

# Trump in Transnational Perspective: Insights from Global LGBT Politics

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Despite campaign promises to be the most “gay-friendly” Republican president, since assuming office, Donald Trump has been proactive in what many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) advocates call a “rollback” of gains made during the Barack Obama administration, shocking many observers and bringing sexual and gender politics to the fore. How can we make sense of the contradictions and consequences of Trump’s sexual and gender politics? I argue that examining the transnational processes of democratization, political homophobia, and homonationalism illuminates the significance of the administration’s actions. A democratization approach reveals how Trump’s reversal of Obama-era policies and appointment of conservative judges signifies a greater effort at de-democratization through the contraction of citizenship rights and weakening of the judiciary; political homophobia clarifies how the administration legitimizes its governance through opposition to LGBT people and issues with the appointment of openly homophobic and transphobic individuals to prominent positions; and homonationalism, or the entry of certain queer subjects into the nation at the expense of racialized “others,” aptly characterizes forms of queer inclusion still taking place under Trump. For these reasons, putting Trump’s sexual and gender politics in transnational perspective can help us better understand this moment in U.S. politics.

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Donald Trump’s inauguration ceremony as president of the United States had scarcely ended when reports surfaced that the new administration had removed reference to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues from the White House website (McAfee

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2017). Indeed, a search for “LGBT” now returns a page with the message “Thank you for your interest in this subject,” asking the thwarted researcher to “stay tuned.”<sup>1</sup> Despite Trump’s promise to be a “real friend” of the gay community just six months earlier (Diamond 2016), his administration has now asserted a remarkably different public position on LGBT issues.<sup>2</sup> Given the number of new responsibilities facing a reportedly overwhelmed administration (Rosenfeld 2016), was eliminating reference to LGBT issues really so pressing?

As it turns out, changes to the White House public profile foreshadowed the importance of sexuality and gender — including specifically LGBT issues — to the nascent administration. Thus far, scholars have attempted to understand sexuality and gender politics as part of Trump’s populist appeal. As do other populist leaders, Trump claims to work on behalf of a homogenous (American) “people” against the corrupting influence of elites and immigrants (De la Torre 2017; Oliver and Rahn 2016). His nationalist critique of globalization stokes white Americans’ fears about their declining economic and political superiority, whether because of international institutions such as the United Nations and the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement or because of the fabricated threat of undocumented migrants (De la Torre 2017). Calling the media “fake news,” his political opponents “Crooked Hillary” and “Pocahontas,” and Mexicans “rapists” and “animals,” he eschews norms of political communication to constantly reiterate the racist and sexist rhetoric that resonates with this political base (Flegenheimer 2018; Korte and Gomez 2018). Indeed, Inglehart and Norris explain this rejection of “political correctness” as particularly appealing to “older, religious white traditionalists who find themselves left behind by growing support in America for such issues as same-sex marriage, rights for transsexuals, gender equality for women in politics, and immigration rights” (2016, 31). Hostility toward LGBT people, then, is one part of a larger “cultural backlash” that explains Trump’s popularity.

While that explanation is no doubt correct, this analysis does not purport to account for Trump’s seeming about-face on gay-friendliness or the

1. From <http://www.whitehouse.gov/LGBT> (accessed October 10, 2017).

2. The initialism “LGBT” refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. I sometimes use the term “queer” as an umbrella term for non-normative genders and sexualities, and other times I use it to refer to queer studies and scholarship. I understand LGBT to be a political construct emerging from a specific set of contentious and changing identity politics in the United States (Murib 2014). The initialism is a transnationally circulated construct that can obscure local ways of knowing gender and sexuality, but it is nonetheless used by politicians and activists in many national contexts (Thoreson 2014).

consequences of Trump's gender and sexual politics during his first term. Following the same impulse as political scientists who search for answers to the hows and whys of the Trump administration by looking across usually siloed fields of study (Lieberman et al. 2017), this article aims to put the sexual and gender politics of the Trump administration in transnational perspective so as to grasp their complexities and broader ramifications. A transnational approach emphasizes interconnected and ongoing processes that cross borders and regions (Ayoub 2016). One of the major insights from scholarship on global sexualities is that seemingly fixed or static categories, such as sexual and gender identities, are processes of dynamic interaction (Povinelli and Chauncey 1999). Identities, strategies, and desires circulate globally — albeit through asymmetrical matrices of military and economic power (Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Grewal and Kaplan 2001). Scholars, attentive to the agency of local activists within these global power relations, have consistently located LGBT activism and politics in a transnational frame so as to appreciate local and national similarities and differences while capturing broader patterns (Ayoub 2016; Friedman 2012; Thoreson 2014). Putting contemporary U.S. LGBT politics in transnational perspective disrupts any presumptions of U.S. exceptionalism that prevent the observation of these patterns.

An examination of three transnational processes that emerge in the global LGBT politics literature — democratization, political homophobia, and homonationalism — illuminates the significance of the administration's actions. Through the lens of democratization theory, Trump's efforts to undo many of Barack Obama's policies and confirm conservative judges not only matter for a mainstream LGBT movement interested in institutional access but also signify a greater effort at de-democratization through the contraction of citizenship rights and weakening of the independent judiciary. In terms of political homophobia, the Trump administration acquires legitimacy through opposition to LGBT people and issues with the appointment of openly homophobic and transphobic individuals to prominent positions. Finally, homonationalism, a process through which certain queer subjects gain entry into the nation at the expense of racialized "others," aptly characterizes forms of queer inclusion taking place under Trump, such as his rhetorical claims to protect LGBT citizens against "Islamic terrorists" and participation of LGBT people in right-wing politics.

