

ISSUE SPOTLIGHT

LGBTQ Voting in the U.S. South

NOVEMBER 2020



The Southern LGBTQ Health Survey is a project of the Southern LGBTQ Health Initiative, led by the Campaign for Southern Equality and Western NC Community Health Services. Published in 2019, the survey included responses from 5,617 LGBTQ people across the South, and collected data on a range of measures related to the health and well-being of LGBTQ Southerners.

This Issue Spotlight focuses on measures related to LGBTQ Voting in the U.S. South.

Nearly 92% of the people who participated in the 2019 Southern LGBTQ Health Survey are registered to vote. Further, 80% of people surveyed believe that their vote has a positive impact.

There are, however, significant differences in voter registration and political efficacy rates across groups according to education, income, race, transgender identity, HIV status, and experience with victimization (see page 6).

Among those registered to vote in our sample, 18.4% felt that their vote did not have a positive impact. Among those not registered to vote, 47.1% felt the same way (see page 8).

This report takes a deeper dive into these findings, exploring factors that affect LGBTQ voting behavior in the South and recommending strategies and interventions to increase voter registration, electoral participation, and LGBTQ Southerners' sense of their own political efficacy.

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CAMPAIGN FOR
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Western North Carolina
Community Health Services

LGBTQ ISSUES AT THE BALLOT BOX

As we approach Election Day on November 3, 2020, it is important to consider some of the political and legal issues the LGBTQ community is facing and why political participation from LGBTQ Southerners is essential in increasing representation at all levels of government and building the political voice and will to achieve full legal equality.

The United States Supreme Court

The federal courts continue to play a determinative role in the national debate about legal protections for LGBTQ people.

June 2020 saw a historic victory at the U.S. Supreme Court, when a 6-3 decision in *Bostock v. Clayton County* found that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits “sex” discrimination in employment, by definition prohibits employment discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The *Bostock* decision was specifically about employment, but it ostensibly applies to other federal laws that prohibit sex discrimination in other areas, including housing (Fair Housing Act), education (Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972), healthcare (Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act), and credit (Equal Credit Opportunity Act). Future litigation under the *Bostock* precedent could soon secure significant other protections for LGBTQ Southerners.

Additional cases about LGBTQ equality lie ahead, however. The *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia* case is now pending at the U.S.

“Political participation from LGBTQ Southerners is essential in increasing representation at all levels of government and building the political voice and will to achieve full legal equality.”

Supreme Court and could lead to serious and harmful religious exemptions from LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination laws. Cases about transgender students centered on sex-segregated facilities like bathrooms and locker rooms – such as *Gavin Grimm v. Gloucester County School Board* or *Adams v. School Board of St. Johns County*, both based in Southern states – could also reach the high court soon. And Supreme Court Justices Thomas and Alito recently called into question the validity of the *Obergefell v. Hodges* marriage decision. LGBTQ Southerners will surely have future fights at the Court, which now includes conservative Amy Coney Barrett on the bench.

Federal Laws and Policies

LGBTQ Southerners also stand to be significantly impacted by federal legislation such as the Equality Act, which would establish comprehensive federal nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQ Americans. Given that Virginia is the only Southern state to have passed such protections, federal legislation like the Equality Act is the best and fastest way to fully and explicitly protect LGBTQ people across

the South from discrimination. Executive and administrative action also plays a vital role: A pro-equality president could restore important federal guidelines or interpretations about LGBTQ people that the Trump Administration has dismantled. These include guidelines for schools on how to protect the dignity of transgender students, explicit interpretation of the Affordable Care Act to prohibit anti-transgender discrimination in healthcare, and more.

LGBTQ Policies at the State and Local Level

The South continues to be ground zero for anti-LGBTQ legislation, including bills attacking the dignity of transgender young people and bills seeking a broad anti-LGBTQ license to discriminate, threatened in many Southern states. From Kentucky to Georgia to Alabama to South Carolina, lawmakers have already or likely will soon file discriminatory legislation that advocates will need to fight off.

At the same time, we are seeing important political breakthroughs at the local and state level. Virginia became the first Southern state to pass comprehensive LGBTQ nondiscrimination protections and a ban on anti-LGBTQ ‘conversion therapy’ in 2020, and North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper has taken executive action against discrimination in public employment and among state contractors, as well as against state funding of ‘conversion therapy’ practitioners. Cities and towns have taken action on their own to pass ordinances banning anti-LGBTQ discrimination, including most recently Statesboro, GA – and in December 2020, North Carolina’s moratorium on local nondiscrimination ordinances will expire, opening the door to local progress in NC.

