Material Status and White Political Identity

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May 20, 2021

Abstract

Does relative actual or perceived material status explain a white individual's propensity to claim a white identity? Existing literature on white political identity argues 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. I argue that actual status and perceived status are rooted in evaluations of an individual's position to members of other racial groups, and that the status of others around them contributes to constructing a white identity. Using data from the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies, I find partial support that economic realities and perceptions can contribute to white identity. The analysis also finds support that in both 2012 and 2016 racial resentment contributed to white identity. In 2016, I observe that partisanship is a strong predictor of white identity suggesting the mediating role of political factors mediating the effects of economic indicators in predicting white identity.

Prepared for a presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Political Science Association, April, 2021

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Acknowledgements: First and foremost, I want to thank Jennifer Wolak for her continued advice, patience, and for pushing me to make this project substantially better. I would also like to thank Kathryn Schauer, Rachel O'Neal, Andrew McLeer, Alexander L. Jensen, Komal Kaur, Tamar Malloy, and Andrew Q. Philips for their helpful advice and comments on my previous drafts. I would also like to thank Anand E. Sokhey and the Keller Center for the First Amendment at the University of Colorado Boulder for the research appointment that allowed me the time and space to make this project happen.

1 Introduction

Several 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 animus (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. Are whites who claim white identity only those who are experiencing actual material losses, or are they also those who perceive or anticipate material loss based on what is happening to other whites around them? One way to sort this out might be to look at one's context (Hornsey 2008). Though some argue that political attitudes are shaped by national trends and events (Hopkins 2018), people's local context has quite a substantial 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 identi-

ties tied to their community type, and these identities shape political attitudes (Lyons and Utych 2021). Differences in perceived and actual status loss have not been studied despite much of the literature on politically relevant identities seem to imply that these may have distinct effects on identity salience and resulting identity-based attitudes and behaviors and behaviors (Morrison, Fast and Ybarra 2009; Huddy 2012). Explanations focusing only on those who are actually faced with tangible loss in material status would fail to recognize well-to-do whites who claim a white identity.

I argue that high white identifiers must not only be those actually experiencing material status loss but may also be those who percieve or anticipate material status loss (because they are white) as well. Those who have relatively low material status are likely to seek out systematic explanations as to why they are doing poorly. Those who perceive relatively low status or anticipate it may also behave in a way to preemptively protect their status and their co-racials. Particularly in a racialized political environment, racial differences are a popular way to evaluate status in the United States. I argue that those not relatively low in material status themselves may anticipate a status loss because they either see those like them experiencing this loss or perceive that they are doing worse simply because group inequality is decreasing with time.

Using the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies and congressional district demographic data from the American Community Survey (ACS), I test whether observing low relative material status among other whites around you or actualized low material status 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 mixed results for my argument. In some years, economic factors matter more than others for white identity. Consistent results show, however, that educational attainment among whites predicts white identity

in both years, evaluations of the nation's economy relative to the past year, age of the respondent, and, unsurprisingly given previous work on the topic of economic threat and racialized political attitudes, racial resentment matter for predicting whether someone claims a white identity.

2 White identity and material status loss

At the center of social identity theory, there are clear delineations between us and them (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Howard 2000). In terms of race, with established group boundaries, evaluations of deservingness of resources often come into play when resources are considered to be scarce (Huddy 2001, 2012; Bobo 1983). Despite people often claiming a deracialized politics (see Stephens-Dougan 2020), 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 (see Kinder and Kam 2010; Winter 2008).

Overall, the literature studying white political attitudes and behavior has primarily focused on 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 animus 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 whites' 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 who claim a white identity, social welfare policies that do not benefit other racial groups more than whites tend to be more popular (Jardina 2019). 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), the precise mechanism that drives white identity is unclear.

A number of scholars argue that white identity is driven by feelings of relative loss of status (Jardina 2019; Wong and Cho 2005; Bunyasi 2019). Direct tests of these claims are somewhat sparse. Bunyasi (2019) for example demonstrates that whites supporting Trump, who was popular among white identifiers (see Jardina, Kalmoe and Gross 2020), were more likely to feel that the economy was in decline. The purpose of this previous

work, did not lend itself to directly testing the linkages between white identity and material status loss.

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. Social categorization theory informs group comparisons. From this literature, that built upon Tajfel's work, scholars argued that people evaluate their status among those around them (see Hornsey 2008). Those making less money than those around them are likely to seek comparisons between them and those like them as a way to explain challenges they face as systematic (Hornsey 2008). 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 are 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 is from 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 stereotypes 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 of status loss more potently than those not directly impacted by it.

