Running & OUTraising Expectations

Abstract

Research on LGBTQ political representation has largely focused on voter attitudes and electoral outcomes, overlooking the critical role of campaign finance in shaping who is able to run for office in the first place. Drawing on intersectionality theory, this study examines fundraising as a gatekeeping mechanism that structures political opportunity for LGBTQ candidates. Using campaign finance and electoral data from state legislative and congressional elections, I analyze patterns of candidate emergence, fundraising, competition, and electoral durability across LGBTQ candidates with attention to differences by race, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Findings reveal a paradox. LGBTQ candidates who enter races often demonstrate substantial fundraising strength, raising more than their non-LGBTQ opponents in many contests and achieving high electoral success rates. However, LGBTQ candidates remain extremely underrepresented among those who run, contesting less than one percent of state legislative seats. Within the LGBTQ candidate pool, significant disparities persist. White, cisgender, gay, and lesbian candidates generally raise more money than transgender, nonbinary, bisexual, pansexual, and many candidates of color. Once elected, LGBTQ incumbents exhibit exceptionally high reelection rates, suggesting that the primary barriers occur before candidates reach office rather than after. These findings support an intersectional understanding of political representation by demonstrating that fundraising networks, donor access, and perceptions of candidate viability operate as unequal filters that shape who can successfully enter electoral politics. The study argues that representation gaps are produced not only through voter behavior

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but also through the hidden financial and institutional structures that determine whose candidacies become viable.

Keywords: LGBTQ Candidates; Campaign Finance; Intersectionality; Candidate Emergence; Political Representation; State Legislatures; Fundraising; Electoral Politics.

People assume fundraising serves as a fair indicator of a candidate's true strength. We see money as a filter for viability, but that logic fails when you examine reality. Actually, networking defines success more than actual merit for most new hopefuls.

Access remains deeply unequal during every election cycle. Some individuals start with vast, wealthy social circles or self funding, while others possess nothing but grit. Success for them becomes nearly impossible without early help. That is the reality. Fundraising operates as an expensive, locked game.

Investigating LGBTQ candidates reveals hidden barriers preceding engagement. Scholars call this phase the invisible primary. Most existing studies favor voter attitudes, yet they completely ignore this earlier stage. Fundraising arrives first. It determines if a campaign gains actual momentum and gets off the ground. Actually, ignoring the financial gatekeepers creates a blind spot. Political outcomes are rarely neutral, so we must analyze how intersecting systems of inequality dictate success. Politicians deal with these harsh realities daily. Anne-Marie Hancock argued that status and wealth shift power dynamics before ballots are cast.

Research into LGBTQ candidates offers a clear lens for this case. Haider-Markel argues gay and lesbian running show growing competitiveness, yet broader political conditions define

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their eventual success. That realization makes uneven representation across districts feel predictable.

Focusing on initial campaign building proves more useful than just watching voter habits. Actually, modern candidates face deep institutional filters before reaching a ballot. Examining these early entry hurdles reveals why representation stays concentrated in specific areas. Analysts must start there to understand the full process instead of merely tracking election night results.

Navigating fundraising within LGBTQ circles reveals stark disparities. Wealthy donor networks often favor specific candidates, while others struggle from nothing. Bourdieu explained this disparity decades ago. Cohen noted that marginalized groups lack uniformity, creating power gaps that mirror wider societal divides. Imagine the difference between a white gay man launching a campaign versus a trans woman of color starting from zero. Intersectionality explains this chaos perfectly. Crenshaw taught us that systems of oppression overlap. Fundraising access remains skewed, favoring those already aligned with institutional gatekeepers. Professional connections determine who receives serious attention, early funding, and momentum. Bilge emphasizes that intersectionality examines how power structures access to resources rather than just listing identities.

Queer political theory complicates these perspectives further. Gambino argues that focusing on shared marginalization sometimes obscures the friction involved in coalition building. Different positions within the LGBTQ umbrella often lead to conflicting priorities. Nash explored these exact tensions, noting why forming unified political fronts remains elusive among differently situated individuals. These debates challenge traditional views on descriptive

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and substantive representation. Mansbridge questioned if having a shared identity truly guarantees aligned political outcomes. Campaigns exist within systems that dictate who gains traction and who fades away. Analyzing these power dynamics helps explain why the playing field stays tilted. Candidates are not just running against external forces but are navigating internal hierarchies that limit their reach. Every identity intersects with institutional bias, shaping real opportunities in ways that favor proximity to established capital. Success requires more than a platform or a banner. It demands a seat at the table that many are denied from the very beginning. Identifying these gaps requires honesty about privilege even within supposed allies. If things are actually going to change, you have to deal with how uneven all of this really is. Just pointing to identity categories isn't enough if the underlying conditions stay the same. Power tends to stay concentrated unless those barriers are addressed directly. Until then, access isn't really expanding in any meaningful way.

Intersectionality does not merely acknowledge that individuals possess unique attributes or distinct backgrounds. Examining how these differences dictate outcomes within campaign fundraising reveals a far more complex reality for those seeking office. Donors rarely evaluate candidates from a clean slate. They arrive with preconceived notions regarding viability and what constitutes a serious political contender. Such biases are anchored deeply in race, gender, class, or other systemic markers. Consequently, certain candidates align with these expectations seamlessly, while others face persistent hesitation from those holding the purse strings. Networks represent another layer of this uneven landscape. Everyone begins on different footing depending on their personal associations and professional history. Once these pieces converge, fundraising gaps cease appearing as random fluctuations. They instead reveal the predictable result of overlapping social identities. Access to major donor networks remains remarkably uneven across

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the political map. Candidates situated near dominant social groups automatically receive preference within these circles. Perceptions of viability, as highlighted by Dittmar 2015, dictate where money flows first. Donors invest heavily in figures who mirror familiar, traditional expectations of leadership. Reliance on specific contribution types creates further friction. High-dollar donors move differently through the system compared to small-dollar contributors, yet impacts vary sharply across race. Truth be told, systemic influence remains firmly locked within the hands of high-resource players. Martin Gilens demonstrated how power concentrates among the wealthy, leaving institutional resources gated behind exclusive, pre-existing networks. Some candidates enjoy natural proximity to these circles based on their background or specific identity, granting them a massive head start on early capital. Others encounter significant barriers immediately upon entry. To be honest, this process acts more like a rigorous gatekeeping mechanism than a neutral test of merit, as de Leon suggested in 2014. Institutional resources are simply not distributed in any fair or equitable fashion.

