

## **Getting Past Go: County Party Chairs' Role in LGBTQ Candidate Emergence**

### **Abstract**

Political representation is shaped not only by voters, but also by the party elites who determine which candidates receive encouragement, institutional support, and access to political networks before campaigns emerge. Although candidate emergence has been extensively studied among women, racial minorities, and other historically marginalized groups, comparatively little research examines whether these same recruitment processes extend to LGBTQ candidates.

This study examines how county party chairs perceive LGBTQ candidates across dimensions central to political recruitment, including electability, strategic viability, and recruitment potential. Drawing on original survey data from 311 county party chairs across the United States, the analysis investigates how partisan identity, LGBTQ voter contact, and perceptions of electoral backlash shape support for LGBTQ candidates and willingness to encourage LGBTQ individuals to run for office. The findings show that perceived electability is strongly associated with elite support and reported recruitment behavior. Chairs with no LGBTQ voter contact expressed nearly one point less support on a five-point candidate-evaluation scale than chairs reporting frequent contact, while greater perceived electability was associated with a higher probability of encouraging LGBTQ individuals to run.

### **Keywords**

LGBTQ representation; candidate emergence; party elites; county party chairs; political recruitment; electability; gatekeeping; political parties; descriptive representation; LGBTQ candidates

## **Introduction**

Decades of research on candidate emergence demonstrates that party elites, political recruitment networks, and informal gatekeepers profoundly influence who ultimately seeks elected office. Although scholars have extensively examined these processes for women, racial minorities, and working-class candidates, we know far less about whether similar gatekeeping dynamics shape the emergence of LGBTQ candidates. This omission is surprising because county party chairs occupy a critical institutional position within local party organizations, determining which prospective candidates receive encouragement, organizational resources, and access to political networks. This paper argues that LGBTQ underrepresentation is shaped not only by voters, but also by elite recruitment decisions occurring before campaigns ever begin.

This paper examines how county party chairs perceive and evaluate LGBTQ candidates across several dimensions central to political recruitment, including electability, competence, relatability, and strategic viability. Drawing on original survey data from county party chairs, the study investigates how perceptions of electoral risk, social contact with LGBTQ communities, and partisan identity shape support for LGBTQ candidates and willingness to recruit them for office.

The findings indicate that elite support for LGBTQ candidates is associated with strategic perceptions of electability and viability. County party chairs reporting frequent interaction with LGBTQ voters evaluate LGBTQ candidates more favorably and report more recruitment activity than chairs with no such contact. Greater anticipated electoral backlash is also associated with lower assessments of candidate viability. These patterns highlight the importance of elite gatekeeping in shaping political representation before candidates reach the electorate.

### **Candidate Emergence and Political Recruitment**

Research on candidate emergence consistently demonstrates that political ambition is not solely an individual characteristic but is instead cultivated through recruitment networks, institutional encouragement, and elite support. Prospective candidates rarely decide to seek office in isolation; rather, political ambition develops through interactions with party organizations, elected officials, interest groups, and other political elites who identify, recruit, and encourage individuals perceived as viable candidates. This insight has fundamentally reshaped scholarship on representation by demonstrating that descriptive inequalities frequently originate before campaigns begin, when potential candidates receive unequal levels of encouragement to enter electoral politics. Women, racial minorities, and working-class Americans are consistently less likely to be recruited for office, even when they possess comparable qualifications and political interest, contributing to persistent disparities in political representation (Fox and Lawless 2010, 2014; Lawless and Fox 2015; Carnes and Lupu 2016).

## **Party Gatekeepers and Candidate Selection**

Party organizations occupy a central position within this recruitment process because they function as institutional gatekeepers responsible for identifying, cultivating, and supporting prospective candidates. Rather than serving as passive observers of electoral politics, party elites actively shape political opportunity structures by determining which individuals receive organizational backing, donor access, campaign resources, and informal encouragement to run for office. County party chairs are particularly influential within decentralized American party organizations because they often represent the first institutional actors with whom prospective candidates interact. Existing scholarship demonstrates that these recruitment decisions are rarely based exclusively on objective measures of candidate quality. Instead, party elites frequently rely upon strategic heuristics regarding electability, constituency preferences, fundraising capacity, and anticipated electoral success when deciding whom to recruit and support (Cohen et al. 2008; Maskett 2009; Crowder-Meyer 2013).

## **Gender, Race, and Descriptive Representation**

Scholarship on descriptive representation has shown that these recruitment dynamics disproportionately disadvantage historically marginalized groups. Studies of women candidates demonstrate that women are significantly less likely than similarly qualified men to receive encouragement from political elites, despite expressing comparable levels of political interest and civic engagement (Fox and Lawless 2010; Crowder-Meyer 2013). Similar patterns have been

documented among racial and ethnic minority candidates, whose access to party recruitment networks often depends upon elite perceptions of electoral viability rather than objective candidate qualifications. These findings suggest that inequalities in political representation are frequently reproduced through institutional recruitment practices operating well before voters evaluate candidates at the ballot box. Consequently, understanding descriptive representation requires examining not only voter preferences but also the elite-level processes through which political opportunities are allocated.

### **Extending These Theories to LGBTQ Candidates**

Despite substantial advances in scholarship on LGBTQ political representation, relatively little research has examined whether these same theories of candidate emergence and elite recruitment extend to LGBTQ candidates. Existing work has primarily focused on voter attitudes, campaign dynamics, legislative behavior, and the electoral success of openly LGBTQ officeholders (Haider-Markel 2010; Reynolds 2013). While this research has significantly advanced understanding of LGBTQ representation, it has devoted comparatively little attention to the institutional gatekeepers who determine whether LGBTQ individuals are encouraged to become candidates in the first place. This omission is theoretically important because county party chairs may rely upon the same strategic calculations documented in the broader candidate emergence literature, evaluating LGBTQ political aspirants according to perceptions of electability, anticipated voter reactions, and organizational risk. If so, barriers to LGBTQ

representation may originate not only in public opinion but also within the recruitment decisions of party elites themselves.

### **Strategic Gatekeeping and Candidate Evaluation**

County party chairs occupy a particularly influential position within the candidate emergence process because they translate broader party goals into concrete recruitment decisions. Although county party organizations differ considerably in resources and institutional capacity, local party chairs routinely identify prospective candidates, facilitate introductions to donors and elected officials, recommend candidates for open seats, and signal organizational support to potential entrants. These decisions are consequential because political ambition is highly responsive to elite encouragement. Individuals who are recruited by party leaders are substantially more likely to become candidates than similarly qualified individuals who never receive institutional encouragement. Consequently, county party chairs serve not merely as organizational administrators but as gatekeepers who shape which individuals gain access to the political pipeline.

### **Strategic Heuristics**

Existing scholarship suggests that elite recruitment decisions are rarely based exclusively on objective assessments of candidate quality. Rather, party elites operate under substantial uncertainty regarding future electoral outcomes and therefore rely upon strategic heuristics when evaluating prospective candidates. These heuristics include

assessments of electability, fundraising potential, constituency fit, media attention, partisan context, and anticipated voter reactions. Although such evaluations may appear politically neutral, they can systematically disadvantage candidates belonging to historically marginalized groups if party elites perceive those identities as creating electoral liabilities. Consequently, recruitment decisions often reflect expectations about how voters will respond rather than only assessments of candidates' qualifications.

### **Extending Existing Theory to LGBTQ Candidates**

Although these strategic dynamics have been documented extensively among women and racial minority candidates, relatively little research has examined whether party elites employ similar heuristics when evaluating LGBTQ political aspirants. Existing scholarship demonstrates that LGBTQ candidates frequently confront stereotypes regarding leadership, constituency appeal, and electoral viability. However, most research examines these dynamics after candidates have entered electoral competition. Whether these perceptions influence recruitment decisions before candidacies emerge remains largely unknown. Extending candidate emergence theory to LGBTQ politics therefore provides an opportunity to determine whether institutional gatekeeping contributes to LGBTQ underrepresentation independently of voter preferences.

### **Electability as the Mechanism**

I argue that perceptions of electability constitute the principal mechanism through which county party chairs translate broader attitudes into recruitment decisions. Party elites rarely reject prospective candidates solely because they belong to a marginalized group. Instead, they frequently justify recruitment decisions through strategic judgments regarding electoral competitiveness, anticipated backlash, fundraising prospects, or district-level viability. If county party chairs perceive LGBTQ candidates as less likely to win elections—even absent explicit prejudice—they should be less willing to recruit, encourage, or invest organizational resources in those candidates. Consequently, disparities in candidate emergence may result from strategic calculations that appear electorally rational while nonetheless reproducing descriptive inequalities.

### **Social Contact as a Source of Elite Evaluations**

Social contact theory provides an important explanation for variation in these strategic evaluations. Decades of research demonstrate that interpersonal interaction with marginalized communities reduces stereotyping, increases empathy, and improves political evaluations. Applied to party recruitment, county party chairs who regularly interact with LGBTQ voters and community members should possess more accurate assessments of LGBTQ candidates' electoral potential and broader constituency appeal. Conversely, limited interpersonal contact may reinforce assumptions that LGBTQ candidates represent narrow constituencies or face exceptional electoral risk. Social exposure therefore should

influence recruitment behavior indirectly by shaping perceptions of candidate electability rather than simply altering generalized attitudes toward LGBTQ representation.

## **Contribution**

This theoretical framework extends the candidate emergence literature in three important ways. First, it shifts attention from individual political ambition to elite recruitment decisions as a source of LGBTQ underrepresentation. Second, it identifies perceived electability as the mechanism linking elite attitudes to recruitment behavior. Third, it situates LGBTQ candidate emergence within broader theories of party gatekeeping and descriptive representation rather than treating LGBTQ politics as a distinct or exceptional domain. By doing so, the study contributes simultaneously to scholarship on party organizations, candidate emergence, gender and politics, and LGBTQ representation.

## **Situating LGBTQ Candidate Emergence within Existing Scholarship**

Existing scholarship provides important foundations for understanding why party elites may shape LGBTQ candidate emergence. Crowder-Meyer demonstrates that party recruitment is not a neutral process but one in which political organizations actively determine whose ambition is cultivated and whose candidacies are encouraged. Her work shows that elite recruitment is central to explaining persistent inequalities in descriptive representation because political parties disproportionately encourage candidates they

perceive as strategically viable. Rather than viewing candidate emergence as an individual decision, this perspective emphasizes that ambition is socially and institutionally produced through interactions with party organizations. Extending this logic to LGBTQ politics suggests that county party chairs may similarly influence whether LGBTQ political aspirants receive the encouragement necessary to enter electoral politics.

Haider-Markel's scholarship similarly demonstrates that LGBTQ candidates confront political environments shaped by stereotypes, strategic calculations, and institutional constraints. While his work has substantially advanced understanding of LGBTQ candidates' electoral experiences and legislative representation, it focuses primarily on candidates who have already entered electoral competition. Consequently, we know considerably less about the earlier stage of candidate emergence, during which party elites determine who receives institutional encouragement before campaigns begin. This study complements Haider-Markel's work by examining the upstream recruitment process through which LGBTQ representation may be facilitated or constrained before candidates ever appear on the ballot.

Reynolds broadens this perspective by demonstrating that LGBTQ representation varies substantially across institutional and political contexts. His comparative work emphasizes that party organizations, electoral systems, and political institutions shape opportunities for LGBTQ political inclusion independently of public attitudes alone. Building on this insight, the present study argues that decentralized American party

organizations represent a particularly important institutional context in which local party elites exercise considerable discretion over candidate recruitment. County party chairs therefore constitute an important—but previously understudied—institutional mechanism through which broader patterns of LGBTQ political representation may be reproduced.

Taken together, these literatures suggest that political inequality is produced through multiple stages of the representation process. Scholarship on candidate emergence demonstrates the importance of elite recruitment, research on descriptive representation illustrates how institutional actors reproduce inequalities across marginalized groups, and LGBTQ politics scholarship documents the challenges LGBTQ candidates encounter during campaigns and in office. The present study integrates these perspectives by arguing that county party chairs occupy a critical institutional position linking these literatures. Specifically, I argue that county party chairs evaluate LGBTQ candidates through strategic perceptions of electability, anticipated electoral backlash, and social familiarity with LGBTQ communities, thereby shaping who receives access to the political pipeline long before voters have an opportunity to evaluate candidates themselves.

