

Redesigning the Political Science Curriculum to Incorporate LGBTQ+ Issues

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ABSTRACT


Political science educators have a responsibility to design their programs in a way that incorporates content that involves and engages underserved populations. In recent polls, a significant majority of Generation Z identified as LGBTQ+, representing a percentage that is larger than those who identify as African American or Hispanic (Jones 2024; Public Religion Research Institute 2024). Implementing changes in mainline political science courses (e.g., introduction to American national government, the presidency, and comparative politics) will allow the discipline to better serve LGBTQ+ students. Ample examples involving LGBTQ+-themed content provide instruction in a wide battery of political science courses. Pivoting into a more supportive pedagogy may be a successful strategy for addressing the oncoming “population cliff” (i.e., a projected decline in college enrollment) that will impact the number of students beginning college in the future. Whereas the process will require substantial investment in energy to initiate, an updated approach to teaching political science courses will reap dividends in terms of student interest, engagement with course material, and LGBTQ+ representation in the profession.

Political science courses are a pathway by which LGBTQ+ students can learn about their history, political challenges and successes, and their place in the struggle for civil rights. More than 40 years have passed since the release of Sherrill and Vogler’s (1982) first American national government textbook to incorporate queer-themed photography as well as to explicitly discuss LGBTQ+ issues (e.g., the gay liberation movement). In the intervening years, the mainline political science curriculum has not offered students serious consideration of LGBTQ+ issues. The benefits of bringing LGBTQ+-themed content to political science courses are many, whether incorporating material that is personally relevant to students, providing greater breadth of discussion of relevant populations in the political science curricula, or normalizing queer issues to a wider audience.

Redesigning political science programs to consider queer issues also will benefit departments. Making these changes may

contribute to increased course enrollment and students progressing through the major. Preparing students can contribute to greater queer representation in academia and governmental institutions. Although LGBTQ+ representation in Congress has never been greater—the 118th Congress touted 15 out members—it lags behind those members who identify as such (Jones 2024; Schaeffer 2023). Pedagogical research in political science has not explored the degree to which LGBTQ+ education comprises course content in core and elective courses and scholars have not proposed a typology of queer-themed topics to be offered.

This article provides instruction for how to navigate issues that instructors may confront, including textbooks that lack deep engagement with marginalized groups and institutional content requirements that limit them from engaging with LGBTQ+ content (Brandle 2020). Qualitative examples of LGBTQ+-themed lecture topics, readings, and assignments from my undergraduate political science courses are presented. Case studies of mainline courses—American national government, the presidency, and comparative politics—provide the framework for holistic inclusion of LGBTQ+ content in lower- and upper-level offerings.

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BENEFITS TO LGBTQ+ STUDENTS

Incorporating LGBTQ+-centric topics and discussion into mainline political science courses will better serve LGBTQ+ students. Although LGBTQ+ collegiate completion rates are similar to the

the same equality under the law as other populations (Engel 2016). Increasing the presence of queer themes in political science pedagogy will contribute to addressing the gap of LGBTQ+ faculty representation in the discipline (Campbell 2019; Reid and Curry

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average for their institutions, queer students are bullied to a greater degree and report higher levels of mental health crises than non-LGBTQ+ students (Williams Institute 2022). The

2019) while also moving toward a more proactive allyship (De Souza and Schmader 2024). Modifying lesson plans in political science courses to highlight substantially more LGBTQ+

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inclusion of personally relevant material will increase LGBTQ+ student interest in courses and their overall well-being (Harackiewicz, Smith, and Priniski 2016). Bolstering queer students' sense of belonging is associated with greater collegiate completion rates (Renn 2022). Students are more engaged with material that involves their personal interest in the short term, which can be transformed into long-term interest in the topic (Reber, Canning, and Harackiewicz 2018).

Of those people in Generation Z, 20% identified in a recent poll as LGBTQ+ (Public Religion Research Institute 2024), which represents a percentage comparable to racial and ethnic minority populations in the United States. The degree to which high school and college-age students identify as LGBTQ+ is greater than in previous generations, which represents a major change in those who will enroll in political science courses.