This progress is in line with where many Southerners’ beliefs about LGBTQ equality

“The elected officials in many Southern states have not yet caught up with their constituents, a process that can be accelerated by the robust participation of LGBTQ people in local and state elections and politics.”

already are: Polling across the South shows that a growing majority of people in every Southern state support nondiscrimination protections. Elected officials in many Southern states have not yet caught up with their constituents, a process that can be accelerated by the robust participation of LGBTQ people in local and state elections and politics.

Voter Suppression

Restrictions around who has access to the ballot and when, how, and where they vote impacts LGBTQ Southerners throughout the region. Gerrymandering – the process of partisan state and local redistricting – makes it harder to elect pro-LGBTQ candidates throughout the South and suppresses the impact of the vote for low-income LGBTQ people and LGBTQ people of color in particular.¹ Additionally, a total of 36 states have passed voter ID laws, with some of the strictest policies passed in Southern states.² Voter ID laws add an unnecessary hurdle for eligible voters and are likely to disproportionately marginalize transgender

¹ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/reports/2020/07/08/487426/partisan-gerrymandering-limits-voting-rights/>
² <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/voter-id.aspx>

and/or low income people who may not have access to accurate identity documentation.³

These are just a few of many political issues that affect LGBTQ Southerners. The local, state, and federal representatives, the local judges and state justices, and all of the various ballot initiatives that Americans are asked to vote on affect LGBTQ people in their communities.

With continued progress toward lived and legal equality, we also are seeing growing political representation of the LGBTQ Community in the South. Danica Roem, the first out transgender state legislator in U.S. history, has used her position as a Virginia legislator to sponsor bills that expand the voter registration time frame,⁴ pay for the postage on absentee ballots,⁵ and prohibit anti-LGBTQ discrimination.⁶ Florida and North Carolina are tied among Southern states for the highest number of out LGBTQ politicians serving roles like mayor, state legislator, or city council member.⁷ And in June 2020 the city of Wheeling, West Virginia elected Rosemary Ketchum, an out transgender leader.⁸

In the 2020 election, LGBTQ candidates throughout the region are running for elected office up and down the ballot. From races for federal or state congressional seats to those for mayor, sheriff, or municipal leadership, these candidates are breaking barriers in their local communities, across the region, and around the country for LGBTQ people.

This type of representation is known as **descriptive representation**, in which political representatives share characteristics with those they represent, such as gender, race, or sexual orientation. Descriptive representation has the potential to bring other LGBTQ

people into the political process, as LGBTQ people see themselves and their issues represented in political campaigns and conversations. Research suggests that when descriptive representation increases for political minorities, residents who share the represented identity are more likely to feel that public officials care about people like them.⁹ Scholars also find that descriptive representation is positively tied to political engagement and political activity for minoritized communities.¹⁰ Increasing LGBTQ descriptive representation has the potential to impact individual behaviors and attitudes and is important for the expansion and protection of LGBTQ freedoms. Of course, electing LGBTQ politicians is but one piece in a larger effort to secure equality – and it cannot be achieved without politically active and engaged voters.

However, not all eligible LGBTQ people are registered to vote – and when LGBTQ people do go to the polls, they do not always believe that their vote will have an impact. The Williams Institute at UCLA estimates that 9 million LGBTQ adults are registered to vote, with approximately 21% of LGBTQ adults not registered.¹¹ Aside from these basic measures of voter registration, there has not been much research on civic engagement or electoral participation among LGBTQ people. On top of this, we know even less about LGBTQ people's belief in the power of their vote.

Using data from our 2019 Southern LGBTQ Health Survey, this Issue Spotlight explores factors that may affect LGBTQ voting behavior in the South and recommends interventions to increase voter registration, electoral participation, and feelings of political efficacy for LGBTQ Southerners.

3 <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/trans-voter-id-impact/>

4 <https://www.billtrack50.com/BillDetail/1158048>

5 <https://www.billtrack50.com/BillDetail/1158113>

6 <https://www.billtrack50.com/BillDetail/1161318>

7 <https://outforamerica.org>

8 <https://time.com/5851971/i-really-want-to-be-in-the-room-rosemary-ketchum-elected-as-west-virginias-first-openly-transgender-official/>

9 Atkeson, Lonna Rae, and Nancy Carrillo. 2007. "More Is Better: The Influence of Collective Female Descriptive Representation on External Efficacy." *Politics & Gender*: 79–101.

