

Racial and Political Dynamics of an Approaching “Majority- Minority” United States

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Do demographic shifts in the racial composition of the United States promote positive changes in the nation's racial dynamics? Change in response to the nation's growing diversity is likely, but its direction and scope are less clear. This review integrates emerging social-scientific research that examines how Americans are responding to the projected changes in the racial/ethnic demographics of the United States. Specifically, we review recent empirical research that examines how exposure to information that the United States is becoming a “majority-minority” nation affects racial attitudes and several political outcomes (e.g., ideology, policy preferences), and the psychological mechanisms that give rise to those attitudes. We focus primarily on the reactions of members of the current dominant racial group (i.e., white Americans). We then consider important implications of these findings and propose essential questions for future research.

Keywords: majority-minority; demographic changes; racial/ethnic diversity; political ideology; racial attitudes

Shortly after the 2012 presidential election, pundits, strategists, and elected officials remarked that shifting societal racial demographics may have changed the electorate in favor of the Democratic Party for the foreseeable future (Center for American Progress 2012; Phillips 2016). Senator Lindsay Graham even commented that Republicans are “not generating enough angry white guys to stay in business for the long term” (Helderman and

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Cohen 2012), and the Republican Party autopsy on the election once again emphasized the need to reach out to racial and ethnic minority communities (Rubin 2013). Just four years later, of course, Donald Trump—the Republican nominee—largely rejected the recommendations of the autopsy, instead making direct and clear appeals to white American voters (Cheney 2016). Although Trump’s election was certainly determined by many factors, it was, perhaps, due in part to largely unrecognized (at the time) social and political dynamics stemming from the very demographic shifts that had previously engendered enthusiasm among Democrats and pessimism among Republicans, namely, the increasing racial minority share of the national population.

The purpose of this review is to integrate the burgeoning literature on the psychological, social, and political implications of making salient projected changes in the racial/ethnic demographics of the United States. Specifically, we summarize extant empirical research on how exposure to information suggesting that white Americans are projected to become less than 50 percent of the national population around midcentury—the so-called “majority-minority” racial shift—affects racial attitudes and political outcomes such as ideology and policy preferences. We focus primarily on the reactions of members of the current dominant racial group; namely, non-Hispanic white Americans.¹ We then consider important implications of these findings and propose essential future directions for research.

Shifting Racial Demographics and Perceived Group Threat

The racial and ethnic diversity of the United States has been increasing for the past several decades (Pew Research Center 2015), a trend that is expected to continue. Indeed, recent U.S. census projections suggest that, somewhere between 2040 and 2050, the percentage of nonwhite Americans² in the United States will surpass that of white Americans—that is, white Americans will compose less than 50 percent of the population (U.S. Census Bureau 2015; but see Alba 2016). Since the late 1990s, media reports of this demographic shift and noteworthy milestones reflective of it—for instance, the year that the U.S. infant population became “majority-minority” (U.S. Census Bureau 2012)—have proliferated (see also Day 1996). It is in the wake of this deluge of information documenting what seems to be an inexorable march toward a “majority-minority” country that social scientists began to explore what (if any) effects this information may be having on the racial dynamics of the nation.

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Although research on this topic is still quite young, this growing body of work finds clear evidence that many white Americans (i.e., the current racial majority) experience the impending “majority-minority” shift as a threat to their dominant (social, economic, political, and cultural) status. For instance, whites for whom a “majority-minority” future is made salient, compared with whites exposed to control information, express greater concern that their racial group’s societal status in the country will decline compared with that of racial minorities (e.g., Outten et al. 2012; replicated in Craig and Richeson 2014a, 2014b, 2017b, forthcoming; see also Schildkraut and Marotta, forthcoming). Highlighting this demographic shift can also trigger more cultural threats, such as the concern that whites will no longer represent the prototypical “American” (Craig and Richeson 2017b; Danbold and Huo 2015; Zou and Cheryan 2018). In other words, salient information regarding a coming era in which whites are no longer more than 50 percent of the national population (despite remaining the largest single racial group) increases concern that the group may lose its place “at the top” of the societal racial, socioeconomic, and political status hierarchy and/or concern that the group will cease to be culturally dominant.

