



Queering Congress

A Congressional candidate makes the case for increasing LGBTQ representation.

January 15, 2024 By Jirair Ratevosian

On this Martin Luther King Jr. Day, I am reflecting on the enormous impact Dr. King's message of equality and hope had on the LGBTQ+ community. The struggle for LGBTQ rights can be seen as a continuation of the broader civil rights movement, embodying the ideals of equality and justice that MLK championed.

The recent wave of hateful rhetoric and blood-thirsty legislation coming from extreme Republicans has made the fight for inclusivity and LGBTQ+ rights more precarious than ever. Sadly, we've heard it all before. The promotion of ultra-conservative Congressman Mike Johnson to Speaker of the House demonstrates just how far Republicans are willing to go to attack our queer community. He is especially known for his anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and for proactively enacting laws that target LGBTQ+ Americans, making him a dangerous and powerful voice that will be heard throughout state and local governments.

In 2023, we saw so many anti-LGBTQ+ bills introduced in state houses that the Human Rights Campaign declared a national state of emergency. The newest form of attacks are so called "erasure bills" that strip away legal protections and rights for LGBTQ+ people. They are coming after the kids too! Hundreds of bills were introduced that would prevent trans youth from being able to access age-appropriate, medically-necessary, best-practice health care. And with the radical Supreme Court MAGA majority, there is no guarantee that my marriage to my husband will remain legal.

It was MLK advisor Bayard Rustin who famously said, "The only weapon we have is our bodies, and we need to tuck them in places so wheels don't turn." I'm convinced the only way to stop the unending MAGA assault on our rights is to elect LGBTQ+ leaders who know how to fight back and win.

Jirair Ratevosian Courtesy of Jirair Ratevosian

In Los Angeles, we have an opportunity to elect an experienced fighter from our community to represent one of the queerest districts (the 30th Congressional district) in America. The district, which includes West Hollywood, is the first majority-gay municipality in the country, and is the birthplace of some of the strongest HIV and LGBTQ+ community organizers, many hailing from the first Stonewall Democratic Club established in the country.

As a proud gay man with more federal experience than anyone else in this crowded primary, I am running for Congress because I know I have what it takes to create real change in Washington, D.C. As a community organizer by training, I developed my political power building skills in the HIV movement over the past 20 years. I've been part of successful campaigns to repeal discriminatory HIV policies, expand access to syringe services programs, and mobilize billions of dollars to fight HIV. Working as Congresswoman Barbara Lee's legislative director, we created the first bipartisan Congressional HIV/AIDS Caucus, increased support for Ryan White, and fought for HIV decriminalization.

My work in public health has taken me to more than 50 countries to work directly with governments in support of PEPFAR, to support women's rights, protect LGBTQ+ communities, and fight pandemics. Never did I think I would need to fight so hard for our values here in the United States—for women to have access to birth control, for people to be treated with respect when they marry, for our kids to be in safe and inclusive schools.

I talk a lot about what the American Dream means, and for me, living without fear, regardless of who you love or how you identify, is a major piece of that. That's why I've included provisions in my proposed American Dream Act to support LGBTQ+ youth by providing safe spaces, mental health services, and support networks for parents and children while also ensuring access to inclusive and culturally competent healthcare for LGBTQ+ individuals. It also includes specific provisions to advance health equity and dramatically expand access to PrEP.

It took me a long time to internalize who I was and gain the confidence I needed to be comfortable about my gay and Armenian identity. I grew up with immense societal and peer pressure to be a certain way, follow a certain path. I did not have a gay-straight alliance in my school. I did not have role models in the Armenian community, certainly not one that was accessible and visible.

Today, I am proud to have the support of pillars in our community, including Lorri L. Jean, Laura Thomas, Tiffany Woods, Phill Wilson, and the first openly gay Member of Congress, Barney Frank. People like Congressman Frank are who inspire me to run for office so that I can fight against MAGA extremism and dysfunction in Congress. I've spent years advocating for marginalized communities, and now it's time to bring representation to Congress to fight for our community.

In 2023, only 14 out of 535 members of Congress identify as part of the LGBTQ+. That's far too few. As recent attacks on the community show, queer representation in Congress has never been more needed. MAGA extremists want to rewrite history and take away LGBTQ+ rights. But we're going to make history instead by electing an LGBTQ+ leader to represent Los Angeles, ready to beat back the assault on our community.

Jirair Ratevosian, DrPH, MPH, is a candidate running to represent California's 30th Congressional district. Go to [jirairforca.com](https://www.jirairforca.com) for more information.