



RESEARCH NOTE

# Beyond electoral performance: reviewing and advancing the literature on LGBTIQ+ political careers

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(Received 16 May 2023; revised 17 January 2024; accepted 17 January 2024)

## Abstract

In recent years, the rising number of LGBTIQ+ politicians across the world has been matched by an increase in academic attention on which factors foster or hinder their careers. Here, we provide a comprehensive analytical review of the relevant literature, with the goal of illustrating both its synergies and imbalances. We show that most of the existing evidence specifically concerns LGBTIQ+ politicians' electoral performance. Moreover, this knowledge has largely been produced in very similar contexts politically and socioculturally. Finally, we highlight the potential of investigating a number of additional factors that may impact LGBTIQ+ political careers, such as intersectional dynamics that may have a differentiated impact within this population. Future works could expand the scope of this literature by considering these elements and focussing more on the direct experience of LGBTIQ+ politicians.

**Keywords:** candidates; LGBTIQ+ politics; political careers; political representation; research design

## Introduction

For a number of years now and after long being neglected, LGBTIQ+ politics has been one of the emerging subfields in political science (Mucciaroni, 2011; Paternotte, 2018; Magni, 2020). At the same time, the political relevance of LGBTIQ+ issues has increased in contemporary politics. This is evident, for instance, through the generalised increase in descriptive representation and out representatives (Reynolds, 2013; Casey and Reynolds, 2015; Magni and Reynolds, 2023), which has been reported by works within one of the most prominent strands in this rising literature: i.e. on the political careers of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, etc. (LGBTIQ+) candidates.

Historically, studying the political dimension of the LGBTIQ+ population, which also includes other aspects such as political participation, attitudes and voting behaviour, has been problematic. An instance amongst several is the hardly surmountable hindrance faced by studies on the political participation of LGBTIQ+ people related to questions on gender identity and sexual orientation pertaining to sensitive data (e.g. Guyan, 2022). This all makes the rise in scholarly output on LGBTIQ+ politics, and particularly LGBTIQ+ careers, even more interesting and relevant.

Here, we specifically intend to answer the following question: what are scholars faced with when approaching the existing literature on LGBTIQ+ political careers? With this goal in mind, in this succinct but detailed contribution we critically analyse this literature, highlighting commonalities and imbalances in this varied body of works (Haider-Markel, 2021).

Following this introduction, we will review the substantive aspects covered by the literature on LGBTIQ+ political careers, stressing some of the elements that are currently overlooked. Likewise,

we will subsequently analyse the research design features characterising these works. Lastly, we will conclude by illustrating future research directions that can contribute to this literature, particularly in regard to the unresolved questions that emerge from our analytical review.

### What: substantive findings

We begin by reviewing the substantive findings of the existing literature on LGBTIQ+ political careers and the factors that foster or hinder them. The starting point of this scholarly debate is that gender identity and sexual orientation matter for voters as political cues during elections (Magni and Reynolds, 2018a; Jones and Brewer, 2019), and hence for the fortunes of political candidates. In this regard, the most widespread notion is that, generally speaking, LGBTIQ+ candidates are penalised compared to their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts (e.g. Magni and Reynolds, 2021).<sup>1</sup> Further, within this differentiated population subgroup, being a trans candidate means facing an even stronger electoral penalty (Jones *et al.*, 2018; Magni and Reynolds, 2021, 2023).<sup>2</sup> Beyond this, the existing literature has predominantly and extensively investigated the factors associated with the electoral success – or lack thereof – of LGBTIQ+ candidates, which can be divided into the following broad categories: party-political, compositional, candidate profile and sociopsychological elements.

First, as to be expected, party-political dynamics are fundamental in the careers of LGBTIQ+ candidates. To start with, in the vast majority of cases, descriptive data show how LGBTIQ+ candidates have historically been selected by left and/or socioculturally liberal parties (Haider-Markel, 2010; Reynolds, 2013) – overwhelmingly, in the case of trans candidates (Casey and Reynolds, 2015). However, a growing number of LGBTIQ+ candidates has been put forward by right-wing parties in recent years, albeit this does not apply to trans candidates (Reynolds, 2013; Magni and Reynolds, 2023). Further, as to be expected, the career prospects of LGBTIQ+ candidates depend on the amount of support or reticence of potential gatekeepers within the party structure, as well as the party leadership (Reynolds, 2013). Finally, the specific impact of different electoral systems is still to be explored, as preliminary descriptive data seem to point to an increase of LGBTIQ+ elected politicians across different systems (Casey and Reynolds, 2015).

