wherein it will be most possible to harness the power of friendly (typically partisan) audiences. That both Clinton and Obama did this, but Obama more so, lends credence to the idea that

this strategy has become all the more common in recent years. Extending Cohen, we would suggest that marginalized groups are an especially likely domain in which to see growth in this kind of targeted communication. Many such groups are seeing their numbers increase, giving them a new political force that presidents may well be eager to harness (cf. Scacco & Coe, 2016).

This possibility naturally raises the issue of pandering. Might it be the case, for instance, that Clinton and Obama were just seeking votes when referencing the LGBT community rather than making a genuine attempt at inclusion? Although accessing the black box of presidential sincerity is impossible, we think that it is worth stressing that policy actions subsequent to discursive ones might provide insight into presidential priorities. For example, Obama's eventual support for same-sex marriage was likely caused by various factors, public opinion and state-level policy changes among them. But in terms of the communicative act itself (Obama announced his new position during an extended national television interview), what helped make that moment plausible—what gave Obama the credibility to say what he said—was the fact that his prior discourse had fully embraced the LGBT community. In other words, his discourse set the stage for his actions—actions that then served to accentuate the seriousness of his prior discourse. In contrast, consider that there was some discussion that Donald Trump's periodic campaign affirmations of the LGBT community—including holding a rainbow flag during one campaign event—portended greater inclusion were he to win the presidency ("Donald Trump's support of the LGBT community," 2016). In fact, as our data show, Trump mentioned the LGBT community just once during his first 6 months in office. Shortly thereafter, he issued a series of tweets declaring that "the United States Government will not accept or allow Transgender individuals to serve in any capacity in the U.S. military." (This was Trump's first and thus far only presidential Twitter mention of the LGBT community, according to searches of the Trump Twitter Archive at www.trumptwitterarchive.com.) Given this, observers might reasonably conclude that Trump's pro-LGBT discourse was closer to pandering than was Obama's.

Notably, our findings also suggest the role that journalists can play in creating a rhetorical context that prompts discussion of marginalized groups. Consider that prior to Clinton taking office half of the total mentions of the LGBT community in the presidency came not from the president himself but from a questioner (almost always a journalist). During George W. Bush's two terms, as the president carefully attempted to limit his discussion to "traditional" marriage rather than the LGBT community per se, the rate of questioner mentions to presidential mentions was nearly two to one. In short, many presidential mentions of this marginalized group would not have occurred without journalists broaching the topic. Research on agenda-setting has documented that presidents often influence the news agenda—a process sometimes called agenda building (McCombs, 2005). Our findings complement this research by underscoring that news media also have a role to play in moving presidential attention toward specific groups that might otherwise not get the consideration that their cultural importance would seem to warrant. Put in other terms, our findings help

illustrate one way that Entman's (2004) theorized feedback loop from journalists to elites can operate in practice.

As expected, we also found that public opinion was more likely to lead presidential communication than to follow it. Consistent with Edwards' (2003) influential argument, our findings point to the difficulty presidents have in moving survey-measured mass opinion. But, increasingly, this is not the level at which we should expect presidential communication to have an impact. Recalling Cohen's (2010) context theory, we would expect the first impact of much of the discourse studied herein to be solidifying support (or opposition) within the LGBT community itself. As noted above, that community expressed gratitude for Obama's communicative recognition. Additionally, our findings point to the limitations of conceiving of importance narrowly in terms of survey-measured effects on public opinion, as Edwards (2003) did (cf. Zarefsky, 2004). Importance does not hinge on effects alone, in the same way that the value of analyzing media discourse does not depend entirely on the demonstration of some measurable outcome on a given audience. Scholars care about media representations of marginalized groups not only because they might lead to important effects on those who encounter them, but also because they tell us something about where U.S. culture is at vis-à-vis social acceptance of the group in question. The parallel concept in presidential discourse is perhaps even clearer: Presidential communication, irrespective of effects, provides a kind of "archeological data" (Lim, 2008) through which we can better understand American political culture.

