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# Breaking the 'Cis' Binary: Examining the Role Model Effect Among Cisgender Women and Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Individuals

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***Breaking the 'Cis' Binary: Examining the Role Model Effect Among Cisgender Women and Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Individuals***

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in

*Political Science.*

By

*Elizabeth Diamanduros*

Under the mentorship of *Dr. Kate Perry*

**ABSTRACT**

While recent strides have been made regarding more transgender and gender non-conforming individuals (TGNC) running for and being elected to political office in the United States, only 64 individuals who identify as part of the community are currently serving elected office (LGBTQ Victory Institute 2021). Though cisgender women have also faced political underrepresentation, higher rates of cisgender women have campaigned for and won elected office at all levels of government in recent years. Previous research illustrates the differences between the political and societal situations of these groups, including drawing attention to the elements of visibility and viability the Role Model Effect and its impact on political engagement among cisgender women. However, past research has not examined whether the recent rise in cisgender women candidates has impacted the political interest of other marginalized groups. In my study, I address this gap and argue that active inclusion of issues relevant to the TGNC community is needed in order for the candidacies of cisgender women to have an impact on TGNC individuals' interest in running for political office. I designed an original experiment to test this theory, and initial results show support for this hypothesis, adding to research addressing the role of identity in politics.

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## Introduction

In the United States of America (US), there have been incredible gains in recent years among transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) individuals winning races for political office. Illustrative examples include Andrea Jenkins' win in Minnesota in 2017, making her the first openly transgender Black woman elected to office in the US; Sarah McBride's win in Delaware in 2020, making her the first transgender senator at the state level; along with Mauree Turner's win in Oklahoma, making them the first non-binary individual elected to a state's legislature (Frost and Nguyen 2019; McDaniel and Garcia 2020). Despite this progress, there are only 64 individuals currently serving elected office in the US who identify as part of the TGNC community (LGBTQ Victory Institute 2021).

At the same time, the TGNC community, which consists of approximately 1.4 million adults in the US, continues to experience discrimination on the state and federal government level (Flores et al. 2016). In 2017, President Donald Trump enacted a ban barring transgender individuals from serving in the military, which was only repealed in 2021 by President Joseph Biden after taking office (Detrow 2021; Eltohamy 2021). 2021 also brought a rise in discriminatory legislation against the TGNC community, particularly regarding trans athletes and gender-affirming medical care. Ten states have signed legislation or passed an executive order that bars trans girls and women from participating in sports that reflect their gender identity, with 3 states passing similar bills which were later vetoed and 23 other states proposing similar legislation (Chen 2021).

Regarding healthcare, 20 states have proposed legislation that would bar youth from accessing medical treatment to affirm their gender identity in 2021 (Block 2021).

Gender-affirming medical care, which includes pubertal suppression or puberty blockers, hormone therapy, or surgery for those over 18 years of age, is supported by research finding that access to such care improves the mental health of TGNC individuals and is “potentially lifesaving” (American Civil Liberties Union 2021; Block 2021; The Trevor Project 2020; Weber 2022). States have continued to propose legislation and opinions targeting the TGNC community in 2022. In February 2022, for instance, Texas state government officials aimed to target TGNC young people by calling on state medical professionals and teachers to report guardians of TGNC youth who have received forms of gender-affirming medical care (Torchinsky 2022). As of March 2022, approximately 58,000 TGNC young people live in states that have enacted legislation limiting young people from accessing gender-affirming medical care (Conron et al. 2022). In addition, rates of violence against the TGNC community have continued and even increased, with rates of murder or suspected murder of TGNC individuals as measured midyear in 2020 surpassing the total number in 2019 (National Center for Transgender Equality 2020).

While definitions of specific identities in this community vary, most current research similarly defines important terms and identifications. For instance, transgender persons are defined as those “whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth” (American Psychological Association 2015; Human Rights Campaign n.d. b; The Trevor Project n.d., 3). Genderqueer is often used as an “umbrella term” to refer to individuals “whose gender identity does not align with a binary understanding of gender,” with some genderqueer individuals also identifying as non-binary, genderfluid, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, or other gender identities (American Psychological Association 2015, 31; PFLAG 2021).

Non-binary individuals are defined as those “whose gender identity is not exclusively male or female,” whereas gender non-conforming persons are defined as those who “do not identify in a way that conforms to the traditional expectations of their gender,” with some also identifying as transgender or non-binary (Fiani and Han 2019; James et al. 2016, 6-7; The Human Rights Campaign n.d. b; The Trevor Project n.d., 2). Similarly, genderfluid individuals do “not identify with a single fixed gender” and “may move among genders” (PFLAG 2021; The Human Rights Campaign n.d.). Agender individuals do “not identify with or experience any gender” (PFLAG 2021; Wamsley 2021). Two spirit is a term used among Indigenous and Native American communities to signify Indigenous persons who traditionally “were considered neither men nor women; they occupied a distinct, alternative gender status” (Indian Health Service n.d.). Individuals who identify with one or more of these groups are therefore represented here under the umbrella term of TGNC.

On the other hand, cisgender individuals, or people “whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth,” maintain the majority of positions at all levels of government in the US (Fiani and Han 2019; James et al. 2016, 6-7; The Human Rights Campaign n.d. b; The Trevor Project n.d., 2). In particular, more cisgender women continue to be elected to office at all levels of state and federal government. Regarding the 2020 congressional elections, 143 women were elected to serve in Congress from the previous number of 127 in 2018 (Rutgers 2021).

Previous research on cis women in politics has looked into how the increase of cis women running for office contributes to a Role Model Effect, or an influence on the political interest of other cis women and men (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006). Regarding

TGNC individuals, past research addresses the political and societal challenges the TGNC community faces due to their gender identity, which undoubtedly differs to the challenges faced by cisgender women. However, there are openings for investigation into whether there are connections between more cisgender women running for political office and the political candidacies of TGNC individuals. Such connections are based on the discrimination, though distinct from each other, that cisgender women and TGNC individuals in US society and government.

In my study, I examine the extent to which the rise of cisgender women running for and being elected to office has contributed to a Role Model Effect influencing TGNC individuals to run. I argue that recognition of issues relevant to the TGNC community is the vital factor in this relationship. Since TGNC individuals face different challenges in society and in the political sphere than cisgender women do, it is essential that cisgender women candidates focus on and make issues relevant to the TGNC community visible in order for the Role Model Effect to expand its impact to TGNC individuals.

