

1 Condensed Argument

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).

Here, I argue that there are indeed differences between the utility of perceived

status loss and actual status loss among those building a white identity. As the political psychology literature demonstrates, the salience of information used in political decision-making is quite significant in predicting the resulting behaviors (Zaller and Feldman 1992; Zaller 1992). This is not just about how people make decisions about for whom one should vote for, salience also has an important racial component as well. For example, those who notice a growing number of nonwhites in their community (rather or not there is actually a discernable demographic shift) are much more likely to become conservative on policies often associated with the helping the urban poor (Enos 2017), who are stereotyped as Black (Gilens 1999; Winter 2008). Taken together, the perceptions of status loss have both been given a lot of attention in the literature on white political attitudes, but that it also appears to be important.

It is much less clear to what extent do actual economic and demographic shifts power individuals taking up their white identity. From the literature on social identity theory, we should expect that this should be a clear driver of ones willingness to accept their membership in a group and to behave like others (Huddy 2001, 2012). Afterall, it might be reasonable to assume that perceptions of status loss begin to take hold before actual status loss. This might mean that some of the variation in which whites claim a white identity can partially be explained by differences between those who are relatively poor and are in racial minority-majority communities. In other words, those where racial equality is gaining ground where there is relatively more equality between the material status of whites and nonwhites, their willingness to claim a white identity may be not just more likely but also is likely to be much more important relative to those who just simply feel relatively disadvantaged but still enjoy privilege.

2 Testing this Argument

To test this, I use data collected by the American National Election Study and the American Community Survey. I use data from both 2012 and 2016 given a number of important political events between those years that were tied to U.S. race relations. In 2012, the Tea Party wing of the GOP were successfully "primarying" more ideologically moderate incumbents using a base of white voters who felt that the country were putting whites behind non-whites (Willer, Feinberg and Wetts 2016). The post-racial society that many Democrats felt Americans were transitioning into faced severe backlash during the Obama presidency (Tesler 2016). By the time that the 2016 Presidential Election was underway, many whites who perceived they were at a disadvantage elected Donald Trump. Although on its face it may appear that decreases in the willingness of survey respondents to claim white identity in 2016 might be a result of whites feeling heard by a candidate who relied on highly racialized rhetoric, this was not the case (Jardina, Kalmoe and Gross 2020). Looking at the willingness of whites to claim a white identity between 2012 and 2016 should help with comparing the ways in which whites' perceptions of being white as an identity changed.

There are not too many ways to measure one's actual material status. To do this, I calculate a relative income measure that is calculated by subtracting a survey respondent's recorded income quartile (see the ANES codebook for more information) from their congressional district's median income quartile (using the same ANES scale).

Perceptions of status loss are a bit more complicated. People may express their feelings of material status in a number of different ways. Using a variety of alternative questions about one's perceptions of financial standing, I use a number of alternative model specifications to account for the number of reasonable operationalizations for perceived material status. Since the literature argues that white identity, as a concept,

is a manifestation of whites feelings of material loss, a measure that captures whether someone feels that compared to the past, their financial standing was better off before than it is now. More prospective evaluations are a bit more fraught due to that measure relying on the assumption that the only evaluation of their financial future is on continued political changes surrounding race - this would appear to be particularly more difficult to make claims about in 2016 with the election of a candidate who quite explicitly spoke to whites' complaints. Other measures such as feeling thermometers and class measures are also somewhat problematic in that people are quite unlikely to think of themselves as anything but the middle class. These class measures are also problematic in that not all of them really get at people's evaluations of where they stand, feeling thermometer measures better capture one's valenced affect toward other class strata.

