An identity is questioned only when it is menaced, as when the mighty begin to fall, or when the wretched begin to rise, or when the stranger enters the gates, never, thereafter, to be a stranger: the stranger’s presence making you the stranger, less to the stranger than to yourself.

James Baldwin (1976)

In 1998, President Bill Clinton gave the commencement address at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon. Standing before the crowd of graduating students, he told them he wanted to speak about the America of their future – an America that was changing and becoming more diverse at a breathtaking rate. The driving force behind this increasing diversity, he stated, was a new and large wave of immigration that was changing the face of the country. He described how in places like Hawaii, Houston, and New York City, there was currently no majority race. “No other nation in history has gone through demographic change of this magnitude in so short a time,” he said. Then, he paused, and posed a question to the crowd, “What do the changes mean? They can either strengthen and unite us, or they can weaken and divide us. We must decide.”

Eighteen years later, the changes Clinton described are upon us. In many more cities, whites, once the numerical majority, are now a minority. According to recent population projections, by 2043, whites will no longer comprise a majority of the country.¹ Our increasingly diverse nation elected its first black president in
2008. The first justice of Hispanic heritage was appointed to the US Supreme Court in 2009.\textsuperscript{2} The 115th Congress, which began its meeting in January 2017, was the most racially and ethnically diverse in history.\textsuperscript{3} Within the walls of our political and economic institutions, individuals of different backgrounds, heritages, and experiences have joined the ranks.

These changes have not come to pass without protest. In numerous ways, some white Americans have expressed their dismay at the changing racial composition of the country and at the strides racial and ethnic minorities have made in achieving political, social, and economic power.\textsuperscript{4} Over the past decade, several predominantly white state legislators have moved to enact strict immigration laws. They have challenged ethnic studies courses, diversity programs, and college courses on race – particularly those perceived as derisive toward whites (Delgado 2013).\textsuperscript{5} They have also proposed legislation requiring presidential candidates to produce birth certificates, and enacted voter identification laws, making it potentially more difficult for racial and ethnic minorities to participate in elections (Bentele and O’Brien 2013).\textsuperscript{6}

During these legislative battles, racial tensions flared. In 2006, hundreds of thousands of Latinos gathered in cities across the United States to protest restrictive immigration legislation and to demand policies that would provide immigrants with pathways to citizenship (Voss, Bloemraad, and Lee 2011). More fuel was added to these fires in the aftermath of Barack Obama’s election as the nation’s first African American president in 2008. Many heralded Obama’s victory as a sign of our nation’s racial progress. But Obama’s election also appears to have brought to the fore more insidious forms of racism and ethnocentrism (Kam and Kinder 2012; Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012; Piston 2010; Tesler 2012a; Tesler and Sears 2010). It also did little to mend the vast divide between white and black Americans over racial policy. Americans today remain more polarized around issues of race than ever (Goldman 2012; Hutchings 2009).

These tensions took center stage during the 2016 presidential election, with the Republican candidacy and election of Donald Trump. Over the course of his campaign, Trump spoke disparagingly of Muslim and Mexican immigrants. He proposed a halt to refugees entering the country and promised to build a wall along America’s southern border to stop the flow of immigrants from Mexico. Vowing
to “put America first,” Trump warned of the dangers of globalization. Outside of Trump’s campaign rallies, protestors, many of whom were black or Latino, clashed, sometimes violently, with white Trump supporters. Hostilities mounted even further when, only days after taking office, President Trump signed an executive order banning citizens from seven Muslim-majority nations from entering the country. Much of Trump’s first year as president was marked by public outcry over immigration policies many regarded as draconian.

It appears, to answer Clinton’s earlier question, that our increasingly diverse nation has in many ways divided us. What explains these rifts? Why are white Americans mobilizing en masse around issues of racial and ethnic diversity? And why were so many white Americans drawn to a candidate like Donald Trump, who was often derisive of racial and ethnic minorities, and whose campaign focused on curbing immigration and rejecting international trade agreements? Why do we now seem to be witnessing a backlash to globalization, a widespread desire to close our nation’s borders, to restrict immigration, and to stay out of foreign affairs? And why have hostilities between whites and other racial and ethnic minorities grown in recent years?