While more people representing diverse and historically politically underrepresented communities are beginning to run for and be elected to political office, the path to full and significant representation is still a long road ahead, especially for the TGNC community. More TGNC individuals in positions of elected office would influence other TGNC individuals to run and would allow for their concerns and interests to be represented, both important objectives for this community (Phillips 1998). Thus, increases in the political representation of TGNC individuals is imperative. In the words of Andrea Jenkins during her campaign for office, “I believe that representation



matters...As grandiose as it sounds, we are fighting for our democracy. We are fighting for our lives” (Lang 2017).

In my thesis, I discuss the current literature on my topic, drawing attention to the political situation of the Role Model Effect involving cisgender women candidates along with the societal situation of the TGNC community and the political challenges they face. I connect the existing literature to the opening of a new focus which my theory provides, that visibility and inclusion of issues and concerns relevant to the TGNC community is key for cisgender women candidates to impact the political interest of TGNC individuals. Finally, I describe my original experimental method for testing my theory, ending with an analysis of the results from my study and how it fits into the current literature regarding political representation.

### **The Political and the Societal: Differing Perspectives Regarding Cisgender Women and TGNC Individuals**

Considerable research examines the patterns involving cisgender women in politics, particularly in relation to increasing the political engagement and representation of other cis women. Regarding the TGNC community, the literature focuses on the societal situation of TGNC individuals, including the challenges they face as well as the strengths found in engaging in collective community, along with the political situation of transgender candidates. In bridging the different areas of focus to look at how cisgender women in politics affect TGNC political candidates, my research gives way to new avenues of investigation regarding the Role Model Effect. Specifically, my research considers how politically underrepresented groups can influence other such underrepresented groups in their paths to political candidacy.

### *The Role Model Effect and Cisgender Women*

Research into the presence of primarily cisgender women in US politics and their influence on increasing women's overall political participation follows different avenues but considers similar outcomes. This 'influence' is referred to as the "Role Model Effect," characterized as "the presence of descriptive representation" that "will transform the political engagement of fellow group members" (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006, 244). It is worth noting that the Role Model Effect captures both increases in numbers of women candidates as well as perceptions of these candidates by the public.

Previous literature focuses on the elements of visibility and viability within the Role Model Effect. The factors of visibility include how visible the campaign is due to media coverage or awareness, which is often influenced by the visibility of the position the candidate is running for (Atkeson 2003; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; 2017; Ladam, Harden, and Windett 2018). For instance, past literature centers on the effects of female candidates running for higher levels of office, like Congress or state governor, along with the effects of "novel" female candidates, such as non-incumbent candidates (Atkeson 2003; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; 2017). The factors involved with viability involve the likelihood of the candidate winning the election based on how competitive the race for office is (Atkeson 2003; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; 2017). However, researchers note the contradictory nature of the theory of visibility: in order for a female candidate to be visible, there must be awareness of or attention to the candidate's gender (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; 2017).

Regarding the specific effects of visibility and viability involved in the Role Model Effect, previous literature offers mixed findings. With women running for offices

held by men, there is support for the Role Model Effect on increasing levels of political engagement, specifically among younger women (Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; 2017). However, research on the influence of women in higher levels of office provides mixed evidence that these women influence women's political engagement, which includes voting in elections, discussing politics, and engaging in political activism or political campaigns (Atkeson 2003; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; 2017; Dolan 2006; Lawless 2004). While there are conflicting findings, it is important to note that much of this literature discusses the effects associated with women's political engagement. My research, on the other hand, is concerned with the effects associated with political ambition, which is described as the interest in running for political office (Fox, Lawless, and Feeley 2001; Fox and Lawless 2004).

Regarding cisgender women's political ambition and its connection to the Role Model Effect, the literature offers largely supporting evidence (Bonneau and Kanthak 2020; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; Costa and Wallace 2021; Ladam, Harden, and Windett 2018). For example, some researchers report an increase in women's political ambition when presented with information on the rise of women running for office overall and on the rise of women running for higher positions, in relation to the visibility component of the Role Model Effect (Costa and Wallace 2021; Ladam, Harden, and Windett 2018). Looking at the impact of an actual candidate and their gender presentation on women's interest in running, Bonneau and Kanthak (2020) note slight increases in political ambition among women who supported the candidate.

Research regarding female candidates' influence on men's political ambition also offers conflicting views (Bonneau and Kanthak 2020; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2017;

Costa and Wallace 2021). Some research indicates small increases on the political ambition of men with more women candidates, while other research indicates no effect or negative effects (Bonneau and Kanthak 2020; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2017; Costa and Wallace 2021). Considering the role of gender, other research examines the gender's influence on female candidates compared to male candidates, particularly in relation to the "candidate emergence stage" (Fox and Lawless 2004). This stage encompasses the phase in which a person makes the decision to declare a candidacy (Fox and Lawless 2004).

This candidate emergence stage is of particular significance given that previous literature has shown there are less differences between men and women who run for office (Fox and Lawless 2004). For instance, both men and women possess similar likelihoods of winning a primary election or a general election and possess similar levels of political ambition (Fox, Lawless, and Feeley 2001; Fox and Lawless 2004; Lawless and Pearson 2008). Despite this, there are some differences based on gender regarding this phase. Women candidates come up against more competition particularly in primaries (Lawless and Pearson 2008). Men are also still more likely than women to decide to run for office (Fox, Lawless, and Feeley 2001). With the consideration that gender differences are more salient in the candidate emergence stage, researchers also note the significance of self-perceived qualifications of women in their decision to run for office (Fox, Lawless, and Feeley 2001; Fox and Lawless 2004).

### *Society and the TGNC Community*

Regarding the TGNC community in the US, previous research not only draws attention to the identities held by transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, but also draws attention to the different societal barriers and struggles regarding discrimination that those in the TGNC community face. Past research highlights the importance of recognizing identity and accessing services through discussing how TGNC individuals face struggles with the legal recognition of their gender identity, particularly when completing legal documentation or forms (Fiani and Han 2019; Ryan 2020). Additional research discusses the struggles faced by TGNC individuals due to the overall “lack of access” to healthcare services, including mental health and gender-affirming care (Fiani and Han 2019; Grossman and D’Augelli 2006; Ryan 2020).

