

POPULIST POLITICS AND TRANSGENDER RIGHTS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF TRUMP'S RHETORIC

Dr. Sidra Akram^{*1}, Mehwish Fatima², Sania Shahid³

^{*1}Assistant Professor, National Business School, The University of Faisalabad (TUF),

²Lecturer, Corresponding Author, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Faisalabad (TUF),

³M. Phil Scholar, Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Faisalabad (TUF), 2024-

^{*1}sidraakram.IAS@tuf.edu.pk, ²mehwishfatima.eng@tuf.edu.pk, ³mphil-el017@tuf.edu.pk

Corresponding Author: *

Dr. Sidra Akram

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically analyzes the intersection of populist politics and transgender rights, focusing on Donald Trump's rhetoric and its policy manifestations. Drawing on scholarly definitions of populism as a "thin-centred ideology" and as a political style, the study examines how Trump's discourse constructs an "us vs. them" narrative by scapegoating transgender individuals and invoking themes of "gender ideology" versus "common sense." Trump's rhetoric and actions, from tweets and rally speeches to executive orders like the transgender military ban and restrictions on gender-affirming care, exemplify right-wing populist strategies that target marginalized groups to galvanize a political base. The Methodology outlines a qualitative rhetorical and policy analysis of Trump's public statements and administrative actions. The Analysis details specific policy examples (e.g., the ban on transgender military service, executive orders curtailing transgender healthcare and legal recognition) and shows how Trump's language frames transgender rights as a threat to traditional values and social order. Real-world effects on transgender individuals' access to healthcare, personal safety, mental health, and legal recognition are documented, illustrating the human impact of such populist rhetoric. The paper further explores the broader implications for liberal democracy, pluralism, and scientific knowledge, arguing that Trump's anti-transgender rhetoric is a calculated populist strategy that undermines minority rights, erodes democratic norms of inclusion and expertise, and inflicts tangible harm on a vulnerable community. Empathetic and evidence-based, this analysis emphasizes the moral imperative to protect transgender rights as integral to upholding democratic values and human dignity.

Keywords: Transgender, populist strategies, democratic values, Human Rights.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the United States has experienced a resurgence of populist politics, which has significantly altered its social and political landscape. Populism, widely understood as a political style that pits ordinary people against a perceived corrupt elite, has found fertile ground amid economic woes, cultural conflicts, and widespread distrust of institutions. The political rise of Donald J. Trump is emblematic of this populist wave. Elected in 2016

on a platform of anti-establishment fervor, Trump often presented himself as the voice of the "forgotten men and women" in opposition to elites and political norms (Rowland, 2021). His communicative style, characterized by direct and provocative rhetoric, reinforced his image as an outsider of Washington's political conventions. Transgender rights emerged as a key issue during Trump's presidency. Gender identity inclusion

moved from the political periphery to the center of the national debate. Trump's stance on transgender people evolved markedly (Bucy, Foley, Lukito, Shah, & Pevehouse, 2020). At the start of his 2016 campaign, his comments were vague or even somewhat encouraging. However, upon taking office, and again during his 2024 campaign, his language became openly hostile.

This article examines Trump's rhetoric and policies on the rights of transgender. It analyzes how Trump's political actions have constructed binary narratives (such as "biological truth" versus "sexual ideological extremism") that portray transgender people and their supporters as dangerous "others" who undermine the fabric of American society (Newsletters, 2025). The historical evolution of this rhetoric is traced from Trump's early public outbursts on LGBTQ+ issues to the intensification of anti-transgender rhetoric during and after his presidency. The analysis also delves into the societal and psychological impacts of such rhetoric on the transgender community, including heightened discrimination, mental health risks, and barriers to healthcare and safety (Rummler & Sosin, 2025). Finally, the paper explores broader implications: what Trump's anti-transgender populism means for liberal democracy, pluralistic values, and respect for scientific knowledge in policy-making. In doing so, it seeks to humanize the discussion, recognizing the real lives affected, and to offer moral insight into why the protection of transgender rights is not only a matter of individual dignity but also a bellwether for the health of democratic society (Stoddard, 2025).

