

RESEARCH ARTICLE

On the Ballot in 2020: Will the United States (finally) embrace civil rights?

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Abstract

This article situates the 2020 presidential election within the context of U.S. history, specifically the longstanding relationship between white supremacist views and what types of U.S. citizens were considered capable of exercising democratic citizenship. I argue that President Trump’s use of racialized, nativist tropes must be understood within that context and the ongoing backlash to the advancement of civil rights in the United States. White resistance to racial progress is not new, nor is the violence associated with it. Only by looking at the intersection of white racial resentment and modern sexism can we fully understand the durability of the Trump coalition. The article closes by considering what political scientists should be learning from this moment in order to better explain American political dynamics moving forward.

Keywords: Race; civil rights; voting behavior; gender; intersectionality; sexism; racism; citizenship

Introduction

Every presidential cycle, advocates and pundits claim that this election “is like no other.” But this time, in November 2020, that claim may be closer to being true than it has been in the past 50 years. Political pundits and commentators continue to talk about the election as a horse race—will Biden’s stance on policing “sell” to suburban voters; will Trump’s doubling down on white racial resentment gain him ground in Wisconsin? What this frame does not capture is the moral reckoning our nation is facing, one that has been hundreds of years in the making. The choices voters make in November will determine whether our nation will, finally, fully embrace the changes that began in the civil rights era. Or will we continue to have a democracy for whites only, one that is supported with ever greater degrees of state violence?

The power of white supremacy

We need to begin by noting that President Trump overtly supporting white nationalism while simultaneously denigrating the concerns raised by Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) activists, community members, or elected officials

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represents a notable change in how the Republican party has approached issues of race and civil rights since the late 1960s. As Ian Haney López (2015) pointed out in *Dog Whistle Politics*, the Republican Party's approach to racial issues after the passage of the Civil Rights Act was to make racialized appeals, but to do so in ways that offered them plausible deniability that the concerns being raised were not really about race but rather about "poverty," "welfare use," or "crime" (Mendelberg 2001). These tropes were clearly understood by whites as being about race, but there was an unspoken agreement that overtly racialized appeals were not acceptable (Haney López 2015). The Civil Rights Movement had changed the national discourse around race.

It is important to recall what a significant shift this was in U.S. politics. Up until that point, overtly racial appeals were the norm in the United States rather than the exception (Ambar 2019). We need to only consider that Eugenics as a science was developed within the U.S. academy. Charles Davenport, a Harvard professor and one of the fields' leading minds, was a highly respected scholar and an elected member of the National Academy of Sciences. His book, *Heredity in Relation to Genetics*, was required reading for undergraduates across the country (Davenport 1913). This ideology was not "fringe," but rather squarely within the mainstream of U.S. scientific thought. Out of this ideology came a set of public policies, including Jim Crow segregation and Americanization programs in U.S. schools, designed around a vision of a U.S. social structure with whites on top and non-whites incapable of being their equals (King 2000; Kendi 2017; Gordon and Lindsay 2019).

Looking further back, we see that our nation's founders saw the U.S. nation-state as a product of divine benevolence. The idea of manifest destiny—that the United States was "destined" to be an Anglo-Saxon Protestant nation that stretched from coast to coast—had its roots in colonial political thought (Smith 1997) and the connection between racial attitudes and religiosity remains until today (Grose 2018; Wong 2018). In a letter to his father in 1811, John Quincy Adams wrote:

The whole continent of North America appears to be destined by Divine Providence to be peopled by one nation, speaking one language, professing one general system of religious and political principles, and accustomed to one general tenor of social usages and customs. For the common happiness of them all, for their peace and prosperity, I believe it is indispensable that they should be associated in one federal Union.¹

Thus, America since its founding was imagined as a white Anglo Saxon Protestant nation, one where only whites were capable of participating in its democratic institutions. Senator John C. Calhoun, speaking on the Senate floor in 1848 during the debate about whether to annex all of Mexico at the end of the U.S.-Mexico war laid out this ideology quite clearly:

I know further, sir, that we have never dreamt of incorporating into our Union any but the Caucasian race – the free white race ... Ours, sir, is the Government of a white race ... Sir, it is a remarkable fact, that in the whole history of man, as far as my knowledge extends, there is no instance whatever of any civilized colored races being found equal to the establishment of free popular government,

although by far the largest portion of the human family is composed of these races. And even in the savage state we scarcely find them anywhere with such government, except it be our noble savages ... Are we to overlook this fact? Are we to associate with ourselves as equals, companions, and fellow-citizens, the Indians and mixed race of Mexico? Sir, I should consider such a thing as fatal to our institutions ... We make a great mistake, sir, when we suppose that all people are capable of self-government ... None but people advanced to a very high state of moral and intellectual improvement are capable, in a civilized state, of maintaining free government; and amongst those who are so purified, very few, indeed, have had the good fortune of forming a constitution capable of endurance.²

In fact, U.S. democratic institutions have, for most of their history, lived up to that promise. The expansion of white male suffrage in the early 19th century to non-propertied whites coincided with the expansion of common schools, publicly funded educational institutions designed to socialize these lower-class whites into democratic citizenship (Moss 2009; Domina *et al.*, 2017). It would not be until the early 20th century that white women were granted suffrage. It would be another 50 years before BIPOC citizens of any gender identity would be able to fully exercise the franchise. This system was sustained through law and also through state-sanctioned violence (Rhyne 2008; Pryor 2016).

One could argue that the five decades since the civil rights movement (and subsequent movements for women's and LGBTQ+ rights) have been the newest American experiment. For the first time in the nation's history, our democratic institutions could be accessed by everyone, not just white elites or the white working class. Overt discrimination in the workplace, housing, and government would no longer be tolerated (at least officially). But the white backlash was immediate. Michelle Alexander (2010) eloquently lays out how the shifts towards racial justice after the civil rights movement were followed by changes in drug policy and the move towards mass incarceration, both of which had very negative impacts on the Black community. This hyper-policing, combined with residential segregation and inequitable economic policies, made it difficult for Blacks to take full advantage of this shift in racial attitudes and in law (Rothstein 2018).

The strength, ubiquity, and organized nature of white resistance to civil rights changes, particularly school segregation, is not often discussed as part of the civil rights story (Bly 1998, Walker 2010; Ward 2015). What most U.S. students learn in school is that Martin Luther King, Jr. was a great leader and that Jim Crow segregation was supported by a few racist whites in the south who lost in the face of King's great moral suasion. The reality is that whites, in the north and the south, violently resisted school desegregation and violently fought the integration of their country clubs, companies, and neighborhoods (Andrews 2002; Campney 2010; Lang 2013). I myself experienced that visceral white resistance when my Latinx family moved into a white neighborhood in southern California in the mid-1970s. Racial epithets were common on the playground and we had dead animals left on our lawn. This type of quotidian white resistance and clear messages to BIPOC families that they were not welcome, experiences rarely covered by the media, were commonplace in

the United States after the 1960s. And for Blacks, in particular, that resistance often went hand in hand with anti-Black violence (Spruill 2016; Combs 2018).

This helps to explain why, by the 2000s, whites and non-whites were essentially living in separate realities when it came to race relations and racial issues in the United States. We see in Figure 1 that U.S. whites are the most segregated of all races. Many have fled urban areas to create what author Rich Benjamin (2009) calls “whitopias.” Our current political situation must be placed within this historical context. We must remember that the principle that discrimination based on race is unacceptable is a fairly recent one, and one that has been continually contested. That contestation, and the violence that has accompanied it, have always been part of U.S. history. What has changed is that it is now overt—a clarion call rather than a dog whistle.

Modern sexism

But the continued power white supremacy holds over the imagination of some U.S. whites and non-whites is not enough to explain how the U.S. system of social stratification has sustained itself. To be successful, systems of social coercion need to be multi-faceted. Just saying “group X is on top and everyone else is on the bottom” would be easy to resist and would not have been nearly as successful. Instead, U.S. whiteness is fluid and is continually being reconstructed (Pierce 2015). The U.S. system of social stratification has multiple, intersecting oppressions that work together to sustain the status quo.³ The second critical piece of the puzzle in the United States is the role that modern sexism plays in supporting and sustaining whiteness in the present day (Frasure-Yokley 2018; Merolla 2018).

