



When White Nationalism Became Popular

Populism Rising

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What rising white nationalism says about race in the 21st century US.

On November 12th, 2016 TheDailyStormer.com, a neo-Nazi website with a monthly viewership of over two million lead with the headline, “The Swastika Reigns in Germany! Trump reigns in America!” After the election a popular thread on the white nationalist website Stormfront.org, with over 300,000 members, carried a discussion thread about Trump’s victory filled with congratulatory posts and happy-face emojis clinking beer mugs. “The Don, is president!” one person wrote. Another wrote, “WE DID IT!!!! WE WON!!!! DONALD TRUMP IS OUR 45TH PRESIDENT!!!!” Another exclaimed simply, “Whoo!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

The rise of a visible white nationalist movement and the precipitous rise in publicly reported hate crimes unsettled racial politics on both the left and right, surprising more than a few academics. How do we account for this changed racial landscape? What does the rise of white nationalism now suggest about racial politics in the US today?

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In the lead-up to the November 2016 presidential election much attention was made of the widespread support of Donald Trump by the contemporary racist right. This culminated in Richard Spencer’s widely cited [alt-right conference speech](#), where he shouted to a room full of supporters and reporters, “Hail Trump, hail our people, hail victory.” While the increasing presence of the organized racist movement is disturbing and noteworthy, we contend that there is a larger racial story highlighted in these dynamics. We note a merging of various elements of the right around white nationalism and a broader transformation of white identity in the US. As whites face their

impending minority status due to demographic changes, many now perceive white Americans as a persecuted group. The white nationalist movement bolsters these feelings through circulating memes about white genocide and crimes against whites by people of color. The broader populist conservative movement is increasingly giving voice to these feelings, embracing and amplifying a politics of white racial resentment. These three factors are creating a potent mix that is transforming racial and political landscapes in the US.

The election challenged our national narrative of racial progress, a narrative fostered throughout the Obama presidency that promised a steady movement away from the significance of race in US politics and that bolstered claims that racism had finally been overcome, swept into the dustbin of history. We are faced with the dismal reality that the first African American presidency ended not with a movement towards racial progress but towards an overt racist backlash. Trump's electoral victory helped to highlight the successful re-articulation of white nationalism to electoral politics but we also argue that it shows the changing meanings of whiteness today and is part of a longer trend of fusing right-wing populism to overt or covert white nationalist projects.

White nationalism—the linking of national identity to white ethnic identity—has a long, **sordid history in the US**. Yet its re-appearance today, in the post-civil rights era, is somewhat surprising. In this era, the dominant racial projects on both the right and left—colorblindness and multiculturalism respectively—eschew white supremacist ideologies, at least explicitly. Neoconservatives have, for example, made a political art form out of the selective appropriation of civil rights era political discourses about enfranchisement and equality to justify the rollback of civil rights legislation and policies, dismantle the social democratic tradition, attack Keynesian welfare statism, and **advance color-blind policy and post-racial ideology**. For their part, neoliberals have countered neoconservatism's post-racialism with multiculturalism. This framework recognizes and celebrates racial differences, though the extent to which this recognition is linked substantively to a robust vision of equal proprietorship of public institutions or to redress and eradication of racial inequalities is hotly debated. If there was one similarity between these two positions, and one line that was not crossed in the culture wars of the 1980s to the mid 2010s, it was that whiteness was off the table as a project of national unification—or so we thought.

An explicitly white supremacist movement has, of course, long existed on the fringes of national politics. Since the 1990s however, efforts have been underway to rebrand white supremacy within more broadly acceptable language. Former KKK leaders adopted language associated with Black nationalism and Black pride in an attempt to redefine their movement as based in cultural pride, not prejudice. This framing exploited a central weakness in multiculturalism, for a celebration of racial difference without an explicit disavowal of white privilege and supremacy fails to take account of the

question, why can't we celebrate white pride? Leaders of the newly branded white nationalist movement also took steps to soften their image. They instructed members to wear suits and ties instead of shaved heads and swastika tattoos, to focus on changing hearts and minds and policy over enacting violence, and to emphasize white culture over overt white supremacy.

