

The mixed evidence of a group competition theory of white political identity

Damon C. Roberts*

February 7, 2022

Abstract

*Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Political Science, University of Colorado Boulder, UCB 333, Boulder, CO 80309-0333. Damon.Roberts-1@colorado.edu.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Jennifer Wolak for her feedback on the many drafts of this manuscript. I would also like to thank Keller Center for the First Amendment for the research appointment that gave me the space to work on this project. I would also like to thank Anand Sokhey and John Griffin for their advice and suggestions in early drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank Tabitha Bonilla, Nicole Yadon, and participants and audience members of a Midwestern Political Science Association conference panel for which an earlier draft this idea was presented. I would also like to thank Tamar Malloy, Andrew Philips, Kathryn Schauer, Rachel O'Neal, and Alexander Jensen for their encouragement and feedback in the early stages of this project. All errors contained in this manuscript are ultimately mine.

1 Introduction

Those conducting post-mortem analyses of the 2016 Presidential election of Donald J. Trump, a presidential candidate thought to personify white grievance, contend that the stronger than expected presence of non-college educated Whites explains his electoral success (Griffin, Teixeira and Halpin 2017). Analyses by political scientists largely contribute Trump's success to his ability to voters who see their whiteness as a politically relevant identity where they are distinct from Americans of other racial groups (Jardina, Kalmoe and Gross 2020). For a long time, political scientists saw white political behavior and attitudes through the lens of prejudice. These analyses exclude whites who exhibit less than explicitly prejudiced views from consideration. More recently, scholars using the Tajfel and Turner (1986) social psychological framework of identity, have challenged this by arguing that some whites may see their whiteness as an identity important and relevant to politics. As a result, while some may express out-group attitudes, others may simply show preference for their in-group (Jardina 2019). The source of these in-group preferences remains somewhat unclear.

The leading argument conceptualizes those expressing a positive white political identity as those motivated by group delineation and difference (Jardina 2019) through cultural or other non-materialistic evaluations. Another interpretation of in-group affinity in the debate surrounding social identity theory see in-group affinity as the result of relative deprivation or group competition (see Huddy 2012); that is a reaction to threats to material status. Those who argue for the latter, illustrate this idea of group competition with the fact that non-college educated whites in 2016 who may be more susceptible to economic hardship and

job market competition were more supportive of Trump due to their concern about more staunch group competition. Many others disagree and argue that the 2016 electoral base for Trump really was about prejudice and discrimination among whites and that economic correlates are weak causal features (Fahey et al. 2020).

To adjudicate between these two explanations of where white identity comes from in the post-Obama or “post-racial” era of American politics, I rely on the literature of economic voting to develop a set of expectations to test this group competition hypothesis. This manuscript examines whether the current measure of white identity is motivated by group conflict and feelings of relative material deprivation among white identifiers. Given the growing body of literature on the implications of white political identity, I contend that the evidence points to a measure which captures group difference as opposed to group competition or relative deprivation. There is ample evidence in the literature that many of the precursors for a politically relevant social identity among whites is present. While group competition and relative deprivation may explain the motivation of some whites to express in-group affinity, it is much farther from a complete explanation than proponents of it admit. Using data from the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies (ANES), I use common sociotropic and egotropic measures of an individual’s attitudes towards the economy and find mixed evidence that those who feel rather pessimistic about their and the country’s relative position in the economy comprise those exhibiting a white political identity. I contend that this mixed evidence highlights the limited viability this argument has to explain the electoral behavior of White political identifiers.

2 White identity as a form of relative deprivation or group difference

There are two camps in the political behavior literature about how the public forms attitudes based on various social identities that they may hold. One camp contends that in-group affinity comes from an individual's preference for those similar to them when group differences (e.g. symbolic, cultural, physical) are salient (Huddy 2012). The second camp sees in-group affinity as the result of the desire to protect the status of one's group in the presence of competition which can be sparked by a sense of relative deprivation of material status (Huddy 2012). Social identities are not inherently political (Huddy 2001). Social groups may become a politically relevant identity by which individuals use the group as a benchmark to evaluate politics through making these groups salient in political contexts (Huddy 2001; Posner 2005).

