

Identity politics in a fractured society

The political divisions that plagued the United States in the 1960s were reflected in the rise of identity politics in the 1970s. As people lost hope of reuniting as a society with common interests and goals, many focused on issues of significance to the subgroups to which they belonged, based on culture, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and religion.

Native American protest

During this period, many Native Americans were seeking to maintain their culture or retrieve cultural elements that had been lost. In 1968, a group of Native American activists, including Dennis Banks, George Mitchell, and Clyde Bellecourt, convened a gathering of two hundred people in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and formed the American Indian Movement, or AIM.

The organizers were urban dwellers frustrated by decades of poverty and discrimination. In 1970, the average life expectancy for a Native American person was 46 years compared to the national average of 69. The Native American suicide rate was twice that of the general population, and the infant mortality rate was the highest in the country. Half of all Native Americans lived on reservations, where unemployment reached 50 percent. Of Native Americans living in cities, 20 percent lived below the poverty line.

On November 20, 1969, a small group of Native American activists landed on Alcatraz Island—the former site of a notorious federal prison—in San Francisco Bay. They announced plans to build a Native American cultural center, including a history museum, an ecology center, and a spiritual sanctuary. People on the mainland provided supplies by boat, and celebrities visited Alcatraz to publicize the cause. More people joined the protestors until they numbered about four hundred.

Photograph of a wall at Alcatraz Island featuring a notice that it is a United States penitentiary. Graffiti on the wall says: "Indians Welcome" and "Indian Land."

From the beginning, the federal government negotiated with them to persuade them to leave. They were reluctant to give in, but over time, they began to drift away of their own accord. Government forces removed the final holdouts on June 11, 1971, 19 months after the occupation began.

The next major demonstration came in 1972 when AIM members and others marched on Washington, DC—a journey they called the Trail of Broken Treaties—and occupied the offices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). The group presented a list of demands, which included improved housing, education, and economic opportunities in Native American communities; the drafting of new treaties; the return of Native American lands; and protections for native religions and culture.

The most dramatic event staged by AIM was the occupation of the Native American community of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in February 1973. Wounded Knee, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, had historical significance: it was the site of an 1890 massacre of members of the Lakota tribe by the US Army. The federal government surrounded the area with US marshals, FBI agents, and other law enforcement forces. A siege ensued, which lasted for 71 days. There was frequent gunfire from both sides; two Native Americans were killed, and a US marshal and an FBI agent were wounded.

The US government did very little to meet the protesters' demands. Two AIM leaders, Dennis Banks and Russell Means, were arrested, but charges were later dismissed. The Nixon administration had already halted the federal policy of termination and restored millions of acres of tribal lands. Increased funding for Native American education, healthcare, legal services, housing, and economic development followed, along with the hiring of more Native American employees in the BIA.

Gay rights

During this era, the struggle for gay and lesbian rights intensified as well. Many gay rights groups were founded in Los Angeles and San Francisco. The first postwar organization for gay civil rights, the Mattachine Society, was launched in Los Angeles in 1950. The first national organization for lesbians, the Daughters of Bilitis, was founded in San Francisco five years later. In 1966, the city became home to the National Transsexual Counseling Unit, the world's first organization for transgender people (transsexual is an older term that was used by doctors and psychologists to describe transgender people). In 1967, the Sexual Freedom League of San Francisco was born.

Through these organizations and others, gay, lesbian and transgender activists fought against the criminalization of and discrimination against their sexual and gender identities on a number of occasions throughout the 1960s. They employed strategies of both protests and litigation.

The most famous event in the gay rights movement, however, took place not in San Francisco but in New York City. Early in the morning of June 28, 1969, police raided a Greenwich Village gay bar called the Stonewall Inn. Although such raids were common, the response of the Stonewall patrons was anything but. As the police prepared to arrest many of the customers, especially transgender people and cross-dressers—who were particular targets for police harassment—a crowd began to gather. Angered by the brutal treatment of the prisoners, the crowd attacked. Beer bottles and bricks were thrown. The police barricaded themselves inside the bar and waited for reinforcements. The riot continued for several hours and resumed the following night. Shortly thereafter, the Gay Liberation Front and Gay Activists' Alliance were formed; these organizations began to protest discrimination, homophobia, and violence against gay people, and promoted gay liberation and gay pride.

Photograph of the Stonewall Inn in 1969.

