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# **The Full Story of Identity Politics: From Individual Identity Formation to Foreign Policy Decisions**

With practical examples from India and the United States

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Literature Review</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Part 1 – Theoretical Framework</b> .....	<b>10</b>
Introducing Identity Politics .....	10
Examining the ‘identity’ concept .....	11
From ‘identity’ to ‘groupness’.....	13
Other aspects worth emphasizing.....	14
<b>Arguments against identity politics</b> .....	<b>16</b>
Over-determination .....	16
Polarization.....	16
<b>Arguments in favour of identity politics</b> .....	<b>17</b>
Critiquing conventional norms.....	17
Social progress.....	17
<b>Identity politics and its relation to democracies</b> .....	<b>18</b>
Difficulties .....	18
Advantages.....	19
<b>Moving beyond the domestic narrative – linking IP to International Relations</b> .....	<b>20</b>
Applying ‘identity’ to states.....	20
Challenging Rational Actor assumptions .....	21
The international dimension of ‘identity’ in identity politics .....	21
Back to the individual – how is foreign policy influenced?.....	24
<b>Part 2 – Practical examples of identity politics</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>The case of India</b> .....	<b>26</b>
Identity politics based on religion.....	27
The role of the Supreme Court .....	30
Identity politics in India’s foreign policy .....	31
<b>The case of the United States</b> .....	<b>32</b>
The election of Trump and the role of Obama .....	32
Black Lives Matter .....	35
Anti-identity identity politics .....	36
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>38</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>42</b>

“Multiculturalist ideology and identity politics have corrupted the way we understand participatory democracy. Indeed, they’ve contributed to a general misperception of the meaning of politics itself.”

- Adam Ellwanger<sup>1</sup>

That *identity politics* has seemingly become a negatively loaded phrase, one that is deployed derisively by the mass media, probably comes as no surprise. Many contemporary debates are framed within the narrative of identity politics. Black Lives Matter? Identity politics. Preferred use of pronouns? Identity politics. The Christchurch mosque shootings? Probably identity politics. The presumed leftist takeover of the universities? Definitely identity politics. Over the past decade, this identity politics movement is thriving, with news outlets lashing on and reporting on this often assumed harmful political narrative. It is used on both ends of the political spectrum: from the growing left to the edges of the far-right. Both sides use identity politics as an accusation to frame topics that fall outside the political mainstream. This is an inherent contradiction, seeing as both sides are political outsiders themselves. However, interestingly, this single tendency is able to bind together the spectrum of the traditional left-right. The binding factor here is the methodology: a virulent focus on people’s identity – their gender, ethnicity, background, religion, sexuality, citizenship or culture<sup>2</sup>. Identity politics enables the forming of coalitions. These come with demands that are based on shared understandings of what it means to be a specific individual – say, an African-American in the USA or a cis gay man in the UK. Identity politics speaks to large classes of people that are bound together by their shared identity and their rights that are demanded because of this. Identity politics is specifically relevant within a democratic framework – where it thrives domestically and can even spill-over into foreign policy.

This master thesis will explore the broad topic of identity politics. It is divided into two parts. Firstly, a theoretical framework will be provided. Through a systematic approach, identity politics will be theoretically examined step-by-step, starting with the concept of identity

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<sup>1</sup> Ellwanger (2019)

<sup>2</sup> Penny (2019)

itself. The structure will methodologically move from identity to groupness to the concept in its entirety. Arguments in favour and against the use identity politics will be presented. Then, the link with liberal democracies will be explored. Here, as well, arguments will be given in favour and against. Lastly, the theoretical framework moves beyond a domestic narrative by linking the concept to the study of International Relations. This international dimension will focus on foreign policy. The theory will be applied in the second part, where practical examples of identity politics will be examined. India and the United States serve as the two case studies. A conclusion will follow to answer the main question: *“To what extent does identity politics domestically and internationally influence politics, democracies and foreign policy?”* Of course, the whole endeavour starts with a brief literature review.

### **Reviewing the existing literature**

‘Identity’ as a research topic is very common in academia. It even experienced a surge in the last two decades. Identity as an analytical tool is not without difficulties – its loose definition and loose application raises questions on the utility and validity of the concept. What is identity? How is it shaped? Is it a determinant factor for behaviour and does it affect political affiliations and values? Regardless of these difficulties, when examining ‘identity politics’, it is important to start with research on identity. When the dynamics of identity formation are known, this can then be applied to different levels of perspective – from local to the state level.

The literature review starts with the great *“Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition”* by Francis Fukuyama. This serves as starting point because it is not only one of the latest books on the topic, Fukuyama’s work has also been featured many times within popular media due to his strong statements about how harmful identity politics is. Fukuyama holds that identity politics causes the fragmentation of social cohesion - where cohesion is the necessary foundation for political consensus. This fragmentation enables ideological and cultural diversity that counteracts a strong sense of belonging. This causes the search for identity in specific identity based movements. This enables a form of pluralism based on identity. This harms democracies because the demanded political change is framed within identity terms as well. People then vote on the basis of identity.

When policies are pursuit based on identity, other identity groups are in danger of being shut out. One identity group can ultimately be harmful for larger society.

The narrative that Fukuyama presents is clear. To examine his claims, Mary Bernstein's work "Identity Politics" is the first step. Bernstein's work is extensive, elaborate and consists of summaries of other academic works. She is one of the few researchers who produced an extensive work on the topic of identity politics alone. When reading other works, Bernstein is often referenced. Bernstein's main point is that identity politics is descriptive, instead of explanatory. She underlines her point by demonstrating that different approaches to identity politics, yield different interpretations. Whilst there are different theoretical traditions, the underlying message remains the same: identity politics only holds descriptive power. Identity politics departs from traditional class-based movements and is defined as a form of (political) activism organized in status-based social movements<sup>3</sup>. Bernstein carries forward a cautionary message. She warns analysts that they must be careful in using the concept 'identity' – its multi-directional focus and loose application raises concerns about the utility and validity of the concept.

Bernstein reiterates the difficulty of using 'Identity' as an analytical concept. This potentially forms a problematic base for the entire study of identity politics. Which has been demonstrated well in "An Introduction to the Special Issue on Identity Politics", written by Kumar et al. The choice for this work as the third analytical undertaking is because Kumar et al. also compile multiple other sources in their work. The most straightforward message reads that identity is spatially and temporally contingent, meaning that identity and also identity politics is socially constructed. Identity politics therefore becomes not only a construct; it is also contingent on the geographical and historical narrative<sup>4</sup>. That does not mean that identity politics is not a valid or a fruitless endeavour. It still forms large part of contemporary resistance movements where it is born out of historical power dynamics and has broad political influence<sup>5</sup>. This means that identity politics is *real*.

Where Bernstein already concluded in her meta-analyses that identity politics is a departure from class politics, Brown, who is continuously mentioned in the work by Kumar et al., goes

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Kumar et al. (2018), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 6.

even further and claims that identity politics is a manifestation of class politics<sup>6</sup>. Those who are classified within the confines of identity politics are not seeking to dismantle existing class structures but instead seek honest representation of minorities among the broader classes. Brown highlights thereby the focus on the individual domain and the individual perception of prejudice and intolerance<sup>7</sup>. This is a constructivist' narrative. Identity politics can be utilized against the state to enforce legal remedies. Building on that, Kumar et al. asserts that there are critics claiming that this essentialism is *just that*: identity politics is strategic and operational and not a particular form of political liberation. The movements that are formed are a consequence of the unfair distribution of rights and goods; meaning that identity politics answers to the shortcomings of a liberal society. This is affirmed by multiple scholars, including Lani Guiner, an American civil rights theorist, and Gerald Torres, a prominent figure in critical race theory<sup>8</sup>. Courtney Jung, in her work "Why Liberals Should Value Identity Politics", maintains that identity politics exposes a power imbalance that threatens the health of a democratic society<sup>9</sup>.

The examination that follows is the search for a possible causal relationship between identity politics and changing the political reality. Because when identity politics causes the formation of social movements that aim for political change; to what extent is there causality? This question holds for the domestic level and for the state level; where the national identity acts as a determinant and causal factor for the state's preferences towards a particular (international) agenda. When focussing on the latter, a shift has to be made away from traditional realist assumptions. Constructivism is often presented as the viable alternative of realism, yet, is not always taken seriously. Bucher and Jasper, who published one of the most recent works about identity, claim that identity research is too focused on individualistic terms and that that causes the underappreciation of the complex, continuous developing and socially interdependent context in which the state actor is situated<sup>10</sup>. The complexity of a causal approach towards identity (also because of the difficulty of the concept) is underlined by multiple academic sources, ranging from, among others, Elias in

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<sup>6</sup> Claimed by Brown (2015) but taken from Kumar et al. (2018), 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Both references are taken from Jung (2006), 33.

<sup>9</sup> Jung (2006), 33.

<sup>10</sup> Bucher & Jasper (2016), 393.

1978 to Guillaume in 2007<sup>11</sup>. It is commonplace to accept the rational actor explanation for state behaviour due to the rationalist mainstream, yet Alexandrov points out that identity as a concept must receive the attention it deserves; even though this constructivist concept conflicts with mainstream rationalist assumptions<sup>12</sup>.