Shifting the focus reveals the underlying mechanics of modern political success. Most of the research looks at what voters think, but this is really about an earlier stage, when campaigns are just trying to get off the ground. That's where a lot of candidates struggle the most. When you look at it through an intersectional lens, it becomes pretty clear that even within marginalized groups, access to money isn't equal. Some candidates are able to raise what they need, others aren't, and it doesn't always have much to do with how qualified they are. Fundraising just doesn't map neatly onto competence. The real drivers involve who possesses pre-existing network access and who society deems worthy of immediate attention. Such dynamics define the structural barriers that hinder diverse candidates from getting their campaigns off the ground. By analyzing these specific entry points, we uncover why the path to

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public office remains obstructed for many talented people. Money follows influence, and influence follows established social proximity. Breaking this cycle requires acknowledging that the current financial machinery is built to perpetuate existing power structures rather than foster objective merit. If candidates cannot overcome these foundational, interconnected hurdles, their political viability often dies before the first vote is actually cast. Addressing these hurdles necessitates looking far beyond the ballot box to the hidden, early mechanics of wealth allocation.

Early-stage funding dictates who manages to launch a viable bid and who stalls at the gate. These dynamics stifle genuine representation. By ignoring the early hurdles inherent in campaign finance, we fail to recognize how candidates are vetted long before they reach the general public. Money dictates movement. When money flows through narrow channels of privilege, the entire democratic project suffers from diminished potential and reduced diversity. Those shaping the political landscape act as auditors of acceptability, weighing a candidate's worth based on how well they mirror current power structures. Breaking this cycle requires acknowledging that the barrier to entry is rarely about individual effort or the specific platform offered to voters. It resides in the architecture of the fundraising system itself. Everything depends on that first check.

Grouping all LGBTQ candidates into a single category ignores basic reality. Individual lives diverge wildly based on race, gender, and economic status, which directly dictates how anyone navigates the political sphere. White cisgender gay men consistently secure support with greater ease than their peers. Accounting for these internal variations is mandatory if we want to understand electoral outcomes.

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Intersectionality dismantles the myth of a uniform queer political experience. Foundational work from the Combahee River Collective confirmed decades ago that marginalized communities contain deep internal divisions regarding power and visibility. Contemporary research mirrors this, proving that white cisgender gay men navigate donor pipelines with more success than others.

Fundraising acts as an excellent barometer for these systemic discrepancies. It reveals hidden barriers regarding who belongs in viable donor networks and who remains outside. Ange-Marie Hancock defines intersectionality as the study of overlapping inequalities that dictate political survival, while Cathy Cohen highlights the hierarchies festering within minority groups themselves. Applied to current campaigns, these theories show that LGBTQ candidates rarely start on equal footing when soliciting funds or proving viability to institutional backers.

Money flows through social capital. Candidates occupying positions closer to traditional power structures tap into high-value donor networks effortlessly. Conversely, those falling outside these norms fight for scraps. Hazel Carby correctly noted that our collective ideas about a real candidate are often constrained by old racial and gendered biases. Donors react to these ghosts. It shapes the entire flow of capital, ultimately determining which campaigns live or die.

Inequality begins long before election day polling. If access to funding is built upon these skewed systems, fundraising gaps emerge early in the cycle. The playing field is rigged from the opening whistle. Candidates positioned within the right inner circles build competitive operations while others scramble. This isn't just about cash. It is about who can afford to play the game in the first place.

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Broader representation suffers when these pipelines remain locked. Scholars like Lawrence Bobo and Franklin Gilliam demonstrated that having diverse leaders in office changes how citizens view government and civic duty. However, those positive shifts remain theoretical if the candidates never actually reach the ballot box. Uneven access creates a filter that removes specific people from consideration before the public even gets a vote.

Systemic hurdles determine who rises. If we cannot fix the funding bottlenecks, we effectively keep the political establishment exclusive by default. Determining who wins depends on who gets funded, and current donor structures actively discourage diverse participation. Asking who wins is only half the battle. We also need to ask who survives the primary gatekeeping to run a legitimate campaign at all. Achieving true representation remains impossible while these hidden barriers govern the starting line. Change requires acknowledging that the current donor system acts as a barrier to equitable politics for everyone involved in these marginalized groups. Ignoring the money side means ignoring the problem entirely. That is the reality.

There's a pretty clear consensus in the literature that money plays a big role in whether someone wins. Work like Jacobson (1990) and Levitt (1994) basically shows that candidates who raise more, especially compared to their opponent, are much more likely to come out ahead. At the same time, research on political ambition, like Schlesinger (1966) and Lawless and Fox (2010), makes the point that not everyone even gets to the starting line. Who ends up running in the first place isn't random, it's shaped by a lot of structural factors. When you put that together with what we see around fundraising and early campaign support, it starts to look like the real inequality shows up earlier than we usually focus on. It's not just about how campaigns play out, but whether people even see running as an option at all. Work on candidate emergence points to

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the same thing. There are all these institutional barriers that quietly shape who gets into the race long before any votes are cast.

. Kira Sanbonmatsu demonstrate that recruitment, party networks, and institutional backing act as heavy filters for aspiring officeholders. Access to donor money serves as a gatekeeping mechanism that dictates who survives the preliminary stages of electoral warfare. Actually, political structures are rarely neutral entities. They actively engineer the environment, handpicking those who receive encouragement or funding while leaving others behind. Truth be told, systemic inequalities trigger well before any formal campaign gains real momentum. It is what it is.

Focusing on these infancy stages remains the primary goal of this investigation. Fundraising is where a lot of the gap really shows up, and it hits LGBTQ candidates hard. But it's not just about sexuality, race and gender shape this too. Jennifer Lawless makes the point that women aren't opting out because they lack ability. It's more about the environment. If people don't feel like they belong in politics in the first place, they're less likely to jump in, regardless of how qualified they are.

Entry barriers materialize when an individual first whispers to themselves, can I actually do this? When donor networks rely almost exclusively on established social circles, those who exist outside of traditional archetypes face an uphill climb that never truly ends. Representation gaps are not merely products of Election Day outcomes; they are built into the bedrock of candidate recruitment processes.

Candidates positioned near dominant sociopolitical groups naturally possess a smoother path toward securing critical fundraising lifelines. Marginalized individuals sitting at the

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intersection of various identity markers encounter compounded obstacles that stifle their mobilization efforts. Political careers depend on structural opportunity as much as personal ambition. Schlesinger once articulated this reality quite clearly, suggesting that ambition is not the only engine driving legislative careers. Broadening this scope, Andrew Reynolds highlighted that recent gains for LGBTQ officials remain heavily fragmented and dependent on specific institutional climates. Geographical concentration of such representation indicates that systemic biases start deep within the party infrastructure, far away from the reach of ordinary voters.

