



VICTORY
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THE DECISION TO RUN

*Uncovering the Barriers and Motivators for
LGBTQ Women Running for Office*



Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Methodology</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Summary of Findings</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Barriers to Running</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Motivations to Run</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Next Steps</i>	<i>26</i>



LGBTQ Victory Institute works to achieve and sustain global equality through leadership development, training, and convening to increase the number, expand the diversity, and ensure the success of openly LGBTQ elected and appointed officials at all levels of government.

**The Decision to Run:
Uncovering the Barriers and Motivators for
LGBTQ Women Running for Office**

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Introduction

Not long after announcing her run, a relentless and coordinated attack was launched against Gina Ortiz Jones, an LGBTQ woman of color and candidate for U.S. Congress. She was considered the favorite to win the 2020 election, but her opponents—the candidate himself and well-financed political organizations—decided to unleash an assault aimed at derailing her campaign. A national political organization urged affiliates to emphasize that she is a lesbian in talking points and attack ads. Her opponent warned she would push a “transgender agenda.” Millions of dollars were spent on television ads claiming she would close military bases to pay for “transgender reassignment surgeries.”

This was Gina’s second run for the Congressional seat, so the attacks did not surprise her. During a 2018 primary debate, a challenger claimed she would “flood the district” with fliers about her sexual orientation—and none of the candidates on-stage attempted to defend her. She knew the homophobic, sexist and racist messages that would arrive in her inbox and be posted on social media. She understood the double standards media and voters would hold her to—on her personal appearance, family life and qualifications—standards the men candidates opposing her would never be held to.

These are the challenges so many LGBTQ women face when running for office. The challenges that often dissuade them from running in the first place.

While more LGBTQ people are running for office than ever before, LGBTQ women continue to run at lower rates. In 2020, just 39 percent of LGBTQ candidates were women and only 10 percent were women of color.¹ Naturally, that gap carries over to representation as well. Of the nearly 1,000 currently serving LGBTQ elected officials, just 40 percent are women and nine percent are women of color.²

Yet when LGBTQ women run, they win. A 2017 analysis by LGBTQ Victory Institute shows LGBTQ women win at higher rates than LGBTQ men. Seventy percent of LGBTQ women candidates endorsed by LGBTQ Victory Fund won their elections in the decade prior, compared to 61 percent of its LGBTQ men candidates.³ This reality highlights the important role LGBTQ women play in increasing representation in government for the entire LGBTQ community.

1 According to LGBTQ Victory Fund’s 2020 “Out on the Trail” report. This includes women who identify as cisgender and transgender.

2 According to LGBTQ Victory Institute’s “[Out for America](#)” map, as of March 2021.

3 According to LGBTQ Victory Institute’s 2017 analysis: “[LGBTQ Women Candidates Win Elections at Higher Rates](#).”

So what obstacles—political, societal, personal and otherwise—most discourage out women from running? And what motivates them to take the leap? There is a wealth of research on the barriers and motivators for women running for office, yet most of it implicitly or explicitly assumes women to be cisgender and heterosexual. This ignores the unique realities LGBTQ women face when running or making the decision to run—realities rooted in sexism, anti-LGBTQ bigotry and racism for LGBTQ women of color. Understanding these dynamics is critical to increasing the number of LGBTQ women who run.

LGBTQ Victory Institute set out to uncover the barriers LGBTQ women face when running or deciding to run for office, as well as what motivates them to consider public service, thanks to a generous grant from The Ascend Fund. It is a first glance—not a comprehensive account—of the challenges LGBTQ women encounter. Yet it can be a guide for equality organizations, campaign training organizations and candidate recruitment programs that believe in the importance of representation for LGBTQ women, as well as a starting point for future research.

Gina Ortiz Jones lost her 2020 race for the U.S. Congress. Whether the attacks and double standards sealed her fate is unknown. But LGBTQ women across the country were watching, confirming fears and further discouraging some from running. It is as important as ever to understand the barriers so we can counter them and to learn the motivators to take advantage of them. True equitable representation in government is on the line.

Methodology

Victory Institute used quantitative and qualitative methods to conduct first-of-its kind research that aimed to uncover barriers and motivators to LGBTQ women running for office. It included a comprehensive 40-minute online survey and four focus groups. The quantitative data collected was analyzed by Victory Institute staff and the qualitative data by research consultants Dr. Mary Christine, Associate Professor at the University of Kansas, and Emily Hedges Vietti, lecturer at the University of Kansas.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

Two surveys were developed to identify the reasons LGBTQ women delayed or hesitated running for office, as well as what motivated them to consider public service. One survey of 74 questions was directed to people who had run for office—including current elected officials—and the other 71-question survey was for those who have considered a run but have not. Nearly 290 people completed the surveys—146 for the “considering a run” survey and 143 for the “previous or current candidate” survey.

Thirty-seven (25 percent) of the “considering a run” respondents were trans women, gender non-conforming, genderqueer or two-spirit and four were intersex. Thirty-nine percent were people of color. Thirty (21 percent) of the “previous or current candidate” survey respondents were trans women, gender non-conforming, genderqueer or two-spirit and one was intersex. Twenty-one percent were people of color.

QUALITATIVE DATA

Four focus groups were held to further explore the findings in the quantitative research: two with people who were running for office or had previously run for office and two with people who were considering a run or had considered a run. The focus groups were one hour and a half each and transcribed to analyze repeated themes. Of the 21 total participants, nine were trans or gender non-conforming and 12 were people of color.

Summary of Findings

Through extensive surveys and focus groups of LGBTQ women elected officials, LGBTQ women candidates and LGBTQ women considering or who considered a run for office, common themes emerged about the barriers and motivators to running.

Among the most common barriers LGBTQ women cited:

Finances—both campaign-related and personal. The amount of money needed to run a competitive campaign was a daunting obstacle, with many citing concerns about their ability to fundraise and lack of access to a donor network. Personal finances were also a consideration, with many concerned about putting jobs on hold and losing benefits such as healthcare.

Threats and violence based on anti-LGBTQ bigotry, sexism, and/or racism. Many feared physical or verbal violence because of their identities, with that fear especially pervasive among trans women. Many were also concerned about their families or children becoming targets for violence.

Anti-LGBTQ bigotry, sexism and racism on the campaign trail. Many were concerned anti-LGBTQ, sexist and racist campaign tactics or media coverage could derail their campaigns, including efforts to weaponize their family or lack of family, their voices and behaviors, and their perceptions of femininity. Some also worried certain voting blocks would refuse to vote for an LGBTQ woman.

External perceptions of qualifications. The vast majority believed themselves to be qualified or somewhat qualified to hold elected office, however many expressed

concern that media and voters would question those qualifications and that women are held to a different standard than cisgender men. Those with prior political experience were most confident in their qualifications.

Knowledge on how to run for office and unfamiliarity with party politics. Not knowing how to run for office—either the initial steps or how to build a campaign—and unfamiliarity with party politics was a reason many delayed or hesitated to run. Some also cited not knowing how to address their identity on the campaign trail.

Lack of representation in elected offices. Many cited a lack of LGBTQ women political mentors who could answer specific questions and reduce fears about running as an out woman candidate. They also spoke about the importance of trailblazers in perceptions of their own viability.

Among the most common motivators LGBTQ women cited:

Representation in elected office. Many said the lack of diversity among elected officials encouraged them to run, knowing their identity-based communities would be better served if represented in elected office.

Desire to work on an issue personal to them and make systemic change. While the range of issues that motivated them to run varied tremendously, most cited a personal connection to the issue that inspired them to run. A common desire to make systemic change was also notable, as was the fight for LGBTQ equality.

External encouragement. Many said they had not considered a run for office until an external validator encouraged them to—usually a friend, spouse, coworker or a non-profit leader or organization. Party officials also play an important, but complicated, role.

Current elected officials and their issue agendas. Frustration over policies enacted and the behavior of existing elected officials inspired many to run. Many who have not yet run cite a particular issue or moment that pushed them to consider it.

Barriers to Running

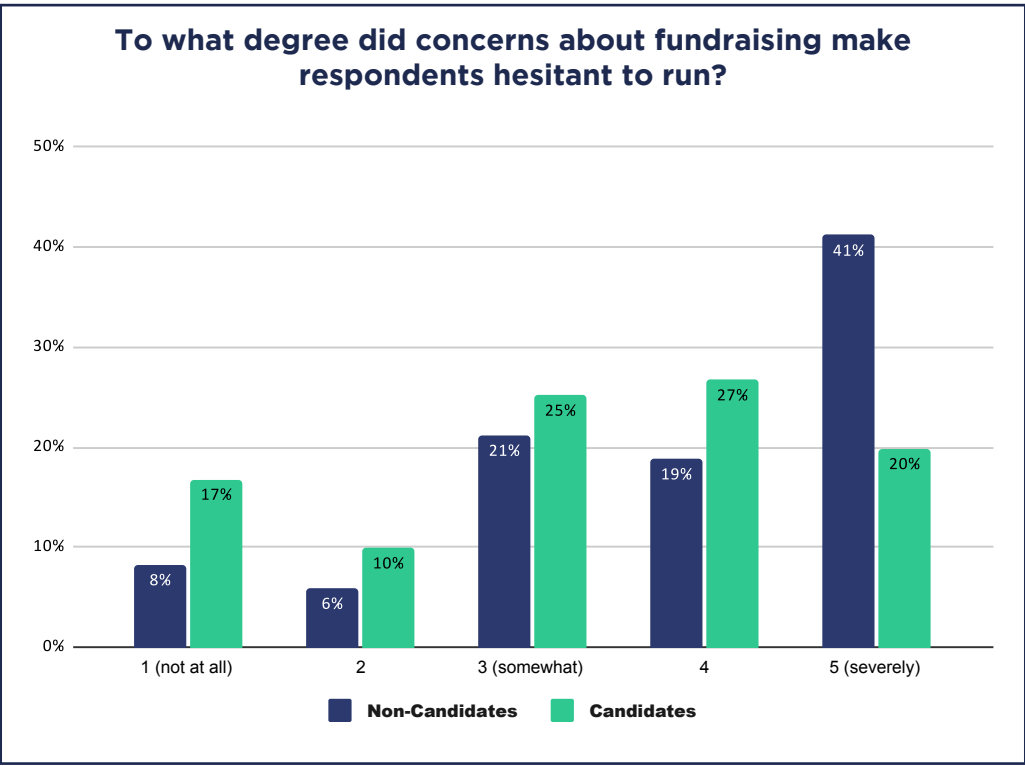
From the survey respondents and focus groups, six common themes emerged about the barriers LGBTQ women face when considering a run or running for office. While some barriers are similar to those that cisgender heterosexual women report, LGBTQ women often view or experience those barriers differently because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity—or face entirely new barriers not reported by cisgender heterosexual women.

