

Political ideology moderates White Americans' reactions to racial demographic change

Group Processes & Intergroup Relations

1–19

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DOI: 10.1177/13684302211052516

journals.sagepub.com/home/gpi



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Abstract

An emerging body of research finds that exposure to the shifting racial demographics of a nation can engender concerns about racial group status among members of the dominant racial group. The present work revisits this finding, probing a broader set of group status concerns than has been examined in most past research. Three experiments exposed four samples of White Americans to racial demographic information or race-neutral control information, then assessed their perception that the relative status of racial groups in the nation would change and the extent to which they were alarmed by such a status shift—that is, status threat. Consistent with past work, what we now term perceived status change increased in response to salient racial demographics information, relative to race-neutral control information, irrespective of participants' political ideology. Departing from past work, however, the perceived threat associated with changing racial demographics was moderated by political ideology. Specifically, politically conservative White participants demonstrated high levels of group status threat in the neutral control condition that either increased (Study 1a, Study 2) or stayed equally high (Study 1b, Study 3) after exposure to information about a racial shift. In contrast, in all studies, politically liberal White participants demonstrated a modest level of group status threat in the control condition that was attenuated upon exposure to a racial shift. Taken together, these results suggest a polarization of responses to the increasing racial diversity of the nation, one that was not observed even just a few years ago.

Keywords

demographic changes, intergroup relations, political ideology, racial attitudes, racial/ethnic diversity

Paper received 13 January 2021; revised version accepted 16 September 2021.

The U.S. Census Bureau projects that the percentage of the United States population comprised of non-Hispanic Whites will continue to decline such that, by 2044, racial minorities will make up more than 50% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). A growing body of research in social and political psychology now

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finds that Whites (Americans, Canadians, and Europeans in countries that are currently majority-White) are often threatened by the idea of a “majority-minority” nation (for a review, see Craig et al., 2018), though a central question remains: Does political ideology shape majority group members’ reactions to racial demographic change? In previous work, when information about a racial demographic shift was made salient, Whites (regardless of their political ideology) reported greater levels of racial group status threat, defined here as a concern about the material, political, and cultural standing of the group (Craig & Richeson, 2014a; Craig et al., 2018; Danbold & Huo, 2015; Outten et al., 2012; Shepherd et al., 2018). However, the majority of studies that considered White Americans’ reactions to racial demographic change were not designed to examine the potential moderating effect of political ideology (e.g., Alba et al., 2005; Danbold & Huo, 2015; Outten et al., 2012). Research that has examined this possibility, however, has not revealed evidence of such moderation (Major et al., 2018). Despite this body of work, there is reason to believe that political ideology should moderate reactions to salient racial diversity, especially in our current political context. The present work sought to examine this possibility.

Political Orientation and Racial Group Status Threat

Existing work across the social sciences suggests that potential challenges to a dominant group’s position atop a racial status hierarchy will likely result in hostile intergroup attitudes and behavior (Blumer, 1958; Bobo, 1998; Pratto et al., 1994). Specifically, according to Blumer’s group position theory, intergroup threat emerges from collective, contextual judgments about challenges to group status. Under this lens, a national racial demographic shift leads to group status threat because it signals to some White Americans that they may lose access to the material and symbolic privileges of their dominant position in the racial hierarchy. As outlined by symbolic racism theory, even

Whites with egalitarian racial attitudes often oppose social policies designed to correct racial injustice (Kinder & Sears, 1981), suggesting that Whites’ political ideology may be less important than their racial identity in determining how they react to prospective challenges to the racial hierarchy.

Group status threat, in turn, affects a number of important intergroup outcomes, including the expression of more negative emotions (e.g., fear, anger, and anxiety) toward racial minorities (Myers & Levy, 2018; Outten et al., 2012), increased antiminority racial bias (Craig & Richeson, 2014b), decreased willingness to live in an integrating community (Zou & Cheryan, 2017), decreased support for diversity (Danbold & Huo, 2015), and increased support for more restrictive race-related policies (e.g., immigration bans; Craig & Richeson, 2014a; Major et al., 2018; for a review, see Craig et al., 2018). Last, making this shift salient increases Whites’ concerns about anti-White racial discrimination (Craig & Richeson, 2017, 2018), reflecting the broader perceived threat to the racial ingroup that increased racial diversity represents to many White Americans. Importantly, none of this previous work has indicated that politically liberal Whites are any less likely than conservatives to experience group status threat or its attitudinal and behavioral outcomes in response to a racial demographic shift.

Broadly, there are at least three possible reasons why evidence that political ideology predicts susceptibility to racial status threat triggered by shifting racial demographics has not been observed in research conducted during the last decade of work on the topic. The first possibility is that any differences by political ideology in White Americans’ reactions to the prospect of national racial demographic change are quite minimal. White liberals and conservatives could be equally uncertain, if not anxious and threatened, about the prospect of a “majority-minority” United States. The second possibility is that prior work has not examined this scenario very robustly. Most notably, racial status threat has been measured inconsistently across studies and,

in some cases, relatively weakly. For instance, much of the research by Craig and colleagues has operationalized “group status threat” with a single item (“If they increase in status, racial minorities are likely to reduce the influence of White Americans in society”). It is possible that this relatively straightforward item reflects an acknowledgment of what greater numbers of racial minority populations should mean in a democratic nation, but not individuals’ level of concern or anxiety about such status changes. If this is the case, then political ideology may not moderate responses to this item.

In the present work, then, we assess beliefs about racial group status change—that is, the expectation that a racial shift will lead to a change in relative group power/status relations—measured with this single item from previous work (Craig & Richeson, 2014a). Further, we differentiate group status change from racial group status threat—that is, feelings of alarm triggered by a racial demographic shift, assessed with a multi-item measure drawn from previous research on this topic. To our knowledge, the present work is the first to differentiate perceived status change from perceived status threat, as well as the first to include multiple dimensions on which individuals could feel threatened (e.g., economic, political, cultural). Consequently, the present research offers a robust test of White liberals’ and conservatives’ responses to salient information about the changing racial demographics of the nation.

