

1 The Research Question and Motivation of the Project

In a society where knowledgeable citizens are scarce (Berelson, 1952; Converse, 2006; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), heuristics are often used by the masses to evaluate political events and to guide their political decisions (Converse, 2006; Taber & Lodge, 2013; Lodge, Steenbergen, & Brau, 1995; Redlawsk & Lau, 1997). One possible useful type of heuristics in politics is the use of identity. Using one's own identity, the public are easily able to find those like them and cue from their evaluations of political events.

As Hajnal (2020) argues, race is one of the most foundational descriptors of political behavior - an even more accurate mold for attitudes than class. One's racial identity correlates to the rates at which you participate in politics (Fraga, 2018; Keele, Shah, White, & Kay, 2017) and how angry you become about politics (Phoenix, 2019), how you evaluate policy (Winter, 2008; Gilens, 1999), how you vote (Schaffner, 2011), and even how you attempt to predict the ideological positions of those within your own racial group (Lerman, McCabe, & Sadin, 2015). Racial identity, at least for some racial groups, are becoming, or have been for quite some time, politicized. From the cognitive approach to studying identity, this implies that for groups that have political importance, we should expect that those members will base their evaluations and decisions more in their racial identity due to the increased costs for them and for their community.

When looking at racial identity, some groups are quite cohesive in their political behaviors. From the social constructivist framework of identity, for example, White and Laird (2020) propose that black voters, despite quite significant amounts of ideological heterogeneity among members of the black community, remain quite loyal to the Democratic party. The explanation for this, as proposed by White and Laird (2020), is that there is a deep social importance to being black. Those who are in the community face strong social pressure to participate politically in ways that benefit the whole community.

In a massive scholarly advancement in studying white racial political identity, Jardina (2019) demonstrates that those who score highly on white identity scores acknowledge that their race is important to their political evaluations and decisions. In this analysis, however, it remains somewhat unclear where white identity comes from. While White and Laird (2020) demonstrates a progression of scholarly understanding about the origins of black political identity, scholars interested in white identity are still unsure where it comes from.

The question guiding this project is simply: For those who claim white identity is important to

them, where does white identity come from?

Gut reactions to answer this question may seem quite simple and parsimonious on their face, but they lack satisfactory falsifiability of alternative explanations. For example, some scholars may assume that white identity stems from an increasing threat to the relative political relevance of white Americans. After all, whites are declining in population and eventual share of eligible voters in the United States. From this social identity theory explanation for the origins of white identity, we may still miss those who score highly on the white identity measure but also claim to be champions of the increasing diversity in the American population. This explanation further is unsatisfactory in that it quickly dismisses the contextual factors that may make someone score highly on the white identity scale.

To briefly illustrate an example, increased conversations about race and the history of it in the United States may cause increased political saliency and stronger opinion formation about race. That is, before Obama's 2008 Presidential victory and before the era of reinvigorated conversations about the failures society and policy makers have committed to supporting racial progress, the public could be "color blind." However, when large demonstrations began to take place calling for action to be taken against discriminatory policing practices of the Black community, a more "conservative" response from both moderate Democrats and the right may have had important impacts on shaping white attitudes about their identity. Conversations and blowback against the idea of white privilege, may have driven a recognition and politicization of what it means to be white. It appears, that in some sense, Donald Trump has certainly created a political conversation where Americans scatter along a continuum of how they feel about the efficacy of the Black Lives Matter movement.

My goal for the project that I am proposing is to test these alternative reasons for white identity's existence and seemingly increasing prominence in American politics. Though this statement seems ambitious and grandiose, I seek to causally understand the psychological mechanisms that give rise to white identity. As a result of this goal, I hope to use a mixture of both survey and experimental data for this project.

2 Intended Empirical Approach

Using a mixture of survey and experimental approaches will help bring empirical evidence to my causal claim in two ways. First, survey data should provide some strong external validity to my

claims. Second, the experiment, as I hope to design it, should provide data to support the causality of my project's claims.

