

Public Attitudes Toward Diversity, Promotion, and Leadership in the U.S. Military

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Public Attitudes toward Diversity, Promotion, and Leadership in the US Military

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Abstract

This article explores how the public understands military service and diversity. Using a conjoint survey experiment, we ask respondents to select between two candidates for promotion. We randomly present respondents two profiles, which vary the candidates' gender, race, sexual orientation, marital status, number of years served, number of deployments, combat experience, and branch of the military. We find that respondents do not discount candidates based on their branch of service, gender, race, or marital status. However, respondents do weigh the candidates' combat experience, number of years served, and number of deployments favorably. Finally, respondents penalize candidates based on their sexual orientation: homosexual individuals are less likely to be selected for promotion. Further, respondents especially discounted transgender individuals for promotion. Important differences, we show in this article, also exist between conservative and liberal respondents, as well as between male and female respondents.

Keywords: Diversity, inclusion, public opinion, professionalism/leadership, gender issues, sexual orientation, military culture

¹ This version of the manuscript has not yet been copy-edited.

In its 244-year history, the United States Marine Corps has never had a four-star general who was not a white man. Across the United States armed services, there are 41 four-star officers. Only two are Black, and only one four-star officer is a woman. The picture that the US public largely sees of the senior ranks of the military is one of a lack of diversity. Yet trust and confidence in the military as an institution is high, and military service is seen by many as a vehicle to advance minority interests. How does the public view diversity in the military? What do members of the public think should count when considering candidates for promotion in the military?

This article explores how the public understands military service and diversity. Using a novel conjoint survey experiment, we ask respondents to select between two candidates for promotion. We randomly present respondents two profiles, which vary the candidates' gender, race, sexual orientation, marital status, number of years served, number of deployments, combat experience, and branch of the military.

This article has important implications for ongoing scholarly debates regarding military service and civil-military relations. First, military service is a way for groups to advance in society and claim rights (Armor, 1996a, p. 22; Krebs, 2006; Snyder, 2003, p. 185). The absence of non-white and non-male officers in the highest ranks limit the visibility of minority groups within the military and can affect how these groups' contributions are viewed. Second, the public is also deferential to the military and has high trust in it as an institution (Krebs et al., 2018). A lack of diversity at the top of the US military continues to paint the image that white (primarily men) are the most authoritative and trustworthy individuals. Finally, research from other sectors of society shows that diversity improves outcomes. A McKinsey study showed that companies with more diverse teams were also top financial performers (Barta et al., 2012), and research on

the judicial system has shown that diverse juries deliberate longer and make fewer factual errors in their discussions (Tufts University, 2006). Diversity thus brings both tangible and intangible benefits to organizations' desired outcomes.

The US military is interested in issues of diversity and inclusion, continues to study and implement policies to increase diversity and inclusion, and sees diversity and inclusion as a core component of readiness and effectiveness. As a Pentagon spokesman said in December 2020, "Diversity and inclusion make us a stronger, better, and more effective military" (Department of Defense, 18 December 2020). Military and policymaker interest in diversity is not new: in 2003, then-General Eric Shinseki formed the Commission on Officer Diversity and Advancement (Smith III, 2010). In years since, the Department of Defense and Congress have supported efforts to understand diversity and inclusion. For example, the 2016 National Defense Authorization Act states that "diversity contributes to the strength of the armed forces" (Kamarck, 2019, p. 1), and each branch of the US military has its own statement of diversity and inclusion ("Navy Diversity & Equity"; "About Diversity"). For example, the Air Force views diversity as a "military necessity" (Lim et al., 2014, p. ix). The November 2020 report of the committee that investigated the command climate at Fort Hood, Texas noted that there was an "unprecedented sensitivity" to racial issues within the US military, demonstrating increased military attention to issues of diversity and inclusion (117). Interest in diversity and inclusion is not just a reflection of national political discourse. Existing evidence shows that battlefield performance is directly related to military inequality: militaries that are unequal in their treatment of ethnic or racial groups perform worse in combat than militaries that treat groups more equally (Lyall, 2020a, p. 2)

This article contributes to ongoing scholarly debates and policy discussions about diversity and the military by studying the image of "military leader" conjured by the public. We

provide evidence about the public's willingness to promote some candidates over others, and, more broadly, who the public views as worthy of being in high ranks within the military.

This article proceeds in four sections. First, we unpack the politics of inclusion and exclusion by treating military service as social and political standing. Additionally, to place our experiment in context, we describe the current demographic makeup of the US military and outline our hypotheses about who the public will be more or less likely to consider worthy of promotion. Next, we describe the survey experiment, the main variables of interest, and the benefits and limitations of our approach. We then discuss and present the main findings. Finally, we return in the conclusion to the broader stakes of the project and future directions for work.

Military Service and the Politics of Inclusion/Exclusion

Diversity and inclusion in the military matters for both military effectiveness and democratic citizenship. First, diversity in the military, like in other organizations, combats groupthink and produces new ideas (Rohall et al., 2017a, p. 2), as well as increases military performance. For example, Jason Lyall has shown that treating minorities as second-class citizens undermines wartime performance (Lyall, 2020a, 2020b). Representation across the ranks should increase performance and effectiveness. Second, the implications of military service stretch beyond battlefield performance and wartime consequences to broader political and social stakes. Military service and sacrifice can be a powerful rhetorical tool to make claims to first-class citizenship (Armor, 1996b; Burk, 1995; Krebs, 2006, 2009; Rohall et al., 2017b; Snyder, 2003). However, not all groups have been able to use military service to claim citizenship rights. Women have not had as much success, perhaps because, until recently, they were excluded from core combat roles that are synonymous with service and sacrifice. As Burke (1995) notes, women “were not permitted to fully perform the military duties of citizenship” (508). This is

compounded by the absence of women at top leadership ranks. The first woman in US history to achieve the rank of four-star general was appointed in 2008. The General, Ann Dunwoody, was commander of Army Materiel Command, which is a logistics command, rather than a coveted and prestigious combat spot. Women's combat exclusion was based on gendered assumptions about performance (MacKenzie, 2015), and reflected dominant social beliefs about the role of women in society (Burk, 1995). Women's participation in the military continues to lag behind national representation: women represent 16 percent of military servicemembers, and 50 percent of the national population (*Demographics of the U.S. Military*, 2020).

We see similar dynamics for other minority groups, even if they have equal or overrepresentation within the armed forces. Comparing overall rates of service to the diversity among the officer corps highlights the contrast in leadership roles. For example, African Americans and Latinos have, particularly since the advent of the All-Volunteer Force in 1973, been overrepresented in the composition of the force (Han, 2017; Krebs, 2006, p. 188).

According to the US Department of Defense, the racial and gender diversity of the military overall is fairly representative of the nation. Black or African American service members make up 17 percent of the military, compared to 13 percent of the national population. The military does not count Hispanic/Latino as a minority race designation, but estimates suggest that Hispanic service members account for 16 percent of the total military force, compared to 18 percent of the national population.¹

Yet this representation has not translated into representation across ranks or status within the military (Rohall et al., 2017a, pp. 7–8). Victor Erik Ray's interviews with recently returned US veterans are instructive. One of Ray's interviewees acknowledged that the military could be both more diverse than civilian jobs and organizations, yet the nominal diversity "does not

necessarily translate into power within the hierarchy” (Ray, 2018, p. 294; See also Smith III, 2010, p. 5). The first Black chief of a military service was appointed in August 2020. The General, C.Q. Brown, is Chief of Staff of the Air Force, and is also the first African-American to lead any branch of the US Armed Forces (Harrington, 2020). Even when they are officers, most African Americans in the US Army are in “force sustainment” roles, rather than in combat or operations, the latter being fields that most frequently lead to top officer slots (Smith III, 2010). The top career fields for Hispanics in the US military include tactical operations officers, healthcare officers, engineering and maintenance, and supply officers.² That is, despite their representation within the military in general, racial minorities are underrepresented at the officer level, and are often not in the more prestigious combat-related roles that lead to promotion to even higher ranks. The roles that minority officers select early in their careers can have a significant effect, down the line, on whether they are considered for promotion to top ranks, meaning that early choices by an officer can effectively self-select them out of promotion.

