Sociological Forum

Sociological Forum, Vol. 35, No. S1, September 2020
DOI: 10.1111/socf.12600

Race, Immigration, and Support for Donald Trump: Evidence From the 2018 North Carolina Election

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One of the longest standing debates in political sociology and political science concerns how people deploy identities and social cues to form political opinions. This debate turns on questions such as, is opinion formation essentially about social class, racial identification, or about other forms of identity or interest? Using original polling data from North Carolina, we model approval for President Trump in the run-up to the 2018 midterm elections. Our findings show that support for Trump and the policies associated with his administration were highly connected to support for one policy that was particularly salient during that campaign—that is, the border wall. Among White respondents, support for the wall is strongly connected with perceptions of group threat; however, among Black respondents, group threat is unconnected with support for the wall and therefore for Trump and Trump-related policies. Consistent with prior work on identity and political views, we theorize that cultural identification as a Trump supporter through one key issue serves as a learning mechanism through which voters develop support for other associated policies.

KEY WORDS: bias; immigration; policy; race; Trump; voting.

INTRODUCTION

A central question in voting research concerns how ideas, identities, and social cues shape political opinions and ultimately vote choices. How do voters distill information and ideas coming from the media? What cues do they use to grant their loyalty to one or another candidate or movement? Do they arrive at policy positions first, then find a candidate who approximates those policies? Or is their choice more a function of social identity or cultural identification?

Much of the commentary around the watershed 2016 election concerned the "white working class" (WWC). By attracting the votes of this group, the conventional wisdom holds, Donald Trump first won the Republican nomination and then the presidency. The WWC narrative was bolstered by the fact that the three states key to his narrow victory (Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin), as well as other swing states such as North Carolina, were "rust belt" states in which Trump campaigned explicitly for these votes (Perrin 2018).

Analysis since the election suggests that the WWC explanation is, at best, only one among several plausible explanations for what was a narrow, geographically specific victory. However, it was a key part of the Trump victory (Fuist and

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Williams 2019; Morgan 2018; Morgan and Lee 2018), and it raises several important questions that are important to answer as we think about future elections.

The theory underlying the WWC hypothesis is one of group threat. As Hochschild (2016) puts it in her elaboration of the "deep story" her respondents affirmed, White working-class male voters understand themselves to be waiting patiently "in line," while people unlike them (African Americans, immigrants, even women) are given opportunities to "jump" the line. Leaving aside the accuracy of this perception, it reveals connections between social class, race, and gender in voters' affiliations.

Beyond the specific question of the WWC, the 2016 election saw unusually quick realignments among policy positions among both Republicans and Democrats. For example, Trump's coalition resulted in conservative voters (and leaders) endorsing international isolationism and increased deficits—both positions more commonly associated with the political left. At the same time, Democrats and liberals became defenders of free trade, a position previously endorsed by conservatives. Again, these quick shifts suggest that most voters do not adopt policy positions first, then search for the candidate who most closely approximates those positions. Rather, voters' affiliations—race, class, gender, as well as cultural identification with movements or candidates—may help drive their attitudes toward policy questions.

Building on that insight, we examine the relationships between group threat, economic security, support for President Trump, and support for Trump-related policies. We use public-opinion polling data we collected for this study in North Carolina in the weeks leading up to the pivotal 2018 midterm elections.

SOCIAL IDENTITY AND VOTER BEHAVIOR

At least since *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960), the reigning assumption is that characteristics of individuals—demographics, education, parental political identification, and similar—drive their decisions of whether to vote and for whom. However, less research focuses on how *competing* characteristics affect vote choice or how the interplay between personal characteristics and the political environment affects these choices. When confronted with a choice between race and class, for example, how does one become more salient than the other? And what combinations of identification, policy preference, and learning come together to form support for political movements or candidates?

In the opening decades of the twenty-first century, these questions of identification have become central to political studies (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018). Racial differences in the interpretation and psychological response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Perrin and Smolek 2009), and the increasing polarization of political orientations after those attacks (e.g., Hetherington and Weiler 2018; Perrin 2005) set the tone for a divisive public sphere focused in particular on race, class, and religion. The election of the first Black president, Barack Obama, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis once again highlighted the intersection of race and class.