Some of this backlash is rooted in prejudice, racism, and ethnocentrism. But as I will show, a great deal of many whites’ reactions to our country’s changing racial landscape do not simply manifest in outward hostility. Amidst these changes, many whites have described themselves as outnumbered, disadvantaged, and even oppressed. They have voiced their anxiety over America’s waning numerical majority, and have questioned what this means for the future of the nation. They have worried that soon they may face discrimination based on their own race, if they do not already (Norton and Sommers 2011). These sentiments hint at the fact that the growing non-white population, the pending loss of whites’ majority status, and the increasing political and economic power of people of color in the United States has a second consequence. For a number of whites, these monumental social and political trends – including an erosion of whites’ majority status and the election of America’s first black president – have signaled a challenge to the absoluteness of whites’ dominance. These threats, both real and perceived, have, as I will demonstrate, brought to the fore, for many whites, a sense of commonality, attachment, and solidarity with their racial group. They have led a sizeable proportion of whites to believe that their racial group, and the benefits that group
enjoys, are endangered. As a result, this racial solidarity now plays a central role in the way many whites orient themselves to the political and social world.

In the pages that follow, I examine the rise and consequences of white identity politics. My argument is rooted in the notion that an identity – a psychological, internalized sense of attachment to a group – can provide an important cognitive structure through which individuals navigate and participate in the political and social world (Conover 1984; Huddy 2003; Lau 1989; Miller et al. 1981). A great body of evidence indicates that as humans, our need to belong, to see ourselves as similar to others with whom we share common goals, is innate. We are, so to speak, primed to adopt group attachments around our social groupings, whether they be based on religion, occupation, or something else. Not surprisingly, these identities can profoundly influence our political preferences and behavior.

As we will see, this solidarity, and whites’ desire to protect their group’s interests, plays a key role in today’s most important and pressing political and social issues. Over the course of this book, I will show that mass opposition to immigration, to government outsourcing, and to trade policies are a function of white identity. What is more, we will learn that white identity undergirds significant support for social welfare spending. Contrary to popular perceptions, many whites are supportive of more government assistance, but primarily when they believe that assistance is directed at their group. Indeed, desires to preserve Social Security and Medicare are rooted in white racial solidarity.

Most importantly, white racial solidarity is a pivotal factor in contemporary electoral politics. A great deal of work on race in political science over the past decade has focused on the profound role racial prejudice played in opposition to Barack Obama and his political agenda. But this work has overlooked the relationship between Obama’s electoral success and whites’ racial in-group attitudes. Perhaps because of this oversight, many social scientists and pundits were surprised by the successful presidential campaign Donald Trump mounted in 2016. This work offers a comprehensive and systematic way for us to understand support for Trump, a candidate who effectively mobilized whites around their racial identity.

For social scientists, this work makes a number of additional contributions. The theory and evidence I present expand our account of intergroup relations more broadly, demonstrating when and in what
ways dominant group identities are salient and consequential. Much of the work on racial conflict in the United States has focused on white *out-group* attitudes in the form of racial prejudice and racial resentment. I look at a whites’ *in-group* attitudes, and make a strong case that such attitudes are not synonymous with prejudice, nor do strong out-group animosities necessarily follow from a strong sense of in-group identity (Brewer 1999). Many whites identify with their racial group without feeling prejudice toward racial and ethnic minorities, and many more whites possess some degree of negative affect toward racial and ethnic minorities without also identifying with their racial group.

I also unpack the nature of white racial solidarity, demonstrating that many whites in the United States not only identify with their racial group, with great political consequence, but a sizeable subset also possesses a sense of group consciousness. That is, some whites not only feel a strong attachment to their racial group, but for some, that attachment is also coupled with a set of beliefs about the need for whites to work together to achieve their political goals. Furthermore, I introduce valid and reliable ways to measure both forms of white racial solidarity on public opinion surveys.

Finally, this book reconsiders our prevailing understanding of race relations in the United States. The evidence here makes clear that race is central to American politics, and pays careful and renewed attention to how the hierarchical arrangement of racial groups profoundly influences our nation’s politics. This work joins a long line of research, which argues that racial conflict and racial inequality in the United States are not merely the product of learned racial prejudice; such disparities are also the product of white efforts to protect their power and status (Blumer 1958; Bobo 1999; Klinkner and Smith 1999; Masuoka and Junn 2013; Parker and Barreto 2013). Indeed, many of the whites in my account are seeking to reassert a racial order in which their group is firmly at the top.

