

Context Matters? Exploring the origin story of White Political Identity

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Abstract

Does the relative actual or perceived material status explain a white individual's proclivity to claim a white identity? Existing literature on white political identity demonstrates that the likelihood a white person claims and behaves in congruence with other whites in the United States is largely motivated by protecting one's self and group interests. It is unclear, however, where individuals experience this threat. This paper argues that actual status loss and perceived status loss are rooted in evaluations of an individual's position and the change in status of those around them act as sources for white identity. Using data from the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies, this paper demonstrates that both actual status loss and perceived or anticipatory status loss act as important sources for increases in white identity. These findings are more important in 2012, whereas, in 2016, increases in white identity are associated with other related relevant political identities.

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1 Introduction

Contemporary white political behavior has severe implications for policy outcomes (Jardina 2019). A number of scholars have argued that the ways in which whites are behaving in politics are what one may predict from Tajfel and Turner's (1986) theory of social identities. That is, although, scholars have long assumed that whites' attitudes are shaped by racial animosity (Kinder and Kam 2010; Gilens 1999; Tesler 2016), others have argued that perceptions of status loss among whites have driven them to behave in a way that resembles a form of preservation for members of their in-group (Berry, Ebner and Cornelius 2019; Bunyasi 2019; Jardina 2019, 2020; Jardina, Kalmoe and Gross 2020; Schildkraut 2019; Willer, Feinberg and Wetts 2016). Although the debate in the literature rages on about whether all in-group oriented whites also express out-group hostility or if all those express negative out-group evaluations are all high white identifiers (Roberts, Engelhardt and Utych 2021), it appears that whites are quite concerned with their societal standing (Bunyasi 2019; Petrow, Transue and Vercellotti 2018; Schildkraut 2017; Wetts and Willer 2018).

One open question to this, however, is whether the whites that are behaving in this way are only perceiving status loss, whether they are actually experiencing status loss, or whether it is some mixture of both. One way to sort this out might be to look at one's context. Though, some argue that political attitudes are shaped by national trends and events (Hopkins 2018), people's context has quite an important effect on how they process political information (e.g. Cramer 2016). Not only does context shape perceptions of how well government represents your interests (Cramer 2016), but people actually have identities tied to their community type and these identities shape political attitudes (Lyons and Utych 2021).

Taking this into consideration, I put forth the argument that high white identifiers are most likely to be those who are experiencing actual status loss relative to those who are only perceiving status loss. Those experiencing status loss are those who are making lower relative incomes to those living in their communities. Those who are experiencing perceived material status loss, on the other hand, are not necessarily doing worse off than others but may feel that minorities are catching up to them. The sources of these feelings are quite varied and are not all readily answerable with existing survey data. I entertain the possibility of each of these probable explanations by providing a discussion of how they work later in the paper and test the explanations that already have measures related to these stories.

Using the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies, I test whether perceived material status loss or actual status loss act as better predictors of whether an individual claims a white identity. From these analyses, I find differences between the sources of white identity in 2012 and 2016. Between the two of them, I observe that a number of indicators for both actual and perceived status loss matter. Comparing 2012 to 2016, I observe that in 2012 more sources of white identity are rooted in one's context whereas in 2016 sources of white identity are more rooted in other politically relevant social identities.

Before presenting my analyses, however, in the next section I provide a brief historical overview of the ways Americans have thought about whiteness over time. This discussion leaves us with a clear understanding of how to measure whiteness. In summary, whiteness is context specific and is quite subjective. For this paper's purposes, existing survey measures of white identity seem reasonable given that the concept of white identity of interest here is one of political relevance and the concept is measured from a survey asking a number of politically relevant questions about people's attitudes

and behaviors. In this way, the context of the survey and the concept match pretty well. The discussion also informs us that the questionnaire practices of allowing respondents to claim a race rather than the interviewer assigning a race fits with the current argument that whiteness is defined by one's own internal narrative of who they are and, as a result, the subjectivity of how we define race in the United States. After the discussion about how we conceptualize whiteness in the United States, I turn to providing a discussion of how white identity operates as a political identity to shape attitudes and behavior, and provide a series of explanations as to why the potency of one's white identity may be better predicted by actual or the various sources of perceived material status loss.

2 Brief Overview of Whiteness in the U.S.

As social scientists, we are often concerned with properly measuring concepts that are often not tangible. Using race as a variable is inherently a challenging concept to measure. The history of how we have defined "whiteness" is a very long and complicated story. In short, whiteness is entirely subjective. More meaningfully, however, legalistic definitions of whiteness have had broad implications for a number of people. For example, in the early 19th century, persecution against those deemed to not be saxton, were discriminated against from gaining meaningful employment, were determined to be less-than in academic publishing, and experienced violence directed toward them. While definitions were somewhat dependent on what academic circles you were in, at that time, the Irish, Italians, those from Mediterranean countries, Jews, and Eastern Europeans were all considered non-saxton and therefore un-American (Painter 2010). While these classifications seem confusing to contemporary Americans, many of these determinants were often considered to be heavily wrapped up on class (Painter 2010).

As abolitionist movements grew, these definitions of "whiteness" in the U.S. evolved some more. White southerners concerned about the social hierarchy that appeared to be disintegrating, broadened their definition to accept the Irish, who filled parts of their Confederate Army's ranks (Painter 2010). This, in part, was due to the legalistic and political implications of emancipation, but it was also a way to ensure that the social hierarchy was not about class status, but about racial status (Painter 2010). For freedmen who can now seek wage employment, many southerners were anxious about what would happen to the poor who were not previously enslaved - though they were not saxtons, they did not want them to be on the same rung of the social ladder as freedmen.

