Beyond Flexibility: The Case for Identity Plurality in Democratic Politics

Sung Jun HAN

Vanderbilt University

sung.jun.han@vanderbilt.edu

Abstract

While Derrick Darby and Eduardo Martinez's "Making Identities Safe for Democracy" proposes flexible identities as a solution to reconciling social identity with democratic politics, this paper argues that flexibility alone is insufficient to address contemporary challenges to democracy. Through a critical examination of their work, I identify two significant limitations in their argument. First, their primary example of veteran status as a flexible identity is problematic, as empirical evidence shows it remains significantly aligned with Republican partisan identity and may be grounded in potentially restrictive forms of national identity. Second, their framework fails to adequately address how identity flexibility can counter the phenomenon of partisan sorting, where partisanship has evolved into a mega-identity that increasingly structures both political and social life. In response to these limitations, I argue that emphasizing the plurality of social identities, rather than merely their flexibility, offers a more effective approach to treating—rather than just preventing—the challenges that identity poses to democratic practice. While flexibility remains important, cultivating multiple, distinct social identities that coexist and interact within individuals and communities may better dilute the dominance of partisan mega-identities and foster more inclusive democratic engagement.

Keywords: Democracy, Identity Politics, Partisanship, Identity Politics, Partisanship, Plurality, Social Identity

Introduction

In modern democracies, it is common for individuals to regard themselves as members of various social identity groups. These can range from declarations of political membership—for example, liberal or conservative—and geographical location—for example, West Coast, Southerner, or Texan—to familiar ethnic, religious, and class-based ascriptions. Yet, social identity can pose a problem for democratic politics. Democratic citizens ought to exercise their share of political power in ways that advance the common good. However, social identity can get in the way of this democratic duty of citizens. In seeing ourselves as members of an identity group, we can lose sight of the common good,

opting instead to advance the good of our own group. Thus, here is a puzzle: seeing oneself as situated within an identity group seems socially necessary, but it poses a threat to democratic politics.

In *Making Identities Safe for Democracy* (2022) Derrick Darby and Eduardo Martinez seek to dissolve this puzzle. They argue that when social identities are made suitably flexible, they are compatible with sound democratic practice. In this way, they diagnose the puzzle as emerging from the rigidity of social identities rather than from identities as such. Their view thus amounts to a "qualified optimism" about the role of identity in democratic politics (Darby and Martinez 2022, 277). Their paper makes an important contribution to democratic theory because it provides an account of how identities can promote democratic accountability while avoiding some of the politically troubling aspects of identities.

However, I argue here that their account does not succeed. Specifically, I argue, first, that flexibility does not answer the problem of ingroup and outgroup conflicts. Then I argue that flexible identities like veteran status cannot make partisanship flexible. Taken together, these objections suggest that to make identity safe for democracy, identities must be not only flexible but also plural.

Are All Identities Dangerous to Democracy?

To begin, I will sketch Darby and Martinez's core argument. They start by acknowledging the tension between social identity and the responsibilities of democratic citizenship. Specifically, they regard social identity as a necessary aspect of the authenticity of individual lives. Social identity supplies an individual with the background of values, commitments, and priorities necessary to navigate life. Religious identity provides a clear example. When one identifies as a Christian, for instance, one adopts various values, priorities, and commitments that not only situate one within a faith community but also orient one's life toward certain goals and projects. In this approach, identities are an essential component of a person's life project.

Darby and Martinez's account of the importance of social identity brings the puzzle into sharp relief. Our social identities can pull us towards political ideals and projects that serve the interests of our own group. On standard conceptions of democracy, however, citizenship involves the duty to seek the common good, rather than simply the good of some subset of the whole. This means that citizens have the responsibility to base their political advocacy on considerations that can speak to the priorities, interests, and concerns of their

fellow citizens as such.[1] Social identities, then, are in tension with the demands of proper democratic citizenship.

Darby and Martinez's solution to this tension is straightforward: Claiming that the problem owes to the rigidity of identities rather than identities as such, they argue that we must loosen our identities and make them more flexible (Darby and Martinez 2022, 292). Drawing on Kwame Anthony Appiah's account of identity, Darby and Martinez note that flexible identities can still support an adequate conception of self-authorship in a democratic society. Flexible identities are those whose boundaries are not exclusive of other identities. These identities do not rigidly bind individuals to specific group boundaries by which in-groups and out-groups are not only distinguished but separated.