Policies of exclusion, whether formal or informal, shape who feels welcome within the military and who can follow the career paths that are most likely to lead to higher levels of promotion. There are currently very few formal barriers to military service: the US military has been racially integrated since 1948; has allowed women to serve in combat since 2016, with partial combat openings dating to 1944; and Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, the policy requiring gay and lesbian servicemembers to remain closeted, was repealed in 2011. In terms of sexual minorities, Goodhart and Taylor note that “sexual minorities serving in the armed forces have occupied a precarious position since the founding of the United States. The military has, at times, tacitly accepted their presence when they were needed, but the risk of involuntary separation always loomed for these service members” (Goodhart and Taylor 2020). Surveys conducted during the

2020 Fort Hood investigation determined that 54% of respondents had concerns about how women or minorities were treated within the Army. In the words of one respondent, “Racism is a huge problem in my unit. My chain of command asked me to keep quiet about it and said ‘It’s not a big deal’ when I reported it (121). On the problem of gender inclusion, one respondent noted that women were “seen and verbally told that we were weaker than males and that we should not be among males in combat” (122).

Focusing on officers allows us to better understand who makes up the visible face of the military, both to the public and to servicemembers. Officers have public visibility in a way that enlisted members of the services do not. For example, when active-duty or veteran members of the military engage in public debates – recently a much-debated behavior – the servicemembers often make use of their military rank, which lends their statements authority and further influences the image of “officer” held by the public (Golby, 2020; Goldberg, 2020; Williams, 2020). For example, retired four-star generals who criticized President Trump’s interest in using the military to quell national protests in the summer of 2020 were all white four-star generals and admirals. In fact, there were more retired four-star generals named John or Mike than there were black men (Stracqualursi, 2020).³

Descriptively, the racial and gender diversity of the military falls in proportion as the rank increases. Officers overall only make up 16.3% of the total active-duty force. The largest percentage of officers are in the O1-O3 rank (lieutenants and captains in the army, marines, and air force, and ensigns and lieutenants in the navy).⁴ According to the Department of Defense, 25% of this category of officers are racial minorities. The next band, O4-O6 that percentage drops to 21%, and at the top ranks, O7-O10, it falls further to 12.3%. The DoD notes, “The lowest proportion of racial minority Active-Duty members is found among high-ranking officers

in all Service branches.”⁵ With respect to gender, similar drop-offs emerge. Across all service branches, women make up 20 percent of O1-O3s, 16 percent of O4-O6s, and only 8 percent of O7-O10s. Table 1, below, summarizes the racial and gender breakdown of the four main branches of the US military. This data is summarized from various branch-specific and Department of Defense reports.

The ranks are male and white at the top. The high-ranking generals – who are often the public faces of their services – are overwhelming male and white. We argue that the lack of diversity at the top ranks will affect who the public sees as most “fit” to serve in these ranks, as explained in the following section.

Hypotheses

We do not expect the public to have much knowledge about the military’s promotion process. Officer candidates are considered for advancement by promotion boards composed of five or more officers, each of whom serves at least one grade higher than the grade of officers under consideration. Promotion boards evaluate candidates on a range of variables, including past job performance, academic and military training, service branch and specialization, breadth of experience, and command experience (Baldwin, 1996, p. 1187). In contrast to the amount of information analyzed by promotion boards, we expect the public to use three types of information to determine who is most fit for promotion, only some of which match the explicit criteria for promotion.

First, we expect career experience to matter, such that candidates with greater experience – including combat experience – to be preferred compared to those with less experience. Within the army, combat arms branches are the predominant pipeline to senior officer ranks, with fifty-nine percent of all officers coming from combat arms branches, and thirteen percent from

combat support (see also Baldwin, 1996; Reyes, 2006). Similarly, Air Force pilots, navigators, air battle managers, and combat systems officers are all experiences that are correlated with improved promotion prospects (Arkin & Dobrofsky, 1978, p. 156; Kamarck, 2019, p. 22). In general, combat experience confers the symbols and signifiers of high status, including combat marks on uniforms, service ribbons, badges, and patches that are used to informally identify an individual's status (Arkin and Dobrofsky 1978, 156).

H₁ (Career Experience): Respondents will choose candidates for promotion who have greater experience (branch, number of years served, number of deployments, combat experience) than candidates who have less experience (number of years served, number of deployments, combat experience).

The second criteria that matter concern the perceived identity of candidates for promotion. We expect those who are seen to have high status or fit ideals to be more likely to be chosen than candidates who do not fit those criteria. These criteria are often based on candidates' identity. As Table 1 demonstrates, the higher ranks skew heavily male and white, which means that both the public and members of the military have few examples of diverse senior officers to draw on when they think about what a high-ranking military member looks like.

Identity-based stereotypes that exist in the contemporary military also demonstrate the continued relevance of identity in images of what a "real" or "proper" service member looks like. Marines have been known to call their Black members "nonswimmers," and the members of the Army have been known to call Black soldiers "night rangers" (Cooper 25 May 2020). A lawsuit filed in February 2020 by a Navy pilot said that airmen were given racially derogatory call signs and were referred to as "eggplants" in group chats (Cooper, 2020a). In short, identity-based

stereotypes exist within the military itself, where groups face discrimination and harassment while serving.

There is also a pipeline issue that informs this hypothesis. As described above, Air Force pilots have high status and are more likely to be promoted than other specialties (Kamarck 2019; Harrington 2020). However, only 1.7 percent of pilots are African American (Harrington 2020). In the Army, all combat positions were only open to women in 2015, which meant women were excluded from this important part of the promotion pipeline. Gendered and racial patterns to the accumulation of career experience mean that women and non-white service members are not the image called to mind when people imagine the candidate in the promotion pipeline (Lim et al 2012, 48).

More generally, a “visibility theory” of promotion (Moore & Trout, 1978), in which candidates are more likely to be promoted based on the contacts they have developed within the military, is moderated by race and gender. Non-white and non-male candidates are less likely to have occupied positions that attract high visibility, such as combat specialties or pilot positions, and are therefore less likely to have developed the contacts and the reputation that can be crucial for successful promotion. Over time, the image of a “good promotion candidate” begins to settle, making it even harder for those who do not meet certain identity criteria to gain recognition needed for promotion.

H₂ (Identity): Respondents will choose candidates for promotion who fit stereotypes of high-ranking military service members than those candidates who do not fit such stereotypes. Specifically, respondents will choose candidates who are White (over non-white candidates), men (over women candidates), and heterosexual (over homosexual and transgender candidates).

We also expect respondents to be sensitive to candidates' sexual orientation. Previous work has demonstrated that active and former members of the military often believe that the inclusion of non-heterosexual members in the military will undermine cohesion (Spindel & Ralston, 2020). The US military has also traditionally promoted a masculinized ideal. In the early 1900s, Army physical standards disqualified men with "feminine" characteristics, such as broad hips, narrow shoulders, or lack of facial hair (Kamarck 2019, 33). Beginning in the 1970s, individuals could be excluded from serving because of a belief that those who had a "homosexual tendency" were unfit or unsuitable. LGBT officers would be removed for "professional dereliction," and because they were thought to pose a risk to national security (Goodhart & Taylor, 2020; Reilly et al., 2020). Military recruitment also emphasizes maleness and masculinity. Consider recruitment slogans like "join the army, be a man," or the Marine Corps' "We only take a few good men." (Arkin and Dobrofsky 1978, 154). Popular images of the military emphasize this masculine mystique, where boys are turned into virulent men (Arkin & Dobrofsky, 1978; Cohn & Enloe, 2003; Enloe, 1983). Finally, there is some evidence that "facial dominance" of service members – the chiseled, square-jawed look – is correlated with promotion (Mueller & Mazur, 1996). Therefore, we expect promotion candidates who purportedly transgress this hypermasculine ideal – either because they are gay or transgender – will be less likely to be chosen for promotion.

