

“Does sexual orientation still matter? The impact of LGBT candidate identity on vote share in the UK elections of 2015.”

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In this paper we address the following question: In the United Kingdom, a country that has had a long history of homophobia curtailed by a recent and rapid period of transformation, does sexual orientation and gender identity remain a factor at election time?

While the transformation of British law in the area of gay rights has been pronounced over the last fifteen years (most notably the equalization of the Age of Consent in 2000, the abolition of Section 28 of the Local Government Act in 2003, the introduction of civil unions in 2004 and of marriage equality in 2013) there remains much homophobia in British society. A 2013 report by Stonewall, *Gay in Britain*, found that the vast majority of lesbian and gay people in Britain expected their child to be bullied in school, that they faced prejudice in becoming a school governor, that they would be treated worse than straight people by the police and prison service, and that they would face barriers if they wanted to adopt or foster a child. One in five had experienced verbal bullying from colleagues or customers in the previous five years.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, pernicious legal discrimination has left a legacy in many social realms and in some regions (most notably Northern Ireland) legal discrimination remains.

The question of any lingering impact of sexual orientation on election outcomes is

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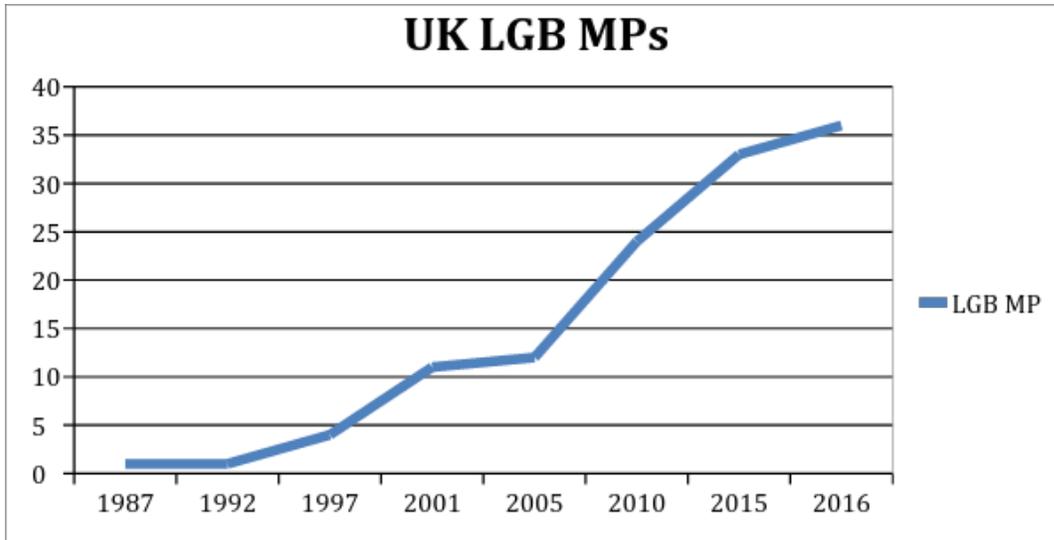
<sup>1</sup> <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/resources/gay-britain-2013>

important not only to understanding the evolution of gay rights but it speaks to the broader study of the consequences of descriptive representation and, relatedly, how rapid social change happens. The UK general election of May 2015 was a ready-made laboratory to explore these questions. A modern democracy had undergone a momentous change from systematic and state-sponsored homophobia, which dominated public policy up until the late 1990s, to the adoption of a raft of sexual orientation equality laws. This legal progress tracked a dramatic transformation in the British public's view of homosexuality and support for LGBT rights. In 2004, 52% of UK voters approved of marriage equality but by 2015 it was 71%. However, the prevailing assumption among the gatekeepers to candidacy, and indeed the voters themselves, was that no matter how much Britain had changed, putting up an openly gay or lesbian candidate remained a gamble and such candidates would almost inevitably struggle against homophobia in the campaign: whether it was sponsored by the media, competing parties or the electorate themselves. Nor was it just the establishment gatekeepers who perceived being gay as a challenge to be overcome. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people also expected to be discriminated against. In the 2013 Stonewall survey three-quarters of LGB Britons felt they would face barriers from the Tories if they wanted to stand as an MP, more than a third would expect to face barriers from the Labour Party and more than a quarter from the Lib Dems. Putting up an out transgender candidate was perceived to be less of a gamble than throwing in the towel completely.

Furthermore, the May 2015 UK general election provided the data points to allow

for a large scale quantitative analysis of the impact of sexual orientation on candidate vote share. The number of openly gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender candidates was unprecedented. There were 155 out LGBT candidates, from all main parties, standing in 140 of the 650 parliamentary constituencies, across all regions of the United Kingdom. Thus, with comprehensive demographic, personal and electoral data we are able to control for the varying characteristics of both districts and candidates. The UK is unique in its propensity to be a laboratory for this question. While other developed democracies have experienced fundamental legal change and seismic shifts in social views about the acceptability of homosexuality, none have revealed the same high levels of out candidates and elected parliamentarians. For example, in Canada marriage equality was instituted in 2005, there have been openly gay members of parliament for 26 years, and over 80% of Canadians say society should accept homosexuality. But the number of out LGBT candidates actually declined from 22 to 21 between 2004 and 2015 and the number of out LGB MPs has remained static at six through four federal elections since 2006. In the US the number of out LGBT candidates for Congress has hovered at around ten since 2012 and the number of victors has never risen above seven. Instead, unlike the US and Canada, the number of out LGBT candidates and elected MPs in the United Kingdom has grown rapidly. Comprehensive historical data on candidates is unavailable but when it comes to elected LGB members of the House of Commons, the numbers have climbed from 1 in 1987 to 36 in 2016.

**Figure 1 – Number of UK LGB members of parliament over time**



### **Are sexual, gender and ethnic minorities penalized at the ballot box?**

There are few quantitative studies on LGBT candidates; in the context of US state legislative elections, Haider-Markel suggests that “individual candidate characteristics only seem to influence vote share on the margins,” but religion and class may mask forces that drive candidate success.<sup>2</sup> There is a stronger literature demonstrating the macro relationship between out LGBT parliamentarians globally and progressive LGBT laws<sup>3</sup> and the effects of local US State legislators on a raft of domestic LGBT relevant issues.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Haider-Markel 2010, 68.

<sup>3</sup> Reynolds 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Haider-Markel 2007; Smith and Haider-Markel 2002.

Related studies have investigated whether demographic characteristics of other traditionally marginalized candidates influence voting behavior. These studies, which have focused on gender and race, offer relevant insights to shape our expectations on the impact of LGBT candidates. Most studies in American politics find that sex has no negative effect on electoral success: women perform on average as well as men when they run for election.<sup>5</sup> Women, however, are sometimes penalized in more conservative contexts: female candidates face disadvantage in Republican primaries<sup>6</sup> and greater competition than male candidates.<sup>7</sup> More recently, others have argued that this seeming gender parity is actually due to a gender-based quality gap.<sup>8</sup> Since bias against female candidates ensures that only the most qualified women emerge as candidates, discrimination still exists: even if women are generally better candidates, their success rate is the same as men.<sup>9</sup>

Results on the impact of race and ethnicity are mixed, but on average more negative. While some studies in the US find that black candidates are not discriminated

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<sup>5</sup> Burrell 1994; Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994; Frederick and Streb 2008; Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Cooperman and Oppenheimer 2001; King and Matland 2003; Matland and King 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Lawless and Pearson 2008; Milyo and Schosberg 2000; Palmer and Simon 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Fulton 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Anzia and Berry 2011; Pearson and McGhee 2013.

against because of their race,<sup>10</sup> others show that white voters are less likely to support black candidates<sup>11</sup> or to participate if black candidates are in the race.<sup>12</sup> Recent work agrees that race negatively affected Barack Obama's electoral results in 2008.<sup>13</sup> As for the UK, ethnic minority candidates in the 2010 election diminished party vote on average by 4%, with Muslim candidates producing an 8% decrease.<sup>14</sup> In the 2010 UK elections, minority challengers also facilitated the re-election of incumbents<sup>15</sup> and their electoral performance depended on the ethnic composition of the district.<sup>16</sup> Ethnic minority candidates had a negative effect on vote share, sometimes conditional on party identity, also in the 1997 and 2005 UK elections.<sup>17</sup>

The less-than-positive impact of female and ethnic minority candidates among majority voters is sometimes partially compensated by the greater support that these office-seekers enjoy among voters with similar demographic traits.<sup>18</sup> While women are

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<sup>10</sup> Highton 2004; Sigelman et al. 1995; Voss and Lublin 2001.