The barriers presented are far from exhaustive but represent the themes most prevalent in both the survey responses and focus group discussions. In the sections below, “candidates” refers to survey respondents and focus group participants who have run for office or were actively running for office—including candidates who lost

and those who won. “Non-candidates” refers to those who have not yet run but have either considered it or are actively considering it. At times, the percentage of respondents reported in graphs will be less or more than 100 percent due to skipped questions related to non-applicability and/or rounding approximations.

1. Finances—both campaign-related and personal.

Among the greatest barriers to running for office were concerns about fundraising and a perceived lack of access to a donor network. The high cost of running seemed daunting to many, with 60 percent of non-candidates hesitating to run because they worried about raising enough money to have a viable campaign.



Some expressed discomfort with asking people for donations, while 60 percent said a lack of a donor network made them hesitate to run. They perceived men, heterosexuals, people with personal wealth and party insiders as having an extreme advantage in fundraising.

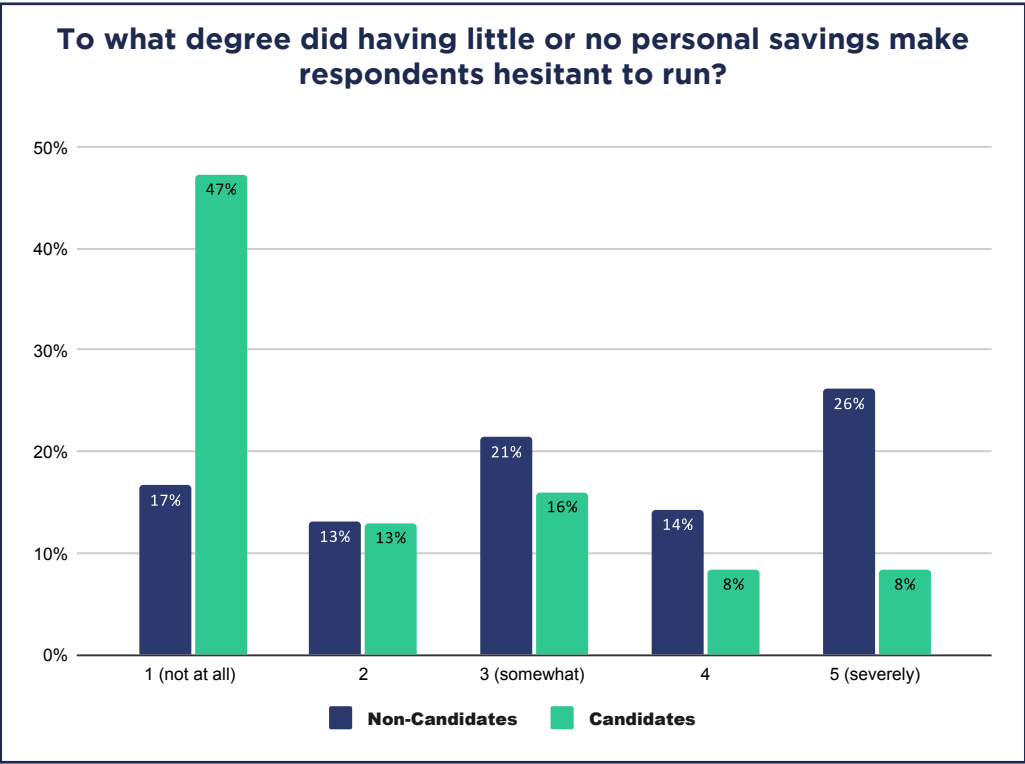
“I’m looking at races for state senate seats in similar neighboring districts, and people have raised over a million dollars. ...And the fact that that number gets higher and higher seems more and more intimidating. There’s no way in the past that I would have been ready to raise any fraction of that. And I’m hoping in the next four years that I’m able to inch closer towards that. But just the amount of money that these races cost to win is still for sure a big barrier.” (non-candidate)

Among candidates, a significant number but fewer reported concerns related to fundraising. Forty-seven percent said they initially hesitated to run because of concerns about fundraising, while the

same number were also worried about access to a donor network.

Some also expressed concerns about personal finances, but to a lesser extent. Many believed campaigning would require them to take off work, resulting in a prohibitive loss of income or benefits such as healthcare. Others said the low salaries elected officials typically receive was a barrier, since many did not have careers where they could work remotely or take off during legislative sessions.

Many expressed concerns about having little personal savings, with about 40 percent of non-candidates and 16 percent of candidates saying it made them hesitate to run. And the concern grew among respondents of color. Half of non-candidates of color said little personal savings made them hesitate to run, with 38 percent saying it made them very much hesitate to run. Among candidates of color, 30 percent said it made them hesitate and 13 percent very much hesitate.



“Similar issues with the finance, it’s on two levels. One is, in 2016 my wife passed away and you know, we have a home here and, and it wasn’t paid off. And I knew that the salary of a state legislator in [state] is very little, it’s like \$9,000 a year... So I had to quickly figure out before I said yes, to figure out how am I going to pay off the house in case I win.” (current candidate)

The challenges around personal finances and running for office are especially acute for LGBTQ women. A Movement Advancement Project and Center for American Progress report shows LGBTQ women are more likely to live in poverty than cisgender heterosexual women and that “women in same-sex couples are more likely to be ‘working poor’ than men in same-sex couples or men or women in opposite-sex married couples.”⁴ ♦

2. Threats and violence based on anti-LGBTQ bigotry, sexism, and/or racism.

The threat of violence on the campaign trail is a concern for many LGBTQ women, worrying both about their personal safety and the safety of their families. The fear of violence based on anti-LGBTQ bigotry or sexism is lower among LGBTQ women who have already run for office, when compared to those who have not. Yet the fear of racism-based violence is about the same for LGBTQ women of color, regardless of whether they have run.

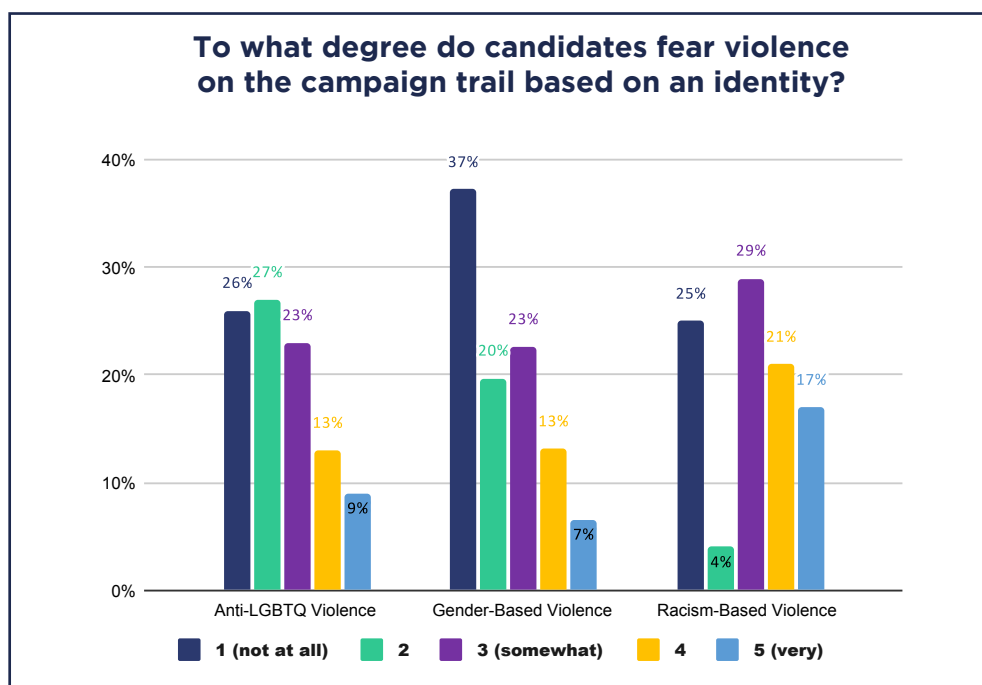
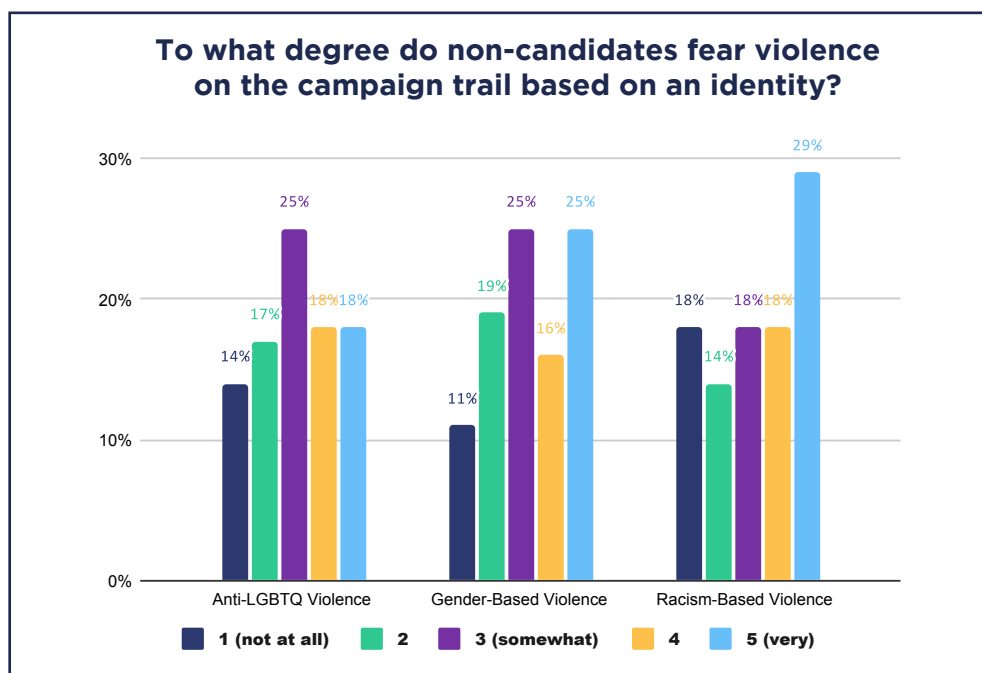
Three out of five non-candidates surveyed report being somewhat concerned to very concerned about threats of violence based on their sexual orientation or gender

