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Identity Politics in Recent American Presidential Elections

Its Underlying Reasons and Unintended Consequences

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ENG 4590: Master's Thesis in American Studies
60 credits

Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages

University of Oslo

Spring 2020

Abstract

The American Presidential Election and its debates are exciting to watch. However, one could claim that they also contribute largely to the continued polarisation of the USA and its citizens. After the 2016 election, both journalists, scholars and politicians tried to understand why Hillary R. Clinton lost. Although the explanations varied largely, many concluded that it was partly due to the Democratic strategy of identity politics. This thesis is based on Francis Fukuyama and Mark Lilla's definitions of liberal identity politics as a polarising policy destined to split both the Democratic Party and its constituency.

In this paper, I will compare the rhetoric used in the 2016 Democratic nomination process with the rhetoric in the current nomination process, ending with Joe Biden as the presumptive Democratic nominee. One of the core questions is whether the Democratic Party has replaced some of this rhetoric of victimisation, special interest and political correctness with more calls for collective action. The thesis indicates that Democratic candidates restored to more identity politics in 2020 than in 2016. Arguments presented by several of the Democratic candidates in 2020 were crudely based on identity, and they were aimed at the political flanks, rather than seeking to find middle ground.

The thesis will also examine the underlying reasons why the Democratic Party became so enthralled with identity politics, and it indicates that the reasons can be found partly in the influence from the civil rights movement. This influence is still evident, and there are political, institutional, social and strategic reasons why the Democratic Party continue to turn to identity politics.

Key words: Identity politics, polarisation, Democratic Party, tribalism, calls for collective action, lived experience, victimisation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Mark Luccarelli, whose insightful comments have helped me understand how to shape the thesis. I would also like to thank my father, Jonathan Parker, who was always willing to give me productive feedback. My husband Rune Alstadsæter and our children Ole and Elemine were vital for inspiration, and their presence required me to be efficient and structured throughout the whole process. I would also like to thank Anette Døvre at Ris Ungdomsskole for her patience and understanding when children and thesis writing had to be prioritised over work for a few weeks during the Corona crisis. My fellow students Tonje Sofie Ranvik and Truls Bjerke Hoem were also important, as they kept my spirits up whenever needed.

Thank you!

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Chapter 1 – Why Identity Politics?

‘Let’s say you’re on the campaign trail and a supporter approaches you and says, “Senator, I’m old fashioned and my faith teaches me that marriage is between one man and one woman”. What is your response?’

‘Well, I’m going to assume it’s a guy who said that, and I’m going to say...then just marry one woman. I’m cool with that! Assuming you can find one’.¹

-Elizabeth Warren

When Senator and presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren (D-Ma) cracked this joke on an LGBTQ forum in October 2019, the whole room exploded in laughter. Supporters took to the social media to give glowing approval. At the same time, the joke was met with stark criticism. Many people saw it as an example of tribalism and an exercise of identity politics at its worst. Senator Marco Rubio (R) wrote on twitter that the joke ‘vividly captures the condescension of elites & their incessant ridicule of Americans with traditional values’.² The criticism was not limited to conservative voices. According to Hank Sheinkopf, a Democratic strategist, the joke tells everyone who does not agree with Warren on this issue that ‘they are backward by definition’.³ Liberal writer Froma Harrop claims that even though Democrats try to ‘sell themselves through special appeals to race, gender, ethnicity or sexual identity’, identity politics does not appeal to Democratic voters anymore.⁴ She explains that even though Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris has African American roots, she was never a favourite among African American voters. She also points out that ‘if we all voted our color, Barack Obama would never have become president’.⁵ According to Harrop, the

¹ Zamira Rahim, ‘“If you can find one”: Elizabeth Warren acclaimed for searing response to homophobic gay marriage question in debate’, The Independent. Last modified October 11, 2019: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/elizabeth-warren-gay-marriage-cnn-lgbt-town-hall-democrats-2020-a9151626.html>

² Alex Bollinger, ‘Marco Rubio feels “disrespected” by Elizabeth Warren’s amazing response to a homophobic supporter’, LGBTQNation. Last modified October 14, 2019. <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2019/10/marco-rubio-feels-disrespected-elizabeth-warrens-amazing-response-homophobic-supporter/>

³ Annie Lindskey, ‘Warren’s same-sex marriage quip captures what some find exciting – and others distressing – about her’, The Washington Post. Last modified October 12, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/warrens-same-sex-marriage-quip-captures-what-some-find-exciting--and-others-distressing--about-her/2019/10/11/f3e15a14-ec34-11e9-85c0-85a098e47b37_story.html?wpisrc=nl_most&wpmm=1

⁴ Froma Harrop, ‘Democrats, Drop Identity Politics Now’, RealClearPolitics. Last modified July 30, 2019. https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2019/07/30/democrats_drop_identity_politics_now_140883.html

⁵ Harrop, ‘Democrats, Drop Identity Politics Now’.

Democratic presidential candidates should not fall for the temptation to use identity as their best shot for the presidency in 2020, as it is ineffective.

Nevertheless, many of the Democratic presidential candidates running in the 2020 election used identity politics as part of their rhetoric.⁶ In October 2019, Pete Buttigieg announced four ways he would make America a better place for women, as ‘progress for women has come despite systemic, persistent sexism and racism that excludes women from economic, political, and social power’.⁷ Addressing improvement for women in itself is maybe nothing different from calling to make improvement for any interest group. However, as Buttigieg at the same time highlighted how women have been oppressed in the past, his rhetoric manifested a victimisation of women, which is part of what has become known as identity politics. Similarly, Bernie Sanders promised in November 2019 to spend billions of dollars on historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), because ‘too many HBCUs have struggled financially in recent years from a lack of federal resources, a drop in enrolment, and from crushing institutional debt’.⁸ While financial support of historically black universities can be labelled interest politics, highlighting African Americans’ struggles is typical identity politics, as it increases the group’s shared identity and their sense of victimhood.

Even though liberal identity politics at first was about large classes of people such as African Americans and women ‘seeking to redress major historical wrongs’, liberal identity politics of today is, according to Mark Lilla, ‘a pseudo-politics of self-regard’ by ‘increasingly narrow and exclusionary’ self-defined groups.⁹ Along with Lilla’s views, contemporary liberal identity politics is in this thesis defined as a kind of politics based on the perceptions of oppression shared by minority groups who are politically identified as victims of the social order.

Senior Lecturer at Loughborough University London Timothy Oliver argues that no single political issue can be explained by identity alone, but identity should always be taken into account. He argues that identity politics is often considered to be entirely negative, but

⁶ The term ‘rhetoric’ is in this thesis used in a non-technical way, as in Cambridge Dictionary: ‘Speech or writing intended to be effective and influence people’. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/rhetoric>

⁷ Pete Buttigieg, ‘Four ways I’ll make America a better place for women’, USA Today. Last modified October 24, 2019. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/10/24/pete-buttigieg-build-power-for-women-democrats-2020-column/4071159002/> and <https://peteforamerica.com/policies/building-power/>

⁸ Juan Perez Jr., ‘How Sanders would pump billions into historically black colleges and universities’, Politico. Last modified November 22, 2019. <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/11/22/bernie-sanders-historically-black-colleges-universities-072758>

⁹ Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2018.), 10.

suggests that although identity offers an insufficient explanation to most issues, it should not be discarded completely, as ‘all politics involves an element of identity’.¹⁰ He uses Brexit as an example and explains that while economy is an important element in the Brexit discussions, people’s identity also matters, as many people feel that the Brexit decision collides with their identity as European citizens. The Republican columnist Jonah Goldberg states that ‘the current debate about identity politics isn’t about whether or not it exists but whether it is good or bad’.¹¹ He fears that the very ideology of America is under threat, and that contemporary identity politics undermines the constitution.

According to Douglas J. Ahler, identity politics is ‘not a new phenomenon’.¹² Instead, he argues that it is what people always have used when ‘evaluating political parties and their supporters’. People generally want to belong to a group, and this affects politics because when considering voting for a particular party, we also consider the people supporting that party and whether or not we wish to identify with them. Consequently, many voters ‘lack basic knowledge about which positions go with which parties’.¹³ Ahler concludes that the polarisation we see across party lines stems from prejudices against the two main parties and their supporters, and not necessarily disagreement with their politics.¹⁴ Although identity politics is not a new phenomenon, both identity politics and polarisation in the USA has been growing, with the result that citizens’ ability to identify with the party they are not voting for (the ‘out-party’) has plummeted. This does also reflect in a strongly reduced trust in government when the out-party has executive power.¹⁵

Political scientists John Sides, Michael Tesler and Lynn Vavreck argue the 2016 election created an American identity crisis, both for the Republican Party, the Democratic Party, as well as for Americans in general. They believe that identity politics became relevant in the 2016 election because political actors put more emphasis on it. By talking about it, the politicians activated people’s feelings of group identification that had been lying below the surface for years. Mark Lilla argues that identity politics has been a disaster for the political

¹⁰ Timothy Oliver, ‘Here’s a better way to think about identity politics’, *The Conversation*. Last modified June 26, 2018. <http://theconversation.com/heres-a-better-way-to-think-about-identity-politics-84144>

¹¹ Jonah Goldberg, *Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy*. (New York: Crown Forum, 2018), 211.

¹² Douglas J. Ahler, ‘The Group Theory of Parties: Identity Politics, Party Stereotypes, and Polarization in the 21st Century’. *The Forum* (2018); 16(1): 4, accessed February 18, 2020. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2018-0002>

¹³ Ahler, ‘The Group Theory of Parties’, 5.

¹⁴ Ahler, ‘The Group Theory of Parties’

¹⁵ Ahler, ‘The Group Theory of Parties’, 5.

left in America, because focus on minority groups¹⁶ has drawn attention away from real issues, and left the Democratic Party unable to develop a ‘fresh political vision of the country’s shared destiny’.¹⁷ The focus on identity has also been a disaster, according to Lilla, because the rhetoric of identity has pushed potential voters away from the Democratic Party, making the gap between the two major parties larger than ever.

The political debate in the USA is changing and polarisation is growing. How is it changing, and how deep is the change? Hopefully, an examination of the debate from the angle of identity politics can help shed light on these questions. This thesis seeks to address important aspects related to identity politics in our time. It draws on Mark Lilla and Francis Fukuyama’s views of identity politics as a polarising strategy. It is also based on *More in Common*’s categorisation of political commitment. They argue that a majority of Americans feel exhausted by the political reality. *More in Common* have named these the ‘Exhausted Majority’¹⁸, and claim that they lack a voice in the national conversation.¹⁹ This thesis strives to find out whether Democrats still try to engage this group, and in which ways, because too much focus on victimising minority groups and argumentation aimed at the political margins can be a polarising factor in American society.

1.1 Research Questions and Chapter Overview

The primary research questions of this thesis are: (a) What are the underlying reasons why the Democratic Party has chosen to pursue liberal identity politics? (b) What are the consequences of this policy? And (c) in which ways have Democratic presidential candidates changed their rhetoric between 2016 and 2020?

As the thesis focuses on the Democratic Party, the history of liberal identity politics is essential. Polarisation and tribalism are also important aspects of the thesis, as well as what I

¹⁶ The terms ‘minority’ and ‘minority groups’ will in this thesis refer to three distinct social formations that may be understood as different from mainstream society: ethnic minorities, women and sexual minorities. Although women are not a minority per se, they have frequently been referred to as one because they are at a disadvantage in terms of the distribution of power. ‘Minority’ and ‘minority groups’ are the terms of a sociological condition, based on fact, where women and sexual- and ethnic minorities are objects of knowledge. The terms ‘identity’, ‘identity groups’ and ‘identity politics’, on the other hand, imply a cultural condition based on attitudes or experiences that are in part subjective and therefore inaccessible to the observer, unless he or she is part of the group in question.

¹⁷ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 8.

¹⁸ Labelled so by Stephen Hawkins et al. ‘Hidden Tribes: A Study of America’s Polarized Landscape’. *More in Common* (2018). Accessed February 18, 2020. Doi: <https://hiddentribes.us/>

¹⁹ Stephen Hawkins et al. ‘Hidden Tribes’, 11. ‘The Exhausted Majority is more practical and less ideological than its more extreme counterparts’.¹⁹ According to *More in Common*, the Exhausted Majority could prove to become an important factor in decreasing polarisation in the USA.

have termed ‘calls for collective action’. All of these aspects will be covered in chapter 1, as well as a brief analysis of why Trump won, and whether this can be seen as a reaction to the Democrats’ usage of liberal identity politics.

In chapter 2, the thesis will examine why identity politics became such an important part of the Democratic Party. To do that, it examines the influence of the civil rights movement and other important social movements in the 1950s, -60s and -70s. Central questions are how the civil rights movement changed the Democratic Party and whether this change led to what we now know as identity politics. Maybe this can give some answers to why identity politics has become such a vital tool for Democratic politicians.

In chapter 3, there will be an analysis of Democratic presidential debates and some of the candidates’ stump speeches prior to the 2016 and 2020 elections. The focus will be on individual candidates, and the thesis will look for rhetoric with traces of identity politics, tribalism and calls for collective action. At the end of chapter 3, there will be a comparison of the 2016 and 2020 campaigns. While many social scientists have written about identity politics lately, and especially after the 2016 election, this thesis will add important information about the 2020 campaign. It will also answer questions about whether the Democratic Party and presidential candidates have changed their rhetoric of identity after critiques of the focus of the 2016 election. Is it possible for the Democratic Party to abandon identity politics altogether, or should they incorporate identity politics into a broader message?

The conclusion will seek to draw lines between all the aspects covered in the thesis, from the theoretical and historical background in chapter 1 and 2, to present developments regarding identity politics covered in chapter 3. In what ways have Democratic presidential candidates sought to move away from identity politics? And what are the political, strategic, ideological and historical reasons why identity politics is still vital for the Democratic Party today? Towards the end, there will be a discussion of the impact of identity politics on the Democratic Party as well as on American society.

1.2 Delimitations and Limitations of the Thesis.

The main methodology of the thesis is qualitative. It seeks to compare the 2016 presidential nomination campaign in the Democratic Party to the 2020 campaign through a qualitative analysis of selected debates, stump speeches and media coverage. The choice of method was guided by the objective of the study and enables an understanding of the debates and speeches not accessible through qualitative methods alone. The selection of debates and stump

speeches is made partly on a basis of what is accessible from Norway, and partly on what is expedient to compare. These serve as the thesis' primary sources. There are thousands of articles about American elections, and my selection of media articles is based on what is relevant regarding identity politics. When I started, choosing to compare Democratic debates from the same time period in the respective elections seemed like the obvious choice, believing the October debates prior to each of the nomination processes would be comparable. However, the record-high number of candidates in the 2020 race made the process very different from 2016, and the October debates turned out to be less similar than I first thought. It therefore seemed right to include the February 2016 and February 2020 debates as well. Just like the October 2015 debate, the February 2020 debate was the last debate with several candidates, as most of the candidates chose to withdraw right after them. Both the February debates were much closer to the primaries, possibly affecting the rhetoric used by the candidates. The thesis looks at rhetoric used by some of the Democratic candidates, and rhetoric of identity politics, tribalism and calls for collective action have been identified in each of the debates. In a qualitative analysis, the results will always be affected by the researcher's perceptions and associations, and this bias is important to acknowledge. Although I have sought to be as objective as possible in every part of the thesis, when determining what can be labelled 'identity politics' and 'tribalism' in debates and stump speeches I nevertheless had to trust my own subjective assessment. The thesis also includes a minor quantitative analysis, which consists of a word count of the four debates, based on words typically associated with these rhetorics. This has backed up the results of the qualitative analysis.

There are several limitations to this thesis. Firstly, the civil rights literature is vast and too comprehensive to be covered in a master's thesis. Secondly, the opinions, literature and media coverage of identity politics and the Democratic Party between 2016 and today are also vast, and it has not been possible to cover them all. Thirdly, as mentioned, the 2016 and 2020 nomination processes were not equal, and a comparison is therefore confined. Moreover, the choice of debates, stump speeches and media articles in this thesis can have affected the conclusions. It would have been interesting to analyse all the Democratic debates and stump speeches in both 2016 and 2020, but that was unfortunately beyond the scope of this thesis. Another factor that has not been examined due to the requirements of length and focus of the thesis is the Republican Party's possible influence on the Democratic Party's use of identity politics. There are many issues that influence a candidate's popularity, such as international-, environmental- and economic issues, as well as the funding of the campaigns themselves

through Super PACs and individual donors. None of these issues are taken into consideration in this thesis, and neither are Clinton's 'damn emails'.²⁰

1.3 The Legitimate Impulses Behind Identity Politics

According to political scientist and economist Francis Fukuyama, in the West, the idea of identity was formed during the Protestant Reformation when Martin Luther expressed the idea of an inner self.²¹ However, he explains, the idea in fact goes much further back. In Plato's *Republic*, Plato argues that the soul consists of three parts. While the first two parts deal with desire and calculation, the third part is *thymos*, and this is where the wish of approval and recognition is located. According to Fukuyama, even though we do not talk as much about the soul anymore, 'the discipline of psychology essentially studies the same subject', and 'this third part of the soul, *thymos*, is the seat of today's identity politics'.²² It is when the image of your inner self conflicts with society's image of you, tensions occur. Many groups have since sought approval and respect from society. Even though the American Declaration of Independence declared that 'all men' were created equal, 'historically, we have disagreed on who qualifies as "all men"'.²³ Fukuyama claims that all major struggles in American history can be ascribed to the collision between minority groups' image of their own worth, and the majority's image of that group. The tension is high whenever societies are forced to change and the struggles over slavery, segregation, women's rights and workers' rights all forced the American society to change, as activists demanded equal rights and equal recognition for groups that previously did not qualify as 'men'. This demand for public recognition can be called identity politics, and has been going on for as long as America has existed.²⁴ One can even argue that identity politics has been 'at the core of democratic movements since the French Revolution', although the term was not yet in use.²⁵ Fukuyama reasons that the 'desire for the state to recognize one's basic dignity' has driven people all over the world to protest against inequality and speak up about human and civil rights. In many ways, this desire has

²⁰ Hillary Clinton's controversial use of a private email server became a dominating issue in the 2016 election. Many people were frustrated that it took focus away from more important issues, among them her opponent Bernie Sanders. In the October 2015 debate, he exclaimed that 'the American people are sick and tired of hearing about your damn emails', to big applause. Ben Jacobs, 'Bernie Sanders to Clinton: people are sick of hearing about your damn emails', *The Guardian*. Last modified October 14, 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/oct/13/bernie-sanders-hillary-clinton-damn-email-server>

²¹ Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*. (London: Profile Books, 2018), 26.

²² Fukuyama, *Identity*, 18.

²³ Fukuyama, *Identity*, 23.

²⁴ Fukuyama, *Identity*, 10.

²⁵ Fukuyama, *Identity*, 49.

therefore been the driving force for equal opportunities for women, African Americans, the LGBTQ community and several other groups. According to Asad Haider, a ‘group of black, lesbian militants’ in fact introduced the term in its contemporary form in 1977.²⁶ So what is this contemporary form?

According to Fukuyama, the mind-set of identity politics follows two different paths, where one is individualistic and the other is collectivistic. The individualistic path led to universal recognition of individual rights and societies trying to achieve individual autonomy for their citizens. Examples of the individualistic path is the American Revolution, and more recently the (failed) Arab Spring. The collectivistic path seeks equal recognition of specific groups in society, for example African Americans or Muslims.²⁷ Both the individualistic and collectivistic paths seek *equal* recognition for the individual or group. Fukuyama is a fierce defender of equal rights and explains that liberal democracies depends on equal treatment of every group in society. The problems arise when ‘that desire for equal recognition [...] slide[s] over into a demand for recognition of the group’s superiority’.²⁸ Fukuyama suggests that the early civil rights movement in the USA is an example of a movement not trying to become superior of other groups. They demanded to be treated equally to other members of society, and did not ‘attack the norms and values that governed the way white people dealt with one another’.²⁹ However, both the Black Panthers, the Nation of Islam and later the Black Lives Matter movement, although different in many respects, argued that black people were different from whites, and that they therefore needed to be treated differently. The focus thus shifted from being on what everyone has in common, to one emphasising differences between groups in society. Fukuyama argues that the same development can be seen in the feminist movement. The basis of the argument is the same: women are different from men, and the history of patriarchy has shaped women in a way that is incomprehensible to men, just as the history of slavery has shaped African Americans.³⁰

Both world wars were triggered by nationalism where one group claimed to be superior of others. Islamism is another example where some groups of Muslims demand a special status for Islam. Fukuyama argues that these two identity movements in fact are quite similar. Both extreme nationalism and Islamism are ‘expressions of a hidden or suppressed

²⁶ Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity - Race and Class in the Age of Trump*. (London: Verso, 2018), 7.

²⁷ Fukuyama, *Identity*, 57.

²⁸ Fukuyama, *Identity*, 22.

²⁹ Fukuyama, *Identity*, 107.

³⁰ Fukuyama, *Identity*, 109.

group identity that seek[s] public recognition'.³¹ They are also similar because they both demand *superior* and not *equal* recognition in society.

According to Fukuyama, current liberal identity politics is to be understood in relation to modernisation. Modernisation of the world creates societies in constant flux, and although freedom is greater in modern societies than it was before, sometimes the confusion grows too. People ask themselves where they belong, and they find groups that they can identify with. Jonah Goldberg explains the rise of identity politics partly with the decline of religiousness in society. People need something to believe in, and 'God's absence creates an opening for all manner of ideas to flood in'.³² Mark Lilla agrees with Fukuyama that identity politics has existed for a long time. 'It is nothing new, certainly on the American right', he argues.³³ According to Lilla, the left developed its own version of identity politics as a reaction to the Reagan administration's focus on individualism. Reagan was very successful in his advocacy for economic individuality, and according to Lilla, the left took up this individualistic approach. In modern time, identity politics has been closely connected to the political left. Several critics state that liberal identity politics is outdated and that the Democratic Party needs to reform.

1.3.1 How Identity Politics Differs from Other Kinds of Political Rhetorical Strategies

Identity politics is never the single rhetorical strategy used by a politician, and it does not appear in a vacuum. As already stated, identity politics can look similar to interest politics, and sometimes the two strategies occur together. However, interest politics differs from identity politics. Political scientist Amy Gutmann states that identity politics usually arises because members of a minority 'share an identity and therefore identify with the people representing the group', and the people who become active in minority groups usually do not join to obtain instrumental goods.³⁴ Moreover, identity politics often 'carry social expectations about how a person of the particular group is expected to think, act, or even appear'.³⁵ In interest politics, however, the members of a group do not necessarily have any mutual identification, and the group usually organises around 'a shared instrumental goal'.³⁶

³¹ Fukuyama, *Identity*, 58.

³² Goldberg, *Suicide of the West*, 334.

³³ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 9.

³⁴ Amy Gutmann, *Identity in Democracy*. (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 9.

³⁵ *Ibid*

³⁶ Gutmann, *Identity in Democracy*, 13.