BENEFITS TO POLITICAL SCIENCE

Presenting substantially more LGBTQ+-themed content in political science courses is a step that faculty members can implement to address department representation concerns and stagnant enrollment numbers (Sinclair-Chapman 2015). The enrollment cliff is likely to exacerbate this downward trend in students majoring in political science in the next decade (Bauman 2024; Copley and Douthett 2020).

Standardization of content among sections may be required by department chairs—conditions that could make it difficult to incorporate LGBTQ+ themes into their courses. Scholars in political science pedagogy indicate that a substantive course-content redesign is necessary to modify the curriculum so that the major is more compelling to underserved populations (Atchison 2013; Ishiyama 2023). Completing institutional and program requirements while also modifying courses is possible.

Political science has been criticized for not adequately representing historically disempowered populations (Beckwick 2015; Josephson and Marques 2017; Novkov and Barclay 2010). LGBTQ+ Americans are fragmented citizens—that is, not yet achieving

content would address current enrollment trends and more effectively serve a historically underserved student population.

TEACHING LGBTQ+ COURSE CONTENT GENERALLY

In an era when the number of students enrolled in political science programs and the number of higher-education institutions offering political science degrees have decreased, it is essential to revisit how courses are taught and the content included in them (Ishiyama 2022; Smith and McConaughy 2021). Designing courses for a specific population is not a novel idea. An introductory course in law goes beyond how court cases and legal subfields work to discuss matters such as professional ethics and occupational opportunities available to students when they complete the program. There are ample situations for queer issues to be included holistically in political science course content while also achieving competency in educational standards. A lesson about how LGBTQ+ rights were impacted by the US Supreme Court during the preceding 40 years provides space for discussions about the abilities of interest groups to influence the judiciary, and even provides an opportunity for students in other disciplines to contribute meaningfully using viewpoints from their major.

Establishing how the attitude of the US Supreme Court toward LGBTQ+ rights has changed from the *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986) decision to recent cases such as *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado* (2018) and *Bostock v. Clayton County* (2020) highlights the role of individual judges in the Court's output (Ball 2017; Eskridge 2009). Matters of federalism and the separation of powers can be discussed when studying the *Windsor v. United States* (2013) case, state legislatures passing Defense of Marriage Acts, and the legalization of gay marriage in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) (Ball 2019). In my American constitutional law course, I require students to prepare a case brief and a verbal presentation about a US Supreme Court case decided after Epstein, McGuire, and Walker's *Constitutional Law for a Changing America* textbook was published. Because students can choose from these cases, those interested in LGBTQ+ topics could focus their research on

decisions such as *303 Creative LLC v. Elenis* (2023) and *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia* (2021).

The patchwork of sodomy laws existing before *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) is relevant for students to understand how legislation differs among states, including knowledge about current issues such as updating gender on official documents, nondiscrimination statutes in labor laws, conversion-therapy bans, and family-leave regulations (Eskridge 2008).

Historically, people who had same-sex sexual activity were not eligible to donate blood; however, the Food and Drug Administration updated its practice guidelines in late 2023. Reviewing this new rule would assist instructors in redesigning their lessons about the hierarchical designs of bureaucracies. This would highlight the actions taken by the Human Rights Campaign to call its membership into action or to indicate how governmental regulations had changed incrementally since the original guidance was released during the height of the AIDS epidemic. Creating a lesson that describes the different steps by which proposed changes to a rule were offered, the open-comment period required by law, and the procedures that allowed for changing this rule would be beneficial for students.

Discussing the cross-cutting cleavages that define citizens may provide LGBTQ+ students with a better understanding of the complexity of attitudes involved when they view current events (Bergersen, Klar, and Schmitt 2018). Incorporating a documentary about Bayard Rustin (i.e., an American political activist and prominent leader in social movements) with discussions of the ideological argument between the abolitionists and suffragettes preceding the Civil War would further highlight the complexity of identity (Coates 2016). The “ideological separation” from the white-led feminist movement proposed in the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) provides a historical example that can be compared to the “identity groups for Harris” meetings during the 2024 presidential campaign. Modules focusing on national defense can include discussions of Richard Grennell and Christine Abizaid (i.e., Acting Director of National Intelligence and Director of the National Counterterrorism Center under the Biden administration, respectively) to examine conceptions of safety (Nagel 2019).