This article contributes to the growing literature on LGBT politics that explores "the relationship between American hegemony and the increasingly global project of LGBT-rights recognition" (Smith 2017, 474). The United States continues to benefit from international

dominance economically and politically, but it is nevertheless embedded in a set of transnational processes that shape LGBT politics the world over. My approach, which focuses on these processes, allows us to consider what is currently happening in the United States as one instance among others of democratization, political homophobia, and homonationalism while exploring the specifics of the Trump administration. By focusing on the significance of the administration's actions, my approach also enables us to analyze the complexities and consequences of Trump's politics as they emerge and unfold. On that point, this article does not purport to explain the motivations or origins of particular Trump policies or behaviors. Evidence, sometimes contradictory or dubious, emerges daily.<sup>3</sup> Instead, I focus on a few key ways that scholarship on global LGBT politics can contribute to understanding the current political predicament of the United States.

Because of the recent nature of Trump's election, there exist few scholarly sources addressing Trump's presidency, and fewer still that draw connections to LGBT issues. As a result, this article examines primary source documents produced by the administration and LGBT organizations, in addition to a variety of mainstream and LGBT media sources, to build a narrative of LGBT politics in the Trump era.<sup>4</sup> While it is far too early to know what lessons scholars of LGBT politics will ultimately draw from the Trump administration, we can begin to apply these insights and suggest some future directions political scientists may take.

## POLITICAL FORECLOSURES: DE-DEMOCRATIZATION AND A ROLLBACK OF RIGHTS

Numerous scholars of LGBT social movements have examined the influence of the democratization process on LGBT movements, arguing

3. For example, former press secretary Sean Spicer published a book in late July 2018, stating that the pro-LGBT statement in Trump's speech at the Republican National Convention was motivated by a deal with Robert Sinners, a delegate from Washington, DC. Sinners agreed to support Trump in exchange for public acknowledgment of the LGBT community (Browning 2018). At present, it is difficult to know the degree to which Spicer's recollection of events is trustworthy, as his book has been described as replete with "incorrect facts" (Gallucci 2018), "misstatements" (Quinn 2018), and "inaccuracies" (Miller 2018) and called "a bumbling effort at gaslighting Americans" (Wemple 2018). The analysis presented here attempts to understand the political effects of the speech, including its vilification of Muslims, rather than to speculate about specific motivations.

4. I rely on newspaper articles for facts regarding the discourse and action of the administration that do not make their way into official policy or press releases. While media data is subject to selection bias by both the researcher and journalists, Earl et al. (2004, 72) find that "description bias" of hard news, or inaccuracy of events described by journalists, is relatively low. Therefore, I trust these sources to provide an accurate account of the administration's actions.

that democracy presents vital political opportunities for movements to grow and to achieve many of their goals (Brown 2002; Croucher 2002; Díez 2011; Duyvendak 1995; Green 1994; Smith 1998, 2005, 2008). In addition to facilitating policy change, Omar Encarnación (2014) argues, democratization is essential for LGBT movements by expanding citizenship and increasing the strength and importance of the judiciary.<sup>5</sup> Yet Donald Trump's victory and subsequent actions in office have heightened fears that the United States, along with other stable democracies, is entering a phase of "de-democratization" (Frum 2017; Huq and Ginsburg 2017). In light of this, Trump's "rollback" of policies by the Obama administration and his rapid nomination of social conservatives to the bench suggests that these actions go further than just presenting obstacles to LGBT activists, but signify a contraction of LGBT citizenship and a weakening of the judiciary.<sup>6</sup>

Obama compiled what Mathew Nosanchuk calls a "robust record of executive branch action to further LGBT equality" (2012, 445), including a presidential memorandum that extended same-sex partner benefits to foreign service and executive branch government employees, a presidential directive that required hospitals receiving federal funding to extend visitation rights to LGBT patients, and a Department of Education guidance that included antibullying efforts for LGBT students. The Obama administration's receptivity to the demands of LGBT activists translated into "significant victories" for the mainstream LGBT movement (Wesley, Hendrix, and Williams 2011, 156).

Since taking office, Donald Trump and his administration have reversed many of the Obama-era policies<sup>7</sup> in a way that constitutes a contraction of

5. Omar Encarnación (2014) argues that democratization also strengthens civil society and develops levels of social tolerance. I find it too soon at present to know what the administration's effects on civil society or social tolerance will be.

6. I am not arguing that conservative efforts to roll back legislative and judicial gains by the LGBT movement are new — these efforts have been made for decades (Goldberg-Hiller 2012). It is also not unusual for a newly elected president to use executive authority to undo policies of his predecessor that run contrary to his politics or to insist that executive branch agencies fall in line with the administration's priorities (Coglianese 2010; Nosanchuk 2012). For example, former president Barack Obama reversed George W. Bush's policies on issues ranging from marijuana criminalization to energy to the environment (Khan 2009). However, I am arguing that a transnational perspective on Trump's actions can illuminate their contemporary import and ramifications, which extend beyond the policy changes themselves.

