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Two-Headed Coins or Kandinskys: White Racial Identification

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Racial identity means different things to members of different racial and ethnic groups in the United States. However, while the study of race and politics is often the study of White racial attitudes (Dawson & Cohen, 2003), research on racial identity almost always refers to non-White identity. This article addresses this hole in the literature by examining the extent and effects of White identity. We compare White identification and Black identification using National Election Studies data (1972–2000) and examine the relationships between racial identity and racial and political attitudes. This study adds a missing case to the study of racial identity, tests how well the theories about the concept travel across cases, and highlights the need for more frequent studies of the racial identity of all groups.

KEY WORDS: race, racial identity, measurement

In the literature focusing on racial identity in the United States, the spotlight tends to rest on groups that are numerical minorities. The Black Power Movement, the American Indian Movement's takeover of Alcatraz, the Japanese American Redress Movement, and protests by Latinos over historical portrayals of the Alamo are all cases where scholars have tied racial and ethnic identity and consciousness to political mobilization (Hatamiya, 1993; Johnson, Champagne, & Nagel, 1999; McAdam, 1985; Rhea, 1997). Political scientists who try to understand when and why people get politically involved have found that racial identity has an effect on political participation (Gamson, 1971; Gurin & Epps, 1975; Guterbock & London, 1983; Junn & Jenkins, 1997; Shingles, 1981). And, in studies of public opinion, scholars have found that racial identification leads to

greater support for government policies concerning jobs for the unemployed and affirmative action, for example, among African Americans (Tate, 1993).

An implicit comparison, control group, or counterfactual in many of these studies is White Americans, who are largely absent from studies of identity politics.[1] Writing about Whiteness studies has proliferated, although the emphasis is often on class issues (see, for example, Wray & Newitz, 1996), ethnicity (Ignatiev, 1996; Jacobson, 1999; Waters, 1990), or "Whiteness" as a cultural phenomenon (Rasmussen et al., 2001). These studies by and large have not examined the racial identification of ordinary White citizens. The discussion in these works tends to focus on abolishing or deconstructing Whiteness, and how ". . . Whiteness operates as the unmarked norm against which other identities are marked and racialized, the seemingly un-raced center of a racialized world" (Rasmussen, Klinenberg, Nexica, & Wray, 2001, 10). The extensive research on racial context and threat in many ways also uses ideas of White racial identity and mobilization, without mentioning them explicitly. For example, when Key (1949) and Blalock (1967) argue that Whites who live in areas with large numbers of African Americans feel threatened politically, economically, and/or socially and therefore act in racially discriminatory ways, the assumption is that geographic context heightens the salience of Whites' racial identity as a result of the "Black threat." And, in analyses of extremist behavior, scholars have examined White supremacist groups and perpetrators of hate crimes (Green, Abelson, & Garnett, 1999) and the rise in White nationalist groups (Swain, 2002). These works all tend to focus on White identity as a negative force enabling social inequality or maintaining the current racial status quo.

Oddly enough, however, there has been no straightforward, contemporary examination of the racial identity of average White Americans, as a phenomenon comparable to the racial identity of African Americans or Asian Americans.[2] Swain (2002) provides one explanation—albeit in a slightly different context—arguing that there is a double standard on college campuses, such that White student unions, European American organizations, and White pride groups are not publicly acceptable; she believes that multiculturalism encourages the expression of group pride by only certain cultural groups. She writes, ". . . because Whites are the dominant group—at least for now—it is apparently acceptable to seek their cultural extinction and the destruction of any pride and privilege that come with White skin" (2002, 317).[3] Another explanation for a lack of research on White

[1] By "White Americans," we mean non-Hispanic Whites in the United States. For the sake of simplicity, we use the shorthand provided by Hollinger's ethno-racial pentagon of Whites, Blacks, Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans (1995).

[2] As Sears, Hetts, Sidanius, & Bobo write, "Identification with the white ingroup . . . has to date not been much explored . . ." (2000, 36). Feagin and O'Brien (2003) examine the racial identity of Whites, but interviewed only upper-class White men. Perry (2002) interviewed only White high school students in California about their racial identities.

[3] Ignatiev and Garvey, in fact, argue that "treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity" (1996, 10).

identity is that racial identity simply may be less salient for dominant groups in society compared to minority groups (Gurin, 1985); the desire to identify with a high status group may be tempered by a need for "optimal distinctiveness" (Brewer, 1991).

Whether racial identity is (or ought to be) less salient among Whites, a simple study of the racial identity of Whites is needed, at least as a point of comparison. One reason is that if one makes an argument about the concept of *racial* identity, the measurement and study cannot focus on only a select group of races. For example, a study of democracy using only the United States and Russia as cases—no matter how well developed the operationalization and measurement of "democracy"—will lack validity and be limited in its ability to test all of the ramifications of theories attached to the concept. Regardless of how knowledgeable the area studies specialists are about their cases, they need to have a comparative perspective to understand and study the concept of democracy well. In similar ways, a full understanding of the concept of racial identity requires that scholars apply it to *all* racial groups in order to understand when and under what circumstances it behaves differently. We need comparativists, thinking across cases, to balance out the excellent "area studies" experts on Blacks and Latinos, for example.