H₃ (Salience of Identities): Among the identity profiles, respondents will be most sensitive to the candidates' sexual orientation.

Finally, we expect respondents' own identities to matter when they make decisions regarding who should be promoted in two ways. First, respondents may desire someone who

“looks like them” to be promoted. A male respondent may wish to see a male candidate promoted, or a female candidate may wish to see a female be promoted. Second, we expect that political ideology will play a role in candidate decisions. Specifically, we expect that conservative respondents will be more hesitant to promote homosexual or transgender candidates compared to liberals. Drawing on research from political psychology and perceptions of LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer+) individuals, we hypothesize that political conservatives are more likely than political liberals to promote heterosexual candidates (Graham et al., 2013, p. 68; Haidt, 2012; Norton & Herek, 2013). This is especially true for transgender candidates; research has shown that those who have negative feelings toward individuals who identify as homosexual hold similar—and often *more negative*—feelings towards individuals who are transgender, especially among conservatives (Moradi & Miller, 2010, p. 405; Norton & Herek, 2013).

H₄ (Respondent and Candidate Identities): Male (female) respondents will prefer male (female) candidates.

H₅ (Respondent Ideology): Conservative respondents will exhibit greater opposition to promoting homosexual, and especially transgender, candidates.

Research Design

To test our hypotheses, we collected a national sample of US adults via Lucid’s “Theorem Academic Platform” from 19 to 21 October 2020 (N = 737). Respondents were invited to participate in the survey from Lucid’s large online opt-in general population panel. The Theorem service used quota sampling to reflect known population benchmarks on age, race, sex, educational attainment, income, and geographic region. Although these data are not formally representative of the US adult population, previous research has found that data from Lucid

closely resemble Census population benchmarks and have been shown to replicate the results of well-known experimental studies (Coppock & McClellan, 2019). Table 1 in Appendix 2 compares our general population sample to known benchmarks for the US adult population.

In addition to our conjoint experiment, described below, we asked respondents a series of pretreatment questions to get a general sense of the public's perceptions of and opinions regarding the US military.⁶ First, we asked respondents to estimate the current percentage of women and non-white members of the US military. Second, we asked respondents the extent to which they agreed with the following statement: "The military does a good job promoting diversity in its ranks."⁷ These questions provide a descriptive sense of our sample's general attitudes toward the military.

Conjoint Experiment Design

To understand what the public weighs when asked to choose between candidates for promotion in the military, we fielded a conjoint experiment (Strezhnev et al., 2013; Hainmueller et al., 2014).⁸ Respondents were provided with the following information, before being presented with two profiles of candidates: "Please read the description of the potential candidates for general carefully. Less than 1% of individuals in the military serve in this role. Then, please indicate which of the two candidates you would personally prefer to see promoted to general."

We varied 8 total attributes of the candidates for promotion. Four of these attributes concern the ascriptive identity of the candidates for promotion: (1) the race of the candidates; (2) the gender of the candidates; (3) the sexual orientation of the candidates; and (4) the marital status of the candidates. The other four of the attributes concerned facts about the candidates' military service and experience: (1) the branch the candidate serves in; (2) the candidates' number of years of service; (3) the candidates' number of deployments; and (4) whether the candidate has

combat experience. Table 2 outlines the 8 attributes, along with the levels of each attribute. All attributes were randomly ordered and assigned. Figure 1 displays an example task that respondents might be asked to evaluate, to provide a sense of the conjoint design and layout of the experiment. Questions regarding a service member's sexual orientation, marital status, and race would not be explicit features of a promotion packet. However, we do not expect the public to have significant experience with the inner workings of promotion boards, and the inclusion of such attributes allows us to understand the impact of ascriptive identity as well as the role of military experience. While the differences between our conjoint experiment and actual promotion boards might affect the responses of a military sample, our experiment allows us to analyze core aspects of diversity and inclusion in a way that makes sense for our survey sample of the public.

The attributes (e.g., Race or Combat Experience) were randomly ordered in each task, so as not to introduce order effects. To prevent implausible scenarios from occurring in our study, we imposed the following restrictions:

1. If the candidate does not have combat experience, then they cannot have deployments (3, 10, 20).
2. If the candidate has 10 years of service, they cannot have 20 deployments.
3. If the candidate has combat experience, they cannot have 0 deployments.

After each task, we ask respondents to choose between one of the two candidates: "If you had to choose between them, which of these two candidates should be given priority to receive a promotion to general?" [Candidate A or Candidate B]. This binary choice question is the dependent variable in our study. Each respondent completed 5 promotion tasks. Our respondents completed, in total, 3,685 promotion choices, viewing 7370 total promotion profiles.

There are several advantages to a conjoint experimental design compared to other forms of survey experiments (Hainmeuller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2013). First, conjoint experimental designs allow researchers to vary multiple pieces of information at once, instead of one dimension at a time (ibid., 3). Second, conjoint analysis “estimates the effects of multiple treatment components in terms of a single behavioral outcome and thus allows researchers to evaluate the relative explanatory power of different theories” (ibid.). In our case, we can test, for example, to what extent identities or objective career traits matter simultaneously. Finally, because conjoint experiments provide respondents with multiple reasons for choosing one profile over another, conjoint experiments may limit social desirability effects, allowing respondents’ true attitudes to emerge (ibid.). In other words, we might expect that respondents would be unwilling to admit that they would prefer a White candidate to an African American candidate, or a heterosexual candidate to a homosexual or transgender candidate. Conjoint studies limit the extent to which respondents feel the pressures of such social desirability effects, thus allowing their concealed preferences to be revealed in our analyses (Horiuchi et al., 2020).

While there are important advantages to conjoint experiments, our study is not without limitations. Because all surveys are snapshots in time and of a given political context, we cannot provide a sense of how the results in this study might change over time. Similarly, it is important to note that our study was conducted a month before the November 2020 elections. While we do not believe, given rampant polarization and partisanship in the United States, that a different fielding date would have changed the results, we acknowledge that the survey takes place in a broader politically divisive moment.⁹

Results

Descriptive Results

We asked respondents to estimate the percentage of nonwhite individuals serving in the US military, as well as the percentage of women serving in the US military. The median respondent in our sample estimated that the US military was comprised of between 21 and 30 percent nonwhite servicemembers, while the median respondent in our sample estimated that the US military was comprised of 11 to 20 percent women. The median respondent—with respect to both race and gender—correctly estimated the percentage of each category serving in the US military.¹⁰ Figure 2 provides a histogram of respondent estimates for each question. Finally, we asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: “The military does a good job promoting diversity in its ranks.” Figure 3 displays respondents’ agreement or disagreement as percentages by gender, race, and military service. While between 71 and 78 percent of white, male, and veteran/active-duty respondents agreed with the statement, only 61 percent and 60 percent of women and nonwhite respondents agreed, respectively. This shows a substantive difference descriptively among respondents in our sample over whether the military does—or does not—promote diversity in its ranks. While our respondents seemed, overall, to choose the correct makeup of the US military, their perceptions of whether such diversity was making its way through the ranks differed according to their own identity. We next turn to our experiment.

Conjoint Experiment Results

The figures that follow display the results for respondents in our sample, with dots for point estimates and the lines representing 95% confidence intervals for each attribute. We first present the conjoint results for the full sample, before splitting the sample along ideology, gender, and self-reported veteran or active-duty status. The base categories in the analysis are listed under each attribute. For example, the base category for the “branch” attribute is the Air

Force. After unpacking the results of the conjoint experiment among all respondents in our sample, we then compare the responses of conservative versus liberal respondents and male versus female respondents. Finally, we present the results from respondents who self-identify as veterans or active duty servicemembers, who constitute a small number of respondents in our sample (14%; N=102).

