

# Identity Politics: Taking a Closer Look at Harris and Warren

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The tides of government are changing: from national to local elections, we see minorities--people of color, women, and queer individuals--running for and winning office. As the country splits into pro- and anti-Trump camps ahead of the 2020 election, a liberal and progressive pool of voters is emerging unlike any in previous generations. Not only are we renewed in our cry for equality and civil rights, unafraid to school each other on microaggressions and their long-term effects, and proud to embrace our cultural backgrounds, we're also empowered by the internet and its ability to reveal documented faults in any politician instantly. Our power to connect and share information via social media may be the cause of politics' largest shift since our country started televising presidential debates.

How does this new frontier at the apex of self, community, culture, and technology play into how we vote? Does a candidate's identity, and how closely it relates to our own, matter? If it does, to what degree?

Two women projected to be front runners for the Democratic Party nomination, Senator

Kamala Harris and Senator Elizabeth Warren, are waging campaigns that combine political experience and identity politics in an effort to secure the presidency in 2020. Each woman has a strong history of doing work with and for the people in her community and each has incurred controversy and criticism for actions directly related to her identity. As a diverse pool of additional hopefuls continue to enter the presidential race it's important to ask ourselves now: do the policies of these two women hold enough weight to put either of them above other candidates? And exactly how much does identity play into our decisions to support or deny their goals?



Major media outlets suggested that presidential hopeful and current California Senator Kamala Harris would run for president almost as soon as she was sworn into the United States Senate in 2017. As a mixed-race woman (Senator Harris' mother is Tamil Indian and her father is Jamaican,) she has the potential to sweep the vote amongst racial minorities and, should she become the party nominee, capture the vote from women upset by Trump's policies. Her platform for the presidential race promises "the largest working and middle-class tax cut in a generation," "universal pre-k and debt-free college," and "Medicare for All." In general, Senator Harris hugs the middle of the road on issues. Subsequently, she never shakes things up to the point of alienating moderate voters.

It's this position in the middle that raises red flags for some potential voters. Since announcing her bid, Senator Harris has come under scrutiny for policies she supported in her roles as District Attorney of San Francisco and General Attorney of California. As General Attorney, Senator Harris disagreed with setting statewide regulations that would require police to wear body cams and, as District Attorney, she didn't support a proposal to end California's especially harsh three-strikes law. The three-strikes law allows the state to sentence individuals with three criminal offenses to life in prison, *even if* those were nonviolent crimes. For a vocal portion of America's black demographic, these measures are patently anti-black. The problem, according to her critics, is that Senator Harris wants to claim her blackness (she announced her official bid for President on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day) for votes despite a personal history of actively upholding policies and laws which disproportionately harm the black community.

The truth of these claims is murky. Yes, Senator Harris decided not to support an attempt to repeal the three strikes law but, as a prosecutor, she refrained from seeking life sentences for some nonviolent offenders, considering the law on a case-by-case basis. In 2010, as San Francisco District Attorney, she opposed the legalization of recreational marijuana in

California, even though black men and women are over three times more likely to be prosecuted for possession than their white counterparts. This is another issue critics of the Senator point to as proving her penchant for prosecuting blacks, and again, the truth is more complicated: in 2010 the senator supported the legalization of medical marijuana. Her official stance in 2019 is not only legalization but also freedom: she believes in clearing the records of everyone convicted of “nonviolent marijuana offenses,” so they can get on with their lives. As for the body cameras on police, Senator Harris believes that the biggest issue between police and citizens is a lack of trust and body cams are not likely to fix that issue.

From top to bottom her stances aren't wildly progressive: she is intent on our country doing the best we can within the confines of the existing framework. After all, as a lawyer, her focus up until recently been on enforcing the law, not creating and defining it. In Senator Harris' America, we don't overhaul or drastically change the economic, political, and educational systems already in place.

Does this justify the calls to take her black card? I don't believe so. No culture is a monolith, and--as a fellow black woman--I won't question her place within our culture because she doesn't want to dismantle the current oppressive systems.

However, I do believe that this is the exact place within the intersection of identity and policy that puts Senator Harris' bid for The White House at risk. As state-sanctioned violence against black bodies continues in the form of police shootings, incarceration, and general discrimination, some voters are more desiring of a complete overhaul of the system rather than a plan to continue trying to fix that which is inherently oppressive (as has been the status quo since the end of Jim Crowe.) That's not something Kamala Harris will give them.

