

The Rise of Identity Politics in America

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Despite the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, racial conflict—and the Civil Rights Movement—persisted in the United States. During the late 1960s, the movement remained the most prominent campaign for social justice in the United States. Other groups were influenced by it and used similar tactics to achieve their goals. By the end of the decade, a new form of politics had emerged, one based on identity rather than ideology.

This tutorial examines identity politics during the late 1960s in three parts:

1. Black Frustration, Black Power

In the mid-1960s, the relationship between Black civil rights activists and the federal government reached a crossroads. Significant as they were, the **Civil Rights Act of 1964** and the **Voting Rights Act of 1965** only addressed segregation in public accommodation and voting rights.



TERMS TO KNOW

Civil Rights Act of 1964

Civil rights law that bans discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

Voting Rights Act

Federal civil rights law that prohibits state and local governments from passing laws that discriminate against voters on the basis of race.

These laws did not confront problems that included residential segregation and economic inequality. Between 1964 and 1968, a series of race riots in cities across the country illuminated these problems as well as the government's inability to solve them.

In August 1965, only days after Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, a traffic stop began a chain of events that culminated in riots in Watts, a Black neighborhood in Los Angeles.



LA police arrest a Black man during the Watts riots, August 12, 1965.



Buildings burn during the Watts riots of August 1965.

Historians estimate that 50,000 people participated in the Watts riots, which took place between August 11 and August 16, 1965. During the riots, thousands of businesses and approximately \$30 million in property were destroyed. By the time the violence ended, 34 people were dead, most of them African Americans killed by the Los Angeles police and the National Guard.

In 1967, a riot in Newark, New Jersey, left 23 people dead. Another riot in Detroit, Michigan, killed 43 in the same year.



DID YOU KNOW

Between 1964 and 1968, there were 329 riots in 257 cities across the nation.

Frustration and anger lay at the heart of the Watts riots and the other riots that took place during this time. Middle- and upper-class White Americans enjoyed prosperity in suburban neighborhoods, but Black neighborhoods lacked adequate health care, job opportunities, and safe housing. Despite President **Lyndon B. Johnson**'s efforts, the Great Society programs, especially the **War on Poverty**, had not solved these problems.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Lyndon B. Johnson

Democratic U.S. president from 1963 to 1969, whose grandiose domestic agenda for civil rights and economic equality, known as the Great Society, ran up against a growing conflict in Vietnam and an unraveling of the liberal New Deal coalition that supported the Democratic Party.



TERM TO KNOW

War on Poverty

Lyndon Johnson's plan to end U.S. poverty by extending federal benefits, job training programs, and funding for community development.

The Johnson administration's reliance on a draft during the Vietnam War, which disproportionately impacted the poor and people of color, led many African Americans to believe that the federal government was unwilling to end their suffering.



DID YOU KNOW

An average of 300,000 young men were drafted into the military each year between 1964 and 1968. After President Johnson escalated the conflict in Vietnam, the Selective Service System, which oversaw the draft, implemented a series of strategies that enabled middle- and upper-class candidates to avoid military service. Deferments for students who attended college or graduate school, exemptions for young men employed in skilled occupations, and officer training programs on college campuses (ROTC) enabled middle- and upper-class men, many of whom were White, to avoid the draft or volunteer for service with a military branch of their choice.

The African American population, though smaller than the White American population, had a much larger proportion of poor and working-class individuals and fewer who belonged to the middle class. Because of the intersection of class and race, Black men were more likely to be drafted, and to face combat in Vietnam, than Whites.



DID YOU KNOW

Nearly two thirds of eligible African Americans were drafted during the Vietnam War, in contrast to less than one third of eligible White Americans.

Disillusioned by their economic and social situations, some turned to ideologies that demanded empowerment and racial separation rather than integration and equality. Together, these ideologies were labeled **Black Power**.



TERM TO KNOW

Black Power

A political, social, and cultural ideology that encouraged African Americans to create their own institutions and develop their own economic resources independent of Whites.

Black Power meant a variety of things. One of the most famous users of the term was **Stokely Carmichael**, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1966. For Carmichael, Black Power meant that African Americans should live apart from Whites and solve their problems themselves. In keeping with this philosophy, Carmichael expelled SNCC's White members in December 1966. This alienated many White supporters of the Civil Rights Movement.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Stokely Carmichael

Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) from 1966 to 1967, who advocated for a reorientation of the organization along the lines of Black Power.

Long before Carmichael called for Black Power, the Nation of Islam, founded in 1930, advocated it. By the early 1960s, its most famous member was **Malcolm X** (formerly Malcolm Little).



