



Fiona Rodger* and Christina Wolbrecht

Transgender Attitudes and Anti-Democratic Sentiment After the 2024 Election

<https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2025-2027>

Abstract: In recent years, conservative actors have decried what they call “gender ideology,” defined as efforts to recognize the complexity of sexuality and gender beyond the simple binary. We first review the recent politics of the anti-gender ideology movement both globally and in the U.S., with a particular focus on the rights of transgender people, a central target of these efforts. We emphasize that many of the attacks on gender ideology are associated with rising anti-democratic forces around the world. Employing a unique national survey with extensive questions regarding both democracy and trans attitudes fielded after Donald Trump returned to the White House in 2025, we find that fewer than half of Americans support policies that expand or defend the rights of trans people. However, support varies considerably across specific trans policy issues and between different groups in society. Without making any claims to causal direction, we find support for democracy and attitudes toward right-wing authoritarianism are strongly associated with support for transgender rights. We conclude that the observed link between anti-democratic forces and opposition to trans rights at the elite level is replicated at the mass level.

Keywords: transgender; public opinion; right-wing authoritarianism; support for democracy; gender ideology; American politics

1 Introduction

On the day he returned to the White House in January 2025, President Donald Trump issued an executive order instructing the U.S. government to “defend women’s rights

Fiona Rodger is a graduate student and Christina Wolbrecht is a professor, both in the Department of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame. Wolbrecht acknowledges her 2023–2024 undergraduate student thesis students, Anna Gazewood and Julia Thomalla, who taught her a great deal about transgender politics in the U.S. We are grateful to Dave Campbell and Matt Hall for the opportunity to add a battery of questions about trans policy issues to the Spring 2025 Notre Dame Health of Democracy Survey.

***Corresponding author:** Fiona Rodger, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, USA,
E-mail: frodger@nd.edu

Christina Wolbrecht, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, USA

and protect freedom of conscience by using clear and accurate language and policies that recognize women are biologically female, and men are biologically male.” In other words, the policy of the Trump Administration is that only two sexes exist, woman and man (Arkin et al 2025; The White House 2025a). In this same vein, a second executive order prohibited the federal government from participating in “illegal and immoral discrimination programs, going by the name ‘diversity, equity, and inclusion’ (DEI)” (The White House 2025b).

These actions, and others, by the Trump White House are part of a broader attack on what conservatives call “gender ideology,” a term used by activists to describe and undermine efforts to recognize the complexity of gender beyond the simple binary of female and male. According to these critics, adherents to “gender ideology” seek to normalize and advance such threats to traditional society as homosexuality, transgender people, and intercourse outside of marriage and for non-reproductive purposes, among other things. The political theorist Butler (2025) has described the conservative “phantasm of gender” as a set of claims about gender as a challenge to patriarchal power and traditional social structures. In conservative framing, gender ideology represents a threat to the state, civil society, and families. One key outcome of the 2024 election was that those who believe gender ideology is a threat to be resisted now control the executive branch of the federal government.

In this paper, we first review the recent politics of the global anti-gender ideology movement, before turning to the United States specifically. We use the term “gender ideology” as this is how conservative actors describe what they oppose, but doing so should not be taken as an endorsement of the claim. We focus particularly on debates over the rights of transgender Americans in all arenas of public life, which has been a central target of the anti-gender ideology movement. We then highlight and explain how attacks on so-called gender ideology have been central to the campaigns and agendas of anti-democratic forces on the rise around the world. In the U.S., the Republican party has long been associated with a preference for more traditional gender roles (Wolbrecht 2000). Donald Trump made anti-gender ideology and anti-trans themes central to his 2024 campaign to take back the White House.

We then turn to the question of how these attitudes characterize the American public. We review previous research and then employ a unique national survey with extensive questions regarding both democracy and trans attitudes fielded in the early months of the second Trump presidency to explore the state of these attitudes and their relationship to each other. We find that fewer than half of Americans support policies that expand or defend the rights of trans people. However, support varies considerably depending on the specific trans issue, and between different groups in society. Similarly, support for democracy and right-wing authoritarianism varies by the exact aspect of each that is queried, and the same demographic groups who are more likely to support trans rights tend to also support democratic values

and oppose right-wing authoritarianism. Without making any claims as to causation or causal direction, we find support for democracy and against right-wing authoritarianism are strongly associated with support for transgender rights. The observed link between anti-democratic forces and opposition to trans rights at the elite level is repeated at the mass level as well.

2 The Global Movement Against Gender Ideology

Patriarchy, homophobia, and transphobia are not new to political debate and contestation. The specific term “gender ideology” dates to the early 1990s, emerging from the Vatican Council for the Family’s framing of issues related to sexuality, family, and gender. The Catholic church, along with a number of other Christian denominations and other faith traditions, believe that God created man and women (a binary understanding of gender) for the purposes of reproductive sex. The traditional sexual division of labor, both in and out of the family, follows from this divinely ordained order. Popes ranging from Benedict XVI to Francis have warned against a gender ideology that undermines God’s divine plan (thus placing human invention above God’s creation), threatening the Church, the family, and children in particular (Butler 2025; Shaw 2022).

The view that gender ideology is a threat has grown far beyond its Catholic roots, however, and into a global political force. Butler (2025) characterizes public anxiety about gender ideology as a threat to social order as a “phantasm,” capturing both that these claims are often amorphous and without empirical foundation, and that they are intended to generate fear and anger. The term “ideology” suggests that those who reject, or even question, the gender binary are motivated by an indoctrinated world view, rather than rooted in reality, science, or values. The threat of gender ideology has become a call to action by some Catholics, evangelicals, and right-wing conservatives (Butler 2025).