Experience

In-line with Hypothesis 1, and as Figure 4 demonstrates, we find that respondents are more likely to promote candidates who have more experience, as evidenced in the number of years served, number of times deployed, or whether they have combat experience. We do not find any significant penalties or benefits for candidates across different service branches. Respondents, in other words, do not have a preference from a candidate who is, for example, from the Air Forces versus the Marines, or the Army versus the Navy. We find that combat experience is weighed heavily by respondents: candidates with combat experience are 17 percentage points more likely to be chosen for promotion than those candidates without combat experience ($p<0.001$). Moreover, candidates with 20 or 30 years of service are 8 and 17 percentage points more likely to be chosen for promotion, respectively, than those candidates with 10 years of service ($p<0.001$ for both). Finally, we find that the number of deployments a candidate has also matters when respondents consider which candidate to promote. Candidates with 10 or 20 deployments are 11 and 19 percentage points more likely to be chosen for promotion, respectively, than those candidates with 0 deployments ($p<0.001$ for both). In summary, respondents in our sample credited candidates for promotion based on their combat experience, years of service, and number of deployments. They did not, however, prioritize the branch of the candidate in making their decisions. These findings lend support to Hypothesis 1.

Identity

We find mixed support for Hypotheses 2 and 3 among our whole sample. First, we do not find evidence among our respondents that the candidates' gender or marital status matters when it comes to promotion decisions (See Figure 4). In other words, women (or men) are not penalized in the promotion decisions of respondents, nor are married (or unmarried) candidates. This is positive from the perspective of diversifying the military when it comes to gender.

However, with respect to race and sexuality, we find differences among candidate attributes. Specifically, we find that, with respect to race, candidates who are identified as Hispanic/Latino are 2.5 percentage points less likely to be chosen for promotion relative to White candidates ($p=0.06$). We do not find, among our whole sample, that Black candidates are less likely to be promoted than White candidates. In short, there is some evidence, among all respondents, that there is a bias against Hispanic/Latino candidates.

Moreover, with respect to sexual orientation, we find that the candidates' sexual orientation is weighed heavily by respondents, more so than any other identity attribute: candidates who are homosexual are 7 percentage points less likely to be chosen for promotion than those candidates who are heterosexual ($p<0.001$). Further, we find that candidates who are transgender are 12 percentage points less likely to be chosen for promotion than those candidates who are heterosexual ($p<0.001$).

In conclusion, respondents weighed some characteristics of the candidates when making decisions in significant ways, particularly the sexual orientation of the candidate. From our experimental results, it suggests that the largest bias exhibited by our sample is with respect to a candidate's sexual orientation than other factors, in support of Hypothesis 3.

Conservatives and Liberals

We hypothesized that political ideology, alongside respondents' own identities, would be a significant point of difference in our sample, because political ideology has been shown to be a major cleavage between individuals when it comes to views of race, gender, and sexuality (Graham et al., 2013, p. 68; Haidt, 2012; Norton & Herek, 2013). Previous research has also highlighted that those who have negative feelings toward individuals who identify as homosexual hold similar—and often *more negative*—feelings towards individuals who are transgender, especially among conservatives (Moradi & Miller, 2010, p. 405; Norton & Herek, 2013). Figure 5 displays the results for conservatives (Left) versus liberals (Right).¹¹ In support of Hypothesis 5, conservative respondents were less willing to promote Hispanic/Latino candidates, as well as homosexual and transgender candidates. Specifically, among conservative respondents, candidates who are identified as Hispanic/Latino are 4.3 percentage points less likely to be chosen for promotion relative to White candidates ($p=0.03$).

We also find that the candidates' sexual orientation is weighed heavily by conservative respondents, in line with Hypothesis 5. Candidates who are homosexual are 11 percentage points less likely to be chosen for promotion than those candidates who are heterosexual among our conservative respondents ($p<0.001$). Further, we find that candidates who are transgender are 19 percentage points less likely to be chosen for promotion among conservatives than those candidates who are heterosexual ($p<0.001$). Therefore, conservative respondents are most averse to candidates who are transgender.

Meanwhile, liberals are no more or less likely to promote a candidate based on their race (Figure 5). However, among our liberal respondents, we find that candidates who are transgender are 4 percentage points less likely to be chosen for promotion than those candidates who are heterosexual ($p=0.04$). Liberal respondents do not discount individuals for promotion who are

homosexual, relative to heterosexual candidates. There are, therefore, some of the same hesitancy among liberal respondents when it comes to promoting transgender candidates.

In summary, conservatives are more likely than liberals to discount candidates for promotion based on their race (particularly Hispanic/Latino candidates) and are more likely to discount candidates based on their sexual orientation. However, liberals still discount candidates who are transgender, although the percentage is much smaller (4 percentage points for liberals versus 19 for conservatives).

Men and Women

We hypothesized that respondents' own identities, alongside political ideology would be a significant point of difference in our sample. Figure 6 displays the results for men (Left) versus women (Right). Like conservatives, male respondents were less willing to promote Hispanic/Latino candidates, as well as homosexual and transgender candidates. Specifically, among male respondents, candidates who are identified as Hispanic/Latino are 6 percentage points less likely to be chosen for promotion relative to White candidates ($p < 0.01$). We also find that the candidates' sexual orientation is weighed heavily by male respondents in our sample. The candidates who are homosexual are 9 percentage points less likely to be chosen for promotion than those candidates who are heterosexual ($p < 0.001$), while candidates who are transgender are 17 percentage points less likely to be chosen for promotion than those candidates who are heterosexual ($p < 0.001$) among our male respondents. Meanwhile, women are no more or less likely to promote a candidate based on their race (Figure 6). However, among our female respondents, we find that candidates who are transgender are 7 percentage points less likely to be chosen for promotion than those candidates who are heterosexual ($p < 0.01$). In short, male respondents--like conservative respondents—are more likely than female respondents to discount

candidates for promotion based on their race (particularly Hispanic/Latino candidates) and are more likely to discount candidates based on their sexual orientation. Female respondents—like liberals outlined above—still exhibit discounting behavior when it comes to candidates who are transgender, although, again, the percentage is smaller than for males (7 percentage points for women versus 17 percentage points for men).

Self-Identified Veterans and Active-Duty Service Members

Figure 7 displays the results for veterans and active-duty service members (N=102). Due to the small sample size of active-duty or veteran service members, the 95% confidence intervals are large. Moreover, it is important to note that respondents who have served in the military might have different views from the much smaller number of individuals who sit on promotion boards. However, we find that respondents who serve(d) in the US military do not significantly discount candidates based on their gender or race. However, we do find that respondents who serve(d) in the US military prefer candidates who are heterosexual at the expense of homosexual and transgender candidates: candidates who are homosexual are 16 percentage points less likely to be chosen for promotion than those candidates who are heterosexual ($p<0.001$). Further, we find that candidates who are transgender are 18 percentage points less likely to be chosen for promotion among our small veteran and active-duty sample than those candidates who are heterosexual ($p<0.001$). However, because of the small number of respondents who self-identify as a veteran or active-duty service member, we urge caution when interpreting these results.

Conclusion

Our results suggest some reason for optimism regarding support for military efforts to diversify and be more inclusive: respondents in our sample, overall, did not seem to discriminate based on gender or against African American candidates when making promotion decisions.

Respondents also took career experiences seriously while making their decisions. While our results highlight areas in which there appears—at least in our sample—to be less discrimination in some categories, there remains strong biases against certain groups serving in the top ranks of the US military.

