

Title: Ashley Jardina, White Identity Politics
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Transcript

Chris Martin: My guest today is Ashley Jardina, Professor of Political Science at Duke University. In her new book, *White identity Politics*, she describes how she found contrasting attitudes between White people in America who identify with their race and White people who don't. She also explains how previous generations of political scientists have been mistaken in conflating the issue of racial prejudice and the issue of identity when explaining the politics of White Americans.

So your book, *White Identity Politics* defines some of the conventional wisdom and the social sciences about Whites and their identity. Tell me a bit about that.

Ashley Jardina: Right. So most of these existing social science work and I think a lot of the lay-work, the way that just sort of everyday people think about whiteness and White identity is that that it's invisible. The Whites don't really have to think about their race and they don't think about their race certainly in the way that we might expect racial and ethnic minorities to think about it. And probably the reason for that is that as the dominant group in society, as the group that holds the disproportionate share of economic and social and political resources, Whites have the advantage of not having to necessarily think about their race.

Actually, the metaphor that people use a lot is that just as fish don't see water, Whites don't see race. And so, the conventionalism of identifying race is this idea of invisibility. And what my book is doing and what I do in the book and what my research suggests is that that might be true sometimes but that in today's political environment, because of increasing diversity in the United States and other factors like the election of the nation's first Black president, Whites are now increasingly thinking about themselves as White and that this identity is politically consequential and those political consequences are I think growing.

Chris Martin: So you started this research about 8 years ago when you're doing your PhD at the University in Michigan. Is that correct?

Ashley Jardina: That's right. I corrected my first survey data on White identity with my adviser in 2010.

Chris Martin: And one of the things you found among other things is that there's a distinction between White identity and racial resentment which some people may have expected to find. So can you elaborate on that distinction?

Ashley Jardina: Yeah, absolutely. So the existing work in social psychology makes this distinction between the attitudes that people hold toward their in-groups and the attitudes that they hold toward out-groups. And for a long time when we studied White racial attitudes, we've

been very much focused on these out-group attitudes. We studied racial resentment and we studied White racial prejudice.

But we haven't really thought a lot about White in-group attitudes and very much for the reasons that I just mentioned, the idea that this attitude are likely invisible and if they did exist, they probably didn't really amounted for Whites, how Whites saw the world, or at least how they saw the political world.

And so, I started asking, well, maybe Whites do think about the race sometimes and under what conditions might they think about their race? And what I find is that there are a number of Whites who do identify as being White and those Whites are not necessarily the same Whites who also hold high levels of prejudice. So, lots of White people in the United States who have some degree of racial resentment or some degree of racial prejudice who don't identify as being white. And there are many weighted identifiers who don't hold high levels of racial prejudice.

Chris Martin: And tell me a little bit about how you picked this as your dissertation topic?

Ashley Jardina: So it was a combination I think of two things. One is that I was thinking a lot about Southern identity and what it meant to have a Southern identity. I think the law of social scientists are often attracted to thinking about the south, particularly people who might spend some time there, who grew up there I like I did.

And so, as I was playing around with this idea of what it meant to have Southern identity, I was thinking a lot about race and a lot about whiteness. But I was also working with a number of scholars who were experts on White racial attitudes and these are the people who had spent a lot of time feeding about White racial prejudice. But part of our job as social scientist is to push back on a lot of existing. Just think about what that work had missed.

And so, in the midst, upbringing and social psychological work on in-groups and out-groups and I'm thinking about White racial prejudice and thinking about Southern identity and whiteness and the combination of those things got me wondering, "Well, do Whites have a racial identity in the way that racial ethnic minorities do? Do you think about their race in that way ever? And if so, when?"

Chris Martin: It's interesting. I had sociology professor who said that the three cardinal rules of sociology are that everything matters a little, nothing matters a lot and everything is different in the South.

And when it comes to the South and why the identity in the South, I mean the South is a unique place for a lot of reasons. It was part of the Confederacy. In your initial explorations, did you pay more attention to the distinction between the South and the rest of the country?