Sometimes, as with 2020 candidates Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, identity politics occurs together with strategies such as populism. A populist rhetoric is not founded in minority groups and their struggles or special needs but is based on the conflict between the people and the elite. American populism has roots back to the nineteenth century, and author John B. Judis argues that just like identity politics, populism is ‘not an ideology, but a political logic – a way of thinking about politics’.³⁷ Even though populism cannot be placed in a specific ideology, he maintains that there is an important difference between left-wing populism and right-wing populism. In his view, left-wing populists try to pit the people against the top of society. Bernie Sanders has been accused of populism since the 2016 election and both he and Elizabeth Warren run campaigns against ultra-rich Americans, proposing a property tax for the wealthiest 0.1 percent. While right-wing populists also try to pit the people against the top, they do so by claiming that the elite pamper an out-group. Examples of such out-groups might be immigrants, Muslims, etc. According to Judis, this strategy is widely used by President Donald Trump when he is blaming Mexican immigrants for job loss and economic problems in the USA. Judis explains how populism is different from socialism, as it does not ‘necessarily seek the abolition of capitalism’.³⁸ It is also different from extreme conservatism, as it supports, and operates within, democratic principles.

1.4 The End of the National Conversation?

Does identity politics create polarisation? Mark Lilla seems to believe so, although he does not use the term.³⁹ He believes that the symbioses of right-wing individualism and left-wing identity politics has created larger detachment to America as a country and to *we* and *us*. We feel solidarity, but only with the groups we have chosen to identify with. Jonah Goldberg takes it even further and fears that the very ideology of America is under threat. According to Goldberg, advocates of identity politics undermine the Constitution and creed that ‘all men are created equal’ when they call for affirmative action and special treatment of certain groups because they are different.⁴⁰ In Goldberg’s view, one of the most profound problems with almost all earlier societies was the predisposed position people had in society. Whether decided by class, caste, gender, culture or colour, it divided people into permanent groups of

³⁷ John B. Judis. *The Populist Explosion*. (New York: Colombia Global Reports, 2016), 14.

³⁸ Judis, *The Populist Explosion*, 15.

³⁹ He focuses on the terms individualism and ‘a democracy without democrats. Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 124.

⁴⁰ Goldberg, *Suicide of the West*, 220-224.

affiliation. He believes the USA is yet again heading towards a society made up of distinctive groups, driven by the urge for unique identities and the fear of stepping on each other's toes.⁴¹ Although he believes the 'key to a thriving civil society is a multiplicity of institutions where diverse groups of people can find a home', he also believes that these groups must conform to American values.⁴²

Goldberg claims that millions of white, Christian Americans find it difficult to keep up with what is considered politically correct. While their beliefs and attitudes one decade ago were perfectly fine, they are now under attack for being bigoted or in conflict with new, liberalist convictions. Although the Democratic Party has become more ethnically diverse, journalist Baxter Oliphant in Pew Research Centre explains that it has become less diverse when it comes to political issues. Today there is significantly less disagreement over issues such as racial equality, immigration and same-sex marriage than it was a decade ago.⁴³ This development might create unity among Democrats but might at the same time push others away from the party, just as Elizabeth Warren's joke about homophobes was popular among her supporters but offended people of 'traditional' values. Whites and Christians are now believed to be responding to this bigotry by creating their own tribal identity politics. The literature on identity politics exploded after the 2016 election, and many believe that the election of Donald Trump can be seen as a response to liberal identity politics and polarisation.⁴⁴ While the Democratic Party was busy wooing smaller and smaller minority groups, the Republicans managed to show their voters that they had visions for America.⁴⁵

As liberal identity politics has turned the focus of the Democratic Party to self-defined groups, Lilla claims that the Democratic Party also has become more unwilling to engage with people unlike themselves.⁴⁶ Democrats have climbed onto their high horse, often 'treating every issue as one of inviolable right leaving no room for negotiation, and inevitably cast opponents as immoral monsters, rather than simply as fellow citizens with different views'.⁴⁷ Goldberg too asserts that stances such as 'If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem' leaves 'no safe harbors' in society where you can do or say something that deviates

⁴¹ Goldberg, *Suicide of the West*, 224.

⁴² Goldberg, *Suicide of the West*, 229.

⁴³ '6 facts about Democrats in 2019'. Pew Research Centre. Last modified June 26, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/26/facts-about-democrats/>.

⁴⁴ Fukuyama, *Identity* and Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*

⁴⁵ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*

⁴⁶ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 111-112.

⁴⁷ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 113.

from what is perceived politically correct.⁴⁸ This practice has created a view of Democrats as politicians thinking highly of themselves, and not being true representatives of the people. One can argue that this practice leads to polarisation or *tribalism*.

According to the organisation *More in Common*, there are seven segments or ‘tribes’ in American society. By examining a large-scale survey of Americans’ opinions, worldviews and group attachments, *More in Common* have identified seven distinct groups. They believe these ‘tribes’ are more accurate in predicting a person’s view on social and political issues than traditional minority groups such as religion, gender, race or income. *More in common* state that there are severe disagreements between some of the groups, specifically and not surprisingly between the relatively small groups Progressive Activists (8%) and Devoted Conservatives (6%) on the far ends of the spectrum. While these two ‘tribes’ differ in almost all issues, from their view on feminism, white privilege, police brutality and the approval of President Donald Trump, the majority of the American population (77%) seem to believe that ‘our differences are not so great that we cannot come together’.⁴⁹

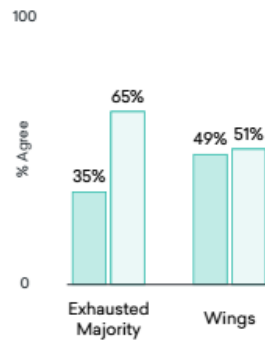
When looking at political debates in the media, it can sometimes seem as though politicians are aiming their arguments at each other instead of their potential voters. *More in Common* claims that the wing groups Devoted Conservatives and Progressive Activists are dominating the national conversation, and that their views deviate from the majority’s on several issues. As the majority tend to be more practical and less ideological in most issues, many of the high profiled debates seem irrelevant to many. This polarisation of the debate has made many people tired of politics, and exhausted by the constant quarrelling, as most people want to find middle ground. This tiredness and exhaustion are reflected in the label that *More in Common* has given the middle segment, namely ‘the Exhausted Majority’. This large group, consisting of about 65% of the American population, is of course a diverse group and by no means a unified midpoint in the political landscape. However, many of the people in the Exhausted Majority ‘share a sense of fatigue with our polarized national conversation’.⁵⁰ According to *More in Common*, they believe it is possible to find middle ground in the national conversation, but the necessary voice is lacking (see figure 1 below).

⁴⁸ Goldberg, *Suicide of the West*, 229.

⁴⁹ Stephen Hawkins et al., ‘Hidden Tribes’, 5.

⁵⁰ Stephen Hawkins et al., ‘Hidden Tribes’, 11.

■ People I agree with politically need to stick to their beliefs and fight
■ The people I agree with politically need to be willing to listen to others and compromise



Which of the following statements do you agree with more?
 Source: More in Common (2018)

Figure 1. From *More in Common's* 'Hidden Tribes'.

Authors Burgard and Hubbard agree that politicians need to do more to move everyone closer to what they call 'the endangered centre'. They believe there are several issues that almost everyone cares about, and they are certain that if these were addressed, 'the world would be immensely healthier and safer'.⁵¹ Both *More in Common* and Burgard and Hubbard claim that arguments aimed at the wings heat up the discussion, the result being that the Exhausted Majority (or 'endangered centre') who want to find middle ground become more politically disengaged, more exhausted by the political debate, and more passive than they already are. Making common cause to alleviate issues that everyone cares about, on the other hand, 'might bring liberals and conservatives closer together'.⁵² According to Burgard and Hubbard, issues that unite Conservatives and Democrats alike are balancing the federal budget, creating more jobs, making America energy-secure, making Congress run more efficiently, reforming Medicare and Social Security, repairing infrastructure, improving the educational system, preventing bullying, remedying the problems of poverty affecting children, and several others.⁵³ Only by addressing these in a better way, they believe, is it possible to combat the growing feeling of frustration making so many potential centre voters retreat from politics altogether.⁵⁴ Tribalism in this thesis is defined as polarising argumentation, pushing either Democrats further away from each other, speaking negatively

⁵¹ Stephen Burgard and Benjamin J. Hubbard, *A Battlefield of Values: America's Left, Right, and Endangered Center*, (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2016), 140.

⁵² Burgard and Hubbard, *A Battlefield of Values*, 140.

⁵³ Burgard and Hubbard, *A Battlefield of Values*, 127-145.

⁵⁴ Burgard and Hubbard, *A Battlefield of Values*, 157.

about groups of people, or using negatively loaded words while speaking about others' opinions, the effect often being increased polarisation in society.

1.4.1 How Liberal Identity Politics Went Wrong

Lived experience is a concept that can be used to explain why certain groups and individuals distance themselves from the majority and divide themselves into smaller and smaller groups. Lived experience is 'the subjective perception of experiences, which might not necessarily be shareable'.⁵⁵ This implies that only members of the minority group themselves are inclined to understand and find solutions for the group. Fukuyama argues that while 'classical liberalism sought to protect the autonomy of equal individuals', eventually, this policy changed into meaning equal recognition of ever diminishing minority groups.⁵⁶ To exemplify, an African American homosexual woman living in a city will probably not identify with an African American heterosexual woman living in the suburbs, and the two will probably not share the same perception of experiences.

Lilla claims that it has become increasingly difficult to speak on behalf of someone with a different lived experience. Pete Buttigieg experienced this difficulty first hand when he tried to reach out to the African American community by claiming that 'his experience as a gay man helps him relate to the struggles of African Americans'.⁵⁷ Some African Americans were upset by this, as they believed Buttigieg tried to appropriate their distinct type of victimhood.

Lilla has seen this development for a while, and he argues that over the past decade, something has happened with the way politicians make arguments. Instead of arguing with reason, more and more people make arguments based on their identity.⁵⁸ It is common to hear phrases such as *speaking as an African American* or *as a mother of a veteran*, etc., which are typical examples of empirical arguments based on lived experience. Lilla argues that this replaces logical arguments in debates, and in certain settings, '[o]nly those with an approved identity status are, like shamans, allowed to speak on certain matters'.⁵⁹ As a consequence of this, Goldberg fears that freedom of speech is threatened. He claims that identity politics 'has always been about the politics and psychology of power', and that some opinions and questions are now taboo, leading to the creation of a new power, controlling free speech of

⁵⁵ Fukuyama, *Identity*, 109.

⁵⁶ Fukuyama, *Identity*, 111.

⁵⁷ Samuels, 'Pete Buttigieg says being gay helps him relate to the black struggle'

⁵⁸ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 90.

⁵⁹ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 91.

professors, politicians, activists and journalists alike.⁶⁰ If ‘tolerance only has one meaning: bending to a single vision of the culture’, the climate of debate will be considerably smaller.⁶¹ Consequently, it becomes difficult for Democratic politicians to balance their rhetoric. On the one hand, they need to connect with their electorate, and party history has shown them that collaborating with minority groups is a fruitful strategy. On the other hand, it is easy to step on someone’s toes, and those who do are not necessarily easily forgiven. When Joe Biden in the October 2019 debate argued that he had helped Elizabeth Warren get votes for her bank bill, he was accused of ‘taking credit for a woman’s work’.⁶² One might wonder if he had been accused of anything at all had Warren been a man.

In the 2016 election, the Democratic Party was accused of being too caught up with trying to address minority groups properly. For example, their website had a designated area to ‘peoples’, where several minority groups were listed. In the 2020 election, this button/area is deleted. However, when looking at the pictures on the homepage, there is a clear overrepresentation of minorities. We know that more than 50% of registered Democrats are non-Hispanic whites, while this demographic features in less than 10% of the pictures on the homepage.⁶³

Lilla, who is a sworn liberal himself, argues that Democrats have balkanised their electorate by focusing on small minority groups and forgetting about the whole. Lilla argues that the Democratic Party lost many opportunities in the Reagan period when Republican views of economic individualism controlled the political conversation. Instead of building up the party all over the country, reaching out to workers who had previously voted for them and teaching people about solidarity and responsibility for each other, they ‘became enthralled with social movements’ and fed people with ideas of minority groups, personal identities and ‘left them incurious about the world outside their heads’.⁶⁴

Many activists in social movements, however, fear that a policy of inclusion forfeits the ‘possibility of structural change’.⁶⁵ Haider worries that when minorities are forced to

⁶⁰ Goldberg, *Suicide of the West*, 218.

⁶¹ Goldberg, *Suicide of the West*, 229.

⁶² Victoria McGrane, ‘Some Democratic Women were Bothered by Joe Biden Debate’, Boston Globe, Last modified October 16, 2019: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/10/16/some-democratic-women-were-bothered-joe-biden-debate-claim-watchdog-that-elizabeth-warren-created/wYniNAti10t1Lon2jPMPPL/story.html>

⁶³ 59% of registered Democrats were non-Hispanic whites: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/26/facts-about-democrats/>. Pictures were counted January 1, 2020 on <https://democrats.org/>. Of a total of 31 pictures of people (in focus), 3 were of non-Hispanic whites. (Pictures on the front page and five sub-pages linked from the top banners were counted.)

⁶⁴ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 60.

⁶⁵ Haider, *Mistaken Identity*, 22.

‘articulate their political demands in terms of inclusion’, the result is that ideals of masculinity and bourgeoisie are being upheld.⁶⁶ A perspective drawn from identity politics drives Haider’s remedy, and he thus believes that groups should seek coalitions to join forces against injustice in society. By contrast, Lilla shows that however praiseworthy its aims, identity politics is a fundamentally flawed policy. He argues that instead of using energy on rhetoric of identity politics, the best way to protect vulnerable minorities is to actually win elections and change politics.⁶⁷ He concludes that ‘the only way to accomplish that is to have a message that appeals to as many people as possible and pulls them together. Identity politics does just the opposite’.⁶⁸ Even though Lilla states that the early civil rights movement’s approach to identity politics was fruitful, he seems to question modern identity politics per se.

Liberal identity politics might have started as a policy of inclusion, and there is no doubt that Democrats focused on minorities in good faith, as there are real and serious threats to minorities in America. Moreover, many strategists and politicians see identity politics as a powerful method to attract voters from these minority groups. However, critics argue that identity politics is a bad strategy both for the Democratic Party and for American society, as it pushes other groups away from the party, turns focus away from more important issues, and increases polarisation.

1.4.2 How Liberal Identity Politics Pushed Voters to Trump

‘Her campaign slogan is “I’m with her”.
*You know what my response to that is? I’m with you: the American people’.*⁶⁹

- Donald Trump

During the 2016 election, many former Obama voters decided to vote for Donald J. Trump and the Republican Party, rather than Hillary R. Clinton and the Democratic Party. Who were they, and why did they change party affiliations? A countless number of politicians, political scientists and journalists have tried to explain why Trump was elected President in 2016. The explanations vary vastly, and it is important to remember that Trump voters is not one

⁶⁶ Haider, *Mistaken Identity*, 22.

⁶⁷ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 10.

⁶⁸ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 12.

⁶⁹ Ian Schwartz, ‘Trump: Clinton’s slogan is “I’m with her”; my response is “I’m with you: the American people”’, RealClearPolitics. Last modified June 22, 2016.

https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2016/06/22/trump_clinton_believes_she_is_entitled_to_the_presidency_im_with_you_the_american_people.html

coherent group of people, and their reasons for voting for Trump are manifold. Some explanations state that globalisation and increasing income inequality are the most important reasons why Trump was elected,⁷⁰ while others explain it as a reaction against Hillary Clinton.⁷¹ Many see Trump as a symptom of something larger, as Bremmer, who states that ‘Donald Trump didn’t create us versus them. Us versus them created Donald Trump’, implying that hate speech and insulting twitter messages from President Donald Trump was an effect of an ongoing polarising process in society.⁷² James J. Brittain claims that an economic, social and ideological crisis in the USA left a room open for opportunism, as traditional parties had become fragmented. Donald Trump embraced this opportunity, and the ways he spoke and acted resonated well with large segments of the people.⁷³ While Clinton focused on identity politics, symbolised by her slogan ‘I’m with her’, Trump managed to appeal to a larger section of voters. We have seen that liberal identity politics increases polarisation, and one might therefore argue that identity politics was one of the factors getting Trump elected.

Political analyst Thomas Frank, a former Republican, also believes that Trump’s victory can be traced back to policies of the Democratic Party, as the party has changed quite a lot the past two decades. This is also emphasised by Goldberg, and both Frank and Goldberg stress that on many moral and/or personal issues, Democrats have changed their positions. The Republican Party, on the other hand, put emphasis on ‘traditional values’ such as keeping Christian values in schools, stopping abortion and same-sex marriages, securing borders and reducing the size of government.⁷⁴ As we have seen, Burgard and Hubbard believe that compromise on many of these issues is ‘the only road to improved health for the nation’.⁷⁵

Lilla explains that the rise of liberal identity politics led to a change in relative social, political and economic power. Groups that used to be indistinguishable demanded well-deserved recognition, and consequently, the previously superior groups experienced a relative lowering of status. Fukuyama argues that modern identity politics has fractured the left side of American politics into several minority groups, but has ‘lost touch with the one identity group

⁷⁰ Ian Bremmer, *Us vs. Them. The Failure of Globalism*. (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2018).

⁷¹ Goldberg, *Suicide of the West*.

⁷² Bremmer, *Us vs. Them*, 161

⁷³ James J. Brittain. ‘Reading the (Identity Politics) Market: Articulating the forest past the trees post-Trump’. *Capital and Class*. Vol 41 (3). 414-415. 2017. Accessed February 18, 2020. Doi: <https://journals-sagepub-com.ezproxy.uio.no/doi/full/10.1177/0309816817734490>.

⁷⁴ Burgard and Hubbard, *A Battlefield of Values*, 99-109

⁷⁵ Burgard and Hubbard, *A Battlefield of Values*, 124.

that used to be its largest constituency, the white working class'.⁷⁶ Although both America's median income growth and GDP have risen in previous years, the middle-class incomes have decreased. At the same time, according to Edward Luce, the prices on essentials such as health care and obtaining an education have risen and become unaffordable to millions of Americans.⁷⁷ American economy has, just like many other rich-countries', diverged rather than converged, resulting in rising within-country inequality.⁷⁸ Although Republican voters in 2016 on average did not have a lower income than Democratic voters did, both their income and feeling of status in society were lower than before. Many people belonging to the white working class thus felt that their identity was under threat and were seeking new platforms to redeem themselves.⁷⁹ Trump's victory can therefore be seen as highly interlinked with liberal identity politics, as both economic and social status of previously unprivileged groups have increased with the rhetoric and policies of liberal identity politics.

Social psychologist Thomas F. Pettigrew agrees that although not solely, Trump's victory was linked to the perceived deprivation of material and social status compared to those 'less deserving'.⁸⁰ Just like other minority groups create a shared understanding of their history and suffering, often leading to a sense of victimhood, the white working class' perceived relative deprivation could lead to a sense of victimhood of this group. Consequently, this could lead to hostility towards other groups in society, as these are seen as threats. Professor of Psychology Marta Marchlewska et al. use the terms 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' to explain this pattern, where the 'in-group' might develop glorified beliefs about their own worth but create feelings of resentment towards 'out-groups'. Marchlewska et al. point out that these beliefs might create a feeling of national identity superior to that of others. This is a form of identity politics termed collective narcissism. Three studies completed by Marchlewska et al. in Poland, Britain and the USA show that such collective narcissism might lead to support for populist ideas. Support for the national conservative party in Poland, support for Brexit in Britain and the election of Trump in the USA were all, according to the authors, populist views mediated by collective narcissism. Thomas Frank suggests that the conservative movement went far in creating a feeling of victimhood, making people feel unfairly treated. According to Frank, many people from the working class already in the 2000

⁷⁶ Fukuyama, *Identity*, 167.

⁷⁷ Edward Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2017), 36.

⁷⁸ Thomas Piketty (2014) cited in Fukuyama, *Identity*, 77

⁷⁹ Fukuyama, *Identity*, 165

⁸⁰ Thomas F. Pettigrew, 'Social Psychological Perspectives on Trump Supporters', *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*. Vol 5(1), 111. Doi: 10.5964/jspp.v5i1.750.

election identified with this image of themselves as authentic Americans, victims of ‘unspeakable persecution by the ruling class, that is, by liberals’.⁸¹

Political scientist Ashley Jardina uses the contested term ‘white identity politics’, which has been ignored or rejected by most social scientists. She argues that for a long time, there has been a focus on whites’ outward behaviour, and especially when it causes problems for other groups, such as racism and prejudice often do. However, the inward attachment to their racial group, their political attitudes, preferences and behaviours have not been considered. Jardina explains that the election of the first black president coupled with increasing diversity in the USA made more white people identify as white than before. In fact, 30-40% of whites in national surveys in 2017 said that their white identity was very or extremely important to them. The people with a high level of white identity on Jardina’s measures more often than not had low levels of education, and many lived in rural areas of the country, but she stresses that this ‘is not merely a tale about the white working class’.⁸² Jardina’s research shows that these white identifiers could be found across the socio-economic spectrum, and that a slightly higher proportion was women. They owned homes, their incomes were on the median income, and they were not more likely to be unemployed. She explains that a ‘much wider swath of whites view their racial group as dispossessed, persecuted, and threatened by America’s changing social dynamics’.⁸³ According to Jardina, many of them feared being ‘outnumbered, disadvantaged, and even oppressed’.⁸⁴ This distress led to a feeling of commonality and solidarity with their own racial group, and voting for Trump was the logical next step as he was one of few who spoke about their problems and worth.

This development has been observed among many groups before, as people who feel disadvantaged seek together in groups, trying to elevate their feeling of self-worth. However, by coming together, they strengthen both the feeling of self-worth and the feeling of disadvantage.

⁸¹ Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 158.

⁸² Ashley Jardina, *White Identity Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 9.

⁸³ Jardina, *White Identity Politics*, 9.

⁸⁴ Jardina, *White Identity Politics*, 3.

1.5 Beyond Identity Politics and Tribalism – What Does Productive Politics Look Like?

As we have seen, many argue that identity politics offered by the Democratic Party has divided the country. Fukuyama fears that the outcome will be ‘state breakdown and failure’, as collective action by society is near impossible when it is split into ever more narrow identities and those who want to find middle ground become more disengaged.⁸⁵ Then what does productive politics look like? Even though Fukuyama, Goldberg and Lilla are harsh critics of identity politics, they all endorse versions of identity politics used in the past. They state that one of the reasons why African Americans and women finally achieved voting rights and other civil rights was that they appealed to the American ideal of equality before the law. By convincing politicians that they agreed with the principles, they managed to make them apply these principles differently to include themselves.⁸⁶ According to Goldberg, the struggle for gay marriage succeeded because ‘it appealed not to radicalism but to bourgeois values about family formation’.⁸⁷ However, politicians today do not always appeal to American ideals of equality when using the rhetoric of identity politics. Fukuyama believes the present divide within the American electorate can be mended if both sides of the political spectrum steer identity politics back to a ‘larger agenda of integrating smaller groups into larger wholes’, and by promoting ‘creedal national identities built around the foundational ideas of modern liberal democracy’.⁸⁸

Lilla somewhat disagrees and believes that the time of identity politics must end altogether. If the Democratic Party manages to start speaking to all American citizens, Lilla believes they now have a better chance than in a long time to reclaim the front seat of American politics.⁸⁹ Lilla stresses the importance of showing voters the progress that has been made in areas such as black education, working opportunities for women and social acceptance for homosexuals, instead of painting a gloomy picture of an America that has never seemed worse.⁹⁰ It is crucial, Lilla confesses, that the Democratic Party re-learns how to speak to people as one group of citizens – not to self-defined groups with different goals and aspirations. He believes that Democratic appeals must be framed in a way that all citizens can affirm to, and to reach this goal, he concludes that it is not enough to persuade a few more

⁸⁵ Fukuyama, *Identity*, 165.