Jardina (2019) argues that "white racial solidarity is a pivotal factor in contemporary electoral politics" in the post-2016 era.

A series of books on the WWC (among others, Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016; Williams 2017) show that conservative identification during the Obama administration took on an explicitly racialized character. Examining the dynamics of candidate appeals, Hahl, Kim, and Zuckerman Sivan (2018) show that in highly divided social situations, some groups prefer candidates they see as authentic, even if they know the candidate to be lying. Experiencing group threat from stigmatized immigrant groups leads to voting for far-right parties (Green et al. 2016), and some voters even change the salience of identities to match their political views (Egan 2019). Perrin, Roos, and Gauchat (2014) theorize that cultural identification with a political movement—in their case, the Tea Party—represents an opportunity for political learning based on group cohesion (Huddy 2015). People develop support for the movement through a particular political or cultural preference, then once in the movement, they learn preferences on other political questions.

Dynamics like this, in reaction to Obama's administration, particularly through the Tea Party (Parker and Barreto 2013) and increasing authoritarian attraction to the Republican Party (Hetherington and Weiler 2018), set the stage for the 2016 election. That election was marked by particular emphasis on race, ethnicity, gender, and social class. When announcing his candidacy, Donald Trump blamed Mexican immigrants for a range of social ills in the United States, and soon thereafter he called for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on." Trump's call to "build a wall" on the Mexican border eventually became a central organizing theme at his rallies.

In this article, we examine the dynamics of identity and vote choice in a particularly important time and place: the 2018 midterm election campaign in North Carolina. To understand and anticipate the political climate in North Carolina, we use structural equation modeling and new polling data to estimate the effects of group threat on support for Trump and his policies. That is, we examine the extent to which support for Trump, as a cultural identification, explains support for his political positions. We also explore the extent to which these relationships are racialized via-à-vis an assessment of group differences between Black and White people.

NORTH CAROLINA IN 2018

Most states remain reliably "blue" or "red" across elections, and these political differences are often deep, revealing cultural differences in states' social organization (Frank 2004), and states' political environments have direct effects on how voters understand their own political identities (Feinberg et al. 2017). Many pundits and campaign strategists agree that the presidency is decided in "purple states": states evenly enough divided that they might go back and forth between "blue" and "red." North Carolina has been understood as a "swing" or "purple" state for the past several decades. Obama won the state narrowly in the 2008 election, then lost

it narrowly in 2012. In congressional elections since 1996, the Republican share of the statewide vote has ranged from a low of 45% in 2008 to a high of 55% in 2014.

North Carolina's congressional districts have repeatedly been the subject of controversy over gerrymandering, both before and after the 2010 election, when Republicans took the majority of both houses of the state legislature. In the state and congressional redistricting that followed that election, Republicans protected their gains through particularly skewed maps that are, as of this writing, the subject of open litigation (Daley 2017). Under those maps, Republicans won veto-proof "supermajorities" in both houses of the state legislature in 2016; they lost the supermajority in the state senate in 2018 but retained the majority.

The state features several major metropolitan areas (Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, Greensboro, Wilmington, and Asheville) as well as substantial industrial and agricultural rural areas. It has experienced dramatic population growth over the past several decades, increasing from 6 million residents in 1982 to 10.4 million in 2018, a rise of 72%. That has resulted in two additional seats in the U.S. House of Representatives: one added following the 1990 census and another following the 2000 census. The population is 22% Black, and the institutional and cultural history of the civil rights movement in North Carolina remains an important force in state politics. Most Black voters live in urban and suburban areas, though there is a significant Black rural population in the eastern part of the state.

Therefore, North Carolina is an excellent site for those interested in partisan voting trends. In this article we use new polling data from North Carolina to examine public opinion on key economic, racial, and ethnic questions, along with support for President Trump, in the immediate lead-up to the 2018 midterm election. While tracking political opinion in purple states is important, the 2018 midterm election was unusual in that there were no statewide races (what local pundits call a "blue moon" election). That is, neither of North Carolina's U.S. senators nor the governor was up for reelection, so all races on the ballot were relatively local; the largest districts were those for U.S. Congress. Democrats won a narrow victory (51.6%) in terms of the total number of votes received in contested House races, but due to gerrymandered districts, only 3 of the state's 13 seats remained Democratic. In addition, there were six ballot measures supported by the state's Republican legislative majority; of these, two were rejected, but four were approved.

