

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

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Minority groups have long been underrepresented in politics. Support for LGBTQ rights and the incidence of LGBTQ candidates have dramatically increased in recent years. But do voters (still) penalize lesbian, gay, transgender and HIV+ candidates? We conducted survey experiments with nationally representative samples in the US, UK and New Zealand. To varying degrees voters penalize LGT and HIV+ 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 and HIV+ candidates face stronger bias. Outright prejudice, identity as a cueing mechanism (i.e. LGT candidates seen as more liberal), and electability concerns 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 LGBTQ people is crucial to improve the representation of marginalized communities.

Word Count: 9,887

Attitudes towards homosexuality and 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, the number of openly gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender candidates for public office has dramatically increased, with a significant number winning elections. A total of 395 out LGBTQ 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 LGBTQ 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). Research has shown that social contact can lessen prejudice against out-groups (Allport 1954, Pettigrew 1998, Harrison and Michelson 2017, Clayton et al. 2019) and specifically against gay, lesbian and transgender individuals (Herek and Glunt 1993, Herek and Capitano 1996, Flores 2015). Descriptive representation, in particular, 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 a close friend or family member.

If the descriptive representation of marginalized communities is an important 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 the demographic traits of candidates impact their likely electoral success, focusing on sexual orientation, gender identity and HIV status. How prejudiced are voters, in what respects, and for what reasons? We explore these questions in three countries:

the US, the UK 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 LGBTQ rights, and different attitudes of conservative parties toward LGBTQ rights. In each country, we conducted a survey 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.

We find that voters penalize lesbian, gay, transgender (LGT<sup>1</sup>) and HIV+ candidates to some extent in all three countries but to widely varying degrees. Penalties are strongest in the US and weakest in New Zealand, and significantly more severe for transgender and HIV+ candidates than for gay and lesbian ones. Important differences also emerge across subgroups of voters. 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. Simple prejudice, the use of identity as a cueing mechanism (which leads voters to see LGT candidates as more liberal), and electability considerations all help explain voter bias, but concerns over electoral viability appear to be dominant.

Building on the literature on ethnic minority and female candidates, we therefore explore bias against other marginalized candidates. Scholarship is limited on lesbian, gay and transgender candidates and almost non-existent on HIV+ ones. And while most of the existing literature on minority candidates has analyzed American elections, we adopt a broader perspective comparing the United States with other advanced democracies.

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<sup>1</sup> Our study does not consider bisexual candidates.

We address measurement challenges with a conjoint design that 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. While there is little dispute that identity bias still plays a role in election outcomes, our research estimates a specific penalty (or bonus) effect, compared across groups and countries, adopting innovative estimation techniques for subgroup differences and interaction effects. In focusing on a variety of demographic traits, we also study the intersectionality of bias, i.e. to what extent multiple minority identities reinforce and magnify exclusion (Doan and Haider-Markel 2010; Strolovitch 2012; English, Pearson, and Strolovitch forthcoming; McGregor, et al. forthcoming).

### **Sources of voter bias toward LGT and HIV-positive candidates: Theory and hypotheses**

The fact that ethnic minorities, women and LGBTQ people remain under-represented in public office is a prima facie case that there may be discrimination. Likewise, the fact that no out HIV+ candidate has ever been elected to a national parliament indicates persistent stigma against seeing those with HIV as legitimate social leaders and decision makers. But do voters actually discriminate against out LGT and HIV+ candidates? Which voters? To what extent? And for which reasons?

We argue that at least three theoretically separate sources could explain voter bias toward LGT and HIV-positive candidates: outright prejudice and discrimination; the fact that sexual orientation and gender identity work as a cueing mechanism leading voters to infer LGT and HIV+ candidate ideological positions; and electability concerns.

### *Outright prejudice and discrimination*

Hostility against minority groups negatively affects the electoral chances of representatives of those groups (on race/ethnicity see Huddy and Feldman 2009, Piston 2010, Fisher et al. 2015; for women see Welch et al. 1985). 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 is still animus toward lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people within each of our cases. Despite positive trends in public opinion on LGBTQ rights (Bishin et al. 2016, Abou-Chadi and Finnigan 2018), in 2016 48% of Americans believed that consensual sexual relations between two adults of the same sex were wrong, 12% thought that homosexuals should not be permitted to teach in college,<sup>2</sup> and 37% said they would be unhappy if their child married someone of the same gender.<sup>3</sup> Since significant portions of the population still display prejudice, we anticipate that LGT candidates will be penalized to some extent purely based on their revealed sexual orientation. Narrative evidence indeed suggests that LGBT individuals running for office in the US in 2018 faced heightened threats and bias.<sup>4</sup>

We expect voter hostility against sexual and gender minorities to be in large part driven by unfamiliarity with LGBTQ individuals, partisanship, ideology, religiosity, and age (Haider-Markel 2010, Haider-Markel et al. 2017, Jones et al. 2018, Jones and Brewer 2019). The positive evolution

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<sup>2</sup> General Social Survey 2016.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.prii.org/research/american-democracy-in-crisis-the-fate-of-pluralism-in-a-divided-nation/>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/05/us/politics/lgbt-candidates.html>

of attitudes toward homosexuality lies, at least in part, in greater exposure to the lives of LGBTQ people. Direct personal contact and vicarious exposition through greater visibility of LGBT people in the media both play a role (Brewer 2003, Flores 2014, 2015, Garretson 2014, 2015, Ayoub and Garretson 2016, Flores et al. 2016, Reynolds 2018).