Another reason why a study of White racial identity is important is that a baseline is needed. According to demographic predictions, non-Hispanic Whites will cease to be the numerical majority group in the United States by 2060. Given previous research on social hierarchy, social identity, and racial threat, it is reasonable to hypothesize that demographic variation that affects Whites' numerical majority status will lead to changes in the salience and centrality of White racial identification (Wong, 2002). Gibson and Gouws's (2000) research on South Africa, for example, points to the importance of understanding the racial identity of *all* groups in society; both numerical and hierarchical statuses play major roles in affecting racial identities and, subsequently, tolerance and the possibility of a successful polyarchy.[4] If scholars wait until White racial identity *seems* politically relevant, we will have missed the opportunity to study how it has changed over time and which factors in particular led to the change. We need to establish a baseline for White racial identification while Whites are still the majority group, so that we will be able to determine in the future *if* racial identification has changed, how much it has changed, and why. In fact, we find that racial identification is already quite common among White Americans.

Obviously, the dissimilar historical and contemporary positions of Whites, Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans are likely to lead to racial and ethnic identity taking different guises, depending on the group in question (Huddy,

[4] In the United States, California, Hawaii, and New Mexico are already "majority minority" states, and there are also other contexts where this is true. For example, in Sidanius, Levin, Van Laar, & Sinclair's (2004) study of organizational memberships and ethnic identities among students, the population they study—the incoming class of 1996 at UCLA—is "majority minority."

2001; Waters, 1990). Nevertheless, if identity refers ". . . in some way to the idea that an individual's self-concept is derived, to some extent and in some sense, from the social relationships and social groups he or she participates in" (Brewer, 2001, 117), this general conceptualization should allow for empirical comparisons of the effects of racial identity.

The first purpose of this article is to examine the level of White racial identification in the United States, the factors that are related to this identity, and the effect White identification has on racial attitudes and policy preferences. Does pro-White, for example, necessarily mean anti-Black?[5] The second purpose of the article is to examine racial identity over time. While looking at White identification patterns over three decades fits the first goal as well, we wonder whether the relationships that racial identification has with demographic factors and political attitudes remain stable over time. Due to resource constraints, it is difficult to obtain large, national samples of African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans for political surveys at regular intervals; while the studies that exist are priceless resources, one is left with uncertainty about whether a particular year was unique in some meaningful way that would affect generalizations from the analyses. The existence of surveys with large samples of Whites and small samples of Blacks asked the same questions over time allows us to address whether conclusions about racial identity drawn from one cross-sectional study are robust.

Social Identity: Conceptualization and Measurement

Social identity is defined in a number of different ways by social scientists: some scholars, for example, simply equate it with group membership, while others view identification as a dynamic process that moves through stages over time. Among social psychologists, social identity emphasizes not only its derivation from group membership, but also the personal meaning associated with that social categorization. Tajfel, for example, defines social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that group membership" (1981, 255). Turner provides a possible rationale for this membership, when he defines social identity as "self-categories that define the individual in terms of his or her shared *similarities* with members of certain social categories in contrast to other social categories" (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994, 454; emphasis added). We use these definitions of identity in this article.

Past experimental work on intergroup relations has made clear that social identity has consequences for attitudes toward outgroup members (Brown, 1986). Sherif (1966) found competition led to ingroup favoritism and outgroup hostility.

[5] This, of course, depends on what "pro-White" entails. In Herring et al. (1999), pro-Black refers to Black identification.

Tajfel and his colleagues then demonstrated that neither competition nor similarity among group members was a necessary requirement for ingroup favoritism, and that arbitrary categorization alone—based on a preference for a particular artist or a random flip of a coin—is enough to trigger intergroup discrimination (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Tajfel, 1981).

Despite these advancements, the translation of social identity theory from experimental work to survey research has not been seamless. Survey researchers have proposed a number of complicated and multidimensional measures of racial identity (Phinney, 1990). For example, Sniderman and Piazza (2002) summarize a number of the measures (and names) used in research on Black identity: shared or linked fate, Black autonomy, solidarity, sense of pride and respect, and Afrocentrism (Dawson, 1994; Gurin, Hatchett, & Jackson, 1989; Herring, Jankowski, & Brown, 1999; Robinson, 1987; Sellers et al., 1998). There are also multistage, dynamic models of identity, such that the process of developing identity is seen as one of gaining self-esteem and pride (Cole, Zucker, & Ostrove, 1998; Helms, 1993). These latter models, developed primarily in counseling psychology, represent the rare theories that address White racial identity explicitly (Behrens, 1997; Carter, 1990; Pope-Davis & Ottavi, 1994; Stoddart, 2002).

