Immigration and the Defense of White Identity

Justin Gest

In this memo, I lay the basic foundation for an argument that immigration and its politicization by Radical Right populists has stimulated the perceived marginality of white identity and the need to defend white identity as an authentic or legitimate source of group politics for working class people. Using descriptive survey data and excerpts of field interviews in Youngstown, OH and East London, UK, I address three related questions: (1) Is white identity on the rise? (2) Why do white working class people feel marginalized? (3) Why is immigration so pivotal to white working class politics? While the data and ideas I present do not fully explain the way demographic change invigorates a sense of identity threat, they do underscore the susceptibility of white working class people to xenophobic, nationalist appeals by populists and why the efficacy of such appeals is unlikely to diminish as demographic change intensifies in North America and Europe.

Is white identity on the rise?

One of President Trump’s most enduring and foreboding achievements may be the reinvigoration of white identity in the United States and beyond. In his social policy proposals and statements during the 2016 American election, he spoke directly to a resentful, anxious constituency of white Americans who felt like they had lost control of their society. He vilified Muslims, cast Mexicans and immigrants as violent opportunists, insulted the disabled, objectified women, undercut American foreign allies, broadbrushed inner cities as war zones, and assailed anyone who shamed his political incorrectness. By the time he praised the “little guy” who was being impoverished and destabilized by a conspiratorial global economy, the race of that “little guy” was quite clear by process of elimination. In championing the views of America’s “silent majority,” he was addressing white people who have felt as though talking about their identity is off limits.

This direct, deliberate appeal engaged a constituency that had felt forgotten and disrespected by political and business elites for a generation of American politics, but also emboldened them to reassert a more muscular and newly condoned white identity. While news publications would cover a subsequent rise in hate crimes and a renaissance of white supremacy, quietly, white people began to identify more closely with their race. When a nationally representative sample of white Americans was asked “How important is being white to your identity?” the proportion who said “extremely important” nearly doubled from 2012 to 2016 (Figure 1.1).

---

1 I assign working-class status to people who did not complete university degrees. While class could be studies with alternative indicators, education credentials are widely measured and a relatively reliable predictor of people’s income, professional rank, and accompanying cultural differences. Education credentials also affect people’s expectations about their sense of power. It is worth underscoring that such definitional choices can affect the results of an analysis. For example, a white working-class person who identifies their status by education tends to be slightly more conservative-leaning than one who defines his or her status according to their income.
Figure 1.1  The distribution of white identity among white working-class people and all other whites in 2012 and 2016. “How important is being white to your identity?” Source: 2012 ANES and 2016 ANES pilot.
Figure 1.2 The distribution of responses to “How likely is it that many whites are unable to find a job because employers are hiring minorities instead?” Source: 2016 ANES pilot.

Figure 1.3 The distribution of responses to “How important is it that whites work together to change laws that are unfair to whites?” Source: 2016 ANES pilot.
Figure 1.4  The distribution of responses to “Britain would begin to lose its identity if [more people from Eastern Europe/Muslims/black and Asian people] came to live in Britain?” Source: 2013 British Social Attitudes Survey.

Figure 1.5  The distribution of responses to “Do you think that most white people in Britain would mind or not mind if one of their close relatives were to marry [a person of Asian origin/a person who is Muslim/a person of black African or Caribbean origin]?” Source: 2013 British Social Attitudes Survey.
If a sense of white American solidarity is emerging, it is emerging more among white working-class people. Alongside the earlier question about the importance of being white to one’s identity, the survey asked, “How likely is it that many whites are unable to find a job because employers are hiring minorities instead?” and “How important is it that whites work together to change laws that are unfair to whites?” When compared to non-working-class white people, a greater share of white working-class people believed that they were “extremely” likely to lose jobs to minority candidates (Figure 1.2). They were also more likely to believe that it is “extremely” important for white people to work together (Figure 1.3). These sentiments are increasingly relevant to American politics. New research by Ashley Jardina finds that when white people no longer feel that their power, status, and group privileges are stable and secure, their racial identity becomes salient and politically consequential to their attitudes and decisions. Racial conflict, she argues, is not merely product of white people’s learned out-group racial hostilities or animus; it is also a function of white people’s desire to protect their in-group’s power and resources.

