Anti-Black Political Violence and the Historical Legacy of the Great Replacement Conspiracy

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Racial violence is central to the American polity. We argue that support for violence, specifically anti-Black violence, has a long historical arc in American politics dating back to chattel slavery. In this paper, we argue that the racial violence associated with the "great replacement" conspiracy is much more pervasive among the white American public because of the historical legacy of anti-Black violent sentiment. To investigate the prevalence of this idea, we conducted a preregistered simple priming experiment aimed to tap into

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top-of-mind ideas about racial demographic change. Our experimental design spans multiple data sources, including two probability samples, over the course of a year. We ultimately find that simply priming attitudes about racial demographic change through a single open-ended question consistently leads to increased support for political violence, increasing racial resentment, and expressed anti-Black views. Our approach allows us to test this question through variant methodological means, all of which confirm strong associations Americans have between racial demographic change, anti-Blackness, and violence. Our findings demonstrate that Black threat is an important driver of democratic backsliding in the realm of political violence that requires further attention.

When white Americans think about the diversification of the United States, they strongly consider Black Americans' political power. Across a series of priming experiments, when we present white Americans with a general question about what comes to mind when they think about racial demographic change in the United States, we find that many articulate their ideas in the same vein as this assertion from a respondent:

> The balance is being tipped toward Blacks. The violence of Blacks in this society accomplishes little. All it does is ruin people's lives. (Lucid, Study 2)

Many Americans view Black Americans making economic and political gains in light of racial demographic change, when in reality they are not. One clear example of this comes in "The Economic State of Black America in 2020." The report reads: "During the majority of the past 50 years, Black Americans have experienced unemployment rates that, were they experienced by the entire population, would be seen as recessionary" (Beyer 2020).

Recent public discussion has considered perceptions of threat from racial demographic change in the context of the "great replacement" conspiracy theory (Cosentino 2020; Pape 2022; Chamie 2022; Obaidi et al. 2022; Miller-Idriss 2022; Hernandez Aguilar 2023). The conspiracy asserts that elites, particularly Democratic elites and anti-semitic tropes of Jewish Americans, are intentionally accelerating racial demographic change to decrease the influence of white Americans and to increase the influence of Americans of color. This, in turn, is thought to benefit the Democratic party electorally. In this project we provide historical grounding for the idea of "great replacement" in American racial politics. We posit that it historically connects to cultural narratives of anti-Blackness that drive violent sentiments in the public. We empirically test the strength of the idea through a series of priming experiments. Through an open-ended prime on demographic change, we show that white Americans express strong anti-Black sentiment in their responses, tapping into the anti-Black sense of racial threat that has been a political norm in the white public for centuries in the United States. This historical pertinence bolsters the conspiracy's current efficacy among white Americans because it rests on long-standing racial ideas.

In this paper, we show that the sentiment of the "great replacement" conspiracy has long existed in American society, and that it specifically embodies perceptions of the encroachment of Black Americans on white Americans' status. We call this the *Black replacement misperception.* This anti-Black sentiment has functioned for centuries and has fed directly into historical public support for political violence.

The Black replacement misperception has been especially pertinent in moments where the American public perceived that Black Americans were making gains in their political agency. Two pivotal moments that we highlight are the responses to Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement (Marable 2007). White Americans grew more violent and supportive of violence in direct reaction to these events. In short, there has been persistent anti-Black political violence in retaliation to the Black replacement misperception throughout America's history. This idea connects to previous work on misperceptions of group size (Gallagher 2003; Herda 2010; Peyton, Weiss, and Vaughn 2022) and others on political parties (Ahler and Sood 2018), but also concerns inferences about the political power of Black Americans. Extending this idea into contemporary political discourse, we expect that white Americans are strongly motivated to think of the diversifying racial demographics in the country as attributable to further gain in political agency of Black Americans—despite there being no socioeconomic or substantive projections on the increasing population of Black Americans.

To test for the Black replacement misperception, we use a simple light-touch and pre-registered survey experiment with a single priming question about the diversification of the United States to test the presumptions Americans make about *which* racial groups they think are increasing in size. We then measure respondents' support for political violence after answering the priming question. We show that, on the whole, when white Americans think of racial demographic change, they infer that Black Americans are greatly increasing in population size and influence. This inference increases violent sentiment among White Americans. Moreover, to clarify the Black replacement misperception as a mechanism, we show that this same simple prime leads to consistent and substantive increases in anti-Black sentiment, including racial resentment, and that white Americans' responses to the priming question disproportionately mention Black Americans.

