Allie Vorley

Professor Melody Crowder-Meyer

POL 121-B: American Politics

21 Nov 2023

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 is integral to everyone's daily life. 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 is influential in shaping the public's political attitudes, which contributes to how well democracy is upheld or eroded. **The public's use of various identities, such as race and gender, in shaping political attitudes strengthens American democracy by increasing the representation of all groups' and individuals' preferences, but when multiple identities are reduced to one, like party identity, this results in polarization that leads to violations of democracy. People should develop opinions by drawing from multiple identities to best represent all groups and individuals in government and policy while reducing polarization.**

One central aspect of 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 people 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 more specific issues within these broader categories, such as education and healthcare, also change based on 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, political priorities are also shaped by group identities, 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 the disadvantage. One clear example of this can be seen in rural communities, where 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, serving to increase the representation of every group and individual. Identities can provide voters with a shortcut and help 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 are acting substantively on issues they prioritize and becoming more civically engaged as individuals or groups, this directly increases 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.

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 clearly seen with political party identification, which creates grounds 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 seeing 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 off 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. When race becomes a dominant identity, this produces both in-group and out-group attitudes that motivate political decisions. For example, in-group attitudes are seen when white people strongly identify with their race and develop group consciousness and white solidarity that create attachment or favoritism toward group members (Jardina 2020). This means members are motivated to protect their group's interest, which in this case is maintaining white privilege. In terms of out-group attitudes, 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). When parties face extreme polarization, this impacts the information they receive and accept. According to the RAS model, individuals first 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 ID 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 key cornerstones of democracy.

In order to maintain the political benefits identity provides while reducing the possible harms, people should draw from multiple identities to form their opinion rather than relying

solely on one. Multiple identities can exist at once, such as enthnoracial, 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. This means that they 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 is created, where 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, identity is an often

overlooked concept in politics that, when applied correctly, can contribute to protecting

American democracy.

References

Bartels, Larry. 2020. "Ethnic antagonism erodes Republicans' commitment to democracy" *PNAS*
https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2007747117

Cramer Walsh, Katherine. 2015. "Putting Inequality in Its Place: Rural Consciousness and the
Power of Perspective." *American Political Science Review* pgs. 517-531
https://www.jstor.org/stable/23275431

Crowder-Meyer, Melody. 2021. "How Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and their Intersections Shape
Americans' Issue Priorities" *Journal of Women, Politics, & Policy,* pgs. 169-179
https://doi-org.proxy048.nclive.org/10.1080/1554477X.2021.1971506

Crowder-Meyer, Melody. Aug 30, 2023. "Democratic Backsliding" *POL 121*

Crowder-Meyer, Melody. Oct 23, 2023. "Public Opinion" *POL 121*

Crowder-Meyer, Melody. Oct 30, 2023. "Public Opinion: Polarization vs. Democracy" *POL 121*

Crowder-Meyer, Melody. Nov 3, 2023. "Public Opinion: Identities Shape Political Behavior"
POL 121

Iyengar, Shanto and Sean Westwood. 2014. "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New
Evidence on Group Polarization." *American Journal of Political Science*, pgs. 690-705

Jardina, Ashley. 2020. "In‑Group Love and Out‑Group Hate: White Racial Attitudes in
Contemporary U.S. Elections" *Political Behavior* https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-020-09600-x

McCoy, Jennifer, Tahmina Rahman and Murat Somer. 2018. "Polarization and the Global Crisis
of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic

Polities." *American Behavioral Scientist* pgs. 16-36 https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218759576

Svolik. 2019. "Polarization versus Democracy" *Journal of Democracy*

https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0039.