Concerning issues involved with discrimination, previous literature gives light to the distinction between types of discrimination of TGNC individuals. These forms include discrimination related to unequal treatment as well as violence, whether verbal, physical, or sexual (Clements-Nolle, Marx, and Katz 2006; Miller and Grollman 2015; Testa et al. 2012). Among TGNC racial minorities, combined discrimination based on their gender identity and racial identity is a significant problem (Jefferson, Neilands, and Sevelius 2013; Wilson et al. 2016). The impact of discrimination against TGNC persons is immense, as transgender individuals who report facing more discrimination of any form are more likely to have attempted suicide, have stress related to suicidal thoughts, have a history of drug or alcohol abuse, and have symptoms of depression (Clements-Nolle, Marx, and Katz 2006; Jefferson, Neilands, and Sevelius 2013; Miller and Grollman 2015; Testa et al. 2012; Wilson et al. 2016). For transgender individuals who

report that others can “read” that their “sex, gender identity, and gender expression do not align,” the impacts of this “felt” discrimination is compounded (Bockting et al. 2013; Miller and Grollman 2015, 813).

The issues and discrimination experienced among different groups in the TGNC community can be compared to the overall issues faced by TGNC people as a whole. Many TGNC individuals, and particularly non-binary individuals, note the “invisibility” of their gender identity and lack of similar role models in society (Fiani and Han 2019; Nicholas 2019). US Society is more attuned to binary categories of gender, as people often distinguish between men and women. As such, the larger public is more aware and often more “easily accepting” of binary identified trans individuals (Fiani and Han 2019; Nicholas 2019). Thus, individuals whose gender identity does not conform to the “binary” categories of gender, including non-binary, genderqueer, and genderfluid individuals, face differing challenges and discrimination from that of binary identified transgender individuals (Fiani and Han 2019; Nicholas 2019). For example, research reports that non-binary individuals are less likely to “affirm” their gender identity socially and are less likely to have support from family members regarding their gender identity (Reisner and Hughto 2019).

Despite these challenges, a sense of the shared importance of community as a type of resiliency or protective factor, including recognition and visibility of other TGNC individuals, is a common thread expressed by those in the TGNC community (Bockting et al. 2013; Fiani and Han 2019). Forms of support for TGNC individuals, including support from family and community, are also associated with being a protective factor

against “psychological distress” or mental health problems (Bockting et al. 2013; Wilson et al. 2016).

### *Politics and TGNC Individuals*

Research focusing on the US political sphere and TGNC candidates centers primarily on support for transgender rights along with potential voters’ views of transgender candidates. Overall, cisgender voters view transgender candidates running for political office negatively, particularly viewing trans candidates as “more liberal” and as less representative of their views (Jones et al. 2018; Jones and Brewer 2019; Magni and Reynolds 2021). In addition, transgender candidates are less likely to receive support from cisgender voters, even if both voter and candidate share the same political party identification (Haider-Markel et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2018; Jones and Brewer 2019; Magni and Reynolds 2021).

Despite these troubling points, women voters, particularly gender non-conforming women, as well as liberal or Democrat leaning voters are more likely to support potential transgender candidates, particularly if the candidates align with their own political views and political party identification (Haider-Markel et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2018; Jones and Brewer 2019; Magni and Reynolds 2021). Women voters and Democrat leaning voters are also more likely to support transgender rights overall (Becker and Jones 2021; Harrison and Michelson 2019; Jones et al. 2018). Looking further into the types of groups who are more likely to support TGNC candidates, past research notes the influence of having experience with gender discrimination and views on differences between genders (Becker and Jones 2021). Specifically, those with experience of gender discrimination

and those who view there to be less differences among those of different genders are more likely to support transgender candidates. These individuals are also more likely to want additional protections and acceptance for transgender individuals in society (Becker and Jones 2021).

### *Opening for Further Investigation*

The varying characteristics of cisgender women and TGNC individuals' paths to political candidacy leave room for different considerations. While the impacts of the Role Model Effect on cisgender women's political engagement are mixed, there is evidence of visible and viable women candidates having positive effects on the political ambition of other cis women (Atkeson 2003; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; 2017; Ladam, Harden, and Windett 2018). A comparison of the differences between cis women and TGNC individuals can also be drawn. While cisgender women face more barriers and challenges during the candidate emergence stage, transgender candidates continue to face challenges even during the election stage. Though cisgender women also face their own set of difficulties and struggles posed by society, TGNC individuals, despite progress in recognition and awareness of the community, continue to experience discrimination of their gender identity and an overall lack of awareness of their identity.

However, there are also points of convergence among cisgender women and TGNC individuals. While more cisgender women than TGNC individuals are running for and being elected to office, more political representation is needed overall for both groups, though especially for TGNC individuals. Though different, both groups have faced discrimination and issues of representation in politics and society. An important



consideration in comparing both groups is the literature reporting that women voters are more likely to support TGNC candidates (Haider-Markel et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2018; Jones and Brewer 2019; Magni and Reynolds 2021). Experience of gender discrimination, which both groups share, is another factor influencing support for TGNC candidates (Becker and Jones 2021). Therefore, I take into account these differences and similarities, both political and societal, among TGNC individuals and cisgender women in order to identify whether or not the rise of cisgender women running for office affects the political ambition of TGNC individuals.

## **Theory**

In examining the extent to which cisgender women running for office have influenced the candidacies of transgender individuals, it is apparent cisgender women and TGNC individuals both face difficulties during the process of declaring a candidacy, though there are unique challenges for TGNC individuals. Cisgender female candidates face more difficulty at the stage of deciding to run for office (Fox, Lawless, and Feeley 2001; Fox and Lawless 2004). On the other hand, TGNC individuals face challenges throughout the candidate emergence process, specifically during the election phase (Haider-Markel et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2018; Jones and Brewer 2019; Magni and Reynolds 2021).

Despite these differences, both cisgender women and TGNC individuals still face underrepresentation and discrimination in politics based on their identity. Representation can be impacted in different ways, such as with the Role Model Effect of cisgender women candidates influencing the political engagement of other cisgender women

(Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006). The power of visible and viable candidates is of particular importance to this Role Model Effect (Atkeson 2003; Campbell and Wolbrecht 2006; 2017; Ladam, Harden, and Windett 2018). There are also other similarities among the political situation of cisgender women and TGNC individuals, including how women voters and voters with experiences of gender discrimination are more supportive of the TGNC community (Becker and Jones 2021).

Following Becker and Jones' (2021) research, I argue that women are more supportive of TGNC candidates and rights for the TGNC community because of their shared similar experiences of gender discrimination. I extend the literature on the Role Model Effect by building on the presence of similar factors regarding representation between cisgender women and TGNC individuals. I propose that the power of visibility and viability of cisgender female candidates contributing to the Role Model Effect among cisgender female candidates can be transferred to TGNC individuals.

