

Playing it Straight: Gay Men's Claim to Office

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## **Introduction**

Contemporary politics has been examined by scholars to answer questions about how gender and race may influence candidates' electability. This is because there is an understanding that gender and race play a role in how candidates are perceived. This has also caused candidates themselves to be fast and steeped in the ways they appear to avoid the negative effects of stereotypes and the merits of that. This has been developed thoroughly by white women candidates and there is a growing knowledge of the ways in which they are affected by stereotypes and how to offset them. However, the question of sexuality and its effects has not been developed to the same extent.

Using the framework of the scrutiny and influence women face due to their gender, which codes them as unfit, we can explore how this extends to sexuality for males. With the notions that exist about gay men being feminine, it is likely that they face similar challenges in politics. Furthermore, the additional aspect of both gayness and whiteness affects these dimensions. With such a long history of straight white maleness in public office, the expectations to live up to that standard to win the political game are high. "Playing it straight" is the way in because proven to be effective, in contrast with other factors that may be less effective. While it may be helpful to add lesbian women candidates to the discourse as they are often subject to the reverse of the stereotypes regarding gay male candidates, that would be beyond the scope of this paper.

## *Literature Review*

Schneider and Bos (2014) posit that there are distinctions in how women and men politicians are viewed in politics and that there should be subtypes utilized to better understand the scrutiny they face. They add that they are not the firsts to suggest that women should have unique stereotype content (Githens & Prestage, 1977; Kirkpatrick, 1974), however they do attribute subtyping theory to themselves. They found that whereas men benefit from the traits ascribed to male politicians because of their alignment with leadership expectations, women politicians were adversely affected as they were not seen differently from other subgroups, such as women professionals. Schneider and Bos highlight that female politicians appear to be “losing” on male stereotypical qualities while also not having any advantage on qualities typically assigned to women. This is because female politicians are viewed differently in comparison to even female leaders and female professionals who are seen in positive lights. They note that Hillary Clinton seems to act more masculine (even in her style of dress) than Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann, who exude femininity.

Haraldsson (2021) in her study builds precedent for how women are affected by sexism in politics which may cause positive or negative reactions. Simon and Hoyt (2013) determined that being exposed to gender stereotypical media images makes women have negative self-perception of their leadership ability, which leads to them having lower leadership aspirations. Similarly, Haraldsson and Wängnerud (2019) theorized that underrepresentation of women in news media is correlated to women’s lower political ambition in the following election. They found in their study that being exposed to media discrimination provoked a “positive challenge response” where women's political ambition increased. Nonetheless, this was only observed in the election task when gender was not involved and not in initial tasks which constituted picking a political role

from others. They note that this could be from a self-sacrifice in which they felt the need to act for women to prove women's value. Women going into politics conscious of the misrepresentation is likely not conducive to their success. In the counter-discrimination condition which included the overrepresentation of women in politics, some women questioned if they possessed the skills of the women depicted.

Yarchi and Azran (2017) suggest that women having higher success on social media than male counterparts is due to the overwhelming amount of talent required to succeed in a male dominated industry, that comes across more easily when they can present themselves without being edited by others in media. This is because having complete control of their images as allowed on social media allows them to circumnavigate the gendered scrutiny that they are subject to in the political sphere. Through the autonomy they have over their image on social media they can connect with people more effectively. They found that their hypothesis that men and women politicians due to today's 'double-voiced' political context, there are no differences in the rhetoric used and topics discussed by male versus female politicians. This is due to Baxter's (2011) finding in a study of the language of UK women business leaders, "the structured disadvantage of the soft and submissive voice leads female leaders to adopt a 'double voiced' discourse, wherein they adjust what they say to fit the male-dominated institutional environment in order to thrive in their institution's atmosphere." This shows that women have gotten strategic about altering their presentation to conform to masculine modes of being to succeed in this male-dominated sphere.

Lee and Lim (2016) find that despite the record number of women in the U.S. Congress (19.4% of the 535 members in 2015), female politicians nevertheless face the same pressures to be accepted and recognized as politicians and earn the credit assumed to male politicians. This was examined in the varying content and multimedia posted by 2016 frontrunners Hillary Clinton and

Donald Trump's twitter accounts and campaign websites. It was noted that Clinton often highlighted her masculine traits and stances on feminine issues in both online platforms. However, Trump was not concerned with his masculinity as much or femininity in terms of issues. While Clinton's tweets were original, Trump often reposted citizen tweets.

