Context Matters? Exploring the origin story of White Political Identity

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Abstract

Does the relative actual or perceived material status explain a white individual's proclivity to claim a white identity? Existing literature on white political identity 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. This paper argues that actual status loss and perceived status loss are rooted in evaluations of an individual's position, and the change in status of those around them contribute to constructing a white identity. Using data from the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies, this paper demonstrates that both actual status loss and perceived or anticipatory status loss act as important sources for increases in white identity. The results are somewhat inconsistent in that the economic indicators that matter in 2012 do not necessarily matter in 2016. The discussion lays out suggestions for testing political factors to determine whether they are more consistent between the samples.

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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 better. I would also like to thank Kathryn Schauer, Rachel O'Neal, Andrew McLeer, and Alexander L. Jensen, Tamar Malloy, and Andrew Q. Philips for their helpful advice and comments on my drafts.

1 Introduction

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 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. That is, 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 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).

I argue that high white identifiers must not only be those actually experiencing status loss but may also experience relative status loss. Those who are experiencing material status loss are likely to seek out systematic explanations as to why they are doing poorly. Particularly in a racialized political environment, racial differences are and have been a popular way in which to evaluate status in the United States. I argue that for those not experiencing loss themselves, they may anticipate this loss because they either see those like them experiencing this loss, or they may perceive that they are doing worse simply because between group inequality is decreasing with time.

Using the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Studies, I test whether perceived material status loss or actual status loss act as better predictors of whether an individual claims a white identity. From these analyses, I find differences between the sources of white identity in 2012 and 2016. Between the two of them, I observe 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 predict white identity in both years, evaluations of the nation's economy relative to the past year, age of the respondent, and 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 is that 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 (Stephens-Dougan 2020, see), 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 have largely focused on whites and out-group attitudes. One of the key measures that scholars have used to study out-group attitudes toward minorities is the "racial resentment" index developed by Kinder and Sanders (1996). With this measure, a number of scholars have argued the ways in which whites evaluate the deservingness of Blacks and other minorities of redistributive policies (Gilens 1999) and evaluate policy framed as benefiting Blacks (Winter 2008). In a racialized political context, racially moderate and conservative whites often evaluate policies and candidates where it is dubious to them as to whether they will benefit whites or whether they will benefit Blacks and other minorities (Tesler 2016; Sides, Tesler and Vavreck 2018; Stephens-Dougan 2020).

More recently, scholars have begun recognizing the role of white political in-group attitudes in explaining why whites behave and hold the attitudes they have in political contexts. Whites not only recognize racial delineations and act with 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 that do claim a white identity, social welfare policies that do not benefit other racial groups more than whites tend to be more popular. It is somewhat unclear from the literature, however, who are those that tend to be more willing to claim a white identity. Descriptively, we are aware of some demographics like conservatives and the less educated tend to be more likely to claim a white identity (Jardina 2019), what drives white identity is unclear.

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). 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 is likely to be directed toward racial minorities. In turn, whites will also evaluate members of their in-group more favorably (Huddy 2012).

From the literature on community identities, where one lives matters for shaping evaluations of politics (Lyons and Utych 2021). For example, Cramer (2016) demonstrates that resentment toward urbanites among those living in poor rural areas is quite clear and the stereotypes expressed by those living in these areas harbor negative 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 more potently than those not directly impacted by it.

Just because someone does not actually experience a loss in status, however, does not necessarily mean that they can not react negatively toward out-groups and positively toward in-groups. If you perceive that loss is happening to those of your group, given that social identity works as a heuristic (Howard 2000), people often assume that they too will soon be impacted. In terms of white identity, this is where the relationship between Trump and the Tea Party used white racial grievances as a way to attract those feeling status loss and as a result were quite popular among high white identifiers (Bunyasi 2019; Willer, Feinberg and Wetts 2016; Jardina 2019). Those living in poor white communities or those with high levels of income inequality are likely to recognize the effects of status loss for whites. Although the person themselves may not experience loss themselves, being presented with whites in your community doing poorly econom-

ically is likely to more aware that claims that whites are ”losing out” may have some basis. With seeing others ”losing out”, like those living among those in poor rural communities in Cramer's (2016) work on rural resentment, white identity is likely to be driven by anxieties of losing out yourself if the slippage of your group continues. In other words, just because those around you have lost out, it does not mean you are not next if your group continues to lose out.