Moving into the early 20th century, where nationalism was neck-breakingly high, the U.S. judicial system was of two minds on legalistically determining who was white. Some courts sought to follow taxonomic definitions of who was constituted as white and the others that saw this as a pragmatically fraught approach used the "common knowledge" rule (López 2006). This "common knowledge" rule was incredibly subjective but yet was used to rule in cases like naturalization for immigration from the 1920's until the 1950's (López 2006).

Scholarly debates of what whiteness is are still quite complex and nuanced. While legalistically it is somewhat unclear how they define whiteness, critical race theorists have argued to stop seeking objective taxonomies for who is white. Instead, critical race theorists have advocated for the ways in which people present a narrative about themselves and who they are (Rile Hayward 2013). In doing so, not only are we better able to understand the categorical explanations of who they are, but we also gather quite a bit of information about what delineates them from others. To build an identity, one must understand how "whiteness" is different from other racial groups (Rile Hayward 2013).

From the history of whiteness in the United States, we have a few important points to keep in mind relevant to my argument. First, a point on measurement, whiteness is arbitrary and contemporaneously, it is dependent on the person which can be context dependent. That is the extent to which someone is willing to claim their whiteness is likely context dependent and should not be considered objective. Second, whiteness has severe economic and political implications. Those considered to be white were granted naturalization in the early 20th century, were able to gain meaningful employment, were not subjugated to racial discrimination by employers, by local government for access to public goods, and by businesses in accessing trade. The transition in the 19th century to emphasize ones status as a former slave or not over class still has implications today. For example, the hatred towards welfare in the United States does not come from a dislike of the policies but rather a dislike of Black people receiving tax dollars (Gilens 1999). In other words, race, and in particular whiteness, is historically *and* contemporarily economic. As a result, those studying sources of white political identity should not ignore the ways in which status loss may present itself to individuals as a material status loss - not just as feelings of political or societal status loss.

3 Theory

At the center of social identity theory is that there are clear delineations between us and them (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Howard 2000). With established group boundaries, evaluations of deservingness of resources often come into play when resources are considered to be scarce (Huddy 2001, 2012). Despite people often claiming "they do not see race", it is clear that there are racial group distinctions in politics and whites often act in accordance with out-group and in-group evaluations of what to do with resources.

Overall, the literature studying white political attitudes and behavior have largely focused on whites and out-group attitudes. One of the key measures that scholars have used to study out-group attitudes toward minorities is the "racial resentment" index developed by Kinder and Sanders (1996). With this measure, a number of scholars have argued the ways in which whites evaluate the deservingness of Blacks and other minorities of redistributive policies (Gilens 1999) and evaluate policy framed as benefiting Blacks (Winter 2008). In a racialized political context, racially moderate and conservative whites often evaluate policies and candidates where it is dubious to them as to whether they will benefit whites or whether they will benefit Blacks and other minorities (Tesler 2016; Sides, Tesler and Vavreck 2018; Stephens-Dougan 2020).

More recently, scholars have begun recognizing the role of white political in-group attitudes in explaining why whites behave and hold the attitudes they have in political contexts. Whites not only recognize racial delineations and act with animosity toward those unlike them, they express that their fates are similar to other whites (Berry, Ebner and Cornelius 2019). From this literature about in-group favoritism among whites, we know that whites expressing favoritism toward members of their own racial group tend to respond well to political movements like the Tea Party that express white grievances about progressive racial policy (Willer, Feinberg and Wetts 2016). Further whites evaluate candidates based on the degree to which they express a willingness to support the status quo - that whites exist at the top of a social hierarchy (McDermott and Samson 2005; Jardina 2020). For candidates that do not express their commitment to uphold white's status, these candidates are often considered to be woefully unpopular in the electorate (Stephens-Dougan 2020). Policy preferences are also driven by in-group favoritism among whites.

Not all whites claim a white identity, however (McDermott and Samson 2005). For

those that do claim a white identity, social welfare policies that do not benefit other racial groups more than whites tend to be more popular. It is somewhat unclear from the literature, however, who are those that tend to be more willing to claim a white identity. Descriptively, we are aware of some demographics like conservatives and the less educated tend to be more likely to claim a white identity (Jardina 2019), what drives white identity is unclear.

We know that white identity is driven by feelings of relative loss of status (Jardina 2019; Wong and Cho 2005; Bunyasi 2019). There are a number of different sources of where status may come from, however, and the literature has yet to explore specific factors that may predict whether someone claims a white identity. One possible typology is actual status loss. Those making less money than those around them are likely to seek external explanations as to why they are doing poorly. In this search for external sources of loss, people often positively evaluate members of their in-group, but often blame out-groups as a source of their loss (Tyler and Dawes 2008). In doing so, actual status loss is likely to be a potent driver of white identity. Those who are poorer than those around them and continue to see that they will be poor, are likely to find groups to blame and as argued about the literature of white political attitudes, readily accessible out-groups are based in race (Enos 2017; Hutchings and Valentino 2004). This means that external sources of blame for poor whites is likely to be directed toward racial minorities. In turn, whites will also evaluate members of their in-group more favorably (Huddy 2012).

