



The Star-Ledger

The politics of identity

Sunday, February 18, 2007

Since it's not too soon for politicians to campaign for the White House, it can't be too soon for the quadrennial civics lesson about the importance of voting. But the 2008 presidential election requires a new paragraph in an old curriculum.

Voting is a civic duty, all right; but how, if at all, are we supposed to take the identities of the candidates into account on Election Day? Should it matter that Sen. Hillary Clinton is a woman, that Sen. Barack Obama's father was African, or that most of New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson's ancestors came from Latin America? What about the fact that former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani is Italian-American, or that former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney is Mormon?

Identity has always been a part of politics: The first Catholic president and the first female and Jewish vice presidential candidates were a big deal in this country. But the especially large and diverse pool of candidates this go-around -- combined with the fact that many Americans respect group loyalty and social progress as serious moral ideals -- makes things especially complicated.

Here is the Old Civics Lesson. It's perfectly legal to live your entire life without ever casting a ballot, but you really should register and vote. Non-participation undermines the ideals of democracy and self-government. If you don't vote, then someone else is running your life with no direct input from you. And if you don't take a citizenly interest in eligibility requirements and poll technology, government may neglect its duty to ensure open and fair processes.

Now, let me offer the New Civics Lesson. The duty to vote is a duty to make responsible selections among the candidates, based on their qualifications, character and where the candidates stand on the important issues. In the primaries and final elections, attention should go to the "electability" of a candidate. Mainstream candidates will have blemishes, but generally avoid wasting your votes on implausible write-ins or fringe-party idealists. And when it comes to voting for potentially electable women and minorities, vote for them if you think they are otherwise the strongest candidates. We are fortunate to have an usually diverse and well-qualified roster of candidates lining up for 2008. Not a one in the bunch is unqualified.

But what about progressive change? Could this be the moment for making identity a priority? Isn't it high time for women and ethnic minorities to take the helm?

Harvard University, one of the oldest and most prestigious universities, recently named a woman president for the first time. Hiring Drew Faust at this juncture has special meaning. The last president, Larry Summers, publicly doubted that women have the aptitude needed for stellar achievement in the sciences. Choosing a woman who is a feminist committed to the education of men and women signaled the university's commitment to equality and nondiscrimination in higher education.

Scaling up from Harvard to the nation, a case could be made for Hillary Clinton. A special commitment to equality and nondiscrimination is a good message for America to send itself and its youth. Shifting from one category of historic exclusion, gender, to another, racial minority, a case could be made for Obama or Richardson.

But there is a problem. It isn't clear that in the short run (best defined as the eight years following the 2008 election) that electing Hillary Clinton or a man from a racial minority group would reap substantive benefits in addition to symbolism. Voters should therefore try to assess the candidates' stands on the issues, and their proven capacities to work the political machinery of Washington effectively enough to make a real difference.

Being bicultural, bilingual or a manly woman sometimes helps open doors and minds shut by prejudice. But whether identity can move mountains of opposition in the national and international arenas is another matter. The idea that a man of mixed race background in the White House would surely bring the races

closer together has a lot of superficial appeal. But people of mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds are not a rarity in our society and have not proven to work that particular magic when in positions of leadership and authority.

The hope remains that a woman or minority president would translate into better lives for the neediest women and minorities. But there is no guarantee of this, either. Cities with well-educated, committed female and minority mayors have not suddenly solved the intractable problems of urban life and economic disadvantage.

Still, the identity of a candidate could matter to voters who believe they have a duty of solidarity to side with candidates of their own kind. Even if a voter didn't think the country would be any better off with a woman, she still might feel bound, as a woman, to support a strong woman candidate, as an Italian would to support a strong Italian, and so on. Political strategists are not above playing into such feelings. It's been a practice to rally support by emphasizing what particular candidates have in common with voters besides a common view on the issues. Politicians trade on the assumption that common skin color, race, ethnicity, regional origin and the like are the bases of politically relevant loyalties.

No one need feel ashamed of same-kind loyalties as such. I have them. Nearly everyone has them to some degree. But making a priority of voting for one's own kind in national elections poses a problem in a world of multiple identities. Consider the obvious problems it would pose for 2008.

An African-American woman wouldn't know whether to back Obama or Clinton -- unless an Ivy League-educated African-American with a white mother and a Kenyan father isn't really a full-fledged member of the African-American community. A Puerto Rican-American woman from Delaware wouldn't know whether to stand behind Clinton, Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Del.), or Gov. Bill Richardson. But maybe for a righteous Puerto Rican-American Latina, a part-white Mexican-Nicaraguan from a Southwestern state is better than any non-Hispanic choice.

Italian-American Democrats couldn't fail to notice that Republican 9/11 mayoral hero Rudy Giuliani of New York is a paesano. A first Italian-American president would advance the cause of diversity and Italian pride. Romney, a Mormon, would de-exoticize Mormons. Asian-Americans of any ethnicity might wonder whether they shouldn't favor Obama, Richardson or Hillary over a traditional white male candidate like John Edwards or Biden. But if they are affluent Asian-American personal injury lawyers from the South, they might suppose they need to support Edwards.

Silly, but the point is serious: There really is not and cannot be an obligation to vote for your own kind. Individual voters belong to too many identity and population groups, as do all the candidates. And in any case, competence, honesty, stance on the important issues are more important than anybody's demographics.

To help simplify the question of group loyalty and political alignment, I used to say things like, "I'm a thus-and-such first and a thus-and-such second." I made bold statements of that sort back in the '70s when the at-last egalitarian nation first began to openly deal with multiculturalism. But I honestly have trouble today remembering how I filled in the blanks. And no matter what I may have once said, looking back at the substantive causes I have supported through my public service and scholarship, I haven't consistently placed one of my identities ahead of all the others. Sometimes it's been the gender, sometimes the race, sometimes the profession, sometimes the region, sometimes the religion, sometimes the bare humanity. I suspect the same is true of many others who have ever declared a "first" identity and then lived on to cope with reality.

Anita L. Allen, a University of Pennsylvania professor of law and philosophy, may be reached at moralistcolumn@yahoo.com.

© 2007 The Star Ledger

© 2007 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.