

Voter Preferences and the Political Underrepresentation of Minority Groups: Lesbian, Gay, and Transgender Candidates in Advanced Democracies

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Minority groups have long been underrepresented in politics. Support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights and the incidence of LGBT candidates have dramatically increased in recent years. But do voters (still) penalize LGT candidates? We conducted original survey experiments with nationally representative samples in the United States, United Kingdom, and New Zealand. To varying degrees voters penalize LGT candidates in all countries, with penalties strongest in the United States. Yet, progressives, people with LGBT friends, and nonreligious individuals do not discriminate against gays and lesbians, while transgender candidates face stronger bias. Electability concerns, outright prejudice, and identity cueing (i.e., LGT candidates seen as more liberal) explain voter bias. This study contributes to the literature on minority candidates and disentangles correlated candidate attributes, exploring the intersectionality of bias. Understanding the barriers to the election of LGT people is crucial to improve the representation of marginalized communities.

Attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual people have evolved swiftly and positively in established democracies in Europe, North America, and beyond. Concurrent legal reforms in many countries have equalized access to marriage, partnership benefits, and adoption rights and have reinforced bars on employment discrimination. Simultaneously, more and more openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) candidates have run for office, with a significant number winning elections. A total of 405 out LGBT parliamentarians have been elected or appointed in 50 countries since the first, Coos Huijsen, in the Netherlands in 1976. Nevertheless, pernicious homophobia and transphobia persist, institutional discrimination remains, and LGBT people still face challenges to be fully accepted members of society.

The election of out LGBT politicians has a significant and positive effect on the pace of legal reform and the waning of homophobia in society (Haider-Markel 2007, 2010; Magni

and Reynolds 2018; Reynolds 2013). Social contact can lessen prejudice against out-groups (Allport, Clark, and Pettigrew 1954; Clayton, Ferwerda, and Horiuchi 2021; Harrison and Michelson 2017; Pettigrew 1998) and specifically against LGBT individuals (Flores 2015; Herek and Capitano 1996; Herek and Glunt 1993). Descriptive representation can amplify the effects of contact theory (Ayoub and Garretson 2017), in that individuals project a feeling of familiarity onto their elected representatives that mirrors the impact of close friends.

If the descriptive representation of marginalized communities is a driver of progress, it is important to understand the continuing barriers to the election of out LGBT people. In this article we assess the degree to which candidates' sexual orientation and gender identity affect their electoral success. How prejudiced are voters, in what respects, and for what reasons?

We explore these questions in three countries—the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand—which allows

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us to analyze voter preferences in candidate-centered election systems. These three cases present varying degrees of LGBT representation, differing levels of legal progress and resistance to LGBT rights, and different attitudes of parties toward LGBT rights. In each country, we conducted a conjoint experiment with a nationally representative sample. Survey participants voted for their preferred candidate among hypothetical alternatives within their own party, akin to a primary election. The conjoint design allows us to contrast social desirability bias, disentangle the causal effect of separate but correlated candidate attributes, and evaluate their relative importance on vote choice.

Voters penalize lesbian, gay, and transgender (LGT) candidates to some extent in all three countries but to varying degrees.¹ Penalties are strongest in the United States and weakest in New Zealand. They are significantly more severe for transgender candidates than for gays and lesbians. Important differences also emerge across voter subgroups. Progressives, people with LGBT friends, and nonreligious individuals do not discriminate against gay and lesbian candidates. In the United States, Democratic voters do not penalize gay candidates and show only a weak opposition to transgender ones, while in New Zealand progressives actually prefer gay over straight candidates. Prejudice, identity as a cueing mechanism, and electability considerations all help explain voter bias, but concerns over electoral viability appear to be dominant.

This article, therefore, builds on the literature on ethnic minority and female candidates to explore bias against sexual and gender minority candidates. There is substantial research that speaks to pernicious discrimination in law and society against LGBT people, but there has been very little comparative research into homophobic voting behavior. While there is little dispute that identity bias still plays a role in election outcomes, our research estimates a specific penalty effect, discusses the drivers of bias, and sheds light on the intersectionality of bias (Doan and Haider-Markel 2010; Strolovitch 2012). We show that multiple minority identities reinforce and magnify exclusion, such as in the case of black gay candidates in the United States, who face a multiplicative penalty that is the result of the specific combination of their race and sexual orientation.

SOURCES OF VOTER BIAS TOWARD LGT CANDIDATES

The fact that LGBT people remain underrepresented in public office is a *prima facie* case that there may be discrimination.

1. Concerns about the number of attribute levels and realism of the profiles drove our decision to not include bisexual/pansexual candidates separately.

But do voters actually discriminate against out LGT candidates? Which voters? To what extent? And for which reasons?

Indeed, voters are just one component factor in the drivers of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) inclusion or exclusion. Party gatekeepers determine who will become a candidate, the media stacks the deck against some types of candidates, and individuals from marginalized communities who do not see themselves in public office may self-select out of ever entering the race. But in that part of the equation that concerns voters, we argue that three theoretically separate sources could explain bias toward LGT candidates: outright prejudice, electability concerns, and the fact that sexual orientation and gender identity work as a cueing mechanism leading voters to infer LGT candidates' ideological positions.

Outright prejudice and discrimination

Hostility against minority groups negatively affects the electoral chances of representatives of those groups (with regard to race and ethnicity, see Fisher et al. 2015; Huddy and Feldman 2009; Piston 2010). Multiple studies have found gender bias in voting (Flannelly 2002; Fox and Smith 1998). Men in the United States are more likely to vote for attractive-looking female candidates, whereas women are more likely to vote for approachable male candidates (Chiao, Bowman, and Gill 2008). Sometimes female candidates in the United States gain marginally greater support from their own gender, even benefiting from female voters' crossover support (Brians 2005). While outright prejudice against female candidates appears on the decline (Dolan 2014; Lawless 2015; Teele, Kalla, and Rosenbluth 2018), women sometimes only perform as well as men because they are more qualified (Anzia and Berry 2011; Fulton 2012).

There remains animus toward LGT people. Despite positive trends in public opinion on LGBT rights (Abou-Chadi and Finnigan 2018; Bishin et al. 2016), in 2019, 24% of European citizens did not agree that gays and lesbians should have the same rights as heterosexual people, and 45% were uncomfortable with their children being in a same-sex relationship (Eurobarometer 2019). Thirty-seven percent of Americans were unhappy if their child married someone of the same gender (PRRI 2020). Since significant portions of the population still display prejudice, we anticipate that LGT candidates will overall be penalized to some extent purely because of their revealed sexual orientation.