While British surveys do not measure white identity as thoroughly or to the same extent, the British Social Attitudes Survey offers proxies. In 2013, it asked respondents to what extent they would agree with the following statement: “Britain would begin to lose its identity if [more people from Eastern Europe [for example, Poland and Latvia]/Muslims/black and [South] Asian people] came to live in Britain.” Compared to the bulk of the British population, the response from white working-class people was stunningly nativist—an almost complete inversion of attitudes (Figure 1.4). Respondents were also asked, “Do you think that most white people in Britain would mind or not mind if one of their close relatives were to marry [a person of Asian origin/a person who is Muslim/a person of black African or Caribbean origin]?” Displayed in Figure 1.5, the results again showed that white working-class Britons were less tolerant (or at least would expect less tolerance from their white peers).

Despite this evidence of white identification, belonging, and even solidarity, white working-class people do not appear to believe that their fates are inextricably linked to those of other white people. A survey taken in 2012 and 2016 asked, “Do you think what happens generally to [white/black] people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life? Will it affect you a lot, some, or not very much?” The responses that white working-class Americans gave showed that they felt their lives were less tied to those of black people and non-working-class white people in 2016 than they were in 2012. Some social scientists believe this concept of “linked fate”—which originated in the study of black Americans—has been improperly extended to other racial and ethnic groups. However, these results may reflect the significant normative differences within the white population—particularly between white people of different social classes, ideologies, and regions. In my previous research, white working-class people expressed a double estrangement, from both racial minorities and white people of higher social standing.

---

Why do white working-class people feel marginalized?

For external observers, one of the most perplexing aspects of white working-class politics is white people’s sense of marginalization. How can a group with such enduring advantages and power lament their weakness? The answer lies in relativity.

To the external observer, the structural advantages for white people in North America and Europe are quite plain. White people benefit from a political and social system of their own creation. They are advantaged by a history of discrimination in their favor, a trajectory unfettered by the legacies of slavery or the exploitation of colonialism. They boast an acquaintance with norms of national culture and language. White males in particular assume the “privileged role of universal subject.”

They enjoy an intangible affinity with predominantly white leaders in business and politics, and they need not worry about adapting their behavior or expectations to this environment. Some describe the situation in harsher terms: White people exploit “unearned advantages” as a means to “improve or maintain their social position.” Earned or unearned, it is assumed that these advantages make white individuals the incumbents.

However, white working-class people are consumed by a sense of loss. While they acknowledge histories of advantage and the oppression of minorities, many neither recognize the endurance of these advantages nor believe that their working-class families had a hand in the oppression of yesteryear. Rather, many believe that their societies and governments have compensated for sins of the past by subordinating white working-class people today—scapegoating them and crafting a global system that leads to their poverty, disempowerment, and, ultimately, their extinction. Accordingly, they view attempts to “level the playing field” as the relative loss of the status they once held or as unnecessary after the recalibrations of the Civil Rights Era. Since the end of the Manufacturing Era and the coinciding Civil Rights Movement, white working-class people have experienced three principal changes—the incorporation of immigrants who compete for work and resources, the loss of political power, and the emergence of social norms that value diversity and discount heritage. Accordingly, there are three components to their marginality.

**Outnumbering:** White working-class people recognize the steady deterioration of their numbers. Increasing proportions of all population groups are attaining higher levels of education and white people comprise a decreasing share of national populations in the United States and the United Kingdom. By 2044, the US Census estimates that white people generally will make up less than 50 percent of the American population. However, this change will be even more pronounced on the local level as the share of white working-class people in neighborhoods and cities falls. Such change is attributable to fertility rates, foreigners moving in, and whites moving out.

In the United States, 20 percent of counties experienced a 10 percent or greater decrease in their white population between 1991 and 2011. About 5 percent of American counties went from being majority white in 1991 to minority white in 2011. In the United Kingdom, 15.5 percent of local authorities experienced a 10 percent or greater decrease in their white population.

