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E Pluribus Unum?

The Fight Over Identity Politics

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Identity Politics Strengthens Democracy

Stacey Y. Abrams

Recent political upheavals have reinvigorated a long-running debate about the role of identity in American politics—and especially American elections. Electoral politics have long been a lagging indicator of social change. For hundreds of years, the electorate was limited by laws that explicitly deprived women, African Americans, and other groups of the right to vote. (Efforts to deny voting rights and suppress voter turnout continue today, in less overt forms but with the same ill intent.) When marginalized groups finally gained access to the ballot, it took time for them to organize around opposition to the specific forms of discrimination and mistreatment that continued to plague them—and longer still for political parties and candidates to respond to such activism. In recent decades, however, rapid demographic and technological changes have accelerated this process, bolstering demands for inclusion and raising expectations in communities that had long been conditioned to accept a slow pace of change. In the past decade, the U.S. electorate has become younger and more ethnically diverse. Meanwhile, social media has changed the political landscape. Facebook captures examples of inequality and makes them available for endless replay. Twitter links the voiceless to newsmakers. Instagram immortalizes the faces and consequences of discrimination. Isolated cruelties are yoked into a powerful narrative of marginalization that spurs a common cause.

These changes have encouraged activists and political challengers to make demands with a high level of specificity—to take the identities that dominant groups have used to oppress them and convert them into tools of democratic justice. Critics of this phenomenon, including Francis Fukuyama ("Against Identity Politics," September/October 2018), condemn it as the practice of "identity politics." But Fukuyama's criticism relies on a number of misjudgments. First, Fukuyama complains that "again and again, groups have come to believe that their identities—whether national, religious, ethnic, sexual, gender, or otherwise—are not receiving adequate recognition." In the United States, marginalized groups have indeed come to believe this—because it is true. Fukuyama also warns that Americans are fragmenting "into segments based on ever-narrower identities, threatening the possibility of deliberation and collective action by society as a whole." But what Fukuyama laments as "fracturing" is in reality the result of marginalized groups finally overcoming centuries-long efforts to erase them from the American polity—activism that will strengthen democratic rule, not threaten it.

THE CLASS TRAP

Fukuyama claims that the Democratic Party "has a major choice to make." The

party, he writes, can continue "doubling down on the mobilization of the identity groups that today supply its most fervent activists: African Americans, Hispanics, professional women, the LGBT community, and so on." Or it can take Fukuyama's preferred tack, focusing more on economic issues in an attempt to "win back some of the white working-class voters . . . who have defected to the Republican Party in recent elections."

Fukuyama and other critics of identity politics contend that broad categories such as economic class contain multitudes and that all attention should focus on wide constructs rather than the substrates of inequality. But such arguments fail to acknowledge that some members of any particular economic class have advantages not enjoyed by others in their cohort. U.S. history abounds with examples of members of dominant groups abandoning class solidarity after concluding that opportunity is a zero-sum game. The oppressed have often aimed their impotent rage at those too low on the social scale to even attempt rebellion. This is particularly true in the catchall category known as "the working class." Conflict between black and white laborers stretches back to the earliest eras in U.S. history, which witnessed tensions between African slaves and European indentured servants. Racism and sexism have long tarnished the heroic story of the U.S. labor movement—defects that contributed to the rise of a segregated middle class and to persistent pay disparities between men and women, disparities exacerbated by racial differences. Indeed, the American working class has consistently relied on people of color and women to push for improved status for workers but has been slow to include them in the movement's victories.

The facile advice to focus solely on class ignores these complex links among American notions of race, gender, and economics. As Fukuyama himself notes, it has been difficult "to create broad coalitions to fight for redistribution," since "members of the working class who also belong to higher-status identity groups (such as whites in the United States) tend to resist making common cause with those below them, and vice versa." Fukuyama's preferred strategy is also called into question by the success that the Democratic Party enjoyed in 2018 by engaging in what he derides as identity politics. Last year, I was the Democratic Party's gubernatorial nominee in Georgia and became the first African American woman in U.S. history to be nominated for governor by a major political party. In my bid for office, I intentionally and vigorously highlighted communities of color and other marginalized groups, not to the exclusion of others but as a recognition of their specific policy needs. My campaign championed reforms to eliminate police shootings of African Americans, protect the LGBTQ community against ersatz religious freedom legislation, expand Medicaid to save rural hospitals, and reaffirm that undocumented immigrants deserve legal protections. I refused to accept the notion that the voters most affected by these policies would invariably support me simply because I was a member of a minority group. (The truth is that when people do not hear their causes authentically addressed by campaigns, they generally just don't vote at all.) My

