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Suburbia and the Mobilization of White Identity in the 2020 Presidential Election

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Donald Trump's presidency was inundated with accusations of white supremacist dog-whistling and stoking racial division. These accusations followed him onto the campaign trail, where his appeals to suburban voters were derided by several critics as coded messages of mobilization for his majority-white base (Wilson, Schmitt, Short, Yasin, & Snyder, 2020). In the context of a rapidly diversifying United States, the perceived threat of loss of status has encouraged a rise in explicit white racial identification (Illing, 2019). Trump appealed to several tenets of white racial identification to frame his termination of Obama-era suburban zoning policies as a protection of white identity.

The policies governing the development and maintenance of American suburbia have long been dogged by racism, which has caused the suburbs to be treated as a proxy for the country's white population. In response to the diversification of the suburbs and the United States, the political saliency of white identity has increased rapidly, thus inspiring academic interrogation into the definition of whiteness in the American context. The prototypical American way of life is heavily informed by white sensibilities, despite its seemingly inclusive facade. By touting his termination of Obama-era zoning policies as a protection of the 'American Dream' and way of life, Trump appeals to this pattern of identification.

Scholarship of white identity has historically been sparse due to the common perception of the invisibility of whiteness due to its dominance in American society (McDermott & Samson, 2005, p. 247). As the racial demographics of the United States' population change rapidly and the relative size of the white population shrinks, the political salience of white identity has increased in tandem (p.245). As the numerical majority, the projection of American ideals according to the sensibilities of white Americans was treated as justifiable. However, as demographic shifts threaten the numerical justification for this status (Illing, 2019), whiteness is rendered visible and its pre-eminence more easily questioned. Anxieties have emerged about the loss of this long-cultivated dominance, thus enabling whiteness to become a politically salient force to be mobilized.

According to scholar Ashley Jardina, approximately 30% to 40% of white

Americans identify with their race in a politically meaningful way (Jardina, 2019, p. 124). It is projected that white people will no longer make up the majority of the American population by approximately 2050 (Illing, 2019). Coupled with the social, political and economic gains of racial and ethnic minorities, these changes have awakened a desire in some white Americans to protect their group status from these perceived threats. Jardina's posits that the perception of "zero-sum access to power and resources" informs social group competition (2019, p. 172). Jardina argues that many of the white Americans she studied were cognizant of their privilege in society and were glad for it, which made them particularly "vulnerable to perceptions of threat" (2019, p. 132). In understanding that their whiteness provided them with a superordinate position and being grateful for it, they implicitly signaled their understanding that other racial groups had a comparatively worse position. These responses weren't "couched in racially progressive language", which implied a desire to maintain this status quo (Jardina, 2019, p. 132). This has manifested in a subsection of white Americans engaging in collective political action to protect their status.

As the largest demographic of American society, the cultural definition of American identity has historically been centered around whiteness, which was reflected in white Americans' definitions of their identity. When interviewed, many respondents drew on tropes associated with American culture and the American dream to define whiteness, namely the imagery of the middle class suburban family (Jardina, 2019, p. 123). By associating white identity with the "average American," white people have the power to define who is or is not truly American. As scholar Joshua Guitar notes, the American dream of middle class suburban life is a "rhetorical manifestation of ideology attending to white interests" (Guitar, 2020, p. 5). Despite the deceptively inclusive tone of familial happiness and financial prosperity, access to the American dream requires an "adherence to the ideological affiliations of whiteness" (p. 5). By projecting the American dream as a collective national ideal, it asks all Americans, regardless of race, to subscribe to values that have long been associated with whiteness to achieve this coveted status.

