

The threat of increasing diversity: Why many White Americans support Trump in the 2016 presidential election

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Abstract

What accounts for the widespread support for Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential race? This experiment demonstrates that the changing racial demographics of America contribute to Trump's success as a presidential candidate among White Americans whose race/ethnicity is central to their identity. Reminding White Americans high in ethnic identification that non-White racial groups will outnumber Whites in the United States by 2042 caused them to become more concerned about the declining status and influence of White Americans as a group (i.e., experience group status threat), and caused them to report increased support for Trump and anti-immigrant policies, as well as greater opposition to political correctness. Increased group status threat mediated the effects of the racial shift condition on candidate support, anti-immigrant policy support, and opposition to political correctness. Among Whites low in ethnic identification, in contrast, the racial shift condition had no effect on group status threat or support for anti-immigrant policies, but did cause decreased positivity toward Trump and decreased opposition to political correctness. Group status threat did not mediate these effects. Reminders of the changing racial demographics had comparable effects for Democrats and Republicans. Results illustrate the importance of changing racial demographics and White ethnic identification in voter preferences and how social psychological theory can illuminate voter preferences.

Keywords

diversity, group status threat, identity, intergroup relations, political psychology

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Why is a reality-TV star billionaire the 2016 U.S. presidential nominee of the Republican Party? What explains why so many Americans support Donald Trump and the anti-immigrant policies that he espouses? Some political scientists claim that Trump's support stems from economic discontent, particularly among working-class White Americans. Still others claim that support for Trump and his policies stems from anger against

the existing political establishment and rejection of traditional politics (De Jonge, 2016). Yet

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another possible explanation, and the one that we examine here, is that the changing racial demographics of the United States are at the core of support for Trump and his policies among White Americans. The U.S. Census Bureau (2012) projects that the national population of non-White racial groups will exceed that of Whites before the middle of this century. Many White Americans in the US view race relations as “zero-sum,” in which status gains for minorities means status loss for Whites (Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014) and less bias against minorities means more bias against Whites (Norton & Sommers, 2011). The belief that Whites are losing out to ethnic minorities is particularly prevalent among Trump supporters (De Jonge, 2016).

Social psychological theories of identity and intergroup relations predict that this demographic shift is not only likely to be threatening to White Americans, but also will cause them to endorse more conservative political positions and discriminate more against outgroups (e.g., Blalock, 1967; Nail, McGregor, Drinkwater, Steele, & Thompson, 2009; Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For example, social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) predicts that people are motivated to maintain a positive social identity, and do so by comparing the status of groups with which they identify to that of other groups. When they feel that their own group’s higher status relative to other groups is unstable or slipping, they experience *group status threat*, that is, worry that their own group’s status, influence, and position in the hierarchy is under threat. Group status threat, in turn, predicts increased discrimination against outgroups (Branscombe & Wann, 1994). Integrated threat theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000) also predicts that increasing diversity poses a threat to White Americans, as an increase in minorities represents a real threat to White Americans’ resources, as well as a symbolic threat to White American values. Both types of threat have been shown to lead to increased prejudice against immigrants (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Likewise, motivated social cognition theory (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003) predicts that increasing ethnic diversity is apt to

be frightening and confusing to Whites; uncertainty and fear, in turn, have been shown to cause people to endorse more conservative political policies (e.g., Bonanno & Jost, 2006).

Accumulating evidence indicates that the racial demographic shift does pose a threat to Whites. After reading about increasing demographic diversity (vs. a control article), Whites show greater fear and anger toward minority groups (Outten, Schmitt, Miller, & Garcia, 2012), greater implicit and explicit bias against racial/ethnic minorities (Craig & Richeson, 2014a), decreased endorsement of diversity (Outten et al., 2012), and increased concern with their own group’s position in society (Danbold & Huo, 2014). Furthermore, Craig and Richeson (2014b) showed that reading that racial minority groups would make up a majority of the U.S. population by 2042 (vs. a control article) led White Americans to be more concerned about Whites’ loss of social status (i.e., experience group status threat), which in turn led them to endorse more conservative political views and policies.

Drawing on the aforementioned research, the current study tested experimentally whether reminding White Americans of the increasing racial diversity in the US: (a) affects their political preferences in the U.S. presidential elections, (b) whether it does so by increasing group status threat, and (c) whether ethnic identification and/or political party affiliation moderates these effects.