7. In a widely circulated essay, Ta-Nehisi Coates (2017) contends that "Trump's presidency is the negation of Barack Obama's legacy." Coates argues that this is motivated by Trump's ideological commitment to white supremacy. Coates's essay demonstrates the importance of race to the contraction of all sorts of citizenship rights under Trump. Indeed, Latino citizens living along the U.S.-Mexico border have experienced difficulty obtaining passports because of suspicions of "citizenship fraud" by the State Department (Sieff 2018).

citizenship for LGBT people. A first example pertains to LGBT participation in the armed forces. The Obama administration ordered a military self-study that resulted in the recommendation to allow transgender troops to serve openly, and in 2016, the military took steps to implement the report's recommendations (Engel Bromwich 2017). However, on July 26, 2017, Trump tweeted that transgender service members are a "burden" and will not be "accept[ed] or allow[ed]" in the U.S. military (Engel Bromwich 2017). While the tweet claimed consultation with "generals and military experts," the administration could not provide any evidence that this was the case, and senior military officials broke convention to make public statements contradicting the president's policy recommendation (Buncombe 2017; Starr, Cohen, and Sciotto 2017). Civil rights organizations, LGBT legal advocates, and service member organizations quickly filed for injunctive relief on the grounds that implementing the ban after the government had announced its intention to allow transgender troops to serve openly violated the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution and represented a stripping of service members' civil rights (Segal 2017). The consequences of this policy reversal are likely to have a disproportionate impact on transgender people of color, as people of color are overrepresented in the U.S. military (Chalabi 2017).<sup>8</sup> While there is significant disagreement within the LGBT movement regarding the merits of petitioning for military inclusion in the first place (Democracy Now 2017), a transgender ban on military service nevertheless constitutes a limit on the extent of citizenship rights for transgender individuals.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) has played a significant role in undoing several policies of the Obama era, the effect of which has been to limit the exercise of LGBT rights. In March 2017, the DOJ blocked proposed questions on the U.S. Census about LGBT populations (Thompson 2017). This is true despite the fact that months earlier, under Obama, the Justice Department was one of four federal agencies, along with the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, and the Environmental Protection Agency, that asked the Census Bureau to include questions regarding sexual orientation and gender identity on the American Community Survey (H. Wang 2017). Once Trump took office, the DOJ sent a letter to the Census Bureau disputing the "appropriateness" of

8. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

these questions, and then, a week later, they were removed (H. Wang 2017). The Census is used to determine the allocation of \$400 billion in federal funding (H. Wang 2017). Refraining from enumerating LGBT people means less funding allocated to programs that support them (Green 2017b).

In April 2017, the DOJ withdrew a lawsuit over North Carolina's antitransgender House Bill 2 (HB 2), the so-called bathroom bill, which prohibited transgender people from using the bathroom that accords with their gender identity and reversed local ordinances expanding protections for LGBT people (Berman 2017). The DOJ said that it dropped the lawsuit because HB 2 was repealed; however, observers say the new bill does not repeal HB 2 and maintains the same provisions (Berman 2017). Another example deals with federal discrimination protection. Former attorney general Eric Holder released a memo in 2014 directing the DOJ to interpret Title VII's prohibition on "sex" discrimination to include discrimination against individuals on the basis of their gender identity or expression (DOJ 2014). In October 2017, the DOJ rescinded that guidance, saying that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 does not cover transgender people (Holden 2017), and it filed a brief in a case before the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit to advance the claim that Title VII does not protect lesbians and gays from workplace discrimination (Frankel 2018).

The DOJ has also worked in concert with the Department of Education to diminish existing LGBT protections. Attorney General Jeff Sessions, in a joint letter with Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, rescinded Obama-era guidance for schools that allowed transgender students to use restrooms in public schools corresponding to their gender identities (Peters, Becker, and Davis 2017). Sessions and DeVos claimed that the guidance had been implemented "without due regard for the primary role of the states and local school districts in establishing educational policy" (Peters, Becker, and Davis 2017). Under DeVos, the Department of Education also refused to pursue discrimination complaints filed by transgender students (Holden 2018). Since January, 2017, the Trump administration has limited the scope of LGBT rights, challenging prior decisions made by the Obama administration to interpret the rights enumerated in the 1964 Civil Rights Act in a more expansive manner.

Donald Trump has made the appointment of federal judges a top priority in his administration, and many of these appointees are skeptical of LGBT rights claims. In the United States, as elsewhere, the judiciary has provided an important avenue for the mainstream LGBT movement

to advance its agenda of political and social change (Andersen 2005; Taylor and Haider-Markel 2014). Trump's appointments not only frustrate such efforts but also weaken and politicize the judiciary. While previous administrations have taken advantage of their influence to nominate politically favorable candidates to the federal bench (Owens 2017; Rosen 2004), Trump has openly criticized federal judges (Scott and Malloy 2017) and nominated individuals with short careers, appearing to privilege political orientation over legal expertise (Blake 2017a; V. Wang 2017).

In his first year in office, Trump made 59 judicial nominations, 18 of which were confirmed (Lambda Legal 2017c). Of those 18 judges, 12 are circuit court judges. Trump confirmed more judges in his first year than Barack Obama, George W. Bush, or Bill Clinton (Lambda Legal 2017c). This is especially consequential as circuit court judges hold lifetime appointments. In a press conference with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Trump said, "I want to say that we will set records in terms of the number of judges . . . There has never been anything like what we've been able to do together with judges" (Blake 2017b). The pace at which Trump has been able to make these confirmations has led advocacy groups to suggest that Trump is "stacking the courts" with social conservatives who would oppose the expansion, or even the exercise, of LGBT and other civil rights (Matthews 2017; Nash 2017; Savage 2017).