Partisanship, ideology and religiosity also contribute to explain prejudice toward sexual minorities. Gay men were often 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 (Rozin et al. 1994, Cottrell and Neuberg 2005, Inbar, Pizarro and Bloom 2012). Conservatism and religiosity have also predicted opposition to LGBT rights, same-sex unions, and adoption by gays and lesbians (Olson et al. 2006, Sherkat et al. 2011, Clements and Field 2014). Moreover, survey data shows that religious individuals are less likely to interact – and therefore be familiar – with LGBT people.<sup>5</sup>

We also expect older people to have more negative attitudes toward LGT candidates as older generations display more negative sentiments toward ordinary LGBT individuals (Loftus 2001). Older people likely received more negative information about homosexuality in their formative years and have, on average, fewer contacts with LGBT people. In 2019 Pew found that while 15% of Gen Zers (i.e. those born between 1997 and 2006) and Millennials (1981-96)

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<sup>5</sup> Religiously unaffiliated Americans (57%) are likelier than white mainline Protestants (47%), Catholics (37%), non-white Protestants (35%), and white evangelical Protestants (32%) to interact at least once a week with LGBT individuals. See PRRI (2019): <https://www.prii.org/research/american-democracy-in-crisis-the-fate-of-pluralism-in-a-divided-nation/>.

opposed same-sex marriage, opposition among the Silent Generation (born between 1928-45) was 43%. And while 35% of Gen Zers personally knew someone going by gender-neutral pronouns, only 7% in the Silent Generation did.<sup>6</sup>

In sum, we anticipate a stronger electoral penalty for LGT candidates among voters who do not have LGBTQ friends or family members; among conservatives, religious individuals, and supporters of right-wing parties; and among older people.

Furthermore, we expect transgender and HIV-positive 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%) would be unhappy if their child married someone who identifies as transgender (PRRI 2019), while according to a 2018 survey conducted in 27 countries only two in five people would use the correct pronoun to refer to a trans person.<sup>7</sup> Familiarity with transgender individuals is also lower, and the demonization of trans people – by both institutions of the state and trans-exclusionary-radical feminists<sup>8</sup> – remains significant.

With regard to HIV+ candidates, research shows that HIV/AIDS often elicits disgust, and that people tend to avoid even indirect personal contact with individuals perceived as disgusting. Repulsion for a person with HIV/AIDS is especially strong, even beyond the simple fear of infection (Rozin et al. 1994). For a long time, people with HIV/AIDS have been politically isolated

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<sup>6</sup><http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/01/17/generation-z-looks-a-lot-like-millennials-on-key-social-and-political-issues/>.

<sup>7</sup> LGBT Nation, February 2018.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/07/opinion/terf-trans-women-britain.html>.

(Epstein 1996). Industrialized democracies failed to implement effective measures against the epidemic (Bosia 2005, 2006).

This lack of engagement further marginalized people living with HIV/AIDS, with the result that even decades after the beginning of the epidemic HIV stigma is widespread in the general public (Bogart et al. 2008). A large share of the population still exhibits concerns about occasional encounters, avoids personal contact, and blames HIV+ individuals for their condition (Beaulieu et al. 2014). Because of such stigma, we anticipate strong voter prejudice against HIV+ candidates. And given that the stigma exists across different demographic groups - among younger and older, wealthier and less affluent, religious and not religious individuals, and even among sexual minorities (Smit et al. 2012) - we expect subgroup differences toward HIV+ candidates to be minimal.

### ***Identity as a cueing mechanism***

Voters use demographic traits as a cueing mechanism – they impute 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” (McDermott 1997: 271; Huddy and Terkilsen 1993, Sanbonmatsu 2002, Dolan 2004, Dolan and Lynch 2013). 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 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 LGBT candidates, inasmuch as voters use sexual orientation and gender identity as a political cue (Golebiowska 2001, 2003; Jones and Brewer 2019). We anticipate that the electorate sees LGT candidates as more liberal than their straight counterparts. This is because lesbians, gays and bisexuals, especially in the US, generally hold more progressive views on a wide range of policy issues far beyond gay rights,<sup>9</sup> including abortion, the environment, and foreign policy (Egan, Murray and Sherrill 2008, Egan 2012, Jones and Brewer 2019).<sup>10</sup>

If voters see LGT candidates as more liberal, we argue, voters' party identification, religiosity and – above all – political ideology will shape their attitudes toward these candidates. Right-wing and religious voters should penalize LGT candidates more strongly than left-leaning and non-religious ones because they assume that such candidates hold ideological positions more distant from their own. Political ideology should also be a strong predictor of vote choice based on cueing mechanism. The more liberal voters in the Democratic (or Labour) electorate should be especially favorably predisposed toward LGT candidates, while the more conservative supporters of the Republican (or Conservative or National) Party should display more negative attitudes.

Our expectations about HIV-positive candidates and ideological cueing are less strong, given the scarcity of data on the perceived ideological position of HIV+ individuals. However, considering the marginalization of people with HIV and the historical association between gay

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<sup>9</sup> In 2007, 88% of LGBs in the US identified as Democrats, compared to 50% of individuals in the general population. 63% of LGBs also defined themselves as “liberal” against 26% overall.

<sup>10</sup> There is also some evidence that liberal Democrats over time have shifted their identification into lesbian, gay or bisexual (Egan n.d.).

men and the AIDS epidemic, some voters may assume that HIV+ candidates are on average more liberal.

### ***Electability concerns***

Concerns about whether citizens see a candidate as “electable” feature prominently in the minds of party elites. Voters, too, when choosing a candidate, consider electability in addition to policy positions and campaign performance, especially during primaries (Rickershauser and Aldrich 2007, Adams and Merrill 2014). Women and ethnic minority candidates, in particular, face heightened scrutiny with regard to electability (Sigelman et al. 1987, Williams 1990, Teele et al. 2018).