<sup>11</sup> Moskowitz and Stroh 1994; Reeves 1997; Terkildsen 1993.

<sup>12</sup> Gay 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Huddy and Feldman 2009; Piston 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Fisher et al. 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Stegmaier, Lewis-Beck, and Smets 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Curtice, Fisher, and Ford 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Curtice, Fisher, and Steed 2005; Mortimore 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Sigelman and Sigelman 1982.

more likely to support female candidates,<sup>19</sup> some minority voters are more likely to vote for candidates of the same ethnic group,<sup>20</sup> which helps explain why minority candidates are most successful in constituencies with a significant minority population.<sup>21</sup>

Even if the impact of demographics on candidate success is not always straightforward, previous literature shows that gender and ethnicity can influence voters by providing informational shortcuts based on group stereotypes.<sup>22</sup> On the one hand, both female and ethnic minority candidates in the US are perceived as more liberal than male or white candidates from the same party. This perceived ideological position interacts with partisanship to affect electoral performance.<sup>23</sup> On the other, sex and race also affect the personality traits and the policy expertise that voters assign to politicians.<sup>24</sup>

These previous findings on gender and race help us develop our hypotheses on the electoral impact of LGBT candidates. First, studies show that sexism and racism can

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<sup>19</sup> Dolan 1998; Paolino 1995; Plutzer and Zipp 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Barreto 2007; Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Collet 2005; Fisher et al. 2015; Gay 2001; Philpot and Walton 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Barreto, Segura, and Woods 2004; Canon 1999; Lublin 1997.

<sup>22</sup> Dolan 1998; Dolan 2004; Dolan and Lynch 2013; Huddy and Terkilsen 1993; King and Matland 2003; McDermott 1997; McDermott 1998; Sanbonmatsu 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander and Anderson 1993; Koch 2000; McDermott 1997; McDermott 1998. However, a study on the 2010 UK election has found that race had no effect on the ideological distance between the two top candidates (Buttice and Milazzo 2011).

<sup>24</sup> See Huddy and Terkilsen 1993; Lawless 2004; Sigelman et al. 1995.

negatively affect vote choice. Given that homophobia is still present in society, LGBT candidates may therefore suffer at elections. If this is the case, gay and lesbians candidates would produce on average a negative effect on vote share, similarly to ethnic minority candidates. If such negative effect exists in the general electorate, LGBT candidates – unlike female and black and ethnic minority (BME) ones – would likely be unable to compensate for such an effect only with increased support among sexual minority voters, considering the relatively low numbers of gays and lesbians in the general population. At most, the negative impact could be partially compensated by the fact that negative attitudes toward homosexuality are decreasing and support for LGBT rights growing in British society.

Second, the penalization of marginalized candidates is sometimes limited to unfavorable contexts, such as more conservative environments. If this is the case, we may expect the impact of LGBT candidates to be negative in constituencies with higher level of deprivation or share of Muslim population; and among the electorate of conservative parties. To the contrary, LGBT candidates may have a positive effect on vote share in other circumstances, if they are on average better candidates or sexual orientation provides heuristics influencing vote choice. First, we could hypothesize that – similarly to female candidates – a quality gap based on sexual orientation exists: given the hurdles that they have to overcome just to be put on the ballot paper, only the most qualified LGBT contenders may emerge as candidates. Second, if LGBT candidates – similarly to women and ethnic minority ones – are perceived as more liberal than straight candidates

from the same party, they may enjoy increased support from the more liberal electorate. McDermott explains that gender works as a voting cue because voters can make “reasonable assumptions about the ideology of a candidate based on associations with salient political or social group.”<sup>25</sup> This mechanism could be at work in the case of LGBT candidates as well, because gays and lesbians tend to be more liberal on a wide variety of issues, at least in the US.<sup>26</sup>

Below we analyze the impact of LGBT candidates on vote share. While we are not able to test the causal mechanisms through which a candidate’s sexual orientation may affect voting decisions, we can evaluate the general impact of LGBT candidates; variation in their electoral performance conditional on constituency characteristics; and differences across parties. Unlike most of previous work on marginalized candidates that was conducted with either surveys of voters or experiments, we rely on official electoral results and objective constituency data. This strategy allows us to overcome the social desirability effect elicited by sensitive issues like homophobia and racism in survey responses and the artificiality of experimental scenarios. Before analyzing the effect of LGBT candidates in the 2015 UK election, we explore the evolving climate around LGBT issues in the country.

## **Out from the shadows**

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<sup>25</sup> McDermott 1997, 271.

<sup>26</sup> Egan, Edelman and Sherrill 2008; Egan 2012.

The social shift on gay rights in Britain has been seismic. From the famous to the unknown, the wealthy to the poor, homosexuality in Britain in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was still a “love that dare not speak its name,” a phrase coined by Oscar Wilde’s lover, Lord Alfred Douglas. In more recent memory, the Thatcher years (1979-90) were characterized by institutionalized homophobia and a spiraling HIV-AIDS epidemic. Upon her death in 2013, Matthew Todd of the *Guardian* newspaper said, “the reality is that Thatcher presided over and took advantage of the most devastatingly homophobic time in recent British history.” In 1987 the Conservatives sought to portray the Labour opposition’s support for gay rights as tantamount to being in league with perverts and pedophiles. One of their billboards showed young men wearing badges such as “Gay pride” and “Gay sports day” with a slogan, “This is Labour’s camp. Do you want to live in it?” After attacking schools for teaching children that, in her words, “they have an inalienable right to be gay,” Thatcher’s government introduced Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act, which mandated local authorities not to “intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality,” nor to “promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.” Section 28 remained law until Tony Blair’s Labour government repealed it in 2003. While Thatcher was memorialized by many, Peter Tatchell, the leading gay rights campaigner in the UK, said “she was extraordinary for mostly the wrong reasons...At the 1987 Conservative party conference she mocked people who defended the right to be gay, insinuating that there was no such right. During her rule,

arrests and convictions for consenting same-sex behaviour rocketed, as did queer bashing violence and murder. Gay men were widely demonised and scapegoated for the AIDS pandemic and Thatcher did nothing to challenge this vilification.” Nor were the Conservatives the only purveyors of homophobia – the 1983 Bermondsey by-election battle between Liberals and Labour, where Tatchell was defeated, was characterized as the most homophobic in British history.

