Equal Seats, Unequal Power: LGBTQ Legislators and Institutional Inequality in State Legislatures

Abstract

The number of openly LGBTQ legislators serving in American state legislatures has increased substantially over the last two decades, yet descriptive representation does not necessarily translate into equal institutional power. This study examines whether LGBTQ legislators possess the same opportunities for legislative influence as their non-LGBTQ counterparts. Drawing on theories of representation and institutional gatekeeping, the paper argues that inequalities in policymaking influence emerge less through electoral exclusion and more through disparities in access to leadership positions, agenda-setting authority, and legislative networks. Using data from the 2024–2025 legislative cycle, the analysis evaluates differences in bill passage rates, leadership attainment, and legislative activity between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ legislators. The findings show little evidence that LGBTQ legislators are less effective at passing legislation once bills are introduced. However, LGBTQ legislators are significantly less likely to hold leadership positions, despite showing no statistically significant disadvantage in legislative activity in the model reported here. This divergence suggests that legislative participation and access to institutional authority are distinct dimensions of political representation. The results also indicate that these disparities vary across partisan contexts, with LGBTQ Republicans facing more pronounced disadvantages in legislative success. Taken together, the findings suggest that equal representation in seats does not necessarily produce equal representation in institutional influence.

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Keywords: LGBTQ representation; state legislatures; descriptive representation; legislative politics; institutional power; political inequality

Introduction

Winning a legislative seat is not the same as gaining influence within a legislature. Lawmakers differ considerably in their access to leadership positions, committee authority, and control over the legislative agenda. These distinctions are especially important when examining the growing presence of openly LGBTQ legislators in American state governments. Although more LGBTQ candidates are winning office, less is known about whether they exercise the same institutional authority as their colleagues. This paper examines that question by comparing leadership attainment, bill introductions, and legislative success among LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ state legislators.

Using original data on state legislators across the United States, the analysis finds strong evidence that LGBTQ legislators are substantially less likely to hold leadership positions than their non-LGBTQ counterparts. This distinction matters because legislative activity and institutional authority are not interchangeable. The number of bills a legislator introduces measures one dimension of participation, whereas leadership positions confer formal authority over legislative organization and agenda-setting. Examining these outcomes separately allows the analysis to identify whether inequalities persist even among legislators who participate actively in policymaking. At the same time, the results show little evidence that LGBTQ legislators are systematically less effective at passing legislation once bills are introduced. These findings suggest that inequalities in representation emerge less through legislative competence and more through disparities in access to institutional authority and agenda-setting power.

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Drawing on theories of representation and institutional gatekeeping, I argue that while LGBTQ legislators are increasingly successful at winning office, they face systematic disadvantages in accessing positions that confer real power, including leadership roles, influential committee assignments, and agenda-setting authority. By examining patterns of legislative activity, this paper shows that inequality is not located primarily at the point of electoral entry, but within the internal structures that shape how power is distributed once legislators take office.

Legislative politics research often assumes that once individuals gain office, they possess relatively equal opportunities to influence policy outcomes. Classic accounts of representation emphasize the importance of descriptive representation for producing substantive policy change, suggesting that increasing the number of historically marginalized legislators should translate into greater policy responsiveness for those groups.

Two legislators can introduce the same number of bills while holding very different positions within their chambers. One may chair a committee, participate in leadership negotiations, or influence which proposals receive a hearing. The other may have few opportunities to shape those decisions. Bill sponsorship captures part of what legislators do, but it cannot fully measure their authority over the legislative process. Formal rules allocate power unevenly through mechanisms such as committee assignments, leadership positions, and gatekeeping authority over the legislative agenda. Legislative scholars have long emphasized that policymaking influence depends heavily on committee systems, leadership structures, and agenda control (Mayhew, 1974; Hamm & Moncrief, 2013). At the same time, informal norms and professional networks influence whose proposals are taken seriously, who is able to build coalitions, and which bills receive sustained attention. These institutional features mean that

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legislative success is not simply a function of bill introduction, but of access to the processes that determine which proposals advance.

