

## VIDEO TRANSCRIPT FOR “THE RISE AND IMPLICATIONS OF IDENTITY POLITICS”

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**On-screen text:**

**Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment  
a discussion with Professor Francis Fukuyama**

**On-screen text:**

**Professor Francis Fukuyama  
Stanford University**

**Francis Fukuyama:** Hello. My name is Francis Fukuyama. I am a Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University and the Mosbacher Director of the Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law. I’m a political scientist that primarily studies international relations and international development, but today I’d like to talk about an issue that I think has become critical in both American and in global politics, which is the question of identity.

Now, identity can mean something simple like what’s printed on your driver’s license, but there’s a more specific meaning which has to do with this feeling that many people have that they have an inner self that they may not understand completely but they feel deserves recognition. It deserves a sense of respect by other people. And oftentimes that respect is not forthcoming, which produces feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and oftentimes anger. This is what drives people into politics because it’s politics that provides recognition when public authorities recognize the status of you or your group. And that’s why I think that there’s been a lot of focus in recent years on identity politics and a big switch towards that kind of politics.

You can see this domestically in the United States through things like the Me Too movement, which is about women that want respect for their whole persons as human beings and not simply them as sexual objects. You see this in the Black Lives Matter movement, in which African Americans are trying to push back against the specific injustices that they suffer as a matter of police violence in American cities.

But it also has a broader international implication because around the world there’s a lot of nationalist movements that also are based on this desire for recognition. A nationalist feels that he or she is a member of a national group that’s not getting adequate recognition. For example, in Catalonia, a part of Spain, there’s an independence movement on the part of people that speak the language Catalan and want Catalonia to be a country separate from Spain. They want it to be recognized in the sense of being a separate political entity. There are similar movements in Quebec in Canada and Scotland in the United Kingdom.

I think also that certain kinds of religious affiliation are driven by this desire for identity. Even something like a terrorist organization like al Qaeda or the Islamic State is oftentimes supported by people who feel that the world has disparaged Muslims, has mistreated them, has been violent towards them, and they are seeking a certain sense of community and identity by picking up an AK-47 and going off to Syria to fight on that community’s behalf.

Now, all of these groups, I think, are morally at a very different place. The Me Too movement or Black Lives Matter are really questions of social justice. With many nationalist movements, they tend to shade over from demanding equal respect to demanding superior respect. They want

to dominate other people; they are willing to use violence in their means. And so, morally these groups are not equivalent, but they are based on these assertions of identity.

I think one of the big changes going on in global politics is that in the 20th century we had a politics that was organized around an economic axis, primarily. You had a left that worried about inequality, that wanted more redistribution, fairer opportunity for poor people or for people that were marginalized in some way. And you had a right that was in favor of the greatest amount of freedom, that wanted a market economy to succeed, that wanted the prosperity that comes from market-based economic growth. And those were the kinds of trade-offs that were involved in our politics that, you know, is certainly the kind of politics that I grew up in.

I think that now we are seeing a shift in many countries away from this focus on economic issues to a polarization based on identity. You can see that in Europe, where in Poland and Hungary, you've had the rise of populist regimes that have emphasized their own national identity above others. In Hungary, for example, the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has argued that Hungary national identity should revolve around Hungarian ethnicity. These tend to be fairly conservative, and one of the unifying factors is their opposition to immigration. There's been a huge increase in globalization over the last 40, 50 years with goods, services, capital, people, ideas moving across international borders. One of the big shifts that's occurred is a big increase in immigration in many countries, and that has provoked a backlash by people who feel that this kind of immigration—large numbers of foreigners moving into one's country—is shifting the country's national identity away from what it had been traditionally. This backlash movement has brought these populist parties to power.

I think this has also been going on in the United States where, with the election of Donald Trump in 2016, you had a very overtly anti-immigrant President who has used opposition to immigration to build support for his base of supporters and has been much more interested in asserting these kinds of identity issues over traditional Republican policies like tax cuts and greater opportunity based on market competition—that sort of thing.

I think that this kind of identity politics in general is not good for modern democracies. The more disturbing things are the things like the rise of white nationalism on the right and the growth of global populism. But that was preceded by a shift in the thinking of many people on the left, both in Europe and the United States, where the focus had previously been on the broad working class—which was a large group of mostly white people in America and in Europe—and over time, the thinking about inequality has shifted more towards a focus on specific identity groups—like racial minorities, immigrants, women—that were suffering from marginalization and injustice but were a different group than the traditional working class base that represented majority communities in these different countries. As a result, the polarization has emerged not so much over economic policy but really over these identity issues.

In the United States, for example, the Republican party increasingly has become a party of white people, and the Democratic party has become increasingly a party of minorities and women. In general, I think the problem for a democracy is that you've got these specific identities—nobody's ever going to deny that we're all born into specific groups, we all suffer shared injustices, we have common experiences that are limited to that group—but for a democracy, you need something more than that. You need an integrative sense of national identity that hopefully is open to the existing diversity of the society that allows people to believe that they're part of the same political community.

Democracies do not produce agreement. People disagree on policies. But they have to agree on certain things. They have to agree on the basic rules and procedures by which they make decisions. They have to agree on the legitimacy of their institutions. In a place like the United States, that's a matter of believing in the American Constitution, in the primacy of the rule of law, and in the principle of equality that's enunciated in the Declaration of Independence. This kind of identity is really, I think, the only common glue that holds an extremely diverse country together.

This is true in other societies as well, because many other rich democracies have become extremely diverse as a result of high levels of immigration and also the social changes that have accompanied modernization, with more and more diverse populations becoming politically aware and politically motivated.

Therefore, I think if you're going to maintain a democracy, you need to have the sense of an integrative national identity to balance all of the specific identities that are inevitably out there. That, I think, is the challenge for modern democracy at the present moment. It's a big challenge, because these partial identities are very powerful and there's a lot of emotion standing behind them. But I think if we worry about the survival of democracy itself, it's important that we emphasize, in a sense, shared values as well as these specific identities that we've grown very accustomed to living inside.

Thank you very much for your attention.