

LETTER

A Rainbow Ceiling? Sexual Orientation and Party Leader Evaluations

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Abstract

How do citizens evaluate lesbian and gay (LG) party leaders? While recent scholarship has provided a window into how individuals evaluate openly gay legislative candidates, few studies have examined voter evaluations of LG individuals in executive positions, where voters may have different expectations of political leaders. This study assesses public perceptions of LG party leaders, with a focus on leader deservingness, competency, and electoral viability. Results from a conjoint experiment in the United Kingdom indicate that LG leaders receive lower leadership evaluations than straight leaders on all dimensions. Additionally, we find that gay women and men face similar penalties. This finding holds regardless of the leader's level of legislative experience. Thus, LG party leaders face a significant disadvantage compared to their straight counterparts when seeking the top position within their party.

Keywords: LGBTQ politics; party politics; party leadership change; gender and politics

Introduction

On 1 February 2009, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir made history as the first openly gay head of government, not just in Iceland, but in the world. Since that time, six other openly gay politicians have ascended to the role – all in European parliamentary systems. While recent scholarship has provided a window into how individuals evaluate openly gay legislators and candidates (Doan and Haider-Markel 2010; Reynolds 2013; Magni and Reynolds 2018; Everitt and Horvath 2021; Magni and Reynolds 2021), few studies have examined voter evaluations of gay individuals in positions of political and executive leadership.

We evaluate public perceptions of lesbian and gay (LG) political party leaders. Given the increasing ‘presidentialization’ of politics in parliamentary systems, the role of party leader has taken on even greater political and symbolic importance (Poguntke and Webb 2005). Leaders serve as both the executive and symbolic heads of the party, managing the party's legislative agenda and electoral campaign, typically ascending to the role of prime minister should their party win a parliamentary majority, determining cabinet composition (O'Brien et al. 2015) or deciding on the government's policy priorities. They are dominant figures in election campaigns (Banducci and Karp 2000) and can be influential in explaining turnout decisions (Ferreira Da Silva et al. 2021) and vote choice (Garzia et al. 2022).

The extant women leadership literature (see, for example, O'Brien 2015; Astudillo and Paneque 2022) shows that women's presence among party elites increases the number of female candidates

and elected officials (Cheng and Tavits 2011), increases the likelihood that the party platform discusses social justice issues (Kittilson 2011), allows other women to ascend to the party leadership post (Jalalzai and Jalalzai 2013), and weakens traditional stereotypes about women's role in the public sphere (Beaman *et al.* 2012) – more so than the presence of women among the backbench MPs. Similarly, then, it is possible that a lesbian or gay party leader, possessing agenda-setting powers, could further enrich the policy environment for LGBTQ citizens, serve as a role model, and help dispel stereotypes surrounding LGBTQ political leadership. Indeed, descriptive representation has been found to amplify the effects of social contact theory (Ayoub and Garretson 2017), lessening prejudice against LGBTQ individuals through social connections (Flores 2015).

But how does the public react to LG party leaders? The growing women party leadership literature shows cross-nationally that women leaders are, on average, more liked than men (Bridgewater and Nagel 2020; Dassonneville *et al.* 2021) and any initial negative ratings on warmth and likability (even in a presidential context like the United States) stabilize during the electoral campaign, 'suggesting that women running for high-levels of political office may be changing how voters think about women in power' (Bauer *et al.* 2024, p.1). Moving to LG leaders, while recent scholarship has provided a window into how individuals evaluate LG legislators and candidates (see more in the section 'Voter Perceptions of LGBTQ Politicians'), we do not know whether LG party leaders are evaluated similarly warmly like women leaders or whether they receive more negative evaluations.

In their role, party leaders have distinct responsibilities from those of rank-and-file MPs, requiring a distinct set of skills. Beyond committee work, constituent services, and crafting/voting on legislation, leaders are meant to unite the party around a common vision and common goals, develop and manage a larger, national legislative portfolio, build and maintain the party organization and infrastructure, develop and execute a national electoral strategy, and serve as the face of the party – both in parliament and in the electorate. Thus, beyond performing legislative functions, party leaders take on the role of party executive, which may induce a different set of expectations and evaluations among the electorate. Indeed, previous research has demonstrated that voters often prefer different traits for politicians in executive, as compared to legislative, office (Sweet-Cushman 2022). Therefore, while LG candidates for legislative office can be strategic in their choice of constituency, party leaders functionally serve a national constituency. Thus, while voters may support individual lesbian or gay MPs in 'safe' constituencies, they may be reluctant to support a lesbian or gay leader who may be subjected to homophobic backlash on a national stage.

