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Equality Act**

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ARTICLE

An Ally and an Intermediary: Bella Abzug, Gay Americans, and the Equality Act

David G. Ferrara 

In 1974, Congresswoman Bella Abzug introduced the Equality Act, the first federal gay rights legislation. A high-profile ally, Abzug occupied a unique space in the gay rights movement, and the Equality Act cemented her as the premier political intermediary for gay rights. Owing to her prominence, Abzug attracted a geographically and ideologically diverse constituency of gay, lesbian, and bisexual Americans. Gay activists as well as isolated individuals reached out to Abzug as a conduit for their grievances and political hopes, and her support unified gay, lesbian, and bisexual Americans around a national focal point at a time when the movement was fractured and regional. In the period after Stonewall, Abzug was gay liberation's most meaningful national intermediary. Routinely undervalued in the history of the gay rights movement, Abzug's legislative advocacy reveals the centrality of political allyship within the struggle for equality.

In 1975, Massachusetts State Representative Elaine Noble contacted New York Congresswoman Bella Abzug. Noble, among the first openly gay and lesbian elected officials in the country, was one of the figureheads of the national gay rights movement.¹ A shrewd political actor, she was willing to cut ties with mainstream organizations like the National Organization for Women (NOW) when she felt they failed in their advocacy for lesbians.² She had long regarded the fifty-five-year-old Abzug as an ally and friend to gay people, and as a legitimate intermediary in the fight.³ Noble now wrote regarding Abzug's proposed federal gay rights bill: "I was a speaker at a national gathering of Metropolitan Community Churches in Dallas several months ago," she said, "at which I urged people to write their representatives in Congress regarding H.R. 5452."⁴ She enclosed a collection of this correspondence, written by gay Americans, to support Abzug's bill.⁵ She gave the cache to Abzug to use in the fight for the bill's passage.

My thanks to Sarah Phillips, the editorial staff at *Modern American History*, and the anonymous reviewers whose thoughtful feedback improved this article in innumerable ways. An early version of this research was presented at the University of Alabama's LGBTQA+ Symposium, and I thank the scholars there for their constructive feedback. I am also grateful to the staff of the Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Columbia University. This research has been improved immensely thanks to the guidance of Kari Frederickson and Steven Bunker. Finally, I would like to thank Ellen Fitzpatrick, who first encouraged me to investigate the Equality Act and guided my research in its earliest stages.

¹Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (New York, 2015), 394–8; Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (New York, 2012), 107.

²"A Woman's Place Is in the House: A Portrait of Elaine Noble," *Something Personal*, season 1, episode 5 (WGBH, 1977), <http://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-15-33rv1gdz> (accessed May 25, 2022).

³Elaine Noble, "Looking In," *The Second Wave*, Mar. 1973, 39–42.

⁴Elaine Noble to Bella Abzug, Oct. 21, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1972," box 150, Bella Abzug Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York City, NY [hereafter BSAP]. The Abzug Papers at Columbia University contains 1,116 boxes. Of these, two boxes are exclusively dedicated to gay rights correspondence and legislation, though letters from gay Americans are also included in boxes of general correspondence.

⁵A note on terminology: this article uses the phrase "gay rights" when describing the movement in which Americans fought discrimination based on sexual orientation. When broadly referencing gay, lesbian, and bisexual

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Abzug, in return, thanked Noble for the letters and placed their authors on a mailing list to keep them abreast of the bill's status. "Presently," Abzug replied, "letter writing is the appropriate effort needed to help in our fight." Abzug pledged to work for the "abolition of discrimination in this country because of sexual preference."⁶

This exchange might appear commonplace. Noble, writing in her capacity as both an activist and state representative, was lobbying on behalf of a piece of legislation that favored gay rights. What is notable, however, is that Noble regarded Abzug as a reliable intermediary, a conduit for facilitating information, and a person through whom gay people could lobby for their rights at the federal level. In 1975, few national politicians were willing to support gay rights. Despite the precipitous increase in gay and lesbian activism in the early 1970s, mainstream support remained rare. It was uncommon to find a consistent ally within the federal government or the national Democratic Party.⁷ Even pro-gay politicians, typically, endorsed a narrow version of gay rights based solely on sexual privacy and not full legal equality.⁸ Abzug, however, advocated for more robust equal protections. In her time in Congress from 1971 to 1977, she elevated gay voices, facilitated connections, and used her significant platform to speak on behalf of the marginalized.

On May 14, 1974, Abzug introduced the Equality Act. An amendment to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it would have prohibited discrimination based on "sex, marital status, and sexual orientation." The bill protected gay, lesbian, and bisexual people from discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations.⁹ Abzug's Equality Act was the first proposed piece of federal legislation that would have protected people on the basis of sexual orientation. All previous acts of Congress relating to homosexuality had been discriminatory.¹⁰ Abzug, therefore, was the first national legislator not only to endorse gay rights in principle, but also in practice. She would reintroduce a version of the Equality Act every session for the remainder of her time in Congress. In 1975, she became the first member of Congress to defend gay rights on the floor of the House of Representatives.¹¹ For gay Americans in the 1970s, the Equality Act was the ultimate expression of solidarity. It did not pass, but it proved to be an important national moment. For both activists and ordinary people, Abzug's allyship became a yardstick against which to gauge all other politicians of the period.

Abzug's advocacy occurred in a context of limited national success for gay rights. Achievements came almost exclusively at the state and local levels. In the 1970s, gay activists lobbied for antidiscrimination laws and changes to existing state and local statutes. Results were mixed. By 1973, activists had successfully agitated to overturn or repeal sodomy laws in eight states. But dismantling sodomy laws proved easier than passing antidiscrimination legislation. While activists did work for such state and local laws throughout the 1970s, repeal efforts often followed any successful attempts.¹² At the federal level, gay rights activists were routinely

Americans, this article uses the term "gay" as an umbrella category. While the historical actors herein possessed a broad range of sexual identities, I use "gay" or "gay and lesbian" as classifiers to avoid repetitious phrasing such as "gay, lesbian, and bisexual Americans." When historical actors clearly indicated their preferred terminology or were a part of a specific movement—such as lesbian feminism—I instead use that language.

⁶Bella Abzug to Elaine Noble, Nov. 23, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP.

⁷Even in the famously leftwing 1972 presidential campaign of George McGovern, vocal and consistent commitment to gay rights was lacking. McGovern's campaign tried to downplay his support for gay rights, only advocating for it when pressed and in areas with significant numbers of gay voters. See Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York, 2012), 271–2.

⁸Clayton Howard, *The Closet and the Cul-de-Sac: The Politics of Sexual Privacy in Northern California* (Philadelphia, 2019), 185.

⁹U.S. Congress, House, *Equality Act of 1974*, HR 14752, 93 Cong., 2 sess., introduced in House May 14, 1974.

¹⁰Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 135–6; David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago, 2006), 55–9.

¹¹*Congressional Record*, 94 Cong., 1st sess., Mar. 25, 1975, 8581.

¹²Self, *All in the Family*, 95.

stonewalled. Despite the expansion of rights during the sexual revolution, gay activists found themselves unable to challenge discriminatory immigration guidelines or overturn the federal sodomy statute.¹³ In 1973, gay and lesbian activists established the National Gay Task Force (NGTF) with the explicit goal of lobbying federal agencies, but had only limited success. NGTF's victories mostly consisted of establishing working relationships with nongovernmental organizations such as the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and the American Bar Association (ABA).¹⁴ In this context Abzug introduced various iterations of the Equality Act. Federal legislation, she argued, would remove "local bigots" from the equation "in the same way that black civil rights were guaranteed through federal laws."¹⁵

That Abzug's Equality Act has received little scholarly attention is not surprising given the context of its introduction. Abzug submitted the Equality Act at the peak of the Watergate scandal, and the mainstream press largely ignored the bill. When scholars recount the bill's introduction, the negative reaction of a few gay rights activists has dominated the narrative. These activists supported the bill but resented Abzug's quiet initial introduction.¹⁶ Indeed, the legislative failure of the Equality Act can render the unpassed bill unremarkable. Every iteration died without debate or hearings. Not until the early 1980s—after Abzug's departure—were public hearings held on a federal bill banning employment discrimination.¹⁷ Abzug's bill has primarily been viewed as the precursor to bills like the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA). To the extent that scholars have discussed Abzug's bill, they note its symbolic character while disregarding the importance of that very symbolism.¹⁸ But we should recognize the larger cultural influence of Abzug's bill.

I excavate Bella Abzug's allyship as a uniquely important instrument in the development of gay rights. At the national level, gay activists regarded visibility and consciousness raising as a significant achievement in a period otherwise bereft of substantive policy changes.¹⁹ Indeed, activists urged gay people to come out in order to normalize homosexuality and mobilize a national constituency. Prominent figures like Harvey Milk felt that their presence as openly gay officials could mobilize and inspire people in small town America as well as

¹³David A. J. Richards, *The Sodomy Cases: Bowers v. Hardwick and Lawrence v. Texas* (Lawrence, KS, 2009), 72–107; Marc Stein, *Sexual Injustice: Supreme Court Decisions from Griswold to Roe* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010), 57–93.

¹⁴Later called the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), NGTF was not directly involved in the APA's decision to declassify homosexuality as a mental disorder, but it organized with the APA to prevent dissenting psychiatrists from overturning the decision. Mary Bernstein, "Identities and Politics: Toward a Historical Understanding of the Lesbian and Gay Movement," *Social Science History* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 531–81, here 547–54; John D'Emilio, "Organizational Tales: Interpreting the NGLTF Story," in *The World Turned: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and Culture* (Durham, NC, 2002), 99–119, here 103–5.

¹⁵Qtd. in Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 261.

¹⁶Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney, *Out for Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America* (New York, 2001), 239–41.

¹⁷Chai R. Feldblum, "The Federal Gay Rights Bill: From Bella to ENDA," in *Creating Change: Sexuality, Public Policy, and Civil Rights*, eds. John D'Emilio, William B. Turner, and Urvashi Vaid (New York, 2000), 149–87, here 153.

¹⁸For instance, see Bernstein, "Identities and Politics," 547–550; Margaret Cruikshank, *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement* (New York, 1992), 79; John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, 2012), 324; Feldblum, "The Federal Gay Rights Bill," 149–53; Amin Ghaziani, *The Dividends of Dissent: How Conflict and Culture Work in Lesbian and Gay Marches on Washington* (Chicago, 2008), 38–9; Doreen Mattingly, *A Feminist in the White House: Midge Costanza, the Carter Years, and America's Culture Wars* (Oxford, UK, 2016), 113, Kindle; Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 131; Katherine Turk, "'Our Militancy Is in Our Openness': Gay Employment Rights Activism in California and the Question of Sexual Orientation in Sex Equality Law," *Law and History Review* 31, no. 2 (May 2013): 423–69, here 451; Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation* (New York, 1996), 2, 7; and Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 261–2.

¹⁹Jean O'Leary, "From Agitator to Insider: Fighting for Inclusion in the Democratic Party," in *Creating Change: Sexuality, Public Policy, and Civil Rights*, eds. John D'Emilio, William B. Turner, and Urvashi Vaid (New York, 2000), 81–114, here 88.

