The 2016 U.S. presidential election was unique and important in many ways. Hillary Clinton became the first woman ever to represent a major political party as the nominee for president. The Republican nominee, Donald Trump, was a true political outsider with no experience in government. In an era of growing political polarization, both candidates had record low favorability ratings (Enten 2016). In addition to the unique nature of their bids for the White House, both candidates made overt identity-based appeals to their base. These campaign strategies were starkly different from the tactics used by most modern presidential candidates.

On the one hand, Trump made numerous appeals to white working-class and rural voters. His campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again,” has been associated with a period of time when working-class and rural individuals could make a good living without having a college degree. Moreover, many argued that Trump’s campaign played to whites’ fears that the changing demographics of the nation would displace white voters and damage the country. On the other hand, Clinton appealed to the growing number of racial and ethnic minorities in the United States, and to women. Her campaign slogan, “Stronger Together,” has been characterized as celebrating diversity. Moreover, Clinton’s campaign website had a specific section on racial justice in which she made numerous appeals to both Latinos and African Americans.

Clinton’s campaign was praised as being much more organized compared to the campaign of Trump (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2019). Moreover, many expected that Clinton was almost a lock to become the next president of the United States because the Obama coalition had grown over the past four years. Most pre-election polls and political pundits corroborated this expectation. On the day of the election, FiveThirtyEight gave Trump just a 28.6 percent chance of winning. Trump even told a crowd in Wisconsin in December 2016 that he had expected to lose on election night (McCaskill 2016; Barnett 2018).

INTRODUCTION

The End of Identity Politics?
In spite of these expectations, Trump surprised many political experts and prognosticators and upset Clinton. The day after the election, pundits and the Democratic Party worked hard to find answers for their stunning defeat. Some argued that Clinton’s ties to the business community made it difficult for her to attract the support of working-class voters (Allen and Parnes 2017). Others pointed to her lack of campaigning in the critical Midwestern states of Michigan and Wisconsin (Dovere 2016). However, one of the most consistent criticisms of Hillary Clinton’s campaign was that it had focused too much on identity politics.

Within days of Clinton’s defeat, the New York Times published an article by Columbia University historian Mark Lilla (2016) titled “The End of Identity Politics.” In the article, Lilla (2016) argued that the Democratic Party’s focus on the plight of underrepresented groups alienated white voters. Moreover, he argued that if the Democratic Party does not abandon this strategy it will lead to more failure in the future. “One of the many lessons of the recent presidential election campaign and its repugnant outcome is that the age of identity liberalism must be brought to an end.” Lilla was not alone in his condemnation of identity politics. Writing for the Denver Post, Froma Harrop (2016) argued that Clinton’s focus on underrepresented groups obscured her economic message and doomed her campaign: “Clinton’s fervent messaging to Latinos, African-Americans, Asians, Muslims, the LGBT community and women went beyond the usual targeting. It drowned out her economic platform, which would have done so much more for the struggling white workers who chose Donald Trump.”

The calls for ending identity politics did not stop there. Since the election, opinion editorials titled “The End of Identity Politics” or slight variations of this have been published by RealClearPolitics, Daily KOS, the National Review, and the New York Times (see Casey 2017; Hanson 2017; Lilla 2016; Williamson 2016). Each article made a similar argument: The Democratic Party spent too much time tailoring appeals to underrepresented groups and sacrificed the white working class as a result. The takeaway from these articles is clear: If the Democratic Party wants to win again, it must focus on a liberal economic agenda and distance itself from identity politics.

The argument that the Democratic Party should abandon identity politics is not new. After repeat defeats of the party’s presidential candidates in 1968 and 1972, many advocated that the Democratic Party move away from its focus on civil rights. Strategists argued that the party should run a campaign devoid of racial appeals, also known as a deracialized campaign. Supporters of the deracialized strategy argued that the party’s focus on race made it difficult for Democrats to appeal to working-class whites and southerners.
who were at one time key members of the Democratic Party’s New Deal coalition. Following these suggestions, presidential and statewide candidates adopted a deracialized strategy—with some success. The advantages of the deracialized strategy were exemplified by the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976, Bill Clinton in 1992 and 1996, and Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012.

However, a lot has changed with regard to race relations since Obama’s reelection to the White House in 2012. A number of high-profile police shootings and acquittals, increasing evidence of growing racial economic disparities, retrenchments on voting rights, and the growth of racial hate groups have made race a more salient issue in American politics. Moreover, demographic changes in the United States have made racial/ethnic minorities a more influential voting bloc. For example, Obama in 2012 received less support from whites than Michael Dukakis did in 1988 but won 221 more electoral votes. Obama’s success demonstrates the growing significance that racial/ethnic minorities play in American politics.