This movement is global, shaping political debate, policymaking, and elections throughout Europe, Latin America, Africa, and Russia. A range of national and international organizations promote gender ideology opposition, share policies and tactics, and provide support across borders (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024, 2024; Shaw 2022). While transnational organizations have long been viewed as a means for advancing policy liberalization globally, recent work highlights their illiberal effects as well (Ayoub 2015; Velasco 2023). The results of this advocacy are striking; claims about the threat of gender ideology are raised in a range of political debates, including places where the relevance may not be immediately evident. For example, in Columbia, Pentecostal Evangelical churches campaigned against the 2016 peace accord between

revolutionaries and the government, claiming that the accord advanced a dangerous gender ideology (Brechenmacher 2025; Butler 2025; Shaw 2022).

For those decrying the specter of gender ideology, gay and trans people are a central threat. For example, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán (2010-present) has been an outspoken opponent of “gender ideology.” In addition to eliminating gender studies departments in Hungarian universities, Orbán’s government has banned content regarding gay and transgender people. When challenged on the latter, an Orbán spokesperson explained, “The Government’s standpoint is that people are born either male or female” (Kent and Tapfumaneyi 2018). Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2023) described himself as “homophobic and very proud of it,” threatened gay people with violence, and banned gender and sexuality education. Poland President Andrzej Duda (2015–2025) described “LGBT ideology” as more destructive than communism (Shaw 2022; see also Grabowska-Moroz and Wójcik 2021). These leaders and their parties – especially Fidesz in Hungary and the Law and Justice party (PiS) in Poland – are all categorized by experts as “lacking commitment to democratic norms” (V-Dem Institute 2025), suggesting a link between conservative attacks on gender ideology and anti-democratic forces.

3 The Movement Against Gender Ideology in the U.S.

The U.S. has been an important source of funding and advocacy for the anti-gender ideology movement around the world, but the movement has also been active in the U.S. itself. In the U.S., debates over sex education, book bans, and especially transgender policies have become increasingly prominent in recent years (Butler 2025). In many ways, this is not a new development in American politics. In the postwar period, political concern about non-traditional gender roles were central to the Lavender Scare in the 1940s and 1950s (an effort to identify and purge LGBTQ people from government as national security risks and likely communist sympathizers), the battle over the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s and 1980s (characterized by inflamed rhetoric about bathroom access and non-traditional roles for women), and in the debates over the teaching of sex education in schools in the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond (Cohen and Galloway 2025).

Since the 1990s, however, American’s views about homosexuality have liberalized dramatically, one of the fastest reversals of public opinion ever recorded (Poushter and Kent 2020). In 2015, the Supreme Court established that the right to marriage could not be denied to same-sex couples in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. Yet, significant minorities of Americans remain opposed to gay rights. Indeed, advances in

gay rights appear to have generated a backlash. Since 2018, for example, the ACLU has tracked more than 1,000 state bills aimed at limiting the rights of LGBTQ+ people (ACLU 2025).

Moreover, liberalizing opinion on gay rights has led to the emergence of new targets for gender ideology opponents. Since gay rights can no longer be counted on as a successful wedge issue, anti-gender ideology candidates and officeholders increasingly turn to transgender people as a target. While social acceptance of trans people has increased (Taylor et al 2018), there are signs that opinion is becoming less tolerant in the last year or two (Pew 2025) as political figures claim that children are transitioning without their parents' consent, trans women are predators in women's bathrooms, and sports achievements are stolen from girls and young women by transgender athletes. In most years before 2020, fewer than 50 anti-trans bills were introduced across the American states. In the last five years, however, those numbers have skyrocketed: The Trans Legislation Tracker reports that more than 600 anti-trans bills were introduced in both 2023 and 2024. Following the 2024 election, more than 1,000 bills targeting transgender people have been introduced in state legislatures so far in 2025. While the vast majority of such bills have failed, more than 100 such bills have passed in 2025 alone (Trans Legislation Tracker 2025).

In his successful 2024 campaign for the White House, Donald Trump took up the anti-gender ideology banner, describing transgender people as a threat to families and children and in opposition to American values. He promised to ban gender transition "at any age," exclude transgender people from participating in women's sports, and remove transgender soldiers from active military service. The Trump campaign viewed attacks on transgender policies as a winning issue, spending \$11 million dollars on an ad that painted Vice President Kamala Harris as a trans ally. It closed with the words, "Kamala is for they/them. President Trump is for you" (Martin and Khurana 2024).

4 Understanding Attitudes about Transgender Issues

In a time when a majority of Americans have become more accepting of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, transgender rights now dominate the conversation on LGBTQ+ issues in the U.S. For decades, most researchers grouped public opinion on transgender rights with research on gay rights. One reason is that only an estimated 1.6 % of the U.S. adult population identifies as transgender (Parker et al 2022), meaning most Americans do not personally know a transgender person and until recently, transgender rights had not been particularly salient. That has changed. A

likely contributing factor is that Donald Trump repeatedly emphasized anti-transgender themes in all three of his presidential campaigns, painting transgender people as a threat to traditional American culture, which appears to have solidified anti-transgender policy attitudes among conservative voters (Mulvihill and Bedayn 2025). In the last decade, the debate over transgender rights has expanded from basic civil rights questions to bathroom access, military service bans, sports bans, and bans on gender-affirming care.

Americans distinguish between the subgroups that make up the LGBTQ+ community and report different views on issues relating to gender identity than on those related to sexual orientation (Lewis et al. 2017). Early academic research examined transgender rights from a general civil rights perspective within the broader context of opinion on LGBTQ+ rights. For example, Flores (2015) found that a majority of people agreed that transgender people should have the same rights as the general public, and that legal protections for gays and lesbians should apply to transgender people. However, people's attitudes toward transgender people specifically, not their rights, were mostly negative across various public opinion surveys from 2002 until about 2015 (Lewis et al. 2022). Americans did not support transgender people on a personal level, but they supported protecting transgender people from discrimination the same way they supported protecting gays and lesbians from discrimination.

