

# Contraction as a Response to Group Threat: Demographic Decline and Whites' Classification of People Who Are Ambiguously White

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## Abstract

How do members of dominant groups, like White people in the United States, react when their privileged social status is threatened, for example, by the prospect of numeric decline? Prior studies identify two sets of reactions: (1) White people identify more strongly with ingroup members, and (2) they withhold material and symbolic resources from outgroup members. This study explores another possibility: White people may alter the boundary around Whiteness by redefining the criteria for membership. I use an original survey experiment to examine how demographic threat affects how White people in the United States classify people who are ambiguously White, and specifically people who are ambiguously White or Latino. The results reveal that White people are less—not more—likely to classify people who are ambiguously White or Latino as “White” under threat. The results contribute to a growing literature on the racial classification of multiracial and racially ambiguous people that has previously ignored ambiguity around the Latino category. They also speak to an active debate about demographic projections and the classification decisions on which they rest.

## Keywords

race and ethnicity, Latinas/Latinos, immigration, diversity

When their privileged social status is threatened, how do members of a dominant group, like White people in the United States, respond? This question has garnered substantial interest from social scientists in recent years. In the case of White people, one threat in particular has received the lion's share of attention: demographic threat stemming from their declining share of the U.S. population. Multiple studies link demographic threat to White people's identification choices across a number of dimensions—racial, national, and political. Results generally support long-standing theories of intergroup relations: in brief, White people who feel their numeric

advantage is in jeopardy are more likely to identify with (and defend) their privileged group—that is, other Whites.

More generally, studies repeatedly show that members of dominant groups respond to group status threats by reaffirming both their commitment to the ingroup and their rejection of outgroups. Boundary-making scholars

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have drawn attention to another set of strategies that people can mobilize to defend the status of their groups: rearticulating the boundary that separates them from outgroups. Do threats to a group's dominant status affect how members circumscribe the category they occupy? According to several theoretical perspectives, groups should respond to external threats by contracting the boundary around them, sloughing off marginal elements in order to homogenize their membership and enhance its value.

The current study investigates this reaction among members of one dominant group, White people in the United States. More specifically, I explore how demographic decline, a prominent source of threat, affects how White people classify others, taking the classification of others (not just self) as a key mechanism through which people construct social categories. To study this, I carried out an original online survey experiment with nearly 800 self-identified non-Latino White adults in the United States. I found that White people who are prompted to think about the changing demographics of the United States are less likely to classify people who are ambiguously White or Latino as "White." This suggests White people respond to demographic threat by contracting the boundary around Whiteness.

Empirically, the findings round out our understanding of how White people, as members of a dominant group, react when they believe their group's privileged status is tenuous. Earlier studies show that White people react by doubling down on their commitment to Whiteness. They prioritize this "identity" relative to others, including "American," and they express greater identification and solidarity with other White people. This study shows that White people also react to demographic threat by *altering the meaning of Whiteness* to expel people of uncertain origin from their ranks. The findings serve as a reminder that being "White" (or "Black," or "American," or "female," and so on) derives its meaning and power as much from who counts as "White" (or "Black," or "American," or "female," and

so on) as who does not. Conceptually, the findings reveal that what is at stake in intergroup conflicts over symbolic and material resources is not just the distribution of resources across boundaries but also the distribution of people.

This study also contributes to a growing social psychology literature on the classification of racially ambiguous people. Prior studies have examined the classification of Whites, Blacks, Asians, and the multiracial and otherwise ambiguous people who straddle these categories. None of these studies has examined the classification of Latinos, a growing group that is phenotypically and ancestrally heterogeneous and whose members are often seen as ambiguous in the U.S. context. As I will argue, Americans often read self-identified Latinos as non-Latino White, which makes Latinos excellent candidates for understanding changes to the boundary around Whiteness. Importantly, Latinos are also the main drivers of ongoing diversification.

## RESPONSES TO GROUP STATUS THREATS

A large body of work explores how members of dominant racial groups, particularly White people in the United States, react to threats to their group's status. This work draws on closely related theories of intergroup relations that foreground the role of competition for scarce resources. Groups may compete for "realistic" material resources, like political power or economic opportunities (Blalock 1967; Key 1949), or for symbolic ones, like status. Competition for status is rooted in a "felt sense of group position," that is, a deeply held vision—manifested in inequalities and ideology—of a group's status vis-à-vis other groups (Blumer 1958; Bobo 1983; Bobo and Hutchings 1996). Naturally, members of dominant groups are most invested in preserving the established system of group positions, a system from which they derive special benefit. Indeed, they view deviations from the status quo as potential threats to their group's privileged position.

Threats to group position can take myriad forms, from declining between-group inequality (Wetts and Willer 2018), to political gains by minorities (Bobo 1983), to changing demographics (for a discussion, see Olzak 1992: Ch. 3). Importantly, threats need not be objective—merely perceived—to be consequential.<sup>1</sup> Starting with Key's (1949) pioneering work on political competition in the U.S. South, the bulk of empirical work has focused on the role of relative group size, and changes therein (see also Blalock 1967). Changes in relative group size pose a material and symbolic threat to the status of dominant groups. For one, relatively larger outgroups exacerbate perceived competition for political and economic resources (see Key 1949; McVeigh and Estep 2019). Although numeric predominance alone does not guarantee a group's hegemony over the collective vision of group positions, it helps, especially combined with material advantage.

Social and political psychologists have theorized two responses to group status threats. On one hand are inward-looking strategies, like self-identification, that implicate one's own position within a group. These strategies are variously referred to as "individual mobility" (Ellemers and Haslam 2012), "positional moves" (Wimmer 2013), or "boundary crossing" (Alba 2005; Alba and Nee 2009). On the other hand, members of the dominant group may pursue outward-looking strategies that take aim at other groups' access to material and symbolic resources (Blalock 1967). These strategies include opposition to redistributive policies associated with subordinate groups, as well as stereotypes and prejudice, insofar as esteem is a valuable symbolic resource.

Against this theoretical background, recent empirical work explores reactions to group status threats engendered by demographic change (for a review, see Craig, Rucker, and Richeson 2018). As McVeigh and Estep (2019:134) note, demographic changes have been "the bugbear of white anxiety for at least a century." These changes received renewed attention following 2008, when the U.S.

Census Bureau projected that White people would become a numerical minority by 2042.<sup>2</sup> The forecast quickly met with considerable anxiety outside academia (Tavernise 2018).<sup>3</sup> On the night of Barack Obama's 2012 reelection, for example, Bill O'Reilly famously declared, "The demographics are changing. It's not a traditional America anymore. . . . The white establishment is now the minority." And, in 2019, shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, and El Paso, Texas, were linked to manifestos decrying the threat of "White replacement" (Bowles 2019; Eligon 2019). As Alba (2018:1) explains, "The scenario of white minority status is telescoped into the very near future, or even the present, by many whites."

Empirical studies of White people document both inward- and outward-looking responses to perceived demographic threat. Regarding the first, several studies link perceptions of a declining White majority to White people's identification and solidarity with their racial group. For example, White people exposed to information about the declining share of White citizens are more likely to express a preference for interacting with other White people (Craig and Richeson 2014a) and to have greater sympathy toward other Whites (Outten et al. 2012). Relatedly, Abascal (2015) finds that White people primed with demographic threat are relatively more likely to identify as "White" than as "American." Knowles and Tropp (2018) report similar findings based on a nationally representative sample and real, as opposed to perceived, demographics. Specifically, the larger the share of non-White people in a census tract, the more likely White residents are to identify with other Whites (e.g., agree that "being a White person is an important part of how I see myself").

Other studies link demographic threat to White people's attitudes and behaviors toward other racial/ethnic groups. White people exposed to information about their numeric decline express greater implicit bias toward Blacks and Asians as well as colder feelings toward Blacks, Latinos, and Asians (Craig

and Richeson 2014a); they express greater anger and fear toward racial/ethnic minorities (Outten et al. 2012); and they are relatively less generous to Black versus White strangers in an incentivized experiment (Abascal 2015). These recent, experimental findings echo those of a large observational literature on the size and growth of minority populations and outgroup stereotypes (Taylor 1998), opposition to race-targeted policies (Fossett and Kiecolt 1989; Glaser 1994), and opposition to immigration (Enos 2014; Hopkins 2010; Quillian 1995; Schneider 2008; Semyonov, Rajzman, and Gorodzeisky 2006; Stein, Post, and Rinden 2000).

