



What is American "White Identity" – and Why Does it Matter?

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Since the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th President of the United States, white nationalism has been in the spotlight. White nationalist groups endorsed Trump, celebrated his victory, and see his win as an invitation to spread their message. Indeed, a person known for advancing this outlook sits as a senior presidential advisor in the White House.

What difference does any of this make, given that many Americans of all backgrounds disagree with the claim that U.S. national identity is, or should be, defined by whiteness? Most Americans reject explicit claims that the interests of white Americans should take precedence over those of their non-white compatriots. All the same, the 2016 election and its aftermath have undoubtedly raised the salience of whiteness. Research in social psychology has long shown that when the surrounding context communicates that a particular identity is politically salient, people are more likely to see themselves in such terms. Heightened centrality can then lead to a host of other attitudinal outcomes, such as favoritism toward the newly salient identity group and negative views of people and communities not part of the in-group. Consequently, even though most white Americans shun the overtly supremacist preferences of white nationalists, the 2016 election makes it imperative that we take a close look at this identity's salience and impact, including how this identity can encourage tacit racism.

Unfortunately, national surveys do not have a long track record of asking white Americans meaningful questions about their racial identity. Most scholarship on white ethnicity focuses on people's ties to national origins, examining how whites incorporate Irish, Italian and similar backgrounds into current social identities and political outlooks. Only quite recently have public opinion scholars begun to include questions about white identity in their surveys, due to the demographic reality that the United States is set to have a majority of non-whites within three decades. My own research has examined white identity in the United States and probed the degree to which this identification shapes how people feel about political representation.

White Identification is Common

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a few political science studies concluded that white racial identification was neither prevalent nor consequential for U.S. political attitudes. However, these studies acknowledged that changing demographics and future political developments could render white identity more potent. Indeed, in a nationally representative survey I commissioned during 2012, white respondents were asked to indicate whether whiteness captures how they think of themselves most of the time – as opposed to usually thinking of themselves as Americans or as members of national-origin groups. I asked whether respondents think that whites in the U.S. face discrimination due to their race, and whether they see their own fate as tied to the fortunes of whites as a whole (scholars refer to this as "linked fate"). Each of my questions arguably taps into distinct, but related, elements of racial group identification.

Results from my survey suggest growing importance for white identification, beliefs that white Americans face discrimination, and the sense that whites have linked fates.

- About a fifth of white respondents said that they think of themselves as white more than as American or members of a particular national origin group. This percentage is not far from the 34% of white respondents in the 2012 American National Election Study who said that being white is very or extremely important to them.
- When asked about discrimination, 10% of my respondents said there is a lot of such bias against whites and 40% said there is some. In the 2012 American National Election Study, 31% of whites said that there is at least a moderate amount of discrimination against whites in the United States.
- Just over half of respondents in my survey said that what happens generally to white people in this country will have something to do with what occurs in their own life. In the American National Election Study, 39% of whites felt this way.

Put simply, there appears to be a fair amount of identification as white and concern about group standing. Several important questions then arise. To what extent have these sentiments become more prevalent since 2012 – and did the 2016 election affect them? What, if any, are the political consequences of these sentiments? Although it is too early to answer the first two questions, my research considers one potential consequence of white racial identification: the extent to which people care about being represented by an elected official who is white.

White Identification is Associated with Preferences for White Candidates

I asked survey respondents how important it is for them to have a political candidate who is white. Answers to this question were strongly affected by the answers people gave to the three white identity questions discussed above. Among white respondents with the lowest score on all three measures, the overwhelming majority – 84% – say that having a white candidate is not important at all. By contrast, this response was given by only 25% of whites with the highest scores on all three measures of white identification. Instead, 37% of those with the highest scores said that it is very or somewhat important to have a white candidate. In short, whites who so identify, perceive discrimination, and feel a sense of linked fate with other whites are substantially more likely to say it is important to have a white candidate on the ballot.

My research demonstrates that a nontrivial share of white Americans think of themselves racially and want to have white candidates on the ballot, perhaps because they fear that non-white officeholders would not understand or represent them effectively. Since 2012, white identification has probably become even more prevalent. As the United States moves toward being a majority-minority nation, scholars will need to continue to probe racial identity dynamics among whites. This was true before the 2016 election and has become more evident in the aftermath.

Read more in Deborah J. Schildkraut, “White Attitudes about Descriptive Representation in the U.S.: The Roles of Identity, Discrimination, and Linked Fate.” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* (forthcoming); and “Defining American Identity in the Twenty-First Century: How Much ‘There’ is There?” *Journal of Politics* (2007).