identity, with 18 percent saying very concerned. Among candidates surveyed, 45 percent reported being somewhat concerned to very concerned, with nine percent very concerned. Two-thirds of non-candidates were somewhat to very concerned about violence based on sexism, with one in four very concerned. But as with fear of anti-LGBTQ violence, the concern drops among candidates. Forty-three percent of candidates were somewhat concerned to very concerned, and only seven percent were very concerned.

Yet among LGBTQ women of color respondents, the overall fear of racist violence does not drop after running for office. Two-thirds of non-candidates of color said they were somewhat to very concerned about racist violence, as did two-thirds of candidates of color. But the extreme fear does lower for some after running. While 29 percent of non-candidates of color report being very concerned about racist violence, it drops to 17 percent among candidates of color.

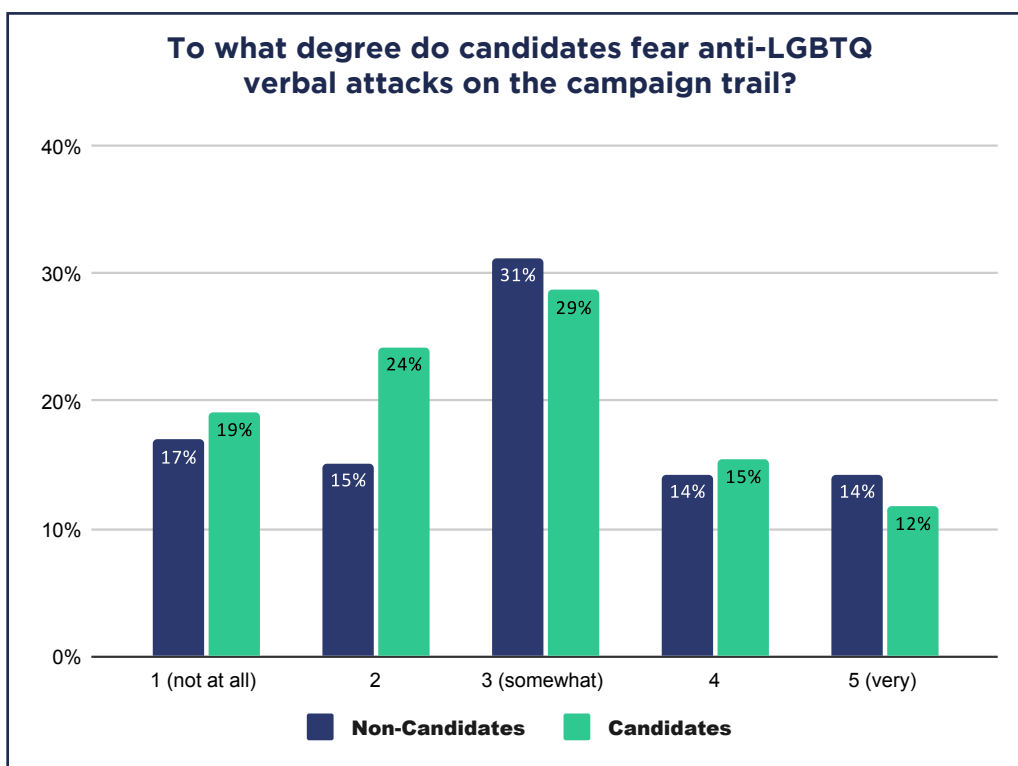
Trans women have the greatest fear of violence of people surveyed, with nearly four out of five fearing violence based on their gender identity. Many attributed it to the national anti-trans political environment, general violence toward trans women and an inability to hide gender identities as easily as sexual orientations. Trans women are the only group whose fear of violence increases *after* they run for office, likely a reflection of actual harassment and threats received on the campaign trail. Eighty-three percent of trans women candidates somewhat or very much fear violence based on their gender identity and about 74 percent of non-candidates say the same. Twenty-one percent of candidates were very concerned as were 21 percent of non-candidates.

⁴ According to the 2015 Movement Advancement Project and Center for American Progress report, [“Paying an Unfair Price.”](#)



Concern about violence based on anti-LGBTQ bigotry, sexism or racism alone could deter a qualified person from running for office, yet the compounding impact of multiple identity-based concerns presents an enormous deterrent to seeking a run. The well-publicized anti-LGBTQ threats against LGBTQ candidates in recent years were also cited by participants—legitimizing their concerns.

“[S]eeing stories of people being attacked for pursuing political office, it’s definitely kind of made us kind of step back a bit. And reconsidering is now a safe time for us even be thinking about this or for me to be looking into these sorts of things?” (non-candidate)



Two out of three non-candidates also said verbal anti-LGBTQ attacks on them were somewhat to very concerning as did 56 percent of candidates. Similar numbers also expressed concern about anti-LGBTQ verbal attacks on their families. ♦

3. Anti-LGBTQ bigotry, sexism and racism on the campaign trail.

Many LGBTQ women report hesitating to run because of the likelihood their sexual orientation, gender identity and/or race will be used negatively by opponents or journalists to harm their campaigns. More than half of non-candidates said seeing other LGBTQ candidates and women candidates targeted with anti-LGBTQ bigotry or sexism made them concerned about running. More than 60 percent of non-candidates of color said the same because of past candidates of color targeted with racist attacks.

However, people who have run report they were much less concerned about the treatment of past candidates.

Respondents agreed women candidates face harsher scrutiny than men candidates—specifically mentioning the areas of experience, qualifications, personal appearance, speaking style and issue positions. Respondents mentioned having to manage facial expressions and tone of voice to come across as warm but serious. They expect sexist commentary on the way they dress and whether they can be “good moms” while on the campaign trail. Concerns were also raised about double-standards around experience and qualifications—with men candidates getting the benefit of the doubt versus women candidates who must prove their qualifications. Even then, they report that women’s experience and qualifications are frequently marginalized, even when that experience is similar to a man’s experience.

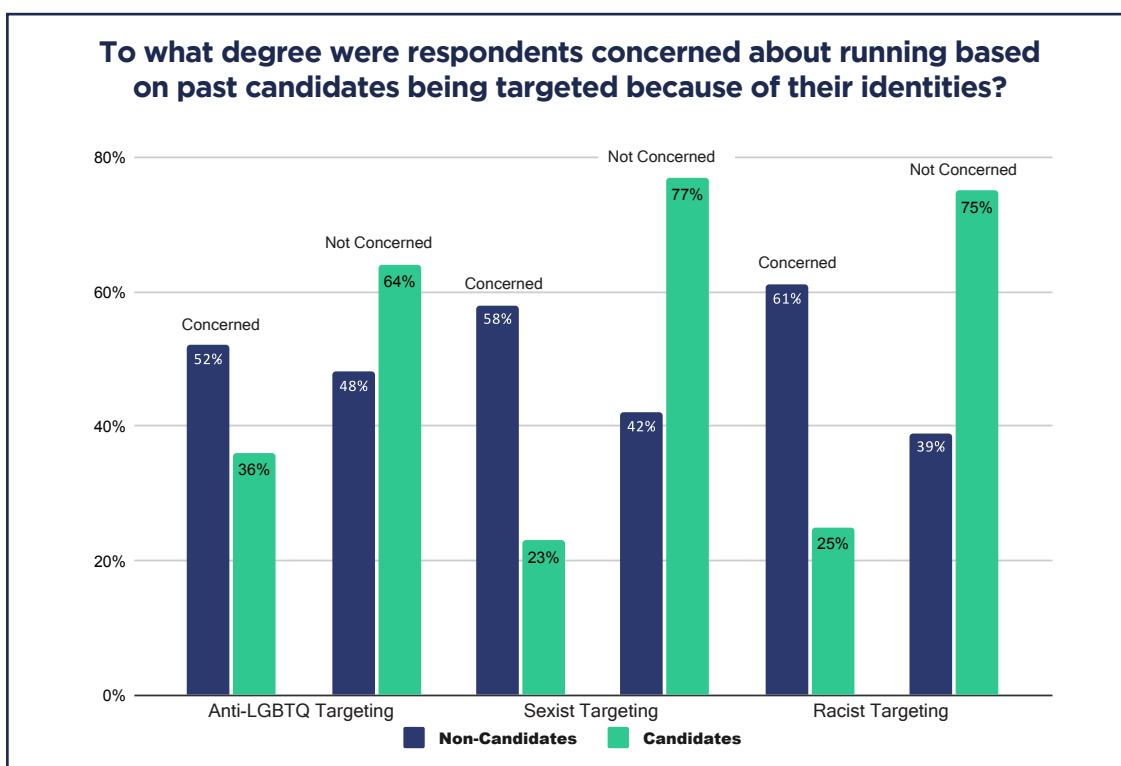
“It’s tiring when I see how women are already treated poorly, but add on to that being a Black woman, it’s just like, I watch it across every race. You know, why does she look angry? But what about her facial expressions and this and that. That wears on you with the responsibility of already running for office.” (non-candidate)