The history of race relations in the United States has been an unsteady, often wavering, climb toward racial equality, with steps taken both forward and backward. The issues I take up in the pages to come are part of another chapter in the story of how Americans choose to confront new challenges to the nation’s racial hierarchy. Ultimately, these matters cut to the core of how Americans define what it means to be citizens, the extent to which we as a nation embrace multiculturalism, and how well we choose to live up to democratic values. These
questions are complicated and knotty, but fundamental to American social and political life. This work is part of an effort to untangle them, and to better understand what divides and what unites us.

**Overlooking White Identity**

To political scientists, the claim that whites possess a racial identity should come as a surprise. Historically, the study of identity, especially as it has pertained to race or ethnicity, has often been one-sided, focusing on the concept’s development and its role among subordinate or minority groups. Hughes (1948) noted how common it was “to study ethnic relations as if one had to know only one party to them” (p. 479). But, as he put so eloquently, we cannot fully understand group relations through the study of one group anymore “than a chemical combination by study of one element only, or a boxing bout by observation of only one side of the fighters” (p. 479).

And yet racial identity among whites has been especially ignored or rejected by social scientists. When considering whether white Americans feel a sense of anxiety about the status of their racial group, or whether whites possess a sense of racial identity that has political consequences, for the past fifty years, the answer generally has been “no.” For the most part, scholars have argued that racial solidarity among whites has been invisible and politically inconsequential. Whites, by nature of their dominant status and numerical majority, have largely been able to take their race for granted. Sears and Savalei (2006) describe this position well:

> In general, whites remain dominant in American society – numerically, socially, economically, and politically – and overt, explicitly racial conflict is now relatively rare. As a result, whites’ whiteness is usually likely to be no more noteworthy to them than is breathing the air around them. White group consciousness is therefore not likely to be a major force in whites’ political attitudes today.  

*(2006, p. 901)*

The scholarly consensus has been that whites do not, by and large, think about their whiteness – at least not in a way that is politically meaningful. They are not, according to the conventional wisdom,
influenced by an inward attachment to their racial group, or by a sense of group identity. Whiteness, according to this line of reasoning, for all intents and purposes, is invisible. Thus, for whites, our perspective on their attitudes and behavior when it comes to race has been almost exclusively outwardly focused; it attends to the nature and consequences of racial prejudice, resentment, and animus among whites, particularly that which is directed toward blacks.

I argue, however, that now is the time to reconsider the scope of racial attitudes associated with whites’ political evaluations, preferences, and behaviors. Most of the scholarship concluding that white racial solidarity is generally invisible or without consequence was conducted between the 1970s and the early 2000s. During this time, the nation looked quite different than it does today. The United States was far less diverse, and most racial conflict was situated primarily between black and white Americans. There was also little doubt that whites constituted an overwhelming numerical majority of the American population and fully controlled government institutions at all levels.

Today’s racial and ethnic landscape is vastly different than it has been at any other time in our nation’s history. Due to immigration and differences in birth rates across racial and ethnic groups, the relative size of the white population is shrinking. The United States is now one of the most racially and ethnically diverse countries in the Western world. Because of the rapid racial and ethnic diversification of the country, we must reevaluate our theories about the nature of racial conflict and racial attitudes, many of which were established under a black–white paradigm. Issues of race, of diversity, of globalization, and of immigration are fundamentally altering our political parties, our political attitudes, and our political institutions (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Hajnal and Lee 2011). Our theories must be updated and reconstructed to account for a much greater array of groups under changing circumstances.

This book offers a framework for understanding racial conflict in today’s more racially and ethnically diverse nation. I contend that, today, whites’ racial attitudes are not merely defined by prejudice; many whites also possess a sense of racial identity and are motivated to protect their group’s collective interests and to maintain its status. As well shall see, whiteness is now a salient and central component of American politics. White racial solidarity influences many whites’ worldview and guides their political attitudes and behavior.
White Nationalism

The backlash to our nation’s growing diversity has undoubtedly contributed to the rise of more insidious groups, often associated with white supremacy, such as the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, skinheads, white nationalists, and some militia movements.10 It has almost certainly fostered the rise of individuals calling themselves members of the “alt-right,” a somewhat amorphous, reactionary group that supports white nationalism, and whose members generally endorse efforts to protect the white race.11 Many argue that these groups have become more mainstream, and they certainly gained significant media attention during the 2016 presidential campaign when they vehemently supported Trump.12

