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Political Science & LGBTQ+ Identity: Thoughts & Suggestions for LGBTQ+ Graduate Students

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Introduction

The choice to pursue a PhD is among the most consequential professional decisions a person can make. That choice can feel even more daunting for a person who identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+¹ community because there are specific questions important to our community that are sometimes difficult to answer. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss some of the challenges and opportunities that come with pursuing a PhD from two perspectives: as an LGBTQ+ person and as someone who wants to conduct research on LGBTQ+ topics. Of course, both can be true!

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of pitfalls and potential solutions to the study of LGBTQ+ identity in political science, including the trajectory of the study of sexuality and gender as a part of the history of political science. Of course, not every LGBTQ+ graduate student will study topics related to LGBTQ+ identity. For those that do, political science has gradually become more open to including LGBTQ+ research topics but several obstacles remain.

The next section addresses concerns about campus climate. We start with general advice. Next, we provide specific information about choosing a graduate program that is the right fit for LGBTQ+ students. Then, we discuss considerations for the job market that are unique to LGBTQ+ identifying people as well as people who research LGBTQ+ politics. Topics include coming out during job interviews, how to ask questions during interviews that ensure the position will be safe and supportive for you, and how to navigate questions at a job talk surrounding your gender identity and/or sexual orientation (see also chapter 45 for more information about academic job interviewing).

The final section identifies networking opportunities and resources, including those available through the American Political Science Association (APSA), including the Sexuality and Politics section, the LGBTQ Caucus, and the Committee on the Status of LGBT Individuals in the Profession as well as others.

LGBTQ+ Inclusiveness in Political Science

Political science has not always been, and may never be, fully welcoming of LGBTQ+ political scholarship. Scholars who study LGBTQ+ issues may be members of the LGBTQ+ community but, of course, they may not be. The assumption, however, may well be that anyone studying LGBTQ+ politics is a member of the LGBTQ+ community. This assumption can be cause for concern for some graduate students, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity, as they begin to formulate a research

agenda and choose a dissertation topic.

In 2007, the APSA Committee on the Status of LGBT Individuals in the Profession conducted a discipline-wide climate survey focused on LGBTQ+ issues (Novkov and Barclay 2010). The survey addressed both the climate for LGBTQ+ individuals and the climate for teaching and research related to LGBTQ+ topics. The data show progress in the years since an earlier climate survey conducted in the early 1990s (Ackelsberg 2017). Respondents in the 2007 survey reported less discrimination and marginalization compared to the earlier study; there were some areas of concern, however, notably around lower scores on student evaluations of teaching. The consensus of the 2007 survey was that teaching LGBTQ+ issues was appropriate for the discipline. Similarly, survey respondents clearly believed LGBTQ+ politics to be an acceptable area for research and scholarship, although there was some variation across subfields. Public law, American politics, and political theory were most supportive of LGBTQ+ research; international relations was the least welcoming.

Despite the generally positive responses in most areas, Novkov and Barclay (2010) note resistance to LGBT research.² Thirteen percent of respondents were concerned about how the discipline recognizes and values LGBT-focused research. A number of respondents (4.1%) appeared hostile to research on LGBT topics. Some of this hostility stemmed from homophobic views or a belief that LGBT researchers lack objectivity when studying LGBT issues: several respondents viewed work on LGBT issues as advocacy, not science (Harrison and Michelson, forthcoming). This concern can be traced even further back to the creation of the Status Committee itself in 1992. One of the charges given to the Committee was to ensure that research on sexual orientation issues be assessed by the same standards as other research in political science (Ackelsberg 2017). Ackelsberg, who served on the Status Committee, notes the assumptions buried in this charge: that such research was perceived as less rigorous or that it would lower the standards for assessing research in the discipline. Thankfully, these assumptions are less common today.