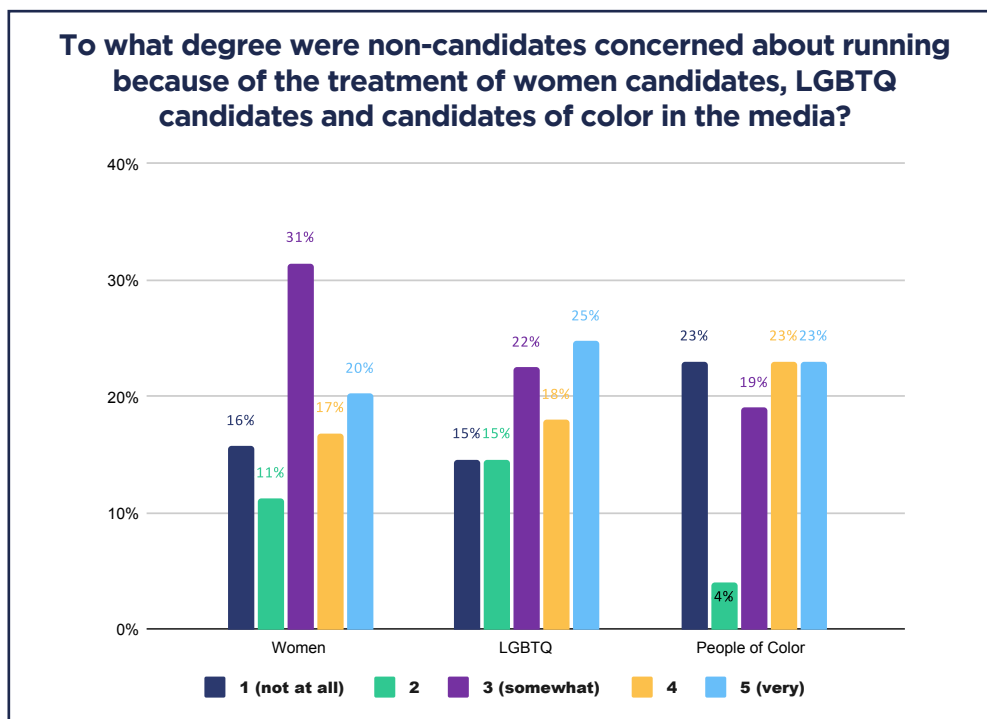
Yet there were unique challenges LGBTQ women cited that are less prevalent or absent from research on cisgender heterosexual women candidates. Many raised fears opponents would attempt to weaponize their families—either subtly or blatantly parading their families as “traditional” as a way to emphasize the “non-traditional” nature of the LGBTQ woman candidate’s family. They worried about the lack of children or lack of spouse being wielded against them—portrayed as “anti-family” or out of touch from the average voter. And for those with spouses, there was concern about a spouse needing to meet outdated gender expectations

around femininity. Some mentioned opponents emphasizing “family values” in their campaigns, a loaded political term long used to attack LGBTQ candidates.

“I wonder if it’ll be difficult for me because I don’t have a traditional family. I don’t have a partner. I don’t have children. And I wonder if that’ll be brought up as, well she’s not for family values and things like that.” (non-candidate)

Respondents shared concerns about how their own personal appearance would be perceived, including whether they should attempt to look “less masculine” to attract less scrutiny. But that prompted other concerns. An attempt to look more traditionally feminine could also come across as less professional than “a woman in a business suit” and they questioned whether a change in appearance would diminish their authenticity. Trans women in particular—but not exclusively—expressed concern about people attacking the sound of their voice.





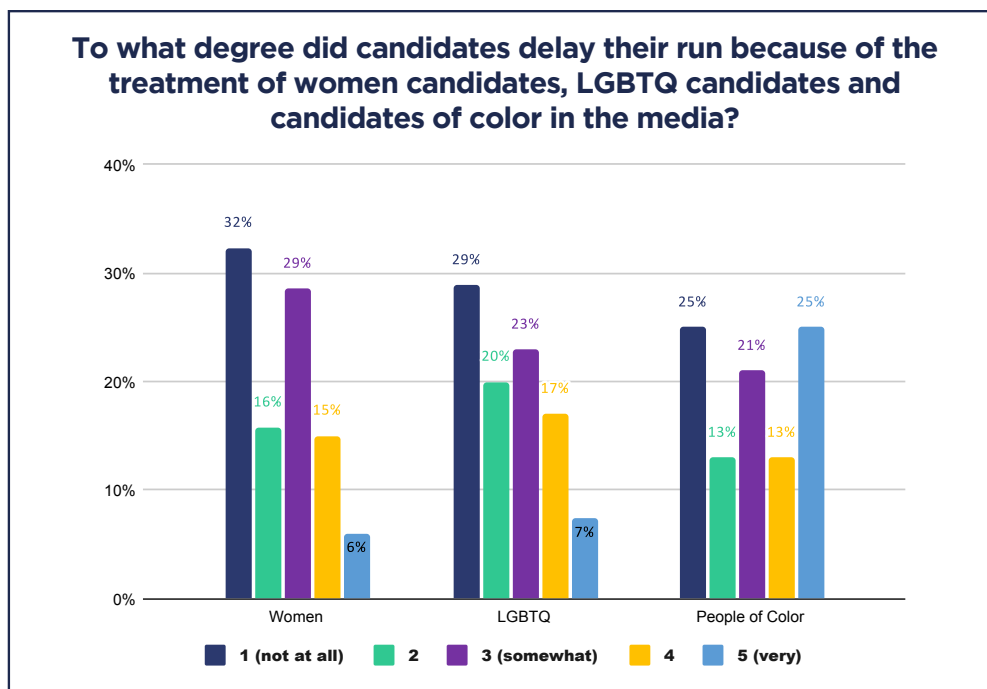
“[I]f I run for office, I feel like I would be highly scrutinized for like the way I dress, the way I interact with people. Like the way, the words that I use, the filler words that I use, the way, just everything that I don’t think a man would be criticized for.”
(non-candidate)

Many of these fears were rooted in respondents having seen past LGBTQ candidates, women candidates and candidates of color covered negatively by media outlets. This included media outlets holding them to higher standards, but also overly focusing on their identities instead of their issue positions. About two-thirds of non-candidates were concerned about running for office because of the treatment of LGBTQ candidates and women candidates in the media, and two-thirds of non-candidates of color were also concerned about running because of how candidates of color were covered. Among candidates, about half *delayed* or somewhat delayed a

run because of the treatment of LGBTQ candidates and women candidates. Almost 60 percent of candidates of color said they *delayed* or somewhat delayed their run because of the media’s treatment of candidates of color.

Some LGBTQ women also worried about losing entire voting constituencies because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, including “church goers” who they feared would be alienated by their LGBTQ status. They cited the need to show pride in their identity as LGBTQ while making sure not to talk about it too much—both to keep LGBTQ and allied voters assured they would fight for equality if elected, but to not get pigeonholed as the “LGBTQ candidate” who cares of nothing else. Some also expressed fear over heterosexual men who sexualize lesbians.