Understanding the rise and the consequences of these movements is important. But that is not the aim of this book. The whites I describe here are not marginalized extremists who actively participate in the production of a white, masculine, and patriarchal ideology – one that advocates for the separation of groups and the superiority of whites (Ferber 1998). The whites in my account are a much broader group and far greater in number. In fact, whites high on racial solidarity comprise approximately 30–40 percent of the white population and, like most whites, the vast majority of those who identify with their racial group reject assertions of white supremacy and racism. And while these whites may share some of the same political views as their more extremist counterparts, they are not one and the same. This sizeable portion of white Americans are not especially interested in the separation of groups and the denigration of other races and ethnicities. Instead, as we shall see, they are primarily concerned with their in-group and desire to protect its status. Nevertheless, this work may provide somewhat of a cautionary tale. With evidence in hand that elites can appeal to whites’ racial interests explicitly and successfully, there is potential for the ranks of white nationalists to grow.

The White Working Class

In response to today’s political and social upheaval, many pundits and academics have turned their attention squarely on the white working class (Gest 2016; Hochschild 2016; Vance 2016). By their account, many of these whites have been left behind by the consequences of
globalization, their jobs shipped overseas or displaced by immigrants. Angry and disenfranchised, they are lashing out and are susceptible to political appeals by elites espousing more protectionist policies and who promise to restore manufacturing jobs. For some commentators, the politics of white identity is the politics of the white working class.

There is, however, far more to the story. Many whites who possess a racial identity are, by some measures, members of the working class. But the phenomena I describe are not limited to whites situated in blue-collar jobs. This is, therefore, not merely a tale about the white working class. A much wider swath of whites view their racial group as dispossessed, persecuted, and threatened by America’s changing racial dynamics. The politics of white identity is not wholly or even primarily rooted in economic disenfranchisement; it is far broader and more pervasive.

From Where We Have Come

To understand the role of white racial solidarity today, we must go back in time. From the country’s very beginnings, race, particularly whiteness, was intricately connected to America’s national identity. One year after the US Constitution was adopted and a year before the Bill of Rights was ratified, the US Congress passed the Naturalization Act of 1790. It was the first statute in the country to codify laws regarding national citizenship. The Act explicitly limited naturalization to any “free white persons” who had lived in the United States for at least two years, excluding American Indians, slaves, free blacks, and indentured servants from citizenship. In subsequent years, as the immigrant population in the United States began steadily to tick upward, racial restrictions on citizenship were left intact, and naturalization laws became increasingly restrictive.

Between the 1840s and 1850s, America experienced one of its first significant, postcolonial waves of immigration. An oppressive caste system and a potato crop decimated by blight encouraged three million Catholic Irish to flee their home country for the United States. In recent decades, the Irish have generally been subsumed under the umbrella of whiteness, but in the early decades of the nineteenth century their racial status was far more ambiguous (Ignatiev 1995). In fact, according to Jacobson (1999), the vagueness of the term “white
people” as first written into the Naturalization Act of 1790 contributed to a new set of ideological tensions in the nation in the 1840s and 1850s. While “established codes of whiteness” were initially inclusive of all Europeans (p. 72), the influx of Catholic Irish at least temporarily prompted an effort to restrict the boundaries around race. The foreignness, lower economic status, and Catholicism of this group of immigrants challenged the religious and ethnic composition of the United States, engendering hostility among old-stock Americans (Billington 1938). This animosity gave way to a pervasive nativism in the 1850s known as the “Know-Nothings” movement. Supporters of this movement formed a political party called the American Party, which was anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant. The party’s leaders demanded more restrictive naturalization laws.

The Know-Nothings did not obtain enough power to accomplish their political goals with much rigor, and political divisions, particularly over slavery, fueled the party’s decline after 1856. But the sentiments espoused by the Know-Nothings have reverberated over the course of the nation’s history. Each subsequent wave of immigration has provoked national conversations around the preservation of America’s identity as a white nation, and one in which whites maintain political, social, and economic power.

