

White Racial Consciousness in the U.S. 2016 ANES Pilot Study Proposal

keywords: race, identity, attitudes, white, presidential evaluation

Overview

Two decades of mass immigration to the U.S., the election of America's first black president, and the nation's growing non-white population have dramatically changed the political and social landscape. In response, public discourse in the U.S. seems to have increasingly reflected a particular set of concerns about the nation's racial dynamics, paying mounting attention to the prospect that across the country's social and political institutions, the dominance of whites, as a racial group, seems to be in jeopardy. There is growing evidence that in response to this threat, whites are increasingly identifying with their racial group, and this group attachment has important political consequences. I argue that social scientists need to go beyond measuring racial identity among whites; they need to consider *white group consciousness*. In support of this proposal, I present a rationale for examining group consciousness, propose a three-item question battery that measures the different dimensions of this construct reliably, and provide results from a pilot study, which show that 1) substantial portions of white Americans possess a racial group consciousness; 2) that group consciousness is distinct from traditional measures of racial animus; and 3) even after controlling for racial resentment, white group consciousness powerfully predicts key political evaluations in expected and distinct ways.

Theory

Social scientists and political pundits alike are focusing on phenomenon like "the death of the white establishment" (Robinson 2012) and to white's reactions to the loss of their majority status (Craig and Richeson 2014; Outten et al. 2012). This attention does not simply reflect reactions to a broad change in the composition of the U.S.; it also runs counter to the

conventional wisdom in political science regarding race relations, which has largely rejected what now seems increasingly apparent: in response to threats to their racial group's status, whites are beginning to view themselves as a political group with common interests and shared political goals. Indeed, a small but growing body of work provides powerful evidence that somewhere between 30 and 40% of white Americans possess a *racial identity* that is politically consequential (Hutchings et al. 2010; Jardina 2014; Petrow 2010; Schildkraut 2014). And for the most part, these scholars agree that threats to whites' relative status in the form of population changes resulting from mass immigration and differential birthrates and the political success of non-white candidates—especially Barack Obama—coupled with elite attention to the waning position of whites, have fostered a sense of group attention and attachment among white Americans.

I argue that because of their magnitude, longevity, and the elite attention paid to them, these shifts in the political and social climate in the U.S. are conducive not only to the development of racial *identity*, but also to *group consciousness*.¹ Unlike group identity, which involves a psychological attachment to a group, sometimes coupled with perceptions of that groups' position in a social stratum, group consciousness “involves identification with a group *and* a political awareness or ideology regarding the group's relative position in society along with a commitment to collective action aimed at realizing the group's interests” (Miller et al. 1981, p.495). Theoretical accounts of group consciousness describe its manifestation as a process of politicization derived through the common experiences of group members; group identity gives way to consciousness when group conflict leads to perceptions that one's group is

¹ It is worth noting that consciousness is distinct from linked fate. Both Dawson (2009) and Jardina (2014) have explored the traditional linked fate item among whites, and both have found that it seems to capture, in part, a more progressive recognition of white privilege, rather than an identification or attachment to one's racial group. Thus, it does not measure the sentiments discussed here.

relatively deprived and collective action is an agreed upon means by which to challenge the social order in an effort to improve the position of the group. In other words, if whites possess a sense of group consciousness, we would expect them not only to identify with their group and feel aggrieved, but also to believe that whites should work together as a group to resolve these grievances.

The extent to which consciousness is developed among group members has important political implications; while identity alone may embody an attachment to a group and a vague desire to protect group interests in the political arena, consciousness suggests that group members have internalized a shared ideology regarding the group's position in society and have committed to collective political action aimed at addressing the group's interests. We might therefore expect that white group consciousness could play a central role in whites' political candidate preferences, particularly among those candidates that appeal to the sentiment that white Americans are being treated unfairly (e.g., Donald Trump, Tea Party candidates). We might also find it predicts support for policies perceived to directly benefit whites and protect their status (e.g., anti-immigration policies, Social Security spending) or for support for symbols like the Confederate Flag.² And just as it does for subordinate group members, white group consciousness might be closely linked with organized participation on behalf of whites through lobbying, demonstrations, and other forms of political engagement.

Proposed Measures

Early work on group consciousness measured it among whites, but the results suggested that whites do not possess a sense of racial consciousness, particularly compared to African Americans (Miller et al. 1981). It is important, however, that we do not write off the possibility

² See Winter (2008) for evidence that Social Security has been deliberately framed by political elites as a policy for whites.

that the contemporary political environment, where white Americans are routinely reminded of threats to their dominant status, is fostering white group consciousness. Furthermore, while early work on consciousness acknowledged its potential among dominant groups like whites, most of the previous survey questions intended to tap consciousness were specifically designed to measure it among subordinate groups.³ Thus, the language of these previous items was ill-suited to assess consciousness among dominant group members, like whites. Thus, we not only need to pay renewed attention to white group consciousness, but we need appropriate measures to capture this concept.