Flexible identities can situate us socially and ground our life projects, while also allowing for healthy ingroup-outgroup relations. For instance, the distinction between the represented and the representatives can enhance the internal coordination of the former with which they are empowered to hold the latter accountable to them (Darby and Martinez 2022, 280).[2] In this way, social identities strengthen political participation and democratic accountability. Flexible identities are thus consistent with the collective self-authorship of an identity group but do not challenge the responsibilities of democratic citizenship.

Thus, Darby and Martinez's account of flexible social identity allows them to describe their view as a "qualified optimism" about the role of identity in democracy. Against the identity optimist, they can hold that social identities can, indeed, pose a threat to democracy. Against the identity skeptic, they can resist the call to seek to eliminate social identities altogether (Darby and Martinez 2022, 275-277).

Is Flexible Identity Safe for Democracy?

Darby and Martinez's account occasions two criticisms. Together, these cast doubt on whether identities can be made safe for democracy. First, there is reason to doubt that their principal example of a flexible identity—veteran status—can resolve the tension between social identity and democratic citizenship. Second, there is the problem that even

---

[1] The Rawlsian duty of civility is an example. However, my view is not committed to a particular conception of it because what I want to preserve is the idea that there is a sense of obligation for citizens to at least try to base their political advocacy on reasons accessible to their fellow citizens. See Rawls 2005.

[2] Such a positive implication of partisanship has been supported in other materials as well. Intensified partisanship increases democratic participation because one's partisan identity provides a motivational reason for participation. See Huddy and Nadia 2007; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2002.

when social identities are flexible, they might yet be captured by partisan mega-identities. I will explain these in turn.

The Flexibility of Veteran Status

Darby and Martinez use veteran status as their prime example of a suitably flexible social identity. On their account, veteran status serves as a ground for an individual's social situatedness but seemingly does not invoke a rigid ingroup and outgroup distinction. However, two critical points emerge. First, even if Darby and Martinez are correct about the flexible nature of veteran identity, it might be that this identity is unique. For example, its flexibility may be due to the overriding acknowledgment of mutually shared trauma on behalf of a common experience in serving one's country. In other words, veteran status might be special. In any case, prevalent social identities that are already codified in US politics present little opportunity for flexibility. In the reality of political conflicts associated with social identities, Darby and Martinez need to show that *existing* identities can be made flexible rather than simply pointing out some examples of flexible identities.

Second, even if we suppose that veteran status does succeed as a model of democracy-safe social identity, and even if we suppose that currently rigid identities could be made to be more like veteran identity, there remains the concern that any social identity, flexible or restricted, will nevertheless posit a boundary between insiders and outsiders. To start, we should accept that flexible identities, like other identities, have a group boundary. Though Darby and Martinez proceed as if flexibility helps overcome conflicts at the boundary, the best that flexibility does to the boundary is to soften, not eliminate it.[3] To see the problem more clearly, consider veteran status. They argue that it is a safe kind of identity for democracy due to its flexible border—it is not aligned with ideologies and, naturally, free from partisanship. On one side, it seems flexible about various identities because almost any citizen can join the army regardless of their background. It may be possible to resolve partisan tensions by strengthening collaboration amongst persons from various political backgrounds when there is an inclusive boundary between ingroups.

However, there are two problems with understanding veteran status as a flexible identity. First, veterans tend to be more Republican than Democrat, and thus emphasizing veteran status as an answer to partisan conflicts could bring in favorable results for

---

[3] The boundary's relative openness to a new ingroup is another benefit of flexibility. For instance, the collective identity of the working class or workers can be flexible because it is compatible with many other non-economic identities. When people who identify as workers encounter a new identity, such as being transgender, they can do so very readily into their overall identity. It is unlikely that flexible identity can demonstrate such openness to an established outgroup, though.