San Francisco.²⁰ Measured by this same metric, Abzug reached individuals otherwise inaccessible to activist groups. The Equality Act served as the type of national event for which people such as Milk advocated. Indeed, even some of Abzug's cosponsors regarded the bill primarily as encouragement for gay people to "surface" nationally. The federal legislative process could encourage public testimonies that would "broaden public perception."²¹ Indeed, all the letters sent to Abzug's office, and the gay media coverage, reveal that Abzug's support profoundly resonated with gay Americans.

While histories of gay liberation have always included allies, they are typically treated as peripheral. No previous history has focused on the role of allies in gay mobilization and consciousness raising. With a few important exceptions, historians' focus on activists has left allies as tangential figures.²² They have primarily examined the movement as a bottom-up phenomenon, and have focused on local efforts to pass ordinances and repeal discriminatory state statutes.²³ Others have looked beyond local organizing, but these studies have remained intracommunal, focusing only on gay people's efforts to raise political awareness and community identity.²⁴

I instead evaluate what Abzug meant—culturally and politically—to gay people throughout the United States. Until recently, most scholarship has regarded the federal government as inherently oppositional to gay rights.²⁵ This article adds to the growing field of scholarship that complicates the relationship between gay activists and federal officials in the post-Stonewall era.²⁶ As a unique figure with broad political appeal, Abzug garnered the support

²⁰Howard, *The Closet and the Cul-de-Sac*, 9.

²¹Paul N. McCloskey, Jr. to Bella Abzug, April 17, 1975, folder "Correspondence," box 152, BSAP.

²²Ian M. Baldwin's "A Ray of Sunshine," Emily K. Hobson's *Lavender and Red*, Marc Stein's *Sexual Injustice*, and Timothy Stewart-Winter's *Queer Clout* all consider political coalitions, although none of these works centers allies as its primary focus. This article builds upon these works by noting how allies, rather than merely assisting activists, could create change and motivate participation within the movement. Ian M. Baldwin, "A Ray of Sunshine: Housing, Family, and Gay Political Power in 1970s Los Angeles," in *Beyond the Politics of the Closet: Gay Rights and the American State Since the 1970s*, ed. Jonathan Bell (Philadelphia, 2020), 40–57; Emily K. Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidary in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (Oakland, CA, 2016); Stein, *Sexual Injustice*, especially chs. 4 and 5; Timothy Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout: Chicago and the Rise of Gay Politics* (Philadelphia, 2015).

²³For instance, see Brett Beemyn, "The Silence Is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Student Groups," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 2 (Apr. 2003): 205–23; David Eisenbach, *Gay Power: An American Revolution* (New York, 2006), 154–74; Kevin J. Mumford, "The Trouble with Gay Rights: Race and the Politics of Sexual Orientation in Philadelphia, 1969–1982," *Journal of American History* 98, no. 1 (June 2011): 49–72; and David A. Reichard, "'We Can't Hide and They Are Wrong': The Society for Homosexual Freedom and the Struggle for Recognition at Sacramento State College, 1969–1971," *Law and History Review* 28, no. 3 (Aug. 2010): 629–74.

²⁴Despite moving beyond local communities, these histories have studied nonphysical networks created by and for gay people with little regard to non-gay intermediaries. For instance, see Marcia M. Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (New York, 2006); Lucas Hilderbrand, "A Suitcase Full of Vaseline, or Travels in the 1970s Gay World," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22, no. 3 (Sept. 2013): 373–402; David K. Johnson, *Buying Gay: How Physique Entrepreneurs Sparked a Movement* (New York, 2019); Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago, 2008), 219–24; Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s–1970s* (Chicago, 2006); and Nicholas L. Syrett, "A Busman's Holiday in the Not-So-Lonely Crowd: Business Culture, Epistolary Networks, and Itinerant Homosexuality in Mid-Twentieth-Century America," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21, no. 1 (Jan. 2012): 121–40.

²⁵For instance, see Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ, 2009); and Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*.

²⁶Kate Batza has shown that gay rights activists were able to utilize federal and state funding for healthcare services to create lasting "gay institutions" in the 1970s. Kate Batza, "A Clinic Comes Out: Idealism, Pragmatism, and Gay Health Services in Boston, 1971–1985," in *Beyond the Politics of the Closet: Gay Rights and the American State Since the 1970s*, ed. Jonathan Bell (Philadelphia, 2020), 19–39, here 19–21.

of middle-class, reformist groups, as well as the countercultural gay press.²⁷ She also appealed to isolated individuals not traditionally incorporated into the national gay rights narrative. Thus, she represented a rare national unifying figure for gay people throughout the United States. Abzug's bill was important not only as a possible law, but as political tool and galvanizing moment.

In the 1970s, Bella Abzug was an exceptional political advocate for gay Americans. Her fame extended her gay rights message beyond formal activist organizations. Her intersectional political philosophy, national stature, and commitment to universal human rights made Abzug the most prominent mainstream ally of the movement. Both publicly and privately, she lent her status as one of America's most celebrated elected officials to the cause of gay rights. While the Equality Act never became law, it provided a cause around which gay Americans could rally. For people detached from formal activist networks, Abzug was a rare mainstream figure to contact. Letters gay Americans sent to Abzug testified to the emotional significance of her allyship. They expressed what Abzug's support meant to gay people in cities and the countryside. On a practical level, Abzug provided a benchmark, a gold standard against which activists could judge other politicians. In a period when most elected officials were enemies of—or indifferent to—the rights of gay people, Abzug stood apart.

Bella Abzug: “Minor Folk Heroine”

A radical, born in New York City in 1920, Bella Abzug often noted how the year of her birth coincided with the year women won the vote.²⁸ She served as member of Congress from New York City during the 1970s, and was known for her leftist ideals, political boldness, and no-nonsense personality. As Leandra Zarnow has argued, Abzug advocated a “pragmatic radicalism” and became a unique figure who sought to bring about sweeping reform from within the American political system. Her electoral politics were grounded in her leftist ideology. Influenced by her religious upbringing and Old Left worldview, Abzug was a “Socialist Zionist” who instinctively allied herself with oppressed groups and sought common cause across political ideologies.²⁹ She identified strongly as an outsider, both because of her gender and her Jewish heritage.

During the social upheavals of the postwar period, Abzug was involved in nearly every major social justice movement of the era. She was a feminist, civil rights attorney, and peace activist. As a young lawyer in 1950, Abzug traveled to Mississippi to serve as chief defense counsel for Willie McGee, an African American veteran accused of raping a white woman. Even at this early stage in her career, Abzug's intersectional politics led her to find common cause with oppressed peoples with whom she ostensibly had no connection.³⁰ Despite being elected in a period of increasingly fractured identity movements, Abzug's leftist ideology led her to consider overlapping spheres of oppression, and she “thought deeply about the interplay between race, class, sexuality, and gender.”³¹ She also ran a congressional office wherein she encouraged her staff to promote political causes and push her on emerging issues, making her more open to new social movements compared to other politicians of her era.³²

²⁷Gay liberationists and rights-oriented reformers are often framed as opposite wings of the movement in the 1970s. Yet Abzug's unique position as a leftist radical within the federal government gave her unique appeal to both groups. Self, *All in the Family*, 222–5.

²⁸Alan H. Levy, *The Political Life of Bella Abzug, 1920–1976: Political Passions, Women's Rights, and Congressional Battles* (Lanham, MD, 2013), 71.

²⁹Leandra Ruth Zarnow, *Battling Bella: The Protest Politics of Bella Abzug* (Cambridge, MA, 2019), 6–7, 15.

³⁰Leandra Zarnow, “Braving Jim Crow to Save Willie McGee: Bella Abzug, the Legal Left, and Civil Rights Innovation, 1948–1951,” *Law & Social Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 1003–41, here 1012.

³¹Zarnow, *Battling Bella*, 9.

³²Suzanne Braun Levine and Mary Thom, *Bella Abzug: How One Tough Broad from the Bronx Fought Jim Crow and Joe McCarthy, Pissed Off Jimmy Carter, Battled for the Rights of Women and Workers, Rallied Against War and for the Planet, and Shook Up Politics Along the Way* (New York, 2007), 165–6; Zarnow, *Battling Bella*, 181, 188.

Abzug's pro-gay sympathies also made her an outlier in the leadership of the women's movement. Sexual orientation caused divisions within feminist movements in the early 1970s. Lesbians, in their doubly oppressed status, were often alienated both in the male-dominated gay rights movement and the straight-dominated women's movement. While liberal feminists sought integration into pre-existing power structures and legislative reform, lesbian feminists often pursued separatist utopias free of men and patriarchy. The leadership of women's groups like NOW advocated for gender equality but viewed issues relating to sexual orientation with skepticism. Feminists like Betty Friedan saw lesbians as a political liability and felt oppression based on sexual orientation was unrelated to the broader movement.

Thus, in the early 1970s, a schism formed within the feminist movement between heterosexual feminists and the "woman-identified woman." Historians generally agree that this schism, while at times overstated, hindered feminists' unity and activism. The so-called "lesbian question" caused tensions within both radical and liberal feminist groups. However, anti-gay sentiment was not universal among feminists, and NOW's leadership did not always speak for its rank-and-file members. By the mid-1970s, NOW and other groups expressed solidarity with lesbian feminists and their struggle. Within this context, Abzug was an earlier advocate for gay people than many high-profile feminists. Indeed, Abzug's feminism occasionally diverged from her liberal feminist contemporaries precisely because she centered economic issues and overlapping systems of oppression in her political philosophy. Yet Abzug also did not feel comfortable with socialist feminists' emphasis on consciousness-raising groups and instead favored institutional reforms. Thus, in a period when many feminist leaders struggled to understand or accept the connection between lesbian oppression and the women's movement, Abzug's ideology made her immediately sympathetic to the plight of gay Americans.³³

In 1970 Abzug defeated fourteen-year incumbent Leonard Farbstein for the Democratic nomination in New York's 19th congressional district. In her first campaign, she openly courted New York City's burgeoning "gay vote." Her campaign headquarters was a short distance from the Stonewall Inn. Her campaign manager, Doug Ireland, himself a gay man, encouraged Abzug's solicitation of gay voters.³⁴ For gay New Yorkers, Abzug was a logical ally. Not only did she support gay rights, but her leftist politics had a broader appeal to many urban gay voters.³⁵ She pursued this voting bloc before other politicians recognized its importance. Despite occasional squeamishness with certain aspects of gay culture, Abzug's politics clearly aligned her with gay Americans. Still, Abzug was uneasy when Ireland sent her to Fire Island, where she encountered several men wearing only towels "held up by Bella buttons."³⁶ Personally, Abzug was not always comfortable with some of the campier or more overtly sexual aspects of gay life. Nor was she a perfect and unproblematic ally. Richard Wandel, a member of New York's Gay Activist Alliance (GAA), fondly recalled Abzug's allyship, but noted her flaws:

³³On the divisions within the women's movement over sexual orientation, see Laurel A. Clark, "Beyond the Gay/Straight Split: Socialist Feminists in Baltimore," *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 1–31; Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (1989; Minneapolis, 2019), ch. 4; Stephanie Gilmore and Elizabeth Kaminski, "A Part and Apart: Lesbian and Straight Feminist Activists Negotiate Identity in a Second-Wave Organization," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 1 (Jan. 2007): 95–113; Self, *All in the Family*, ch. 6; and Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp, "Women's Culture and Lesbian Feminist Activism: A Reconsideration of Cultural Feminism," *Signs* 19, no. 1 (Autumn 1993): 32–61. On Abzug's ideological divergences with other feminists, see Zarnow, *Battling Bella*, 65–75, 103–6.

