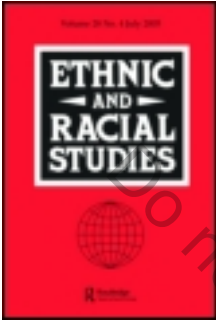


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# White ethnicity in twenty-first-century America: findings from a new national survey<sup>1</sup>

Jason Torkelson and Douglas Hartmann

*(First submission May 2009; First published January 2010)*

## Abstract

The 1980s and early 1990s witnessed a great deal of research on white ethnicity. Yet since this time, few systematic empirical studies of white ethnicity have emerged. This paper uses data from a recent nationally representative survey of Americans to (re)assess white ethnicity in the twenty-first century. Three primary areas are explored: (1) the pervasiveness and salience of ethnic claims among white Americans; (2) the social and demographic characteristics of self-identified white ethnics; and (3) the impact of white ethnic identity on political opinions and racial attitudes. We find that a smaller but significant number of white Americans claim ethnicity today and that distinguishing social characteristics of white ethnics still remain. Contrary to current prevailing theoretical formulations, however, these markers of distinction do not appear to be related to political or racial attitudes in any systematic way.

**Keywords:** Ethnicity; whiteness; racial attitudes; colour-blindness; demography; white ethnic.

Following the ethnic revival of the 1970s (Jacobson 2006), sociologists produced a plethora of studies on white Americans who claimed distinctive ethnic identities for themselves, culminating in monumental and award-winning books by Mary Waters (1990) and Richard Alba (1990). These studies provided important descriptions of white ethnics. Their documenting the volatility and voluntaristic nature of white ethnicity played an important role in decoupling ethnicity from ancestry (and race) in scholarly discourses. In stark contrast to then-conventional wisdom (cf. Glazer and Moynihan 1963), these collected

works demonstrated that ethnicity was essentially voluntary, variable, and fundamentally malleable for white Americans. In the post-civil rights period, white ethnicity was personally meaningful and subjectively negotiated but not particularly determinative – a ‘symbolic’ identity in Herbert Gans’s (1979) famous formulation.

The impact of these studies was more substantial than is often appreciated. At a basic level, the reconceptualization of white ethnicity sounded the death knell for ethnic and racial primordialism and focused analytic attention more toward social forces that shape and sustain ethnic (and racial) boundaries. In doing so, these works situated white ethnicity in the context of American racial relations by laying bare fundamental differences between white ethnic boundaries and other group claims as well as the way ethnic affiliations can contribute to the reproduction of established racial hierarchies (Steinberg 1981; Waters 1990). Moreover, these studies provided impetus and vital empirical footing for the interdisciplinary field of critical whiteness studies to emerge in the 1990s, as well as a whole series of subsequent sociological works reconceptualizing American racism.

White ethnicity has continued to occupy contemporary scholars. Historians, for example, have devoted a good deal of attention to charting the shift from ethnicity into whiteness for a variety of groups (Ignatiev 1995; Barrett and Roediger 1997; Brodtkin 1998; Guglielmo 2003). For their part, racial theorists and cultural critics have continued to critically reflect on the role white ethnicity and claims to white ethnic identity (or the lack thereof) play in reproducing racial stereotypes and hierarchies (Winant 1997; Perry 2001; Gallagher 2003). Despite this continued attention, little new systematic empirical work on white ethnicity has appeared since the 1980s post-revival period. We have little data by which to evaluate whether patterns of white ethnicity from the 1980s are still the same, or how white understandings of ethnic identities might have shifted.

To fill these gaps in the literature and update the field we use data from a recent, nationally representative telephone survey to accomplish three main tasks. First, we provide baseline estimates of the pervasiveness of ethnic identity claims and the salience of these claims among white Americans. Second, we use logistic regression to explore the social and demographic characteristics of whites who claim ethnicity. Third, we examine the political opinions and racial attitudes of white ethnics with an emphasis on white privilege, colour-blindness, and liberal individualism.

Our analyses indicate that a smaller number of white Americans assert ethnicity compared to the past, but that whites who claim ethnicity remain distinguishable from their non-ethnic counterparts across multiple dimensions. Specifically, whites who assert ethnicity in twenty-first-century America appear significantly more likely to be

older, male, married, of lower socio-economic status, religious, and from urban centres, among other things. Contrary to certain prevailing theoretical speculations, however, the political attitudes and opinions of white ethnics in contemporary America do not appear to be distinguishable from those of non-ethnic whites in our data, though ties to ethnicity do appear to be related to racial identity saliency for whites in a way that is not the case for identifying ethnics from other racial categories. The implications of these findings for understandings of white ethnicity, whiteness, and racial ideologies are discussed by way of conclusion.

### **Review of relevant literature**

Sociological research on white ethnicity from the post-revival period made three fundamental contributions: it provided basic social facts about white ethnics; it demonstrated that white ethnicity was more variable and voluntary than was previously thought; and it laid the groundwork for post-civil rights conceptualizations of race/ethnicity, racism, and whiteness.

