

United States and beyond: Trump, the right, and the broader anti-trans reaction

The material roots of scapegoating

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Following Donald Trump's reelection and reactionary executive orders Eric Maroney discusses the material basis of right's anti-trans appeals.

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In the wake of Donald Trump's recent electoral victory, some Democratic pundits and party elites appear eager to distance themselves from the issue of transgender rights, while others have withdrawn their support for these rights altogether. Following the election, Tom Suozzi, a congressman from New York's third district, and [Seth Moulton](#), a congressman from Massachusetts's sixth district, spoke with the [New York Times](#) about the party's appeal among moderate and independent voters. Suozzi cautioned Democrats against "pandering to the far left," arguing that the party should oppose the idea that "biological boys should be playing in girls' sports." Moulton, more selective in his language, stated, "I have two little girls; I don't want them getting run over on a playing field by a male or formerly male athlete, but as a Democrat, I'm supposed to be afraid to say that."

Suozzi and Moulton are not alone in their calls for the party to distance itself from transgender rights. Writing for *The Nation*, [Sydney Bauer](#) documents several party affiliates who are coming to similar conclusions, and both Democrats and Republicans supported the recent National Defense Authorization Act, despite what LGBTQ rights advocates identify as an anti-trans healthcare provision (Sec 708) targeting the children of military service members. Even trans political leaders have shown an unwillingness to defend trans rights. In response to a resolution banning trans people from the use of sex-segregated facilities on Capitol Hill, incoming congressperson [Sarah McBride](#), the first openly trans person to serve in Congress has said she intends to "follow the rules as outlined by Speaker Johnson, even if [she] disagree[s] with them."

As many on the [Left have noted](#), the Democratic Party is a fair-weather friend, offering support for trans rights only when the political winds allow. However, calls for political independence without an analysis of the right's anti-trans appeals do little to seed the ground for that independence. It is evident that Trump and the MAGAtized Republican Party have taken advantage of voters' anxieties and created a sense of panic surrounding transgender issues. However, what remains less clear are the reasons why these appeals resonate with certain voters, what drives this particular political reaction, and how the Left can effectively respond.

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To be clear, the stakes are high. Just hours into his second presidency, Trump issued an executive order declaring that the federal government will recognize only two genders, which are immutable and biologically determined. The Kafkaesque order, titled [“Defending Women From Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government.”](#) will have significant implications if enforced. Trans journalist Erin Reed [described the issuance](#) as a “... far-reaching order [that] impacts nearly every aspect of transgender lives, from federal identification to education, healthcare, and workplace protections.” As shockingly reactionary as the order is, Trump’s exploitation of the anti-trans turn has been long in the making.

In perhaps its most grotesque form, the MAGA anti-trans reaction can be illustrated by a series of anti-trans attack ads directed at presidential opponent Kamala Harris during the final months of the election. The ads, which ended with the line “Harris is for They/Them; Trump is for you,” sought to cast Democrats as out of touch with working-class people. Writing for Tempest Magazine, Ashley Smith [describes](#) the ads as a “toxic mixture of resentment” which cost the Trump campaign over [215 million dollars](#) “[and] spoke to popular grievances of small business owners, contractors, and sections of the working class against the establishment...” Although they make up less than one percent of the total U.S. population, anxiety about transgender individuals was effectively mobilized to sway the election in Trump’s favor. The ads, which targeted trans-feminine individuals in particular, also drew on concerns related to healthcare, immigration, and employment. These anxieties certainly help to sustain the anti-trans animus as trans issues have become a repository for generalized social, economic, and imperial insecurities. While there is no single reason for the success of the right’s anti-trans appeals, examining some of their material bases can better prepare the Left to respond.

Healthcare

The murder of United Healthcare CEO Brian Thompson and the subsequent outpouring of support for suspect Luigi Mangione has demonstrated the profound popular [disdain for the U.S. healthcare system](#). According to the [National Center for Health Statistics](#), 8.2 percent or 27.1 million people were uninsured in 2024. For those who are insured, increased deductibles and other out-of-pocket expenses have meant that fewer people are seeking necessary care. A 2022 study by the [Commonwealth Fund](#) found that “Forty-six percent of respondents...skipped or delayed care because of the cost, and 42 percent said they had problems paying medical bills or were paying off medical debt.” In the post-pandemic world, this figure is even more striking. As of 2023, eight percent of U.S. residents remained uninsured and the number of [uninsured children](#) rose from 3.8 million in 2022 to 4.0 million in 2023.