³⁴Levy, *The Political Life of Bella Abzug*, 109–10; Zarnow, *Battling Bella*, 93, 106.

³⁵"Bella Abzug & Lenard Farbstein," *East Village Other*, April 7, 1970, 6, 19. On the relationship of gay liberationists and the New Left, see Hobson, *Lavender and Red*.

³⁶Qtd. in Levine and Thom, *Bella Abzug*, 99.

[Abzug was], clearly, a friend—and I think truly so ... a true friend—but she loved to call us “her little *fagelas*.” Alright? It’s not as bad as “faggot,” alright, but in the Yiddish community, it’s the form of referring to a gay person as being somewhat insignificant ... So it’s a time, in other words, when here’s truly a friend who still has those kind of ideas.³⁷

Despite this mild homophobia, Abzug nevertheless understood the political struggle in clear terms. In a very public way, Abzug embraced her gay constituents. She glad-handed constituents in gay bars. When confronted with a group of semi-nude men during one campaign stop, Abzug won them over with humor, saying “I’m sorry that I’m not quite dressed for the occasion!”³⁸ Campaigning in this fashion solidified gay support, and several members of GAA began volunteering on her campaign.³⁹ In 1970, Abzug received endorsements from national periodicals such as *GAY* and *The Advocate*. Peter Ogren, managing editor of *GAY*, declared, “Bella Abzug is one of the most dynamic people I’ve ever met.” His magazine was thrilled at her “openly request[ing] the vote of New York’s homosexual community.”⁴⁰ Such attention in gay publications allowed Abzug’s reputation as a pro-gay advocate to spread far beyond her district. As early as her first year in office, Abzug had a nationwide reputation for supporting gay rights. Merle Miller referenced Abzug’s allyship in his famous coming out essay in the *New York Times*.⁴¹ In early 1971, *Rolling Stone* contacted Abzug for an article on gay liberation. The journalist noted that he kept “running across” Abzug’s name and news of her “outspoken work” for gay people. “In the interviews I am conducting,” he told her, “I discover you are a minor folk heroine.”⁴²

Abzug continued her vocal support after her election, becoming arguably the most pro-gay member of Congress of the 1970s.⁴³ Abzug’s commitment was even more important given her status as a national figure and reputation as a savvy political actor. By the end of 1971, a Gallup poll listed Abzug among the most admired women in the United States.⁴⁴ She gained a reputation as both principled and effective. She was a civil libertarian and an anti-imperialist. She supported gender equality and a robust welfare state. She earned her radical reputation with bold stances. On her first day in Congress, Abzug submitted a resolution to set a date for removal of all U.S. troops from Vietnam.⁴⁵ She was among the first members of Congress to call for Richard Nixon’s impeachment. After the difficult campaign in 1972, she operated from a relatively safe congressional seat and could risk taking more left-wing positions than the average Democrat.⁴⁶ At the 1972 Democratic National Convention (DNC), she was among the few delegates who supported the gay rights plank in the party platform. At the

³⁷Richard Wandel interview by Liza Zapol, June 8, 2016, transcript, Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation West Village Oral History Project, New York, NY.

³⁸Qtd. in Levy, *The Political Life of Bella Abzug*, 110.

³⁹Levine and Thom, *Bella Abzug*, 99–100.

⁴⁰“The Editors Speak,” *GAY*, June 29, 1970, 2.

⁴¹Merle Miller, “What It Means to Be a Homosexual,” *New York Times*, Jan. 17, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/01/17/archives/what-it-means-to-be-a-homosexual-a-fag-is-a-homosexual-gentleman.html> (accessed May 25, 2022).

⁴²Stan Brossette to Bella Abzug, Feb. 26, 1971, folder “Correspondence 1970–1974,” box 152, BSAP.

⁴³Other congresspeople supported ending discrimination based on sexual orientation. Most notably, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, in her pathbreaking 1972 presidential run, affirmed her support for gay rights, courted gay voters, and pledged her support to GAA. However, gay activists’ relationships with other national figures were far more contentious. For example, George McGovern, the 1972 Democratic nominee, tried to rescind his endorsement of gay rights, and GAA occupied the campaign’s offices in protest. Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 107; Barbara Winslow, *Shirley Chisholm: Catalyst for Change* (New York, 2014), 121.

⁴⁴George Gallup, “Golda Tops ’71 Admired Women List,” *Salt Lake Tribute*, Jan. 1, 1972, 3.

⁴⁵Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *Peace Now! American Society and the Ending of the Vietnam War* (New Haven, CT, 1999), 170.

⁴⁶Richard Madden, “Bella Abzug Wins Easily; Reid Leads as Democrat,” *New York Times*, Nov. 8, 1972, 97.

1974 National Women's Political Caucus, she encouraged women to withhold their votes from male candidates who did not support women's rights, racial equality, and gay rights.⁴⁷

Abzug was also known for her effectiveness in Congress. In 1974 she authored the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, which banned discrimination against women who sought to obtain their own lines of credit, loans, and mortgages.⁴⁸ Alongside Shirley Chisholm (D-NY), Abzug wrote and oversaw the passage of the Comprehensive Child Development Act, which would have established a national daycare program were it not for a presidential veto.⁴⁹ As a subcommittee chair, Abzug oversaw implementation of the 1974 Privacy Act and Freedom of Information Act Amendments.⁵⁰ House Leader Tip O'Neill (D-MA) made Abzug a Democratic at-large whip, and by 1976 *US News & World Report* designated her the "third most powerful member of Congress."⁵¹

Both publicly and privately, Abzug established her bona fides as a friend to gay Americans. When members of GAA were arrested for public displays of affection in 1970, they called Abzug and she provided them with a lawyer.⁵² In January 1971, Abzug and Congressman Ed Koch (D-NY) sent letters of support to the New York State Assembly's Special Committee on Discrimination Against Homosexuals. Members of GAA, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), NYC Mattachine, NYC Radicalesbians, and the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) were in attendance. Bob Kohler of GLF invoked Abzug's allyship during a speech criticizing the assemblymen: "Bella Abzug will walk the streets with me, will you?"⁵³ When 250 gay rights activists protested the *New York Daily News* in May of 1972, Abzug spoke at the demonstration.⁵⁴ If she could not attend protests, Abzug sent statements of support.⁵⁵ She petitioned the New York Supreme Court on behalf of Jim Owles of GAA. Owles had sued New York for refusing to certify GAA's incorporation due to the organization's name. Abzug defended GAA's purpose and name. Ever the lawyer, Abzug cited a lack of precedent in the state's denial of the certificate of incorporation.⁵⁶ Several gay rights activists attended an Abzug fundraiser in May 1972, and the *Washington Post* made the presence of a "drag queen" named Aurora Borealis the central focus of its coverage. Borealis supported Abzug because she was "the only one in Congress championing all minorities, including homosexuals." While the *Post* found the presence of a drag queen noteworthy, Abzug seemed nonplussed. "With typical equanimity," the *Post* noted, Abzug "shrugged her shoulders" about her gay supporters: "Everybody is people," she told the reporter.⁵⁷

Abzug's reputation spread, and some gay Americans felt she was their only federal ally. Dorothy Dedman, representing a group called the Association for Homosexual Rights in the Military, contacted Abzug in December 1972. Dedman had lobbied various government offices in protest. Her letter catalogued the indifference she encountered from other federal officials. She had tried formal petitions of complaint, contacting the White House and even the Supreme Court. Ultimately, however, her group had received no assistance. Federal officials' unresponsiveness had driven her organization's members to their breaking point. Dismayed,

⁴⁷"Bella Advocates Withholding Vote," *Great Bend Tribune*, June 30, 1974, 2.

⁴⁸Levine and Thom, *Bella Abzug*, 110, 149.

⁴⁹Self, *All in the Family*, 128–31.

⁵⁰Abzug cosponsored both pieces of legislation and oversaw their implementation in her capacity as chair of the House Committee of Government Operations' Subcommittee of Government Information and Individual Rights. Zarnow, *Battling Bella*, 201–2.

⁵¹Zarnow, *Battling Bella*, 4–5.

⁵²Eric Marcus, *Making Gay History: The Half-Century Fight for Lesbian and Gay Equal Rights* (New York, 2002), 145.

⁵³Bob Osborn, "Gay People vs The State Ass.," *Empty Closet*, Feb.–Mar. 1971, 7–10.

⁵⁴"Gays Picket Editorial Bigots," *Gay Liberator*, May 1, 1972, 5.

⁵⁵"Gay Sisters & Brothers," *Great Speckled Bird*, Mar. 1, 1971, 22; Jeanne Córdova, "Flowers of Evil," *Lesbian Tide*, Jan. 1975, 16, 18.

⁵⁶Walter H. Waggoner, "Fight Is Pressed by Homosexuals," *New York Times*, Feb 25, 1971, 32.

⁵⁷Myra McPherson, "Everybody Is People," *Washington Post*, May 3, 1972, B1.

Dedman wrote to Abzug: “It has come to our attention that you are sympathetic to our cause.” She asked Abzug to endorse a list of four “demands.” The group wanted Abzug to support reversal of their discharges, support nondiscrimination legislation, endorse their right to privacy, and advocate repeal of the federal anti-sodomy law.⁵⁸ Abzug’s response was prompt. She endorsed the group’s demands, calling them a “matter of sound public policy” as well as constitutional law. Perhaps most importantly, she offered to keep the lines of communication open, encouraging Dedman to write again. It was entirely in keeping with Abzug’s principles and her unwavering support for the rights of gay Americans. When she wrote to Dedman, it was at the conclusion of a year in which Abzug had fought for her political life. Redistricted out of her congressional seat, Abzug lost her 1972 primary only to remain in Congress after her opponent, William F. Ryan, died of cancer. She also wrote in a political climate where Democrats had suffered their worst defeat in decades.⁵⁹ Abzug offered her “full support” to Dedman even in dire political circumstances.⁶⁰

During her time in office, Abzug worked with gay activist organizations. She maintained an ongoing dialogue with New York’s Mattachine Society.⁶¹ From her first campaign, she had a strong working relationship with GAA.⁶² A logical ally, GAA was not as radical as other organizations.⁶³ While pre-Stonewall homophile activists publicly performed a conservative politics of respectability, post-Stonewall radicals advocated systemic, revolutionary change.⁶⁴ In the early 1970s, gay liberation’s more radical groups gave way to rights-oriented activism. The anti-capitalist, anticolonial critique of groups like GLF made for splintering and unstable organizations. Subsequent groups like GAA and NGTF advocated for the development of gay political power rather than revolutionary change.⁶⁵ Reformers rather than radicals, GAA and NGTF worked toward a politics of inclusion and a rights-based equality.⁶⁶ Thus, gay reformers’ worldview coupled well with Abzug’s “practical radicalism.” This is not to suggest the relationship was without friction. Peter Fisher, one of GAA’s central members, chastised Abzug in March 1972 for failing to consistently mention gay people during her public statements. Somewhat vexed, Fisher stressed that Abzug could not continue to “leave gay people—and their votes—in the closet.”⁶⁷ Still, GAA and NGTF had an ongoing working relationship with Abzug’s office.