## **Hypotheses**

Building on theories of candidate emergence, party gatekeeping, and strategic recruitment, I argue that county party chairs evaluate LGBTQ candidates through perceptions of electoral viability rather than solely through ideological preferences. Specifically, interpersonal contact with LGBTQ communities should improve perceptions of candidate viability, whereas

anticipated electoral backlash should reduce those perceptions. In turn, these strategic evaluations should influence recruitment decisions.

**H1.** Greater interpersonal contact with LGBTQ communities will be associated with more favorable perceptions of LGBTQ candidate electability.

**H2.** Greater anticipated electoral backlash associated with LGBTQ candidacies will be associated with lower perceptions of LGBTQ candidate electability.

**H3.** County party chairs who perceive LGBTQ candidates as more electorally viable will be significantly more likely to encourage LGBTQ individuals to seek elected office.

## **Research Design**

To examine how county party chairs evaluate LGBTQ candidates and make recruitment decisions, this study employs a survey-based quantitative research design with embedded vignette components. The primary empirical component consists of an original nationwide survey administered to county party chairs across the United States between May 10 and May 20, 2026. The survey produced 311 responses from county party chairs across most states. Respondents were identified through publicly available county party organization directories, county party websites, and state party infrastructure lists.

County party chairs represent a theoretically important population for studying candidate emergence because they occupy one of the earliest institutional positions in the

political recruitment process. Unlike national or state party leaders, who frequently become involved after prospective candidates have already expressed interest in seeking office, county party chairs routinely identify, encourage, and cultivate potential candidates for local and state elections. They frequently serve as prospective candidates' first point of contact with formal party organizations, making early assessments regarding political viability, organizational fit, and electoral competitiveness. Because political ambition is highly responsive to elite encouragement, examining county party chairs provides a unique opportunity to observe how recruitment decisions shape political representation before campaigns begin (Fox and Lawless 2010; Crowder-Meyer 2013; Masket 2009). Their institutional role therefore allows this study to examine candidate emergence at the earliest stage of the political pipeline, where inequalities in representation may first be produced.

The survey was designed to measure both explicit evaluations of LGBTQ candidates and the strategic considerations that shape elite recruitment decisions. Respondents assessed LGBTQ candidates across multiple dimensions frequently identified within the candidate emergence literature, including perceived electability, competence, relatability, and strategic viability. Additional questions measured anticipated electoral backlash, attitudes toward LGBTQ representation within party coalitions, and prior recruitment behavior. These measures operationalize theoretical concepts identified in prior scholarship on candidate recruitment and elite gatekeeping, allowing direct examination of how strategic evaluations influence willingness to recruit LGBTQ candidates (Fox and Lawless 2010; Lawless and Fox 2015; Crowder-Meyer 2013).

A central component of the study involves measuring candidate support through evaluative questions and embedded vignette-style assessments. These measures allow for examination of how county party chairs assess LGBTQ candidates relative to broader strategic considerations. Several questions specifically capture dimensions associated with political gatekeeping, including willingness to support LGBTQ candidates in competitive or conservative districts, support for LGBTQ presidential candidates, and perceptions of whether LGBTQ candidates face unique media scrutiny or political liabilities.

Because social contact theory predicts that interpersonal interaction reduces stereotyping and increases positive evaluations of marginalized groups, respondents were also asked how frequently they interacted with LGBTQ voters and community members. This measure captures variation in interpersonal familiarity and allows examination of whether greater LGBTQ contact is associated with more favorable assessments of candidate electability and recruitment behavior. Prior research demonstrates that interpersonal exposure substantially influences attitudes toward LGBTQ individuals and political minorities, making social contact an important theoretical mechanism linking elite experiences to recruitment decisions (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Flores 2014).

Throughout the paper, electability refers to county party chairs' perceptions that LGBTQ candidates can successfully compete in general elections and appeal to broad constituencies.

The principal dependent variables capture three distinct dimensions of elite gatekeeping: support for LGBTQ candidates, perceptions of LGBTQ candidate electability, and whether respondents reported encouraging LGBTQ individuals to seek office. Independent variables include partisan identification, interpersonal contact with LGBTQ voters, and perceptions of anticipated electoral backlash. Ordinary least squares regression models with HC2 robust standard errors estimate the relationships among these variables while accounting for heteroskedasticity. Interaction models further examine whether the influence of partisan identification varies according to levels of LGBTQ social contact. This modeling strategy permits evaluation of both the direct effects of elite attitudes and the indirect mechanisms through which strategic perceptions influence recruitment behavior.

The empirical strategy focuses not only on direct support for LGBTQ candidates, but also on the mechanisms through which elite gatekeeping operates. In particular, the analysis examines whether perceptions of electability mediate the relationship between social contact, backlash concerns, and recruitment behavior. This approach allows the project to move beyond descriptive accounts of partisan polarization and toward a more nuanced explanation of how strategic evaluations shape candidate emergence.

Several limitations warrant consideration. First, because the study relies on self-reported survey responses, estimates may be affected by social desirability bias, particularly regarding attitudes toward LGBTQ political representation. Second, although the sample includes county

party chairs from across the United States, participation was voluntary and therefore may not perfectly represent the broader population of local party leaders. Third, the cross-sectional design limits strong causal inference regarding whether interpersonal contact directly alters elite attitudes or whether more supportive party elites are simply more likely to interact with LGBTQ communities. Finally, the decentralized structure of American political parties means that county party chairs exercise different levels of influence across states and local political environments. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as evidence regarding institutional gatekeeping within the contemporary American party system rather than as automatically generalizable to all democratic contexts.

Despite these limitations, the research design offers several important strengths. The survey constitutes one of the first nationwide studies of county party chairs' evaluations of LGBTQ candidates and directly measures theoretical mechanisms identified within the candidate emergence literature, including perceptions of electability, anticipated electoral backlash, interpersonal contact, and recruitment behavior. By focusing on elite decision makers rather than voters, the study provides a novel perspective on how political representation is shaped before candidates formally enter electoral competition.

## **Findings**

The empirical results provide strong support for the theoretical framework advanced in this paper. Consistent with research on candidate emergence and elite gatekeeping, county party chairs' evaluations of LGBTQ candidates are shaped less by

generalized ideological support than by strategic assessments of electoral viability. Across the models, perceived electability was the strongest positive predictor of both support for LGBTQ candidates and willingness to encourage LGBTQ individuals to seek office. In the recruitment model, a one-point increase in perceived electability was associated with an approximately 18-percentage-point increase in the probability of reporting that an LGBTQ individual had been encouraged to run. These findings suggest that recruitment decisions are structured by strategic heuristics similar to those documented in the broader literature on women and minority candidate emergence, extending those theories to LGBTQ political representation.

Initial analyses reveal a sizable partisan difference in support for LGBTQ candidates. In the baseline model, Republican county party chairs scored 0.94 points lower than Democratic chairs on the five-point gay-candidate support scale, a difference equal to approximately 23 percent of the scale's full range. The estimated partisan coefficient changed substantially after electability perceptions, LGBTQ contact, and their conditional relationships were introduced. In the fully specified interaction model, the Republican coefficient was 0.22 and was not statistically distinguishable from zero, although this constituent coefficient represents the partisan difference only at the model's reference values. This pattern suggests that partisan differences are partially mediated through strategic perceptions of candidate viability rather than reflecting ideological opposition alone. The finding is consistent with theories of elite gatekeeping, which argue that party

actors frequently evaluate prospective candidates through expectations about electoral success rather than solely through personal policy preferences.

Perceived electability emerged as the central theoretical mechanism linking elite attitudes to recruitment behavior. County party chairs who viewed LGBTQ candidates as more electorally viable expressed greater support for LGBTQ candidacies and were more likely to report encouraging LGBTQ individuals to seek office. In the recruitment model, each one-point increase on the five-point electability measure was associated with an approximately 18-percentage-point increase in the probability of reported recruitment. Figure 1 illustrates this relationship. This association is consistent with the argument that strategic assessments of electoral viability help connect broader elite attitudes to recruitment behavior. Because the data are cross-sectional, however, the analysis cannot establish electability perceptions as a definitive causal mechanism. Rather than excluding LGBTQ candidates through explicit hostility, party elites appear to rely upon judgments regarding electoral competitiveness, thereby reproducing representational inequalities through seemingly strategic decision-making.

Social contact was also associated with substantively meaningful differences in elite evaluations. County party chairs reporting frequent interaction with LGBTQ voters rated LGBTQ candidates more favorably and reported more recruitment activity than chairs with no such interaction. In the baseline support model, chairs who never interacted with LGBTQ voters scored 0.92 points lower than frequently interacting chairs on the

five-point candidate-support scale, nearly one full response category. By contrast, chairs who reported interacting with LGBTQ voters only sometimes scored 0.16 points lower than frequently interacting chairs, a comparatively small difference that was not statistically distinguishable from zero in the baseline model. These findings closely align with social contact theory, which predicts that interpersonal familiarity reduces stereotyping and broadens perceptions of social competence. Extending this literature, the present findings demonstrate that interpersonal exposure influences not only generalized attitudes toward LGBTQ communities but also strategic political judgments regarding candidate viability and recruitment. Consequently, social contact appears to shape institutional gatekeeping through its effects on perceptions of electability.

The interaction models indicate that the association between LGBTQ contact and candidate support is especially pronounced among Republican county party chairs. In the interaction model, the estimated difference between Republican chairs who never interact with LGBTQ voters and Republican chairs who interact frequently is approximately  $-1.07$  points, calculated by combining the constituent contact coefficient with the Republican-by-never-contact interaction. In the fully specified interaction model, the corresponding conditional difference is approximately  $-1.51$  points. These estimates suggest that among Republican chairs, complete absence of LGBTQ voter contact is associated with a decline of roughly one to one-and-a-half points on the five-point candidate-support scale. Support for an LGBTQ presidential candidate is positively associated with support for the gay candidate vignette among Democratic chairs. A

one-point increase in support for an LGBTQ president corresponds to approximately a 0.09-point increase in vignette support. Moving across the full four-point range of the presidential-support measure is therefore associated with an estimated increase of approximately 0.37 points in candidate support among Democratic respondents. The negative interaction estimate suggests that this association is weaker among Republican chairs.

Importantly, the effect of LGBTQ voter contact extended beyond symbolic attitudes and influenced actual recruitment behavior. Respondents who reported never interacting with LGBTQ voters were approximately 47 percentage points less likely than frequently interacting respondents to report encouraging an LGBTQ individual to run, holding the other variables in the recruitment model constant. This finding is especially important because it moves beyond attitudinal support and demonstrates how social exposure shapes tangible gatekeeping decisions within party organizations.

Perceived electoral backlash was negatively associated with evaluations of LGBTQ candidate viability, although its direct association with recruitment was small once electability perceptions were included. County party chairs who anticipated greater electoral costs associated with supporting LGBTQ candidates consistently evaluated those candidates as less electable. However, once electability was incorporated into the statistical models, the independent effect of backlash concerns declined substantially. This pattern is consistent with the possibility that backlash concerns are related to recruitment partly through electability perceptions. However, a

formal mediation analysis is necessary before concluding that electability transmits the effect of backlash on recruitment behavior. These findings are consistent with the argument that perceptions of electability represent an important pathway connecting strategic considerations to reported recruitment behavior.

The findings therefore point toward a broader process of strategic gatekeeping. County party chairs appear to evaluate LGBTQ candidates through a framework heavily informed by viability heuristics, anticipated electoral reactions, and social familiarity with LGBTQ communities. While explicit opposition to LGBTQ representation certainly exists among some respondents, much of the observed variation in support appears rooted in perceptions of electability and strategic risk rather than overt ideological hostility alone.

Taken together, the findings provide evidence that county party chairs' candidate evaluations are structured by strategic considerations associated with electability, anticipated voter reactions, and LGBTQ contact. Rather than relying exclusively upon ideological evaluations of LGBTQ candidates, party elites appear to make recruitment decisions using perceptions of electability, anticipated voter reactions, and interpersonal familiarity with LGBTQ communities. This pattern extends existing theories of candidate emergence by demonstrating that the strategic heuristics previously identified among women and racial minority candidates similarly structure elite evaluations of LGBTQ political aspirants. Consequently, inequalities in descriptive representation may originate not only from voter preferences but also from institutional recruitment practices operating before campaigns begin.

The direction and approximate magnitude of the principal relationships remain similar across the reported specifications. Electability perceptions are positively associated with recruitment behavior, whereas limited LGBTQ contact is negatively associated with recruitment behavior.

