Parahyangan Catholic University

Faculty of Social and Political Sciences

Department of International Relations

Understanding Trump's Rise to Presidency:
A Perspective on White Identity Politics in America

Thesis

By

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Bandung

2021

Parahyangan Catholic University
Faculty of Social and Political Sciences
Department of International Relations

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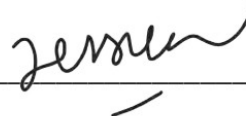Anggia Valerisha, S.IP., M.Si.   : _____

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Hereby assert that this thesis is the product of my own scientific writing and has not been submitted by any other party to attain an academic degree. Any work or opinion of other party is written in accordance to the valid scientific writing method.

I make this statement with full responsibility and am willing to accept any consequences in accordance with applicable rules if in the future it is discovered that this statement is not true.

Bandung, 30 July 2021

Alanna Deborah

ABSTRACT

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Title   : Understanding Trump's Rise to Presidency:
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The victory of Donald J. Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election has left many in dismay and disbelief. Many concerned political pundits and academicians are triggered to dissect various factors that may have caused the American public to democratically elect the controversial candidate who embodies a strikingly divisive persona and seem to represent everything but what America should be. While the popular belief attributes economic hardship to be the main determinant behind the support for Trump, this thesis will focus on the alternative narrative that identity politics is the stronger predictor of Trump's successful rise to the presidency. Specifically arguing how the salience of white identity, coupled with Trump's leadership appeal, holds a strong influence over the white Americans' political preference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. By conducting a qualitative research method with narrative data analysis, the writer discovered the strength in Trump's campaign rhetoric to strategically garner political support from the significant share of the high-identifying white voters. They are the specific subset of Trump's supporters who expressed most discomfort and resistance in responding to the increasingly diverse U.S. demography and rapidly changing racial relations—both of which are perceived as threats to their group's dominant status within the society's racial hierarchy. Essentially, in seeking the answer to how white identity politics contribute to Trump's rise to presidency, this thesis would come to suggest that Trump's electoral victory might not be an unexpected phenomenon. Rather, Trump's rise to the presidency might be a predictable outcome resulted from a congruence of factors that increased the salience of the dominant white group identity among the anxious white Americans. Trump just happens to effectively politicize the salient white identity that is particularly ripe in 2016; he strategically presented himself as the right candidate who truly sees, understands, and is capable to represent the grievances and aspirations of the *high-identifying* white voters—a leader who can truly make the changes necessary to create the kind of America they envisioned together.

Keywords: American Politics, Donald Trump, Identity Politics, The United States of America, White Identity Politics

ABSTRAK

Nama   : Alanna Deborah

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Judul   : *Memahami Kebangkitan Trump Menuju Kepresidenan:*
         Sebuah Perpektif Tentang Politik Identitas Kulit Putih di Amerika

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Kemenangan Donald J. Trump *dalam pemilihan presiden Amerika Serikat tahun 2016 merupakan sebuah momen bersejarah yang mengejutan berbagai pihak. Banyak pakar politik maupun akademisi terpicu untuk memahami berbagai faktor yang mendorong masyarakat Amerika untuk memilih sesosok pemimpin kontroversial yang tampaknya tidak selaras dengan identitas negara Amerika Serikat. Berbeda dari pemahaman populer bahwa faktor ekonomi merupakan dorongan terbesar yang membentuk dukungan terhadap* Trump, *tesis ini akan fokus kepada narasi alternatif bahwa politik identitas adalah prediktor terkuat dari kebangkitan* Trump *menuju kepresidenan. Penulis akan secara khusus memperdebatkan bagaimana bersama dengan daya tarik kepemimpinan* Donald Trump, *politik identitas kulit putih memiliki andil yang sangat penting dalam mempengaruhi preferensi politik masyarakat Amerika yang berkulit putih di pemilihan umum 2016. Melalui penelitian kualitatif dan metode analisis data naratif, penulis menemukan bahwa retorika kampanye* Trump *memiliki kekuatan strategis untuk menggalang dukungan dari* high-identifying white Americans. *Mereka adalah kalangan pemilih yang cenderung memiliki sikap negatif dalam menanggapi perubahan tren demografi menuju keberagaman yang turut mengubah sifat hubungan antar kelompok ras di Amerika, karena dipandang sebagai ancaman terhadap status dominan kalangan kulit putih dalam hirarki masyarakat Amerika Serikat. Pada dasarnya, dalam upaya menjawab bagaimana politik identitas kulit putih berkontribusi terhadap kemenangan* Trump, *penulis menemukan adanya kemungkinan bahwa kebangkitan* Trump *menuju kepresidenan bukanlah sekedar fenomena janggal yang tidak terduga. Melainkan, kemenangan* Trump *merupakan fenomena politik yang dapat diprediksi oleh penggabungan berbagai faktor yang telah membangkitkan kesadaran kalangan kulit putih di Amerika akan identitas kelompok ras mereka.* Trump *kebetulan berhasil meraup hasil sukses politisasi identitas kulit putih yang merupakan isu sensitif pada tahun 2016; ia secara strategis memposisikan dirinya sebagai kandidat yang sungguh-sungguh mendengar, memahami, dan mampu mewakilkan kepentingan kelompok* high-identifying white Americans. *Maka dari itu,* Trump *merupakan kandidat yang tepat bagi kalangan kulit putih, sosok pemimpin yang dapat membawa perubahan di Amerika sesuai dengan visi mereka bersama.*

Kata Kunci: Politik Amerika, Donald Trump*, Politik Identitas, Amerika Serikat, Politik Identitas Kulit Putih*

FOREWORD

The rise of Donald J. Trump to become the 45th U.S. president in 2016 has caught the attention of many people who are taken back by the seemingly unpredicted electoral outcome. The fact that America went from electing the nation's first African American president, to carrying the controversial figure with strikingly divisive persona to the nation's highest authority might seem to be a setback to America's supposed progress beyond its past sins of racial inequality and injustice. It is thus interesting to attempt to dissect what or who exactly made the Trump phenomenon a reality. In retrospect to the underlying tensions surrounding America's political climate leading to the 2016 election, many have dubbed economic grievances to be the main factor driving the will of the American people to vote for the Donald. However, after conducting a dive deep study, the author found that the role of economic factors might not be as significant as the role identity politics play in influencing the political attitude and behavior of the Trump white base. Thus, brought forth the aim of this thesis, to seek a new understanding of how white identity politics contribute to the rise of Donald Trump to the presidency.

By the grace of God, with great effort and care, the author is proud to present her thoughts and opinions in form of this academic writing. She would like to thank those who have greatly contributed to the writing process and those investing their time into digesting this thesis. Fully realizing the many flaws that would be found, the author greatly welcomes any constructive feedback and necessary criticism to further improve this work in the future.

Bandung, July 30, 2021

Alanna Deborah

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Throughout the many experiences I had as a college student, I am grateful to have received many lessons and inspiration not only from my fellow batchmates but also the seniors and juniors I've had the privilege to work alongside with in *Inkor TAHI* 2016, *Acara SIAP* 2017, *Protokol GINTRE* 2017, *UNPAR* Delegation for *PNMHII* XXIX, *Stage PMKT* XXI-XXII, PIXAR, IREC Matter and Research, *HMPSIHI* 2017-2019. I also acknowledge the great privileges offered by this campus that has unlocked some of the most valuable opportunities I never imagined to experience before, particularly from being part of *UNPAR* Ambassador 2018, *UNPAR* Delegation for ISC 2018 and *UNPAR* Delegation for INU 2019.

Even outside of the campus walls, I truly have been equipped and supported by the families I found at *GKPB Fajar Pengharapan,* Young Leaders for Indonesia, ProSpark, and Women Works. I attribute much of the discipline, resilience, professionalism, and confidence I have today to the like-minded peers, mentors, and role models I have had the privilege to know and learn from. Most importantly, I'd like to dedicate this work to my beloved family—the Letedara and Soeitoe clan—especially to my dearest mom, dad, and brother. Thank you for your endless prayers, constant support, and relentless love—I would not be standing where I am today without you. Last but not least, to Maria Angelia Panjaitan, my best friend and my person, thank you for always lending me your strength when I am down and out and just wanted to roll.