Shifting Racial Demographics and Intergroup Relations

Initial research examining the effects of making the “majority-minority” racial demographic shift salient for white Americans focused on the potential consequences for whites’ intergroup attitudes and emotions. Given classic research noting the role of perceived threat from increasing racial/ethnic diversity in the promotion (or expression) of intergroup hostility (e.g., Blalock 1967; Blumer 1958), and research finding that white Americans who (mis)perceive greater national racial diversity tend also to hold more negative racial attitudes (e.g., Alba, Rumbaut, and Marotz 2005), it is perhaps of no surprise that salient anticipated societal demographic changes like the “majority-minority” shift also affect whites’ intergroup attitudes. Indeed, experiments reveal that exposure to these anticipated changes results in increased feelings of anxiety and negative affect among white Americans (Burrow et al. 2014; Myers and Levy, this volume). Additional research finds that making anticipated national racial demographic changes salient leads both white Americans and white Canadians to express more anger and fear toward ethnic minorities and more sympathy for whites, compared with whites not exposed to these demographic shifts (Outten et al. 2012).

We have replicated and extended this work, finding that white Americans exposed to the racial shift information (relative to a number of control conditions) express greater preference for racial homophily in their social settings and interpersonal interactions, and have more negative evaluations of racial minority groups on both self-report and reaction-time measures (Craig and Richeson 2014a; see also Schildkraut and Marotta, forthcoming; Skinner and Cheadle 2016). Building on this work, Zou and Cheryan (2018) found similar effects among whites who are informed that their neighborhood will become

“majority-minority” in the near future. Specifically, compared with whites who expected their neighborhood to stay majority-white, those who thought that another racial group (i.e., black, Latino, or Asian Americans) would become the majority reported being significantly more likely to move. Further, as alluded to previously, concerns about group status statistically mediated the effects of the future white minority (i.e., racial shift) information on whites’ intergroup emotions, explicit racial attitudes, and desire to exit “majority-minority” neighborhoods (Craig and Richeson 2014a; Outten et al. 2012; Zou and Cheryan 2018).

In addition to the perceived threat to the socioeconomic and/or political status of the group, cultural threats in response to the declining white majority also engender racially exclusionary sentiments. Danbold and Huo (2015) found, for instance, that exposure to the projected racial demographic shift triggered fear that what it means to be the “prototypical American” will change. This cultural threat, in turn, reduced perceptions that ethnic diversity is valuable to American society and increased support for the idea that racial minorities should assimilate to mainstream American customs and practices. Similarly, Zou and Cheryan (2018) found that whites’ intention to move out of their current neighborhood if it becomes majority Asian American (but, not majority black) was mediated by cultural threat—namely, the concern that foreign cultural practices will overtake white American practices in the community. Interestingly, cultural threat also seems to underlie whites’ tendency to be more concerned about whites facing discrimination in a future “majority-minority” United States (Craig and Richeson 2017b).

In addition to these outcomes for intergroup emotions, attitudes, and perceptions, information about changing national racial demographics can elicit racial discrimination. Specifically, whites who read about the growth in the Hispanic population donated more money to an unknown white recipient, compared with an unknown black recipient (Abascal 2015). If nonracial information were made salient (i.e., iPhone market share growth), however, white participants donated equal amounts of money to black and white recipients. Taken together, this growing body of research suggests that communications about the changing racial demographics of the nation (or, even one’s local community) readily trigger multiple concerns about the status, standing, and potential vulnerabilities of one’s racial group among whites, which, in turn, promote increased favoritism toward the racial ingroup and derogation of relevant outgroups (i.e., racial minorities). In the next section, we explore the effects of these group status concerns on political outcomes.