While a deracialized strategy has been successful for the Democratic Party in the past, the question remains whether it is still the most advantageous strategy in the current political context. One of the chief strategists behind the call for deracialization in the 1970s, Columbia University professor Charles V. Hamilton (1977, 3) argued that the political context should determine when the deracialization strategy is most applicable: “A deracialized strategy makes certain assumptions about the American electoral political arena. . . . It assumes, likewise, that the political participants realize that elections in this system are not for all time but occur from time to time. The latter assumption means, of course, that a strategy adopted for one election in a particular context is not written in stone, but is precisely a strategy used at that time to maximize the possibility of achieving certain goals.”

While a significant amount of work has explored whether deracialization strategies work well in contexts that are majority black or white (see, e.g., Gillespie 2012; H. Perry 1991) and whether some voters are more supportive of a deracialized approach than others, no work has explored how the national political context shapes the efficacy of a deracialized campaign approach. Controversies over the Democratic Party’s focus on racial appeals in 2016, along with the unique political context in which it occurred, provide a great opportunity to assess whether the Democratic Party distancing itself from identity politics is a prudent strategy.

*The Case for Identity Politics* explores whether racial appeals improve the electability of candidates from the Democratic Party in the current political context. In doing so, this book provides information about when a racialized approach is most effective. The early chapters of the book describe the current
racial and political context. I then analyze whether voters of different races/ethnicities and political parties have shifting views about race relations in a period where activism around racial issues has increased. Subsequently, I explore why whites, and in particular white Democrats, may be more supportive of a racially progressive agenda using a variety of public opinion polls and whether whites of different partisanships are more or less likely to support candidates who make racial appeals or appear racially progressive.

The book then shifts to focus on the political preferences of African Americans and Latinos. In these chapters, I analyze whether the current political context has increased blacks’ and Latinos’ levels of “linked fate,” a measure of racial solidarity. Moreover, I explore whether blacks and Latinos, who in the past have supported deracialized candidates, are developing a stronger devotion to candidates who make racial appeals. The final section of the book uses the results from previous chapters to investigate whether the use of racial appeals is enhanced by the growing number of racial/ethnic minorities in the United States. Through this analysis, I hope to not only answer questions about whether the use of racial appeals was and will be problematic for the Democratic Party from 2016 going forward, but also to further our understanding of how the political climate shapes voters’ reactions to politicians using identity politics.

Defining Deracialization

As noted above, in 1977 Charles V. Hamilton outlined a campaign strategy to help the Democratic Party craft a plan to build a multiracial coalition, arguing the party should avoid appeals to race. Hamilton recognized that the Republican Party was using the Democratic Party’s stances on civil rights issues to mobilize unsympathetic whites and break apart the New Deal coalition of blue-collar workers, union members, racial/ethnic minorities, and white southerners. To combat this strategy, Hamilton (1977) argued that the Democratic Party may benefit from focusing on color-blind, class-based policies, designed to benefit all poor people, such as universal employment, expansions in healthcare, and income maintenance programs. He also argued that this new strategy, a deracialized campaign strategy, should avoid targeted appeals to underrepresented racial groups. In essence, the deracialized campaign style was meant to revive the New Deal coalition that created a bond between blacks, whites, and other groups by focusing on class interests rather than racial interests.

By focusing on class over race, Hamilton (1977) argued, the Democratic Party would still advance black political interests without turning off racially conservative voters. For example, blacks were (and still are) disproportion-
ately unemployed and uninsured at the time Hamilton was writing. As a result, a campaign strategy that could address the problems faced by many blacks without explicitly discussing race could help the Democratic Party engage economically liberal but racially conservative whites while at the same time helping the black community.

Moreover, many have argued that a focus on class over race may produce better outcomes for a broader swath of the black population. William Julius Wilson (1987), in his study *The Truly Disadvantaged*, argued that race-based policies generally expand opportunities for wealthier blacks and fail to address problems faced by poorer blacks. Similarly, Reed (2013) argued that even if racially targeted policies could erase class disparities between blacks and whites, a society in which the top 1 percent of income earners has so much more wealth and opportunity than the bottom 99 percent is immoral. As a result, shifting focus to class rather than race not only presents an electorally advantageous strategy, but it appears most beneficial to racial/ethnic minorities. This focus on class-based appeals versus race-based appeals is at the heart of the deracialization strategy.

After his strategy was applied successfully in the 1976 election, Hamilton (1977) outlined the deracialization framework in a three-page article “Deracialization: Examination of a Political Strategy,” which was published in the *First World Journal* in March 1977. The article had an immediate and widespread impact on American politics. The framework was used by several Democratic presidential candidates, including Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. Moreover, it was used to advance the political opportunities of countless black candidates who, before the strategy had been widely implemented, were largely confined to representing majority-minority electorates.

The success of the strategy was perhaps most evident with the Black Tuesday candidates, who expanded black representation in numerous majority white cities and states. On November 7, 1989, a number of black officials were elected to majority white cities, including New Haven, Connecticut; Seattle, Washington; and Cleveland, Ohio. Moreover, it was on this day that L. Douglas Wilder became the first African American to be elected governor of any state (Virginia). Most political commentators and scholars attributed the success of these candidates to their ability to focus on centrist political issues like taxes and crime and to distance themselves from racial or racially tinged issues like welfare, affirmative action, and busing.

