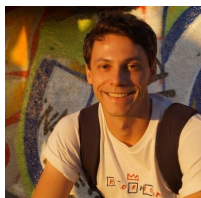


Lesbian, gay, and transgender candidates still face electoral discrimination in advanced democracies, including the UK



Gabriele Magni and **Andrew Reynolds** find that voters in the United States, United Kingdom, and New Zealand still penalise LGT candidates to varying degrees, with penalties strongest in the US. 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 this voter bias.

While lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals 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) penalise LGBT candidates? Our research, published in [The Journal of Politics](#), shows that lesbian, gay and transgender (LGT) candidates still face electoral penalties in the United Kingdom, United States, and New Zealand. However, penalties are not uniformly widespread. Furthermore, the main reason why voters discriminate against LGT candidates are electability concerns, i.e. the fear that these candidates are less likely to win elections. This suggests that examples of successful out LGBT politicians may weaken electability concerns and improve the electoral chances of future candidates.

We conducted our analysis running surveys with nationally representative samples in 2018. In total, we had more than 4,000 respondents. Of the three countries, the UK has the highest number of out LGBT members of parliament (MPs). In 2021, 55 of the 650 (8.5%) House of Commons MPs identify as LGBT. The US elected in 2020 its largest and most diverse LGBT delegation to Congress, with 11 members (2%). New Zealand has the most rainbow parliament in the world, with 13 (or 11%) of its members identifying as LGBT.

Evaluating voter attitudes is tricky. All candidates present a bundle of characteristics that are often correlated. For instance, a gay candidate could also be non-religious and highly educated. For this reason, it can be hard to disentangle to what extent each candidate characteristic influences vote choice. Moreover, survey respondents can often provide untruthful answers they consider to be socially acceptable. For instance, a voter may dislike a Black or a gay candidate but be reluctant to openly admit that for fear of looking racist or homophobic. To address these challenges, we embedded a conjoint experiment in each survey to assess the effect of individual demographic characteristics on support for candidates in primary elections. The experiment presented respondents with pairs of hypothetical candidates and asked them to vote for their preferred ones. In the experiment, we randomised candidate gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, religion, education, age, health and political experience. Because of that randomisation, we can estimate the independent effect of each candidate characteristic (for example, being gay) on vote choice while controlling for other attributes (such as being a young, white, religious man).

We find that voters penalise gay candidates in all three countries. Compared to their straight counterparts, gay candidates face penalties of 6.7 percentage points in the US, 4.6 in the UK and 3.3 in New Zealand. The penalty for gay candidates is therefore 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. While the difference between gay and lesbian candidates is not significant in the US and New Zealand, lesbian candidates face an additional penalty of 2.6 percentage points compared to gay men in the UK. Transgender candidates face even stronger bias in the three countries. Their penalty compared to cisgender candidates is 11% points in the US, 10.7 in the UK and 8.5 in New Zealand. Hence, transgender candidates face a relatively smaller penalty in New Zealand, the first country in the world to elect a transgender parliamentarian in 1999 – Georgina Beyer.

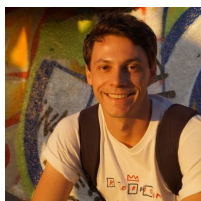
Not all voters, however, equally discriminate against LGT candidates. Supporters of left-leaning parties do not significantly penalise gay candidates, while right-wing voters strongly do. Partisan differences are strongest in the US, which can be explained by the greater hostility of the Republican Party toward LGBT rights and candidates, compared to Conservative parties in the UK and New Zealand. In the UK, the difference between Labour and Conservative supporters is not statistically significant. This 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. Moreover, progressives, the non-religious, and people with LGBT friends do not discriminate against gay and lesbian candidates. Progressives do not penalise trans candidates either.

We also analysed the reasons behind the discrimination and found three factors to be especially relevant. The most important mechanism explaining vote choice are electability concerns, that is concerns about LGT candidates chances of winning elections. Outright prejudice explains part of the penalty in the three countries. Voters also see LGT candidates as more left-leaning, but the explanatory power of perceived ideology on vote choice is limited.

Our research, therefore, reveals that LGT candidates still face electoral discrimination. This suggests that the recent record-breaking victories of LGBT candidates are a testament to their exceptional quality, given their ability to win despite great obstacles. At the same time, LGBT politicians are now more visible and successful than ever. The increased visibility of LGBT leaders is crucial to assuage electability concerns and to improve the victory chances of LGBT candidates in the future. Indeed, LGBT politicians in office send the powerful message that such candidates can win elections and belong everywhere.

Note: the above draws on the authors' [published work](#) in *The Journal of Politics*.

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