



June 2026

Heated Relations

The Past, Present, and Future of the LGBTQ+ Community in Germany and the United States

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Foreword

For over a century, LGBTQ+ communities in Germany and the United States have fought for rights and recognition, built robust civil society structures, and influenced culture, business, and politics. Germany and the United States have been pioneers in achieving LGBTQ+ equality, and movements in the two countries have long influenced and inspired each other in their development. However, challenges remain. LGBTQ+ rights have been the subject of political attacks, and organizations are working to address homelessness, healthcare access, and safety concerns within the community, as well as a more challenging funding environment.

To better understand how these transatlantic movements have intertwined and what can be learned to maintain and further advance LGBTQ+ equality, the American-German Institute developed the project, “Building LGBTQ+ Communities in Germany and the U.S.: Past, Present, and Future.” Over three years, this comparative study of the history, present, and future of LGBTQ+ rights brought together forty-two members of the LGBTQ+ community for site visits and discussions across nine cities in the United States and Germany. Through articles, podcasts, and multimedia reports, the participants shared important lessons for how LGBTQ+ people—and other marginalized groups—can build political, economic, and organizational power to advocate for themselves and serve the needs of their communities.

The final publication reflects themes from throughout the three years of the project: the history of LGBTQ+ movements across the Atlantic; the role healthcare research and access have played in LGBTQ+ rights; LGBTQ+ culture’s inherent political nature; how online rhetoric has fueled anti-LGBTQ+ policies; the interplay of public opinion and funding for LGBTQ+ organizations and initiatives, and how the community participates in and contributes to economies.

It is crucial at this juncture—as LGBTQ+ rights are under threat in both countries and the broader transatlantic relationship is undergoing a fundamental transformation—to promote expertise on LGBTQ+ issues in a transatlantic context and to strengthen the special bonds and solidarity among experts and advocates. The shared experiences gained through this project have deepened understanding of the joint efforts and achievements of the past, present, and future.

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About the Authors

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Jack Fornasiero is the Program Associate at AGI. In his role, he develops and implements grant-funded programs, strategic initiatives, conferences, symposia, and exchanges that strengthen U.S.-German relations. Since joining AGI, he has co-led a multi-year transatlantic exchange program on LGBTQ+ issues, organized high-profile public events featuring leading transatlantic policymakers and experts, supported AGI's activities at the Munich Security Conference, and authored analysis on geopolitical issues. He oversees AGI's internship program, mentoring and supervising emerging professionals. Before joining AGI, Mr. Fornasiero served as a legislative intern in the offices of Senator Kirsten Gillibrand and Congresswoman Susie Lee. Additionally, he completed an Executive Office and Communications Fellowship with Meridian International Center, where he supported cultural exchange programs, diplomatic leadership engagement, and internal communications. Mr. Fornasiero received a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and German Studies from Wayne State University with university and departmental honors. He spent his third undergraduate year at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich through Wayne State University's Junior Year in Munich program. In addition to his studies in political science, German language, and literature, he has completed coursework in Italian language and European history.



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G. Samantha Rosenthal (she/her/hers) is an independent journalist and professional historian. Over fifteen years, she has written widely about the United States, with an abiding commitment to Appalachia and the U.S. South. Samantha is the author of two books, most recently *Living Queer History: Remembrance and Belonging in a Southern City*. Her writing has been featured in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Scientific American*, *Salon*, *The Advocate*, *The Conversation*, *Southern Cultures*, *Lilith*, and *Them*. Samantha is co-founder of the Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project, an award-winning queer community history organization; Second Friday, a lesbian social monthly pop-up; and the Southwest Virginia Trans Wellness Fund, a mutual aid initiative that empowers transgender people through financial assistance. Her work has been recognized with awards and honorable mentions from the National Council on Public History, the Oral History Association, the LGBTQ+ History Association, the American Society for Environmental History, and the Working Class Studies Association.



A History of LGBTQ+ Rights in Germany and the United States

TRANSATLANTIC CHALLENGES, INFLUENCES, AND MOVEMENTS

ERIC LANGENBACHER

Although no country has achieved full equality and acceptance for LGBTQ+ individuals, Germany and the United States emerged in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as leaders. According to the LGBT Equality Index, Germany currently ranks ninth-most LGBT-friendly country worldwide and the United States thirty-second (Iceland, Norway, and Uruguay take the top spots).¹ It is not just that developments in these two cases have influenced other countries, but the two nations have deeply and continually affected each other. Early activist organizations in 1920s America were directly inspired by similar groups in Germany. Later, the Stonewall riots and mobilization around the HIV/AIDS crisis spurred a new generation of activists in West and East Germany. A comparative examination of these two intertwined countries is essential to understand how the communities arrived at this point and what might be expected going forward.

Germany

Germany has a long history of homophobia buttressed by Christian theology. For centuries, the crime of sodomy—usually defined as same-sex relations—was punishable by death. One notable example was the beheading of Catharina Margaretha Linck in 1721, who had dressed like a man, married a woman, and served in several armies. Some jurisdictions, however, were more lenient at times. Prussia's Frederick the Great—it was an open secret that he and his brother Henry were both gay—suspended the death penalty in 1746 for that crime, and

that state abolished the death penalty for sodomy in 1794. Some states, like Bavaria, adopted Napoleonic law and decriminalized consensual homosexual acts in 1813.

By the nineteenth century and despite (perhaps because of) the harsh laws, the country began to assume an important place in the history of the LGBTQ+ rights movement. Robert Beachy has argued that Germany is the birthplace of “modern homosexual identity and homosexual rights activism.”² In fact, the term “homosexual” was first used in print by an Austrian-born writer living in Berlin in 1868. At an 1867 conference of German lawyers, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-1895)—deemed “the first gay man in world history” and one of the first activists—spoke out against the persecution of homosexuals or his preferred term “urning” (*uranian*), arguing that sexual orientation was a natural phenomenon.³ Though rejected by his colleagues and driven from the legal profession, Ulrichs continued to publish as a journalist before being pushed out of the country by the Prussian authorities.

After unification in 1871, the Prussian government's criminalization (up to two years imprisonment) of sodomy extended to all corners of the unified German Empire through the infamous Paragraph 175 of the German legal code. Notably, this crime was restricted to male homosexuals (and bestiality), although there was a late and unsuccessful effort to add lesbians shortly before World War I broke out. However, a gay

subculture began to flourish, especially in Berlin, where the police department generally opted not to enforce laws against homosexuality.⁴ During this period, Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld (1868-1935) founded both the world's first gay rights organization in 1897 (the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee) and later the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin in 1919, pioneering research on gay and trans individuals.⁵ This period also witnessed the Eulenberg Affair in 1907-1909, deemed the "biggest homosexual scandal ever" (comparable to the trial and conviction of Oscar Wilde in Britain), in which a close confidant to the Kaiser, Philipp, Prince of Eulenberg, and many other prominent members of the elite were accused of homosexuality, generating much domestic and international attention and numerous legal proceedings.

Through the 1920s, gays and lesbians in Berlin enjoyed a degree of freedom and openness not found anywhere else in Europe or the United States. In fact, Weimar Berlin is considered the world's first queer capital, a gay Eden. Gays and lesbians could patronize gay establishments such as the Eldorado club (made famous in Christopher Isherwood's novel *Goodbye to Berlin* and the musical *Cabaret*) and social events and enjoy gay music, literature, and performances, mostly free from persecution.⁶ Hirschfeld performed the first gender reassignment surgery in 1922 on Dora Richter. Under the Weimar Republic, there was even a push to repeal Paragraph 175 of the German Penal Code, which passed a parliamentary committee vote but was in limbo when the Nazis seized power.⁷

The rise of the Nazis in the early 1930s ended any prospect of reform and brutally ended open gay culture in Germany. In 1933, Nazi students destroyed Hirschfeld's institute and burned his library. At first, the Nazis tolerated homosexuals in their ranks; Ernst Röhm, known for his dealings with male prostitutes, led the Nazi *Sturmabteilung* (SA) militia. Following Röhm's assassination by the rival *Schutz-Staffel* (SS) in 1934, Heinrich Himmler assumed responsibility for internal security and began the harsh repression of Germany's LGBTQ+ community. A wider range of homosexual acts was criminalized under a sharpened Paragraph 175, now including "intent" to commit a homosexual act and even mere suspicion. Approximately 100,000 men were arrested for violating the regime's anti-gay laws, which represented a tenfold increase compared to the Weimar era. Of this group, thousands ended up in concentration camps, where they were marked with a pink triangle (*rosa*

Winkel) and faced brutal labor, forced castration, cruel medical experiments, and death. The number of gay men who perished is unknown, but is estimated to be around 4,000-5,000.⁸ In 2008, a memorial to gay victims of the Holocaust was dedicated in Berlin, a belated recognition of their suffering. Other monuments to Nazi persecution have been erected at former concentration camps such as Dachau near Munich, on the Nollendorfplatz in the middle of the old gay neighborhood in Berlin, and in Cologne (long a center of gay life) on the banks of the Rhine.

The defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 did not end the repression and persecution of Germany's gay community. After liberation from concentration camps, some gay men were forced to fulfill their sentences. The Federal Republic even opted to maintain the Nazi version of Paragraph 175 and convicted approximately 50,000 men between 1945 and 1969 for having homosexual relations. In 1950-1951, the prominent Frankfurt Homosexual Trials, presided over by judges and prosecutors active during the Third Reich, prosecuted over 200 men. With the advent of a center-left government, consensual sexual acts between men over 21 were legalized in 1969, and the age of consent was lowered to 18 in 1973.⁹ East Germany reverted to the pre-Nazi version of Paragraph 175 and, partially because personnel active during the Nazi era were removed, largely stopped enforcing it by the late 1950s, abolishing it in 1968.¹⁰ All mentions of homosexuality in the legal code were removed in 1989, months before the regime fell. Though East and West Germany diverged on gay rights, each country's movement influenced the other. West Germany's gay rights movement grew in the 1970s with the emergence of organizations such as the *Allgemeine Homosexuelle Arbeitsgemeinschaft* in Berlin and activist artists such as filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim (1942-2025), whose landmark film *It Is Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse, But the Society in Which He Lives* premiered in 1971.¹¹ According to historian Samuel Huneke, these efforts "inspired" East German activists to establish their own organizations.¹²

As in the United States, the 1980s brought greater visibility as well as the crisis of HIV/AIDS. In 1985, federal prosecutor Manfred Bruns came out as gay on a talk show, and Herbert Rusche became the first openly gay member of the Bundestag—followed by the first openly lesbian member (Jutta Oesterle-Schwerin) in 1987.¹³ Also in 1985, *Der Spiegel* ran an article describing the fear and panic that had swept Germany's gay community because of HIV/AIDS.¹⁴ The epidemic spurred further activism in

the West, following the lead of U.S.-based organizations like ACT UP.¹⁵ In the East, activism in the 1980s grew under the auspices of semi-independent protestant churches. These efforts produced a series of reforms in the second half of the decade, such as allowing gays to serve in the military.¹⁶ After reunification, the ten states of former West Germany remained under the reformed Paragraph 175, while it remained abolished in the former East German states. In 1994, the Bundestag removed Paragraph 175 from the legal code, ending “the legal persecution of male homosexuals in Germany.”¹⁷ Recognition for Paragraph 175’s victims, however, was slow in coming. Nazi victims were pardoned in 2002, and the Bundestag voted to pardon and financially compensate post-war victims only in 2017.¹⁸

In the twenty-first century, Germany’s LGBTQ+ community made great strides toward legal equality based on the efforts of countless activists and organizations such as LSVD+ (founded in 1990). LGBTQ+ Germans became eligible to serve in the military in 2000.¹⁹ The Bundestag voted to recognize life partnerships between same-sex couples in 2002 and full marriage equality in 2017. Under the marriage equality law, same-sex couples also gained an equal right to adopt children.²⁰ Since 2006, LGBTQ+ Germans have been protected from discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics under European Union (EU) law. The Bundestag voted to ban “conversion therapy” in 2020.²¹ Under the left-liberal “traffic light” coalition, the Gender Self-Determination Act became law in 2024, greatly simplifying the process for people (including minors) to change their legal gender identity.²²

LGBTQ+ Germans have achieved widespread acceptance in mainstream society. Significant gay communities exist across the country, especially in Hamburg, Munich, Cologne, and Berlin, where about 7 percent of the population identifies with the community. Surveys indicate high public acceptance of same-sex marriage and parents.²³ Several openly gay politicians have held prominent roles at the state and federal level, including current Munich Mayor Dominik Krause, former Berlin Mayor Klaus Wowerweit, former First Mayor of Hamburg Ole von Beust, former Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, former health minister and current CDU/

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CSU parliamentary group leader Jens Spahn, AfD leader Alice Weidel, and long-serving Green Volker Beck. Other prominent members of the community over the years are Rainer Maria Fassbinder, Stefan George, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Wolfgang Tillmans, Ulrike Folkerts, Susanne Baer, Kitty Kuse, and Ludwig II of Bavaria.

However, a recent EU survey of LGBTQ+ individuals in Germany revealed that many members of the community still experience regular discrimination and harassment.²⁴

Transgender and intersex Germans were more than twice as likely as other groups to report being physically or sexually attacked. Of equal concern are the policy pronouncements of the populist radical right-wing party the Alternative for Germany (AfD), which was founded in 2013.

Although mainly known for its anti-immigrant xenophobia, it has long criticized “*Gender Gaga*,” “gender madness” (*Genderwahnsinn*), “*Trans-Kult*,” or “*Trans-Gender-Hype*.” The party wants to nullify the Self-Determination law, codify two biological sexes in law, and ban puberty blockers. A family is defined as a father, mother, and children.²⁵ The AfD and many of its regional branches have been investigated (and determined) by the authorities as being a threat to the liberal democratic order, which could lead to a constitutional process to disband and ban the party. Nevertheless, it is the largest opposition party in the Bundestag and polling as high as 28 percent in spring 2026, and is twice as popular in the eastern states, where it could lead or be part of governments after elections in fall 2026.

United States

For a century, the American LGBTQ+ community has fought for official rights and recognition and public acceptance. The Society for Human Rights, recognized as the first American gay rights organization, was founded in Chicago in 1924 by German immigrant and First World War Army veteran Henry Gerber (1892-1972).²⁶ Gerber returned to Germany and encountered a gay community that enjoyed a greater degree of openness and acceptance than could be found in the United States.²⁷ Influenced by Germany’s pro-LGBTQ Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, Gerber founded the Society to advocate for rights that he believed were “guaranteed...

by the Declaration of Independence.” The group faced numerous challenges to its existence. The criminalization of homosexuality meant that participation put members in legal peril. Though legal harassment in the form of an obscenity charge brought his organization down, Gerber continued to write and is credited as a pioneer “who anticipated strategies others would one day use with great success.”²⁸ The Gerber House in Chicago was named a National Historic Landmark in 2015.²⁹

After World War II, more LGBTQ+ organizations were founded in the United States such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis.³⁰ However, official discrimination remained deeply entrenched, and sexual orientation was far outside of mainstream discourse. While public awareness of homosexuality increased during this period, acceptance did not. In 1952, the American Psychiatric Association labeled homosexuality a “sociopathic personality disturbance,” only reversing this position in 1974.³¹ As a marginalized group, gays became a target for anticommunists looking to flush “subversives” out of government. In 1953, President Eisenhower signed an executive order that banned gays from serving in the federal government, part of a wave of repression directed at LGBTQ+ people that became known as the “Lavender Scare.” Although the exact numbers are unknown, the policy likely cost thousands to tens of thousands of gay workers their jobs. The federal government’s policy toward gay civil servants did not change until 1975 (or 1993 for the military).³² One notable victim of this policy was Frank Kameny (1925-2011), who was fired from his federal job in 1957 and then devoted the rest of his life to activism.