From the literature on community identities, where one lives matters for shaping evaluations of politics (Lyons and Utych 2021). For example, Cramer (2016) demonstrates that resentment toward urbanites among those living in poor rural areas is quite clear and the stereotypes expressed by those living in these areas harbor negative stereo-

types of urbanites. These stereotypes were often racialized and centered around who was deserving of investment by the Wisconsin state government (Cramer 2016). Often the conclusion by these rural poor individuals was that urbanites were undeserving of the state monies and that the blue-collar worker were more deserving (Cramer 2016). As this work demonstrates, people recognize their status by looking at those around them. For those who are actually of lower status than those around them, they are likely to feel the threats more potently than those not directly impacted by it.

Just because someone does not actually experience a loss in status, however, does not necessarily mean that they can not react negatively toward out-groups and positively toward in-groups. If you perceive that loss is happening to those of your group, given that social identity works as a heuristic (Howard 2000), people often assume that they too will soon be impacted. In terms of white identity, this is where the relationship between Trump and the Tea Party used white racial grievances as a way to attract those feeling status loss and as a result were quite popular among high white identifiers (Bunyasi 2019; Willer, Feinberg and Wetts 2016; Jardina 2019). Those living in poor white communities or those with high levels of income inequality are likely to recognize the effects of status loss for whites. Although the person themselves may not experience loss themselves, being presented with whites in your community doing poorly economically is likely to make you more aware that claims that whites are "losing out" may have some basis. With seeing others "losing out", like those living among those in poor rural communities in Cramer's (2016) work on rural resentment, white identity is likely to be driven by anxieties of losing out yourself if the slippage of your group continues. In other words, just because those around you have lost out, it does not mean you are not next if your group continues to lose out.

Perceived status loss does not only have to happen among those living in contexts

of poor whites, it may be that exposure to rhetoric expressing white racial grievances may drive anxiety around status thus driving white identity. Even if you are not faced or have not yet seen those faced with status loss, whites exposed to messages that indicate a change in the racial status quo, are likely to respond in kind. We know that political messaging about race weighs heavy on the minds of white voters. Without relatively explicit assurances that the racial status quo will not change, most whites are reluctant to support those candidates (Stephens-Dougan 2020). The presence of racialized frames work as a cue for whites to either support or reject policy. Those messages indicating whites will benefit from policies more than other racial groups receive more support among whites (Winter 2008; Jardina 2019; Roberts, Engelhardt and Utych 2021). As an alternative explanation to context for explaining the source perceived or anticipatory status loss driving white identity, rhetoric seems like a clear possibility.

To summarize, there are two primary sources for white identity. The first is actual status loss. This is likely driven by context due to the fact that those actually experiencing status loss are likely making that assessment through comparing themselves to those around them. When doing so, those that are worse off than those around them are likely to assign blame to out-groups. The other source of white identity can come from a number of different places but is often rooted in the perception of status loss. Those that see those around them doing poorly are likely to seek explanations in anticipation due to the heuristic nature in which we evaluate the world. For those that see those around them doing poorly are likely to anticipate that they may also do poorly in the future with the continued slippage of their group. It may also be less contextual in that people rely on political rhetoric in a number of contexts to evaluate race. Race in rhetoric are used as a way to garner support or disapproval of candidates and policy. It is likely that rhetoric can also be used to express concerns about the loss of status for whites. In the

next section, I study whether this story has empirical support.

4 Methods

I model my theory using data from the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Study and the American Community Survey¹. While the measure proposed by Jardina (2019) is relatively new and has only been included in ANES and CCES questionnaires since 2016, I take advantage of the single question contained in both executions of the ANES that asks how important being white is to an individual's identity. The measure is constructed as a Likert scale where I coded it as values of 1 represent strongly disagree and values of 5 represent responses of strongly agree. I provide descriptive statistics of the average response by white respondents to both studies in Table 1 and Table 2. From the two tables, we see that the average respondent in both years tend to disagree with the statement that white identity is important to who they are.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of white identity.

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
2012 White Identity	3,150	2.769	1.303	1.000	2.000	4.000	5.000

Source: 2012 American National Election Studies.

Descriptive statistics of importance of being white to identity.

I also wanted to determine whether in 2012 and 2016 if there were differences of the characteristics of the average respondent claiming that white identity was important or very important to who they are relative to those who were not high on the white identity importance measure. Table 3 presents the characteristics of the mean respondent in the sample who claimed that white identity was at least somewhat important to them

¹www.data.census.gov

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of white identity.

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
2016 White Identity	2,586	2.642	1.341	1.000	1.000	4.000	5.000

Source: 2016 American National Election Studies.

Descriptive statistics of importance of being white to identity.

in 2012 and Table 5 shows the same but for the 2016 ANES sample. Tables 4 and 6 demonstrate the characteristics of the mean respondent in the sample for 2012 And 2016, respectively, who report that white identity is not important to them (values of 3 or less). There is a lot to look at here. These variables will act as my covariates to the various models I use in the following regression analyses. But for now, a brief explanation of the differences between the mean respondent of each subsample from 2012 and 2016 along with a brief explanation of why these may be important predictors for white identity is in order.

As my theory states, actual status loss should be an important classification of factors that may have significant impacts on my ability to predict white identity. These are somewhat straight forward to measure. In my analysis for both 2012 and 2016, we might expect that one's relative income is a sign of where someone stands in their community - this is a sign of where someone actually materially stands. Those with incomes lower than the median income for their Congressional District have lower material status than those around them. From the descriptive statistics in both 2012 and 2016 this is the case. We might also be interested in educational attainment and their employment status. Again looking at the tables, we see that high white identifiers have lower educational attainment than low white identifiers in both 2012 and 2016. The same is true comparing high white identifiers to low white identifiers in both 2012 and 2016 samples - more high white identifiers are not employed at the time of agreeing to take the survey.