Just because someone does not actually low relative material 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 for whites. Although the individual may not experience low relative status themselves, those presented with other whites in the community doing poorly economically is likely to increase their awareness that claims of whites "losing out" may seem plausible. 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 for the individual if the slippage of the group continues. In other words, just because those around the individual have lost out, it does not mean they are not next if the 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. Outside of the United States, scholars have shown that elite rhetoric expressing differences in ethnic groups drive the

salience of ethnic identity and, as a result, leads to in-group and out-group behaviors and attitudes (Posner 2005). In the United States, we know that rhetoric describing differences between racial groups is quite pervasive (Winter 2008). As a result, even if one has not faced or have not yet been exposed to those faced with status loss, whites exposed to messages that indicate a change in the racial status quo are likely to respond in kind; that is, in a way where racial social identities have been activated. We know that political messaging about race weighs heavy on the minds of white voters by shaping attitudes and behaviors (see Sides, Tesler and Vavreck 2018; Tesler 2016; Gilens 1999). 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 actualized and low material status for an individual. Those who are doing poorly may seek systematic rationales as to why they are doing poorly. Doing so protects one's self-esteem (Tajfel and Turner 1986). The other source of white identity can come from a number of different places but is often rooted in the perception of how others around them are doing. Those that see those around them doing poorly are likely to seek explanations in anticipation due to the heuristical 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 is 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.

Whites have long enjoyed economic privilege. In fact, many definitions of who was white was tied to class. In the 19^{th} century, Europeans considered to come from poor countries were often excluded from definitions of whiteness (Painter 2010). Not until the American Civil War were the Irish in the South considered to be white (Painter 2010). This expansion was partly explained by the preoccupation of Southerners to consider Blacks as inferior. Before the war was over, it was easy to claim differences in treatment and access was due to racial differences. With emancipation, race was protected, and an expansion of who was considered to be higher in the social hierarchy was changed to ensure that freedmen still had fewer rights than anyone else (Painter 2010).

With race and economics conflated with one another in American politics (Gilens 1999), decreasing income disparities among Blacks and whites[1] present themselves as a material threat to whites. In other words, whites have long associated status, morality, and deservingness with economic advantages they have over Black Americans (Winter 2008). With narrowing economic advantages, this delineation between whites and Blacks poses a tangible manifestation in the changing status quo. Recent research also argues that those feeling economically insecure are more likely to have more negative racial attitudes (Melcher 2021). Electorally, whites are sensitive to signals of a change in the racial status quo (Stephens-Dougan 2020) and discussions of equality often activates racially-based identity (Takahashi and Jefferson 2021). As a result, whites who

[1] pewresearch.org

are experiencing or are perceiving the narrowing in economic status may see that the standing whites have in society as narrowing, which activates white identity. Therefore, evaluations of economic status loss may be what activates the actual and perceived mechanisms of status loss that I argue contribute to white identity.

