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Introduction

In November 2016, during the United States presidential elections, Republican Donald Trump won the electoral vote in a historical upset over his favored opponent, Democrat Hillary Clinton. Almost a year and a half into the Trump presidency, Americans are still grappling with how—and why—Trump was elected. How did a candidate with no political experience beat out an opponent whose resume touted former member of Congress, First Lady, and Secretary of State?

The answer to this question is not simple, nor limited to one explanation. We may never really know exactly how Trump was able to rally a group of people who usually do not vote (poor whites) into showing up at the polls. More puzzling still is how he managed to convert voters who had previously voted for Barack Obama into supporters of his campaign.

There are questions about one specific demographic group who tended to favor Trump, however, that may find answers within the realm of political psychology. Post-election polls show that by a slim margin, more white women voted for Trump than for Clinton. How could this be, when time and time again, Trump made blatantly sexist and misogynistic remarks about women before and during his campaign? Why did white women prefer Trump when the very candidate he was running against was a white woman herself?

The topic of social justification theory may be a place to start. Social justification theory (SJT) posits that people have underlying needs to legitimate and justify the status quo by adhering to certain social, political, and economic ideologies as a method of satisfying troubling cognitive dissonances. SJT is utilized among both high-status (Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007) and low-status (Sengupta & Sibley, 2013) members of groups. Therefore, SJT may help to explain Trump's unexpected election outcome by understanding the power dynamics of groups—in this case, the Republican Party.

Historically, the GOP has been a perpetrator of oppressive "tradition," including upholding the status of white men as the sole benefiters of ingrained cultural institutions such as racism, sexism, and xenophobia. Women of the Republican Party, as gender minorities (within the Republican group *and* as members of American society on the whole), may be defined as low-status members of the Republican Party. As such, they may be bound by their positions partially through system justification—they must externally and internally justify their unequal position within their party.

Furthermore, SJT asserts that low-status members of minority groups may implicitly favor other, high-status groups (Sengupta & Sibley, 2013). As low-status members of the Republican Party, women's voting behavior in the 2016 election showed preference for high-status members of their group: Republican men (or, Donald Trump). To put it broadly, internalized cultural biases and the perpetuation of such biases are a way of maintaining the status quo.

A number of experimental and non-experimental studies have been conducted around the topic of system justification. For the purposes of this paper, there are two in

particular that are worth mentioning.

In an experiment, Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen (2007) found that system justification leads to decreased moral outrage (anger at injustice), and that such decreased moral outrage leads to decreased support for helping others. The authors demonstrated that specifically, participants (N = 108) who exhibited increased rates of moral outrage tended to support policies for fairer college admissions. Decreased support was mediated by decreased moral outrage.

Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen also demonstrated that priming participants in a high system-justification condition (presenting them with "rags-to-riches stories of heroic achievement") versus a low system-justification condition (presenting them with "stories of innocent victims") mediated reported emotional distress and the likelihood for supporting community service programs. Furthermore, when negative affect (emotional distress) was measured, the authors found that such affect toward a group increased support for helping, and negative affect toward the self decreased this support.

Such findings provide a window into why white women voted for Trump, simply because these data demonstrate that higher system justification dampens moral outrage. Women who engage in system justification may be able to internally satisfy cognitive dissonance about some of the policies Trump supported or statements he made (e.g., opposition to access to birth control and abortion, admitting to groping women). When moral outrage is controlled, women may be able to decrease support for fellow women and other minority members by supporting the Republican Party and voting for Trump (arguably a type of antithesis for supporting social and political policies that benefit those

who are disadvantaged).

In another study, Sengupta & Sibley (2013) demonstrated that intergroup contact between a disadvantaged group (the Maori of New Zealand) and a dominant group (European New Zealanders) was found to actually decrease support (among disadvantaged group members) of a governmental policy that would actually benefit them (redistribution of land).

Such findings are supported by the "equality-of-meritocracy" ideology, which is the belief that inequality arises from individual differences rather than historically based group differences. Additionally, endorsement of this ideology is associated with higher rates of system justification.

The findings of this study are also pertinent to the topic at hand, because (as previously mentioned), low-status Republican women frequently have contact with high-status members of the Republican Party: men. This is especially salient when such a woman is in a heterosexual marriage, and may frequently employ system justification ideologies to account for constant exposure to the inequality of "traditional" marriages so heavily endorsed by the Republican Party (e.g., women as homemakers and subservient, men as breadwinners).

Furthering the aforementioned topics and research discussed thus far, the proposed research in this paper appropriately follows as such: it is an attempt to find a correlation between economic and gender system justification levels and a specific demographic of women who voted in the 2016 presidential election. The target demographic of this study is white, married, Republican women who voted for Donald

Trump. Compared to unmarried white women and married women of color, do they exhibit lower levels of system justification? That is to say, as low status members of both the Republican Party and their heterosexual marriages, are they more likely to place greater emphasis on the status quo and attempt to preserve as such by having voted for Trump?