We expected that reminding White Americans of changing racial demographics would increase support for Republican candidates (Trump, Cruz, and Kasich) and decrease support for Democratic candidates (Clinton and Sanders) by increasing group status threat. We hypothesized that reminding Whites of the racial demographic shift would be especially likely to increase support for Trump compared to the other Republican candidates because of Trump’s more explicit anti-immigrant and antidiversity rhetoric. Such rhetoric should make him an especially appealing candidate to people experiencing group status threat because his positions promise to assuage that threat. We also predicted that

reminding White Americans of the racial demographic shift would increase support for anti-immigrant policies and decrease support for antibias or “political correctness” (PC) norms, that is, norms meant to promote tolerance toward diverse groups. We expected that all of these effects would occur via increased group status threat (our hypothesized mediator) in response to reminders of a racial shift.

We also tested ethnic identification and political affiliation as potential moderators of the predicted effect of condition.¹ Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), we expected that reminders of increasing ethnic diversity would be especially threatening to Whites whose race/ethnicity is a central aspect of their identity. Thus we expected them to report greater support for Republican candidates, anti-immigrant policies, and opposition to political correctness in response to reminders of the racial shift compared to Whites low in ethnic identification. In contrast, based on Craig and Richeson’s (2014b) finding that reminders of the racial shift increased support for conservative ideology irrespective of political leanings, we did not expect political affiliation to moderate effects.

Methods

Participants

Data collection occurred between March 24 and March 27, during the U.S. presidential primary elections. Five hundred ninety-four U.S. residents participated in a “Brief Study on Perceptions & Beliefs” on Amazon Mechanical Turk in exchange for \$1.00. Based on a power analysis, we determined that a sample size of 423 would provide 95% power to detect an effect of the size observed in Craig and Richeson (2014b, Study 2) when predicting group status threat ($\eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .03$). We thus set a target sample size of 600, which we expected would produce our desired sample size after eliminating non-White participants, and stopped data collection when that number was reached. Of those who

consented to participate, 96.6% completed the study. We limited our analyses to the 464 respondents who identified as White/European American. Prior to data analyses, we omitted 14 participants who failed to pass attention checks. This resulted in a sample of 450 White Americans, of whom 262 identified as Democrat, 114 as Republican, 50 as independent, and 24 as “other.”² Because we also sought to examine whether our hypothesized effects differed as a function of political identification, we also limited our analyses to those who identified as Democrat or Republican.³ This resulted in a final sample of 376 White American partisan participants (51.1% female).

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two press releases and told they would be asked to recall the information later. They were given up to 2 minutes to read the release. One release indicated that racial minorities will outnumber non-Hispanic Whites in the US by 2042 (racial shift condition); the other used similar language to indicate that geographic mobility is increasing (control condition). These were identical to the press releases used by Craig and Richeson (2014b, Study 2). Participants then completed measures assessing group status threat, support for the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates who were running in the primary elections at the time (Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, John Kasich, Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders), anti-immigrant attitudes, opposition to political correctness, and ethnic identification. Participants then reported their political affiliation (Democrat, Republican, independent, other) and demographic information. They were then debriefed regarding the purpose of the study, asked for permission to use their data, and compensated.

Measures⁴

Group status threat. Four items, adapted from Outten et al. (2012) assessed the extent to which

Whites feel that their group status is threatened by increasing ethnic diversity ($\alpha = .70$). For example, participants indicated how much they agreed that “My ethnic group should be threatened by growing ethnic diversity in the US” on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Candidate support. We assessed *positivity toward the candidates* with the feeling thermometer used by the Center for Political Studies in their national election studies (<http://www.electionstudies.org/>). Participants indicated, “how warmly/coldly you feel towards each of the presidential candidates” on a sliding scale (0 = *very cold*, 100 = *very warm*). We also asked participants “How likely you would be to vote for each of the following presidential candidates in the general election?” on a 7-point scale (1 = *extremely unlikely*, 7 = *extremely likely*).⁵ We counterbalanced the order in which candidates were rated across participants.

