

Ending the Backlash on LGBTQI+ Issues

By Caleb Smith and Winnie Stachelberg July 23, 2026



Civil rights are inalienable; they exist independent of shifting parties in power or the latest polling results. A bedrock American principle is that people should not be harassed or targeted by the government for who they are.

At the same time, we must reckon with the defensive environment the LGBTQI+ community finds itself in. We all know there are differences between men and women. But right-wing attacks on LGBTQI+ issues have sought to drive back the gains made and have become a reliable feature of modern campaigns. The far right is spending [hundreds of millions](#) of dollars attacking not just transgender people but increasingly [lesbian, gay, and bisexual people](#). These attacks on already vulnerable communities are dangerous and irresponsible. And the rhetoric and vitriol against transgender people reach beyond LGBTQI+ communities and seep into seemingly unrelated spaces.

Most Americans [do not rank](#) LGBTQI+ issues at the top of their priority list. Yet much of the public still may want to know where leaders stand. We believe that we can support civil rights protections for all Americans, allow all people to live with dignity and respect, and uphold the basic value of equal treatment under the law.

If leaders can regain their foothold on these issues, we will move closer to a better and more inclusive future for all of us.

Establishing grounding values

Core rights exist regardless of popularity, acting as the foundation from which to build progress:

1. Discrimination against people for who they are is wrong. Transgender people didn't choose to be transgender. They deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.
2. LGBTQI+ people deserve to work, access housing, and enjoy public spaces free from discrimination. LGBTQI+ Americans cannot be denied federal services simply because of who they are.
3. Politicians should not interfere with medical decisions or the health of patients.

Equal treatment of LGBTQI+ people

Protections from discrimination and harassment

Comprehensive LGBTQI+ nondiscrimination protections, such as those provided in the [Equality Act](#), must be urgently passed. According to the [2024 CAP LGBTQI+ Community Survey](#), 36 percent of LGBTQI+ adults experienced discrimination the previous year. The community reported high rates of discrimination across all areas of life—for example, more than one-quarter of transgender people were discriminated against in the workplace. Protections from discrimination in housing, employment, public spaces, and credit are crucial to ensure LGBTQI+ people are fully able to participate equally in their communities.

Furthermore, no child should be harassed, mocked, or made to feel worthless—and no student should be bullied because of who they are. Society should protect children from those who wish them harm. Schools should enforce anti-bullying policies consistently, and adults in positions of authority have a responsibility to model respect. That same principle should extend to transgender adults, who also don't deserve ridicule or mistreatment under any circumstances. This isn't about ideology or politics; it's about human decency.

Transgender sports participation

Decisions about eligibility in athletics should be made by local school districts, communities, and sports associations that best understand the competitive demands of sports and their students' needs. As is true for any eligibility requirements, localized sports policies will vary based on the level of competition and specific sport characteristics. The guidelines that support higher levels of competition may not be appropriate for middle school activities, and the policies that work for one sport may not be sufficient for another.

The NCAA recently promulgated a restriction on transgender women playing in women's sports, a decision that it deemed appropriate for its level of competition and the sports it governs. Other associations, such as the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association, have passed policies allowing students to participate according to their gender identity. This is where these decisions appropriately lie: with sports' governing bodies or schools themselves rather than with politicians. While local bodies and associations should minimize unnecessary exclusion, restrictions may be appropriate under some circumstances.

Students participate in school sports to be part of a team, get exercise, and play with their friends—and all athletes deserve fair competition and a level playing field.

Transgender medical care access for young people

Decisions about whether or when minors access transgender medical care should be made by parents—not politicians. Like other medical care, transgender medical care is not one-size-fits-all. It refers to a [suite](#) of treatment options, and treatment plans are individualized and unique to each patient’s needs. This medical care is backed by [extensive research](#), and [every major medical association](#) opposes bans on care for trans youth. [Parental consent](#) has always been and should be required for minors to receive ongoing transgender medical care.

Parents’ decisions about the types of treatments that transgender teens do—or do not—receive are complex, intensive, and they must be made by doctors and families together. Parents should certainly not be criminalized, nor should politicians overrule parents seeking medical care for their child. Parents know their child best, and politicians shouldn’t interfere with parents’ rights.

Veterans and military service

All who are qualified and willing should be able to serve their country—including transgender people—and no one should be excluded from participating in or contributing to their communities due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. [Bans on transgender people](#) serving in the military are not only clear discrimination—they also prevent the military from recruiting the best candidates to protect our country.

LGBTQI+ people have a [long history](#) of contributing to our national security. We are all safer when we allow all who are qualified and dedicated to service to join our military.

Transgender veterans also deserve access to the benefits they earned. Veterans who served honorably should be able to access housing, education, and health care benefits. Members in active-duty service should be able to provide the same benefits to their LGBTQI+ children and other dependents as they can to their non-LGBTQI+ dependents.

The military defends and represents the values of our country, such as freedom from discrimination in all forms. It is crucial that LGBTQI+ military members, like all troops, are supported during their service and beyond.

Taking back control of our policy goals

LGBTQI+ people make up [less than 10 percent of the country](#), and transgender people are less than 2 percent, but that isn't the whole story. LGBTQI+ people are not a demographic separate from everyday Americans. They are parents, siblings, employees, neighbors, and community members. Importantly, LGBTQI+ people are part of families—families that feel the brunt of anti-LGBTQI+ policies alongside other everyday challenges. This is why truly supporting LGBTQI+ people also means supporting families.

Just like much of America, many LGBTQI+ families are balancing increasingly tight checkbooks, struggling to find affordable housing, and watching prescription costs soar. Fixing the affordability crisis brought on by the Trump administration will support all American families—including LGBTQI+ families.

Leaders must take a joint approach: fiercely defending LGBTQI+ people from discrimination and advocating for policies that will lift up families across the country. When families do well, LGBTQI+ families do well, too.

Conclusion

Families are healthier when they have access to stable housing and affordable health care. Workers are safer when they are protected from discrimination regardless of who they are or who they love. Our military is stronger when all who are qualified and dedicated can serve.

An inclusive future is a brighter future—and an attainable one. Leaders must stay the course, protecting all of our civil rights and holding tight to a vision where we all can thrive.



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