3 Methods

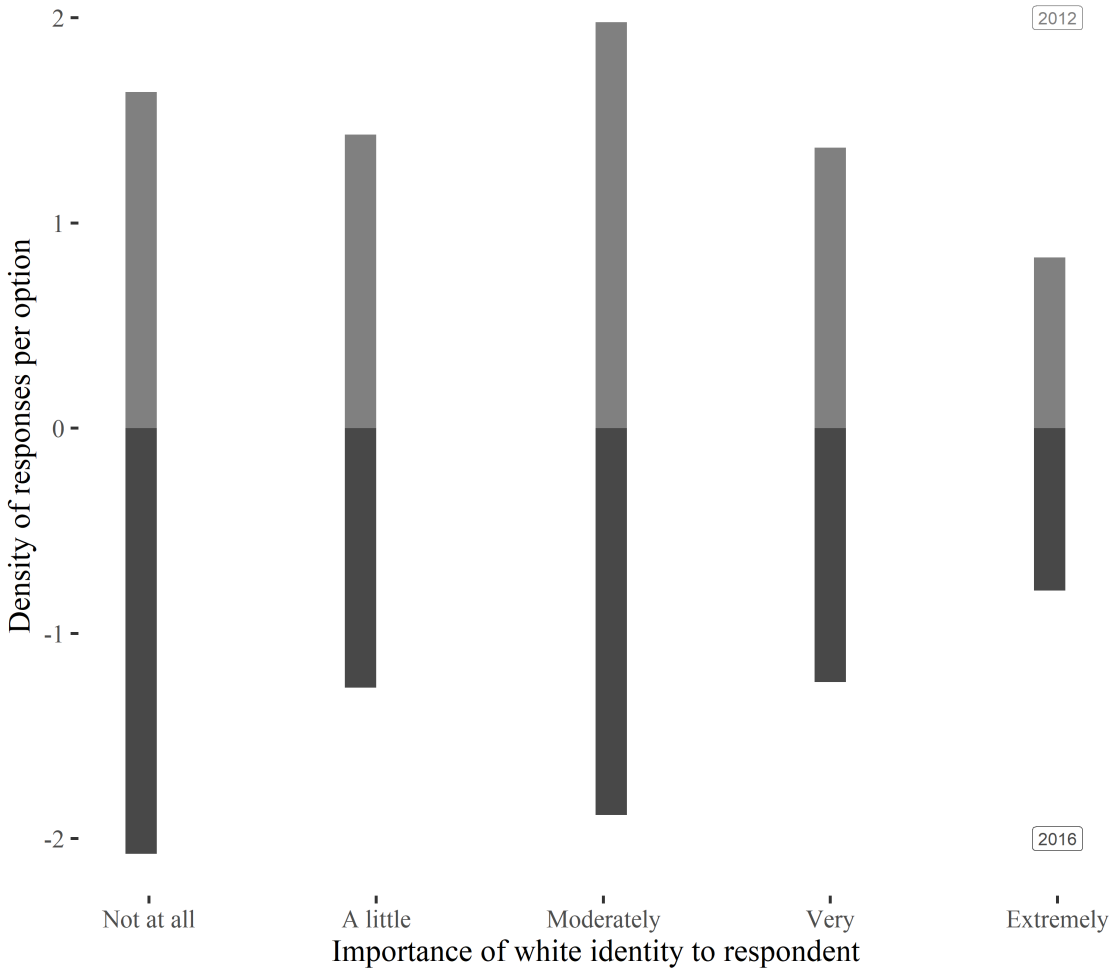
3.1 Hypotheses and Measures

I model my theory using data from the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Study and the American Community Survey[2]. While the measure proposed by Jardina (2019) is relatively new and has only been included in ANES 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. Definitions of whiteness have changed dramatically over time (Painter 2010). Contemporary constructions of "whiteness," while still blurry, have moved past biological and taxonomic definitions to definitions that are rooted more in one's personal narrative of who they are (Rile Hayward 2013; Painter 2010; Helms and Carter 1990). Although people's identity can be quite context-dependent, we are interested in studying white identity when primed by politics. Allowing respondents to claim their whiteness while also in the context of a survey about attitudes on politics, we should expect that measures of whiteness and the importance of whiteness should not be too far afield from that of making decisions or forming evaluations of politics. Additionally, 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. Fig-

[2] www.data.census.gov

ure 1 presents the count of responses per category for both the 2012 and 2016 samples [3]. The figure shows that white identity was higher in 2012 than in 2016.

Figure 1. Density of responses to white identity importance



Data Source: 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies.
Note: Density of responses flipped about y-axis.

As my theory would predict, actual relative status should be an important classification of factors that may have significant impacts on my ability to predict white identity. The most straightforward measure of someone's material status is their income. This

[3]Table of descriptive statistics for both samples can be found in Appendix A. We see that between 2012 and 2016, more respondents in 2012 said that being white was important to them relative to 2016.

is a categorical variable provided by the ANES. Another possible way to measure this would be to look at the relative income one has. 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 (Trounstine 2018). Also, from my theory, I expect that community-based identities matter here. That is, individuals are likely to compare their material status to those in their community and will seek to explain why other whites in their community might be worse-off. As a result, one's relative income represents not only a respondent's material status but also their material status relative to those around them. Using the ANES ordinal coding of respondent incomes, I coded a variable of the district's median income using the same categories. The relative income measure was then calculated by taking the difference between the respondents' reported income (the category) in the ANES from the categorized median income for the district in which the respondent resides. For the relative income measure, negative values represent those with incomes lower than the median income in the district, and positive values represent those with incomes higher than the median income in their respective district. For the relative income measure to their Black neighbors, the measure was calculated the same way but based on the median income of Black residents for the respondents' congressional district. Models with measures of respondent income relative to everyone in the district[4] and relative

[4]See Table 4

income to their Black neighbors[5] are located in Appendix B.

Another way in which we might measure actual status is through their educational attainment - using the standard ordinal measure used by the ANES. Political scientists know 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), but it also predicts a number of forms of participation in politics (see Brady, Verba and Schlozman 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 do better economically, those individuals will be among the first to lose their status in the social hierarchy. 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.

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 feel the effects of a changing racial landscape. As a result, this increase in salience of group differences and conflict will likely increase the tendency by which someone

[5] See Table 5

relies on identity-based evaluations of politics. Scholars have also argued that policies concerned with government assistance for the unemployed often are considered to be disproportionately helpful to Black Americans (Gilens 1999). Those who are unemployed and are likely on the same programs assumed by whites to be a common source of income for Black Americans may see a smaller material gap between themselves and the average Black American. This decreased gap should drive identity-based attitudes. 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.