While previous literature takes the factors of visibility and viability of candidates into account concerning impacts on political ambition, I offer a new area of consideration by looking into the issues prioritized by candidates. I argue that for the Role Model Effect to produce similar positive effects on TGNC potential candidates as on cisgender female potential candidates, the recognition and inclusion of TGNC individuals by cisgender women running for office must be added to this "visibility and viability" component. More specifically, cisgender female political candidates must actively make space for and work with TGNC individuals. This includes having an active focus on issues and concerns relevant to the TGNC community in their campaign, employing TGNC individuals on their campaign staff, or working with and listening to

the responses and views of TGNC potential voters in order for there to be a significant effect on the interest of TGNC individuals in running for office. As such, I propose the following hypotheses:

***H1: If more cisgender women run for office regardless of whether they address the concerns of TGNC individuals, then the level of interest among cisgender women in running for political office will increase.***

***H2: If cisgender women running for office address the concerns and interests of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, then the level of interest of transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals in running for political office will increase slightly.***

## **Research Design**

For my study, I conducted an original experiment involving political messaging by a hypothetical cisgender female candidate to examine how the candidate's issue prioritization influences cisgender women and TGNC individuals' interest in running for political office. Following the precedent of Iyengar et al. (1982) in the development of experimental research in the field, I conducted a study using "experimental investigations" to test and examine the potential Role Model Effect of cisgender women running for office on the political ambition of TGNC individuals. As Druckman et al. (2006) define in their discussion of the development of experimental political science research, an experiment denotes a type of methodology "with an unrivaled capacity to demonstrate cause and effect" (627). Guided by this, my experiment seeks to investigate or 'search' for facts to examine the causal connection between my groups of focus (Druckman et al. 2006). As part of my experiment, I used survey questions given to cisgender female and TGNC participants that included prompts of a hypothetical cisgender female candidate to examine this potential effect.

### *Dependent Variables*

The dependent variables of my hypotheses are the *level of interest in running for political office among cisgender women* and the *level of interest in running for political office among TGNC individuals*, respectively. In particular, question 16 listed in Figure 1 in the Appendix and question 13 listed in Figure 4 in the Appendix ask the respondent to rate their interest in “running for political office in the future” using a Likert Scale of ratings from 0, signifying no interest, and 10, signifying strong interest. To measure the dependent variables, I examined the responses of the participants in the experimental and control groups on the pre- and post-prompt survey questions regarding their level of interest in running for political office. I measured their level of interest before reading the prompts involving the hypothetical candidate as well as after reading the prompts.

### *Independent Variables*

The independent variables of my hypotheses involve an *increase in cisgender female candidates running for office overall* and *cisgender women running for political office who support the TGNC community* through actively addressing the issues and concerns of TGNC individuals. For my first independent variable, regarding cisgender female candidates, my survey included a control prompt of a hypothetical cisgender female candidate running on a platform that does not mention TGNC issues. This control prompt is included in Figure 3 in the Appendix.

For my second independent variable, regarding inclusion of interests and concerns of TGNC individuals by cisgender female candidates, my survey included an experimental prompt of a hypothetical female candidate running on a platform that

specifically mentions issues and concerns of the TGNC community. Specifically, the experimental prompt contained a discussion of increasing access to “gender-affirming healthcare” and an expression of support for the Equality Act. This experimental prompt is included in Figure 2 in the Appendix.

### *Control Variables*

The control variables of my experiment are *political party identification*, *racial identification*, *importance of religion*, and *knowledge of TGNC individuals* and are listed in Figure 1 in the Appendix. To control for *political party identification*, Question 9 in the pre-prompt survey asked the respondent which political party they “most identify with.” I expected participants who identify as liberal or with the Democratic party to be more supportive of TGNC individuals and issues as compared to respondents who identify as conservative or with the Republican party. I specifically expected liberal leaning participants to be more supportive of the hypothetical female candidate discussed in the prompt, particularly in the experimental prompt with mention of TGNC issues, as supported by the findings in previous research regarding liberal leaning respondents and support of TGNC individuals (Becker and Jones 2021; Haider-Markel et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2018; Jones and Brewer 2019; Magni and Reynolds 2021). I controlled for participants’ *political party identification* in my study in order to ensure that political party alignment is not affecting the results of the measurement of the participants’ political ambition.

Regarding race, question 8 in the pre-prompt survey asked the respondent to list the racial or ethnic groups with which they “most identify with.” I controlled for the

*racial identification* of the participants so that it is also not a factor influencing the results of the study, given that previous research involving views of TGNC candidates also controlled for race as well (Becker and Jones 2021; Jones et al. 2018).

Concerning views on the *importance of religion*, questions 10 and 11 in the pre-prompt survey asked the respondent if they view religion as an “important part” of their lives and to rate how important religion is in their daily lives. I expected participants who identify religion to be important in their lives to be less supportive of TGNC individuals and issues relevant to the TGNC community. Past literature supports this expected result involving religious individuals’ views on TGNC candidates (Becker and Jones 2021; Haider-Markel et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2018; Jones and Brewer 2019; Magni and Reynolds 2021). I also expected respondents who view religion as important to be less supportive of the hypothetical female candidate in the prompt, specifically with mention of TGNC issues in the experimental prompt. Thus, I controlled for the importance of religion so that it does not affect my findings related to political ambition.

Regarding the last control variable of *pre-existing knowledge of TGNC individuals*, questions 4 and 5 in the pre-prompt survey asked the respondent if they had any prior knowledge of TGNC individuals before taking the survey as well as if they have any people in their lives who identify as part of the TGNC community. I expected participants who have knowledge of TGNC individuals prior to the survey to be more supportive of TGNC individuals and issues, and to be more supportive of the hypothetical female candidate and her focus on TGNC issues in the experimental prompt. This expectation is supported by previous literature researching connections between knowledge of TGNC individuals and views on TGNC candidates (Becker and Jones

2021; Jones et al. 2018; Magni and Reynolds 2021). Since prior knowledge of the TGNC community could affect the participants' responses in the survey, I controlled for this variable as well.

### *Method of Analysis*

To test my hypotheses, I developed an online survey experiment as my method of analysis. In the experiment, the population consists of cisgender women and TGNC individuals of at least 18 years of age in the US. Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, number H22148, I conducted the survey using a random sample of adult cisgender women and TGNC individuals in the United States. The sample was taken from Georgia Southern University students, faculty, and staff who responded to posts and emails that shared the survey information and from those who accessed the survey information shared on the "Research Participant Opportunities" webpage of the Office of Research at Georgia Southern University.

To expand upon the sample of respondents, I also distributed the survey on social media websites including Discord, Twitter, Reddit, Facebook, and GroupMe. The survey received responses from 48 participants. The survey consists of a pre-prompt survey to establish a baseline of information from the respondents, followed by a prompt for respondents to read concerning a hypothetical cisgender female candidate running for office, and finally, a post-prompt survey to measure respondent reactions to the prompt. The full experimental materials were compiled using Qualtrics software to protect the anonymity of respondents and to allow for efficient distribution of the survey.