One problem with some of the more complicated operationalizations of racial identity is that they preclude comparable measures of White identity, sometimes because the measures are context-dependent, and sometimes because they appear to be *outcomes* of racial identity. It would seem odd (or offensive or scary), for example, to ask respondents whether they were affected by the "White rights movement," whether they feel close to White Scandinavians, and whether "Blacks keep Whites down" in order to measure the racial identity of ordinary White Americans. These, however, are simply questions used to measure Black identity, with "White" substituted for "Black" and "Scandinavian" for "West Indian" (Herring et al., 1999, p. 376). Stage-based models of racial identity are also problematic because of their overt ideological tone; certain attitudes and beliefs are described as indicative of "less mature statuses of racial identity development" (Thompson & Carter, 1997). For example, both a Black man who "acts White" as well as a racist White woman who opposes policies that benefit minorities are considered to have immature or undeveloped senses of racial identity, and that they "experience a myopic and distorted vision of reality" (1997, p. 16). We believe it is preferable to have a measure of racial identification that is independent of its effects, such that we can test whether such relationships exist. Finally, while some of the more complex measures of identity and consciousness are better predictors of group mobilization and political participation than simpler measures of identity, an equally important, if not more interesting, question is when and how an identity *becomes* politicized (Conover, 1984; Jackson, 1987; Miller, Gurin, Gurin, & Malanchuk, 1981; Shingles, 1981).

Even when comparable measures of racial identity seem logically plausible for researchers to ask White respondents—regarding, for example, common fate

with other Whites—these questions have not been asked in surveys. Because we are interested in being able (1) to measure the racial identification of Whites and (2) to compare it to that of racial minorities, we need a metric that is comparable for all groups. We are also interested in a measure that is basic, since there is no previous literature that has established complex and nuanced measures of White racial identity that are also comparable to measures of Black identity, on which the bulk of the research on racial identity focuses. Thus, in this article, we adhere to a simple measure of racial identity: the NES group closeness question. We do not argue that it is the best or most sophisticated measure of racial identity; nonetheless, it has a number of advantages: It has face validity as an indicator of social identity as defined by Tajfel and Turner; it has been asked of White and Black respondents about Whites and Blacks as groups; and thus, it provides the opportunity to add Whites to our understanding of racial identity.

In the next section, we describe the group closeness question and explore the extent of White racial identification, the trends in Whites' identity over time, and the demographic factors related to identification. Throughout the discussion, Black identification serves as a comparison so that we can examine how well previous analyses of (and conclusions about) racial identity travel across cases, and also to provide perspective on how we should interpret our findings about White identity.

Data and Measures

For the analyses that follow, we use National Election Studies data from 1972, 1976, 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, 1996, and 2000 (Burns et al., 2001). The purpose of using multiple datasets is not to analyze the data as a time series (implying that White identity may have fluctuated due to political or social trends in the country), but to use the eight datasets as opportunities for replication and tests of the reliability of any one year's results. Because we are interested in Whites' racial identity compared to Blacks', the analyses are restricted to the White and Black respondents only; the sample sizes range from about 1200 to 1900 for Whites and from about 150 to 260 for Blacks, depending on the year.[6]

We use the "group closeness" item to measure racial identity. The question wording for the closed-ended "group closeness" item is almost the same in 2000 as it was in 1972, when the question was first asked to measure respondents' affinity to various groups in society.[7] Except for small grammatical changes (e.g., changing the format from a question to a statement), respondents have been asked the following over the past three decades:

[6] These numbers refer to those White and Black respondents who answered the question used to measure racial identity. In 2000, we only analyzed the face-to-face interviews for comparability with previous years (Bowers & Ensley, 2003); there were approximately 550 Whites and 70 Blacks in the face-to-face sample.

[7] For discussions of the validity of the group closeness item as a measure of group identity, see Conover (1987), Lau (1989), and Wong (1998).

Table 1. White Identifiers and Black Identifiers

Year	White Identification	Black Identification
1972	42%	84%
1976	50	81
1980	49	87
1984	65	86
1988	41	78
1992	45	84
1996	43	76
2000	75	86

Data: National Election Studies. 2000 data are from face-to-face respondents only.

> Please read over the list [in the booklet] and tell me the number for those groups you feel particularly close to—people who are most like you in their ideas and interests and feelings about things.

The list (and number) of groups has varied over the years, but Whites and Blacks have always been included in the list.[8] In the following discussions, we will refer to individuals who feel a psychological attachment or closeness to their ingroup as "group identifiers," those who fit the definition of social identity laid out by Tajfel.

The first question that arises is whether there are any White identifiers and how many we might expect to find. If White identification is simply a measure of racism, then we might anticipate low numbers, either out of optimism or because social desirability would be a factor. If we think racial identity is simply not salient for Whites, then we would also expect the numbers to be low. However, according to social identity theory, a fairly large percentage of Whites should identify with their race because it is a high status group.

Table 1 presents the percentages of Whites who are White identifiers and the percentage of Blacks who are Black identifiers from 1972 to 2000. This table shows that the level of racial identification remains relatively stable over time, with a couple exceptions. On average, over half (51%) of the White respondents felt close to Whites. While this level of ingroup identification is lower than that of African Americans—83% on average[9]—a substantial portion of Whites are, nonetheless, racial identifiers, as social identity theory would predict. Regardless of whether White identification currently plays a role in American politics, it is much more common than one might have guessed from the literature on racial identity and the virtual absence of Whites.