When analysing identity politics from the perspective of the state the topic of analysis becomes 'state identity'. This is understandable because the ascriptive identities, like race and gender, are only applicable on an individual level. When analysing a concept that is based on identity characteristics, this identity must be conceptualized first. This means that the focus on 'national identity' is a reasonable first step to tackle the international dimension of identity politics. That said, there is not enough empirical evidence to suggest that state identity *an sich* is a causal determinant for state preferences, interests and policies. The state identity does have the ability to shape state behaviour but this is done through state representatives and other relevant political actors. These actors reinforce, redefine or weaken contemporary beliefs about the state's representation and their accompanying behaviour. According to Alexandrov, this process is known as *state identity politics* and has as goal to influence foreign policy and the relations with other states<sup>13</sup>.

Within its most basic and narrow sense is *state identity politics* a process that influences the state's identity. This implies that the identity of a state remains a relevant, important and indispensable topic when researching identity politics.

There is an extensive body of IR literature devoted to state behaviour and realism. The way to challenge realist assumptions is by testing a scenario where a state's foreign policy prioritizes identity over security considerations. Deepa M. Ollapally, an international affairs research professor at George Washington University, embarks on that quest and establishes beforehand that the strongest scenario against realism would be the pursuit of identity imperatives at the expense of the country's overall security<sup>14</sup>. Of course, motivations have to be established *a priori*. Ollapally, in her article "Foreign Policy and Identity Politics: Realist versus Culturalist Lessons", presents the Iran-Iraq war as the scenario that opposes realism. She uses Iranian foreign policy to demonstrate that the behaviour of Iran's elite, at least in

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<sup>11</sup> References taken from Bucher & Jasper (2016), 394.

<sup>12</sup> Alexandrov (2003), 34.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ollapally (1998), 255.

relation to the Iraq war in 1980-1988, is inconsistent with the expected realist paradigm. She analyses the pre-war period and the 1982 war-prolongation and concludes that the explanation of Iran's reaction to the threat of Iran's territorial integrity could only be explained using identity considerations. The war-prolongation refers to the situation in 1982, when the Iraqi army had largely withdrew from Iranian territory, and Iran still decided to continue the war. A logical realist approach, which would be security driven, would consist of attempts to end the war. Instead, Iran continued the war. This behaviour can only fully be explained with the addition of the Islamic worldview and Iranian state identity.

Ollapally demonstrates that the effects of state identity should not be neglected. Whether or not there is a direct connection between state identity and foreign policy depends on the willingness and on the viability of disregarding the dominant discourse. Ollapally did excellent work in providing the first step; assuming that the Iran-Iraq war is not unique in its kind. So, the real question would be whether or not IR scholars would seriously consider the effects of socio-cultural factors and then specifically the identity paradigm when studying foreign policy. The hesitance is understandable since constructivism remains secondary compared to realism. This is underlined by Kenneth Waltz, who wrote one of the most influential IR works: "Theory of International Politics", a book where he demonstrated the academic importance of realism, rational-actor assumptions and the anarchical international system. That said, the recognition of the relevance of socio-culture factors does not necessarily undermine the significance of the interests that serve as the main driving force of state behaviour. Instead, it allows scholars to see how socio-cultural factors might *temper* these interests.

What does the literature review demonstrates? The choice for the reviewed academics might seem limited, but all are strategically chosen. The choice was based on how influential their work was, how recent their publications were and if there work was a sort of 'meta-analysis'. Because with the latter, there are automatically more scholars taken into account. That said, the limitation also comes from the realization that most scholars approach identity politics one-sided. It is either very much focused on its relationship to economics, race, liberalism, nationalism or Marxism, or it specifically focuses only on identity. That said, the literature teaches that identity politics is real, that it is descriptive, a type of political activism, relevant from the state level and that it is grounded in constructivism.



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Considering previous research, what misses is the entire story: from individual emergence to state expression. The link between individuals who classify their politics as identity based and how these individuals, as state officials, influence state behaviour (through foreign policy) is the whole story and therefore occupies the main topic of this thesis. The underlying element that links these ingredients together is *democracies*. Based on Fukuyama's analysis; identity politics specifically manifests itself within the confines of a liberal democracy and it is the freedoms that democratic societies bring forward that enables this political activism. And in order to provide the reader with the whole story of identity politics the relationship with liberal democracies must be explored. But in order to embark on any analysis an introduction and definition must be provided first.

## Part 1 – Theoretical Framework

### Introducing ‘Identity Politics’

Before reliably defining the term *identity politics* understand that the rhetorical noise surrounding it has enabled an automatic sense of disregard, especially within popular media. Dr. Christina Greer describes that its contemporary usage differs from its historical definition<sup>15</sup>. The former has gotten a bad reputation, where Greer states that identity politics as a term is merely used as a descriptive mechanism without its original, historical, basis<sup>16</sup>. Used by those who are arguing against the concept. When talking heads mention ‘identity politics’, they often steer away from adequately defining the concept<sup>17</sup>. A parallel can be drawn with how George Orwell, in his essay ‘Politics and the English Language’, commented on the word ‘fascism’; where the word has become little more than a reference to “something not desirable”. This same dynamic is happening here; where identity politics is the new fascism – and in the same way the new neo-liberalism and the new populism; where both terms experience the same negatively-laden scrutiny without a solid academic basis<sup>18</sup>. At least within popular media. Identity politics has become a shorthand for what one finds undesirable. The present-day use of the term has together with its rhetorical cousin *political correctness* been reduced to a political buzzword status<sup>19</sup>.

Identity politics, when trying to identify its historical definition, signifies a broad range of political activity that has its foundation in the shared experiences of (past) injustices of the members of a specific identity-based social group<sup>20</sup>. These identity-based groups organize deliberately and explicitly around a specific identity, rather than their party affiliation or belief systems. Their desired objective is to ensure the political freedom of their constituency that has been marginalized within its larger context<sup>21</sup>. The members of the constituency use their distinctiveness, what in essence constitutes their identity, to dispute the dominant and oppressive reality. There is a demand for recognition and legitimization

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<sup>15</sup> She explains this in a Sunday Civics video episode. See bibliography.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Oliver (2018).

<sup>18</sup> This parallel is described by Timothy Oliver. Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> In an article assessing mass media, Parker Molloy draws this conclusion. See:

<https://www.mediamatters.org/laura-ingraham/media-keep-talking-about-identity-politics-what-does-it-even-mean-anymore>

<sup>20</sup> Bliss (2013), 1013 and the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

within larger society<sup>22</sup>. In simple terms, ‘identity politics’ refers to those political actions that are oriented at the needs, interests and values of collective groups that possess a shared identity<sup>23</sup>. In turn, ‘identity’ refers to the sense of self in relation to others; to the ones around oneself<sup>24</sup>. This means that identity signifies “a place in society”<sup>25</sup>. This individual-specific identity consists of different *markers*, where each person carries a unique combination of these markers within<sup>26</sup>. Examples of markers are religious beliefs, physiognomic features, gendered experiences, linguistic abilities and cultural habits. A plurality of these markers forms one’s identity and one’s identity politics is often shaped by one of the identity markers.

### **Examining the ‘identity’ concept**

‘Identity’ and its formation is widely studied in the social sciences, humanities and arts. Defining ‘identity’ is not specifically necessary when building a case surrounding identity politics, because any definitional attempts of it are simultaneously embedded with an explanation of identity. However, it is interesting to take a moment to see how the concept of identity is related to politics. In doing so, a closer look at the notion of identity is inevitable. Identity, as a concept, is necessarily and unavoidably defined by two opposites: difference and sameness<sup>27</sup>. When someone declares to have a specific identity (trait) then one claims at the same time that he or she is in that sense identical to other persons or entities that possess that same identity (trait). Concurrently, these identity traits are perceived as being unique, as making up unique qualities: one’s identity. This simultaneously provokes differentiation and delineation when compared to the ones who do not identify as such. Inevitably, a divide between the possessors and the non-possessors of this identity (trait) is established. This delineation thus leads to inevitable forms of exclusion: where exclusion is inherent and unavoidable to the identity concept<sup>28</sup>. This also means that identity is undeniable related to the external world – the world that provides

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Thiel and Coate (2010), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, preface.

<sup>25</sup> As described by Simon (1999) in “A Place in the World: Self and Social Categorization”

<sup>26</sup> ‘Marker’ as a reference is taken from S. Gupta.

<sup>27</sup> Hekman (1999), 5.

<sup>28</sup> Tilly (2015), 8.

the separation between one and the other<sup>29</sup>. This means that the one who possess this identity is different than the one who does not. The relation of the individual with the external world is providing the delineation necessary for identity formation. In addition, (personal) identity presents a sense of continuity and endurance<sup>30</sup>. This is seen in the Latin roots of the word 'identity' where *idem* means 'the same'<sup>31</sup>. This 'sameness' represents the continuity of a personality; it signifies the idea that a person remains roughly the same throughout its life<sup>32</sup>. All this teaches us, is that being unique, through an identity, also means being the same in two ways: namely being identical to others that share the same identity (traits) and being identical to oneself over time. This dynamic introduces a paradox: sameness is creating individuality – "being the same makes you different"<sup>33</sup>. The play of opposites is an inescapable battle presented within the concept of identity<sup>34</sup>.