⁵⁸Dorothy A. Dedman to Bella Abzug, Dec. 5, 1972, folder “Correspondence 1972,” box 150, BSAP.

⁵⁹Zarnow, *Battling Bella*, 160–5, 173–5.

⁶⁰Bella Abzug to Dorothy A. Dedman, Dec. 18, 1972, folder “Correspondence 1972,” box 150, BSAP.

⁶¹Bella Abzug to Michael Stephen Kotis, October Oct. 19, 1970, folder “Correspondence,” box 152, BSAP; Bella Abzug to New York Mattachine Society, June 1, 1972, folder “Correspondence,” box 152, BSAP.

⁶²Zarnow, *Battling Bella*, 106.

⁶³Simon Hall, “The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no. 3 (Sept. 2010): 536–62, here 552–4.

⁶⁴Martin Meeker has argued that the homophile movement’s focus on respectability was a tactical public relations measure that allowed for more aggressive community activism. Meeker has dismantled the stereotype that Mattachine was entirely focused on education rather than community-based care and confrontation. Martin Meeker, “Behind the Mask of Respectability: Reconsidering the Mattachine Society and Male Homophile Practice, 1950s and 1960s,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no. 1 (Jan. 2001): 78–116, here 81–9, 105–7.

⁶⁵Mumford, “The Trouble with Gay Rights,” 55; Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945–1972* (Chicago, 2000), 360–2. Emily Hobson has pushed back against this narrative, arguing instead that both gay liberal and gay leftist organizations grew throughout the 1970s. Nevertheless, more reform-minded organizations were the groups typically advocating for legislative change and electoral politics. Hobson, *Lavender and Red*, 13–4.

⁶⁶Jonathan Bell has persuasively shown that national organizations like NGTF retreated from class, racial, or gender-based arguments in favor of respectability politics, seeking to instead make arguments based on privacy and “subsume sexual identity behind a respectable face of normative citizenship.” Jonathan Bell, “Making Sexual Citizens: LGBT Politics, Health Care, and the State in the 1970s,” in *Beyond the Politics of the Closet: Gay Rights and the American State Since the 1970s*, ed. Jonathan Bell (Philadelphia, 2020), 58–80.

⁶⁷Peter Fisher to Bella Abzug, Mar. 1972, folder “Correspondence 1972,” box 150, BSAP.

Gay activists like Fisher pushed Abzug for even more visible allyship out of a desire for publicity for their cause. Behind the scenes, however, Abzug consistently advocated for gay people in her capacity as a congresswoman. In 1971, she supported GAA's efforts to pass New York City's Intro 475—a controversial municipal bill that would have added sexual orientation to New York City's Human Rights Law. She lobbied City Councilman Thomas Cuite directly, as he was the obstructionist member of the council delaying a public hearing on the bill.⁶⁸ That same year, she acted as an intermediary for GAA, encouraging Mayor John Lindsay to publicly endorse the measure. In her advice to Lindsay, Abzug pressured him using her typical rhetoric of human rights and solidarity. Other groups, including women's and civil rights organizations, had endorsed the bill. Lindsay's "silence," she warned, "would be seen as tacit support for ... discrimination that exists against homosexuals." Abzug informed Lindsay that the activists felt his office had been "aloof" on gay rights. She urged Lindsay to meet with the organization to discuss the bill.⁶⁹

Abzug often lobbied on behalf of GAA's interests with powerful political figures. She chastised Police Commissioner Patrick Murphy, for example, in April 1972:

I was shocked to read newspaper accounts of an incident at the Inner Circle dinner April 15, at which members of the Gay Activist Alliance were reportedly stomped and beaten in public view while police refused to intervene or to let the victims identify their assailants.... I urge you to conduct an immediate investigation of this episode and to take whatever action the findings require. Homosexuals are human beings, citizens and taxpayers who are entitled to the full protection of the law. It is the responsibility of your department and the city administration to assure them of this protection and to guarantee that their civil rights are not violated.⁷⁰

In July 1975, Abzug petitioned Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger on behalf of Air Force veteran Leonard Matlovich. A decorated Vietnam veteran, Matlovich chose publicly to come out to fight the military's ban on gay service members.⁷¹ Abzug protested Matlovich's dismissal, arguing both for Matlovich's right to privacy and the larger principle that sexuality had no impact on a person's right to employment.⁷² Abzug also facilitated connections to other areas of government for gay rights activists. In 1976, at the DNC platform committee, Abzug placed Jean O'Leary of NGTF in contact with Midge Costanza, who would go on to serve in the Carter White House.⁷³ Abzug thus facilitated O'Leary and Costanza's partnership and—indirectly—the historic NGTF meeting that occurred in 1977. While the NGTF White House meeting did not yield long-term policy consequences, it is regarded as a historic first step both symbolically and in national gay groups beginning to be heard as a lobby.⁷⁴ Of course, while grassroots activism pressured the Carter administration, Abzug's role as an intermediary facilitated this connection.⁷⁵

⁶⁸Bella Abzug to Thomas Cuite, July 29, 1971, folder "N.Y. Office - 5-7/1971," box 41, BSAP.

⁶⁹Bella Abzug to John V. Lindsay, Apr. 8, 1971, folder "12/1970-4/1971," box 41, BSAP.

⁷⁰Bella Abzug to Patrick Murphy, Apr. 18, 1972, folder "Correspondence," box 152, BSAP.

⁷¹Mike Hippler, *Matlovich: The Good Soldier* (Boston, 1989), 42–3.

⁷²Bella Abzug to James Schlesinger, July 15, 1975, folder "Correspondence," box 152, BSAP.

⁷³Mattingly, *A Feminist in the White House*, 73–4.

⁷⁴On the White House meeting, see Bell, "Making Sexual Citizens"; Claire Bond Potter, "Paths to Political Citizenship: Gay Rights, Feminism, and the Carter Presidency," *Journal of Policy History* 24, no. 1 (Jan. 2012): 95–114; Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 298–304; and Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 133–4.

⁷⁵Abzug's longtime relationship with Costanza and O'Leary showed both the possibilities and the limits of Abzug as an intermediary figure. A close friend of Abzug, Costanza secured Abzug's appointment as presiding officer of the International Women's Year (IWY) Commission in 1977. Costanza and O'Leary grew frustrated with Abzug's unwillingness to embrace gay and lesbian protections as one of the "core recommendations" of the commission. Abzug, in her capacity as chairperson, tried to walk a fine line, balancing the interests of pro- and

In addition to directly interceding on behalf of activist groups, Abzug viewed herself as both a congresswoman and organizer, one who could introduce bills in order to encourage grass-roots activism outside of Congress. She considered one of her primary functions as a radical within the halls of power to be raising political awareness for various oppressed groups. Abzug detailed her theory of change during her first re-election bid:

I have a greater appreciation of what can be done [in Congress] and I believe that the kind of activism I represent is unique. I think we need more of it, not less, and we need it *in* Congress. Before I was elected, I would organize and lead mass delegations to Washington in support of end the war resolutions that had been introduced by liberals. Now I do both: I introduce legislation or work inside to see that others do so, and then I mobilize support for it inside and outside of Congress.... My presence in Congress assures [organizers] that there is hope that other women and young people and other unrepresented groups can break through the barriers and have an equal voice in their government.⁷⁶

Thus, when Abzug became the first member of Congress to introduce gay rights legislation, she was not only introducing a potential law but providing a signal to gay Americans to mobilize around her efforts.

The Act Itself

Abzug quietly introduced the Equality Act in 1974, with only Ed Koch as cosponsor. On March 25, 1975, she reintroduced the bill to the new session of Congress with twenty-three cosponsors. Her office had worked directly with NGTF's Bruce Voeller and Sidney Abbott on the revised language of the bill. NGTF preferred the term "sexual preference" to "sexual orientation" because they felt it reflected a constitutionally protected right to choice and, therefore, privacy. Abzug's revised bill reflected NGTF's wishes.⁷⁷ The reintroduction of the Equality Act did garner some press coverage, and also satisfied activist organizations.⁷⁸ Much had changed since its first introduction. Richard Nixon had resigned, and Gerald Ford ascended to the presidency. In the 1974 Congressional elections, Democrats won landslide victories in the backlash over Watergate. Abzug's own 1974 re-election had been overwhelming. She garnered over 78 percent of the vote, and her landslide firmly established her seat as safe.⁷⁹

Her fight for gay rights remained a risky political stance, however, as Abzug had aspirations of higher office. By the time Abzug reintroduced the Equality Act, she had already begun an exploratory committee for the 1976 Senate campaign, which would ultimately end her political career.⁸⁰ Despite these ambitions, Abzug remained firm in her commitments. In March 1975, she became the first person to speak in favor of gay rights on the floor of the House of Representatives. In her speech, she argued for gay equality with the terminology of both civil rights as well as principles of full equality and inherent human rights:

anti-lesbian feminists. While the commission ultimately incorporated guidelines on gay and lesbian rights, lesbian activists like O'Leary had to apply pressure to Abzug to achieve this compromise. Marjorie J. Spruill, *Divided We Stand: The Battle Over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics* (New York, 2017), 120–5, 130–2, Kindle.

⁷⁶Bella Abzug to Belinda C. Plutz, Mar. 22, 1972, folder "1972 June–December," box 42, BSAP.

⁷⁷Mary Ziegler, *Beyond Abortion: Roe v. Wade and the Battle for Privacy* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 62.

⁷⁸The reintroduced version of the bill was technically called "Civil Rights Amendments of 1975," but correspondence and periodicals continued referring to Abzug's bill as the Equality Act or "the Abzug Bill." Feldblum, "The Federal Gay Rights Bill," 153.

⁷⁹*Statistics of the Congressional Election of November 4, 1974* (Washington, DC, 1975), 26.

⁸⁰Zarnow, *Battling Bella*, 231–2.

This bill would ensure that gay individuals would be entitled to jobs, to housing, to education, to utilization of public accommodations, to participation in federally assisted programs, on the same basis as other Americans.... What is at issue here is equal rights for all Americans.... I have long been a proponent of measures which would ensure that these [Constitutional] principles are guaranteed for all individuals—women as well as men, married individuals as well as those who are unmarried, people of every nationality, ethnic groups [sic], race, or religion. Likewise, sexual orientation should be no barrier to equal treatment under the law. Homosexuals are a minority group whose concerns have too long been ignored. If the prejudice and discrimination that they suffer are to be eliminated it is essential that Congress enact measures such as the one I am introducing today. It has been estimated that there are 20 million homosexuals in the United States. But even if homosexuals were only a small minority, the considerations would be the same. These considerations are the right to privacy, and the right of a person to choose his or her own affectional or sexual preference without being denied other basic rights—principles which I firmly support.⁸¹

Abzug lobbied Don Edwards (D-CA), chair of the House Judiciary Committee, for public hearings on the bill, but to no avail.⁸² Because of the busing controversy, the subcommittee was unwilling to hold hearings “on any proposed amendments to the Civil Rights Act.”⁸³ From a legislative perspective, this is where the story of the Equality Act might end. However, her vocal reintroduction was not only an important example of Abzug’s allyship, but the bill itself became a cause for gay people across the country. Correspondence to Abzug’s office testifies to the bill’s importance as a focal point. Letters show that Abzug’s message of full equality resonated across the political spectrum. While the bill did not pass, Abzug’s allyship motivated gay people across the United States to engage with the politics of gay rights. Additionally, the bill became the gold standard against which gay and lesbian press could gauge would-be political allies.