To the five years of my life, thank you for everything.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ANES	American National election Studies
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CBS	Columbia Broadcasting System
CNN	Cable News Network
DACA	Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals
GOP	Grand Old Party
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
ISIS	The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MAGA	Make America Great Again
NBC	National Broadcasting Company
PNAS	Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America
PRRI	Public Religion Research Institute
TPS	Temporary Protected Status
US	United States

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Background

Global politics of the 21st century have witnessed significant shifting trends of contemporary issues as it is profoundly characterized by the steadily increasing 'hyper' interconnection of newly emerging international actors apart from states gaining significance in actively shaping thus changing the nature of international relations. The world is changing at a rapid pace, and with globalization—the increase of cross-border flows of goods, services, money, people, information, and culture[1]—as defined by Held, comes the challenge of shifting traditional demographics and long-standing socio-cultural realities for citizens in every country to face, adapt, and thrive in the unfamiliarity of inevitable being a part of the 'global village'. Realistically, however, the prospect of such intrusive changes is not always welcomed with open arms by all.

Academics and scholars alike have drawn their attention to dissecting the struggle for identity on a national level in face of globalization, as such force of interdependence could either undermine or reinforce a country's sovereign power in dealing with the intensive promotion of cultural exchanges, imposed international

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[1] Gal Ariely, "Globalisation and the Decline of National Identity? An Exploration across Sixty-Three Countries: Globalisation and the Decline of National Identity," *Nations and Nationalism* 18, no. 3 (July 2012): 2, accessed January 11, 2021, http://doi.wiley.com/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2011.00532.x.

responsibility for universal moral values, and seemingly inescapable pursuit for collective identification. Naturally, having intensified contact with a diverse set of social groups who are attached with their identity attributes, cultural practices, and interests, highlights differences that can turn into division or inclusion. Identity in this sense is a double-edged sword, depending on the manner and ways in which the governing authorities, institutions, as well as members of society define, embrace, and protect their national identity with regards to the historically established narrative of unity from its national symbols, memories, values and norms that prevails to hold relevance over time of volatility against the newly presented realities[2].

International politics being increasingly defined by issues of identity is thus nothing new, rather, the role of identity in politics dates back to the two world wars that were believed to be driven by a nationalistic motivation to gain recognition of dignity and respect as a separate, sovereign, entity[3]. Yet as nation-states become increasingly stable, national identity became less about needs for territorial gains and more of an issue for who are the sovereign people, that is especially critical for modern liberal democratic countries as the defining aspects for which individuals are to be included in the national community, enables the people to exercise their will and is the basis of government legitimacy. Complex multifaceted transnational issues such as immigration, thus take center stage in the debates for collective identity as is national

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[2] Stephen Castles, Hein de Haas, and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration, Fifth Edition: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 5th ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 18–20.
[3] William Bloom, *Personal Identity, National Identity and International Relations*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations 9 (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 55–59.

identity, as it doesn't only relinquish the exclusive control over the cultural transformation within one's community communities but also changes the demographic and economic composition which directly affects the social and political dynamics within a society.

In 2016, headlining narratives such as "take back control" in Britain regarding the continuation of its European Union membership or the "America first" vision of then-presidential candidate Donald Trump sent shockwaves to the international politics, as two of the leading democratic countries who had been the architects of the modern liberal political order seems to regress into a narrow nationalist political outlook. It is important to note how such rhetoric suggests the reality of varying fragmented perceptions among the people, those who resonate with the messages reflect their conviction reflected in their political preferences and voting choice, representing what kind of country they believe to be worth preserving or protecting and to whom does the said-country belong to. Indeed, the success of both narratives to reap support and divisive votes from its citizens proves the sobering reality of what Larry Diamond called a 'global democratic recession'[4], that is the decline of democracy's popularity and tainted reputation as the ideal political ideology. A similar theme of events also swept across other established democracies particularly in Europe who have been facing a mass influx of migrants, coupled with anti-immigrant and anti-muslim

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[4] "Democracy's Deepening Recession - The Atlantic," accessed January 12, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/05/the-deepening-recession-of-democracy/361591/.

sentiments, right-wing nationalist parties such as the French Front National, Germany's Alternative für Deutschland gained popularity in and populist leaders such as Viktor Orbán and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan claimed victories in Turkey and Hungary[5]. They won the votes of a population searching for security and a sense of belonging, and in turn, they presented the prospect of leading the sliding democracies into further dismay by widening the gap between those defined as the 'people' and the 'others'.

The phenomena of democratic recession and rise of populist nationalism believed to happen due to the people's disappointment at the broken promises modern liberal democracy had failed to deliver equality and freedom for all, that is not received by the anxious pro-populist nationalism voters who felt left behind and forgotten against the defining socioeconomic consequences of globalization[6]. The main concern the voters raised are related to (1) suffering job loss due to the industrial shifts, immersion of international labors, technological disruption changing job trends, all leading to the increased unemployment especially shifting the economic standing of the world's old middle-class within developed countries; coupled by (2) crisis of their identity due to the diversity of people, cultures, and ideas from other areas and parts of the world being intertwined and changing everyday lives of native 'born and bred' locals. These dramatic reality changes thus strengthen the perception that the elites are corrupt and

[5] "The Rise of Populism in Europe | Foreign Affairs," accessed January 12, 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2016-06-03/rise-populism-europe.
[6] "In U.S. and UK, Globalization Leaves Some Feeling 'Left Behind' or 'Swept Up' | Pew Research Center," accessed January 12, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/2020/10/05/in-u-s-and-uk-globalization-leaves-some-feeling-left-behind-or-swept-up/.

the system has betrayed their 'own people'. Consequently, populist-like political leaders who voice out these grievances, in ways that claim to have a charismatic connection with 'the people', receive massive support from their constituents' who entrusted them with their votes.

Through the lens of identity, however, one could argue that much of what passes for economically motivated issues most possibly are rooted in the innate need of human beings to gain recognition for the sake of dignity that is not able to be satisfied by economic means alone[7]. In other words, economic grievances could become much more acute when attached to feelings of indignities or disrespect. Hence, in the peculiar case of America's 2016 electoral surprise, it is crucial to understand the people who resonated with Trump's campaign rhetoric of "Make America Great Again", those who claim to suffer the most, those whose voices are the loudest claiming to bring back a nostalgic sense of their country from the perspective of identity politics. The fact that Donald Trump was the democratically elected leader of America raises reasonable concern to dissect the driving factors behind the people who voted a strikingly divisive persona, someone who embodies for everything but what America seemingly should be. We must talk about the White Americans and the politics of identity they embraced for the hope of achieving unity in its increasingly polarized multicultural society.

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[7] Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and The Politics of Resentment*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), xiii–11.

1.2. Problem Identification

There is an alarmingly growing amount of disconnection, distrust, and frustration plaguing the modern American society in the years leading up to Trump; where a majority of American citizens (66%) have reported to feel a high level of dissatisfaction with the current state of U.S. domestic politics and doubting the effectiveness of the U.S. system of government[8]. Political discourses are hostile and not exercised effectively as partisan, ideological, and racial identities have moved into strong alignment hence becoming socially sorted. Both the left and right have created a homogenous electorate who perceives the differing opinions from the other side as an attack on the nation's well-being, and not mere ideological differences. For the first time in 20 years, majorities in both parties express very unfavorable views of the others attached with feelings of fear and anger beyond frustration in the 2016 survey[9].

Particularly on racial relations, profound differences between how black and white Americans perceive the state of racial inequality and other race-related issues through their lived experience are still apparent. Following Barack Obama's presidency, 63% of whites, particularly white Republicans believe that Obama has made race relations worse, while 51% of blacks say that he has made progress. About

[8] Justin McCarthy, "In U.S., 65% Dissatisfied With How Gov't System Works," *Gallup.Com*, last modified January 22, 2014, accessed January 12, 2021, https://news.gallup.com/poll/166985/dissatisfied-gov-system-works.aspx.