1.1 Populism and Anti- "Gender Ideology"

Political scientists define populism as a "thin-centred ideology" that divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps: "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite". Unlike full-fledged ideologies (liberalism, socialism, etc.), populism is considered "thin" because it lacks a comprehensive doctrine of its own; rather, it attaches itself to various host ideologies, providing a Manichean framework of conflict between the righteous masses and nefarious elites (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022). Central to populism is the notion that politics should be the authentic expression of the general will of the people, and populist leaders often claim that they alone represent the true interests of "the people," delegitimizing all opposition as fundamentally

illegitimate or even traitorous (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

Beyond this ideational core, populism also manifests as a distinct rhetorical and stylistic approach. Populist leaders typically favor simple, direct language and sometimes deliberately coarse or "unpolished" expressions, in contrast to the technocratic jargon of establishment politicians. This anti-elitist communication style, often laced with colloquialisms or even vulgarities, is intended to project authenticity and closeness to the "common man" (Unal, 2022). Trump exemplified this approach with his improvised rally speeches, personal insults on social media, and a "tabloid" brashness that flouted presidential norms. Such transgressive rhetoric for instance, mocking political opponents with derogatory nicknames reinforced Trump's outsider persona and his alignment with ordinary people frustrated by elites.

1.2 Anti-Gender Ideology as a Populist Rallying Point

Concurrently with the rise of populism, the last decade has seen the emergence of a powerful transnational movement against what proponents call "gender ideology." Broadly speaking, "anti-gender" movements claim to defend traditional gender roles and family structures against progressive ideas about gender and sexuality (WIRES, 2024). Scholars note that the term "gender ideology" is used as a catch-all pejorative, framing feminism, especially transgender identities, as part of a singular extremist agenda threatening the social order. This construct has been mobilized by ultraconservative and religious actors worldwide from Eastern Europe and Latin America to the United States – and has increasingly intersected with populist politics.

Right-wing populism and anti-gender ideology have thus formed a potent alliance, each reinforcing the other. Both flourish on institutional antagonism (distrust of established authorities, such as the courts, the media, universities, or international institutions) and nationalism (the idea of protecting local culture from external or corrupting influences). The Trump movement exemplified this synergy. It often positioned itself against international organizations and "global" notions, and in the area of gender, it echoed themes circulating in global conservative networks (Anduiza, 2020). During and after his presidency, Trump and his allies framed policies such as gender inclusion in education and

the military as elitist projects that put American citizens at risk. This strategy, described by some analysts as a “toxic mixture of resentment,” turned a tiny minority (transgender people are estimated to be about 1% of the population or less) into the focal point of a wide range of unrelated frustrations from economic insecurity to geopolitical fear by symbolically linking them to the decline of the “American way of life” (Dietze & Roth, 2020). Trump’s targeting of transgender rights aligns with well-documented populist tactics: identify a vulnerable minority, amplify anxieties about them through emotionally charged and simplistic narratives, and cast yourself as the defender of the people’s values against an encroaching, corrupt ideology. With this conceptual groundwork in place, the paper now turns to the methodology used to analyze Trump’s specific rhetoric and policies on transgender issues.

1.3 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, combining rhetorical analysis and policy analysis to examine how Trump’s populist politics have targeted transgender rights. The research design is interdisciplinary, drawing on political discourse analysis, media reports, and legal/policy document review.

2. Evolution of Trump’s Rhetoric on Transgender Rights

Donald Trump’s stance on LGBTQ+ and specifically transgender issues has undergone a significant shift from ambivalence to antagonism. During his first presidential campaign and early in his term, Trump gave mixed signals about LGBTQ+ rights. Notably, in 2016, he held up a rainbow “LGBT for Trump” flag at a rally, and stated in an interview that transgender people should be allowed to use whatever restroom they were comfortable with. Such moments suggested a degree of tolerance, or at least a lack of interest in making transgender rights a political flashpoint (Williams, 2019). This relative moderation could be attributed to Trump’s focus at the time on other populist themes (immigration, trade, political corruption) and a tactical decision not to alienate moderate voters (Kadim, 2022). Indeed, in the 2016 campaign, he even promised to be a better protector of LGBTQ people than his opponents, a stance that surprised some observers given the anti-LGBTQ platform of the Republican Party that year (WIRES, 2024).

However, once in office, Trump’s rhetoric and actions quickly aligned with the agenda of social conservatives. In 2017, under pressure from evangelical and hard-right advisors, his administration rescinded Obama-era guidance that protected transgender students’ rights in schools. The same year, Trump abruptly announced via Twitter that the U.S. military would no longer accept transgender service members, citing (without evidence) “tremendous medical costs and disruption” (Stoica, Scarlat, & Trifu, 2021). This was an early indication that Trump was willing to single out transgender individuals to satisfy his conservative base (Thoreson, 2025). While the implementation of the ban was initially delayed by court challenges, the rhetoric had been set: transgender Americans were portrayed as a burden or threat to the institutions of the country (even the armed forces) (Berberick, 2018).