---

between 1991 and 2001—a shorter period than what was measured in the United States. About 5 percent of British local authorities went from being majority white in 1991 to minority white in 2001.

In my interview with a white community activist in East London, she would stop me if I referred to immigrant groups as “minorities.” “It’s a fact that we are a minority,” she asserted. “There’s not a school in the borough that’s not eighty percent ethnic. Nobody English moves into this borough. They only move out. It’s gotten to the stage where, even queuing for the loo, it’s a novelty when you meet an English person to speak to. . . . I won’t allow myself to feel on the outside of my society. But a lot of other people are scared. They feel intimidated.” Nancy’s statements reflect a generally monolithic view of nonwhite, non-English people that is shared by many in her neighborhood.

Exclusion: White working-class people express a sense that they lack representation not just in government, but also in popular culture, public institutions, and employment. They are wary that the same principles of equal access and representation that compensate for other groups’ disadvantages do not apply to them. Only 2 percent of those currently serving in Congress can claim working-class backgrounds.9 The Washington Post reports that between 1984 and 2009, the median net worth of a member of the House of Representatives grew from $280,000 to $725,000 in inflation-adjusted dollars, while the wealth of an American family slightly declined from $20,600 to $20,500.10 As a result, government and business feel distant, clubby, and unwelcoming.

In Youngstown, Ohio, a 29-year-old chef told me that his disempowerment extends to the workplace. “Whites are the minority now,” he said. “Sometimes, it gives [black people] greater power because it’s the higher group. So they can get their way. My uncle works at a plant where everybody is scared to tell the black people what to do because they’re worried about retaliation. The managers are outnumbered and they don’t have a backbone. . . . White people are held to a different standard. In history books, whites were always above the blacks. But we desegregated to change the world. It’s been one hundred years and they still want more.” Paradoxically, he implied that black people are privileged in the United States, while simultaneously acknowledging that white people continue to occupy most positions of authority.

In surveys, white working-class people are more likely to deny the advantages that white people continue to possess, and they express a sense that they are subject to unique disadvantages that reinforce their exclusion from mainstream society. A nationally representative sample of Americans was asked, “Does being white help you, hurt you, or make no difference for you personally in today’s society?” A near majority of white working-class people believed that being white made no difference to their fate (Figure 1.6). Meanwhile, white working-class people in the same sample were more likely than other demographics to believe their whiteness hurt them. In another metric, the sample of people were asked, “How many disadvantages do white people have that minorities do not have in today’s society?” (See Figure 1.7.) Compared to the rest of those surveyed, white working-class people were far less likely to say “none.”

---

Figure 1.6 Distribution of responses to: “Does being white help you, hurt you, or make no difference for you personally in today’s society?” among white working class and everyone else. Source: 2016 ANES pilot.

Figure 1.7 Distribution of responses to: “How many disadvantages do white people have that minorities do not have in today’s society?” among white working class and everyone else. Source: 2016 ANES pilot.
Figure 1.8  Proportion of white working-class, white non-working-class, and non-white respondents who agree that there is a great deal or a lot of discrimination against each group in the United States. Source: 2016 ANES pilot.

Figure 1.9  Distribution of responses to “In general, does the federal government treat whites better than blacks, treat blacks better than whites, or treat them both about the same?” among white working-class, non-working-class whites, and non-white respondents. Source: 2016 ANES pilot.
Discrimination: Many white working-class people believe they are frequently subject to conscious or unconscious prejudgment by members of ethnic minorities and middle- and upper-class white people. They believe that such prejudice affects their ability to get jobs, receive equal treatment by officials and businesses, and access government benefits like housing or welfare. Sometimes, this is also a matter of the special treatment white working-class people believe members of nonwhite minorities receive—such as scholarships, employment, exemptions or leniencies, and government contracting. “I fought for this country,” lamented a pensioner I interviewed in East London, “and it ain’t even our country anymore. You’re not the priority. We’ve got everything here. Gays, lesbians—what do you call them?—bisexuals, prostitutes, pedophiles. This place is like [the soap operas] ‘Coronation Street’ meets ‘East Enders’ and ‘Holly Oaks’ all at once.” In Youngstown, an electrician told me, “White people have become the minority itself. . . . People have freaked out on me for things I’ve said, because I can’t say anything [about black people] because of slavery and their historical oppression. [Black] people aren’t looking for equality; they’re looking for retaliation.” While the pensioner refers to her loss of priority beneath people she finds deviant, the electrician does not mind relegation so long as it promotes actual equality. However, many white working-class individuals view the struggle for equal treatment as a vengeful persecution—a campaign to demote white people, rather than to promote others.

