Justin Gest

THE NEW MINORITY

White Working Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality

The New Minority

The New Minority

White Working Class Politics in an Age
of Immigration and Inequality

JUSTIN GEST

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2

The New Minority

A COUNTER-NARRATIVE AND ITS POLITICS

We are people who are used to being represented as problematic. We are the long-term, benefit-claiming, working class poor, living through another period of cultural contempt. We are losers, no hopers, low life scroungers. Our culture is yob culture. The importance of welfare provisions to our lives has been deni-grated and turned against us; we are welfare dependent and our problems won't be solved by giving us higher benefits. We are perverse in our failure to succeed, dragging our feet over social change, wanting the old jobs back, still having babies instead of careers, stuck in outdated class and gender moulds. We are the challenge that stands out above all others, the greatest social crisis of our times.
—Peter Mandelson, Labour Minister[1]

This book's polemical title suggests that white working class people may be understood as a minority. I do not introduce this counter-narrative in the interest of reappropriating victim status or competing with the claims of ethnocultural minorities, whom I have previously studied at length. Rather, it is to demonstrate that marginalization and minoritization may be experienced in different ways, and simultaneously, by different people. It is to explore how disparate experiences of marginalization are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is to consider what connects the marginalization of ethnocultural minority and majority communities. And it is to examine the extent to which the white working class can control their fate, and to what extent it is determined by the severity of their circumstances.

The conceptualization of any group of white people in the United Kingdom or the United States as a "minority" is questionable, to be modest. Less modestly, such a conceptualization stands in the face of 50 years of progress achieved by civil rights struggles, community cohesion agendas, and affirmative action policies. At their inception, such efforts acknowledged—and indeed were mobilized against—the privileged status of white people.

White people benefit from a political and social system of their own creation. They are advantaged by a history of structural discrimination in their favor, a trajectory unfettered by the legacies of slavery or the exploitation of colonialism. They boast an acquaintance with what are widely perceived to be norms of national culture and language, which enable their effortless integration into circles of belonging and recognition. White males in particular assume the "privileged role of universal subject" (Kennedy 1996: 88). They enjoy the intangible sense of affinity with predominantly white leaders in business and politics. They are unhindered by the pressures of adaptation. Some describe the situation in harsher terms, going so far as to argue that whites exploit "unearned advantages" as a means to "improve or maintain their social position" (Olson 2002: 388). Earned or unearned, it is assumed that these advantages make white individuals, in short, the incumbents.

And yet, among white working class people, there is an emerging sense of displacement and disempowerment. From my ethnographic research in East London and Youngstown, I find that claims of minority status range from the subtle to the blatant, but nearly all pertain to three phenomena:

Outnumbering : White working class people recognize the steady deterioration of their numbers. Increasing proportions of all population groups are attaining higher levels of education, and white people comprise a decreasing share of national populations in the United States and the United Kingdom (Kaufmann 2004c; Dench et al. 2009). By 2040, the US census estimates that white people will number less than 50% of the American population. However, this is more conventionally a local matter, when demographic change alters the share of white working class people in neighborhoods and cities. Such change is attributable to fertility rates, foreigners' immigration, and native emigration to other parts of a region or country.

In my interview with activist Nancy Pemberton in Thamesview, East London, she would stop me if I referred to immigrant groups as "minorities." "It's a fact that we are a minority," she asserts. "There's not a school in the borough that's not 80% ethnic. Nobody English moves into this borough. They only move out. It's gotten to the stage where, even queuing for the loo, it's a novelty when you meet an English person to speak to. [. . .] I won't allow myself to feel on the outside of my society. But a lot of other people are scared. They feel intimidated." Nancy's statements reflect a generally monolithic view of nonwhite, non-English people that is shared by many in her neighborhood.

Externality : White working class people are sensitive to their exclusion from consultation and representation—not only in bodies of representative government, but also more generally in popular entertainment, public institutions, and employment. They are wary that the same principles of equal access and

representation that compensate for other groups' disadvantages do not apply to them. Congresspeople who have previously belonged to the working class comprise only 2% of Congress (Carnes 2012). The *Washington Post* reports that between 1984 and 2009, the median net worth of a member of the House of Representatives grew from $280,000 to $725,000 in inflation-adjusted dollars, while the wealth of an American family slightly declined from $20,600 to $20,500 (Whoriskey 2011). As a result, government and business feel distant, clubby, and unwelcoming.