The 2018 midterm elections also took place at an "unsettled time" (Swidler 1986) in North Carolina (and American) history. The partisan divide in the state had raised bitter debates over gerrymandering, transgender access to public restrooms, funding and governance of public universities, teacher pay, and many others. Understanding the dynamics of identity and voting decisions in 2018 provides a window into the ways these decisions may respond to different unsettled environments as well. As a swing state with demographic shifts mirroring many national trends, North Carolina is an excellent site for detailed political study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Building on these research traditions, we address a broad research question: What identities, experiences, and attitudes lead to support for Trump during a contested time, and how do these effects combine to form that support? We break down this question into several component questions, then recombine these into a unified model later in the article. The component questions are as follows:

- How does the experience and perception of group threat—composed of group-based discrimination as well as negative attitudes toward immigration—affect support for key "hot button" issues such as the border wall?
- How does support for particular issues relate to more general support for President Trump and the movement he heads?
- How does support for Trump, in turn, affect perceptions of policy and economic performance?
- How do these effects vary between racial groups?

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this study come from a telephone poll we commissioned in October 2018. On our behalf, Public Policy Polling, Inc. (PPP) contacted a random sample of North Carolina registered voters and requested that they take a short telephone survey. They also contacted an oversample of Black registered voters in order to achieve sufficient sample size for race-related questions. This was an interactive voice-response (IVR) survey, which typically yields low response rates but accurate results through weighting based on prior knowledge of nonrespondents (Perrin et al. 2014; Tourangeau, Steiger, and Wilson 2002). PPP has a strong reputation for accuracy and particularly strong knowledge of North Carolina for sampling and weighting purposes (Mahtesian 2012).

In this case, the response rate was 2.2% (1.8% for the Black oversample, 2.8% for the random sample), yielding a total respondent sample of 967 (542 Black, 420 White, and 5 unreported). PPP provided demographic and additional information on the entire sample (not just respondents), which allowed for reliable estimation of nonresponse. We weighted respondents by key demographic and political variables to represent the registered voting population of North Carolina. Data collection was approved under the institutional review board (IRB) at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and assigned protocol number 18-2356.

We asked respondents a series of questions concerning their support for Donald Trump, support for social and economic policies that are associated with the Trump administration, and gathered perspectives on immigrants and perceptions of racial discrimination. We assessed support for President Trump by asking respondents, "Do you approve or disapprove of President Donald Trump's job performance? If you approve, press 1. If you disapprove, press 2. If you're not sure, press 3." We asked about social, political, and economic policies that are associated with the Trump administration at both the local and national level. At the local level, we

assessed respondent support for an Amendment to the North Carolina State Constitution that would require voters to present a valid form of identification when voting. Our question was, "As you may know, there are several constitutional amendments on the NC ballot this fall, one of them would require voters to present a photo ID in order to vote. Do you support or oppose the NC Voter ID Amendment? If you support it, press 1. If you oppose it, press 2. If you're not sure, press 3."

We also assessed respondent support for building a wall between the United States and Mexico with the question, "Do you support or oppose building a wall along the border between Mexico and the United States? If you support building a wall along the border between Mexico and the US, press 1. If you oppose it, press 2. If you're not sure, press 3." We assessed perceptions of current economic policies with the question, "Overall, do you think the American economy is doing well or not? If you think the American economy is doing well, press 1. If not, press 2. If you're not sure, press 3" and "Some people say tariffs help protect American jobs, while others say that tariffs will hurt the American economy and workers. Do you support or oppose increasing tariffs for goods that are imported to the United States? If you support increasing tariffs for goods that are imported to the US, press 1. If you oppose it, press 2. If you're not sure, press 3."