It may also be the case that high white identifiers may be experiencing material status loss not necessarily to their own pocketbooks but it may present itself in the community around them. Those living in communities with high inequality, as measured as a Gini Coefficient, may experience actual status loss - their community is poorer and that may lead to a number of decreases in factors contributing to quality of life and the ability to access public goods and utilities. Alternatively but relatedly, those experiencing actual status loss may live in communities with high percentages of poverty. Just because there is not significant inequality, it does not mean that good schools for their children, effective public utilities, and continued opportunity for economic growth around them may decrease simply because it is a homogenously poor community. Looking at the tables comparing the average high white identifiers and low identifiers in 2012 and 2016, the differences are more mixed. In 2012 and 2016, the average high white identifier is less likely to see income inequality as a serious problem. In 2012 and 2016 the gini coefficients of the community that the average high white identifier resides in and the low white identifier are the same. The one that provides preliminary support for a hypothesis is in 2016. The difference between the average high white identifier and low white identifier is positive which indicates that the low white identifier is likely to live in a community with a lower proportion of their neighbors living in poverty relative to high white identifiers. While, again, I want to reiterate, this discussion is in no way taken as conclusive evidence for supporting my hypotheses, it does provide some preliminary support that the hypotheses derived from my theory may be true.

Another component of my theory is that perceived material status loss may be important to white identity as well. Measuring this is a bit more tricky. To do this, I need to include variables that proxy for whether people feel left out or are treated unfairly (Tyler and Dawes 2008), those who see economic inequality as more salient, those

who feel that they are personally experiencing or anticipating changes in their financial standing, those who may recognize or anticipate more sociotropic changes in the economy. Those that feel that it is hard for them to get ahead or to have opportunities to do better, as my theory would predict, would seek to assign blame to other groups for their inability to do better. Whites who have experienced relatively more privilege and thus more social mobility who feel that they are losing status relative to minority racial groups may express their feelings of frustration for this loss of privilege as a lack of ability to make their own way and these whites are likely, as my hypotheses would suggest, to express either out-group animosity for the loss of ability to do so, express more in-group favoritism, or both. Additionally, those perceiving economic status loss may see income inequality as more salient than those who are not experiencing or concerned about status loss. As social identity theory would predict, status threats and the proclivity to accept and use a social identity are related to the salience of relevant signs of threat and status loss (Huddy 2012). This is also related to another set of pocketbook and sociotropic economic voting measures that I have included here as possible proxies of perceived material status loss. Those who either feel that they are or will be doing worse are likely, if my theory is correct, to seek out alternative explanations for why this may be happening - which either leads them to blaming out-groups and harboring animosity towards members of out-groups contributing to this personal perceived financial insecurity along with also possibly seeking to bolster a complementary group, racial, in hopes it improves their own and their group's position in the future. Anticipation and perceived financial insecurity does not need to only be egoistic, however. Those perceiving trends in the national economy may perceive that the economic downturns will soon come to impact them and their families. Sociotropic evaluations may also cloud people's evaluations of their own personal standing - even if it has not necessarily im-

pacted them. If they are living in a poor economy, just because it has not impacted their employment status, it does not mean it has not made it harder to look for other jobs, buy houses, invest in the stock market and other forms of participating in the broader market.

From the tables, we see that comparing the average high white identifier and low white identifier in 2012 and 2016 there seems to be some support that these predictions may be the case. Whether these differences are different than zero, that is left for the regression analyses later. When comparing the average high white identifier to the average low white identifier in each 2012 and 2016, the hypotheses generated from my theory have some preliminary support. Except for the ability to get ahead among 2016 respondents and prospective evaluations of the economy, the average high white identifier tends to be more negative than the high white identifier in both 2012 and 2016 on retrospective and prospective evaluations of their personal finances along with retrospective evaluations of the economy. The fact that there is no descriptive difference in response for the average high and low identifier for prospective evaluations of the economy make sense considering that 2012 was the year that the Tea Party successfully primaried a large number of incumbent and more moderate members of the GOP and 2016 was when Trump had been actively campaigning on white grievances. Given this, it is reasonable to expect that prospective evaluations capture the hope of white identifiers feeling that the racial order will be reestablished or at least progressive racial changes will be significantly slowed with comparatively more voices entering the mainstream expressing their interest in upholding the racial status quo.

The discussion and analysis thus far have not rigorously tested whether there are distinguishable differences between average high white identifiers and the average low white identifier in each of the samples. The following analyses, though, should be a

Table 3: Descriptive statistics predictor variables.

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
Relative Income	850	−1.041	7.596	−22.000	−7.000	5.000	16.000
Retrospective - better off	946	−0.158	1.228	−2.000	−1.000	1.000	2.000
Prospective - better off	935	0.178	0.892	−2.000	0.000	1.000	2.000
Retrospective - economy	951	−0.409	1.120	−2.000	−1.000	0.000	2.000
Prospective - economy	928	0.165	0.935	−2.000	0.000	1.000	2.000
News	956	2.412	2.551	0	0	5	7
Rural	956	0.121	0.327	0	0	0	1
% White	956	82.042	12.471	16.800	74.900	91.900	97.600
Gini	956	0.453	0.028	0.385	0.433	0.468	0.587
% below poverty	956	23.214	8.859	0.200	17.175	29.500	48.000
Income Inequality	935	4.293	0.962	1.000	4.000	5.000	5.000
Employment Status	956	0.472	0.499	0	0	1	1
Racial Resentment	949	0.076	0.471	−1.500	−0.250	0.250	2.000
Age	956	53.430	18.638	−2	39.8	67	90
Female	956	0.527	0.500	0	0	1	1
Education	948	2.897	1.136	1.000	2.000	4.000	5.000
Party Identification	956	4.343	2.120	1	2	6	7
Ideology	883	4.506	1.396	1.000	4.000	6.000	7.000

Source: 2012 American National Election Studies.

