June 13, 2024 / Will LGBTQ+ voters come out for Biden?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING <DAVE THE MADGE BEGOTTEN INSTRUMENTAL HIP HOP>

NOEL KING (host): President Joe Biden has always gone pretty hard during Pride Month.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT BIDEN, 2022: I think we have more LGBTQ + people than any administration or every administration combined.” Laughter. “No, I really mean it.*

NOEL: But this June, he’s in full campaign mode, launching “Out for Biden/Harris” and dispatching icons such as… Vice President Harris.

*<CLIP> VICE PRESIDENT HARRIS: As the great Harvey Milk once said –*

NOEL: … and Transportation Secretary Pete Buttiegieg, no video found…

*<CLIP> SFX: train whistle*

NOEL: …. to talk to the American people. His campaign may be rattled by some survey data suggesting that Biden’s support among LGBTQ + communities - solidly, solidly, solidly Democratic communities - may be slipping. Coming up on Today, Explained: our reporter with the surprising findings!

[THEME]

*<CLIP> TEX 2024 THEME: 2020, 2020 – 4!*

NOEL: It’s Today, Explained. I’m Noel King with Vox Senior Politics Reporter Christian Paz who recently wrote a piece titled: “Are LGBTQ voters about to abandon Biden?” Joe Biden is still leading in the polls with this bloc BUT there’s some evidence that, this year, queer voters have many of the same concerns as the general electorate.

CHRISTIAN PAZ (*Vox* senior correspondent): There have been a few surveys, actually, that don't necessarily ask about the head to head between the candidates, but ask about issues and the way that they're thinking about 2024. And the thing that comes up again and again in those surveys is it's the economy, inflation, kitchen table issues that are significantly influential in the way that these voters are thinking about 2024. And that kind of makes them look a little bit like, you know, voters from other demographic groups, you know, whether we're thinking about Latino and Black voters, whether we're thinking about, you know, non-college-educated voters, things that they prioritize, also tend to be the economy, inflation, affordability, prices. And especially for LGBTQ voters, that's significant because that's coming in significantly higher than concerns over LGBTQ rights or equality. And that's one of those interesting pictures that kind of complicates 2024, since it suggests that LGBTQ voters are kind of behaving in ways similar to other voters.

NOEL: We've covered some of this this election season with respect to Black voters, which you mentioned. And there's a thing that I always wonder Christian, which is: if a group is beginning to behave like the rest of the electorate, if a group is saying, ‘We have other issues beyond just like what our identity is’, why is that such a problem for Democrats?

CHRISTIAN: It's definitely a problem for Democrats when you think about what it is that binds groups of voters together and makes them work and operate as a voting bloc that gives a significant margin of support to one party - in this case, obviously, Democrats. Because, usually when you have groups of voters that begin to behave a little bit more like other voters, it means that they're becoming more persuadable swing voters, and more open, perhaps, to considering the other side, or to reconsider what it is that binds them to one party. And so with LGBTQ voters and Black voters, those are actually two of the most loyal voting groups in the Democratic coalition. You're starting off with such high levels of support that any drop off in that level is sure to have some kind of effect on the overall vote share within a given state, you know, within a given district or just across the country with the popular vote.

NOEL: I imagine Democrats are looking at this same polling and realizing they may have a problem. So what are they doing about it?

SCORING <Here’s The Plan>

CHRISTIAN: Yeah, they're definitely revving up the outreach efforts for Pride Month. Obviously, we’re in June. A lot of it looks like emphasizing how much this party has done in terms of increasing visibility for LGBTQ folks. They're bringing out Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg.

*<CLIP> TRANSPORTATION SEC PETE BUTTIGIEG: My marriage, and my family, and the two beautiful children that, that my husband Chasten and I are raising – that, that marriage only exists by the grace of a single vote on the United States Supreme Court that expanded our rights and freedoms back in 2015 and made it possible for someone like me to get married.*

CHRISTIAN: They're, you know, elevating members of Congress, like, Representative Robert Garcia from California as a key spokesperson, even though he is a freshman representative.