Ashley Jardina: I did. And initially, I expected to find that levels of White identity were higher in the South. They might actually be. It turns out that it's actually hard to get at that with a lot of contemporary public opinion data in parts because there's a difference between living in the

South and having been socialized in the South. And oftentimes, on public opinion surveys, we simply ask people where do you live? We don't ask them, where did you grow up and how long have you spent in any particular place?

And so, I think the jury is still out on whether people who were born and raised in the South have higher levels of White identity but I'm not able to really pick that up with a lot of the survey data that I do have.

Chris Martin: I see. So who is a White identifier based on your data?

Ashley Jardina: Yeah. This is a great question. So I think a lot of people have this expectation that someone high on White identity is a White working class man. And it turns out that that's really not the profile of a White identifier. In part, because White identifiers are found across the socio-economic spectrum. It's not the case that men identify more as White than women do. In fact, I often find across my surveys that it's the opposite. Women are more – slightly more likely to identify as White than men. I don't want to overstate that. It's not a dramatic difference but it's nevertheless a notable one.

The thing that distinguishes people who have a high level of White identity from those who score lower on my identity measure is that they tend to be people who have lower levels of education particularly those who didn't go to college.

There's also I think in keeping probably with kind of the way expectations, some relationship between having grown-up all living in a rural part of the country compared to the more urban part of the country. But Whites who identify as White look a lot like sort of just most White people. They own homes. They don't have incomes really below the medium. They're sort of right in the medium income in the United States. They are not people who are more likely to be unemployed. They are not people who report being especially economically vulnerable to the extent that there is some relationship with occupation. It's kind of hard to untangle that from education.

So they are less likely to hold sort of professional or managerial jobs. They are more likely to be situated in jobs that we might consider working class slightly. It's not the overwhelming percentage. But that's also the case of people who tend to have lower levels of education.

And so, it's not clear that being a working class person for example is what drives someone to adapt to high level of White identity and it's certainly the case that there are many Whites who are of higher socio-economic status and who have more professional jobs or jobs that might require a college degree who also have high levels of White identity.

Chris Martin: I want to get more into the education issue but before we past the issue, the questions – tell me about the questions you used to measure White identity.

Ashley Jardina: So I use a series of questions but the one that I most commonly turn to and that I find is more frequently available across public opinion surveys is very straightforward. I simply

ask Whites, to what extent do you think is being White important to your identity? And when I ask that question on nationally about percentage of surveys, I find that about 30-40% of Whites say that their identity is very if not extremely important to them.

Chris Martin: So when it comes to education and people who received a formal education are obviously different in a number of ways. One of which is that because colleges tend to be more diverse in especially small towns, if you received an education, you definitely have a little more contact with people of different races. Of course, that depends on the size of the college or university you went to. But there's a likelihood there.

So is there some difference between White identifiers who have a college education or a graduate degree and Whites who don't?

Ashley Jardina: That's a great question. So I don't – for the most part, I don't find major differences. I mean at the end of that measure, there are surely Whites probably ones who went to college who adapts what some people would call a more progressive White identity. These are people who indicate that being White is important to their identity because they feel like they have a degree of privilege or even advantage as a result of being White. And they find that sort of problematic. It's part of the same set of attitudes that may lead the same White people to worry a lot about racial equality to want a more racially egalitarian society.

The same thing – what's interesting though is that a lot of people who have those very beliefs would also indicate that their identity isn't very important to them. And so, it's – to some extent, a kind of noisy measure but I should say that the Whites who possess those particular receptive attitudes are very small relative to the population. So there aren't a lot of White people who are really thinking about race in that way.

Chris Martin: And even though there's a lot of diversity among people who identify as white, you did find that being White was a very good predictor of voting for Romney and voting for Trump. Isn't that right?

Ashley Jardina: Yup, absolutely.

