

The “Electability” of LGBTQ Candidates



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Every year, more and more LGBTQ candidates are running for office on the local, state, and federal levels—and winning their races. In 2018, the number of LGBTQ Members of Congress nearly doubled to eight, and in 2020, two more joined their ranks. Despite the historic performances by LGBTQ candidates up and down the ballot, there’s still hesitation in some corners about running LGBTQ candidates in swing districts. But there’s compelling evidence to refute this concern and prove these candidates can win in tough places.

In fact, almost half of the sitting LGBTQ Members of Congress hail from swing districts—Representative Angie Craig (MN-02), Representative Chris Pappas (NH-01), Representative Sharice Davids (KS-03), and Representative Sean Patrick Maloney (NY-18). All these districts rank between R+2 and D+1 on the Cook Partisan Voting Index, meaning they’re competitive seats that track within 2 points of the national presidential vote. While redistricting is still underway, the Cook Political Report estimates there will be just 48 competitive house seats in 2022, compared to 89 in 2020. And with only a nine-person majority in Congress, these four seats are vital. In 2016, Donald

Trump won three of these four districts. All four flipped from red to blue in the last decade. And all four of these Members have at least one reelection under their belt. Clearly, LGBTQ candidates can win—and not just in super blue places.

The LGBTQ Candidates Who Built the Pro-Equality Majority

While these four Members of Congress who represent swing districts are trailblazers for LGBTQ representation, they're also mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, neighbors, and members of their communities. Representative Craig is a married mother of four who spent the majority of her career working in health care. She attends her local church and was involved in several local community boards before running for office, including the Rotary Club. Representative Davids is the daughter of a single mother and army veteran. She was an MMA fighter who then devoted her career to economic development on Native American reservations. She even opened her own small business. Representative Pappas was born and raised in New Hampshire. He served in his local and state governments and co-owns a family restaurant with his siblings. And he very recently announced his engagement to his partner. Representative Maloney is married to his partner of 20 years and has three children. He worked for President Clinton and New York Governor Eliot Spitzer before he ran for office himself.

While many of these Members are “firsts” when it comes to LGBTQ representation in Congress, they were candidates to whom people could relate. They shop at their local grocery store, watch their children’s soccer games, go to school talent shows, and work to pay their mortgage.

LGBTQ Candidates Outperformed House Dems

Across the country, House Democrats underperformed President Biden by 1.3 points in 2020. Three of the four swing district LGBTQ candidates outperformed that average. Representative Pappas won his district by five points, only underperforming Biden by one. Representative Davids won her district by ten points, only 0.6 points lower than Biden’s margin. And Representative Maloney won his district by 12.6 points, actually outperforming Biden by nearly eight. Representative Craig was the only one to underperform House Democrats, winning her district by 4.7 points less than President Biden. Part of this could be explained by a bizarre race that included a third-party candidate running on the “Legal Marijuana Now” ballot line whose September 2020 death postponed the election before courts stepped in to reverse that edict.

Some Democratic candidates struggled in 2020 because they didn’t have the same appeal to moderate voters as President Biden did. These LGBTQ candidates didn’t seem to have that problem.

LGBTQ Candidates Outperformed House Dems

Candidate	Performance compared to Biden
House Democrats	-1.3
Representative Pappas	-1.0
Representative Davids	-0.6
Representative Maloney	+7.9
Representative Craig	-4.7

Source: Nir, David. "Daily Kos Elections' presidential results by congressional district for 2020, 2016, and 2012." Daily Kos, 19 Nov 2020. <https://www.dailyskos.com/stories/2020/11/19/1163009/-Daily-Kos-Elections-presidential-results-by-congressional-district-for-2020-2016-and-2012>. Accessed 18 Jan 2022.

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LGBTQ Candidates Flipped Their Districts

In 2018, Representative Craig and Representative Davids both won seats that were historically held by Republicans. The former had run for her seat two years earlier and lost by 2.2 points as Trump won the district. In 2018, she beat the Republican incumbent by 5.6 points and helped to flip the House from red to blue. Support for her persisted in 2020 as she outraised her Republican challenger by \$2.6 million. The latter also helped to deliver a pro-equality majority, beating the Republican incumbent, Kevin Yoder, by nearly 10 points. Yoder had been a historical overperformer who won reelection in 2016 by 10.7 points as Trump was losing the district by a point. That means the total swing from 2016 to Davids' victory in 2018 was nearly 21 points. And in 2020, Davids outraised her challenger by \$3.5 million.

Representative Sean Patrick Maloney also flipped his district from red to blue back in 2012, beating the Republican incumbent by 4 points. He's held onto his seat ever since, and his margins continued to grow, winning by 11.2 points in 2016 and 12.6 points in 2020. And while Representative Pappas didn't flip his seat, it was held by a Republican four years prior to his election and consistently flipped back and forth between parties. In 2018, he won by an impressive 8.6 points, more than 4 points higher than the margin of the Democrat who won in 2016, and the first time since 2008 the seat didn't flip. And in 2020, he outraised his Republican challenger by \$1.4 million.

All four of these candidates ran in competitive swing districts—three of them in districts that Trump won in 2016. Three of the four flipped their seats, beating Republican incumbents. And all

four have consistently outraised their Republican opponents. Not only did LGBTQ candidates deliver in their districts, but they held onto the electoral support they earned even in the face of depressed support for down-ballot Democrats in 2020.

LGBTQ State Legislature Candidates Saw Similar Results

Within these four swing districts, several LGBTQ candidates ran for their State Legislatures and garnered similar results. Two candidates for the Kansas State House in Representative David's district flipped their seats from red to blue in 2018. State Representative Brandon Woodard (HD-30) won his seat by 8.6 points, a more than 13-point gain over the performance of the Democratic candidate in 2016. State Representative Susan Ruiz (HD-23) beat the Republican incumbent by 4.2 points, when the Democratic candidate in 2016 had lost to the incumbent by nine. And while candidate Katie Dixon (HD-49) narrowly lost her 2020 election by 2.2 points, it was a great improvement from 2016 and 2018 when Democratic candidates lost by 16.8 and 7.8 points, respectively. Like LGBTQ candidates on the federal level, state-level LGBTQ candidates are proving their mettle—flipping their districts and winning over moderate voters.

Voters Say They Have No Problem Electing Gay or Lesbian Candidates

The results above should not be surprising given recent public opinion research around this topic. In May 2019, Gallup asked voters if they would be comfortable electing candidates of specific backgrounds. When asked if they would consider voting for a gay or lesbian person for president, 76% of voters said yes.¹ Gallup had been asking this question consistently since the 1980s, and it broke majority support around the turn of the century and has been growing ever since. There was majority support across both parties and independents, as 83% of Democrats, 82% of Independents, and 61% of Republicans said they would vote for a gay or lesbian candidate.

Conclusion

The 117th Congress includes a House controlled by a narrow pro-LGBTQ majority of four seats. That majority is built on four LGBTQ Members of Congress who have been able to win repeatedly in tough, swing districts. Representatives Craig, Davids, Maloney, and Pappas have shown that you can be LGBTQ and appeal to moderate voters. They kept up with President Biden and outperformed their House Democratic counterparts in 2020. And they've all been elected, and reelected, in previously red districts. So, in 2022 and beyond, those who want to win should not hesitate to recruit LGBTQ candidates to build their majorities in purple places.

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ENDNOTES

1. McCarthy, Justin. "Less Than Half in U.S. Would Vote for a Socialist for President." *Gallup*, 9 May 2019. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/254120/less-half-vote-socialist-president.aspx>. Accessed 10 January 2022.