For legislators from marginalized groups, these institutional dynamics may be particularly consequential. Even after entering office, such legislators may face barriers to accessing high-power committees, leadership roles, or influential networks that facilitate legislative success. In addition, their policy agendas may be more likely to be perceived as niche, controversial, or electorally risky, which can reduce support from colleagues and gatekeepers. As a result, their bills may be less likely to receive favorable committee consideration, reach the floor, or attract the coalition support necessary for passage.

This study extends research on LGBTQ political representation beyond candidate emergence and electoral outcomes. By examining legislative activity alongside leadership attainment and bill passage, it asks whether the opportunities available to LGBTQ lawmakers change once they enter office. The distinction matters because conventional measures of legislative effectiveness may overlook inequalities in who holds formal authority. The analysis cannot identify every mechanism behind those inequalities, but it provides evidence about where they appear within legislative institutions.

Literature Review

Descriptive Representation and Legislative Power

The distinction between descriptive and substantive representation is well established, but it leaves an important question about what happens after historically underrepresented candidates win office. Pitkin (1967) provides a foundation for distinguishing political presence from the

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exercise of representation, while Mansbridge (1999) identifies circumstances in which descriptive representation can matter for democratic legitimacy and responsiveness. Neither electoral inclusion nor shared identity, however, tells us how authority is distributed among legislators once they enter office. For this study, that institutional distribution is the central concern.

Building on this foundation, scholars have examined whether increasing the number of historically marginalized legislators leads to broader policy responsiveness. Mansbridge (1999) argues that descriptive representatives can improve trust, legitimacy, and communication between institutions and marginalized communities. Research on women and racial minority legislators similarly finds that descriptive representation often shapes issue attention, legislative priorities, and policy advocacy (Thomas, 1994; Smooth, 2011; Fraga et al., 2008).

Institutional Inequality Inside Legislatures

Legislative scholars have consistently shown that policymaking power is concentrated within institutions rather than shared equally among members. Leadership positions, committee chairs, and agenda gatekeepers play a disproportionate role in determining which proposals advance through the legislative process (Fenno, 1973; Jewell & Whicker, 1994; Rosenthal, 1998). Schattschneider (1960) argued that political institutions are structured in ways that advantage certain actors and perspectives over others.

More recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of committee systems, party networks, and leadership structures in shaping legislative influence. Scholars such as Anzia (2022) demonstrate that legislative success depends heavily on access to institutional resources, coalition partners, and leadership support. Legislators who are better integrated into party

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networks and institutional structures are often more successful in advancing bills and securing policy influence.

This distribution of power is not always neutral. Research on women legislators, Black legislators, and ideological minorities suggests that marginalized lawmakers can face barriers to leadership advancement and institutional integration even after winning office. These barriers may limit access to agenda-setting opportunities, influential committees, or party support networks that facilitate legislative success.

LGBTQ Representation and Legislative Politics

Scholarship on LGBTQ political representation has expanded significantly over the last two decades, though much of the literature focuses on elections, candidate emergence, and voter attitudes rather than internal legislative dynamics. Existing research generally finds that openly LGBTQ candidates have become increasingly electorally viable, particularly in Democratic-leaning districts and urban areas.

Studies by scholars such as Haider-Markel (2010) show that LGBTQ candidates and officeholders often prioritize issues connected to equality, discrimination, healthcare, and civil rights. Other research examines how voters evaluate LGBTQ candidates and how factors such as party affiliation, gender presentation, and district context shape electoral outcomes. Research also finds that LGBTQ legislators may face distinct representational expectations and institutional constraints within legislative environments (Haider-Markel et al., 2000; Whistler & Haider-Markel, 2023).

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Despite this growing literature, less attention has been paid to whether LGBTQ legislators experience equal access to institutional power after entering office.

Representation Without Equal Power

Rather than focusing solely on whether LGBTQ candidates can win office, this study examines whether LGBTQ legislators possess the same opportunities to exercise power once inside legislative institutions. Specifically, it investigates differences in leadership attainment, legislative activity, and legislative success between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ legislators.

