

Politics Should Be a Drag: Why Political Science Needs to Take Drag Seriously

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ABSTRACT

Drag has a long history in the LGBTQ community as a means of political engagement, activism, protest, and community building. Today, drag is popular in the LGBTQ community and in the rest of society. At the same time, it is routinely a target of conservative backlash against the LGBTQ community. Despite drag's inherently political nature, political science has failed to engage substantially with the influence of drag. This article offers a justification and research agenda to bring drag into the mainstream of political science.


Political science traditionally focuses on institutions, policies, and power dynamics. However, the field often overlooks the cultural expressions that influence and reflect these very aspects. Drag, with its vibrant performance art and history of political activism, offers a valuable lens through which to understand critical issues in contemporary politics, one that has not been given proper attention in political science. In this article, we discuss the history of drag queens and kings in politics and political activism. We then focus on how political science can use this history to explore current questions central to the discipline and conclude by proposing a research agenda. Political science needs to examine the ways that drag—and drag performers—can be important subjects for research in ways that are relevant to broad swaths of the discipline.

Today, drag is celebrated not just within the LGBTQ community but in the wider population as well, thanks in large part to the success of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, one of the most popular reality television shows. Drag is an important aspect of the social world and, given the role of celebrity in politics, could be an important aspect of the political world, too. A January 2023 YouGov poll found that 23% of respondents had attended a drag show and that another 20% would be interested in doing so (Orth & Frankovic 2023). *Drag Race* has brought drag queens into living rooms across the globe, creating an opportunity for many straight people to encounter LGBTQ political issues directly (Taylor and Rupp 2006). At the same time, although *RuPaul's Drag Race* and the

style of drag shown there has brought drag into the mainstream, it represents only a single example of the breadth of the artform. We mention *Drag Race* multiple times in this essay, but as a cultural touchstone rather than as a definitive definition of drag. Studying the now-mainstream status of drag and *Drag Race* and how that has affected the drag and LGBTQ communities could provide insights into the politics of marginalized groups.

At the same time that drag has gone mainstream, attacks on drag performers have reached new heights. This is particularly true in the context of drag story time at libraries and access to LGBTQ-inclusive materials in libraries and schools (Davis and Kettrey 2021; Ellis 2022; Shenton 2023). As discussed below, conservative attacks on drag performers, trans people, and the broader LGBTQ community remain important avenues for research. The nature and effectiveness of these attacks, particularly the increasing targeting of drag queens, shed light on a host of questions relevant for political science.

Drag and drag performers, both widely popular and routinely villainized, remain understudied in political science. The political science literature has largely ignored the important role that drag queens and kings play in their communities. Keyword searches in the top political science journals (e.g., *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*) return no articles about drag. Given the historic challenges of publishing anything on LGBTQ politics in the top journals (Ayoub 2022; Novkov and Barclay 2010), the lack of attention to drag is unsurprising. However, even other political science journals that would appear to be more welcoming to research on drag, like *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, are similarly lacking. Although research on the LGBTQ community has become more widely accepted in political science (Currah 2011), drag remains elusive as a subject of study, even within the LGBTQ politics literature. The major edited volume on LGBTQ Politics offers only three passing references to drag in its index (Brettschneider, Burgess,

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and Keating 2017). Other disciplines, notably anthropology, history, and sociology, have engaged more intentionally with drag than political science (e.g. Barrett 2017; Greene 2021; Taylor and Rupp 2005, 2006; Wilcox 2018).

Drag performers should be of interest to political science because they are community leaders, activists, issue leaders, celebrities, and often the target of significant political backlash. Political science, however, has yet to make significant progress toward studying drag. We hope this piece encourages political science to, as they say in drag, brush up on herstory and get to werk.¹

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DRAG AND POLITICS: A LONG AND IMPORTANT HISTORY

Gender deviance, both in dress like drag and in sexual attraction like homosexuality, made those in the LGBTQ community targets for both legal and social stigma (Lvovsky 2021; Sears 2014). The ability for drag to upset conventions around gender has made it a target for culture wars for decades. Even today, drag remains an important tool of resistance against the conservative political pressure of the Trumpian Era (Greenhalgh 2018). Drag is inherently political because of its efforts to subvert conventional ideas of gender and what is considered culturally appropriate. By exaggerating gender stereotypes, drag artists expose the nuance of these constructs and many scholars have taken note. As van den Berg (2021, 1) writes, “drag highlights the inherent ambivalence of gender generated by heteronormativity, simultaneously playing with the inconsistencies between gendered cultural paradigms and actual experience.” Butler (1996) also calls attention to drag and its potential for gender subversion. Thus, drag performance is a “symbolic inversion of hegemonic gender norms, and a blurring and playing with gender boundaries” (van den Berg 2021, 11).