More broadly, studies also find that White people in the United States respond to demographic diversification by aligning themselves with more conservative policy positions (Craig and Richeson 2014b; Fox 2004; Wetts and Willer 2018), political parties (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Craig and Richeson 2014b; Willer, Feinberg, and Wetts 2016), and candidates, including Donald Trump (Knowles and Tropp 2018; Major, Blodorn, and Blascovich 2018). These findings evoke the link between racial resentments and partisanship that was deliberately forged by the Republican Party as part of the Southern Strategy (Haney López 2015), a link that may have grown stronger in the wake of Donald Trump (McElwee and McDaniel 2017).<sup>4</sup>

## **BOUNDARY CONTRACTION AS A RESPONSE TO GROUP STATUS THREAT**

Boundary-making theorists bring to light a third set of strategies that entail neither changes to one's position within a system of boundaries nor changes to the distribution of resources across them. Instead, these strategies take aim at the location of existing boundaries and, by extension, the topography of the racial order itself (Alba 2005; Alba and Nee 2009; Wimmer 2013). These theories build on the premise that boundaries are "not so much means of knowledge as means of

power," and thus, by extension "the stake of struggles between the groups they characterize, who fight over them while striving to turn them to their own advantage" (Bourdieu 1984:477). In particular, Wimmer (2013) draws attention to two such strategies: expansion and contraction. Expansion refers to shifts in a boundary that make the category it circumscribes more inclusive; contraction refers to shifts that make this category more exclusive.<sup>5</sup>

In response to demographic threat, which strategy will White people pursue, expansion or contraction? We might expect White people will expand the boundary around Whiteness to recruit more members. At face value, this seems like a straightforward strategy to combat numeric decline. However, two related theoretical perspectives lead us to expect people will instead contract the boundary around Whiteness in response to perceived status threats.

The first perspective is grounded in Simmel's (1955) writings about groups in conflict. According to Simmel, groups in conflict tend to pursue centralization and homogenization. They do so because the centralization of authority and the heightened solidarity that stems from homogeneity allow groups to organize effectively against external threats. By policing the boundary around itself, a group increases the homogeneity of its members. Conflict and threat, Simmel (1955:99) contends, promote "the concentration of an existing unit, radically eliminating all elements which might blur the distinctness of its boundaries against the enemy." These centripetal forces lead to an unexpected outcome: a group in conflict may benefit, rather than suffer, from a decline in "membership, as long as this decline purifies it" (Simmel 1955:96).

A second perspective sheds light more specifically on conflicts that spring from perceived threats to group status. This perspective compels us, like so much work on White racial identity, to see Whiteness as a form of symbolic capital from which people who identify as White derive benefit. According to power devaluation theory, threats entail a

perceived “decline in the demand for what an actor offers, . . . an increase in the supply of others who offer the same thing in exchange,” or both (McVeigh 2009:40; see also McVeigh and Estep 2019).<sup>6</sup>

Consider the case of ongoing demographic changes, which increase the supply of non-White workers and voters. From White people’s perspective, these changes heighten competition in labor markets and dilute their own political power. Demographic changes may also dilute White people’s esteem in symbolic exchange markets, if the growing non-White population does not subscribe to a vision of group positions in which Whites prevail. In response to these perceived threats, power devaluation theory predicts White people will attempt to enhance the value of Whiteness. To this end, they may limit the number of claimants on Whiteness: “Actors gain prestige and esteem by adhering to and displaying behaviors and traits that are simultaneously admired and relatively scarce” (McVeigh 2009:41). The notion that scarcity furthers esteem, in turn, draws on Simmel’s (1971) writings on fashion and Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of distinction.

But, *how* do social actors, like White people, contract boundaries? Classification practices are a critical tool: symbolic boundaries are an accretion of decisions about where people belong vis-à-vis each other. By classifying others, we locate boundaries and construct the very categories in which we ourselves claim membership (Roth 2018). We classify people racially by interpreting phenotypic (e.g., skin color) and other traits (e.g., dress) that are laden with social meaning. As Wimmer (2013:65) explains, “Members of both dominant and subordinate groups can try to police the boundaries against potential crossovers . . . by relying on or inventing a variety of symbolic markers that allow the identification of group members.” However, our motivation to police these boundaries—and, relatedly, the ciphers we use to translate continuous traits into discrete categories—can shift depending on the broader context in which we are doing the classifying.

In this framework, hypodescent is exposed as one tool for defending White people’s privileged position in the United States and the existing hierarchy more generally (Ho et al. 2013). The rule of hypodescent dictates that multiracial or ambiguous people are classified with the lower-status group available to them. Rejecting liminal others’ claims to group membership both homogenizes a group and enhances its value in symbolic exchange markets. Therefore, this practice should be especially appealing in times of threat: “Those high in the need to belong or whose belonging has been threatened should be less likely to accept racially ambiguous targets into their racial ingroup, as a way to protect the ingroup” (Gaither et al. 2016:100). Taken together, these insights converge on the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* Dominant group members who perceive a threat to their group’s status will be less likely than those who do not perceive a threat to classify ambiguous others as ingroup members.

Preliminary empirical evidence for this hypothesis comes from Ho and colleagues (2013), who find that when White people who score high in social dominance are prompted to think about political and socioeconomic gains by Black people, they are more likely to report that the child of a Black parent and a White parent will “fit in better” with Black people. Two related studies find that White people who are asked to write about Whites’ unfair advantages (Gaither et al. 2016) and those prompted to think about demographic change (Cooley et al. 2018) are relatively more likely to classify ambiguous Black–White faces as Black. The present study builds on this work, extending it in critical ways. Like Cooley and colleagues (2018), I examine White people’s reactions to threats engendered by demographic changes, the so-called “bugbear” of White anxiety. But unlike these studies, and studies of racial classification more broadly, I focus on the classification of people who are ambiguously Latino. As the largest minority group in the United



States, Latinos are a powerful harbinger of demographic threat to White people. In addition, as I argue next, Latinos are likely the greatest source of racial ambiguity in the United States. Despite this, the empirical literature on racial classification has neglected the case of Latino ambiguity.

## RACIAL CLASSIFICATION OF OTHERS

A growing literature in social psychology examines the classification of people who are racially ambiguous. These studies bring to light three sets of factors that shape classification: traits of the people being classified (i.e., “targets”), traits of the people doing the classifying (i.e., “observers”), and broader contextual factors.

*Those being classified.* Racially ambiguous targets tend to be classified in ways that are consistent with racial stereotypes. Freeman and colleagues (2011), for example, find that morphed White–Black male faces are more likely to be classified as Black when wearing janitor (i.e., low-status) attire, and Noymer, Penner, and Saperstein (2011) find that medical examiners are more likely to classify victims of homicide as Black on their death certificates, controlling for the racial classification provided by the deceased person’s next-of-kin (see also McDermott 2018; Miller, Maner, and Becker 2010).<sup>7</sup> Studies also show that people follow different rules when classifying ambiguously White–Black people<sup>8</sup> versus ambiguously White–Asian people. Respondents are less likely to classify ambiguously White–Black people than ambiguously White–Asian people with the higher-status group (i.e., Whites) (Ho et al. 2011).