Research and analysis using GenForward data from the 2016 election are instructive in this regard (Cohen *et al.*, 2016). In their analysis of their quarterly youth polls conducted before the 2016 election, Cathy Cohen and her colleagues created three scales—white vulnerability, racial resentment, and modern sexism. For their white vulnerability scale, they asked respondents: (1) whether they believe being white helps, hurts, or makes no difference in today’s society; (2) whether—through no fault of their own—whites are economically losing ground today compared to other racial and ethnic groups; and (3) whether discrimination against whites is today as big a problem as discrimination against Blacks and other minorities.

To measure racial resentment, they looked at respondents’ agreement or disagreement with the following two statements: (1) Blacks should work their way up without any special favors, and (2) Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class. To explore modern sexism, they analyzed respondents’ levels of agreement with the following three questions: (1) Women often miss out on good jobs due to sexual discrimination, (2) Society has reached the point where women and men have equal opportunities for achievement, and (3) It is easy to understand why women’s groups are still concerned about societal limitations of women’s opportunities (Cohen *et al.*, 2016, 17–18).

They find that respondents with high levels of white vulnerability were about 46 percentage points more likely to support Trump than respondents with low reported levels of white vulnerability. The difference between white respondents with high and low levels of racial resentment was 27 percentage points. Higher levels of modern

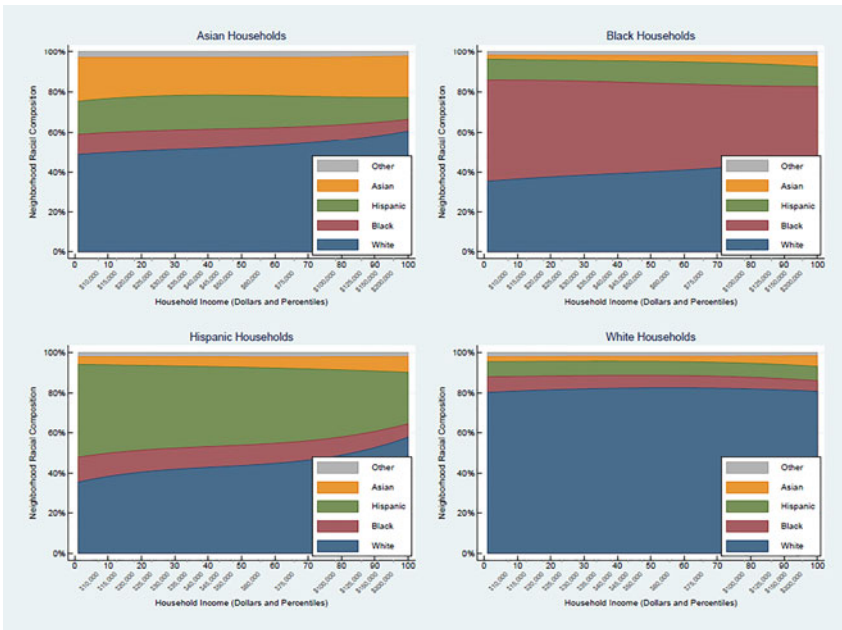


Figure 1. Average Neighborhood Racial Composition, by Household Income and Race, 2007–2011. Source: Reardon, Fox, and Townsend 2015.

sexism made whites 31 percentage points more likely to support Trump. Yet, this analysis considered each of these attitudes separately. But the authors hypothesized that these factors were highly correlated with one another, because “whites who perceive their racial group as especially vulnerable today also tend to be resentful of African Americans and to have sexist attitudes about women” (Cohen *et al.*, 2016, 20).

When they conducted the analysis with all three scales in the same model, “both racial resentment and modern sexism are no longer statistically significant when included in a model with white vulnerability, and the association between each of these factors and Trump support declines substantially. White vulnerability largely washes out the effects of racial resentment and modern sexism, suggesting that white vulnerability includes dimensions of racial resentment and sexism” (Cohen *et al.*, 2016, 21). Even after controlling for feelings of racial resentment and modern sexism, their analysis finds that white youth with high levels of white vulnerability were 33 percentage points more likely to support Trump than white respondents with low levels of white vulnerability.