We also asked respondents several questions about race and immigration. We assessed personal discrimination with the question, "How much discrimination have you personally experienced because of your race or ethnicity: a lot, some, or none at all? If you have experienced a lot of discrimination because of your race or ethnicity, press 1. If you've experienced only some discrimination, press 2. If none at all, press 3. If you're not sure, press 4." We assessed the perception of discrimination toward the respondents' racial group with the question, "Overall, do you believe people of your racial or ethnic group suffer more or less discrimination than people in other groups or about the same? If you believe people of your racial or ethnic group suffer more discrimination than others, press 1. If you believe they experience less discrimination, press 2. If you believe they experience about the same as others, press 3. If you're not sure, press 4." We assessed respondent attitudes toward immigrants with two questions: "In general, are immigrants making American society better, making it worse, or have they not made a difference? If you think immigrants are making American society better, press 1. If making it worse, press 2. If they haven't made a difference, press 3. If you're not sure, press 4" and "Does it bother you when you come into contact with immigrants or not? If it bothers you when you come into contact with immigrants, press 1. If not, press 2. If you're not sure, press 3."

METHODS

We developed post-stratification sampling weights that account for the fact that we oversampled black people and that our sample was either slightly over- and underrepresented on other key sample characteristics, including whom the respondent voted for in 2016, their gender, political party identification, and age cohort.

Since Blacks and Whites often have very different social experiences and political views, we observe these populations separately throughout the study.

We use structural equation models to estimate the pathways between group threat, support for Trump-identified policies, and support for Trump himself. Although we present findings from just one multiple group structural equation model, we analyzed models that assessed competing perspectives, but the model we present described underlying associations and patterns in the data most accurately (i.e., we present the model with the best model fit indices).

We begin by constructing a measure of group threat based on four questions from the survey: personally experienced discrimination because of race and ethnicity; belief that one's racial or ethnic group suffers discrimination; belief that immigrants are making American society worse; and being bothered by coming into contact with immigrants. We use structural equation modeling to assess these questions as indicators of a latent *group threat* variable.

Other variables in our model include approval of Donald Trump ("Do you approve or disapprove of President Donald Trump's job performance?"), perceptions of economic success under the Trump administration, and attitudes toward three policies identified with President Trump. Those policies are the border wall ("building a wall along the border between Mexico and the United States"); tariffs ("Do you support or oppose increasing tariffs for goods that are imported to the United States"); and voter identification requirements ("Do you support or oppose the North Carolina Voter ID Amendment?"). Measures of perception of economic performance are about the American economy ("Do you think the American economy is doing well or not?") and personal success ("Do you think you are better or worse off than you were 10 years ago?").

We estimated separate models for Black and White respondents in order to allow for the possibility that the pathways to support for Trump work differently for these racialized populations. That is, given the salience of race and ethnicity in the current political climate, we allow for the likelihood that race affects not just the weights of the pathways but also the structure of those pathways themselves. All models are adjusted using our post-stratification sampling weights to represent the population of registered North Carolina voters.

RESULTS

Table I contains weighted frequencies for the survey questions. It shows differences between our Black and White respondents. Since all of the variables were categorical, we assessed differences using a weighted or "design corrected" *F*-test that relies on the chi-square to assess statistical significance. The table shows that our Black and White respondents are different on just about every question, with the exception of whether they think contact with immigrants is bothersome, where the statistical significance is only marginal ($F = 2.34$, $p = .097$).[3] Our White respondents were much more likely to support the job performance of President Trump (62.9%)

[3] Note that although this statistical significance is marginal, it remains significant even with a fairly small sample size.

than were our Black respondents (22.6%). Differences in support for policies that are commonly associated with the administration were very similar to differences in support for Trump. White respondents were more likely to support building a wall between Mexico and the United States (62%), were more likely to think the economy was doing well (72.8%), more likely to support trade tariffs (47.2%), and more