Introductory law textbooks include a section about probate law but do not provide much discussion about the nuances impacting LGBTQ+ individuals and their ability to claim inheritances and to be given equal treatment in rental agreements (Ball 2010). Labor-law sections discuss employee protections generally; however, incorporating readings that address how transgender employment protections would provide a deep analysis of the interaction between federal workplace legislation and state laws concerning the workforce. In areas where outward LGBTQ+ behavior may be perceived negatively, students may not feel comfortable in seeking information about issues relevant to them. In addition to acting as subject-matter educators, political science instructors have a responsibility to provide skills in understanding matters of judicial and bureaucratic jurisdiction for their students.

CASE STUDIES

This section presents case studies of a lower-level introductory American national government course and two upper-level elective courses on the presidency and comparative politics. LGBTQ+-themed topics, readings, and assignments were incorporated throughout each course.¹

American National Government

American national government is an introductory-level course that is required for political science students as well as those majoring in justice studies and social work at Southern Arkansas University.² LGBTQ+-themed content is used in many sections of American national government, from federalism to civil rights, bureaucratic procedure, and the judiciary.³ The decision rendered in *Bostock v. Clayton County* (2020) is useful in several pedagogical situations: understanding the status quo existing before the US Supreme Court decision in the case, the LGBTQ+ rights guaranteed in the 1964 Civil Rights Act, how the majority opinion of the justices came to their conclusion, and what Justices Samuel Alito and Brett Kavanaugh claimed in their dissents (Pierceson 2022). The Human Rights Campaign’s Congressional Scorecard is an example of how citizen-based interest groups attempt to mobilize their members.⁴ During the Congress module, the class discusses party control of the chambers as well as the role of caucuses, with the LGBT Equality Caucus included with other competing meetings.

Political socialization is a major topic in the American national government course. In this module, the class explores political-identity formation. Events such as the dismissal of lesbians from the National Organization for Women are explained through the upbringing and socialization of leaders like Betty Friedan (Brownworth 2023). Students discuss current events (e.g., the 2022 *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* decision and the “fight for \$15”) and are asked to reflect about which parts of their identity influence their feelings about each topic. Students often indicate that they have conflicting feelings, which enables them to discuss matters of cross-cutting cleavages.

The differing legal statuses of LGBTQ+ populations concerning matters—such as the legality of the “gay-panic defense” (i.e., homosexual-advance defense), age requirements for gender-affirmation surgery, and how responsive states are in updating government documents after a name change—highlight how states may adopt policies similar to those of their “ideological neighbors” (Mallinson 2021). Delving into the 2024 rule that expands the gender-identity and sexual-orientation protections in Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act and the Biden administration’s Title IX regulation prompts discussion about the bureaucratic process and rulemaking (Dawson et al. 2024).

Students learn about comparative politics analysis during a writing-intensive assignment, in which they contrast the civil rights struggle of two or more historically underserved groups discussed in class, including women, Native Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, LGBTQ+ Americans, and Asian Americans. Similar results are observed whether the assignment is carried out in-class, as a homework assignment, or as an exam prompt; that is, LGBTQ+ Americans are written about more frequently in this assignment.

Students are required to complete a research paper on a topic of their choosing and how it has been influenced by players relevant to American national government. Although students can choose their own topic, the initial assignment proposal lists numerous suggestions specifically concerning queer topics (e.g., LGBTQ+ politics) or that could be expanded (e.g., 2024 presidential nominees, civil rights policies, and major policies of the Trump and Biden presidencies). As students submit their initial proposal and a rough draft of their term paper, I provide targeted feedback identifying additional relevant information to include in subsequent iterations.⁵

Table 1

Percentages of LGBTQ-Themed Final Papers Submitted in American National Government Courses, 2022–2023 and 2023–2024

Semester	% LGBTQ+ Papers	# Submissions
Fall 2022	12.1	33
Spring 2023	7.4	27
Fall 2023	8.0	50
Spring 2024	12.9	31

Students in the American national government course frequently choose to focus on LGBTQ+ politics for their final paper. Based on 141 submissions collected from seven sections during the 2022–2023 and the 2023–2024 school years, LGBTQ+-themed final papers were submitted 9.9% of the time. The only other topics observed more frequently were the Second Amendment (11.1%) and abortion policy (13.0%) (table 1) (McQuiston 2025).

