

# Melanin Deficiency as a Political Identity: The Origins of White Political Identity

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## Abstract

Where does white identity come from? Leading accounts of what white identity is and the political implications for policy all state that white identity comes from threat. Of course, there are several ways that threat may present itself. This paper explores the argument that white identity has been driven by a number of personal and contextual factors. The article also argues that some of the out-group animosities that white identity creates originate from those already harboring racial resentment. [INSERT DATA SOURCES AND FINDINGS HERE]

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# Introduction

With a surge in the study of race and ethnicity in American politics and the growing political cohesion of whites, scholars have become quite interested in studying white identity and the behavioral and political consequences of it. Scholars have started from the presupposition that white identity comes from a status threat in discussing white identity. Since the 2008 economic collapse, the election of a Black president, racial turmoil from police brutality, the increased usage in workplaces, and the increased rhetoric from critical race theory, the estimations that whites will become the racial minority before the end of the century, whites have been made aware and are continually reminded that their status may be slipping. As a reaction to this, many white's have adjusted their vote choices to support movements like the tea party movement (Wong & Cho, 2005) and candidates like Donald J. Trump (Jardina, 2020). While the literature has cited and has concluded that the surge in individuals claiming their white identity is due to threat, the exact origins are still somewhat unclear.

This paper sets out to determine where white identity comes from. Given that status threat is the leading explanation for the rise in white identity, I seek to determine which among a smattering of the types of threat whites are facing have the most explanatory value. That is, are whites claiming their white identity due to personal or contextual threats? Or, possibly, is white identity simply arising from racial resentment, and do threats exacerbate whites' anxiety? Within these two categories, I discuss a number of distinct threats in more detail later in the paper.

In my analysis, I find that ... [INSERT FINDINGS AND STUFF HERE].

## **Whiteness as an Identity**

In the last few years, the study of categorical politics has exploded on to the scene. From this literature, scholars interested in white political behavior have learned a few things. One key argument from segments of the literature is that group consciousness and behavioral homogeneity are not necessarily the same thing. For example, we see that among Black voters there is strong group consciousness and that the community tends to behave as a reliable Democratic block, even in the face of conflicting self interests (White, Laird, & Allen, 2014). While there is certainly ideological heterogeneity within the Black community, their cohesiveness comes from a strong group consciousness and informal group norms that socially reward group-centric political decision making (White & Laird, 2020). Not all groups that have a group consciousness act so monolithically, however.

While members of various groups may hold group consciousness, many have members that act quite differently from one another. While women have a shared history of difficulty accessing political and economic autonomy relative to men, not all women are Democratic or support policy that are seen as benefiting the feminist movement (Barnes & Cassese, 2017). Heterogeneity among groups also bleeds into racial groups due to ethnic differences too. Latinos for example are not a monolithic group (Morín, Macías Mejía, & Sanchez, 2020). So far, the current survey of the literature demonstrates that while many groups may be political and have a shared recognition of discrimination and a lack of access, it does not necessarily translate into a homogenous political group.

Whites, while they tend to be split on party identification, tend to do so for many reasons. Historically being white has not appeared to be the primary lens whites have used to evaluate politics. Whites have been strongly divided on a number of fronts like

on education, class, religious affiliation and a number of other control variables that political scientists have used as a standard practice for a long time when studying vote choice (see Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). With the racialization of politics since the Obama administration, however, Whites have begun to show signs of increasingly recognizing a group consciousness and a feeling of deprecation relative to other groups (Wong & Cho, 2005; Tesler, 2016; Sides, Tesler, & Vavreck, 2018; Jardina, 2020; Bunyasi, 2019). Many scholars saw this and became quite interested in the racial resentment that whites quite commonly displayed on racialized policies such as welfare (Gilens, 1999) and evaluations of the president's dog Bo Obama (Tesler, 2016). There is quite a bit of evidence, however, that white identity is becoming stronger as an in-group evaluation too (Jardina, 2019, 2020); which would indicate a growing group-centric frame for policy and politics among whites. Although this increasing group consciousness has not led to political cohesion, it appears to become an increasingly important lens through which whites view politics (Jardina, 2019, 2020). While the literature on categorical politics has been instrumental for white identity scholars to get to this point, it is also crucial to recognize the process by which whites have begun building this group consciousness and how might we expect for it to translate into "white political behavior". For this, social identity theory is helpful.

Much of the work on categorical politics and the existing body of work on white identity politics heavily relies on social identity theory as first conceptualized by Tajfel and Turner (1986).

