Sound Allyship? Straight Politicians and LGBQ Representation in Canada

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ABSTRACT

How do heterosexual politicians who are allies perform LGBQ representation? Through the eyes of Canadian LGBQ parliamentarians, I uncover some heterosexual politicians' motivations for becoming allies and some of their concrete practices in this regard. I also identify some criticisms voiced by LGBQ parliamentarians in relation to their heterosexual colleagues' activities of LGBQ representation. Straight politicians become allies for ideological and lived experience reasons. However, beyond best intentions, heterosexual allyship is not without its critics among LGBQ parliamentarians. In conclusion, I contemplate some of the contributions that this article can make to substantive representation and argue for further work to address the voices and experiences of straight parliamentarians on their allyship activities of LGBQ representation.

Keywords: Canada, heterosexual allies, legislators, LGBQ substantive representation.

1. Introduction

In Queering Representation, Tremblay (2019, p. 221) launched this provocative idea: “Although the support of straight allies is indispensable, only out (and proud) lesbian and gay politicians can descriptively and symbolically represent LGBTQ people, and in terms of substantive representation only they have the legitimacy to perform a politics of emotion with regard to LGBTQ representation.” In other words, Tremblay (2019) argued that heterosexual allies cannot represent LGBTQ people and communities descriptively and symbolically simply because they are not LGBTQ people, but they can contribute to LGBTQ substantive representation through their activities in legislatures, in their constituencies, and elsewhere. However, Tremblay (2019) did not push this argument further. My goal in this article is to explore LGBQ substantive representation as performed by heterosexual parliamentarians who are allies. Specifically, I document how heterosexual allies’ practices and behaviors enable them to perform LGBQ substantive representation. I also examine two questions upstream and downstream, respectively, of this central question: how do LGBQ politicians make sense of the reasons that heterosexual politicians perform allyship? What do LGBQ politicians think of the allied behaviors of their straight colleagues? The idea I am inspired by is that heterosexual allies definitely contribute to LGBQ substantive representation; however, their involvement in representing LGBTQ people and communities is not without some pitfalls. First, it is important to understand what substantive representation is, to define allyship, and to specify some methodological details.

1.1. Defining Substantive Representation

Pitkin’s (1967) notion of substantive representation refers to “the activity of representing as acting for others” (p. 114) or, put another way, “acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them” (p. 209). It involves discourses and practices such as giving a speech in the legislature advocating for an LGBQ issue and participating in a Pride Parade. Although the notion of substantive representation has informed a wealth of studies on women elected to political office, this

1 In this paper I do not address trans representation, and thus I use the acronym “LGBQ,” simply because no trans person has been elected as a parliamentarian in Canada.
is much less true of openly LGBQ politicians—perhaps because they are a newer phenomenon. These works support the idea that LGBQ politicians substantively represent LGBQ people and communities, most often linking their substantive rationale to descriptive arguments: “Higher [descriptive] LGBT representation in state legislatures leads to greater substantive representation” (Herrick, 2009, p. 1125; see also Haider-Markel, 2007, 2010, pp. 152–153; Haider-Markel et al., 2000; Rayside, 1998, pp. 179–211; Reynolds, 2013, 2019, p. 96–97). However, according to Reynolds (2019, p. 283), a tiny proportion of seats in the world’s parliaments are held by LGBT people: 0.002 percent. In such a minority context, LGBQ politicians require heterosexual allies to achieve substantive representation.

Who Are Allies?

According to Jones et al. (2014, p. 181), an ally is “someone who identifies as heterosexual, yet actively works to develop an understanding of the needs and experiences of LGBT groups and chooses to align with the social and political causes of LGBT groups. In doing this, an ally recognizes the role that oppression has played in impacting LGBT groups, and actively works to challenge the unfair treatment and systemic oppression toward these groups.” Being an ally encompasses both mental endeavor and practices: it involves knowing about the experiences of LGBQ people and groups, an awareness and understanding of their second-class citizenship, and activism to overturn systemic injustices and promote changes beneficial to LGBQ people and groups.