Support for anti-immigrant policies. Eight items, modeled after statements related to immigration reform on Donald Trump’s presidential campaign website (<https://www.donaldjtrump.com/positions/immigration-reform>), assessed support for anti-immigrant policies ($\alpha = .93$). An example item was “I support building a wall across the southern U.S. border to prevent immigration.” Participants indicated agreement on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Opposition to political correctness. Seven items assessed opposition to political correctness norms ($\alpha = .94$). Participants indicated agreement with statements such as “Political correctness norms interfere with Americans’ right to free speech” on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).⁶

Ethnic identification. Ethnic identification was assessed with the four-item Identity Centrality Scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992; $\alpha = .91$). Participants indicated agreement with items such as “The ethnic group I belong to is an important reflection of who I am.” on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

Results

Analytic Approach

Our two potential moderators, party affiliation (−1 = Democrat, 1 = Republican) and ethnic identification, were significantly, albeit modestly, correlated, $r(376) = .25, p < .001$. Neither varied as a function of condition; party affiliation: $\chi^2 < 1, p > .250$; ethnic identification: $t(374) = -0.37, p > .250$. We first tested whether condition and ethnic identification interacted to predict the outcomes, controlling for political affiliation. We then tested whether condition and party affiliation interacted to predict the outcomes, controlling for ethnic identification. Finally, we tested our hypothesis that reminding Whites of the changing racial demographics impacts candidate support, anti-immigrant attitudes, and opposition to political correctness by increasing group status threat.

Condition × Ethnic Identification Analyses

We conducted hierarchical regression analyses entering condition (−1 = control, 1 = racial shift), mean-centered ethnic identification, and party affiliation (−1 = Democrat, 1 = Republican) on Step 1, and the condition × ethnic identification interaction on Step 2 for all dependent variables. Full results are reported in the supplementary materials.

We observed a significant main effect of condition predicting only group status threat ($\beta = .15, p = .001$), such that White Americans exposed to the racial shift condition ($M = 4.15, SD = 1.19$) reported greater group status threat than those in the control condition ($M = 3.81, SD = 0.99$). We also observed either significant or marginal effects of ethnic identification on group status threat, support for Trump, support for Sanders, support for anti-immigration policies, and opposition to political correctness (all $ps \leq .072$). Party affiliation was a significant covariate for all outcomes (all $ps < .001$).

These main effects, however, were qualified by significant or near significant condition × ethnic

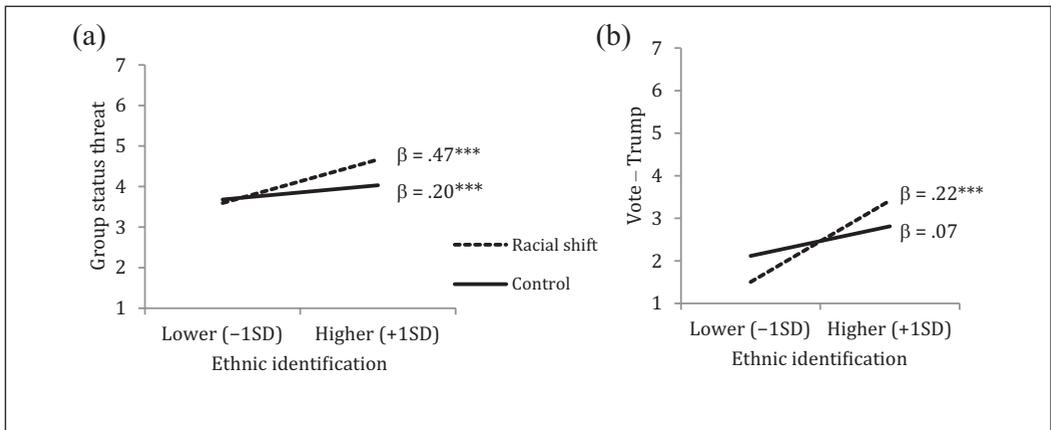


Figure 1. Interactions between condition (racial shift vs. control) and ethnic identification predicting group status threat (a) and likelihood of voting for Trump (b). *** $p < .001$.

identification interactions predicting: group status threat ($\beta = .14, p = .001$), positivity towards Trump ($\beta = .11, p = .006$), likelihood of voting for Trump ($\beta = .08, p = .063$), positivity towards Sanders ($\beta = -.07, p = .072$), likelihood of voting for Sanders ($\beta = -.08, p = .027$), support for anti-immigration policies ($\beta = .10, p = .006$), and opposition to political correctness ($\beta = .11, p = .014$). Results of simple effects tests of these interactions are reported below. We present graphs of the interactions for group status threat (Figure 1a) and likelihood of voting for Trump (Figure 1b). Graphs of the other interactions, which reveal similar patterns, are presented in the supplementary materials.

