The Case for Identity Politics: Polarization, Demographic Change, and Racial Appeals

By Christopher T. Stout. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020. 268 pp., $42.50 Cloth.

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In *The Case for Identity Politics: Polarization, Demographic Change, and Racial Appeals*, Christopher T. Stout asks his readers to re-imagine the effectiveness of the deracialized electoral strategy given our current political context: changes in population composition, high-profile police shootings, the Black Lives Matter Movement, and increases in hate groups, voting rights restrictions, and economic disparities. He suggests that while in the past, the deracialized strategy proved to be most effective in winning over white working-class voters, that may no longer be the case, and we need to be more aware of the situational context behind its use. It is not a one-size-fits-all strategy; the Democratic Party should not use it in all cases nor at all times.

Stout proposes that the Democratic Party needs to think more broadly about racialized and deracialized electoral strategies. However, his focus in this book is to make a case for situations where racialized appeals would be most suitable for the Democratic Party, given our current political climate. He contends that the country's national mood plays an important role in some of the shifts we have seen in the effective use of racial appeals. Stout uses survey data from sources such as the American National Election Survey, Pew Research Center, and experimental studies to test his claim that context may matter when it comes to candidates successfully using racial appeals. He provides evidence to suggest we may be at a time where racialized appeals may be advantageous to the Democratic Party.

Stout begins his analysis by making a case for the increasing significance of race by attributing the greater awareness of the effects of racial discrimination on minority populations to the rise of the Tea Party movement, high-profile instances of police brutality, and the subsequent emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement and Donald Trump's presidential campaign. As minority voters begin to make up an increasing portion of the electorate and the electorate becomes more polarized, there may be more incentives for politicians to shift to racialized appeals. However, Stout does caution that despite the current demographic changes in the US racial/ethnic population, we may not see a drastic difference in the racial/ethnic partisan makeup of the US electorate for some time. Further, as Blacks and Latinos experience a resurgence in linked fate among their racial and ethnic groups, it provides an ideal situation where candidates can make explicit racial appeals without being punished at the polls. Similarly, with racial resentment becoming a

more significant divide in the American electorate, we are beginning to see more coherence around white voters' level of racial resentment. Stout contends that racial appeals can mobilize and possibly cement a coalition of liberal whites, Blacks, and Latinos. For example, in recent elections, he found that candidates who appear racially liberal increased turnout among Black voters.

Much of this may result from Trump's use of negative racial/ethnic appeals during his presidential campaign, causing many voters to swing towards racially liberal candidates who voiced their intent to use the government to address racial inequality. For example, in 2008, Latinos were less likely to support Obama when they perceived him favoring the Black community but by 2016 we see a reversal, with Latinos supporting more racially progressive candidates. This example provides another situation where the current political context, especially under the Trump presidency, could lead Latinos to reward rather than punish racially liberal candidates. Similarly, for Asian Americans, Stout also found that they were more likely to support other racial/ethnic groups after Trump's election. Stout does note that small numbers of Asian American respondents in the surveys used for this work limit the implications of his findings in this area, and future research should address this deficiency. Additionally, on many occasions, he identifies the Trump campaign as a contributor to this polarization and rise in identity politics, but not to the degree necessary given the political implications of the Trump presidency.

Stout argues that the Democratic party would do well by discussing racial issues to mobilize those passionate about addressing racial inequality. He found that direct appeals to Latino and Asian–American voters did not shift Black approval of Obama, leading him to conclude that Democrats would not suffer a loss in their Black supporters if they were to begin making more directed appeals to the Latino and Asian communities. The same held for whites, regardless of their partisanship. Since there is no evidence of backlash within the Democratic party for promoting the needs of differing racial/ethnic minorities, Stout suggests that the Democratic party focus on all members' interest in their alliance, for not doing so could lead to alienating segments of their alliance. If the party chooses to racialize messages, it must do so on a broader scale to avoid alienating its coalition members. This approach toward mobilization seems plausible since Stout also found that the electorate has become more entrenched in their political views. He advises that the Democratic Party should focus on the "path of least resistance," which would be to use racial appeals to remobilize the Obama coalition of liberal whites, Blacks, and Latinos.

Overall, Stout provides strong, logically flowing, and empirically tested arguments detailing the specific contextual factors that may inhibit or promote the successful use of racial appeals among Democratic candidates. The importance of Stout's work serves as a reminder that deracialized and racialized appeals are contextual strategies. Stout presents a great starting point for future research in this area, given his findings. In particular, one may want to examine how negative racial/ethnic appeals made by Republican candidates affect voter turnout among Republicans, in general, and minority members of the Republican Party.