

Should gay candidates come out of the closet? Study says yes

September 5 2016, by Rachel Richardson



The first mailer included only a photo of the candidate and generic campaign claims. Credit: University of Cincinnati

Drastic shifts in public opinion in the last decade have seen an uptick in gay and lesbian candidates running for—and winning—public office as never before.

But experts often advise even openly gay and lesbian candidates to downplay their sexual orientation or risk losing votes.

Now, a new study by David Niven, an assistant professor of political science at the University of Cincinnati, calls that advice into question.

The research, presented Friday at the annual meeting of the American

Political Science Association in Philadelphia, suggests that not only does a gay or lesbian candidate's sexual orientation no longer pose a political disadvantage, but that, in some cases, it may actually help them win office.

"Our results call into question the always and everywhere assumption that running as a gay or lesbian candidate is necessarily a hurdle that must be overcome," said Niven.

LGBT candidates are often advised to downplay their sexual orientation for good reason, says Niven. He points to an established body of research documenting how a candidate's sexual orientation can be an impediment to higher office.

"All the research that we have says you have to overcome and to downplay it," he said.

That conclusion, based largely on surveys, offers subjective and interpretive data on how voters react to fictional or hypothetical candidates, but little in the way of how voters respond to actual candidates once they're in a private voting booth, Niven said.

So he decided to test the theory in a real race, with real voters casting ballots for real candidates. Enter the 2016 March primary race for county recorder in Ohio's Franklin County, which includes Columbus.

The Study

Two Democratic candidates vied for the position: Incumbent Terry Brown, an openly gay man seeking his second term in office, and challenger Danny O'Connor, who is straight.



The second mailer listed the same campaign claims as the first mailer, but featured a photo of the candidate and his husband. Credit: University of Cincinnati

The match-up proved an ideal field study, said Niven. While Brown's website features a photograph of him and his husband, neither he, his opponent nor the "Democrats United" ticket both candidates ran with referenced Brown's sexual orientation or interests in advancing civil rights issues.

Moreover, the low-key race for county recorder drew only minimal media attention, none of which identified Brown as gay, said Niven.

Niven randomly chose 30 precincts for the study. Because most gay and lesbian candidates tend to compete in places where Democrats are likely to win, he said, only households with a registered Democrat in residence were included.

Fifteen of the precincts received one of three 4x6 glossy postcards featuring Brown, while the other half, serving as a [control group](#), received no mailing.

- The first mailer featured a photograph of Brown and listed his efforts to save taxpayer money, improve the efficiency of the recorder's office and commitment to stamping out real estate fraud.
- A second mailer included the same campaign claims, but featured a photograph of the candidate and his husband.
- A third mailing repeated the claims of the previous two and included the same photograph as in the second mailing, but added an additional claim of the candidate's commitment to marriage equality for gay people.

The Results

Brown ultimately lost the race to O'Connor, but not because of his sexual orientation or commitment to marriage equality, says Niven.

According to the study, Brown actually received slightly less votes from voters who received the first mailer (which included only a photo of him) than he did from those in the control group who didn't receive any mailers.

Swapping a mailer featuring a photograph of the candidate with one of Brown and his husband produced slightly more votes, comparable to those of the control group.

That increase, while negligible, speaks volumes, said Niven.

"Study after study suggests there is some kind of penalty gay and lesbian candidates are subject to without exception. That decidedly did not happen here," he concluded.



A third mailer featured a photo of the candidate and his husband and also listed his commitment to marriage equality. Credit: University of Cincinnati

The results of the third condition, in which voters received a mailer featuring a photograph of the candidate and his husband and listing his commitment to marriage equality, also defied conventional campaign wisdom, says Niven.

In that scenario, Brown received more than four percent more votes than he did in all of the other scenarios.

"A lot of races are won on four percent," said Niven. "This is a pretty startling jump in terms of getting people's attention in a race they wouldn't otherwise give two thoughts about."

Niven says the results strongly suggest that emphasizing Brown's commitment to the rights of gay and lesbian people gave him a political edge.

"He's not just filing deeds, he's on the front lines of the civil rights struggle," he explained. "This is what was compelling to people."

Building Political Power

Niven acknowledges the limitations of the study, which focused on how Democratic voters in a specific region responded in one race. He's planning a follow-up study of the wider electorate this fall.

Nonetheless, he says the data indicates that the nation might be closer to a state of post-gay politics than some realize.

"When candidates hide or downplay their [sexual orientation](#), it sends a message that significant barriers remain for gay and lesbian candidates," Niven said. "This study shows they might be hiding from a reality that isn't as bad as they think."

That comes as welcome news to Aisha C. Moodie-Mills, president and CEO of the Victory Fund, a nonpartisan organization that supports openly lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender candidates running for public office.

She said the study indicates a growing appreciation amongst voters for LGBT [candidates](#) who are open about their lives and policy positions.

"LGBT elected officials make tremendous public servants because they are painfully aware of the impact policies have on people's lives, and therefore think critically about the issues confronting them," she said. "This research offers important insights into the advantages of being an openly LGBT candidate in certain political environments, and provides a fresh perspective on strategies for building long-term political power."

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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