It was professor W.J.M. Mackenzie, a professor of government and politics, who was one of the first that tried to track the emergence of identity politics. He used the etymological roots of identity (that is: sameness) as a starting point. From thereon, he traced the identity evolution from seeking recognition to a means for the establishment and characterization of collectives<sup>35</sup>. Mackenzie hypothesized that the history of identity politics dates back to the 50's and 60's of the last century, implying the relative newness of the term. Mackenzie studied the emergence of the social and political movements that unfolded a new narrative in the United States; one centred around the claims of injustice. The Black Civil Rights movement and the Lesbian and Gay Liberation movement, as well as the second of was of feminism, propelled the debate that concerns the origins, nature and future of identity groups. Unfortunately, any further rendering of the history lays beyond the scope of this paper.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Rowland (1994), 132.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> This is taken from how the English Oxford Dictionary defines identity, as further explained by Hekman (1999)

<sup>33</sup> Hekman (1999), 5.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> His book is called "Political Identity" (1978)

### From 'identity' to 'groupness'

Aforementioned quickly highlights how similar identity (traits) invoke a sense of 'sameness'. Those unique characteristics make up a stepping stone for the creation of groups. When individuals mutually identify with one another people cluster together to form identity groups<sup>36</sup>. This is then called the *collective identity* and refers to the cognition that the members of a single group share: it signifies the characteristic of the group<sup>37</sup>. When these groups are created a specific dynamic between group membership and the understanding of a deeper sense of self surfaces. When the groups cognition is based on history, specifically on past grievances, then the most dominant form of identity politics surfaces<sup>38</sup>. Here, the historical narrative forms a trajectory that constructs the essence of the groups identity politics<sup>39</sup>. It is the history of these identity groups that provides the individual group members the story of how its specific identity is perceived through time and how they are perceived in its larger societal context; often through comparisons<sup>40</sup>. This is where the link with politics is presented; its historical narrative provides the groups with the context on how to view contemporary political issues and how they should ascertain past and present challenges. The challenges that are characterized by social exclusion pertain to those where its historical narrative is written on the basis of oppression and marginalization<sup>41</sup>. The oppression was based on the identity itself, meaning that these groups experienced (social) exclusion, only on the virtue of having a particular identity. It is the experience of the oppression that brings about particular perspectives and needs of the oppressed groups; both of which were unable to be assimilated through the existing political power structures<sup>42</sup>. The reaction to this is the involvement of group members in political action on behalf of the collective (the identity group)<sup>43</sup>. When group members engage in political protest the collective identity politicizes<sup>44</sup>. The focus is on the struggle for power, where group members want to change, establish or defend existing power structures. As said, this

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<sup>36</sup> Guttman (2009), 2.

<sup>37</sup> Klandermans (2013), 3.

<sup>38</sup> Kumar et al. (2018), 6.

<sup>39</sup> Liu & Hilton (2005), 538.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 539.

<sup>41</sup> For a more thorough analysis on social exclusion see, for instance, the work by Robin Peace: "Social Exclusion: A Concept in Need of Definition?" (2001)

<sup>42</sup> Heyes (2009)

<sup>43</sup> Klandermans (2013), 4.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

process starts with the groups' awareness of the shared past grievances where the collective identity forms, at least in part, the basis of these grievances. In general, this political activism is brought under the heading of identity politics.

*Identity politics, in essence, seeks recognition and accommodation of identity-related differences<sup>45</sup>. Identity politics can therefore be seen as a form of activism which aims to, first, end domination, and, second, to transform the institutions and power structures that prevent the marginalized groups from the participation in the determination of their own actions<sup>46</sup>.*

### **Other aspects worth emphasizing**

Aforementioned explanation should suffice in giving a general idea of what identity politics is. In short, historical power-dynamics form the driver of this type of political activism. The exploited and marginalized groups form collective identities that get politicized as a response to the desire and the willingness to change the existing power structures that failed to include them in actions of self-determination. The most known examples of identity-based collectives are groups centred around nationality, race, ethnicity, class, religion, gender or sexuality. This identity, say being a women or a gay men, makes the person vulnerable for cultural imperialism, exploitation, violence and powerlessness. Mostly, identity politics starts off with the reality of oppression. What follows is the re-description, reclaiming, and transformation of the stigmatized group<sup>47</sup>. This means that the negative ascriptions voiced by the dominant culture are rejected. Within these groups it is the *individual* identity that is placed as a secondary - a separate matter<sup>48</sup>. This means that considerations of the collective identity supersedes the considerations of the individual identity.

Another important observation is that identity politics is not the same as the politics of recognition. The departure can be found in the demand for recognition based on the same grounds upon which recognition had previously been denied: demanding recognition

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<sup>45</sup> Page 517, "Identity Politics" by James Tully

<sup>46</sup> Page 72, "Problematising the Political Theory of Identity Politics" by Bregham Dalgliesh

<sup>47</sup> Heyes (2009)

<sup>48</sup> Gupta (2007), 8.

*because* one is a woman as a consequence of recognition that has been denied *because* she is a woman<sup>49</sup>. This specific demand is not one that fits in the “universal humankind” narrative; a narrative that is based on the many shared attributes that humans possess, nor is it a demand for respect despite one’s differences. Instead, the demand is one *because* of the difference<sup>50</sup>.

### **Disclaimer**

Identity politics is an umbrella term for a specific form of political activism. This means that the scope of political movements that can be categorized as such is broad. The examples given in popular media and academic literature are mostly from struggles within Western capitalist democracies but similar narratives and arguments are made within the wider political universe. Indigenous rights movements and groups that demand regional and national self-determination are perfect examples of identity politics outside the established context. There is no clear rulebook that classifies specific political struggles as an illustration of identity politics. Instead, for this thesis onwards, it must be acknowledged that identity politics here solely refers to those political activities that advocate for the social position of the collective that has previously been suppressed, neglected or erased. The demand for any more descriptive details is not only unrealistic, because the term simply is intended to cover a broad array of political actions, but also implies an impracticable and thorough analysis of the inexhaustible literature that covers multiple academic disciplines; an endeavour already embarked on by the academia who wanted to define ‘populism’; a term that ended up signifying a wide (yet demarcated) range of political activity as well<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> Kruks (2001), 58.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> As concluded by one of the most influential political scientists who studies populism: Cas Mudde. See for instance the introductory book he wrote together with Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017)

## Arguments against identity politics

### Over-determination

Building on the premise that individual identity is built on a unique combination of *markers*, a collective would magnify one of these markers and take it as a common denominator for its members. It is implicitly accepted that this common denominator confers a shared sense of experience on its members, one that enables a perception of mutual understanding and joint aspirations. This facilitates a sense of allegiance<sup>52</sup>. Subsequently, the specific focus on one marker can harmfully lead to its over-determination. An individual is thereby reduced to only one aspect of their identity; or merely reduced to their identity-based collective. When analysing this from a policy perspective, the possibility of over-determination still exists. Racial policies, or the opposition thereof, insists on the over-determination of physiognomic features. Feminist policies might emphasize the over-determination of what it means to be a woman. This over-determination can lead to a fixed idea about what constitutes a particular identity trait, leaving no room for other individual experiences and interpretations. Also, an individual's identity might serve as secondary importance – leaving collective identity hierarchical higher; thereby leaving little room for individual development.

### Polarization

The formation and association of identity (groups) do not require political values and ideologies. Identity is based on inclusion and exclusion<sup>53</sup>. The formation of groups, which is in this case based on identity, can fulfil two basic psychological needs: inclusion, where one is part of the group, and exclusion, where one distinguishes oneself from other groups. Before diving too much into sociology and the social identity theory, it suffices to say that inclusion and exclusion is a precursor for the well-studied *us versus them* mentality. It enables in-group privilege and favouritism and out-group derogation<sup>54</sup>. Since identity does not rely on an adherence to ideology or creed, an increased dislike towards other groups is

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<sup>52</sup> Gupta (2007), 8

<sup>53</sup> Brewer (2001), 118.

<sup>54</sup> Mason (2018), 869.



without a direct link to issue-based ideological disagreements<sup>55</sup>. This could foster identity-based polarization. If this is translated into politics, then the identity-based polarization might spill over into political decisions. Participation in politics can therefore be exercised based on factors other than contemporary political concerns.

## **Arguments in favour of identity politics**

### **Critiquing conventional norms**

The irrefutable reality is that individuals have been denied access to acts of self-determination based on specific identity traits. Marginalization is not a myth and the well-known civil rights and feminist movements were a necessary reaction to the prejudice and unfairness in the political system. Women being denied rights just for being a woman and men of colour being denied jobs or citizenship because of their race or ethnicity are just three real life examples of the skewness of the system. Identity politics can be seen as the answer to this – taking back self-determination and fighting against the narrative that certain identity traits are inferior. Identity politics is the response to the unjust system and the unjust hierarchies as a consequence. Whether or not one believes in, for instance, the existence of the white male patriarchy, certain social groups believe that the patriarchy is an undeniable reality and built their narrative around it. Identity politics embodies the persuasion that inequality and injustice are wrong. Treating women the same as men; just as black and whites; extending suffrage to individuals without property; equalizing economic opportunity regardless of the lack of resources.