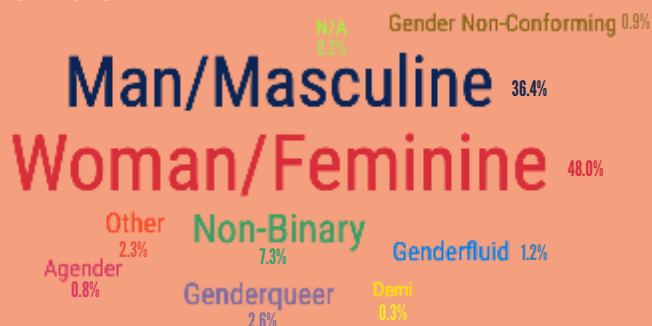
10 See Banducci, Susan A, Todd Donovan, and Jeffrey A Karp. 2004. "Minority Representation, Empowerment, and Participation." *The Journal of Politics* 66(2): 534–56 and Reingold, Beth, and Jessica Harrell. 2010. "The Impact of Descriptive Representation on Women's Political Engagement: Does Party Matter?" *Political Research Quarterly* 63(2): 280–94.

11 <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/the-2020-lgbt-vote/>

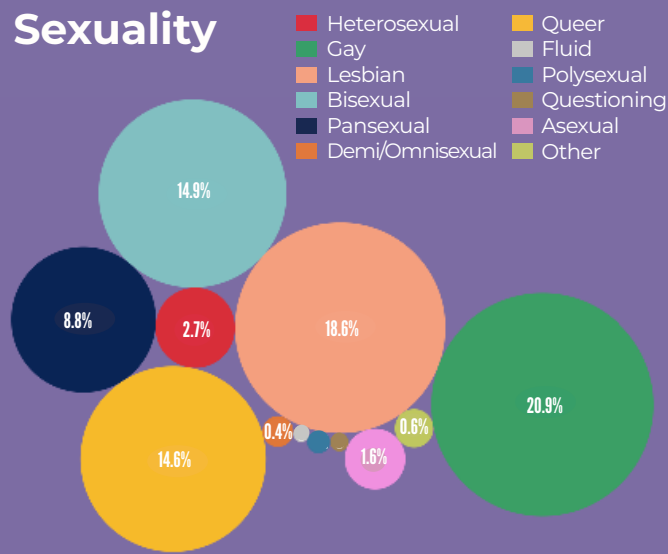
DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE SAMPLE

5,617 Total Respondents

Gender



Sexuality



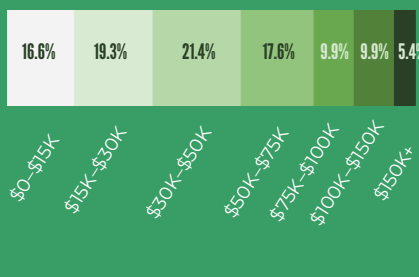
30.2%

identify as transgender

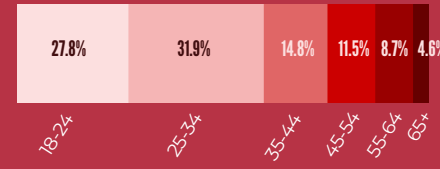
(Transgender, Gender Nonconforming, or Non-Binary)



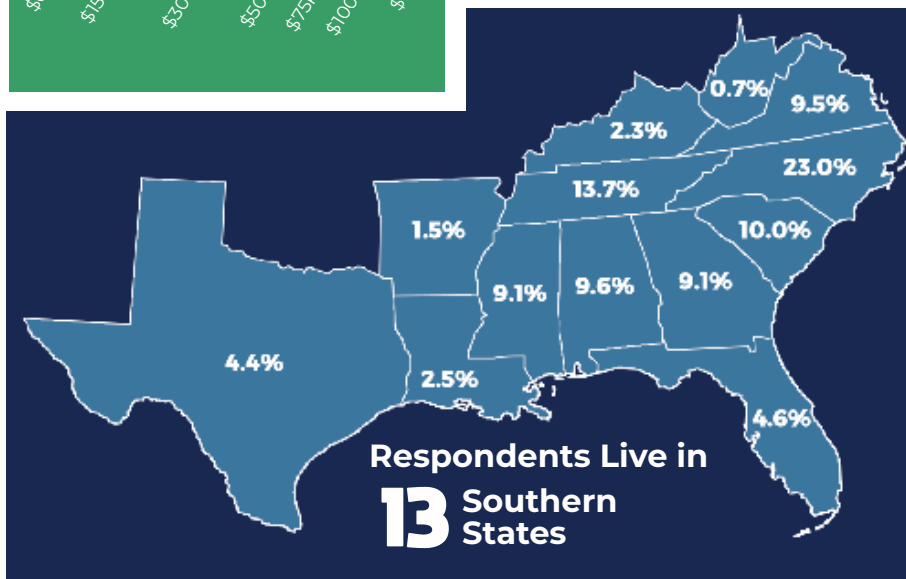
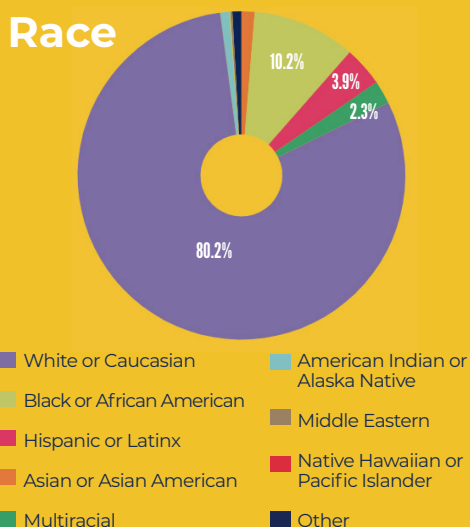
Household Income