As advocacy organizations called for gay men and lesbians to come out—reveal their sexual orientation—gay and lesbian communities moved from the urban underground into the political sphere. Gay rights activists protested strongly against the official position of the American Psychiatric Association, which categorized homosexuality as a mental illness. This classification often resulted in job loss, loss of custody, and other serious personal consequences for people in the LGBT—lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender—community. By 1974, the APA had ceased to classify homosexuality as a form of mental illness but continued to consider it a “sexual orientation disturbance.”

Nevertheless, in 1974, Kathy Kozachenko became the first openly lesbian woman voted into office in Ann Arbor, Michigan. In 1977, Harvey Milk became California's first openly gay man elected to public office. His service on San Francisco's board of supervisors, along with that of San Francisco mayor George Moscone, was tragically cut short by the bullet of disgruntled former city supervisor Dan White.

The 1960s

The 1960s marked a pivotal era for the gay rights movement, defined by a determined struggle against discrimination and a push for social justice. Your understanding of this period is enhanced by acknowledging key events and the growing advocacy for acceptance.

On June 28, 1969, the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City, was raided by police, an event all too familiar in the LGBT community at the time. This act of police brutality ignited a series of protests and riots, marking a significant turn in the gay rights movement. In the days following, your gritty determination, alongside others, gave rise to spontaneous demonstrations and clashes with law enforcement.

The aftermath of Stonewall accelerated the formation of gay rights organizations. By the end of 1970, multiple groups, such as the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance, had formed with a new, bolder approach to advocacy and visibility.

Advocacy and Acceptance

After the Stonewall riots, a newfound energy propelled the gay rights movement into public consciousness. You would see advocacy groups work towards the repeal of discriminatory laws. A significant milestone was when Illinois decriminalized homosexuality in 1961, leading the way for other states to follow.

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s, the LGBT community sought to challenge societal norms and promote equal rights. During this time, what you might notice is a shift from the margins toward the mainstream, enhancing the push for broader societal acceptance and legal equality. Despite facing continued discrimination, the determination and advocacy efforts persisted, laying the groundwork for the progress in gay rights that would follow.

Women's liberation in the 1970s

The feminist push for greater rights continued through the 1970s. Feminists opened battered women's shelters and successfully fought for protection from employment discrimination for pregnant women, reform of rape laws—such as the abolition of laws requiring a witness to corroborate a woman's report of rape—criminalization of domestic violence, and funding for schools that sought to counter sexist stereotypes of women. In 1973, the US Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* affirmed a number of state laws under which abortions obtained during the first three months of pregnancy were legal. This made nontherapeutic abortion a legal medical procedure nationwide.

A photograph shows a protest march of women on a city street. Participants hold signs with messages such as “Women Demand Equality;” “I’m a Second Class Citizen;” and “GWU Women’s Liberation. Students Employees Faculty Wives Neighbors.”

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In 1970, supporters of equal rights for women marched in Washington, DC. Image credit: OpenStax

Many advances in women's rights were the result of women's greater engagement in politics. For example, Patsy Mink, the first Asian American woman elected to Congress, was the coauthor of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, Title IX of which prohibits sex discrimination in education. Mink had been interested in fighting discrimination in education since her youth, when she opposed racial segregation in campus housing while a student at the University of Nebraska. She went to law school after being denied admission to medical school because of her gender. Like Mink, a number of other women sought and won political office, many with the help of the National Women's Political Caucus, or NWPC. In 1971, the NWPC was formed by Bella Abzug, Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisholm, and other leading feminists to encourage women's participation in political parties, elect women to office, and raise money for their campaigns.

The ultimate political goal of the National Organization for Women, or NOW, was the passage of an Equal Rights Amendment, or ERA. The amendment passed Congress in March 1972, and was sent to the states for ratification with a deadline of seven years for passage; if the amendment was not ratified by 38 states by 1979, it would die. Twenty-two states ratified the ERA in 1972, and eight more ratified it in 1973. In the next two years, only four states voted for the amendment. In 1979, still four votes short, the amendment received a brief reprieve when Congress agreed to a three-year extension, but the amendment never passed due to the opposition of socially conservative grassroots organizations.

The 1960s

In the 1960s, you witnessed the rise of a powerful social force: the Women's Liberation Movement. It was fueled by a collective desire to end gender inequality, bringing groundbreaking changes to societal norms and legislations.

Emergence of Feminism

Feminism during the 1960s ignited as women across the United States sought to challenge and dismantle institutionalized gender discrimination. With the National Organization for Women (NOW) established in 1966, you saw a more formal push towards gender equality. NOW aimed to advocate for your rights through actions and policies, marking a pivotal moment in feminist activism.