More broadly, these results demonstrate that political representation is shaped through institutional recruitment decisions long before citizens cast ballots. By identifying perceived electability as the primary mechanism connecting elite attitudes to recruitment behavior, this study contributes to broader theories of candidate emergence, party gatekeeping, and descriptive representation. LGBTQ underrepresentation therefore appears to reflect not only electoral dynamics but also the strategic calculations of party elites responsible for determining which prospective candidates receive early organizational encouragement and access to political opportunity structures.

## **Discussion**

This study advances scholarship on candidate emergence by demonstrating that LGBTQ political representation is shaped not only by voter preferences but also by elite recruitment decisions occurring well before campaigns begin. Whereas previous research has focused primarily on voter attitudes, campaign dynamics, and legislative behavior, the present findings identify county party chairs as important institutional gatekeepers whose strategic evaluations influence whether LGBTQ political aspirants receive encouragement to seek office. In doing so,

the study extends theories of candidate emergence by showing that representational inequality may originate during elite recruitment rather than solely during electoral competition.

The findings make three principal theoretical contributions. First, they extend the candidate emergence literature by demonstrating that theories previously applied to women and racial minority candidates also explain variation in elite evaluations of LGBTQ candidates. Research on candidate emergence has consistently shown that political ambition depends not only on individual motivation but also on institutional encouragement from political elites. The present findings indicate that LGBTQ candidate evaluations vary meaningfully with perceived electability and LGBTQ contact. Most notably, no LGBTQ voter contact was associated with a 0.92-point reduction in candidate support in the baseline model, while each one-point increase in electability was associated with an estimated 18-percentage-point increase in reported recruitment.

Second, the study identifies perceived electability as the central mechanism linking elite attitudes to recruitment behavior. Although previous scholarship has emphasized the importance of strategic calculations in party recruitment, comparatively little research has examined how these perceptions influence evaluations of LGBTQ candidates specifically. The results suggest that county party chairs frequently justify recruitment decisions through expectations regarding electoral competitiveness rather than explicit ideological opposition. Consequently, strategic assessments that appear politically neutral may nonetheless reproduce persistent inequalities in descriptive representation.

## **Contributions to Gender and Politics**

More broadly, the findings contribute to scholarship in gender and politics by extending existing theories of descriptive representation beyond traditional analyses of gender and race. Research in this field has long demonstrated that women and racial minority candidates encounter institutional barriers during recruitment and candidate selection. The present study suggests that LGBTQ candidates encounter similar forms of strategic gatekeeping, indicating that theories developed to explain gendered political recruitment also illuminate patterns of LGBTQ political inclusion. Rather than constituting an entirely distinct process, LGBTQ candidate emergence appears to reflect broader institutional dynamics governing whose candidacies are perceived as politically viable.

## **Party Organizations as Democratic Gatekeepers**

The findings also underscore the importance of local party organizations as democratic institutions. County party chairs do more than administer party activities; they actively shape political opportunity structures by determining which prospective candidates receive encouragement, organizational resources, and early institutional legitimacy. These recruitment decisions influence the composition of the candidate pool long before voters have an opportunity to express electoral preferences. Consequently, understanding democratic representation requires examining not only voter behavior but also the internal organizational processes through which parties cultivate political ambition and allocate opportunities for political participation.

Importantly, the results complicate simplistic narratives that frame LGBTQ underrepresentation solely as a product of voter intolerance or partisan polarization. Although partisan differences certainly exist, several of the models demonstrate that the direct effect of Republican identification weakens considerably once electability perceptions and LGBTQ social contact are incorporated. This suggests that elite gatekeeping may operate through more indirect and institutionalized mechanisms, including strategic calculations about district viability, donor reactions, and anticipated backlash. Such processes can reproduce inequalities in political representation even among elites who do not explicitly oppose LGBTQ candidacies.

More broadly, this study contributes to scholarship on candidate emergence by shifting attention upstream in the representation process. Political inequality is often studied at the level of campaigns, elections, or legislative behavior, yet many inequalities are produced before candidates ever appear on the ballot. County party chairs serve as early institutional filters who shape which political actors receive encouragement, legitimacy, and access to organizational networks. Understanding representation therefore requires examining not only voter preferences, but also the elite-level processes through which candidacies are cultivated or discouraged.

Several limitations qualify these findings. First, because the analysis relies upon cross-sectional survey data, causal relationships among social contact, electability perceptions, and recruitment behavior cannot be established definitively. Second, county party organizations vary substantially across states in organizational resources, institutional authority, and recruitment practices, suggesting that the magnitude of elite gatekeeping may differ across

political contexts. Third, because participation was voluntary, respondents may differ systematically from county party chairs who chose not to complete the survey. Finally, the decentralized structure of American political parties differs from party organizations in many parliamentary and proportional representation systems. Accordingly, these findings should not be interpreted as universally generalizable but rather as evidence regarding elite recruitment dynamics within the contemporary American political system.

### **Comparative Implications and Future Research**

The findings additionally raise important comparative questions regarding LGBTQ political representation beyond the United States. Party organizations vary considerably across democratic systems in their authority over candidate recruitment, suggesting that elite gatekeeping may operate differently under proportional representation, centralized party-list systems, or parliamentary institutions. Future research should therefore examine whether perceptions of LGBTQ candidate electability similarly influence recruitment decisions across diverse institutional settings. Comparative analyses would clarify whether the mechanisms identified here reflect broader features of democratic party organizations or characteristics specific to decentralized American political parties.

Ultimately, the study demonstrates that LGBTQ political representation is shaped through institutional recruitment decisions operating long before voters enter the electoral process. County party chairs appear to function as strategic gatekeepers who evaluate prospective candidates according to perceptions of electability, anticipated electoral

backlash, and interpersonal familiarity with LGBTQ communities. By identifying these mechanisms, the study contributes to broader theories of candidate emergence, party organizations, and descriptive representation while demonstrating that political inequality often originates within the internal decision-making processes of democratic institutions rather than exclusively through voter behavior.

Although this study focuses on county party organizations in the United States, its theoretical implications extend beyond American politics while remaining institutionally contingent. Candidate recruitment occurs within every democratic political system, but the actors responsible for recruitment differ substantially across institutional contexts. In decentralized party systems such as the United States, county party chairs frequently exercise considerable discretion over identifying and encouraging prospective candidates. By contrast, centralized party-list systems, parliamentary democracies, and proportional representation systems often concentrate recruitment authority within national or regional party leadership. Consequently, while the specific institutional actors examined here may not exist outside the United States, the broader theoretical mechanism identified in this study—elite gatekeeping through perceptions of candidate electability—may operate across a wide range of democratic settings.

At the same time, these findings should not be assumed to generalize automatically beyond the American context. Electoral institutions, party organization, candidate selection procedures, and public attitudes toward LGBTQ communities vary substantially

across democracies. In countries where parties exercise greater centralized control over nominations, elite evaluations of LGBTQ candidates may be more or less influential than those observed here. Likewise, differences in electoral rules, district magnitude, and legal protections for LGBTQ individuals may alter how party elites assess candidate viability. Future comparative research should therefore examine whether similar strategic recruitment dynamics emerge across diverse institutional settings and whether perceptions of LGBTQ electability influence candidate selection under alternative electoral systems.

## **Conclusion**

The findings demonstrate that LGBTQ political representation is shaped not only at the ballot box, but also through elite recruitment decisions operating earlier in the political pipeline. This study demonstrates that county party chairs serve as important gatekeepers within the candidate emergence process and that their evaluations of LGBTQ candidates are heavily influenced by perceptions of electability, social contact with LGBTQ communities, and concerns about electoral backlash.

The findings suggest that barriers to LGBTQ political representation often emerge through strategic gatekeeping mechanisms rather than explicit opposition alone. County party chairs who perceive LGBTQ candidates as electorally viable are significantly more likely to support and recruit them for office, while limited interaction with LGBTQ voters reduces perceptions of electability and willingness to encourage LGBTQ candidacies. These results

indicate that elite judgments about political viability play a central role in shaping who gains access to the political pipeline.

Importantly, the study also highlights the institutional nature of political inequality. LGBTQ underrepresentation cannot be understood solely through public opinion or voter behavior. Local party elites actively construct political opportunity structures by determining who is viewed as a legitimate, competitive, and strategically acceptable candidate. In doing so, they shape not only electoral outcomes, but also the composition of the candidate pool itself.

More broadly, this project contributes to scholarship on political representation, party organizations, and candidate emergence by shifting attention upstream in the political process. It demonstrates that representation is filtered through elite perceptions long before candidates appear on ballots or reach voters. Understanding inequality in political representation therefore requires greater attention to the informal institutional dynamics operating within party organizations and recruitment networks.

Future research should continue exploring how elite gatekeeping shapes representation across intersecting identities and political contexts. Additional work examining race, gender identity, class, and regional variation among party elites would further illuminate how strategic evaluations influence candidate emergence. Longitudinal and comparative studies may also help clarify how changing political environments alter elite perceptions of LGBTQ candidate viability over time.

Ultimately, the findings underscore a broader democratic implication: political inclusion depends not only on whether marginalized candidates can win elections, but also on whether they are encouraged to run at all. County party chairs occupy a pivotal position within this process, functioning as institutional gatekeepers who shape access to the political pipeline itself by determining which candidacies receive early institutional encouragement and legitimacy.

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## Appendix

**Table 1. Predicting Support for Gay Candidates Among County Party Chairs**

| Variables                             | Baseline Model | Interaction Model | Full Interaction Model |
|---------------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| Republican Party                      | -0.938***      | -1.051*           | 0.219                  |
|                                       | (0.269)        | (0.441)           | (0.775)                |
| Never Interacts with LGBTQ Voters     | -0.920*        | 0.378***          | 0.296+                 |
|                                       | (0.460)        | (0.105)           | (0.169)                |
| Sometimes Interacts with LGBTQ Voters | -0.159         | -0.232            | -0.116                 |

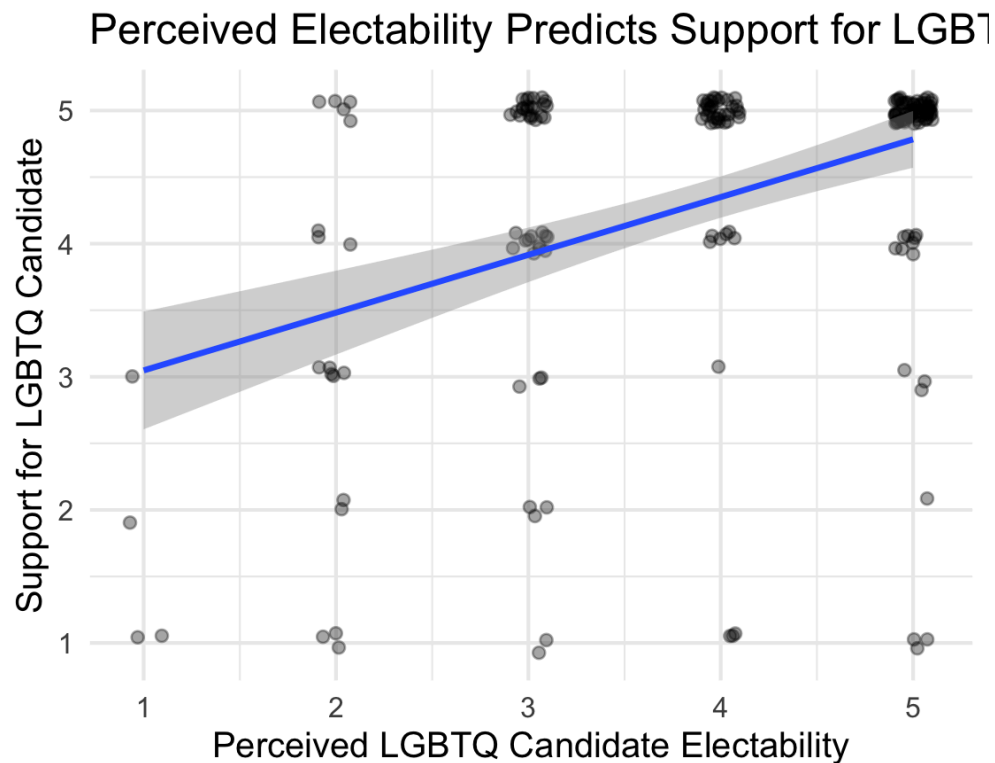
|                                      |         |         |         |
|--------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|
|                                      | (0.162) | (0.171) | (0.180) |
| Republican × Never Interacts         |         | -1.449* | -1.801* |
|                                      |         | (0.611) | (0.735) |
| Republican × Sometimes Interacts     |         | 0.232   | 0.060   |
|                                      |         | (0.575) | (0.640) |
| Support for LGBTQ President          |         |         | 0.092*  |
|                                      |         |         | (0.042) |
| Republican × LGBTQ President Support |         |         | -0.198+ |
|                                      |         |         | (0.107) |
| Years as Chair Controls              | Yes     | No      | No      |
| Observations                         | 311     | 311     | 311     |

|                |       |       |       |
|----------------|-------|-------|-------|
| R <sup>2</sup> | 0.189 | 0.177 | 0.203 |
|----------------|-------|-------|-------|

Notes: OLS regression models with HC2 robust standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variable is support for the gay candidate vignette (1–5 scale). Reference category for political party is Democratic Party. Reference category for LGBTQ voter interaction is “Frequently.” + p < .10, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001.