Given their unique roles and responsibilities, the nationwide reach of their image and policy-making, and the different expectations of legislative and executive leadership, we ask the question: Do LG party leaders face a penalty when compared to their straight counterparts? If so, do gay men and gay women face similar penalties? Or, as shown in the women leadership literature (Bridgewater and Nagel 2020; Dassonneville *et al.* 2021), do lesbian leaders receive more positive evaluations compared to gay men?

In this study, we test public evaluations of leader deservingness, competency, and electoral viability for elected political party leaders using the results from an original conjoint survey experiment in the United Kingdom with questions capturing the unique role of party leaders as well as the anticipated reaction of the public and other political elites to recently elected party leaders, varying their sexual orientation and gender. The results demonstrate that LG leaders receive lower leadership evaluations than straight leaders, and this effect is robust regardless of their prior experience in office. Specifically, they are seen as less effective in uniting their parties and passing legislation, less likely to win additional seats in a subsequent election, and less likely to work hard on behalf of their parties – key traits expected of party leaders. Comparing LG leaders, we show that, while gay women receive higher evaluations than gay men, both face a similar penalty from voters when compared to their straight counterparts. While these results corroborate existing research on LGBTQ political candidates and politicians (see, for example, Magni and Reynolds 2021), exploring

how voters evaluate party leaders, who compete for the top executive position of the prime minister, provides an important insight into how LG politicians are perceived by the public. This analysis thus offers a greater understanding of the barriers LG politicians face in reaching positions of power and encourages us to think about the political glass ceiling for gay men and women. The bias against LG leaders may mean that LG politicians will have a harder time reaching the same level of prestige or power as their straight counterparts.¹

Voter Perceptions of LGBTQ Politicians

Public opinion towards LGBTQ rights has become increasingly positive in Western democracies (Ayoub and Garretson 2017), contributing to the expansion of LGBTQ rights provisions, including widespread legalization of same-sex marriage. More LGBTQ individuals have also been elected to political office (Reynolds 2013). More recently, LGBTQ politicians have risen to the highest positions of political leadership, including former Irish Taoiseach and Fine Gael leader Leo Varadkar, who stepped down in April 2024.

Despite the successes of the LGBTQ rights movement, studies have found that LGBTQ politicians are still penalized by voters (Haider-Markel 2010; Magni and Reynolds 2021). This penalty is stronger for religious and conservative voters and for voters without LGBTQ friends or family members (Doan and Haider-Markel 2010; Magni and Reynolds 2021). In part, hostility to LGBTQ candidates comes from the prejudice some voters have towards the LGBTQ community (Magni and Reynolds 2021). Beyond outright prejudice, LGBTQ candidates also face electability concerns, even among voters generally supportive of LGBTQ rights (Magni and Reynolds 2021). Both conservative hostility to LGBTQ candidates and electability concerns can be partially explained by the relationship between LGBTQ identity and ideology. LGBTQ candidates are often viewed as more left-leaning than their heterosexual counterparts (Golebiowska 2003; Magni and Reynolds 2021). Thus, sexual orientation and gender identity can serve as a heuristic for voters when determining a candidate's ideology, with some voters perceiving LGBTQ candidates as too far left to win office.²

Recent work, however, has suggested that the penalty incurred by LGBTQ candidates may not be as significant as portrayed above. In analyzing the 2015 UK general election, Magni and Reynolds (2018) found that LGBTQ candidates generally did not have a negative impact on party vote share and performed at least as well as their heterosexual counterparts. Similar results were found in Canada (Everitt and Horvath 2021) and the United States (Haider-Markel et al. 2020). Finally, Loepp and Redman (2022) found that the negative effect of a candidate's sexual orientation significantly decreases when voters are given information about the candidate's partisanship. Party identification, then, may trump concerns that arise due to a candidate's identity.

Although the studies highlighted above provide insight into how voters evaluate gay candidates for legislative office, we still know little about how voters evaluate gay politicians in executive leadership positions. Two studies, one from the United States and one from Canada, provide some initial insights. In their study, Magni and Reynolds (2024) found that voters penalized Democratic presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg for being in a same-sex relationship, although emphasizing his military background mitigated this penalty. Everitt and Camp (2009) found that media coverage of Allison Brewer, the openly lesbian leader of New Brunswick's New Democratic Party, was dominated by stereotypes of lesbians and women in politics. Beyond these studies, however, we do not know much about how voters evaluate gay leaders.

