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An Open Letter to the Political Science Community

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An Open Letter to the Political Science Community

Abstract

In 2003, the American Political Science Association (APSA) selected New Orleans as the site for its 2012 annual meeting.

In 2004, 78 percent of Louisiana voters (including 54 percent in Orleans Parish) passed the following amendment to their state constitution:

Marriage in the state of Louisiana shall consist only of the union of one man and one woman. No official or court of the state of Louisiana shall construe this constitution or any state law to require that marriage or the legal incidents thereof be conferred upon any member of a union other than the union of one man and one woman. A legal status identical or substantially similar to that of marriage for unmarried individuals shall not be valid or recognized. No official or court of the state of Louisiana shall recognize any marriage contracted in any other jurisdiction which is not the union of one man and one woman.

Keywords

American Political Science Association (APSA), New Orleans, LGBT

“An Open Letter to the Political Science Community”

by **Daniel R. Pinello**

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This language both limits marriage to different-sex couples and denies to same-sex pairs all “legal incidents” of marriage that arise from civil unions, domestic partnerships, and other familial arrangements. In other words, as a matter of state constitutional law, coupled lesbians and gay men can be nothing other than legal strangers to one another in the Pelican State.

In 2005, the APSA’s Committee on the Status of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and the Transgendered in the Profession adopted a resolution calling for the Association not to hold conventions in states with constitutional prohibitions of same-sex marriage. During the next two and a half years, sundry APSA committees considered the LGBT Status Committee’s siting resolution. But the organization as a whole never acted on the request.

In late 2007, I circulated e-mail messages to APSA members calling for the Association to relocate the 2012 convention and otherwise to boycott New Orleans.

That APSA holds annual meetings in states with constitutional provisions, like that of Louisiana, impedes the ability of LGBT political scientists to participate in the Association and to progress in the profession.

For instance, the domestic partners and children of LGBT members travel with them to conventions. Lee, my own partner of 12 years, has gone with me to meetings in Chicago and San Francisco. Were I to be hospitalized or otherwise incapacitated while visiting New Orleans in 2012, I would want Lee to make medical and other decisions on my behalf. However, under the Louisiana amendment, we could not do that for each other, because health care proxies, hospital visitation authorizations, and other documents between same-sex couples are invalid incidents of marriage under the constitutional language.

This example is not hypothetical. I will be sixty-two years old in 2012. My mother died at that age, and my father passed a few years later. This year, I was diagnosed to have asthma. So Lees

being legally stripped of any capacity to assist me medically in the Crescent City is a serious concern for me. I would not want him to face the question from medical staff in Louisiana, “Are you a member of Dan’s family?” In short, only heterosexual families would be welcome at a New Orleans annual meeting.

The APSA’s current refusal to relocate the 2012 convention hits LGBT graduate students and junior faculty with particular force. They will face the Hobson’s choice of, on the one hand, subjecting themselves and their families to an overtly hostile legal environment while in the Big Easy or, on the other hand, not attending the conference and missing its opportunities to interview for jobs and to present papers in order to advance careers.

What is more, the Association established a relevant precedent a generation ago when it refused to hold conventions in states that had not ratified the federal Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). That policy precluded meetings in Chicago, because Illinois never approved the ERA.

Hence, while the APSA was fully prepared twenty-five years ago to battle gender discrimination, the organization is not willing today to combat sexual-orientation discrimination with similar resolve. Instead, by confirming New Orleans for an annual meeting, the Association condones the condemnation of same-sex couples to the legal purgatory that Louisiana, and the Crescent City itself, authorized in 2004.

If the Pelican State Constitution in effect said, “People of color may not marry or enter into marriage-like unions,” or “Jews may not marry or enter into marriage-like unions,” or “Disabled people may not marry or enter into marriage-like unions,” the APSA would not be mired in the present debate. The organization would never regard New Orleans as a viable conference site under those circumstances. Yet for two and a half years, the Association has been—and continues to be—willing to overlook the Louisiana Constitution’s prohibition of marriage and civil unions for same-sex couples.

By far, the most frequent reproach to the embargo on the Crescent City stems from the heartfelt need to show solidarity with the Big Easy after the natural devastation and political debacle of Hurricane Katrina. Yet consider the practical reality of the APSA’s solidarity commitment: “Hold on, New Orleans! We’re coming to your rescue! Our help is on the way! Just give us *five years* to get down there.” If Association members truly want to demonstrate meaningful affinity with the plight of the Crescent City, they should make financial contributions to its rebuilding effort now, and not just attend a conference there seven years after the hurricane.

My partner Lee’s brother-in-law, Jeff, is a clinical psychologist and was among the first American Red Cross volunteers permitted to enter New Orleans after Katrina’s landfall. Balancing the demands of his own patients back home in Schenectady, NY, Jeff donated full-time counseling services to hurricane victims by means of three two-week trips to the Big Easy staggered over several months. Now *that* is solidarity, while three days of convention-going over Labor Day Weekend in 2012 is symbolic support at best.

And why should such purely symbolic aid be borne on the backs of LGBT colleagues? They would face in the Crescent City the real and enduring impact of the Pelican State's inhospitable legal environment.

The Status Committee's conference-siting resolution eliminates just Atlanta and New Orleans from the cities with convention facilities that have been sufficient in the past to accommodate the Association's annual gatherings. Boston, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Toronto, and Washington are, and will remain, viable venues for conferences. Surely this list is adequate to suit the organization's siting needs.

I have faith that the American Political Science Association has the capacity—and can summon the compassion—to ensure that all of its members are treated with dignity and respect at annual meetings. I hope that its leadership and members share my belief.

Daniel R. Pinello is Professor of Government at John Jay College of Criminal Justice of the City University of New York and the author of *America's Struggle for Same-Sex Marriage* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) and *Gay Rights and American Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).