

## Culture Wars Key to Elections

### Marginalized by Gender

*All people need to be accepted for who they are,  
with love and respect*

By Rev. Charles Brock  
April 2022

*Following is the third in a series of articles by the Rev. Charles Brock, scholar and Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson Educational Society. Rev. Brock examines how culture wars in America are linked politically, religiously, through businesses, sociologically, and psychologically. Today's subject is gender.*

Culture wars may well determine the next several elections unless a major national event intercedes, such as a war, recession or even another huge national infection. These issues have been stewing since the 1990s and there are many going on at this moment.

They have political, religious, business, sociological, and psychological aspects. Regarding religiousness, Pat Buchanan was the first major political figure to bring it to the foreground. In the 1993 Republican National Convention, he said: "There is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as the Cold War itself. For this war is for the soul of America."

Culture clashes have raged since then and the determinates are before us now. There are around 20 major issues, and I want to concentrate on these seven: 1. Guns (Constitution, masculinity, Hollywood, NRA, evangelicals) 2. Climate Change 3. Gender (including book bans, anti-LGBTQ laws, trans sports, etc.) 4. Abortion 5. Race 6. Welfare and Healthcare 7. Immigration and white supremacy (Christian nationalism)

Within each are variants and differences between the advocates and the scholars who study them. I will try to simplify as much as I can, keeping in mind the broader picture and the interrelationships.

**GENDER**

There is macho stuff about gender these days. It deeply divides the nation and is part of the major culture wars going on. This includes debates about gay rights, transgender issues, laws that make it even harder for LGBDQ people, book banning in schools, nasty school board fights. (I was amused when New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman wrote a few years ago that if you want to see American democracy at work, go to a local school board meeting. Ha ha).

“According to Gallup, the share of younger Americans who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender has risen precipitously in the last decade. Almost twenty-one percent of Generation Z – meaning, for the purposes of the survey, young adults born between 1997 and 2003 – identifies as LGBT, compared to about 10 percent of the millennial generation, just over 4 percent of Generation X, and less than 3 percent of Baby Boomers. Comparing the Generation Z to the Baby Boom generation, the percentage of people identifying as transgender, in particular, has risen twentyfold.”[1]

It is nevertheless hard to get the facts straight when both straights and gays sometimes or even often won't tell the truth about themselves in polling, and sometimes they don't even know.

### ANTI-LGBTQ LAWS

**There are new restrictive laws being passed by states in America.** “The most notorious of these new laws is Florida’s H.B. 1557, the [so-called] “Don’t Say Gay” law, which prohibits classroom instruction on sexual orientation or gender identity for children below fourth grade, and any such instruction that is not “age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate” for older students. It has an enforcement mechanism similar to Texas’ recent abortion bounty law, allowing individual parents to sue for damages and recoup attorney fees if they win. What constitutes “classroom instruction” is unclear, but many fear it could include any mention of gay or transgender people, including students’ families. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed it on a [March Madness] Monday last month. It looks like Ohio is going to copy it, too.

To justify the law, the right wing has taken to accusing anyone who opposes it of wanting to expose young kids to explicit material to prime them for abuse. On Twitter, DeSantis’ press secretary wrote, “If you’re against the Anti-Grooming Bill, you are probably a groomer or at least you don’t denounce the grooming of 4- to 8-year-old children.” The extremist QAnon idea that the right’s political opposition, Democrats, is a cabal of pedophiles has gone mainstream. This is superstitious nonsense.

This is, of course, not the first time that gay and gender-nonconforming people have been framed as a moral threat to children. In 1977, Anita Bryant, a former beauty queen and spokeswoman for the Florida Citrus Commission, started the anti-gay Save Our Children campaign. “Homosexuals cannot reproduce, so they must recruit,” she said. “And to freshen their ranks, they must recruit the youth of America.”

In recent years, the Republican Party has largely eschewed such language, appearing to make their peace with the presence of gays, lesbians, and transgender people in public life. Now such rhetoric is back, and it’s potentially explosive.

