

Taylor Swift's imperfect activism

Opinion by Jill Filipovic

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Jill Filipovic is a journalist based in Washington and author of the book "[The H-Spot: The Feminist Pursuit of Happiness](#)." Follow her on [Twitter](#). The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely her own. View more [opinion articles](#) on CNN. This piece has been updated to reflect the latest news.

(CNN)At MTV's Video Music Awards on Monday night, Taylor Swift used her Video of the Year acceptance speech to promote LGBTQ equality and take a swipe at President Donald Trump.

Her winning video, "You Need to Calm Down," features an array of LGBTQ stars and promotes [a petition](#) in support of the [Equality Act](#), a bill that would protect LGBTQ people from many forms of discrimination. Despite some half a million signatures, Swift noted that the White House hasn't recognized the request.

On Tuesday, White House deputy press secretary Judd Deere responded and said, "The Trump administration absolutely opposes discrimination of any kind and supports the equal treatment of all; however, the House-passed bill in its current form is filled with poison pills that threaten to undermine parental and conscience rights."

Celebrities are rarely the best vessels for politics. Narcissism tends to be high, and genuine engagement tends to be low. And, more to the point, talent as a singer/songwriter does not translate into political sophistication. Someone who is famous for being famous is probably not the best source of information on any given social policy. In an ideal world, our political views would be shaped more by people who have experience and expertise than by people whose singing, acting or Instagramming we enjoy.

But we don't live in an ideal world, and celebrities do have massive platforms. Most of them shrug off any obligation those platforms might require, forgoing political engagement entirely. Others lean into the outgrown egos of stardom and begin to fancy themselves political experts -- musician Kid Rock, who knows very little but says a whole lot, is one example.

A few others, though, walk an appropriate line. They raise the platforms of actual activists and experts. They work on a specific issue or set of issues they care about. They push their audience to learn more, to engage and to realize that the political process affects their lives. Take actress America Ferrera, for instance: She takes on specific [crucial issues](#) like women's health, democracy and #MeToo, and seeks to fill a necessary gap (she was also instrumental in the TimesUp legal defense fund that serves the many non-famous, disadvantaged women who are sexually harassed or assaulted at work).

Swift is no Ferrera. She hasn't struck this balance perfectly -- there are a lot of [LGBTQ organizers](#) who are doing better work than celebrities when it comes to advocating for [marginalized communities](#) -- but she has, laudably, used her platform for good. She chose a specific issue. She gave her fans and followers a specific action they can take: Sign the petition and push your elected representatives to pass the Equality Act.

Petitions, unfortunately, don't do much to sway a president who is hostile to LGBTQ rights, nor Senate Republicans who also refuse to give LGBTQ Americans necessary anti-discrimination protections. In an age of "Queer Eye" and Ellen DeGeneres, a great many Americans may not even realize that it remains broadly legal to discriminate against someone for being gay, bisexual or transgender.

The truth is that anti-discrimination laws are a hodgepodge, and where you live determines what rights you have: According to the Human Rights Campaign, [in 30 states](#), an employer can fire someone for being gay; a landlord can refuse to rent to a trans person; a waitress can refuse to serve a lesbian couple; an adoption agency can refuse to place children with a same-sex couple; a taxi driver can refuse to pick up a person he believes is queer. The [Equality Act](#) simply says that you can't discriminate against someone for their sexual orientation or gender identity in situations where sex discrimination would also be illegal.

LGBT people face pervasive discrimination, to devastating effect. According to [congressional findings](#), one in five transgender Americans suffers homelessness. As they age, women in same-sex relationships have twice the poverty rate of couples in opposite-sex relationships. "LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the foster care system by at least a factor of two and report twice the rate of poor treatment while in care compared to their non-LGBTQ counterparts," the Equality Act states.

The US has made incredible strides on LGBTQ equality. Yet there is still so far to go. Celebrities won't get us all the way there, and celebrity politics are nearly always flawed. But stars with platforms as large as Swift's have a choice: They can remain apolitical and not rock the boat, or they can use their fame for good and advocate for their fellow humans. That Swift did the latter, however imperfectly, is worth commending and emulating.

1. Who is the intended audience(s)?

2. What is the author's purpose?

3. What is the exigence of the piece?

On the back, write a rhetorical precis for this piece. Use your model to help.