### Figure 1. Perceived LGBTQ Candidate Electability and Support for LGBTQ Candidates

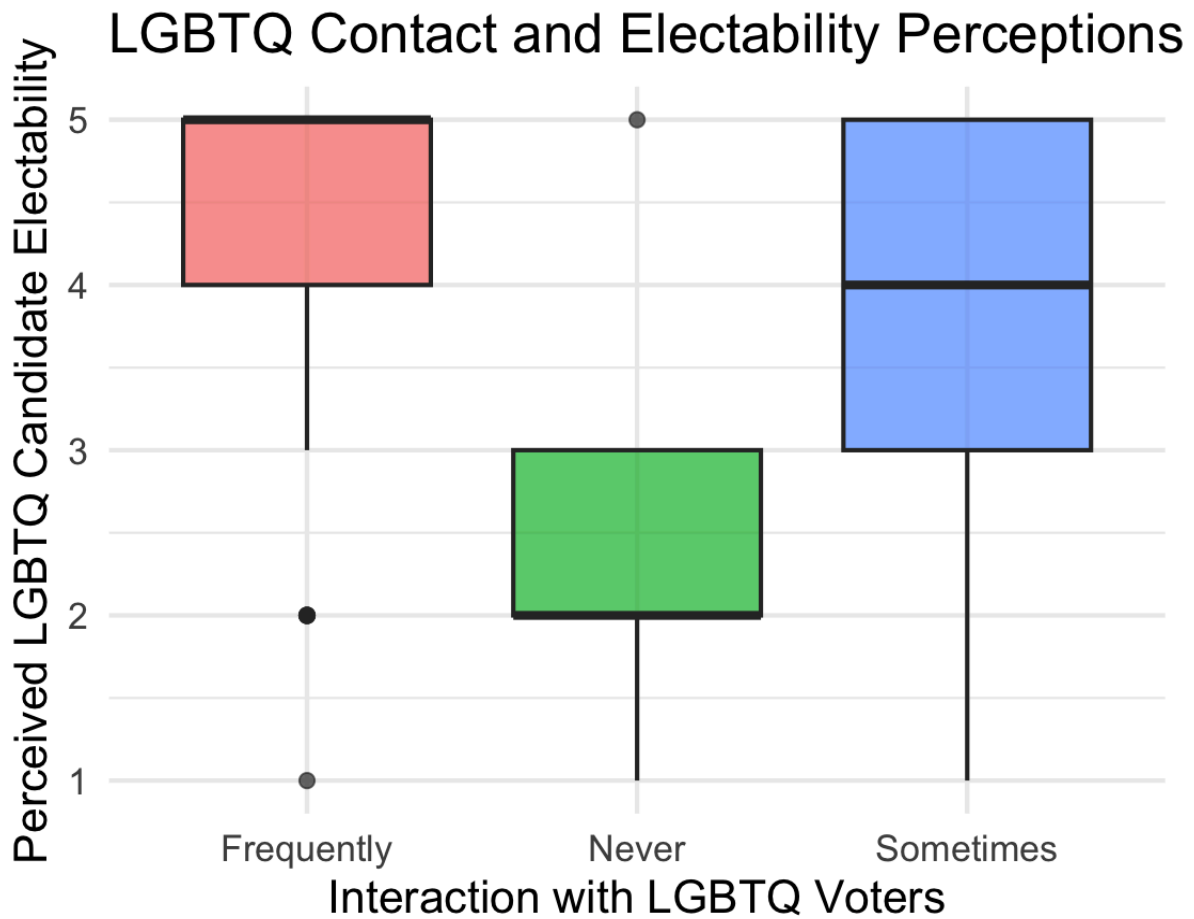
This figure displays the relationship between county party chairs’ perceptions of LGBTQ candidate electability and their willingness to support LGBTQ candidates. The positive relationship suggests that respondents who view LGBTQ candidates as more electorally viable are substantially more likely to express support for LGBTQ candidacies. The fitted regression line and confidence interval indicate a consistent upward trend across levels of perceived electability.



**Figure 2. LGBTQ Voter Contact and Electability Perceptions**

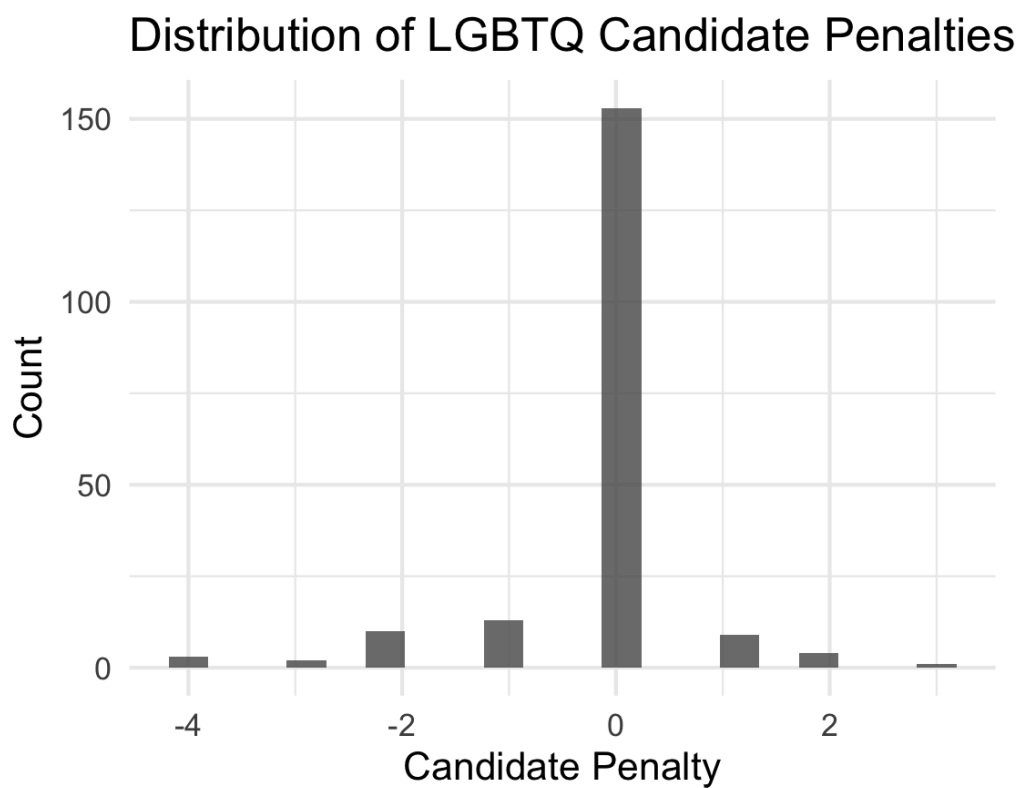
This figure illustrates how frequency of interaction with LGBTQ voters shapes county party chairs' perceptions of LGBTQ candidate electability. Respondents reporting frequent interaction with LGBTQ voters consistently rated LGBTQ candidates as more electable than respondents with limited or no interaction. The results provide visual support for the argument that social exposure influences elite political evaluations and strategic assessments of candidate

viability.



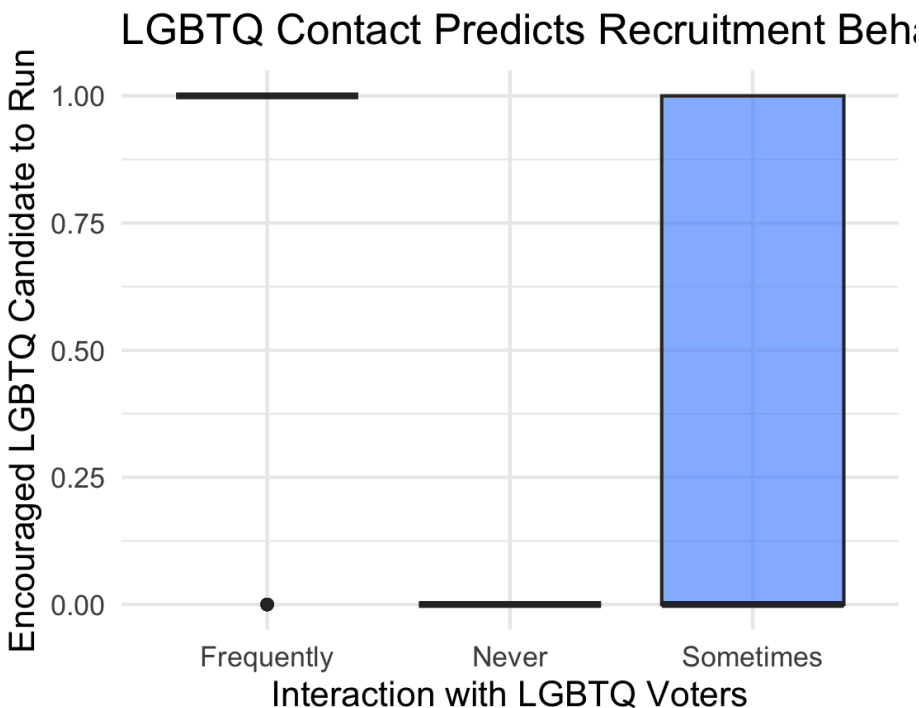
**Figure 3. Distribution of LGBTQ Candidate Penalties**

This figure presents the distribution of LGBTQ candidate penalty scores among county party chairs. The histogram demonstrates that most respondents clustered around neutral or relatively low penalty values, indicating generally favorable or mixed evaluations of LGBTQ candidates. However, the presence of several strongly negative scores suggests that a subset of respondents continue to perceive meaningful disadvantages associated with LGBTQ candidacies. The distribution highlights substantial variation in elite candidate evaluations and suggests that while overt opposition may be limited overall, perceptions of electoral liability remain present within portions of local party leadership.



