

THE IMPORTANCE OF WHITE IDENTITY WHEN IT COMES TO TRUMPISM – A RECONSIDERATION?

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Abstract: The political movement of Trumpism, which comprises the various political ideologies that are associated with president-elect of the United States Donald Trump and the different political figures who espouse similar views, has frequently been placed on the right to the far-right side of the political spectrum. It has attracted controversy and criticism due to Trump and many of the ideologues behind the movement being depicted as having contributed to the rise of white identity politics and even having become enablers of white supremacy. While the paper does not dispute that nativist and white grievance rhetoric has occupied a prominent role in the discourses connected to the variant of national-conservatism promoted by Trump and his surrogates, it argues that the degree to which it constitutes a core aspect of Trumpism may be exaggerated. By using a qualitative approach, grounded in the philosophy of the unobtrusive research method and premised on the synthesis and analysis of a variety of secondary sources from an array of disciplines ranging from political science to sociology and ethnicity studies, the paper demonstrates that in the case of many of the white nationalist and white identitarian groups initially gravitating towards Trump, support for the president evaporated shortly into his first term due to his policies generally considered not to constitute a sharp break from any of his predecessors in terms of the tackling of key nativist issues such as immigration. In addition to that, Trump's significant inroads into certain non-white minority demographics - a process set in motion since at least the 2020 election, but which is believed to have come to fruition with the almost historic broadening of the Republican Party's appeal among non-traditional voting blocks in 2024 - does not mesh well with the hypotheses that he is essentially a white ethno-nationalist candidate at heart. The article also argues that Trump and many of his prominent ideologues' apparent skepticism of the need to decisively support Ukraine coupled with their pro-Russian statements are actually not too consistent with the notion that they are political figures for whom white grievance causes are of paramount importance. In many respects Ukraine fits the bill of a white country that is representative of conservative values and is unapologetically nationalist, which has found itself in an existential struggle against a globalist power driven by Realpolitik. As a conclusion, the paper turns back the clock to 2016 and draws some parallels between the expectations pertaining to the change of the racial dynamics in the United Kingdom as a result of the Brexit vote as well as Donald Trump's successful securing of the Republican Party ticket, attempting to demonstrate how the prevailing rhetoric pertaining to white anxiety at the time is not very predictive when it comes to future race-related trends, i.e. pertaining to voting patterns, within both countries. Follow-up studies, for example involving semi-structured interviews with self-identified advocates of white interests who are supporters of Trump, as well as with Brexit voters who fall within the category of white identitarians, may be helpful in terms of shedding further light on the issues.

Keywords: white identity, right-wing populism, Trumpism, United States, Ukraine

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2024 United States Presidential election produced an outcome, which though certainly not as unexpected as Donald Trump's win in 2016 that qualified as one of the largest political upsets in American history, has nonetheless caught many analysts by surprise in terms of the sheer magnitude of Trump's victory, especially due to him sweeping all seven swing states and his improved performances even in Democratic party strongholds, subsequently sparking a multitude of discussions regarding the new realignments in American politics.

According to Gallup polls, social conservatism in the United States reached a low in 2021, when Joe Biden was inaugurated in the aftermath of the January 6 events. However, it saw a rise soon after that, with the "conservative/very conservative" identification on social issues on the part of Republicans growing by 14 points, with independents moving to the right on social issues as well. (Filipovic, 2023) In the aftermath of the 2024 presidential election, once it became clear that Trump had secured a second term, America's shift in a rightward direction became even more evident. What is less obvious at a first glance is what this transformation entails in terms of the underlying racial dynamics.

One of the main themes surrounding Trump's meteoric rise in politics, beginning with the lead-up to his 2016 presidential campaign, has concerned the adoption of a nativist rhetoric, which has successfully tapped into white grievance politics. Some authors even contend that white nationalism has become an ideological pillar of the Trump-led Republican Party, (Massey, 2021) with a new form of "white identity politics believed to constitute an integral ingredient of Trumpism. (Serwer, 2018). Nativism itself could be defined as an exclusionary form of nationalism

that tends to demarcate society into ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups. In its most extreme version it is associated with the stance that only people of a particular ethnic group are to be considered to be legitimate citizens and deserving of full membership in the state.