The theory and demographic composition of white identifiers indicate that those claiming the identity are not all experiencing economic threat themselves. That is, one does not have to be a poor, uneducated, or unemployed white individual to feel that being white is important to who they are. Anticipated status loss may drive white identity as well for an individual. To test this, I also use a number of plausible indicators for perceived and anticipatory status loss. We know from my theory that location-based identities are important to political attitudes and behavior, too (Lyons and Utych 2021). As a result, we may see those living in communities who share the same race as an individual to be the most like them among other whites. This would then indicate that noticing status loss among whites living in their community will activate the saliency of status threat.

An indicator of this perceived or anticipatory mechanism driving white identity may be measured by the inequality present in their 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, inter-group conflict should also be a concern (Brader and Valentino 2006). Although a respondent may not be experiencing status loss themselves, high poverty presents itself as an external manifestation of potential status loss in the future. Classic social identity theory does not stipulate that status threats must be actual threat (Tajfel and Turner 1986).

Another source we might anticipate perceived status loss to manifest is through feelings of fairness. Feelings of being left out and a sentiment expressing an inability to get ahead may signal feelings of helplessness against changing contexts where racial equality is increasing. Feelings of unfairness and being left out is associated with increased levels of identity-based evaluations (Tyler and Dawes 2008). As a result, I expect that those who feel like they are unable to get ahead are more likely to respond that white identity is important to who they are. This sentiment of an inability to get ahead should also be associated with my predictions about why education can predict white identity - they, however, explain a different mechanism. The 2016 ANES asks a question about whether they feel that it is harder for them to get ahead. This measure, unfortunately, was not included in the 2012 ANES and was not included in the 2012 analyses [6]. Those that responded that there was no chance to get ahead or strongly disagreed with the

[6] Although there is a question in 2012 and 2016 that asks respondents the degree to which one believes society should ensure there is equal opportunity, a comparison between the preferred measure of fairness that was only included in 2016, and the equal opportunity measure demonstrates they are measuring two different concepts. If the equal opportunity and fairness measures capture the same latent concept, we should expect respondents to respond in similar ways to the two questions, and a resulting Pearson's r correlation should be close to a point estimate of 1. The Pearson's r of -0.02 demonstrates these two measures are quite different. Given that this is a question about the degree to which a respondent feels that the system is fair, the measure getting at their perceptions of opportunities for them to get ahead is better aligned with the concept intended to be measured here. A comparison of a 2016 model with the measure and one without the measure did not lead to substantive differences in the conclusions I make later in the paper, nor did it lead to dramatically different BIC scores in a table not included in the present manuscript.

statement about equal opportunity were coded with a value of 1 and a value of 5 if there was a great amount of opportunity to do so.

I also include measures of pocketbook and sociotropic economic voting to explain the mechanism of perceived or anticipatory status loss, respectively. 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 impacted 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. The ANES asks respondents about the degree to which they think the economy or their personal finances are better or worse compared to the previous year and whether the economy or their personal finances will be better a year from now. Those that were the most negative prospective or retrospective evaluations for their own pocketbook or for national trends received a value of 1 and a value of 5 for those most positive for each of the four measures.

I also include an indicator that might capture the degree to which one may experience perceived status loss. Income inequality is a long-term factor that demonstrates the heterogeneity in incomes. Asking respondents about the degree to which they feel

that income inequality is problematic when mediated by partisanship and racial attitudes may represent the degree to which people feel that there is fairness. When people feel that things are stacked against them and that there is not much fairness, they often seek external explanations tied to their identity (Tyler and Dawes 2008). If they feel that things are unfair and use identity as a heuristic to evaluate what is causing this unfairness, individuals will likely express more positive sentiments to their in-group. Therefore, I expect that those who feel that inequality has become worse in the past 20 years are more likely to be white identifiers. This is measured by an ANES question asking whether respondents feel that income inequality has gotten much larger or much smaller over time. I coded the respondents' responses as 1 for those who feel that it has gotten much smaller and 5 for those who feel it has gotten much larger.

An alternative explanation important to this story is the role of elite rhetoric. As my theory discusses, it may be the case that elite rhetoric is more important at driving the salience and use of identity than actual status loss or perceived status loss. In the 2016 Presidential election, those experiencing material status loss were the most likely to support Trump for his rhetoric blaming external actors, like China, for Americans' economic hardship (2018). If respondents receive more messaging about white grievances, we should expect that racial differences, the inter-group conflict, and their racial identity should be more salient. Unfortunately, the ANES has no direct measure of how much white respondents were exposed to racialized elite rhetoric. As a proxy, however, I use a measure of how many times per week respondents watch the news. While this is indirect and any exposure to this elite rhetoric may be moderated by partisanship (see Taber and Lodge 2013; Licari 2020).