Group status threat. Whites high in ethnic identification (+1 *SD*) reported greater group status threat in the racial shift condition than the control condition ($\beta = .29, p < .001$), whereas Whites low in ethnic identification (-1 *SD*) did not ($\beta = .01, p = .859$). Ethnic identification was positively related to group status threat in both the racial shift ($\beta = .47, p < .001$) and control ($\beta = .20, p = .001$) conditions, but was stronger in the former (see Figure 1a).

Support for Trump. Whites high in ethnic identification reported marginally greater positivity

towards Trump ($\beta = .11, p = .054$) and a significantly greater likelihood of voting for Trump ($\beta = .14, p = .001$) in the racial shift condition than the control condition. In contrast, Whites lower in ethnic identification reported *less* positivity towards Trump in the racial shift condition than the control condition ($\beta = -.11, p = .049$), although their likelihood of voting for Trump did not differ by condition ($\beta = -.07, p = .199$). In the racial shift condition, ethnic identification was related to increased positivity towards Trump ($\beta = .29, p < .001$) and likelihood of voting for Trump ($\beta = .22, p < .001$). In the control condition, however, ethnic identification was unrelated to both positivity towards Trump ($\beta = .06, p = .268$) and likelihood of voting for Trump ($\beta = .07, p = .227$; see Figure 1b).

Support for Sanders. Whites high in ethnic identification felt somewhat (but not significantly) less positive toward Sanders ($\beta = -.09, p = .113$) and were somewhat less likely to vote for Sanders in the racial shift than the control condition ($\beta = -.10, p = .052$). Among Whites low in ethnic identification, condition had no effect on either positivity towards ($\beta = .05, p = .335$) or likelihood of voting for Sanders ($\beta = .06, p = .234$). In the racial shift condition, ethnic identification was negatively related to positivity towards ($\beta = -.14,$

$p = .011$) and likelihood of voting for Sanders ($\beta = -.18, p = .001$), whereas in the control condition, identification was unrelated to both positivity towards ($\beta = -.01, p = .890$) and likelihood of voting for Sanders ($\beta = -.01, p = .780$).

Support for anti-immigrant policies. Highly identified Whites were more supportive of anti-immigrant policies in the racial shift condition than the control condition ($\beta = .13, p = .017$), whereas Whites low in ethnic identification did not differ by condition ($\beta = -.08, p = .130$). Ethnic identification was positively related to anti-immigrant sentiment in both the racial shift ($\beta = .32, p < .001$) and the control conditions ($\beta = .12, p = .021$), but this relationship was stronger in the former.

Opposition to political correctness. Highly identified Whites did not differ by condition ($\beta = .09, p = .149$), whereas Whites lower in ethnic identification reported *less* opposition to political correctness in the racial shift condition than the control condition ($\beta = -.13, p = .040$). Ethnic identification and opposition to political correctness were positively related in the racial shift condition ($\beta = .28, p < .001$), but unrelated in the control condition ($\beta = .06, p = .360$).

Condition \times Party Affiliation Analyses

We also conducted 2 (Condition: $-1 = \text{Control}$, $1 = \text{Racial Shift}$) \times 2 (Party Affiliation: $-1 = \text{Democrat}$, $1 = \text{Republican}$) analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) with ethnic identification as a covariate on all dependent variables. Full results are presented in the supplementary materials. We again observed a main effect of condition on group status threat, $F(1, 371) = 9.78, p = .002; \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .03$, but no significant main effects of condition on any other dependent variable (all $ps \geq .109$). Unsurprisingly, we found that party affiliation was a significant predictor of all dependent variables (all $ps < .001$). Consistent with Craig and Richeson's (2014b) findings, however, political affiliation did not significantly interact with condition to predict any dependent variable (all $ps \geq .072$).

In summary, exposure to the racial shift condition (vs. the control condition) increased group status threat, support for Trump, and support for anti-immigrant policies, and somewhat (but not significantly) decreased support for Sanders, but only among Whites high in ethnic identification. In contrast, exposure to the racial shift condition had no effect on group status threat, support for Sanders, or anti-immigrant attitudes, and actually led to decreased positivity toward Trump and decreased opposition to political correctness among Whites low in ethnic identification. Party affiliation, in contrast, did not moderate the effect of the racial shift manipulation on the dependent variables.