*<CLIP> CONGRESSMAN ROBERT GARCIA (D-CA): Hey everyone, it’s Congressman Robert Garcia with all these amazing people launching “Out for Biden”....*

CHRISTIAN: They're bringing out Vice President Harris to talk to specifically LGBTQ media outlets. They're bringing Second Gentleman Doug Emhoff out to pride events to talk about the accomplishments of the Biden administration. Another thing that they're doing is trying to, quote unquote, lay out the stakes.

*<CLIP> FIRST LADY JILL BIDEN: Donald Trump is a bully. He is dangerous to the LGBTQ community. To our families…*

CHRISTIAN: They're emphasizing the threats to IVF, and threats to trans rights and, you know, gender affirming care for, for trans folks. And one of the other interesting things to point out is that, again, LGBTQ people are not monolithic. They understand the importance of those stakes. But at the same time, they want both parties to focus on some of these everyday issues of affordability. And so that is one thing that I think is missing from some of this messaging during Pride Month is it's very, very specifically focused on LGBTQ identity and rights. But perhaps there's a little bit less of a focus on some of the things that are making these voters think like the average voter.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: Where are Republicans at, and what are they doing?

CHRISTIAN: It's interesting because it's depended on whether it's Donald Trump himself – who is not necessarily, somebody who speaks the most about LGBTQ identity or rights or even, you know… While the rest of his party was very directly going after trans identity and going after, you know, books and LGBTQ visibility. It took him a while to actually weigh in on that.

*<CLIP> CNN, JAKE TAPPER: Let’s talk about same-sex marriage. You said a few years ago that you were evolving on that issue. Where are you?  
FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: I’m traditional marriage. It is changing rapidly.   
TAPPER: But what do you say to a lesbian who’s married, or a gay man who’s married, and they say, ‘Donald Trump, what’s traditional about being married three times?”   
TRUMP: Well, uh, uh, they have a very good point.*

CHRISTIAN: And even then, it doesn't seem like those social issues are the ones that he's the most, you know, concerned about, which is maybe why it's easier for a lot of Republican and conservative-leaning LGBTQ groups to try to make appeals to LGBTQ voters rooted a little bit more in some of those kitchen table concerns: talking about affordability, talking about prices, talking about inflation, and with some appeals to other factors like immigration and crime. But it's interesting to see that, even though President Trump himself doesn't necessarily talk a lot about LGBTQ issues, he's kind of turned to his family as ways to make those appeals in his stead. So, famously, back in 2016, his daughter Tiffany Trump attended a few LGBTQ for Trump rallies.

*<CLIP> TIFFANY TRUMP: And people can say whatever they want to say, but I’m here because I support my father, he supports all of you, and we are here to fight for equality, democracy…*

CHRISTIAN: And this year, actually in April, former first lady Melania Trump, appeared at a fundraiser for the Log Cabin Republicans. That's the major conservative, Republican-aligned LGBTQ group, in the US. And she was there to kind of announce additional investments that the campaign and allied groups would be making to partner with Log Cabin Republicans to reach out to LGBTQ, conservative and Republican voters. A few of those details haven't yet been announced. But even like, stating that that's something that they want to do is interesting because, historically, the Republican Party hasn't necessarily thought of this voting group as a group that is necessarily, the most fruitful for them to try to make investments in, because that creates some tension with the core social conservative evangelical base of the party that they've needed for so long.

NOEL: Hmm.

CHRISTIAN: But it looks like we're seeing a little bit of, you know, even the Republican Party itself considering just how much to reach out to these voters because they're also seeing this polling. They're also seeing indications that Trump improved in 2020 compared to 2016. So why not maybe try to peel off a few more votes on that side?