In Youngstown, 29-year-old chef Paul Podolsky says disempowerment extends to the workplace. "Whites are the minority now," he says. "Sometimes, it gives [black people] greater power because it's the higher group. So they can get their way. My uncle works at a plant where everybody is scared to tell the black people what to do because they're worried about retaliation. The managers are outnumbered and they don't have a backbone. [. . .] White people are held to a different standard. In history books, whites were always above the blacks. But we desegregated to change the world. It's been 100 years and they still want more." Paradoxically, Paul implies that black people are privileged, while simultaneously acknowledging that white people continue to occupy most positions of authority.

Subjection to prejudice : Many white working class people believe they are frequently subject to conscious or unconscious prejudgment by members of ethnic minorities, as well as by middle- and upper-class white people. They believe that such prejudice affects their ability to get hired for jobs, receive equal treatment by officials and businesses, and access government benefits like housing or welfare. Sometimes, this is also a matter of the special treatment white working class people believe members of nonwhite minorities receive—such as scholarships, employment, exemptions or leniencies, and government contracting.

"I fought for this country," lamented pensioner Harriet Johnson from Dagenham, East London, "and it ain't even our country anymore. You're not the priority. We've got everything here. Gays, lesbians—what do you call them?—bisexuals, prostitutes, pedophiles. This place is like [the soap operas] 'Coronation Street' meets 'East Enders' and 'Holly Oaks' all at once." In Youngstown, electrician Iggy Nagy says, "White people have become the minority itself. [. . .] People have freaked out on me for things I've said, because I can't say anything [about black people] because of slavery and their historical oppression. People aren't looking for equality; they're looking for retaliation." While Harriet refers to her relegation in priority beneath people she finds deviant, Iggy does not mind relegation so long as it promotes actual equality. However, many white working-class individuals view the struggle for equal treatment as a personal loss of status—a campaign to demote white people, rather than to promote others.

This indeed turns the tables of racial politics. And yet, this book's closer examination suggests that, in powerful ways, the tables have been turned on white working class people in their countries' post-traumatic regions.

The next section of this chapter exhibits how (1) systemic, (2) psychological and rhetorical, and (3) political forces compound to institutionalize the marginalized social position of white working class people in the United Kingdom and the United States. As a foundation for my examination of what explains white working class political behavior and marginality, I also discuss how their disempowerment poses challenges to external observers who study this group. Finally, I consider the variable ways individuals respond to these circumstances of disempowerment with political behavior. In the end, we are confronted with a puzzle: why do white working class political actors in similar positions of disempowerment respond so differently?

Multiple Means of Disempowerment

White working class people's disempowerment is entrenched in three primary ways: (1) by systemic forces; (2) by rhetorical and psychological forces; and (3) by political forces. By identifying each of these, we see how they compound to reinforce white working class marginality.

(1) SYSTEMIC ENTRENCHMENT

A review of recent scholarship about inequality in the United Kingdom and the United States exhibits how socioeconomic conditions (among both white and nonwhite communities) may be entrenched by key processual dynamics and structures of the political system. These conditions exist from the highest echelons of power down to individual preferences. Gilens presents evidence of what he describes as an "elite-led democracy" where, consistently, government policy is more strongly related to the preferences of higher income voters (2005: 788–789). However, even if democratic governing bodies better reflected the interests of both the poor and the rich, economic inequality could still prove to be self-reinforcing. Kelly and Enns (2010: 856) conclude that this is the case, due to how the preferences of both the rich and the poor respond to changes in income inequality. They find a distinct tendency in the American populace to oppose redistribution in the face of rising inequality with a significant negative correlation between economic inequality and public opinion favoring redistribution. Surprisingly, this relationship holds for individuals in both the top and the bottom quintiles of income. Taken together, such trends enable political

agenda-setting by elites—a mechanism of control defined by Gaventa as "the second dimension of power" (1980: 9–11). Agenda setting allows elites to exclude grievances or issues from the relevant decision-making arenas by "controlling the rules of the game," considered by Gaventa to be a set of predominant values, beliefs, rituals, and institutional procedures. These act as barriers preventing the dominated group from even participating in the decision-making process.