A third reason why we may have yet to observe an ideological divergence in responses to salient racial demographic shift information is because such divergence is newly emerging. For instance, it is possible that White liberals’ and/or conservatives’ attitudes about the shifting racial demographics of the nation have changed over the decade and a half since the Census Bureau first started releasing their projections regarding the coming “majority-minority” nation. Whereas White conservatives may continue to be alarmed by the shift, White liberals may have habituated to the idea or may even appraise it positively. This pattern of moderation by political orientation would be consistent with existing theoretical

approaches to intergroup divides, such as social dominance theory (SDT; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and aversive racism theory (Hodson et al., 2004). According to SDT, for instance, some individuals are more affected by the societal group hierarchy than are others (Pratto et al., 1994) and, thus, should respond differently to evidence that such hierarchies may be collapsing. Consistent with this idea, Wilkins and Kaiser (2014) found that White individuals who generally believe the U.S. racial status hierarchy is legitimate were more threatened by cues that the racial hierarchy may be flattening, compared with their more racially egalitarian counterparts. Because status legitimizing beliefs and preferences for social hierarchy (SDO) are highly correlated with political conservatism, especially among members of dominant societal groups (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius et al., 1992), one might expect White conservatives to find cues that the U.S. racial hierarchy may be changing more threatening than White liberals would.

Aversive racism theory (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Hodson et al., 2004) also predicts an ideological divergence in response to the growing racial diversity of the nation. Rather than suggesting that White political conservatives may be especially troubled by the national racial shift, this theory suggests that White political liberals may be especially welcoming of it. Specifically, White individuals with low levels of explicit racial bias, yet still relatively high levels of more implicit or automatic racial bias, are often motivated to respond to salient, unambiguous race-related cues in an egalitarian manner (Hodson et al., 2004). For example, Gaertner and Dovidio (1977) found that in an ostensible emergency situation, White participants were equally likely to help Black victims and White victims when they believed they were the only person in a position to offer assistance. However, when White participants believed that there were other people present who could also presumably respond to the emergency, they were more likely to help White victims than Black victims. In other words, racially egalitarian Whites often treat racial minorities fairly or even preferentially in contexts in

which their behavior can be clearly observed and/or the relevance to their egalitarian self-image is clear, but they discriminate against racial minorities when their behavior will not be observed and/or the implication for their egalitarian self-image is murkier (Hodson et al., 2002).

Given the evolving and increasingly partisan conversation about national racial demographic change, it is possible that White liberals are clear on how they—and people like them—should respond to this information. Indeed, one can trace what has become an increasingly polarized media discussion of these U.S. Census Bureau population projections over time. Early reports focused more directly on the demographic projections of a “majority-minority” future (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008), without providing much additional commentary, leaving more room for ambiguity in White Americans’ responses. More recently, rhetoric associated with the nation’s changing racial/ethnic demographics is decidedly alarmist and negative among right-wing media outlets (e.g., Fox News, 2013), and decidedly positive, if not naïve, among left-wing media outlets (e.g., Cordero-Guzman, 2014). If this polarization shapes or reflects social norms about demographic change, then we would expect White Americans who ascribe to more liberal ideologies to be motivated to express low levels of racial group status threat when asked to report their opinions of the shifting racial demographics of the nation.

Consistent with this possibility, recent polling suggests an increasing partisan gap in racial attitudes in general (Tesler, 2012, 2016), with White Democrats self-reporting increasingly egalitarian attitudes over the past decade. Similarly, Democrats’ and Republicans’ beliefs about whether a “majority-minority” US will be good or bad for the country have also diverged (Parker et al., 2019). Moreover, very recent studies have observed differential effects of exposure to racial shift information by political orientation on negative affective reactions (Myers & Levy, 2018) and in patterns of the racial categorization of faces (Abascal, 2020). Taken together with the aforementioned theoretical work, these data hint

at the possibility that a political divide in reactions to the prospect of racial demographic change in the nation has recently emerged.

The Present Work

In this work, we first draw a distinction between group status change and group status threat, examining White Americans’ beliefs about whether the current racial hierarchy is likely to change over the next few decades and their feelings of threat regarding that change. We then tested whether and how political ideology affects both status change and threat in response to shifting racial demographics, using a multi-item measure of threat. We conducted three studies (including a direct replication for a total of four samples) in which we manipulated exposure to the “majority-minority” shifting racial demographics of the nation (compared to two control conditions), then measured liberal and conservative White Americans’ racial group status threat with multiple items reflecting different types of threat. In Studies 1a and 1b, participants read about either a racial shift, current racial demographics, or nonracial control information, and then reported their levels of status change and threat. Study 2 contrasted the racial shift and nonracial control conditions with an “amplified” racial shift condition, where participants read about demographic changes framed in a manner thought to be more threatening to the racial ingroup. Study 3 assessed whether the threat triggered by the racial shift information may be related to perceived changes in the political composition of the US associated with increased national racial diversity, that is, the potential relative political dominance of liberals or conservatives. Across studies, we expected exposure to the shifting racial demographics information to increase perceived racial group status change, regardless of political orientation. In contrast, we explored whether racial group status threat may be moderated by participants’ political ideology, such that information about racial demographic change leads to higher levels of threat for White conservatives relative to White liberals.

Study 1

In two independent samples (Studies 1a and 1b) collected 5 weeks apart,¹ Study 1 tested whether exposure to projected racial demographic change (the U.S. racial shift) affects racial group status change and threat among politically liberal and conservative White Americans. White participants were randomly assigned to read about the projected “majority-minority” racial shift, the current U.S. racial demographics, or race-neutral control information prior to reporting on their experiences of racial group status change and threat.

Method

Participants. Two samples of U.S. citizens were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk, retaining only self-identified non-Hispanic Whites (Study 1a: $n = 478$; 253 female, 224 male, one nonbinary; $M_{\text{age}} = 37.1$, $SD = 12.3$; Study 1b: $n = 478$; 274 female, 197 male, two nonbinary; $M_{\text{age}} = 35.9$, $SD = 11.7$). Sample size was determined a priori via a G*Power analysis (Faul et al., 2009) based on the observed size of the effect of the racial shift manipulation on group status threat observed in prior studies (95% power to detect an effect size of $d = 0.20$; Craig & Richeson, 2014a), then adjusting upward to account for a three-cell rather than a two-cell experimental design, and a possible interaction with participant gender. Participants were recruited to take a 12-minute study “about news and memory,” and were paid \$1.25. All measures, manipulations, and exclusions are reported in all studies.

Materials and measures

Demographic shift manipulation. Similar to past research (Craig & Richeson, 2014b; Outten et al., 2012), participants in the racial demographic shift condition read an article headlined “Census Bureau Estimates that in a Generation, Racial Minorities May Be the U.S. Majority,” which described data projections that non-Hispanic Whites would make up less than half the country’s population by 2042. Participants in the race-salient current demographics control condition

read an article about the current majority-White demographics of the United States. Participants in the race-neutral control condition read about geographic mobility in the US. This article did not mention race but contained information about a different demographic shift—increasing geographic mobility, which was presented in a similar manner to the other two conditions (full texts are available at <https://osf.io/2c8h9/>).