In 1961, the burgeoning gay rights movement won one of its first major victories when Illinois became the first state to repeal its sodomy laws.³³ As is well-documented, the 1969 raid on the Stonewall Inn in New York City’s Greenwich Village proved to be a decisive turning point. At the time, it was commonplace for police departments to conduct raids on LGBTQ+ establishments. A liquor license raid on June 28, 1969, sparked five days of confrontation between LGBTQ+ people and police outside the bar and in the surrounding neighborhood.³⁴ According to Michael Bronski, Stonewall represented “direct action” more akin to that of other protest groups of that era than traditional gay activism. The protests spawned new gay rights organizations unafraid to take a more visible approach than their predecessors. The tradition of annual Pride parades began a year after the riots with the Christopher Street Liberation Day march.³⁵

The next decade resulted in several significant firsts for America’s LGBTQ+ community. Novel organizations dedicated to advancing LGBTQ+ rights emerged. Lambda Legal became the first legal organization “dedicated to achieving full equality for lesbian and gay people” and won a court battle for the right to exist as a nonprofit.³⁶ LGBTQ+ people began to win elections at the state and local level; Kathy Kozachenko and Elaine Noble won offices in Michigan and Massachusetts, respectively, in 1974. In 1977, San Francisco voters elected openly gay Harvey Milk to the city Board of Supervisors, where he worked to defeat anti-gay legislation in California and improve life for marginalized groups in San Francisco. As one of the country’s highest-profile gay figures, Milk’s death at the hands of an assassin sparked protests in San Francisco and Washington, DC, and cemented his place as one of the most important figures in the movement’s history.³⁷ In 1979, the year after Milk’s murder, over 75,000 people participated in the first National March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights, demanding legal protection and an end to discrimination.³⁸ There was also backlash to the burgeoning gay rights movement, symbolized by the religiously motivated and successful campaign in 1977 led by singer Anita Bryant to repeal an ordinance that prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation in Miami-Dade County, Florida.

The 1980s and 1990s saw increased visibility, activism, and some political and legal victories for LGBTQ+ people, as well as setbacks. In 1982, Wisconsin became the first state to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation. Many state sodomy laws—in many cases dating back to the colonial era—had by this point been repealed or struck down, although the Supreme Court decided in the 1986 *Bowers v. Hardwick* decision that states could outlaw sodomy (later overturned in *Lawrence v. Texas* in 2003, which nullified such laws in fourteen remaining states).³⁹

The devastation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic drove community members to band together for survival.⁴⁰ LGBTQ+ organizations stepped in to provide medical care for HIV/AIDS patients neglected by the government and coordinated a public campaign to pressure the Reagan and Bush administrations to address the epidemic.⁴¹ The AIDS Memorial Quilt project began in San Francisco in 1987 and was repeatedly displayed in Washington, DC, where 1.2 million visitors came in 1996. In 1993, over 1 million people marched on Washington to protest the government’s handling of AIDS and anti-LGBTQ policies, including the ban on gay servicemembers.⁴² A few months

later, President Clinton announced the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Policy,” which allowed closeted individuals to serve but resulted in the discharge of more than 13,000 LGBTQ+ servicemembers.⁴³ The marriage equality movement began to gather steam in the 1990s, although the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act’s definition of marriage as a heterosexual union permitted states to refuse to recognize same sex marriages performed in other states.⁴⁴

In the twenty-first century, LGBTQ Americans have made major strides toward legal equality and achieved an unprecedented degree of mainstream recognition and acceptance. President Obama repealed “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” in 2011, allowing gay, lesbian, and bisexual Americans to serve openly in the military. Marriage equality advanced at the state and then federal level. The first same-sex marriages in the United States were recognized in Massachusetts in May 2004, following a ruling by the Massachusetts Supreme Court that nullified the state’s ban on same-sex marriage.⁴⁵ An initial backlash followed with eighteen states subsequently passing constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage.⁴⁶ However, other states began to legalize same-sex marriage, starting with Connecticut in 2008. State bans began to fall as judges struck them down and states opted not to appeal. In 2011, the Obama administration announced that it would no longer defend the Defense of Marriage Act’s provision defining marriage as between a man and a woman in court.⁴⁷ That act was greatly weakened with the *United States v. Windsor* case in 2013. In 2015, the Supreme Court ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution guarantees same-sex couples the right to marry in *Obergefell v. Hodges*.⁴⁸ By 2025, 68 percent of Americans said they supported same-sex marriage, albeit down from a high of 71 percent a few years earlier and, as with everything, subject to a gaping partisan divide.⁴⁹ The same year, Congress passed the Respect for Marriage Act, which repealed the federal definition of marriage as between one man and one woman and required states to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states.⁵⁰ The Supreme Court’s 2020 *Bostock v. Clayton County* decision, in which a 6-3 majority ruled that private employers could not discriminate against employees based on sexual orientation, represented another landmark win for LGBTQ+

LGBTQ+ activism—inspired by previous generations—needs to be substantially revived to defend the rights already won and to push for further equality.

rights.⁵¹

Unlike the last decade, the 2020s have witnessed setbacks with LGBTQ+ and particularly trans rights being sucked into intensifying culture wars. Two Supreme Court cases, *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* (2018) and *303 Creative LLC v. Elenis* (2023), overturned state anti-discrimination laws to allow for business owners to refuse to provide services (a same-sex wedding cake and a website) on religious grounds. Health care and education have emerged as major fronts for LGBTQ+ activism and political contestation. Republican-led states have passed laws to restrict transgender students’ ability to use bathrooms, participate in athletic competitions, or switch to pronouns that do not correspond to their birth sex.⁵² As of 2026, twenty-seven mainly Republican-led states had passed laws restricting or banning transgender youth from

receiving gender-affirming care.⁵³

Tennessee’s ban was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2025, and in 2026, both the American Society of Plastic Surgeons and the American Medical Association changed their official recommendations to postpone gender-affirming medical interventions until adulthood.⁵⁴

At the same time, a number of

Democratic-led states have passed laws intended to protect health care access for transgender people and prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in schools.⁵⁵ Passing the Equality Act (proposed in 2021), which would amend federal law to broadly prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, or gender identity, is a major priority for the LGBTQ+ rights movement.⁵⁶

The second Trump administration aggressively pursued the rollback of LGBTQ+ rights. In fact, Trump campaigned in 2024 on such issues with one particularly effective television ad proclaiming, “Kamala is for they/them. President Trump is for you.”⁵⁷ The number of initiatives, including executive orders and intra-departmental directives, is large and wide-ranging, and the pace has been frenetic. With the goal of weakening or eliminating DEI initiatives, “wokeism,” and “gender ideology,” various terms have been banned or restricted from governmental documents and websites, including transgender, gender-based violence, LGBTQ, men, women, bias, nonbinary, non-binary, they/them, and even victim.⁵⁸ The website

for the Stonewall National Monument opened in 2016 was changed from “Before the 1960s, almost everything about living openly as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ+) person was illegal” to “Before the 1960s, almost everything about living authentically as a lesbian, a bisexual person, or a gay man was illegal.”⁵⁹ In 2026, the Pride flag was temporarily removed from the site only to be quickly reinstalled by the city of New York. The administration has decreed that there are only two sexes, affecting many trans and non-binary people and their government-issued identification that previously had an “X” marker. Sex at birth is also now required on federal government documents. Federal funding cuts have affected many organizations and services such as Lambda Legal (subsequently reversed), HIV/AIDS services, youth suicide prevention, and medical research, specifically \$125 million in research grants through the National Institutes of Health.⁶⁰

Members of the community have increasingly banded together with other social justice movements, recognizing a common struggle for rights and representation. Following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in 2020, over seventy-five LGBTQ+ rights organizations signed a letter expressing “explicit commitments to embrace anti-racism and end white supremacy.”⁶¹ According to Human Rights Watch, a prominent LGBTQ+ rights organization, “achieving racial justice is not a step on our path to LGBTQ+ liberation—it is the only way forward.”⁶² Nevertheless, a rising backlash in many U.S. states has presented new complications and threats, as evidenced by the massacre of forty-nine people at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in 2016 and the attack at a gay bar in Colorado Springs in 2022 that killed five and wounded seventeen. Indeed, over 2022, the number of far-right protests against LGBTQ+ individuals and organizations tripled, accounting for two-thirds of all such protests by the end of that year.⁶³ Such trends have continued in the years since.⁶⁴ Given the rising backlash, official Trump administration policies, and the actions in many conservative states, the present situation deeply concerns many members of the LGBTQ+ community and the organizations that represent them.

The list of prominent American LGBTQ+ individuals is long and covers all walks of life; politicians such as Pete Buttigieg, Barney Frank; artists, composers, and entertainers include Ellen DeGeneres, Jodi Foster, Neil Patrick Harris, Rock Hudson, Divine, Liberace, Harvey Fierstein, Annie Leibovitz, Cole Porter, Stephen Sondheim,

Aaron Copland, John Cage, John Waters, Andy Warhol, Keith Haring; writers like William S. Burroughs, Truman Capote, Allen Ginsberg, Tennessee Williams, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Gertrude Stein, Judith Butler, and Walt Whitman; businesspeople and journalists such as Rachel Maddow, André Leon Talley, Michael Kors, Suze Ormond, Tim Cook, Peter Thiel, Tom Ford, David Geffen, and David Sedaris; activists and intellectuals like Angela Davis, Susan Sontag, and Larry Kramer; and even criminals such as Jeffrey Dahmer and William Bonin. Gay life has always centered on the big cities, but especially prominent places include San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC, where 14.5 percent of the population belongs to the community.⁶⁵

Uncertain Transatlantic Futures and the Need for Shared Activism

Over the last century, the LGBTQ+ community in both countries has made immense progress overall. From the elimination of anti-sodomy laws to marriage equality to increased levels of institutional and societal acceptance, the successes have been life-changing. The last five to ten years, however, have witnessed a backlash, especially from the right, particularly in the United States and largely focused on the trans community. This is happening both at the federal level through Trump administration policy and decisions from the ultra-conservative Supreme Court, as well as in many Republican-dominated states. There are likewise signs of a backlash in Germany, as revealed by the platform of the ever-more popular Alternative for Germany. One hopes that the widespread belief that what happens in the United States will happen a few years later in Germany is not true.

The future is yet to be written, and several scenarios are possible. On the one hand, the current backlash could intensify. There are fears that the current U.S. Supreme Court could overturn the *Obergefell* precedent, or even *Lawrence v. Texas*, leading to a deterioration of LGBTQ+ life in many conservative states. A conservative majority on the court is likely for the foreseeable future. Other decisions or federal policies could even erode or eliminate rights in more liberal jurisdictions. It is not inconceivable that the AfD will eventually join a national coalition in Germany. It is even more likely that the party will govern at the state level, perhaps as early as fall 2026. On the other hand, a change in executive power in the United States

could reverse the backlash. The Equality Act could pass if Democrats achieve unified control in Washington as early as 2028. The AfD could govern poorly and rapidly lose support in Germany. Efforts to ease parenthood for same-sex couples—for instance, allowing two mothers on a birth certificate or liberalizing surrogacy for gay men—are already being seriously discussed. The only certainty is that LGBTQ+ activism—inspired by previous generations—needs to be substantially revived to defend the rights already won and to push for further equality.

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The Past and Present of LGBTQ+ Healthcare in Germany and the United States

G. SAMANTHA ROSENTHAL

In 2017, on the banks of the river Spree in central Berlin, a colorful, playful monument consisting of large, sculpted flowers, accompanied by two gray steles embossed with explanatory text, was installed to commemorate Berlin's role in history as the "birthplace of the first homosexual emancipation movement."¹ Indeed, in 1897, a small group of German scientists and activists founded the *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee* (Scientific-Humanitarian Committee). They argued that homosexuality was an innate human condition, that it could not be changed, and therefore should not be criminalized.²

It is no coincidence that science and medicine were at the forefront of the world's "first homosexual emancipation movement," for the study and treatment of gender and sexual differences as a medical phenomenon has long been, and remains, core to the narrative of LGBTQ+ activism in both Germany and the United States.

The history of LGBTQ+ healthcare in Germany and the United States is a fundamentally transnational narrative that jumps back and forth across the Atlantic and spans 150 years from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Within global LGBTQ+ healthcare history, Germany and the United States play outsized roles as centers of scientific and medical innovation and expertise, as well as where queer and trans "patients" have long organized, again and again, in resistance to that authority.

A History of LGBTQ+ Healthcare in Two Countries

In 1864, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, a German lawyer and theologian, coined the term "Urning" to describe a person who experienced *mannmännliche Liebe* (same-sex love between men). Ulrich corresponded with physicians and psychiatrists across Europe, hoping to influence the medical profession.³ Karl Maria Kertbeny, an Austro-Hungarian writer and frequent correspondent of Ulrichs', went a step further in 1869, developing the categories *Heterosexualität* and *Homosexualität* to describe natural, innate variations in human sexuality.⁴ In so doing, Ulrichs and Kertbeny both shifted the discussion of same-sex activity away from "sodomy," a Biblical concept that for centuries had been used to punish male same-sex sexual activity as sin, and toward "homosexuality," a modern, scientific term meant to describe and diagnose a natural variation in human sexuality.⁵ As such, this new concept shifted societal and legal understandings of same-sex activity away from something that someone did (a behavior) and toward something that someone was (an identity), creating a class of people who could both be oppressed and also advocate for their own rights.⁶

By the turn of the twentieth century, the term "homosexual" had entered U.S. scientific and clinical settings.⁷ New theories of why people were homosexual also came into prominence, most influentially the theory of so-called sexual inversion: that the male homosexual

was a biological man with a female internal self, and the female homosexual was a biological woman with an internal male self.⁸ At the same time, the scientific study of hermaphroditism, what today is called intersex, developed in the late nineteenth century, moving away from a prior understanding of sex as determined by one's external anatomy (the presence or absence of a penis) toward a gonadal theory of sex: that one's sex is determined by the presence or absence of certain reproductive organs (ovaries and testes).⁹ These two new understandings—that sex was determined by one's gonads rather than genitalia and that someone might have an inner psychological sex that differs from their biological sex—set the stage for the later scientific and medical decoupling of “sex” and “gender” in the twentieth century.

