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GUEST ESSAY

The Unsettling Truth About Trump's First Great Victory

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Donald Trump's 2016 election victory continues to confound election experts. How could American voters put such a fractious figure into the White House?

This is more than an academic question. For the third time, Trump is the leading candidate for the Republican presidential nomination.

Three books, published in the years following Trump's election — "Identity Crisis: The 2016 Presidential Campaign and the Battle for the Meaning of America" by John Sides of Vanderbilt, Michael Tesler of the University of California-Irvine and Lynn Vavreck of U.C.L.A.; "White Identity Politics" by Ashley Jardina of George Mason University; and "Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity" by Lilliana Mason of Johns Hopkins — shed light on Trump's improbable political longevity.

Each points to the centrality of racial animosity.

Sides, Tesler and Vavreck, for example, cite 2016 American National Election Studies data that asked four questions in order to explore dimensions of white identity: "the importance of white identity, how much whites are being discriminated against, the likelihood that whites are losing jobs to nonwhites, and the importance of whites working together to change laws unfair to whites."

The authors combine these questions into a "scale capturing the strength of white identity and found that it was strongly related to Republicans' support for Donald Trump."

"Strongly related" is an understatement. On a 17-point scale ranking the strength of Republican primary voters' white identity from lowest to highest, support for Trump grew consistently at each step — from 2 percent at the bottom to 81 percent at the highest level.

Now, this earlier scholarship notwithstanding, three political scientists are presenting an alternative

interpretation of the 2016 election. In their Feb. 28 paper "Measuring the Contribution of Voting Blocs to Election Outcomes," Justin Grimmer of Stanford, William Marble of the University of Pennsylvania and Cole Tanigawa-Lau, also of Stanford, write:

> We assess claims that Donald Trump received a particularly large number of votes from individuals with antagonistic attitudes toward racial outgroups (Sides, Tesler and Vavreck, 2017; Mason, Wronski and Kane, 2021). Using the ANES, however, we show that in 2016 Trump's largest gains in support, compared to Mitt Romney in 2012, came from whites with moderate racial resentment. This result holds despite the fact that the relationship between vote choice and racial resentment was stronger in 2016 and 2020 than in other elections.

How could these two seemingly contradictory statements both be true? Grimmer, Marble and Tanigawa-Lau write:

> Decomposing the change in support observed in the ANES data, we show that respondents in 2016 and 2020 reported more moderate views, on average, than in previous elections. As a result, Trump improved the most over previous Republicans by capturing the votes of a larger number of people who report racially moderate views.

In an email, Marble provided more detail:

> Whites with high levels of racial resentment supported Trump at a historically high rate compared to prior Republican presidential candidates. Yet, between 2012 and 2016, the number of people who scored at the high end of the racial resentment scale declined significantly. As a result, there were simply fewer high racial resentment voters for Trump to win in 2016 and 2020 than there were in earlier eras. At the same time, the number of people scoring at moderate levels of racial resentment increased. Trump was not as popular among this voting bloc, compared to those with high racial resentment. But because this group is larger, whites with moderate racial resentment scores ended up contributing more net votes to Trump.

I asked Grimmer to explain the significance of his work with Marble and Tanigawa-Lau.

Responding by email, Grimmer wrote:

> Our findings provide an important correction to a popular narrative about how Trump won office. Hillary Clinton argued that Trump supporters could be placed in a "basket of deplorables." And election-night pundits and even some academics have claimed that Trump's victory was the result of appealing to white Americans' racist and xenophobic attitudes. We show this conventional wisdom is (at best) incomplete. Trump's supporters were less xenophobic than prior Republican candidates', less sexist, had lower animus to minority groups, and lower levels of racial resentment. Far from deplorables, Trump voters were, on average, more tolerant and understanding than voters for prior Republican candidates.

The data, Grimmer continued,

> point to two important and undeniable facts. First, analyses focused on vote choice alone cannot tell us where candidates receive support. We must know the size of groups and who turns out to vote. And we cannot confuse candidates' rhetoric with the voters who support them, because voters might support the candidate despite the rhetoric, not because of it.