White identity as conceptualized and operationalized as positive in-group affinity seemingly is assumed to be the result of group difference as opposed to group competition. This assumption is not unfounded. This group difference argument suggests that there must be a delineation between the groups and that it is salient (Huddy 2001; Tajfel and Turner 1986). Whites not only see race as a dimension by which Americans are divided in politics, but they also tend to rely on racial evaluations to form their attitudes (Knowles et al. 2014). Despite the extensive examination of whites' prejudiced attitudes in the literature, not all of these racial evaluations are focused on the out-group. Americans tend to engage in an ethnocentrism where discrimination arises as a result of a preference for the in-group (Kinder and Kam 2010). Many whites exhibit a sense of psychological attachment

to other whites (Schildkraut 2017) and express linked fate in political contexts (Berry, Ebner and Cornelius 2019).

Given the presence of foundational components that foster group difference evaluations, some scholars use the presence of a white identity to draw political implications such as higher support for Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election (Jardina, Kalmoe and Gross 2020), harboring more anti-democratic views (Bartels 2020), exhibit lower levels of support for non-white candidates (Petrow, Transue and Vercellotti 2018), and whites generally are more likely to feel disempowered when talking about their privilege with others (Takahashi and Jefferson 2021) and express more negative attitudes toward liberal immigration policy when faced with cultural differences but not job competition (Albertson and Kushner Gadarian 2015).

Others seem to attribute these attitudes and behaviors to group competition. They argue that the homogenization of whites' attitudes and behaviors are not the result of group differences but rather it is due to concerns about status and threats (Wetts and Willer N.d.). These authors directly tie concerns about economic or material competition and the threat of relative economic deprivation to the rise in a white political identity. For example, some provide evidence suggesting that the rise of the tea party movement during the Obama presidency is a result of whites' concerns about their long term economic status (Willer, Feinberg and Wetts 2016). Others link this rise in white political identity to support for Donald Trump in the 2016 election as a result of concern for group status (Mutz 2018). These arguments do not imply real economic hardship as a necessary cause for one to use relative deprivation as a motivator for the uptake of a white political identity, but that concern for status is sufficient.

Group competition and relative deprivation lead individuals to exhibit more in-group affinity. When experiencing anxiety about one's status and the prospect of higher competition can lead individuals to seek security by turning to those who resemble them (Bobo 1983; Huddy 2012). These whites who support Trump's messages of economic isolationism (Bunyasi 2019) and movement to less support for liberal immigration policy (Hopkins 2010) are attributed to the rise of a increasing homogenization of whites' attitudes.

The economy and individual financial hardship repeatedly come up in the arguments made by those who support the hypothesis of relative deprivation and group competition. The literature of economic voting and its challengers point to a few directions with which one might test whether in-group affinity come from group competition and feelings of relative deprivation among whites. There are sociotropic and egotropic attitudes that one may hold. In line with a story of relative deprivation, we may also see individuals who have lower levels of income, education, and who are unemployed to be more concerned about competition.

Between egotropic and sociotropic attitudes, the economic voting literature largely agrees that sociotropic attitudes are stronger predictors of political attitudes than egotropic attitudes (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981). Of these sociotropic attitudes, retrospective views tend to be less reliable once one is asked about their evaluations spanning back more than six months (Mackuen, Erikson and Stimson 2007). Many contend, however, that retrospective evaluations are quite powerful for predicting one's evaluation of an incumbent candidate (Healy and Malhotra 2013).