campaign built an unprecedented coalition of people of color, rural whites, suburban dwellers, and young people in the Deep South by articulating an understanding of each group's unique concerns instead of trying to create a false image of universality. As a result, in a midterm contest with a record-high turnout of nearly four million voters, I received more votes than any Democrat in Georgia's history, falling a scant 54,000 votes shy of victory in a contest riddled with voting irregularities that benefited my opponent.

DIFFERENT STROKES

Beyond electoral politics, Fukuyama and others argue that by calling out ethnic, cultural, gender, or sexual differences, marginalized groups harm themselves and their causes. By enumerating and celebrating distinctions, the argument goes, they give their opponents reasons for further excluding them. But minorities and the marginalized have little choice but to fight against the particular methods of discrimination employed against them. The marginalized did not create identity politics: their identities have been forced on them by dominant groups, and politics is the most effective method of revolt.

To seek redress and inclusion, the first step is to identify the barriers to entry: an array of laws and informal rules to proscribe, diminish, and isolate the marginalized. The specific methods by which the United States has excluded women, Native Americans, African Americans, immigrants, and the LGBTQ community from property ownership, educational achievement, and political enfranchisement have differed; so, too, have the most successful methods of fighting for inclusion—hence the need for a politics that respects and reflects the complicated nature of these identities and the ways in which they intersect. The basis for sustainable progress is legal protections grounded in an awareness of how identity has been used to deny opportunity. The LGBTQ community is not included in civil rights protections, which means members may lose their jobs or their right to housing or adoption. Antiabortion rules disproportionately harm women of color and low-income women of every ethnicity, affecting their economic capacity and threatening their very lives. Voter suppression, the most insidious tool to thwart the effectiveness of identity politics, demands the renewal of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and massive reforms at the state and local levels.

When the groups most affected by these issues insist on acknowledgment of their intrinsic difference, it should not be viewed as divisive. Embracing the distinct histories and identities of groups in a democracy enhances the complexity and capacity of the whole. For example, by claiming the unique attributes of womanhood—and, for women of color, the experience of inhabiting the intersection of marginalized gender and race—feminists have demonstrated how those characteristics could be leveraged to enhance the whole. Take, for example, the Family and Medical Leave Act, which feminists originally pushed for in order to guarantee women's right to give birth and still keep their jobs, but which men have also come to rely on to take time off from work to care for children or aging parents.

The current demographic and social evolution toward diversity in the United States has played out alongside a trend toward greater economic and social inequality. These parallel but distinct developments are inextricably bound together. The entrance of the marginalized into the workplace, the commons, and the body politic—achieved through litigation and legislation—spawned reactionary limits on their legal standing and restrictions meant to block their complaints and prevent remedies. The natural antidote to this condition is not a retrenchment to amorphous, universal descriptors devoid of context or nuance. Instead, Americans must thoughtfully pursue an expanded, identity-conscious politics. New, vibrant, noisy voices represent the strongest tool to manage the growing pains of multicultural coexistence. By embracing identity and its prickly, uncomfortable contours, Americans will become more likely to grow as one.

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Identity Politics Can Lead to Progress

John Sides, Michael Tesler, and Lynn Vavreck

Francis Fukuyama argues that "identity politics has become a master concept that explains much of what is going on in global affairs." He attributes a variety of political developments in the United States and abroad—especially the emergence of populist nationalism—to identity politics. In Fukuyama's telling, the rise of identity politics constitutes a fall from grace. For him, most of "twentieth-century politics was defined by economic issues." But in the 1960s, he writes, the civil rights, feminist, and other social movements embraced identity politics. Later, he claims, forces on the political right followed suit, adopting "language and framing from the left." Fukuyama warns that if democratic societies continue "fracturing into segments based on ever-narrower identities," the result will be "state breakdown and, ultimately, failure."

