Elections and the Role of LGBT Issues in the United States and Abroad

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Summary and Keywords

LGBT issues have played an important role in elections. They have been the focus of direct democracy, that is referenda and ballot initiatives in which citizens voted on LGBT rights. The issues considered evolved over time from nondiscrimination ordinances in the 1970s to same-sex marriage bans in the 2000s and transgender rights in the 2010s. Religiosity, partisanship, and ideology generally predicted electoral outcomes. While supporters of LGBT rights have often been defeated at the ballot box, the tide started to change in the 2010s. Beyond direct democracy, LGBT issues have played a role in general elections. The religious right exploited them to mobilize the conservative electorate or to persuade voters to reconsider their party loyalties. The 2004 US presidential election, when same-sex marriage bans were on the ballot in several states, offers an important case study. LGBT actors are also important in elections. LGB voters have generally been more progressive and more supportive of the Democratic Party than the general population. Additionally, the number of openly LGBT candidates has significantly grown over time. In the early years, gays and lesbians running for office faced an electoral penalty but made up for their disadvantage by strategically competing in more favorable districts. By the late 2010s, however, large subsets of the electorate, including Democrats, progressives, nonreligious voters, and people with LGBT friends no longer penalized gay and lesbian candidates. The penalty remained stronger for transgender candidates. LGBT issues have also been important outside the United States, as shown by same-sex marriage referenda in Europe and beyond and by the increasing success of lesbian and gay candidates in the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Future research should explore issues concerning minorities in the LGBT community, the shifting position of right-wing parties on LGBT rights, and the role of LGBT issues and candidates in elections outside the Western world.

Keywords: LGBT rights, LGBT candidates, LGB voters, LGBT representation, LGBT politics, same-sex marriage referenda, transgender candidates, elections, minority rights, direct democracy

Some consider 1977 a watershed for gays and lesbians in politics. That year, while Harvey Milk was elected to the Board of Supervisors in San Francisco, Anita Bryant commanded national attention with her successful campaign to rescind a nondiscrimination

ordinance offering protection on the basis of sexual orientation in Miami-Dade County, Florida.

In fact, 1974 was the first year that LGBT issues received special attention in elections. Elaine Noble became the first openly gay person elected to a statewide office, having won a seat in the Massachusetts House of Representatives. Furthermore, 1974 was also the year when the first antigay measure was put on the ballot. A referendum in Boulder, Colorado, overturned an antidiscrimination measure, removing sexual orientation from Boulder's Human Rights Ordinance, and started a recall initiative against the mayor and a closeted member of the city council (Stone, 2012).[1] Numerous similar initiatives followed all over the country. In the 30 years after the Boulder referendum, almost 150 local and state gay civil rights initiatives and referenda took place throughout the United States (Haider-Markel, Querze, & Lindaman, 2007).

This article offers a picture of LGBT issues in elections focusing on five main areas. It starts by exploring direct democracy on gay rights. Direct democracy refers to referenda and other ballot measures. The article first considers the issues addressed by these initiatives, including nondiscrimination ordinances in housing and employment, homosexuality in school, same-sex civil partnerships, and marriage equality. It then explores whether direct democracy has favored or hindered the advancement of LGBT rights and analyzes which factors predicted electoral outcomes when LGBT issues were on the ballot.

Second, the article examines the broader role that LGBT issues played in general elections. LGBT issues can mobilize certain sectors of the electorate or persuade voters to reconsider their party loyalties. The third sections turns to LGBT candidates. As more and more openly gay, lesbian, and transgender candidates have contested elections in recent years, candidates' sexual orientation and gender identity have often become important issues. The discussion explores how LGBT candidates performed in elections, which voters were more likely to oppose or support sexual minority candidates, and which reasons explained votes for or against LGBT candidates. Next, the article analyzes party identification and electoral behavior of LGB voters. The last section examines LGBT issues in comparative perspectives, with a focus on same-sex marriage referenda and LGBT candidates outside the United States. The conclusion suggests avenues for future research.

Direct Democracy and Votes on LGBT Rights

LGBT Issues at the Ballot Box: From Nondiscrimination Ordinances to Same-Sex Marriage and Transgender Rights

The LGBT issues decided by direct democracy have evolved over time. Ballot initiatives considered discrimination ordinances and homosexuality in schools in the 1970s, focused on constitutional bans on discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in the 1980s and 1990s, moved to same-sex marriage in the 2000s, and addressed transgender rights in the 2010s.

In the early 1970s, local governments began to approve ordinances prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. East Lansing, Michigan, was the first city to pass such a measure, in 1972. In response to these ordinances, the religious right promoted numerous ballot initiatives that aimed to repeal the legislative victories of gays and lesbians. The first referendum of this kind took place in Boulder, Colorado. In 1974, Boulder residents voted to overturn the city's antidiscrimination ordinance that offered protection to sexual minorities, but the referendum did not receive much national news coverage.