As we note throughout this article, representation and diversity in the US military matters. Recent efforts, such as those put forward by the US Army in 2020, can only help in improving diversity in the military. Our study has sought to examine these dynamics from the civil side of the civil-military relationship, and the results, we argue, speak more broadly than promotion to how the public understands military service more broadly. While the public does not make promotion decisions, this experiment is instructive for two reasons. First, using a conjoint approach, we can get a sense of what the public thinks is important with respect to promotion. This is useful for establishing a baseline understanding of what characteristics – both in terms of military experience and demographics – the public associates with military leadership. The emphasis on combat experience and number of deployments suggest that the public still differentiates between combat and all other military specializations, even though excelling in combat might not make someone the best at logistics, organization, or leadership. We also found that the public was less likely to promote homosexual or transgender servicemembers, suggesting that the public continues to see these groups as less fit for leadership positions. Understanding these biases and preferences may help in encouraging the military to address issues of promotion. Second, this study speaks more broadly to how the public understands military service: who the public thinks should serve in the upper echelons of the US military, and who they think are “ideal” service members. As the US military embarks on

concerted efforts to increase diversity within the top ranks, our findings serve as an indication of how much work lies ahead to transform the public's image of the "ideal" service member.

It is important to also note several limitations to the study. First, as a single-shot study, we cannot speak to variation over time in how the public may understand diversity in the military and choose candidates for promotion. Second, while we can report on *who* respondents chose for promotion, we cannot fully explain *why* respondents chose these options. Future research should ask follow-up questions that ask respondents why they made their decisions. Third, we did not include some context that may have been important for respondents: that candidates for promotion face an "up or out" system in which, if they are not promoted, they leave the military. This could affect how respondents make their decisions, though we expect it to affect the magnitude, rather than the direction, of our effects.

This study suggests several other avenues for future research. First, future research could vary the context of the conjoint experiment. For example, instead of asking respondents who should be promoted, studies could ask who should be allowed to serve, or who should lead the military. Second, our study did not allow for open-ended responses. Future studies could allow space for respondents to explain their reasoning. Third, our sample of veterans and active duty servicemembers is small. Future research could oversample, or target, such populations to understand the views of those within, or who have served, in the military. Fourth, our results, and those of future surveys, could be compared to the actual results of promotion boards: are there differences that emerge between civilian and military evaluators? How do the promotion materials and their presentation affect promotion decisions?¹² Fifth, future research could conduct this study cross-nationally to understand how other publics respond to similar experiments and whether beliefs regarding who should be promoted differ across nations.

Tables

Table 1: Sexual and racial diversity among US military officers

Pay Grade	Army	Navy	Marine Corps	Air Force	Total
O1-O3 (61% of total officers)	79% men, 21 % women 25.9% racial minorities	78% men, 22% women 23.6% racial minorities	91% men, 9% women 20.1% racial minorities	76% men, 24% women 23.2% racial minorities	80% men, 20% women 24% racial minorities
O4-O6 (38% of total officers)	83% men, 17% women 25.1% racial minorities	85% men, 15% women 19% racial minorities	94% men, 6% women 18.6% racial minorities	82% men, 18% women 18.9% racial minorities	84% men, 16% women 21.1% racial minorities
O7-O10 (0.4% of total officers)	93% men, 7% women 18.2% racial minorities	92% men, 8% women 8.9% racial minorities	98% men, 2% women 11.8% racial minorities	91% men, 9% women 8.4% racial minorities	92% men, 8% women 12.3% racial minorities
Total	Black: 12.1% White: 73.5%	Black: 7.8% White: 77.7%	Black: 5.7% White: 79.7%	Black: 6.1% White: 78.7%	Black: 8.9% White: 91.1% Hispanic/Latino: 7.6%

Note: The Department of Defense does not include Hispanic as a minority race designation. The percentage of active-duty service members (officer and enlisted) who identify as Hispanic is 16%. O1-O3: 7.8% O4-O6: 6.0% O7-O10: 1.8%¹³

Table 2: Conjoint Study Treatments

Attribute	Candidate A	Candidate B
Race	African American White Hispanic/Latino	African American White Hispanic/Latino
Gender	Male Female	Male Female
Sexuality	Heterosexual Homosexual Transgender	Heterosexual Homosexual Transgender
Marital Status	Married Unmarried	Married Unmarried
Branch	Air Force Army Marines Navy	Air Force Army Marines Navy
Years of Service	10 20 30	10 20 30
Number of Deployments	0 3 10 20	0 3 10 20
Combat Experience	Yes No	Yes No

Note: attributes were randomly ordered for each task.

Figures

Figure 1: Example Conjoint Treatment

Please read the description of the potential candidates for general carefully. Less than 1% of individuals in the military serve in this role. Then, please indicate which of the two candidates you would personally prefer to see promoted to general.

Please carefully review the options detailed below, then please answer the questions.

	Candidate A	Candidate B
Number of Deployments	0	20
Years of Service	30	30
Race	White	African American
Combat Experience	No	Yes
Gender	Male	Female
Marital Status	Married	Married
Branch	Army	Navy
Sexuality	Transgender	Heterosexual