Research and scholarship on LGBTQ+ issues in political science has continued to grow. Tadlock and Taylor (2017, 212) refer to this as “an explosion” of research, across a host of topics. Scholars have shown how the study of LGBTQ+ politics enhances our understanding of questions asked throughout the field (Mucciaroni 2011). Research on LGBTQ+ topics is published in leading journals in the discipline as well as more in subfield or specialty journals. Tadlock and Taylor used keyword searches in the leading journals to determine how and to what extent LGBTQ+ issues are discussed in the articles published. Scholarship is increasing, with a slight majority of articles in their dataset published since 2007. Their study also looked at books addressing LGBTQ+ politics and find a similar increase in scholarship, with significant increases beginning in the mid-1990s. This demonstrates that LGBTQ+ topics in political science are increasingly accepted and fruitful areas for research. This trend is true across the full breadth of the discipline, although there remains significant variation in how common LGBTQ+ scholarship is in each subfield. There is also variation on topics within the broad LGBTQ+ umbrella: research on bisexual and transgender people remains less common than research on gay men and lesbians (Smith 2011). This discrepancy may shift, however, as the issues being addressed in government continue to single out transgender individuals for particularly harsh treatment. Whatever shifts may happen, we expect LGBTQ+ politics to continue to be an important part of the discipline.

Finding a Welcoming and Supportive Campus

Whether as an incoming graduate student or a candidate on the job market, one core issue remains the same: finding a campus community that will welcome and support you. This is true for all of us. But members of the LGBTQ+ community may face challenges on top of the normal ones associated with these processes. In this section, we address general concerns about campus climate and then shift to specific issues to consider at each stage of this process: starting graduate school and finding a faculty job.

First, you need to decide how open you want to—or can be—about your identity. This crucial decision affects how a person is perceived and treated by others in the department, the discipline, and beyond. It can also have important consequences for research and employment opportunities. Not everyone can be openly-LGBTQ+. For some, it is essential to stay closeted, particularly at certain religiously conservative institutions. Sometimes, scholars can be personally open about their identity but need to

remain somewhat closeted professionally. LGBTQ+ scholars who do field work in areas that are hostile to LGBTQ+ people, like in areas where LGBTQ+ identity is criminalized or stigmatized, must think carefully about how much of their identity they share publicly (see also chapter 20). There may be other reasons to think carefully about how open you are about your identity and in which forums. You need to do what is best for you, at all stages of your career.

Although society has come a long way regarding the public treatment of members of the LGBTQ+ community, many departments aren't safe havens for all members of the community. Even if a department is welcoming for some LGBTQ+ people, you cannot assume that trans and non-binary faculty will be equally welcome or supported. Even today, people struggle to treat LGBTQ+ students and colleagues appropriately. People may form assumptions about how a person talks, the kinds of research topics a person may be interested in, how a person dresses, and the activities and interests of that person based only on their LGBTQ+ status.

Getting a genuine sense of a department can be challenging. Even in departments with clear, LGBTQ+ inclusive policies there may be disconnects between those policies and the everyday experiences of LGBTQ+ people in the department. While on campus or speaking with representatives of the department, trust your gut regarding how individuals interact with you. These conversations are essential for figuring out how you will be treated in your day-to-day life in that department. If you have interactions that make you uncomfortable or that give you a sense you would not be welcome, you need to think carefully about whether that campus is a good fit for you. Ask yourself if it is an environment where you can spend the next several years of your life.

As you navigate these decisions, there are some key considerations to keep in mind. First, it is a good general rule to consider whether you would be the only LGBTQ+ person in your cohort or department. Academia can be an isolating experience; having a community and a group of allies to lean on for support is important (see also chapter 63 for more on academic isolation). Look for department or university-wide LGBTQ+ organizations, either for graduate students or faculty. These organizations can help build community. Try to find out about campus life and LGBTQ+ life in the broader community. Many cities have thriving LGBTQ+ communities that can help supplement the campus community. In other areas, though, the LGBTQ+ community, both on and off campus, is smaller. You need to figure out what type of LGBTQ+ community is most important to you. Moving to a smaller town, with a small LGBTQ+ population (especially if you come from a larger urban environment) can be quite challenging. This is particularly true for single people looking for dating opportunities. They exist but can be hard to find.