Beyond the inherently political nature of drag, drag performers have played an important role in political activism both within the LGBTQ community and beyond it.

Beyond the inherently political nature of drag, drag performers have played an important role in political activism both within the LGBTQ community and beyond it. Many early gay liberation activists embraced the transgressive nature of drag, adopting it “as a public, political tactic” (Hillman 2011, 170). José Sarria was a notable early leader; he was a prominent drag performer at the Black Cat Cafe and was the first openly gay person to run for public office when he ran for a seat on San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors in 1961, 16 years before Harvey Milk (Goodman 2018; Retzliff 2007). Proclaiming himself as the first “Empress of San Francisco,” Sarria founded or helped found several organizations advocating for LGBTQ rights: the League for Civil Education (1960) to rectify laws that made it illegal to serve alcohol to LGBTQ people; the Imperial Court de San Francisco (1965), now known as the International Court system, which now has

65 chapters in the United States, Canada, and Mexico (Drushel 2016; Slotnik 2013); and the Tavern Guild, the first gay business organization, to build economic clout to resist abuses and to lobby for change (Kammerer and Barreto 2022). In the 1970s, activists like Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson formed STAR, a group founded to help gender-nonconforming homeless people in New York (Retzliff 2007). More recently, drag performers have won office, mobilized voters, and testified before legislative bodies on issues that are relevant to their communities—all while in drag.

Drag groups, like the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and Sarria’s Imperial Court System, founded in the 1960s and 70s, are still active in local politics today. The Sisters played an integral role during the height of the AIDS epidemic, providing both education and emotional support while pushing for policy change (Wilcox 2018). Chapters in the Imperial Court System raise thousands of dollars each year for charities in their communities and function, in some ways, like the Elks, the Lions Club, and other civic associations (Drushel 2016). Both sets of groups provide social capital and offer ways to get involved with community service and influence local politics. But these LGBTQ civic organizations remain understudied in political science despite clear parallels to other more commonly studied groups.

However, drag has not been universally welcome even within the LGBTQ movement. The Mattachine Society, an early homophile activist group, enforced gender-normative dress codes at meetings and events (Bruce 2016; Hillman 2011). Many objected to drag queens in pride parades because they were associated with negative stereotypes about gay people (Bruce 2016). The goal was

to make the LGBTQ community appear more respectable, and thus palatable, to the heterosexual majority. This emphasis on presenting an image of respectability may be misplaced but has been a deliberate strategy that is directed at making rights claims by gay and lesbian individuals more acceptable to the general public (Jones 2022; Murib 2023).

Drag and politics are intertwined, despite the ways that political science ignores their connections. Below, we offer a remedy to this clear omission.

DRAG AND POLITICAL SCIENCE: WHAT’S MISSING AND A PROPOSED RESEARCH AGENDA

Research into drag and drag performers can illuminate issues that are relevant to political science, similar to Ayoub’s (2022) observation about LGBTQ politics generally. In this section, we offer a

research agenda for how political science broadly, and LGBTQ politics scholars specifically, can engage with drag and drag performers to advance our understanding of a wide range of political issues. As scholars of American politics, we focus our attention there but hope our colleagues in other subfields including comparative politics and international relations undertake a similar agenda.

Respectability Politics

Drag involves respectability politics both within and outside the LGBTQ community. Strolovich and Crowder (2018) note that LGBTQ activists have often engaged in respectability politics, minimizing differences between members of the group to make them seem normatively acceptable and thus deserving of rights, equality, and fair treatment. This “homonormativity” version of respectability politics was used by homophile organizations in the 1950s and 60s (Hillman 2011) and more recently by those seeking legalization of same-sex marriage (Frank 2017; Kammerer 2016). Yet, this strategy defines LGBTQ people “in narrow, gender-normative, and exclusionary ways, underscoring and reinforcing other lines of exclusion and secondary marginalization” (Strolovich and Crowder 2018, 343). Drag provides another perspective on this phenomenon. Taylor and Rupp (2005, 2217) find that drag queens face both “celebrity and hostility.” Some see drag queens as a sign of openness and diversity, but others see all drag as freakish. Over time, RuPaul’s *Drag Race* (and its performers) have become sanitized (or, made more respectable), but the show has only occasionally hinted that there are other versions of drag in the world—drag that is more transgressive and more subversive. Although transgender women, Asian, Black and Latinx queens, and thick queens are included in the show, they rarely succeed; instead, winners tend to be white and thin and conventionally attractive when out of drag.