A number of Trump's judicial nominees have track records of discriminatory statements or writings, and even judicial histories wary of LGBT rights claims (Lambda Legal 2017c). The first judges confirmed under George W. Bush, also a staunchly conservative administration, did not have comparable public records of anti-LGBT animus.<sup>9</sup> Of the 12 circuit court appointments made in Trump's first

9. To add comparative context, I performed a Google search of George W. Bush's and Trump's appointments during their first year in office for evidence of their track records on LGBT issues. While 75% (9 out of 12) of Trump's judicial appointments were associated with anti-LGBT public statements or rulings, none of Bush's initial judicial appointments displayed similar evidence of anti-LGBT leanings. A caveat is that the past 10 years have witnessed a dramatic increase in LGBT visibility, and older digital public records may not reflect the same level of concern with these issues as they do today.

year, all but three had track records that concerned LGBT advocates (Lambda Legal 2017c).<sup>10</sup> For example, 27 organizations sent a letter urging Senators Chuck Grassley and Dianne Feinstein to oppose the nomination of John K. Bush to the federal bench on the grounds that he had spoken out against the decriminalization of sodomy and used a homophobic epithet in a public speech (Lambda Legal 2017a). Another appointee, Amy Coney Barrett, who subsequently made Trump's shortlist for the U.S. Supreme Court, gave a paid lecture to the conservative legal group Alliance Defending Freedom, the organization that represented business owners accused of LGBT discrimination in two recent Supreme Court cases (Lambda Legal 2017c).

Ralph Erickson, confirmed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit in October 2017, was one of two judges in 2016 to order the federal government not to enforce health care nondiscrimination protections for transgender individuals (Bendery 2017). Another example from the Eighth Circuit is Leonard Steven Grasz. As the chief deputy attorney general of Nebraska, he opposed same-sex marriage and argued in court that an unmarried lesbian couple should be prohibited from adoption because "[t]he state's adoption law was not written with the intent to sanction gay adoption" (Lambda Legal 2017b). The American Bar Association (ABA) deemed him "not qualified" on the grounds that he has not demonstrated the ability to separate his personal political beliefs from his role as a judge. After his successful appointment, Republicans warned that the ABA, which has unofficially vetted candidates for more than half a century, may be stripped of this role as an independent assessor (Savage 2017).

In perhaps the most consequential appointment of all, Trump secured the confirmation of Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court. LGBT advocates decried Gorsuch's nomination, citing his opinion in *Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc. v. Sebelius*, which arguably allows for discrimination in the name of religious conviction (Wong 2017). In June 2018, Trump nominated Brett Kavanaugh to replace the retiring Justice Anthony Kennedy on the Supreme Court. Kavanaugh's record on LGBT issues is unclear; however, the right-wing Family Research Council has publicly praised his rulings (Sherman and Peltz 2018).

10. Trump's nominations also lack racial, gender, and sexual diversity. Obama's efforts to diversify the judiciary were extensive, and for his part, George W. Bush undertook some attempts to increase diversity among his nominees (Tobias 2018). As of late 2017, Trump had nominated only 10 people of color out of 113 circuit and district court nominees (Tobias 2018). His record on judicial diversity is "the worst one since President Ronald Reagan's tenure when dramatically fewer persons of color, LGBT individuals, or women were practicing attorneys" (Tobias 2018, 402).

The Trump administration is taking actions that foreclose political opportunities for LGBT activists to undertake institutional and legal reform. However, an examination of sexual and gender politics from a transnational perspective reveals the ways in which the administration's steps to roll back or reinterpret policy and appoint conservative federal judges means more than just missing opportunities. These actions pose a threat to democratization efforts such as the extension of citizenship rights to LGBT people and democratic institutions such as the independent judiciary. In a 2017 Vox article, German Lopez writes, "Trump is a reminder that rights gained can still be lost." While the success of the LGBT movement may be intertwined with democratization and its more inclusive institutional landscape, maintenance of these gains is hardly a foregone achievement, even for established democracies.

### POLITICAL HOMOPHOBIA, BY APPOINTMENT

Global LGBT scholarship is particularly attentive to the ways in which anti-LGBT animus becomes manifest in politics and under what conditions this sentiment gains traction among elites and the larger society. Scholars have conceptualized politicians' deployment of antigay sentiment and policy in the process of state building using the term "political homophobia" (Boellstorff 2004; Bosia and Weiss 2013; Currier 2010, 2012; Murray 2007). For example, political homophobia is manifest in President Vladimir Putin's "traditional values" discourse that underpins his rule and justifies Russia's 2013 law prohibiting the distribution of information on homosexuality (Chaney 2018; Horvath 2016; Wilkinson 2014). Political homophobia, then, is about legitimizing political authority through the assertion of a properly heterosexual state. While that law has the effect of squelching dissent in civil society, political homophobia cannot be reduced to failing democratization or authoritarian governance (Currier 2010). Such reductionism "erases the gendered and sexualized contours of this strategy," which disproportionately affects sexual and gender minorities (Currier 2010, 111–12).

Since taking office, Trump has appointed openly homophobic and transphobic individuals to lead nearly every executive agency. Using political homophobia, it becomes clear that choosing anti-queer individuals to fill high-profile appointments reasserts the state's heteronormativity and cisnormativity — both symbolically by making

these individuals the “face” of the government<sup>11</sup> and in practice by enacting policies that marginalize LGBT people. Further, in the case of this administration, the deployment of political homophobia by government higher-ups sometimes means undermining the purpose of the agency they were appointed to lead.

Trump sent early signals that political homophobia would characterize his administration with his choice of Mike Pence, former governor of Indiana, as his running mate. In March 2015, Pence signed into law an Indiana bill called the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. The bill allowed businesses to turn away LGBT individuals by citing a conflict with their religious convictions (Williams-Jent 2016). He opposed same-sex marriage, participation by gays and lesbians in the military, and funding for HIV treatment (Williams-Jent 2016).