[9] "Partisanship and Political Animosity in 2016," *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy*, June 22, 2016, accessed January 12, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/06/22/partisanship-and-political-animosity-in-2016/.

four in ten Blacks were doubtful that the U.S. would ever achieve racial equality while only 11% of whites share this view[10]. As socioeconomic inequality and systemic injustice persist, such is magnified with the widespread political movement of Black Lives Matter, thus prevails the deep political polarization along racial lines within the U.S. domestic political climate.

Indeed, a new political era has dawned upon the United States of America as Donald Trump was elected as the 45th president of the world's leading democratic country. Many concerned political pundits and academicians who were left in shock by the seemingly unpredicted electoral outcome have embarked on the quest to dissect various factors that might explain how the American public could democratically elect the strikingly divisive persona who has not shied away from being described as a narcissist, sexist, and most apparently racist[11]. In this sense, Trump's rise to presidency is an anomaly that needed to be further investigated, as he seems to represent everything that is the opposite of who America has prided itself to be—an epitome of freedom and equality—contradicting the symbolic progress Obama represented, one where the nation is moving past its sins of racial inequality and injustice that has plagued the U.S. history.

[10] "5 Key Takeaways about Views of Race and Inequality in America," *Pew Research Center*, January 12, 2021, accessed January 13, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/27/key-takeaways-race-and-inequality/.

[11] Dylan Matthews, "Read Every Horrible Thing Donald Trump Has Said about Women and Tell Me He's Not a Sexist," *Vox*, last modified May 16, 2016, accessed July 28, 2021, https://www.vox.com/2016/5/16/11683122/donald-trump-misogynist-sexist.

Economic hardship, derived from the consequences of globalization, is one of the most popular narratives claimed as the main driving factor shaping the political preference among Trump supporters. However, many have also leaned into the alternative narrative emphasizing the role of identity in contemporary American politics, particularly white identity politics to be the stronger underlying link encouraging the white voters to greatly contribute to Trump's electoral victory[12]. In other words, Trump's rise to the presidency might not be an unpredictable phenomenon, rather, he could be a symptom of the predating growth of political polarization among the modern American society that has mainly been driven by and over issues of race.

Specifically targeting those whom he calls as the 'forgotten hard-working Americans', Donald Trump appears to embody populist-like leadership traits with his approach to build a charismatic connection with 'the people' by validating their grievances with his message of 'Make America Great Again' that essentially presents the notion of 'bringing back the country' to the hands of its 'real people'. In this way, Trump activated the existing divisive attitudes within the American society over the notion of 'the true American identity', consequently triggering a debate on who should be considered as part of 'who we are' and who should not be included. Trump's electoral victory should thus be greatly attributed to the support of those who strongly

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[12] Diana C. Mutz, "Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 19 (May 8, 2018): E4330–E4339.

resonate with the notion that they are losing their rightful place in the rapidly changing country, who have aligned to find their representative voice in the candidacy of Donald Trump.

The significant number of support directed towards Trump is particularly evident among those who are of the white race with non-Hispanic ethnicity, most of whom are adult male, belonging to the older generation, residents of a rural/suburban community, possessing no college degree, affiliates with the Christian faith, and identifies as Republicans[13]. A deeper comprehension between the relationship between the Trump appeal and white Americans may be found if one were to highlight the fact that many white Americans in 2016 have claimed to experience existential crisis and expresses fear of being culturally displaced[14] by multiple factors they perceive as 'threats', giving way to a deeper motivation for political change based on feeling disrespected or treated with indignity. Following the recent U.S. Census Bureau projection on the U.S. population for 2050, white Americans are faced with the prospect of becoming a minority in the very country they have historically taken center stage. As the projected exponential increase of population towards a racially diverse America will surely replace the dominant position white race Americans have held for multiple generations, hence threatening the role of whiteness that had been deeply embedded in the American

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[13] "Behind Trump's Victory: Divisions by Race, Gender and Education," *Pew Research Center*, January 12, 2021, accessed January 12, 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/behind-trumps-victory-divisions-by-race-gender-education/.

[14] "Beyond Economics: Fears of Cultural Displacement Pushed the White Working Class to Trump | PRRI/The Atlantic Report," *PRRI*, n.d., accessed July 12, 2021, https://www.prri.org/research/white-working-class-attitudes-economy-trade-immigration-election-donald-trump/.

way of life. Racial and cultural anxiety thus adds to the already experienced economic disorientation, particularly by middle-class rural whites[15] who are witnessing the changing face of their neighborhood, local shops closing down, and experiencing job losses.

The popularity of candidates oozing similar appeal to populist leaders is not an unfamiliar political trend in America. The compounding stress of economic, cultural, and racial anxiety, is foreseeable and they have been there before. The dominant identity group of white people suppressing non-whites' rights due to the latter's increasing demand to promote their group identity's social status is also not something new. The same dominant group of whites joining forces to protect their collective interest via the ballot box, all the while echoing a united narrative as an 'oppressed' group, however, is new and rather shocking. A recent poll by Public Religion Research Institute reveals that 44% of Americans identify 'discrimination against whites' as of the same magnitude as bigotry are aimed at blacks and other minorities. Among those who share this view, 61% identify with the Tea Party, 56% of Republicans, and 57% of white evangelicals[16]. This is white identity politics—not necessarily referring to the kind of racial pride embraced by white supremacists nor the white nationalist movement, rather, a racial group consciousness embraced by the everyday white

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[15] Emma Newburger, "'Deaths of Despair' in Rural America Helped Trump Win Presidency," *CNBC*, last modified September 5, 2018, accessed January 13, 2021, https://www.cnbc.com/2018/09/04/deaths-of-despair-in-rural-america-helped-trump-win-study-finds.html.
[16] "Are Whites Racially Oppressed?," last modified March 4, 2011, accessed January 13, 2021, http://www.cnn.com/2010/US/12/21/white.persecution/index.html.

Americans who might just become recently awakened after being used to not needing to be conscious of their race due to the historical dominance of white identity since the founding days of America.

While the significance of white Americans has often been linked to Trump's electoral victory in 2016, unfortunately, there are very few constructive discussions attempting to understand the underlying narrative of the white Trump voters' political preference beyond the narrative of economic hardship. Meaning, existing mainstream discussions around the possible role white identity politics play in the 2016 U.S. presidential election were often framed in the zero-sum outlook, where Trump's victory was a victory for the conservative 'racist bigots' of the right against the liberalist 'woke' culture raiders of the left who supported Clinton. Consequently, there is a tendency for explanations on how Trump appealed to the white voters to be narrated in a pessimistic and dismissive manner.

It is thus critical to provide an alternative voice of reason seeking to appease the emotionally charged debate of identity politics by hearing the grounded concerns of those who hold long-standing influence and power within the hierarchical U.S. society, to lead the public narrative away from division towards the possibility of inclusion. Further, to enrich the limited number of researches found in drawing a historical connection on how the deep-rooted significance white race holds over the development of America as a nation would prove to play a key role in defining the socio-economic and political climate in the recent years leading up to the Trump era. These are the

research gaps this thesis aims to address, contextualized under the specified scope of discussion and formulated research question that would be found in the two following subsections.

1.2.1. Scope of Research

In pursuit of gaining a deeper understanding of the seemingly controversial rise of Donald Trump to the presidency, the author is intrigued to conduct a qualitative study upon the role of white identity politics in America as visibly demonstrated in the 2016 presidential election. In this research, the author will not engage in normative debates arguing to prove the good or the bad of the analyzed political development as visibly seen on the field, but rather appeals to explore the complex dynamic of meanings prescribed to the concept of identity in a multicultural democratic society as it is becoming an increasingly salient issue in America.