*Those doing the classifying.* Observers’ characteristics also shape racial classification. For example, political conservatives are relatively more likely to classify morphed White–Black faces as Black (Krosch et al. 2013), as are White people who score higher on “social dominance orientation”—that is,

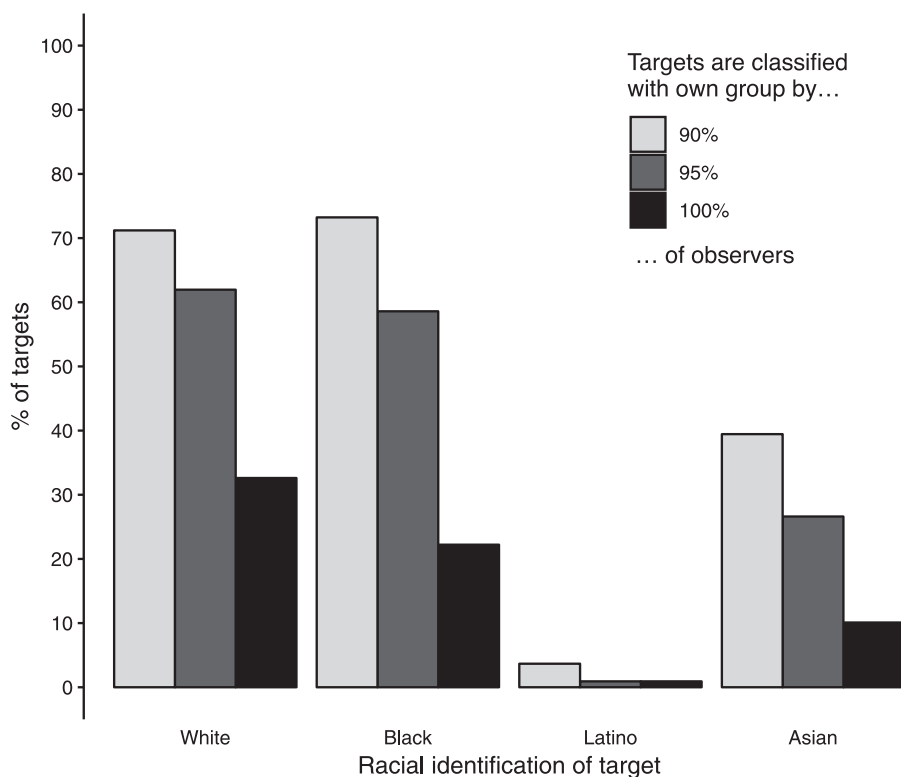
they express “preferences for group based hierarchy and inequality” (Ho et al. 2013: 940)—and those who identify relatively more strongly with their racial ingroup (Gaither et al. 2016; Knowles and Peng 2005). More generally, Gaither and colleagues (2016) find that White people who express a stronger need for social belonging (or whose needs are exacerbated by experiencing social exclusion) are more likely to classify targets as Black.

*The broader context.* Finally, a series of studies link racial classification to characteristics of the broader context in which classification takes place. For example, in the United States, the classification of ambiguous White–Black targets is relatively more sensitive to ancestry information, whereas in Brazil, it is relatively more sensitive to phenotype (Chen et al. 2017). At the subnational level, Freeman, Pauker, and Sanchez (2016) find that White people with less exposure to Blacks—as proxied by the share of Black residents in their ZIP-code areas—find it harder to classify ambiguously White–Black faces. In a related vein, Black–White biracial targets are more likely to be classified as Black when presented alongside other Black-presenting faces (Cooley et al. 2018).<sup>9</sup>

## LATINOS: THE OVERLOOKED MAJORITY

Studies of racial classification focus on people who are ambiguously White–Black or ambiguously White–Asian, whether ambiguity is conveyed through morphed faces, the faces of people who identify as biracial, or information about targets’ parents. To date, no study has investigated the classification of people who are ambiguously Latino.

Nevertheless, self-identified Latinos, who are themselves heterogeneous in terms of ancestry and phenotype, are probably the primary source of racial ambiguity in the United States today. A look at a racially diverse face database makes the point. The Chicago Face Database (CFD) (Ma, Correll, and Wittenbrink 2015) is a publicly available database of nearly



**Figure 1.** Share of White-, Black-, Latino-, and Asian-Identified Targets in the Chicago Face Database Who Are Classified with the Racial Group with Which They Identify by 90, 95, and 100 Percent of Observers

600 people who self-identify as White, Black, Latino, or Asian. The database, which includes the target photographs used in this study, also provides information on how a convenience sample of independent observers rated these photographs. One dimension on which observers rated targets was race/ethnicity. To be clear, the individuals represented in this database are not representative of the populations who self-identify as White, Black, Latino, or Asian. The patterns described here, however, are sufficiently pronounced to be highly suggestive.

First, concordance between self- and other-classification is lowest for self-identified Latinos. Concordance is highest for self-identified Whites and self-identified Blacks. Of 184 self-identified Whites in the database, 61.96 percent were classified as White by the vast majority (at least 95 percent) of the observers who rated them (see Figure 1). Of 198 self-identified Blacks, a similar share (58.59

percent) were classified as Black by at least 95 percent of observers. Concordance is lower for self-identified Asians, about one-quarter (26.61 percent) of whom were classified as Asian by at least 95 percent of observers. Concordance between self- and other-classification is even lower for self-identified Latinos: of 109 self-identified Latinos in the database, just one (.92 percent) was classified as Latino by at least 95 percent of raters.

Second, when self-identified Latinos are not classified as Latino, they are most often classified as White. To capture the categories spanned by ambiguous faces, for each face, I calculated a *z* statistic based on the difference between the proportions of observers who classified that face as White or Latino.<sup>10</sup> The White–Latino boundary was subject to the greatest ambiguity: 34 people in the database were classified as White or Latino by statistically indistinguishable shares of observers.<sup>11</sup> Next is Asian–Latino

**Table 1.** Representation of Different Types of Ambiguity in Chicago Face Database (Weighted by U.S. Population Shares)

	White	Black	Latino	Asian
White		0	6.84%	.22%
Black			.96%	0
Latino				2.81%
Asian				

ambiguity, with 26 faces in the database classified as Asian or Latino by similar shares of observers. Black–Latino ambiguity is a distant third, with eight faces in this group. Only two faces were classified as White or Asian by statistically indistinguishable shares of observers, and none were classified as White or Black by statistically indistinguishable shares of observers, although the literature on racial classification is dominated by the empirical study of White–Black ambiguity, followed by White–Asian ambiguity.

Table 1 reports the shares of people who are ambiguous across all combinations of the “big four” racial categories, reweighting by the shares of self-identified Whites, Blacks, Latinos, and Asians in the United States. For example, if White–Latino ambiguity were as prevalent in the U.S. population as it is in the CFD, then 6.84 percent of all Americans would be racially ambiguous across the White–Latino boundary. This figure would probably be higher if we could account for the prevalence of White–Latino ambiguity among people who identify with other racial categories (e.g., “American Indian or Alaska Native”) or those who identify with multiple racial categories, neither of which is represented in the CFD. The upshot is that most instances of racial ambiguity (in this case, 97.97 percent) span the Latino category. Relatedly, self-identified Latinos make up a majority (in this case, 62.82 percent) of the self-identified Whites, Blacks, Latinos, and Asians who are racially ambiguous.

To be sure, these analyses would benefit from replication with a representative sample of faces. They nevertheless imply that the boundaries separating Whites from Blacks

and Whites from Asians are sites of less ambiguity and uncertainty than the boundary separating Latinos from everyone else, but especially Whites. Why then, does the literature on racial classification uniformly focus on the empirical case of ambiguously White–Black and White–Asian people, especially those who are formally identified (either internally or externally) as “biracial”? The answer lies in the elision between racial ambiguity and multiracial identification.

Indeed, many earlier studies cite the growth of the multiracial population to justify their attention to racial ambiguity. These studies are peppered with references to Barack Obama, Halle Berry, and Tiger Woods, public figures who either identify as multiracial or whose parents identify with different racial groups (e.g., Chen and Hamilton 2012; Cooley et al. 2018; Ho, Kteily, and Chen 2017; Krosch et al. 2013). There is nothing natural or automatic, however, about the translation of ancestry to self-identification to external classification. As Loveman and Muniz (2007:934) remind us, “intermarriage and procreation change individual positions vis-à-vis racial boundaries only where they are *socially recognized* to have that effect.”

