

Rasim Alam

12/06/2020

Question: Is President Trump's voting support driven by '*racial resentment*'? Assess this argument in the literature and the U.S. evidence for and against this claim.

Explaining the Trump Vote: Does Racial Resentment Drive Support for Trump?

The 2020 US Presidential Election has been surprising in many ways. The polls, which were under scrutiny in 2016, has once more proven to be unrepresentative of the electorate support for Donald Trump in 2020. And although President Trump did not win re-election, the 74 million plus votes he earned, despite a botched coronavirus response, numerous scandals, and impeachment, were unprecedented. The president began his 2016 campaign partially as a response to President Obama's presidency, and as recent financial documents from the New York Times has shown, partly because of financial difficulties.¹ His campaign rhetoric has often been anti-immigrant: building a wall on the Southern border for example. His actions in office have also raised concerns about worsening xenophobia in the country. President Trump signed a "Muslim Ban" in 2017 barring citizen of several Muslim majority countries to enter the US indefinitely, a ban that persists at the writing of this paper.² And this year, while the country mourned the extrajudicial killing of George Floyd, sparking several protests across the country, President Trump focused on "looters" in Minneapolis.³ Despite this pattern of racial antagonism, President Trump's total votes have increased in 2020, and his vote share among minorities has increased as well. Is the Trump electorate voting for the President despite his anti-immigrant remarks and policies? Or does part of the electorate vote for him because of his

¹ Buettner, Russ, and Susanne Craig. "\$421 Million in Debt: Trump Calls It 'a Peanut,' but Challenges Lie Ahead." *The New York Times*, October 16, 2020, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/16/us/trump-taxes.html>.

² Hauslohner, Abigail. "Undoing Trump's 'Muslim Ban' Could Take Minutes, but Results Could Take Months or Years." *Washington Post*. Accessed December 5, 2020. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/12/02/biden-trump-muslim-travel-ban/>.

³ Astor, Maggie. "What Trump, Biden and Obama Said About the Death of George Floyd." *The New York Times*, May 29, 2020, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/29/us/politics/george-floyd-trump-biden-obama.html>.

attitude towards race and immigration? This paper studies racial resentment in the Trump electorate, using data from the ANES 2020 pilot survey.

Literature Review:

In their 2018 study, Hooghe and Dassonneville finds that racial resentment issues and anti-immigrant sentiments are important predictors of the Trump vote, even when they controlled for partisanship and trust in government.⁴ Although, the study only included data from 600 people who answered questions on political trust and anti-immigrant sentiments. The paper opposes the theory that the Trump vote was a “protest vote” against the establishment. The racial resentment and anti-immigration effects were present in Democratic voters as well as Independents and Republicans. Brian et al. (2018) corroborates this finding, and further argues that even if explicit racist statements cost Trump some votes among educated Whites, it won him more support among non-college educated whites.⁵

However, the racial resentment thesis has its limits. Some of the white voters who voted for Trump in 2016 actually voted for President Obama in 2008 and 2012. Of the 700 counties that Obama won twice, 194 went to Trump in 2016.⁶ Some of these counties were in key swing state such as WI, OH, and PA. The argument is that it may not have been the *racist appeal* of the Trump campaign that won people over. Rather it was other issues: dislike of Secretary Clinton, lost faith in Washington elites, economic disenfranchisement, and so on. Donald Trump also won a smaller share of the white vote in 2016 than Mitt Romney did in 2012, and therefore Trump did not seem to mobilize a hidden White vote motivated by racial resentment.⁷ Al Gharbi (2018) explores fallacies in the study of the 2016 elections, and the confirmation biases in some of the research about racial resentment and support for the Trump presidency. He finds from a case study of Wood

⁴ Hooghe, Marc, and Dassonneville, Ruth. "Explaining the Trump Vote: The Effect of Racist Resentment and Anti-Immigrant Sentiments." PS, Political Science & Politics 51, no. 3 (2018): 528-34.