Research confirms that there is a strong correlation between attitudes toward lesbians and gays and attitudes toward transgender people; however, most report that people have significantly more negative opinions on transgender rights compared to gay rights (Cragun and Sumerau 2015; Flores 2015; Lewis et al. 2017; Norton and Herek 2013). Many factors, including partisan identification, gender, sexual orientation, and education, have similar effects in shaping policy attitudes about both LGB and trans people, but the baseline level of support is higher for LGB issues compared to trans issues (Flores 2015; Jones et al. 2018; Lewis et al. 2017; Norton and Herek 2013; Tadlock et al. 2017).

Americans do not think about transgender rights in a monolithic way. For instance, the public remains relatively supportive of more basic civil rights issues concerning protection from discrimination and harassment (Jones et al. 2018; Lewis et al. 2022; Miller et al. 2017). When you move from abstract questions about protections from discrimination to more specific issues, there is increased variance and weakening support. Transgender issues such as bathroom usage, military service, and participation in sports are much more divisive (Castle 2019; Cunningham and Pickett 2018; Lewis et al. 2022). Americans have particularly negative attitudes toward transgender policy issues that are 'body-centric,' or that emphasize and focus on how transgender people physically represent gender and gender roles with their bodies and through medical transitions (Miller et al. 2017). Being faced with the

violations of gender norms that come with transgender bathroom usage, sports participation, and gender-affirming care (all of which are body-centric issues) may spur more negative reactions from the public.

Consistent with the party's long stance on the side of traditional gender roles (Wolbrecht 2000), Republican identification typically correlates with anti-transgender rights attitudes (Castle 2019; Flores 2015; Jones et al. 2018; Lewis et al. 2017, 2021). Along with Democrats, women, younger people, liberals, those with more education, and city dwellers are more likely to support trans rights (Castle 2019; Cragun and Sumerau 2015; Flores 2015; Jones et al. 2018; Lewis et al. 2017, 2021; Norton and Herek 2013).

Religiosity is also a predictor, with increased religiosity associated with opposition to transgender rights (Castle 2019; Cragun and Sumerau 2015; Norton and Herek 2013). Again, transgender people are viewed as violating social norms and gender stereotypes, and research has long found that increased religiosity is associated with a stronger desire for political, social, and religious orthodoxy (McClosky and Zaller 1984). Castle (2019) reports that a majority of the population has polarized attitudes on transgender rights and religious liberty, with religion and partisanship acting as predictors of attitudes on these issues. These findings suggest that the religiosity-based division on transgender issues is a reflection of the religious divide on culture wars issues that have long characterized American politics (Haider-Markel et al. 2019).

Another common determinant of attitudes is interpersonal contact with a transgender person. Contact theory (Allport 1958) suggests that people who have more or closer contact with a minority out-group tend to perceive less difference between themselves and members of that group, making people more tolerant. Initial results were mixed (e.g. Flores 2015; King et al 2009), perhaps due to the low probability that any cis person knows a transgender person. More recent research finds that interpersonal contact with a transgender person is correlated with more positive attitudes toward transgender rights (Flores et al. 2018; Jones et al. 2018; Lewis et al. 2017; Tadlock et al. 2017). As the transgender population increases and growing numbers of Americans report knowing a transgender person, this increased contact likely contributes to the rising levels of support for transgender rights in the general public that were observed before 2024 (Lewis et al. 2022).

In 2020, opinions on transgender bathroom usage were evenly split, but support for allowing transgender people to serve in the military was at 75 % (Lewis et al. 2022). Active-duty service members comprise just 1 % of U.S. adults (Schaeffer 2023), so allowing transgender people to serve in the military may not be viewed as a personal cost the way that allowing them to use the bathrooms that align with their chosen gender identity is. Opinion may be shifting, however. A recent article reports that Americans in 2025 have become more opposed to transgender rights compared

to 2022. Even support for laws that protect transgender people from discrimination, arguably the least controversial transgender rights policies, is down eight points in 2025 (Pew 2025).

5 Anti-gender Ideology and Anti-Democratic Attitudes

What unites many of the prominent politicians who have taken up the fight against gender ideology is that most are characterized by experts as far right and/or authoritarian, and are understood as part of the global trend toward weakening democratic norms and democratic backsliding. In its 2025 Report, the V-Dem Institute (which houses the Varieties of Democracy project, a multidimensional gauge of the quality of democracy around the world), describes the past 25 -years as a “third wave” of autocratization, in which democratic states are in decline, the late twentieth century trend in democratization has slowed or reversed, and autocratic states continue to increase in number. For the first time in two decades, the world has more autocracies (91) than democracies (88) (V-Dem Institute 2025).

Looking beyond the U.S. illuminates how the relationship between anti-LGBT attitudes, anti-democratic attitudes, and rising authoritarianism is materializing across the globe. Authoritarianism challenges liberal democratic norms, and LGBTQ+ rights are particularly susceptible to being targeted by illiberal actors and activists as they are less institutionalized than many other norms (Velasco 2023). While it is true that LGBTQ+ rights are not protected in all democracies, they are noticeably absent in countries that do not have democratic forms of government, and it is often thought that wealthier and more secular nations are more likely to protect gay rights (Ayoub 2015; Encarnación 2014). Essentially, it is difficult to separate out the rise in anti-LGBTQ+ efforts, and particularly anti-transgender attacks, from rising authoritarianism across the international system.

The two often go hand-in-hand. For example, Poland represents a recent case illustrating the connection between anti-LGBTQ+ attitudes and anti-democratic attitudes among political elites. During the late 2010s, Poland experienced democratic backsliding after the Law and Justice party came to power, which led to the erosion of rule of law standards; this not only allowed for the limitation of LGBTQ+ rights, but also made legal resistance to these limitations more difficult (Grabowska-Moroz and Wójcik 2021). Poland is now considered to be on the path to restoring liberal democracy, but this and other cases help make the case for connecting democratic erosion to the political and legal undermining of LGBTQ+ rights.

