

Gender roles shape public attitudes about transgender military service, study finds

August 16 2019, by Jon Niccum



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Attitudes toward transgender people have become increasingly scrutinized during the last few years. But those attitudes intersect with actual policy most visibly in the military.

A new research study titled "Public Attitudes on Transgender Military

Service: The Role of Gender," published in the current issue of *Armed Forces & Society*, examines how cultural opinion affects the shifts in acceptance.

"It fundamentally shows the values of not only egalitarianism and traditionalism but also the role of sex and gender conformity in shaping these attitudes," said Don Haider-Markel, professor and chair of political science at the University of Kansas.

Together with KU Associate Professor Patrick Miller, Haider-Markel seeks to establish a more concrete frame of reference for this subject, as well as surveying how it's both similar and distinct from gay and lesbian concerns.

"Significant portions of the public—around 30 percent—still don't have clear attitudes on [transgender](#) policy-related issues. That itself is important so we get some kind of baseline for analysis. Only in the past seven or eight years did we get the first real national polling data about transgender issues. To even develop some initial measures and predictors of those attitudes is still relatively unique," said Haider-Markel, whose co-authors also include Daniel Lewis, Barry Tadlock, Andrew Flores and Jami Taylor.

Their initial research hypothesized that "personal experiences with the military and with transgender people, along with values, personality predispositions and religion, are likely to influence individual attitudes." They tested this using data from a unique 2015 national survey of American adults. The results suggest interactions, opinions on gender roles and religiosity had the most substantial (albeit conditional) effects on viewpoints regarding transgender [military service](#).

Haider-Markel became interested in exploring this topic when he came across an unusual statistic discovered by the Williams Institute at UCLA

School of Law: Transgender individuals are more likely to have served or be serving in the U.S. military when compared to the general population.

"Ironically, as an institution, the military is seen as one where gender norms are pretty rigid," he said. "So it may actually be attractive to some [transgender people](#) prior to fully coming out. At the time when people enlisted or went to officer training school, they were perhaps trying to rigidly conform to a gender they had already started to feel uncomfortable with, and they thought the military might help."

A veteran of the Air Force, Haider-Markel served until 1993. He may not have knowingly served with anyone transgender, but he says that was a genuine possibility.

"When I was 18 and in tech school, I was surprised at the number of male soldiers who on the weekend would leave the base and wear makeup or do other forms of cross-dressing or gender-nonconforming kinds of things," he said. "But even in the mid-to-late 1980s, that was a big surprise to me."

This latest research builds on the work of a group that has earned the nickname "Team Kansas." After producing nine articles on the topic, Haider-Markel's team published its first book: "The Remarkable Rise of Transgender Rights" (University of Michigan Press, 2018).

"It's probably the most efficient and effective research team I've ever worked with," he said.

Having spent 22 years at KU, Haider-Markel's work focuses on [public policy](#) and public opinion, with an emphasis on [civil rights](#), criminal justice and counterterrorism.

Earlier this year, the Trump administration reinstated a near-total ban on transgender individuals serving in the military. This was supposedly based on the "tremendous medical costs and disruption" of allowing these troops to serve.

Will Trump's ban be overturned? "I don't know if it will be the next president or if it will be before that," Haider-Markel said. "But the pathway is difficult to change. We can see these temporary setbacks, but the movement itself is well-established. A march toward full civil rights for LGBT people is just a matter of time."

More information: Daniel C. Lewis et al. Public Attitudes on Transgender Military Service: The Role of Gender, *Armed Forces & Society* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0095327X19861737](https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X19861737)

Provided by University of Kansas

Citation: Gender roles shape public attitudes about transgender military service, study finds (2019, August 16) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-08-gender-roles-attitudes-transgender-military.html>

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