Evaluating Transgender Candidates: Identity, Gender Presentation, and Partisan Differences

Abstract

Transgender candidates have become increasingly visible in American politics, yet little is known about how voters distinguish between transgender identity and visible gender presentation when evaluating candidates. Existing research typically treats transgender identity as a single political cue, overlooking the independent role of gender presentation. This study addresses that gap using a randomized 2 × 4 × 2 factorial survey experiment that independently manipulates candidate transgender identity, visual gender presentation, and campaign issue emphasis. Respondents evaluated hypothetical congressional candidates on perceived electability, candidate support, competence, and trustworthiness. Results indicate that transgender candidates receive significantly less favorable evaluations than otherwise identical cisgender candidates. Visible gender presentation also independently shapes candidate evaluations, suggesting that appearance-based heuristics influence electoral judgments beyond explicit identity labels. By contrast, campaign issue emphasis provides limited evidence of moderating these effects, while partisan differences largely reflect patterns documented in previous research. Overall, the findings suggest that voter evaluations of transgender candidates are driven more strongly by identity-based and visual heuristics than by campaign context. The study contributes to scholarship on transgender political representation, candidate evaluation, and

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gender stereotypes by demonstrating that transgender identity and gender presentation are analytically distinct mechanisms shaping electoral perceptions.

Keywords

Transgender candidates; Candidate evaluation; Gender presentation; LGBTQ politics; Political behavior; Survey experiment; Role congruity; Electoral behavior

Introduction

As transgender Americans have become increasingly visible in electoral politics, questions about how voters evaluate transgender candidates have taken on growing scholarly and political importance. Existing research demonstrates that transgender candidates often encounter electoral disadvantages, yet considerably less is known about whether these disadvantages depend on candidates' gender presentation or the policy issues they emphasize during campaigns. This study addresses that question using a randomized survey experiment that independently varies transgender identity, visual gender presentation, and issue emphasis.

Existing scholarship generally conceptualizes transgender identity as a discrete candidate characteristic. Yet candidate evaluations are unlikely to depend solely on identity labels. Rather, voters observe a constellation of cues—including gender presentation—that

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may independently shape perceptions of competence, leadership, and electoral viability. Consequently, transgender identity and visual gender presentation should be treated as analytically distinct dimensions of candidate evaluation.

Voter evaluations are also shaped by issue ownership stereotypes. Research consistently demonstrates that policy domains are gendered in the minds of voters, with issues such as national security, crime, and the economy commonly associated with masculine leadership, while education, health care, and social welfare are more closely associated with feminine traits (Hayes 2011; Sanbonmatsu 2002). Consequently, evaluations of transgender candidates may depend not only on identity and gender presentation but also on whether campaign issue emphases reinforce or violate prevailing gender stereotypes.

This study integrates these perspectives within a single experimental framework. Rather than treating transgender identity as a singular political cue, I separately manipulate candidate identity, visual gender presentation, and campaign issue emphasis. This design makes it possible to determine whether penalties associated with transgender candidates arise primarily from identity itself, from visible gender nonconformity, or from the interaction of these characteristics with campaign context.

Existing research frequently treats transgender candidates as a homogeneous category. However, transgender candidates differ in visible gender presentation, campaign messaging, and other characteristics that may independently influence voter evaluations. Examining

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within-group variation therefore provides a more complete understanding of how transgender candidates are perceived and why representation gaps persist.

Throughout this article, the primary outcome is perceived electability. Measures of candidate support, competence, and trustworthiness are treated as secondary outcomes that illuminate potential mechanisms underlying evaluations of electoral viability.

Research on political cognition demonstrates that voters routinely rely on cognitive heuristics when evaluating political candidates, particularly when information is limited (Popkin 1991). Rather than conducting extensive policy evaluations, citizens frequently rely on visible characteristics and social identities as informational shortcuts (McGraw 2003). These heuristics influence judgments of competence, leadership, trustworthiness, and ultimately perceived electability.

Role congruity theory provides a complementary explanation for these heuristic evaluations. Individuals are generally evaluated more favorably when they conform to socially prescribed gender roles and less favorably when they violate them (Eagly and Karau 2002). Within electoral settings, these expectations shape perceptions of competence, leadership, and viability (Brooks 2013; Lawless and Fox 2010). Consequently, candidates whose gender presentation departs from conventional expectations may experience systematic disadvantages independent of their qualifications.

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The concept of gender presentation extends these theoretical expectations. Drawing on scholarship on "passing," visible conformity to dominant gender norms influences how others interpret social identity (Snorton 2017; Currah 2022). In electoral settings, voters may rely on visual gender presentation as an additional heuristic when evaluating candidates. Consequently, even when transgender identity is held constant, candidates perceived as more visibly gender nonconforming may receive less favorable evaluations because they deviate more clearly from conventional expectations regarding political leadership.

Campaign context may further shape these evaluations. Research on issue ownership demonstrates that voters associate certain policy domains with masculine or feminine leadership characteristics (Hayes 2011; Sanbonmatsu 2002). If these stereotypes influence evaluations of transgender candidates, penalties associated with gender presentation should become especially pronounced when candidates campaign on issues stereotypically associated with masculine leadership, such as public safety.

These theoretical perspectives generate competing expectations. Role congruity theory and issue ownership suggest that evaluations should depend on the interaction between candidate identity, gender presentation, and campaign context. By contrast, research emphasizing identity-based heuristics suggests that voters may rely primarily on broad social categories, producing relatively stable penalties regardless of issue emphasis. The present experiment adjudicates between these competing explanations.

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The remainder of the article reviews the relevant literature, describes the experimental design, presents the empirical findings, and discusses the implications for research on transgender political representation.