Choosing and Navigating a Graduate Program

Choosing a graduate program can be complicated and stressful (see chapter 2 for more information). In addition to the issues common to all graduate students, and those noted above, there are specific issues prospective LGBTQ+ graduate students need to consider.

First is finding a supportive advisor. If you are able, ask potential faculty members with whom you may work, about whether they have worked with LGBTQ+ students in the past. This can be helpful in determining how easy it will be to find an advisor and build a committee. This is especially important if you want to study LGBTQ+ political issues. Not all departments will have faculty who specialize in LGBTQ+ politics, but they may have faculty who can apply their area of specialization to LGBTQ+ topics. (See also chapters 10 and 13 for choosing a subfield and advisor, respectively.)

If you can identify an LGBTQ+ graduate student already in the department, see if they are willing to have a frank conversation about their experiences, both on and off campus. You can also ask the department to put you in touch with a current, or recent, LGBTQ+ student. This conversation can help you address those climate concerns we noted above.

Academic Job Market

Of course, the goal of any graduate student is simple: to finish and get a job! The most important consid-

eration in the job market is your health and safety. That supersedes all other elements of the job search. Yes, finding an academic position is important and there are numerous financial and personal concerns about finding a job. Any advice presented here, however, needs to be centered around your individual well-being, first and foremost. If being open about your identities is important to you and if it contributes to your continued health, then you should be open about your identities, provided it is safe for you to do so, even if it may be detrimental on the job market. Life is too short to not be true to yourself and to what you need. Self-care is always your first priority.

The reality of the job market is there are many aspects outside of your control: the other applicants, the needs of the hiring department, the expectations of the dean...just to name a few (see chapter 34 for further elaboration). An additional aspect out of your control is how you and your LGBTQ+ identity and/or research will be received by the search committee. There are steps to take to ensure you make informed decisions about self-disclosure during the job market process.

Sometimes it is unclear whether it's advantageous or even safe to be open about your identity during a job interview. On the one hand, it could highlight an aspect of yourself that can add to the diversity of a department. On the other, it might open you to explicit or implicit bias from department members (for more about navigating implicit biases within the profession, see chapter 49). Your goal should be to gather as much information as possible prior to an interview: ask with whom you will meet during a phone call or an on-campus interview and research each person. Have they made comments on-the-record about LGBTQ+ people or inclusion in general? What values can you glean from their research and teaching statements? Does anything in the general department and college/university website mention that diversity (including LGBTQ+ identity) is valued and cultivated? While there is rarely a perfect indicator, getting a feel for the values of the individuals, department, and college can provide clues about whether being open about your identity during interviews is a good idea.

There are concrete steps you can take while on a campus interview to discern whether the campus is a welcoming and LGBTQ+ affirming place. Many on-campus interviews will involve a meeting with a representative from the Human Resources department. (If there is not a meeting with HR personnel on your schedule, you may ask the search chair if you could add one.) During this confidential meeting, you can ask questions about existing policies that can support you and your family that will not be shared with the search committee. If you are comfortable, you can also request to add additional meetings. You can ask to meet with an LGBTQ+ faculty or staff member, a member of an on-campus LGBTQ+ group, or another person who might be able to answer questions about campus culture. Be aware that these meetings are generally not confidential so be sure to ask questions carefully and thoughtfully. Questions you could ask include how comfortable the person feels on campus and in their department; if there are ways the person feels they could be better supported as an LGBTQ+ person; whether the city or town is safe for LGBTQ+ people; and if there are groups or organizations on campus or in the community that are specifically oriented to LGBTQ+ people. If your research is on LGBTQ+ politics, you can also ask about research support and how valued LGBTQ+ research is on campus. Since it can still be difficult to publish LGBTQ+ research in the top journals, this may be a concern for tenure and promotion.

