White Identity Politics Aren't Going Anywhere

How should Democrats understand — and confront — them?

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For 50 years Republicans have battered the Democratic coalition, wielding the so-called southern strategy — built on racism and overlaid with opposition to immigration — to win control of the White House and one or both chambers of Congress.

At the same time, Democrats have struggled to piece together a coalition strong enough to deliver an Election Day majority. In the 1950s, the Democratic coalition was 87 percent white and 13 percent minority, according to the American National Election Studies; it is now 59 percent white and 41 percent minority, according to Pew Research.

As the Democratic Party has evolved from an overwhelmingly white party to a party with a huge minority base, the dominant strategic problem has become the tenuous balance between the priorities of its now equally indispensable white and minority wings.

President Trump has aggressively exploited Democratic vulnerabilities as no previous Republican candidate had dared to do. The frontal attack Trump has engineered — in part by stigmatizing "political correctness" — has had a dual effect, throwing Democrats back on their heels while simultaneously whetting their appetite for a fight.

For Democrats to counter Trump effectively, a number of scholars believe it is essential to understand the motivations — the needs, beliefs and agendas — of those whites who have moved into the Trump camp. Only armed with that information, the way these scholars see it, can the left recapture enough of those voters to regain majority status on a more permanent basis, both in its battles for Congress and for the White House.

In her forthcoming book, "White Identity Politics," Ashley Jardina, a political scientist at Duke, describes three groups of whites who generally fall on the right side of the political spectrum.

The first is made up of those for whom their white "identity is extremely or very important" to them. Surveys taken from 2012 to 2016, according to Jardina, show that the percentage of whites who say their white identity is very or extremely important ranges from 28 to 42 percent.

According to Jardina, "higher levels of white identity are somewhat linked to higher levels of racial animosity." At the same time, she contends in her book:

A small percentage of white identifiers score quite high on measures of racial prejudice or resentment, but many more white identifiers possess average and even low levels of racial prejudice. In other words, white

identity is not defined by racial animus, and whites who identify with their racial group are not simply reducible to bigots.

The second group comprises those who rank high on a test of "white consciousness." The difference between white identity and white consciousness, Jardina argues, is that those in the latter category believe that "many whites are unable to find jobs because employers are hiring minorities." Jardina reports that they also stress "the importance of whites working together to change laws that are unfair to whites."

The third constituency is made up of whites high in "racial resentment."

This is based, Jardina writes, on responses to four survey items, with response options ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree for each. The survey items ask respondents if they agree/disagree that (1) blacks should work their way up without any special favors; (2) generations of slavery and discrimination make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class; (3) blacks have gotten less than they deserve; (4) blacks must try harder to get ahead. The index is scaled to range from 0 (least resentful) to 1 (most resentful).

On average, the level of racial resentment among whites is high, Jardina found: "Among all whites in the 2012 ANES face-to-face study, the mean level of racial resentment is 0.68 on a zero to one scale."

Jardina argues in her book that the racial resentment scale reveals a new type of racial prejudice — one that is a subtle combination of anti-black affect and the belief that blacks do not adhere to traditional American values associated with the Protestant work ethic.

Racial resentment predicts whites' opinions toward a wide range of racialized political policies and has a profound impact on political candidate evaluations. It is, quite clearly, a central component to the way in which whites interpret the political and social world.

There is an ongoing dispute over the use of such questions to measure racial resentment. Jardina acknowledges that "some scholars are critical of this framework" and "argue that racial resentment entangles conservative principles, like individualism, with racial prejudice."

Most recently, Riley Carney and Ryan Enos, political scientists at Harvard, have sought to assess the validity of racial resentment questions in their working paper, "Conservatism and Fairness in Contemporary Politics: Unpacking the Psychological Underpinnings of Modern Racism."

In survey experiments, Carney and Enos substituted Lithuanians and other nationalities for African-Americans so that the first resentment question would ask for agreement or disagreement with the statement: "Lithuanians should work their way up without any special favors." Their conclusion:

The results obtained using groups other than blacks are substantively indistinguishable from those measured when blacks are the target group. Decomposing this measure further, we find that political conservatives express only minor differences in resentment across target groups. Far greater differences in resentment toward blacks and other groups can be found among racially sympathetic liberals. In short, we find that modern racism questions appear to measure attitudes toward any group, rather than African-Americans alone.

Carney and Enos conclude that the "modern racism scales" fail to capture attitudes specific to African-Americans. However, the scales do capture a form of racism, both a general resentment that applies to many groups and a specific failure to recognize the unique historical plight of African-Americans.

[Jardina](#), whose work I have written about [before](#), agrees that "some of this backlash" — including the election of Donald Trump and the opposition to immigration — "is rooted in prejudice, racism, and ethnocentrism."

But, she adds, many whites' reactions to our country's changing racial landscape do not simply manifest in outward hostility. Amidst these changes, many whites have described themselves as outnumbered, disadvantaged, and even oppressed. They have voiced their anxiety over America's waning numerical majority, and have questioned what this means for the future of the nation. They have worried that soon they may face discrimination based on their own race, if they do not already.

Such fears, in Jardina's view, drive the emergence of white identity as a political issue:

These threats, both real and perceived, have, as I will demonstrate, brought to the fore, for many whites, a sense of commonality, attachment, and solidarity with their racial group. They have led a sizable proportion of whites to believe that their racial group, and the benefits that group enjoys, are endangered.

The result?

This racial solidarity now plays a central role in the way many whites orient themselves to the political and social world.

Central to Jardina's argument is the contention that some whites "identify with their racial group without feeling prejudice toward racial and ethnic minorities," while others do "possess some degree of negative affect toward racial and ethnic minorities without also identifying with their racial group."