¹The glass ceiling theory was first coined in the late 1970s to refer to invisible barriers that prevent women from rising in a workplace. Recent comparative analysis suggests that the glass ceiling is still detrimental to women's careers in party leadership (Aldrich and Somer-Topcu 2025).

²In Appendix E.6, we show that political parties with LG leaders indeed are seen as more left-wing with data from our experiment.

Existing scholarship has shown that voters prefer different traits for politicians in executive office and those in local and legislative office, with voters tending to prefer that legislators possess more communal traits that can facilitate coalition-building and consensus, while executives possess more agentic traits such as assertiveness and decisiveness (Sweet-Cushman 2022). Given the increasing presidentialization of party politics (Poguntke and Webb 2005) and the personalization of party leadership in Europe (Blondel and Thiebault 2010), where party leaders dominate the campaigns, elections, media coverage, and governance, and where they serve as the national face of the party, in both the electorate and the legislature as they set the party agenda and manage party operations (Garzia *et al.* 2022), it is critical to know how voters react to LG party leaders. Thus, while candidates for legislative office need only compete in one (likely strategically chosen) district, party leaders are meant to oversee the national campaign and represent the party in each constituency, regardless of its ideological bent. While parties may be comfortable running LG candidates in ‘safe seats’ to mitigate any voter bias, selectorates (whether politicians, activists, or party members) may be reluctant to elevate an LG politician to the leadership post so as not to alienate needed voters. Therefore, while MPs win their seats in an election, party leaders are said to have earned the role through their strong commitment to the party organization, legislative successes or robust legislative agendas, and, typically, significant tenure in office. Indeed, party leaders are meant to maintain and build the party organization, oversee party committees and branches, work with grassroots activists and organizations, manage the party whip, and manage and build the party’s resources well beyond what could be expected of a rank-and-file MP. Finally, party leaders are responsible for managing a national legislative agenda for the parliamentary faction and shepherding legislation through the parliament.

Recent research also reveals that LG leaders are often depicted in the media differently from straight leaders because their identity as gay is always part of the narrative (Lalancette and Tremblay 2019), potentially contributing negatively to the broader narrative of their fit for the top political offices. For instance, former Prime Minister Leo Varadkar faced characterization as an ‘other’, with critiques regarding his suitability as a leader due to his identity as an Irish Indian and his sexuality. While international media framed him as a progressive figure, the Irish media forwarded narratives undermining his legitimacy through anti-gay stereotypes (Kerrigan and Pramaggiore 2021). Similarly, a study of Canadian Premier Kathleen Wynne by Everitt *et al.* (2019) noted that, despite her high profile among voters, she could not fully escape the stereotypes linked to her being an openly gay politician, facing media portrayals that questioned her electability and whether Ontario was ready for a lesbian leader (McLean 2019). In contrast, former Icelandic Prime Minister Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, the world’s first openly gay prime minister, was primarily portrayed as gay only at the start of her term, with her gender identity serving as a more dominant narrative throughout her leadership (Mundy 2013).

We also know that while there are many examples of LG legislators, there have been relatively few openly LG party leaders. Thus, stereotypes may play an outsize role in citizen perceptions of LG leaders. Outside political science, recent scholarship on LGBTQ CEOs found that the companies they lead are persistently undervalued due to investor discrimination and that LGBTQ individuals are more likely to represent small growth stocks with poor past performance (Shanaev *et al.* 2023).³ Might LG leaders face similar perceptions in the political arena?

Ultimately, given the unique role of party leaders, we argue that LG leaders are likely to suffer penalties as compared to heterosexual leaders that go beyond what is experienced by LG legislators. LG party leaders, who are more widely covered in the media, run the electoral campaigns, and dominate the legislative politics in parliamentary systems, may be seen as less likely to have earned their position due to perceptions that they were selected in an attempt to increase diversity, rather than selected based on merit. They may be perceived as less able to unify the party given expectations of homophobia among more conservative factions within the party or perceptions that an LG leader

³This phenomenon is similar to the ‘glass cliff’ experienced by women in politics (Ryan *et al.* 2010).

is farther left ideologically than the mainstream of the party. Rank-and-file legislators, however, are often not expected to perform this type of unifying role. Similarly, given that leaders are the face of the party nationwide, rather than simply the party's representative in a 'safe' constituency, they may be perceived as less able to help their party win seats in a subsequent election due to perceptions of their ideological leanings as well as expectations of homophobia among voters. Finally, LG party leaders may be perceived as less effective in advancing the party's legislative agenda due to anticipated homophobia among other political elites and stereotypes that LG politicians will be overly focused on 'LGBTQ issues' (Herrick and Thomas 1999; Golebiowska 2002).

