

Study examines attitudes toward transgender athletes

January 14 2020

As several states draft legislation that would force student-athletes to play as their gender identified on their birth certificate instead of on a team that matches their gender identity, a team of political scientists investigated underlying factors that drive public opinion on transgender athletes.

The new study shows while women in general are more supportive than men of transgender athletes participating in sports by [gender identity](#) instead of biological sex, women who are sports fans are more likely to oppose it, holding views that resemble male sports fans.

The research recently published in the journal *Sex Roles* investigated public attitudes toward the participation of transgender people in sports by using data from a 2015 survey of 1,020 adults across the U.S.; the data was previously used by the same researchers to analyze [public opinion](#) on a variety of transgender rights issues.

Dr. Jami Taylor, professor of political science and public administration at The University of Toledo who focuses on transgender politics and policy, is part of the team who found that attitudes about transgender athletes are strongly shaped by an individual's characteristics, political values and personality traits.

Also, the study shows people who have contact with transgender, gay and lesbian people as well as those with stronger egalitarian attitudes are more favorable toward transgender participation, whereas those with

high moral traditionalism are more opposed.

"This is a very complicated area, and there are legitimate concerns about fairness for both transgender athletes and those who are not transgender," said Taylor, author of the 2017 book "The Remarkable Rise of Transgender Rights." "We need to have thoughtful policies that ensure fair competitions but also ensure that transgender athletes aren't discriminated against. As governments, nonprofits and businesses begin to craft policies that decide how and with whom transgender athletes will compete in sports, they need to avoid one-size-fits-all solutions because of the complexity of the issues."

"Given the gendered nature of sports and the resistance to the issue among [sports fans](#)—both male and female—policymakers will likely need to tread carefully and should have a care in this area as they craft policy solutions. Our work might be helpful to inform policymakers, as well as advocates who promote inclusion."

Research contributors include Taylor; Dr. Andrew Flores, assistant professor in the Department of Government at American University and lead author of the study; Dr. Donald Haider-Markel, professor and chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of Kansas; Dr. Daniel Lewis, associate professor of political science at Siena College; Dr. Patrick Miller, associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Kansas; and Dr. Barry Tadlock, professor of political science at Ohio University.

Current policy depends on the position of governing bodies, such as the NCAA at the collegiate level, and applicable laws that may vary by location. For instance, California law requires that transgender students be treated according to their gender identity, not biological sex.

The issue, according to lawmakers proposing new legislation in New

Hampshire, Washington, Georgia, Tennessee and Missouri, is whether transgender-rights protections are leading to unfair competition in women's sports, referencing male-to-female transgender students and arguing they have natural physical advantages over biological females.

However, the study cited a female-to-male case: Mack Beggs' victory in the Texas Class 6A girls' state wrestling championship in 2017, even though the female-to-male transgender student started his transition two years prior and took testosterone injections.

"It was a ridiculous situation. He wanted to wrestle with the boys and received harsh treatment from fans when he was forced to compete with girls," Taylor said. "Due to his success, parents accused him of cheating, but the rule in Texas was he had to compete according to the gender on his birth certificate, which was a girl. If he was in California, he would've competed against boys."

The study finds that 35.6% of women agreed with allowing transgender athletes to participate in sports aligned with their gender identity, compared to 23.2% of men.

As the 2020 Olympic games in Tokyo approach, Taylor calls the Olympics reasonably inclusive to transgender athletes and commends the International Olympic Committee for its attention to both human rights and fair competition.

"The International Olympic Committee no longer requires [transgender](#) athletes to have had surgery, but there is a strict requirement around hormonal management," Taylor said. "It's far less restrictive for female-to-male athletes than for male-to-female athletes, which seems to be a reasonable attempt to grapple with this complex issue. Importantly, the IOC's approach looks at evidence in this evolving area."

More information: *Sex Roles* (2020). link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11199-019-01114-z

Provided by University of Toledo

Citation: Study examines attitudes toward transgender athletes (2020, January 14) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-01-attitudes-transgender-athletes.html>

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