

Manifesting a Shift in the “Overton Window”: The Threat of Project 2025 on the LGBTQ+ Community in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Since the first Trump administration, historically marginalized groups in the United States have been subjected to greater instances of bigotry and discrimination due to conservative influence on sociopolitical institutions. These actions suggest a shift in the “Overton Window,” whereby policy preferences previously deemed “unacceptable” are given consideration in the mainstream, especially by conservative policy actors. “Project 2025” is a comprehensive plan to restructure the federal government according to conservative dictates in the second Trump administration. This article is an examination of how higher education may be impacted by this plan, especially as it relates to LGBTQ+¹ faculty, administration, staff, and students.

The “Overton Window” refers to a range of policy perspectives deemed acceptable to the public at any given time.² Policy ideas that once may have been deemed “unthinkable” eventually are given consideration by politicians in response to societal changes. For example, the several polls conducted in the 1970s revealed that 70% of the population rejected the idea of homosexuality (De Boer 1978). However, public support for civil rights for the LGBTQ+ community has improved steadily since 2004, from 42% in 2004 to 71% in 2023.³ As public attitudes changed, politicians responded in kind by supporting policies designed to protect the rights of the community. This is an instance in which a shift in the Overton Window was manifested: a set of policy preferences that were not readily accepted in the 1970s have since been embraced in the twenty-first century.

However, since the 2016 presidential election and the presence of Donald Trump in politics, policies that were considered too far to the “right” of the window now are being promulgated by conservative politicians at the federal, state, and local levels. Many of these policies target the LGBTQ+ community: states

have banned transgender healthcare; open expression of transgender status in K–12 education (i.e., vis-à-vis sports participation and bathroom preferences); and literature, teaching, and class discussion related to LGBTQ+ issues. Therefore, it appears that conservatives, under the aegis of the Republican Party, are intent on implementing policies that eradicate LGBTQ+ protections the cornerstone of their platform across government. A comprehensive set of policies, dubbed “Project 2025,” was designed to ensure this eradication. This article examines the potential impact of Project 2025 on these LGBTQ+ protections, especially in higher education.

PROJECT 2025, UNITARY EXECUTIVE THEORY, AND PARTY RESPONSIBILITY

Project 2025 is the conservative blueprint for restructuring the federal government.

What Is Project 2025?

Project 2025 is a comprehensive conservative policy platform promulgated by the conservative think tank Heritage Foundation, in connection with 100 other conservative organizations and more than 400 conservative scholars. Overall, the “project” entails restructuring the federal government (with emphasis on the executive branch) and is rooted primarily in the “Unitary Executive Theory” (Aberbach, Peterson, and Quirk 2007; Calabresi and

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Rhodes 1992; Gostin 2009; McPherson 2011; Rudalevige 2012; Schier 2011; Waterman 2009). The theory, embraced largely by conservative politicians, posits that the powers of the president should extend beyond the powers addressed explicitly in Article II of the Constitution and that the individual in office should exercise complete control over all offices within the executive

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branch. In addition, the theory intimates that the concept of “checks and balances” is attenuated in favor of the executive branch. For example, Congress’s ability to override a presidential veto and the Supreme Court’s ability to declare a presidential act unconstitutional would be weakened when power is concentrated completely in the hands of the president. This year, the Supreme Court held that:

The nature of presidential power entitles a former president to absolute immunity from criminal prosecution for actions within his conclusive and preclusive constitutional authority. And he is entitled to at least presumptive immunity from prosecution for all his official acts. There is no immunity for unofficial acts.⁴

This ruling, coupled with a Republican majority in Congress, virtually ensures that along with the bureaucracy, the legislative and judicial branches will subordinate to the executive branch and policy promulgation under this plan. Moreover, it is not hyperbolic to assume that all federally elected officeholders who are Democrats (or Republicans who do not support the plan) will be perceived as “enemies of the state” and summarily dismissed from their positions alongside government personnel (Savage et al. 2024). A precursor of Project 2025 is “Schedule F,” an executive order signed by Trump in October 2020 and designed to reclassify federal employees into “excepted service,” making it easier for them to be removed from their positions. Although the language of the executive order suggests making it easier to terminate employees based on failures of “work ethic, judgment, and ability to meet the particular needs of the agency,”⁵ the order makes it easier for civil service employees to be removed if these criteria are not accompanied by loyalty to the president.

James Wilson, an early proponent of this theory, argued in the Constitutional Convention that the executive branch should be run by a single individual—“a single magistrate, as giving most energy dispatch and responsibility to the office” (Farrand 1911). In the twenty-first century, conservative politicians and Republican presidents have used the Unitary Executive Theory to defend their actions. George W. Bush used it to make unilateral decisions in the wake of 9/11—most notably, demanding Congress to pass the Patriot Act and creating the Department of Homeland Security (Aberbach, Peterson, and Quirk 2007). Project 2025 ensures the executive branch’s power is placed into Donald Trump’s hands during his second term. Finally, whereas conservatives have embraced the “Reagan plan” of 1980 (Hibbs 1982), members of the Heritage Foundation (along with conservative political

scientists, research scholars, and contributors) believe that an extended, more comprehensive plan for a unitary executive and conservative policy promulgation is necessary.

