

Naomi Zack: Government Should Be Boring

Christiane Wisehart, host and producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by The Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Partly Sage]

Christiane: The subject of identity politics is part of a constellation of heated issues in the United States, and whatever side of the American political divide you find yourself on, you'll no doubt agree that politics in general has been fraught with conflict in the last decade or so. My guest today, Naomi Zack, professor of philosophy at Lehman College, argues that identity politics is the source of a lot of that conflict and has no place in government. She offers an alternative vision for the future of American government and identity politics.

Naomi Zack: I have a kind of utopian view of government. Government should be boring. It shouldn't be exciting. It shouldn't be a cliffhanger as to who gets elected.

Christiane: Stay tuned for my interview with Naomi Zack on today's episode of Examining Ethics.

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Christiane: It perhaps won't surprise my regular listeners to hear me say that I am left of center when it comes to politics, maybe kind of a lot left of center when it comes to politics. And not all leftists think this way, but I happen to be in the camp whose views are heavily informed by identity politics. And I only say this to explain why today's interview was so thought-provoking, challenging, and impactful for me. My guest, Naomi Zack, explores the fraught and often dysfunctional relationship between identity politics and government in the United States.

[interview begins]

Christiane: You've written a book called *Progressive Anonymity*, and your main argument is that identity politics do not belong in the government. After I read the first chapter, I realized that even though identity politics is something that I think I value, I might not really understand what that term is, so can you help us kind of get on the same page in terms of what identity politics is?

Naomi Zack: It's kind of open-ended, but the idea is that individuals might have a specific identity pertaining, say, to race or gender or sexual preference or ethnicity or religion, or any one of a number of identities that are believed to be disadvantaged in the society in which people have those identities. So the idea is that the individuals get together as a group and make themselves known, create solidarity among themselves, and push for change that will either ameliorate or drastically improve the conditions of the group. So let me say that identity politics

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as we know it today is a relatively recent phenomenon, because if you read the liberatory scholarship after World War II... And obviously, World War II was a period of extreme oppression, and the paradigm case was the Holocaust and the extermination of 6 million Jews, Roma Catholics, people who are disabled, elderly people, all manner of people who had visible or identifiable disadvantage in society.

The progressive writing after World War II had a tendency to focus on the oppressors, in other words the psychology of the oppressors, rather than assert the identity of those who have been oppressed. And following that, there was a need for identity politics, and I think the need for identity politics only became felt probably during the course of the civil rights movement, talking about the United States. So there's definitely a need for identity politics where the word politics is used loosely as contention for equality or some kind of sharing of existing power. Was that your understanding of... Did you have a different understanding?

Christiane: No, I think I realized after reading your book and after listening to you again, that my understanding of identity politics is very surface. I cling to it in a way that is not informed by the history that you talked about, so I really appreciated that. And why shouldn't identity politics have a part or a place in government?

Naomi Zack: Well, there are several ways to approach that. I have a kind of utopian view of government, which I think is motivated by Karl Popper more than any other theorist, and that is that government exists to solve problems. So we're assuming here that government is some actualization of democracy, that those governed will have a consent to the legitimacy of the government, to the existence of a government. The question then becomes, "Well, why do you want government? What is the purpose of government," and my utopian view of government is government exists to solve problems that smaller units in society cannot solve on their own. In a pandemic, it might be crisis management. In terms of mitigating or avoiding the effects of climate change, it might be new energy policies. But the general idea is that there are things that government can do in terms of preparation, in terms of administration, that no other entity can do.

Now, it doesn't always have to be national government. It might be state governments. So beyond this, I don't think that government has a function that can serve the groups that make up identity politics, and it's for purely pragmatic reasons. Whenever a particular group on the basis of their identity, and I would include here even political party identity, whenever a particular group gains power within government, it's never the end of the story. You have two other things that are immediately going to happen. One is pushback from the other identity groups, because there's always a struggle among identity groups within society. And the other is that if that particular identity group prevails in the policies that it wants, and usually they don't want to change the structure of the government, they just want the government to design and implement certain policies, there is no guarantee that the members of society as a whole are going to obey those policies.