Does the association between opposition to gender ideology, and trans rights in particular, and authoritarianism and anti-democratic attitudes hold for the mass public? Empirical research on the relationship between anti-transgender and anti-democratic or authoritarian attitudes is limited. A few scholars have examined the relationship between egalitarianism and moral traditionalism, and support for transgender rights (Flores 2020; Jones et al. 2018; Miller et al. 2017; Norton and Herek 2013). In their analysis, Jones et al. (2018) found that respondents with more egalitarian leanings were more likely to support transgender rights. Similarly, Lewis et al. (2021) found a positive correlation between higher levels of egalitarianism and more supportive attitudes on the topic of allowing transgender people to serve in the military. High levels of anti-egalitarianism and political conservatism have been linked to negative attitudes toward transgender people for both men and women (Norton and Herek 2013). Psychological authoritarianism and anti-egalitarianism are associated with both opposition to transgender rights and negative feelings toward transgender people (Miller et al. 2017; Norton and Herek 2013).

People who value strict adherence to rules and who do not prioritize equality for marginalized groups are, perhaps not surprisingly, more opposed to transgender rights, as transgender people are thought to challenge traditional societal and gender norms. Additionally, people who report higher levels of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) are more likely to report anti-transgender prejudice (McCullough et al. 2019). This finding holds for both men and women, with homophobia and transphobia found to be highly correlated with Right-Wing Authoritarianism (Nagoshi et al. 2008). While similar to psychological authoritarianism, RWA is tied to submission to authority figures who are thought to do things the ‘right’ way. People with higher levels of RWA are more likely to support authoritarian leaders, favor punishing norm violators, and demonstrate prejudice against groups that they believe threaten the existing social order (McFarland 2010). Similar patterns are observed in other countries. For example, survey research in the United Kingdom, where much like the U.S., hostility toward transgender people is becoming increasingly common, shows that people with higher levels of authoritarian beliefs had extremely hostile views and significantly negative attitudes toward transgender rights (McLean and Streeter 2025).

6 Trans Attitudes after the 2024 Presidential Election

In 2024 former president Donald Trump both secured his party’s nomination for the third election in a row and won the general election, returning to the White House in

early 2025. Trump immediately moved to fulfill his campaign promises to limit trans rights. In addition to those noted in the introduction, one of the first executive orders President Trump signed prohibited the federal government to “fund, sponsor, promote, assist, or support the so-called ‘transition’ of a child from one sex to another” (Montague 2025). In another executive order signed a few days later, Trump moved to ban trans girls and women from participating in women’s sports (West and Schnell 2025). Moreover, the Trump administration retracted the X gender marker on passports for trans and nonbinary people, threatened to remove federal funding from schools that teach “gender ideology and discriminatory equity ideology” or use students’ preferred names or pronouns, eliminated information about trans public health and history from federal websites, banned transgender troops, and prohibited gender-affirming health care (Rummel and Sosin 2025).

What is the state of gender ideology attitudes in the U.S. following the 2024 election? To explore the relationship between views about democracy and transgender rights specifically, we turn to the University of Notre Dame’s Health of Democracy Survey (NDHDS). NDHDS is a nationally representative survey conducted online twice a year by NORC AmeriSpeak. The sample size for the Spring 2025 wave is 1,541, including both longitudinal panel members (1,093) and a fresh sample (448). The purpose of the NDHDS is to assess the state of American’s views on democracy. As such, the survey provides a series of different measures concerning support for democracy and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA). Additionally, the Spring 2025 wave contains a set of questions regarding specific transgender rights policies, including access to bathrooms, gender affirming care, military service, and participation in sports. As this survey contains more questions gauging both opinions on transgender rights and democratic attitudes than other surveys, such as the American National Election Studies (ANES), it is a particularly suitable dataset for investigating these concepts. As these are observational data, we report on associations without making causal claims. All estimates reported are weighted to make the data representative of the U.S. population.

6.1 Transgender Policy Views

We turn first to attitudes toward various trans policy issues. The NDHDS contains five items, asking respondents whether they support or oppose various policies (5-point Likert scale).

- Several states have considered laws that would ban **transgender boys** from participating in K-12 boys’ **sports**. Would you support or oppose such a law? (reverse coded)

- Several states have considered laws that would ban **transgender girls** from participating in K-12 girls' **sports**. Would you support or oppose such a law? (reverse coded)
- Do you support or oppose allowing transgender people to serve in the United States **Armed Forces**?
- Do you support or oppose it being legal to provide someone younger than 18 years old with surgery and hormones for a **gender transition**?¹
- Do you support or oppose allowing transgender people – that is, people who identify themselves as the sex or gender different from the one they were born as – to use public **bathrooms** that match the gender they identify with?

We report the percentage of respondents who somewhat or strongly support the policy (or oppose in the case of bans on transgender boys or girls in sport) in Figure 1. In the wake of the 2024 election and the Trump administration's actions on a range of trans policies, attitudes regarding trans people and rights continue to vary by the specific issue queried. Consistent with previous research, allowing transgender people to serve in the U.S. military garners the highest level of support (43 %), although that level is considerably lower than in some earlier work (Lewis et al. 2022). Interestingly, while trans girls in sports have received the most media attention and controversy (Barnes 2024; Graham 2025), there is surprisingly little difference in support for permitting trans girls or boys to participate in K-12 sports, with only about 27–28 % of respondents opposing bans. (Those two items were randomized to avoid question wording effects). The lowest support, just 13.5 %, was for permitting trans youth access to gender-affirming health care. It is perhaps not surprising that President Trump moved so quickly to ban gender-affirming health care and trans athletes.