Descriptive statistics of predictor variables among high white identifiers.

Table 4: Descriptive statistics of predictor variables.

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
Relative Income	1,995	−0.075	7.921	−22.000	−6.000	6.000	16.000
Retrospective - better off	2,171	−0.133	1.212	−2.000	−1.000	1.000	2.000
Prospective - better off	2,152	0.205	0.881	−2.000	0.000	1.000	2.000
Retrospective - economy	2,186	−0.223	1.120	−2.000	−1.000	1.000	2.000
Prospective - economy	2,150	0.213	0.927	−2.000	0.000	1.000	2.000
News	2,194	2.697	2.620	−8	0	5	7
Rural	2,194	0.104	0.305	0	0	0	1
% White	2,194	80.814	13.649	29.500	74.100	91.300	97.400
Gini	2,194	0.453	0.028	0.385	0.434	0.468	0.587
% below poverty	2,194	23.909	8.716	0.200	18.000	29.500	48.600
Income Inequality	2,161	4.344	0.892	1.000	4.000	5.000	5.000
Employment Status	2,194	0.583	0.493	0	0	1	1
Racial Resentment	2,179	−0.032	0.443	−2.000	−0.250	0.250	1.750
Age	2,194	50.514	16.549	−2	38	63	90
Female	2,194	0.492	0.500	0	0	1	1
Education	2,177	3.255	1.133	1.000	2.000	4.000	5.000
Party Identification	2,185	4.064	2.062	1.000	2.000	6.000	7.000
Ideology	2,101	4.272	1.507	1.000	3.000	6.000	7.000

Source: 2012 American National Election Studies.

Descriptive statistics of predictor variables among high white identifiers.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics predictor variables.

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
Relative Income	666	−1.024	7.837	−23.000	−7.000	5.000	16.000
Retrospective - better off	722	−0.147	0.945	−2.000	−1.000	0.000	2.000
Prospective - better off	715	0.131	0.877	−2.000	0.000	1.000	2.000
Retrospective - economy	722	−0.382	1.044	−2.000	−1.000	0.000	2.000
Prospective - economy	707	0.023	0.917	−2.000	0.000	0.000	2.000
News	723	5.696	1.914	0	5	7	7
Rural	723	0.104	0.305	0	0	0	1
% White	723	80.324	13.134	31.400	72.400	90.500	97.700
Gini	723	0.461	0.027	0.386	0.443	0.475	0.590
% below poverty	723	12.267	4.158	4.100	9.500	14.500	26.900
Income Inequality	718	4.280	1.000	1.000	4.000	5.000	5.000
Employment Status	722	0.571	0.495	0.000	0.000	1.000	1.000
Opportunity to get ahead	723	2.992	1.037	1	2	4	5
Racial Resentment	716	0.117	0.497	−1.500	−0.250	0.500	2.000
Age	708	55.418	18.216	18.000	41.750	69.000	90.000
Female	716	0.557	0.497	0.000	0.000	1.000	1.000
Education	722	11.543	7.164	3.000	9.000	13.000	95.000
Party Identification	721	4.545	2.166	1.000	3.000	7.000	7.000
Ideology	720	23.896	38.092	1.000	4.000	7.000	99.000
Disgust - Trump	723	2.602	1.531	−9	2	4	5

Source: 2016 American National Election Studies.

Descriptive statistics of predictor variables among high white identifiers.

Table 6: Descriptive statistics predictor variables.

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
Relative Income	1,707	0.391	7.580	−21.000	−5.000	7.000	17.000
Retrospective - better off	1,858	−0.003	0.958	−2.000	−1.000	1.000	2.000
Prospective - better off	1,844	0.206	0.836	−2.000	0.000	1.000	2.000
Retrospective - economy	1,855	−0.088	1.022	−2.000	−1.000	1.000	2.000
Prospective - economy	1,830	−0.047	0.853	−2.000	0.000	0.000	2.000
News	1,863	5.666	1.958	−9	5	7	7
Rural	1,863	0.087	0.282	0	0	0	1
% White	1,863	80.117	13.759	19.300	72.700	90.700	97.700
Gini	1,863	0.461	0.028	0.386	0.442	0.474	0.590
% below poverty	1,863	12.053	4.195	4	8.8	14.2	28
Income Inequality	1,854	4.403	0.888	1.000	4.000	5.000	5.000
Employment Status	1,862	0.712	0.453	0.000	0.000	1.000	1.000
Opportunity to get ahead	1,861	2.922	0.985	1.000	2.000	3.000	5.000
Racial Resentment	1,857	−0.017	0.477	−2.000	−0.250	0.250	2.000
Age	1,826	49.498	17.122	18.000	35.000	63.000	90.000
Female	1,855	0.520	0.500	0.000	0.000	1.000	1.000
Education	1,863	12.137	6.957	1	10	13	95
Party Identification	1,858	4.042	2.125	1.000	2.000	6.000	7.000
Ideology	1,858	18.082	33.697	1.000	3.000	6.000	99.000
Disgust - Trump	1,863	3.053	1.490	−8	2	4	5

Source: 2016 American National Election Studies.