The legacy of the one-drop rule means that only the offspring of recent Black–non-Black unions are classified as multiracial, and only some of the time (see Porter, Liebler, and Noon 2016; Roth 2005). Indeed, Americans have long been conditioned to recognize a phenotypically diverse population as Black (Davis 1991), stifling racial ambiguity around this category. The rules for classifying Latinos, however, are less settled, and, for this group, multiracial identification is likely an even worse proxy for ambiguity. Many foreign-born Latinos hail from countries where long-standing narratives of *mestizaje* (racial mixture) construe all citizens as multiracial *mestizos* (Roth 2012; Wade 2005). However, Latinos who understand themselves as multiracial often cannot communicate this on surveys, including the Census, that operationalize multiracial identification as explicit identification with specific racial categories. And, for



Latinos, racial self-identification is a poor proxy for both phenotypic appearance and external classification (Roth 2010, 2012).<sup>12</sup> As a result, the number of racially ambiguous Latinos likely far exceeds the number of Latinos who formally identify—and are identified—as multiracial. By equating ambiguity and multiraciality (and ignoring the social origins of the latter), earlier studies have missed the primary subjects of ambiguity in the United States today: Latinos.

## DATA AND METHODS

The following analyses are based on an original survey experiment fielded over a five-day period in July 2019; the experiment was a replication and extension of an experiment fielded in September 2018, which yielded substantively similar results.<sup>13</sup> It was distributed to an online convenience sample through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The design of the experiment as well as the main hypotheses were registered with Experiments in Governance and Politics (EGAP).<sup>14</sup> The amended pre-analysis plan reports a necessary sample size of 800 self-identified White respondents.

Data collection was restricted to adults living in the United States. Respondents first answered four questions about their demographic background (gender, age, race/ethnicity, party identification). Respondents who did not identify as “White” were not allowed to complete the survey. Respondents who exceeded programmed quotas for “Democrat,” “Independent,” or “Something else” responses were not allowed to complete the survey. Quotas were implemented to ensure a politically diverse sample, one in which at least one-third of respondents identified as “Republican.”<sup>15</sup> The analytic sample includes 798 self-identified White adults living in the United States.<sup>16</sup>

Eligible respondents then answered four items from the Importance to Identity subscale of Luhtanen and Crocker’s (1992) Collective Self-Esteem Scale. The items gauge strength of identification as White (e.g.,

“Being White is an important reflection of who I am”). Respondents then continued to the core of the survey. In the first part, which purportedly dealt with “quantitative ability,” respondents studied and answered basic questions about one of two graphs to which they were randomly assigned. The graphs were designed to manipulate demographic threat via the presentation of population trends data for the United States; they are described in more detail below. To reinforce the manipulation, respondents had to spend one minute on this page before they could continue.

Then, respondents viewed and rated 18 faces, in block-randomized fashion. First, they viewed and rated eight ambiguously White–Latino faces. Next, they viewed and rated 10 faces, including unambiguously White, Black, Asian, and Latino faces as well as ambiguously Black–Latino faces. Within these two blocks, faces were presented in random order. The selection of these faces is also described in more detail below. Next, respondents were asked to provide additional demographic information about themselves, including their educational attainment, family income, 2016 presidential vote choice, and five-digit ZIP code. Finally, respondents answered a series of understanding/manipulation check items as well as open-ended items designed to gauge suspicions about the study and its purpose.

*Manipulating perceived demographic changes.* The graphs used to manipulate perceived demographic changes were modeled closely after the graphs used by Wetts and Willer (2018) in their study of demographic threat and support for redistribution (Figures A1 and A2 in the Appendix). Both graphs report accurate population trends and projections for the United States, broken down by race/ethnicity. The “demographic threat” graph (Figure A1), reports trends in the White, Latino, Black, and Asian populations between 1960 and 2060. The graph depicts a dramatic decline in the share of White people, from 85 percent of all Americans in 1960 to just 44 percent in 2060. Most importantly, the graph depicts White residents

becoming a numerical minority between 2040 and 2045, an issue that has received widespread attention. The “control” graph (Figure A2) reports a subset of the same, accurate population data. Specifically, this graph reports population trends for White, Black, Latino, and Asian people between 2000 and 2025. Although the share of White residents is declining, the decline is modest, and White people constitute a clear numerical majority throughout the time period.

The graphs are ideal for manipulating demographic threat for several reasons. First, similar manipulations of demographic threat have been successfully used in prior experimental studies that link them to a range of related outcomes, from outgroup attitudes (Craig and Richeson 2014a) and racial classification (Ho et al. 2013) to support for redistribution (Wetts and Willer 2018) and monetary contributions to ingroup and outgroup members (Abascal 2015). Second, the graphs present accurate information about U.S. population trends and projections. They do not entail deception, which, if caught, might inspire distrust among respondents. Instead, the graphs rely on a subtle tweak to the date range reported on the  $x$  axis to manipulate demographic threat.

Responses to understanding/manipulation check items confirm two things. First, respondents were able to read and understand the graphs, by and large. Second, the graphs successfully affected respondents’ perceptions of which racial/ethnic groups were growing and which were declining. Regarding the first point, just below the graphs, respondents were asked to report the share of one group at the beginning of the time period and the share of another group at the end of the time period. Among respondents who viewed the control graph, 94.24 percent answered both questions correctly, compared to 91.98 percent of respondents who viewed the demographic threat graph. The difference is not significant ( $p = .209$ ). Results are substantively similar among the subset of respondents who correctly answered understanding check items.<sup>17</sup>

Regarding the second point, at the end of the survey, the following question was posed to respondents: “Think back to the graph we showed you at the beginning of the survey. Which of the following groups are declining?” Respondents were allowed to select multiple groups. In fact, the White population was the only one shown to be declining in either graph. However, this fact was less salient to respondents in the control condition, only 83.46 percent of whom selected Whites, and Whites alone. By comparison, 95.24 percent of respondents in the treatment condition selected Whites alone, and the difference is significant ( $p < .001$ ).<sup>18</sup>

*Selecting ambiguous and unambiguous faces.* I drew faces from the Chicago Face Database (CFD) (Ma et al. 2015). The CFD contains high-resolution images of 597 men and women between 17 and 65 years old who self-identify as White, Black, Latino, or Asian. In addition, the CFD provides “norming” data for faces, generated by a racially diverse convenience sample of 1,087 independent respondents who each rated between 10 and 15 unique faces on a number of dimensions, including perceived race/ethnicity, age, attractiveness, and other traits. On average, each face was evaluated by 44 unique raters.

My first goal was to identify a set of faces that are ambiguously White or Latino, that is, they could plausibly be categorized as White or Latino by an observer. To do this, for each face, I calculated a  $z$  statistic based on the difference between the proportions of raters who classified the face as White or Latino. Then, I omitted faces for which the  $z$  statistic indicated a significant difference. The resulting set of 34 faces includes all faces for which the proportion of raters classifying that face as Latino is statistically indistinguishable from the proportion of people classifying that face as “White.”<sup>19</sup> Eight of these faces are people who self-identify as White (four women, four men). The remaining 26 self-identify as Latino (13 women, 13 men). I pared this list further to reduce noise and avoid over-taxing respondents. Ultimately, I selected the six

self-identified Latinos (three women, three men) and two self-identified Whites (one woman, one man) with the smallest absolute  $z$  statistics. Facsimiles of the racially ambiguous faces are included in the online supplement.

Technically, it is possible for a face that was classified by very few raters as either White or Latino to obtain a small  $z$  statistic. I confirmed that none of the faces in the final set were classified as either White or Latino by less than 10 percent of all observers.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, on average, the faces in the final set were classified as “Latino” by 38.00 percent of all raters and as “White” by 42.44 percent of all raters.

My second goal was to identify a set of unambiguously White, Black, Latino, and Asian faces. Within each of eight subsets (self-identified White women, White men, Latina women, Latino men, Black women, Black men, Asian women, and Asian men), I selected the first face listed in the Norming Data spreadsheet that was classified with the corresponding racial/ethnic group by 100 percent of all raters. I relaxed this criterion for Latino men, because no self-identified Latino man in the database was classified as Latino by 100 percent of all raters. For this group, I selected the “next best” face, which was classified as Latino by 92.86 percent of raters.

Finally, I included two additional faces that are ambiguously Black–Latino, both belonging to Black-identified people. They were selected according to the same criteria as the White–Latino ambiguous faces, but applied to Black- or Latino-identified individuals and classifications as Black or Latino. One of these faces belongs to a woman, the other to a man. I confirmed that none of the faces selected were outliers in terms of perceived age or attractiveness.

