The Experiences of Black LGBTQ+ Candidates

A REPORT FROM THE *WHEN WE RUN* SURVEY

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Introduction

A record-breaking 141 Black out LGBTQ+ people ran for office in the United States in 2022, from small town city councils to statewide seats to high-profile races for Congress. While the historic number of Black LGBTQ+ candidates demonstrates tremendous progress – up from 69 candidates in 2018 and 85 candidates in 2020[1] – the obstacles to winning remain enormous as Black LGBTQ+ candidates confront racism, homophobia and transphobia on the campaign trail.

For the 2023 report *When We Run: The Motivations, Experiences and Challenges of LGBTQ+ Candidates in the United States*, Loyola Marymount University's LGBTQ+ Politics Research Initiative and LGBTQ+ Victory Institute conducted the largest survey of LGBTQ+ candidates in U.S. history to learn about the experiences and challenges of LGBTQ+ candidates. Of the 470 LGBTQ+ survey respondents who ran for office between 2018 and 2022, 47 identified as Black and LGBTQ+ – a close approximation to the proportion of LGBTQ+ candidates who were Black during that period.[2]

This new report brief – *When We Run: The Campaign Trail Experiences of Black LGBTQ+ Candidates* – analyzes the responses from those 47 Black LGBTQ+ candidates and other Victory Institute data to explore four areas:

1. **The state of Black LGBTQ+ representation in the U.S.;**
2. **The challenges Black LGBTQ+ candidates face when running for office;**
3. **Priority issues and the importance of LGBTQ+ identity on the campaign trail; and**
4. **Steps to confront racism, homophobia and transphobia in political institutions and environments.**

Black LGBTQ+ people remain severely underrepresented in elected office – in part because of the obstacles cited in this report – with devastating consequences for Black LGBTQ+ people and all Americans. Not having Black LGBTQ+ people fairly represented in the halls of power often leads to a lack of focus on, or outright opposition toward, policies that can positively impact their lives. It also contributes to a larger threat to American democracy, as Black LGBTQ+ people may disengage from running or voting without their voices represented.

While more comprehensive studies and research are needed on the experiences and challenges of Black LGBTQ+ candidates on the campaign trail, this report brief provides a unique and first-of-its-kind glance.

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[1] Out on the Trail 2022. LGBTQ+ Victory Fund. October 2022. https://victoryfund.org/out-on-the-trail-2022/

[2] Out on the Trail 2023. LGBTQ+ Victory Fund. (Between 2018 and 2022, 386 known Black LGBTQ+ candidates ran out of 3579 total candidates.). https://victoryfund.org/out-on-the-trail-2023/

The State of Black LGBTQ+ Representation in Public Office in the U.S.

As of February 2024, 142 Black out LGBTQ+ people[1] were known to be serving in the United States – including two in Congress and one in statewide office.[2] That means Black LGBTQ+ people hold just 0.03 percent of elected positions in the United States, despite Black LGBTQ+ people comprising an estimated 0.5 percent of the U.S. adult population.[3]

Given that, to achieve equitable elected representation for Black LGBTQ+ people, 2,453 more Black LGBTQ+ people would need to be elected to office in the U.S.[4]

Additionally, Black LGBTQ+ people represent 11.1 percent of LGBTQ+ elected officials currently serving in the U.S., while Black people are estimated to be 12 percent of the overall LGBTQ+ population in the U.S.[5]

Challenges Facing Black LGBTQ+ Candidates

As one candidate stated: "Barriers to inclusion are high, including in majority [Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPoC)] contexts." Whether from racism, homophobia and transphobia to a lack of support from political organizations, Black LGBTQ+ survey respondents highlighted distinct challenges to running for office. Among them:

1. Racism, homophobia, and transphobia

More than one in three Black LGBTQ+ candidates (36 percent) cited prejudice because of their race as one of the top challenges in their campaign, while 31.9 percent cited prejudice because of their sexual orientation and 10.6 percent because of their gender identity. The large numbers facing racism, homophobia and transphobia on the trail highlight the obstacles Black LGBTQ+ candidates must navigate as they appeal to a potentially wide variety of voters.

On this, Black LGBTQ+ respondents said:

> "Bias challenge[s] many Black candidates."
>
> "[E]very endorsing political organization I encountered demanded respectability politics. At each instance I encountered thinly veiled anti-Black racism or homophobia."
>
> "...Transphobia and biphobia are [seen in] both the straight and [lesbian and gay] communities."

2. Lack of LGBTQ+ role models

More than four in 10 Black LGBTQ+ candidates – 42.5 percent – said that the lack of LGBTQ+ elected officials that can serve as role models for people running for office was a challenge. This is a consequence of the continued underrepresentation of Black LGBTQ+ people in elected office. Many states have just one or two Black LGBTQ+ elected officials and some have zero, making it hard for candidates to build personal relationships with other LGBTQ+ Black leaders who have successfully run before.