For example, one leading assumption about where white identity comes from is threat (Jardina, 2019). Although the literature has not dug much deeper than this, the idea is quite powerful. As Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) posits, those observing misfortunes befalling their group encourages action on the part of the indi-

vidual for impression management. In political contexts, threat has led those with high group identity to engage more with participatory behaviors that political scientists often consider to be costly - actions such as voting, volunteering, and protest (Riker & Ordeshook, 1968; Brady, Verba, & Lehman Schlozman, 1995). When faced with an existential threat to the group, whites are likely to seek ways to help their group's status since they are invested and associated with it. Often, when these threats come from a competing group, individual members of the group become increasingly likely to harbor animosity towards that group.

Whites have long expressed disparate levels of support for other racial groups. Using racial resentment measures, scholars have demonstrated that whites are less likely to support social welfare policies that the media frame as being primarily helpful to Blacks (Winter, 2008; Kinder & Kam, 2010) and have consistently viewed reliance on social welfare policy as a Black issue (Gilens, 1999). Out-group animosity is not the only important outcome of white identity, however. On feeling thermometer measures, whites feel warmer to their own in-group at about the same level as other politically cohesive groups (Wong & Cho, 2005), such as Blacks (White & Laird, 2020). As an implication, whites who have claimed this racial identity have also become more likely to support policies that uniquely support their racial group (Jardina, 2019, 2020). One question remaining in this literature is why white identity might arise and what types of threats have led to all these attitudinal and behavioral outcomes.

Whites may see their fate as a group identity as linked with a prototypical member of their group. While the past literature has often seen linked fate as not being an appropriate measure for whites, recent work has argued that whites actually do have a linked fate - they share a story of privilege (Berry, Ebner, & Cornelius, 2019). With this linked fate, whites feel that adverse events occurring to the prototypical member in their group

could happen to them. This association of negative events to other group members to themselves, changes an individual's motivational structure. It leads the psychologically invested members to become increasingly concerned about the prospects of these effects becoming more widespread and more malignant. This effect is particularly true as these threats become increasingly salient.

For whites, the threats to their status and position in society abound. Quickly following the 2008 recession, where many Americans faced financial crises, particularly middle-class whites, the Tea Party emerged and produced several candidates who primaried the GOP. One leading explanation for why the Tea Party candidates were so successful in capturing congressional seats was their popularity among whites who felt disenfranchised (Wong & Cho, 2005). Also, at the time, the first Black president, Barack Obama, had a sweeping victory. The ascendance of a Black man to the White House led many conservatives like Bill O'Reilly and Rush Limbaugh to set out on a crusade to convince Americans that the status-quo was under attack - whites no longer were dominant (?, ?). To rub it in further, increased conversations around race and systematic disadvantages that non-whites faced were growing. An increased saliency that there are issues besides white issues led to an increase in white anxiety so that by the time 2016 came around, a Donald J. Trump who spoke to white fears was quite popular among whites (Bunyasi, 2019). Not only was Trump popular among whites, generally, but he was incredibly popular among whites who felt disadvantaged on a number of economic factors and those who disagreed with assessments that Blacks were uniquely faced with systematic discrimination relative to whites.

In studying white identity, this literature has all come from the assumption that threat, defined broadly, causes a rise in white identity. Given the literature on identity and the origins of it, this is quite a powerful explanation. Threat to whites not only

causes whites to support political candidates that promise to help re-establish the status of whites, but it motivates them to turn out to vote for those candidates and to participate in a number of other costly political behaviors that political scientists often consider to be quite challenging to convince citizens to be participants of (Riker & Ordeshook, 1968; Brady et al., 1995). In discussing threat, though, as mentioned before, the rise of white identity had a number of possible types of threats that coincided with it.

There are two types of threats that I want to focus on here. The first being personal threats. These sorts of threats are ones that have been included the most in different models of white identity. Namely, factors such as personal economic challenges that one may blame on the whites' loss of status as being better off than others should be an essential antecedent to white identity. These financial challenges include evaluations of an ill economy such as the unemployment rate, how difficult it is for whites to find a job relative to Blacks, The second type of threat that I want to focus on here receives less attention in the identity literature, which is context. Here, I consider contextual factors to be related to how whites perceive the environment around them. Factors such as how many minorities live in their communities and their community are primarily white, their perceptions about the United State's increasing diversity. This last point is particularly interesting. It may be the case that those who have long enjoyed insulation from the growing diversity around them may have faced a more potent jolt during the increased racialization of American politics in the early 2010's relative to those living in communities that have already been diverse or had already been in the process of diversifying. We know that demographically, whites (not those who necessarily have accepted their white identity) have interesting behavioral and attitudinal changes when faced with the fact that their community is changing. When reminded that they are not in the racial majority of a community, whites often feel more threatened and hold

stronger racial resentment and support policies perceived to help minorities less (Enos, 2017; Enos & Gidron, 2018). In the case of Israel and Palestine, when identity is at play, those faced with an increase in those of an out-group in their community tend to become much more hostile and hold stronger out-group animosities. Social contact theory would indicate that identity and context are essential here.