⁸⁶ Goldberg, *Suicide of the West*, 209.

⁸⁷ Goldberg, *Suicide of the West*, 228.

⁸⁸ Fukuyama, *Identity*, 166.

⁸⁹ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 16-17.

⁹⁰ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 116.

Republicans to vote Democratic. To do so, he claims that the Democratic Party needs to learn from the Republicans in building the organisation from the bottom up, but also learn how to prioritise differently. As he puts it, it is crucial that the Democratic Party starts to prioritise ‘institutional over movement politics’, ‘democratic persuasion over aimless self-expression’, and ‘citizenship over group or personal identity’.⁹¹ The goal is to ‘develop an inspiring, optimistic vision of what America is and what it can become through liberal political action’.⁹² He wants the Democratic Party to start talking about *we* and *us*, and use the term *citizen* about every American, because being an American citizen does not conflict with any other American identity, and these identities can therefore live side by side in American society. Lilla hopes citizenship can be a way to talk about what Americans already share. Professor of Rhetoric Adam Ellwanger agrees and argues that identity politics is the politics of selfishness. It is the ‘complete inversion of the democratic ideal, which is *selflessness*, the pursuit of policies that benefit the collective as a *whole*’ (original italics).⁹³ He also believes true politics should unite ‘individuals under a single entity: citizen’.⁹⁴ In this thesis, calls for collective action have been defined as arguments made about unity, common interests and citizenship. Some arguments are made about minority groups, but when support for these are made by referring to shared citizenship rather than victimisation, uniqueness or lived experience, these have been categorised as calls for collective action, based on Fukuyama’s position on identity politics.

1.6 Summary

Identity politics has existed for a very long time. Even though it can be said to have been the driving force behind important victories such as the enfranchisement of African Americans and women, later developments have been criticised by many. Liberal identity politics is in this thesis defined as politics and rhetoric where the focus is on self-defined groups and their self-regard. A rhetoric of lived experience has become exalted and unassailable, and the self-defined, often narrow and exclusionary groups are united by a focus on victimhood or superiority. Identity politics is thus a kind of politics based on the perceptions of oppression shared by minority groups who are politically identified as victims of the social order.

⁹¹ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 104.

⁹² Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 104.

⁹³ Adam Ellwanger, ‘Why Identity Politics Kills Democracy’. Last modified September 16, 2019, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/why-identity-politics-kills-democracy/>

⁹⁴ Ellwanger, ‘Why Identity Politics Kills Democracy’.

The individual path of identity politics is based on a demand for equal recognition based on citizenship, and this version of identity politics was vital during most of history. During the civil rights movement, identity politics developed into a collectivistic version; a demand for equal rights for a group of people, for example African Americans. In the beginning, they argued that all Americans are equal and should therefore have equal rights. After a while, however, the focus started to be on the group's victimhood and uniqueness. More and more people accepted the notion that special circumstances, such as sufferings in the past, should grant special privileges.

Mark Lilla argues that identity politics is a disaster for America because it has drawn attention away from important issues. It is also a disaster for the Democratic Party, as it has pushed potential voters away from the party. It increases polarisation because the gap between the two major parties becomes even larger. Especially after Trump's unexpected victory in 2016, both supporters and opponents of the Democratic Party have criticised them of using identity politics too actively. Many argue that their use of identity politics pushed voters to Trump by creating a sense of victimhood among rural, white voters. Although liberal identity politics does not appear in a vacuum, and it often operates in close proximity to interest politics, tribalism and populism, the chapter has shown that identity politics can create polarisation, especially when coupled with tribalism.

This thesis agrees with Lilla that the Democratic Party needs to appeal to what Americans already share, both because current liberal identity politics pushes potential voters away from the party, and because it increases polarisation in society. Not everyone knows a transgendered person, or would 'agree in every case on what constitutes discrimination or racism today', but many can agree that all American citizens should be treated equally.⁹⁵ Or as Lilla puts it: 'Equal protection under the law is not a hard principle to convince Americans of'.⁹⁶ However, identity politics keeps dominating Democratic rhetoric and policies. Why? Chapter 2 will take a closer look at the historical reasons why identity politics became so central in the Democratic Party.

⁹⁵ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 130.

⁹⁶ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 128.

Chapter 2 – Did the Civil Rights Movement Create Identity Politics?

How did the Democratic Party become so enthralled with identity politics? To understand that, we need to go back in time. Professor of Sociology Doug McAdam argues that the divisions we see in America today stem from the civil rights era of the 1960s, when African Americans organised grassroots movements to demand equal recognition in society. According to Fukuyama, seeking equal recognition is the core positive attribute of identity politics, but when the civil rights movement started to seek *special* recognition, identity politics as we know it today was born. This chapter will examine how the civil rights movement inspired and inflicted practices of identity politics in the Democratic Party that are still evident today.

The civil rights movement is generally considered to have had its major influence in the 1950s and 1960s, and the Democratic Party underwent major changes during these two decades due to their involvement in civil rights policies. The civil rights movement fought against racial segregation within law and practice, and its members demonstrated their opinions through marches, boycotts, sit-ins, speeches, etc. In 1957, the movement achieved its first major goal: The Civil Rights Act of 1957, with the objective of ensuring equal voting rights for everyone. In 1964, another Civil Rights Act was passed, outlawing discrimination based on race, colour, sex, religion and national origin in schools and jobs. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 outlawed literacy tests and other discriminatory practices used in the South to prevent African Americans from voting. Finally, the Fair Housing Act of 1968 was passed, and several executive orders were made to secure equality for African Americans and other ethnic minorities. Of course, most people today condemn the Jim Crow laws and illegal practices in the South before these important acts; however, this period did not only change the situation for African Americans, it also led to other important changes in society.

Contrary to popular belief, politicians in the Republican Party were in the 1950s and - 60s much more liberal on racial issues than their Democratic colleagues were. When the Civil Rights Act of 1957 was voted for in Congress and the Senate, an overwhelming majority of GOP representatives supported the bill, while more than half of the Democrats opposed it. According to Doug McAdam, it was ‘Southern Democratic intransigence on the “Negro question” that had blocked reform until the 1957 breakthrough’, but during the 1950s and -

60s, the roles were reversed.⁹⁷ This period thus marks a shift in both major parties in the USA. During the 1940s, the Democratic Party nationally became more closely related with modern liberalism, including the promotion of civil rights. For quite a while, members of the Democratic Party in the North supported the civil rights movement, while members in the South still supported racial divisions. Many of the liberal Democratic politicians from the North who entered the House and Senate these years replaced either Republicans or conservative Democrats. Consequently, the northern, liberal wing of the Democratic Party was strengthened, while the southern, conservative wing quickly became marginalised. This was to become crucial for politicians and policies to come.

Historian John Frederick Martin asserts that John F. Kennedy was not an ideologue, but a pragmatic politician. After he lost the vice president nomination in 1956, he understood the importance of wooing the liberal flank of the Democratic Party. He gradually strengthened his position with the liberals by promising them to support desegregation, and in 1960, ‘blacks and labor came out for Kennedy as they had not for a Democratic candidate since Franklin Roosevelt’, and his Democratic presidential nomination was a fact.⁹⁸ According to Martin, ‘it seemed a special though narrow mandate’.⁹⁹ He argues that Kennedy had considerable resistance in Congress on the civil rights issue, but the fact that he drew attention to the issue was new, and spurred hope in African Americans and liberals alike. Professor of Sociology John Skrentny argues that another important, and strategic, reason why Kennedy and other politicians at the time pursued civil rights issues was the pressure from other countries. The Cold War was a contest of political and social systems, and Soviet propaganda pointing out racial inequality in the USA harmed their interests both at home and in the developing world.¹⁰⁰

Whatever the reasons, Kennedy argued for greater equality between black and white, rich and poor, women and men. One of his repeated arguments was that all Americans should have the same rights, and he argued for equality and respect for all citizens.¹⁰¹ Both Kennedy and the black civil rights movement at the time argued for equality before the law for all

⁹⁷ Doug McAdam, ‘Be Careful What You Wish For: The Ironic Connection Between the Civil Rights Struggle and Today’s Divided America’. *Sociological Forum*. Vol. 30, No. S1. (2015): 500.

⁹⁸ John Frederick Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, Inc, 1979), 169 and 171.

⁹⁹ Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*, 171.

¹⁰⁰ John Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 2002), see chapter 2.

¹⁰¹ Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*, 171-172.

individuals.¹⁰² Even though the black civil rights movement worked to achieve better conditions for one minority group, their policies these early years were different from contemporary identity politics as they focused on equality between every group, and they did not victimise or enhance specific minority groups or use arguments based on lived experience.

Both McAdam and Professor of Social Policy and History Mark Stern argue that after Kennedy's assassination in 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson made the Civil Rights Act his number one priority in order to keep Kennedy's allies close.¹⁰³ Although he had previously voted against civil rights legislation (like Kennedy himself and many other Democrats at the time), as a southerner, Johnson depended on northern liberals to trust him on civil rights issues. According to Stern, there was no doubt that Johnson was personally engaged in the civil rights agenda, but the speed with which Johnson moved the issue was new for him. Stern asserts that 'he had to move quickly and effectively with the issue as his political life was at stake'.¹⁰⁴

During a few years, 'Johnson was creating a mounting structure of power' and he 'made into law the liberal words' by framing bills on civil rights.¹⁰⁵ One of these bills was the 1965 Voting Rights Act, ensuring African Americans the right to vote without constraint. That year, a record-high percentage of the African American population in the South was able to vote, making them a considerable part of the electorate. For this reason, one might argue that for Democrats, the Voting Rights Act was the most important of all the civil rights bills. The bill's effect was also easy to measure, probably making it appealing for Democrats to endorse even more civil rights bills. Johnson's wooing of the liberal forces in the party succeeded, but the year after, 'disaffected white Southerners did the unthinkable and cast their votes for the once-despised Republican Party'.¹⁰⁶ This was the decisive shift for the Democratic Party in the South. Although Johnson was certain this act would deliver the South to the Republican Party 'for a long time to come', Stern claims that the shift was a deliberate strategy.¹⁰⁷ Even though the Democrats would lose white votes in the South, 'it would also add black votes to the Democratic totals'. Furthermore, as Johnson was dependent on liberal

¹⁰² Hugh Davis Graham, *The Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy 1960-1972*. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 113.

¹⁰³ Mark Stern, 'Lyndon Johnson and the Democrats' Civil Rights Strategy' *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 16, no. 1. 1990: 1-29. Accessed February 18, 2020, doi: www.jstor.org/stable/24003020, and McAdam, 'Be Careful What You Wish For', 490.

¹⁰⁴ Stern, 'Lyndon Johnson and the Democrats' Civil Rights Strategy', 15.

¹⁰⁵ Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*, 179.

¹⁰⁶ McAdam, 'Be Careful What You Wish For', 494.

¹⁰⁷ Stern, 'Lyndon Johnson and the Democrats' Civil Rights Strategy', 18.

support, he saw no other choice than to support a strong civil rights legislation.¹⁰⁸

Consequently, however, Democratic politicians in the South who just a few years earlier did not want African Americans enfranchised, suddenly depended on black people to vote for them in order to be re-elected. In the Republican Party, a decisive shift to the right occurred to attract disillusioned white southern voters.¹⁰⁹ Another theory, however, is that affluent whites moved to the Republican Party not because of racial issues but because of their policy of individualism, such as ‘less government intrusion and regulation, and lower taxes’.¹¹⁰ Most likely, a combination of class- and racial issues influenced people’s choice of party.¹¹¹

2.1 Social Rights and Affirmative Action

In 1965, Johnson signed an executive order banning racial discrimination in jobs offered by federal employers, moving legislation on the issue from political rights to social rights. This order paved the way for affirmative action, because it required the employer to ‘make additional efforts to recruit, employ and promote qualified members of groups formerly excluded’.¹¹² An amendment would later expand this order to include discrimination by sex. According to Skrentny, affirmative action is ‘the most important policy in the minority rights revolution’, because it moved America formally away from the policy of colour-blindness it had pursued for hundreds of years.¹¹³ Liberals had for a time strongly believed in equal rights for all men. When they understood that equal rights were not enough to ensure equality, Martin argues that ‘the next step to compensatory action and special treatment was easy and logical’.¹¹⁴ It should, however, prove to be far from easy in the years to come, as people on the political right started opposing affirmative action actively. In addition, some people within the Democratic Party would doubt its advantages. At the time, though, the focus within the Party was on securing every person’s political and social rights, and as the policy of equality had yet not led to equality of results, special treatment seemed the only way to assure that. This decision was a leap in the Democratic Party’s identity politics, as the new policy would officially divide the country into ‘the majority and the minorities, the privileged and the

¹⁰⁸ Stern, ‘Lyndon Johnson and the Democrats’ Civil Rights Strategy’, 17 and 15.

¹⁰⁹ McAdam, ‘Be Careful What You Wish For’, 496.

¹¹⁰ Mark D. Brewer and Jeffrey M. Stonecash, ‘Class, Race Issues, and Declining White Support for the Democratic Party in the South’, 132. *Political Behavior*, Vol. 23, No. 2. June 2001. Accessed February 18, 2020. Doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1558364>

¹¹¹ Brewer and Stonecash, ‘Class, Race Issues, and Declining White Support for the Democratic Party in the South’, 149-150.

¹¹² Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*, 182.

¹¹³ Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution*, 85.

¹¹⁴ Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*, 216.

oppressed'.¹¹⁵ Thus, minority groups that for a long time had felt that they were different from the majority now got it manifested by the government.

As an amendment to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, desegregation of public schools was set forth in 1968. Johnson sought a 'Great Society', where poverty had to be fought by every possible means. When Johnson became president, he wanted to 'surpass all previous presidents' to create equality between rich and poor, black and white.¹¹⁶ This ambition seems to have underpinned decisions, strategies and rhetoric in the Democratic Party in years to come, as Johnson built a strong collaboration with minority groups to achieve his goals.

2.2 How Affiliation with the Civil Rights Movement Affected the Democratic Party

In the beginning, the civil rights movement was dominated by Martin Luther King Jr.'s thoughts of nonviolent tactics and principles, as well as an overarching goal of equal rights for everyone. During the 1960s, however, new leaders agitating for violent 'black power' emerged with demands of special treatment and uniqueness. Political journalist and author Jules Witcover argues that this, together with student organisations, anti-war movements and the feminist movement moved the Democratic Party further to the left during the 1960s.¹¹⁷ It is also possible to argue that this shift within the black civil rights movement created a shift towards identity politics, as focus went from equal rights for all individuals to unique recognition of special groups.

While in power, the Democratic Party started understanding that society had to change in order to end discrimination and poverty among blacks as well as whites.¹¹⁸ The Democrats held a landslide majority in Congress and the Senate, and as they knew this would not continue forever, they pushed through several new laws, such as civil rights legislation and Medicare for the old and poor.¹¹⁹ Although the Democratic Party accomplished many of their goals, they started struggling to attract voters towards the end of the 1960s. Martin argues that their downfall was in fact partly due to their success. When legislation for racial equality was enacted, these issues 'could no longer serve as the focus and unifying purpose of the liberal movement'.¹²⁰ In addition to this, problems of poverty and discrimination persisted in society,

¹¹⁵ Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*, 216.

¹¹⁶ Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*, 188.

¹¹⁷ Jules Witcover, *Party of the People: A History of the Democrats*. (New York: Random House, 2003), 537-540.

¹¹⁸ Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*.

¹¹⁹ Graham, *The Civil Rights Era*, 233.

¹²⁰ Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*, 191.

and it seemed difficult to deal with them. The Democratic Party responded to these problems by pointing them out and proposing various means to solve them. However, the problems of racism, poverty and city slums were enormous, and the Democrats did not manage to find adequate solutions. Many the voters even opposed their attempts. The Democratic Party was pushed from two sides: on their right, there was a wave of disapproval of their exercise of authority, as the party had used federal power to a larger extent than before to secure social rights for minority groups. In many people's minds, this was an abuse of power, and social rights was not seen as something the federal government should deal with. Consequently, resistance grew. On their left, however, many minority peoples wanted them to do more to secure equal rights and opportunities for all. Thus, the Democratic Party was punished for failing to reduce the problems, but also for trying.

Busing of schoolchildren, the policy of Model Cities and affirmative action became symptomatic of liberal policies that were criticised from both flanks. Unemployment and low salaries were major problems among blacks, and the Democratic Party tried to remedy the situation by introducing affirmative action. However, whites started challenging these policies in the 1970s, and they did so forcefully. According to historian and sociologist Hugh Davis Graham, whites had used racial quotas actively since Jim Crow to push blacks out of various positions. Nevertheless, many whites now argued that affirmative action was a violation of principles of equal treatment of all peoples, principles manifested in both the Fourteenth Amendment and the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Some civil rights leaders changed their views and started believing that African Americans' 300 years of suffering and discrimination could not be mended simply by equality before the law. They now believed that to ensure equal results, blacks should be prioritised over other nationalities.¹²¹

Obviously, many people were critical of this development. The large bulk of civil rights protests so far had advocated equal rights, and this shift in argumentation and policymaking towards equality of results created a larger focus on *us* and *them* and can thus be said to mark the very beginning of liberal identity politics in the USA as we know it today. Furthermore, for most blacks, affirmative action did not solve any of their problems, and they opposed it almost as eagerly as the whites did.¹²² Some argued that keeping a focus on past problems and seeking special privileges would make African Americans seem bitter and alienate them further from the majority. Graham argues that 'demands for racial preferences echoed unsavory practices from the past under a color-conscious Constitution' and was a

¹²¹ Graham, *The Civil Rights Era*, 111-112.

¹²² Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*, 206.

significant shift for a movement that earlier had ‘derived its moral authority from liberalism’s core value of equal treatment for individuals’.¹²³ Moreover, affirmative action for African Americans would be discriminatory for other minorities, as well as punish innocent people for wrongs done by their predecessors. Nonetheless, policies of affirmative action were implemented in various areas of society, influencing minority groups and the Democratic Party more than one might have thought at the time.

Busing of schoolchildren had a similar effect on the Democratic Party. The purpose was to desegregate the 3 million black students of the South, as equal opportunities in schools based on parents’ free choice had not yet mended the problems of segregation. However, the program created great opposition. Not only did people think busing was an abuse of power, it did not solve any problems of the slums either. Both whites and blacks despised the policy of busing but for different reasons. Many blacks saw the use of power as oppressive, while many whites saw no need to integrate schools or society. Martin argues that partly due to forcible busing, many whites fled the inner cities during the 1970s, leaving integration meaningless, as ‘there were not enough whites to go around’.¹²⁴

Another reason why the Democratic Party struggled towards the end of the 1960s was that radical forces within the African American wing saw the Democratic Party’s use of power as problematic, as it symbolised the power white people always had exercised over blacks. Martin writes that ‘what blacks wanted now, when liberals brought attention to their problems, was power for themselves’.¹²⁵ Gradually, more minority groups claimed this capacity of self-authorisation, and the once so unified Left fragmented into smaller, self-defined groups with focus on their unique strengths, their unjust history and shared identity. The Democratic Party’s organisational power decreased proportionately. The party was in many states squeezed between wanting to support minority groups and wanting to maintain control of their party. Some places, the Democratic Party gave minorities the majority of delegates to the Democratic Congress.

While the American population was evenly split between Democrats and Republicans at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, towards the end of the 1960s, people became more conservative. According to Martin, ‘the only group to grow more liberal from the 1950s to the 1970s was the blacks’, and as we have seen, they were not particularly fond

¹²³ Graham, *The Civil Rights Era*, 113.

¹²⁴ Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*, 204.

¹²⁵ Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*, 193.

of the Democratic Party.¹²⁶ Although the policies of affirmative action, busing and Model Cities did not reduce poverty or end discrimination, the Democratic Party was stuck in its commitment to these policies. During the 1970s, maybe because African Americans proved to be the only group becoming more liberal, they strengthened the policies even more. This was a failure because it was widely unpopular in both the North and the South. In fact, the Republican Nixon fortified his support among white southerners by ‘fashioning a politics of racial reaction’, with opposition to busing as one of his central issues.¹²⁷ It was also a failure because it fractured the power the Democratic Party had once held into even smaller minority groups. Martin claims that this fragmentation of power was the illiberal result of giving attention and power to minority groups in party councils. These groups of blacks and poor, and later women, homosexuals, Native Americans, young people, Hispanics and others now wanted to speak for themselves, and these competing groups ensured that ‘the liberal coalition fell apart’.¹²⁸ Although all these groups’ issues were important, a united fight against poverty was impossible as long as the groups fought each other. The liberal agenda of fighting poverty and slums drowned in individual issues such as the Vietnam War, abortion, gay rights etc.

On the 1964 Democratic convention, the party changed their rules and made it illegal to choose delegates on racist principles. While civil rights leaders at the time saw this as a major victory, Martin believes this was ‘when liberals first lost control of their forces’.¹²⁹ In the years to come, affirmative action was implemented on Democratic conventions, where there was more of a mathematical representation of minority groups on dispense of the representatives’ political commitment and opinions. Although compensatory action had seemed like the right thing to do, many now sensed that the result was unfair and ‘restrictive, rather than liberating’.¹³⁰ Moreover, blue-collar whites grew suspicious of the Democratic Party, which only focused on busing and affirmative action and even embraced black militancy, instead of issues that were important to them. Consequently, the labour movement no longer wanted to be dependent on the Democratic Party, and ‘the liberal alliance was splitting up’.¹³¹ The Democratic Party thus became an even smaller organisation, and the wooing of various minority groups intensified to secure a basis of voters. Liberal forces within the Democratic Party had nourished minority groups such as blacks, labour, women,

¹²⁶ Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*, 208.

¹²⁷ McAdam, ‘Be Careful What You Wish For’, 506.

¹²⁸ Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*, 209.

¹²⁹ Stern, ‘Lyndon Johnson and the Democrats’ Civil Rights Strategy’, 15 and quote from Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*, 209.

¹³⁰ Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*, 216.

¹³¹ Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*, 217.

homosexuals, Native Americans and young people to believe in their own rights and self-expression, and the groups had now started to do so. As they now wanted victories of their own, they no longer felt obligations to the Democratic Party. At the same time, liberals lost faith in their own policies. Not only did many fear that they had taken civil rights such as affirmative action too far; they were also afraid they had abused their authority while in power. The classical, liberal view of a limited government came back, but as we see from today's practices, identity politics and minority politics persisted as vital parts of the Democratic Party's rhetorical strategies. Some reasons why identity politics manifested itself as an important rhetoric can be found in the formation of a civil rights model on the political Left.

2.3 The Civil Rights Model

The civil rights movement inspired and influenced many other social movements, as well as the Democratic Party. For example, the black civil right achievements 'accelerated policy development for other groups'.¹³² Doug McAdam takes the argument even further and claims that 'most social movements are caused by other social movements', and sees the many social movements at the time as 'movements that cluster in the same "family"'.¹³³ As we have seen, however, there are major differences between the early civil rights movement and the development of identity politics within the Democratic Party and various minority groups in America, as the former sought equal recognition, while the latter sought special recognition. In addition, women and gays' struggles for equal rights diverge largely from those of the early and late black civil rights movement.