We expect similar concerns to affect LGT and HIV+ candidates. Some voters may *expressively* support sexual minority candidates. Others, however, will also *strategically* take into account which candidates are more likely to succeed in the election. When this happens, LGT candidates may suffer. Voters may think that others will discriminate against LGT candidates, which could lead even positively predisposed citizens to not vote for LGT candidates seen as less likely to succeed. Openly lesbian Democratic candidates Ashley Lunkenheimer in Pennsylvania and Gina Ortiz Jones and Lupe Valdez in Texas faced questions in 2018 *within the Democratic Party* about whether an out candidate could win.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, LGT and HIV+ candidates may suffer from a double bind. They often lack previous political experience, a characteristic that voters see as contributing to electability (Teele et al. 2018, Horiuchi et al. 2018). These concerns should be especially strong with regard to HIV+

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/05/us/politics/lgbt-candidates.html>.

candidates, considering that so far no openly HIV-positive person has ever been elected to a national parliament.

### **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. 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 survey 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 had elected out LGBT officials, which we believe increases the plausibility of the candidate profiles presented to our respondents.

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, out LGBT members of parliament sit on the benches of three different parties (plus one independent) and constitute 7% of the House members; in New Zealand three parties and 5%; but in the US, all LGB members are Democrats and constitute only 2% of the House. The UK has also had the highest number of out LGBT candidates in recent years (over 150 in the 2015 and 2017 elections). HIV+ candidates have contested elections in the US and UK in recent years, and in 2018 the British MP, Lloyd Russell-Moyle, revealed he was HIV-positive. New Zealand elected the first out transgender legislator in the world in 1999.

Attitudes of right-wing parties toward LGBT rights and candidates also differ greatly in the three countries. While the Republican Party in the US is still largely hostile toward LGBT rights and has never elected an out LGBT congressperson, conservative parties in the UK and New

Zealand have embraced LGBT rights more convincingly 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.

*United States of America.* The first out LGBTQ member of the US Congress was Gerry Studds, who came out while in office in 1983. The LGBTQ congressional caucus, however, never grew past single figures until 2018, when it finally reached ten (eight in the House, two in the Senate). Sixteen out Congresspeople have been elected in total, and as of 2019 the caucus was half women and half men.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> However, there remains no federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act, LGBTQ people can be fired for their sexual orientation without redress in sixteen states, and in January 2019 the Supreme Court allowed the Trump administration's ban on transgender people serving in the US military to go into effect.

*United Kingdom.* 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 LGBTQ Britons in 2000, the age of consent was equalized in 2001, and marriage equality came into force

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<sup>12</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/11/13/banner-year-lgbt-candidates-got-even-stronger-with-kyrsten-sinemas-senate-win/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.f173dc4f60bd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/11/13/banner-year-lgbt-candidates-got-even-stronger-with-kyrsten-sinemas-senate-win/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f173dc4f60bd)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/fact-sheet/changing-attitudes-on-gay-marriage/>

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%.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the province of Northern Ireland continues to have discriminatory laws and has never elected a national or province-wide out LGBTQ person.

The first out member of the British House of Commons was Chris Smith in 1984. After two decades of no more than a handful of out MPs being in the House at any one time, the numbers sky-rocketed to 24 in 2010, 32 in 2015 and 45 in 2019. 62 out MPs have been elected in total, representing 63 distinct parliamentary constituencies, alongside another 24 appointed Lords.<sup>15</sup>

*New Zealand.* 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.<sup>16</sup> In 2014, the New Zealand military was ranked as the most LGBTQ inclusive in the world.<sup>17</sup> 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. The nation has had 15 out MPs in total representing all the main parties: Labour, National

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-35/key-findings.aspx>

<sup>15</sup> UNC LGBTQ Representation and Rights Research Initiative.

<https://lgbtqrepresentationandrights.org>

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.nzherald.co.nz/civil-unions/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=565&objectid=3597388;](https://www.nzherald.co.nz/civil-unions/news/article.cfm?c_id=565&objectid=3597388;)

[https://www.webcitation.org/6fzOPe5oC?url=http://www.colmarbrunton.co.nz/images/Views\\_on\\_same\\_sex\\_marriage\\_May\\_2012.pdf](https://www.webcitation.org/6fzOPe5oC?url=http://www.colmarbrunton.co.nz/images/Views_on_same_sex_marriage_May_2012.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> [https://hcss.nl/news/lgbt\\_military\\_index\\_1](https://hcss.nl/news/lgbt_military_index_1)

and Greens. The current LGBTQ parliamentary caucus is unique in being majority women and majority-minority (Māori).

Based on support for LGBTQ rights and degree of LGBTQ representation in the three countries, we expect that voter discrimination against LGT candidates will be generally higher in the US than in the UK or New Zealand. First, measurable animosity towards LGBTQ people is higher in the US than in the other two cases. Second, the scope of cross party LGBTQ 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-wing, 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).

We also anticipate partisan cleavages to be more consequential in the US, where the division between the mainstream parties on LGBTQ equality is far less pronounced. 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. Further, we hypothesize that voters in New Zealand will penalize transgender candidates less strongly than in the other cases, since the election of the first transgender MP more than twenty years ago has familiarized voters with transgender candidates. Finally, given the partisan nature of LGBT candidacies and the relative scarcity of sexual minority representatives in the US, we expect electability concerns and identity cues to be especially strong sources of bias among American voters.

In contrast, we anticipate weaker cross-country differences with regard to HIV+ candidates, given the very limited exposure to HIV+ elected officials in the three countries. Indeed, the only HIV-positive MP currently in office, Lloyd Russell-Moyle in the UK, came out as positive only very recently, after we ran our study (and has not yet stood for re-election).