Tests of Indirect Effects

We proposed that the effect of exposure to the racial shift on candidate and policy preferences among highly identified Whites results from the heightened group status threat that reminders of the racial demographic shift produce. To test this hypothesis, we conducted moderated mediation analyses on the dependent variables with ethnic identification as a moderator (PROCESS macro Model 8; Hayes, 2013). Specifically, controlling for party affiliation, we ran moderated mediation analyses with the interaction between condition ($-1 = \text{control}$, $1 = \text{racial shift}$) and ethnic identification predicting the dependent measures through the mediator of group status threat (see Figure 2). Given that political party affiliation did not moderate any of the variables we did not conduct these analyses using party affiliation as a moderator. Significant indirect and direct effects are reported below; full results are presented in the supplementary materials.

Consistent with our hypothesis, among Whites high in ethnic identification, exposure to the racial shift (vs. control) condition indirectly predicted greater positivity towards Trump ($B = 1.98, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.79, 3.66]$), greater likelihood of voting for Trump ($B = 0.11, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.05, 0.22]$), less positivity towards Sanders ($B = -1.13, 95\% \text{ CI } [-2.63, -0.04]$), less likelihood of voting for Sanders ($B = -0.08, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.17, -0.02]$),

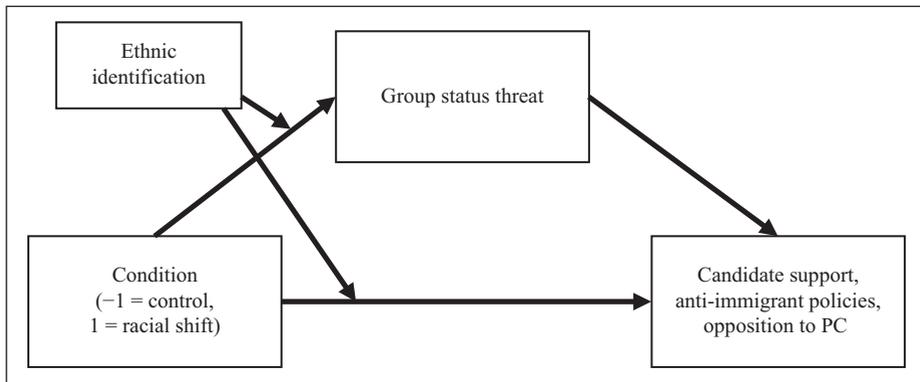


Figure 2. Conceptual model, in which reminders of racial shift (vs. control) alter candidate and policy support by increasing group status threat among Whites, with ethnic identification as a moderator.

greater support for anti-immigrant policies ($B = 0.19$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.29]), and greater opposition to political correctness ($B = 0.14$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.24]) via increased group status threat. No other indirect effects were significant among Whites high in ethnic identification, and no indirect effects of condition through group status threat were significant among Whites low in ethnic identification.

We only observed direct effects of condition among Whites low in ethnic identification for two outcomes. The racial shift (vs. control) condition led to less positivity towards Trump ($B = -4.01$, 95% CI [-7.85, -0.16]) and less opposition to political correctness ($B = -0.21$, 95% CI [-0.41, -0.03]) among weakly identified Whites.

Discussion

Donald Trump's success in the 2016 campaign for the U.S. presidential election has defied the expectations of many Americans. This study is the first to demonstrate experimentally that the changing racial demographics of America are directly contributing to Trump's success among Whites by increasing perceived threats to their group's status. It is also the first to show that White Americans' responses to increasing racial diversity depend on how identified they are with their ethnic group.

Consistent with our theorizing, among Whites high in ethnic identification, the racial shift message indirectly predicted increased support for Trump and anti-immigrant policies, increased opposition to political correctness norms, and decreased support for Sanders via increased group status threat. In contrast, among Whites low in ethnic identification, reminders of the racial demographic shift did not increase group status threat, nor did it lead to greater support for Trump or for conservative policies. These findings illustrate that increasing racial diversity is threatening to some, but not all, White Americans. Indeed, reminding Whites low in ethnic identification of the racial shift caused them to become *less* positive toward Trump and *increased* their support for PC norms that prohibit bias in speech, effects that were not mediated by group status threat. One potential explanation for these latter effects is that Whites low in ethnic identification were thinking of the effects of the changing racial demographics on the country as a whole, rather than on their own ethnic group, which may have made them less likely to support someone who is intolerant of increasing diversity and anti-bias norms. More research is needed to replicate and understand this phenomenon.

We found that reminding White Americans high in racial identification of the racial shift significantly increased their support for Trump and also decreased their support for Sanders.

