

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

#### 4.1. Restatement of the Research Objective

This thesis initially sets out to explore brought forth a greater understanding of how white identity politics contribute to the seemingly unpredictable phenomenon of Donald Trump's victory in the United States presidential election in 2016. Through *the theory of dominant group, the concept of identity leadership*, under the theoretical umbrella of *constructivism*, the author sets out to (1) examine the social construction of white racial identity throughout American history, to (2) highlight the periodical development and activation of white identity in contemporary America, and to ultimately (3) assess the political significance of the salient white identity towards the 2016 presidential electoral outcome—combined with the element of identity leadership Trump demonstrated to garner the support among the white Americans.

#### 4.2. Key Findings of the Research

Through the process of exploring the *development, activation, application* of white identity in America, the author found that the fundamental premise of *the theory of dominant group identity* proved to be true in the case of the dominance of white race positioned at the top of the pyramid of racial hierarchy within America's social order. (1) *Development*: Since the founding generation, the ideology of whiteness that

suggests the superiority of the white race has been inextricably woven into the social, political, and economic fabric defining America as a nation and its people. In this sense, the *development* of white identity among the early days American whites tends to be regarded as an ‘invisible’ identity that remains largely hidden in their racial consciousness, due to the nation-wide protection and mimicry of whiteness positioned on par to America’s national identity.

(2) *Activation*: As America entered the post-civil rights era, the increasing racial and ethnic diversity shifting the composition of America’s demography brought by immigration, in parallel with the growing influence and power the non-white minority groups hold over the nation, have proved to be salient threats towards the whites dominant status. The nation’s changing face and shifting race relations have forced the previously renowned ‘white nation’ to deconstruct its collective understanding of who they are as a united nation and people. In this sense, the race-blind privilege that has been enjoyed by many generations of white Americans is no longer protected, their sense of racial security is being increasingly replaced by the gripping feeling of racial and cultural anxiety, as they must face the reality of race-related issues in modern-day America.

(3) *Application*: The consecutive electoral victory of Barack Obama has further strengthened the narrative of ‘the end of white establishment in America’, crystalizing the whites’ growing fear and anxiety over their declining dominance and diminishing majority status. Along with their increasing ingroup racial consciousness, white

Americans are thus compelled to mobilize and politically act based on their group's collective agenda—that is to defend their dominant status in face of the rapidly changing America. Such assumption is proven having analyzed the white voters' shifting electoral behavior from the Obama to Trump era—with the sharp reversal of voter turnout trend, particularly evident if seen from the black-white gap. In 2012, the former race group reached an all-time high record while the latter shown low enthusiasm, conversely, the opposite is true in 2016, with a strong majority of the white voting population cast their votes in the ballot box while many black voters did not show up to the polls.

There is an identifiable pattern of common characteristics among whites who expressed most discomfort and resistance to the key turn of events in contemporary America that are perceived as 'threats' to their group's dominant status and whites who cast a ballot for Trump in the 2016 presidential election. Derived from the operational definition of white Americans and *high-identifiers* elaborated in the theoretical framework; the author found that American people who self-identifies as a person of the white race, non-Hispanic ethnicity, male their 50s or older, rural/suburban residents, affiliating to the Christian faith, with Conservative/Republican-leaning partisan identity, and not holding a college degree, are most likely to be the *high-identifying* whites who are mainly responsible to Trump's rise to the presidency.

Additionally, as analyzed from the concept of *identity leadership*, this thesis also affirms the assumption that Trump effectively politicized the significant share of

the *high-identifying* whites among the voters who cast a ballot for him in the 2016 election. Through the embodiment of a populist-like leadership approach, Donald Trump strategically established a charismatic connection with ‘the people’ through his campaign rhetoric that specifically appeals to the anxious *high-identifying* white voters. His main message of ‘Make America Great Again’ validated the beliefs and concerns of the ‘forgotten hard-working (white) Americans’, which essentially equates the deteriorating state of America’s greatness to the declining status of white Americans. Throughout his campaign rally, Trump’s strong appeal towards his white base is evident by the great enthusiasm his supporters shown in chanting narratives of change where ‘Mexicans, Muslims, the political elites and the establishment’ is the enemy. While Trump is seen as ‘our guy’ who can and will ‘bring back the country’ to the hands of its ‘real people’.

