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Transgender Activists Question the Movement's Confrontational Approach

Jeremy W. Peters

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Facing diminishing public support, some activists say all-or-nothing tactics are not working. “We have to make it OK for someone to change their minds.”





Rodrigo Heng-Lehtinen, executive director of Advocates for Transgender Equality, said activists should see benefits in treating skeptics less like enemies and more like future allies. Credit...Greg Kahn for The New York Times

[Jeremy W. Peters](#)

Jeremy Peters has written about the evolution of the L.G.B.T.Q. movement for more than a decade.

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To get on the wrong side of transgender activists is often to endure their unsparing criticism.

After a Democratic congressman defended parents who expressed concern about transgender athletes competing against their young daughters, a local party official and ally [compared](#) him to a Nazi “cooperator” and a group called “Neighbors Against Hate” [organized](#) a protest outside his office.

When J.K. Rowling [said](#) that denying any relationship between sex and biology was “deeply misogynistic and regressive,” a prominent

L.G.B.T.Q. group [accused](#) her of betraying “real feminism.” A few angry critics posted videos of themselves burning her books.

When the Biden administration convened a call with L.G.B.T.Q. allies last year to discuss new [limits](#) on the participation of transgender student athletes, one activist fumed on the call that the administration would be complicit in “genocide” of transgender youth, according to two people with knowledge of the incident.

Now, some activists say it is time to rethink and recalibrate their confrontational ways, and are pushing back against the more all-or-nothing voices in their coalition.

“We have to make it OK for someone to change their minds,” said Rodrigo Heng-Lehtinen, executive director of Advocates for Transgender Equality. “We cannot vilify them for not being on our side. No one wants to join that team.”

They cite tactics, especially on social media, that became routine for devoted backers of the movement: Attempts to police language, such as excising the words “male” and “female” from discussions of pregnancy and abortion; decrying the misidentification of a transgender person as violence; insisting that everyone declare whether they prefer to be referred to as he, she or other pronouns.

Some L.G.B.T.Q. activists have put pressure on liberal candidates for office to take positions that align with theirs — which can backfire. Republicans pummeled Vice President Kamala Harris in ads this year over the answers she gave on a 2019 [questionnaire](#) from the American Civil Liberties Union, one of the groups that has been active in the transgender cause. The questionnaire asked Ms. Harris to commit to ensuring that transgender people in

federal custody, “including those in prison and immigration detention,” could receive gender-transition surgery.

Mr. Heng-Lehtinen, 38, who grew up in a prominent Republican family in Florida and came out to them as transgender after college, said that as painful as Mr. Trump’s election may be for transgender people, their movement should see the benefit in treating skeptics less like enemies and more like future allies.

“No one wants to feel stupid or condescended to,” Mr. Heng-Lehtinen said.

Image



Demonstrators marched in Austin, Texas, in 2022 to protest statements made by Gov. Greg Abbott equating transition care for minors with child abuse. Credit...Christopher Lee for The New York Times

This soul-searching comes at a time when Democrats are [engaging](#) in a broader [discussion](#) of how their efforts to advance social and racial justice in recent years may have appeared to be too judgmental and helped contribute to the perception that their party had lost its understanding of the problems Americans want politicians to prioritize.

Republicans spent tens of millions of dollars on ads that accused Democrats of “wokeness” and capitalized on the unfamiliarity most Americans have with transgender people’s lives, using hyperbole and distortions that often created false impressions of schoolhouse indoctrination and locker rooms full of predators.

L.G.B.T.Q. activists are confronting a political landscape that has grown more hostile. More than two dozen states now limit access to transition medical treatment. Last week, House Republicans [vowed](#) to bar transgender women from using women’s restrooms in the Capitol, a not-so-subtle affront to Sarah McBride of Delaware, who this month became the first transgender person elected to Congress.

Ms. McBride — who [has insisted](#) that she is a voice for all her constituents, and “not a spokesperson for a movement” — said that she would follow House rules even if she disagreed with them.

It is that kind of targeting from conservatives — which transgender people say is deeply personal and far too common — that makes many activists wary of relying on a gentler, more traditional political approach. Some of them saw avoidance in Ms. McBride’s matter-of-fact response, and accused her of capitulating to the right.

If they seem impatient, activists say, it is because they are.

“What we’re facing is fundamental unfairness — and that is not

coming from people who are interested in compromise and open debate,” said Gillian Branstetter, a communications strategist with the American Civil Liberties Union who works on transgender advocacy. “These are people who are threatened by trans people’s very existence. And, more importantly, they’re trying to scapegoat us.”