Influential Feminist Works

Central to this era was Betty Friedan's publication, "The Feminine Mystique." This groundbreaking book spotlighted the dissatisfaction of women in traditional roles, encouraging you to seek personal and professional fulfillment. Additionally, groups like the Redstockings amplified your voice, articulating the shared experiences of women and the urgent need for liberation.

Achievements and Legal Advances

The movement's advocacy resulted in tangible advancements for your rights. By 1963, the Equal Pay Act challenged gender-based wage disparities, seeking to ensure you received equal pay for equal work. Moreover, the movement's efforts paved the way for anti-discrimination laws and increased societal awareness of issues like rape and sexual harassment, fundamentally shifting the legal landscape to better protect you and your rights.

Remember, these milestones were more than just historical moments; they were steps forward for you and women everywhere, proving the indomitable strength of collective action for social change.

The Antiwar Movement

As you explore the social movements that shaped the 1960s, you'll find that the Antiwar Movement, particularly opposition to the Vietnam War, stands out with its significant impact on politics and peace advocacy. This movement saw a wave of demonstrations led by groups like Students for a Democratic Society and defined the era's spirit of challenging the status quo.

Opposition to Vietnam War

The Vietnam War, a conflict that followed the intense global politics after World War II, became a focal point for peace activists and political figures. This discontent was fueled by the belief that the war was unnecessary and inhumane. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), representing the New Left, became a prominent force opposing the war. They began organizing "teach-ins" that served to educate the public and protest the continuation of the conflict. Your understanding of this period would be incomplete without recognizing how these young activists reshaped the public's view on the Vietnam War.

Major Demonstrations

In the 1960s, major demonstrations brought the antiwar sentiment to the forefront of American consciousness. Notably, following President Richard Nixon's announcement of U.S. incursion into Cambodia, campuses across the nation erupted in protest. The most striking example of this is the tragic event at Kent State University, where four students were killed by the Ohio National Guard. These protests and demonstrations, often animated by the hope for peace and the desire to end military involvement in Vietnam, left an indelible mark on the collective memory of the country and the world's view of activism.

The Chicano Movement

In the 1960s, you would have witnessed the rise of the Chicano Movement, a pivotal era where Mexican-Americans sought to redefine their identity and assert their civil rights. Facing discrimination and seeking justice, they galvanized around educational reform and cultural expression.

Racial and Educational Justice

Discrimination in schooling was a critical issue you would have observed during the Chicano Movement. Activists fought for educational justice, pushing for bilingual education and culturally relevant curriculum. They wanted you to see history through their lens too, highlighting the importance of understanding their unique cultural heritage.

Walkouts and Protests: You would likely remember the mass walkouts, where thousands of Chicano students left their classrooms to protest against educational inequality.

Lawsuits and Legislation: Legal action, such as the landmark *Salazar v. Delgado* case, challenged discriminatory practices and sought broader reform.

Here's how activism played a role: Driven by a robust sense of unity, *El Movimiento* empowered you and your community to stand up for your rights and voice demands for change in the educational system.

Cultural Identity and Expression

In the realm of cultural identity, the Chicano Movement embraced a renewed sense of pride in your Mexican heritage. Cultural expression became a powerful tool for activism, and you would have seen this in various forms:

Art: Murals and other visual arts flourished, giving you vivid images that celebrated Chicano-specific themes.

Theater: Passionate plays like those from *El Teatro Campesino* communicated your struggles and aspirations creatively.

Language: The term "Chicano" itself became a marker of identity, reclaimed to express political and ethnic solidarity.

The influence of immigration: This was ever-present, as your family's history of crossing borders and building lives in the U.S. was a story shared at rallies, in literature, and through music.

With each act of resistance and celebration of your culture, the Chicano Movement fundamentally challenged and reshaped society's views about your place in it. It was an era of transformation, where your voice contributed to the greater American narrative in the fight for civil rights.

La Raza

La Raza was the name of a Chicano community newspaper edited by Eliezer Risco in 1968. Risco was one of the "LA Thirteen", a group of young Mexican-American men who were political activists identified by the government as being leaders of a Brown Power movement in Los Angeles. Raul Ruiz joined the staff of La Raza while a student at California State University, Los Angeles.

Other community newspapers of the time were *Inside Eastside* and *Chicano Student Movement*. Ruiz, a key journalist in the movement, eventually became the editor of La Raza. It became the most influential Chicano-movement publication in southern California. The publications filled a void: for the most part, there had heretofore been no media coverage of any type for the Brown Power movement and its activities.

