



Political Science

by Kate Bedford

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Scholars of politics have generally been slow to focus attention on sexuality, and their college and university departments have typically been unwelcoming to glbtq people. A 1995 report on the status of lesbians and gay men in political science, written on the recommendation of the discipline's professional association, highlighted multiple barriers faced by glbtq faculty and students, and a discipline-wide failure to incorporate sexuality into course curricula.

That said, however, political scientists have generated insights of considerable importance to the study of sexuality, particularly through research into glbtq participation in formal politics and social movements, studies of sexuality as a category of power, and reconceptualizations of the relationship between sexuality and politics.

Glbtq Participation in Politics

Political scientists should have an automatic interest in glbtq people because they often participate, in completely conventional ways, in politics. They vote, for example. Indeed, evidence from a pioneering study on the "lavender vote" by Mark Hertzog found that self-identified lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals are more liberal, feminist, and concerned about health care and the environment than the general sample.

Some glbtq people also run for political office, join social movements, and participate in organizations that act as conventional interest groups. In the United States, for example, glbtq organizations lobby Congress, submit briefs to the Supreme Court, and raise funds for friendly candidates.

Glbtq involvement in these conventional areas of politics leads some scholars, such as Haider-Markel and Meir, to argue that "gay and lesbian politics is no different from politics in many other areas." For example, Ken Kersch links debates about same-sex marriage to mainstream literature about federalism and the role of judges in policymaking. He frames the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act as an example of the Congressional usurpation of traditional state prerogatives to define marriage. This reading of sexuality and politics is in keeping with the conventional concerns of the discipline.

Likewise Haider-Markel, Joslyn, and Kniss use openly gay elected officials to consider the relationship between numerical representation of a marginalized group and political change to represent their interests substantively. They found that the election of group members did significantly increase the probability that gay-supportive policies would be adopted. Other examples in this tradition include Donald Haider-Markel's work on interest groups and morality politics as it affects glbtq politics, and Barbara Gamble's study of the use of citizen's initiatives to block civil rights protections for gay men and lesbians.

Research has also been conducted on glbtq social movements. In the United States, for example, Wald, Button, and Rienzo found that variation in the expansion of legal protection to glbtq people was influenced by the strength and political mobilization of both the gay and lesbian community and Protestant fundamentalist groups, the presence of sympathetic political elites, and the existence of a political

environment responsive to new claimants.

Jennings and Andersen found that variation in support for confrontational tactics among AIDS activists (measured by judgment of ACT UP) was influenced by factors such as personal suffering, ideological position, and sexual orientation. Using a different approach, Jeffrey Edwards attempts to explain the decline of AIDS street activism through the shattering of movement solidarity, the increasingly hostile external political environment, and poorly chosen alliances with formal political leaders.

In a compelling overview of gay and lesbian activism Craig Rimmerman considers issues that have long puzzled political scientists, such as tensions between assimilationist and transformative strategies for social change, the advantages and dangers of alliances with mainstream politicians, and the ideal role of the state in progressive politics. Arguing for a broad, eclectic strategy rather than a unitary focus on legal rights or lobbying, Rimmerman highlights the dangers attending a top-down, state-focused vision of politics that ignores the broader economic, social, and cultural changes needed by glbtq people to achieve true equality.

Such studies confirm the contribution that rigorous research on politics can make to glbtq activism, in the United States and elsewhere.

Sexuality and Power

In addition to registering varied forms of glbtq political participation, political scientists have also noted that debates about sexuality are an important site for the articulation of political power. In recent years courts, politicians, protesters, and voters in the United States, the United Kingdom, France, South Africa, Zimbabwe, India, and elsewhere have participated in disputes about appropriate sexuality, directed at both glbtq and heterosexual populations.

Several political scientists interested in these debates draw attention to the complex processes by which political actors help forge normative forms of sexuality; in the words of Phelan, they ask "how the state is constituted as a heterosexual body and how heterosexual imperatives constitute citizens."

For example, Davina Cooper argues that the British Thatcherite state was a site of both repressive and productive power with respect to sexuality. Certainly Thatcher's anti-gay legislation used repressive power, but it also mobilized and (re)produced the heteronormative family as the cornerstone of normality while framing sexuality as it relates to gay men and lesbians as personal and private, outside the public policy realm. Heterosexuality is thus "naturalized into invisibility," allowing the state to appear asexual as it waxes lyrical about heteronormative behavior, and to prohibit entry of any gay and lesbian issues into the public realm.

