

The Study of LGBT Politics and Its Contributions to Political Science

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Although the study of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) politics appears to be widely accepted within political science, a recent survey of political scientists reported some skepticism about its legitimacy and scholarly worth (Novkov and Barclay 2010). This article examines potential concerns about LGBT studies and draws attention to the field's scholarly importance. The first part briefly addresses three objections to the study of LGBT politics that echo criticisms of the study and practice of identity politics. I argue that these objections do not withstand scrutiny, and that the case for studying the intersection of politics and sexuality within the discipline of political science is compelling. Sexuality and gender are fundamental aspects of human societies that reflect power relations and increasingly have become the object of public policy. The second part of the article examines the burgeoning literature on the politics of sexual orientation and identity. Beyond its intrinsic importance, LGBT politics contributes to a broader understanding of politics, power, social movements, public opinion, policymaking institutions, urban politics, and the relationship between science and public policy. Though not exhaustive, this review addresses many of the principal empirical and theoretical works in this area.

POTENTIAL OBJECTIONS TO THE STUDY OF LGBT POLITICS

The case for studying the LGBT rights movement in political science would seem obvious. The movement has grown from a small group of counter-culture activists operating outside of mainstream politics to a mature movement with extensive political organization. Sex and gender distinctions are pervasive in our laws—for example, they affect determinations of who is eligible to marry and adopt children, serve in the armed forces, collect welfare state benefits, and avoid paying taxes. In particular, same-sex marriage and the ban on gays serving in the military have produced widespread media attention, resulting in growing numbers of court decisions, legislative measures, and constitutional amendments. Self-identified LGBT voters and candidates are increasingly visible and engage in patterns of political behavior that are somewhat different from that of their straight peers (Hertzog 1996; Haider-Markel 2010). Political scientists are obliged to study LGBT groups and their claims, because to ignore them is to overlook an important aspect of political reality.

Nevertheless, skepticism about the wisdom of studying LGBT politics lingers, perhaps reflecting criticisms of multiculturalism and identity politics from the left and right (on

the latter, see, e.g., Gitlin 1995; Bloom 1987). Critics argue that identity politics (politics based upon issues such as race, gender, and sexual orientation) reduces politics to a disparate set of parochial group struggles at the expense of transcendent, “universal” values. This criticism overlooks the close link between identity politics and universal values. At the center of decades-long struggles for civil rights and liberties, social welfare provision, and family law reform lie universal values such as freedom, equality, dignity, and respect. Second, the criticism suggests a false dichotomy. Simply because many conflicts transcend group identities does not mean that identity-based interests are unimportant, or that if we pay attention to identity politics, we ignore citizens’ broader interests. LGBT claims are part of a larger category of issues about sexual behavior, identity, and orientation that have become controversial during recent decades and include abortion and birth control, teenage and unwed pregnancy, sexual harassment, and pornography (Wald 2000, 4). Third, LGBT studies are not only about the struggles of a single identity group. Rather, they lie at the intersection of sexuality and politics. Inevitably, they are about the politics of *heterosexuality* and gay-straight relations, just as the study of race is about the white majority and black-white relations, and the study of women is about relations between men and women (Phelan 1994, xv). The story of sexual politics is both a narrative about a heterosexist majority that has used religion and ideology to maintain its cultural and legal privileges and a story of social learning in which disproportionately younger, more educated citizens have come to know openly gay people and have responded with greater tolerance and support for LGBT equality. Same-sex relationships also elucidate and challenge the cultural and moral status of traditional gender roles based on patriarchy among heterosexual couples. Increasing numbers of open same-sex spousal and parental relationships, as well as other alternatives to the traditional nuclear family, have expanded the definition of what counts as a “family” and reshaped public policies regulating divorce, child adoption, custody, and visitation.

Skeptics of LGBT political studies may also suspect that the study of identity groups is political advocacy masquerading as scholarship, or that identity politics generates passions that induce scholars to color their analyses. The perception that mainly LGBT individuals study LGBT politics may also fuel suspicions of bias. All decisions that we make about what to study are political because they reveal the topics that we consider most legitimate and important to warrant examination. If our decision to study LGBT politics is a political one, so too was our neglect of it for many years.

