Gatekeeping in Organized Labor: Union Leader Evaluations of LGBTQ Candidates

Abstract

Political representation depends not only on voter preferences but also on the decisions of political gatekeepers who recruit, endorse, fund, and mobilize on behalf of candidates. Despite growing scholarly attention to LGBTQ representation, relatively little is known about how organized labor evaluates LGBTQ candidates for public office. Labor unions remain among the most influential actors in Democratic coalition politics, yet their role as gatekeepers of LGBTQ political representation remains understudied. This article examines evaluations of LGBTQ candidates among union political leaders using an original survey experiment administered to 162 union leaders involved in political endorsement decisions.

Respondents evaluated five otherwise comparable candidate profiles: a heterosexual male candidate, a gay male candidate, a transgender woman candidate, a Black transgender woman candidate, and a nonbinary candidate. Contrary to expectations of broad anti-LGBTQ bias, LGBTQ candidates were evaluated favorably overall. The gay male candidate received slightly higher evaluations than the heterosexual male candidate, while evaluations of transgender and nonbinary candidates were broadly comparable to those of the heterosexual candidate. However, significant variation emerged across ideological groups. Progressive and moderate union leaders consistently evaluated transgender and nonbinary candidates more favorably than conservative leaders. Greater familiarity with transgender issues also predicted more favorable evaluations. While perceptions of candidate electability significantly predicted support for all candidates, electability failed to explain differential evaluations of transgender candidates relative to

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otherwise identical heterosexual candidates. Instead, ideology and familiarity with transgender issues emerged as the primary predictors of transgender candidate penalties.

These findings challenge assumptions that concerns about electoral viability are the primary source of gatekeeper resistance to transgender candidates. Rather, variation in support appears rooted in ideological commitments and experiential familiarity. The results contribute to research on political gatekeeping, LGBTQ representation, and labor politics by demonstrating how ideological and experiential factors shape candidate evaluations within a generally supportive political environment.

Keywords: LGBTQ representation; transgender candidates; organized labor; political gatekeeping; electability; unions; descriptive representation

Introduction

The number of openly LGBTQ elected officials in the United States has increased dramatically over the past two decades (The Williams Institute, 2024). Once largely absent from political institutions, LGBTQ candidates now hold positions at every level of government, from local school boards to Congress. Yet substantial inequalities remain. Transgender and nonbinary individuals continue to be significantly underrepresented in elected office despite increased visibility and growing public awareness. While scholars have devoted increasing attention to voter attitudes toward LGBTQ candidates, far less attention has been paid to the role of political gatekeepers in shaping candidate emergence and political opportunity.

Political representation is not determined solely by voter preferences. Before candidates ever appear on a ballot, they must navigate a series of institutional gatekeepers that influence

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who receives endorsements, campaign resources, volunteer support, fundraising assistance, and organizational legitimacy. Parties, donors, advocacy organizations, and interest groups all serve as critical intermediaries between prospective candidates and the electorate. These actors help determine which candidates are viewed as viable, which campaigns receive resources, and ultimately who is able to compete for office (Pitkin, 1967; Mansbridge, 1999).

Among these gatekeepers, labor unions occupy a particularly influential position. Organized labor remains one of the largest and most consequential political actors within Democratic coalition politics (Dark, 1999). Union endorsements provide candidates with financial resources, volunteer labor, voter contact operations, and political legitimacy. Particularly in local and state elections, labor endorsements can significantly influence electoral outcomes. Yet despite their importance, labor unions have received relatively little scholarly attention as gatekeepers of LGBTQ political representation.

This omission is particularly striking given the evolving relationship between organized labor and LGBTQ rights. While labor unions have increasingly embraced LGBTQ-inclusive policies and supported LGBTQ candidates, tensions remain regarding gender identity, transgender inclusion, and the political consequences of identity-based representation. As debates surrounding transgender rights have become increasingly salient within American politics, understanding how labor leaders evaluate transgender candidates has become an important question for scholars of representation, social movements, and political behavior.

A common explanation for barriers facing LGBTQ candidates centers on electability concerns. Political elites often justify reluctance to support marginalized candidates by arguing that voters are unwilling to elect them. Such concerns have historically been invoked against

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women candidates, candidates of color, and openly LGBTQ candidates (Lawless & Fox, 2005; Sanbonmatsu, 2006). Existing scholarship suggests that perceived electability may function as a socially acceptable rationale through which gatekeepers express reservations about candidates from historically marginalized groups. Yet surprisingly little empirical evidence directly evaluates whether electability concerns actually explain variation in support for transgender candidates.

This study examines candidate evaluations among union political leaders using an original survey experiment administered to 162 union leaders involved in endorsement and political decision-making processes. Respondents evaluated five candidate profiles that varied in LGBTQ identity while holding other characteristics constant. The design allows for direct examination of whether LGBTQ candidates face evaluation penalties and, if so, what factors explain those penalties.

The findings challenge several common assumptions. First, there is little evidence of broad opposition to LGBTQ candidates among union political leaders. The gay male candidate received slightly more favorable evaluations than the otherwise identical heterosexual candidate, while transgender and nonbinary candidates were evaluated similarly to the heterosexual candidate overall. Second, ideological orientation emerged as the strongest and most consistent predictor of candidate evaluations. Progressive and moderate union leaders evaluated transgender and nonbinary candidates substantially more favorably than conservative leaders. Third, familiarity with transgender issues independently predicted more favorable evaluations. Finally, while perceptions of candidate electability significantly predicted candidate evaluations generally, electability failed to explain differential treatment of transgender candidates relative to otherwise identical heterosexual candidates.

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These findings suggest that variation in support for transgender candidates among labor gatekeepers is driven less by concerns about electoral viability than by ideological commitments and familiarity with transgender issues. The results contribute to multiple literatures by identifying the mechanisms through which political gatekeepers evaluate transgender candidates and by highlighting organized labor as an important site of representation politics.

Literature Review

Descriptive Representation and LGBTQ Political Inclusion

Research on descriptive representation emphasizes the importance of shared identities between representatives and constituents (Pitkin, 1967; Mansbridge, 1999). Scholars have long argued that the demographic composition of political institutions influences both substantive policy outcomes and symbolic representation. Women, racial minorities, and LGBTQ officials often bring distinct experiences and perspectives to public office, potentially influencing agenda setting, policy priorities, and public trust (Mansbridge, 1999; Broockman, 2013).

The literature on LGBTQ representation has expanded considerably in recent years (Haider-Markel, 2010; Reynolds, 2013). Scholars have examined the electoral experiences of openly LGBTQ candidates, public attitudes toward LGBTQ officeholders, and the substantive effects of LGBTQ representation on policymaking. Research generally finds that voter resistance to openly gay and lesbian candidates has declined substantially over time, particularly among Democratic voters and younger generations (Haider-Markel, 2010). However, transgender candidates continue to face unique challenges rooted in social stigma, gender norm violations, and contemporary political polarization.

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Recent work suggests that transgender candidates encounter barriers distinct from those experienced by gay and lesbian candidates (Magni & Reynolds, 2021). Whereas public acceptance of gay and lesbian individuals has increased significantly over the past several decades, attitudes toward transgender individuals remain more polarized. Political discourse surrounding transgender rights has become increasingly contentious, particularly regarding education, sports participation, healthcare access, and gender identity recognition. These dynamics raise important questions regarding whether political elites evaluate transgender candidates differently from other LGBTQ candidates.

Yet candidate emergence is shaped by more than voter preferences alone. Political gatekeepers play a central role in determining which candidates receive institutional support and political resources. Consequently, understanding transgender representation requires attention not only to mass public attitudes but also to elite decision-making processes.

Political Gatekeeping

Political gatekeeping refers to the processes through which organizations and elites influence candidate emergence, resource allocation, and electoral viability. Parties, donors, unions, advocacy groups, and other organizations routinely make decisions regarding which candidates to endorse, support, and invest in (Lawless & Fox, 2005; Sanbonmatsu, 2006).

Gatekeeping theories emphasize that political opportunities are shaped long before voters cast ballots. Endorsements signal candidate legitimacy, influence fundraising networks, and affect media coverage (Lawless & Fox, 2005). Consequently, candidate evaluations by gatekeepers may have profound implications for descriptive representation.

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Importantly, gatekeepers often justify decisions through appeals to electability. Concerns about whether a candidate can win frequently shape endorsement decisions, particularly when organizations seek to maximize policy influence through electoral success. Scholars have therefore questioned whether electability functions as a neutral strategic consideration or as a mechanism through which biases are expressed.

For marginalized candidates, electability concerns may be especially consequential. Political actors may believe that voters are unwilling to support candidates from underrepresented groups, leading organizations to withhold support even when they personally favor greater representation (McDermott, 1998; Sanbonmatsu, 2006). Whether such concerns explain evaluations of transgender candidates remains an open empirical question.

Theory and Hypotheses

Understanding how union political leaders evaluate transgender candidates requires integrating insights from representation theory, political gatekeeping, contact theory, and research on candidate electability. While each perspective offers a distinct explanation for variation in candidate support, they generate competing expectations regarding the mechanisms through which transgender candidates are advantaged or disadvantaged.

Ideology and Candidate Evaluation

Political ideology provides a powerful framework through which individuals interpret social and political issues. Within contemporary American politics, attitudes toward LGBTQ rights have become increasingly polarized along ideological lines (Haider-Markel, 2010). Progressive political actors generally express stronger support for LGBTQ equality, while

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conservative actors are more likely to express skepticism regarding LGBTQ-inclusive policies, particularly those involving gender identity.

These ideological differences may influence evaluations of transgender candidates in several ways. Progressive leaders may view transgender representation as consistent with broader commitments to diversity, inclusion, and social justice. By contrast, conservative leaders may evaluate transgender candidates through frameworks emphasizing traditional gender norms or concerns regarding identity-based politics.

