

Working Draft: Do Not Cite

STRATEGIC PRIMORDIALISM:  
HOW POLITICAL PARTIES ORGANIZE IDENTITY POLITICS

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Prepared for presentation at the  
State of the Parties Virtual Conference  
Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics  
University of Akron  
November 4±5, 2021

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*Identities are not fixed essences; they are strategic assertions*  
Dorinne Kondo (2009)

*An identity is questioned only when it is menaced, as when the mighty begin to fall, or when the wretched begin to rise, or when the stranger enters the gates, never, thereafter to be a stranger:*

James Baldwin (1976)

On November 2, 2021, Boston made history by electing Michelle Wu as the first Black and Asian American Mayor.

After the incumbent Mayor Marty Walsh was appointed by President Biden as Labor Secretary, Janey Iostri the Democratic primary, which was won by two women, Michelle Wu and Annissa Essaibi George, both members of the City Council, who faced each other in the November 2 election. That, besides their gender, Michelle Wu and Annissa Essaibi George are American-born daughters of immigrant parents.

Michelle Wu is an immigrant from Poland, and she identifies herself as Polish American. But the press routinely describes her as a person of color, a designation which Essaibi George has often accepted, but for which she has also been criticized because her physiognomy easily identifies her to be white, prompting the [Boston Globe](#) to ask: "American People of Color?"

Political philosopher Kwame Appiah begins his brilliant book *They Than Bind: Rethinking Identity* (Appiah 2018), with stories of taxi drivers mistaking him as Brazilian and addressing him as a Maghrebi from Belgium in Paris, and expressing skepticism in Washington that he cannot speak Hindi.

These two stories, which can be repeated many times, point up the malleability and contingency of identity, and the ambiguity of physiognomy as an identity marker. The Boston story also highlights the intrinsic problems in the way identity is conceptualized, analyzed and understood in the United States ordinary people, journalists, and scholars. These problems are best captured by two statements. The first statement, made by politicians of all ideological stripes and understanding of identity (Smith 2020). The second statement, usually made in learned discourse, that identity, including, especially, race, is socially constructed. The second statement is made with the sense that simply making it validates the claim embodied in it. Almost never is the statement followed with even a minimal explanation of how identities, including race, are constructed.

In this paper, draw on the insights of the comparative politics literature on identity to sketch elements of a theoretical framework that might help to clarify the analytical (conceptual, theoretical and methodological) issues in the systematic study of identity and use these insights to examine how American political parties organize identity politics. With rare exceptions (Egan 2020), the comparative politics literature on identity and the study of identity politics in the United States have proceeded in isolation. But the voluminous literature on identity politics in the United States generally, and on partisanship as social identity (Greene, Palmer and Schickler 2002; Mason 2018) and the emergence of white identity politics in particular (Cramer 2016; Jardina 2019; Sides, Tesler and Vavreck 2018) reveal issues that lend themselves to improved analysis with the analytical insights of the comparative politics scholarship on identity.

### Comparative Insights on Identity

The accumulated findings of over three decades of comparative research on identity and politics reflect a strong consensus among scholars on three related analytical issues: (1) Identity is a variable; (2) Identity is endogenous to the political process and institutions that structure politics and (3) Identity is constructed. I will discuss the variability of identity as a separate topic, but I will combine the discussion of identity as endogenous and identity as constructed.

#### The Variability of Identity<sup>1</sup>

The variability of identity is intimately tied to the definition of identity. Definitions of identity abound and I will not review them here. I will instead proceed pragmatically with a utilitarian



extreme cases, eliminate, the malleability ~~of~~ identity. This conflict, in other words, are attempts to primordialize a social construct and to naturalize a human artifact.

The futility of a primordialist conception and understanding of identity also suggests the need for a constructivist conception and understanding of identity that treats the formation, maintenance and transformation of identities as the outcome of social, economic and political processes.

### Constructivism and the Endogeneity of Identity

One would be hard put to find reference to a ~~constructivist~~ constructivist approach that treats identities as endogenous to politics in the voluminous literature on identity and politics in the United States.

The dominant approach, however, betrays an unwarranted degree of reflexivity in the process of self-categorization that initially signals the potentially relevant *connection* between the person and the identity group member (Hogg and Terry 2000). But the initial *decision* to join the identity group derives from the *recognition* that the members of the target group possess the relevant attributes that invite the decision to join. That decision involves choice, choice suggests availability of alternative information, and choice and availability of alternative information imply the exercise of rationality in linking the expected emotional and psychic satisfaction derived from joining the identity group.