Figure 2

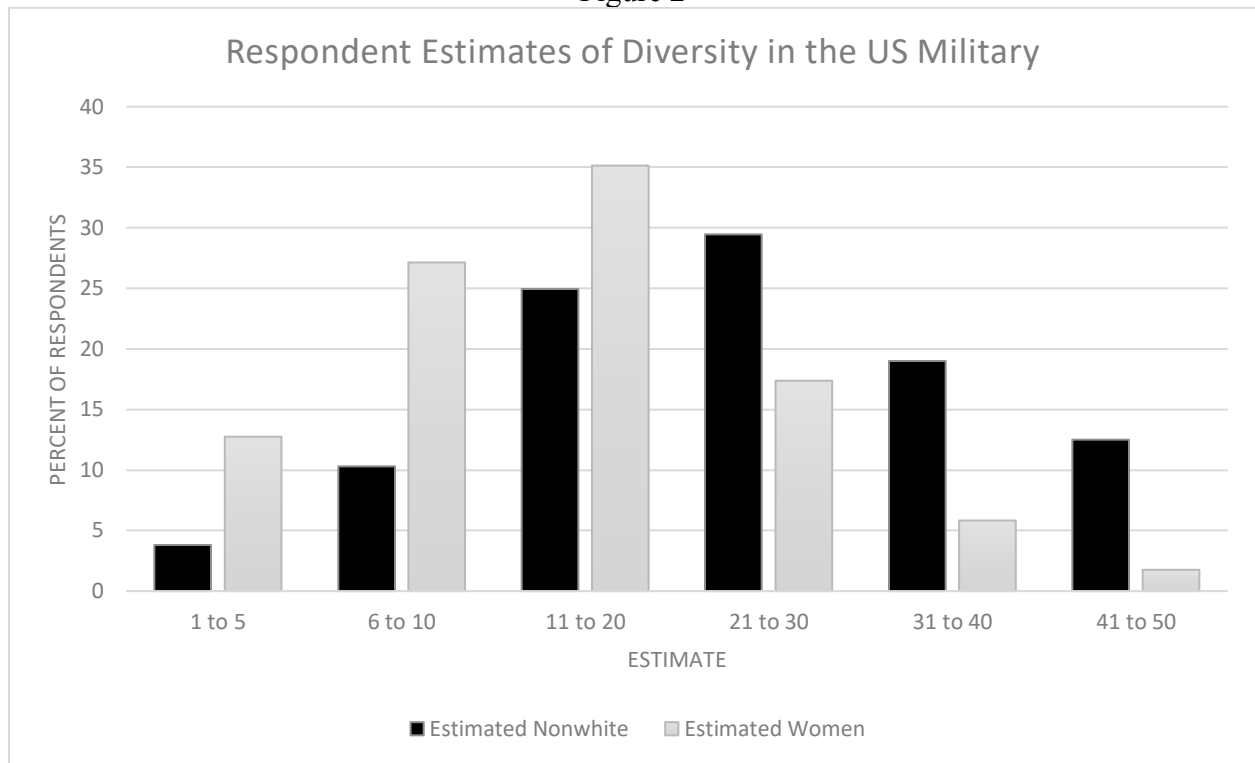


Figure 3

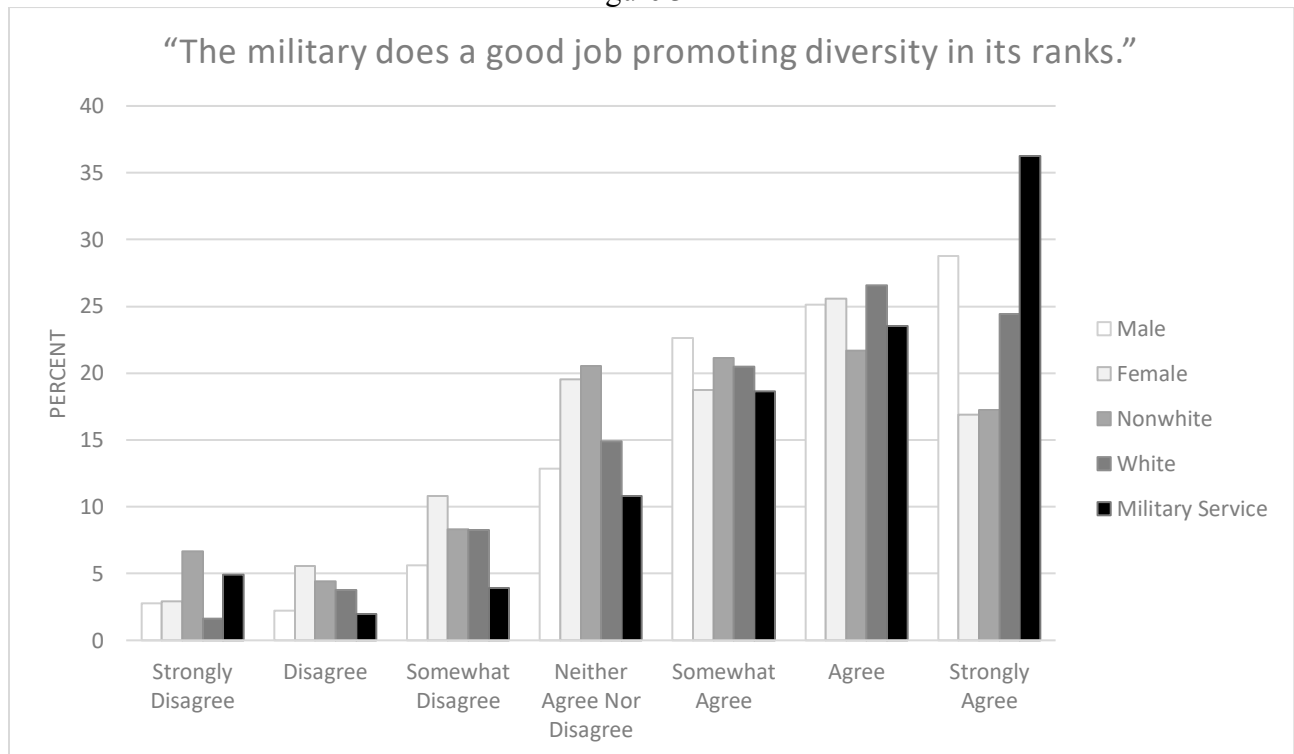


Figure 4: Effects of Candidate Attributes on Probability of Being Preferred for Promotion
All Respondents¹⁴

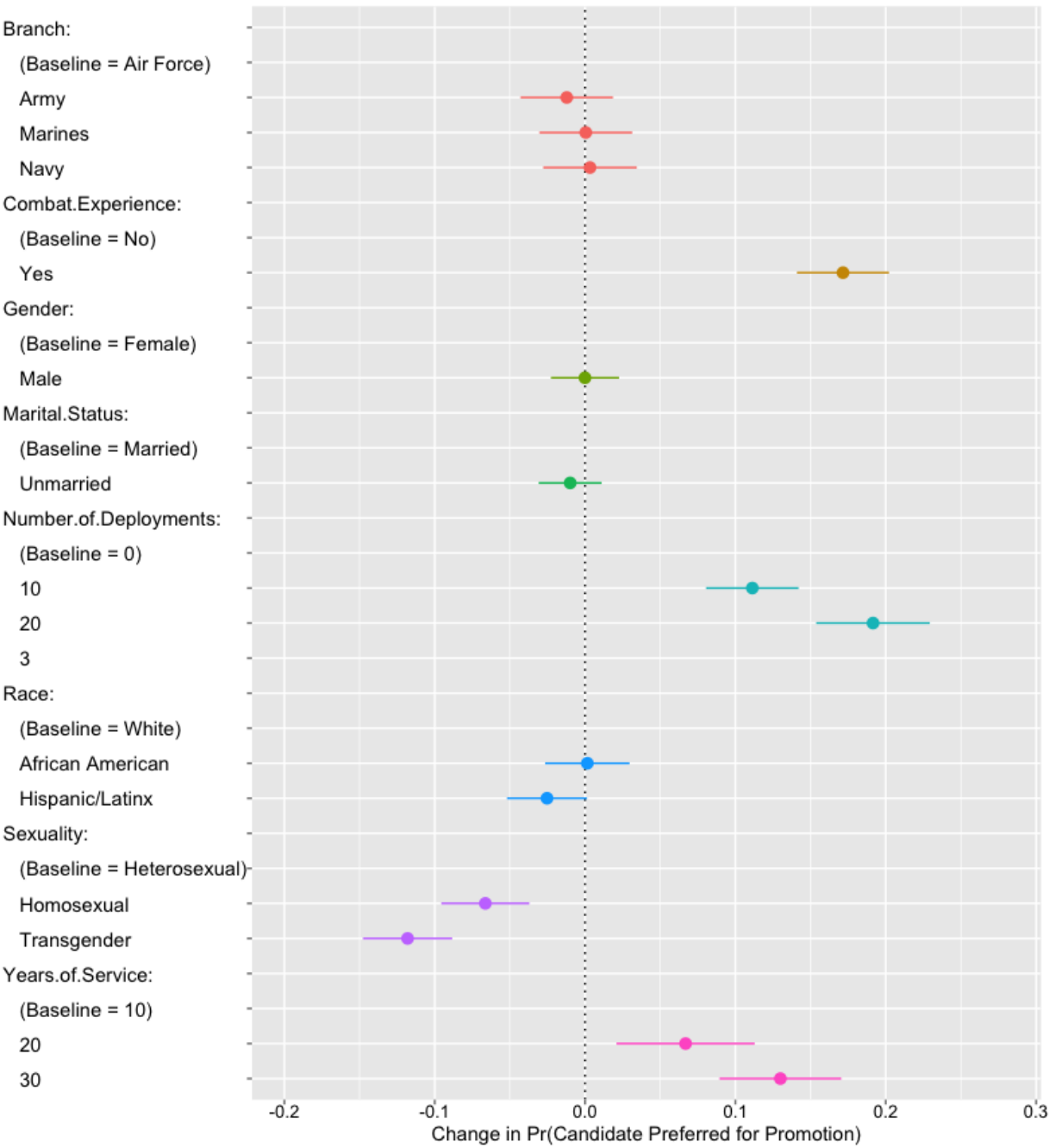


Figure 5: Effects of Candidate Attributes on Probability of Being Preferred for Promotion by Respondent Ideology¹⁵