Several social psychology studies have sketched a socio-demographic and ideological portrait of straight allies—a portrait that resembles that of activists in other progressive societal causes. Women, white people, young people, people with post-secondary education, those living in urban areas, and—on the ideological level—people who are less conservative, less religious, and have a less traditional view of gender roles are more likely to become LGBQ allies (Burgess & Baunach, 2014; Fingerhut, 2011; Goldstein & Davis, 2010; Herek, 2000; Jones & Brewster, 2017). It is no surprise that allies exhibit a critical understanding of sexual prejudice, heterosexual privilege, and homophobia (Duhhig et al., 2010; Grzanka et al., 2015).

Yet, as Grzanka et al. (2015) argue, allyship is not just about being—it is also about doing. Allies take on supportive, educational, and advocacy roles that are expressed in widely diverse ways: some are discreet, and others exposed to the sight of all; some are occasional and others sustained; some target specific clienteles and others the whole population. More importantly, becoming an ally is a dialogic process that rests on recognition: an individual is more likely to take on an ally identity if her or his commitment to LGBQ causes is recognized and valued by her or his entourage (Ji & Fujimoto, 2013). Hence the interest in how out LGBQ politicians view their straight colleagues’ allyship.

1.2. Methodological Considerations

My research is based on interviews with twenty-eight of the thirty-one (90.3%) openly LGBQ sitting members of provincial and territorial legislative assemblies (MLAs) and of the federal Parliament (MPs) between January 2017 and June 2020. These interviews focused on the representative role of our LGBQ MLAs and MPs, but one question probed their perceptions of the role that heterosexual politicians can play in LGBQ representation: “Do heterosexual representatives have the capacity to represent LGBQ communities?” The answers can be summarized in two words: “Yes, but ...” It is the answers to this question given by LGBQ MLAs and MPs about their straight colleagues that I analyze here.

The 28 LGBQ legislators interviewed form a quite heterogeneous group. Eleven identify as women and lesbians, thirteen as gay men, one man as bisexual, and three female-bodied individuals identify as genderqueer or gender non-binary. Respondents are overwhelmingly white, with only three having a BLAME (Black, Latino, Asian and minority ethnic background. 15 are New Democrats, 6 are Liberals, one is Conservative, 5 are from another political party (such as the Parti québécois), and one is not affiliated with a party. The vast majority (twenty-two) were elected to a provincial or territorial legislature and six to Parliament. Finally, eleven had served as cabinet ministers.

How Do LGBQ Politicians Make Sense of the Reasons that Heterosexual Politicians Demonstrate their Allyship?

Several social psychology authors provide some answers to straight allyship. In an attempt to synthesize the numerous factors involved, Russell (2011) suggests two broad motivational models for the process of ally identity development: motives based on fundamental principles (such as civil and human rights, morals, patriotism, religious beliefs, social justice) and motives based on personal roles (at work, in the community, in the family), experiences (such as witnessing blatant homophobic discrimination), and relationships (with family members, friends, neighbors) (see also Broido, 2000; Castro-Convers et al., 2005; Duhhig et al., 2010; Goldstein & Davis, 2010; Grzanka et al., 2015; Stotzer, 2009). The contact hypothesis developed by Allport in the 1950s, which posits that direct contact between groups experiencing tensions can reduce their disagreements (or prejudices) and even lead to collaboration, is relevant to understanding why people become allies: for heterosexuals, having
personal contact with LGBTQ individuals is a major predictor of ally identity and behaviors (Fingerhut, 2011; Garretson, 2018; Henry et al., 2021; Swank et al., 2013). As emerges here, these two models capture the motivations of many straight politicians to support LGBTQ causes.