Scholars working in political psychology that heavily informs the dominant approach point to important developments in cognitive psychology in correctly rejecting the utility of rational choice explanations (Huddy, Sears and Levy (2013); Chong (2011) But this rejection amounts to throwing the baby out of the bathwater, for the rejection is more appropriate for the earlier insights from cognitive psychology on the limits of decision making captured by such processes (Kahneman and Tversky 1982) draw attention instead to a more realistic *strategic rational choice* approach that takes into account the reality of imperfect information, the computational limits on information-processing, and the associated use of heuristics, concepts that can fruitfully clarify key aspects of identity construction, stability and change, such as the subjective meaning of identities, gradations in identity strength considerable stability of social and political identities (Huddy 2001).

The dominant approach moreover, slides over the institutional incentives and the associated strategic rationality that motivate the choice of parties, politicians and voters whether to activate the varied social identities (racial, ethnic, religious) separately or jointly, or to separate or fuse them. For example, it is unclear whether the impact of social sorting on the forging of partisanship as an all-encompassing social identity and the resulting political polarization in the United States was the result of autonomous calculations by voters or the result of elite rhetoric and elite polarization. In a nuanced and hence a more realistic study,endusky (2009) shows that the joint ideological sorting and political polarization are elite phenomena that is reflected in citizens sorting themselves ideologically but with

social identities are inextricably tied to the political process and the institutions that structure politics in the United States. And even when an otherwise excellent book titled *Crisis* identities, especially racial identities, the 2016 presidential campaign, the analysis never campaign strategies combined with the heightened salience and politicization of race during the 2016 campaign and Presidency (Desler and Sears 2010) contributed to that politicization.

Identity politics and the politics of identity, then, are not mutually exclusive approaches. Incorporating their complementary insights, however, requires casting a theoretical lens than allowed by the behavioral approach that underpins the extant literature on identity politics. I discuss the elements of this framework in the next section,

A caveat. The framework below is not a fully fledged framework from which we can draw testable hypotheses, although the potential for drawing such hypotheses will be evident from the discussion. The framework is part of my larger project on the politics of identity. The discussion below should, therefore, be viewed as a suggestive

### A Preliminary Theoretical Framework

The central insight of constructivism is that social identities are constructed in the course of social, economic and political processes. I first compare constructivism with primordialism, the alternative conception and understanding of identity. Constructivism emerged as a powerful and I then discuss key concepts that comprise my theoretical framework

#### What is Primordialism?

Primordialism is the idea (ideology?) that identified

behavior, senior members of recruitment (-9(a)4(nd)-912 792(li)-3gnatiothat imse rlde2r on the chas of social interaction(s)9d (whic)4(,)10(-9(i00091utut)18(r)-6n(,)10(-9v(a)4(ti)-3((a)4(te)-7(the)-7(t)18(m

Pavlovian reflexivity that animates the primordial allegiance and dedication to the well



political processes through which messages for identification are sustained, contested, and negotiated.

These insights suggest the need for a theoretical framework that rejects a simplistic instrumentalism in which political agents manipulate identities in any way they please to maximize their interests, and acknowledges structural, institutional and strategic constraints on agency in the construction of social identities. Agency is thus important in the construction of social identities. And agency involves choice. But agents construct identities but not under conditions of their choosing. The concept of constrained constructivism usefully captures these insights.

### The Logic of Constrained Constructivism?

[Figure 1 Here]

Figure 1 displays the logic of constrained constructivism. The central logic of constrained constructivism is that ethnopolitical group and identity construction is quintessentially a strategic activity of cultural artisanship, but one that is constrained by a combination of social, structural, institutional and strategic factors. The strategic cultural artisanship that animates social identity construction involves the selection of objective identity markers from the available portfolio of varied cultural elements that comprise plural societies and their configuration into a composite criterion for drawing cultural boundaries that simultaneously assimilate and differentiate individuals into distinct identity groups and invest them with normative significance and political salience. The configuration of multiple identity markers into a composite criterion of social identity markers, of a multiplicity of symbols and of striving for multi-symbol congruence among a group of individuals, if successful, results in the construction of conceptually parsimonious composite identity ethnopolitical groups (Hispanic, Asian American, Muslim, African American, White, Christians) that subsume important intra-group differences (Cubans and Mexicans, Chinese and Koreans, Sunnis and Shiites, Irish and Italians, Catholics, Protestants and Evangelicals).

#### *Social-Structural Constraints*

Variations in the presence and in the indicators of intra-

A related structural constraint on the unfettered identity construction concerns territorial concentration of potential identity groups. The growing cultural unity of southern Whites in the United States is the most obvious example. But the results of the 2016 presidential elections also showed the importance of territorial concentration in juxtaposing ethnic and political identities in the Texas counties in the Rio Grande Valley where Hispanics, who make up as high as 90% in some of these counties, voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump. While ethnically Hispanic, their ideological orientations with respect to guns and illegal immigration align them with the ideological orientations of white rural voters in the Midwest.