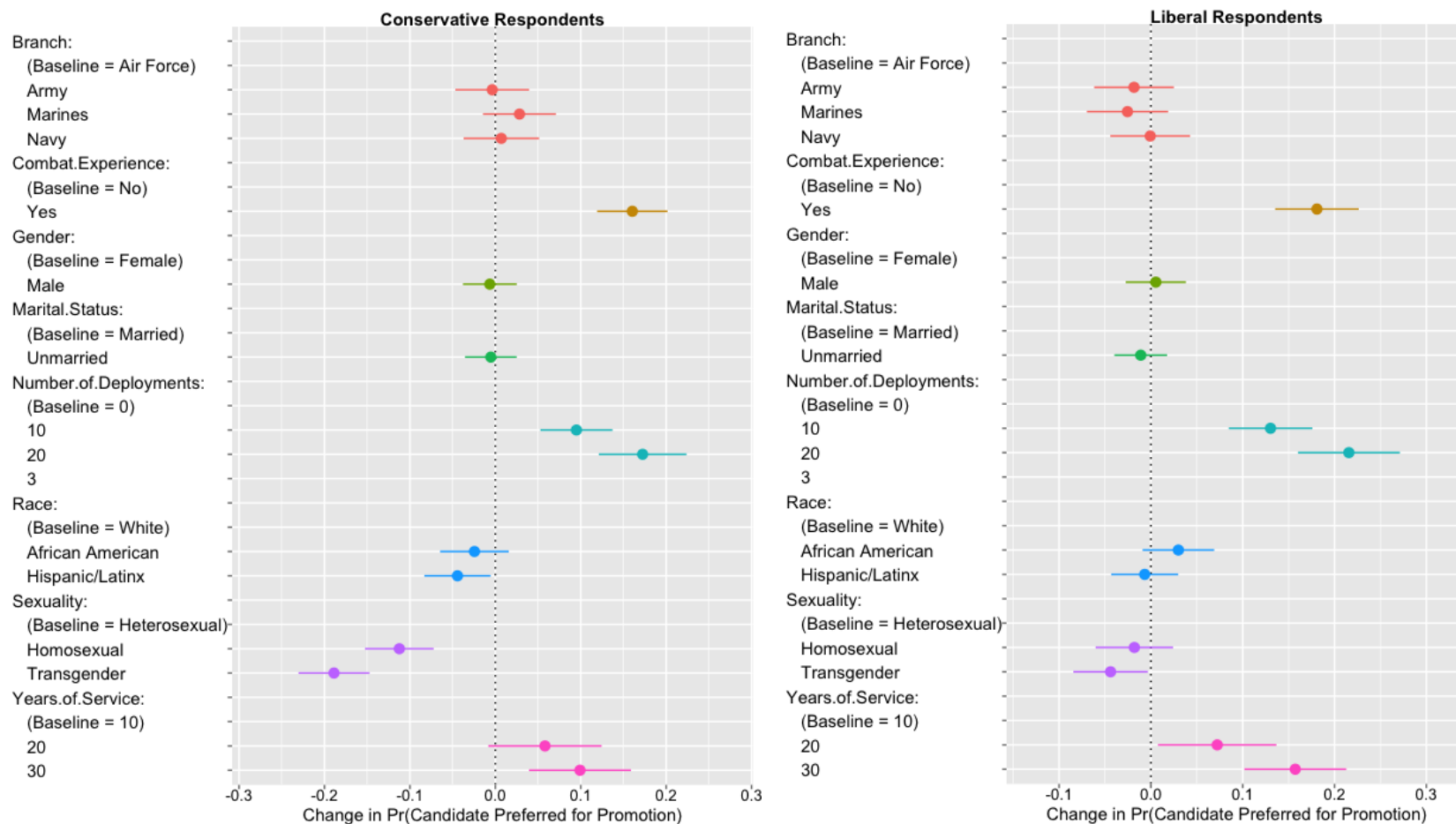
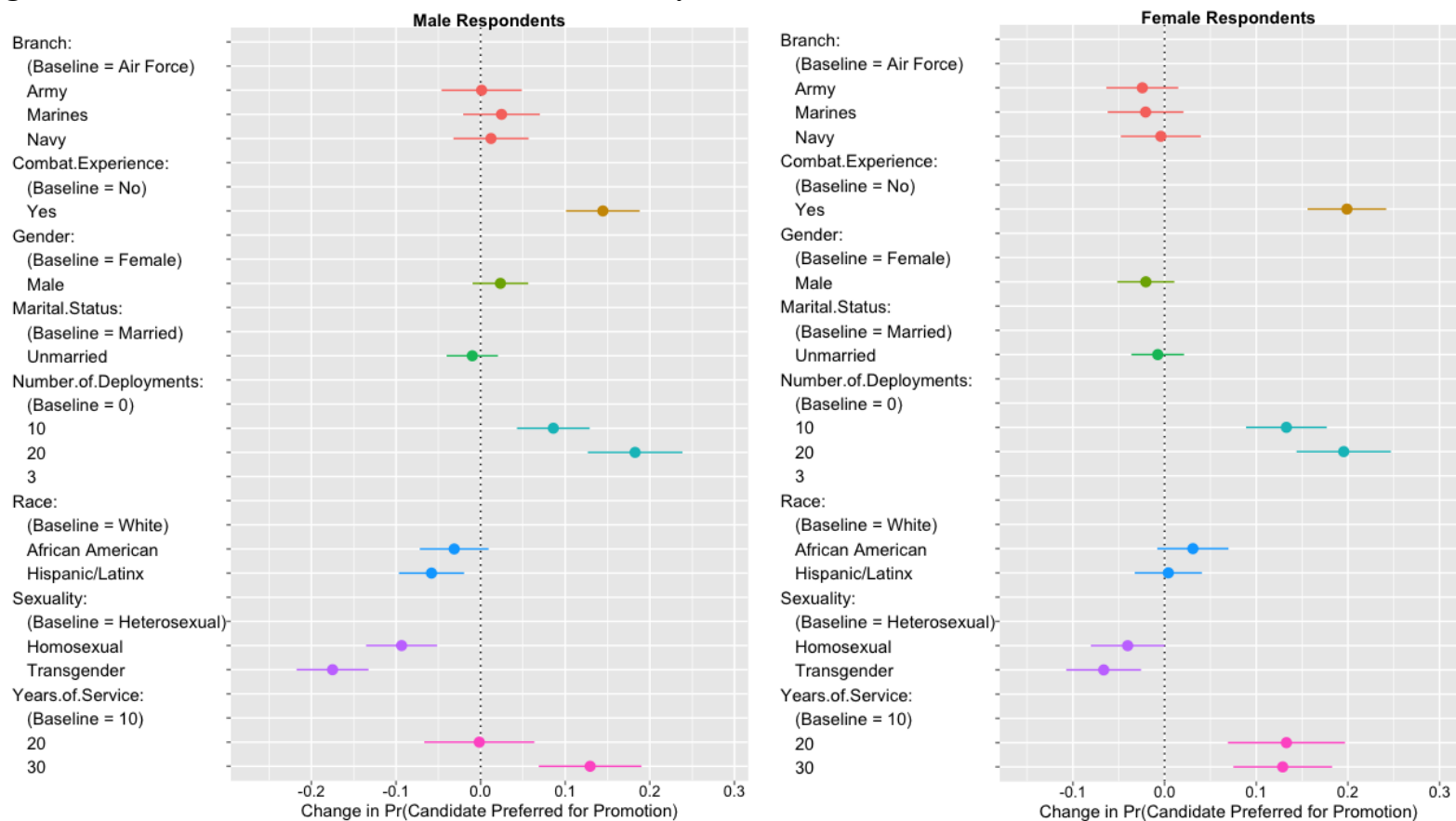
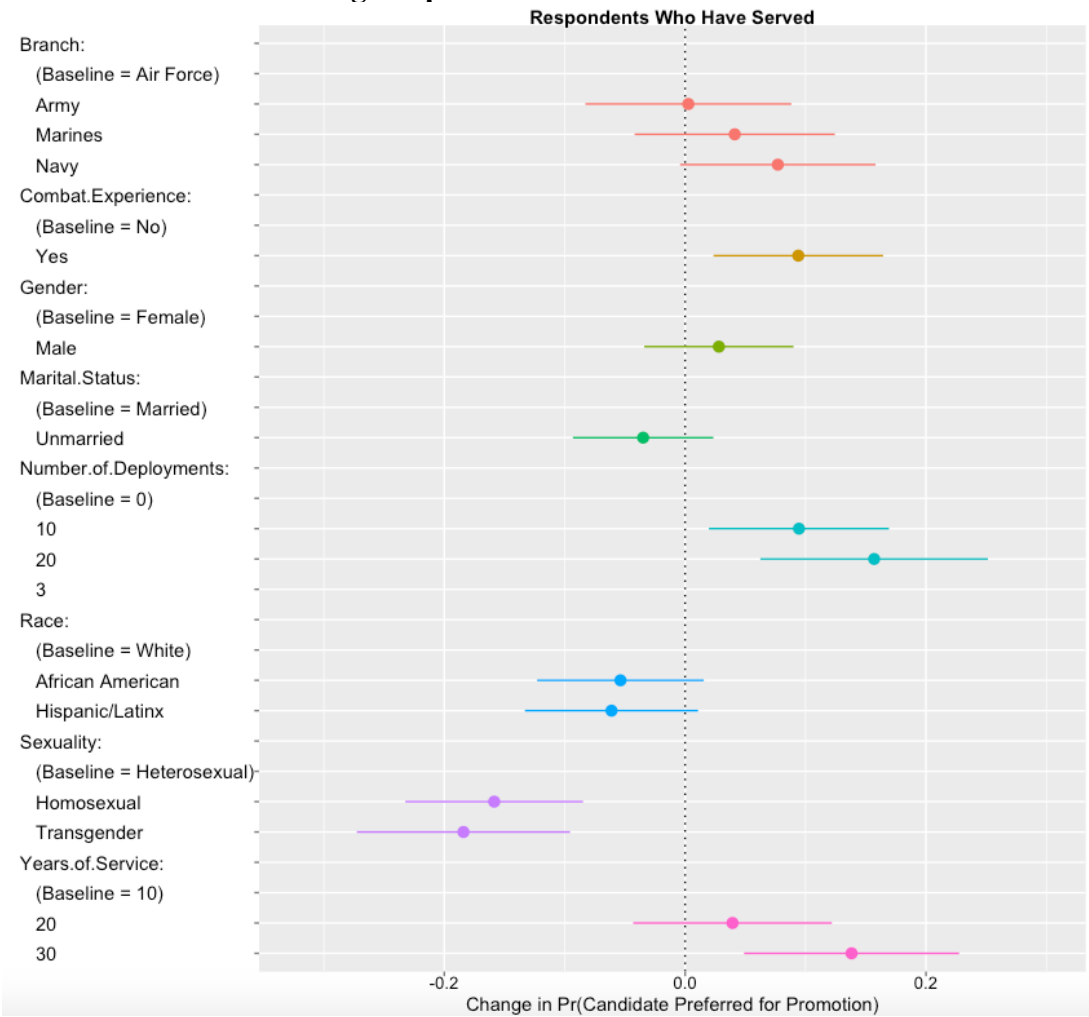


