

Why do so many Gen Zers identify as LGBTQ? Because of the sacrifices of prior generations, experts say

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For baby boomers, it was Stonewall. For many in Generation X, it was the AIDS crisis and for millennials, it was the legalization of gay marriage.

Those battles over whether all Americans have equal rights, regardless of their [sexual orientation](#), helped shape each of those generations and experts say Generation Z, where more than 20% of Americans identify as LGBTQ, are reaping the benefits of those fights.

"I think we've done a really good job collectively of understanding that you are who you are, like, there's no one right way to be in the community," said 19-year-old Olivia Julianna, a Houston-based activist who identifies as queer.

"It's just accepting people for who they are," Julianna said.

Overall, a record 7.1% of adults in the U.S. identify as LGBTQ, according a Gallup poll released this year. But about 21% of adults in Julianna's generation—those born between 1997 and 2003—identified as LBTQ in the poll, compared to 10.5% of millennials, 4.2% of Gen Xers and 2.6% of [baby boomers](#).

Changes in attitudes towards LGBTQ identities, increased visibility and access to information through the internet are among the factors that contribute to younger adults feeling more comfortable identifying as LGBTQ, experts said.

The LGBTQ community's fights for acceptance and equal rights are still ongoing, and the pending Supreme Court decision on abortion threatens to open a new front in that war. But as more Gen Zers enter adulthood, the proportion of LGBTQ adults will likely keep growing, said Gallup senior editor Jeff Jones.

"If the ones who are still 17 and younger are just like the people in the generation who are 18 and older, the numbers should increase. But it's possible, too, that the younger generation might be even more likely to identify than the other part of that generation," Jones said.

Generational differences

Gen Z has grown up amid the Supreme Court's recognition of same-sex marriage in the Obergefell v. Hodges decision and shifts in acceptance of LGBTQ identities. But for that to happen, previous generations paved the way.

Baby boomers and Gen Xers were at the frontlines of the LGBTQ liberation movement during the mid-to-late 20th-century and came out of a "[generation](#) of repression, violence, institutionalization," said Laura Westengard, coordinator of the gender and sexuality studies program at the New York City College of Technology.

Baby boomers, for instance, lived through the 1969 Stonewall uprising, an event catalyzed by a police raid and a turning point in LGBTQ rights.

Gen Z is "benefiting from the history of LGBTQ activism and protests," Westengard said. "And that has opened up the possibilities for exploring and naming non-heteronormative ways of being, but also, they are generationally distanced from those circumstances."

Unlike previous generations, Gen Z is coming of age online, with access to LGBTQ content and communities without the need of physical proximity.

"LGBTQ communities have thrived in certain ways since the advent of internet because it's allowed people to connect with each other and seek out information from the privacy of their home and maybe, you know, clear their browser history and no one has to know about it," Westengard said.

Julianna said TikTok allowed her to find "a community that I had never been able to get to because of where I grew up where I lived."

"I was able to find people on TikTok, who were open or who would answer questions and talk about their experiences and that allowed me to realize a lot of truths about myself as well," she said. "If I hadn't been on TikTok in the way that I was, I don't know that I would have realized as soon as I did, or I don't know if I ever would have actually realized."

Young people were born in a time of changing attitudes towards LGBTQ identities due to several factors, including increased visibility in media, said Amy Adamczyk, a sociology professor at the City University of New York.

"In 20 years, we went from 'homosexuality is really problematic' to 'everybody is very liberal on that issue'," Adamczyk said. "I think that's really important for understanding Generation Z, because they are the first cohort that comes into the room and everything is all set for them."

'A lot of work to do'

The rise in the number of [young people](#) who identify openly as LGBTQ doesn't mean Gen Z is free from oppression and the challenges related to gender and sexuality, Westengard said.

"It's amazing that Gen Z has a new relationship with their own gender and sexuality, but they also still have a lot of work to do," Westengard said.

LGBTQ youth today face anti-trans bills across the nation, as well as legislation targeting conversations around sexuality and gender identity in schools. Meanwhile, books with LGBTQ characters have been disproportionately targeted in a wave of book-banning in the country.

And experts have said the possible overturning of Roe v. Wade could open the door to the reconsideration and reversal of other established

rights, including marriage equality.

"LGBTQ-plus rights are completely tied to reproductive health care and abortion rights," Julianna said. "The number one thing we can do is...to have support systems in place for ourselves as a community, meaning we can be there for each other emotionally or financially if or when Obergefell v. Hodges or Roe v. Wade is struck down."

As an activist, Julianna said she focuses on the candidates who show the best potential for making significant changes in her home state of Texas, particularly around reproductive rights. Last year, she helped sabotage a website meant to take in tips on violations of Texas' six-week abortion ban.

Civic engagement, Julianna said, is important to protect LGBTQ rights, but shouldn't be limited to voting in presidential or congressional elections as local races, too, are crucial.

"We could increase access to resources," Julianna said, "but we can also start to shift the narrative by having people who were openly allies or openly queer themselves in positions of power, that understand the struggle and can help us maintain our rights and our freedoms."

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