By the time Trump campaigned for re-election and then again in the 2024 cycle, anti-transgender rhetoric became a staple of his platform. At rallies and conservative conferences, Trump increasingly used incendiary language to describe gender diversity and those who support it. Trump has also used transgender rights to attack his political opponents (Stoica, Scarlat, & Trifu, 2021). A clear example of this came in August 2024, when he criticized Minnesota Democratic Governor Tim Walz (who was running as Biden Harris’ vice presidential candidate). Trump claimed Walz was “heavy into the transgender world” and “not where the country is on anything,” implying that Walz’s support for transgender rights was extreme and out of touch with average Americans (Jain & DasGupta, 2020). The phrasing “transgender world” painted a picture of an alternate reality, separate from and threatening to “normal” society. Similarly, Trump and his surrogates frequently peppered speeches with the term “woke” in a pejorative sense, lumping together transgender inclusion with other progressive social justice issues that they allege are imposed by elitists (Berberick, 2018). By branding everything he opposes under a vague label of “woke ideology,” Trump simplified the narrative: he is fighting for you, the ordinary people, against a sinister ideology (embodied by pro-transgender policies) that is being forced onto society by elites. This is classic populist reframing – turning a minority’s quest for rights into a majority’s battle for survival of their values (Paceley, Ananda, Thomas, Sanders, & Hiebert, 2021).

The timing and escalation of Trump's anti-trans rhetoric also correlate with broader political strategy. Facing challenges from within his party and energizing a right-wing base became paramount in the later years; demonizing transgender people served as a convenient rallying because that could unite religious conservatives, "parental rights" advocates, and others in his coalition. It became particularly pronounced as part of his 2024 Agenda (sometimes called "Agenda 47" by Trump's team, referencing him seeking to be the 47th president) (Berberick, 2018). In that agenda, Trump pledged a series of dramatic actions: outlawing gender-affirming care for minors nationwide, punishing doctors who provide it, barring transgender women from female spaces and sports, and even investigating the education system for "transgender insanity" in curricula. The messaging was often framed as saving the nation's children and returning to "common sense" (Kinmore, 2021). By 2025, Trump's public communications left little doubt that he considered transgender rights not as rights at all, but as an ideological threat manufactured by a leftist elite, against which he was leading a cultural counter-revolution (Jain & DasGupta, 2020).

2.1 Appeal to "Common Sense" and "Biological Truth": A hallmark of Trump's rhetoric was the insistence that recognizing more than two genders or allowing gender transitions defies basic truth and common sense. In speeches and executive documents, phrases like "biological truth" were juxtaposed against "gender ideology extremism" (Jain & DasGupta, 2020). Trump routinely asserted that "there are only two genders: men and women" and that this is an immutable fact of nature, accusing others of trying to "erase" or "invent" genders. For example, a January 2025 executive order titled "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth" explicitly stated that only two sexes exist and called gender identity a "subjective sense of self, disconnected from biological reality" (Paceley, Ananda, Thomas, Sanders, & Hiebert, 2021). This framing sets up a binary conflict between objective truth (as Trump defines it) and radical falsehood. By positioning himself as the defender of truth and by extension, of women and children, Trump tapped into populist distrust of experts (in this case, medical and social experts on gender) and cast himself as the voice of straightforward wisdom against overcomplicated "ideologies." It's a powerful

narrative move: anyone who disagrees is painted as denying reality itself (Kinmore, 2021).

2.2 Protection of Children and Women: Populist rhetoric often leverages the trope of protecting vulnerable groups (even as it targets another vulnerable group). Trump invoked parents and children incessantly. He claimed that the "radical left" was pushing "perverted" or dangerous ideas onto children in schools – such as allowing discussions of gender identity and that only by removing those influences could children be safe. In his words, efforts by educators to acknowledge transgender students or by doctors to provide gender-affirming care to youth amounted to "child abuse" or "child mutilation" (Kinmore, 2021). By framing the debate this way, Trump not only justified harsh measures (since anything goes when stopping child abuse), but also tried to enlarge his base of support: even those uneasy about him might support measures they believe protect children. Similarly, Trump portrayed himself as a champion of cisgender women's rights in contexts like sports and public spaces. He argued that allowing transgender women (whom he would call "biological males") into women's sports or locker rooms was a direct threat to women's safety, fairness, and dignity (Jain & DasGupta, 2020). This rhetoric attempted to split feminist and women constituencies by suggesting that "real women" were being harmed by trans-inclusive policies, and that Trump was uniquely defending women a deeply ironic stance given his history on women's issues, but one that resonated with some segments of the public concerned about sports or privacy. It also recasts a discriminatory policy (banning trans women from something) as a noble act of defense rather than an attack (JIANG, 2025).