Importantly, ideological differences may persist even among political elites who broadly support LGBTQ rights. While union leaders are generally more progressive than the broader public, substantial variation exists within organized labor. Different unions possess distinct political cultures, organizational histories, and relationships with progressive social movements.

Accordingly, ideological orientation should shape candidate evaluations even within a generally supportive population.

H1: Progressive union leaders will evaluate transgender and nonbinary candidates more favorably than conservative union leaders.

Familiarity and Contact

Contact theory suggests that interpersonal interaction with members of marginalized groups can reduce prejudice and increase empathy (Allport, 1954). Exposure to LGBTQ individuals often challenges stereotypes, increases knowledge, and humanizes previously unfamiliar experiences.

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Research on LGBTQ attitudes consistently finds that individuals who personally know LGBTQ people express more favorable attitudes toward LGBTQ rights (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Similar patterns have emerged regarding transgender individuals specifically (Flores et al., 2016). Familiarity with transgender people and issues appears associated with greater support for transgender-inclusive policies and more positive attitudes toward transgender communities.

Within organized labor, familiarity may operate through several channels. Leaders may work alongside LGBTQ members, collaborate with LGBTQ staff, or engage with LGBTQ activists through coalition work. Such experiences may reduce uncertainty regarding transgender candidates and increase willingness to support transgender representation.

Unlike ideology, familiarity reflects experiential rather than ideological influences. As a result, familiarity may independently shape candidate evaluations even after controlling for political orientation.

H2: Greater familiarity with transgender individuals and transgender issues will be associated with more favorable evaluations of transgender and nonbinary candidates.

Electability and Political Gatekeeping

Electability occupies a central place in theories of political gatekeeping. Endorsing organizations frequently justify support decisions by referencing electoral viability. Organizations seeking policy influence may prioritize candidates perceived as capable of winning elections, even when those candidates are not ideologically preferred.

Research on women candidates, candidates of color, and LGBTQ candidates suggests that concerns regarding electability often emerge during candidate recruitment and endorsement

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processes. Gatekeepers may fear that voters will respond negatively to candidates from underrepresented groups, leading organizations to invest resources elsewhere.

This logic suggests that support for transgender candidates may depend upon beliefs regarding electoral viability. Leaders who view transgender candidates as electable should be more willing to support them, while those who doubt their electoral prospects may be less supportive.

Consequently, electability perceptions may function as a key mechanism linking candidate identity to candidate support.

H3: Greater perceptions of LGBTQ candidate electability will be associated with more favorable evaluations of transgender and nonbinary candidates.

Competing Mechanisms

The three hypotheses imply different mechanisms. If electability concerns drive candidate evaluations, support for transgender candidates should be largely explained by perceptions of electoral viability. Alternatively, if ideology and familiarity remain significant after controlling for electability, this would suggest that evaluations are shaped by deeper attitudinal and experiential factors.

This distinction is particularly important because electability concerns are frequently invoked to explain barriers facing marginalized candidates. If electability fails to explain differential evaluations of transgender candidates, then commonly cited explanations for representation gaps may require reconsideration.

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Data and Methods

Survey Design

Data were collected through an original survey administered to union leaders involved in political and endorsement decision-making processes. The final sample consists of 162 respondents representing a diverse range of unions and organizational roles.

The survey targeted individuals who play meaningful roles in candidate evaluation, endorsement decisions, political strategy, or organizational leadership. Respondents included executive leaders, political committee members, endorsement decision-makers, and individuals responsible for political operations.

The sample reflects a highly politically engaged population. A majority of respondents reported that their organizations had previously endorsed openly LGBTQ candidates, and most indicated that LGBTQ individuals currently occupy leadership positions within their organizations.

Table 1 About Here

Descriptive Characteristics of Respondents

Variables to include:

- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Ideology
- Union sector

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- Organizational role
- LGBTQ endorsement history
- LGBTQ leadership presence
- Democratic Party alignment
- Familiarity with transgender issues

Candidate Evaluation Experiment

Respondents evaluated five hypothetical candidates:

1. Michael (heterosexual male)
2. Marcus (gay male)
3. Emily (transgender woman)
4. Danielle (Black transgender woman)
5. Taylor (nonbinary candidate)

Candidate profiles were designed to be comparable while varying candidate identity characteristics. Respondents evaluated each candidate across multiple dimensions including competence, trustworthiness, leadership ability, and support.

Composite evaluation scales were constructed by averaging responses across candidate evaluation items.

Independent Variables

Ideology

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Respondents self-identified as:

- Conservative
- Moderate
- Progressive

This distribution reflects the generally progressive orientation of organized labor but also highlights meaningful ideological variation within the sample.

Familiarity with Transgender Issues

Respondents reported their familiarity with transgender issues on a five-point scale ranging from "Not at all familiar" to "Extremely familiar."

Familiarity levels were generally high. Nearly half of respondents reported being either very familiar or extremely familiar with transgender issues.

Electability Scale

The survey included a battery of questions measuring perceptions of LGBTQ candidate electability. Items assessed beliefs regarding voter receptiveness, donor support, candidate viability, and electoral prospects.

A composite electability scale was constructed by averaging responses across these items.

Figure 1 About Here

Distribution of Electability Perceptions

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Analytical Strategy

Analysis proceeds in four stages.

First, descriptive statistics compare evaluations across candidate profiles.

Second, mean difference tests examine whether LGBTQ candidates receive significantly different evaluations than the heterosexual candidate.

Third, ANOVA models evaluate ideological differences in candidate evaluations.

Fourth, multivariate regression models assess the independent effects of ideology, transgender familiarity, and electability perceptions.

Finally, candidate gap models examine differential treatment directly by comparing evaluations of transgender candidates relative to the heterosexual candidate.

Results

Candidate Evaluations

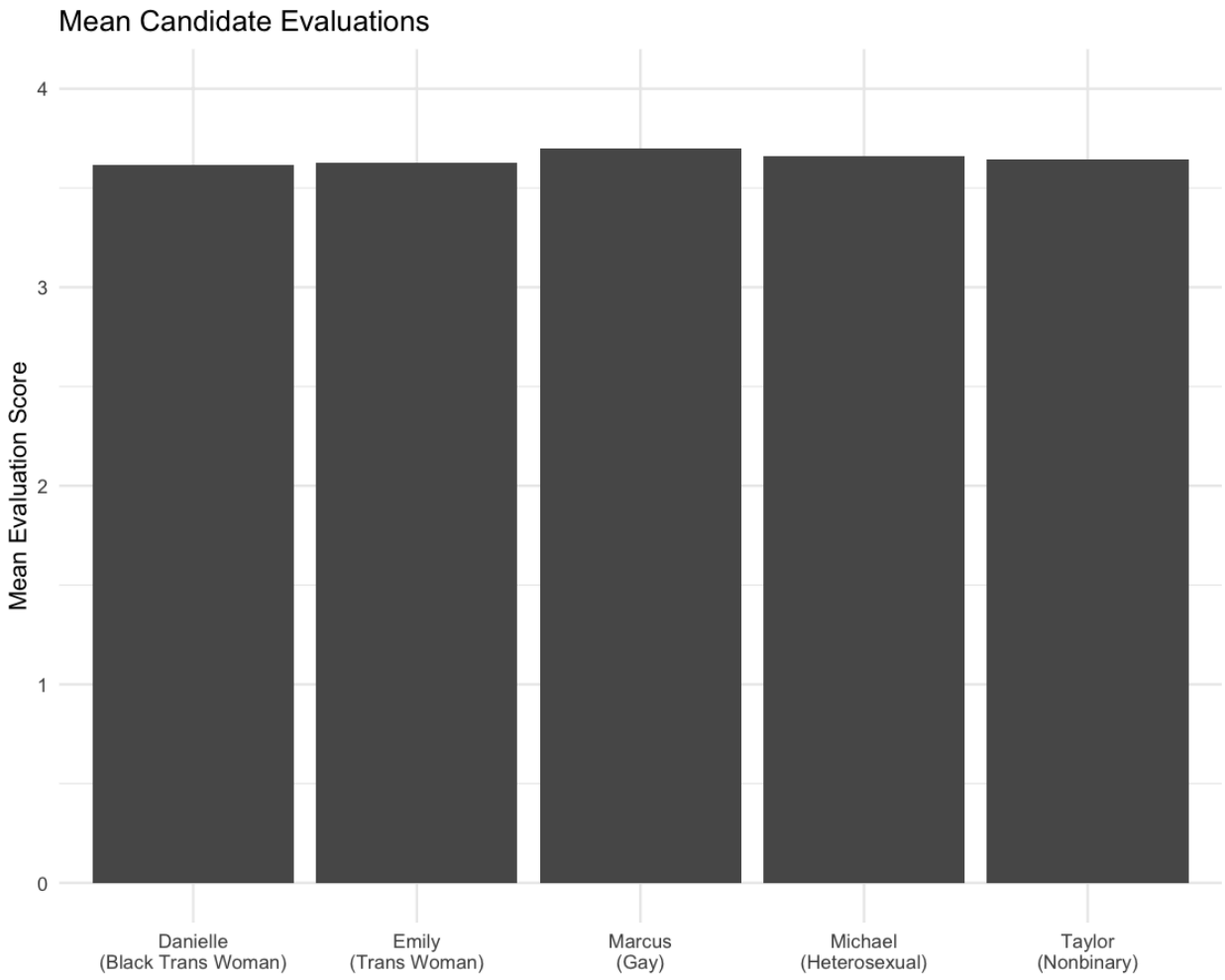
Contrary to expectations of broad anti-LGBTQ bias, candidate evaluations were generally favorable across all candidate profiles.