At the same time, one cannot examine the hostility towards LG party leaders without assessing the intersectional role of gender and gender-based stereotypes. The stereotypes of women as compassionate and empathetic and men as assertive and confident (Hedlund et al. 1979; Alexander and Andersen 1993) suggest that men, but not women, are often linked to leader-like behavior (Eagly et al. 1992). More specifically, women are often stereotyped as possessing more communal, rather than agentic, traits, making them more suitable for legislative, rather than executive, office in the eyes of voters (Sweet-Cushman 2022). Furthermore, studies have found that heterosexual women perceive lesbians as more masculine and heterosexual men perceive gay men as more feminine (Kite and Whitley Jr. 1996; LaMar and Kite 1998; Herek 2002). In separating voter evaluations of gay and lesbian congressional candidates, Doan and Haider-Markel (2010, p.85) found that 'gay men are feminized and lesbians are masculinized by heterosexuals', although their analysis cannot determine if lesbians are helped or gay men are hurt by these stereotypes.⁴ Finally, Doan and Haider-Markel (2010) found that gay men were more likely to face negative stereotypes than gay women, mainly due to the lower likelihood of heterosexual women negatively stereotyping lesbians. If voters perceive gay men as possessing more feminine traits while gay women are seen as possessing more masculine traits, gay men may receive a stronger penalty than gay women when serving as party leader. Therefore, given the divergent expectations for legislators and executives, and the potential feminization of gay men, the penalty for gay men as leaders may be greater than the penalty found in the literature on LG candidates for legislative office.⁵

Despite our expectations that LG leaders, especially men, are negatively evaluated by the public, we also note that context matters for activating stereotypes (as shown by Dolan [2014] for voter perceptions of women candidates for office). When other cues send voters signals about candidate quality, such as incumbency or party ID, voters may rely less on stereotypes when assessing candidate competence. We therefore argue that voters may base their evaluation of the leader's competency more on experience in office than on stereotypes of LG political leaders, if a new leader has considerable legislative experience.

Our hypotheses, therefore, are as follows:

- H_1 : Straight leaders will be seen as more deserving, competent, and electoral viable (that is, have higher evaluations) than LG leaders.
 - H_{1a} : A straight male leader has higher evaluations than a gay leader.
 - H_{1b} : A straight female leader has higher evaluations than a lesbian leader.
 - H_{1c} : A gay leader has lower evaluations than a lesbian leader relative to their straight counterparts.
- H_2 : The gap between evaluations of LG and straight leaders narrows when LG leaders have more legislative experience.

⁴Studies have found mixed results as to whether gay men (Herek 2002; Magni and Reynolds 2021) or lesbians (Golebiowska and Thomsen 1999; Bailey and Nawara 2017) face a stronger penalty or whether there is no difference (Haider-Markel 2010; Everitt and Horvath 2021). Another study found that, while gay candidates performed as well as straight candidates in the United States, lesbians actually received an electoral benefit over straight candidates (Magni and Reynolds 2019).

⁵These effects may be conditional on a candidate's gender presentation rather than biological sex (see Karpowitz et al. 2024); however, this question is beyond the scope of this study.

In assessing citizen perceptions of LG party leaders, we focus on a leader's perceived deservingness, effectiveness in the various aspects of the position, and electoral viability. Beyond simply capturing the leader's favorability or popularity, we assess various factors that contribute to individual perceptions of a leader's performance in the role. As mentioned above, party leaders are expected to effectively manage the party organization, legislative caucus, and electoral campaign. Party leaders, then, are likely to receive higher leadership evaluations when citizens feel they have earned their position and will work hard to maintain and build the party apparatus. Additionally, party leaders are likely to receive higher evaluations when they are seen as contributing to – and responsible for – the party's legislative and electoral successes. Assessing party leadership evaluations along these dimensions thus provides a more comprehensive assessment of an individual's perception and evaluation of a party leader. Additionally, not only do evaluations of party leaders along these dimensions depend on the qualities of the leader themselves, they also likely induce individuals to consider potential reactions to LG party leaders from the public and other political elites. As mentioned above, some of the bias faced by LG candidates for legislative office has been linked to concerns that they are unable to appeal to a broader electorate. We further clarify how we measure these dimensions in the next section.