#### Figure 4. LGBTQ Contact Predicts Recruitment Behavior

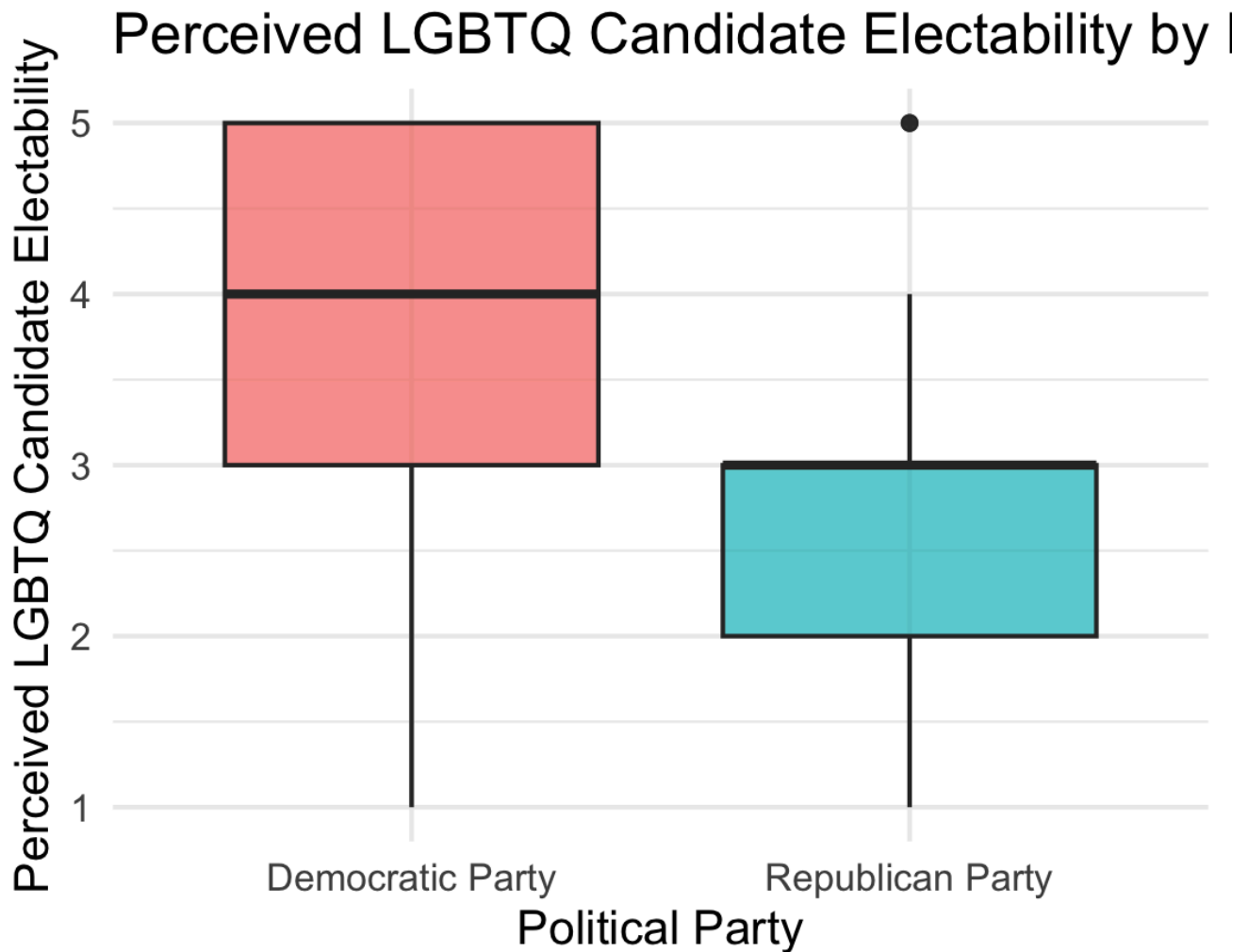
This figure illustrates the relationship between county party chairs' interaction with LGBTQ voters and their likelihood of encouraging LGBTQ individuals to run for office. Respondents who frequently interacted with LGBTQ voters were substantially more likely to report engaging in recruitment behavior, while respondents with limited or no LGBTQ contact demonstrated significantly lower levels of candidate encouragement. The findings suggest that social exposure plays an important role in shaping elite gatekeeping decisions and willingness to expand political representation within party organizations.



### **Figure 5. Perceived LGBTQ Candidate Electability by Political Party**

This figure compares perceptions of LGBTQ candidate electability across partisan groups. Democratic county party chairs generally rated LGBTQ candidates as highly electable, while Republican respondents expressed lower and more varied assessments of candidate viability. These results suggest that partisan identity influences strategic evaluations of LGBTQ candidates, although subsequent analyses demonstrate that social contact and backlash

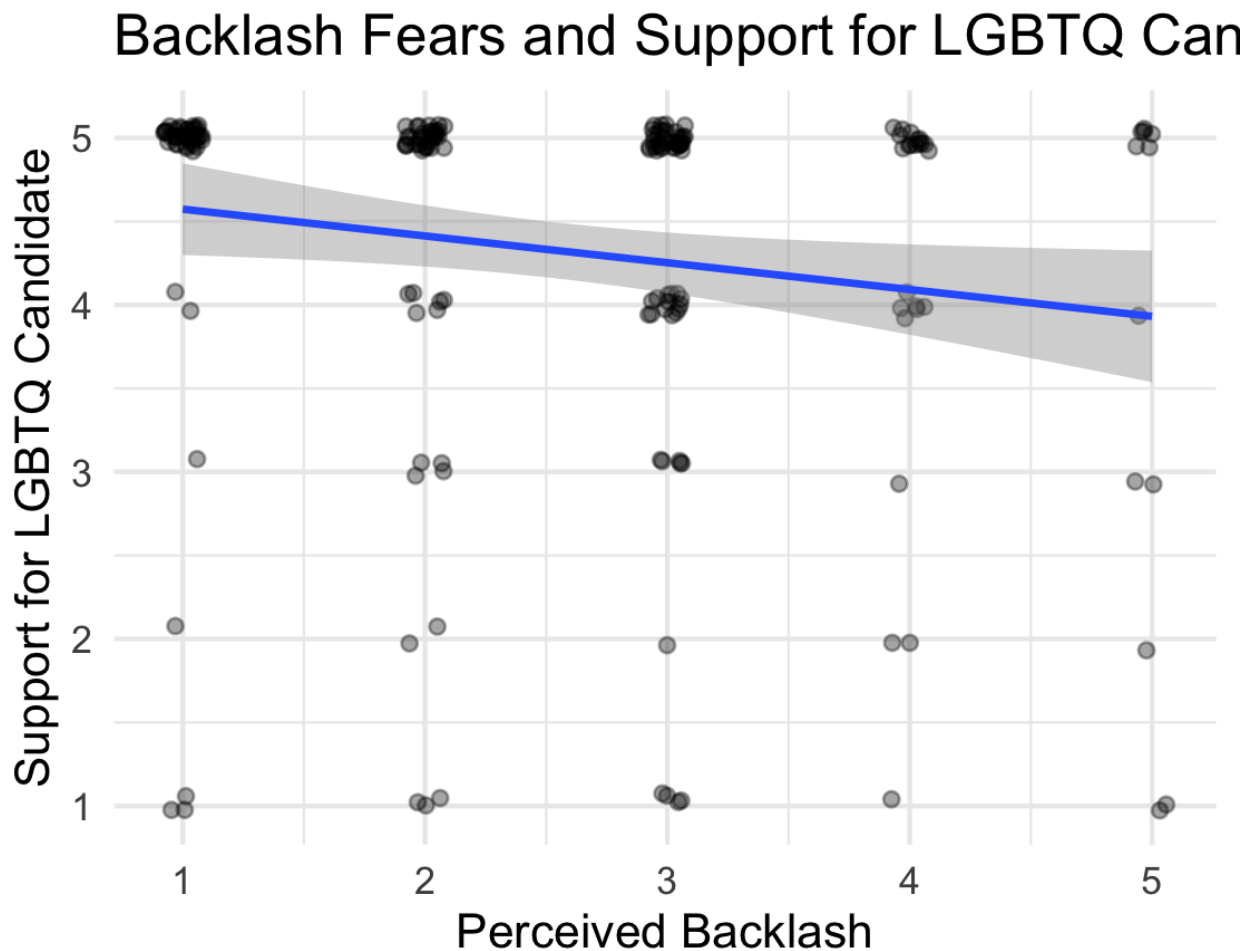
perceptions also contribute significantly to electability judgments.



**Figure 6. Backlash Fears Reduce Electability Perceptions**

This figure displays the relationship between perceived electoral backlash and assessments of LGBTQ candidate electability. The downward-sloping regression line indicates that county party chairs who anticipate greater backlash for supporting LGBTQ candidates tend

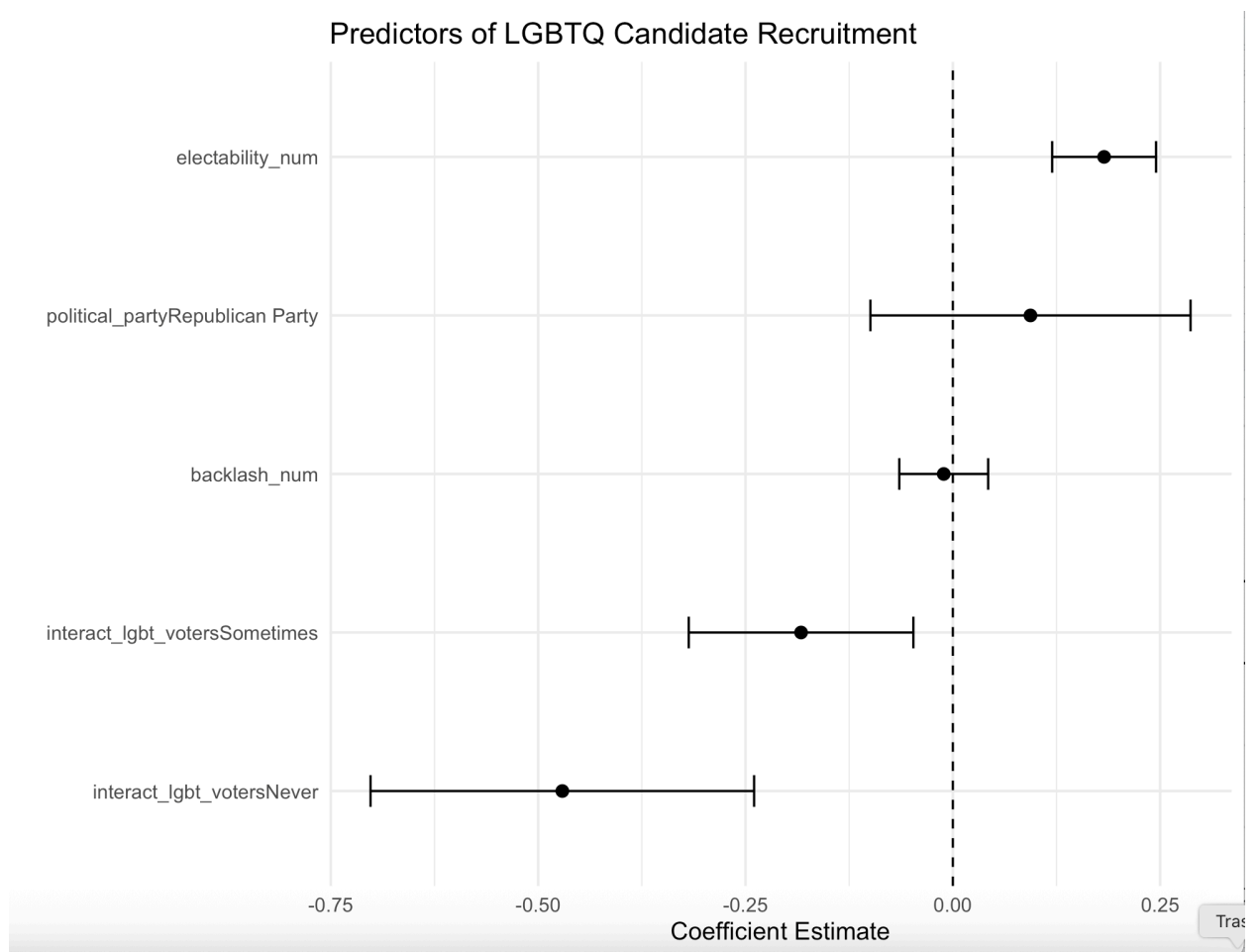
to view those candidates as less electorally viable. The findings suggest that strategic concerns regarding voter reactions and political risk play an important role in shaping elite candidate evaluations.