Expectations regarding these dynamics are quite specific. Fundamentally, structural hierarchies imply that LGBTQ candidates generally endure disparities compared to their non-LGBTQ peers. Within this specific group, those aligned with dominant racial or gender categories will inevitably show stronger fundraising capacity. Relative position within the donor network serves as a much stronger indicator of winning than raw financial totals. Finally, the barrier to entry remains the most punishing phase of the lifecycle. Incumbency serves as a stabilizer here, effectively cutting down these disparities provided that the candidate manages to win that first seat. The process is rigged for the comfortable.

Understanding these mechanics requires a shift in focus away from general election metrics. We must evaluate how elite networks filter talent and deny resources to those who deviate from the norm. If the system relies on gatekeepers to determine who counts as a viable seeker of power, the outcome is inevitably skewed. Equality in representation is missing. Those who control the flow of capital dictate the boundaries of democracy itself. Shifting the spotlight to the early stages of recruitment allows us to see how the deck is stacked from the very beginning. Disparities in funding are the symptoms, but the structure remains the actual disease.

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Ignoring these early checkpoints makes meaningful change impossible to achieve in any sustainable or meaningful way.

Part 1: Candidate Emergence

The most striking result of my analysis of campaign finance disclosure records across fifty states is that LGBTQ candidates often far surpass their opponents in fundraising at the individual race level and in the aggregate, a counterintuitive finding that shows an unusual sign of strength from a historically marginalized community. In 2024, LGBTQ candidates raised over $170M compared to $80M raised by their opponents. Notably, there is an average $427K difference in fundraising across all the races, pointing to significant competitive advantages for the well-funded. That's more than double the amount of funds raised by LGBTQ candidates compared to their opponents, an undeniable advantage. Lawless finds that for the category of women, they have been just as successful in fundraising as men, and my findings are consistent with this trend (Lawless, 2010). This tracks the classic findings from Gary Jacobson (1990), who shows that relative fundraising advantage strongly predicts electoral outcomes. If fundraising reflects unequal access to political networks rather than neutral candidate strength, then disparities should be most visible at the point of candidate emergence. In particular, candidates with greater proximity to elite networks should exhibit early financial advantages, even before voter behavior becomes relevant. At first glance, this pattern appears to contradict expectations of structural disadvantage. However, from an intersectional perspective, this may reflect selective emergence rather than equal access. Candidates who are able to run may already be those with stronger network ties or access to nationalized donor bases, while others are filtered out before entering the race. In this sense, observed fundraising strength may mask deeper inequalities at the entry stage.

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Figure 1. Total Fundraising by Candidate LGBTQ Status

LGBTQ Candidate Fundraising	Non-LGBTQ Candidate Fundraising
$170,894,218	80,112,585

This advantage holds for both winning and losing candidates. Among winners, LGBTQ candidates raise slightly more on average than their non-LGBTQ counterparts ($758,843 compared to $752,603). Among losing candidates, the gap is much larger: LGBTQ candidates raise $907,061 on average, compared to just $277,161 for non-LGBTQ candidates.

Figure 2. Fundraising Advantage and Electoral Outcomes

LGBTQ Candidate Outraising Non-LGBTQ Candidates	
Winners	90%
Losers	52%

This pattern suggests a few different possibilities. One is that LGBTQ candidates may need to meet a higher fundraising threshold to be seen as viable in the first place. Another is that some candidates are able to draw on strong, identity-based donor networks that provide a built-in base of support. At the same time, in 84 of the 174 races where LGBTQ candidates won, their opponents either spent nothing or ran unopposed. This raises the possibility that strong fundraising may deter challengers, or that these candidates are running in particularly favorable districts.

Looking more directly at relative fundraising reinforces how important this dynamic is. LGBTQ candidates who outraise their opponents win over 91 percent of the time. When they do

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not outraise their opponent, the win rate drops to about 63 percent. That gap highlights a core point from the campaign finance literature: what matters most is not how much candidates raise in absolute terms, but how they compare to their opponents (Levitt 1994). At the same time, the fact that win rates remain relatively high even without a fundraising advantage suggests that money is not the only factor shaping electoral success.

Figure 3. Distribution of LGBTQ Candidates Across Districts

Outraised Opponents and Won	91.3%
Did not outraise opponent and Win	62.8%

LGBTQ candidates are running in a really small share of districts to begin with. Out of more than 7,000 state legislative seats, only about 217 include an LGBTQ candidate, that's less than one percent. Almost every district has none. That points to a bigger issue earlier on. The problem isn't just winning elections, it's getting on the ballot at all.

Figure 4. Distribution of LGBTQ Candidates Across District

Where LGBTQ Candidates Compete?	
Districts Contested	217 (0.29%)
Districts Uncontested	7,169 (99.71%)
Total Seats	7,386

. This twelve year age gap suggests that LGBTQ candidates are entering politics earlier in their careers, which may reflect generational shifts in openness around identity. The bulk of LGBTQ legislators are millenials, and came of age during a transformative period of time for the

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LGBTQ rights movement with marriage equality and growing public acceptance (Reynolds 2013).

Figure 5. Age Differences Between LGBTQ Candidates and State Legislators

Age	
LGBTQ Candidates	44
Average Age (State Legislators)	56

LGBTQ candidates are not evenly distributed across regions. The Midwest (27%), West (26%), and Northeast (25%) each account for roughly a quarter of all candidacies, while the South lags behind at 16%. The Mid-Atlantic represents only a very small share at about 0.5%.

This pattern suggests that LGBTQ candidates are less concentrated in the South, but not limited to traditionally liberal regions. The Midwest, in particular, stands out as a somewhat unexpected center of activity, pointing to a broader geographic spread than is often assumed. At the same time, the lower presence in the South likely reflects ongoing structural or political barriers that make entry more difficult in that region.

Figure 6. Geographic Distribution of LGBTQ Candidates

Region	
Region	Number of Candidates
Mid-Atlantic	11 (0.5%)
Northeast	55 (25%)
West	57 (26%)
Midwest	58 (27%)

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South	36 (16%)

At the congressional level, the pattern looks a bit different. LGBTQ candidates are actually raising quite a bit more than non-LGBTQ candidates. On average, LGBTQ candidates for the U.S. House bring in about $787,530, while non-LGBTQ candidates raise around $369,182. That's more than double.

This goes against the idea that LGBTQ candidates are always at a financial disadvantage. Instead, it suggests that at least in some races, they may be able to tap into strong donor networks, national fundraising support, or issue-based backing that helps them stay competitive.

Figure 7. Average Fundraising in U.S. House Races by LGBTQ Status

U.S. House LGBTQ Fundraising (Average)	**U.S. House Non-LGBTQ Fundraising (Average)**
$787,530.00	$369,182.00

There are some differences in how much candidates raise depending on how they identify, but it's not a totally clean pattern. Overall, LGBTQ candidates are raising more than straight candidates, about $787K on average compared to around $360K. But once you look within the LGBTQ group, it varies quite a bit. Lesbians and gay men are at the higher end, a little over $500K on average, while candidates who identify as bisexual, pansexual, or queer are much lower, usually under $200K.