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Malcolm X

African American minister in the Nation of Islam and later a human rights activist, who rejected the nonviolent approach of the mainstream Civil Rights Movement.

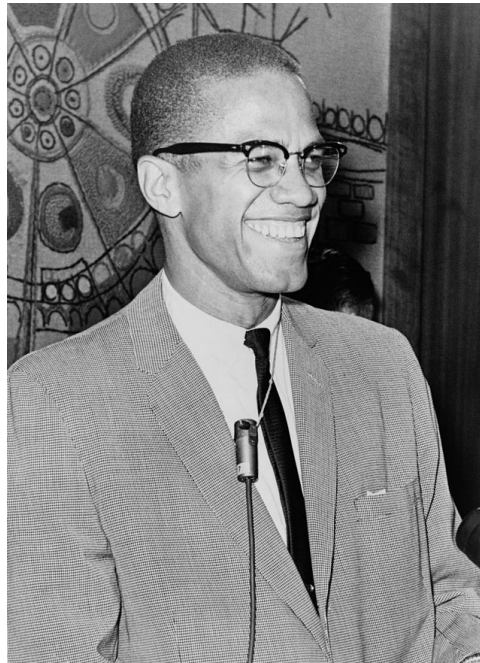
The Nation of Islam advocated the separation of the races because the organization believed African Americans could not thrive in an atmosphere of White racism.



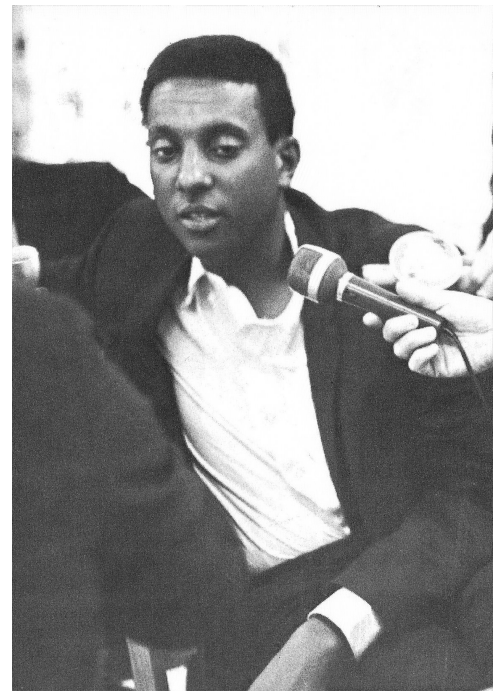
DID YOU KNOW

In a 1963 interview, Malcolm X referred to White people as “devils” more than a dozen times.

Unlike Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights activists, Malcolm X rejected nonviolence and maintained that the use of violence was appropriate when necessary.



Malcolm X, 1964.



Stokely Carmichael discusses “Black Power” at Michigan State University in 1967.

In 1964, after a trip to Africa, Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam and founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity, which sought freedom, justice, and equality “by any means necessary.” His views regarding race relations moderated somewhat, but he remained fiercely committed to Black empowerment. On February 21, 1965, he was killed by members of the Nation of Islam.

Another notable expression of Black Power was the Black Panther Party, founded in 1966 by **Bobby Seale and Huey Newton** in Oakland, California. In their Ten Point Program, the Black Panthers called for jobs, housing, education, protection from police brutality, and exemption from military service. Members of the Party wore dark uniforms and armed themselves.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Bobby Seale and Huey Newton

Founders of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California, in 1966.



DID YOU KNOW

The Black Panthers patrolled the streets of Black neighborhoods to protect residents from police brutality, a tactic they called “policing the police.”

Their militant attitude and advocacy of armed self-defense attracted young Black men, but it also led to many encounters with police and federal investigators that sometimes ended in arrests or even shootouts.

Regardless of the methods used by various groups, the central message of Black Power was racial empowerment.



BRAINSTORM

The Pan-African movement that occurred during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was based on the belief that African Americans have a distinct racial heritage and embraced Africa as the homeland of all people of African descent. In what ways was the Black Power movement of the 1960s similar and different?

In addition to its messages regarding racial equality—or racial separation—Black Power was a product of a broader celebration of African heritage and solidarity during the 1960s and 1970s. Black pride encouraged African Americans to celebrate their heritage and their communities. African and African-inspired cultural practices (e.g., handshakes, hairstyles, and dress) promoted solidarity.

The popular television music program *Soul Train*, created by Don Cornelius in 1969, was one of the many expressions of Black Power.



When the Jackson Five appeared on *Soul Train*, each of the five brothers sported an afro hairstyle, a symbol of Black pride during the 1960s and 1970s.