Maier and Renner (2018) point out that to prove a candidate's superiority in the political arena, politicians are expected to show a high level of competence, assertiveness, perseverance, and leadership (Kinder, Peters, Abelson, & Fiske, 1980). This means being aggressive and utilizing attacks towards opponents is especially important to a candidate's perceived competency among voters (Trent, Trent, Mongeau, & Short-Thompson, 1997). They further state that if male politicians did not attack an opponent at all they violate both stereotypical expectations regarding the behavior and norms of a successful leader and norms concerning stereotypical male behavior. Referencing past studies on negativity they state that factors like the political role (challenger versus incumbent), the level of election (state versus national, or the strategic situation (I.e., if a candidate is behind or ahead in the polls) influences the use of attacks (Benoit, 2014; Maier & Jansen, 2017). These elements all play a role in the use of attacks in debates against women however the study underlines the fact that attacks are used generally. This means irrespective of gender attacks will be used. When using a negative campaign strategy, candidates have to be careful that their attacks are not perceived as unfair or disproportionate by the electorate. Otherwise, attacks will cause "backlash effects" (Benoit, 2007; Jasperson & Fan, 2013)

Hayes, Lawless, Maier and Renner agree that the usage of language and behavior that is perceived as sexist can have detrimental effects to male candidates support in electorates. Nonetheless Hayes and Lawless state this applies to moderate and liberal voters but may help a candidate appeal to sexist voters. They also add that if sexist criticism comes from another sources

such as news media or an outside political group the backlash would likely be less harsh (Brooks and Murov 2012). Maier and Renner also point to choices made about usage of debate attacks on women depending on how aggressive rhetoric in campaigns was. This means that attacks on women in debates and campaigns is a strategy used after consulting multiple factors. These choices are made to benefit the appearance of male candidates.

These perceptions translate to gay candidates as well. Paul et al. conclude that participants who were informed that the actor was a gay male rated him as less masculine than participants in the “straight” and control conditions. This supports other findings that revealed that gay males are perceived as less masculine than heterosexual men (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009). Wong et al. (1999) further found that people tend to perceive a direct connection between sexual orientation and established gender roles, and as a result may perceive gay or lesbian actors as having attributes associated with the opposite gender (Mitchelle & Ellis, 2011). Herek et al. (2009) says that gay men and lesbian women face increased risk of negative treatment when coming out, which includes interpersonal violence, internalized and external stigma, and discrimination in housing and employment. Taylor and Raadt build on previous research (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009; Freud, 1905 et al) that having a stereotypically gay voice (i.e, effeminate) is one of the most egregious violations of hegemonic masculinity. They also reference the Do I Sound Gay documentary (Gertler et al. 2014) regarding heterosexual and gay men in the United States having been deeply concerned about the effects that having a stereotypically gay-sounding voice might have on their social and professional lives. They also found that teachers perceived a speaker with a stereotypically gay voice to have lower leadership qualities, to have less classroom management skills, and to be less mature.

Pasek et al. 2017 says that there are different circumstances which can motivate individuals to either be open about their identity or not open. They argue that this is due to social structures and how they are affected by individuals' decisions to be open about their identities which may have stigmas attached to them. They develop this more saying one factor likely to affect concealment and disclosure decisions is people's assessment of a given social context. Moreover, that people can choose how and when to disclose, even within particular social contexts, while others may choose to disclose only after observing the people and prevailing attitudes in a social context and concluding that disclosure is safe and warranted. This underlines the importance of gay white male candidates utilizing straight tactics to control public perceptions of them. By detaching themselves from the behaviors typically assumed of them they can control their public disclosure.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

Through a content analysis of speeches, debates of gay male politicians a description of their behavior will be given to analyze the ways they conform to norms of straight white masculinity. By utilizing the writing of scholars to conceptualize their behaviors and the unique ways appearing straight plays out in a political setting, a conclusion will be drawn. Much of this question is theoretical and cannot ascertain whether the gay candidates themselves consciously adapted the behavior which is ascribed to straight white males. Still, I track "Personal Appearance," "Policy Platform," "Biography and Background" and I cross-reference these variables through an intersectional feminist lens of race, class, gender, sexuality.



## **Chapter One: Pete Buttigieg**

To circumnavigate the challenges of succeeding within a predominantly straight sphere and role such as politics, gay male politicians have had to get crafty about the ways they play it straight. This provokes them to employ different methods to meet the objective of appearing straight. It is not certain how effective these tactics are as gay male candidacy is still being theorized. However, a gauge is that Buttigieg is currently in the President's cabinet as the Secretary of Transportation and holds a considerable stake in being the democratic candidate for President in 2024 or 2028.

As noted, women in politics face a variety of challenges due to sexism, as the political sphere is dominated by men. They have thus adapted certain behaviors in their attempts to maneuver around this. While the challenges are different for gay men there are areas where they overlap and can be used to understand why gay men have similarly employed certain tactics. This is an effective way of measuring this because gay men are stereotyped as feminine. Paul S et al. posit that as seen in previous findings (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009), participants who were informed that the actor was a gay male rated him as less masculine than participants in the “straight” and control conditions. Taylor and Raadt also found that teachers perceived a speaker with a stereotypically gay voice to have lower leadership qualities, to have less classroom management skills, and to be less mature. This means candidates such as Pete Buttigieg must maneuver around presumptions, they are less masculine and less capable of being a leader because of their sexuality.

Women and gay men are subject to similar stereotypes that may be seen as positive or beneficial in certain circumstances but disservice them in a political role. Schneider and Bos found

that whereas men benefit from the traits ascribed to male politicians because of their alignment with leadership expectations, women politicians were adversely affected as they were seen differently from other subgroups such as females and women professionals. This is because unlike heterosexual men who embody traditional masculinity which aligns with the expectations of political leadership, women and woman leaders in society differ from what women politicians have had to become. There are also different expectations and exceptions for different roles and levels of power. This leads to what Schneider and Bos highlight female politicians “losing” on male stereotypical qualities while also not having any advantage on qualities typically assigned to women.