*Institutional Constraints*

In the United States, the census has been the principal institutional source of identity construction. For example, census designations reconstitute the culturally distinct identities of Puerto Ricans, Cubans and Mexicans into a broader Hispanic identity. But the political salience of the expression of common political demands of the broadly defined Spanish-speaking population at the national level, but the culturally distinct Puerto Rican, Cuban and Mexican identities encourage separate affiliations and foster competitive local politics (Nelson and Tienda 1985).

European immigrants in the 19th Century. In addition to reducing the transaction costs of new immigrants into a broader hyphenated identities (Italian American, Irish American, etc.) in the context of political competition for powers and resources. Since local institutions (parties, elections, municipal governments) mediated access to these resources, ethnic entrepreneurs had the incentive to mobilize their identity communities to control these institutions.

Thus, while the institutional framework of federalism permitted the existence of functionally delimited ethnic communities in urban centers, local political institutions, also constituted and legitimized by national institutions, encouraged the political construction and mobilization of ethnicity as a politically relevant social identity in local politics. Such mobilization was crucial after the Depression, when the expanding role of the state in macroeconomic management rendered political institutions at all levels of the polity powerful resource allocation mechanisms.

Similarly, the separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers and federal relations structured the political strategy of African-Americans. After being repeatedly thwarted at the state level to secure full civil rights guaranteed in the Constitution at the state level and by the President and Congress, African-Americans were eventually successful in the federal courts.

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<sup>4</sup> <sup>3</sup>, QVWLWXWLRQDO FRPSOHWHQHVV' UHIHUV WR WKH HANNAH QAV WR ZKLF

The landmark Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* began the process of dismantling the onerous discriminatory institutions that eventually resulted in the passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights.

But these political achievements of African Americans occurred in the long shadow cast, and continues to be cast, by the most odious example of the institutional construction of identity in the country, the three-fifths compromise. The politics surrounding the compromise is well know. What is important for my purposes, however, is that primordial biological definition of identity it created established the baseline conception of Black identity that has shaped American race relations. The Thirteenth Amendment only eliminated the material and empirical foundation of that identity, but did not erase the culturally inscribed meaning of racial inferiority fostered initially by the three-fifths compromise. And as King and Smith (2005) have shown, that identity was sustained by the racial institutional orders in the country after the Emancipation.

Institutions, then, present a combination of constraints and opportunities for the strategic construction, maintenance and transformation of social identities.. How institutions perform this crucial task is best captured by Mary Douglas in her book *Institutions Think* (Douglas 1986: 53):

> , @ Q V W L W X W L R Q V « D U H I R X Q G H G > R Q D Q D O R J \ @ Z L W  
naturalized, they are part of the order of the universe. So are ready to stand as grounds  
I R U D U J X P H Q W « % \ X V L Q J I R U P D O D Q D O R J L H V W K D W H

First, interest heterogeneity transfers the ~~sup~~ cost of social identity groups to cultural entrepreneurs who deploy their entrepreneurial skills (and entrepreneurship is a quintessential strategic activity) to invest the selected objective identity markers with symbolic significance for identity construction and interest definition and mobilize individual actors distinguished by those markers for collective action. Second, due to the ~~large~~ size of social identity groups, especially in large country like the United States where such groups are geographically spread and, indeed, whose individual may never know each personally, interest heterogeneity helps reduce the maintenance ~~cost~~ of ethno-political groups over time, since the individual cost of supporting the group is lower in large groups. Joint production and maintenance of social identity thus becomes possible. Third, interdependence engenders conditional cooperation among ethno-political actors, whereby the benefits of group action accruing to individual actors depend on the collective benefits accruing to the whole group. In ongoing social identity group, ~~HDFK DFWRU V LQWHUHVW LQ PXWXD Desirable DWLRQ LV W UHIHUHQFH -RKQVRQ WR WKH RWKHU DFWRUV LQ~~ individual suboptimal benefits from non-cooperative behavior motivates the irredeemably conditional cooperative strategy of all social identity group actors (Johnson 1988).

However, large social identity groups comprised of heterogeneous interests, even as they help to reduce the cost of individual contributions to group solidarity, render strategic rationality an insufficient

## Strategic Primordialism

Given my exposition in support of constructivism as the correct theoretical approach to the study of identity, the notion of strategic primordialism stands as a glaring oxymoron. In these concluding comments, I explain why the notion is a useful way to think about the vitriolic tone and dangerous discourse on identity in the country.