In addition to inspiring a generation of politicians, Hamilton’s deracialization framework also inspired a large number of social scientists, who explored the effectiveness of the strategy in great detail (Gillespie 2010; Johnson 2015; Liu 2003; McCormick and Jones 1993; Orey and Ricks 2007; Reeves
One of the seminal works on this topic is “The Conceptualization of Deracialization” by Joseph McCormick and Charles E. Jones (1993). In this study, the authors provided a formal definition of a deracialized campaign as one conducted “in a stylistic fashion that defuses the polarizing effects of race by avoiding explicit reference to race-specific issues, while at the same time emphasizing those issues that are perceived as racially transcendent, thus mobilizing a broad segment of the electorate for purposes of capturing or maintaining public office” (76). McCormick and Jones (1993) also provided examples of what a deracialized campaign should look like in practice. According to these authors, a deracialized candidate will avoid discussing racial policies such as affirmative action, voting rights, civil rights, and immigration. Additionally, a deracialized candidate may work to distance themselves from racial/ethnic minorities by avoiding public appearances with prominent blacks and/or Latinos.

Why a Deracialized Campaign Can Be Useful

There are a number of reasons why a deracialized campaign was necessary for left-leaning candidates to succeed, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s. First, there was fear that white voters would not support candidates who appeared to be engaging in minority racial favoritism. Minority racial favoritism is the idea that left-leaning candidates, regardless of their race, will redistribute resources and opportunities to blacks and Latinos at the expense of whites. For example, whites have long been opposed to affirmative action as a policy because many see it as unfairly benefiting blacks to the detriment of whites (Swim and Miller 1999). If left-leaning candidates hope to win in elections in majority-white settings, they have to demonstrate that they will not engage in minority racial favoritism, given that some whites are turned off by racially progressive political stances. This may be particularly important for the Democratic Party given that their white base supports its economic policies but is often turned off by their discussion of racial issues. As a result, a deracialized strategy can remove the cross-pressures white Democrats face and boost their levels of support for liberal candidates.

Additionally, proponents of a deracialized approach argue that Republican candidates will exploit left-leaning candidates’ stances on racial issues to drive a wedge between racial/ethnic minorities and working-class voters who have traditionally been part of the Democratic Party’s base. As Hamilton (1977, 3) pointed out, “A political party not likely to obtain a significant share of a particular group’s votes would find it advantageous to attempt to isolate that group by making overt and covert appeals to more receptive groups.” There are several examples of this. First, in the 1988 presidential election, the
George H. W. Bush campaign exploited Michael Dukakis’s policy as governor to allow weekend furloughs for inmates. In addition to painting Dukakis as soft on crime, they used the image of a black man named Willie Horton and discussed his murder and rape of a white couple to attract white voters (Mendelberg 2001). The advertisement played on fears that left-leaning candidates were too weak on criminals so as to protect racial/ethnic minorities, all at the cost of the public safety of whites (Mendelberg 2001). Along the same lines, in a 1990 North Carolina U.S. Senate race, Republican Jesse Helms attacked his Democratic opponent Harvey Gantt’s support of affirmative action in an advertisement that showed a white male losing out on a job because they “gave it to a minority.”

More recently, a 2010 television advertisement by Nevada U.S. Senate candidate Sharon Angle portrayed Latinos as gang members to incite fears among whites that the growth of the Latino population in the United States would lead to increased levels of crime (Parker 2017). She connected the growing Latino population in the United States to her opponent Harry Reid’s liberal positions on immigration reform. Two years later, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney ran a campaign advertisement that argued that his opponent Barack Obama was weakening the 1996 Welfare Reform Act to make it easier for people to get welfare without working. The ad appeared to be exploiting fears among whites that left-leaning candidates unfairly provide social services to minorities (Nteta and Tarsi 2016).

In combination, these attacks use liberal candidates’ support for racial policies as a way to demonize them with otherwise sympathetic centrist white voters. A deracialized campaign approach is effective because it removes these tools from Republicans. Moreover, if Republicans use these racially aggressive tactics without much basis, they run the risk of appearing as racist, which has been shown to decrease support for them (Mendelberg 2001).

Finally, there is some research to suggest that racial/ethnic minority voters may be more receptive to deracialized campaigns in recent years. The main argument for this is that young black and Latinos are less likely to perceive the same levels of discrimination as their predecessors (Cose 2011). As a result, they tend to believe that candidates who focus on race are pandering to their demographic by playing on racial/ethnic divisions that no longer exist. This is in part aided by the fact that many black and Latino leaders have moved to the political center as they hope to advance within the Democratic Party (see Gonzalez Juenke and Sampaio 2010; Tate 2010). Blacks and Latinos in the electorate adopt these more centrist racial attitudes because they follow the lead of co-racial/ethnic political leaders. In sum, many argue that a deracialized campaign may help left-leaning candidates maximize their vote.
Deracialization in Practice

Following the success of the Black Tuesday candidates and later the success of Barack Obama, numerous studies have been conducted to try to determine whether deracialization truly enhances the opportunities of left-leaning candidates. The earliest work on this topic identified both the benefits and problems of a deracialized approach. For the former, several studies noted that white voters were more supportive of deracialized candidates, particularly if these candidates were African American. For example, Jeffries (1999) and Frederick and Jeffries (2009) demonstrated that white voters were much more supportive of deracialized candidates than they were of candidates who made some racial appeals.