Conversely, Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren tackles the racism question head-on. In a December 2018 video announcing the formation of an exploratory committee to run for president in 2020, the Senator clearly highlighted the disparities in income between black and white Americans and referred to a system of “corruption poisoning our democracy.” As Senator Warren asserts that tax cuts, union regulations, and dismantling financial rules have allowed Wall Street and politicians to cripple the middle class, she succinctly emphasizes her understanding of intersectional oppression.



In the aforementioned video, Senator Warren refers to the current economic system as a “scam,” and suggests rebuilding an already broken system. “We can rebuild America's middle class, but this time, we have to build it for everyone,” her voice proclaims as grainy images of civil rights

marches light up the screen. Senator Warren wants to be clear: our current method of operations isn't working and she intends to create a system of fairness and opportunity unhampered by race, sexuality, gender, immigrant status, and income. This raises the question: can capitalism work for everyone? Can it be fair?

In February of 2019, Senator Warren announced an official bid for the presidency. Her platform is one of returning Washington "to the people" and her stance on issues tends to sit firmly on the left. As a constant and unabashedly vocal critic of Trump and his policies, Senator Warren's stances on how to move the country forward make her more appealing to voters looking for a drastic change. She's aware that we can't make America great again because her goal is to make it great for the first time.

Senator Warren's understanding of generational oppression and our country's racist and discriminatory history is part of what makes her identity issue so puzzling. For years, she has claimed to be Native American. In fact, a Texas bar registration card from 1986 shows her identifying as "American Indian." Senator Warren's beliefs in her ancestry stem from stories passed down from parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles and are not uncommon in the United States: both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama claimed Native American ancestry, though it was never proven in either case.

What stands out about Senator Warren's decision to meld identity and politics is the fact that she took a DNA test. After mocking her claims of Cherokee heritage, Trump challenged her to a DNA test claiming he would donate one million dollars to her favorite charity if the results could prove her ancestry. The test revealed that Senator Warren likely had a Native American ancestor 6-10 generations ago. Her decision to publically share the results of the test drew immediate outrage from prominent tribal leaders as defining ethnicity solely based on DNA breakdowns is a dicey proposition.

Senator Warren has since apologized for her claims, and in January of 2019, she addressed her mistake. "I am not a person of color; I am not a citizen of a tribe. Tribal citizenship is very different from ancestry. Tribes, and only tribes, determine tribal citizenship, and I respect that difference," she said at an appearance in Sioux City, Iowa. In the public eye, Senator Warren learned something that thousands of Americans are still struggling with: that lineage doesn't stipulate tribal affiliation. Membership in a Native American tribe is determined by culture, sovereign tribal governments, and tribal law.

Is the publicity of this whole scandal enough to ruin Senator Warren's chances of winning the White House? I don't know. She's running as a straight, white, cisgender woman and ally-to people of color, immigrants, and the LGBTQ community--after admitting to and apologizing for past mistakes. In fact, she's the only 2020 presidential hopeful on the record supporting reparations for black Americans affected by slavery *and* Native Americans. While

some might dismiss this as pandering to a demographic she's on thin ice with, it is a valid notion and Senator Warren (as someone who apparently believed she was Native American up until a year ago) has obvious reasons for suggesting it.

In general Senator Warren's solutions for America's ills are more progressive than Senator Harris'. By the nature of where each candidate falls on the political spectrum, Senator Warren's suggestions for across the board rebuilding of economic and political systems are more radical than Senator Harris' goals to amend problems in the existing system. It's not any specific aspect of identity that causes these differences in policy and strategy: it's that these are two women who see different outcomes for what government can and should achieve in the next four to eight years.

Either one stands a valid chance of becoming the first woman to be elected President of the United States *if* she can convince us that her professional background empowers her to enact her plan for our nation's future. For me, what a candidate looks like or says about who s/he is, comes second to what s/he actually does for me and my community. As we draw closer to election day, it's important that each one of us, as voters, determine for ourselves what matters more between politics and identity. With nine politicians already competing to win the Democratic Party nomination, what we prioritize between the two will determine who ends up sparring against Trump for the presidency next year.