Regarding baseline facts, studies collectively demonstrated that old boundaries between white ethnic groups greatly weakened in the later twentieth century and that a more encompassing, generic category of 'white ethnic' had taken shape. Sociologists paid a good deal of attention to distinguishing this new 'white ethnic' category. Alba (1990, p. 294), for instance, estimated that upwards of 20 per cent of post-revival whites still held fairly strong ties to ethnicity. On the other hand, it was becoming clear that the traditional ethnic neighbourhood as a site of identification was in decline (Hirshman 1983). Locality, however, remained significant to white ethnicity, just in a new way. Lieberman's (1985, pp. 175–6) study of 'unhyphenated' whites showed that whites who did not claim ethnicity tended to be rural, less educated, and southern. Similarly, Alba (1990, p. 58) found that whites with higher education living in non-rural areas were more likely to ethnically identify. Lieberman and Waters (1993, pp. 435–6) showed that life-course factors influenced white ethnic identification as well, by finding that some whites change ethnic identity around the age they leave their parental home. And regarding generational distance, Hansen's (1938) famous notion of the 'third generation return' to ethnicity was problematized by the insight that whites identify ethnically the closer they are to their family's immigrant generation (Alba 1990, pp. 54–5).

Changing marriage practices also impacted white ethnic identification patterns, particularly for women. The twentieth century saw great increases in intermarriage among white ethnics, though racial boundaries were not often crossed (Lieberman and Waters 1988, p. 246; Alba

1990, pp. 164–80). In these (inter)marriages, white women often adopted their husband's surname, began to think of themselves less in ethnic terms, and/or simply adopted their husband's ethnicity (Waters 1990, pp.102–14). Additionally, despite the fact that identifying white ethnic women were more likely to place greater importance on ethnicity than men (Alba 1990, pp. 69–70), Lieberman and Waters (1993, pp. 435–6) found that white girls were more likely to have multiple ancestries conferred upon them by parents while boys were more likely to be granted a singular identity. This was important because, the more components that are incorporated into ethnic identity, the more likely whites are to disavow ethnicity over time (Alba 1990). Given the likely effects of marriage, multiplicity, and time on women's ethnic identification, it is perhaps not surprising that, of identifying white ethnics, married women were more likely to self-report unmixed ancestry than unmarried women (Lieberman and Waters 1986).

In documenting these patterns, the empirical components of post-revival studies suggested that white ethnicity was more voluntaristic than was previously realized. Waters (1990) showed that many white children are assigned identities that are not the logical combination of parental ancestries; and Alba (1990) similarly demonstrated that many native-born whites describe ethnicity in ways that are inconsistent with nationality. Lieberman and Waters' (1993) work with census data further found that when ethnicity was volunteered by whites, it was often a 'simplification' of identity – respondents selected one of many potential identities. In sum, these works made it clear that white ethnicity was highly variable and largely a matter of choice, calling into question certain primordial assumptions about race and ethnicity that were then in vogue.

Gans's (1979) paper on 'symbolic ethnicity' perhaps articulated and developed this point most fully. This concept stems from Weber (1922) who argued against seeing ethnicity in ostensibly 'objective' blood differences and for conceptualizing ethnicity along the lines of overlapping subjective beliefs in common traits or customs. In Gans's formulation, symbolic ethnicity is a phenomenon in which white ethnicity is not expressed through culture or social attachments, but through symbols that do not fundamentally organize one's life or preclude intermixing with other groups (Gans 1979). As Waters' work subsequently demonstrated, white ethnics frequently conceptualize ethnic caricatures of sorts – 'cache(s) of beliefs, images, stereotypes, and stories about American ethnic groups' – that they can choose to identify with (1990, p. 129).

Post-revival scholarship on white ethnicity also suggested that the increasing amount of choice in symbolic white ethnicity was not without consequences. Alba (1990, pp. 315–19), for example, noted

that the extent to which white ethnic groups were able to successfully integrate into mainstream American society had come to serve as the measuring stick against which other groups' (lack of) successes were evaluated. Similarly, Waters claimed that one of the hidden costs of white ethnicity was that ethnic whites are at risk of being blinded to the structural advantages they enjoy in American society—that because white ethnicity is voluntary, lacks social costs, and is mostly used as a point of pride, white ethnics are less able to understand social disadvantages faced by racial(ized) groups who do not possess white identity options (Waters 1990, pp. 147–68).

In recent years, Waters' and Alba's reflections on the potential social consequences of white ethnicity have been picked up, expanded, and extended in the context of a range of works that critically examine whiteness, white ethnicity, and new forms of racism (for fuller reviews, see Twine and Gallagher 2008; Hartmann, Gerteis and Croll 2009). First and perhaps most notably, the field of critical whiteness studies came together in the 1990s and developed the insight that whiteness comprises a largely invisible and taken for granted category to most whites; and that because of this, whiteness acts as a blank and unarticulated backdrop against which many whites perceive difference and otherness (Frankenberg 1993; Hyde 1995; Delgado and Stefanic 1997; Lipsitz 1998). Overall, the central thrust of these works is that the less visible whiteness is to whites, the less likely it is whites will see privileges they enjoy. Indeed, as Doane's (2003) review of the field underscores, a good many theorists now believe that white racial invisibility leads many whites to subscribe to individualistic explanations for their own successes; and this 'attribution error' (Ditomaso, Parks-Yancy and Post 2003, p. 194) is thought to be consonant with a growing abundance of empirical research that consistently finds whites becoming more liberal regarding traditional markers of inequality but continuing to oppose policies intended to ameliorate racial inequality like affirmative action (Sniderman and Piazza 1993; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Bobo and Kluegel 1997; Sniderman and Carmines 1997; Bobo 1998; Feagin and O'Brien 2003).

