



BY WILLIAM F. FELICE
Guest Columnist

Liberation for one group is liberation for all

Despite the many impressive advances, LGBTQ+ people in the U.S. and around the world currently face a frightening onslaught of repression, violence and fear.



A guest wears a Pride-themed Mickey ears hat at the Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World in Lake Buena Vista on June 3. [JOE BURBANK | AP]

In 1995, the eminent architectural historian Vincent Scully declared: “I think especially of the three great movements of liberation which have marked the past generation: Black liberation, women’s liberation, gay liberation. Each one of those movements liberated all of us, all the rest of us, from stereotypical ways of thinking which had imprisoned us and confined us for hundreds of years.” In every century of the American experience, we have gone through one more round of the American struggle with the meaning of freedom, equality and inclusiveness.

In the first decades of the 21st century, the LGBTQ+ community in the United States experienced enormous progress toward equality in civil society, in marriage and in the military. In its historic decision in June 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in all fifty states. Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote: “The right to marry is a fundamental right inherent in the liberty of the person, and ... couples of the same sex may not be deprived of that right and that liberty.” Kennedy wrote of the “transcendent importance of marriage,” and that “through its enduring bond, two persons together can find other freedoms, such as expression, intimacy and spirituality. This is true for all persons, whatever their sexual orientation. There is dignity in the bond between two men or two women who seek to marry and, in their autonomy, to make such profound choices.”

In addition, in the United States and around the world, a fresh awareness emerged calling for an end to gender roles classified through a binary lens of male/female. To hundreds of thousands of individuals, gender identity is not defined by a person’s biology, sexuality or who he/she/they love but, rather by who the person is. While gender identity can correlate with a person’s biological sex at birth, this is not always the case. Some people do not identify with the sex assigned to them at birth and instead refer to themselves as “transgender” and “nonbinary.” As Michael Schulman wrote in the New York Times: “The core question isn’t whom they love, but who they are — that is, identity as distinct from sexual orientation.”

Gallup polling reveals that 1 in 5 adults in Gen Z (those roughly 18 to 26) identify as LGBTQ+, compared with 7% of adults in the United States overall. In addition, around 2% of Gen Z adults are transgender. About half of all adults under 30 reported knowing someone transgender.

Despite many impressive advances, LGBTQ+ people in the U.S. and around the world currently face a frightening onslaught of repression, violence and fear. To consolidate and gain political power, autocrats, dictators and democratically elected leaders are pursuing a widely publicized “culture war” against LGBTQ+ people. These attacks are particularly focused on the most vulnerable segment of the LGBTQ+ community, the transgender population.

The Republican Party has aggressively pursued anti-trans legislation introducing more than 450 anti-LGBTQ+ bills in state legislatures across the United States this year alone. These harsh legal codes include the denial of gender-affirming care to youth and the criminalization of those health care providers that attempt to do so. Books with trans content have been banned and trans students have been blocked from participating in sports. The impact of these statutes is to make it harder to be trans in an already intimidating and unfriendly society.

A central element to Gov. Ron DeSantis’ platform for seeking the Republican presidential nomination is anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and legislation. Days before announcing his presidential campaign, DeSantis signed a Florida bill that banned gender-affirming care for minors, targeted drag shows, restricted discussion of “preferred pronouns” in schools and forced people to use certain bathrooms. At the bill signing, DeSantis presented a false narrative that children were routinely being “mutilated” by health care providers practicing gender affirming care.

Experts from America’s major medical associations have categorically disputed DeSantis’ claims and note that cases of regret after transitioning are extremely rare. Furthermore, puberty blockers are reversible and low-risk. While there are, of course, risks to any medical intervention, there are even more extreme risks associated with continued gender dysphoria.

This onslaught of Republican-led anti-LGBTQ+ legislation has created a mental health crisis among young transgender and gay people. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 70% of high school students who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual report persistent sadness, twice the rate of their heterosexual peers. In addition, 1 in 5 LGBTQ+ students attempted suicide in the past year, nearly four times the rate of straight young people. Further data show that roughly half of transgender youth have considered suicide in the past year.

Trans and nonbinary individuals have existed throughout time in all cultures on all continents. For example, for hundreds of years Indigenous people in North America recognized multiple gender identities, including transgender identities. This history is, unfortunately, either ignored or erased and replaced with myths and disinformation.

We rightfully celebrate during Pride month the many advances throughout America toward the acceptance and equality of LGBTQ+ people. But this year, the assaults on the LGBTQ+ community demand more than partying and celebration. Faced with DeSantis' demonization of LGBTQ+ people, we must speak out, organize and push our leaders to reverse these life-denying policies. The Human Rights Campaign writes: "The entire country should be alarmed by Gov. DeSantis's form of hateful politics. He is an existential threat to every LGBTQ+ person in Florida and beyond." All LGBTQ+ youth deserve access to health care, safe schools and an "education that allows them to see themselves in their school's curriculum and society."



William F. Felice is professor emeritus of political science at Eckerd College. He is the author of six books on human rights and international relations. He can be reached via his website at williamfelice.com.