The overwhelming amount of evidence found upon the rising salience of white identity coinciding with the victory of Donald Trump has made it impossible to not assume a close, if not a direct relationship between the two units of analysis. Referring to the definition of white identity and identity politics that was explained in the theoretical framework, this thesis found that the seemingly unlikely electoral outcome of Trump’s victory may be best understood as a predictable outcome from the embodiment of white identity politics. Meaning, the ingroup identification among the dominant group of white Americans significantly affects their political attitude and

behavior due to the increased sense of group belonging and shared fate compelling its *high-identifying* members to pursue their ingroup's self-defined objectives.

In 2016, the white group's political agenda focuses on the protection of their dominant status within the American racial hierarchy, one that is perceived to be threatened by the increasing racial diversity and shifting racial relations—both of which represents a deeper root cause to the plaguing sense of racial and cultural anxiety experienced by a greater part of the white population in America. In this sense, Donald Trump was a manifestation of a long-harbored racial tension and division among Americans who have been struggling over different ideas of who America is and who should be considered as Americans, upon whom rights and equality are to be granted. He just happened to strategically frame himself as the right candidate who truly sees, understands, and is capable to represent the grievances and aspirations of the *high-identifying* white voters, who can make the changes necessary for America they envisioned together.

Concerns over key issues related to the dominant status of the white group identity such as immigration, terrorism, and foreign have been found to hold great significance in predicting supports towards trump, more so than the economic challenges whites face in the current age of globalization. As mentioned in the research background, political attitude and behavior that may pass as economically driven are highly likely to have stemmed from the innate need of human beings to gain recognition of their dignity. In other words, economic grievances only point to a greater underlying

motivation when it is attached to feelings of anxiety and anger of having their identity threatened, hence might not be solved through economic means alone. Upon such understanding, this thesis strongly supported the alternative narrative introduced in Chapter I which assumed white identity politics, not economic hardship, to be the stronger predictor of Trump's rise to presidency in 2016.

#### **4.3. Novelty and Contribution of the Research**

Several new understandings have also emerged from the following unique findings of this thesis: (1) The construction of white identity in America was deeply ingrained in the nativist belief of inherent white race superiority. This was historically reflected throughout the nation's creed and culture, law, and order, where the dominance of whiteness has been protected since its founding generation. Though the meanings attributed to the construction of white identity over the years have evolved past the theory of white superiority, it may not have necessarily changed in practice. In other words, the underlying tensions along racial lines within the modern-day American society predates the nation's current state of division and polarization hence should be addressed accordingly. This is one of the key strengths of this research, as it managed to draw a connecting line upon the significance of white identity in shaping the political outlook of America's development as a liberal democratic nation. Thus, contributes to the study of identity politics in the field of international relations, specifically emphasizing the importance of historical account in assessing the role of dominant group identity in defining a nation's way of life.

(2) The *high-identifying* white Americans who voted for Trump should not be blatantly labeled as racist bigots, as feelings of ingroup attachment do not necessarily translate into outgroup hostility, though if left unattended may lead to such possibility. Most of the white Trump supporters should be considered as everyday white Americans who have been oblivious to the reality of race-related issues and just recently become aware of how racial identity in America critically affects one's lives, unlike white supremacists. Trump just happens to successfully appease their feelings of anxiety and fear through his campaign messages that made them feel seen, heard, and prioritized—which is a basic human need that we all share; however, it is unfortunate how the tools of communication Trump gave to his white constituents comes in form of a divisive language of 'us vs. them'. Essentially, identity politics is a democratic vehicle at heart for one's group to present their grievances and aspiration civilly, hence should be welcomed without prejudice and responded with grace. Thus, sums up the second key strength of this research as it constructively engaged with the underlying motives of the Trump white supporters beyond the typically emotionally charged and divisive narrative, urging the importance of further studies upon white identity in American politics.

