

Gender Ideology, the Far Right, and LGBTQ Politics

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ABSTRACT


“Gender ideology” rhetoric has diffused globally. Mobilized by a coalition of conservative actors, this discursive innovation helps to fuel the election of far-right politicians who scapegoat LGBTQ people, migrants, racial and ethnic minorities, and women as responsible for economic downturns as well as social and political disorder. This essay outlines the history and current landscape of gender ideology for political scientists and situates it in relation to the rise of far-right and authoritarian regimes globally. It builds on these political trends by concluding with a research agenda for scholars of LGBTQ politics to consider moving forward.

I was recently contacted by an independent researcher who was interested in conducting a background interview to discuss the connections between the attacks on LGBTQ people and the current assaults on US democracy. During our conversation, I learned that she had been commissioned by a prominent national LGBTQ interest group to write a white paper that would address major donors pulling their funds and redirecting them to political groups fighting to preserve democracy, especially in light of another possible Trump presidency. The goal for the researcher was simple: provide evidence that would persuade funders to reconsider pulling their donations by showing the connections between the far-right mobilizations represented by Trump and attacks on LGBTQ people.

We began the interview with the sort of rueful laugh that queer people have too many occasions to share with each other lately. This is because queer people generally like to laugh when they are together and also because it is fairly obvious to those of us under attack that the assaults on LGBTQ people and democracy are deeply interwoven. The immediacy of these threats is best represented in the concern over the Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025, which proposes significant alterations to voting and the structure of US government while also promising a return of “family values,” or coded language targeting gay men and lesbians (Theoharis and Barnes 2024). In the US, targeted groups include (but are not limited to) migrants against whom a purported war is being waged at the southern border, people who lost control over their bodily autonomy with the Supreme Court’s 2022 repeal of *Roe v Wade*, transgender people who begin each day with news of yet another ban on some aspect of their lives, LGB people who fear losing recently won rights like same-sex marriage, and educators and librarians whose work is now subject to widespread

censorship in the form of bans against teaching about critical race theory, gender, and sexuality. These attacks are also global in scope. Far-right nationalist parties across Western Europe scapegoat Muslim and African migrants for domestic social and economic problems, leaders in African countries criminalize same-sex sexuality based on the claim that homosexuality is a colonial imposition, and in Latin America, far-right politicians like Argentina’s Javier Milei recently won office by running as a political outsider whose populist appeal was grounded in banishing gender-inclusive language at all levels of government (Rondón 2023).

Scholars argue that at the core of each of these developments on the far right is a blend of nationalism and xenophobia that promotes racial and ethnic purity (Miller-Idriss 2022; Mudde 2019). More recently, attention has turned to the gendered and sexualized dimensions of far-right discourse and tactics that abets these nationalist projects (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024; Butler 2024; Corredor 2019; Heinemann and Stern 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). “Gender ideology,” a term coined by opponents to describe state-sponsored gender equality and policies benefitting LGBT people, now figures as a prominent target and useful scapegoat for far-right political actors. Those leading the assault on gender ideology emphasize the nuclear family as the primary social unit of the polity, rhetoric stressing safety for (certain) children as future citizens, and the repudiation of gender fluidity in favor of a strict sex binary grounded in biological difference with the aim of sexual reproduction. Far-right attacks on gender ideology work because these discursive tactics lay an ideological foundation for linking the regulation and control of families and reproduction with the nation and racial purity. All those who do not conform to these rigid standards are stigmatized as outside of the proper boundaries of the nation and citizenship, which puts lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender, and queer people—among many

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other vulnerable groups—in precarious positions vis-à-vis the state.

If “politics is downstream of culture,” as Andrew Breitbart (the late founder of the eponymous far-right news network) asserted, then the development, dissemination, and deployment of gender ideology as a global threat to normative gender, sexuality, and

Critical to the Vatican’s position on feminism and gender mainstreaming—that is, “gender ideology,” was the assertion that the differences between men and women are salient, stable, and complementary because they emanate from natural sexual dimorphism responsible for reproduction. This insistence on biological complementarity in service of sexual reproduction implicitly tar-

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family serves as a particularly useful vehicle for the far right to smuggle antidemocratic principles into mainstream discourse (Freidersdorf 2017). In this essay, I put forward a brief history of the development of gender ideology to explicate the links between far-right nationalist mobilizations and attacks on gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, unmarried women with children, racial and ethnic minorities, and migrants. I argue that in addition to creating a discursive climate in which these groups are cast as unequal members, outsiders, deviant, and/or lawless others, thereby disenfranchising them and putting their status in the polity on shaky ground, these attacks on “gender ideology” lay the groundwork for bringing leaders into power who seek to contravene principles of equality, open dialogue, and liberty enshrined in democratic principles (Butler 2024).

