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Visualizing the Increasing Effect of Racial Resentment on Political Ideology among Whites, 1986 to 2016

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Abstract

The author constructs an over-time coefficient plot to allow visualized evaluation of the role played by indicators of racial resentment on political ideology among Whites since 1986. The visualization makes clear that the role of racial resentment in the formation of political ideology is one that (1) has been a consistently significant factor in U.S. politics for 30 years and (2) was increasing in importance prior to the candidacy of Donald Trump.

Keywords

U.S. politics, racial resentment, visualization, 2016 election

Substantial scholarly and public attention has been paid to characterizing the factors associated with Donald Trump's unlikely path to the White House in 2016, a path notably driven by White voters. A primary feature of this debate has been the question of whether and to what extent economic or racial concerns animated support for Mr. Trump (Morgan 2018). Importantly, most such analyses attend to this debate by focusing on voting behavior alone and use either cross-sectional or two-point change models. Another limitation of this debate is that the consideration of these economic and racial effects is undertaken separately from longer term trends in U.S. political culture.

This debate is well served by considering a different dimension of our politics, namely, political identity. There exists a robust literature establishing the centrally (and increasingly) identitarian nature of our politics and an emerging signal that political ideology is at least as much an expression of identity as an expression of principles (Mason 2018). Recent research has also established that racial attitudes in general and racial resentment in particular play an important role in the formation of partisan attachments, policy attitudes, voting behavior, and other measures of political behavior, a relationship that has grown significantly since the election of Barack Obama in 2008 (Tesler 2016; Tuch and Hughes 2011). However, researchers have yet to characterize the relationship between racial resentment and political identity, as measured by political ideology, across time.

It is important to attend to this question visually given that over the past 30 years, U.S. political culture has undergone substantial and important changes, and any recent developments must be placed into that context. Using the four measures of racial resentment included since 1986 (the first year in which they were available) in the American National Election Survey, Figure 1 represents the weight of each attitude's effect on expressed political ideology among Whites, net of a range of controls.[1]

The graph tells a compelling story, one that echoes research documenting the increasing racialization of U.S. politics. First, racial resentment has been a consistently significant force in U.S. politics, net of other factors, for at least 30 years. Consistent with previous research, there is a notable spike in this association in 1994, perhaps attributable to partisan realignment and the racialization of opposition to President Clinton (Sears, Valentino, and Cheleden 1999). Second, the recent increase in the role of racial resentment in political identity long preceded the emergence of Donald Trump. That increase is more rightly situated concurrently with the election of Barack Obama in 2008.

[1]Controls include change in economic status, partisanship, age, gender, income, region (South), and education.

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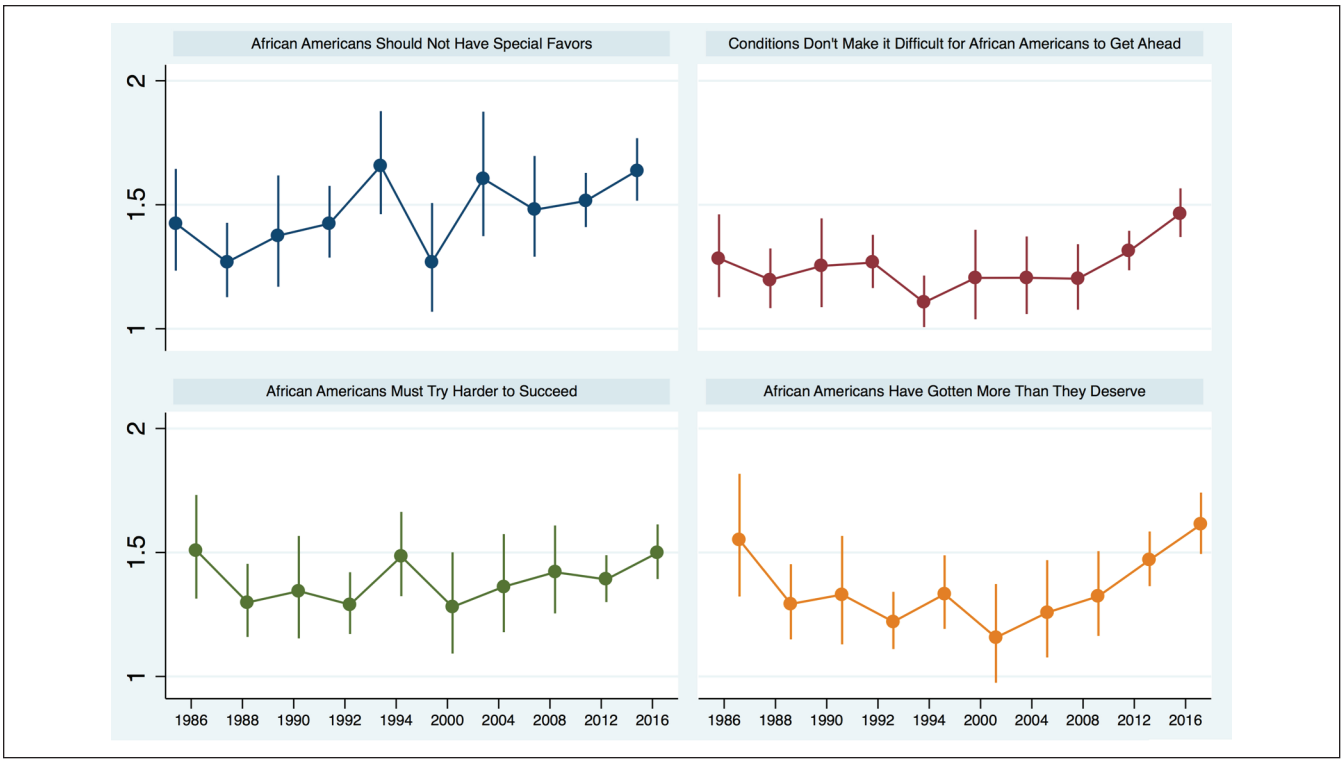


Figure 1. The effect of racial resentment on political ideology among whites, 1986 to 2016.
Note: Effects are presented as odds ratios. All models control for partisanship, change in economic status, income, age, gender, education, and region (South or non-South).

This graph suggests, among other things, that what it means to identify with the liberal or conservative "team" for U.S. Whites is increasingly bound up with one's racial politics. Even after considering economic measures, political ideology is increasingly driven by racial resentment in the modern United States. The trend represented in this graph invites troubling questions in an increasingly racially diverse society that is also riven by growing political polarization.

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Ryan Jerome LeCount is an assistant professor of sociology at Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. He studies the ways racial attitudes and identity structure political attitudes and behavior among Whites in the United States. His recent work has also included analyses of the racialization of criminal justice policy attitudes and practices, as well as the correlates and consequences of gun policy attitudes in the United States.