The right’s anti-trans politics feeds from social precarity and access to healthcare is one measurement of that precarity. While the outpouring of support for Magione illustrates a general contempt for the healthcare system across the political spectrum, Trump’s attack ads, which claimed that Harris supported “tax-payer funded healthcare for transgender inmates,” successfully mobilized

that contempt in another direction. Writing for the conservative UK-based Times, [Hugh Tomlinson notes](#) the “ad tied cultural policy to discontent over crime and the Democrats’ handling of the economy.” Tomilson’s observation marks the way that backlash against the Black Lives Matter movement and political reaction to the Democrat’s inability to meaningfully cap inflation became represented by anti-trans animus. I would add that the success of the right’s anti-trans appeals is also an expression of discontent with and distrust of the profit-driven healthcare system and public health officials.

Compare Trump’s use of gender-affirming care to mobilize voters in 2024 to the Democrats’ use of insulin costs to mobilize voters in 2020. In both cases, political leaders offered a target for popular frustration with the privatized healthcare system without implicating the insurance industry as a whole. Following the highly publicized death of twenty-six-year-old Alec Smith whose rationing of insulin led to his passing in 2017, Democrats directed constituents’ grievances toward specific insulin manufacturers and made calls for reform on the pricing of insulin [central to the 2020 campaign cycle](#). Trump’s mishandling of the COVID-19 response, along with growing public health concerns during the pandemic and the strength of the Black Lives Matter movement, pressured Democrats to adopt more progressive campaign messaging. However, the party ultimately failed to advocate for significant healthcare reform. As a result, an important yet incomplete reform has allowed the insurance industry to maintain its profitability by employing tactics such as legal depositions and defending against disproportionately denied claims.

The right has mobilized that same anger and distrust for the insurance industry toward transgender people. The notion that a small number of “woke coastal elites” have access to specialized gender-affirming healthcare while 15 million Americans are saddled with medical debt is foundational to the right’s anti-establishment appeal.

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That trans people in particular and LGBTQ people in general are [more likely to be uninsured](#) and more likely to carry medical debt is erased by the right’s framing. Indeed, even among trans people who are adequately insured, coverage for transition-related procedures is uneven and up until very recent years often not covered at all. This has historically led to an economic stratification among transgender people, with wealthy, often white, trans people able to finance transition-related surgical procedures, while low-income trans people cannot. [Trans scholars](#) and activists have long pointed to the relationship between the medicalization of trans embodiment and the establishment of [neoliberal subjecthood](#); however, the right’s version of this casts all trans people as privileged recipients of Cadillac healthcare. It also ignores the fact that a growing number of cisgender people receive coverage for gender-affirming care including testosterone replacement therapies for aging men.

Among the right, dissatisfaction with health insurance agencies is coupled with an increasing distrust of public health officials, particularly among anti-trans activists. During the COVID-19 shutdowns, the right effectively addressed the economic grievances of workers and small business owners who were unable to pivot to remote work. These concerns were expressed through a series of protests against masks, vaccines, and lockdowns, which reflected both economic anxieties and a

general distrust of public health authorities. This was notably exemplified by the Canadian “Freedom Convoy” and the U.S. “People’s Convoy” which featured independent truckers protesting against restrictive COVID-19 mandates.

The current of [anti-trans sentiment and anti-woke ideology](#) within these protests suggests a connection between the rejection of pandemic health authorities and skepticism toward trans medical experts. In a political climate where common sense often trumps scientific evidence, the right’s skepticism of Dr. Fauci aligns with its dismissal of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH). Although there are valid criticisms of both the COVID-19 response and WPATH practices, engaging in these discussions becomes challenging in a political landscape narratively dominated by the right.

Education

Education is similarly a site of anti-trans reaction. Efforts to frame transgender inclusion as a threat to parents’ rights and traditional values are facilitated through well-funded astroturf groups like Moms for Liberty (M4L). Embedded in a broader anti-woke politic M4L receives [significant funding](#) from the Heritage Foundation and the George Jenkins Foundation, and has close ties with Republican Party leaders and affiliates. M4L organizers have sought to take over local school boards, pass anti-trans ordinances, and advocate for conservative curriculum revisions, most absurdly backing the use of a textbook, [The Making of American History](#), which argues that “slave owners were the worst victims of slavery.”