### **Empirical approach: Conjoint experiments embedded 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.<sup>18</sup>

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.

The conjoint design is especially well suited to serve our purposes. 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. 2018). For instance, voters may assume that HIV+ candidates are gay men because of the strong link between HIV, AIDS and the gay community. The conjoint design allows us to disentangle the effect of correlated attributes and evaluate their marginal and relative importance.

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<sup>18</sup> We pre-registered the experiment before data collection.

Furthermore, 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. 2018).

Measuring voter attitudes through surveys presents several challenges, which we address with our approach. First, while survey measures always carry the risk of eliciting socially acceptable answers, the conjoint experiments embedded in our surveys 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.

Second, survey measures can be dismissed as “cheap talk.” Voters may express support or opposition to candidates because the stakes are low, given that these are not real elections. 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.

Third, one may question the generalizability of our findings to actual elections, when candidates seek to control which biographic aspects they want to reveal or highlight. While this is true for some candidate characteristics (e.g. religiosity), it is less of a concern for us since we are focusing on *out* LGT candidates. Sexual orientation and gender identity are often known to voters. A growing number of candidates now feel comfortable openly discussing their sexual orientation. For instance, in the UK there were over 150 out candidates in 2015 and 2017, while in the US general election in 2018 there were 21. Transgender candidates are particularly visible and receive considerable media attention. This also applies to HIV+ politicians, as shown by the hyped media



attention in the UK for candidates in 2015 and for MP Lloyd Russell-Moyle, who came out as positive on World AIDS Day in 2018.

### ***Experiment design***

We developed nearly identical designs for each country. We presented respondents with five pairs of candidates,<sup>19</sup> adapting only 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 national lower chamber in their district. Considering the vast literature showing 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 socio-demographic characteristics across survey participants: sexual orientation (straight, gay); gender (male, female, transgender); health (healthy, in a wheelchair since birth, overweight with diabetes, HIV positive, HIV positive since birth); 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); and 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

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<sup>19</sup> Respondents can perform up to 30 conjoint tasks before survey satisficing degrades response quality (Bansak et al. 2018).

Commons; NZ: no previous experience, town council member, member of the House of Representatives).

After each pair of profiles, respondents answered the question: “Which of these two candidates would you be more likely to vote for?” Since the units of analysis in the conjoint experiment are the individual candidate characteristics, we can evaluate marginal effect, relative importance, and interaction effect of different attributes.

Respondents also answered questions that allow us to explore the reasons why they voted for – or against – specific candidates. We asked: “In your opinion, which of these two candidates... (i) ...is more liberal?<sup>20</sup> (ii) ...would you prefer to have as a neighbor? (iii) ...has better chances to win the election?” Respondents could select either or neither candidate. We can therefore evaluate whether respondents perceive LGT and HIV+ candidates as more progressive, whether outright prejudice still exists, and whether electability concerns influence vote choice.

The post-experiment questionnaire collected information on participants’ demographics, socio-economic conditions, and political preferences, including age, gender, education, income, religiosity, political ideology, partisan identity, location of residence, and whether respondents have LGBT family members or friends.

### **Results: Voting for or against LGT and HIV+ candidates**

We run 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

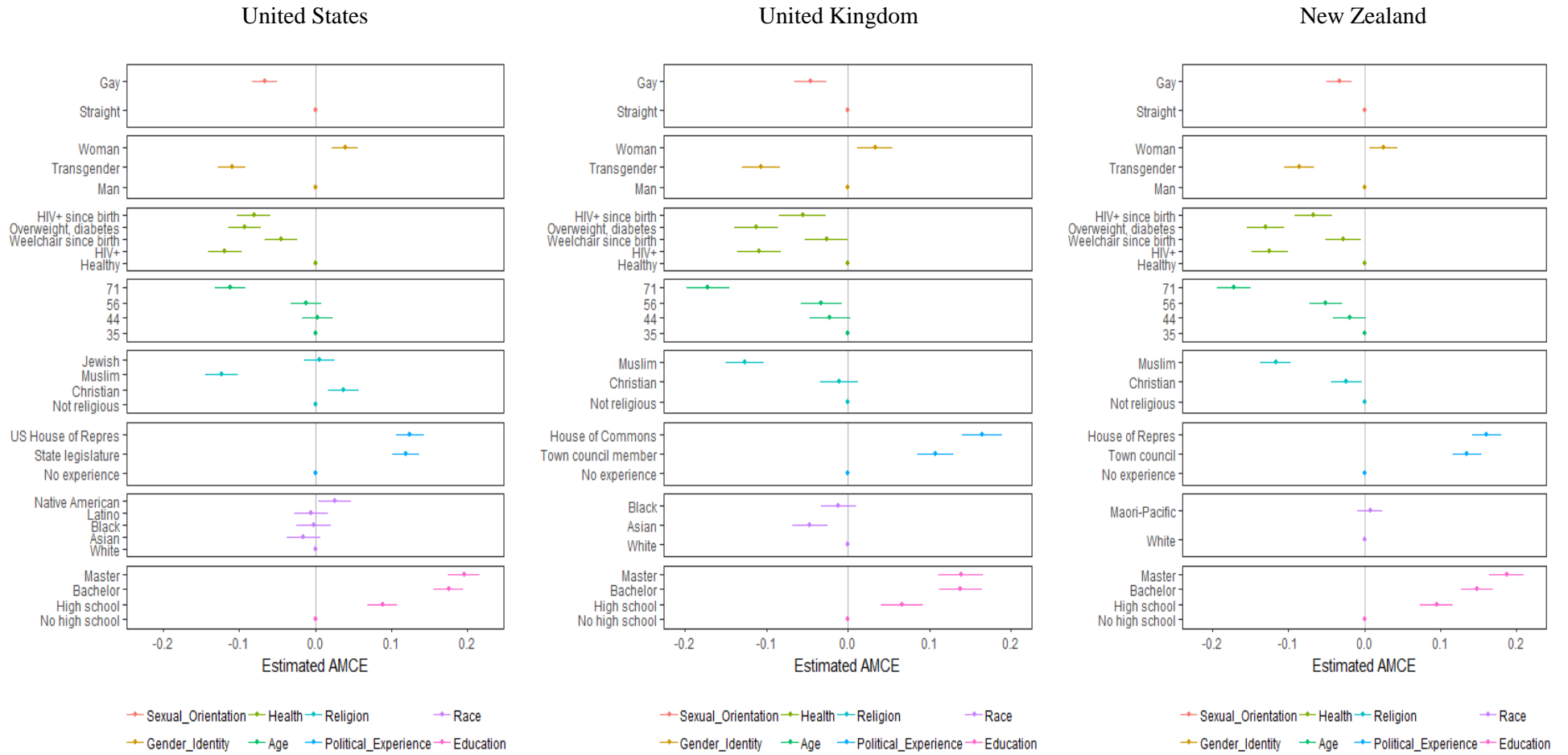
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<sup>20</sup> In the UK and New Zealand, we used “left-leaning” rather than “liberal.”