Identity is indeed a "master concept" for understanding American politics. But identity politics has a much longer history than Fukuyama describes. And in the United States, identity politics hasn't led to the breakdown of democracy; rather, it has helped democracy thrive.

ORIGIN STORY

In Fukuyama's telling, identity politics first emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. In fact, Americans have been engaged in identity politics since the founding of the republic. If the fight for civil rights for African Americans was fueled by identity politics, then so was the fight to establish and ensure white supremacy via slavery and Jim Crow. In other words, identity politics isn't behind only the efforts of marginalized groups to seek redress: it also drives the efforts of dominant groups to marginalize others.

Fukuyama believes identity politics went too far when groups such as African Americans began to "assert a separate identity" and "demand respect for [their members] as different from the main-

stream society." Leaving aside whether that statement correctly characterizes the goal of such groups, it is important to acknowledge that identity politics also defined who was and who was not part of "mainstream society" in the first place.

In Fukuyama's telling, U.S. politics were healthier when Americans—especially those on the left—organized around economic concerns that transcended ethnic categories. "In past eras," he writes, "progressives appealed to a shared experience of exploitation and resentment of rich capitalists." But there is no period in U.S. history when economics were so cleanly divorced from identity. For example, as the political scientist Ira Katznelson has documented, the key social welfare programs of the New Deal era were predicated on racial discrimination: U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt relied on the support of white segregationists, which he won by allowing southern states to prevent blacks from enjoying the New Deal's benefits. Identity, and especially racial and ethnic identity, has always been intrinsic to fights over economic opportunity and equality.

This is not to say that today's identity politics is the same as its historical forebears. What makes it different is how tightly Americans' views about racial, ethic, and religious identities are now bound up with another salient American identity: partisan affiliation. Well before 2016, Democratic and Republican voters had begun to diverge in their views of immigration and racial equality. Democrats became more supportive of immigration and more willing to attribute racial inequality to discrimination. Republicans became less supportive of immigration and more willing to attribute racial inequality to a lack of effort on the part of African Americans. This divergence sharpened during Barack Obama's candidacy and presidency, as whites' racial attitudes became more closely tied to their partisan identities.

This trend might have accelerated even faster than it did had major political leaders tried to exploit it. But Obama actually talked about race less than other recent Democratic presidents and frequently used rhetoric that sought to unify Americans of different racial backgrounds. Meanwhile, Obama's Republican opponents in the presidential elections of 2008 and 2012, John McCain and Mitt Romney, chose not to stoke racialized fears of Obama.

Donald Trump was different. His provocative statements about race, immigration, and Islam helped define the 2016 election. Partly as a result, Americans' views on such issues became stronger predictors of how they voted. For example, compared with in earlier elections, it was easier to determine how people voted in 2016 based on whether they wanted a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants or believed that racial inequality was just a matter of minorities "not trying hard enough." Meanwhile, economic issues achieved more political potency when refracted through race. As far back as the 2016 Republican primary, whether voters supported Trump depended less on whether they were worried about losing their own jobs than it did on whether they were worried about whites losing jobs to ethnic minorities.

WHOSE CHOICE?

Since the election, this alignment of partisanship and attitudes about race and immigration has grown even stronger,

What democracy looks like: new members of the U.S. Congress, January 2019

BRIAN SNYDER / REUTERS

and it has an important implication for Fukuyama's argument. Fukuyama's favored political agenda closely resembles that of Democratic voters and the Democratic Party. He supports remedies for police violence against minorities and the sexual harassment of women, endorses birthright citizenship, and wants an American identity based on ideals rather than on "blood and soil" nationalism.