Republicans. Darby and Martinez could be right that veterans are inclusive of various identities. However, this does not rule out partisan inclination within veteran groups. For example, during the presidential election campaign of 2020, 52% of veterans supported Trump while Biden supporters remained 42%. Though the number of Trump supporters among veterans decreased by 8% compared to the previous election, it shows that the partisan inclination of the veteran group still exists (Shane 2020). Note that this is not limited to the 2020 election. A Gallup survey in 2009 shows that veterans are less Democrat and more Republican in their partisan orientation. The partisan gap—the percentage of Democrats minus the percentage of Republicans—was a minus 1

3% in the age between 18 to 24 and remained in the range of negative number throughout most age ranges except for 50 to 59 and 80 to 99. Veterans of most ages are, therefore, more likely to lean Republican than Democrat (Newport 2009). Moreover, veterans tend to be more Republican than Democrat compared to non-veterans of the same age. In the same Gallup survey, the partisan gap between veterans and non-veterans ranges from 31 points to a low of 10 points. For example, while non-veterans of the age group of 18 to 24 are much more Democrat than Republican (18% more Democrats), veterans of the same age group are strongly Republican (13% more Republican) (Newport 2009). Lastly, veterans tend to be supportive of civilians' gun-carrying rights compared to non-veterans, though their responses vary in degrees when it is to individual policies (Ellison, Kelley, Leal, and Gonzalez 2022). This implies that veteran status has partisan inclination because there is a stark partisan divide over gun policies.

Darby and Martinez offer veteran status as their principal example of a flexible identity, but the empirics tell a different story. Veteran social identity skews significantly conservative and veterans tend to vote Republican. Were veteran status indeed as flexible as Darby and Martinez suggest, partisan profiles among veterans should roughly match those of the larger electorate, but they do not. This suggests that veteran status is less flexible and more restrictive.

This gives rise to a second critical point. Perhaps, the flexibility of veteran status, such as it is, owes to the more restrictive background identity of being an *American*, or an *American who served the country* in a special way. A nation is a pre-political community wherein its membership is determined by various standards such as ethnicity, culture, language, and civic values (Habermas 1989; Miller 2013). Thus, national identity can be defined as a social identity with a sense of belonging to the nation (Huddy, Leonie and Khatib, Nadia. 2007, 65). Surely, not all national identities are restrictive. Because of the country's greater breadth

than either the Democrat or Republican parties, attachment to the nation is not usually correlated with ideological affiliation. Additionally, a liberal interpretation of national identity can assist various ethnic groups in identifying themselves with the nation rather than their ethnicity, providing a secure foundation for social cohesion and collaboration (Citrin, Wong, and Duff 2001). For example, different ethnic groups endorse a national identity that places racial equality and freedom among its top priorities for what it means to be a "true American" (Citrin, Reingold, and Gree 1990). In this regard, there might be a space for flexibility in the national identity and, consequently, the veteran identity.

However, despite this optimism, other than a liberal national identity comes with moderate to excessive restrictiveness. For example, while ethnic minorities tend to conceive of them in dual terms of their ethnicity and being American, whites are inclined to see themselves as "just Americans" restricting the membership in the national identity to a particular ethnic group (Citrin, Wong, and Duff 2001). Veterans are not an exception, since they view military policies like increased military budget and involvement in overseas conflicts more favorably than other identities (Endicott 2002). This suggests that the veteran identity is still tied to a national identity, whose fundamental commitment may include defending the country's security using military force.[4] Presenting veteran status as a flexible identity only moves the issue from the domestic to the international level at the expense of a potentially more severe issue, given that international conflicts typically take a more violent shape. Thus, even veteran status, which is the main example of the paper, does not eliminate but only temporarily displaces the problem.

Partisanship as a Mega-identity

Perhaps Darby and Martinez can reformulate their conception of the flexibility of social identities in a way that addresses the foregoing concerns. Nonetheless, a second challenge looms. It is not enough for Darby and Martinez to provide examples of social identities that are flexible enough to be safe for democracy. They must also provide a reason to think that the restrictive social identities that prevail in the US can be made to be more flexible. Here, the worry is that many of our social identities have been captured by partisan mega-identities that are defined by opposition to the outgroup, and thus do not allow for flexibility. As Lilliana Mason has argued, in the United States, partisan allegiance has coalesced into a mega-identity with which various social identities are aligned (Mason 2018).