randomized from one another, OLS produces unbiased and consistent estimates of the average marginal component effects, or AMCEs (Horiuchi et al. 2018b: 199, Hainmueller et al. 2014). In the coefficient plots below, the x-axis measures the impact of each candidate characteristic on the probability that respondents chose that candidate. The vertical line depicts a null effect. Points to the right of the line indicate a positive impact of the corresponding attribute level, 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, whose corresponding point estimate is on the null effect line (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.

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



Voters penalize gay candidates in all three countries, with the penalty being strongest in the US (Figure 1). 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 experience even stronger negative bias. Their penalty compared to cisgender candidates is of 11% points in the US, 10.7 in the UK and 8.5 in New Zealand. The penalty in the US is similar in size to what Jones and Brewer found in 2019.

HIV-positive candidates also face strong opposition. Compared to “healthy” candidates, those who are HIV-positive are 11.9% points less likely to be chosen in the US, 10.9 in the UK and 12.5 in New Zealand. The penalty is less strong for candidates who have been HIV-positive since birth (-8.1% points in the US, -5.5 in the UK and -6.7 in New Zealand). We speculate that candidates who were born HIV-positive are less likely to be blamed for their condition. This is consistent with Weiner’s attribution theory of controllability, which showed that people who believe that homosexuality is biological or genetic rather than a choice attributable to individuals have less negative attitudes toward homosexuals (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008).

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. To evaluate the interaction effects of candidate attributes, we calculated 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. Unlike traditional interaction effects, the relative size of the AMIE is not conditional on the attribute levels adopted as baselines in the conjoint analysis (Egami and Imai 2018).

In the US and New Zealand, lesbians do not face a significantly smaller or larger electoral penalty than gay men because of their sexual orientation. Therefore, the advantage that lesbians overall 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, lesbian face a penalty of 2.6% points (95% C.I. [0.2, 4.9]). Hence, while female candidates in the country 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 gay male and lesbian candidates.

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

Respondents also reward candidates with previous experience in public office, in addition to incumbency advantage and name recognition (Horiuchi et al. 2018). This creates a vicious circle that constitutes a double lock against LGT and HIV+ candidates. Voters prefer candidates with political experience, but since party leaders have been reluctant to place sexual minority and HIV+ candidates on the ballot, these candidates are less likely to have experience as elected officials.

### **Voting preferences among voter subgroups**

Our findings hide considerable variation across subsets of voters. To explore how different groups react to LGT and HIV+ candidates, we ran subset analyses based on respondents' characteristics.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Because of space constraints, plots of the subset analyses are reported in the appendix.

Studies based on conjoint experiments usually conduct subgroup analysis by splitting the sample into relevant subsets, calculating the average marginal component effect for each subset and comparing AMCEs between subgroups. This approach, however, can lead to misleading representation of similarities and differences in subgroup preferences because the results are sensitive to the attribute levels adopted as baselines (Leeper et al. 2019). To address this challenge, we report marginal means and marginal mean differences between subgroups.<sup>22</sup>

Marginal means are a measure of “favorability toward profiles that have a particular feature level, marginalizing across all other features” (Leeper et al. 2019: 4). In a forced choice design with two alternative candidates, marginal means correspond to the probability that respondents chose candidates with the specific attribute under consideration. To explore differences in preferences between subgroup of respondents, we calculated conditional marginal means (e.g. marginal means for men vs. women) and tested for pairwise differences.

Additionally, we report AMCEs for subgroups of respondents, which allow us to quantify, for instance, how much Democratic and Republican voters penalize gay candidates compared to their straight counterparts. Since (subgroup) AMCEs are sensitive to the baseline categories, we chose substantively important baselines that correspond to a traditional candidate profile: someone who is white, straight, male and “healthy.”

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>22</sup> Clayton et al. (2019) adopt a similar approach.