Enter Magnus Hirschfeld, a gay, Jewish, German doctor and scientist and one of the co-founders of the Berlin-based Scientific-Humanitarian Committee in 1898. In his 1910 book *Die Transvestiten*, Hirschfeld coined the term “transvestite”—the first modern term to acknowledge trans people as something different than homosexuals.¹⁰

In 1919, Hirschfeld opened the *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* (Institute for Sexual Science) adjacent to the northeast corner of the Tiergarten in central Berlin. From 1919 through 1933, during the Weimar era, the Institute hosted a medical clinic, a lecture hall, and the world's largest library dedicated to the study of human sexuality.¹¹ At this Institute, the first recorded transgender medical treatments were endeavored. Building on the work of the Viennese scientist Eugen Steinach, who in the 1920s experimented with the removal or transfer of gonads between male and female animals as a way to change an animal's sex, Hirschfeld and his colleagues began to experiment with applying a similar concept to human patients: removing the testes of trans women to stop the production of testosterone; and in some rare cases, attempting vaginoplasty, the construction of a new vagina to replace a patient's former penis.¹²

In 1933, with the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party, seventy years of German scientific and medical advancement came crashing down. In May of that year, right-wing youth marched on Hirschfeld's Institute and ransacked the building. They carted out thousands of volumes from the Institute's library and three days later burned many of the books on the Opernplatz in central Berlin.¹³ Hirschfeld was actually outside of Germany's

A plaque commemorating the site of the *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* (Institute for Sexual Science), Berlin, Germany. Photograph by the author.



borders at the time; he never returned to his home country, dying in exile in France in 1935.¹⁴

During the twelve years of Nazi rule, roughly 100,000 suspected homosexuals and trans people in central Europe were arrested, and as many as 7,000 to 10,000 were murdered in concentration camps.¹⁵ The Nazis also conducted medical experiments on some detainees, including forced castrations, and conversely, testosterone implants, as a way to “cure” prisoners of their homosexuality.¹⁶

Harry Benjamin, a German-born physician and scientist, survived the war. In fact, he had been living in New York City since the 1910s and was not in Germany during the Nazi era. As a specialist in the Steinach method (named for the aforementioned Austrian Jewish scientist), Benjamin prescribed hormonal and surgical treatments to treat postmenopausal women as well as aging men who desired to restore the sexual vitality of their youth.¹⁷ Building on Steinach's experiments with gonads and hormones in the 1920s, and thanks to the invention of synthetic forms of estrogen and testosterone in

the 1930s, Benjamin was able to prescribe hormone injections or tablets, and, in 1949, for the first time ever, he prescribed estrogen to a trans woman patient.¹⁸ In that same year, the American doctor David O. Cauldwell coined the term “transsexual” to distinguish someone who wished to undergo medical treatment to change their sex from those other trans people (Hirschfeld’s “transvestites”) who simply wanted to change their attire.¹⁹

In the 1950s, doctors in the United States increasingly turned to synthetic hormones as a way to manipulate a patient’s sexual characteristics, most commonly in the treatment of intersex children and adults. Indeed, the 1950s witnessed increasing scientific and medical activity devoted to the “correction” of intersex bodies, pioneered at medical centers like Johns Hopkins University in the United States.²⁰ In the context of studying intersex children and endeavoring to align these children’s psychological sex with their biological sex, American scientists coined the term “gender role” in 1954 to describe a person’s social behavior and later “gender identity” to describe a person’s internal sense of self.²¹

While doctors in the United States developed increasingly specialized surgeries for “fixing” intersex persons’ genitalia, trans people were excluded from the same treatments due to so-called “mayhem laws” which restricted medical professionals from destroying “healthy” body tissue.²² In other words, because intersex bodies were considered malformed and had to be “corrected,” they could receive gender-affirming care, while trans people, who had “normal” male and female bodies, were denied the same care. Trans Americans, therefore, had to travel abroad for medical care in the 1950s and 1960s. Famously, the American trans woman Christine Jorgensen traveled to Denmark in 1952 for her surgery; other trans patients traveled to Morocco and Mexico.²³ Alternatively, they might also deceive doctors into believing that they were intersex, as the trans woman “Agnes” did in 1959 when, after years of stealing and ingesting her mother’s prescribed estrogen pills, she appeared at UCLA with breasts and a penis and received a vaginoplasty reserved only for intersex patients. Five years later, Agnes revealed to her doctors that she was actually transsexual, not intersex.²⁴

The study and treatment of gender and sexual differences as a medical phenomenon has long been, and remains, core to the narrative of LGBTQ+ activism in both Germany and the United States.

For many Americans, Cold War science and technology were believed to be an unstoppable force for modernization. 1966 marked a banner year in the emergence of “transsexuality” as a mainstream medical subject, with the publication of Harry Benjamin’s magnum opus *The Transsexual Phenomenon* and the opening of the first mainstream medical clinic for transsexuals, the Johns Hopkins University Gender Identity Clinic.²⁵ Yet there was also a dark side to this era’s medical regime, demonstrated by the increasing belief among scientists and the public that modern medicine might “cure” people of their homosexuality.²⁶ This led to the increased application of now-discredited techniques such as electroconvulsive shock therapy and even lobotomies performed upon coerced homosexual patients.²⁷

In the United States and in Germany, the late 1960s marked a turning point, with the Stonewall Riots in New York in 1969 propelling activists in the United States to advocate for Gay Liberation and West German activists in 1971 commencing the *Schwulenbewegung* (Gay Rights Movement).²⁸ The United States also saw a short-lived Trans Liberation movement, from 1969 through 1973, that included a widely-published manifesto calling for the depathologization and demedicalization of transsexuality,

free hormones and surgeries on demand, and the decarceration and deinstitutionalization of transvestites and transsexuals involuntarily confined in American jails and mental institutions.²⁹ None of these demands came to fruition. Instead, the Gay Liberation movement marched to its own drummer—to the exclusion of trans and intersex people.³⁰ One of the gay movement’s greatest successes, in 1973, was the removal of “homosexuality” from the American Psychiatric Association’s handbook of mental disorders in the United States. This move effectively depathologized homosexuality and shifted views of gay and lesbian life from the medical to the social and political realms. Trans and intersex conditions, however, continued to be classified as mental and physiological disorders.³¹

The 1970s also witnessed the emergence of a women’s health movement in the United States led by queer and feminist women who were distrustful of the male-oriented and male-led professions of science, medicine, and technology. These health activists advocated for

women to take control over their own bodies and medical decision-making.³² One of the most highly influential books of the movement was *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, which included liberal discussions of lesbianism as a healthy and normal aspect of women's sexuality.³³ In turning their ire on male-dominated medicine, some lesbian feminists also developed a critique of transsexual medicine as a patriarchal project in which male doctors were technologically manifesting new forms of womanhood by "creating" trans women, thus reinforcing sex stereotypes and inappropriately claiming power over women's bodies.³⁴ The most influential text to emerge from this movement was Janice Raymond's 1979 *The Transsexual Empire*, which claimed that an "empire" of psychologists, endocrinologists, and surgeons was engaging in the technological conquest of women's bodies.³⁵

A major backlash against transsexual medicine ensued. The feminist critique of trans medicine, added to internal debates over the effectiveness of gender-affirming care within the medical profession, plus the rise of the modern right-wing evangelical movement in the United States, led to the swift closure of most gender clinics in the United States by the end of the 1980s, as well as curtailing government funding, via Medicaid, to cover gender-affirming care.³⁶ Meanwhile, in West Germany, a new 1981 law, the *Transsexuellengesetz* (or Transsexuals Act), marked a sign of progress in that it allowed trans Germans for the first time to change their legal name and sex designation. However, the law also required trans people seeking these changes to undergo medical treatments resulting in permanent sterilization.³⁷ In both countries, the medical model of transsexuality reigned, and governments became increasingly suspicious of this unique class of people.

At that same moment, a new virus, Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), began spreading in the United States in the late 1970s and within Germany by no later than 1982.³⁸ The HIV/AIDS crisis spurred gay men and lesbians into health activism. From the Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York in 1981, to the Treatment Action Group, an arm of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP), gay men created AIDS hotlines, staffed their own clinics, and experimented with drug treatments on their own bodies at a time when the U.S. government was doing very little to help them.³⁹ As the U.S. government finally began to invest funding into AIDS research and prevention in the 1990s, this helped to spur new LGBTQ+ health centers in the United States, including support

groups and clinics that served trans people, creating some of the first paid professional positions for transgender health activists.⁴⁰

One of the greatest legacies of the AIDS crisis was a turn in the global LGBTQ+ rights movement toward increasing advocacy for marriage equality. Many gay men had been locked out of their partners' end-of-life care due to their lack of marriage rights. Marriage equality became law in the United States on a state-by-state basis between 2003 and 2015 and in Germany on the federal level in 2017.⁴¹

The 1990s also witnessed the emergence of the first modern intersex rights organizations, such as the Intersex Society of North America. The intersex rights movement began advocating for laws to end the nonconsensual hormonal and surgical treatment of children.⁴² This era also saw the emergence of "transgender" as a new, non-medicalized term that encompassed a broader array of people, including non-binary individuals as well as those who did not wish to undergo medical transition.⁴³ The emergence of "transgender" as distinct from "transsexual" marked a movement toward the de-medicalization of trans identities. Yet while Gender Identity Disorder was removed from the American Psychiatric Association's list of mental disorders in 2013, treatments such as hormones and surgeries have remained governed by medical professionals in both Germany and the United States, and transgender and intersex people both continue to be routinely viewed as medical subjects.⁴⁴

A final achievement of the LGBTQ+ rights movement in the twentieth century was the decriminalization of same-sex behavior. In 1994, the newly united German government finally repealed Paragraph 175, which since the 1870s had criminalized same-sex sexual activity.⁴⁵ While some liberal states in the United States had decriminalized "sodomy" as early as the 1960s, it was not until 2003 that the U.S. Supreme Court finally invalidated all sodomy laws, decriminalizing homosexuality nationwide.⁴⁶ With marriage equality plus decriminalization, it seemed that LGBTQ+ people in both the United States and Germany, by the mid-2010s, had achieved a level of acceptance and equality that heralded the end of the 150-year medical model of gender and sexual deviance. However, a period of intense anti-LGBTQ+ backlash on both sides of the Atlantic in the 2020s shows that fights over LGBTQ+ healthcare are far from over.

Denkmal für die erste homosexuelle Emanzipationsbewegung (Monument to the First Homosexual Emancipation Movement), Berlin, Germany. Photograph by the author.



Transatlantic Debates over LGBTQ+ Healthcare

In March 2026, participants of the American-German Institute's Building LGBTQ+ Communities in Germany and the United States program met with leaders of Aidshilfe Leipzig and RosaLinde Leipzig in a small storefront clinic on the outskirts of Saxony's largest city. These young, queer health activists talked about their activities conducting free HIV testing at saunas, dance clubs, and in refugee camps; providing counseling to sex workers; and offering gender-affirming counseling for trans youth and adults. Clearly, LGBTQ+ health activism is alive and well in Germany, even if these activists operate on the margins of the city, fearful of right-wing intimidation and targeted violence.⁴⁷

One of the greatest recent advancements in LGBTQ+ sexual health in both countries is the introduction of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis treatment, or PrEP (in 2012 in the United States, and in 2016 in the EU), which helps to prevent the transmission of HIV between sex partners. Aidshilfe Leipzig endeavors to get PrEP into the hands of

as many high-risk populations as they can.⁴⁸ AIDS remains a pressing issue in both countries, and especially within the Black community in the United States.⁴⁹

In terms of family planning healthcare in Germany and the United States, there is an uneven playing field. According to the Movement Advancement Project, a U.S.-based NGO that tracks LGBTQ+ legislation, as of April 2026, all fifty states recognize same-sex partners as legal parents in cases of medically-assisted reproduction if the parents are married, yet only twenty states recognize the non-biological parent in medically-assisted reproduction when the couple is unmarried.⁵⁰ In Germany, the non-biological gay or lesbian parent in medically-assisted reproduction is never legally recognized, regardless of marriage status, and must therefore apply to "adopt" the child to become a legal co-parent.⁵¹ In terms of health insurance coverage for fertility treatment for LGBTQ+ adults, only six U.S. states require insurance providers to cover such treatment for queer and trans people; the vast majority of states allow insurers to deny such coverage for LGBTQ+ people.⁵² In Germany, lesbian couples may legally receive sperm donations to conceive a child, yet egg donation is prohibited, and gay male couples are also barred from using a surrogate to carry a child.⁵³

Regarding intersex health freedom and bodily autonomy, Germany's laws are much more progressive than America's. In Germany, a 2021 federal law prohibits nonconsensual "corrective" surgeries on intersex children, allowing, in most cases, for the child to grow into their teenage years before reaching the age of consent at which they can agree to undergo hormonal or surgical treatment.⁵⁴ In the United States, on the other hand, there are only a handful of local hospitals that have enacted prohibitions on nonconsensual "corrective" treatment for intersex children; not even one state has enacted similar legislation barring these procedures.⁵⁵

Without question, the most highly debated and controversial subject in LGBTQ+ healthcare in both countries at the present moment is transgender care, especially the use of puberty blockers, hormones, and surgeries for trans youth. After a long period of trans medicine's marginalization and general inaccessibility in both the United States and Germany from the 1980s through the 2000s, the 2010s witnessed an easing of restrictions in accessing care within both countries. In the United States, the Obama administration lifted the prohibition on Medicaid insurance coverage for

gender-affirming treatments in 2014, and a flurry of clinics began, or restarted, offering transgender medical care.⁵⁶ In Germany, public health insurance coverage for gender-affirming care was guaranteed in a 1987 federal court case, yet treatment options were slow to meet the increasing demand in the 2010s due to diverging guidance governing transgender medicine in different jurisdictions as well as a lack of specialized centers for administering care.⁵⁷

At present, the legal landscape regarding transgender healthcare could not be more different between Germany and the United States. Access to gender-affirming care varies widely by state in the United States, with more liberal jurisdictions enacting explicit protections for transgender healthcare, and more conservative states, on the other hand, placing prohibitions on both youth and adult healthcare access. The Movement Advance Project documents, as of April 2026, at least twenty-six states that ban youth access to gender-affirming healthcare; six of those states also make it a felony to provide this medical care.⁵⁸ A 2025 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *United States. v. Skremetti* affirmed the constitutionality of state-level bans on youth access to transgender care in the United States.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, in Germany, there are no legal prohibitions on accessing gender-affirming care for either transgender adults or minors, and furthermore, the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Wissenschaftlichen Medizinischen Fachgesellschaften* (the Association of Scientific Medical Societies) in Germany released new guidance in 2025 affirming transgender youth access to gender-affirming care.⁶⁰

The question of insurance coverage for gender-affirming care is a complicated subject in the United States. As of April 2026, twenty-six states explicitly require Medicaid to cover gender-affirming care, while on the other hand, at least fourteen states expressly prohibit Medicaid spending on trans youth, and eleven of those states also bar Medicaid funding for trans adult care.⁶¹ In terms of private insurance, the Movement Advancement Project documents twenty-four states that explicitly prohibit discrimination against trans patients in private insurance coverage, while the other half do not protect trans people.⁶² Additionally, eleven U.S. states have laws permitting medical professionals to refuse to treat LGBTQ+ patients based on their religious beliefs.⁶³

There is fear in both countries that the rise of far-right governments—the second-term Trump administration

in the United States, which is already in power, and the possibility of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) gaining control in several German states, if not at some point also on the national stage—could mean further restrictions on LGBTQ+ healthcare.

In the United States, the Trump administration has made clear its desire to ban transgender healthcare across all fifty states for minors and young adults under the age of 19. It has attempted to do this through various means, including federal executive orders, threats to pull government funding from universities and hospitals that engage in transgender medicine, and federal healthcare directives handed down by the Department of Health and Human Services.⁶⁴ Some in the MAGA movement have also expressed a desire to ban transgender healthcare outright for adults.⁶⁵

In Germany, AfD members in the Bundestag have called for the rollback of LGBTQ+ rights and the promotion of heterosexual reproduction and nuclear families.⁶⁶ In their 2025 Election Platform, the AfD calls gender-affirming treatments for transgender youth a form of “child endangerment” (*Kindeswohlgefährdung*) and refers to surrogacy as a means of “child trafficking” (*Kinderhandel*). They call for the curtailing of any discussion of LGBTQ+ identities in student sex education; the banning of puberty blockers, hormonal, and surgical treatments for transgender youth; and a full repeal of Germany’s landmark 2024 Self-Determination Act, which gave transgender Germans the right to change their name and sex designations without having to undergo invasive psychological and medical testing and treatments.⁶⁷

The Future of LGBTQ+ Healthcare

In September 2025, when participants of the American-German Institute’s Building LGBTQ+ Communities in Germany and the United States program assembled in Washington, DC, we met with Naseema Shafi, CEO of the Whitman-Walker Clinic, one of the nation’s oldest LGBTQ+ health clinics, founded in 1973 and located in DC’s historic “gayborhood.”

