

Staying Tuned: LGBTQIA Politics in the Trump Era

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“Donald Trump’s inauguration ceremony as president of the United States had scarcely ended when reports surfaced that the new administration had removed reference to LGBT issues from the White House website. Indeed, a search for “LGBT” now returns a page with the message ‘Thank you for your interest in this subject,’ asking the thwarted researcher to ‘stay tuned.’”

— Julie Moreau

Since Donald Trump took office in 2017, the White House has issued several clear anti-LGBTQIA signals and initiatives.¹ Reflecting on Trump’s election as U.S. president, many political scientists have analyzed his rise in the context of the literature on American political development (e.g., Skowronek 2017) and comparative governments (e.g., Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Some of this work has received significant

1. In this introduction, we use the term “LGBTQIA politics” (LGBTQIA standing for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual/allied) to refer to struggles to end discrimination, persecution, and marginalization based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Naming is a hotly debated political question. In general, there has been a trend toward inclusivity in nomenclature, with the acronym expanding to incorporate minority sexual and gender identities as they gain political traction as well as more open-ended identities such as “queer” or “questioning.” One important critique of the acronym is that it is based on English-language terms for minority sexual and gender identities and thus erases cultural and linguistic variation of both identity and practice as well as reinforces Western cultural and linguistic dominance. In our use of the acronym, we do not intend to foreclose options for politics beyond those signaled with this term. Further, because naming is an important and ongoing political question, we do not impose conformity of nomenclature in this special issue and leave the choice of how to refer to the movement up to each contributor.

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media attention and attained a popular readership. The American political development analyses have often focused on the lens of political time and potential party realignment, exploring the possibility of a “disjunctive presidency,” which foretells the demise of the coalition that has enabled the Republican Party to dominate U.S. politics since the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s. Comparative work in the discipline argues that Trump initiatives are threatening to democratic principles, portending a turn toward authoritarianism that parallels the rise of right-wing authoritarian leaders across the globe.

LGBTQIA issues do not typically figure prominently in these accounts, despite the fact that virulently anti-LGBTQIA agendas are often part and parcel of the coalition-building, autocratic initiatives that are being analyzed. The articles in this special issue address this gap, exploring what LGBTQIA politics can add to the analysis of politics more broadly in the Trump era and how Trumpian politics may affect the study of LGBTQIA politics. Each of the articles in this special issue of *Politics & Gender* explores these questions through literatures of the discipline of political science (such as comparative politics and democratic theory, interest groups and agenda formation, and human rights), as well as through more interdisciplinary and intersectional literatures (such as reproductive justice and queer theory). In addition, six books that focus on LGBTQIA politics are reviewed in a segment of this issue’s “Reviews of Scholarship” section.

Since the beginning of his term in office, Trump has sent clear signals that his administration would pursue an anti-LGBTQIA agenda. The essays in this special issue highlight and link what might otherwise seem to be disparate attacks on LGBTQIA communities in various arenas of governance and law. Examples of some specific anti-LGBTQIA initiatives that we have already seen include attempting to bar transgender people from serving in the military, excluding federal employees who are transgender from protection against discrimination, and restricting restroom use of transgender people. In the articles for this special issue, authors discuss how domestic and international LGBTQIA nongovernmental organizations have reported that their typically scant resources have been further strained by responding to these challenges, which have further emboldened resistance to LGBTQIA rights and liberties. Further, they note that Trump’s use of incendiary rhetoric in mainstream social media against multiple marginalized groups, including his attacks on truth, also appear to have animated anti-LGBTQIA agendas.

There is growing evidence that the Trump administration aims to forward a long-term anti-LGBTQIA agenda that may extend beyond his presidency. For example, the Trump administration has removed questions about sexual orientation from the federal census, which will yield less information about LGBTQIA people and thus fewer resources for vital issues affecting the community. The Trump administration has also appointed people hostile to LGBTQIA issues to posts directly related to LGBTQIA issues, for example, the appointment of anti-LGBTQIA Christian conservative Sam Brownback to serve as ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom (Cynthia Burack, in this issue). Such appointments illustrate the Trump administration's pattern of appointing people whose political commitments challenge the missions of the agencies to which they have been appointed.

Anti-LGBTQIA leadership in these agencies is likely to result in additional shifts in domestic and international rhetoric and policy, as well as to long-term changes in bureaucratic policy and practices, such as gender categories on bureaucratic intake and assessment forms. The Trump administration has also kept various posts vacant, undermining the effectiveness of particular government agencies. An example of this pattern is that as of September 2018, the position of special envoy for the human rights of LGBTI persons in the U.S. State Department has yet to be filled (Burack, in this issue). Nonetheless, it should also be noted that some within the administration have refused to implement some of the new president's measures. For example, military leaders questioned the wisdom of a Trump tweet calling for transgender people to be excluded from serving in the armed forces, and after several successful challenges in federal court, this policy shift appears to have been abandoned, at least for the moment.