Percieved 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 are quite pervasive (Winter 2008). As a result, even if you are not faced or have not yet seen those faced with status loss, whites exposed to messages that indicate a change in the racial status quo, are likely to respond in kind; 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 actual status loss. 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 status loss. Those that see those around them doing poorly are likely to seek explanations in anticipation due to the heuristic nature in which we evaluate the world. For those that see those around them doing poorly are likely to anticipate that they may also do poorly in the future with the continued slippage of their group. It may also be less contextual in that people rely on political rhetoric in a number of contexts to evaluate race. Race in rhetoric are used as a way to garner support or disapproval of candidates and policy. It is likely that rhetoric can also be used to express concerns about the loss of status for whites. In the next section, I study whether this story has empirical support.

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 inflated 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 pose a tangible manifestation in the changing status quo. 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 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

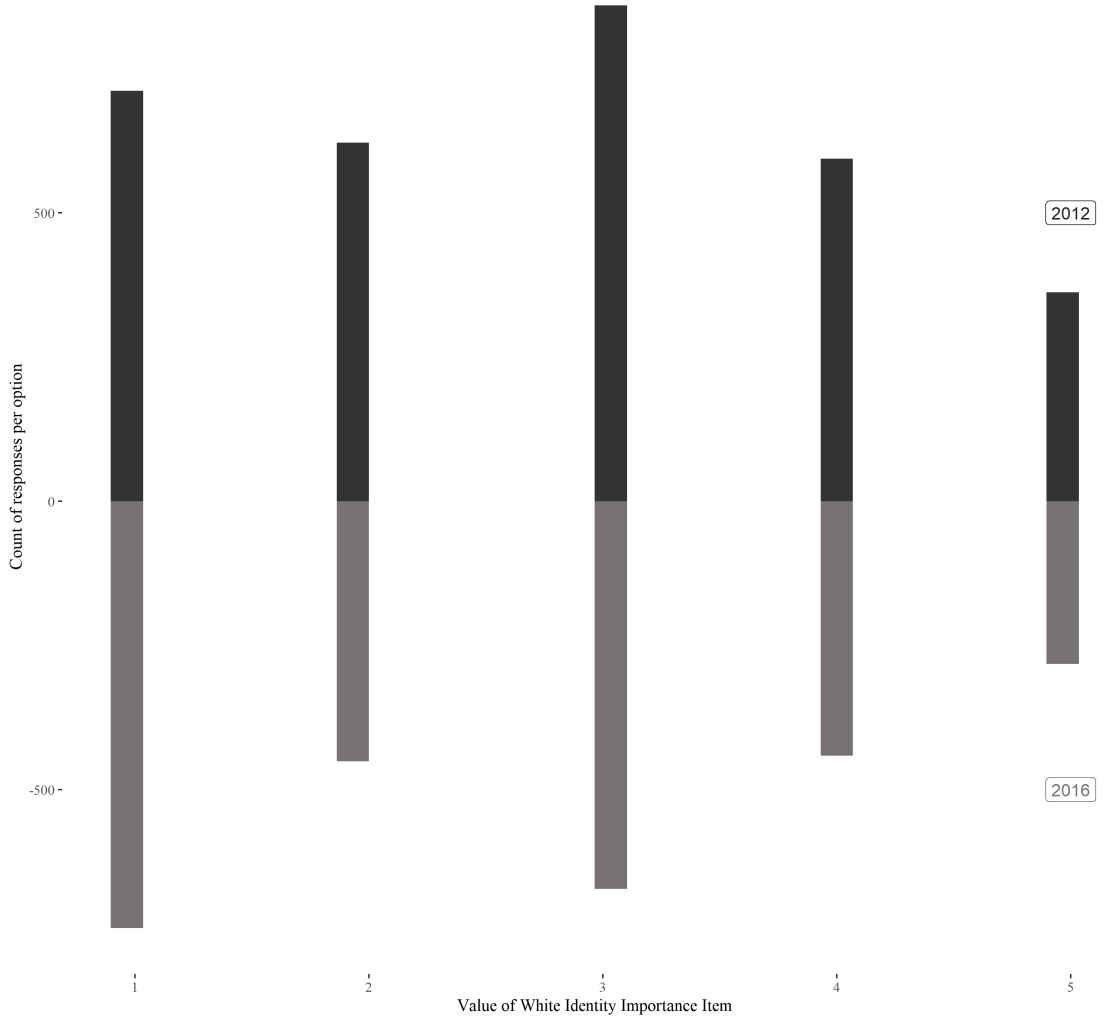
I model my theory using data from the 2012 and 2016 American National Election Study and the American Community Survey[2]. While the measure proposed by Jardina (2019) is relatively new and has only been included in ANES since 2016, I take advantage of the single question contained in both executions 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 more rooted in one's personal narrative of who they are (Rile Hayward 2013; Painter 2010; Helms and Carter 1990).