[8] For more information on the groups listed and the reliability of the survey item, see Wong (1998).
[9] In the 1984 National Black Election Study, 94% of the respondents said they felt "very" or "fairly close" to Blacks in their "ideas and feelings about things" (Tate, 1993, 24–25).

It should be noted that the apparent increase in identification among Whites in 1984 is not likely a change in race relations (e.g., a result of Jesse Jackson's or Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign); closeness to *all* eighteen of the groups listed increased that year, in comparison to preceding and succeeding years.[10] The large increase in White identification in 2000 is unusual, and this increase in feelings of closeness is not replicated for all other groups that same year. It is possible that the 2000 election was perceived by Whites as racially polarizing, and this led to an increase in their racial identification. However, a quick examination of the question wording and order also indicates that "Whites" is the first group listed in the 2000 battery, which may have led to the surge in White identity.[11] The evidence that White and Black identity do not fluctuate greatly over time supports the hypothesis that variation in intergroup conflict and perceptions of threat—at least of the type witnessed in the United States over the last few decades—do not strongly affect feelings of closeness;[12] this does not, of course, preclude changes in the *salience* of identities and their relationships to policy preferences under varying contexts.

Who are these White identifiers? Previous research on Black identity has examined which respondents are more likely to identify with their race, so here we apply one such model of Black identity to Whites. We also test the robustness of the results by replicating the analyses for each NES survey for the closeness questions from 1972 to 2000. The particular predictors used in the models were chosen because of their significance in predicting Black racial identification (Tate, 1993): age, education, income, gender, and region. Tate's model of racial identity includes a measure of urbanicity, which we roughly try to capture with the measure of population size of the place of interview. She also included a measure of social class identification, which we do not use here. In her analyses of the

[10] On average, across the 17 groups that were included in the "closeness" lists in both 1980 and 1984, feelings of closeness increased by 10% (Wong, 1998). It is possible that the presidential campaigns affected the salience of racial groups, while other factors contributed to the increases in identification with other groups, like environmentalists, businessmen, and women. The increases across the board are *not* due to a unique sampling frame in 1980; while the 1980 and 1984 samples were drawn from different sampling frames, the 1984 and 1988 NES used the same sampling frame (Stoker & Bowers, 2002, 22).

[11] However, being first on the list does not always result in an increase in feelings of closeness. Question wording and mode can also affect responses: the 1996 General Social Survey carried a similar question with a shorter prelude and a 9-point scale, and a much larger number of respondents said they felt close to Whites than respondents in the 1996 NES. Furthermore, respondents who are read a list over the phone answer differently from those who have a card with a list of groups in front of them during a face-to-face interview (Wong, 1998). In 2000, of the White NES phone interviewees (for whom the order of the groups listed was randomized), 93% said they felt close to Whites. Across all 17 groups listed in the closeness question, there was a 29% increase in feelings of closeness between the face-to-face and phone interviews. Finally, it is impossible to determine if this increase in the 2000 NES represents a trend; the "closeness" questions are only asked in presidential election years, so we cannot look at White identification in the 2002 NES.

[12] Feelings of closeness to groups (including racial and nonracial ones) generally do not fluctuate greatly over time (see Wong, 1998). Again, this is in the context of the United States in the last 30 years.

1984 National Black Election Study, the responses ranged from "poor" to "upper class," but in the National Election Studies surveys, the response options only range from "average working" to "upper middle." Furthermore, in analyses of the "group closeness" question, Wong (1998) found that while a majority of Americans feel close to middle-class people, closeness to this group is one of the least reliable over time (compared to other groups, like conservatives or women).[13]

Table 2 shows that, in different years, the predictors we drew from Tate have different effects on identification, and these predictors are rarely significant (substantively and statistically). For example, the sign for the effects of region and population size changes over the years. The models indicate that younger respondents *tend* to be more likely to be White identifiers (i.e., in six out of the eight years, the coefficient for age is negative). For people with the probability of feeling close to Whites equal to .50 (i.e., they are equally likely to feel close to Whites or not close to them), for example, the estimated effect of being in the youngest age category (18 to 24 years old), compared to the oldest (85+), is 16.8 percentage points in 1996. Gender and education also seem to be related to identification occasionally, such that female and better-educated Whites are more likely to express racial identification than male and less-educated respondents. The positive coefficients for education are worth pointing out, because they reinforce the idea that White identification is not synonymous to White supremacy; the better educated are more racially tolerant (Kinder & Sanders, 1996), *and* they are also more likely to express their racial identification.[14]

The picture of who the Black identifiers are, drawn from Table 3, does not look like that portrayed by previous work. The only factor that has a relatively consistent effect (i.e., the sign of the coefficient does not change from year to year) is education. Although its effect is not always discernible from zero, the better educated respondents seem to be more likely to express a racial identification. Age, income, region, gender, and local population size have no consistent relationship with Black identification. In contrast, using the 1984 NBES, Tate (1993) found that among African-American respondents, men, the better educated, and members of the lower class were more likely to identify racially. It should be noted, of course, that Tate analyzed over 700 respondents, and her measure for Black identification combines questions about closeness, salience of race, and common fate. Nevertheless, the NBES and 1984 NES were both based on national samples, and the coefficients do not at all tell a similar story;[15] the results of the analyses of Black respondents *across* the NES studies also do not show consistent findings.