Fast-forward thirty years to 2013 when the British House of Commons debated the second reading of the Marriage (Same Sex) Bill. Fourteen out of the one hundred Members of Parliament who spoke in the debate were openly gay or bisexual men or women – drawn from a cohort of twenty-three LGBs, and the largest group were gay Conservatives. The legislative committee that drafted the bill had twenty-one members, of whom six (30%) were openly gay. All of them started their remarks with the pronoun “I” and went on to tell a very personal story about growing up gay in Britain and the fear, secrecy and limited future implied. Politicians usually focus their remarks on what a law might mean to their constituents or the nation writ large but for a few hours on a dreary February night by the Thames, fourteen members of the mother of all parliaments faced their straight colleagues and said ‘*let me tell you what this means to me.*’ The British public’s acceptance of homosexuality and support of for gay rights legislation has both led and responded to the changing laws.

### **The 2015 UK General Election**

By 2015 all the main parties and party leaders were committed to the recently enacted marriage equality law and anti-discrimination legislation. Among the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Labour and Green parties there was something of an out-bidding race to claim the most ‘gay-friendly’ platform and history. All bar the Conservatives published LGBT focused manifestos while the Tories committed themselves to tackling homophobic and transphobic abuse, pardoning men convicted of homosexuality before 1967 and a transgender action plan. Labour promised action in the areas of health and education and to appoint a new international envoy on LGBTQ rights.

Part of David Cameron’s modernization agenda for the Conservative Party upon taking the leadership in 2005 was to incorporate the faces of modern Britain into his candidate ranks. An effort to signal a new type of Tory party, an ‘A List’ promoted women, ethnic minority and openly gay candidates. Perhaps even more crucially was a cultural shift in the top echelons of the Tory party. Between 2005 and 2010 the majority of the candidate selections were chaired by one of four senior Conservatives who all happened to be high profile out gay men: Rob (later Lord) Hayward, Matthew Parris, Iain Dales and Michael Brown. These chairs did not get to influence the vote per se but they set the tone and parameters of the meeting.

Ultimately twenty out LGB Tory candidates were selected and twelve were elected in the elections which brought to power a Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010. As Prime Minister, Cameron was unequivocal when he said in October 2011 in front of the party faithful, “I don’t support gay marriage despite being a

Conservative, I support gay marriage *because* I am a conservative.” Despite his relationship with the rank and file of the Conservative party being strained over the Same-Sex marriage bill he soldiered on. Indeed, a majority of Conservative MPs voted against the bill in 2013 (128 to 117 on the final vote) and there was a fear of voter backlash in the constituencies – especially the rural shires that had returned ‘traditional’ Tories for centuries. In 2015 many backbench Tories openly expressed fears that their voters would punish the party for being too socially liberal and LGB activists worried that local selection committees would back away from installing candidates who were outside of the mainstream. The ‘A list’ was shelved for candidate selections for the 2015 election but this did not stop Conservative Central Office from crafting space for candidates from ‘marginalized’ communities in more subtle ways. Each local party selection meeting chose from between three to six candidates offered by headquarters. Again, those meetings, often public, which ended with a vote of party members, were chaired by a figure sent by central office.

Across the aisle, the Labour Party had claimed advocacy of the LGBT community as their bailiwick since the mid 1980s. Despite Labour having fewer out MPs in 2010, even the Conservatives credited Tony Blair’s Labour government for transforming the law between 2003 and 2010 and laying the ground for marriage equality in 2013. Figures at the center of parliamentary debates across partisan divides were often quick to credit the Labour peer Lord Waheed Alli as one of the most influential, if unsung, agents behind all the major legal reforms on gay rights that had occurred since his elevation in

1998. The Liberal Democrats had four out gay or bisexual MPs in the 2010-2015 parliament and they trumpeted the role of their junior Minister Lynne Featherstone in shepherding through marriage equality.

In 2010 LGBT voters had been split between all the main parties but a plurality said they were voting for the Labour Party. By 2015 the Conservatives had moved up to match Labour's share of the LGBT vote and the Liberal Democrats had dropped back just behind the Greens.

**Table 1 – Party Support by LGBT Voters**

	<b>2010</b>	<b>2015</b>
Labour	28%	26%
Conservative	25%	26%
Liberal Democrats	25%	19%
Greens	19%	20%
UKIP	NA	2%
Don't Know	3%	7%

Source: Pink News 2010 and 2015 (Online, 1000 voters).

Compared to previous elections, in 2015 there was a striking reduction of overarching and personalized homophobia in the election campaign. The only notable exception came in Margaret Thatcher's old constituency of Finchley and Golders Green in north London. Here, sitting Tory MP Mike Freer – who was openly gay when selected and elected for the seat in 2010 – complained of Labour party canvassers raising his sexual orientation on the doorsteps of orthodox Jews in the area. A poll a couple of weeks

before Election Day had Freer down a couple of points to his Labour challenger but ultimately he increased his vote by 4,000 and enjoyed as comfortable a majority as in 2010.

At the national level the UKIP leader Nigel Farage made a series of comments about migrants with HIV-AIDS burdening the British National Health Service but these statements were broadly condemned by all other parties and viewed as emblematic of outdated prejudices which characterized both UKIP limited appeal and its unfitness for government. The mere fact that UKIP was condemned for being homophobic by all other mainstream parties illustrated how little homophobia resonated with the electorate. Indeed, UKIP itself sought to counter the criticism by pointing to its six openly gay parliamentary candidates. Last, Jim Wells, the Democratic Unionist Party Health Minister in the government of Northern Ireland, was forced to step down after making homophobic remarks to a lesbian couple while out campaigning.

### **Election 2015 results**

As noted, the Conservatives put up more openly gay candidates than any other party: thirty-nine men and three women. Of their thirteen incumbent out MPs twelve stood for re-election and only one lost (Eric Ollerenshaw in Lancaster and Fleetwood) but his loss was made up for by the election of Ben Howlett in Bath. Howlett overcame a huge Liberal Democrat majority in what had been a LibDem seat since 1992. A quick analysis of the 50 races where there were competitive LGBT candidates suggests that

Tory LGBT candidates performed better than their straight colleagues. 72% of them had larger vote share increases than the national trend, and on average their gains were three times the Tory average. The ranks of LGB identifying Tory MPs were swelled when the Minister for Schools, Nick Gibb, came out in an interview in the *Times of London*, in June 2015, the Secretary of State for Scotland, David Mundell, came out in a New Year's statement on his website in January 2016, Justine Greening, the then Minister for International Development, came out in June and backbench MP William Wragg followed suit in XX .

Labour did not take many seats from the Tories in 2015 but of the ten they did win, three were won by gay or bisexual candidates. Wes Streeting and Peter Kyle generated two of the biggest swings to Labour in Ilford North and Hove respectively, and Cat Smith's victory in Lancaster and Fleetwood was one of the five head to heads where both major parties ran out LGB candidates. The nine incumbent Labour lesbian and gay MPs held on comfortably and the party stood Gerald Jones in the safe seat of Merthyr Tydfil in Wales. In a slap in the face of stereotypes, Wales and Scotland are the UK areas with the highest proportions of out gay MPs. The nine Scots and four Welsh are not concentrated in the green valleys and shimmering lochs, rather they were predominantly returned from working class constituencies struggling with life after mining and industrial decline. The Labour MP Nia Griffith came out in February 2016.

It is true that all four gay and bisexual Liberal Democrat MPs were ousted: David Laws (Yeovil), Simon Hughes (Bermondsey), Stephen Williams (Bristol West) and

Stephen Gilbert (St. Austell and Newquay) – but they were swept away on a tide which had little or nothing to do with their work as constituency MPs. The Scottish National Party sent shock waves through British politics in May 2015 and on that wave rode in seven new LGB identifying Members of Parliament. They exemplify the demographic diversity that is LGBT Britain: ranging from the high profile Edinburgh Queen’s Council Joanna Cherry to the 20 year old Glasgow University politics student Mhairi Black. It meant that the SNP had the highest proportion of LGBT MPs anywhere in the world - alongside their five MSPs and one MEP. That number was further increased when Hannah Bardell MP came out in February 2016.