Age



Race



Respondents Live in
13 Southern States

A full demographic breakdown and analysis is available in the full report at www.southernequality.org/Survey

View the Full Report at: WWW.SOUTHERNEQUALITY.ORG/SURVEY

VOTER REGISTRATION

Nearly 92% of the people who participated in the 2019 Southern LGBTQ Health Survey are registered to vote. Further, 80% of people surveyed believe that their vote has a positive impact.

Consistent with prior data, we find lower registration rates among survey respondents who identify as Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino compared to other racial and ethnic groups, while finding higher registration rates among respondents who are White or Caucasian. Racial and ethnic minorities are likely to have lower registration rates given their historical exclusion and marginalization, combined with modern acts of voter suppression. For example, Georgia and Texas have both recently been challenged in court for their efforts to purge voter rolls in ways that were likely to impact minorities.

We also find a slightly lower registration rate for transgender respondents. The voter registration rate for transgender respondents is 88.85% while the rate is 93.60% for cisgender respondents.

Fig. 1:
“Are you registered to vote?” in the total sample



Fig. 2: “Are you registered to vote?” segmented by race

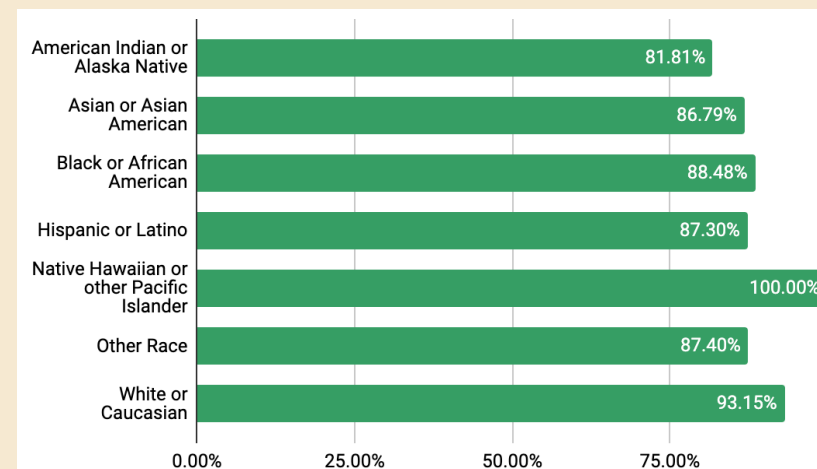
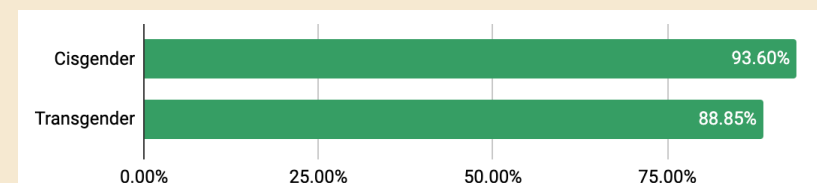


Fig. 3: “Are you registered to vote?” segmented by cis/trans identity



We also find that voter registration rates rise with increased income and education, with the most profound impact coming from a respondent's education background. Less than half of the sample (46%) with less than a high school diploma is registered to vote, whereas almost all respondents (97%) with a doctoral degree are registered.

Respondents' experience with anti-LGBTQ violence is also negatively associated with voter registration. That is, 88.69% of respondents who have experienced physical violence or abuse due to their LGBTQ identity are registered to vote, compared to 93.15% of respondents who did not report experiencing physical violence due to their identity.