### *Experimental Design*

For the pre- and post-prompt survey questions, I used a combination of Likert Scale questions and open-ended questions designed to establish the basic self-described identities, political leanings, and general social and political attitudes toward political candidates of each respondent. Specifically, the pre-prompt questions included in Figure 1 in the Appendix detail the general information of the participant, their level of political ambition prior to viewing the prompt, whether they have any existing knowledge of the TGNC community, and their views of TGNC individuals running for office. The post-prompt questions included in Figure 4 in the Appendix detail respondent views of the hypothetical candidate described in the prompt as well as their level of political ambition after reading the prompt and how the hypothetical candidate may affect their level of political ambition. Using the survey platform Qualtrics, I randomly assigned participants into a control group and an experimental group.

The control group consists of TGNC individuals as well as cisgender women who were given the prompt as outlined in Figure 3 in the Appendix. This prompt discusses a hypothetical cisgender female candidate and issues relevant to her campaign as well as other information regarding her campaign, with no specific mention of the interests and concerns of the TGNC community. The measurements of how participants in the control group react to the prompt with no mention or recognition of TGNC individuals and interests relevant to the community in the post-prompt questions serve as a comparison to the experimental group.

The experimental group consists of TGNC individuals along with cisgender women who were given a prompt discussing a hypothetical cisgender female candidate



and the issues relevant to her campaign along with other information regarding her run for office. However, this prompt included specific recognition of TGNC individuals and a focus on concerns relevant to the TGNC community as outlined in Figure 2 in the Appendix. I measured the responses of the post-prompt questions from participants in the experimental group and compared the results to those of the control group, in order to examine how an inclusion and focus on TGNC individuals affects participants' levels of political ambition.

## **Analysis and Results**

Given my theory that visibility and viability of issues important to individuals in the TGNC community are integral to the Role Model Effect of cisgender women running for office on the political ambition of TGNC individuals, I expected the survey results to reflect this. Upon completion of the survey submission period and analysis of results, I expected to find an increase in the interest level in running for political office among cisgender female respondents who were given the experimental prompt and among cisgender female respondents who were given the control prompt. I also expected to find an increase in the interest level of running for political office among TGNC respondents who were given the experimental prompt.

### *Overview of Respondents*

After receiving IRB approval, I sent out my survey and received responses from 48 participants. 46 of the participants listed their *assigned sex at birth* as female, while 2 participants listed their assigned sex at birth as male. The survey also asked respondents

whether they *self-identify as TGNC*, and 17 respondents considered themselves as part of the TGNC community, while 31 respondents did not self-identify as TGNC. However, when asked about their *gender identity*, the identities of 18 respondents fall under the TGNC umbrella I use in this thesis, with participants identifying as transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, and genderfluid. In addition, many of these respondents, which I classify as TGNC, identified as multiple different identities, including respondents identifying as both transgender and non-binary among other identities. 26 of the participants identified as cisgender women, while 4 participants identified their gender identity as unsure/questioning. Respondents who identified as unsure/questioning, regardless of if they also identified as TGNC or as a cis woman, were categorized as unsure/questioning. The demographic characteristics of the total sample and of the control and experimental groups are listed in Table 1 in the Appendix.

### *Interest in Running for Office*

Initial results regarding the change in political ambition of the respondents show support for the hypotheses. While the *n* is not large enough to run a logistic regression, I examined the responses to provide descriptive statistics of all variables, which are provided in Table 2 in the Appendix. Concerning the measurements of respondents' *interest in running*, as aforementioned, participants rated their interest in running for political office on a Likert Scale from 0 to 10 when asked in both the pre- and post-prompt survey questions. However, it must be noted that only 36 of the participants in the sample responded to the *post-prompt interest in running* question. By breakdown of group and *gender identity*, 9 cis women and 8 TGNC individuals in the control group as

well as 7 cis women and 9 TGNC individuals in the experimental group responded to both political ambition questions. As such, I only examined the measurements of the political ambition of the cis women and TGNC participants in the control and experimental groups who responded to the questions asking for their interest in running in both the pre-prompt survey questions and in the post-prompt survey questions.

Looking at the pre- and post-prompt mean scores of political ambition among cis women, these results show increases in the control and experimental groups and are included in Figure 5 below. Of cis women in the control group, the pre-prompt mean score averaged to around 2 and increased to approximately 2.75. In the experimental group, cis women respondents' mean score interest in running was around 1.8 and increased to a mean score of around 2.7 in the post-prompt. Considering the average rate of change in cis women's interest in running, these results also reflect an increase and are represented in Figure 6 below. Among cis women in the control group, the average rate of change was around .44. In the experimental group, the average rate of change in political ambition among cis women was around .28. Thus, while the average rate of change in political ambition among cis women respondents was lower in the experimental group than in the control, the results do show support for Hypothesis 1.

Figure 5. Comparison of means in pre- and post-prompt political ambition among control and experimental groups