Not all candidates within the LGBT community, however, face the same degree of hostility. We expect transgender candidates to be even more disadvantaged than lesbians and gays. Attitudes toward transgender people are generally

more negative (Flores 2014, 2015). Almost half of Americans (45%) and three-fifths of Europeans (57%) would be unhappy if their child married a transgender individual (Eurobarometer 2019; PRRI 2020). Forty-one percent of Europeans do not support the right of transgender people to change their documents to match their gender identity (Eurobarometer 2019). A survey conducted in 27 countries found only two in five people would use the correct pronoun to refer to a trans person (Ipsos 2018). Familiarity with transgender individuals is also lower, and the demonization of trans people—by state institutions and trans-exclusionary-radical feminists (Lewis 2019)—remains significant.

We believe that two main factors predict prejudice: ideological/religious beliefs and familiarity with LGBT people. Hence, we anticipate a stronger electoral penalty for LGT candidates among conservative, right-wing, and religious voters; among individuals who do not have LGBT friends; and among older people.

Partisanship, ideology, and religiosity contribute to explain prejudice toward sexual minorities (Haider-Markel 2010; Haider-Markel et al. 2017; Jones and Brewer 2019; Jones et al. 2018). Some religions and ideologies are imbued with worldviews that say the homosexual or transgender person is inherently unequal and less worthy of respect. Gay men have often been described as engaging in sexual practices conducive to infectious diseases in unsanitary places. As a result, they have elicited disgust and aversion, especially among religious conservatives (Cottrell and Neuberg 2005; Inbar, Pizarro, and Bloom 2012; Rozin, Markwith, and McCauley 1994). Conservatism and religiosity have also predicted opposition to LGBT rights, same-sex unions, and adoption by gays and lesbians (Clements and Field 2014; Olson, Cadge, and Harrison 2006; Sherkat et al. 2011).² For these reasons, some religions and ideologies encourage voters to be prejudiced against LGBT candidates.

We expect voter hostility against sexual and gender minorities to be also driven by unfamiliarity with LGBT individuals. In fact, the positive evolution of attitudes toward homosexuality lies, at least in part, in greater exposure to the lives of LGBT people. Both direct personal contact and vicarious exposition through greater visibility of LGBT people in the media play a role (Ayoub and Garretson 2017; Brewer 2003; Flores 2014, 2015; Flores, Brown, and Park 2016; Garretson 2014, 2015; Reynolds 2018). Individuals who do

not have contact with LGBT people, therefore, we expect to be more hostile to LGT candidates.

Relatedly, we expect older people to have more negative attitudes toward LGT candidates. Older generations have, on average, fewer contacts with LGBT people. According to Pew Research, in 2019 35% of Gen Zers (i.e., those born between 1997 and 2006) personally knew someone going by gender-neutral pronouns, but only 7% in the silent generation (born between 1928 and 1945) did (Parker, Graf, and Igielnik 2019). Older people also are more likely received negative information about homosexuality in their formative years and have less positive attitudes toward LGBT rights (Loftus 2001). The same Pew survey found that while only 15% of Gen Zers and millennials (1981–96) opposed same-sex marriage, opposition was at 43% in the silent generation (Parker et al. 2019).

Furthermore, we expect country variation in the levels of prejudice against LGT candidates. At the aggregate level, prejudice should be stronger in countries with less familiarity with sexual minority candidates, that is, countries that have elected a limited number of LGT representatives. Additionally, we should find overall more negative attitudes in countries that exhibit a strong partisan divide over LGBT rights, given that conservative parties and voters in these countries should be less likely to support LGT candidates.

Electability concerns

Concerns about whether citizens see a candidate as electable feature prominently in the minds of party elites and voters, especially during primaries (Adams and Merrill 2014; Ricker-shauser and Aldrich 2007). Women and ethnic minority candidates, in particular, face heightened scrutiny with regard to electability (Teele et al. 2018).

We expect similar concerns to affect LGT candidates. Citizens may think that other voters will discriminate against LGT candidates, which could lead even positively predisposed individuals to not vote for LGT candidates seen as less likely to win. Electability concerns around out LGT candidates are exacerbated by the fact that such candidates—long ostracized by parties—often lack political experience, a feature that voters see as bolstering electability (Horiuchi, Smith, and Yamamoto 2020). While electability concerns apply to all LGT candidates, we anticipate a stronger penalty for transgender ones, because of widespread hostility toward trans individuals and because of the very low number of successful transgender candidates in past elections.

Unlike with prejudice against LGT candidates, we expect more limited differences across voter subgroups with regard to electability. Even favorably supportive segments of the electorate (e.g., progressive, young, nonreligious voters) may

2. Some may see gays and lesbians as more caring, empathetic, and bridge-builders, but we have not seen research specifying this beyond the anecdotal.

worry about the electoral chances of LGT candidates. The importance of electability considerations should also vary across countries. In countries where more gays and lesbians have been elected to office, voters should have fewer concerns, since successful sexual and gender minority candidates in the past showed a path to victory. Concerns should also be more limited in countries with less pronounced partisan divide over LGBT rights. Where conservative parties and voters have embraced LGBT candidates, the electoral chances of such candidates outside progressive strongholds look brighter.

Identity as a cueing mechanism

Voters use demographic traits as a cueing mechanism, imputing political values to candidates based on their identity (Arnesen, Duell, and Johannesson 2019). Candidate gender and ethnicity allow voters to make “reasonable assumptions about the ideology of a candidate based on associations with salient political or social groups” (McDermott 1997, 271; see also Dolan 2004; Huddy and Terkilsen 1993; Sanbonmatsu 2002). In the United States, voters tend to see female and ethnic minority candidates as more liberal than male or white candidates from the same party. This perceived ideological position often interacts with partisanship to affect electoral performance (Koch 2000), so that female democratic candidates do better than male democratic ones among liberal voters and worse among conservatives (McDermott 1997).

We expect similar dynamics to apply to LGT candidates, inasmuch as voters use sexual orientation and gender identity as political cues (Golebiowska 2001, 2003; Jones and Brewer 2019). We anticipate voters to see LGT candidates as more liberal because, at least in the United States, lesbians and gays identify as Democrats in great numbers and hold progressive views on a wide range of policy issues far beyond gay rights (Egan 2012; Egan, Edelman, and Sherrill 2008). As a result, voters’ party identification, religiosity, and political ideology should shape attitudes toward LGT candidates. Conservative, right-wing, and religious voters should penalize LGT candidates assumed to hold ideological positions distant from their own. In contrast, the more liberal voters in the left-leaning electorate should embrace LGT candidates more warmly.

Identity as a cueing mechanism should be especially important in countries with deep partisan divides over LGBT rights, where we expect LGT candidates to be more likely seen as liberal. In contrast, in countries with bipartisan support for LGBT rights, and where LGBT candidates have been elected even within conservative parties, LGT candidates should be less likely to be identified as left leaning.