Materials and Methods

To evaluate how transgender identity, gender presentation, and campaign issue emphasis influence candidate evaluations, I conducted a randomized factorial survey experiment administered through Qualtrics Panels. Respondents were randomly assigned to candidate profiles that independently varied these characteristics while all other candidate information remained constant. Random assignment permits causal inference regarding the effects of each treatment on candidate evaluations.

Although the sample is not nationally representative, random assignment ensures strong internal validity for estimating causal treatment effects. Consequently, the primary objective is to identify differences across experimental conditions rather than estimate population parameters.

Respondents were randomly assigned to evaluate a hypothetical congressional candidate presented through a standardized vignette. The vignette varied only the experimentally manipulated characteristics while holding all other candidate information constant.

Candidate identity was manipulated by varying whether the hypothetical candidate was identified as transgender or cisgender. In some versions, that information is included

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directly in the profile, while in others it is not mentioned. Campaign issue emphasis was experimentally manipulated by varying whether the candidate prioritized public safety or economic issues. Some respondents see a version that emphasizes public safety and crisis leadership, while others see one that focuses more on economic issues like the cost of living and jobs.

Visual gender presentation was manipulated through candidate photographs that varied in perceived gender conformity. Respondents are shown a photo of the candidate, and the images differ in how closely they fit more familiar expectations of gender presentation. One of the images is meant to be more visibly gender non-conforming, while the others are more conventional.

After reading the profile, respondents are asked a set of evaluation questions. The main outcome is perceived electability, measured on a seven-point scale ranging from very unlikely to very likely. Because each respondent only sees one version of the candidate, differences in responses across groups can be attributed to the changes built into the vignette.

The study employed a randomized $2 \times 4 \times 2$ factorial survey experiment varying candidate identity, gender presentation, and issue emphasis. The candidate's identity, their presentation, and the issue they emphasize are all varied independently. This design permits estimation of both the independent and interactive effects of each treatment. Since assignment to conditions is random, differences in outcomes can be interpreted as causal effects of those features.

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Factor	Levels
Identity	Transgender/Cisgender
Presentation	Least conforming/moderately conforming/highly conforming/no photo
Issue	Economy/Public Safety

Balance checks across treatment conditions indicate no systematic differences in respondent characteristics. For example, age distributions are similar across conditions ($p = 0.706$), suggesting that random assignment was successful.

Across all conditions, candidate biographies, qualifications, and policy positions remained constant except for the experimentally manipulated factors. This design isolates the independent effects of transgender identity, gender presentation, and issue emphasis while minimizing confounding from other candidate characteristics.

Sample

Data were collected from 1,265 U.S. adults recruited through Qualtrics Panels. Although the sample is not nationally representative, random assignment provides strong internal validity for estimating causal treatment effects.

Treatments

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Respondents were presented with a short vignette describing a congressional candidate. The vignette was designed to resemble a brief campaign or news-style profile and included basic information such as the candidate's background, policy priorities, and, in some conditions, a photo.

The experimental treatments were embedded within this vignette. Respondents were randomly assigned to different versions of the candidate profile in which three elements were varied. First, candidate identity was manipulated by indicating whether the candidate was transgender or not. Second, visual presentation was varied through the inclusion of different candidate images, which differed in the degree of gender conformity. One image was designed to reflect a less gender-conforming (non-passing) presentation, while the others reflected more conventional appearances. Third, the issue domain of the campaign was manipulated by emphasizing either public safety and crisis leadership or economic concerns such as cost of living and job growth.

All other aspects of the vignette, including the candidate's name, general background, and overall structure, were held constant across conditions. This ensures that any observed differences in evaluation can be attributed to the experimental manipulations of identity, presentation, and issue emphasis.

Hypotheses

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The theoretical framework suggests two primary expectations. First, visible gender presentation should independently influence evaluations because voters rely on appearance-based heuristics when assessing candidate viability. Second, explicit transgender identity should reduce candidate evaluations relative to otherwise identical cisgender candidates. These expectations are evaluated using the following hypotheses.

H1: Non-passing transgender candidates will be evaluated as less electable than passing candidates.

H2: Transgender candidates will be evaluated as less electable than cisgender candidates.

Results

The primary outcome variable is perceived electability. Following exposure to the candidate profile, respondents evaluated how likely they thought the candidate was to win the election. Responses were recorded on a seven-point scale that runs from very unlikely to very likely. Electability captures respondents' perceptions of a candidate's likelihood of electoral success rather than personal support. Candidate support measures respondents' own willingness to support the candidate. Competence and trustworthiness capture evaluations of candidate traits that may underlie perceived viability.

Candidate support, competence, and trustworthiness serve as secondary outcomes that illuminate mechanisms underlying perceived electability.

Covariates / Moderators

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Alongside the experimental treatments, I also include a set of demographic and political variables to examine whether the effects differ across groups. These include party identification, age, race, ideology, gender, and class.

Partisanship

Consistent with prior research, treatment effects were substantially larger among Republican respondents than among Democratic respondents. These analyses therefore reinforce existing evidence regarding partisan polarization while demonstrating that the principal treatment effects remain evident in the pooled sample.

Figure 1: Predicted Support by Identity and Partisanship Here

The figure above shows that the penalty associated with transgender identity varies sharply by partisanship. Among Democratic respondents, differences are minimal in how transgender and non-transgender candidates are evaluated. Independent respondents exhibit a modest reduction in candidate support. In contrast, Republican respondents exhibit a substantial decrease in support for transgender candidates. The gap between transgender and non-transgender candidates is largest among Republicans, indicating that the overall penalty observed in pooled models is primarily driven by this group rather than reflecting a uniform pattern across the electorate.

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Ideology

The ideological results closely parallel those observed for partisanship. Among respondents on the left, there is little to no penalty. As respondents become more ideologically conservative, the negative effect becomes more pronounced. This again suggests that the overall pattern is being driven primarily by respondents on the conservative end of the spectrum.