3. Financial challenges

Black LGBTQ+ candidates also faced acute financial challenges, including a lack of personal finances (reported by 44.7 percent of candidates) and difficulty in raising money (48.9 percent of candidates). More than four in ten (42.6 percent) Black LGBTQ+ candidates incurred personal debt for campaign expenses during their run for office.

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[1]Out for America Map. LGBTQ+ Victory Institute. February 13, 2024. https://outforamerica.org/

[2]U.S. Senator Laphonza Butler, U.S. Representative Ritchie Torres and Connecticut State Treasurer Erick Russell.

[3]Black LGBTQ Adults in the U.S. The Williams Institute. (1.2 million Black LGBTQ+ adults) https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/black-lgbt-adults-in-the-us/. The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Total Population by Child and Adult Populations in the U.S. (258.1 million U.S. Adults in 2021). https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/99-total-population-by-child-and-adult-populations#detailed/1/any/false/1095,2048,574,1729,37,871,870,573,869,36/39,40,41/416,417

[4]There are 519,682 U.S. elected positions, according to Becoming a Candidate, Jennifer L. Lawless.

[5]Black LGBTQ Adults in the U.S. The Williams Institute. https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/black-lgbt-adults-in-the-us/

This is partly a result of the higher rates of poverty among LGBTQ+ people and Black people, compared to straight cisgender people and white people. A 2019 Williams Institute study found that LGBTQ+ people had a poverty rate of 21.6 percent, compared to 15.7 percent for straight cisgender people. Black LGBTQ+ people had a poverty rate of 30.8 percent compared to 25.3 percent of Black cisgender straight people.[1]

These realities undermine the ability of Black LGBTQ+ candidates to take time off to run for office, to contribute to their own campaign, and to have access to wealthier circles of potential donors.

On this, Black LGBTQ+ respondents said:

"We don't have the same financial resources that other non-[B]lack candidates [have], so we are still having to work full-time and run."

"So much of the life of political organizations revolves around money and power, both of which BIPoC candidates have been generationally disadvantaged in procuring. BIPoC candidates can be effective in representing inclusion and [in] raising funds from people who care about that, but the truth is overwhelmingly that white elected officials and white donors are where most of the power lies in non-BIPoC political organizations."

"[M]oney is more important than I imagined. I won the general and lost in the runoff because I ran out of money."

"Fundraising was a big deal, people and organizations wanted to talk to the people who raised the most."

4. Lack of campaign support from political organizations

Black LGBTQ+ candidates reported a lack of support from both political endorsement organizations and their local political parties

– citing exclusion and negative biases, as well as perceptions that Black LGBTQ+ candidates are somehow "outsiders." Four in five Black LGBTQ+ candidates (79.5 percent) believed that endorsing organizations biased white candidates over Black candidates. Almost half of Black LGBTQ+ candidates (46.8 percent) believed their local political party was not very supportive or not supportive at all of their candidacies.

On this, Black LGBTQ+ respondents said:

"I had supreme court justices and judges endorsing me, but [the] good old boy network minimized that appeal – [it] painted me as an outsider in a community that has 281 black people, [which was] easy to do."

"[Organizations don't] take [the] same strong stand against racism as [they do] in favor of pregnant people's reproductive choices and of LGBTQ+ inclusion/marriage equality, for example. I think something like that sends a message."

"The political machine is very old school in many areas around metro Detroit, and so I have no doubt that bias exists in some places."

"In a state like Mississippi, I think there just needs to be more ongoing collaborative efforts to get a Black candidate elected. It doesn't seem to work to treat each candidacy as its own one-off event. We need to build a network of support, fundraising, etc. over many cycles."

5. Anti-LGBTQ+ Attacks

Seven in ten (70.2 percent) Black LGBTQ+ candidates worried that running as an out LGBTQ+ candidate could increase the likelihood of harassment or attacks against them. An even greater number, three in four (74.5 percent), encountered homophobic or transphobic hate and harassment during their campaign.

[1] LGBT Poverty in the United States. Williams Institute. https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/National-LGBT-Poverty-Oct-2019.pdf

Of these, almost seven in ten (68.6 percent) experienced verbal attacks and almost six in ten (57.1 percent) attacks on social media. About one in ten (11.4 percent) faced physical threats. Of those who experienced attacks, 82.9 percent said the attacks negatively affected their personal mental health.

On this, Black LGBTQ+ respondents said:

"Don't underestimate the effort to block your success. It starts very early. Be wary of helpful strangers and watch out for charlatans. Most of these people are not your friends."

"People will throw everything at you including the kitchen sink. [R]emain composed and levelheaded."