In addition to attracting white voters, left-leaning white and black candidates have successfully used a deracialized approach to put together multiracial coalitions. Canon, Schousen, and Sellers (1996) demonstrate that black candidates who use deracialized campaigns in diverse districts often perform better than their deracialized counterparts because they are able to win a sizable amount of the black vote and capture the lion’s share of the white vote. Gillespie (2010, 2012) arrives at a similar conclusion in her analysis of Cory Booker’s campaign to become mayor of Newark, New Jersey. Moreover, some have argued that a deracialized approach may improve candidates’ standing with black voters. McIlwain and Caliendo (2011) used experimental methods to demonstrate that when all else is equal, black and white voters prefer deracialized candidates to their racialized counterparts.

Potential Pitfalls of Deracialization

However, it is important to note the deracialization is not without its critics. In particular, several studies demonstrate the limits of a deracialized campaign strategy. The most identified shortcoming of deracialization is that it demobilizes black and Latino turnout. This may be particularly problematic for deracialized racial/ethnic minority politicians who largely rely on the support of coracial or coethnic voters to succeed. For example, Citrin, Rein gold, and Green (1990), Orey (2006), Pierannunzi and Hutcheson (1996), and Wright Austin and Middleton (2001) in separate studies show that blacks and Latinos are less likely to turn out to support candidates who run deracialized campaigns. This made a huge difference in elections that were decided by a few percentage points. For example, Citrin et al. (1990) argue that California gubernatorial candidate Tom Bradley’s deracialized approach led to lower levels of black turnout at the polls, which could have made the difference in an election where Bradley and his opponent were only separated by 2 percentage
points. Along the same lines, I’ve demonstrated that black candidates who do not make racial appeals experience a decline in black political support (Stout 2015). My previous book argues that racial/ethnic minority candidates who distance themselves too much from race appear as unsympathetic and squander their goodwill with coracial voters.

Additionally, myself and others have suggested that a deracialized campaign approach may not actually lead to large gains among whites (Johnson 2015; Stout 2015). For example, Lewis, Dowe, and Franklin (2012) demonstrate that in spite of Obama’s deracialized campaign in 2012, he received just 40 percent of the white vote (see also Sinclair-Chapman and Price 2008). Moreover, in previous work I also show that whites are statistically as likely to support black racialized candidates as they are black deracialized candidates (Stout 2015). I argue that this is driven by the fact that regardless of whether black candidates racialize or not, they are perceived as making race-based appeals (see also Block 2011). Additionally, my previous work suggests that racialized candidates also receive less electoral support from Latinos and blacks (Stout 2015).

When candidates make conscious efforts to disassociate from minority communities, many may feel that the candidates are just taking their vote for granted and may be less willing to turnout or support them on Election Day (McCormick and Jones 1993; H. Perry 1991). This may be particularly bad for racial/ethnic minority candidates as they may be perceived as particularly uncaring when they fail to discuss the issues that concern those who share their race/ethnicity. Blacks and Latinos may feel demoralized by candidates/elected officials who do not speak about issues that concern them and become less engaged as a result, in turn hurting black and Latino candidates because they are expected to advance the political interests of those in their racial/ethnic community.

**Context and Deracialization**

One of the difficult things about the deracialization literature is that, depending on the case, there tend to be conflicting results. In some cases, a deracialized campaign advances a candidates’ ability to succeed (McCormick and Jones 1993; Price 2016; Reeves 1997) but in others it appears to be counterproductive (Gillespie 2012; Johnson 2015; Stout 2015). The inconsistent results demonstrate the necessity for further theorizing about the efficacy of deracialization. Clues to better understanding this puzzle may come from Hamilton’s early writing on the topic. Here, as mentioned above, the political context may help us understand when candidates should make identity-based appeals. Hamilton (1977, 5) noted: “The deracialization document was
addressed to a strategy applicable to electoral politics in the presidential contest of 1976. It is not a strategy to be pursued at all times in all places. Whether it would (or should) apply in a local election with a majority black electorate remains to be calculated. How it should be applied in conjunction with protest and pressure-group politics remains to be calculated. But at all times calculation is the key” (my emphasis).

Most previous research on deracialization has focused on the racial composition of the electorate as the predominant predictor of when a race-neutral campaign might succeed (Hamilton 1977; Liu 2003; McCormick and Jones 1993). Put simply, scholars argue that when the electorate is majority white, candidates should ignore race-based appeals to attract white voters. When the electorate is majority-minority, then the candidate should focus on identity politics to maximize their support.