Of the 15 executive departments whose secretaries currently compose the cabinet, 13 employed political homophobia as a feature of their public service prior to taking office or have done so in their current positions.<sup>12</sup> At the State Department, Trump’s initial pick of Rex Tillerson stood out as more socially liberal than Trump’s other cabinet members; in office, Tillerson recognized Pride Month (Caplan 2017) and retained Randy Berry as special envoy for the human rights of LGBTI persons — a position created by President Obama (Hudson 2017).<sup>13</sup> Trump “soured” on Tillerson and replaced him with Mike Pompeo, his initial pick for Central Intelligence Agency director. As a congressman, Pompeo publicly opposed same-sex marriage (he called homosexuality a “perversion”) and the inclusion of lesbians and gays in the military (Parker et al. 2018).

At the Department of Commerce, Wilbur Ross attracted criticism for sexist and homophobic jokes at a Wall Street fraternity party in 2014 (Roose 2014). Under his direction, the Commerce Department removed reference to “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” from its annual equal opportunity statement (Eilperin 2017). At the Department of

11. Claire Annesley and Susan Franceschet write that “[e]xecutives are the most visible political actors, representing the public ‘face’ of government” (2015, 613).

12. To determine this, I searched publicly available data on the statements and comportment of each appointee both before and since taking up their cabinet position. The only current cabinet appointees that do not have significant records of political homophobia are Kirstjen Nielsen at the Department of Homeland Security and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin. Mnuchin lacks a track record of public service and therefore had no opportunity to engage in political homophobia. At other levels of government, Trump has appointed individuals who may prove more sympathetic to LGBT issues, including former Log Cabin Republican leader R. Clarke Cooper to the position of assistant of secretary of state for political-military affairs (Johnson 2018).

13. Berry has since left. The State Department told reporters that it was “looking to fill the position” (Lavers 2017). The position was vacant at the time of this writing.

Defense, James Mattis initially received praise from LGBT organizations for “defying” the president on the issue of the transgender military ban (Barbash and Hawkins 2017). However, Mattis later signed a memo that backed up Trump’s assessment of the risks of allowing openly transgender troops to serve (Johnson 2018).

At the Department of Labor, Alexander Acosta has a thin public record on LGBT issues, but he served on the awards committee of the conservative organization Family Research Council and founded a group designed to monitor judicial decisions for “activism” on issues such as LGBT rights (Ogles 2018). In her capacity as labor secretary under George W. Bush, current head of the Department of Transportation Elaine Chao opposed LGBT antidiscrimination protections (Agerholm 2016). At Veterans Affairs, the LGBT military organization OutServe-SLDN opposed the nomination of Robert Wilkie to lead the department because of his support for the transgender ban on military service in his capacity as under secretary for personnel and readiness at the Department of Defense (OutServe-SLDN 2018).

Attorney General Sessions is perhaps the best example of a state official asserting the state’s heteronormativity and cishnormativity both symbolically and in practice. As an Alabama senator, he came out against scrapping the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, and in 2014, he sponsored a bill to allow states to continue to restrict the definition of marriage to heterosexual couples (Bendery 2016). He voted against the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009 on the grounds that he was “not sure women or people with different sexual orientations face that kind of discrimination” (Lang 2016). He also opposed the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which would have extended federal antidiscrimination protections to LGBT people (Lang 2016). Sessions was one of the sponsors of the First Amendment Defense Act, which “would allow any taxpayer-funded organization to ignore laws that conflict with its religious beliefs about marriage” (Bendery 2016).

In addition to narrowing the DOJ’s interpretation of Title VII as attorney general, Sessions issued a guidance instructing DOJ attorneys to protect religious liberty, potentially at the expense of nondiscrimination protections for women and LGBT people (Moreau 2017). Under his direction, the DOJ filed a brief for the Supreme Court case *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* on behalf of a Jack Phillips, a Christian baker who refused to serve a same-sex couple (Barnes 2017). In July 2018, Sessions announced the creation of a “religious liberty task force” that would “help the department fully

implement our religious guidance.” In his speech, Sessions declared, “A dangerous movement, undetected by many, is now challenging and eroding our great tradition of religious freedom. There can be no doubt. This is no little matter. It must be confronted and defeated” (DOJ 2018). Though he did not mention the LGBT movement by name, Sessions evoked LGBT issues through the repeated reference to the baker Jack Phillips, including once to say the DOJ was “proud to file a brief in support” of him. Here, Sessions engages in political homophobia by conjuring the specter of a “dangerous” movement intent on sabotaging the free exercise of religion and conferring upon himself the responsibility to confront and defeat it. As such, he symbolically consolidates the state as properly heterosexual and cisgender and announces his intention to, in practice, use state power to combat and destroy threats to the state’s investments in these forms of normativity.

Trump’s appointment of public servants with histories of political homophobia is especially consequential, as Trump’s overall appointment rate to entities such as the State Department lags behind that of previous presidents and is thought to be part of a concerted political strategy to weaken government institutions (Kessler 2017). Indeed, in addition to making homophobic statements and advocating for homophobic policies in their official capacities, many of the appointments are “fox in the henhouse” appointments, meaning the appointees espouse political positions at odds with the duties of their new roles (Green 2017a). For example, Trump appointed Betsy DeVos to head the Department of Education. DeVos comes from a wealthy family whose foundation has donated more than \$6 million to the conservative group Focus on the Family, an organization that opposed the very antibullying programs developed by the Department of Education to aid LGBT youth (Signorile 2017). This means that political homophobia under Trump consolidates a straight state even as it undermines state institutions.

In another example, Trump tapped Ben Carson to head the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). During his confirmation hearings for the position, Carson eroded confidence in his ability to fulfill HUD’s mission to “build inclusive and sustainable communities free from discrimination”<sup>14</sup> when he answered that he would not extend “extra rights” to LGBT people in response to a question about housing discrimination (Bollinger 2017). Indeed, recent reports suggest that

14. See <https://www.hud.gov/about/mission> (accessed July 31, 2018).

Carson intends to release a new mission statement for HUD with references to discrimination removed (Olmstead 2018).