Table I. Descriptives for Study Variables

	Black	White	F, p
Support for Trump			18.58, $p = .000$
Disapprove	71.0%	35.9%	
Not sure	6.4%	1.2%	
Approve	22.6%	62.9%	
N	342	291	
Wall between United States and Mexico			16.25, $p = .000$
Oppose	66.1%	34.4%	
Not sure	7.7%	3.6%	
Support	26.2%	62.0%	
N	344	291	
American economy			13.50, $p = .000$
Not doing well	42.9%	19.1%	
Not sure	17.9%	8.1%	
Doing well	39.3%	72.8%	
N	342	291	
American tariffs			4.77, $p = .009$
Oppose	48.3%	35.0%	
Not sure	24.7%	17.9%	
Support	27.1%	47.2%	
N	344	291	
Voter ID			13.15, $p = .000$
Oppose	57.0%	28.3%	
Not sure	7.1%	3.1%	
Support	35.9%	68.6%	
N	343	291	
Perceived racial discrimination			10.68, $p = .000$
None	27.7%	59.0%	
Some	41.0%	29.3%	
A lot	31.3%	11.7%	
N	336	287	
Group racial discrimination			23.19, $p = .000$
Less than others	18.9%	43.5%	
About the same	14.0%	34.5%	
More than others	67.1%	22.0%	
N	333	282	
Immigrants make society better			5.95, $p = .003$
Make it worse	23.7%	45.9%	
Made no difference	26.6%	18.2%	
Make things better	49.7%	35.9%	
N	323	274	
Immigrant contact is bothersome			2.34, $p = .097$
No bother	89.1%	77.6%	
Not sure	2.6%	8.2%	
Bothersome	8.3%	14.2%	
N	309	261	

likely to support voter ID in North Carolina (68.6%) than were our Black respondents (who reported 26.2%, 39.3%, 27.1%, and 35.9%, respectively).

Table I also reports the experiences and perceptions that Blacks and Whites have with race and immigration in the United States. Blacks are more likely than Whites to report that they have personally experienced "some" or "a lot" of racial discrimination ($F = 10.68$, $p = .000$). Blacks are even more likely than Whites to report that their racial group experiences more discrimination than members of other racial groups ($F = 23.19$, $p = .000$). Even though the pattern of these perceptions is to be expected, it should also be noted that 27.7% of Blacks report not experiencing any personal discrimination, and 18.9% report that Blacks experience less racial discrimination than members of other racial groups. It is also notable that 41% of Whites report either "some" or "a lot" of personal experiences with racial discrimination, and 34.5% believe that Whites experience the same amount of racial discrimination as non-Whites and that nearly one in four believe that Whites experience more racial discrimination than non-Whites.

In addition to their level of support for President Trump, policies associated with his administration and experiences and perceptions of and with racial discrimination, Table I shows that Blacks and Whites also think about and experience immigration differently. Relative to the other issues in the table, our respondents are relatively diffuse on whether immigrants make our society better ($F = 5.95$, $p = .003$). While our Black respondents are more likely (49.7%) than Whites to believe that immigrants make our society better (35.9%), a full 26.6% of our Black respondents are indifferent on this question and 23.7% believe that immigrants make our society worse. Conversely, 18.2% of Whites report indifference and 45.9% report that immigrants make our society worse. Although Blacks and Whites are somewhat dispersed on their beliefs about how immigrants shape the country overall, Blacks and Whites generally agree that they are not particularly bothered by the immigrants they meet. The clear majority of both Blacks and Whites report not being bothered by their encounters with immigrants (89.1% and 77.6%, respectively).

We found a strong relationship between both the discrimination questions and the immigration questions and the latent *group threat* construct for White respondents. Among Whites, the general concept of group threat is significantly related, therefore, to the experience and perception of ethnic or racial discrimination and to negative attitudes toward immigrants. By contrast, for Black respondents group threat is not significantly related to attitudes about immigrants or immigration; it is related only to group and personal discrimination experiences. It is not surprising that Black and White respondents' endorsement of racial discrimination against their groups would indicate very different political identifications. Moreover, given the histories involved, the meaning associated with White respondents believing that are discriminated against is of course quite different from Black respondents believing that Black people are discriminated against.

Among Whites, group threat is also strongly related with support for the border wall, while for Black respondents there is no significant relationship—a clearly related finding to the fact that for Whites, but not Blacks, group threat is tied directly to attitudes about immigrants.

For both groups, wall support is positively and significantly related to approval for Trump, and for both groups approval of Trump is, in turn, positively and significantly related to assessments of additional Trump-related policies (economic performance, tariffs, and voter ID).