The most forceful opposition to such ideas has come from the Trump administration and its Republican allies and supporters. Yet Fukuyama does not put the onus on Republicans to reject Trump. In his view, the "major choice" belongs to the Democratic Party, which must decide whether to double down on "the mobilization of . . . identity groups" or "try to win back some of the white working-class voters . . . who have defected" to the GOP. But if Fukuyama wants federal action on his policy agenda in an era of divided government and narrow congressional majorities, the real onus is on Republicans to support his ideas. And if he wants an American identity based on shared values and open to all citizens—even those who hail from what Trump reportedly called "shithole countries"—then he will need at least some Republicans to stand up to Trump.

Fukuyama may be against identity politics, but identity politics is also critical to the success of the agenda that he supports. History has shown that progress toward equality doesn't come about because of happenstance, a sudden change of heart on Capitol Hill, or the magnanimity of dominant groups. Instead, progress comes when marginalized groups organize around their shared identities. Their fight is often unpopular. In one 1964 survey, conducted a few months after the passage

of the Civil Rights Act, of those polled, 84 percent of southerners and 64 percent of Americans living outside the South said that civil rights leaders were pushing too fast. But pushing was their only recourse, and pushing helped change the country's laws and attitudes.

Fukuyama wants a unifying American identity, what he calls a "creedal national identity." But the country is already fairly close to having one. According to the December 2016 Views of the Electorate Research, or VOTER, Survey, 93 percent of Americans think that respecting U.S. political institutions and laws is somewhat or very important to "being American." Far fewer believe that it's important to be born in the United States (55 percent) or to have European heritage (20 percent). Moreover, most Americans actually place identity politics at the center of the American creed: the vast majority (88 percent) think that accepting people of diverse racial and religious backgrounds is important to being American.

There is no necessary tension between identity politics and the American creed. The question is whether identity politics will help Americans live up to that creed. Historically, it has.

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A Creedal Identity Is Not Enough

Jennifer A. Richeson

Francis Fukuyama argues that identity politics is eroding national unity in the United States and Europe, undermining the kind of civil discourse essential to the maintenance of liberal democracy. He also claims that "perhaps the worst thing about identity politics as currently practiced by the left is that it has stimulated the rise of identity politics on the right." This is highly misleading. Identity politics was part of the American political discourse long before liberals and leftists began to practice it in the 1960s and 1970s. Think of the anti-immigrant Know-Nothing Party in the 1850s and the white-supremacist Ku Klux Klan during the first half of the twentieth century. What were such groups if not early practitioners of a brand of white identity politics?

But other parts of Fukuyama's argument are more persuasive, and he is right to focus on the role that identity plays in the health of American democracy. Fukuyama makes one particularly useful point in the closing passages of his article:

> People will never stop thinking about themselves and their societies in identity terms. But people's identities are neither fixed nor necessarily given by birth. Identity can be used to divide, but it can also be used to unify. That, in the end, will be the remedy for the populist politics of the present.

What Fukuyama gets right here is the fact that human beings have a fundamental need to belong—a need that their collective identities, be they racial, ethnic, religious, regional, or national, often satisfy. Such affiliations, which psychologists call "social identities," serve multiple psychological functions. These include, for example, the need for a sense of safety, which social identities satisfy by reducing uncertainty and

providing norms that help people navigate everyday life. Some social identities also offer rituals and customs to aid with loss, mourning, and other significant challenges that occur during the course of one's life. At times, identities provide a sense of purpose and meaning and a basis for esteem and regard that is larger than people's individual selves. As Fukuyama suggests, identities efficiently satisfy the human need for respect and dignity.

What Fukuyama gets wrong, however, is the idea that a single unifying identity—a "creedal" American identity—could alone satisfy this suite of psychological needs and thereby allow citizens to abandon the smaller social identities that people invest in and clearly value. Broad identities such as the one Fukuyama promotes are useful and unifying at times, but they rarely meet the human need for individuation. That is why people look to narrower bases for identification. Moreover, broad social identities such as national affiliations—even when ostensibly based on principles that are hypothetically accessible to all—often rely on the terms and norms of the dominant majority and thus end up undermining the identity needs of minority groups.