By the early part of the twentieth century, such sentiments reached new heights, with significant political consequence. In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s famous novel, The Great Gatsby, in which one of the central characters, Tom Buchanan, remarks to his wife, “[t]he idea is if we don’t look out the white race will be – will be utterly submerged … It is up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things.” Fitzgerald’s book is set at the beginning of the Roaring Twenties, in the aftermath of World War I, and following intense domestic racial tensions resulting in the race riots of 1919’s Red Summer. It was published in 1925, just after the passage of the American Immigration Act of 1924, which slowed down to a trickle the massive waves of European immigrants who had arrived during the previous two decades. The Act established strict immigration quotas, sharply curtailing “non-white” immigrants from Asia and Southern and Eastern Europe. Many proponents of this law embraced the argument espoused by Tom Buchanan; they were supremely interested in controlling the ethnic composition of the US population and believed in the racial superiority of Northern Europeans. They also saw the
law as part of a larger effort to establish a distinct American identity – an identity biased toward Anglo-Saxon culture and which privileged “whiteness” (King 2000).

For nearly a century, the Immigration Act of 1924 had its intended effect. It was not until the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that national quotas were lifted. Many scholars argue that policymakers were motivated to eliminate the national origins system by the Civil Rights movement, viewing the restrictions as counter to the country’s democratic ideals (Chin 1996; King 2000). Others, however, have expressed skepticism that support for the legislation revealed the better angels of our nature when it comes to race. For one, congressional reports on the 1965 legislation noted that the quota system put in place by the 1924 Act never achieved its goals of maintaining the ethnic balance of the US population (King 2000). Very few immigrants came from the Nordic countries from which immigration was preferred. Furthermore, by the 1960s, the narrative around race and ethnicity had transformed. “Race relations” had become a squarely black–white issue, and the alarm that some Americans had felt in the 1920s around a broader array of racial and ethnic groups altering the demographic composition of the United States had faded. Immigrants from parts of Europe who were viewed as undesirable in the 1920s had become part of a new American myth about immigration – one that cast the assimilation of European immigrants and their economic mobility as a standard against which blacks were judged and found wanting (Jacobson 1999). In fact, the 1965 legislation, some argue, was intended to increase the number of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe – immigrants who were now considered white (White 1982).

In reality, the 1965 Act opened the door for the sweeping demographic changes we are witnessing today, allowing massive immigration from Asia and Latin America. But it would still be decades before immigration levels would reach a critical mass. In the meantime, white Americans remained dominant over the political, economic, and social institutions in the United States. By a landslide, they have comprised the majority of the country’s residents. In each decade between 1790 and 1990, whites, as defined by the US Census, made up over 80 percent of the US population. At the federal level and in most locales, they have held the vast majority of elected offices. More white people have served as heads of America’s most powerful companies and corporations than
people of color, and whites have captured a disproportionate share of the nation’s wealth. They have been, for all intents and purposes, securely positioned atop the country’s racial hierarchy, maintaining their status as the dominant group in American society (Kim 2000).

Scattered throughout these decades there have, of course, been moments of racial unrest and upheaval, particularly as African Americans fought to end discrimination and demanded equality. Racial integration and the Civil Rights movement chipped away at white hegemony. But for the most part, whites’ power has been resolute, and they have therefore never suffered what W.E.B Du Bois called double consciousness – the internal conflict, or sense of twoness, experienced by blacks in the United States, who must reconcile their own oppressed racial identity with their American identity. Whites have, in contrast, been able to cast and maintain the identity of the nation as their own.

The Study of Racial Attitudes and Racial Conflict in the United States

These circumstances have profoundly structured how we have thought about and studied race in America. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, moving into the early twentieth century, anthropologists, biologists, and other scientists relied on pseudoscientific techniques to claim that humans could be organized into distinct racial groups with different capabilities and capacities rooted in biological differences. Greatly influenced by Charles Darwin, American and European thinkers promoted the theory of Social Darwinism in an effort to prove European and white American superiority over Native Americans, Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans. As Richard Hofstadter describes, “The measure of world domination already achieved by the ‘race’ seemed to prove it the fittest” (Hofstadter 1992, p. 173).

These theories, which we have now come to refer to as scientific racism, were used to justify eugenics programs and anti-miscegenation laws. Proponents of these claims also favored the use of intelligence tests to “demonstrate” the inferiority of non-white races. In fact, these tests were eventually administered to immigrants arriving in the United States through Ellis Island in the early 1900s. With little command of English, many of these newcomers fared poorly on the tests, but the results were interpreted as evidence that immigrants from Russia, Hungary, Italy, and elsewhere were mentally inferior. The findings were
used to justify the quotas put in place by the Immigration Act of 1924 (Franco 1985; Gould 1981).

