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**STRATEGIC PRIMORDIALISM:  
HOW POLITICAL PARTIES ORGANIZE IDENTITY POLITICS**

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## STRATEGIC PRMORDIALISM: HOW POLITICAL PARTIES ORGANIZE IDENTITY POLITICS

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

*An identity is questioned only when it is menaced, as when the mighty begin to fall, or when the wretched begin to rise, or when the stranger enters the gates, never, thereafter to be a stranger: the stranger's presence making you the stranger, less to the stranger than to yourself*  
James Baldwin (1976)

On November 2, 2021, Boston made history by electing Michelle Wu as the city's first female and Asian-American Mayor.

After the incumbent Mayor Marty Walsh was appointed by President Biden as Labor Secretary, he was replaced on an acting basis by Kim Janey as Boston's first female and Black mayor. Janey lost in the Democratic primary, which was won by two women, Michelle Wu and Annissa Essaibi-George, both members of the City Council, who faced each other in the November 2 general election for Mayor. What makes the Boston's mayoral race historic by any measure was that, besides their gender, Michelle Wu and Annissa Essaibi-George are American-born daughters of immigrant parents.

Wu's parents immigrated from Taiwan, and her physiognomy easily identifies her as Asian-American. Essaibi-George's father is an immigrant from Tunisia and her mother is an immigrant from Poland, and she identifies herself as Polish-Arab American. But the press routinely describes her as a person of color, a designation which Essaibi-George has often accepted, but for which she has also been criticized because her physiognomy easily identifies her to be white, prompting the [Boston Globe](#) headline "Are Arab-Americans People of Color?"

Political philosopher Kwame Appiah begins his brilliant book, *Lies Than Bind: Rethinking Identity* (Appiah 2018), with stories of taxi-drivers mistaking him as Brazilian and addressing him in Portuguese in Sao Paulo, identifying him as "Colored" in Cape Town, Ethiopian in Italy, and a Maghrebi from Belgium in Paris, and expressing skepticism in Washington and London that he cannot speak Hindi.

These two stories, which can be repeated many times, point up the malleability and contingency of identity, and the ambiguity of physiognomy as an identity-marker. The Boston story also highlights the intrinsic problems in the way identity is conceptualized, analyzed and understood in the United States ordinary people, journalists, and scholars. These problems are best captured by two statements. The first statement, made by politicians of all ideological stripes, is "That is not who we are", or more positively, "This is who we are," conveying an essentialist conception and understanding of identity (Smith 2020). The second statement, usually made in learned discourse, that identity, including, especially, race is socially constructed. The second statement is made with the sense that simply making it validates the claim embodied in it. Almost never is the statement followed with even a minimal explanation of how identities, including race, are constructed.

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

### **Comparative Insights on Identity**

The accumulated findings of over three decades of comparative research on identity and politics reflect a strong consensus among scholars on three related analytical issues: (1) Identity is a variable; (3) Identity is endogenous to the political process and institutions that structure politics; and (4) Identity is constructed. I will discuss the variability of identity as a separate topic, but I will combine the discussion of identity as endogenous and identity as constructed.

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

The variability of identity is intimately tied to the definition of identity. Definitions of identity abound and I will not review them here. I will instead proceed pragmatically with a utilitarian approach that helps advance the intellectual purpose of my paper.

Identity is a social role that derives its variability from the culturally prescribed meanings assigned to it. Conceptualizing identity as a role with culturally prescribed meaning has several advantages.

First, it helps separate the empirical markers conventionally and incorrectly used to define identity (e.g., physiognomy, language, food) from the culturally prescribed meaning attached to those markers, and thereby also helps to avoid the primordialism (essentialism) that infects conventional conception and understanding of identity, as reflected in the controversy captured by the Boston Globe headline referenced above. This distinction is aptly captured by UCLA historian Robin Kelley's statement that "racism is not about how you look; it is about the meaning assigned to how you look."