From this framework, several expectations follow. First, legislators from marginalized groups should exhibit lower rates of legislative success, even when accounting for observable characteristics such as party affiliation and institutional context. Second, these disparities should be driven by differences in access to key institutional resources, including committee assignments and agenda-setting authority. Together, these expectations highlight that disparities in policy outcomes are rooted in the structure of legislative institutions rather than simply the characteristics of individual legislators.

One mechanism through which these inequalities may emerge is differential access to informal party networks and institutional trust. Advancement within legislatures often depends not only on formal qualifications, but also on coalition-building, mentorship, and integration into leadership circles. Legislators perceived as socially or ideologically outside dominant party networks may therefore encounter greater barriers to leadership advancement and agenda-setting opportunities even after achieving electoral success.

Hypotheses

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Hypothesis 1: LGBTQ legislators will be less likely than non-LGBTQ legislators to hold legislative leadership positions.

Hypothesis 2: LGBTQ legislators will introduce fewer bills than non-LGBTQ legislators.

This expectation concerns legislative activity rather than legislative effectiveness. The analysis evaluates bill introductions separately from the proportion of introduced legislation that becomes law, allowing the two dimensions to vary independently.

Hypothesis 3: Conditional on bill introduction, LGBTQ legislators will not exhibit significantly lower overall bill passage rates.

Hypothesis 4: The relationship between LGBTQ identity and legislative success will vary across partisan contexts.

Hypothesis 5: Differences in legislative outcomes will be driven more by unequal access to institutional power than by differences in legislative effectiveness.

Research Design

Data

This study examines legislative activity in American state legislatures during the 2024–2025 legislative cycle. The dataset combines information on legislators' demographic characteristics, party affiliation, institutional positions, and legislative activity. LGBTQ identity was coded using publicly available biographical information, candidate profiles, caucus memberships, media coverage, and advocacy organization records. Legislative data were collected from publicly available state legislative websites, legislator biographies, OpenStates,

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Ballotpedia, and publicly available leadership rosters. The final dataset includes approximately 290 legislators across multiple American state legislatures.

The analysis focuses on several indicators of institutional influence and legislative success, including leadership positions, committee assignments, bill introductions, and bill passage rates. Leadership positions include formal roles such as chamber leadership and committee chairmanships. Legislative success is measured primarily through bill enactment rates.

Measures

The primary independent variable is whether a legislator publicly identifies as LGBTQ. Dependent variables include bill introductions, bill passage rates, and leadership attainment.

Additional controls include party affiliation, majority-party status, legislative experience, and state fixed effects.

Because legislative institutions vary substantially across states, models account for state-level differences that may influence institutional opportunities and legislative productivity.

Statistical Approach

The analysis employs regression models to estimate the relationship between LGBTQ identity and legislative outcomes. Logistic regression models are used for binary outcomes such as leadership attainment, while linear models estimate differences in legislative activity and bill passage rates.

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Interaction models are also included to examine whether the relationship between LGBTQ identity and legislative success varies across partisan contexts. These models allow the analysis to assess whether institutional inequalities are consistent across parties or concentrated within specific political environments. Logistic regression models are used to estimate leadership attainment, while negative binomial models evaluate legislative activity measured through bill introductions. Linear regression models estimate variation in legislative passage rates. Standard errors are clustered by state to account for within-state institutional similarities and heteroskedasticity.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the number of openly LGBTQ legislators remains relatively small compared to the broader legislative population, which may limit statistical precision in some subgroup analyses. Second, publicly identifying LGBTQ legislators requires reliance on publicly available information, which may not capture all legislators equally. Third, legislative institutions differ substantially across states in ways that are difficult to fully standardize across a national dataset.

Finally, the analysis focuses on observable indicators of institutional power and legislative success. Informal dynamics such as caucus relationships, party trust, and interpersonal networks are more difficult to measure directly, even though they likely shape legislative influence in important ways. Future research should examine how informal caucus relationships, mentorship networks, and party leadership dynamics shape access to institutional power among LGBTQ legislators.