A respondent also recommended candidates "have someone monitor your social media and safety."

6. Unfair media coverage

Black LGBTQ+ candidates faced unfair questions from the media about their qualifications and viability in a general election. About half of the Black LGBTQ+ candidates (46.8 percent) said the media's coverage of their campaign was at least somewhat unfair. More than half (55.3 percent) noticed double standards in media coverage of their campaign compared to media coverage of straight cisgender candidates. Of these, two in three (65.4 percent) said the double standards were about their viability and chances of winning the election.

On this, Black LGBTQ+ respondents said:

"We have to prove ourselves 300% more than non-Black candidates, and we are the ones who are really doing the work in the community."

"They are going to know you are LGBTQ and if you are a person of color or Black, you will need to really address your qualifications and the issues, and know them well."

"[P]eople will think your only qualification is being LGBTQ+."

"As all news is becoming more national, it hadn't occurred to me that being a Black and gay mayor may open me to national opposition... not me specifically but generally and toward the City. The outreach has been vastly positive but there has been a bit of negative outreach from outside of our community."

Priority Issues and the Importance of LGBTQ+ Identity on the Campaign Trail

Most Black LGBTQ+ candidates (70.2 percent) cited a desire to make positive change for their local community as a primary motivator for running for office – mentioning a multitude of issues they wanted to prioritize to improve people's lives. Just over half (55.3 percent) said LGBTQ+ rights were at least moderately important in their campaign and six in 10 (61.7 percent) said their sexual orientation played at least a moderately important role in their campaign.

Black LGBTQ+ candidates often mentioned housing, healthcare and employment as issues central in their campaigns – and often emphasized how these issues disproportionately affect Black and Brown LGBTQ+ people. One candidate said their priority issue was "Protecting homeless and displaced students in Atlanta, in which more than 60 percent of Black and brown youth who are homeless identify as LGBTQ+."

More broadly, Black LGBTQ+ candidates frequently identified that racial and ethnic minorities within the LGBTQ+ community face unique challenges that are often not addressed by either the larger LGBTQ+ or larger Black communities. One candidate said: "[N]ot all LGBTQ [people] are treated the same and have the same experiences when other identities intersect, like race, gender and class."

Steps to Confront Racism, Homophobia and Transphobia in Electoral Politics

When prompted on sharing first steps to address the challenges Black LGBTQ+ candidates face – and to confront racism, homophobia and transphobia in political parties, endorsing organizations and other political environments – several themes emerged from the responses of Black LGBTQ+ candidates:

1. Prioritize financial support for Black LGBTQ+ candidates.

2. Provide additional non-financial resources to Black LGBTQ+ candidates – campaign trainings, political advice and media connections – and ensure personal finances are not a barrier to accessing those resources.

3. Build leadership development programs that attract young Black LGBTQ+ leaders and support their path to public service.

4. Proactively work to identify racism, homophobia and transphobia in political parties and endorsing organizations and build plans to remedy it.

5. Increase diversity in the staff and leadership of political parties and endorsing organizations.

6. Create networking opportunities and facilitate relationship building among Black LGBTQ+ candidates, Black LGBTQ+ elected officials, and other leaders.

7. Welcome and encourage Black LGBTQ+ candidates to be authentic, both on the campaign trail and in political spaces.
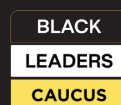
Conclusion

A record number of Black LGBTQ+ elected officials are now serving in the United States, with more than 140 in elected positions at every level of government, as of February 2024. Yet, this report reveals major hurdles to running for office as a Black LGBTQ+ candidate, a reality that discourages Black LGBTQ+ leaders from pursuing elected office. It is imperative that these obstacles on the campaign trail and within political institutions are addressed and remedied to the extent possible, as the lack of Black LGBTQ+ representation is a threat to both equality and democracy.

Black LGBTQ+ leaders must be in the halls of power to ensure their unique perspectives are considered in policies that impact LGBTQ+ and Black people. When in office, their presence restores a belief in democracy, as others see themselves reflected in government. It encourages more people to participate by running themselves, campaigning for candidates and showing up at the ballot box. And when in office, Black LGBTQ+ leaders change the hearts and minds of colleagues and transform the legislative and policy debates, leading to more inclusive legislation and a better democracy.

The **LGBTQ+ Politics Research Initiative at Loyola Marymount University** advances the study of the political behavior of LGBTQ+ individuals, fosters conversations with LGBTQ+ leaders and offers research opportunities to students.

Through research, trainings and leadership programs, **LGBTQ+ Victory Institute** works around the world to increase LGBTQ+ representation and participation in the political process.

The **Black Leaders Caucus** is a network of LGBTQ+ Victory Fund supporters dedicated to electing more Black LGBTQ+ officials at all levels of government.