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LGBT Vote 2012

by Gary J. Gates



Introduction

Exit polls from the 2012 presidential election suggest that 5% of the electorate identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Consistent with findings from a recent [Gallup survey](#) of LGBT-identified Americans, these LGBT voters overwhelmingly supported President Obama for re-election.

Exit polls suggest that the President garnered 76% of the LGBT vote compared to 22% support for Gov. Mitt Romney. The Gallup analyses and a recent [Williams Institute analysis](#) also show that the strong LGBT support for President Obama was likely a key factor in his ability to win the national popular vote and the very close election in Florida. This research brief considers the impact of the LGBT vote on the Electoral College and explores the extent to which LGBT identity, as opposed to underlying demographic characteristics, impacts the LGBT vote.

Key findings show that:

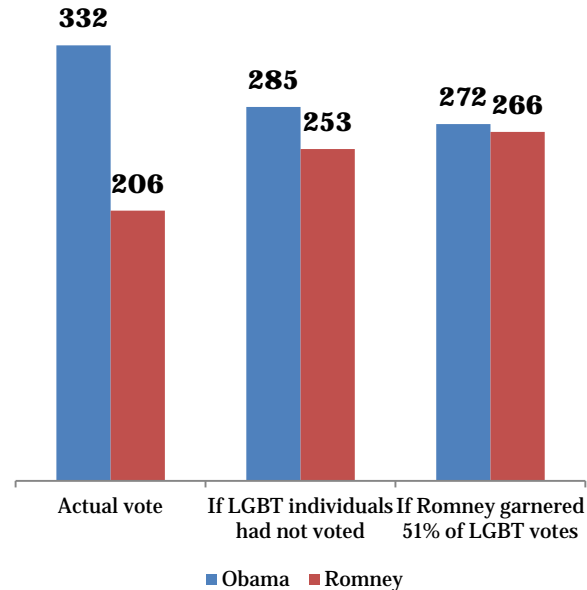
- Strong LGBT support for President Obama in Ohio and Florida was enough to alter the outcome of the election in those two states in his favor.
- Had Gov. Romney garnered 51% of LGBT votes nationally and in state tabulations, he would have won the popular vote and won the battleground states of Ohio, Florida, and Virginia.
- LGBT voters are disproportionately young, female, and non-white, all factors that suggest increased support for President Obama. If LGBT individuals voted consistent with patterns for their age and race/ethnicity, the national LGBT vote would be 55% for Obama and 43% for Romney. The actual LGBT vote reflects a 21% swing for Obama beyond the expected level of support.

LGBT vote in critical swing states

Because LGBT individuals comprise a relatively small proportion of the electorate, the LGBT vote can only have a substantial impact on very close elections. These analyses consider the four states in the 2012 presidential election with the closest vote margins between the two candidates: Ohio, Florida, Virginia, and Colorado. All four of these were considered to be “battleground” and “swing” states by both campaigns. Combined, the Electoral College votes from these states constitute the margin of victory for President Obama. If Gov. Romney had won these four states, we would have won the election.

Exit poll data for the LGBT vote are only available at the national level. Estimates of the

Electoral College Vote

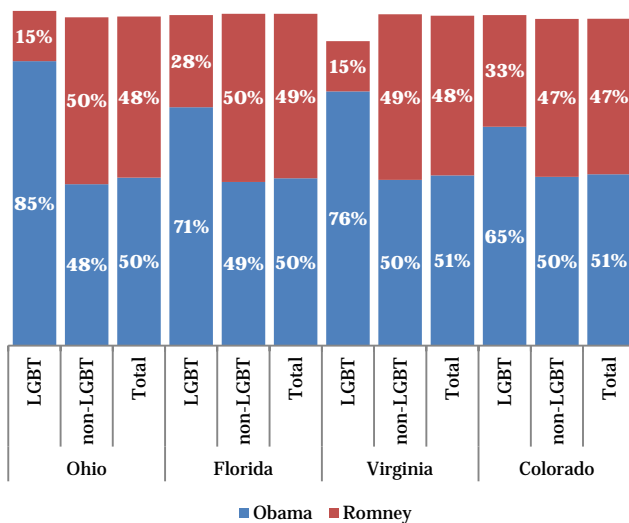


state-level LGBT vote are derived using information from both the [national presidential exit poll](#) and data from the Gallup Daily Tracking Survey (June-September, 2012). Consistent with the national exit poll, it is assumed that 5% of the electorate in all four states was LGBT. The Gallup data suggests some variation across states in LGBT support for President Obama and Governor Romney. Estimates for this report adjust the reported LGBT vote percentages for each candidate to reflect the state-level variation observed in the Gallup data.