You are not required to disclose any aspect of your identity, even if you conduct research about LGBTQ+ issues or rights. Of course, others may assume you are a member of the LGBTQ+ community simply because of your research but you need not confirm or even respond if that question is asked. Remember that an employer cannot legally ask you intrusive personal questions during an interview, including questions about your sexual orientation, your family dynamics, or your gender identity. If questions are becoming too personal, you are within your rights to ask for that line of questioning to stop. If you have any questions, you can consult with someone in the Human Resources department at the college or university. These can be uncomfortable conversations. After all, you are the one trying to impress them, so they hire you for an academic position! It is important to consider, though, that there are boundaries that should not be crossed in a professional setting, and you are well within your rights to demand that you are treated with respect and within the parameters of employment law.

Sometimes your identity is closely intertwined with your research and a question may arise during a job talk. You should anticipate a question about the applicability of your research and develop a response that highlights the broad implications and importance of your work. You should also think about

whether self-disclosure is an important part of that response. If someone were to ask about the normative importance of your work on LGBTQ+ rights, for example, you might choose to respond that the work helps to protect people like you from bias and discrimination. Personalizing the impact of LGBTQ+ research can have a meaningful influence on how your work is interpreted. However, others may try to dismiss your work because you are “studying yourself,” known pejoratively as “me-search.” This was a concern in the 2010 Novkov and Barclay study discussed above. Being able to pivot between the personal and the abstract will be useful depending on the campus environment in which you find yourself.

Thinking through these issues before a job interview or job talk can help you determine your comfort level with self-disclosure based on the prior research you can do about the department and the college or university and some of the questions you can ask while on campus. If you have questions and are not comfortable speaking with your advisor about these issues, you can reach out to the leadership of the APSA LGBTQ+ Caucus or Sexuality and Politics section for more specific advice. More information about these groups is listed below.

Name Changes: Keeping Your Publication Record Current

Another issue that can arise for scholars involves name changes on previously published work. It is important that scholars' entire body of work be clearly identified as their own. Yet, some scholars may not want to be linked to work with a previous name. This is particularly important for trans scholars who transition after they begin publishing. The Committee on Publication Ethics³ drafted a statement of principles urging publishers to make this process easier, noting the hardship that a lack of name change policy creates for trans scholars. Thankfully, many journals now have a process to update author names on previously published work. The process for each journal varies and name changes may not be available at all journals. The Committee on the Status of LGBT Individuals in the Profession is currently working to ensure broad access to name changes for political science journals.

Resources and More Information

We want to close this chapter with information about the formal institutions within the American Political Science Association that exist to support LGBTQ+ scholars and research about LGBTQ+ politics. There are three main groups, each with a slightly different focus. The Sexuality and Politics section's primary focus is on scholars who study issues of sexuality; it is not limited to LGBTQ+ political scientists. The LGBTQ+ Caucus, on the other hand, is designed for LGBTQ+ political scientists (and their allies) regardless of their area of study. The APSA Committee on the Status of LGBT Individuals in the Profession has a focus similar to the Caucus but is more formally integrated into APSA's leadership channels and is an important advocacy voice for the community with APSA itself.

In 2007, the Sexuality and Politics section was created to provide a place for scholars working on LGBTQ+ issues as well as other topics related to sexuality (Wilson and Burgess 2007). The decision to name the section “Sexuality and Politics” rather than “LGBT Politics” was intentional, both to provide a name less likely to spark homophobic backlash and to provide a wider substantive focus to help maintain minimum thresholds of membership (Wilson 2017). Membership in the section has fluctuated over the years but the section continues to be a vibrant community for those engaged in LGBTQ+ research. Every year, the section sponsors or co-sponsors several panels at the APSA Annual Meeting.

The Sexuality and Politics section also sponsors two awards for research on sexuality and politics: the Cynthia Weber Best Conference Paper Award and the Kenneth Sherrill Best Dissertation Award. Along with the LGBTQ+ Caucus's Bailey Award (also for the best conference paper) and the Centennial Center's award recognizing the best dissertation proposal covering empirical LGBT politics, these awards demonstrate the understanding that scholarship on LGBTQ+ politics deserves serious recognition by the discipline. While the Sexuality and Politics section is the primary institutional home for research on sexuality and politics, many scholars are also members of the LGBTQ+ Caucus. The Caucus's primary focus is supporting LGBTQ+ political scientists, regardless of their field of study. In addition to

that, the Caucus sponsors panels on LGBTQ+ research at the APSA Annual Meeting and recognizes the best work on LGBTQ+ politics with the Bailey Award.