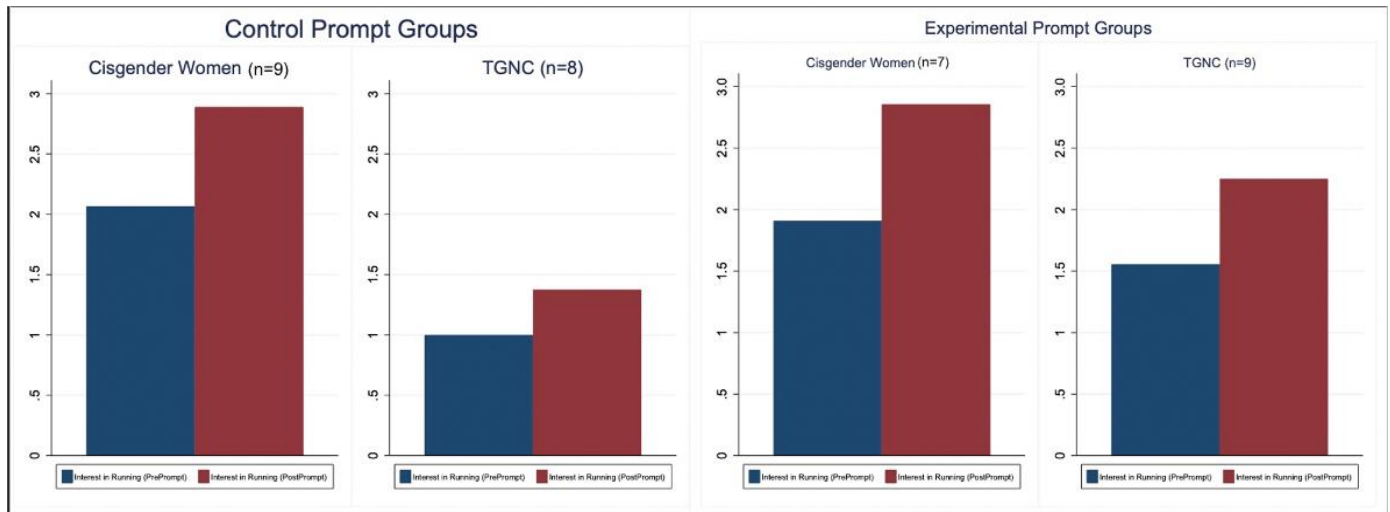
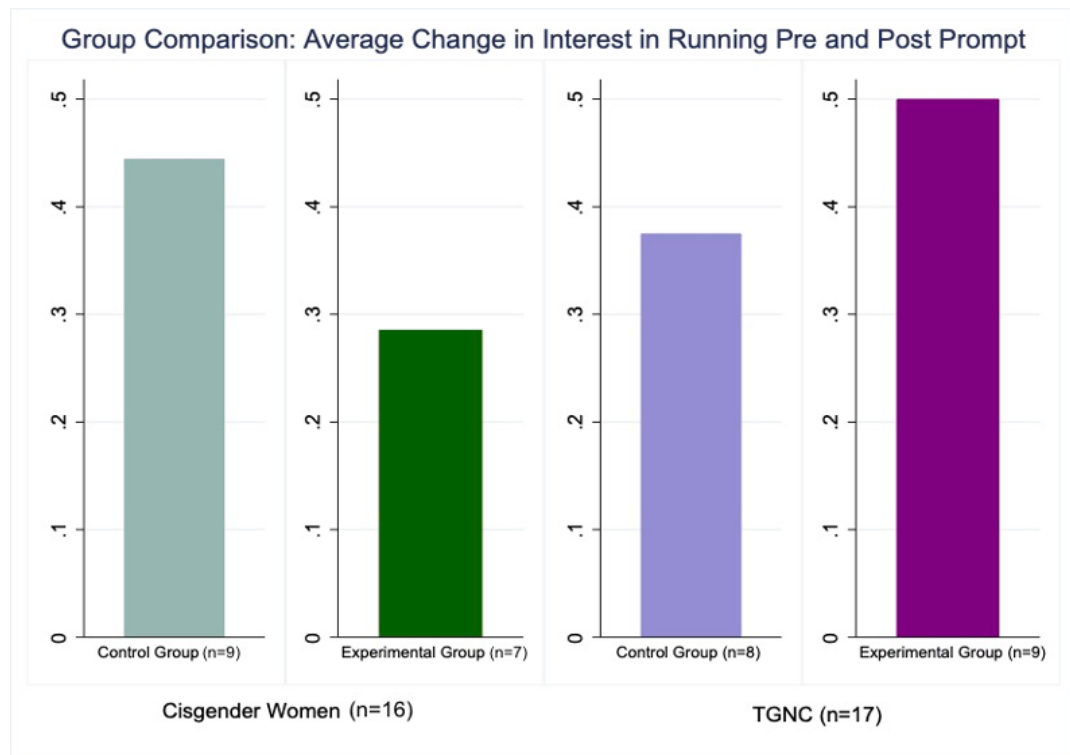


Figure 6. Comparison of average change in political ambition from pre- to post-prompt among control and experimental groups



Moving to the pre- and post-prompt mean scores of TGNC respondents' interest in running, the findings also show increases in political ambition in the control and experimental groups. These results are included in Figure 5 above. In the control group, the mean score of TGNC respondents' pre-prompt interest in running was about 1 and increased to a mean of 1.4 in the post-prompt. In the experimental group, their pre-prompt mean was about 1.5 and increased to a post-prompt score of 2.25. Regarding the average rate of change in interest in running among TGNC participants, the results also show support for an increase as represented in Figure 6 above. Among TGNC respondents in the control group, the average rate of change in their interest in running was around .38. In the experimental group, the average rate of change regarding political ambition of TGNC respondents was around .5, higher than the rate of change in the control group. As a whole, the increase in political ambition among TGNC participants in the control group is unexpected, but the results of TGNC participants in the experimental group show support for Hypothesis 2.

#### *Other Findings of Note*

The responses to the control variables of the control and experimental groups and the overall sample are included in Table 1 in the Appendix. Regarding my control variable of *political party identification*, I classified the respondents based on their open-ended responses to question 9 in the pre-prompt. I classified 39 respondents as identifying as liberal or left-leaning. Among the respondents in this classification include participants who identified as "Liberal," "Democratic," "Centrist Left-Leaning," or "Independent Liberal." Other participants in this classification identified with the "Democrat," "Social Democrat," "Socialism," or "Anarchism" political parties or

ideologies. I classified 9 respondents as identifying as independent. Among the respondents in this classification include participants who identified as “Independent,” “No Party,” or “No identification.” No respondents identified as conservative or right-leaning. This could influence the results to be skewed to more favorable views of the hypothetical candidate in the prompts, as well as the mention of TGNC issues in the experimental prompt.

Regarding my control variable of *racial identification*, 41 of the respondents listed their racial or ethnic identification. The majority of respondents identified as white, with 27 respondents listing their race as white. 4 respondents listed their race as Black and 5 respondents listed their race as Asian. Among the 6 Hispanic/Latino respondents, 3 of these respondents also identified as white, while 3 listed their ethnicity, including “Mexican,” “Caribbean American,” or “Native Caribbean.” I classified 3 respondents as mixed race, as these respondents listed their identity as “Black and white,” “African American and white,” or “Japanese and white.” 1 respondent identified as Jewish, while 1 respondent identified as White Middle Eastern. It is important to note that the results will likely be less reflective of the political interest and views toward TGNC individuals held by minority groups given that the majority of respondents in the sample identify as white.

Regarding my control variable of *importance of religion*, I analyzed responses asking whether the respondent views religion as important in their life, as outlined in question 10 in the pre-prompt. I also analyzed responses asking participants who do view religion as important to rate the importance of religion in their daily lives, as outlined in question 11 of the pre-prompt and included in Table 2 in the Appendix. 13 respondents viewed religion as an important part of their lives. However, 33 respondents did not view

religion as important in their lives, and 2 respondents chose the option of “prefer not to say.”

