

## Diversity in Practice *identity politics vs. diversity*

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For better or for worse, national politics and diversity have crashed into each other in 2008. We have witnessed historical achievements that signal the disintegration of long standing racial and gender barriers in American politics. Yet, the choices we make as to how we talk about these achievements have the potential to resurrect the same barriers we have fought so hard to break down.

The 2008 political campaigns have given us a tremendous opportunity to celebrate and leverage the diversity of talented leaders who are willing and eager to serve this country. These same political campaigns have also provided us the opportunity to use stereotypes and biases – identity politics – to politicize our differences. Given a choice between diversity and identity politics, we are unfortunately shunning the future benefits of the former to embrace the heated rhetoric of the latter.

Stanley Fish, a literary theorist and frequent contributor to the New York Times and Wall Street Journal, defines identity politics as “vot[ing] for or against someone because of his or her skin color, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or any other marker that leads you to say yes or no independently of a candidate’s ideas or policies.” (NYT 2/17/08) Identity politics are invoked to categorize politicians and voters by their identities to predict voting patterns. In reality, the voting patterns in 2008 have been far more aligned with diversity of opinions on issues and values, but our rhetoric has focused doggedly on identity politics. In reality, millions of white and female voters have voted for Barack Obama, but the conversation still lingers on whether white voters can overcome racial bias to vote for him. Millions of men and minorities voted for Hillary Clinton, but the conversation on “Clinton voters” hones in only on whether the white women who voted for Clinton will support Obama. Instead of leveraging the value in these two diverse candidates drawing support from millions of voters who did not subscribe to identity politics, our

conversations have revolved around the stereotypes that whites will defer to racial bias and that angry feminists will use their votes for revenge.

The underlying drumbeat of identity politics, even if it is in the heat of political battles, fundamentally threatens our ability to translate what we have accomplished in 2008 into sustainable inclusion of women and minorities in politics. Identity politics locks candidates and voters alike into one-dimensional identity categories that pervert how we fully see ourselves and the choices we make. The outdated paradigm of identity politics not only diminishes the extraordinary achievements of diverse candidates, but it also undermines our ability to explore and understand the remarkable diversity of electoral perspectives.

When John McCain selected Sarah Palin as his running mate, identity politics reduced Palin to the one-dimensional identity of being a woman. This not only made it easier to criticize her as a woman (a good mom should be at home with her children, especially if she has an infant with special needs), but it also allowed the inclusion of women to be reduced to a political game. Stereotypes of women are resurrected when we reduce a politician to being a female politician, and gender bias creeps back into our conversations when we assign and expect a particular political ideology to gender (female politicians have to be feminists).

Similarly, a recent article in the Washington Post referred to the 2008 Republican National Convention as a “mostly white RNC” that is relying on its base of working-class whites to mitigate its lack of popularity with minorities. ([www.msnbc.com](http://www.msnbc.com) 9/4/08) While it is important to report on the lack of diversity at the RNC, identity politics cements this relationship between race and political party without leaving room for the history made by Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Elaine Cho, Rod Paige, and Alberto Gonzalez, all of whom broke critical racial barriers in a Republican administration. These names belong in a dialogue on politics and diversity, but identity politics often mute that conversation before it can begin.

Identity politics is, at its core, about politics, not identity. Diversity, at its core, is about identity, not politics. Identity politics needs stereotypes for its survival. Diversity is inclusive of individual and group identities, but it cannot tolerate stereotypes. Identities may shape the ways in which we see ourselves and the world around us, but they are not causal predictors of what we should believe or what we will do. Recognizing and respecting different identities is critical to diversity, but once we begin to presume opinions and behaviors based on those differences, we cross the line into bias.

In this remarkable political season where politics and identity have become inextricably intertwined, we can either contribute to making history or we can set ourselves up for repeating it. We can celebrate diverse identities in politics or we can politicize diversity through identity politics. The first will move us forward. The latter will push us back. But, thanks to the campaigns of 2008, inaction is no longer an option.