Gender

None of the estimated interaction terms reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Consequently, the present study provides limited evidence that campaign issue emphasis substantially moderated evaluations of transgender candidates under the experimental conditions examined.

Race

No statistically significant differences emerge across racial groups. Some of the estimates move around a bit, but they are not precise and do not follow a consistent pattern. This likely reflects smaller subgroup sizes more than anything else. Overall, the results do not point to race playing a major role in shaping responses to the candidate.

Age

Age does not significantly moderate treatment effects. The estimates vary slightly across groups, but no statistically significant differences are observed. In practical terms,

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younger and older respondents do not seem to be reacting very differently to the candidate's identity.

Class

There is limited evidence that socioeconomic class moderates candidate evaluations. The interaction terms are small and not statistically significant, and the negative effect of transgender identity looks fairly similar across class categories. At least in this sample, economic position does not seem to play a major role in shaping how respondents evaluate the candidate.

Empirical Strategy

The primary analyses rely on ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to estimate the effects of the experimental treatments. The main specification models perceived electability as a function of candidate identity (transgender vs. not), visual presentation (degree of gender conformity), and issue domain, along with interaction terms between these variables. Although the dependent variable is measured on an ordinal scale, OLS is used for ease of interpretation, and results are substantively consistent with ordered logistic models. Because respondents were randomly assigned to conditions, the estimated coefficients can be interpreted as causal effects of the treatments. Robust standard errors are used in all models to account for potential heteroskedasticity.

A key focus of the empirical strategy is on interaction terms, which test whether the effect of transgender identity varies depending on the candidate's visual presentation or the issue context. These models allow for an assessment of whether penalties associated with transgender

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identity are conditional, such as being larger for less gender-conforming candidates or in certain policy domains, or whether they operate more uniformly across conditions. Additional models incorporate interactions with respondent characteristics, such as partisanship and ideology, to examine whether treatment effects differ across subgroups.

As a robustness check, I estimate an ordered logistic regression model given the ordinal nature of the dependent variable. The results are substantively consistent with the OLS models. Transgender identity remains associated with a statistically significant decrease in candidate support ($p < 0.05$), and the least gender-conforming candidate continues to receive a large and significant penalty ($p < 0.01$). The issue domain variable is marginally significant ($p \approx 0.06$), suggesting a weaker but directionally consistent effect. Overall, these findings indicate that the main results are not sensitive to model specification and hold across both linear and ordinal approaches.

Standard diagnostic checks were conducted for the OLS models. Visual inspection of residual plots did not reveal major violations of model assumptions. While the residual distribution reflects the ordinal nature of the dependent variable, results are robust to alternative specifications, including ordered logistic regression. No influential observations were found to be driving the results. The diagnostic plots indicate no major violations of OLS assumptions. Residuals are reasonably centered around zero with no clear pattern, and there is no evidence of strong heteroskedasticity. The Q–Q plot shows some deviation from normality, which is expected given the ordinal nature of the dependent variable.

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Influence diagnostics (Cook's distance) do not identify any observations exerting undue influence on model estimates.

Figure 2: Diagnostics Here

Main Effects

The analyses begin by estimating average treatment effects across experimental conditions in how respondents evaluate candidates across the experimental conditions. Across all model specifications, transgender candidates received significantly lower evaluations than otherwise identical cisgender candidates.

Visual gender presentation independently influenced candidate evaluations. Relative to the most gender-conforming profile, candidates depicted as least gender-conforming received significantly lower electability evaluations. The effect persists after accounting for transgender identity, indicating that visible gender presentation contributes additional information beyond explicit identity labels.

Issue emphasis produced comparatively modest effects. Although candidates emphasizing public safety and the economy differed slightly in perceived electability, interaction models provide limited evidence that campaign issue emphasis substantially conditioned the effects of transgender identity or gender presentation. Accordingly, the

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experiment offers stronger evidence regarding baseline identity effects than contextual moderation.

Three principal findings emerge from the analyses. First, transgender candidates receive systematically less favorable evaluations than comparable cisgender candidates. Second, gender presentation independently shapes these evaluations. Third, the experiment provides limited evidence that campaign issue emphasis substantially moderates these relationships.

Interaction Effects

Interaction models were estimated to assess whether treatment effects varied across experimental conditions.

Table 2 reports the estimated average treatment effects of transgender identity, gender presentation, and issue emphasis on perceived electability. Across specifications, transgender identity is associated with significantly lower evaluations relative to otherwise comparable cisgender candidates. Figure 2 illustrates the magnitude of these treatment effects.

Additional analyses examine whether the effect of transgender identity itself varies by issue domain. The results point in the same direction. The interaction between identity and issue framing is not statistically meaningful, which suggests that transgender candidates are not being penalized more in areas that are typically seen as masculine, like public safety.

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I also estimate a model that includes the full set of interactions between identity, presentation, and issue domain. Those results do not show a clear or consistent pattern either. Taken together, these points lead to a fairly simple takeaway. Both transgender identity and gender non-conformity matter on their own, but they are not combining in a systematic way across different issue contexts.

Moderator analyses indicate that treatment effects are concentrated among Republican respondents and political conservatives, whereas effects among Democratic respondents are comparatively modest. By contrast, treatment effects do not vary systematically by respondent gender, race, age, or class.

Figure 3: Distribution Here

To make these patterns more concrete, the figure below presents predicted levels of candidate support across identity, presentation, and issue conditions. Two patterns stand out clearly. First, candidates identified as transgender are consistently evaluated less favorably than otherwise identical candidates. Second, visual presentation matters in a similar way, with the least gender-conforming candidate receiving the lowest levels of support across conditions. Importantly, these differences remain relatively stable across issue domains, suggesting that these penalties are not strongly conditional on context.