Concepts developed in the social sciences also shed light on why some heterosexual individuals become allies in LGBTQ battles. One is the notion of “conscience adherents,” individuals and groups who are engaged in a social movement but do not benefit directly from its achievements (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Conscience adherents’ participation in LGBTQ struggles may, therefore, stem from a range of motives very similar to those identified by social psychology, such as commitment to core values, experiences at work, and personal relationships. Wahlström et al. (2018) have refined the notion of conscience adherents by linking it to three types of “approximating experiences.” The first type is “borrowed approximation experiences”: an individual becomes an ally of a social movement because she or he knows a potential beneficiary of that movement’s struggles. The second type is “overlapping approximation experiences”: an ally participates because she or he belongs to a marginalized and oppressed social minority (The authors found that an overwhelming proportion of their conscience adherents were women and hypothesized that they “transferred their own experiences of discrimination to support for LGBT issues” [Wahlström et al., 2018, p. 96]). The third type is “global approximation experiences”: a person becomes an ally because of fundamental principles such as human rights, equality, and justice.

These notions are helpful in interpreting LGBTQ MLAs’ and MPs’ perceptions of their straight colleagues’ motivations for becoming allies: they believe that fundamental principles motivate some of their heterosexual peers. In Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms fundamentally crystallizes such core values, as it is an integral part of the country’s constitution. One interviewee, Colin, observed that Paul Martin, prime minister of Canada from 2003 to 2006, came to support the opening of civil marriage to same-sex couples (thus becoming an LGBTQ ally) because of the Charter—that is, he had to act in accordance with the principles set out in the Charter: “It wasn’t easy for him, but . . . at one point his mother-in-law, Sheila, had a conversation with Paul and said: Well, what’s your problem with this? . . . That has to have had an impact. . . . And so Paul Martin had something switched, and he thought, well, the Supreme Court has spoken, but I need to speak too. And so he did.” It is worth mentioning that Martin was the leader of the Liberal Party of Canada, which had enacted the Charter in 1982 and with which his party remains closely associated (Smith, 2008, p. 158); in this context, he may have had no choice but to show his goodwill by becoming an LGBTQ ally—especially on the eve of the 2005 election (Johnson & Tremblay, 2016).

Some heterosexual politicians may become allies to fulfill subjective values, such as happiness. Referring to Hedy Fry, member of Parliament for Vancouver Centre, interviewee Kenny noted, “And she was a real champion at a time when the gay rights movement had very few or fewer . . . And I think there are a number of people who deserve a great deal of credit like Hedy, who, I think by championing our cause, championed happiness and freedom.” However, while acknowledging Fry’s ally activism, Colin argued that the electoral fabric of her riding somehow explains her commitment to LGBTQ causes: “We [LGBTQ people and communities] would not be where we are if Hedy Fry hadn’t been elected in a gayish riding in Vancouver Centre, hadn’t been already a practicing physician with a fairly large gay male clientele. And she pushed the issues, and she could open doors that other people couldn’t.” In addition to illustrating Russell’s (2011) observation that some individuals become allies because of their professional roles, this interview excerpt supports Hansen and Treul’s (2015) argument that one of the factors influencing politicians’ LGB representation activities is their constituency’s proportion of LGBTQ people.

Out LGBTQ MLAs and MPs believe that borrowed experiences—that is, knowing LGBTQ people—also lead their straight colleagues to become allies. Such borrowed experiences may be based on political roles. Referring to a colleague who sat on a parliamentary commission with her, interviewee Raquel recounted his transformation from a quasi-LGBQ-phobic individual to an ally of LGBTQ causes:

The guy [in the name of electoral district], deputy [in the name of political party], you know, a type of first meeting of the commission, you know, he’s like that on his chair. You think he’s going to faint, you don’t know what. He asks questions, and you think, Oh my God, I’m going to rip off his head . . . So, all of this lasts a few weeks, even a few months, and in the end, when the bill was adopted, that’s what made me bawl. What he said was, you opened my eyes. I ask all grandparents to tell your grandchildren that you’ll love them, no matter what. I talk about it and I still get the shivers. So, that’s what made me bawl. What he said was, you opened my eyes. I ask all grandparents to tell your grandchildren that you’ll love them, no matter what. I talk about it and I still get the shivers. So, you see, that guy made progress. So, maybe someone who isn’t an ally one day may become one if the right chord can be struck.