*Items and variables.* The primary outcome variable is based on the following item, which was presented just below the face being rated: “If you had to guess, what would you say is this person’s racial/ethnic background?” Possible answers included “Most

likely White,” “Most likely Black/African American,” “Most likely Hispanic/Latino,” “Most likely Asian or Pacific Islander,” and “Most likely American Indian or Alaska Native.”

Some of the models estimated control for differences across individual respondents as well as the counties in which they live. Respondents were linked to these counties via their self-reported ZIP codes. The individual-level variables include age, gender, family income, educational attainment, and party identification. The county-level variables capture local demographics, affluence, and stability. They include percent Latino (of any race), percent college-educated, median household income, and percent in same residence for at least one year (a proxy for residential stability). They are based on five-year estimates from the American Community Survey (ACS, 2013 to 2017). For multiple regression models, I standardized responses to ordinal and ratio variables; coefficients for these variables represent the statistical effect of a one-standard-deviation increase. More details on the coding of all variables can be found in the online supplement.

*Randomization and descriptive statistics.* MTurk workers are not representative of the U.S. population (Huff and Tingley 2015; Paolacci and Chandler 2014). For example, the average worker in my sample is younger and more highly educated than the average White American (see Table S1 in the online supplement). However, MTurk workers are more demographically diverse than the average college student sample (Buhrmester, Kwang, and Gosling 2011), the norm for prior studies of racial/ethnic classification. Moreover, factorial experiments fielded on MTurk yield results similar to those based on population-based panels, particularly once demographic differences are taken into account (Weinberg, Freese, and McElhattan 2014). In the online supplement, I reweight the sample to produce a synthetic estimate of the causal effect in a sample of all White Americans.

Table 2 reports unweighted descriptive statistics for the full sample of White respondents and the subsets of respondents who were assigned to the control or treatment conditions. With one exception, *t* statistics confirm randomization achieved balance across individual and county characteristics, taken individually. The exception is county median household income: respondents in the treatment condition live in counties with significantly lower median household income than respondents in the control condition ( $p < .01$ ). One significant imbalance is to be expected when making multiple comparisons. However, a global *F* statistic from a linear regression model predicting experimental condition confirms balance was achieved across individual and county characteristics, taken together ( $p = .312$ ).

*Modeling strategy.* The following section reports the results of linear probability models predicting the classification of ambiguously White–Latino targets as White. By contrast with logistic regression models, linear probability models facilitate the interpretation of interaction terms and the comparison of coefficients across models—both of which are goals of the following analyses. In addition, they are appropriate for modeling non-extreme probabilities (in the .20 to .80 range), like the ones examined here. Nevertheless, I re-estimate the main models using logistic regressions; the results, which are similar, are reported in the online supplement.

Each respondent classified multiple targets, and each target was classified by multiple respondents. The models deal with intra-respondent and intra-image dependencies in two ways. First, they include fixed effects for images. Second, they include random effects for respondents. Some models also include random effects for respondents' state-of-residence, to address the geographic clustering of respondents. The estimation strategy yields information about the nature of this clustering, which I present via the standard deviation of the respondent and state intercepts (random effects). In general, the

larger the standard deviation, the more the outcome is expected to vary across clusters.

*Replication with non-Whites.* In August 2019, I replicated the survey experiment with a sample of non-White respondents. The replication instrument was identical to the one described above, with two exceptions: respondents were not asked to answer items regarding the strength of their racial identification, and instead of rating 18 targets, they rated only the eight ambiguously White–Latino targets. The replication was registered with EGAP via an amended pre-analysis plan. The pre-analysis plan declares a sample size of 200 respondents; the final, analytic sample consists of 195 self-identified non-Whites with non-missing values for relevant covariates. Additional details on this data collection are included in the online supplement; the results are also described in the main text.

## RESULTS

Does demographic threat affect how White people classify people who are ambiguously White–Latino, and if so, how? Model 1 in Table 3 reports the results of a linear regression predicting classification as White by experimental condition, as well as unmodeled heterogeneity across respondents and images. Respondents are significantly less likely to classify an ambiguously White–Latino target as White under demographic threat. Specifically, the probability of classifying an ambiguously White–Latino target as White is 3.32 percentage points lower in the demographic threat condition than in the control condition. In terms of predicted probabilities, 33.93 percent of respondents in the control condition classified the reference face as White; in the threat condition, just 30.61 percent of respondents did so.

To address geographic clustering, Model 2 includes a random-effects parameter for states. Model 3 additionally controls for specific differences across respondents, and Model 4 controls for differences across respondents as well as the counties where

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for Full Sample and by Experimental Condition

	Full Sample		Treatment		Control	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<i>Individual Level</i>						
Female [0,1]	.534	.534	.541	.499	.526	.500
Age [21,70]	38.063	12.632	37.982	12.377	38.143	12.896
College-educated [0,1]	.494	.500	.496	.501	.491	.501
Family income [5K,200K]	62550.125	43884.980	62456.140	43403.940	62644.110	44415.112
Republican [0,1]	.377	.485	.378	.486	.376	.485
<i>County Level</i>						
% Latino [0.429,99.185]	13.350	13.205	12.670	11.765	14.031	14.486
% College-educated [7.841,74.133]	30.869	11.231	31.439	11.212	30.298	11.234
Median household income [27K,130K]	59244.439	15875.156	60624.734	16799.328	57864.143	14786.377
% Same residence [66.943,94.808]	84.914	3.783	84.925	3.857	84.902	3.712
N	798		399		399	

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-sided).



**Table 3.** Mixed-Effect Linear Probability Models Predicting Classification as White

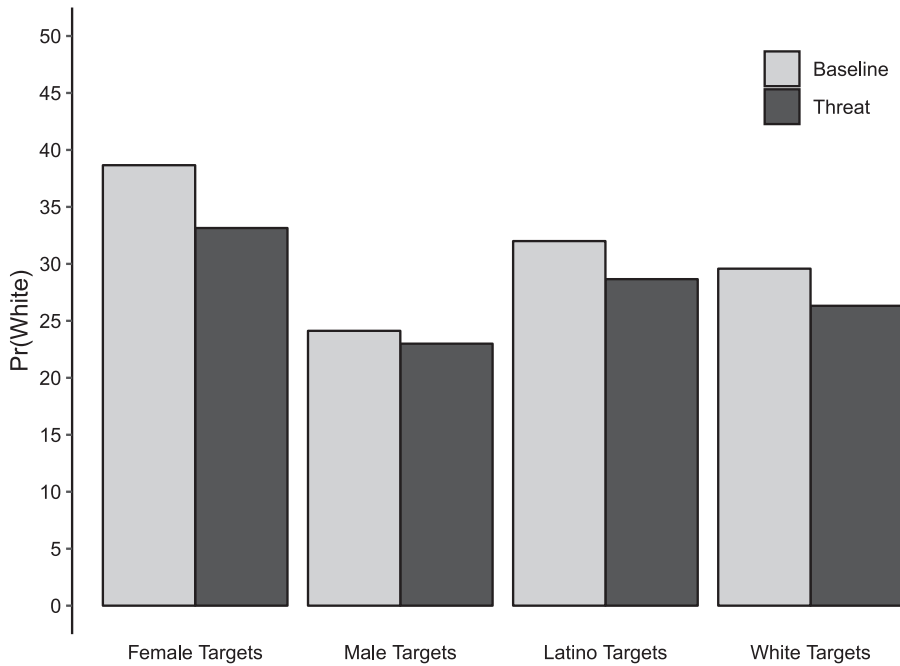
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Demographic threat	-.033* (.016)	-.033* (.016)	-.034* (.016)	-.032* (.016)
<i>Individual Level</i>				
Female			-.034* (.016)	-.036* (.016)
Age			.002 (.008)	.002 (.008)
College-educated			.022 (.017)	.030 (.017)
Family income			-.010 (.009)	-.007 (.009)
Republican			.036* (.017)	.031 (.017)
<i>County Level</i>				
% Latino				-.015 (.008)
% College-educated				-.023 (.015)
Median household income				.011 (.015)
% Same residence				.003 (.010)
Constant	.339*** (.029)	.340*** (.029)	.333*** (.032)	.330*** (.032)
Image fixed effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
$\sigma(1)$	.178	.178	.176	.174
$\sigma(2)$		.009	.000	.000
AIC	7545.024	7547.002	7546.200	7546.233
<i>N participants</i>	798	798	798	798
<i>N states</i>		48	48	48

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-sided).

they live. The estimated effect of demographic threat remains largely unchanged in terms of magnitude, direction, and significance, as we would expect, given that assignment was orthogonal to pretreatment characteristics. In fact, the simplest model (1) minimizes the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC), which suggests the additional covariates do not improve model fit sufficiently to justify their inclusion in the model.

