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Reading Response 1

<u>Thinking about the "Diploma Divide"</u>

In reading "Identity Crisis," what I found most interesting was my own self-reflection on the ways in which my beliefs were shaped by Trump's election. The morning after Trump's victory the halls of my high school were filled with Trump signs, "Make America Great Again" hats, and cheers of joy abundant in the. However, my AP level classes saw a vastly different scene, with many of my classmates nearly in tears. My school was a microcosm of the polarization being seen across the nation, and it was fascinating seeing how students in higher level courses were abundantly more upset about the election's outcome.

In my time at Bowdoin, I have found myself questioning and challenging the beliefs of my extended family members who do not hold a college degree in a way I never did in high school. One of the hardest parts of this has been trying to engage in an open conversation that does not make me sound elitist, or like I am trying to pick a fight, since my college education is what shaped my current views. Thus, the argument in "Identity Crisis" that resonated with me was the analysis of the 'diploma divide' between Clinton and Trump voters. While there has been evidence that people with a higher level of education lean more liberal for decades, one of the core messages of the book is how in the 2016 election, Trump was able to "activate people's pre-existing views of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities" rather than actually changing them. Opinions about identity politics were the basis of both Clinton and Trump's campaigns, with Democrats reacting to Trump's identity-driven agenda with their own identity based politics.

Chapter 8 of "Identity Crisis" explains how "white voters with less formal college education" helped Trump win "important battleground states including Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Ohio" (155). The motivation for these voters can be explained by matters related to identity more than anything else, primarily racial issues and immigration. One statistic I found shocking was that 42 percent of people who reported voting in 2016 were whites with no college degree, while 31 percent were whites with a college degree (163). The statistic is not only much higher

than I would have guessed, but also succinctly helps frame the argument that the diploma divide explains the shift in votes to Trump more than anything else--there were simply a lot of whites without a college degree in the voting pool, meaning they were the largest base of people for Trump to motivate. And he did exactly that. In continuing to research the degree to which the diploma divide was present in the 2016 election, I found this article from fivethirtyeight which shows how Clinton's margin of voters improved in "48 of the 50 most educated counties" while collapsing in the 50 least educated counties. The opposite trend was found for Trump, and interestingly, he was more popular than Romney in counties with high income but medium income. This supports the argument presented in the book that racialized income was not as strong of an indicator for Trump votes as racialized education. In other words, whites with low levels of education shifted to Trump regardless of their income.

This trend has continued into the presidency, with the midterm elections being a great example. In fact, of the 34 house districts that democrats picked up from Republicans, 29 "are in the top half among all house districts for educational attainment" [Pew Research Center]. This level of educational attainment means that more than 30% of adults have a bachelor's or more advanced degree. So, what does this mean for the 2020 election? Studies have shown that Trump's key voter base, whites without a college degree, have shrunk in terms of percentage of eligible voters due to increasing diversity--demographic cohorts including "whites with a college degree, Latinos and, to a lesser extent, Asian Americans and other groups" have all gone up. While this does not necessarily reflect who will show up to the polls, it does mean that Trump will have to appeal to more college-educated whites and minorities. Still, beyond any statistic, my biggest takeaway from the diploma divide is the reason Trump resonated with working-class whites. Let us not forget the anger of many of these voters that Trump capitalized on: their alienation, dwindling educational and career opportunities, and dwindling hope for a better future.

Articles Cited:

1. https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/education-not-income-predicted-who-would-vote-for-trump/

2. https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/09/10/voters-attitudes-about-race-and-gender-are-even-more-divided-than-in-2016/