GENDER IDEOLOGY

Scholars trace the origin of what would ultimately come to be known as gender ideology to The Vatican’s response to the 1995 UN World Conference on Women (Corredor 2019; Kuhar and Patternote 2017). It was at that meeting—the fourth and final UN-sponsored conference on women—where the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action to take action on ensuring equality for women, access to reproductive technologies, and gender mainstreaming was unanimously adopted by the 189 countries represented. In response to the embrace of feminism (and internationalism) symbolized by the successes of that conference, an alarmed Pope John Paul II argued that feminism and women’s changing roles at the precipice of the twenty-first century represented critical challenges to the social order and began laying the foundation for the Church’s evolving doctrine on women, family, and sexuality to stem what he saw as social upheaval. The solution according to The Pope was simple: individuals and sympathetic governments ought to embrace traditional family roles consisting of men occupying the public sphere and women returning to the private space of the home to attend to domestic duties such as childrearing. Although The Vatican introduced gender ideology to name anxieties over what it perceived to be a crisis of these divinely (and naturally) ordained social roles for the sexes, it is worth noting that the Catholic Church was also facing a period of declining membership around the world and, it might be argued, relevancy to people’s lives (Johnson 2020; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). Gender ideology thus entered the story as an opportunity for The Vatican to return control over populations to centralized institutions of power—namely, religious entities such as the Catholic Church but also aligned state governments.

geted gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and all those whose sexuality, family formations, and gender expressions fell outside the normative and disciplining confines of the gender binary and nuclear family headed by two married heterosexual parents. As Cathy Cohen’s (1997) essay “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens” trenchantly underscores, political attacks on nonnormative sexuality and family formations is most immediately about lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals and also about upholding particular white supremacist understandings of gender and family that emphasize the primacy of the nuclear family headed by heterosexual parents. In the United States, these attacks on nonnormative sexuality look like political actors stigmatizing Black families, poor people, and undocumented people as pathologically oversexed and deviant (Hancock 2004). Globally, the condemnation of nonnormative sexuality by far-right political actors intersects with white supremacy to create conditions of severe precarity for migrants, lesbians and gay men, and unmarried women, who are similarly constructed as perverse and abnormal (Alexander 1994).

HOW GENDER IDEOLOGY RHETORIC IS DEPLOYED BY FAR-RIGHT POLITICAL ACTORS

The power of gender ideology rhetoric is due in part to its circulation as what Stefanie Mayer and Birgit Sauer (2017) refer to as an “empty signifier” to connote any policy or social development that is perceived as contravening traditional gender roles and family configurations. Attaching “ideology” to “gender” places what appears to be commonsense movement toward gender equality and rights for sexual minorities on shaky ground by implying these were not teleological steps toward progress but instead a set of ideas and associated practices on par with other contested bodies of thought. These ideologies include communism, totalitarianism, and religious terrorism (Corredor 2019).

In response, pro-capitalist and religious conservative movements alike have hastened opposition to gender ideology by casting “a set of abhorred ethical and social reforms, namely sexual and reproductive rights, same-sex marriage and adoption, new reproductive technologies, sex education, gender mainstreaming, [and] protection against gender violence” as liberal or outside impositions (Kuhar and Patternote 2017, 5). Moral conservatives position themselves as champions of tradition by vocally criticizing these developments as leftist, communist, totalitarian, pro-LGBTQ, or feminist, all which function as synonyms for threats to the normative social order (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024). These nativist rhetorical maneuvers have proven to be a successful formula for generating populist appeals to “common sense” and tradition that land far-right political figures in office, from

Florida's Ron DeSantis to Italy's Georgia Meloni and Hungary's Viktor Orbán.

Gender ideology rhetoric also works hand in glove with anti-migrant discourse; a focus on tradition—with white, heteronormative and reproductive families as the cornerstone of the polity—undergirds these links. Opponents of gender ideology claim to resist outside incursions on tradition that are embodied by women who are liberated from childrearing, LGBTQ people, and migrants. For these leaders, gender ideology becomes a useful way to veil the underlying xenophobic project because it appeals to commonsense and popularly held attitudes about hegemonic sex, sexuality, and family norms. Amplifying the perceived threats of gender ideology for popular audiences has consequently emerged as a powerful tool of far-right ascendancy in places such as Brazil, Poland, Israel, Argentina, Italy, Finland, Sweden, and the Philippines, where nativist leaders and the political parties they represent have used gender ideology discourse to elevate the heterosexual and reproductive family as the proper unit of the polity, casting all others as outsiders.