NOEL: And what makes that so interesting is that there is still obviously a fairly broad vein of what can be described as homophobia in the policy making. This this has not been this has not been solved within the Republican Party.

CHRISTIAN: Oh, it's definitely not been solved. And if anything, what we've seen is, a pretty big cleavage:even in 2022, you still had a significant number of Senate and House Republicans voting in favor of codifying same sex marriage protections. And then later that year, also, we see the rise of Ron DeSantis. And, the relevance again, of these Don't Say Gay law efforts…

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS: This morning, the Florida law critics dub the “Don’t Say Gay” bill is expanding.   
FLORIDA GOVERNOR RON DESANTIS: Gender ideology has no place in our K-12 school system. And we’ve made that very, very clear. It is wrong for a teacher to tell a student that they may have been born in the wrong body, or that their gender is a choice.*

CHRISTIAN: … and that it seems like somewhere around 2022, we have a pretty sharp return to old school homophobia, where for that last year, it seemed like it was a specifically focused attack on trans Americans and trans rights.

*<CLIP> PBS: According to the Human Rights Campaign, an LGBTQ advocacy group, lawmakers in 28 states are considering 93 bills limiting the rights of transgender Americans.*

CHRISTIAN: And it's a sharp contrast to the way we saw the party kind of change a bit from, when, the first efforts to repeal Don't Ask, Don't Tell, the military policy that prohibited, LGBTQ service members from serving openly in the military. That was repealed in 2011. And from then to 2022, we saw a general march front along a path toward greater acceptance, tolerance, definitely within the Democratic Party. Um, and a slight kind of shift toward the center among Republicans. And then from 2022 on, we definitely see a sharp pivot against, definitely with the rise of, you know, Republicans to the right on social issues compared to Donald Trump and kind of pulling Donald Trump in that direction. And what we're seeing, since, you know, especially since the 2020 election, is one party continuing, you know, as, as, milquetoast as some of these, some of these outreach efforts might seem, it's still relevant that the Democratic Party is, you know, elevating folks like Pete Buttigieg when the other party is actively turning against them.

NOEL: What do you think, in 2024, what do you think the story of this community and this election will be?

CHRISTIAN: It's definitely going to be a nuanced picture that develops because, a lot of, history for, you know, we're thinking about other marginalized groups and experiences that other voting blocs have had that has kind of made them become less of a voting bloc and more of just a swing group. And here I'm thinking about Catholic voters, Italian- and Irish-American voters. More recently, something that's happening among Hispanic and Latino voters, potentially, where they used to also be a pretty significant voting bloc on the Democratic side and are now much more persuadable and swingable. There's a lot of history there that suggests that something similar would be in store for LGBTQ voters. Combine that with an unpopular Democratic incumbent, combine that with a generally still-sour mood on the economy and the state of the status quo. And you see kind of a recipe for a pretty significant shift happening.

SCORING <The Sky Darkens>

CHRISTIAN: And yet we're also going to see something that is maybe just unique to LGBTQ voters, that these shared experiences are still really, really relevant, that they're still really important, that they're still significant enough to make them not even consider the opposite party.

SCORING BUMP

CHRISTIAN: And so we're going to see, just how relevant and influential this voting group becomes, and get some indications as to whether or not their experiences and that shared sense of identity is strong enough to overcome some of the other factors that might otherwise suggest that they become less loyal to the Democrats.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Coming up: a California Congressman on Out for Biden/Harris!

SCORING OUT

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

*<CLIP> MEG STALTER TWITTER VIDEO: Hi gay, happy Pride Month. We are sashaying away with –*

NOEL: Today, Explained. Congressman Robert Garcia, Democrat of California, one of nine openly LGBTQ house members working with the Biden campaign to get out the queer vote. I began by asking the question that we were here to discuss today:

NOEL: The question that we're here to discuss today is this: can President Biden count on LGBTQ support in the 2024 election?