Intersectionality and electoral penalty

Intersectional identities can be as significant, as the various labels that we carry are important in their singularity. Candidates who are both sexual and racial minorities, for instance, may suffer a particularly strong penalty that comes from combinations of these traits, rather than just as a result of separate additive penalties from their sexual orientation and racial identity. Despite the great achievements of black lesbians and gay men in office, we anticipate outright prejudice against nonwhite LGT candidates to be especially severe. Indeed, such candidates suffer from several layers of stigma derived from their gender, sexual, and racial identities. Electability concerns will also likely play a heightened role, given that successful gay and lesbian candidates in national elections have been disproportionately white.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: UNITED STATES, UNITED KINGDOM, AND NEW ZEALAND

We conducted survey experiments with nationally representative samples in the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand.³ All three countries use single-member district election systems. Focusing on democracies with candidate-centered systems increases the realism of our study because our empirical approach asks respondents to vote for their preferred candidates. Citizens from these countries are accustomed to voting for specific candidates, rather than party lists. Moreover, these democracies have elected out LGBT officials, which we believe increases the plausibility of the candidate profiles presented to our respondents.⁴

Yet these cases present significant variation in terms of attitudes toward LGBT rights, scope of out LGBT parliamentary representation, and party positions on LGBT rights. In the United Kingdom, 52 out LGBT MPs sit on the benches of four different parties and constitute 8% of the 650 House of Commons members; in New Zealand, there are seven MPs (5%) representing two parties; in the United States, all eight out LGB members are Democrats and constitute only 2% of the House.⁵ The United Kingdom has also had a high number of out LGBT candidates in recent years (over 150 in the 2015, 2017, and 2019 elections).

3. The surveys were completely in fall 2018, which was arguably a high point in the electorate’s propensity to vote for women.

4. Because of resource constraints, we focused on three cases: the United Kingdom, with the highest number of LGBT candidates and members of Parliament (MPs); New Zealand, the first country to elect a transgender MP; and the United States, where attitudes toward LGBT rights and candidates are strongly divided along party lines.

5. All the data on the numbers of LGBT elected officials come from the Victory Fund, United States (<https://outforamerica.org>), and Queer Politics at Princeton (<https://queerpolitics.princeton.edu>).

Attitudes of right-wing parties toward LGBT rights and candidates also differ greatly in the three countries. While the US Republican Party is still largely hostile to LGBT rights and has never elected an out LGBT congressperson, conservative parties in the United Kingdom and New Zealand have embraced LGBT rights and elected lesbian and gay representatives. The shift was especially remarkable for the British Conservative Party, which not only fielded more LGBT candidates than any other party in 2010, 2015, and 2017 but also passed marriage equality under the leadership of Prime Minister David Cameron in 2013. In contrast, the dominant parties of the left—the Labour Party in the United Kingdom, the Labour Party in New Zealand, and the Democratic Party in the United States—have expressed strong support for LGBT rights since the 1990s. They have led momentous reforms such as ending Don't Ask, Don't Tell and supplying the state-by-state push for marriage equality in the United States; civil partnerships, equalizing the age of consent, and the repeal of section 28 in the United Kingdom; and marriage equality in New Zealand.

United States of America

The first out LGBT member of the US Congress was Gerry Studds, who came out while in office in 1983. Sixteen out congresspeople have been elected in total, and in 2019 the caucus was half women and half men. Since 1975, 324 out individuals have also been elected to state houses. Homosexuality was decriminalized at the federal level in the United States in 2003, while same-sex marriage and adoptions were legalized in 2015. Simultaneously, attitudes toward gay rights have evolved quickly and positively. While 57% of Americans were opposed to same-sex marriage in 2001, by 2017 62% were in favor (Pew Research Center 2019). However, there remains no federal Employment Non-discrimination Act, LGBT people can be fired for their sexual orientation without redress in 16 states, and in 2019 the Supreme Court allowed the Trump administration's ban on transgender people serving in the US military to go into effect.

United Kingdom

The first out member of the House of Commons was Chris Smith in 1984. After decades of no more than a handful of out MPs in the House, the numbers skyrocketed to 52 in 2019, and 62 out MPs have been elected in total alongside 24 appointed Lords (Queer Politics at Princeton, <https://queerpolitics.princeton.edu>). Homosexuality was decriminalized in England and Wales in 1967, in Scotland in 1981, and in Northern Ireland in 1982. Military service was open to out LGBT Britons in 2000, the age of consent was equalized in 2001, and marriage equality came into force in 2014. Support for gay rights has

also dramatically increased over the last 40 years. In 1983, only 17% of Britons thought that same-sex relationships were “not wrong at all,” but by 2016 that number had jumped to 64% (Huchet-Bodet, Albakri, and Smith 2019).

New Zealand

The first out MP was Chris Carter in 1993, although Marilyn Waring had been outed in 1976 but refused to comment, on the advice of her party leader. Georgina Beyer became the first out transgender parliamentarian in the world when elected in New Zealand in 1999. Since the first, the nation has had 15 out MPs representing all the main parties. The current LGBT parliamentary caucus is unique in being majority women and majority minority (Māori). Homosexuality was decriminalized in New Zealand in 1986, and marriage equality was introduced in 2013. Support for same-sex marriage has increased from 40% in 2004 to 63% in 2012.⁶ In 2014, the New Zealand military was ranked as the most LGBT inclusive in the world (Australian Associated Press 2014).

Given our theoretical expectations, we anticipate voter discrimination against LGBT candidates to be more severe in the United States than in the United Kingdom or New Zealand. First, measurable animosity toward LGBT people is higher in the United States. Second, the scope of cross-party LGBT representation in the United Kingdom (Tory, Labour, Liberal Democrat, Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru) and New Zealand (National, Labour, Green) reduces the cue that LGBT candidates are all left of center, thus allowing right-of-center voters to more comfortably support an out LGBT candidate. Third, the United States has the least experience of out parliamentarians in elected office. While out congresspeople have been present in Washington, DC, for a combined 108 years of service, the comparable figure is 442 years for elected parliamentarians in the United Kingdom and 119 years in New Zealand (at a much higher proportion of the total). With specific regard to transgender candidates, we expect their penalty to be weakest in New Zealand, where the election of the first transgender MP more than 20 years ago has familiarized voters with such candidates.

As far as subgroup preferences, we anticipate partisan cleavages to be more consequential in the United States, where the division between the mainstream parties on LGBT equality is far more pronounced. Hence, we expect Republican voters to be more hostile toward lesbian and gay candidates than supporters of right-wing parties in the United Kingdom and New

6. See Colmar Brunton, “View on Whether Same-Sex Couples Should Be Able to Marry,” https://web.archive.org/web/20151005023402/http://www.colmarbrunton.co.nz/images/Views_on_same_sex_marriage_May_2012.pdf (accessed June 29, 2021).

Zealand. Regarding sources of voter bias, we expect electability concerns and identity cues to be especially strong among American voters, given the relative scarcity of sexual minority representatives and the partisan nature of LGT candidacies in the United States.

EMPIRICAL APPROACH: CONJOINT EXPERIMENTS IN NATIONALLY REPRESENTATIVE SURVEYS

We conducted surveys in the United States (1,829 respondents), the United Kingdom (1,122 respondents), and New Zealand (1,287 respondents) in fall 2018. The surveys were administered online by the company Cint and are nationally representative, mirroring census quotas for gender, age, location of residence, and education.