Still, there are ample reasons to assume that Trumpism, the version of American nationalism promoted by Trump and the leading right-wing ideologues who have influenced his policies, may be significantly less exclusionary and less faithful to white identity considerations than frequently believed. In order to achieve this purpose, the article challenges the salience of the white identity narrative as it relates to the actions of the Trump administration and the ways in which they are perceived by the Alt-Right. It also shows how the positions adopted on the Russian invasion of Ukraine by prominent right-wing American political commentators who are supportive of Trump and considered by mainstream sources to at least implicitly promote white nationalist policies are paradoxically not exactly in line with white solidarity.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper draws on a qualitative approach and is grounded in the unobtrusive research method – the integrated analysis of mostly secondary sources, which may include academic articles, newspaper publications, and policy analysis papers from a multitude of disciplines in order to support the main arguments (Kutsyuruba, 2017). The information that is obtained from the different documents is put on the radar, interpreted and synthesized for the purpose of eliciting meaning and helping develop new perspectives. The article subscribes to Strike and Posner’s definitions of synthesis as an activity in which separate parts are brought together to form a whole, with the result greater than the sum of its parts, bringing about an innovative element (Mengshoel & Sim, 2023). The approach to the analysis could be considered to be inductive in the sense that the general propositions gradually emerge from the raw data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While the signs were already present during the 2020 presidential election, which albeit resulting in a loss for Trump and the Republican Party, saw an improved performance among a number of minority groups in comparison to 2016, the analysis of the 2024 final vote tally suggests that the Republican Party has succeeded in actually making notable inroads into traditionally Democratic demographics. The rightward drift among non-white men, aided by Trump’s multi-racial style of populism, i.e. by using the “Jamal and Enrique” strategy to court the votes of men of color, potentially offsetting the somewhat reduced support among white women, (Paz, 2024) was most clearly exemplified with regard to Latino men, but the Republican candidate was also buoyed by being able to carve away other minority voters from the Democrats, such as Blacks, Asian-Americans and Native Americans, (Cheney-Rice, 2024) arguably setting the GOP on course towards becoming a “multi-racial men’s party”. Political strategist and pollster Patrick Ruffini has gone so far as to rate Trump’s assembled coalition as the most diverse one in history for the Republican Party. (Karma, 2024) Even though it is still the case that the reliance on the support of the white, working-class voters can hardly be overstated, the diversity of the voting blocks that brought Trump to power is believed to a sign of a racial depolarization in American political life, assuaging a concern prominent in the minds of Republican politicians that became especially acute during Barack Obama’s 2012 reelection – that the Republican Party was inevitably going to lose non-white support for the conceivable future. (Cheney-Rice, 2024) In this context, North Carolina State University political scientist Steve Greene has surmised that values that are connected to living in rural areas may be surpassing the importance of racial and ethnic factors when it comes to the political orientations of American citizens. (Kruse, 2020) Similarly, Ruffini has suggested that Trump has been an important driver of a tendency in which the traditional dividing lines of race and wealth are gradually supplanted by new ones, for instance pertaining to education and degree of trust in the country’s institutions. (Karma, 2024)

Of course it would be a gross oversimplification to completely ignore the politics of nativism engaged in by Trump and regard his second term as likely to eventually usher in a post-racial utopia in the United States. Nationalism scholar Anthony Smith has argued that U.S. political culture has been shaped by three traditions: a liberal tradition that puts a premium on universal rights and individualism; a civic republican one that stresses the importance of community self-governance as well as collective rights and obligations; and an ethnocultural one, which reflects the white population’s desire to retain its political dominance. (Bonikowski & DiMaggio, 2016) In accordance with the abovementioned third tradition, it is thus worth emphasizing that Trump’s political ascendance was undoubtedly at least somewhat steeped in racial resentment and aided by nativist themes, such as his revival of the Barack Obama “birther conspiracy”, which has been characterized as a racist trope due to giving an implicit nod to the notion that black Americans are perpetual foreigners. (Inwood, 2018) In addition, Trump’s political rise gave further prominence to the Alternative Right (Alt-Right), which encompasses a collection of far right groups and individuals who are mostly active online, hold the core belief that white identity has come under attack by a variety of

multicultural forces and are generally inclined to view white ethno-nationalism as a fundamental value. (Wilson, 2020)

However, at the same time it would be fallacious to view Trump's first presidency as having fallen neatly in line with or having aimed to fulfill the expectations of such groups, with his dabbling with nativism likely reflective of pragmatic considerations rather than any deeply held ideological convictions.