Mean candidate evaluations were as follows:

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Candidate	Mean Evaluation
Marcus (Gay Male)	3.697
Michael (Heterosexual Male)	3.658
Taylor (Nonbinary)	3.644
Emily (Transgender Woman)	3.625
Danielle (Black Transgender Woman)	3.616

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Mean Candidate Evaluations Across Candidate Profiles

Unexpectedly, the gay male candidate received the highest average evaluation score. Differences between the heterosexual candidate and transgender candidates were small and statistically insignificant at the aggregate level.

Results

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Candidate Evaluations

Table 2 presents mean evaluations for each candidate profile. Contrary to expectations of widespread bias against LGBTQ candidates, evaluations were generally favorable across all candidate types. The gay male candidate (Marcus) received the highest average evaluation score (M = 3.70), followed by the heterosexual male candidate (Michael; M = 3.66), the nonbinary candidate (Taylor; M = 3.64), the transgender woman candidate (Emily; M = 3.62), and the Black transgender woman candidate (Danielle; M = 3.62).

Mean Candidate Evaluations by Candidate Identity

To assess whether LGBTQ candidates faced evaluation penalties, paired-sample t-tests compared each LGBTQ candidate profile against the heterosexual candidate. The only statistically significant difference emerged between Michael and Marcus. Respondents evaluated the gay male candidate significantly more favorably than the heterosexual candidate (mean difference = -0.037, p = .023). By contrast, differences between Michael and Emily (p = .357), Michael and Danielle (p = .183), and Michael and Taylor (p = .460) were not statistically significant.

These findings provide little evidence of broad opposition to LGBTQ candidates among union political leaders. In fact, the gay candidate received slightly more favorable evaluations than the otherwise identical heterosexual candidate.

Figure 1 About Here

Mean Candidate Evaluations Across Candidate Profiles

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Ideological Differences in Candidate Evaluation

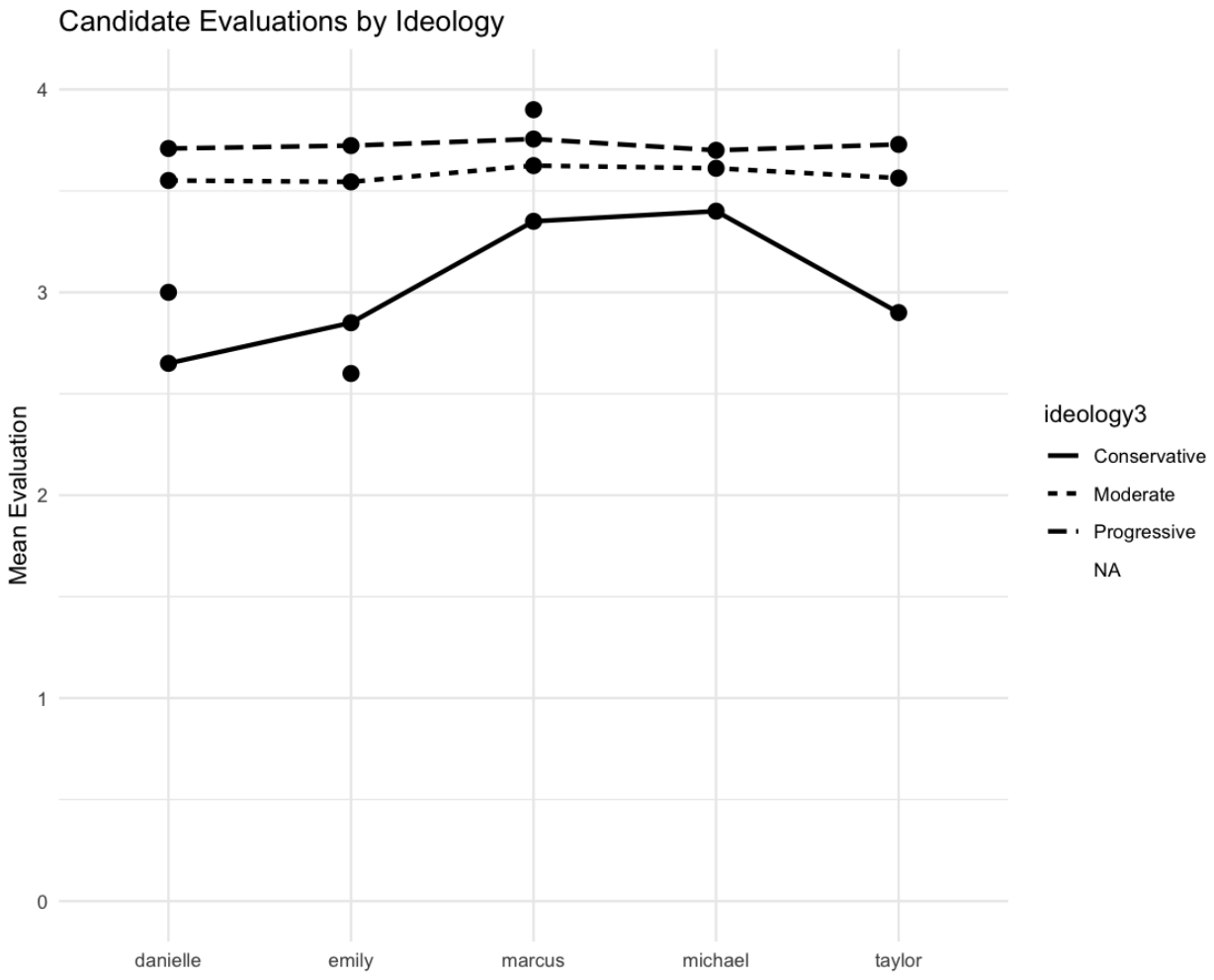
Although overall support for LGBTQ candidates was high, substantial variation emerged across ideological groups. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) revealed significant ideological differences in evaluations of transgender and nonbinary candidates.

For Emily, the transgender woman candidate, ideology significantly predicted candidate evaluations ($F = 8.69$, $p < .001$). Similar patterns emerged for Danielle, the Black transgender woman candidate ($F = 10.04$, $p < .001$), and Taylor, the nonbinary candidate ($F = 8.26$, $p < .001$).

Post-hoc Tukey tests indicate that both moderate and progressive respondents evaluated transgender and nonbinary candidates significantly more favorably than conservative respondents. For Emily, moderates evaluated the candidate approximately 0.69 points higher than conservatives ($p = .011$), while progressives evaluated her approximately 0.87 points higher ($p < .001$). For Danielle, the corresponding differences were 0.90 points ($p = .001$) and 1.06 points ($p < .001$). For Taylor, moderates and progressives evaluated the candidate 0.66 points ($p = .012$) and 0.83 points ($p = .001$) higher than conservatives, respectively.

Notably, differences between moderates and progressives were generally small and statistically insignificant. The primary ideological divide appears to exist between conservatives and everyone else.

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Mean Candidate Evaluations by Ideological Group

These findings suggest that variation in support for transgender and nonbinary candidates is concentrated within a relatively small conservative faction of union leadership rather than reflecting broad disagreement across organized labor.

Multivariate Models

To determine whether ideological differences persisted after accounting for organizational and experiential factors, a series of multivariate regression models were estimated.

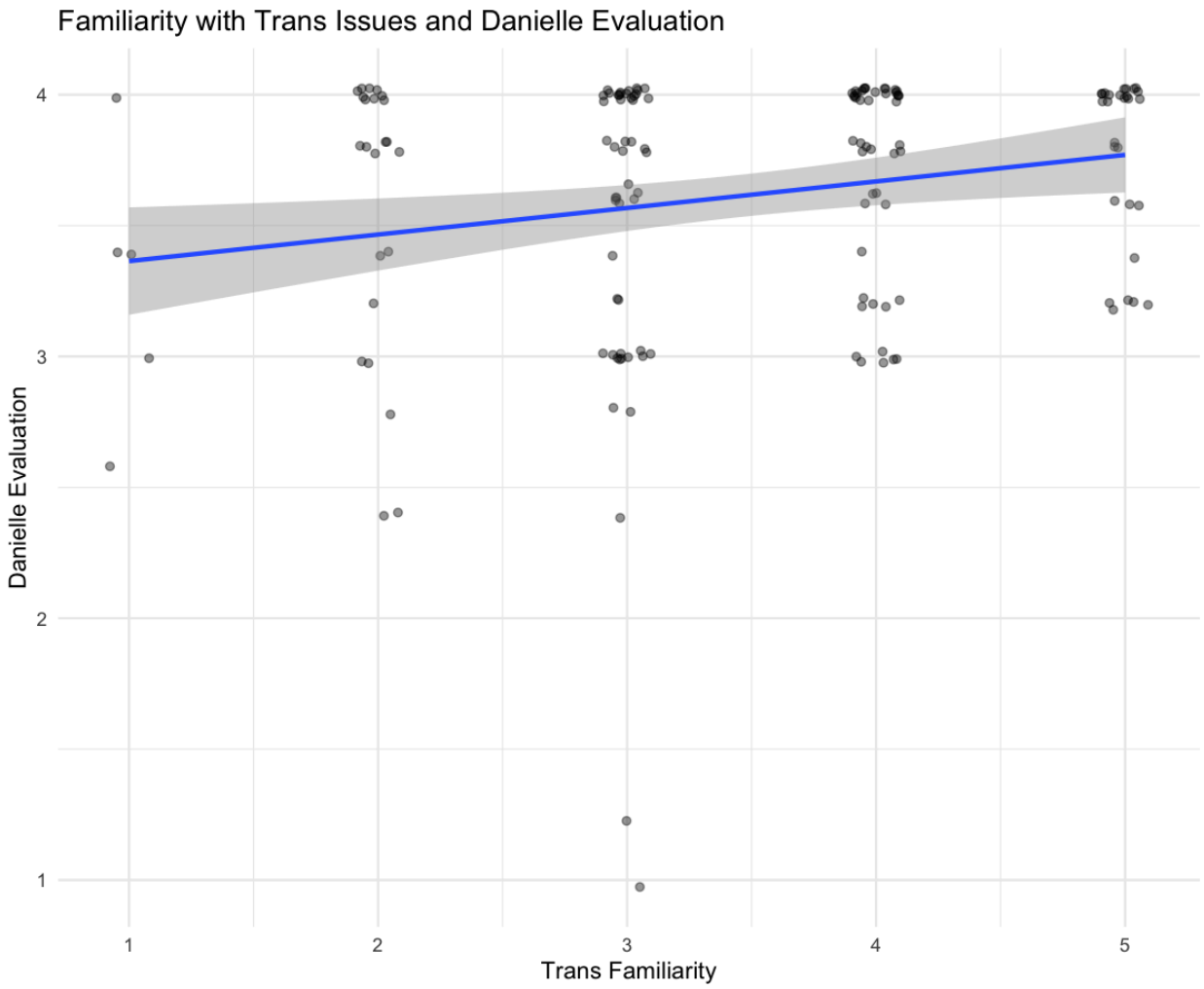
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Initial models included organizational characteristics, including prior endorsement of LGBTQ candidates, the presence of LGBTQ leaders within the organization, and organizational alignment with the Democratic Party. None of these variables significantly predicted evaluations of transgender candidates. By contrast, ideological orientation remained a strong predictor.