Personal viewpoints can creep into any subject that political scientists study. Many people who study the U.S. Congress are fond of the institution; others dislike it. Many who study public opinion have faith in the public's rationality and capabilities; others are skeptical. We should not assume, however, that scholars' political beliefs compromise their scholarship. The questions of interest to most political scientists are empirical and do not have answers that clearly support one side or another of a political conflict. Social science training and procedures guard against bias by encouraging scholars to review and replicate their colleagues' research findings. A personal connection to a topic often kindles interest in and enthusiasm for studying it and leads to insights that otherwise might be missed. Ultimately, the proof is in the pudding. The appearance of scholarship on LGBT topics in reputable, peer-reviewed

Attempts by gays to alter their status through political means gives us the opportunity to study how small, weak and despised groups can use political means to challenge larger and stronger political forces who enjoy the support of entrenched social values. . . . The clash of social movements over gay rights thus forces us to ask fundamental questions about the nature and distribution of power in the United States, which is a central concern of political science. (2000, 6)

Few endeavors could be more important to the discipline of political science than the development of its central concepts. The study of LGBT politics helps broaden our understandings of "politics" and "power." Like feminist politics, LGBT politics reminds us that "the personal is political." The oppression of gays and lesbians is most effective when it pres-

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journals and books indicates that scholars do not let political opinions distort their findings and analyses.

Finally, critics may believe that a focus on a single social movement is inconsistent with the social science goal of making generalizations. Applied consistently, this argument calls into question virtually the entire field of American politics, most of which focuses exclusively on a single, atypical country that constitutes a smaller fraction of the world's population (about 4.5%) than estimates of the gay and lesbian population (between 5% and 10%). We can study LGBT politics in ways that increase its relevance and analytic leverage. We can combine findings from LGBT studies with findings from studies of other movements. We can also select LGBT cases strategically so that we include significant variation on key variables and control for others. LGBT issues vary dramatically, for example, in the degree to which the movement has achieved its goals and on key variables that explain degrees of success. Furthermore, in-depth case studies can identify new variables and hypotheses and uncover causal relationships that we can use to guide studies of other movements.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF LGBT POLITICAL STUDIES BEYOND THE STUDY OF SEXUALITY AND POLITICS

Studies of LGBT politics address basic, longstanding issues in political science, including how democratic regimes cope with the challenges posed by social diversity and how minorities and excluded groups induce the majority to address their claims for recognition, freedom, and equality. As Wald notes:

sure these people to remain closeted. "Coming out" is a form of political resistance with significant political repercussions, not just an intensely personal decision. Greater awareness of and contact with openly LGBT individuals increase tolerance toward such groups and support for their political demands. Thus, LGBT politics lies at the intersection of private desire, social legitimacy, and civil rights. LGBT individuals and groups have brought sex out into the open and have challenged ideas about sexuality that are ingrained in our culture, social norms, and legal institutions (Blasius 1994). By developing a group identity and community, LGBT individuals have challenged this system of domination and created a "new ethic" or "truth" about sexuality.

Gay and lesbian politics reminds us that power relations exist even in the absence of overt political conflict. For decades, the state, religion, medicine, the mass media, and other institutions have constructed a negative group identity for gays and lesbians that discouraged these groups from mobilizing, kept their grievances off the agenda, and presented formidable obstacles to progress after the emergence of the movement (see Lehning 2003). Studies of attitudes toward gays and lesbians have helped us understand how stereotypes shape levels of tolerance toward stigmatized groups, attitudes toward their legal claims, and support for electoral candidates who are members of such groups (Riggle and Ellis 1994; Golebiowska 2001; Golebiowska and Thomsen 1999). LGBT politics also reminds us that conflict occurs outside of formal political channels and conventional modes of participation, as well as through the pursuit of "outsider" strategies and protest tactics.