During the 1930s, the Nazi Party used scientific racism as a means to justify the superiority of the German people and of the Aryan race. But in the 1940s, the advances of science, coupled with horror over the atrocities committed in the name of the Nazi ideology, marked a turning point for scientific racism. In the wake of World War II, prominent social scientists argued that America needed to denounce doctrines of racial superiority and confront racism and inequality in order to live up to the nation’s democratic ideals (Benedict 1945; Montagu 1942; Myrdal 1944). Scholars took up this call and turned their attention to the study of racism and white racial prejudice in earnest. Today, our attention to the role of whites’ racial animus in understanding racial conflict has not wavered. When it comes to explaining race relations in the United States, research continues to focus heavily on whites’ out-group prejudices and hostilities.

As social scientists began to uncover further the nature of whites’ racial prejudice, they also took up understanding the consequences of racial conflict. Some of this work, inspired by Marxism, focused on the effects of groups in society seeking to protect their group’s interests, either real or imagined (Blumer 1958; LeVine and Campbell 1972). Other work focused on the development and role of group cohesion and solidarity among blacks, especially during and immediately after the Civil Rights movement. Much of this work drew on psychological theories of group identity – ones that were developed, independent of the study of racial conflict, in order to understand the role of group cohesion and identities as they mattered for political beliefs, behavior, and group conflict more generally (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Tajfel 1974; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Many argued that the feelings of group threat, racial alienation, and group subordination experienced by blacks in the United States were important ingredients in the development of a strong sense of group attachment and racial consciousness among blacks in America (Bobo and Hutchings 1996; Dawson 1994; Matthews and Prothro 1966; Miller et al. 1981).

Over this same period, beginning in middle of the twentieth century, researchers noticed a decline in whites’ explicit expression of racial prejudice toward blacks (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Kluegel and Smith 1982; Schuman et al. 1985). Whites’ racial attitudes, scholars argued, were transforming (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Kinder and
Sears 1981; McConahay and Hough 1976). In the midst of the Civil Rights movement, whites’ egalitarian ideals were joined with a sense of racial sympathy. They supported racial equality, and civil rights were regarded as the nation’s most important problem. This support motivated the passage of monumental civil rights legislation. But in the days following the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, an intense three-day race riot broke out in the Watts neighborhood in Los Angeles. Blacks looted and set fire to the city. Other riots across the country followed, and in their wake, white sympathy for blacks faltered.20

Moving into the 1970s, the importance of civil rights in the minds of whites waned, and many seemed to believe that the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 meant that legal barriers to black equality had all but disappeared. The persistence of race riots and violence in inner-cities made whites apprehensive. Conservative politicians exploited these fears and accused blacks of failing to live up to American values. If racial equality had not been achieved, they argued, it was because of the moral failing of blacks. As political scientists Donald Kinder and Lynn Sanders write, these politicians, like Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{did not promote biological racism; they did not promise a return to segregation; they did not imply that blacks were second-class citizens or that they should be treated differently than anyone else. Their message was subtle, rather than blatant; it was that blacks should behave themselves. They should take quiet advantage of the ample opportunities now provided them. Government had been too generous, had given blacks too much, and blacks, for their part, had accepted these gifts all too readily. (1996, p. 105)}
\end{align*}
\]

This rhetoric breathed life into a new type of racial prejudice – one that is subtle, and a combination of anti-black affect and the belief that blacks do not adhere to traditional American values associated with the Protestant work ethic.

This theoretical framework is the dominant paradigm for how we think about whites’ racial attitudes today. In political science, we refer to this collection of attitudes as symbolic racism, modern racism, or racial resentment (Kinder and Sanders 1996; Kinder and Sears 1981; McConahay 1983; Sears and Henry 2005). This form of racial
animus is considered a socialized predisposition. That is, whites are taught to subscribe to these beliefs as children, and they then carry these attitudes into adulthood, where they inform political judgments. The evidence for their import is compelling. Racial resentment predicts whites’ opinions toward a wide range of racialized political policies and has a profound impact on political candidate evaluations. It is, quite clearly, a central component to the way in which whites interpret the political and social world.

The theories of symbolic racism and racial resentment are not without their critics (e.g., Sniderman and Carmines 1997; Sniderman and Piazza 2002). One common complaint is that because the theories’ architects define the concept as a combination of anti-black affect and more conservative values, they rely on a measure that confounds these two constructs (Feldman and Huddy 2005; Sniderman and Tetlock 1986; Tetlock 1994). Thus, in work examining the associations between racial prejudice and political preferences, many scholars instead focus on the negative racial stereotypes about blacks (Piston 2010). Nevertheless, this alternative approach shares, with racial resentment, an emphasis on the negative out-group attitudes whites possess toward blacks.