2. Women's Liberation

When young women participated in the New Left or the Civil Rights Movement, they encountered organizations that were influenced—consciously or otherwise—by the concept of male superiority.

➔ **EXAMPLE** When two members of SNCC, Casey Hayden and Mary King, presented some of their concerns about their organization's treatment of women in a document entitled "On the Position of Women in SNCC," Stokely Carmichael responded that the appropriate position for women in SNCC was "prone."

Some older, married women, who might not have participated in the social movements of the times, found their traditional roles as housewives and mothers unfulfilling.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In 1963, *The Feminine Mystique*, by writer and feminist **Betty Friedan**, was published. In it, she contested the traditional belief that women's primary social role was to marry and bear children. Friedan's book was a bestseller, and it raised the consciousness of many women who believed that suburban home life drained them of their individuality.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Betty Friedan

Feminist activist, founding member of the National Organization for Women (NOW), and author of *The Feminine Mystique*, which called into question the traditional belief that women's most fulfilling social role was to marry and bear children.

Medical advances also contributed to debates regarding women's liberation. In 1960, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the birth control pill, which enabled women to limit, delay, or prevent conception. Approximately 6 million women were using the birth control pill within 5 years of its approval.

Although the pill enabled women to work outside the home, attend college, and delay marriage more easily, opponents argued that it promoted sexual promiscuity, undermined marriage and the family, and damaged national morality. During the early 1960s, the sale of contraceptive devices was a criminal offense in 30 states.

In this context of civil rights agitation, frustration with traditional gender roles, and the debate over birth control, the **National Organization for Women (NOW)** was established, and it began to set an agenda for the feminist movement.



TERM TO KNOW

National Organization for Women

A major feminist group founded in 1966.



Early members of NOW discuss the problems faced by American women. Betty Friedan is second from the left.

Source: Smithsonian Institution Archives.

Like the NAACP, a mainstream civil rights organization, NOW members used legal action to influence legislative changes or to ensure the enforcement of laws that established gender equality and equal

opportunity. As in the Civil Rights Movement, however, some radical feminists used direct tactics against institutions that they believed oppressed women.

➔ **EXAMPLE** One of the most famous expressions of the radical feminist movement occurred in September 1968. Hundreds of protesters, organized by New York Radical Women, demonstrated against the Miss America Pageant in Atlantic City, New Jersey. They sought to focus attention on the contest's—and society's—exploitation of women. Protesters crowned a sheep as Miss America, then tossed symbols of oppression, including high-heeled shoes, curlers, girdles, and bras, into a “freedom trash can.” News accounts famously, and incorrectly, described the protest as a “bra burning.”

3. The Politics of Identity

The rise of Black Power and feminist organizations like NOW indicated the emergence of **identity politics** in the United States during the late 1960s.