These ideas about whiteness and white privilege have also been connected to prevailing analyses and critiques of colour-blindness. Colour-blindness can be understood as the ideology that individuals should be judged only on their own merits without regard for racial or other social group backgrounds. Social critics (cf. Carr 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2006) have argued that such a perspective cannot appreciate or understand (much less work to change) the persistent inequalities and structural disadvantages associated with race. Under Bonilla-Silva's formulation, for example, colour-blind ideologies are articulated through four primary frames: the belief(s) that force should not be used to achieve race-based social policy, that racial difference

and self-segregation is natural, that cultural-racial differences are essential, and that discrimination no longer affects minority life outcomes (2006, pp. 26–9).

Although scholars of whiteness and colour-blindness have not explicitly detailed how white ethnicity plays into their various conceptual frameworks, recent theoretical and qualitative works have suggested some linkages (cf. Winant 1997; Brodtkin 1998; Jacobson 1998; di Leonardo 1999; Jacobson 2006). Two main threads are postulated that tie white ethnic identity and colour-blind ideology together. First, the unarticulated nature of ‘whiteness’ is believed to give ethnic whites the unique ability to assert ethnicity at their convenience (Gallagher 2003). From this, it is suggested that white ethnics do not experience negative consequences from ethnicity that other groups face, which, in turn, leaves them less aware of structural (dis)advantages associated with race and ethnicity. Second, white ethnics are thought to be more likely to subscribe to historically inaccurate narratives that treat the oppression, circumstances, and assimilative potential of past white ethnic immigrant groups as equal to that of present-day minorities. Like the malleability of white ethnic identity, perceiving closeness to immigrant antecedents who are believed to have pulled themselves up from the bottom rungs of the socio-economic ladder on their own merits is theorized to lead many identifying white ethnics to view current racial inequality as more legitimate than other whites.

While highly provocative and valuable, much existing scholarship on whiteness and racial ideology has tended to treat whiteness as a largely invariant monolith and emphasize theory over empirical evidence (McDermott and Samson 2005, p. 256). In this vein, recent scholarly forays into the situational social forces that impact how whiteness is articulated, shaped, negotiated and variable (Hartigan 1999; Perry 2001; Twine and Gallagher 2008) are indicative of a growing need for more empirically grounded studies that tease out the complexities of whiteness and different dimensions of white affiliation.

### **Questions for investigation**

The preceding review suggests a series of questions about white ethnicity that are worth exploring empirically.

*How ethnic is white America today?* Since white ethnic groups diffused into a broader, more generic grouping in the twentieth century, we ask how many white Americans still assert ethnicity today? And how significant or salient are those identity claims that remain? There has been no systematic attempt to assess white ethnicity since the post-revival period. It is thus important to establish some baseline estimations about the prevalence and salience of ethnic identity in the white population today.

*What distinguishes whites who profess an ethnic identity from other whites?* While the post-revival studies of ethnicity demonstrated that there are indeed some clear patterns that characterize white ethnicity, these studies also emphasized the flux and volatility of these patterns. To us, it seems necessary to explore whether white ethnics still constitute a relatively coherent category as they did in the 1980s, and to see if and how patterns of white ethnicity might have shifted. Put another way, what social characteristics relate to whites' choices to 'opt' for an ethnic identity today?

*How is white ethnic identity related to political attitudes, racial ideologies, and racial identity salience?* How does the theorized relationship between white ethnic identity and colour-blind racial ideology play out when assessed through large-scale survey data? Until now, there has been no attempt to systematically explore prevailing notions of white ethnicity and colour-blindness. We ask how the political and racial attitudes of white ethnics compare to those of non-ethnic whites. Connected with this is another set of questions about the relationship between white ethnic identification and white racial identity. There is surprisingly little discussion of the relationship between white racial identity and white ethnic identity in both whiteness studies and more recent critical works on white ethnicity. To move the field(s) forward, then, we believe it is important to highlight how white ethnic identity might relate to white racial identity, and how that compares to the relationship between ethnic and racial identity for non-whites.

### **Data and methods**

Data come from the survey component of the American Mosaic Project [AMP] in the Department of Sociology at the University of Minnesota. The survey (2003, N = 2,081) was fielded by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center and used random digit dialling [RDD] techniques to yield nationally representative data (with significant oversamples of Black and Hispanic/Latino respondents) on issues of diversity and solidarity with an emphasis on race and religion as key frames of reference. Households were randomly selected for the thirty-minute survey, then respondents chosen randomly from within households. The response rate, calculated for known households, was 36 per cent, a rate that compares favourably with other recent RDD samples.<sup>2</sup> For this study, we focus on questions involving ethnic and racial identification to establish baseline demographics and assess their relationship to items about political attitudes, racial ideologies, and racial identification more generally.

