

United States: In three years, LGBT Americans have gone from triumph to backlash

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The movement for LGBT rights has made stunning progress in recent years. But the latest results of an ongoing poll commissioned by the gay rights organization GLAAD [1], which is releasing the results at the World Economic Forum in Davos today, suggests that just because change has come swiftly doesn't mean it's durable. For the first time since the survey began in 2014, non-LGBT Americans told pollsters that they're less comfortable with their LGBT neighbors. And the number of LGBT survey respondents who told pollsters that they'd experienced discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity jumped by 11 points.

"My first reaction to this was that there's an unseen casualty of a tumultuous year," said John Gerzema, CEO of the Harris Poll, which conducts the study.

Gerzema says the results suggest that Americans are taking advantage of an environment in which it has become more permissible to express discomfort with marginalized groups, even as people don't want to be thought of as bigots. The number of non-LGBT Americans who gave what Gerzema called "the PC response," telling pollsters that they support equal rights for LGBT people, held steady at 79 percent. But the number of respondents who said they would be somewhat or very uncomfortable having LGBT members of their faith communities, learning that a family member was LGBT, having their child taught by an LGBT teacher or study LGBT history in school, finding out that their doctor was LGBT, or even seeing same-sex couples holding hands all ticked upward.

"When it comes to walking the walk of LGBTQ acceptance," Gerzema warned, "it seems like Americans are pulling back."

President Trump's most venomous public statements haven't targeted LGBT Americans. But his policies have, from his selection of Mike Pence as his running mate and Neil Gorsuch as his first Supreme Court nominee to his attempts to ban transgender people from the military. The rollback of LGBT rights may be quiet, but it's still consequential. Even the White House's silence on gay rights — in 2017, Trump declined to continue President Barack Obama's tradition of recognizing June as National LGBT Pride Month [2] — can matter, especially when it means failing to respond to rising homophobia and anti-LGBT violence in countries such as Chechnya, Egypt and Indonesia.

Yet facing off against procedural changes when other Americans have to contend with the president's undisguised animosity "is actually more of a challenge for us, because it keeps it out of the headlines more so than immigration," said GLAAD President and CEO Sarah Kate Ellis. Ellis pointed to the fact that LGBT people and issues made up just 2 percent of the coverage of the 2016 presidential election: "We've been erased from news media coverage because it's turned into Trump TV 24/7."

In response, GLAAD is trying to find a way to tell stories that the media can't find bandwidth for. The organization is working on expanding a documentary short about transgender service members into a feature. Ellis hopes to find more opportunities for GLAAD to fund new projects. Philanthropist Ari Getty is supporting some of that work via a \$15 million grant to GLAAD that she sees as an investment in the future for her children, August and Natalia, both of whom are LGBT, and their friends. She hopes in particular that storytelling can focus as much on the achievements of LGBT youth as on their struggles.

The results also raise challenging questions about one of the LGBT movement's long-term strategies. Part of the argument for individual LGBT people to come out, and for the power of television shows such as "Will & Grace" and "Glee," is the idea that familiarity breeds acceptance. It's easier, the theory goes, to reject a hypothetical gay person than your own child. And even if some Americans don't personally know anyone gay or transgender, pop culture gives them plenty of surrogate sassy gay friends and sympathetic bullied gay kids.

But now, Gerzema noted, 80 percent of non-LGBT Americans say they know someone who is lesbian, gay or bisexual, and 20 percent of Americans know someone transgender. If they know LGBT people and are getting less comfortable with them anyway, we may have reached the end of exposure therapy as a political tactic.

It's not a revelation that progress isn't always permanent. The Supreme Court struck down elements of the 1965 Voting Rights Act in 2013, and efforts ranging from voter ID laws to attempted purges of voter rolls have made it harder for many Americans to cast their ballots [3]. The Americans who integrated city buses, public schools and lunch counters are held up as heroes even as the country has become increasingly segregated once again [4]. But these reversals represent slow declines after major victories. This rising discomfort with LGBT Americans comes just eight years after Obama signed a repeal of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy that kept members of the military closeted and a mere 2½ years after a Supreme Court ruling made marriage equality the law of the land.

Gay rights seemed to arrive quickly, but the GLAAD survey results remind us not to become complacent. A 2015 GLAAD study found that 50 percent of Americans "said that we were done, that we had achieved full rights and acceptance," even as "in 29 states, you can still be fired for being LGBT," Ellis said. "To have a big victory like marriage equality is amazing, but after you celebrate for a day, you have to get back to work and fight to make sure that we have full equality and that we're fully protected. But the real protection comes from acceptance. You can't legislate acceptance. People discriminate."

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P.S.

* The Washington Post, January 25:

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2018/01/25/in-three-years-lgbt-americans-have-gone-from-triumph-to-backlash-blame-trump/?sw_bypass=true&utm

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.glaad.org/publications/accelerating-acceptance-2018>

[2] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/06/27/last-year-june-was-national-pride-month-this-year-it-isnt/?utm_term=.9955165a12eb

[3] https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/plum-line/wp/2018/01/04/trumps-vote-fraud-commission-is-dead-but-the-gop-voter-suppression-effort-is-just-getting-started/?utm_term=.e4e3b012f08e

[4] <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/resegregation-america-ncna801446>