In line with group competition, however, egotropic attitudes are likely to be the stronger test for whether one claims a white identity. Those facing financial

hardship are likely to be more concerned about their economic future and may see more racial economic equality as a threat to the status quo where inequality gave them an advantage and where they had less competition in the job market simply because they are white (Melcher 2021). Those who observe that others like them are facing more competition and are facing relative deprivation to others are likely to see this as a threat to their future but it is not an immediate threat. Therefore, sociotropic evaluations are likely to spark white identity, but I expect it is likely to be less potent than egotropic views. Therefore, for the strongest test of the group competition theory, I focus the examination on egotropic factors.

3 Methods

The hyper-racialization of national politics seemingly took place during the Obama presidency (Tesler 2016). As Obama inherited a historically problematic recession in 2008, we may expect that the constellation of the increasing salience of race and the slow economic recovery may be the best test of whether relative deprivation predicts one's proclivity to claim a white identity. Therefore I use the 2012 ANES. As White grievance politics was present during Trump's presidential candidacy (Sides, Tesler and Vavreck 2018), I also examine the predictive power of these economic indicators in the 2016 ANES. Measuring whether an individual expresses group competition and is affecting them personally, I include a number of measures for egotropic economics.

There are a number of individual level indicators of economic performance and the probability someone might personally experience more competition. The most straightforward measure of someone's financial situation is their income. This is a

categorical variable provided by the ANES. Those who make less money are more likely to feel and have negative reactions to a change in the racial status quo.

Another indicator of actual status for an individual may also be their employment status. Those who have lost the ability not just have an income but to seek opportunities to build experience to presumably make more money will also be among those who seek external loci of where to place the blame. As a result, this increase in salience of group differences and conflict will likely increase the tendency by which someone relies on identity-based evaluations of politics. Using a question in the ANES asking about respondents' employment status, those who were employed or reported that they were students were given a value of 1. Those that were unemployed, laid off, or unable to work were coded as having a value of 0 for the employment status variable in the model.

Another way in which we might proxy for egotropic effects on converting one to claim a white identity is through their educational attainment - using the standard ordinal measure used by the ANES. Political scientists have long understood that in terms of politics, education is an important resource not just correlated with the level of familiarity and sophistication by which they evaluate politics (see Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), but it also predicts a number of forms of participation in politics (see Brady, Verba and Schlozman 1995; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). In terms of predicting white identity, we might expect those with lower levels of education are more likely to claim a white identity relative to those with higher levels of education with all else equal. Those that have lower levels of education are likely to have lower levels of social mobility, which may make changes in the racial status quo more salient - if nonwhites begin to attain higher levels of education, those individuals will be among the first to be affected

by increased labor market competition. Education may also be important here in that political sophistication may decrease the degree to which one claims a white identity. Those who are more educated may recognize the nuance in politics and the economy. I should expect that those with low levels of educational attainment are more likely to claim a white identity because they will be among the first to feel changes in material status relative to nonwhites and will be among the least likely to use less heuristical thinking (which is what identity-based thinking is) when seeking explanations as to why their status has fallen.

Scholars have argued that along racial lines, perceptions of material status loss activates a number of emotions that drive behaviors similar to what we might see in accordance with inter-group conflict (Brader and Valentino 2006). Those who are poor and reside in poor communities may seek external explanations for why they, and those like them, are doing poorly (Melcher 2021). Although it is not accurate to assume that all live in racially homogeneous communities, we know that American communities are quite segregated even after formal segregation ended (Trounstein 2018). Also implied from my review of the literature, I expect that community-based identities matter here. That is, individuals are likely to face events making racial group delineations salient more when they live in a community that is more racially heterogeneous. Using the ANES ordinal coding of respondent incomes, I coded a variable of the district's median income using the same categories. In terms of the community, I have access to the respondent's congressional district. While there are certainly more fine-grained geographic boundaries when looking at community level, the Congressional district loosens any assumptions about how large or porous the labor market competition is. For example, if the respondent lives in Prescott, Arizona and has or is looking for employment there

and I define the labor market competition to only include Prescott, Arizona, then I may miss those who come from Phoenix or any of the small towns or rural areas around Prescott. Additionally, congressional districts have policy import as well. Credit-claiming for any national politics tend to be for the district or for the state. Local level politicians tend to fly under the radar to most voters.