For Danielle, moderate respondents evaluated the candidate approximately 0.90 points higher than conservatives ($\beta = 0.895$, $p = .003$), while progressive respondents evaluated her approximately 1.03 points higher ($\beta = 1.027$, $p < .001$). Similar patterns emerged for Emily, with moderates scoring the candidate 0.70 points higher than conservatives ($\beta = 0.697$, $p = .014$) and progressives scoring her 0.85 points higher ($\beta = 0.849$, $p = .003$).

These findings indicate that ideological orientation remains an important predictor of candidate evaluations even after accounting for organizational context.

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Regression Models Predicting Candidate Evaluations

Familiarity with Transgender Issues

Familiarity with transgender issues emerged as an additional predictor of candidate evaluations. Models including both ideology and transgender familiarity indicate that familiarity is positively associated with support for transgender and nonbinary candidates.

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For Danielle, a one-unit increase in transgender familiarity was associated with a 0.078-point increase in candidate evaluation ($p = .043$). Similar effects emerged for Emily ($\beta = 0.074$, $p = .042$) and Taylor ($\beta = 0.060$, $p = .089$).

Importantly, ideological effects remained statistically significant after controlling for familiarity. Compared with conservative respondents, moderates and progressives continued to evaluate transgender candidates substantially more favorably. These findings suggest that familiarity contributes independently to candidate support but does not fully explain ideological differences.

Electability and Candidate Evaluation

The survey included a battery measuring perceptions of LGBTQ candidate electability. Electability emerged as a significant predictor of candidate evaluations across all candidate profiles.

For Michael, a one-unit increase in the electability scale was associated with a 0.252-point increase in candidate evaluation ($p < .001$). Similar effects emerged for Marcus ($\beta = 0.233$, $p < .001$), Emily ($\beta = 0.323$, $p < .001$), Danielle ($\beta = 0.351$, $p < .001$), and Taylor ($\beta = 0.296$, $p < .001$).

Table 4 About Here

Electability Models Predicting Candidate Evaluations

The strongest electability effect emerged for Danielle, suggesting that perceptions of electoral viability are associated with support for transgender candidates. However, additional

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analyses indicate that this relationship does not explain differential treatment of transgender candidates relative to heterosexual candidates.

To explore the origins of electability perceptions, electability was modeled as a dependent variable. Results indicate that ideology significantly predicts electability beliefs. Moderate respondents reported significantly higher electability perceptions than conservatives ($\beta = 0.566$, $p = .030$), while progressives reported similarly elevated perceptions ($\beta = 0.641$, $p = .013$). By contrast, familiarity with transgender issues was unrelated to electability perceptions ($\beta = -0.004$, $p = .924$).

These findings suggest that beliefs regarding LGBTQ candidate electability are themselves structured by ideology.

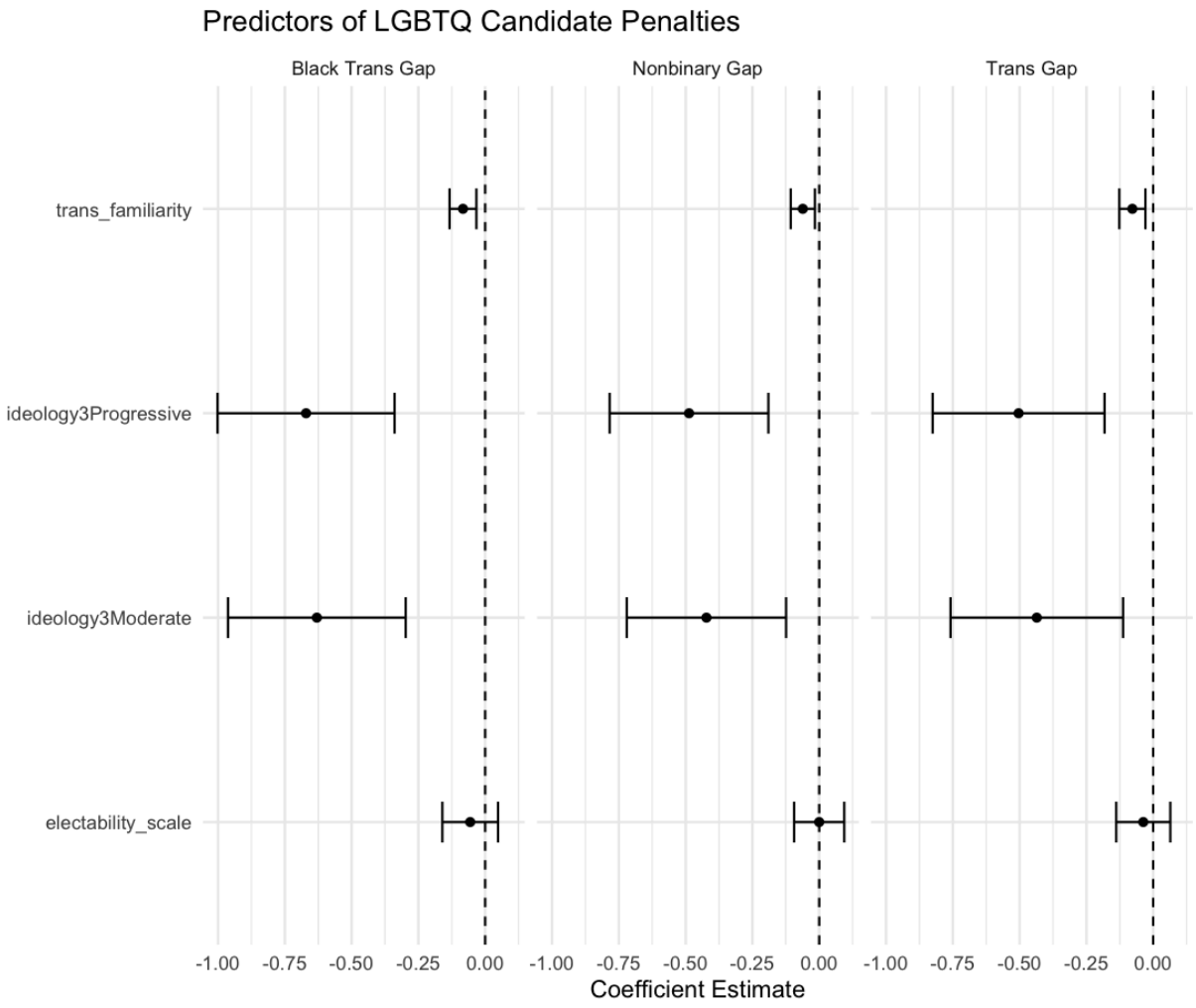
Candidate Penalty Models

The most direct test of differential treatment comes from candidate penalty models. Three dependent variables were constructed by subtracting evaluations of transgender and nonbinary candidates from evaluations of the heterosexual candidate:

- Trans Gap = Michael − Emily
- Black Trans Gap = Michael − Danielle
- Nonbinary Gap = Michael − Taylor

Positive values indicate greater penalties against transgender or nonbinary candidates relative to the heterosexual candidate.