The thirty-nine sitting British MPs who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual is a world record. They represent 6.0% of the House, close to the proportion of Britons estimated to be LGBT. The total far exceeds the levels of representation in countries where gay rights have been entrenched for decades: for example, there are currently twelve out MPs in the Swedish Riksdagen and eleven in the Dutch Tweede Kamer. Alongside the eight SNP MPs, sixteen of the new LGB House of Commons members are Conservatives, and fifteen are Labour. Indeed, these numbers may rise further as MPs feel comfortable enough to come out to the world beyond their immediate circle of family and friends.

### **Analysis: Data and Variables**

As noted above, we explore the impact of self-proclaimed sexual orientation on candidates' vote share in the 2015 UK election. Our analysis focuses on single-member plurality districts in England, Scotland, and Wales. We leave out the 18 districts in Northern Ireland for substantive and practical reasons. The region has a peculiar history and different parties from those competing in Great Britain. Additionally, most of the data we use are either not available or measured differently in Northern Ireland, which makes a valuable comparison difficult.<sup>27</sup> We also exclude the district of Buckingham, in which the Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, ran for re-election unopposed by candidates from major parties.<sup>28</sup> This leaves us with 631 districts clustered into 11 regions.

We have built an original dataset from personal fieldwork and a variety of existing sources. Since we aim to explore how sexual orientation and other candidate traits like gender and ethnicity affect the electoral results, our dependent variable is the candidates' vote share in the district. We include all of the candidates running for the major parties: the Conservative Party, the Green Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal-Democrats, Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). The total number of candidates in our dataset is 3,172.

Candidates' vote share varies substantially, ranging from 0.7% (Gary McLelland, Liberal

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<sup>27</sup> There was one out LGBT candidate in Northern Ireland: Andrew Muir, the Alliance Party candidate in North Down.

<sup>28</sup> Only the Green Party and UKIP stood candidates.

Democratic Party, Glasgow East) to 81.3% (Steven Rotherham, Labour Party, Liverpool Walton). The average candidate vote share across parties is 19.72%.

Our regressors can be grouped in three sets: candidate-level, constituency-level, and regional-level variables. Among individual-level indicators, the main variable of interest is sexual identity (LGBT), which is coded 0 for candidates identifying as straight and 1 for candidates identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. In our dataset, 154 candidates from 140 constituencies identify as LGBT; of these, 23 are women, 4 transgender and 3 non-white.<sup>29</sup>

At the individual-level, we also include candidate gender: the variable “female” equals 1 for women (and transwomen) and 0 for men (and transmen). The indicator BME (“black and minority ethnic”) captures the ethnic identity of the candidates and is coded 0 for whites and 1 for minority candidates. Both gender and ethnic identity are obtained from the 2015 British Election Study (BES) dataset and we have a total of 860 women

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<sup>29</sup> In addition to identity, we also measure the visibility of LGBT candidates, in essence the degree to which the electorate were exposed to the information that the named candidate self-identified as LGBT. To compile the visibility indicator we studied the candidate’s printed election leaflets and websites; and supplemented these campaign materials by categorizing whether the candidate was an incumbent openly lesbian, gay or bisexual MP and whether there had been a news story during the campaign (local or national) discussing the candidate’s LGBT identity. The impact of visibility does not vary substantially from the impact of the variable measuring sexual orientation, i.e. LGBT. Further information on how the variable “visibility” was built and the full analysis of the impact of visibility (as a control in addition to LGBT or in alternative to LGBT) can be found in the online appendix.

and 228 non-white candidates. We also control for political indicators. First, the incumbency variable equals 2 for incumbents, 1 for candidates who ran but lost in the 2010 election, and 0 for those who did not run in 2010. We consider whether candidates ran in 2010, even if they were not elected, to account for factors such as name recognition and candidate experience, beside the more traditional incumbency advantages. These factors are important inasmuch as they contribute to the strength of a candidate and may affect their electoral success. Party ID indicates the party of the candidate: while the Conservative, the Labour, and the Liberal Democratic parties ran in every district, UKIP had 613 candidates, the Greens 567, SNP 59 and Plaid Cymru 40. Finally, we control for parties' vote share at the district level in the 2010 election. By accounting for previous party electoral support, we can observe how the traits of the 2015 candidates affected the vote share. All of the political variables are obtained from Democratic Dashboard and the BBC constituency results pages.

**Table 2 – Candidates at the 2015 Election**

	<b>All candidates (frequency)</b>	<b>All candidates (percentage)</b>	<b>LGBT candidates (frequency)</b>	<b>LGBT candidates (percentage of LGBT)</b>	<b>LGBT candidates (percentage of all candidates)</b>
<b>Total</b>	3172	100%	-	-	-
<b>LGBT</b>	154	4.85%	154	100%	4.85%
<b>Women</b>	860	27.11%	22	14.29%	2.56%
<b>BME</b>	228	7.19%	3	1.95%	1.32%
<b>Incumbent</b>	523	16.49%	23	14.94%	4.40%
<b>Ran and</b>	266	8.29%	11	7.14%	4.14%

lost in 2010					
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**Table 3 – Candidates’ sexual orientation, gender, and ethnic identity by party  
(in parenthesis percentages based on total number of candidates by party)**

	Conservative	Green	Labour	Lib-Dem	PC	SNP	UKIP
<b>LGBT</b>	42 (6.67%)	21 (3.70%)	36 (5.71%)	39 (6.19%)	3 (7.5%)	7 (11.86%)	6 (0.98%)
<b>Female</b>	159 (25.24%)	215 (37.92%)	212 (33.65%)	164 (26.03%)	10 (25%)	21 (35.59%)	79 (12.89%)
<b>BME</b>	62 (9.84%)	22 (3.88%)	53 (8.41%)	47 (7.46%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (1.69%)	42 (6.85%)

Constituency-level variables allow us to explore the impact of sexual orientation conditional on the socio-demographic characteristics of the district. First, ‘deprivation’ measures the socio-economic wellbeing and is obtained from the Census Indices of Deprivation, which are organized across seven domains.<sup>30</sup> Since our variable measures the percentage of households that are *not* deprived in any dimension, a higher value

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<sup>30</sup> The domains are: Income Deprivation; Employment Deprivation; Health Deprivation and Disability; Education, Skills and Training Deprivation; Crime; Barriers to Housing and Services; and Living Environment Deprivation. Data for England and Wales are obtained from the 2011 Census; data for Scotland calculated from the Scottish Census.

indicates a relatively richer constituency. The indicator ranges from the value of Wokingham district, where three in every five households are not deprived on any dimension, to Birmingham Hodge Hill, where only one out five households is not. Second, “social grade” measures the share of residents in the upper middle, middle, and lower middle class (ABC1 categories). Because this variable excludes members of the working class and those at the lowest level of subsistence, higher values correspond to a higher social composition of the district. Third, “urban” is a five-category variable ranging from “mainly rural” to “entirely urban” districts. Fourth, “Muslim” captures the percentage of Muslim residents in the districts. Finally, “UK born” refers to the share of individuals in the constituency who were born in the UK.<sup>31</sup>

Two additional regressors are measured at the regional level.<sup>32</sup> The first reports the average change in party vote share in the region between 2010 and 2015. This indicator controls for the general trend of the party, which presumably affects candidates’ electoral success. For instance, all of the candidates from the SNP likely benefited from the strong performance of the party in Scotland. Second, support for marriage equality measures the percentage of residents in favor of same-sex marriage and represents an

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<sup>31</sup> Social grade and urban are obtained from Democratic Dashboard; Muslim and UK born from 2011 Census data.

