

LGBTIs Inclusion in Democracy: Trends and Outcomes



KEY FINDINGS:

- *Improvements in LGBTI inclusion has been very limited over the past 30 years. In MENA, Africa and Asia, LGBTI individuals are still altogether excluded from political power and the protection of civil liberties.*
- *Potential drivers of LGBTI inclusion are secularization, integration into the global system, and the level of democracy.*
- *Recent evidence suggests that countries where LGBTI rights are protected, perform better economically.*

To what extent are LGBTIs excluded from the political system? And what are the consequences of this? Sexual orientation has historically been a key source of political marginalization. Several new data sources and academic studies yield important insights into the political conditions of LGBTIs, representation, as well as the outcomes of LGBTI exclusion. This briefing paper summarizes some key findings of current trends and developments in LGBTI inclusion, including whether this group has access to political power and are protected by laws and civil liberties.

Global trends in LGBTI inclusion

During the last 60 years, the extent to which LGBTIs are included in political systems has improved at the global level. This is demonstrated in **Figure 1**, which shows the world averages from 1960 to 2018 in the extent to which political power is distributed based on sexual orientation. The figure also disaggregates the data by region. A zero on this indicator reflects that LGBTIs are entirely, or

almost entirely excluded from political power. A value of three or higher corresponds to LGBTIs being equally powerful to heterosexuals.

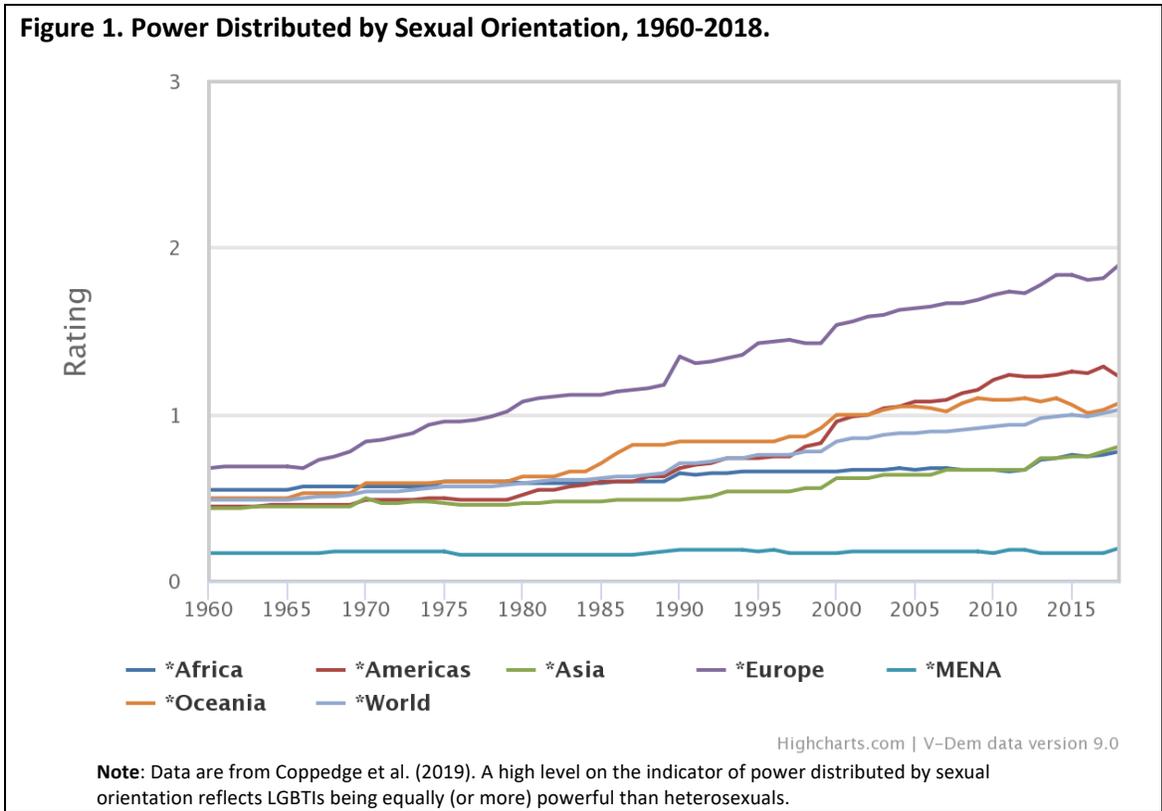
The light blue line, representing the global mean level of power distribution by sexual orientation, indicates that LGBTIs political inclusion has improved gradually, although most of the improvements have occurred after 1990.

