

# Gender Identity as a Political Cue: Voter Responses to Transgender Candidates

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Voters frequently use demographic characteristics such as race or gender as shortcuts when evaluating politicians. We use two survey experiments to show that candidates' gender identity (specifically whether they identify as the same gender as the sex they were assigned at birth) functions as a similar cue. When a news story identified candidates as transgender, respondents rated them as more liberal and less likely to represent them, and less likely to receive their vote. The overall electoral penalty is moderated by voters' party, ideology, religiosity, and authoritarianism. In contrast to research on other demographic cues, we find that these effects persist even in the presence of cues about the candidate's party, suggesting that voters infer substantial information from politicians' gender identity.

Voters frequently infer information from politicians' demographic traits. For example, they use gender (Koch 2002), race (McDermott 1998), and sexual orientation (Golebiowska 2003), among other attributes, to categorize candidates. Voters stereotype women, minorities, and LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) politicians as more liberal, and more likely to prioritize group-specific issues, than their male, white, and straight counterparts—potentially generating electoral disadvantages for the former.

Recent years have seen openly transgender candidates running for, and winning, office (Eltagouri 2017). As the attention paid to transgender rights and the visibility of transgender people increases, the number of such candidates will likely rise, as was the case for LGB issues and politicians (Haider-Markel 2010). In this article, we explore the political inferences voters derive from candidates' gender identity (specifically whether they identify as the same gender as the sex they were assigned at birth) and the electoral consequences of such assumptions.

What literature that exists shows that voters penalize transgender candidates described in hypothetical terms (Haider-Markel et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2018). We extend this research

with two studies manipulating whether survey respondents are given information in a news story that a candidate is transgender, a stimulus more akin to how people learn about candidates in reality.

Study 1 tests several hypotheses about how voters use this information. First, we assess whether gender identity serves as a cue for candidate ideology. The vast majority of transgender candidates to date have run as Democrats (Eltagouri 2017). This is not surprising, given that elite rhetoric in recent years has increasingly linked support for transgender rights with liberal politicians and groups (Jones and Brewer 2018). Among the mass public, transgender Americans are more liberal, too. The average ideological placement of transgender respondents to the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) was 0.34 points to the left of cisgender respondents on a seven-point scale ( $t$ -statistic for difference in means = 3.11,  $p < .01$ ). We thus hypothesize that candidates identified as transgender will be perceived as more liberal than those who are not. We also explore whether voters use gender identity to infer information about candidates' other characteristics such as trustworthiness, authenticity, and responsiveness.

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Given previous research showing reduced electoral support for transgender candidates (Haider-Markel et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2018), we hypothesize that voters will be less likely to support a candidate who is identified as transgender. We also hypothesize that values predicting support for transgender rights—including ideology, party, religiosity, and authoritarianism (Haider-Markel et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2018; Miller et al. 2017)—will moderate responses toward a transgender candidate, such that more conservative, Republican, religious, and authoritarian respondents should be less supportive of an openly transgender candidate than those with opposing predispositions.

Study 2 examines the effect of gender identity in the presence of a potentially more powerful heuristic, party affiliation. Previous studies suggest that the effects of demographic cues such as gender, race, or ethnicity are reduced in the presence of partisan information (Hayes 2011; Kam 2007). As such, we explore whether inferences about and evaluations of transgender candidates are moderated by the introduction of partisan cues.

## STUDY 1

Study 1 embedded an experiment in a module of the 2016 CCES. Of the 1,000 respondents, 14 identified as transgender and are excluded from this analysis of cisgender Americans' attitudes. Throughout, the analyses use poststratification weights provided by the CCES.

Respondents were shown a screenshot of a news story about a candidate for city council, Jenifer Pool, that identified her as a "Businesswoman"/"Transgender woman" and potentially the first "woman to represent the 4th district"/"transgender woman to serve on City Council." The rest of the story (including the candidate's image and information about her background, as shown in the appendix, which is available online) was identical across conditions. Pool is a transgender woman who ran unsuccessfully for Houston City Council in 2011; the stimulus was based on media coverage of her campaign. The control condition did not label Pool as cisgender. We thus estimate the effect of exposure to information that the candidate is transgender (the treatment) versus no information about her gender identity (control).

Respondents rated how well several phrases—represents people like you, focuses on important issues, trustworthy, moral, and authentic—described Pool, measured from 1 (not at all well) to 4 (very well). Their propensity to vote for Pool ranged from 1 (very unlikely) to 4 (very likely), and views of her ideology from 1 (very liberal) to 7 (very conservative).