Figure 4: Predicted Levels of Support by Identity Here

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The figure below shows the estimated effects of candidate identity, visual presentation, and issue framing on support. The points reflect the estimated effects, and the bars show 95 percent confidence intervals. The least gender conforming candidate, Photo 1, stands out with a clear and sizable drop in support. The transgender condition also moves in a negative direction, though the effect is smaller. Issue framing goes the other way. Candidates who emphasize economic issues tend to be rated a bit more positively than those focused on public safety. All effects are measured on a seven point support scale.

Figure 5: Estimated Average Treatment Effects on Candidate Support Here

The figure below shows that the least gender-conforming candidate (Photo 1) generates a higher proportion of negative evaluations and fewer positive responses relative to other conditions. This indicates that visible gender non-conformity shifts respondents toward more negative assessments, rather than simply lowering average levels of support.

Figure 6: Distribution of Support by Photo Condition Here

The ordered logit results point in the same direction as the main models. The negative coefficient on the transgender variable suggests that respondents are less likely to place transgender candidates in the higher support categories. Similar patterns are observed, but even

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stronger, with the least gender conforming candidate, Photo 1, where responses shift more clearly toward the lower end of the scale. If anything, the effect tied to visual presentation looks a bit larger than the identity effect itself, which highlights how much these visible cues seem to matter.

These findings indicate that the pattern is not just about lowering the average level of support. It is more about where responses end up. Transgender candidates are less likely to be placed in the higher categories and more likely to fall into the lower ones. So the penalty shows up as a shift in the distribution of responses, not just a small drop overall.

Figure 7: Distribution of Support by Gender Identity Here

Overall, three findings emerge. First, transgender candidates receive systematically less favorable evaluations than comparable cisgender candidates. Second, visible gender presentation independently shapes candidate evaluations. Third, the experiment provides limited evidence that campaign issue emphasis substantially moderates these relationships. These findings are robust across alternative model specifications.

Collectively, the analyses indicate that transgender identity and visible gender presentation exert consistent effects on candidate evaluations, whereas campaign issue emphasis produces comparatively limited evidence of moderation. The following section considers the implications of these findings for research on candidate evaluation and transgender political representation.

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Discussion

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. These limitations primarily concern the interpretation of the experimental manipulations and the generalizability of the results rather than the internal validity of the experimental design.

First, respondents evaluated a single hypothetical congressional candidate. Future research should examine whether these findings generalize across candidates differing in race, party affiliation, incumbency, and electoral context.

Although the photographs were selected to vary perceived gender conformity, respondents may also have inferred differences in attractiveness, competence, or warmth. Consequently, the presentation manipulation may capture broader appearance-based heuristics rather than gender conformity alone.

Finally, as with most survey-based work, there is always the possibility of social desirability shaping responses. Some respondents may be hesitant to express negative views about transgender candidates directly (Tourangeau, R. and Yan, T. 2007). If that is happening, the estimates here could be understating the size of the effect. These findings suggest that biases in candidate evaluation are not primarily driven by context-specific concerns about competence, but instead reflect broader identity-based heuristics. This helps explain why representation gaps persist even as more transgender candidates enter electoral politics.

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Future research should explore whether these generalized penalties persist across different candidate characteristics, including race, party affiliation, and incumbency status, and whether they translate into real-world electoral outcomes. First, it examines whether transgender candidate evaluations depend on gender presentation and issue emphasis rather than treating transgender identity as a singular cue. Second, it evaluates whether these effects vary systematically across partisan groups. Using a randomized survey experiment, I find consistent evidence that transgender candidates receive less favorable evaluations than otherwise comparable candidates and that visible gender nonconformity further reduces evaluations. By contrast, I find limited evidence that issue emphasis substantially moderates these effects.

First, the findings extend research on transgender political representation by demonstrating that transgender identity and visible gender presentation exert independent effects on candidate evaluations. Existing research has primarily examined transgender identity as a single political cue. The present study suggests that voters also respond to differences in gender presentation beyond explicit identity labels.

Second, the findings refine theories of role congruity. Although role congruity theory predicts that evaluations should depend on the alignment between candidate characteristics and contextual expectations, the present experiment provides comparatively limited evidence that campaign issue emphasis substantially moderates evaluations.

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Instead, baseline identity cues appear more influential under the experimental conditions examined.

Third, the analyses reinforce previous research demonstrating that partisan identity strongly conditions evaluations of transgender candidates. Consistent with earlier studies, treatment effects are concentrated among Republican respondents while remaining comparatively modest among Democratic respondents.

These findings also have practical implications for transgender candidates and political organizations. Campaign professionals often assume that emphasizing particular policy domains may offset potential identity-based disadvantages. The present results provide limited evidence supporting that expectation, suggesting that broader perceptions of candidate identity and gender presentation may be more consequential than campaign issue emphasis.

Future research should examine whether these findings generalize across electoral offices, partisan contexts, candidate races, and real campaign environments. Additional work should also investigate whether similar patterns emerge when voters evaluate actual candidates rather than hypothetical profiles.

Overall, the experiment demonstrates that transgender identity and visible gender presentation independently shape candidate evaluations. Although campaign issue emphasis produced comparatively limited evidence of moderation, identity-based cues consistently influenced perceptions of electability. These findings suggest that understanding transgender

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political representation requires attention not only to identity itself but also to how candidates are visually perceived during electoral campaigns.

As transgender representation continues to expand in American politics, understanding how voters integrate identity, appearance, and campaign context will remain essential for explaining the opportunities and constraints facing transgender candidates.

