

Substantial Disruption



The End of Identity Politics?

By Mike Tully

A current [meme](#) circulating among commentators on both the right and left holds that the presidential election signaled the end of identity politics. Liberal author Mark Lillanov [wrote](#) in the [New York Times](#) on November 18th, “One of the many lessons of the recent presidential election campaign and its repugnant outcome is that the age of identity liberalism must be brought to an end.” He later added, “National politics in healthy periods is not about “difference,” it is about commonality.”

Writing in the same publication the same weekend, conservative columnist Ross Douthat [argued](#) that what liberalism really needs is more of that ol’ time religion: “(I)t may not be enough for today’s liberalism, confronting both a right-wing nationalism and its own internal contradictions, to deal with identity politics’ political weaknesses by becoming more populist and less politically correct. Both of these would be desirable changes, but they would leave many human needs unmet. For those, a deeper vision than mere liberalism is still required — something like “for God and home and country,” as reactionary as that phrase may sound.” (For others the same needs could be met by good ol’ fashioned “sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll,” as Woodstockian as that phrase may sound!)

Lillanov and Douthat are hardly alone in their opinions. It seems popular to declare that identity politics coded on the table November 8th and is now as cold as yesterday’s stuffing. But where do we take their premise? Is the answer to fashion a talismanic populism that leads us to all hold hands around the political campfire? Or does it mean pay more attention to white people? Bernie Sanders, whose followers generally ran the gamut from white to slightly less white, recently [stated](#), “(O)ne of the struggles that you’re going to be seeing in the Democratic Party is whether we go beyond identity politics. I think it’s a step forward in America if you have an African-American CEO of some major corporation. But you know what, if that guy is going to be shipping jobs out of this country, and exploiting his workers, it doesn’t mean a whole hell of a lot whether he’s black or white or Latino.”

To paraphrase [Mark Twain](#), the report of the death of identity politics is an exaggeration. As Paul Krugman [noted](#) in the *Times* on November 25th, “The only way to make sense of what happened is to see the vote as an expression of, well, identity politics — some combination of white resentment at what voters see as favoritism toward nonwhites...” It’s a misread to interpret the election result through an exclusively racial lens, but Krugman is on to something. And the something is as old as politics itself: interest groups.

As R. Allen Hays writes in the [Democracy Papers](#), “Interest groups are one important mechanism through which citizens in the United States make their ideas, needs, and views known to elected officials. Citizens can usually find an interest group that focuses on their concerns, no matter how specialized they may be.” Or, I would add, how “ethnic” they might be, or how [identitarian](#) they might be. The flaw in the “identity politics is dead” meme is that interest group politics is not dead and never will be. The Black Lives Matter movement is not going anywhere, not as long as African-Americans are incarcerated and killed by police at a disproportionate rate. And, while Hispanics are hardly a homogenous group, many of them are bound by concerns over immigration policy and discrimination. Gay people will form an interest group as long as their marriages are protected but their jobs are not. To suggest that these groups are not valid constitutes a fundamental misunderstanding of politics. They exist, they organize, they vote, and they will be sought after, no matter how much Bernie Sanders and the cognoscenti prefer otherwise. Liberals are as likely to abandon them as the early bird is to abandon the worm.

How then, to explain the election? In August of 2015 I took a sick day and was watching television to pass the time. Fox News re-ran the previous day’s presidential debate “undercard” (Rick Perry, Rick Santorum, Bobby Jindal, etc.) and asked as lame a question as has been asked in a debate: what three words would you use to describe Hillary Clinton? Every answer became a soliloquy, but I decided to play along and came up these three words: *sell by date*. Her time had passed. It was as simple as that. Her experience and policies fell on the deaf ears of natives who had gone restless and were no longer listening.

Instead, they voted for Custer.