Respondents' ideology was measured on the same scale. Party identity ranged from 1 (strong Democrat) to 7 (strong Republican). Religiosity reflected how important religion was

to their lives, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (very). As in Miller et al. (2017), authoritarianism was measured as the number of authoritarian traits respondents preferred children to have, from 0 to 4. Full information about the measures is in the appendix.

## RESULTS

The treatment significantly affected perceptions of the candidate on two of six dimensions. First, exposure to information about the candidate's transgender identity caused respondents to rate her as more liberal, by an average of  $-.75$  points ( $t = -7.96, p < .001$ ) on the seven-point scale. Second, respondents in the treatment condition were less likely to say the phrase "represents people like you" described the candidate well, by an average of  $-.24$  points on the four-point scale ( $t = -3.05, p < .01$ ). Information about the candidate's gender identity did not change average ratings of her as trustworthy, moral, authentic, or likely to focus on important issues.

Consistent with prior studies (Haider-Markel et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2018), respondents were also less likely to vote for the candidate in the treatment condition, by  $-.16$  points ( $t = -2.03, p < .05$ ). Fully 76.0% of the control group said that they would be very or somewhat likely to vote for Pool, compared to 65.1% in the treatment condition. Overall, there was a roughly 11-point electoral penalty when the candidate was identified as transgender.

Mediation analysis, shown in more detail in the appendix, indicates that negative perceptions of the candidate's ability to represent respondents led to this decline in support. The average causal mediated effect (ACME) of perceived candidate responsiveness was  $-.13$  on the four-point scale (95% confidence interval =  $-.22, -.04$ ). Perceptions of responsiveness thus accounted for around four-fifths of the total effect of  $-.16$ . In contrast, the ACME of perceived candidate ideology did not reach standard levels of significance ( $-.04 [-.10, .02]$ ). Rather, exposure to information identifying the candidate as transgender led respondents to believe she would not represent them well, in turn reducing her electoral support.

The direction and magnitude of the effect on vote intentions varied across subgroups, however. Regression models A–D in table 1 interact the treatment with respondents' ideology, party, religiosity, and authoritarianism. To assess the significance of these relationships across the range of each moderator, we simulated the regression results and derived the estimated treatment effect, as shown in figures 1A–1D.

Respondents' predispositions substantially moderated the effect on electoral support. As shown in figure 1A, the treatment caused the most liberal respondents to be more supportive of the candidate (by an average of  $.47$  [95% confidence interval =  $.17, .76$ ]), while making the most conservative

Table 1. Linear Regression Models Predicting Likelihood of Voting for Candidate

	Study 1				Study 2		
	No Party Label	No Party Label	No Party Label	No Party Label	No Party Label	Democratic Candidate	Republican Candidate
	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D	Model E	Model F	Model G
Intercept	2.85 (.11)***	2.85 (.08)***	2.68 (.14)***	2.92 (.07)***	2.90 (.08)***	2.70 (.12)***	1.96 (.10)***
Treatment	.66 (.19)***	.45 (.14)**	.75 (.19)***	.25 (.11)*	.63 (.12)***	.94 (.15)***	1.44 (.12)***
Ideology	-.01 (.02)						
Ideology × treatment	-.19 (.04)***						
Party ID		-.01 (.02)			.01 (.02)	-.03 (.03)	.19 (.02)***
Party ID × treatment		-.17 (.03)***			-.20 (.03)***	-.20 (.04)***	-.33 (.03)***
Religiosity			.04 (.04)				
Religiosity × treatment			-.32 (.07)***				
Authoritarianism				-.03 (.03)			
Authoritarianism × treatment				-.20 (.05)***			
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	.11	.12	.08	.08	.13	.14	.19
N	926	952	979	826	562	505	569

Note. The appendix includes models using an ordered logistic estimator, which produces substantively similar results, and replications of models A, C, and D by the party of the candidate in study 2. Standard errors in parentheses.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

respondents significantly less so (-.69 [-.96, -.40]). A similar relationship emerges when comparing strong Democrats (.28 [.05, .50]) to strong Republicans (-.73 [-.99, -.50]) in figure 1B. Consistent with the evolving political landscape surrounding transgender candidates, liberals and Democrats were more supportive of her candidacy, conservatives and Republicans less so.

Treatment effects likewise varied by religiosity (for the least religious, .43 [.16, .68]; for the most, -.54 [-.76, -.32]) and authoritarianism (for the least authoritarian, .25 [.03, .48]; for the most, -.55 [-.81, -.30]). As they do with attitudes on transgender rights in general (Haider-Markel et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2018; Miller et al. 2017), ideology, party, religiosity, and authoritarianism all drove responses to the transgender candidate.