Based on the research background and problem identification narrated above, this thesis will focus on The United States of America as a nation-state, specifically upon White Americans –the dominant racial identity group– as the main object of analysis, and its relationship with Donald Trump as the head of state and head of government from the year of 2016-2020. By discussing White Americans, this thesis will focus on how their white racial identity became salient and how it affects their political attitude and preference as demonstrated in the 2016 presidential election. With the election of Trump, the author will also

explain how he effectively appeals to his voters through his conduct of campaign rhetoric spilling over to his leadership as the president-elect. As for the research timeframe, the author will highlight key events demonstrating the salience of white identity in America leading up to 2016 as the year where identity politics prevails in parallel with the rise of Donald Trump to presidency, and briefly discuss Trump's post-election.

1.2.2. Research Question

Having identified the main problem that will be strategically addressed within the limits of the research scope above, the author thus raised the following research question of this thesis: *"How does white identity politics contribute to Trump's rise to presidency in America?"*

1.3. The Objective and Contribution of Research

1.3.1. The Objective of Research

The overarching objective of this thesis is to understand the rise of Donald Trump to presidency by examining the social construction of white racial identity throughout American history, highlighting the salience of white identity in America within its multicultural democratic society, and ultimately discussing how it partakes in the 2016 presidential election. Additionally, to showcase how Trump effectively presented himself as the fitting leader for his core constituency, the white identity groups.

1.3.2. The Contribution of Research

This thesis can be utilized as an additional reference for students studying identity politics in a multicultural society, particularly of dominant social groups. The growing salience of racial identity groups, and the appeal of populist-like leaders in liberal democratic countries, all of which are particularly relevant in the context of American politics. It is also made in the hope of offering a deeper comprehension upon the complex role of identity in contemporary American politics from a constructivist perspective, hence appeal to the importance of identity in the studies of international relations. This thesis is also made as a graduation requirement for acquiring a bachelor's degree in Parahyangan Catholic University.

1.4. Literature Review

In pursuit of understanding the rise of Trump, specifically focusing on the significance of white identity in modern American politics, it is essential to examine previously written works of literature on (1) The evolving concept of identity, (2) The rise of populism in liberal democratic countries, and (3) The challenge multiculturalism brings towards American identity. These three broad themes shall provide the necessary contextual backdrop to enrich the reader's comprehension upon the key variables of this research, informs the author's position, and hints the importance of the upcoming research discussion. The author will review three pieces of literature in this

sub-section, one for each theme above, to then conclude with the identification of research gaps that this paper aims to address.

1.4.1. The Evolving Concept of Identity

To understand the role of identity in contemporary politics, it is noteworthy to look into Francis Fukuyama's latest book entitled *'Identity: The Demand for Dignity and The Politics of Resentment'*, where he discusses the evolving concept of identity. According to Fukuyama, the concept of identity is rooted in the Greek *thymos,* a permanent and universal aspect of human nature that seeks recognition[17]. This innate desire of the human soul that craves recognition became radicalized as the realities of societies rapidly evolve along with the economic and technological change in the modern era, with the democratized opportunities for social mobility. Previously established social hierarchies that reserve recognition for a particular class of human beings are now challenged, where every single member of the society is believed to have an inner self that deserves respect above social arrangements, and the outer world is in the wrong should they fail to recognize it.

Thus, emerges the modern sense of identity where a distinction is made between one's true and free inner self that holds a higher value than the outer self where its social rules and norms don't adequately recognize the inner self's worth

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[17] Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and The Politics of Resentment*, 23–24.

or dignity. In other words, the dignity of the inner self rests on its moral freedom, it is shared with all and must be recognized by all human beings. Self-esteem arises out of esteem by others. This broadened and universalized sense of identity has turned the inner self away from being a personal matter into a political project where its freedom was to be embodied in rights and law[18].

It is important to note that as social creatures, human beings intensely crave a communal sense of belonging to a common identity and are emotionally inclined to conform to the norms of their surroundings. This psychological fact exposes the dual character of the politics of recognition and dignity, where one moves towards universal recognition of individual rights and the other towards assertions of collective identity. As democratic movements attempt to ever-expand the scope of individual autonomy, identity crisis tends to appear and seek refuge in an exclusive assertion of collective identity instead, such is apparent in the nineteenth century with the emergence of nationalism and politicized religion[19]. 'The struggle for recognition', as argued by the philosopher Hegel followed by Charles Taylor, is therefore believed to be the ultimate driver of human history and key to understanding new politics. In turn, its misrecognition or disrespect within the larger part of society would encourage tribalistic attitudes where one acts based on their tribal group membership, a phenomenon known as

[18] Ibid., 37–41.
[19] Ibid., 56–57.

'the politics of resentment' which carries far more emotional weight to human motivation than economic matter[20].

In essence, Fukuyama points out the inherent contradiction within human needs for self-worth, where we crave to be seen as both equal and superior to others. While the popularity of liberal democracy and international law that comes with modernization has made important progress to recognize universal dignity of individuals, the practice of freedom and equality for all is still far from ideal, and the assertions, especially for members of groups who suffers historical marginalization within the social hierarchies. This is the key to understanding the role identity plays in contemporary politics, as the modern sense of identity quickly evolves into identity politics that defines most of the global issues today. Threatening to nullify the function of democracy, the unity and cohesion of liberal societies are being divided into tribes who are demanding partial recognition of superior dignity based on their exclusive membership.

Unfortunately, Fukuyama doesn't explore further the dynamics of identity in intergroup context, the embodiment, and development of group-based identity, how ingroups assert their identity, and its relation to outgroups which is now more relevant than ever in contemporary global issues. It is particularly important to articulate how individuals come to identify with certain social groups and embrace it as part of their own, bearing in mind that every person –

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[20] Ibid., 7–11.

especially in large, complex, modern society—is a complex compendium of diverse elements, and how it affects their political behavior as it shapes the fate of its larger community, most evidently in a liberal democratic country where the hierarchy of power exists.

1.4.2. The Rise of Populism in Liberal Democracy

As a fellow believer in liberal democracy, William A. Galston offers further investigation upon the rising trends of populist nationalism and the losing confidence in key liberal democratic principles in recent international politics. In *'The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy'*, he laid out a critical review on populism and populists, often viewed as the enemy of pluralism thus modern democracy, thus critical to shed light on where we are at and where we are going with the perspective of identity-driven political attitudes plaguing democratic societies that seemingly threats the survivability of liberal democracy.

In light of the growing demand for 'strong leaders' in recent global political development, Galston accredits the emotional stress of facing rapid economic, demographic, and cultural changes as the external challenges driving liberal citizens—especially those who are less educated—to seek political actors who share their doubt in key liberal democratic principles such as the rule of law, freedom of the press, and minority rights. Such concerns are reflected upon the emerging arguments from those seeking to drive a wedge between democracy and liberalism, claiming liberal institutions to be ineffective and contradictory in

practice as it prevents the people from democratically acting on behalf of their interest, thus, fundamentally harms democracy. This is the internal challenge towards liberal democracy Galston focuses on deconstructing.

For reasons of clarity before evaluating populists' critiques, precise characterization of liberal democracy is needed. It is a political order that relies on four distinct concepts with contents as follows: (1) The republican principle – the people are the sole source of legitimacy for the government to govern; (2) Democracy – equality of all citizens, broadly inclusive citizenship, majority rule; (3) Constitutionalism – structured formal boundaries upon institutional power; (4) Liberalism – Independence and privacy of individuals beyond rightful reach of government. Out of these concepts, populism accepts the principles of popular sovereignty (the exercise of majoritarianism power) and is skeptical towards constitutionalism and liberal protections for individuals and minority groups[21]. It is important to note that populism has a coherent structure as outlined above, and not merely a momentary emotion-laden expression of disappointment over frustrated economic expectations, resentment against rigged rules and special interests of corrupt leaders, fear of threats to physical and cultural security. In this sense, populism might not be so much of an attack but rather a corrective approach better understood as an 'illiberal democratic' response towards

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[21] William A. Galston, "The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 2 (2018): 9–10, accessed November 29, 2020, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/690069.