Many of the Trump administration's measures have been met with fierce resistance from people in the United States and around the world. For example, millions of women and allies marched worldwide in protest the day after Trump's inauguration. These large-scale resistance efforts often highlight the close relation of multiple prongs of social justice struggles in resistance to Trump's initiative. For example, one of the first unity principles of the 2017 Women's March declared that "LGBTQIA Rights are Human Rights and . . . it is our obligation to uplift, expand, and protect the rights of our gay, lesbian, bi, queer, trans, or gender non-conforming brothers, sisters and siblings. We must have the power to control our bodies and be free from gender norms, expectations, and stereotypes" (<https://www.womensmarch.com/unity-principles/>). The #MeToo movement arose in the

wake of the Women's March in part because of the outrage over Trump's own history of sexual harassment, highlighted in the release of the video-tape of earlier comments he made on the *Access Hollywood* television show in which he bragged about such behavior. This movement has led to high profile resignations of public servants and party leaders who have allegedly engaged in serial sexual harassment such as Senator Al Franken (D-MN) and Steve Wynn (former finance chair of the Republican National Committee).

Huge crowds of people, including immigration attorneys offering their professional services at no charge, immediately flocked to airports in various cities across the United States following Trump's announcement of a ban on Muslims' entry into the country shortly after the inauguration. Since that time, various federal courts have found the ban unconstitutional and the administration has been forced to narrow the scope of the policy. The rulings of federal courts have also foiled the Trump administration's drive to deport Dreamers by March 5, 2018. In addition, a federal appeals court has issued a decision that supports the right of gays and lesbians to be free from discrimination at work by including sexual orientation in the Civil Rights Act. After 17 high school students in Parkland, Florida, were shot with assault weapons and killed in their school, surviving students launched a nationwide movement for gun control. As of this writing, this gun control-focused aspect of the resistance has led to the adoption of laws restricting the availability of these weapons in Florida, long considered an intractably pro-gun state, and other states may soon follow. In response to public pressure, many private corporations have also stopped doing business with the National Rifle Association.

In addition to these movements, there have been important electoral victories in the struggle against the Trump administration that could portend an electoral reversal for the Republican Party as soon as the 2018 midterm elections and possibly in 2020. These electoral examples include Doug Jones's victory in Alabama, the extremely close elections in Virginia that nearly turned a long-standing red state blue (but for a random tie-breaking slip of paper in a key race that was literally pulled out of a hat), as well as state legislature wins in solidly red districts in Wisconsin and Pennsylvania.

In this volume, readers will find a call to intensify the multiple ways we do LGBTQIA politics in the academy and in the street, staying alert to the ways that anti-LGBTQIA measures are linked to Trump's antidemocratic, white nationalist agenda. In such a situation, we can see that LGBTQIA

issues matter on their own in order to secure the status and life circumstances for LGBTQIA people, for example expanding trans bathroom accessibility, working against anti-trans policies in the military, removing LGBTQIA experiences from public school sex education curricula, and challenging initiatives such as those proposed by law makers in Alabama that would ban LGBTQIA adults from adopting children. At the same time that building a movement for issues specific to LGBTQIA individuals and communities is important, we also can see the importance of drawing out the linkages of LGBTQIA politics to broader phenomena. In this special issue, scholars look at the ways that LGBTQIA analysis and activism help us see and address broader issues such as an independent judiciary, a robust civil sphere, democratization, citizenship rights, and civil rights generally. In the past, scholars and activist leaders only made LGBTQIA arguments if they showed “broader” impact, and not because LGBTQIA concerns matter on their own. At this historical juncture, we can do both at the same time in a multitiered movement that is both grassroots and abstract and that is connected with both national and international efforts.

Trump has leveled attacks on multiple groups, LGBTQIA populations among them. These attacks are rooted in long standing modes of oppression but are being mobilized in new ways in the Trump era. As this special issue makes clear, addressing these attacks requires a connected and multifaceted approach both because the populations themselves are overlapping (for example, queers and Muslims, queers and those seeking reproductive justice, etc.) but also because the attacks amplify and reinforce each other. Indeed, his attacks not only impact those particularly concerned with LGBTQIA justice matters but all of us.

The essays in this special issue were all written relatively early in Trump’s administration. In their respective pieces, each scholar analyzes unfolding events, rhetoric, and policies in order to understand and assess the potential impact of the Trump administration on their areas of study. In this rapidly developing context, distinct shifts in policy and trends in political approach have emerged. While the effects of the Trump administration’s signals and initiatives and the manner in which they may co-construct, amplify, and constrain each other is not fully clear, each of the articles in this special issue offers ample evidence of these trends. Grounded in different subfields and methodological approaches within political science, each piece documents and interprets the Trump administration’s use of LGBTQIA issues to forward the agenda of its fiercely loyal coalition of patriarchal Christian fundamentalists, white Christian supremacists,

nativists, and economic populists, while undermining democratic institutions and norms in favor of authoritarian and proto-fascist practices.

