



LGBT Inclusion in Sports

Beliefs About the Role of Professional Sports in Public Life

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Throughout the country's history, professional sports have helped advance understanding, acceptance, and equality. When done right, athletics can reflect the best of America because on the playing field, people are judged based on their skills, talents, and contributions—not their identities. In addition to modeling the value of nondiscrimination, there are notable examples of times when professional sports franchises and college athletic departments have taken public stances in the service of equality for women, people of color, and—more recently—lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBT, people.¹

The Center for American Progress undertook a study to explore the public's beliefs about professional sports teams that support LGBT issues, which are often perceived as controversial. Using an online sample of adults, CAP explored several research questions, including:

- To what degree do people believe that professional sports teams should take public stances on social causes?
- How do opinions of professional sports teams change if those teams express support for LGBT athletes and fans?
- How do opinions of professional sports teams change if those teams express support for laws protecting LGBT people?
- Does the explicit inclusion of LGBT people in diversity statements affect perceptions of professional sports teams?

Analyses were conducted to assess the influence of age, gender, political ideology, and LGBT status on respondents' perceptions. Study results suggest that professional teams that express support for LGBT athletes and fans and those that endorse laws that protect LGBT people will be viewed favorably by the public. Findings also show no negative impact of making explicitly LGBT-inclusive statements about diversity.

Support for teams that advocate social causes

In general, respondents either “somewhat agreed” (33.2 percent) or “strongly agreed” (19.3 percent) that “professional sports teams should utilize their platforms to advocate for causes they believe in.” One in three respondents (30 percent) stated they were neutral on this issue or had “no opinion.” Among respondents who identified as men, 46.5 percent either “somewhat agreed” or “strongly agreed” that sports teams should use their platforms to advocate for causes, while 33 percent had “no opinion.” Among respondents who identified as women, 60.4 percent either “somewhat agreed” or “strongly agreed” with that statement, with another 25.6 percent stating that they were neutral or had “no opinion.”

The majority of respondents ages 18 to 44 stated that they either “somewhat agreed” or “strongly agreed” that professional sports teams should use their platform to advocate for causes; 40.2 percent of those ages 45 to 54 and 43.4 percent of those above age 55 answered affirmatively. Significant portions of all age groups stated that they held no opinion or were neutral on the statement, including 36.9 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds, 27.3 percent of 25- to 34-year-olds, 32.8 percent of 35- to 44-year-olds, 20.6 percent of 45- to 54-year-olds, and 33.3 percent of those over 55 years old.

A majority or plurality of respondents from all political parties also expressed that they “somewhat agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement; 59.8 percent of Democrats, 39.1 percent of independents, and 49.4 percent of Republicans said they “somewhat agreed” or “strongly agreed” that professional sports teams should use their platforms for causes. Significant shares of respondents from all parties also expressed that they held no opinion or were neutral, including 28.9 percent of Democrats, 37.7 of independents, and 26.4 percent of Republicans.

Positive perceptions of teams that support LGBT athletes and fans

Overall, 56.1 percent of respondents stated that their opinion of a professional sports team would become “somewhat more positive” or “significantly more positive” if the team “expressed support for LGBT athletes and fans.” Another 36.2 percent responded that their opinion “would not change at all.” Only 7.6 percent answered that their opinion would become “somewhat more negative” or “significantly more negative.” Support reached across gender lines, with 54.5 percent of men and 57.3 percent of women responding that their opinion would become “somewhat more positive” or “significantly more positive.”

Among self-identified Republican respondents, 28.7 percent answered that their opinions would become “somewhat more positive” or “significantly more positive,” while a majority of Republicans (54 percent) said that their opinion “would not change at all.” 44.9 percent of independents and 73.2 percent of Democrats said their opinions would become “somewhat more positive” or “significantly more positive,” while 47.7 percent of independents and 24.2 percent of Democrats said it would not change.

The majority of respondents ages 18 to 44 stated that their opinions would become “somewhat more positive” or “significantly more positive,” while 38.2 percent of those ages 45 to 54 and 43.4 percent of those above the age of 55 said their opinions would become more positive. 47.1 percent of those ages 45 to 54 and 40.0 percent of those over the age of 55 said their opinion would not change at all.

Positive perceptions of teams that support laws protecting LGBT people

The positive perception remained at similar levels when respondents were asked about changes in opinion if a professional sports team “expressed support for laws that protect LGBT people.” In total, 56.9 percent of respondents said that their opinion would become “somewhat more positive” or “significantly more positive” if teams expressed support for LGBT-inclusive laws, and 35.4 percent said their opinion “would not change at all.” 72.7 percent of Democrat respondents, 47.8 percent of independent respondents, and 30 percent of Republican respondents said their opinion would become more positive. 24.7 percent of Democrat respondents, 46.4 percent of independent respondents, and 49.4 percent of Republican respondents said their opinion “would not change at all” if professional sports teams expressed support for laws that protect LGBT people.

Among respondents who identified as men, 55.5 percent responded that their opinion would become “somewhat more positive” or “significantly more positive,” while 38.5 percent stated that their opinion would not change. 58 percent of respondents who identified as women said that their opinion would become “somewhat more positive” or “significantly more positive” if a team expressed support for laws that protect LGBT people, while 32.2 percent said it would not change their opinion.

The majority of respondents between the ages of 18 to 44, including 63.1 percent of respondents ages 18 to 24, said that their opinion would become “somewhat more positive” or “significantly more positive” if a professional sports team articulated support for LGBT-inclusive laws, while a plurality of respondents above the age of 55 stated that their opinions would do the same. 43.4 percent of those above the age of 55 said it would not make any difference to their opinion. 41.2 percent of those ages 45 to 54 said their opinion would become more positive, while 41.2 percent of that same age group stated that their opinion would not change.