GARCIA: I mean, I think he can. I mean, [I] think first let's – [I] think we got to be real honest. I think traditionally, LGBTQ+ people have been strong supporters of, of Democrats, of progressives. Most – vast majority – are progressive. And the president and the vice president have a great record on gay rights and the advancement of, of rights for, for queer people. And so I expect, very overwhelmingly, that our community is going to come out for the president and the vice president. Let's not forget the President Biden was the first person, as vice president to actually come out in favor of gay marriage. And he actually nudged, at the time, President Obama.

*<CLIP> THEN-VP JOE BIDEN, 2012: I am Vice President of the United States of America. The president sets the policy. I am absolutely comfortable with the fact that men marrying men, women marrying women, heterosexual men and women marrying – all are entitled to the same exact rights, all the civil rights, all the civil liberties, and quite frankly I don’t see much of a distinction beyond that.*

GARCIA: So I think his advocacy, you know, is really well-noted in the community.

NOEL: Let me shoot you some numbers and ask you what you think. Okay, so according to exit polling in 2020, President Biden won 64% of the queer vote. Trump, Donald Trump, candidate Trump, won 27%. Recent polling from the Independent Center showed that in a Biden Trump match up in 2024, it's about 56% for Biden, 28% for Trump, and another 16% were undecided. What do you think that 16% undecided are trying to decide?

GARCIA: Well, I think first, I think, like any election, these numbers will harden once the actual choice is in front of voters. And so I think that we’ll find when all is said and done in this election, that you're going to see a significant number of voters who are actually going to be with, with President Biden. I think that will match or exceed the last election. And so I'm not overly concerned. I think there are obviously a lot of issues going on right now in the world. And, and the way people feel about the economy as it continues to improve. And so it's not super surprising that all of the president's numbers haven't hardened with all communities. I think you're seeing that across communities, not just ours. And so, um… but I'm not super concerned, I think. I mean, Donald Trump is a con man and a criminal. He is going to be on the ballot. He is anti-LGBTQ+. He says horrible things about the trans community. So those are all issues that we're going to get out there. And we're going to remind voters what the difference in the records are. And as we do that, I think those numbers will, will, will harden and shift.

NOEL: Donald Trump hasn't changed a lot over the years. He hasn't really changed the way he talks. He hasn't really changed the way he presents. What has changed here is the numbers. It's that 16%. And I hear you saying you're not concerned. Why not? Donald Trump does have a tendency to win groups that people say he can't win.

GARCIA: Well, I think first, I mean, let's also be clear. I mean, President Biden is going to win the LGBTQ+ community. I mean, that's, that's a fact. He's going to win it on Election Day, and he'll win it overwhelmingly. But I think the point about the legal predicament that, that, that Trump's in, I mean, the fact that he has, now has, these convictions and will have more is a good reminder to the community: that's someone that can't be trusted and that wants to harm our community. I also think that the election and we're comparing some numbers, one is, at Election Day and the other is, you know, still many months before the election. And I think the, the numbers at the end of the day, when Election Day is here, those numbers will strengthen because we'll be in a full-blown campaign.

NOEL: Hmm.

GARCIA: We have, you know, I helped the campaign launch ‘Out For Biden,’ which is a national campaign to engage LGBTQ+ voters. I was there at the launch. I’ve done events. I was just in Tucson, Arizona, launching Out for Biden there. And so I'll continue to do that work across the country activating our base. And it's not just me. It's, it's other national LGBTQ+ groups that are out there doing the same kind of work. And so, you know, we… we shouldn't take our voters for granted, and we shouldn't just assume that they're going to be good Democratic voters all the time. We have to, we have to put in the work and remind folks about the record. That is why I don't have a huge concern about somehow Trump winning over more of these votes. We're going to remind our community how horrific Donald Trump is for queer people. His transgender ban, leaning into you know, Project 2025, which essentially wants to roll back the rights of gay people in this country. His extreme Supreme Court justices. So these are all important and, and certainly we're going to lean into him really, really hard as Election Day gets closer.