Disclosure of interest

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Appendices

Appendix A: Figures

Figure 1

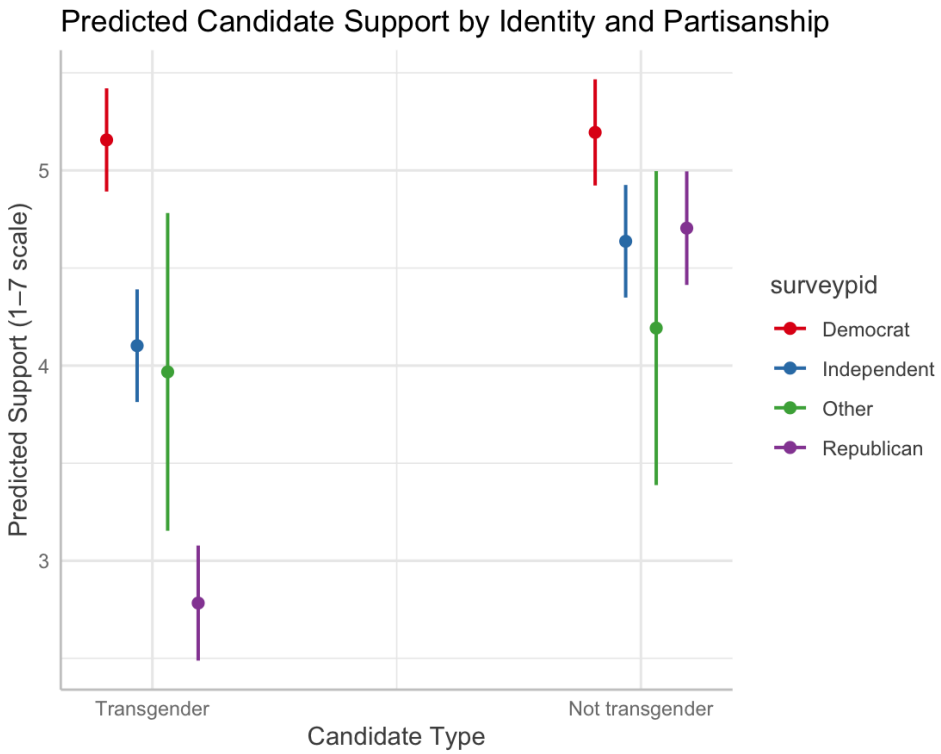


Figure 2

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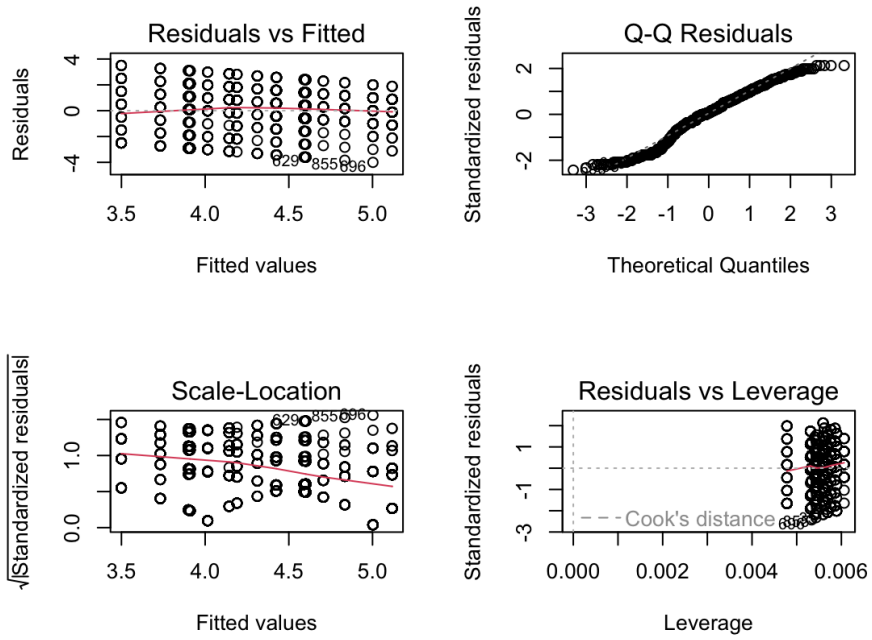


Figure 3

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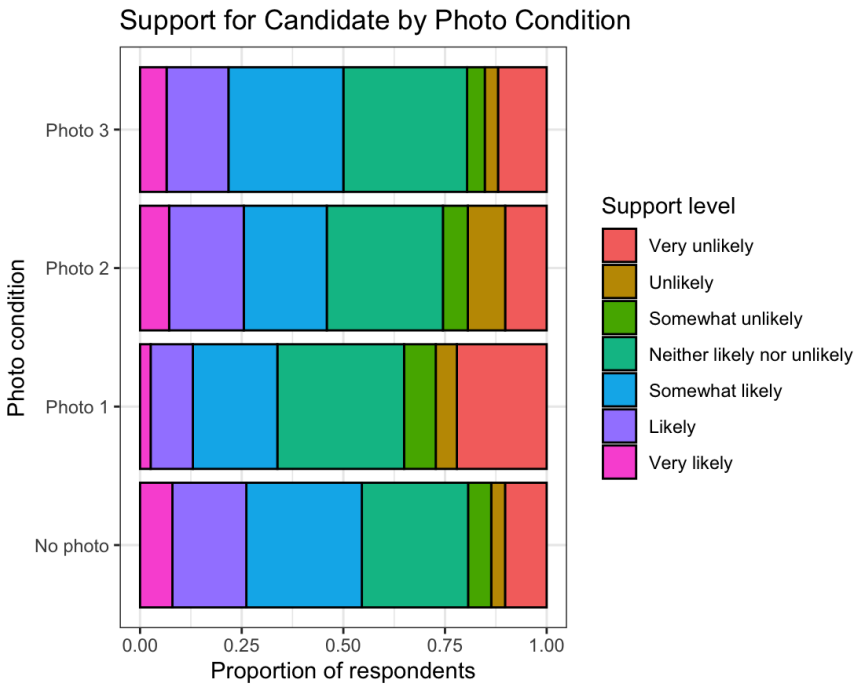