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Candidate Penalty Models

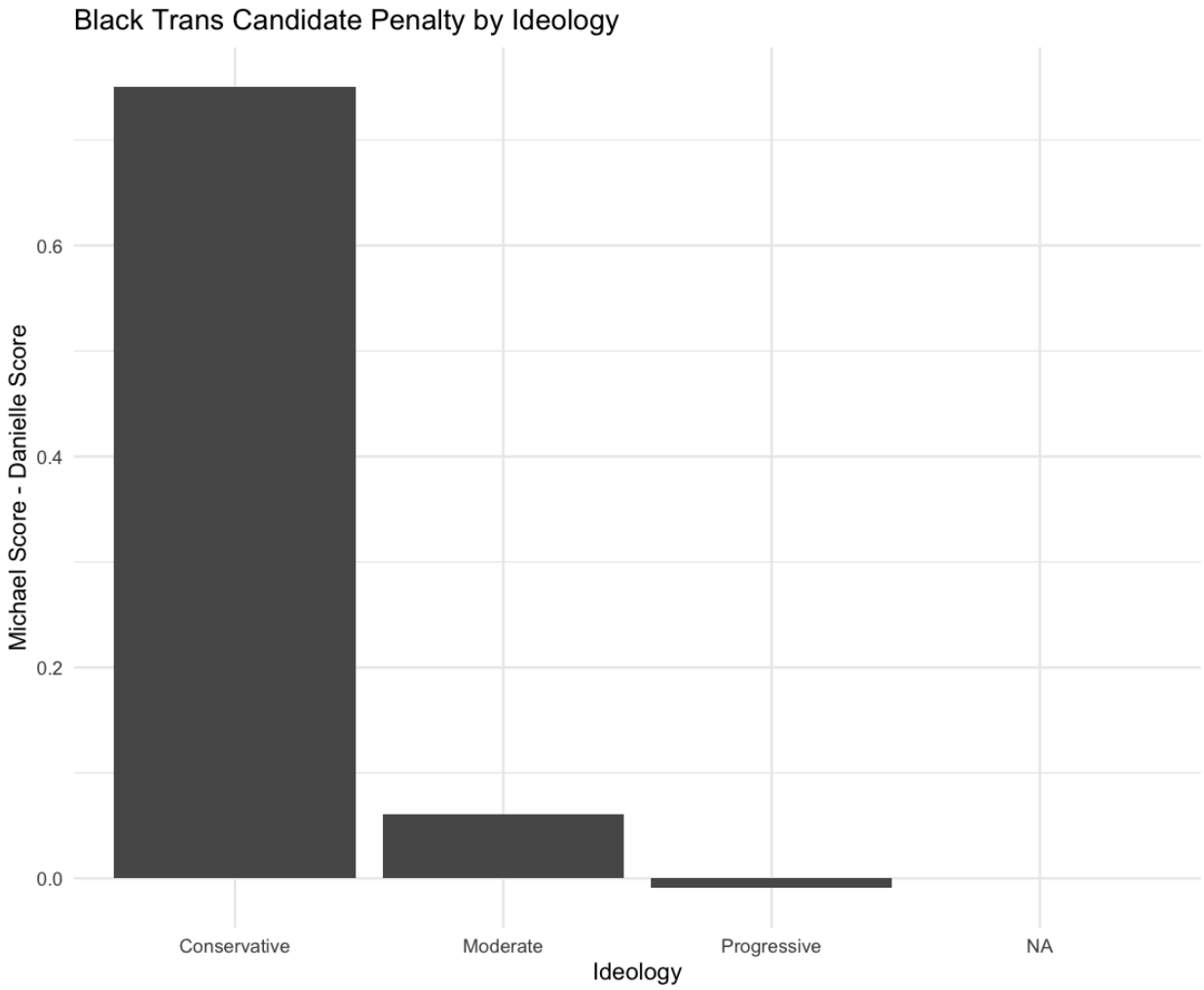
Results reveal a remarkably consistent pattern across all three models.

For the Black Trans Gap, moderates exhibited significantly smaller penalties than conservatives ($\beta = -0.630$, $p < .001$), while progressives exhibited similarly reduced penalties ($\beta = -0.671$, $p < .001$). Greater familiarity with transgender issues also reduced penalties ($\beta = -0.083$, $p = .001$). Electability, however, was not statistically significant ($p = .294$).

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The Trans Gap model produced nearly identical results. Moderates (β = -0.436, p = .009) and progressives (β = -0.504, p = .003) exhibited smaller penalties than conservatives, while familiarity again reduced penalties (β = -0.078, p = .002). Electability remained insignificant (p = .474).

Finally, the Nonbinary Gap model replicated this pattern. Moderates (β = -0.422, p = .006) and progressives (β = -0.487, p = .002) displayed significantly smaller penalties than conservatives. Familiarity again reduced penalties (β = -0.061, p = .009). Electability had no effect whatsoever (β ≈ 0.000, p = .999).



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Predicted Candidate Penalties by Ideology

These findings represent the strongest evidence in the study. While perceptions of electability increase support for all candidates, they do not explain differential evaluations of transgender candidates relative to otherwise identical heterosexual candidates. Instead, ideology and familiarity with transgender issues consistently predict candidate penalties across all models.

Taken together, the results suggest that support for transgender candidates among union political gatekeepers is shaped primarily by ideological commitments and experiential familiarity rather than concerns about electoral viability.

Discussion

This study examined how union political leaders evaluate LGBTQ candidates and sought to identify the factors that explain variation in support for transgender and nonbinary candidates. Several important findings emerge.

First, the results provide little evidence of widespread opposition to LGBTQ candidates among union political gatekeepers. Across all candidate profiles, average evaluations were highly favorable. The gay male candidate received the highest average evaluation score in the experiment and was evaluated significantly more favorably than the otherwise identical heterosexual candidate. Meanwhile, transgender, Black transgender, and nonbinary candidates received evaluations comparable to those of the heterosexual candidate. These findings challenge assumptions that organized labor constitutes a particularly resistant environment for LGBTQ candidates seeking endorsement support.

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Second, despite high overall support, substantial variation emerged across ideological groups. Progressive and moderate union leaders consistently evaluated transgender and nonbinary candidates more favorably than conservative leaders. These differences remained statistically significant across multiple model specifications and persisted after controlling for familiarity with transgender issues and perceptions of electability.

The consistency of these ideological effects suggests that political values continue to structure candidate evaluations even within a generally supportive population. While organized labor is often characterized as a progressive institution, the findings demonstrate that meaningful ideological variation exists within labor leadership and that such variation shapes evaluations of transgender representation.

Third, familiarity with transgender issues emerged as an important predictor of candidate support. Respondents who reported greater familiarity with transgender issues consistently evaluated transgender and nonbinary candidates more favorably. These effects remained significant even after accounting for ideology.

This finding is broadly consistent with contact-based theories of prejudice reduction. Previous research has demonstrated that exposure to LGBTQ individuals can reduce prejudice and increase support for LGBTQ rights (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The present study extends this literature by showing that familiarity with transgender issues also influences evaluations of transgender candidates for public office. Importantly, familiarity appears to function independently of ideology. Even among respondents with similar ideological orientations, those who reported greater familiarity with transgender issues tended to evaluate transgender candidates more positively.

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Perhaps the most theoretically important finding concerns electability.

Political elites frequently invoke electability concerns when discussing support for candidates from historically marginalized groups. Similar arguments have been made regarding women candidates, racial minority candidates, openly LGBTQ candidates, and transgender candidates. Scholars have therefore questioned whether concerns about electability represent genuine strategic considerations or socially acceptable justifications for withholding support from underrepresented candidates(Lawless & Fox, 2005; Sanbonmatsu, 2006).

At first glance, the findings appear consistent with electability-based explanations. Perceptions of LGBTQ candidate electability significantly predicted evaluations of every candidate in the study. Respondents who believed LGBTQ candidates were electable tended to evaluate all candidates more favorably.

However, the candidate penalty models tell a different story.

When differential treatment was measured directly through candidate-gap models, electability ceased to matter. Across all three gap measures—the Trans Gap, Black Trans Gap, and Nonbinary Gap—electability was statistically insignificant. By contrast, ideology and familiarity with transgender issues remained significant predictors.

This distinction is critical. Electability influences candidate evaluations generally, but it does not explain why respondents evaluate transgender candidates differently from otherwise identical heterosexual candidates. In other words, electability appears to function as a broad candidate evaluation heuristic rather than a mechanism producing transgender candidate penalties.

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Instead, the factors that consistently explain candidate penalties are ideology and familiarity.

This finding has important implications for theories of political gatekeeping. Existing scholarship often assumes that gatekeepers hesitate to support marginalized candidates because they believe voters will reject them. While such concerns may occasionally play a role, the present evidence suggests that differential treatment of transgender candidates is more closely tied to ideological commitments and experiential familiarity than to beliefs about electoral viability.

The findings also contribute to debates regarding descriptive representation. Research on candidate emergence has traditionally focused on voter attitudes, institutional barriers, and campaign resources. Yet representation is also shaped by the attitudes of political intermediaries who determine which candidates receive organizational support. By examining union leaders directly, this study shifts attention toward elite-level processes that influence representation before candidates ever reach the ballot.

The results suggest that increasing transgender representation may depend not only on changing voter attitudes but also on addressing variation in elite attitudes and experiences. Familiarity with transgender issues consistently reduced candidate penalties, indicating that exposure and engagement may play an important role in expanding support for transgender representation among political gatekeepers.

Organized Labor and LGBTQ Representation

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The findings also contribute to the literature on organized labor and social movements. Over the past several decades, labor unions have increasingly incorporated LGBTQ rights into their political agendas (Dark, 1999). Many unions have adopted inclusive nondiscrimination policies, supported LGBTQ legislative priorities, and endorsed openly LGBTQ candidates.

The present findings suggest that these developments have translated into generally favorable evaluations of LGBTQ candidates among union leaders. The absence of broad anti-LGBTQ bias, combined with the favorable evaluations of the gay male candidate, indicates that LGBTQ inclusion has become relatively normalized within many segments of organized labor.

At the same time, ideological differences persist. Support for transgender and nonbinary candidates is not uniform, and meaningful variation remains among union leaders. Consequently, organized labor should not be viewed as monolithic. Rather, labor organizations contain internal political diversity that shapes candidate evaluation processes.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the sample contains relatively few conservative respondents. Only four respondents identified as conservative, limiting the precision of comparisons involving that group. Although ideological effects were large and consistent across analyses, future research should examine whether similar patterns emerge in samples with greater ideological diversity.

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Second, the study relies on hypothetical candidate profiles rather than real-world endorsement decisions. Experimental designs offer strong internal validity but may not fully capture the complexity of actual endorsement processes. Future research could examine whether similar dynamics emerge in real endorsement contests.

Third, the sample consists exclusively of union political leaders. While this population is theoretically important, findings may not generalize to other political gatekeepers such as party officials, donors, advocacy organizations, or elected officials.

