

Study suggests the reason many white Americans support Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election

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Brenda Major. Credit: Sonia Fernandez

In this election year of unprecedented acrimony, one of the most polarizing issues of all is rooted in what's typically considered a national strength: diversity.

But as it turns out, according to UC Santa Barbara psychologist Brenda Major, not all Americans value the country's multicultural ethos.

"Many whites are feeling very threatened by the increasing ethnic and racial diversification of America," explained Major, a professor in UCSB's Department of Psychological & Brain Sciences who specializes in social identity. "Donald Trump understands that, feels their same

angst and plays to it. The threat of diversity among white Americans who highly identify with their ethnicity is playing a key role in shaping this year's presidential contest."

To explore that idea, Major designed an experiment to demonstrate how the changing racial demographics of America are contributing to Trump's success as a presidential candidate among white Americans. The findings appear in the journal [Group Processes & Intergroup Relations](#).

While previous studies have shown that reminding white Americans about increasing racial diversification of the country makes them identify as more politically conservative, none of those studies had considered whether the degree to which the participants identified with their white ethnicity made a difference. That's where Major decided to focus her spotlight.

In March 2016, 594 white U.S. residents participated in a "Brief Study on Perceptions and Beliefs." They were asked to read one of two randomly assigned press releases. The first indicated that racial minorities would outnumber whites in the U.S. in about 25 years; the other used similar language to explain that geographic mobility is increasing.

Participants then answered questions about perceived threats to the status of their group, their support for the Republican and Democratic primary candidates, anti-immigration attitudes, support for anti-bias norms in speech ("political correctness") and how important their ethnicity was to them.

An analysis of their answers showed white Americans whose ethnic identity was important to their self-concept became more supportive of Trump after reading the article about increasing racial diversity vs. the

article about geographical mobility. This was true regardless of political party affiliation.

"If you're white and you're highly identified with your ethnicity, reminding you of increasing diversity moves you toward Trump, turns you against anti-bias norms and makes you endorse anti-immigrant policies more," Major said, "whether you are Democrat or Republican."

Why does this happen? Because reminding highly identified white Americans of increasing racial diversity caused them to become more concerned about the declining status and influence of their group. This threat to group status, in turn, led to more pro-Trump, anti-immigrant and anti-PC attitudes.

Noting the nuances revealed by the data, Major added: "Not everyone reacted the same to the diversity message. While highly identified white people became more pro-Trump after reading about increasing diversity, for those less identified with their ethnicity, we found the opposite effect. Reminding them of increasing [diversity](#) made them more against Trump and more supportive of anti-bias norms."

For Major, the findings underscore the importance of identity politics—the tendency of people to adopt political positions based on the interests of social groups with which they identify, such as race, gender or religion.

"I predict that [white](#) identity politics will be on the stage more and more and become a larger part of the political discourse in the United States in the coming years," Major said.

Provided by University of California - Santa Barbara

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