Figure 4

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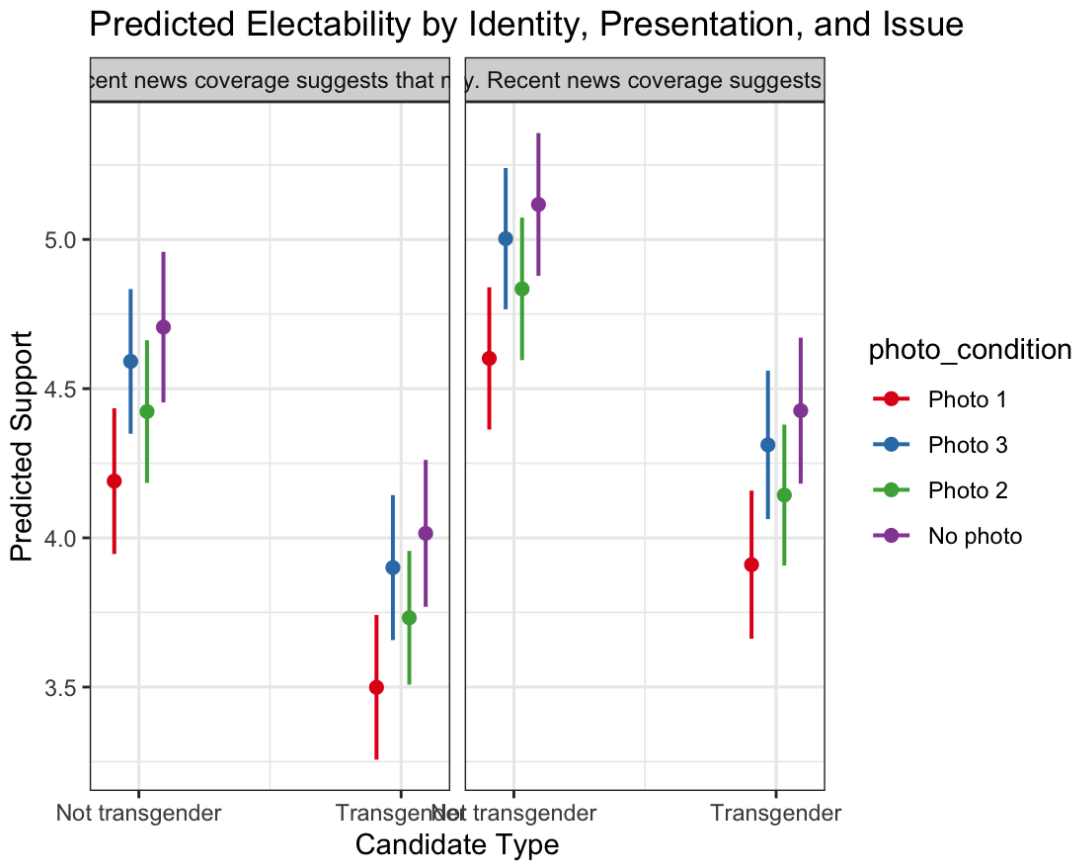


Figure 5

https://doi.org/10.33774/apsa-2026-164bx **ORCID:** https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7374-684X Content not peer-reviewed by APSA. **License:** All Rights Reserved

