

Do Voters Reject Gay Candidates? Partisanship, the Far-Right, and the Electoral Effect of Candidate Sexual Orientation in Latin America

Journal of Politics in Latin America

1–24

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DOI: 10.1177/1866802X251415389

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Abstract

In recent years, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights and candidacies have expanded across Latin America. Some argue that such progress may provoke a conservative reaction, including the electoral rejection of LGBT candidates. Do voters punish gay candidates? To answer this, we conducted survey experiments in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico. We find no punishment among the general electorate: voters in Argentina reward gay candidates, while Chilean and Mexican citizens are indifferent. We then focus on right-wing voters and compare reactions among supporters of the mainstream right and the reactionary far right – the group most likely to reject a gay candidate. Consistent with our expectations, mainstream right supporters do not penalise such candidates in any country. Similarly, in Argentina, voters who back Freedom Advances – a hybrid party combining libertarianism, anti-system appeals, and right-wing radicalism – do not punish gay candidates. Only

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voters aligned with a clearly far-right party, the Republican Party in Chile, reject gay candidates.

Manuscript received 16 May 2025; accepted 17 December 2025

Keywords

LGBT politics, far-right, voting behaviour, Latin America

Attitudes towards lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people have evolved positively in Latin America in the last decades (Abreu Maia et al., 2023; Chaux et al., 2021). The region has also made progress in LGBT legislation, such as same-sex marriage, gender identity laws, adoption rights for same-sex partners and non-discrimination statuses. As of 2025, eight Latin American countries allow same-sex marriage at the national level – either approved by Congress or judicial rulings – a stark contrast to 2009 when no country did (Pew Research Center, 2025). LGBT candidates have also gained visibility and become more prominent in electoral politics.

Yet, despite these advances, the political landscape in Latin America has shifted, with the far-right gaining power in several countries. In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, who positioned himself as a staunch opponent of progressive social values and “gender ideology,” won the 2018 presidential second round election with 55% of the vote (Gstalter, 2019). In Argentina, voters elected Javier Milei as President in 2023. Milei received about 30% of votes in the first round of the presidential election, and 56% in the second round. Milei, along with members of his party, has made openly homophobic and transphobic remarks and has repeatedly attacked what he calls “woke ideology” (Rioseco, 2025). Similarly, in Chile, José Antonio Kast – who has denounced the “gay lobby” and made transphobic comments – secured second place in the 2021 presidential election, and his party won most seats in the 2023 Constitutional Assembly elections (Lavers, 2022). In 2025, Kast won the presidential election with 58% of the vote. These examples highlight that the presence of a relevant far-right force within a political system is likely to deteriorate the electoral conditions for LGBT candidates to succeed. When far-right candidates use anti-LGBT rhetoric, they make a candidate’s sexual orientation more salient, which may prompt some voters to base their electoral decisions on this issue. This can have negative electoral consequences for LGBT candidates – particularly by leading the most conservative segments of the electorate to reject them.

These developments reflect a broader narrative in the region, where the rise of the right has been framed as a backlash against the cultural liberalisation promoted by previous left-wing governments (Corrales, 2017; Rennó, 2020; Smith, 2019). In other Latin American countries like Mexico, however, culture war issues are relatively less salient. Following the Supreme Court’s progressive rulings on LGBT and abortion rights, the center-right *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) has deemphasised its conservative sociocultural positions. Only marginal far-right activists, such as Eduardo Verástegui or

grassroots organisations like the *Frente Nacional por la Familia*, have denounced “gender ideology” or promoted anti-LGBT rhetoric (Castro Cornejo, 2023a).

Against this backdrop, we analyse negative voter responses to lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) descriptive representation – specifically, electoral punishment of gay candidates. In particular, our research asks: are gay candidates punished by voters in Latin America?. While other studies examine shifts in public attitudes following progressive policy reforms (Abreu Maia et al., 2023; Smith and Boas, 2024), we focus on whether punishment to descriptive representation manifests in voter behaviour at the ballot box.

Our first goal is to examine whether the electorate as a whole punishes gay candidates or instead refrains from doing so. Our second objective is to focus on right-wing voters, the ideological group most likely to punish LGB candidates (Magni and Reynolds, 2021a; Sherkat et al., 2011). Examining their reactions allows us to assess whether opposition to gay candidates is a core mobilising force for these voters. Do right-wing voters and partisans penalise gay candidates? And do these dynamics vary across countries with different levels of right-wing representation and political opposition to sexual minorities? Moreover, building on Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (2026), this study distinguishes between a moderate mainstream right and a reactionary far right and propose that these two types of right-wing parties will respond differently to LGB candidates: voters aligned with far-right parties will be less willing to vote for a gay candidate.

To answer these questions, we conduct original survey experiments in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico – three countries that illustrate contrasting trajectories in LGBT rights and the rise of right-wing politics. We analyse one country where with a clear far right party/leader who advances an ultraconservative agenda that defends Pinochet’s economic legacy and traditionalist social values (Chile/José Antonio Kast) and a country where the far right is almost absent from (Mexico). We also study a hybrid case that combines a libertarian economic agenda with an aggressive anti-establishment rhetoric and right-wing radicalism (Argentina/Javier Milei). Each experiment employs a vignette design. Respondents are presented with a candidate profile that included fixed attributes (e.g., marital status and campaign promises), while the candidate’s sexual orientation was randomly assigned. This design allows us to causally identify the effect of candidate sexual orientation on vote choice, while minimising concerns about social desirability bias. Because the experiment embeds sexual orientation as one characteristic in a candidate profile and randomly assigns respondents to see it or not, it reduces the likelihood that participants recognise orientation as the focus of the study and adjust their answers to appear tolerant – something more likely to occur with observational data when respondents are asked directly about attitudes toward gay candidates.

Across all three countries, we find no punishment of gay candidates among the whole electorates; instead, on average, voters tend to reward them in Argentina, and neither punish nor reward them in Mexico and Chile.¹ Focusing on right-wing partisans, we find that in Argentina and Mexico, they do not penalise LGB candidates. However, in

Chile, opposition to gay candidates arises among supporters of the far-right Republican Party.

Our research contributes to the literature in several ways. First, rather than focusing on broader public attitudes toward LGBT rights, we analyse if voters discriminate against LGBT individuals in electoral politics. We interpret the absence of a voting penalty as evidence of tolerance toward sexual diversity in the electoral arena, even if it does not imply broader support for LGBT rights. Second, while existing survey projects in the region rely on observational data to examine how sexual orientation affects the electoral success of candidates (e.g., LAPOP's AmericasBarometer), these surveys are potentially influenced by social desirability bias. In turn, we implement a survey experiment designed to reduce such bias and uncover genuine preferences toward LGB political representation. Third, we build a bridge to the emerging literature on the far right in Latin America and study the conditions under which sociocultural issues trigger rejection among right-wing voters. In particular, we analyse how different factions of the right respond to gay political representation. Finally, our findings contribute to debates on LGBT political representation in Latin America. While we hope that future research extends our analysis to other members of the LGBT community, our paper shows that there is no general punishment against gay candidates among voters in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico. We find that, on average, the mainstream right does not reject gay candidates. Electoral punishment is concentrated among supporters of the internally consistent far-right Republican Party in Chile.