The model we identified as having the best fit with the data for White respondents rests on the group threat questions (attitudes toward immigrants and belief or experience with discrimination against White people). These attitudes indicate a latent variable we label as *group threat*. In turn, that variable predicts support for the border wall, which predicts approval of President Trump. Finally, approval of the president predicts a greater likelihood of believing the national economy is performing well.

Figure 1 represents the best-fitting structural equation model for White respondents. Driving the model is group threat: beliefs about group and individual discrimination and attitudes toward immigrants. These, in combination, predict support for the border wall, which in turn predicts approval of Trump. Finally, approval of Trump is directly related to assessment of the economy, support for tariffs, and support for the voter identification amendment.

Figure 2 shows the same model for Black respondents. Group threat is unrelated to attitudes toward immigration and is also unrelated to support for the

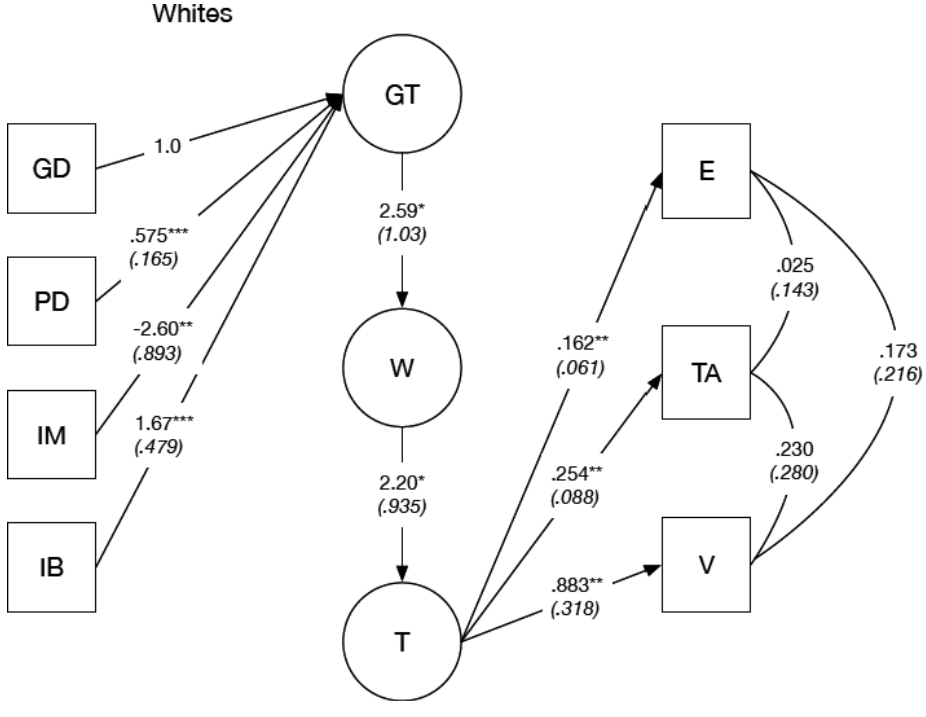

Figure 1. Structural equation model for attitudes among White respondents. E: Assessment of economy; GT: Group Threat; GD: Group Discrimination; IB: Immigration Bother; IM: Support for Immigration; PD: Personal Discrimination; TA: Support for tarriffs; T: Approval of Trump; V: Support for Voter Identification amendment; W: Support for Border Wall

border wall. Among Black respondents, then, support for the border wall emerges from attitudes or experiences other than group threat. However, the remainder of the pathway is substantially similar: support for the wall predicts approval of Trump, which in turn predicts pro-Trump assessments of the economy, tariffs, and voter identification.

Most striking about the models—particularly the one for White voters—is that at the time and place of this poll, approval of Trump *explains*, rather than being explained by, positive evaluations of many of his policy positions. Most salient was the border wall, which appears to be directly related to group threat for White respondents. But once respondents had identified with Trump through support for the wall, their views of the other policies and economic performance followed. It is less clear how Black respondents joined the Trump-approval segment, but once there, their attitudes appear to follow similar dynamics.