When they have a say about economic assistance from the government, white working class communities are prone to "welfare chauvinism," whereby xenophobia distracts or derails redistributive agendas that would otherwise benefit them. Studies find that more ethnically heterogeneous societies display lower levels of support for redistributive welfare (Freeman 2009: 2–5).[2]

While the phenomenon of welfare chauvinism reflects the salience of income-oriented political divisions, this fault line is complicated by emerging cultural divisions. Gelman (2009) shows that where income is not an accurate predictor of American electoral behavior, we see voters (especially those in richer states) voting against their economic interests to support social or culturally aligned agendas. Under these circumstances cultural considerations can be so important that income and voter choice has no correlation (Gelman 2009: 18). However, this has been shown to be less true outside the American South, where many poorer voters are attracted to the sociocultural agendas of Republican policymakers, who simultaneously oppose further wealth redistribution (see Bartels 2008; Gelman 2009: 83; and Inglehart and Welzel 2005: 3).

Explaining such trends, Saffran (1977: 10) contends that because working class people tend to be predominantly liberal on economic issues and predominantly conservative on most social issues, an increase in the salience of social issues will encourage these individuals to vote against their own economic self-interest. Using the concept of "assortative migration," Bishop argues that internal migration in the United States serves as a mechanism for Americans to sort themselves into more homogeneous "tribes," a process that generates segregation. Critically, this sorting process leads to segregation (by income, belief system, political affiliation, etc.), and entrenchment inevitably results.

The effects of this sorting and resulting segregation are profound. In terms of opinions and beliefs (political, social, religious, etc.) the grouping of like-minded people may act as a positive feedback loop. Indeed, research in social psychology suggests that "as people [hear] their beliefs reflected and amplified, they . . . become more extreme in their thinking" (Bishop 2008: 6). This in turn leads to more intense polarization, and a lack of common ground that makes (sometimes violent) anti-system political behavior more likely (20–21; see Gest 2010). Perhaps more specifically relevant to our discussion of socioeconomic

entrenchment is the fact that the American population is simultaneously being sorted along socioeconomic lines.

While a certain level of segregation by income and education has always been present in American society, Bishop and others now warn that this trend is accelerating beyond any historical precedent—in part, as a result of modern transportation, social insurance programs, and a more efficient "college sorting machine" (Bishop 2008: 11). Murray also cites the dramatic rise of "superZips," ZIP codes in which residents earn on average in the 95th to 99th percentile of household income. At the same time, the lower status groups are also re-sorting themselves geographically along class lines (Bishop 2008: 135). Over time, this self-segregation results in further socioeconomic entrenchment, in part because the chances for social mobility that are created by the mixing of different types of people are diminished, and perhaps also because society is also being divided by cognitive ability, as Charles Murray more controversially suggests (61).

While Bishop, Murray, and others have highlighted many important effects (political, economic, social, etc.) of internal migration and population "sorting," their preliminary investigations leave important gaps unexplained. For instance, how do these migration trends influence political behavior on the individual level? As previously noted, Bishop suggests that the decreased common ground and increased extremism associated with segregation along ideological lines may increase the likelihood that individuals turn to active, anti-system behavior. Current scholarship does not provide a model for how such demographic trends might alter political behavior. And yet, if resource-oriented understandings of political behavior are correct, such transformations hold serious implications for the psychological orientations that promote civic engagement (and disengagement).

(2) PSYCHOLOGICAL AND RHETORICAL ENTRENCHMENT

Given the growing inequality in developed states, recent scholarship demonstrates a set of paradoxical tendencies among actors that reinforce immobility. A sociological and psychological literature on "system justification theory" traces people's tendency to support and justify the status quo, particularly inequality and social hierarchies. Jost and Hunyady (2005: 263–264) argue that most people, from both advantaged and disadvantaged groups, possess at least some motivation to see the social, economic, and political arrangements around them as fair and legitimate. This tendency to "justify" the current social system is driven by people's desire to reduce uncertainty and threat by maintaining what is familiar, thereby providing psychological benefits such as increased satisfaction at the individual level (Jost and Hunyady 2005: 262). The mechanism by which people engage in system justification consists in forming stereotypes that

rationalize social and economic status differences between groups. These stereotypes come about by attributing more moral worth to the advantaged than to the disadvantaged (Jost et al. 2004: 894, 912).