Looking at more recent polls focused on the 2020 election, we see how gender intersects with the race to influence political attitudes. Figure 2 summarizes gaps in Trump job approval among Latinx voters and Figure 3 vote choice among young voters of multiple races aged 18–36. We see in both cases significant gender-based differences in terms of support for Trump.

Among Latinx voters, the gender gap in Trump approval ranges from a high in North Carolina, where Latinx women were 21 percentage points less likely to say

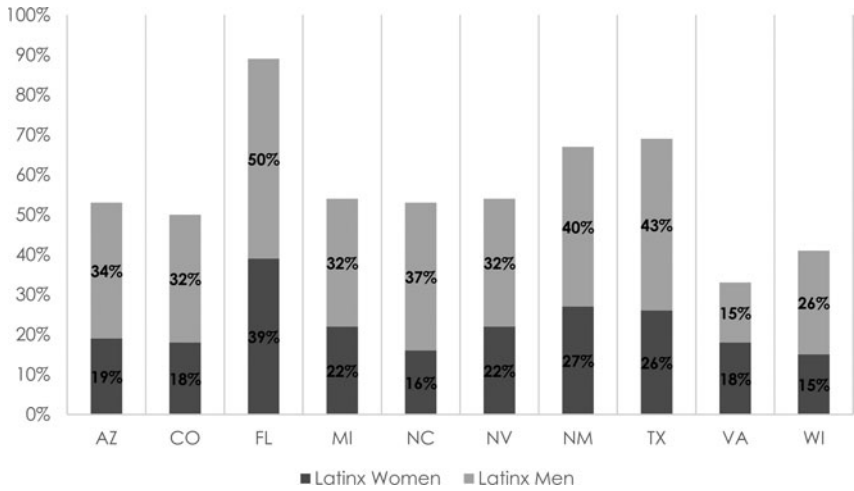


Figure 2. Trump Job Approval among Latinx Voters, October 2019, by Gender and State.
 Source: Equis Research https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d30982b599bde00016db472/t/5dfa5a9dcda8467a3e889820/1576688288258/Solving+for+X_+Latina+Voters+in+2020.pdf
 Note: Columns do not add up to 100% due to nonresponse

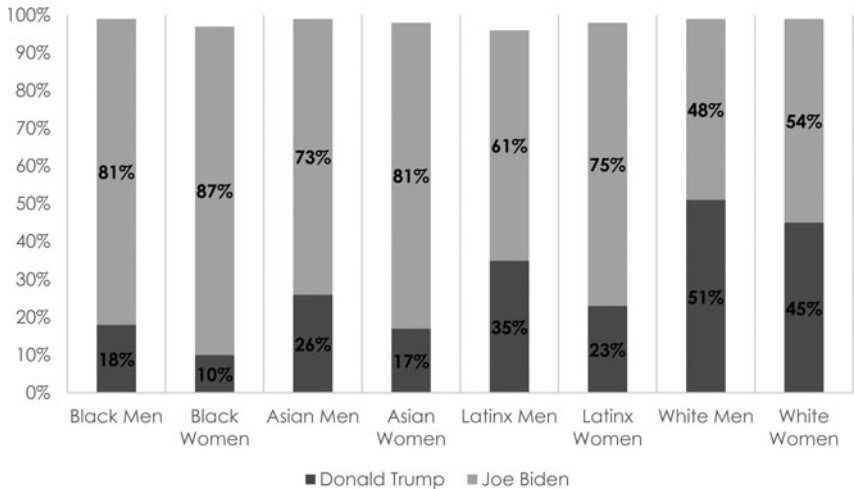


Figure 3. Presidential Vote Preference among Young Voters (18–36), in April 2020, by Race and Gender.
 Source: GenForward Survey April 2020, <https://genforwardsurvey.com/download/?did=308>
 Note: Columns do not add up to 100% due to nonresponse

they approved of Donald Trump than Latinx men, to a low in Virginia, where Latinx men were 3 percentage points less likely to say that they supported President Trump than Latinx women. These results highlight two important dynamics: the degree to which the modern sexism that is part of Trump’s rhetoric may appeal to some men of color, resulting in greater support for Trump among them than among

their female-identified co-ethnics; and the fact that gender and racial socialization are situated within particular local contexts. For Latinx voters, those contexts reflect important national origin, generational, and occupational differences. These factors all intersect to impact how these voters' racialized and gendered positionalities influence their political attitudes.