To evaluate voter attitudes toward candidates with minority identities, we embedded a conjoint experiment in each survey. Conjoint experiments present respondents with alternative options combining several attributes that are randomly varied across participants and ask respondents to choose the option that they prefer. Through proper statistical analysis, researchers can then causally estimate the relative effect of each attribute on the resulting decision.

Measuring voters' preferences through survey experiments presents some limitations. Providing several pieces of information about the candidates may lead to cognitive processes different from those occurring in natural settings. Decisions made by survey respondents in hypothetical elections may differ from decisions at the ballot box. While this is undeniable, we presented the choice as individuals being vetted by parties as potential candidates and asked respondents to consider several factors, including the electability of the alternative profiles.

One may also question the generalizability of our findings to actual elections, when candidates seek to control which biographical aspects they want to reveal. While this is true for some candidate characteristics (e.g., religiosity), it is less of a concern for a study focused on out LGT candidates. Sexual orientation and gender identity are often known to voters, as candidates feel increasingly comfortable discussing them, and the media devotes considerable attention to them.

One limitation of the conjoint design is that it is hard to evaluate whether respondents take into account all the information provided. Because of limited cognitive capacity, respondents may ignore some information if profile characteristics are too complex, which could lead to biased estimates (Orquin and Loose 2013; Payne et al. 1992). To reduce the risk of attribute nonattendance, we limited the number of attributes in each profile.

Yet, the conjoint design offers unique advantages. First, politicians have many attributes that may attract (or repel)

voters, which makes it hard to pinpoint which characteristics voters consider more important. The challenge is magnified because attributes are often correlated (Horiuchi et al. 2020). The conjoint design allows us to disentangle the effect of correlated attributes and evaluate their marginal and relative importance. Second, by presenting respondents with hypothetical rather than actual candidates, the experiment allows us to isolate the effect of specific characteristics, such as sexual orientation, abstracting from real-life candidates who possess them (Horiuchi et al. 2020).

Finally, while survey measures carry the risk of eliciting socially acceptable answers, the conjoint experiments reduce social desirability concerns (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014; Horiuchi, Markovich, and Yamamoto 2021). Conjoint designs offer multiple ways for respondents to (internally) justify their choice. For instance, respondents may vote against a transgender candidate with lessened fear of appearing transphobic, since they would be able to explain their choice on the basis of other candidate characteristics such as political experience.

Experiment design

We developed nearly identical designs for each country. We presented respondents with five pairs of candidates, adapting some of the attribute levels to the specific country.⁷ We kept party constant by telling respondents that the party for which they were more likely to vote was considering those individuals as candidates for the lower house of parliament in their district.⁸ Given the vast literature on the powerful effect of partisan identity on vote choice, this design allows us to evaluate the effect of candidates' personal background in intra-party competition.

For each candidate, we fully randomized eight characteristics across respondents: sexual orientation (straight, gay), gender (male, female, transgender), race/ethnicity (United States: White, Black, Latino, Asian, Native American; United Kingdom: White, Black, Asian; New Zealand: White, Maori-Pacific Islander), religion (United States: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, not religious; United Kingdom: Christian, Muslim, not religious; New Zealand: Christian, Muslim, not religious), education (less than high school, high school degree, college degree, master degree), age (35, 44, 56, 71), health (healthy, on a wheelchair since birth, overweight with diabetes, HIV positive, HIV positive since birth), and political experience (United States: no previous experience, member of state legislature,

7. Respondents can perform up to 30 conjoint tasks before survey satisficing degrades response quality (Bansak et al. 2018).

8. We speculate that in local elections some voter bias may be mitigated by closer interactions and knowledge of individual candidates.

member of the US House of Representatives; United Kingdom: no previous experience, town council member, member of the House of Commons; New Zealand: no previous experience, town council member, member of the House of Representatives).⁹

We adopted a forced-choice design. After each pair of profiles, respondents answered the following question: “Which of these two candidates would you be more likely to vote for?” Respondents also answered questions that allow us to explore the reasons why they voted for—or against—candidates. We asked: “In your opinion, which of these two candidates . . . (i) . . . is more liberal?¹⁰ (ii) . . . would you prefer to have as a neighbor? (iii) . . . has better chances to win the election?” We can therefore evaluate whether respondents perceive LGT candidates as more progressive, whether outright prejudice exists, and whether electability concerns influence vote choice. The postexperiment questionnaire collected information on participants’ age, gender, sexual orientation, education, income, religiosity, political ideology, partisan identity, and whether respondents have LGBT family members or friends.

Estimation method

We ran ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with cluster-robust standard errors because each respondent evaluated several pairs of candidates. The dependent variable is the choice indicator, and the independent variables are the set of dummies for the attribute levels. Since attribute levels are independently randomized from one another, OLS produces unbiased and consistent estimates of the average marginal component effects, or AMCEs (Hainmueller et al. 2014; Horiuchi, Smith, and Yamamoto 2018, 199). In figure 1, the vertical line depicts a null effect. Points to the right of the line indicate a positive impact of the corresponding attribute level on the probability that respondents chose that candidate; points to the left, a negative effect. The plot also reports 95% confidence intervals (CIs).

Coefficient estimates indicate the percentage point change in the probability of choosing one candidate over the baseline (e.g., a gay candidate compared to a straight one)—or, in other words, the percentage point change in the probability of winning for that candidate. Because coefficient sizes in conjoint analysis are directly comparable, the plot also reveals the relative importance of each attribute as a determinant of vote choice.

To evaluate the interaction effects of candidate attributes, we calculate the average marginal interaction effects (AMIE).

The marginal interaction effect represents the causal effect produced by the interaction of attributes beyond the sum of the marginal effects induced separately by each attribute. Hence, we can estimate, for instance, whether black candidates are penalized more than white candidates for being gay, in addition to the separate penalties that they face for sexual orientation and race. The relative size of the AMIE is not conditional on the attribute levels adopted as baselines in the conjoint analysis (Egami and Imai 2019).

RESULTS: VOTING FOR OR AGAINST

LGT CANDIDATES

Voters penalize gay candidates in all three countries, with the strongest negative effect in the United States. Compared to their straight counterparts, gay candidates face penalties of 6.7 percentage points in the United States, 4.6 in the United Kingdom, and 3.3 in New Zealand. Transgender candidates face even stronger bias. Their penalty compared to cisgender candidates is 11 percentage points in the United States, 10.7 in the United Kingdom and 8.5 in New Zealand.¹¹ These results confirm our expectations with regard to cross-country variation. The penalty for gay and lesbian candidates is stronger in the United States, the country of the three with greater hostility toward LGBT rights, the least experience of out LGBT congresspeople, and the most severe partisan divide over LGBT rights and candidates. Transgender candidates face a relatively smaller penalty in New Zealand, the first country in the world to elect a transgender parliamentarian in 1999.