To counter the assumptions and limitations placed on them women and gay men must develop tactics. This extends from how they interact on social media, the issues they prioritize in campaign communication, to how they present themselves. Yarchi and Azran highlight Baxter’s (2011) finding in a study of the language of UK women business leaders, “the structured disadvantage of the soft and submissive voice leads female leaders to adopt a ‘double voiced’ discourse, wherein they adjust what they say to fit the male-dominated institutional environment to thrive in their institution's atmosphere.” This finding solidifies gay male candidates like women candidates having to be intentional about the issues they engage, the stances they take on them, down to the way they speak to appease a masculine way of being.

Women and gay male politicians often make choices about how and when they will assimilate to be successful in the political sphere. Yarchi et al. found that analysis of Hillary Clinton’s rhetoric during the 2016 US elections campaign also indicated a combination of authoritative voice; for example, in combining aggressive attacks on Trump with a softer, more feminine voice emphasizing the theme of motherhood (Kenty, 2016). Utilizing aggression and

being assertive is a trait that is typically prescribed to men that is seen as necessary in a competent leader. They also find that females imitate the institution's speech styles, which are highly affected by the male-dominated language to fit within the institution's culture. This furthermore highlights that these ways women candidates behave are influenced by the behavior suitable to men in the political space.

Gay male candidates can utilize previously mentioned tactics however in addition they can also utilize more general behaviors typically seen in straight male politicians such as their relationship with women candidates. Through doing this they can avoid being associated with the gay feminine stereotype and gain status that is typically limited to straight men. Russell claims that Buttigieg captured national attention and a considerable number of Democratic delegates through the pairing of his gay identity and his conformity with masculinity expectations typically prescribed to straight men, by taking aim at more distinguished female candidates in rank and age such as Senators Klobuchar and Warren.

Russel also says this desire to break from feminine stereotypes affiliated with them causes them to have an interest in separating themselves from females. This underlines that gay male candidates who conform to straight standards of masculinity can use aspects of their male identities to help them reap benefits typically reserved to straight male candidates. Targeting women irrespective of their superior status and rank in politics is a way Buttigieg elevates himself and lays claim to a straight way of being.

Other tactics utilized by Buttigieg include a politics of respectability and at times diluting his identity to appeal to the public. While speaking at an event before offering reasons why he is proud to be gay Buttigieg "extensively goes into wishing when he was younger that he could

change himself, that if there was a pill he could take or a part of himself to cut out he would in a second” (Lederman).

“If I had not deployed to Afghanistan, I might never have found the courage to come out. So, I knew when I did come home safely in 2014 that it was just gonna be a matter of time, inconveniently that time came in the middle of my reelection campaign” (Buttigieg to Pence, ‘Your quarrel, sir, is with my creator). This approach to talking about his sexuality is a stark contrast from being unabashed and matter of fact. Buttigieg addressing a newfound courage to be open about his sexuality acquired in his military service is an evident attempt at aligning with populations that are uncomfortable with his sexuality and need to be affirmed that it is acceptable to feel bothered by it. This signals his affiliation to cis white straight male/patriotic values and can divert attention from that.

This way of presenting himself extends even to campaign photos. A photo of Pete and his husband Chasten on the cover of Times Magazine, Greta Lefleur says evokes what she deems heterosexuality without women. That in the photo they embrace each other mildly as is typical of straight people and even the background of the photo likens to heteronormative family values. “The tulips; the Chinos; the notably charming but insistently generic porch; the awkwardly minimal touching that invokes the most uncomfortable, unfamiliar, culturally-heterosexual embrace any of us have ever received — offers a vision of heterosexuality without straight people” (Heterosexuality Without Women, Greta LaFleur).

In another show of respectability Pete’s husband, Chasten, was scheduled to appear at a gay club for a campaign event however later cancelled after the club refused to remove a stripper pole. This choice was likely ordered by Buttigieg due to his desire to appease a non-sexual identity.

A stripper pole in a gay club signal all the indecent and promiscuity that conservative populations ascribe to gay people. Buttigieg in his pursuit of being arid of any disqualifying associations thus did not want his husband to appear in a club with those sexual symbols. For him to be amendable to conservative tastes is to have all the family values that come with it and simply desire to include gay people in it.

“In 2018 he married Chasten Glezman, a schoolteacher from Michigan. Chasten Buttigieg has since become a prolific fund-raiser in his own right, stumping for his husband at events across the country” (Pete Buttigieg, A Midwestern Former Mayor who is calling for generational change in the White House, the new york times, Reid J Epstein). Having a husband who plays into heteronormativity through his work as a teacher, a field typically associated with women and domestic labor; is another ingenious part of Buttigieg's presentation. This likens his husband closely to the traditional image of a first lady and thus elevates them in line with a conventional presidential family.