**There is growing evidence that to sweep this under the table at any age is dangerous to children’s mental health.** “Some pediatric psychologists say the law stigmatizes being gay or transgender and could harm the mental health of LGBTQ youth who are already more likely to face bullying and attempt suicide than children who are cisgender and straight. “We all have processes around clarifying who we know in our heads and hearts we are and who we are drawn to or attracted to,” said Laura Anderson, a child and family psychologist in Hawaii whose focus is LGBTQ+ youth and their families. “To make an increasingly large percentage of the population’s experience invisible and taboo is just so harmful and unsafe for all kids.”[2]

Said Natasha Pouloupoulos, a pediatric psychologist in Miami: “Transgender people, in particular, already often face greater psychological distress than the US general population. The National Center for Transgender Equality’s 2015 US Transgender Survey found that 40 percent of transgender respondents had attempted suicide, which is nine times the rate of the general population. We have governors – that have no education or basis or expertise in child mental health – that impose such laws that are going to have horrendous impacts on kids.”

Supporters of the Florida law claim it is necessary because children are being exposed to “radical concepts regarding sexual orientation and gender identity.”[3]

**A bit of historical context might be suitable.** We are to some extent products of our pasts. Western civilization and religion are built largely upon Hebrew, Greek, and Roman ideas. Jews and Muslims are completely anti-gay, and the Hebrew Scriptures and the Qur’an make that blindingly clear. On the other hand, Greece and Rome celebrated homosexuality. Plato would be cursed today by most in the West for claiming that true love is a ladder – starting with men with women, then men with men, then men with boys, leading to God, leading to the true, good, and beautiful. For the complete life, you move from lower to higher, from one rung to another. Sure, we in the West strongly disagree preferring Hebrew over Greek, but at least we ought to know from whence we came.

During the 2022 legislative session, dozens of states will consider LGBTQ legislation. Some bills will seek to advance the comprehensive nondiscrimination laws that LGBTQ people so sorely need, while others will almost certainly attempt to single out and target LGBTQ people for unfair and unequal treatment.

“State lawmakers have proposed a record 238 bills that would limit the rights of LGBTQ Americans this year – or more than three per day – with about half of them targeting transgender people specifically.

Nearly 670 anti-LGBTQ bills have been filed since 2018, according to an NBC News analysis of data from the American Civil Liberties Union and LGBTQ advocacy group Freedom for All Americans, with nearly all of the country’s 50 state legislatures having weighed at least one bill.”[4]

This is a terrible toll on American rights and acceptance of otherness. We have a long way to go.

## **BOOK BANNING (*Burning*) IN RED STATE SCHOOLS**

**Slaughterhouse Five** by Kurt Vonnegut (National Book Awards 1970 for

Fiction)

**Alchemist** by Paulo Coelho (France's Grand Prix Litteraire Elle in 1995)

**Her Body and Other Parties: Stories** by Carmen Maria Machado

**1984** by George Orwell

**The Kite Runner** by Khaled Hosseini

**The Catcher in the Rye** by J D Salinger

**Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy (Book 1)** by Douglas Adams

**I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings** by Maya Angelou (National Book Award)

**A People's History of the U.S.** by Howard Zinn

**Of Mice and Men** by John Steinbeck

**To Kill a Mockingbird** by Harper Lee (Pulitzer Prize)

**Beloved** by Toni Morrison (Nobel Prize)

These are some of the best writers in English today. All have won various and multiple awards, and I have only listed a few. The last two books mentioned have been so widely acclaimed that it would take a lengthy paper to begin to show their virtues. I have read the ones in dark print and cannot see any problems here. It is reminiscent of Nazi Germany in the good old USA. Are we going to jail school administrators and teachers who recommend these books? What in our current American hell is going on?

The short answer is that some people let loose from the political looney bin have found references to gays, lesbians, transgender people, sexual acts, gender identity, socialism, race ideologies, nudity, curse words, and other things they don't like. They are unwilling to take the judgment of literary critics and librarians and schoolteachers that these books are not only well written but raise issues about our current society that we ought to examine – impartially.

And what are the consequences of banning books? Author Laurie Halse Anderson, whose young adult books have frequently been challenged, said that pulling titles that deal with difficult subjects can make it harder for students to discuss issues like racism and sexual assault.