Fourth, social desirability bias may influence responses. Because support for LGBTQ rights is generally normative within organized labor, some respondents may have been reluctant to express negative evaluations. The candidate-gap models partially mitigate this concern by focusing on relative evaluations rather than absolute support levels, but social desirability remains a potential limitation.

Finally, the cross-sectional nature of the data prevents strong causal claims regarding the origins of ideological attitudes or familiarity effects. Longitudinal and experimental research would be valuable for identifying how these factors develop over time.

Conclusion

Political representation depends on more than voter preferences. Before candidates ever appear on a ballot, they must navigate a network of political gatekeepers who influence access to endorsements, resources, and organizational support. Despite the importance of these gatekeepers, relatively little research has examined how labor leaders evaluate LGBTQ candidates.

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Drawing on an original survey experiment of 162 union political leaders, this study provides evidence that organized labor is generally supportive of LGBTQ candidates. The gay male candidate received the highest average evaluation score, while transgender and nonbinary candidates were evaluated similarly to an otherwise identical heterosexual candidate.

Yet important differences emerged beneath these aggregate patterns. Progressive and moderate union leaders consistently evaluated transgender and nonbinary candidates more favorably than conservative leaders. Familiarity with transgender issues also increased support and reduced candidate penalties.

Most importantly, electability failed to explain differential treatment of transgender candidates. Although perceptions of electability influenced evaluations of all candidates, they did not account for differences between evaluations of transgender candidates and otherwise identical heterosexual candidates. Instead, ideology and familiarity emerged as the primary predictors of candidate penalties.

These findings challenge common assumptions regarding the role of electability in political gatekeeping. While electoral viability concerns are frequently invoked in discussions of LGBTQ representation, the evidence presented here suggests that ideological commitments and experiential familiarity play a more important role in shaping support for transgender candidates among labor leaders.

As transgender and nonbinary candidates continue to seek elected office, understanding how political gatekeepers evaluate these candidates will remain essential for explaining patterns of political representation. The findings presented here suggest that barriers to transgender

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representation may be rooted less in concerns about electability and more in the ideological and experiential perspectives of those who control access to political opportunity.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix

Figure A1. Mean Candidate Evaluations Across Candidate Profiles

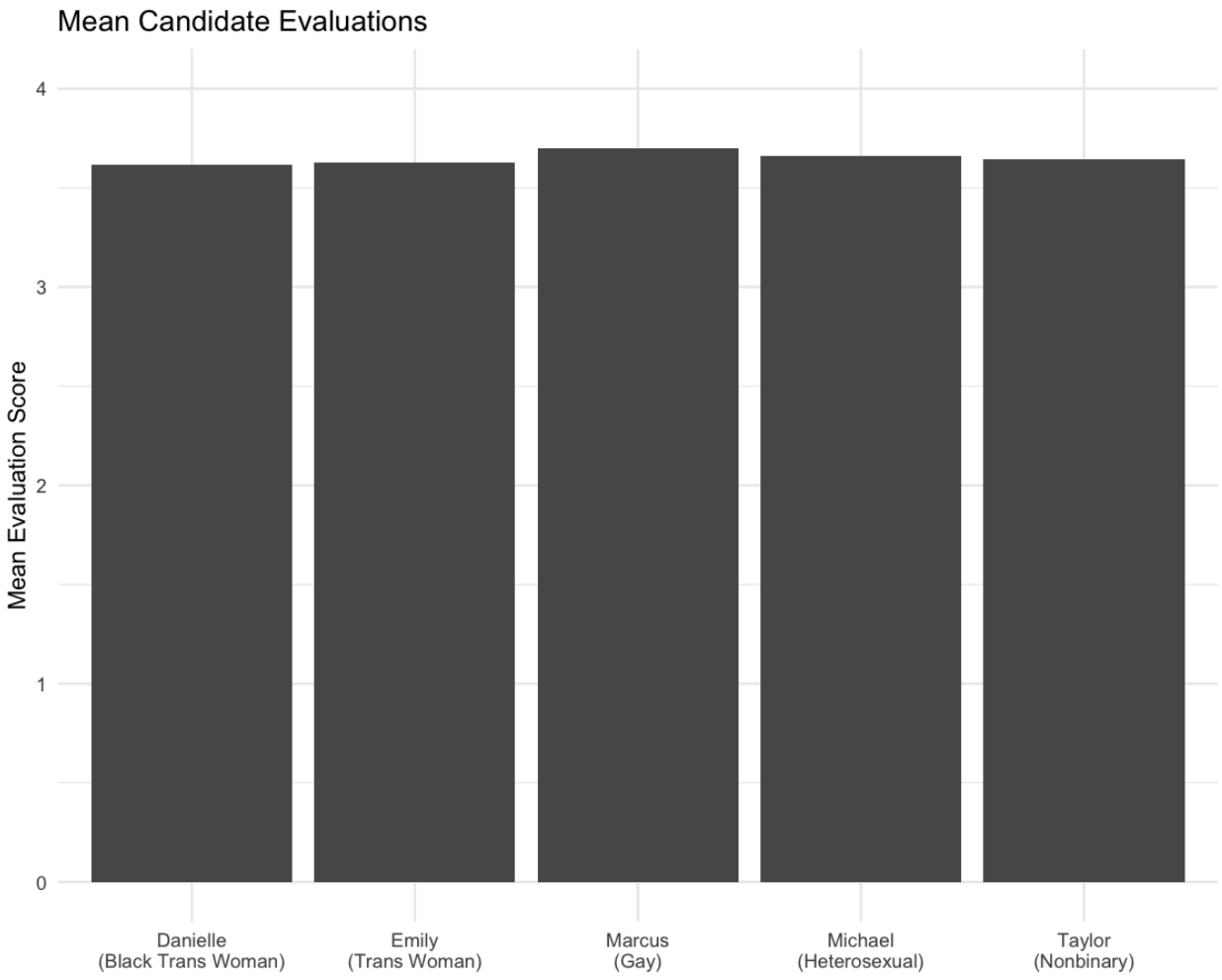


Figure A2. Mean Candidate Evaluations by Political Ideology

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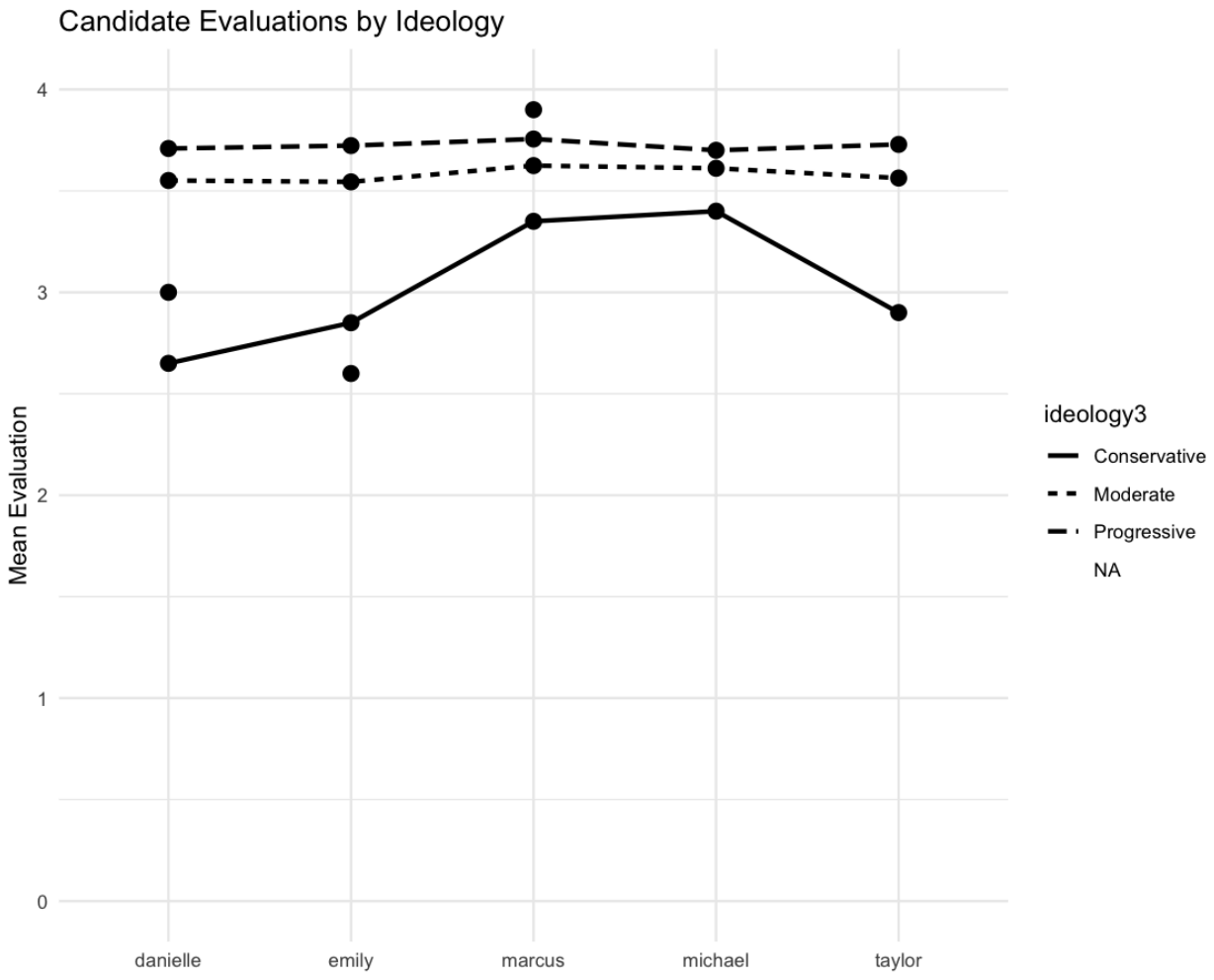