That could be about networks, or just who donors are more familiar with. Some candidates might have easier access to established donor circles, while others are trying to build

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support without those same connections. So even though LGBTQ candidates as a whole can raise a lot, that doesn't mean everyone within that group is starting from the same place.

Work in queer of color critique gets at this in a different way. There are still pretty strong ideas about what a "serious" candidate looks like, and people who fit that mold tend to have an easier time getting support. Others aren't necessarily shut out, but they can run into more hesitation, from donors, parties, or even voters, which makes it harder to build momentum (Cohen 1997; Ferguson 2004).

Section 2: Competition

Figure 8. Fundraising Variation by Sexual Orientation

Fundraising by Sexuality	
Sexuality	**Raised**
Bisexual	$158,303
Gay	$559,734
Lesbian	$584,186
Queer	$132,836
Pansexual	$163,451
Straight	$752,603

Fundraising also varies by gender identity among LGBTQ candidates. Cisgender women raise the most on average, just over $1 million, followed by cisgender men at around $750K. Transgender candidates come in lower, at about $600K, and non-binary or gender nonconforming candidates are much lower still, under $100K.

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Some groups seem to have an easier time bringing in money than others. That said, these differences don't line up perfectly with who wins. Win rates are pretty high across the board, which suggests that a lot of these candidates are running in places where the broader political environment is already working in their favor. Recent work also suggests that transgender candidates face distinct barriers tied to visibility and institutional legitimacy, even within broader LGBTQ political gains (Flores, 2021).

Taken together, this points to uneven access to resources, even within the LGBTQ candidate pool. Some candidates are just better positioned to raise money, likely because of the kinds of networks they have access to .As Patricia Hill Collins argues, access to resources is shaped through overlapping systems of power rather than distributed evenly. Applied here, that suggests fundraising differences are not just about individual candidates, but about where they are positioned within those broader structures. Some candidates are closer to the kinds of networks that make campaigns viable, while others are not, and that shows up in who is able to raise money early on.=

Figure 9. Fundraising Variation by Gender Identity

Fundraising by Gender Identity	
Gender	**Raised**
Cis-Male	$749,294
Cis-Female	$1,004,312
Transgender	$599,742
Non-Binary/Genderqueer/Gender Nonconforming	$68,748

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Fundraising also varies quite a bit by race among LGBTQ candidates. White candidates raise the most on average, around $946K, followed by Black candidates at about $804K and Asian candidates at roughly $551K. Latinx candidates are lower, around $270K, and multiracial and Native American candidates are much lower still.

This striking gap likely reflects differences in access to donor networks and resources, not just candidate effort. At the same time, these gaps don't seem to translate directly into who wins. Win rates are actually pretty high across different groups, which suggests a lot of candidates are running in places where they already have a decent shot. That lines up with what Kelly Dittmar points out, ideas about who "looks like" a viable candidate still shape who gets taken seriously and who gets support early on. There's no reason to think that only applies to gender.

When you put everything together, it starts to look like access to resources isn't evenly distributed, even within the LGBTQ candidate pool. Some candidates come in with more support, especially when it comes to fundraising, while others don't. And those gaps seem to reflect broader patterns of inequality rather than anything about the candidates themselves. It's similar to what Deborah King describes as "multiple jeopardy," where different layers of disadvantage stack on top of each other and shape who actually has a shot.

Figure 10. Fundraising Variation by Race

Fundraising by Race	
Race	**Raised**
White	$946,389
Latinx	$269,582

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Black	$804,584
Asian	$551,044
Multiracial	$118,857
Native American	$30,674

But once you break things down by office and outcome, the picture gets a bit more complicated. At the state legislative level, LGBTQ candidates who win actually raise less than non-LGBTQ winners, about $169K compared to $229K. A similar pattern shows up in U.S. House races, where winning LGBTQ candidates bring in around $3.8 million, while their opponents raise over $5.3 million. So even when they win, they're often doing it with fewer resources.

What stands out the most, though, is that losing LGBTQ candidates raise a lot, on average about $6.2 million, which is more than winning candidates. That suggests money on its own isn't enough to overcome whatever barriers they're facing. It could also be that LGBTQ candidates are more likely to run in tougher or more competitive races, where you need a lot of money just to stay in the game.

Work by Yalidy Matos (2016) also shows that candidate identity shapes how political actors are interpreted, particularly for candidates of color. These kinds of perceptions are not separate from institutional processes they can influence who is seen as viable and who receives support early on. Research on racial and ethnic representation also suggests that candidate entry is shaped by the political environment, not just individual resources. Research on candidate emergence also shows that who runs is shaped by political context as much as individual resources (Shah 2010). Shah finds that race and local political conditions influence when

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candidates from marginalized groups are likely to enter races at all. That perspective helps explain why LGBTQ candidates in this dataset are concentrated in certain types of districts, and suggests that inequalities may be built into where candidates are able to compete, not just how they fundraise once they do.

LGBTQ candidates clearly can raise significant funds, especially in higher-profile races, but that money doesn't always translate into wins in the same way. It points to a situation where resources matter, but where access, context, and the kind of race a candidate is in matter just as much.

Figure 11. Average Fundraising Differences Between LGBTQ and Non-LGBTQ Incumbents

Incumbency Status	
LGBT Incumbent	**Non LGBT Incumbent**
$821,410	$732,729

The gap in re-election rates really stands out. LGBTQ incumbents are re-elected about 96 percent of the time, compared to just over 50 percent for non-LGBTQ incumbents. That's a huge difference. Once LGBTQ candidates win and become incumbents, they seem to be very secure in their seats.

This suggests that whatever barriers exist are mostly happening earlier, before candidates ever get elected. Once they're in office, those obstacles don't seem to matter in the same way. In that sense, it lines up with Mayhew's (1974) argument about how powerful incumbency is in shaping electoral outcomes.

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Taken together, it points to a pretty clear pattern: the biggest hurdle is getting in the door. After that, LGBTQ candidates appear just as viable, if not more so, than others. That reinforces the idea that the main constraint on representation isn't voter behavior as much as it is access to the resources and opportunities needed to run in the first place.

Section 3: Representational Durability

Figure 12. Re-Election Rates by LGBTQ Status

Re-Election Rates	
LGBTQ Incumbents	95.77%
Non-LGBTQ Incumbents	50.66%

Win rates are pretty high across the board, but there are still some differences by race. In this dataset, multiracial candidates won all of their races, while Black candidates won about 90 percent and Latinx candidates just under that, around 86 percent. Asian candidates also did well, at roughly 82 percent. White candidates still have high win rates, but they're the lowest of the group at about 78 percent.