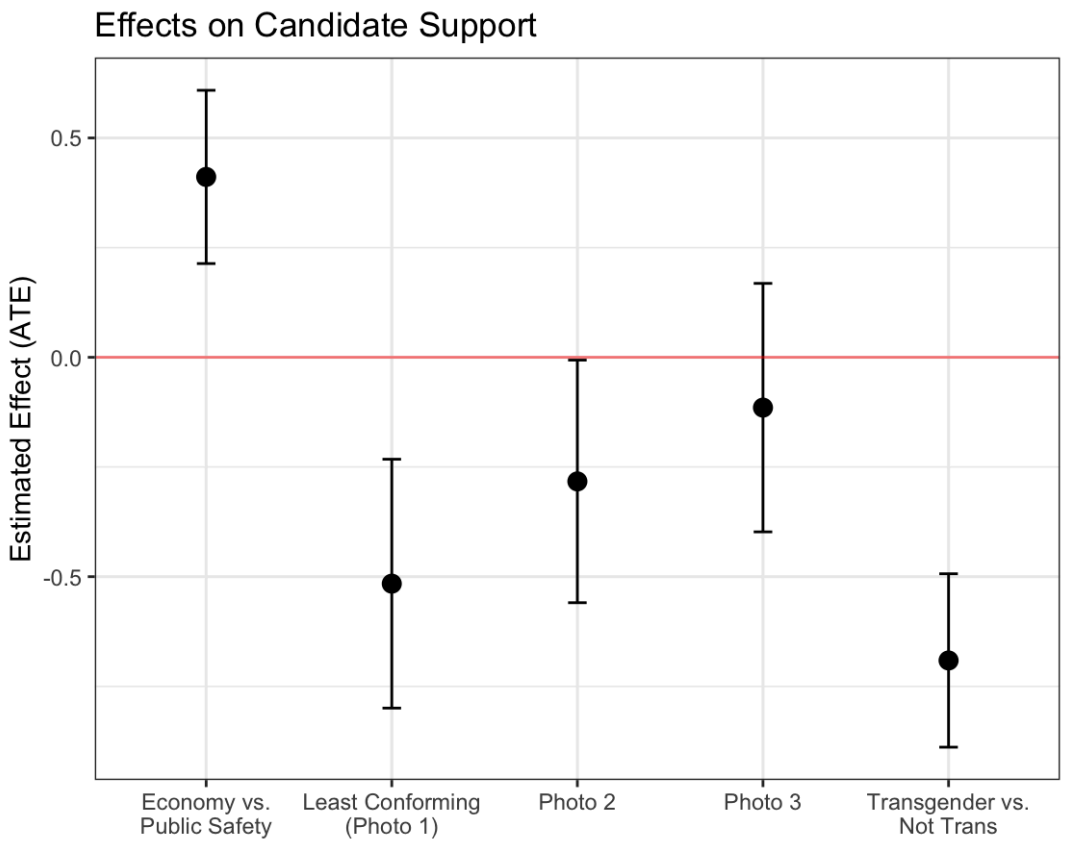


Figure 6

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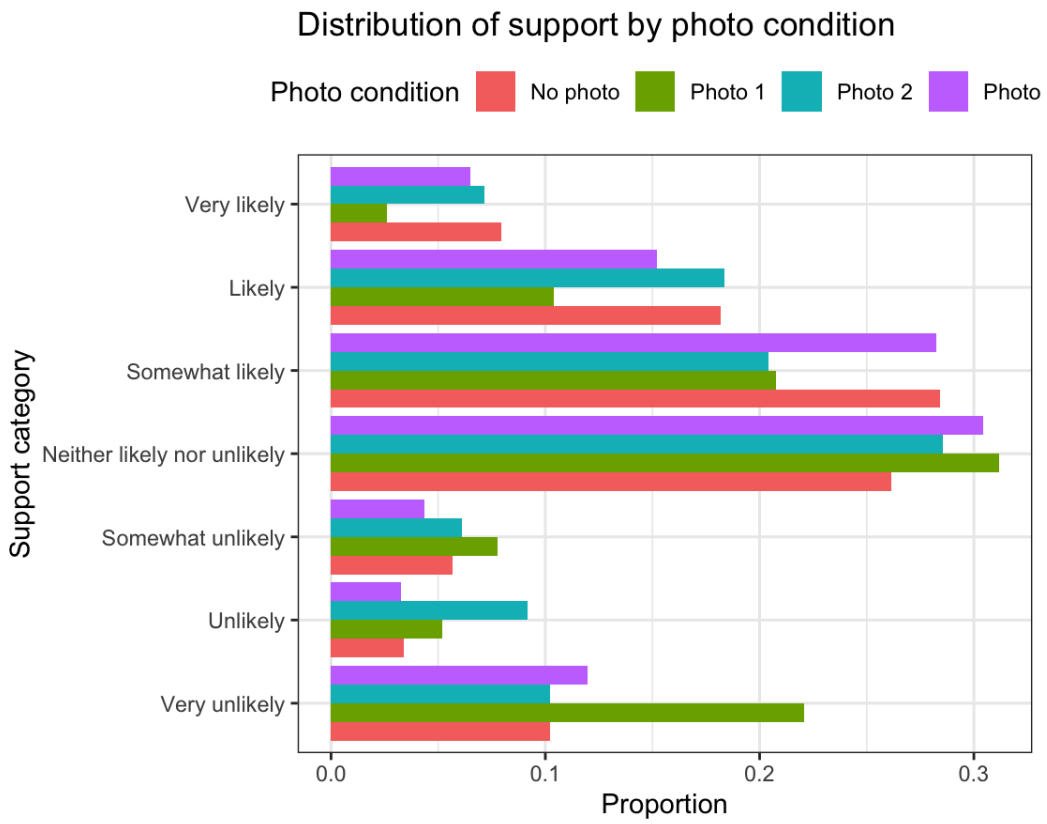
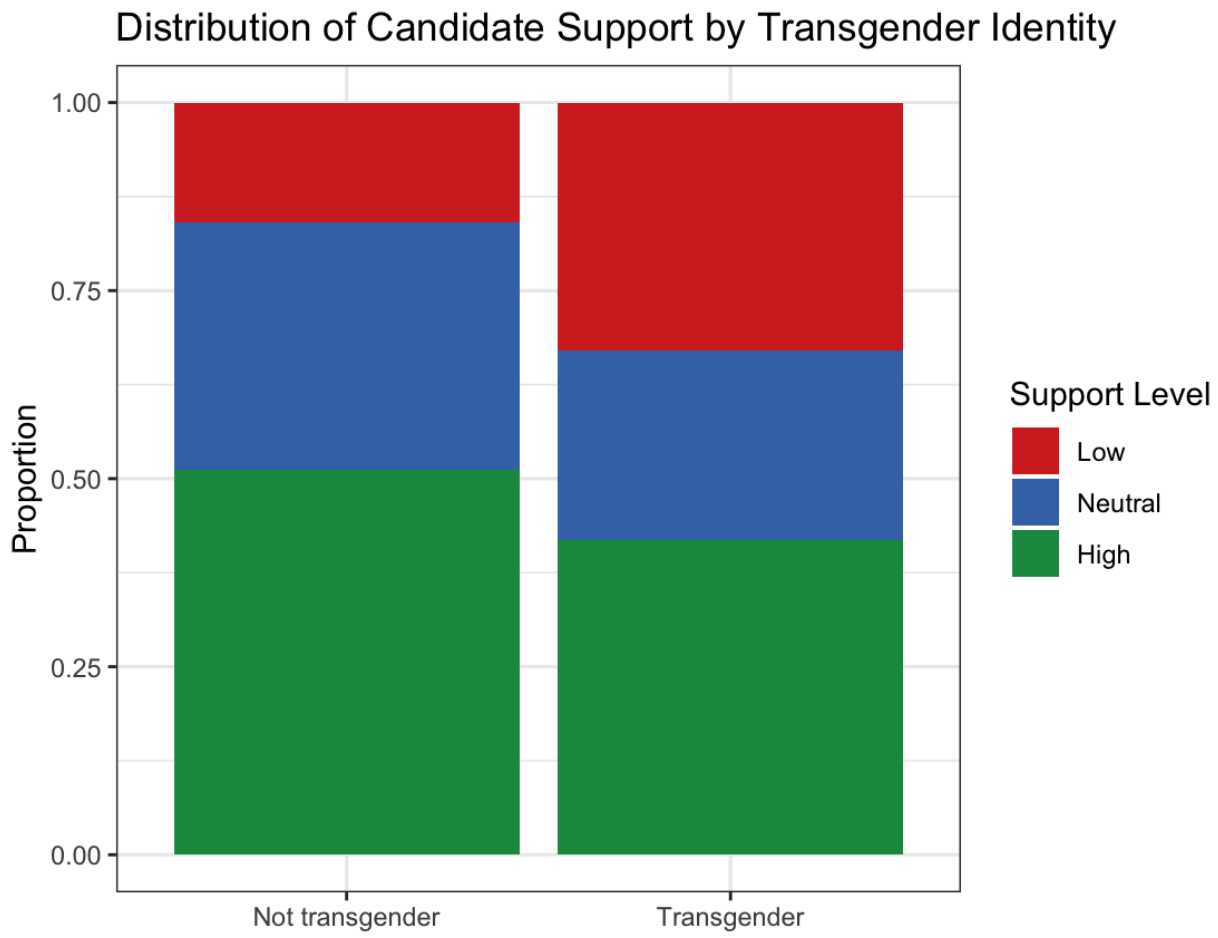
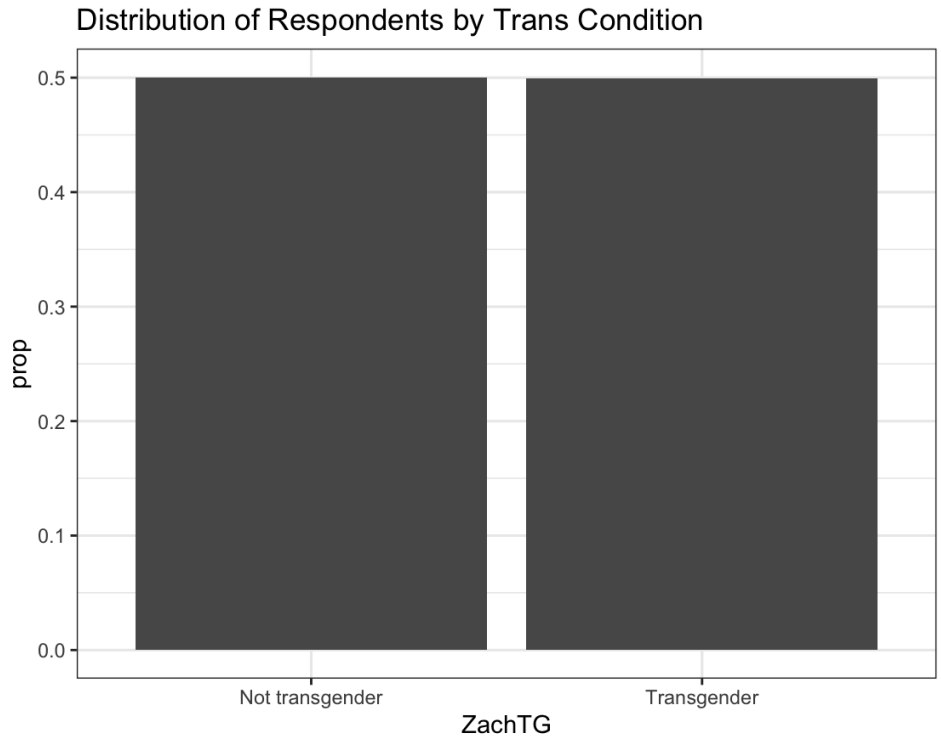


