

Dignity—A Unifying Value for American Politics

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Both political parties know that a unifying core value expressed in a pithy slogan translates into votes. FDR's Democrats had "The New Deal"; LBJ's party advanced "The Great Society." Republicans rally to "lower taxes," "smaller government," "strong defense," and "family values."

What core value, what slogan, could move us beyond the toxic standoff that paralyzes American politics today? The answer lies in a single word—Dignity.

This core value takes wings on the inclusive slogan: "Dignity For All." The bumper sticker reads "Dignity4All," and it will soon begin appearing on cars across America.

The idea of a universal right to dignity may at first seem too simple to pull together the disparate elements of this divided nation, but it's not. Dignity is what people want, on the left, on the right, and most importantly, in the vast, non-ideological middle.

Dignity is not negotiable. People will stand up for their dignity, and once they're on their feet, it's usually not long before they're marching for justice.

Two hundred years of bloody world history have shown that there is no direct path from Liberty to Justice. But if we interpose a steppingstone, we *can* build a bridge to justice. The name of that stone is not "Equality," it's "Dignity." By establishing the right to dignity, and then enacting legislation that protects everyone's dignity equally, we can give concrete meaning to Thomas Jefferson's evocative claim that "All men are created equal."

A "[dignitarian society](#)" pulls together what's best from the three broad strands of civic culture dominating politics since the French Revolution—Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. The polarizing stranglehold these ideals exert on the contemporary imagination, when any one is prioritized over the others, is a major source of the incivility that infects our politics today.

Conservatives see themselves as Liberty's defenders; progressives pride themselves as the champions of equality. Both parties promise Fraternity, but neither delivers it.

Dignity is more encompassing than Liberty, Equality, or Fraternity. It's the missing link that when restored will yield an electoral mandate to make good on America's founding promise of "liberty and justice for all."

The politics of dignity puts the "We" back in "We the People." It spans the conservative-liberal divide. It closes the ideological fissures that separate libertarian, egalitarian, and fraternitarian ideologies and breaks the stalemate that has stalled the advance of justice since the 1960s.

A dignitarian society does not tolerate indignity—towards anyone. When this principle is translated into policy, it rules out acceptance of a permanent underclass. It disallows prejudice and discrimination toward *all* the groups that have rallied around the various flags of identity politics.

It transforms the stalemate over abortion and gay marriage into a civil discussion of whose rights to dignity are being abridged. It proclaims everyone's right to a sustainable environment.

Like liberty and justice, dignity is most easily defined in the negative. As a precursor to banishment or enslavement, we're all attuned to detect the slightest hint of indignity.

What causes people to experience indignity? The precise and universal cause of indignity is the abuse of power. Make a list of the most distressing issues of recent years: corporate corruption, the Katrina catastrophe, sexual abuse by clergy, Abu Ghraib, domestic spying, etc. Every one of them can be traced to an abuse of power by individuals of high rank. Often the abuses had the blessing of people of even higher rank.

To effectively oppose the full range of abuses of power vested in rank, we need a word that identifies them collectively. Abuse and discrimination based on color and gender are called "racism" and "sexism," respectively. By analogy, abuse and discrimination based on the power inherent in rank is "[rankism](#)." This coinage provides a vitalizing link between the methods of identity politics and the moral values of democratic governance. Having a generic name for abuses of power makes them much easier to target, and targeting them is precisely what's called for if democracy is to resume its evolution.

However principled the cause, no party can present itself as a champion of dignity so long as its members reserve the right to indulge in rankism. This includes treating political opponents with indignity. Humiliation and condescension—toward domestic opponents or foreign enemies—are inherently rankist postures, and as such they have no place in a dignitarian politics.

How would a society that makes dignity its linchpin differ from ones shaped by ideologies that accentuate liberty, equality, or fraternity? The difference is one of nuance, not opposition, for a dignitarian society combines the strengths of all three traditions.

A dignitarian society promotes individual freedom, while at the same time tempering the uninhibited free market with institutions of social responsibility that insure that economic power does not confer unwarranted educational or political advantages. For example, you shouldn't have to be rich to attend good schools, or command a fortune to stand for office.

A dignitarian society provides genuine equality of opportunity. In a dignitarian society, loss of social mobility, let alone division into master and servant classes, is unacceptable. There's a way out of poverty in a dignitarian society. Everyone earns a living wage and has access to quality health care.

The politics of dignity sees democracy as a work in progress. Democracy's next step—one that will enlarge liberty, deliver justice, and foster fraternity—is to overcome rankism and build a dignitarian society.

Dignity is an idea whose time has come. The party that takes dignity as its core value can mobilize the energy not merely to win at the polls, but to win with a mandate to fulfill our nation's implicit promise of "Dignity For All."