For right-wing political leaders and their wealthy foundation backers, the anti-trans reaction in schools is certainly tied up with a desire to discipline teachers’ unions and student activism. Speaking on a virtual panel organized by the Tempest Collective, legal scholar [Naomi Murakowa](#) described bans on Critical Race Theory as a reaction to student organizing, “We have seen a wave of protests... over everything from BLM to gun violence, climate change, and queer and trans liberation. So, CRT bans are part of a backlash against BLM, public education, teachers and their unions, and a new generation of activists.” Likewise, *Rethinking Schools* editor [Jesse Hagopian](#) has argued that anti-woke attacks on public education are motivated by a desire to discipline the teaching workforce:

Just as the Red Scare and the Lavender Scare were used to purge teachers, the attacks today on what history deniers have labeled critical race theory and gender ideology are being used to fire educators and exclude any discussion about racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, or any form of oppression.

Both Murakowa and Hagopian make clear that the anti-woke and anti-trans discourses are very much tied to a project to reassert control over public education; however, this observation does not address the reasons why these discourses resonate with layers of ordinary people.

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As with healthcare, the success of the right's anti-trans appeals are, in part, tied to a general distrust of institutions of authority and a reaction to the insufficiency of liberal leadership within state institutions. The gutting of the public sector in the fallout of the Great Recession (2008), placed enormous pressure on public schools and universities as the preeminent state institutions of social reproduction. Schools have always been relied upon to train or retrain the workforce, but this function becomes all the more crucial in a shifting labor market that is increasingly stratified between low-wage service sector employment and specialized technical jobs. In the post-recession political climate which sought to restore profitability through cuts to social spending and attacks on public sector unions, teachers lost a degree of autonomy and curricular control. The Common Core Curriculum was one effort among many to standardize k-12 instruction while also deskilling the teaching force. However, skepticism of the Common Core Curriculum, which had been a policy pursued under the Obama administration, has been expressed by both the Left and the right. The controversial curriculum, largely defended by Democrats, has been criticized for its lack of clarity, overreliance on standardized testing, and federal overreach, laying the foundation for generalized distrust of public education officials.

Almost ten years into the MAGA moment, the right has successfully redirected this preexisting distrust towards "woke" educators and their unions whom it argues are pushing gender ideology on children. Within this framing U.S. education is not falling behind due to lack of funding or an over-reliance on testing, but because "radical leftist" teachers are encouraging students to hate "America" and question gender. Indeed, the [Trump administration](#) has even promised to cut funding to "woke" schools, remove tenure, and expand school vouchers—a financial boon for charter schools and religious schools.

An additional source of the rights anti-trans appeal traces its origins to many parents' frustration with COVID-19 school closures. As schools transitioned to remote learning, [many families struggled](#) to manage increased workloads and balance care-taking responsibilities. For working parents, especially those in essential roles, school closures created childcare crises. Educators, who could work from home, were often criticized as privileged elites who were out of touch with the challenges faced by working parents. Inconsistent policies around school reopenings and conflicting information concerning safety protocols and social distancing sometimes put teachers at odds with families and often led to increased tensions with school board members and policymakers, raising questions about parents' rights and the role of schools in periods of crisis.

This generalized antagonism has also fueled distrust among a layer of conservative-leaning parents, which may be misdirected at their children's teachers. Instead of collaborative fights for mental health services and local democratic curricular control, parents and teachers may find themselves at odds with one another. While the COVID-19 closures are not the cause of the growing anti-trans animus, generalized distrust of public school educators and authorities, made worse by inconsistent policies from the Biden administration on down, has provided fertile terrain for the right's anti-trans appeals.

Economy

Trump's success in pairing anti-trans politics with overtly right-wing criticisms of social spending reflects voters' economic anxieties and frustration with inflation. The Biden administration inherited

runaway inflation which peaked at 9.1 percent in June 2022 and has been unable to deliver meaningful relief to working people and small business owners.

Food prices have risen [28 percent since 2019](#) and according to Moody's Analytics in 2022 estimated inflation cost U.S. households an additional [\\$433 per month](#). While consumer prices have reduced some, many families still struggle to cover basic expenses. Amid this destabilizing terrain, voters' financial anxieties were a [key determinant](#) in the outcome of the 2024 election.

Summarizing the rhetorical power of Trump's "Harris is for They/Them" attack ads, executive director of the right-wing American Principle Project [Terry Schilling](#), offered the following: "We're already struggling enough and... that's what you're funding with our tax dollars? What are your priorities? Not working class families that built this country." As Schilling's comments about the Trump ads indicate, the right has effectively mobilized anger and fear over economic precarity against transgender individuals, whom it casts as undeserving recipients of public welfare. In this framing, the wrong kind of people receive public support while the majority, "real Americans", suffer. It is no coincidence that a nearly identical line of attack is [mobilized against immigrants](#).