Arguably, Republican proponents of Project 2025 view promotion of the Unitary Executive Theory as a core element of their party’s plan to embody the notion of “party responsibility.” The

idea, first proposed by Schattschneider (1942) and expounded on in an issue of the *American Political Science Review* (Schlesinger 1951), was that the political parties would embark on specific, significantly different courses of action in their policy preferences and bring them to fruition on election. Project 2025 is viewed as the embodiment of this responsibility because the tenets presented in this plan may be seen as diametrically opposed to any policy ideas proffered by the Democrats.

Tenets of Project 2025

The proposed project for restructuring the federal government is built on the following four pillars:

- (1) *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*. This 955-page book, created “by conservatives and for conservatives,” is the centerpiece of the conservative plan for change vis-à-vis the Republican Party on Trump’s (re)election. According to the foreword, the “Conservative Promise” has “four broad fronts that will decide America’s future”:⁶
 - a. Restore the family as the centerpiece of American life and protect our children.
 - b. Dismantle the administrative state and return self-governance to the American people.
 - c. Defend our nation’s sovereignty, borders, and bounty against global threats.
 - d. Secure our God-given individual rights to live freely—what our Constitution calls “the Blessings of Liberty.”
- (2) *A Presidential Personnel Database*, a repository for resumés of potential employees who are conservative and who will pledge their loyalty to the Trump administration. These employees are expected to replace “non-loyalists” (e.g., liberals, moderates, and Democrats) across the executive branch beginning on inauguration day.⁷
- (3) *A Presidential Administration Academy*, which trains new hires in the weeks before and after inauguration, preparing them for roles in the new administration.⁸
- (4) *The 180-Day Transition Playbook*, “a comprehensive, concrete transition plan for each federal agency.” The playbook describes the conservative agenda plans for restructuring the federal government (i.e., vesting *all* authority over the executive branch in the president) and conservative-based policies that will be implemented within the first 180 days of the second Trump presidency.⁹

According to the Heritage Foundation and Project 2025 overview:

The actions of liberal politicians in Washington have created a desperate need and unique opportunity for conservatives to start *undoing the damage the Left has wrought* (emphasis added) and build a better country for all Americans in 2025. It is not enough for conservatives to win elections. If we are going to rescue the country from the grip of the radical Left, we need both a governing agenda and the right people in place, *ready to carry this agenda out on day one of the next conservative administration* (emphasis added).¹⁰

Project 2025 makes it clear that one of its main objectives is the implementation of conservative policies targeting underrepresented communities—in particular, communities of color and the LGBTQ+ community. As part of the first “front,” Project 2025 states:

The next conservative president must make the institutions of American civil society hard targets for woke culture warriors. This starts with deleting the terms sexual orientation and gender identity (“SOGI”); diversity, equity, and inclusion (“DEI”); and *gender, gender equality, gender equity, gender awareness* (emphasis added), gender-sensitive, abortion, reproductive health, reproductive rights, and any other term used to deprive Americans of their First Amendment rights out of every federal rule, agency regulation, contract, grant, regulation, and piece of legislation that exists (*The Conservative Promise*, p. 5).

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Project 2025 not only targets marginalized groups; it does so by introducing policies with little or no constitutional collaboration with Congress and the tacit support of the US Supreme Court. By utilizing the Unitary Executive Theory, the actions of the conservative president endanger freedoms (of women, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community) and undermine the system of democracy currently in place. However, the average Trump supporter—older, white conservatives (male and female), mostly rural dwellers (with some suburban support), with low to moderate socioeconomic status and strong evangelical leanings (Keating, Blanco, and Hawkins 2024)—is very likely to support this plan and its implementation.

POSSIBLE EFFECT OF PROJECT 2025 ON FEDERAL LGBTQ+ PROTECTIONS

In recent years, conservatives have wrongly conflated queer identity with sexual perversion. Under Project 2025, there are 12 references to “LGBT,” which are presented as part of the broader “culture war” that conservatives expect to win by instituting policies designed to reverse gains made by marginalized communities.

In a section titled “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Agenda,” Project 2025 plans to dismantle DEI initiatives completely, especially policies that advance the “bullying LGBTQ+ agenda” (p. 258). In addition, Project 2025 promulgates the plan for the Secretary of Health and Human Services to “reverse the Biden administration’s focus on LGBTQ equity” (p. 284). Another goal of Project 2025 is to define “marriage” as between a biological male

and female and “family” as a married mother, father, and their children” (p. 451). Arguably, Project 2025 will accelerate the rollback of LGBTQ+ protections begun under Trump’s previous administration—and occurring at the state level in certain states (i.e., Florida, Texas, and South Carolina). The “rollback” may include the following actions:

- (1) Directing the Supreme Court to overturn *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which has been alluded to by conservative justices in the wake of the *Dobbs* decision (Elliott 2024).
- (2) Exclusion of transgender Americans from all protections against discrimination, including repeal of anti-discrimination laws.
- (3) No acknowledgment of LGBTQ+ in connection with HIV/AIDS and loss of healthcare protections, including transition healthcare.
- (4) Rejection of “Pride” and attendant celebrations, notifications, and advertisements.
- (5) Amplification of anti-LGBTQ+ voices, especially those of Evangelical Christians.

