

The Democratic Party's 2018 View of Identity Politics Is Cynical and Opportunistic

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THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL election was the peak, at least thus far, for the tactics of identity politics in U.S. elections. In the Democratic primary, Hillary Clinton's potential status as the first female candidate was frequently used not only to inspire her supporters but also to shame and malign those who supported other candidates, particularly Bernie Sanders.

In February 2016 — at the height of the Clinton-Sanders battle — former Clinton Secretary of State Madeleine Albright introduced Hillary Clinton at a New Hampshire rally by [predicting a grim afterlife](#) for female supporters of Sanders, while Clinton and Cory Booker cheered: “There’s a special place in hell for women who don’t help each other!” she announced.



Though Albright [apologized in the New York Times](#) for her insensitive phrasing after a backlash ensued, she did reaffirm her central point: “When women are empowered to make decisions, society benefits. They will raise issues, pass bills and put money into projects that men might overlook or oppose.”

At roughly the same time, Clinton supporter Gloria Steinem said female supporters of Sanders [were motivated by](#) a primitive impulse to follow “the boys,” who, she claimed, were behind Sanders. Just this week, the Clinton loyalist and Salon writer Amanda Marcotte [said Trump won](#) “because some dudes had mommy issues,” [then clarified](#) that she was referring to left-wing misogynists who did not support Clinton: “I also have those moments where I’m like, ‘Maybe we need to run Bland White Guy 2020 to appease the fake socialists and jackass mansplainers.’”

By no means did these rhetorical tactics make their debut appearance in the 2016 Democratic primary. Indeed, the far more vitriolic 2008 primary — between Clinton and Barack Obama — was driven in large part by similar identity-based accusations from both camps.

Clinton supporters constantly accused Obama supporters of being driven by misogyny for opposing the first female president (a charge [voiced by Clinton herself](#)), while Obama supporters [routinely depicted the Clintons](#) and their supporters [as racist](#) due to the nature of their opposition to the first African-American president.

The term “Bernie bros,” which became so widespread as a term of recrimination against Sanders supporters in 2016, was actually conceptually invented in 2008 to malign Obama supporters. Rebecca Traister, then of Salon, [wrote under the headline](#): “Hey, Obama boys: Back Off Already!” about women reporting “the sexism they felt coming from their brothers and husbands and friends and boyfriends [who

supported Obama over Clinton]; some described the suspicion that their politically progressive partners were actually uncomfortable with powerful women.”

Even in the 2016 election, there were glaring inconsistencies in the application of this reasoning. Had Sanders won, for example, he would have become the first Jewish president in U.S. history: quite an impressive and important feat, given the mistreatment of Jews in the West generally and the U.S. specifically. Yet few accused Clinton supporters of refusing to support him due to latent anti-Semitism, and it’s unlikely that — as these same Clinton supporters continue to find others to support in the 2020 primary against Sanders — they’ll face such a grave accusation now.

But despite the inconsistencies, one of the dominant themes that emerged in Democratic Party discourse from the 2016 election is that it is critically important to support female candidates and candidates of color, and that a failure or refusal to support such candidates when they present a credible campaign is suggestive evidence of underlying bigotry.

BUT ALL OF THESE stalwart, bedrock imperatives of identity politics seem strangely absent from the 2018 election cycle. These professed beliefs, in fact, seem to have vanished from Democratic Party politics almost entirely.

Over and over, establishment Democrats and key party structures have united behind straight, white male candidates (including ones tainted by corruption), working to defeat their credible and progressive Democratic opponents who are women, LGBT people, and/or people of color. Clinton herself has led the way.

In New York state, Cynthia Nixon is attempting to become the first female governor, as well as the first openly LGBT governor, in the state’s history. She’s running against a dynastic politician-incumbent, Gov. Andrew Cuomo, whom the New York Times [denounced this year](#) for being “tainted” by multiple corruption scandals.

But virtually the entire Democratic establishment has united behind the white male dynastic prince, Cuomo, over his female, LGBT challenger. That includes Clinton herself, who [enthusiastically endorsed Cuomo](#) last month, as well as Democratic Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, who — despite [starting a political action committee](#) with the explicit purpose of supporting women running for office — [also endorsed Cuomo](#) over Nixon in March.

The same dynamic is now driving the Democratic Party primary campaign in New York’s 14th Congressional District, a district that is composed of 70 percent nonwhite voters. The nine-term Democratic incumbent, Joe Crowley, is a [classic](#)

[dynastic machine politician](#). His challenger, a 28-year-old Latina woman, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, has generated nationwide excitement for her campaign after her [inspiring introduction video went viral](#). At a fundraising event, Crowley accused his opponent of playing identity politics, [saying she](#) was trying to make the campaign “about race.”