So when you have different identity groups contending amongst each other within government, the basic problem-solving function of government can become dysfunctional. I think we've seen

that happen in a number of cases in the United States. We have a situation at present where there are certain pressing public issues involving police reform, involving voter rights, involving preparation for climate change and mitigation of climate change, and these issues which speak to broad social problems that everyone encounters are virtually insoluble within government, because the different identities kick in. Because politicians are no longer... Or if they ever were, but now more than ever, they seem to enact roles of being in the vanguard of this or that identity group. So it's a very inefficient, and at times unjust, way for government to function.

Christiane: Can you speak a little bit more to the unjust piece of that? How is it an unjust form of government?

Naomi Zack: First of all, it's going to seem unjust when one identity group appears to be favored, so that's going to bring in the pushback. And if a dominant identity group in society has control of the different parts of government, control of the Senate, control of the executive of the United States, not just on a federal level, but on a state level, then they're going to impose measures that, if they're already dominant in society, might be even more oppressive towards other identity groups that are striving for greater equality.

Christiane: Yeah. I think that's the thing that I found particularly striking about your book and this argument is that, it seems to me you're saying that if we want justice to happen, we should be focused on power, more than morality, maybe? Right? That it doesn't necessarily matter so much who is morally right.

Naomi Zack: I think justice probably has to begin in society. We haven't had tremendous and conclusive success when justice is imposed from government, because government is basically the segment of society that has a monopoly of physical force. There's a limit to what people can be forced to do, even in the name of justice. You can see this with affirmative action, the tremendous pushback against affirmative action, the tremendous pushback against residential desegregation, because despite the laws for desegregation, residential segregation in the United States is greater now than it was in '70s. The same thing goes for educational segregation. It's obvious that there is quite a lot of work that has to be done in society and for one group or its advocates to expect, well, if their politicians get elected for office, they can put everything right. Well, maybe they can for a short period of time. But meanwhile, there's tremendous pushback that's brewing, that will eventually erupt.

In a sense, we're at the mercy of democracy, because if we genuinely have a democratic society, as long as there's disagreement, strong disagreement, within society, it's impossible for government to lastingly impose the views and demands of just one group or one set of groups. Let me take this a step further. How do social problems get solved? Well, I think social problems have to be recognized broadly as problems. In all likelihood, in a democracy, and democracy, it doesn't just exist for the benefit of Progressives. Democracy includes Regressives as well. The Progressives can't rule the country in a democracy if there are also Regressives. The Regressives are going to demand their share of power.

Many of the problems that we face today are not problems that are specifically identifiable in terms of racial identities, for instance. They cut across all racial identities, but unless the problems are addressed in ways so that everybody can benefit, then they become unnecessarily politicized. That process of politicization acts as an obstacle to solving the problems that we all face.

Christiane: That idea is counter to what I've learned from civil rights leaders in the '60s. I take them to be arguing that maintaining the moral upper hand in these arguments is a key part of the struggle for civil rights, is a key part of the struggle for justice. I think that's something that I often find myself thinking of, especially during the Trump administration was, I would just get so frustrated, because I would think we're on the right side of history. How can people not see that? I would get in a froth about that. So why doesn't it matter which side is morally right?

Naomi Zack: It doesn't matter who's morally right, because those in power on the wrong side have rarely been persuaded by moral argument. Actually, I didn't learn from looking at politics. I learned as an academic in academic disputes, that you could be on the morally right side, but as long as your colleagues, who opposed you, have the power to not change, they wouldn't change. There have been exceptions. When Gandhi prevailed in securing Indian independence, he very carefully held to nonviolence. For a couple of reasons. One was, it was religious not to harm living creatures. The other was that it was strategic. The British, according to some accounts, knew that they could have crushed the Gandhi demonstrators militarily, but they didn't want to do that. It was sort of an uncertain path. Instead, they yielded to the morality, to moral arguments.