Descriptive statistics of predictor variables among low white identifiers.

more rigorous test of my hypotheses, though. Including a number of demographic controls and alternative explanations, I test whether indicators of perceived status loss are better at predicting whether someone feels being white is important to their conception of who they are or if indicators of actual status loss are better predictors.

Given the discussion thus far, I ran a multi-level model for each 2012 and 2016 where the standard errors are clustered by the district and the intercepts vary depending on district. The model includes a number of important alternative explanations and controls that were discussed earlier in this section. Putting a number of plausible alternative explanations in the same model allow for comparability between the predictive power each explanation has relative to each other, something the discussion of descriptive statistics earlier in the section could not do.

In the first column of table 7 I present the primary 2012 model that we should focus on. Here, we see no support for a claim that either perceived and actual material status loss matters more than the other. We see both actual and perceived proxies have significant effects on predicting white identity. Retrospective personal evaluations of one's finances has a positive impact on predicting whether someone claims white identity is important to who they are. Those that see that they were better off in 2011 were more 0.05 units more likely to also say that being white was important to them. Those with lower educational attainment, which is an indicator of actual material status, are also more 0.121 units likely to say that being white is important to them relative to those with higher levels of educational attainment, this difference between low and high levels of educational attainment is significant. Another indicator of actual status loss is important for predicting white identity in 2012. This time this is a contextual variable. Those living in communities with lower levels of poverty are more likely to claim a white identity relative to those living in communities with a higher proportion of those in poverty.

Table 7: Effects of actual and perceived material status loss on predicting white identity adoption

	White Identity Importance	
	2012	2016
Relative Income	0.002 (0.003)	-0.010* (0.004)
Retrospective - better off	0.050* (0.023)	0.030 (0.033)
Prospective - better off	0.006 (0.030)	-0.009 (0.036)
Income Inequality	-0.024 (0.029)	-0.046 (0.031)
Education	-0.121* (0.024)	-0.006 (0.004)
Employment	-0.178* (0.057)	-0.148* (0.073)
Opportunity to get ahead		0.004 (0.029)
Racial Resentment	0.296* (0.057)	0.279* (0.057)
Age	0.006* (0.002)	0.007* (0.002)
Female	0.031 (0.050)	0.075 (0.056)
% White	0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)
Gini	1.699 (0.950)	1.260 (1.202)
% below poverty	-0.008* (0.003)	0.006 (0.008)
Party Identification	0.002 (0.017)	0.049* (0.017)
Ideology	0.025 (0.024)	0.003* (0.001)
Disgust - Trump		-0.066* (0.024)
Constant	2.193* (0.546)	1.923* (0.669)
Num. groups: District	407	399
Variance: District(Intercept)	0.01	0.02
Variance: Residual	1.58	1.67
N	2,595	2,286
Log Likelihood	-4,318.194	-3,890.307
AIC	8,670.389	7,818.615
BIC	8,770.032	7,927.572

Source: 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies.

Coefficients from regression with random intercepts by congressional district.
Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$

In 2012, we also see that those who are more racially resentful, or who express more racial animous, are also more likely, by 0.296 units, to claim a white identity.

In 2016 we see a somewhat differnt story in the second column of table 7. We see that actual status loss and demographic factors are better predictors of white identity than indicators of percieved economic status loss. In 2016, I observe that those with an income lower than the median income of their community is an important and positive predictor of white identity. That is, those with an income less than the median of those in their Congressional district are 0.10 points more likely to state that being white is important to who they are. We also see that unemployed² respondents are 0.148 units more likely to claim a white identity relative to employed respondents. As observed in 2012, racial resentment has a positive effect on predicting white identity. Unlike 2012, in 2016 we see more demographic variables are important for predicting white identity. This is somewhat unsurprising given arguments posted by other scholars suggesting that high white identifiers are more likely to be Republican in 2016 (Jardina, Kalmoe and Gross 2020). Those that like Trump more are more likely to claim a white identity. Those who were disgusted by Trump, however, were less likely to claim a white identity (Jardina, Kalmoe and Gross 2020), which is also replicated here.

These results seem to suggest that it is not just personal factors that matter for people but that realizations of actual and percieved status loss rooted in their context matters too. As the hypotheses presented earlier and discussion of the descriptive statistics suggested, however, sociotropic measures often used for economic voting may also help with predicting white identity. To test whether these matter too and if they may matter more than personal economic factors, I ran an alternative model to determine whether this may be the case.

²Those either temporarily laid off, unemployed, or unable to work

Table 8: Effects of actual and perceived material status loss on predicting white identity adoption

	White Identity Importance	
	2012	2016
Relative Income	0.002 (0.003)	-0.010* (0.004)
Retrospective - better off	0.060* (0.024)	0.044 (0.034)
Prospective - better off	-0.007 (0.033)	-0.033 (0.037)
Prospective - economy	0.054 (0.033)	0.108* (0.035)
Retrospective - economy	-0.054 (0.030)	-0.105* (0.033)
Income Inequality	-0.025 (0.029)	-0.047 (0.031)
Education	-0.118* (0.024)	-0.006 (0.004)
Employment	-0.173* (0.057)	-0.144* (0.074)
Opportunity to get ahead		0.013 (0.029)
Racial Resentment	0.294* (0.058)	0.280* (0.057)
Age	0.006* (0.002)	0.007* (0.002)
Female	0.039 (0.050)	0.075 (0.056)
% white	0.002 (0.002)	-0.0003 (0.002)
Gini	1.775 (0.954)	1.292 (1.207)
% below poverty	-0.008* (0.003)	0.004 (0.008)
Party Identification	-0.003 (0.018)	0.042* (0.017)
Ideology	0.019 (0.025)	0.002* (0.001)
Disgust - Trump		-0.040 (0.025)
Constant	2.161* (0.550)	1.856* (0.671)
Num. groups: District	407	399
Variance: District(Intercept)	0.01	0.03
Variance: Residual	1.58	1.65
N	2,569	2,257
Log Likelihood	-4,277.661	-3,836.342
AIC	8,593.321	7,714.685
BIC	8,704.495	7,834.842

Source: 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies.