### **Social progress**

To build on previous, identity politics constitutes attempts to create a more inclusive and fair society: identity politics drives social progress. One of the biggest struggles of our human existence is the push for justice and equality across the whole spectrum of what it means to be a human. From race, to religion, to gender, sexual orientation and so forth. Due to identity politics, these identity traits are incorporated into the governing reality of a

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<sup>55</sup> For a short overview of studies that concluded this dynamic see page 870. Ibid.

political nation. By accepting the political nature of, for instance, gender and race, these matters are as a consequence taking outside the moral realm into the realm of (political) actions and legislation. Moral rhetoric is transformed into enforcing legal mechanisms.

### **Identity politics and its relation with democracies**

There is an uneasy but necessary place for identity politics in democracies. Francis Fukuyama claims that identity politics is undermining democracy<sup>56</sup>. Before thoroughly analysing that claim it is interesting to understand that a key condition for the existence of contemporary identity politics is institutionalized liberal democracy itself<sup>57</sup>. Liberal democracies come with certain freedoms; freedoms that enable, for instance, individuals to associate and form groups. Association naturally happens in free societies because it is inevitable that individuals will mutually identify in many ways, including political relevant ways<sup>58</sup>. Whenever association is prohibited then a society becomes a tyranny. Associational freedom is therefore the legitimizing factor that facilitates identity groups. The freedom of expression, speech and political participation – all democratic freedoms – ensure the functioning and continuation of identity groups and thus their politics. In other words: identity politics is a by-product of the freedoms brought forward in liberal democracies<sup>59</sup>.

### **Difficulties**

The most apparent contradiction can be found in the most fundamental democratic value. A just democracy treats its individuals as civic equals. They accord individuals their freedoms equally, and this equal regard account for the most fundamental fairness in the system. This means that a just democracy has individuals as its ultimate source – not groups<sup>60</sup>. Whenever the ultimate source would be groups, they will subordinate the equal freedom and civic equality of persons. Treating a group as if it were morally ultimate would be inconsistent

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<sup>56</sup> See this Washington Post article:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/theworldpost/wp/2018/09/18/identity-politics/>

<sup>57</sup> Claimed by Brown (1995)

<sup>58</sup> Guttman (2009), 4.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 8.

with the idea that individuals could live their life in the way that suits them best. Whenever self-appointed groups would occupy the moral high ground there is the possibility of them imposing their identity on individuals; people who might desire otherwise. That would then, in essence, presuppose the idea that people can choose and live their life as they aspire. There is ultimately an inherent contradiction between democracies' focus on the individual – and identity politics' focus on groups.

To add to that, when making democratic decisions based on identity means surpassing decisions based on ideology. Politics might be dominated by the identity narrative which can lead to the fragmentation of society based on these different identity groups. The democratic process would be about competing *identity proposals*; where each identity proposal constitutes an idea about the national self, meaning: state identification and its specific behaviours<sup>61</sup>.

### **Advantages**

Those difficulties do not imply that identity groups are not a legitimate source in the democratic process. Better yet: groups are both important and valuable. Groups can influence individuals identities without compromising their freedoms – both are not necessarily incompatible. Individuals value groups because groups introduce the value of mutual identification, relationships and support<sup>62</sup>. All of which are necessary conditions for the appreciation of oneself. This would ultimately play into the value of democracies: it is exactly this freedom that people can choose to identify as group members; and more often than not does group membership offers benefits vital to individuals wellbeing. To add to that, groups have the potential to combat injustice. Because in democracies, *numbers count*. So groups have the ability to change unjust policies and power structures due to the fact that they outnumber a mere individual. At its core, political influence is legitimately exercised when a plurality of individuals, in this case through identity groups, make their voice heard.

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<sup>61</sup> Term and line of reasoning proposed by Lisel Hintz in chapter 2 of "Linking Identity Politics and Foreign Policy"

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

## Moving beyond the domestic narrative – linking identity politics to International Relations

### Applying ‘identity’ to states

Identity as a concept and as the embeddedness in identity politics has originally been developed for the democratic citizen<sup>63</sup>. Then how is this applied to states?. States and individuals are different entities and at multiple levels incomparable. However, there is extensive academic literature that is accepting of the general applicability of the (individual) identity concept to the state<sup>64</sup>. In the framework that is used here, state identity and identity politics are analysed from the level of policy makers; and specifically how these individuals are using their identity to influence state behaviour. These state officials (state actors) are acting on behalf of their state and their actions are observed through its foreign policy behaviour. The focus therefore stays with the individual. This means that identity – and how it is developed for persons, can also be applied to the level of the state.

As mentioned, identity politics can lead to competing *identity proposals* and, in turn, create different expectations on how governments should reinforce these identity proposals. Building on the work by Lisel Hintz; identity proposals consists of prescribed and proscribed behaviours both for the state and the self<sup>65</sup>. This means that there is, to some extent, an understanding of what are (un)acceptable points of contention from those who support a different identity proposal. Not every identity proposal is accepted in the framework of domestic politics and Hintz argues that whenever supporters encounter a blockade they are driven “outside” the national stage. Using transnational activist networks, diasporic politics and international institutional conditionality, the battle for identity recognition moves international<sup>66</sup>. Lisel Hintz continues by arguing that whenever the domestic stage is surpassed a government’s foreign policy is taking over as an alternative arena<sup>67</sup>. This is not the only institution/ mechanism/ activism that has the possibility to do so but Hintz argues that a foreign policy agenda is traditionally linked with a nation’s national identity. National identity beliefs are being spilled over into foreign policy, and this makes the link with

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<sup>63</sup> Ashizawa (2008), 575.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Her book is called “Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey” (2018)

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, chapter 2.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 4.

identity politics apparent<sup>68</sup>. From here onwards, the focus will lie on foreign policy; a subfield of International Relations.

### **Challenging Rational Actor assumptions**

State action (and in particular foreign policy) is traditionally rooted in rational actor assumptions, materialistic accounts and security considerations. This, of course, opposes identity related concerns that are rooted in the socio-cultural realm. Nevertheless, identity is becoming increasingly relevant within International Relations theory<sup>69</sup>. This idea is rooted in the belief that “foreign policy expresses not only what one wants, but also what one is”<sup>70</sup>. A good example of this can be found in the post-Soviet states. The ideological flux and the internal and external crisis combined with the process of nation building enabled the increased importance of identity, symbols and ideas<sup>71</sup>. When looking at the foreign policy strategy of Georgia, a post-Soviet country that could have easily identified itself with the Caucasus, or to a lesser extent due to geography with the Middle East, choose to focus its identity construction on the European identity. This became essential in its political discourse as much as it became a huge cultural driver<sup>72</sup>. Whilst this example is missing the necessary details, the main message is that identity *can* be an important driving force in a country’s foreign policy agenda. Identity is becoming increasingly important in International Relations.

### **The international dimension of ‘identity’ in identity politics**

Francis Fukuyama claims that most (if not all) of the contemporary political struggles, from social movements to democratic revolutions to Islamism and nationalism, are founded in the desire for public recognition. Therefore, essentially, can they be categorized as matters framed as identity politics<sup>73</sup>. This means that identity plays a central role and whilst identity politics has been discussed from the perspective of the individual, when the perspective is changed to the level of the state the same struggles regarding recognition hold. Indicating

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Bucher & Jasper (2016), abstract.

<sup>70</sup> Fuller (2007), 93.

<sup>71</sup> Jones (2004), 85.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Main premise of his book “Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition”

that identity politics is still relevant when you steer away from the local level; this is because the identity of a state (meaning: the state's national identity) is essential and decisive in harbouring states' fortunes and averting misfortunes<sup>74</sup>. When the national identity is weak, the state can disintegrate into failed states; this is what happened to for instance Yemen and Libya<sup>75</sup>. Other Middle Eastern countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria, have seen their weak national identity being played out through chaos and internal insurgency. The problems of those countries are of course multifaceted, span across time and space and have the burden of an imperial past. Nevertheless, their struggles are undeniably related to matters of identity – specifically on disagreements regarding religion and ethnicity<sup>76</sup>. This is also seen in sub-Saharan Africa, in countries like Kenya and Nigeria; where identity matters remained unresolved and their national unity has to be described as weak. Divide among religious and ethnicity lines, caused a weak identity which led to high levels of corruption and poverty<sup>77</sup>.

It works the other way around as well: countries with a strong national identity, like China, Korea and Japan, who have experienced tremendous (economic) growth in the twentieth and the early twenty-first century, did so because these countries did not have to settle domestic matters and questions of identity first. Of course, these countries all experienced social upheavals and other forms of unrest but what sets them apart is that these countries could rely on a solid foundation of statehood.

So far, it has become clear that identity matters. Identity as a topic of research within the foreign policy field emerged in the nineties of the last century<sup>78</sup>. The scholarship was born under the heading of constructivism, where it tried to explain how identity is shaping state behaviour and, reversely, how the international structure itself can aid in the shaping of state identity. Constructivists, and post-structuralists alike are additionally arguing that the identity (which is tied to particular interests and preferences) is a determinant factor of state action<sup>79</sup>.