However, this assumes that white voters will always be opposed to racial appeals and minority voters will always be supportive of this outreach. Instead, it is highly likely that the significance of race in society largely shapes when the white, black, and Latino electorates will be most receptive to policies aimed at ending racial inequality. Moreover, political strategies are largely contingent on who decides elections, which has shifted significantly over the last forty years since Hamilton’s original proposal for a deracialized campaign strategy. By taking contextual factors more seriously, we may better understand when a deracialized approach is the most effective. Moreover, we may gain insight into whether voters in the current political context will reward or punish candidates for making racial appeals.

The New Civil Rights Movement

A significant amount of research demonstrates that context shapes political opinion and voting behavior. For example, Egan and Mullin (2012) demonstrated that individuals who are exposed to extreme weather patterns are more likely to support action being taken on climate change. Along the same lines, attitudes about social welfare and crime policy are driven by the salience of crime and the employment rate of the country (see Kinder and Kiewiet 1979; Marschall 2004). In combination, when individuals are presented with new information, and particularly information that they can personally sympathize with, they are more likely to shift their attitudes.

Previous studies have found that shifts in attitudes about race can also occur under the right context. In his seminal work on the civil rights movement, McAdam (1999) demonstrated that northern whites became more supportive of the government taking action to address racial inequality following a number of high-profile protests. McAdam (1999) describes how a
confluence of contextual factors made the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act possible in a country that was majority-white and long opposed to supporting the government taking action on race relations. One of the biggest developments was that changes in technology made it possible for individuals to view some of the horrific obstacles that blacks in the South had to overcome to accomplish mundane activities like voting or riding a bus.

For example, public opinion about racial inequality shifted dramatically after civil rights protestors marched from Selma to Montgomery in Alabama to demand that black Alabamans have the right to register and vote. On March 7, 1965, protestors faced a significant amount of violence from the police as they arrived in Montgomery and were ultimately beaten back across the Edmund Pettis Bridge. The image of peaceful protesters being unable to vote simply because of the color of their skin was a poignant one for many Americans. Following the event, whites sided with the protestors over the police by a more than 2-to-1 margin (Kohut 2015). The spectacle became known as Bloody Sunday and led to a large shift in public opinion about the needs for a voting rights bill. For these and other reasons, including the importance of blacks as a swing vote and the rising black middle class, politicians were encouraged rather than discouraged to take bold steps to address racial inequality. As a result, numerous policies were passed to address the concerns of the black community.

There is good reason to believe that the current political context provides incentives for politicians to advance a racially progressive agenda. For example, there has been a heightened awareness among whites that racial discrimination constitutes a serious barrier to normalcy for blacks and Latinos. As in the civil rights movement, a new technology, the smartphone, has allowed the public to easily view examples of discrimination leading to the unwarranted shootings of African Americans. Moreover, the Black Lives Matter movement has made Americans more aware of the tangible consequences of racial discrimination. These changes have been correlated with a shift in white public opinion supporting more action to ensure racial equality. For example, in a 2015 Pew Research Center poll a majority of white respondents (~53%) agreed with the statement that more changes needed to be made so that blacks can enjoy equal rights with whites (Kohut 2015). As was seen during the civil rights movement, the public’s support for addressing racial inequality may change how individuals react to racial appeals.

Whites are not the only ones who have become more supportive of changes being made to the political system to advance racial equality in recent years. In The End of Anger, Ellis Cose (2011) showed how black millennials don’t harbor the same levels of black group consciousness as their parents. Many
younger blacks pointed to the success of Barack Obama as evidence that with hard work and playing by the rules, blacks could succeed in this country. However, just five years after the publication of The End of Anger, these same black millennials were some of the most active members of Black Lives Matter movement, and a recent Pew poll of black millennials demonstrated that over 80 percent of them supported the movement (Horowitz and Livingston 2016). While black millennials are just one part of the black community, the late Obama years saw a resurgence in black group consciousness and black activism. For example, more blacks in 2016 displayed the highest levels of linked fate captured in any survey dating back to the 1980s (see chapter 5 for more details).

Given blacks’ increased levels of consciousness in the current political context, politicians who run deracialized campaigns may face a significant backlash from the black community. Hamilton (1977) suggested a deracialized campaign must be met with pressure among blacks to ensure that government officials are responsive. He notes that “the real burden of a deracialized strategy, in fact, is not to lay one’s self open to having been coopted, but require continued diligent political mobilization to be able to reward and punish” (4). Hamilton’s prophetic statements may be playing out in practice if blacks are more likely to punish elected officials whom they perceive as ignoring the plight of the black community.

Most previous research on deracialization has focused on black and whites (see Gonzalez Juenke and Sampaio 2010; Wright Austin and Middleton 2004; see also Stout 2015 as an exception). However, Latinos’ responsiveness to racial appeals may also be influenced by the current racial climate. Having surpassed blacks as the largest racial/ethnic minority group, Latinos have also faced increased levels of discrimination in the form of racist rhetoric. Moreover, their panethnic group has been the target of restrictive policies, including punitive immigration legislation and voter identification laws. This increase in discrimination may lead Latinos, like blacks, to find an increased sense of group consciousness. In addition, it may lead them to be more supportive of candidates who address racial/ethnic inequality in their campaigns. Even in the 2016 election, the perception that Hillary Clinton cared for Latinos was a strong predictor of whether they supported her or not (Barreto 2017). In summary, the current racial context may increase the interest of whites, blacks, and Latinos in racialized appeals.