Support for statements about diversity in professional sports

In addition to providing information about their perceptions of professional sports teams that express support for the LGBT community, respondents were randomly assigned to read and respond to one of two hypothetical scenarios in which a professional team makes a positive statement about diversity in sports. Both descriptions were identical except that the team’s players and coaches “made public statements

supporting diversity in professional sports, including support for athletes of all types of backgrounds” in one description (Hypothetical A), while they “made public statements supporting diversity in professional sports, including support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender athletes” in the other (Hypothetical B).

First, all respondents were asked to think about the professional sports team in their area that they follow the most and to rate their support for that team on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being “completely support this team.” Next, respondents read one of the hypothetical scenarios and were asked to rate their degree of support again. In this experiment, mean scores for each hypothetical scenario were compared to test whether the explicit inclusion of support for LGBT athletes had a significant effect on support for the team. In addition, respondents’ initial ratings of support were compared to their degree of support after reading the hypothetical scenario. In total, 48 percent of the sample read Hypothetical A and 52 percent read Hypothetical B.

Comparing the two scenarios, there was no statistically significant difference between the mean rating of the generic diversity scenario (Hypothetical A; $M = 8.00$, $SD = 2.35$) and the mean rating of the LGBT-specific diversity scenario (Hypothetical B; $M = 7.95$, $SD = 2.45$). Combining all respondents, a paired samples t-test showed that the mean support ratings increased significantly from 7.11 ($SD = 2.74$) to 7.98 ($SD = 2.40$) after reading the scenarios ($t(366) = 7.68$, $p < 0.001$).

Respondents who themselves identified as LGBT had a significantly greater increase in support for the team ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 2.43$) when compared with respondents who did not identify as LGBT ($M = 0.79$, $SD = 2.12$; $t(362) = 2.70$, $p = 0.007$). There were no significant differences in change scores based on gender or age.

Conclusion

Results of this study indicate that professional sports teams that make public statements in support of LGBT equality for both athletes and everyday people will generally be viewed favorably by the public at large. Importantly, this study provides two pieces of evidence to support this conclusion:

- The majority of study participants reported that their opinions would become more positive.
- An experimental manipulation showed no negative effect of making diversity statements that explicitly include LGBT people.

The findings suggest that positive feelings are strongest among women, young people, self-identified Democrats, and LGBT-identified people.

Survey methodology

The results presented above are from a convenience sample of 367 respondents recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk,² an online platform that allows for the purposeful sampling of respondents who meet relevant criteria. This survey-hosting website has been shown to be an efficient platform for gathering reliable data from diverse populations.³ Respondents were eligible for the survey if they were over age 18 and gave consent to participate. All respondents were paid \$0.25 for their participation. In total, 403 participants gave their consent to participate and 367 provided enough data to complete the analyses presented above. All analyses were conducted by the authors using SPSS Statistics.

When asked “to what degree would you consider yourself a sports fan,” 37.9 percent of respondents answered “a significant amount,” 49.9 percent answered “somewhat,” and 12.3 percent answered “not at all.” 54.8 percent of respondents identified as men, while 44.9 percent identified as women and 0.54 percent selected that their gender was “not listed here” and were asked to specify their gender. Given the small number of nonbinary-identified adults in the sample, all analyses presented above included only those respondents who identified as men or women. 7.7 percent of respondents identified as LGBT. 44.1 percent of respondents were between the ages of 18 and 29, 38.3 percent were between the ages of 30 and 44, and 17.8 percent were above the age of 44. 10.4 percent of respondents identified as “strong Democrat,” 26.0 percent as “Democrat,” 16.7 percent as “independent-lean Democrat,” 18.9 percent as “independent,” 8.7 percent as “independent-lean Republican,” 10.4 percent as “Republican,” and 4.6 as “strong Republican.” For the purposes of results, independent-leaning Democrats were grouped with Democrats and independent-leaning Republicans were grouped with Republicans. The sample was 77.3 percent white, 8.5 percent Asian American or Pacific Islander, 6.8 percent African American or black, 4.7 percent Hispanic or Latino, 1.4 percent biracial or multiracial, and 0.8 percent American Indian or Alaska Native; 0.3 percent of respondents indicated that they were a race not listed as a response choice, and 0.3 percent preferred not to state their racial background.

The hypothetical scenarios were presented to respondents as follows:

Hypothetical A

You are reading about your favorite local professional team in the newspaper. You’ve rooted for this team in the past and follow their standings during the year. The team is active in the local community. Recently, the players and coaches made public statements supporting diversity in professional sports, including support for athletes of all types of backgrounds.

Hypothetical B

You are reading about your favorite local professional team in the newspaper. You've rooted for this team in the past and follow their standings during the year. The team is active in the local community. Recently, the players and coaches made public statements supporting diversity in professional sports, including support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender athletes.

Additional information about the sample characteristics and methodology is available upon request. Raw data and study questions are on file with the authors.

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Endnotes

1 Rossi Anastopoulo, *Sports in Black and White* (Raleigh, NC: Lulu Press, 2013); It Gets Better, "Giants and ItGetsBetter.org," available at <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/video/entry/ATTCd95kmGQ> (last accessed December 2015); National Collegiate Athletic Association, "NCAA Inclusion Forum," available at <http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/events/ncaa-inclusion-forum> (last accessed December 2015).

2 Amazon Mechanical Turk, "Welcome," available at <https://www.mturk.com> (last accessed December 2015).

3 Michael Buhrmester, Tracy Kwang, and Samuel D. Gosling, "Amazon's Mechanical Turk: A New Source of Inexpensive, Yet High-Quality, Data?," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6 (1) (2011): 3–5.