Project 2025 and Targeting the LGBTQ+ Community in Higher Education

Project 2025 is an extension of the conservative impetus to remove “all things woke” from government and society as a whole

(although the term “woke” has a completely different original meaning, conservatives have co-opted and redefined it). Collectively, the policy plans addressed under Project 2025 reverse the protections afforded to the community and threaten both the livelihoods and lives of its members, including those in higher education.

In recent decades, gains made by members of the LGBTQ+ community in higher education have resulted in significant increases in the number of students enrolled in college who identify as part of the community. A 2020 Gallup Poll shows that approximately 17% of college students identified as “gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, queer, or questioning” and 1.7% identified as “transgender, nonbinary, or questioning” (Gallagher 2023). In terms of faculty, approximately 16% also identify as LGBTQ+.¹¹ As such, thousands of LGBTQ+ faculty and staff in higher education are threatened in terms of employment and college experience by the conservative plan for the 2025 Republican president.

With Project 2025’s implementation, it is surmised that all LGBTQ+ faculty and staff in higher education in *conservative* states will be under *immediate* threat of the discriminatory changes. We expect to see the greatest threats in states with the highest electoral support for Trump. Table 1 lists the states where Trump won at least 55% of the popular vote in 2024.

Many of the discriminatory actions we may see that affect LGBTQ+ faculty, staff, and administration include (but are not limited to) the following:

Table 1

2024 POTUS Election Results (in States with Trump Winning 55+% of the Popular Vote)

STATE	TOTAL VOTES	HARRIS%	TRUMP%
Alabama	2,265,090	34.10%	64.57%
Arkansas	1,182,676	33.56%	64.20%
Florida	10,893,752	42.99%	56.09%
Idaho	904,812	30.39%	66.89%
Indiana	2,936,677	39.62%	58.58%
Iowa	1,663,506	42.52%	55.73%
Kansas	1,327,591	41.04%	57.16%
Kentucky	2,074,530	33.94%	64.47%
Louisiana	2,006,975	38.21%	60.22%
Mississippi	1,228,008	38.00%	60.89%
Missouri	2,995,327	40.08%	58.49%
Montana	602,963	38.46%	58.39%
Nebraska	947,159	39.06%	59.63%
CD-1	318,304	42.77%	55.82%
CD-3	312,165	22.52%	76.32%
North Dakota	368,155	30.51%	66.96%
Ohio	5,767,788	43.93%	55.14%
Oklahoma	1,566,173	31.90%	66.16%
South Carolina	2,548,140	40.36%	58.23%
South Dakota	428,922	34.24%	63.43%
Tennessee	3,063,942	34.47%	64.19%
Texas	11,388,674	42.46%	56.14%
Utah	1,488,494	37.79%	59.38%
West Virginia	762,390	28.11%	69.98%
Wyoming	269,048	25.84%	71.60%

Source: The American Presidency Project. www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/elections/2024.

- Restructuring of work contracts, including rescinding tenure and removing tenure “lines” in favor of shorter, terminable contracts.
- Shift in teaching and/or research interests that exclude addressing LGBTQ+ people and issues. Bond (2017) addressed a

- Demote or remove “out” instructors and disallow course content that may be construed as representative of the LGBTQ+ community, even if the instructor is heterosexual and cisgendered (Kearns, Mitton-Kükner, and Tompkins 2014, 2017).
- More classroom observations to ensure that a faculty member is not teaching LGBTQ+ material.
- Elimination of queer studies courses and programs.
- Rescission of benefits to spouses and partners—that is, no longer being able to claim them for insurance purposes or utilize Family and Medical Leave Act provisions.
- Termination of on-campus groups and events addressing LGBTQ+ people and issues.
- Less likelihood of being considered for open faculty, staff, and administrative positions by hiring committees, using “fit” as an excuse to exclude LGBTQ+ candidates (King 2023). In addition, questions regarding sexuality or sexual orientation in job interviews—currently illegal under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act—will be acceptable under Project 2025 and will be used to exclude queer candidates from positions.
- Faculty training (e.g., harassment, DEI, and sensitivity) that excludes LGBTQ+ people and concerns.
- Restrictions from collecting and posting data on LGBTQ+ youth and federal funding for research projects related to LGBTQ+ people and issues.
- Overall reduction in faculty diversity, which in turn may create greater disparity between the demographic representation of faculty and the student body. According to Funk (2018, 184), “The most notable demand requested by students was the need to diversify faculty members. This should come as no surprise as faculty members are significantly less represented than under-represented student populations on college campuses.”

LGBTQ+ students will experience their own set of restrictions because they may be unable to (1) take courses or major in queer studies; (2) begin or maintain a campus group dedicated to LGBTQ+ issues; (3) participate in sports; (4) access “safe spaces” and faculty and staff “safe-space allies,” which may contribute to mental and/or physical health issues or compromise their ability to complete their studies; and (5) take advantage of student health services that have evolved (somewhat) in the twenty-first century regarding treatment and care for LGBTQ+ patients (Herek 2010; Hsieh and Shuster 2021; Wyatt-Nichol 2014). Even the social interactions of LGBTQ+ students and faculty—in particular, dating and intimate relationships—may be forbidden under Project 2025 unless the individuals

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teacher’s experience in teaching street harassment; under Project 2025, faculty may be restricted from teaching this type of material. In fact, all protections against harassment on behalf of people of color and LGBTQ+ individuals may be eliminated and redirected toward protecting harassment against cisgendered white males—the very group most likely to engage in harassment in the first place.

replicate heteronormative behavior when navigating campus relationships (Lamont, Roach, and Kahn 2018).

