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## CHAPTER 1

# Fayetteville

Rakeem Jones didn't see the punch coming.

He had been part of a group protesting at a rally for presidential candidate Donald Trump in Fayetteville, North Carolina. It was March 9, 2016, and Trump was leading the race for the Republican presidential nomination. After Trump began speaking, one of the group started shouting at Trump. A Trump supporter screamed at the group, "You need to get the fuck out of here!" The group was soon surrounded by sheriff's deputies, who began to escort them out. Jones gave the audience the finger. Another member of the group, Ronnie Rouse, said that someone shouted, "Go home, niggers!" (Both Rouse and Jones are black.)

As police led Jones out, seventy-eight-year-old John McGraw, who uses the nickname "Quick Draw McGraw," moved to the end of his row and sucker-punched Jones as he walked past. Jones was then tackled by the deputies, who said they had not seen McGraw's punch. McGraw, who is white, was able to leave the event and was interviewed afterward by a reporter from the program *Inside Edition*. When asked if he liked the rally, he said, "You bet I liked it." When asked what he liked, McGraw said, "Knocking the hell out of that big mouth." Then he said, "We don't know who he is, but we know he's not acting like an American. The next time we see him, we might have to kill him." The day after, McGraw was identified, arrested, and charged with assault and battery and disorderly conduct.

The incident went viral. One reason was Rouse's cell phone footage of the attack. Another was Trump's reaction. In his speech in Fayetteville, Trump

appeared to excuse violence against the protesters, saying, “In the good old days this doesn’t happen because they used to treat them very, very rough.” Two days later, Trump said, “The audience hit back and that’s what we need a little bit more of.” Two days after that he offered to pay McGraw’s legal fees. That never came to pass. McGraw appeared in court nine months later and pleaded no contest to both charges. He was sentenced to a year’s probation.<sup>1</sup>

The attack on Rakeem Jones was just one of several violent incidents involving protesters and attendees at Trump rallies. Two days after the Fayetteville rally, the Trump campaign canceled a rally planned for the University of Illinois at Chicago when violence erupted between Trump supporters and protesters. And Trump’s reaction to the attack on Jones was just one of many times when he condoned violence against protesters. After a Black Lives Matter activist was attacked and called “nigger” at a November 2015 rally in Birmingham, Trump said, “Maybe he should have been roughed up because it was absolutely disgusting what he was doing.” On other occasions, referring to protesters, he said, “Knock the crap out of them” and “I’d like to punch him in the face” and “I’ll beat the crap out of you.”<sup>2</sup>

What happened in Fayetteville, Birmingham, and other places revealed something else about the election. McGraw’s comment “We know he’s not acting like an American” distills what the election was fundamentally about: a debate about not only what would, as Trump put it, “make America great again,” but who is America—and American—in the first place. It was a debate about whether the president himself, Barack Obama, was an American. It was a debate about how many immigrants to admit to the country. It was a debate about how much of a threat was posed by Muslims living in or traveling to the United States. It was a debate about whether innocent blacks were being systematically victimized by police forces. It was a debate about whether white Americans were being unfairly left behind in an increasingly diverse country.

What these issues shared was the centrality of *identity*. How people felt about these issues depended on which groups they identified with and how they felt about other groups. Of course, group identities have mattered in previous elections, much as they have in American politics overall. But the question is always *which* identities come to the fore. In 2016, the important groups were defined by the characteristics that have long divided Americans: race, ethnicity, religion, gender, nationality, and, ultimately, partisanship.

What made this election distinctive was *how much* those identities mattered to voters. During Trump’s unexpected rise to the nomination, support for Trump or one of his many rivals was strongly linked to how Republican voters felt about blacks, immigrants, and Muslims, and to how much discrimination Republican voters believed that whites themselves faced. This had

not been true in the 2008 or 2012 Republican primaries. These same factors helped voters choose between Trump or Hillary Clinton in the general election—and, again, these factors mattered even more in 2016 than they had in recent presidential elections. More strikingly still, group identities came to matter even on issues that did not have to be about identity, such as the simple question of whether one was doing okay economically.

