The homepage of the Republican Party features a document, “Principles of American Renewal,” which begins with the Constitution and contains policy positions on eleven political issues. In stark contrast, the Democratic Party’s homepage provides links to “People,” each of which has a text designed to appeal to a distinct identity group. “You might think,” Mark Lilla declares, “that by some mistake you have landed on the web site of the Lebanese government – not that of a party with a vision of America’s future.”

In *The Once and Future Liberal*, Lilla (a professor of the Humanities at Columbia University and the author, among other books, of *The Reckless Mind: Intellectuals and Politics* and *The Legacy of Isaiah Berlin*) argues that in the decades following the election of Ronald Reagan, Democrats have failed to offer a political vision adapted to the new realities of American society. Instead, “they lost themselves in the thicket of identity politics and developed a resentful, disuniting rhetoric of difference to match it.”

For two generations, Lilla maintains, the United States has been governed by Republicans, who question the existence of a common good and a collective obligation to help others, if necessary, through government action; or Democrats, who ‘fetishize individual and group attachments, applaud self-absorption, and cast a shadow of suspicion over any invocation of a universal democratic we.”

Lilla is not the first liberal to condemn identity politics as a bad turn. In *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, published in 1995, Todd Gitlin, the former president of Students for a Democratic Society, asserted that “the hardening of boundaries between groups, the insistence that
individuals are no more than their labels, is an American tragedy.” Gitlin claimed that even if the alarm over “political correctness” was exaggerated, identity politics had overloaded the symbolic stakes, ignored the fact that majorities are needed to protect and promote the rights of minorities, and, in “affirming the virtues of the margins…had left the centers of power uncontested.” Hoping for an end “to the perfection of differences,” Gitlin issued a plea to build cultural, social, and political bridges.

Hoping for an end “to the perfection of differences,” Gitlin issued a plea to build cultural, social, and political bridges.

Subscribe to The Morning Email.
Wake up to the day's most important news.

That said, Lilla’s manifesto is important, compelling, and, quite obviously, timely. Lilla, it is important to note, readily acknowledges that identity-based social movements have made the United States “a more tolerant, more just, more inclusive place than it was fifty years ago.” But he provides a forceful reminder that identity politics depended on “being unstained by compromise and above trafficking in mere interests,” and on reducing or eliminating the space between what “movement warriors felt inside and what they did in the world.” Endorsed in universities as “an activity that must have some authentic meaning for the self,” movement identity politics became an alternative rather than a supplement to institutional politics.

Lilla concludes with a passionate, intentionally provocative plea to his fellow progressives. Instead of “identity follies” that encourage a “self-righteous narcissism,” he writes, progressives should try to convince Americans from different walks of life “that they need to stand together.”

To win elections, progressives should dust off a musty concept. Citizenship, Lilla insists, is an “identity” that “brings home the fact that we are part of a common enterprise,” with reciprocal rights and duties.

Equal protection under the law and economic justice are more likely to be advanced, Lilla maintains, by appealing to shared citizenship than to (the inevitably divisive) class, race, or gender identities.

Lilla’s analysis is certainly worth considering. If Democrats decide to press the reset button, on rhetoric, campaign strategy, and policy priorities, however, they will have to confront the reality that identity politics is entrenched in their core constituencies.

©2017 Oath Inc. All rights reserved.
HuffPost News