A New Framework for Understanding Whites’ Racial Attitudes

If we step back and think about how we understand racial politics in the contemporary United States, we have white racial prejudice, on the one hand, driving white opposition to policies that benefit racial and ethnic minorities. On the other hand, we have a sense of racial solidarity or consciousness among blacks, motivating their political preferences and voting behavior. You will notice that this arrangement focuses on just two groups in American society: blacks and whites. Because for most of our nation’s history these were the two predominant racial groups in conflict, our theories about race are derived primarily from the interactions between these two groups. But our changing racial landscape means not only that existing theories might need to be modified, but also that they cannot necessarily help us fully understand racial dynamics today.

In this book, I offer a new framework for thinking about racial attitudes. It is one that does not dismiss the power of white racial
resentment, but that does reassess existing theories of group dynamics. It reconsiders how white Americans might be responding to growing racial and ethnic diversity, and to the political, social, and economic success of a myriad of racial and ethnic groups. Many whites, I argue, are anxious about these changes. They are worried about what such changes mean for the status of their group and its future in American society. These concerns have driven some whites to turn inward, to circle the wagons, and to see their racial group as one that is threatened, with members who have shared political interests. In short, in reaction to threats to their group, whites are bringing their racial identity to bear on their political attitudes and behavior in important ways. White identity has real consequences.

Understanding the nature of whites’ racial attitudes and their consequences is crucial to understanding the dynamics of American politics and to achieving a more racially egalitarian society. Recognizing that when it comes to race, whites are motivated not merely by racial animus, but by in-group favoritism, suggests the need for a shift in understanding how individuals might work to change whites’ attitudes. The import of white identity indicates that whites’ racial attitudes are not merely a function of socialization, but that they are also rooted in perceptions about their group’s status and its potential loss of power or privileges. Modifying such beliefs may require new and different strategies.

The distinction between white prejudice and white identity also has implications for the types of political messages elites may use to persuade whites. Politicians need not appeal to racial animus to be politically successful under this framework; instead, they might campaign to preserve the status quo, or to protect whites’ collective interests. Such efforts might on their face seem less problematic than overt racial bigotry, but nonetheless serve, in a broader scheme, to preserve racial inequality. By stoking concerns about their racial group’s status, politicians might also encourage whites to believe further that whites experience racial discrimination; consequently, whites may become even less sympathetic toward policies that promote racial equality for other groups and more inclined to support policies that disproportionately benefit their own group, thereby exacerbating racial inequality. White biases may also transform, marked less by a dislike of racial out-groups than by a defense of collective interests – a position potentially as problematic, but perhaps more insidious and easily cloaked in
a façade of legitimacy (Effron and Knowles 2015). In short, the future of white racial attitudes in American politics may be defined by both racial prejudice and racial solidarity.

**Where We Are Headed**

In moving forward with a new theory about the nature of racial attitudes in today’s contemporary social and political environments, I start by taking a step back. A long line of work in the social sciences has considered how socio-demographic groups have influenced individuals’ political beliefs and behavior. They have examined how one’s occupation, union membership, religion, and other group memberships have been integral to the policies people endorse and the political candidates for whom they cast their ballots (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). A second, tangential, and enormously influential body of work in social psychology has focused on intergroup behavior and the sources of intergroup conflict (Sherif 1961; Tajfel 1974; Tajfel and Turner 1979). Many of the theories in this domain propose that individuals are intrinsically motivated to see themselves as members of distinct social groups. A natural consequence of this behavior is the expression of in-group favoritism. People are inclined to think more positively of their in-group, and they are more likely to share resources with other group members, sometimes at the expense of out-groups.

In Chapter 2, I borrow insights from these lines of scholarship to develop a theory of dominant group identity. Because dominant groups usually co-opt the cultural mainstream of the larger society, their group identity is often taken for granted or is seen as invisible. I describe when we would expect this type of identity to become salient and politically consequential. My main claim is that such identities are reactionary – they are activated in response to group threat. I also consider when and in what circumstances we might expect white identity to inform public opinion.