3.2 Results

With these expectations established about my particular indicators of these separate mechanisms, I ran a multi-level model for both samples where I varied the intercepts based on which congressional district the respondent lived in. I use a multi-level model here due to the both personal and contextual level indicators of actual and perceived I hypothesized to have effects on predicting respondent white identity. The assumption used in most common forms of regression estimation is that my errors are independent from one another. Here, it is important to relax this assumption, given that my theory explicitly states that observations are context-dependent. That is, white respondents facing the same contextual mechanisms that I predict should drive up white identity breaks the independence assumption of regular Ordinary Least Squares Estimation. One approach is to use standard clustered errors (Primo, Jacobsmeier and Milyo 2007; Jackson 2020). Given the sampling technique of the ANES, however, I do not have the same number of observations for congressional districts. Therefore, using random effects on the intercept allows for calculations of the uncertainty of the unexplained variance of my dependent variable based on the district. Congressional District level (the second, or the context, level) while also allowing for group-specific differences not explained by my predictor parameters nor the model's error (Steenbergen and Jones 2002).

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 characteristics. 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). 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. From the literature, there is also a debate attempting to dissect whether white identity is entirely separate from out-group attitudes (Roberts, Engelhardt and Utych 2021). While it is somewhat unclear if racial animus drives white identity, it is certainly still an important factor to control for here given the extensive work exploring the relationship between economic threat and race (see Bartels 2020). It is quite clear that racial resentment will drive white identity. The presence of racial animous indicates a recognition of the salience of race to some extent (see Kinder and Kam 2010). What is important to the model, since the literature on white policial identity seeks to distinguish itself from racial resentment, to consider whether these economic indicators of actual and percieved status loss are mediated by out-group animous as opposed to the more in-group oriented conceptualization of white identity.

I also include a number of sociological and political variables here too. There tend to be particular characteristics associated more with white identification, such as one's age and gender (see Jardina 2019, Chapter 2). I also include relevant political factors in the model as well. From 2012 to 2016, we saw a number of white voters go from supporting Obama to later voting for Trump. An important explanation of this behavior is concerns about whether Obama was beholden to Black interests and will disrupt the racial status quo (Stephens-Dougan 2020). White identifiers tended to be Republican after Obama's presidency due primarily to the highly racialized political landscape af-

ter 2008 (Tesler 2016). Therefore, I include Partisanship and Ideology in the model - coded as the standard 7-point measure of ideology and partisanship where extremely liberal and strong Democratic respondents were given values of 1, respectively, and a value of 7 if they considered themselves as being strong conservatives and strong Republicans, respectively. Although scholars have debated the validity of claims about whether demographic changes make threat salient (see Hutchings and Valentino 2004), the composition of one's community is likely to matter for the salience of racial identity (Enos 2017). To account for this, I include a measure from the ACS accounting for the percentage of white residents in the respondent's Congressional District. The results of this model are presented in Table 1[7].

In the table, we see a number of interesting results. Looking at the model for 2012, it suggests that that two of the three indicators of actual status loss have statistically significant effects. The model demonstrates that those with lower levels of education are 0.107 units more likely to claim a white identity relative to those with higher levels of education. We also see in the table that unemployed respondents are 0.147 units more likely to claim a white identity relative to employed respondents, as well; these effects are also meet conventional levels of statistical significance.

In terms of my hypotheses about perceived or anticipatory status loss driving white identity, the results are much weaker. I observe that two of the indicators reach con-

[7]Both relative income measures not included in the model here. Pearson's correlation between relative income to Black neighbors and income is about 0.95 in 2012 and 0.93 in 2016 while relative income. Pearson's correlation between relative income to all neighbors and income is 0.95 in 2012 and 0.94 in 2016. Further analysis demonstrated a relatively low variance in the categorical measures of median income for congressional districts used to calulate the relative income measures of 2.5 in 2012 and 2.7 of 23 possible categories. With this low variance in the measure used to calculate the relative income measures and the similarity between both reatlive income measures and income, including a simple measure of income seemed reasonable for the analysis due to concerns about the underlying effects stemming from the congressional district median income measure. Appendix B demonstrates using these relative status measures led to no differences in substantive conclusions demonstrating a robustness of my income point estimates.