Second, the careers of LGBTIQ+ candidates are fundamentally tied to the political, socio-economic and cultural composition of the constituency in which they run. Here, the literature seems unanimous in its assessment: the electoral success of LGBTIQ+ candidates is generally associated with electorates made up of highly educated, higher-income, younger, secular and more socially diverse voters with liberal attitudes (Button *et al.*, 1999; Haider-Markel, 2010; Reynolds, 2013; Haider-Markel *et al.*, 2017; Jones *et al.*, 2018; Magni and Reynolds, 2018b, 2021). Conversely, more conservative, religious and less socially diverse contexts, often with right-wing parties in power, ‘older’ in age and with lower levels of education, are detrimental to LGBTIQ+ candidates’ electoral performance (Reynolds, 2013; Haider-Markel *et al.*, 2017; Miller *et al.*, 2017; Jones *et al.*, 2018; Magni and Reynolds, 2018b; Loep and Redman, 2022). Moreover, descriptive representation is also important for electoral outcomes, as gender-non-conforming people will exhibit greater support for LGBTIQ+ candidates (Haider-Markel *et al.*, 2017).

Third, candidate profile is also essential for the electoral fortunes of LGBTIQ+ politicians. For a start, being LGBTIQ+ is not only tied to prejudice and concerns surrounding electability, but also to its political heuristic function of constituting an identity cue for liberal values, which can hence draw opposition (and, conversely, support) from the aforementioned population subgroups (Magni and Reynolds, 2021). Further, in general terms coming out has been shown to electorally

<sup>1</sup> Although the size or even the existence of this negative bias towards LGBTIQ+ candidates is context-dependent (Magni and Reynolds, 2018a; Loep and Redman, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Data show how, within this subgroup, trans women are relatively less penalised (Casey and Reynolds, 2015).

penalise LGBTIQ+ candidates and should be put off for as long as possible (Golebiowska, 2003). What moderates (or exacerbates) this LGBTIQ+ electoral penalty from a sociocultural viewpoint is, for instance, whether LGBTIQ+ candidates conform to heteronormative social norms on relationships or not (Everitt and Horvath, 2021); and if they have previous electoral experience (Haider-Markel, 2010; Casey and Reynolds, 2015).

Lastly, more sociopsychological and personality-based dynamics related to voters are also at play. Robust evidence shows how some of the most prominent mechanisms leading the above population subgroups to electorally oppose LGBTIQ+ people at large, and more specifically candidates, are higher levels of disgust sensitivity (Crawford *et al.*, 2014; Haider-Markel *et al.*, 2017; Miller *et al.*, 2017) and need for cognitive closure (Jones *et al.*, 2018). Further, gender- and sexuality-related stereotypes also play a role at the ballot box under certain circumstances (Golebiowska, 2002), especially penalising stereotype-consistent gay males and lesbian candidates who do not emphasise both feminine and masculine traits (Golebiowska, 2001). Of course, social dynamics that increase the visibility and social capital of the LGBTIQ+ community, such as media coverage and direct connections to LGBTIQ+ people, contribute to moderating such electoral penalties (Flores, 2015; Jones *et al.*, 2018; Magni and Reynolds, 2021).

With that being said, two points should now be made. First, works on LGBTIQ+ political careers provide readers with extensive knowledge about the factors and dynamics that shape LGBTIQ+ candidates' success at the polls. Conversely, much less is currently known about how gender identity and sexual orientation impact other important aspects of LGBTIQ+ political careers, e.g. the entry and permanence in politics (Bouvard, 2023). For instance, in light of the recent increase in LGBTIQ+ political representation, are LGBTIQ+ candidates mostly 'new-comer' or 'peripheral' political profiles, or are there also sizeable portions of more established and experienced local- and national-level politicians (e.g. Marino *et al.*, 2021)? Do LGBTIQ+ politicians fare differently in primaries? And do LGBTIQ+ politicians follow the same governmental and parliamentary career paths as other, non-LGBTIQ+ colleagues emerging from non-US contributions (for a most recent overview, see Sandri and Seddone 2021)? These questions have not been empirically explored yet by the specialised literature on LGBTIQ+ political careers.

Second, another contribution emerging from our review is highlighting a number of relevant factors potentially aiding or disrupting the careers of LGBTIQ+ candidates that are currently left uncovered by this literature, as they have only been explored *vis-à-vis* other minorities. These topics include the political consequences of intersectionality derived from belonging to multiple minorities, which can either constitute a strategic advantage or disadvantage. Such an impact, shaped by formal (e.g. quotas) and informal (e.g. discrimination) dynamics alike (e.g. Mügge and Erzeel, 2016), has mostly been analysed in studies on gender and race (Philpot and Walton, 2007; Gershon and Monforti, 2019), barring few exceptions (e.g. Doan and Haider-Markel, 2010). It could hence be further explored at the intersection between being LGBTIQ+ and belonging to other minorities.