LGBT Politics and LGB Candidates

The role of sexual orientation has gained increasing attention in political behaviour research. Studies on LGBT politics and public opinion have largely focused on attitudes toward gays and lesbians, particularly regarding issues such as same-sex marriage and adoption rights (Chaux et al., 2021; Dion and Díez, 2017). These studies typically explore the political, attitudinal, and demographic factors that influence public opinion.

Another way to assess equality for LGBT individuals is by examining how sexual orientation affects the electoral success of political candidates. Although it does not capture support for LGBT rights per se, it signals tolerance for their political participation. Sexual orientation, in this context, refers to a persistent pattern of sexual and/or romantic attraction to individuals of the same, different, or multiple sexes or genders (Hoy and London, 2018). This paper specifically examines public attitudes toward political candidates who openly identify as gay. Conceptually, this falls within the study of the political representation of sexual minorities, including LGB candidates. By contrast, the representation of transgender candidates is analytically distinct, as gender identity represents a distinct conceptual category from sexual orientation. On average, transgender candidates face larger electoral penalties than LGB candidates (Haider-Markel et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2018).² In this paper, we focus on negative voter reactions to gay descriptive representation – specifically, the electoral punishment of gay candidates.

Public perceptions of LGB individuals have improved over the past few decades in regions such as the USA, Europe, and Latin America. Alongside this shift, legal protections for LGB rights have expanded, granting LGB individuals in more countries access to marriage, adoption, and anti-discrimination laws. However, despite a growing number of openly LGB politicians being elected in advanced industrial democracies, representation remains limited in Latin America, even with legal advancements. This suggests that full societal acceptance of LGB individuals remains an ongoing challenge.

Research indicates that electing LGB politicians can foster greater tolerance and help reduce prejudice. Descriptive representation enhances the effects of contact theory, demonstrating that visibility can shift public attitudes (Ayoub and Garretson, 2017; Magni and Reynolds, 2021a). However, evidence suggests that lesbian, gay, and bisexual candidates face notable disadvantages in electoral politics compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Golebiowska, 2019; Haider-Markel et al., 2017; Rajan and Pao, 2022). In the United States, while at the aggregate level results are mixed (Haider-Markel et al., 2020), openly homosexual candidates encounter higher levels of rejection from Republican voters, conservative voters, highly religious and older people, and those who do not have LGB friends (Flores, 2014; Golebiowska, 2019). In Canada, LGBT candidates most likely to win elections are those who established a reputation for community service before coming out and adopt heteronormative relationships (Everitt and Camp, 2014; Everitt and Horvath, 2021). In Latin America, scholars have explored citizens' support for LGBT rights, particularly same-sex marriage (Chaux et al., 2021; Dion and Díez, 2017), as well as whether positions on sexuality politics predict voting for left- or right-wing parties. Generally, research has found that such positions have limited influence on vote choice (Carlin et al., 2015; Singer and Tafoya, 2021; Zechmeister and Corral, 2013).

To our knowledge, this is the first study to analyse whether the electorate rejects candidates based on their sexual orientation in Latin America. We analyze three cases in the region where LGBT citizens are increasingly running for public office and where there is variation in the dominant type of electoral right. These ranges from mainstream right-wing parties (e.g., PRO in Argentina, RN and UDI in Chile and PAN in Mexico) to the authoritarian far-right (Republican Party [PR] in Chile) and a hybrid case like Freedom Advances [LLA] in Argentina. In other words, our study encompasses variation in the presence of a far-right party – ranging from absence (Mexico), to partial presence (Argentina), to full presence (Chile). This variation enables us to examine the conditions under which far-right forces influence the electoral success of gay candidates

The presence of a relevant authoritarian far-right party within a political system is likely to deteriorate the conditions for LGBT candidates to succeed. When far-right candidates use anti-LGBT, homophobic rhetoric during campaigns, they make a candidate's sexual orientation more salient, which may prompt voters to base their electoral decisions on this issue – something they might not have done in the absence of such rhetoric. Far-right politicians can also mobilise conservative segments of the electorate who might otherwise remain politically disengaged. This far-right mobilisation not only can increase hostility toward LGBT candidates but can also pressure mainstream parties to

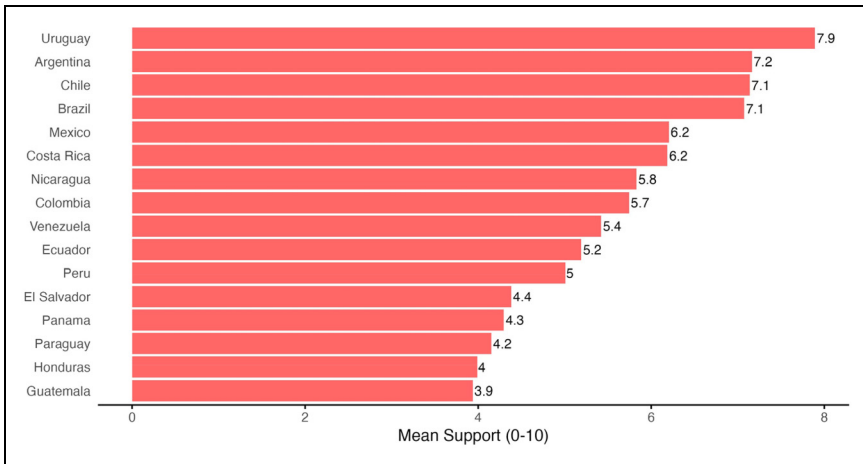


Figure 1. Mean Approval for Gay Candidates Running for Office in Latin America (1–10). Source: LAPOP.

distance themselves from inclusive agendas, further constraining opportunities for representation. In this paper, we primarily focus on the first electoral consequence: the presence of a relevant far-right party can increase the likelihood of voters rejecting gay candidates at the ballot box.

The Cases: Argentina, Chile, and Mexico

Figure 1 presents average approval levels for gay candidates running for public office across Latin America. The data comes from the 2023 LAPOP survey, based on the question: “And now, changing the topic and thinking of homosexuals, how strongly do you approve or disapprove of such people being permitted to run for public office?”³ Respondents were asked to rate their approval on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 indicates “strongly disapprove” and 10 indicates “strongly approve.”⁴ Approval is especially high in Argentina and Chile, followed closely by Mexico. These three countries stand out in the region for their comparatively strong support for gay candidates. Figure 2 shows the evolution of support for gay candidates in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico. In Chile and Mexico, public support has increased steadily over time. In contrast, support in Argentina was relatively high in 2008, declined slightly in the early 2010s, and then gradually returned to similar levels by 2023.