NOEL: Tell me about Out for Biden's message, where you've been, what you're telling folks.

GARCIA: Right? I mean, first we want to remind people that, you know, it's been President Biden that signed the Respect for Marriage Act. It's been President Biden that has put forward really strong judges across the country that support our rights. It's been the president that, you know, that reverses Trump's misguided attacks on trans people. So we're going to remind him of that, but we're also going to lean into the fact that – what's next, I mean, the Equality Act, we need a president that can sign the Equality Act into law. That's going to be President Biden. We need a president that is going to kind of push back on, on some of these states that are passing these horrific anti-LGBTQ+ laws, and that's going to be President Biden. And so there's a lot to remind people of. We need to encourage all those voters to vote Biden-Harris.

NOEL: Harris, we heard in the first half of the show that polling shows this bloc is not just motivated by rights inequality. In fact, they're also very interested in jobs in the economy, in inflation. You didn't mention that as part of Out for Biden's message. Should it be? Why isn't it?

GARCIA: No. Well, I mean, it is. I mean, I think I – obviously I'm focusing on the LGBTQ+ broader themes. But Out for Biden focuses on the entire Biden-Harris record. And, and you're absolutely right. I think that queer people absolutely care about the economy, and they absolutely care about other issues like reproductive rights for women. They absolutely care about student loan relief. They absolutely, absolutely care about climate and so on. All of these issues, the president is on the right side. And so we have to remind voters of all of that. And so I think that's really, really important for voters. I've talked to, I talked to some voters when I was in Tucson about the president lowering prescription drug prices. These are senior, you know, LGBTQ members of the community. That was something that was, that was important to them. And so we've got to remind everyone about the record, but especially for our community, we can't, we can't walk away from the fact that Trump would be a complete disaster for our rights. And and he is fueling this extreme kind of white nationalism, this extreme view of authoritarian worldview where, you know, he's the, the, the guiding master of, of, of, of our country and can just roll back these rights and make people feel unsafe, give people a vehicle to to bully in our schools. And we're seeing this happening, right now. And so I think a lot, a lot is at stake for our community, for gay voters. And we have to be aware of what the stakes are. It is a very clear contrast, and we've got to ensure that we meet that contrast in the months ahead.

NOEL: Congressman Robert Garcia, Democrat, California. Thank you for your time. *Vox*’s Christian Paz is back with us. A little unusually for *Today, Explained*, Christian was listening to our interview with Mr. Garcia. Congressman Garcia didn't seem too concerned, Christian, with that undecided 16%. Do you think that is the campaign putting on a brave face? Do you think that is the campaign making an assumption that I think I think in the past has hurt Democrats that, yeah, of course we're going to get this voting bloc. They're saying it now. But but come, come voting day we got them.

CHRISTIAN: There's definitely a little bit of both. I don't think that there's, much a data or, you know, even anecdotal information that leads us to suggest that Donald Trump will win a significantly larger chunk of the LGBTQ vote or a majority. What I think I'm a little more hesitant – and this is maybe a little bit of just campaign speak here – is the assumption that there'll be a significant increase in support for President Biden given that all signs kind of suggest that there's general dissatisfaction across the Democratic base, and across the American electorate as a whole. And so on that front, I do think that there is maybe a little bit of, of wish casting, but then also recognizing that there is plenty of time left in the election, and that there will be a lot, that the campaign does to try to reach out to these voters. And plenty of time for them to fine tune their message as well.

SCORING <Scanning the Horizon>

NOEL: Christian Paz covering the 2024 election for Vox. Thanks for hanging out, Christian.

CHRISTIAN: Thank you.

NOEL: Today’s show was produced by Amanda Lewellyn and edited by Amina al-Sadi. It was fact-checked by icons Laura Bullard and Matthew Collette. It was engineered by Rob Byers and Andrea Kristinsdottir. I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Explained.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]