Sociocultural touchstones are another important explanatory factor. In the case of presidential communication about the LGBT community, key touchstones clearly shaped the discourse of several presidents. Don't Ask, Don't Tell and, later, the killing of Matthew Shepard and subsequent push for hate crimes legislation prompted much of Clinton's discussion. Obama discussed the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, as well as the legal status of same-sex marriage. It also appears, though, that presidents' party and their perception of public opinion (among their supporters) influence how they decide to engage such touchstones. In George W. Bush's case, his opposition to same-sex marriage was consistent with his party's position and unlikely to hurt his support among his base. So, rather than engaging the LGBT community directly (and perhaps being charged with insensitivity), he simply focused on marriage. This is an understandable political calculus—and one that has, in various related forms, probably kept presidents from communicating about marginalized groups as often as they might have otherwise.

Finally, our findings shed light on opposition frames in presidential discourse. General framing of the LGBT community as a problem was common in the limited early discourse, especially among Republicans. However, the more specific opposition frames we tracked were both largely absent from presidential communication. This despite the considerable efforts of religious conservatives in America to promote such frames (Domke & Coe, 2010). Interestingly, it seems possible that the intense advocacy for these frames in certain quarters might be one reason for their rarity in presidential communication. Whereas, for an advocacy organization, heated rhetoric

can be a useful means of galvanizing the donor base, presidents must proceed more cautiously lest they generate unwanted backlash. For a Republican president, then, limiting one's discussion of the LGBT community altogether would likely provide a safer path than would invoking controversial frames—a lesson George W. Bush apparently understood. More broadly, this helps to highlight some of the constraints presidents will likely face as they continue to employ the targeted messaging characteristic of the "ubiquitous presidency" (Scacco & Coe, 2016; see also Cohen, 2010; Domke & Coe, 2010; Rottinghaus, 2010).

This study had several limitations that future research might seek to address. Our focus was strictly on the presidency, which limited the breadth of the claims we could make. Future research might attend to broader forms of political discourse, where different norms might generate different patterns. For instance, it seems plausible that the "choice" and "special rights" frames so rare in the presidency would be more common in congressional speeches, where speakers answerable to narrower constituencies might feel freer to speak their minds. Similarly, though our data focused on the LGBT community, our analytic framework should be applicable to other marginalized groups. Future research could test this possibility, either by focusing on other groups in isolation or by considering the manner in which presidents group together different marginalized groups. Additionally, our use of content analysis allowed us to track large-scale patterns but limited the interpretive nuance that our study could provide. Future research might therefore seek to isolate key presidents or speeches and analyze them in greater detail than was possible here. Finally, the present study worked with the census of available discourse, but was still limited by the reality that only a few of the eight presidents in our analysis had a large enough number of communications to facilitate thorough analysis. So, although we feel comfortable offering some generalizations pertaining to the content of presidential communication about the LGBT community, we would urge caution in seeking to generalize from our specific analyses of each explanatory factor. As presidential communication about marginalized groups continues to expand, future research will be increasingly able to identify meaningful trends and offer broader generalizations.

Acknowledgment

Notes

1 Following Williams (1998), we define marginalized groups as consisting of people who together "experience patterns of social and political inequality" because of their (usually involuntary and immutable) membership in a group that is assigned "negative meanings … by the broader society or the dominant culture" (pp. 15–16).
2 Our understanding of the LGBT community encompasses people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and/or asexual (LGBTQIA), as well as those

questioning their sexual identity. For parsimony, we refer just to "the LGBT community" or "LGBT people."

3   GLAAD is an organization that monitors media coverage of the LGBT community. Their language, and that which follows, was retrieved from www.glaad.org/reference/offensive.

4   Both same sex and same gender were searched with and without the hyphen. We also searched alternate versions of LGBT, capturing two errors: LGTB and LBGT. These were counted as references to LGBT. Searches for "trans" alone returned thousands of false returns (e.g., transportation), so we used an extensive series of terms and phrases to isolate relevant instances. We also removed any text that contained only irrelevant instances (e.g., "gay" meaning happy).

5   An appendix explaining the nature and importance of these touchstones is available from the first author upon request. Note that these touchstones are focused primarily on gays and lesbians as opposed to others of LGBTQIA identity — consistent with presidents' engagement of the LGBT community and the broader sociopolitical environment over the past several decades.

6   Trends for the morality question were retrieved from www.gallup.com/poll/1651/gay-lesbian-rights.aspx and for the marriage question from www.gallup.com/poll/117328/marriage.aspx

7   For the remaining analyses, we isolated just those 506 texts in which the president (as opposed to another speaker) made at least one LGBT reference.

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