We focus on Argentina, Chile, and Mexico – three countries that exhibit above average levels of public support for gay candidates in Latin America. This case selection is theoretically and empirically justified. First, if bias against gay candidates persists even in relatively accepting societies, it would point to deeply rooted barriers to political inclusion in Latin America. Second, this case selection ensures the plausibility of the experimental treatment:

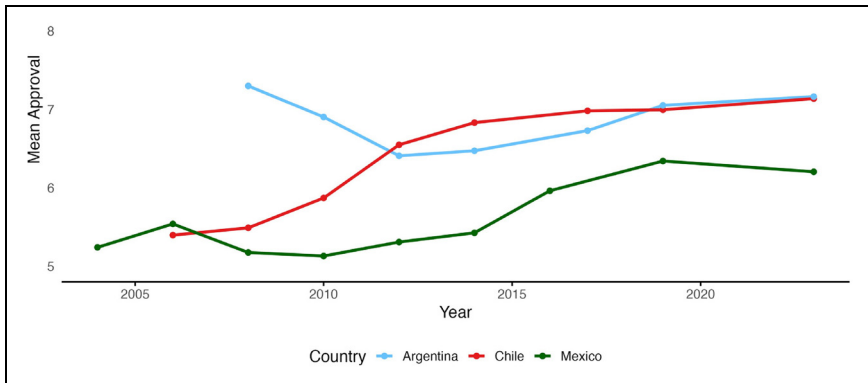


Figure 2. Evolution of Mean Approval for Gay Candidates Running for Office in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico (1–10).

Source: LAPOP.

in each of these countries, openly gay individuals have competed in recent elections, making the presence of a gay candidate credible to respondents. At the same time, these countries vary in the strength and orientation of their right-wing voters: there is no far-right in Mexico, but there is an ideologically coherent far-right in Chile and a hybrid case in Argentina. Although Argentina’s Freedom Advances is less ideologically coherent, its leader and other prominent figures have expressed anti-LGBT rhetoric, making it relevant to examine how its supporters view gay candidates.

The history of civil unions and same-sex marriage in Argentina and Chile illustrates how the mainstream and the far-right have reacted differently on LGB issues. In Argentina, a landmark 2009 court ruling allowed same-sex marriage. The city’s Chief of Government at the time, Mauricio Macri from the center-right PRO, chose not to appeal the decision, stating that “the world was headed in that direction” and accepting the ruling. A year later, in 2010, Argentina’s Congress legalised same-sex marriage under the presidency of Peronist Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, whose party promoted the law. Thirty-six per cent of the 11 PRO Deputies supported the law, while 54% voted against it. More recently, however, parts of the right have moved in the opposite direction. Since Javier Milei was elected President in 2023, some members of his party, the anti-system Freedom Advances (*La Libertad Avanza*), have made homophobic and transphobic remarks, including Milei himself, Deputy Bertie Benegas Lynch, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Diana Mondino.

In Argentina, the number of openly LGBT candidates remains low.⁵ In the 2019 elections, only four out of 599 candidates for the Lower House openly identified as LGBT, while none of the 72 Senate candidates did.⁶ Among the 141 candidates for governor, only one was openly LGBT. Despite this underrepresentation, some notable figures have gained national attention, including the first openly gay senator (2011) and the governor of Tierra del Fuego (2019).

In Chile, same-sex civil unions were legalised in 2015 under the presidency of socialist Michelle Bachelet. Same-sex marriage was legalised in 2021 during the presidency of Sebastián Piñera, from the center-right RN, who was allied with also mainstream UDI and the newer modern center-right party EVOPOLI. Piñera publicly supported the law, declaring that “the state must always fulfill its fundamental role of promoting a free, diverse, tolerant, and inclusive society.” The voting patterns of right-wing parties in Congress reflected both support and limited opposition within the mainstream right: 31% of the 26 UDI deputies supported the law and 31% opposed it; 35% of the 31 RN deputies voted for it and 23% voted against; and 50% of the six EVOPOLI deputies supported the law, with none voting against it.⁷ By contrast, the two deputies from the far-right Republican Party voted unanimously against it. In reaction to these developments, José Antonio Kast criticised the adoption of same-sex marriage and attacked the mainstream right for betraying conservative values. He denounced the “gay lobby” and made transphobic comments.

In Chile, some LGBT politicians have gained attention. Since 2012, openly LGBT politicians in Chile have won seats as councilors and in Congress. During the 2021 elections, openly LGBT representatives secured seats in both the Constitutional Convention and the Lower House. In the elections for the Constitutional Convention, which drafted the proposed new Constitution of the Republic and was noted for its diversity following the 2019 social outburst: eight out of 154 elected members were openly LGBT.⁸ In the Lower House election, four out of 155 elected representatives openly identified as LGBT. Despite these gains, LGBT representation in Chilean politics remains low.

Mexico differs from Chile and Argentina in how LGBT politics – and, more broadly, culture war issues – have been politicised by partisan elites. While the center-right party, PAN, generally favours more conservative positions and the political left, represented by the PRD and more recently by MORENA, leans progressive, culture wars have largely been overshadowed by performance-related issues such as the economy, corruption, or criminal violence. As a result, most culture war issues have remained confined to local politics. When they have emerged at the national level, they have largely been addressed by the Supreme Court, which have not encouraged strong politicisation of sociocultural issues (Castro Cornejo, 2023a).

Notably, after the Supreme Court ruled that any law defining marriage as the “union of a male and a female” was unconstitutional – effectively legalising same-sex marriage – the PAN deemphasised its conservative and, later on, even endorsed progressive stances. While President Felipe Calderón, a member of the PAN, challenged the constitutionality of same-sex marriage in 2010, the party’s presidential candidates in 2018 and 2024 endorsed it. Interestingly, while the PRD and MORENA, as party organisations, have endorsed progressive positions, former President Andrés Manuel López Obrador avoided taking explicit stances on culture war issues (Castro Cornejo, 2023b). Since serving as mayor of Mexico City in 2000, he was fairly moderate even compared to his own party at that time, the PRD (Bruhn, 2012). As a presidential candidate and eventually President, he explicitly downplayed the importance of culture war issues compared to economic concerns and corruption, advocating that same-sex marriage and abortion

decriminalisation should be decided by referendum (Díaz Domínguez, 2020). These two factors combined, weak politicisation of culture war issues and a Supreme Court that has upheld progressive change, have reduced the importance of LGBT politics in Mexico compared to other countries in Latin America (Álvarez Reyes and Castro Cornejo, 2023).