(3) The *high-identifying* white voters is a growing political base where its significance should be critically taken into account in assessing the dynamics of contemporary American politics. Trump's core white constituents in particular exhibit a unique characteristic of group loyalty hence is highly resistant to be disappointed by

their chosen leader's shortcomings—as was shown in the persisting, if not growing, feelings of 'warmth' they claim to have towards Trump in 2018 even when the rest of the American public greatly unfavored him. Trump's success in activating his supporting group's enthusiasm to faithfully stand by him, despite his apparent errors or lies, is evidence of the important role identity leadership plays for the specific subsets of white Americans. This is worth noting as it highlights the strategic power identity leadership holds over the strengthening *high-identifying* white voter bloc in the upcoming U.S. presidential elections, the last key strength of this research which expanded the leadership aspect within the study of white identity in America's electoral politics.

#### **4.4. Limitation and Recommendation of the Research**

Having elaborated on the novelties and contributions this research offers, the author is well aware that this research also has its limitations. Firstly, the findings upon the historical dominance of white identity in America are inherently speculative. As mentioned in Chapter II, this is due to the lack of historically reliable data that specifically gauge the significance of ingroup racial identity among white Americans in how it affects their political attitude and behavior. Secondly, the scarce conduction of research in the past to empirically measure the relationship between white Americans with their ingroup racial identity has thus conditioned the author to rely on available data from various verifiable sources to sufficiently provide observable trends and patterns which supported the core arguments and assumptions of this research.



Thirdly, it is important to note that the utilized variables of data sourced from public opinion polls and interviews were not all-encompassing to show the many facets of how white identity has grown in salience in modern-day America; how the shifting norms and culture over racial discourse empirically suppressed the whites' pre-existing beliefs on their ingroup's dominant/superior identity which translated into subtle nativist sentiments along the lines of "the best days of U.S. are behind us" or "the U.S. is losing its core values", or how the sense of ingroup attachment and identification have indeed grown along with the racial consciousness of everyday white Americans.

Despite the apparent limitations of this research, the author believes that the adoption of qualitative research method, employment of narrative data analysis, conduction of desk research, sourcing various forms of secondary data that are mostly descriptive and non-numerical, were appropriate. This confident assurance is grounded on the fact that the utilized data points were mainly sourced from scientific journal articles, verified reports, and interviews published by respectable research, educational, and media institutions. Additionally, the identified trends and patterns among the supporting data utilized to strengthen the key arguments of this thesis were found to be consistent with the guiding principles of the *constructivist* theoretical framework, along with *the theory of dominant group identity* and *the concept of identity leadership*.

On recommendations for further research upon this topic, the author would like to direct the attention of fellow researchers towards the fact that despite America's eagerness to move past its historical sins and wrongdoings, a huge gap between the

envisioned idealism and reality remains. Particularly in the case of racial equality fairness, the increasingly salient racial tension and division among modern-day Americans thus calls for critical investigation upon case studies of America's past milestones that were supposed to symbolically represent the nation's progress. Among which are the electoral victory of the nation's first African American president (Barack Obama) in 2008-2012, the enactment of the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 that eliminated the discriminative immigration quota system, the signing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 which ended segregation laws and the widely protected minority-based discriminatory customs, all the way back to the abolishment of slavery and granting of birthright citizenship to all persons in America under the passing of the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment in the early years of America (1868).

Additionally, there is a lack of collaborative and concerted efforts to reconstruct the meaning of American identity—reimagining answers to “who America is” and “what it means to be American”—penetrating every layer of the U.S. society. Upon which the culture of having mindful conversations is important, as it allows differing standpoints to constructively engage in hard discussions upon race-sensitive topics without fear of humiliation nor condemnation. In the specific case of handling the potential extremism white identity politics may bring in the upcoming years of American politics, the author strongly suggests white and non-white Americans alike start with the acknowledgment that white Americans were responsible for the nation's past sins of racism that has caused great pain for generations of non-white Americans.

Followed by the collective effort to educate one another upon the reality of white privilege and systemic racial discrimination that has not granted true equality for all Americans and still prevails in modern-day American with its many shapes and forms. Only then, may any false beliefs and assumptions among race groups that might have contributed to the nativist appeal of groupism and the zero-sum outlook on living as fellow Americans become critically challenged.

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