

Should Ethnic and Racial Identities Lose Their Political and Economic Importance?

Posted on September 15, 2018

Introduction

The question of whether racial and ethnic identities should lose their political and economic importance requires a careful answer. In an ideal society, a person's racial or ethnic classification would not determine access to employment, education, housing, healthcare, political power, safety, or wealth. Individuals would not be rewarded, excluded, stereotyped, or disadvantaged because of their appearance, ancestry, language, or cultural background. In this sense, racial and ethnic identities should lose their importance as foundations for inequality.

However, it does not follow that such identities should disappear from social or political life. Racial and ethnic identities may provide people with cultural continuity, language, family history, collective memory, religious traditions, community support, and a sense of belonging. They may also be politically important when communities must organize against discrimination or seek fair representation. Eliminating racial categories from public discussion while racial inequalities remain could make those inequalities more difficult to identify and correct.

The most defensible position is therefore that race and ethnicity should lose their power to determine life chances, but individuals should remain free to value and express their identities. Governments and institutions should not assign benefits or burdens according to assumptions about racial superiority. At the same time, they may need to collect demographic information and adopt carefully designed corrective policies where reliable evidence demonstrates continuing discrimination.

This issue is also related to women's political representation. Gender, race, ethnicity, and economic position often interact in shaping access to political office. Although women have served successfully as national leaders in numerous countries, they remain underrepresented in legislatures and executive offices. The United States is likely to elect a woman president eventually, but such an outcome is not automatic. It depends on candidate recruitment, party support, campaign financing, voter attitudes, media treatment, and the removal of structural barriers.

Discussion One: Race, Ethnicity, and Social Equality

Race Is Not a Collection of Separate Biological Types

Race and ethnicity are related concepts, but they are not interchangeable. The original biological definition of race as a set of genetically distinct divisions within the human species is misleading. Contemporary genetics does not support the idea that humanity can be divided consistently into a small number of natural, biologically separate races.

Human beings display genetic variation, and some patterns of ancestry are connected to geographic population histories. However, genetic ancestry is not the same as race. Racial categories are created and modified by societies, governments, legal institutions, and historical circumstances.

The National Human Genome Research Institute states directly that “race is a [social construct](#).” It explains that no clear and consistent biological method exists for placing all people into racial categories. People with similar skin color may be classified differently in different societies, while people placed in the same racial category may have substantially different ancestry.

Skin color is influenced partly by ancestral adaptation to ultraviolet radiation, but it does not provide a complete summary of a person’s genetic background. Treating physical characteristics as evidence of fixed racial types confuses visible variation with distinct biological divisions.

The biological reality of human variation should not be denied. Certain genetic variants occur at different frequencies among populations because of migration, geographic isolation, natural selection, and historical patterns of reproduction. Nevertheless, broad racial labels are poor substitutes for specific genetic, environmental, or social information. The National Human Genome Research Institute warns that using race as a proxy in research can obscure the actual biological, environmental, and social factors affecting health.

Race is therefore socially constructed, but its consequences are real. Laws, institutions, employers, housing markets, schools, and political systems have historically classified people according to race. These classifications have influenced access to citizenship, property, voting rights, education, employment, and legal protection.

Describing race as socially constructed does not mean that racial discrimination is imaginary. Money, national borders, and legal citizenship are also social constructions, yet they produce significant material consequences. Race becomes socially powerful when people and institutions use it to distribute status, opportunity, and punishment.

Understanding Ethnicity

Ethnicity generally refers to a shared cultural identity associated with ancestry, history, language, customs, religion, homeland, food, traditions, or collective memory. An ethnic identity is not necessarily determined by physical appearance. People who appear similar may belong to different ethnic communities, while members of the same ethnic group may display considerable physical diversity.

Ethnicity may also be flexible. Individuals can possess several identities simultaneously and emphasize different aspects of themselves in different situations. A person may identify as Japanese American, Asian American, American, a member of a particular religious tradition, and a resident of a particular state or city. These identities do not necessarily contradict one another.

A Japanese American should not automatically be described as belonging to a separate “Japanese race.” Japanese identity may refer to ancestry, nationality, cultural heritage, or ethnicity. Whether a person regularly practices Japanese traditions does not eliminate that ancestry. At the same time, individuals should generally have substantial freedom to determine how strongly they identify with a cultural community.