Trump is not the first to connect transgender issues with discussions about economic insecurity. In 2020, former Fox News host [Tucker Carlson](#) made a viral statement claiming that "transgender rights" are a "boutique issue" for "wealthy people." By framing trans individuals as either burdensome recipients of public tax dollars or disconnected elites, this perspective serves as one rationale that the MAGA-aligned Republican Party will employ to justify further cuts to public spending.

Imperialism

In a period of reignited imperial rivalries and an [asymmetrical multi-polar order](#), anxiety over U.S. international standing has also been exploited by the anti-trans right. They argue that feminism and gender and sexual diversity are to blame for a crisis of masculinity, causing traditional males to fall behind, and lose their competitive edge. Consequently, they claim that the economic and technological supremacy of the U.S. is at risk because boys are denied access to their natural masculinity. According to figures like Senator [Josh Hawley](#), the solution to the country's social and economic crises is for men to "reclaim their roles as leaders, creators, and heroes." While this proposed remedy may seem ineffective, it nonetheless resonates with many, particularly in the context of declining U.S. hegemony and renewed imperial rivalries.

Right-wing leaders have expressed concern over the declining economic supremacy of the U.S., coupled with worries about the feminization of the military. Pete Hegseth, a Fox News weekend host and Trump's choice for Secretary of Defense, has long argued that ["woke" policies have weakened the U.S. military](#). In his 2024 book, *The War on Warriors*, a New York Times Best Seller, he asserts, "The military has long been a place for turning mere boys into fighting men—not just teaching them honor and sacrifice, but also channeling daring, building strength, and accumulating skills." However, Hegseth claims that permitting openly LGBTQ individuals to serve and allowing women in combat roles have lowered military standards. In an interview with [Meidas News](#), he stated that the U.S. military is now "more interested in social engineering led by this president [Biden] than in war fighting."

Donald Trump has expressed similar beliefs, [tweeting during his first presidency](#) that military "victory cannot be burdened with the tremendous medical costs and disruption that transgender in the military would entail." And on day one of his second presidency, Trump issued an executive order banning transgender people from [serving in the military](#). The logic that animates this

particular form of anti-trans appeal is rooted in a generalized anxiety over the U.S. position in the global order, which aligns with Trump's "America First" rhetoric. The idea is that if boys are raised to be weak men, or worse, if they give up on manhood altogether, the U.S. risks losing its economic and military dominance.

This line of thinking is not without historical precedence. Modern political leaders from [Roosevelt](#) to Mussolini have mobilized [masculinity in service of empire](#). Moreover, China, the U.S.'s main imperial rival has also expressed concern for Chinese masculinity. In 2021, the nation implemented a television [ban on effeminate men](#) and demanded that broadcasters "put an end to sissy men and other abnormal aesthetics."

LGB without the T

In the context of economic uncertainty and geopolitical tensions, anti-trans rhetoric is leveraged to shift focus from the root causes of these challenges, casting transgender rights as emblematic of misplaced priorities. This strategy appeals to those frustrated by economic and institutional failures and redirects their discontent toward cultural issues rather than structural ones. Anti-trans appeals resonate with layers of the U.S. population precisely because there is no alternative to the social and economic crises on offer. Dangerously, these appeals have even drawn in sections of the LGBT community. Organizations like *Gays Against Groomers*, founded by right-wing content creator and January 6 "Stop the Steal" participant Jaimee Mitchel, oppose transgender visibility and argue for the protection of children from the overreach of gender ideology. Likewise, conservative trans celebrities like Caitlyn Jenner and Buck Angel have also voiced criticism of transgender advocates. These voices, though controversial, resonate with audiences who seek validation for their skepticism about progressive trans rights, creating a complex coalition that spans political and social boundaries.

Ultimately, the Left will need to deepen its understanding of trans politics and sharpen its political messaging around trans rights if it hopes to build on these efforts and overcome the Right's anti-trans appeals.

It is important to recognize that there are effective responses to counter anti-trans messaging. For example, Starbucks United workers have linked their unionization efforts to the promotion of workplace dignity and [protection for transgender baristas](#). Likewise, the [2023 SAG-AFTRA strike](#), which secured wage increases and protections concerning the industry's use of AI, featured a trans-takeover [action](#) aimed at highlighting the contributions of transgender and gender-nonconforming writers in the industry. Ultimately, the Left will need to deepen its understanding of trans politics and sharpen its political messaging around trans rights if it hopes to build on these efforts and overcome the Right's anti-trans appeals. A starting point might be advocating for gender-affirming care for everyone, both cis people and trans people, and calling for progressive economic policies that not only reject the scapegoating of trans individuals but also uplift them. Doing so will also allow us to sharply call attention to the root causes of the social and economic crises animating the right-wing attacks more broadly.

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P.S.

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