Table 1: Effects of actual and percieved material status loss on predicting white identity adoption

	White Identity Importance	
	2012	2016
Income	0.002	−0.009*
	(0.003)	(0.004)
Education	−0.107*	−0.006
	(0.024)	(0.004)
Employment Status	−0.147*	−0.152*
	(0.057)	(0.072)
% below poverty	−0.009*	−0.002
	(0.003)	(0.007)
Opportunity to get ahead		0.030
		(0.029)
Retrospective - better off	0.070*	0.039
	(0.024)	(0.033)
Prospective - better off	−0.007	−0.030
	(0.032)	(0.036)
Economy Better - Past	−0.060*	−0.114*
	(0.030)	(0.031)
Economy Better - Future	0.041	0.121*
	(0.033)	(0.033)
Get ahead - Income Inequality	−0.018	−0.050
	(0.029)	(0.030)
Frequency of news consumption	−0.013	−0.019
	(0.010)	(0.015)
Rural	0.106	0.149
	(0.083)	(0.102)
Racial Resentment	0.281*	0.302*
	(0.057)	(0.055)
Age	0.007*	0.007*
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Female	0.056	0.077
	(0.050)	(0.054)
% White	−0.0002	−0.002
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Party Identification	−0.003	0.050*
	(0.017)	(0.014)
Ideology	0.022	0.002*
	(0.024)	(0.001)
Constant	2.987*	2.743*
	(0.259)	(0.331)
Num. groups: District	423	418
Variance: District(Intercept)	0.00	0.03
Variance: Residual	1.59	1.63
N	2,685	2,368
Log Likelihood	−4,485.413	−4,010.090
AIC	9,010.825	8,062.179
BIC	9,128.734	8,183.345

Source: 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies.
Coefficients from regression with random intercepts by congressional district.
Standard errors in parentheses.
* $p < 0.05$

ventional levels of statistical significance that also goes in the hypothesized direction. Those who feel that they had done better financially in the past year than the current year were 0.070 units more likely to claim a white identity relative to those who felt more positive about their economic status the previous year. I also observe that those who perceive the country's economy as doing worse in 2011 relative to 2012 were 0.060 units more likely to claim a white identity. The other perceived or anticipatory status loss indicator that has significant effects in 2012 is the percent of the congressional district that is impoverished. For this indicator, we see that those living in Districts with more poverty are 0.009 units less likely to claim a white identity than those with less poverty. This goes against my hypothesis [8]. The 2012 model also tells us that racial resentment was a significant predictor of white identity as well high racial identifiers being 0.281 units more likely to claim a white identity relative to those scoring lower on the racial resentment scale. Those who are older than the average respondent are also more likely to claim a white identity relative to younger respondents.

We see a different story in 2016. In 2016, two of the three indicators of actual material status were statistically significant. We see that those making less money than their Black neighbors, all else equal, tended to be 0.009 units more likely to claim a white identity than those making a higher relative income. We also see that in 2016 unemployed respondents were 0.152 units more likely to claim a white identity than those who were employed.

Sociotropic attitudes mattered more in 2016 than they did in 2012 for predicting white identity. Again these are indicators of perceived status loss. We see here that those who were less likely to believe that the economy was better the previous year than

[8] A correlation matrix demonstrates there is no multicollinearity between percentage of the district below poverty and the other covariates. Jardina (2019) found that about 54% of high white identifiers had incomes above the US median in 2012.

the current year were 0.114 points more likely to claim a white identity. Those more likely to claim a white identity were also those who felt that the economy will be better in the next year. We also see that racial resentment is important in predicting white identity in 2016, as we saw in 2012.

What is different about 2016 compared to 2012 is the importance of political factors. Although the measure of news consumption was intended to capture some effect of elite rhetoric that made white grievances more salient, partisanship and ideology still mattered. As one would expect, Republicans and conservatives were more likely to claim a white identity than Democrats and liberals. The literature has demonstrated that white identifiers were more supportive of Donald Trump and that those who were disgusted by him were less likely to be white identifiers (Jardina, Kalmoe and Gross 2020). These results seem to fall in line with a number of scholars' arguments about whites harboring racially moderate and conservative views and their tendency to migrate more towards Trump and other Republicans in 2016 (Sides, Tesler and Vavreck 2018; Stephens-Dougan 2020).

In terms of information about the unexplained differences within the districts, the estimated variation between respondents, there is a within congressional district standard deviation, $\hat{\sigma_y}$, of 1.59 in 2012 and 1.63 in 2016. In terms of the estimated standard deviation of the district intercepts, $\hat{\sigma_x}$, are 0.00 and 0.03 respectively.

4 Discussion

The overall results are not consistent from 2012 to 2016. We only see one actual indicator of economic status predicts white identity - employment status. Those who are unemployed are more likely to move up the scale of white identity than those who were

employed in 2012 and 2016. The results also show that only one indicator of perceived economic status predicts white identity consistently between 2012 and 2016. Those that saw the nation's economy as doing better in the past year relative to the year in which the respondent was surveyed are more likely to claim a white identity. From the table, I also observe that older respondents are consistently more likely to be high white identifiers in 2012 and 2016. Most importantly, we see that racial resentment is also a consistent and quite strong predictor of white identity.