Under the direction of Alex Azar, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) erased references to “sex stereotyping” and “gender identity” from the department’s website describing antidiscrimination protections covered by Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) (Bergman and Campbell 2018). Also at HHS, Trump appointee Roger Severino took over as head of the Office of Civil Rights (OCR). Before his appointment, Severino worked at the Heritage Foundation, where he took strong stances against same-sex marriage and access to public facilities for transgender people (Green 2017a). He coauthored a report outlining his opposition to considering gender identity and sexual orientation as protected classes in civil rights, including as classes covered by Section 1557 of the ACA (Green 2017a). As director of the OCR, his very mandate is to interpret and enforce these nondiscrimination protections. Beginning in May 2017, the OCR began rolling back discrimination protections for transgender patients, and in April 2018, it announced an impending rule change to this effect (Thoreson 2018). In the meantime, the OCR created a division to defend health workers who refuse to care for certain patients (including LGBT patients) or perform certain services because of religious objections (Thoreson 2018).

Much of the political homophobia of Trump’s cabinet appointees takes the form of a public opposition to same-sex marriage.<sup>15</sup> While opposition to same-sex marriage is certainly a way to signal conservative credentials, it is also a position now at odds with a Supreme Court decision. At least two appointees have used their public platforms to question the authority of the judicial branch to weigh in on the issue. At the Department of the Interior, former congressman Ryan Zinke cosponsored legislation that put into writing his disagreement with the Supreme Court’s decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (Ogles 2018). The bill is intended to express that “the majority opinion in *Obergefell* unconstitutionally and indefensibly distorts the definition of marriage.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Trump appointee Sonny

15. Other cabinet members who have similar histories are Tom Price and Rick Perry. Price, who has since resigned from his appointment as the head of the Department of Health and Human Services amid allegations of misuse of public funds (Baker, Thrush, and Haberman 2017), called the Supreme Court’s 2015 marriage equality decision “a sad day for marriage” and, like Sessions, opposed the 2009 Hate Crimes Prevention Act (Ring 2016b). At the Department of Energy, former Texas governor Perry publicly opposed same-sex marriage and supported a Texas ballot measure to define marriage as between a man and a woman (Ring 2016a).

16. See the text of the bill at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-resolution/359> (accessed July 27, 2018).

Perdue now heads the U.S. Department of Agriculture. As governor of Georgia, Purdue signed legislation to prohibit same-sex marriage in the state and vowed to fight any court ruling that declared such a ban unconstitutional (Ogles 2018). The effect of appointing executive branch officials whose political homophobia includes weakening the institutions to which they are appointed or attacking other branches of government is to build a homophobic state at the same time as undermining institutional checks and balances on Trump's authority.

Adopting a transnational perspective on Trump's sexual and gender politics allows us to bring homophobia into focus as a "category of analysis" in the United States (Keating 2013, 246). Indeed, Michael Bosia and Meredith Weiss note that in the U.S. context, where public opinion on same-sex marriage has markedly improved, "pundits have seized on survey data to foretell not only the ultimate success of marriage equality in the United States, but the death of homophobia" (2013, 7), such that analysis of homophobia has receded into the background. However, in the past few months, the Trump administration has provided ample evidence for their warning: "Homophobia remains not just alive, but kicking" (Bosia and Weiss 2013, 7).

Trump has appointed individuals with public records of hostility to LGBT people and rights to upper echelons of the government. The anti-queer sentiment expressed by the majority of his cabinet officials is not a coincidence or simply the result of successful lobbying by socially conservative organizations, though the latter certainly plays a role (Mahler 2018). Rather, as a manifestation of political homophobia, these appointments create the image of a straight state and signal to LGBT people that they have no place in it, a message that is reinforced when these government officials enact policies that further marginalize LGBT people. In the case of Trump's cabinet, their deployment of political homophobia often contravenes the missions of their departments, undermining these institutions from within, or impugns the authority of the judiciary, undermining checks on the executive branch.

## HOMONATIONALISM AT PRESENT

The retrenchment of rights and the clearness of political homophobia mobilized by elites in the United States could lead one to believe that Trump's sexual and gender politics are only about the political exclusion of LGBT people. However, in the run-up to the election, Trump

appeared to make overtures to LGBT voters. One of the most striking optics of the campaign occurred at a rally in Colorado in October 2016 when Trump was handed a rainbow flag with the words “LGBTs for Trump” scrawled on the front with black sharpie, which he held while walking around on stage (Lambert 2016). This was not an isolated incident. His website sold the “Pride Men’s Tee”<sup>17</sup> with the slogan “LGBT for Trump” against a rainbow background. He also made public statements opposing HB 2 in North Carolina (Levitz 2016) and calling same-sex marriage a settled issue (de Vogue 2016). Even after taking office, and despite rumors to the contrary, Trump did not rescind Obama’s executive order extending employment protections to federal LGBT workers (Scott and Wright 2017).<sup>18</sup>

Trump’s gestures toward LGBT inclusion merit theorization. Indeed, observers of global queer politics note the ease with which the LGBT community can be recast from “foe” to “friend” (Siegel 2017). Amy Lind and Christine Keating (2013) explore the contradictory actions by political elites to both include and exclude LGBT people. They posit that the other side of political homophobia is “homoprotectionism,” or instances in which the state takes a paternal stance toward LGBT citizens to legitimize state authority. While political homophobia relies on maligning sexual and gender minorities, homoprotectionism allows the state to curry favor with queers by offering them protection from other groups or forces in society (Lind and Keating 2013). In the United States and other parts of the world, politicians claim that LGBT people require state protection from “Islamic terrorism.”