In surveys, white working-class people reveal a greater sensitivity to discrimination in all forms—as it hinders their own pursuits, but also as it hinders other constituencies. The same, nationally representative survey asked whether its American respondents agree that there is “a great deal” or “a lot of” discrimination against various groups in the United States, including blacks, Christians, Hispanics, Muslims, whites, women, and gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people (Figure 1.8). White working-class people were more likely than non-working-class whites to acknowledge prejudice against all the named groups. However, white working-class people perceived discrimination against blacks, Hispanics, and women far less than nonwhites, and they perceived discrimination against whites and Christians more than all others. In another metric, the sample was asked, “In general, does the federal government treat whites better than blacks, treat blacks better than whites, or treat them both about the same?” (Figure 1.9). White working-class people were more likely to believe the government reserved “much better” treatment for black people.

Why is immigration so pivotal to white working-class politics?

In light of the party coalitions established after the American political realignment in the 1960s and cemented during the Obama presidency, cross-party “vote switching” is exceedingly rare in the United States. However, a significant number of people who voted for Democrats in 2012 (or did not vote at all) cast votes for Donald Trump in 2016. Collingwood et al. have found that the principal driver for this switch is a backlash against immigration among white working-class people. Inversely, individuals with positive views about immigration were most likely to switch from the Republican Party to vote for Hillary Clinton. Similarly, during the Brexit campaign, no policy issue was more salient than immigration. These debates were not so much about Left

versus Right or liberal versus conservative, as in previous cycles. Rather, the elections turned on
the debate over open versus closed, globalism versus nationalism.

In such an environment, immigration offers the whole polemical package. It features the
politics of job creation. Do immigrants create new jobs with all the businesses they start and
products they innovate? Do they accept and perform unwanted jobs? Or do they compete with
natives for jobs? It features the politics of trade. Do immigrants undermine unions or bolster
them? Do immigrants keep companies from offshoring work? Do companies exploit temporary
labor visas to replace the native-born? It features the politics of welfare. Are immigrants net
recipients of or contributors to the welfare state? It features the politics of criminal justice. Is
immigration enforcement deporting valuable contributors to society and destroying families? Are
we letting criminals stay? It features the politics of foreign affairs. Do countries have a
humanitarian obligation to welcome refugees? Are immigrants a source of international
terrorism?

Most of all, immigration features the politics of identity. The fire of nationalism is stoked
by immigration because the arrival of newcomers raises broad, existential questions about how a
nation should be defined and what its future ought to be. Based on what criteria should we select
immigrants? What predicts or prepares people for integration? According to what standards
should we integrate newcomers? What are the qualifications for being an American? What are
British values? There are no easy answers to such questions, particularly when these countries
are already quite diverse, and narrow understandings would alienate large numbers of citizens.
Modernity has seen the questioning, reinterpretation, and evolution of orthodoxies in every
regard. This has revived efforts to reinforce (and re-create) national understandings of heritage,
but it also has fostered a recognition that there is strength in diversity.

The native-born—not merely white people—always understand their national identity
with more complexity and nuance than they understand the identity of newcomers.
Consequently, immigrants’ culture and attributes always appear far more strident and unified
than one’s own. This truth was inadvertently expressed by Financial Times columnist Christopher
Caldwell in his alarmist book about the threat Muslims pose to European democracies,
Reflections on the Revolution in Europe. In it, he referred to European societies as “hospitable,”
“insecure,” and “malleable.” In contrast, he depicted Islam as “anchored,” “confident,” and
“adversarial.” However, Islam is a religion with dozens of sects, thousands of traditions, and a
cacophony of beliefs that has left it irreconcilably splintered. Imagine how “anchored,”
“confident,” and “adversarial” European states appear when they are able to align into a 27-
country supranational union.