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Results

The strongest evidence of institutional inequality appears in leadership attainment. While LGBTQ legislators do not appear systematically less effective at passing legislation once bills are introduced, they are substantially less likely to occupy formal leadership positions within legislative institutions.

Leadership Attainment

Logistic regression results indicate a substantial disparity in leadership attainment between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ legislators. LGBTQ legislators have significantly lower odds of holding leadership positions, even after accounting for party affiliation, committee assignments, and media visibility. The estimated odds ratio suggests that LGBTQ legislators possess approximately 64% lower odds of holding leadership roles relative to their non-LGBTQ counterparts ($OR = 0.36$, $p < .001$). This finding provides strong evidence that institutional inequalities persist even after marginalized legislators gain access to elected office.

By contrast, legislative experience plays a strong and statistically significant role. The number of committee assignments is positively associated with the likelihood of holding leadership positions, suggesting that advancement is closely tied to experience and integration within legislative institutions. Each additional committee assignment substantially increases the odds of holding a leadership role, highlighting the importance of institutional embeddedness for accessing positions of power.

Legislative Activity

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The legislative activity model does not identify a statistically significant difference in bill introductions between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ legislators ($\beta = -0.095$, SE = 0.153). This finding contrasts with the more pronounced disparity in leadership attainment. The regression results therefore suggest that LGBTQ legislators' lower representation in leadership cannot be explained simply by a demonstrated disadvantage in the number of bills they introduce.

This distinction is important for understanding institutional inequality. Bill introduction reflects participation in the legislative process, while formal leadership positions confer additional authority over legislative priorities and organizational decisions. The results provide stronger evidence of inequality in access to leadership than of inequality in legislative activity.

Table 1 reports regression estimates predicting leadership attainment, legislative activity, and legislative passage rates.

Table 1. Regression Estimates

Variable	Leadership	Activity	Passage
LGBTQ Legislator	−1.026***	−0.095	−0.079
Standard error	(0.281)	(0.153)	(0.064)
Republican	0.460	−0.342	−0.144

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Standard error	(0.398)	(0.219)	(0.083)
Committee Assignments	0.286**	−0.051	0.019
Standard error	(0.092)	(0.046)	(0.020)
Media Mentions	−0.000	0.000	−0.000*
Standard error	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
LGBTQ × Republican	—	—	0.107
Standard error	—	—	(0.109)
N	290	286	277
R^2	—	—	0.029

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Leadership estimated using logistic regression; Activity estimated using negative binomial regression; Passage estimated using OLS with state-clustered standard errors.

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* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Bill Passage Rates

The interaction model provides evidence that the relationship between LGBTQ identity and legislative success is conditional rather than uniform across partisan contexts. Consistent with earlier models, there is no statistically meaningful difference in bill passage rates between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ legislators overall. Among Democrats, the estimated effect of LGBTQ identity is substantively small and close to zero, indicating that LGBTQ legislators are just as effective as their non-LGBTQ counterparts in advancing legislation once bills are introduced.

The analysis finds limited evidence that LGBTQ legislators experience systematically lower legislative passage rates once bills are introduced. Although the direction of several coefficients suggests somewhat lower average passage rates among LGBTQ legislators, these relationships do not consistently reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Similarly, interaction effects between LGBTQ identity and party affiliation remain limited. Taken together, these findings suggest that disparities in representation emerge less through legislative effectiveness and more through unequal access to institutional leadership and agenda-setting authority.

The passage-rate models provide limited evidence of an overall LGBTQ disadvantage. Although several estimates are negative, they do not consistently reach conventional levels of statistical significance. The interaction analysis also offers limited statistical support for differences across partisan groups. Descriptively, the predicted probabilities suggest a larger gap among Republican legislators, but the available estimates do not establish that this partisan

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difference is statistically distinguishable from zero. The clearest disparity in the analysis therefore concerns leadership attainment rather than bill passage.