Despite the overall improvement, there are still reasons to be concerned. First, improvements in the political inclusion of LGBTIs have been very modest even at the global level. On a scale from 0 to 4, the average world levels of LGBTI inclusion has increased only by 0.6 or 15 percentage points over almost 60 years, from 0.5 in 1960 to 1.1 in 2018. This improvement is modest when compared, for instance, to the improvement in global level of Electoral Democracy, which has increased quite dramatically from 0.29 in 1960 to 0.53 in 2018 or 24 percentage points on a scale from 0 to 1 (see, e.g. Luhrmann et al 2018). It is also modest compared to the developments in inclusion of other groups, such as women and ethnic minorities (see, e.g. Luhrmann et al 2018).

Second, although the global average level of LGBTI inclusion has increased (somewhat), several regions have experienced (close to) no improvement at all. This is particularly the case for the MENA region, in which LGBTIs have been fully excluded from the public and political sphere throughout the past 60 years.

There have also been very little improvements in LGBTI inclusion in Sub-Saharan Africa, and only some minor improvements in the most recent decades in Asia. Indeed, most of the global average improvements in LGBTI inclusion is due to quite substantial positive developments occurring in America and Europe.

Figure 1. Power Distributed by Sexual Orientation, 1960-2018.



This overall picture is also supported by data from the “Global Index on Legal Recognition of Homosexual Orientation” (GILRHO), which contains information on legal rights and protections afforded to LGB people in countries across the globe, from 1961-2014 (Badgett et al 2019). It includes, for instance, information about de-criminalization of homosexual acts, anti-discrimination legislation, and partnership rights. While the overall index has increased moderately from the late 1960s to 2014 (from 0.5 to 2.2 on a scale from 0-8), many countries and regions register very marginal improvements. For instance, there were 71 countries with a score of 0 (on a scale from 0-8) on the GILRHO index in 2014, which means that they offer no equality or protection of rights for LGBTI members of society.

Explanations for LGBTI inclusion

A limited amount of research is devoted to explaining why some countries strengthen their political inclusion of LGBTIs (while others do not), but a few explanations have been suggested. First, it has been advised that improvements in LGBTI political inclusion and protection of their rights, are driven by changes in mass attitudes. More specifically, a rise in tolerance levels of LGBTIs in the general

Improvements in LGBTI inclusion has been very limited over the past 30 years, especially in MENA, Africa and Asia.

population lowers the barriers for LGBTIs’ participation in politics.

Increasing tolerance of LGBTIs in a population is in turn explained by secularization and increasing socio-economic development (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). However, researchers trying to disentangle the relationship between tolerance for homosexuality and the political representation of LGBTIs are confronted with the “chicken and egg” problem, as it is hard to pin down whether representation of LGBTIs is a product of mass tolerance, or if it is the other way around.

But there is some solid evidence that political representation of LGBTIs improves attitudes towards LGBTI. For instance, it has been shown that the legalization of homosexuality leads to improvements in popular acceptance of homosexuality (Kenny and Patel 2017). This could occur through a “familiarity through presence”-mechanism, according to which citizens’ acquaintance with and thereby also acceptance and tolerance of LGBTI is strengthened by observing LGBTI individuals in positions of power and representation.

There is also evidence that even a small number of openly LGBTI legislators is associated significantly with future strengthening of LGBTI rights (Reynolds 2013).

Drivers of LGBTI inclusion are secularization, integration into the global system, and the level of democracy.

As indicated by the blue line, Electoral Democracy and LGBTI inclusion are positively related. Most of the countries that are highly inclusive of LGBTIs are also the countries with the best performance on Electoral Democracy. This mainly includes countries in Western Europe and North America, but also countries such as South Africa, Benin and Argentina.