LGBT political participation in Mexico grew significantly after 2020 affirmative action laws required parties to nominate LGBT candidates. The Mexican National Electoral Institute (INE) expanded the interpretation of antidiscrimination laws and required political parties at the federal level to nominate at least four LGBT candidates – three for the Chamber of Deputies and one for the Senate – in addition to fulfilling quotas for other marginalised groups, including Indigenous people, citizens with disabilities, Afro-Mexicans, and Mexicans living abroad. The INE also established affirmative action measures at the state and local levels to promote broader inclusion across the country. While milestones began earlier – with the first lesbian elected in 1997, the first gay mayor in 2011, and the first transgender official in 2016 – the 2021 and 2024 elections saw notable increases with the new affirmative action law. In 2021, 1.9% of over 5300 candidates identified as LGBT; in 2024, that rose to 2.8% of 43,430 candidates. Center-left parties like Citizen Movement and PRD exceeded quotas, nominating dozens of LGBT candidates. The Mexican case also highlights that even in countries with quota systems, LGBT representation remains very low. The presence of a gay candidate is plausible but still uncommon, representing a departure from the status quo.

Despite varying levels of politicisation of culture war politics across Chile, Argentina, and Mexico, LGBT representation in electoral politics has recently increased in all three countries. However, this growing visibility may also trigger societal punishment, particularly among certain sectors of society. High profile politicians, particularly far-right candidates, often rely on anti-LGBT rhetoric to mobilise their voters, which can deteriorate the conditions for LGBT candidates to succeed. In the next section, we outline the hypotheses of this study.

Voting for or Against LGB Candidates

We examine negative voters' reaction to gay descriptive representation – specifically, the electoral punishment of gay candidates. Some studies argue that expanding rights for minorities may generate a negative reaction among segments of the majority population, especially those opposed to progressive change (Gaskins et al., 2013; Klarman, 2012). Some observers have argued that the electoral victories of right-wing candidates in countries like Brazil, Chile, and Argentina might be understood, at least in part, as a reaction against cultural liberalisation, including the expansion of LGBT rights (Corrales, 2017; Rennó, 2020; Smith, 2019)

In contrast, recent research suggests that expanding LGBT rights does not necessarily provoke conservative public attitudes in the electorate or a rise of the right. Abreu Maia et al. (2023) find no evidence of backlash in public attitudes toward LGBT rights across 17 Latin American countries, suggesting that expansions of minority rights do not trigger

negative mass reactions. Borges and Vidigal (2024) find that the recognition of LGBT rights does not increase party system polarisation. Similarly, Smith and Boas (2024) show that sexuality politics only become politically salient in specific contexts and that in much of the region, voters do not react negatively to LGBT issues unless prompted by elite discourse. In the UK, Magni and Reynolds (2021b) find that LGBT candidates perform at least as well as their straight counterparts. These findings suggest that if we focused specifically on gay representation, voters may respond with tolerance – or at least indifference – toward gay candidates.⁹ Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis about how the electorate will react to LGB candidates:

Hypothesis 1: Voters will penalise a gay candidate, compared to a candidate without explicit sexual orientation.

The hypothesis above is stated with reference to the entire electorate, and not to specific subgroups. Having discussed the reaction among the whole electorate, we turn to variation within right-wing voters, the ideological group most likely to oppose LGB descriptive representation (Magni and Reynolds, 2021a; Sherkat et al., 2011). In contemporary Latin America, right-wing parties are far from homogeneous. Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (2026) differentiate between the mainstream right, which is moderate and accepts democracy, and the far-right, which adopts a hardcore defense of right-wing ideas and is semi-loyal or disloyal towards democracy. Their minimal definition of the right – based on the notion that most socioeconomic and sociocultural inequalities are natural and difficult to eradicate – closely aligns with earlier formulations by Luna and Rovira Kaltwasser (2014) and Loxton (2021).

Following this definition, we distinguish between a mainstream right that accepts democracy and a far right that holds semi-loyal or disloyal stances toward democratic institutions (Mudde, 2007; Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2026). In Latin America, the mainstream right embraces economic liberalism alongside moderate positions on gay rights. These parties often support gay rights as expressions of personal liberty and protection from state interference – or at least refrain from opposing such rights (Corrales, 2015). Examples include PRO (Argentina), EVOPOLI (Chile), and RN (Chile). The Mexican PAN also fits into this category, although the PAN is a “catch-all” party that includes both liberal and conservative factions as the only right-wing party in the country. The Chilean UDI falls into this category as well, although it embraces religious principles to a greater extent than other mainstream parties.

PRO is a clear case of a socially liberal mainstream right party. It was established in 2005 in the city of Buenos Aires by business-friendly elites, advocating economic liberalism and state modernisation. It is a secular party that has generally avoided strong stances on polarising moral issues and instead projects an image of modernity, pragmatism, tough-on crime, and managerial competence (Vommaro, 2023). The Chilean party EVOPOLI founded in 2012, also fits the typology. EVOPOLI represents a liberal-conservative right that emphasises modernisation, respect for diversity, technocracy, and generational renewal (Alenda et al., 2019). Since its inception, it supported gay marriage.

RN is a traditional center-right party that emerged in 1987 from moderate civilian supporters of the economic model of the Pinochet dictatorship (1973–1990). The party sought to distance itself from the regime’s human rights abuses while maintaining its economic legacy (Valenzuela et al., 2018). The party is diverse in its cultural positions (Siavelis, 2014). In fact, President Sebastian Piñera, from the RN, governing in alliance with UDI and EVOPOLI, promoted the law on gay marriage. Meanwhile, UDI is a mainstream right-wing party with ties to religious principles. The party was founded in 1983 by Jaime Guzmán, a Catholic conservative and chief ideologue of the Pinochet dictatorship. The party positioned itself as the heir of the dictatorship, with a strong defense of its neoliberal economic policies (Loxton, 2021). It moderated its association with the dictatorship and some of its programmatic positions since becoming a member of Piñera’s governing coalition, but remained more conservative than RN (Siavelis, 2014).

The Mexican PAN (National Action Party) was founded in 1939 as a Catholic reaction to the Mexican Revolution (Mabry 1974) and served as a loyal, pro-democracy opposition to the authoritarian PRI. Since the PAN’s conservative platform on sociocultural issues such as abortion and sexual freedom risked alienating key voter blocs, including the urban middle class (Magaloni and Moreno, 2003), the party – especially at the national level – downplayed these positions and instead campaigned on democracy and market-oriented economic reforms. In fact, the PAN did not always secure a majority of votes from Catholics or more religiously observant voters (Díaz Domínguez, 2020; Magaloni and Moreno, 2003). Much to the frustration of its conservative factions, the PAN continued to emphasise its market oriented economic agenda after the transition to democracy, often sidelining its conservative sociocultural stance or even endorsing moderate positions. This shift has drawn sharp criticism from its conservative factions; many of them eventually left the party and founded nonpartisan grassroots organisations (e.g., *Frente Nacional por la Familia*) (Castro Cornejo, 2023a).