The findings suggest that the strong support for President Obama in both Ohio and Florida were enough to alter the outcome of the election in those two states (see Figure 1). The non-LGBT vote in Ohio is estimated to favor Gov. Romney

by 50% to 48%. When the LGBT vote (which is estimated to have favored Obama by an 85% to 15% margin) is included, the results are reversed with President Obama winning by a margin of 50% to 48%. In Florida, the non-LGBT vote is estimated at 50% for Romney and 49% for Obama. Like Ohio, if the LGBT vote (estimated at 71% for Obama and 28% for Romney) is included, President Obama wins by a margin of 50% to 49%. In Virginia and Colorado, President Obama's winning margin was large enough that the LGBT vote was not sufficient to alter the outcome of the election in those states.

Figure 1. Estimated LGBT and non-LGBT vote in Ohio, Florida, Virginia, and Colorado



In the absence of LGBT voters, President Obama's Electoral College winning margin of 332 to 206 would have been substantially reduced. Without the LGBT vote, he still would have won the election, but his Electoral College margin would have been reduced to 285 compared to Gov. Romney's 253.

How much of the LGBT vote would Romney need to win?

To win the national popular vote, Gov. Romney would need to garner slightly more than half of the LGBT vote. If 51% of LGBT voters had supported the Republican candidate, he would have won the popular vote by a very small margin.

However, analyses of the four swing states suggests that if Romney received that level of support in Ohio, Florida, Virginia and Colorado, he would fall just short of winning the Electoral

College. In Ohio, support from just 35% of LGBT voters would result in a Romney victory. In Florida, support from 37% of the LGBT electorate would give the Republican a win. In Virginia, Romney would need just over half (51%) of the LGBT vote to win. However, Colorado (and all of the other states) presents a substantially more difficult challenge for Gov. Romney. He would need 81% of the LGBT vote to secure Colorado's nine Electoral College votes.

These estimates suggest that while majority support among LGBT voters would not get Gov. Romney over the threshold for election, it would give him a popular vote majority and get him to 266 Electoral College votes, just four short of victory.

LGBT identity and the LGBT vote

Findings from the [Gallup data](#) suggest that the LGBT electorate is younger, more female, and more non-white than the general population. All of those factors are associated with increased support for President Obama. The remainder of the analysis considers the extent to which the distinctive demographic characteristics of the LGBT electorate affect voting patterns. Specifically, what would the LGBT vote be if it followed patterns similar to the broader US voting population? The difference between this predicted voting behavior and actual voting provides a measure of the distinctive impact of LGBT identity on voting preferences.

Exit polling data tabulated the support for the two presidential candidates among voters by race/ethnicity and age. If LGBT voters are assigned their votes based on these two characteristics, the expected result would be 55% for President Obama and 43% for Gov. Romney. This suggests that the impact of LGBT identification is a 21% swing in in the President's favor. Absent that swing, Gov. Romney would have won both Ohio and Florida.

Conclusion

Much of the post-election analyses rightly focused on the disproportionate support for President Obama among women and racial/ethnic minorities as a key factor in his victory. These analyses suggest that, in states where the vote was very close, the LGBT vote also played a pivotal role. Fairly modest increases in LGBT support for Gov. Romney would have substantially increased his odds of winning the Presidency as the electoral votes of Ohio and Florida would have gone to him.

Methodology

State-level LGBT vote estimates adjust the national LGBT vote documented in exit polls based on variation in state LGBT voting preferences observed in Gallup Daily Tracking Survey data collected between June and September, 2012. The Gallup data show that LGBT voters preferred Obama over Romney by a 73% to 23% margin. These figures were compared to state-level support. For example, if state X showed LGBT voters giving 80% support to Obama, this implies that LGBT support was approximately 1.1 times higher (80%/73%) in that state than the national average. To calculate state X LGBT vote estimates, this figure is multiplied by the national LGBT support for Obama found in the exit polling data (76%). So in the example, LGBT support for Obama in state X would be 76% x 1.1 or approximately 84%. A comparable procedure was done to calculate support for Gov. Romney.

About the author

Gary J. Gates, PhD is the Williams Distinguished Scholar and a national expert in the demographic, geographic, and economic characteristics of the LGBT population.

About the institute

The Williams Institute on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Law and Public Policy at UCLA School of Law advances law and public policy through rigorous, independent research and scholarship, and disseminates its work through a variety of education programs and media to judges, legislators, lawyers, other policymakers and the public. These studies can be accessed at the Williams Institute website.

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