Waters (1990) demonstrates that ethnic identity can become partly symbolic and voluntary for some groups, particularly when membership does not expose individuals to severe social penalties. A person may celebrate an ancestral holiday, prepare traditional food, or discuss family history without allowing ethnicity to dominate everyday life.

However, ethnic flexibility is not equally available to everyone. People whose appearance, names, accents, or religious practices identify them as members of stigmatized groups may not be permitted by others to treat ethnicity as optional. Society may continue assigning them an identity even when they personally wish to emphasize another aspect of themselves.

Should These Identities Become Less Important?

Racial and ethnic identities should become less important in determining political and economic outcomes. An employer should not reject a qualified applicant because of skin color or an ethnic surname. A bank should not deny credit because a customer belongs to a minority community. Police protection, school quality, medical care, voting access, and legal treatment should not depend on race or ethnicity.

This goal can be described as reducing the stratifying importance of identity. Stratification occurs when social groups are arranged unequally and receive different levels of wealth, authority, prestige, security, or opportunity. Racial and ethnic distinctions become unjust when they are converted into lasting hierarchies.

The United Nations continues to identify racial discrimination as a driver of poverty and economic marginalization. Racially marginalized populations are disproportionately represented in low-wage and insecure work in many societies, while structural discrimination affects access to labor protections, education, healthcare, housing, and political influence.

The ideal outcome is not necessarily a society in which no one notices cultural difference. It is a society in which difference does not establish superiority or inferiority. People should be able to preserve meaningful cultural identities without having those identities determine their economic value or political rights.

The Limits of a Colorblind Approach

One possible response to racial inequality is colorblindness, the principle that governments and institutions should stop considering race altogether. This position has an attractive moral foundation. If race should not determine a person's treatment, perhaps institutions should simply ignore it.

Colorblindness may be a desirable long-term aspiration, but it can be inadequate when applied without attention to existing inequality. If an institution stops collecting racial data, it may become unable to determine whether discrimination continues. A company might claim to treat everyone equally while consistently hiring, underpaying, or failing to promote members of particular groups.

Consider a school district in which decades of residential segregation produced major differences in school funding and educational opportunity. Applying identical rules today may not correct the unequal conditions inherited from the past. Formal equality treats people according to the same rule, while substantive equality asks whether institutions provide genuinely fair opportunities under existing conditions.

Race-conscious policies can also create legitimate concerns. They may use broad categories that fail to reflect individual circumstances, generate resentment, or encourage institutions to assume that every member of a group has the same experience. Such policies should therefore be evidence-based, proportionate, regularly evaluated, and directed toward specific inequalities.

The objective should not be to make race permanently central to public policy. It should be to reduce the inequalities that make race politically and economically consequential. Demographic categories should function as diagnostic tools rather than permanent definitions of individual worth.

Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination

Prejudice and discrimination are connected but distinct. Prejudice is an attitude, judgment, or emotional response directed toward people because they are perceived as members of a group. Discrimination is behavior, policy, or institutional practice that treats people unequally on the basis of

group membership.

A person may hold prejudiced beliefs without having an opportunity to act upon them. Conversely, discrimination can occur without openly hostile personal attitudes. A manager may follow a seemingly neutral recruitment practice that repeatedly disadvantages applicants from particular communities. Institutional discrimination therefore cannot always be explained by individual hatred.

Stereotypes are generalized beliefs about the characteristics of a group. Some stereotypes appear positive, but they can still be harmful because they treat individuals as representatives of a category rather than as complex persons. Assuming that members of one ethnic community are naturally intelligent, submissive, athletic, dangerous, or suited to particular occupations restricts individuality.

Allport (1954) describes prejudice as an inflexible judgment that is resistant to contrary evidence. Once people organize information through stereotypes, they may interpret ambiguous behavior in ways that confirm their existing expectations.

