

# **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 LGBT rights and the incidence of LGBT candidates have dramatically increased in recent years. But do voters (still) penalize lesbian, gay, transgender (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 US. Yet, progressives, people with LGBT friends, and non-religious 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.

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Attitudes towards 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; Reynolds 2013). Social contact can lessen prejudice against out-groups (Allport 1954; Clayton et al. 2019; Harrison and Michelson 2017; Pettigrew 1998) and specifically against LGBT individuals (Flores 2015; Herek and Glunt 1993; Herek and Capitanio 1996). 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 which 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 impact 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 allow 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<sup>1</sup>) candidates to some extent in all three countries but to varying degrees. Penalties are strongest in the US 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 non-religious individuals do not discriminate against gay and lesbian candidates. In the US, 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,

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

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 US, 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 under-represented in public office is a prima facie case that there may be discrimination. 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 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 US 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 US 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 et al. 2018), women sometimes only perform as well as men because they are more qualified (Anzia and Berry 2011; Fulton 2012).

There remains animus toward lesbian, gay, and transgender 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). 37% of Americans were unhappy if their child married someone of the same gender (PRRI 2019). Since significant portions of the population still display prejudice, we anticipate that LGT candidates will overall be penalized to some extent purely based on 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 2019). 41% of Europeans do not support the right of transgender people to change their documents to match their gender identity (Eurobarometer 2009). A 2018 IPSOS survey conducted in 27 countries found only two in five people would use the correct pronoun to refer to a trans person. 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 et al. 2018; Jones and Brewer 2019). 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 (Nussbaum 1999). As a result, they have elicited disgust and aversion, especially among religious conservatives (Cottrell and Neuberg 2005; Inbar, Pizarro and Bloom 2012; Rozin et al. 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 et al. 2006; Sherkat et al. 2011).<sup>2</sup> 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 2016; Brewer 2003; Flores 2014, 2015; Flores et al. 2016;

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

Garretson 2014, 2015; Reynolds 2018). Individuals who do not have contacts 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. Older people also 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.

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 lesbian, gay and transgender representatives. Additionally, we should find overall more negative attitudes in countries which 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; Rickershauser and Aldrich 2007). Women and ethnic minority candidates, in particular, face heightened scrutiny with regard to electability (Sigelman et al. 1987; Teele et al. 2018; Williams 1990,).

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 - for long ostracized by parties - often lack political experience, a feature that voters see as bolstering electability (Horiuchi et al. 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 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, non-religious voters - may 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 a candidate based on their identity (Arnesen et al. 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 group” (Dolan 2004; Dolan and Lynch 2013; Huddy and Terkilsen 1993; McDermott 1997, 271; Sanbonmatsu 2002). In the US, 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 US, 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, Murray and Sherrill 2008; Egan 2012). 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 which 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 non-white 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 vote 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.<sup>4</sup>

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 UK, 52 out LGBT members of parliament sit on the benches of four different parties and constitute 8% of the 650 House of Commons members;<sup>5</sup> in New Zealand there are seven MPs (5%) representing

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<sup>3</sup> The surveys were completed in fall 2018, which was arguably a high point in the electorate's propensity to vote for women.

<sup>4</sup> Because of resource constraints, we focused on three cases: the UK with the highest number of LGBT candidates and MPs; New Zealand, the first country to elect a transgender MP; the US, where attitudes toward LGBT rights and candidates are strongly divided along party lines.

<sup>5</sup> All the figures on the numbers of LGBT elected officials come from the Victory Fund (US) and the UNC LGBTQ Representation and Rights Research Initiative.

two parties; in the US all eight out LGB members are Democrats and constitute only 2% of the House. The UK has also had a high number of out LGBT candidates in recent years (over 150 in the 2015, 2017 and 2019 elections).

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 UK 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 LGB 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 UK, the Labour Party in New Zealand, and the Democratic Party in the US - 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 US; civil partnerships, equalizing the age of consent, and the repeal of section 28 in the UK; 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 US 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 2019). However, there remains no federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act, LGBT people can be fired for their sexual

orientation without redress in sixteen 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 sky-rocketed to 52 in 2019. 62 out MPs have been elected in total alongside 24 appointed Lords (UNC LGBTQ 2019). 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 forty 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% (BSA 2017).