Firstly, there is some evidence, according to a study by Andrew Engelhardt, that racial resentment did not actually show an increase within the Republican Party in the period between 2012 and 2016, suggesting that the extent of the Trump campaign's stoking of racist attitudes may have been exaggerated. (Boggs et al, 2020) A 2019 study focusing on the professed biases of white Americans conducted by Daniel Hopkins from the University of Pennsylvania actually found a slight decrease in racial prejudice. (Stanley-Becker, 2019)

Secondly, by late 2017, and after the mass demonstration held in August in Charlottesville, Virginia failed to achieve the purpose of "uniting the right", some of the Alt-Right's most influential propagandists that represented different factions and splinter groups were already publishing articles, which revealed fading enthusiasm for Trump. (Farivar, 2020) They lambasted certain policy actions of Trump, such as him removing political strategist Steve Bannon from the National Security Council, the insufficient progress on the border wall, and Trump's perceived reverence for Saudi Arabia and Israel. Alt-Right enthusiasm for Trump during his 2020 campaign for reelection was notably muted as compared to in 2016 because Trump's presidency had purportedly fallen short of the right-wing groups' hopes for revolutionary and transformative policies, for instance in relation to immigration. (Wilson, 2020) In the lead-up to the 2020 presidential election a number of prominent white interest advocates such as Richard Spencer and Jared Taylor even pondered extending their support to progressive Democratic party politician Bernie Sanders. (Farivar, 2020) Similarly, when Kamala Harris gained momentum and saw her electoral fortunes improve significantly in August and September 2024, Donald Trump's perceived openness to centrist policies in order to potentially win over moderate voters, was characterized as a betrayal by some members of the alt right such as Nick Fuentes and Lara Loomer. (Pape, 2024) According to Colin Henry, a researcher at George Washington University with an expertise on online political extremism, Trump's recent disavowal of hard-line policy proposals, such as Project 2025, has also attracted criticism among the members of this movement. (Harwell, 2024) In spite of Trump making a number of bombastic and seemingly racially charged pronouncements in October 2024 and notably questioning Harris' racial identity, in the assessment of a few commentators, such as journalist Kelefa Sanneh, the 2024 election cycle actually saw both candidates rarely broaching the subject of race, at least in an explicit fashion. (Sanneh, 2024)

Furthermore, the reduction in the potency of race as an essentialist dividing line may also be attributable to the emerging trend of non-white political figures playing increasingly visible roles across the spectrum of far-right activism in the United States, (Bender et al., 2024) heralding the emergence of a new "multiracial far-right", seemingly decoupled from concerns focused on traditional inter-racial dynamics and mainly characterized by a stark opposition to the "woke" and politically correct ideologies propagated by liberal political elites. (Rios, 2023; Allam & Nakhlawi, 2021) Arguably, Trump's framing of crime in America as in essence being the fault of illegal immigrant groups such as Haitian migrants and Venezuelan gang members could somewhat counterintuitively be seen as flattering to a broad range of Americans, including minority groups, who view themselves as belonging to a diverse country where all the locals are well-behaved and the only criminal threats emanate from beyond the borders of the country. (Sanneh, 2024) Conversely, within the US mainstream there have also been a few instances of non-white politicians directly or indirectly raising concerns about "exclusively white issues". For example, Indian-American entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy who endorsed Trump after ending his own presidential campaign in January 2024 and has supported a hard-line approach to illegal immigration, (Koretski & Tabet, 2023) has proudly adopted the label of a non-white [American] nationalist (Booker, 2023) and in 2023 controversially broached the subject of the great replacement theory, (Gilbert, 2023) according to which a cabal of global elites is encouraging immigration of people of colour in order to replace white voters and fundamentally change the racial demographics in countries such as the United States.