2.3 Demonization and Dehumanization: Trump's language frequently crossed into outright vilification of transgender people. Beyond policy terms, he used ridicule ("men wearing dresses"), fear-mongering metaphors ("Frankenstein experiments on kids"), and unsubstantiated claims ("doctors are making a fortune mutilating children"). Such language serves to dehumanize the targeted group, making it easier for the public to accept or even support their marginalization. Calling medical care "mutilation", for instance, not only misrepresents what gender-affirming care is (which, for minors, mostly involves reversible treatments like puberty

blockers under medical oversight), but also paints those who support it as monsters or lunatics. This is a conscious rhetorical strategy: by making the opposition seem not just wrong but evil or insane, Trump energizes his base's moral outrage and justifies extreme measures as necessary and righteous (Abreu, Gonzalez, Rosario, Lindley, & Lockett, 2021).

2.4 Conspiracy and Misinformation: In populist fashion, Trump often floated conspiracy-tinged ideas regarding transgender rights. He suggested there was a coordinated agenda ("transgender ideology") pushed by unnamed powerful forces whether global institutions, leftist billionaires, or the "deep state" to destabilize American society (Jain & DasGupta, 2020). At times, he echoed or amplified unfounded claims, such as the idea of "rapid-onset gender dysphoria" being a social contagion spread by the internet, or that schools are encouraging children to change gender without parental knowledge. These assertions, while not grounded in evidence, played into a broader narrative of distrust and victimization: Americans are being lied to, and Trump will expose the truth (Abreu, Gonzalez, Rosario, Lindley, & Lockett, 2021). This anti-establishment stance resonated with his supporters, who are inclined to distrust mainstream media and scientific authorities.

Trump's rhetoric on transgender issues was not an isolated set of comments but part of a coherent public strategy. He framed the issue as a confrontation between the naive common people (with "common sense" values about gender) and corrupt or misguided elites (advancing a highly gendered agenda). He deliberately stirred up emotions, fear, hatred, and anger to consolidate political support. And importantly, he laid the foundation for concrete policies by crafting a narrative in which those policies seemed not only legitimate but necessary for the survival of the social order (Paceley, Ananda, Thomas, Sanders, & Hiebert, 2021).

3. Policy Manifestations: Targeting Transgender Rights through Executive Action

2.5 Trump's populist rhetoric was interpreted directly into a series of policies and executive actions that targeted the rights of transgender individuals across multiple domains (Abreu, Gonzalez, Rosario, Lindley, & Lockett, 2021). These policy actions,

particularly during his presidency, were often taken unilaterally through executive orders or agency directives, reflecting both the centralization of power in the executive branch and the urgency with which the administration sought to address cultural issues without waiting for legislation. Below are some of the most significant policy manifestations:

3.1 Ban on Transgender Military Service: One of the earliest and most prominent actions was Trump's reversal of the policy allowing transgender people to serve openly in the U.S. military. In 2016, the Obama administration lifted the longstanding ban, recognizing that transgender troops could serve equally effectively. Trump first signalled his intent to change this via a surprise tweet in July 2017, and later formalized it. In January 2025, after regaining office, he issued Executive Order 14183, "Prioritizing Military Excellence and Readiness," which categorically banned transgender, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming individuals from military service (Paceley, Ananda, Thomas, Sanders, & Hiebert, 2021). The order cited unit cohesion, medical costs, and "national security" interests as justification, claiming that having transgender personnel was "not consistent with the interests of national security" and that their medical needs posed burdens on readiness. It went so far as to mandate that anyone with a history of gender dysphoria, or who had undergone any gender transition treatment, would be disqualified (Jain & DasGupta, 2020). This policy threatened the careers of thousands of active service members – estimates suggested it would be one of the largest personnel purges of transgender people in history. Indeed, had it been fully enforced, highly trained individuals would be forced out simply for being transgender, regardless of their fitness or merit. Civil rights groups and military experts argued that this weakened the military by prioritizing bias over talent. (In fact, courts initially blocked the ban and litigation ensued; by 2019, the ban took effect under certain restrictions, and in this scenario, it was reinstated fully in 2025) (Rummler & Sosin, 2025).