The difficulty in comparing white identifiers in 2012 to 2016 is primarily due to the fact that the racialization of contemporary politics really started in 2008 (Tesler 2016) and later Trump's effect on white political behavior in 2016. By 2016 even compared to 2012, the US had experienced large protests reminiscent of those from the civil rights era in the 1960s with extensive news coverage. This is to say that it may be the case that the threshold for someone to claim a white identity in 2012 versus those who claim it in 2016 is different. Second, and relatedly, a number of things related to material status changed between 2012 and 2016. Pew reports that in 2012 the difference in median income between Whites and Blacks was $\$47,415$[9]. In 2016, this gap shrunk to a difference of $\$28,000$[10]. Comparing the models in Table 1 to those in Table 4 and Table 5, we see that my results are robust to these alternative measures of Relative income. My key model, Table 1 presents the effect of the respondent's income. Table 4 and Table 5 demonstrates the relative income respondents have to their neighbors writ-large and to their Black neighbors. Neglecting for a second concerns discussed in an earlier footnote about measurement of relative income, it appears that both measures of relative income do not change my conclusions in a substantive way. Although material

[9] pewresearch.org
[10] pewresearch.org

inter-group competition is central to my theory, it appears that, at least in the case of relative economic standing, it does not have a large effect.

Comparing these inconsistencies, however, are interesting considering the same information, however. If income did not matter for whites in 2012, but it matters in 2016 (see Table 1), is this explained by this narrowing of the gap in income between the two racial groups? We should expect then that income inequality would matter then. Those that see the wealth gap decreasing between races but increasing within races should be concerned about inequality. Even if it is just concern about generalized economic inequality, Table 4 demonstrates that whites are no more concerned about their relative income to their neighbors at-large than to their Black neighbors as demonstrated in Table 5. This finding is striking. One important factor that often determines the lenses through which people evaluate politics is exposure to elite rhetoric (Zaller 1992).

It appears that white identity may be politicized. The results in 2016 demonstrate partisanship and ideology matters. Although the claim that white identity is politicized has not been directly tested and further work should determine whether this is so, this is not a far-fetched alternative explanation given the results here. In 2012 we know that while the racialization of politics was quite high, this was not in one direction. That is, Obama was known to use racial stereotypes himself and would often chastise Black audiences for these stereotypes (Stephens-Dougan 2020). At the same time, racial stereotypes were popular and common among Republicans and the Tea Party movement in 2012 (Willer, Feinberg and Wetts 2016). In 2016, however, this changed. Although Hillary Clinton had to distance herself from perceptions that she would be beholden to Black interests since she is a Democrat (Stephens-Dougan 2020), gender was an important player in the election and was of central focus for Donald Trump's attacks (Cassese and Holman 2019). As a result, the racialized rhetoric may have been coming

from Trump, leading to the significant difference in effects of Partisanship and Ideology in 2016. Mutz (2018) argues that those experiencing material status threat were more likely to support Trump in the 2016 election. In line with my theory, those facing economic status threat and faced with rhetoric espousing white grievance are likely to be high white identifiers. In 2012, there may have not been many differences in these effects because the racialization of politics was discussed by both sides.

5 Conclusion

The results in the present manuscript demonstrate that economic hardship was a primary driver in 2012. As my discussion above concludes, economic factors were more important than political factors in 2012. In 2016, however, political factors were more important for predicting white identity. These conclusions may prove useful to existing debates about whether identity mattered in the 2016 Presidential election. To the original question motivating this paper, these conclusions appear to be even less informative. Whether actual material status or perceived status loss matters for white identity, the results are mixed. Some indicators of actual status loss mattered in 2012, and other indicators mattered in 2016; this is the same for indicators of perceived or anticipatory status loss.

The conclusions drawn here also speak to the literature on where white identity comes from. Overall, I conclude from the analyses that it depends. While it remains to be seen whether political rhetoric is a consistent driver of white identification, the predictive utility of both actual and perceived indicators of status loss in 2012 and 2016 are somewhat mixed. Those that were unemployed were more likely to claim a white identity in both 2012 and 2016. Additionally, those who saw the nation's economy as

better off in the past were more likely to claim a white identity in both years. Besides these points, scholars should be careful about generalized claims of where white identity comes from since it appears to be quite dependent on the political context that surrounds it. This is not too far afield from scholars who argue the degree to which one particular social cleavage is more politically relevant at any given time depends on the degree to which leveraging the cleavage for political gain is beneficial (Posner 2005). While there is some support that economic status matters, scholars should undertake the exploration of the claim that the degree to which economic factors matter may be mediated by the framing of white grievance.