Borrowed experiences may also be based on family relationships, as described by interviewee Kirsty: “But I work with a premier who has a gay brother who very much is . . . will always, always have my back in anything.” But there is more: family relationships constitute borrowed experiences that are overt and real, although, as Kenny noted, they can also be latent and occur at any time: “You know,
there are Conservatives who can be swayed [to become allies]. The thing about gay rights is that it can affect or does affect almost everybody. Dick Cheney came out as a champion of gay rights because his daughter came out as a lesbian.”

Finally, Russell (2011, p. 390) notes that one motivation for becoming an ally is to respond to a call to do so. A few out LGBQ MLAs and MPs also feel this way and support the call for their heterosexual peers to become LGBQ allies: “It’s our [out LGBQ politicians’] job . . . I think to be advocates within our own party big time, right? Like encouraging [MLAs and MPs] to be a part of gay pride events, you know, and helping them navigate that community, if they have questions, sharing our contacts” (Mona).

In sum, heterosexual individuals become allies for several reasons, including possibly for reaping electoral and political dividends.

### What Practices Do Straight Individuals Deploy as Allies?

As the question of straight politicians who are allies of LGBQ causes has not been the subject of a comprehensive study, heterosexual allies’ practices must be inferred from the few works on LGBTQ politicians. Thus, several studies have uncovered a wide range of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary means used by LGBTQ politicians to represent LGBTQ people and communities, among them: introducing (or co-sponsoring) a pro-LGBTQ bill or, conversely, blocking or watering down anti-LGBTQ legislation; holding members of the executive accountable; sitting on parliamentary committees that deal with LGBTQ issues; conducting backroom procedural maneuvering; promoting LGBTQ issues within their party and having them included in their program; encouraging LGBTQ groups to participate in state processes (for example, by giving testimony in parliamentary committees); and hiring LGBTQ people as staff (Haider-Markel, 2007, 2010; Herrick, 2010; Raysia, 1998, pp. 105–139, 179–211; Reynolds, 2013, 2019; Truelove, 2013, pp. 57–94, 185–198). Strictly speaking, heterosexual parliamentarians have the same resources as their LGBQ colleagues to perform their mandate of representation: they can deploy the same practices to act as allies of LGBQ causes—for example, intervene in the House and in committees on an LGBQ issue and participate in a Pride Parade in their constituency. Do they do this, and if they do, how?

To address this issue, it seems fruitful to return to Grzanka et al.’s (2015) observation that ally behaviors are diverse and vary in intensity—hence their distinction between “passive” and “active” straight LGBT activism. Passive allies are driven by fundamental principles, “certain moral standards of respect and empathy toward LGBT individuals” (Grzanka et al., 2015, p. 177), whereas active allies add to this a commitment to LGBT advocacy and organized social action. However, things are not always so clear-cut because allies’ behaviors are fluid, as is the ally identity with which they are related. The argument underlying the notion of an opinion-based group—that a person’s ally identity varies according to her or his understanding of an LGBQ issue—is therefore fruitful for understanding allies’ behaviors as being constantly constructed and reconstructed according to the circumstances in a flux that moves along a continuum delineated by two poles defined as passive activism and active activism. These notions are useful in that they allow us to conceive of a continuum of allies’ behaviors that captures the fluidity of their practices, the nature and intensity of which vary according to the LGBQ issues at stake, of course, but also to other political and electoral circumstances (such as the party’s position on a given issue and electoral opportunism). The continuum conveys the ideas of instability, of moving, of re/shaping—in short, of complexity—an accurate description of allies’ practices, depending on the contexts in which they unfold.