Things quickly changed. In the following years, the movement to repeal local ordinances became nationally prominent. Anita Bryant, a former beauty queen and president of Save Our Children, became the national spokesperson after successfully leading the effort to repeal the antidiscrimination ordinance in Miami-Dade County, Florida, in 1977. Emboldened by this victory, similar repeal campaigns spread throughout the country, but they faced two important defeats in 1978. California voters rejected Proposition 6, promoted by State Senator John Briggs, which would have prohibited homosexuals form working in public schools and would have led to the firing of gay and lesbian teachers. The same year, voters in Seattle defeated an initiative that would have repealed the city's antidiscrimination ordinance (Stone, 2012).

The mid-1980s and the early 1990s saw a new stream of anti-LGBT ballot initiatives. The religious right promoted constitutional amendments in several states to repeal local antidiscrimination ordinances and to proactively bar local governments from passing similar ordinances in the future. Two of these measures received special attention. Oregon's Measure 9, which was introduced by the Oregon Citizens Alliance, was defeated 56 to 44% in 1992. The same year, voters in Colorado approved Amendment 2, 53 to 47%. Amendment 2 was in the end struck down by the United States Supreme Court in 1996 in *Romer v. Evans*. The decision declared that a constitutional amendment banning sexual orientation as a basis for antidiscrimination measures violated the Equal Protection Clause in the Fourteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The Supreme Court decision halted attempts to pass similar initiatives in Maine and Idaho (Murdoch & Price, 2002).

In the early 1990s, conservatives introduced initiatives aiming to repeal domestic partnerships. Such initiatives failed in San Francisco and Seattle but were successful in Austin. It was not until the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, that same-sex unions became the central target of anti-LGBT initiatives, when a flourishing of ballot measures promoted by the religious right led to the ban on same-sex marriage across the country. Between 1998 and 2012, citizens in 32 states voted on state constitutional amendments against same-sex marriage. Ten of these states were in the West, ten in the Midwest, and twelve in the South. Voters went to the polls first in Alaska and Hawaii in 1998.[2] Thirteen states voted on same-sex marriage in 2004, when the conservative right worked to mobilize religious voters for the re-election of George W. Bush. Notable cases in the following years included Proposition 8 in California in 2008 and Amendment 1 in North Carolina in 2012. In all these votes except for two—Arizona in 2006 and Minnesota in 2012—the pro-

ponents of marriage bans were successful.[3] The level of support varied considerably, with opposition to same-sex marriage ranging from 52% in Virginia (in 2006) and California (in 2008) to 86% in Mississippi (in 2004; CNN, 2004; Egan & Sherrill, 2009).

In California, the 2008 marriage equality defeat happened the same night that Barack Obama was elected President. The defeat was especially harsh, considering that LGBT groups had spent a record $43.3 million, more than the combined amount spent in the previous campaigns on same-sex marriage referenda in 24 states (Stone, 2012). The wind, however, began to change in 2012, when not only did voters in Minnesota reject a constitutional ban on marriage for same-sex couples, but also Maine, Maryland, and Washington became the first states to legalize same-sex marriage by popular vote, with majorities of 52–53% in each state (Carter & Brennan, 2012). In the end, marriage equality became the law of the country in 2015, when the U.S. Supreme Court *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling struck down all state bans.

In the mid-2010s, the religious right started to target transgender rights. In November 2015, a referendum in Houston, Texas, rejected the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO) passed in 2014 under the leadership of openly lesbian mayor Annise Parker. HERO, which had strengthened antidiscrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, became known as the “bathroom bill,” because of the religious right’s campaign depicting the ordinance as a green light for men in women’s bathrooms. Houston voters rejected HERO 61 to 39% (Taylor, Lewis, & Haider-Markel, 2018).

Three years later, transgender rights activists obtained important electoral victories. In April 2018, voters in Anchorage, Alaska, rejected Proposition 1, which would have eliminated protection against discrimination in employment and housing based on gender identity. In November, Massachusetts voters were the first to uphold the state antidiscrimination statute—which included protection based on gender identity—through a statewide referendum in which 68% of voters expressed support for transgender rights (Gstalter, 2018; Moyer, 2015).

Winners and Losers When LGBT Rights Are on the Ballot

The history of LGBT rights at the ballot box is a history of both victories and defeats for gay, lesbian, and transgender rights. Overall, outcomes of direct democracy initiatives have become more positive for LGBT rights supporters over time.