I also include a number of important contextual and individual level controls to reduce some possible alternative explanations. One possible important alternative predictor of white identity might be that conservatives are just inherently more critical of the efforts toward racial equality that Democrats and liberals have been advocating for. Another key alternative explanation here is that racial resentment, or out-group animous, is what drives white identity. To include this alternative explanation in my model, I use the standard battery of ANES questions used for racial resentment originally developed by Kinder and Sanders 1996. The discussion above also implied that there are differences between those living in rural and urban communities - even in the face of partisanship. I calculate a dichotomous measure of whether an individual lived in a rural or urban congressional district by assigning the value of 1 to the variable the value of 1 if they lived in a district that is considered to be 50% or more rural at the time of the survey. In 2016, the likelihood of claiming a white identity decreased for those disgusted by Trump (Jardina, Kalmoe and Gross 2020) - a control I include

in the 2016 model to account for this. I also include the gini coefficient as a control to account for districts where there is likely to be a lot of heterogeneity relative income quartiles due to high inequality in their congressional district. As an alternative to gini, since the coefficient is likely to be inflated due to a few wealthy residents, I also include a control for the percent of residents in a district below poverty.

In my primary model, I use a multi-level modeling approach to deal with the inherent clustering of my standard errors based on Congressional district, which breaks a traditional linear regression assumption of independent errors. The results in **Table 1** demonstrate that there were indeed differences in what drives the willingness of someone to claim a white identity. The 2012 model shows that racial resentment is a strong predictor of white identity. It is not only statistically significant, but it increases the likelihood of someone claiming a white identity by almost 0.35 points, a magnitude much higher than any of the other observed effects among the predictors. The magnitude of these effects also remain in 2016 with a coefficient around 0.32. In 2016, those with a lower relative income were more likely to claim a white identity by about 0.01 points and meets conventional levels of statistical significance. The predictive power of relative income in 2012, however, does not meet conventional levels of statistical significance but the effect goes in the same direction. Those with incomes lower than the median of those living around them, are more likely to claim a white identity. In 2012, those living in districts with lower levels of poverty were more likely to claim a white identity. While these results meet conventional levels of statistical significance, the effect sizes are the lowest among the statistically significant predictors. Also of note, in 2016 party identification and ideology are both significant predictors of whether someone claims a white identity. In the direction one would expect given Trump's appeals to white identity and an America that needs to be made "great again", Republicans and conservatives were more likely to claim a white identity in the face of

contextual factors. Ideology in 2012 was also a strong predictor but partisanship was a much weaker predictor.

In an attempt to determine whether contextual variables or more sociotropic and attitudinal factors drive white identity, there is some mixed support that one's actual financial status matters for predicting white identity. In 2012, those living in poorer areas were more supportive of white identity and in 2016 those with a lower income relative to others in their congressional district predicted white identity well. Pretty consistently, however, racial resentment towards Black Americans and ideology were powerful predictors of whether someone claimed a white identity or not. While it remains to be seen what more robust tests of the alternative explanations discussed above tell us about the influence of rural identity and the alternative sociotropic variables representing perceived status loss, it appears among the measures of economic status loss, actual status loss has a more significant impact as a predictor of white identity.

Table 1: Effects of actual and perceived material status loss on predicting adopting a white identity

	White Identity Importance	
	2012	2016
Relative Income	-0.005 (0.003)	-0.011* (0.004)
Retrospective - Better Off	0.021 (0.021)	-0.009 (0.030)
Racial Resentment	0.349* (0.056)	0.323* (0.058)
Percent of District White	0.129 (0.085)	0.161 (0.100)
Rurality	0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)
Gini Coefficient	0.947 (0.966)	1.422 (1.194)
Percent Below Poverty	-0.007* (0.003)	-0.001 (0.008)
Party Identification	-0.014 (0.017)	0.046* (0.017)
Ideology	0.056* (0.024)	0.003* (0.001)
Disgust - Trump		-0.071* (0.024)
Constant	2.180* (0.529)	2.059* (0.632)
Num. groups: District	407	395
Variance: District(Intercept)	0.02	0.02
Variance: Residual	1.61	1.72
N	2,679	2,286
Log Likelihood	-4,476.254	-3,901.034
AIC	8,976.507	7,828.068
BIC	9,047.226	7,902.617

Source: 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies.

Coefficients from regression with random intercepts by congressional district.

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$

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