Ms. Shafi told us that her clinic serves roughly 20,000 LGBTQ+ patients a year, including 4,000 transgender patients who rely on this clinic for accessing gender-affirming healthcare. Under the second Trump administration, the clinic has been targeted by federal threats to withhold Medicaid funding unless they stop

offering gender-affirming care. Ms. Shafi is defiantly keeping the doors open—and still serving transgender patients.⁶⁸

For over 150 years, LGBTQ+ rights in Germany and the United States have continuously revolved around questions of science, medicine, and healthcare. Terms such as “homosexual” and “transsexual” emerged in scientific and medical contexts in which queer and trans people were studied, labeled, diagnosed, and offered (or sometimes forced into) treatment options. By the twenty-first century, LGBTQ+ activists have been largely successful in shifting legal, societal, and cultural understandings of diverse genders and sexualities away from this former medical model. And yet, recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions affirming the practice of conversion therapy and allowing restrictions on gender-affirming care, as well as far-right political calls for ending the normalization of LGBTQ+ families in both countries, demonstrate that concerns over LGBTQ+ healthcare remain at the forefront of debates over LGBTQ+ citizenship on both sides of the Atlantic.

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Drag as a Political Form of Cultural Expression

JASMIN GRÄWEL

He dances to music by the famous singer and queer icon Freddie Mercury and his band Queen, wearing a leather jacket and a fake mustache. On his shoulders, he carries a wooden structure with cardboard letters glued to it. It reads *“Patriarchat,”* the German word for patriarchy. He lip-syncs.

“Pressure pushin’ down on me. Pressin’ down on you, no man ask for...”

The audience can see how heavy the burden is that he is suffering under. It is not because he is performing this act outside on a stage in 95-degree Fahrenheit heat in the summer, in front of hundreds of spectators. No, it is patriarchy above all that oppresses him. Later, he sets down the structure, goes through several costume changes, stripping off his clothes with relish, and a Superman outfit comes into view.

“I want to break free. I want to break free...”

With this song, he frees himself from all the pressure weighing him down. He dances and jumps across the stage, just like Superman. He encourages the audience to clap along to the beat of the music.

“Don’t stop me now, ‘cause I’m havin’ a good time...”

And as the grand finale, he finally smashes the cardboard letters. He does this with a baseball bat in his hand. And if you look closely, you can see that there is a sticker on the bat with the anti-fascist acronym “FCK NZ.” After about

five minutes, it is all over. The patriarchy in ruins and the audience thrilled by this stunning performance of a drag king.

What I am describing here was a performance by drag king MisterButchJay. He won the drag competition at Christopher Street Day Leipzig 2025—the first drag king ever to do so at this competition. I am part of the Christopher Street Day Leipzig (Leipzig Pride)¹ organizing team, and I saw this performance. I was fascinated and overwhelmed by it. As a fan of drag myself, I want to write an essay about this special type of art that is so closely linked to the queer community.

For many people, drag is one thing above all else: art. A show—it is dance, it is music, it is lip-syncing. It is entertainment. It is about expressing yourself. Being something you want to be. But it is much more than just art and fun. Drag is self-empowerment. Drag is a performance. Drag is a play on gender and gender roles. What is a man? What is a woman? Drag is community work, and drag is political!

The art of drag has been an essential part of the queer community² from the very beginning. Through drag, people draw attention to the issues that concern them. Perhaps they also draw attention to things they want to let go of. How else can one explain how a drag king like MisterButchJay—that is, a woman who deliberately and exaggeratedly mimics a man—smashes letters with a baseball bat that once spelled out the word *“Patriarchat”*? Patriarchy does not just oppress women—it oppresses



MisterButchJay performs. Photo by CSD Leipzig 2025/Christiane Gundlach.

everyone, especially marginalized groups. That is what MisterButchJay wanted to express with his performance.

Many books, articles, essays, and academic publications have already been written about drag and its significance. For this reason, this essay can by no means give a complete picture of the art of drag but will rather offer a tiny glimpse into the world of drag to those who have not known much about it until now. Although drag is often seen as entertainment, it can also be a political form of cultural expression that challenges traditional ideas of gender and supports queer activism.

First, the essay will give a short overview of drag, gender roles, and how drag is a form of cultural performance; it will introduce a few key terms relevant to the topic. It then moves on to the Stonewall Riots, where drag plays a significant role in terms of politics and resistance, and the AIDS epidemic, where drag has helped in some way to overcome this crisis. Finally, the essay returns to MisterButchJay as an example of contemporary drag activism, exploring his vision of drag, launching the first drag king race in Leipzig, and why drag is political.

So let the following pages take you on a journey; immerse yourself and try to understand why drag is so important to so many people in the queer community. Why it is—and always will be—an integral part of our community's culture.

Drag as Cultural Performance

"We are all born naked and the rest is drag." -RuPaul

The world of drag features a wide variety of performers and artists. Drag queens and drag kings are the two most well-known categories. But, it is not just cisgender men who are gay performing as drag queens or cisgender women who identify as lesbians performing as drag kings. There are drag creatures (performers without a clearly assigned gender; sometimes animals or mythical creatures are also incorporated into a performance of a drag creature) and other drag artists, too. They all have their own ideas about how they want to look and how they want to present themselves on stage. Some of them play with gender; others deliberately avoid clear gender categorization as part of their stage persona.

"While many drag queens are gay cisgender men, drag shows have always included transgender women and other gender diverse people as performers. Some of these trans performers may have begun their careers perceived as gay men, and they were drawn to drag culture because it was one of the few places where their femininity was accepted and even celebrated [...] Today, drag performance is more popular than ever, and the term drag artist is being used to recognize that drag is an art form that is open to everyone."³

There is one person who is among the most popular drag

artists in the world: RuPaul. His quote, “We are all born naked and the rest is drag,” is one of the most famous within the queer community and probably beyond. Whenever people talk about drag and want to know more about it, it is oftentimes this quote that is brought up. RuPaul is an American singer, actor, model, performer, host, and drag queen and most famous for his tv show RuPaul’s Drag Race, a reality show about drag queens competing against each other in various contests and challenges. This show is also an inspiration for so many drag queens, drag kings, and performers around the world. It has become part of queer culture. RuPaul is a pop cultural phenomenon.⁴

The sentence made famous by RuPaul is a way of simply saying that everything people wear is all drag. People express themselves and their identity with clothes, makeup, and behavior, meaning one’s gender is performative or constructed. In a conversation with Oprah Winfrey, RuPaul once explained what his intention was when he first said that famous sentence: “What it teaches people is this [...] all things are temporary [...] just clothes, paint, powder [...] this body even is temporary [...] drag actually reveals who you are.”⁵

This touches queer theory. A prominent figure who gained widespread recognition in the early 1990s for her idea of gender as something that people perform is feminist philosopher Judith Butler. She and other thinkers basically say the same thing as RuPaul. Butler argues that gender is not simply a given naturally; it is constructed through the things people do, the ways they behave, and the repetition of these actions: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender... identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”⁶

Combining RuPaul’s famous quote with Butler’s theory about gender expression, it can be said that drag is an art form that brings this performance of gender to light in a very unique way, for example, by exposing stereotypes of what it means to be a woman or a man. This happens when drag queens take the stage and, for instance, portray an exaggerated form of femininity. Or when this art form challenges the very physical traits and behaviors that are typically understood as masculine or feminine. Drag challenges cultural norms, questioning them or bringing them up for discussion.

Drag and Queer Resistance: Stonewall Riots

Drag artists have also been an essential part of queer resistance. Stonewall and the Stonewall riots have been among the most significant events in the history of the LGBTQ+ community. What happened on and around June 28, 1969, on Christopher Street in New York City has had a profound impact that continues to this day. The Stonewall riots were a turning point, giving rise to a movement of queer people that championed the rights of minorities and brought them into the streets through protest marches, not only in the United States but around the world. Among the key figures who took the streets back then to fight against oppression and police violence were gender nonconforming people, drag queens, and trans people.⁷

Primary sources such as newspaper articles and newsletters can give a sense of what the mood was like in New York at the time and, above all, who was protesting against the police in the streets. A newsletter from the Mattachine Society of New York, a national gay rights organization, provides a very detailed account of who was out on the streets around the Stonewall Inn on these fateful nights and who bravely and vocally stood up to the police:

“It was an interesting sidelight on the demonstrations that those usually put down as “sissies” or “swishes” showed the most courage and sense during the action. [...] At one point a cop grabbed a wild Puerto Rican queen and lifted his arm to bring a club down on “her.” In his best Mario Montez voice, the queen challenged, “How’d you like a big Spanish dick up your little Irish ass?” The cop was so shocked he hesitated in his swing and the queen escaped.”⁸

The terms “swishes,” “sissies,” and “queen” used in this short excerpt suggest that this may be a euphemism for a drag queen. It should be noted that “swishes” and “sissies” were used at the time as derogatory terms to describe gay men who dressed and moved in a very feminine manner.⁹

Among the people who later became particularly well-known in the history of the Stonewall riots was Marsha P. Johnson. Johnson, a black transgender woman, was also described as a gender-nonconforming activist often associated with drag culture. There is even a myth that it was Johnson who threw the first brick, although this cannot be proven. Johnson was a frequent visitor to the

Stonewall Inn, and she played an important role in the events surrounding Stonewall.¹⁰

Marsha P. Johnson, together with Sylvia Rivera, a drag queen, later founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). Through this organization, Johnson and Rivera sought to provide a safe haven for transgender people in New York City who were particularly vulnerable. At the time, many of them were working in prostitution to make money and lacked protection, money, or food. In this way, Johnson and Rivera were also trailblazers for later transgender activism.¹¹

Drag and Activism during the AIDS Crisis

Drag has also frequently been associated with activism, and this was especially true of drag and the queer community in the AIDS crisis. During the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, the disease disproportionately affected gay communities. The stigma attached to gay men in particular and by extension to the entire community was incredibly intense in the early stages of the crisis. AIDS was often disparagingly referred to as “the gay plague.”¹²

In the early days of the AIDS crisis in the early 80s—and really, right up to the present—drag was used to raise awareness about the disease; it was a way to bring people together to support one another during the crisis, but drag shows also served to raise funds. As Craig Seligman wrote for *Time*, “At a time when unembarrassed homophobes were proclaiming that people with AIDS had gotten just what they deserved, drag queens became recognized as keepers of the flame of gay culture by a gay population finally proud to acknowledge that it had a culture.”¹³

Lady Bunny was one of those fierce drag queens of New York who organized events simply to bring people together and cheer them up in the difficult and devastating times in the early and mid-80s, when the crisis hit the community very hard. Lady Bunny created an outdoor all-day festival called Wigstock,¹⁴ which “began when the gay community was decimated by AIDS; it was something to lift our spirits, because a lot of gay people were activists

back then.”¹⁵

Wigstock was inspired a bit by the famous Woodstock festival from the 1960s, but in a drag version. It brought together hundreds of people, and it helped sustain a sense of solidarity at a time when the community was heavily affected by the AIDS crisis. A twenty-minute documentary called *Wigstock – The Movie*¹⁶ from the late 80s provides a good sense of what the event was like back then and who else was on stage alongside Lady Bunny.

Doris Fish is another fierce drag queen that raised awareness of the AIDS crisis. She was a popular drag queen living in San Francisco. Fish was a whirlwind—artist, singer, actress, author. In the early 1980s, she and her band Sluts-A-Go-Go were among the most famous drag

queens San Francisco had ever seen. She was known for hosting fabulous shows and was also raising awareness about AIDS and holding fundraisers.¹⁷ Doris Fish had her own column for quite some time in the *San Francisco Sentinel*, a newspaper for and about the gay community. She wrote about a lot of things, including her own battle with being HIV positive.¹⁸ Sadly,

she died of AIDS in 1991. In her honor, there is an online archive with photos and information about her life.¹⁹

Drag queens, such as Lady Bunny and Doris Fish, have stepped into the spotlight to draw attention. They organized community events, partly to give each other a good time and provide mutual support during the AIDS crisis. In addition, fundraisers were organized to collect money for various initiatives designed to benefit those affected. These drag queens were role models, too, using entertainment as a means to make a political statement and draw attention to things that are going wrong.²⁰

Contemporary drag activism

Contemporary drag performances are still political. They have not lost any of their activist spirit.

After winning the Leipzig drag contest, MisterButchJay came up with the idea of providing a stage primarily for drag kings. This is because even within the drag community, there are disparities in the visibility of individual drag artists. Drag queens are the ones who

have gained a great deal of visibility in recent decades within the queer community and in mainstream culture, while the kings still remain somewhat in the shadows. This is changing in many parts of the world, which is wonderful. To bring visibility to other drag performers, MisterButchJay has launched the Drag King Race. He organized the event on his own, drawing inspiration from RuPaul's famous Drag Race. He found a venue open to queer events and planned the race together with a few helpers.

MisterButchJay made a conscious decision to give drag kings from Leipzig and beyond a stage. Local artists, each one different, played an offensive, macho game; presented themselves as the stereotypical beer-bellied, beer-drinking version of a man; or took the stage as a clown, thereby dismantling the binary male-female system. All of this found its place that evening. Moreover, it was meant to be a stage that was intentionally open to newcomers. MisterButchJay's goal was for them to try their hand at drag and showcase themselves and their personal style of drag to a larger audience. The audience was thrilled. Queer people and allies applauded the kings who competed against each other on stage in lip sync battles.

MisterButchJay's dedication shows that drag creates a space where people can come together and find a special kind of community. In a recent podcast interview that MisterButchJay conducted with me for the podcast *Inside CSD Leipzig – der Podcast*, he says that his drag art is about queer feminist activism and about celebrating diversity, too. Furthermore, it is a political statement: "The very fact that, as a cis woman, I dress in a way that has masculine connotations and that I appropriate and use everything for myself is, in itself, a political act. Drag gives me the freedom to do whatever I want."²¹

This small, local example from MisterButchJay shows that drag has not lost any of its activist spirit today. Beyond all the fun, it is also political. If you will, it is an act of self-empowerment—for example, for a cis woman to step onto a stage and work with masculinity, while also questioning it to some extent, just as MisterButchJay does, or all the other drag kings who were there that evening.

Conclusion

While drag is often viewed primarily as entertainment, its history shows that it has repeatedly served as a form of political expression within the queer community. During

the Stonewall riots, it was primarily the drag queens and others who stood on the front lines and in the front row, fighting back against police violence and discrimination. Take the example of Marsha P. Johnson, who later went on to found the organization STAR. When the AIDS crisis hit the queer community very hard in the early 80s and 90s, once again, drag queens, kings, and others were there to help with organizing events for fundraising, and drag was simply an anchor of joy that helped people in difficult times. Or given a very recent example from MisterButchJay in Leipzig, Germany. They all show just how much more drag is. It has been a part of our community from the very beginning and will continue to play a significant role by courageously bringing issues that concern the community to the stage or by questioning the status quo.