Chris Martin: So tell me a bit about how you think Donald Trump was more successful than any other candidates on the Republican primary in 2016 based on his appeal to White identity? Because even though you started this research in 2010, you get into that in the latter half of your book.

Ashley Jardina: So Donald Trump was particularly strategic when it comes to attracting this particular subset of White voters. And so to understand that, you have to understand a little bit more about the policy preferences of the people who are high in White identifier half. So for one thing, White identifiers are adamantly opposed to immigration. They would prefer more restrictive immigration policies. They would significantly prefer lower levels of immigration to United States. And part of the reason for that is that they find that immigrants are a threat to this

dominant White American culture. They are worried about their numerical decline as a result of immigration and subsequent demographic change.

The other thing that White identifiers really like policies that they feel like are benefitting their group. These are policies like social security and Medicare that have been traditionally associated with whiteness. And part through their opposition and their juxtaposition to policies like welfare, we see welfare as sort of handout of policy that is associated with disparaging stereotypes and erroneous stereotypes of people of color this idea that they take advantage of the system, that they are not working hard. In contrast, Social Security is seen as a policy that's a benefit for hard work. It's very much associated with this sense of individualism and this Protestant work ethic values.

And the other thing that White identifiers really like are policies that make the United States more isolationist. So if you understand White identity in part as a response to feelings of insecurity to feelings like Whites in the United States are kind of losing their status or losing ground when you think about that globally this idea that as the US becomes more diverse and as we become more part of a globalized world that Whites might be losing their status as well. But it turns out that Whites also are – these Whites are also more supportive of policies that restrict free trade and that pull the United States out of interference with their countries.

So if you kind of weigh these things down on a table and then you also think about Trump as somebody who said he was uniquely an opposition to Barack Obama, the nation's first Black President, you've got a candidate who comes along who is incredibly opposed to immigration.

One thing I like to point out about Donald Trump is that when he began his presidential campaign in August of 2015, if you went to his website and you can do this, you can go to the [Internet Archive Wayback Machine](#) and you can look at Donald Trump's presidential website in August 2015, if you click on the positions link on his website, the only issue that he has listed is immigration reform. And then Donald Trump parts ways with the traditional GOP platform and comes out and says, "I'm going to protect Social Security. I'm going to protect Medicare." Whereas most other Republican candidates are talking about privatizing Social Security, talking about cutting Social Security.

And then Trump spends a lot of time focused on free trade, on promising to renegotiate trade agreements to pull the United States out of a lot of what he saw as sort of interference in other countries. So unlike of the other presidential candidates, particularly other Republican candidates, Trump focused on this very specific set of issues and it happens to be the very specific set of issues that really appeals to people who are high on White identity.

Ashley Jardina: So when it comes to Social Security and Medicare, we do know from older political research that there was a campaign around the Reagan era or slightly prior to that maybe where Social Security and Medicare beneficiaries were portrayed as White in advertisements and public propaganda whereas welfare recipients were portrayed as Black. So part of this was the result of a deliberate effort on the part of a conservatist. Is that right?

Ashley Jardina: That's absolutely right. And I'm not the first one to – from those political scientists to think a lot about this. So Nick Winter at the University of Virginia is someone who spent a lot of time, he has a great book on this, thinking about the ways in which Social Security has been framed as a policy for White people. And so we know from his work and just as sort of anecdotal evidence with respect to the way that elites have framed Social Security that one, that it's very likely linked in people's mind as a policy that is for Whites and that it benefits Whites.

Chris Martin: And the same goes for Medicare?

Ashley Jardina: Yeah, absolutely. Very much the same way. Again, it's sort of the reward that you receive for making it to 65 and doing all the things that you're supposed to do and paying into the system.

Chris Martin: And this idea of small government or shrinking government all together, you found that that's actually not a very good appeal when it comes to appealing to White identifiers. So one of the reasons Trump may have been more successful too is that he didn't talk about shrinking government overall.