In addition, Buttigieg fits the nuclear family trope perfectly living with his husband their two children they adopted and two dogs. Buttigieg's' father is a Maltin immigrant, and his mother is a fifth generation Indianan(transportation.gov). Buttigieg is a Harvard and Oxford graduate as he was a Rhodes Scholar and had the opportunity to acquire a degree in philosophy, politics, and economics(transportation.gov). The Rhodes scholarship is a highly selective and esteemed international scholarship.

Barack Obama while obviously having cards against him having been the first black President of America was as promising as it got. If albeit in different ways Obama could overcome the oppression due to his race, Buttigieg through embodying Obama, could similarly overcome

the biases against him as a white gay man. In the way he uses figures to aid people and his illustrious way of speaking Buttigieg embodies Obama hoping to receive the same merit that negates his disadvantages. Speaking in a generally low tone of voice and inflecting in a way that is characteristic of Obama's oration style, it is evident he does this intentionally. Through doing this Buttigieg code switches as straight again because of the imagination of people that associates mannerisms with personalities.

In other words, just as people of color engage in codeswitching to avoid stereotypes, gay politicians code-switch to avoid gay stereotypes. "Although all employees may behave more professionally at work compared to more casual settings, individuals from stigmatized racial groups may feel a disproportionate pressure to conceal significant cultural aspects of themselves to minimize stereotyping ascribed to their social identities" (McCluney). Buttigieg surely also conceals important aspects of himself to dissuade negative scrutiny over his sexuality. "Engaging racial codeswitching might limit how Black people are 'allowed' to behave at work if they desire to maintain these perceptions. further, it places a burden on Black employees to chronically monitor their appearance, speech, and behaviors while at work" (McCluney). This constant codeswitching is required when the culture and the standard an individual creates has to be maintained. Thus, as stated, it becomes an incessant fixation for individuals checking their ways of being to make sure they conform to expectations.

Buttigieg, being a current Secretary of Transportation, previously served two terms as the mayor of his hometown of South Bend, Indiana, during which time he collaborated across the aisle to revolutionize the city's future. During that time, poverty dropped, household income increased, and unemployment was cut in half. The work he did was recognized nationally, and he was awarded for innovative streetscape design by the U.S. Department of Transportation where he now

presides (transportation.gov). Pete served as an officer to the U.S. Navy Reserve for seven years and took a leave of absence from the mayor's office for deployment to Afghanistan in 2014(transportation.gov). This leave from his mayoral position while in the public eye was undoubtedly intended to capture people's attention and support for him.

Some of Buttigieg's policies include ending cash bail reform, eliminating mandatory minimum sentences and private prisons, ending capital punishment, combining construction funding and rent subsidies for affordable housing, investing in workers and rural America to combat income inequality, raising minimum wage, supporting nuclear power, and boosting the defense budget (politico.com). But, for Buttigieg, "You know our party has this tendency to lead with the policies, first we gotta explain our values" (video profile of Pete Buttigieg, New York Times). Whether Pete's tactics have a positive effect remains to be seen. It's not Pete's being gay that has made him successful, what can be substantiated is that his conformity with the white straight male identity that he closely resembles until he mentions his sexuality, that has helped him succeed.

The respectable approach has also been questioned in research. Nonetheless, there is research that supports the statement that partisan identity does not always dictate how people feel about certain issues. It is difficult to make definitive claims when there have not been many gender non-conforming gay male politicians, and only those who follow politics of respectability have made it. In addition, some scholars have theorized that candidates utilizing respectability politics can adversely affect rights for more marginalized members of their groups and have less support from those populations. This is a notable difference from previous research that found that respectability politics increases support from those in the group.

## **Chapter Two: Richie Torres**

Much like Pete Buttigieg, gay male candidates of color such as Richie Torres may also take the approach of being palatable with respect to sexuality. However, their approach may slightly differ due to the limelight that candidates of color receive. While gay white male politicians can access a script of sorts on the condition of their aligning with a long tenure of white male politicians throughout history, gay male candidates of color must make their own way. This means being a tough match for the intense scrutiny that comes with being a candidate of color. Part of being formidable to this challenge means knowing how to be authentic and when that is being required, since Black candidates do not have the same opportunities.

In a CBS segment covering his push for a house seat in 2020 Torres was asked how he felt about being compared to AOC and appeared slightly bothered by it. “I have enormous respect for the skills and dynamism of AOC but in the end I'm my own person. I've been a public servant for 6 years. I'm in charge of investigations in the New York City Council, so I'm my own person with my own roots in the Bronx, my own story, my own record, and I would prefer to be judged on my own terms rather than in relation to someone else” (Richie Torres pushes for House seat in 2020, CBS News). This recalls Robinson's observation that gay men aim to separate themselves from women to undermine the gay stereotype of femininity.

Interestingly though, Torres also says in this segment that he respects Elizabeth Warren's command of public policy. This distinguishes him from Buttigieg who challenged Warren and Klobuchar (highlighting Robinson's claims about appealing to masculinity through womanhating). Torres does not want to be compared to AOC, while saying he admires Klobuchar is likely because



of their shared background as Puerto Ricans serving over neighboring districts which allows him to more easily be seen in a similar light as it pertains to gender and otherwise.