However, there are some obvious and important parallels. Professor of Law and History Serena Mayeri explains that by the end of the 20th century, the fight for black civil rights was routinely used as a template for other minority groups to gain equal rights.¹³⁴ She argues that 'the African American quest for civil rights has become so deeply ingrained in American consciousness that it is the yardstick against which all other reform movements are measured'.¹³⁵ Professor of Political Science Sidney Tarrow also stresses that the black civil

¹³² Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution*, 86.

¹³³ Doug McAdam, "'Initiator" and "Spin-off" Movements: Diffusion processes in Protest Cycles'. In *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action*, edited by Mark Traugott. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995: 218 and 227.

¹³⁴ Serena Mayeri, *Reasoning from Race: Feminism, Law, and the Civil Rights Revolution*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

¹³⁵ Mayeri, *Reasoning from Race*, 2.

rights movement inspired other minority groups in the 1960s and -70s. Observing the success of the black civil rights movement, other movements copied many of their protest forms. Tarrow argues that social movements will ‘set in motion important political, cultural, and international changes’, whether they succeed or fail.¹³⁶ John Skrentny argues that even though movements were important to achieve change in this period, the political process went so fast that it is impossible to ascribe all political success to these protests. Just as important were elected officials in government, both in the Senate, White House and as employed officials in the bureaucracy.¹³⁷ Moreover, social movements are more likely to rise when governments are weak or in crisis. During the Cold War, when the American government was in a crisis both abroad and domestically, a room of political opportunity opened, and many social movements used this opening. The black civil rights movement was the first, and it functioned as an initiator or catalyst for other social movements.¹³⁸

In the following section, it will be highlighted how the civil rights movement inspired the feminist movement and the gay movement. The question is how these movements were treated differently from the African American one, and how did they influence the Democratic Party’s usage of identity politics?

2.3.1 The Fight Against ‘Jane Crow’

As women comprise approximately 50% of the population, they cannot be regarded as a minority per se. For natural reasons, they do not agglomerate in specific areas the way ethnic groups often tend to do either.¹³⁹ However, many argue that they should be termed a minority group due to their suffering and inferior position throughout history. During the 1960s and 1970s, many African Americans believed women’s struggles compromised the civil rights movement, while others saw a need to join forces.

Pauli Murray was an African American feminist who fought for equal rights for both women, people of colour and workers. She emphasised that both women of colour and white women suffered from sexual discrimination, and she argued that black men were more privileged than any woman, black or white. She tried to bridge the conflict between feminists

¹³⁶ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 6.

¹³⁷ Skrentny, *the Minority Rights Revolution*, 2.

¹³⁸ McAdam, ‘“Initiator” and “Spin-off” Movements’, 223.

¹³⁹ Graham, *The Civil Rights Era*, 390.

and black civil rights activists by uniting them against the common enemy; white men, because ‘when white women and black men were at odds, both lost’.¹⁴⁰

Important issues to the feminist movement during these years were affirmative action for women in workplaces and universities, and abortion. Even though these two issues were controversial, they united the interests of feminists with those of ethnic minorities and poor women. As seen above, affirmative action was not necessarily the strategically best choice, as it created divisions between minorities and the majority. However, divisions did already exist, as ‘many government officials [...] believed that women were simply different from black, Latino, Asian American, American Indian and Euro-American men’ in the sort of jobs they could and would do.¹⁴¹ Another argument used to limit job possibilities for women was that ‘women were weaker than men and that their health should be maintained for their important roles as mothers’.¹⁴²

Lyndon B. Johnson had been a primary advocate for civil rights for African Americans, and after eight years of Republican rule, the Democrat Jimmy Carter was elected president in 1977. After the Equal Pay Act of 1963 the amendment to the 1965 executive order, there had not been done much to put women’s rights on the agenda, and Nixon’s administration had been without any trace of ‘women leaders and women’s issues’.¹⁴³ Carter, however, ‘promised to be to women’s rights what LBJ had been to civil rights’.¹⁴⁴

Women struggled more than African Americans in their quest for equal rights, seen for example in the only narrow inclusion of discrimination by sex to Title VII, an amendment to the Civil Rights Act banning discrimination by race. In 1966, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was founded to promote equal rights for women. They had a list of eight demands, where ending discrimination in workplaces and advertisements were among the most important. At the end of the list, there was a suggestion to develop affirmative action programs. Soon after the list of demands, women did in fact ‘win a place in affirmative action regulations’, and discrimination by sex was added to the 1965 executive order about job discrimination by federal employers despite major controversy.¹⁴⁵ However, many of the other demands were neglected, and they were still regarded different than other minority groups. It is possible to question whether the methods of the civil rights movement were

¹⁴⁰ Susan M. Hartmann, ‘Pauli Murray and the “Juncture of Women’s Liberation and Black Liberation”’, *Journal of Women’s History*. Vol. 14, Number 2, 2002, 75

¹⁴¹ Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution*, 87.

¹⁴² Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution*, 95.

¹⁴³ Graham, *The Civil Rights Era*, 398.

¹⁴⁴ Mayeri, *Reasoning from Race*, 186

¹⁴⁵ Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution*, 87.

strategically smart for women, as they seemingly were so different from men. While job advertisements were termed illegal if they classified between ‘white jobs’ and ‘black jobs’, ‘advertisements that separated male and female jobs’ were still legal.¹⁴⁶ The assumption was that discrimination based on sex was different than discrimination because of race. According to Skrentny, ‘NOW’s work as a pressure group was on eliminating any relevance of perceived sex differences and equating sex discrimination with race discrimination’. In 1972, the Equal Rights Amendment was passed in the Senate, banning all discrimination based on sex.

Many feminists were disappointed with Carter’s work for women’s rights. One of the reasons he did not do more for this issue can be found in the importance of strategy in a politician’s decision-making. This is a typical trait of politics, as a politician’s prime concern is to be re-elected. Even though Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson all ‘acknowledged the legitimacy of the demand for black civil rights [...], none of these presidents placed the issue on their decision agendas until they believed it was politically advantageous to do so’.¹⁴⁷ Similarly, women’s, homosexuals’ and poor people’s demands were largely overlooked in the Cold War era, as there was ‘no strong strategic interest’ in these issues.¹⁴⁸ As the Soviet Union did not focus their propaganda on women’s rights in the same way as on racial equality, women’s rights did not become a matter of national security in the same way, and politicians such as Nixon and Carter could afford to leave the situation as it was without the fear of losing face.

As the American legal system is based on precedence, black civil rights have been repeatedly used to justify other minority rights in court.¹⁴⁹ For example, second-wave feminists used analogies comparing women’s struggles to African Americans’ struggles, and these analogies secured women’s legal rights against discrimination and in affirmative action. However, they also had their limitations. Women of colour felt that they faced a double dose of prejudice, and that their unique experiences were obscured. Consequently, they started a fight to be recognised as a minority group on their own terms. When both women of colour and homosexuals had formed their own self-defined groups, gay women of colour felt that their unique experiences were obscured, as it was argued that it is more difficult to be gay in an African American community than in a white. To be a transvestite or gender binary is even more difficult, and they all thus created their own groups and communities. When minorities

¹⁴⁶ Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution*, 114.

¹⁴⁷ Stern, ‘Lyndon Johnson and the Democrats’ Civil Rights Strategy’, 20.

¹⁴⁸ Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution*, 75.

¹⁴⁹ Mayeri, *Reasoning from Race*, 2.

form self-defined groups like this, one of the effects is that the primary focus of the groups is on their shared identity, not necessarily on political demands. This choice can strengthen the bonds between members of the group but can at the same time make them less approachable to others. To address all these different minority groups on their own terms is challenging, and one should mind one's step when trying. To try to woo these various minority groups, the Democratic Party placed great effort to show them the respect they demanded. Although some would say they failed just as much as they succeeded, the Democratic rhetoric of identity politics was manifested.

2.3.2 'Gay Is the New Black'

According to Professor in Gender and Women's Studies Andrew Matzner, members of gay liberation societies in the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s 'tended to be conservative when it came to social change'.¹⁵⁰ Just like the first civil rights activists, they wanted to portray themselves as respectable, non-threatening citizens who did not differ noticeably from other middle-class men. It was important for many to act in a civilised fashion, and on protests, 'demonstrators acted in an orderly, polite manner'.¹⁵¹ The only thing separating them from any other man was 'what they did in the bedroom'.¹⁵² This difference, however, proved to be too big for many conservative Americans. While the rhetoric of cohesion proved to take them nowhere, the civil rights movement evolved in a more radical direction in the 1960s. As a result, members of gay liberation movements became inspired to act in more radical and aggressive ways. Gay activists believed they should copy the black pride movement, as African Americans gained more rights after they moved away from 'mere persuasion, information and education'.¹⁵³ This eventually led to what is known as the Stonewall riots (1969) and a month after that, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was founded. Between 1969 and 1973, there was a huge increase of gay organisations and political groups across the country, amounting to 800 at its peak. During the same period, homosexuals won an important victory when six states removed laws against homosexuality. As more people chose to 'come out' as gay, their homosexuality became viewed as their primary identity, 'similar to the way policymakers perceived a minority identity'.¹⁵⁴ These interrelated circumstances

¹⁵⁰ Andrew Matzner, 'Stonewall Riots', *gltq. Inc.* 2015. Accessed February 18, 2020. Doi: http://gltqarchive.com/ssh/stonewall_riots_S.pdf, 1.

¹⁵¹ Matzner, 'Stonewall Riots', 1.

¹⁵² Matzner, 'Stonewall Riots', 1.

¹⁵³ Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution*, 316.

¹⁵⁴ Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution*, 316.

show the formation of identity politics in a nutshell: when the divisions between the minority and the majority intensify, identity becomes the most important characteristic of a group, and divisions thus increase even more.

The gay-rights movement had considerable influence on elections in some states and within the Democratic Party, but even though gay rights ‘grew as a force in US politics throughout the 1970s’, it did not make it all the way to the White House or Congress.¹⁵⁵ Not even the Democratic Party included gay rights in their political platform, apart from some vague formulations about diversity. The difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals, though small, was enough to deter the American people and policymakers. People believed ‘gays were different. They were immoral’ and politicians were afraid that commitment to the gay cause could create opposition and damage coalitions.¹⁵⁶ Another reason was that nobody knew how many people were actually gay or the extent of sympathy for their movement. When ‘government officials became keenly aware of the numbers of minorities during the 1960s’, they started pursuing civil rights issues.¹⁵⁷ Even though some gay neighbourhoods influenced policies in their communities, gay rights were largely excluded from the national debate. As a ‘late-riser movement’, there was simply not enough ‘public attention and leverage necessary for success’.¹⁵⁸ This theory is also emphasised by sociologist Debra Minkoff, who claims that ‘political space is initially opened up by organizational expansion, but later becomes overcrowded and less open to new entrants’.¹⁵⁹

According to Professor of Constitutional Law Kenji Yoshino, the 1964 Civil Rights Act manifested women or racial minorities’ legal protection, while homosexuals have still not gained this right. Skrentny agrees that homosexuals ‘failed to gain a federal foothold in the minority rights revolution’.¹⁶⁰ Yoshino argues that one of the reasons why they have not gained the same legal protection is that it is not seen as necessary. Homosexuals have always been viewed in a different light than women and ethnic minorities because of what can be termed ‘converting’ or ‘passing’. He explains that while ethnic minorities and women cannot convert their identity or pass as someone they are not, gays are able to convert or pass although they have a sexual orientation that is not viewed as preferential by the majority. The Civil Rights Act thus ‘reflects and reinforces a schism between gays on the one hand and

¹⁵⁵ Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution*, 317.

¹⁵⁶ Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution*, 319 and 323.

¹⁵⁷ Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution*, 322.

¹⁵⁸ McAdam, ‘“Initiator” and “Spin-off” Movements’, 225.

¹⁵⁹ Debra C. Minkoff, ‘The Sequencing of Social Movements’, *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 62, No. 5 (Oct., 1997). Accessed February 18, 2020. Doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2657360?seq=1>, 780.

¹⁶⁰ Skrentny, *The Minority Rights Revolution*, 3.

racial minorities and women on the other'.¹⁶¹ Pete Buttigieg experienced this attitude when he in November 2019 tried to reach out to African American voters. Many African Americans condemned his attempts because they believed gays did not experience discrimination to the same extent as blacks. One of the arguments was that Buttigieg and other homosexuals could convert, hide or pass as heterosexuals in situations where this was needed, while African Americans would always be recognised as members of a racial minority.¹⁶² Yoshino emphasises that even though gays can convert or pass when necessary, it should still be possible to 'find common cause with racial minorities and women', especially because they all tend to cover (or are being expected to fit in) in many situations.¹⁶³ He stresses that all these groups of minorities can benefit by combining forces against expectations to hide their identity. The question, however, is the focus of this possible joint work. If the focus is on an unrelenting division between minorities and the majority, will identity politics continue to polarise politics?

2.4 Summary

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Democratic Party gradually made minority groups an important part of their policies. The civil rights movement came at a time when it was politically advantageous to support their claims, and they therefore gained equal rights relatively quickly. Getting immediate results from their new policies, the Democratic Party met support from voters and benefited largely from this policy for a while. Towards the end of the 1960s, however, both voters and minority groups turned against them, some claiming they abused their powers, others claiming they did too little. The Democratic Party struggled as African Americans gained growing independence and self-determination. The black civil rights movement inspired other minority groups, as for example second-wave feminists and the gay liberation movement. Both these groups were for a long time seen as too different from 'ordinary men' to gain equal rights. After a while, however, the Democratic Party slowly included these groups into their platforms and rhetoric.

¹⁶¹ Kenji Yoshino, 'Covering: the Gay Rights Movement and the American Civil Rights Paradigm', *Yale Law Journal*, (Jan 2001), Vol.111 (4), 779.

¹⁶² Robert Samuels, 'Pete Buttigieg says being gay helps him relate to the black struggle. Some reject that notion', *The Washington Post*, last modified Nov. 28, 2019: https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/pete-buttigieg-says-being-gay-helps-him-relate-to-the-black-struggle-some-reject-that-notion/2019/11/27/a29b48ec-113a-11ea-b0fc-62cc38411ebb_story.html

¹⁶³ Samuels, 'Pete Buttigieg says being gay helps him relate to the black struggle'

Many Democrats had worked hard to implement equal rights for minority groups, and the logical next step seemed to be equal opportunity. At the same time, the most pressing issues in society for minority groups and whites alike were poverty, city slums and discrimination. While the party's smaller pressure groups fought each other, however, much of the power to deal with these demanding issues diminished. The Democratic Party was stuck in a vicious circle: to win elections, they needed the support of minority groups, and to get this support, the party had to give these groups ever-more power and attention, leading to even less power to deal with over-arching problems of poverty, discrimination and slums. Identity politics had taken hold of the Democratic Party, and it did not seem to lift its claw for a while yet.

Mark Lilla professes that during the 1970s and 1980s there was a shift of perspective within the various movements, from a focus on relatively large minority groups and their relationship to American society, to a focus on smaller, self-defined minority groups and their relationship to each other.¹⁶⁴ The former 'did not question the legitimacy of the American system; they just wanted it to live up to its principles and respect its procedures'.¹⁶⁵ The latter, however, began seeing movement politics as an alternative to institutional politics, and some began to see movement politics as more legitimate.¹⁶⁶ Many minority groups did not want to accept the majority's definitions of society anymore, and demanded respect for their own unique culture and ways of living. The effect, however, was that during the 1980s, large groups transformed into increasingly narrow groups, excluding more than including, and in this way, both conservatives and liberals started pursuing 'individualistic ideologies intrinsically incapable of discerning the common good and drawing the country together'.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 66-67.

¹⁶⁵ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 108-109.

¹⁶⁶ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 109.

¹⁶⁷ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 99.

Chapter 3 – Identity Politics Today

Thus far we identified a typology of political ideas and rhetoric: identity politics, tribalism and calls for collective action. Identity politics is politics and rhetoric aimed at minority groups such as homosexuals, African Americans, women, etc. It addresses these groups differently from the majority by pointing out their differences, either in terms of past or present sufferings or in terms of uniqueness. When politicians argue with lived experience, they also use identity politics. Tribalism has been defined as rhetoric focusing on the political wings, and thereby polarising the electorate. An example of tribal rhetoric is for example focusing on relatively marginal issues that harden the fronts instead of focusing on broad issues that are important to most of the electorate. Tribal rhetoric does not necessarily try to appeal to certain minority groups but is characterised by being confrontational towards opponents. According to *More in Common*, members of the wing ‘tribes’ are usually less practical and more ideological than ‘the Exhausted Majority’ and thus create a sense of fatigue among the general electorate. As both tribalism and identity politics are polarising forms of rhetoric, a combination of the two can be off-putting for the general electorate, potentially leading to lower voter turnout. Calls for collective action, on the other hand, is defined as rhetoric that is trying to build bridges between the electorate’s differences. Calls for collective action can also be rhetoric focusing on citizenship and equal rights for all citizens. This chapter will give an overview of rhetoric linked to both identity politics, tribalism and collective action in the 2016 and 2020 campaigns commonly used by individual Democratic presidential candidates. It will do so by examining the Democratic Party’s nomination debates in 2015 and 2019, as well as in February 2016 and February 2020. In addition, it will analyse stump speeches given by some of the Democratic presidential candidates in both elections. Finally, there will be a comparison between the candidates’ use of identity politics in the 2016 and 2020 Democratic primaries.

Differing conditions should be acknowledged before attempting a comparison of the 2016 and 2020 campaigns for the Democratic nomination. Firstly, there were only five Democratic presidential candidates in the 2016 primaries, while there were more than 25 different candidates in the 2020 process. Second, we already know the results of the 2016 primaries and election, while it was not until April 2020, when Bernie Sanders withdrew from the race, that Joe Biden became the Democratic Party’s presumptive nominee. Third, although the critique of Hillary Clinton stemmed from her losing the general election in 2016, it is unfortunately beyond the focus of this thesis to analyse how identity politics is going to affect the election of president in 2020, as the general election is still months ahead. Forth, the

situation in the Republican Party is different. In 2016, few believed that Trump would end up as the nominee, while in 2020, most Democratic candidates assume that the sitting president will be their opponent, and their rhetoric is shaped by this knowledge.

3.1 The Role of Identity Politics in the 2016 Campaign

The Democratic Party's first presidential debate prior to the 2016 election was televised on October 13, 2015 and had the most viewers of all the Democratic Party presidential debates in that nominating process. To qualify for the debate, the candidates had to achieve an average of at least 1% in three (recognised) national polls and file a statement of candidacy with the Federal Election Commission. As we know, Hillary R. Clinton became the Democratic nominee after the Democratic National Convention, and thus made history by being the first woman capturing a major party's nomination. In addition to Clinton, four other candidates qualified to attend the October 13 debate. These were Bernie Sanders, Martin J. O'Malley, Lincoln D. Chafee and James H. Webb Jr.

Hillary Clinton was the first Democrat to announce her candidacy in April 2015. This was her second attempt to become the Democratic nominee, after her unsuccessful run in 2008 when President Barack H. Obama won the Democratic nomination and the presidency. According to Amy Chozick, Clinton downplayed gender in the 2008 election and tried to show that 'she was tough enough to be president'.¹⁶⁸ In the 2016 election, however, she changed her tactics, highlighted the fact that she is a grandmother and 'trumpet her chance to make history'.¹⁶⁹ One of her slogans, 'I'm with her', plainly signalises her focus.

Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) officially announced that he was running as a Democratic presidential candidate in May 2015. In his 36-minute announcement, he said that his candidacy marked the beginning of 'a political revolution'.¹⁷⁰ He highlighted the fact that he had run outside the two-party system before, and that he had defeated both Democrats and Republicans. Even though he had never been a registered Democrat, his opinions fit with the Democratic left, and as many potential Democratic voters found Clinton to be too moderate,

¹⁶⁸ Amy Chozick. 'Hillary Clinton announces 2016 presidential bid', The New York Times. Last modified April 12, 2015: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/13/us/politics/hillary-clinton-2016-presidential-campaign.html>

¹⁶⁹ Amy Chozick. 'Hillary Clinton announces 2016 presidential bid'.

¹⁷⁰ Bob Kinzel. 'Sanders Calls Political Revolution Campaign Kickoff', Vermont Public Radio. Last modified May 27, 2015: https://www.vpr.org/post/sanders-calls-political-revolution-campaign-kickoff?_ga=2.125211458.993495368.1573208704-1411454979.1573208700#stream/0

his supporters believed he had a good chance of winning.¹⁷¹ Sanders only accepted his loss after Clinton's victory in the National Convention in July 2016.

As we saw in chapter 1, Sides et al argue that the rise of attention on identity politics in the 2016 election was heavily influenced by the candidates' focus on identity issues. While Trump focused on 'racially charged issues', Clinton 'fashioned her campaign as a direct rebuke of Trump'.¹⁷² On issues such as civil rights, immigration and policing, Clinton took 'sharply different positions' from Trump.¹⁷³ She also emphasised the fact that she ran as the first woman presidential candidate and accused Trump of mistreatment of women. By focusing their campaigns around emotional issues such as race, immigration and gender, Trump and Clinton increased the feeling of partisanship in the electorate, effectively polarising voters 'in terms of party – which is virtually inevitable – but also in terms of other group identities'.¹⁷⁴

3.1.1 The October Debate 2015

The Democratic presidential debate in October 2015 was the first of nine debates.¹⁷⁵ The three Democratic presidential candidates who qualified for the debate in addition to Clinton and Sanders were Martin O'Malley, Jim Webb and Lincoln Chafee.

Governor Martin O'Malley announced his candidacy for the presidency at the end of May 2015, in Baltimore, MD where he used to be mayor before he was elected governor. His call 'to rebuild the truth of the American Dream for all Americans' was combined with attacks on both Republican candidate Jeb Bush and fellow Democrat Hillary Clinton.¹⁷⁶ After disappointing results in the Iowa caucus, O'Malley withdrew from the race in February 2016.

Early in June 2015, Lincoln D. Chafee announced that he too wanted to run for office. The former Republican and independent governor was, according to Time's reporter Ryan Beckwith, the most unlikely candidate of the 2016 race considering his low national name recognition and low approval rate even in his own state. Some of Chafee's key issues were a

¹⁷¹ Dan Merica, 'Bernie Sanders Announces Presidential Run', CNN Politics. Last modified April 30, 2015:

<https://edition.cnn.com/2015/04/29/politics/bernie-sanders-announces-presidential-run/index.html>

¹⁷² John Sides, Michael Tesler and Lynn Vavreck, *Identity Crisis – the Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America*. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), 5-6.

¹⁷³ Sides, Tesler and Vavreck, *Identity Crisis*, 6.

¹⁷⁴ Sides, Tesler and Vavreck, *Identity Crisis*, 11.

¹⁷⁵ All quotes and paraphrases in this section are from the full transcript of the October debate, New York Times, Oct 14, 2015: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/14/us/politics/democratic-debate-transcript.html>

¹⁷⁶ Streitfeld, Rachel and Lee, MJ. CNN Politics, May 30, 2015:

<https://edition.cnn.com/2015/05/30/politics/martin-omalley-2016-presidential-announcement/index.html>

more humane foreign policy and moving the USA to the metric system.¹⁷⁷ Chafee left the race a few weeks after the first Democratic debate.

James H. Webb Jr. announced his candidacy early in July 2015. According to Rachel Weiner, Webb had ‘little national name recognition and scant financial support’.¹⁷⁸ However, the fact that Webb was a conservative Democrat ‘in a party that has moved further left in recent years’, was what made him withdraw only a fortnight after the first debate in October 2015.¹⁷⁹ When he withdrew, he highlighted that ‘our candidates are being pulled to the extremes. They are increasingly out of step with the people they are supposed to serve’.¹⁸⁰

Harvard professor Lawrence Lessig announced his candidacy in September 2015 and left it in November the same year, without having qualified for any national debates.

