

Public attitudes are more negative toward policies specific to transgender issues than gay rights policies, study finds

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Public attitudes are significantly more negative toward transgender people and policies pertaining to them than they are toward gay people and policies of gay rights advocates, according to a study that includes two University of Kansas researchers.

The research, published recently in *Political Research Quarterly*, found the split of general public support for transgender-friendly policies between those typically perceived as civil-rights issues—like employment protections—versus those more specific to transgender people, such as the use of public restrooms or gender selection of sports teams in schools.

"The public sees a similarity in certain issues—military service or employment nondiscrimination, for example—that they consider as equality issues, much like they did with [gay rights](#) issues, or historically on some issues rights for women and racial minorities. However, when it comes to newer issues that are more transgender-specific—bathrooms or medical services, for example—the general public does not see them as equality issues as much," said Patrick Miller, assistant professor in the Department of Political Science. "These are also a set of issues that gay people and other groups didn't necessarily bring up."

Miller and Don Haider-Markel, professor and chair of the KU department, co-authored the study with researchers from across the

country. The research team has completed a series of studies on transgender politics and public opinion that have appeared in a variety of academic journals this year.

For this paper, the researchers examined nationally representative survey data on attitudes toward the LGBT community with a specific focus on transgender people, something political science research had shed little light on until now.

"One thing we tried to understand is how much the public is lumping people together and seeing them as a group, thinking about their rights in similar ways," Miller said. "We also looked at whether the same things that influence attitudes toward gay rights would influence attitudes toward [transgender rights](#)."

The level of public support for transgender policies is not uniform, as those who identify as Democrats, more liberal, more educated and younger voters tended to be more supportive of all types of policies that pertain to transgender rights, even the types other voters did not seem to support, he said.

However, overall for the public the reasons behind less support for transgender rights policies could be related to population, Miller said. Most researchers estimate that roughly 3-4 percent of the U.S. population identifies as gay or lesbian, with only an estimated 0.5 percent identifying as transgender.

Therefore, most Americans, especially in recent decades, are more likely to know someone who is gay, which has likely led to more public support for policies such as same-sex marriage.

"Gay people are also more likely to be open about being gay," Miller said.

However, fewer people are familiar with or might have had contact with a transgender person.

"So you have a tiny population and there is a social stigma around that identity," Miller said. "The result is there are not many Americans who know a transgender person, especially compared to gay people. Most don't know [transgender people](#), but most know a gay person. So there's a disparity in contact."

One potential implication from the study, he said, is that those advocating for more transgender rights and policies should be open to sharing information and educating people about what it means to be transgender or what life is like.

"People want to say 'I'm transgender' and stop the conversation right there," he said. "But if you shut down the conversation and tell people this is private and none of your business, I think not discussing that can be detrimental. I'm sympathetic with the point of view that it's private and maybe an intrusive question. But when people are trying to understand, that's not bringing them closer to your experiences and your point of view, especially when their attempts to understand are met with hostility or dismissiveness.

Provided by University of Kansas

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