### Figure 7. Predictors of LGBTQ Candidate Recruitment

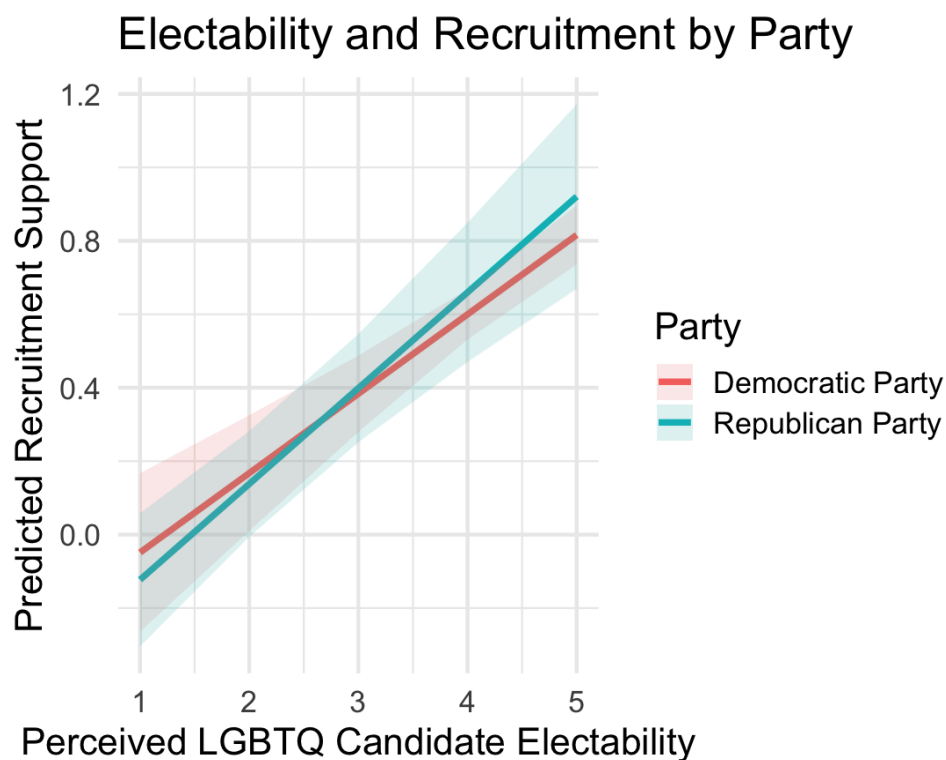
This figure presents regression estimates predicting whether county party chairs reported encouraging LGBTQ individuals to seek office. Electability perceptions exert the strongest

positive effect on recruitment behavior, while limited interaction with LGBTQ voters substantially reduces the likelihood of candidate encouragement. Partisan identification demonstrates weaker effects once strategic perceptions and social exposure are incorporated into the model. The results suggest that recruitment decisions are driven primarily by viability assessments rather than overt ideological opposition alone.



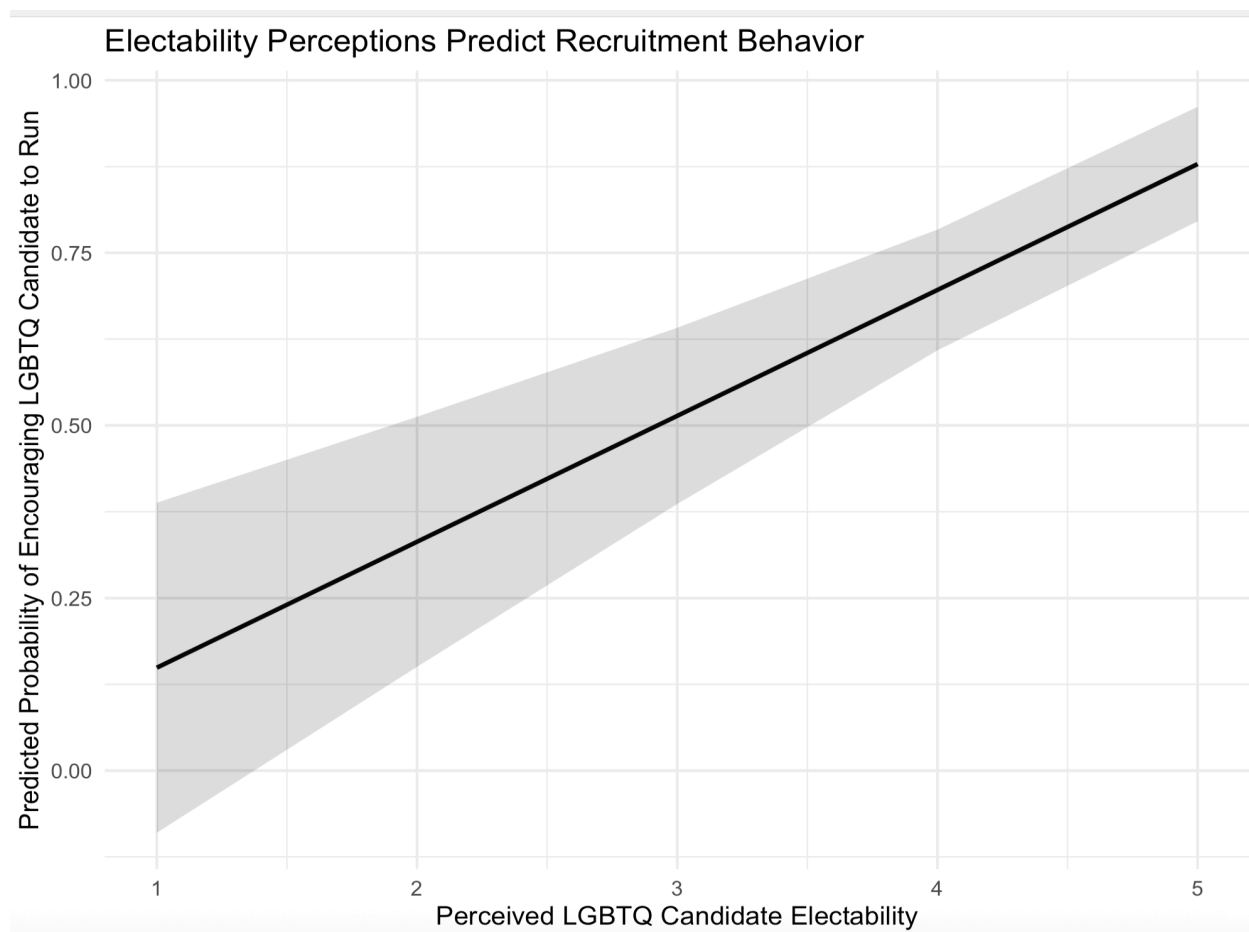
**Figure 8. Electability Perceptions and LGBTQ Candidate Recruitment by Political Party**

This figure illustrates how perceptions of LGBTQ candidate electability shape recruitment behavior across partisan groups. County party chairs who viewed LGBTQ candidates as more electable were substantially more likely to report encouraging LGBTQ individuals to run for office, regardless of party affiliation. However, Democratic respondents generally demonstrated higher levels of recruitment support overall, while Republican respondents displayed greater variation and lower average levels of encouragement. The figure highlights the central role of electability perceptions in structuring elite gatekeeping decisions within local party organizations.



### **Figure 9. Electability Perceptions Predict Recruitment Behavior**

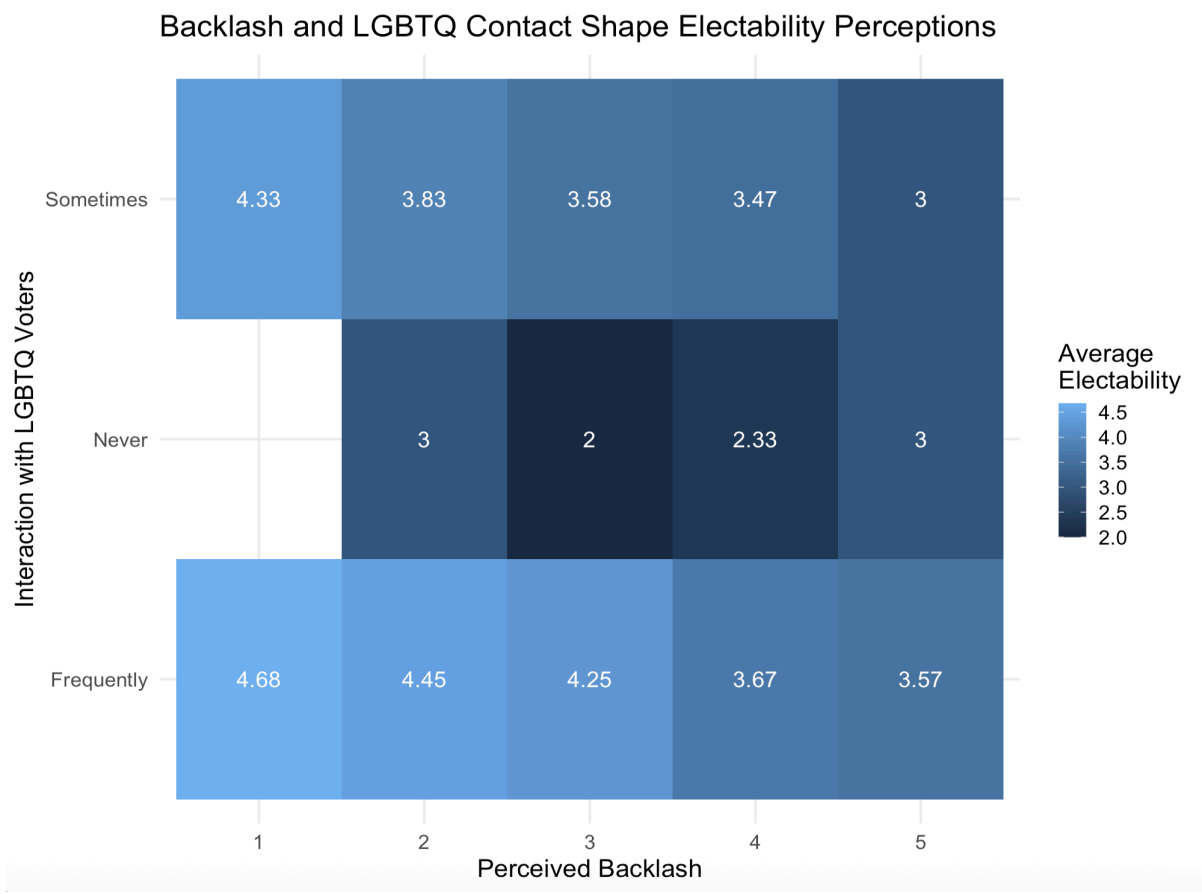
This figure displays the relationship between perceived LGBTQ candidate electability and the predicted probability that county party chairs encourage LGBTQ individuals to run for office. The upward-sloping line indicates that respondents who view LGBTQ candidates as more electorally viable are substantially more likely to engage in recruitment behavior. Shaded confidence intervals represent 95% confidence bands around the predicted values. The findings provide strong evidence that electability perceptions serve as a central mechanism shaping elite gatekeeping and candidate emergence.



**Figure 10. Backlash and LGBTQ Contact Shape Electability Perceptions**

This heatmap illustrates how perceived backlash and interaction with LGBTQ voters jointly shape assessments of LGBTQ candidate electability. Darker shading indicates lower average electability ratings, while lighter shading reflects more favorable evaluations. County party chairs who frequently interacted with LGBTQ voters consistently rated LGBTQ candidates as more electable across all levels of perceived backlash. In contrast, respondents with little or no LGBTQ contact expressed substantially lower electability assessments, particularly when

backlash concerns were high. The figure highlights the interactive relationship between social exposure and strategic electoral fears in shaping elite candidate evaluations.



### Survey Instrument

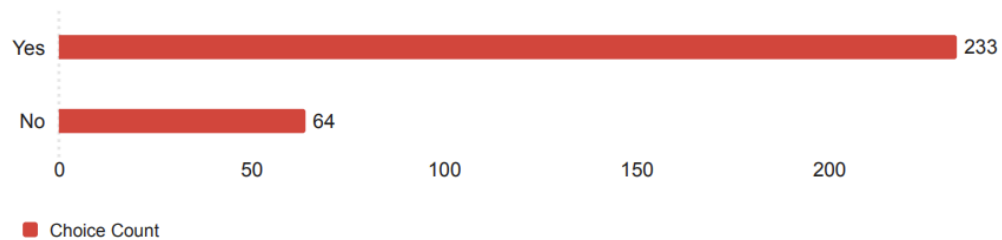
1. Have you ever considered an LGBT candidate for political office?
2. Would you ever consider an LGBT candidate for political office?
3. Do you believe LGBT candidates can represent diverse constituencies or will be too concerned with LGBT community concerns?
4. Do you believe LGBT candidates are electable?
5. Do you believe LGBT candidates are competent?
6. Do you believe LGBT candidates are relatable?
7. Do you believe party chairs have a responsibility to elevate historically marginalized communities?
8. Do you believe you would face backlash for backing an LGBT candidate?
9. Do you have a point person for organizing the LGBT community?
10. What words come to mind when thinking about an LGBT candidate?
11. Have you ever asked or encouraged a LGBT person to run for office?
12. Do you consider the LGBT community an important constituency in your electoral coalition?
13. Would you support an LGBT person for President?
14. Do you believe America is ready for an LGBT person as President?
15. Do you have concerns that LGBT candidates bring more baggage or are scandal prone?
16. Would you support an LGBT candidate in a competitive district?
17. Would you support an LGBT candidate in a conservative district?