<sup>32</sup> There are 9 regions in England (East of England, East Midlands, London, North East, North West, South East, South West, West Midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber), in addition to Scotland and Wales.

indicator of progressiveness of the region when it comes to LGBT rights.<sup>33</sup> Table 4 below shows that constituency and regional-level indicators do not vary substantially between districts with LGBT candidates and districts without LGBT candidates. LGBT candidates therefore did not run under more favorable conditions; if anything, the districts in which they competed had a slightly higher percentage of Muslim residents, a factor that may be a disadvantage for the electoral success of sexual minorities.

**Table 4 – Constituency socio-demographic characteristics**

	<b>Constituency with at least one LGBT candidate (average)</b>	<b>Constituencies without any LGBT candidate (average)</b>	<b>Minimum value across constituencies</b>	<b>Maximum value across constituencies</b>
<b>Deprivation</b>	41.36	42.36	22.21	59.71
<b>Social Grade</b>	53.47	52.56	30	81.4
<b>Urban</b>	2.943	2.676	0	4
<b>Muslim</b>	4.95	3.82	0.11	52.12
<b>UK born</b>	86.36	88.67	40.73	98.02
<b>Support SSM</b>	67.53	68.34	63	81

## **Models and results**

Our units of analysis are the candidates running for the House of Commons. The data present therefore a hierarchical structure: several candidates vie for election in each single-member district; the 631 districts are then grouped into 11 regions. The variables

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<sup>33</sup> The first variable is calculated from the BBC region and constituency electoral results pages. The second one is derived from a 2014 ComRes/BBC poll on support for same-sex marriage.

in the models are measured at these three different levels: individual, constituency, and region. Since candidates are clustered by district, they are exposed to the same contextual features. Ignoring the presence of constituency-level common indicators violates the OLS assumption of independent error terms and could lead to underestimation of the standard errors. Hence, we account for this hierarchical structure by adopting a multilevel model with varying intercepts, in which candidates are grouped by constituency clustered into regions. Model 1 below shows the results of the impact of sexual orientation and other variables across all the observations.

A caveat on the interpretation of the coefficients is necessary. As explained, our dependent variable measures the district vote share of candidates from the seven main parties. In the models grouping candidates by constituency and region, the coefficient of the independent variables captures therefore the average impact of those variables across all of the parties. For this reason, the effect of the constituency-level variables is not expected to be significant. For instance, the urban nature of a district may have a positive impact on the vote share of Labour candidates and a negative impact on the electoral results of Conservative candidates. If that is the case, these two opposite effects may cancel each other out and return a non-significant coefficient. While the unconditional impact of constituency-level indicators may not be as meaningful, individual-level variables can be more interestingly interpreted. They allow us to evaluate whether sexual orientation, gender, and ethnic minority identity have a negative impact on candidates' electoral results.

But district-level indicators are interesting because they allow us to observe how characteristics of the district shape the effects of candidates' individual traits. Hence, to explore whether the impact of sexual orientation varies across contexts, we introduce interaction terms between sexual orientation and constituency indicators.<sup>34</sup> In the table below, model two considers the interaction between sexual orientation and the rural or urban nature of the constituency, to assess whether LGBT candidates perform better in urban settings. Model three gauges whether the impact of LGBT candidates is more negative when the percentage of Muslim residents increases by interacting sexual orientation with the share of Muslim population in the district. Finally, to investigate whether LGBT candidates obtain better results in socio-economically wealthier

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<sup>34</sup> Since we want to explore the interaction between the LGBT variable and group-level indicators (constituency characteristics like urban nature and rate of Muslim population), we cannot adopt what is sometimes referred to as a fixed effects model with dummies for constituencies. Indeed, such a model cannot include both group indicators and group-level predictors (Gelman and Hill 2007, 246). However, as a robustness check, we also ran a fixed effects model with constituency dummies that includes only individual-level predictors. This model produces very similar results, for individual-level coefficients, to model 1 in table 5 and can be found in the online appendix. Furthermore, while not the central focus of this paper, we have also explored how the effect of sexual orientation vary across geographical contexts. We cannot build a multilevel model with the slopes of LGBT and party ID varying by constituency because the number of random effects would be higher than the number of observations (since we have 3172 observations and 630 constituencies, 7 parties and 2 values for LGBT). Hence, we have built a multilevel model in which the intercept and the slopes of LGBT, party ID, female and BME vary by region. This model can be found in the online appendix.

environments, model four explores the interaction between sexual orientation and levels of deprivation.<sup>35</sup>

**Table 5 – Multilevel model with candidates grouped by constituencies clustered into regions**

	Vote Percentage			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Individual-level variables (N = 3,172)</i>				
Incumbent	1.835*** (0.134)	1.831*** (0.134)	1.831*** (0.134)	1.826*** (0.134)
LGBT	-0.012 (0.336)	2.603* (1.038)	0.455 (0.391)	-3.528 (2.056)
Female	0.247 (0.165)	0.245 (0.165)	0.249 (0.165)	0.245 (0.165)
BME	-0.764** (0.288)	-0.778** (0.287)	-0.792** (0.288)	-0.769** (0.287)
Party ID (Labour)	-0.332 (0.229)	-0.352 (0.229)	-0.355 (0.229)	-0.345 (0.229)
Party Vote % (2010)	0.872*** (0.008)	0.873*** (0.008)	0.872*** (0.008)	0.873*** (0.008)
<i>Constituency-level variables (N = 631)</i>				
Deprivation	0.004 (0.026)	-0.0003 (0.026)	0.003 (0.026)	-0.001 (0.026)
Muslim	0.008 (0.016)	0.008 (0.016)	0.015 (0.017)	0.008 (0.016)

<sup>35</sup> In all of the models, Party ID is a 7-category variable and the left-out category is the Conservative Party. Since the impact of party on candidate success is not the focus of this paper, only one category (Labour) is reported in the tables for clarity of representation.

Urban	0.130 (0.083)	0.155 (0.084)	0.127 (0.083)	0.130 (0.083)
% UK Born	-0.002 (0.013)	-0.002 (0.013)	-0.001 (0.013)	-0.002 (0.013)
Social Grade	-0.023 (0.018)	-0.021 (0.018)	-0.023 (0.018)	-0.022 (0.018)
<i>Regional-level variables (N = 11)</i>				
Party Vote Difference (2015-10)	0.979*** (0.022)	0.980*** (0.022)	0.979*** (0.022)	0.979*** (0.022)
Support SSM	-0.010 (0.017)	-0.009 (0.017)	-0.009 (0.017)	-0.009 (0.017)
<i>Interaction terms</i>				
LGBT*Urban		-0.885** (0.333)		
LGBT*Muslim			-0.097* (0.041)	
LGBT*Deprivation				0.085 (0.049)
<i>Constant</i>	4.476* (1.840)	4.402* (1.838)	4.406* (1.839)	4.608* (1.841)
Observations	3,172	3,172	3,172	3,172
Log Likelihood	-8,928.773	-8,925.417	-8,928.300	-8,929.365
Akaike Inf. Crit.	17,901.550	17,896.830	17,902.600	17,904.730
Bayesian Inf. Crit.	18,034.910	18,036.260	18,042.030	18,044.160

*Note:* \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

Model 1 shows that the LGBT coefficient is not significant: on average, sexual orientation does not have a negative impact on candidates' vote share. In other words, the electorate does not punish LGBT candidates over straight ones because of their sexual orientation. The non-significance of the coefficient is in itself an important finding.