This paper is an initial attempt to fill the gap in scholarship about how political parties organize identity politics and, generally, how identity is conceived and understood by scholars studying the relationship between identity and politics in the United States. Competing conceptions inform the political organization of identities and the conception and understanding of identity: (1) *Primordialism*, which views identities as fixed essences ineluctably reflected in physiognomy, values, attitudes and behavior, and (2) *Constructivism*, which stresses the strategic malleability of identity stemming from age-related activation of varied and observable identity constitutive markers to construct, maintain and transform social identities. Comparative scholarship over the past three decades and more has rejected primordialism in favor of constructivism, but without significant influence on the systematic analysis and understanding of identity politics in the United States. Primordialism, as a result, has become the default conception and explanation.

All social identities, and race and ethnicity in particular, lend themselves easily to a primordialist conception. The empirical markers that they embody and that ostensibly constitute identities represent cost-effective shortcuts that signal ineluctable causal packages between them and individual values, attitudes and behavior, and more broadly, social, economic and political outcomes. The reliance on primordialism in the study of identity politics in the United States, however, is not a function of Pavlovian reflexivity. It is quintessentially strategic.

, H P S O R \ W K H W H U P ^ 3 V W U D W H J L F S U L P R U G L D O L V P ^ W R U H I I  
groups to increase the social salience and political relevance of erstwhile latent or weakly mobilized varied identity- F R Q V W L W X W L Y H P D U N H U V W R F R D O H V F H D U R  
identity that supersedes other sources of identity and suppresses associated intergroup differences. This oxymoronic construction enhances the explanatory power of strategic primordialism by highlighting the fundamental paradox of identity politics in the United States

American exceptionalism derives from its aspirational founding that envisioned the construction of a new national identity. The vision, of course, is to be perfectly realized, and progress toward it has been fraught, as we have debated and fought over the nature and meaning of the constructed identity. While slavery and its legacy posed, and continues to pose, a fundamental challenge to this identity, the struggles of several generations of immigrants to contribute to its construction indicate the influence of competing conceptions and understanding of identity.

7 R G D e f i n e d  
Identity politics emerged as a response to the oppression, discrimination and marginalization of individuals and groups based on some ascriptive characteristics (race and ethnicity) that were previously defined in essentialist terms and the definition enshrined in law and policy, endowing the subjects with institutionalized primordial identity. This institutionalization structured the mobilization of identity politics, which was now framed and animated by the same essentialist ascriptive characteristics and associated identities that

formed the basis of the oppression and marginalization in the first place. Political parties have  
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WKH LQVWLWXWLRQDOLJDWL RFDORPHWRUMLTLCULTURALQD O VLQ´ LQ  
ostensibly represents an alternative to racism, but the two mirror each other in their primordial  
conception and understanding of identity.

Primordialism as an approach to the systematic study of identity and politics is now widely  
rejected across the human sciences and the humanities. Unfortunately, it continues to influence,  
perhaps unwittingly, the work of scholars who study identity politics in the United States. It  
continues to inform media narratives in which the journalistic penchant for using simplifying  
adjectives ignores the malleability of identities and gloss over their intrinsic characterological  
variability discussed above. And it is insidiously manifested in popular and academic discourse  
on diversity, authenticity and cultural appropriation.

The reason for the continued visible hold of primordialism on our thinking about identity is the  
conceptual simplicity of assigning identity to readily observable physiognomy and related  
physical and behavioral attributes. It is motivated by a longing for an elusive certainty  
reflexively reflected in the simplifying narratives of everyday discourse (I am a Republican, said  
with pride; she is a Democrat, said with venom), even as we suspect, however reluctantly, that  
our identities are not fixed by nature, but artifacts of our own making that can be easily be  
deconstructed.

Hence, the imperative of strategic primordialism. But strategic primordialism is a fraught  
strategy, especially in the context of the current political polarization with a hollowed-out middle  
(Abramowitz 2010). Motivated reasoning is the everyday reflexive response. Over time,  
however, cultural entrepreneurs and political parties

W KHUHIRUH EH ILFWL Wase Relations and Interests La pollution way of  
seeing becomes a way of not seeing

But agency is a double-edged sword. In a society based on freedom without ordered liberty  
DJHQWV EHRPH <sup>3</sup>UDWLRQDO IRROV´ DQG <sup>3</sup>VRFLDO PRURQV  
recognized, in a society based on freedom tempered by ordered liberty, institutions can  
HQFRXUDJH VWUDWHJLFDOO\ UDWLRQDOOdson with the WR FUDIW  
social and cultural endowments to transform swords into ploughshares.

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Figure 1  
The Logic of Constrained Constructivism