WILL “HETERONORMATIVITY” BLUNT PROJECT 2025’S IMPACT?

Conservative implementation of Project 2025 is designed to emphasize heteronormativity and traditional gender and sexuality

roles. Heteronormativity assumes that everyone is “straight,” intimate relationships are between one man and one woman, and gender is an immutable change established at birth. However, the literature is replete with studies regarding its impact on the LGBTQ+ community (Asencio 2011; Berlant 1995; Cronin 2015; Eeden-Moorefield et al. 2011; Gupta 2015; Kearns, Mitton-Kükner, and Tompkins 2014, 2017; Lamont, Roach, and Kahn 2018; Martin 2009; Pennell 2017; Ripley et al. 2012; Roseneil et al. 2020; Stryer, n. d.) To conservatives, the assimilative nature of heteronormativity expects people to (1) appear “straight,” (2) identify as the gender to which they are born, and (3) possess an outward appearance that does not suggest gender fluidity. Members of the queer community that possess these characteristics may be able to avoid (or escape altogether) the threats promised under Project 2025. With regard to (3), Schilt (2006) argued that female to male transgenders (FTMs)—especially tall, white FTMs who are assumed by the public to be cisgender—receive more authority, respect, and reward than they received as women and as compared to short or of color FTMs, and they might be able to avoid the potential punishments that Project 2025 will inflict on the LGBTQ+ community as a whole.

Members of the community who retain their biological identity at birth (i.e., cisgenders) but are in same-sex relationships may be able to avoid the most stringent ramifications of Project 2025 by remaining “closeted”—that is, choosing not to divulge their sexual orientation (Asencio 2011).

In higher education, faculty and administration suspected of being gay may be forced to address queerness vis-à-vis interrogation from other faculty members, administrative staff, and government officials. In addition, faculty members and administrative staff who are parents of queer children may be expected to “normalize heterosexuality and heteronormativity” in them as part of a “tradeoff” for remaining employed (Martin 2009). Conservatives anticipate that adults will eschew homonormativity and that parents will enforce heterosexuality and heteronormativity in their queer children; those who fail to do so will be subject to punishment construed under Project 2025’s implementation.

Arguably, conservatives know that gays will continue to exist (albeit hopefully back “in the closet”). However, the language of Project 2025 implies that even cisgender gays and lesbians eventually will be subject to its policies. We could argue potential parallels with the “Lavender Scare” of the 1950s—in which heteronormative gays were “outed” as gay or lesbian via congressional investigation—will come to fruition again in the wake of Project 2025’s promulgation.

PROJECT 2025’S PLAN: ERADICATE TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

At its core, cisgenderism implies heteronormativity to conservatives; anyone who presents outside of this established norm (i.e., transgendered and queer individuals) is to be regarded with great skepticism. Unlike people who are “straight presenting,” those with a more “fluid” appearance tends to stand out more in the mind of a “heteronormative” (e.g., a person who appears to be a biological woman but has facial hair). As such, transgendered people have become a readily identifiable group easily targeted by conservatives.

The transgendered community has been explicitly targeted by conservatives since Trump was in office. The introduction of

“bathroom bills” (i.e., requiring transgender students in K–12 schools to use the restroom of their birth gender) was the opening salvo against the rights of the community (Schilt and Westbrook 2015). Several conservative states were more than willing to entertain legislation restricting “bathroom choice” for transgendered students in K–12 schools and have since passed those bills into law (figure 1).

Marginalization of transgendered persons and their rights as citizens stems primarily from the inability of conservatives to accept that gender identity, like sexuality, exists on a spectrum. Some people feel that they were “born in the wrong body” and are desperate to change into the body and gender that suits them best (Redfield et al. 2023). Conservative beliefs are entrenched in dichotomous thinking about these concepts. As such, anyone who presents, for example, as being outside of their birth gender (or gives it up later) suggests to conservatives that something is “wrong” with those who do not adhere to their standards and perception.