Among respondents who are living with HIV, the voter registration rate is 89.16%, compared with 93.13% for respondents who are not living with HIV. We find further differences among those living with HIV based on race and gender identity. Among participants who are living with HIV, the registration rate is 93.68% for White respondents, 87.77% for Black respondents, 86.27% for trans respondents, and 90% for cisgender respondents.

Fig. 4: "Are you registered to vote?" segmented by income

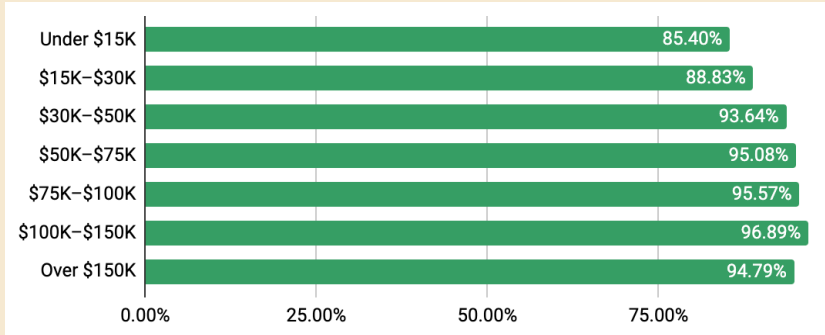


Fig. 5: "Are you registered to vote?" segmented by educational background

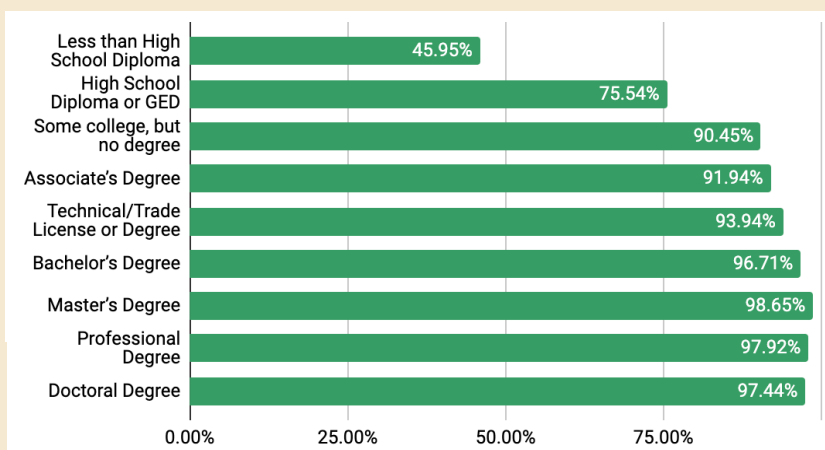


Fig. 4: "Are you registered to vote?" segmented by experiences with violence or emotional abuse

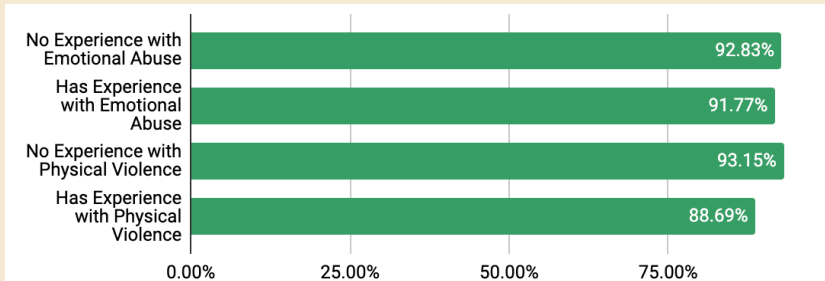
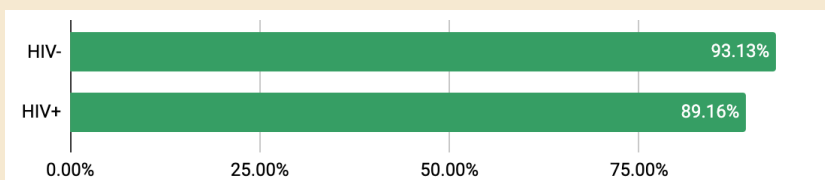


Fig. 6: "Are you registered to vote?" segmented by HIV status



POLITICAL EFFICACY

Political efficacy is the feeling that you are able to influence politics. To measure political efficacy, we asked respondents if they feel their vote has a positive impact.

Among those registered to vote in our sample, 18.4% felt that their vote did not have a positive impact. Among those not registered to vote, 47.1% felt the same way

We find that political efficacy is positively linked with both education and income, though both seem to have a modest impact. The percent of those who feel their vote has a positive impact rises from 76.19% for those with less than a high school diploma to 82.65% for those with a doctoral degree, and from 71.93% for those whose income is under \$15,000 to 86.54% for those making over \$150,000 a year.