Who supports trans rights? To examine variation among different demographic groups, we create a *trans issues index* combining these five survey items. To ensure consistent measurement, we include only respondents who provided valid responses to all five items ($n = 1,469$) in the scale. We then computed the scale using respondents' mean score across the five items. The resulting scale is a continuous measure ranging from 1 (least supportive) to 5 (most supportive). Reliability analysis indicated that the scale had a high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.849$), suggesting that the items load well together and measure the underlying concept of support for transgender rights. Higher values on the scale reflect stronger support

¹ We note that while many associate surgery and cross-sex hormones with gender affirming care (as this question does), gender affirming care can also refer to a wider set of treatments like puberty blockers or even aspects of social transition. Future research should consider public opinion on these other approaches as well.

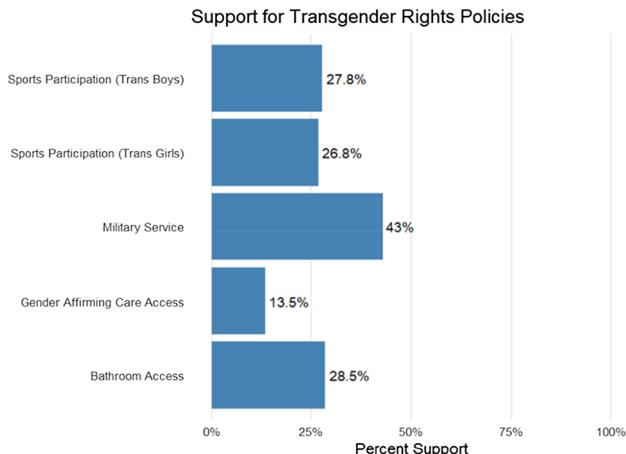


Figure 1: Support for trans policy issues varies depending on the policy.

for transgender rights across the five policies. The weighted mean score is 2.61 (SE = 0.04), and the weighted median score is 2.6 (95 % CI: 2.6, 2.8). As both these weighted scores fall below the neutral midpoint (3), this suggests that on average, the general population is neutral to opposed to transgender rights issues.

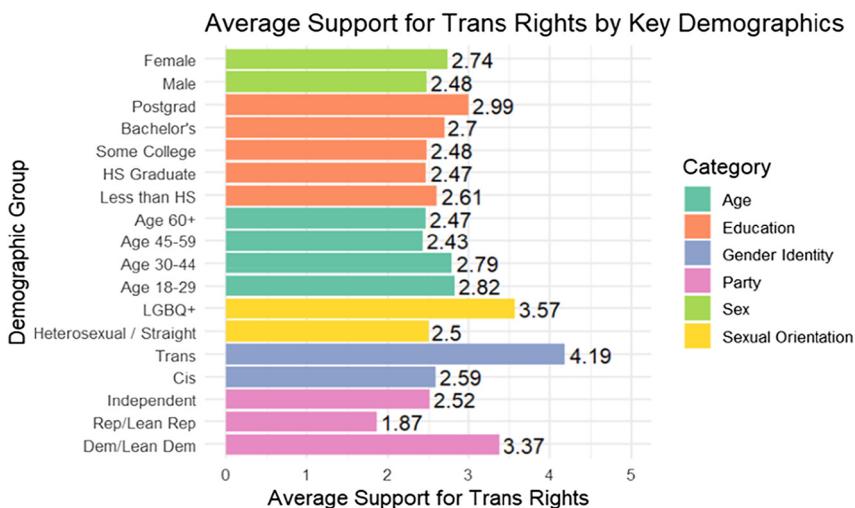


Figure 2: Support for trans policies varies considerably across social groups.

We observe considerable variation across different social groups in Figure 2. Not surprisingly, the highest support for trans policies comes from the trans respondents in our sample, with a weighted mean support score of 4.19/5 (SE = 0.44, $n = 12$), with those who identify as LGBQ+ coming in second (mean score 3.57/5, SE = 0.14). Perhaps reflecting the strong Republican rhetoric in opposition to trans rights, Republicans (including leaners) register the lowest support for trans policy issues at 1.87/5. In general, in the Spring of 2025, women, better educated, and younger respondents were more supportive of pro-trans policies, consistent with earlier findings.

6.2 Support for Democracy

What about attitudes toward democracy? As Figure 3 shows, support for democracy has been declining in the U.S. across the past 25 years. This pattern is distinctive to the U.S.; other advanced industrial democracies have not seen similar trends. The decline in democratic support is observed across generational cohorts, and does not appear to be a function of life-cycle effects (Claassen and Magalhães 2023a)

What do democratic attitudes look like following the 2024 presidential election? The NDHDS includes a battery of items which are designed to gauge the extent to which respondents support fundamental liberal democratic values, such as representation via free and fair elections, civil rights, civil liberties, and the rule of law. To this end, respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed (7-point Likert scale) with the following statements.

- A. Everyone should be allowed to vote.
- B. Voting should be easy.
- C. The more people participate in politics and elections, the better.
- D. Everyone should be allowed to express any i.e. even potentially dangerous ideas.
- E. The government should never shut down media outlets, even if they spread disinformation.
- F. No idea is dangerous enough to justify censorship.
- G. The president should not be above the law.
- H. The law should treat everyone the same, regardless of wealth or power.
- I. Men and women should have the same legal rights and protections.
- J. Laws need to protect minority groups when society makes them vulnerable.
- K. Two adults who love each other should be allowed to get married, regardless of sexual orientation.
- L. The government should never treat members of one religion differently than members of any other religion.
- M. In order for a leader's actions to be legitimate, they need to follow the rules.