Discrimination can occur at several levels:

Level	Example	Likely consequence
Interpersonal	A landlord refuses to rent to a family because of ethnicity	Immediate denial of housing
Organizational	A company recruits only through social networks dominated by one group	Unequal access to employment
Institutional	School funding reflects historically segregated residential patterns	Persistent educational inequality
Political	Voting rules place unequal burdens on minority communities	Reduced political participation
Cultural	Media repeatedly associate one group with danger or inferiority	Reinforced stereotypes and social exclusion

The distinction matters because changing personal attitudes alone may not eliminate institutional inequality. Diversity training may reduce overt prejudice, but organizations must also examine hiring criteria, promotion systems, pay practices, disciplinary procedures, and reporting mechanisms.

Economic Mobility and Intermarriage

Economic mobility, residential integration, migration, and intermarriage can make racial and ethnic identities more flexible over time. Children from multiethnic families may reject rigid categories or identify with several traditions. Social interaction can reduce unfamiliarity and challenge stereotypes.

However, intermarriage does not automatically eliminate inequality. The boundaries of social groups may change rather than disappear. New identities can emerge, while older hierarchies are reconstructed through skin color, religion, immigration status, language, or nationality.

Alba and Nee (2003) explain that assimilation does not simply require minority groups to abandon their cultures. It may involve changes in the wider society, including the incorporation of cultural practices once considered foreign. The boundaries of national identity can expand.

Greater integration should therefore be welcomed when it results from free interaction rather than pressure to erase minority cultures. People should not have to abandon language, names, traditions, or religious practices to receive equal treatment.

Political Identity and Group Representation

Racial and ethnic identity can have legitimate political importance when communities experience common disadvantages or seek recognition. Political organizing has played a major role in struggles against slavery, colonialism, segregation, forced assimilation, discriminatory immigration laws, and denial of voting rights.

Without collective identity, marginalized people may find it difficult to describe shared experiences or demand institutional reform. Identity-based political movements can make previously excluded experiences visible.

However, identity politics also presents risks. Political leaders may claim to speak for an entire ethnic group despite significant differences within it. Communities contain variations in class, religion, gender, ideology, age, sexuality, and migration history. No individual should be expected to adopt a political position merely because of race or ethnicity.

Healthy democratic representation does not require every member of a group to think alike. It requires political institutions to remain open to people from different backgrounds and to take seriously the evidence of unequal treatment.

The preferred goal is not the permanent organization of politics into competing racial blocs. It is a democratic system in which cultural identities can be expressed, discrimination can be challenged, and citizens can form political alliances across group boundaries.

Cultural Preservation Without Economic Hierarchy

Ethnic traditions can retain cultural importance even when they lose stratifying importance.

Language, music, clothing, cuisine, religious observance, storytelling, and collective memory can enrich society without determining people's legal or economic status.

Governments should protect individuals from forced assimilation while also supporting participation in a shared civic system. This balance requires respect for cultural difference together with equal citizenship.

Kymlicka (1995) argues that minority cultural rights can sometimes support individual freedom because culture provides the social context through which people understand choices and identities. Cultural recognition does not necessarily conflict with national unity.

Problems arise when cultural preservation is used to justify coercion within a group or hostility toward outsiders. No community should be permitted to violate individual rights merely by labeling a practice traditional. Respect for culture must remain consistent with human dignity, equality, and freedom.

A Balanced Answer

Racial and ethnic identities should lose their political and economic importance when that importance means unequal treatment, exclusion, inherited privilege, or restricted opportunity. They should not determine who receives a quality education, obtains credit, wins employment, exercises political power, or receives protection from the law.

However, these identities need not lose their cultural, personal, and historical meaning. Nor should societies stop studying racial inequality before it has been eliminated. Data about race and ethnicity may remain necessary to expose discrimination, monitor representation, and evaluate whether public policies are fair.

The objective is therefore not to abolish identity. It is to abolish hierarchy. A just society would permit people to value their heritage while ensuring that ancestry does not determine their life chances.

Discussion Two: Will the United States Elect a Woman President?

Women's Political Leadership Is Historically

Established

There is no credible basis for believing that women are inherently less capable of national political leadership. Women have served as presidents, prime ministers, chancellors, governors, ministers, legislators, judges, and diplomats in diverse political systems.