Drag is so much more than just fun and entertainment. If you're now interested in learning more about drag, go for it—my sources will provide you with even more in-depth information, and who knows, maybe you'll even try drag yourself someday? Don't worry, you don't even have to be part of the queer community to do so. Drag is for everyone, no matter what gender you are or how you define yourself. And well, we're all actually doing drag every day, whether we realize it or not, because as RuPaul so beautifully put it, "We are all born naked and the rest is drag."

NOTES

1 CSD Leipzig is an organization in eastern Germany, formed in 1992. Every year volunteers organize a Pride demonstration and several events. Leipzig Pride is always in July. More information: www.csd-leipzig.de.

2 I use the term “queer community” as an inclusive term. To me, queer is an umbrella term, and it includes all sexual orientations and identities. These include lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, inter, nongender, agender.

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From Online Outrage to State Policy

ANTI-LGBTQ+ BACKLASH ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

MIEKO KURAMOTO AND CHRISTOPH MAYER

On January 20, 2025, the first day of his second term, U.S. President Donald J. Trump signed an executive order titled “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government.”¹ The order did more than change federal policy. It sent a signal to right-wing movements far beyond the United States: “gender ideology,” long a rallying cry of the anti-gender movement, had become official government language. In the days that followed, further measures targeted trans rights, DEI programs, and gender-affirming healthcare.² Across the Atlantic, similar language was gaining ground in Germany.³ Rainbow flags,⁴ Pride events, drag queen story hours, gender-inclusive language,⁵ and trans rights were increasingly cast as symbols of so-called “wokeism,” turning once-fringe culture-war talking points into mainstream political issues. The parallels are hard to miss: narratives that had circulated for years in right-wing online spaces, often as memes, hashtags, and outrage campaigns, were now appearing in executive orders, official statements, and legislative proposals. The wording changed from country to country, but the target stayed the same. Across both sides of the Atlantic, anti-LGBTQ+ politics shows how online outrage can harden into policy, legislation, and institutional practice.⁶

The 2024 U.S. Election Cycle: Extremism Takes Center Stage

After losing the culture war on same-sex marriage in 2015, the American right needed a new social stump issue; something that would galvanize their base in the way that gay marriage once had.⁷ After significant message testing,

they landed on one: transgender identity.

As less than 1 percent of the population, transgender Americans made an easy target for demonization. Most Americans had never met a trans person before. Right-wing message-testers latched onto the growing social anxiety that many on the right felt and recast transgender identity as evidence of “radical indoctrination”⁸ and a cause for moral panic. Especially when it came to transgender children, conservatives found that they had a potent political message and were easily able to attach it to other seismic social shifts: the COVID-19 pandemic had fueled widespread distrust in the government, extreme economic anxieties and fear about the state of the world were ever-present, and a new generation of right-wing extremism was on the rise. The environment was ripe for a scapegoat, and the “gender ideology” panic was born.

Social media played a key role in amplifying these fears. As right-wing messaging caught on, terms like “groomer” and “pedophile” saw a massive surge online,⁹ largely led by far-right politicians,¹⁰ podcasters,¹¹ and activists¹² like “Libs of TikTok”¹³ who used their platforms to circulate outrage and conspiracy theories. Transgender girls and women in sports, gender-affirming care, and inclusive curriculum suddenly shifted from obscure talking points of the extreme right to the mainstream conservative stump issues.

That strategy worked: the battle against gender ideology brought in thousands of new political donors in 2023.¹⁴ “Project 2025,” the 900+ page policy agenda written by

the right-wing Heritage Foundation think tank in 2023, made one of its primary objectives “maintain[ing] a biblically based, social-science-reinforced definition of marriage and family” and described “purveyors” of “gender ideology” as “child predators and misogynistic exploiters of women.”¹⁵ Once considered extreme, this playbook became the blueprint for mainstream conservative positioning.

By Election Day of 2024, Republicans had poured over \$222 million into running anti-trans advertisements.¹⁶ The right deployed these ads strategically, concentrating them heavily in swing states and airing them over 30,000 times, primarily during professional and collegiate football broadcasts.¹⁷ They framed Vice President Kamala Harris and other Democrats as “dangerously liberal,” hammering the narrative that Harris favored American taxpayer dollars going to “sex change operations” for people in prisons and immigrants in detention centers. “Kamala is for they/them, Trump is for you” became one of the defining slogans of the 2024 cycle, and initial polling estimated that these ads alone shifted the race an estimated 2.7 percentage points in Trump’s favor.¹⁸

These same ads quickly caught fire online and spread rapidly across platforms beyond TV, reaching an even broader domestic and international audience by the time November rolled around. Once online, they were applied beyond just Harris—numerous Democrats in vulnerable seats were smeared with the same punchy accusations.¹⁹

The Democrats’ lack of response to the sheer volume of ads that were run left the impression that Democrats were not only unable to respond, but were culpable of the accusations the right wing lodged: that the left was out of touch, obsessed with ideology, and pandering to political correctness.²⁰ Because the Democrats never talked about it, on-the-fence Americans had no counter-narrative other than the Republican framing of the leftist stance on trans issues.

That strategy worked, and from relative obscurity, “gender ideology” became one of the defining issues of the ultimately successful Trump campaign, alongside immigration and the economy.²¹ President Trump won a second term, Republicans won control of both the U.S.

House and Senate, and the right succeeded in bringing an issue from the extremities of its party and establishing it as one of the central tenets of the ruling party’s entire legislative agenda.

The Second Trump Administration: A Campaign Strategy Becomes Law

One year into the Trump administration, the impacts of that rhetoric-turned-policy are shaping the lives of LGBTQ+ Americans in significant and dangerous ways.

Starting on his first day in office, Trump quickly began implementing his policy priorities via executive order²²—most of which were taken directly from Project 2025. His administration rescinded dozens of Biden-era protections for LGBTQ+ Americans, defined sex as a fixed binary based on birth;²³ prohibited federal funding, research, or support for gender-affirming care;²⁴ mandated the elimination of federal funding

for “gender ideology” in schools;²⁵ threatened funding for schools with inclusive athletic policies at any age;²⁶ and barred transgender individuals from serving in the armed forces.²⁷ Over the course of the year, the axing of federal funding to (or the federal investigation of) school districts,²⁸ colleges and universities,²⁹ research labs,³⁰ clinics,³¹ hospitals,³² libraries,³³ state governments,³⁴ and public and private companies³⁵ has forced them to change their policies, and the threat of investigation and funding loss has led hundreds more to proactively comply with the ideological demands laid out in the Trump administration’s agenda.

The U.S. House and Senate, now both under Republican control, quickly followed suit. In the 119th Congress alone, over sixty-five anti-LGBTQ+ pieces of legislation have been introduced in the House. At the state level, 2025 saw the introduction of 616 bills attacking the LGBTQ+ community, making it the worst legislative year on record for LGBTQ+ Americans.³⁶ Some of the legislative measures at the state and federal level have been particularly extreme, including a bill to establish criminal penalties³⁷—including up to ten years in jail—for doctors who provide gender-affirming care to minors. Nine U.S. states now

Increasingly, right-wing and far-right actors are using online mobilization to shape the political agenda far beyond their own parliamentary strength.

ban transgender people from using public bathrooms consistent with their gender identity,³⁸ and Kansas passed a law that invalidates state-issued driver's licenses, the most common form of identification in the United States, if the gender marker does not align with the individual's sex assigned at birth.³⁹

These policies have had widespread and devastating consequences for trans Americans. Two-thirds of trans Americans report that Trump administration policies have led to difficulties in accessing healthcare. 57 percent of trans Americans report experiencing bias or stigma at work.⁴⁰ The United States has become a dangerous place for transgender people to live: rates of anti-trans hate crimes nearly tripled in six years.⁴¹ As a result of political attacks, nearly half of transgender Americans have seriously considered leaving the country.⁴² Even in states where the legal marginalization of trans individuals is less severe, there is still a palpable sense of fear.

The U.S. example is exactly why nations around the world must take seriously the rhetoric that they might be tempted to write off as extreme. The ultraconservative policies that have come down on LGBTQ+ Americans in the last few years were no surprise; the intentions of their right-wing authors were loudly declared for years—it was the failure to anticipate how willing an electorate might be to find a scapegoat and the failure to prepare a response that was ultimately fatal for the left.

As authoritarianism moves more prominently to the center of the global stage, allies and members of the LGBTQ+ community must focus their attention on all threats to the autonomy and freedoms of the marginalized, no matter how small they may seem.

Not Central, but Contested: Queer Rights in Germany's 2025 Election

Compared with the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign, LGBTQ+ issues played a less central role in Germany's 2025 federal election campaign. But they were far from absent: anti-gender and anti-trans narratives appeared in party manifestos, televised controversies, and right-wing online spaces. At the level of party manifestos, however, the divide was clear: progressive parties treated the protection of LGBTQ+ people as a question of equal rights, anti-discrimination, and democratic inclusion. In their

manifestos, The Greens (*Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*),⁴³ The Left (*Die Linke*),⁴⁴ and the Social Democratic Party (SPD)⁴⁵ all framed queer rights as a matter of anti-discrimination and legal equality, supporting stronger constitutional protections, the Self-Determination Act, and equal rights for LGBTQ+ families. The Greens pledged to defend the Self-Determination Act, while The Left argued that it should be strengthened even further.

By contrast, the far-right Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) framed queer and especially trans issues as part of a broader culture-war narrative, using terms such as “gender ideology,” “trans cult,” and “indoctrination,” and called for the Self-Determination Act to be repealed in full.⁴⁶ The center-right Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) also promised to repeal the law and adopted the term “*Gender-Zwang*” (compulsory gendering), a phrase from conservative and right-wing online debates, calling for public institutions to refrain from using gender-inclusive language.⁴⁷

Online, the campaign moment that drew the strongest reaction in queer circles was Friedrich Merz's comment on Donald Trump's “two genders” policy. In a televised debate, Merz, who was then a candidate and is now chancellor, said Trump's position was “understandable.”⁴⁸ The remark quickly circulated in queer and trans communities, where it was read not simply as a comment on U.S. politics, but as a signal about the CDU/CSU's own stance on gender self-determination.⁴⁹ The backlash was intensified by the resurfacing of a 2020 interview in which Merz, asked whether he would object to a gay chancellor, said sexual orientation was irrelevant to him “as long as it does not affect our culture” and did not enter “the area of laws and of child abuse.”⁵⁰ Although Merz later rejected the accusation that he had linked homosexuality to child abuse, critics argued that placing homosexuality and child abuse in the same answer reproduced a deeply homophobic association. In this sense, queer issues may not have dominated the campaign, but when they did break through, they often did so through moments of controversy and online re-circulation rather than through sustained policy debate.

But LGBTQ+ issues were not a decisive factor for the general electorate in 2025. Election analysis by *Forschungsgruppe Wahlen* found that voters were primarily concerned with peace and security, the economy, and social justice.⁵¹ Within the queer community,

however, the picture looked different. A 2025 LGBTQ+ election study by the University of Giessen and LSVD+ found strong support for the Greens and The Left, while the CDU/CSU and AfD performed poorly among respondents.⁵² The results of the study suggest that party positions on queer rights mattered to many queer voters.

After the election and during the process of forming a new government, the ambivalence in their manifestos became visible in the coalition agreement between the CDU/CSU and SPD. The coalition agreement included a general commitment to protect queer life from discrimination and to ensure that people can live equally and free from violence regardless of sexual orientation.⁵³ Yet the language remained broad and cautious. The most concrete provision concerned the Self-Determination Act: the new government announced an evaluation of the law by July 31, 2026. This showed that, after the election, LGBTQ+ rights were not treated as a central reform agenda but rather as a contested field to be reviewed, limited, and politically managed. Queer organizations criticized the agreement for leaving major gaps, including the absence of stronger constitutional protection, comprehensive measures for LGBTQ+ families, and a clear continuation of the previous government's queer action plan.⁵⁴

LGBTQ+ Rights in Germany After the 2025 Election: From Rainbow Flags to Funding Cuts

Under Germany's new conservative-led government after the 2025 election, one queer-related controversy that gained significant attention online was not about a specific legal reform, but about symbolism: the rainbow flag at the Bundestag.⁵⁵ The debate was triggered by conservative Bundestag President Julia Klöckner's decision not to fly the rainbow flag over the Reichstag building for Berlin Pride, limiting it instead to May 17, the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Interphobia, and Transphobia. The controversy escalated when Chancellor Friedrich Merz defended the decision by saying that parliament was "not a circus tent,"⁵⁶ a remark widely criticized as dismissive of queer visibility. In response, lawmakers from the Greens and The Left staged a visual protest in the plenary chamber: dressed in coordinated colors, they collectively formed a rainbow flag.⁵⁷ The action showed how political contestation

around queer visibility increasingly plays out through images designed to travel online. In a debate shaped by symbolism and social media outrage, the lawmakers answered with a visual counter-symbol: a parliamentary rainbow that was immediately recognizable and easy to share.

The significance of the controversy around the rainbow flag lies not only in the decision itself, but in what it displaced. At a moment when queer people in Germany face rising hostility, the most visible queer-related national debate became a debate about whether a flag should fly over parliament. Questions of concrete rights, protection from violence, funding for queer organizations, or the implementation and defense of the Self-Determination Act were pushed into the background. In this sense, the culture-war framing was politically successful: it narrowed public attention to symbolic recognition while making the material conditions of queer safety and equality far less visible.

A similar pattern can be seen in the debate over gender-inclusive language. Parallel to the controversy around the rainbow flag, several federal ministries moved to restrict the use of gender-inclusive language in official communication.⁵⁸ Because the German language often treats the masculine form as the default, many feminists and LGBTQ+ activists have long argued that women and non-binary people are rendered invisible in language. Gender-inclusive forms, such as gender-neutral terms or written markers like the asterisk and the gender gap, seek to make them visible. This was not a central concern for most voters during the election campaign, but it has long functioned as a powerful conservative and far-right talking point online. Like the flag debate, it turned a symbolic question of recognition into an ideological marker. Taken together, these debates suggest that Germany's anti-gender backlash is not only about rolling back specific rights, such as the Self-Determination Act. Increasingly, it is also about contesting the symbols of recognition themselves. Under pressure from the right, questions such as which flag may fly over parliament or which forms of address may be used in government communication have become part of a broader struggle over queer visibility and democratic belonging.

Increasingly, right-wing and far-right actors are using online mobilization to shape the political agenda far beyond their own parliamentary strength. This logic became even more visible in the case of Frauke Brosius-

Gersdorf.⁵⁹ In 2025, the nomination of the constitutional law professor to Germany's Federal Constitutional Court was derailed after a highly orchestrated right-wing online campaign put massive pressure on the political process. The orchestrated campaign focused primarily on her legal work on abortion reform, using her constitutional views on reproductive rights to portray her as radical and unfit for a seat on the Court. But the attacks went further, drawing on her positions on gender equality and anti-discrimination law to frame her as ideologically extreme. What should have been a parliamentary procedure around a judicial appointment turned into a culture-war controversy over abortion, gender politics, and equality law, eventually leading parties in the political center and on the right to withdraw support or delay the vote. Brosius-Gersdorf ultimately withdrew her candidacy, showing how an online campaign had not only shaped the debate but also changed the course of a formal institutional process. Subsequent analysis by researchers and digital campaign experts showed how the attacks followed a coordinated pattern, with right-wing actors amplifying and reinforcing one another across platforms.⁶⁰ The case illustrates how orchestrated right-wing campaigns can transform complex institutional questions into moralized online battles and exert pressure on political decision-making.