In this project I intend to use the ANES 2016 pilot study due to the presence of the (Jardina, 2019) white identity battery. The additional benefit of this survey is that there are a large number of variables that will be useful to use for creating measures of contextual and material exogenous variables that may pin down the origins of white identity.

To speak to the internal validity of any conclusions I receive from the survey data, an experiment using racial identity primes may be a useful treatment to identify whether a primed white identifier adjusts their evaluations of what factors have more relative importance as compared to a respondent without the white identity prime. The experiment designed this way will determine the psychological importance of a white identity frame and will speak to shifts in factors guiding political evaluations.

An experiment that sets out to look at differences between those primed or not also helps with my expectations about changing political contexts. This is particularly important given that, unfortunately, the white identity measure was not introduced until 2016. Not having this data prior to 2016 makes it particularly challenging to study how the changing contexts before and after Obama's administration effected the rise of white identity.

3 Concluding thoughts and concerns about the project

Overall, I am quite excited about the project. In a time where white racial identity seems to be quite important as a participatory driver in American politics, I hope adding to the literature on understanding where white identity comes from is important. I believe this assertion is especially true for scholars studying race and ethnicity in politics given the large advancements in our scholarly understanding of the origins of Black political cohesion and the corresponding emotional differences relative to whites (White & Laird, 2020; Phoenix, 2019, for example).

Of primary concern for this project, I still feel somewhat unsatisfied with organizing my thoughts around a theory for this project. While I feel that it is quite unlikely that the only explanation for where white identity originates is an external threat to white's relative power in politics, the other explanations are quite numerous and are quite complex and nuanced. The paper could be framed as a story about both white Democrat and Republican discontentment with Obama's handling of racial issues, it could be framed as a story about the media, and probably could be framed a few more ways.

Damon Roberts

I look forward to, in the coming weeks, to continue to read through the literature further to seek possible avenues that help clarify this.

References

- Berelson, B. (1952). Democratic theory and public opinion. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 16(3), 313–330.
doi: 10.1086/266397
- Converse, P. E. (2006). The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics. *Critical Review*, 18(1-3), 1–74.
- Delli Carpini, M. X., & Keeter, S. (1996). *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Fraga, B. L. (2018). *The Turnout Gap: Race, Ethnicity, and Political Inequality in a Diversifying America*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gilens, M. (1999). *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Hajnal, Z. L. (2020). *Dangerously Divided: How Race and Class Shape Winning and Losing in American Politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jardina, A. (2019). *White Identity Politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Keele, L. J., Shah, P. R., White, I., & Kay, K. (2017). Black Candidates and Black Turnout: A Study of Viability in Louisiana Mayoral Elections. *The Journal of Politics*, 79(3).
- Lerman, A. E., McCabe, K. T., & Sadin, M. L. (2015). Political Ideology, Skin Tone, and the Psychology of Candidate Evaluations. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 79(1), 53–90.
- Lodge, M., Steenbergen, M. R., & Brau, S. (1995). The Responsive Voter: Campaign Information and the Dynamics of Candidate Evaluation. *American Political Science Review*, 89(2), 309–326.
- Phoenix, D. L. (2019). *The Anger Gap: How Race Shapes Emotion in Politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Redlawsk, D. P., & Lau, R. R. (1997). Voting Correctly. *American Political Science Review*, 91(3), 585–598.
- Schaffner, B. F. (2011). Racial Salience and the Obama Vote. *Political Psychology*, 32(6).
- Taber, C. S., & Lodge, M. (2013). *The Rationalizing Voter*. Cambridge University Press.
- White, I. K., & Laird, C. N. (2020). *Steadfast Democrats: How Social Forces Shape Black Political Behavior*. Princeton University Press.
- Winter, N. J. G. (2008). *Dangerous Frames: How Ideas About Race & Gender Shape Public Opinion*. Chicago University Press.