Empirical studies of gay and lesbian issues have supported and contradicted important theories, identified critical variables, and generated new hypotheses. Several works have linked the movement's success to particular political and social conditions. Gay rights advocates have succeeded in pushing for the adoption of civil rights laws in bigger cities with large numbers of non-family households; communities that are more socially diverse, located outside the South and Midwest, and with fewer religious conservatives; and states with bipartisan coalitions, Democratic legislatures, a history of tolerance toward minorities, and the presence of key bureaucrats who hold favorable opinions toward gays (Haider-Markel and Meier 1996; Haider-Markel 2000; Button, Rienzo and Wald 1997). We can compare these findings to data gathered about other social movements, as well as use them to guide future research.

Studies of LGBT politics have confirmed and disconfirmed various social movement theories. Button, Rienzo, and Wald (1997) found support for resource mobilization, political process, community protest, and urban diversity explanations for movement success. Focusing on the organizational structures and strategies that gay rights "movements" have adopted, Rimmerman (2000; 2002) finds that the major social movement theories mentioned previously are unable to account for those important strands of the LGBT movement that go beyond "mere identity politics." He traces the movement's limited success to its reliance on professionalized lobbyists and its embrace of a narrow, rights-based strategy eschewing the aims of broader class, race, and gender politics. Engel (2007) shows that "cost-centered" resource mobilization theory and three variants of political process theory fall short of an adequate explanation of the strategic behavior of social movement organizations. Comparing the divergent strategies pursued by major LGBT rights organizations, he finds that identity is a resource during the early phases of social movement development but constrains action once movements mature. Engel argues that social movement organizations are able to participate productively in the political arena when a good "fit" exists between their identity, the issues on the agenda, and the institutional venue in which the issues are addressed. Andersen (2005) refines and elaborates the concept of a political opportunity structure by identifying a "legal opportunity structure." The legal opportunity structure consists of the legal system's formal rules and organization, the existence of allies and opponents within it, and the existing stock of cultural and legal frames. To explain how LGBT litigants fare in court, she shows how formal organization shapes access to the courts and the distribution of power, how the frames used in legal venues favor some kinds of arguments over others, and how petitioners encounter allies and opponents at different points in the process.

In accounting for why the gay rights movement in the United States lags far behind the Canadian movement in accomplishing its policy goals, Smith (2008) broadens the applicability of historical-institutional analysis to the politics of sexuality. She traces the sharp policy differences between the two countries back to their very different institutions, policy legacies, and broader political contexts. Issues unrelated to gay rights (e.g., the politics of race and civil rights in the

United States and the Quebec separatist movement and the adoption of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in Canada) have set each nation on a policy trajectory that has made success much more likely in Canada than the United States.

Other studies have examined public opinion on LGBT rights to shed light on opinion dynamics, framing effects, and the impact of political knowledge on the shaping of opinion. Minority groups facing a potent opposition often need public support when pressing their claims. Public opinion can play a key role in issues of personal morality and discrimination, which are often salient and relatively easy for citizens to understand. Like attitudes toward other minority groups, greater positive affect toward gays and greater support for egalitarianism are linked with support for LGBT demands (Wilcox and Wolpert 2000). Support for gays is also greater among youth, women, the more educated, the less religious, nonevangelicals, residents of more dense urban areas, and people who believe that homosexuality is innate (Lewis and Rogers 1999; Haeberle 1999; Wilcox and Wolpert 2000). Brewer (2002) has shown that although "equality" and "morality" frames strongly affect opinions, these effects diminish with exposure to both frames, and individuals may challenge dominant frames. In another study, Brewer (2003) finds that the effects of political knowledge on forming opinions are mediated by whether debate is dominated by competing frames for a single value or a single dominant frame.

Lax and Phillips (2009) find that public policy responds to public opinion for some gay rights issues when controlling for other variables. At the same time, institutions mediate the impact of public opinion (Mucciaroni 2008; Smith 2008). Mucciaroni examines six issues for which the gay rights movement has experienced dramatically different outcomes. Despite a deeply divided public, sodomy laws have been repealed throughout the United States and gays have gained adoption rights in many parts of the country; meanwhile, the ban on gays serving openly in the military has remained in place for years, despite a majority of the public favoring its repeal. Federalism and judicial policymaking facilitated the repeal of sodomy laws and the spread of adoption rights. Meanwhile, military opposition, judicial deference, the national government's control over military policy, and conservative dominance in Congress have blocked the lifting of the military ban. More broadly, Mucciaroni suggests that patterns of success and failure vary across issue areas more than across social movements. Issues for which movements experience similar levels of public support and face similar institutional opportunities and constraints lead to similar outcomes.