Figure A3. Predictors of LGBTQ Candidate Penalties

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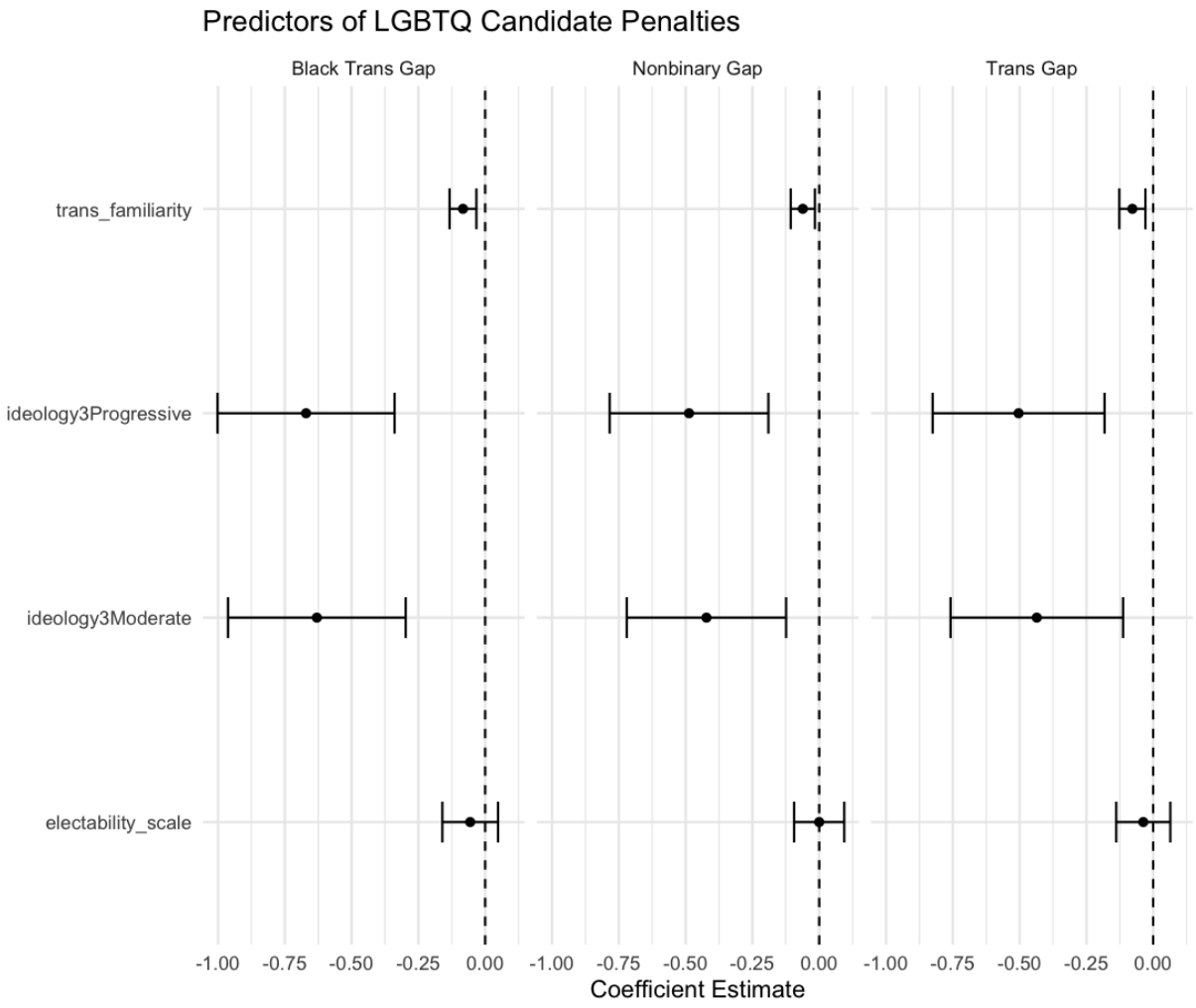


Figure A4. Predictors of the Transgender Candidate Support Gap

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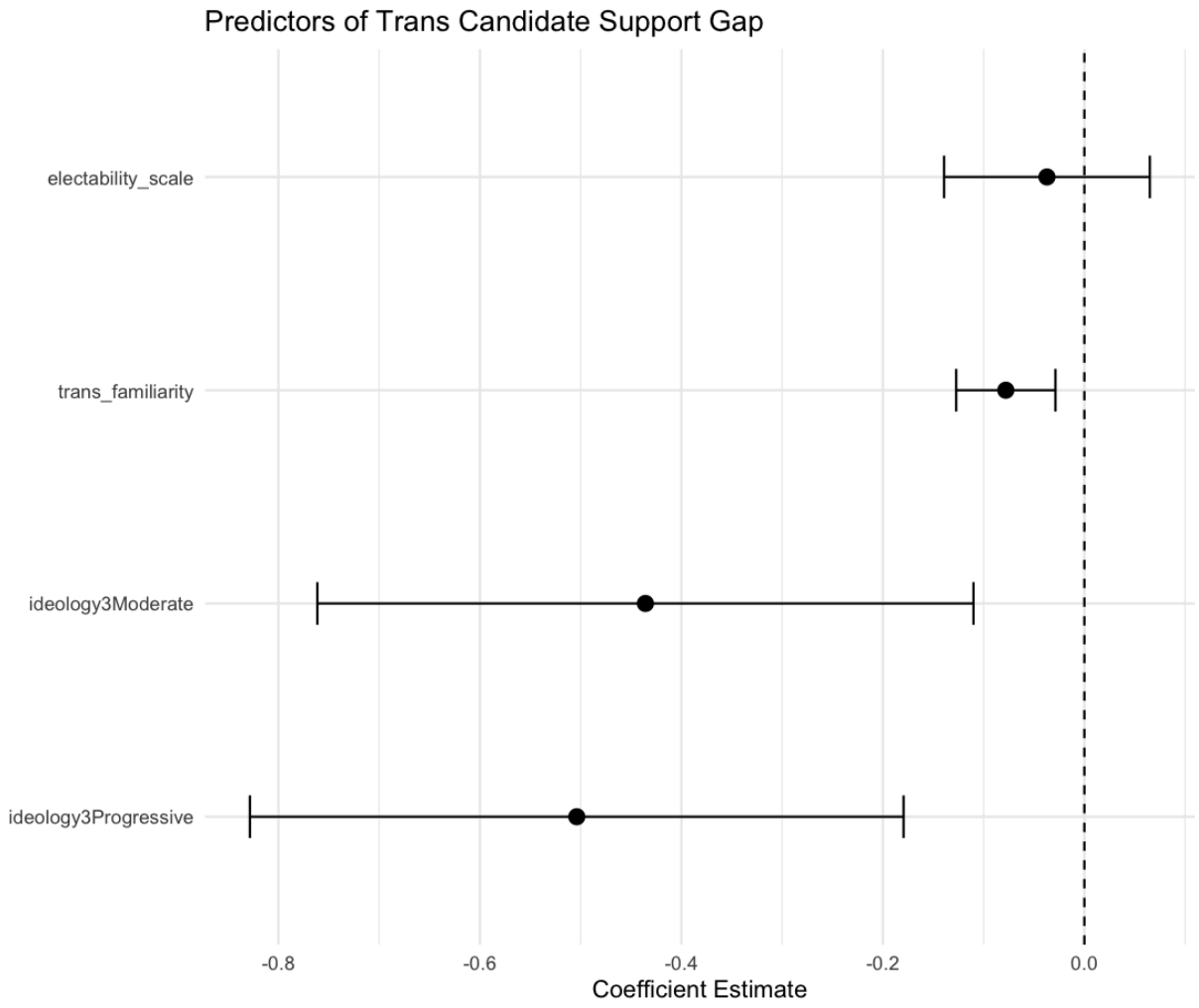


