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A micro-level examination of candidate sexuality in UK elections

Likely to be the first micro-level examination of candidate sexuality in UK elections, the project utilised multinomial choice models applied on large voter-level panel data-sets to address the influence on vote share due to candidates being lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) on the individual level in the 2015 British General Election. Unsurprisingly, in line with previous macro-level work, candidate sexuality in general does not matter. However, LGB voters and homophobic voters assign significant reward and penalty, respectively, to LGB candidates; in particular, the effects are only significant on Conservative LGB candidates. This provides strong evidence to the contrary that candidate sexuality does not matter at all, as a recent published article in the American Journal of Political Science argued.

In my follow-up work which will take the form of a chapter in my politics thesis, I will attempt to explain the above pattern by the Conservatives' unique heterogeneity on social issues, sexuality being a signalling device and these voters' emphasis on social issues. Alternative explanations such as selection bias, omitted variable bias and covariation between candidate sexuality and policy stance will be considered. On the macro-level, this implies candidate sexuality may actually matter in constituencies with certain demographics.

The project would not have been possible without these 6 weeks in residence in Oxford, when I had the opportunity to work closely with Prof. Andy Eggers (Nuffield) and Prof. Sergi Pardos-Prado (Merton), and carry out interviews right here in the UK with voters and representatives. Moreover, being in residence meant that I had physical access to the powerful computing resources at the Department of Politics and International Relations to run the multinomial probit models in R and Stata. While the model specification allowed for realistic modelling of political behaviour by relaxing the independence of irrelevant alternatives (IIA) assumption, the model contains very high dimensional integrals; monte carlo simulation techniques, which demanded substantial computing power, were used to estimate the model coefficients.

I would like to thank Merton and its fellows for the generous support in the project, which may help further unpack the dynamics of LGB candidates running in elections and provide insights for a more targeted eradication of barriers preventing equal representation of LGB people in politics.