Finally, the authoritarian far right couples semi-loyal stances on democratic institutions with pro-market economic policies and conservative social views. These parties often promote reactionary positions on gender and sexuality. Unlike in Europe, anti-immigration positions play a less prominent role in Latin America (Kaltwasser and Zanotti, 2023; Kestler, 2022). The Republican Party (Chile) and Bolsonaro’s Liberal Party (Brazil) exemplify this type. As we will discuss in the next paragraphs, the expectations for Milei’s Freedom Advances (Argentina) are less clear.

In Chile, the Republican Party was founded in 2019 by José Antonio Kast, a former UDI politician who broke with the more moderate right to reassert a staunch defense of Pinochet’s economic legacy and traditionalist social values (Díaz et al., 2023). The Chilean party system experienced a process in which the mainstream right increasingly moderated itself, adopting some positions similar to the mainstream center-left (Madariaga and Kaltwasser, 2020; Zanotti and Roberts, 2021). This opened a space for a far-right political alternative. In fact, Kast accused the Chilean political right of abandoning its principles and adjusting its values to gain the sympathy of other sectors of society (Zanotti, 2026). He, instead, adopted explicit radical right-wing stances. He positioned himself as the sole defender of traditional morality, explicitly opposed abortion

and same-sex marriage and condemned “gender ideology” and the “gay lobby” in Chile. Kast and his party also endorse neoliberal economic policies, strict immigration controls, and a hard-line approach to crime.

In Argentina, Freedom Advances (La Libertad Avanza [LLA]) emerged as an alliance in 2021 and was formalised as a political party in 2024. Led by Javier Milei, LLA positions itself as a radical alternative to the “political caste,” combining libertarian economic proposals with aggressive anti-establishment rhetoric (Murillo and Oliveros, 2024). As Kestler (2022) argues, while Milei is frequently classified as far right, he represents an ambiguous case, given that his programmatic positions vary from radical right-wing (abortion, gun laws) to moderate and even liberal (family, sexuality, and marriage). In fact, neither Milei nor his party have advanced a consistent conservative moral agenda (Kestler, 2022; Vommaro, 2026). Milei supports same-sex marriage on libertarian grounds, framing it as a private contract between individuals, but he strongly opposes “gender ideology,” gender-inclusive language, and abortion. He defends individual liberty from any state-imposed ideology – typically opposing left-wing agendas, but not necessarily advocating for state-enforced traditionalism. As a result, Freedom Advances is less predictable when it comes to issues like LGBT rights. While far-right parties with coherent traditionalist moral agendas – such as Chile’s Republican Party – are expected to oppose gay candidates, our expectations for LLA partisans are more agnostic.

Finally, Mexico does not have any relevant far-right political party. Non-partisan grassroots organisations like the *Frente Nacional por la Familia* have been the main far-right actors mobilising against “gender ideology,” abortion, and same-sex marriage. Even in the context of the legalisation of same-sex marriage and the decriminalisation of abortion – advanced by the Supreme Court and eventually legalised at the state level – the far-right failed to successfully mobilise to prevent these reforms. More recently, ultraconservative activist Eduardo Verástegui ran an independent presidential campaign in 2024. He labeled the PAN a “cowardly right-wing” party because of its increasing programmatic moderation, arguing that it has failed to represent conservative interests (Castro Cornejo, 2023a). His candidacy, however, failed to secure the support of 1% of registered voters, preventing him from appearing on the ballot and underscoring the limited appeal of far-right politics in Mexico.

In light of this discussion, we propose the following hypothesis for right-wing partisans:

Hypothesis 2A: Mainstream Right. Voters aligned with mainstream right-wing parties will be more willing to vote for a gay candidate.

Hypothesis 2B: Far Right. Voters aligned with far-right parties will be less willing to vote for a gay candidate.

Experimental Design

Survey experiments were embedded in three nationally representative surveys conducted in Mexico, Argentina, and Chile. In Mexico, the polling firm, Data OPM, conducted a

telephone survey from February 16 to 21, 2021, with a sample of 1000 respondents. In Argentina and Chile, the surveys were conducted in November–December 2024 using the online panel provider Netquest, with a sample size of 4000 respondents in each country. The incumbents at the time were left-wing populist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (MORENA) in Mexico, right-wing libertarian Javier Milei (Libertad Avanza) in Argentina, and leftist Gabriel Boric (Frente Amplio) in Chile.

The experimental design allows us to manipulate information that is both difficult to observe varying in real-world settings and sensitive in nature. In public opinion surveys, respondents may provide socially desirable answers rather than expressing their true opinions. The survey experiment randomly assigned respondents to view the profile of a candidate running for mayor. The treatment group received a candidate profile that explicitly mentioned his sexual orientation as gay, while the control group received the same profile without this information. The control condition is realistic, as heterosexual candidates rarely state their sexual orientation explicitly – heterosexuality is assumed by default. All other candidate attributes remained constant, including his occupation (economist), marital status (married), and campaign promises (improving security and creating better job opportunities). There is no information on the party list the candidate is competing for.

Our goal was to isolate the effect of sexual orientation while minimising other reasons why different subgroups of voters might like or dislike the candidate. For that reason, we avoided partisan or ideological positions, since these would lead to systematic differences in baseline support across groups. Instead, we used only broad valence promises that are common in local campaigns and unlikely to polarise respondents, ensuring that differences between treatment and control can be attributed to the candidate’s sexual orientation.

We chose to describe the candidate as married to keep marital status constant and avoid introducing another potential source of variation in how respondents might evaluate him. While marital status itself may shape candidate evaluations, it is not the focus of this study. Our vignette may have been somewhat more appealing to the average voter because by being married the candidate conformed to heteronormative rules (Doan and Haider-Markel, 2010). Future research should explore variations in responses to gay candidates across heteronormative conformity.

In Argentina and Chile, respondents were randomly assigned to either the treatment group, where they saw the candidate described as “gay,” or the control group. In Mexico, the treatment assignment varied slightly: one-third of respondents saw the control condition, another third saw the candidate described as “gay,” and the final third saw the candidate described as “homosexual.” For analysis, the “gay” and “homosexual” groups were later combined into a single treatment condition. As shown in the Appendix, the distribution of the outcome is statistically indistinguishable between the “gay” and “homosexual” conditions, supporting the decision to pool them.

The wording of the experiment was the same in the three countries with minor variations. The experimental wording in Chile can be found below (Figure 3).¹⁰ Immediately after exposure to the profile, respondents were asked how unlikely or likely they would be

Please read the profile of a candidate running for mayor in the upcoming elections:

Juan Silva is an economist, [he is gay], and is married. His main campaign promise is to improve security in his municipality and ensure more and better jobs.

On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means not at all likely and 10 means very likely, how likely are you to vote for Juan Silva in the upcoming mayoral election?

Figure 3. Experimental Design in Chile.