Of the 13 respondents who viewed religion as important, 3 respondents viewed religion as “slightly important,” 5 respondents viewed religion as “moderately important,” and 5 respondents viewed religion as “very important” in their daily lives. Interestingly, 7 respondents who did not view religion as important still rated the level of importance of religion in their daily lives. Of these 7 respondents, 5 selected the option “unsure/prefer not to say” and 2 rated religion as “slightly important” in their daily lives. In addition, the 2 respondents who did not specify the importance of religion in their lives rated the importance of religion in their daily lives. Of these 2 respondents, both rated religion as “slightly important” in their daily lives. While 17 total respondents viewed religion as holding some importance in their daily life, 33 respondents did not view religion as important in their daily life. With most of the respondents not viewing religion as important, this could influence the results to be more favorable of the hypothetical candidate in the prompts and to be more accepting of the candidate’s focus on TGNC individuals in the experimental prompt.

Regarding my control variable of *pre-existing knowledge of TGNC individuals*, all 48 respondents indicated that they had knowledge of the individuals who identify as TGNC prior to taking this survey. That all respondents held prior knowledge of TGNC individuals is important to note, as this will likely influence the results to be more supportive of TGNC individuals and to be more supportive of the hypothetical candidate in the prompt as well.

## Conclusion

Building on previous literature on the Role Model Effect among cisgender women, I examined the impact of cisgender women running for political office on the political ambition of TGNC individuals. I designed and conducted an original survey experiment which divided participants into a control or experimental group. Participants in the control group received a prompt of a cis woman candidate's campaign with no discussion of issues of concern to the TGNC community, while participants in the experimental group received a prompt of a cis woman candidate campaigning on issues relevant to the TGNC community. The results provide support for both hypotheses: that cisgender women candidates increase the political ambition of other cisgender women regardless of the issues the candidate campaigns on and that cisgender women candidates increase the political ambition of TGNC individuals when campaigning on issues relevant to the TGNC community.

However, my research also offers surprising findings. When looking at the average rate of change in political ambition among cisgender women, the interest in running for political office was higher in the control group than in the experimental group. Although the political ambition of cisgender women increased in both groups, these findings suggest that the impacts of cis women candidates on the political ambition of other cis women may vary in strength depending on the issues the cis woman candidate campaigns on. Regarding TGNC participants, the average rate of change in political ambition increased not only in the experimental group but also in the control group. As expected, the average rate of change in interest in running among TGNC participants in the experimental group was higher than among TGNC participants in the



control group. However, the increase in political ambition for the experimental group was more than twice as large as the increase for the control group. These findings suggest that cis women candidates may impact the political ambition of TGNC individuals regardless of the issues they campaign on, but that an inclusion of issues relevant to the TGNC community may hold a much greater impact.

Though this thesis provides promising results, there are also limitations to consider. Due to the small  $n$  of this research study, I was unable to conduct a logistic regression, which raises concern regarding the applicability of the results to a wider population. Considering the demographics of the respondents, the majority of respondents identified as white and considered religion to not be important in their lives. In addition, no respondents identified as conservative or right leaning, and all respondents had prior knowledge of TGNC individuals. Though these variables were controlled for, it's important to note that this survey sample may not be representative of the entire population of cis women and TGNC individuals in the US.

However, this thesis still provides encouraging results to study further and expand upon. Future iterations of this project could include a larger sample of respondents to allow for a logistic regression analysis and to capture a more diverse sample. Additional research can further the contributions of this thesis and of other literature on the Role Model Effect by examining the impacts of representation on the political interest and political ambition of other politically underrepresented groups. For instance, future research might consider the impacts of representation regarding racial minority groups, such as the impacts of white women candidates on the political interest of people of color or specifically women of color.

In sum, this thesis considers a new avenue regarding the Role Model Effect by investigating the impact of cisgender women candidates on the political ambition of TGNC individuals. This thesis also recognizes the importance of political representation and efforts to increase it among underrepresented groups. I believe this research helps bring light to the societal and political challenges faced by the TGNC community. It is my hope that future research continues to build on the factors influencing political interest and political ambition to help bolster political representation among all politically underrepresented groups.

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## Appendix

*Figure 1. Pre-Prompt Questions*

1. What sex were you assigned at birth on your birth certificate?  
☐ Male  
☐ Female  
☐ Unsure/prefer not to say
  
2. Do you think of yourself as transgender or gender non-conforming?  
☐ Yes  
☐ No  
☐ Unsure
  
3. How do you describe your gender identity? Please select all that apply.  
☐ Agender  
☐ Cisgender (assigned sex at birth matches gender identity)  
☐ Genderfluid  
☐ Gender non-conforming  
☐ Genderqueer  
☐ Non-binary  
☐ Transgender  
☐ Man  
☐ Woman  
☐ Two Spirit

\_\_\_ Unsure/Questioning

\_\_\_\_\_ Other category not listed (please specify)

4. Prior to taking this survey, were you aware of or did you have any knowledge of individuals who identify as agender, genderfluid, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, non-binary, transgender, two spirit, or another gender identity other than cisgender?

\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_ No

\_\_\_ Prefer not to say

5. As far as you know, do any of your family members or friends identify as agender, genderfluid, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, non-binary, transgender, two spirit, or another gender identity other than cisgender?

\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_ No

\_\_\_ Prefer not to say

6. How would you rate your feelings about individuals who identify as agender, genderfluid, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, non-binary, transgender, two spirit, or another gender identity other than cisgender, with 0 signifying very negative, 5 signifying indifferent, and 10 signifying very positive?

0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

7. How much discrimination do you think people who identify as agender, genderfluid, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, non-binary, transgender, two spirit, or another gender identity other than cisgender, face in the United States?

\_\_\_ None

\_\_\_ Some/a little

\_\_\_ A moderate amount

\_\_\_ A lot

\_\_\_ A great amount

8. What racial or ethnic group(s) do you describe yourself as part of?

---

9. What political party do you most identify with, if any?

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10. Do you view religion as an important part of your life?

\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_ No

\_\_\_ Unsure/prefer not to say

11. If you answered “yes” to the previous question, how important is religion in your daily life?

\_\_\_ Great importance

\_\_\_ Moderate importance

\_\_\_ Some importance

\_\_\_ Unsure/prefer not to say

12. How important is it that a candidate running for political office shares your views on significant political issues, with 0 signifying no importance and 10 signifying strong importance?

0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

13. How important is it that a candidate running for political office shares your religious views, with 0 signifying no importance and 10 signifying strong importance?