We also explored whether lesbians are penalized more or less than gay male candidates and whether gay and transgender racial and ethnic minorities face more negative attitudes. In the United States and New Zealand, lesbians do not face an electoral penalty significantly different from gay men’s for their sexual orientation. Therefore, the overall advantage that lesbians have over gay men is due to the fact that they are women, inasmuch as voters show a preference for female candidates over men (+3.9 percentage points in the United States and +2.5 percentage points in New Zealand). In the United Kingdom, compared to gay men, lesbians face a penalty of 2.6 percentage points (95% CI [0.2, 4.9]). Hence, while female candidates perform better than men (+3.4 percentage points), the gap in favor of women is larger when voters consider straight male and female candidates, rather than gays and lesbians.

9. The theoretical reasons for the choice of candidate traits are discussed in the appendix because of space constraints.

10. In the United Kingdom and New Zealand, we used “left-leaning” rather than “liberal.”

11. AMCE averages direction and intensity of voters’ preferences (Abramson, Koçak, and Magazinnik 2019). Hence, below we present subgroup analysis to isolate respondents who may feel particularly strong about LGT candidates.

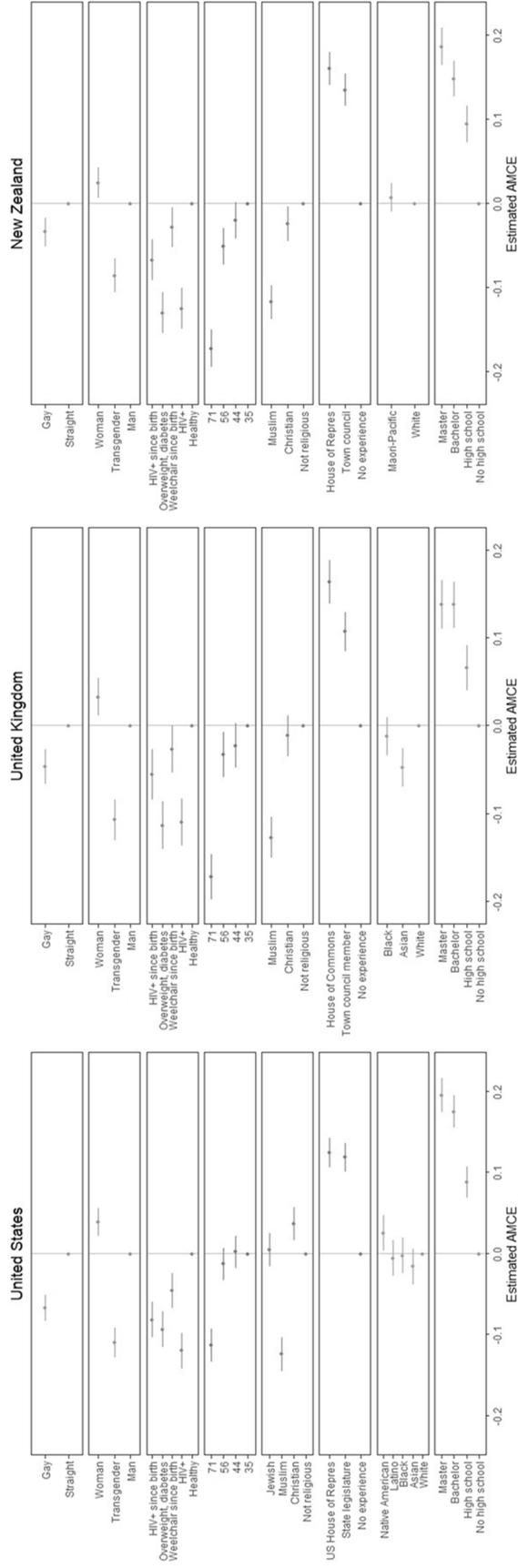


Figure 1. Candidate choice in the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand (average marginal component effects)

Voters do not additionally penalize racial and ethnic minority candidates for being gay or transgender, with one important exception: black gay candidates in the United States, who face an additional penalty for their sexual orientation of 3.6 percentage points (95% CI: [1.3%, 5.9%]) compared to whites. Respondents also clearly reward candidates with previous experience in public office. This creates a vicious circle against LGT candidates. Indeed, voters prefer candidates with political experience, but sexual minority candidates are less likely to have experience as elected officials because party leaders have been reluctant to place them on the ballot.

Preferences among voter subgroups

Our findings hide considerable variation across subsets of voters. To explore how different groups react to LGT candidates, we ran subset analyses.¹² Studies based on conjoint experiments usually conduct subgroup analysis by comparing AMCEs between subgroups. This approach, however, can lead to a misleading representation of subgroup differences because the results are sensitive to the baseline levels (Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley 2020). Therefore, we report subgroup marginal mean differences. Marginal means (MMs) are a measure of “favorability toward profiles that have a particular feature level, marginalizing across all other features” (210). In a forced choice design with two alternatives, MMs correspond to the probability that respondents chose candidates with a specific attribute. To explore subgroup preference variation, we calculated conditional MMs and tested for pairwise differences.

Additionally, we report AMCEs for voter subgroups, which allow us to quantify, for instance, how much Democratic and Republican voters penalize gay candidates. Since AMCEs are sensitive to the baselines, we chose substantively important baselines that correspond to a traditional candidate profile: someone who is white, male, and straight. We report subset analyses based on respondents’ party ID, ideology, gender, religiosity, age, and whether the respondent has LGBT friends or family members.

Partisan identity strongly conditions voter attitudes (table 1). Supporters of left-leaning parties do not significantly penalize gay candidates, while right-wing voters strongly do. Differences across countries, however, emerge when we consider right-wing parties. While in the United States Republicans strongly penalize gay candidates (−14.8 percentage points), such penalty is considerably weaker among supporters of the UK Conservative Party (−6.4 percentage points) and the New Zealand National

Party (−7.3 percentage points). In the United States, the difference in the probability of voting for a gay candidate between Republican and Democratic voters is 8.4 percentage points; in New Zealand, 5, while in the United Kingdom the difference between Labour and Conservative supporters is not statistically significant. The strongest difference in the United States can be explained by the greater hostility of the Republican party toward LGBT rights and candidates, compared to conservative parties in the United Kingdom and New Zealand. In the United Kingdom, the lack of difference between Labour and Conservative could be partly explained by the fact that the Conservative Party at the time of our experiment had as many openly gay and lesbian MPs as the Labour Party.

Results are even starker for political ideology. Progressives do not discriminate against gay candidates in the United States and the United Kingdom, and in New Zealand they actually favor gay over straight candidates by 3.7 percentage points. In contrast, conservatives in the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand penalize gay candidates by 17.2, 11.4, and 14.8 percentage points, respectively.

Having LGBT family members or friends is also a strong predictor of vote choice. Voters who have LGBT friends do not penalize gay candidates in any of the three countries. It is worth noticing that being friends with someone who is not heterosexual shapes specific attitudes toward gay candidates, rather than general propensity to vote for minority candidates. Indeed, having LGBT friends does not influence attitudes toward women or Muslim candidates. Interestingly, LGBT voters also exhibit a strong preference for gay candidates (+9 or 10 percentage points in each country).