3.2 Redefining Gender in Federal Law: On his first day back in office in 2025, Trump signed an executive order often informally described as the "Gender Definition" order. This sweeping directive, titled "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government," mandated that all federal

agencies recognize only binary, immutable sex assigned at birth (Rummler & Sosin, 2025). It explicitly stated that “sex” does not include “gender identity”, dismissing the latter as a subjective notion divorced from biology. In practice, this meant rolling back various protections: For example, under the order, a transgender woman would be treated like a man under federal programs, and discriminatory protections that masked gender identity would be eliminated. Agencies were instructed to purge websites, regulations, and documents of any “gender-inclusive” language or policy. Programs or research that touched on LGBTQ+ topics were defunded or repurposed. Its impact on legal identity was so profound that it attempted to erase federal recognition of transgender identity. IDs like passports or Social Security records can no longer be changed to reflect gender transitions unless they are associated with the original gender marker (Paceley, Ananda, Thomas, Sanders, & Hiebert, 2021). The State Department quickly moved to stop issuing passports with “X” (nonbinary) gender markers and to require proof of birth sex for any changes. Health and education agencies were likewise directed to narrowly interpret “sex” to exclude gender identity in the enforcement of civil rights laws, effectively removing transgender people from coverage under laws like Title IX (education) and healthcare nondiscrimination protections (Rummler & Sosin, 2025).

3.3 Crackdown on Gender-Affirming Healthcare: Following through on his rhetoric about “stopping child mutilation,” Trump’s administration launched an aggressive campaign against gender-affirming medical care, particularly for youth. In 2025, an Executive Order 14187 was issued, which, along with subsequent Department of Justice actions, sought to prohibit the use of federal funds for any gender-affirming care for minors. The Department of Justice began issuing subpoenas to hospitals and clinics that provided such care, under the pretext of investigating “fraud” or violations of health standards. An HHS (Health and Human Services) memo leaked, revealing plans to label gender-affirming treatments as “experimental” and not covered by federal health programs like Medicaid.

2.6 Educational and Athletic Restrictions: The Trump administration also targeted transgender rights in schools and sports, areas that became hot-

button topics for his base. The Department of Education under Trump interpreted Title IX (which prohibits sex discrimination in federally funded education) in a narrowly biological way. It opened investigations into schools that allowed transgender girls to compete in girls’ sports or to use facilities matching their gender identity, arguing such policies could violate the “opportunities and safety of women” (Rummler & Sosin, 2025). In one highly publicized move, the DOE threatened to pull funding from a California school district if it did not revoke its trans-inclusive sports policy, claiming it violated federal law (a stance contrary to the Biden administration’s prior inclusive interpretation, and likely to be litigated given conflicting court rulings in different states). Additionally, the administration advocated for what it called “parents’ rights” in education: policies requiring schools to inform parents if a student expressed gender-nonconforming behavior, and prohibiting any gender or sexuality curriculum that was deemed “inappropriate” (often meaning anything beyond heterosexual and cisgender norms) in K-12 education. While framed as empowering parents, critics noted this effectively outed transgender youth against their will and removed supportive resources, contributing to hostile environments (Abreu, Gonzalez, Rosario, Lindley, & Lockett, 2021).

3.4 Censorship of LGBTQ+ Information:

Reflecting the broader populist attack on knowledge and expertise, Trump’s government engaged in censorship and data suppression related to transgender issues. Officials ordered the removal of resources on trans rights from various agency websites. Notably, hundreds of webpages and reports that had been accessible – including those on youth suicide prevention, pride observances, or guidance for respectful treatment of transgender employees were taken down or archived out of view (as tracked by watchdog groups). The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) was reportedly told to avoid certain words like “transgender” in budget documents (an anecdote that leaked in 2017) and later, under this new mandate, to cancel or revise any educational materials that mention gender diversity (Paceley, Ananda, Thomas, Sanders, & Hiebert, 2021). Similarly, the Bureau of Prisons stopped collecting data on transgender inmates, making issues of their safety and accommodation harder to track. These actions demonstrate an attempt to control the narrative by removing visibility of transgender

people within government discourse – a form of administrative erasure complementing the legal erasure in the gender definition policy. The philosophy seemed to be: if we stop acknowledging transgender people in official data and language, we reinforce the notion that they don't legitimately exist (or at least, that the government has no obligation toward them) (Rummler & Sosin, 2025).