Source: Authors.

to vote for the candidate, on a scale that went from very unlikely (0) to very likely (10). The response to this question serves as the main outcome variable.

To estimate the Average Treatment Effect (ATE) of the experimental manipulation, we use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression, taking advantage of the random assignment of treatment. The main specifications regress the outcome variable on a binary treatment indicator, where the coefficient on the treatment variable represents the estimated ATE. Since randomisation ensures balance between treatment and control groups, this approach provides an unbiased estimate of the causal effect.¹¹ In all models, we report heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors to account for potential variance heterogeneity. Effects for each country are standardised using the pooled sample's standard deviation of the outcome.

The samples included sociodemographic quotas to approximate national representativeness, but individuals with no high school education were underrepresented. Given that education predicts our outcomes of interest, we apply raked post-stratification weights using census data in our analyses. This approach is appropriate for our goal of estimating how the population as a whole reacts to gay candidates. We adjust the samples to match the population distributions of education, age, and gender to ensure overall sociodemographic representativeness in the weighted data.¹²

For robustness, given the multiple hypotheses tested, we apply a Bonferroni correction. We test a total of 19 hypotheses, including the main effects as well as subgroup effects among leftist, centrist, and right-wing voters, and partisan groups in each country. Results that are not robust to this correction are flagged accordingly in the next section.

Main Results

Figure 4 displays the treatment effects on voting for a gay candidate, relative to a candidate with no stated sexual orientation, using pooled samples from Argentina, Chile, and Mexico. The outcome is the change in standard deviations of the likelihood of voting for the candidate. Estimates shown in black are robust to the multiple hypothesis correction, whereas those in gray are not. The results show no evidence of punishment among the whole electorates. Instead, voters in Argentina respond sympathetically to gay candidates, while those in Chile and Mexico exhibit indifference. Specifically, the likelihood

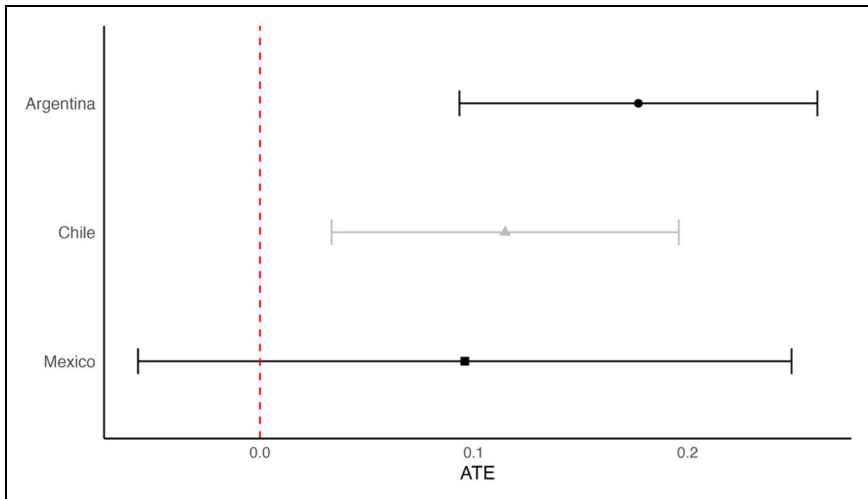


Figure 4. Average Treatment Effects for All Voters. Note: The Outcome Is the Change in Standard Deviations of the Likelihood of Voting for the Candidate, Employing the Pooled Sample’s Standard Deviation. Estimates Are Weighted to Match the Population’s Distribution on Education, Age, and Gender. Each Point Represents the Coefficient Estimate from an OLS Regression on the Specified Sample. Lines Represent 95% Confidence Intervals Using Heteroskedasticity-Robust Standard Errors. Results That Are not Robust to a Multiple Hypothesis Correction Appear in Gray.

Source: Author.

of voting for a gay candidate increases by 0.18 standard deviations of the outcome in Argentina. Treatment effects are indistinguishable from zero in Mexico, and are positive in Chile, but not robust to a multiple hypothesis correction.

Figure 5 presents the treatment effects on vote choice for a gay candidate, relative to a candidate with no stated sexual orientation, across leftist, centrist, and right-wing voters in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico.¹³ In Argentina and Chile, left-leaning voters tend to reward gay candidates, while right-wing voters respond with indifference. Centrist voters also reward gay candidates in Argentina but are indifferent in Chile, where the estimated effect is positive yet not robust to the multiple hypothesis correction. In Mexico, voters across the ideological spectrum show indifference toward gay candidates.

We now turn to an analysis disaggregated by party support to explore whether reactions differ across distinct segments of the right. Figure 6 shows the effects among right-wing partisans in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico. In Argentina, among partisans of PRO and LLA there is no punishment. ATEs are indistinguishable from zero. In Chile, among partisans of the far-right PR, Jose Antonio Kast’s party, there is punishment: the treatment causes a decrease of 0.48 standard deviations in the likelihood of voting for a candidate. However, the treatment effect is indistinguishable from zero for

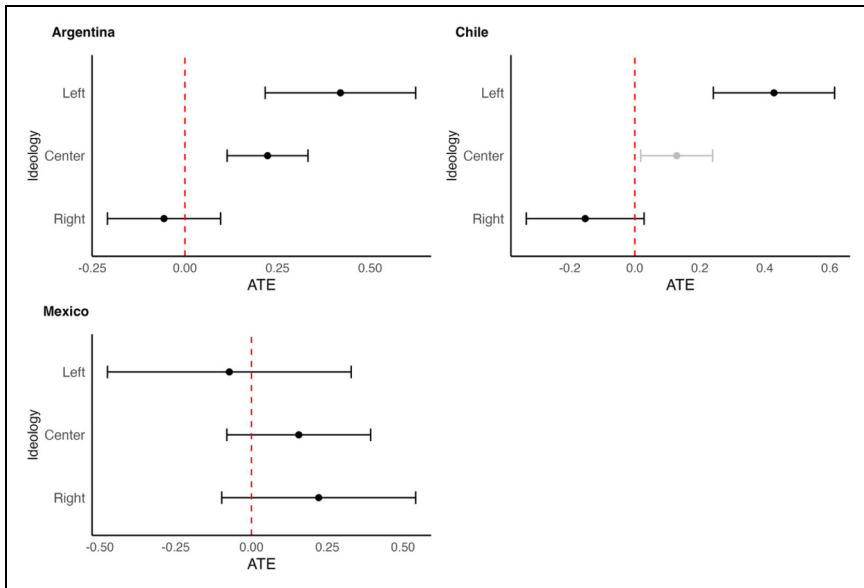


Figure 5. Average Treatment Effects by Ideology. Note: The Outcome Is the Change in Standard Deviations of the Likelihood of Voting for the Candidate, Employing the Pooled Sample's Standard Deviation. Estimates Are Weighted to Match the Population's Distribution on Education, Age, and Gender. Each Point Represents the Coefficient Estimate from an OLS Regression on the Specified Sample. Lines Represent 95% Confidence Intervals Using Heteroskedasticity-Robust Standard Errors. Results That Are Not Robust to a Multiple Hypothesis Correction Appear in Gray. Source: Authors.