*New Zealand.* The first out Member of Parliament 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 (Colmar Brunton 2012). In 2014, the New Zealand military was ranked as the most LGBT inclusive in the world (Hague Center 2014).

Given our theoretical expectations, we anticipate voter discrimination against LGT candidates to be more severe in the US than in the UK or New Zealand. First, measurable animosity towards LGBT people is higher in the United States. Second, the scope of cross party LGBT

representation in the UK (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 US has the least experience of out parliamentarians in elected office. While out Congresspeople have been present in Washington D.C. for a combined 108 years of service, the comparable figure is 442 years for elected parliamentarians in the UK 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 twenty years ago has familiarized voters with such candidates.

As far as subgroup preferences, we anticipate partisan cleavages to be more consequential in the US, 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 UK and New 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 US.

### **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 quota 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 biographic 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 media devote 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 (Hensher 2014; Orquin and Loose 2013; Payne et al. 1992). To reduce the risk of attribute non-attendance, we limited the number of attributes in each profile.

On the other hand, 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 et al. 2014; Horiuchi et al. n.d.). Conjoint designs offer multiple ways for respondents to (internally) justify their choice. For instance, a respondent 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,<sup>6</sup> adapting some of the attribute levels to the specific country. We kept party constant by telling respondents that the party for which they were more likely to vote for was considering those individuals as candidates for the lower house of parliament in their district.<sup>7</sup> 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.

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<sup>6</sup> Respondents can perform up to 30 conjoint tasks before survey satisficing degrades response quality (Bansak et al. 2018).

<sup>7</sup> We speculate that in local elections some voter bias may be mitigated by closer interactions and knowledge of individual candidates.

For each candidate, we fully randomized eight characteristics across respondents: sexual orientation (straight, gay); gender (male, female, transgender); race/ethnicity (US: White, Black, Latino, Asian, Native American; UK: White, Black, Asian; NZ: White, Maori-Pacific Islander), religion (US: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, not religious; UK: Christian, Muslim, not religious; NZ: 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); political experience (US: no previous experience, member of state legislature, member of the US House of Representatives; UK: no previous experience, town council member, member of the House of Commons; NZ: no previous experience, town council member, member of the House of Representatives).<sup>8</sup>

We adopted a forced choice design. After each pair of profiles, respondents answered: “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?<sup>9</sup> (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 post-experiment 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.

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<sup>8</sup> The theoretical reasons for the choice of candidate traits are discussed in the Appendix due to space constraints.

<sup>9</sup> In the UK and New Zealand, we used “left-leaning” rather than “liberal.”