While symbolic controversies and online campaigns have dominated the national debate, anti-LGBTQ+ hostility has also become more visible on the ground in Germany. Pride events in particular have turned into targets of organized far-right mobilization.⁶¹ In 2024, the Center for Monitoring, Analysis, and Strategy (CeMAS) documented anti-Pride protests in twenty-seven German cities, often driven by young neo-Nazi groups organizing through Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp.⁶² These platforms allow far-right actors to turn local Pride events into national culture-war flashpoints, spread calls to action quickly, and use memes, protest videos, and images from demonstrations as recruitment material. Follow-up research for 2025 found little reason for reassurance: although the average size of far-right counter-protests declined, the total number of anti-Pride mobilizations increased.⁶³ Established extremist actors also tried to build on the momentum created by new youth groups. Monitoring by the Amadeu Antonio Foundation and victim-support

The same digital spaces that spread backlash can also be used to build solidarity.

organizations points in the same direction: Pride events have become symbolic targets in a broader anti-gender and far-right strategy.⁶⁴ Yet these attacks have not gone uncontested: in many places, Pride events continued to draw broad support from local communities and civil society, often far outnumbering the far-right counter-protests directed against them.⁶⁵

These attacks make support for queer organizations and civil society all the more important. Yet federal policy is sending the opposite signal. The government has declared the national action plan "*Queer leben*," which queer organizations had described as the only nationwide funding framework specifically aimed at queer projects, as "completed."⁶⁶ At the same time, the planned restructuring of the federal funding program "*Demokratie Leben!*" could

leave more than 200 democracy projects, which include LGBTQ+ initiatives, without funding by the end of 2026.⁶⁷ That uncertainty hits especially hard in rural areas and eastern Germany, where these projects often provide some of

the few stable structures for democratic engagement, anti-discrimination work, and support for marginalized communities.

These funding decisions followed a longer campaign in right-wing media and online spaces, where publicly funded civil-society work had already been turned into a recurring culture-war target. Organizations such as HateAid, Campact, and the Amadeu Antonio Foundation were portrayed as partisan "left-wing NGOs" or "front organizations," while public support for democracy, anti-discrimination, and anti-hate work was framed as ideological state funding.⁶⁸ In this sense, the funding debate shows the same pattern as other parts of the anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-gender backlash in the United States: talking points that first gained traction in right-wing online spaces were taken up by political actors and translated into institutional pressure.

The contradiction is stark: anti-queer mobilization is becoming more organized, while the organizations that provide counseling, protection, education, and local democratic infrastructure are being weakened. Strengthening queer organizations, local Pride organizers, and anti-discrimination projects is not symbolic politics. It is a practical response to far-right intimidation, especially in places where queer communities already

face organized pressure. Despite growing right-wing mobilization and increasingly vocal anti-LGBTQ+ narratives, public opinion in Germany still shows clear majority support for LGBTQ+ equality and protection against discrimination.⁶⁹ The challenge is to translate this mainstream support into political protection for the organizations, local Pride organizers, and anti-discrimination projects facing pressure on the ground.

When Hate Travels, Solidarity Must, Too

What these examples from the United States and Germany show is that anti-queer mobilization no longer develops in isolated national contexts. It moves as memes and codes across platforms, political milieus, and national borders, reinforcing itself along the way. The same is true of the online communities that produce and amplify them. Manosphere influencers, anti-feminist networks, and far-right media ecosystems increasingly operate as transnational spaces. They borrow from one another, translate each other's talking points, and adapt culture-war narratives to local political debates.⁷⁰ In this environment, queerphobia is not only a domestic backlash. It is part of a wider political language that connects misogyny, authoritarian masculinity, anti-feminism, and hostility toward liberal democracy.

This dynamic also appears in meme cultures that have moved from fringe spaces into more mainstream social media environments. One example is the "Dagestan" meme, which originally refers to Dagestan, a republic in the North Caucasus region of Russia that has become associated online with combat sports, wrestling, and "hypermasculine" fighter aesthetics. Under queer or feminist content, comments referring to "Dagestan" or "sending someone to Dagestan" are often used as a coded threat.⁷¹ They imply that queer people, feminists, or "soft" men should be disciplined, humiliated, or "cured" through exposure to a supposedly harder, more traditional masculinity. The fact that this code appears under both German- and English-language content shows how easily anti-queer memes now travel across borders and platforms. In these contexts, "Dagestan" functions less as a real place than as a symbolic language through which right-wing actors and anti-queer users can normalize misogyny, queerphobia, and authoritarian ideas.

When anti-queer codes travel across borders, strategies of resistance and solidarity have to do the same, and

responses must be transnational. LGBTQ+ communities, democratic actors, journalists, researchers, and civil society organizations in the United States and Germany can learn from one another because they are increasingly facing connected strategies. This does not mean copying tactics one-to-one. The political and legal contexts are different. But the underlying patterns are often similar: the targeting of trans people as a wedge issue, the use of "gender ideology" as a catch-all enemy image, the normalization of harassment through humor, and the attempt to turn visibility itself into a provocation.

Transatlantic LGBTQ+ solidarity, therefore, needs to be more than symbolic. World Pride and other international moments of visibility matter, but they should also be used to build durable networks of support. That includes sharing research on online hate campaigns, documenting cross-border extremist narratives, supporting people targeted by coordinated harassment, and developing democratic counter-strategies that do not simply react to the outrage cycle. It also means strengthening queer voices online, investing in digital safety, and refusing to leave the public sphere to those who weaponize fear and humiliation.

The central lesson from both the United States and Germany is that online queerphobia should not be treated as a fringe internet phenomenon. It shapes political agendas, influences public debate, and can spill over into real-world intimidation and violence. But the same digital spaces that spread backlash can also be used to build solidarity. Across borders, LGBTQ+ people and their allies are not only facing similar attacks. They are also developing shared forms of resistance, care, and democratic resilience.

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Shifting Public Opinion and Funding Trends for LGBTQ+ Communities in the United States and Germany

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Over the past two decades, citizens of Western nations have become more accepting of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, and many democratic governments have expanded legal protections and rights. The trajectory for transgender people has been more varied: visibility has increased while policy debates, media controversies, and political backlash have produced sharp regional and partisan differences. Funding for LGBTQ+ communities has diversified from grassroots and local fundraising toward major private foundations, corporate diversity programs, and public grants, and in recent years, donors have created rapid-response mechanisms to meet urgent legal and safety needs. The United States and Germany have been at the forefront of inclusion and support of queer communities, but changes in public attitudes and funding trends up to 2025 have manifested themselves.

United States: Public Opinion and Legal Milestones

Public opinion on same-sex marriage and related rights shifted dramatically in the United States between the 1990s and the 2010s. Gallup, a global analytics and advisory firm, documents this trend through its long-term support series. Gallup reports that support for same-sex marriage rose from 27 percent in 1996 to a broad majority by the 2010s, with the highest support of 71 percent in 2022 and 2023 and a light leveling off in 2024/25.^{1 2} The trend indicates that public opinion aligned with the Supreme Court's *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision in 2015,

which enshrined same-sex marriage nationally.³

Attitudes toward transgender people are more contested than attitudes toward lesbian and gay people. Detailed polling by the Pew Research Center in 2022 examined Americans' complex views on transgender people and specific transgender-related policies.⁴ In a comparison of the years 2019 and 2021, Gallop showed high awareness of transgender people and broad support for nondiscrimination in principle but more divided views on issues like access to gender-affirming care for minors, participation in sports, and serving in the military.⁵ More recent polling conducted by Pew in February 2025 as well as related Gallup updates continue to reflect partisan differences and show that between 2022 and 2025, public support for transgender issues declined significantly. For example, majorities of U.S. adults favor or strongly favor laws and policies that require trans athletes to compete on teams that match their sex assigned at birth (66 percent, up from 58 percent in 2022) and ban healthcare professionals from providing care related to gender transitions for minors (56 percent, up from 46 percent).⁶

The U.S. political arena has seen numerous state-level bills and policies concerning transgender youth and school curricula since 2021. The Human Rights Campaign, the largest civil rights organization in the United States working to achieve LGBTQ+ equality, maintains a detailed State Legislative Tracker that lists anti-LGBTQ+ bills, their status, and summaries of enacted restrictions. The

2024 State Equality Index shows that 489 bills have been introduced that would negatively affect LGBTQ+ rights and that almost 40 percent of transgender youth now live in states that deny them access to essential medical care.⁷

Nonetheless, there is strong organizational support for LGBTQ+ individuals and their families. Both the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and Lambda Legal track litigation and provide analysis of legal challenges to these measures. The March 31, 2026, Supreme Court ruling that struck down a ban on conversion therapy in Colorado has been widely condemned in the community and specifically in an official statement by Lambda Legal.⁸ The ACLU's LGBTQ Rights Hub "works to ensure that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people can live openly without discrimination and enjoy equal rights, personal autonomy, and freedom of expression and association."⁹

Germany: Public Opinion and Legal Milestones

Germany's legal and political pathway differs from the United States. Germany was lagging in its support for the LGBTQ+ community, somewhat surprising given the oppression and persecution of homosexuals by the National Socialists in the 1930s and 40s. Germany repealed the criminalization of homosexuality (Paragraph 175 in the German Basic Law) only gradually, registered life partnerships (*Lebenspartnerschaften*) were introduced in 2001, and full marriage equality was only enacted by the Bundestag in 2017.¹⁰ While a majority of 393 members of the Bundestag voted for marriage equality, 226 voted against, and four abstained. The party divide was significant, with only about a quarter of the members of the Christian conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) voting in favor. Members of the Social Democrats (SPD), the Greens, and the Left Party voted in favor.¹¹

Similar to the United States, in Germany, the support for diversity generally is shrinking. Since 2019, the Robert Bosch Stiftung has twice conducted a diversity barometer. The 2025 report found a general decline in acceptance regarding different dimensions of diversity, including age,

disability, gender, and sexual orientation.¹² Support for the LGBTQ+ community is also declining: acceptance of the dimension "sexual orientation" reached seventy-seven out of 100 points in 2019, but has now fallen to sixty-nine points. The barometer asks four questions about "sexual orientation" with two referencing transgender individuals. It is especially here that the decline in acceptance is clearly reflected in the numbers. To the statement, "Changing one's sex is against nature," 23 percent of respondents in 2025 said "completely agree," while 34 percent said "do not agree at all." By comparison, in 2019 the same question elicited 15 percent "completely agree" and 54 percent "do not agree at all." For the statement, "Transsexual people should stick to themselves," the complete rejection of this claim fell from 74 to 54 percent, while "completely agree" rose from 7 to 13 percent.¹³

By contrast, when comparing the two statements about homosexuality in the Bosch survey, the change regarding attitudes toward transgender individuals is strikingly clear. Twelve percent of respondents in 2025 completely agreed with the statement, "It's disgusting when homosexuals kiss in public;" in 2019, it was 10 percent. In 2025, 16 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that homosexuals should not have their own children; in 2019, it was 14 percent. The difference in each case is only two percentage points. The two statements on trans issues, however, indicate a decrease in support of up to 18 percent between 2019 and 2025.

Across both countries, the strategic challenge is to transform episodic emergency funding into sustained investment in institutions, intersectional programs, and preventive measures so that rights and personal wellbeing are preserved.

The social research institute Ipsos conducts a survey every year in connection with June Pride Month, a worldwide celebration that advocates for the rights of queer people and promotes more tolerance in society. The study examines people's attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community in twenty-six countries and sheds light on how public opinion has developed

on a number of topics—including marriage equality, corporate diversity programs, and trans people in sports. In Germany (2024/25) there is still broad consensus that sexual minorities should have the same rights and be protected from discrimination. In principle, three-quarters of Germans believe that lesbians, gays, and bisexuals (78 percent) as well as trans people (75 percent) should be protected from discrimination, for example at work or

when looking for housing. Compared with the previous year, agreement with this statement has risen by five percentage points in each case.

About as many Germans (74 percent) support the statement that same-sex couples should have the same rights to adopt children as heterosexual couples. Less than one-fifth (19 percent) reject this. Seventy-one percent also support allowing homosexuals to marry legally, while only 10 percent oppose any form of legal recognition.

A smaller proportion of Germans, about 50 percent, support specific laws that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The possibility for non-binary individuals to choose a third option on their passport or ID applications is supported by half of the general population as well. One exception is the issue of transgender people competing in professional sports. Here, Germans align with the global trend that largely rejects this notion. However, compared to other countries, where the majority is in favor of prohibiting transgender people from competing in the gender group they identify with (up to 61 percent), in Germany only 39 percent voice their opposition.¹⁴

The Evolving Funding Landscape in the United States

Funding for LGBTQ+ communities in the United States comprises four main elements: private philanthropy, corporate giving and workplace programs, public funding (federal, state, and municipal), and grassroots donations. Private foundations such as the Gill Foundation, the Arcus Foundation, and the Elton John AIDS Foundation have provided long-term support for rights advocacy, cultural work, and health programs. Candid, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that aggregates and enriches data to connect different nonprofits with funders, maintains profiles on 1.9 million U.S. nonprofits and tracks three million annual grant transactions amounting to \$180 billion. The organization also catalogues philanthropic data and provides thematic resources for LGBTQ+ funding.¹⁵

Corporate giving witnessed a significant increase after the Supreme Court case *Obergefell v. Hodges* legalized same-sex marriage (2015). Between 2015 and 2019, funding for LGBTQ+ organizations increased by 46.3 percent. By comparison, funding for non-LGBTQ+ organizations increased by 24.9 in the same time frame.¹⁶ Corporate sponsorship of Pride events and support for employee-

resource groups increased visibility and resources for many organizations for many years. However, corporations also faced political backlash, especially in certain states where anti-LGBTQ+ bills prompted boycotts or withdrawal of corporate statements. Corporations felt this nationwide as the Trump administration targeted diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and public opinion likewise rejected DEI. Compared to 2024, approximately one-quarter of New York Pride supporters canceled or reduced their support for the event in 2025.¹⁷ Other diversity and LGBTQ+ events and activities have experienced similar shortfalls from corporate donors. Many donors cited economic concerns and opted to forgo publicity of their contributions.¹⁸

Federal public funding in the United States supports HIV prevention, research, and some behavioral health initiatives. Each year, the U.S. government invests billions of dollars to support HIV prevention, testing, care and treatment, and research initiatives in the United States and around the world, as well as appropriating funds to U.S. government departments and agencies. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) administer HIV prevention programs and publish surveillance reports.^{19 20}

In 2026, federal funding for HIV programs are being maintained despite efforts by the Trump administration to reduce funding.²¹ This follows a similar pattern exhibited by the U.S. administration in 2025.²² A number of government web pages, including one that addresses LGBTQ+ youth health issues, were taken down at the beginning of the second Trump administration and restored due to a court order in early 2025. A notification box at the top of web pages that mention gender related issues indicate the administration's rejection of any form of gender ideology and promotes its firm belief in "the immutable biological reality that there are two sexes, male and female." The CDC's LGBT Health page and HIV Surveillance Reports nonetheless constitute core references for the average U.S. citizen.²³ The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) funds mental health programs that include LGBTQ+ youth initiatives. However, the specialized suicide prevention services for LGBTQ+ youth on the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline were terminated by the Trump administration on July 17, 2025, effectively removing specially trained counselors to offer support for affected individuals.²⁴