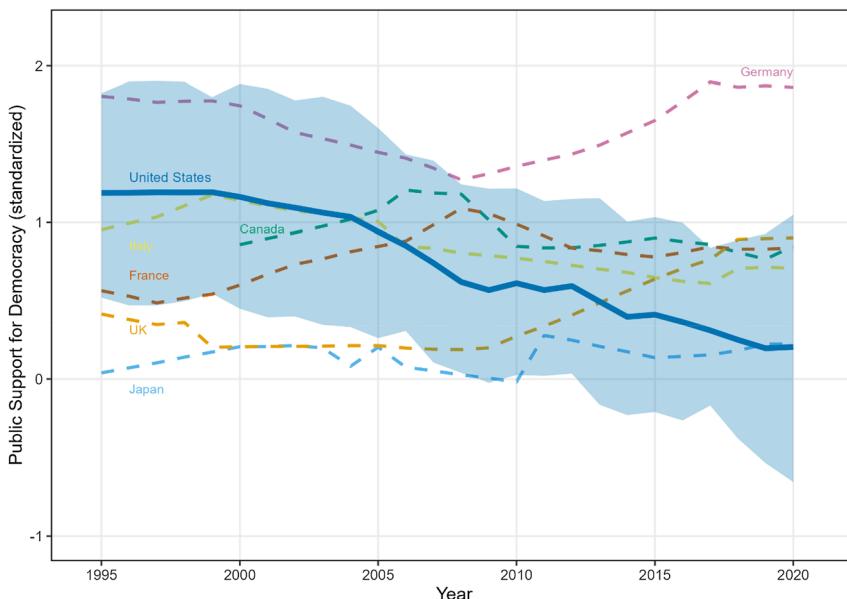


Figure 3: Declining public support for democracy in the United States, 1995–2020.²

Overall, a majority of Americans support these democratic principles, as the mean response for each item exceeds the midpoint (agree rather than disagree). As Figure 4 (weighted mean response to each item) demonstrates, however, support for democratic principles varies considerably depending on the aspect of democracy in question. Support for rule of law (items G, H, I, M) is very high; large shares of Americans believe the president should not be above the law, the law should treat everyone the same, regardless of wealth or power, that men and women should have the same legal rights and protections, and that leaders must follow the rules to be legitimate. In terms of electoral participation, there is strong support for voting being easy (B) and high turnout (C). Religious freedom (L) is also well supported. Other democratic values generate less support. At this moment in history, Americans are less committed to the idea that every person should be able to vote (A), to freedom of speech and the press (D-F), to minority group protections (J), or to same-sex marriage

² Figure 3 shows “...Bayesian estimates of latent public support for democracy in the United States and the other G7 nations, based on Claassen (2020). Data are standardized such that the mean level of support for democracy across 141 countries and 33 years equals zero and the standard deviation equals one. The US estimates rely on survey data from the World Values Survey, AmericasBarometer, Pew Research, and the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems” (Claassen and Magalhães 2023b, 720). Ribbon shows 95 % CI for U.S.

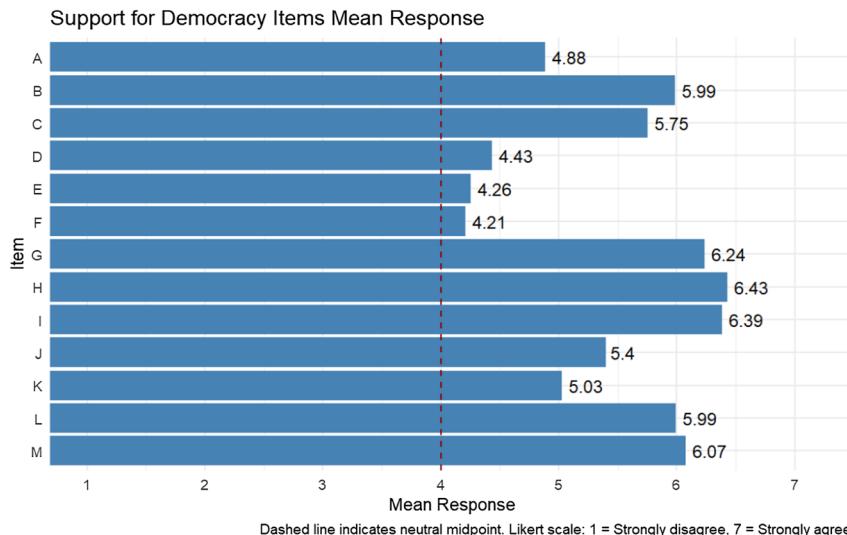


Figure 4: Considerable variation in support of different aspects of democracy.

(K). (We note, however, that support for same-sex marriage exceeds support for speech and press freedom).

As with our *trans policy index*, we create a *democratic support* index from this battery. We included respondents who provided valid responses to all 13 items as well as those with up to three invalid or missing responses for items. We then computed the scale as a continuous averaged index using each respondents mean response from the support for democracy items. The resulting scale is a continuous measure ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 7 (agree strongly). The 13 items have high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.837$), and an overall weighted mean of 5.47 and a median of 5.64.

As Figure 5 shows, neither age or sex (male or female) do much to predict support for democracy. Higher education, LGBQ+ identity, trans identity ($n = 12$), and Democratic identification all are associated with greater support for democracy.

6.3 Right-Wing Authoritarianism

Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) also has been shown to predict trans attitudes. The NDHDS RWA battery includes four seven-point agree/disagree items:

- A. Our country desperately needs a mighty leader who will do what has to be done to destroy the radical new ways and sinfulness that are ruining us.

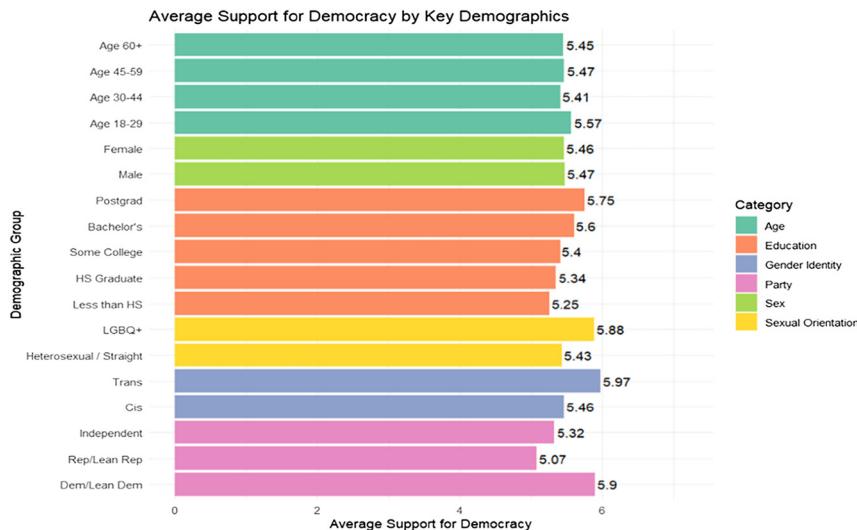


Figure 5: Support for democratic values varies by education, sexual identity, gender identity and party, but not age or gender.