There is agreement in both sociology (Stone, 2012) and political science that, on the whole, direct democracy has penalized LGBT people. Analyzing 43 state and local gay rights initiatives between 1977 and 1993, Gamble (1997) found that supporters of minority rights were defeated in 34 initiatives (79% of the time). The measures considered varied widely, including the repeal of gay rights ordinances, the removal of sexual orientation as a category from nondiscrimination measures, the prevention of passing new gay rights legislation, the prohibition of homosexuals from teaching in school, and declarations of homosexuality as abnormal. Gamble concluded that direct democracy often led to

the tyranny of the majority, with voters stripping gays and lesbians of fundamental rights (Gamble, 1997).

Extending Gamble's work to include 90 cases of local and state ballot measures concerning LGBT rights and AIDS policies between 1972 and 1996, Donovan and Bowler (1998) clarified the conditions under which the tyranny of the majority could emerge. Direct democracy was more likely to produce outcomes in favor of LGBT rights in larger jurisdictions, i.e., when votes took place at the state level or in larger localities. This is because the interest heterogeneity that often characterizes larger jurisdictions made it harder for a cohesive anti-LGBT majority to emerge (Donovan & Bowler, 1998).

More recent work conducted after the 2004 marriage bans, however, cast doubt on the role of jurisdiction size and reaffirmed the more negative picture initially offered by Gamble. Haider-Markel et al. (2007) extended the analysis to 2005 to consider 143 state and local ballot initiatives on LGBT rights. They included both bills in support of LGBT rights (e.g., expansion of antidiscrimination legislation, stricter punishment for hate crimes, introduction of same-sex civil unions) and antigay bills, such as barring homosexuals from working in schools, bans on same-sex marriage, and adoption bans for LGBT people. Supporters of gay and lesbian rights lost 71% of the time.

Lewis (2011) confirmed the results in an analysis of antiminority proposals between 1995 and 2004, which considered both antiminority ballot initiatives and legislation to account for the direct and the indirect effect of direct democracy. States with direct democracy were generally more likely to pass antiminority proposals, and especially antihomosexual proposals. This was particularly true in states that combined direct democracy with low support in public opinion for gay rights (Lewis, 2011).

Some evidence, however, indicates that voter attitudes have changed over time. While there is no systematic study including post-2005 data, the results in favor of same-sex marriage in the 2012 ballot initiatives in Maine, Minnesota, Maryland, and Washington, along with the popular vote in support of transgender rights in Massachusetts in 2018, suggest that electoral outcomes have become more favorable for LGBT rights supporters in the 2010s.

Explaining the Results on LGBT Ballot Initiatives: Religiosity, Ideology, and Partisanship

Gay rights policy has generally followed an interest group model when the salience was low and decisions were made by legislatures. In this framework, the strength of opposing interest groups and the values of the political elites connected to interest groups often explained outcomes of LGBT rights votes (Haider-Markel & Meier, 1996). When gay and lesbian rights are decided by voters in referenda rather than by elected officials, however, the scope of the decision broadens and the issue salience increases. When salience is higher, morality plays a larger role, and opposing coalitions defending antithetical core values are likely to emerge (Haider-Markel & Meier, 1996, 2003).

Religiosity, ideology, and partisanship have influenced decisions over gay rights in elections. Localities with a higher percentage of Protestant fundamentalists have displayed stronger opposition to LGBT initiatives, while votes in favor of gay rights usually increased as the percentage of Democratic residents grew (Haider-Markel & Meier, 2003, Smith, De Santis, & Kassel, 2006). Party identity, political ideology, and religiosity were central predictors of vote choice on Proposition 8 that banned same-sex marriage in California. Such factors mattered more than gender, race, and knowing LGBT people (Egan & Sherrill, 2009). Education also played a key role, with communities with a higher percentage of college graduates producing more positive votes on LGBT issues (Donovan & Bowler, 1998; Smith et al., 2006).

Areas with higher support for traditional family values have also displayed stronger opposition to LGBT rights. For instance, the 1992 Bush vote—that is, the level of political support for a campaign that placed a significant emphasis on the defense of the traditional family—strongly predicted vote against gay rights in ballot initiatives between 1978 and 1998 (Haider-Markel & Meier, 2003). Consistently, an analysis of initiatives to ban same-sex marriage between 2000 and 2008 in 28 states showed that opposition to same-sex marriage was stronger in counties where traditional gender roles and family structure were predominant. These communities saw homosexuality as a threat to their interests and values, especially if social cohesion was already low (McVeigh & Diaz, 2009).

LGBT Issues in General Elections

LGBT rights have also been important in general elections. LGBT issues can be a topic of debate in local, congressional, or presidential campaigns, alongside issues like the economy, foreign policy, or immigration. Alternatively, LGBT issues can be the focus of direct democracy initiatives happening at the same time as legislative or presidential elections and can generate spillover effects influencing vote choice in general elections. LGBT issues can be exploited to mobilize supporters for one candidate or party, embarrass the opposition, or persuade voters to reassess their party loyalties by priming them to think about the position of their party on gay, lesbian, and transgender rights (Camp, 2008).