The October debate was the only debate where all the five major candidates participated. This section will look at Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders’ rhetoric in the October debate and analyse their use of polarising forms of rhetoric, such as tribalism and identity politics, and their calls for collective action. The other candidates will also be referenced, but mostly to show context and to compare their statements to Clinton and Sanders’.

In the debate, Clinton repeatedly focused on women, motherhood and her status as the first female presidential candidate. When the candidates were asked how their presidency would be different from Obama’s, Webb for example focused on working with both parties in Congress ‘instead of allowing these divisions to continue to paralyze what we’re doing’, which is a typical call for collective action. Clinton, however, said that ‘I think being the first woman president would be quite a change from the presidents we’ve had up until this point, including President Obama’. When answering questions about being an insider, she said, ‘Well, I can’t think of anything more of an outsider than electing the first woman president’, and ‘I’m running because I have a lifetime of experience in getting results and fighting for people, fighting for kids, for women, for families, fighting to even the odds’. Clinton focused on women when answering questions about social security too. When the topic was paid family leave, she told a story about when she was a young mother ‘having a baby wake up who was sick and I’m supposed to be in court, because I was practicing law. I know what it’s

¹⁷⁷ Beckwith, Ryan. Time, June 2, 2015: <https://time.com/3907731/lincoln-chafee-announces-presidential-run/>

¹⁷⁸ Weiner, Rachel. Washington Post, July 2, 2015: https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/jim-webb-announces-2016-presidential-bid/2015/07/02/92ec7168-20e5-11e5-84d5-eb37ee8eaa61_story.html

¹⁷⁹ Taylor, Jessica. NPR, October 20, 2015: <https://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/10/20/450239642/jim-webb-ends-his-presidential-campaign>

¹⁸⁰ Taylor, Jessica. NPR, October 20, 2015: <https://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2015/10/20/450239642/jim-webb-ends-his-presidential-campaign>

like. And I think we need to recognize the incredible challenges that so many parents face, particularly working moms'. These are all examples of identity politics, framing victimhood for one minority group, rather than focusing on all citizens. In this last quote, Clinton also argued with *lived experience*, making it hard for the other candidates to challenge her, because she was the only one in the panel with the experience of being a working mother. One could argue that these examples of Clinton's rhetoric are mere expressions of trying to show compassion for the struggles and hardships that women face. By using her lived experience as an example of women's hardships, many people would probably be touched, and some would probably also see themselves in her story. However, this focus might be strengthening group identity and feeling of victimisation among some women, while both women and men who do not identify with these descriptions will be pushed away from her.

In a presidential debate, specific issues attract specific rhetoric and those relating to African Americans were no exception. When the candidates in the October debate were asked the polarising question 'do black lives matter, or do all lives matter?', Bernie Sanders answered 'black lives matter' without hesitation. He elaborated his answer by explaining that black lives matter because of African Americans' unique history of suffering under slavery, the Jim Crow system, and because of the real fear of police violence in the USA today. By contrast, James Webb said that every life in this country matters. Although Webb called for collective action by saying that all lives matter, he also pointed out that he has a long record of working for equal treatment of African Americans, and when asked about immigration he talked at length about his wife's experiences being an immigrant and a refugee from Vietnam. All these answers can therefore be labelled identity politics, as they are pitting minority groups' needs against other people's needs and pointing out their difficult past and present. Clinton did not answer the question specifically but said that we need to go further than reforming the criminal justice system. As we have seen, Mark Lilla believes that many minority groups have valid issues to raise, but that it is counterproductive to single them out. He recommends highlighting progress and unity in order to achieve equality for all groups in society.

Many candidates in the October debate were tempted to use tribal rhetoric by condemning the candidates participating in the Republican nomination process and their views. It seemed like the Democratic candidates used tribal rhetoric primarily to show their distance to Republicans, and thereby unite Democrats. O'Malley underlined that all the Democratic candidates were better equipped to govern the country than any of the Republican candidates were, saying that, 'on this stage, you didn't hear anyone denigrate women, you

didn't hear anyone make racist comments about new American immigrants, you didn't hear anyone speak ill of another American because of their religious belief'. Clinton did also use this tactic when saying that, 'I think what you did see is that, in this debate, we tried to deal with some of the very tough issues facing our country. That's in stark contrast to the Republicans who are currently running for president'. Many of the candidates also returned to tribalism when the host asked questions designed to create division. An example of this was when the host asked, 'Which enemy are you the proudest of?' and Clinton answered, 'probably the Republicans', pushing Republican voters further away from her and the Democratic Party. Sanders, however, chose 'Wall Street and the pharmaceutical industry', strengthening his focus throughout the debate on fighting income inequality rather than on identity politics. While tribalism can probably be an effective means to win primaries, as it is a way for Democrats to feel united against a common enemy, chapter 1 has shown that many people become politically exhausted by tribal rhetoric, and this kind of rhetoric might be pushing those who are politically detached further away from the party.

As we saw in chapter 1, *More in Common* argues that tribal rhetoric exhausts people by emphasising political conflict, making them less politically engaged. Tribal rhetoric coupled with identity politics could have a double negative effect, as tribalism exhausts the electorate while identity politics splits people into narrow groups. Minority groups' core undertaking is to improve their own rights, and they thus make arguments to achieve that. This identity politics of special interest can therefore lead to even more tribal rhetoric, as debates revolve around relatively small issues. An example of this can be seen in the identity debate about transgendered people's plea to be able to use whichever bathroom they want. For the transgendered community, this has been an important issue, while others feared that it prevented politicians to take care of other pressing issues. When David Betras, chairman of the Mahoning county Democratic Party, explained why former Democratic voters chose to vote for Trump in 2016, he said that 'The people here thought — wrongly — the national Democratic Party cared more about where someone went to the bathroom than whether or not these people had a job'. Thus, some specific identity issues felt minor and even unnecessary or counterproductive to Average Joe.¹⁸¹

Most of the candidates in the October debate also called for collective action on several occasions. Sanders explained that, 'the only way we can get things done is by having

¹⁸¹ David Betras, cited by Asma Khalid in 'Democrats Try to Find a Future Post-Obama', NPR. Last modified January 24, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/01/24/511246837/democrats-try-to-find-a-future-post-obama-with-fault-lines-around-economics-race>

millions of people coming together'. In his closing statement, he used arguments based on calls for collective action when he said that, 'we should not be the only major country on Earth that does not guarantee health care to all of our people as a right of citizenship'. Webb explained that he would be different from other candidates because he wanted to lead by 'working with both parties in the Congress and working through them in the traditional way that our Constitution sets'. Clinton argued that 'I know how to find common ground and I know how to stand my ground'. Regarding health care, she stressed that 'we agree on the goals, we just disagree on the means'. O'Malley argued that, 'the genius of our nation is that we find ways in every generation to include more of our people more fully in the economic life of our country, and we need to do that for our families, and especially so that women aren't penalized in having to drop out of the workforce'. All these statements can be labelled calls for collective action, as they are all either arguing for increased collaboration between different wings of politics, or, as O'Malley, arguing for equal rights for certain groups based on equal recognition of all groups.

In sum, the October debate 2015 was characterised by unity against the common enemy – Republicans, as well as courtesy to certain minority groups such as African Americans and women. Although many of the candidates called for collective action, none of them were persistent in that call, as all the candidates also talked negatively about groups of people or used identity politics to get their points across. Both Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton used identity politics, tribalism and calls for collective action as rhetorical devices, although Clinton used them more often than Sanders. Latino voters were not a priority in any respect for any of the candidates, as it might seem as though the candidates had not developed a rhetoric specifically aimed at Latino voters. When the host asked Sanders why he left Latino voters 'at the altar', he did not do much to prove him wrong, and he did not mention Latinos himself at any later occasion either. LGBTQ rights was mentioned once by Clinton, but not by any of the other candidates.

3.1.2 The February Debate 2016

As all the other Democratic presidential candidates had withdrawn from the race, there were only two candidates left in February 2016; Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders. The debate was sent from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, February 11, 2016, and being at the beginning of the primaries and with Super Tuesday coming up just two weeks later, the candidates needed

momentum in their campaign. This section will consider the candidates' use of identity politics, tribalism and calls for collective action to achieve that momentum.¹⁸²

In this debate, Clinton's rhetoric was centred around identity politics from the very beginning. While Sanders' opening speech was about his political revolution to crush establishment politics and -economics, Clinton spoke about tackling barriers standing in the way for minorities such as African Americans, immigrants and women.

Sometimes, topics related to identity politics are unavoidable, and after the opening speech, the first half of this debate was a good example of such a situation. The moderators repeatedly asked the candidates about issues related to women and African Americans. When the moderators asked Clinton about her appeal to women voters and the fact that in the New Hampshire primary 55% of the women voters chose Sanders, Clinton answered that she had 'spent her entire adult life working toward making sure that women are empowered to make their own choices', even when that meant not voting for her. She continued explaining that 'we still have some barriers to knock down, which is why that's at the core of my campaign'. Clinton argued that she was not asking people to support her because of her gender, but in the same breath explained how she was proud to be endorsed by women organisations across America. When being asked about how she would ensure that low-income seniors got their basic needs met, she pointed out how she would prioritise women, rather than expand benefits for everyone, because 'women have been disadvantaged' ever since the Social Security Program was started in the 1930s as 'they do not get any credit for their care-taking responsibilities'.

Although Sanders' opening speech focused on his political revolution, he did not avoid identity politics altogether. He mentioned unemployment among African American youth when answering questions about the price of his proposals. On several occasions, Sanders brought up the question of abortion, explaining how he has voted pro-choice his whole life and how Republicans are hypocrites for wanting a small government when it comes to healthcare but still want to control women's choice to have an abortion. He did also mention different minority groups when answering questions about his appeal to women voters, listing 'women, men, straight, gay, African-Americans, Latinos, Asian-Americans', trying to explain how the party tried to bring America together. Technically, mentioning both women and men, he included everyone in the US. However, as many other minorities were

¹⁸² All the quotes and references in this section are from the full transcript of the 2016 February debate, provided by Presidency.ucsb: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/democratic-candidates-debate-milwaukee-wisconsin>

listed, these seemed not to be included among women and men, creating an even bigger feeling of differentness to the minorities mentioned. Sanders' answer was formulated in a way that could give the impression he did not think gays, African Americans, Latinos or Asian Americans automatically were included in the concepts of 'man' and 'woman'. As mentioned, it is difficult to stay away from a rhetoric of identity politics when questions from moderators require a certain focus, but the effect of singling out specific minority groups is the same; a feeling of exclusion, possibly both for members of the minority groups and for parts of the majority who were not mentioned explicitly.

When the moderators asked the candidates questions about African American male incarceration, both candidates argued for a police reform and to change the criminal justice system. They both also brought up systemic racism in other areas, such as in education and employment, and they almost seemed to want to outdo the other in how far they could support African Americans by emphasising their victimhood. Sanders also suggested that Latinos are being incarcerated in unproportionate numbers. When Clinton got yet another question about African Americans, it was about Barack Obama's legacy as a president working for African Americans' rights. Her response was partly what Lilla recommends politicians to talk more about; the advancement that has been made in the area. She argued that 'I think President Obama had set a great example' by initiating the Affordable Care Act and working with black young men and women. She also claimed that the fact that Obama put the issue on the agenda was a step in the right direction. As we remember, Sides et al, however, argued that the more attention identity gets, the more aware the minorities become of their own suffering and uniqueness, leading to polarisation in society. One can thus argue that Obama and Clinton both contributed to increased polarisation due to their focus on minority groups and identity politics.

This debate was coloured by the moderators' relentless questions about racism and sexism, and both Sanders and Clinton swallowed the bait. When one of the moderators said, 'I want to talk about white people', the audience laughed. While the topic seemed to take the candidates too a bit off guard, they both accepted the challenge and explained how the white working class has suffered recent years. Clinton answered that she was 'deeply concerned about what's happening in every community in America, and that includes white communities' and 'there are actually as many, if not more, white communities that are truly being left behind and left out'. Sanders pointed out that 'for white working-class people between 45 and 54, life expectancy is actually going down'. Even though they both also highlighted how white and black communities should stand together in their struggles, by

emphasising the white working class' sufferings, they both contributed in strengthening their victimhood. On the topic of undocumented immigrants, the candidates also seemed to try to outdo each other on fighting for the most progressive immigration reform.

Only midway through the debate did the moderators choose topics not related to minority groups. The rest of the debate was devoted to super PAC's and foreign affairs. In his closing statements, Sanders called for collective action by arguing that nobody can take on injustice alone, it must be done together. Clinton also tried to include everyone but did it in a different way. Her point was that minority groups have been and still are oppressed, and she mentioned the LGBTQ community and people who experience racism and sexism. Her argument was that, 'I don't think our country can live up to its potential unless we give a chance to every single American to live up to theirs'. This attempt at bringing everyone together around a focus on minorities' rights is identity politics, and as we have seen, it does unfortunately not appeal to everyone.

3.1.3 Hillary Clinton's Super Tuesday Victory Speech

In March 2016, Hillary Clinton won seven of the eleven states having their primaries on Super Tuesday. Clinton's Super Tuesday victory speech started off calling for unity and collective action.¹⁸³ Her slogan was 'fighting with us', and she repeatedly said things like, 'America is strong when we're all strong' and, 'trying to divide America between us and them is wrong'. These are calls for collective action, as they speak to everyone. In her relatively short speech, the word 'together' appeared seven times.

After a while, however, she started naming all the different groups of people she wanted to come together. Here, she mentioned both struggling rust belt communities, black children who were exposed to violence, African Americans who were deprived of their voting rights, immigrants who were exploited, workers' rights, women's rights, 'civil rights and voting rights, LGBT rights and rights for people with disabilities'. It must be tempting to mention all these minority groups as it indicates a certain degree of knowledge of people's problems, and she appears compassionate about their struggles. However, it is probably not a good strategy if the focus is to unite all Americans, as a mention of some groups unavoidably will leave others out. Not every African American or person living in a struggling rust belt community might want to be associated with each other, or the other minority groups on her

¹⁸³ All quotes and paraphrases from Clinton's Super Tuesday victory speech are from Vox.com's transcript by Tara Golshan. Last modified March 1, 2016. <https://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11144350/hillary-clinton-super-tuesday-transcript>

list. To be part of a list of victimised groups might not lift a group's self-regard. On the contrary, it might give the group an even larger reason to feel disadvantaged and at odds with society.

Later in Clinton's victory speech, she went back to her rhetoric of collective action, stressing the importance of working together to fight inequality or 'make America whole' and 'fill in what's been hollowed out', as she put it.

To sum up, Clinton's victory speech after Super Tuesday focused less on identity politics and more on collective action. Why? One reason could be that in any speech, as compared to a debate, one can talk virtually undisturbed. Clinton could decide in advance what to say and how to say it, and she was not interrupted by difficult questions. In addition, she did not have to compete for attention among a flock of other candidates. In a victory speech, it is also important to seem unifying. As the party's presumptive nominee, she would want everyone even loosely associated with the Democratic Party to vote for her in the general election.

3.1.4 Bernie Sanders' Stump Speech

In Sanders' stump speech in the summer of 2016, he started by making connections between his own political revolution to other fights 'to create a nation of social and economic justice', and he included the civil rights movement, the union movement, the women's movement, the gay rights movement and the environmental movement.¹⁸⁴ By making these groups stand out, he singled them out from the rest of society. People who were listening to his speech probably agreed that they were great examples of fighters for equal rights that America can learn from. The problem, however, is that this focus on specific groups both would leave some people out of the story and strengthen the groups' feeling of differentness.

Although Sanders' speech started by comparing his own campaign to important historical movements, large parts of the stump speech were in fact calls for collective action, such as, 'this campaign has never been about one single candidate. It is always about transforming America'. He spoke repeatedly about raising the minimum wage and changing prospects for all workers. His terms were generic and including (and quite populist). In Lilla's spirit, he also talked about transforming the Democratic Party to 'develop

¹⁸⁴ All quotes and references to Bernie Sanders' stump speech are from the full transcript at Politico.com. Last modified June 16, 2016. <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/transcript-bernie-sanders-speech-in-burlington-vermont-224465>

organizations that can compete effectively in the future’ by working in every state across the nation, also those ‘which have so long been ignored’.

Nevertheless, also later in the speech, he mentioned both single mothers’ hardships, native Americans, Mexicans and Latinos, Muslims and African Americans. In addition, he talked about pay equity for women, the right to abortion and for homosexuals to get married.

Even though a stump speech by definition is repeatedly delivered, candidates frequently need to change their stump speech if a campaign lasts for a long time. The speech that has been analysed here came late in the campaign, at a point when most people believed he would lose the Democratic nomination. When candidates strive for attention, identity politics and tribalism have proven to be popular crutches, and this might explain why Sanders’ stump speech this summer was more filled with identity politics than before. Although Sanders later criticized Clinton for her focus on identity politics, he seemed to have endorsed it to some extent in this stump speech.

3.1.5 Hillary Clinton’s Stump Speech September 2016

While Clinton’s October and February debates were bursting with rhetoric of identity politics and tribalism, one of her campaign slogans and title of her book was ‘Stronger Together’, which can be seen as a call for collective action. In her stump speech in September 2016, she regularly referred to this slogan and emphasised that change ‘cannot be done by any one person. It must be done by all of us’.¹⁸⁵ She also said that ‘I want to be a president for all Americans, not just some Americans – Democrats, Republicans, independents, every single American. [...] I want to bring this country together’.¹⁸⁶ Her common phrase ‘building an economy that works for everyone, not just those at the top’ can also be termed a call for collective action (as well as a hint of populism). When talking about equal payment for equal work, a topic that is regularly loaded with identity politics such as women’s sufferings, she did not use arguments based on identity, but chose to use unifying phrases instead. Two examples of such phrases are, ‘anyone who is willing to work hard should have enough money to raise a family’ and ‘if you’re doing the job, you deserve to get the pay’. This can be termed calls for collective action, as the focus is on equality for everyone, not on special rights for women. However, with her focus on equality for everyone who works hard, her

¹⁸⁵ Tamara Keith, ‘Inside Hillary Clinton’s Stump Speech, Annotated’. Last modified September 15, 2016.

<https://www.npr.org/2016/09/15/493924325/inside-hillary-clintons-stump-speech-annotated?t=1573117433235>

¹⁸⁶ Keith, ‘Inside Hillary Clinton’s Stump Speech, Annotated’.

statement here can also be labelled classic individualism. When talking about equal rights for minority groups such as women, immigrants, disabled people, homosexuals, etc., she also avoided identity politics and instead incorporated the message into a bigger picture of inclusion of everyone, saying things like ‘So these rights are not for somebody else. We all know somebody – we all know a woman, we all know somebody in a racial or ethnic minority, we all know a worker or a voter, we all know a gay person, and we all know somebody with a disability. These are our rights’. The fact that she talked about the needs of these groups as necessary, because they are just people like everybody else, can defend labelling this statement a call for collective action. However, the fact that she did name specific groups created a focus on these specific groups and their identities. It can thus be termed identity politics.

Nonetheless, when comparing her own positions to those of Donald Trump, signs of tribalism emerged. In her stump speeches, Clinton repeatedly attacked Donald Trump’s negative actions against people with disabilities, women, immigrants and Muslims, and while doing so she claimed that it was either Trump’s way or the American way. As she put it, ‘So, yes, we have a lot of plans, but we also have values, my friends. And we’re going to stand up for American values’, signalling that Trump and his voters did not stand up for first principles of American politics. Although it is necessary to create distance to the opponent in a political election, Clinton might have gone a bit far. By stating that her values were the only valid values, she might have pushed doubters and opponents even further away from her and the Democratic Party, and thus contributed to increased polarisation. Undecided voters are likely to hear this as an attack, regardless of what she said about being ‘a president for all Americans’.

In her speech, Clinton barely used identity politics at all, and one reason might be that this stump speech was from September 2016, almost a year after the October debate. At the Democratic National Convention in July, Bernie Sanders had to admit his defeat, and Clinton was the only Democratic candidate left. After this, she did not have to compete for votes among other liberal candidates who all wanted to attract liberal voters. All their votes were now Clinton’s, at least in theory. Identity politics and tribalism can be efficient ways to get attention and attract liberal voters in the primaries, but during her campaign against Donald Trump, Clinton possibly tried to attract other voters who did not necessarily yearn for identity politics.

3.1.6 Beyond Identity Politics? Reactions and Critiques after the 2016 Election and Democrats' Response to the Critique

Before the 2016 election, the literature on identity politics was not as vast as it is today. However, some political scientists and strategists within the Democratic Party were discussing the pros and cons, and some voiced scepticism about Clinton's candidacy, explaining it as a symptom of identity politics' strong position in the Democratic Party. Political editor Josh Kraushaar argued in 2015 that the only reason why Clinton would probably become the party's nominee was that 'Democrats have become the party of identity', and 'as the first female major-party nominee for president, Clinton hopes to win decisive margins with woman voters'.¹⁸⁷ Although some people voiced their concern, the bulk of literature and opinions on the topic did first come when Clinton lost the presidency to Donald Trump in 2016.

After the unexpected election of Trump, many liberals started viewing Democratic strategies differently. Mark Lilla was one of the critics who for a long time had voiced his disapproval. He wrote the book *The Once and Future Liberal* as 'a frustrated American liberal', whose frustration was aimed at the strategy of identity politics.¹⁸⁸ He believed that this rhetoric 'for decades has prevented liberals from developing an ambitious vision of America and its future that would inspire citizens of every walk of life and in every region of the country'.¹⁸⁹ Lilla claimed that Republicans have managed to show their voters that they have visions for America, while Democrats have spent their time wooing smaller and smaller minority groups. As explained in chapter 1, Lilla believed the only solution for Democrats was to 'offer a vision of our common destiny based on one thing that all Americans, of every background, actually share. And that is citizenship'.¹⁹⁰ Lilla claimed that the American Left had for a long time accentuated the differences among people rather than what we share. According to Lilla, this kind of cultural politics withdrew a lot of energy from electoral politics and created an opportunity for Republicans to win elections and to form the country. Moreover, the Democratic Party has not managed to do anything about Republicans' influence because they are not willing to compromise or cooperate with religious, white, traditional voters. In an opinion piece written in 2016, Lilla argued that one of Clinton's major mistakes was that she called out to 'African American, Latino, L.G.B.T. and women voters at

¹⁸⁷ Josh Kraushaar, 'Democrats have an identity-politics problem', the Atlantic. Last modified April 7, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/04/democrats-have-an-identity-politics-problem/448776/>

¹⁸⁸ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 6.

¹⁸⁹ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 6-7.