Figure A5. Predicted Transgender Candidate Support Gap by Political Ideology

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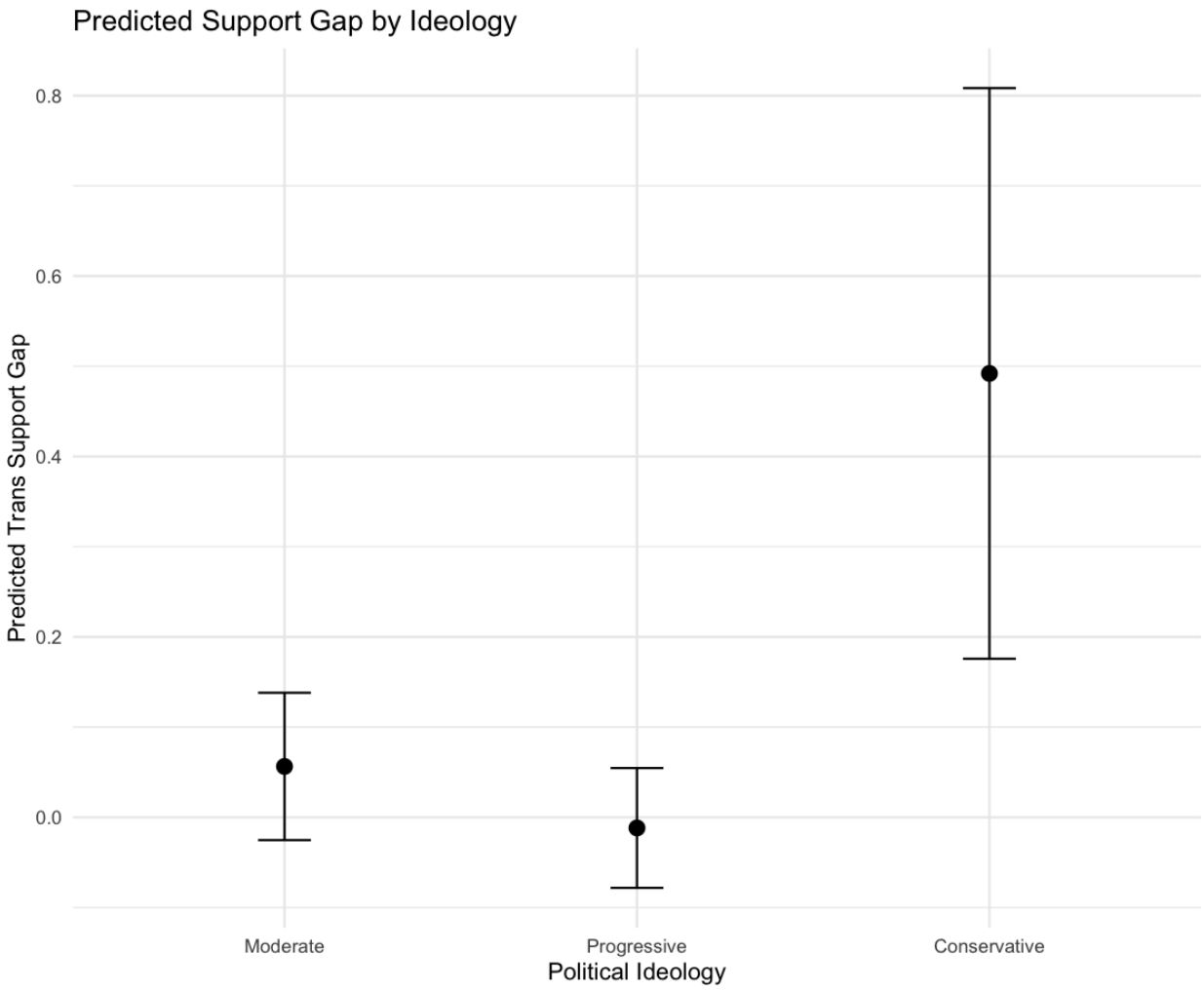


Figure A6. Effect of Familiarity with Transgender Individuals on Candidate Support Gaps

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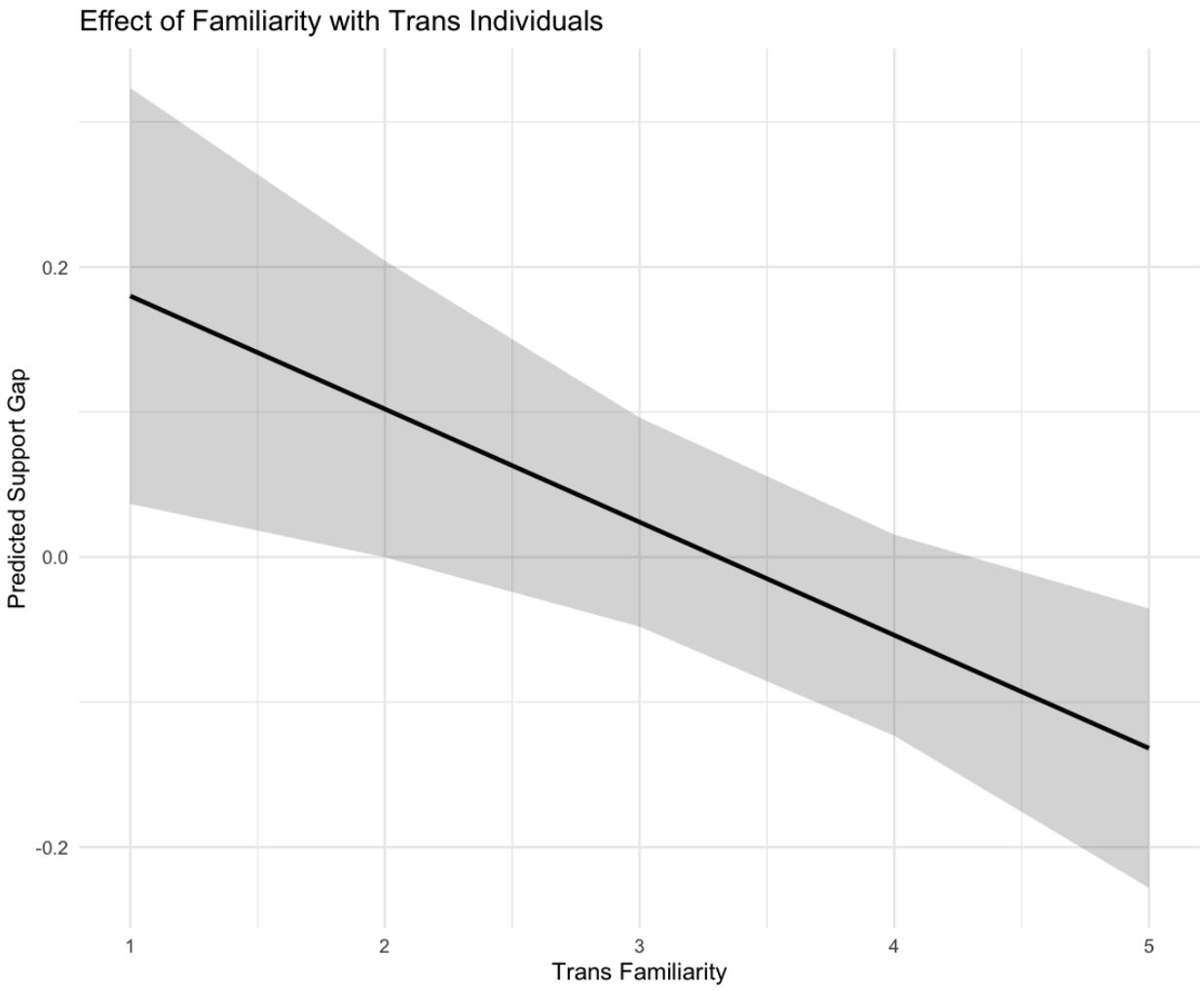
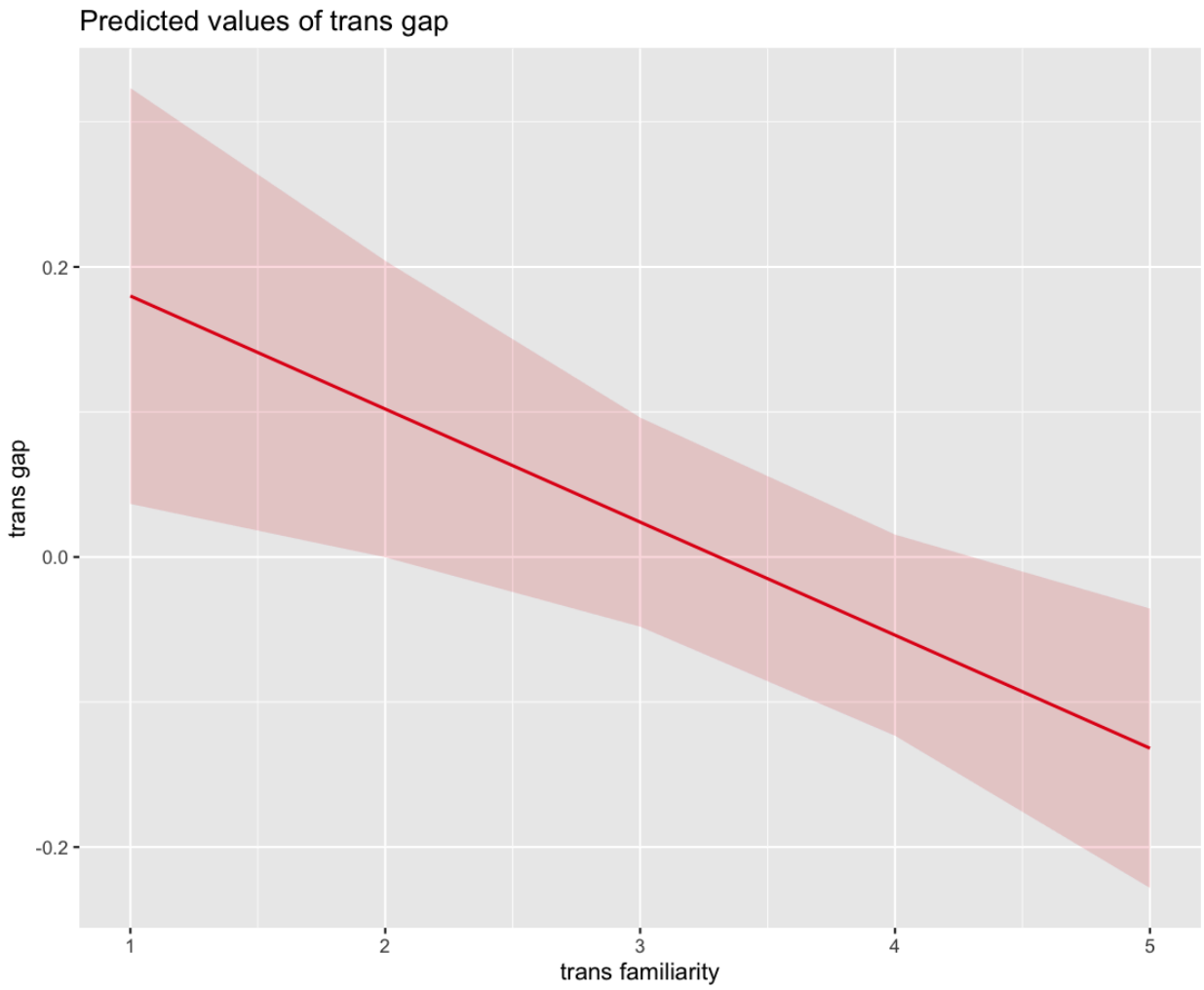


Figure A7. Predicted Values of the Transgender Candidate Support Gap by Familiarity

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