**STUDY 2**

A second study replicated study 1’s experiment, with additional conditions that identified Pool’s party affiliation, resulting in a 2 (gender identity cue absent/present) × 3 (no party/Democrat/Republican) design. Study 2 was fielded as a stand-

alone survey of 1,678 adult US residents via Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in December 2017. We again exclude transgender respondents ( $N = 31$ ) from the analyses. As expected given previous research (e.g., Levay, Freese, and Druckman 2016), the MTurk sample differs from the population both demographically and politically (see the appendix for more information about the samples and experimental stimuli). Of particular importance, the sample differs from the CCES on all of the variables that study 1 found to moderate the treatment effect, each time in ways that would lead us to expect a more positive response to the treatment. We return to this point when discussing average treatment effects below.

**RESULTS**

In the comparable no-party condition, results were largely similar to study 1. The treatment caused respondents to view the candidate as more liberal (on average by -1.23 points;  $t = -12.56, p < .001$ ) and less likely to represent them (-.16;  $t = -2.33, p < .05$ ) but did not affect perceptions of other traits. Although the average treatment effect on vote intentions was smaller than in study 1 and not significant (-.07;

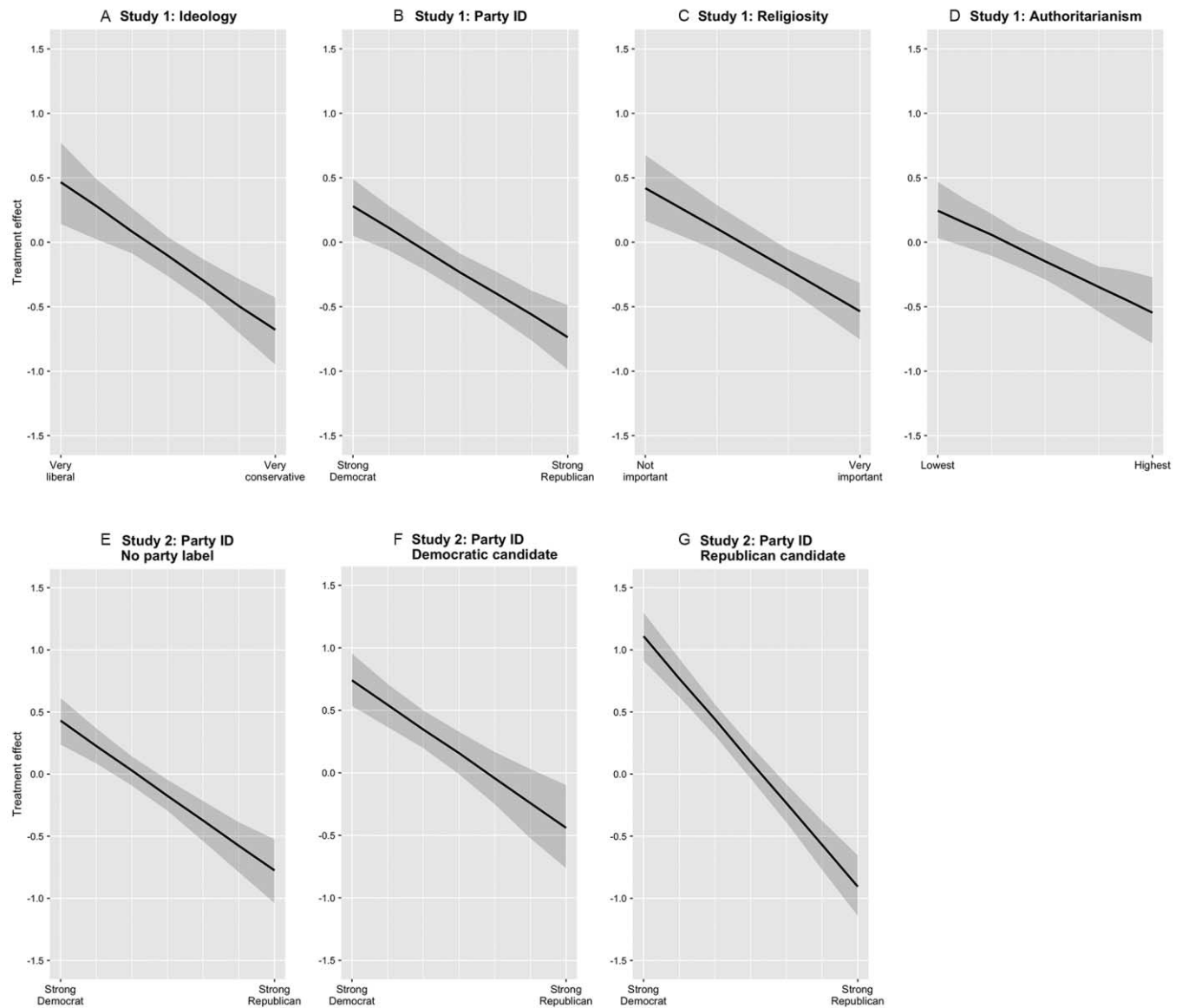


Figure 1. Treatment effect on likelihood of voting for candidate, by respondent characteristics and candidate party affiliation. Simulated from models in table 1, with 95% confidence intervals.

$t = -1.15$ )—unsurprisingly, given the less conservative, Republican, religious, and authoritarian composition of the sample—the heterogeneous treatment effects shown in table 1 replicated very closely (see the appendix).

The partisan conditions in study 2 allow us to assess whether the treatment effects reported in study 1 differed in the presence of explicit partisan cues. Within party conditions, respondents continued to stereotype the openly transgender candidate as more liberal. When presented as a Democrat, the treatment caused respondents to perceive her as  $-1.57$  points more liberal ( $t = -12.64, p < .001$ ); when a Republican, the treatment effect was a similar  $-1.63$  ( $t = -15.25, p < .001$ ). Indeed, the treatment led respondents to place the Republican candidate identified as transgender

$0.80$  points to the *left* of the Democratic candidate whose gender identity was not mentioned ( $t = -6.63, p < .001$ ).

In both partisan conditions, the treatment led respondents to rate the candidate as *more* likely to represent them, by  $.14$  points ( $t = 1.69, p < .10$ ) in the Democratic condition and by  $.29$  points ( $t = 3.96, p < .001$ ) in the Republican condition. Likewise, respondents were more likely to vote for the candidate identified as transgender by  $.28$  points ( $t = 3.45, p < .001$ ) when she was shown as a Democrat and by a similar  $.30$  points ( $t = 4.23, p < .001$ ) when a Republican.