Shifting Racial Demographics and Political Ideology, Preferences, and Behavior

Although the research on whites’ reactions to anticipated racial diversity understandably began with explorations of intergroup attitudes and emotions, studies quickly moved to consider whether political ideology and behavior may also be

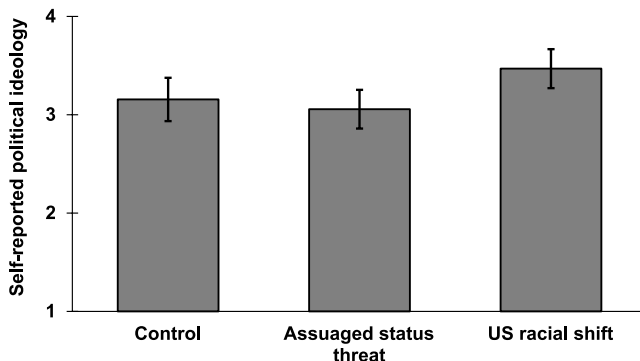
shaped by this information. Given the rise in group status threat in response to exposure to the “majority-minority” shift information reviewed previously; the known influence of group status threat on political identity (e.g., Giles and Hertz 1994); and support for racial exclusionary policies designed to protect whites’ political, economic, and social privileges (Blumer 1958; Bobo 1998; Parker and Barreto 2013), it is, again, unsurprising that highlighting this shift affects whites’ political behavior (see also, Enos 2016). Indeed, whites for whom the impending racial demographic changes of the nation are salient (1) endorse more conservative positions on a variety of policy issues (Craig and Richeson 2014b, 2017b; Myers and Levy, this volume; Schildkraut and Marotta, forthcoming); (2) express more support for the Tea Party—a relatively extreme version of political conservatism (Willer, Feinberg, and Wetts 2016); and (3) reported greater support for Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump (if they also reported having higher levels of ethnic identification; Major, Blodorn, and Major-Blascovich 2016).

Moreover, studies have confirmed the mediating role of group status threat in engendering each of these outcomes. In one such experiment (Craig and Richeson 2014b), white participants were randomly assigned to be exposed to information about the projected racial demographic shift information alone (the typical racial shift treatment), or they were exposed to this information but it was followed by a statement designed to assuage participants’ status threat. Specifically, participants in this *assuaged threat condition* were told that the societal status of groups—that is, their relative hierarchical position—is unlikely to change in a significantly more racially diverse United States, given group differences in educational attainment, access to resources, and so on (see Craig and Richeson [2014b] for specifics). The responses of participants in these two conditions were compared to those of participants in a control condition in which shifting racial demographics were not made salient but, rather, were changes in geographic mobility among Americans.

As shown in Figure 1, participants in the standard U.S. racial shift condition expressed greater endorsement of conservative ideology, compared with participants in the control condition, as well as compared with participants in the assuaged threat condition. That is, white participants in the assuaged threat condition endorsed conservative ideology less than participants who were exposed to the racial shift information alone. Indeed, those in the assuaged threat condition supported conservative ideology no more (or less) than did control participants. This experiment suggests, in other words, that information about the “majority-minority” racial demographic shift increases whites’ sense that their racial group’s societal status is in jeopardy, which, in turn, leads to greater support for politically conservative parties, policies, and candidates (see Craig and Richeson [2017b] for a replication of this effect).

Although most of the research conducted thus far has understandably focused on white Americans, the dominant majority racial group, recent work finds similar effects among racial minority participants. Specifically, Craig and Richeson (2017a) examined the effects of making salient the growth in the Hispanic population in the United States on the political ideology and policy preferences of non-Hispanic racial minorities (i.e., black, Asian, Native Americans, multiracial).

FIGURE 1
 Self-Reported Political Ideology of White Americans after Exposure to Racial Demographic Shift Information Alone, with Information to Reduce the Status Threat, and Control Information



NOTE: Self-reported political ideology scale 1–7; higher numbers indicate more conservative ideology. Error bars reflect 95 percent confidence intervals about the mean.

Similar to the findings for white Americans, members of these non-Hispanic racial minority groups, on average, also endorsed politically conservative policies more strongly and identified as more conservative (or, qualitatively, less liberal) after exposure to the Hispanic growth, rather than control, information. Although the mechanism underlying these findings is not yet known, they suggest that the impacts of salient shifting demographics are not unique to whites—that is, members of dominant societal groups. They also highlight the need to examine how racial minorities are responding to the omnipresent information regarding the changing demographics of the nation (see also Abascal 2015).