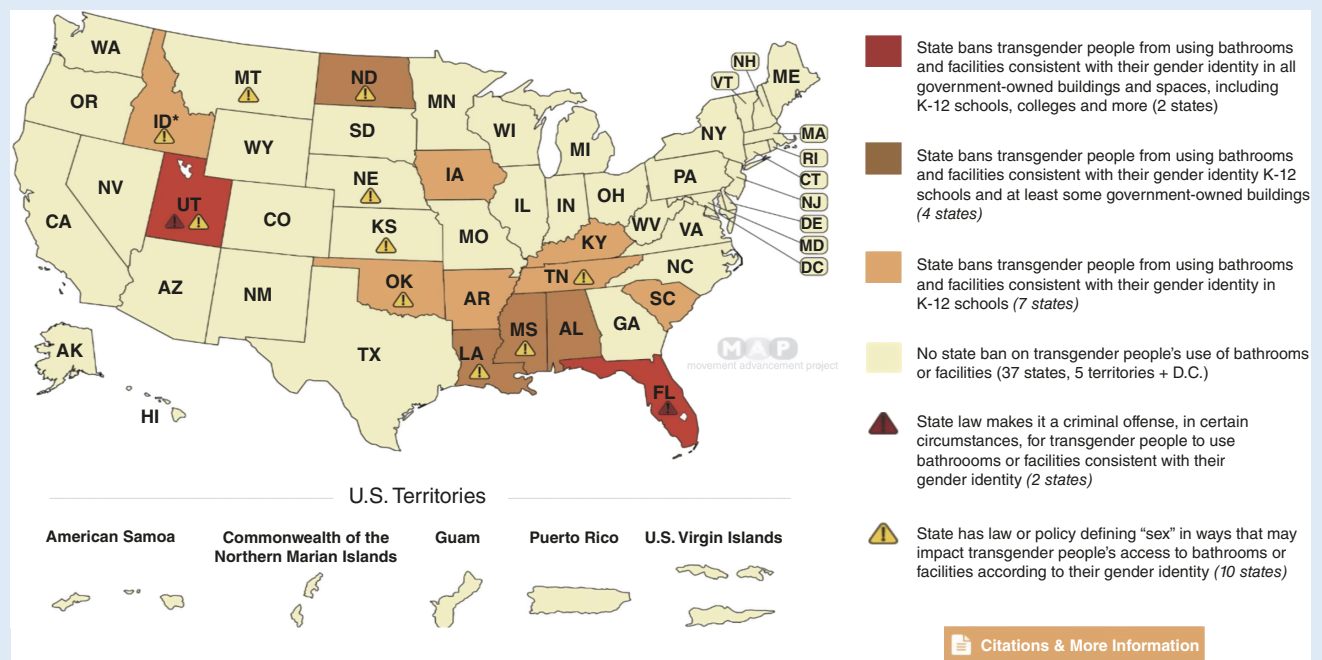
Under Project 2025, conservatives conflate notions of gender, gender expression, and gender identity with cisgenderism and heteronormativity; thus, they seek to punish those who fall outside of the male/female dichotomy assigned at birth. Conservatives, for the most part, are confused, then angered by the homonormative identity that embraces queerness. By rejecting the spectrum of gender identity and expression, conservatives are eschewing ideas about the human form (and its appearance) that run counter to their idea that men are “masculine” and should “look like men,” women are “feminine” and should “look like women,” and there should be no blurring of the lines between them. Thus, the idea of any gender identity outside of “male” and “female” is seen by conservatives as a foreign concept and therefore should be shunned. Denial of gender-affirming care for transgendered people—especially young people—will not only deny individuals to be able to obtain their “rightful bodies” but also may exacerbate health disparities experienced by the group (Hsieh and Shuster 2021; Lewin and Meyer 2002; McWayne et al. 2010; Redfield et al. 2023). More important, Project 2025 threatens to reverse the advancements in healthcare and patient–doctor relationships experienced by LGBTQ+ patients because of policy changes enacted during the Obama administration (McWayne et al. 2010).

Katyal (2017, 468) contended that transgenderism is an extension of the argument that “anxieties about the body remain a central theme in opposition to civil rights reforms.” For Project 2025, the notion of “gender pluralism” will be eliminated, and the binary standard of gender will be considered. This will affect transgender faculty and students more directly, although it can include gays, lesbians, and bisexuals because government (and, by extension, higher education) will expect them to “choose the right side” or face any consequences that are implemented from not doing so.

In conservative communities, transgenderism is viewed as a state of being that violates religious tenets—despite the fact that the Bible is silent on this issue. Christians default to the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis as justification for two genders only, which are separate from one another. In addition, transgenderism confounds Christian expectations of cisgenderism and heteronormativity, which in turn creates additional challenges for LGBTQ+ people (especially young people) seeking to reconcile their faith

Figure 1

Bans on Transgender People Using Public Bathrooms and Facilities According to Their Gender Identity



Source: Movement Advancement Project. www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/nondiscrimination/bathroom_bans.

and their queer identity (Berlant 1995; Cragun, Sumerau, and Williams 2015; Deeb-Sossa and Kane 2007; Ericksen 2019; Gushee 2015; Harris 2018; Lauricella, Phillips, and Dubow 2017; Lenning 2017; Lewis et al. 2017). Finally, conservatives are convinced that transgenderism is a mental disease or defect—not unlike “homosexuality” before it was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in the 1970s (Barounis 2017; Herek 2010; Hsieh and Shuster 2021; Lewin and Meyer 2002; McWayne et al. 2010). By viewing those whose gender identity moves beyond the putative dichotomy (established at birth) as “sinful” and “disturbed” yet “influential,” conservatives fear that others may be coerced into questioning their own gender identity, especially children. By banning art, literature, and entertainment that has LGBTQ+ influence, conservatives are demonstrating an outsized fear of the queer community—in particular, transgendered people—and the supposed deleterious effects it has on children. The fear of “grooming” children to become LGBTQ+ is at the core of much of the language of Project 2025 aimed toward the LGBTQ+ community (and explicitly toward transgendered) because of the perceived “criminality” of transgender existence in the minds of conservatives (Woods 2017). To reiterate, it can be surmised that the architects of the Project 2025 “Mandate for Leadership” (and the conservative organizations they represent) chose the transgender community as a relatively “easy” and immediate target for marginalization. In their minds, it is the easiest group to force out of existence if their policy preferences materialize at the federal level.