¹⁹⁰ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 14-15.

every stop'.¹⁹¹ Although it seems nice to address some groups' problems and uniqueness, the problem is that groups that are not mentioned feel left out. Lilla argued that the white, rural working class was certainly left out of the Democratic rhetoric prior to the 2016 election, resulting in that 'fully two-thirds of white voters without college degrees voted for Donald Trump'.¹⁹²

Others also voiced their concern that significant groups such as uneducated, rural, white voters would be more compelled to vote Republican when Democrats used a rhetoric of identity politics. As we have seen, Jardina argued that identity politics on the political left created what she labelled 'white identity politics' on the right. The number of people who identifies as white has increased, and many of these white identifiers fear that their identity is under threat 'by America's changing social dynamics'.¹⁹³

Democrats responded in different ways to the voices that claimed that identity politics injured their party. One of the important voices against identity politics was Bernie Sanders himself, who in November 2016 branded identity politics as the Democratic Party's major problem.¹⁹⁴ Although he wanted more women and racial minorities in the Senate, he explained that it would not be enough in itself to be a woman or racial minority. He stated that, 'what we need is a woman who has the guts to stand up to Wall Street, to the insurance companies, to the drug companies, to the fossil fuel industry', and that the Democratic Party needed to 'go beyond identity politics'.¹⁹⁵

On the other hand, an important reason why Democrats started focusing on identity politics in the first place was to attract voters from minority groups. The question was; does identity politics push potential voters away from the party or is it crucial to keep identity voters within the party? Some people believed that Democrats should continue to woo different minority groups, as 'people bothered by that kind of talk are already Republicans'.¹⁹⁶ Christopher Stout, Professor of Political Science, argued that Democratic candidates *should* talk about fighting racial inequality, as it appeals to people of colour. He believed that identity

¹⁹¹ Mark Lilla, 'The end of identity liberalism', NY Times. Last modified November 18, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html>

¹⁹² Mark Lilla, 'The end of identity liberalism', NY Times. Last modified November 18, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/opinion/sunday/the-end-of-identity-liberalism.html>

¹⁹³ Jardina, *White Identity Politics*, 9.

¹⁹⁴ Jeff Stein, 'Bernie Sanders: "It is not good enough for someone to say, "I'm a woman, vote for me!"', Vox. Last modified November 21, 2016. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/11/21/13699956/sanders-clinton-democratic-party>

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Christopher Stout, cited by Perry Bacon Jr. 'Why Identity Politics Could be Good Politics for Democrats in 2020'. FiveThirtyEight. Last modified April 2, 2019. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-identity-politics-could-be-good-politics-for-democrats-in-2020/>

politics could be used successfully to achieve higher voter turnout and attract voters of colour and people with higher education to the Democratic Party. Democratic candidate in the 2020 primaries Kamala Harries argued that African Americans are the backbone of the Democratic Party, and candidate Julian Castro said that ‘we need to nominate a candidate who can appeal to the African-American and Latino communities’.¹⁹⁷ According to Pew Research Centre, Democratic voters are now more diverse than before. Demographically, the Democratic Party is changing more quickly than the Republican Party. With 39% of the voters being ‘black, Hispanic, Asian-American or of another race’, it is obvious that the Democratic Party has managed to attract voters to reflect the demographic changes in the nation in a better way than the Republican Party whose votes are 83% white non-Hispanics.¹⁹⁸

Guardian columnist Nesrine Malik agreed with Castro and Harries that identity politics might be a fruitful strategy for the Democratic Party. Using a new definition of identity politics, also seen in Jardina’s work, she believed identity politics worked for Trump, and that it therefore would work for the Democratic Party too. She argued that during the 2016 election, the Democrats used a ‘when they go low we go high’ approach that did not work.¹⁹⁹ She believed Democrats should ‘get down and dirty’ in their identity politics rhetoric.²⁰⁰ The question is, however, would it be possible to beat Trump in his own game? His rhetoric is filled with hatred towards illegal immigrants, mockery of women and drastic solutions.²⁰¹ Political strategist and pollster Brad Bannon believed that Trump’s rhetoric in fact serves the Democratic Party by being too extreme for a majority of the American people. In line with this view, the Democratic Party would lose voters by trying to exceed Trump’s rhetoric. Identity politics on the political left can therefore never be as confrontational and sensational as Trump without losing touch with large voter groups.

According to NPR journalist Asma Khalid, identity politics is a successful strategy for Democratic candidates in the primaries. The question is, however, ‘what it would mean in a general election’.²⁰² She believed that candidates who slip when ‘navigating racial

¹⁹⁷ David Siders, ‘To defeat Trump, Dems rethink the Obama coalition formula’, Politico. Last modified January 25, 2019. <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/11/25/race-identity-democrats-2020-electability-072959>

¹⁹⁸ Oliphant, ‘6 Facts about Democrats in 2019’.

¹⁹⁹ Nesrine Malik, ‘To beat Trump, Democrats will need to get down and dirty’, The Guardian. Last modified August 26, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/26/trump-2020-democrats-identity-politics>

²⁰⁰ Malik, ‘To beat Trump, Democrats will need to get down and dirty’,

²⁰¹ Brad Bannon, ‘identity politics will trump race-baiting in 2020’, The Hill. Last modified July 21, 2019. <https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/454047-identity-politics-will-trump-race-baiting-in-2020>

²⁰² Asma Khalid, ‘Democrats Can’t Avoid Identity Politics in 2020’, NPR. Last modified December 20, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/20/673937768/democrats-cant-avoid-identity-politics-in-2020>

conversations' might flop in a Democratic primary, and she explained how Democratic candidates lately have emphasised race to a larger extent than before. Quoting conservative pollster Frank Luntz, she asserted that at the same time, identity politics is dangerous for society, as it is 'effectively destroying the unity in the country'.²⁰³ When minority groups emphasise their uniqueness and victimhood, they 'in essence declare war on other groups'.²⁰⁴ Clinton's politics of gender got her through the primaries, but one of the reasons why she lost the presidency was that she could not carry the male vote in the general election. Although she fared well with ethnic minorities and women, Trump had a 12-point margin advantage among men and even won by 2 percentage points among white women.²⁰⁵ Thus, Clinton's victory in the primaries could have been due to her focus on identity, while this focus might have been her downfall in the general election as men, and even most white women, probably felt pushed away from her and the Democratic Party. During her stump speech in September, her absence of identity rhetoric might have been an attempt at pulling these voters in. As we have seen, it was not enough for her to win the presidency.

3.2 The Role of Identity Politics in the 2020 Campaign

The Democratic presidential nomination process prior to the 2020 election turned out to be quite different from the process prior to the 2016 election. The field was crowded, with more than 25 presidential candidates competing. As we have seen, Democrats and scholars alike disagree whether identity politics is the right strategy to use when trying to win an election. Regardless of what people believe is the strategically best choice for the Democratic Party, a vast majority of the scholars who have studied the issue, believe that identity politics increases polarisation in *society*. A Democrat running for president in the United States could be expected to care about the degree of polarisation in his or her country; yet, the immediate prospects of winning votes over other Democrats in the long primaries must also be tempting. As we saw in chapter 2, presidents in the past have pursued legislation they support when it seems politically advantageous. For a long time, identity politics seemed like the right choice to gain votes from minority groups. After the devastating loss in the 2016 election, however, Democrats have been challenged to think differently. This section of the thesis will look at

²⁰³ Frank Luntz, cited in Khalid, 'Democrats Can't Avoid Identity Politics in 2020'

²⁰⁴ Frank Luntz, cited in Khalid, 'Democrats Can't Avoid Identity Politics in 2020'

²⁰⁵ Alec Tyson and Shiva Maniam, 'Behind Trump's victory: Divisions by race, gender, education', Pew Research Center. Last modified November 9, 2016. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/behind-trumps-victory-divisions-by-race-gender-education/>

how far the candidates have come in changing their rhetoric, if they have chosen to change it at all.

3.2.1 The October Debate 2019

The Democratic presidential debate in October 2019 was the largest presidential primary debate ever with twelve candidates. The qualifications to attend were to have required a minimum of 2% nationally in four approved polls and to have a minimum of 130,000 individual donors by October 1, 2019. To compare this debate to the October 2015 debate is difficult, as they were very different. While the October 2015 debate had five candidates and two of them quit the race immediately after the debate, most of the twelve candidates in the October 2019 debate continued in the race several months after the debate. While the 2015 debate was the first debate of that nomination process, the 2019 debate was the fourth. However, both debates were important in the race, as the 2015 was the first, and the 2019 was the biggest with most candidates competing for attention. They were also both early in the nomination process, meaning that the rhetoric might be comparable. However, as the 2019 debate had so many candidates, it was probably more important for each candidate to stand out from the pack.

The twelve candidates who qualified for the debate were Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, Joe Biden, Pete Buttigieg, Kamala Harris, Tulsi Gabbard, Tom Steyer, Andrew Yang, Beto O'Rourke, Julian Castro, Cory Booker, and Amy Klobuchar. Just as in the Democratic presidential debates prior to the 2016 election, the candidates used different rhetoric related to different topics. Both identity politics, calls for collective action and tribalism were used by the candidates. Analysis of the fourth Democratic presidential debate shows that some of the Democrats still used identity politics actively. However, many of them also called for collective action, either by promoting unity among all Democrats or all Americans, sometimes emphasising that citizenship is what unites them. This was the case when Cory Booker supported Kamala Harris in her argument about women's reproductive health care. Booker argued that 'Women should not be the only ones taking up this cause and this fight. It is not just because women are our daughters and our friends and our wives. It's because women are people. And people deserve to control their own bodies'.²⁰⁶ Women's

²⁰⁶ All the quotes from the Democratic Debate October 2019 are from the full transcript provided by the Washington Post. Last modified October 16, 2019.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/10/15/october-democratic-debate-transcript/>

reproductive health has been a polarising issue for many years, and maybe not surprisingly, some candidates hung on to the old lines of division.

Senator Kamala Harris said that ‘the reality is that while we still have -- as I said earlier -- these state legislators who are outdated and out of touch, mostly men who are telling women what to do with their bodies, then there needs to be accountability and consequence’. She was here branding people opposed to abortion ‘outdated’ and ‘out of touch’ and asserting women’s selfhood rests on overcoming social obligations and exercising individual choice, which might have had the effect of pushing away more conservative voters who are concerned with social cohesion. Harris emphasised women’s lived experience and the inappropriateness of men having opinions about anything that concerns women. A different way to frame this can be seen in Senator Cory Booker’s comment. He stated that ‘it is an assault on the most fundamental ideal that human beings should control their own body’. Booker here argued from the position of universal rights by pointing out that women are humans and should have the same rights as other humans (i.e. men). It is natural that the case of women’s reproductive health care would come up in a debate like this, as it is an important issue with strong opinions on both sides. However, Harris’ focus on lived experience and choosing to discuss that specific aspect of health care over all the other issues related to health care shows us where her concerns are and maybe who she wants to woo. This can therefore be labelled identity politics.

On other topics, too, Kamala Harris repeatedly used identity politics in her argumentation. When chipping in on the topic of gun legislation, her argument was that ‘the leading cause of death of young black men in America is gun violence’. She also emphasised the fact that she was the first woman attorney general of California and the second black woman elected to the United States Senate.

Although Cory Booker called for collective action in the example above, he also emphasised the different identities present on the stage. He said that ‘the fact that there’s an openly gay man, a black woman, all of us on the stage are here because we in the past are all inheritors of a legacy of common struggle and common purpose’. He followed up this statement by explaining that ‘the next leader is going to have to be one amongst us Democrats that can unite us all’, although he himself frequently focused on the differences.

Joe Biden did not use identity politics in his argumentation during the October debate. Whether talking about gun legislation, health care, or any other issue, he did not talk about minority groups in favour of other groups. When asked specifically about women’s reproductive rights, he answered that ‘reproductive rights are a constitutional right. And, in

fact, every woman should have that right'. This must be defined as a call for collective action, as he emphasised how women should have rights that are manifested by the constitution.

Elizabeth Warren mentioned historically black colleges and universities when talking about her priorities for a prospective presidential period. Apart from that, her rhetoric was not characterised by identity politics.

Although all the candidates agreed Donald Trump was a corrupt liar with poor judgement who was dangerous for America's position in the world, in the October 15 debate, they did not speak negatively about groups of people, Trump voters or each other. Andrew Yang even had a moment where he said: 'How did we get here? The fact is we were falling apart at home, so we voted in Donald Trump'.²⁰⁷ This can be seen as a call for collective action, an attempt to bring Americans together again after the polarising election in 2016. Even though there were many candidates participating in the debate, all competing for attention, identity politics was not what mainly characterised the debate, apart from Harris' part.

3.2.2 The February Debate 2020

In the Democratic presidential debate 25 February 2020, there were seven candidates: Elizabeth Warren, Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders, Tom Steyer, Amy Klobuchar, Pete Buttigieg, and Michael Bloomberg. This was the last Democratic debate on national TV before Super Tuesday.²⁰⁸ In the days after the debate, several of the candidates decided to withdraw from the race. When Buttigieg, Klobuchar and Bloomberg withdrew, they all chose to endorse Biden. Even though Warren had not yet decided whom to endorse, 50 of her former staffers chose to endorse Sanders in an open letter in March 2020.²⁰⁹ The February debate is comparable to the October 2015 debate because they were both the last debates where several candidates met on national TV. Because debates in February are much closer to the primary elections, one might expect the rhetoric to be more polarising and more filled with identity politics than in October debates.

In the February 2020 debate, the candidates also used a mix of the rhetorics of identity politics, tribalism and calls for collective action. Just like in the October 2019 debate, the

²⁰⁷ 'October Democratic Debate Transcript'.

²⁰⁸ All the quotes from the Democratic Debate February 2020 are from the full transcript provided by CBS News. Last modified February 25, 2020. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/south-carolina-democratic-debate-full-transcript-text/>

²⁰⁹ Zack Budryk, 'Ex-Warren staffers endorse Sanders', The Hill. Last modified March 10, 2020. <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/486940-ex-warren-staffers-endorse-sanders>

candidates were very critical of President Donald Trump, as when Tom Steyer said that, ‘Donald Trump stinks. He’s incompetent’. By throwing derisive terms at his opponent like this, Steyer and the other candidates resorted to the polarising rhetoric, which in this thesis is referred to as tribalism. As anticipated, the candidates in the February debate were much harsher with each other compared to the October debate few months earlier. When Bloomberg, Buttigieg and Klobuchar discussed Bloomberg’s ‘stop and frisk’ policies as mayor in NY City, both Buttigieg and Klobuchar labelled the policy as ‘racist’. This is an example of polarising rhetoric, only this time targeting fellow Democrats. Bloomberg apologised that he ‘let it get out of control’. Warren was also harsh in her criticism against Bloomberg, accusing him of discrimination against women. Warren said that Bloomberg previously had helped re-elect right-wing senators from the Republican Party against women candidates. She also accused him of forcing women employees to sign nondisclosure agreements, allegedly keeping discrimination based on sex away from the public eye. Bloomberg rejected Warren’s account and claimed he had already released the women from the nondisclosures. Moreover, he accused Warren of being too critical, stating that ‘the trouble is with this Senator, enough is never enough’.

Several of the candidates used identity politics in their argumentation. Buttigieg said that he was ‘conscious of the fact that there are seven White people on this stage talking about racial justice’, and he continued to explain that none of them have the lived experience of being judged and regarded dangerous, just because of the colour of their skin. He proceeded by talking about hardships that African Americans must endure just because they are black. This is identity politics, both focusing on hardships for specific groups and lived experience. Bloomberg did not want to miss the opportunity to reach out to African American voters and said that ‘Wait a second. I know that if I were Black, my success would have been a lot harder to achieve. And I know a lot of Black people that if they were White, it would’ve been a lot easier for them’. Here he points to the victimisation of African Americans, and even though everything he said might be true, Lilla and others have shown how this identity politics create feelings of distance between minorities in society, making it harder to agree on important issues for every citizen.

When talking about housing, Warren called attention to redlining and discrimination against African Americans in the past. While Klobuchar called for collective action and talked about the importance of building coalitions between different parts of the country to get things done, Warren persisted that ‘we need to talk about race’. She added, ‘we can no longer pretend that everything is race neutral’. On this topic too,

she attacked Bloomberg, accusing him of ‘blaming the housing crash of 2008 on African Americans and Latinos’. Bloomberg, on the other hand, argued against her, stressing that in order to build affordable housing, it is important to ‘learn how to work with both sides of the aisle’. Bloomberg did not strike any counterattacks on Warren, but instead went for a call for collective action. He emphasised his experiences as a mayor who managed to work with different parts of the political spectrum: ‘I did it in New York City. I got the Republican State Senate to vote for gay marriage, virtually before anybody else in this country. You can work across the aisle. You just have to know how to deal with people’. Warren’s focus on African Americans and women are good examples of identity politics, as she emphasised inequality and differences between races and sexes. Mentioning specific groups like Bloomberg did can also be labelled identity politics as it leaves other minority groups out, although he at the same time called for collective action by pointing to his experiences of working across the aisle.

When Biden was asked what he wanted to do to ensure racial equity, he answered in generic terms. His propositions were mostly directed to all poor people, not emphasising African Americans to a larger extent than other groups. When mentioning African Americans, he included them in a bigger picture, such as: ‘we double the amount of money that is available for young entrepreneurs, and black entrepreneurs are as successful as any other group of people in the country’. This way of talking about a minority group is not identity politics, as it highlights how the group is similar to everyone else, not how it stands out.

Even though Sanders during the debate seldom specified injustices against minorities, he did mention some, for example when talking about legalising marijuana. ‘I’ll tell you what else we’re going to do, we’re going to provide help to the African American, Latino, Native American community to start businesses, to sell legal marijuana’. When mentioning some groups, he inevitably leaves others out. He also turned to identity politics in his closing speech, saying that, ‘we don’t need more people in jail, disproportionately African American, than any other country on earth’, and, ‘If we can bring people together, black and white and Latino, we can create a nation’.

3.2.3 Pete Buttigieg and Elizabeth Warren’s Stump Speeches

In his stump speeches, Buttigieg tried to call for unity, but he sometimes did so by bringing his fellow Democrat, Bernie Sanders, down. When he in January 2020 said that, ‘if you think the last four years has been chaotic, divisive, toxic, exhausting, imagine spending the

better part of 2020 with Bernie Sanders versus Donald Trump', he compared Sanders to Trump, saying they are equally polarising.²¹⁰ This is an example of tribalism.

Although some parts of Pete Buttigieg's stump speech were polarising, it was also a call for collective action. He asked his audience to picture the day Donald Trump was no longer in the White House, and continued by explaining that when this happens, America will be even more divided than before. He talked against hate in all forms, and especially against racial minorities, and explained that because the country consists of people, real patriotism means to accept every person in the country. In most campaigns in the USA, the candidate's spouse is a visible and important part of the campaign. As Buttigieg is married to a man, it was almost inevitable that he drew attention to gay rights. However, this was not Buttigieg's focus, and when he did mention his husband, he emphasised that he was a teacher, calling out to all teachers, showing that he was compassionate about their work and struggles.

Elizabeth Warren's stump speech in January 2020 was short, as Warren had shortened it during the campaign in order to make room for more questions from the audience. The stump speech was centred around her life story, from growing up wanting to become a public school teacher, through twists and turns, ending up practicing law and becoming a politician.²¹¹ According to journalist Astead W. Herndon, Warren structured her speech around her own life, both so people could get to know her, but also to 'correct how she is frequently cast: an out-of-touch Harvard elitist'.²¹² He believed Warren's speech tried to show potential voters how she really is 'a person rising from a working-class upbringing in Middle America'.²¹³ The focus on her desire to become a teacher was a shout out to teachers, an important part of the electorate, and her story about not being hired because she was visibly pregnant acted as a focus on pregnancy discrimination.

3.2.4 Identity Politics in Other Parts of the 2020 Campaign

Whether a presidential campaign is characterised by identity politics or not is of course not only apparent through debates and stump speeches, as the candidates' campaigns contain interviews, opinion pieces, meetings with voters, etc. The two next sections reflect some of these important aspects of the campaigns.

²¹⁰ All quotes and references to Buttigieg's stump speeches are from: <https://thepetechannel.com/stump-speeches>

²¹¹ Transcript of Elizabeth Warren's stump speech, annotated by Astead W. Herndon. Last modified January 30, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/01/31/us/politics/elizabeth-warren-campaign-speech.html>

²¹² Ibid

²¹³ Ibid

During American elections, exit polls showing voter turnout for different groups are common. Journalists analyse how well the candidates do with minority groups such as women, Latinos, African Americans, gays, etc. After the 2016 process, it was emphasised repeatedly by the media how Sanders must do better with both Latinos and African Americans to be able to win the nomination in 2020, and this can have affected his campaign and rhetoric. While Sanders in the 2016 nomination process seldom mentioned specific minority groups, and even criticised Clinton's usage of identity politics in the 2016 campaign, he mentioned specific groups more in the 2020 process and had a strategy of 'appointment of Latinos to top campaign positions'.²¹⁴ While Sanders in 2016 lost to Clinton in many Latino dominated states, he has won most of the Latino states in the 2020 nomination process. Sanders' Hispanic senior advisor Chuck Rocha explained that they had 'crafted an entirely new strategy to engage Latino voters in 2020'.²¹⁵ Of Sanders' two hundred employees, seventy-six were Latino and these filled 'positions that range from national political director to volunteers'.²¹⁶ Political flyers in both English and Spanish were distributed to Latino neighbourhoods, he organised soccer matches, and 'bilingual campaign workers have knocked on thousands of doors'.²¹⁷ Sanders also aired a television add in Spanish, focusing on his family's story of emigrating from Poland. Latino followers granted him the nickname *Tío Bernie* (Uncle Bernie) for all his time and energy spent on courting Latino voters. All these measures aimed specifically at one minority group, emphasising their strengths and unity are examples of identity politics. In Sanders' case, it seemed to be working in several Latino states. However, it did not prove to be enough, as Biden won more states in total and Sanders chose to withdraw from the race in April 2020.

One of the reasons Sanders lost so many states to Biden was his inability to win the African American vote. His disconnect from black voters has since 2016 been blamed on a major strategy of class consciousness without taking racial divisions into consideration, and Sanders has been criticised for not prioritising African American communities on his campaign trail. In his 2020 campaign, the focus did somewhat change. In a speech January

²¹⁴ Bafael Bernal, 'Hispanic Democrats see Sanders' Latino strategy as road map for Biden', the Hill. Last modified 11 March, 2020. <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/487137-hispanic-democrats-see-sanders-latino-strategy-as-road-map-for-biden>

²¹⁵ Stephania Taladrid, 'What Bernie Sanders is doing differently to win over Latino voters', The New Yorker. Last modified February 21, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/campaign-chronicles/what-bernie-sanders-is-doing-differently-to-win-over-latino-voters>

²¹⁶ Ibid

²¹⁷ Ibid

2019, he said that, ‘racial inequality must be central to combating economic inequality’, prioritising problems of racism above class struggles.²¹⁸ This is a clear step in the direction of identity politics. However, although he also appointed African American Nina Turner as co-chair of the 2020 campaign and she frequently opened for him at rallies and went for Sanders’ rivals ‘in ways he never would’, the campaign did not manage to connect with enough African American voters.²¹⁹ One reason was that not everyone in the campaign was happy with the appointment of Turner, another that many criticised the priorities of the campaign; ‘not advertising more aggressively on television and black radio; and missing opportunities to bring Sanders in for face time with black leaders and voters’.²²⁰

Joe Biden ended up as a clear favourite without using a message of identity politics largely during the process. His heavy support from the African American community seemed to come partly from his past as President Barack Obama’s vice president and partly from being endorsed by James Clyburn.²²¹ Moreover, he gained a reputation as the most electable candidate. Many African Americans felt that Biden was the safest choice ‘to putting a Democrat in the White House’.²²² Although he did not use identity politics largely in his rhetoric, he showed up at important events for the African American communities and showed his support for example when commemorating the four black children that were killed by white supremacists at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham in 1963. Actions such as these might have helped form the opinion of African American voters without pushing other voting groups away such as a rhetoric of identity politics often does.