Fig. 7: Political efficacy in the total sample, segmented by voter registration

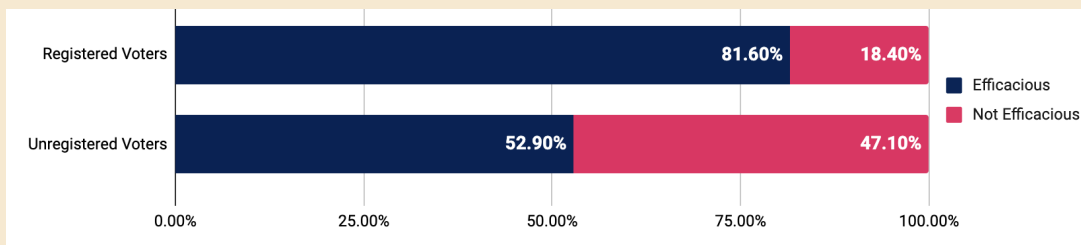


Fig. 8: Political efficacy in the total sample, segmented by education

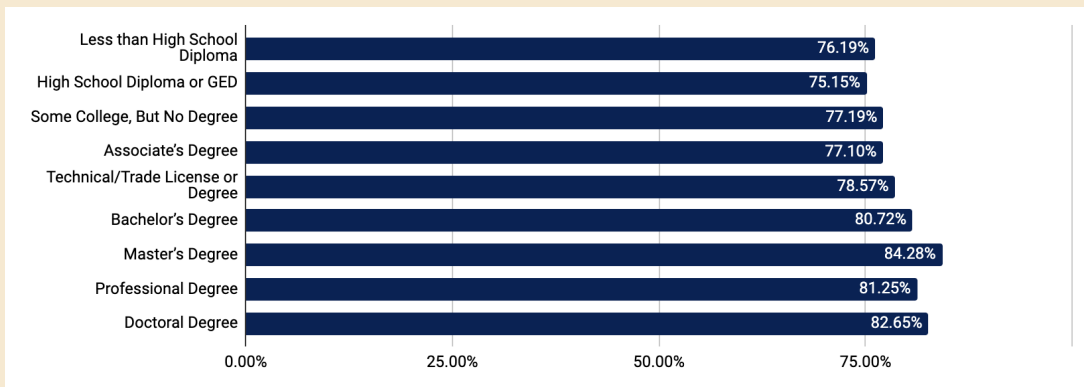
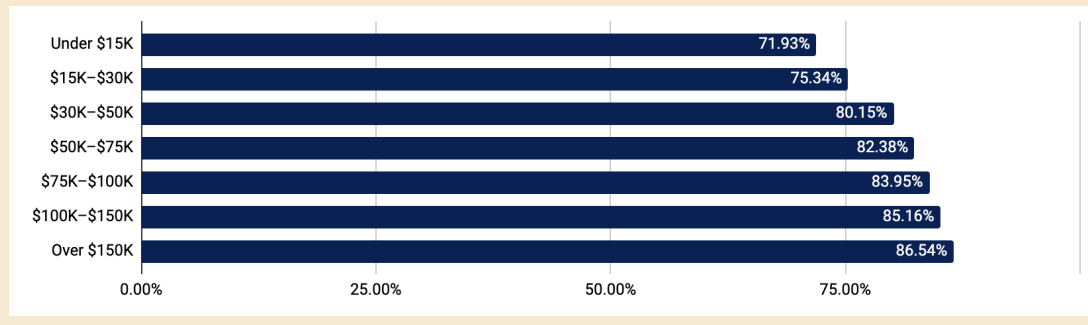


Fig. 9: Political efficacy in the total sample, segmented by income



* **Note:** Respondents were able to answer "Impactful" "Somewhat Impactful," or "Not Impactful" to the question of whether their vote has a positive impact. These charts dichotomize the responses and collapse "Somewhat" and "Impactful" responses into a total efficaciousness percentage.

Race and ethnicity also appear to have an impact on political efficacy. The data show that the percentage of respondents who believe their vote has a positive impact is significantly higher among those who identify as Black or African American at 84.21% compared to all other racial and ethnic groups at 79.72%.

Fewer transgender respondents (73.84%) report feeling that their vote has a positive impact compared to cisgender respondents (82.31%).