Second, the variability of identity as a role with culturally assigned meaning derives substantively from the constitutive norms, the codified and informal rules and practices that constitute an identity, prescribing what is and is not appropriate behavior and rendering identity into a social role. These constitutive rules structure two related processes that help validate the social role of identity, one external and the other internal. The external process involves the strategic social interaction in which the person defined by the identity interacts with others with dissimilar identities to pursue a variety of personal, social, economic and political goals. Repetition of such strategic social interaction and the associated realization of one's goals help

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<sup>1</sup> This section draws on Abdelal et al (2006, 2009)

validate the identity, and validation fosters accrued confidence in the identity, infusing the otherwise disconnected empirical markers of identity with subjective meaning and symbolic significance (Stryker 1980, 1987).

Third, the external validation of identity complements and reinforces the internal validation of the constitutive norms that define identity as a social role. The meaning, recognition, and obligation embodied in those norms are validated through repeated practices consistent with these constitutive norms. Habituation consistent with the logic of appropriateness prescribed by the constitutive norms inculcates deep internalization wherein “rules are lived rather than consciously followed” (Fierke 1966). Options are simply excluded from the cognitive radar.

Fourth, these twin processes of external and internal validation underscore the social salience and political relevance of identity as a social role. And cognition of the social salience and political relevance of identity reinforce the affective attachment to the symbols embodying it, resulting in the fusion of social identity and political interest that underpin and propel collective action.

Fifth, the fusion of identity and interest in organizing and animating collective action endow identity groups with a social purpose. The successful and repeated achievement of social purpose further validates the identity and the interest, which are now inextricably fused.

Sixth, because all identities are social in the sense that identities derive their salience, validation and legitimacy in ongoing processes of strategic interaction with other conflicting identity groups, inter-group comparison serves to differentiate identity groups from each other, engendering the simultaneous and reciprocal processes of in-group solidarity and out-group hostility (Tajfel 1982). An identity group, in other words, is defined not only by what is, but also by what is not.

Seventh, at the most abstract level, identity can be viewed as a cognitive model of the world. As a cognitive model, identity described by concepts such as race, ethnicity and nation are not “real thing,” but a way to perceive and make sense of the world Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov (2004).

Finally, the variability of identity also derives the fact that none of the previous seven intrinsic and variable features of identity are fixed. They are all open to contestation by members of the identity group. This contestation threatens the unity and strength of identity groups that are essential for their survival and competitive advantage in the political struggle for status and resource. Contestation, however, confronts identity group with a paradox. On the hand, the absence of contestation suggests a “natural” quality to identity groups, conveying the impression of a primordial basis of group identity. On the other hand, contestation fosters a constructivist strategy for identity formation and maintenance, but whose success depends, paradoxically, on primordial logic and interpretation to validate the legitimacy and survival of the identity group.

The intrinsic variability of identity along these eight dimensions suggests the futility of a primordial (or essentialist) conception and understanding of identity. But as I will show below, the multidimensionality and variability are also the sources of conflict, often deadly conflict, over identity. This conflict is fundamentally about attempts, often brutal attempts, to reduce, in

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

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

### **Constructivism and the Endogeneity of Identity**

One would be hard put to find reference to a constructivist approach that treats identities as endogenous to politics in the voluminous literature on identity and politics in the United States. The dominant approach that informs this literature is captured by the label “identity politics,” which conveys an expressive conception of identity as an independent variable in politics. A constructivist approach is captured by the label “politics of identity,” which conveys a constitutive conception of identity as a dependent variable that is constituted by political and social processes *and* individual choice structured (*not determined*) by institutions and culture (Smith 2020).

The dominant approach has produced important analyses of the impact of Americans’ religious, racial, ethnic, gender, regional and sexual identities on elections and partisanship. Grounded in social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel 1981; Tajfel and Turner 1979), the singular achievement of this body of scholarship over the past 20 years has been the depiction of partisanship, the psychological attachment to a political party, as a persistent social identity that is immune to short-term political fortunes of political parties, poor performance in governing, and leadership crises and scandals (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2002; Greene 1999, 2002, 2004; Huddy 2001; Huddy and Bankert 2017; Mason, 2018).