The AMP survey questions on racial and ethnic identification provide a unique opportunity to measure the comparative effects of



racial and/or ethnic identity on whites and others. We classified respondents as 'white' if they asserted they were white when asked the open-ended question 'What is your race?' All other valid respondents were classified as 'non-white'. A respondent was classified as ethnic if they answered affirmatively to the question 'Is there another ethnic category that you more closely identify with than the (racial) group we've been talking about?' (Respondents who did not answer affirmatively were considered non-ethnic.)

We assess the salience of ethnic claims by distinguishing ethnic respondents whose identities appear 'thick' – in the sense that ethnicity organizes individual social life more comprehensively – from those whose identities are comparatively 'thin' (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, pp. 77–81). In our analyses, thicker ethnics are 'salient ethnics', thinner ethnics are 'nominal ethnics', and respondents who do not assert ethnicity are 'non-ethnics'. The distinction between 'salient' and 'nominal' was determined based upon how ethnic respondents answered two questions which immediately followed the ethnic identification measure: 'How important is this (ethnic) identity to you?' and 'Do you feel this (ethnic) group has a culture that should be preserved?' Ethnic respondents who both stated their ethnic identity was 'very important' and believed their ethnic group had a culture worth preserving are considered 'salient' ethnics, while those who answered differently are 'nominal' ethnics.

To estimate the number of white Americans who still assert ethnicity, and to see how strong these identities might be, the number of whites volunteering ethnic identity are tallied and accordingly placed into the categories 'salient' or 'nominal'. The prevalence and salience of white ethnic identity is then compared with that of non-whites. A comparison to non-white ethnics is meant to serve as a contextualizing point of reference.

To identify characteristics that distinguish whites who hold an ethnic identity from those who do not (our second set of questions), we use three fairly standard blocks of independent variables: demographics, social context, and cultural values. (These sets had been used in previous analyses of AMP survey data (cf. Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006).) Descriptive statistics are provided in Table 1. We also note here that we use a quadratic rather than a linear specification of age in our models since prior work has shown flux in white ethnic identity over the life-course.<sup>3</sup>

To see if white ethnic identity relates to political and racial ideologies, as many theorists have recently speculated (our third set of questions), the responses of ethnic whites and non-ethnic whites are compared across parameters that measure their relative alignment with various political and colour-blind ideals. We follow Bonilla-Silva's (2006) conceptualization of colour-blind ideology to designate

**Table 1.** Description of independent variables in multivariate analysis

Variable	Description/range	Mean or %	SD
<i>Demographics</i>			
Age	In years (18–93)	44.76	16.109
Gender	Recorded gender (male = 1)	51%	–
Education	Highest level completed (1 = some H.S. or less to 6 = post-grad)	3.98	1.472
Father's education	Highest level completed (1 = some H.S. or less to 6 = post-grad)	2.89	1.777
Income	Family income (1 = <10k to 8 = >100k)	5.69	1.793
Marital status	(1 = married, 0 = other statuses)	60%	–
<i>Social context</i>			
% voted Democrat	% respondents' county voting Democrat 2000 Presidential election	48.45	11.657
% below poverty line	% respondents' county population below poverty line	10.98	4.586
US citizen?	(1 = yes)	99%	–
Parents foreign born?	(1 = yes)	9%	–
Community diverse?	(respondents' report of community diversity 1–5, least to highest)	3.78	1.430
Grew up in urban environment	(1 = yes)	9%	–
Lives in south US	(1 = yes, 0 = other regions)	30%	–
<i>Cultural values</i>			
Social conservative	(1 = social conservative, 0 = moderate/liberal)	32%	–
Economic conservative	(1 = economic conservative, 0 = moderate/liberal)	43%	–
Value diversity in community	(1–5, least to highest valuation of diversity in personal life)	4.45	.948
Religious salience	(1–5, least to highest investment in current religion)	4.08	1.279
Shares African-American vision of society	(1–4, least to highest agreement)	2.56	.779
Follow same rules	(different lifestyles OK so long as everyone follows same rules, 1–5 least to highest agreement)	4.10	1.206

Source: AMP Survey; N = 1,220.

four operational dimensions: (1) unawareness of white privilege; (2) aversion to multiculturalism; (3) individualistic explanations for life outcomes; and (4) opposition to expenditure policies intended to ameliorate racial inequality. Descriptive statistics are provided in Table 2.