²¹⁸ Annie Lindskey and David Weigel, ‘Sen. Bernie Sanders changes his message to black voters: Racism is alive’, The Washington Post. Last modified January 23, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/sen-bernie-sanders-changes-his-message-to-black-voters-racism-is-alive/2019/01/22/6c2b5466-1dbe-11e9-8e21-59a09ff1e2a1_story.html

²¹⁹ Janna Johnson, ‘THE. Nina. Turner. Bernie Sanders’s most visible and passionate surrogate is helping him connect with black voters’, The Washington Post. Last modified February 28, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-nina-turner-bernie-sanderss-most-visible-and-passionate-surrogate-is-helping-him-connect-with-black-voters/2020/02/28/21a5abb2-597c-11ea-9000-f3cffee23036_story.html

²²⁰ Sean Sullivan, ‘Insiders recount how Sanders lost the black vote – and the nomination slipped away’, The Washington Post. Last modified March 25, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/insiders-recount-how-sanders-lost-the-black-vote--and-the-nomination-slipped-away/2020/03/24/2b7b8b8e-685e-11ea-b313-df458622c2cc_story.html

²²¹ Caitin Oprysco, ‘Biden wins crucial Jim Clyburn endorsement ahead of South Carolina primary’, Politico. Last modified February 26, 2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/26/jim-clyburn-endorses-joe-biden-117667>

²²² Janell Ross and Dartunorro Clark, ‘Black voters know what they want. On Tuesday, it was Joe Biden. Here’s why’, NBC News. Last modified March 5, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/black-voters-know-what-they-want-tuesday-it-was-joe-n1151001>

In some areas, however, Biden used identity politics actively in the 2020 nomination process. In June 2019, he tried to woo LGBTQ voters by saying that their rights would be ‘his main priority’ if he won the White House.²²³ In March 2020, right after Super Tuesday, both Biden and Sanders released policy plans to advance LGBTQ equality in society. According to NBC News exit polling data, nearly one out of every ten voters on Super Tuesday identified as LGBTQ, and this group’s influence on the nomination might have influenced the two frontrunners to move quickly on LGBTQ policy. Even though the only openly gay candidate, Pete Buttigieg, endorsed Biden when he left the race before Super Tuesday, that did not seem to help Biden much with LGBTQ voters, as most of these voters chose Sanders (nearly 40%).²²⁴ It might therefore seem like his rhetoric of special interest aimed at sexual minorities did not work as Biden hoped.

3.2.5 ‘Woke’ Criticism of Democratic Candidates

Although many gay and feminist groups early in the race embraced Pete Buttigieg as their preferred candidate, he has faced criticism from parts of the ‘politically correct’ America.²²⁵ When Buttigieg dropped out of the Democratic race March 1, 2020, one of the reasons was that he failed to ‘build a broad coalition of voters’, and many believed his ‘main challenge was his inability to appeal to voters of color, both African Americans and Latinos’.²²⁶ Buttigieg is perhaps the Democratic candidate who was most frequently accused of not addressing African Americans correctly. In addition, many accuse him of not having any

²²³ Maya Oppenheim, ‘Joe Biden says LGBT+ rights will be his number one priority if he wins 2020 election’, Independent. Last modified 2 June 2019. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/joe-biden-lgbt-rights-equality-act-ohio-2020-election-human-rights-campaign-a8940891.html>

²²⁴ NBC News exit polling data. ‘Biden sweeps the South, wins most delegates’. Last modified March 8, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/live-blog/2020-super-tuesday-live-updates-14-states-hold-primaries-n1146871/ncrd1148601#liveBlogHeader>

²²⁵ For feminist support, see for example: Stephanie Gerber Wilson, ‘Why Pete? A feminist take on why Pete Buttigieg should be the next president of the United States’, last modified September 8, 2019: <https://medium.com/why-pete/why-pete-a-feminists-take-on-why-pete-buttigieg-should-be-the-next-president-of-the-united-states-49eb80ad99f8> and ‘Pete Buttigieg releases plan to boost women’s economic, social and political empowerment’, last modified October 28, 2019: <https://feminist.org/blog/index.php/2019/10/28/presidential-hopeful-pete-buttigieg-released-a-new-plan-to-boost-womens-economic-social-and-political-empowerment/>. For LGBTQ support, see for example ‘LGBTQ Victory Fund endorses Pete Buttigieg for president’, last modified June 29, 2019: <https://apnews.com/2e07eb04fb6842c6ae835e4be5f6c9e2>.

²²⁶ Reid J. Epstein and Trip Gabriel, ‘Pete Buttigieg drops out of Democratic presidential race’, NY Times. Last modified March 1, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/01/us/politics/pete-buttigieg-drops-out.html>

accomplishments on black issues, such as in his hometown South Bend, Indiana, where people believe he lacks understanding of ‘what it’s like to be a poor African-American’.²²⁷

In the autumn of 2019, Buttigieg was criticised harshly when his campaign used a stock image of a woman from Kenya when promoting a plan to dismantle racial inequality in America, as this was seen as ignorant and tone-deaf.²²⁸ In February 2020, he was attacked for tweeting that ‘we need a president whose vision was shaped by the American Heartland rather than the ineffective Washington politics we’ve come to know and expect’.²²⁹ Although many saw the tweet as a clear reference to the ineffective policies of Washington, where ‘the heartland’ was used to create contradiction, others accused it of so-called ‘dog whistling’. Dog whistling is a type of rhetoric that appears to mean one thing to the public but in fact has an additional meaning, only apparent to specific groups. Some critics claimed that ‘the heartland’ did not mean the opposite of Washington at all; in fact, it meant a ‘place where white people run things’.²³⁰ This reaction to Buttigieg’s tweet can be seen as both tribalism and identity politics. Tribalism because it was aimed at the political flanks, seeking to split the electorate, and identity politics because the reaction was formed by a narrow perception of right and wrong, created by minority groups.

To many black people, Buttigieg was ‘the embodiment of white privilege’, and as he could not share their lived experience, it was hard for him to prove them wrong.²³¹ It is by now obvious that Buttigieg had not hit the right tones with the African American community, but did he have support from other minority groups?

Although the LGBTQ community endorsed Buttigieg’s candidacy early in the race, many criticised him too. ‘Queers against Pete’ and ‘LGBTQ - Let’s Get Buttigieg To Quit’ were popular slogans by parts of the community.²³² Many believed ‘Buttigieg’s campaign

²²⁷ Stan Wruble, chairman of the South Bend Democratic Party in ‘Pete Buttigieg faces hometown criticism on race relations’, Financial Times. Last modified February 13, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/565ec498-4daa-11ea-95a0-43d18ec715f5>

²²⁸ Tim Stickings, ‘Pete Buttigieg campaign uses a stock shot of a black woman...’, Daily Mail. Last modified November 18, 2019: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7698465/Pete-Buttigieg-campaign-uses-stock-photo-Kenyan-woman.html>

²²⁹ Buttigieg, cited by Sam Dorman, ‘Pete Buttigieg faces racism, ‘dog whistle’ accusations after touting his roots in “American heartland”’, Fox News. Last modified February 1, 2020. <https://www.foxnews.com/media/pete-buttigieg-backlash-american-heartland>.

²³⁰ Dorman, ‘Pete Buttigieg faces racism, ‘dog whistle’ accusations after touting his roots in “American heartland”’,

²³¹ Benjamin Dixon, ‘Pete Buttigieg is the embodiment of white privilege – and black voters know it’, The Guardian. Last modified February 11, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/feb/11/pete-buttigieg-black-americans-democrats>

²³² Anna Iovine, ‘Queers against Pete highlights the LGBTQ community’s frustration with Buttigieg’, Mashable. Last modified February 12, 2020. <https://mashable.com/article/queers-against-pete-buttigieg-lgbtq-community/>

symbolize[d] everything the marriage-focused mainstream gay rights movement has failed to deliver’, and they were not satisfied with him as their spokesperson.²³³ Even though Buttigieg was the first openly gay presidential candidate to have reached this far in an election, there was a lack of unanimous support from the LGBTQ communities. Why? One possible reason is that identity politics has outlived its usefulness and that gays simply do not vote for another person just because he happens to be gay too. This is what Froma Harrop suggested early in the campaign when she warned candidates against using identity politics, as she believed it was ineffective. However, drawing evidence from the articles quoted above, it seems more likely that parts of the LGBTQ community found Buttigieg to be too moderate, too mainstream, and too marriage focused. He has been criticised of distancing himself from gay communities that do not have same-sex marriage as their biggest concern. Many homosexuals face workplace discrimination, and for transsexual people, violence is a huge concern. The LGBTQ community accused Buttigieg of not addressing these issues and suspected that he suppressed the issues because pursuing them would be unpopular with the wider electorate. The result was that Buttigieg did not seem to share lived experience with most gays either. Both the African American and gay communities criticised Buttigieg for his lack of lived experience, and the debates related to these issues show us that identity politics is live and real, also in 2020. Minority groups have the power to define the debate, and their endorsements or lack of such can have huge impact on a candidate’s chances of getting positive media coverage.

Although Joe Biden was considered the candidate with the biggest appeal to African American voters, he has not escaped ‘woke’ criticism altogether. After the third Democratic debate in September 2019, he was accused of ‘paternalistic racism’ without the ‘vocabulary to engage in antiracist conversation’.²³⁴ Interestingly, these and other accusations have not hampered his popularity with African American voters. It might seem that his actions in the past as vice president and his commitment to the African American cause by meeting people from the community are such advantages that his flawed rhetoric has been excused. His promises to make his running mate a woman and to appoint the first African American woman to the Supreme Court also made the headlines. Some people were concerned he

²³³ Shannon Keating, ‘You wanted same-sex marriage? Now you have Pete Buttigieg’, Buzzfeednews. Last modified December 11, 2019. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/shannonkeating/pete-buttigieg-marriage-equality-lgbtq-gay-rights>

²³⁴ Jamil Smith, ‘Why it’s time for Joe to go’, Rolling Stone. Last modified September 13, 2019. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/political-commentary/drop-out-joe-biden-democratic-primary-884047/>

discarded qualifications and experience, while others termed the statement ‘identity politics at their best’.²³⁵

Bernie Sanders was also accused of not being politically correct enough. In January 2020, Warren accused Sanders of saying that ‘a woman could not win the presidency’. Sanders denied having said anything like that, and the disagreement became public. Even though electability is discussed a lot among Democrats and journalists, and Democratic voters seem to be concerned about which one of the Democratic candidates that have a chance of beating Trump, saying that a woman cannot win the presidency was apparently inappropriate.²³⁶ Whether Sanders uttered these words or not, the debate shows that identity politics matters to the Democratic Party, to the media and probably to Democratic leaning women voters too. For while women under 45 made up ‘a larger share of Bernie Sanders’ base than men’ in September 2019, Sanders was at a disadvantage among women after his dispute with Elizabeth Warren.²³⁷ During the first 18 primaries and caucuses, Sanders had a consistently lower support from women than from men.²³⁸ According to journalist Ian Schwartz, Sanders’s problem was that he did not use identity politics enough, and that he therefore did not manage to ‘expand the base’ of supporters.²³⁹

After the Iowa caucus, the Democratic field narrowed down after many of the candidates decided to quit the race. The decisions were made based on a lack of either funding, support, or both. While the field was broad and diverse at the beginning of 2019, the prospects of a woman or a person of colour winning became less likely after Iowa and next to impossible after Super Tuesday when Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden were the only two likely candidates left. Even though Tulsi Gabbard was still in the race until mid-March when she withdrew and endorsed Joe Biden, no one seemed to deem her a serious contestant due to her

²³⁵ Matt Ford, ‘Biden’s diversity promises are identity politics at their best’. Last modified March 16, 2020. <https://newrepublic.com/article/156945/bidens-diversity-promises-identity-politics-best>

²³⁶ Astead W. Herndon and Jonathan Martin, ‘Warren says Sanders told her a woman could not win the presidency’, The New York Times. Last modified January 17, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/13/us/politics/bernie-sanders-elizabeth-warren-woman-president.html>

²³⁷ Marie Solis, ‘Young women actually make up more of Bernie’s base than men do’, Vice. Last modified September 20, 2019. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/gyzjmb/bernie-bros-women-under-45-make-up-a-larger-share-of-bernie-sanders-base-than-men

²³⁸ Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux and Meredith Conroy, ‘Why are women less likely than men to support Sanders?’, FiveThirtyEight. Last modified March 12, 2020. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-are-women-less-likely-than-men-to-support-sanders/>

²³⁹ Ian Schwartz, ‘Hillary Rosen: Sanders doesn’t think in identity politics, he talks class politics that «breeds a level of distrust»’, RealClearPolitics. Last modified February 27, 2020. https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2020/02/27/hilary_rosen_sanders_doesnt_think_in_identity_politics_he_talks_class_politics_that_breeds_a_level_of_distrust.html

low rating.²⁴⁰ According to journalist Dan Balz, the party was criticised for not having enough minorities represented among the candidates, and this created a feeling among women and people of colour ‘of being left out once again’.²⁴¹ By only having two white, heterosexual men on the ticket, some Democrats feared that parts of the electorate would become less energised and less likely to turn up and vote in the general election.²⁴² Others indicated that members of the Democratic Party indeed should be free to choose whomever they wanted as their candidate, and that affirmative action is undesirable in a democratic process.²⁴³ Bernie Sanders chose to withdraw in April 2020, amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, ‘which halted in-person campaigning for both Sanders and Biden and has led many states to delay their primary elections’.²⁴⁴ This cleared the path for Biden’s nomination.

In the beginning of May 2020, Biden was accused of sexually assaulting his former staff assistant Tara Reade. Biden has flatly denied this, saying, ‘it never, ever happened’.²⁴⁵ This issue is obviously very problematic for the Democratic Party going into the general election, particularly since they have endorsed the maxim: “believe all women”, but now questioned whether Reade was credible.²⁴⁶ This led to charges of hypocrisy, as Democrats in 2018 were fierce in their accusations against Bret Kavanaugh, based on believing Christine Blasey Ford’s testimony of sexual assault without securing evidence for claims made against

²⁴⁰ John Haltiwanger, ‘Tulsi Gabbard is still in the 2020 race and it’s unclear why’, Business Insider. Last modified March 5, 2020. <https://www.businessinsider.com/tulsi-gabbard-still-in-2020-the-race-unclear-why-2020-3?r=US&IR=T>

²⁴¹ Dan Balz, ‘A Democratic race among mostly white men leaves many women, minorities feeling abandoned’, The Washington Post. Last modified February 8, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/a-democratic-race-among-mostly-white-men-leaves-many-women-minorities-feeling-abandoned/2020/02/08/c54df170-4a86-11ea-bdbf-1dfb23249293_story.html

²⁴² Michael Marks, ‘With their hopes for a female president dashed, Democratic women now look to the vice presidency’, KUT. Last modified March 5, 2020. <https://www.kut.org/post/their-hopes-female-president-dashed-democratic-women-now-look-vice-presidency>

²⁴³ Megan McArdle, ‘Elizabeth Warren is out. And no, it’s not because of her gender’, The Washington Post. Last modified March 5, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/03/05/elizabeth-warren-is-out-no-its-not-because-her-gender/?utm_campaign=wp_week_in_ideas&utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&wpisrc=nl_ideas

²⁴⁴ Gregory Krieg, Ryan Nobles and Annie Grayer, ‘Bernie Sanders drops out of the 2020 race, clearing Joe Biden’s path to the Democratic nomination’, CNN Politics. Last modified April 8, 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/08/politics/bernie-sanders-drops-out/index.html>

²⁴⁵ Katty Kay, ‘Tara Reade: What are the sex attack allegations against Joe Biden?’, The BBC News. Last modified May 3, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52462113>

²⁴⁶ Louis Casiano, ‘Feinstein, after strong defense of Blasey Ford, questions Tara Reade’s Biden sex-assault claim’, Fox News. Last modified May 8, 2020. <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/feinstein-blasey-ford-tara-rea-de-biden-sex-assault-claim>

3.3 Identity Politics in 2016 Compared to the 2020 Campaign

The presidential nominating processes prior to the 2016 and 2020 elections were different in many respects. In the years between 2016 and 2020, the Democratic Party faced stark criticism for their use of identity politics. Did they choose to change their rhetoric? In this chapter, the main methodology has been qualitative, analysing debates, stump speeches and media coverage in regards of content. Comparing these analyses reveals four main tendencies: (a) Candidates in both February debates were more likely to use a rhetoric of identity politics and tribalism than candidates in the October debates; (b) Candidates generally use identity politics less in speeches than in debates; (c) Many of the Democratic presidential candidates in 2020 resorted to a rhetoric of identity politics more fiercely than the candidates in 2016 did; (d) Identity politics can be an effective way to win votes in Democratic primaries, presupposed it is not only a matter of rhetoric, but also includes excessive effort in other areas; and (e) Many candidates called for collective action, but none managed to stick to this focus throughout the campaign.

3.3.1 Identity Politics and Tribalism Increases Closer to the Primaries

In the October debate in 2015, Hillary Clinton frequently returned to a message of gender inequality. She focused on women's uniqueness and the adversities they face, emphasising how she as a woman would govern the country differently than her male opponents. She also called for collective action on several occasions, often in relation to African American issues. Bernie Sanders referred to African Americans only when asked, and barely mentioned other minority groups. Several of the candidates used tribal rhetoric, but only when talking about Republican opponents. Similarly, the October debate in 2019 was not especially characterised by identity politics or tribalism, except from Kamala Harris' focus on women's reproductive health care, which can be categorised as victimisation of a gender.

In the February 2016 debate, the moderators repeatedly asked questions about racism and sexism, and both Sanders and Clinton followed up with answers filled with the politics of race, gender and sexual minorities. The two candidates seemed to try to out-do each other in their attempts at wooing minority groups, and the focus on identity politics was much larger

²⁴⁷ Daniel Strauss, 'Who is Tara Reade and what are her allegations against Joe Biden', The Guardian. Last modified May 2, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/02/tara-rea-de-joe-biden-sexual-assault-allegations-democrats-response>

in this debate than in the October debate some months before. Similarly, the February 2020 debate was bursting with the politics of race, gender and sexual minorities, as well as tribalism. Although the moderators did not seem as preoccupied with identity issues as in the February 2016 debate, issues related to racism and sexism were frequently raised by the candidates themselves. Some of the candidates also launched severe attacks on fellow Democrats, criticising them for not being committed enough to compensating minority groups for the discrimination they have suffered.

A simple quantitative analysis shows us the same pattern, shown in figure 2 below. Most of the words chosen, typically appear when people use a rhetoric of identity politics. The remaining three words are often used in calls for collective action.

	October 2015	February 2016	October 2019	February 2020
Woman + women	13	39	30	17
Black + African American	18	27	4	38
Latino	1	7	0	7
Racial + race + racism	7	14	5	29
Minority/-ies	0	0	1	1
Identity/-ies	1	0	0	0
Discriminate/-ion	2	2	0	4
Abortion + reproductive + pro- choice	0	1	22	2
LGBT + gay + homosexual + lesbian + trans	3	3	1	1
Together	21	18	14	10
Everyone + everybody + every	55	34	93	51
Citizenship/citizen	8	4	2	1

Figure 2: Word count of the three debates analysed in the thesis.

While the word ‘racism’ (or ‘racial’/‘race’) appeared only seven times in the October 2015 debate and only five times in the October 2019 debate, in February 2016 it appeared 15 times throughout the debate, and in the February 2020 debate it appeared 29 times. Similarly, ‘Latino’ is hardly mentioned at all in the October debates but appears seven times in both the February debates. The same pattern can be found in almost all word categories, although the margins are smaller. These increases can be due to the moderators’ questions but are also a result of individual candidates’ focus of attention. The quantitative analysis can thus strengthen the theory that the closer candidates get to the primaries, the more they seek attention through a rhetoric based on victimisation, special interest and political correctness. On the topic abortion, the October debate in 2019 stands out. This matter was close to Kamala Harris’ heart, and she introduced the issue several times during the debate.

3.3.2 Less Identity Politics in Speeches

In Clinton’s Super Tuesday victory speech, identity politics played a small, but significant role. In her stump speech in September 2016 when she had become the Democratic Party’s nominee, she did not use identity politics at all, but one of her slogans in the campaign was ‘I’m with her’, emphasising her gender. Other slogans were ‘Stronger together’ and ‘Fighting for us’, which both can be labelled calls for collective action. Bernie Sanders’ speech in 2016 was not bursting with identity politics either, and neither were Buttigieg’s and Warren’s in 2020.

Analysis of these speeches can indicate that a speech is not the arena in a nomination process where identity politics plays the most important role. Reasons for that can be that in speeches, the candidates can speak undisturbed, and they do not have to compete for attention among several other candidates. The candidates can avoid minority issues without seeming indifferent to their problems, simply because they can choose a different approach altogether. In debates, on the other hand, they are often required to answer loaded questions from the moderators or fellow candidates in the most politically correct way in order to please the crowd.

3.3.3 Identity Politics Increase in the 2020 Campaign

After 2016, many Democrats feared that Clinton had lost the Presidency due to identity politics and did not want to see that happening again. Despite the criticism, the 2020 nomination process demonstrated an even greater emphasis on identity politics than in 2016. Although many of the candidates in the 2020 process called for collective action, several of

the candidates used rhetoric of identity politics and tribalism excessively. Individual candidates' choice of rhetoric varied both in degree and nature.

Although Sanders was one of Clinton's strong critics for her use of identity politics after the 2016 election, he used identity politics more in his 2020 campaign than he did in 2016. Sanders' Latino approach changed drastically, possibly because his loss to Clinton was partly due to a lack of support from Latino voters. In 2020, he designed a large part of his campaign around gaining more Latino votes. Using this strategy, he managed to attract large parts of the Latino population to his campaign. He attempted to woo African American voters through a message of victimisation, but this strategy did not prevent him from losing several African American dominated states to Joe Biden.

In the 2020 campaign, there were more candidates, who all wanted their share of the spotlight. This can maybe explain why several of the candidates returned to different versions of identity politics and tribalism, as these kinds of rhetoric can be efficient ways to get attention. The more provocative a candidate is, the more media attention he or she gets. The three candidates Warren, Buttigieg and Harris all used identity politics of race, gender, special interest and/or political correctness quite extensively during the campaign, often focusing on victimisation instead of collective action. Bloomberg stayed away from identity politics in his one debate. Contrary to Warren, Sanders and Harris, Bloomberg did probably not feel as dependent on popularity among young, politically correct, left-leaning Democrats. While Clinton also used identity politics in the October 2016 debate, Harris' focus on women's victimhood and men's inappropriateness in addressing women's issues were even fiercer than Clinton's politics of gender. As several of the candidates in the 2020 race were relatively young and/or progressive, the expectations from their supporters were high on issues such as abortion, gay rights and ethnic minorities' rights. Kamala Harris, for instance, already had to stand up against accusations about not being 'black enough', and to back away on minority issues would probably have created a storm of negative media coverage, not to mention the criticism she would have faced on social media.²⁴⁸ Several of the candidates were accused of not being politically correct enough, and this affected the media coverage they received during the campaign. This shows that identity politics is very much alive and critically important to the media and therefore also to the Democratic Party. It might also

²⁴⁸ Robin Givhan, 'Kamala Harris grew up in a mostly white world. Then she went to a black university in a black city', The Washington Post. Last modified September 16, 2019. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/09/16/kamala-harris-grew-up-mostly-white-world-then-she-went-black-university-black-city/?arc404=true>

show us how media coverage is affected by political wing groups, for instance the group that *More in common* terms Progressive Activists.