Of course, those inside the European Union perceive a thin consensus and threats to
national sovereignty. For many white working-class people there, the EU and its open internal
borders represent precisely the threat that globalization poses. Many Americans are similarly
perturbed by how the movement of people, money, and culture blurs national distinctions—
cheapening them by endowing newcomers with membership, bending to accommodate their
differences, and importing commercial and cultural products from overseas. This is a far greater
threat both to people who do not have the resources to make use of these products and
opportunities and to people who derive their self-worth from their sense of heritage.
Figure 1.10  The distribution of responses to “To be truly American how important is it to_____?” among the white working class and everyone else. Source: 2016 ANES.
According to the survey data presented in Figures 1.10 and 1.11, white working-class people place greater value in heritage-based attributes than all others when defining the American and British identities. More than the general American population, white people without university degrees believe that, to be truly American, people need to have American ancestry, American traditions, an American birth, and fluency in English. More than the general British population, white working-class respondents believed that, to be truly British, people needed to have British ancestry, a British birth, and, in some cases, a Christian faith. These factors don’t accord with official qualifications for American and British citizenship. While immigrant admissions were once explicitly or implicitly dictated by race and ethnic heritage, the requirements since the 1960s have focused on length of residency and good conduct. As the ranks of American and British citizens swell with people from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, heritage is perceived to be devalued.
Ultimately, any country that offers the possibility of naturalization must recognize that the composition of their society will change with immigration—that there is no such thing as “full assimilation.” However, this truth has been hard to accept for many in Europe, where national identities can theoretically be traced back to antiquity. It has also been controversial in settler states like the United States. In a precursor to Caldwell’s Muslim panic, Samuel Huntington published a book that similarly warned of the threat posed by Latin Americans—Mexicans in particular. Huntington argued that the United States was defined by an “Anglo-Protestant creed” throughout its history, and that all immigrants assimilated into this creed until it fell “under assault by diversity.” Mexicans, he argued, had the capacity to alter that creed because of their size, concentration, proximity, and refusal to integrate. Subsequent research has demonstrated that Mexicans and other Latinos integrate into the United States very well, particularly considering that most arrive with fewer resources than other immigrants. Yet Huntington’s book was an example of the type of concerns raised by demographic change. If nothing else, it was very aptly titled: *Who Are We?*

**Prospectus**

In the way that Western Muslims—many of whom are or were previously secular—more tightly embraced their religious identity when Islam was vilified over the last 20 years, the salience of whiteness as a source of group identity has risen recently in the face of perceived threats. Indeed, at its most extreme, white nationalism mimics the militant obsession with purity and supremacy that characterizes Islamic fundamentalisms. They are mutual antagonists. It is for this reason that populists have been so successful engendering xenophobic backlash with Islamophobic fear-mongering and the exaggeration of demographic change and its implications. For white working class people more specifically, such tactics exploit their multi-faceted sense of marginality from the society they once defined. They also provide simplistic answers to the questions that immigration raises in diversifying societies: Who are They? How will They change our society? Who are We? And what is Our place in society going forward?

Such questions underscore the way that many white—and particularly white working class people—feel like they have lost status and lost control of their country. In response, the polling and interview data suggest that we are at the beginning of a period of tribal brinkmanship. There is little indication that immigrant-origin communities and people of non-white identities will cease to safeguard their political gains and press for institutions and environments that respect their equal status. And in response, many white native communities are poised to resist the realities of a more global, more fragmented society. Meanwhile, opportunistic political entrepreneurs will inspire overreactions to demographic change and resist the *fait accompli*. The challenge for those promoting a more convivial and less polarized polity is threefold:

1. help white people accept the inevitable social transformations before them
2. construct a new identity that dignifies their heritage and enriches their future
3. persuade ascendant members of ethnic minorities that the consolation of white people does not infringe upon their immigrant incorporation, but rather advances it.

---