[1] pewresearch.org
[2] www.data.census.gov

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. Figure 1 presents the count of responses per category for both the 2012 and 2016 samples [3].

[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.

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 status loss should be an important classification of factors that may have significant impacts on my ability to predict white identity. One 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. 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, ones relative income represents not only a respondent's material status but also their material status relative to those around them. Given that this is a theory relying on inter-group conflict and racial comparison, my primary model uses a measure of relative income to Black neighbors. A model with a measure of respondent income relative to everyone in the district is located in Appendix B.

Another way in which we might measure actual status is through their educational attainment. 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; Brady, Verba and Lehman 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, you will be among the first to lose your status in the social hierarchy. Education may also be important here in that political sophistication may decrease the degree to which you claim 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 loss 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 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.

The theory and demographic composition of white identifiers indicate that those claiming the identity are not all experiencing status loss themselves. That is, you do not have to be a poor, uneducated, or unemployed white individual to feel that being white is important to who you are. Perceived status loss for you and anticipated status loss may drive white identity as well. 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 a community below poverty. That is, communities with high levels of poverty should make the scarcity of resources salient. As a result, intergroup 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.

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.

I also include measures of pocketbook and sociotropic economic voting to explain the mechanism of perceived and anticipatory status loss. Those who either feel that they are or will be doing worse are likely, if my theory is correct, to seek out alternative explanations for why this may be happening - which either leads them to blaming out-groups and harboring animosity towards members of out-groups contributing to this personal perceived financial insecurity along with also possibly seeking to bolster a complemen-

tary 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.

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.

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. 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).

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 way to relax this assumption 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.

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 their 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 after 2008 (Tesler 2016). Therefore, I include Partisanship and Ideology in the model. Although scholars have debated the validity of claims about whether demographic changes make threat salient (see Hutchings and Valentino 2004), the composition of your community are likely to matter for the salience of racial identity (Enos 2017). To account

for this, I include a measure accounting for the percentage of white residents in the respondent's Congressional District. The results of this model are presented in Table 1[4].

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 0.113 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 0.143 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 of the indicators reach conventional 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 0.069 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 0.058 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 0.010 units less likely to claim a white identity than those with less poverty. This goes against my hypothesis [5]. The 2012 model also tells us that racial

[4]Income is not included in the model here. Pearson's correlation between relative income and income is about 0.95 in 2012 and 0.93 in 2016.

[5]A correlation matrix demonstrates there is no multicollinearity between percentage of the district below poverty and the other covariates.

