



## How Do People Make Political Decisions When Compelling Identities Pull Them in Different Directions?

**Samara Klar**, University of Arizona

Most people feel a sense of identity with various different groups. A young black woman, for example, might feel a sense of involvement with African Americans, with women, with younger people – and, if she has a child, she could also identify as a parent. Scholars who study democratic politics are very interested in how group identities influence citizens' political decisions. But to figure out how identities influence political choices, scholars have to do a lot more than drop people into one category or another, because people hold many different identities that can range from highly stable traits (such as race or gender) to relationships that can shift over the course of life (like marital status or active parenthood). These identities can spike or recede in importance depending on what people are doing and with whom. Different identities may come to the fore when parents watch a children's soccer game, as opposed to when those same people are at work or attending a political rally.

### Competing Identities and Political Preferences

Not only do most people negotiate many different identities, but at any given time a person can be pulled in different directions by identities associated with competing interests. Even at the level of apparently stable life-identities like race or religion, this may be truer today than ever before. For example, surveys reveal that rates of interracial and interfaith marriages in the United States are at an all-time high, and rates of immigration are also higher than in the mid-twentieth century. Thus 14.6% of all marriages now occur between members of two different racial groups; nearly 40% of marriages link partners from different faiths; and 21% of children speak a different language at home than they do at school. In sum, Americans are increasingly likely to identify with multiple ethnic, religious, and cultural groups – and there are plenty of times when the apparent political interests of groups within their multiple affiliations may clash, when public arguments or mobilizations can pull the same person in divided directions. And of course the same thing can happen when a person has a certain relational identity – like parent – but also feels other group loyalties that seem at odds with what most parents think, or are said to think. Scholars trying to understand how Americans reach their political preferences have to take such divided loyalties into account.

### Studying Parenthood as an Influential Identity

My research looks at the issue of conflicting identity influences by probing partisan identities in relation to the understudied identity of parenthood. Family roles are commonly emphasized when individuals are asked for their most important identities, and experiences within families provide powerful cues for our political preferences. Politicians commonly target parents when they are discussing their policy positions and platforms, and candidates make frequent mention of parents. For example, in the course of presidential debates during the 2012 election, President Obama and Governor Romney mentioned parents forty-eight times! They talked that way for good reason: when parenthood becomes relevant, individuals are likely to prioritize their parental concerns over other potentially conflicting interests. In my own research, I realized that the concerns of “parents” and “Democrats” sometimes conflict, so it would be fascinating to see what happens when parents who identify with the Democratic Party are asked to make policy choices on matters where these identities pull in different directions.

### An Experimental Study

To set up a controlled identity tension I could measure, I designed and administered a survey experiment – that is, a survey where questions are used to make things salient with some of those interviewed, but not others. My survey posed questions to a large number of self-identified Democrats who are also parents. Particular questions reminded certain respondents that they are, indeed, identified with both groups – and then proceeded to raise three issues that research shows pull in different directions for “parents” and “Democrats.”

I asked about *federal spending on the military*, because parents tend to support more military spending, while Democrats prefer less. Other questions focused on *prison sentencing for sex offenders*, because parents tend to support harsh prison sentences, whereas Democrats prefer programs to rehabilitate offenders. Finally, the survey probed attitudes about *federal spending on social welfare during a recession*, because parents tend to be more concerned with the deficit that will be left for our children's generation, while Democrats support social welfare spending to help those in need during economic downturns.

## Results and Larger Implications

What happens when people who are reminded that they are both parents and Democrats have to deal with such conflicting issues? A clue comes from how politicians make identity appeals. Often they emphasize a threat to the group. Similarly, my research shows that people are most likely to defend an identity-based interest when they feel the group to be under threat.

- When Democratic parents are told that their party principles are threatened, they react by expressing strong preferences for policies that represent Democratic ideals.
- But when parental concerns are threatened, Democratic parents switch and express strong support for policies that protect their children, regardless of partisan implications.
- When *both* identity groups are perceived to be under an equal threat, Democratic parents become ambivalent – they lose any strong preference for either policy.

As my study underlines, when individuals perceive a threat against an identity they hold along with their partisan identity, they may deviate from the partisan position. Political outcomes are influenced not only by partisanship, but also by cross-cutting loyalties. Given the proliferation of cross-cutting identities for so many Americans, politicians have a lot of room to prime different identities and make various appeals. At the same time, communicators must keep in mind that reminding citizens why their group is being threatened may have little effect – or lead to ambivalent withdrawal – if people feel that another heartfelt identity is equally threatened.

Read more in Samara Klar, "**The Influence of Competing Identity Primes on Political Preferences.**" *Journal of Politics* 75, no. 4 (2012) and "**Identity Importance and Political Engagement among American Independents.**" *Political Psychology* (2013).