The out LGBQ MLAs and MPs interviewed perceive the behaviors of their straight colleagues who are allies as clearly falling on the active activism side of the continuum. But before presenting these allies’ practices, it seems relevant to mention that several out LGBQ MLAs and MPs insisted that being an ally is a collaborative endeavor between heterosexual and LGBQ individuals, that the former should open themselves up to LGBQ issues and the latter train and empower their allies to become autonomous in their actions. For instance, interviewee Mona argued, “I think being an ally is being a good listener, educating yourself.” Interviewee Sean further expanded this opinion: “Well, it’s going out and listening to LGBTQ plus people, learning what their stories are, learning what hurdles they have to go through just to even get housing or education or even to become a representative.” These words are reminiscent of what Nussbaum (2010, p. xviii, emphasis in original) calls a “politics of humanity, a political attitude that combines respect with curiosity and imaginative attunement.” By opening up to LGBTQ people and communities, heterosexual individuals gain the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and confidence they need to become LGBQ allies (Broido, 2000; Ji et al., 2009).

It comes as no surprise that legislating is a practice of choice deployed by straight individuals in their allyship endeavor, as it is a capacity exclusively available to parliamentarians—LGBQ or straight. Some heterosexual allies seem to have gained such confidence and control that they initiate legislation. Interviewee Jeremy recounted such an instance:
The funny thing is that it wasn’t one of the LGBTQ members who brought over the legislation [amending the human rights legislation to include gender identity and gender expression as prohibitive grounds]. It was one of our elected [heterosexual members] ... [Her or his] first, I guess, campaign promise was to make changes to the human rights [law], and it was because, you know, [she or he] represents the downtown [name of a Canadian city] core and members of the community had gone up to [her or him] and talked to [her or him] about these issues. And so [she or he] made it a campaign promise that [she or he] would look into it and amend it if it was possible. And [she or he] did, right? So ... it didn’t actually come from the members of the LGBTQ community who are elected representatives. It came from a heterosexual [member] who did that. Of course, [she or he] consulted with us when [she or he] decided to go forward, and of course, we were part of the whole process. But the initiative came from [her or him].

These words recall Hansen and Treul’s (2015) findings, cited above, that a straight representative may be led to act on LGB issues when the LGB people and communities in her or his constituency have sufficient demographic weight to motivate her or his action and are mobilized in the field of electoral politics. Needless to say, the prospect of electoral gain also explains why straight allies act with regard to LGBTQ representation.

Although straight allies sometimes take the lead, they may also be instrumentalized by their LGBTQ colleagues to serve LGBTQ representation. Here is an example:

I mean, my staff said to me, this bill ... which will equalize the age of consent for heterosexual people with gay men particularly, do you want to speak? And I said, it’s the anal sex bill. And I said, Do you think I’m going to stand up and talk about anal sex in the House? I’m not. Partly because I am gay, so I want ... allies to do that because otherwise, I’m going to be seen as a one-issue person ... So an issue like Islamophobia, if I take it on, there’s a huge help I can be. I’m not Muslim. I don’t have the personal experience of Islamophobia. But when I speak about it, it helps. I’m an ally in the Muslim community. It’s the very same. On the anal sex bill, I need heterosexuals to stand up and talk about it because the giggle factor, the laughter that if I talk about it, it is prone to jokes (Colin).

At first glance, Colin’s words capture Wahlström et al.’s (2018) notion of “overlapping approximation experiences”—that belonging to a marginalized and oppressed social minority is a motivation to create alliances with other deprived social groups: Col is gay, and he is also “an ally in the Muslim community.” That being said, Colin argued that if he were to speak out on the anal sex bill, he might “be seen as a one-issue person” and that this issue “is prone to jokes.” By passing the torch to allies, he avoids putting himself in an unfavorable posture, but above all. He refuses to allow the show of an openly LGBTQ member advocating in the House in favor of anal sex—which could only fuel LGBQphobia, provide ammunition to anti-LGBQ groups, and even cast a shadow on all LGBTQ struggles. By addressing sensitive LGBTQ issues, straight allies have the ability to deLGBQize them, which can sometimes be beneficial (for example, by dissociating anal sex from gay men) but also has its own detrimental effects (I will come back to this below). Heterosexual allies can also LGBQize issues that, at first glance, appear to have no LGBTQ content. Interviewee Frank gave the example of a minister who, as a speaker for Black History Month, took the initiative to incorporate an LGBTQ perspective into her or his reading: “The other evening, at the evening for Blacks, Black History Month, at the museum [the minister] spoke about the LGBTQ community in [her or his] speech. So, that’s strong, and it was maybe unexpected, but [she or he] did it of [her or his] own accord. That’s wonderful.”