Regarding awareness of white privilege, respondents were asked to assess whether racial privilege or work ethic has helped whites get

**Table 2.** Description of other independent variables

Variable	N	% Agree
<i>White perception of white advantage</i>		
Prejudice and discrimination favour whites	838	62%
Laws and institutions favour whites	835	46%
Effort and hard work favour whites	854	89%
Upbringing favours whites	849	79%
Access to schools and connections favour whites	858	83%
<i>Colour-blind ideals and multiculturalism in whites</i>		
Group-centred mentality is problematic	1,527	64%
Focus on background is divisive	1,550	84%
Group rights are important	1,537	89%
Employers should promote diversity	1,527	54%
Schools should promote diversity	1,548	89%
<i>Colour-blind ideals and individualism in whites</i>		
Favouritism 'helped' in getting ahead	1,548	17%
Hard work and effort 'helped' in getting ahead	1,558	93%
Upbringing 'helped' in getting ahead	1,555	86%
Schools and connections 'helped' in getting ahead	1,557	73%
<i>Colour-blind ideals in race-related contexts in whites</i>		
African-Americans should receive special consideration in hiring decisions and school admissions	1,540	21%
African-Americans should get more economic assistance from the government	1,536	15%
Charities and non-profit organizations should do more to help African-Americans	1,523	37%
<i>Salience of white identity</i>		
Racial identity very important now	1,556	38%
Racial identity very important growing up	1,541	26%
Racial group has a culture worth preserving	1,483	77%
<i>Salience of non-white identity</i>		
Racial identity very important now	503	72%
Racial identity very important growing up	505	57%
Racial group has a culture worth preserving	495	91%

Source: AMP Survey.

ahead of blacks in American society in five separate areas.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, respondents were asked to assess whether 'prejudice and discrimination', 'laws and institutions', 'effort and hard work', 'differences in whites' family upbringing', and 'access to better schools and connections' were either 'very important/somewhat important' or 'not very important/not important at all' in explaining whites' better success in American society. Attitudes toward multiculturalism were measured via questions that assessed respondents' views toward issues of diversity and group rights. Specifically, respondents were asked if they 'strongly agree/somewhat agree' or 'somewhat disagree/strongly disagree' with the statements: 'Employers should be required to promote diversity in the workplace', 'Public schools should teach about the racial and ethnic diversity of the American people', 'It's a problem if people think of themselves mostly as members of groups rather than individuals', 'Focusing too much on people's different backgrounds divides people', and 'It is important to recognize the rights of groups as well as the rights of individuals'.

As a measure of individualism, respondents were asked the extent to which 'favouritism', 'hard work and effort', 'upbringing', and 'access to resources like schools and social connections' either 'helped', 'held back', 'neither helped or held back', or 'both equally' helped and held back their own efforts to get ahead in life. For purposes of analysis, responses of 'helped' are compared to all other mentioned categories. Finally, regarding attitudes toward race-based ameliorative compensatory policies, respondents were asked whether they 'strongly agree/somewhat agree' or 'somewhat disagree/strongly disagree' with the statements: 'African-Americans should receive special consideration in job hiring and school admissions', 'African-Americans should get more economic assistance from the government', and 'Charities and other non-profit organizations should do more to help African-Americans'.

To assess how white ethnicity might affect white racial identity, respondents were asked a set of questions (separate from those that assessed the salience of ethnic identity) tailored toward gauging racial identity salience. Specifically, respondents were asked, 'Do you feel this (racial) group has a culture that should be preserved?' 'How important is this (racial) identity to you?' and 'How important was your racial identity growing up?' For purposes of analysis, respondents are considered to be more aware of and invested in their racial identities if they stated that their racial identity was 'very important' currently and when growing up, and if they felt that their racial group had a culture worth preserving. We also analyze ethnicity and racial identity salience for non-whites to serve as a point of reference, and to highlight differences that might be present between how ethnicity relates to white versus non-white racial identity.

## Findings

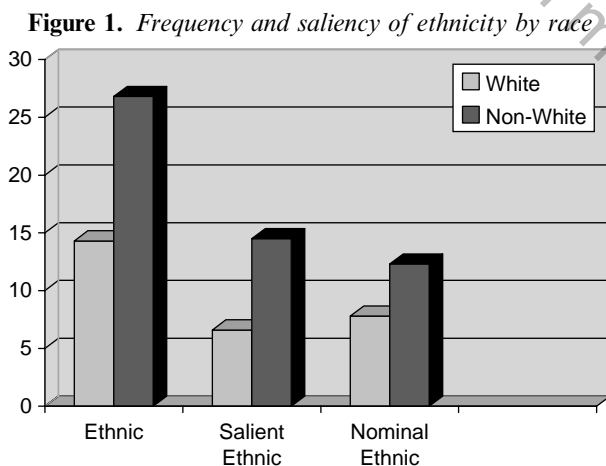
Our first set of findings consists of basic estimates of the number of white Americans who claim an ethnic identification, and our further analysis of the salience of this identity for that population. Our data suggest only a small segment of the white population in the early twenty-first century identifies as ethnic.

As Figure 1 shows, about 14 per cent of the white population, less than 1 in 6, asserts an ethnic identity. This is not a particularly large number, either in comparison to the prominence of white ethnic claims in the popular culture in the 1970s and early 1980s or in comparison to the percentage of non-white Americans who assert an ethnic affiliation. Moreover, less than half of that group – some 46 per cent – hold a categorically ‘salient’ rather than ‘nominal’ ethnic identity by our measures. Taken together, these data indicate that slightly less than 7 per cent of all whites hold a salient or ‘thick’ ethnic identity.