'undemocratic liberalism', aiming to create a governing system capable of translating popular preferences into public policy without the institutional barriers to effectively respond to urgent problems[22].

A different conclusion arises, however, as Galston demands a clearer meaning of who exactly are 'the people' populism claims to champion and protect with its popular sovereignty principle. In today's world and era, the ideal definition of 'the people' would mean all citizens without exceptions of a certain religion, manners, and customs, nor the length of citizenship. According to populists, that being people who embrace the political stance of populism, 'the people' should refer to the ones fundamentally opposing 'cultural elites' where the former is uniformly virtuous hence completely different than the latter who is hopelessly corrupt. This moralized zero-sum relationship is drawn by populists, who claim that they alone represent 'the people', thus reveals two major flaws of populism (1) It is divisive by definition: Splitting 'the people' and 'others' violates inclusion that is necessary to democracy, and (2) 'The people' is inherently counter-factual: Suggesting that 'the people' could develop a single will is not possible as people have plural interests hence will by nature. This forceful assumption of uniformity on the reality of diversity is not only factually misleading, but it also elevates the characteristics of certain social groups over others, also enabling overbearing leaders to dismantle the necessary pulse checks

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[22] Ibid., 11.

or rather safety nets liberal institutions provide to prevent misuse of single concentrated leadership power and potentially leading the people to autocracy. Political movements adopting a populist outlook will likely come to a sorrowful end, but not before their disappointment and anger use violent means in search of the 'hidden enemies of the people'. This is the threat populism imposes on democracy[23].

Ultimately, Galston made a strong case defending liberal democracy with a hopeful note that its fate rests upon human choice, not a historical inevitability. The fierce threats brought forth by 'loud' populists are present but also solvable by detaching ourselves from fearful projection and focus on addressing reality-based grievances of the people. This enables liberal democratic leaders and believers alike to become aware of the loophole within the system that gives room for aroused political minorities to exercise disproportionate influence among public debate. They must not leave unchecked the movements undermining freedom of the press, constitutional courts, power-hoarding executive leaders, and cultural discussions determined to divide social cohesion into fragmented groups of citizens defined by rigid identity lines.

Rather, liberal-democratic institutions must be strengthened to allow the existence of political contestations about issues of trade, immigration, and even national sovereignty to flourish into constructive political feedback and policy

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[23] Ibid., 12–13.

changes that will make the democratic society stronger. However, aside from the elaborate positive-leaning suggestions Galston laid out, his work doesn't provide critical insight this thesis aims to explore the populist's practical appeal upon the people's grievances, how much of a populist leader's influence contributes to the debate of who 'we the people' are, and how would it lead to tangible powerful political consequences where such suggestions may be too hopeful to possibly exist in the current reality of modern liberal society.

1.4.3. The Challenge of Multiculturalism for American Identity

Having explored the concept of identity and the political reality of populism it is capable of manifesting within the dominating narrative of liberal democracy, it is now critical to zoom into some of the key decades-long debate that has consistently been the source of social and political tension in some of the most influential countries in global politics who are pioneers of liberal democracy itself. Namely, the issue of immigration among the relationship between multiculturalism and American identity. We will broadly discuss the main arguments and critiques from the work of Gene Lankford, *'Immigration, Multiculturalism, and American Identity: A Critique of Samuel Huntington'*, that dissects two of Huntington's most cited book *'The Clash of Civilizations and The Remaking of World Order' (1996)* and *'Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity' (2004).*

Lankford believes that the seemingly unending immigration debate is an issue of collective identity, rooted in the question of whether or not immigrants are indeed a threat to national identity. The answer to this is critical as it is the primary determinant that can dictate one's interpretive framework through which they define certain beliefs upon 'facts' thus drives their stance when engaging in public debates regarding the pragmatic socio-economic consequences of the reality of immigration within a society. Huntington adopts an essentialist view, that perceives the necessary existence of fixed, rigid, continuous boundaries and unique, exclusive attributes to belong to a particular society, or culture, or civilization – in this case, the Western American, that is pure thus critical to maintain and protect its nativity from the danger of decline that will inevitably lead to perishing.

In this context, American national identity is defined as a collective identity historically constructed based on a fixed and static Anglo-Protestant cultural core by White Anglo-Saxon Americans since the colonial period up to the late 1960s, from which the American Creed and its foundational values were birthed. He identifies the disruption of immigration and multiculturalism from the late 1960s onwards as the main sources of threat towards American identity,

particularly due to the pattern of ever-increasing immigrants flooding in from Asia and especially Latin America[24].

In 'the clash of civilizations', Huntington asserts firm division between civilizations of 'the West and the rest' as distinct entities that are essentially and primarily in conflict with each other. Through this fixed-lens worldview, Langston criticizes how Huntington exalts the exclusivity of 'Western culture' along with its presumably inherent values in contrast with stereotypical attributes of the non-Western culture, a rigid perspective that seems to be oblivious, or rather consciously ignorant to critically evaluate it as a construct that is factually misleading and alarmingly feeds on the political narrative of preserving Western superiority[25].

Langston points out an interesting dimension of Huntington's argument regarding Hispanics' threat to American identity, though in brief, that his next work builds upon where he presented the premise that the Hispanics, primarily Mexicans, has created a barrier to assimilation due to their inability and unwillingness to adopt Anglo-Protestant values and habits. This claim however was ruled to be completely unfounded on empirical grounds yet the drive behind such prevailing claim might be better understood with the following statement of Huntington: "In order of the threat to existing, Hispanics must be sufficiently

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[24] Gene Lankford, "Immigration, Multiculturalism, and American Identity: A Critique Of Samuel Huntington," *São Paulo* 12, no. 1 (2014): 269–270.
[25] Ibid., 271.

viewed as the other". It is thus hard to ignore how Huntington deliberately excluded Latin America from his definition of Western civilization and how the framing of "Latin" Americans as having darker skin and not White enough, must have contributed to exacerbating the perspective that immigrants from Latin America have invaded and threaten the way of life of Westerners by belonging to other cultures[26].

In Huntington's second book, probing the heavily contested question of 'who are we', he believes that multiculturalism is a more immediate and dangerous threat towards the American national identity as it perceives diversity and unity as complete opposites rather than recognizing the possibility of unity in diversity. Multiculturalism here is defined as the celebration of diversity, transnational and subnational identities. Huntington justifies his stance by claiming to defend the Founding Fathers' concerns and efforts to protect individual rights that is of a central element to the American Creed as he predicts diversity seeks to replace it by the rights of groups defined largely by rigid identifiers such as race, ethnicity, and other subnational groupings[27].

In this sense, Huntington not only presents multiculturalism as a threat but further as a divisive force rejecting the very nature and authentic being of the United States of America. Langston emphasizes the irony in Huntington's false

[26] Ibid., 272–273.
[27] Ibid., 273–274.

premise upon the alleged 'group rights' as it comprises of denied individual rights of often marginalized persons that are imposed to be defined as the 'other' by the discourse built by the 'hidden' dominant group of mostly White heterosexual males, which consequentially defines each group's places within the American society's hierarchy. Additionally, Langston challenges Huntington's pessimistic outlook upon multiculturalism by seeing it not as a threat to replace the previous culture, rather as an evolution capable to bring negotiations in public discourse to include previously excluded elements that are relevant to the realities of American society today. To strive for consistency, eliminate existing contradiction, and support the actualization of unfulfilled promises of the American Creed and founding principles[28].

Huntington's main mission is to restore and maintain the supposed 'cultural purity' of American identity before the racially dividing line of multiculturalism contaminated it. He acknowledges and supports the historically homogenous component of American society, White Americans, to be at the frontlines of preserving the 'true' American culture and demand immigrants to completely conform to, not to add nor to critique, the established fixed cultural pattern. As a nativist, culture is understood by Huntington as a collection of ideas, values, institutions, common language, and religion, embedded in key cultural elements of blood, language, religion, and way of life. Hence, all necessary

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[28] Ibid., 274–275.

measures, including deliberate exclusion, must be done to eradicate the new information, ideas, and even profiles of individuals that don't fit the old system of thought.