The dominant approach has been particularly useful in Lilliana Mason’s (2018) excellent analysis of the impact of social sorting, the process by which Americans’ varied identities based on race, ethnicity, religion, region, ideology and class have come to be almost neatly aligned with their party identification the political polarization. The varied identities not only overlap with each other, but encompassed within an overarching partisan identity, reinforce and strengthen partisanship. These reinforcing identities encompassed within an overarching partisan identity represent a sharp departure from the cross-cutting identities that previously influenced partisanship and electoral behavior and that was brilliantly captured by *The American Voter*.

Social sorting and the strong partisan social identity it has fostered are the source affective polarization (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012), the accompanying political vitriol in political discourse and the relegation of electoral competition to a team sport in which, to quote the words of the legendary coach Vince Lombardi, “winning is not everything, it is the only thing.”

And disturbingly, affective polarization that divides Democrats and Republics transcends even the policy agreements that otherwise exist among the partisans of the two parties, according to Mason, hence the subtitle of her book, “Uncivil Agreement And worse yet, Mason presents data (2018: 54-59) that reveal that the partisans’ deep political divisions redound to greater social distance among them that is reflected in their reluctance to socialize with, and even marry, each other.

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

Scholars working in political psychology that heavily informs the dominant approach point to important developments in cognitive psychology in correctly rejecting the utility of rational choice explanations (Huddy, Sears and Levy (2013); Chong (2013)). But this rejection amounts to throwing the baby out of the bathwater, for the rejection is more appropriate for the earlier crude version of "thin" rational choice theory that treated human beings as disembodied actors. Insights from cognitive psychology on the limits of decision-making captured by such processes as "bounded rationality" (Simon 1957, Chong 2013) and judgements under certainty (Kahneman and Tversky 1982) draw attention instead to a more realistic *strategic rational choice* approach that takes into account the reality of imperfect information, the computational limits on information-processing, and the associated use of heuristics, concepts that can fruitfully clarify key aspects of identity construction, stability and change, such as the subjective meaning of identities, gradations in identity strength considerable stability of social and political identities (Huddy 2001).

The dominant approach, moreover, elides over the institutional incentives and the associated strategic rationality that motivate the choice of parties, politicians and voters whether to activate the varied social identities (racial, ethnic, religious) separately or jointly, or to separate or fuse cultural issues and economic interests. In Mason's (2018) otherwise excellent analysis, for example, it is unclear whether the impact of social sorting on the forging of partisanship as an all-encompassing social identity and the resulting political polarization in the United States was the result of autonomous calculations by voters or the result of elite rhetoric, elite sorting and elite polarization. In a nuanced and hence a more realistic study, Levendusky (2009) shows that the joint ideological sorting and political polarization are elite phenomena that is reflected in citizens sorting themselves ideologically but without becoming polarized. This is not a chicken and egg problem. Fifty years of public opinion research dating back to Converse's (1964) classic exposition shows that their information deficit and ideological incoherence propel American citizens to rely on the elite ideological cues to influence their political behavior (Zaller 1992).

And a related question in Mason's analysis concerns the extent to which the overlapping social identities of race, ethnicity and religion that animate social sorting and political polarization are reflexive outcomes of decontextualized essentialism or contingent convergence of strategic choices of elites and citizens shaped by historical developments and institutional incentives.

The result is a paradox. The dominant approach leads the voluminous literature on identity and politics in the United States to treat identities as exogenous to politics and the institutions that structure politics, but the actual analysis reveals that the social salience and political relevance of

social identities are inextricably tied to the political process and the institutions that structure politics in the United States. And even when an otherwise excellent book titled *Identity Crisis* (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018) painstakingly details the politicization of Americans' social identities, especially racial identities, in the 2016 presidential campaign, the analysis never systematically clarifies the mechanisms by which Donald Trump's and Hillary Clinton's campaign strategies combined with the heightened salience and politicization of race during Barack Obama's presidential campaign and presidency (Tesler and Sears 2010) contributed to that politicization.