Sometimes extremely powerful forces will yield to a moral argument. But I don't think you can count on it, because there are so many battles where... I mean, look at what's been happening in Congress since the election. Look at the behavior of Republicans who will support Trump no matter what, no matter how crazy. We must know what the moral thing to do is, but they're not going to do it, because it threatens their power. When I say it doesn't matter, I don't mean morality doesn't matter, we should be amoral. I mean that it may not be effective in all... You can't count on its being effective. Sometimes it is. But probably more often it isn't. So there have to be other strategies than just moral strategies. That's what I meant to say. I didn't mean to dismiss morality.

But I think the problem with a lot of Progressives, especially people who write in academia, is they think that if they can establish a morally right position, then the problem is solved. This is it. This is what's right. I've just proved to you that this is right. Therefore, there's nothing more to be done. Everybody's going to fall into line. Well, the world doesn't work that way. People don't work that. So that's the sense in which I'm trying to say that the moral argument is not enough.

Here's another example, 26 million people were out in the streets after George Floyd's murder. 26 million people protested. And you still cannot get Congress to agree on whatever they can do on a federal level concerning police reform. That tells you that it's not that the moral side isn't important. It's the moral side often isn't forceful enough to bring about change that you want.

More kinds of strategic thinking are necessary.

Christiane: That was something that I just found so compelling from your argument, just personally. We can stop focusing on the moral rightness of our argument and start focusing on tactics, strategy and then maybe gathering some kind of power.

Naomi Zack: Look, I think it's better to be on the morally right side. If you know anything about ethics, if you have whatever it is that makes people care about change for the better, you want to do what's morally right. You want to advocate what's morally right. But the mistake is to think that after you've done that, your work is done. It isn't. It matters, personally. It matters in moral terms and human terms. It might matter fifty or a hundred years from now, but it's just not enough to bring change that you want. Sometimes it will. But in most cases it's not enough.

Christiane: It's like the old therapy line, are you interested in being right? Or are you interested in making progress? The rightness piece is important, but so is the progress.

Naomi Zack: The mistake is to over emphasize the importance of being right. You can't count on it to get your everything that you want.

Christiane: The argument that identity politics doesn't belong in government doesn't mean it's not important.

Naomi Zack: Identity politics is a great engine for change within society. This is how people become aware of what's going on. This is how people come to some kind of agreement that they might not have had before. I think, for example, the final Supreme Court ruling that lesbian and gay couples could marry came after a tremendous amount of negotiation and education and moral pressure on all levels within society. And then you reach a governmental conclusion, which after the work has been done in society, I think we can say now-

After the work has been done in society, I think we can say now, so far so good. Now that's not to say the work doesn't still have to be done. Police reform is another really interesting question in a federal system, because there are 18,000 different police departments in the United States, and they all have a tremendous amount of autonomy. And their autonomy depends on their relationship with relatively local organizations. It might be with the city, it might be with township, might be with the state, but the police system is not federalized. So you have to ask yourself, is the best way to reform the police in the United States to have laws on a national level, when the nation doesn't have any control over the police in a federal system? And you might say the same thing about education.

There are, I believe, over 100,000 different school districts. 100,000. And all those school districts are subject to influence and pushes and pulls and argument in their local communities. So this whole bogus discussion at present time about what's being called critical race theory. Nobody even knows who they're talking about. This is all playing out on local levels, local pushes and pulls.

So I think that process on local levels is probably the only way that the big problems can get solved. Although there may be some things that could be done by governments, but I think if government action is partisan, and in our system, it always does seem to be partisan. It's so partisan that it hasn't been possible to have uniform policies of dealing with COVID-19. We're lucky this time, because there was a vaccine, but the federal government does not have the power to mandate that everybody get vaccinated, and most states are really reluctant to do that as well. Again, there's this factor of democracy that crops up.