Transgendered students in higher education arguably have exceptionally more difficult experiences than other queer students. Survey results indicate that approximately 24% of

transgendered students (or students thought to be transgendered) experienced some form of verbal, physical, or sexual harassment in college, and 16% left higher education because of harassment (James et al. 2016). Recently, state-level conservative government officials have targeted transgender youth through a series of denials: to gender-affirming care, access to bathrooms that correspond with their gender identity, and the opportunity to engage in activities such as sports that align with their identity (Paris 2023). According to Redfield, Conron, and Mallory (2024, 2), approximately 93% of all transgender youth between the ages of 13 and 17 live in states that have “passed or proposed one or more laws banning access to gender-affirming care, participation in sports, use of bathrooms and other sex-separated facilities, or affirmation of gender through pronoun use.” Corbat (2017) discussed how protections of transgendered individuals (students, in this case) have been sabotaged by legal and moral battles by conservatives against these protections. This undoubtedly will continue under Project 2025; however, this also may extend to faculty (e.g., transgender faculty members denied the right to use the bathroom of their choice going forward—if they remain employed). Since the “bathroom bills,” attacks against transgendered young people extended to prohibitions against participating in sports with the gender they specify or denial of gender-affirming healthcare (i.e., medication and/or surgery) for young people and possible criminal charges for medical providers (Redfield, Conron, and Mallory 2024; Redfield et al. 2023; Reisner et al. 2015; Schilt and Westbrook 2015).

In higher education, students, faculty, staff, and administrators who are in the process of transitioning may be denied necessary healthcare; in extreme cases, these individuals may be forced to

resume their birth identity to avoid expulsion or termination. Overall, it is reasonable to speculate that through Project 2025, the federal government will enshrine into law policies that are designed to remove employees who identify as transgender, deny funding to public colleges and universities that employ transgender faculty and staff, and deny transgendered students the opportunity to have an overall positive college experience. Most important, transgenderism is decried by conservatives as not only “immoral” but also that it should be deemed “illegal.” Under Project 2025, conservatives anticipate that virtually all vestiges of the transgender community’s existence will be removed from society.

TITLE IX: WILL PROTECTIONS FOR LGBTQ+ IN HIGHER EDUCATION BE RESCINDED?

Under Project 2025, it is a certainty that the “college experience” for LGBTQ+ students will change significantly for the worse, especially those attending public institutions in heavily conservative states. Kimmel (2016) argued that it is necessary for schools to understand that LGBTQ+ students are expected to use Title IX to protect them and that these students are entitled to equal education. Title IX protections were expanded during the Obama administration to include protections for transgendered students (Arenas, Gunckel, and Smith 2016). Under Project 2025, Title IX (in its entirety) is one of five programs likely to be *eliminated* under the new administration. This elimination will result in a greater percentage of LGBTQ+ students (especially transgendered students) experiencing some form of harassment.

According to the mandate (Project 2025, pp. 333–34), the Trump administration is expected to:

- Work with Congress to use the earliest available legislative vehicle to prohibit the department [of Education] from using any appropriations or from otherwise enforcing any final regulations under Title IX promulgated by the department during the prior administration.
- Commence a new agency rulemaking process to rescind the current administration’s Title IX regulations; restore the Title IX regulations promulgated by then–Secretary Betsy DeVos on May 19, 2020; and define “sex” under Title IX to mean only *biological sex recognized at birth* (emphasis added). This idea runs counter to the proposals set by the American Association of University Professors. In particular, proposal #6 states that “Colleges and universities must address all forms of inequality on campus, including inequalities of race, gender identity, class, and sexual orientation” (American Association of University Professors 2016, 97).
- Work with Congress to amend Title IX to include due-process requirements; define “sex” under Title IX to mean only *biological sex recognized at birth* (emphasis added); and strengthen protections for faith-based educational institutions, programs, and activities.
- The next administration should abandon this change redefining “sex” to mean “sexual orientation and gender identity” in Title IX immediately across all departments.
- On its first day in office, the next administration should signal its intent to enter the rulemaking process to restore the Trump administration’s Title IX regulation, with the additional insistence that “sex” is *properly understood as a fixed biological fact* (emphasis added). Official notice-and-comment should be posted immediately.

- At the same time, the political appointees in the Office for Civil Rights should begin a full review of all Title IX investigations that were conducted on the understanding that “sex” referred to gender identity and/or sexual orientation. *All ongoing investigations should be dropped, and all school districts affected should be given notice that they are free to drop any policy changes pursued under pressure from the Biden administration* (emphasis added).

To answer the question posed in this section’s heading, Title IX will not protect LGBTQ+ students (or faculty/staff/administration, for that matter) from problems in higher education because the conservative plan is to eliminate it altogether. If it were retained, Project 2025 will enshrine the notion of “gender exclusion,” which is present in recent state-level legislation (Sharrow 2021), at the federal level. Thus, Title IX protections will no longer exist for transgendered people in higher education and in a limited capacity to others in the queer community.

CONCLUSION

Conservatives in general were emboldened by Trump’s 2016 slogan, “Make America Great Again”; for them, America’s “return to greatness” requires these reversals. All marginalized groups will suffer in some form under Project 2025 and the second Trump administration. However, for the LGBTQ+ community, Project 2025 will create a swift, undesired return to the “shadows” of society: loss of civil rights protection and the inability to exist freely in a country that ironically proclaims itself to be the “Land of the Free.”