Ballot initiatives on LGBT rights played an important role in the 2004 US presidential election, when citizens in 11 states voted on same-sex marriage bans.[4] The religious right adopted this strategy to mobilize the conservative and religious electorate in support of George W. Bush. Same-sex marriage became a key issue on the agenda of the Christian right because it had wide appeal, had the potential to draw majorities opposing the right of homosexuals to marry, and could bring together different religious denominations, including Evangelicals, Catholics, and Mormons. The religious right focused on the need to protect the institution of marriage by barring gays and lesbians from marrying and proposed a national amendment banning same-sex marriage (Wilcox, Merolla, & Beer, 2006).

During the presidential campaign, Christian right groups often debated the issue and several GOP congressional candidates made it a centerpiece of their campaign, but Bush himself was less outspoken. Indeed, the Bush campaign worried about fully embracing a

national ban on same-sex marriage at a time when support for gay rights was on the rise. As a result, Bush announced his support for a national ban only after significant pressure from religious groups, but he refused to talk further about the issue in the remainder of the campaign. Instead, localized efforts took place, with mail and calls raising the issue among microtargeted conservative voters (Campbell & Monson, 2008; Wilcox et al., 2006).

Scholars disagree on the impact of the same-sex marriage bans on the 2004 presidential election. Opposition to gay marriage was strongly correlated with support for George W. Bush, but whether such initiatives actually boosted turnout for the President, and whether, therefore, they were a decisive factor in his re-election, is less clear (Smith et al., 2006).

Some argue that marriage initiatives increased support for Bush by mobilizing core supporters or persuading citizens to shift their vote. Some evidence indicates that White Evangelical Protestants had a higher level of mobilization in states where gay marriage was on the ballot (Campbell & Monson, 2008). Marriage initiatives also likely primed presidential vote, increasing the salience of gay marriage as an issue and its importance for voters choosing between presidential candidates (Donovan, Tolbert, & Smith, 2008). Marriage bans may also have convinced some African Americans—who are traditionally more supportive of the Democratic Party but were more likely to oppose same-sex marriage—to reevaluate their party loyalty (Camp, 2008).

Other scholars, however, disagree on the mobilizing or persuasive effects of same-sex marriage bans. Using aggregate data, some find that states with marriage initiatives on the ballot did not have higher turnout or support for Bush once it is taken into account whether the state had a Senate race or was a “swing state” in 2004 (Abramowitz, 2004; Burden, 2004). Studies based on individual-level surveys also found that attitudes toward gay marriage had a limited impact on presidential vote choice, and certainly a smaller effect than issues like the Iraq War and the economy. Survey data also show that attitudes toward gay marriage did not have a significant effect in states with ballot initiatives, in battleground states, or among independents (Hillygus & Shields, 2005; Lewis, 2005).

2004 was not the only year when same-sex marriage measures took place at the same time as a presidential election: similar initiatives were on the ballot in 2008 and 2012. Evidence suggests that the rapid and positive change in the intensity of support for same-sex marriage on the left reversed the spillover effect that may have increased mobilization of the conservative electorate in 2004. Indeed, in 2008, marriage measures mobilized more pro-marriage-equality voters supporting Obama than conservative voters choosing McCain (Garretson, 2014). Given that the four states where marriage was on the ballot in 2012—Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, and Washington—all embraced marriage equality, one may speculate that a similar effect may have emerged even when Barack Obama won re-election.

The increasing public support for marriage equality has also been reflected in the evolution of the Democratic Party's position. In 2004, presidential candidate John Kerry promoted civil unions but supported a same-sex marriage ban. In 2008, the Democratic Party platform expressed disapproval for the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). But only 4 years later, the Democratic Party called for an explicit repeal of DOMA and embraced marriage equality. This happened a few months after President Obama became the first sitting president to voice support for same-sex marriage in May 2012, quickly following a similar move by Vice President Biden (NPR, 2012; Peters & Shear, 2012).

LGBT Candidates in Elections

Over time, a growing number of candidates have been running as openly gay, lesbian, and transgender. What are voter attitudes toward LGBT candidates? Are candidates penalized because of their sexual orientation or gender identity? If so, by which voters and to what extent? And what are the reasons explaining the electoral penalty? The question of any lingering impact of sexual orientation on election outcomes is important not only to explore the evolution of LGBT rights, but also to understand the consequences of descriptive representation and, relatedly, how rapid social change happens.