One factor that merits consideration concerns minority groups being able to look back on the first Trump presidency, thus causing them to view him as a somewhat known quantity who is unlikely to actually implement his more extreme policy proposals. However, it is dubious to what extent this consideration would be sufficient in explaining Trump's unprecedented and almost historic gains in traditionally *Democratic* strongholds.

The degree to which stark white identity considerations could be considered to constitute a core element of Trump's ideology is also questionable if one is to examine the opinions expressed on the Ukraine war by many pro-Trump political figures such as Matt Gaetz and Charlie Kirk who belong to the political right in the United States. In particular, journalist Tucker Carlson who has been described as a leading voice of white grievance politics, (Kranish, 2021) is considered to be a high-profile proponent of Trumpism and is even believed to have exerted an

influence on some of Trump's decisions during his first presidential term, such as the abandonment of airstrikes against Iran in June 2019, (Baker et al, 2019) has personified the saturation of anti-Ukraine rhetoric in right-wing US media. Carlson's staunch opposition to providing military aid to Ukraine and his peddling of pro-Russian conspiracy theories, which have been equated in certain circles with a "demonization" of the country and its president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, (Kight, 2024) seem reflective of the tendency among the American right to view Putin's Russia as a conservative power that is a natural ally due to being at loggerheads with the mainstream liberal consensus in the West, thus purportedly serving as a bulwark against social progressivism.

However, the tacitly pro-Russian stance, which has persisted since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, is difficult to square with Carlson's and other figures on the American right's implicit and explicit advocacy of white identity politics. At least in a theoretical sense, Ukraine as a country that by almost any metric could be considered to have fallen victim to an imperialist war of aggression ticks plenty of boxes in terms of being perfectly poised to engender sympathy among Alt-Right supporters who are committed to the protection of core white identity interests.

Firstly, it is a European nation-state with a relatively ethnically homogeneous population, in which the expression of vociferous nationalist sentiments has hardly been considered taboo. (Lieven, 2023) While gravitating strongly towards the EU since at least 2014 as a result of the Ukrainian Revolution and Russia's annexation of Crimea, actually remains more in line with socially conservative Eastern European values than with Western liberal ones. According to a 2023 sociological study conducted by Akaliyski and Reeskens Ukrainians do lean more towards the Russian Slavic Orthodox world than Western Europe in terms of their outlooks on a number of social issues and actually tend to display less tolerance of ethnic diversity than Russians. One somewhat surprising additional finding is that Western Ukraine that is the least influenced by Russia is somewhat more socially conservative in terms of opposition to EU liberal values than the other parts of the country. (Akaliyski & Reeskens, 2023)

Secondly, white identity advocates in the USA could be well-placed to portray the Ukraine war as a cause célèbre due to the disproportionate involvement in the "brotherly war" of often non-white and non-Christian ethnic minority groups from Russia. (Bessonov, 2022) Soldiers from the Russian Federation, belonging to ethnic minorities such as Chechens and Buryats have in fact been accused by Ukrainian authorities of carrying out some of the more gruesome crimes over the course of the ongoing war, such as the Bucha massacre. (Petkova, 2022) Recent events like North Korean troops' direct involvement in the conflict on the Russian side, could lend further credence to the interpretation that vocal support for Ukraine would actually fall within the sphere of protecting a white Christian country against an "Islam-Eurasianist" globalist coalition that includes Russia, Iran and North Korea, also with the indirect support of China. The Ukrainians themselves have sometimes emphasized their innate Europeanness in a racial and cultural sense, sharply contrasting it with the less humane "Eurasian values" associated with Russia. (Lieven, 2023) Even prior to its invasion of Ukraine, Russia, courtesy of its involvement in a multitude of conflicts worldwide, for instance in Africa and the Middle East, hardly qualified for the label of an anti-globalist, non-interventionist actor that was inclined to put the principle of national sovereignty on a pedestal. However, it was the Harris-Walz presidential campaign rather than the Trump-Vance one that explicitly spelled out the long-term risks for the national sovereignty of the Central and Eastern European countries in case of a Russian victory, in its direct appeal to the approximately 800,000 Polish-American voters in Pennsylvania in October 2024. (Karatnycky, 2024)