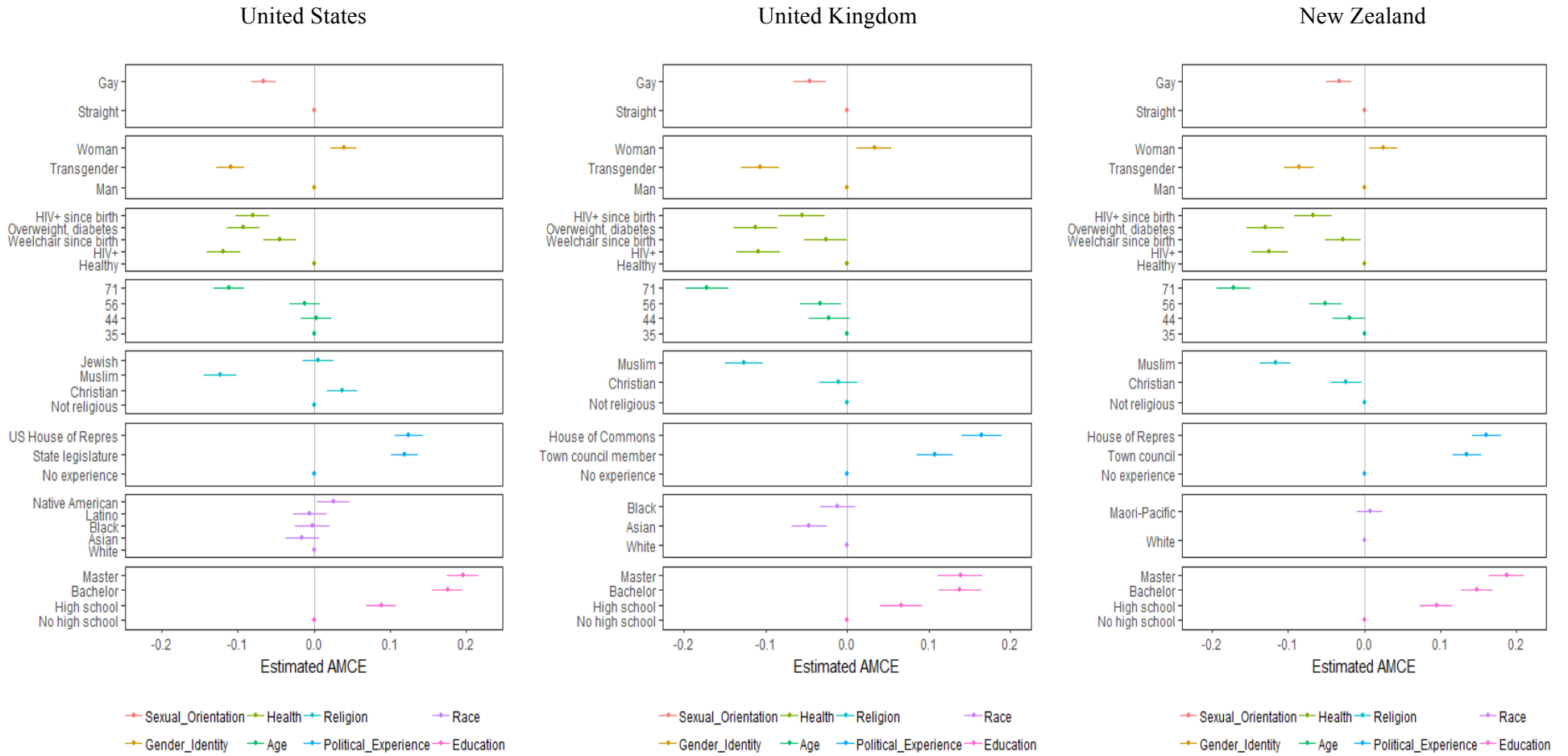
### *Estimation method*

We ran 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 et al. 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.

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, if 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).

Figure 1: Candidate choice in the US, the UK and New Zealand (average marginal component effects)



## **Results: Voting for or against LGT candidates**

Voters penalize gay candidates in all three countries, with the strongest negative effect in the US. Compared to their straight counterparts, gay candidates face penalties of 6.7% points in the US, 4.6 in the UK and 3.3 in New Zealand. Transgender candidates face even stronger bias. Their penalty compared to cisgender candidates is 11% points in the US, 10.7 in the UK and 8.5 in NZ.<sup>10</sup> These results confirm our expectations with regard to cross-country variation. The penalty for gay and lesbian candidates is stronger in the US, 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 US and New Zealand, lesbians do not face a significantly different electoral penalty from gay men 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% points in the US and +2.5% points in New Zealand). In the UK, compared to gay men, lesbians face a penalty of 2.6% points (95% C.I. [0.2, 4.9]). Hence, while female candidates perform better than men (+3.4% points), the gap in favor of women is larger when voters consider straight male and female candidates, rather than gays and lesbians.

Voters do not additionally penalize racial and ethnic minority candidates for being gay or transgender, with one important exception: black gay candidates in the US, who face an additional penalty for their sexual orientation of 3.6% points (95% C.I.: [1.3%, 5.9%]) compared to whites.