Given my discussion thus far, I would expect the following relationships to lay bare in the data.

Linked fate is a mechanism by which whites demonstrate an increased psychological attachment to other whites. Linked fate demonstrates this psychological attachment by recognizing that there is a shared story among whites, and that story is under attack, leading whites to see what happens to one of their own to affect them all potentially.

**Hypothesis 1.** *We should expect to see that, over time, whites have increasingly reported a psychological attachment with each other.*

We know from the literature on retrospective voting that voters are sociotropic voters (Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981). They see that gloomy forecasts for the country's economy are likely to affect later their wallet (Mackuen, Erikson, & Stimson, 2007). Here, whites likely see that economic misfortunes for other whites across the country will likely end up impacting their bank account because they are white too.

**Hypothesis 2.** *We should expect that negative evaluations of the economy for whites will increase ones willingness to express white identity*

We also know from the literature that when faced with an increase in racial out-groups in your community, it increases your willingness to express your identity that is most relevant (Enos, 2017).



**Hypothesis 3.** *In this case, we should expect to observe that when whites notice an increase in racial minorities in their community, their willingness to express and claim a white identity will increase.*

**Hypothesis 4.** *We should also expect that those living in predominantly white communities will have increases in white identity around the time of Obama's administration and Obama's election in 2016.*

We may also see that racial resentment is an important measure here. While many scholars have discounted the role of racial resentment in the origin story of white identity, in the presence of these other measures, we may see that white identity is pretty popular among those who hold intense out-group animosity. The existing narrative around white identity argues that it comes from both out-group hostility and in-group affinity (Jardina, 2019).

**Hypothesis 5.** *Given this, white identity, in the presence of these other factors that cause white identity, racial resentment still plays a part for some.*

## **Data and Methodology**

To model my theory and hypotheses, I primarily rely on the American National Election Study. Namely, I use the 2016 Cumulative study by the ANES, the 2012 study, and the 2016 and 2018 Pilot studies for my analyses. Using these studies have a number of advantages. First, the ANES has long asked psychological and attitudinal questions that lend itself well to individual-level analyses. Second, the ANES uses a number of common behavioral measures related to race and identity. And third, the ANES often ask about impressions of their respondents about their personal finances and issues

the respondent perceives to be most important for government to address. Given these advantages of the ANES, it allows me to not only look at attitudinal changes over time, but it allows me to examine a large number of personal and contextual threats that white respondents may be feeling.

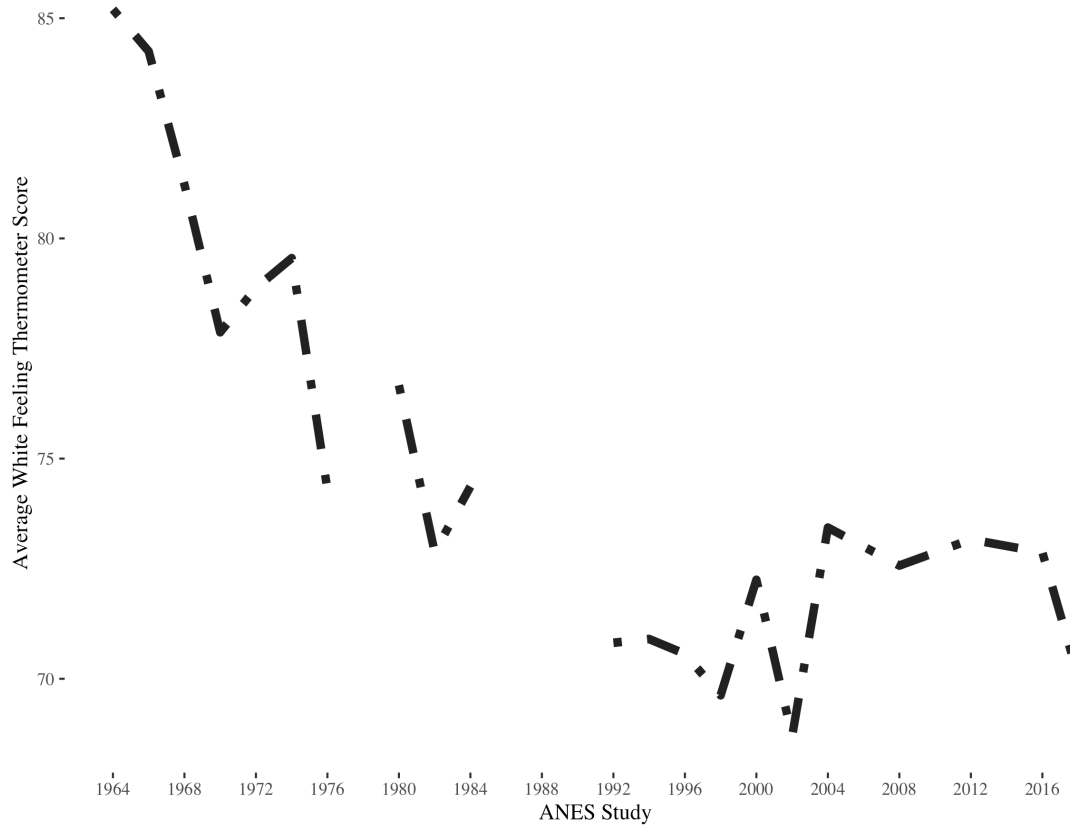
### **Have whites increased psychological attachments?**