Jacqueline Stevens offers a similar account of the role of state-sanctioned kinship rules in (re)producing group affiliations of family, race, ethnicity, and nation, arguing that the state organizes and categorizes its population in part through gendered, racialized, and heterosexualized regulations around marriage and birthright. Such regulations privilege normative family affiliations, by denying full citizenship rights to those in gay and lesbian unions, for example. Borrowing from Michael Warner, Stevens thus argues that key political concepts such as nation and citizenship rely on heteronormative "reproculture" in which individuals are offered an imagined past and future through intergenerational families.

Anne-Marie Smith analyzes United States welfare reform as another example of the state's regulation of citizens' sexuality. Unmarried mothers were penalized, poverty was blamed on sexually irresponsible women, and marriage was proposed as an anti-poverty strategy in a powerful state attempt to (re)produce normative forms of heterosexuality. As Cathy Cohen argues, not all heterosexuals enjoy the power and entitlement of normative heterosexuality here; there are many heterosexuals on the "outside" of heteronormativity, including single mothers, young mothers, women dependent on some types of state

support, and sex workers.

Jacqui Alexander's work on the Bahamas also offers important insights regarding the state interest in heteronormatively disciplining subjects. In legislation originally designed to combat domestic violence, for example, lesbianism and prostitution were criminalized alongside rape and incest, and non-normative sexuality was framed as a threat to the nation-state. In reality, state sovereignty was undermined through international economic policies, but the state eroticized the dissolution of the nation through discourses of dread sexual diseases and sexual perversions.

Alexander's recognition that non-normative sexuality is often scapegoated for the effects of globalization has been observed by other scholars, such as Barry Adam, interested in comparative and international issues.

Reconceptualizing Sexuality and Politics

Finally, political scientists have attempted to re-imagine the relationship between sexuality and politics. This attempt at reconceptualization has been particularly important in literature on identity and citizenship.

In an overview of sexuality and political science, for example, Timothy Cook argues that debates over identity and politics are at the cutting edge of contemporary research. When re-conceptualizing "politics" from glbtq perspectives, self-identification can become a crucial political activity, confusing boundaries between private identity and public politics.

Yet the use of identity categories as mobilizational referents for politics has led to exclusions and community self-policing, as Shane Phelan's work on sexuality and political theory notes. Phelan shares the concerns of many queer and post-structuralist thinkers that unitary identity categories produce exclusions; however, she also recognizes the continued salience of categories such as gay and lesbian, and wishes to retain them in political struggles. She advocates a coalitional approach in which activists struggle for equal membership in a democratic polity, sharing power, transforming politics, and redefining both it and themselves in the process.

Cathy Cohen's work on AIDS and African-American politics provides another compelling account of the need to reconceptualize identity and politics. Cohen criticizes unidimensional representations of the African-American community that frame the fate of some members as representative of the entire group, while marginalizing those marked as deviant, non-normative, or blameworthy. In the AIDS crisis this process was evident in the stigmatization of sex workers, drug users, and "the dreaded bisexual" by community elites. Proposing an alternative model for politics, Cohen calls for recognition of overlapping, complexly situated identities, and more inclusive definitions of community.

These debates about identity, sexuality, and politics have informed attempts to reconceptualize citizenship. This concept is central to political science, and it presents a paradox for activists since it has often been defined in exclusionary ways that define glbtq existence as the antithesis of good, responsible citizenship. Simultaneously, however, the term can be re-appropriated by those it excludes, either when demanding inclusion into practices that represent ideal citizenship (such as marriage and military service), or when redefining "the good citizen" in new ways.

As Diane Richardson notes, there is considerable variation in discourses of sexual citizenship; some activists demand rights to enjoy previously demonized sexual conduct, some demand rights to sexual self-definition, and others seek validation of chosen relationships. Several authors relate debates over citizenship to literature on identity, urging activists to reappropriate the language of citizenship in inclusive ways that do not reinforce national divisions.

Although such efforts at reimagining the terms and practice of politics are not limited to political scientists, the discipline is well-placed to offer important insights to glbtq studies based on its interest in questions of power, identity, and social struggle. While marginalized in college and university political science departments, this research contributes to interdisciplinary conversations about sexuality, both in United States and international contexts.

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Kate D. Bedford is a doctoral candidate in political science at Rutgers, specializing in feminist politics, comparative politics, and international political economy. She has worked in the field of gender and development, contributing to projects in several countries. She is currently completing a dissertation on heteronormativity and the World Bank.