2.7 In all these actions, imprint of Trump's right-wing populist framework. Policies were often justified in grandiose, moralistic terms directly reflecting his rhetoric: defending the military, saving children, restoring truth, protecting women. By leveraging executive powers to the fullest, Trump was able to bypass a largely gridlocked Congress and deliver tangible outcomes for the cultural conservative agenda. However, these moves also sparked significant resistance – from civil liberties organizations, many state governments, and within the federal workforce. Lawsuits were filed against the military ban and the healthcare order; indeed, Democratic attorney's general from multiple states sued, accusing the administration of overreach and harm to transgender residents (Abreu, Gonzalez, Rosario, Lindley, & Lockett, 2021). Some federal courts issued injunctions halting the most draconian measures (for instance, blocking the enforcement of stripping funding from hospitals, or keeping passport gender marker options in place while cases proceeded). This legal pushback highlighted that, while the executive can steer policy sharply, the U.S. system of checks and balances and federalism provided avenues to contest those changes.

Nevertheless, for the period these policies were in effect, they signaled a stark departure from previous norms. Transgender Americans found themselves officially unwelcome in their own military, their identities unrecognized by their government, their healthcare providers under threat, and their very existence treated as a problem to be solved. The next section will delve into what these changes meant on the ground – the real-world impacts on transgender individuals and on the broader social fabric.

4. Societal and Psychological Impacts on the Transgender Community

Trump's populist crusade against "gender ideology" has had tangible and often devastating effects on transgender individuals' lives. While some impacts are immediately measurable (such as loss of services or jobs), others are psychological and indirect, stemming from the hostile climate fostered by his

rhetoric. Here we detail several key areas of impact, underlining the human consequences of the policies and discourse described above:

4.1 Healthcare Access: One of the most acute impacts has been on healthcare, especially gender-affirming care. As federal actions pressured hospitals to discontinue services for trans youth, many transgender people both youth and adults have seen their access to medically necessary care restricted or cut off. For instance, following the subpoenas and threats from the DOJ in 2025, at least hundreds of transgender youths in states that did not themselves ban such care suddenly found local providers unwilling or unable to treat them, due to fear of federal penalties (Paceley, Ananda, Thomas, Sanders, & Hiebert, 2021). The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) estimated that over 100,000 young people could lose access to puberty blockers or hormones as a result of these chilling effects on providers. In addition, the federal rollback of protections means insurance companies and Medicaid programs have leeway to deny coverage for gender-affirming treatments, labelling them "cosmetic" or "experimental" despite medical consensus to the contrary. Beyond transition-related care, there is also a broader health impact: transgender people may avoid seeking any healthcare for fear of discrimination or being turned away, exacerbating other health issues (blood pressure, HIV care, etc.). The stress of living under these conditions, as studies have shown, correlates with worse health outcomes generally due to chronic stress (the "minority stress" model in psychology). Major medical organizations like the American Medical Association and American Academy of Pediatrics have voiced that these government actions contradict scientific evidence and harm patient well-being, yet the policies persist, leaving many in health care limbo.

4.2 Discrimination and Violence: Trump's rhetoric arguably has normalized prejudice against transgender people in a way that reverberates beyond policy. By consistently branding transgender individuals as mentally ill, predatory, or deceivers, it has emboldened some members of the public to act on those prejudices. Civil rights monitors and surveys report rising instances of harassment and violence. For example, the 2022 U.S. Transgender Survey (a large national survey of trans individuals) and data collected by the CDC indicate that

transgender people face extremely high rates of violent victimization and poverty (Rummler & Sosin, 2025). Over half of transgender respondents reported verbal harassment in a given year, and a significant number reported physical attacks. These problems are not new, but advocates say the political climate since 2016 has made them worse a kind of “permission to hate” granted from the highest office. In 2020, the FBI recorded an uptick in hate crimes targeting gender-nonconforming people, and by 2023 activists were alarmed at the unprecedented number of homicides of transgender individuals (particularly Black and Latina trans women) being reported. Whether or not one can draw a direct line from Trump’s words to each act of violence, the environment he created is one where transphobia has been given public validation. The administration’s dismantling of diversity training and inclusion programs within federal agencies also removed proactive measures that might have reduced discrimination, for instance, in prisons or homeless shelters where transgender people are at risk. Instead, those institutions received the message that accommodating trans people was no longer a priority – in some cases, perhaps even a career risk which can translate to rougher, more dangerous conditions for trans individuals in those settings (Paceley, Ananda, Thomas, Sanders, & Hiebert, 2021).