Study Design

We test our hypotheses through a conjoint survey experiment conducted in the United Kingdom in 2023 by the survey firm Bilendi.⁶ Our sample consists of 1,198 respondents from Bilendi's online panel and was designed using quotas to match the population distribution of gender, age, and region.⁷ Although none of the major political parties has had an openly LG leader, surveys show that citizens have increasingly favorable views towards homosexuality, all major parties support both marriage equality and anti-discrimination legislation, and over 150 LGBTQ candidates ran for office in the 2015 election (Magni and Reynolds 2018). This relatively favorable view of the LGB community suggests that the United Kingdom is a more difficult test for our hypotheses when compared to countries with fewer rights protections and less descriptive representation for the gay community.⁸

Upon agreement to participate in the study, respondents were asked to answer a standard battery of demographic questions. Respondents were then informed that they would see five pairs of hypothetical political parties and their recently elected leaders and would be asked about their attitudes towards the party and its leader.⁹ Following recent scholarship on conjoint designs, the first four tasks in our experiment consisted of classical conjoint tasks (with attribute levels randomized for each profile), while the fifth task repeated the first task, flipping the order of the profiles, serving as a way to account and correct for intra-respondent reliability (Clayton *et al.* 2023).¹⁰ Therefore, our design should be conceived as a four-task conjoint, a reasonable number with likely minimal impact on respondents' survey satisficing (Bansak *et al.* 2018).

⁶The study was pre-registered at OSF (https://osf.io/knasd/?view_only=b0a51c6ee60d4702a8e5a18c583bec92) and received IRB approval (IRB number: 00004899). For more details on our research with human subjects, see Appendix A.

⁷Descriptive statistics are reported in Appendix B.1. We used the 2021 UK Census data to determine the gender, age, and region ratios for our sample. Power analysis was also conducted before fielding the experiment. Results are reported in Appendix B.2.

⁸It is important to note that in the UK context, the rights of the transgender community, a community not covered by this study, have been a hotly contested political issue as compared to LGB rights.

⁹The full instructions given to participants as well as an example of the conjoint task can be found in Appendix C.

¹⁰Intra-respondent reliability scores are reported in the Appendix E.1. We also checked whether our results differ between uncorrected and corrected measures in Appendix E.1, which shows that the results are robust.

Among other traits, the profiles randomly presented to participants varied the recently elected party leader's gender, sexual orientation, and previous political experience.¹¹ After being presented with each pair of profiles, we assessed respondents' evaluations of the hypothetical party leaders. Specifically, we focused on a leader's deservingness, competency in managing the party organization and legislative caucus, and electoral viability. We measured leadership evaluations on these various dimensions using a five questions battery:

1. Which of these leaders earned their position?
2. Which of these leaders would be more effective in passing legislation?
3. Which of these leaders will work harder on behalf of their party?
4. Which of these leaders would be more effective in unifying the party?
5. Which of these leaders would help their party win more seats in the next election?

Thus, in going beyond existing studies of candidates for legislative office, our questions focus on the specific responsibilities of party leaders, including their role in unifying the party, in crafting a successful legislative agenda, and in helping the party grow its parliamentary faction in subsequent elections. As described in the previous section, there is good reason to believe that LG leaders will suffer additional penalties across these dimensions as compared to heterosexual leaders and, due to their different roles and expectations, LG candidates for legislative office.

Additionally, these questions not only capture perceptions of the party leaders themselves, but also how the respondent anticipates the electorate, party activists, and other party elites would react to the new leader (specifically questions 2, 4, and 5). These anticipated reactions are particularly important because, as discussed in the previous section, LG politicians are often stereotyped as unelectable and potentially ineffective, even by supporters of LGBTQ rights, due to expected homophobia from the public and other politicians.

While these questions capture both evaluations of party leaders themselves (questions 1 and 3) and anticipated reactions to party leaders (questions 2, 3, and 5), as well as leader-specific attributes such as the ability to unite the party (question 4) and helping the party win more seats (question 5), and more general political attributes that take on enhanced significance for party leaders (questions 1, 2, and 3), we find participant responses across all five dimensions to be highly consistent. Thus, because Cronbach's α , which shows how closely a set of items relate to each other as a group, is 0.84 for our five questions, we combined the results to create a leadership evaluation index ranging from 0 to 5, which serves as the main outcome variable ($\bar{Y} = 2.5$, $\hat{\sigma}_Y = 1.96$).¹²

We also included an attention check and a manipulation check. The first was presented to participants before the conjoint tasks and asked respondents to pick the (text of) color *brown* among six color options. Respondents who failed this attention check were not presented with the conjoint tasks and were thus excluded from our sample. The second was presented to respondents after the conjoint tasks and asked in a multiple-choice format which office the politicians in the tasks were elected to, with the correct answer being 'the position of the party leader'.¹³

¹¹Experiment attributes and a randomization check can be found in Appendix C.