Thirdly, the extent of the coverage and attention devoted to the war in Ukraine compared to other ongoing conflicts around the world as well as the outpouring of support for the Ukrainians in Europe has been criticized by mainstream media sources such as Global Times (Wenwen, 2022) and the Guardian (Bayoumi, 2022), which have attributed benefits related to white privilege to the Ukrainians due to the color of their skin. If pro-Trump conservatives like Carlson were truly concerned about white vulnerabilities across time and space, they would have likely jumped at the opportunity to call out such influential media outlets for being anti-white by appearing to trivialize the suffering of Ukrainians and using US-specific racial criteria in their interpretations on the matter. In the 2010s Carlson had commented sympathetically regarding the situation of the Boers in South Africa, viewing them as a struggling white group facing an existential threat in a country formerly governed by white elites. (Thompson, 2018) Curiously, one of the main political parties in South Africa, the Economic Freedom Fighters, which is led by Julius Malema, and has not been averse to using explicitly anti-white rhetoric, has actually expressed support for Putin's actions in Ukraine.

The seeming lack of consistency, if we are to assume that protecting white interests constitutes a core element of many pro-Trump alt righters' agenda, may suggest that while in the US context Eastern and Western Europeans have seamlessly blended into an overarching concept of a white identity, non-American whites residing outside Western and Northern Europe such as the Ukrainians may still only be accorded the label of peripheral whites, reflective of the existence of intra-racial distinctions within the white category. In a 2024 study covering white racial preferences and views on immigration, researcher David Macdonald actually found that people with stronger White

identifiers, thus those who consider “being White” to be more important with regard to “who they are,” do not actually appear to desire more immigrants from Europe as a means of maintaining and/or even increasing the power and status of their racial/ethnic group (the native-born White American majority). (Macdonald, 2023) Arguably, these findings are reflective of the reality that even from the standpoint of many right-wing white identitarians in the USA, Eastern European white ethnicities may to a degree fall into the category of cultural and ethnic out-groups.

4. CONCLUSION

Approximately 8 years ago, on 23 June 2016, the United Kingdom, another multicultural country and a liberal democracy, voted “yes” in a referendum to leave the European Union. At the time, this development was viewed in conjunction with Donald Trump’s securing of the Republican presidential nomination as well as right-wing parties’ gains in many European countries, being characterized as a manifestation of a white anxiety or crisis of whiteness, which could contribute to a political tumult in the West. (Taub, 2016) In particular, some 2016 publications equated the Brexit result to giving a voice to racism and connected it to racist incidences involving visible minority groups such as Muslims. (Versi, 2016)

It is certainly the case that Brexit was to a large degree associated with a new surge in English nationalism, which in a sense was expected to increase tension between white and non-white groups in the UK context, especially given that minority groups in the UK were significantly more likely to support the “Remain” side compared to the white British people. (Begum, 2023) However, while it has been indeed linked to an increase in incidents along racial lines, the UK’s decision to leave the European Union perhaps more notably exacerbated the already existing polarization between the white British and the non-British whites, especially Central and Eastern European (CEE) people. In the early to mid-2000s, CEE immigrants were regarded as candidates to be placed within the category of an invisible group of immigrants due to their whiteness allowing them to almost seamlessly blend into British society. However, because of factors such as hostile political campaigns, the “crime narrative” began to be increasingly associated with them in the minds of the general public, (Reed, 2018) with anti-CEE sentiments believed to have even started to spill over into realms such as classroom settings in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. (Käkelä et al, 2022) Similarly, the new multiracial working class coalition that played a non-negligible role in handing Donald Trump his second presidency as well as many pro-Trump white identitarians’ scapegoating of Ukraine could hardly have been predicted when Trump emerged as a serious presidential candidate in 2015. What is evident is that political candidates committed to white identitarian messaging may still have it in store to create surprising inter-racial realignments and also exhibit a polarizing effect with regard to intra-racial relations.

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