Jasbir Puar (2007) elaborates a connection between queer inclusion and Islamophobia with the concept of homonationalism. Puar argues that the war on terror that characterized the presidency of George W. Bush “rehabilitated some — clearly not all or most — lesbians, gays, and queers to US national citizenship” (2007, 38). A particular kind of white, middle-class, and normatively gendered homosexual was folded into the body politic through the extension of marriage rights, military participation, and other inclusive policies, thus enjoying the biopolitical investments historically reserved for heterosexuals. This inclusion is a fundamentally racialized process, which is only enabled through the racist and xenophobic invocation of the Muslim “terrorist” in opposition

17. At time of writing, this garment remains available for purchase at <https://shop.donaldjtrump.com/products/trump-pride-mens-tee-small>.

18. President Trump did issue a separate order that relaxed the documentation standards for federal contractors, arguably allowing for anti-LGBT discrimination (O’Hara 2017).

to the queer citizen. Puar explains that bids for inclusion or acquisition of “gay rights” rely on “the shoring up of the respectability of homosexual subjects in relation to the performative reiteration of the pathologised perverse (homo- and hetero-) sexuality of racial others, specifically Muslim others, upon whom Orientalist and neo-Orientalist projections are cast” (2013, 25). Pairing the entry of queers into the nation with Islamophobia is important because doing so sanctions a global project of white supremacy, belief in U.S. exceptionalism and superiority, and militarism abroad.

Though the concept began to circulate in the twilight of George W. Bush’s second term, homonationalism went viral during the Obama years, when mainstream acceptance for LGBT people was increasing and barriers to institutional access in the United States appeared to be falling away. However, homonationalism’s description of the racist, xenophobic exclusion that accompanies forms of queer inclusion continues to take place under Trump. In the postscript to the 10-year rerelease of *Terrorist Assemblages*, Puar directly addresses the question of the relevance of homonationalism to “Trump times.” “Trump-era style homonationalism,” she writes, is “masterfully elastic, sustaining the production of feared racial others and religious others on behalf of, but never directly benefiting (Christian secular), queers” (Puar 2017, 235). She argues, therefore, that homonationalism is not tied to the moment of “terror” post-9/11 but rather “names a historical shift” from states legitimizing authority through the enforcement of heteronormativity to leaning on both heteronormativity and homonormativity in the exercise of power (Puar 2017, 231).

Understanding homonationalism as a process thus helps resolve the seeming contradiction between moves to include and exclude LGBT people. Candidate Trump deployed anti-Muslim rhetoric in almost the same breath as his declarations to be a “real friend” of the LGBT community. In a speech immediately following the shooting at the Pulse nightclub, Trump remarked, “This is a very dark moment in America’s history. A radical Islamic terrorist targeted the nightclub not only because he wanted to kill Americans, but in order to execute gay and lesbian citizens because of their sexual orientation.” Trump clearly juxtaposes gays and lesbians with an “Islamic terrorist,” and he proceeds to call the attack a “strike at the heart and soul of who we are as a nation” (Diamond 2016). Trump does not mention that the majority of the victims were Latinx. As a result, the specific subjectivity of “gay and lesbian citizen” is racialized as white (Vidal-Ortiz 2016) before being

incorporated into the nation as its heart and soul. Just as Puar argues that the homonational politics of the George W. Bush administration did not aim to recuperate all queer subjects for U.S. nationalism, under Trump, this racialized inclusion has been accompanied by equal moves to exclude certain queer subjectivities — namely, queers of color and all transgender people. Richard M. Juang (2006) argues that it is not possible to separate transphobia from issues of racism, ethnocentrism, and Eurocentrism. Since Trump became president, these ideologies have been clearly entangled in his attempts to shore up a white Christian nation through the implementation of a “Muslim ban,” a “zero-tolerance” policy on migrants entering the United States, and a “transban” on military service.

A similar discourse featured at the Republican National Convention, where Trump stated that “49 wonderful Americans were savagely murdered by an Islamic terrorist. This time, the terrorist targeted our LGBT community. As your President, I will do everything in my power to protect our LGBT citizens from the violence and oppression of a hateful foreign ideology” (Politico 2016). Trump shifts the discussion from “gays and lesbians” to an “LGBT community,” which he claims as “ours.” In opting for the initialism and using the word “community,” Trump avoids any reference to specific queer subjectivities. The possessive language reinforces LGBT individuals’ subordinate status and vulnerability, as he casts himself as the only person capable of preventing future violence against them. As Puar’s work anticipates, Muslims are associated savagery and queers with citizenship. Omar Mateen, though born in the United States (BBC News 2016), is described as a foreign, external threat because the America Trump seeks to defend is defined as a Christian nation. In short, Islamophobia is justified as a campaign promise to LGBT Americans.

In addition to Trump’s rhetoric, homonationalism can also elucidate processes of racialized inclusion of LGBT people and issues into political institutions. For example, scholars of LGBT mobilization demonstrate the increasing incorporation of LGBT issues into political parties (Adam, Duyvendak, and Krouwel 1999; Encarnación 2011; Lind and Keating 2013; Schulenberg 2013). With Trump at the helm, the mainstream LGBT movement in the United States can expect a loss of institutional access, but right-wing parties in the United States and elsewhere have been making overtures to gays and lesbians, who increasingly fill their ranks (Reynolds 2015, 2016). In these cases, LGBT

subjectivities and issues are not the dangerous “other” but a marker of modernity against Muslim otherness.