While allies deploy their practices in the parliamentary arena, notably by getting involved in bills, they also undertake active activism outside the parliamentary space, notably in civil society. Several out LGBTQ MLAs and MPs noted that their heterosexual colleagues attended public events associated with LGBTQ people and communities, such as “coming to the Pride event or coming to a flag raising ceremony or having a town hall meeting with members of the community” (Jeremy). However, Jeremy stressed that these behaviors could not be superficial but should be an opportunity to establish a sustained relationship with LGBTQ people and communities motivated by a genuine openness to them and a commitment to fulfilling their needs:

I think heterosexual politicians can still represent the community as long as they take an active interest and an active role in learning the issues, being part of the community, and constantly checking back with the community to make sure that they got it right ... At any time, yeah. They can be as much of a part of the community as possible, too. It’s not just about showing up once a year at the pride parade or showing up once a year at the gala. It’s about constantly being in touch with the different organizations that serve the community, having contact with the different services that are being provided, and then checking back with the government to make sure that those providing the services are still responsive to the needs.

That said, it can be intimidating for a heterosexual ally to approach LGBTQ people and communities, and interviewee Mary offered to assist with this initial contact:
Yeah, and I think they [heterosexual members] do it in a lot of ways. One of the ways that I found to make this more accessible is that sometimes, I become the primary contact. So everyone still has a responsibility to talk to all groups, LGBTQ included. And so sometimes, instead of it being me that does it, what I encourage is: “Oh, you don’t know anyone in the community. I can introduce you to them”… So becoming a conduit of information.

This excerpt highlights the mentoring role of LGBTQ politicians with their straight colleagues who are allies, a role that consists of training and networking, as there is a need for heterosexuals to be in contact with LGBTQ people and communities in order to fulfill their role as proponents of LGBTQ causes.

In sum, straight politicians demonstrate their allyship to LGBTQ causes by deploying active behaviors in both the legislative arena and civil society. Although their allyship is well-intentioned, it is not without raising a few criticisms.

**What Critiques Do Out LGBTQ Politicians Have of Heterosexual Allies?**

For a number of reasons, heterosexual politicians’ allyship with LGBTQ representation can only be welcomed: they bring the strength of numbers that is essential for passing pro-LGBQ legislative measures; they deLGBQize issues subject to popular ostracism by framing them as acceptable to the broad heteronormative public; they sometimes LGBQize issues that, at first glance, seem irrelevant to LGBQ people and communities; they enhance the dissemination of pro-LGBQ ideas, thereby helping to reduce LGBQphobia and develop egalitarian attitudes among the general public; and they contribute to the endeavor of inclusive citizenship whereby privileged citizens work with deprived minorities for equality and social justice.

However, my interviewees had some criticisms of heterosexual allies. One is that they engage in symbolic gestures—a criticism also noted by Grzanka et al. (2015). Some straight allies’ actions are empty signifiers; for example, adding the notation “she/her” is a gesture that perhaps serves a politician’s reputation as a progressive more than it does LGBTQ causes.