Furthermore, people's existing social identities are important to them, and attempts to dissolve them would likely be met with severe resistance. The potential loss of a group's identity, real or imagined, is psychologically threatening. A powerful urge compels people to defend their groups at all costs in the face of such threats. As Fukuyama himself notes, a sense of loss due to the changing racial and ethnic composition of the United States is partly to blame for the rise of right-wing identity politics. Hence, it is important not only to cultivate a common American identity, as Fukuyama argues, but also to promote the idea of the United States as inclusive of multiple racial, ethnic, religious, and other types of identities. Indeed, Americans must create that society.

WHY DON'T WE HAVE BOTH?

Perhaps the main weakness of Fukuyama's argument is the implication that Americans face a binary choice when it comes to political identity: either they can embrace a broad creedal identity or they can cling to narrow identities based on race, ethnicity, gender, or ideology. There is no reason to think that is true. Political leaders can address the sense of psychological vulnerability triggered by shifting demographics and social change and also respect rightful claims for inclusion and fair treatment on the part of members of marginalized groups. Americans can acknowledge and, when appropriate, celebrate the particular identities, cultures, and histories of distinct social groups and also pursue a unifying national creed.

There is even some evidence to suggest that the more identities people maintain—and the more complex and overlapping those identities are—the less conflict they will have with people who maintain different sets of identities. Greater identity complexity may serve as a buffer against the feelings of humiliation and resentment that often fuel ethnonationalist movements.

Identifying as American does not require the relinquishing of other identities. In fact, it is possible to leverage those identities to cultivate and deepen one's Americanness. For instance, researchers

have found that when people highlight their shared experiences, even when they belong to what appear to be opposing, if not adversarial, social groups, they experience an increase in empathy and harmony. Rather than dividing people, the act of reflecting on the marginalization of one's own social group—be it current or historical—can encourage societal cohesion.

In the United States, an honest accounting and acknowledgment of what it has meant to be American could reveal Americans' shared vulnerability and their common capacity for wrongdoing, as well as their resilience in the face of mistreatment. This sentiment is echoed by the lawyer and civil rights activist Bryan Stevenson, who has argued for the need to engage honestly with the history of racial injustice in the United States. "We can create communities in this country where people are less burdened by our history of racial inequality," Stevenson told an interviewer last year. "The more we understand the depth of that suffering, the more we understand the power of people to cope and overcome and survive."

That sounds like a unifying national creed that would allow Americans to embrace their own identities, encourage them to respect the identities embraced by others, and affirm shared principles of equality and justice. Fukuyama appears to believe that this more complex form of national identification is not possible. I think it is. It may even be the only path toward a diverse nation that lives up to its democratic principles.

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Fukuyama Replies

I appreciate these thoughtful comments on my article. But all three responses, which contain a number of common themes, fundamentally miscast my thinking about identity politics. One reason for this might be that the article focuses more on the kind of identity politics characteristic of the contemporary progressive left, whereas the book from which the article was adapted, *Identity*, focuses more on my central concern: the recent rise of right-wing nationalist populism. This development threatens liberal democracy because populist leaders seek to use the legitimacy they gain from democratic elections to undermine liberal institutions such as courts, the media, and impartial bureaucracies. This has been happening in Hungary, Poland, and, above all, the United States. Populists' distrust of "globalism" also leads them to weaken the international institutions necessary to manage the liberal world order.

I concur with the commonplace judgment that the rise of populism has been triggered by globalization and the consequent massive increase in inequality in many rich countries. But if the fundamental cause were merely economic, one would have expected to see left-wing populism everywhere; instead, since the 2008 financial crisis, parties on the left have been in decline, while the most energized new movements have been anti-immigrant groups, such as the far-right party Alternative for Germany and the populist coalition now governing Italy. In the 2016 U.S. presidential election, enough white working-class voters abandoned the Democratic Party to put Donald Trump over the top,

capping a 40-year trend of shifting party loyalties. This means that there is something going on in the cultural realm that needs explaining, and that something is concern over identity.