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

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

### **A Preliminary Theoretical Framework**

The central insight of constructivism is that social identities are constructed in the course of social, economic and political processes. I first compare constructivism with primordialism, the alternative conception and understanding of identity. Constructivism emerged as a powerful and successful corrective to primordialism's core assumptions, flawed logic and empirically validity. I then discuss key concepts that comprise my theoretical framework

#### **What is Primordialism?**

Primordialism is the idea (ideology?) that identities, inescapably rooted in objective ascriptive markers, such as genealogy, language, race, religion, ethnicity, and gender, are immutable. Shared immutable identities, ineluctably embodied in physiognomy, values, attitudes and behavior, foster norms of reciprocity and obligation that impose order on the chaos of quotidian social interactions, which, in turn, validate the immutable identities that propel them. Repetitive quotidian social interactions become habits that congeal into a way of life, otherwise known as culture, the distinctive *volksgeist* that separates people into self-contained *natural* communities and encapsulates individuals in immutable *natural* identities. Cultural is experienced as "natural", and because alternative identities are culturally proscribed, the immutable "natural" identities reflexively animate the habit-forming quotidian social interactions that in time endows them with unassailable emotive power.

Primordialism, then, is an essentialist conception of identity. It envisions society constituted by stifling cultural homogeneity. People in this vision are not autonomous individuals, but irredeemable cultural categories constituted by the all-encompassing *volksgeist* and inextricably linked by enduring kinship to the larger cultural community to which they are required to owe unquestioned allegiance and to whose survival they are expected to dedicate and, if necessary, sacrifice themselves. Cultural heterogeneity, in the primordial, is an existential threat. And the

Pavlovian reflexivity that animates the primordial allegiance and dedication to the well-being and survival of the cultural community also animates the implacable animus toward the others excluded from it.

### **What is Constructivism?<sup>2</sup>**

Constructivism draws attention to the strategic choice of social identity as a basis of group organization and on the political and social processes that structure (constrain/facilitate) that choice. The strategic choice specifically involves the selection of empirical markers (physiognomy, genealogy, language, race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation) from the available portfolio of varied cultural elements of plural societies and their configuration in a way that defines an intersubjective group identity for individuals possessing some or all of those markers and encourages them to mobilize for political action based on that constructed identity. In other words, the mere presence of objective markers of identity that constitute plural societies is not an automatic basis for the construction of social identity. These elements have to be consciously activated, coherently articulated and strategically deployed as the constitutive ingredients of social identities, as the cement of social interaction, as the definition of group interests, and as mechanisms of group organization and political action.

The emphasis on the self-conscious selection and transformation of varied empirical identity markers into a composite definition of social identity and a basis of group action helps to limit the analysis to those elements and to those groups defined by them that have acquired political salience. A plural society will typically have a portfolio of varied empirical identity markers ( $x_1, x_2, x_3, \dots, x_n$ ), although the variety will not be infinite. Which of these will be activated, however, depends on the number, diversity and potential political relevance of the available cultural elements as well as the incentives and opportunities defined by the state, the institutional framework of governance, the role of political parties in mobilizing social identities both as political resource and interest definition, and the dynamics of electoral politics. For example, even a cursory review of US history will reveal marked temporal and cross-sectional variations in the social salience and political relevance of race, ethnicity, religion, gender and sexual orientation as sources of social identities. Thus, the emergence in the past 20 years of partisan identity as a composite social identity constituted by reinforcing racial, ethnic, religious and regional identities (Mason 2018), which, stands in sharp contrast to the cross-cutting cleavages that underpinned American electoral politics in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, was not foreordained. How the country moved from a cross-cutting political structure to a polarized political structure cannot easily be explained as the reflexive outcome of primordial identities.