---

[4] Due to the possibility of multiple nations existing within a state, national conflicts are not exclusively confined to foreign relations. For instance, Quebecois believe that they belong to a distinct nation from other Canadian provinces. Consequently, national conflict threats might manifest on both a global and a local level. See Meadwell 1993.

Partisanship is not merely a political but a social identity, sorting people of various social lives by the partisan line. Thus, it became almost like a second-order identity that overlaps other identities as such. However, partisan sorting poses a threat to collective rule among political equals because partisan citizens would view other partisans as an object to be defeated for justice rather than equal participants of democratic collective rule (Talisse 2021).

Surely, Darby and Martinez's view might be right that flexible identities weaken the restrictiveness of partisanship by imbuing flexibility into it (Darby and Martinez 2022, 293-294; 297). As party members identify their partisanship more in line with flexible identities, partisanship itself can become flexible accordingly. Nevertheless, we should consider the opposite scenario wherein the restrictiveness of partisanship makes a flexible identity more restrictive. This scenario might involve political sorting that is more identity-based and less issue-based because political issues have more breadth than identity groups. For instance, Black Americans' political identity during the civil rights debate in the 1960s was pliable because their party identification was mostly based on policy choices. They supported the Democratic party because it promoted ethnically inclusive policies. However, more modern Black Americans put their party preferences less on the policies and more on their racial identity (Mangum 2013).

As partisanship became the dominant social and political identity, it is not limited to one's policy preferences but means who one is. Though some partisan conflicts are genuine conflicts of ideologies, many of them are collisions of psychological attitudes based on the friend and enemy relation (Mason 2018). Certainly, people with flexible identities may be relatively open to other identities. When they enter the arena of partisan struggle, however, they may have to view the other as an enemy. This is not because their identities are insufficiently flexible. It is because the political situation brings animosity between them. Because one might even willingly sort their identities along party lines to prevail against other partisans, no single flexible identity can survive against partisan sorting in this environment. Thus, flexibility seems hardly to be an answer for mitigating partisan sorting of social identities.

Plurality, not Flexibility

One might ask where we should go with identities in democracy. To answer, we should consider two approaches to solving a problem—preventing and fixing it. Preventive methods should be taken to eliminate the conditions for the problem before it is prevalent. When it already prevails, however, fixing it by reversing its effects should be the appropriate cure (Talisse 2019). Then, the question should be: Are we tasked with preventing an identity

from becoming a mega-identity or treating an existing mega-identity not to be a threat to democracy? Unfortunately, partisanship has already become a mega-identity, and the problem with identities in democracy is not a matter of prevention but treatment.

The most worrisome aspect of partisanship is that it saturates non-political identities with politics (Mason 2018). Even if we accept the positive effect of flexible identity for diminishing the restrictiveness, they are easily calcified into elements of restrictive partisan identities at least under existing conditions of democracy. For that reason, flexible identities may be, at best, preventive methods, not a cure.

Then, what can be the answer for treating the rise of mega-identity and its threats to democracy? One possible answer is found in James Madison's answer to diversification. To prevent the appearance of a dominant faction, James Madison suggested two solutions: Removing the cause and controlling the effects of it. Since the former option is not viable as factions are rooted in human psychology, he argued for controlling the negative effects of factions by diversifying sects (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 2008). Likewise, I suggest pursuing plurality in addition to the flexibility of identities as a treatment of partisanship.

The plurality of identities refers to the idea that individuals possess multiple and distinct social identities that coexist and interact with each other. For example, a person might simultaneously identify as a parent, a professional, a member of a particular religious group, a citizen of a nation, and so forth. Each of these identities plays a role in shaping that person's values, perspectives, and behaviors.

In a democratic society, the plurality of identities is essential because it can dilute the dominance of any single identity, reducing the risk of rigid ingroup-outgroup dynamics that threaten democratic practices. When people recognize and engage with the multiple facets of their identities, they are less likely to adopt extreme or exclusionary positions based on a single identity. This diversity within individuals can foster more inclusive and deliberative democratic practices, as it encourages citizens to consider a broader range of perspectives and interests.