I also expect that one way of measuring real relative deprivation is through the inequality present in an individual's community as operationalized as a measure of the percent of those in their community below poverty - in the case of this model, the estimate provided by the American Community survey by district. That is, communities with high levels of poverty should make the scarcity of resources salient. As a result, group competition should also be a greater concern (Brader and Valentino 2006).

In the models, I include a number of relevant controls. The first control that appears important to include here would be a measure of community descriptors. My theory and the discussion of my hypotheses discuss the importance of community identity to political evaluations (Lyons and Utych 2021). These differences in community type tend to be along rural and non-rural differences (Cramer 2016). From this literature, we should expect that those living in poor rural communities will likely express resentment toward those residing in non-rural communities (Cramer 2016). My theory also implies that the degree to which one's egotrophic indicators matter are dependent on how much they are in competition with those of other racial groups for where white individuals place their blame. To absorb some of this variation that may be explained by community-type identities rather than racial identities, I calculated a dichotomous measure of rurality for the congressional district each respondent lives in. This was determined by merely coding

congressional districts that are more than 50 percent as 1 and 0 for those that where rurality counts as the minority community type in the district. I also include a few sociological controls. There tend to be particular characteristics associated more with white identification, such as one's age and gender (see Jardina 2019, Chapter 2).

Due to the hierarchical structure of these data, I use a multi-level model to examine both the contextual and attitudinal factors that may predict one's propensity to express in-group affinity towards other whites. As there may be endogeneity present in the model coming from reverse causality, taking advantage of the hierarchical nature of the data should help with reducing these threats to causal identification by a least squares regression.

To summarize expectations drawn above, if the group competition hypothesis explains white political identity, we should expect from these models that a number of egotropic indicators of economic status and whether one lives near those who may be facing higher levels of material competition with other racial groups should prove to be significant and substantive predictors of responses indicating affinity to other whites. It is important to note that a lack of evidence supporting these claims does not necessarily indicate support for the non-materialistic origin story for white political identity. Sufficient evidence of support for that hypothesis requires a different set of models not tested here. These models simply test whether the group competition hypothesis has validity on its own.

4 Discussion

5 Conclusion

References

- Albertson, Bethany and Shana Kushner Gadarian. 2015. *Anxious Politics: Democratic Citizenship in a Threatening World*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Bartels, Larry M. 2020. "Ethnic antagonism erodes Republicans' commitment to democracy." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 117(37):22752–22759.
- Berry, Justin A., David Ebner and Michelle Cornelius. 2019. "White identity politics: linked fate and political participation." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 0(0):1–19.
- Bobo, Lawrence. 1983. "Whites' opposition to busing: Symbolic racism or realistic group conflict?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45(6):1196–1210.
- Brader, Ted and Nicholas A. Valentino. 2006. Identities, interests, and emotions: Symbolic vs. material wellsprings of fear, anger, and enthusiasm. In *The affect effect: Dynamics of emotion in political thinking and behavior*, ed. Russel W. Neuman, George E. Marcus, Ann N. Crigler and Michael B. MacKuen. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press pp. 180–201.
- Brady, Henry E, Sidney Verba and Kay Lehman Schlozman. 1995. "Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation." *American Political Science Review* 89(2).
- Bunyasi, Tehama Lopez. 2019. "The Role of Whiteness in the 2016 Presidential Primaries." *Perspectives on Politics* 17(3):679–698.