Straightforward constructivist explanations, however, offer an overly deterministic interpretation of how social identities are constructed. Some constructivist scholars suggest, moreover, that there are limits to the construction of social identities. Norval (1999: 86), for instance, points out that socially inscribed identities are not fungible in the sense that they can be “picked and chosen as if from a supermarket shelf” and emphasizes the contingencies of historical, social, and

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<sup>2</sup> The constructivist literature is vast and diverse, because of which it lacks unified theory. The single-best attempt to impose a semblance of theoretical coherence to constructivism is Chandra (2012), which includes some of the best in constructivist scholarship. Chandra’s Introduction is invaluable.

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

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

### **The Logic of Constrained Constructivism**<sup>3</sup>

[Figure 1 Here]

Figure 1 displays the logic of constrained constructivism. The central logic of constrained constructivism is that ethno-political group and identity construction is quintessentially a strategic activity of cultural artisanship, but one that is constrained by a combination of social-structural, institutional and strategic factors. The strategic cultural artisanship that animates social identity construction involves the selection of objective identity markers from the available portfolio of varied cultural elements that comprise plural societies and their configuration into a composite criterion for drawing cultural boundaries that simultaneously assimilate and differentiate individuals into distinct identity groups and invest them with normative significance and political salience. The configuration of multiple identity markers into a composite criterion of social differentiation and assimilation is specifically a “process of intensifying the subjective meanings of a multiplicity of symbols and of striving for multi-symbol congruence among a group of people defined initially by one or more central symbol” (Brass 1991: 20). The striving for multi-symbol congruence, if successful, results in the construction of conceptually parsimonious composite identity ethno-political groups (Hispanic, Asian-American, Muslim, Afro-American, White, Christians) that subsume important intra-group differences (Cubans and Mexicans, Chinese and Koreans, Sunnis and Shiites, Irish and Italians, Catholics, Protestants and Evangelicals).

#### ***Social-Structural Constraints***

Variations in the presence and in the indicators of intra-group differences point to variations, respectively, in the type and complexity of social-structural constraints on the instrumentalism of strategic cultural artisanship that otherwise animates social identity construction. These social-structural constraints stem from the quantitative variety and qualitative differences in the available portfolio of objective identity markers in culturally plural societies that furnish multiple bases of politically salient significant inter-group as well as intra-group cleavages. For example, in the United States Muslims are divided by race and ethnicity (e.g., between Black Muslims and Muslims from Asia, Africa and the Middle East) and also by intra-denominational differences (Sunnis and Muslims) as well as religion (e.g. Syrians are largely Christians) (Eck 2001)

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<sup>3</sup> This section draws heavily from Mozaffar (1995, 2010).

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

### *Institutional Constraints*

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

America's institutional pluralism also allowed for the construction social identities anchored in local "institutional complete" identity communities.<sup>4</sup> This is the classic residential settlement patterns of "ethnic neighborhood" that emerged in major US cities as a result of the influx of European immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup>-Century. In addition to reducing the transaction costs of new arrivals in accessing economic resources in an unfamiliar environment, these "institutionally complete" communities reconstituted their erstwhile localized identities of their country of origin into a broader hyphenated identities (Italian-American, Irish-American, etc.) in the context political competition for powers and resources. And since local institutions (parties, elections, municipal governments) mediated access to these resources, ethnic entrepreneurs had the incentive to mobilize their identity communities to control these institutions.