Nevertheless, considered in tandem with the findings outlined previously, these results suggest that highlighting significant growth in any racial minority *outgroup* may be perceived as threatening to individuals' own racial group and, thus, promote ingroup favoring, or group defensive and/or even system protective behavior, including greater endorsement of conservative ideology (Jost et al. 2003).

Conservative Shift or Racial Resentment?

One question that is generated by the findings reviewed thus far is whether they are separable outcomes or, rather, that the findings for political conservatism reflect racial attitudes.³ There is certainly some reason to expect that there could be shared variance in the two seemingly different outcomes (Zigerell 2015). For instance, as mentioned previously, exposure to the racial shift information increased the extent to which white Americans with higher levels of white ethnic identification expressed support for Donald Trump during the Republican primary (Major, Blodorn, and Major-Blascovich 2016). Given that Trump was not

the most traditionally conservative candidate in the primary contest at the time that the data were collected, regularly engaged in explicit antiminority language and appeals, and garnered the very public support of several white supremacist groups, it is certainly likely that support for Trump's candidacy may reflect racial attitudes in addition to support for conservative principles. The same could be argued of Tea Party support (Parker and Barreto 2013; Tope, Pickett, and Chiricos 2015). In other words, some of the political outcomes that have been examined thus far may have a racial component, be it racial minority (outgroup) animus or white racial ingroup concern.

There is, however, also reason to believe that the conservatism findings and racial attitude outcomes are distinct. Most notably, research examining how exposure to the racial demographic shift (compared with control) information affects policy support (e.g., Craig and Richeson 2014b, 2017b; Major, Blodorn, and Major-Blascovich 2016) has found effects on policies that are clearly race-related (e.g., affirmative action, immigration) and those that are race-neutral (e.g., oil and gas drilling, tax rates), as well as on those that are somewhat in between (e.g., health care, defense spending; Tesler 2012). Indeed, some work has found effects of exposure to the shifting demographics on whites' support for race-neutral (taxation and public spending), but not race-related (immigration), policies (e.g., Myers and Levy, this volume). Moreover, in addition to policy support, salient racial shift information also results in greater identification with conservative ideology among whites and non-Hispanic racial minorities and even predicts the tendency for white self-described political Independents to report that they "lean Republican" when considering living in a "majority-minority" region of the country (Craig and Richeson 2014b, 2017a, 2017b). Taken together, then, there is good reason to assert that considering the increasing racial diversity of the nation results in both racial and political outcomes, although both sets of outcomes are likely to have important implications for societal racial equality.

Implications

For those most committed to progressive racial politics, the findings of recent research examining how people are responding to information about the changing racial demographics of our nation are quite sobering. This work suggests that whites experience greater concern regarding their racial group's societal rank and cultural status, which, in turn, can lead to a host of negative intergroup outcomes as well as yield greater support for politically conservative policy positions, including policies most relevant to societal racial equity (e.g., affirmative action, immigration policy, harsh criminal justice policies). The findings of this growing body of work also suggest that whites are increasingly likely to embrace an assimilative, rather than multicultural, ideology regarding racial/ethnic diversity in the United States and promote the social, political, and economic interests of whites—the racial ingroup. In other words, white identity politics (Knowles and Marshburn 2010) is likely to reemerge in overt and explicit forms (Vavreck 2017)

as the racial diversity of the nation increases (see also Richeson and Craig 2011; Schildkraut 2017). Indeed, it probably already has. As mentioned previously, support for Donald Trump's candidacy for president—a candidate embraced by white nationalist and supremacist groups—was strongly predicted by concerns about the so-called “majority-minority” shift (Pew Research Center 2016) and racial resentment (Tesler 2016).