Implementation of Project 2025 in the Trump administration reflects a definitive shift in the Overton Window. Whereas the policy concerns of conservatives have always been a part of politics, policy making that results in a reversal of 60 years of civil rights protections in a matter of months was considered unthinkable—until now. It is interesting that polls reveal that 57% of voters view Project 2025 unfavorably (Venegas 2024). A University of Massachusetts–Amherst national poll found that 53% of respondents (45% of Republicans) have read, seen, or heard of Project 2025 (table 2). In addition, conservative and Republican support for the plan’s policies ranged from a low of 13% (supporting restricted access to abortion) to 67% (favoring an end to DEI policies at the federal level). Regarding rescission of civil rights for LGBTQ+ people, more than 37% agree with this proposal and 71% intend to vote for Trump.¹²

More than 70% of survey respondents in 2003 supported civil rights for LGBTQ+ people. Conservative attitudes toward Trump suggest that with his reelection, their position regarding Project 2025 and its potential impact on the LGBTQ+ community will be acceptable as well. However, citizens tend to be more tepid in their opinions regarding the transgender community. Jones et al. (2018) demonstrated that although people are more familiar with transgender people because of celebrity representatives and they believe that they have rights and are entitled to freedom, they have not come to terms with the prospect of supporting transgender candidates for elected office. Overall, the shift in the Overton Window regarding LGBTQ+ civil rights has begun and will move rapidly with the promulgation of Project 2025.

Many of the planned initiatives are rooted in policies central to Evangelical Christians and their overwhelming impact on the Republican Party. The group’s main concern—that is, overturning *Roe v. Wade*—has been accomplished; thus, other elements of the

Table 2

Americans Widely Oppose Project 2025 According to University of Massachusetts–Amherst Poll

		PROJECT 2025 POLICES (% SUPPORT)						
		Reducing federal civil rights protections for LGBT people?	Ending federal policies to promote DEI in education, employment, and housing?	Shutting down social media companies/internet sites that contain depictions of pornography?	Firing federal employees and replacing them with political appointees loyal to the president?	Restricting women's access to contraception?	Eliminating the Department of Education?	Cutting funding for renewable energy research and investment?
Gender	Men	28%	44%	36%	14%	12%	24%	25%
	Women	17%	34%	49%	10%	6%	15%	20%
Age	18–29	25%	26%	36%	11%	20%	7%	19%
	30–54	17%	31%	36%	9%	8%	14%	16%
	>55	26%	53%	54%	15%	5%	32%	32%
Education	HS or less	23%	41%	48%	13%	11%	14%	26%
	Some Coll.	19%	35%	35%	6%	7%	18%	17%
	Coll. Deg.	25%	38%	41%	14%	8%	24%	20%
	Postgrad	16%	40%	46%	10%	7%	27%	27%
Income	<\$40k	17%	35%	43%	12%	9%	14%	17%
	\$40k–\$100k	28%	41%	46%	11%	10%	20%	24%
	>100k	19%	41%	36%	13%	8%	24%	23%
Party ID	Dem.	12%	18%	28%	3%	7%	2%	6%
	Ind.	19%	31%	41%	17%	10%	15%	16%
	Rep.	35%	67%	61%	19%	11%	42%	45%
Ideology	Lib	8%	20%	25%	3%	6%	3%	9%
	Mod.	23%	31%	42%	12%	10%	11%	12%
	Cons.	37%	67%	61%	20%	13%	46%	45%
Race	White	23%	42%	43%	12%	9%	24%	26%
	African American	18%	20%	42%	4%	10%	2%	6%
	Latino	24%	35%	45%	16%	13%	10%	19%
	Asian	26%	40%	44%	6%	5%	13%	15%
2020 Vote Choice	Biden	10%	12%	26%	2%	5%	2%	3%
	Tump	35%	71%	59%	18%	8%	50%	47%
Parent	Parent	25%	43%	50%	11%	8%	25%	25%
	Non-parent	18%	33%	33%	13%	11%	13%	20%

Source: University of Massachusetts–Amherst, Project 2025 National Poll. www.umass.edu/political-science/about/reports/2024-0.

“culture wars” are being tackled by the Evangelical Right’s adherents under the guidance of the Republican Party. Pizer (2017) examined how “religious freedom” has been the main reason that individuals and groups have challenged LGBTQ+ rights; under Project 2025, the country will move closer to a “religious autocracy” than ever before. As such, religious freedom will be the reason that LGBTQ+ rights and protections will be eradicated in swift fashion because the policy plans are anticipated to be implemented in full within a 180-day period.

Overall, the architects of Project 2025 seek to normalize bigotry and outright discrimination against marginalized groups, which not only is reminiscent of a not-so-distant past but also will exceed it. They seek to erase entire groups from both the workforce and the body politic while implementing an authoritarian regime at the federal level. Dismantling the governmental support that led

to recognition of civil rights for *all* marginalized groups in favor of conservative, theocratic orthodoxy appears to be the primary aim of this plan. At the same time, the architects of Project 2025 have centered eradication of the LGBTQ+ community in this plan.

One final note about Project 2025: although it is expected to be implemented in its entirety at the federal level during Trump’s second administration, it is reasonable to assume that parts of the project also are being implemented—or at least considered for implementation—at the state level by conservative governors. There is “Project 2025 lite” already at the state level because several states have created policies that align with its aims. Figure 2 shows the states that have implemented elements of Project 2025 by introducing anti-LGBTQ+ bills.