Several examples in the original discussion require clarification. Margaret Thatcher served as the United Kingdom's first woman prime minister from 1979 to 1990. She was head of government rather than head of state.

Angela Merkel served as Germany's first woman chancellor from 2005 to 2021. She was also head of government, while Germany's federal president served as head of state. Merkel left office in December 2021; she is not Germany's current chancellor.

Julia Gillard became Australia's first woman prime minister in 2010. Australia does not have a president; it is a constitutional monarchy in which the prime minister leads the government.

New Zealand has also had women prime ministers, including Jacinda Ardern, who led the government from 2017 until 2023. Historical examples also include Golda Meir in Israel and Indira Gandhi in India.

These leaders followed different ideologies and produced different political records. Their existence does not prove that women govern in one distinctive manner. It demonstrates that leadership ability cannot reasonably be assigned according to sex.

Female Leadership Does Not Make a Country Appear Weak

The claim that other countries will view a nation as weak because it elects a woman is based on a gender stereotype rather than reliable evidence. National power depends on economic capacity, political stability, military resources, diplomatic alliances, technological development, institutional credibility, and the quality of policy decisions.

A leader's gender does not determine the strength of a healthcare system, military, economy, or scientific sector. Australia did not become weak because Julia Gillard served as prime minister, just as Germany did not lose international influence under Angela Merkel.

Female leaders can be effective or ineffective, just as male leaders can. Democratic equality does not require claiming that every woman will govern better than every man. It requires evaluating candidates according to experience, judgment, policies, ethics, and leadership ability rather than stereotypes.

Women Remain Underrepresented

Although women constitute roughly half of most national populations, they remain underrepresented in political office. As of June 2026, women held approximately 27.6 percent of parliamentary seats worldwide.

The 119th United States Congress began in January 2025 with 150 women, representing approximately 28 percent of its members. This was a slight decrease from the number serving immediately before the new Congress began.

These figures show considerable progress compared with earlier generations, but they do not represent equal participation. Women are present in political institutions without being represented in proportion to their share of the population.

The United States has not yet elected a woman as president. However, women have achieved major presidential milestones. Hillary Clinton became the first woman nominated for president by a major political party in 2016. Kamala Harris became the first woman elected vice president in 2020 and the second woman to receive a major-party presidential nomination in 2024.

These developments demonstrate that a woman can compete at the highest level of American politics. They do not guarantee when the first woman president will be elected.

Why Women Face Political Barriers

Women's political underrepresentation cannot be explained simply by voter prejudice. The process begins long before citizens cast ballots. Potential candidates must decide to run, gain party support, raise money, recruit staff, receive media coverage, survive primary elections, and establish public credibility.

UN Women identifies discriminatory institutions, unequal access to resources, violence, family responsibilities, and limited party support as major barriers to women's political participation. Women often have less access to the financial networks, political connections, and institutional sponsorship required to secure nominations and conduct competitive campaigns.

Gender stereotypes also shape candidate evaluation. Voters may associate leadership with traditionally masculine characteristics such as toughness, dominance, or military authority. Women candidates can face contradictory expectations. A woman who appears forceful may be described as unlikeable, while one who appears warm may be viewed as insufficiently strong.

Women candidates are also more likely to receive attention concerning appearance, clothing, family responsibilities, voice, age, and emotional expression. These standards may require them to demonstrate both leadership strength and conformity to expectations of femininity.

The obstacles are not identical for all women. Race, ethnicity, social class, disability, religion, and sexuality can combine with gender. Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality explains that discrimination cannot always be understood by studying race and gender separately. Women from historically marginalized racial communities may face both gendered and racialized assumptions.

The American Candidate-Selection System

The United States relies heavily on primaries, fundraising, personal ambition, and self-nomination. This system is sometimes described as entrepreneurial because candidates must create their own campaigns, assemble donors, attract party support, and convince voters that they are viable.

Such a system provides opportunities for candidates who do not possess approval from centralized party leadership. However, it can also reproduce inequality. People with access to wealth, professional networks, flexible employment, political contacts, and previous public visibility are better positioned to launch campaigns.

Women are sometimes less likely than similarly qualified men to consider themselves prepared to run for office or to be encouraged by political leaders to become candidates. Candidate recruitment therefore matters. Parties cannot assume that an open primary automatically creates an equal contest.