However, even if white working class constituencies were to develop a sense of collective grievance and a desire to organize, they lack an acknowledged identity around which they may mobilize. Poorer white people are subject to the same elite classism that subordinates poorer ethnocultural minorities, but due to their status as an in-group, poorer whites exist without widespread recognition of the structural circumstances that entrench their deprivation. This "invisibility" of the white working class position affects how these individuals make political claims and socially define themselves. As Zweig (2000: 61) argues, "when society fails to acknowledge the existence and experience of working people it robs them of an articulate sense of themselves and their place in society." And unlike ethnocultural minority members of the working class, poor whites are largely deficient of the local social cohesion and compensatory governance mechanisms that attempt to mitigate the effect of marginality on visible minority groups (Fenton et al. 2010).[3]

The importance of a strong identity around which to organize is highlighted by the experiences of African Americans in the United States as described by Dawson (1995). He attributes much of the unity of African-American political behavior to their "linked fate." According to this logic, where prospects of success were deemed to be determined by one's race, that which is good for the racial community is also good for the individual (Dawson 1995: 81). Similarly, Lamont (2000: 20–21) argues that black working class individuals exhibit a more "collectivist" morality than their white counterparts, a unity formed around black "cultural resources" such as the shared experience of "fighting together against racial segregation and discrimination." White workers who do not have access to these same collective cultural resources and subsequently tend to embrace a more individualistic moral code.

It has also been shown that communities at the bottom of social hierarchies may be further disincentivized to act politically because of certain psychological tendencies. Laurin et al. (2010) have shown how beliefs in the fairness of sociopolitical conditions impact people's motivation to pursue and willingness to invest resources in long-term goals, which are recognized as being fundamental to psychological and physical well being. Fairness beliefs, they find, are more important in the motivation of members of disadvantaged groups when pursuing long-term goals, because their chances of success are more likely to be determined by fairness of opportunity (Laurin et al. 2010: 165).

Such perceptions also connect with psychological research on individuals' "locus of control," their understanding of the extent to which they can control events that affect their life (see Rotter 1990). A sense of powerlessness, in turn,

may encourage withdrawal from the political sphere, which then further diminishes the power of that group. Indeed, Zweig notes that feeling powerless within the political sphere results in the belief that politics is a waste of energy (2000: 166)—a belief that may derive from a number of different sources, including perceptions about the influence of corporations or wealthy individuals, impressions of government corruption or incompetence, or even broader feelings about the efficacy of the political system. As I previously suggest, these beliefs may be reinforced or amplified in communities where like-minded working class individuals reside. Table 2.1 summarizes different demographics' perceptions of their political power, based on this book's original surveys of Britons. We see that perceptions of politics power are weakest among those without university educations, the working class, and those who are middle-aged. However,

Table 2.1 **Perceived Political Power**

	United Kingdom Mean	*United States Mean*
Education		
University Education	3.88	4.46
No University Education	3.53	3.38
Age		
18–24	3.99	3.97
25–39	3.78	4.27
40–59	3.54	3.31
60 +	3.73	3.47
Self-reported Social Class		
Upper	4.02	6.07
Middle	3.71	4.28
Lower Middle	3.54	N/A*
Working	3.25	2.81
Gender		
Male	3.79	3.86
Female	3.60	3.58

British respondents were asked to report to what extent "people like me have political power" on a scale from 0 to 10. 10 indicates that the respondent thinks that "people like me have a lot of political power" and 0 indicates that "people like me don't have any political power." White working class here is defined as white and having no college education. * In the United Kingdom, class is measured using the British NRS social grade scale. There is no equivalent in US surveys.

the range of perceptions is much wider between the rich and poor in the United States. (See Appendix A for a discussion of survey methods.)

White working class communities' tendency to self-segregate or justify their disadvantage is reinforced—or perhaps inspired—by similar trends in social discourse that crystallize class tensions. In deconstructing the rhetorical treatment of white people, Wray (2006) details how over time the most disadvantaged "white people" have been cognitively categorized as an out-group. Terms such as "white trash" are evidence of the symbolic distancing and social exclusion of the lowest-status white citizens (Wray 2006: 134). This symbolic boundary can, with enough social power, become institutionalized and therefore lead to unequal opportunities for those stigmatized by the stereotype. If we again consider psychological research, there is a tendency for people to fulfill the characteristics of a stereotype more than they otherwise would if the stereotype did not exist (Steele 1997).

These findings about boundary-making and white people's exclusion from working class cultural resources suggest a subtle racial dimension to white working class entrenchment. While stigma against them may be less intense, it is more socially accepted in light of the other advantages white people enjoy. And while white people remain a numerical majority nationally, they are constrained from forming organizations based on a sense of group consciousness. Finally, as Chapter 6 discusses, even if they were to form such organizations, the basis for white working class identity is weak and incoherent.