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<sup>74</sup> Written by Francis Fukuyama in <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/why-national-identity-matters/10559382>

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> "Identity and Foreign Policy" by Srdjan Vucetic

<sup>79</sup> Bucher & Jasper in the introduction of "Revisiting 'Identity' in International Relations"

This overlaps greatly with the research on the international dimension of identity politics. The idea is that identity politics functions as a determinant factor – one that shapes foreign policy decisions<sup>80</sup>. The accompanying reasoning operates among the same lines as when one explains the formation of one's own internal identity. This formation always happens in relation to the other; where possessors and non-possessors of identity traits are categorized as belonging (or not belonging) to the same identity. This interaction with the external world creates boundaries that separates *you* from *me* and *us* from *them*. A separation that inevitably leads to exclusion, especially considering that the boundaries of an identity are constructed through unavoidable interactions with 'the other' – meaning that exclusion is inherent to the identity concept. A 'by-product' of this identity formation and exclusion is the nation – as a theoretical concept and practical construct<sup>81</sup>. This is because the nation also delineates the national self from the international other; a process that served as a prior necessity for national integration<sup>82</sup>. This process historically led to the mutual attachment and common fate of a nation's inhabitants. This, in turn, generates national unity. 'The Other' in this scenario could be the inhabitants that share the same territory but differ in their cultural, historical, ethnical, political or religious considerations, or, it can be outside nations that are interacting with said nation in any shape or form. 'The Other' can also signify a set of diverging values or conflicting characteristics.

The practical reality of this Self-Other demarcation is that it enables the formation of policy ascriptions. This generally means that the Self-Other demarcation shapes state behaviour. It provides the state with the framework on how to view oneself, others, certain norms and values and what the appropriate behaviour is to enforce or counter any outside friction. In line with this, there are two underlying motivations for states to pursue these ideals. The first is to be able to perceive and counter any possible threats that might harm the nation's physical or spiritual stability<sup>83</sup>. The second serves as an explanatory and legitimizing force; one that legitimizes political ideologies and policies<sup>84</sup>. The dynamics that are at hand here are similar to the individual and are also arguably identical to the specific study on identity formation. Nevertheless, it is important to understand state-level dynamics and how in

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<sup>80</sup> Page 471, "Identity Politics and Foreign Policy" by Yinan He

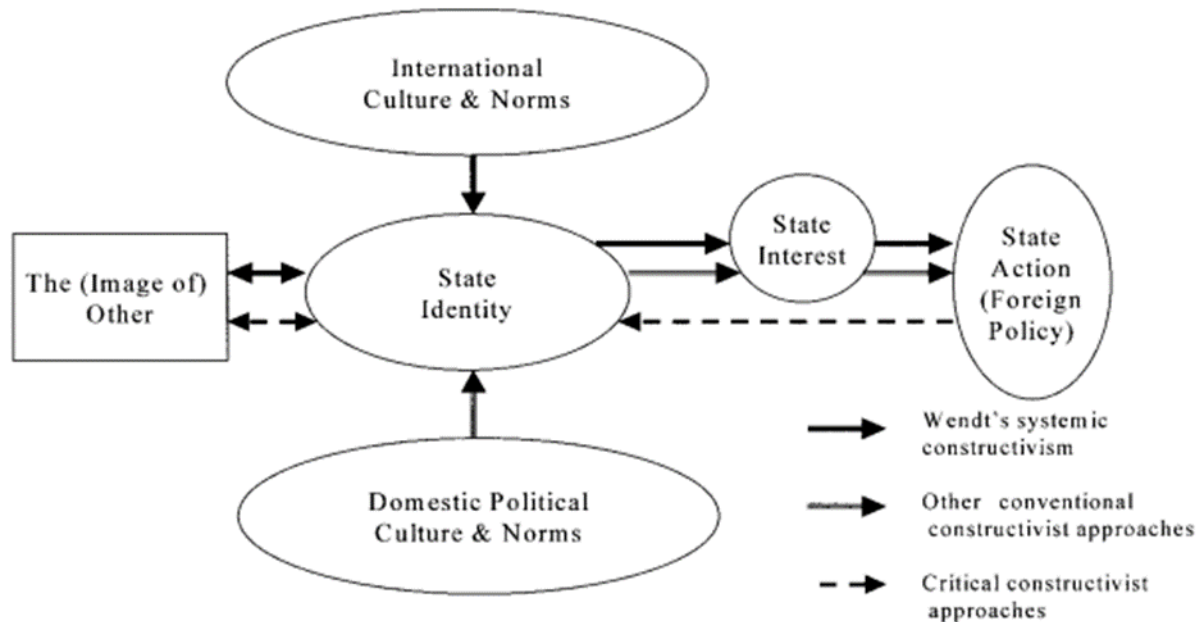
<sup>81</sup> Page 472, *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Page 473, *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

general identity shapes state behaviour. Mayim Alexandrov designed a graphical representation of the literature on (state) identity, behaviour and international relations theory, as can be seen in figure 1.



**Figure 1: a graphical representation of contemporary international relations theory and its understanding about the possible directions within state identity<sup>85</sup>**

### **Back to the individual – how is foreign policy influenced?**

The interesting question that remains unsolved is how previous identity research is a matter of identity politics. In order to answer, the circle must be completed and be brought back to the individual level of analysis; only this time in relation to the nation's government and politics. Individuals have specific identities – and some have multiple. These identities and the accompanying loyalties have evolved drastically over the fast few centuries<sup>86</sup>. It became anchored within the territorial state in such a way that individuals are no longer 'subjects' of the ruling elites but instead national 'citizens' of the government they 'belong' to<sup>87</sup>. The hierarchical bonds have been displaced with an identity-based membership within a geographical and juridical space. To identify as a citizen within territorial boundaries became

<sup>85</sup> Alexandrov (2003), 38.

<sup>86</sup> Mansbach & Rhodes (2007), 438.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.



the essence of a political identity<sup>88</sup>. The state has always been a powerful entity; one that has been reinforced through its coercive capabilities. Another powerful tool has been (and still is) socialisation, where the hierarchical dominance of the citizen's identity is assured. There has been another major shift within the political realm and that is the possibility for citizens to enter the political arena and participate within the political field. Individuals have the possibility to influence politics and exercise power through the different mechanisms present within a nation's institutional architecture. This entails a departure from the historical requirement of, for instance, being born in the right family in order to have a say in matters of power and government. This does not only hold for liberal democratic societies – Xi Jinping's China and Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey serve as two examples, among many. Citizens have the possibility to become state representatives, political entrepreneurs or, more generally, a political actor. These actors have the possibility to influence, alter, reinforce or weaken their states' representations and beliefs. These representations and beliefs are anchored within its national identity and determine (at least partially) the appropriate behaviour. Within the context of internationality, this behaviour is translated into foreign policy. *State identity politics* is the process where political actors use their own identity and therefore their own representations to influence state behaviour in order to alter the country's foreign policy agenda<sup>89</sup>. Through this process is the political actor gaining support, or acquiring opposition, for a particular policy that deals with the relation to other states. These policies are, in turn, viewed as state representations. The consequences of these policies could reinforce or weaken accepted beliefs about state portrayal. *State identity politics* refers to the process where individuals are attempting to influence state identity<sup>90</sup>. State identity politics can manifest itself in decisions regarding spending capital in developing nations or whether or not to use military force. Climate change, technological advancements and privacy are some more examples that fit within state identity politics.

State identity politics is used to strategically alter foreign policy orientations. Political actors compete with other political actors who are their domestic or their international rivals for a

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<sup>88</sup> Agnew & Corbridge (1995), 85.

<sup>89</sup> Alexandrov (2003), 39.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

particular understanding of an identity of a social group<sup>91</sup>. Foreign policy is here the framework to move beyond domestic contestation about identity politics. It serves as a way to persuade other (political) actors to accept their specific identity proposal. Groups, in the form of political parties, compete domestically and internationally and are trying to establish a standard of what the appropriate national identity is. Foreign policy adds a layer of legitimacy, support and esteem<sup>92</sup>. Identity politics becomes externalized and can serve as a successful strategy for domestic fights.

## **Part 2 – Practical examples of identity politics**

So far, the theoretical foundation has been laid down and identity politics has been theoretically studied from its positive and its negative aspects. To make the topic more tangible, there will be practical examples presented. The two case studies will be India and the United States. The former is an interesting example of identity politics because India's approach towards identity politics slightly differs from what has been discussed so far. Which fits perfectly in the intended objective; which is to examine every aspect of identity politics. Identity politics is being deployed by government officials, with Narendra Modi as the most noteworthy. Identity politics is in India not invoked because of past grievances, but on what Modi's government perceives as current grievances – but grounded in past experiences. This makes India an interesting case study. The United States is chosen as a more obvious example, because identity politics is emerged there. Lastly, due to absolute importance and relevancy is Black Lives Matter examined.

### **The case of India**

India gained independence in 1947 and the country has had to deal with four specific identity based groups ever since: religion, language, caste and tribe<sup>93</sup>. The most spoken language is Hindi, but there are over fifteen other languages that are spoken by at least ten million Indians each. To be more precise: Hindi is the most spoken and prominent language,

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<sup>91</sup> Hintz (2018), 339.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, 340.

<sup>93</sup> Pingle & Varshney (2006), 359.

but the majority of India's population speaks another language. India's main religion is Hindu, but there are several other religious systems; there are three caste categories and eight percent of the population, which are approximately 110 million Indians, are classified as belonging to a tribe<sup>94</sup>. This diversity became an important point of recognition and acceptance and speaks to the core of India as a nation – at least, that is what Mahatma Gandhi preached<sup>95</sup>. The idea was that the many contestations over identity had to be transcended in order to get the 'unity-in-diversity' approach to succeed<sup>96</sup>. Unfortunately, this policy had been weakly institutionalized and contention over identity differences paved way to a myriad of subnational identities<sup>97</sup>. India's political system lives within the liberal democratic framework and India hosts the world's largest-scaled democratic election. This democratic reality enables the articulation of political demands that are grounded in identity-based grievances. The tensions and conflicts between the different groups and communities remain troublesome. India did implement some institutional arrangements to alleviate some of these tensions. Unfortunately, these attempts remain unsuccessful<sup>98</sup>. This is mainly due to the failure of the institutional system and India's government to recognize the smaller and marginalized groups<sup>99</sup>.