Abzug’s advocacy mattered more than other members of Congress. Comparing the importance of Abzug’s allyship against the similar positions of Congressman Ed Koch provides a useful juxtaposition. Like Abzug, Koch represented New York City and supported gay rights earlier than most politicians.⁸⁴ When Abzug argued on behalf of various gay rights causes, Koch was often one of the few members of Congress to make similar shows of support.⁸⁵ In 1974, Koch was the lone cosponsor of Abzug’s initial bill. Indeed, once Abzug left Congress, it was Koch who briefly oversaw subsequent reintroduction in 1977.⁸⁶ And yet, for gay Americans, Abzug was the more popular ally. In press coverage of the bill, Koch never received the kind of attention Abzug did. When Koch was mentioned at all, his name was an afterthought. After Abzug, when Koch reintroduced the equivalent of the Equality Act in 1977, gay press coverage was perfunctory.⁸⁷ From 1974 until Abzug left Congress, gay media and the broader public plainly considered the legislation to be “Bella’s Bill.”⁸⁸

Why did gay Americans and media fawn over Abzug and disregard Koch? For both stylistic and substantive reasons, Koch’s support mattered less than Abzug’s. Prior to his run for mayor of New York City in 1977, Koch lacked the name recognition of Abzug; he was not yet a

⁸¹*Congressional Record*, 94 Cong., 1 sess. Mar. 25, 1975, 8581.

⁸²Don Edwards to Bella Abzug, May 28, 1975, folder “Correspondence,” box 152, BSAP.

⁸³“Bella Continues Gay Rights Push,” *The Blade*, Jan. 1976, 1, 14.

⁸⁴Jonathan Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City* (New York, 2012), 92.

⁸⁵“Killers Go Free While Gays Rot in Jail,” *Gay Flames*, Feb. 19, 1971, 1.

⁸⁶Feldblum, “The Federal Gay Rights Bill,” 153–8.

⁸⁷“New Gay Rights Bill in Congress,” *Bay Area Reporter*, Feb. 17, 1977, 4; “Gay Rights Bill Renewed,” *Fifth Freedom*, Mar. 1977, 3; “News Shorts,” *Mainly Gay*, Mar. 1977, 5.

⁸⁸“Bella’s Bill,” *Gay Liberator*, Sept.–Oct. 1974, 2; “Bella Continues Gay Rights Push.”

national figure.⁸⁹ While Koch supported gay rights in principle, rumors about his sexuality and his political ambition made such backing a delicate issue. Koch's support fell within traditional liberal justifications of privacy rights. Unlike Abzug, a socialist who advocated for human rights in addition to civil liberties, Koch considered himself "a moderate and a pragmatist." He was much further to the right than Abzug, and his worldview presaged the ascendancy of the neo-liberal wing of the Democratic Party.⁹⁰ On a personal level, Abzug and Koch disliked each other, and that animosity stemmed as much from their differing political ideologies as their personalities. Koch disliked Abzug's radicalism and advocated change "without destroying the system."⁹¹ After the Stonewall Uprising, which occurred in Koch's district in 1969, Koch criticized police raids in New York City not as immoral, but instead asserted it was not a technical violation of the law "to be homosexual or heterosexual, and the law should never be used to harass either."⁹² He remained consistent in this right-to-privacy argument even when he was the primary sponsor of the successor to Abzug's Equality Act. The solitary time Koch spoke about gay rights on the floor of the House, he did so only to clarify that the bill would not require affirmative action programs. He made no positive statements regarding the gay community, instead adopting the language of Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, stating the government had "no business in the bedrooms" of its citizens.⁹³ As a leftist, Abzug was willing to make an affirmative case for the humanity of gay people in addition to privacy-based arguments.⁹⁴ It was Abzug's allyship that resonated with a more politically diverse contingent of gay people.⁹⁵

People wrote to Abzug to convey the meaningfulness of her advocacy. Letters shared stories of discrimination, testifying to the necessity of the Equality Act as legislation. Gay people emphasized the need for protection in public housing and employment by sharing their personal histories. They recounted ugly episodes of hate crimes and harassment. Expulsion from the armed forces was a recurring form of discrimination, and Abzug received several letters detailing dishonorable discharges based on sexual orientation. Many framed this injustice as an issue of equality as well as privacy, citing the sexual double standard that gay service members faced compared to their straight counterparts.⁹⁶ In 1975, Harold Pitcock of Amarillo, Texas, told Abzug that "a homosexual was beaten in the streets" there and a "local

⁸⁹Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City*, 103.

⁹⁰Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City*, 4–7.

⁹¹Qtd. in Levine and Thom, *Bella Abzug*, 114.

⁹²Qtd. in Soffer, *Ed Koch and the Rebuilding of New York City*, 92.

⁹³*Congressional Record*, 95 Cong., 1 sess., June 14, 1977, 18855.

⁹⁴Abzug's leftist credentials endeared her to radical figures. Cesar Chavez, president of the United Farm Workers, contacted Abzug regarding the Equality Act. Like Abzug, Chavez's leftist principles led him to see the struggle for gay liberation as interconnected with the struggle against all forms of discrimination. Cesar E. Chavez to Bella Abzug, June 18, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP.

⁹⁵The geographical diversity of people who contacted Abzug testifies to her unique standing and the national importance of the Equality Act. Placing the legislation at the federal level greatly broadened its appeal. All told, Abzug received correspondence relating to gay rights from at least twenty-six states and the District of Columbia. As a useful comparison, we can equate this sample with the geographical diversity of correspondence regarding New York City's Intro 475. That local measure was a comparable piece of nondiscrimination legislation, similarly held up in committee, which also received coverage in the mainstream and gay press. Of the correspondence that survives in the archive, however, virtually none came from outside New York. Of the over 250 pieces of unique correspondence relating to the 1971 bill, only two letters came from outside the state. Local politics, then, stayed local. Abzug's national gambit had a farther-reaching impact than battles over local ordinances. Box 050521 "General Welfare Committee Introduction 475," The Council of the City of New York Collection, LaGuardia & Wagner Archives, LaGuardia Community College, Long Island City, NY, https://www.laguardiawagnerarchive.lagcc.cuny.edu/pages/FileBrowser.aspx?LinkToFile=FILES_DOC/Microfilms/05/009/0000/00026/050521/05.009.0000.00026.050521.204751971.PDF (accessed June 3, 2022).

⁹⁶Dedman to Abzug, Dec. 5, 1972, folder "Correspondence 1972," box 150, BSAP; Craig L. Derr to Bella Abzug, Oct. 21, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP; Laurence L. Heisel to Bella Abzug, Jan. 21, 1975,

gay bar was burned down.” Despite the severity of the crimes, Pitcock related the indifference of local law enforcement.⁹⁷ Others relayed stories of being denied entrance to colleges because of their sexual identity.⁹⁸

Stories like these were evocative and harrowing. In sharing them, gay people attempted to turn terrible acts of hate into tools with which they could advocate for social change—and into ammunition for their intermediary to use in Abzug’s advocacy for gay rights.⁹⁹ Sharing stories of assault, harassment, suicide, and police brutality was more than a cathartic experience; it was the documenting of reality and a meaningful political act.

Abzug’s broad appeal inspired a wide array of gay Americans. Different aspects of Abzug’s ideology appealed to different people. Some who reached out to Abzug were self-described gay rights activists who showed an understandable interest in Abzug’s efforts. Others were drawn to Abzug’s bill because of their feminist identity. Cheryl Reeves, who had come to her lesbian identity through the women’s movement, praised the initial bill for protecting women in their sexuality, gender, and marital status. Originally from West Virginia, Reeves was “a novice in terms of gay politics” and regarded Abzug as her best possible ally.¹⁰⁰ Another woman exalted the bill because it would liberate all women, straight and gay alike, from the insidious reality that homophobia created in professional environments. Not only were gay women subject to harassment, she told Abzug, but men could weaponize threats of homophobic slander to force women into sex. She viewed the bill as a blow against this type of heterosexism, not just a civil rights bill for lesbians.¹⁰¹

Abzug’s appeal also reached gay Americans who fell squarely within traditional liberal politics. They advocated for privacy rights, the right to be left alone and free of state-sponsored harassment.¹⁰² Others understood Abzug’s allyship as a push for full, comprehensive equality and in keeping with expanding civil rights. The bill was an affirmation of their right to live publicly and proudly. Symbolically, they regarded Abzug’s bill not as an attempt to protect their privacy rights, but a signal that their group had the ability to claim full equality in both the public and private sphere.¹⁰³ Additionally, Abzug’s actions even inspired straight-identified people to advocate for gay rights. Marian Carr, a heterosexual New York teacher, said the bill had given her a “fresh reason to love” Abzug. She wanted to help, not for her sake, but for her gay students and friends.¹⁰⁴ In this way, Abzug also modelled allyship for straight Americans.

Abzug was even more important for people who otherwise had no outlet. Rural gay people saw Abzug as someone who could advocate on their behalf and provide connection to larger gay networks.¹⁰⁵ In regions of limited access to gay political movements and subcultures,

folder “Correspondence,” box 152, BSAP; Letter to Bella Abzug, Sept. 11, 1975, folder “Correspondence 1975,” box 152, BSAP; Harold W. Pitcock to Bella Abzug, July 7, 1975, folder “Correspondence 1975,” box 152, BSAP.

⁹⁷Pitcock to Abzug, July 30, 1975, folder “Correspondence 1975,” box 152, BSAP.

⁹⁸Bob Waldrop to Bella Abzug, May 4, 1976, folder “Correspondence 1976,” box 152, BSAP.

⁹⁹Abzug did use the correspondence in this way. In her testimony on behalf of Intro 475, Abzug read an anonymous letter from a young lesbian that detailed harassment and discrimination into the official record.

¹⁰⁰Cheryl Reeves, digital correspondence with author, Oct. 13, 2020; Cheryl Reeves to Bella Abzug, Aug. 12, 1974, folder “Correspondence 1974,” box 150, BSAP.

¹⁰¹Carolyn F. R. Dissosway to Bella Abzug, Apr. 19, 1976, folder “Correspondence 1976,” box 152, BSAP.

¹⁰²Letter to Bella Abzug, Jan. 30, 1971, folder “Correspondence,” box 152, BSAP; Robert Ermerius to Bella Abzug, May 23, 1974, folder “Correspondence,” box 152, BSAP.

¹⁰³Kermit Berg to Bella Abzug, Sept. 19, 1976, folder “Correspondence 1976,” box 152, BSAP; Erica Gollub to Bella Abzug, undated, folder “Correspondence 1975,” box 152, BSAP; Robert Lewis to Bella Abzug, Feb. 21, 1975, folder “Correspondence 1975,” box 152, BSAP; Sherri A. Yeager to Bella Abzug, Aug. 26, 1976, folder “Correspondence 1976,” box 152, BSAP.