Coefficients from regression with random intercepts by congressional district.
Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$

The results here in table 8 are similar to that of the results in table 7. I do see, however, that sociotropic economic voting measures do have some predictive power for white identity. I observe that in 2016, respondents who anticipate that the economy will be better in 2017 are 0.108 points more likely to claim a white identity relative to those who are more pessimistic about the future of the economy - controlling for demographics, partisanship, and ideology. I also see that retrospective evaluations of the performance of the economy has distinguishable effects on predicting white identity. For those who saw the economy in 2015 as worse off than in 2016, they were 0.105 points more likely to claim a white identity relative to those who evaluated the past year's economy as more positively even when controlling for partisanship and ideology.

These models again provide broad support for both personal and contextual indicators of perceived status loss. I, however, have not tested for whether political rhetoric explains where perceived status loss comes from. Although the survey data cannot predict this directly, unfortunately, as an alternative explanation, I can test whether perceived status loss is associated with one's exposure to the news. Theories of where people gain racialized attitudes about politics and policy often point to the role of the news media for exacerbating often pre-established racial stereotypes gained from socialization as young children (Valentino and Vandebroek 2017; Gilens 1999). Even if individuals only watch televised political speeches, they are still exposed to racialized politics. For example, President Barack Obama is famously criticized for his use of racial stereotypes against Blacks and his racial distancing used to build electoral support among racially moderate and conservative whites (Stephens-Dougan 2020). This is not something that only Obama participated in, but it is a more successful electoral strategy than deracializing your campaign for both Black and White Democrats and Republicans (Stephens-Dougan 2020). In other words, race is central to understanding

politics and current events (Hutchings and Valentino 2004; Hajnal 2020), as a result, exposure to racialized content is incredibly likely. While an experimental test of whether a treatment of rhetoric expressing ideas of white grievance and status loss has an effect on these results, as a first cut, testing whether those exposing themselves more to the news - and as a result, are more likely to be exposed to these discussions - can serve as a useful test of whether contextual factors matter or whether exposure to racialized rhetoric matters. To do this I took the question from the 2012 and 2016 ANES asking respondents how many days of the week they watch the news. Again, this is an imperfect measure due to social-desirability and it being at best a loose proxy of rhetoric, it still provides some information. I use this instead of a measure of political knowledge since those who know more about politics are likely more sophisticated and as a result are often more biased political information processors (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). This indicates that political sophisticates are likely to have much more stable political attitudes and are less likely to become higher white identifiers just for simply being exposed to political rhetoric expressing white grievance. Instead, the more exposure you have to this information, the more likely you begin to use it to make future decisions (Zaller 1992). Instead, the amount of exposure should be a more appropriate proxy.

The results in table 9 does not provide support for the alternative explanation that more exposure to political rhetoric expressing white grievances has more influence on explaining the rise of perceived material status loss compared to more contextual sources. We see that the results from the previous models remain quite robust in both 2012 and 2016. Comparing the Bayesian Information Criterion between the models from the primary table and those contained here, we see that it punished our BIC score for including a variable that does not do much to explain the variation in our dependent variable (see Hilbe 2011). This means that adding this variable did nothing for our

Table 9: Effects of actual and perceived material status loss on predicting white identity adoption

	White Identity Importance	
	2012	2016
Relative Income	0.002 (0.003)	-0.009* (0.004)
Retrospective - better off	0.049* (0.023)	0.031 (0.033)
Prospective - better off	0.008 (0.030)	-0.008 (0.036)
News	-0.012 (0.010)	-0.016 (0.015)
Income Inequality	-0.024 (0.029)	-0.046 (0.031)
Education	-0.117* (0.024)	-0.006 (0.004)
Employment	-0.167* (0.057)	-0.150* (0.073)
Opportunity to get ahead		0.004 (0.029)
Racial Resentment	0.296* (0.057)	0.279* (0.057)
Age	0.006* (0.002)	0.008* (0.002)
Female	0.026 (0.050)	0.070 (0.056)
% white	0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)
Gini	1.646 (0.950)	1.346 (1.204)
% below poverty	-0.008* (0.003)	0.005 (0.008)
Party Identification	0.002 (0.017)	0.048* (0.017)
Ideology	0.025 (0.024)	0.003* (0.001)
Disgust - Trump		-0.066* (0.024)
Constant	2.221* (0.546)	1.955* (0.669)
Num. groups: District	407	399
Variance: District(Intercept)	0.01	0.02
Variance: Residual	1.58	1.67
N	2,595	2,286
Log Likelihood	-4,321.218	-3,893.011
AIC	8,678.436	7,826.022
BIC	8,783.940	7,940.713

Source: 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies.
Coefficients from regression with random intercepts by congressional district.
Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$

model and reduced the parsimony we often like in our models as social scientists.