So what can be done to avoid the likelihood of increased racial tension, discrimination, and perhaps violence in the wake of the increasing diversity of the nation? One possibility is that altering the way the demographic change information is framed could reduce its most divisive effects. Consider, for instance, the “majority-minority” construct. Is there any compelling reason to think of all Americans who are not in the “non-Hispanic white” category as one group to be contrasted against non-Hispanic whites? This “us vs. them” framing is certain to facilitate the zero-sum thinking that promotes racial conflict. Similarly, it may be useful to rethink who is counted as “white” in these estimates (Alba 2016). Indeed, recent research suggests that creating a definition of white that includes, rather than excludes, anyone who identifies as having a white parent can alleviate some of the social and political effects typically found when the growing diversity of the nation is made salient (Myers and Levy, this volume). Future research is, of course, needed to understand the varied effects of employing this or other more inclusive constructions of the white category and, further, whether they will be accepted by members of the American public (see e.g., Peery and Bodenhausen 2008).

The emerging research on reactions to anticipated diversity also would benefit from being in conversation with the established body of research on the experiences people have in communities that are rapidly diversifying (e.g., Craig, Rucker, and Richeson, forthcoming). For instance, it would be useful to identify the conditions under which actual local diversity and perceived or projected diversity result in similar, rather than divergent, outcomes (see Craig and Richeson [forthcoming] for a discussion). How individuals respond to actual diversity may shape how they respond to projected diversity. For instance, whites who already live in quite diverse environments may not feel particularly threatened by these projected demographic shifts and may actually push for more inclusive social policies in response to their salience (Lee and Bean 2010; Zárate and Shaw 2010). It is also possible, however, that the effects of status and cultural threat in response to projected racial diversity on relevant policies and practices may actually change the trajectory of these population projections (Alba 2016). Given that group status and cultural threat increase support for policies that generally serve to restrict diversity (e.g., citizenship rules, immigration policy and laws, etc.), for instance, the anticipation of increasing national diversity may motivate the implementation of laws, policies, and norms that serve to slow down at least some of the factors that are currently giving rise to it.

Before we close, we should note that although the bulk of the research reviewed here examined the responses of white Americans to the growing racial diversity of the nation, additional research is needed to examine the effects of projected racial demographic shifts: (1) in more local contexts, such as

neighborhoods (e.g., Zou and Cheryan 2018) and (2) on the intergroup attitudes and political behavior of members of various racial minority groups, especially depending on whether they are the current majority group in the locale, the group “moving in” or, rather, long-standing residents who are not in the numerical majority. In addition, research is needed to examine whether other emerging population trends that are beginning to garner attention are having similar social and political impacts as those found for shifting racial demographics. For instance, in *The End of White Christian America*, Robert Jones (2016) notes that white Christian Americans are already less than 50 percent of the national population, and asserts that this minority status has led to what he calls “nostalgia politics,” which serves to protect the interests of the ethno-racial-religious ingroup and undermine those of relevant racial and religious outgroups. Needless to say, careful examination of these dynamics and the psychology that underlies them is paramount. In general, examination of the basic social psychological component processes—for example, categorization and perceptual biases or more social processes, such as feelings of belonging and citizenship—that are influenced by increasing societal diversity may help to elucidate the mechanism(s) underlying the downstream consequences for social and political attitudes.

Conclusion

Although the research reviewed here is relatively new, scholars, journalists, and those in positions to shape policy cannot afford to ignore it. Indeed, the relevance of race and racially motivated concerns in public opinion regarding these demographic trends is clear, and the notion that America is postracial or has overcome the racism of its past is incongruent with this social scientific literature. As the nation continues to diversify, the relevance of race, ethnicity, religion, and identity politics is likely to increase rather than fade. Indeed, it is entirely likely that some effort to assuage the identity threat and broader concerns of white (Christian) Americans is going to be necessary, but any efforts to do so will also need to avoid privileging the continued and guaranteed racial dominance of whites. Maintaining a functioning democracy in the wake of increasing racial, ethnic, and religious diversity, in other words, is likely to require the creation of a representation of America and Americans to which members of all racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds can feel connected and included.

Notes

1. For brevity, we refer to this group hereafter as “white.”

2. Reporting on these demographic changes often compares non-Hispanic whites to all other racial groups (“minorities”), including those who identify as white and some other racial group (e.g., as multiracial; see U.S. Census Bureau 2015).

3. Interestingly, in some ways this is the reverse of prior arguments regarding how racial resentment and conservative ideology are related (e.g., Feldman and Huddy 2005).

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