As also revealed in Figure 1, almost twice as many, roughly 27 per cent, of non-white Americans claim ethnicity. Of non-whites, 54 per cent of ethnics hold a salient identity, which is equal to roughly 15 per cent of the overall non-white population. By these measures, ethnicity is about half as prevalent in whites as it is in other racial groups, and there are more non-whites who possess *salient* ties to their ethnicity than there are whites asserting any ethnicity identity at all.

So who are these white ethnics? A multivariate analysis is provided in Table 3.

The independent variables from Table 1 are used in successive blocks to measure the odds that they affect white ethnic identity (1 = white ethnic, 0 = non-ethnic white). Model 1 shows that white men, older whites, whites in lower income brackets, and married whites are



**Table 3.** Summary of logistic regressions on white ethnic identity (1 = white ethnic, 0 = non-ethnic white)

Independent variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Exp (B)	CI (95%)	Exp (B)	CI (95%)	Exp (B)	CI (95%)
<i>Demographics</i>						
Age (years)	1.076*	1.011–1.145	1.069*	1.002–1.140	1.082*	1.011–1.158
Age squared	.999*	.999–1.000	.999*	.999–1.000	.999*	.998–1.000
Gender (1 = male)	1.505*	1.086–2.086	1.598**	1.139–2.241	2.162***	1.498–3.121
Education	1.024	.906–1.158	1.013	.892–1.150	1.011	.889–1.151
Father's education	1.068	.964–1.182	1.081	.974–1.200	1.087	.977–1.210
Income	.843**	.750–.927	.833**	.745–.931	.797***	.710–.896
Marital status (1 = married)	1.499*	1.020–2.203	1.671*	1.120–2.492	1.825**	1.192–2.795
<i>Social context</i>						
% voted Democrat	–	–	1.012	.997–1.028	1.016*	1.000–1.032
% below poverty line	–	–	1.011	.974–1.049	1.008	.970–1.047
US citizen	–	–	.228**	.076–.680	.101***	.029–.348
Parents foreign born	–	–	1.400	.800–2.450	1.403	.788–2.498
Community diversity	–	–	.986	.878–1.108	.971	.862–1.093
Urban environment	–	–	3.416***	2.180–5.355	4.342***	2.706–6.966
Southern United States	–	–	1.092	.737–1.620	1.150	.766–1.727
<i>Cultural values</i>						
Social conservative	–	–	–	–	1.082	.732–1.599
Economic conservative	–	–	–	–	1.049	.733–1.499
Value diversity	–	–	–	–	1.164	.951–1.424
Religious salience	–	–	–	–	1.334**	1.129–1.575
Af-Am share vision	–	–	–	–	1.572***	1.246–1.984
Follow same rules	–	–	–	–	.930	.807–1.072
Constant	.050***	–	.098*	–	.010***	–
Nagelkerke R Sq	.033	–	.092	–	.140	–

Source: AMP Survey. N = 1,220 \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.

significantly more likely to opt for an ethnic identity net of controls. Age, gender, marital status, and income do not just retain significance in subsequent models, but they also become more robust. Model 2, accounting for social context, additionally shows that whites who grew up in urban centres and whites who are not US citizens are significantly more likely to assert an ethnic identity. After the inclusion of cultural values in the final model, these factors retain significance and also become more robust. Model 3 reveals that possessing a more salient religious identity and agreeing with African-Americans' vision of society (as respondents conceptualize this) are significantly related to white ethnicity.

The final model takes the analysis even further. Here, our measure of county voting patterns gains significance as well, indicating that white ethnics are more likely to come from areas that lean Democrat.<sup>5</sup> This model also confirms that several of the social characteristics identified above are significantly related to the odds that whites will opt for an ethnic identity net of controls. Perhaps most importantly, the Nagelkerke R square statistic (.140) estimates that our final model accounts for a full 14 per cent of the variation between white ethnics and non-ethnic whites, compared to 3.3 and 9.2 per cent in Models 1 and 2, respectively.

When we consider the magnitude of the effect of significant independent variables on the odds of white ethnic identification in this final model, we can begin to get a clearer, more nuanced picture of twenty-first-century American white ethnics. Demographically, as Model 3 shows, white ethnics in contemporary America are more likely to be older, male, married, and from lower income brackets. Specifically, the odds of claiming an ethnic identity are more than twice as large for men as for women – white men are a full 2.162 times more likely than white women to assert ethnicity ( $p < .001$ ). Also, for each year increase in age among whites, the odds of asserting a white ethnic identity are 1.082 larger ( $p = .023$ ). In addition to age, married whites are 83 per cent more likely to report an ethnic identity than are non-married whites ( $p = .006$ ). Finally, for each decrease in income on our eight-bracket income scale, the odds that whites assert an ethnic identity decrease by 20 per cent compared to whites of a higher income bracket ( $p < .001$ ).

As for social context, data indicate that non-US citizens are more likely to identify as ethnic than are citizens. Our final model shows that the odds of asserting an ethnic identity decline by 90 per cent for US citizens as compared to non-US citizens ( $p < .001$ ). This is not exactly surprising. Aside from being non-citizens, though, white ethnics appear more likely to have grown up in urban centres. The odds of asserting ethnic identity are a full 4.342 times higher for whites who grew up in metropolitan areas compared to whites from different settings ( $p < .001$ ). Given that white ethnics are more likely to come

from cities, it perhaps makes sense that ethnic whites are also slightly more likely to come from Democrat-leaning counties net of controls ( $p = .049$ ).