Although my theory does not directly hypothesize that differences between rural and urban communities matter for predicting individual proclivities to claim a white identity, this is an explanation lurking in my theory. We know that community-level identities matter for predicting political attitudes and behavior (Lyons and Utych 2021; Cramer 2016). In the models I have presented thus far, we see that contextual factors matter for predicting whether individuals claim a white political identity. It may be the case that differences between Congressional districts that are more rural have different features that make them more favorable for incubating individuals that eventually claim a white identity. For example, Cramer (2016) demonstrates that although it is primarily based in location, negative stereotypes about urbanites have racial undercurrents to it. Those living in poor and rural communities tend to hold negative stereotypes of urbanites while also expressing many more positive stereotypes about other "hard-working" blue-collar workers living in small towns (2016). We also see that poor racial and class representation is often higher in small communities relative to more urban metropolises (Schaffner, Rhodes and La Raja 2020). Extrapolating this argument, it indicates that lower class citizens in small towns may not just simply experience status loss due to their inability to keep up with the joneses, but it may also present itself to poorer whites experiencing status loss as less representation as well. Although poor Black constituents are the ones who experience less representation in small towns by their government (Schaffner, Rhodes and La Raja 2020), whites experiencing less representation due to their class may be important here. This would mean that my previous results are better broken down by explaining the differences between poor whites in small towns compared to poor whites in more urban areas in predicting white identity. Experiencing less representation and acutally being poor may make these particular whites in small towns

Table 10: Effects of actual and perceived material status loss on predicting white identity adoption

	White Identity Importance	
	2012	2016
Relative Income	0.002 (0.003)	−0.010* (0.004)
Retrospective - better off	0.050* (0.023)	0.031 (0.033)
Prospective - better off	0.007 (0.030)	−0.008 (0.036)
Income Inequality	−0.023 (0.029)	−0.045 (0.031)
Education	−0.121* (0.024)	−0.006 (0.004)
Employment	−0.175* (0.057)	−0.151* (0.073)
Opportunity to get ahead		0.007 (0.029)
Racial Resentment	0.295* (0.057)	0.277* (0.057)
Rural	0.103 (0.084)	0.161 (0.102)
Age	0.006* (0.002)	0.007* (0.002)
Female	0.029 (0.050)	0.075 (0.056)
% white	0.001 (0.002)	−0.002 (0.002)
Gini	1.661 (0.950)	1.293 (1.202)
% below poverty	−0.008* (0.003)	0.003 (0.008)
Party Identification	0.002 (0.017)	0.049* (0.017)
Ideology	0.024 (0.024)	0.003* (0.001)
Disgust - Trump		−0.065* (0.024)
Constant	2.251* (0.548)	2.006* (0.671)
Num. groups: District	407	399
Variance: District(Intercept)	0.01	0.02
Variance: Residual	1.58	1.67
N	2,595	2,286
Log Likelihood	−4,318.998	−3,890.433
AIC	8,673.996	7,820.866
BIC	8,779.500	7,935.557

Source: 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies.

Coefficients from regression with random intercepts by congressional district.
Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$

have more potent racial identification. Combining these respondents with poor whites in more urban areas with more representation, despite being poor, may attenuate the effects for these respondents. Adding a level-two control for my multi-level model of whether the district is a plurality rural or not, may absorb some of the variation in the DV that really should be captured by these urban-rural differences.

Although a deeper exploration of this question is warranted, a brief test of this may provide a cursory view of these differences. Table 10 present the results of including whether a district is a majority rural in the key model from above for both 2012 and 2016. Here we see that including the rurality of the district for which a respondent lives is not a significant predictor of white identity. It appears, that like frequency of news watching, the Bayesian Akilike Criterion score increases. This means that including this particular operationalization of rurality, the measure adds little to the model's ability to explain variation in the DV - at least less than the penalty BIC assigns for more complex models with no gain in predictive power.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

The results demonstrate that both actual and percieved forms status loss matter for predicting whether someone claims a white identity in both 2012 and 2016. Although, the particular sources of actual and percieved status loss vary between 2012 and 2016. Between both years, one's employment status matters for predicting whether someone claims a white identity. Those who are unemployed, for a number of different reasons, are more likely to claim a white identity in both 2012 and 2016. The model also shows that in 2016, those with lower incomes relative to the median in the Congressional District for which they reside also are more likely to claim a white identity. Also in 2016,

I find results similar to those of others in that Republicans and conservatives are more likely to claim a white identity relative to Democrats and liberals. In 2012, economic sources of white identity are more prevalent. Those who felt like they were doing better off financially in 2011 were more likely to claim a white identity and those with lower educational attainment were more likely to claim a white identity.

I would also be amiss to ignore the influence of racial resentment here. In both 2012 and 2016, racial resentment was a commonly significant and positive factor for predicting white identity. As others have claimed about the white electorate, appealing racially moderate and racially conservatives is important if one wants to avoid backlash from whites Stephens-Dougan (2020). Further studies should explore whether out-group animosity is exclusive among those expressing large amounts of in-group favoritism, or if the relationship goes the other direction. A rigorous test is outside of the abilities of my present data but may elucidate racial resentment's relationship with my other covariates.

Overall, we see that context is important for white identity. Scholars interested in understanding what shapes and drives white political attitudes and behavior should further study the role of relative status. These effects may also be more potent in some community types than others and with differences in exposure to political rhetoric expressing racial grievances. Either way, white political identity is not just simply an attitude built from evaluations of where the country is headed, but it is bolstered by people's experiences and feelings of where they stand in their communities.

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