Perceived racial group status change and threat. Eight items evaluated perceived group status threat, including items assessing cultural and material threat drawn from previous research examining reactions to shifting racial/ethnic demographics. These included two items to assess prototypicality threat from Danbold and Huo (2015), specifically, “Compared to today, 50 years from now what it means to be a true American will be less clear” and “Compared to today, 50 years from now the values and beliefs of the typical American will be more different from the values and beliefs of people like me.” Additionally, two items assessed what Shepherd et al. (2018) called “collective angst”: “I feel anxious about the future of American culture” and “I feel confident that American culture as we know it will survive” (reverse-coded). We created one item to assess general alarm about shifting racial/ethnic demographics, “Americans should be alarmed about the demographic trends described in this article”; and two items to assess perceptions of potential loss of specific material resources and political power, namely, “Members of other racial groups are displacing members of my racial group from jobs” and “Even if racial minorities increase in number, my political beliefs will still be well-represented in America” (reverse-coded). Additionally, we included the measure of group status change previously conceptualized as group status threat in Craig and Richeson (2014a, 2017): “If they increase in status, racial minorities are likely to reduce the influence of White Americans in society.” All items were rated on 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), and the order of presentation was randomized.

Article comprehension checks. Participants answered two comprehension check questions in each condition, which also served to reinforce the manipulation's content and to help maintain the study's cover story as being about memory for news. In each condition, one comprehension check question tested whether participants could identify the central point of the article. Participants who failed to correctly respond to the key comprehension check questions about the manipulation article and an unrelated second article were excluded.

Political conservatism. Among a set of other demographic items such as age, education, race, gender, socioeconomic status (SES), and home state, participants completed two items assessing their political ideology: "I endorse many aspects of conservative ideology" and "I endorse many aspects of liberal ideology" (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The liberalism item was reverse-scored and then averaged with the conservatism item (Study 1a: $r = .80$; Study 1b: $r = .78$). Higher scores reflect greater self-reported political conservatism.

Procedure. Participants learned that they would be completing a study on memory for news articles. After providing informed consent, they were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions: racial demographic shift (shifting racial demographics article), race-salient control (current racial demographics article), and race-neutral control (geographic mobility article). After reading the relevant article for their condition, participants answered the two comprehension check questions, followed by the eight group status threat items. Next, participants read a second article and completed other measures unrelated to the present study (available at <https://osf.io/2c8h9/>). At the end of the study, participants reported their demographic characteristics (e.g., race, gender, education), including their political ideology. They were then debriefed and compensated.

Results

Preliminary analyses. Participants who answered both key comprehension check questions incorrectly were excluded, eight from Study 1a and five from

Study 1b, leaving final samples of 470 and 473. Preliminary regression analyses revealed that self-reported political conservatism was not affected by the article manipulation in either sample ($ps > .34$), allowing us to examine political orientation as a moderator of any effects of condition on the dependent measures. Hence, each dependent variable was regressed on experimental condition, self-reported political conservatism (centered), and the interactions between these variables.² Condition was indicated with a binary code for both the racial shift and the current demographics conditions, such that the geographic mobility condition was coded 0,0, the racial shift condition 1,0, and the current demographics condition 0,1. The results from both samples are presented in parallel in the following lines, with the subscripts "1a" and "1b" denoting the sample in question.

Perceived group status change. Recall that we predicted that relative to those in the race-neutral control and the race-salient control (i.e., the current racial demographics) conditions, participants in the racial shift condition would report expecting greater group status change.³ As predicted, and consistent with past research (Craig & Richeson, 2014a, 2014b), participants in the racial shift condition expressed greater perceived group status change ($\beta_{1a} = 0.51, p = .003$; $\beta_{1b} = 0.43, p = .006$) than participants in the race-neutral control condition. Further, contrary to predictions, there was no difference between the status change perceived by participants in the racial shift and the current racial demographics conditions in Study 1a ($\beta_{1a} = 0.04, p = .811$), but this comparison was reliable and as predicted in Study 1b ($\beta_{1b} = -0.36, p = .024$). Surprisingly, participants in the current racial demographics condition also expressed more perceived group status change than those in the race-neutral control in Study 1a ($\beta_{1a} = 0.55, p = .002$); however, consistent with previous work, there was no difference between these two conditions in Study 1b ($\beta_{1b} = 0.07, p = .643$). Last, in Study 1a but not in Study 1b, conservatism also predicted perceived group status change ($\beta_{1a} = 0.15, p = .032$; $\beta_{1b} = -0.02, p = .706$). There were no reliable interactions between condition and conservatism in either sample.

Perceived group status threat. The seven-item status threat composite ($\alpha_{1a} = .88$; $\alpha_{1b} = .78$) was submitted to the same analysis. The effect of conservatism emerged ($\beta_{1a} = 0.29, p < .001$; $\beta_{1b} = 0.22, p < .001$), wherein more conservative participants reported greater levels of racial group status threat than did more liberal participants. In Study 1a, there were no first-order effects of the manipulations (for current demographics: $\beta_{1a} = -0.08, p = .476$; for racial shift: $\beta_{1a} = 0.08, p = .482$), though interactions emerged between participant conservatism and condition for both the current demographics ($\beta_{1a} = 0.17, p = .008$) and racial shift ($\beta_{1a} = 0.18, p = .003$) conditions, each compared with the race-neutral control (i.e., geographic mobility). Interestingly, in Study 1b, although we saw a reliable effect of the current racial demographics condition ($\beta_{1b} = -0.20, p = .046$) and a nonsignificant trend in the same direction for the racial shift condition ($\beta_{1b} = -0.11, p = .283$), each compared with neutral control, both effects were moderated (albeit only marginally in the current demographics condition) by participants' level of political conservatism (current demographics: $\beta_{1b} = 0.10, p = .061$; racial shift: $\beta_{1b} = 0.16, p = .008$), replicating Study 1a. These interactions are depicted in Figure 1.