Regarding how cultural values relate to white ethnicity, religious salience and believing in a shared vision of American society with African-Americans correlate to white ethnicity claims. Specifically, for each increase on our five-point scale that measures the salience of current religious affiliations, the odds that whites assert an ethnic identity are 1.334 times greater ( $p = .001$ ). In addition to possessing more salient ties to religion, white ethnics also appear to conceive of a shared vision of American society with African-Americans. The odds that whites assert an ethnicity are a full 1.572 greater with each increase on the four-point scale that measures these sentiments ( $p < .001$ ).

Given that the final model shows that *ethnic* whites are more likely than others to believe in a shared vision of American society with African-Americans, it is perhaps not surprising that ethnic whites did not appear to be more aligned with colour-blind ideologies than non-ethnic whites, as more recent theories of white ethnicity would otherwise predict. Table 4 allows us to explore this relationship in more detail.

As Table 4 indicates, by our measures, white ethnicity and colour-blind ideologies do not appear to be greatly related. White ethnics and non-ethnic whites are not systematically distinguishable across measures of perceiving white advantage, multiculturalism, individualism, and support for race-based ameliorative compensatory policies. Most observable differences between white ethnics and non-ethnic whites are not statistically significant; and moreover, these variations are not patterned in any particular way.

The only exception to this general pattern (or lack thereof) comes with regard to questions that detail attitudes toward advantages in schools where ethnic whites possess slightly more colour-blind attitudes than non-ethnic whites. Specifically, 75 per cent of ethnic whites compared to 85 per cent of non-ethnic whites see white advantage in schooling ( $p = .005$ ), 85 per cent of ethnic whites compared to 90 per cent of non-ethnic whites believe schools should promote diversity ( $p = .033$ ), and 66 per cent of ethnic whites compared to 74 per cent of non-ethnic whites see 'schools' and connections' as helping them get ahead in life ( $p = .022$ ). This suggests white ethnics hold onto colour-blind ideals slightly more than non-ethnic whites regarding their attitudes toward race and schooling alone. In contrast, though, we point out that white ethnics appear more racially progressive than non-ethnic whites in their attitudes toward charities providing assistance to African-Americans. Here, 45 per cent of ethnic whites compared to 36 per cent of non-ethnic whites are in support of non-profit organizations lending more help to



**Table 4.** White adherence to colour-blind ideals by ethnicity

% Agree	Ethnic	Non-ethnic
<i>Colour-blind ideals and white perception of white advantage</i>		
Prejudice and discrimination favour whites	63%	61%
Laws and institutions favour whites	40%	48%
Effort and hard work favour whites	87%	89%
Upbringing favours whites	77%	80%
Access to schools and connections favour whites**	75%	85%
<i>Colour-blind ideals and multiculturalism in whites</i>		
Group-centred mentality is problematic	60%	64%
Focus on background is divisive	80%	85%
Group rights are important	90%	89%
Employers should promote diversity	58%	53%
Schools should promote diversity*	85%	90%
<i>Colour-blind ideals and individualism in whites</i>		
Favouritism 'helped' in getting ahead	20%	16%
Hard work and effort 'helped' in getting ahead	96%	93%
Upbringing 'helped' in getting ahead	84%	86%
Schools and connections 'helped' in getting ahead*	66%	74%
<i>Colour-blind ideals in race-related contexts in whites</i>		
African-Americans should receive special consideration in hiring decisions and school admissions	22%	21%
African-Americans should get more economic assistance from the government	18%	15%
Charities and non-profit organizations should do more to help African-Americans**	45%	36%

Chi-sq: \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.

African-Americans ( $p = .007$ ). Given that variations between white ethnics and non-ethnic whites are slight, mostly not significant, and mostly not patterned, Table 4 ultimately indicates that ethnic whites and non-ethnic whites are not substantively distinguishable regarding their alignment with colour-blind ideals.

While ethnicity does not appear to impact racial ideologies for whites, it does appear to be related to white awareness of racial identity in a significant and patterned way.

Table 5 shows that 46 per cent of white ethnics compared to 36 per cent of non-ethnic whites felt their racial identity was very important at present ( $p = .003$ ). Moreover, 34 per cent of white ethnics (compared to 25 per cent of non-ethnic whites) believed their racial identity was very important growing up ( $p = .002$ ), and 84 per cent (compared to 76 per cent of non-ethnic whites) saw their racial group as having a culture worth preserving ( $p = .012$ ). As Table 5 further shows, this relationship is only significant for whites. Ethnicity does not

**Table 5.** *Salience of racial identity by ethnicity and race*

% Agree	Ethnic	Non-ethnic
<i>Whites</i>		
Racial identity <i>very</i> important now**	46%	36%
Racial identity <i>very</i> important growing up**	34%	25%
Racial group has a culture worth preserving*	84%	76%
<i>Non-whites</i>		
Racial identity <i>very</i> important now	77%	70%
Racial identity <i>very</i> important growing up	56%	58%
Racial group has a culture worth preserving	93%	90%

Chi-sq: \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.

significantly impact non-whites' awareness of their racial identity in any of these areas. In sum, Table 5 indicates that the assertion of ethnic identity is related to a heightened awareness of racial identity for whites.