Looking at youth voters, we see in [Figure 3](#) a similar gendered dynamic, with young men of color more likely to say they will vote for Trump than their co-ethnic women. The gap is largest among Latinx voters but still present across all groups. This analysis underscores why the concept of intersectionality—the idea that human beings possess multiple identifications simultaneously, and that the intersection of those identities has important implications for their beliefs, attitudes, and experiences—is so important for understanding how voters' racialized and gendered experiences are playing out in this political moment in the United States ([Hancock 2016](#)).

The 2020 presidential election, then, is about policing (literally) the boundaries of the U.S. polity. What is at stake is whether we will finally, as a nation, will take the next step towards fully implementing civil rights or we will turn the clock back to the pre-civil rights United States. This is not how the stakes of this election are currently being framed in popular media. Starting in August 2020, the *Washington Post's* editorial board has taken the unprecedented step of running a series of editorials, entitled “Our Democracy in Peril,” that focus on the damage President Trump has done and will do to American democracy if he were to be re-elected.⁴ The *Post's* reporting and commentary are entirely accurate. They reference the corruption that has run rampant within the Trump Administration, its incompetence, and the Administration's continual violation of long-established U.S. democratic norms.

What the *Washington Post* pieces are missing, however, is the fact that the voters Trump appeals to may not necessarily be concerned about maintaining those democratic norms if they no longer feel that democracy is there to serve them. A recent study by Larry Bartels ([2020](#), 22752) finds that many Republicans (most of whom are white) believe “the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it.” More than 40% of respondents agreed that “a time will come when patriotic Americans have to take the law into their own hands” ([Bartels 2020](#), 22752). Bartels finds that what he calls “ethnic antagonism” is the best predictor of Republicans' antipathy towards democracy. He defines ethnic antagonism as “concerns about the political power and claims on government resources of immigrants, African-Americans, and Latinos” ([Bartels 2020](#), 22754). For a non-trivial number of U.S. voters, then, the threat in this election is an existential one; a perceived threat that has significantly eroded their commitment to democracy. Given this, it becomes much clearer why President Trump has chosen to double down on white power, law and order, and the chaos and disorder that arises from social unrest as the frames for his campaign. He knows his base and the fears they already have; his political acumen is rooted in his ability to frame effective appeals that capitalize on those fears.

The 2020 election and political science research

If turnout among BIPOC voters is high enough in November 2020, it is possible Trump will lose the election. Recent research by Towler and Parker ([2018](#)) suggests

Trump's presence on the ballot may have a mobilizing effect on Black voters. The final outcome also depends on how many whites are mobilized by Trump's racialized messages. We need to remember that, despite the demographic change, the US electorate (which is not the same as the US population) remains overwhelmingly white. According to the Pew Research Center, the 2020 presidential electorate is expected to be 66.7% white, 13.3% Latino, 12.5% Black, and 4.7% Asian. Despite the fact that, in 2020, non-whites are expected to make up the largest percentage of the electorate ever, they still are outnumbered by whites by almost 2 to 1. That means that a Republican electoral strategy that focuses on energizing and turning out white eligible voters, particularly those who do not vote regularly, remains a viable, and potentially winning, strategy.