### **Identity politics based on religion**

India integrated in the global economic order in the 1990s by embarking on market-oriented reforms<sup>100</sup>. In the same period, a specific type of identity politics emerged; one that was solely focused on religion. Key to this emergence was the national broadcasting of religious-mythological epics, like Ramayana, which was an example of an attempt by the government to adapt to the market-oriented changes<sup>101</sup>. Ramayana links economic reforms to liberalization. It tells the story of the lost Utopia, an idea that was summoned by the Hindu nationalists, and the brave new world; a contemporary reality that was promised by the

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Gandhi (1968)

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Chadha (2018), 85.

<sup>98</sup> Meetei (2014), 101.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, 84.

<sup>101</sup> Rajagopal (2001), 74.

same Hindu nationalists. This was applauded by the market enthusiasts<sup>102</sup>. What specific dynamics account for the rise of this majoritarian identity politics remains open for debate, but the 1990s are nevertheless known for the fundamental redefinition of India's identity in the context of Hinduism.

The political wing of Hindu nationalism is the Bharatiya Janata Party, the BJP. Led by Narendra Modi, the party has won a parliamentary majority in the 2014 and 2019 elections. The BJP thrives on an anti-Muslim and pro-business agenda, making the BJP an active fighter for symbolic identity<sup>103</sup>. The strong emphasis on the Hindu identity is downplaying identity politics that is employed by marginalized groups, while simultaneously using their own identity politics to further the BJP cause. Vandita Mishra, a National Opinion Editor for the Indian Express<sup>104</sup>, wrote extensively about the political vision of the BJP. She points out that BJP deploys an ideological narrative called *Hindutva*, a Hindu nationalist philosophy formulated by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, an Indian independence activist<sup>105</sup>. As a consequence, the BJP engages in persistent 'Othering'. The non-Hindus, particularly the Muslims, wear the proverbial hat of 'the Other'. The political objective of Hindutva is to establish a Hindu state and securing the collective rights of the Hindu community<sup>106</sup>. The particular focus on the Hindu community comes at the cost of other (religious) communities and their rights. By first attracting the popular support of the Hindu majority, BJP tries to 'mould' domestic opinion for their support of a Hindu reformation<sup>107</sup>. Modi and his party the BJP aim for regime stability by using the rhetoric and symbols of identity politics. The slogan "achhe din aane waale hain", which translates to "good days are coming", was Modi his main rhetorical tool during the 2014 general election<sup>108</sup>. In 2019, this was "nara", which stands for "national ambition and regional aspiration"<sup>109</sup>. Both highlight the clear vision Modi has for an economic rising and shining India, preferably devoid of regional differences. The latter is an odd aspiration due to the many entrenched differences within the country. Any economic hardship, like a possible economic decline, does not correspond with the

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> The Guardian (2019)

<sup>104</sup> Words copied from her own Twitter biography

<sup>105</sup> Pingle & Varshney (2006), 363.

<sup>106</sup> Khokhar (2019)

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Aliberti (2018), 1.

<sup>109</sup> Telegraph India (2019)

political narrative with its specific pro-business focus. To bypass this and to control the entire national conversation, the BJP has shifted the discourse from discussions about socio-economic development to issues that centre identity politics<sup>110</sup>. The discourse is changed to the “identity politics of Hindu renaissance and revivalism”<sup>111</sup>. The declining economy becomes a secondary topic within this strategy.

Hindu nationalists believe that Christians and Muslims form a threat to the national identity and to India in its entirety<sup>112</sup>. The perception of particularly the Muslim citizens as ‘the Other’ has caused Modi to demand government action in the form of legislative measures. In 2019, three anti-Muslim laws were passed by parliament – with the most controversial being the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The CAA was initially publicized as that it would both reclaim the constitutional values and the ‘idea for India’. Also, the CAA is said to preserve the secular ethos<sup>113</sup>. This last reason has been received with ridicule by the global media; who are saying that India’s secular image, even though this notion is present in its constitution, is significantly dented because of this act<sup>114</sup>. The CAA offers amnesty and citizenship to non-Muslim illegal immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. It amends the previous citizenship law, which prohibited any illegal migrants to become Indian citizens. In addition, the CAA expedites the route to become an Indian citizen for six religious minority groups – as long as they can prove they are from the aforementioned three Muslim-majority countries. When the CAA was passed into law it sparked widespread controversy and demonstrations. It is said to marginalize India’s Muslim community because it grants amnesty on the basis of religion. Opponents question its constitutional validity and it sparked massive protests across the country. The CAA is a legislation rooted in the characteristics of identity politics; where a specific religious identity is advanced and the Muslim identity is disregarded.

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<sup>110</sup> Khokhar (2019)

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Pingle & Varshney (2006), 363.

<sup>113</sup> Talukdar (2020)

<sup>114</sup> Mitra (2019)

## The role of the Supreme Court

Interestingly: on January 2, 2017, the Indian Supreme Court banned any appeal made to identity in electoral politics in the *Abhiram Singh v. C.D. Commachen* case<sup>115</sup>. The Supreme Court provided a new judgement on the interpretation of the 1951 Representation of the People Act. This law governs the way elections are conducted. Section 123 (3) maintained that attempting to gain votes on the basis of religion, caste or community is 'corrupt'<sup>116</sup>. The consequence would be disqualification of the electoral process. Due to interpretation difficulties the judges of the Supreme Court stepped in. The Court ruled that India is a secular country and that invoking caste, religion, community or language is not relevant for the political process. *Abrihim Singh v. C.D. Commachen* ruled that as electoral malpractice<sup>117</sup>. Any political actor that participates in electoral politics and invokes any of these four categories is officially in violation of the law. It is clear that the Supreme Court is working to establish the right conditions for a balanced political system; one that provides equal opportunities for all. Regardless of this intention, the practicality in a country where religion and community serve as the main political tool is questionable. Especially considering that identity politics is still a relevant tool employed by political actors. However, in essence, *Abhiram Singh v. C.D. Commachen* bans the use of identity politics.

The discrepancy between this legislation and the political reality can be traced back to the 1995 *Ramesh Yeshwant Prabhoo v Prabhakar Kashinath Kunte* case. R. Y. Prabhoo was the mayor of Mumbai in 1987 and 1988 and was in 1987 elected as an independent candidate into the legislative assembly. Allegations were made against Prabhoo for corrupt practices – based on the 1951 Representation of the People Act. What makes this case an important case in identity politics research is that it lays down the difference between Hindutva and Hinduism. The Supreme Court ruled that Hindutva is “a way of life, or a state of mind of the people of India, and should not be equated with Hindu fundamentalism”<sup>118</sup>. Based on this ruling, when Hindutva is used in the electoral process an appeal can be made to the ethos of

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<sup>115</sup> Kumar (2017)

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Hegde (2017)

<sup>118</sup> *Ramesh Yeshwant Prabhoo v Prabhakar Kashinath Kunte* (1996): SCC, SC, 1, p 130.

Indian society and culture. An appeal on religious grounds, as is forbidden based on the law, can be circumvented.

This ruling still stands, regardless of the 2017 Supreme Court ban on identity politics. The *Abhiram Singh v. C.D. Commachen* case ruling did not interpret, clarify or overrule the court's decision on Hindutva. As long as Hindutva is understood and applied as 'a way of life', than the Supreme Court ruling and any legal violations can be circumvented. Hindutva is in that case interpreted differently than a religious appeal. This explains why Modi and the BJP can still invoke identity politics.

### **Identity politics in India's foreign policy**

The Hindutva ideology also has its footing in India's foreign policy. Modi and party members of the BJP believe that Hindutva provides the means to build a tough and strong India<sup>119</sup>. This must provide the basis for a strong national security as well as anchor India's place on the international stage. That said, the broad trajectory of Modi's foreign policy has seen few changes since he is in office. Ian Hall wrote "Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy" and Rajesh Basrur wrote "Modi's Foreign Policy Fundamentals – A Trajectory Unchanged", where both analysed Modi's foreign policy discourse and concluded that there are few shifts in its trajectory – despite what the title of the former suggests. However, ever since his second electoral win, Modi is taking more Hindutva-based decisions<sup>120</sup>. Whether or not this also means that Modi is taking a more firm stance in his foreign policy discourse remains to be seen. This is also dependent on the domestic context – which is now characterized by a struggling economy, that is simultaneously being overshadowed by divisive nationalism.

When it comes to identity politics, India is a peculiar and clear example. They use identity politics without absolute hindrance from the courts. India demonstrates that identity politics can be translated in a piece of legislation and that this can have far reaching consequences. Its also not grounded on past grievances, but more on current 'grievances'. It

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<sup>119</sup> Basrur (2017), 8.

<sup>120</sup> Barron (2020)

remains to be seen how far Modi can go, even though he is democratically chosen. India is an example of the negativity that identity politics can produce.