Respondents' predispositions moderated the treatment effect in ways that were consistent with study 1, suggesting that these average effects are partially a result of the MTurk sample's composition. Models E–G in table 1, and associated plots

in figure 1, show the effect by respondents' partisanship in each of the candidate party conditions. In each case, party ID moderated the treatment such that Democrats responded positively, and Republicans negatively, to the gender identity cue. This is true whether the candidate was presented as a Democrat (when the effect for strong Democrats is .74 [.53, .96]; for strong Republicans,  $-.43$  [ $-.76, -.11$ ]) or as a Republican (the effect for strong Democrats is 1.10 [.91, 1.30]; strong Republicans,  $-.91$  [ $-1.15, -.66$ ]). As shown in the appendix, we observed similar results for the other moderators. Respondents with higher levels of authoritarianism, conservatism, and religiosity reacted to the treatment more negatively, regardless of whether the candidate was presented as a Democrat, as a Republican, or without a party label. Contrary to the hypothesis that voters would be less responsive to gender identity when also provided with partisan cues, respondents reacted to information about the Democratic and Republican candidates in similar ways.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Much as they do with other demographic attributes, voters use candidates' gender identity as a cue in forming political judgments. When exposed to a candidate identified as transgender, voters rated them as more liberal, less likely to represent them, and less likely to receive their vote. The electoral penalty is moderated by respondents' ideology, party, religiosity, and authoritarianism in ways consistent with findings on attitudes toward transgender rights (Haider-Markel et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2018; Miller et al. 2017). In contrast to previous studies showing that partisan labels reduce voters' reliance on demographic cues (e.g., Hayes 2011; Kam 2007), these relationships largely persisted in the presence of party cues. Regardless of the candidate's party label, information about her gender identity still led respondents to stereotype her as more liberal—and still evoked particularly strong opposition to her bid for office from more conservative, Republican, authoritarian, and religious respondents.

We view these as initial tests of a largely unexplored but powerful cue, gender identity. Future research could manipulate additional aspects of candidates such as gender (although Jones et al. [2018] report no significant effects), the type of office being sought (although Haider-Markel et al. [2017] show few differences), or individuating policy information to ex-

plore the scope and limits of these findings. Other respondent characteristics may also moderate responses, such as disgust sensitivity or gender nonconformity (Miller et al. 2017; preliminary analysis of the latter appears in the appendix). Extending this research along such lines will become increasingly important as transgender people and candidates become more politically visible.

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