[13] The variables in our analyses have all been recoded to run 0 to 1. Population is ln (population size of place of interview).

[14] However, see the work of Federico and Sidanius (2002) for an alternative interpretation of the effect of education.

[15] It is, of course, possible that predictors of race salience and common fate are more consistent, but there are no data available to test these relationships over time.

Table 2. Who are the White Identifiers?

	1972		1976		1980		1984		1988		1992		1996		2000	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
age	.11	.20	−.30	.21	−.63**	.25	−.71**	.23	−.72**	.24	−.98**	.25	−.70**	.24	.31	.44
income	.16	.21	.02	.20	.04	.25	−.24	.22	.77**	.24	.60*	.26	.05	.25	.85	.68
South	.36**	.11	.08	.13	−.03	.14	−.08	.14	−.12	.14	.08	.16	.01	.13	−.18	.25
education	.38#	.20	.29	.22	.29	.26	.82**	.25	.36	.25	.12	.28	.26	.27	.00	.50
gender	.10	.10	.18#	.11	.14	.12	.13	.11	.19#	.11	.16	.13	−.15	.12	−.30	.21
population	−.03	.02	−.02	.02	−.05#	.03	−.02	.03	−.01	.03	.04	.03	.04	.03	.01	.05
constant	−.67	.19	−.13	.19	.07	.25	.57**	.21	−.75**	.22	−.50*	.25	−.19	.25	.82*	.42
n	1,871		1,489		1,091		1,495		1,350		1,101		1,196		464	
log likelihood	−1,264.40		−1,027.56		−748.48		−953.44		−897.99		−742.99		−809.75		−265.70	

Data: National Election Studies, white respondents only. bs reported are logit coefficients. **p < .01, *p < .05, #p < .10.

Table 3. Who are the Black Identifiers?

	1972		1976		1980		1984		1988		1992		1996		2000	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
age	−.41	.85	−.26	1.11	1.84	1.20	−1.91*	.88	.41	.85	.72	.92	−2.18*	.95	1.56	2.05
income	−.67	.98	2.81*	1.24	2.43*	1.21	.35	.94	−1.23	.80	−1.35	.95	−.66	.90	1.98	4.91
South	.19	.50	1.65**	.62	−1.14#	.62	.02	.52	.22	.42	−.15	.42	−.02	.49	−1.37	1.34
education	.43	.82	.29	1.23	.60	1.34	.33	.99	2.69**	1.01	1.62	1.01	.77	1.13	1.33	2.28
gender	−.10	.41	.01	.52	−.31	.60	.00	.46	−.69	.44	.01	.44	.09	.45	−.99	1.05
population	.04	.07	.22*	.10	.13	.12	.09	.10	−.12	.08	−.09	.10	−.11	.09	.34#	.20
constant	1.71#	.90**	−.89	1.12	.41	1.12	1.84*	.91	1.51#	.80	1.90*	.89	2.60*	1.03	1.04	1.91
n	202		152		143		185		193		202		148		58	
log likelihood	−89.22		−65.05		−46.44		−72.27		−93.59		−82.84		−71.11		−16.42	

Data: National Election Studies, black respondents only. bs reported are logit coefficients. **p < .01, *p < .05, #p < .10.

Although the analyses presented in Tables 2 and 3 were intended to apply findings of previous work on racial identity to Whites, they have ended up raising more questions than providing answers. There is little reason to assume that the composition of who identifies should change from year to year, especially if a constant proportion of the population at the aggregate level are identifiers. These data, however, do not allow us to discern if identification is more a result of contact or context—political, economic, or geographic—rather than the demographic characteristics in the models presented. For example, young White Americans may feel closer to Whites than their elders because of the segregated conditions of schools (Schmitt, 2001), or because racial identity changes through the life stages (Helms, 1993).

From the varying results that arise from the analysis of the eight national surveys, there is little support for a simple model of racial identification used in previous research, as applied to either Blacks or Whites. These results do indicate, however, that researchers should be wary of generalizing about the predictors of racial identity from analyses of any one cross-sectional dataset, regardless of the racial group in question. In other words, it is not good that race politics scholars must rely on a rare handful of national surveys conducted of African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans, however valuable they are. We need to be careful about generalizing beyond the context in which a survey was conducted, and for the study of racial politics to advance, we need to have more racial identity measures asked regularly of all racial groups.

The Relationships between Racial Identification and Racial Attitudes

Previous research on Black identity clearly indicates that identification is linked to feeling favorably toward Blacks, but this literature does not provide much guidance for developing expectations about White identity. Does White identification go hand in hand with positive feelings toward Whites and negative feelings toward Blacks—as one might expect, given social identity theory, or if one thought White identity were a measure of racism—or will it have little substantive effect despite its common expression—as one might assume, given its absence from the study of racial identity? In this section, we examine the relationships between identification and three measures of racial attitudes to determine if there is a correlation between closeness to a group and warm feelings toward that group (recognizing that the direction of causality is difficult, if not impossible, to determine).[16] The three racial attitudes we look at are group affect, stereotypes, and symbolic racism.