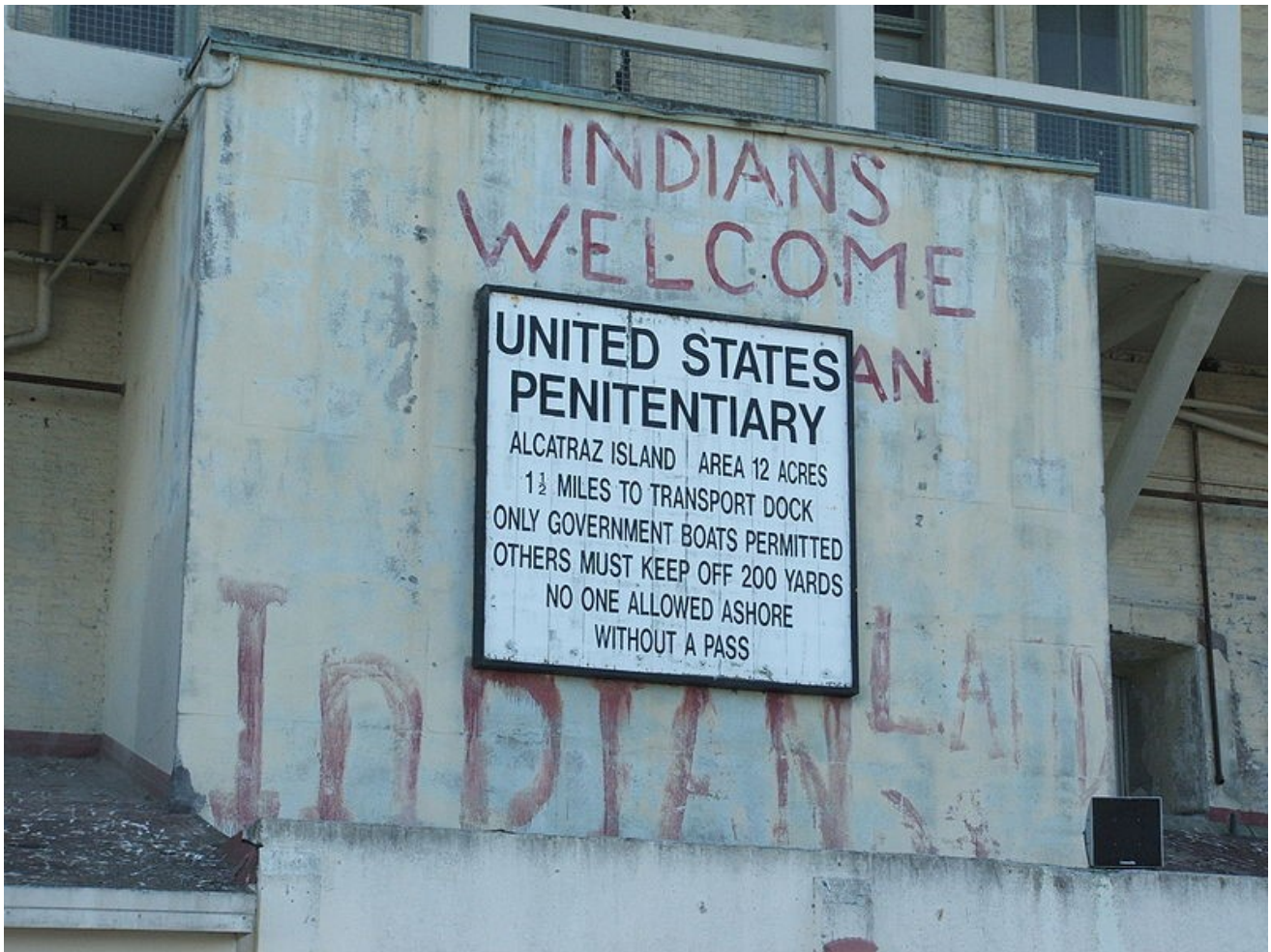
Instead of attempting to unite American society around a set of common values, identity politics focused on issues that were significant to the subgroups, including those based on culture, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. When making their demands, identity politics movements borrowed from the language and tactics of Black Power and the New Left.

3a. The American Indian Movement (AIM)

In 1968, a group of Native Americans gathered in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to form the American Indian Movement (AIM). Many AIM supporters were urban Native Americans who had experienced poverty and discrimination.

During the late 1960s, 20% of urban Native Americans lived in poverty. Half of all Native Americans lived on reservations, where the unemployment rate was over 50%. Most reservations lacked sufficient housing, education, and job opportunities.

On November 20, 1969, AIM made national headlines when a small group of activists landed on Alcatraz Island (the former site of a notorious federal prison) in San Francisco Bay and announced plans to build an American Indian cultural center. People continued to join the occupiers until, at one point, there were about 400 of them on the island.



Evidence of the occupation of Alcatraz Island between 1969 and 1971 lingers, as shown in this 2006 photograph.

Over time, many of the occupiers left the island on their own. The federal government removed the few remaining holdouts in June 1971, 19 months after the occupation began. By that time, AIM was mobilizing future protests to assert Native sovereignty over economic and environmental resources promised by federal treaties.

3b. Gay Liberation

Gay and lesbian activists protested and litigated against discrimination and the criminalization of their sexual identities on a number of occasions during the 1960s. On June 28, 1969, their struggles entered the national spotlight when New York City police raided a gay bar called the Stonewall Inn.





A photograph of the Stonewall Inn in 1969.

As the police prepared to arrest some customers, mostly transgender people and cross-dressers, some of the other customers attacked the police. Following the riot, two new organizations—the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists' Alliance—were formed. Both groups protested against the discrimination and violence directed at gay people and promoted gay pride.



BIG IDEA

Whatever the organization or focus, identity politics sought “power,” engendered group pride, and organized to achieve the “liberation” of a specific group. Their goals and methods—including protest, occupation, and confrontation—directly challenged the existing state of affairs, including the liberal policies of President Johnson. Change did not come easily. Throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries, movements based on identity politics have been met with opposition and hostility from individuals, local officials, and, in some cases, the federal government.



SUMMARY

Frustrated by the continued inequality and the slow pace of change, some African Americans adopted the Black Power ideology—which could mean a number of things, including racial separation, militant opposition, and celebration of African American culture. At the same time, women sought gender equality by questioning traditional norms and advocating for social and legal change. Black Power and feminism are two examples of the emergence of identity politics in the United States during the late 1960s. Identity politics encouraged groups to celebrate their identities and to demand their rights as American citizens.

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