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

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

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<sup>4</sup> "Institutional completeness" refers to the extent to which the set of membership rules and ascriptive markers that distinguish an identity group make the group the exclusive source of its members' social and economic needs. *Ceteris paribus*, the greater the institutional completeness of the group the greater the dependence of social actors on it for their life chances. For explication of the concept of institutional completeness, see Breton (1964)

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

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

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

[I]nstitutions ... are founded [on analogy] with nature and, therefore, in reason. Being naturalized, they are part of the order of the universe and so are ready to stand as grounds for argument ... By using formal analogies that entrench an abstract structure of social conventions in an abstract structure imposed upon nature, institutions grow past the initial difficulties of collective action ... [T]he logically prior question, [then], is how individuals ever agree that any two things are similar and dissimilar. Where does sameness reside? The answer has to be that sameness is conferred on the mixed bundles of items that count as members of a category; their sameness is conferred and fixed by institutions.

### ***Strategic Constraints***

In combination, the social-structural and institutional constraints discussed so far reinforce the strategic constraints of high start-up costs, which include the unknown maintenance cost of potential groups, that are intrinsic to the set of decisions and activities involved in constructing large and cohesive social identity groups. Even as the configuration of social-structural variables and the institutional framework of political, social and economic interactions constrain, but also facilitate, the construction of social identities, start-up costs exert an independent constraint on the strategic cultural artisanship of creating new ethnopolitical groups and identities as well as changing existing ones, since the logic of both processes are functionally equivalent.

Strategic cultural artisanship is fundamentally a process of coordinating the heterogeneous interests of individual actors to construct and promote the corporate interest of the social identity. Interest heterogeneity derives from intra-group role differentiation, especially between leaders and followers, but also creates an interdependence among them that affects the process of group formation, identity construction, interest definition and collective behavior in three ways.

First, interest heterogeneity transfers the start-up cost of social identity groups to cultural entrepreneurs who deploy their entrepreneurial skills (and entrepreneurship is a quintessential strategic activity) to invest the selected objective identity markers with symbolic significance for identity construction and interest definition and mobilize individual actors distinguished by those markers for collective action. Second, due to the usually large size of social identity groups, especially in large country like the United States where such groups are geographically spread and, indeed, whose individual may never know each personally, interest heterogeneity helps reduce the maintenance cost of ethnopolitical groups over time, since the individual cost of supporting the group is lower in large groups. Joint production and maintenance of social identity thus becomes possible. Third, interdependence engenders conditional cooperation among ethnopolitical actors, whereby the benefits of group action accruing to individual actors depend on the collective benefits accruing to the whole group. In ongoing social identity group, each actor's interest in mutual cooperation is thus contingent on, "involves ineliminable reference" (Johnson 1988: 229) to, the other actors in the group. A common interest in avoiding individual sub-optimal benefits from non-cooperative behavior motivates the irredeemably conditional cooperative strategy of all social identity group actors (Johnson 1988).

However, large social identity groups comprised of heterogeneous interests, even as they help to reduce the cost of individual contributions to group solidarity, render strategic rationality an insufficient basis for sustaining contingent cooperation over narrow materialist concerns, especially in the long run. Characteristic information problems of accurate communication of divergent individual interests and their coherent expression in terms of the particular (religious, racial, ethnic, gender) identity pose problems for group leaders in crafting and sustaining group solidarity. The availability of heterogeneous identity markers and their potential reconfiguration by competitors, moreover, present options for defection and construction of alternative social identity groups identities. And social structural differentiation creates additional opportunities for organizing group behavior and realizing individual interests, potentially diminishing the salience of identity for those purposes. Their continued ability to sustain group solidarity thus depends, in addition to the small size of ethnopolitical groups and their entrepreneurial skills, on the response of the state to ethnopolitical demands.

In sum, strategic cultural artisanship animates the construction of social identity groups. But its unfettered impact is constrained by the combination of (a) the historically configured social-structural constraints reflected in the variety of identity ethnic markers in the available portfolio of cultural elements of the country, (b) the historically configured institutional constraints reflected in the state actions and policies that establish the arenas of political, social and economic interactions and prescribe which of the multiple identity markers will be selected and combined to define social identity as the criteria of entry and participation in these interactions, and (c) the strategic costs of creating and maintaining large ethnopolitical groups.