I asked Sides, Tesler and Vavreck for their assessment of the Grimmer, Marble and Tanigawa-Lau paper. They provided a one-paragraph response affirming, in the phrase "identity-inflected issues," the crucial role of racial resentment:

> There are of course many complexities in characterizing changes in aggregate election outcomes over time. Several pieces of research into the 2016 election, including our book, "Identity Crisis," and this interesting paper by Grimmer, Marble and Tanigawa-Lau, find that people's vote choices in that election were more strongly related to their views on "identity-inflected issues" than they had been in prior elections. That is why our book argues that these issues are central to how we interpret the outcome in 2016.

John Kane, a political scientist at N.Y.U. and an author with Lilliana Mason and Julie Wronski of "Activating Animus: The Uniquely Social Roots of Trump Support," which was cited in the Grimmer paper, suggested that the Grimmer paper in fact provides a key corrective to the debate over the 2016 election. In an email, Kane pointed to a key section that reads:

> Trump's surprising win in 2016 was not due to a large increase in Republican votes among the most racially resentful Americans. Instead, Trump's support grew the most, relative to prior Republican candidates', among whites with relatively moderate racial resentment scores. This potentially surprising finding is explained by the shifting distribution of racial resentment in the population.

Grimmer's point, Kane wrote, is

> to highlight the fact that, if we don't account for a group's size in the population (e.g., how many racially resentful people there are) and how many of them actually turn out to vote, we could incorrectly infer that certain groups have become more or less supportive of particular parties over time. I fully agree with this point and really do think it's extremely important for people to understand.

That said, Kane continued,

> The point about Trump voters being less racially resentful on average than voters for previous Republican candidates, while likely true, should, I think, be interpreted as a statement about why it's important to be mindful of over-time changes in groups' sizes in the population, and NOT as a statement about Trump being successful in attracting racially liberal voters (indeed, those lowest in racial resentment turned away from him, per Grimmer-Marble-Tanigawa-Lau's own findings).

Other scholars who have explored issues of race and politics were generally supportive of the Grimmer paper.

Andrew Engelhardt, a political scientist at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, wrote by email:

> I find this argument persuasive because understanding election outcomes requires not just understanding what contributes to vote choice (e.g., racial group attachments, racial prejudice), but also how many people with that particular attitude turned out to vote and what share of the electorate that group makes up.

The Grimmer paper, Engelhardt continued, "encourages us to take a step back and focus on the big picture for understanding elections: where do most votes come from and are these patterns consistent across elections?" Along these lines, according to Engelhardt,

> Discussion of racial resentment driving support for Trump could miss how folks low in racial resentment were actually critical to the election outcome. The paper makes just this clarifying point, noting, for instance, that White Democrats low in racial resentment were even more influential in contributing votes to Clinton in 2016 than to Obama in 2012. Change between 2012 and 2016 is not exclusively due to the behavior of the most prejudiced.

“I like this piece,” Alexander George Theodoridis, a political scientist at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, wrote. “It is a nice reminder for scholars and, especially, the media, that it is important to think carefully about base rates.”

In his email, Theodoridis argued:

> Donald Trump’s candidacy in 2016 was a stress test for Republican partisanship, and Republican partisanship passed with flying colors. The election was close enough for Trump to win because the vast majority of G.O.P. voters found the idea of either sitting it out or voting for a Democrat they had spent 20+ years disliking so distasteful that Trump’s limitations, liabilities and overt racism and misogyny were not a deal-breaker.

Theodoridis noted that his one

> minor methodological and measurement critique is that this sort of analysis has to take seriously what the racial resentment scale actually means. It may be that race is actually quite salient for those in the middle part of the scale, but they are just less overtly racist than those at the top of the scale. Also, the meaning of the racial resentment scale changes over time in ways that are not independent of politics, and especially of presidential politics. Position on the scale is not immutable in the way some descriptive characteristics may be.

Sean Westwood, a political scientist at Dartmouth, was explicitly supportive of the Grimmer-Marble-Tanigawa-Lau methodology. Writing by email, Westwood argued:

> It is an interesting academic exercise to predict who will win the vote within a specific group, but it is more fundamental to elections to understand how many voters candidates will gain from each group. The limitation in Sides-Vavreck-Mason-Jardina is that they find a strong relationship between racial attitudes and Trump support, but while predictive of individual vote choice these results lead to relatively few total votes for Trump.