¹²Disaggregated results match those reported in the next section for each question (see Appendix E.1). We also recomputed our index five times by iteratively dropping one item to further verify that our results are not driven by any one item (Appendix E.2). Finally, it is important to note that we refer to this index as a leader legitimacy index in our pre-registration documents. After receiving reviewer reports, we believe that leadership evaluation index more accurately captures the concept we are measuring.

¹³The majority of respondents (51%) selected this option. Results presented in the next section are largely unchanged when individuals who failed are excluded from the analysis (see Appendix E.3).

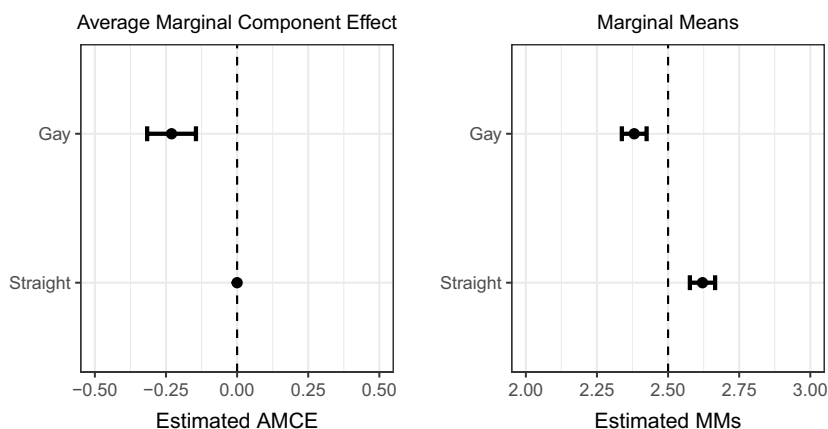


Figure 1. Effect of leader's sexual orientation on their leadership evaluations. Horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Results and Discussion

We begin by assessing participant evaluations of straight versus LG leaders. Figure 1 reports the average marginal component effect (AMCE) and marginal means (MMs) of a party leader's sexual orientation on voters' evaluations of their leadership qualities.¹⁴ The results demonstrate that, all else equal, LG leaders received lower leadership evaluation scores than straight leaders, supporting H_1 . Substantively, LG leader evaluation scores are .23 points lower than those of straight leaders (on a five-point scale, $p < .001$).

Next, we assess the effects of gender on perceptions of LG party leaders (H_{1a-c}). Figure 2 displays the conditional MMs for both gay and straight men and women (leftmost panel), and the differences in MMs between LG and straight leaders (rightmost panel). The results support H_{1a} and H_{1b} . Both gay men and lesbian women received significantly lower leadership evaluation scores than their heterosexual counterparts. Contrary to H_{1c} , however, lesbian women and gay men face similar penalties, with no statistically significant differences between them. Despite receiving a substantively similar penalty, the data do indicate that women have an advantage over men.¹⁵

Thus, LG leaders of both genders are seen as less deserving, competent, and electorally viable than their heterosexual peers. Substantively, the size of the penalty is relatively small. However, this effect size is similar to the penalty Magni and Reynolds (2024) find in their study of Pete Buttigieg's presidential campaign (0.4 points on a 10 points scale when he is described as 'proudly gay').¹⁶ The effect size is also larger than results from recent conjoint studies assessing LGBTQ candidates for legislative office in Canada, Germany, and the United States (Everitt and Horvath 2021; Howard and Wehde 2024; Lopez Ortega and Radojevic 2024). While our effect size is similar to that found in Magni and Reynolds's (2021) study of LGBTQ parliamentary candidates in the United Kingdom, their study found that gay women faced a lower penalty than gay men. In contrast, our study finds an equivalent penalty for gay men and gay women leaders. Thus, there is some evidence that the penalty faced by LG party leaders, especially gay women leaders, is greater than that faced by LG candidates for legislative office.