¹⁰⁴Marian Carr to Bella Abzug, Mar. 26, 1975, folder “Correspondence 1975,” box 152, BSAP.

¹⁰⁵The rural turn in LGBTQ history has addressed gay mobility and culture in the countryside. However, scholars have not yet noted how mainstream allies facilitated gay activism in rural America. For instance, see John

affirmatively asserting their gayness was an important—albeit limited—form of identity work.¹⁰⁶ Abzug's intermediary status made her the go-between through whom people could channel this identity work. Both to bolster Abzug's sense of support and to affirm their sexual identities, nonmetropolitan gay people used correspondence to assert their existence. Representative of a broader trend in the letters, one wrote from Kansas to declare "I am openly GAY and feel very liberated."¹⁰⁷ People from rural locales were glad to inform Abzug about gay existence "out here in the hinterlands."¹⁰⁸ Authors asserted their presence in small towns, the Midwest, and Deep South.¹⁰⁹ Far removed from formal activist organizations, rural gay Americans could do little to pressure social change in the 1970s. Physically and economically isolated from groups such as Radicalesbians or NGTF, nonmetropolitan gay people had to pursue a different method of involvement. Even the relatively small act of writing to a congresswoman allowed gay Americans outside metropolitan spaces to participate in gay liberation.

Abzug was important for these rural gay people. For example, James Moody was isolated "both politically and socially" from the gay rights movement living in rural Tennessee. Though "aware" of gay organizations, he was unable to make contact throughout the 1970s. Moody overcame this reality by accessing gay newspapers, and it was here he first learned about Abzug's Equality Act.¹¹⁰ "Reaching out to Bella Abzug," he recalled, "seemed to be the only viable option at that time." Letter writing was one of his "few means of working as an activist."¹¹¹ In July 1975, Moody contacted Abzug to advocate, in a small but meaningful way, for gay rights at the national level.¹¹² For people unable to overtly organize, contacting Abzug was a practical option. Thus, while mainstream allies like Abzug may initially seem peripheral to the identity formation process, the letters instead show that mainstream resources were an important tool in identity work.

J. F. Hastings, a 25-year-old dairy farmer from Pennsylvania, regarded Abzug as a potential guide to the gay world. His town was stiflingly small, composed of fewer than 500 people.¹¹³ Hastings wanted to help in the movement but did not know "how to become involved." He turned to Abzug to facilitate connection. "My problem is that I have no contacts," he confided. Unable to live openly in his rural community, Hastings felt he had "no way of knowing who to contact" within urban gay communities. He included a self-addressed stamped envelope, and requested that Abzug send him names, phone numbers, and addresses for gay organizations in the Pittsburgh area. He urged her to be discrete, as he felt it was "still *unsafe* to live openly in rural central PA." Hastings longed to participate in a community with which he self-identified despite having virtually no knowledge or contacts. For him, writing to Abzug was a lifeline.¹¹⁴

Gay people often used Abzug's office in this way, and the Equality Act raised her already visible profile. They frequently asked Abzug for copies of the bill to reference and

Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago, 1999); Brock Thompson, *The Un-Natural State: Arkansas and the Gay South* (Fayetteville, AK, 2010); and Colin R. Johnson, *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America* (Philadelphia, 2013).

¹⁰⁶Identity work is the active, self-conscious performance of a given identity by using culturally understood codes and behaviors to signify a group status. For an analysis of queer identity work in a rural setting, see Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (New York, 2009).

¹⁰⁷Robert Lewis to Bella Abzug, Feb. 21, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP.

¹⁰⁸Michael Kile to Bella Abzug, Aug. 1, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," Box 152, BSAP.

¹⁰⁹James R. Moody to Bella Abzug, July 10, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP; Linda to Bella Abzug, Sept. 25, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP.

¹¹⁰James R. Moody, digital correspondence with author, Feb. 17, 2014.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²James R. Moody to Bella Abzug, July 10, 1975, BSAP.

¹¹³United States Census Bureau, *Census of Population: 1970*, vol. 1: Characteristics of the Population, part 40: Pennsylvania, section 1, "Population of Places, 1970 and 1960—Marion Center, PA," 40-14.

¹¹⁴J. F. Hastings to Bella Abzug, Dec. 12, 1974, folder "Correspondence 1970-1974," box 152, BSAP.

redistribute.¹¹⁵ Additionally, people asked for details about the larger political process. Some knew only vague particulars and wanted to know what the bill would do and when it would be reintroduced.¹¹⁶ More politically savvy authors showed they were following the bill's progress with great interest. "Last I heard," wrote Rick Troth of Pasadena, California, "it was sent to the Judiciary Committee. This was, however, some time ago." Troth's curiosity extended beyond the standard legislative process and into the machinations of the political strategy: "I would like to know ... what its present state in Congress is and what strategy as it were would be appropriate for seeking its passage."¹¹⁷ Far from mere letters of support, letter writers were trying to effect change at the federal level.

The Equality Act inspired such participation, and people volunteered to help in the limited capacity they could. Writing to Abzug in September 1975, one woman succinctly spoke for many in a national gay community, asking simply: "What can I do?"¹¹⁸ Spurred to action, letter writers concluded it was not enough "to just write a letter to the *Times*," but instead participate actively in the process.¹¹⁹ Letters inquiring about the bill's status often asked for practical details to help its passage. Letter writers wanted information about legislative procedure, which subcommittee the bill would go to, and who was on that committee.¹²⁰ They wanted names of their representatives and "whatever key figures" they should write to.¹²¹ Although their access to this kind information was limited, gay people used Abzug as an intermediary to stay informed and become involved in the endeavor. Abzug's office provided a standard response letter to these inquiries, informing people of the bill's status and providing the name of Congressman Don Edwards, the chair of the Judiciary Committee.

Gay Americans informed Abzug of their efforts on behalf of the bill. Even more common than letters that asked, "what can I do?" were letters informing Abzug about what was already being done. Curtis Ball wrote from Bowling Green, Kentucky, to tell Abzug of a newly formed local organizing effort. The group's first project was "writing our representatives in support" of Abzug's bill.¹²² Cheryl Reeves wrote to Don Edwards, and vowed to send additional letters "to appropriate people."¹²³ Jerry White of Tampa wrote to every congressional representative in Florida.¹²⁴ Others informed Abzug that they had contacted their members of Congress from Colorado, Maine, and Washington.¹²⁵ Multiple people wrote to Abzug from prison, citing their incarceration as a major handicap that would not stop them from advocating for the bill. Ronald Rose wrote from prison in Vacaville, California, promising to spread the word about Abzug's bill. "I write for several publications plus know many people across the nation," he wrote. "Althouh [sic] I am a prisoner, my voice is heard."¹²⁶

¹¹⁵Thomas C. Burch to Bella Abzug, Mar. 18, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP; Leo Gallant to Bella Abzug, Sept. 2, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP; Keith McGee to Bella Abzug, Jan. 27, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP; Rick Troth to Bella Abzug, Sept. 9, 1974, folder "Correspondence 1974," box 150, BSAP.

¹¹⁶Randy Grant to Bella Abzug, Nov. 17, 1974, folder "Correspondence 1974," box 150, BSAP.

¹¹⁷Troth to Abzug, Sept. 9, 1974, BSAP.

¹¹⁸Haroldine Trowe to Bella Abzug, Sept. 11, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP.

¹¹⁹Carr to Abzug, Mar. 26, 1975, BSAP.

¹²⁰Linda to Abzug, Sept. 25, 1975, BSAP; Kile to Abzug, Aug. 1, 1975, BSAP; Eric L. Pisane to Bella Abzug, Mar. 28, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP.

¹²¹Gallant to Abzug, Sept. 2, 1975, BSAP.

¹²²Curtis Ball to Bella Abzug, Jan. 15, 1976, folder "Correspondence 1976," box 152, BSAP.

¹²³Reeves to Abzug, Aug. 12, 1974, BSAP.

¹²⁴Jerry D. White to Bella Abzug, May 14, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP.

¹²⁵Bruce David Baub to Bella Abzug, Dec. 10, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP; Gerald A. Gerash to Pat Schroeder, Mar. 12, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP; Susan Henderson to William S. Cohen, Mar. 4, 1975, folder "Correspondence," box 152, BSAP.

¹²⁶Ronald Rose to Bella Abzug, Sept. 1, 1974, folder "Correspondence 1974," box 150, BSAP; Marvin W. Walden to Bella Abzug, Mar. 3, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP.

The Gold Standard

In both its original and reintroduced forms, Abzug's bill served as a *cause célèbre* in the gay and lesbian press. While mainstream media coverage was limited, some major outlets such as the *New York Times* noted the bill and Abzug's declaration that "all individuals, regardless of differences" were entitled to full equality.¹²⁷ In correspondence with Abzug, gay Americans showed that they were monitoring gay media to keep track of the bill, typically through the *Advocate*.¹²⁸ The magazine had a relatively large circulation by the mid-1970s and was one of the rare lifelines for gay news in smaller urban and suburban markets.¹²⁹ Others referenced short articles in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and *Time* magazine. Regardless of where people heard about the Equality Act, the correspondence shows an engaged cohort of gay people eager to learn more about the national "gay cause."¹³⁰ As the letters to Abzug attest, gay press coverage also sparked interest in the bill and mobilized letter writing campaigns.

Gay and lesbian media touted Abzug's Equality Act. A gay radio station in Dallas devoted an entire episode of programming to what it called the "Abzug Emancipation Proclamation."¹³¹ Articles in gay periodicals—both radical and reformist—from across the United States stressed the practical and symbolic importance of the bill. In December 1974, the *Bay Area Reporter* (*BAR*) summarized how the bill would intercede in existing laws. "Write to your member of Congress today," *BAR* counselled its readers. "You may need this kind of law tomorrow." Gay people were urged to engage with the process: "If YOU don't support it, who will?"¹³² But the gay press coverage went beyond the practical implications of the bill. Gloria de la Rosa, writing in the radical *Lesbian Connection*, framed the bill's importance, not only as a matter of civil rights, but also of human dignity and an affirmation of personal identity. Advocating on behalf of the bill was in keeping with personal politics and, in her view, a way to "reaffirm our right to be you and me."¹³³

Throughout the bill's various iterations, gay and lesbian publications updated readers about its status and instructed them on how best to participate. Detroit's *Gay Liberator* encouraged persistence, telling readers even Abzug felt it would "take at least several terms of Congress" before passage and would require "extensive pressure" from gay people.¹³⁴ The Washington, DC-based *Blade* reported that prospects were "not bright" in 1976 but noted that the bill's profile was on the rise and caused "almost daily" inquiries to Abzug's office. The paper encouraged gay people "to write, call, or visit your Congressman's office." The *Blade* delved into the minutia of the committee process, telling readers to cajole their own member of Congress rather than committee members. Since most members of Congress did not feel gays were "politically strong," it was important for "constituents [to] let them know that there is an interest in gay rights within their districts."¹³⁵ Similar instructions came from gay publications throughout the country.¹³⁶ The *NGTF Newsletter* encouraged people nationwide to write to Congress

¹²⁷"Homosexual Rights Measure Introduced by 24 in House," *New York Times*, Mar. 26, 1975, 6.