“A lot of people around this area have come up to me, and they’re trying to be so sweet, these little old grandmas, like,



'You will have to bring that gay stuff down a little bit.' I'm like, 'I'm a proud bisexual woman.' And so there's like, 'But do you have to have the rainbow decals, do you have to?' And that concerns me 'cause I'm just like, how do you balance that? I don't ever want to show up and not be authentic.'
(non-candidate)

Additionally, some worried about people using the media to weaponize their pasts. Among non-candidates, half were somewhat to very concerned about existing information or images on the internet being used against them, with 10 percent very concerned. One in five said they were somewhat to very concerned about a past dating relationship or spouse, 12 percent about revenge porn and 12 percent about past sex work being used in a campaign. The number concerned for each was significantly less for candidates—perhaps because the candidate survey respondents skewed older than non-candidates, when digital media and camera phones were less prevalent. ♦

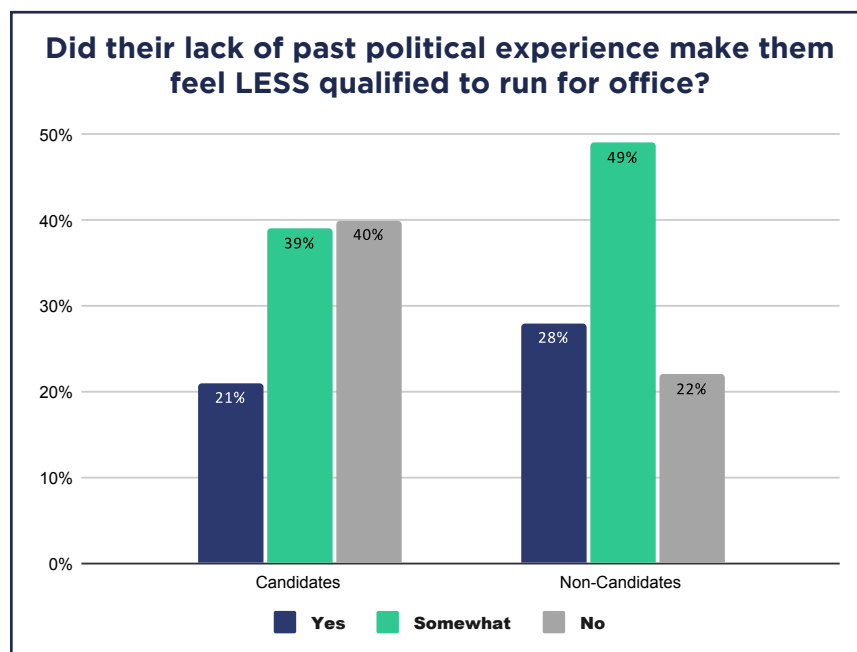
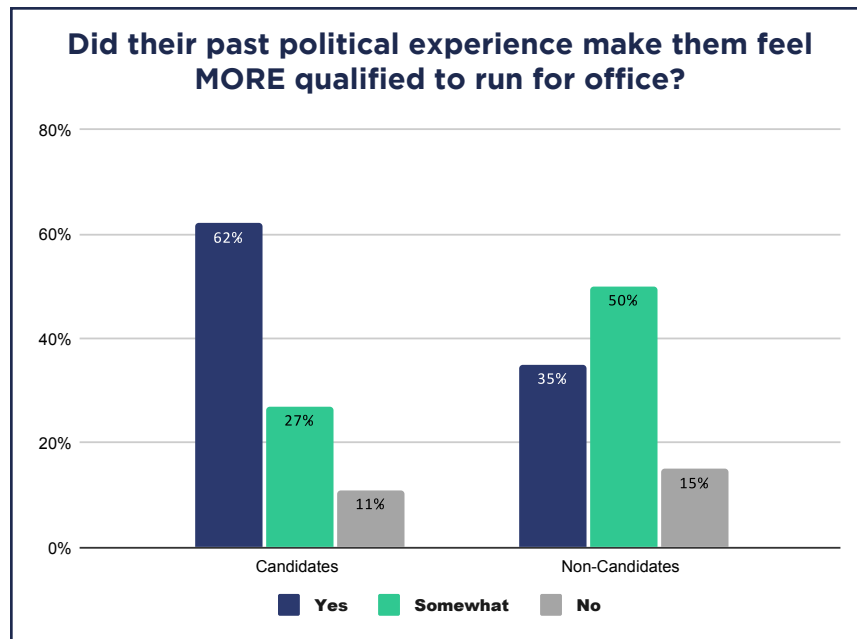
4. External perceptions of qualifications.

Most believed themselves qualified or somewhat qualified to hold elected office when they first considered a run and perceptions of qualifications were especially positive among those with prior political experience. Yet many expressed concern that media and voters would question those qualifications and said women are held to a different standard than cisgender men.

Many worry voters and media would portray their previous work experience as inconsequential and that their accomplishments would be unfairly devalued. Several said women are reduced to their profession or family—referred to as “just a nurse” or “just a mom”—whereas men’s qualifications are viewed more holistically, and often, exaggerated. Others with careers in activism—LGBTQ equality in particular—worried they would be viewed as single-issue radicals without

the broad experience needed to be strong elected officials. They again noted that men are less likely to be viewed through a single occupational lens. Several trans women noted that when they had male privilege earlier in their life, people assumed they were qualified and experienced until proven otherwise.

"I mean, you can have a woman with a PhD and 30 years' experience and she's still 'just' a something. And, you have men who may not even have a bachelor's degree run into stuff, right? And I'm not one who's a degree snob, like that's cool if you're capable and you're competent, do it. But it only happens to women where we are reduced to whatever the culturally accepted 'just' something is."
(non-candidate)



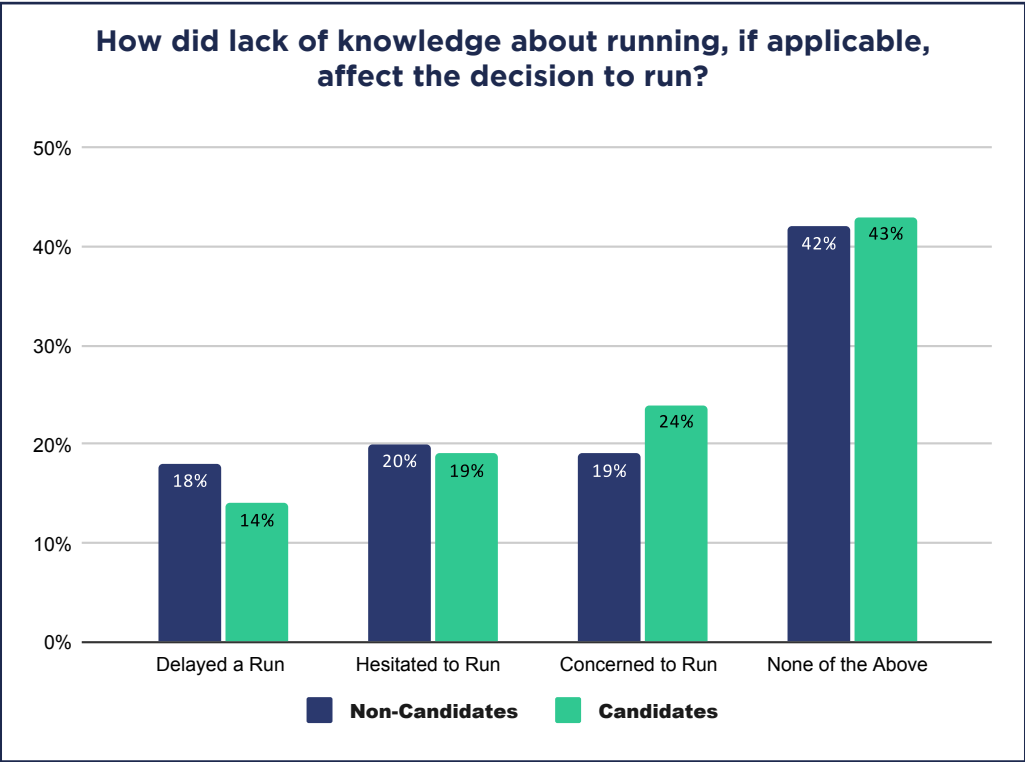
While most considered themselves qualified or somewhat qualified to serve in elected office, there were stark differences in perception among non-candidates with political experience and those without. Eighty-five percent of non-candidates with political experience said it made them more qualified to run for office, as did 89 percent of candidates. Yet 77 percent of non-candidates without prior political experience said it made them feel less or somewhat less qualified to run for office, as did 60 percent of candidates.

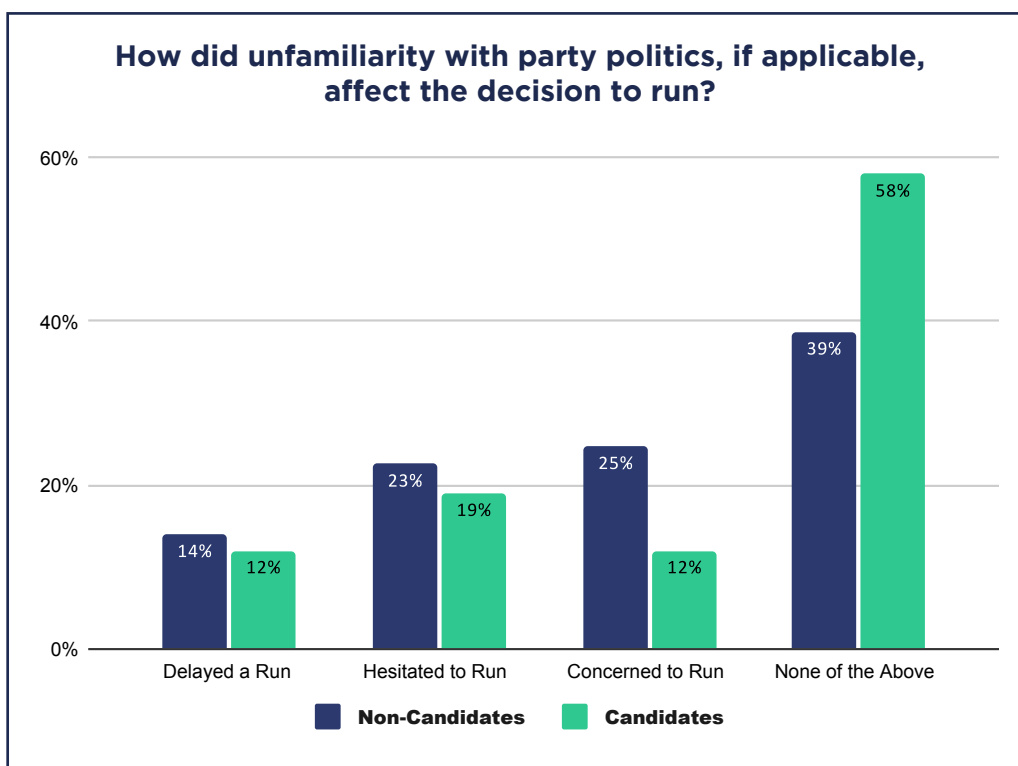
“[W]hat gets you through is having folks that can combat that negative self-talk and negative talk from other people, and just, you know, help push you forward.” (non-candidate) ♦

5. Knowledge on how to run for office and unfamiliarity with party politics.

A perceived lack of knowledge about how to run for office—especially as an out LGBTQ woman—as well as an unfamiliarity with party politics act as significant deterrents to running. From filing as a candidate to fundraising to hiring a campaign team, many were unsure how best to learn the hard skills necessary to run a campaign. They also expressed concern about the uniqueness of running as an out LGBTQ women, saying that “normal” candidate training programs or non-LGBTQ women mentors could not address the full scope of what they would confront on the campaign trail.