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% <sup>***</sup>	40.1%	[5.9, 10.9]	-6.4% <sup>***</sup>	45.9%	[-0.7, 6.0]	-7.3% <sup>***</sup>	44.6%	[2.1, 7.9]
<b>Liberals</b>	+0.1%	49.5%	10.7%	+3%	51.9%	9.6%	+3.7% <sup>*</sup>	52.2%	12.3%
<b>Conservatives</b>	-17.2% <sup>***</sup>	38.8%	[7.5, 13.8]	-11.4% <sup>***</sup>	42.2%	[5.3, 13.9]	-14.8% <sup>***</sup>	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% <sup>***</sup>	42.6%	[4.2, 8.5]	-7.3% <sup>***</sup>	45%	[2.0, 7.7]	-7.1% <sup>***</sup>	45.3%	[2.5, 7.1]
<b>Women</b>	-4.1% <sup>***</sup>	47.2%	3.8%	-1.3%	48.6%	3.9%	-0.6%	49.5%	3.9%
<b>Men</b>	-9.5% <sup>***</sup>	43.4%	[1.7, 5.9]	-7.8% <sup>***</sup>	44.7%	[1.2, 6.6]	-6.3% <sup>***</sup>	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% <sup>***</sup>	41.2%	[4.6, 10]	-12.3% <sup>***</sup>	41.2%	[3.3, 12.6]	-18.8% <sup>***</sup>	37.2%	[9.7, 16.4]
<b>&lt;35 years old</b>	-3.9% <sup>*</sup>	47.1%	3.4%	-1.5%	48.2%	5%	-0.6%	49.5%	5.9%
<b>&gt;60 years old</b>	-9.7% <sup>***</sup>	43.7%	[0.5, 6.2]	-10.7% <sup>***</sup>	43.3%	[1.2, 8.7]	-9.2% <sup>***</sup>	43.6%	[2.9, 8.9]

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 attitudes toward gay candidates (Table 1). Supporters of left-leaning parties do not significantly differentiate between gay and straight candidates, while those of right-wing parties exhibit strong penalty. Interesting 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 British Conservative Party (-6.4) and the New Zealand National Party (-7.3). In the UK, the difference between Labour and Conservative supporters is not statistically significant. This may not come as a surprise, considering that the UK Conservative Party at the time of our experiment had as many openly gay and lesbian members of parliament 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. Being friends with someone who is not heterosexual shapes attitudes specifically toward gay candidates, rather than just being a proxy for liberal ideology. Indeed, having LGBT friends does not condition attitudes toward women or Muslim candidates.

Respondents' religiosity also shapes electoral preferences. Citizens who never attend religious services do not discriminate against gay candidates, while those who attend church at least weekly strongly penalize them (ranging from 12% points in the US and UK to 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

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% ***	44.1%	7%	-9.5% ***	42.5%	1.7%	-3.4%	46.5%	5.7%
<b>Republicans<sup>++</sup></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]
<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% ***	37.1%	[6.5, 12.6]	-15.9% ***	37.1%	[5, 13.4]	-17.6% ***	37.6%	[7.8, 14.7]
<b>LGBT friends</b>	-5.2% ***	44.2%	5.1%	-7.3% ***	44.4%	3.9%	-4.4% **	46%	4.8%
<b>No LGBT fr.</b>	-15.4% ***	39.1%	[3, 7.2]	-12.4% ***	40.5%	[1.1, 6.7]	-12.6% ***	41.2%	[2.5, 7.1]
<b>Women</b>	-9.4% ***	41.9%	1.2%	-10.2% ***	42.3%	0.8%	-3.4% *	46.4%	6.1%
<b>Men</b>	-12.6% ***	40.7%	[-0.9, 3.2]	-10.9% ***	41.4%	[-1.8, 3.5]	-14.2% ***	40.3%	[3.8, 8.4]
<b>Not religious</b>	-5.7% ***	44.3%	5.9%	-10.3% ***	41.9%	-2%	-6.8% ***	44.3%	5.4%
<b>Religious</b>	-17.6% ***	38.3%	[3.3, 8.6]	-9.3% **	43.9%	[-6.6, 2.6]	-14.6% ***	38.9%	[2, 8.8]
<b>&lt;35 years old</b>	-8.3% *	43.1%	2.1%	-6.6% **	45.3%	4.8%	-7.6% ***	44.7%	3.4%
<b>&gt;60 years old</b>	-11.5% ***	41.1%	[-0.7, 4.9]	-12.3% ***	40.5%	[1.2, 8.4]	-10.1% ***	41.3%	[0.3, 6.4]

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)

The penalty for transgender candidates is stronger in all subsets of the electorate and differences across subgroups are more limited (Table 2), with the partial exceptions of ideology and partisan identification. Progressive voters are the only group in the three countries who do not penalize transgender candidates. In fact, they exhibit a positive – even if insignificant – bias in New Zealand (+1.3% points). In contrast, conservatives penalize trans candidates by 16 to 18% points.

In each country, left-leaning voters penalize transgender candidates less strongly. The difference is largest between Democrats and Republicans in the US (-5 vs. -15% points), but not statistically 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>23</sup> 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 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.

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<sup>23</sup> Beginning in 2018 the Labour Party saw internal conflict over whether transwomen should be allowed on women-only shortlists for parliamentary seats.