Gay and Lesbian Candidates

There is an important literature showing the macro relationship between out LGB parliamentarians and progressive LGB laws (Reynolds, 2013) and the effects of local US state legislators on a raft of domestic LGB-relevant issues (Haider-Markel et al., 2007). Quantitative studies on LGBT candidates, however, are limited.

The pioneering work on gay and lesbian candidates explored the contextual conditions that facilitated the emergence of such candidates, explaining that sexual minority candidates tended to run in favorable political and urban contexts. Focusing on the 120 openly gay officials who had been elected by the mid-1990s in the United States, mostly at the local level, Button, Wald, and Rienzo (1999) found similarities between the electoral patterns of gays and lesbians and those of women and ethnic minorities. Gay and lesbian candidates were more likely to emerge in urban and socially diverse contexts and in communities offering favorable political opportunity structure, such as wider coverage of gay rights at the state level. The ability to mobilize resources, captured by the spread of same-sex partner households, also influenced the electoral viability of gay candidates (Button et al., 1999).

Gay and lesbian candidates were often penalized in the 1990s for openly revealing their sexual orientation. Golebiowska (2003) found that candidates were better off waiting to reveal their homosexuality until they had made themselves known to their constituency, either through effective campaigning or representation following elections. This was especially true for gay men, who tended to be disliked more than lesbians (Golebiowska, 2003). Voters' evaluations of gays and lesbians were also influenced by whether the can-

didates presented characteristics consistent with their group stereotypes, such as being a feminine gay man or a masculine lesbian (Golebiowska, 2001).

Once they had made strategic decisions over their run, however, LGB candidates could successfully avoid an electoral penalty. Focusing on state legislative elections between 1992 and 2006, Haider-Markel (2010) conducted an impressive study combining surveys, public opinion data, and interviews of LGBT candidates. About 25% of Americans—especially older, Republican, conservative, religious, and less educated individuals—expressed opposition to a gay or lesbian candidate. Sexual orientation, however, did not seem to be a deciding factor. Democratic gay and lesbian candidates, in particular, did not do worse than their straight counterparts, mostly because they had greater political experience and ran in more liberal districts. The apparent lack of electoral penalty for gay and lesbian candidates, therefore, actually masked a quality gap and the need to strategically decide where a run was possible (Haider-Markel, 2010).

Were LGBT candidates still penalized in the late 2010s, after marriage equality had become the law of the country and attitudes toward LGBT rights had improved at a dizzying pace? The short answer is that, overall, they still were, but the penalty was limited and no longer existed among Democratic and progressive voters. Magni and Reynolds (2018B) conducted a study just before the 2018 congressional elections to evaluate voter attitudes toward candidate sexual orientation. They embedded a conjoint experiment in a nationally representative sample of more than 1,800 American citizens. The conjoint experiment allowed the authors to isolate the impact of sexual orientation from other candidate characteristics and to address social desirability bias often elicited by survey questions on sensitive topics. When two candidates exhibited the same characteristics except for sexual orientation, the likelihood that voters chose the straight candidate—as opposed to the gay one—was 7 percentage points higher.

This general finding, however, hid large variation across subgroups of voters. The penalty for gay candidates was especially strong among Republicans (–16 percentage points), conservatives (–20 percentage points), voters who supported Donald Trump in 2016 (–14 percentage points), Evangelicals (–19 percentage points), men (–12 percentage points), and people who did not have LGBT family members or friends (–11 percentage points ; Magni & Reynolds, 2018B). Voters' electability concerns, outright prejudice, and the fact that gay candidates were seen as more liberal and as a threat to traditional values explained the penalty (Magni & Reynolds, 2019). In contrast, a substantial part of the electorate no longer penalized gays and lesbians. This was true for Democratic supporters, liberals, individuals who had LGBT friends or family members, and people who were not religious (Magni & Reynolds, 2018B). These results are in line with findings from a 2017 survey experiment conducted on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which found that American voters saw gay and lesbian candidates as more liberal. As a result, Democrats were more likely to support them, while Republicans were more likely to oppose them (Albertson & Zachary, N.D.).

Transgender Candidates

Transgender candidates have been elected to office at least since the early 1990s, but they often did not run as openly transgender. Althea Garrison, a Black woman, was elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1992 and was then outed as transgender after the election by a *Boston Herald* reporter. In 2003, Michelle Bruce won a seat on the Riverdale City Council in Georgia. When she ran for re-election a few years later, she was accused by her opponent of misleading voters by presenting herself as a woman and was sued for election fraud (Eltagouri, 2017).