- B. What our country really needs is a strong, determined leader who will crush evil, and take us back to our true path.
- C. Our country will be great if we honor the ways of our forefathers, do what the authorities tell us to do, and get rid of the “rotten apples” who are ruining everything.
- D. This country would work a lot better if certain groups of troublemakers would just shut up and accept their group’s traditional place in society.

As with our democratic support measure, we observe some variation in responses across these items. The idea that “troublemakers” should just “shut up” (D) gets the lowest support (weighted mean response: 3.68/7), with “destroy the radical new ideas” (A) coming in at 4.36/7. The most popular is the desire for a “strong, determined leader who will crush evil” (B, with 4.78/7) and then “honor the ways of our forefathers” (C) at 4.19/7.

We create a RWA index (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.90) and reverse the response direction so that higher values indicate more *opposition* to RWA. As Figure 6 indicates, while democratic support does not vary much by age, opposition to RWA is concentrated among younger respondents, while other variables, including

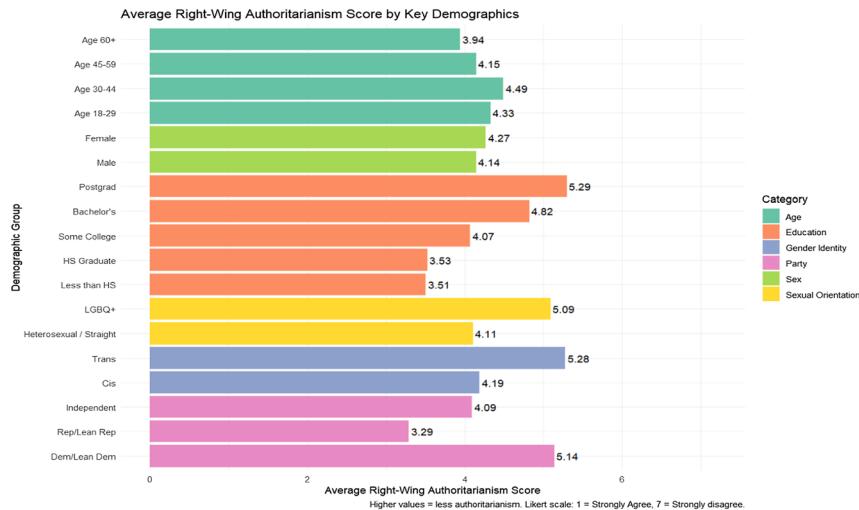


Figure 6: Demographic patterns for right-wing authoritarianism are generally similar to those for the democratic support index.

education, sexual identity, trans identity, and partisanship, function similarly as they do with the democratic support index.

6.4 Connecting Trans Attitudes, Support for Democracy, and Right-Wing Authoritarianism

Opposition to so-called gender ideology, and transgender people in particular, has been strongly associated with far-right movements and democratic backsliding. How do those values – opposition to trans rights and anti-democratic attitudes – connect in the mass public in the wake of the 2024 presidential election? Few previous studies have been able to examine these associations directly, but our unique survey permits us to offer some insight into these patterns.

We regress (using OLS) our *trans policy index* on a series of controls associated with trans attitudes in past research. LGBTQ identity ($n = 134$) is a dummy variable where 1 = such “non-straight” identities as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and so on. Trans identity is also a dummy variable ($n = 12$). We include dummies to indicate people who identify as women, as well as for race and ethnicity, with dummy variables for Black, Hispanic, Asian, and/or multiracial. White identity is the omitted

reference category. To capture the possible effect of contact with transgender people, we include a dummy variable for whether the respondent indicated they have any transgender family members, close friends, neighbors, or co-workers. Education is a five-point variable where higher values indicate more educational attainment. We include dummies for age cohorts, with the youngest cohort (18–29) the comparison category. Given the association of the anti-gender ideology movement with religious authority, we control for how frequently respondents attend religious services, ranging from never (1) to at least once a week (8). Ideology is a five-point scale where higher values indicate greater conservatism. We measure party identification using the full 7-category scale where higher values are associated with Republican identification. (For further information on all variables, consult the Appendix).

Our independent variables of greatest interest are democratic support and right-wing authoritarianism indices. Note that the RWA index is reverse coded so that higher values indicate less support for right-wing authoritarian ideals. While our two IV indices demonstrate similar demographic patterns and tap similar concepts, they are less correlated overall than we might expect: RWA and democratic norms support correlate at just 0.42. We report separate models with only one index each, as well as a full model with democratic support, RWA, in Table 1.

The results are incredibly consistent across models, so we will concentrate on the full model in column 3. The controls generally behave as expected. People who identify as transgender, lesbian, gay, or bisexual, or women are significantly more supportive of pro-trans policy. With other attitudes and factors controlled, neither age nor race/ethnicity is a predictor of views on trans policy. People who attend church often or who identify as conservative and/or Republican are less supportive. Respondents with trans friends or family are more positive toward pro-trans policy, though this relationship was not significant in the models that include RWA. Interestingly, given our findings in the figures above, level of education is not significantly related to trans policy attitudes ($p > 0.05$). Given the strong correlation between education and our IV indices of interest, as well as some of the other variables, those factors may have accounted for enough variation that education on its own does not register an effect.