Westwood contends that

> the important contribution from Grimmer et al is that there was a big change in the attitudes of the white electorate. A small number of whites with high levels of racial resentment did support Trump in 2016 at a higher rate than in prior elections, but the bulk of support for Trump came from more moderate whites. Trump managed to pull in support from racists, but he was able to pull in much more support from economically disadvantaged whites.

The Grimmer paper, according to Westwood, has significant implications for those making “general claims about the future Republican Party,” specifically challenging those who believe

> that Republicans can continue to win by appealing to white Americans’ worst attitudes and instincts. While it is true Trump support is largest for the most racist voters, this group is a shrinking part of the electorate. Republicans, as Grimmer et al. show, must figure out how to appeal to moderate whites who hold more moderate attitudes in order to win. Racist appeals can win votes, but it is critical to remember that this number is smaller than the votes gained by speaking on economic concerns of moderate white voters (many of whom were uncomfortable with Trump’s racist rhetoric and were voting solely based on economic policy).

Trump, Westwood concluded, “found support from both racists and moderates, but with the pool of racist voters shrinking, it is clear this is not a path to future victory.”

Other scholars were more cautious in their response to the Grimmer paper. Daniel Hopkins, a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania, commented by email:

> The 2016 presidential election included ballots cast by more than 128 million Americans, and so any one narrative used to explain that election will be partial and incomplete. So I think it's critical to avoid the idea that there is a single skeleton key that can explain all the varied undercurrents that led to Trump's 2016 victory, or that any one paper will provide a definitive explanation. That said, I published an article in 2021 in Political Behavior titled "The Activation of Prejudice and Presidential Voting," which I entirely stand by.

Hopkins said his paper demonstrates that

> white Americans' prejudice against Black Americans was more predictive of their vote choice in 2016 than it had been in 2012. Importantly, it also shows that levels of prejudice against Black Americans were more predictive of voting in the 2016 G.O.P. primary than in the 2016 general election. But Grimmer and colleagues are looking at a different question using different data, so I don't consider the analyses to be contradictory.

One clear benefit emerging from the continuing study of Trump's 2016 victory is a better understanding of the complexity and nuance of what brought it about.

Marc Hetherington, a political scientist at the University of North Carolina, pointed out in an email that the presence of racial resentment among Republican voters emerged long before Trump ran for president, while such resentment among Democratic voters has been sharply declining:

> I think what Justin Grimmer would say is that racial resentment didn't do more for Trump than it did for Romney. The highly racially resentful have, with reason, been voting for Republicans for a long time. Trump's more explicit use of race didn't make supporters more racially resentful. Levels of racial resentment among Republicans are no higher now than they were before Trump. In fact, they are slightly lower. And the highly racially resentful already knew full well that their home was in the G.O.P.

While the focus of attention has been on those who fall at the high end of the distribution on racial resentment, Hetherington wrote,

> Almost all the change has taken place among Democrats, as they moved to lower and lower levels of resentment. In a statistical sense, the fact that there are now so many more people at the low end of the distribution than before will produce a larger coefficient for the effect of racial resentment on voting behavior. Put another way, racial resentment has a bigger effect. But that does not mean that those high in racial resentment are now even more likely to vote for Republicans or that there are more people high in resentment. In this case, I think it reflects that there are more people low in resentment than before and that they are even less likely to vote for Republicans than before. So the low end of the scale is doing the work.

I began my examination of the Grimmer paper concerned that he and his co-authors might be drawing large conclusions from statistical oddities. After further examining the data and going over the commentary of the scholars I contacted, my own view is that Grimmer, Marble and Tanigawa-Lau have made a significant contribution to understanding the Trump phenomenon.

Most important, they make the case that explanations of Trump's victory pointing to the role of those at the extremes on measures of racial resentment and sexism, while informative, are in their own way too comforting, fostering the belief that Trump's triumph was the product of voters who have drifted far from the American mainstream.

In fact, the new analysis suggests that Trumpism has found fertile ground across a broad swath of the electorate, including many firmly in the mainstream. That Trump could capture the hearts and minds of these voters suggests that whatever he represents beyond racial resentment — anger,

chaos, nihilism, hostility — is more powerful than many recognize or acknowledge. Restoring American politics to an even keel will be far tougher than many of us realize.

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