The literature on LGBT politics has also contributed to the debate about whether particular institutional venues are especially hospitable to movements' demands. Robust debate exists about whether groups seeking social change can rely on courts to deliver favorable policy outcomes. Skeptics argue that civil rights advocates have a misplaced faith in the courts' ability to promote minority rights (Rosenberg 1991; Spann 1993). Some work on LGBT politics supports this view (Wald 2000, 24; Brewer, Kaib, and O'Connor 2000, 338; Pacelle 1996; Gerstmann 1999; Cain 2000; D'Emilio 2007), but other findings suggest that the court's impact is complex and varies across issues

and over time; at times, courts have contributed significantly to the advancement of LGBT rights (Pinello 2003, 10; Mucciaroni 2008, 252–54). Meanwhile, Barclay's (2010) study of the role of state and federal courts in the same-sex marriage debate supports existing political science research (and goes against much popular wisdom) that courts rarely contradict legislative preferences and make policy only when legislatures have failed to act. In his study of openly LGBT candidates for office, Haider-Markel (2010) advances our understanding of the challenges and opportunities for minority group candidates, the relevance of their group membership to their chances for winning election, and the ways in which descriptive representation helps produce greater substantive representation.

Other studies have elucidated the relationship between science and politics. The American Psychological Association's (APA) reversal of its designation of homosexuality as a mental illness (Bayer 1981), the federal government's response to the AIDS crisis (Epstein 1996; Rom 2000), and ongoing scientific study of the biological origins of sexual orientation (Stein 1999; Mucciaroni and Killian 2003) have provided fertile ground for exploring the relationship between these two areas. The APA and AIDS cases show that social movements can successfully challenge scientific expertise and wrest control of decisions from experts. Meanwhile, research about the political impact of studies of the origins of sexuality reveals scientific evidence's lack of influence in decisions involving sharp moral conflict and in situations in which policymakers have credible *non*-scientific sources of information at their disposal.

Studies of LGBT politics have helped to elucidate "morality policy" as a distinct category of public policy and have tested several hypotheses. Morality policies—including gay rights, abortion, school prayer, and pornography—fit poorly into existing policy typologies. Morality policies are conflicts over basic values rather than economic interests, are difficult to resolve through compromise, and are marked by technical simplicity and citizen participation (Meier 1994; Mooney 2001). Haider-Markel and Meier (1996) find that gay rights struggles resemble morality policy when they become salient but traditional interest group politics when they do not. Other scholars have compared and contrasted the politics of LGBT issues with other morality policy issues at the local (Sharp 1999; Sharp 2005), national (Oldmixon 2005), and cross-national levels (Studlar 2001) and have teased out broad patterns concerning how such issues are resolved.

Finally, examining cities' responses to gay rights struggles has enriched our understanding of urban politics, which has historically been shaped by studies of economic development and distribution (see Bailey 1999; Button, Rienzo, and Wald 1997; Sharp 1999; Sharp 2005). Cities have long served as centers of LGBT community building and political organization. Gays and lesbians have played an important role in shaping the economic and cultural life of urban areas. The identity politics that these urban-focused studies have uncovered differs from the traditional politics of growth and redistribution in its focus on the affirmation and legitimization of group identities and the fierce resistance that arises in response. LGBT discourses and priorities have become embedded in the conduct of local elections, city council redistricting, relations

with the police and police hiring, the design of school curricula, and other areas of urban life (Bailey 1999).

CONCLUSION

Sexual orientation and identity issues reflect power relations and fundamental value conflicts in society. LGBT individuals and organizations are visible and active at every level of government and in electoral, legislative, and judicial arenas. Gender and sexual distinctions shape a long list of public policies. Political science and political theory provide a deeper understanding of issues that lie at the intersection of sex and politics. The significance of LGBT political studies extends far beyond the specific concerns of LGBT politics. Studies of LGBT politics have enriched our understanding of politics and power generally and have made special contributions to a variety of literatures and topics of interest in the discipline. ■

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