The movement also expanded exponentially online. A large white nationalist chatroom Stormfront.org grew from 30,000 members in 2004 to over 100,000 in 2016, with 30,000 visitors each day. The movement has also expanded into new digital arenas, with younger members proliferating on sites such as 4chan and reddit, multiple podcasts and radio programs, and a variety of news sites that collectively generate millions of hits per month.

This rebranding of the white supremacist movement accelerated when the activist Richard Spencer introduced the term "alt-right." This name moves the emphasis further away from explicit white supremacy and instead describes white nationalist ideas as one wing of a broader conservative movement that is not solely focused on race. This reframing exposed white nationalist ideas to entirely new audiences. Individuals holding neo-Nazi views were suddenly granted extensive interviews in the mainstream press, so long as they identified as alt-right.

The rise of a media savvy movement accounts in large measure for white nationalism's broadening political appeal in the 21st century. But it is also important to take into account the politics of white racial resentment that has long festered on the fringe of the Republican Party. In the 1960s, in the context of the civil rights movement, Republicans put concerted effort into appealing to white Southerners' racial resentments to gain their support. This politics was helped along in the 1970s and 80s by the political valorization of the white ethnic community across the political spectrum. Once vilified as ignorant, dangerous, and criminal in comparison to mainstream WASP culture, white ethnicity became politically legitimate and even fashionable as [a white identity political backlash](#) against Black Power and other protest movements of the 1960s and 70s. In the 1980s and 90s the culture wars were effective in further articulating the politics of white ethnic pride to the politics of white racial resentment. The New Right's condemnation of "illiberal" causes such as affirmative action, multiculturalism, political correctness, and liberal immigration policy helped considerably in this regard. So too did the attacks on government dependency and on "welfare queens," for whom many whites came to hold disdain as the preferred recipients of government largess.

The politics of white racial resentment then gained traction in the aftermath of the global economic collapse of 2008, as the libertarian and populist (not neoconservative) right arose as a counterweight to the Obama administration's liberal centrist attempts to revive the economy. The anti-tax, anti-government Tea Party played a crucial role in giving this politics broad appeal at the

grassroots level. Funded into existence by the oil industry tycoons, the Koch brothers, and by other libertarian and conservative donors, it popularized opposition to debt-driven government spending. Yet the Tea Party turned out to be an unwieldy and unpredictable political formation. If it started out as a movement of libertarian, anti-tax, deficit scolds, **its rank and file turned out to be more concerned about race** and immigration than it was about debt and fiscal constraint.

Cultivated effectively on the right for over four decades, the politics of white racial resentment is now widely felt. This is evidenced by survey data showing that whites now tend to understand racism as a zero-sum game, with whites on the losing side. Surveys show, for example, that many whites broadly **believe that anti-white bias is on the rise** and that as people of color gain new forms of social, political, and cultural power, whites are in turn losing power. Many whites also tend to experience what Robin DiAngelo calls “white fragility,” a situation in which long-term insulation from experiencing racial stress has created a fragile racial identity, at least one intolerant of racial stress.

This brings us to the political rise of Donald Trump. Trump was certainly not the only political figure to attempt to craft a populist political message in the 2016 Republican primary race. But he was the most effective at exploiting white racial resentments to expand his political base. Trump did not just run on an anti-globalist and anti-immigrant platform; he took an explicitly white nationalist-friendly stance. In fact, his version of right-wing populism is noteworthy for its overt elaboration of white racial resentments that have long been exploited, *sub rosa* by the Republican Party. His foray into birtherism against President Obama in the early years of the Obama presidency was at the time considered a fringe position. But it gave him early credibility in some white Republican quarters, and it firmly linked his subsequent anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim positions to anti-black politics, which should be understood, we think, as foundational to his political project.

Carol Anderson reminds us that throughout US history each step towards racial equality for African Americans has been met with white rage and backlash. Although attention must be paid to the organized white nationalist movement and the alt-right, we also think that the growing popularity of this movement points to troubling new racial trends more broadly. And it is these broader trends in racial meaning and racial politics that we encourage scholars of race and politics to address.

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