Alternatively, Langston makes the case to see culture as a symbol system that must evolve to incorporate new development by altering the existing order to fit the contemporary world. This is the key for societies to survive and thrive, Langston argued, especially as we are in the era of globalization where intensive intercultural encounters and discourse are presenting new sets of opportunities to examine, critique, and even transform all cultures, religions, and peoples to ensure that no voice is left unheard and for all people to take part in shaping the America and the world that are becoming[29]. While Huntington puts forth the idea of cultural homogeneity imposed by the dominant group to be the solution to restore America's social unity and national cohesion, Langston is well aware that being a large and complex society such as America, to have a disagreement over specific values and issues in a pluralistic context is of high risk and difficult. Rather, it is best to expand, not to repress, the meaning system that brings light to a new perspective and enhanced grasp of truth where no one culture is superior to the other[30]. This is not to say that all views are equally valid, rather encourage individuality, particularity, and difference to be acknowledged, tested, and

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[29] Ibid., 285.
[30] Ibid., 282.

subjected to mutual critique in the intercultural dialogue in search of a system of meaning that takes into account diverse experiences of all people[31]. In this way, some kind of unity in diversity may then be achieved.

Langston's case for an inclusive collective identity in a multicultural society is indeed hopeful but more on a realistic note that the author wholeheartedly agrees upon, specifically in the context of American identity. Nonetheless, Langston's work is rather incomplete as it seems reluctant to expose the grave struggle for the American society to reach such embracing culture where all opinions, values, and cultures may be welcomed and contested in a neutral and safe ground of public debate. The great influence dominant identity group exerts to shape the national political discourse, in this case belonging to the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant Americans, is an aggressive agency with strong historic roots that must be appeased and cannot simply be dismissed.

This is where the author stands apart from Langston, although hoping to reach the same goal through this research. The author stands to acknowledge the historic roots of mainstream American culture and its importance to those who took part in building it but does not agree in defending the attached superiority of ethnic-centric or religious identity of White European settlers. Understanding the grievance of the dominant identity group of White Americans in facing modernization is important, as, through the lens of identity, one may gain a better

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[31] Ibid., 284.

understanding on the reality of relations among the society on the ground. Hence, empathy and clarity of pain points are required to reach the main purpose of this thesis, that is to defuse the currently divided, angry, and prejudiced society which could open the possibility of entering into a new civic discourse over the kind of America they believe in and want to recreate.

In sum, out of the identified research gaps outlined in each theme above, this thesis sets out to build a case on understanding how Trump, the political anomaly who embodies populist-like leadership traits, arose to presidency in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. This shall be done by looking into the embodiment of white identity among America's dominant race group within the U.S. hierarchical society, essentially highlighting how the salient group-based identity carries political consequences to intergroup relations and the state of the liberal democratic country. Given the existing divisive narrative further polarizing the multicultural American society away from its aspiration of unity, it is critical to address the loudest voice driving the mainstream political discourse to adequately address the friction and rekindle the constructive public debate to hopefully making America greater than ever before.

1.5. Theoretical Framework

The author will utilize a multidisciplinary approach from political science and social psychology in exploring the multifaceted concept of identity that is deemed relevant to answer the presented research question within an appropriate political

context**,** adopting the guiding principles from one of the major schools of thought within international relations, constructivism.

1.5.1. The Theory of Constructivism

Constructivism offers a much more nuanced understanding of international affairs as it emerged in the mid-1990s, responding to the challenges international relations discipline faced post-cold war era by presenting alternative perspective to the nature of reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) that concentrates on the issues of identity in world politics and the theorization of domestic politics and culture in international relations theory. Significantly distinguishing itself from the dominant theoretical paradigms of neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism, constructivism claims that the central themes of international relations are socially and historically constructed, just as realities are meanings assigned to material objects, rather than the mere existence of such objects by nature.

On each concern, constructivism fundamentally differs as follows: (1) *Anarchy* have multiple meanings as actors and structures mutually constitute each other thus must be interpreted; (2) *State interests* are part of the *state identity* construction, thus implies its *choices* to be consistent to the practices and structures that constitute its identity; (3) *Material and discursive power* are both significant sources of influence and authority in world politics, and (4) The prospects of *change in world politics are both possible and difficult,* for better or

worse, with the possibility of multiple different understandings of why states act in certain ways concerning existing structures[32]. In giving account to the politics of identity, constructivism proposes a way of understanding how national and subnational identities are constructed, what norms and practices accompany their reproduction, and how they construct each other, to generate a new understanding of diverse social phenomena in global politics. Constructivist research study thus pays attention to subjects beyond states, but to human agencies, in dealing with issues of not just nationalism and ethnicity, but to race, gender, sexuality, and religion as part of the international relations theory[33].

For clarity, this thesis will look into the conventional and critical variants of constructivism to properly align its analytical approach. Ted Hopf attempts such distinction by highlighting its common grounds with traditional international relations theory and pointing out its differences with the critical theory that is often misleadingly combined. Fundamentally as a theory, both variants seek to 'denaturalize' the social world by discovering empirical data of intersubjective reality and meanings that are the product of human agency and social construction, contextualized within the social environment in which they

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[32] Ted Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory," *International Security* 23, no. 1 (July 1998): 171–181, accessed November 29, 2020, https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/isec.23.1.171.
[33] Ibid., 192–193.

were gathered. Conventional and critical constructivism however differs in the following issues:

(1) *On understanding social reality*: Conventional theory accepts the possibility and/or the desirability of contingent universalism or "minimal foundationalism" while critical theorists completely reject such a stance[34]. In this way, conventional constructivism may offer an understanding of social reality but is unable to criticize the boundaries of its understanding, unlike critical theorists. This thesis leans into the conventional approach in accepting the fundamental importance of race and racial relations as an unchangeable social fact that is intricately relevant towards the construction and reconstruction of American identity.

(2) *On understanding identity: C*onventional constructivists seek to discover identities and their reproductive social practices to present an understanding as to how it affects their actions. Critical theorists, on the other hand, seek not to offer an account on the effects of identities, but rather to investigate the rationale behind driving the need for identity formation by specifying some understanding of the origin of identity[35]. This thesis prioritizes the conventional agenda of explaining the effects of white identity among those who embrace it, while also giving a brief account of the critical agenda by

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[34] Ibid., 183.
[35] Ibid., 183–185.

investigating the white identity's underlying rationale rooted in its historically attributed meanings and social-political status.

(3) *On assumptions about power:* Critical constructivism conceptualizes the ever-existing exercise of power within every social exchange where there is always a dominant actor thus all social relations are instances of hierarchy, subordination, or domination. Its theoretical agenda is to analyze social constraints and cultural understandings for the sake of emancipation and enlightenment, while conventional constructivists only seek to produce new knowledge and insights based on novel understandings. Although they too acknowledge the idea that power is everywhere, the conventional theory does not show interest to further interrogate such social relations and remain "analytically neutral"[36]. This thesis adopts the critical constructivists' assumption on power relations and theoretical agenda by investigating the consequences of social reality where white identity holds social-political dominance in the hierarchy of American society.

(4) *On producing change:* Critical theorists recognize that the actor and observer cannot be separated hence are self-aware of their participation in the reproduction, constitution, and fixing of the social entities they observe. Conventionalists however ignore this self-reflective stance, where the observer was never accounted as subject to such critical inquiry, rather adopts an

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[36] Ibid., 185.

interpretive understanding on the connectivity of subjects with other subjects in a web of intersubjective meaning[37]. This thesis claims the conventionalists' stance where the observer, in this case, the author may not be accounted as a subject capable of manipulating the construction of observed social entities.

