The New Identity Frontier: Explaining Public Opinion toward Transgender People & Rights

Over the past several years, attitudes toward LGBT Americans have received increased attention in political science, building on decades of existing scholarship on the LGBT community elsewhere in the social sciences (see Vallely 2012). The vast majority of this work, however, can be more accurately described as attitudes toward LGB Americans, often entirely neglecting the T in the acronym. While LGB rights have seen recent victories and explicit discrimination is on the decline in many areas, transgender and gender non-conforming individuals (TGN) continue to face overt discrimination at home, school and work, at doctor's offices, and at the hands of landlords and police officers. While TGN individuals are beginning to enter public consciousness—e.g. former Olympian Caitlin Jenner; imprisoned whistleblower Chelsea Manning; Laverne Cox and her character Sophia Burset on the Netflix series *Orange Is the New Black;* and through appearances of transgender individuals on popular programs by author Janet Mock on *The Colbert Report*— they remain astoundingly vulnerable to explicit discrimination, unemployment, detachment from family structures and social institutions, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, extreme poverty, suicide, and violence.

There a dearth of public opinion data about attitudes toward these groups and that lack of understanding is contributing to social and political disenfranchisement and a whole host of adverse conditions for TGN individuals. Respondents of a 2011 survey of 6,450 self-identified transgender and gender non-conforming individuals found that sixty-three percent (63%) had experienced at least one serious act of discrimination that would have a major impact on a person's quality of life and ability to sustain themselves financially or emotionally (Grant, et al. 2011). TGN respondents were four times more

likely than the general population to live in extreme poverty (less than $10,000 in annual income) and 41 percent of respondents reported attempting suicide (compared to just 1.6 percent of the general population), with rates even higher among those who had been bullied at school, fired due to bias, or who were victims of physical or sexual assault.

There are alarming trends in school as well. Among those who expressed a transgender identity or gender non-conformity while in grades K-12, 78% reported being harassed at school, 35% reported being physically assaulted, and 12% reported sexual violence at school. Harassment was so severe that it led to nearly 1 in 6 TGN individuals (15%) to leave school entirely and not return (Grant, et al. 2011). TGN individuals are more likely to be (a) homeless and are often denied access to shelters; (b) refused medical care or harassed in doctors' offices or hospitals; and (c) regularly mistreated by police and sexually assaulted by officers. Their difficulty in obtaining documents that match their name and gender leads to difficulties in accessing employment, housing, health care and travel. In sum, as gay men and lesbians are gaining acceptance, TGN individuals continue to be marginalized; additional research needs be conducted to investigate attitudes toward this marginalized, vulnerable segment of the American public.

All of these statistics beg a few simple questions: why do TGN individuals have these experiences? On what does the public base their views of transgender people? How are attitudes changing on this increasingly visible group of people? In short, existing data don't provide a clear answer. Several questions relating to transgender and gender non-conforming individuals could be easily added to the ANES time-series pilot that would greatly enrich our understanding of attitudes toward transgender and gender non-conforming people. As Wald (2000: 6) notes:

Attempts by gays to alter their status through political means gives us the opportunity to study how small, weak and despised groups can use political means to challenge larger and stronger political forces who enjoy the support of entrenched social values…. The clash of social movements over gay rights thus forces us to ask fundamental questions about the nature and distribution of power in the United States, which *is* a central concern of political science.

The same holds true for TGN individuals; we need a better understanding of which groups of people support or oppose expansion of rights to include transgender people, similar to yet different from the expansion of rights to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people over the last decades. While LGB individuals have seen political and policy victories in the recent past, there have been fewer such victories for transgender people. Despite somewhat increased visibility of TGN individuals in media and in the public sphere, additional time-series questions focused on these people would help to track and to better understand how the public is coming to terms with contemporary conceptions of gender identity and sexual identity.

Existing ANES questions extended to transgender or gender non-conforming people:

(1) Thermometer rating
Adding a feeling thermometer rating for transgender people would mirror the existing questions for a variety of groups. We note that the validity of feeling thermometer ratings have come into question recently so we include several other possible questions as well.

I'd like to get your feelings toward some of our political leaders and other people who are in the news these days. I'll read the name of a person and I'd like you to rate that person using something we call the feeling thermometer. The feeling thermometer can rate people from 0 to 100 degrees. Ratings between 50 degrees and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorable and warm toward the person. Ratings between 0 degrees and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorable toward the person. Rating the person at the midpoint, the 50 degree mark, means you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the person. If we come to a person or group you don't recognize, you don't need to rate that person. Just tell me and we'll move on to the next one.

The first (next) group is transgender and gender non-conforming people.

(2) Aid to (group) question; Aid to Transgender/ gender non-conforming individuals:
"Some people feel that the government in Washington should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of people who are transgender or who do not conform to a gender. (Suppose these people are at one end of a scale, at point 1.) Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help these groups because they should help themselves. (Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7.) And, of course, some other people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6."

(3) Sympathy:
How often have you felt sympathy for transgender people? VERY often, FAIRLY often, NOT TOO often, or NEVER.

(4) Overcome prejudice
(Original question: Irish, Italians, Jewish) Gay, lesbian, and bisexual people and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Transgender people should do the same without any special favors. Do you AGREE STRONGLY, AGREE SOMEWHAT, NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE, DISAGREE SOMEWHAT, or DISAGREE STRONGLY with this statement?

(5) Military service:
Do you think transgender people should be allowed to serve in the United States Armed Forces or don't you think so? (1) Transgender people should be allowed to serve; (5) Transgender people should not be allowed to serve.

(6) Job discrimination:
Do you favor or oppose laws to protect transgender people against job discrimination? (1) favor (5) oppose (8) don't know.

Follow-up: [Do you favor such laws STRONGLY or NOT STRONGLY? / Do you oppose such laws STRONGLY or NOT STRONGLY?]

(7) Respondent gender identity (two options)

(a) Are you male, female, or do you have a different gender identity? (Add response option: other, with a follow-up to clarify)

(b) Do you consider yourself to be transgender or gender non-conforming? (*note: this was asked in 2012 in the web-only survey).
(1) yes (2) no

(8) Familiarity with transgender individuals
Among your immediate family members, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, or close friends, are any of them transgender or gender non-conforming? (1) yes (2) no

(9) Perceptions of discrimination (two options)
(a) How serious a problem is discrimination against transgender people in the United States? [Not a problem at all, a minor problem, a moderately serious problem, a very serious problem, or an extremely serious problem / An extremely serious problem, a very serious problem, a moderately serious problem, a minor problem, or not a problem at all]?

(b) How much discrimination is there in the United States today against each of the following groups? Transgender people. [A great deal, a lot, a moderate amount, a little, or none at all / none at all, a little, a moderate amount, a lot or a great deal]?

(10) Employment discrimination
When employers make decisions about hiring and promotion, how often do they discriminate against transgender people? [Never, some of time, most of the time, or always / Always, most of time, some of the time, or never]?

(11) Perceptions of common ground
How much do transgender people have in common with your own beliefs? [A great deal, a lot, a moderate amount, a little, or nothing all, a little, a moderate amount, a lot, or a great deal]?