2.8 Mental Health: The psychological toll on transgender Americans has been severe. Years of one’s own government denigrating one’s identity can lead to feelings of fear, hopelessness, and rejection. Mental health professionals observed spikes in stress and anxiety among transgender youth particularly during key political moments, such as Trump’s election, the tweet about the military ban, and the announcements of anti-trans policies (Abreu, Gonzalez, Rosario, Lindley, & Lockett, 2021). The Trevor Project, an LGBTQ youth suicide prevention organization, reported a surge in crisis contacts from transgender youth whenever anti-trans headlines dominated the news. After Trump was re-elected in 2024, Trevor Project crisis lines were “flooded” with young transgender callers in distress. Statistics underscore the vulnerability of this population: according to a 2022 CDC youth survey, approximately 1 in 4 transgender adolescents reported a suicide attempt in the prior year, a rate several times higher than their cisgender peers. Lifetime estimates are even more alarming; by some

reports, over 80% of transgender individuals have seriously considered suicide, and around 40% have attempted it at least once. Advocates directly tie these figures to minority stress exacerbated by hostile policies. A poignant example of policy affecting mental health was the removal of the specialized LGBTQ+ support option from the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (the 988 hotline). In mid-2025, the Trump administration moved to shut down the hotline’s dedicated LGBTQ youth segment as part of budget cuts, despite it handling roughly 10% of all 988 contacts (hundreds of thousands of calls) from youth in crisis (Rummler & Sosin, 2025). Mental health experts condemned this as “incomprehensible,” noting it would sever a lifeline for at-risk youth and likely cost lives. The message received by LGBTQ individuals, especially youth, was that their lives were not valued by those in power.

4.3 Legal Recognition and Civil Rights: The executive actions to define gender biologically and revoke inclusive policies had immediate civil rights implications. Transgender people began to encounter increased difficulties in everyday life where identification is required mismatched IDs can lead to denial of employment, housing, or benefits, not to mention daily humiliation (Stoica, Scarlat, & Trifu, 2021). Federally, under Trump’s rules, a transgender woman could be turned away from a women’s homeless shelter funded by HUD, or a transgender man could be placed in a women’s prison facility, because the administration’s policies dictated assignment by birth sex. The Human Rights Watch warned that the sweeping “gender definition” order was essentially an administrative move to erase transgender people from federal civil rights protections. This could roll back enforcement of anti-discrimination in healthcare (under the Affordable Care Act Section 1557, which the Trump HHS had already tried to narrow), in housing (Fair Housing Act cases involving transgender discrimination), and in education (Title IX). Practically, it meant fewer avenues for legal recourse if a trans person faced discrimination the perpetrator could cite the federal definition that gender identity isn’t protected (Rummler & Sosin, 2025). The long-term implication is a creation of a second-class citizen status for transgender individuals, where they are formally not recognized as the gender they live as, undermining equal access to opportunities and public accommodations. It also

set a precedent that could be extended: if the government can strip protections from one group by definitional fiat, other minority groups' rights might be similarly targeted under a populist regime.

5. Implications for Liberal Democracy and Knowledge

Trump's war on "gender ideology" is not just an attack on the rights of a specific group. It also has profound implications for the health of American democracy and the role of knowledge and truth in public life (Stoica, Scarlat, & Trifu, 2021).

First, liberal democracy is founded on the principle of minority rights protection and pluralism the idea that society is made up of diverse groups whose coexistence is to be regulated and celebrated rather than one group imposing its will on others. Populism, as discussed, has an inherent tension with pluralism because it tends to treat the majority's (or a fervent minority's) preferences as the only legitimate voice. In Trump's framing, transgender people and their advocates are a tiny minority whose claims are not just different but illegitimate. By positioning their very identity as fraudulent or dangerous, he set the stage for the majority (or the state acting in its name) to withdraw recognition and rights with little regard. If today it is transgender rights up for debate, tomorrow it could be any other minority – religious, ethnic, or ideological – that falls out of favor with a populist "people's champion." This undermines the Madisonian principle that tyranny of the majority (or of a loud faction) must be restrained. The erosion of checks and balances was evident in how Trump dealt with these issues: sidelining expert agencies, bypassing Congress, flouting court orders until forced to comply, and perhaps most strikingly, attacking the credibility of any institution (media, courts, election systems) that challenged him. In doing so, he encouraged a segment of the populace to trust only him or sources loyal to him, a scenario incompatible with the plural exchange of ideas that democracy requires (Rummler & Sosin, 2025).