The wave of success by populist parties in Europe suggests “a turning point in gay people’s willingness to publicly embrace the populist right” (Rogers 2017). Alice Weidel, openly lesbian, is the new face of Germany’s far-right party, Alternative for Germany (AfD). The party also has an LGBT group, “Alternative Homosexuals,” formerly known as “Homosexuals in the AfD.” Embracing queerness coincides with electoral success. In September, the AfD garnered 12.6% of the vote, an increase of 7.9%, to win a total of 13.3 seats (*The Guardian* 2017). Germany is not alone. Thomas Rogers (2017) writes that “in the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, and Austria, right-wing populist parties have registered surprising success with openly gay voters, complicating the widely held assumption that LGBT people are innately more likely to support left-wing parties.”

These parties consistently juxtapose gayness with Islam in order to “appear as ‘defenders of Western values’, particularly against a supposed ‘Islamisation’ of Europe” (Wielowiejski 2016). Scott Siegel (2017) argues that “speaking out against homophobia, anti-Semitism and sexism not only lends credibility to right-wing populists; it is a strategy that positions them inside ‘the enlightened West’ and, therefore, as ‘true Europeans.’” Siegel suggests that when family values are no longer as salient among the electorate, right-wing politicians may mobilize gay-friendliness. Siegel cites France’s National Front as another party “in ideological transition” putting issues like same-sex marriage in the background, while foregrounding Islamic fundamentalism. Polls show that the National Front performed better with gays and lesbians than it did with the general population (Siegel 2017).

According to exit polls, Donald Trump garnered approximately 14% of the LGBT vote in November 2016 (Chibbaro 2016). The Log Cabin Republicans, the only nationwide Republican LGBT organization, waited until after his victory to throw their support behind Trump. The organization’s president, Gregory T. Angelo, said in an interview with Quartz that Trump’s presidency represented a “tremendous opportunity” for gay rights. Angelo listed “Obamacare, tax reform, death tax repeal, preservation of the second amendment, fighting radical Islamic terrorism” as the Log Cabin Republicans’ top priorities under Trump. Angelo’s foreign policy perspective included opposition to the Iranian nuclear deal because of “human rights abuses against gay men and men just perceived to be gay.” Angelo also mentioned the shooting at the

Pulse nightclub, saying, “On radical Islamic terrorism, Log Cabin Republicans called the Orlando massacre what it was, when the Obama administration was tip-toeing around that. This was an attack on the gay community” (de Haldevang and Timmons 2017).

Chris Barron, former head of the now-defunct gay conservative organization GOProud, used very similar rhetoric to express his support for Trump. Describing Hillary Clinton’s foreign policy as “reckless,” he said in an interview with CNN, “She can find plenty of time to crucify Christians in the U.S. for perceived antigay bias, but when we’ve got ISIS throwing gay people off of buildings, when we have Muslim states that are prescribing the death penalty for people who are gay, I would think this would be something that a friend of the LGBT community would be able to speak out on” (Moody and Rosen 2016). Other groups sprang up around Trump’s candidacy, including Gays for Trump, led by Peter Boykin. The organization’s website (<http://gaysfortrump.com>) juxtaposes gay pride with Islamophobia. The hashtag #GaysForTrump is prominently displayed next to “Just say no to Radical Islam.”

Homonationalism connects queer inclusion to the racialized othering of Muslims in a manner useful for explaining the dynamics of queer inclusion in the Trump era. As such, it resolves the seeming contradiction between the Trump administration’s political homophobia and candidate Trump’s homoprotectionist rhetoric. It can also help us understand the increasing role played by white cisgender gays and lesbians on the radical right. In this sense, the United States represents another case study for investigating right-wing parties as opportunities for certain queer people and policies. It is an empirical question if, in the U.S. case, the porosity of Trump’s populist politics will open up surprising opportunities for LGBT inclusion or if LGBT people continue to be political scapegoats.

## CONCLUSION

This article has brought to bear some of the main insights in the literature on global LGBT social movements and politics on issues of sexuality and gender in the Trump era. I argue for the utility of a transnational perspective to understand the central role of LGBT issues in legitimizing Trump’s administration, the consequences of his policies, and seeming contradictions in his rhetoric and action. I have employed literature on democratization to understand the broader ramifications for LGBT

citizenship of the rollback of the policies of the Obama era and rapid federal court appointments. Though it is important not to romanticize the Obama administration, it is equally important to recognize the impact such changes in the tenor of political leadership can have. Since 2016, a smattering of hate crimes and bullying have been justified with the words “Make America Great Again” (Blum 2017; Brammer 2017).

The Trump administration has deployed anti-queer animus through the appointment of openly homophobic and transphobic individuals to prominent positions within the administration. Not only do these individuals have records of legitimizing their power through recourse to political homophobia, but also many have undertaken policies that marginalize LGBT people and threaten the integrity of the institutions to which they are appointed. Bosia and Weiss (2013) suggest that transphobia falls under the umbrella of political homophobia; however, the Trump administration’s focus on transgender issues raises the question of whether political transphobia merits its own consideration (Michaelson 2017). Future research could explore differences between populists’ use of homophobia and transphobia, especially as part of a broader politics of race and citizenship.

Finally, Trump’s election and tenure raise questions about how to think of this period in U.S. history. The concept of homonationalism remains indispensable in thinking through LGBT politics in the United States because of the focus on racialization and Islamophobia as components of LGBT inclusion. LGBT politics in the era of Trump may at times feel shocking, but a transnational perspective reveals that this moment in U.S. history shares many important features with other contemporary contexts.

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