(3) POLITICAL ENTRENCHMENT

With a set of structural conditions that hardens social hierarchies and a set of perceptive tendencies that inhibit dissent and activism, white working-class communities possess limited resources and even fewer outlets for political engagement. Indeed, the extant circumstances reinforce each other and combine to exert downward pressure. In his comprehensive consideration of political opinion, Zaller (1992) reveals the dynamics of marginalized communities' dismissal by political opinion leaders. His model suggests that individuals with low political awareness are less likely to change their attitudes over political issues, primarily because of the low probability of political communication filtering through to them. Political parties consequently tend to divert their efforts to citizens with higher levels of reception to their outreach, typically those in the middle classes and above. The implication of this trend is that marginalized communities are ignored. Conversely, Goodwin (2011) reveals that many poor white British voters experienced more face-to-face contact with extremist party campaigners than those from mainstream parties, who lack an active and visible presence in poor white communities.

Such findings hold true for the marginalized independent of their ethnocultural identity. In his consideration of African Americans, Dawson (1995) shows how the poor may be funneled into political organizations that do not accurately represent their interests or views due to a deficiency of group-specific outlets for political expression. Despite finding class-based differences in African-American public opinion, he notes that isolation on the left of the political spectrum could mask important political cleavages within the black community (Dawson 1995: 181). While the Democratic Party is the only viable mainstream partisan outlet for African Americans, poor white Britons are perhaps even more restricted today. During thirteen years of Labour Government from 1996 to 2010, little attention was paid to the plight of the white working class—the party's one-time base—and the United Kingdom's inequality gap expanded. However, options became limited with the unlikely coalition of Conservatives—long viewed as averse to working class agendas—and Liberal Democrats—who have a mixed relationship with poor whites anyway, given the party's views on European integration and immigration. Such circumstances relate to the earlier argument advanced by Templeton (1966: 256) that the traditional two-party political system does not allow a significant proportion of the electorate to express their political views with their vote. Given the trends discussed above, it is reasonable to expect poor white people to be among the least represented.

Because people are thinking beyond the paradigms provided by political parties today, individuals are increasingly able to define their political views separately from organized agendas (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). In order to pursue alternative agendas, activists are engaging in largely informal means including Internet-based petitions, demonstrations, boycotts, and blogging rather than party campaigning, associational membership, and letters to policymakers. While Inglehart and Welzel argue that these shifting means of political activism should placate fears of widespread civic disengagement and a "crisis of democracy" (2005: 117), it is questionable how much access under-resourced communities have to such efforts. The under-resourced tend to lack a sense of internal and external political efficacy, lack access to new tools of self-expression, and lack the disposable time and energy of middle-class citizens. At the same time, as previously noted, individuals of lower socioeconomic status feel a deficiency of influence because of the notion that the government is controlled by rich campaign donors and "corporate influence" (Zweig 2000, 166). Table 2.2 summarizes different demographics' perceptions of politicians' care for their interests, based on this book's original surveys of Britons.

We see that perceptions of politicians' care are lowest among the working class, those without university educations, and those who are middle-aged. And again, the range of perceptions is much wider between the rich and poor in the United States.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have subsequently witnessed the rising salience and support of radical right and populist political parties in Europe and similar movements in the United States. Ford and Goodwin

Table 2.2 **Perceived Politicians' Care**

	United Kingdom Mean	United States Mean
Education		
University Education	3.93	4.38
No University Education	3.49	3.46
Age		
18–24	4.11	3.99
25–39	3.66	4.38
40–59	3.42	3.47
60+	3.93	3.24
Self-reported Social Class		
Upper	4.12	5.32
Middle	3.75	4.08
Lower Middle	3.47	N/A*
Working	3.14	2.94
Gender		
Male	3.64	3.89
Female	3.74	3.61

British respondents were asked to report to what extent "politicians care a lot about people like me" on a scale from 0 to 10. 10 indicates that the respondent thinks that "people like me have a lot of political power" and 0 indicates that "politicians don't care about people like me." Working class here is defined as having no college education. * In the United Kingdom, class is measured using the British NRS social grade scale. There is no equivalent in US surveys.