18. How often do you interact with LGBT voters?

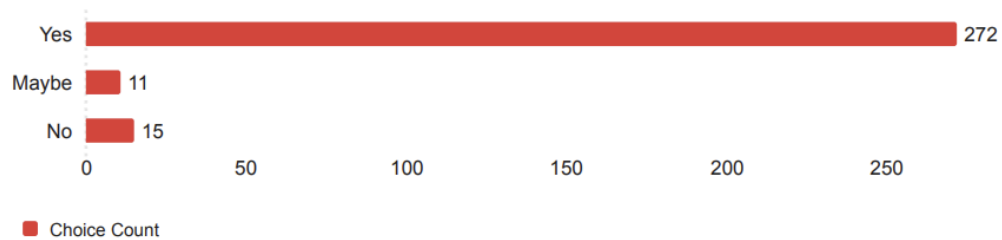
### Survey Results

1

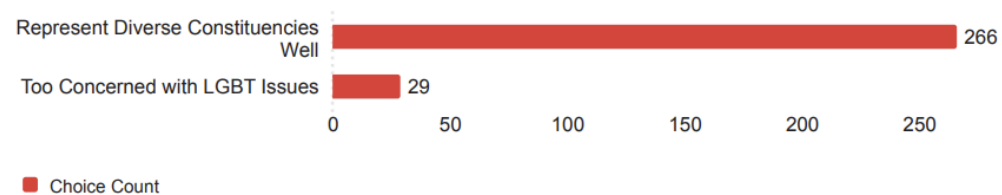
Q1 - Have you ever considered an LGBT candidate for political office?



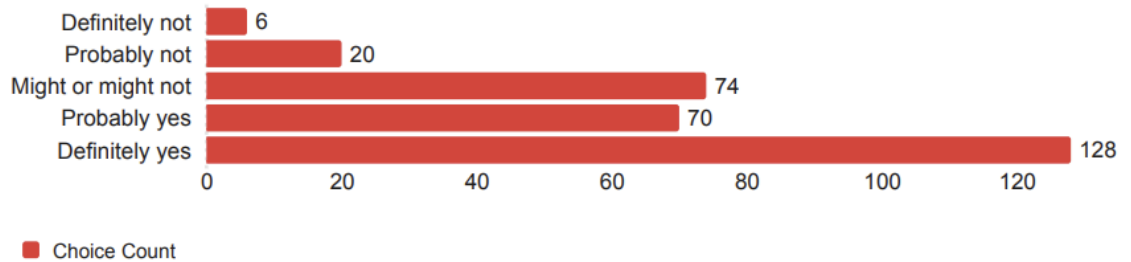
Q2 - Would you ever consider an LGBT candidate for political office?



Q3 - Do you believe LGBT candidates can represent diverse constituencies or will be too concerned with LGBT community concerns?



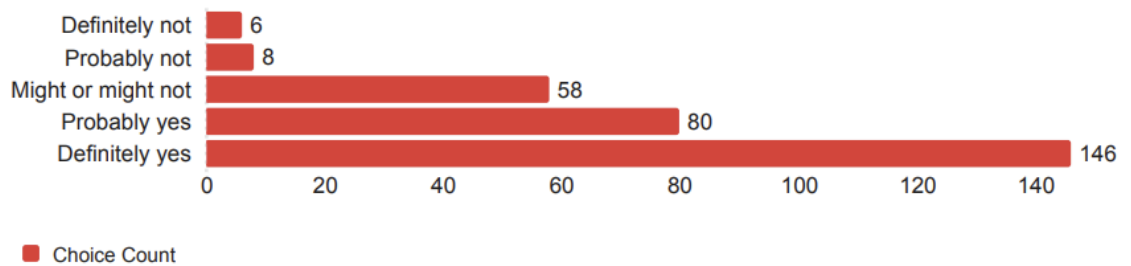
#### Q4 - Do you believe LGBT candidates are electable?



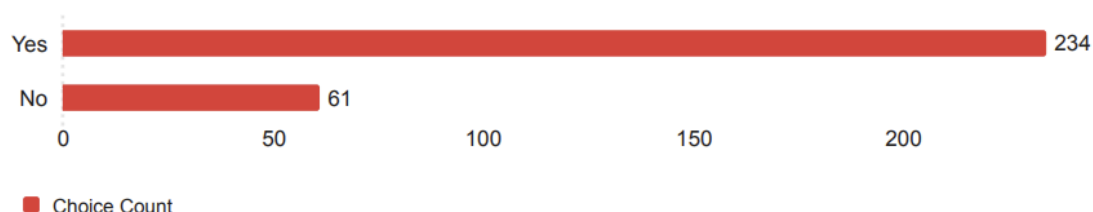
#### Q5 - Do you believe LGBT candidates are competent?



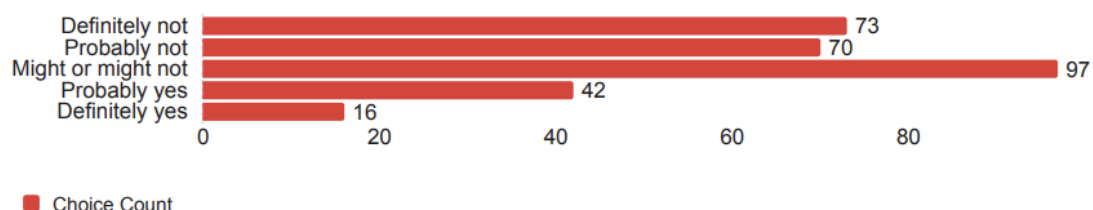
#### Q6 - Do you believe LGBT candidates are relatable?



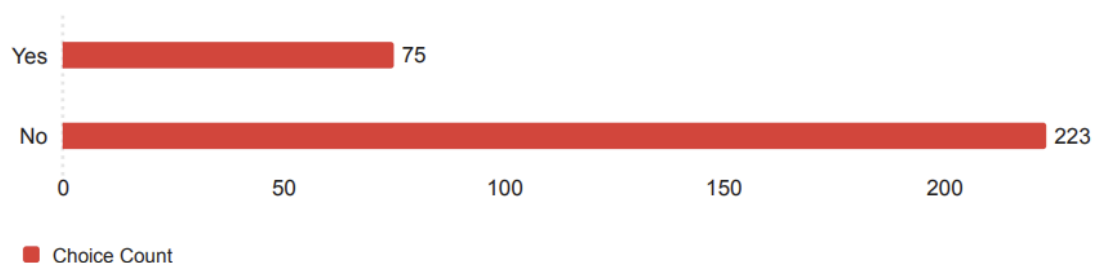
Q7 - Do you believe party chairs have a responsibility to elevate historically marginalized communities?



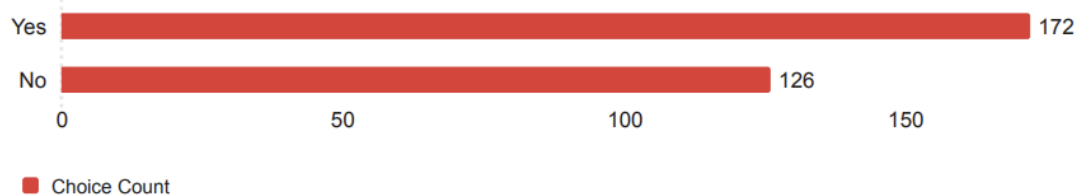
Q8 - Do you believe you would face backlash for backing an LGBT candidate?



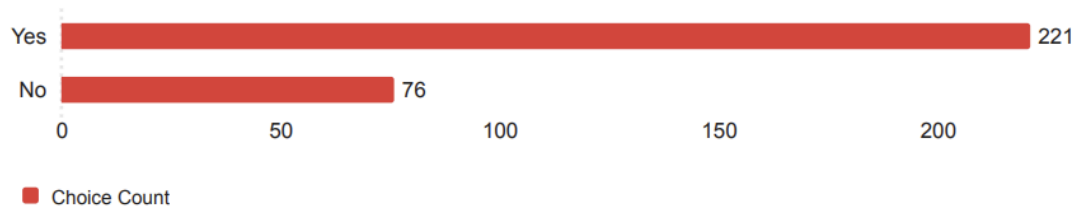
Q9 - Do you have a point person for organizing the LGBT community?



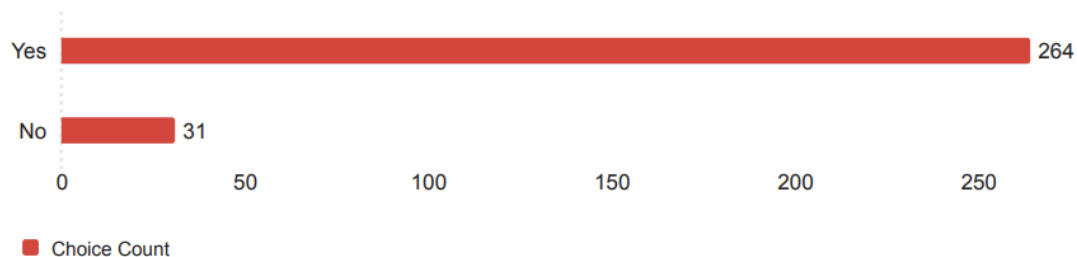
Q12 - Have you ever asked or encouraged a LGBT person to run for office?



Q13 - Do you consider the LGBT community an important constituency in your electoral coalition?



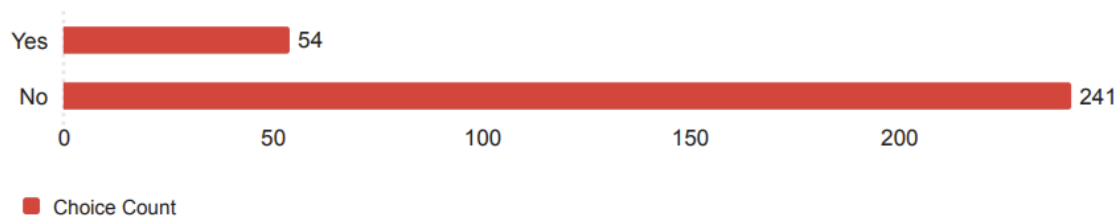
Q14 - Would you support an LGBT person for President?



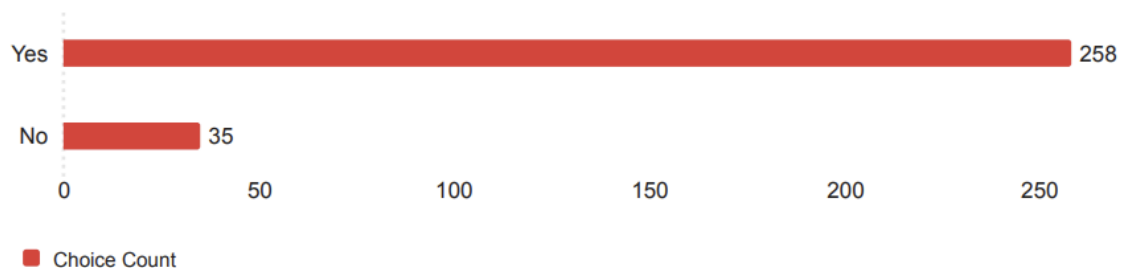
Q15 - Do you believe America is ready for an LGBT person as President?



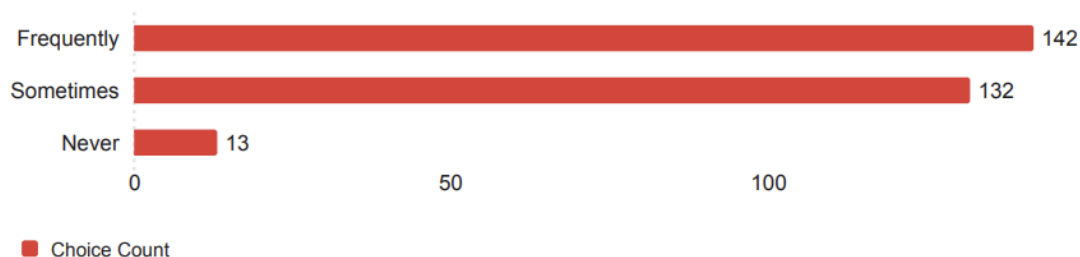
Q16 - Do you have concerns that LGBT candidates bring more baggage or are scandal prone?



Q17 - Would you support an LGBT candidate in a conservative district?