Indeed, at a time when parties may still be reluctant to field openly gay and lesbian candidates because of uncertainty about voters' attitudes, this result shows that those fears are at best overstated. Model 1 also reveals an interesting comparison between LGBT and other marginalized candidates. Similarly to sexual orientation, gender does not have a negative impact on vote share: female candidates do not decrease their parties' electoral success. Instead, in line with findings from recent work on the UK elections,<sup>36</sup> results are negative for ethnic identity: compared to whites, ethnic minority office seekers decrease their party vote share on average by about 0.8%.

While these findings provide us with a general picture, it is also interesting to explore whether the impact of candidates' individual traits is conditional on the socio-economic environment of the district. In the models with interactions presented in the table, the LGBT coefficient refers to the impact of sexual orientation when the value of the interacting variable is 0, so that the interaction term is eliminated. To fully evaluate the impact of the interaction, we need to consider the sum of the LGBT coefficient and the interaction coefficient across all of the values of the interacting variable. The plots below help us visualize the impact of such interactions and their significance at the .05 level.

## **Figure 2 – Impact of LGBT candidates in urban and rural districts**

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<sup>36</sup> Fisher et al. 2015.

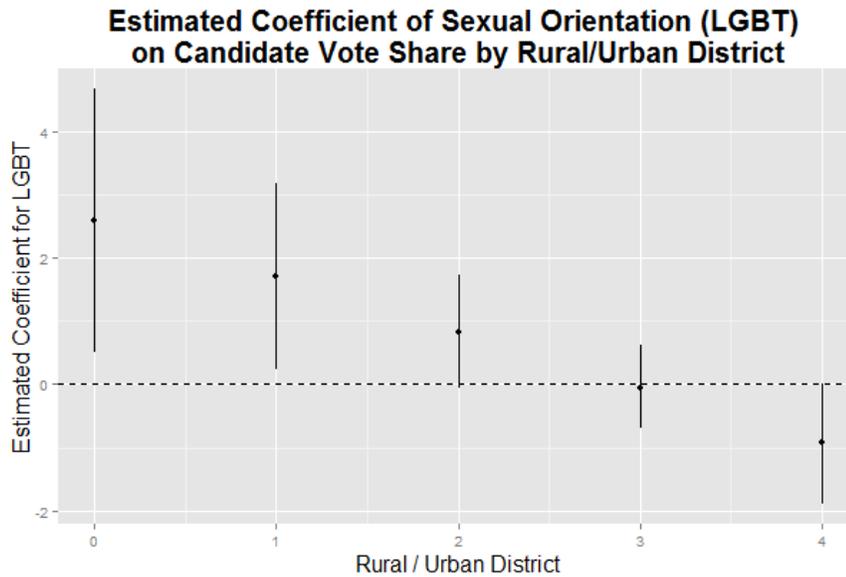
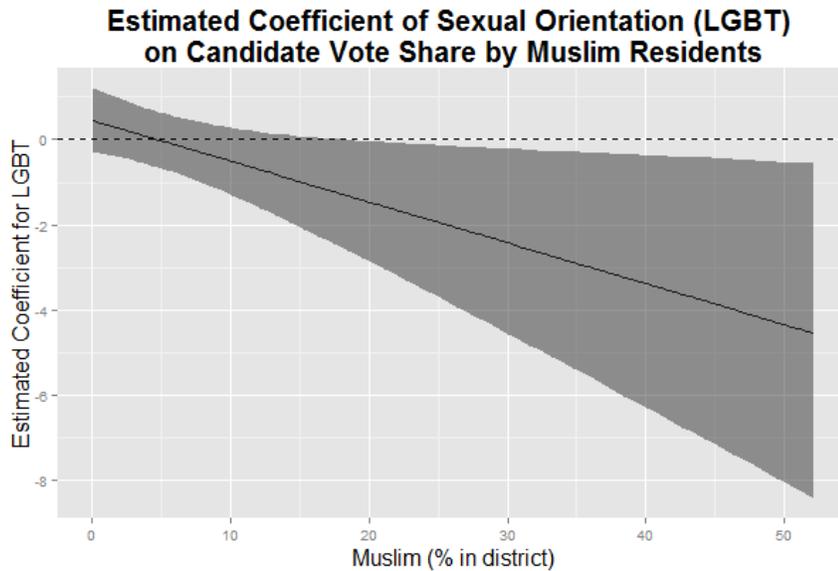


Figure 2 shows that LGBT candidates have a positive impact in “mainly rural” (urban variable equals 0) and “largely rural” (urban equal to 1) districts. In these contexts, LGBT candidates increase the vote share by about 2%, a substantial contribution in times in which election results are often close and the average vote share across all parties is just slightly less than 20%. The graph also shows that the LGBT coefficient is not significant in mixed and urban districts, suggesting that sexual orientation is not a determining factors in those contexts. At first, these results could seem puzzling, since one may expect that urban settings are more welcoming of sexual minorities. However, rural districts in the UK tend to be socio-economically wealthier and ethnically less diversified than urban areas. Indeed, they display lower levels of deprivation and lower

shares of Muslim residents, two factors that can negatively affect the results of LGBT candidates.<sup>37</sup>

**Figure 3 – Impact of LGBT conditional on percentage of Muslim residents**



Findings also show that LGBT candidates do not have a statistically significantly negative impact until the percentage of Muslims living in the district becomes relatively large, representing around 18% of the population. In Great Britain, only 32 out of 632 constituencies have a proportion of Muslims larger than this threshold. When Muslims

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<sup>37</sup> The average of Muslim residents in ‘mainly rural’ districts is 0.3%, while the average in ‘entirely urban’ is 9.48%. The average share of household not deprived in any dimension in ‘mainly rural’ districts is 43%, while the average in ‘entirely urban’ is 37.9%.

represent about a fifth of the residents, sexual minority candidates are expected to decrease the vote share on average by about 1.5%. Interestingly, gay candidates from the Labour Party – Wes Streeting and Steve Reed – were elected in the districts of Ilford North and Croydon North, where the share of Muslim residents equals 15.28% and 12.94%, respectively (40<sup>th</sup> and 61<sup>st</sup> constituency in the country by Muslim share). Furthermore, Kieran Mullan, a gay candidate from the Conservative Party, ran in the constituency with the highest share of Muslims in the country: Birmingham Hodge Hill, where 52.12% of residents are Muslim.<sup>38</sup>

So far we have observed how LGBT candidates perform in different socio-economic environments.<sup>39</sup> We have not explored, however, variation across parties. Considering that voters of different parties may have different attitudes toward homosexuality and that minority candidates are sometimes perceived as more liberal than their straight colleagues, it is interesting to investigate whether the electoral impact of LGBT candidates varies depending on their party membership. To evaluate this conditional effect, we run a multilevel model in which candidates are grouped by party

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<sup>38</sup> Gay candidates also ran in the constituencies with the third and fourth highest Muslim population share: Birmingham Hall Green (46.58%) and East Ham (37.38%).