Respondents’ religiosity is also correlated with electoral preferences. Citizens who never attend religious services do not discriminate against gay candidates, while those who attend at least weekly strongly penalize them (by 12 percentage points in the United States and United Kingdom and 19 percentage points in New Zealand). Women and younger people in the United Kingdom and New Zealand do not have a significantly negative bias against gay candidates, while in the United States they do but to a lesser extent than men and the elderly. No significant differences emerge between voters with lower and higher education.

The penalty for transgender candidates is stronger in all subsets of the electorate, and subgroup differences are more limited (table 2), with the partial exceptions of ideology, party ID, and voter’s own sexual orientation. Progressives and LGBT voters are the only groups in the three countries who do not penalize transgender candidates. In fact, they often exhibit a positive—even if insignificant—bias. In contrast, conservatives penalize transgender candidates by 16–18 percentage points.

12. By isolating subgroups of respondents who feel especially strong about sexual orientation and gender identity, the subset analysis also helps alleviate the risk of a misleading finding interpretation raised by Abramson et al. (2019), which derives from the fact that AMCE averages direction and intensity of voter preferences.

Table 1. Bias toward Gay Candidates across Subgroups of Voters (%)

Subgroup of Voters	United States			United Kingdom			New Zealand		
	Penalty Compared to Straight Candidate (AMCE)	Vote Probability for Gay Candidate (MM)	Difference in Vote Probability (MM Difference)	Penalty Compared to Straight Candidate (AMCE)	Vote Probability for Gay Candidate (MM)	Difference in Vote Probability (MM Difference)	Penalty Compared to Straight Candidate (AMCE)	Vote Probability for Gay Candidate (MM)	Difference in Vote Probability (MM Difference)
Democrats ^a	-1.2	48.5	8.4	-2	48.6	2.6	-0.6	49.6	5
Republicans ^b	-14.8***	40.1	[5.9, 10.9]	-6.4***	45.9	[-7, 6.0]	-7.3***	44.6	[2.1, 7.9]
Liberals	+1	49.5	10.7	+3	51.9	9.6	+3.7*	52.2	12.3
Conservatives	-17.2***	38.8	[7.5, 13.8]	-11.4***	42.2	[5.3, 13.9]	-14.8***	40.0	[8.8, 15.7]
LGBT friends	-1.8	48.9	6.3	+1	49.8	4.8	+7	50.1	4.8
No LGBT friends	-10.6***	42.6	[4.2, 8.5]	-7.3***	45.0	[2.0, 7.7]	-7.1***	45.3	[2.5, 7.1]
Women	-4.1***	47.2	3.8	-1.3	48.6	3.9	-0.6	49.5	3.9
Men	-9.5***	43.4	[1.7, 5.9]	-7.8***	44.7	[1.2, 6.6]	-6.3***	45.6	[1.6, 6.2]
Not religious	-1.9	48.6	7.3	-9	49.1	7.9	+5	50.3	13.1
Religious	-12.5***	41.2	[4.6, 10]	-12.3***	41.2	[3.3, 12.6]	-18.8***	37.2	[9.7, 16.4]
<35 years old	-3.9*	47.1	3.4	-1.5	48.2	5	-0.6	49.5	5.9
>60 years old	-9.7***	43.7	[5, 6.2]	-10.7***	43.3	[1.2, 8.7]	-9.2***	43.6	[2.9, 8.9]
LGBT	+10.8***	56.0	11.4	+10.4***	55.1	9.1	+9.1***	56.6	9.9
Straight	-7.9***	44.6	[7.1, 15.6]	-5.7***	46.0	[3.9, 14.3]	-4.8***	46.7	[6.1, 13.7]

Note. Average marginal component effects (ACMEs), marginal means (MMs), and marginal mean differences. ACME: Penalty for gay candidates compared to straight candidates. MM: Measure of favorability toward gay candidates, indicated by percentage of times that respondents chose gay candidates. MM difference: Difference in likelihood of choosing gay candidates across voter subgroups. 95% confidence interval in brackets.

^a Labour voters in United Kingdom and New Zealand.

^b Conservative voters in United Kingdom and National voters in New Zealand.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Bias toward Transgender Candidates across Subgroups of Voters (%)

Subgroup of Voters	United States				United Kingdom				New Zealand			
	Penalty Compared to Cisgender (AMCE)	Vote Probability for Trans Candidate (MM)	Difference in Vote Probability (MM Difference)	Penalty Compared to Cisgender (AMCE)	Vote Probability for Trans Candidate (MM)	Difference in Vote Probability (MM Difference)	Penalty Compared to Cisgender (AMCE)	Vote Probability for Trans Candidate (MM)	Difference in Vote Probability (MM Difference)	Penalty Compared to Cisgender (AMCE)	Vote Probability for Trans Candidate (MM)	Difference in Vote Probability (MM Difference)
Democrats ^a	-5.6***	44.1	7	-9.5***	42.5	1.7	-3.4	46.5	5.7	-3.4	46.5	5.7
Republicans ^b	-18.8***	37.1	[4.5, 9.5]	-12.9***	40.8	[-1.6, 5.0]	-12.6***	40.8	[2.9, 8.6]	-12.6***	40.8	[2.9, 8.6]
Liberals	-2.3	46.7	9.6	-1.3	46.3	9.2	+1.3	48.9	11.2	+1.3	48.9	11.2
Conservatives	-17.5***	37.1	[6.5, 12.6]	-15.9***	37.1	[5, 13.4]	-17.6***	37.6	[7.8, 14.7]	-17.6***	37.6	[7.8, 14.7]
LGBT friends	-5.2***	44.2	5.1	-7.3***	44.4	3.9	-4.4**	46.0	4.8	-4.4**	46.0	4.8
No LGBT friends	-15.4***	39.1	[3, 7.2]	-12.4***	40.5	[1.1, 6.7]	-12.6***	41.2	[2.5, 7.1]	-12.6***	41.2	[2.5, 7.1]
Women	-9.4***	41.9	1.2	-10.2***	42.3	.8	-3.4*	46.4	6.1	-3.4*	46.4	6.1
Men	-12.6***	40.7	[-9, 3.2]	-10.9***	41.4	[-1.8, 3.5]	-14.2***	40.3	[3.8, 8.4]	-14.2***	40.3	[3.8, 8.4]
Not religious	-5.7***	44.3	5.9	-10.3***	41.9	-2	-6.8***	44.3	5.4	-6.8***	44.3	5.4
Religious	-17.6***	38.3	[3.3, 8.6]	-9.3**	43.9	[-6.6, 2.6]	-14.6***	38.9	[2, 8.8]	-14.6***	38.9	[2, 8.8]
<35 years old	-8.3*	43.1	2.1	-6.6**	45.3	4.8	-7.6***	44.7	3.4	-7.6***	44.7	3.4
>60 years old	-11.5***	41.1	[-7, 4.9]	-12.3***	40.5	[1.2, 8.4]	-10.1***	41.3	[-3, 6.4]	-10.1***	41.3	[-3, 6.4]
LGBT	+1.3	49.1	8.3	+1.8	49.2	8	+2.9	50.5	7.8	+2.9	50.5	7.8
Straight	-11.8***	40.8	[4.0, 12.6]	-11.7***	41.3	[2.7, 13.2]	-10.0***	42.7	[4.0, 11.5]	-10.0***	42.7	[4.0, 11.5]

Note. Average marginal component effects (ACMEs), marginal means (MMs), and marginal mean differences. ACME: Penalty for transgender candidates compared to male cisgender candidates. MM: Measure of favorability toward trans candidates, indicated by percentage of times that respondents chose trans candidates. MM difference: Difference in likelihood of choosing trans candidates across voter subgroups. 95% confidence interval in brackets.