So overall, candidates of color in this sample aren't underperforming at the ballot box. If anything, they're often doing just as well or better than white LGBTQ candidates. That points back to the earlier argument, whatever barriers exist seem to be happening before the election itself. Once candidates make it onto the ballot and into viable races, those gaps appear to shrink quite a bit.

Figure 13. Win Rates by Race

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LGBTQ Candidate Win Rates by Race	
Race	Win Rate
Black	90%
Latinx	85.7%
Asian	81.8%
Multiracial	100%
Native American	100%

Win rates don't vary that much across sexuality, though there are some small differences. Lesbian candidates have the highest win rate, just over 84 percent, followed closely by gay candidates at around 83 percent. Queer candidates are a bit lower, at about 80 percent, and bisexual candidates come in slightly below that, around 78 percent. Pansexual candidates have the lowest win rate, about 75 percent, but there are fewer cases there, so it's harder to say much with confidence.

Overall, the gaps aren't huge, but there is some indication that bisexual and pansexual candidates may face slightly more difficulty at the ballot box compared to gay and lesbian candidates.

Figure 14. Win Rates by Sexual Orientation

Win Rates by Sexuality	
Sexual Orientation	Win Rate
Gay	82.6%
Lesbian	84.1%
Bisexual	78.3%

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Queer	80%

Win rates are pretty high across all gender identities, though there are some differences. Cisgender women have the highest win rate at about 84 percent, followed by cisgender men at around 80 percent. Transgender candidates are a bit lower, at roughly 76 percent, and non-binary candidates are lower still, at about 73 percent.

Figure 15. Win Rates by Gender Identity

Win Rates by Gender	
Gender Identity	Win Rate
Cis-Male	80.4%
Cis-Female	83.9%
Trans	76.5%
Non-Binary	72.7%

Uncontested elections make up a pretty large share of state legislative races overall, about 38 percent of seats. But in races with LGBTQ candidates, that number drops to around 21 percent. That suggests LGBTQ candidates are less likely to run in, or benefit from, uncontested races and are more often facing at least some level of competition.

Figure 16. Uncontested Elections and Candidate Presence

Uncontested Elections	
State Legislative Seats (Overall)	38%
Races with LGBTQ Candidates	21.2%

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The donor numbers point to something similar. LGBTQ candidates, on average, have way more donors, around 17,000 compared to just over 3,000 for non-LGBTQ candidates. At first, that makes it seem like they're doing really well in terms of building support.

Winning LGBTQ candidates actually have fewer donors on average, around 13,000, while losing candidates are closer to 40,000. So just having more donors doesn't necessarily mean better outcomes.

That probably says something about the type of support candidates are getting. Some might have smaller networks that are more connected or more useful in campaigns, while others are pulling in a lot of smaller contributions that don't go as far. So it's not just the number of donors, it's what those networks actually look like and how they function.

Figure 17. Average Number of Donors by Candidate Type and Outcome

Average Number of Donors (U.S. House)	
LGBTQ Candidates	17,082
Non-LGBTQ Candidates	3,156
Winning LGBTQ Candidates	13,273
Non-Winning LGBTQ Candidates	39,936

The average donation for LGBTQ candidates is way lower, around $343, while other candidates are getting something like $4,000 per donor. So it's not that people aren't giving, it's just a totally different scale.

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They're basically piecing it together from a lot of smaller donations instead of leaning on a few big ones. And there's definitely interest, over 239,000 donations in 2024 is a lot, so it's not like people don't care.

Figure 18. Average Contribution Size by Candidate Type

Average Donation Size (U.S. House)	
LGBTQ Candidates	$343.39
Non-LGBTQ Candidates	$4,006.44
Winning LGBTQ Candidates	$344.24
Non-Winning LGBTQ Candidates	$338.33

Looking at where the money is coming from gives a clearer sense of how candidates are plugged into different networks. For LGBTQ candidates, support is split pretty evenly between elite sectors like finance and law and more ideological sources, both show up as the top source in about 43 percent of cases. Working-class sectors make up a much smaller share.

For non-LGBTQ candidates, the pattern leans more heavily toward elite networks. About half have finance or law as their main source of support, compared to around 36 percent for ideological sectors.

So it's not that LGBTQ candidates don't have access to elite donors, they clearly do. But they don't seem to rely on them in the same way. Instead, their support is spread across different types of networks. That's a slightly different position to be in. Non-LGBTQ candidates look more consistently tied into high-dollar networks, while LGBTQ candidates seem to draw from a mix of sources.

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That difference probably matters. It suggests that access isn't the only issue, how central those networks are to a campaign also varies. Some candidates are more anchored in elite circles, while others are pulling support from multiple places without one dominant base.

Figure 19. Primary Donor Sectors by Candidate Type

Fundraising by Sector (Congressional)		
	LGBTQ Candidates	**Non-LGBTQ Candidates**
Elite Sectors (i.e finance and law)	42.9%	50%
Ideology	42.9%	35.7%
Working Class Sectors	14.3%	14.3%

LGBTQ candidates are averaging around 55% of the vote, so they're not struggling to compete when they're in a race. Altogether it comes out to a little over 11 million votes, about 51,000 per race. But even with that, it's still a really small share of the electorate overall, something like 0.7% of registered voters. And when they win, they usually win pretty comfortably. The average margin is around 36 points, so these aren't close races. So it's not that they can't win. It just looks like most of those wins are happening in places where they already have an advantage. They're not really breaking through in tighter races as much.

Figure 20. Electoral Performance of LGBTQ Candidates

LGBTQ Raw Voteshare (Average)	**Average LGBTQ Margin of Victory**	**Average LGBTQ Candidate Percent of Vote**	**Votes for LGBTQ Candidates**
51,188	36.13%	54.8%	11,005,381

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Looking at district composition helps explain a lot of what's going on. LGBTQ candidates tend to run in much more Democratic areas, on average, about 66 percent of voters are registered Democrats in those districts, compared to around 48 percent in districts without LGBTQ candidates.

That suggests these candidates are more likely to emerge in places where the political environment is already favorable. It helps make sense of the high win rates and large margins, those outcomes aren't just about the candidates themselves, but also about where they're running.

It also points to a pretty clear constraint. LGBTQ candidates seem to have a harder time in less Democratic areas. In fact, only about 7 percent of wins happen in districts where Democrats make up less than half of registered voters. That starts to look like a kind of floor, below that, it's much harder to win, which likely shapes who decides to run in the first place.

Figure 21. Partisan Composition of Districts with LGBTQ Candidates

Democratic Composition	
% Dem Registered Voters (LGBTQ Districts)	66.09%
% Dem Registered Voters (Non-LGBTQ Districts)	47.74%

Race competitiveness also leans pretty heavily toward less competitive elections. Only about 11 percent of races with LGBTQ candidates are decided by five points or less, and another 14 percent fall within ten points. About one-fifth are somewhat competitive, with margins between ten and twenty points.