Hypothesis

Based on previous research findings, I predict that white, married Republican women who voted for Trump will show a higher endorsement of system justification than other demographic characteristics of women who voted in the 2016 presidential election, including white, married, Democratic women (or women who voted for Clinton in this same group), women of color who are married, unmarried white women, and unmarried women of color.

Variables

Independent variable

My independent variable is the previously defined target sample (to reiterate: white, straight, married women who are Republican and voted for Trump in 2016). I will measure these via self-reporting on the survey.

Dependent variable

My dependent variable is levels of system justification among this target

population—if a white woman who is married to a Republican man, then she may have lower levels of SJ and thus be more likely to have supported Donald Trump during the election. I will measure these via the economic and gender system justification scales.

Method

Participants

The target population, as I have mentioned, is white, married, heterosexual women who are Republicans and who voted for Trump. However, I would also need information from women who do not fit into this demographic as a measure of finding comparable correlational differences. The rule of thumb for a valid and reliable study is 25–30 participants, but a larger sample is always better.

Exclusionary criteria would include anyone who is not a woman or who did not vote in the 2016 presidential election.

Materials and Procedure

This research would be a non-experimental study, meaning that I will not be attempting to manipulate any variables, but instead collect information and use it to attempt to find any statistically significant correlations between system justification and voting behavior, party alignment, and demographics.

The method of data collection would be a survey administered online, through a software that administers survey formats, such as Google Forms or Surveymonkey.

Part one would collect demographic information (race, gender, age, marriage

status). Part two would collect voting information (party affiliation, party affiliation of spouse (if applicable), and voting record regarding the 2016 presidential election. All identifying information (e.g. name) would not be asked in assuring participant confidentiality. Part three (the final section) would include two system justification scales, specifically the Economic System Justification Scale (ESJS) (Jost & Thompson, 2000) and the Gender System Justification Scale (GSJS) (Jost & Kay, 2005).

The ESJC measures attitudes in regard to economic policy, wealth, poverty, and fairness of existing economic systems. It is comprised of 17 items; participants are asked to agree with statements on a Likert scale of 1–7 (1 being *strongly disagree* and 7 being *strongly agree*). Some items are reverse-coded. The measure includes statements such as "Most people who don't get ahead in our society should not blame the system; they have only themselves to blame," and "Social class differences reflect differences in the natural order of things."

The GSJC measures attitudes in regard to gender equality and gender roles. The GSJC is comprised of 8 items; participants are asked to agree with statements on a Likert scale of 1–7 (1 being *strongly agree* and 7 being *strongly disagree*). Some items are reverse-coded. The measure includes statements such as "In general, relations between men and women are fair", and "Everyone (male or female) has a fair shot and wealth and happiness."

Expected Results

I believe there will be a statistically significant positive correlation between white

married women who voted for Trump and lower levels of SJ (to clarify, lower levels on the measurements, corresponding to 1 equaling *strongly agree* on the Likert scale, mean that an individual expresses higher endorsements of system justification ideology) on both the ESJS and the GSJS. Conversely, I also believe that there will be a statistically significant negative correlation between white, married Democrat women, unmarried Democratic women, and both married and unmarried women of color and lower levels of SJ on both the ESJS and GSJS. I cannot predict the correlation between unmarried, white Republican women.

Possible Limitations

There are multiple issues that might threaten the validity and reliability of this study. Most importantly, there are mediating factors that may affect voting behavior and reports of system justification. There are a number of complicated reasons that one chooses to marry another—one may be similar political values and ideologies. Therefore, the positive correlation between white married Republican women and stronger endorsements of SJ values may not be mediated by marriage, as that woman may have chosen to marry her husband *because* and *not in spite of* his own values.

Furthermore, as a young Democrat living in New York City (a liberal bubble), I may have limitations in reaching my target demographic. I know very few Republicans. Furthermore, if I recruit people known to me, they may change their answers on the ESJS and GSJS with the fact in mind that I would be looking at and coding their responses, regardless of anonymity. They might also misreport whom they voted for.

Finally, the fact that white women favored Trump (albeit by a slim majority) may have nothing to do with psychology and everything to do with politics. During and after the election, the Clinton campaign was criticized for not reaching out to and campaigning in critical swing areas, in which Trump ultimately won. Women may have voted for Trump in these areas simply because Clinton failed to effectively reach out to them. There were also a number of political scandals that occurred during this time for both candidates. The fact that then-FBI director James Comey announced he would conduct an investigation into Clinton's private email account less than two weeks before the election almost certainly affected voting outcomes out of her favor. Finally, there is the question of Russian meddling in the election. While it's common knowledge now that Russia certainly infiltrated the campaign (for example, trolling Facebook with bots), we do not know if they actually infiltrated the election. It's not out of the realm of possibility that voting numbers for Trump were bumped up through some sort of hacking by the Russians, as most voting districts now count votes electronically.

All in all, I believe this research proposal holds potential promise. However, in order for survey results to really count, a number of mediating factors must be controlled for. It may be possible in the future to conduct a more in-depth study that accounts for possible outside variables, although it would take many people, a large sample, and experienced analysts to find and interpret valuable information.

References

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