¹²⁸None of the authors specified which article they were referencing, but the *Advocate* published two news pieces about the Equality Act in 1974 and 1975. "Rights Struggle Shifts to Capitol Hill," *The Advocate*, July 31, 1974, 1; David L. Aiken, "Bella's Bill: 'Time to Enjoy the Fruits,'" *The Advocate*, Apr. 23, 1975, 4.

¹²⁹As of 1976, the *Advocate* had a national circulation of roughly 60,000, making it the most prominent outlet for LGBTQ news in America. Rodger Streitmatter, *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America* (Boston, 1995), 185.

¹³⁰Burch to Abzug, Mar. 18, 1975, BSAP.

¹³¹"Dallas to Have Gay Radio Show," *Community News: Gay Paper of North Texas*, Nov. 11, 1975, 1.

¹³²"Gay Civil Rights," *Bay Area Reporter*, Dec. 26, 1974, 6.

¹³³Gloria de la Rosa, *Lesbian Connection*, Aug. 1976, 17.

¹³⁴"Bella's Bill," 2.

¹³⁵"Bella Continues Gay Rights Push," 14.

¹³⁶"Womenspace Sisternews," *The Amazon* 4, no. 1 (May 1975): 11; *The Amazon* 5, no. 2 (Jun./Jul. 1976): 6; "Federal Gay," *Off Our Backs* 5, no. 4 (Apr.–May 1975): 23.

with details of their experiences with homophobic prejudice.¹³⁷ Thus, the bill offered an incentive for gay Americans to refute congressmembers' assumptions that they had no gay constituency. The assumption was somewhat fair, the Chicago-based *Blazing Star* noted, as most Representatives had "never been contacted by a gay constituent." Abzug's act encouraged gay Americans to "explode this myth."¹³⁸ The Equality Act provided gay and lesbian Americans with an opportunity to "come out" to their representatives.

And gay and lesbian Americans did just that. People petitioned their own representatives, not just Abzug. They asserted the existence of gay people in unexpected places. Letter writers told their representatives that gay people were members of their constituency. In April 1975, the Houston-based *Contact* disdainfully published a "non-committal response" from Congressman Bob Eckhardt (D-TX) regarding an inquiry about the bill.¹³⁹ Wisconsin resident Don Schweitzer wrote to Henry Reuss (D-WI) urging him to support Abzug's bill. "Perhaps you are not aware," he told Reuss, "but the State of Wisconsin has a considerable number of homosexual and bisexual people ... far more than you might imagine."¹⁴⁰ An Illinois man told Philip Crane (R-IL) that the only reason he did not hear from more of his gay constituents was due to fear that "to even write their congressman on this subject might invite discrimination." The very assumption that gay people did not live in Middle America was itself an argument for the necessity of the Equality Act.¹⁴¹ Susan Henderson contacted Congressman William Cohen (R-ME) in March 1975. She urged Cohen to support the bill and offered to answer "any questions concerning the need of Gay residents" in his district.¹⁴² In June 1975, James Dawson of Kansas City, Missouri wrote to Senator Thomas Eagleton (D-MO), imploring him to take up Abzug's bill in the Senate. Dawson wrote on behalf of himself and "the thousands of gay people in Missouri who do not want or cannot afford to reveal their names to you." Dawson pressed Eagleton by referencing "the constant cloud of fear and risk of exposure" that most gay Americans lived under. He cited homophobic murders as well as suicide among gay Americans as proof of the bill's necessity.¹⁴³ Tony Pritchard, writing from Norfolk, Virginia, told the Judiciary Committee that discrimination "daily grinds the homosexual into the dust [and] makes a mockery of [American] values." The Committee ought to know that gay people were everywhere: "We are your neighbors, your friends, your sons and daughters."¹⁴⁴

Perhaps no one ruminated on the importance of the Equality Act more than radical lesbian feminist activist Jeanne Córdoba. Founder of *The Lesbian Tide* and Human Rights Editor for the *Los Angeles Free Press*, Córdoba was one of the most prominent lesbian voices of the 1970s.¹⁴⁵ While she was committed to the ideals of lesbian feminism, including the rejection of patriarchy, heterosexism, and monogamy, she nevertheless eschewed lesbian separatism. Thus, Córdoba felt that when national figures embraced gay rights it was too significant an opportunity to ignore.¹⁴⁶ In the August 1974 *Free Press*, Córdoba discussed the Abzug bill,

¹³⁷"Have You Written to Your Congressman About H.R. 5452 Yet?" *NGTF Newsletter* reprinted in *Lambda*, August 2, 1976, 3.

¹³⁸"Gay Rights Legislation," *Blazing Star*, Sept. 1975, 3–4.

¹³⁹*Contact*, Apr. 16, 1975, 30.

¹⁴⁰Don Schweitzer to Henry Reuss, June 13, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP.

¹⁴¹Ronald K. Lancaster to Philip Crane, Apr. 22, 1975, folder: "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP.

¹⁴²Henderson to Cohen, Mar. 4, 1975, BSAP.

¹⁴³James R. Dawson to Thomas Eagleton, June 12, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP.

¹⁴⁴Tony E. Pritchard to the Judiciary Committee, Apr. 29, 1975, folder "Correspondence 1975," box 152, BSAP.

¹⁴⁵As a publication, *Lesbian Tide* was significantly more radical than other gay activist periodicals. For this reason, it had splintered from DOB's newsletter *The Ladder*. Politically, Córdoba was a grassroots activist, but was occasionally willing to participate in coalitional politics, especially when facing anti-gay measures of the New Right in the late 1970s. Faderman, *The Gay Revolution*, 310, 383, 720; Streitmatter, *Unspeakable*, 160–1, 169–70.

¹⁴⁶Jeanne Córdoba, *When We Were Outlaws: A Memoir of Love & Revolution* (Midway, FL, 2011), 410–1; Streitmatter, *Unspeakable*, 160–1, 169–70.

its obstacles and its importance as a turning point in the gay rights movement. The bill's initial language, which included sex and marital status, was indicative of Abzug's status as a "long-time feminist advocate as well as 'friend' of the gay community." Córdova told her readers the Equality Act was significant "on several levels." The crucial element was that the bill represented "a qualitative leap of consciousness among gay people." It was simultaneously a testament to the previous decades of struggle and a signal for the possibilities of full equality in the future. Córdova argued the bill represented a shift from the homophile movement's desire "to be left alone" toward a positive affirmation of the right to love. "The new wave of gay women and men are no longer content to fuck freely, we want to live freely," Córdova told her readers. "We have developed an unnatural desire for secure jobs and equal protection under *our* laws."¹⁴⁷

Two years later, Córdova would make use of Abzug's bill in a different way. Reflecting on the upcoming 1976 presidential election in *The Lesbian Tide*, Córdova used the bill as a litmus test for gay voters. President Gerald Ford did not deserve the gay vote, she reasoned, as he had "made no comment on the gay rights legislation of Abzug and Koch." Governor Jimmy Carter, on the other hand, had at least acknowledged the legislation and indicated he "would probably" support it.¹⁴⁸ Since no iteration of the Equality Act would ever pass Congress, this kind of application was ultimately its most practical political utility. Over a decade before NGTF gave "report cards" to judge representatives' standing on gay rights, gay and lesbian journalists employed Abzug's bill in a similar way.¹⁴⁹

San Francisco's *BAR* employed Abzug as the true measure of political allyship. The paper ran an editorial by California Senate candidate Tom Hayden in which he announced his support of Abzug's bill.¹⁵⁰ In the same issue, the Alice B. Toklas Memorial Democratic Club endorsed Hayden over incumbent John Tunney, citing Hayden's support for the "Abzug amendment" as a key factor.¹⁵¹ Hayden would lose that primary, and *BAR* subsequently endorsed Tunney after he came around on the bill.¹⁵² The paper applied the Abzug standard at the presidential level as well. In an interview with *BAR*, presidential candidate Senator Birch Bayh (D-IN) would not commit to supporting Abzug's bill despite claiming to be an ally.¹⁵³ Conversely, *BAR* received commitment from Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter. In May 1976, the Carter campaign ran a full-page ad in *BAR* declaring his support for gay rights generally and Abzug's bill specifically.¹⁵⁴ In an interview in the same issue, Carter said as president he would sign Abzug's Equality Act.¹⁵⁵ When the gay rights plank was dropped from the 1976 DNC platform, *BAR* feared Carter was betraying his gay supporters. One gay delegate urged patience, however, pointing to Carter's promise on the "Abzug bill."¹⁵⁶ After the election, it seemed apparent that Carter had no intention of actively pursuing the legislation. In December 1976, San Francisco activist Wayne Friday wrote a scathing critique of Carter in *BAR*. Gay people, he said, had been betrayed, won over with Carter's false promise on the Equality Act. When Carter "made that commitment," Friday opined, "Ms. Abzug had already been defeated in a Primary Election.... Carter really went out on a limb by making that

¹⁴⁷Jeanne Córdova, "Free, Equal and Still Hungry," *Los Angeles Free Press*, Aug. 9, 1974, 18, 31; emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁸Qtd. in Jeanne Córdova, "The Candidates: If You Must Vote," *Lesbian Tide*, May–Jun. 1976, 7.

¹⁴⁹D'Emilio, "Organizational Tales," 109.

¹⁵⁰"Hayden's Platform," *Bay Area Reporter*, Apr. 1, 1976, 3.

¹⁵¹"Alice B. Endorses Hayden," *Bay Area Reporter*, Apr. 1, 1976, 6.

¹⁵²George Mendenhall, "Why John Tunney?," *Bay Area Reporter*, Sept. 16, 1976, 10–1.

¹⁵³"Sen. Bayh Peaks [sic] on Gay Rights," *Bay Area Reporter*, Jan. 8, 1976, 2.

¹⁵⁴*Bay Area Reporter*, May 27, 1976, 3.

¹⁵⁵"Jimmy Carter's SF Gay Rights Statement," *Bay Area Reporter*, May 27, 1976, 12.

¹⁵⁶Paul D. Hardman, "Carter Dumps Gay Plank," *Bay Area Reporter*, July 8, 1976, 6.