⁵ Schaffner, Brian F, Macwilliams, Matthew, and Nteta, Tatishe. "Understanding White Polarization in the 2016 Vote for President: The Sobering Role of Racism and Sexism." Political Science Quarterly 133, no. 1 (2018): 9-34.

⁶ Uhrmacher, K., Schaul, K., & Keating, D. (2016). These former Obama strongholds sealed the election for Trump. Washington Post. November 9

⁷ al-Gharbi, M. (2015b). White people are not the enemy. Salon, 25 August.

(2017) in *The Washington Post*⁸ that authoritarian sentiments and a derived racial sentiment (called the SRS) score both were lower in 2016 for Trump voters than they were in 2012 for Romney voters. This data from the ANES time series study shows that Trump voters harbored less authoritarian and less racist views in 2016 than in 2012.⁹

Furthermore, in 2020, early exit poll data showed that non-college educated white voters shifted towards the Democratic vote.¹⁰ This further complicates the issue of the racial resentment argument. Have white voters finally had enough of Trump's racist rhetoric? Or are non-voters who previously paid little attention to politics voting in higher numbers to oust Trump? Non-college educated non-white voters have, ironically, shifted towards Republicans, especially Asians and Hispanics; Hispanics have shifted towards Trump by 8 percentage points.¹¹ However, it is not impossible that these groups can also harbor racist sentiments towards other minorities.

There are two questions of importance here: have racial resentment in 2016 among Trump voters comparable to those of previous years? Abramowitz and McCoy (2018) find that the Trump campaign exploited identity cleavages that were growing within the electorate for decades.¹² Secondly, was racial resentment a driving force for the Trump vote in 2020?

Data and Methodology

I use data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) pilot survey conducted in July 2020 with 3080 respondents to explore the influence of racial resentment on support for Trump in 2020. Since post-election exit poll data are yet not released, I will be using the ANES pre-election survey. The outcome

⁸ Thomas Wood, "Racism motivated Trump voters more than authoritarianism," *Washington Post*, 17 April 2017

⁹ Al Gharbi, Musa. "Race and the Race for the White House: On Social Research in the Age of Trump." *The American Sociologist* 49, no. 4 (2018): 496-519.

¹⁰ Burn-Murdoch, John, and Christine Zhang. "By Numbers: How the US Voted in 2020," November 7, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/69f3206f-37a7-4561-bebf-5929e7df850d>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Abramowitz, Alan, and McCoy, Jennifer. "United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump's America." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (2018): 137-56.

variable is derived from the respondent's support for candidate Trump and support for candidate Biden before July, when other candidates were also competing in the primaries. Respondents who supported Trump on the ANES Fahrenheit scale more than Biden was scored "one", and the others were scored "zero". With this outcome variable, several survey questions were condensed into singular predictors. These predictors include conservatism, partisanship intensity, rural resentment, economic frustrations, and worries about the impact of Covid-19 on health and the economy. Some of these predictors are created by averaging respondents' ratings on a Likert scale. Factors that are important to single-issue voters were also included: support for abortion rights, opposition to multiculturalism, and opposition to affirmative action. Lastly, one predictor for racial resentment towards African Americans and another for anti-immigration views were created from the survey answers pertaining to these issues. Hispanic, African American, and Caucasian race dummy variables were created, with all other races as the reference category.

I use logistic regression to study the inference between support for Trump and all the predictors mentioned above. The cutoff point for statistic significance was determined at the 5 percent level, and the McFadden's Pseudo R-Squared was used to check model fit. It is important to note that McFadden's Pseudo R-Squared differs from R-Squared model fit. Generally, 0.2 to 0.4 McFadden's R-Squared score is considered a good fit for the model.

The survey was conducted four months before the election was held in November 2020, and therefore the views of the respondents may have changed, especially given the rising death toll of the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the results of this study must be considered in this context. Furthermore, those respondents who did not respond to the Fahrenheit score for Trump or Biden were removed from the dataset. These responses may have not been missing at random. Although only 28 observations were removed, and this should not affect the overall results of the model. The final dataset contains 3052 observations.