Of the LGBTQ women respondents, nearly three in five delayed, hesitated to run or were concerned about running because of a lack of knowledge on how to run a campaign.





A lack of understanding around party politics also presented a barrier. Some mentioned the “good old boys” network that often excludes women and LGBTQ people, or that they simply didn’t have the time or resources to “schmooze” and network. There was also fear that party officials viewed men and heterosexuals as more viable and therefore preferable to an LGBTQ woman candidate. Among non-candidates, three out of five said unfamiliarity with party politics negatively affected their decision to run, as did two out of five candidates.

Many mentioned an LGBTQ woman political mentor would alleviate anxieties about how to run for office—both the hard skills and in addressing their identity on the campaign trail. Yet few had access to an LGBTQ woman mentor who had run—a reflection on the severe underrepresentation of LGBTQ women in elected office. Also mentioned was the need for more trainings specific

to LGBTQ women, as well as a better network of LGBTQ women interested in running for office.

“I think having someone to bounce ideas off of and, sort of do a realism check, and that might be the purpose of the mentor partnership that I know that the Victory Institute does as part of the Victory training. But having someone at Victory or elsewhere to be able to say, like, ‘Here’s the race I’m thinking of, here’s the timeline I’m thinking of, here’s the budget, does this seem at all realistic?’” (non-candidate)

Some candidates noted they were unfamiliar with Victory Institute’s candidate trainings when they first ran and that it would have likely made them run earlier had they known. Some believed candidates needed special, LGBTQ-specific campaign trainings to be fully effective on the trail. ♦

6. Lack of representation in elected offices.

Political role models are an extremely important factor in the decision to run, yet many say there are too few role models to demonstrate that LGBTQ women are regularly viable. The fear around political viability is especially strong when no LGBTQ person—or for LGBTQ people of color, no person of color—has won the seat they wanted to run for. Therefore, local trailblazers—the candidates who shatter glass ceilings in their communities—play a vital role in reducing viability concerns for future LGBTQ women candidates.

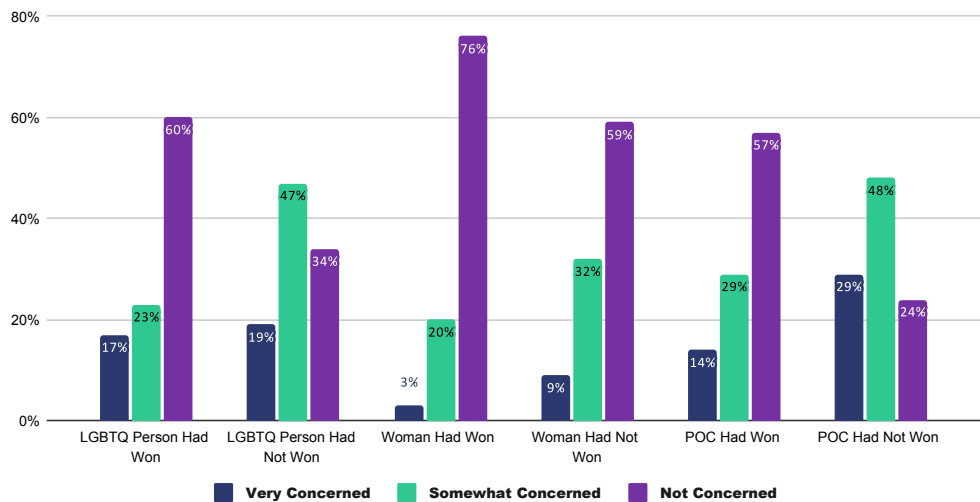
Sixty-two percent of non-candidates said seeing other LGBTQ women succeed in running for office plays a *very* important role in them wanting to run and 60 percent of non-candidates of color said the same for candidates of color succeeding. Yet 38 percent of non-candidates expressed concern about running for office because there are “few or no” LGBTQ political role models and 27 percent of non-candidates of color said the same about political role models of color. However, just 15 percent of non-candidates expressed concern about

“few or no” women political role models. Still, the compounding factors of multiple identities and the lack of role models for each creates a significant barrier for many.

Beyond role models generally, many said their perceptions of viability were to some degree tied to whether a person like them had previously won the seat. Among respondents who ran or wanted to run for a position never held by an LGBTQ person, 66 percent were somewhat or very concerned an LGBTQ person could not win the seat. This dips to 40 percent among respondents who ran or wanted to run for a position an LGBTQ person had won before.

Among respondents who ran or wanted to run for a seat never held by a person of color, 76 percent were somewhat or very concerned a candidate of color could not win the seat compared to 43 percent when a candidate of color had won the seat previously. Respondents were least concerned about a woman candidate winning a seat never held by a woman, yet two in five still reported they are or were somewhat or very concerned about winning a seat never won by a woman. ♦

To what degree were respondents concerned about a person of a particular identity winning, based on whether a candidate from that identity had won before?



Motivations to Run

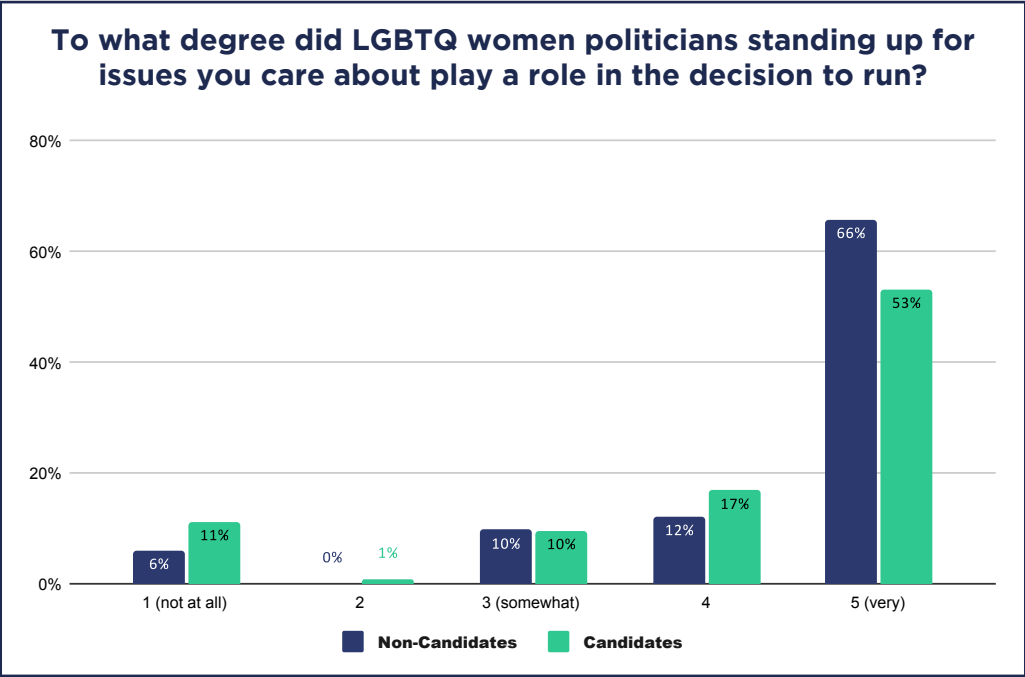
What motivated LGBTQ women survey respondents and focus group participants were highly personalized, yet four common themes emerged. While these motivators may be shared by many cisgender heterosexual women, the need for LGBTQ representation and the fight for LGBTQ equality was a constant throughout.

As in the barriers section, the list of motivators is far from exhaustive and reflect only the most prevalent themes. In the sections below, “candidates” refers to survey respondents and focus group participants who have run for office or were actively running for office—including candidates who lost and those who won. “Non-candidates” refers to those who have not yet run but have either considered it or are actively considering it. At times, the percentage of respondents reported in graphs will be less or more than 100 percent due to skipped questions related to non-applicability and/or rounding approximations.

1. The need for representation in elected office.

Many LGBTQ women cited the lack of LGBTQ representation in elected positions as a primary motivation to run for office. They noted the lack of people who look like them or share their lived experience and the importance of being a role model for other LGBTQ people like them.