The number of transgender candidates increased substantially in the late 2010s. In 2017, 25 transgender and nonbinary candidates ran for office in the United States, with 10 of them winning their race (Casey, 2019). Among the winning candidates was Danica Roem, who became the first transgender person elected to a state legislature when she won a seat in the Virginia House of Delegates. Roem focused her campaign on transportation and public policy, emphasizing her past experience as a news reporter, rather than her transgender identity—indeed, she explained that her gender identity was only one of the many aspects of her life. The same year, two transgender Black people were elected to the Minneapolis City Council (Beachum, 2019; Eltagouri, 2017).

In 2018, 51 transgender candidates ran in the United States, including seven for the House of Representatives and two for the Senate. Of the 51 transgender candidates, nine won their races (Casey, 2019). Three transgender candidates were elected to state houses: Brianna Titone in Colorado and Gerri Cannon and Lisa Bunker in New Hampshire (Eltagouri, 2017). Despite their growing numbers, a major obstacle remained the ability to raise money. The nine transgender candidates who ran for Congress in 2018 raised collectively less than $300,000, with only three of them—most notably, Chelsea Manning, who lost her primary for U.S. Senate in Maryland—raising more than $5,000 each. This number was dwarfed by the average spending of a seat winner in the U.S. House of Representatives, which amounted to $1.5 million in 2016 (Beachum, 2019).

Transgender candidates have become increasingly more common, but voters' attitudes remain negative. In 2015, while a majority of citizens supported policies on transgender rights, such as nondiscrimination at school and work, the ability to serve in the military, and the so-called bathroom policy, opposition to transgender candidates was still strong. In a hypothetical voting scenario, respondents were much less likely to say that they would vote for their own party when their party candidate was presented as transgender—the percentage dropped from 67.5 to 37% (Jones, Brewer, Young, Lambe, & Hoffman, 2018). Transgender candidates faced a severe electoral penalty regardless of whether they were running for local, state, or federal office (Haider-Markel et al., 2017).

Other studies have used experimental methods to isolate the causal effect of gender identity on vote choice. In their 2018 nationally representative study using a conjoint experiment, Magni and Reynolds found strong opposition against transgender individuals running for office. Transgender candidates were 11 percentage points less likely to be chosen than cisgender males and 15 percentage points less likely than cisgender females

(Magni & Reynolds, 2018B). Jones and Brewer (2019) obtained similar results, with transgender candidates facing an 11 percentage points electoral penalty.

Attitudes toward transgender candidates, however, varied widely across subgroups of voters. The penalty was especially strong among Republicans, conservatives, religious individuals, and men. Party and ideology played a greater role in conditioning support for transgender candidates than they played for lesbians and gays (Haider-Markel et al., 2017; Jones & Brewer; 2019). Magni and Reynolds (2018B) quantified the penalty, which was stronger among Republican than Democratic voters (–21 vs. –6 percentage points), those who attended religious services weekly compared to those who never did (–19 vs. –5 percentage points) and among people who did not have LGBT family members or friends as opposed to those who did (–16 vs. –6 percentage points). Several factors helped explain the electoral penalty for transgender candidates, including outright prejudice, concerns about their electoral viability, and the fact that they were often seen as more liberal—which in turn led some voters to doubt that transgender candidates would effectively represent “people like them” (Jones & Brewer, 2019; Magni & Reynolds, 2019). Interestingly, liberal voters in 2018 no longer penalized transgender candidates (Magni & Reynolds, 2018B).

LGB Voters

Candidates are not the only LGBT actors who can play a role in elections. A separate literature has explored the electoral preferences and behavior of lesbian, gay, and bisexual voters. Two studies in the 1990s showed that LGB voters tended to be more progressive and more supportive of the Democratic Party than heterosexual individuals (Bailey, 1999; Hertzog, 1996). A pioneering 2007 online survey with a nationally representative sample of 768 LGB individuals revealed that LGB voters were to the left of their families and the voting population as a whole even with regard to issues not related to sexual orientation, such as abortion, the environment, and the Iraq War (Egan, Edelman, & Sherrill, 2008).

As a result, LGB voters have been one of the most loyal Democratic voting blocs (Egan, 2012; Flores & Sherrill, 2015; Schaffner & Senic, 2006). Gays and lesbians convincingly supported Bill Clinton over other presidential candidates in the 1990s (Edelman, 1993; Haeberle, 1999) and overwhelmingly embraced Al Gore over George W. Bush in 2000 (Lewis, Rogers, & Sherrill, 2011). Exit polls revealed that this pattern continued between 2004 and 2012, when between 70 and 80% of LGB voters supported Democratic presidential candidates and the Democratic Party in midterm elections (Perez, 2014). Some partisanship differences emerged over time in the LGB community, where majorities of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual women identified as Democrats, while only a plurality of bisexual men did (Flores & Sherrill, 2015).[5]

Several factors help explain the general electoral cohesion of LGB voters. LGB concerns about acquiring economic benefits for the community account for similar preferences on LGBT issues, such as same-sex marriage (Schaffner & Senic, 2006). More broadly, socialization within the LGB community increases the degree of political liberalism (Lewis et

al., 2011). But sometimes LGB voters display group cohesion even in the absence of group mobilization. This can be explained by the selection process that leads individuals to acquire a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity, since chosen—rather than inherited—group identities tend to produce more cohesive political attitudes (Egan, 2012). Recent evidence also suggests that, over time, liberal Democrats have shifted their demographic identities, becoming more likely to identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual in order to better align with their politics (Egan, 2019).