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But most races aren't especially close. Around a third are decided by margins between twenty and forty points, and another 21 percent are landslides of more than forty points.

So overall, LGBTQ candidates are usually running in races that aren't that competitive. Close elections are relatively rare, which again points to candidates emerging in places where the broader conditions are already working in their favor.

Figure 22. Electoral Competitiveness in Races with LGBTQ Candidates

Race Competitiveness	
Highly Competitive (0-5 pts)	11.5%
Competitive (5-10 pts)	13.9%
Moderately Competitive (10-20 pts)	20.1%
Safe (20-40 pts)	33.2%
Landslide (40+ pts)	21.3%

LGBTQ candidates also tend to win in more diverse districts. On average, the districts where they win are about 39 percent nonwhite, compared to roughly 26 percent in districts where they lose.

What stands out is how close the winning districts are to the national average, which is about 41 percent nonwhite. The losing districts, by contrast, are much more heavily white.

That suggests diversity isn't just background context, it's playing a role in shaping where LGBTQ candidates are more likely to succeed. Put more simply, they tend to do better in districts that look more like the country as a whole, and struggle more in places that don't.

Figure 23. Minority in Composition in Districts with LGBTQ Candidates

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Minority Composition	
Districts where LGBTQ Candidates won	39.01%
Districts where LGBTQ Candidates Lost	25.65%
Non-White U.S. Population	40.7%

Margins of victory are strong across all racial groups, but candidates of color tend to win by a bit more. Multiracial candidates have the largest average margin, just over 40 percent, followed by Black candidates at around 39 percent. Latinx and Asian candidates also win comfortably, generally in the mid to high 30s. White candidates have the smallest margins, at about 35 percent, though those are still solid wins. So when candidates of color win, they're often doing so by fairly wide margins rather than in close races.

Figure 24. Average Margin of Victory by Candidate Race

Average Margin of Victory by Race	
Race	**Margin**
White	34.8%
Black	38.6%
Latinx	36.9%
Asian	35.7%
Multiracial	40.2%

Margins of victory are strong across groups, though there are some differences by sexuality. Lesbian candidates tend to win by the largest margins, a little over 38 percent on average. Gay and queer candidates are in the mid-30s, while bisexual candidates are slightly lower, around 34 percent. Pansexual candidates have the smallest margins, just under 32 percent.

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The gaps aren't huge, but they do suggest that some groups are winning a bit more decisively than others once they're on the ballot.

Figure 25. Average Margin of Victory by Candidate Sexuality

Average Margin of Victory by Sexuality	
Sexual Orientation	Margin of Victory
Lesbian	38.4%
Gay	35.6%
Queer	34.9%
Bisexual	33.7%
Pansexual	31.8%

There are some differences in how decisively candidates win across gender identity. Cisgender women have the largest average margins, a little over 38 percent, followed by cisgender men at around 36 percent. Transgender candidates win by somewhat smaller margins, about 33 percent, and non-binary candidates are a bit lower still, around 32 percent.

The differences aren't huge, but they do suggest that candidates outside more traditional gender categories tend to be in slightly closer races, even when they win.

Figure 26. Average Margin of Victory by Candidate Gender Identity

Average Margin of Victory by Gender	
Gender Identity	Margin of Victory

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Cis Female	38.1%
Cis Male	35.9%
Transgender	33.4%
Non-Binary	31.6%

Most LGBTQ candidates in this dataset come from public service-type backgrounds. Government roles make up about 19 percent, followed by education at around 17 percent, nonprofit work at 16 percent, and law at about 15 percent. Together, those four categories account for well over half of the sample. Business backgrounds are less common, around 11 percent, and healthcare makes up about 8 percent. Other fields, like finance, media, and real estate, barely show up at all.

So there's a pretty clear pattern here. LGBTQ candidates are much more likely to come out of advocacy, policy, and service-oriented work than from traditional private sector paths.

Win rates vary a bit more by occupation than some of the other categories. Candidates with government experience do the best, winning close to 88 percent of the time. Those from education, nonprofit, and legal backgrounds are all fairly similar, with win rates in the low to mid-80s. Candidates from business backgrounds are a bit lower, around 75 percent, and healthcare is slightly below that. The lowest win rates show up among candidates with campaign or consulting backgrounds, at around two-thirds.

Overall, candidates with more direct experience in public service seem to have a clearer path to winning than those coming from outside those spaces.

Figure 27. Candidate Professional Background and Electoral Success

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Profession	% of Candidates	Win Rate
Law	15.2%	81.8%
Business	11.1%	75%
Healthcare	7.8%	76.6%
Government	18.9%	87.8%
Non-Profit	15.7%	82.4%
Politics	5.5%	66.7%
Education	17.5%	84.2%

Fundraising also looks pretty different depending on what candidates did before running. People coming from law or business tend to raise the most, and those with government experience are usually not far behind. After that it kind of drops off, healthcare and political professionals are somewhere in the middle, and candidates from nonprofit or education backgrounds are generally raising less.

At the lower end, there are candidates from areas like media or religion, but there just aren't that many of them, and the numbers are a lot smaller.

So part of this probably just comes down to where people are coming from. Candidates from higher-paying or more connected fields seem to have an easier time raising money, while those coming out of more service-oriented work don't have the same kind of access.

Figure 28. Fundraising by Candidate Profession

Fundraising by Profession	
Profession	Funds Raised

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Law	$412.580
Business	$368,441
Government	$331,207
Healthcare	$294,118
Politics	$276,552
Non Profit	$241,903
Education	$198,774

Section 4: Efficiency

Cost per vote also varies a bit across groups. On average, LGBTQ candidates spend a little over six dollars per vote, but candidates of color tend to be more efficient. Multiracial, Asian, Latinx, and Black candidates all come in below that average, while white candidates are a bit higher.

You see something similar with gender. Transgender and nonbinary candidates seem to get more out of each dollar compared to cis candidates. The differences across sexuality aren't as big, but lesbian candidates do seem to have slightly lower costs per vote than gay candidates.

So even when some groups are raising less money overall, they may be using it more effectively. It's not just about how much is raised, but how well those resources actually translate into votes.

Figure 29. Cost Per Vote by Candidate Type

Cost Per Vote	
LGBTQ Candidates	$6.14

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Win rates go up pretty clearly as fundraising increases. Candidates raising under $100,000 win about 69 percent of the time, which is still fairly high but lower than the rest. Once candidates get into the $100,000 to $500,000 range, win rates jump to over 80 percent. It goes up again for those raising between $500,000 and $1 million, and candidates bringing in more than $1 million win over 90 percent of their races.

