

Review: Economic concerns appear to be weak predictors of White Political Identity

October 21, 2023

This paper proceeds to offer a comprehensive test of whether cultural or economic concerns are more reliable predictors of White's racial identity. It also situates the relationship between these variables and White political identity in particular "social contexts" to explain modeled variability across different election years. Where White political identity has commonly been viewed as a manifestation of White's declining economic power (relative to non-Whites and in absolute terms), this paper offers clearer evidence that, when compared to predictors of cultural or political power, economic attitudes do little to explain the importance of Whiteness for some Whites.

The research sets a high standard for sorting out this debate, moving beyond an over-fitted regression model and a comparison of coefficients, to using regularization techniques to account for multicollinearity among different measures of those two competing concepts. To the extent that White Identity has been used as an important predictor for candidate choice, the implications of this research seem to be that properly sorting out these relationships meaningfully sorts out the potential mediation of cultural and economic threats, through White identity, at the ballot box. To be clear, the paper is only interested in predicting White identity, but the larger implication as to what is driving vote choice among White identifiers is hinted at throughout.

The statistical modeling approach is appropriate and the author relies on widely-used measures for the key concepts at play. There are few issues that would prohibit publication of this piece. I would recommend a little more consideration of two points, more or less concerned with the operationalization of the underlying concepts and the way "context" matters in these models. I recognize data limitations would prevent substantial revisions along these lines, but perhaps more attention to the measurement decisions would convince a larger audience to take these findings seriously.

1) Operationalization of White Identity and Key Threats.

Theoretically, the emphasis on political threats (as opposed to economic threats) is grounded in group identity theory, which emphasizes cultural, symbolic, and political aspects of a group's identity, as opposed to the more individualized or socio-tropic considerations that inform a person's view on their economic conditions. Of course, there are data limits. The paper depends on the 2012, 2016, and 2020 ANES, where the question: "How important is being White to your identity?" is asked. As such, the operationalization of "economic threats" and "political threats" must also appear in the data.

This paper's frame/purpose is not unlike recent work on rural identity and rural consciousness, which has similarly attempted to sort out the competing dimensions of rural identity – whether it is driven by symbolic concerns (Lunz Trujillo and Crowley 2022) and the extent to which it is a particular manifestation of racial grievance (Dawkins et al. 2023). What is theoretically notable

about this paper's contribution is, whereas much of the social identity framework relies on vulnerability and marginalization (thus, in Connover's old formulation, increasing the group's likely proximity to politics), Whites are potentially motivated by a desire to maintain the social dominance. They are not a vulnerable group, as the author writes, but a potentially vulnerable group.

Still, when put in comparison to rural identity politics (and other group-oriented theories of political behavior), it is notable that economic threats are largely individualized measures. That is, as modeled, the test attributes for whether "economic threats" matter include: individualized retrospective evaluations, individualized impressions about the U.S. economy and unemployment, individual education and income (as a proxy for vulnerability), whether the individual is worried about losing a job, or whether they, personally, know someone who lost a job. This is reasonable if the theory stipulates that personal economic vulnerability motivates White identity. But it is also possible to understand *group* attachment through understandings of the *group's* economic position. Consider, for instance, how the above cited, as well as Cramer (2016) and recently Jacobs and Shea (2023), attempt to operationalize the economic vulnerability felt by rural Americans vis-à-vis urban Americans: rural communities do not get what they deserve; children have to leave [specific rural community] in order to get ahead; Decades of technological and economic changes have made it difficult for some in rural communities to improve on their own. If the concept is economic vulnerability of the *group*, then the questions and measures have to account for the group. In this case, we might consider responses to: Whites face a harder time getting a job in America these days; Whites do not get what they deserve. I'll note that in the "economic threats" list of variables, there are none that tap into attitudes towards immigration (although a promising variable exists in the appendix). Anecdotal evidence would suggest that this is a major "threat" to many White's economic position, although it is also highly racialized.

Then there is the question of how "political threats" are operationalized. Here we are presented with more group-oriented measures: new lifestyles breaking down society; whether the federal government treats Blacks or Whites better; how much influence Whites have on politics; whether Whites are discriminated against; and then the standard racial resentment battery.

I think these are better measures, and I am particularly convinced by the theory that "changes to 'traditional American values' may reflect concern about changes to the influences of White values." But I'll note that two other significant measures are a bit suspect. First, "Whites are discriminated against" stems from the specific question on the ANES: "How much discrimination is there in the United States today against each of the following groups? Whites." When someone with White Identity answers affirmatively to this question, what are they thinking? I can only surmise that it is filled with considerations that are related to politics AND economics at the same time. Affirmative action is political, but it matters to the extent that it allegedly discriminates against White's position in the job market. Likewise, the workhorse of the findings – racial resentment – intentionally sits in that middle ground of "symbolic racist" concerns that tie Whiteness and American values to hard work and merit. Two of the questions

are about working their way up, the others getting what they deserve, and trying harder. As Davis and Wilson (2022) have recently argued, answers to these questions are less likely to stem from a sense of prejudice and vulnerability, as much as from a “just-world” consideration of what is fair. Of course, the model does not suggest that everyone who agrees with those beliefs have strong White identity, so it is reasonable to wonder if those who do are systematically more likely to hold those just-world beliefs, even if they do not feel “threatened.”

2) Context Effects

The author uses this term, but differently than how I anticipated. By context, the author means year-specific effects in the larger electoral environment. In a word, Trump.

I would encourage a different word, unless a significant expansion of the research agenda is desired. Most scholars interested in context effects would have attempted to model for some situational variation in the lived economic and racial experiences of the respondents. It would be motivated by the idea that subjective understandings of government actions and purposes are shaped by objective local conditions, including localized social mobility, demographic change, and economic vulnerability. Likewise, individual interests would reflect larger, geotropic concerns of the people living around them (Cutler 2007), not just themselves, personally.

Again, this has been a motivating framework for much of the research on rural identity, but it also has been shown to matter for general voting patterns (see, for example: Reeves and Gimpel 2012; Cho and Gimpel 2009).

Year-to-year differences do pick up on a type of context. But it does not account for the different contexts that might inform White identity outside the shifts in the presidential campaign environment. How does “knowing someone who lost a job” play out in communities where job market participation is lower than the national average? Does the predictive value of education increase once we account for communities where the percent of individuals holding BA degrees is lower than average? What does the relationship between racial resentment look like among White identifiers in nearly all White-communities vs. more diverse locales.

While heterogeneity is tested across political identity and gender, when I read context (as do most scholars of context effects), we have these moderated relationships in mind.

3) Finally, four small items:

- a) It is likely my own error, but from the results (no coefficients at 0) and description, I am confused by the statement that a LASSO approach is used. My understanding is that LASSO specifically refers to L1 regularization, whereas clearly a L2 regularizer (ridge) seems to have been adopted here.

- b) How does listwise deletion handle respondents' answers to worried about losing job....my assumption is that this drops people who are unemployed or dropped out of workforce from the model. This is problematic, especially in 2020.
- c) Racial resentment is listed as a "control" but it carries the bulk of the analysis. Is this a typographical error in the appendix, or is it used as a "control"?
- d) Figure 2 is mislabeled (bottom right panel)

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