In the February debate 2020, the primaries were coming up, and most candidates used tribal rhetoric not only towards Republicans, but towards fellow Democratic candidates as well. Bloomberg was one of the candidates who was criticised by many of the others, but he kept focusing on his own policy instead of launching counterattacks. Soon after the debate, he withdrew from the race. However, it is impossible to decide whether his lack of success was due to a lack of identity politics and tribal rhetoric. On the contrary, the reasons were probably much more complex.

3.3.4 Effective Identity Politics

Even though Sanders succeeded in attracting Latino voters in 2020, it was insufficient to become the Democratic Party's nominee. There are many possible reasons. His defeat might show us that many Democrats were too sceptical to the use of identity politics to choose a nominee that restored to this kind of rhetoric. Or it might show us that although Sanders won many Latino dominated states, his campaign was inadequate in other respects. As we have seen, Sanders had difficulties connecting with African Americans, while he succeeded with Latinos. Although far from a monolithic group, in general, the African American community is more inclined to be politically conservative than Latinos, and Sanders' advocacy of a political revolution might appear too extreme for many blacks.²⁴⁹ However, his success with one minority group and failure with another might also stem from the campaign's different approach to the different minority groups. While Sanders met Latinos on several occasions and courted them on their own playing field, both literally and figural, African Americans were not prioritised by the Sanders campaign except in rhetoric.

Although negative media coverage of identity issues can be devastating for some candidates, it bounces off of others, and it has not always resulted in diminished support among the minority groups affected, as we saw with Joe Biden's support among African Americans. Biden did not use a rhetoric of identity politics to any large extent towards African Americans in the 2020 campaign, but he was still a popular candidate in this community due to his potential electability, his direct meetings with members of the community and his reputation as an important part of the Obama presidency. Trying to woo

²⁴⁹ Amina Dunn, '5 facts about black Democrats', Pew Research Center. Last modified February 27, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/27/5-facts-about-black-democrats/>

the LGBTQ communities, however, he used a rhetoric of identity politics that did not prove effective.

It appears identity politics is most effective when it is not only a matter of rhetoric. The candidates that have succeeded with a minority group have usually not just relied on rhetoric, but also shown excessive effort in other areas, such as direct meetings with central figures of the community. This was Joe Biden's strategy with the African American community and Bernie Sanders' strategy with the Latino community, and they have both succeeded largely with these groups.

3.3.5 Collective Action

All candidates in the debates and stump speeches analysed in this thesis have called for collective action to some degree, and some more than others. However, few if any were consistent in that call. In the 2016 campaign, both Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton expressed how they wanted to fight for everyone in society, as for example when Sanders stressed how he wanted millions of people to come together. He also reasoned that nobody can take on injustice alone, it must be done together. Clinton expressed how she thought of herself as a person who found common ground, and also that she agreed with the other Democratic candidates on the goals, they just disagreed on the means. Even though Clinton sometimes called for collective action, she often had a different approach than other candidates. Her argument was that every minority group had to be included and respected if American society was to live up to its potential, and she pointed to different groups and minorities who were treated unequally. James Webb withdrew shortly after the October debate, claiming his approach for a unified America did not fit in a party where the differences become larger each day. Nonetheless, his calls for collective action in the October debate were also supplemented by identity politics.

In the 2020 campaign, all the candidates had moments when they called for collective action, in the interest of unifying all Americans. Cory Booker and Joe Biden argued that women's reproductive health care was a matter of human rights, Andrew Yang emphasised that Democrats had to unite America after the polarising election in 2016, and Bloomberg answered the harsh attacks from his opponents in the debate by calling for unity. Nonetheless, all these candidates also used rhetoric with traces of either identity politics or tribalism, or both. Amy Klobuchar tried to build her reputation around calls for collective action. She frequently talked about building coalitions between different parts of the country and between the different political parties but did also resort to identity politics and tribalism at some

points. In December 2019, for example, she received considerable media attention for pointing out what she believed was a double standard in American elections, where women presidential candidates were ‘held to a higher bar’ than men.²⁵⁰

The quantitative analysis shown in figure 2 displays three words commonly associated with calls for collective action. Sometimes, these words did point to calls for collective action, as in the February 2020 debate when Elizabeth Warren said that, ‘And, for everyone on this stage, we talk about how to build a future’ and when Joe Biden said that, ‘everyone is entitled to be treated with dignity, no matter what’. However, the numbers in the table are not quite illustrative for how many times the candidates actually called for collective action. On several occasions the words appeared when they were not related to a call for collective action at all, and sometimes even used in a tribal argument or in rhetoric of identity politics. An example of the latter was Pete Buttigieg’s argument about black voting rights in the February debate, where he explained how a lack of these rights ‘harms everyone’. Often, the three words mentioned were simply part of an entirely different argument, showing that the chosen words might have been too generic to show any tendencies in this context.

²⁵⁰ Anna North, ‘Would a female candidate be treated like Pete Buttigieg? Amy Klobuchar sees a double standard’, Vox. Last modified November 20, 2019.
<https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/11/20/20975349/democratic-debate-november-2019-klobuchar-buttigieg-gender>

Chapter 4 – Conclusions

Identity politics is still a growing phenomenon of American society. Fukuyama argued that people's identity has always been important, and that it even was a driving force in major developments of the USA, such as the American Revolution and the American Civil War, to name some. However, this was not identity politics as we know it today. The term identity politics was coined much later and is in constant flux. Developments during the civil rights era are crucial for understanding the contemporary version. In the beginning of the era, civil rights leaders advocated equal rights for everyone, emphasising that African Americans deserved equity due to their citizenship of the United States of America. They were driven by a demand for society's recognition and wanted the rest of society to treat them equally to everyone else. Francis Fukuyama calls this approach an individualistic version of identity politics, as the focus is on every individual's equal rights. This tactic, however, gained them equal rights in theory, but many civil rights activists saw that equality of results was not yet obtained as African Americans still faced racism in almost all areas of life. Civil rights leaders changed their rhetoric to a focus on past and present sufferings and African American uniqueness. This focus on victimhood as a platform from which to petition for equal rights developed into a demand for special rights, such as affirmative action. As other minority groups saw the success of the civil rights movement, they followed their lead. Different minority groups became more concerned about their own issues rather than the common interest, and increasingly narrow, self-defined groups now demanded both recognition and power. This phenomenon is what we now know as contemporary identity politics.

The Democratic Party went through major changes during this period. From being a party divided between fierce opponents of voting rights and integration in the South and civil rights advocates in the North, they took a major step towards integration which fundamentally changed the party. They were in the 1960 election the party with the most African American voters and has become more and more dependent on minorities in the following decades. African Americans, the LGBTQ communities, women and Latinos are some of the groups that increasingly prefer the Democratic Party. However, this support does not come without conditions. In a time of political correctness and a large focus on identity, Democratic candidates have fought to become the most electable choice for all these minority groups. Large or small rhetorical mishaps have proven to be fatal and the Democratic primaries, instead of being a chance to address the American public, have become a competition devoted to addressing minority groups the best.

Mark Lilla and Francis Fukuyama emphasise how this contemporary form of identity politics splits and polarises society, as the rhetoric tears people apart more than it unites. When politicians try to woo certain minority groups, they at the same time often push others away. Elizabeth Warren's appeal to LGBTQ voters quoted at the beginning of this thesis is an example of rhetoric that splits the electorate. While LGBTQ supporters were thrilled, voters with more traditional values were offended. Kamala Harris' appeal to women in the October debate 2019 was in the same way spot on for pro-choice supporters but labelled everybody opposing abortion backwards and outdated. According to Goldberg, Lilla and Fukuyama, the Democratic Party should try to appeal to larger segments of the people by focusing on what we all have in common. Goldberg for example argues that the struggle for gay marriage succeeded because 'it appealed not to radicalism but to bourgeois values about family formation'. Several of the candidates in both the 2016 and the 2020 nomination processes tried to call for collective action, such as Hillary Clinton in her stump speech with the slogan 'Stronger together'. All the candidates in both nomination processes did at some point try to reach out to all Americans, calling for unity and to join forces. However, none of the candidates managed to be consistent in this call. When a call for collective action is followed by either tribal rhetoric or identity politics, the attempt might lose its value.

Our theorists argue that American politicians should move away from identity politics and never look back. After the 2016 election, several social scientists and political strategists joined them in their concern. Many believed Hillary Clinton had lost the presidency partly due to her focus on being the first woman candidate running for president, and the excessive attention paid to minority groups was questioned. Clinton's runner-up, Bernie Sanders, was one of the critics.

One of the main research questions of this thesis was: in which ways have Democratic presidential candidates changed their rhetoric between 2016 and 2020? In chapter 3, we saw that members of the Democratic Party still choose a rhetoric of identity politics that often slips into a rhetoric of tribalism. In addition to Bernie Sanders, candidates such as Kamala Harris, Pete Buttigieg and Elizabeth Warren used identity politics more extensively than the 2016 candidates. Nevertheless, none of them succeeded in their attempts at becoming the nominee. This could prove Froma Harrop right, that identity politics has lost its momentum, and that people do not choose their candidates based on identity anymore, or it could prove that these candidates failed in some other respect. Despite their attempts at grooming minority groups, some of the candidates have been fiercely criticised for not being politically correct enough.

The campaign for the Democratic nomination this year showed that even as candidates slipped deeper into the rhetoric of identity politics, supporters remained dissatisfied with limitations of the rhetoric and deeply alienated from the political process. Although candidate Pete Buttigieg was the first openly gay candidate to have been a serious contender for the nomination of a major party for president, large parts of the LGBTQ community chose not to endorse him. Even though the gay movement in the past might have succeeded because of its appeal to conformity, this did not seem to help a gay candidate in 2020. Pete Buttigieg did not appeal to radicalism, and he also fulfilled all the (gay) requirements of bourgeois values of family formation. To parts of the LGBTQ community, however, this was the very reason to turn against him, and their lack of approval was vital to his loss. To them, Buttigieg was too mainstream and too marriage-focused, ignoring many of the most important issues in the community. This shows how difficult it is for Democratic politicians to court everyone, and the possible consequences of contradicting the opinions of minority groups. Buttigieg's attempts to appeal to the African American community was also a flop. Identity politics does not provide a clear path to victory.

Bernie Sanders himself changed his strategy from 2016 towards a larger focus on Latino voters in 2020. Sanders tried to court other minority groups too, such as the African American community and the LGBTQ community, but although the Latino strategy got him far, other minority groups were not impressed. African American voters' devotion to Joe Biden seemed to sustain even though Biden had been accused of several politically incorrect statements regarding this group. This shows that even though political correctness can be vital for some candidates' survival, such as Buttigieg and Harris', rhetoric is not everything. This thesis has shown that a rhetoric of identity politics can be successful to win votes in the Democratic primaries, but only if it at the same time is backed up with *acts* of identity politics. Sanders and Biden both succeeded in their wooing of important minority groups and failed with others. It will be interesting to see where this strategy will take the nominee in the general election in November.

As we have seen, politicians from the Democratic Party still choose to use identity politics and it seems difficult for Democratic politicians to leave the rhetoric altogether. Two other, important research questions in this thesis were: What are the underlying reasons why the Democratic Party has chosen to pursue liberal identity politics, and what are the consequences of this policy? Drawn from the work of this thesis, it is possible to identify political, ideological, institutional and strategic reasons why the Democratic Party still choose

identity politics, and the last section will illuminate how these reasons have influenced the Democratic Party and American society.

4.1 The Changing Make-up of the Party

Why does the Democratic Party keep turning to identity politics? A party's choice of rhetoric is influenced by several factors. One important factor is political – both the party's own policies, but also foreign policy or political movements within the country. During the civil rights movement, the Democratic Party decided to support the movement, partly because it had become politically advantageous. One of the reasons why American politicians put black civil rights on the agenda during the 1950s and 1960s was because of the Cold War. The Soviet Union criticised the USA for their treatment of African Americans, which sped up the process. However, women and other ethnic minority groups were not in focus and did consequently not undergo as large changes as quickly as the blacks. Their issues were not seen as crucial in winning the propaganda war going on across the globe. Moreover, the Democratic Party neglected gay rights for decades until they shifted their opinions as a political strategy to attract more voters from that group. President Barack Obama, who previously had been firmly against same-sex marriage, started 'evolving' on the issue early in his presidency.²⁵¹ In 2008, more than 80% of people who identified as LGBTQ voted Democratic, partly due to the Democratic Party's new policies on LGBTQ issues.²⁵²

This thesis has shown that the initiation of affirmative action might have been an important event in the development of contemporary liberal identity politics. Affirmative action was an attempt to right the wrongs of the past and give minority groups the advantages they needed to be able to obtain equality of result. At the same time, this policy might also have strengthened minority groups' perception of themselves as different from the majority, and the feeling of victimhood and uniqueness became even stronger. These feelings define many minority groups today and might have influenced the Democratic Party's use of identity politics in the past.

Several social scientists quoted in this thesis argued that while the Democratic Party held a landslide majority in the 1960s, they pushed through civil rights legislation because

²⁵¹ Katy Steinmetz, 'See Obama's 20-year evolution on LGBT rights', Time Politics. Last modified April 10, 2015. <https://time.com/3816952/obama-gay-lesbian-transgender-lgbt-rights/?fbclid=IwAR1XFAijVdxl9ptxselljI-zKliHDSDK2s72bhwy1DeXTsmRFjCNMTNalwQ>

²⁵² Tim Fitzsimons, 'Record LGBT support for Democrats in midterms, NBC News exit polls show'. Last modified November 8, 2018. <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/record-lgbt-support-democrats-midterms-nbc-news-exit-poll-shows-n934211>

they knew that their majority would not last. As many of their goals were achieved, many white voters in the South who disagreed with the development went over to the Republicans. Even for civil rights supporters, the speed of the legislation started to be viewed as a misuse of power, deplorable to many traditional Democratic voters who thus lost faith in their party. Moreover, radical forces within the African American community saw this misuse of power as a symbol of the power white people always had exercised over minorities. At the same time, less radical minority groups were not satisfied either. They wanted the party to do even more to secure equality in society. The result was that both African American communities and smaller self-defined minority groups now wanted power themselves. This made the Democratic Party even more dependent on wooing minority groups and can therefore be seen as crucial in explaining why the Democratic Party keep turning to liberal identity politics.

While the population in general grew more conservative during the 1960s, African Americans was the only group that became more liberal. According to Martin, ‘the only group to grow more liberal from the 1950s to the 1970s was the blacks’.²⁵³ This might have strengthened the Democratic Party’s focus on African Americans.

4.2 Ideological Reasons: Persistence of Liberalism

An important reason why many Democrats still front identity politics can be found in party members’ ideology and personal engagement. Just as Lyndon B. Johnson became personally engaged in the civil rights issue in the 1960s, many Democrats today are personally engaged in issues of justice and equity for everyone. Many believe a focus on minority groups’ uniqueness and victimhood can increase the majority’s understanding of these groups, and many also believe that affirmative action is one of the solutions to help create equality for every citizen. This might have been one of the reasons they chose to join the Democratic Party, and for many people, minorities’ rights are at the essence of their commitment to the party. Identity politics is by many seen as inherently good, as it lifts questions of inequality to the national agenda. To abandon these commitments is not on the agenda for many Democrats. The 2020 Democratic presidential process was characterised by a large field, more diverse and progressive than before. Progressive voters had high expectations of their preferred candidate, and candidates who did not meet these expectations could face stark criticism. This might have led to a larger focus on identity issues, as many Democratic candidates thus tried to please minority groups and progressive voters by developing policies

²⁵³ Martin, *Civil Rights and the Crisis of Liberalism*, 208.

and making statements on issues close to their heart, such as racism, abortion and discrimination.

4.3 Institutional Reasons

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 ensured the voting rights of the African American population in the South. It was obviously an important bill for the civil rights movement but perhaps also the most important institutional change in the development of liberal identity politics. When African Americans became a considerable part of the electorate in the South, Democratic politicians jumped at the opportunity to gain their vote. African Americans thus became important in policy development and rhetoric. Today, the African American population constitute more than 13% of the total population in the USA and to get this demographic's support means considerable voting power. This can thus be seen as another prerequisite for the development of identity politics in the Democratic Party.

4.4 Strategic Reasons

In the 2020 nomination process, identity politics still played an important role in the Democratic Party, and one of the reasons was probably strategic. Minority groups have become the backbone of the Democratic Party, and without their support at the polls, the party will lose severely. On the other hand, identity politics aimed at wooing specific minority groups pushes other voter groups away from the party. Thus, pollsters and party strategists disagree whether identity politics is a good strategy or not. Some argue that since the Democrats did not lose by many votes in 2016, they should keep to their scheme and work hard to attract the people who did not vote the last time. The 2016 election was in fact the first time in 20 years where the black voter turnout declined and it declined by seven percentage points.²⁵⁴ If the Democratic Party could manage to attract these voters, they would do better, and as many of them used to vote Democratic, the goal is maybe not totally unrealistic. For example, in Iowa, a small but politically and symbolically significant state, the Republican Party increased their total amount of votes with seven percentage points, while 'Hillary Clinton underperformed Mr. Obama's vote tally by 22%'.²⁵⁵ Some strategists think that the

²⁵⁴ Jens Manuel Krogstad and Mark Hugo Lopez, 'Black voter turnout fell in 2016, even as a record number of Americans cast ballot', Pew Research Center. Last modified May 12, 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/12/black-voter-turnout-fell-in-2016-even-as-a-record-number-of-americans-cast-ballots/>

²⁵⁵ Christa Case Bryant and Story Hinckley, 'Can Democrats win back Obama-Trump voters? Dubuque, Iowa, may offer a clue', the CS Monitor. Last modified February 3, 2020.

best plan is to try to increase voter turnout both among African Americans and among people in general by putting an even stronger emphasis on identity politics.

On the other hand, there are the so-called Obama-Trump voters, people who voted for Obama in 2012, but changed party affiliations in 2016. It might be hard to get back this group by using a strategy of identity politics, as many of them are whites who felt left out by the Democratic Party's rhetoric of identity politics in 2016. According to Dan Balz, 'the party can win without doing significantly better among white working-class voters, so why consider appeals that could dilute powerful themes of racial justice, tolerance and inclusion'?'²⁵⁶ Should the Democratic Party leave the strategy of identity politics, it is uncertain which votes they would lose and which they would gain, if any.

Chapter 3 showed us that Bernie Sanders' strengthened Latino strategy might have worked to a certain degree, as he performed considerably better in several Latino dominated states in 2020 than he did in 2016. Joe Biden's African American strategy can also be said to have succeeded, and he was the preferred candidate among most African Americans. These strategies included several elements of involvement, not just identity rhetoric. These are examples of successful strategies involving identity politics, but the question is how this strategy will play out in the general election in November. Democratic politicians are dependent on minority groups to gain enough votes in the primaries, and identity politics of victimisation and special interest, based on race, gender or sexual orientation might therefore seem unavoidable. However, it is difficult to measure whether this policy is pushing more people away from the voting booths than enticing people to vote.

4.5 Effects on the Democratic Party and American Society

Lilla and Fukuyama have shown that identity politics polarises the national conversation, and a large majority of Americans now feel exhausted by the political debate. While identity politics makes some people more attached to their minority group status, others distance themselves from politics altogether. The analysis in chapter 3 showed that the Democratic Party has increased their use of identity politics and tribalism between 2016 and 2020. It also showed that candidates were more inclined to use rhetoric of identity politics the closer they got to the primaries, while stump speeches were not an arena where identity politics was

<https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2020/0203/Can-Democrats-win-back-Obama-Trump-voters-Dubuque-Iowa-may-offer-a-clue>

²⁵⁶ Dan Balz, 'Analysis: Will the Democrats wake up before 2020?', The Washington Post. Last modified October 2, 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/magazine/wp/2018/10/02/feature/will-the-democrats-wake-up-before-2020/>

widely used. The analysis showed that identity politics can be an effective tool to win primaries, but only if it is part of a larger strategy. The Democratic Party has become dependent on minority groups' support, and this conclusion explains why the party ended up being dependent on identity politics.

The effects on the Democratic Party are many. In the primaries, the candidates compete for attention by focusing on minorities and identity politics. On the positive side, this could possibly lead to a higher voter turnout among minorities and youth, who would be dissatisfied with anything less than politically correct statements from their preferred politicians. However, it is difficult to pursue a strategy of identity politics and at the same time develop a 'fresh political vision of the country's shared destiny'.²⁵⁷ Moreover, other important political issues might be given less priority, and voters from both parties might get the impression that Democrats' only concern is minority issues. Furthermore, if the strategy is pursued in the general election, the Democratic Party might lose to Trump again, because identity politics has the effect of pushing those who are not in a minority group away from the party. If former Republican voters or people with traditional values constantly feel under attack from Democratic presidential candidates, it will take a long time to build enough trust to win them over. This thesis has shown that regarding identity politics, Democratic politicians are in a no-win situation.

The effects on society are also multiple. Although Donald Trump has been cast as the most divisive president ever, the Democratic Party must take their part of the blame for the spiralling conflict level in the USA. Identity politics and tribalism create large groups who are anxious about being considered politically incorrect. Even though the election of Donald Trump in 2016 showed us clearly that political correctness does not appeal to all Americans, a substantial part of the media coverage and the debates going on at American campuses are polarised, leaving no room for differing opinions. Political opponents are cast as morally degenerate, and opinions that are not 'woke' enough are equally immoral. This climate for debate leads to polarisation and political exhaustion, which in turn can lead to lower voter turnout and distrust of authorities.

Moreover, identity politics will change the relative income and social status among groups in society. While minority groups receive more attention, thereby heightening their relative status, the majority falls behind. Although equality for everyone undeniably should be a goal that politicians and others strive to achieve, it seems unavoidable that parts of the

²⁵⁷ Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal*, 8.

majority with low income and low prospects of advancement will come to see this shift in relative status as problematic, if they have not done so already.

Even though the Democratic Party has several important reasons for continuing to choose identity politics, doing so should be done with knowledge about its disadvantages for the party and for society. The USA is a nation made up of minorities, and without diversity, America would not have been the same. Nonetheless, these minorities' contribution to a shared society has been a core value of American history, and the Democratic Party's involvement in identity politics might have contributed to splitting these minority groups up in self-defined groups more concerned about their own self-regard than American society. This might have changed America forever. For the Democratic Party to continue down this path is a huge risk, but it seems to be a risk they are willing to take.

Although the Democratic Party seems to be tied up with identity politics, there could be other roads forward. While Donald Trump has monopoly on his daily press briefings about the corona crisis, his remedies seem insufficient, and the pandemic could maybe strengthen the Democratic call for a national health care system for all American citizens. Another possible angle could be the climate issue, as it has gained momentum lately, attracting young people all over the country to protest.²⁵⁸ A focus on climate change is even in accordance with the old Democratic idea of being a responsible world leader. All these three approaches could be termed calls for collective action, and although there are differing opinions about these issues too, it would focus the attention on important issues for all citizens, instead of groups of people.

²⁵⁸ Oliver Milman, 'US to stage its largest ever climate strike', The Guardian. Last modified September 20, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/20/climate-strikes-us-students-greta-thunberg>

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