Table 3: Bias toward HIV+ candidates across subgroups of voters (average marginal component effects, marginal means, and marginal mean differences)

Subgroup of voters	US			UK			NZ		
	Penalty compared to healthy candidate (AMCE)	Vote probability for HIV+ candidate (MM)	Difference in vote probability (MM difference)	Penalty compared to healthy candidate (AMCE)	Vote probability for HIV+ candidate (MM)	Difference in vote probability (MM difference)	Penalty compared to healthy candidate (AMCE)	Vote probability for HIV+ candidate (MM)	Difference in vote probability (MM difference)
<b>Democrats<sup>+</sup></b>	-15.1% ***	40.5%	-2.6%	-11% ***	43.9%	1.4%	-10.3% ***	44.1%	1.8%
<b>Republicans<sup>++</sup></b>	-10.3% ***	43.1%	[-6.4, 1.3]	-13.1% ***	42.5%	[-3.6, 6.4]	-13.3% ***	42.3%	[-2.6, 6.2]
<b>Liberals</b>	-12.9% ***	42.4%	-4.5%	-2.6%	50.7%	8.3%	-8.3% ***	45.7%	5.5%
<b>Conservatives</b>	-6.8% **	46.8%	[-9.2, -0.2]	-14% ***	42.5%	[1.7, 14.8]	-17.7% ***	40.2%	[0.3, 10.7]
<b>LGBT friends</b>	-11.4% ***	43.4%	1.1%	-8.3% ***	45.3%	2.2%	-11.9% ***	42.6%	0.6%
<b>No LGBT fr.</b>	-12.4% ***	42.2%	[-2.1, 4.3]	-12.1% ***	43.1%	[-2.1, 6.4]	-13% ***	42%	[-3, 4.1]
<b>Women</b>	-13.7% ***	40.9%	-4%	-8.4% ***	46.9%	6.1%	-12.9% ***	41.9%	-0.7%
<b>Men</b>	-10% ***	44.9%	[-7.2, -0.8]	-13.8% ***	40.7%	[2.1, 10.2]	-12.4% ***	42.7%	[-4.3, 2.8]
<b>Not religious</b>	-11.2% ***	44.1%	1.2%	-9.2% ***	45.3%	1.8%	-11.7% ***	42.7%	-1.5%
<b>Religious</b>	-10.8% ***	42.9%	[-2.9, 5.3]	-10.8% *	43.6%	[-4.9, 8.4]	-12% ***	44.2%	[-6.8, 3.8]
<b>&lt;35 years old</b>	-12.2% ***	43.4%	0.4%	-11.1% ***	44.4%	0.3%	-9.7% ***	43.4%	3%
<b>&gt;60 years old</b>	-12.5% ***	43.1%	[-3.8, 4.5]	-11.7% ***	44.1%	[-5.2, 5.8]	-16.2% ***	40.4%	[-1.7, 7.6]

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 HIV+ candidates compared to “healthy” candidates

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

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

Subgroup differences are even more limited for HIV+ candidates (Table 3). Partisan identity, social contact with LGBT people, religiosity, and age do not generate significant subgroup differences. The electoral penalty faced by HIV+ candidates is almost always greater than 10% points.

Differences emerge only along ideological – and to some extent gender – lines. While progressives in the UK and New Zealand are less likely to penalize HIV+ candidates, liberals in the US actually exhibit a stronger negative bias than conservatives. Women’s attitudes are more negative than men’s in the US and New Zealand, but the difference is not significant. In contrast, in the UK women vote more often than men for HIV+ candidates.

### **Sources of voter bias**

Why do citizens vote the way they do? Why do some penalize LGT and HIV+ candidates more strongly than others, and why do some voters not oppose or even reward gay candidates?

Respondents agree that LGT and HIV+ candidates face a tougher path to election. Almost all subgroups in the three countries believe that LGT and HIV+ candidates have a lower chance of winning elections. The only exceptions to this belief are young people in the UK and New Zealand and progressives in New Zealand. Electability concerns help explain why LGT candidates overall face a penalty in the three countries. If we assume that voters care about their party winning elections, and some consequently vote strategically, they may be less inclined to support candidates seen as less competitive, even when they do not personally have animus toward those candidates.

How do we explain, however, that some voters do not penalize gays and lesbians? Beyond strategic calculations, expressive considerations may also play a role. Voters may choose the

candidate who best represents their ideological beliefs, or they may vote for (or against) a candidate who – because of *who they are* – sends a positive (or negative) message to society.

We examined whether sexual orientation and gender identity work as a cueing mechanism that allows voters to infer candidates' ideological stances. Results are especially clear in the US, where all subgroups see gay, lesbian, and transgender candidates as more liberal. This is consistent with previous work showing how gays and lesbians tend to be more progressive (Egan, Edelman and Sherrill 2008) and how voters assume transgender candidates to be more liberal (Jones and Brewer 2019). Voters see LGT candidates as more progressive also in the UK and New Zealand, even if the effect is less strong.

Ideological cueing influences vote choice, conditional on voters' own ideological preferences. For progressives, these considerations partially offset the negative practicality considerations related to electability, which helps explain why LGT candidates do not face a penalty among left-leaning citizens in the three countries. In contrast, in the conservative electorate, the inferred liberal ideology of LGBT candidates reinforces the negative effect of electability concerns.

Does prejudice also play a role? To measure outright hostility, we asked respondents which candidate they would prefer to have as a neighbor. The conjoint experiment, which reduces social desirability bias, is especially appropriate to measure prejudice. Our sobering results indicate that prejudice persists within important subsets of the population. In the three countries, most subgroups, except for young people, people with LGBT friends, and liberals prefer *not* to have gay and lesbian neighbors. Hostility is even more severe toward transgender people, who are welcomed only by progressives. Progressives in New Zealand go even further, indicating that they would prefer gay and transgender over straight and cis-gender neighbors. The relatively higher hostility

toward LGBTQ people in the US and the lower hostility in New Zealand shed light on why attitudes toward LGT candidates are the most negative in the US and the least negative in New Zealand.

With regard to HIV+ candidates, prejudice and electability concerns play the biggest role. All subgroups in the three countries believe that HIV-positive candidates would face a tougher path to election. Almost every group also strongly dislikes the idea of having HIV+ neighbors, the only exception being progressives in the UK. In contrast to LGT candidates, those who are HIV-positive are not seen as more left-leaning.