Results and Discussion

The results suggest that racial resentment towards African Americans and anti-immigration views, often targeted towards Hispanics, is positive correlated with support for Trump. This association persist even when a wide range of issues and demographic factors are accounted for: age, gender, income, education, race, partisanship, ideology, economic and other frustrations, Covid-19 worries, and single-issue factors such as support for abortion and affirmative action.

Model 1 shows that when only demographic data is used, we see expected results. Women are less likely to vote for Trump. College-educated voters are less likely. Hispanics and African Americans are less likely to vote for Trump, but Caucasians are more likely. When partisanship and ideology predictors are included in Model 2, all the former associations persist except education. In Model 3, I added the respondent's frustrations with the economy, their views on Trump's tax cuts, views on the government's treatment of rural versus urban communities, and lastly fears about the impact of Covid-19 on the respondent's personal health and the economy. I find that the previous associations change markedly. Previous correlations with demographic factors no longer apply except those of race. Instead, the primary factors that influence support for President trump are economic frustrations, views on tax cuts, and the degree of conservatism. This result shows that the partisan divide is the primary factor for supporting Trump. The economic frustrations and partisanship on the conservatism-liberalism scale are closely related. 84 percent of Trump voters in the Presidential elections thought that the condition of the economy was excellent, whereas 87 percent of Biden voters thought the economy was doing poorly.¹³ The same partisan divide exists regarding respondents' views on the Trump administration's Covid-19 response. An overwhelming 91 percent of Trump voters believed the high Coronavirus cases were not a factor in influencing their vote. Among Biden voters, 61 percent said it was the most important factor.¹⁴ Model 3 shows no association with frustrations regarding Covid-19 and support for Trump; this is perhaps because the partisanship variable adequately accounts for this split among Republican and Democratic voters.

¹³ "National Results 2020 President Exit Polls." CNN Exit Polls. Accessed December 6, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/election/2020/exit-polls/president/national-results>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

In Model 4, factors that influence single-issue voters were added such as support for abortion, views on affirmative action, and views on multiculturalism and diversity were included. All three variables were strongly correlated with support for Trump along with the previous factors in Model 3. Those who oppose affirmative action and multiculturalism were more likely to support Trump. Expectedly, those who are for abortion rights are much less likely to support Trump. These factors are, of course, related to racial resentment. Affirmative action is frequently under attack for providing benefits to African Americans. The multiculturalism question asks whether growing diversity makes the United States a better place to live, and the results suggests voters who support Trump do not support more diversity in American communities.

Model 5 includes direct data on racial resentment and anti-immigration views. The racial resentment variable is created from four questions regarding the influence of racial discrimination in determining the opportunities available for African Americans. Similarly, the anti-immigration sentiment variable is created from three survey questions regarding criminal penalties for undocumented immigrants, pathway to citizenship, and deportation of unauthorized immigrants. Both predictors are strongly associated with support for Trump. Voters that believe African Americans do not experience systemic racism and racial bias, and do not require “special favors” are much more likely to support Trump. Similarly, voters who support criminal penalties and forced deportations of undocumented immigrants, and do not support pathways to citizenship, are strongly correlated with support for Trump. In Model 5, with all the predictors accounted in the model, only race, conservatism, economic factors taxations, and views on abortion are the other predictors that are statistically significant. Interestingly, views on affirmative action and multiculturalism are no longer statistically significant at the 5 percent level. As discussed before, these predictors are strongly correlated with racial resentment and views on immigration, the latter predictors explain the association with support for Trump in lieu of the former.

Conclusion

After accounting for demographic data and views on a wide range of issues, my analysis finds that racial resentment against minorities are strongly associated with support for Trump. Whether these issues are

the primary driver for Trump's support is unclear. Intention of the voter is difficult to establish. However, my analysis confirms the importance of racial resentment, economic frustrations, and controversial issues such as abortion rights for Trump supporters, while highlighting issues that are less important for voters such as Covid-19 fears and rural resentment. My analysis also does not determine whether racial resentment has exacerbated among Trump voters compared to 2016 and 2012. However, this study establishes a robust positive association between racial resentment towards African Americans, opposition to immigration, and support for Trump.