Although some scholars posit that negative responses to progressive policy developments are logical and expected after significant advances, such as the legalization of same-sex marriages (see Mansbridge and Shames 2008), others contend that efforts to roll back progressive policy gains represent an influx of existing ideologies—like white supremacy, xenophobia, heteronormativity—that perpetually create conditions of precarity for nondominant groups (Murib 2020; Strolovitch 2023; Townsend-Bell 2020). In this latter view, gender ideology is just the newest way to refer to political mobilizations that scapegoat gender and sexual minorities to assert explicitly heteronormative and white supremacist nationalist projects.

GENDER IDEOLOGY AND CONTEMPORARY ATTACKS ON SEXUAL AND GENDER MINORITIES

The international circulation of gender ideology and the places where it has gained traction over the past 20 years in service of white supremacist and heteronormative nationalist projects highlights its symbolic uses. In Russia, for example, Vladimir Putin consistently poses the amorphous threat of gender progressivism and same-sex sexuality against Russian tradition to secure power and, more recently, justify the invasion of Ukraine (Edenborg 2022). India's Narendra Modi weaponizes language of a “great Hindu motherland” to explicitly link reproduction, statehood, and racial purity in his calls to expel Muslims (Sharma 2023). And as

In the United States, an unlikely coalition of evangelical Christians, Catholics, and wealthy conservative actors draw on gender ideology rhetoric to foment antidemocratic splits in the polity that create conditions of inequality for some and the elevation in status for others. Mikey Elster (2022) characterizes the divisions fostered by this rhetoric as “insidious concern” in which familiar familial terms such as “mom and dad or “children” are used by political actors to promote a “normative reproductive order in need of protection rather than actually existing children, parents, or families” (409; see also Gash et al. 2020). This rhetorical sleight of hand deploys care as a way to disguise the embedded restrictions on children, parents, and families deemed aberrant because they are outside the white supremacist and heteronormative family structure.

For example, in the United States, proponents of legislation banning transgender girls from competing in sports mobilize the language of fairness and care about the safety of nontransgender girls, leaving transgender girls on the sidelines (Murib 2022). Political maneuvering to criminalize surgical and chemical abortions draw on personhood and the primacy of the family as a way to elevate the well-being of fetuses over the people who carry them (Leach 2022). Black, Latine, Asian, Native, and Arab students attend class in schools where lessons about the history of race and ethnicity are banned out of concern for the feelings of white students. Teachers in Florida and copycat states are not allowed to reference sexuality and gender in conversations with students due to claims that doing so impinges on a parent's right to lead their children in these conversations, even while many of the parents and children connected to these schools are, in fact, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer.

In each instance, democratic principles of equality and liberty are pitted against the empty signifier of gender ideology and its close relative, “the woke mob.” The paradoxes and contradictions in this brief litany of examples from the United States illustrates instances of antidemocratic forces at work in the production of worthy and belonging members of the polity at the expense of those cast outside of it. They also underscore the deeply intertwined nature of attacks on democratic norms and nondominant groups, especially LGBTQ people, migrants, and people of color.

RESEARCH AGENDA

The rapid proliferation of countermobilizations that target the extension of membership to sexual and gender minorities in the

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early as 2011, Jair Bolsonaro, then a representative in the Brazilian National Congress, mounted a campaign against Brazil's federal “School without Homophobia” education (Lage Carbone 2024). In all these examples, gender ideology functions as a symbolic vessel to connote lost traditions and a threat to the normative political and social order within a nation's borders.

polity requires urgent attention from political scientists studying inequality, marginalization, sexuality and politics, gender, race, class, and democracy. In the remainder of this essay, I propose topics and approaches geared toward revealing the agents and mechanics of power that operate behind the veil of gender ideology to advance antidemocratic projects. My hope is that these

examples can provide a template for political scientists to consider regardless of subfield.