In 2016, former *Drag Race* contestant Jasmine Masters posted to YouTube saying, “*RuPaul’s Drag Race* has fucked up drag,” criticizing the degree to which the drag portrayed in the show was disconnected from authentic drag. On a similar note, drag scene photographer Magnus Hastings commented in 2019, “it annoys me when it gets made more family-friendly. Real drag is kind of punk rock and it is unapologetic and in your face ... it’s dangerous and sexual and doesn’t fit in with the tongue snapping, death dropping, catchphrase forcing new normal. . . . I have had battles with people trying to keep it PG which isn’t the point” (Jansen 2019).

As these comments illustrate, respectability politics are already part of the mainstream conversation about drag. Is this a positive, even inspiring, story of using art and performance to improve attitudes toward LGBTQ people by making drag performers mainstream celebrities? Or is it a negative story about how capitalism and bias have conspired to further marginalize and exclude those members of the drag community that don’t conform to RuPaul’s aesthetic?

Gender Politics

Drag is also relevant to scholars of gender politics. Political science, through the lens of drag, can delve deeper into the power dynamics associated with gender. Analyzing how drag both reinforces and challenges societal expectations around gender roles allows for a more comprehensive understanding of power structures and their influence on political participation.

As noted above, drag is inherently political because of its subversion of gender norms, a subversion that is not always

welcome. There is a long history of questioning drag’s place in the LGBTQ community because of the way it links gender performance with identity. In the 1960s and 70s, for example, certain LGBTQ groups distanced themselves from drag, trying to present a masculine front to society to undermine then-prevailing stereotypes about gay men and effeminacy (Hillman 2011). Feminist critiques of drag liken it, in some ways, to blackface; men don women’s clothes for comedic effect in much the same way that white actors donned blackface for minstrel shows (Hillman 2011).

There are gender hierarchies within the drag community. Drag queens are significantly more popular than drag kings. Drag queens generally have access to larger platforms than kings; *Drag Race*, for example, has yet to feature a drag king. This illustrates the ways that gay men have long dominated the LGBTQ movement, even when performing as drag queens. It also raises important questions about how drag and gender transgression work in making political statements. Men, even gay men, dressing as women remains more transgressive than women dressing as men—this complicates the way that drag functions to break down gender binaries and stereotypes. Drag queens and drag kings also approach drag differently (Rupp, Taylor, and Shapiro 2010), further presenting important questions about drag, gender, and politics that have not been given sufficient attention from political scientists.

Drag Race has recently begun to include nonbinary and transgender queens, reflecting broader inclusion that drag performances have long held. The conversations launched in response to the inclusion of these individuals draw attention to the push for inclusion of smaller subgroups within the broader gay community and parallel the history of how broader political actions in support of LG people have often marginalized TQ people. The evolution of the show (and of RuPaul himself) demonstrates the broader inclusion of transgender people in LGBTQ politics and US society in recent years. During the gay liberation movement, many feared linking drag and gay men with the growing trans movement of the time. Today, although many are more inclusive of trans and gender-non-conforming members of the LGBTQ community, that acceptance is not universal. A growing anti-trans movement on the conservative right seeks to reignite the tensions between the gay and lesbian movement and the trans movement, clinging to specific ideas around gender identity that warrant much greater consideration in political science.

Similarly, controversy over the inclusion in season 14 of *Drag Race* of a heterosexual man (Maddy Morphosis) is an important illustration of the politics of straight people adopting or infringing on traditionally LGBTQ spaces. Cisgender women, known as bio queens, have also begun to perform as drag queens (Eastmond 2017). Whether this is a sign of inclusion and acceptance or an indication of cultural appropriation that undermines the power and cohesion of drag and LGBTQ communities remains contested. Yet all these conversations are missing from political science scholarship.

Electoral Politics

In the arena of electoral politics, drag performers play a role both as candidates for elected office and as catalysts for increased civic engagement by members of the LGBTQ and fan communities. Drag performers have engaged in electoral politics as candidates—sometimes as protest candidates and sometimes with more serious intentions (Hirshman 2012; Jeffries 1993; Kammerer and Barreto

2022), and some of those candidates have been successful. Joan Jett Blackk ran several campaigns for mayor (of Chicago and San Francisco) and then for president in 1992, using the free media attention to advocate for the LGBTQ community. In 2019, Maebe A. Girl was elected (running using her drag name) to the Silver Lake Neighborhood Council, in Southern California. In 2020, Eric Morrison, who was attacked during the campaign for his drag performances as Anita Mann, was elected to the Delaware House of Representatives. The electoral activities and successes of these drag performers illustrate the degree to which drag is now considered mainstream entertainment and drag performers are considered mainstream celebrities. Just as Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger used their Hollywood backgrounds to pivot to electoral politics, drag performers are now using their celebrity to succeed in the electoral arena. Are Girl and Morrison the sign of more to come or notable exceptions?