In many of his campaign press Torres sports a straight demeanor. He is cold, to the point, and does not smile often. This makes sense as Maer and Renner point out that for candidates to prove their superiority in the arena, they must show an assertiveness that denotes competency to voters. “I’m Richie Torres born and bred in the Bronx and I’m running for congress because the Bronx needs a fighter in Washington D.C” (torres.nyc). In Torres’ platform video he calls himself a fighter, again appealing to straight male roles and expectations. This is interesting as Torres representing one of the poorest districts in the country, could instead frame himself as a listener or empathetic or even diplomat, however, chooses fighter to appeal to roles that are not feminine as Schneider and Bos observe. This is because listening, empathy, and collaboration are roles counter to male expectations such as assertiveness.

CBS News’ John Dickerson says about Torres “he has the idealism of youth but recognizes politics has limits, some moral debates for example are distractions” (The personal mission of Rep. Ritchie Torres, CBS). This framing of Torres also harkens back to the roles and stereotypes attributed to men and leaders as being rational and women being seen as more emotional which coincides with idealism. Dickerson brings up as a hypothetical for Torres, a republican opponent’s mischaracterization of critical race theory, to which Torres says the bulk of his remarks would be reserved for prescription drugs: “I would focus on prescription drug costs because if you conduct your campaign on the terms set by your opponent’s then you’re gonna lose. [...] I refuse to allow progressive purity to be the enemy of progress in the real world” (CBS). Torres speaks to his belief that at times moral debates can be distractions from the issues that matter in his district. While this seems respectable in theory the question of whether Torres does not feel responsible to certain

issues comes from his desire to appeal to straightness and whiteness as he has a large Jewish population in his district.

Torres seems content to hear Bill Mahers's comment: "You could be insufferably woke, but I think you're just perfectly sane and an old school liberal, and you know you, like, you want police reform, as I think everyone knows there needs to be some, but you're not for defunding the police, which a lot of your party ... that's not where you are" (Rep. Ritchie Torres: From Poverty to Politics | Real time with Bill Maher). Instead, Torres responded,

I'm an organizer who has my feet planted in the ground. I represent the people of the south Bronx and the people of the south Bronx like most rank-and-file democrats are practical and not ideological and want us to focus on the bread-and-butter issues of health and housing, schools and jobs and that's where my focus lies" (Real time with Bill Maher).

For Torres to speak to his district's interests in a generalized way when the events of summer 2020 culminated in such a politically strong way is perplexing. To say the movement and the people in the south Bronx have not moved away from reform and towards complete abolishment is simply inaccurate. Torres' incentives for this are surely not aligning with representing his district and likely more with not dissuading support from other demographics in his constituency.

Torres seems, as Lee and Lim point out, that the issues politicians choose, and their stances are affected by their desire to appeal to gender expectations. In America's political climate as has been observed with Buttigieg it seems the further you are on the political continuum from liberal the more in alignment you are with traditional masculine expectations. This makes sense as masculinity as displayed by candidates such as Buttigieg is highly traditional. Torres thus by

appealing to an old school liberal sensibility is appearing more masculine. He says also in this address that while he believes in reform against qualified immunity, he does not believe in defunding the police.

Torres may find some respite in being able to follow the respectable approach like Buttigieg, nonetheless he still must traverse the canon being gay, and afro-Latin. Candidates of color through their inhabiting positions in these high offices make the country reckon with uncomfortable realities. That they associate these positions with whiteness unconsciously. Moreover, they are symbols of a power and identity that is seen as belonging to and expressive of whiteness. This also means the pressure candidates of color experience from white publics forces them to assuage this in certain ways. Torres confronts his racial identity similarly to Obama however his sexuality also adds dimension to his presentation.

The response to Obama's presidency underlines how politicians of color are scrutinized differently than their white counterparts. "What we heard from our guests was that race shaped both support and dissent for Obama, raised the stakes of his success, exposed the constraints of his office, and made the whiteness at the center of American politics permanently visible" (Gene Demby, *Obama's Racial Legacy*). This raises the point that prior to Obama's presidency there had been no immediate confrontation for the country with race. As Demby later adds in the article issues with race prior to this were in the background such as the Black Lives Matter movement; which rose to prominence during Obama's presidency. This came as he addressed the conflict between a noted Harvard historian and a black man and a white local police officer.

Obama's presidency because of the caliber of his qualifications and endearing character crystallized in a way unseen prior how his being nonwhite was what disqualified him. The creator

of The Whiteness Project in the weeks leading up to the election echoed this, "[When] these guys said, 'Well, I never think about race, but now, every time I look up and see the president, I have to think about race,' it's a reminder about this tension [between] how you see yourself and what you know yourself to be" (Demby). Obama's occupation of the presidential office, previously occupied only by white men, caused confusion and ultimately discontent from white people. "He'd said he'd felt some of the same disorientation whenever he got a Christmas card with the First Family's picture on it" (Demby). This disorientation indicates that white people see government as representations of them and their white identity.