Formal equality allows anyone who meets legal requirements to run. Substantive equality examines whether potential candidates have comparable access to encouragement, funding, media attention, safety, childcare, and party resources.

Quotas and Deliberate Recruitment

Political parties and governments in many countries have adopted gender quotas or representation targets. These may take the form of reserved seats, legal requirements for candidate lists, or voluntary party rules.

International IDEA explains that quotas move part of the responsibility for correcting underrepresentation away from individual women and toward the institutions controlling political recruitment.

Quota systems remain controversial. Critics argue that officeholders should be chosen exclusively on merit and that quotas may appear to treat women as symbolic representatives. Supporters respond that candidate selection has never occurred in a socially neutral environment. Informal networks, party traditions, wealth, incumbency, and historical exclusion already shape who receives an opportunity.

A well-designed quota does not necessarily require voters to elect an unqualified candidate. It can require political parties to recruit and nominate qualified women rather than repeatedly selecting men from familiar networks.

Evidence suggests that legislated quotas can increase women's representation. Among countries holding elections in 2020, parliaments using legislated quotas elected a substantially higher average proportion of women than those without such requirements.

The United States is unlikely to adopt national reserved-seat quotas because of its constitutional and electoral traditions. Political parties can nevertheless recruit women deliberately, support them in competitive districts, provide campaign training, strengthen protection against political violence, and improve access to donor networks.

Is a Woman President Inevitable?

It is reasonable to predict that the United States will eventually elect a woman president. Women have already served as governors, senators, cabinet secretaries, congressional leaders, major-party presidential nominees, and vice president. The pool of experienced candidates is much larger than it was several decades ago.

Nevertheless, historical progress is not automatic or irreversible. Women's representation can stagnate or decline. The number of women entering the 119th Congress was slightly lower than the number serving near the end of the previous Congress. Globally, the Inter-Parliamentary Union reported only slow gains in women's parliamentary representation during 2025.

The election of one woman president would be historically significant, but it would not by itself establish full gender equality. A female president could face a male-dominated legislature, unequal party structures, gendered media coverage, or limited representation among judges, governors, and local officials.

Representation also should not be confused with policy agreement. Women do not hold one political ideology. A woman leader may support or oppose policies commonly associated with gender equality. Descriptive representation concerns who holds office, while substantive representation concerns the interests and policies advanced by those officeholders.

The democratic argument for women's representation is not that women will always make the same decisions. It is that political power should not be informally reserved for men.

Conclusion

Racial and ethnic identities should lose their importance as mechanisms of political and economic

inequality. A person's ancestry, skin color, language, or cultural background should not determine access to education, employment, housing, healthcare, credit, political office, or legal protection.

Race should not be understood as a set of clearly separated biological types. It is a social classification that has been historically connected to power and hierarchy. Ethnicity is more closely associated with culture, ancestry, language, traditions, and collective memory, although it can also be shaped by political conditions.

A fair society does not need to erase racial and ethnic identities. Individuals may continue valuing their communities, histories, and traditions. Governments may also need demographic information to identify discrimination and evaluate whether institutions are becoming more equal. The objective should be to remove hierarchy without requiring cultural disappearance.

Prejudice and discrimination must also be distinguished. Prejudice involves attitudes and judgments, while discrimination involves unequal behavior, policy, or institutional outcomes. Eliminating racial inequality therefore requires both changes in personal beliefs and reforms to organizational practices.

The discussion of women's political representation demonstrates that formal equality alone does not always produce equal participation. Women have led powerful and democratic countries without making those countries appear weak. Yet women remain underrepresented because of unequal recruitment, campaign resources, media treatment, family expectations, stereotypes, and political institutions.

The United States is likely to elect a woman president, but this development cannot be treated as inevitable. Progress requires political parties, voters, donors, journalists, and institutions to judge candidates according to qualifications and policies rather than traditional assumptions about leadership.

Ultimately, racial, ethnic, and gender identities should not determine a person's value or limit participation. They may remain meaningful sources of culture and belonging, but they should cease functioning as barriers to economic opportunity and political authority.

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