<sup>39</sup> The impact of LGBT candidates also tends to become more positive when levels of deprivation are lower, but the coefficient fails to reach statistical significance at the .05-level. Interestingly, even in the most deprived constituencies LGBT candidates do not have a significantly negative effect on vote share. A plot illustrating these findings can be found in the online appendix.

and by constituency clustered into regions. We let the intercept vary by party and by constituency and we also let the slopes of candidate-level variables (i.e. LGBT, Female, BME) vary by party. This way we can assess whether the impact of candidates' sexual orientation, gender, and ethnic identity is conditional on party identity.<sup>40</sup>

**Figure 4 – Impact of LGBT candidates conditional on party**

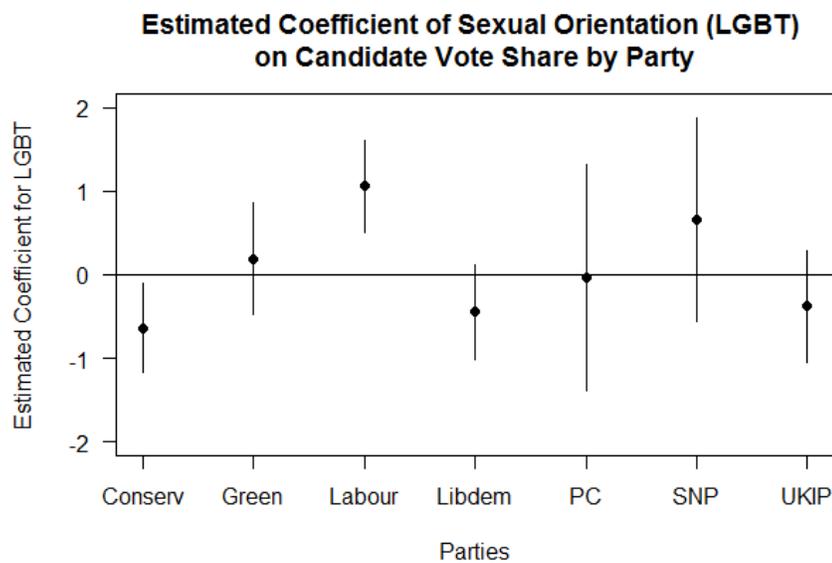


Figure 4 reveals that the general lack of significance of the LGBT coefficient hides interesting differences among parties. Indeed, LGBT candidates have a positive

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<sup>40</sup> A table reporting the model with the average effect of all variables across parties can be found in the appendix.

impact for the Labour Party, for which they increase the vote share on average by 0.9%. Their impact is instead negative for the Conservative Party, where LGBT identity decreases the electoral result by 0.6%.

The descriptive statistics of constituencies with and without LGBT Conservative candidates reveals that LGBT Tories – compared to straight Conservative candidates – faced conditions arguably more hostile to the Conservative party: they ran in districts where the Tories gained a smaller percentage of votes in 2010 (29% vs. 36%), where Muslim residents are more numerous (6.4% vs 3.9%), and households not deprived in any dimensions fewer (40.4% vs. 42.3%). Even if we control for these indicators in the analysis above, we now want to explore more directly the role of district competitiveness, and evaluate whether the impact of LGBT Tories varies between marginal and non-marginal constituencies. Hence, we add a binary variable for marginal districts, coded as 1 for districts in which the difference in vote percentage in 2010 between the winning candidate and the second candidate was smaller than 10%; and 0 for districts in which such difference was larger than 10%. Overall, 194 seats are marginal, i.e. 30.7% of the total: 26% of the constituencies with LGBT candidates and 32% of the constituencies without LGBT candidates. This data suggests that LGBT candidates are not substantially more likely to be selected in either marginal or safe constituencies, nor to be placed in unwinnable seats, for purely presentational value.<sup>41</sup> In the model grouping candidates by constituency and party, we now introduce the variable measuring competitiveness of the

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<sup>41</sup> More descriptive statistics on marginal vs. safe districts can be found in the online appendix.

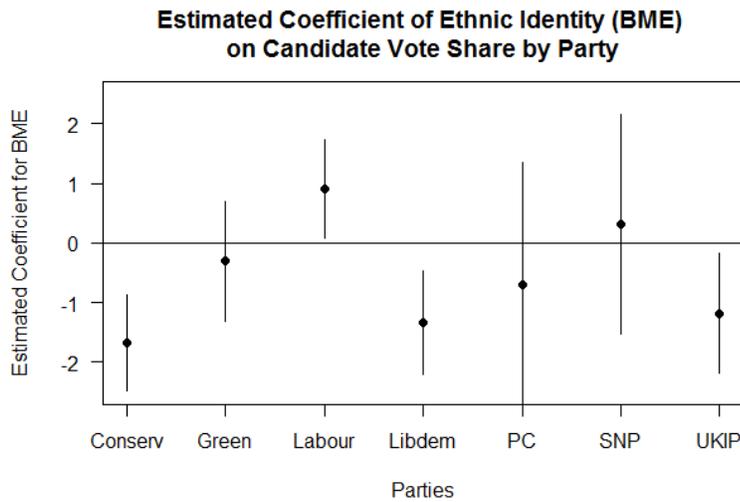
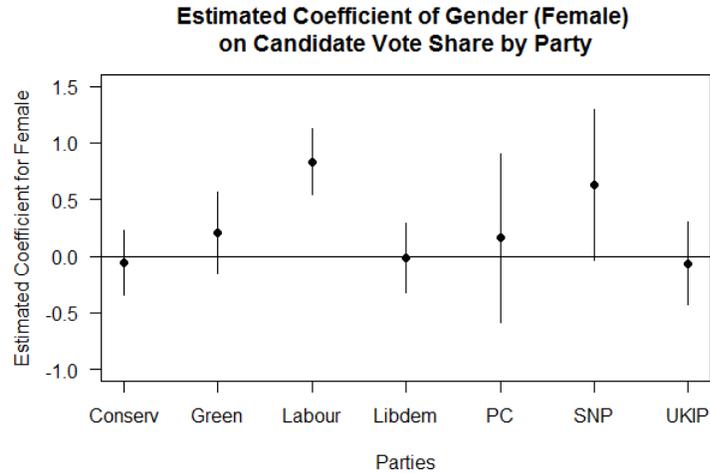
district, both by itself and in interaction with LGBT. In this model, we let the slopes of competitiveness and the interaction of competitiveness with LGBT vary by party, in addition to the slopes of individual characteristics (LGBT, Female, BME). The results reveal that the impact of LGBT Tories in marginal districts is not significant. LGBT candidates do not decrease the vote of the Conservative Party in competitive districts, while LGBT Tory candidates in no-hoper seats do see a minor reduction in their vote share. Hence, the overall suppression of Tory LGBT vote found above is being driven by the vote share of candidates that have no chance.<sup>42</sup>

Plots on the effects of female and ethnic minority candidates (figure 5 below) also reveal interesting comparisons. The impact of gender is similar to that of sexual orientation: female candidates have a positive impact for the Labour Party (+0.9% on average), but their effect is not significant for the other parties. Ethnic identity, instead, generally has a more negative effect. While minority candidates still improve the electoral results of the Labour Party (+0.9%), they decrease the vote share of the more conservative parties, including Conservative (-1.7%), UKIP (-1.2%), and LibDem (-1.3%).

### **Figure 5 – Impact of female and BME candidates conditional on party**

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<sup>42</sup> Since this model lets the slope of competitiveness vary by party, we account for the fact that marginal districts may have a different impact for different parties. Plots illustrating the findings of the model including competitiveness are reported in the online appendix.