‘commitment,’ didn’t he[?]¹⁵⁷ Friday’s condemnations proved somewhat overstated. The Carter administration would become the first to listen to its gay constituents and allow them access to the executive branch.¹⁵⁸

When Abzug lost her Senate race in 1976, gay Americans lost their most prominent friend in Congress. The gay press was dismayed by Abzug’s defeat.¹⁵⁹ The *Philadelphia Gay News* bemoaned her primary loss because the victor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, had not shown similar commitment to gay rights.¹⁶⁰ Of course, federal gay rights legislation did continue after Abzug’s exit, and future iterations of the bill received some attention in Congress. In 1978, with Ed Koch gone to become the Mayor of New York, Congressmen Henry Waxman (D-CA) and Ted Weiss (D-NY) briefly shepherded a bill. In 1979, Senator Paul Tsongas (D-MA) introduced a more limited rights bill in the Senate, which would have prevented discrimination in private employment but not housing or public accommodations. Two hearings were eventually held on the House bill in 1981 and 1982.¹⁶¹ The allyship of Waxman, Weiss, and Tsongas is notable. Waxman, in particular, would go on to be a key ally in the federal response to the AIDS epidemic. However, the changing political landscape rendered the antidiscrimination bills moot. The rise of the New Right clearly impacted gay people’s reaction to the various bills, and enthusiasm waned. *BAR* was grateful for the efforts of Senator Tsongas, but gone was the passionate reverence for the bill’s symbolism.¹⁶² Ideologically, Tsongas was not Abzug. And while his allyship was meaningful, the antigay backlash of the new political context rendered symbolic victories less satisfying for *BAR*, which noted the futility of his Senate bill. By 1979, *BAR* also reported a general disengagement among gay Americans who faced increasing attacks with the rise of the New Right. The antigay Family Protection Act, proposed by Senator Paul Laxalt (R-NV), had received 500 letters of support from constituents, whereas Tsongas’s office had not received any. Backed by powerful cultural forces such as Reverend Jerry Falwell, *BAR* feared Laxalt’s bill was much closer to becoming a political reality than Tsongas’s.¹⁶³

BAR was similarly skeptical about the chances for the House bill introduced by Waxman and Weiss. The paper kept tabs on the bills and urged people to write to their representatives.¹⁶⁴ Still, while *BAR* continued to promote this activism, it acknowledged the reality of the situation. Just as the Senate bill was less likely to pass than its antigay counterpart, *BAR* noted that an increased number of cosponsors on the House bill was not particularly meaningful in the Reagan era. In 1981, when the bill was reintroduced yet again, *BAR* took a cynical tone, noting that 159 members of Congress had just signed on to reinstate the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). One of HUAC’s primary functions, famously, had been the persecution of gay Americans during the height of the Red Scare.¹⁶⁵ The message,

¹⁵⁷Wayne Friday, “Reflections of an Election,” *Bay Area Reporter*, Dec. 9, 1976, 15–6.

¹⁵⁸As president, Carter had a mixed record on gay rights. He courted the support of gay voters, although nothing substantive was achieved during his presidency. Carter’s staff worked with members of NGTF, most notably on the famous White House meeting with Costanza. During his presidency, however, Carter did not offer very vocal or sustained support to high-profile political battles, nor did he appear personally invested in the struggle. See Baldwin, “A Ray of Sunshine,” 53–4; Bell, “Making Sexual Citizens,” 71–8; and William B. Turner, “Mirror Images: Lesbian/Gay Civil Rights in the Carter and Reagan Administrations,” in *Creating Change: Sexuality, Public Policy, and Civil Rights*, eds. John D’Emilio, William B. Turner, and Urvashi Vaid (New York, 2000), 3–28.

¹⁵⁹Streitmatter, *Unspeakeable*, 225.

¹⁶⁰“Only Handful for Rights in New York,” *Philadelphia Gay News*, Dec. 1976, 3.

¹⁶¹Feldblum, “The Federal Gay Rights Bill,” 159, 164.

¹⁶²“Senator Seeks Co-Sponsors for Gay Bill,” *Bay Area Reporter*, Sept. 27, 1979, 16.

¹⁶³“Gay Bill Introduced in Senate,” *Bay Area Reporter*, Dec. 20, 1979, 5, 7.

¹⁶⁴“National Rights Bill—A Decade Away?” *Bay Area Reporter*, Mar. 29, 1979, 4; Claudia Moomjy, “News from Gay Rights National Lobby,” *Bay Area Reporter*, Mar. 27, 1980, 9; “34 Initial Sponsors: National Gay Rights Bill Becomes H.R. 1454,” *Bay Area Reporter*, Feb. 12, 1981, 9; “Record Number Co-Sponsor Federal Gay Civil Rights Bill,” *Bay Area Reporter*, Jun. 16, 1983, 13.

¹⁶⁵“The Congressional Two-Step,” *Bay Area Reporter*, Dec. 17, 1981, 35.

then, was clear: gay activists must soldier on, but the political realities of the Reagan era meant the Equality Act was a much more distant possibility than previously imagined.

Conclusion

In 1976, Daniel Patrick Moynihan defeated Abzug in an election that pitted Abzug's practical radicalism against an emerging conservative wing of the Democratic Party. Moynihan barely defeated Abzug: he won by less than one percent of the vote.¹⁶⁶ After her senate campaign, Abzug ran for mayor of New York City in 1977, losing to Ed Koch. She ran to fill Koch's vacant congressional seat in 1978 but lost to Republican S. William Green, who ran an underground smear campaign against her. Among other things, Green tried to establish Abzug as "Queen of the Lesbos."¹⁶⁷ She never again held elected office. Various iterations of the federal gay rights bill were introduced by a handful of congressional allies and eventually by Barney Frank (D-MA), an openly gay member of Congress. In 1992, activists coalesced around ENDA. This narrower measure stood the best chance of passage since the Equality Act. However, conservatives in Congress and the ascendancy of Third Way Democrats impeded its advancement. ENDA languished in Congress well into the twenty-first century.¹⁶⁸ In 2020, the Supreme Court's decision in *Bostock v. Clayton County* affirmed LGBTQ people's right to federal employment protections under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In an ironic and unlikely turn of events, conservative jurists on the Supreme Court—Justice Neil Gorsuch and Chief Justice John Roberts, joining with the liberal justices—affirmed employment protections for LGBTQ Americans.¹⁶⁹ As of this writing, no such protections exist in housing or public accommodations, and the Equality Act remains unpassed.

The end of Abzug's congressional career, then, can be viewed partially as an inflection point. Having a charismatic, adept ally at the federal level had encouraged gay Americans to assert themselves as constituents. It had also given gay and lesbian media a fixed goal for federal legislation. The counterfactual this raises is what might have happened to the Equality Act had Abzug—a serious, popular, and fervent proponent of gay rights—risen to the United States Senate. While no single political figure could prevent America's rightward shift, Abzug at least represented a more forceful ideology than the incrementalist vision that supplanted her generation of Democrats.¹⁷⁰ For her part, Abzug continued to fight for all forms of civil and human rights until her death in 1998.

¹⁶⁶Patrick Andelic, "Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the 1976 New York Senate Race, and the Struggle to Define American Liberalism," *Historical Journal* 57, no. 4 (Dec. 2014): 1111–33, here 1128; Zarnow, *Battling Bella*, 257–61.

¹⁶⁷Levine and Thom, *Bella Abzug*, 188.

¹⁶⁸On the various promises regarding gay rights made and broken by the presidential administration of Bill Clinton, see Craig A. Rimmerman, "A 'Friend' in the White House? Reflections on the Clinton Presidency," in *Creating Change: Sexuality, Public Policy, and Civil Rights*, eds. John D'Emilio, William B. Turner, and Urvashi Vaid (New York, 2000), 43–56.

¹⁶⁹Christy Mallory, Luis A. Vasquez, and Celia Meredith, "Legal Protections for LGBT People After *Bostock v. Clayton County*," *UCLA: The Williams Institute*, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1h88n2d8> (accessed Feb. 15, 2022).

¹⁷⁰Even by the twenty-first century, gay activists had to recalibrate expectations. Under President Barack Obama's administration, activists won victories insofar as their demands were suited to the administration's austerity politics. Thus, gains by gay activists came in more conservative demands of the movement: marriage equality and military service—institutions that reinforce homonormativity and homonationalism. Democratic politicians could, ultimately, support these policies because they did not threaten capital or the fundamental structures of the current system—the system that Abzug hoped to radically alter. On gay rights in the Obama era, see Timothy Stewart-Winter, "The Gay Rights President," in *The Presidency of Barack Obama: A First Historical Assessment*, ed. Julian E. Zelizer (Princeton, NJ, 2018), 95–110. On the construction of gays and lesbians as model citizens for the purpose of maintaining American empire, see Liz Montegary, "Militarizing US

Abzug's efforts presaged an important phenomenon in the struggle for LGBTQ equality: the unique position of allies and intermediaries in the movement. America's rightward drift, as well as the emerging AIDS crisis, consumed most organizational energy throughout the 1980s. These factors left lobbying federal antidiscrimination legislation a lower priority and in the hands of increasingly professionalized and corporate organizations.¹⁷¹ In some cases, such as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), gay organizations simply failed to operate coherently as an effective lobbying group within presidential administrations.¹⁷² At the same time, gay activists—in conjunction with local political allies—managed to pass rights ordinances throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s.¹⁷³ At the federal legislative level, mainstream allies were rare, but in a more secure position than LGBTQ organizations.

Indeed, LGBTQ people's most reliable federal allies in the late twentieth century were politicians much like Abzug: people in safe districts who espoused more leftist ideologies than their contemporaries. In 1995, the socialist congressman from Vermont, Bernie Sanders (I-VT), indignantly chastised Congressman Duke Cunningham (R-CA) for a flippant comment about "homos in the military." Sanders, a longtime ally in the Abzug mold, demanded an apology from Cunningham on the floor of the House.¹⁷⁴ In 1996, while the House debated the Defense of Marriage Act, Representative John Lewis (D-GA) stood in vocal opposition. While many Democrats supported the bill, Lewis forcefully opposed it. Like Abzug, Lewis's politics were informed by his civil rights activism and an intersectional understanding of oppression. He called the bill a "slap in the face of the Declaration of Independence," because it denied the "basic human right" of marriage. Like Abzug, Lewis' allyship was based on principled solidarity:

You cannot tell people they cannot fall in love.... I will not turn my back on another American. I will not oppress my fellow human being. I have fought too hard and too long against discrimination based on race and color not to stand up against discrimination based on sexual orientation. I have known racism. I have known bigotry. This bill stinks of the same fear, hatred, and intolerance.¹⁷⁵

Although a legislative failure, the Equality Act is far from a historical footnote. Abzug's unique status as a national ally allowed her to expand participation in gay liberation, working with activists and engaging average gay people otherwise isolated from the movement. Her Equality Act encouraged a vigorous participation in a national conversation for full and comprehensive equality at a moment when formal organizations were divided, and when the movement began facing widespread backlash. It also created a benchmark against which gay and lesbian Americans could judge other would-be allies, helping them distinguish the committed few from false friends. The significance of Abzug's allyship challenges us to reconsider the

Homonormativities: The Making of 'Ready, Willing, and Able' Gay Citizens," *Signs* 40, no. 4 (Summer 2015): 891–915.

¹⁷¹Elizabeth A. Armstrong, *Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950–1994* (Chicago, 2002); Feldblum, "The Federal Gay Rights Bill," 158–9, 169.

¹⁷²In an effort to more accurately reflect the composition of the organization, the National Gay Task Force renamed itself the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) in the mid-1980s. D'Emilio, "Organizational Tales," 108–11.

¹⁷³Stewart-Winter, *Queer Clout*, 210–1; Kenneth D. Wald, James W. Button, and Barbara A. Rienzo, "The Politics of Gay Rights in American Communities: Explaining Antidiscrimination Ordinances and Policies," *American Journal of Political Science* 40, no. 4 (Nov. 1996): 1152–78, here 1154.

¹⁷⁴"Rep. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) on Clean Water Act," C-SPAN video, May 11, 1995, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4546293/user-clip-rep-bernie-sanders-clean-water-act> (accessed May 25, 2022).

¹⁷⁵"John Lewis on DOMA—1996," C-SPAN video, July 12, 1996, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4399400/user-clip-john-lewis-doma-1996> (accessed May 25, 2022).

importance of historical actors ostensibly outside gay rights organizations and to occasionally center the narrative of allies in histories of the movement.

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