The A.C.L.U. noted in a statement, for instance, that its 2019 questionnaire asked 19 questions on a range of subjects because voters needed to be able to “draw meaningful policy distinctions among the crowded field.”

Democrats are experiencing their own disillusionment with the national conversation over transgender rights, a debate that they say can sound dogmatic and intolerant.

“Here we are calling Republicans weird, and we’re the party that makes people put pronouns in their email signature,” said Representative Seth Moulton of Massachusetts, a Democrat who [ignited fury](#) and protests at his office after he expressed concern that transgender athletes could have an unfair advantage or hurt other athletes.

Even so, he added, Democrats — and most Americans, for that matter — still want to protect transgender people from discrimination.

“Having reasonable restrictions for safety and competitive fairness in sports seems like, well, it’s very empirically a majority opinion,” Mr. Moulton said. “But should we take civil rights away from trans people, so they can just get fired for being who they are? No.”

Transgender rights were not top of mind for most voters on Election Day. According to [Gallup](#), voters who were asked how

important each of 22 national issues were in their voting decisions ranked transgender rights lowest.

The public does not appear to be growing more empathetic to the transgender cause. [Fewer](#) Americans today than two years ago say they support some of the rights that L.G.B.T.Q. activists have pushed for, like allowing children to undergo gender transition treatment, according to the Public Religion Research Institute. And [multiple](#) recent [polls](#) have found that a considerable majority of Americans believe advocacy for transgender rights has gone “too far.”

This trend pains many longtime L.G.B.T.Q. activists, many of whom worked on the decades-long campaign to win widespread acceptance for gay and lesbian people.

In interviews, some activists stressed that it was important to see the big picture: The L.G.B.T.Q. movement is working through a difficult pivot, trying to apply lessons from the same-sex marriage campaign to the newer fight for transgender equality.

Image





Evan Wolfson, founder of Freedom to Marry.Credit...Greg Kahn for The New York Times

Evan Wolfson, founder of the pro-same-sex marriage group Freedom to Marry, said he and other activists learned that a key to victory in the long term was accepting small, less rewarding gains at first, like civil unions.

“We always said, ‘We’re not going to ask for civil unions. But we’ll take it as a mechanism to move people along’,” Mr. Wolfson said.

He received criticism from all sides, with some gay rights activists dismissing civil unions as empty half-measures and many Democrats blaming electoral losses on the perception that the party was pushing same-sex marriage on a reluctant country.

Eventually, the debate over legalizing civil unions in the 1990s evolved into dialogue over full marriage rights by the 2000s,

culminating in the next decade with the Supreme Court [decision establishing](#) same-sex marriage as a constitutional right.

The discussion about transgender rights is “still a relatively new one — and a growing one,” Mr. Wolfson said. “That conversation takes time.”

Mara Keisling, an activist who founded the National Center for Transgender Equality in 2002, remembered an adage she used 20 years ago about legislative priorities: “You can’t say ‘Don’t fire them’ until you can say ‘Don’t kill them’” — meaning that advocates should focus first on measures that reinforced the fundamental humanity of transgender people, such as hate-crime protections. Then, she said, you can push more effectively for laws about discrimination.

Ms. Keisling said too many activists today are distracted by counterproductive debates — boycotting Ms. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, for example, and insisting that there are no reasonable objections to allowing transgender women into high-level sports.

Ms. Keisling noted that L.G.B.T.Q. activists lost credibility with many Americans once they started accusing people of bigotry over sports.

“We looked unreasonable,” she said. “We should be talking about the 7-year-old who just wants to play soccer with her friends.”

(Ms. Keisling insists she is hardly naïve about the animosity from the right; it has been directed at her personally. Her image was used in one of the Trump campaign ads that attacked Democrats over transgender rights this year.)

Mr. Heng-Lehtinen of Advocates for Transgender Equality said he agreed that the movement needed a more persuasive message on sports. School districts and athletics associations, he said, have long been dealing with the issue of transgender athletes. The matter should be left to them, and not to the whims of Republican legislators, he added.

Image



Lia Thomas, a transgender athlete at the University of Pennsylvania, swims in a meet against Harvard.Credit...M. Scott Brauer for The New York Times

“I don’t think we are best served by imposing a one-size-fits-all solution,” he said, adding that “sweeping and crude” bans on transgender athletes are just that.

Advocates said their research had found that the most effective messaging takes into account that most Americans do not know a lot about life as a transgender person, and reinforces the basic

idea that transgender people want what everyone else wants: fairness, respect and love.

“It is our job to break the misinformation down and to say compassionately, ‘It’s perfectly understandable that you have questions,’” Mr. Heng-Lehtinen said.

Put more directly, he added, “That’s not yelling at someone.”

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