Figure 6: Effects of Candidate Attributes on Probability of Being Preferred for Promotion by Gender of Respondent¹⁶



**Figure 7: Effects of Candidate Attributes on Probability of Being Preferred for Promotion
Among Respondents Who Have Served¹⁷**



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Notes

¹ Data according to the US Census Bureau, last updated April 2019. Available at:

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/LFE046219>; U.S. Air Force, “Total Force Military Demographics,” 2016, p. 41. Available at:

<https://diversity.defense.gov/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=gxMVqhkaHh8%3D&portalid=51>. For a discussion of Hispanics in the US military, see De Angelis, 2017.

² U.S. Department of Defense, Office for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, “Portrait of Hispanic Active Duty Service Members,” 2019. Available at:

https://diversity.defense.gov/Portals/51/Documents/Demographics_Info/Demographic%20Portrait%20of%20Hispanic%20Active%20Duty%20Service%20Members%20and%20DoD%20GS%20Civilians.pdf?ver=2019-02-27-125522-177.

³ The speakers included Generals James Mattis, John Kelly, John Allen, Richard Myers, Martin Dempsey, Raymond Thomas, and Mike Hayden and Admirals Mike Mullen, William McRaven, and James Stavridis.

⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, “2018 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community,” 2018, p. 14.

Available at <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2018-demographics-report.pdf>.

⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, “2018 Demographics: Profile of the Military Community,” 2018, p. 28.

Available at <https://download.militaryonesource.mil/12038/MOS/Reports/2018-demographics-report.pdf>.

⁶ We also ask presented respondents with an attention check question to ensure that respondents were paying attention, as well as a CAPTCHA question to ensure that respondents were not ‘bots.’

⁷ While these questions appeared pre-treatment, we are not concerned about treatment effects generated by

posing these questions, for two reasons. First, such treatment effects, presumably, would make respondents more conscious of issues of diversity—though we do not suggest as such in the questions—and would therefore be a “hard test” for our experiment. Second, as we note in the conjoint experiment design section, the nature of the conjoint experiment means that issues of social desirability are reduced.

⁸ See Appendix 3 for the Relevant Survey Questions

⁹ Although we fielded our survey during the lead up to the 2020 Presidential Election, including immediately before the October 22, 2020 debate, viewership data and debate transcripts suggest that these events would not have significantly affected our findings. According to Nielsen, the final presidential debate on October 22 drew only 63 million viewers, which was lower than the viewership for each of the 2016 presidential debates and lower than the September 29, 2020 debate. Further, the election did not hinge on the results of military promotion boards. In the October 22 debate, the military was only

mentioned five times; four of those were in response to questions about Operation Warp Speed's vaccine development and distribution plans. The final mention of the military was from then-candidate Biden about how he would address tensions between China, North Korea, and South Korea. The minimal emphasis on the military, and the absence of discussion about the military's policies gives us increased confidence that neither the debate nor the election increased (or decreased) the salience of military policies for the U.S. public. See "Media Advisory: Final Presidential Debate of 2020 Draws 63 million Viewers," *Nielsen*, 23 October 2020, <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/press-releases/2020/media-advisory-final-presidential-debate-of-2020-draws-63-million-viewers/>. Debate transcript obtained from the Commission on Presidential Debates, <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-22-2020-debate-transcript/>.

¹⁰ We cannot discount the possibility that respondents searched for the answers to these questions on their own.

¹¹ For this analysis, we group all respondents into either the liberal or conservative group. Moderates (N= 249) were asked a follow-up question which asked them whether they leaned conservative or liberal. Therefore, the liberal and conservative groups include both strong liberals/conservatives as well as leaners.

¹² Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this line of future inquiry.

¹³ Data compiled from: U.S. Air Force, "Total Force Military Demographics," 2016, p. 41. Available at: <https://diversity.defense.gov/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=gxMVqhkaHh8%3D&portalid=51>; Kamarck 2019, 21.

¹⁴ Due to profile restrictions (See Appendix 1, Section 1), the number of deployments omits a coefficient for 3 deployments. Predictably, however, the coefficient for 3 deployments when combat experience is removed is less than that for 10 and 20 deployments. For the underlying results used to produce this figure, see Appendix 2, Section 2, Table 1.

¹⁵ Due to profile restrictions (See Appendix 1, Section 1), the number of deployments omits a coefficient for 3 deployments. Predictably, however, the coefficient for 3 deployments when combat experience is removed is less than that for 10 and 20 deployments. For the underlying results used to produce this figure, see Appendix 2, Section 2, Tables 2 and 3.

¹⁶ Due to profile restrictions (See Appendix 1, Section 1), the number of deployments omits a coefficient for 3 deployments. Predictably, however, the coefficient for 3 deployments when combat experience is removed is less than that for 10 and 20 deployments. For the underlying results used to produce this figure, see Appendix 2, Section 2, Tables 4 and 5.

¹⁷ Due to profile restrictions (See Appendix 1, Section 1), the number of deployments omits a coefficient for 3 deployments. Predictably, however, the coefficient for 3 deployments when combat experience is removed is less than that for 10 and 20 deployments. For the underlying results used to produce this figure, see Appendix 2, Section 2, Table 6.