In short, these identities became the lens through which so much of the campaign was refracted. This book is the story of how that happened and what it means for the future of a nation whose own identity is fundamentally in question.

## The Political Power of Identity

That identity matters in politics is a truism. Getting beyond truisms means answering more important questions: which identities, what they mean, and when and how they become politically relevant. The answers to these questions point to the features of the 2016 election that made group identities so potent.<sup>3</sup>

People can be categorized in many groups based on their place of birth, place of residence, ethnicity, religion, gender, occupation, and so on. But simply being a member *of* a group is not the same thing as identifying or sympathizing *with* that group. The key is whether people feel a psychological attachment to a group. That attachment binds individuals to the group and helps it develop cohesion and shared values.

The existence, content, and power of group identities—including their relevance to politics—depends on context. One part of the context is the possibility of gains and losses for the group. Gains and losses can be tangible, such as money or territory, or they can be symbolic, such as psychological status. Moreover, gains and losses do not even need to be realized. Mere threats, such as the possibility of losses, can be enough. When gains, losses, or threats become salient, group identities develop and strengthen. Groups become more unified and more likely to develop goals and grievances, which are the components of a politicized group consciousness.

Another and arguably even more important element of the context is political actors. They help articulate the content of a group identity, or what it means to be part of a group. Political actors also identify, and sometimes exaggerate or even invent, threats to a group. Political actors can then make group identities and attitudes more salient and elevate them as criteria for decision-making.

A key question about identity politics is how much it involves not only an attachment to your own group but also feelings about other groups. Identities can be “social,” with direct implications for how groups relate to each other. These relationships do not have to be competitive, and thus group loyalties do not have to create hostility toward other groups. But group loyalties can and often do. Hostility can arise because groups are competing over scarce resources. It can also arise not out of any objective competition but because group leaders identify another group as a competitor or even the enemy. Both the “us” and the “them” of group politics can depend on what political leaders do and say.<sup>4</sup>

## A Changing America

The social science of group identity points directly to why these identities mattered in 2016. First, the context of the election was conducive. The demographics of the United States were changing. The dominant majority of the twentieth century—white Christians—was shrinking. The country was becoming more ethnically diverse and less religious. Although the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, no longer dominated the nation’s consciousness, there were other terrorist attacks in the United States and elsewhere. The civil rights of African Americans were newly salient, as the Black Lives Matter movement coalesced to protest the deaths of unarmed blacks at the hands of police. Indeed, several high-profile incidents between the police and communities of color made Americans more pessimistic about race relations than they had been in decades.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, there was no recession or major war, either of which tends to dominate an election-year landscape, as the Great Recession and financial crisis did in 2008 and the Iraq War did in 2004. This created more room for different issues to matter.

Another crucial part of the context: even before 2016, group identities and attitudes were becoming more aligned with partisanship. Racial and ethnic minorities were shifting toward the Democratic Party and voting for its candidates. Meanwhile, whites’ attitudes toward racial, ethnic, and religious minorities were becoming more aligned with their partisanship. People who expressed favorable attitudes toward blacks, immigrants, and Muslims were increasingly in the Democratic Party. People who expressed less favorable attitudes toward these groups were increasingly in the Republican Party.

This growing alignment of group identities and partisanship is crucial because it gives these group identities more political relevance. It helps to orient partisan competition around questions related to group identities. It gives candidates a greater incentive to appeal to group identi-

ties and attitudes—knowing that such appeals will unify their party more than divide it. It makes the “us and them” of party politics even more potent.

## A Racialized Campaign

But none of this context was new in 2016. The country’s growing diversity was a long-standing trend, and its mere existence did not ensure an outsize role for group identities in 2016. Certainly this trend cannot itself explain differences between the 2016 election and presidential elections only four or eight years prior. Something else was necessary: *the choices of the candidates*. That the candidates talked so much about these issues, and disagreed so sharply, helped make these issues salient to voters.