For example, in the case of support or opposition to domestic spending programs, she writes, "Higher levels of white identity and consciousness are actually associated with greater support for spending." By comparison, she continued, "racial resentment is associated with support for decreasing spending on all groups, including whites."

This finding leads, in turn, to another Jardina assertion:

Many whites are not motivated to oppose immigration because they dislike Latinos. They are also not inclined to support Donald Trump because they feel negatively about people of color in the United States.

Rather, Jardina puts forward the argument that these whites feel, to some extent, that the rug is being pulled out from under them — that the benefits they have enjoyed because of their race, their groups' advantages, and their status atop the racial hierarchy are all in jeopardy.

Put another way, she makes the case that white identity is not synonymous with racial prejudice. White racial solidarity provides a lens through which whites interpret the political and social world that is inward looking.

According to Jardina, whites, to a certain extent, are deliberately claiming victimhood:

White identifiers have co-opted the language of racial discrimination and oppression. Put bluntly, the politics of white identity is marked by an insidious illusion, one in which whites claim their group experiences discrimination in an effort to reinforce and maintain a system of racial inequality where whites are the dominant group with the lion's share of power and privileges.

Because for many whites "identifying with their group and protecting its status hardly seems problematic, especially compared to racism," it's difficult to "convince some whites that there's something normatively objectionable about identifying with one's racial group and wanting to protect its interests."

Eric Kaufmann, in his forthcoming book "Whiteshift: Populism, Immigration, and the Future of White Majorities," addresses similar racial and ethnic tensions. Kaufmann writes:

As the urban West gets more diverse, the finger increasingly points to the white majority as the engine of segregation. White majorities are retreating towards places where they are relatively concentrated.

Kaufmann, a political scientist at the University of London, argues provocatively in an email that a strategic shift to compromise on the most divisive issues, including immigration, could work to Democrats' advantage:

The right's problem in America is more its doctrinaire tax-cutting, suspicion of government and international institutions. If the left didn't give it so much domestic cultural ammunition, the right would face defeat and have to adjust.

Kaufmann argues that there is a structural dilemma posed by the multiracial nature of the left coalition: he views what he calls "the institutionalization of multiculturalism/diversity/equity" and of "high immigration" as fueling the rightward direction of recent political movements in the United States and Europe. He believes that it would benefit progressive groups, "in the interests of harmony," for liberals to "argue their case for diversity" but that they should "tolerate difference of opinion and accept compromise."

Kaufmann's strategic approach and suggestions run counter to the thinking of many others.

In an essay published in Time in September, "Don't Let the Loud Bigots Distract You. America's Real Problem With Race Cuts Far Deeper," Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., a professor of religion and African-American studies at Princeton, argued that the media and many political analysts reached the wrong conclusion after the 2016 election by claiming:

that more attention needed to be given to the dire circumstances of working white men and women, that Trump's election was a white, working-class, often rural backlash and what was needed was a focus on Middle America. This criticism coalesced with an ongoing obsession about what suburban white America was thinking.

It felt, Glaude wrote, "like folks weren't fighting the true problem. They were, in fact, protecting it."

Lynn Vavreck — a political scientist at U.C.L.A. and one of the authors of one of the most influential books on the 2016 election, "Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America" — is also looking at the recent rightward drift in the United States. She believes that developments in contemporary politics are not in any sense racially neutral but instead amount to "hostility or fear of outgroups."

One of the key attitudes revealed in survey data linked to support for Trump has been the "fear of losing your job to a minority," Vavreck wrote me by email. In addition, 64 percent of Trump voters believed that "average Americans" have gotten "less than they deserve" but "only 12 percent said black Americans have gotten less than they deserve."

Vavreck argues that whatever identity exists at present among whites as a group is largely based on ideas about deservingness, and centers on outgroups getting too much or taking too much that is not due to them.

Lawrence Bobo, the W.E.B. Du Bois professor of social science at Harvard, is also far from agreeing that more accommodation should be granted to the white working class, arguing that intractable racism, in one form or another, continues to pervade American politics.

In a 2017 paper, "[Racism in Trump's America: Reflections on Culture, Sociology, and the 2016 US Presidential Election](#)," he suggests that contemporary racial conflict can be described as "laissez-faire racism."

Laissez-faire racism, he argues, identifies this new era as one where longstanding values of meritocracy, individualism, majority rule and competition in a free marketplace weave together as rationalization for persistent racial inequality in a putatively anti-discrimination, race-neutral democratic state.

In a 2018 paper, "[Immigration and Redistribution](#)," Alberto Alesina, Armando Miano and Stefanie Stantcheva, who are all economists at Harvard, point to the costs of ignoring majority opinion on public policy matters that affect redistribution — policies that arguably have a disproportionate ethnic or racial impact. The three authors found that merely prompting "respondents to think about immigration and immigrants' characteristics generates a significant negative effect on support for redistribution."

They surveyed 22,500 people in France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Britain and the United States and found that

respondents greatly overestimate the total number of immigrants, think immigrants are culturally and religiously more distant from them, and are economically weaker — less educated, more unemployed, poorer, and more reliant on government transfers — than is the case.

When shown more accurate — and more positive — information about the hard work performed by immigrants, respondents "become significantly more favorable to redistribution." But that did not last long:

If respondents are also first prompted to think in detail about immigrants' number and composition, then none of the favorable information treatments is able to compensate for the negative priors that resurface and that lower support for redistribution.

In other words, pro-immigration, pro-diversity Democrats face clear obstacles breaking the Republican hold on white voters — and a challenge in repelling Trump's race-and-immigration-focused offensive. Still, the accumulating insights on how and where Republicans have successfully worked these levers may help demonstrate — as President Barack Obama, President Bill Clinton and the results of this year's midterm elections prove — that these obstacles are not insuperable and that they can be overcome.