CONCLUSION: LOOKING FORWARD TO 2020

Our findings provide some clues as to how race, class, gender, and cultural identification might play out in the 2020 election. Our models confirm existing research suggesting that, at least sometimes, policy views follow cultural

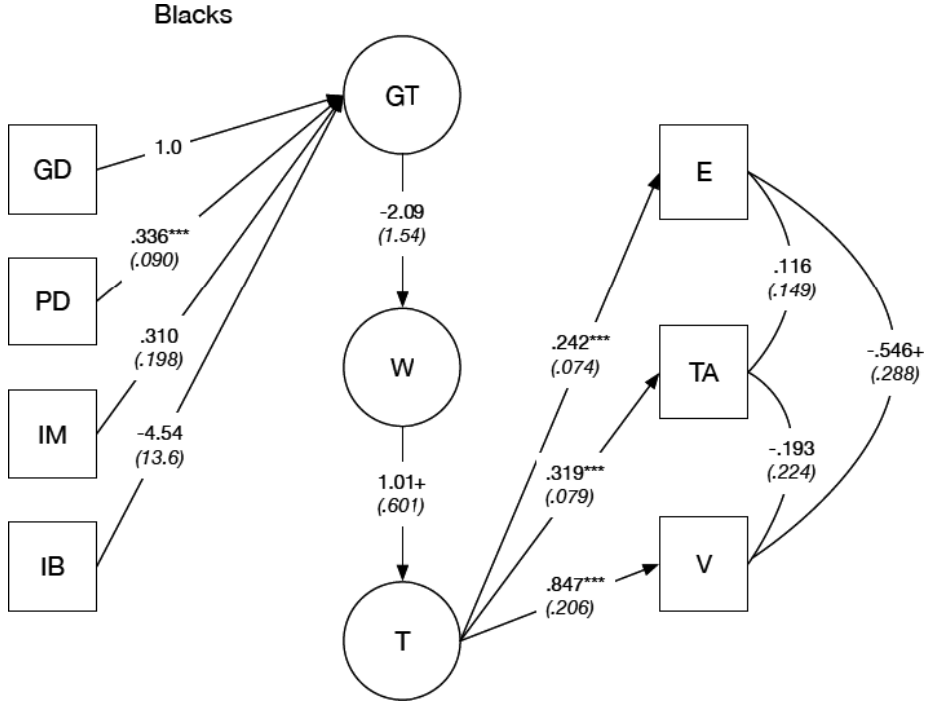

Figure 2. Structural equation model for attitudes among Black respondents. E: Assessment of economy; GT: Group Threat; GD: Group Discrimination; IB: Immigration Bother; IM: Support for Immigration; PD: Personal Discrimination; TA: Support for tarriffs; T: Approval of Trump; V: Support for Voter Identification amendment; W: Support for Border Wall

identification. In our case, identification with Trump-associated cultural views "teach" citizens specific political positions. Perrin et al. (2014) suggested that possibility in relation to the Tea Party movement, and our data are consistent with a broadly similar idea. While a naïve model might assume that voters first adopt policy preferences and then support candidates and movements that might further those policy preferences, our data suggest otherwise. This may be due to the power of cultural identification itself—whether through group identification such as race, class, and gender, or through movement or candidate loyalty—but it may also reflect epistemic communities. Voters who enter such communities through particular preferences (in our case, support for the border wall) may select sources of news, information, and opinion that reinforce those preferences and add others by combining them in the same information flow.

In particular, our models suggest that identification with Trump may explain quick changes in policy positions during and since the 2016 election. Trump's success, that is, was not in representing an extant coalition but rather in forming a coalition based on cultural identification that changed preexisting loyalties. Due to the racially charged character of much of that coalition-building work, there are of course important racial differences not just in specific approval of Trump but also in the structure of group threat.

While the specific policy and cultural identification elements will likely change during an election season filled with primary challenges, debates, news, and social media, it is appropriate to expect the 2020 election to be about the mobilization and configuration of identities and loyalties, not primarily about isolated estimations of economic performance or policy proposals. Our evidence suggests that Trump, in particular, gains significantly from cultural identification with his governing style and highly charged political positions. While the border wall may fade from the public imagination, it is likely that other identification will take its place. Outcomes in swing states like North Carolina may depend on the relative strength of such cultural identifications with Trump and his eventual opponent.

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