

## MANUFACTURED CONTROVERSIES:

### WHY POLITICIANS DO NOT RESPOND TO POWERLESS MINORITIES

by Walter Williams

draft 25 November 2023

When people do not know the way to solve really big problems facing society, or when they feel that they will be the losers if these problems are addressed, they will have status anxiety. Such persons will deflect their anxiety by manufacturing controversies on other issues, which in fact may have absolutely nothing to do with the real problems they are facing in their life. Such persons flock to support political candidates who adopt those controversies, just as a means of getting elected.

A politician who was elected on such issues might personally care very little about the issues facing the nation. Such a person may not have a realistic solution for any issue. What matters to such politicians is if they are able to articulate an attack on the manufactured controversy that will generate enough votes to be elected to public office.

This is a fundamental flaw of democracy. No matter how good a political system is, if a majority of voters can be attracted to support politicians who manufacture a controversy, that is what will occur. Persons who are attracted to run for public office are the type of personality who seeks to gain fame, influence, wealth, and power. They do not have to really believe what they are saying; what is important to them is if they will be able to attract 51% of the voters. Voters who are not within that 51% do not matter to that political candidate. If the politician's goal is power, then in a democratic society the 51% rules.

There are many ways that a political candidate can attain power. One way is to arouse 51% of voters to support a military attack on another nation. They identify an enemy, for example, a foreign nation which has some kind of conflict with the United States and can be demonized enough to arouse Americans to support a war. The history of the United States is filled with demonized enemies.

The very birth of the United States as an independent nation, during the American Revolution, was undertaken in the context of demonizing the British government, as well as the indigenous American nations that were allied with the British. A second war was fought against the British, during the War of 1812, which was once again also an attack on indigenous nations. As Euroamerican settlers expanded westward across the

continent, there were numerous frontier conflicts with indigenous peoples who were resisting that expansion. Native land loss was occurring during the term of office of every president elected between 1790 and 1890, but land loss was especially severe during the presidencies of Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, and Abraham Lincoln. During every decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was at least one war that was raging between the United States and indigenous Americans. James K. Polk threatened war with Britain, waged war against native tribes, and sought to conquer and annex all of Mexico into the United States.

The United States has waged major wars against Spain (1898), Germany (1914-1918 and 1941-1945), Japan (1941-1945), and a Cold War with the Soviet Union (1945-1991). As soon as the Soviet Union collapsed the United States turned to wars in Iraq (1992 and 2001-2003), and Afghanistan (2001-2021). War clouds are gathering with China now. It seems that America is almost always at war with some other nation, or at least the threat of war hangs over the nation. Wars are the ultimate manufactured controversy.

If Americans cannot be aroused enough to fight a war against a foreign nation, then a xenophobic politician can arouse resentments against an ethnic minority which is actively challenging discrimination within the nation. This has happened from the beginning of the United States with indigenous Americans and African Americans, but also since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with Asian Americans, Italians, Jews and Latinos. All minorities have the potential to become a scapegoat.

If Americans cannot be aroused enough to engage in a war, or to attack racial minorities, politicians can arouse resentments against various groups of people who may be challenging socio-economic norms. This might apply to groups as diverse as communists, labor unionists, feminists, hippies, lesbians and gay men, environmentalists, pedophiles, undocumented immigrants, transgendered people, abortionists.

No matter how different the groups and issues are, in the response to these cases, politicians seeking power search for an issue that is currently unresolved in society, and they try to gain political influence and power by attracting followers. In all these cases, political opportunists manufacture controversies because they have no real solutions to the critical problems currently facing society. Lacking a clear enemy to attack, they pick on a group that is small enough for their vote weight to be irrelevant, powerless enough not to strike back, and verifiably different from the majority.

In a democracy, where the majority rules, small groups are vulnerable and subject to being demonized. Politicians seeking power will grab onto a controversial subject, and project themselves into the media speaking about it. If they can use this issue to reach 51% of the voters, that will lead to their election. Since being in power is the motive for the politician, they will usually be impervious to changing their mind.

This is why democracies are so dangerous for stigmatized minorities. The only hope is for such minorities to be able to change society's view of their issue, or for other issues to arise which other politicians can use to convert 51% of the voters to vote for them. As far as professional politicians are concerned, their response will depend on how they can calculate gaining at least 51% of the voters. Since their motivation is to gain personal power, they will adapt their agenda to whichever means will result in that goal..

Activists who seek to convince politicians of the need to support various minority groups need to keep all this in mind. Don't expect them to be supportive of your issues, just on the merits and logical reasoning of your case. Politicians, like most people, make their decisions on the basis of logical argument only about a third of the time. A more common reaction is due to emotional issues rather than rational ones. Most politicians seem to have an acute ability to calculate how their approach on any given issue either adds to or subtracts from their persuading 51% of voters to support them.

Given this reality, one strategy is to figure out some way for the politician to consider a particular group as part of their 51%. If you show that you can deliver a substantial number of voters to be supportive of that person when they are running for public office, while at the same time not alienating their other supporters, they may become supportive of your issues.