First there was Trump himself. Trump was a real estate developer and a fixture of New York City society and its tabloids, which chronicled his marriages, affairs, and business dealings throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In 2004, he became a reality television star, hosting NBC’s *The Apprentice* and *Celebrity Apprentice*, in which contestants competed for positions in his businesses. It was an unusual biography for a presidential candidate. But as Trump positioned himself to run for office, he did so with a strategy that has been anything but unusual in American politics: focusing on racially charged issues.

Even before he ran for office, Trump was no stranger to racial controversies. In 1973, the government accused him and his father, who was also a real estate developer, of refusing to rent apartments they owned to minorities and steering African Americans toward other properties where many minorities lived. The Trumps would later settle the case without admitting wrongdoing.

In 1989, there was the case of the Central Park Five: four black men and one Hispanic man who were wrongfully convicted of raping a white jogger in Central Park. Within days of the incident, Trump took out a full-page ad in New York City newspapers that declared, “BRING BACK THE DEATH PENALTY! BRING BACK THE POLICE!” The men’s convictions were vacated in 2002 after another man confessed to the crime, although Trump continued to insist that the men were guilty and would do so again during the 2016 campaign.<sup>6</sup>

As Trump elevated his political profile during the Obama administration, racially charged rhetoric was central. He rekindled the long-discredited claim that Obama was not a native American citizen and became a virtual spokesperson for the “birther” movement. The strategy worked: when Trump flirted with running for president in 2011, his popularity was concentrated among the sizable share of Republicans who thought that President Obama was foreign born or a Muslim or both.<sup>7</sup>

Obama eventually released his long-form birth certificate, but Trump made similar insinuations throughout the 2016 campaign. This was only one of Trump's many claims during the campaign that played on racial and religious anxieties and fears and brought elements of the election-year context—undocumented immigrants, terrorism, Black Lives Matter, and others—to the fore.

Trump's tactics by themselves were not enough to make racial issues central to the campaign. Had his opponents taken the same positions as him, then voters' own views on these issues would not have helped them choose among the candidates. But for the most part Trump's opponents took different positions and condemned his controversial statements. In the Republican primary, many of Trump's Republican opponents—and many Republicans, period—broke with him when he proposed things like banning travel by Muslims to the United States.

Then, in the general election, Hillary Clinton fashioned her campaign as a direct rebuke of Trump. One part of that involved a different social identity: gender. Of course, because she was the first woman major-party nominee, Clinton's gender was already significant. But she also emphasized the historic nature of her candidacy and targeted Trump for his mistreatment of women.

Moreover, Clinton distinguished herself from Trump on issues related to race and ethnicity. She took sharply different positions on civil rights, policing, and immigration. She accused Trump of catering to white supremacists and hate groups. Ultimately, she ran as Obama's successor and the curator of the coalition that had put him in the White House—a coalition predicated on ethnic minorities, young people, and others who were relatively liberal on racial issues. Clinton did not embrace every aspect of Obama's record; indeed, on some racial issues she took more liberal positions than Obama. But her candidacy was clearly meant to cement and expand his legacy as the first African American president.

## How Identity Mattered in 2016

Because Trump, Clinton, and the other candidates focused so much on issues tied to racial and ethnic identities, it is no surprise that those identities and issues mattered to voters. But how? It was *not* because those identities and attitudes changed much in the aggregate. In the years immediately before 2016, there was no clear secular increase or decrease in the strength of ethnic identities—with the possible exception of a modest increase in the strength of racial identity among white Americans. Similarly, there was no secular

increase in prejudice against ethnic or religious minorities. The metaphor of a wave was sometimes used to describe what was happening in the United States and many European countries. This was fundamentally misleading, as the political scientist Larry Bartels argued based on European survey data, which showed no change in, for example, attitudes toward immigration between 2002 and 2015.<sup>8</sup>

The better metaphor, Bartels argued, was a reservoir. Among Americans, there is a range of sentiments about ethnic and other groups. Some people strongly identify with their group and some people do not. Some people have favorable attitudes about other groups and some people do not. It is not that these sentiments never change, or that the balance of people with different sentiments is unimportant. But the key question for elections is whether and how these sentiments actually matter for voters. In 2016, the candidates tapped into these reservoirs of opinion and helped “activate” ethnic identities and attitudes, thereby making them more strongly related to what ordinary Americans thought and how they voted.