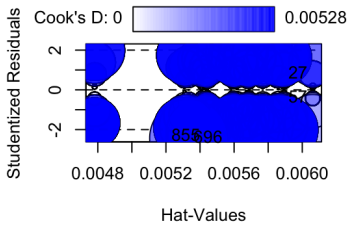
Figure 7

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print(table1, showAllLevels = TRUE)

Stratified by ZachTG

level Not transgender Transgender p test

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n		176	179	
surveyage (%)	18-24 years old	13 (7.4)	21 (11.7)	0.706
	25-34 years old	45 (25.6)	38 (21.2)	
	35-44 years old	29 (16.5)	33 (18.4)	
	45-54 years old	35 (19.9)	34 (19.0)	
	55-64 years old	24 (13.6)	26 (14.5)	
	65 years or older	30 (17.0)	27 (15.1)	

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Appendix B: Vignettes

Vignette 1:

Sophia Reynolds is running for Congress in your state. In this election, national security has become one of the most important issues for voters, with growing concerns about global conflict, terrorism, and military readiness.

Sophia has a background in public service and previously worked as a policy advisor on national security and economic issues. She is a transgender woman and has been endorsed by several local leaders. She has emphasized her ability to keep the country safe and respond to international threats.

Vignette 2:

Sophia Reynolds is running for Congress in your state. In this election, the economy has become one of the most important issues for voters, with concerns about inflation, jobs, and wages.

Sophia has a background in public service and previously worked as a policy advisor on economic and national security issues. She is a transgender woman and has been endorsed by several local leaders. She has emphasized her ability to strengthen the economy and improve economic stability.

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Candidate Images

Assessing Gender Conformity



Transgender (Cis Conforming)



Transgender (Cis Conforming)



Transgender (Less Cis Conforming)



Transgender (Less Cis Conforming)

Respondents were evenly distributed across treatment conditions, with approximately equal proportions assigned to the transgender and non-transgender conditions, consistent with successful randomization.

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