E Pluribus Unum?

The Fight Over Identity Politics

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-