Future work (or future iterations of this project) should more directly test whether racialized rhetoric drives white identity. If this hypothesis is true, this indicates that economic status matters less for whites in predicting their racial attitudes, which has severe implications. This could potentially mean that if the rhetoric is powerful enough, whites with average or below-average incomes who have lost their material status may not be any different in racial attitudes than the wealthy who are exposed to the same messages. For scholarly understanding of identity, if confirmed, this hypothesis would also cast doubt on whether racial identity is really based on material status or have scholars relying on the social-psychological theory neglected to consider the sources contributing to the salience of threat. Perhaps elite cues are that strong in shaping political attitudes. This would also imply that identity is what is important to white political behavior in the 2016 Election - not their economic situation. It would also be important to understand whether heavier reliance on identity-based evaluations were just a matter of it being 2016 or whether this is a sign that economic evaluations for vote choice are going to become less common.

Future work should also examine the reasons as to why those living in districts with

less poverty were more likely to claim a white identity in 2012. Although explanations here are only speculative, this finding is consistent with Jardina's (2019) discovery that about 54% of high white identifiers had incomes above the US median. In the racialized political environment that 2012 was, with the effects of the Great Recession still salient, this finding may be a sign that the wealthy were more susceptible to white identity than my theory had anticipated. Future work should explore the mechanism driving this association, given that there are no directly clear explanations.

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Appendix A.

Table 2: 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.

Table 3: 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.

Appendix B.

Table 4: Effects of actual and percieved material status loss on predicting white identity adoption

	White Identity Importance	
	2012	2016
Relative Income	0.002	−0.009*
	(0.003)	(0.004)
Education	−0.110*	−0.006
	(0.024)	(0.004)
Employment Status	−0.158*	−0.146*
	(0.058)	(0.074)
% below poverty	−0.008*	0.004
	(0.003)	(0.008)
Opportunity to get ahead		0.016
		(0.029)
Retrospective - better off	0.059*	0.041
	(0.024)	(0.034)
Prospective - better off	−0.005	−0.031
	(0.033)	(0.037)
Economy Better - Past	−0.056	−0.114*
	(0.030)	(0.032)
Economy Better - Future	0.058	0.115*
	(0.033)	(0.034)
Get ahead - Income Inequality	−0.025	−0.049
	(0.029)	(0.031)
Frequency of news consumption	−0.013	−0.018
	(0.010)	(0.015)
Rural	0.112	0.154
	(0.083)	(0.103)
Racial Resentment	0.289*	0.278*
	(0.058)	(0.057)
Age	0.007*	0.008*
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Female	0.030	0.059
	(0.050)	(0.056)
% White	−0.0004	−0.002
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Party Identification	−0.004	0.054*
	(0.018)	(0.015)
Ideology	0.019	0.002*
	(0.025)	(0.001)
Constant	3.098*	2.493*
	(0.266)	(0.344)
Num. groups: District	407	399
Variance: District(Intercept)	0.00	0.03
Variance: Residual	1.58	1.65
N	2,569	2,257
Log Likelihood	−4,283.769	−3,839.218
AIC	8,607.538	7,720.435
BIC	8,724.563	7,840.593

Source: 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies.
Coefficients from regression with random intercepts by congressional district.
Standard errors in parentheses.
* $p < 0.05$

Table 5: Effects of actual and percieved material status loss on predicting white identity adoption

	White Identity Importance	
	2012	2016
Relative Income	0.003	−0.010*
	(0.003)	(0.004)
Education	−0.113*	−0.005
	(0.024)	(0.004)
Employment Status	−0.143*	−0.171*
	(0.057)	(0.072)
% below poverty	−0.010*	0.005
	(0.003)	(0.008)
Opportunity to get ahead		0.031
		(0.029)
Retrospective - better off	0.069*	0.032
	(0.024)	(0.033)
Prospective - better off	−0.010	−0.035
	(0.032)	(0.037)
Economy Better - Past	−0.058*	−0.107*
	(0.030)	(0.031)
Economy Better - Future	0.047	0.123*
	(0.033)	(0.034)
Get ahead - Income Inequality	−0.021	−0.040
	(0.029)	(0.030)
Frequency of news consumption	−0.012	−0.019
	(0.010)	(0.015)
Rural	0.099	0.129
	(0.083)	(0.107)
Racial Resentment	0.290*	0.313*
	(0.057)	(0.056)
Age	0.007*	0.007*
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Female	0.053	0.074
	(0.050)	(0.054)
% White	−0.0002	−0.001
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Party Identification	−0.002	0.054*
	(0.018)	(0.014)
Ideology	0.021	0.002*
	(0.024)	(0.001)
Constant	3.069*	2.389*
	(0.262)	(0.333)
Num. groups: District	418	408
Variance: District(Intercept)	0.00	0.03
Variance: Residual	1.60	1.61
N	2,655	2,311
Log Likelihood	−4,436.617	−3,906.244
AIC	8,913.235	7,854.488
BIC	9,030.919	7,975.142

Source: 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies.
Coefficients from regression with random intercepts by congressional district.
Standard errors in parentheses.
* $p < 0.05$