RN, EVOPOLI and even UDI supporters. Finally, in Mexico, among PAN partisans, there is no penalisation.

Our findings provide no support for Hypothesis 1, as the whole electorates in the three countries do not actively reject LGBT candidates. Consistent with Hypothesis 2A, voters aligned with the mainstream right do not penalise gay candidates. Hypothesis 2B is supported: PR voters in Chile show the strongest punishment.¹⁴ LLA voters in Argentina, a hybrid case that combines libertarianism, anti-establishment rhetoric, and right-wing radicalism, do not penalise gay candidates.

Our findings suggest that not all far-right parties are alike; some exhibit greater consistency in their moral agendas than others. Kast and the Republican Party in Chile present a coherent conservative platform rooted in Catholic values and traditional family roles. In contrast, Milei is a libertarian outsider who prioritises market freedom, lacks a consistent moral agenda, and diverges from traditional conservative norms. The absence of punishment among Freedom Advances partisans may reflect both the greater salience of economic and anti-establishment appeals for these voters and the ideological inconsistency of the party's moral agenda.

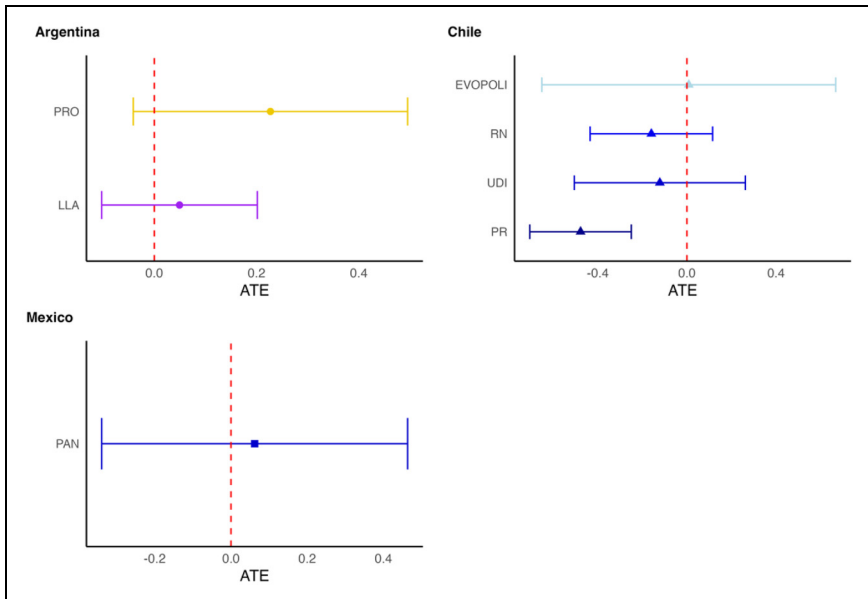


Figure 6. Average Treatment Effects for Argentine, Chilean, and Mexican Right-Wing Partisans. Note: the Outcome Is the Change in Standard Deviations of the Likelihood of Voting for the Candidate, Employing the Pooled Sample’s Standard Deviation. Estimates Are Weighted to Match the Population’s Distribution on Education, Age, and Gender. Each Point Represents the Coefficient Estimate from an OLS Regression on the Specified Sample. Lines Represent 95% Confidence Intervals Using Heteroskedasticity-Robust Standard Errors. Source: Authors.

Conclusion

Our study offers several contributions to the understanding how voters react to LGBT political representation in Latin America. First, rather than focusing on broader public attitudes toward LGB rights, we examine how voters react to gay individuals as political candidates. We evaluate electoral prejudice, treating the absence of a voting penalty as evidence of tolerance for sexual diversity without implying broader policy support. Second, we employ a survey experiment that mitigates social desirability bias by presenting sexual orientation as one randomly assigned characteristic rather than asking respondents directly about gay candidates. With this experimental strategy, we are able to capture more honest evaluations of voters’ willingness to vote for gay candidates. Third, given the variation across the political right, we rely on Rovira Kaltwasser et al.’s (2026) framework and explore how distinct segments of the right respond to gay candidates.

Overall, our findings reveal that the whole electorates in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico do not actively reject gay candidates competing for political office. In fact, Argentine

voters in the treatment group are more likely to support a gay candidate than those in the control group, where sexual orientation is not specified. We then focus on right-wing voters as the subgroup that is most likely to penalise LGB candidates at the ballot box. Our findings suggest that supporters of mainstream right-wing parties do not reject gay candidate. Far-right voters – who identify with the *Partido Republicano*/José Antonio Kast – however punish a gay candidate when running for political office.

Voters aligned with the Freedom Advances in Argentina do not reject a gay candidate. This is likely because Freedom Advances is not a clear far-right party, but a hybrid party that combines an anti-establishment agenda, economic libertarianism and conservative/authoritarian values in the sociocultural dimension. This means that LLA's agenda allows the party to draw support from both the traditional center-left and center-right. At the same time, LLA advances an inconsistent moral agenda – hostile to “gender ideology” yet accepting of same-sex marriage and broadly supportive of individual freedom from state intervention. These deviations underscore the need to consider not only whether a party has some characteristics of far-right party. It is also necessary to pay attention to the internal coherence of its moral positions; which make parties more or less likely to send clear and consistent cues to the electorate and, particularly, to their core supporters. Notably, the absence of a consistent moral agenda among far-right parties is not unique to Latin America. In Western and Northern Europe, some far-right parties refrain from opposing gay rights, instead using LGB issues to position themselves against Muslim immigration and in defense of “European values” (Magni and Reynolds, 2023).

Several factors may explain why the Argentine electorate, on average, supports gay candidates. Voters may be unprejudiced and value minority participation in the public sphere. Alternatively, voters may attribute positive traits to gay candidates – such as honesty – because they are open about their sexuality. Support may also stem from perceptions that gay candidates advance progressive economic and cultural policy positions (Jones and Brewer, 2019; Magni and Reynolds, 2021a). Finally, backing gay candidates could represent a thermostatic reaction to the rise of the far right, particularly to the figure of Milei (Claassen, 2019; Wlezien, 1995). In this sense, future studies should aim to understand why voters in Argentina, on average, express greater support for gay candidates compared to other countries, such as Chile and Mexico.