“By attacking these books, by attacking the authors, by attacking the subject matter, what they are doing is removing the possibility for conversation,” she said. “You are laying the groundwork for increasing bullying, disrespect, violence and attacks. ... Jack Petocz, a 17-year-old student at Flagler Palm Coast High School who organized a protest against the book ban, said that removing books about LGBTQ characters and books about racism was discriminatory and harmful to students who may already feel that they are in the minority and that their experiences are rarely represented in literature.”[5]

Let the kids speak for themselves. I don't think they need the help of old white people who have never knowingly known gays.

## **TRANS SPORTS**

What is a reasonable numerical estimate of people who identify as transgender? “We find that 0.6% of U.S. adults identify as transgender. This figure is double the estimate that utilized data from roughly a decade ago and implies that an estimated 1.4 million adults in the U.S. identify as transgender.”[6] That is a lot of people. Lots want to play sports in the gender they now have.

Remember the fuss about public toilets – who has the right to which urinal or toilet? Some states or counties insisted that it must be based on gender at birth.

That means that a manly trans guy had to use the ladies' loo. That was terribly embarrassing and asinine. The same issue has come up in sports.

“For years state lawmakers have pushed legislation attempting to shut trans people out of public spaces. In 2020, lawmakers zeroed in on sports and introduced 20 bills seeking to ban trans people from participating in athletics. These statewide efforts have been supported through a coordinated campaign led by anti-LGBTQ groups that have long worked to attack our communities. ... Believing and perpetuating myths[7] and misconceptions about trans athletes is harmful. Denying trans people the right to participate is discrimination and it doesn't just hurt trans people, it hurts all of us.”[8]

**What about surgical operations?** This is a biggie. Can some kids and/or their parents be rushing in too fast? “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread”? “The use of medical interventions for trans-identifying youth — puberty blockers and hormone therapy and then the possibility of surgery in young adulthood — dramatically raises the stakes of the controversy and undercuts the agnostic middle ground. ... The anxiety of parents, especially, at being potentially in the dark about their children's self-identification is heightened by the possibility that without their knowledge, their child could end up on a path that leads to surgical intervention — and that their own fitness as parents may be attacked if they object.”[9] And yet the mental health of the child may well be compromised if nothing is done. But to defer too much to parental objections is to make suicides more likely. It is really a dilemma that needs a lot of professional help during the process of deciding what to do.

**Well, we have a long way to go.** But there are ways forward. Religious people need to reflect on the fact that God created gender in various ways. The number of gays around the world is estimated at 4 to 5 percent. It includes most if not all animal groups. “According to Bruce Bagemihl, same-sex behavior (comprising courtship, sexual, pair-bonding, and parental activities) has been documented in more than 450 species of animals worldwide.”[10] There have been so many attempts to get around these facts by prayer, psychological, and medical methods, but it hasn't worked. It has wrecked a lot of people. And maybe even some pets. And they don't need retrograde phony religious counseling.

Politicians need to read some material beside right-wing propaganda and not take seriously the nasties that spout hate against gays, transgender people, et al. Come on — what is more important? Keeping your political seat sponsored by hate-mongers or coming down on the side of acceptance and justice.

We need to accept what people say about themselves and accept them for who they are, with love and respect. And unless we want a deeply split society with a lack of trust on all sides, there ain't no other way that is going to work.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Charles Brock, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and as Director of the

Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is also acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pennsylvania. He is a founding member of the Jefferson Education Society, where he serves as the secretary of the Board of Trustees.



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## End Notes

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2. Eric Berger, *How Florida's 'don't say gay' law could harm children's mental health*, Guardian, Mon 4 Apr 2022
3. ibid
4. Matt Lavietes and Elliott Ramos, *Nearly 240 anti-LGBTQ bills filed in 2022 so far, most of them targeting trans people*, March 20, 2020, NBC
5. Elizabeth A. Harris and Alexandra Alter *Book Ban Efforts Spread Across the U.S.*, Jan. 30, 2022, Updated Feb. 8, 2022, NY Times
6. Andrew R. Flores, Jody L. Herman, Gary J. Gates, Taylor N. T. Brown; *How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?* June 2016
7. Chase Strangio, Gabriel Arkles; *Four Myths About Trans Athletes, Debunked*, ACLU & UCLA Williams Institute, School of Law, April 30, 2020
8. Douthat op cit
9. Wikipedia, *Homosexual Behavior in Animals*, no date, but a very long and detailed article

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