So, what about strategic primordialism? I answer this question in the Conclusion which follows.

## Strategic Primordialism

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

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

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

I employ the term “strategic primordialism” to refer to the deliberate action of marginalized groups to increase the social salience and political relevance of erstwhile latent or weakly-mobilized varied identity-constitutive markers to coalesce around a shared, single (“essential”) identity that supersedes other sources of identity and suppresses associated inter- and intra-group differences. This oxymoronic construction enhances the explanatory power of strategic primordialism by highlighting the fundamental paradox of identity politics in the United States.

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

Today’s identity politics emerged as a response to the oppression, discrimination and marginalization of individuals and groups based on some ascriptive characteristics (usually race and ethnicity) that were previously defined in essentialist terms and the definition enshrined in law and policy, endowing the subjects with institutionalized one-dimensional primordial identity. This institutionalization structured the mobilization of identity politics, which was now framed and animated by the same essentialist ascriptive characteristics and associated identities that

formed the basis of the oppression and marginalization in the first place. Political parties have reflected and structured this vicious cycle in American politics since the country's inception and the institutionalization of its "original sin" in the three-fifth compromise. Multiculturalism ostensibly represents an alternative to racism, but the two mirror each other in their primordial conception and understanding of identity.

Primordialism as an approach to the systematic study of identity and politics is now widely rejected across the human sciences and the humanities.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, it continues to influence, perhaps unwittingly, the work of scholars who study identity politics in the United States. It continues to inform media narratives in which the journalistic penchant for using simplifying adjectives ignores the malleability of identities and gloss over their intrinsic characterological variability discussed above. And it is insidiously manifested in popular and academic discourses on diversity, authenticity and cultural appropriation.

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

Hence, the imperative of strategic primordialism. But strategic primordialism is a fraught strategy, especially in the context of the current political polarization with a hollowed-out middle (Abramowitz 2010). Motivated reasoning is the everyday reflexive response. Over time, however, cultural entrepreneurs and political parties confront the classic leadership dilemma of falling victim to their own success. The very benefits (psychic and material) they confer on their followers by their successful fusion of identity and interest undermine their power and influence. Anger and resentment are enervating.

Strategic rationality now encounters the need to invent tradition. The invention of tradition is a quintessential rational and political act of inventing, constructing and formalizing a historical past (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). It is the intellectual bricolage (Lévi-Strauss 1966) of constructing identity and difference as a single process of simultaneously fostering group solidarity and group differentiation. The symbols and rituals that constitute invented tradition endow social identities with normative significance and invest interests defined in terms of that identity with unassailable emotive power. Symbols are the "intersubjective cognitive resources" (Johnson 1988: 232) that impose order in strategic relationship through public dramatization in rituals (Geertz 1981). Rituals are practices representing social relations as "real." Symbols are rationalized by analogy as existing in nature (Douglas 1970; 1986: 45-33). Their ritualistic expressions "literally" embody certain possibilities and exclude others (Moore and Meyerhoff 1977). Identity means difference. And since symbolic identity simply exists in nature, "our" identity must be real and "our" identity-based relations and interests natural. As "dirt is matter out of place" (Douglass 1966), difference is naturally unnatural. "Their" identity must,

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<sup>5</sup> Although it occasionally informs the work of some scholars (Esman 1994; Reilly 2001). For an earlier crude version of its use, see Isaacs (1975). For a particularly odious use of it, see Vanhanen (1999).

therefore, be fictitious and “their” identity-based relations and interests a pollutant. A way of seeing becomes a way of not seeing.

But agency is a double-edged sword. In a society based on freedom without ordered liberty agents become “rational fools” and “social morons” (Sen 1977). But, as James Madison well recognized, in a society based on freedom tempered by ordered liberty, institutions can encourage strategically rational agents to craft “imagined communities” (Anderson) with the social and cultural endowments to transform swords into ploughshares.

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**Figure 1**  
**The Logic of Constrained Constructivism**