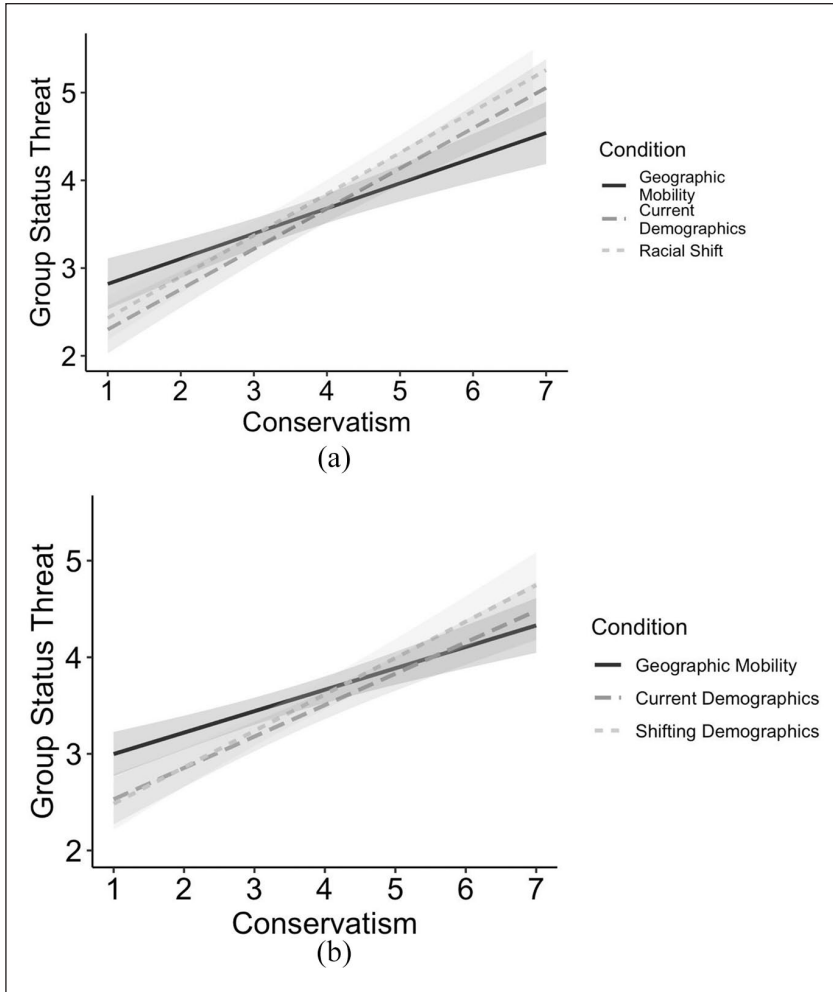
To examine these interactions more closely, we assessed each condition effect at 1 *SD* above and below the mean level of political conservatism. Among more conservative participants, exposure to the racial shift condition led to higher ($\beta_{1a} = 0.42, p = .011$) or equal ($\beta_{1b} = 0.17, p = .256$) levels of perceived group status threat compared to the race-neutral control. There were no reliable differences between the current demographics and the race-neutral control conditions in either study ($\beta_{1a} = 0.23, p = .147$; $\beta_{1b} = -0.01, p = .911$). Surprisingly, among the more liberal participants in Study 1a, those exposed to the current demographics condition expressed significantly less racial group status threat, compared with their liberal counterparts in the race-neutral control condition ($\beta_{1a} = -0.40, p = .018$). A similar trend, albeit nonsignificant, was observed among liberal participants in the racial shift condition ($\beta_{1a} = -0.26, p = .110$),

compared with the race-neutral control. This pattern replicated in Study 1b, where more liberal participants once again reported less group status threat after exposure to either the current ($\beta_{1b} = -0.38, p = .007$) or projected ($\beta_{1b} = -0.39, p = .007$) racial demographics of the US, compared with exposure to the neutral control information.

Discussion

Studies 1a and 1b manipulated exposure to information about projected racial demographic changes in the US—specifically, the idea that White Americans will make up less than 50% of the population in the future—and compared its effects on White Americans' perceptions of and concern about the status of their racial group to those triggered by exposure to the current racial demographics of the nation or to a race-neutral demographic shift (i.e., geographic mobility). While exposing White Americans to the racial demographic shift information led to the expectation of more group status change compared with the race-neutral control information among liberals and conservatives alike replicating past work (Craig & Richeson, 2018), the results for group status threat were far more intriguing. Specifically, reactions to exposure to the racial demographic shift information, compared with the race-neutral control, diverged by political ideology. Whereas more conservative White participants reported equally high or even higher levels of group status threat when exposed to racial demographic shift information compared with the neutral control information, more liberal White participants reported lower levels of group status threat when exposed to racial demographic shift, compared with race-neutral control, information. This divergence by political ideology in threat reactions to shifting racial demographics information is (to our knowledge) a new phenomenon. Given the emergence of this ideological divide in both our initial study and a direct replication, we sought to explore whether it would persist under a treatment of the racial demographic shift information that is likely to be more threatening to both White conservatives and liberals.

Figure 1. Group status threat by conservatism and condition: Studies 1a and 1b.



Note. At baseline, White conservatives express high levels of group status threat, which increases (1a) or stays the same (1b) in response to racial demographic information. White liberals express low levels of threat, which decreases in response to racial demographics information.

Study 2

The previous study revealed and replicated the novel finding that exposure to information about the shifting racial demographics of the nation leads White liberals to express lower levels of racial group status threat, relative to exposure to race-neutral demographic information. White conservatives revealed the opposite pattern in Study 1a, and no differences in group status threat as a function

of exposure to racial demographic shift, compared with control, information in Study 1b. Study 2 aimed to test the robustness and perhaps a potential boundary condition of this divergence by political ideology by introducing an additional condition in which the racial demographic change was framed in a manner expected to be especially threatening.

To examine this, we drew on previous work demonstrating that “extinction threats” are particularly strong motivators of ingroup concerns (Bai &

Federico, 2020; Wohl et al., 2010), in order to create a new “amplified racial shift” condition to tap into these existential anxieties. Rather than focusing on growth of the racial minority population, participants in the amplified racial shift condition read an article about the decline in the White population due to higher death rates relative to racial minority populations. Because this framing is likely to be more jarring, albeit both veridical and still within mainstream discourse (e.g., Tavernise, 2018), we expected it to be more threatening, and perhaps equally so for White liberals and conservatives. We assessed the perceived racial group status threat and status change triggered by this new amplified shift treatment, compared with the original racial shift treatment and the race-neutral control treatment from the previous studies, in a new sample of White Americans who varied in political ideology. In addition to the new treatment, we also assessed political ideology in this study prior to exposing participants to any racial shift information, ensuring that the moderation by political ideology found in Study 1 is not attributable to having been exposed to the manipulation.

Method

Participants. A sample of U.S. citizens was recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk, retaining only self-reported non-Hispanic Whites (after exclusions: $n = 411$; 235 female, 176 male; $M_{\text{age}} = 34.0$, $SD = 10.7$).⁴ Participants were recruited to take a 12-minute study “about news and memory,” and were paid \$1.20 upon completion. As in Study 1, the target sample size was 460, but a higher than expected percentage of participants identified as non-White and were therefore excluded. Still, a post hoc analysis using G*Power concluded that the sample of 411 participants was powered above 99% to detect the effect size observed in Study 1.