Using the group consciousness items originally developed by Miller and co-authors (1981) as a guide, I have generated new items designed to assess group consciousness among whites.⁴ The first component of consciousness is group identification, and the ANES has already employed a racial identity importance item on the 2012 Time Series study. This item asks respondents, “How important is being white to your identity?” Response options on a five-point scale range from “Extremely important” to “Not at all important.” Among whites in the 2012 ANES face-to-face sample, 20% indicated that their racial identity is “very important” and another 14% said that it is “extremely important.” This item alone predicts vote choice in 2012 and support for a range of policies that disproportionately benefit whites like Social Security and Medicare, and it does so above and beyond traditional measures of racial attitudes like racial resentment (Jardina 2014).

³ Gurin (1985) writes that, “group consciousness, of course, holds in dominant groups as well. It justifies advantage, gives legitimacy to their social and economic superiority, and evokes action aimed to perpetuate that advantage. Conscious articulation of a dominant group ideology occurs primarily when it is challenge by deprived groups” (p. 146)

⁴ Gurin (1985) also significantly informs the development of these survey items.

Beyond mere identification, group consciousness entails a sense of collective orientation—an indication that the group desires a change in its rank or power because its status has been challenged. Survey items designed to capture this dimension have asked respondents whether they think members of their group should work together to change laws unfair to their group. Thus, the proposed item assessing collective orientation among whites is as follows: “How important is it that whites work together to change laws that are unfair to whites?” This question has five response options ranging from “extremely important” to “not at all important.”

Group consciousness also requires that group members believe the disparities or loss of status their group suffers are the result of some illegitimate, structural barriers, rather than the result of inadequacies of individual group members. Previous survey items have measured beliefs about the legitimacy of group disparities or circumstances by asking respondents whether they think group members are unable to get jobs due to a lack of qualifications or due to discriminatory practices. The following item is designed to capture this dimension among whites: “How likely is it that many whites are unable to find a job because employers are hiring minorities instead?” The response options for this item would range along five points from “extremely likely” to “not at all likely.”

Reliability and Validity

These items were piloted using a non-probability but nationally diverse sample recruited by the firm Survey Sampling International (SSI) in July of 2013 (N=698). SSI recruits individuals to their Internet-based panel via opt-in methods, and provides a Census-balanced sample by sampling based on demographic attributes within their large panel.⁵ A slightly larger number of

⁵ SSI’s panel closely matches the characteristics of the larger white, adult, American citizen population based on 2010 Census data. For more information on this sampling approach see Berrens, Bohara, Hank, Silva, & Wiemer (2003) and Best, Krueger, Hubbard, & Smith (2001).

whites in this sample claim that their racial identity is very, if not extremely important (40%) compared to whites in the ANES Sample (34%), but we can see here again that the number of white identifiers is sizeable. When asked how important it is for whites to work together to change laws that are unfair to whites, 52% indicate that it is very, if not extremely important. And when asked how likely it is that many whites are unable to find a job because employers are hiring minorities instead, 40% responded that it is very, if not extremely likely.⁶

Scaled together, these items achieve a respectable Cronbach’s alpha of .74. Of course, we should expect that white consciousness is *not* the same as white racial animus, be it in the form of either racial resentment or old fashioned prejudice.⁷ Table 1 presents the correlation between white consciousness and these constructs, in addition to party ID and ideology.

Table 1. Associations between White Consciousness and other Attitudes and Identities

	Pairwise correlation coefficient	Significance level
Racial Resentment	0.41	$p < 0.00$
Stereotype Index	0.36	$p < 0.00$
Party ID (Republican)	0.10	$p > 0.29$
Ideological Self-ID (Conservative)	0.23	$p < 0.01$

Source: SSI 2013 Study

We can see that white group consciousness is not significantly correlated with party ID, and it is only weakly correlated with political ideology. Significant correlations do emerge with respect to racial stereotypes and racial resentment, although because the consciousness items ask both about race and about perceptions of discrimination, these relationships are not especially surprising.⁸ The correlations make it clear that white group consciousness is not the same construct as either of these measures of racial animus.

⁶ The complete distribution of these items is presented in Appendix A.

⁷ Old fashioned prejudice is measured here using the stereotype index, which is a difference score between how whites evaluate themselves versus blacks on two dimensions: lazy versus hardworking, and intelligent versus unintelligent.

⁸ It is worth noting that in this sample, party ID and racial resentment are also correlated at .4—the same extent that we see racial resentment and white group consciousness.