LGBT Issues in Comparative Perspective

Even outside the United States, voters went to the polls to vote on LGBT rights, most notably same-sex marriage. LGBT candidates have also emerged in numerous countries, especially in Western Europe, with the United Kingdom having the highest number of openly LGBT people running for office and winning seats in the national parliament. This section explores LGBT issues and candidates outside the United States.

Voting on LGBT Rights

Since 2013, several countries have held same-sex marriage referenda, including Croatia, Ireland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bermuda, Australia, and Taiwan. Voters in Croatia were called to decide in 2013 whether a constitutional amendment should define marriage as a union between a man and a woman, effectively banning same-sex marriage. The center-left government coalition and human rights organizations opposed the initiative, while conservative parties and the Catholic Church supported the constitutional ban. The opposition to same-sex marriage easily won the electoral battle, with 66% of the votes.

Two years later, Ireland became the first country in the world to introduce same-sex marriage by popular vote, a sign of how socially liberal a country once deeply religious and under the influence of the Catholic Church had become. On May 22, 2015, 62% of voters approved the thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution, known as the Marriage Equality Act, which modified the constitution to permit marriage between two people of the same sex (Johnston, 2015).

Citizens in Slovakia, Slovenia, and Bermuda also voted on same-sex marriage in 2015 and 2016. In Slovakia, the referendum that would have banned same-sex couples from marriage and adoption was invalid, because only 21% of citizens went to the polls, much less than the required 50% threshold. Similarly, a referendum in Bermuda on both same-sex marriage and civil unions did not reach the required 50% threshold and was therefore invalid, even if almost 70% of those who went to the polls opposed same-sex marriage. In Slovenia, the required 20% threshold was reached, and 63.5% of voters rejected a bill embracing marriage equality.

In 2017, Australia consulted its citizens over same-sex marriage in a nonbinding national survey, and 62% of voters expressed support for marriage equality, which paved the way for the adoption of the Marriage Amendment legalizing same-sex marriage in December.

One year later, a referendum in Taiwan rejected same-sex marriage (Humayun & Cullinane, 2018).[6]

On average, results of same-sex marriage referenda have been more positive for supporters of LGBT rights outside the United States. This could partly be due to timing. While many same-sex marriage bans were on the ballot in the United States in 2004, most same-sex marriage referenda outside the United States took place at least 10 years later, after attitudes toward LGBT rights had positively evolved in most of the Western world. A second factor explaining the different outcomes may lie in the position of conservative parties. While the Republican Party has to a large extent continued to oppose LGBT rights, conservative parties in Western Europe and beyond have promoted same-sex marriage. As the next section shows, they have also embraced LGBT candidates, thereby making gay, lesbian, and transgender rights a less partisan issue.

LGBT Candidates

It is hard to find comprehensive global data on sexual minority candidates running for elections. Between 1977 and 2015, 126 transgender candidates from 30 countries ran in 209 races and were elected 72 times (Casey & Reynolds, 2015). Data on gay and lesbian candidates—decisively more numerous than transgender ones—are, however, scattered.

The United Kingdom constitutes an exception, with its high number of openly LGBT candidates. There were 155 out LGBT candidates in the 2015 election, standing in 140 of the 650 parliamentary constituencies. All the major parties fielded gay and lesbian candidates, including 42 LGB candidates for the Conservative Party, 36 for Labour, and 39 for the Liberal Democrats. In 2017, 159 LGBT candidates ran for parliamentary election (Magni & Reynolds, 2018A).

A remarkable aspect of LGBT politics in the United Kingdom has been the shift of the major parties, and especially the Conservative Party, in support of LGBT rights. Before 1979, party manifestos largely ignored LGBT issues. Between 1979 and 1997, the Liberal Democrats and to some extent the Labour Party advanced reform proposals in support of gay rights, while Conservatives embraced heteronormativity (Chaney, 2013). The 1983 Bermondsey by-election, which saw the defeat of Labour candidate Peter Tatchell, the leading gay rights campaigner in the United Kingdom, was described as the most homophobic in British history. In 1987, Conservatives portrayed the Labour support for gay rights as a defense of perverts and pedophiles. One of the Conservative campaign billboards showed young men wearing badges like “Gay pride” and “Gay sports day,” while the slogan asked voters: “This is Labour’s camp. Do you want to live in it?” (Reynolds, 2018).