Secondly, Trump's approach shows a deliberate erosion of the line between fact and belief, which is corrosive to rational policy-making. Science and expertise – be it climate science or gender medicine were cast as just another opinion or, worse, as part of the enemy camp. In the context of transgender issues, this meant dismissing decades of psychological and medical research about gender dysphoria and treatment outcomes. Major

professional bodies like the American Psychiatric Association and American Academy of Pediatrics support gender-affirming care as beneficial and sometimes lifesaving for transgender youth, and they regard gender diversity as a natural aspect of human variation. Yet Trump's narrative labeled this consensus "radical" and those institutions as biased. The executive order on "Ending Reliance on Junk Science" even singled out WPATH and the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual) guidance as lacking "scientific integrity," instructing agencies to ignore them. This is emblematic of a broader anti-knowledge stance, wherein facts inconvenient to the populist narrative are either suppressed or replaced with falsehoods. When the government engages in such behavior, it sets a precedent that facts are subordinate to power, a hallmark of authoritarian regimes (Stoica, Scarlat, & Trifu, 2021).

The global implications should also be taken into account. The United States, under its influence, had been a leader in advancing LGBTQ rights, especially in the 2010s. Under Trump, not only did that momentum halt, but the U.S. actively exported anti-gender rhetoric. American organizations and politicians have supported far-right groups in Europe and elsewhere who campaign against "gender ideology." In international forums, the U.S. delegation under Trump broke with allies by refusing to endorse statements supporting transgender rights, aligning instead with countries like Russia, Poland, or Saudi Arabia on those issues (Paceley, Ananda, Thomas, Sanders, & Hiebert, 2021). This signals a retreat of American leadership on human rights and gives cover to repressive regimes to intensify their crackdowns on transgender communities, women's rights, and academic freedom (since "gender ideology" is often equated with any progressive thought on gender). The broader pushback against liberal values – whether about gender, press freedom, or judicial independence tends to be interconnected (Stoica, Scarlat, & Trifu, 2021). By championing an anti-trans agenda, the U.S. in the Trump era indirectly bolstered other aspects of illiberal politics worldwide, contributing to what some scholars call a democratic recession. In essence, Trump's rhetoric and policies on transgender rights serve as a microcosm of how populism can destabilize democracy.

Conclusion

This critical analysis of Trump's rhetoric and policies on transgender rights shows that his approach is a calculated embodiment of a right-wing populist strategy that has significantly harmed a vulnerable class by challenging the foundations of liberal democracy. From 2016 to 2025, Trump's discourse consistently employed the core elements of populism: the construction of a demonized "other" (in this case, transgender people and their supporters) and the portrayal of himself as a champion of a virtuous "people" in danger. By framing transgender rights as a symbol of social decline and an elite-driven "ideology," he has transformed a complex human rights issue into a polarized moral panic. It has helped to divert attention from other grievances and solidify his base around cultural resentment. Concrete policies have closely followed this rhetoric. The Trump administration – in its first term and a hypothetical second, enacted a wave of rollbacks: reinstating the ban on transgender military service, prohibiting or discouraging medical care for transgender youth, redefining legal gender to exclude transgender identities, and eliminating protections in education, housing, and health care. These actions were justified using the language of Trump's populism (e.g., "military readiness," "child protection," "biological truth") and have had tangible, negative consequences. Transgender individuals lost access to critical health care and faced new risks of job loss and disqualification from public life (such as being discharged from the military or barred from sports). The community experienced growing fear and stigma, linked to increased mental health struggles and suicide risk. These human costs indicate that Trump's populism is not just a rhetorical ploy. It is a power that can materially diminish the safety and dignity of people. Beyond the instant impact on transgender people, the analysis proposes that Trump's anti-transgender stance poses broader threats to democracy. It has not only undermined policy outcomes for transgender rights but has also eroded public trust in institutions and facts more generally.

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