How did the activation of identities and attitudes matter in 2016? The story begins even before the election itself (chapter 2). As the campaign got under way, much was made of Americans’ “anger” and anxiety about their economic circumstances. But levels of anger and anxiety were no greater in 2016 than in recent years. In fact, economic anxiety had been *decreasing*, not increasing, in the eight years before 2016. What economic and political dissatisfaction did exist was powerfully shaped by political identities. With a Democrat in the White House, Republicans had much less favorable opinions about conditions in the country. But dissatisfaction also reflected racial attitudes: under Obama, white Americans’ feelings about blacks became associated with many things, including whether and how they felt about the economy. “Racial anxiety” was arguably driving economic anxiety. Moreover, during Obama’s presidency, there was an even stronger alignment between partisanship and identities and attitudes tied to race, ethnicity, and religion. The party coalitions were increasingly “racialized” even before the 2016 campaign began.

The upshot was not an electoral landscape heavily tilted toward the opposition Republicans, as would typically happen had economic anxiety been increasing. Instead, the landscape implied both a toss-up election and one that was ripe for racially charged divisiveness.

Then, in the Republican primary, the party was forced to confront its own divides (chapter 3). These divides had to do with racial and ethnic issues, particularly immigration. Ultimately, the party was so fractured before and during the 2016 election that party leaders could not agree on any front-runner. This opened the door for Trump. From the moment he entered the



race, Trump garnered extraordinary media coverage, which helped propel him to the top of the polls and helped ensure that he stayed there (chapter 4). That coverage amplified his unusually vitriolic message. Although many Republican leaders believed that the party needed to moderate on issues like immigration, many Republican voters were not so sure. These voters helped propel Trump to the nomination (chapter 5). Attitudes toward African Americans, Muslims, and immigrants more strongly related to support for Trump than support for the previous Republican nominees John McCain and Mitt Romney. Moreover, support for Trump was also strongest among white Americans with racially inflected grievances. This activation of whites' own group identity was an uncommon pattern in GOP primaries—and it showed again how economic anxieties came to matter more when they were refracted through social identities. The important sentiment underlying Trump's support was not "I might lose my job" but, in essence, "People in my group are losing jobs to that other group." Instead of a pure economic anxiety, what mattered was racialized economics.

In the Democratic primary, party leaders were more unified behind Hillary Clinton than leaders have been behind any nonincumbent presidential candidate in years (chapter 6). But Clinton still faced an unexpectedly strong challenge from Senator Bernie Sanders, an independent who, while caucusing with Democrats in the Senate, stood firmly outside the party. Sanders's appeal, like Trump's, depended on extensive and often positive media coverage. Although many believed that the divide between Clinton supporters and Sanders supporters was fundamentally ideological—with Sanders supporters much more liberal—Clinton and Sanders supporters were largely in agreement on many policy issues. Similarly, Clinton and Sanders supporters were not much divided by gender, gender identity, or sexism, even though Clinton's campaign routinely emphasized the historic nature of her bid to become the first female president. More important were partisan and racial identities. Clinton's status as a longtime Democrat allowed her to build support among primary voters who themselves identified as Democrats. Similarly, Clinton's embrace of Obama and her racially progressive message helped her build support among racial minorities and especially African Americans. The prevalence of Democrats and African Americans among primary voters propelled Clinton to the nomination.

In the general election campaign, Clinton and Trump continued to clash on issues tied to race, ethnicity, and gender (chapter 7). But now, Trump's controversial statements and behavior—and the media attention that they generated—hurt him in ways that they did not during the primary. The more news attention Trump received, the more his poll numbers dropped. Trump also seemed disadvantaged by his unorthodox campaign organization, which

raised far less money than a typical presidential campaign and lagged behind Clinton's in televised advertising and field organizing. It made sense, then, that Clinton had a durable lead in the polls even though she continued to face extensive media attention to her use of a private email server as secretary of state, which in turn helped make voters' views of her on several dimensions as negative as, if not more negative than, views of Trump. Nevertheless, her controversies seemed to pale compared to Trump's. By the end of the campaign, it seemed almost impossible for Trump to win.