The change in party positions has been remarkable since the early 2000s. The Labour Party lay the ground for marriage equality between 2003 and 2010, but the shift was even more noticeable for the Conservative Party. Not only did Conservatives field more LGBT candidates than any other party in 2010, 2015, and 2017, but also they passed marriage equality under the leadership of Prime Minister David Cameron in 2013. By 2015, all the

main parties and party leaders were committed to the recently enacted marriage equality law and antidiscrimination legislation (Reynolds, 2018).

Given the change in party positions and public opinion, how did sexual minority candidates perform in the United Kingdom after the introduction of marriage equality? Evidence suggests that LGB candidates were no longer penalized. Magni and Reynolds built a data set combining individual-level data on more than 3,000 candidates in the 2015 UK election with sociodemographic indicators at the constituency level. After gathering data for candidate education, political experience, and campaign spending, they found that LGB candidates generally did not have a negative impact on party vote share. Even in more conservative environments, lesbian and gay candidates performed at least as well as their straight counterparts (Magni & Reynolds, 2018A).

A 2018 comparative study used experiments embedded in nationally representative surveys to measure voters' attitudes toward LGT and HIV+ candidates in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, in addition to the United States. Voters penalized LGT and HIV+ candidates to some extent in all cases but to widely varying degrees. Penalties were strongest in the United States and weakest in New Zealand. Prejudice, the use of identity as a cueing mechanism, and electability concerns helped explain voter bias, even though electability concerns appeared to be the dominant factor. Progressive voters, people with LGBT friends, and nonreligious individuals did not discriminate against gay and lesbian candidates in any of the three countries. In fact, lesbian candidates in New Zealand did better than straight men (Magni & Reynolds, 2019).

Future Directions

The study of LGBT issues has made substantial progress since the time when doubts were cast on whether researching LGBT politics was a legitimate contribution to political science (Mucciaroni, 2011). In the late 20th and early 21st century, increased attention has been devoted to the effect of direct democracy on LGBT rights, the analysis of LGBT issues in elections, the preferences of LGB voters, and the impact of lesbian, gay, and transgender candidates. Numerous questions, however, remain unanswered.

Work on issues that concern minorities in the LGBT community is still limited. Many studies in the past have focused on same-sex marriage and direct democracy related to discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Future studies should engage more directly with electoral issues addressing transgender rights, such as nondiscrimination initiatives based on gender identity, and gay and lesbian people of color, examining for instance the peculiar obstacles that such candidates face in elections.

LGBT candidates are becoming increasingly popular. Pete Buttigieg, an openly gay man from South Bend, Indiana, emerged as a serious contender for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2019, and a Black lesbian, Lori Lightfoot, was elected the same year as mayor of Chicago, the third largest city in the United States. This raises interesting questions: How do sexual minority candidates discuss their sexual orientation and gender

identity during campaigns? What is the role of stereotypical or counter-stereotypical traits of gay, lesbian, and transgender candidates in influencing their chances of electoral success? And what are the reasons why voters may oppose or support candidates because of their sexual orientation and gender identity?

There is also relatively little work on political parties and LGBT issues. In many countries, conservative parties have embraced LGBT rights and candidates. The Republican Party in the United States, however, is to a large extent an anomaly. Why have right-wing parties in Europe and beyond radically shifted their position, while the change has not happened in the United States? What is the role of LGBT elected officials and of increasingly positive public attitudes toward LGBT people in influencing positions of parties on the right?

We also do not know much about LGBT issues in elections in non-Western countries. Most of the literature has focused on the United States, while the studies that have included other countries have usually been limited to Western Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Future work would do well to explore LGBT issues and candidates in elections in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. At a time when 69 countries around the world still criminalize consensual same-sex conduct, focusing on regions where progress on LGBT rights has stalled is as important as ever.

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Notes:

(1.) Out of the Shadows: A Timeline of Boulder LGBT History.

(2.) The amendment in Hawaii gave the state the power to ban same-sex marriage, rather than directly introducing a constitutional ban.

(3.) Arizonans voted again in 2008, when the ban on same-sex marriage was approved 56% to 44%.

(4.) Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Ohio, Oregon, and Utah. Voters in Missouri and Louisiana approved similar bans in previous months in 2004.

(5.) Similarly, in Canada, LGBT voters display much greater support for liberal over conservative parties (Perrella, Brown, & Kay, 2012). Some evidence also suggests that lesbian and gay voters are more supportive of left-leaning parties in Australia (Mansillo, 2014).

(6.) Taiwan became the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage in May 2019, following a Constitutional Court ruling and a vote in the legislature.

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