Christiane: So yeah, I want to kind of shift and talk about what government could look like, absent identity politics. And you write that universalism should be one of the standards. And I wondered if you could just explain a little bit what universalism is, what it might look like in practice.

Naomi Zack: Universalism means that a government policy ... And we're talking about policy here, we're talking about policy within given structures. Universalism means that our policy has something for all contending parties. So I think for instance, single pair healthcare is too loaded because it's been associated with socialism and that's a partisan ideological quicksand, for want of a better word. But on the other hand, it's kind of interesting that the affordable care act had more people signing onto it recently this year than ever before. So the affordable care act offers medical care for everybody.

Now, if a program like that is first introduced in the United States to an emphasis on how it's going to help save poor people of color, then that's going to politicize it. But if it's introduced in a way that it's able to help everybody, which it is, then that would be an example of a universal program. Various kinds of infrastructure is really universal. Everybody benefits from infrastructure. The medical assistance programs and social security, again, everybody benefits.

Now, I think that regressives and conservatives who are opposed to any kind of affirmative help to people who are disadvantaged, especially if they're people of color and we're talking about white conservatives or regressives are going to resist programs that specifically help those groups. But on the other hand, if that also helps them, even though it's understood that the disadvantage groups will be helped more, I think there's a greater likelihood that the programs will be acceptable if the conservatives and regressives also benefit.

So my vision of government, as I said, it's utopian. That's kind of a sad thing to say. Government should be boring. It shouldn't be exciting. It shouldn't be a cliffhanger as to who gets elected. And it used to be boring. People would say, "Well, there really isn't much difference between the two parties." What's happened, I think since, oh I don't know, the past maybe 10 or 15 years, is government has gotten very exciting. And that's a terrible thing, really, because it means that people are focused more on which side wins. Which officials who they feel represent them are in power to the neglect of what's actually going to happen.

Christiane: So the idea, is it something like universal design where if you design a door that's easy for a person who uses a wheelchair to open, it benefits the person in the wheelchair, but it just happens to be easier for everyone to open. Is that sort of ...

Naomi Zack: That's right. That's the kind of thing we want, and it's hard to design public policies like that. But I think even the most affirmative policies can be re-presented and redesigned the such a way that everybody benefits, and the people benefit the least are nevertheless benefiting, so they won't be as enraged at the benefits to those who are benefiting the most. Let me take social security. Social security is probably a greatest benefit to people who are relatively poor, but you don't find many wealthy people objecting to social security. Everybody gets some benefit from social security. And I think the affordable care act, introduced as Obamacare, is evolving into something like that, where not only the groups that need some kind of assistance with medical insurance most are benefiting, but even people who may not need it as much, or may not be as socially disadvantaged can benefit, so they're signing on as well. So it becomes universal, and boring. People are just not going to be that excited if government actually functions well. You might not even notice it. Like I said, that's a utopian idea.

Christiane: When we're thinking about universalist's policies and ideals, I can think of examples from our nation's past where something has been called universal, but universal means you own property, you're white, and you're a man.

Naomi Zack: Well, I'm not talking about universal rhetoric. I'm talking about policies that are genuinely universal. People can say anything they want. I'm teaching a course on democracy and one of my students kept saying, "Well, the problem is that leaders have been hypocritical." In what sense? Well, they talk about one nation indivisible, equality and justice for all, and it's never been that way. But I think we can better understand the history of democracy in a country like the United States if we realize that despite the universalist language, it was not ever literally intended to apply to everybody. It was understood that it was only going to apply to a select group. So you had this universal rhetoric that was not literally true. That's not really hypocrisy. It's its exclusiveness.

Christiane: And so if we were to see your thesis in action ...

Naomi Zack: Oh it's a utopia. You'll never see it.

Christiane: Yeah. You'd be bored to death, right? That's the idea.

Naomi Zack: Right. Well not bored to death, but this ... This is something I have to be informed about. People won't be excited about it. It won't light up Facebook or social media.