While race issues obviously existed prior, they were typically designated to the background or treated in a way that was more suitable to white interests as the former presidents were white. With candidates of color becoming more common they are likely to have opinions that are more suitable to people of colors interests and thus provoke discomfort from white people. Nonetheless, their sole occupancy in these positions is the primary source of discomfort to these groups. "They had settled into a comfortable, middle-class retirement, so they weren't competing with anyone for jobs, and there were few immigrants in their virtually all-white town . . . they said that they never thought about race — that America didn't have any problems with race. That was, until Obama came along and started making *everything* about race" (Demby). An older white Montana couple said this while also explaining that they never had any problems with race.

Because of the constraints of whiteness at the epicenter of the presidential office, Obama employs techniques to benefit how he is perceived. "Part of Obama's genius is a remarkable ability to soothe race consciousness among whites. [...] Never has it been practiced at such a high level, and never have its limits been so obviously exposed. This need to talk in dulcet tones, to never be angry regardless of the offense" (Fear of a Black President, Ta-Nehisi Coates). While Congress

does not have as high stakes as the presidential office the considerations in terms of perception are similar. Torres, though slightly on a different axis due to his sexuality, must still, like Obama, mind how he can be read due to his race.

What this highlights is that Obama's image is subject to being altered because of the chance of misperception by white people. "Michael Moore suggested that the dredging up of an old video of Obama talking to a black crowd at Hampton University in 2007 had intimidated Obama. 'For the past 2 days, the Right has been pounding their "Obama is an angry black man video." Did this affect O, that he had to appear timid?'" (Demby). If candidates of color were to be scrutinized only by other people of color of which there is not much representation in government and among pundits, they would express themselves more naturally.

Thus, Torres, being a politician of color, with an awareness of the way his actions could translate to white people, makes similar countermoves. However, being that he is gay there are some grey areas that allow him to benefit. It is plausible that because of the stereotypes associated with gay men Torres has more pressure to be tough on issues than Obama did as a heterosexual man. That through being tough on an issue like the Israeli Palestinian conflict in a largely Jewish district he could earn credit. That through signaling this Israeli patriotism he is signaling his formidability. Torres in most of his appearances is introduced as being gay and Afro-Latino however embodying what that means is entirely different. There are evidently ways to embody other identities that are more privileged.

### **Chapter Three: Chi Ossé**

Of the three, Chi Ossé relies on respectability politics the least. This is likely due to the positioning of being a feminine gay Black man. Because he has the least claim to conventional standards, he has to stay in his identity position, whereas Buttigieg and Torres were able to evade theirs by conforming in certain ways. Nonetheless, Ossé had a different entry and reasoning for endeavoring to public office than Torres and certainly Buttigieg. Ossé was motivated by the protests he took part in with people in the summer when George Floyd was killed and even started his own protest initiative. He was inspired by being part of the people on the ground and emboldening them to believe they can take those positions too.

Chi Ossé, as the least conforming of the three, makes sense when considering how his approach differs from theirs. He does not just conveniently splice his sexuality into his presentation when useful to being impervious, but reasonably embodies it before dropping a mention. Ossé is authentic; from his race to his sexuality and everything it means to be identified in that way. Torres identifies as Afro-Latino but does not carry the proximity to blackness in the same way. Part of the reason for this is likely due to their different upbringings and means of becoming representatives.

Ossé in addition to being more flamboyant in presentation, had a father who was heralded as being one of the most knowledgeable and involved people in hip-hop and rap, meeting the likes of Jay-Z and Puff Daddy before fame. “The amazing thing about Combat Jack’s life is that he had two successful runs in the hip-hop business. . . One, as an entertainment lawyer back in the day, and then a second run as a podcaster, where he became this real authority about everything that

was hip-hop culture and history.” (Combat Jack, Hip-Hop Lawyer Turned Podcast Pioneer, Dies at 53, Jonah Engel Bromwich). Rap came out of impoverished black communities and was revolutionary in its functions. It centered on black perspectives and rose to popularity when it was counter-cultural to do so. His father’s connection to black culture in this way likely gave rise to how connected he is to it and advocating on its behalf.

“Ossé believes that his advantage comes from his cultural ties, his upbringing in a multiracial household, his long history with Crown Heights, and his exposure to the music industry” (Democratic Party Promoter The 23-year-old nightlife impresario Chi Ossé finds a new VIP area: the City Council). This connection likely led him to protest on the streets alongside BIPOC in the focused energy that sprung out of George Floyd’s murder and ultimately endeavor to office. “I was in this weird haze, or limbo in my life of not knowing what I was going to do next. . . I read this book called The Alchemist . . . It helped guide me through finding where I wanted my life to go. And these protests happened, again I found my voice and found this passion that I haven’t felt before and it's taken me to where I am now and I think its gonna take me further” (Combat Jack’s son Chi Ossé Announces City Council Candidacy In New York, HOT 97).

Whereas Ossé’s connection to his people is staunch in how he aligns with their causes and shares them, Torres is questionable at times. Only saying that undermining qualified immunity and cultures of silence are the solutions to the brutality on black/brown communities by police but not defunding the police. “I want to defund the NYPD and reallocate those funds back into communities that they’ve wreaked havoc upon . . . the NYPD is the fourth largest standing army in the world, and it needs to be defunded at a larger rate. We need to reallocate those funds invest that into education, invest that into public health, invest that into public housing, and clean up the how the city actually should be cleaned up” (HOT 97).