Ashley Jardina: Yeah, I think that's one thing that's so interesting about this. I mean for a long time, we've really associated this idea of small government. In some ways with race and with Whites in part because a lot of big government policies historically have been ones that have focused on leveling the playing field across racial group site, school integration for example or even the creation of a lot of these big social welfare programs.

And it turns out that Whites who are high in White identity, they were not particularly interested in making the government smaller. In fact, what they would prefer is that government do more for them as a group. They want government to help their group. And they often see government instead as helping other groups.

Chris Martin: So Romney famously said—well, he didn't win—but he said the 47% of American are just moochers who do not pay income taxes. And that's not a very successful way to appeal White identifiers.

Ashley Jardina: No. I think that something like that falls flat. And so, when Trump comes along and says, "Hey, I'm going to protect Social Security. I'm going to protect Medicare." Again, that's not something that you commonly hear from Republican presidential candidates. That certainly appeals to this subset of White voters and perhaps to more voters actually thought about. There's this assumption that people want government to stay out of their lives or they don't want government to help them. And I think that there are a lot of White people in this country who simply think that government just isn't for them and doesn't benefit them but would like it too.

Chris Martin: So tell me a bit about the lack of correlation you found between racial resentment and White identification.

Ashley Jardina: Yeah. This is something that I think people often find quite surprising. Part of it is just sort of motivation to wonder about the difference between White identity and racial attitudes. And I think a lot of people suspect that if you have a high level of White identity then you probably do also have a high level of or high degree of racial resentment.

And for those of you out there who are thinking about correlations, the correlation actually between White identity and racial resentment is only about 0.13, so very small correlation. And part of the reason for that is that there are many Whites who score high on this racial resentment scale.

And for those of you who aren't familiar with this, the theory of racial resentment, the measure is attempting to capture this combination of anti-Black affect and the belief that Blacks in the United States do not subscribe to traditional American values like hard work. And so, the scale is comprised of questions like do you agree or disagree with the idea that the Irish, Italians, and Jews have to work their way up without special favors and Blacks should do the same or do you agree or disagree that generations of slavery have made it difficult for Blacks to get ahead?

And it turns out that most White Americans in the United States score at the midpoint or above in that scale. Most Whites in the United States are what we would call to some degree, racially resentful. And it's because there are many Whites who possess that sort of moderate to high level of racial resentment who also do not necessarily think of themselves as being White or being don't possess a high level of White identity. And then the converse is true. There are a lot of Whites who score high in White identity who aren't necessarily especially high in racial resentment. You don't therefore observe a strong correlation between those two.

And I think part of it just kind of goes back to conceptually to the idea that there are many Whites in the United States who are worried about their groups. They are worried about their loss of status, their loss of privilege, but that concern isn't necessarily coupled with a sense of hostility or animosity or a dislike of people of color.

Now, I don't want to go overstate that because I think one interpretation of this difference is that therefore White identity is maybe somehow more innocuous or that we shouldn't worry about the social or political consequences of it. And that's not true. I mean just because they, they being racial resentment and White identity have different psychological underpinnings doesn't mean that they both don't have similar consequences or they don't have problematic consequences.

In fact, I would argue that in some ways, White identity is more insidious and more socially problematic than racial resentment. And part of the reason is that you might be motivated by a sense of identity and has decided to protect your group in a way that's independent of racial prejudice. But nevertheless, Whites who are high in White identity, they want to maintain white's dominance status in the United States and not necessarily comes at the expense of a more racially egalitarian society.

Chris Martin: And a rough way of putting this might be, they are nervous about the demographic makeup changing but they are not resentful towards any particular demographic group. Would that be fair?

Ashley Jardina: Yeah, I think that's definitely a fair way of putting it. So another way that I like to explain it is a lot of these Whites are opposed to immigration and it's not because they have this high degree of animosity toward Latinos for example or they just simply dislike Latinos. It's because they are worried about the idea that United States may not look like a country that reflects them. It may not look like a White country. That culturally, it's going to change in a way that doesn't reflect their group and their group's culture and their group's values.