Christiane: Do you see any future where there's part of what you're arguing for in action.

Naomi Zack: Yeah. Well actually, what's really interesting is I think ... I finished ... This book came out in November of 2020, and then Biden was elected. It turns out that Biden's policy... 2020 and then Biden was elected. It turns out that Biden's policies are amazingly inclusive in this way. The administration is very careful when they talk about jobs, to talk about jobs for everybody. Now, will poor people of color benefit more than others from some jobs? Yeah, they will. But as long as there are jobs for everybody, it's not an affirmative action program. And the government is like plumbing in a way. So if you have a plumbing problem, you got to ask yourself, do you really care who comes and fixes your sink or your toilet? Does it really matter who the person is? You have this urgent plumbing problem in your household.

Christiane: If I have an emergency, yes I want the experienced master plumber to come. But well, if he's like a creep or something.

Naomi Zack: They're going to behave professionally. Do you care if it's person of color, or a woman, or a disabled person, or an old person? You just want somebody to do the repair. Right? So I think we should see government in that way. We should stop glamorizing, and personifying, and treating government as though it's an unending series of soap opera type scandals. This makes us decadent because these are frivolous concerns that have nothing to do with very real problems. And there are a lot of smart people in public policy, and sociology, and government itself, who could actually solve or come up with plausible attempts to solve broad problems that we have.

And what we don't want is we don't want them shot down by politicizing the problems and then having a certain political group in power, just reject solutions because they're coming from the wrong side. We saw that time and time again during the Trump administration. We went through, and this really was a life and death situation. We went through a pandemic that resulted in now over 600,000 Americans dying because the early stages of preparing for the pandemic were hampered by the fact that it was being politicized. So there's a classic case of how toxic politics is in a serious situation. Where you have a problem, it's not a political problem, it's a public health problem.

Christiane: All of that became so much clear to me personally during the pandemic. Because this was the first time in my life that I had ever experienced a situation where yeah, I almost didn't care who the person was, it was just keep me safe. Right? Keep me and my family from dying. Right? Or when I'm engaged in any of like the mutual aid projects that I work on, I don't care who I'm working with. It's are you going to help me help these people? Great, let's go. Right? It just sort of leveled everything for me.

Naomi Zack: Unless we have government that actually does things and solves problems for everybody, we're kind of screwed. Because if we go back to intense, partisan politics, nothing gets done because the officials spend all their time fighting with one another. Interestingly enough, that's what happened during the French Revolution. So at the beginning of the French Revolution, there was the Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen. Beautiful, humanistic

declaration of universal human rights, but it was never implemented, it's still is not implemented. And during the French Revolution in particular, they had this incredible rhetoric about universal human rights, but all of the energy of government until Napoleon came to power, and then shortly after Napoleon, was spent in disputes within the government. Who is going to rise to the power within the government? That is not a form of government that serves the people under some vague concept with democracy.

Christiane: So why do you care about these issues?

Naomi Zack: Well, it's what I do. You know what I mean? It's not like, why do I care? It's what I do. I teach philosophy and I do a certain amount of original, creative work in philosophy. And it seems to me that some of these contemporary issues are interesting. They seem to be very interesting. They affect... I'm not trying to be relevant. It's not a question of relevance it's a question of interest. That personally, I found COVID fascinating. It was difficult to think or talk about anything else. And recently I've found politics very interesting because politics has changed in the United States and possibly throughout the world. And it's a real cliff hanger. And we don't know from one moment to the next what's going to happen.

So, I find those things they're happening really interesting. And I also think that there is another job that philosophers can offer and that is that you have to realize when, this speaks to the partisan issue, when the side that is giving you your information is imposing its own biases and hysteria. And there is no one source of information on what's going on that you can trust to the exclusion. You have to do a certain amount of sifting and thinking on your own. I think the world is interesting. Don't you?

Christiane: Absolutely.

Naomi Zack: Yeah.

Christiane: Yeah.

[music: Blue Dot Sessions, Colrain]

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