Materials and measures

Demographic shift manipulation. The salience of the demographic shift information was again manipulated with exposure to news articles. For the new amplified racial shift condition, we

modified an article that appeared in *The New York Times* headlined, “Fewer Births Than Deaths Among Whites in Majority of U.S. States” (Tavernise, 2018). The article connected the changing racial/ethnic demographics of the nation to an increasing death rate among White Americans. The articles used in the racial shift condition and the geographic mobility (i.e., race-neutral control) condition were nearly identical to those used in the prior studies, with some minimal editing to make the graphics more similar to the article in the amplified racial shift condition.

Comprehension checks. For each condition, there were two comprehension check questions, which also reemphasized the article’s content. In each condition, one question asked participants to identify the central point of the article. Participants were excluded if they failed to answer the key comprehension check question.

Perceived group status change and threat. Perceived group status change was assessed with the same item used in Study 1. Likewise, the same seven items measuring group status threat in the previous study were also used in Study 2.

Group extinction threat. Given the framing of the amplified racial shift condition on population decline, we solicited responses on two items assessing extinction threat (Wohl et al., 2010; e.g., “I don’t think changing demographics pose a threat to the existence of American culture” [reverse-coded]). These were also assessed on 7-point agreement scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Procedure. Participants were recruited for a study on “memory for news articles.” After providing informed consent, participants reported on their demographic information (age, gender, SES, race, home state), among which the two items used to measure political conservatism were embedded ($r = .80$). Participants were then randomly assigned to one of three conditions: racial shift, amplified racial shift, or geographic mobility. They read the article relevant to their condition and completed

the two comprehension check items. Next, all participants answered the perceived group status change, status threat, and extinction threat items, prior to indicating their support for 16 policy items (described in the supplemental material).⁵ Participants were then debriefed and paid for their participation.

Results

Twenty-one participants were excluded for incorrectly answering the relevant comprehension check question, leaving 121 in the geographic mobility condition, 144 in the racial shift condition, and 146 in the amplified racial shift condition.

Perceived group change and threat. As in Study 1, a factor analysis revealed that the generic group status change item did not load with the status threat or extinction threat items and was, again, analyzed separately. The factor analysis also revealed that the two extinction threat items (Wohl et al., 2010) did load with the seven status threat items and, thus, all nine items were combined to assess perceived group status threat ($\alpha = .88$).⁶

Perceived group status change. We regressed group status change on condition, political conservatism (centered), and their interactions. For this analysis, condition was again indicated with a binary code for both the racial shift and amplified racial shift conditions, such that the geographic mobility condition was coded 0,0, the racial shift condition 1,0, and the amplified racial shift condition 0,1. As expected, relative to the geographic mobility control, participants in both the racial shift ($\beta = 0.54, p = .002$) and amplified racial shift ($\beta = 0.53, p = .002$) conditions reported greater perceptions of group status change. No other effects emerged, replicating past work (Craig & Richeson, 2014a, 2014b) and both samples in Study 1.

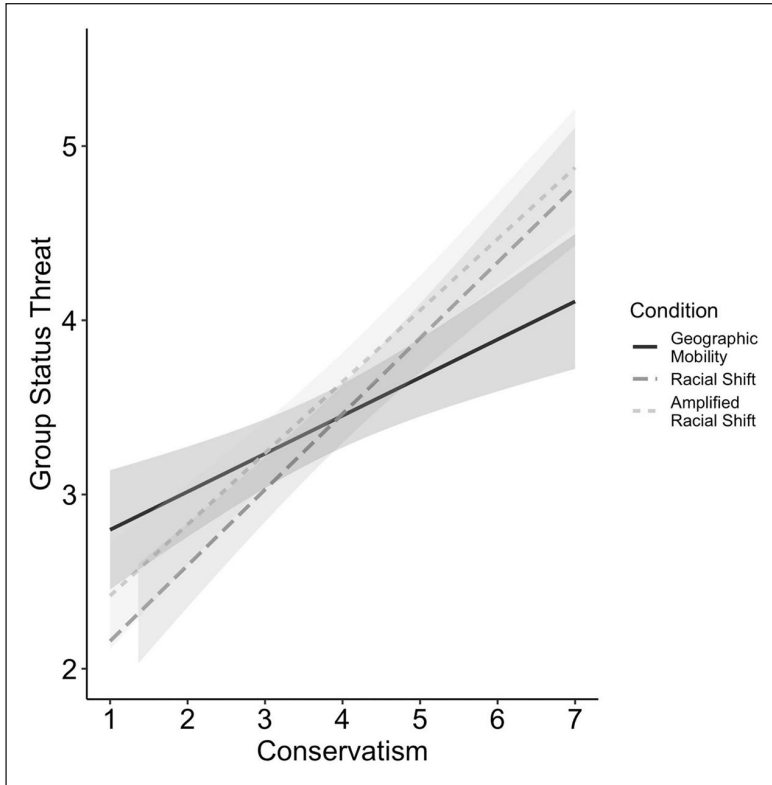
Perceived group status threat. We also regressed the nine-item perceived group status threat⁷ measure on condition, political conservatism (centered), and their interactions. As in the prior studies, there was a significant first-order effect

of participant conservatism, such that more conservative participants expressed greater perceived group status threat ($\beta = 0.22, p < .001$). Also, similar to Study 1, there were no first-order effects of condition (racial shift $\beta = -0.03, p = .798$; amplified racial shift $\beta = 0.16, p = .208$); however, an interaction with conservatism emerged for both the racial shift ($\beta = 0.22, p = .003$) and the amplified racial shift ($\beta = 0.19, p = .007$) conditions, relative to the control.

To examine these interactions further, we tested the effect of each racial shift condition, compared with the control, at 1 *SD* above and below the mean level of political conservatism. As depicted in Figure 2, among more conservative participants, exposure to the amplified racial shift condition increased perceived group status threat compared with the race-neutral control information ($\beta = 0.50, p = .006$). The pattern was in the same direction among conservatives in the standard racial shift condition, compared with the control, but failed to reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($\beta = 0.35, p = .050$). Among more liberal participants, the pattern was just the opposite, replicating Study 1. Exposure to the racial shift information reduced perceived group status threat compared with control information ($\beta = -0.42, p = .020$; see Figure 2). Interestingly, the group status threat expressed by liberals in the amplified racial shift condition did not differ significantly from that in the control condition ($\beta = -0.18, p = .303$), although an examination of the means suggests the trend is in the same direction as the more conventional racial shift manipulation (see Table 1 for condition means).