The standard measure for affect in the National Election Studies is the feeling thermometer, which asks respondents to rate a group on a scale from 0 to 100.

[16] Herring et al. (1999) also argue that the "closeness" measures actually tap both affect and cognition.

Since we are interested in the effects of both White and Black identification, we regressed the feeling thermometer for Whites on racial identification and the set of demographic controls mentioned earlier—age, education, income, gender, region, and population size. We then regressed the Black feeling thermometer on the same predictors among Blacks.[17]

The first row of Table 4 shows that White identifiers feel about five degrees warmer toward Whites than nonidentifiers. Black identifiers also feel more warmly toward African Americans—on average, about six degrees warmer—than Black nonidentifiers (Table 4, second row).[18] In other words, White and Black identification behave in very similar ways in their relationships with ingroup affect.

The relationship between racial identification and outgroup affect, however, is quite different than for ingroup affect, and this is true for both Whites and Blacks. As shown in Table 5, White identification does not have much effect on feelings about Blacks, and Black identification does not affect feelings about Whites. On average, White identifiers feel two degrees cooler toward Blacks than nonidentifiers, and Black identifiers feel three degrees cooler toward Whites than nonidentifiers, although the effect bounces back and forth between positive and negative affect; for most years, the effect of identification is indistinguishable from zero.

Other racial attitude measures are not available for the same time span as the feeling thermometers. However, for the years available, we examined the relationship between racial identity and stereotypes of one's ingroup and outgroup (asking whether group members tend to be hardworking, intelligent, and trustworthy) and symbolic racism. Tables 6, 7, and 8 show a similar pattern for White identification and racial attitudes: compared to nonidentifiers, White identifiers have more positive stereotypes of Whites, they have slightly less positive stereotypes of Blacks, and they are a little more likely to express symbolic racism. Black identification appears to have little effect on stereotypes (and again, the coefficients switch signs), although identifiers are much less likely to express symbolic racism than Blacks who do not identify with their race.[19]

From social identity theory, one might have hypothesized that White identification would be strongly related to negative attitudes about African Americans, but this is not the case. This finding supports work by Herring et al. (1999), which

[17] Although it is common practice to norm the feeling thermometer scores in order to standardize scale usage across respondents (Wilcox, Sigelman, & Cook, 1989), we did not want to regress a differenced score (e.g., White FT-Black FT) on the closeness items; we wanted to see the direct relationship between ingroup identification and group affect. We did, however, also rerun our models using the differenced score; the substantive conclusions remain the same.

[18] To put this in perspective, the average standard deviation for these ingroup feeling thermometer scores is 18 and 17 degrees for Whites and Blacks, respectively.

[19] Of course, the concept of symbolic racism was not developed to travel across groups using the same measures; therefore, it is not clear what the meaning of the symbolic racism scale is for Black respondents.

Table 4. Affect Toward Ingroup (Each row is a separate model)[&]

	1972		1976		1980		1984		1988		1992		1996		2000	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
White Identification	.05**	.01	.06**	.01	.08**	.01	.02[#]	.01	.05**	.01	.05**	.01	.05**	.01	.02	.02
Black Identification	.06**	.02	.04	.03	.07[#]	.04	.09*	.05	.06[#]	.03	.06[#]	.03	.02	.04	.05	.09

Table 5. Affect Toward Outgroup (Each row is a separate model)[&]

	1972		1976		1980		1984		1988		1992		1996		2000	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
White Identification	−.01	.01	−.02**	.01	.00	.01	−.01	.01	−.01	.01	−.02[#]	.01	−.01	.01	−.06**	.02
Black Identification	−.02	.04	.03	.05	.01	.05	.10*	.04	−.03	.04	.00	.04	−.02	.04	−.16*	.07

Table 6. Stereotypes of Ingroup (Each row is a separate model)[&]

	1992		1996		2000	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
White Identification	.03**	.01	.04**	.01	.05**	.02
Black Identification	.06[#]	.03	−.01	.04	−.01	.08

Table 7. Stereotypes of Outgroup (Each row is a separate model)[&]

	1992		1996		2000	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
White Identification	−.02*	.01	−.02*	.01	−.01	.02
Black Identification	.02	.03	−.05	.05	−.05	.07

Table 8. Symbolic Racism (Each row is a separate model)[&]

	1988		1992		2000	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
White Identification	.00	.01	−.04**	.01	−.05*	.02
Black Identification	.16**	.04	.11**	.04	.27**	.09

[&]Data: National Election Studies. Controls for age, income, region, education, gender, and population size were included in all of these models. High scores indicate positive affect, low levels of stereotyping, and low levels of symbolic racism.
**$p < .01$, *$p < .05$, [#]$p < .10$.

finds that among Blacks, identifiers do not necessarily have much more negative attitudes about Whites than nonidentifiers; the converse also appears to be true. White identification instead leads to warmer feelings toward Whites, much as how Black identification leads to warmer feelings toward Blacks. What is perhaps most surprising from these results is that White and Black identity are so similar in how they relate to ingroup and outgroup affect; in these situations, theories of racial identity travel across cases quite well.