¹⁴We cluster standard errors at the respondent level for all analyses to correct for potential within-subject correlations in responses. For full results and tables, see Appendix D.

¹⁵We further unpack the gender differences in a different manuscript.

¹⁶To put it in perspective, our effect sizes are equivalent to a -0.12 standard deviation decrease in leader evaluations, a magnitude similar to the -0.13 standard deviation decrease found by Magni and Reynolds.

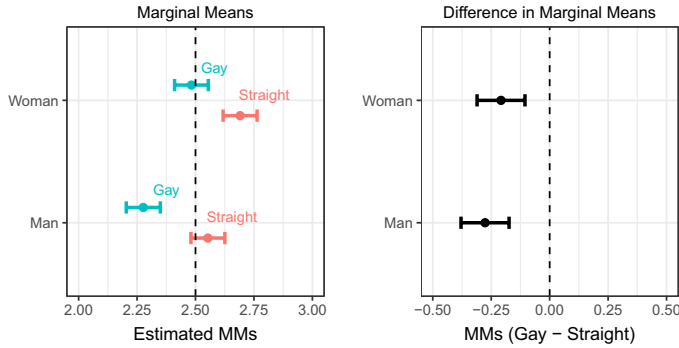


Figure 2. Treatment effects on leadership evaluations conditional on leader's sex. Horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

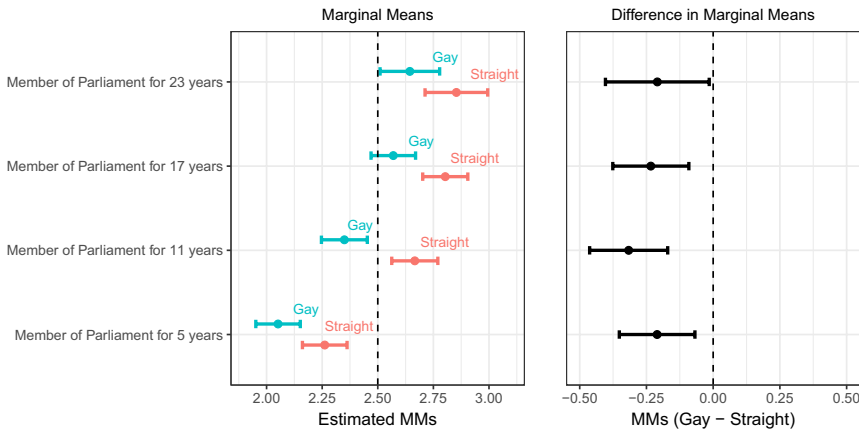


Figure 3. Treatment effects on leadership evaluations conditional on leader's experience. Horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Additionally, conjoint studies often find women have an electoral advantage over men (as we do here) that is not found in observational studies, likely due to the social desirability bias affecting the answers in the pro-women direction (see Schwarz and Coppock 2022). The social desirability problem refers to the survey answers being in the pro-women direction because of the respondents' potential willingness to indicate support for *hypothetical* women candidates in surveys, but not real-world women candidates in the voting booth. Given this bias in the gender and politics literature, our finding of consistent negative evaluations of LG party leaders is even more impressive. Although experimental studies of LG politicians have consistently found a negative effect, suggesting social desirability may present less of a concern in these studies than in the gender and politics literature, the effect sizes in the real world may be even larger, suggesting that our estimates are potentially conservative.

To assess the potential mitigating effects of experience (H_2), we vary the length of the new leader's tenure in Parliament (Figure 3). Although not the only relevant experience for party leaders, tenure in office can indicate strength of electoral support and depth of connections within – and dedication to – the party, offering voters a relevant heuristic on which to base their evaluation of the new leader and potentially reducing reliance on stereotypes. However, results indicate that an LG leader's legislative experience does little to mitigate the evaluation penalty they face. The difference between evaluations of LG and straight leaders narrows at very high levels of

experience, but LG leaders are still subject to significantly lower leadership evaluations than straight leaders ($p < .05$).

Robustness

The results presented are robust to a variety of robustness checks provided in the Appendix. First, following the recommendation of Clayton *et al.* (2023), we assessed the intra-respondent reliability by including a repeated conjoint task at the end of the survey. Respondents completed an additional task where the profiles from the first task were repeated with leader profiles flipped. Results demonstrated a high degree of consistency in responses within individuals, reducing concerns about intra-respondent reliability (see, Appendix E.1 for these results).