Additionally, the data suggest a strong negative relationship between LGBTQ victimization and political efficacy. Only 72.03% of those who have experienced physical violence think their vote has a positive impact compared to 82.14% for those who have not been victims of violence. Similarly, 76.98% of those who experienced abuse are politically efficacious, while the positive response rate is 86.59% for those who have not experienced abuse. The rate of political efficacy decreases as fear of violence or abuse increases. Among those who report “never” feeling fear of experiencing violence, 85.09% said they feel politically efficacious. That percentage drops to 67.86% among those who are “always” afraid of experiencing violence. The difference in efficacy is even more pronounced when segmented by fear of abuse and harassment. The efficacy rate is 87.43% for those who “never” fear abuse compared to 67.86% for those who “always” fear experiencing abuse or harassment due to their LGBTQ identity.

Fig. 10: Political efficacy in the total sample, segmented by race

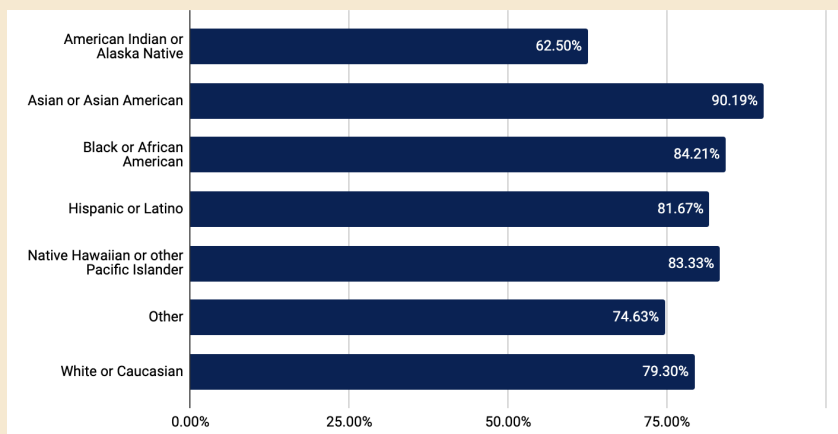


Fig. 11: Political efficacy in the total sample, segmented by cis/trans identity

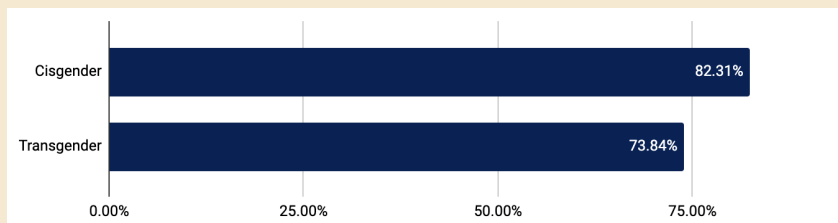


Fig. 12: Political efficacy in the total sample, segmented by experience with emotional abuse or physical violence

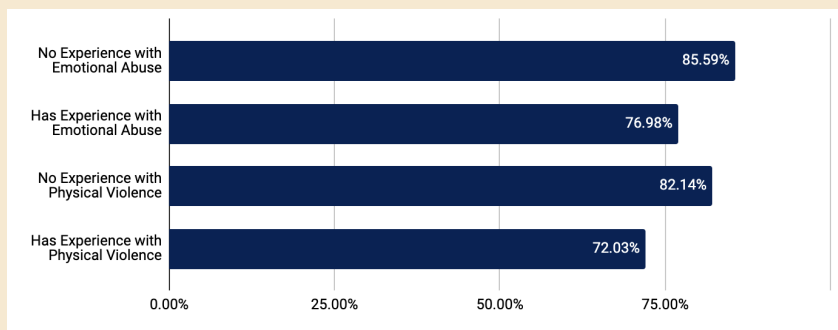
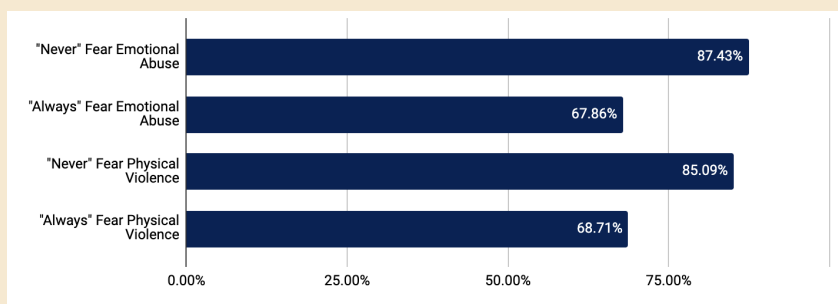


Fig. 13: Political efficacy in the total sample, segmented by fear of emotional abuse or physical violence



RECOMMENDATIONS

Discriminatory laws and practices do not happen in a vacuum. We, along with our friends, family, and neighbors, exercise our right to vote and select candidates who then go on to impact our social and political reality. LGBTQ Southerners have the power to elect representatives and shape the policies that structure their lived experience. And, LGBTQ leaders in the region have the power to educate their communities on the individuals and initiatives that would affect their lives, to provide opportunities and motivation for voter registration, and empower LGBTQ Southerners to advocate for themselves at the ballot box.