The Effect of White and Black Identification on Policy Attitudes

Even if racial identification is related to racial attitudes, irrespective of racial group, does White identification have *political* effects? Past research has shown that racial identification can affect attitudes about public policies, but most of this work has concerned Black identification. The question we address in this section

is whether racial identification behaves similarly for Whites as it does for Blacks. One might expect White and Black racial identification to have the same type of political effects, given their similarity with respect to racial attitudes, but there are two additional factors. First, even if racial identity leads to a desire to benefit one's ingroup, are Whites helped, hurt, or unaffected *as a group* by the same type of policies that affect Blacks as a group? Whites could see government aid to minorities, for example, as detrimental to Whites simply because it benefits the outgroup; they could see it negatively because any aid that does not go to the ingroup hurts the ingroup in a zero sum world; or they could believe aid to minorities is irrelevant to their concerns. The second factor that could affect whether White identity will behave like Black identity is whether the former has the same type of political importance that the latter does, independent of whether Whites express a racial identity or not.

We test whether White identifiers express different attitudes than nonidentifiers about four public policies, two that explicitly deal with race—aid to minorities and Civil Rights progress—and two that concern race-neutral social welfare—government guaranteed jobs and spending for services. We run the same models for Black identification for the sake of comparison.[20]

As Tables 9a–d show—controlling for respondents' party identification, ideology, and the same personal characteristics as for the previous tables—White identification tended to have little impact on these policy preferences, regardless of whether the question focused on race or not. Even when the effect of White identity could be distinguished from zero, it was not large. The overall direction of the effects for White identification, however, indicated that a racial identifier is slightly more likely than a nonidentifier to oppose government programs and believe Civil Rights leaders were pushing too quickly. Nevertheless, what is clear from these analyses is that White identification has very little power to predict preferences about policies directed at African Americans.

Black identity has a greater effect on political attitudes than White identity. Tables 9a and b show that Black identifiers tend to be more supportive of government aid to minorities than nonidentifiers; identification also leads one to believe that Civil Rights leaders are not pushing too quickly. These results are consistent with previous literature on the effects of Black identity. In comparing the results from Tables 9a and b to Tables 9c and d, it is not surprising that policies that are race-neutral on their face would be less strongly influenced by Black identity than policies that explicitly address racial inequities. However, government spending and welfare-type programs have been linked to racial attitudes (Gilens, 1999), and while White identification has no relationship with these

[20] See the appendix for question wordings; the dependent variables range from "liberal" to "conservative."

Table 9a. Aid to Minorities/Blacks (Each row is a separate model)[&]

	1972		1976		1980		1984		1988a		1988b		1992		1996		2000	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
White Identification	.03[#]	.02	.00	.02	.02	.02	−.01	.02	.03	.02	.01	.02	.04*	.02	.01	.02	.07*	.03
Black Identification	−.15*	.07	−.02	.10	−.09	.16	.00	.08	−.27*	.11	−.09	.15	−.20*	.09	.00	.09	−.49[#]	.25

Table 9b. Pace of Civil Rights Leaders' Actions (Each row is a separate model)[&]

	1972		1976		1980		1984		1988		1992	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
White Identification	.01	.02	.01	.02	.04*	.02	.00	.02	.06**	.02	.02	.02
Black Identification	.08	.08	−.10	.10	−.14	.15	−.11	.09	.04	.08	−.15[#]	.08

Table 9c. Government Guaranteed Job and Standard of Living (Each row is a separate model)[&]

	1972		1976		1980		1984		1988		1992		1996		2000	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
White Identification	.02	.02	−.04*	.02	.03	.02	−.01	.02	.02	.02	.03	.02	−.01	.02	−.02	.03
Black Identification	.15*	.07	−.04	.10	−.47*	.20	−.04	.08	−.11	.09	−.03	.09	.15	.09	−.41	.25

Table 9d. Spending/ Services (Each row is a separate model)[&]

	1984		1988		1992		1996		2000	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
White Identification	.00	.02	.03[#]	.02	−.01	.02	−.03*	.01	.00	.03
Black Identification	−.21*	.09	.05	.07	−.16*	.08	−.08	.08	−.07	.23

[&]Data: National Election Studies. Controls for age, income, region, education, gender, and population size were included in all of these models. Party ID and ideology were also added as controls for the models in Tables 9a–d.
**p < .01, *p < .05, [#]p < .10.

policy preferences, Black identity is related to greater support for these government programs sporadically over the time period covered.

Therefore, despite social identity theories about ingroups and outgroups that would link White identification with negative attitudes toward Blacks' interests, we find little such evidence. We do, however, find confirming evidence that Black identification tends to be related to support for policies that benefit African Americans. Therefore, despite the similarity of racial identification for Whites and Blacks with respect to ingroup and outgroup attitudes, White identification plays a different and much smaller role when it comes to political beliefs.