## **The case of the United States**

### **The election of Trump and the role of Obama**

The reason why Donald Trump won the 2016 presidential election is often attributed to one major theme: identity politics<sup>121</sup>. Sides, Tesler & Vavreck, all political scientists, have analysed the 2016 election campaign and covered it in the book 'Identity Crisis'. The authors conclude that identity politics is defining and changing contemporary American politics<sup>122</sup>. They contribute the election of Donald Trump to identity politics, but also argue that the presidency of Barack Obama is an inevitable contributor to it<sup>123</sup>. Reasoning begins with the basic idea that identities matter in election times. Identity determine one's political affiliations and who they want as political representatives. In the case of the United States, being a Democrat or a Republican was arguably the most salient identity of an individual. Before 2008, when the largest part of the power structure was occupied by white individuals, whiteness as an identity attribute might not have been on the minds of most white Americans<sup>124</sup>. This changed when Barack Obama was inaugurated as the first black president<sup>125</sup>. Ezra Klein wrote an article for Vox.com where he reasoned that Barack Obama surpassed the idea of only being identified as a Democrat<sup>126</sup>. Instead, the main characterization was his racial background. This became the biggest topic of conversation and as soon as he got elected, racial attitudes and racial identities became potent political forces<sup>127</sup>. This lead to a widening gap between the political opinions of blacks and whites. Even though some hoped that Obama's presidency would invoke a post-racial period, the reality demonstrates an opposite effect. The political beliefs, when based on racial

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<sup>121</sup> Sides et al. (2017), 2.

<sup>122</sup> Conclusion drawn from Klein (2018)

<sup>123</sup> Sides, Tesler & Vavreck (2019), 13.

<sup>124</sup> Klein (2018)

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/11/5/18052390/trump-2018-2016-identity-politics-democrats-immigration-race>

<sup>127</sup> Sides, Tesler & Vayreck (2019), 13.



considerations, have become even more polarized<sup>128</sup>. Race has become a massive political influence and racial considerations increasingly influence political decision-making<sup>129</sup>.

Barack Obama changed the political identity in the United States and this contributed to the election of Donald Trump. Trump appeals to a form of white nationalist fear that views the increase of non-white Americans as a threat<sup>130</sup>. He created a narrative in which the white men, as well as the evangelical Christians, were presented as a minority group that is being oppressed by the oppressive coalition<sup>131</sup>. Trump has been tapping into what is often described as white identity politics, thereby often deploying racial and racist language. The 2016 American National Election Study has conducted research on the role of white identity politics and how this predicts support for Trump<sup>132</sup>. Their data suggests that a white racial identity and the belief in the unfair treatment of whites serve as predictors for the support of Trump: see figure 2 below. The idea that identity politics played an important role in the general election is not a new one, but it is important to note that there are more variables that contribute to the election of Trump. Issues like educational background, overall stance on immigration or a particular dislike to Hilary Clinton all serve as explanatory variables.

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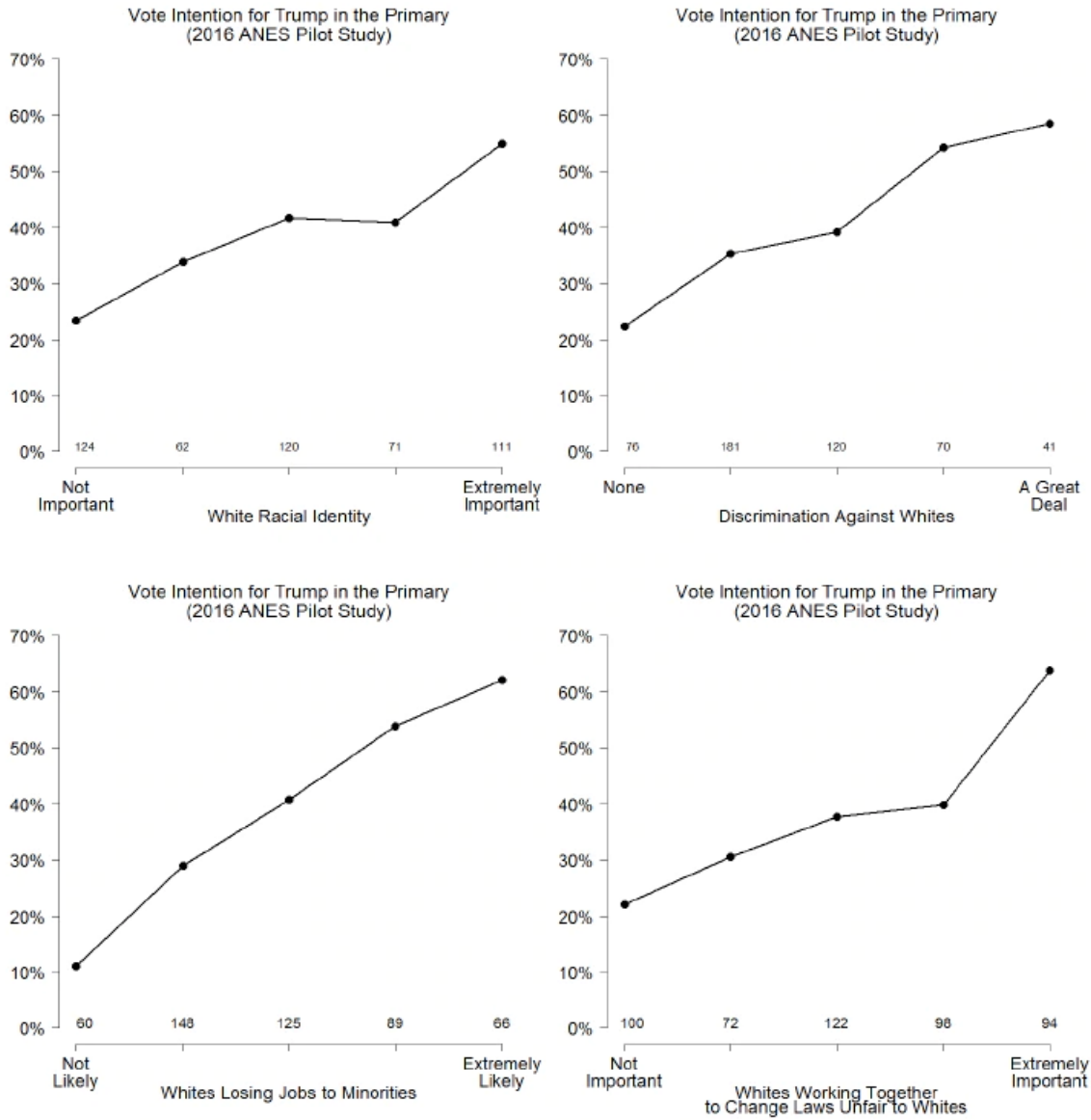
<sup>128</sup> This is the main thesis of Tesler (2016)

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Tesler & Sides (2016)

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> This is data from the Republican Primaries and not from the general election. However, its conclusion does provide relevant information on the political climate



**Figure 2: The correlation between Trump support and white identity politics. Source: 2016 ANES Pilot Study<sup>133</sup>**

<sup>133</sup> Graph from Tesler, Sides & Vavreck (2019), 91.

## Black Lives Matter

Identity politics has been defined at the beginning of this thesis. With the help of a few set characteristics, identity politics is defined as a form of political activism. People form alliances based on a specific identity trait, like religion, race, ethnicity or gender and these alliances become politically organized. The goal is to demand the rights that have been denied to these groups *because* of that particular identity trait. Past grievances often shape its specific narrative. Black Lives Matter is a movement that fits perfectly inside the identity politics box.

George Floyd, a black 46-year old man, has been killed in Minnesota by a white police officer on May 25 2020. Derek Chauvin, the police officer, had pressed his knee on the neck of Floyd for almost eight minutes; thereby directly causing the death of Floyd. This institutional murder as a consequence of systemic racism sparked massive protests in the United States and all over the world. Under the banner of Black Lives Matter, these protests campaign against racism. The movement is based on the injustices and inequality experienced by Black people<sup>134</sup>. These are found in the historical power struggles and the reality of a colonial past. It was as if the murder, which happened for the umpteenth time, created a metaphorical mirror in which the whole world was able to see their own national history and reflect on the extent of its racial injustice. The mirror portrayed different images and realities for different countries, but were all anchored within the Black Lives Matter narrative. In Australia, the hashtag #aboriginallivesmatter became trending and in Poland the use of the word Murzyn became topic of conversation; which is a term for black individuals and is regarded as offensive<sup>135</sup>. In England, the statue of Edward Colston, a slave trader, was toppled and tossed in a Bristol river. Sudan, Indonesia and Brazil experienced similar events. Just like the #MeToo movement, Black Lives Matter sparked global clamour where equal rights are demanded based on a particular identity trait. It shifted public consciousness and has already enforced changes – so has the Minneapolis City Council issued a resolution that disbands their police department fully<sup>136</sup>.