“I’m not just a political figure or I don’t want to just be a political figure. I want to be another member of this movement and I think that’s something we’ve been saying on these streets is it’s not a moment it’s a movement . . . I want to be an inspiration for other people with progressive ideals and other young people that feel the way that I do to know that they can run for these positions in power” (HOT 97). In the wake of Floyd’s killing Ossé has campaigned heavily around defunding the police and re-investing into neighborhoods, however Torres has not. For Torres not to be sharing this sentiment in the momentum for BLM that came out of Floyds killing alludes to the ways he is not in alignment with the black community.

Ossé was directly involved during the movement and showcases that in his campaign. Through founding Warriors in The Garden which was a social media protest collective and leading demonstrations. “This time around after that video of George Floyd that gave me this urge to go out and speak up. Each day I went out, I started to find my voice and was starting to figure out what I wanted to say, and people were listening to it. Not only were people listening to it, but they were following it” (The Gen Z Candidate: How Chi Ossé Found His Voice, Complex world). The connection to the Black Lives Matter movement and to black community is something Ossé does not shy away from in his campaign and his identity. “When I found out Chi was running for office, I was inspired I mean he’s a black man in America, Hes queer, he’s twenty-two, I feel like he represents what gen z and millennials are right now. He’s literally a manifestation of that right. He’s creative, he’s an activist, and now a future politician” (Complex). Ketia Chi’s public relations manager rightly speaks to why he is such a good representation of the values and character of generations that are coming of age with different perspectives than those of the culture.

Ossé’s non-conformity is not only limited to the switching Torres and Buttigieg are so adept at in terms of stances, but also in more seemingly arbitrary ways such as fashion. In a curbed



article about Ossé's background as nightclub promoter he is photographed in a bright red matching suit covered in stamps with tapered legs, black loafers, paired with a clashing green plaid shirt underneath, and his signature black beret. Although these choices may seem unimportant, they are a stark contrast from the classic and expected ones Buttigieg and Torres make. As LeFleur points out these choices refamiliarize onlookers with a white masculine identity that is engrained in their memory without them realizing.

Ossé's queerness also expands into all the ways he defies expectations. Buttigieg's father is a high-profile professor, and he is ivy league educated as is typical of straight male politicians, though Ossé is a former nightlife promoter and college dropout. Ossé's work as a promoter in night clubs challenges the sexless portrayal Buttigieg embodies as evidenced in Chasten's cancelled appearance at a gay bar due to the presence of a stripper pole. Buttigieg unlike Chi takes this approach because acting non-sexual makes him more palatable to voters whose inclinations are towards straight white male politicians. Further because he can more easily attach himself to the mold and model that has worked for white straight men.

In Ossé's NBC campaign video he mentions being endorsed by Congress Woman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's political organization Courage to Change. "AOC says that it takes 100 of us to try, in order for one of us to get in. If I can be that beacon of hope and beacon of inspiration for these other young people or even older people that have progressive ideals . . . then that's something that I want to be" (HOT 97). Whereas Torres was mildly peeved at being compared to AOC, Chi, being inspired by her, speaks to the differences in their political identities. Ossé alluding to her support and ethics on multiple occasions underlines how him as a brazenly queer man does not mind comparison to a woman of color and what it means.

“There are three main issues that I’m running to change within this community. First is affordable housing . . . I’m sick and tired of seeing my neighbors kicked out of this community because of predatory developers that are tied to government . . . I’m running to reimagine public safety; our current public safety system isn't working for communities of color . . . the sanitation problem . . .our streets have been littered with trash, rats are festering in the 36<sup>th</sup> district” (Meet Chi Ossé: The Queer BLM Activist Running For New York City Council, NBC News). Per the main issues Ossé campaigned on, Ossé advocates for the continuation of the New York city rent stabilization law of 1969, reporting on park capital expenditures, and requiring the fire dept to conduct residential education and outreach regarding the safe operation of electric space heaters. He has enacted legislation requiring the office of neighborhood safety and prevention of gun violence to provide training and operational support to not-for-profit service providers participating in the city’s crisis management system and requiring mayor's office of criminal justice to evaluate the performance of criminal justice programs that receive funding from city. He has also passed legislation for rat mitigation progress in rat mitigation zones, abating rodents as a requirement for issuance of construction permits, and the tracking of street cleaning operations online.

Ossé currently sitting only as a council member may call into question some of the conclusions that can be drawn about what it means for him to present himself differently than Torres and Buttigieg. However, it may in the same vein draw attention to a new era being dawned on for the coming generations. Perhaps Buttigieg and Torres are faring well along with Ossé because the current landscape has culminated in a meeting between the old and the new. A moment where the old is not yet gone and the new is only just arriving. Jones (2021) asserts that through his experiment of exposing straight people to LGB people at varying degrees of conformity to

monogamy/exclusivity had subtle or no results on straight people's views of them. Further there is no evidence that factors such as the race, ethnicity, gender of the LGB people being observed or respondents' political predispositions mitigate these results. Jones's research underlines the claim that adhering to respectability does not help straight people's perceptions of queer people. This could be one reason why Ossé and Buttigieg are treated respectively: people's beliefs do not change much for individual politicians, but more so by their policies, which either are appealing or repelling. Nonetheless with a new generation of voters this could be shifting in either direction of either a Buttigieg or a Ossé.