Mapping the Far Right

One of the more puzzling aspects of gender ideology's development and diffusion is the unlikely coalitions of religious groups, political organizations, and ultrawealthy corporate interests. The transnational nature of the networks linking these entities together is largely responsible for obscuring the individuals and organizations that serve as important hubs. Although the diffuse transnational networks that promulgate gender ideology and efforts to oppose it have been analyzed by researchers (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024; Kuhar and Patternote 2017), the hidden connections between anti-LGBTQ mobilizations and partnerships with domestic countermobilizations, such as those put in motion by opponents of racial equality and/or refugees, require ongoing attention as these relationships continue to evolve and morph. For political scientists, conducting this research will necessitate overcoming the discipline's tendency toward compartmentalization into subfields that translates into movement research that often focuses on international dynamics to the exclusion of those operating at the domestic level and vice versa (Schotten 2022).

Devoting analytic attention to developing longitudinal monitoring and mapping of the far right will serve two purposes. First, charting these pathways will sharpen scholar's understandings of how policies diffuse across borders as well as the main proponents driving them. Research in this vein will contribute to theorizations of coalition formation and efficacy, the role of rhetoric in political mobilizations, political strategy choice, and identity formation. Second, focusing on the entities funding these mobilizations will aid in efforts to combat misinformation, which is a primary aspect of antigender ideology campaigns. The emergent genre of debunking, in which journalists guide readers through distinguishing between fake and real news, relies on research that uncovers the capital flows that push biased news to the forefront (Herrero-Diz, Varona-Aramburu, and Pérez-Escobar 2024). Political scientists are particularly well positioned to conduct this research given the field's attention to political institutions and theorizations of how they operate.

Grassroots Organizing and Informal Politics

New and forthcoming publications in political science devote attention to the grassroots dimensions of LGBTQ political organizing, which represents a welcome shift from the discipline's focus on formal politics that stresses electoral gains, representation in political office, and rights wins. This research departs from the discipline's tendency to prioritize quantitative research as the standard approach in the field, and introduces innovative questions and qualitative—and even queer—approaches for answering them (Thomas 2017).

One of the more promising aspects of qualitative research on grassroots politics is the scrutiny devoted to how discourse shapes what comes to be known of identity-based groups and the movements that represent them. Examples from American politics illustrate these possibilities. Lisa Beard's (2023) *If We Were Kin*, for instance, examines how discursive efforts to link disparate groups of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people through the language of kinship overcomes the opposition's divide and conquer strategy. Research like Beard's, which foregrounds the connections that bind political praxis and political

theory, aids in the theorization of political coalitions as well as strategies that political actors can apply to forge solidarities. Similarly, Edward Kammerer and Melissa Michaelson (2022) examine an important case tangential to formal politics: how drag performers help to register and mobilize voters. The interviews Kammerer and Michaelson conduct with drag performers draw attention to how they use humor and camp to highlight the stakes of political activity for their audiences and reveals the ways in which political performances (informal politics) intersect with political activity such as voting (formal politics).

Studies in comparative politics similarly demonstrate the ways that scholars of LGBTQ politics are uniquely positioned to shed light on political questions related to marginalization, belonging, and political action by drawing on their experiences as scholar/activists. An important development in this work is the focus on expanding understandings of how what might be best characterized as queer sensibilities, such as ideas of linked fate or activist approaches to political problems, shapes political behavior and outcomes (Moreau, Nuño-Pérez, and Sanchez 2019). Nayia Kame-nou (2024) conducts interviews with LGBTQ voters in Cyprus to understand what keeps people from voting (i.e., abstention as a result of dissatisfaction with choices) and the extent to which LGBTQ voters “queer the ballot” by casting votes in ways that they understand as responding to intersectional concerns. New research on Bolivia shows how transgender activists take advantage of the unique openings provided by the overlap in social movements and political parties to cooperate with lawmakers and pass gender identity laws that protect transgender people (Hummel and Velasco-Guachalla 2024).

These brief (and nonexhaustive) examples from American and comparative politics are united by the common feature of LGBTQ-identified scholars using their grounded experiences in LGBTQ political worlds to develop research questions and new ways to answer them. Breaking with the tight grip quantitative methods has on the discipline opens these possibilities for viewing politics from multiple angles and illuminates political processes in action. Future research agendas should consider ways to build on scholar's backgrounds in LGBTQ spaces to formulate research that will in turn aid political practitioners who are working with affected communities to pursue political change.