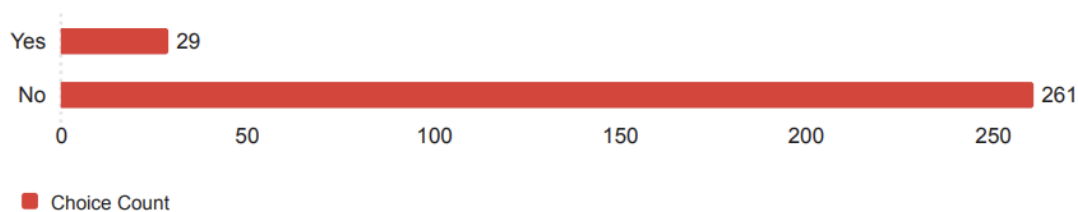
### Q18 - How often do you interact with LGBT voters?



### Q20 - What factors most influence your decision to recruit a candidate?

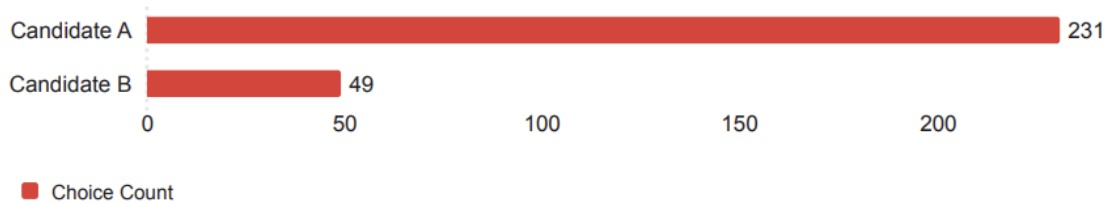
| Field               | Min  | Max  | Mean | Standard Deviation | Variance | Responses | Sum     |
|---------------------|------|------|------|--------------------|----------|-----------|---------|
| Funds               | 1.00 | 8.00 | 5.17 | 2.41               | 5.80     | 258       | 1334.00 |
| Electability        | 1.00 | 8.00 | 3.08 | 2.08               | 4.32     | 258       | 795.00  |
| Community Ties      | 1.00 | 8.00 | 3.16 | 1.72               | 2.96     | 258       | 815.00  |
| Experience          | 1.00 | 8.00 | 3.91 | 1.82               | 3.30     | 258       | 1010.00 |
| Policy Platform     | 1.00 | 8.00 | 3.94 | 1.86               | 3.45     | 258       | 1016.00 |
| Ideology            | 1.00 | 8.00 | 4.97 | 2.19               | 4.79     | 258       | 1281.00 |
| Diversity           | 1.00 | 8.00 | 6.46 | 1.46               | 2.14     | 258       | 1666.00 |
| Political Potential | 1.00 | 8.00 | 5.31 | 2.37               | 5.60     | 258       | 1371.00 |

### Q21 - Have you ever decided not to support a candidate due to concerns about voter backlash?

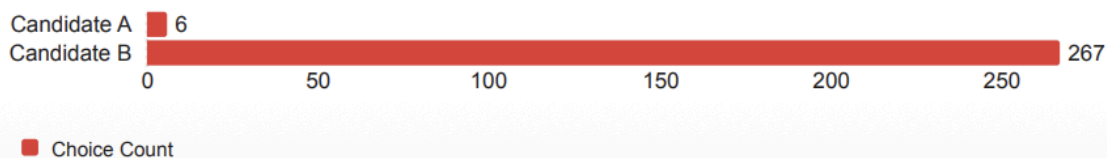


Q24 - You are advising your party on which candidate to prioritize in a competitive state legislative race. Candidate A has raised \$650,000, has a large national donor network, and has received strong support from advocacy organizations. However, internal polling shows the candidate trailing slightly. Candidate B has raised \$180,000, has fewer donors, and less national visibility, but is well known locally and is currently leading in internal polling. Both candidates have similar experience and policy

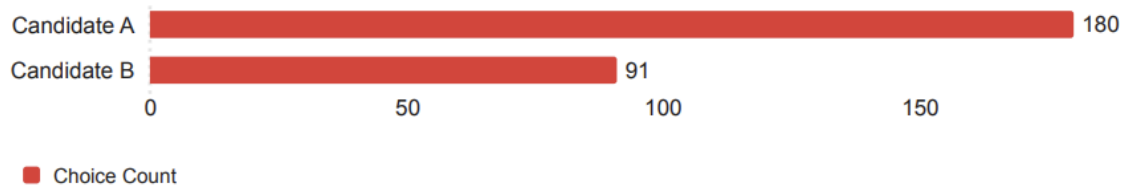
Q25 - Two candidates are running in similar districts. Candidate A has raised \$400,000 from 4,000 small donors across the country. Candidate B has raised \$400,000 from 40 large donors, primarily local business leaders. Both candidates have similar experience and endorsements. Which candidate do you believe is stronger?



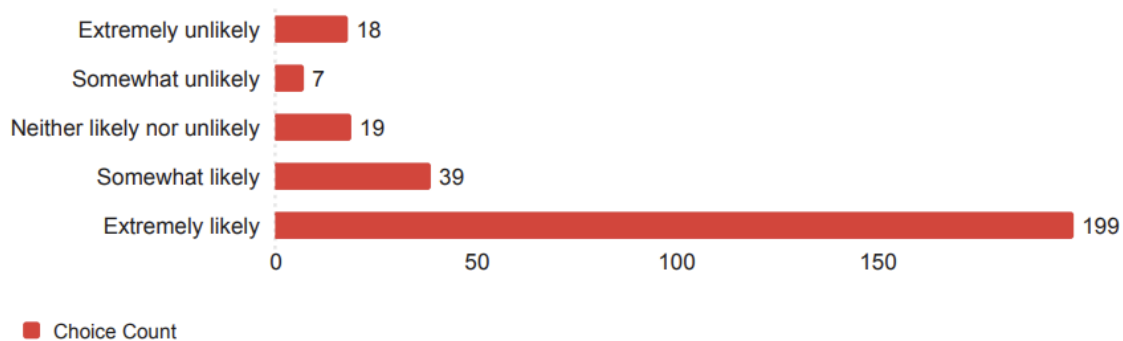
Q26 - Two candidates are running in competitive districts. Candidate A has raised \$500,000 but polling shows only modest increases in voter support after significant spending. Candidate B has raised \$250,000 but has seen steady gains in voter support with less spending. Both candidates are otherwise similar. Which candidate would you be more likely to support?



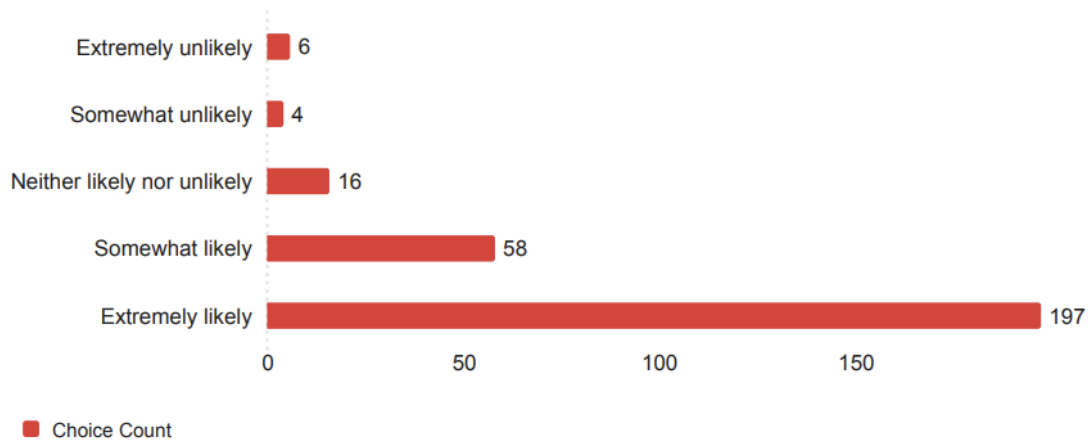
Q27 - You are evaluating two candidates in a competitive race. Candidate A is the incumbent and has raised \$200,000. Candidate B is a challenger and has raised \$700,000. Both candidates have similar policy positions and experience. Which candidate is more likely to win?



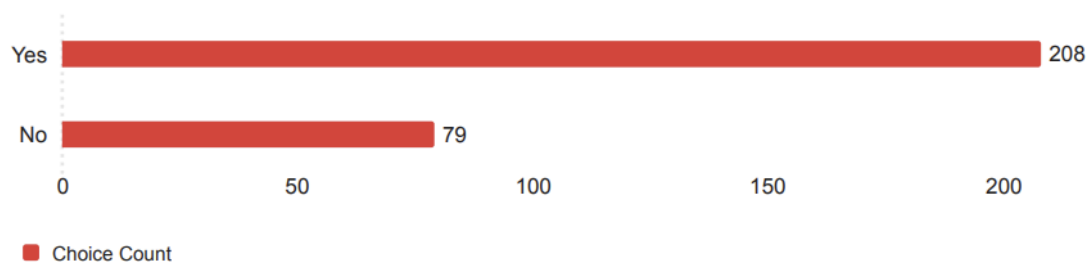
Q28 - You are considering whether to support a candidate for a competitive district. The candidate is well-qualified, has prior elected experience, has raised over \$500,000, and has strong endorsements. The candidate identifies as gay. How likely are you to support this candidate?



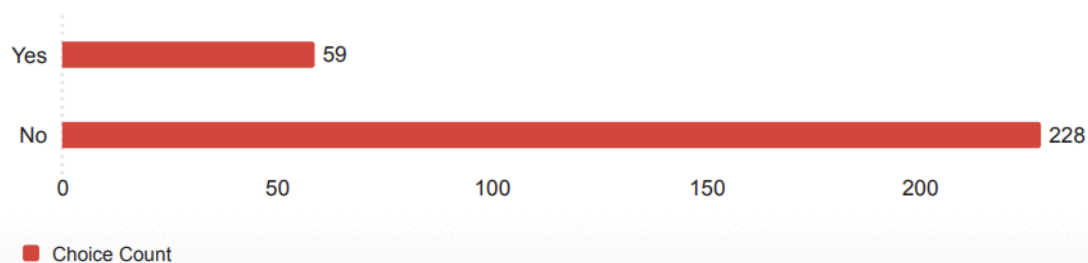
Q29 - You are considering whether to support a candidate for a competitive district. The candidate is well-qualified, has prior elected experience, has raised over \$500,000, and has strong endorsements. How likely are you to support this candidate?



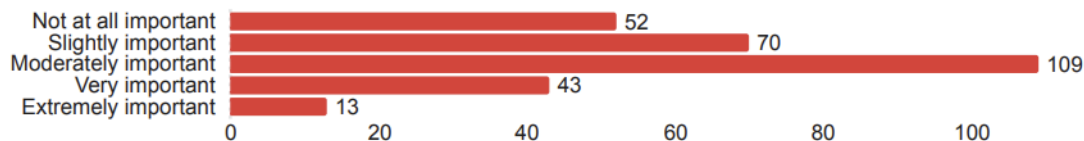
Q32 - Does your party provide funding support to candidates?



Q33 - Does your party endorse in primaries?

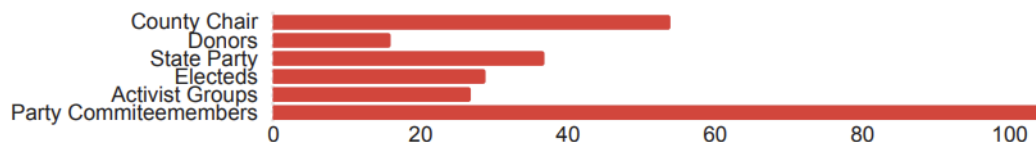


### Q38 - How important is early fundraising strength in your decision to support a candidate?



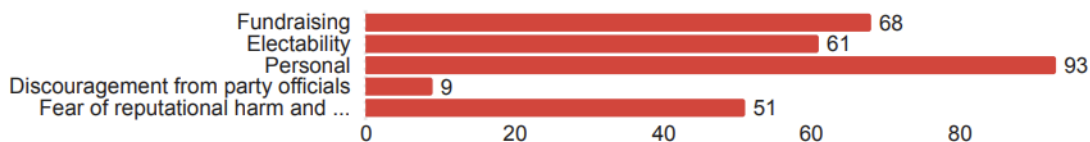
Choice Count

### Q39 - Who typically has the most influence in candidate selection in your county



Choice Count

### Q41 - What were the most common reasons that candidates exploring runs did not run?



Choice Count