Polarization and the Increasing Efficacy of Racialized Politics

Several recent studies have demonstrated that Americans have become more ideologically sorted by their partisanship (see, e.g., Levendusky 2009).
In particular, liberals are much more likely to identify with the Democratic Party and conservatives are much more likely to identify with the Republican Party (Levendusky 2009). Along these lines, Americans have become more sorted with regard to their views of African Americans and Latinos (Tesler 2016). In 1976, when Hamilton first wrote about deracialization as a strategy, there were no significant differences in black “feeling thermometer” scores (i.e., scores that measure how well-liked or disliked an individual/group is) between white Democrats and white Republicans according to the American National Election Studies (ANES). This was largely driven by the fact that many white Democrats during this period had negative views of the black community. According to the 1976 ANES, 43 percent of white Democrats rated blacks at 50 points or lower on the 0 (cold) to 100 (warm) feeling thermometer scale.

Since that time, many of these individuals have left the Democratic Party, and those who remain tend to be more progressive on racial issues. For example, in the 2012 ANES there were significant differences between white Democrats and white Republicans, and less than a third of white Democrats rated blacks as 50 points or lower on the feeling thermometer scale. While Democrats have become more racially liberal, Republicans have moved in the opposite direction. In fact, the proportion of Republicans who rate blacks at 50 points or lower on the feeling thermometer scale actually increased by about 3 percent between 1976 and 2012. Taken in combination, individuals are becoming more sorted by their racial attitudes into one of the two major parties.

These changes in racial polarization have direct consequences for racialized politics. As voters sort based on their opinions about race, fewer liberal politicians have to worry about appealing to a group of individuals who are ideologically consistent on some issues but are weary of racially progressive politics. For example, when Jimmy Carter campaigned for president in 1976, there was a sizable number of white Democrats who supported his economic policies but were opposed to any legislation that expanded opportunities for blacks. These cross-pressured voters were exemplified by people like Mississippi Democratic U.S. senator John C. Stennis, who endorsed numerous liberal policies such as advocating for public works spending and limiting the United States’ role in the Vietnam War. However, Stennis was a staunch supporter of racial segregation. He and many southern Democrats like him were willing to support the Democratic Party, but not if they supported racially progressive policies. As a result, it was strategic for Democratic candidates to not overemphasize progressive racial politics so as to appeal to these individuals.
Today, there are fewer individuals who identify as liberal who also are antagonistic to racial policies. As a result, Democratic candidates who want to appeal to copartisans worry less about whether their positions on racial issues will alienate a segment of their supporters. In fact, several studies demonstrate that many progressive Democrats prefer candidates who advance black’s and Latino’s political interests (Tesler and Sears 2010; Stout 2015). As a result of ideological sorting, politicians don’t face the same challenges of having to appear as liberal on some issues while ignoring racial issues to be elected. As voters become more sorted by partisanship and racial attitudes, it is unlikely that Democratic politicians’ positions on racial issues alone will be what drives copartisans or ideologically similar independents away. Politicians in this era may no longer pay the same penalty for discussing racial issues.

Changing Demographics and a Changing Electorate

In 1968, the poor performance of Democratic presidential nominee and civil rights advocate Hubert Humphrey in the reliably Democratic states of Louisiana, Georgia, and Mississippi exposed problems for the Democratic Party. Many southern whites were unhappy with the party’s growing support for a progressive civil rights agenda. Richard Nixon was able to exploit these problems in 1968 and 1972 by focusing on a “Law and Order” campaign that played to whites’ negative stereotypes about blacks (McCombs and Shaw 1972). The strategy was widely successful as Nixon won in a landslide in 1972 and did well in the South, traditionally a Democratic stronghold. This was extremely problematic for the Democratic Party at the time because they were not consistently winning states like New York or California. As a result, the Democratic Party desperately needed to perform well in southern states to win the White House.

The necessity of the Democratic Party appealing to southern white voters is evident from the fact that between 1964 and 2004, the only Democrats to win the White House had connections to the South (Lyndon B. Johnson, Jimmy Carter, and Bill Clinton). To win at the national level, Democrats would largely have to appeal to white southerners who might be weary of supporting a candidate who professed a racially progressive agenda. This is exactly what made a deracialized approach so necessary during this period.

However, the political landscape has changed in two fundamental ways since then, which may limit the importance of the white vote in the South for the Democratic Party. The first is that the electoral map has changed, with states like California, Illinois, and New York, which at times had gone with the Republican Party, now safely Democratic. This change makes the Demo-
Democratic Party less reliant on southern white support. For example, in 2004 Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry famously made the statement that he could win the presidency without winning a single southern state (Guillory 2012). Kerry ultimately lost the presidential election, but had he carried Ohio, he would have indeed won the White House without winning a single state in the South.