More importantly, we should find that white consciousness has distinct predictive power above and beyond traditional measures of racial attitudes. Unfortunately, the SSI study did not contain measures of vote choice, but it did ask about evaluations toward Barack Obama on the 101 point feeling thermometer. It also assessed beliefs about whether the Republican Party or Democratic Party better represents whites, attitudes toward the Tea Party movement on the 101 point feeling thermometer item, and support for Social Security and welfare spending. Table 2 presents the results of five OLS regression models in these dependent variables are regressed on white consciousness, controlling for racial resentment and a number of other controls.⁹

The results are compelling. White consciousness predicts negative affect toward Obama, endorsement that Republicans better represent whites compared to Democrats, and positive affect toward the Tea Party movement, even after controlling for racial resentment.¹⁰ The results of the two models in which support for Social Security and welfare were regressed on white consciousness provide further evidence that this construct is also distinct from racial animus. As expected, racial resentment is strongly related to opposition to welfare, but white consciousness is not (Gilens 1999). On the other hand white consciousness is a powerful predictor of attitudes toward Social Security, whereas racial resentment is unrelated. In short, these results provide provocative evidence that white consciousness potentially plays an important role in candidate and party evaluations. It also has important implications for policy attitudes in ways that are distinct from racial animus.

⁹ Controlling for the stereotype index instead of racial resentment produces substantively identical results.

¹⁰ Jardina (2014) shows that white identity alone predicted vote choice in 2012. In fact, after controlling for white identity, racial resentment was not a significant predictor of vote choice.

Table 2. The Predictive Power of White Consciousness

	Obama Feeling Thermometer	Republicans better represent whites than Democrats	Tea Party Feeling Thermometer	Support for Social Security	Support for Welfare
White Consciousness	-0.064* (0.038)	0.090** (0.045)	0.151*** (0.044)	0.188*** (0.037)	0.025 (0.045)
Racial Resentment	-0.329*** (0.045)	0.166*** (0.055)	0.091* (0.053)	-0.072 (0.044)	-0.347*** (0.055)
Age	-0.005 (0.037)	-0.068 (0.045)	-0.086** (0.044)	0.178*** (0.037)	-0.066 (0.045)
Education	0.089 (0.081)	-0.030 (0.098)	0.040 (0.095)	-0.197** (0.080)	-0.269*** (0.098)
Party ID (Republican)	-0.405*** (0.035)	-0.001 (0.042)	0.229*** (0.041)	0.013 (0.034)	-0.061 (0.043)
Ideology (Conservative)	-0.133*** (0.043)	0.057 (0.052)	0.228*** (0.051)	-0.195*** (0.043)	-0.186*** (0.053)
Female	0.021 (0.017)	0.055*** (0.021)	-0.003 (0.020)	0.010 (0.017)	-0.013 (0.021)
Income	-0.009 (0.042)	0.029 (0.050)	-0.039 (0.049)	-0.123*** (0.041)	-0.190*** (0.050)
Support for Limited Gov.	-0.161*** (0.023)	0.019 (0.028)	0.137*** (0.027)	-0.066*** (0.023)	-0.129*** (0.028)
Constant	0.742*** (0.073)	0.656*** (0.088)	0.138 (0.085)	0.786*** (0.072)	1.146*** (0.088)
Observations	676	683	676	681	679
R-squared	0.590	0.047	0.380	0.161	0.312

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Summary

Previous scholarship has largely dismissed the notion that whites possess a racial identity, let alone a racial consciousness. Growing evidence, however, suggests that in the contemporary political environment, whites are viewing themselves as a distinct and aggrieved political group. The proposed items take an important step toward validly capturing these sentiments, which may have enormous consequences for U.S. electoral politics in the coming years. By simply focusing on racial out-group animus among whites, we are potentially missing an important and essential

part of the puzzle—that racial in-group attitudes inform political preferences among white Americans as well, and they do so in distinct and consequential ways.

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Appendix A

Distribution of Consciousness Items in SSI Study

White Identity

“How Important is being white to your identity?”

Extremely important	19 %
Very important	21
Moderately important	28
A little important	12
Not at all important	19

N=697, percentages are rounded

Consciousness – Collective Orientation

“How important is it that whites work together to change laws that are unfair to whites?”

Extremely important	26 %
Very important	26
Moderately important	22
A little important	11
Not at all important	16

N=696, percentages are rounded

Consciousness – Legitimacy of Disparities

How likely is it that many whites are unable to find a job because employers are hiring minorities instead?”

Extremely likely	19 %
Very likely	21
Moderately likely	23
Slightly likely	23
Not at all likely	14

N=698, percentages are rounded