Our Recommendations to Increase Voter Registration Rates and Political Efficacy Among LGBTQ Southerners:

- ☒ Vote in every election - primaries and local, state and federal. Remember that your vote counts the same as anyone else's, regardless of income, education, race, gender, orientation, or HIV status.
- ☒ Encourage friends and family members to register to vote and to cast their ballots – and help them with any questions related to getting registered, finding their polling place, or voting. Find information about voting in your state at: <https://www.whenweallvote.org/>
- ☒ Use social media to follow and share information about politicians, political organizations, advocacy groups, and issues you care about, including officials' public stances on LGBTQ issues, national and state legislation impacting the LGBTQ community, and LGBTQ-related legal cases.
- ☒ Reach out to your politicians to ask where they stand on issues impacting the LGBTQ community. You can find their phone numbers and emails on their websites.
- ☒ Find ways to get engaged in the political system. Support LGBTQ politicians and leaders who will fight for LGBTQ political empowerment. Many political campaigns use volunteers to help register voters, contact potential voters, and host campaign events.
- ☒ Discuss out LGBTQ politicians with friends and family to raise awareness for their campaigns and to normalize LGBTQ political representation.
- ☒ Recognize historical and ongoing anti-LGBTQ discrimination in politics. Acknowledge how this discrimination disenfranchises citizens and reduces trust in the government.
- ☒ Attend town hall and city council meetings.
- ☒ Write and sign petitions regarding the protection and empowerment of the LGBTQ community.
- ☒ Vote with your dollar. Be conscious of where you spend your money. Some companies and corporations donate to anti-LGBTQ politicians.



Southern LGBTQ Voter Checklist

Before heading to the polls, look up a sample of your ballot and check out where each of the candidates stand on LGBTQ issues and how any ballot initiatives affect you and your LGBTQ neighbors, friends, and family.

- ☐ Register to Vote
- ☐ Double-Check Your Registration.
- ☐ Find Your Polling Place
- ☐ Check Voter ID Law in Your State
- ☐ Look Up Your Sample Ballot
- ☐ Make a Plan to Vote
- ☐ Vote!
- ☐ Encourage your friends, family, and neighbors to vote!
- ☐ Volunteer to get out the vote, serve as a poll worker, or make calls to increase turnout.

www.vote.org/register-to-vote

www.vote.org/am-i-registered-to-vote

www.vote.org/polling-place-locator

www.vote.org/voter-id-laws

www.ballotpedia.org/Sample_Ballot_Lookup

www.votesaveamerica.com/plan

ABOUT THIS SURVEY SPOTLIGHT

Recommended Citation

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Campaign for Southern Equality

The Campaign for Southern Equality (CSE) is based in Asheville, North Carolina, and works across the South to promote full LGBTQ equality – both legal and lived. Our work is rooted in commitments to empathy and to equity in race, class, and gender.

Western North Carolina Community Health Services

Western North Carolina Community Health Services, Inc. (WNCCHS) is a federally-qualified health center that provides primary healthcare, HIV/AIDS care, and transgender healthcare to residents of Western North Carolina.

Southern LGBTQ Health Initiative

The Southern LGBTQ Health Initiative is a collaboration between CSE and WNCCHS that works to achieve health equity for LGBTQ Southerners by increasing access to LGBTQ-friendly primary care, HIV prevention and treatment, transgender health care and support services. Learn about the initiative at: www.southernlgbtqhealthinitiative.org.

Press Inquiries

For media and other inquiries, contact Adam Polaski, Communications Director at the Campaign for Southern Equality, by phone (610-306-7956) or email (adam@southernequality.org).

Don't Miss the Full Report of the 2019 Southern LGBTQ Health Survey

A complete analysis is available in the full 150+ page Report of the 2019 Southern LGBTQ Health Survey, which includes:

- ◆ In-depth discussion of respondents' physical health, mental health, health insurance, healthcare behaviors and experiences, experiences with HIV, experiences with gender-affirming hormone therapy, and regionality.
- ◆ Detailed description on participant demographics, methodology, and limitations.
- ◆ More qualitative responses from participants on their individual experiences with health and healthcare.
- ◆ Glossary of terms.
- ◆ Full text of the Survey instrument.
- ◆ Appendix with tables of all responses, including demographic cross-tabs.

www.southernequality.org/Survey