The movement's own print-media publications were really the only forum that the Brown Power movement had to keep party members informed about what was going on in the movement across the Los Angeles area. The lack of the mainstream media coverage contributed to silencing the movement and its activities, unlike with the Black

Power movement; the latter received much more coverage, which contributed to that movement's success in spreading their message and growing their movement.

In the 1960s, the California Department of Transportation built the I-5 freeway through the area, demolishing homes and splitting the neighborhood in two. To compensate, residents were promised that the land under the Coronado Bridge would be turned into a park, something the community had wanted for years. More time went by, but no park appeared.

Chicano Park

On April 22, 1970, residents learned that the promise had been rescinded and the land would be used for a California Highway Patrol station. The local community rallied quickly to halt construction. Hundreds of men, women and children converged on the site, forming a human chain around bulldozers. They occupied the space for 12 days, attracting the attention of government officials.

Months of negotiation followed as city and state agencies argued questions of land use and ownership. Residents, led by the Chicano Park Steering Committee, kept up pressure. The artist Salvador Torres proposed to transform the bridge's massive concrete pylons into a towering canvas for expression in the spirit of the Mexican Mural Movement.

The formation of Chicano Park was signed into law in 1971 and mural painting began two years later. At first it was an exuberant, unconstrained explosion of color, as hundreds of people "attacked the wall with rollers," according to Torres. He, together with many local artists, including Guillermo Aranda, Yolanda Lopez and Victor Ochoa, and groups such as Toltecas en Aztlan and Congreso de Artistas Chicanos en Aztlan, continued to guide the aesthetic development. As years passed, more artists from across California were invited to contribute, producing a range of Pre-Colombian, colonial, modern and contemporary imagery.

Cesar Chavez

Cesar Chavez was a Mexican American labor leader and civil rights activist who dedicated his life's work to what he called *la causa* (the cause): the struggle of farm workers in the United States to improve their working and living conditions through organizing and negotiating contracts with their employers. Committed to the tactics of nonviolent resistance practiced by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., Chavez founded the National Farm Workers Association (later the United Farm Workers of America) and won important victories to raise pay and improve working conditions for farm workers in the late 1960s and 1970s.

The Counterculture and New Social Norms

In the 1960s, you witnessed a seismic cultural shift through the emergence of the counterculture. This movement fundamentally altered societal norms, placing an emphasis on love, social justice, and revolution.

Hippie Movement

The Hippie movement represented a radical departure from traditional American values, characterized by an aversion to materialism and a pursuit of free love. You saw baby boomers adopting a lifestyle that emphasized simplicity and harmony with nature. Prominent among these were the hippies of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district, who played a significant role in redefining family and societal expectations.

Famous Individuals: Joan Baez, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin

Hallmarks: Communal living, colorful garments, peace signs

Music and Art Festivals

The counterculture expressed itself vividly through music and art festivals. Perhaps the most iconic festival that you recall is Woodstock—a celebration of rock music and countercultural values. The festival, and others like it, became a unifying force for the young generation, promoting peace and unity across the generational divide.

You noticed significant shifts in family and generational dynamics during the 1960s. The counterculture contributed to widening the generation gap as younger people, especially baby boomers, started to reject the traditional family model.

The Black Power Movement

The Black Power Movement emerged in the 1960s as a pivotal force striving for African American empowerment and self-sufficiency. Spearheaded by groups and activists seeking to confront embedded racial injustice, it marked a significant chapter in civil rights history.

Formation of the Black Panther Party

In 1966, you witness the birth of the Black Panther Party (BPP), founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California. This organization became synonymous with the phrase “black power,” representing a more militant and assertive approach to combating racial discrimination. The Black Panther Party sought to provide African Americans not just with civil rights, but with the means to defend themselves and improve their socio-economic conditions.

Their Ten-Point Program eloquently laid out their demands, ranging from fair housing to the end of police brutality. Here, the term black power transcends a slogan, becoming a cornerstone of a comprehensive platform for change.

Community Programs and Protests

Your exploration of the Black Power movement reveals a landscape marked by both community programs and vocal protests. The Black Panther Party didn’t limit themselves to demonstrations; they rolled out community-driven initiatives. Among these were Free Breakfast for Children programs and community health clinics, directly addressing discrimination’s impact on access to basic needs and healthcare.

The protests you’ll see, often amplified by media coverage, weren’t just outbursts of frustration. They were calculated actions aiming to highlight the deep-seated racial inequalities and to advocate for systemic change. Through these protests, members of the Black Power movement pressed for the recognition of their rights amidst widespread institutional neglect and hostility.