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<sup>10</sup> AMCE averages direction and intensity of voters' preferences (Abramson et al. n.d.). Hence, below we present subgroup analysis to isolate respondents who may feel particularly strong about LGT candidates.

Respondents also clearly reward candidates with previous experience in public office. This creates a vicious circle that constitutes a double lock 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 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.<sup>11</sup> Studies based on conjoint experiments usually conduct subgroup analysis by comparing AMCEs between subgroups. This approach, however, can lead to misleading representation of subgroup differences because the results are sensitive to the baseline levels (Leeper et al. 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” (Leeper et al. 2020, 4). 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 marginal means 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.

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<sup>11</sup> By isolating subgroups of respondents who feel especially strong about sexual orientation and gender identity, the subset analysis also helps alleviate the risk of misleading finding interpretation raised by Abramson et al. (n.d.), which derives from the fact that AMCE averages direction and intensity of voter preferences.

Table 1: Bias toward **gay candidates** across subgroups of voters (average marginal component effects, marginal means, and marginal mean differences)

Subgroup of voters	US			UK			NZ		
	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)
<b>Democrats<sup>+</sup></b>	-1.2%	48.5%	8.4%	-2%	48.6%	2.6%	-0.6%	49.6%	5%
<b>Republicans<sup>++</sup></b>	-14.8%***	40.1%	[5.9, 10.9]	-6.4%***	45.9%	[-0.7, 6.0]	-7.3%***	44.6%	[2.1, 7.9]
<b>Liberals</b>	+0.1%	49.5%	10.7%	+3%	51.9%	9.6%	+3.7%*	52.2%	12.3%
<b>Conservatives</b>	-17.2%***	38.8%	[7.5, 13.8]	-11.4%***	42.2%	[5.3, 13.9]	-14.8%***	40%	[8.8, 15.7]
<b>LGBT friends</b>	-1.8%	48.9%	6.3%	+1%	49.8%	4.8%	+0.7%	50.1%	4.8%
<b>No LGBT fr.</b>	-10.6%***	42.6%	[4.2, 8.5]	-7.3%***	45%	[2.0, 7.7]	-7.1%***	45.3%	[2.5, 7.1]
<b>Women</b>	-4.1%***	47.2%	3.8%	-1.3%	48.6%	3.9%	-0.6%	49.5%	3.9%
<b>Men</b>	-9.5%***	43.4%	[1.7, 5.9]	-7.8%***	44.7%	[1.2, 6.6]	-6.3%***	45.6%	[1.6, 6.2]
<b>Not religious</b>	-1.9%	48.6%	7.3%	-0.9%	49.1%	7.9%	+0.5%	50.3%	13.1%
<b>Religious</b>	-12.5%***	41.2%	[4.6, 10]	-12.3%***	41.2%	[3.3, 12.6]	-18.8%***	37.2%	[9.7, 16.4]
<b>&lt;35 years old</b>	-3.9%*	47.1%	3.4%	-1.5%	48.2%	5%	-0.6%	49.5%	5.9%
<b>&gt;60 years old</b>	-9.7%***	43.7%	[0.5, 6.2]	-10.7%***	43.3%	[1.2, 8.7]	-9.2%***	43.6%	[2.9, 8.9]
<b>LGBT</b>	+10.8%***	56%	11.4%	+10.4%***	55.1%	9.1%	+9.1%***	56.6%	9.9%
<b>Straight</b>	-7.9%***	44.6%	[7.1, 15.6]	-5.7%***	46%	[3.9, 14.3]	-4.8%***	46.7%	[6.1, 13.7]

Note: \* p< 0.05, \*\* p< 0.01, \*\*\* p< 0.001

<sup>+</sup>Labour voters in UK and NZ. <sup>++</sup>Conservative voters in UK and National voters in NZ

ACME = Average marginal component effect: Penalty for gay candidates compared to straight candidates

MM = Marginal means: Measure of favorability toward gay candidates, indicated by percentage of times that respondents chose gay candidates

MM difference = Marginal mean difference: Difference in likelihood of choosing gay candidates across voter subgroups (95% C.I. in brackets)