Then he did. To be sure, Clinton's narrow lead in the national polls was borne out in her victory in the national popular vote (chapter 8). Her victory was also in line with the growing economy and Obama's increasing approval rating. Indeed, Clinton arguably exceeded what would be expected from the candidate whose party was seeking the rare third consecutive term in the White House. These facts made it difficult to interpret the election as centering on economic anxiety or a desire for "change."

Instead, the election turned on the group identities that the candidates had activated—and these identities help explain why Trump won the Electoral College and, thus, the White House (chapter 8). First, partisan identities ensured that Trump ultimately faced little penalty within a Republican Party that had often failed to embrace his candidacy. Despite Trump's many controversies, Republican Party leaders and voters rallied to him at the end of the campaign. Indeed, Trump did about as well among Republicans as Clinton did among Democrats.

Second, attitudes concerning race, ethnicity, and religion were more strongly related to how Americans voted in 2016 than in recent elections. By contrast, the apparent impact of economic anxiety was much smaller and not particularly distinctive compared to earlier elections. This activation of racial attitudes helped Trump more than Clinton. Despite the ongoing alignment of racial attitudes and partisanship, as of 2012 a substantial minority of white Obama voters still expressed less favorable views of immigration, undocumented immigrants, African Americans, and other minority groups. Trump's appeal to these voters helped ensure that Obama supporters in 2012 who voted for Trump in 2016 outnumbered Romney supporters who voted for Clinton. And because these voters were disproportionately represented in battleground states such as Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, they helped Trump win the Electoral College—especially when the coalition that elected Obama did not show up for Clinton in comparable numbers.

Before the election, the prevailing wisdom was that the country's growing diversity would help the Democrats continue to win the White House. Trump's victory showed that the backlash against that diversity could be a winning issue too.

## What Is the Identity Crisis?

It is one thing to say that identity mattered in 2016. It is another to call it an “identity crisis.” When that term was coined by the psychologist Erik Erikson, it referred to the individual’s struggle, particularly in adolescence, to develop a sense of self—that is, his or her true identity. Analogous crises were the preconditions, and arguably the legacy, of this election.

There was, for instance, the ongoing identity crisis within the Republican Party—one that the party’s unexpected victory in November did little to remedy. Party leaders were already divided on issues like immigration, and many of these leaders rejected Trump’s inflammatory comments during the campaign. But his victory raised the question of whether the GOP would now embrace his views. Trump also called into question the party’s apparent unity on economic issues. During the primary, he took heterodox positions—expressing support for entitlement programs and raising taxes for the wealthy—and then became the Republican nominee anyway. Trump revealed that many Republican voters were not movement conservatives or even particularly ideological. This raised a deeper question about what it truly meant to be a Republican or a conservative in the era of Trump.

The Democratic Party faced its own internal debate in the months after the election. The party’s ranks in Congress, state legislatures, and governors’ mansions had already taken a serious hit during Obama’s presidency. But many blamed this on Republican gerrymandering and believed that an ascendant Obama coalition would continue to deliver the White House. With that theory now in tatters, the party began the same soul-searching that Republicans had engaged in after 2012. A key question was whether the party needed to moderate the progressive stance on racial issues that Clinton had embraced—and thereby try to win back white voters who had voted for Obama but then Trump.

The election was also symptomatic of a broader American identity crisis. Issues like immigration, racial discrimination, and the integration of Muslims boil down to competing visions of American identity and inclusiveness. To have politics oriented around this debate—as opposed to more prosaic issues like, say, entitlement reform—makes politics “feel” angrier, precisely because debates about ethnic, racial, and national identities engender strong emotions. It is possible to have a technocratic discussion about how to calculate cost-of-living increases in Social Security payments. It is harder to have such a discussion about whether undocumented immigrants deserve a chance for permanent residency or even citizenship. It is even harder

when group loyalties and attitudes are aligned with partisanship, and harder still when presidential candidates are stoking the divisions. Elections will then polarize people not only in terms of party—which is virtually inevitable—but also in terms of other group identities.

The upshot is a more divisive and explosive politics.

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