In “Queering Reproductive Justice in the Trump Era: A Note on Political Intersectionality,” Kimala Price clarifies that “given that political intersectionality is central to the mission, vision, and values of the reproductive justice movement,” we cannot accept a queer movement that stands apart from reproductive justice. In this piece, Price asks critical questions such as “What constitutes a gay rights issue, and who gets to decide that? What does it mean to queer reproductive justice? What are the implications of queering reproductive justice for political organizing and building coalitions? Are intersectionality and queerness incompatible frameworks?”

In “Trumpism, Citizenship, and the Future of the LGBTQ Movement,” Zein Murib draws on an analysis of LGBTQ political history to address some specific challenges that LGBTQ activists face under a Trump administration in which “precarious groups are targeted for ever-more scrutiny on the basis of their citizenship or claims to it.” Employing an intersectional framework, Murib points to the necessity of an LGBTQ politics that breaks “sharply with the citizenship and assimilation frame.” Murib argues instead for a “more decentralized political agenda, with the main features of this decentralization being a return to grassroots agenda setting at the local level to best assess and identify urgent sites of resistance, loosely associated coalitions of organizations focused on specific issues . . . and public education campaigns that aim to combat the swelling tide of resentment by indicating shared experiences of hardship, difficulty, and marginalization in politics and social life.”

In “Fagchild Tools: Softening the Body Politic and Sexualizing Paul Ryan in a Pussy-Grabbing Era,” Queer J. Thomas makes use of personal narrative to theorize what he calls “fagchild tools” as methods to resist assimilation to the demands of heteronormativity and to theorize new forms of sexual citizenship, or more full participation in democratic life. Based on the experiences of boys bullied as faggots, whose sexualities are conflated with femininity, Thomas’s “fagchild tools are technologies, strategies, behaviors, political stances, affects, and materialities that help queers survive, navigate, reshape, and flourish in oppressive sexual cultures.”

In “Trump in Transnational Perspective: Insights from Global LGBT Politics,” Julie Moreau analyzes Trump’s candidacy and his presidency for what it can teach us about increasingly transnational LGBT advocacy and politics. Conversely, she also examines the literature on LGBT

social movements in comparative and transnational perspective for what it might be able to tell us about U.S. politics in the Trump era. In her contribution to this special issue, Moreau argues that contextualizing Trump's presidency within a transnational perspective can enable us to "de-exceptionalize" this moment in U.S. politics. Doing so we will likely be able to see more clearly the processes of racialization and nation-building that are operative in trends of homonationalism globally. Additionally, de-exceptionalizing this moment in U.S. politics can demonstrate the need for U.S. actors to take note domestically of the critiques of rights-based approaches coming from the global South and the roles of elite homophobia in national politics.

In "SOGI Human Rights Assistance in the Time of Trump," Cynthia Burack analyzes "10 key data points" from Trump's first year in office in order to "provide some sense of what we might expect on commitment to SOGI [sexual orientation and gender identity] from the Trump administration." In particular, she argues that this early evidence points to a conclusion that differs somewhat from arguments that the Trump administration is "motivated by a particular animus toward LGBTQ/SOGI human rights." Instead, she suggests that the administration's anti-LGBTQIA impetus can best be understood by the explanation that the "Trump administration is prepared to discount human rights in favor of what the president and his closest advisors regard as a nationalist, 'America First,' agenda" and that "the probability that the administration will discount human rights likely increases when indifference or enmity toward categories of human rights or endangered people is popular with Trump supporters."

Taken together, these articles suggest that the current political order calls for the development of a movement that is multilevel, multi-issue, and transnational in scope rather than a movement that is single issue and U.S. isolationist and/or exceptionalist. Grounded in feminist, anti-racist, anti-nationalist, anti-ableist, and anti-classist critique and strategy which also challenge an increasingly virulent Christian hegemony, such a grassroots movement will do well to foreground the vectors of both sexual orientation and gender identity, individually and interactively. Based on critical analysis of LGBTQIA movement strategies over time, we see that the agenda-building process of the current resistance movement will likely be strongest when it centers the needs of diverse populations, particularly those of the most marginalized in the coalition, while also being flexible enough to address rights-based expectations. Such an approach should question administrative solutions that conform to

mainstream interest group politics too facilely and should avoid splitting LGBTQIA people and concerns. Indeed, as a group, the articles of this special issue outline the possibility of a dynamic resistance movement that takes affirmative care not to reinforce existent stigmas, medicalization, criminalization, and state power. In this historical moment, these analyses also point to the wisdom of paying close attention to the insights of non-conforming LGBTQIA populations, whose expressions and explorations are all too often marginalized, even within the movements for sexual and gender justice.

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