

Identity in Democracy

Amy Gutmann

I can trace my lifelong interest in justice to my father who fled Nazi Germany as a Jewish college student in 1934 and brought his entire family -- including his parents and four older siblings -- to join him in India. My father's family would not have survived (and I would not be alive) were it not for the fact that my father both took the initiative and was permitted to immigrate, first to India and then to the United States. For many years as a child growing up in a small town in the United States, I was the only Jewish girl in my class. Everyone knew everyone else's religious affiliation. There was "released time" for Catholic students to attend "Church school" and I went to "Hebrew school" after class once a week. But beyond being acutely aware of our different religious identities, we had no shared understanding of their meaning. When the first Jewish boy came into my elementary school, a classmate pointedly remarked on the playground that the "Jews were Christ-killers." My own personal history made me think early in life about the role of group identity in the lives of individuals and democratic societies.

It is hard to overestimate the role that appeals to group identity, which are now commonly called "identity politics," play in contemporary democratic societies, in the widest range of phenomena ranging from routine political mobilization in elections to unsettling civil unrest during crises.

Critics of identity politics focus on its downside. Groups demand loyalty from their members that can conflict with their obligations to society, fellow human beings and the public good. Group identities—Christian, Muslim, Jew, male, female, Latino, Black, Caucasian, to mention just a

few—almost inevitably stereotype people (whether as “Christ killers” or anti-Semitic, intolerant or tolerant, lazy or industrious, strong or weak, ambitious or nurturing). Stereotypes by their very nature pigeonhole individuals, limiting their freedom to define themselves. Stereotypes also tend to generate hostility rather than the alliances based on common values that hold democracies together. Distrust, hatred, and even violence ensue from the divisiveness of identity group politics. Not a prescription for the health of democracies or the pursuit of just causes.

Defenders of identity politics, however, paint a very different picture. They point out that not only have human beings always identified in groups, they always will. Human beings, they observe, are social animals. Moreover, individuals naturally identify with those who are “like us”—being like us, after all, includes both involuntary and voluntary group identities as far ranging as identifying (and being identified) as human, male or female, young or old, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, heterosexual, homosexual, or transsexual, and so on. To deny the importance of group identity is not only to deny a central component of any individual’s identity. It is also to overlook the positive roles that group identity plays in many people’s lives: many identity groups—especially minority groups who have historically experienced discrimination from majorities—provide personal security and social belonging, pride and mutual support, when majorities have yet to become fully nondiscriminatory. Even in the absence of discrimination, defenders of group identity remind us that the numbers count in democratic politics. The key to success in democratic politics is appealing to, organizing, and mobilizing groups, whether they be called interest groups or identity groups (they are typically one and the same).

Is there a way of bridging this rather acrimonious divide between the critics and defenders of identity politics? *Identity in Democracy* offers a way to consistently recognize “the good, the bad and the ugly of identity politics.”

In democratic politics, most people are most influential in groups, and identity groups manifest a basic freedom of association. Given the freedom, individuals will identify in groups. But an identity politics that is not informed by a sense of justice will divide more than it will unite democracy. The key then is to use one’s sense of democratic justice to inform and assess identity politics. There are many ways in which a politics that depends on identity groups but is also informed by a sense of justice can work to better secure equal liberty, opportunity, and civic equality for all individuals, not only for the most privileged or the most powerful members of advantaged or disadvantaged groups.

Consider one vivid case, which could have been decided otherwise, of justice denied because of identity politics: Julia Martinez lived at the Santa Clara Pueblo reservation in the Southwest of the United States almost all her life. She married a Navajo man, and they raised eight children as Pueblo on the reservation, speaking the traditional language, Tewa, and practicing Pueblo traditions and customs. Because Martinez married outside of the Pueblo tribe, she and her children were denied Pueblo citizenship and welfare rights. If Martinez had been a man who intermarried, she and her children would have received full Pueblo rights. Martinez sued the tribal authorities, invoking the Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968: “No Indian tribe in exercising powers of self-government shall... deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of its laws.” Martinez lost her case because the majority of a divided United States Supreme Court decided that: “To

abrogate tribal decisions... for whatever good reasons, is to destroy cultural identity under the guise of giving it.” In the mind of the Supreme Court majority, to protect the Pueblo group identity meant denying Julia Martinez and her children, as well as women and children of other tribes, the equal rights to benefit by affiliating and belonging to their tribes.

In the name of protecting Pueblo sovereignty, the Court majority effectively denied American Indian women and their children equal citizenship by not recognizing that most (if not all) individuals have multiple group identities—in Martinez’s case as a Pueblo woman married to a Navajo man, who is also a United States citizen, with the expectation of enjoying the same rights as men would under these same circumstances. Denying her an equal standing with men, as the Indian Civil Rights Act of 1968 required, was justice denied. It forced her to accept a subordinate standing as a Pueblo and a United States citizen. The Martinez case illustrates what’s wrong with the idea that absolute sovereignty—without any consideration of equal rights—should be granted to any group. Martinez lost her appeal for equal treatment not because of her group identity but rather because a majority of the members of the United States Supreme Court decided to cede absolute sovereignty to Pueblo authorities—all of whom were men—even though this meant abrogating the civic equality, equal freedom and opportunity of Pueblo women. There is no evidence whatsoever that Pueblo identity would have been “destroyed” by a decision to give these equal rights to Pueblo women. Group identities, as this cases demonstrates, are multiple, not singular. Surely Martinez’s identity as a Pueblo women counts as part of what Pueblo identity entails.

Because group identities are multiple, not singular, and because democratic politics depends on considerations of justice to flourish, the

relationship between group identity and democracy is complex. A democratic perspective attends to the interplay between group identities and democratic politics, and assesses their relationship on the basis of broadly defensible principles of justice.

Identity groups as a whole are neither friends nor enemies of democratic justice. They pose distinctive challenges that must be addressed by those who care about democracy. Identity groups offer advantages of organizing on the basis of mutual identity in democratic politics. They also pose challenges to sub-groups within them and to those who do not belong. A democratic view of identity politics should recognize both the positive and the problematic parts played by group identity in democratic politics. *Identity in Democracy* suggests how we can recognize the good, the bad, and the ugly of identity politics in order to encourage the good, and discourage (even if we cannot completely overcome) the bad and the ugly.