

New research shows split on how people consider transgender rights issues

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The Trump administration in late February withdrew Obama administration federal protections for transgender students that would allow them to use bathrooms corresponding with their gender identity.

Transgender activists protested outside the White House. With two presidents essentially taking opposite stances on the issue within a year, it is obvious how polarizing transgender rights policies have become, said a University of Kansas researcher of partisanship and American politics.

"For as hotly contested as transgender rights are for some people, we don't know a lot about how Americans think about this set of issues and what shapes those attitudes," said Patrick Miller, a KU assistant professor of political science. "We don't have a very rich understanding about how average people think about transgender rights."

Miller was lead author of a new study measuring attitudes on transgender rights issues that found significant support for protection of general civil rights for transgender people—like equal access to military service, employment and housing non-discrimination laws. However, public opinion is more divided on policies that relate to the body and gender roles, such as people being able to choose which public restroom to use based on one's [gender identity](#) or the ability to change one's sex on a state-issued driver's license.

"On traditional civil rights debates, people are more liberal on those

issues when it comes to transgender people," Miller said. "On policies that are more body-related, such as physical changes and physical presentation of gender, all of which are more specific to the transgender community, more Americans seem to differentiate those and can be more conservative on those questions. People don't see all transgender rights questions equally."

The journal *Politics, Groups, and Identities* recently published the study online. The article, "Transgender politics as body politics: effects of disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism on transgender rights attitudes," includes Don Haider-Markel, chair and professor of the KU Department of Political Science, as a co-author, and the research team has completed a series of studies on transgender politics that will appear in a variety of journals this year.

Miller said regarding body-centric policy questions—such as questions about public restroom choice, or whether Medicare or health insurance companies should be required to pay for gender reassignment surgery or hormone therapy—those most opposed are people who report having a higher tendency to feel disgusted in general, though not specifically about transgender people. Also, more opposed are those who score higher on a psychological trait called "authoritarianism," which represents a higher need for order or to see the world in black-and-white terms. These individuals may place greater value on conforming to traditional social norms.

The researchers found those traits outweighed factors such as partisanship, ideology, and demographics in shaping attitudes about transgender rights, he said.

The findings would make sense given that much of the controversy surrounding debates at the federal level and in state legislatures have centered around transgender rights policies such as public restrooms,

identity on driver's licenses, and coverage for medical procedures.

"For many Americans, when they think about transgender people, their mind is on the body and how that defines transgender people in some ways, and maybe how that makes them different in some ways," Miller said.

The study could provide insight for [transgender rights](#) advocates. Oftentimes it is communicated that it is taboo or offensive to discuss issues surrounding the body and transgender people, such as how someone dresses or how someone is undergoing medical transformations to their body.

"Certainly, I understand people have the attitude that it is 'none of your business' or 'why would you ask that?'" Miller said. "But I think the implication of our research is that the evidence points toward the body being a major consideration that people have. So, if you want to lead society in a more accepting direction on things like the bathroom debate, you might be doing yourself more harm than good to not engage with questions about the body and to shut down those questions and discussions."

Researchers consider the transgender population to be around 0.5 percent of the American population, and it's likely most people won't have direct contact with a transgender person, he said. However, as mass media news coverage and depictions of characters in popular culture becomes more common, that could influence how people think about the minority group. That also could spur more people to become curious and ask more questions about the [transgender](#) community, spurring some of those conversations that might be seen as taboo, he said.

"That's an area where engagement may be uncomfortable for some people," Miller said, "but it could be beneficial if you want people to be

more sympathetic and understanding of the experiences that [transgender people](#) have."

More information: Patrick R. Miller et al, Transgender politics as body politics: effects of disgust sensitivity and authoritarianism on transgender rights attitudes, *Politics, Groups, and Identities* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/21565503.2016.1260482](#)

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