Second, we validated the leadership evaluation index through disaggregated analyses of its five component questions. These analyses showed that treatment effects were consistent across these five questions. In addition, we validated our results by iteratively removing each question from the index and confirming that the patterns remained unchanged. Further, our results remained stable under alternative approaches to modeling correlation in responses for each individual, such as specifying respondent fixed effects instead of clustering standard errors by respondents (see Appendix E.1 and Appendix E.2).

Third, we replicated our results by excluding inattentive respondents identified through the manipulation check following the conjoint tasks asking the respondents to identify the tasks' political office of focus. Appendix E.3 shows that our results stay robust when we use only the subsample of those respondents who correctly identified the tasks' focus as the political party leadership.

Finally, we checked whether the respondents' ideological orientation and predispositions towards gay individuals condition our results. Appendix E.4 and Appendix E.5 present these findings and demonstrate that penalties for LG leaders are more pronounced among ideologically conservative respondents and those with higher levels of bias against gay politicians, as measured by attitudinal questions included in the survey.¹⁷ In contrast, respondents with more supportive attitudes towards gay politicians evaluated LG and straight leaders more similarly. These patterns reinforce the robustness of the findings by demonstrating that the observed penalties align with well-documented ideological and attitudinal divides on LGBTQ+ issues.

Conclusion

Party leaders serve as the public face of a political party, shaping the party's legislative agenda and electoral campaign and building and maintaining the party apparatus. Thus, the electoral prospects of a party largely depend on the success of its leader. Should they enter government, parties' leaders determine cabinet formations and set the policy agenda for the country. Despite the importance of the position, we know very little about how the public evaluates LG party leaders or politicians in positions of leadership.

Our results indicate that LG party leaders are perceived to be less deserving, competent, and electorally viable than straight leaders. Specifically, they are seen as less effective in uniting their parties and passing legislation, less likely to win additional seats in a subsequent election, and less likely to work hard on behalf of their parties – key traits expected of party leaders. This finding holds regardless of the leader's prior legislative experience. Although women leaders have an advantage over men in the study, both gay men and women face similar penalties. Thus, LG politicians face a significant disadvantage compared to their straight counterparts when seeking executive office within the party.

¹⁷To mitigate priming effects, we varied when these questions were presented to participants, with one-third receiving these questions post-treatment and two-thirds receiving them pre-treatment. The results are consistent across these two groups.

These findings have important implications for party politics. The fact that party leaders represent their parties in all constituencies regardless of their ideological leanings may explain why LG legislative candidates in the United Kingdom have not been found to reduce party vote share (Magni and Reynolds 2021), yet our experiment reveals that LG leaders face a penalty from voters. Parties may be more comfortable running LG candidates in ‘safe seats’, since they are better able to navigate or mitigate the potential penalties identified in the literature, but would be reluctant to elevate an LG politician to the position of party leader to avoid needlessly sacrificing electoral support.

This study is among the first to assess LGBTQ party leadership. However, more work is still needed. Given the relative dearth of LGBTQ party leaders, we employed a conjoint experiment to assess the penalty hypothetical LG politicians may face. This approach necessarily strips away some context, sacrificing a degree of external validity. For example, it is possible that having an openly gay party leader could benefit left parties in a multiparty system in which the party is not attempting to compete for centrist or right-leaning voters. Therefore, this penalty may be more costly for mainstream center-left, centrist, and right-leaning parties, especially in systems with fewer parties (like the United Kingdom). Additionally, while we are able to compare the results of this study with those reported in studies of LGBTQ legislators and legislative candidates, the study design does not allow us to directly compare perceptions of party leaders to those of LG politicians in other elected positions. Thus, while we argue that party leaders are evaluated on different criteria, captured by the questions used in the survey instrument, we cannot firmly establish that voters evaluate LG leaders and LG legislators differently. Third, as discussed in the section ‘Voter Perceptions of LGBTQ Politicians’, it is also possible that a gay politician’s gender identity and presentation shape public perceptions of their deservingness, competency, and electoral viability. Hence, if a gay man presents as more masculine, he may not suffer as great a penalty from voters. The potential effects of gender (non)conformity are less clear for gay women, however. Additionally, future studies should consider how race affects perceptions of LG party leaders and assess whether the findings reported here hold in other contexts. Finally, future studies should examine if other types of experience, such as serving in a cabinet or shadow cabinet or private sector leadership experience, may further mitigate the penalty LG leaders face from voters.

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Data availability statement. Replication data for this paper can be found in Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/GT6VQT>

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