In the fully specified model (4), gender also predicts classification. Specifically, women are 3.57 percentage points less likely to classify ambiguously White-Latino faces as White ( $p < .05$ ). In terms of county differences, respondents in more heavily Latino

counties are less likely to classify these faces as White, although the coefficient falls shy of significance ( $p = .072$ ). White people in more heavily Latino areas might be more attuned to phenotypic heterogeneity among Latinos, by virtue of their exposure to them. As Lee and Bean (2007:575) note, “many non-Latinos have a very narrow vision of what a Latino *should* look like” (see also Lee and Bean 2010). The association with Latino share also hints at the ecological validity of the experimental findings: White respondents who are prompted to think about diversification and those who live in more diverse areas are less likely to classify people who are ambiguously White as White.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 2.** Predicted Probabilities of White Classification across Targets: Model 1

How large is the effect of demographic threat? We might compare it to effects from prior studies, but by and large, these studies capture classification on a spectrum. For example, Ho and colleagues' (2013:942) study of threat asked respondents to report whether Black–White biracial individuals would look like, behave like, or “fit in better with” Black or White people, using seven-point scales. The present study operationalizes classification, instead, as a discrete choice (e.g., “If you had to guess, what would you say is this person’s most likely racial/ethnic background? Most likely White, Most likely Black . . .”). This approach more closely tracks folk notions of racial categories as bounded and exclusive. In capturing less variance across respondents, my approach also sets up a more stringent test of the hypotheses. It does, however, preclude direct comparisons with prior effect sizes. Instead, I compare the effect of demographic threat with the statistical effect of another predictor, specifically, gender. The effect of being in the demographic threat condition is roughly comparable to the statistical effect on classification of being a woman as opposed to a man.

Is the classification of some targets—for example, female versus male, Latino- versus White-identified—more sensitive to demographic threat? I re-estimate Model 1 (from Table 3) twice, once including an interaction term with female target, once with a White-identified target.<sup>22</sup> Figure 2 reports the predicted probabilities of White classification across the four subsets of targets.

In terms of gender, classification of female targets is significantly more sensitive to demographic threat than is classification of male ones ( $p < .01$ ). The probability of classifying an ambiguously White–Latino male target as White is 1.13 percentage points lower in the demographic threat condition than in the control condition. By contrast, the probability of classifying an ambiguously White–Latino female target as White is 5.51 percentage points lower in the demographic threat condition than in the control condition. This difference might be indicative of a “protectionist impulse” aimed at policing the purity of White *women*. However, it is inconsistent with the results of the earlier data collection,<sup>23</sup> and it appears to contradict, at face

**Table 4.** Coefficients of Interaction with Demographic Threat: From Mixed-Effect Linear Probability Models Predicting Classification as White

Interaction	B	SD	AIC
<i>Individual Level</i>			
x Female	.008	.032	7548.170
x Age	-.025	.016	7545.839
x College-educated	-.018	.032	7547.938
x Family income	-.004	.016	7548.174
x Republican	-.061	.033	7544.901
<i>County Level</i>			
x % Latino	-.017	.017	7547.168
x % College-educated	-.008	.016	7548.010
x Median household income	-.011	.016	7547.769
x % Same residence	.019	.016	7546.819

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-sided).

value, prior experimental work, which finds male faces are more sensitive to racialization (Garcia and Abascal 2016). The point merits additional investigation. Is the difference meaningful or is it an artifact of idiosyncrasies across the faces used in this study? Is it due to floor effects on the classification of male faces, which were less likely than female faces to be classified as White, regardless of experimental condition? The interaction of demographic threat and target racial identification, by contrast, does not reach statistical significance ( $p = .973$ ). In other words, the effect of demographic threat is comparable for White- and Latino-identified targets.

*Heterogeneous treatment effects and generalization.* Is the effect of demographic threat moderated by respondents' characteristics or characteristics of the counties where they live? I re-estimate Model 4 (from Table 3) nine times, each time including an interaction term with one of the nine covariates (five individual, four county-level). Table 4 reports the results. One covariate seems to moderate the effect of demographic threat: identification with the Republican Party. The interaction coefficient between threat and Republican identification, however, falls shy of statistical significance ( $p = .068$ ). Nevertheless, the model that includes this interaction exhibits a smaller AIC value than the reference model

that excludes it (Model 4, Table 3), which suggests that including the interaction improves model fit, compensating for the corresponding loss of parsimony.

Specifically, classification choices are more sensitive among respondents who identify as Republicans, which suggests diversification may be more threatening to these respondents, an issue I discuss in the next section. More broadly, the finding echoes research linking status threats to political conservatism (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015; Craig and Richeson 2014b; Willer et al. 2016) and support for Trump (Knowles and Tropp 2018; Major et al. 2018; Mutz 2018).

The interaction also implicates the estimates reported in Table 3, which are unbiased estimates of the causal effect of demographic threat *in the study sample* (Deaton and Cartwright 2018). If the traits that moderate the effect of demographic threat are also traits on which the experimental sample differs from the population of interest, then estimates from this sample will diverge from those in the population. To this end, I reweighted the experimental sample to resemble a nationally representative sample of White people from the 2018 Cooperative Congressional Election (CCES).<sup>24</sup> Then, I re-estimated Models 1 to 4 (from Table 3) using these weights. In every case, the estimated effect of demographic threat is larger in the reweighted sample. In

short, the estimated effect from the survey experiment is likely conservative.

## STATISTICAL INFERENCE AND REPLICATION WITH NON-WHITES

I interpret classification choices as evidence of “boundary work”: White people whose sense of group status is threatened contract the boundary around Whiteness by expelling people of dubious origin from their ranks. The findings are also consistent with a more mundane interpretation, however. White respondents might simply be making statistical inferences about the likelihood that an ambiguous person belongs to one racial/ethnic group or another, based on the perceived composition of the U.S. population at large. Put differently, White people who receive information about demographic change might think an ambiguously White–Latino person is more likely to be Latino as opposed to White, because they think any random U.S. resident is relatively more likely to be Latino and relatively less likely to be White (and reasonably so).

Are White respondents in the demographic threat condition less likely to classify ambiguously White–Latino faces as White because they are making reasonable inferences about the composition of the U.S. population? If so, White people of varying political shades should be equally responsive to information about demographic changes. This is not what we observe. We already saw that respondents who identify as Republican are less likely than those who do not to classify ambiguous faces as White under demographic threat ( $p = .068$ ).<sup>25</sup> So are respondents who voted for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election ( $p < .05$ , Model 4.T, Table S4 in the online supplement). These results are consistent with a threat interpretation. Heightened sensitivity to group status threat has been repeatedly linked to support for conservative political positions, parties, and candidates, including Trump (e.g., Mutz 2018). “White replacement theory” is a case in point. This

conspiracy theory, which posits White people are being deliberately replaced by non-White people,<sup>26</sup> has been given voice by conservative media personalities, like Tucker Carlson, and by Donald Trump (Bowles 2019; Eligon 2019).

I carried out additional analyses to investigate whether the observed effects are in fact due to participants’ inferences about the composition of the U.S. population. For example, I examined White respondents’ classification of the two ambiguously Black–Latino faces in the experiment. The rationale is that statistical inference might also lead White respondents to classify ambiguously Black–Latino faces as Latino, because the demographic threat graph depicts the share of Latinos growing but the share of Blacks remaining stable. In fact, White respondents in the demographic threat condition are slightly *more*, not less, likely to classify these faces as Black ( $p = .088$ ), challenging the inference explanation.