Butler’s (1993/2014, p. 80) theorization captures a second critique: “Sympathy involves a substitution of oneself for another that may well be a colonization of the other’s position as one’s own.” By their involvement in LGBTQ representation, allies pose the risk of sideling LGBTQ politicians who struggle to assert their leadership and public visibility. Brian alluded to this possibility: “I have sometimes had concerns about other members of Parliament who have claimed to speak for the community, who are not members of the community. And [ally’s name] is the prime example where quite often in events, for instance, raising the pride flag, [ally’s name] is on the stage with the . . . openly gay members. I’m like, Hmm. I’m not sure about that.” Perhaps this is why Alcoff (1991) argues that one group (in this case, straight people) cannot speak for others (that is, LGBTQ people), although they can certainly speak with them. I would add that straight voices cannot be in the forefront and dominant but must instead be expressed backstage and in support of LGBTQ voices. Larry expanded this argument further:

They [heterosexual individuals] can be good allies. Absolutely. I think people who are not from a community can be good allies for sure, but I would say that the best allies are the ones who sometimes find ways to let the community speak for themselves. Rather than being the ones marching at the front of the parade, they are the ones who are supporting people to create the parade or, you know, supporting people to have their voices heard … [heterosexual people] can definitely be allies, and I’ve worked with many allies, but just don’t assume that you have personal experience. Go to people who actually do.

The balance between starring and supportive roles in this representative performance is not always easy, for, as mentioned above, it is sometimes strategically wiser for LGBTQ politicians to keep quiet about certain LGBTQ issues and let their heterosexual colleagues speak; but this can take place only under the mentoring—or authoritative power—of LGBTQ politicians.

Butler’s (1993/2014, p. 80) observation also underlines the fact that by getting involved in LGBTQ representation, straight allies gain the power to impose their ontological and epistemological categories of LGBTQ identities, subjectivities, and experiences, with the potential outcome of heteronormalizing them—of interpreting diversified LGBTQ needs, interests, experiences, and aspirations through the prism of a hegemonic heteronormative lifestyle. Colin alluded to this critique: “Heterosexism and this dominant cultural attitude that hetero is normal as opposed to the majority is something I will take on fiercely … So when I hear about family-friendly Parliament, which means mom and dad and the kids, I say that’s heterosexism … very few allies take on heterosexism. They don’t see that. They’ll take on homophobia.” Homophobia and heterosexism refer to clearly distinct ontological meanings: homophobia concerns the individual and the psychological in the sense that it targets an individual who feels uncomfortable with anything that is not heterosexual and calls for remedies that focus on the individual, whereas heterosexism addresses the collective and the sociological—the ideologies, practices, and institutions that underpin, reproduce, and promote heterosexual hegemony, and thus pleads for reengineering of society as a whole.
A third criticism that out LGBQ MLAs and MPs level at their straight allies is their lack of personal experience. Echoing Larry, Sean asserted, “It’s important to have allies. However, it’s very different for someone who has been through things the LGBT community has gone through, such as coming out, which is huge for the LGBT community, and it’s just as individuals, it’s a very important part of our identity as the coming out story.” ‘Sean did not explain why the lack of personal experience would hinder heterosexual individuals’ ability to be allies, but it might be because only LGBQ people have the option of using their personal experience and speaking in the “I” voice. Heterosexual individuals, however, allied they may be, cannot speak about a situation in the first person and benefit from the capital of truth and authenticity that it entails.

2. Conclusion

This article bolsters Tremblay’s (2019) undocumented claim that straight politicians can be instrumental to LGBQ substantive representation—sometimes, they are even better positioned than LGBQ legislators to perform this representation. This qualifies the link, too often taken for granted, between LGBQ descriptive and substantive representation and shows not only that our LGBQ politicians do not have a monopoly on LGBQ substantive representation but that such representation may not even be possible without the input of straight allies. This is a powerful lesson in humility.

Despite its theoretical and empirical contributions, the main weakness of this research is its reliance not on the voices of straight allies but on the perceptions that LGBQ MLAs and MPs have of their heterosexual peers’ allyship activities. Further research should survey straight allies on their motivations, activities, the difficulties they encounter, and other issues. Indeed, it is critically important to better understand the work of heterosexual allies in Canadian politics because, barring an unexpected turn of events, LGBQ people and communities will, for a long time to come, need the support of their heterosexual peers to achieve LGBQ substantive representation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that she does not have any conflict of interest.

REFERENCES


