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# 'Identity Politics' and Its Defenders

David Leonhardt NOV. 21, 2016

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Mark Lilla's much-discussed piece in yesterday's Times tapped into a debate about "identity politics." Lilla argued that Democrats had lost the election by focusing on ethnicity, gender and sexuality rather than "appealing to Americans as Americans and emphasizing the issues that affect a vast majority of them."

His view fits with the post-election conventional wisdom: that Democrats must do better appealing to the white working class to regain power. I largely agree, but I also think that Democrats need to be careful about alienating their current constituencies — particularly since many of those constituencies are growing.

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So I spent some time yesterday looking for critiques of Lilla, to think through their arguments.

The core criticism was that Lilla was wrong to suggest the political left deserves blame for initiating the focus on racial (and other) groups. “The label of ‘identity politics’ is mostly ridiculous whenever used, because American politics historically was based on white male identity,” Vann R. Newkirk II of The Atlantic wrote on Twitter. “Trump’s entire candidacy & now presidency was based on one of the most effective campaigns of identity politics in history.”

Likewise, Ira Madison III, at MTV.com, wrote: “Trump is confirming racists and white nationalists for his cabinet, but it’s the liberals focusing on identity politics that are getting us into trouble?” You’ll find similar points in the comments section of Lilla’s article, including one from Sara, one of the first comments under “Readers’ Picks.”

All of these arguments make a vital historical point: This country’s deep racial problems stem from discrimination, not from oversensitivity about discrimination. And it would be a terrible mistake for anyone to shy away from criticizing Donald Trump’s alarming choices for attorney general and chief White House strategist.

At the same time, there’s a reality that Democrats would be foolish to underestimate. This country’s political system — the rules for electing both Congress and the president — is biased toward large, sparsely populated areas. Those areas tend to be overwhelmingly white.

Unless Democrats can win more support from white voters than they did this year, the party will be left to complain about the country’s political situation rather

than do something about it.

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