0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

14. How important is it that a candidate running for political office focuses on issues and/or concerns relevant to you, with 0 signifying no importance and 10 signifying strong importance?

0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

15. How would you rate your interest in volunteering for a candidate or campaign in the next election cycle, with 0 signifying no interest and 10 signifying strong interest?

0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

16. How would you rate your interest in running for a political office in the future, with 0 signifying no interest and 10 signifying strong interest?

0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

*Figure 2. Experimental Prompt*

Pamela Davis has announced her campaign to run for the 2nd district of the US House of Representatives in the 2022 election year. Davis spent 20 years working as a high school teacher before entering politics. Her clear dedication to her community led to her election to city council in 2018. With her background serving on the City Council and commitment to helping her community, Davis hopes to continue to serve and represent the interests of the 2nd district on the national level.

Davis' issues of focus include increasing access to healthcare, stating that "Given the problems with our healthcare that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on, I will work to ensure everyone has access to equal, affordable, and gender-affirming healthcare for all their needs." Equal rights is another key focus for Davis, an issue she describes as "lying at the core of so many of the problems we continue to face." Davis supports efforts to reform the criminal justice system as well as passing anti-discrimination legislation such as the Equality Act, a current bill Davis will work to pass "in order to protect our friends in the LGBTQ community, particularly given the rise of anti-trans state legislation and increased violence against people in the trans community."

If Davis is elected, she would serve as the first woman to represent the 2nd District.

*Figure 3. Control Prompt*

Pamela Davis has announced her campaign to run for the 2nd district of the US House of Representatives in the 2022 election year. Davis spent 20 years working as a high school teacher before entering politics. Her clear dedication to her community led to her election to city council in 2018. With her background serving on the City Council and commitment to helping her community, Davis hopes to continue to serve and represent the interests of the 2nd district on the national level.

Davis' issues of focus include increasing access to healthcare, stating that "Given the problems with our healthcare that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on, I will work to ensure everyone has access to equal and affordable healthcare for all their needs." Equal rights is another key focus for Davis, an issue she describes as "lying at the core of so many of the problems we continue to face." Davis supports efforts to reform the criminal justice system and strengthen anti-discrimination legislation.

If Davis is elected, she would serve as the first woman to represent the 2nd District.

*Figure 4. Post Prompt Questions*

1. What is your overall impression of the candidate presented in the material you just read, with 0 signifying strong negative preference, 5 signifying neutral preference, and 10 signifying strong positive preference?

0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

2. Is this a candidate you would be interested in learning more about?

\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_ No

\_\_\_ Unsure/Prefer not to say

3. How would you rate your interest in volunteering for the candidate presented in the material you just read, with 0 signifying no interest and 10 signifying strong interest?

0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

4. If you were able to vote for this candidate, how would you rate your likelihood of voting for them, with 0 signifying no likelihood and 10 signifying strong likelihood?

0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10



5. Elaborate on what about the candidate informed your interest or disinterest in voting for them.

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6. How important to you are the issues focused on by the candidate, with 0 signifying no importance and 10 signifying strong importance?

0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

7. Rank the issues presented by the candidate in order of importance to you, starting with the issue of greatest importance.

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8. Elaborate on why the issue you listed first is of the greatest importance to you.

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9. Are there any issues of great importance to you that the candidate did not discuss?

\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_ No

\_\_\_ Unsure/Prefer not to say

10. If you answered “yes” to the previous question, what issue of greatest importance to you was not discussed by the candidate?

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11. How would you rate the likelihood of the candidate winning in an election, with 0 signifying no likelihood of winning and 10 signifying strong likelihood of winning?

0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

12. What assumed barriers or benefits of this candidate influenced your answer on the likelihood of the candidate winning in an election?

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13. Taking into consideration the information in the prompt and your answers above, how would you now rate your interest in running for a political office in the future, with 0 signifying no interest and 10 signifying strong interest?

0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

*Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents*

Variable	Control Group n=24		Experimental Group n=24		Total Sample N=48	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Assigned Sex at Birth						
Female	22	91.7	24	100	46	95.8
Male	2	8.3	0	0	2	4.2
Gender Identity						
Cis woman=1	15	62.5	11	45.8	26	54.2
Unsure/Questioning=2	1	4.2	3	12.5	4	8.3
TGNC=3	8	33.3	10	41.7	18	37.5
Self ID as TGNC						
Yes	7	29.2	10	41.7	17	35.4
No	17	70.8	14	70.8	31	64.6
Political Party Identification						
Liberal/Left-Leaning	19	79.2	20	83.3	39	81.25
Independent	5	20.8	4	16.7	9	18.75
Racial Identification						
White	12	50	15	62.5	27	56.25
Black	2	8.3	2	8.3	4	8.3
Hispanic/Latino	2	8.3	1	4.2	3	6.25
Hispanic/Latino-White	2	8.3	1	4.2	3	6.25
Asian	3	12.5	2	8.3	5	10.4
Mixed	1	4.2	2	8.3	3	6.25
Jewish	1	4.2	0	0	1	2.1
Middle Eastern/White	1	4.2	0	0	1	2.1
None Listed	0	0	1	4.2	1	2.1
Importance of Religion						
Yes	7	29.2	6	25	13	27.1
No	15	62.5	18	75	33	68.8
Prefer not to say	2	8.3	0	0	2	4.2
Prior Knowledge of TGNC						
Yes	24	100	24	100	48	100

*Table 2. Summary statistics of variables, including interest in running for political office*

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Gender ID	48	1.8125	.9375443	1	3
Feelings about TGNC	48	9.083333	1.673744	5	10
Discrimination faced by TGNC	48	2.916667	.2793102	2	3
Importance of Religion	48	.3541667	.5645402	0	2
Importance of Religion-Daily	22	1.454545	1.100964	0	3
Importance Candidate- Shares Religious Views	47	2.042553	2.612324	0	10
Importance that Candidate- Shares Political Views	47	9.340426	1.238453	5	10
Importance that Candidate- Focus on Issues of Concern	47	8.723404	1.499306	5	10
Interest in Political Volunteering	47	4.574468	3.524724	0	10
Pre- Prompt- Interest in Running	48	1.9375	2.435607	0	8
Post-Prompt- Impression of Candidate	43	8.046512	1.587953	5	10
Post-Prompt- Interest in Volunteering for Candidate	43	5.162791	2.918987	0	10
Post-Prompt- Likelihood of Voting for Candidate	44	7.840909	1.904013	4	10
Post-Prompt- Likelihood of Candidate Winning	36	5.083333	1.130739	3	8
Post-Prompt- Interest in Running	36	2.5	2.420153	0	7