So the pattern is pretty straightforward, more money is linked to a higher chance of winning. At the same time, it's worth noting that candidates can still be competitive even at lower fundraising levels.

Figure 30. Win Rates by Fundraising Level

Fundraising Tier	
Under $100K	68.9%
$100-$500K	81.7%
$500K-$1M	88.5%
Over $1M	93.2%

To get at how well candidates are actually turning resources into results, I put together a simple Electoral Efficiency Index. It combines win rate, margin of victory, and cost per vote by multiplying win rate and margin, then dividing by cost per vote. The idea is just to get a rough sense of how much electoral strength candidates are generating per dollar spent. Using this measure, LGBTQ candidates in this dataset score about 0.048 (or 4.8 when scaled), which suggests they're generally pretty effective at turning resources into wins and comfortable margins.

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When you break it down, some patterns stand out. Candidates of color tend to be more efficient overall, with multiracial candidates especially high, followed by Black, Latinx, and Asian candidates. White candidates come in lower on this measure. You see something similar across gender and sexuality, though the differences aren't as big. Cisgender women and lesbian candidates are a bit higher, while cis men and bisexual candidates are slightly lower.

Taken together, it suggests that even though some groups may be raising less money, they're often using what they have more effectively. In other words, it's not just about how much money comes in, it's also about how well it translates into actual electoral outcomes.

Figure 31. Electoral Efficiency Index by Candidate Identity

Sexuality	**EEI**
Lesbian	0.058 (5.8)
Gay	0.046 (4.6)
Queer	0.050 (5.0)
Bisexual	0.045 (4.5)
Pansexual	0.047 (4.7)

Race	**EEI**
Multiracial	0.082 (8.2)
Black	0.060 (6.0)
Latinx	0.058 (5.8)
Asian	0.057 (5.7)
White	0.040 (4.0)

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Race	EEI
Cis Female	0.055 (5.5)
Cis Male	0.044 (4.4)
Transgender	0.049 (4.9)
Non-binary	0.046 (4.6)

To move past the descriptive patterns, I estimate a logistic regression model predicting whether a candidate wins. The earlier results show differences in things like fundraising, win rates, and margins, but those are all tied together and hard to separate out on their own. For example, raising more money might reflect candidate strength, but it could also just be a function of incumbency or other built-in advantages.

So instead of looking at each piece separately, this model looks at them together. It includes incumbency and fundraising, along with whether a candidate outraises their opponent, to get a better sense of what actually matters for winning. The goal here is just to sort out whether outcomes are mostly about resources, positional advantages like incumbency, or the relative balance between candidates in a given race.

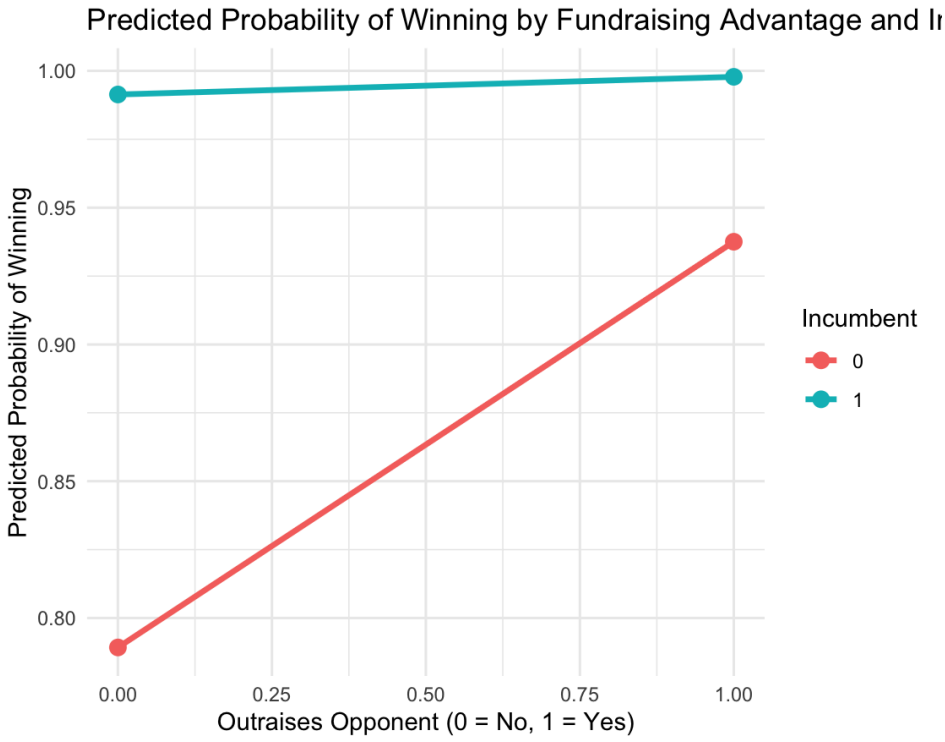
$$Pr(Win_i=1)=\beta 0+\beta 1Outraise_i+\beta 2Incumbent_i+\beta 3LGBTQ_i+\beta 4X_i+\epsilon_i$$

Figure 32. Regression Model

The logistic regression results indicate that structural factors play a central role in shaping electoral outcomes. District partisanship emerges as the strongest predictor of victory, with candidates running in more Democratic districts significantly more likely to

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win ($p < 0.001$). Incumbency also has a large and statistically significant effect, substantially increasing the likelihood of electoral success ($p < 0.001$). By contrast, relative fundraising advantage is positively associated with winning, but only reaches marginal statistical significance ($p < 0.10$) once these factors are taken into account. Taken together, these findings suggest that while fundraising matters, its effects are conditional on broader structural conditions, particularly the political composition of the district and incumbency status.