Surprisingly, however, it did not affect their support for the other presidential candidates. We believe that Trump's more explicit anti-immigrant and antidiversity rhetoric and policies, relative to the other candidates, makes him especially appealing to those experiencing group status threat because his positions promise to assuage the precise threat they are experiencing. Of all of the candidates, Trump has been most vocal in his opposition to "outsiders" such as Muslims and illegal immigrants from Latin America, and most openly critical of "political correctness" in both his rhetoric and his behavior. Trump's rhetoric and policies thus appear to hold special appeal for White Americans highly in racial/ethnic identification who are concerned about the declining position of Whites in American society and who often perceive reverse discrimination as prevalent. In contrast, Sanders may have been perceived as the most inclusive candidate and thus most likely to exacerbate threats to White's status as a group.

Unsurprisingly, political party affiliation had large and expected effects on candidate and policy preferences. Compared to Democrats, Republicans reported much stronger support for Republican candidates and much less support for Democratic candidates; the former were also more supportive of anti-immigration policies and held more anti-PC attitudes. But party affiliation did not significantly moderate the effects of increasing diversity. When reminded of changing demographics, members of both parties who were highly identified with their racial group moved toward the right and toward Trump.

This study brings important social psychological insights about group identity and intergroup processes to voting preferences, an area that has traditionally been dominated by other approaches such as political science, opinion polls, and media commentary. Its demonstration that increasing racial diversity affects voter preferences among Whites, and that strength of White racial/ethnic identity moderates this effect, makes important theoretical and empirical contributions to this field. For many years, psychologists and political scientists have deemed White identity concerns to be unimportant determinants of White Americans' political attitudes and preferences,

and certainly less important than identity concerns among non-White Americans (Jardina, 2014; Schildkraut, 2015). Sears and Savalei (2006), for example, found that in the late 1990s, racial identification, perceptions of discrimination, and linked fate were only weak predictors of White Americans' attitudes on policies related to race and immigration. This led them to conclude that "Whites' whiteness is usually likely to be no more noteworthy to them than is breathing the air around them" (2006, p. 901). Current political events in the United States indicate that this is no longer the case. As White Americans' numerical majority shrinks and they increasingly feel that their group's status is threatened, White identity will become increasingly salient and central to White Americans. To the extent that their ethnic identity as White becomes an important part of their self-concept, it is likely to guide White Americans' political preferences in the future, especially on policies and issues closely related to group status threat, such as those related to immigration and tolerance of diversity. Thus, Trump has successfully tapped into the threat to group status that White Americans who are highly identified with their racial group feel as their numerical advantage shrinks.

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Supplementary Material

The online Supplement Material is available at <http://gpi.sagepub.com/supplemental>.

Notes

1. We also tested right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) as a potential moderator of the predicted effects. We assessed RWA immediately following ethnic identification with a 15-item scale (Zakrisson, 2005; $\alpha = .94$). Participants indicated agreement with statements such as "Our country needs a powerful leader, in order to destroy the radical

and immoral currents prevailing in society today” on a 9-point scale ($-4 = \text{very strongly disagree}$, $0 = \text{neutral}$, $4 = \text{very strongly agree}$). RWA was strongly correlated with political affiliation, $r(376) = .641$, $p < .001$, and moderately correlated with White ethnic identification, $r(376) = .403$, $p < .001$, and was unaffected by condition, $t(374) = 0.16$, $p < .872$. RWA significantly predicted greater group status threat, support for all three Republican candidates, anti-immigrant attitudes, opposition to political correctness, and less support for the Democratic candidates. However, RWA did not interact significantly with condition to predict any of the dependent variables.

2. Sixty-five individuals identified as “Independent-leaning Democrat” and 24 identified as “Independent-leaning Republican.” Following Iyengar and Westwood (2015), we categorized the former as Democrat and the latter as Republican.
3. Participants who identified as independent and “other” differed on key dependent variables, making it inappropriate to combine them. Independents reported greater group status threat ($t = 2.07$, $p = .042$), greater positivity towards Trump ($t = 2.62$, $p = .011$), greater likelihood of voting for Trump ($t = 2.51$, $p = .014$), and greater anti-immigrant attitudes ($t = 2.13$, $p = .037$) than those who identified as “other.” See the supplemental materials for analyses with independents and “other” included.
4. All items for all dependent measures are shown in the supplementary materials.
5. Given that 35 states and DC had held their primary elections or caucuses at the time of data collection (March 24–27, 2016), we assessed participants’ voting preferences for the general election.
6. Factor analyses confirmed through both scree plot and eigenvalues that anti-immigration and anti-PC attitudes scales formed two different factors.

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