Discussion

Study 2 manipulated exposure to shifting national racial demographics, either as presented in prior work or with a more negative frame, and measured perceived group status change and threat. Largely replicating the results of Study 1, White participants who were exposed to the projected racial demographic shift revealed an ideological divergence in status threat but not status change responses, regardless of whether that shift was presented as being due to increases in racial

Figure 2. Group status threat by political conservatism and condition: Study 2.

Note. White conservatives expressed elevated threat at baseline, which remained elevated in response to racial demographic information. White liberals expressed low threat at baseline, which decreased in response to racial demographic information.

minority populations (standard racial shift treatment) or due to disproportionate deaths among Whites (amplified racial shift). This suggests that the ideological divergence in racial status threat, including the relative decline observed among more politically liberal White participants, generalizes to alternate, perhaps especially sobering, methods of communicating this information. Moreover, these findings suggest that the observed ideological divide in responses to the increasing racial diversity of the nation may be quite robust.

Study 3

The previous studies revealed an ideological divergence in how White Americans respond to

exposure to information about the projected “majority-minority” national racial demographic shift. Notably, this divergence is the result of a change in White liberals’ behavior. In earlier work, White Americans reported greater threat in response to this demographic shift information, regardless of their political orientation (e.g., Major et al., 2018). Consequently, it is important to consider why White liberals may now be responding in this way. One clear explanation stems from aversive racism theory (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), wherein White liberals could be responding to the racial shift information in a way that affirms their racially egalitarian self-image (Hodson et al., 2004). It is also possible, however, that more instrumental concerns are responsible for White liberals’ reduced racial

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of dependent variables by condition: Study 2.

	Race-neutral control <i>n</i> = 122		Racial shift <i>n</i> = 144		Amplified racial shift <i>n</i> = 146	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Group status threat	3.40	0.96	3.40	1.33	3.56	1.28
Group status change	4.29	1.41	4.83	1.42	4.82	1.30

Note. Participants believed there would be more change in the relative status of groups after exposure to the racial shift and amplified racial shift conditions.

group status threat in response to exposure to the shifting racial demographics information. Specifically, White liberals may believe that the changing racial demographics of the nation will be politically advantageous. Given that non-White Americans are relatively more likely to affiliate with the Democratic rather than the Republican party, White liberals may anticipate political gains to accrue as the nation becomes less White. And, by extension, they may expect to experience less threat in such a racially diverse nation, compared with the current (at the time) political context. In other words, White liberals may be demonstrating this reduced group status threat response to the shifting racial demographics information due to instrumental motives, rather than ego-expressive/affirmation motives.

To begin to examine this possibility, Study 3 again exposed White Americans to information about the shifting racial demographics of the nation (or to race-neutral control information) and assessed their perceived racial group status threat and change. In addition, however, we solicited perceptions of the current and likely future partisan composition of the nation, in order to discern whether related instrumental concerns may be shaping White liberals' lower status threat in the racial shift, compared with the control, condition.

Method

Participants and procedure. A sample of 277 White Americans was recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk for a 10-minute survey about social issues, paying \$1.00 (124 women, 153 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 34.6$, $SD = 11.0$).⁸ Sample size was determined a priori by adjusting the Study 2 sample size from a

three-condition to a two-condition design. Participants first completed demographic information, including two items assessing their political orientation (see Study 1; $r = .77$). Next, they were randomly assigned to read either the racial demographic shift article or a race-neutral control article described in Study 1, followed by a multiple-choice comprehension check item requiring them to identify the central point of the article. They then completed the primary dependent measures (described in the next section⁹), then were debriefed and paid.

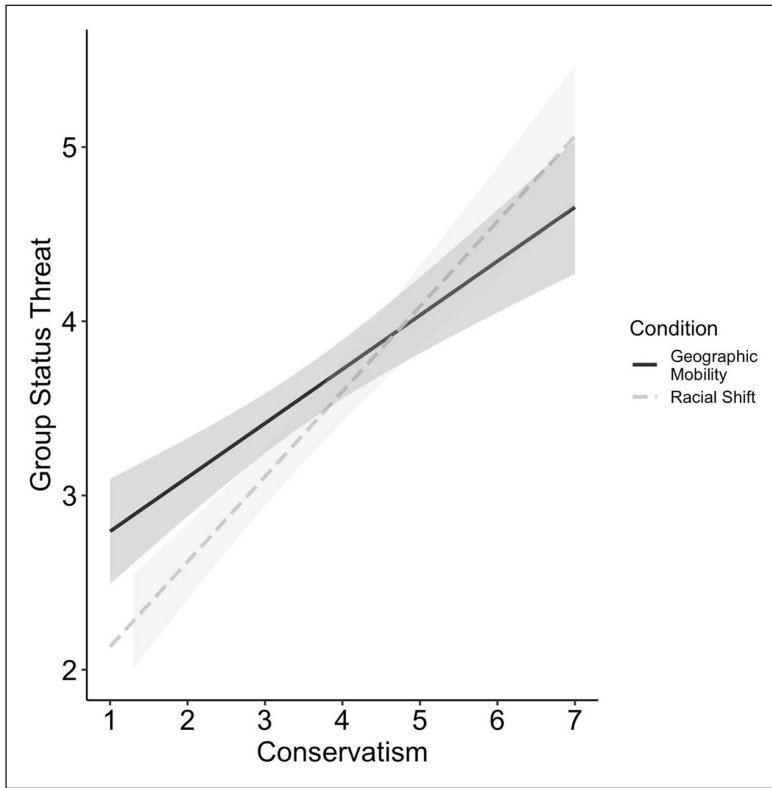
Measures

Perceived group status change and threat. Participants responded to the same one-item group status change measure and the seven-item group status threat measure described and used in Study 1.

Current and future partisan composition. Participants were told that we were interested in what they thought the make-up of America currently was and what it would be in the year 2050; they were asked to provide estimates of the percentage of the population that fell into each of several groups. Specifically, they indicated what percentage of Americans they thought identified as Democrat, Republican, or third party/other at each time point. Responses were constrained so that the total of all the estimates added to 100% in order for participants to advance to the next question.

Results

Ten participants were excluded for failing the comprehension check, resulting in 139 participants in the racial shift condition and 128 in the

Figure 3. Perceived group status threat by condition and political orientation: Study 3.