More recently, drag has been used to engage voters. When Donald Trump arrived on the national political stage in 2016, drag performers used their public profiles to encourage viewers to register and vote, as did panelists at DragCon, an annual fan convention hosted by RuPaul. Drag Out the Vote, a nonprofit formed in 2019, has worked with both celebrity drag queens and local drag performers to educate and register voters since the 2020 election cycle (Kammerer and Michelson 2022). For the 2024 election cycle, drag performers launched DragPac to help campaign for LGBTQ rights. These efforts use drag as a catalyst to engage otherwise nonpoliticized individuals and bring attention to political issues that are relevant to the LGBTQ community that might otherwise not be on the radar of mainstream audiences. Taylor and Rupp (2006, 17) note, “[p]recisely because drag shows are entertaining, they attract people who might never otherwise be exposed to gay politics.” Further research is needed on the effect that these efforts have on voter attitudes and behavior, including members of the LGBTQ community and the broader drag fanbase.

State and Local Politics

The different ways in which drag relates to electoral politics in the national and subnational arenas is just one way in which drag is relevant to modern studies of state and local political politics (as are legal battles related to local politics, as noted below). Drag is often discussed in municipal and school board elections and agendas. School boards and constituents clash over the degree to which content about drag and gender can and should be part of the curriculum or accessible at school libraries, whereas in some cities and states lawmakers have debated (and sometimes enacted) bans on drag performances, often defined as “sexually explicit” or “adult-oriented” performances (Harris 2023). Studying these examples will help political scientists better understand how the politics and power of drag-related issues varies across different political spaces and whether local and state politics are leading or following national political trends.

Social Movements

Drag also helps explore important issues that are relevant to social movement scholars, particularly around agenda setting and multi-issue advocacy. For example, “[d]ebates on drag in emerging gay liberation groups illustrate how multi-issue politics created ideological divisions among gay activists over the role of gender politics in gay activism, as individuals and groups struggled to incorporate class and racial activism, women’s liberation, and New

Left critiques of capitalism alongside gay rights activism” (Hillman 2011, 168). Similar issues were present in ACT UP protests in the 1990s (McDonnell and Everhart 2024). Studying drag’s role in social movements also allows political science to explore unconventional forms of political participation and analyze how marginalized communities leverage performance and artistic expression to challenge the status quo. Political science can gain deeper insights into the complexities of identity politics and how that identity shapes social movement formation and participation by analyzing drag’s influences. Studying drag allows for a deeper understanding of how marginalized communities navigate the political landscape, their strategies for self-representation, and their influence on broader social movements.

Judicial Politics and Administrative Law

Lawmakers in some states are attempting to limit exposure to drag content. As of March 2023, lawmakers in two states (Montana and Tennessee) approved laws explicitly restricting drag performances and others (Arkansas, Florida, North Dakota, and Texas) approved laws about adult performances that could be used to restrict drag. None of these attempts to restrict drag are enforceable due to temporary legal injunctions (Movement Advancement Project 2024). How drag is defined affects what is covered by the laws that attempt to restrict it. Is drag speech or conduct? What type of clothing, worn by which types of people, engaging in which types of actions constitute “drag” for the purposes of these statutes? These legal questions are complicated, and how judges decide them will have significant political consequences.

Efforts to regulate drag also raise questions about the intersections of the administrative state and access to public space. Public administrators today are confronted with questions about how drag performers and those objecting to the presence of drag can access government spaces like libraries and classrooms. Is drag queen story hour protected by free speech and an excellent way to get young children interested in reading, or can it be banned by those who fear how drag queens might negatively affect those young children? If drag performances are determined to be sexual in nature, as these laws routinely attempt to classify them, it becomes easier to limit them. But how can that determination be made at the administrative level? The state has long played a role in policing sexuality and gender expression (Canaday 2009; Currah 2022; Eskridge 1999). But how the state has policed those categories through administrative law is constantly changing. Drag is important to understand as administrators regulate gender, sex, and expressions of those things (Currah 2022; Davis 2017).