Additionally, whilst it is well-known that gendered patterns concerning different electoral issues and policy domains determine differences in the perceived competence of male and female candidates in public opinion and media coverage (Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993), our review highlights how the exploration of such dynamics is still to be extended to LGBTIQ+ candidates.

Further, whilst we know from extant works that a favourable environment towards the LGBTIQ+ community is conducive to the extension of this subgroup's rights (Riggle and Ellis, 1994), the literature on LGBTIQ+ political careers does not elucidate whether this favourable climate also translates into a career advantage, and how. Moreover, generally speaking, minority candidates are penalised in constituencies characterised by a climate of exclusionary 'ethnocentrism' and social antipathy towards outgroups, for instance on religious grounds (Kalkan *et al.*, 2018). Yet, we currently lack evidence concerning whether this pattern specifically extends to LGBTIQ+ candidates as well.

Lastly, our review shows that the existing literature overlooks other factors that may impact the course of LGBTIQ+ political careers. These include, for instance, targeted hate campaigns, which have generally been shown to hinder the political representation of minority candidates (e.g. *vis-à-vis* women) by pressuring them into lowering their political ambition or even quitting politics (e.g. Krook and Sanín, 2020). Another underexplored factor is the different relationships of LGBTIQ+ candidates with the related social movements, civic associations and activists, which – depending on the person and level of election – may characterise career trajectories in a different way compared to purely party-political factors.

### How: research design characteristics

We now review how the scholarly contributions that analyse LGBTIQ+ political careers reached the illustrated substantive conclusions, hence focussing on aspects of research design. In this regard, we are able to highlight a number of prominent commonalities emerging from this literature, especially in light of the aforementioned predominant focus on the electoral success of LGBTIQ+ candidates in specific contexts.

A first common aspect is the use of quantitative methods. In particular, data from surveys, survey experiments and other experimental designs are chiefly analysed by means of descriptive statistics (Casey and Reynolds, 2015; Magni and Reynolds, 2023); a wide range of regression techniques such as ordinary least squares, logistic, multinomial logistic and seemingly unrelated regression (Button *et al.*, 1999; Golebiowska, 2001; Reynolds, 2013; Flores, 2015; Haider-Markel *et al.*, 2017; Miller *et al.*, 2017; Jones *et al.*, 2018; Magni and Reynolds, 2018a; Jones and Brewer, 2019; Magni and Reynolds, 2021; Loepp and Redman, 2022); two-way and multiple analyses of variance (Golebiowska, 2003; Everitt and Horvath, 2021); and analysis of conditional average treatment effects (Magni and Reynolds, 2018b). Further, it must be noted how there are at times inconsistencies between the results of studies relying on observational and experimental data (for instance, Magni and Reynolds, 2018a; 2021). There is also a minority of studies adopting qualitative or mixed-methods designs, either solely relying on the thematic analysis of interview data or open survey responses, or combining it with the quantitative analysis of descriptive statistics (Golebiowska, 2002; Haider-Markel, 2010; Reynolds, 2018).

The second design commonality emerging from our review concerns the geographical scope of works within this literature. Indeed, almost all contributions focus on the US, either at the national or the local level (e.g. the Greater Boston Area in Golebiowska, 2003). The few exceptions that do not focus on the US are either placed within analogous high-income, English-speaking developed countries (Magni and Reynolds, 2018a, 2021; Tremblay, 2019; Everitt and Horvath, 2021) or in very large and diverse groups of national contexts, mostly but not solely from OECD, European and Western countries (Reynolds, 2013; Casey and Reynolds, 2015; Magni and Reynolds, 2023).

Finally, most of such contributions concerning the factors favouring or penalising LGBTIQ+ candidates reach their conclusions by analysing voters' behaviour (Golebiowska, 2001, 2003; Haider-Markel *et al.*, 2017; Jones *et al.*, 2018; Magni and Reynolds, 2018a, 2018b; Jones and Brewer, 2019; Everitt and Horvath, 2021; Magni and Reynolds, 2021; Loepp and Redman, 2022) and attitudes (Flores, 2015; Miller *et al.*, 2017). Fewer works focus instead on LGBTIQ+ candidates themselves and are split between those employing aggregate-level data to explore which factors favour the careers of publicly out LGBTIQ+ candidates (Button *et al.*, 1999; Reynolds, 2013; Casey and Reynolds, 2015; Magni and Reynolds, 2023); and those retrieving data from the direct involvement of LGBTIQ+ candidates as participating subjects in their research (Golebiowska, 2002; Haider-Markel, 2010; Reynolds, 2018).