More importantly, changes in the demographics in the United States have made it so that elected officials, and in particular Democratic elected officials, must appeal to racial/ethnic minorities to win elected office. During the time of Hamilton’s writing of the “Deracialization Strategy,” Latinos made up less than 5 percent of the population. As noted above, they now are the largest minority group in the United States and account for 15 percent of the nation. At the same time, blacks are exceeding expectations with regard to participation given that they tend to be disproportionately poorer and less educated. These traits are often are associated with lower levels of turnout (Philpot, Shaw, and McGowen 2009; Tate 2003). In combination, minority voters are making up an increasingly important part of the electorate. In fact, census estimates suggest that the country will become majority-minority by the year 2043 (Haynes, Merolla, and Ramakrishnan 2016).

These changing demographics provide strong incentives for politicians to appeal to racial/ethnic minorities. This is best illustrated by the multiracial coalition that led to Obama’s victories in 2008 and 2012. In 2012, Obama lost the white vote by 20 points. This margin was the largest by which any Democratic presidential candidate had lost in the previous twenty-eight years (Walter Mondale lost by a wider margin in 1984). Obama did particularly poorly among white southerners, who in the past had been a crucial swing vote. In fact, Obama received less than 30 percent support from white voters in the South according to exit polls (Scala, Johnson, and Rogers 2015).

So how did Obama succeed without the winning the southern white vote? He did so by putting together a coalition of liberal whites, African American voters, and Latinos (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2009). Black and Latino voters were particularly mobilized by the historic nature of his campaign. Obama proved that candidates can succeed in national elections if they are able to mobilize liberal whites, blacks, and Latinos. This will become a more fruitful strategy in the future as these groups grow as a percentage of the electorate. In sum, the combination of democratic dominance of more populous states, the Democratic Party’s systematic decline in southern states, and changing demographics presents a new context where a racialized campaign may be more advantageous than a deracialized one.
A Note on Terminology

Together with “deracialization,” which I defined earlier in this introduction, I also use the terms “racial appeal” and “racialization” throughout this book. I define “racial appeal” as any form of outreach that is targeted specifically at members of underrepresented groups. When candidates discuss reparations for slavery, recognize black history month, address racial/ethnic income equality, or speak in Spanish they are making a racial appeal. Similarly, when I use “racialization,” I am arguing that a candidate is using racial appeals meant to advance the interests of racial/ethnic minorities. This is an important distinction to make because previous work has tied racialization to both liberal and conservative racial policies. While this term could be tied to policies meant to inhibit or advance the interests of racial/ethnic minorities, in this book racialization refers only to politicians making attractive appeals to blacks and Latinos.

Additionally, when I mention “racialized campaigns,” I am not only speaking about campaigns that are solely or mostly based on racial appeals. Instead, I generally speak of racialized campaigns as campaigns that make some racial outreach as part of their appeals to voters. This type of a racialized campaign is much more common given that there are few campaigns that are built solely to focus on race. As a result, I use a broad definition of racialization when I use this term. For example, 2020 U.S. presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren would be described as running a racialized campaign in my definition because of her appeals to racial/ethnic minorities. A quick perusal of her website reveals that while her campaign does not ignore race, it is not solely focused on racial issues. For example, in her “Plan” section of the website (as of September 27, 2019), she has forty-five different issues listed. However, only about five are explicitly tied to racial groups, including “Valuing the Work of Women of Color” and “Leveling the Playing Field for Entrepreneurs of Color,” among others. While some may disagree with my definition of this term, for the purposes of this book I use a broader definition of racialization, which includes individuals who make at least some appeals to people of color.

Chapter Outline

The Case for Identity Politics explores whether and how different racial/ethnic groups’ racial attitudes have changed over time, and how these shifts in public opinion may lead blacks, Latinos, and liberal whites to be more supportive of Democratic candidates who use racial appeals in the current political context. Chapter 1 explores how race became more salient after the
election of Barack Obama in 2008. Here I focus on how the Tea Party movement, sparked by Obama’s election to the White House, increased concerns about racial discrimination in society. I explore how this, in combination with the high-profile police shootings of people of color, the Black Lives Matter movement, and Donald Trump’s nomination to the White House, led to dramatic changes in American’s attitudes about racial issues.

Dramatic shifts in the racial context of the United States have an important impact on public opinion. I discuss this in chapter 2 by focusing on how changes in the racial context influence whites’ attitudes about racial/ethnic minorities and racial policies. I demonstrate that America’s growing interest with race combined with growing political polarization is leading white Democrats to express more progressive racial attitudes now than in the recent past. Conversely, it has led Republicans to become slightly more conservative on these issues. In combination, the results of this chapter show that gaps in racial attitudes among white Democrats and white Republicans have grown substantially in the last ten years and that much of this growing division is driven by the increasingly racially liberal attitudes of white Democrats.