The analysis therefore shows that LGBT candidates generally do not depress the vote share of their party. In some contexts, such as wealthier and ethnically more homogeneous rural areas, they actually improve the electoral results of their party. While some resistance still remains among supporters of the Conservative Party, this negative effect is limited to non-competitive districts, in which LGBT candidates did not enjoy a

real chance of winning the seat. Interestingly enough, in 2015 LGBT candidates were more like female candidates than ethnic minority ones: while BME candidates continued to decrease the vote share of their party, neither LGBT nor female candidates had an overall negative impact.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

The finding that LGBT Labour candidates do better than their straight colleagues is, for all the historical reasons mentioned above, a dramatic finding. What might explain this? We believe that we need to consider a divide existing between three groups: political parties and their leaders, straight voters (who are the vast majority) and LGBT voters. As noted earlier, the main UK parties were united in their strong support for LGBT rights in their manifestos and public statements. This drove LGBT voters to fragment between the four main UK-wide parties, and presumably between five in Scotland and Wales (when one includes the pro-LGBT Scottish Nationalists and Plaid Cymru). However, despite the radical transformation of the Conservative party under David Cameron, the legacy of state-sponsored homophobia under Tory governments led by Margaret Thatcher and her predecessors remained resonant in the electorate's minds. Therefore, straight voters who supported Labour were likely more inclined to see their party as the historic guardians of gay rights, and voting for an LGBT candidate could be a symbolic statement about what they wanted their party and country to be, and who they wanted to be. Labour voters in 2015 were more likely to be left-of-center progressives who celebrated marriage equality

and the transformation of Britain's legal and social attitudes towards gay people. If there was suspicion of Labour's leftist bona-fides, then having an out LGBT candidate to support may have motivated voters who were initially ambivalent about voting to turnout. An alternative possibility is that Labour LGBT candidates were more able to reach out to voters who had supported other parties previously. This is plausible in the case of Liberal Democrats who may have been disenchanted with the right-ward turn of their party and defected to Labour in 2015 – especially if their progressive values were demonstrated by Labour running an out LGBT candidate.

The fact that being a candidate who was openly lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender more likely increased one's vote share than decreased it in the 2015 UK election is, to understate the obvious, something of a surprise. For those who remember the Bermondsey by-election of 1983, or the 1987 general election when the Conservatives demonized gay men as perverts and pedophiles, the evaporation of homophobia in British electoral politics is striking. One of the factors explaining the stalled progress of openly LGBT people in Canadian and American national politics (as opposed to law) may be the reluctance of their right wing parties to embrace gay rights and gay candidates. The Canadian Conservatives are ambivalent at best and the US Republicans remain unapologetically homophobic. Conversely, in Britain, as in Western Europe, the Tory embrace of gay rights and gay politicians has taken much of the partisan sting out of gay rights issues.

Has Britain reached a post-homophobic state of grace, or do the better angels of our nature just come out at election time? (Not a thesis which is often proposed). While barely disguised homophobia continues to blight British schools, streets and screens, electoral politics seems to have reached a point where being a gay or straight barely registers on the hustings. The last parliament was defined by the fight for marriage equality and its aftermath – but any fear that Tory voters would punish the party for being too socially liberal proved to be unfounded in 2015.

This analysis suggests that if there were votes withheld for candidates because they happened to be LGBT, they were more than made up for with votes won *because* the candidate was LGBT.<sup>43</sup> The intensity of positivity has increased while the intensity of hostility has lessened. The likelihood that LGBTQ identity increases a personal vote has risen - it becomes a higher level variable in the voter's decision making matrix - but the likelihood that being hostile to homosexuality will reduce a personal vote has decreased. You may not be comfortable that the candidate is gay but it is not going to destroy your likelihood for voting for that candidate as it once might. In essence some voters are still homophobic and others remain homo-positive but on average the homophobes are less numerous and less passionate as they once were while the homo-

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<sup>43</sup> The post-election coming out of four MPs (Tories Gibb and Mundell, Labour's Griffith and the SNPs Bardell) gives a sliver of supporting evidence. In the May election these four closeted MPs performed more like straight candidates, with Mundell and Bardell doing slightly better than their party's regional average and Griffith and Gibb doing slightly worse. **UPDATE**

positives are more numerous and more passionate. Our multiple interviews and days spent on the campaign trail with LGBT candidates, from multiple parties and in both urban and suburban constituencies, confirmed that on the doorstep a candidate's sexual orientation was not an red flag to the average voter. The senior Tory Crispin Blunt couldn't recall a single person bringing the issue up in Reigate, while the Liberal Minister of Justice, Simon Hughes, was mobbed by adoring BME voters in London untroubled by long forgotten tabloid headlines about his sexual orientation.

As noted earlier, voters tend to invest a candidate's identity with meaning. An identity – whether ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation – has become a useful shortcut for voters to assess candidate appeal: what you know, what you like, what you fear, and what you aspire to be. Up until a decade ago, when law and society vilified homosexuality, a gay candidate signaled rebelliousness, deviance and being out of the mainstream: the very essence of abnormality. Thus, a 'gay candidate' would attract votes if the voter, gay or straight, shared that otherness, that rebelliousness, a yearning *not* to be part of the mainstream. But by May 2015 British homosexuals were no longer deviants with diseases. They were embraced by the establishment and society. A gay candidate now signaled something new to the voter: a sense of progress and empathy – the underdog with a heartwarming story. The rough right wing edges of a Tory were smoothed, and the progressive bone-fides of a Labour candidate were bolstered if they identified as LGBTQ. It is our supposition that traditional Labour, Liberal Democrat and Green voters were, all else being equal, more likely to vote Tory if the candidate

identified as LGBT, while Liberal Democrat, Green and disillusioned Labour voters were more likely to vote Labour if the local candidate was LGBT. When the numbers of Britons who say they know, like, love and respect someone who is LGBT are at an all-time high, the fact that on balance they are inclined – all else being equal – to vote for an identifying LGBT candidate makes perfect sense.

How could it be that rural voters are more homo-positive than urban ones? Our conjecture is that there is also something about rural communities and social structures which enhances sympathy towards LGBTQ people. We know that growth in support for gay rights is driven in large part by visibility and familiarity. The number of voters that support marriage equality tracks closely the growing number who say they have a close friend or family member who is gay. In rural areas families can be more cohesive and the community close knit. In essence when your son Johnny comes out he affects not only his immediate parents and siblings but the grandparents and uncles, aunts, and cousins he interacts with often. Plus, everyone in the village pub or football team knows him. Twenty years ago Johnny would have moved to the big cosmopolitan city to escape the stifling homophobia of the village but now the village is much less homophobic, he is more likely to come out there and thus powerfully affect the people close to him. Of course this narrative is not absolute - there is still rural homophobia and gay kids fleeing to the city - but the general shift in visibility and anti-LGBT views may actually yield higher changes in rural areas where families remain extended and communities are tight knit.

While the record number of British LGB MPs is triumph for diversity, internally the club is distinctly less diverse. There were only two lesbians in the 2010-2015 parliament, and while the number of women has risen to nine, (as of January 2017) they are still out-numbered by 30 men. All the LGBT MPs in the last House of Commons were white, all those elected in 2015 were white, and a full 152 of the 155 candidates were white. There were four out transgender candidates in the elections. Emily Brothers for Labour in Sutton and Cheam who increased the Labour vote by over 4%, Zoe O'Connell the Liberal Democrat in Maldon whose vote actually declined less than the national and regional average, and Green Stella Gardiner (Bexleyheath) and Charlie Kiss (Islington South), who both increased their party share of the vote. Kiss, the only trans-man in the election, actually increased the Green vote by 6%, which was twice the national and regional average. This skewing of LGBT representation by ethnicity and gender may mold what issues get prioritized and highlighted. For many white middle class gay men marriage equality became a significant talisman, but lesbians and minority gay men, not to mention transgender and gender variant communities, often have different priorities and aspirations.

In November 2015 the second named author had the pleasure of describing the findings of this paper to Lord Smith of Finsbury at Pembroke College, Cambridge where he is the Master. In 1984 Chris Smith had been the first British MP to come out publicly as gay: it was a courageous leap into the unknown. After describing that in 2015 being a gay Labour candidate now statistically increased your personal vote share Smith gazed

through the window to the walled garden below, ruefully smiled, and said "...thirty-one years."

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