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POL 121-B: American Politics

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Prompt: People's identities (e.g., partisan, race, gender, geographic) affect their political opinions. How does the public's use of specific identities to shape political attitudes strengthen and/or weaken American democracy? Is there a better way for people to develop their political opinions?

Identity forms an integral component of contemporary society. It dictates an individual's family and cultural experiences, challenges they face, the way they connect with others, and the way others view them. Another crucial domain heavily influenced by identity is politics, specifically in the United States. Identity shapes public political attitudes, which contribute to how well democratic principles are maintained or eroded. **The public's use of various identities, including race and gender, to shape political attitudes strengthens American democracy by increasing the representation of all groups' and individuals' preferences. Reducing individuals to a singular identity, such as a political party, cultivates polarization that leads to violations of democracy. The public should develop opinions by drawing from multiple identities to best represent all groups and individuals in government and policy while reducing polarization.**

One central contributor to political attitude is the prioritization of different political issues, which is directly linked to individual identity. Racial, ethnic, and gender identities, as

well as the intersections between them, all impact which issues individuals consider most important. People of color are more likely than white people to prioritize issues related to racism, criminal justice, and immigration, regardless of gender. Women are more likely than men to prioritize issues related to poverty and caregiving, and support for more specific issues within these broader categories, such as education and healthcare, also differs across ethnoracial identities (Crowder-Meyer 2021). This pattern makes sense given individuals' opinions are inevitably rooted in their personal experiences, which are affected by identities such as race and gender.

Similarly, group identities also shape political priorities, as seen with group consciousness. Group consciousness starts with a set of individuals that identify with a specific social group and their values. Group members then begin to perceive a disadvantage in the group's relative power and resources and collectively prioritize this issue, seeking ways to address their disadvantage. Rural communities illustrate a clear example of this concept; residents of rural areas recognize a deprivation of their group, such as a lack of resources, and consequently act to address that issue through voting or other forms of political action (Cramer Walsh 2015). Overall, with both individual and group identities, those who prioritize an issue are more likely to act substantively (Crowder-Meyer 2021) to solve it.

In addition to influencing priorities, identity can also drive political action in other ways, increasing the representation of every group and individual. Identities can provide voters with shortcuts and mobilize supporters (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018), increasing political participation. Individuals are also motivated to form groups through a shared identity in order to create a higher likelihood of producing real political change (Crowder-Meyer Nov. 3, 2023). When citizens act substantively on issues they prioritize and become more civically engaged as

individuals or groups, they directly increase the representation of all citizens' needs and preferences. Democracy relies on the aggregation and equal consideration of all citizens' opinions to achieve a shared decision representative of the full population (Crowder-Meyer Aug. 30, 2023). Applying identity to politics helps include all individuals' and groups' priorities in government and policy decisions.

The use of identity in shaping political attitudes becomes harmful when multiple identities coalesce, resulting in polarization. The process of polarization occurs when normal differences align on a single dimension, causing people to move from cross-cutting identities to a single mega-identity (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018). In other words, individuals stop identifying with multiple groups and instead primarily see themselves as one identity. As a result, two (or more) groups emerge, each with mutually exclusive identities and interests. Each group becomes united internally, reducing differences between members, and simultaneously begins to see other groups as a threat, producing an "us" vs "them" mentality (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018).

Polarization is evident in political party identification, which forms a foundation for several key violations of democracy. Extreme polarization ingrains hostile feelings for the opposing party in voters' minds (Iyengar and Westwood 2014). Group members question whether outsiders have equivalent moral worth, leading them to perpetuate stereotypes and dehumanize members of the opposing party. As a result, each group starts viewing politics and elections as zero-sum (Crowder-Meyer Oct. 30, 2023). Both parties see the other as a threat to such an extent that they sanction abuses of democracy (Bartels 2020), as well as morality and humanity, in order to secure power. The out-group questions the moral legitimacy of political leaders, and the in-group tolerates violations of democracy. Research shows that voters with a

strong party association are proven to be more lenient with an undemocratic candidate that belongs to their own party, meaning they trade partisan interests for democratic principles (Svolik 2019). Democracy requires that losing candidates respect the winner's right to make policy and citizens obey the policies (Crowder-Meyer Aug. 30, 2023), both of which are at risk under political polarization.

Another polarizing identity that can harm democracy is racial identity. Viewing race as a dominant identity produces both in-group and out-group attitudes that motivate political decisions. For example, white people that strongly identify with their race and develop group consciousness and white solidarity show in-group attitudes that produce attachment or favoritism toward group members (Jardina 2020). Members are motivated to protect their group's interest, in this case, maintaining white privilege. Hostility toward out-group members, or non-white Americans, also affects vote choice and candidate evaluations through racial resentment and prejudice (Jardina 2020). In fact, the strongest predictor of antidemocratic attitudes is ethnic antagonism (Bartels 2020).

Using party as a sole identity also negatively impacts public opinion, which policymakers rely on to protect against minority tyranny (Crowder-Meyer Oct. 23, 2023). Extreme polarization impacts the information parties receive and accept. According to the RAS model, individuals receive a message, decide whether to accept it or not, then use the most easily accessible information when stating their opinion (Crowder-Meyer Oct. 23, 2023). Strong party identification creates a screen that filters out any information that doesn't fit with a preconceived narrative. This identity affects both the way information is interpreted and beliefs about facts (Crowder-Meyer Oct. 23, 2023), which influences public opinion and vote choice, two integral cornerstones of democracy.

In order to maintain the political benefits identity provides while reducing the possible harms, the public should draw from multiple identities to form their opinion rather than relying solely on one. Multiple identities can exist at once, such as ethnoracial, gender, regional, and party identities, all of which overlap and interact together to form a person's political priorities (Crowder-Meyer 2021). When people simultaneously draw from more than one of these, this will motivate them to act substantively to benefit multiple dimensions of their identity. If all Americans acted in this way, politicians and policy would get closer to representing all identities to accurately reflect the population. Furthermore, with this more complex definition of identity, each individual shares more commonalities with others, reducing polarization. Every American identifies with multiple groups, reducing the strength of their connection to any one group. Consequently, individuals will be less likely to allow democratic violations from in-group members or view outsiders as an inhumane threat, reducing polarization and its consequences (Svolik 2019).

To summarize, identities like race, ethnicity, and gender impact how individuals prioritize political issues, which leads them to act substantively. Group identities and group consciousness, such as with rural residents, show how a shared identity can motivate political action, and when more people are politically engaged and actively participating, this increases equal representation of all Americans in politics. However, when the normal multiplicity of identities merges into a single mega-identity, polarization grows as each group becomes united internally and develops hostility toward outsiders. This is seen in political parties, with both groups dehumanizing the other and allowing clear violations of democracy, as well as racial identity, where in-group and out-group attitudes such as ethnic antagonism lead to antidemocratic attitudes. Instead, using multiple identities to form political opinions can reduce the likelihood of polarization by creating

more commonalities. It also maintains the benefits, helping American politics accurately reflect the population and their identities. Overall, it is essential to intentionally consider multiple identities to strengthen and protect American democracy.

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