Much of the change described in chapter 2 has been driven by partisan realignment, which is explored in chapter 3. In this chapter, I assess how growing divisions in partisanship and voting behavior among working-class whites with high or low levels of racial resentment may reshape how parties work to appeal to this electorate. The analysis in this chapter demonstrates that white working-class voters, a group that was originally the target of desegregated campaigns, are severely fragmented around issues of race. As a result, a one-size-fits-all policy around desegregation may no longer work to attract this group of voters. Moreover, as these voters have moved stronger toward one political party, labeling them as “swing voters” may no longer be accurate.

This substantial shift in polarization and partisanship raises questions about whether abstaining from racial appeals is still an effective strategy to attract white support. In chapter 4, I analyze how white Democrats, Republicans, and independents respond to candidates who appear racially progressive through the use of a survey experiment and survey data. For the latter, I use the ANES and Pew Research Center polls to explore whether Democratic presidential candidates from 1980 to 2016 were punished for appearing as racially progressive. The results demonstrate that unlike previous elections, perceptions of racial progressivism in 2016 did not lead whites to be less supportive of Hillary Clinton. Instead, white Democrats who perceived Clinton as racially progressive were more likely to vote, boosting her chances of success. The results of the Pew analysis demonstrate that whites did not become
more or less supportive of Obama after he made a public appeal to Latinos in the form of expanding protections for the undocumented parents of American citizens. The results of an experimental analysis show that white respondents, regardless of partisanship, were equally supportive and enthusiastic for a hypothetical Democratic candidate who focused on racial issues as they were for the same candidate when they focused on liberal economic issues. In combination, the results demonstrate that racial appeals may not lead to less support for Democratic politicians, and, in some cases, it may actually mobilize supportive white voters.

While attracting white support is essential for election to most offices in the United States, discussions about race are especially significant for members of underrepresented groups. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on African Americans’ reaction to the changing racial climate in the United States and their responses to racial appeals. In chapter 5, I discuss why the high-profile police shootings of blacks, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the perceived poor treatment of Obama by whites has led to a heightened sense of black linked fate. I then show that this change in levels of linked fate among blacks overlaps with their greater support for racially progressive policies.

Using the ANES, a Pew poll, and an online experiment, in chapter 6 I show that this change in racial policy preferences and group consciousness among blacks translates into greater levels of support for racially liberal Democratic candidates. I find that blacks are more supportive of racially liberal candidates in both the ANES and the experiment in primary elections, but partisanship washes away the influence of racial progressivism in general elections. I also find that blacks are more mobilized and enthusiastic for Democratic candidates who are perceived as more likely to address racial inequality. However, I find little evidence that blacks respond to appeals to the Latino community. Overall, the results from chapters 5 and 6 demonstrate that blacks reward candidates who engage in political outreach to their community.

Modern racial appeals must take into account the reaction from not just blacks and whites but also the growing Latino population in the United States. Chapter 7 explores whether the racial context in the United States has increased Latinos’ levels of group consciousness and whether Latinos have become more liberal on racial issues in recent years. The results demonstrate that Latinos have increased in their levels of panethnic linked fate and hold more racially liberal attitudes now than in the recent past. In chapter 8, I show that this change in ethnic consciousness among Latinos leads them to respond positively to racially progressive candidates. Latinos are more supportive of these candidates in the primaries and are more mobilized and enthusiastic for these candidates in the presidential election. I also find that Obama’s ap-
proval ratings increased substantially among Latinos after his announcement to protect more undocumented individuals from deportation. The combined results demonstrate that racial/ethnic minorities respond positively to racially progressive candidates. Moreover, they demonstrate that the efficacy of appealing to these groups through discussions about race is greater now than in the past.

The efficacy of racial appeals is also largely be affected by changes to the demographic patterns in the United States. In chapter 9, I assess how the results from the previous chapters in combination with the growing political power of racial/ethnic minorities may make racial appeals more fruitful as time progresses. I examine the effectiveness of these appeals at different levels of government by exploring whether racially liberal candidates at the top of the ballot have the ability to improve perceptions of the party overall. The results show that blacks’, Latinos’, and white Democrats’ perceptions of a racially progressive president lead to more positive feelings for the Democratic Party. However, the same racially progressive candidates lead white Republicans to view the Democratic Party more negatively.

The conclusion synthesizes the analysis in this project to summarize how candidates should use racial appeals to maximize their chances of success. In particular, I argue that in the current political climate Democratic candidates should not shy away from racial appeals because polarization makes mobilization a more effective strategy compared to attempting to persuade unmovable voters. I also argue that the Democratic Party should engage in multiracial outreach that does not minimize their appeals to white working-class voters. While I show that racial appeals improve the Democratic Party’s standing with the electorate, I argue that a campaign that is solely focused on racial/ethnic minorities is likely to be equally exclusionary and ineffective as a deracialized campaign that subjugates the interest of blacks and Latinos. Overall, the analysis in *The Case for Identity Politics* demonstrates that, under the right conditions, appeals to underrepresented groups can boost political organizations’ chances of success by engaging racial/ethnic minorities and mobilizing sympathetic whites.