The predominant (although, not constant) design characteristics of the literature on LGBTIQ+ political careers emerging from our review are perfectly compatible with the key substantive focus on electoral contests illustrated above. This is true in terms of the methods traditionally employed

in electoral studies (i.e. largely quantitative); the selection of a spatial context in which elections are especially important for politicians as individuals, not least because of the less structured nature of American parties; and the abundance of relevant data on LGBTIQ+ voting behaviour and public opinion on LGBTIQ+ issues at different levels in the US.

Yet, these imbalances highlight the opportunity for the literature on LGBTIQ+ political careers to expand this consolidated knowledge beyond the sole aspect of electoral performance. If we look at strands of literature on other minorities outside of LGBTIQ+ politics, this has mostly been done by looking at the direct experience of minority politicians, most often employing more qualitative and interview-based research designs (e.g. Evans and Reher, 2023). These different approaches are well-suited to investigate the personal experiences, perceptions, representations, strategies and values of minority candidates within the party-political and broader societal contexts in which they are embedded (van Dijk, 2023). As this critical examination points to, following similar pathways centred around politicians' direct experiences may be very fruitful for expanding the scope of the literature on LGBTIQ+ political careers.

Finally, we believe questions of generalisability should be asked concerning the findings of this literature, as they are based on contexts with very similar sociocultural and party-political/electoral characteristics. Of course, variation along both such dimensions and the related factors – e.g. on the one hand the level of sociocultural liberalism, and on the other the presence of more or less structured parties and candidate-centred electoral systems – may impact the structure of political opportunities faced by LGBTIQ+ politicians, and hence their career trajectories. Therefore, we reckon that future works should further explore how different configurations of sociocultural and party-political/electoral features shape LGBTIQ+ career dynamics by extending the geographical scope of this literature.

## Conclusions and next steps

Our analytical review of the literature on LGBTIQ+ political careers provides us with a number of relevant and underexplored questions: in light of the empirical evidence provided by the literature on political careers in non-US contexts, how do candidate selection and career progression work in the case of LGBTIQ+ politicians? Which are the specific profiles and career paths of LGBTIQ+ candidates, and do they differ from those of non-LGBTIQ+ politicians? Do the determinants of LGBTIQ+ career trajectories apply across different contexts and to all candidates from this minority, or are there intersectional differences between the various subgroups or even individuals making them up?

One of the main contributions of our review is highlighting the ample room for a future research agenda complementing the existing works in this strand of literature. More specifically, future research on LGBTIQ+ political careers should go into greater depth concerning: (a) the individual and contextual factors (Vercesi, 2018) favouring or disfavouring LGBTIQ+ political careers as a whole, including in so far empirically unexplored contexts with different sociocultural and party-political/electoral characteristics, to see which and whether of such factors makes a difference in LGBTIQ+ political careers; (b) the impact of formal rules and other internal party-specific dynamics, such as the openness of candidate selection rules and the degree of intra-party personalisation, on the selection and career progression of LGBTIQ+ candidates both in parliamentary and governmental terms (e.g. Marino *et al.*, 2021); (c) likewise, the impact of informal norms such as those concerning performance-based promotion criteria and portfolio allocation *vis-à-vis* politicians from gender and sexual minorities (e.g. Smrek, 2022); and (d) the commonalities and differences in the experiences of LGBTIQ+ candidates, both between and within the various subgroups making up the LGBTIQ+ population (e.g. see Magni and Imse, 2023).

The broader subfield of LGBTIQ+ politics, which focuses on the political dimension of the LGBTIQ+ population at large – e.g. in terms of political participation, representation, attitudes and voting behaviour – is ever-expanding. We are hopeful that political science as a discipline

will keep engaging in the necessary act of further focussing on and investing resources in the LGBTIQ+ politics subfield and its large research agenda, which also concerns LGBTIQ+ candidates and political careers. It is in regard to this specific aspect that, through this analytical review of the related literature, we hope to contribute to this collective effort.

**Funding.** The research has been funded by the CARIPLO Foundation 'Inequalities Research' Research Grant, as part of the 'Assessing obstacles and inequalities in gender and LGBT + political leadership and careers: an intersectional perspective (GENPOLEAD)' research project.

**Competing interests.** The authors declare none.

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