^a Labour voters in United Kingdom and New Zealand.

^b Conservative voters in United Kingdom and National voters in New Zealand.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

In each country, left-leaning voters penalize transgender candidates less strongly than right-wing individuals. The difference is largest between Democrats and Republicans in the United States (−6 vs. −19 percentage points), while it is not significant in the United Kingdom. This could be a sign of the progress of the UK Conservative party in embracing LGBT rights or the result of the strong negative effect observed among Labour voters, when compared to leftist supporters in the other two countries.¹³ In New Zealand, there is no significant penalty among Labour voters.

Having LGBT friends and family members significantly decreases the penalty for trans candidates, most notably in the United States and New Zealand (down to about 5 percentage points). In the United States and New Zealand, nonreligious voters show less negative attitudes toward transgender candidates, while religious ones have some of the strongest negative bias (−18 percentage points in the United States and −15 percentage points in New Zealand). Surprisingly, religiosity does not significantly condition attitudes toward transgender candidates in the United Kingdom. Women and younger people support transgender candidates more than men and older voters in the three countries, but the difference fails to reach significance in the United States. Voters' education is never a significantly discriminating factor.

How do our results compare with previous work exploring the effect of candidate gender on vote choice? A meta-analysis of studies that use conjoint or vignette experiments reveal interesting differences and similarities (Schwarz and Coppock 2020). First, in previous studies respondents on average preferred women over men by 2 percentage points, a clear difference from our findings on the penalty faced by LGT candidates. Second, the preference for women is generally limited to white candidates and does not apply to black ones. This echoes our finding on the multiplicative penalty faced by black gay candidates. Third, Democratic voters in the United States show a stronger preference for female candidates than Republican voters do. Consistently, in our study, Republicans exhibit significantly stronger negative bias toward LGT candidates. Fourth, several respondents' characteristics affected the likelihood to vote for LGT candidates but did not generally influence preferences for female candidates in previous studies—namely, religiosity, contact with LGBT people, age, and ideology.

Sources of voter bias

What determines attitudes toward LGT candidates? This section tests three possible sources of bias: outright prejudice,

electability concerns, and identity as a cueing mechanism. We proceed in two steps. First, we produce mediation analysis testing the impact of these mechanisms on vote choice. Second, we present the effects of the conjoint attributes on the three sources of bias operationalized as dependent variables, which allow us to more intuitively quantify bias. For instance, what is the difference in perceptions of electability between gay and straight candidates? For each country, we report results for the general sample, left-wing voters, and right-wing voters.

In the mediation analysis, candidate features (e.g., sexual orientation) are the treatment; the mechanisms (e.g., electability concerns), the mediator; and the choice indicator, the outcome.¹⁴ With regard to gay candidates, the most important mechanism explaining vote choice in the general sample are electability concerns. Such concerns explain 52% of the effect of candidate sexual orientation on vote choice in the United States, 56% in the United Kingdom, and 63% in New Zealand. Outright prejudice explains 32% of the effect in the United States, 36% in the United Kingdom, and 20% in New Zealand. The fact that gay candidates are perceived as more liberal explains 9% of the effect of sexual orientation in the United States and 5% in the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

With regard to transgender candidates, electability concerns explain most of the effect of gender identity on vote choice (57% in the United States, 43% in the United Kingdom, and 67% in New Zealand). Prejudice explains a substantive amount of the effect in the United States (34%) and a slightly smaller one in the United Kingdom (24%) and New Zealand (16%). Voters also see transgender candidates as more left leaning, but the explanatory power on vote choice is limited (6% of the effect in the United States and 3% in the United Kingdom and New Zealand).

We now move to the analysis with the three alternative dependent variables (table 3). Electability concerns play a central role for gay candidates. Their penalty compared to straight ones in terms of perceived electability ranges from 5.5 percentage points in the United Kingdom to 8.4 percentage points in the United States. All voter subgroups in the three countries exhibit electability concerns.¹⁵ Gay candidates are

14. Since inferences about mediation effects depend on the sequential ignorability assumption, the appendix discusses this assumption and presents the sensitivity analysis.

15. Prejudice and electability may be correlated, inasmuch as electability concerns may mask prejudice. To disentangle their effect, we also ran a model with electability as the dependent variable and prejudice as a control. The electability penalty diminishes for gay (−5.8, −3.7, and −4.8 percentage points in the general samples in the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand, respectively) and transgender (−10.5, −6.7, and −11.7 percentage points, respectively) candidates but is not eliminated. This suggests that electability is influenced by—but separate from—prejudice.

13. In 2018 the Labour Party saw internal conflict over whether trans women should be allowed on women-only shortlists for parliamentary seats.

Table 3. Sources of Voter Bias toward Gay and Transgender Candidates

	Gay Candidates: General Sample			Transgender Candidates: General Sample		
	United States	United Kingdom	New Zealand	United States	United Kingdom	New Zealand
Electability	-8.4***	-5.5***	-5.7***	-14.6***	-10.0***	-12.9***
Prejudice	-5.6***	-3.6***	-2.3**	-8.8***	-6.6***	-3.2**
Identity	+8.7***	+2.5**	+2.7**	+10.0***	+2.1**	+4.6***

	Gay Candidates: Left-Leaning Voters			Transgender Candidates: Left-Leaning Voters		
	US Democratic	UK Labour	NZ Labour	US Democratic	UK Labour	NZ Labour
Electability	-7.0***	-6.0***	-4.3**	-11.9***	-10.6***	-10.7***
Prejudice	-2.8***	-3.8*	+2	-3.8**	-6.1***	+1.0
Identity	+8.0***	+2.2	+1.3	+7.6***	+1.6	+2.4

	Gay Candidates: Right-Wing Voters			Transgender Candidates: Right-Wing Voters		
	US Republican	UK Conservative	NZ National	US Republican	UK Conservative	NZ National
Electability	-11.9***	-6.2***	-6.5***	-18.7***	-10.5***	-15.3***
Prejudice	-10.8***	-6.1***	-4.3**	-16.2***	-6.8***	-5.4**
Identity	+11.1***	+2.5*	+3.5*	+11.4***	+3.2*	+5.2**

* $p < .05$.
 ** $p < .01$.
 *** $p < .001$.

also seen as more liberal, to a substantially higher degree in the United States (+8.7 percentage points) than in the United Kingdom and New Zealand (+2.5 and +2.7 percentage points, respectively). Additionally, prejudice remains a barrier to the election of gay candidates, especially in the United States, where gay candidates are 5.6 percentage points less likely to be wanted as neighbors than straight ones. In each country, important subgroups—namely, young people, people with LGBTQ friends, progressives, and nonreligious individuals—do not show prejudice against gay candidates. Also worth noticing, in each country prejudice against Muslim candidates is stronger than prejudice against gays.