The Presidency

The presidency is an upper-division course in the political science department.⁶ It is open to all undergraduates who have completed the American national government course. How the office changes over time is discussed throughout the entirety of the presidency course. Facilitating student knowledge about the president's authority to issue Executive Orders (EOs) can be achieved by discussing EO 10450. The dismissal of LGBTQ+ bureaucrats based on their "sexual perversion" via EO 10450's grant of greater investigative and firing powers to bureaucratic heads can be compared to the long-term exclusion of queer populations from more prestigious offices in the American governmental bureaucracy (Larson 2022).

Discussions about how the administration engages with LGBTQ+ stakeholders, considers LGBTQ+ issues in the hiring and organizational environment of federal employees, and incorporates queer individuals in high-authority positions present students with evidence that the institution has transformed over time. Students compare and contrast EO 10450 with Biden-era EO 13988, which instituted protections for federal LGBTQ+ employees.

The role of the president in responding to emergencies is another module in the presidency course. In this section, students discuss how the presidency has a disproportionate ability to shape the American response to crises through executive actions and the messaging that is coordinated by the White House Office of Public and Media Affairs (Biden 2022; United Nations Human Rights Council 2022). The Reagan administration's negative response to the early stages of the AIDS crisis is illustrative for understanding the slow response of the United States in responding to the virus compared to other developed democracies (Richert 2009). The glacial response to the AIDS epidemic parallels the quicker response by the Biden administration to the 2022–23 monkeypox outbreak.

Students analyze how executive decisions are portrayed in mass media outlets, whether the president's policy decisions or how individuals such as Dr. Rachel Levine—the highest-ranking, out transgender person ever to serve in the federal government—are portrayed. Understanding Bill Clinton's role as commander-in-chief in establishing the US military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell"

program is relevant to discussions of the Democratic Party's rightward shift in the 1990s; Barack Obama's 2011 revocation of the program demonstrates how the party's coalition changed in the intervening years. The varying support of the White House regarding transgender bathroom protections in recent presidential administrations also can be analyzed (Lieberman et al. 2019). Sessions that explore how individual-level qualities of presidential candidates influence voters' decisions can address Pete Buttigieg's 2020 primary campaign (Magni and Reynolds 2024).

Comparative Politics

Comparative politics is an upper-division course in political science for students who have passed the American national government course. When exploring the popularity of far-right movements in European countries, students examine how marginalized communities (e.g., LGBTQ+ citizens and immigrant populations) were portrayed as an outgroup by political leaders.⁷ Data-quality issues are explored extensively; the students' critical-analysis skills are tested when they compare quantitative data (e.g., AIDS incidence and crimes against LGBTQ+ individuals) provided in an official capacity to independent data collection conducted by foreign and transnational institutions.

Legal bans against homosexual activity in other countries are compared to explore how recently the act was criminalized, the severity of the punishment, and how frequently the law is applied. Discussing how sexual orientation and gender identity have been weaponized by political parties to promote "traditional values" highlights a tactic observed frequently across case studies (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024). The role of the mass media outlets in influencing citizens' attitudes is discussed throughout these case studies; how they portray LGBTQ+ individuals influences electoral tactics and the policies initiated by local politicians (Ayoub and Garretson 2017).

Discussions concerning the reasons why LGBTQ+-related data are infrequently collected by a country's authorities use theoretical readings about state capacity. The case studies chosen for comparative politics allow students to learn about examples such as the Indonesian Buginese (i.e., an Austronesian ethnic group), who conceptualize multiple genders beyond male and female. Adapting cases such as Thailand into comparative politics allows students to compare how other countries statutorily approach alternatives to the male/female dichotomy as well as how they establish laws concerning matters including sex tourism. In the module about immigration and displaced persons, the focus is on LGBTQ+ people, who comprise a greater proportion than their population demographic indicates (Gorman-Murray, Mckinnon, and Dominey-Howes 2014; United Nations Human Rights Council 2022).