As a result of anti-LGBTQ+ bills and rhetoric, philanthropic

funders in the United States in the last few years have created and expanded pooled rapid-response funds to meet urgent needs arising from state and federal attacks. The Funders for LGBTQ Issues and other donor collaboratives publicize guidance and announcements about pooled funds. The latest report published in 2025 indicates some of the developments regarding philanthropic shifts and rapid response grantmaking for LGBTQ+ services.²⁵

Germany: Public Budgets, Foundations, and EU Funding

Germany's welfare state institutions fund many social services, which also determines how LGBTQ+ service provision is financed. The Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (*Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend*, BMBFSFJ) provides program funding for the protection and acceptance of sexual and gender diversity. Its programs focus on anti-discrimination and counseling centers and provides information, in particular regarding legal name changes after the Self-Determination Law was passed in 2024.²⁶ The BMBFSFJ funds a number of other organizations through its "*Demokratie Leben*" (Democracy Lives) program.²⁷ The umbrella organization and competence network "*Selbstverständlich Vielfalt*" (Naturally Diversity) is a cooperative association that supports the acceptance of sexual, romantic, and gender self-determination. The goal is to reduce and eliminate hostile attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals.²⁸ Beneficiaries of the network are, e.g., the *Bundesverband Trans** (Federal Association Trans*), which was founded in 2015 and works on behalf of trans and non-binary individuals.²⁹

The *Demokratie Leben* program serves to strengthen democracy and to contribute to a peaceful, diverse, respectful, and anti-extremism society. It works to upend any form of hostility toward certain groups and toward democracy. While the third funding period began in 2025 (until 2032), the current BMBFSFJ minister, Karin Prien (CDU), announced in March 2026 that funding for about 200 programs will expire at the end of the year and that organizations have to reapply.³⁰ This announcement has created uncertainty for many projects. In an open letter directed at Minister Prien, the Amadeu Antonio Foundation collected 1,000 signatures from individuals and organizations warning about the devastating effect

such funding cuts would have for the country and its democracy.³¹

The Magnus Hirschfeld Foundation (*Bundesstiftung Magnus Hirschfeld*), established in 2011 by the German federal government to promote research and fight discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, represents an important voice for the queer community and reports on funded projects and research. The Foundation has set itself the goal of preserving the memory of Magnus Hirschfeld, promoting educational and research projects, and counteracting any social discrimination of queer persons in Germany. The foundation aims to promote the acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, and other people who do not conform to heterosexual, binary, or cisgender ideas. The foundation's work is based on three pillars: research, education, and remembrance.³²

EU funding mechanisms such as the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) program support civil society organizations addressing hate speech, discrimination, and support for vulnerable migrants, including LGBTQ+ asylum seekers.³³ Many German NGOs and municipal programs co-finance projects through EU instruments and national funds.

German philanthropic foundations and NGOs, including, for example, LSVD (*Lesben- und Schwulenverband in Deutschland*), are active in policy advocacy, legal support, and service provision for vulnerable groups such as queer refugees. LSVD provides access to its policy work and reports on its website.³⁴ In addition, Germany is host to a large number of NGOs that support LGBTQ+ issues, which are active in every major city in the country.³⁵

Developments and Funding Shifts from 2023 through 2025

The period 2023–2025 saw heightened political salience of transgender rights and new pressures on service delivery. Funders in both countries reallocated resources to emergency legal defense, relocation assistance, youth mental health and shelter services, digital security measures for staff, and communications campaigns to counter misinformation. At the same time, some funders increased emphasis on intersectional programming targeting communities experiencing layered marginalization. Many organizations and the community have underscored the need for targeted support for LGBTQ+ people who face racialization, migration status

precarity, disability, or age-related vulnerabilities.^{36 37}

United States: Escalation of Rapid-Response Funding and Legal Defense

In the United States a wave of state-level policies restricting gender-affirming care for minors, limiting transgender participation in sports, and regulating school discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity has intensified since 2021 and continued through 2025. According to a new report from the Williams Institute covering the year 2025, circa 724,000 young people identify as transgender in the United States, and more than half of them live in a state that implemented at least one law that restricts their rights.³⁸ In response to legal threats and emergency needs, leading foundations and donor collaboratives launched campaigns to increase donations for rapid-response funds, to expand grants to legal organizations (Lambda Legal, ACLU, and local legal aid groups), and to increase support for youth shelters and mental health programs.³⁹ The NGO Funders for LGBTQ Issues is committed to providing resources during times of crises and has created a resource hub for funders seeking to increase support for LGBTQ+ communities.⁴⁰

Federal public funding continued to support HIV prevention, research, and some behavioral health work—but the uneven patchwork of state policies created disparities in service availability, particularly for trans youth seeking gender-affirming care. CDC guidance on LGBTQ+ youth health and SAMHSA mental-health program pages continue to provide information on federally supported services.⁴¹

Corporate donors and employers continued to play an important role in supporting LGBTQ+ employees and in some cases public advocacy. However, news reporting and several studies have documented instances in which corporations reduced public-facing commitments or adjusted activities in response to political pressure or reputational risk. Retreating from DEI policies can be observed across industries.⁴²

Germany: Stability in Public Funding with Localized Pressures

In Germany, most core services for LGBTQ+ people continued to be sustained through government funding at federal, state, and municipal levels. The BMBFSFJ announced programmatic funding streams for counseling centers and anti-discrimination projects during 2022–2024.⁴³ Increased scrutiny of the *Demokratie Leben* program by the current CDU-led government has already been addressed above.

The increased visibility and parliamentary presence of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), a populist right-wing party in Germany that has been gaining ground in recent state elections, have intensified anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric in some regions, prompting local civil society organizations to increase monitoring, legal readiness, and communications work. The AfD takes a traditional family stance and rejects marriage equality, the use of gendered language, and transgender movements.⁴⁴

German NGOs have been able to apply for and receive EU grants for anti-hate and digital safety projects through CERV and related programs. The topic of anti-hate and digital safety is one of the six priorities of the call for proposals for EU action grants to promote equality and to fight racism, xenophobia, and all other forms of discrimination under the CERV program. For the CERV-2025-EQUAL call that closed on October 23, 2025, 787 proposals were submitted.⁴⁵

The EU Commission presented its “List of Actions to Advance LGBTI Equality” for the first time in 2015. While the Commission found that LGBTQ+ individuals are more vocal about their sexual orientation and gender identity in society, the community has been confronted with a significant increase in hate-motivated harassment and physical attacks. In a reaction to this trend, the Commission in 2020 adopted the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025, which was the first-ever Commission strategy on LGBTQ+ equality and delivered on the European Commission’s overarching commitment to building a Union of Equality. The Commission’s successor

Sustaining progress in support of the rights of LGBTQ+ communities will require a balanced approach.

strategy was adopted in October 2025. It aims to build on the ambition and achievements of the 2020-2025 Strategy and is part of the EU's effort to build a Union where diversity is celebrated as part of a "collective richness, where all people can be themselves without risk of discrimination, exclusion or violence."⁴⁶ The European Commission's anti-hate and civic-space initiatives supply policy frameworks and funding routes for digital safety and counter-hate projects.⁴⁷

The post-2025 Strategy marks a new phase in the Commission's efforts to promote equality for LGBTQ+ individuals and their families. It seeks to provide protection against harmful practices and hate-motivated offences and to empower queer communities, promote equality, and engage civil society as well as EU Member States. A series of measures are designed to proactively integrate LGBTQ+ equality in all policy areas and to help lift the voices of LGBTQ+ communities, also by funding civil society organizations.

Conclusion

In the last twenty years, acceptance of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people increased substantially in both the United States and Germany, and legal recognition institutionalized many rights. Transgender rights have become the central focal point of political conflict in recent years, altering public debate and driving shifts in funding priorities. Across both countries, the strategic challenge is to transform episodic emergency funding into sustained investment in institutions, intersectional programs, and preventive measures so that rights and personal wellbeing are preserved over the long term.

The recent reorientation of funds toward legal defense and emergency response has preserved immediate rights and protected vulnerable individuals. Litigation successes have occasionally blocked restrictive laws, sustaining access in affected jurisdictions. However, crisis-driven funding has crowded out longer-term investments in community infrastructure, research, and prevention. Small, local organizations—especially those serving intersectional communities—report persistent difficulties securing multi-year core funding, hindering staff retention, strategic planning, and general organizational resilience. Funders for LGBTQ Issues provide resources and analyses that track detailed nonprofit funding challenges.⁴⁸

Donors and governments face multiple constraints.

Political polarization, particularly in the United States, produces urgent need for action and donor fatigue at the same time. Philanthropic strategies must navigate legal restrictions, privacy obligations, and reputational risks. In Germany, while public funding is more stable, bureaucratic processes, project-specific funding structures, and shorter grant cycles limit the abilities of NGOs to scale strategic programs. EU funding programs offer important supplements but are competitive, project-based, and administratively demanding.

Sustaining progress in support of the rights of LGBTQ+ communities will likely require a balanced approach. It will be important for funders to increase multi-year, unrestricted, and project support to local and regional organizations to stabilize services and preserve staff capacity. Governments should preserve and expand public funding for counseling, mental-health services, HIV prevention, and legal aid, especially for young people and their families. Donors and NGOs must invest in digital security and communications capacity to counter organized and harmful misinformation campaigns. Funders must also prioritize intersectional programs to address layered vulnerabilities among LGBTQ+ people of color, migrants, disabled people, those facing homelessness, and aging adults. Transatlantic and cross-border exchange among funders, NGOs, and governments can disseminate best practices, mobilize pooled funds rapidly in crises, and support litigation strategies that build durable protections.

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Investing in Diversity

THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY IN THE TRANSATLANTIC ECONOMY

JACK FORNASIERO

The LGBTQ+ community is a significant player in labor markets and entrepreneurial ecosystems in Germany and the United States. Its presence contributes to workforce diversity and consumer activity, influencing business engagement across sectors. As a sizable share of both consumers and members of the workforce, the LGBTQ+ community influences purchasing patterns, recruitment practices, workplace culture, and corporate reputation. Increasingly, businesses and policymakers view LGBTQ+ inclusion not only as a civil rights issue, but also as a driver of innovation and competitiveness in the global market and an important customer base.

This chapter analyzes the development of LGBTQ+ inclusion within private-sector employment in Germany and the United States, focusing on legal frameworks, corporate adoption of diversity practices, and associated economic and institutional effects. It also covers how anti-LGBTQ+ policies affect not only workplace participation and employee retention through corporate governance but also consumer and community engagement.

The Legal Basis

Combating discrimination in the U.S. workplace has been a fundamental component of progressive policymaking for decades. The Civil Rights movement was key to advancing federal policies addressing discrimination, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 mandated that businesses take active approaches to address historical inequities and discrimination in hiring, primarily in response to systemic racial inequalities in the United States. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act served as the legal framework prohibiting discrimination in the workplace on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.¹ This protection

extended to many groups in the United States who faced discrimination; however, explicit legal protections covering LGBTQ+ individuals at the federal level would not come for many years.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, U.S. states passed laws protecting LGBTQ+ individuals from discriminatory hiring practices.² While Title VII of the Civil Rights Act addressed broad issues of discrimination in federal and private workplaces, the national shift in protections accounting for sexual and gender minorities was achieved gradually, primarily through court cases after many decades of advocacy work.³

Macy v. Holder (2012) marked a turning point in federal interpretation on the hiring of LGBTQ+ individuals. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) ruled in favor of a transgender individual who had been denied employment in a federal agency after disclosing they planned to transition from male to female.⁴ This was furthered in 2015 by *Baldwin v. Foxx*, affirming that employees could not be denied promotion based on sexual orientation.⁵ In *Bostock v. Clayton County* (2020), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that protection from discriminatory employment practices for sexual orientation and gender identity was covered under the Civil Rights Act Title VII, expanding protections across the United States.⁶ This shift set a federal precedent, which guided private sector practices toward inclusivity for LGBTQ+ employees.

In Germany, the General Act on Equal Treatment⁷ (*Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz*) enacted on August 14, 2006, established protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation. This

law established protections for LGBTQ+ Germans in the workplace fifteen years ahead of the United States. Germany implemented LGBTQ+ workplace protections after the Council of the European Union's 2000 Equal Employment Directive. This ordered federal governments of member states to protect workers against discrimination based on sexual orientation by 2003.⁸ While ahead of the United States, Germany trailed behind other EU member states such as the United Kingdom⁹ and France,¹⁰ enacting anti-discrimination protections three years past the 2003 deadline. However, Germany's overall legal development reflects alignment with EU human rights frameworks for economic activity and the gradual integration of LGBTQ+ protections into the German workplace.

Inclusivity Practices in the Workplace

U.S. federal regulatory policies and court rulings in the early 2000s established the foundation for integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) into corporate strategy. Over time, this foundation expanded significantly, reshaping how companies engage with LGBTQ+ employees, approach corporate governance, and interact with external communities.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion activities are regularly criticized and mislabeled as quota systems and reverse bias against historically dominant groups. In reality, diversity practices foster fair treatment, ensure equal access, and affirm representation for all people. Beyond recruitment, DEI informs product development, workplace culture, and external engagement strategies, encouraging firms to account for the perspectives and needs of diverse stakeholders across all levels of operations.¹¹

What began primarily as compliance with federal non-discrimination laws, including Equal Employment Opportunity regulations, evolved into a more formalized and strategic function within companies. Organizations incorporate DEI responsibilities into human resources and legal departments as well as at the executive level. Since 2020, 53 percent of Fortune 500 companies have established Chief Diversity Officer roles, demonstrating a shift to embed inclusivity within corporate governance

and decision-making.¹² This transformation has reshaped leadership structures while also creating new administrative and operational positions focused on corporate accountability and employee support.

As of 2022, approximately 91 percent of Fortune 500 companies reported protections against gender identity discrimination and policies incorporating equitable practices for LGBTQ+ employees.¹³ This marks a transformation from earlier decades—just 5 percent of companies included protections for sexual orientation and gender identity in 2002—highlighting the speed at which corporate norms have shifted, as well as the interplay of Title VII interpretation in the courts and shift in cultural attitudes toward the role of LGBTQ+ individuals in the workforce.

Research increasingly connects DEI implementation to high levels of firm performance. Research from McKinsey & Company found that executive teams in the top quartile of gender diversity are 25 percent more likely to outperform those in the bottom quartile in profitability globally.¹⁴ Comparable developments have emerged in Germany, where corporate diversity strategies expanded alongside European Union anti-discrimination

frameworks. Major German firms such as SAP have linked diversity initiatives to profitability, higher productivity, employee recruitment and retention, job satisfaction and greater innovation.¹⁵ Deutsche Bank incorporates diversity and inclusivity initiatives into strategic planning and corporate reporting,

emphasizing partnerships with workforce associations in Germany and abroad that support LGBTQ+ employees' workplace inclusion.¹⁶

Studies in 2018 by Boston Consulting Group found a strong relationship between workforce diversity and innovation.¹⁷ Reviewing 1,700 companies across eight countries—the United States, France, Germany, China, Brazil, India, Switzerland, and Austria—the survey reported that companies with above-average levels of diversity generated 19 percent higher innovation revenues and 9 percent higher earnings before interest and taxes (EBIT). The study measured diversity across numerous dimensions, including migration, industry, career path, gender, education, and age. However, only 40 percent of the companies surveyed incorporated components

Companies with above-average levels of diversity generated higher innovation revenues and higher earnings before interest and taxes.

associated with diversity and inclusion, which included fair employment practices (defined by equal pay), participative leadership, top management support for diversity, and open communication practices. Companies that implemented these measures demonstrated the highest levels of innovation performance relative to other firms in the study.