As a more systematic test of the impact of these mechanisms on vote choice, we conducted causal mediation analysis. In our models, candidate features (e.g. sexual orientation) are the treatment, the mechanisms (e.g. electability concerns) the mediator, and the choice indicator the outcome.<sup>24</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 in the general samples (57% in the US, 43% in the UK and 67% in New Zealand). Prejudice explains a substantive amount of the effect in the US (34%) and a slightly

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<sup>24</sup> Since inferences about causal mediation effects depend on the sequential ignorability assumption, the online appendix discusses this assumption and presents the sensitivity analysis.

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 New Zealand). The only statistically significant mediator among Democrats in the US is electability concerns, which explains almost 60% of the effect of gender identity on vote choice.

For HIV+ candidates, these mechanisms generally account for a lower proportion of the effect of candidate health on vote choice. Electability concerns exhibit the strongest explanatory power (33% in the US, 23% in the UK, 46% in New Zealand), followed by prejudice (24% in the US, 22% in the UK, 27% in New Zealand).

## **Conclusion**

It is sobering to find that voters still discriminate against LGT and HIV+ candidates in all our cases. While the greatest penalties come from conservative and religious voters, all subgroups except for progressives penalize transgender candidates and all subgroups without exception penalize HIV+ candidates. Indeed, support for LGBTQ rights has plateaued since 2016 in both the US and UK.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, it is heartening to observe the lessening of bias in significant subsets of voters. Women, citizens with LGBT friends or family, progressives, and non-religious individuals do not penalize gay and lesbian candidates. This seems consistent with the fact that the

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2019/07/10/acceptance-gay-people-stalled-uk/>, GLAAD 2019.



number of voters in the US saying they are “enthusiastic” or “comfortable” with a gay person running for President has risen dramatically from 43% in 2006 to 68% in 2019.<sup>26</sup>

To isolate the effect of demographic characteristics from partisan considerations, our experiment created a competitive race between candidates of the same party. Thus, we are not able to estimate whether voter bias against the specific demographic traits of a candidate overwhelms partisan loyalty within multi-party races. However, the magnitude of some of the bias we found has the potential to do so, in particular in the case of transgender and HIV+ candidates. Even the reduced penalty for lesbian and gay candidates may be consequential in close races.

While voter bias is partially explained by outright hostility against LGT and HIV+ 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 the 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 and HIV+ candidates because they are seen as less electable, descriptive representation of these groups continues to languish. Additionally, a vicious circle emerges: voters prefer candidates with political experience but political society has blocked minority progress in politics. LGT candidates who often still lack experience as elected officials face therefore a double whammy. This discrimination suggests that LGT candidates need to be especially qualified - more

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<sup>26</sup> [https://www.nbcnews.com/card/most-americans-are-ok-gay-presidential-candidate-s-big-shift-n989541?fbclid=IwAR2k0bO7gD8NlnwGvt6NiwRQIYOGqrCjPafs\\_0CjSD-\\_LaQsTzzCf0jqL7o](https://www.nbcnews.com/card/most-americans-are-ok-gay-presidential-candidate-s-big-shift-n989541?fbclid=IwAR2k0bO7gD8NlnwGvt6NiwRQIYOGqrCjPafs_0CjSD-_LaQsTzzCf0jqL7o)

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 (Herek and Glunt 1993, Flores 2015, Ayoub and Garretson 2017). Respondents across all three cases were substantially less likely to penalize LGT candidates if they had LGBT friends or family. Having LGBT friends or family completely neutralized 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 dramatically lower levels of bias against lesbian and gay candidates than older ones across all our cases.

It is also true that visibility is a multi-dimensional force beyond friends and family. We do not just see LGBTQ politicians - perspectives are altered by the sights of positive role-models in the public sphere. As Ayoub (2016) notes, there is a diffusion of activism and rights adoption across like minded states. LGBTQ movements replicate strategies and role-model empowering lessons of success across national boundaries. LGBTQ politicians in many countries have also assisted and supported candidates and newly elected politicians overseas (Reynolds 2018).

The large magnitude of penalties faced by HIV+ and transgender candidates in our study also reflects the degree to which these communities remain biomedicalized, contrary to sexual orientation, which has been significantly de-medicalized in the West over the last half century. Classifying transgender people as 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. Further, HIV/AIDS is still seen as an insidious foreign

threat with persistent misconceptions about transfer and the capacities and legitimacy of HIV+ individuals.<sup>27</sup>

What do our findings imply for LGT candidate success in the future? In the US, the easiest and quickest pathway to victory for LGT candidates appears to be in progressive and left-leaning Democratic constituencies. 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 of the US there has been significant growth of out LGBT representatives from right of center political parties. LGT candidates could also wait for a new generation of voters to pervade the electorate, given that Gen Zers and Millennials are far less driven by homophobia and transphobia.

However, younger generations are not distinct from older generations in their discriminatory attitudes toward HIV+ people. Here issues of invisibility reinforce distrust, prejudice and an empathy deficit. While the number of Americans reporting knowing a gay or lesbian person has gone up from 62% in 1995 to 87% in 2016 and the number reporting knowing a transgender person increased from 8% in 2008 to 37% in 2017, the number of those who know an HIV+ person actually declined from 44% in 2004 to 19% in 2014.<sup>28</sup> Visibility leads to contact, which in turn lessens prejudice. But if voters are increasingly less likely to know a person with HIV, they retreat to negative stereotypes.

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.gscene.com/news/hiv-stigma-remains-as-rife-as-ever-in-2019/>.

<sup>28</sup> Polling from Pew Research, Kaiser Family Foundation, GLADD, NBC News/WSJ, 538, and PRRI.

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