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 US Republicans strongly penalize gay candidates (-14.8% points), such penalty is considerably weaker among supporters of the UK Conservative Party (-6.4% points) and the New Zealand National Party (-7.3% points). In the US, 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 UK the difference between Labour and Conservative supporters is not statistically significant. The strongest difference in the US can be explained by the greater hostility of the Republican party toward LGBT rights and candidates, compared to conservative parties in the UK and New Zealand. In the UK, 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 US and the UK, and in New Zealand they actually favor gay over straight candidates by 3.7% points. In contrast, conservatives in the US, the UK and New Zealand penalize gay candidates by 17.2%, 11.4%, and 14.8% 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 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% points in the US and UK and 19% points in New Zealand). Women and younger people in the UK and New Zealand do not have significantly negative bias against gay candidates, while in the US 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 to 18% points.

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 US (-5% vs. -15% points), while it is not significant in the UK. 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.<sup>12</sup> In New Zealand, there is no significant penalty among Labour voters.

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<sup>12</sup> In 2018 the Labour Party saw internal conflict over whether trans-women should be allowed on women-only shortlists for parliamentary seats.

Table 2: Bias toward **transgender candidates** across subgroups of voters (average marginal component effects, marginal means, and marginal mean differences)

Subgroup of voters	US			UK			NZ		
	Penalty compared to cis-gender (AMCE)	Vote probability for trans candidate (MM)	Difference in vote probability (MM difference)	Penalty compared to cis-gender (AMCE)	Vote probability for trans candidate (MM)	Difference in vote probability (MM difference)	Penalty compared to cis-gender (AMCE)	Vote probability for trans candidate (MM)	Difference in vote probability (MM difference)
<b>Democrats<sup>+</sup></b>	-5.6% <sup>***</sup>	44.1%	7%	-9.5% <sup>***</sup>	42.5%	1.7%	-3.4%	46.5%	5.7%
<b>Republicans<sup>++</sup></b>	-18.8% <sup>***</sup>	37.1%	[4.5, 9.5]	-12.9% <sup>***</sup>	40.8%	[-1.6, 5.0]	-12.6% <sup>***</sup>	40.8%	[2.9, 8.6]
<b>Liberals</b>	-2.3%	46.7%	9.6%	-1.3%	46.3%	9.2%	+1.3%	48.9%	11.2%
<b>Conservatives</b>	-17.5% <sup>***</sup>	37.1%	[6.5, 12.6]	-15.9% <sup>***</sup>	37.1%	[5, 13.4]	-17.6% <sup>***</sup>	37.6%	[7.8, 14.7]
<b>LGBT friends</b>	-5.2% <sup>***</sup>	44.2%	5.1%	-7.3% <sup>***</sup>	44.4%	3.9%	-4.4% <sup>**</sup>	46%	4.8%
<b>No LGBT fr.</b>	-15.4% <sup>***</sup>	39.1%	[3, 7.2]	-12.4% <sup>***</sup>	40.5%	[1.1, 6.7]	-12.6% <sup>***</sup>	41.2%	[2.5, 7.1]
<b>Women</b>	-9.4% <sup>***</sup>	41.9%	1.2%	-10.2% <sup>***</sup>	42.3%	0.8%	-3.4% <sup>*</sup>	46.4%	6.1%
<b>Men</b>	-12.6% <sup>***</sup>	40.7%	[-0.9, 3.2]	-10.9% <sup>***</sup>	41.4%	[-1.8, 3.5]	-14.2% <sup>***</sup>	40.3%	[3.8, 8.4]
<b>Not religious</b>	-5.7% <sup>***</sup>	44.3%	5.9%	-10.3% <sup>***</sup>	41.9%	-2%	-6.8% <sup>***</sup>	44.3%	5.4%
<b>Religious</b>	-17.6% <sup>***</sup>	38.3%	[3.3, 8.6]	-9.3% <sup>**</sup>	43.9%	[-6.6, 2.6]	-14.6% <sup>***</sup>	38.9%	[2, 8.8]
<b>&lt;35 years old</b>	-8.3% <sup>*</sup>	43.1%	2.1%	-6.6% <sup>**</sup>	45.3%	4.8%	-7.6% <sup>***</sup>	44.7%	3.4%
<b>&gt;60 years old</b>	-11.5% <sup>***</sup>	41.1%	[-0.7, 4.9]	-12.3% <sup>***</sup>	40.5%	[1.2, 8.4]	-10.1% <sup>***</sup>	41.3%	[0.3, 6.4]
<b>LGBT</b>	+1.3%	49.1%	8.3%	+1.8%	49.2%	8%	+2.9%	50.5%	7.8%
<b>Straight</b>	-11.8% <sup>***</sup>	40.8%	[4.0, 12.6]	-11.7% <sup>***</sup>	41.3%	[2.7, 13.2]	-10% <sup>***</sup>	42.7%	[4.0, 11.5]