## Discussion

Overall, our data show that white ethnics comprise a relatively small portion of the white population, judged in relation to the ethnic identity claims of non-whites in the contemporary United States and to prior estimates of white ethnicity. Despite their size, white ethnics nonetheless appear to still constitute a distinguishable grouping compared to their non-ethnic counterparts. Self-identifying white ethnics are more likely to be male, older, of lower socio-economic status, married, and non-citizens, who also tend to conceive of a shared vision of American society with African-Americans. White ethnicity also appears to be influenced by social forces such as religious salience, being from an urban community, and coming from localities that lean Democrat.

We believe these findings indicate that the more diffuse category of 'white ethnic' that scholars showed came together in the later part of the twentieth century has persisted through to the twenty-first century in America. The composition of this grouping, however, appears to have shifted somewhat over time. Unlike the ethnic patterns of the 1980s, for example, our data suggest that education, being from the South, or being one generation removed from the family's immigrant generation no longer significantly relate to the odds of ethnic affiliation. Additionally, it appears that ethnicity has become more significant for white men than for white women, that white ethnics now tend to be married and from lower socio-economic strata, and

that they are more likely than others to believe in a shared vision of American society with African-Americans.

Without minimizing these distinctions, we would also note that our data show that white ethnics do not seem quite as unique as some of the most recent critical theorizing around whiteness and ethnicity would indicate. Our cross-tabulations show that white ethnics are not substantively different from non-ethnic whites regarding their views of white privilege, multiculturalism, individualism and support for race-based compensatory measures. While certainly not unequivocal, we believe these findings have important implications for theories which infer a relationship between white ethnicity and colour-blindness. Specifically, our analysis suggests white ethnic identity does not hold direct substantive explanatory power as far as determining which whites will hold onto colour-blind ideals.

Inasmuch as this point can empirically inform recent critical conceptualizations of white ethnicity, it also perhaps sheds some light onto the state of white racial ideology in contemporary America, broadly speaking. Our data show two theoretically differentiated groups of American whites that are also significantly distinguishable across a variety of demographic and social-level variables, who appear, nevertheless, to be in relative agreement regarding their basic attitudes toward race. To be sure, traditional survey methods cannot entirely determine the full range of factors that affect how white ethnic identity and colour-blind whiteness play out in various social contexts. However, our results do indicate that even apparently different groupings of American whites seem to share a certain measure of ideological common ground with one another regarding racial privilege, individualism, and colour-blindness.

While whites' racial attitudes are unrelated to ethnicity in our data, white ethnicity does appear to be related to the extent to which whites are aware of their racial identities. Our findings show that white ethnic identification affects racial identity more than non-white ethnicities affect identification with other racial (or pan-ethnic) categories. In other words, ethnic affiliation appears to uniquely influence how whites view their race. This is an important finding if only because there has been surprisingly little discussion on the relationship between white ethnicity and white racial identity in the literature – in both whiteness studies and more recent works on white ethnicity.

On the subject of racial identity, we believe these findings to be important for several additional reasons. First, this material contributes to our understanding of the salience (or lack thereof) of racial identity among white Americans of different backgrounds (cf. Hartmann, Gerteis and Croll 2009). More than this, our results speak to theoretical speculations about the racial attitudes and ideologies of white ethnics, specifically the claim that ethnic affiliations might

render whites more prone to colour-blind ideals than others. If anything, our finding that white ethnics are not significantly more colour-blind or conservative would suggest that the phenomenon may be better situated in the context of broader shifts toward multiculturalism in American culture where diversity is valued and Americans aspire to unique cultural practices (Glazer 1997; Bell and Hartmann 2007), rather than the literature on racial attitudes and ideologies.

Future research on white ethnicity will obviously profit by returning to the spirit, ambition, and quality of the work of the earlier, post-revival period. But we also believe our findings clearly demonstrate that white ethnicity has not remained stable and inert over the past quarter-century but in fact has undergone some significant shifts and transformations. We hope that our findings and comments can help re-awaken a study of white ethnicity that is attentive to these changes as well as their broader implications for our understandings of race, ethnicity, racial attitudes, and racial ideologies in contemporary American society.

## Notes

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2. For additional details and documentation, see, respectively, Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann (2006), and <http://www.soc.umn.edu/amp/ampindex.htm>
3. As with prior studies (cf. Alba 1990), age is not statistically significant when operationalized linearly. With the exception of age and the county voting measure (which nonetheless approaches significance at  $p=.05$ ), all other independent variables that we present as statistically significant in this analysis are statistically significant when age is specified linearly. Tables are available upon request.
4. It should be noted that although the white privilege questions entailed a split ballot design, there were a sufficient number of respondents for analysis.
5. We note here that sensitivity analyses which operationalized the scaled independent variables differently yielded similar results. Tables are available upon request.

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