Despite all that, virtually the entire Democratic establishment has united behind the white male incumbent, and virtually none is supporting the woman of color who is challenging him. Yesterday, the very same Gillibrand who has a PAC to support female candidates and who endorsed Cuomo over Nixon announced that she was supporting Crowley over Ocasio-Cortez. That led [to this tweet](#) from Ocasio-Cortez upon hearing this news:



Across the country, the Democratic establishment has united behind white males at the expense of their female challengers and candidates of color. In Nebraska’s 2nd Congressional District, for instance, a pro-choice Democrat, Kara Eastman, is running against a former GOP male candidate, Brad Ashford, who has a history of support for abortion restrictions.

Yet national Democratic Party organizations, such as the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, [have rallied behind Ashford](#), while the most well-funded women’s groups and pro-choice groups — often accused of putting party loyalty ahead of their ostensible causes — have strangely ignored the race. When Chelsea Manning, who would be the first-ever transgender senator, earlier this year announced her intention to challenge the white, straight, male Democratic Senate incumbent and American Israel Public Affairs Committee favorite Benjamin Cardin of Maryland, centrist Democrats [maligned her](#) before the dust on her announcement had even settled.

A similarly bizarre dynamic asserted itself in the race for Senate in New Jersey, where the [Democratic establishment united behind](#) incumbent Bob Menendez despite his having been indicted on multiple bribery felony counts by the Obama Justice Department and, when that trial ended in a hung jury, was “severely admonished” by the Senate ethics committee and ordered to pay back gifts.

Uniting behind Menendez, from an identity politics perspective, is somewhat different than the other examples, given that he's the son of Cuban immigrants, but this uniting behind him despite his serious corruption problems had the effect of driving his [young African-American challenger](#), Michael Starr Hopkins, out of the race, and then made it [impossible for his female challenger](#), Lisa McCormick, to win.

IT IS POSSIBLE, of course, to argue that uniting behind a white male against challengers who are female or people of color is justified by ideological, policy, and strategic preferences. And there's likely a great deal of truth to that in these cases: The candidates challenging Cuomo, Crowley, Menendez, and Ashford are running to their left. They are advocating things like abolishing U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, "Medicare for All," an end to the war on terror, and a far higher minimum wage.

The Democratic establishment tends to despise progressive platforms like that — such views, after all, are a direct threat to the interests of the corporate, Wall Street, and weapons manufacturing funding base that sustains the party — and so it's not just plausible but likely that their opposition to those candidates really is driven by ideology, rather than demographic preferences or bigotry.

But that's not the ethos or philosophy that the Democratic establishment embraces when it's their centrist, pro-status-quo candidates who are women, LGBT people, or people of color, at which point it becomes a moral obligation to support them and evidence of bigotry if one refuses to do so. Indeed, supporters of Sanders throughout 2015 and 2016 endlessly and vocally insisted that their preference was due to ideology, not misogyny, yet they still had the label "Bernie bro" affixed to their forehead.

That's why it is truly disorienting to see Democratic leaders such as Clinton, Gillibrand, and others line up so loyally behind white men at the expense of their female and minority challengers. It's not that doing so is inherently wrong if one finds those candidates more ideologically appealing or strategically wise. It's that such behavior seems very much at odds with the prevailing ostensible views within Democratic Party politics about which candidates one should prefer.

As I discussed with Ocasio-Cortez in the interview I conducted with her, [published earlier today](#) by The Intercept, "identity politics" does not mean that one should automatically support a woman or person of color over a white male. That's the right wing's caricature of the theory. (Though it's also quite arguably the theory advanced by Clinton supporters in 2016 against Sanders supporters.)

What it does mean in its most convincing rendition, though, is that gender, race, sexual orientation, and other demographic factors should be a significant factor in evaluating competing candidates on the ground that diversity is inherently good and also a better guarantor of actual representation:



At the very least, in light of all this seemingly conflicting conduct in the 2018 election cycle, real clarification is needed for what Democrats believe about these matters.

Otherwise, people may start suspecting that the Democratic Party establishment does not have any genuine belief in these lofty principles of diversity and identity politics it likes to invoke. It may start to appear that party leaders instead only cynically and opportunistically embrace these precepts when doing so helps their preferred candidates, only to ignore and violate them when they want to rally behind centrist white men like Cuomo and Crowley, at the expense of more leftist challengers like Nixon and Ocasio-Cortez.