While our findings point to tolerance for gay candidates in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico, generalisability to other Latin American contexts may be limited. According to LAPOP data, these three countries consistently rank among the most supportive of LGBT political rights in the region. We would expect similar patterns of tolerance among the whole electorates in countries with comparable public opinion trends, such as Uruguay, Brazil or Costa Rica (Figure 1). However, even in these cases, support for LGBT candidates may still be constrained. For example, if the argument of this paper holds beyond our three case studies, we should expect rejection among some Brazilian voters despite a comparatively above average level of tolerance in public opinion across Latin America. The presence of a far-right political party and political identity in Brazil – Bolsonarismo – can make anti-LGBT appeals more salient during political campaigns,

leading voters to base their decisions on this issue – something they might not have done in the absence of such far-right rhetoric. Far right cues to his supporters, explicit opposition to “gender ideology” and even homophobic statements, may increase the likelihood that the electorate to penalise candidates based on their sexual orientation. Moreover, other effects not examined in this paper could also be relevant. Far-right rhetoric can mobilise far-right voters, who are usually disengaged from the electoral process, and increase their participation. Far-right mobilisation can also prompt mainstream parties to distance themselves from pro-LGBT agendas to avoid further fueling far-right reactions.

Costa Rica is also a country that ranks among the most supportive of LGBT political rights in the region (Figure 1). Similar to Brazil, it has relevant far-right parties (e.g., National restoration Party, New Republic Party, etc.), particularly aiming to mobilise evangelical voters, which can limit the electability of gay candidates. In other words, while average support for LGBT candidates provides a baseline for the acceptance or rejection of LGBT candidacies, the presence of far-right parties is likely to influence these candidacies by activating anti-LGBT predispositions among the electorate that would remain dormant in the absence of far-right rhetoric. It is also important to highlight that, when a party exhibits only some characteristics of a far-right party, it is not clear whether its voters will reject gay candidates, as the Argentina’s LLA case illustrates with its combination of libertarianism, anti-system appeals and conservative/authoritarian sociocultural agenda. Future research should test the extent to which support for LGBT political representation is context-dependent across varying political environments.

Future studies in Latin America should also examine the conditions under which voters penalise other types of LGBT candidates in the region. This study focuses on a married gay candidate. Given that transgender candidates are more likely than gay candidates to face prejudice (Flores, 2014; Golebiowska, 2019; Jones et al., 2018), our vignette may have been somewhat more appealing to the average voter, only triggering prejudice among the most conservative voters. Furthermore, the fact that our candidate conforms to the stereotypical image of a politician as someone who is married may have made him more acceptable (Doan and Haider-Markel, 2010). Moreover, same-sex marriage is legally recognised in all three countries where this research conducted survey experiments. Future research should explore variations across gender identity and heteronormative conformity to better understand the conditions that make some voters more or less likely to reject LGBT candidates at the ballot box – particularly in countries in which same-sex is not legally recognised yet.

This study examines whether sexual orientation triggers prejudice among voters. Given our finding that far-right voters are the ones penalising a gay candidate, prejudice is likely the driving mechanism in this study. Future research should explore alternative explanations for the support or rejection of LGBT candidates at the ballot box. For example, beyond prejudice, factors such as electability concerns (the perception that LGBT candidates may face additional challenges in elections) or identity cuing (the tendency to perceive LGBT candidates as more progressive) could also influence voter behaviour (Jones and Brewer, 2019; Magni and Reynolds, 2021a). While our vignette examines a gay candidate running for local office, these mechanisms may be particularly

relevant in national elections, where strategic and ideological considerations are more likely to shape voter behaviour.

Finally, it is important to highlight that, even though the absence of electoral punishment in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico is encouraging from a normative perspective, voting for a candidate who identifies as LGBT does not guarantee support for policies or legislative proposals that promote their rights. Although the level of acceptance of homosexuality in Latin America has increased over the past 30 years, same-sex marriage has not been approved in more than half of the countries, and numerous restrictive rules affecting the LGBT population remain in place. In this sense, our findings are limited to the electoral dimension, where LGBT candidates are increasingly running for political office.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the participants of the Sexual Identity and Political Participation panel at the 2025 Midwest Political Science Association (MPSA) Conference for their valuable feedback.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


Ethical Considerations and Informed Consent Statements


The Mexico survey was reviewed and approved by the CIDE Institutional Review Board, IRB 0007/21 (Expedited). The Argentina and Chile surveys were declared exempt by the University of Chicago Institutional Review Board (IRB24-0777).

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. In Chile, treatment effects are positive in the full sample, but the statistical significance disappears once Bonferroni correction for multiple testing is applied.
2. In addition to being a different conceptual dimension, acceptance of transgender and gender nonconforming people is significantly less prevalent in both long-standing and new democracies. Even parties and citizens who are committed to LGB equality sometimes remain ambivalent toward transgender equality (Magni and Reynolds, 2023).
3. Data for all countries is from 2023, except for Venezuela, which is from 2016.

4. Respondents who chose “don’t know” or “not applicable,” who did not respond to the question, or who were not asked the question were coded as missing and excluded from the analysis.
5. Survey data indicate that approximately 8% of the population in Argentina, 10% in Chile, and 10% in Mexico identify as gay or lesbian (Statista 2025). Although these estimates are imperfect and subject to measurement error, they provide a useful benchmark to illustrate the underrepresentation of LGBT individuals in our cases of study. That said, this paper does not argue that the normalization of gay candidacies increases the likelihood of voters refraining from punishing gay candidates at the ballot box. Instead, we focus on the crucial role of far-right political parties in limiting the electoral success of gay candidates.
6. https://www.argentina.gob.ar/sites/default/files/participacion_politica_del_colectivo_lgbti.pdf
7. The remaining deputies abstained or were absent. By not voting against the law, they allowed it to pass.
8. <https://indhciudadano.indh.cl/orgullo2023-participacion/>
9. In the Appendix, we explore whether punishment to gay representation among the whole electorates is more likely to emerge among some subgroups that may also react negatively to LGB political representation: older, male, less educated, evangelical, and those with no contact with LGB individuals.
10. The complete wording of the experiments in every country can be found in the Appendix. The wording was identical in Argentina and Chile, except for the candidate’s name: Juan Arias in Argentina and Juan Silva in Chile. In Mexico the candidate’s name was “Juan Gallegos,” and the candidate also promised to “provide better equipment to the police.” While in the three countries the candidate promised to “improve security,” we excluded the “provide better equipment to the police” item in the Southern Cone experiments because it was not unambiguously positive in valence, and we wanted to avoid lowering baseline support for the candidate in the control condition, which would have limited our ability to detect treatment effects. The Mexico experiment was conducted first in 2021. Since we did not find meaningful differences between the terms gay and homosexual in that experiment, we decided to use gay consistently in the 2024 experiments in Argentina and Chile.
11. Balance plots can be found in the Appendix.
12. Distributions for the sample, population, and weighted sample are presented in the Appendix.
13. Left-wing voters are those who placed themselves between 0 and 3 on a 0–10 left-right self-placement scale; centrists between 4 and 6; and right-wing voters between 7 and 10.
14. This result is robust to a multiple hypothesis testing correction.

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