While Republicans typically oppose socialism, they found that labeling the response as socialist did not alter opinions. This adds to the question of whether affective bias, expressive ideology, and operational are linked (Rogowski and Sutherland 2016; Webster and Abramowitz 2017). This reveals that partisan identity is not always indicative of policy views. Also, that individuals may be compelled to support an individual not just by their presentation but also their stances on issues.

## **Chapter Four: Discussion**

Having now considered each case individually, I now put them in critical, comparative relation to one another more explicitly. Again, I use the metrics of "Personal Appearance," "Policy Platform," "Biography and Background" to organize my comparison.

When considering the three cases together relative to their personal appearance, we can begin by recalling the concept of 'double voice' (Baxter 2011) and how it allows code-switching in an auditory way. Buttigieg's utilization of double voice is clear in his mention of his veteran status often and his coating queerness with internalized homophobia. Through always saying he

wished he was not gay before saying he is proud. Torres' use of double-voice manifests in his prioritization of bread-and-butter issues instead of what he calls moral distractions. Ossé, of the three, utilizes double voice the least, as he identifies with the people and embodies his identity without many filters or constraints. One may argue (Pasek 2017), with individuals choosing which contexts to disclose their identities for fear of stigma, Buttigieg and Torres come out; however, both retreat into the closet through their heteronormative actions and masculine identities. Ossé, arguably through fluidly embodying himself, does not have to come out.

Paul et al. posits that as seen in previous findings (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009), participants who were informed that the actor was a gay male rated him as less masculine than participants in the "straight" and control conditions. This supports other findings which revealed that gay males are perceived as less masculine than heterosexual men (Blashill & Powlishta, 2009). Buttigieg's demarcating himself from gayness through his policies is shown through his support of expanding the defense budget and supporting nuclear power. Torres does this through his insistence on supporting Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and disinvesting from the interest of POC in his district who want to defund the police. Ossé again is not invested in this aim as he embodies queerness, this shows in his adamant commitment to support defunding the police and disinvesting from whiteness, unlike Torres. It is also evident in his protesting Jordan Neely's lynching in the streets alongside his constituents and not just being a disembodied symbol of fighting for the people in his constituency.

Haraldsson (2021) in her study builds precedent for how women are affected by sexism in politics which may cause positive or negative reactions. Simon and Hoyt (2013) determined that being exposed to gender stereotypical media images makes women have negative self-perception of their leadership ability, which leads to them having lower leadership aspirations. In line with

the analyses in the paper these can be applied to gay men as well and may have different effects depending on the intersections of different identities. Buttigieg being a conformist white cis man and only differentiated from the conventional expectations of a politician by his sexuality is the most privileged. He is moreover ivy-league educated, a Rhodes scholar who speaks multiple languages and thus has the best chance when considering challenges of gay politicians. Torres and Osse being college dropouts and black men are less favored by the conventional image of a politician as it is white, male, cis, and educated; Ossé even more having a background as a nightclub promoter.

### **Conclusion:**

Through weighing the ways in which each candidate differs respective to their own political presences and policies an understanding can be garnered about why each does it in the way they do. How each must balance or compensate to facilitate a political goal. It is also important to understand what factors contribute to the political space in which they act in. Some of these questions can be best addressed by qualitative comparative analysis, which provides deep, rich detail, but not large samples. But a study like mine could easily be complimented by a large national survey of public opinion about gay male electability.

The limits of the study are that while it does trace people who are marginalized there are always others to consider. As society brings important questions to the fore such as those pertaining to the justice system and those deemed second-class citizens, new types of candidates who may never have seemed fit for office may be of interest. As the country currently stands, those who have committed non-violent offenses and many others wrongfully convicted may never be candidates. Undocumented people who have not gained residency regardless of when they entered

the country. Candidates should generally challenge the specter of what a leader means. Possibly those who speak a language spoken heavily by those in their district that is not English. The paradox is that the people who are the most marginalized and affected systematically are the ones who often know how to best deal with this issue, but never have a chance because of barriers.

Nevertheless, my study contributes to this scholarship by broadening the field and raising new variable of analysis and questions for the discipline to weigh. This argument encourages people to investigate why they support certain politicians and whether they may be upholding conformist views and favoring those who adhere more than those who do not. It challenges gatekeeping of political positions and disinheriting certain people who are breaking the mold. It encourages being civically engaged and supporting queer candidates who have integrity and are more expansive in how they approach roles. This argument inclines us to consider how marginalized groups can see to it that they are represented in government. Whether it means diffusing homogenous bodies with mandates for marginalized members and having strict codes of conduct in place to ensure smooth transitions. It is likely based on my research that putting the most marginalized members of groups in positions of power benefits entire marginalized groups. It is also possible that through increasing visibility of marginalized groups there will be less bias and stigma towards them.

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