Predicted Probabilities and Distributional Patterns

Figure 1 presents predicted probabilities from the interaction model, illustrating the conditional nature of legislative inequality across partisan contexts. Among Democrats, the probability of bill passage remains nearly identical for LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ legislators, indicating no meaningful difference in effectiveness. In contrast, among Republicans, LGBTQ legislators exhibit a lower predicted probability of passage, with a noticeable decline relative to their non-LGBTQ counterparts. This pattern reinforces the conclusion that disparities in legislative success are not universal, but instead emerge within specific partisan contexts.

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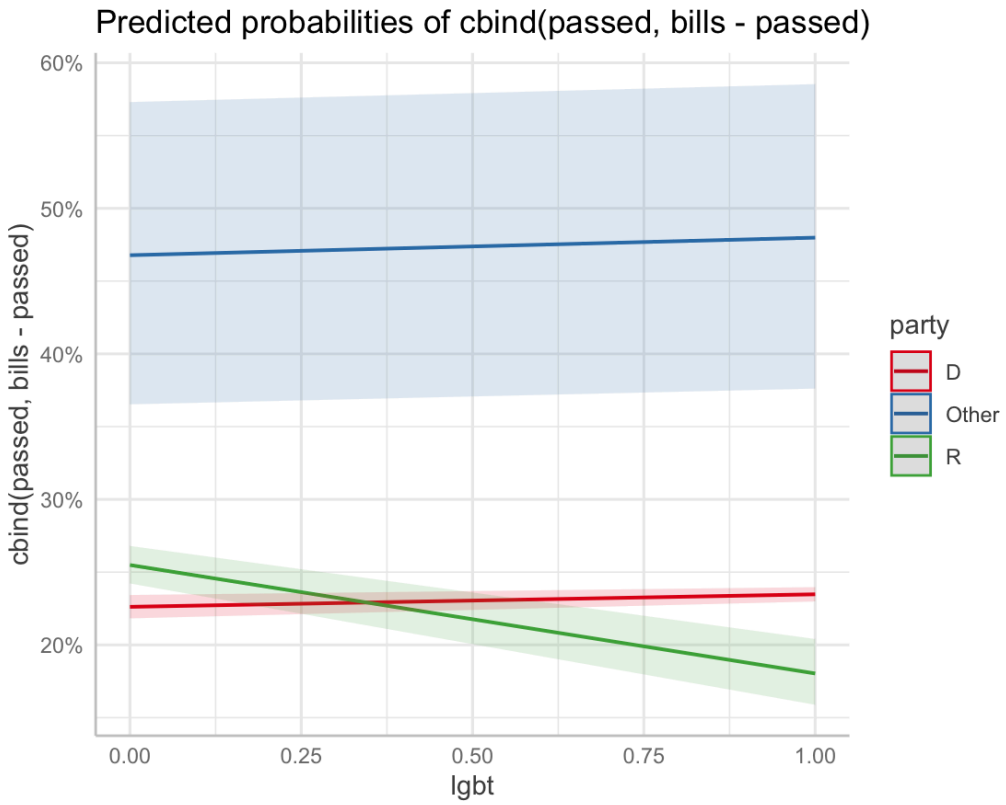
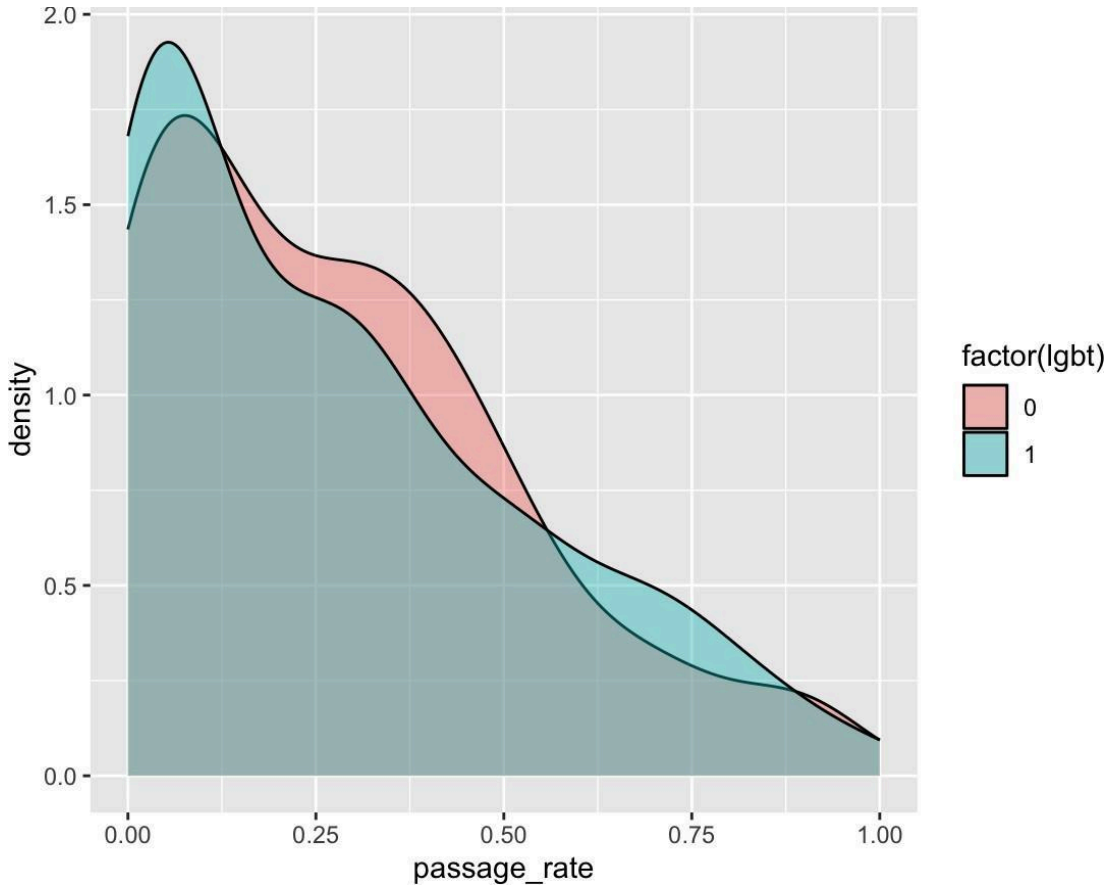