Interestingly, frustrations regarding Covid-19 were not negatively associated with support for Trump. As explained before, since views on both the economic crisis from the pandemic and the public health response are divided across partisan lines among US voters, the partisanship variables capture this information better in predicting support for Trump.

The 2020 election exit polls show greater support for Trump among minorities, especially among Hispanics and Asians. In fact, Trump has gained more votes with every demographic except White men.¹⁵ This trend suggests that there is more to Trump's appeal than race issues that is attractive even to minorities. Nevertheless, Trump's dog whistle remarks regarding immigrants, Muslims, and other minorities in the are clearly not grounds for dismissal for many of his voters. And neither are his policies that discriminate against these minorities. The exit poll data also shows that conservatives and liberals live in two different realities. This is especially concerning regarding views on race, as 91 percent of conservatives do not think racism is an issue in the United States at all.¹⁶ The most important development in recent years is this deep divide between conservatives and liberals in essentially any issue that concerns the nation. And racial resentment and immigration issues are deeply connected to this demographic divide. Further research is required to study if

¹⁵ Jacob Jarvis "Donald Trump Made Gains in Every Demographic except for White Men." Newsweek, November 5, 2020. <https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-support-demographics-white-men-exit-poll-1545144>.

¹⁶ "National Results 2020 President Exit Polls." CNN Exit Polls. Accessed December 6, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/election/2020/exit-polls/president/national-results>.

these differences in race issues have exacerbated between conservatives and liberals, especially after the contentious George Floyd protests that have surely left a mark in the American conversation regarding race.

Fig1: Explaining the Trump vote (July 2020 ANES pilot survey)

Logistic Regression	Model 1 Demographics		Model 2 +Ideology		Model 3 +Frustrations		Model 4 +Single-Issue		Model 5 +Racial Resentment	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B.	S.E.
Age	0.01*	0.00	-0.01**	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.00
Female	-0.26** *	0.07	-0.21*	0.10	-0.07	0.10	-0.06	0.10	-0.04	0.12
Income	0.02**	0.01	0.02**	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Education	-0.08**	0.02	-0.03	0.03	-0.06	0.03	-0.05	0.03	-0.08	0.12
Hispanic	-0.53** *	0.12	-0.44**	0.14	-0.47**	0.16	-0.45**	0.16	-0.38*	0.16
Caucasian	0.21**	0.08	0.25**	0.09	0.30**	0.10	0.28**	0.10	0.24*	0.11
African American	-0.174* **	0.23	-1.64***	0.25	-1.62***	0.26	-1.59***	0.27	-1.46***	0.28
Partisanship Strength			0.12**	0.04	0.07	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.03	0.05
Conservatism			0.62***	0.03	0.51***	0.03	0.41***	0.03	0.34***	0.03
Rural Resentment					0.04	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.07	0.05
Economic Frustration					-0.57***	0.06	-0.52***	0.06	-0.51***	0.06
Oppose Tax-Cuts					-0.64***	0.04	-0.57***	0.04	-0.50***	0.04
Covid-19 (Not Worried)					-0.08	0.05	-0.07	0.06	-0.02	0.06
Oppose Affirmative Action							0.13***	0.03	0.03	0.03
Oppose Multiculturalism							0.18***	0.04	0.04	0.04
Support Abortion							-0.26***	0.02	-0.25***	0.03
Racial Resentment towards African Americans									0.48***	0.07
Anti-immigration Views									0.51***	0.07
Constant	-0.25	0.29	-2.68***	0.25	1.83***	0.42	1.77***	0.44	-0.62	0.48
Pseudo R-Squared	0.04		0.22		0.37		0.41		0.44	
N	3052		3052		3052		3052		3052	

signif. codes: 0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1