Note. More conservative White participants expressed more threat than more liberal White participants in the control condition. Exposure to a racial demographic shift further decreased the threat expressed by liberals, while the threat expressed by conservatives remained high.

race-neutral control condition. As in the previous studies, we analyzed group status change and group status threat ($\alpha = .83$) separately.¹⁰

Perceived group status change. We regressed group status change on condition (0 = geographic mobility, 1 = racial shift), political conservatism (centered), and their interaction. As predicted, participants in the racial shift condition perceived more group status change than participants in the control condition ($\beta = 0.49, p = .004$). There was a marginal effect of conservatism on this measure ($\beta = 0.14, p = .068$), though the interaction between conservatism and condition was not reliable ($\beta = 0.10, p = .370$). Replicating the prior studies and previous research, exposure to the projected U.S. racial demographic shift increased

Whites' perceptions that the status of their racial group would change, regardless of their political ideology.

Perceived group status threat. As in the previous studies, regressing group status threat on condition, political conservatism (centered), and their interaction revealed a first-order effect of conservatism; political conservatism significantly predicted racial group status threat ($\beta = 0.29, p < .001$). Additionally, there was a marginal effect of condition ($\beta = -0.22, p = .064$), qualified by the now anticipated interaction between condition and conservatism ($\beta = 0.20, p = .007$). As depicted in Figure 3, tests of the effect of the manipulation among more conservative participants (+1 *SD* above the mean) revealed no significant differences. More conservative participants

Table 2. Estimates of political party affiliation in current and future US: Study 3.

	Democrats		Republicans		Third party/other	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Current (2019)	42.62	7.64	42.73	7.94	14.64	9.74
Future (2050)	44.72	14.81	33.37	12.22	21.91	17.05
Difference	2.10*	13.54	-9.37**	12.78	7.27**	14.70

Note. Participants believed that there were currently similar numbers of Republicans and Democrats but that, over time, fewer people would be Republican, slightly more would be Democrat, and many more would be members of third parties or other political affiliations. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$

expressed relatively high levels of racial group status threat in both the race-neutral control and the shifting racial demographics condition ($\beta = 0.10, p = .542$). Consistent with the findings of Studies 1 and 2, however, White liberals exposed to the racial demographic shift expressed less racial group status threat compared to those in the control condition ($\beta = -0.54, p = .001$).

Partisan composition of the US. Overall, participants' estimates of the current and future demographics of each political party did not vary significantly by their own political orientation. Participants correctly reported that there are approximately even numbers of Democrats and Republicans (estimating 42.6% and 42.7%, respectively), but overestimated both these groups compared to national polling (30% Democrat and 31% Republican; Gallup, 2020). They also underestimated the current percentage of third-party affiliates (14.6% vs. the actual total of 38%). By the year 2050, participants expected the number of Democrats to increase slightly to 44.7%, and the number of Republicans to decrease to 33.4% (and the number of third-party affiliates to increase somewhat to 21.9%). These estimates about current and future political composition did not vary by condition either (all $ps > .147$).

We calculated a difference score between participants' estimates of the current and future population percentage shares of Democrats, Republicans, and third party/other. We regressed these estimates of change in political party percentage on condition, conservatism (centered), and their interaction. Means for the estimates of

political party affiliation are displayed in Table 2. For estimated change in the Democratic share of the population, analyses revealed only a marginal effect of exposure to the racial shift condition ($\beta = 2.90, p = .079$), but neither an effect of conservatism ($\beta = -1.12, p = .133$) nor a significant interaction between conservatism and condition ($\beta = 0.04, p = .967$) emerged. There were no reliable effects on estimates of change in the Republican or third-party/other population percentages. These results do not offer evidence that White liberals express lower levels of status threat in the shifting racial demographics condition compared with the race-neutral control, because they anticipate gaining political influence in a diversifying nation.¹¹

Discussion

Study 3 manipulated exposure to the projected U.S. racial demographic shift and, once again, measured perceived racial group status change and threat. Relative to race-neutral control information, reading about the U.S. racial shift led White participants to expect more racial group status change, regardless of their political orientation. Further, replicating the previous studies, we observed an ideological divergence in racial group status threat. Specifically, more conservative participants expressed higher levels of threat than more liberal participants in the neutral control condition, and the magnitude of this difference increased upon exposure to the racial shift information because White liberals expressed lower levels of threat, relative to the control.

In an attempt to gain additional insight into this now quite robust pattern of reduced group status threat among White liberals in the racial shift compared with the control condition, we examined perceptions of the current and future political make-up of the country. Specifically, we wondered whether the ideological divergence in group status threat may be related to an expectation among White liberals that the increasing diversity of the nation will be accompanied by partisan gains. Indeed, this “demographics is destiny” idea that a diversifying electorate will translate into increased political power for Democrats, and reduced political power for Republicans, has been promulgated in popular media (e.g., Judis & Teixeira, 2002). However, the present findings were not consistent with this explanation. Exposure to the racial demographic shift information did not significantly affect participants’ estimates of the relative compositions of political parties in the future. Further, and importantly, supplemental analyses revealed that anticipated changes in the size of the major parties (and third-party membership) did not predict racial group status threat. Consequently, these results are not consistent with the idea that this more instrumental, rather than ego-expressive/affirming, motive accounts for why White liberals report less racial group status threat when exposed to the shifting demographics, compared with the race-neutral control, information.

General Discussion

The present research suggests that whereas perceptions of group status change increase as a function of exposure to the projected “majority-minority” racial demographics of the nation, irrespective of political ideology, the level of threat or alarm triggered by this racial shift information differs for White liberals and conservatives. Specifically, using a robust multi-item measure of group status threat, we found that White conservatives tended to express high levels of group status threat both in general (i.e., in the control condition) and in response to the racial demographic shift information. By contrast, White

liberals tended to express lower levels of racial group status threat after exposure to the racial demographic information, compared with race-neutral control information. This pattern is in stark contrast to the findings of most past research (for a review, see Craig et al., 2018; but see also Myers & Levy, 2018). Together, the present findings reveal a significant and relatively new ideological divide in reactions to the increasing racial/ethnic diversity of the nation.

We began this work by offering three possibilities for why past research has consistently failed to observe partisan divergence in White Americans’ responses to shifting racial demographics. The first possibility was that there is no such moderation in the population. Contrary to this possibility, across four samples, we found a reliable divergence by political ideology. The second possibility was that previous work had not sufficiently examined the topic. It is possible that the divergence described in this paper is simply a result of our decision to measure group status threat—that is, the level of alarm triggered by the racial shift—more robustly and separately from what we now call group status change (i.e., the recognition and/or expectation that the racial shift will lead to a change in relative group power/status relations). While we cannot entirely rule out this possibility, careful review of past research suggests that this explanation is unlikely. Experiments examining these dynamics have used a variety of measures of racial group threat and have rarely found moderation by political ideology (e.g., Danbold & Huo, 2015; Major et al., 2018; Outten et al., 2012). That said, distinguishing between perceived status change and status threat is an important contribution of the present work, offering a number of intriguing directions for future research, including examining conditions that lead individuals to acknowledge the likelihood that their group’s status may be lowered without triggering threat and alarm.