For their capstone project, students choose a country not covered extensively in class and deliver a lecture about their case. Required parts of the presentation include the design of governance institutions, treatment of minority populations, and contemporary political issues. A term-paper assignment asks students to compare how a few countries approach a specific policy, based on their own choice. Instructions for the initial proposal are similar to those provided in the American national government course including a sample of policy areas from which to choose.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although these case studies encompass courses that frequently are offered in political science departments, the courses described in

this article do not comprise the entirety of the major's coursework. Exploring how LGBTQ+ content can be used in the political theory or international relations subfields would enable the discipline to better address Brandle's (2020) concerns. These case studies describe an instructor teaching undergraduate courses at a singular institution. Additional observations, such as establishing

increase the number of political science programs in the era of the enrollment cliff. An increase in the prominence of LGBTQ+ materials in political science coursework may inspire subsequent generations of scholars to address gaps that exist in the discipline, contributing to more LGBTQ+ faculty members in political science departments (Ayoub 2022). LGBTQ+ examples and viewpoints

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a survey instrument that polls members of the discipline, would increase knowledge about how LGBTQ+-themed course content changes over time. This survey would allow researchers to test whether the amount of this content presented in higher education varies when factors including a supportive state legislature, the rural or urban placement of the institution, university size, and departmental composition are considered.

CONCLUSION

Increasing the presence of LGBTQ+ facts, viewpoints, and topics in mainline political science courses provides benefits for students. Adopting more LGBTQ+-focused content provides them with knowledge that they otherwise may not possess.⁸ Modifying existing lesson plans to establish more LGBTQ+-themed content in required and elective courses is another way to reach traditionally underserved populations. Including this material alongside commonly taught examples at the subject and course levels fosters greater student understanding and can increase student engagement in political science courses.

Students have been receptive to the LGBTQ+-intensive approach, with post-semester evaluations indicating that they appreciate the class discussions. A frequent comment is that they learned information that was not presented during their high school government classes. Many students come into the introductory American politics course presuming that LGBTQ+ rights are a "solved issue," and they are astonished when they learn that the struggle for equality is ongoing. There have been situations in which students indicated during class discussions that the LGBTQ+ movement was an ongoing civil rights struggle similar to those with which they personally were familiar. Student evaluation ratings have been high for these courses, with the average score consistently higher than that of the department as a whole.

Continuing to incorporate LGBTQ+ examples in political science courses will normalize queer concerns for non-LGBTQ+ students, which may lead to greater allyship and a decrease in the frequency of negative actions that LGBTQ+ populations experience (Dessel, Goodman, and Woodford 2017). Providing LGBTQ+-themed knowledge in political science courses increases the potential that students will become interested in that topic. A fraction of today's undergraduates will become tomorrow's graduate students, and others will be hired for positions that will benefit from political science knowledge (e.g., social studies educators, government employees, and non-profit workers).

In addition to these benefits to students, redesigning coursework to provide a greater voice about LGBTQ+ concerns will be advantageous to higher education. Modernizing political science courses to better integrate LGBTQ+ topics is a tactic that may

should be incorporated transformatively throughout political science courses rather than compartmentalizing the topics into a unit.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S104909652500023X>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ZWLBG8>.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. For a greater selection of theory-based political science articles, see Brettschneider, Burgess, and Keating (2017).
2. American national government class sizes at Southern Arkansas University range from 40 to 150 students. For larger classes, instructors could modify the assignment to an essay or a short paper about a LGBTQ+ political figure or interest group.
3. A list of LGBTQ+-themed articles and videos assigned for political science courses (i.e., American national government, the presidency, and comparative politics) is available in the *PS: Political Science & Politics* version of the article.
4. See www.hrc.org/resources/congressional-scorecard.
5. For instructors teaching large classes, I recommend offering this assignment in an essay or short-paper format. Alternatively, small groups could present information on LGBTQ+ topics (e.g., positions of presidential candidates, relevant congressional legislation, and queer interest groups) to the class.
6. This course is cross-listed as an upper-level history course. A number of the resources used in this course focus on specific presidencies and exceed the five-to-10 year rule-of-thumb for "freshness."
7. See Türk's (2023) article about the creation of an ingroup/outgroup in Türkiye to bolster the Erdoğan regime.
8. Current state educational program policies may not provide time for LGBTQ+ topics or outright ban them from being discussed in the classroom.

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