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Logistic Regression Predicting Electoral Victory	
	(1)
Outraises Opponent	1.389*
	(0.777)
Incumbent	3.425***
	(0.955)
Democratic Vote Share	20.001***
	(4.864)
Num.Obs.	198
AIC	80.5
BIC	113.4
Log.Lik.	-30.268
RMSE	0.22
* p < 0.1, ** p < 0.05, *** p < 0.01	

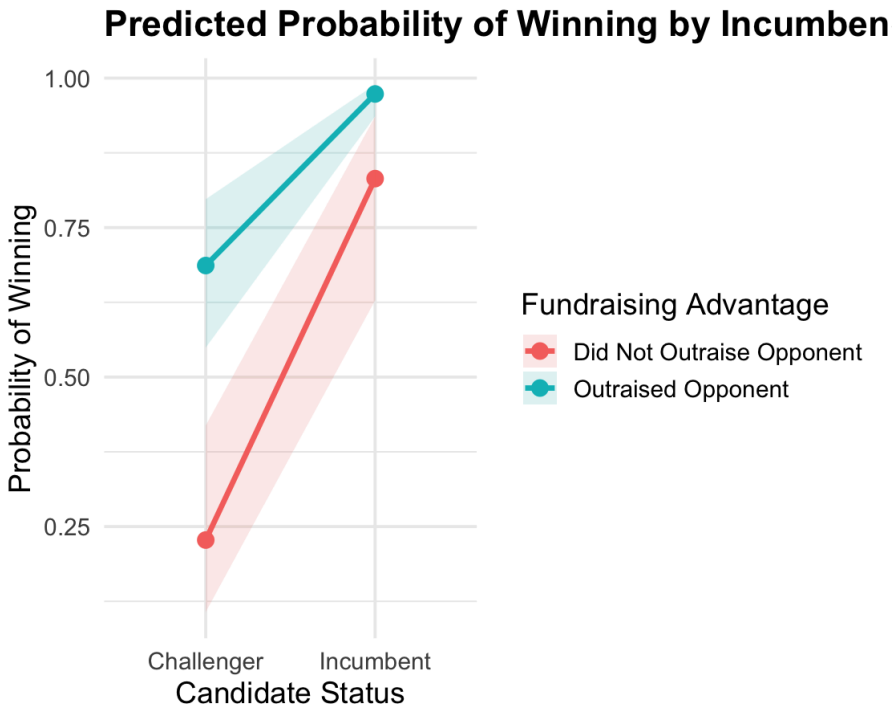
What's kind of interesting is that total fundraising by itself doesn't really do much once you account for that. So just raising a lot of money isn't enough, it matters more whether you're ahead of the other person in the race. It ends up being a pretty relative thing.

You can see that more clearly in the predicted probabilities. The worst position is a challenger who's also getting outraised, while the best is an incumbent who already has that edge. Everything else falls somewhere in between. But challengers who do manage to outraise

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their opponents still have a decent shot, so money can at least help make up for not having incumbency, even if it doesn't fully close the gap.

Figure 33. Predicted Probability of Winning by Incumbency Status

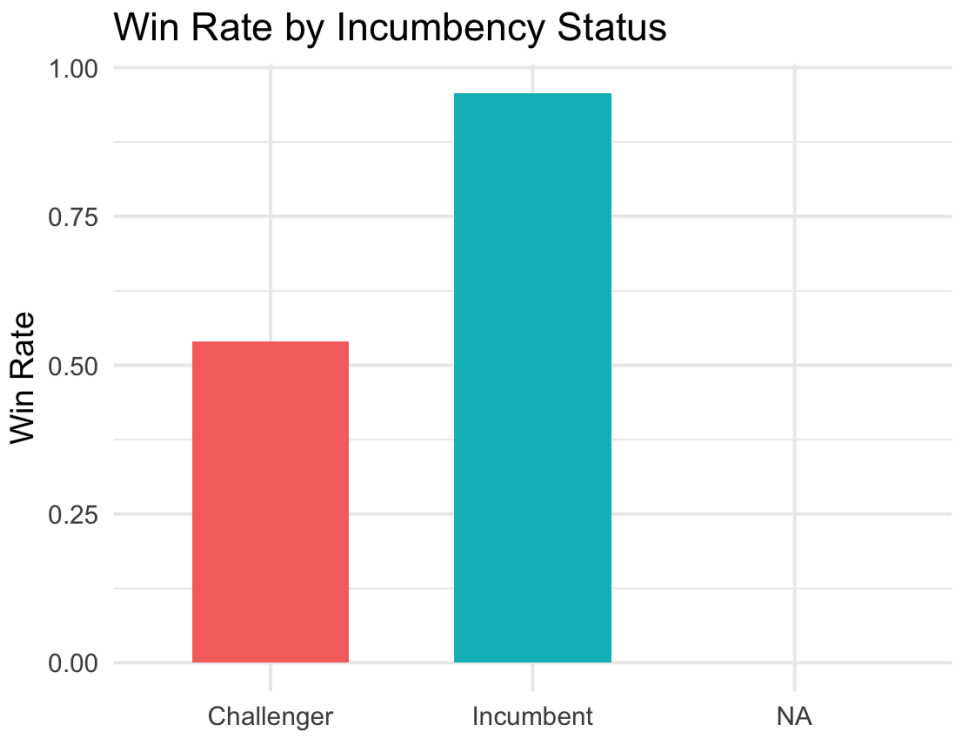


The figure shows a pretty big gap between incumbents and challengers. Challengers win a little over half of their races, while incumbents win at something like 95 percent. That's a huge difference.

It really underscores how strong incumbency is as an advantage. Once LGBTQ candidates get into office, they don't seem to have much trouble staying there. So the main hurdle doesn't look like re-election, it's getting elected in the first place.

Figure 34. Win Rates by Incumbency Status

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These findings suggest that inequalities in political representation are not primarily the result of voter bias, but are embedded in earlier stages of the electoral process. By the time voters are making decisions, many candidates have already been filtered out.

I started this paper thinking about something that gets taken for granted a lot, which is that fundraising is just a way to tell whether a candidate is strong. But looking at the data, it doesn't really work like that. It seems a lot more tied to who already has access to donors and political networks than to anything like neutral "candidate quality."

The LGBTQ case makes that a little clearer, but also kind of complicates it. On the surface, these candidates actually look pretty strong. They raise a lot of money, and they win at high rates, especially once they're incumbents. But at the same time, they're running in a really

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small number of districts overall. That part stuck out to me more the more I looked at it. It's hard to square high success with such limited entry unless something is happening earlier on.

So I think part of what's going on is that we're mostly seeing the candidates who made it through that earlier stage. In other words, the dataset is already kind of filtered. The people who didn't have the right connections, or couldn't get campaigns off the ground, just don't show up here. That makes the fundraising numbers look stronger than they might be if we could see everyone who considered running.

That's also where the intersectionality angle actually matters for the argument, not just as background. LGBTQ candidates aren't all coming in with the same kinds of resources or access. Race, gender identity, and other factors seem to shape who can connect to donors more easily and who gets taken seriously early on. Some candidates are clearly closer to those networks, while others are not, and that difference shows up in the data even if it's not always obvious at first.

What this shifts, at least for me, is where the inequality is happening. A lot of the literature focuses on voters, but this looks like it's happening before that. Fundraising ends up being part of how candidates get sorted before most voters are even paying attention.

At the same time, once candidates do get into office, things look different. The re-election rates are extremely high, which suggests that the main barrier isn't staying in office. It's getting there in the first place.

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So overall, it seems like if we only look at election outcomes, we're missing a big part of what's going on. The more important differences might be happening earlier, in who is able to run and what kinds of resources they can access when they do.

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