Voters' party ID affects both electability concerns and prejudice, but partisan divides are deeper with regard to prejudice. Right-wing voters show stronger prejudice than left-leaning voters, with partisan differences especially acute in the United States (-2.8 percentage points among Democrats vs. -10.8 percentage points among Republicans). In New Zealand, gay candidates enjoy positive bias among

Labour supporters, but the result is not statistically significant. Partisan differences are limited in the United Kingdom and New Zealand with regard to electability, while such concerns are stronger among Republicans than Democrats in the United States (-11.9 vs. -7 percentage points).

Transgender candidates are also more likely to be seen as left leaning, with identity cueing strongest in the United States (+10 percentage points) and weakest in the United Kingdom (+2.1 percentage points). Electability penalties for transgender range from 10 percentage points in the United Kingdom to 14.6 percentage points in the United States, and they emerge in all voter subgroups. Prejudice is also an obstacle to the election of transgender individuals, more in the United States (-8.8 percentage points) than in New Zealand (-3.2 percentage points). In each country, progressives do not show prejudice against transgender candidates. Once again partisan differences are more relevant for prejudice than electability. They are greatest in the United States (-3.8% among Democrats vs. -16.2% among Republicans) and

weakest in the United Kingdom. In New Zealand left-leaning voters actually choose transgender over cisgender neighbors, even though the difference is not significant.

These findings suggest a few considerations. First, electability concerns are highest in the United States, where there have been fewer openly LGBT elected officials. Second, prejudice is also highest in the United States, consistent with the higher hostility toward LGBT rights in the country. Third, the United States produced the deepest partisan differences with regard to prejudice and electability concerns, with Republicans displaying substantially more negative attitudes. This may be due to the fact that LGBT candidates and elected officials in the United States are almost always Democrats, while they are distributed across parties in the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Fourth, partisan divides between progressive and conservative voters are more acute with regard to prejudice than electability. This suggests that even supportive progressives worry about the electoral chances of LGT candidates.

Gay and transgender candidates are also seen as more liberal. For progressives, this may partially offset the negative practicality considerations related to electability and help explain why LGT candidates do not face a penalty among left-leaning citizens. In contrast, in the conservative electorate, the inferred liberal ideology of LGT candidates reinforces negative attitudes. The left-identity cueing is especially strong in the United States, consistent with previous findings (Egan et al. 2008; Jones and Brewer 2019). In contrast, it is weaker in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, where openly gay candidates have been elected even in Conservative parties.

CONCLUSION

It is sobering to find that voters still discriminate against LGT candidates. Our findings, however, do not imply that LGT candidates are doomed to failure but rather that they face extra hurdles in electorates where homo- and transphobia remain present. Transgender candidates, in particular, face very large penalties in all our cases. While the greatest opposition comes from conservative and religious voters, all subgroups except for progressives penalize transgender candidates. This may also reflect the degree to which this community remains biomedicalized, contrary to the gay community. Indeed, the classification of transgender as individuals having a “gender identity disorder” was dropped from the US Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders only in 2013, 40 years after homosexuality was removed as a mental illness in 1973.

Yet, it is heartening to observe that significant subsets of voters do not discriminate against gay and lesbian candidates. In New Zealand, progressive voters prefer gay over straight

candidates. Across all our cases, women, citizens with LGBT friends, progressives, and nonreligious individuals do not penalize gays and lesbians running for office. This is consistent with the fact that the Americans who are “enthusiastic” or “comfortable” with a gay person running for president have risen dramatically from 43% in 2006 to 68% in 2019 (Dann 2019).

To isolate the effect of demographic characteristics from partisan considerations, our experiment created a competitive race between candidates of the same party, similar to primaries. Thus, we are not able to estimate whether voter bias against the demographic traits of a candidate overwhelms partisan loyalty within multiparty races. The magnitude of some of the bias, however, seems to have the potential to do so, in particular in the case of transgender candidates.

While voter bias is partially explained by outright hostility against LGT candidates, its drivers are more complex than simple bigotry. All subgroups see LGT candidates as more left leaning, even though electability concerns appear to be the dominant factor. Voters’ perceptions of likely success play a large part in their reluctance to vote for LGT candidates. This self-fulfilling prophecy of unelectability is particularly pernicious. If citizens are less likely to vote for LGT candidates because they are seen as less electable, descriptive representation of these groups keeps languishing. This also creates a vicious circle, as LGT candidates continue to lack the experience as elected officials that voters particularly reward. Facing a double whammy, LGT candidates need to be especially qualified—perhaps more qualified than their straight or cis opponents—to be successful, similar to women running for office (Anzia and Berry 2011; Fulton 2012).

Our research also reinforces the evidence that contact with people from marginalized communities is a powerful treatment to prejudice and voter bias (Ayoub and Garretson 2017; Flores 2015; Herek and Glunt 1993). Having LGBT friends or family neutralizes negative bias against gays and lesbians in the three countries. Generational differences also powerfully speak to the effects of personal contact. Younger respondents, who are more likely to have LGBT friends, demonstrate substantially lower levels of bias against lesbian and gay candidates than older voters across all our cases. But visibility is also a multidimensional force beyond friends and family. Perspectives are altered by the presence of LGBT politicians and positive role models in the public sphere. As Ayoub (2016) notes, there is a diffusion of activism and rights adoption across like-minded states. LGBT movements replicate strategies and empowering lessons of success across national boundaries. And LGBT politicians in many countries have assisted and supported candidates and newly elected politicians overseas (Reynolds 2018).

What do our findings imply for LGT candidate success in the future? LGT candidates will face better electoral chances as a new generation of voters pervades the electorate, given that Gen Zers and millennials are more likely to have LGBT friends and be far less driven by homophobia and transphobia. In the short term, the easiest pathway to victory for LGT candidates in the United States appears to be in progressive and Democratic constituencies with high interaction between LGBT individuals and straight and cisgender people. In contrast, there is less reason for LGT candidates to be boxed into left-leaning districts in the United Kingdom and New Zealand. In fact, outside the United States there has been significant growth of out LGBT representatives from right-of-center political parties.

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