Additional analyses assessed (1) mediation by perceived U.S. racial composition, and (2) moderation by racial identification strength. The analyses are described in detail in the online supplement. Across the board, the results refute the notion that the observed effects are driven exclusively, or even primarily, by inferences about the composition of the U.S. population. In a final test of the inference explanation, I replicated the experiment with a sample of non-White respondents. I describe those results next.

*Replication with non-White respondents.* A replication of the original experiment with approximately 200 non-White respondents serves as an additional test of the threat interpretation. Just as the tendency to draw statistical inferences should not vary by political orientation, it should not vary by racial/ethnic identification. Only White respondents, though, should interpret White population decline as a threat to their group’s status. If threat is the primary mechanism through which information about demographic change drives classification choices, non-White respondents should be impervious to this effect. This is in fact the case. Among non-White respondents,

experimental condition is not significantly associated with the propensity to classify ambiguously White–Latino faces as White ( $p = .524$ ; Table S5 in the online supplement). Nor is there evidence that the null result is due to a lack of statistical power and that with a comparable sample of 800 non-White respondents, the demographic change condition would be significantly, negatively associated with White classification (discussion in the online supplement). The null result among non-White respondents confirms that White demographic decline operates on classification through a process that is limited to White people, like perceived group status threat.

## DISCUSSION

Faced with the threat of numeric decline, White people in the United States are less—not more—likely to classify people who are ambiguously White as White. This pattern is especially pronounced among White people who identify as Republican and those who voted for Trump. By contrast, non-White people who are exposed to the same information are neither more nor less likely to classify people who are ambiguously White as White. Indeed, as members of subordinate groups, non-White people should be less invested in the prevailing system of group positions and less reactive to changes therein.

Taken together, the findings suggest White people's classification choices reflect a boundary-making strategy, not merely statistical inferences. Specifically, when White people perceive a threat to their group's status, they contract the boundary around Whiteness to expel claimants of ambiguous origin. This is not the only conceivable option: White people might have expanded this boundary in an effort to recruit new coethnics and allies. However, the findings are consistent with several theoretical perspectives, according to which groups under threat tend to slough off marginal elements to homogenize group membership and enhance its value.

The findings enrich our account of how members of dominant groups react when their

group's status is threatened. Prior work, which deals primarily with White people in the United States in the context of changing demographics, has identified two types of reactions: some White people respond by identifying more strongly as White or by hoarding symbolic and material resources from outgroups. The present study documents a complementary strategy: dominant group members can respond to threat by altering the boundary around them. Under threat, White people do not simply identify more strongly as White or withhold resources from non-Whites; rather, they reformulate the criteria for being White and, in so doing, alter the meaning of the category in which they themselves claim membership.

More broadly, the findings underscore the fact that racial esteem in the United States continues to be firmly grounded on claims to purity.<sup>27</sup> White dominance has never rested solely (maybe even principally) on numeric advantage. Even in parts of the antebellum South where enslaved Blacks outnumbered Whites, White people easily justified and reproduced their dominance, in part by appealing to their supposed purity. Their claims, famously codified in the one-drop rule (Davis 1991), still echo in Americans' folk theories of race (Krosch et al. 2013; Morning 2010; Roth and Ivermark 2018).

Finally, the present study contributes to the growing literature on racial classification, which focuses on ambiguity across the White and Black categories and, to a lesser extent, across the White and Asian categories. This study is the first to examine ambiguity around the Latino category. Prior studies ignore this case because they conflate uncertainty about the classification of others with explicit identification with multiple racial/ethnic groups. Analysis of a racially diverse face database, however, suggests (1) self-identified Latinos are the primary subjects of racial ambiguity in the United States, (2) racially ambiguous Latinos significantly outnumber self-identified multiracials, and (3) ambiguity across the White and Latino boundaries is the modal form of ambiguity.



*Latinos in the U.S. racial hierarchy.* What can the findings of this study tell us about Latinos and their place in the U.S. racial hierarchy? Most immediately, the findings speak to patterns of White–Latino intermarriage and residential integration. Studies consistently find that White people are more likely to marry and live near Latinos than Blacks (Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino 2015; Qian and Lichter 2007; Tienda and Fuentes 2014); these facts are taken to mean that “racial boundaries are more prominent, and the black/white divide more salient than the Asian/white or Latino/white divides” (Lee and Bean 2004:229). However, social scientists have also observed that both intermarriage and integration are lower in areas where immigration is higher (Lichter et al. 2007; Lichter et al. 2009). Explanations for this association typically stress structural features of communities rather than individual preferences. Namely, in high-immigration communities, Latinos have more opportunities to interact with other Latinos. However, the present findings suggest preferences may also play a role: White people in high-immigration areas might be less likely to count Latinos as candidates for inclusion in White social spaces. In short, where Latinos are more concentrated, the White/Latino boundary is brighter and the benchmark for being considered “honorary Whites”<sup>28</sup> higher.

More fundamentally, the findings imply that White people will increasingly fortify the boundary separating Whites from non-Whites as the Latino and Asian populations continue to grow and the U.S. population diversifies (e.g., Abascal 2015). This is not to deny that other boundaries—like Black/non-Black (Gans 1999; Lee and Bean 2004) or American/foreign—will assume situational importance. Nor does it suggest the White category will never admit people who are currently denied entry, especially if their inclusion comes to serve White people’s emerging social or material interests. Relatedly, the United States may eventually converge on a triracial pigmentocracy where Asians and some Latinos occupy an intermediate position (Bonilla-Silva 2004).

In short, the future of the White category remains uncertain and contingent. In part, this is because White people will not be alone in defining the ultimate vision of social division; hegemony requires some degree of consent. One thing is clear: as long as White people believe their group’s status is under threat, they will raise the bar to inclusion to all but the most White-presenting newcomers.

To get a fuller picture of what this means for the racial hierarchy, we need to know more about what happens to claimants who are nominally classified as White, even in situations of threat. Hughey (2010:1290) contends that the White category produces and maintains cohesion in two ways: “(1) through positioning those marked as ‘white’ as essentially different from and superior to those marked as ‘non-white,’ and (2) through marginalizing practices of ‘being white’ that fail to exemplify dominant ideals” (see also Hughey 2012). This study documents when liminal others are less likely to be admitted into the White category; it did not examine whether those who are admitted derive inferior benefits from their positions. This seems likely, given that their membership is more tenuous by virtue of being less agreed-upon. Still, this line of inquiry opens up an interesting avenue for research.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

This study examined reactions to demographic threat. Other sources of threat, including political and economic, may also affect classification (see, e.g., Gaither et al. 2016; Ho et al. 2013), and future work could study them. However, the focus on demographic threat speaks to an important debate about population projections and the classification choices on which they rest.

When the U.S. Census Bureau predicted in 2008 that White people would be a numerical minority by 2042, the media quickly met the forecast with attention, the public with alarm. Soon after, social scientists began to publish experimental studies documenting the consequences of this information for White people’s

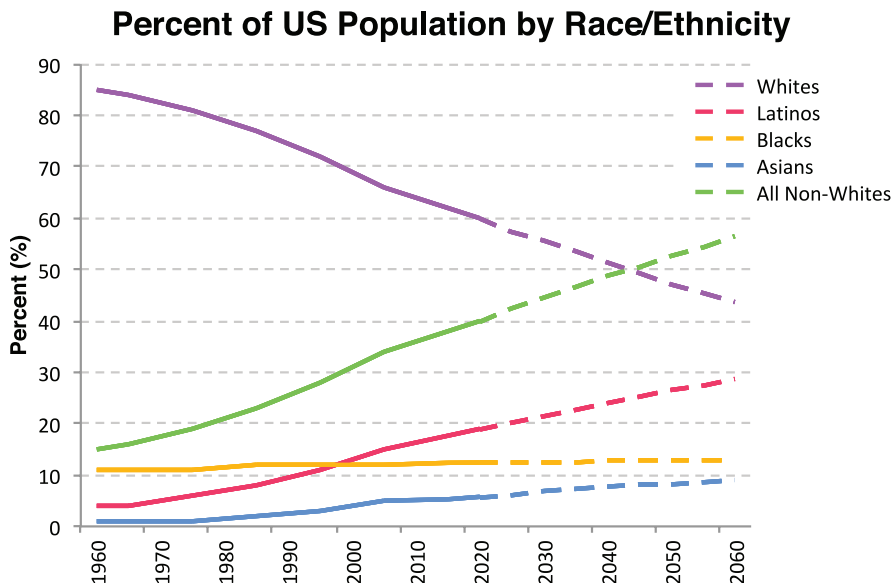
racial identification, outgroup attitudes, policy preferences, and other outcomes. Recently, some social scientists, most notably Richard Alba (2018), have drawn academic and public attention to the classification choices that underpin the Census Bureau's projections (see also Tavernise 2018). The most famous projections depend on defining "Whites" as people who identify as *non-Hispanic White alone*. Alternative definitions of "Whites" yield a less dramatic picture, with White people remaining a majority well into the foreseeable future (Alba 2018). Experimental frames that stress an enduring White majority largely mitigate threat among White people (Myers and Levy 2018a, 2018b).