Note: \* p< 0.05, \*\* p< 0.01, \*\*\* p< 0.001

<sup>+</sup>Labour voters in UK and NZ. <sup>++</sup>Conservative voters in UK and National voters in NZ

ACME = Average marginal component effect: Penalty for transgender candidates compared to male cis-gender candidates

MM = Marginal means: Measure of favorability toward trans candidates, indicated by percentage of times that respondents chose trans candidates

MM difference = Marginal mean difference: Difference in likelihood of choosing trans candidates across voter subgroups (95% C.I. in bracket)



Having LGBT friends and family members significantly decreases the penalty for trans candidates, most notably in the US and New Zealand (down to about 5% points). In the US and New Zealand, non-religious voters show less negative attitudes toward transgender candidates, while religious ones have some of the strongest negative bias (-18% points in the US and -15% points in New Zealand). Surprisingly, religiosity does not significantly condition attitudes toward transgender candidates in the UK. 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 US. 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 et al. 2018). 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 US show stronger preference for female candidates than Republican voters. Consistently, in our study, Republicans exhibit significantly stronger negative bias toward LGT candidates. Fourth, several respondents' characteristics affect 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.<sup>13</sup> 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 US, 56% in the UK, and 63% in New Zealand. Outright prejudice explains 32% of the effect in the US, 36% in the UK 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 US and 5% in the UK and New Zealand.

With regard to transgender candidates, electability concerns explain most of the effect of gender identity on vote choice (57% in the US, 43% in the UK and 67% in NZ). Prejudice explains a substantive amount of the effect in the US (34%) and a slightly smaller one in the UK (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 US, 3% in the UK and NZ). We now move to the analysis with the three alternative dependent variables. Electability concerns play a central role for gay candidates. Their penalty compared to straight ones in terms of perceived

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<sup>13</sup> Since inferences about mediation effects depend on the sequential ignorability assumption, the online appendix discusses this assumption and presents the sensitivity analysis.

electability ranges from 5.5% points in the UK to 8.4% points in the US. All voter subgroups in the three countries exhibit electability concerns.<sup>14</sup> Gay candidates are also seen as more liberal, to a substantially higher degree in the US (+8.7% points) than in the UK and New Zealand (+2.5% and +2.7% points, respectively). Additionally, prejudice remains a barrier to the election of gay candidates, especially in the US, where gay candidates are 5.6% 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 non-religious individuals – do not show prejudice against gay candidates. Also worth noticing, in each country prejudice against Muslim candidates is stronger than prejudice against gays.

*Table 3: Sources of voter bias toward gay and transgender candidates*

	<i>Gay candidates General sample</i>			<i>Transgender candidates General sample</i>		
	<i>US</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>NZ</i>	<i>US</i>	<i>UK</i>	<i>NZ</i>
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***
	<i>Gay candidates Left-leaning voters</i>			<i>Transgender candidates Left-leaning voters</i>		
	<i>US Democratic</i>	<i>UK Labour</i>	<i>NZ Labour</i>	<i>US Democratic</i>	<i>UK Labour</i>	<i>NZ Labour</i>
Electability	-7.0***	-6.0***	-4.3**	-11.9***	-10.6***	-10.7***

<sup>14</sup> 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, -4.8 in the general samples in the three countries) and transgender (-10.5, -6.7, -11.7) candidates, but is not eliminated. This suggests that electability is influenced by - but separate from - prejudice.

