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Politics, Equity and Meeting Boycotts

To those who favor gay marriage rights, the site of the American Political Science Association's meeting this year couldn't have been better. The association is meeting this week in Boston, where gay marriage is permitted.

But for many gay academics, the association's plan to hold its 2012 meeting in New Orleans couldn't be worse. That's because Louisiana has passed one of the most restrictive bans on gay marriage in the country — a measure that prohibits not only gay marriage, but recognition of any equivalent relationship. As a result, gay academics say that in event of illness or accident in New Orleans, their partners could be denied access to them in hospitals. And that means some gay academics will skip the meeting.

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In June, the association announced [what it hoped would be viewed as a compromise](#). The meeting would go ahead in New Orleans, but new criteria would be used for future site selections, and the association would encourage scholarship and engagement on gay rights issues when it convened in New Orleans. On Thursday, many of those involved with the compromise and representatives of many of the caucuses within political science gathered to discuss the issue — and it appears that the compromise has many critics.



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Gay political scientists — some sporting “Boycott New Orleans” buttons — said that the compromise didn't actually address what they consider the key issue: the association's willingness to meet where they don't feel safe. Others, meanwhile, questioned whether the call for a boycott was really a progressive act, and still others said that the political science association needed to be more open about the fact that it makes political decisions.

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The discussion illustrated the increasingly vexed question for disciplinary associations of how and where to schedule their meetings. In recent years, many associations have moved cities or hotels due to labor strife or other issues. Such moves can be expensive, however. Most disciplinary groups schedule their meetings well in advance (five years isn't uncommon). Only a limited number of cities are options for meetings that attract thousands of attendees. Most associations try to move around different geographic areas. And canceling a contract can lead to steep fees.

Many of the political scientists who spoke Thursday applied their disciplinary background to the issue — with debate not only over the meeting site, but on the relative importance of state vs. city power, critical race theory, federalism, nonprofit regulation and the proper criteria by which to judge whether a locality protects the rights of gay people.

Dianne Pinderhughes, a professor at the University of Notre Dame who is president of the association, stressed in her presentation that the APSA was fundamentally changing the way it will relate to its host cities. Not only will it sponsor sessions that relate to the city, but it will seek “to engage” local leaders on issues of concern, such as the limit on gay partners' rights in Louisiana. But in one sign of how difficult the issue has been, she said — when asked repeatedly — that she couldn't really say whether going ahead with the New Orleans meeting was consistent with the new policy, a matter of grandfathering in the choice, or an intentional exception to the policy.

Donald Rosenthal of the State University of New York at Buffalo, chair of the APSA's Committee on the Status of Lesbians,

Gays, Bisexuals and Transgendered in the Profession, said that the association had “a tin ear” on this issue. Rosenthal praised Pinderhughes for talking about the issue during her year as president and taking action, even if not the action he wanted. But Rosenthal noted that the committee had been pushing on the issue since 2005 (the vote by Louisiana was in 2004) and was largely ignored until this year.

[Growing numbers of scholars are backing the boycott plan](#), and issuing statements indicating that they will stay away from the conference. The petition backing the boycott seeks to rebut arguments about helping the Katrina recovery by noting that political scientists can do that right now, and that a convention in 2012 is not key to the recovery of New Orleans. The pro-boycott argument states that the association has an obligation to meet only in cities where members feel safe, and that it would never meet in a city engaged in comparable discrimination by denying marriage rights to individuals who have disabilities or are Jewish or are members of other minority groups.

Pro-boycott speakers questioned the statements from Pinderhughes and others that New Orleans was sufficiently gay-friendly to justify meeting there despite the state constitutional amendment. While Pinderhughes noted the many ways in which New Orleans is different politically and culturally from the rest of the state, others noted that a majority of the city’s voters backed the amendment (although by a smaller margin than the rest of the state). When APSA officials said that they consulted with gay leaders in New Orleans, audience members said that local gay leaders in any locality have a vested interest in encouraging conventions to help their cities, and that they should not be consulted in this way, or no city would be boycotted.

Celeste Montoya Kirk, who spoke at the meeting on behalf of the Committee on the Status of Latinos y Latinas in the Profession, said she was sympathetic to the concerns of any scholars about meeting in areas that are hostile to them. But she noted that as someone who teaches at the University of Colorado at Boulder, she lives in a city that has “the most progressive policies” one could imagine, but that is also “the whitest community I’ve ever lived in.”

Another political scientist in the audience said that whenever black or Latino scholars travel to any city, they risk being mistreated — potentially in violent ways — by police officers who engage in ethnic profiling. Citing critical race theory, this political scientist noted that for all the concern about the Louisiana law, the reality of law enforcement’s impact on minority scholars wasn’t a focus of the APSA.

Some of the debate shifted into questions of democracy and majority rule. While the association has previously declined to characterize the breakdown of input it received from members about the New Orleans controversy, some involved in reviewing those materials said that a majority favored no change — not moving away from New Orleans or adding the new provisions to “engage” the city.

Amid the back and forth, some tried to take the discussion to the broader question of political stances. The APSA has rules that bar it from taking political positions.

Joe Soss of the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities said that the debate appeared to be trying to make “a distinction between the political and the professional.” He said that the association was pretending in all kinds of ways not to be taking political positions when it was. For example, he noted that the association meets in union hotels, which is a political stance, but explains it in part by saying that members believe that unions can contribute to the quality of service at hotels. Soss said it was time to “deal with these issues in more open way.”

He said that the current debate has featured a “ludicrous, utilitarian calculus” on the odds of a gay academic and the meeting getting sent to the hospital vs. the odds of significant funds from the convention going to low-income New Orleans neighborhoods. If the APSA is going to be “engaged” with New Orleans leaders on gay rights, Soss said, why not admit it was taking a political stand. He noted that other scholarly associations take stands on issues such as the war in Iraq without their organizations falling apart or losing their tax-exempt status.

The comments by Soss prompted several others in the audience to ask why sociologists or English professors could be more clear on their values than political scientists.

The next test of the association’s policies will come at next year’s meeting, in Toronto. A group of scholars — many of them right-leaning — have announced [their own petition to the APSA](#), demanding that it protect members from Human Rights Commissions, which in Canada have held hearings on statements or publications that have offended certain ethnic groups. The petition suggests that these commissions limit academic freedom and could inhibit the free exchange of ideas in Toronto. Pinderhughes said Thursday that the APSA was still “fact finding” about the issue.

But organizers of the Toronto meeting pledged that they would have conference sessions on the commissions, consistent with the new policy.

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

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