With this groundwork laid, I turn in Chapter 3 to measuring white identity and white consciousness. I show that in the United States, a sizeable proportion of white Americans identify with their racial group, and I demonstrate that both white racial identity and white consciousness are distinct from other political predispositions.
In other words, white identity is not merely a proximate measure of other attitudes or values that we consider important fixtures or antecedents of contemporary public opinion. Perhaps more importantly, I show that both identity and consciousness are not merely alternative measures to racial animus. Both measures of group solidarity are distinct from our most common conceptualizations of racial prejudice.

In Chapter 4, I examine the antecedents of white identity and white consciousness, exploring the demographic characteristics, economic circumstances, geographic contexts, and personality dimensions associated with higher or lower levels of white identity. Many might find the results surprising, as they challenge conventional expectations about who among whites might be more predisposed to adopt a white identity or possess a sense of consciousness. For instance, white identifiers are not overwhelmingly among those residing in the South, or the economically disaffected. But those whites who are older, with lower levels of education, who live in rural areas, and who are more inclined toward dispositions like authoritarianism, are in fact likely to have a stronger racial identity and to possess higher levels of white consciousness.

From here, I move on to explore the confluence of attitudes white identifiers possess; I demonstrate that white racial solidarity is not without content. Whites who identify with their racial group share beliefs about their place in society, about national identity, racial conflict, group competition, and group privilege. These beliefs are part of the content of white identity, which Chapter 5 describes in more detail. High white identifiers tend to possess more exclusionary views about American identity, perceive greater competition between their own racial group and others, and possess a greater sense of racial alienation – the belief that their group has been or is currently being treated unfairly in society. At the same time, white identifiers recognize and enjoy their group’s privileged status and express little collective guilt.

White identity and white consciousness play a powerful and distinct role in a number of domains, but one of the key places these constructs exert their influence is with regards to immigration opinion. Just as in the 1920s, ideas about race, whiteness, and national identity are significantly implicated in contemporary conversations about immigration. Accordingly, we see in Chapter 6 that white identity and consciousness are remarkably strong and consistent predictors of immigration attitudes. This racial attachment is one of the most
central components of immigration opinion. Whites who possess higher levels of racial identity and consciousness are far more supportive of restrictive immigration opinion. They are also more likely to believe that immigration has especially negative consequences for the United States.

The reach of white identity and consciousness exceeds the domain of immigration. As we see in Chapter 7, it also influences attitudes about policies like Social Security and Medicare – programs viewed as disproportionately benefiting whites. There are other places where it makes a difference; whites who feel a stronger attachment to their racial group are also more opposed to many of the consequences of globalization, like the outsourcing of jobs. This chapter also examines the important, but distinct role of white identity as compared to racial prejudice. While whites are interested in protecting their group and maintaining its privileged status, they are not especially invested in opposing policies that benefit racial and ethnic minorities. White identity and consciousness, it seems, are usually unrelated to attitudes toward programs like affirmative action and welfare.

The consequences of racial identity go well beyond these policy domains. White identity plays a central role in one of our most fundamental and important political activities: vote choice. The analysis in Chapter 8 reveals that even after accounting for the range of factors we usually believe motivate electoral outcomes, it is clear that white identity is a key component in support or opposition of candidates in recent presidential elections. In 2012, the evidence is straightforward; whites high on racial identity were far more supportive of Mitt Romney. Even more significantly, in 2016, we can explain the unconventional, yet successful candidacy of Donald Trump through the lens of white identity and consciousness. Trump, who ran on an anti-immigrant, pro-Social Security platform, in many ways uniquely appealed to whites who were anxious about their group’s waning status. It is, perhaps, entirely unsurprising that white identity and consciousness were two of the best indicators of support for Trump.

Taken together, the evidence I have amassed across these different domains demonstrates the significance of white racial identity and consciousness in American politics. In the book’s conclusion, I lay out some important observations. I describe how the vastly changing demographic landscape, which has brought white identity to the fore, is here to stay for the foreseeable future. White identifiers are not likely
to be politically marginalized by these changes but are instead likely to be a key constituency targeted by political elites. The import of white identity has, therefore, significant consequences for the future of racial inequality in the United States. As whites seek to maintain the racial status quo, they are fighting to maintain a racial hierarchy, one that privileges their group, often at the expense of other racial and ethnic groups. These struggles are likely to define American politics for years to come.

The issues taken up here are not trivial. We cannot, I argue, understand contemporary racial attitudes or modern American politics, without turning our attention to the role of white racial solidarity. And so, let us begin.