The Supreme Court has declined to hear these cases thus far, but there are attempts to restrict drag making their way through at least 10 different state legislatures and the judicial system which emphasizes the degree to which some political entrepreneurs use drag as a culture war issue to gain power. Legal scholars have explored the legality of laws that seek to repress freedom of speech and ban the time, place, and manner of drag performances. For example, a recent note in the *Harvard Law Review* details how drag performances are under attack in the United States and how these attacks are unconstitutional, writing, “These attacks have been couched in homophobic language that portrays drag performers as sexual deviants—or, worse, ‘groomers.’ In just a short span of time, antidrag regulations have generated legal, emotional, physical, and economic harms to drag performers and the LGBTQ+ community” (“Drag Queens” 2024, 1469). Political science should

also explore what these efforts mean in terms of administrative power and constitutional rights as well as the public opinion issues discussed below.

Threat, Fear, and Public Opinion

Drag has, in recent years, become the focus of a major culture war. Efforts to ban drag entirely or restrict it significantly are underway in several states. Ongoing legal battles notwithstanding, these efforts to politicize drag have affected public opinion. A public opinion poll conducted in March 2023 found that 58% of Americans opposed laws restricting drag performances in their state and only 39% supported such laws. Support for drag bans was much higher among Republicans (61%) and much lower among Democrats (23%) and Independents (38%) (Marist Poll 2023). Another poll in April 2023 found that 14% of Americans thought drag shows should be banned entirely, whereas 50% thought they should only be for adults. Again, attitudes were split by partisanship, with 8% and 9% of Democrats and Independents, respectively, supporting full bans versus 25% of Republicans. Among Democrats, 40% thought drag should only be for adults, as did 52% of Independents and 58% of Republicans (Orth and Frankovic 2023).

An analysis of the effect of emotions like fear and threat on attitudes and behavior has long been a focus in fields like psychology, anthropology, and sociology (see Shenton 2023). Political science scholars should be interested in the effect of gender subversion among people with more traditionalist views given that conservative forces exploit these views to advance an anti-

shows for the entertainment value but leave with a clearer understanding of the political issues facing the LGBTQ community (Taylor and Rupp 2005). Entertainers have often found success in politics, as evidenced by Ronald Reagan, Sonny Bono, Jesse Ventura, and Arnold Schwarzenegger (Clint Eastwood, Al Franken, and Jerry Springer too!). Today, celebrity and the spectacle attached to drag have reached new heights. Drag performers embody both celebrity and spectacle (Kammerer and Michelson 2022). Performers who achieve success on *Drag Race* become nationally recognized figures. Local queens remain highly recognized celebrities in their own communities. And all drag is about spectacle. To date, the intersections of celebrity, drag, and political engagement have not been examined in the political science literature. Therefore, studying drag performers who are engaged in politics can provide insight into the ways that celebrity shapes political behavior.

CONCLUSION

By incorporating drag into its framework, political science can gain a richer understanding of identity politics, power dynamics, and social movements. Drag's ability to challenge norms, spark conversation, and promote social change makes it a valuable tool for political scientists who are seeking to comprehend the complex tapestry of contemporary politics. And, of course, the mechanisms and theory behind this tapestry will advance our understanding of gender dynamics, norm deviation and threat, and other core concepts in American political science.

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LGBTQ agenda. There are several examples of work linking emotions, fear, and threat to LGBTQ+ rights (see Harrison 2020; Harrison & Michelson 2019; Michelson & Harrison 2020), but it remains a fruitful avenue for future work, particularly as drag is used to stoke those fears.

Exploration of the use by individual politicians or political parties of drag performers and performances as a means of gaining public support illustrates multiple themes in Democratic Party politics, including the use of fear (and particularly fear on behalf of children) regardless of the existence of evidence of credible threats. According to Media Matters, Fox News spent significantly more time targeting drag queens and transgender people than covering hearings related to the January 6th insurrection hearings (Whitehouse 2022). Marco Rubio used video footage of a drag queen participating in a local library story hour in a 2022 campaign ad in which he claimed, “[Democrats] indoctrinate children, try to turn boys into girls.”² Sociologists have begun to explore these framings; political science should be exploring how these attacks on drag, by both legislatures and individual politicians, help us better understand modern political parties and campaigns (Stone 2019).

Politics as Entertainment

Drag performers also provide a useful way of analyzing the changing face of politics as it moves away from traditional politicians to entertainers as politicians. Many attend drag

To paraphrase RuPaul: Good luck, political science. And don't fuck it up.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. According to Merriam-Webster, *herstory* has been used since 1876 to refer to “history considered or presented from a feminist viewpoint or with special attention to the experience of women.” Today it is often used to refer to drag history. Urban Dictionary defines *werk* as doing “something to an exceedingly excellent capacity. Most notably used in reference to dancing, modeling, sexual prowess and/or other physical performance that requires a large amount of fiery attitude, vitality and vigor.”
2. Campaign ad available at: <https://youtu.be/zffDFBIocXs>

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