Surely, despite plurality, each of plural identities might become restrictive and thereby worsen the problem of identities in democracy. This still calls for the emphasis of flexibility as a means to mitigate the restrictiveness of a single identity and, for that reason, flexibility is still important for plurality. In other words, each of the plural identities still needs to be flexible. Yet, unless we were in a situation where partisanship is not a mega-identity and had a chance to make it flexible, the task of making partisan identities flexible seems to be a toll order. Therefore, the foremost task for those who want to save identities for democracy

should be to ensure that non-partisan identities are sufficiently present within individuals and in society. Surely, some non-partisan identities are restrictive and, consequently, pose identity conflicts. As more non-partisan restrictive identities are made flexible by non-partisan flexible identities, however, we will have a greater pool of non-partisan flexible identities with which the calcification effect of partisanship can be less effective. Thus, Darby and Martinez have offered a good recipe for preventing social identity from posing a threat to democracy, but in so doing they have not provided a remedy for the threat identities currently pose.

Conclusion

Darby and Martinez's attempt to make identities safe for democracy poses a lens through which we can think positively about identities in democracy. Yet, flexibility alone cannot be a reliable answer to the problem of democracy, namely that flexible identity can be rooted in a restrictive identity and it seems not robust enough to reduce the dominating influence of partisan mega-identities. Accordingly, the tension between social identity and democratic citizenship stands.

When partisan identities dominate non-political identities and, for that reason, their threats are not a matter of the future but the present, we should emphasize how to treat them rather than prevent them. Emphasizing plurality over flexibility means encouraging our society to be a place where individuals embrace and engage with the full spectrum of their identities, not limited to political ones, in their daily lives. This can help mitigate the dangers posed by rigid social identities, particularly in environments where partisanship has become a mega-identity that overshadows other forms of social belonging. By fostering a plurality of identities, democracy can better safeguard against the divisive effects of identity politics.

References

Citrin, Jack, Cara Wong and Brian Duff. 2001. The Meaning of American National Identity: Patterns of Ethnic Conflict and Consensus. In *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction*, edited by Richard Ashmore, Lee Jussim, and David Wilder, 71-100. New York: Oxford University Press.

Citrin, Jack, Reingold Beth and Donald Green. 1990. "American identity and the politics of ethnic change." *Journal of Politics*, 52: 1124-1154. https://doi.org/10.2307/2131685.

Darby, Derrick and Eduardo Martinez. 2022. "Making Identities Safe for Democracy." *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 30, no. 3: 273-297. https://doi.org/10.1111/jopp.12266.

Ellison, Christopher, Margaret Kelley, David Leal and Pablo Gonzalez. 2022. "How do veterans view gun policies? Evidence from the Guns in American Life Survey." *Social Science Quarterly*, 103, no. 3: 752–768. https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12555.

Endicott, Travis. 2022. "Veteran social identity, partisanship, and political behavior." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2022.2047740.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate.* trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Hamilton, Alexander, Jame Madison and John Jay 2008. *The Federalist Papers.* ed. by Lawrence Goldman. New York: Oxford University Press.

Huddy, Leonie and Nadia Khatib. 2007. "American Patriotism, National Identity, and Political Involvement." *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1: 63-77. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2007.00237.x.

Mangum, Maruice. 2013. "The Racial Underpinnings of Party Identification and Political Ideology." *Social Science Quarterly* 94, no. 5: 1222–44. https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12029.

Marcus, George, Russel Neuman and Michael MacKuen. 2000. *Affective Intelligence and Political Judgment.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mason, Liliana. 2018. *Uncivil Disagreement.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Meadwell, Hudson. 1993. "The Politics of Nationalism in Quebec." *World Politics* 45, no. 2: 203-241. https://doi.org/10.2307/2950658.

Miller, David. 2013. *Justice for Earthlings: Essays in Political Philosophy.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Newport, Frank. 2009. "Military Veterans of All Ages Tend to Be More Republican: Political difference highest among younger veterans." *Gallup.* https://news.gallup.com/poll/118684/military-veterans-ages-tend-republican.aspx

Rawls, John. 2005. *Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Shane, Leo. 2020. "Poll: Trump backed by majority of veterans, but not younger ones." *Military Times.* https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2020/10/26/poll-trump-backed-by-majority-of-veterans-but-not-younger-ones/

Talisse, Robert. 2019. *Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in its Place.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Talisse, Robert. 2021. *Sustaining Democracy.* New York: Oxford University Press.