Conclusion

About half of American Whites feel a sense of racial identity. So, while Whites are absent from discussions of the concept, it is a common identity, albeit less prevalent among Whites than among Blacks.[21] The analyses in Tables 2 and 3, however, do not provide a clear answer to the question of who is more likely to express closeness to their ingroup. The results in the tables neither replicated previous research using a similar model, nor did they remain consistent over time; the story appears to change from year to year. In 1996, for example, young people were more like to express White identity, while in 1972, educated Southerners were the most likely to be White identifiers. Race relations in the United States have evolved over the last three decades, but it is not obvious that the picture should change so abruptly every four years. The actual level of racial identification does not fluctuate much over time, and it is a very unlikely possibility that the same proportion of Whites racially identify over time while the motivations behind identification shift. It is more likely that we do not yet have the right model for racial identity.

The results from these analyses of eight cross-sections also raise a concern about previous works that rely on one-shot surveys and conclude that a certain few variables are *the* significant predictors of racial identification. In studying predispositions and attitudes of White Americans, there is an abundance of data from numerous surveys. However, surveys of African Americans' political attitudes are infrequent, and studies with random samples of Latinos and Asian Americans are even rarer. Scholars do not often have the luxury of testing the robustness of their findings with another dataset, yet the results we present here indicate that even with large samples over time, the results of a simple model of racial identity could not be replicated. This is rather sobering news for racial politics scholars, for

[21] It is also less central for Whites than Blacks. From 1972 to 1992, a follow-up to the group closeness question was asked about to which group respondents felt closest. Among African Americans, 34% chose Blacks as their closest group on average; among White respondents, 4% chose Whites as their closest group.

whom surveys like the National Black Election Studies, the Latino National Political Study, and the Pilot National Asian American Political Survey are invaluable resources. However, it does provide additional support for the argument that more frequent surveys of racial minority groups need to occur, either as separate studies, or as sufficiently large oversamples of other survey series.

Another interpretation of our results is that White racial identity is not politically salient, and it may be more sensitive to the political environment than Black identity. The identity exists and is related to ingroup attitudes, but it has yet to become a politicized identity. If White identity is indeed unstable but easily triggered, the danger is that a demagogue could influence the salience of these identities to promote negative outgroup attitudes, link racial identification more strongly to policy preferences, and exacerbate group conflict.

We do find that racial identity influences racial attitudes in similar ways for Whites and Blacks: White identification leads to more positive feelings toward Whites and slightly cooler feelings toward Blacks, while Black identification leads to much more positive feelings toward Blacks and has no consistent effect on affect towards Whites. This confirms the validity of the closeness items, and contradicts the notion that the closeness responses for Whites are nonattitudes, chosen by about half the respondents each year, but with little content or understanding.

Despite the large numbers of White respondents who express a racial identity, and the confirmation of the measure's validity, closeness to Whites has very little effect on policy preferences. The limited effect of White identification may be due to the fact that Whites' group interest is not activated for the policies examined.[22] We do not have measures for the role that group interests played in policy attitudes for these data, but it is also possible that racial identity currently has very little significance in the political lives of White Americans, regardless of the policy. The question of whether White identity has political effects cannot be fully resolved, given existing data.

The conceptual importance of White identity, however, is clear. We have shown how it can play an important role in the study of racial identity. By adding this case to the research, we are better able to understand how our theories travel, and under what circumstances racial identity behaves in different ways. Finally, we have established a baseline for the racial identity of Whites at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a century during which they are projected to become a minority group in this country.

[22] Stoker shows that even for affirmative action policies, Whites do not necessarily perceive a conflict of interest between Whites and Blacks. She also finds that "whites' concern for blacks' interests is largely contingent on the happenstance of shared interests" (1996, 27).

APPENDIX

Question Wording for Policy Preferences

National Election Study 1972–2000

Aid to Blacks/Minorities

1972–1984, 1988 FORM B:

"Some people feel that the government in Washington should make every possible effort to improve the social and economic position of Blacks and other minority groups (1980: even if it means giving them preferential treatment). Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help minorities because they should help themselves."

1988 FORM A, 1992–2000:

"Some people feel that the government in Washington should make every (prior to 1996 only: possible) effort to improve the social and economic position of Blacks. . . . Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help Blacks because they should help themselves."

ALL YEARS: "Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about it?" (7-point scale shown to R)

Pace of Civil Rights Leaders' Action

"Some say that the civil rights people have been trying to push too fast. Others feel they haven't pushed fast enough. How about you: Do you think that civil rights leaders are trying to push too fast, are going too slowly, or are they moving about the right speed?"

Government Services and Spending

"Some people think the government should provide fewer services even in areas such as health and education in order to reduce spending. Suppose these people are at one end of the scale, at point 1. Other people feel it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. Suppose these people are at the other end, at point 7. And of course, some people have opinions somewhere in between, at points 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6.

Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?"

Government Guaranteed Job/Standard of Living

"Some people feel that the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. . . . Others think the government should just let each person get ahead on his/ their own. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?" (7-point scale shown to R)

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