Figure 2 shows the distribution of passage rates further underscoring the absence of a broad performance gap. The density plots show substantial overlap between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ legislators, with both groups concentrated at relatively low passage rates. While there is a slight shift suggesting lower passage rates among LGBTQ legislators, the distributions are largely similar, indicating that differences in legislative effectiveness are modest at best. This visual evidence aligns with the regression results, which show no statistically significant overall difference in passage rates once relevant factors are taken into account.

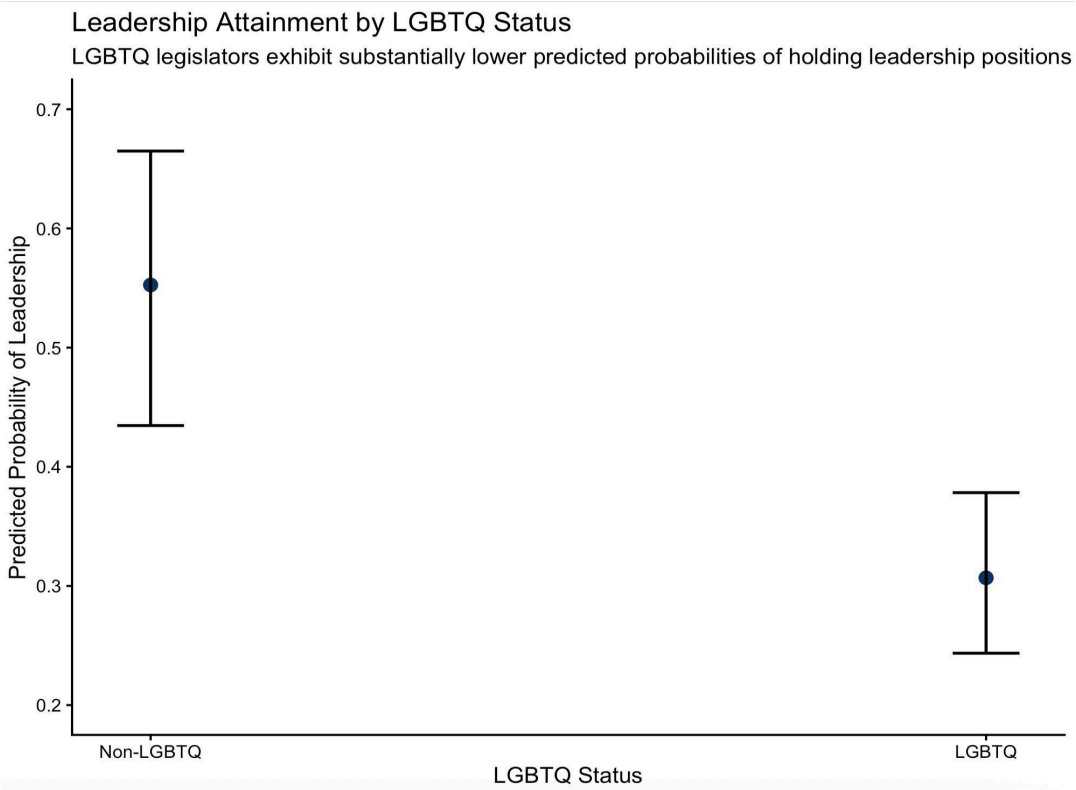
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LGBTQ legislators introduced a total of 34,668 bills in the period of 2024–2025, of which approximately 9,645 were enacted, yielding a passage rate of 27.82 percent. By comparison, non-LGBT legislators achieved a passage rate of 32.35 percent. If LGBTQ legislators had experienced the same success rate, an estimated 11,214 of their bills would have been enacted. This implies a shortfall of roughly 1,569 bills. This calculation illustrates the difference between the groups' unadjusted passage rates, but it should not be interpreted as evidence of a statistically significant effect of LGBTQ identity. The regression models do not establish a statistically significant overall difference in passage rates after accounting for the included covariates. Nor does the descriptive comparison identify whether institutional barriers, differences in bill characteristics, or other factors explain the observed gap.

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The figure below illustrates a substantial gap in predicted leadership attainment between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ legislators. Consistent with the regression results, LGBTQ legislators exhibit markedly lower predicted probabilities of occupying formal leadership positions.



Conclusion

The growth of LGBTQ representation in state legislatures raises a question that electoral statistics alone cannot answer: what opportunities do LGBTQ lawmakers have to exercise power once they take office?

The evidence presented here points to an important distinction. LGBTQ legislators have substantially lower odds of occupying formal leadership positions, even though the reported models do not establish a comparable disadvantage in bill passage or legislative activity.

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Leadership attainment and legislative effectiveness are therefore not interchangeable measures of political incorporation.

These findings also raise questions that the present analysis cannot resolve. The data do not establish whether disparities in leadership reflect seniority, party networks, selection decisions, or other institutional factors not fully captured by the models. Nor can formal leadership positions account for every way legislators exercise influence. Examining these processes more directly would help clarify whether unequal access to institutional authority persists among otherwise similarly situated lawmakers.

The central implication is that studies of descriptive representation should pay closer attention to what happens after election. Counting who holds office is necessary, but understanding how political power is distributed requires examining the positions legislators occupy and the opportunities available to them within the institution.

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The finding that LGBTQ legislators introduce more bills has not yet been incorporated as a verified result because the manuscript's current regression table reports $\beta = -0.095$ (SE = 0.153). Once that result is reconciled with your underlying data, the abstract, legislative activity results, Table 1, and conclusion should be updated together.

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