The third and most likely possibility is that the ideological divergence in reactions to changing national racial demographics observed here is a relatively recent phenomenon. One explanation is simply the saturation of this information in the media. Specifically, repeated exposure to the idea

that racial demographic change may portend a reevaluation of the current racial hierarchy may contribute to the generally high levels of group status threat expressed by White conservatives relative to liberals, as well as their largely null response to the standard racial shift manipulation, compared with neutral control, across our studies. The prevalence of the projections regarding U.S. racial demographics in the media may also help explain the relative lack of differences between the race-salient control condition (i.e., current racial demographics) and the shifting racial demographics condition in Study 1. In other words, just thinking about national racial demographics may activate the thought of the pending “majority-minority” shift; however, this possibility needs to be tested directly.

Importantly, of course, the prevalence of the “majority-minority” demographic projections may also contribute to the novel pattern of decreased racial group status threat we observed in White liberals. Since the initial reports of the shift in the nation’s demographics, discourse about its significance has become more ideologically polarized (e.g., Cordero-Guzman, 2014; Fox News, 2013); White liberals who initially may have been threatened by the prospect of a so-called “majority-minority” United States may have incorporated emerging ideological norms about the value of racial diversity. Be it to remain consistent with these norms or rather to maintain and/or express an egalitarian self-image, White liberals may now seek to embrace a “majority-minority” US, as observed in these studies.

It is also possible that the observed decrease in threat among White liberals has a more instrumental explanation—that increased racial diversity will increase liberals’ political power or decrease the political power of conservatives. Though Study 3 found no evidence that exposure to the racial shift affected participants’ estimates of the number of Democrats or Republicans in a future US, it is possible that White liberals nevertheless believe the shifting demographics will be politically advantageous (e.g., they may believe a more diverse population will be more liberal on various policy/social issues, even if there is no change in the number of

Democrats/Republicans). Future research should test whether the prospect of more racial minorities in the nation is interpreted as portending greater political or ideological influence among White liberals and, thus, buffers against the activation of racial group status threat.

Rather than this instrumental explanation, however, the responses of White liberals to the racial demographic shift information are consistent with extant social psychological theory (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Hodson et al., 2004), as well as with growing evidence that White liberals have indeed become more progressive on a number of racial issues (Pew Research Center, 2017). This, too, may be a reaction to policies enacted by the Trump administration that many deem particularly hostile to racial/ethnic minorities and racially egalitarian principles (e.g., the travel ban, DACA repeal, investigations into anti-White discrimination in college admissions; Huber, 2016; Shear & Davis, 2017). It is possible that these moves have, somewhat ironically, served to divorce White liberals’ perceptions of group status change due to the rising racial/ethnic diversity of the nation from their concern that the status of White Americans is declining and, thus, undermined the activation of group status threat. Additional research is needed to examine the relationships between ideology, political party identification, and racial identification in the context of demographic change. It is also possible, of course, that White liberals’ expression of lower group status threat in response to salient national racial demographics, compared with the control, is due to a desire to appear less racially prejudiced rather than an actual reduction in racial group status threat. Future work could attempt to examine this question with more unobtrusive or implicit measures of status threat.

Conclusion

The racial demographic landscape of the US is changing. Increasing numbers of non-White Americans are leading to increasingly prominent calls for racial justice in the country’s political, social, and economic institutions. Whereas White

liberals and conservatives both acknowledge the likely shift in relative group sociopolitical status that will come from this changing demographic landscape, White conservatives appear to be more alarmed by it compared to White liberals. Given the predictive utility of group status threat for any number of important race-related policy issues (see Craig et al., 2018), gaining a better understanding of the complicated interplay between race, political ideology, and these group status concerns may help us predict, if not resolve or preempt, some of the conflicts that have recently emerged regarding race-related issues.


Acknowledgements


We thank Yarrow Dunham and Jack Dovidio, as well as participants of department colloquia, lab meetings, and conferences where this work was presented, including the Social Perception and Communication Lab, Crockett Lab, Yale Intergroup Relations Lab, Society of Personality and Social Psychology, and the Weary Symposium on Diversity and Social Identity.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Study 1a was launched February 20, 2018, and Study 1b was launched March 27, 2018. Participants were excluded from subsequent studies.
2. Previous work identified a large set of potential covariates including age, gender, race, education, and geographic region within the US. We tested whether any of these potential covariates improved the model fit, finding an effect

of education for Studies 1a and 1b, and of age for Study 2. Here, we report the effects without either of these covariates, but the analyses in this manuscript are robust to the inclusion of age and education as covariates.

3. A factor analysis revealed that the group status change item loaded separately from the seven threat items. Hence, after appropriate reverse-scoring, the group status threat composite was created from averaging the seven threat items, and the single group status change item was analyzed separately. Controlling for conservatism, perceived group status change and group status threat were moderately related ($r_{1a} = .35$; $r_{1b} = .23$). Further analysis revealed that this correlation was somewhat more robust for conservatives ($r_{1a} = .47$; $r_{1b} = .46$) than for liberals ($r_{1a} = .24$; $r_{1b} = -.11$).
4. Data collection for this sample began on November 19, 2018.
5. Participants also indicated whether they had previously seen the information in the article manipulation, either in another paid study or elsewhere. These results are reported in the supplemental material.
6. Group status change and group status threat were, once again, moderately correlated ($r = .27$), and the relationship was stronger among conservatives ($r = .60$) than liberals ($r = .09$).
7. In order to ensure consistency with the previous studies, we also conducted all the threat analyses using the original seven-item measure of threat, without the two additional extinction threat items. The pattern of results matches that of the new nine-item measure throughout, so we report the latter in accordance with the factor analysis.
8. Data collection began on August 15, 2019.
9. Participants also completed measures of beliefs about current racial demographics and support for conservative policies, reported in the supplemental material.
10. Again, these measures were moderately correlated ($r = .24$), though less so among White liberals ($r = .05$) than White conservatives ($r = .22$).
11. Estimated growth in Democratic or Republican party membership was not correlated with racial group status threat ($r_D = .04$; $r_R = -.03$). Furthermore, controlling for the estimated growth of either party in the model predicting threat did not change the pattern of results.

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