(5) *On understanding world politics: C*ontrary to mainstream presumption on the homogenous nature of world politics thus universally valid generalization within theories is to be expected, critical theorists position themselves on the contrary where world politics is so heterogeneous thus proposes to only focus on the unique and differentiating aspects. Conventional theorists however presume that we should instead look for communities of intersubjectivity in world politics, of domains within which actors share an understanding of themselves and each other, thus yielding predictable and replicable patterns of action within a specific context[38]. The latter perfectly sums up the purpose of this thesis, which is to critically dissect the politics of dominant group identity within a liberal democratic country in the hope to provide critical insights upon possible predictability of similar phenomena in contemporary world politics.

This concludes the overarching theoretical landscape, principled assumptions, and claims upon which the *theory of dominant group identity* and

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[37] Ibid., 184.
[38] Ibid., 199–200.

the concept of identity leadership will build the case for understanding Trump's rise to presidency in the 2016 election. In brief, the author will utilize *the theory of dominant group identity* to chronologically explain how the ingroup racial identity among white Americans was developed throughout the nation's history, how it was activated into salience in contemporary America, and eventually, how it affected the political attitude and behavior of Trump's voters who are fearing the loss of their dominant status in the rapidly changing America. Conjoined by *the concept of identity leadership*, this thesis shall essentially showcase how Trump's rise to presidency was not much of an unpredictable phenomenon as it was a long-awaited manifestation of multiple socio-economic trends, congruently increasing the salience of white identity among the anxious white Americans, which was then strategically politicized by Donald Trump.

1.5.2. The Theory of Dominant Group Identity

In contemporary politics, *identity politics* can be generally defined as the politics in which people engage when they mobilize based on, and when they define their experiences, their political problems, and their aims in terms of the good of their identity-groups[39]. Most often than not, the phenomena ascribed to identity politics are tied to power relations between social groups, especially in democratic societies, where the politics of identity is commonly used as means

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[39] Clarissa Rile Hayward and Ron Watson, "Identity and Political Theory," *Washington University Journal of Law & Policy* 33 (January 2010): 9.

to challenge a culturally dominant group hence liberating the non-dominant identity groups due to their vulnerability to marginalization, exploitation, and oppression. Predictably, due to the term's loose criterion to coherently categorize what kind of political struggle of whose identity can be accounted as identity politics, the author seeks to expand the discussion on *white identity politics* by focusing on the embodiment of the dominant group's identity, through investigating the salience of white race ingroup identity among its members, and how it affects their political attitudes and behaviors in seeking to achieve the group's self-defined political objectives.

White identity, in this sense, refers to the white people's conscious, psychological attachment to their racial group and to a belief that the group has shared interests[40]. Additionally, the status of one's identity, in this case of white racial group identity, are not seen as fixed in nature and rigidly assigned by birth like an essentialist thinker would suggest, but rather adopts the constructivist view through which society and the interaction with other people are these statuses created and also constantly under negotiation[41]. Particularly within the discussion scope of this thesis, the author adopts the operational definition of white people in America as a person who self-identify with the 'white' race—

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[40] Ashley Elizabeth Jardina, "Demise of Dominance: Group Threat and the New Relevance of White Identity for American Politics" (PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2014), 14.
[41] Anders Berg-Sørensen, Nils Holtug, and Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, "Essentialism vs. Constructivism: Introduction," *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 11, no. 1 (January 2010): 39–45, accessed January 10, 2021, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1600910X.2010.9672754.

referring to the U.S. Census Bureau classification as those having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa[42]—and of non-Hispanic ethnicity. These are the defining grounds upon which the arguments in this thesis will be brought forth, anchored in *the theory of dominant group identity* that was proposed by Ashley E. Jardina in her remarkable work on "The Demise of Dominance: Group Threat and The New Relevance of White Identity in American Politics".

The proposed theoretical account is comprised of combined assumptions and correlated claims built from multiple existing group-based theories under the study of intergroup relations, that failed to individually offer a broad theoretical framework that can account for how the white race's ingroup identity affects their political preference. To understand the nature of *white identity group,* a dominant group identity, Jardina considered the relevant general knowledge acquired from intergroup relations theory which focuses on the *development, activation, and application* of ingroup identity among dominant groups[43]. Such theory primarily falls into two categories: (1) *Predispositional theories* such as Symbolic Politics Theory, Racial Resentment Theory, and Ethnocentrism focuses on how individual-level predispositions acquired from early-life socialization, coupled with a general sense of outgroup animosity, strongly influences one's political

[42] US Census Bureau, "About Race," *The United States Census Bureau*, accessed July 29, 2021, https://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html.
[43] Jardina, "Demise of Dominance: Group Threat and the New Relevance of White Identity for American Politics," 31.

attitude and behavior towards outgroups. However, these predispositions' applicability in a dramatically changing racial landscape remains questionable, although may still play an important role to explain the broader picture of intergroup race relations, the theory of dominant identity will focus more on the behavioral consequences of identity instead of prejudice. (2) *Group-identity theories,* on the other hand, place immense focus on identity, group categorization, and group interests. Several central components are derived from Social Identity & Self-categorization Theory, Social Dominance Theory & Orientation, Group Position Theory, Realistic Group Conflict & Integrated Threat Theory, each of which is drawn together to lay the following framework for the Theory of Dominant Group Identity that's arguably applicable to other dominant social groups across societies, aside from white identity group [44].

1. *On how dominant group members recognize and identify with their ingroup identity (development):*

   Under the condition of being in a hierarchically arranged society, dominant group identity tends to be positioned on a par with national identity where their ingroup's set of customs and culture is mimicked across the dominant group population, even if it excludes subordinate

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[44] Ibid., 15–25.

groups, thus seen as 'invisible'. As long as it remains unchallenged or unthreatened, the dominant group identity will remain largely hidden[45].

In regards to the acquisition of in-group identity among individuals, the theory of dominant group identity recognizes the varying strength and fluctuating likelihood for individual members to adopt their group identity, however remains agnostic due to the lack of comprehensive sources to measure such individual variation. Nevertheless, the theory attempts to assert the importance of making such distinctions known by labeling those of *high-identifiers* and *low-identifiers*. The possible contributing determinants to differing levels of strength ingroup identification can only be considered as plausible factors through empirical observation of conditional patterns among the individuals' characteristics, their environmental vulnerability to threats, and their sensitivity to express perceptions of competition with the outgroup, while tending to support policies benefitting ingroups [46].

2. *On how dominant ingroup identity becomes salient (activation):*

Ingroup identity for dominant groups only becomes relevant when members feel that their dominance is being threatened thus provoking them to politically and ideologically defend their social standing in a system of stratification. The nature of the threat can be realistic or

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[45] Ibid., 31.
[46] Ibid., 32–33.

symbolic, it can also be short-lived, but the persistence and significance of the threat over time will strengthen the ingroup identity to become chronically salient hence affecting their political attitude and behavior. It is important to note, that any subsequent reaction (negative or positive) made by dominant groups to defend their 'rightfully deserved privilege and rights' will only be directed to the specific source of identified or perceived threat and not in form of animosity to all outgroups[47].

3.   *On how salient dominant ingroup identity affects the members' political preferences (application):*

The role of threat in dominant group identity is critical as it not only serves as an important element that increases the salience of ingroup identity in the public domain but also conditions the group towards political solutions to tackle the specific sources of perceived threats. Simple attachment upon identifying with a group can thus easily turn into a politicized attachment, generating group consciousness, which is when the act of identifying with a group is met with a growing awareness of the group's position in the society at large persists then compels members to commit to collective or political action aimed at benefiting the interest of the group[48].

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[47] Ibid., 32.
[48] Ibid., 28.

Group domination typically requires the customs of the ingroup to assume moral superiority as the ingroup becomes large and depersonalized, hence serves as justification to view outgroups who digress from the moral order with intolerance and contempt, though doesn't necessarily result in intergroup hostility and conflict, but changes in the social order that facilitates close contact or increases the possibility for integration between ingroup and outgroup may serve as a key catalyst to kindle outgroup animosity[49].