(2010: 3) recognize rising support for the British National Party among white working class voters in the United Kingdom. Similarly, Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior (2004) show how the growth of ethnic minorities in Western European countries has, in several countries, driven increased support for extreme right-wing parties. Despite this support, Givens (2005) argues that the success of radical right parties across countries is largely determined by differences in these countries' electoral systems. Proportional-representation electoral systems, and conditions where two main parties form coalition governments, both reduce strategic voting among radical rightists, who instead may feel incentivized to back a fringe candidate (Givens 2005: 100). However, in first-past-the-post (i.e., winner-take-all) electoral systems like those of the United States and the United Kingdom, the relative difficulty of supporting such parties and movements (and

their subsequent lack of success) has led significant numbers of individuals to disengage from the political process completely.

Challenges for the External Observer

The circumstances I describe here, and elaborate on in the pages ahead, pose two primary challenges for observers' consideration of white working class politics and social affairs. First, the state of white working class people's politics and social affairs challenges conventional considerations of minority groups. The general public has typically equated minority status with smaller numbers and persistent legacies of disadvantage, rather than self-assertion of said status (Joppke 2010: 50). In particular, social scientists have followed Wirth's early definition of a minority as "a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination" (Wirth 1940: 347). These approaches disqualify any claims of minority status by white people, whose physical characteristics have allowed them to evade such discrimination and instead employ it to their advantage. Going one step further, Waters (1990: 156) has distinguished the claims of European-origin immigrants in the United States as those of an "ethnic group"—rather than those of an "ethnic minority" that has endured the "real and often hurtful" effects of being black, Latino, or Asian. However, are poor white people subject to the same empowerment enjoyed by wealthy white people?

White working class people lead us to question whether minoritization is— alongside socioeconomic disadvantage, histories of disempowerment, sociocultural discrimination, and situated demography—also a matter of race. If the concept of a "minority" cannot apply to white people, this suggests the limitation of its use as a universal concept—for how useful is a concept that cannot be applied across populations? Alternatively, if minority status is not necessarily a matter of race, it demands the consideration of alternative claims of minority status from a group that similarly experiences disempowerment and forms of disadvantage. It demands sober consideration when they claim to be "minoritized."

Second, the objective study of white working class people demands that the observer reasonably consider claims of disadvantage. While we are obligated to contextualize and even vet the claims made by the people with whom I speak, we are also obligated to resist the immediate dismissal of these claims on grounds of moral judgment. Scholars and observers of minority politics and social affairs generally maintain a sense of empathy (or at least common understanding) that heightens their sensitivity to subjects' disadvantage and their perceptions, despite their subjects' demonstrated flaws. The challenge is to sustain this empathy for the primary antagonist of the minority subjects we are accustomed to examining.

Indeed, white working class people complicate conventional understandings about marginality because the social and political system is one that they believe they helped build, and one that rendered them a structural advantage for centuries. This remains true even though working class white people are subject to alternative forms of disadvantage. In response to a perceived loss of social, economic, and political status, the last decade has witnessed white working class communities' efforts to reclaim the high ground of cultural politics. The British National Party and UKIP developed footholds in several English constituencies and boroughs, leading to the election of numerous municipal councilors, a Member of Parliament, and Members of European Parliament in the United Kingdom. In the United States, white working class constituencies have swayed several national and congressional election campaigns in the "swing states" that determine presidential campaigns. Simultaneously, white working class communities have engaged in political violence through organizations like the English Defence League in the United Kingdom and "sovereign citizen" or "survivalist" groups across the American countryside. There has also been extensive disillusionment from the democratic political arena, leading to lower civic participation levels and organizational apathy. These trends represent white working class responses to their disempowerment, and it is imperative that we understand them more clearly.

Political Responses to Disempowerment

In light of the disempowerment that white working class people perceive and experience, I am particularly concerned with individuals who decide that the best course of action is:

(A) to deliberately withdraw from the political sphere of their society; or
(B) to pro-actively disrupt the political sphere by engaging in coercive or circumventive activities to achieve their political preferences.

I refer to these political choices as anti-system political behavior, and I argue that they embody a political expression of marginality (see Gest 2015.)

Beyond Voice and Loyalty

Democracies depend on a citizenry that is confident in the government's capacity to govern without constant reinforcement. Indeed, democracies make myriad daily decisions without public consultation. To make this form

of self-governance function effectively, then, the system simultaneously depends on citizens' generally passive vigilance of government action and, when needed, citizens' active intervention to express dissatisfaction. While voting in elections represents an appointed opportunity for intervention, most other forms of voluntary participation are subject to the impulsive or calculated desire of citizens to advocate. In this spirit, passivity with the readiness to act and participation within democratic channels can be thought to support such a political system.