These insights raise an important question: To what extent do alternative definitions of Whiteness resonate with White people themselves?<sup>29</sup> The results of this study suggest self-identified White people faced with demographic changes are less, not more, likely to accept the relatively inclusive definition of "Whites" that underpins more tempered

projections. Demographic threat, it seems, is a vicious cycle: White people threatened by the prospect of numeric decline are more likely to define Whiteness in a way that amounts to a smaller, more rapidly shrinking share of coethnics. This may help explain why alternative projections based on more inclusive definitions of Whiteness have garnered considerably less attention than the initial, ominous projections they mean to qualify.

The results of this study fill out our picture of White people's exclusionary reactions to demographic decline. In so doing, they validate Alba and Myers's concerns about the Census Bureau's projections and the widespread paranoia they have fueled. At the same time, however, the results make clear that the Census Bureau's definition of Whites as non-Latino, monoracial Whites is hardly arbitrary. It rests on a deep-seated understanding of Whiteness as a category of purity, an understanding that only gains renewed force in the wake of demographic change.

## APPENDIX



**Figure A1.** Demographic Threat Graph

Note: Adapted from Wetts and Willer (2018). Figures A1 and A2 appear in color in the online version of this article.

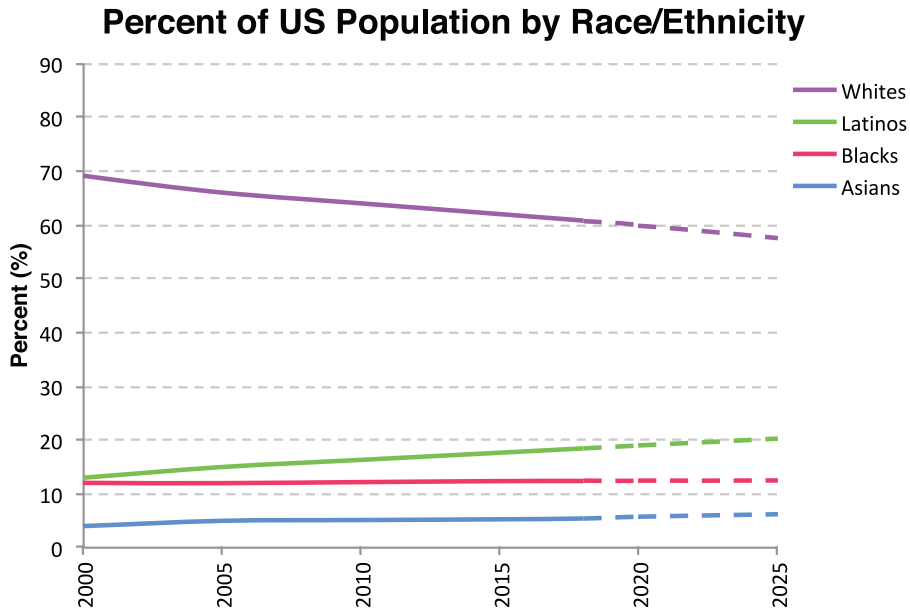


Figure A2. Control Graph

## Acknowledgments

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## Notes

1. In fact, inaccurate perceptions of racial demographics themselves predict threat and racial attitudes (Alba, Nee, and Nee 2005; Gallagher 2003). On a possible link between inaccurate perceptions of racial inequality and threat, see the discussion in Kraus, Rucker, and Richeson (2017).
2. Most of the experimental studies described here rely on treatments that were modeled closely after graphs and reports published by news outlets about the Census Bureau's projections.
3. On media representations of Census statistics, see the discussion in Diaz McConnell (2011).
4. See also Green and McElwee (2018) and Mutz (2018), as well as Morgan's (2018) critique of, among other things, Mutz's operational measure of status threat.

5. Boundary-making scholars also theorize other possible strategies, including shifting allegiance to a higher-order category (e.g., "American") or to a different set of categories altogether (e.g., gender) (Wimmer 2013). Because these other strategies do not directly implicate the location of boundaries within the field of racial/ethnic categories, I do not consider them here.
6. Like group position theory, power devaluation theory predicts that members of dominant groups will be especially sensitive to perceived threats: "Individuals and group members are more quickly disposed toward action when they are losing rights and privileges that they have previously enjoyed" (McVeigh 2009:44).
7. Medical examiners are also more likely to classify the deceased as American Indian if the person suffered from cirrhosis, a liver disease associated with alcoholism.
8. Respondents also follow different rules when classifying those who identify (or are identified) as biracial. Prior studies often treat ambiguity and multiraciality synonymously, an issue to which I return.
9. For research on economic context and racial classification, refer to Rodeheffer, Hill, and Lord (2013) and Krosch and Amodio (2014).
10. The procedure, described in greater detail under "Data and Methods," is adapted from Garcia and Abascal (2016).
11. This and subsequent figures are limited to faces that were classified with either category by at least 10 percent of observers, because technically, it is

- possible for faces that were infrequently classified with either of two categories to yield a small  $z$  statistic.
12. Regardless, external classification as Latino is linked to phenotype, and especially skin color (Feliciano 2016).
  13. The experiment was replicated (a) to gain additional insight into the mechanisms underlying observed effects, and (b) to implement new measures for collecting unique, high-quality responses. Additional information on the earlier data collection is available in the original pre-analysis plan.
  14. EGAP ID: 20180903AA.
  15. Republicans are known to be underrepresented in the MTurk subject pool (Huff and Tingley 2015). Despite the quotas, Republican respondents were underrepresented in the study sample relative to a nationally representative sample of White people, an issue I address in the online supplement.
  16. The individual-level data necessary to reproduce the main analyses will be made available through the Dataverse Network (<http://www.thedata.org>) by December 2021.
  17. Results available on request.
  18. The difference is also significant ( $p < .001$ ) if instead of comparing respondents who selected Whites alone, I compare respondents who selected Whites, either alone or in combination with other groups.
  19. Garcia and Abascal (2016) use a similar method to identify ambiguous faces.
  20. In fact, none of the faces were classified as either "White" or "Latino" by less than 20.83 percent of observers.
  21. The findings are also consistent with a long-standing line of empirical work that links White people's racial attitudes to minority-group size in local contexts (e.g., Fossett and Kiecolt 1989; Glaser 1994; Taylor 1998).
  22. I also removed the fixed-effects parameter for images. Results are available on request.
  23. Results available on request.
  24. The online supplement includes additional details on the comparison between the study sample and CCES sample as well as the reweighting approach.
  25. This is confirmed in a simple regression model that excludes other covariates (Model 4.R, Table S4, online supplement).
  26. This conspiracy theory was also linked to shootings in New Zealand and the United States (Bowles 2019; Eligon 2019).
  27. Contraction might take a different form in contexts where esteem is less firmly grounded in presumed purity or where a more diffuse sense of "groupness" precludes threat-based interpretations of social change (see, e.g., Chen et al. 2017).
  28. To borrow Bonilla-Silva's (2004) term.
  29. And, more specifically, with people who self-identify as non-Latino White alone.

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