In its basic premises, the Theory of Dominant Group Identity claims that under certain contextual conditions, ingroup identity along with its sense of ingroup bias bears political relevance among its members. The conditional relevance of identity most likely applies to the dominant groups who possess the greatest control over a society's social, economic, and political institutions, where their ingroup identity becomes salient in reaction to perceived threats to the security of their group's dominant status. In the case of whites Americans' race-related political preferences, white identity becomes a meaningful construct among its members hence are ingroup oriented in their political behavior instead of acting on behalf of outgroup hostility. In sum, the racial relations in America may no longer be driven by the biracial conflict between whites and blacks, rather characterized by the whites' concern over their ingroup's eroding power and

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[49] Ibid., 29–31.

privileges as a dominant group in face of the country's rapidly shifting racial landscape.

1.5.3. The Concept of Identity Leadership

A leader who recognized that the collective social power rests in shared social identity understands that the transformation of disparate individuals into a coherent social force is key to achieve transformed collective reality. Hence, comprehending the narrated elements and processes of social identity is key to be properly equipped in identity leadership, an evidence-based theory crafted by Haslam, Reicher, Platow to provide a holistic overview of effective leadership based on their latest work entitled "The New Psychology of Leadership". They argue that leadership is essentially a process of social identity management, whereas effective leadership must be grounded in the social identity that the leader builds upon and advances with his or her followers, rather than in his or her identity as an individual. There are four key rules to exercise effective leadership[50]:

1.   *Leaders need to be in-group prototypes*, where they must be seen as 'one of us' to be a representation of the given social identity.

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[50] S. Alexander Haslam, Stephen D. Reicher, and Michael J. Platow, *The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power* (Hove: Psychology Press, 2011), 137–138.

2. *Leaders need to be in-group champions*, where they must be "doing it for us" in representing the 'we-ness' of the group. In this sense, 'we-ness' empowers and also constrains the leaders' agency.

3. *Leaders need to be entrepreneurs of identity*, where they must work hard to construct identity to ensure that they and their policies are influential.

4. *Leaders need to be embedders of identity*, where the sense of 'who we are' and 'how we believe the world' should be organized that is associated with a particular sense of social identity needs to be translated into social reality.

In practice, the authors recommended a model of identity leadership encompassing the four rules, known as the three 'R's: Reflecting, Representing, Realizing, as visualized below.

Reflecting → Representing → Realizing

Observe and listen to the group in order to understand its culture — Ensure that your actions reflect and advance the group's values — Deliver, and be seen to deliver, things that matter for the group

Source: S. Alexander Haslam, Stephen D. Reicher, and Michael J. Platow, The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power (Hove: Psychology Press, 2011), 322.

1. *Reflecting* requires aspiring leaders to firstly understand the nature of the group they aspire to lead through careful acts of observation—watching, listening, learning—instead of assuming intuitive knowledge over what

identity attributes matters to the group members. For those who have been equipped by the comprehensive knowledge upon the in-group's history, culture, and identity—both in a general sense and also in details—this step is an essential rite of passage to be accepted as a member of that group, entrusted as 'one of us'. Only then would it be possible for a leader to gain authority and advantageous influence over their following group, where every word and nuance they uttered carries weight to the construction of themselves as representative and their rivals as unrepresentative[51].

2. *Representing* requires the aspiring leaders to be like the group and be for the group in every way, where no element of what a leader does is too trivial to merit consideration, that is essential to not only ensure the success of the represented group but also as a testament to the authenticity and authority of their leadership. There are 3 components to this step: (a) The leader must represent themselves as prototypical of the group, this can be a matter of defining what the group is and/or defining themselves in ways that not only show how the leader authentically represent the group. (b) The leader must develop policies, projects, and proposals that represent the group identity, in turn, should be recognized as such—showing how they are genuinely invested to represent the group's interest.

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[51] Ibid., 324–327.

(3) The leader must ensure the representation of the group identity within the structures, procedures, and practices of their organization, party, or movement in ways that ensures the alignment between the leadership rhetoric surrounding 'who we are' with the social reality their followers experienced on the ground, if not reflecting what the group can become by making the vision real within their entity[52].

3. *Realizing* requires the leaders to deliver on their leadership promises that were made for the advancement of the group interests in two key respects: (a) Helping the group accumulate things that are regarded as valuable to them, depending on the content of the group identity—could involve material, spiritual, or symbolic outcomes. (b) Collaborating with their following group to create a social world envisioned together where they can live according to its values; a world where they can dominate or cooperate with others, depending on the group's nature. Essentially, the key to a thriving leadership rests on what the authors termed as *collective self-objectification*—a collaborative agenda where the group is made to matter. The realization of such agenda can come about in many ways: the identity group leader's ability to mobilize their enthusiastic followers takes up a large part of the process through reflecting on and representing the group identity as outlined in the previous two components of identity

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[52] Ibid., 328–332.

leadership. Beyond the creation of social force, however, it is critical to wield it to its maximum effect which is where the strategic creation of structures within such collaboration is important to channel and direct efforts of group members towards greater efficiency, ultimately led to greater odds of making the *collective self-objectification* a reality[53].

1.6. Research Method and Data Collection Technique

1.6.1. Research Method

This thesis shall utilize the qualitative research method, with regards to the constructivist paradigm it adopts. According to John Creswell, the qualitative method allows the researcher to understand the underlying meanings, processes, and contexts ascribed to the observed phenomenon, and in return, gain in-depth insights into the complexity of the explored issue[54]. Relying mainly on non-numerical or descriptive data, the researcher in qualitative method shall act as the primary instrument in data gathering and data analysis, responsible to describe and interpret the ambiguities and complexities of the multiple data collected, most commonly done in an inductive approach[55]. The inductive system of analysis meant that upon identifying patterns, themes, or categories that cut across the data sources, the emerged hypothesis shall not be considered as a full

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[53] Ibid., 333–336.
[54] John W Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (California: SAGE Publications, 2013), 32.
[55] Ibid., 234.

assurance upon the truths drawn in the conclusion, but rather as supportive evidence to enrich the broad comprehension of a complex study.

The adopted method for this thesis' qualitative data analysis is in the form of narrative analysis. The narrative method shall be used to assess the underlying meanings, attitudes, and actions attributed to stories told related to the researched phenomenon, which could be in form of a written, verbal, or even non-verbal data, that act as a story. This is critical to strengthen the author's arguments and hypothesis in an attempt to answer the formulated research question[56].

1.6.2. Data Collection Technique

As means to gather all the necessary data in support of the claims and arguments presented in this thesis, the author shall employ desk research to source descriptive non-numerical data. All procurement of data presented in this research shall be in the form of secondary data, including but not limited to books, academic journals, dissertations, speech transcripts, interviews, films or videotapes, official documents, public opinion polls, and electronic sources of relevant articles from credible online journalism and government websites.

1.7. Thesis Roadmap

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[56] Umar Suryadi Bakry, *Metode Penelitian Hubungan Internasional* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2017), 113.

In the first chapter, the author will establish the overarching background of the studied topic, identify the research problem, formulate the anchoring research question, assert the research scope along with research objective and contribution, introduce the relevant key themes and addressing the research gap in the literature review, and finally inform the employed research method and data collection technique, concluded with the overall thesis roadmap. The second chapter will be a deep-dive exploration upon the salience of white identity as a long-standing dominant group in America and how it affects the social-political reality in America's multicultural society over the years leading up to the 2016 presidential election. In the third chapter, the author will narrow the thesis' discussion upon the focal point of Trump's rise to presidency by demonstrating how the candidacy of Trump appealed to the *high-identifying* white voters who then make up most of the political support he received. This chapter will also briefly showcase the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election with Trump acting as president-elect. Lastly, chapter four will conclude the thesis with findings, emerging hypotheses, and suggestions on further studies as the author acknowledge the limitations this thesis has and the vast room for improvement there is to explore.