Among the most LGBTI-restrictive countries, the majority of these are also highly authoritarian as reflected by low scores on Electoral Democracy. One notable exception is Tunisia, which has a relatively high level of Electoral Democracy, but largely excludes LGBTI individuals from access to political power and protection by civil liberties (for instance, homosexuality is still illegal).

Meanwhile, several (former) communist countries such as Vietnam, Cuba, China and Ukraine overperform on LGBTI inclusion relative to their level of Electoral Democracy.

Consequences of LGBTI inclusion

While LGBTI inclusion is unquestionably an important issue in itself, several studies have documented that exclusion based on sexual orientation also have harmful consequences beyond the exclusion as such. In particular, research suggests that LGBTI inclusion promotes prosperity and economic development, through a number of channels.

First, as the exclusion of LGBTI individuals reduces their ability to participate in and contribute to the economy, the overall

production level (in this economy) will fail to reach its full potential. This can happen, for instance, due to LGBTIs lacking opportunities to obtain education, or due to exclusion from the workforce based on discrimination.

Societies that exclude and restrict the freedoms of LGBTIs may also inhibit innovation and the circulation of new ideas, both because an entire group of individuals is kept out of the public discourse and because lack of tolerance discourages the circulation of a diverse set of ideas. Restrictions on the flow of new ideas may again prevent technological development and productivity.

Recent evidence suggests that countries where LGBTI rights are protected, perform better economically.

Badgett et al (2019) provides empirical evidence that LGB rights are related to higher levels of economic development. They find, for instance, that the introduction of one additional LGB right is associated with an increase in GDP of 2,000 USD. Similar findings are presented in Dahlum and Mechkova (2018).

It should be stressed that we cannot, based on these studies, conclude that LGBTI inclusion *causes* economic development. To be sure, the patterns identified in these studies could also reflect that economic development promotes LGBTI inclusion, for instance through stimulating more liberal attitudes and a higher level of tolerance in the population. Or, that other factors such as cultural change or other aspects related to socio-economic modernization stimulates both economic development and LGBTI inclusion. Future

studies should do more to do disentangle these mechanisms.

Recommendations:

Increasing representativeness of the LGBTI individuals in the decision-making process, for instance through more representatives in

parliament, can also increase tolerance for LGBTIs in the general population.

- *LGBTI exclusion should be understood and addressed as part of the larger discussion on democracy: The majority of those countries that discriminate against and restrict the freedoms of LGBTIs are also the least democratic.*

RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Asal, Victor, Udi Sommer, and Paul G. Harwood. "Original sin: A cross-national study of the legality of homosexual acts." *Comparative Political Studies* 46.3 (2013): 320-351.
- Ayoub, Phillip M. "Contested norms in new-adopter states: International determinants of LGBT rights legislation." *European Journal of International Relations* 21.2 (2015): 293-322.
- Badgett, MV Lee, Kees Waaldijk, and Yana van der Meulen Rodgers. "The relationship between LGBT inclusion and economic development: Macro-level evidence." *World Development* 120 (2019): 1-14.
- Encarnación, Omar G. "Gay rights: Why democracy matters." *Journal of Democracy* 25.3 (2014): 90-104.
- Reynolds, Andrew. "Representation and rights: The impact of LGBT legislators in comparative perspective." *American Political Science Review* 107.2 (2013): 259-274.

OTHER READINGS CITED IN THE TEXT

- Anna Lührmann, Sirianne Dahlum, Staffan I Lindberg, Laura Maxwell, Valeriya Mechkova, Moa Olin, Shreeya Pillai, Constanza Sanhueza Petrarca, Rachel Sigman, Natalia Stepanova (2018). V-Dem Annual Democracy Report: Democracy for all? Varieties of Democracy Institute, Gothenburg University.
- Charles Kenny and Dev Patel. 2017. "Norms and Reform: Legalizing Homosexuality Improves Attitudes." CGD Working Paper 465. Washington, DC: Center for Global Development. <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/norms-and-reform-legalizinghomosexuality-improves-attitudes>