Prejudice	-2.8 <sup>***</sup>	-3.8 <sup>*</sup>	+0.2	-3.8 <sup>**</sup>	-6.1 <sup>***</sup>	+1
Identity	+8.0 <sup>***</sup>	+2.2	+1.3	+7.6 <sup>***</sup>	1.6	+2.4
	<b><i>Gay candidates Right-wing voters</i></b>			<b><i>Transgender candidates Right-wing voters</i></b>		
	<i>US Republican</i>	<i>UK Conservative</i>	<i>NZ National</i>	<i>US Republican</i>	<i>UK Conservative</i>	<i>NZ National</i>
Electability	-11.9 <sup>***</sup>	-6.2 <sup>***</sup>	-6.5 <sup>***</sup>	-18.7 <sup>***</sup>	-10.5 <sup>***</sup>	-15.3 <sup>***</sup>
Prejudice	-10.8 <sup>***</sup>	-6.1 <sup>***</sup>	-4.3 <sup>**</sup>	-16.2 <sup>***</sup>	-6.8 <sup>***</sup>	-5.4 <sup>**</sup>
Identity	+11.1 <sup>***</sup>	+2.5 <sup>*</sup>	+3.5 <sup>*</sup>	+11.4 <sup>***</sup>	+3.2 <sup>*</sup>	+5.2 <sup>**</sup>

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 US (-2.8% points among Democrats vs. -10.8% 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 UK and New Zealand with regard to electability, while such concerns are stronger among Republicans than Democrats in the US (-11.9% vs. -7% points).

Transgender candidates are also more likely to be seen as left-leaning, with identity cueing strongest in the US (+10% points) and weakest in the UK (+2.1% points). Electability penalties for transgender range from 10% points in the UK to 14.6% points in the US, and emerge in all voter subgroups. Prejudice is also an obstacle to the election of transgender individuals, more in the US (-8.8% points) than in New Zealand (-3.2% 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 US (-3.8% among Democrats vs. -16.8% among Republicans) and weakest in the UK. In New Zealand left-leaning voters actually choose transgender over cis-gender neighbors, even though the difference is not significant.

These findings suggest a few considerations. First, electability concerns are highest in the US, where there have been fewer openly LGBT elected officials. Second, prejudice is also highest in the US, consistently with the higher hostility toward LGBT rights in the country. Third, the US 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 US are almost always Democrats, while they are distributed across parties in the UK 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 US, consistently with previous findings (Egan et al. 2008; Jones and Brewer 2019). In contrast, it is weaker in the UK 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 lesbian, gay and transgender 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 come from conservative and religious voters, all subgroups except for progressives penalize transgender candidates. This may also reflect the degree to which this community remains bio-

medicalized, 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, forty years after homosexuality was removed as a mental illness in 1973.

On the other hand, 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 non-religious 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 (NBC).

To isolate the effect of demographic characteristics from partisan considerations, our experiment created a competitive race between candidates of the same party, similarly to primaries. Thus, we are not able to estimate whether voter bias against the demographic traits of a candidate overwhelms partisan loyalty within multi-party 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 gay, lesbian and transgender candidates. This self-fulfilling prophecy of un-electability 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 which 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, similarly 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 neutralize 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 multi-dimensional force beyond friends and family. Perspectives are altered by the sights 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 pervade the electorate, given that Gen Zers and Millennials are more likely to have LGBT friends and far less driven by homophobia and transphobia. In the short term, the easiest pathway to victory for LGT candidates in the US appears to be in progressive and Democratic constituencies with high interaction between LGBT individuals and straight and cis-gender people. In contrast, there is less reason for LGT candidates to be boxed into left-leaning districts in the UK and New Zealand. In fact, outside the US there has been significant growth of out LGBT representatives from right of center political parties.

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