The cultural association of the American suburbs with white identity is built upon decades of housing policy which has systematically excluded people of colour from the American myth of the suburban family living the 'American dream'. The suburbanization of the United States began in earnest with President Roosevelt's Housing Act of 1937, which provided direct aid to cities through a low-rent housing program. After the Second World War, the Federal Housing Administration, which was the precursor to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), gave federal loans to builders to mass-produce suburbs which they were specifically instructed not to sell to black homebuyers (Capps, 2015). This ensured that the suburbs were a white enclave, which was solidified through the practice of redlining. Redlining is a practice in which "legally binding

covenants…prohibited a buyer from reselling a home to someone of a different race" (Frasure-Yokely, 2015, p. 24). These racist practices created the suburbs, which were inaccessible to minorities for generations.

Though *de jure* racial discrimination in housing is no longer legal due to the Fair Housing Act (Racial Equity and Fair Housing, n.d), which was adopted in 1968 in the context of the Civil rights movement, there are several modern housing policies that uphold the legacies of these cycles of racial concentration and exclusion. Suburban enclaves zoned exclusively for single-family homes limited mixed-income suburban developments, which would enable low-income apartment buildings to be built in suburban neighborhoods (Wilson, Schmitt, Short, Yasin, & Snyder, 2020). Low-income housing disproportionately houses minorities; 6% of white non-Hispanic households are extremely low-income renters, whereas as 54% of low-income renters are black, Hispanic or Indigenous (Racial Disparities Among Extremely Low-Income Renters, 2019). These are families who have not been able to accumulate the generational wealth of their white counterparts due to federal policies that deliberately excluded them from suburban home ownership.

Obama's Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing Rule (AFFH) attempted to remedy this (Murray 2020), by requiring recipients of federal housing funds to evaluate the equity impacts of their programs. The AFFH, which was implemented in 2015, attempted to provide specificity to the federal law that required housing-related programs administered by federal agencies to further fair housing in an affirmative manner (Kurtzleben, 2020). To do so, it required jurisdictions receiving federal housing funds to assess patterns of housing discrimination, with the help of a data-based tool provided by the government, and develop plans to address these patterns (Kurtzleben, 2020).

This Obama-era policy was suspended in 2018 and eventually terminated in July of 2020, which was one of the centerpieces of Trump's appeals to White Americans during his campaign rallies. Despite the AFFH offering no clear sanctions for non-compliance, Trump characterized Obama's policy as an attempt at federal over-reach which "required high-density zoning [and] eliminated single-family zoning" (President Donald J. Trump Is Protecting Our Suburbs and Preserving the American Dream for All Americans, 2020). Trump's replacement policy instead allowed localities to self-certify that their policies were not discriminatory, which enabled the preservation of the status quo and provided no incentive to actively combat housing discrimination (Choi, 2020). In his tweets announcing the decision, Trump claimed that "suburbanites would 'no longer be bothered or financially hurt by having low-income housing built'" in their neighborhoods (Choi, 2020). These characterizations echo historical justifications of housing discrimination and prioritize the comfort of the suburban population over ending the systemic barriers that contribute to generational poverty.

In a commentary penned with Ben Carson, then head of HUD, Trump argued that the equity-based guidelines of the AFFH forced developers to introduce the "crime and chaos" of the projects into the communities of good suburban families, thus robbing them of the "American dream" (Trump & Carson, 2020). The suburbs are no longer mono-ethnic, 32% of the United States' suburban population are non-white (Kim Parker, 2020) and it is no longer a bastion of affluence, with 49% of the U.S poor population living in suburbs and small metro counties (Kim Parker 2020). Despite the changing demographics of the suburbs, the symbolism of its historic association with whiteness continues to make the suburb a potent symbol of the American dream and the White American way of life in the minds of many. Trump's triumph in his abolishment of equitable policies allows him to position himself as the protector of the American dream.

The traditional vision of the American dream steeped in the mythos of idyllic suburbia has been a hallmark of dominant American culture for decades. However, as demographic shifts challenge the dominance of white interests in the definition of the national identity, catering to these racialized anxieties has become politically expedient. By fashioning himself a protector of the American Dream, Trump positions himself as the defender of the dominance of the White American way of life. Trump's suburban policies build on the legacy of generations of housing policy that barred entry of racialized people into the quintessential definition of Americana.

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