Albert Hirschman (1970: 32) refers to this as "an alternation of involvement and withdrawal" (see also Schudson 1999). Hirschman argues that democracy benefits from a mix of "alert" and "inert" citizens—a situation in which political participation is somewhere between "permanent activism" and "total apathy." A critical weakness of Hirschman's model is that he focuses almost exclusively on actions within the political system. That is, Hirschman considers "exit" in the sense that an individual may leave an association or political party in order to switch to a new group, simply changing affiliations. However, he—and most other scholars of political behavior—does not address the possibility that the same individual might just as easily rebel against the political system or exit the political system entirely, and certainly not with the intention of doing so indefinitely. Anti-system political behavior exists in contraposition to the political system, outside the boundaries of its procedures of consultation.

Contrapositions

As indicated above, one such contraposition exists among individuals who have a potential cause to advocate but who nevertheless choose to refrain from making any claims of the system—a conscious withdrawal. In this case, passivity is not a conscious "step back" taken with the intention to return when feasible or more motivated. Instead, it represents a conscious commitment to inactivity, the removal of oneself as a stakeholder in the political system, regardless of their desire for reform. I will refer to this as passive anti-system behavior, or more simply, withdrawal.

A second such contraposition exists among political advocates who act to impose their preferences on the political system by employing tactics that circumvent the system's established channels for influence and, in doing so, undermine its capacity to reflect popular will. Such activities may include violence, bribery, exclusivist hate groups, intimidation, or campaigning for civic abstention. I will refer to this as active anti-system behavior, or more simply, rebellion. Both withdrawal and rebellion represent political choices (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2).

PRO-SYSTEM	ANTI-SYSTEM
I. **Active**: Activity that impairs, disrupts circumvents or overthrows the system. Examples: a. Violence for political purpose b. Membership in an exclusivist organization c. Revolutionary action d. Clandestine activity	II. **Active**: Activity that engages the institutions and channels of the democratic system. Examples: a. Voting, parties, holding office b. Commune, union, cooperative c. Association or NGO membership d. Civil disobedience, protest e. Volunteer or community work
III. **Passive**: State of inactivity within the system. Examples: a. Complacent, satisfied b. Ignorant, disinterested c. Otherwise occupied	IV. **Passive**: Committed inactivity and withdrawal from the system. Examples: a. Rejection b. Withdrawal

Figure 2.1 Variation in Political Behavior. The four quadrants model the observable behavior of individuals who are anti-system or engaged, passively or actively. (See Gest 2015.)

	PRO-SYSTEM	**ANTI-SYSTEM**
ACTIVE	ENGAGEMENT	REBELLION
PASSIVE	SITTING OUT	WITHDRAWAL

Figure 2.2 Variation in Political Behavior. This is a shorthand edition of the four quadrants modeling observable political behavior (Gest 2015).

The passive anti-system individual does not voluntarily participate in democratic political life. He or she is withdrawn. As previously discussed, apathy in the form of non-participation does not necessarily mean a person is alienated; rather, he or she may be satisfied, complacent, ignorant, or lack the resources to participate. So passive anti-system behavior encompasses individuals' conscious removal from the political system. Unlike active anti-system behavior, this passive variant neither intentionally weakens the democratic system, nor intentionally hinders or overrides other citizens' capacity to make claims. Instead, it allows disagreeable governance to continue, under circumstances in which citizens believe they have a legitimate grievance. Withdrawal leaves a lack of government accountability, a less representative political system, and a widening social rift between those citizens who make claims of the system and those who do not.

Whereas active anti-system behavior circumvents democracy's mechanisms and impairs the capacity of other citizens to make claims of the system, passive anti-system behavior atrophies democratic mechanisms and mutes the claims of the alienated themselves.

The active anti-system individual is committed to behavior that undermines or attempts to topple the democratic system. He or she may engage in clubs, organizations, and other political efforts that become substitutes for the democratic political system or are detrimental to it. His or her form of protest is not intended to reform the system, but rather to undermine or defeat it. An example might be someone espousing or practicing political violence as part of the British National Party, English National Alliance, or an American "sovereign citizen" group, but also exclusive or racist political movements. This definition excludes strong critics of the democratic political system who see struggles against "powers-that-be" as a struggle for improving democracy in a system that they perceive to have become less democratic.

As long as such a movement attempts to improve the democracy in non-coercive ways that do not infringe on others' capacity to dissent, there is no reason to think of them as anti-system. Indeed, such movements attempt to improve the system using the mechanisms of the system.