Chris Martin: So even the book is mostly scientific and not normative. You aren't making many claims about what people should do or what we should worry about necessarily. However, you get into that in chapter 9, the final chapter. So tell me a bit about chapter 9.

Ashley Jardina: So this is where I do drop some normative implications about these rising – the rising significance of White identity in American politics. And I think there are a number of things to think about. So one is the extent to which politicians can capitalize on this and it's quite clear from Donald Trump's success that this is an enormously successful political strategy to appeal to White identity politics. And I think it's one that is somewhat more insidious than appealing to racial prejudice or to racial animosity.

We often find these political appeals and rhetoric that is directed at people of color that's often disparaging as a society. It's really normatively unacceptable. I mean that's just – I think part of what Trump is doing is sort of testing the boundaries around that. But nevertheless, we generally as a society don't like our political figures to displace some or any degree of racial prejudice.

But when politicians can instead start talking about wanting to just help Whites or to protect a particular group or to make America great again or when Whites start advocating for white-only organizations and then point to the fact that people of color get to have a Black student union or a Blacks-only organization. Why can't Whites do the same? That doesn't sound as troubling to most White people. So what that means is that I think politicians can make appeals toward these White Americans without a lot of pushback.

And the other thing that I'm sort of uncovering here is this idea that White racial attitudes in the United States aren't simply about this hostility. It's also about a desire to preserve white's power and white's status. And what that means arguably is that it's an attempt for Whites to help maintain a racial hierarchy in the United States, to maintain some degree of racial inequality where Whites do get to maintain their disproportionate social economic and political resources.

And so if what we want is a more racially egalitarian society, well, the prevalence and the importance of White identity politics is really pushing back and pushing away from that. So what do we do about this? Well, I think one thing is we think about the degree to which we allow politicians to try to make these appeals. I like to point out that there is some sanctioning that can happen and that we have seen this.

So if you think about the remarks that Congressman Steve King made, sort of questioning why can't we talk about White civilization and the wanting to preserve White civilization? Well, a lot of people came out and said, "Hey, that's pretty problematic language. That does seem racially problematic." And he is removed from Congressional Committee and I think a lot of people rightfully said, "Hey, we don't want to hear this kind of language. This isn't acceptable."

The problem is that we don't tend to do that or there hasn't – there haven't been many consequences for Donald Trump making these remarks. And so for now, it feels like a lot of the condemnation and the consequences that Trump is outside the bounds of that. But he is not the only political candidate who is going to try to attempt these strategies. And so, we want to think about as a society whether we allow other political candidates to do this. We want to think about how far we are willing to let them go.

Chris Martin: I need to point out that even though there has been wave of Hispanic immigration, White Hispanics may start identifying as white. So we're not necessarily going to see a majority/minority country.

Ashley Jardina: Yeah, and that's absolutely right. And a lot of people point to the fact that just as the Irish and Italians who in the early 1900s were not considered White that they were eventually assimilated into the sort of category of whiteness that eventually Hispanics will do the same. And I think that's a possibility absolutely. I don't know that that is sort of the kind of ideal solution to the problem of White identity politics. I think if that were to occur then we certainly would see that White identity will not be as strong or as powerful of a force in American politics.

But the consequence of that phenomenon, were it to happen would essentially be just to reestablishment of the racial hierarchy in the United States. And Whites would no longer see Hispanics as a threat because Hispanics would be considered white. But that doesn't necessarily mean that we would become a more racially egalitarian society.

In fact, if we use the 1920s as an example and immigration during that period of time, well, we subsumed all of these immigrant groups under the category of whiteness but we still very much live in a society where Whites are at the top and other racial and ethnic minorities particularly Blacks in the United States are at the bottom of this hierarchy. So I'm not sure that the Hispanics-becoming-Whites argument or prediction is one that we should be particularly hopeful about.

Chris Martin: So tell me a bit about some of the reactions or criticisms you received for the book either at academic presentations or popular presentations?