*“[P]art of it is also because of my identity as a transgender woman, and wanting serve as representation for people that I never had when I was growing up. I just didn’t see any other trans women. I didn’t have any of the trans representation and I really want to make a difference. I think politics is a way that I can do that.”
(non-candidate)*



“For me, it was looking at the county in and of itself. I saw that we did not have equity on our judicial benches, even though our county was 45 percent Latino....And I said, ‘Well, I’m qualified to do this job, so why not me?’....And I just felt that moral responsibility to change something that I didn’t agree with.”
(current candidate)

Nearly all see a direct link between representation in government and securing resources and policies that are fair and inclusive. Many felt a lack of representation in state capitals and other legislative bodies was responsible for the lack of LGBTQ protections or the introduction of anti-LGBTQ bills. Almost nine in 10 non-candidates and eight in 10 candidates said LGBTQ women politicians standing up for issues they care about played a positive role in their desire to run.

“And I feel like representation really does matter. And I hear so many people say that, but it really does. And those of us that are [in this focus group], we know that. We know that representation matters. And so that, that really did give me the energy to say that we needed, I needed to be at the table.” (current candidate)

“[L]ived experience is expertise that you see a problem every day, you figure out how to work your way around it, and you deal with it, like you push through and find a solution yourself. Those people should be in decision-making situations because they should be driving policy if you know how to work through a solution. Why not bring those people in?”
(non-candidate) ♦

2. Desire to work on an issue(s) personal to them and make systemic change.

While the reasons people choose to run or consider a run vary tremendously, most cited working for change on a particular issue and/or making systemic change as primary motivations for running. When discussing the various issues that motivated them to run—whether it be public transportation, healthcare access or police reform—most reported their interest emerged from a personal connection to that issue. For instance, one candidate shared that raising an autistic nephew has motivated them to run to improve special education in their state. Others shared similar stories.

“Health access and equity was a driving force for me, because of my own family experience. And prior to working or to running for office, I worked for Planned Parenthood Federation of America, for an AIDS organization in San Francisco, and for a children’s hospital. And I just saw over and over the number of people who were either uninsured because they couldn’t afford it or because there wasn’t a program that covered them.” (current candidate)

Among candidates, 55 percent said they chose the first position they ran for because it could best address an issue they were passionate about. Other motivations—such as defeating an anti-LGBTQ incumbent, that it was an open seat, or that they thought it was a position they were qualified for—were secondary.

Among non-candidates, 82 percent said they were motivated to run because an issue they were passionate about was often ignored by elected officials, and 64 percent of candidates said the same. Seventy-nine percent of non-candidates and 89 percent of candidates said their ability to put forward new solutions to address an issue they are passionate about was a motivation to run.

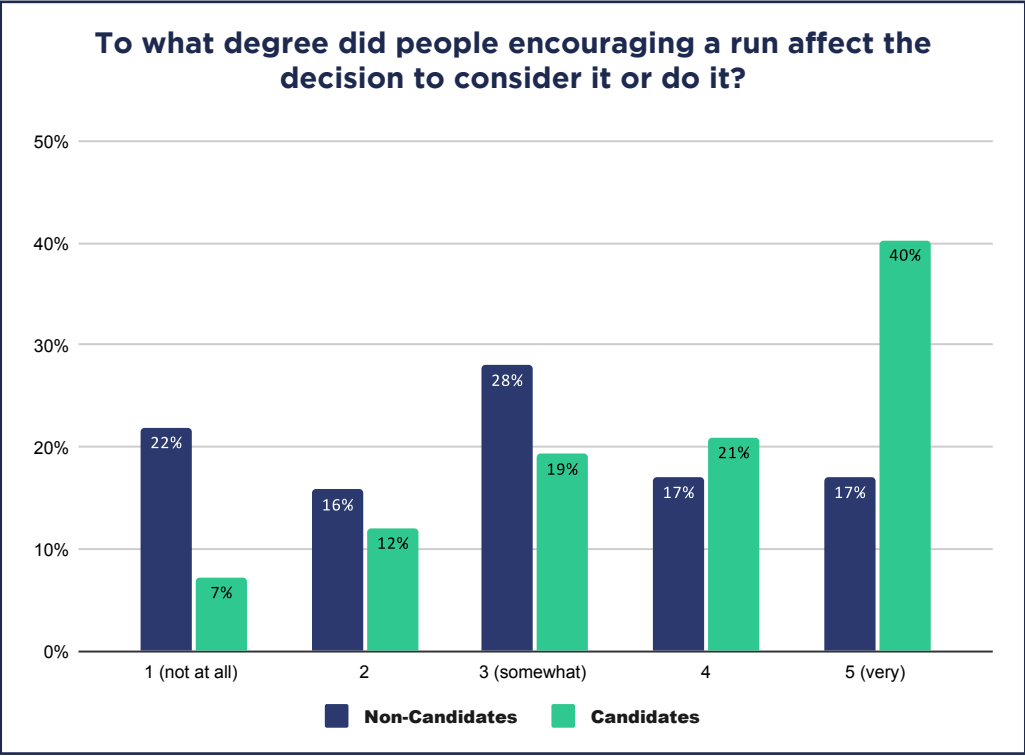
Creating systemic change is also a frequent motivator for running for office, particularly among non-candidates. Advancing wholesale change around LGBTQ equality, systemic racism and poverty were often mentioned. Nearly three-quarters of non-candidates and 61 percent of candidates said political attacks on LGBTQ equality played a role in their decision to run or want to run.

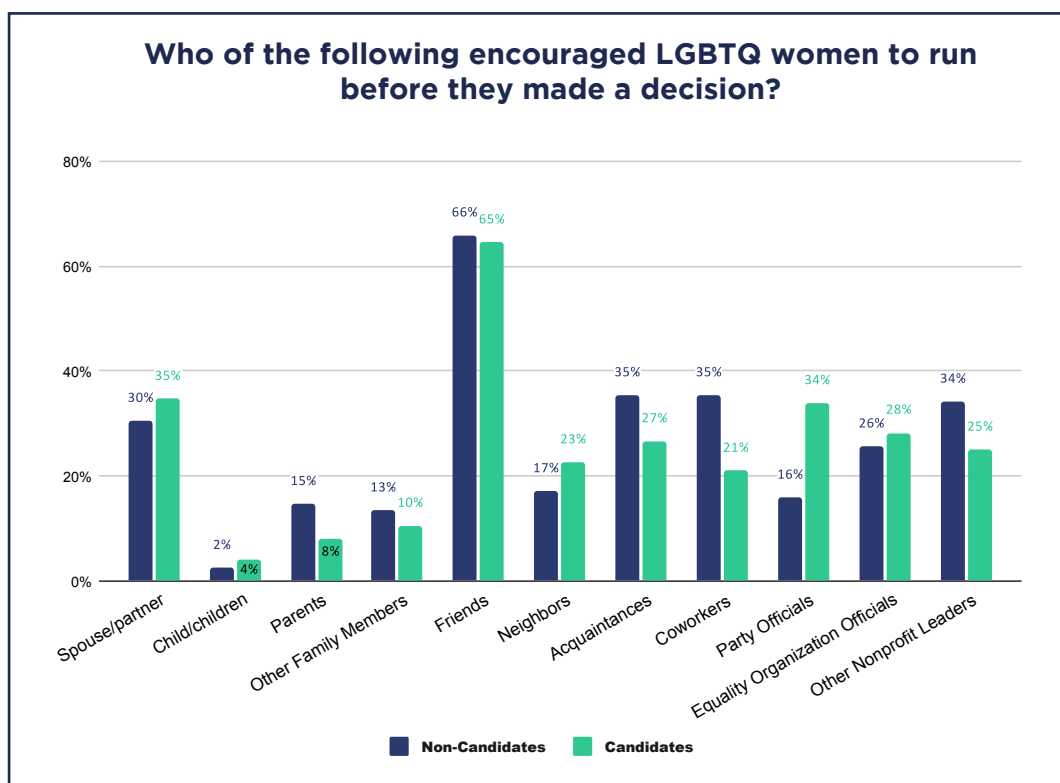
“So I, whenever I do decide to run for office, I want to reimagine the way that we engage with our communities and making sure that regardless of

whatever, social or economic status you’re on now, that you can still have a basic living and that you can live comfortably somewhere somehow.”
(non-candidate) ♦

3. External encouragement.

Outside validators and external encouragement played a significant role in many LGBTQ women’s decision to run for office—a finding consistent with research focused on cisgender heterosexual women. Fifty-six percent of candidates said they had not thought about running for office until someone asked them to, as did 28 percent of non-candidates. Four out of five candidates said people encouraging them to run was somewhat to very important and about three-fifths of non-candidates said the same.





For both candidates and non-candidates, friends were most frequently cited as important encouragers, and about one-third of respondents said a spouse or partner played an encouraging role. The finding is significant given more than 70 percent of candidate respondents had a spouse or partner when they decided to run, compared to just 47 percent of non-candidates. Having a spouse or partner—and the encouragement, emotional support, financial stability and other benefits that often come with it—could be a strong determinant on whether one runs.

Coworkers, nonprofit leaders and acquaintances also were important, while few reported parents or other family members playing encouraging roles. Some noted neither women or LGBTQ people were traditionally groomed by parents or family members to assume leadership positions—and

that politics was often considered a “man’s sport” by older generations. Appeals from equality organizations urging more LGBTQ people, women and people of color to run also played a positive role in decision-making.