- Cramer, Katherine J. 2016. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Delli Carpini, Michael X and Scott Keeter. 1996. *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Fahey, James J., Tracy L. Johns, J. Robyn Goodman, Jon D. Morris and Michael J. Scicchitano. 2020. "Emotional Voting, Racial Animus and Economic Anxiety in the 2016 Presidential Election." *American Review of Politics* 37(2):29 – 47.
- Griffin, Rob, Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin. 2017. "Voter Trends in 2016: A Final Examination.". [Online; posted 1-November-2017].
URL: <https://americanprogress.org/article/voter-trends-in-2016/>
- Healy, Andrew and Neil Malhotra. 2013. "Retrospective voting reconsidered." *Annual Review of Political Science* 16:285–306.
- Hopkins, Daniel J. 2010. "Politicized places: Explaining where and when immigrants provoke local opposition." *American Political Science Review* 104(1):40–60.
- Huddy, Leonie. 2001. "From social to political identity: A critical examination of social identity theory." *Political Psychology* 22(1):127–156.
- Huddy, Leonie. 2012. *From Group Identity to Political Cohesion and Commitment*. In *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. Leonie Huddy. Oxford University Press chapter Chapter 23, pp. 737–773.
- Jardina, Ashley. 2019. *White Identity Politics*. Cambridge University Press.

- Jardina, Ashley, Nathan Kalmoe and Kimberly Gross. 2020. "Disavowing White Identity: How Social Disgust can Change Social Identities." *Political Psychology* 0(0):1–18.
- Kinder, Donald R. and Cindy D. Kam. 2010. *Us Against Them: Ethnocentric Foundations of American Opinion*. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
- Kinder, Donald R. and Roderick D. Kiewiet. 1981. "Sociotropic Politics : The American Case." *Cambridge University Press* 11(2):129–161.
- Knowles, Eric D., Brian S. Lowery, Rosalind M. Chow and Miguel M. Unzueta. 2014. "Deny, Distance, or Dismantle? How White Americans Manage a Privileged Identity." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 9(6):594–609.
- Lewis-Beck, Michael S, William G. Jacoby, Helmut Norpoth and Herbert F. Weisberg. 2008. *The American Voter Revisited*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.
- Lyons, Jeffrey and Stephen M Utych. 2021. "You ' re Not From Here !: The Consequences of Urban and Rural Identities." *Political Behavior* (0123456789).
- Mackuen, Michael B, Robert S Erikson and James A Stimson. 2007. "Peasants or Bankers? The American Electorate and the U.S. Economy." *American Political Science Review* 86(3):597–611.
- Melcher, Cody R. 2021. "Economic Self - Interest and Americans ' Redistributive , Class , and Racial Attitudes : The Case of Economic Insecurity." *Political Behavior* .

- Mutz, Diana C. 2018. "Status threat, not economic hardship, explains the 2016 presidential vote." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* .
- Petrow, Gregory A., John E. Transue and Timothy Vercellotti. 2018. "Do White In-group Processes Matter, Too? White Racial Identity and Support for Black Political Candidates." *Political Behavior* 40(1):197–222.
- Posner, Daniel N. 2005. *Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Schildkraut, Deborah J. 2017. "White attitudes about descriptive representation in the US: the roles of identity, discrimination, and linked fate." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 5(1):84–106.
- Sides, John, Michael Tesler and Lynn Vavreck. 2018. *Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tajfel, Henri and John C Turner. 1986. "The social identity theory of intergroup behavior." *Psychology of intergroup relations* 2:7–24.
- Takahashi, Koji J and Hakeem J. Jefferson. 2021. "When the Powerful Feel Voiceless: White Identity and Feelings of Racial Voicelessness." *PsyArXiv Preprints* .
- Tesler, Michael. 2016. *Post-Racial or Most-Racial?: Race and Politics In The Obama Era*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Trounstine, Jessica. 2018. *Segregation by design: Local politics and inequality in American cities*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E. Brady. 1995. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wetts, Rachel and Robb Willer. N.d. . Forthcoming.

Willer, Robb, Matthew Feinberg and Rachel Wetts. 2016. “Threats to Racial Status Promote Tea Party Support Among White Americans.” *SSRN Electronic Journal* (416).