Ashley Jardina: Oh, it's such a good question. Well, so one thing that comes up a lot is people want to know about these ethnic identities. So they ask, "Well, what about Irish-Americans? What about Italian-Americans?" They want me to talk about it because they think that's really interesting or they are critical of the lack of attention to these identities and they want to know like how do this fit in with White identity. I mean this surprises me a lot of the time in part

because there was a time in American history where those ethnic identities were really essential to how a lot of Whites thought about themselves and they were even important for how Whites thought about the political world.

But really over the past 40, 50 years, the importance of those identities has really declined quite dramatically as people have assimilated, as sort of first-generation immigrants from those groups have reached old age and many of them are no longer with us. And in fact for a long time, there was a whole segment of work in sociology that focused on those ethnic identities and the importance of those identities. If you look at the work of Richard Alba and Mary Waters and those same scholars who were focusing on these ethnic identities really in the 1990s very exquisitely said, “Hey, these are really no longer important part anymore of the way that Whites think about themselves and certainly not how they think about the political world.”

So there’s a reason we don’t talk about like the Irish votes anymore. We don’t talk about the Italian-American votes anymore. And so, part of my response is that I don’t focus on those identities because they don’t matter in the same way that this now kind of larger racial White American and maybe even arguably sort of a Pan-European identity matters for a lot of Whites today. So that’s one of the criticisms I’ve received or one place in which I get some pushback.

A lot of people too ask or want to know, “Well, if White identity is different than racial prejudice but the consequences are the same, well, why should we care about it?” And part of my response is that, well, they are different psychological phenomenon and there are two things to think about. One is that as I mentioned, we are talking about two different sets of White voters which means that politicians can now use race in two different ways to capture entirely different sets of White people.

So there are some Whites who are pretty high in racial prejudice in the United States who are going to find explicit and over and disparaging remarks that politicians make toward racial and ethnic minorities, they are going to find those appealing and they are going to find subtle appeals to people with respect to race that are motivating and that are going to get them into politics.

But what I’m suggesting us that politicians can also use these other strategies with communities who have dubbed, “Let’s make America great. Let’s push back immigration. Let’s protect White people.” And attract an entirely different set of White voters. And those two sets of White voters may at the end of the day both dislike immigration but they’re not necessarily the same set of people. So I think that’s one reason why we have to care about the rise of White identity politics is that White identifiers are not also the racially prejudice. Absolutely.

Chris Martin: So before we wrap up, what are you looking on now?

Ashley Jardina: A couple of different things. So one thing that I’m thinking about is the fact that there was in fact a notable decline in levels of White identity immediately after the 2016 election. And so, I’m curious who has moved away from this identity. And the evidence so far suggests this, primarily people who before the election indicated that their racial identity was

important to them but were not big fans of Donald Trump. And so I'm interested in understanding the decline in identity.

And the other thing that I'm working on is – because I sort of focused generally on the nature of racial attitudes. I'm working on a project with my colleague, Spencer Piston, and we're interested in understanding the extent to which scientific racism is still prevalent among the White American population and the consequences of those types of attitudes toward things like criminal justice policy in the United States.

Chris Martin: Well, thanks for joining us on the show. It has been great having you.

Ashley Jardina: Yeah, thank you so much.

Chris Martin: You can find links to the book and to our recent New Yorker interview with Ashley in the show notes. And upcoming episodes, we have representatives from several different disciplines. First, there is Christopher Federico, a political psychologist at the University of Minnesota's Political Science Department. And we will have Maria Dixon Hall, Senior Advisor to the Provost for Cultural Intelligence at Southern Methodist University. And in the summer, we will have an episode with Teresa Bejan who is an Associate Professor of Political Theory at Oxford University.

If you enjoyed the show, please leave us a review on iTunes. It helps other people find out about the show. As always, you can email me at Podcast@HeterodoxAcademy.org. And you can find me on Twitter @ChrisMartin76. Thanks for listening.

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