

Identity in Democracy

Amy Gutmann

My avid, lifelong interest in justice evolved from having a father who fled Nazi Germany as a Jewish college student in 1934 and who brought his entire family -- including four older siblings -- to join him in India. Living in a small community in upstate New York, I was the only Jewish student in my class. This personal history has led me to think early in life about the role of group identity for individuals and for a democratic society.

In contemporary democratic societies the role of group identity is clear in a variety of cases, from political mobilization to civil rifts. Identity groups have long occupied a controversial place in democracy. Critics point out the downside of identity politics: groups sometimes demand loyalty from their members that goes beyond their affiliation with the state, with their fellow human beings, or with the public good. Group identities – male or female, black or white, Christian, Muslim or Jew, Latino or Caucasian – stereotype people and can create hostility rather than shared values and justice. Some identities propel people to distrust, hate, and even exert violence.

Defenders of identity politics point out that human beings have always identified in groups. Human beings, they observe, are social animals. Human psychology is prone to identifying with those who are ‘like us’ – who share with us some trait including tradition, gender, looks, or values. To deny group identity is to deny an important part of any individual’s identity. In addition, groups tend to support personal security and social belonging, pride and mutual support. Identity groups are important in a democracy, because in democratic politics the numbers count, and organizing with other

who share the same views can offer any individual political power and influence.

So how should we think about group identity? Although my family history and personal identity drew me to be intensely interested in justice, the desire to bring more justice to one's society and the world should not be dependent on any particular identity. In democratic politics, most people are most influential in groups, and identity groups are a manifestation of a basic freedom of association. In my book *Identity in Democracy* I have sought to demonstrate the ways in which a politics that depends in no small part on identity groups 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 disadvantaged groups.

Consider a controversial case: Julia Martinez lived at the Santa Clara Pueblo reservation almost all her life. She married a Navajo man, and they raised eight children as Pueblo on the reservation, speaking Tewa (the traditional language) and practicing Pueblo traditions and customs. Martinez and her children were denied Pueblo citizenship and welfare rights because she intermarried. If she were a man who intermarried, 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's case did not succeed because the United States Supreme Court majority said "To abrogate tribal decisions... for whatever good reasons, is to destroy cultural identity under the guise of giving it." Thus in its quest to protect the Pueblo group identity the Supreme Court has denied Julia Martinez and her children, as well as women of other tribes, their affiliation and belonging.

Mutual identification is central to human psychology and to democratic politics, and it should thus be protected. But sometimes this identification can discriminate, as in Julia Martinez's case, and sometimes it can express stereotypes and breed hatred. The protection of group identity in these cases should be mitigated by the democratic principles of civic equality, non-oppression and non-discrimination. The U.S. Supreme court has effectively denied Julia Martinez of her equal citizenship in the name of protecting Pueblo sovereignty. But Julia Martinez, like most individuals, had connections and affiliation with multiple cultures and groups. Denying her an equal standing forced her to accept a subordinate standing as a Pueblo, or give up this identity if she could. Her efforts to be accorded equal respect as a Pueblo, as a woman and as an American citizen gave evidence of why granting absolute sovereignty to any group or institution is both morally dangerous and empirically ungrounded. Martinez lost her appeal for equal treatment because the Court accepted the claim that sovereignty be ceded to Pueblo authorities even though this meant abrogating the civic equality, equal freedom and opportunity of Martinez and other women.

The relationship between group identity and democratic politics is far more complex than blanket critiques and defenses of identity politics suggest. A democratic perspective should attend to the interplay between group identities and democratic politics and assesses their relationship on the basis of broadly defensible principles of justice.

I argue that identity groups as such 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

sometimes pose challenges to sub-groups within them and to those who do not belong. A democratic view of identity politics should recognize the legitimate but also problematic parts played by group identity in democratic politics. *Identity in Democracy* suggests how we need to 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.