Unfortunately, questions about linked fate are relatively new. The first question about linked fate in the ANES was in 2004 and was only directed toward black respondents. The earliest instance of the formal linked fate measure directed towards whites was in 2012 and then again in 2016. Given that the timeline directed by the literature for when threats to whites became more salient predates those studies, I have to rely on feeling thermometer scores towards other whites. While this does not precisely capture the same thing as linked fate, feeling thermometers are useful in a number of ways for capturing in-group affinity (Kinder & Kam, 2010). The most common use of feeling thermometers in the behavior literature occurs in the study of polarization. In the polarization literature, high feeling thermometer scores for in-partisans is argued to demonstrate an affinity and a psychological investment to their party (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019).

To first determine whether whites are increasing in their psychological attachments to one another, I use the feeling thermometer ratings of white respondents to whites as a group and plot how those ratings have moved over time. The ANES has collected feeling thermometers of whites since 1964. Using the 2016 ANES cumulative dataset, I plot the mean feeling thermometer ratings that white respondents gave whites as a group. I additionally calculated the average feeling thermometer score among white

respondents for the 2018 ANES pilot study and included that average in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1. Mean White Feeling Thermometer Scores of Whites



The leading narrative of white identity would tell us that during times where threat are at its highest, we should expect spikes in white identity. In **Figure 1**.<sup>1</sup> we see that whites' psychological attachments were quite high. In 1964-68, when the Voting Rights Act and discussions about race were salient, whites were scorchingly warm towards other whites (85.20% and 84.24%, respectively). As the anti-war movement gathered steam, it appears as though group attitudes towards other whites became less white-hot. As we entered the 1990's, whites were still quite warm to their own group, hovering around a mean feeling thermometer above the 70's. The next peak for warm attitudes

<sup>1</sup>Unfortunately, the gaps in the graph are due to missing data for Feeling Thermometer scores for whites by white respondents.

towards other whites was in 2004, in the first presidential election year since the terrorist attacks in 2001, the average feeling thermometer rating rose to 73.43%. This observation is somewhat unsurprising given the rise of ethnocentrism that became quite widespread in American society. Afterwards, we saw a decrease in average ratings as we entered the election season of 2008, where the first Black president would ascend to office. In the 2008 ANES we observed a bit of a drop in the average ratings of whites to decrease to 72.57%. However, as the discussion thus far would expect, we see that around the time the 2010 ANES was fielded, white racial attitudes began to rise again and appear to have been at their post Bush-administration peak in 2012 (73.16%). Once we entered 2016, the average white respondent rated other whites on the feeling thermometer at 72.86%. Based on the 2018 white feeling thermometer scores, we saw another drop in whites feeling thermometer scores to other whites with the average score at 70.05%.

Based on these observations, it appears as though that we do experience increases in whites expressing a psychological attachment to one another during times of heightened racial saliency. While this is just observational and is in no way causal, these data still provide some face-validity to the claim that white identity arises during times of threat. Furthermore, with the wealth of causal evidence provided by other scholars arguing that white racial identity increases during times of high racialization in the political sphere, these observations of long-term trends seem to corroborate that story. So far, the aggregative data show large spikes of whites expressing in-group favoritism in the face of racialized political events. While feeling thermometers can express a psychological attachment to a group to an extent (Kinder & Kam, 2010), this is a rough measure, and thankfully, there are other more direct measures that the ANES have more recently developed and include in their studies.

Next, I use the 2012 study, the 2016 and the 2018 pilot studies to examine linked fate in those three years. Specifically, I seek to determine whether linked fate increased from 2012 to 2016 and if that that has since grown during the first two years of the Trump Administration. While I have no expectation that linked fate among whites has had a tidal shift between 2012 and 2016, given the conclusions from Sides et al. (2018), I, nonetheless, do expect to find a marginal increase in linked fate among whites in 2016 relative to 2012. Previous literature has demonstrated that partisanship is strongly associated with whether whites hold linked fate. Specifically, Berry et al. (2019) demonstrate the disparate effects linked fate has on partisan turnout. In a Autoregressive Distributed Lag Model where my outcome variable is linked fate and the primary independent variable is the year of the study, I also include controls for age, sex, education, income, and racial resentment.

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