There is ample evidence that DEI and marginalized groups are already under attack in several states that Trump won easily

Figure 2

Mapping Attacks on LGBTQ Rights in US State Legislatures in 2024

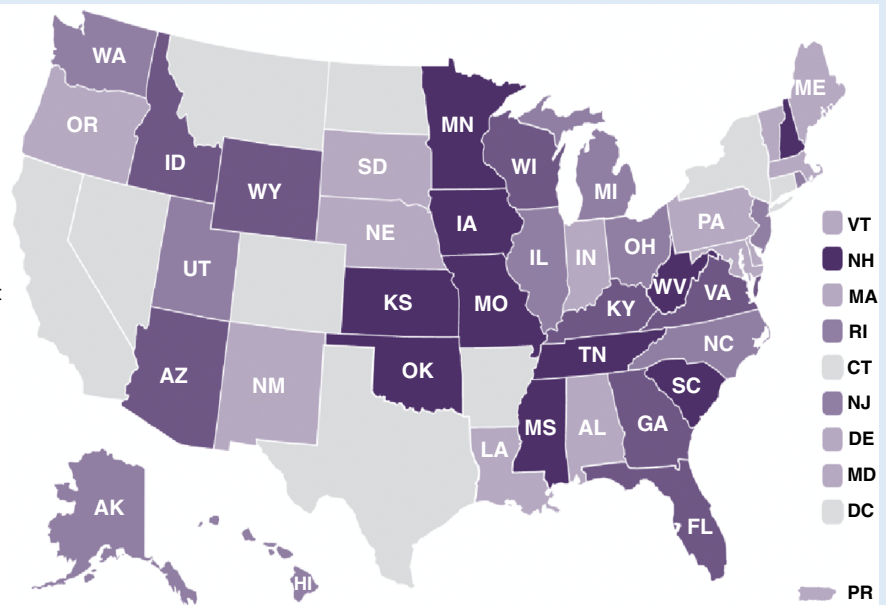
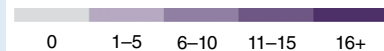
▼ 2024 LEGISLATIVE SESSION

The ACLU is tracking 530 anti-LGBTQ bills in the U.S.

Choose a state on the map to show the different bills targeting LGBTQ rights and take action. While not all of these bills will become law, they all cause harm for LGBTQ people.

Last update on September 5, 2024 ⓘ

Bills per state



Source: American Civil Liberties Union. www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights-2024.

in 2020, and the effects appear to be diffusing to other conservative states across the country. Because Republicans were successful in November 2024 and Trump was reelected, Project 2025 is being implemented because as a Republican president, he supports the policies and proposed governmental restructuring outlined in it. At the same time, conservative states that have adopted Project 2025 tenets will continue to serve as “laboratories of authoritarianism.” Therefore, it is incumbent on colleges and universities to ensure the protections of its marginalized groups and to question government initiatives that are reminiscent of (or taken directly from) the Project 2025 playbook. Also, it is incumbent not only on the queer community but also on “community allies” (i.e., family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and employers) to increase political participation. This is achieved not only by voting against elected officials who seek to implement this plan but also by engaging in the political process at all levels and by taking full advantage of our First Amendment rights of “assembly” and “petition.” Otherwise, to borrow the slogan of the *Washington Post*, “democracy dies in darkness,” taking the rights of marginalized communities—the LGBTQ+ community in particular—along with it.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. Throughout this article, the terms “LGBTQ+” and “queer” are used interchangeably. Although the letter “Q” in the acronym stands for “queer” or “questioning,” it also is “used as an umbrella term that covers all people who do not identify as

straight or heterosexual and those who prefer to not be categorized by singular labels.” (LGBTQ Community Center of the Desert. <https://thecentercv.org/en/blog/the-guide-to-lgbtq-acronyms-is-it-lgbt-or-lgbtq-or-lgbtqia>.)

2. See “The Overton Window.” Midland, MI: Mackinac Center for Public Policy. www.mackinac.org/OvertonWindow. (Accessed April 20, 2024.)
3. See “LGBTQ+ Rights.” The Gallup Poll. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1651/gay-lesbian-rights.aspx>. (Accessed April 20, 2024.)
4. See 23-939, *Trump v. United States* (July 1, 2024). www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/23pdf/23-939_e2pg.pdf.
5. See “Executive Order on Creating Schedule F in the Excepted Service.” Issued October 21, 2020. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-creating-schedule-f-excepted-service>. (Accessed September 28, 2024.)
6. See www.project2025.org/policy.
7. See www.project2025.org/personnel.
8. See www.project2025.org/training/presidential-administration-academy.
9. See www.project2025.org/playbook.
10. See www.project2025.org/about/about-project-2025.
11. See “College Professor Demographics and Statistics in the U.S.” www.zippia.com/college-professor-jobs/demographics. (Accessed May 10, 2024.)
12. See “Americans Widely Oppose ‘Project 2025’ According to New UMass Amherst Poll.” August 8, 2024. University of Massachusetts—Amherst Project 2025 National Poll. www.umass.edu/news/article/americans-widely-oppose-project-2025-according-new-umass-amherst-poll. (Accessed September 28, 2024.)

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