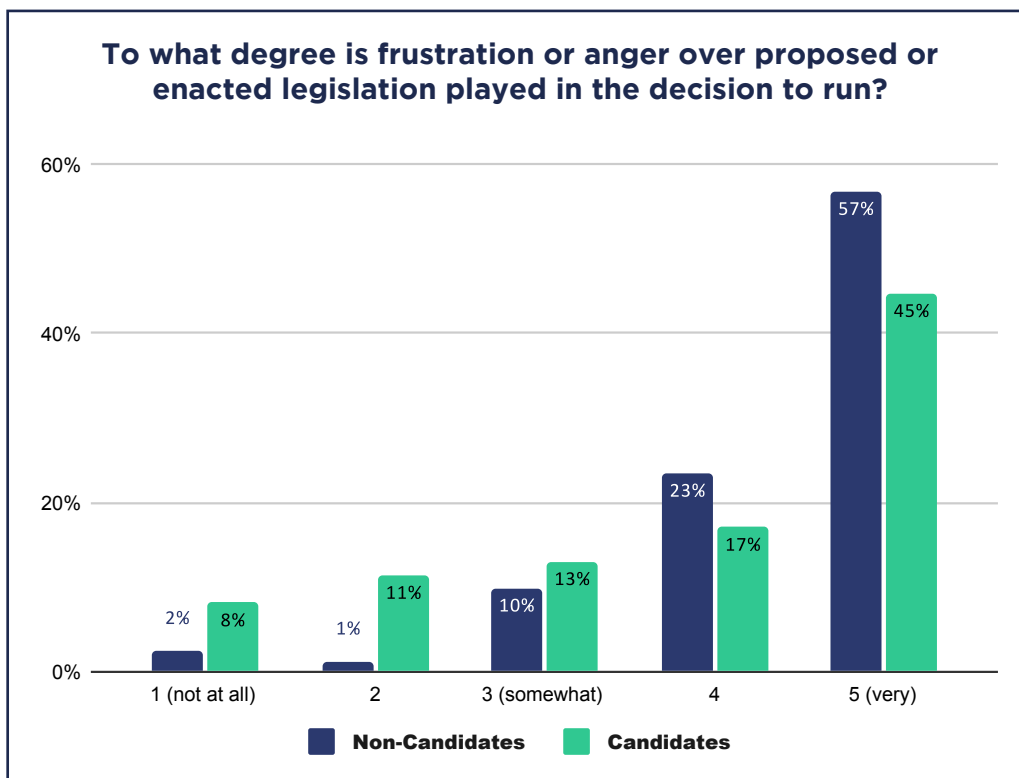
Party officials could have either an encouraging or discouraging role in the decision to run. About a third of candidates said party officials played an encouraging role while just 16 percent of non-candidates reported the same. In fact, 27 percent of non-candidates said *discouragement* from party officials made them hesitate or delay their decision to run. Some mentioned party officials who thought heterosexual and cisgender men candidates were safer bets in general elections and therefore aimed to recruit heterosexual cisgender men. Yet others said a party official who sought diverse candidates played an influential and positive role in their decision to run. ♦

4. Current elected officials and their issue agendas.

Many were motivated to run for office because of legislators supporting policies they oppose and/or the behavior of elected officials already in office. Among non-candidates in particular, a legislator's specific issue position or a key moment involving a legislator sparked them to consider a run. Some mentioned incidents of racist police violence and the failure of an elected official to respond appropriately. Some mentioned legislators who support anti-LGBTQ bills or make transphobic comments. And others mentioned key moments created by candidates or elected officials—such as the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump's ban on trans servicemembers, or a racist diatribe by a legislator—as the tipping point.

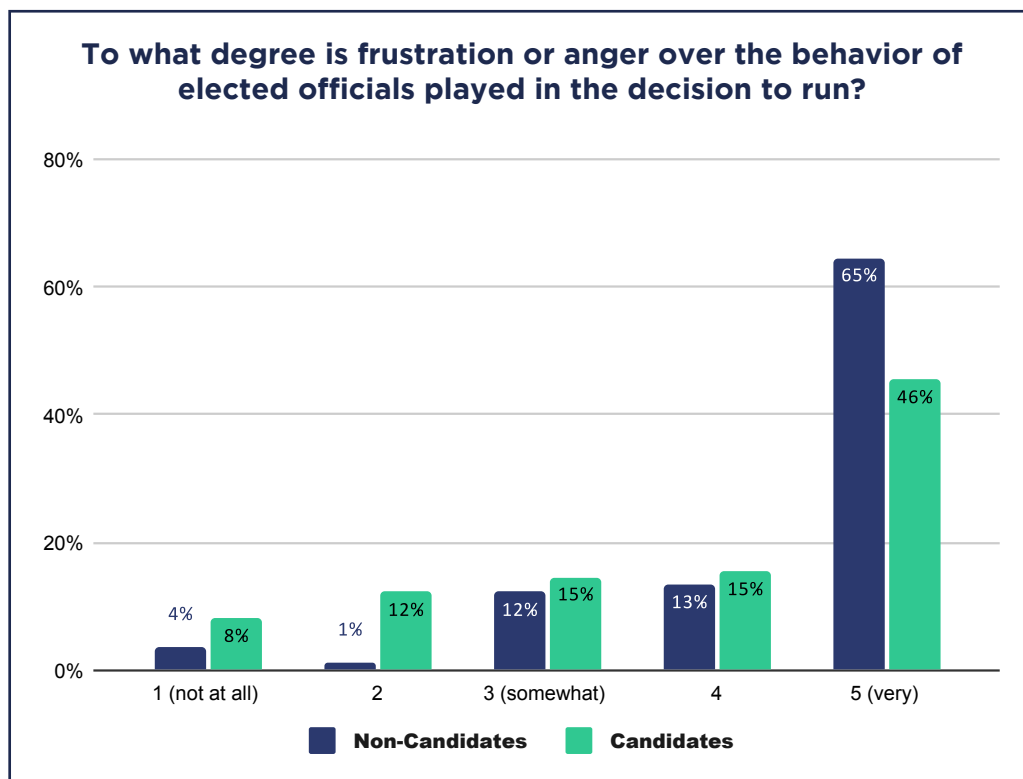
*"I never, I didn't think, you know, as a young girl that I wanted to run for office someday, but it was on election night, 2016....that all the work that I had done was at risk and that I couldn't raise enough money to make the policy change that folks in my community needed. So that's, that's why I decided to run."
(current candidate)*

Nearly three out of five non-candidates said frustration over proposed or enacted legislation or policies was a *very* important part of their desire to run. Almost two-thirds said frustration over the behavior of elected officials was *very* important in their desire to run, with most citing former President Trump and the U.S. Congress. That frustration with policies or the behavior of elected officials was also prominent among candidate respondents, but to a lesser degree.



Forty-five percent of candidates said frustration over legislation was *very* important in their decision to run and 45 percent said frustration over the behavior of elected officials was *very* important. Yet candidates cited frustration over state legislators—not the president or U.S. Congress—as the primary motivator.

While putting forward a positive agenda to work on a personal issue is the strongest motivator for most, dismay over existing elected officials and their issue agendas is prominent in discussions about why they ran. ♦



Next Steps

A national and comprehensive effort to address the structural inequalities that perpetuate the underrepresentation of LGBTQ women, and others, in political office is needed to fully address the disparity. Yet equality organizations can take immediate steps to tackle some of the barriers, and take advantage of some of the motivators, to inspire and support more LGBTQ women who want to run.

These include:

Skills and Networking

- Developing and promoting more LGBTQ woman-focused candidate trainings that address key issues of concern, including fundraising and countering anti-LGBTQ, sexist and racist campaign tactics.
- Creating a mentorship network for LGBTQ women that connects current or prospective candidates with an LGBTQ woman elected official or former candidate who can share advice and experiences.
- Encouraging more young LGBTQ women to volunteer on campaigns or gain other political experience that places them on a path to run for office.

Inspiration & Recruitment

- Launching campaigns to encourage LGBTQ women to run for office and urging influencers to ask LGBTQ women they know to run.
- Telling the stories of LGBTQ women elected officials and their impact, making them the solution to underrepresentation.

- Working with state and local political parties and equality organizations to actively identify and recruit LGBTQ women to run and focusing party officials on building and implementing more proactively inclusive policies.

Fundraising

- Building a national network of donors with a passion for supporting LGBTQ women candidates, especially at the state and local levels.
- Promoting legislation and policies to address economic inequalities that harm women, LGBTQ people and people of color and exacerbate financial barriers to running.

Reducing Attacks

- Working with state and local officials, social media companies and others to ensure all threats are taken seriously and responded to.
- Ensuring anti-LGBTQ, sexist and racist attacks on candidates backfire and fail, so they are used less frequently by opponents.
- Supporting media literacy among journalists and credible media outlets to ensure fair reporting on LGBTQ women candidates and calling-out bad actors when productive.

The barriers for LGBTQ women discussed in this report are enormous and will not be erased by implementing the opportunities suggested here. Yet chipping away at the barriers and exploiting motivators can move America

closer to having LGBTQ candidates that reflect the diversity of the entire community, and eventually, achieve equitable representation in office. When LGBTQ women run, they succeed, as proven by leaders such as Oregon Governor Kate Brown, Massachusetts Attorney General Maura Healey and Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot. So ensuring they consider and then take that leap must be a focus for equality organizations moving forward. The more LGBTQ women leaders who secure seats in elected office, the more other LGBTQ women will be inspired to run and win.

LGBTQ Victory Institute works to achieve and sustain global equality through leadership development, training, and convening to increase the number, expand the diversity, and ensure the success of openly LGBTQ elected and appointed officials at all levels of government.



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