Despite these advantages, challenges remain in implementation. Analysis of corporations with inclusivity platforms found 25 percent of employees dedicated to implementing DEI initiatives reported lack of clear direction in strategic inclusivity planning and 30 percent of HR employees reported insufficient resources to achieve institutional goals.¹⁸ While DEI practices have proven to benefit the workforce and firms, research suggests that more can be done to further the development and implementation of DEI goals into business operations.

LGBTQ+ Chambers of Commerce play an important role in supporting LGBTQ+ entrepreneurs and businesses through advocacy, networking, and development. Operating at local, national, and international levels, they help to advance the interests of LGBTQ+ businesses and inclusive practices, furthering economic competitiveness and participation within LGBTQ+ communities. Established in 2002, the National LGBTQ+ & Allied Chamber of Commerce makes up an umbrella organization of fifty-three domestic affiliate chambers,¹⁹ twenty-four international chambers,²⁰ and 438 corporate partners. Domestically and globally, 2,500 businesses are certified as LGBT Business Enterprise Suppliers by the U.S. National LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce. Certification allows businesses to compete for sourcing contracts with the chamber's corporate and government partners, as well as making them eligible to participate in national conferences and regional events, elevating their profile for an important consumer group.²¹

The European LGBTQ+ Chamber of Commerce (EGLCC), founded in Vienna in 2002, was the first such European chamber and built a network of chambers across Europe. The German LGBTQ+ Business Chamber (GGLBC) belongs to this European network, collaborating with queer-friendly businesses and LGBTQ+ led businesses operating in Europe. They convene business leaders and help increase market opportunities for members. The GGLBC collaborates with the Proud at Work Foundation, a German association and think tank that raises awareness of queer topics in German workplaces.²²

Their work includes disseminating guidance and actions for corporate responsibility, networking opportunities, workshops, events, and lobbying to shape more inclusive policies at the federal level.

The Case for Social Inclusion

Advocates for inclusivity argue that protections and acceptance within society generate broader social and economic benefits beyond individual rights. These factors are also frequently associated with stronger labor force participation, improved educational outcomes, higher productivity, and stronger economic competitiveness, particularly in the developing world. Scholars examining the relationship between social acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community and economic development suggest that discrimination and exclusion of queer individuals can limit workforce participation, reducing overall economic output. Research shows that more inclusive developing countries exhibit higher Human Development Index (HDI) rankings and greater overall economic competitiveness through factors like innovation, workplace stability, and human capital development.²³ Within the private sector, businesses stand to benefit from or be disadvantaged by the social treatment of LGBTQ+ individuals.

For LGBTQ+ youth, social inclusion is an important factor in preparation for lifetime productivity. Failure to attend schooling due to mental or physical dangers such as bullying or social isolation²⁴ harms workforce readiness. Missing crucial training that prepares individuals in childhood for later economic productivity has adverse effects on overall human productivity capabilities through one's lifetime, diminishing individual gross domestic product (GDP) contributions per capita.

Losing employees due to instances of discrimination poses major financial consequences for private industry. For large U.S. companies, employees who depart over issues of discrimination and harassment in the workplace cost companies significant amounts of revenue, on average, between \$5,000 to \$200,000.²⁵ These costs extend far beyond the loss of a single worker. When an employee leaves, companies must invest additional resources in recruiting, hiring, and training replacements, all while coping with reduced productivity and potential disruptions to team performance. High turnover can also damage employee morale, as remaining workers may feel less engaged, less valued, or concerned about the fairness of their workplace environment.

Benefits to openness include boosting creativity and innovation, while attracting talent and supporting retention. Advocates argue that being “out” about sexual orientation eliminates the need to hide or mislead colleagues or supervisors, allowing for more trustful relationships with colleagues and supervisors. In addition to personal benefits, advocates argue that LGBTQ+ openness in the workplace has an overall positive impact for the community, increasing visibility and breaking down barriers by developing more understanding with heterosexual counterparts.²⁶ Past surveys have found that up to 42 percent of closeted individuals often reported feeling isolated at work, compared to 24 percent of LGBTQ+ individuals that were open. 52 percent of closeted individuals also reported feeling as though their career had stalled, compared to only 36 percent of out individuals.²⁷

The private sector benefits directly from inclusivity initiatives through market competitiveness. In the United States, companies implementing inclusivity practices on average experience a 6.5 percent increase in stock prices in contrast to industry peers.²⁸ This suggests that investors understand inclusivity as a competitive business model; equipping companies with a more productive workforce internally leads to better output externally. It also suggests that investors do not view inclusivity as a short-term component of business behavior, rather, a long-term component of corporate governance and operations. Beyond firm-level practices, these dynamics extend into broader patterns of economic activity.

Globally, the purchasing power of the community accounts for \$3.9 trillion in annual spending.

The Community’s Impact on Local Economies

LGBTQ+ entrepreneurship and commercial activity represent a major part of the transatlantic economy. This economic activity generates innovation, creativity, and revenue that position the United States and Germany as leading global economic powers.

Studies show that LGBTQ+ patronage makes up a significant portion of consumer spending in the United States. The community’s purchasing power in the United States alone totaled \$1.4 trillion in 2021.²⁹ Queer businesses represent \$1.7 trillion in the U.S. economy annually and generate 33,000 jobs.³⁰ Globally,

the purchasing power of the community accounts for \$3.9 trillion in annual spending.³¹ In major cities with robust queer business ecosystems, commercial activity generates a significant portion of annual GDP. Miami-Dade’s LGBTQ+ & Allied Chamber makes up \$15 billion in purchasing power, fueled by local business and tourism.³²

LGBTQ+ entrepreneurship makes up a vital portion of U.S. small- to medium-sized business (SME). In 2024, an estimated 10 percent of new business operations were initiated by LGBTQ+ entrepreneurs. Generation Z and millennial entrepreneurs were 40 percent more likely to identify as LGBTQ+ than their Generation X counterparts, suggesting that the LGBTQ+ community is making up an increasing percentage of small- and medium-sized business owners in the United States.³³ The Biden administration recognized the economic power of LGBTQ+ small businesses, providing resources such as guaranteed loans for queer-owned businesses through the Small Business Administration (SBA).³⁴

As in the United States, LGBTQ+ patrons in Germany make up a significant portion of consumers which businesses need to consider. Estimates in 2024 put the queer population in Germany at 9 million, or 11 percent of the population—a significant percentage of German consumers and the workforce.³⁵ Comparable estimates place LGBTQ+

populations at roughly 8 percent of adults, and skewing as high as 13 percent with Gen Z, underscoring the broader economic relevance of queer consumers and workers.³⁶ Declines in workplace and social inclusivity risk reducing economic activity and weakening labor force participation, mirroring trends observed in the United States.

Pride festivals serve as important cultural events for the LGBTQ+ community and massive drivers of economic activity, supporting local and international business. In San Francisco, Pride is a multimillion-dollar public event, generating an estimated \$350 million in 2015³⁷ and an estimated \$500 million in 2024.³⁸ The 2025 World Pride festival in Washington, DC, brought \$310.7 million from tourism, local business revenue, and job creation, as well as an estimated \$25 million in tax revenue for the district. It also saw involvement from 1.2 million people,³⁹ representing many jobs as well as patronage. In Cologne, Christopher Street Day (how Pride is referred to in Germany, honoring the location of the Stonewall

Inn), brought an estimated 1.2 million people to the city in 2024, the largest Pride in Germany.⁴⁰ Munich reports approximately 250,000 attendees annually.⁴¹ This influx in patronage around Pride celebrations in cities in Germany, the United States, and across the globe represents trillions of dollars annually, supporting local businesses as well as major corporations, such as airlines, hotels, restaurants, and retailers that support the tourism industry.

Economic Challenges for the Community

Despite progress toward equal opportunity and economic equality over the past decades, research shows that LGBTQ+ individuals continue to face disproportionate economic disparities. Compared to heterosexual Americans, LGBTQ+ individuals in the United States experience 7 percent greater rate of food insecurity, 6 percent greater share of recent loss of employment, and 7 percent greater rate of overall poverty.⁴² In terms of population, of the 10.7 million LGBTQ+-identifying individuals in the United States, 2.7 million are experiencing food insecurity. Studies in 2014 showed that same-sex couples were also 1.6 times more likely to be on SNAP benefits. In 2010, 8 percent of male same-sex couples and 14 percent of female same-sex couples were on SNAP, compared to the national 7 percent of opposite-sex couples.⁴³

Economic challenges in the U.S. workforce are particularly pronounced for trans individuals, and accounting for intersectional factors such as race, ethnicity, and immigration background, rates of poverty become even more severe. Black (40 percent) and Latino (45 percent) transgender individuals represent the demographics most likely to be affected by poverty compared to both heterosexual and other LGBTQ+ counterparts.⁴⁴ The lack of inclusivity in education, social stigma against LGBTQ+ individuals, anti-LGBTQ+ business practices, and insufficient policymaking at the local, state, and federal levels all contribute to the economic disparities the community experiences.

In 2026, there are fewer detailed statistics on income disparities in Germany compared to the United States. Studies conducted in 2020 demonstrate that LGBTQ+ Germans share similar rates of employment, but experience lower earnings, notably 15 percent lower on average for gay and bisexual men compared to heterosexual counterparts. Research highlights

differences in employment patterns (freelance working versus traditional 9-to-5 employment) between heterosexual and queer Germans that may be the cause of these disparities.⁴⁵ Comparably, gay and bisexual women experienced similar earnings to their heterosexual female counterparts. Older LGBTQ+ Germans notably face higher rates of poverty to heterosexual counterparts.⁴⁶

Political Backsliding in Support for Inclusivity

Recent political developments in both Germany and the United States have introduced new uncertainties for LGBTQ+ inclusion in the economy. In particular, segments of the political right have increasingly framed diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives—especially those related to gender identity—as overextensions of civil rights protections. These critiques have focused most heavily on policies affecting transgender individuals, contributing to a more contested regulatory and corporate environment.⁴⁷ The contestation has had indirect impacts in the private sector, hurting regions' overall economic competitiveness.

In the United States, policies from the Trump administration⁴⁸ and state governments have prompted reassessment of DEI practices in the private sector.⁴⁹ Federal actions aimed at limiting certain diversity-focused programs have led firms to scale back or eliminate initiatives where legal risks are perceived. These shifts have also affected broader inclusion efforts, including those related to race and gender. However, many practices targeted by the administration have been long ruled illegal in the United States through the judicial branch. U.S. law firms guiding U.S. businesses have outlined that compliance involves not conducting DEI in ways that involve quotas, set-asides, or policies that explicitly favor or disadvantage employees based on race, gender, or other protected characteristics.⁵⁰ Many DEI workplace practices are already in compliance but rely on legal guidance to address political contestation.

Local communities have also felt the impact of anti-LGBTQ+ inclusivity policies from the federal level. Pride organizations have struggled to maintain corporate giving for annual Pride celebrations, leaving organizers with depleted resources to continue community engagement. Reports of losses of around 10 percent of corporate giving have been reported in 2025 in larger LGBTQ+ centers such as San Francisco and New York City and as much as half in smaller localities such as St. Petersburg,

Florida.⁵¹ This is expected to not only have a negative impact on communities' abilities to organize celebrations but also bring in tourism dollars associated with the festivals.

Analysts believe that anti-LGBTQ+ legislation at the state level has the potential to reduce economic competitiveness. After North Carolina passed a controversial "bathroom bill," mandating how public institutions may use of facilities, organizations such as the NCAA responded to state restrictions by announcing avoidance of the state in hosting major collegiate sports competitions.⁵² After other major corporations announced seeking alternative locations to North Carolina, decisions projected to cost the state \$3.76 billion over the next twelve years, and the state ultimately repealed the law.

In Germany, political contestation around LGBTQ+ inclusive politics has heightened. The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has framed LGBTQ+ inclusivity as anti-German and attacked state-funded programs benefiting marginalized groups.⁵³ Their party platform primarily has argued against gender-inclusive language and teaching anything related to non-heteronormativity.⁵⁴ This draws significant parallels to the MAGA movement in the United States, where conservative leaders in recent years focused on transgender and non-conforming individuals, framed as protecting women and youth from so-called gender ideology.⁵⁵

Germany's Christian Democrats (CDU) have maintained opposition to inclusivity⁵⁶ and reaffirmed commitments to revisit the Self-Determination Act passed by the previous center-left government.⁵⁷ These actions have also been primarily focused on issues pertaining to youth, mainly in regard to language and material in education, but stop short of approaches to control or end inclusivity initiatives in the workplace that is being seen in the United States. The current coalition government has also reevaluated federal grant-giving projects such as *Demokratie Leben* (Living Democracy), which includes support for LGBTQ+ organizations. This has worried many organizations about the future of financial support for institutions doing work that benefits LGBTQ+ individuals in Germany.⁵⁸ Civil society organizations in Germany rely on state-supported financing, and some German NGO leaders are now pursuing new avenues to secure revenues from potential federal rollbacks.

With deep economic relations⁵⁹ between Germany

and the United States, German firms have a strong interest in considering U.S. regulatory policy in their business models. After years of developing DEI programs and creating LGBTQ+ inclusive workplaces, large, internationally operating companies in Germany with footprints in the United States have reevaluated their inclusivity programs due to Trump administration policies.⁶⁰ This includes companies such as Volkswagen and SAP that rely on the U.S. workforce and consumer. As in the United States, German firms' reevaluation of DEI initiatives has shifted engagement with local partners. Some Christopher Street Day Parades have experienced loss of corporate sponsorships of up to €200,000,⁶¹ making organization more challenging and hindering economic stimulation.

Despite these challenges, 6,000 companies as of 2025 remained signatories of the *Charta der Vielfalt* (Charter of Diversity), making up the employers of 14.7 million German workers.⁶² This 2006 employer initiative was set up to hold private sector entities responsible for committing to recognition and appreciation for diversity of LGBTQ+ individuals as well as other traditionally marginalized groups in the workplace. The antagonism of diversity in federal U.S. policy also prompted new signatories, and 90 percent of existing signatories committed to an unchanged continuation of DEI programs.

Conclusion

In Germany and the United States, through the intersection of legal development, market incentives, and political change, LGBTQ+ individuals have gained more inclusion in the workplace and been recognized as economic drivers. While regulatory frameworks have established a baseline for non-discrimination, the private sector has emerged as a key driver of inclusive practices, linking workplace equality with economic competitiveness and innovation. Recent political shifts on both sides of the Atlantic, however, highlight the fragility of these gains and the extent to which corporate strategies remain responsive to changing policy environments. As transatlantic economic ties deepen, the future of LGBTQ+ inclusion will likely depend not only on legal protections, but also on sustained engagement from businesses, institutional networks, and policymakers to ensure that inclusivity remains aligned with both democratic values and long-term economic performance.

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The South Portico of the White House is seen lit up in rainbow colors, Tuesday, December 13, 2022, following the Respect for Marriage Act bill signing. Official White House Photo by Adam Schultz, Biden White House via Flickr,
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This publication is generously funded by the *Transatlantik-Programm der Bundesrepublik Deutschland aus Mitteln des European Recovery Program (ERP) des Bundesministeriums für Wirtschaft und Energie (BMWE)* (Transatlantic Program of the Federal Republic of Germany with Funds through the European Recovery Program (ERP) of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy (BMWE)).

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ISBN 978-1-933942-71-1

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