A more likely way to persuade the average American politician to be actively supportive of your issues is for you to donate a substantial amount of money to their election campaign. Because of the large expense necessary to win a public office, and to retain that office when challenged by political opponents, the base of political power in the United States is money. In the United States, mainly because of the high cost of television and radio ads, the candidate with the largest campaign fund is usually the winner. Political officeholders have to spend a substantial amount of their time begging for money, and they recognize that if they want to continue receiving money they must provide tangible benefits for their donors.

This means, of course, that it is usually wealthy individuals and highly profitable corporations who have the kind of cash that politicians pay attention to. However, this does not mean there is no hope for people who are not wealthy. If an organization can effectively raise small donations from a large number of people, and that organization knows how to wield influence inside the political system, politicians will pay attention.

A good example of this kind of influence was exerted by the Municipal Elections Commission of Los Angeles County in the 1970s. Before 1970, the elected supervisors of Los Angeles County were supremely hostile to the gay and lesbian population in the city. County sheriffs arrested gay men who congregated in any public space, and paid little attention to the ill treatment of lesbian parents by the county social services department. Supervisors remained unmoved by gay activists' appeals for justice. That changed, however, in a dramatic way, when lesbian and gay political activists began fundraising events and then donated all the money to support one new candidate who vowed to run against one of the sitting supervisors. This new candidate not only refused to attack queer people, but openly supported issues of importance to the LGBTQ community. When the old supervisor was unseated, the other ones paid attention. Once they saw that their opponents would reap the money of this segment of the population, they suddenly found the time to seek donations themselves. Those supervisors who did not do this were, one by one, replaced by candidates who supported lesbian and gay issues. A county government that had once been blatantly hostile was transformed, within less than a decade, to become one of the most progressive local governments in the nation. It was the power of organizing masses of voters, combined with large money donations to cooperative candidates, which made this change. The crucial factor was money.

I remember my own personal experience with local politics in the 1970s. I was the head of the Greater Cincinnati Gay Coalition, and I had access to some of the leading liberal political activists in the city. They were very interested when I proposed that LGBT people would support their liberal candidate for mayor, with both money donations and with votes, if that candidate would support our issues. I made my best efforts trying to raise money, attract volunteers to assist that candidate's campaign, and turn out people to vote for them. But I was not very good at fundraising, and evidently not good at persuading large numbers of people to vote, because on election day, our liberal candidate was crushed. The campaign did not attract enough money or enough

volunteers, and the conservative incumbent won by a large margin. I was very disappointed.

I was even more disappointed by my liberal political activists. There was an immediate change in their attitudes toward me. Doors that were previously open slammed shut, and when I tried to talk to them about gay rights, their eyes glazed over and they soon excused themselves from further conversations. I learned that I was not a very effective political activist.

My disappointment grew in the early 1980s after I and other gay activists persuaded Cincinnati's sole progressive mayor, a sincere man named Jerry Springer, to issue the city's first Gay and Lesbian Pride Proclamation. When Mayor Springer issued this proclamation, the outcry from conservatives was deafening. We were not prepared for the backlash that followed. It was so severe that Mayor Springer did not run for reelection, and he vowed never to seek political office again. When his term ended he left Cincinnati, moved to Chicago, and entered a new field moderating a local television talk show. To our surprise "The Jerry Springer Show" became nationally syndicated, pioneered a new kind of shock-confrontation television, and attracted hordes of vocal fans. Jerry Springer was such an improbable celebrity, but after his bad experience in Cincinnati I suppose he figured his work on television was more noble than being a mayor. We all learned the realities of politics at that time; that logical arguments do not produce political change.

These are just the realities of politics in a democracy. If an idealistic activist does not recognize the paramount importance of money in politics, if one does not have high hopes for persuading voters by logical presentations, if one observes the messy politics required to gain the support of 51% of the voters, all that ironically makes one more effective. Because the great insight that comes with age is the recognition that what may seem to be a hopeless struggle can actually produce tangible results. What is necessary, above all, is to recognize that political change takes time. It does not happen right away, or all at once. There are going to be defeats, crushing losses, and dispiriting setbacks along the way. If the loss is too great, it may require relocating to another locale. It may mean that individual lives are lost, and some may breathe their last breath without seeing many substantial results.

But, over time, after ups and downs, if enough people do not give up, things can in fact change. And those changes can, eventually, result in real fundamental transformations.

Dr. Martin Luther King famously said that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice. He did not live long enough to see the changes he advocated come to pass. But in the last year of his life he was filled with the moral certainty that, even if he himself would not live to see it, that if people kept striving for justice, they would eventually get to the promised land of self-determination and personal liberty.

Ultimately, the essence of freedom is what Thomas Jefferson called, "the pursuit of happiness." What is more central to happiness than its pursuit? If one can live with that end in mind, no matter what may be imposed externally, by the mere fact of pursuing it, one can gain fundamental happiness and contentment. That, ultimately, is what may be called a fulfilled life. Living well is, truly, the best revenge.

.