Republican party leaders understand that the country's demography will not favor them in the future.⁵ That is why for the past decade they have been laying the groundwork for minority rule through racialized gerrymandering and by passing laws, such as voter identification requirements, that make it more and more difficult for people to vote.⁶ If Trump wins in November 2020, this erosion of our democratic institutions will continue in order to ensure Grand Old Party (GOP) minority rule for as long as possible. The GOP emphasis on appointing judges is part and parcel of this strategy. Only through the lifetime appointment of judges can they ensure their ideology remains in power even when they are no longer in office.⁷

If Trump loses, he has spent months laying the groundwork for a claim that the election was "rigged" and therefore the results are not valid. This could lead not only to a contested election, as we had in 2000, but also the unprecedented situation where the incumbent refuses to leave the office. In that instance, it is possible Joe Biden could only be sworn in as president with military intervention. Any review of world history makes clear that the politicization of the military in this way—their activation to engage in the political process—is a very dangerous precedent to set (Linz and Stepan 1978). It will be very difficult to put that genie back in the bottle if the military begins to see itself as the "defender" of U.S. democracy on U.S. soil, as they define it.

Many of our most commonly used theories in American politics research are not very helpful for understanding this political moment. The most dominant paradigm undergirding many of our theories is that politicians and voters act upon their self-interest, either in terms of getting re-elected or of maximizing their personal utility (Olson 1971; Dahl 1991). Those that have focused on inequality and governance have generally looked only at class, rather than race (Schattschneider 1975; Lindblom 1980; Gilens 2014). What none of these intellectual frameworks helps us understand is when a politician or set of voters hold to a set of values that may be fundamentally irrational and/or harmful to capitalist accumulation, such as racism. Saying that racism can simply fit within the definition of "self-interest" derived from economics expands the concept to the point that it becomes tautological. Also, because of the relative stability of U.S. democracy, the American politics subfield also has a limited ability to explain how U.S. democratic institutions will survive in the face of an erosion of democratic norms. In general, the subfield has not taken seriously how our presidential institutional structures (compared to parliamentary systems) make it more difficult for our democratic institutions to weather political polarization of the type the United States has been experiencing recently (Linz and

Valenzuela 1994). Perhaps this is a moment to reconsider the study of U.S. politics as its own subfield, rather than treating the United States as another case study within a comparative politics frame.

The Race, Ethnicity, and Politics (REP) subfield has long argued that race is central to understanding American politics and that it is critical that we conceptualize these issues intersectionally, both at the individual and institutional levels (Strolovitch 2007; Novkov 2009; Beltrán 2011; Frances 2015; Hancock 2016; Hanchard 2019; Lemi and Brown 2019). Conceptualizations of race as an object of study has advanced in important ways since the mid-20th century but more needs to be done (Garcia 2017). We need to think deeply about the intersection between white supremacy and democratic governance in the United States. We need to consider how marginalization and privilege can exist simultaneously within individuals, adding more complexity and nuance to our understanding of how social position shapes people's political attitudes and behavior (García Bedolla 2007). In general, we need to accept these dynamics as multi-layered and contextually contingent, and also situated within the long history discussed above. I hope that the challenges of 2020 make clear the importance of incorporating REP and comparative politics insights into mainstream American politics research within political science.

Trump may have done the nation a favor, laying bare the racism and sexism festering just beneath the surface. His rhetoric, and his strong, loyal following, make clear that these beliefs are not fringe but rather constitutive of U.S. national identity. Only by facing this history and this reality head-on will the nation be able to move towards a new origin story, one which honors our shared purpose and our shared humanity, regardless of our race, gender identity, sexuality, national origin, or nativity.

Notes

1 As quoted in Martha S. Hewson (2004).

2 John C. Calhoun, speech on the floor of the Senate, 1848; more information available at <https://president.yale.edu/advisory-groups/presidents-committees/committee-establish-principles-renaming/appendix-documents/selected-congressional-speeches-calhoun>.

3 These oppressions also include heteronormativity, among others. By not including them here I am not suggesting that they are somehow less important than racism and sexism.

4 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/08/21/our-democracy-in-peril-editorial-board-series/?arc404=true>

5 The Growth & Opportunity Project Report was commissioned by the GOP after the 2012 election to lay out a path forward. The report made clear that demographics meant the GOP would need to appeal to voters of color, which would require policy change: <https://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/RNCreport03182013.pdf>.

6 For a summary of studies looking at voter identification laws and their potential impact, see: <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/research-voter-id>

7 The passing of Ruth Bader Ginsberg in September 2020 resulted in a durable 6-3 conservative majority within the Supreme Court, a reality that will help to sustain a generation of minority rule through the judiciary.

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