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<sup>134</sup> Nayak (2020)

<sup>135</sup> Pilling (2020)

<sup>136</sup> Wills (2020)

BLM was a response to the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman, a white police officer who shot and killed Trayvon Martin, an unarmed 17-year old African American<sup>137</sup>. BLM began as #BlackLivesMatter on social media and gained national traction after the 2014 street demonstrations as a response to the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. Two years later, in 2016, BLM became topical during the presidential election. The movement has received its share of criticism as well, especially regarding its slogan “Black Lives Matter”. Critics assert that adopting a more universal approach instead of emphasizing the particular is a necessary condition for recognizing our shared common humanity<sup>138</sup>. Rand Paul, who was a presidential candidate for the Republicans in 2015, believed that the slogan should be changed to “All Lives Matter”. He asserted that the focus on one racial identity equals the bullying of other groups<sup>139</sup>. Donald Trump echoed the slogan All Lives Matter as an alternative to “the racialised BLM movement”<sup>140</sup>.

### **Anti-identity identity politics**

The basic assumption behind identity politics is that political activism based on identity is valid. The belief that identity in itself can form the fundamental focus of political action is the essential driver of every argument made within identity politics. When Black Lives Matter is changed to “All Lives Matter”, there is a particular rejection of identity politics. Supporters of All Lives Matter reject the belief that identity can be the main category for exercising politics. Joshua Paul names this phenomenon ‘anti-identity identity politics’; where All Lives Matter serves as a case study of anti-identity identity politics<sup>141</sup>. The ‘anti-identity’ refers to the rejection of the identity category as a legitimate source of political action<sup>142</sup>. It is presumed that identity should not have a place in politics; it has to be decoupled from the political, economic and social realm. When, in the case of BLM, there is oppression or brutality towards them, this is not attributed to institutional structures. Instead, it is believed that this problem is attributed to culture<sup>143</sup>. That inherently means

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<sup>137</sup> Paul (2018), 3.

<sup>138</sup> Said by Maguire (2016)

<sup>139</sup> Paul (2018), 4.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Paul (2019), 3.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

that there is also only one way to solve this problem; and that is through culture. These culturalist diverge the focus of BLM away from state violence to individual 'Black-on-Black crime'. This view is exemplified by Peggy Hubbard, a resident from Ferguson, who went viral with her rant on the BLM movement<sup>144</sup>. Hubbard focused not on police brutality but instead on black brutality; claiming that the blacks are the most violent people she has ever seen and she consequently pleads for personal responsibility. Hubbard rejects the idea that racism holds any significance and rather opts for the individual responsibility and a closer look to the harsh reality of black culture.

All Lives Matter is grounded in 'anti-identity identity politics'. This preaches a universal identity, thereby rejecting any recognition of the particular<sup>145</sup>. The idea behind anti-identity identity politics is that the truth lies in sameness and every law, every piece of legislation, is blind to differences. Private interests and group affiliations are therefore surpassed. Identity politics is seen as mere defensiveness and unproductive for any political participation<sup>146</sup>. All Lives Matter operates on the belief that the state is ethnically neutral. Identarian claims are grounded in collective universality. This is the same dynamic present within 'anti-identity identity politics'. It is a type of identity politics but then without separate and specific group claims. Whilst they reject identity politics and its specific focus on identity traits, there is an inherent contradiction in All Lives Matter and 'anti-identity identity politics'. The contradiction is that All Lives Matter does deploy identity; namely by adopting a post-racial approach that deploys a neoliberal identity as its foundational focus<sup>147</sup>. The collective identity is built upon the idea of the post-racial neoliberal citizen. It is a new type of identity politics that goes beyond race and opts for personal responsibility. Identity is thus deployed strategically while they call for collective action. Demands are either to reinforce or to weaken existing institutions in order to preserve the neoliberal culture; including the values, structures and policies<sup>148</sup>. The focus remains on the individual, but together they must realize collective action. As with neoliberalism, acts of racism and racism in its entirety are perceived as matters of individual calculation. A characteristic of identity politics is that its proponents demand recognition for their particular identity. Within All Lives Matter, the

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<sup>144</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M0ueaM7rMOU> for a summary and a redirection

<sup>145</sup> Paul (2019), 10.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Paul (2019), 5.

<sup>148</sup> Paul (2019), 13.

issue of race is specifically asked to not be recognised. This way, race becomes ‘non-recognized’. However, and to quote David Theo Goldberg, this is “racism without race, racism gone private, racism without the categories to name it as such”<sup>149</sup>.

The phenomenon of ‘anti-identity identity politics’ is an interesting counter movement to identity politics. All Lives Matter served here as a practical counter example to the identity politics’ Black Lives Matters. The examination of ALM revealed a paradoxical reality – where its rejection of an identity is being replaced with a search for another specific identity (the post-racial neoliberalist). Without making any ungrounded inferences about the entire anti-identity identity politics; this does indicate that even the denial of one identity trait can be translated into the desire for another one. Even when the intention is the opposite, it does indicate the importance that identity plays in contemporary politics. Political participation becomes less focused on ideology or economically driven motivations. Furthermore, when BLM is changed to ALM, the rhetorical power of Black Lives Matter is diminished. You turn a blind eye to lived experiences of class-society and simultaneously add a part of society in its wider narrative while this place has always been denied. The BLM is a practical example of how identity politics can be used for its theoretically based objectives.

## Conclusion

This thesis has aimed to answer the following research question: *“To what extent does identity politics domestically and internationally influence politics, democracies and foreign policy?”*

The research question was broad; this was intended since it was aimed to explore the full story of identity politics. The whole endeavour started with an analysis of a book written by Francis Fukuyama. Fukuyama pessimistically concluded that identity politics is undermining and even endangering the workings of a liberal democracy. Identity politics as a term increasingly popped up within popular media articles and, here too, was often described as harmful, adverse and even dangerous. Frustratingly, the term was hardly academically

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<sup>149</sup> Goldberg (2009), 23.

defined. Aside from some loose definitions, identity politics seem to merely signify “something not desirable”.

With that narrative in mind, this thesis has ended up to provide a more nuanced image. It started with reviewing the existing academic literature, which provided the initial tools to define identity politics. Building on these findings, this thesis systematically explored the definition of the term starting with ‘identity’ as a concept, then moving to ‘groupness’ before arriving at the term itself. Aside from the definition, it is established that identity politics is politically relevant, influential and controversial. Identity politics firstly relies on the mutual identification of an identity trait. When this trait become politicized and policy changes are demanded, identity groups enter a form of political activism. This gives rise to identity politics.

The thesis continued to provide both arguments in favour and against the use of identity politics, thereby highlighting the issues over-determination, polarization, the questioning of conventional norms and social progress. After that, its relationship with democracies was explored.

Identity politics thrive in democratic systems. The liberties that accompany this political system enable the formation of identity groups. The right to assemble, the right to protest and have your voice heard are among the necessary conditions for identity politics to flourish. The relationship with democratic politics and group identity is a complex one, but when the fight is for the institutionalization of equal treatment than identity politics aid in the pursuit of democracies’ good. That said, democracies are based on civic equality and on equal regard for individuals; this means that identity groups come in secondary and they do not constitute democracies’ ultimate source of value.

This view is more nuanced than the narrative that Fukuyama presented. Identity politics need democracies, and democracies need identity politics. There are concerning aspects, especially when identity groups occupy the moral high ground and demand that their political agenda surpasses that of the wider society. When identity hegemony is the goal, than the freedoms of the individual are impeded – where this freedom remains the ultimate source of value in a democracy.

Identity politics moves internationally when political actors use their identity and their identity politics to influence foreign policy and therefore state behaviour. This constructivist narrative clashes with the widely acted realist paradigm. That said, this thesis demonstrated that the use of identity should rightfully receive attention and that identity politics can act as a determinant factor within state behaviour. The most general message when identity politics is moving internationally is that scholars have to accept that socio-cultural factors have the possibility to temper state interests.

The practical examples from India and the United States demonstrate how identity politics can be used for bad and for good. Modi's political agenda is rooted in identity politics and the way he is using this form of political activism is by oppressing the already marginalized Muslim minority. Modi's desire for identity hegemony endangers the pluralistic nature of India's democratic society and this perfectly illustrates how identity politics can have far-reaching negative results.

The case of Black Lives Matter served as its positive counterpart. BLM illustrates how identity politics can be used for social progress and for the demand to shift the balance of power. It strives for the political change for groups whose identity is historically oppressed and marginalized. It is a necessary tool for political activism and the values embedded within a liberal democracy enables this demand for action. When critics frame BLM's identity politics in a derogatory way and assert that the slogan must be changed to "All Lives Matter", they must be cautious that this will change the entire narrative. What effectively happens is that all mentions of race will be erased. The initial discourse on police brutality and structural forms of racism and violence will then be altered into a two-dimensional conversation; one where race either matters, or not at all. The seriousness of the movement, and the amount of oppression that the blacks have had to endure in the past, makes the specific mention of race a necessary condition. If not, the aim for equality might be undermined by not acknowledging the inequalities.

This thesis tried to be as nuanced as possible by providing arguments from both sides to determine whether identity politics must be seen as a friend or a foe. The last message of this thesis must be that identity politics is widely misunderstood. Yes, it can be a valuable



tool for political movements and for overall civic engagement. And yes, it can also be used for immoral reasons. However, it would be unrealistic to demand from individuals that they divorce their past experiences, bad or otherwise, from their political participation. Plus, identity politics did not cause the prevalence of all the different identities and their accompanying hardships. Identity politics is merely exposing those differences. With this in mind and as to answer to Fukuyama: it can be wondered whether it is that bad to base electoral decisions on one's identity, instead of on ideology.

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