Legal Scholarship

Legal scholars who focus on LGBTQ politics suggest that there are a variety of reasons that nondominant groups might want to pursue legal avenues (as opposed to legislative ones) to address discrimination (Currah 2008). Legal approaches are theorized as more successful because they rely on the opinions of a small number of experts—judges—versus large legislative bodies. Future research building on these observations will benefit from complex approaches to what makes a legal claim successful.

For example, Alison Gash (2015) turns conventional legal logic on its head by showing how legal appeals are more successful if they are pursued “under the radar” to escape scrutiny from opponents. Jason Pierceson's 2022 analysis of court cases concerning gay men and lesbians since 1979 argues that statutory approaches, versus constitutional ones, are ultimately more successful because “adding a group or groups to an already existing statutory framework is arguably less judicially radical than creating a new constitutional right or applying an old one in a new fashion” (18). Research conducted in this vein should examine

underappreciated avenues for legal strategists and activists to take as they mount resistance to the rollback of progressive policy gains in the name of gender ideology. Comparativists, in particular, are well positioned to conduct this scholarship by focusing on variations in legal systems with an eye toward how successful strategies might be generalized to other sites.

Limitations of Rights

Gender ideology rhetoric is a countermobilization that targets progressive policy gains made by LGBTQ people, people of color, and women since the 1970s (Corredor 2019). Phillip Ayoub and Kristina Stoeckl (2024) go further and describe these dynamics as far more enduring and recursive, in which conservative move-

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ments repackage their long-standing efforts to oppose LGBTQ rights wins using the language of gender ideology to mobilize new supporters. Writing of the US context, legal scholar Kevin Minter (2017) understands the pivot away from same-sex marriage to attacks on transgender people as part of a longer mobilization by the conservative and evangelical political actors to preserve “traditional families” and the right to religious affiliation.

One of the common themes across these two approaches is the focus on what LGBTQ activists and political actors celebrate as advances in rights afforded to LGBTQ people and the countermobilizations that emerge to contest them. This paradox of rights, following Wendy Brown (2002), suggests that these patterns are somewhat inevitable if rights remain at the top of political agenda. Future research on gender ideology, countermobilizations, and rights ought to examine the utility of rights claims with an eye toward endurance and efficacy. Courtenay Daum’s (2020) *The Politics of Right Sex*, for instance, argues that a significant drawback of movements focusing on rights is the possibility for injecting discussion of rights into the public sphere as debatable, thus creating the conditions for rights reversals. The back and forth on rights reveals how rights claims do little to address the underlying conditions that create social and political problems. Similarly, my 2023 book shows how LGBTQ political leaders used rights and citizenship claims to move the ball forward on major wins, including same-sex marriage, but that they did so despite objections from those who argued they would be left behind due to the focus on rights (Murib 2023). These groups include lesbians and transgender people as well as Black, Latine, Asian, and Native LGBTQ people.

Emerging critiques of rights as both a political strategy and objective suggests two areas for analysis. First, scholars should examine the conditions that predict the rollback of rights for minority groups. These dynamics are of particular importance as the rights discourse becomes increasingly adopted by conservatives and far-right political actors who assert the right to discriminate based on religious beliefs, such as “traditional families” headed by one biological man and one biological woman. Second, political scientists should consider who and to what extent those

claiming rights (and losing rights) are affected by these dramatic shifts. This within-group perspective will shed light on the effects of rights for all marginalized groups, not only LGBTQ people.

CONCLUSIONS

I opened this essay with the claim that the links between far-right mobilizations, attacks on democracy, and the current assault on LGBTQ rights and standing are deeply intertwined. The introduction of gender ideology rhetoric as the newest innovation mobilizing these forces shows that these connections are both intimate and inextricable. Tracing the history and current landscape of gender ideology rhetoric in this essay is one small step in revealing these relationships.

The global shift to the right and the rollback of rights and status for LGBTQ people, migrants, and women suggests that research to examine these developments is urgent, particularly as these trends appear unlikely to wane anytime soon. Of further concern are efforts to foster splits within these groups and drive wedges between them. Political scientists, with an empirical focus on power as it is routed through movements and institutions, are particularly well positioned to develop approaches for understanding and combatting these developments. Focusing research on mapping the networks that enable the diffusion of gender ideology, elaborating unique legal strategies to combat the rollback in rights, and critically examining the utility of rights are three of many potential research areas for political scientists and experts in sexuality and gender to consider moving forward. If current trends are any indication, we will need all the resources we can get to obstruct and potentially reverse the march of anti-LGBTQ, antimigrant, and antiwoman forces.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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