BALANCING IDENTITY

The concept of "identity," as I use the term, builds on a universal aspect of the human psyche that Plato labeled *thymos*, the demand for respect for one's inner dignity. But there is a specifically modern expression of *thymos* that emerged after the Protestant Reformation and that values the inner self more highly than society's laws, norms, and customs and insists that society change its own norms to give recognition to that inner self. The first major expression of modern identity politics was nineteenth-century European nationalism, when cultural groups began to demand recognition in the form of statehood. I believe that much of modern Islamism is similarly driven by identity confusion among Muslims in modernizing societies who feel neither Western nor traditional and see a particular form of politicized religion as a source of community and identity.

But is not correct to say, as John Sides, Michael Tesler, Lynn Vavreck, and Jennifer Richeson do, that identity politics as I define it drove white-supremacist and anti-immigrant movements in the nineteenth-century United States. Racism and xenophobia have always existed. But a generation or two ago, white Americans did not typically think of themselves as a victimized minority mistreated by elites who were indifferent to their problems. Today, many do, because contemporary racists have borrowed their framing of identity from groups on the left, in ways that resonate with people who are not necessarily racist.

Another major misunderstanding of my argument has to do with my view of contemporary identity movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo. Of course they are rooted in real social injustices such as police violence and sexual harassment; they legitimately call for concrete policy remedies and a broad shift in cultural norms. But people can walk and chew gum at the same time. Even as Americans seek to right injustices suffered by specific social groups, they need to balance their small-group identities with a more integrative identity needed to create a cohesive national democratic community. I am not arguing, contrary to Richeson, that this will be an adequate substitute for narrower identities; rather, it will be a complement to them.

Liberal democracy cannot exist without a national identity that defines what citizens hold in common with one another. Given the de facto multiculturalism of contemporary democracies, that identity needs to be civic or creedal. That is, it needs to be based on liberal political ideas that are accessible to people of different cultural backgrounds rather than on fixed characteristics such as race, ethnicity, or religion. I thought that the United States had arrived at such a creedal identity in the wake of the civil rights movement, but that accomplishment is now being threatened by right-wing identitarians, led by Trump, who would like to drag Americans backward to identities based on ethnicity and religion.

WINNING VS. GOVERNING

Stacey Abrams criticizes my desire to return to class as the defining target of

progressive politics, since class and race overlap strongly in the United States. But it is absurd to see white Americans as a uniformly privileged category, as she seems to do. A significant part of the white working class has followed the black working class into underclass status. Communities facing deindustrialization and job loss have experienced increases in crime, family breakdown, and drug use; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has estimated that 72,000 Americans died in 2017 of drug overdoses related to the opioid epidemic. So although part of the populist vote both in the United States and in Europe is driven by racism and xenophobia, part of it is driven by legitimate complaints that elites—the mainstream political parties, the media, cultural institutions, and major corporations—have failed to recognize these voters' plight and have stood by as this decline has occurred.

Abrams knows much better than I do what is required to win an election in the contemporary United States, and I'm sorry that she did not succeed in her bid for governor of Georgia. But I'm not sure that a successful electoral strategy would necessarily translate into a sustainable governing strategy. The country's single greatest weakness today is the intense polarization that has infected its political system, a weakness that has been exploited by authoritarian rivals such as China and Russia. In practical terms, overcoming polarization means devising a posture that will win back at least part of the white working-class vote that has shifted from the left to the right. Peeling away populist voters not driven by simple racism means taking seriously some of their concerns over cultural change and national identity. I agree that the burden is on Republican politicians to stop defending Trump, but they will do so only when they realize that their own voters are turning against him.

The contemporary Middle East, like the Balkans before it, is an extreme example of out-of-control identity politics and what ultimately happens to countries that do not invest in integrative national identities. The United States is fortunately far from that point of state breakdown. But what is happening in the country is part of a larger global shift from a politics based on economic ideas to a politics based on identity. In the 2018 midterm elections, Trump was reportedly advised by Paul Ryan, the Republican Speaker of the House, to campaign on the 2017 tax cut and economic growth; Trump chose instead to go the identity route by railing against migrant caravans and birthright citizenship. This is identity politics on steroids.

This shift, echoed in other countries, is not compatible with modern liberal democracy. The latter is rooted in the rights of individuals, and not the rights of groups or fixed communities. And unless the United States counters this trend domestically, it will continue to set a bad example for the rest of the world.