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

	White Identity Importance	
	2012	2016
Relative Income to Black	0.003	−0.009*
	(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)
Retrospective - better off	0.069*	0.037
	(0.024)	(0.033)
Prospective - better off	−0.010	−0.033
	(0.032)	(0.036)
Economy Better - Past	−0.058*	−0.106*
	(0.030)	(0.031)
Economy Better - Future	0.047	0.125*
	(0.033)	(0.034)
Get ahead - Income Inequality	−0.021	−0.044
	(0.029)	(0.030)
Frequency of news consumption	−0.012	−0.019
	(0.010)	(0.015)
Rural	0.099	0.123
	(0.083)	(0.107)
Racial Resentment	0.290*	0.315*
	(0.057)	(0.056)
Age	0.007*	0.007*
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Female	0.053	0.073
	(0.050)	(0.054)
% White	−0.0002	−0.001
	(0.002)	(0.002)
Party Identification	−0.002	0.056*
	(0.018)	(0.014)
Ideology	0.021	0.002*
	(0.024)	(0.001)
Constant	3.069*	2.475*
	(0.262)	(0.323)
Num. groups: District	418	408
Variance: District(Intercept)	0.00	0.03
Variance: Residual	1.60	1.61
N	2,655	2,312
Log Likelihood	−4,436.617	−3,905.403
AIC	8,913.235	7,850.807
BIC	9,030.919	7,965.724

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

resentment was a significant predictor of white identity as well high racial identifiers being 0.290 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 status loss 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 0.171 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 the current year were 0.106 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.

In terms of information about the the unexplained differences within the districts, the estimated variation between respondents, there is a within congressional district standard deviation, $\hat{\sigma_y}$, of 1.60 in 2012 and 1.6 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 and Conclusions

The overall results are not consistent from 2012 to 2016. We only see one actual indicator of economic status predict 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. This leaves us with more questions.

Focusing on the inconsistencies between the 2012 and 2016 models is somewhat fraught, however. First it is somewhat difficult to compare white identifiers in 2012 to 2016 is primarily due to the fact that the racialization of contemporary politics really started in 2008 (Tesler 2016). By 2016 even compared to 2012, the US had been experienced incredibly large protests reminiscent of those from the civil rights era in the 1960's. 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 changed between 2012 and 2016. Pew reports that in 2012 the difference in median income between Whites and Blacks was $\$47,415$[6]. In 2016,

[6] pewresearch.org

this gap shrunk to a difference of $\$28,000$[7]. Comparing the models in Table 1 to those in Table 4, we see that my results are robust to this alternative measure of Relative income. My key model, Table 1 presents the relative income the respondent has to their Black neighbors, whereas the model in Table 4 in Appendix B uses a measure of the respondent's relative income to all their neighbors. We see that my results in Table 1 are robust to this. Although material 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 relative income to Black neighbors does not matter for whites in 2012, but it matters in 2016, 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. This is finding is striking. One important factor that often guides 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

[7] pewresearch.org

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 (Tesler 2016) in 2012. 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 racialalized rhetoric may have been coming from Trump leading to the significant difference in effects of Partisanship and Ideology in 2016. In 2012, there may have not been many differences in these effects because the racialization of politics was discussed by both sides.

Future work 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. Torturing this logic, 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.

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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 perceived 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)
Retrospective - better off	0.059*	0.043
	(0.024)	(0.034)
Prospective - better off	−0.005	−0.030
	(0.033)	(0.037)
Economy Better - Past	−0.056	−0.113*
	(0.030)	(0.032)
Economy Better - Future	0.058	0.116*
	(0.033)	(0.034)
Get ahead - Income Inequality	−0.025	−0.051
	(0.029)	(0.030)
Frequency of news consumption	−0.013	−0.018
	(0.010)	(0.015)
Rural	0.112	0.150
	(0.083)	(0.103)
Racial Resentment	0.289*	0.279*
	(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	0.055*
	(0.018)	(0.015)
Ideology	0.019	0.002*
	(0.025)	(0.001)
Constant	3.098*	2.537*
	(0.266)	(0.332)
data. Num. groups: District	407	399
Variance: District(Intercept)	0.01	0.03
Variance: Residual	1.57	1.67
N	2,569	2,258
Log Likelihood	−4,283.769	−3,837.982
AIC	8,607.538	7,715.964
BIC	8,724.563	7,830.409

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