Both the Sexuality & Politics Section and the LGBTQ Caucus strive to be welcoming for graduate students. Graduate students receive free membership in the Section. Caucus membership dues are voluntary and suggested dues are based on a sliding scale making membership affordable for everyone. The executive committee includes a graduate student representative and graduate students are welcome and encouraged to participate in leadership opportunities within the section.

For LGBTQ+ graduate students, or those who study LGBTQ+ politics, joining the Section and the Caucus can also provide invaluable mentorship. While there are more LGBTQ+ faculty in the discipline now than in decades past, they are not present in every department. Similarly, LGBTQ+ politics courses, while more common, are not offered everywhere. The Section and the Caucus can provide graduate students opportunities to find mentors, co-authors, or to discuss research ideas with a receptive and knowledgeable audience. In addition to attending the variety of panels on LGBTQ+ politics offered at APSA, graduate students can and should attend the business meetings for both the Section and the Caucus and the evening social reception jointly sponsored by the Section, the Caucus, and the LGBT Status Committee. These events help build community and can connect graduate students to important resources, particularly when students face challenges based on their identity or their research agenda. (For more information about networking and conferencing, see chapters 7 and 21.)

Finally, the Committee on the Status of LGBT Individuals in the Profession is another important resource for LGBTQ+ graduate students. The Status Committee is charged with advocating for the needs and concerns of LGBTQ+ political scientists, including graduate students, to APSA leadership. The members of the LGBTQ Status Committee work to ensure that APSA's policies take the needs of LGBTQ+ people into account and to encourage diverse voices to be heard. The Status Committee also sponsors grants to help defray the cost of attending APSA, with a particular focus on graduate students, contingent, community college, and other faculty who may lack resources for conference attendance.

Conclusion

LGBTQ+ scholars and scholars who study LGBTQ+ issues have a place in political science. While not every individual campus or department is a welcoming place, the discipline as a whole has become increasingly welcoming throughout the years. While much of the advice in this chapter centers around challenges and concerns, we do not want to paint a picture that LGBTQ+ political scientists cannot be successful in their academic careers. We have been and will continue to be. We hope the advice presented here helps make that success a reality for everyone.

Resources

Resources from APSA and Related Groups:

- APSA Sexuality & Politics Section: <https://www.apsanet.org/section38>
- APSA Committee on the Status of LGBT Individuals in the Profession: <https://www.apsanet.org/statuscommitteelgbt>
- APSA LGBTQ Caucus: <https://connect.apsanet.org/lgbtq-caucus/>
- LGBTQ Caucus Twitter: <https://twitter.com/LGBTQCaucus>
- LGBTQ Caucus Facebook Group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/apsalgbtqcaucus>
- Centennial Center Sherrill Prize: <https://connect.apsanet.org/centennialcenter/grants-awards/kenneth-sherrill-prize/>
- ISA LGBTQ Caucus: <https://www.isanet.org/ISA/Caucuses/LGBTQA-Caucus>

Selected Resources for Scholars of LGBTQ+ Politics

- Queer Politics: <https://www.queerpolitics.org/>
- ONE Archive: <https://www.onearchives.org/>
- NY Public Library LGBT Collection: <https://www.nypl.org/lgbtqcollections>

- Williams Institute (UCLA Law School): <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/>

Endnotes

- 1 While we use the term LGBTQ+ here, we acknowledge that the abbreviations and terminology used to refer to the LGBTQ+ community are constantly evolving and vary across subfields. Some may prefer a longer, or different, abbreviation. We do not intend to exclude those people from this chapter's focus.
- 2 Note the survey in 2010 utilizes the acronym LGBT so we use that acronym to describe the survey's findings here.
- 3 <https://publicationethics.org/news/vision-more-trans-inclusive-publishing-world>

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