Based on these definitions, Table 2.3 and Table 2.4 assemble self-reported political behavior data from this book's original surveys of white Britons and white Americans, respectively. The results show that over 8% of white Britons say they have participated or would participate in the violent racism of groups like the British National Party or the English Defence League. Another 13% have abstained or would deliberately abstain from any political engagement in light of their frustration. A further 37% would strongly consider voting for UKIP. In the United States, over 60% of white people would favor a third party that mirrored the British National Party's platform and 17% have or would abstain from any political engagement. This is a significant segment of the electorate, about whom we lack a strong understanding. This book addresses this void.

Prospectus

Until now, contemporary understandings of social marginality and political alienation have been primarily informed by examinations of ethno-religious minorities (e.g., see Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Wilson 1987; Wacquant 2008; Gest 2010). These understandings leverage the externality of the group from the social and political system that excludes them (or the system from which the group has excluded itself). Indeed, my earlier research contends that people who are actively or passively alienated are likely to perceive

Table 2.3 **Demographics of Anti-System Behavior in the United Kingdom**

	Favor Radical Right	Favor Withdrawal	Support any RR
Education			
University Education	.05	.14	.29
No University Education	.10	.11	.46
Age			
18–24	.07	.08	.31
25–39	.10	.13	.35
40–59	.08	.16	.42
60 +	.05	.10	.42
Self-reported Social Class			
Upper	.06	.14	.33
Middle	.06	.13	.36
Lower Middle	.10	.13	.45
Working	.10	.10	.44
Gender			
Male	.08	.13	.42
Female	.07	.13	.36
Working Class			
White Working Class	.09	.11	.46
All Other Whites	.05	.15	.39
Full Sample	**.08**	**.13**	**.39**

Cells indicate the proportion of British respondents for each demographic category that indicated that it had engaged or expressed willingness support the Radical Right. This includes people who have voted or expressed willingness to vote for the British National Party, or took part or expressed willingness to take part in English Defence League or English National Alliance protest or demonstration. The "withdrawn" are those who have purposefully abstained from voting in the last 12 months.

a political system that does not work for their interests and is not going to change (Gest 2010).

White working class communities are structurally disadvantaged in ways that differ greatly from the deprivation endured by ethno-religious minorities. Divorced by upwardly mobile white co-ethnics and relegated to an increasingly entrenched economic underclass where they are segregated from the solidarities of ethno-religious affinities, white working class communities are disempowered

Table 2.4 **Demographics of Anti-System Behavior in the United States**

	Trump	*Tea Party*	*Third Party*	*Withdrawal*
Education				
University Education	.29	.31	.58	.13
No University Education	.41	.36	.67	.18
Age				
18–24	.26	.34	.58	.22
25–39	.41	.37	.66	.21
40–59	.38	.34	.66	.15
60 +	.41	.34	.65	.10
Social Class				
Upper	.35	.18	.56	.05
Middle	.30	.36	.56	.15
Working	.30	.36	.64	.25
Gender				
Male	.42	.41	.65	.16
Female	.33	.30	.64	.18
Full Sample	.37	.35	**.64**	**.17**

Cells indicate the proportion of American respondents for each demographic category that indicated they support the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump, the Tea Party, or a hypothetical third party that advocated for "stopping mass immigration, providing American jobs for American workers, preserving America's Christian heritage, and stopping the threat of Islam." I classify each of these as support for the radical right.

in a very unconventional sense. Summarizing the review I undertook earlier in this chapter, white working class individuals in the United States and the United Kingdom tend to be:

- subject to economic pressures that widen socioeconomic inequality;
- raising children that are unlikely to experience much social mobility in future years;
- pessimistic about their chances of improving their general well-being or political clout;
- subject to political parties that are disinclined to solicit their electoral support or views;
- situated at the fringe of sprawling cities or in declining factory towns;
- complacent or averse to altering these social and political conditions;

- unconfident in their ability to enact political change or agenda-setting;
- and in many cases, unsupportive of redistributive agendas anyway.

This book seeks to explain why white working class political actors in similar positions of systemic, psychological, and economic entrenchment respond politically in divergent ways. In other words, given the same structural circumstances, why are not all white working class people in one box—or even on one side—of the political behavior diagram? What leads some to maintain faith in the democratic channels of participation? What leads others to rebel, and still others to deliberately withdraw?