Our analysis confirms that attitudes toward democracy and about right-wing authoritarianism are clearly related to attitudes toward trans people and policies. The more supportive a person is of democratic principles like free and fair elections and the rule of law, the more supportive they are of policies designed to advance transgender rights. Similarly, the less a person prioritizes strong leadership, hierarchy, and control, the more that person supports pro-trans policy. Of course, the

Table 1: Explaining support for policies to advance the rights and opportunities of transgender people.

	Democratic support only	RWA only	Full model
Support for democratic values	0.317 ^c (0.045)	0.282 ^c (0.048)	
Right-wing authoritarianism (reverse)		0.146 ^c (0.024)	0.126 ^c (0.023)
Trans identity	0.564 ^a (0.246)	0.566 ^a (0.269)	0.566 ^a (0.242)
LGBTQ identity	0.407 ^c (0.113)	0.430 ^c (0.115)	0.409 ^c (0.113)
Woman	0.213 ^c (0.059)	0.181 ^b (0.060)	0.200 ^c (0.059)
Black	-0.145 (0.112)	-0.075 (0.131)	-0.076 (0.117)
Hispanic	-0.009 (0.091)	-0.000 (0.089)	0.013 (0.087)
Asian/Pacific Islander	-0.204 (0.144)	-0.072 (0.139)	-0.108 (0.142)
Multi-racial	-0.244 (0.160)	-0.182 (0.179)	-0.163 (0.164)
Know someone transgender	0.171 ^a (0.077)	0.144 (0.078)	0.109 (0.074)
Level of education	0.015 (0.027)	-0.028 (0.029)	-0.042 (0.028)
Age 30–44	0.071 (0.108)	0.012 (0.117)	0.072 (0.108)
Age 45–59	-0.198 (0.110)	-0.181 (0.116)	-0.159 (0.108)
Age 60+	-0.096 (0.102)	-0.051 (0.110)	-0.044 (0.102)
Religious attendance	-0.037 ^b (0.012)	-0.042 ^c (0.012)	-0.035 ^b (0.011)
Ideology	-0.159 ^c (0.039)	-0.167 ^c (0.039)	-0.136 ^c (0.038)
Party identification	-0.198 ^c (0.024)	-0.193 ^c (0.025)	-0.165 ^c (0.025)
Intercept	2.137 ^c (0.331)	3.414 ^c (0.200)	1.739 ^c (0.323)
Adjusted R ²	0.527	0.521	0.549
Number of observations	1,416	1,404	1,401

Data from the Spring 2025 Notre Dame Health of Democracy Survey, fielded by NORC AmeriSpeak. ^a $p < 0.001$, ^b $p < 0.01$,

^c $p < 0.05$. Robust standard errors (HC1) in parentheses.

opposite is also true: People who do not value democratic principles or prefer authoritarian structures are less supportive of policies that advance the rights and opportunities of transgender people.

7 Conclusions

In the summer of 2025, an English instructor at Texas A&M was recorded teaching about differences between gender identity, expression, and sexuality. The student who recorded the lecture claimed that teaching these topics was in violation of President Trump's executive order that the federal government recognize only two biological sexes. There is no Texas state or federal law banning teaching about gender or sexual orientation. Nonetheless, the video went viral in the Fall. Within weeks, the instructor had lost her job, and her dean and department head had been removed from their administrative positions. On September 18th, the president of Texas A&M resigned over the incident (Priest et al 2025).

Questions related to gender – as an identity, an ideology, a set of expectations, a social structure, a political distinction, and so much more – have long been central to our politics. Around the world, including in the U.S., a conservative movement against “gender ideology” opposes non-traditional gender identities, roles, and self-presentation (Butler 2025). Many authoritarian leaders, part of a broader anti-democratic shift worldwide, have taken up the anti-gender ideology banner, restricting gay rights, trans rights, and even teaching and writing about gender.

We find that this elite alignment between anti-democratic forces and the anti-gender ideology movement is replicated among the mass public, with anti-democratic and right-wing authoritarian attitudes clearly associated with opposition to trans rights. Future analysis should dive more deeply into the structure and direction of these relationships, as well as consider other factors important to our current politics, such as Christian nationalism. Other aspects of the anti-gender ideology movement, such as pro-natalism (Matei 2025), merit further investigation as well. As democratic backsliding and fights over gender continue to define our politics, a better understanding of these relationships is pressing.

Appendix

The Health of Democracy Surveys (NDHDS) is a project of the Democracy Initiative at the University of Notre Dame. The Spring 2025 survey was fielded between April 14 and May 12, 2025, by NORC AmeriSpeak. For more information, see Hall and Campbell 2025.

In addition to the batteries for trans policy, democratic support, and right-wing authoritarianism described in the text, we employed or created the following additional variables from the NDHDS:

LGBQ

0. Heterosexual/Straight
1. LGBQ+: Respondents who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, pansexual, A-spec, Ace, Asexual, or autosexual

TRANSID

Question: Do you identify as transgender?

0. No
1. Yes

TRANSNOW

Question: Among your immediate family members, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, or close friends, are any of them transgender as far as you know?

0. No
1. Yes

ATTEND_final

Question: How often do you attend religious services?

1. Never
2. Less than once a year
3. About once or twice a year
4. Several times a year
5. About once a month
6. 2–3 times a month
7. Nearly every week
8. At least once a week or more

AGE_4

Age in four categories.

1. 18–29
2. 30–44
3. 45–59
4. 60+

Female

0. Male
1. Female

Race/ethnicity

Variable description: combined race/ethnicity.

Response options:

1. White, non-Hispanic
2. Black, non-Hispanic
3. Hispanic
4. Asian-Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic
5. Other, non-Hispanic and 2+, non-Hispanic

EDUC

Response options:

1. Less than HS
2. HS graduate or equivalent
3. Some college/associates degree
4. Bachelor's degree
5. Post grad study/professional degree

Ideology

Response options:

1. Very liberal
2. Somewhat liberal
3. Moderate
4. Somewhat conservative
5. Very conservative

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