We confirm across these studies that ideas about racial demographic change are strongly determined by unfounded fears that Black Americans are increasing in size. We assert that these ideas are closely related to long-standing anti-Black views that have led to increasing

historical racial violence over multiple eras of American democracy.

When ideas of the diversification of the United States are prompted, Americans express distinctly anti-Black views even though Black Americans are not described in the prime regarding changing demographics of the country. Nor are Black Americans empirically the racial group who are central to the story of U.S. diversification.

Our ultimate conclusion is that the "great replacement" is a storied and common threat response that is foundationally about Black Americans. Throughout American history, white Americans have feared Black American encroachment on white supremacy. We find that this persists in contemporary attitudes. The relationship between racial demographic change and violent attitudes in the American public is foundationally directed by anti-Black sentiments, despite Black Americans not making sizable gains in numbers nor socioeconomic status in the United States. It spills over into increasingly violent views on a general level among the white American public. White Americans view these demographic changes as zero sum, leading to their perceived status diminishing (Norton and Sommers 2011). Walters writes that "Black advancement in society is defined as a threat to White national interests in the competitive context of the 'zero-sum' concept. If Blacks are empowered, then White interests suffer" (Walters 2003, 3).

Many Americans mistakenly believe that the racial demographic change underway in the United States is an event directly involving Black Americans, seemingly being interpreted as a moment of Black empowerment. This misperception strongly motivates increasing support for political violence across white Americans; we show that these sentiments are *not* limited to white supremacist extremists, making this a major normative problem for multiracial American democracy which we discuss in our conclusion.

The Historical Relationship between Anti-Black Sentiments and Political Violence

There is a strong sense of threat felt mostly by white Americans about Black Americans' status that begins as an outgrowth of the historic racial system in the United States. Black slaves, along with Native Americans, were pushed to the bottom of the racial hierarchy in the United States through a series of institutional means. In one pertinent example, chattel slavery worked to set forth the racial hierarchy system in the United States that persisted in a series of informal ways immediately following the eradication of the institution of slavery (Cunliffe 2008; Echols 2022). U.S. democracy has long been described as "The White Man's Republic," which Jardina and Mickey describe as being threatened by Black encroachment on white power: "Rather than rehearsing claims about Blacks' racial inferiority, adherents to this vision instead argued that Black political equality betrayed America's purpose at the expense of White group interests" (Jardina and Mickey 2022, 82).

The significant white American publics' anti-Black sentiment manifested in forms of violence as a direct reaction to Reconstruction in the South. To this point W.E.B. Du Bois writes that "the South was impelled to brute force and deliberate deception in dealing with [Black Americans] because it had been astonished and disappointed not by Black's failure, but by his success and promise of greater success" (2017, 584).

In light of the Reconstruction Amendments to the Constitution—the Thirteenth through the Fifteenth Amendments—that followed the Civil War, white Americans generally expressed a strong sense of racial threat from Black Americans, the fear of Black Americans encroaching on whites' status, a concept that has been evidenced in the centuries that followed (Blumer 1958; Blalock 1967; Key and Heard 1984). Racial threat was tied to Black Americans' political enfranchisement through the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, as well as by the shifting size of Black Americans as a group (Taylor 1998; Behrens, Uggen, and Manza 2003). Scholars have previously shown that threat from Black Americans, based on group size, functions uniquely in prompting prejudiced responses. Compared with Asian and Latino American populations, Taylor (1998) shows that Black increases in population size in local demographics lead to increased anti-Black threat.

In reaction to this threat, white Americans historically have been willing to engage in violence and support it because they view Black Americans as existentially threatening to their way of life, due to the way that Blackness has been historically counterposed to whiteness. The existential concern echoes the view of American democracy operating in a racialized manner in the minds of white Americans. To this concern, Du Bois writes that "it had been insistently and firmly believed by the best thought of the South: that if political power were given to Negroes it would result virtually in the overthrow of civilization" (2017, 524). Benjamin Tillman, former Governor of South Carolina, described these anti-Black actions in depth, admitting that "we have scratched our heads to find out how we could eliminate the last one of them. We stuffed ballot boxes. We shot them. We are not ashamed of it" (Mackintosh 2017, 2).

Of course, violent reactions to perceptions of Black encroachment on white supremacy did not end with the Black Nadir. They persisted on a mass public level (Schickler 2016); materializing in the forms of lynching and other violent actions, then again in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, which is often colloquially referred to as the *Second Reconstruction* (Marable 2007; Gaines 2018). Anit-Black violence was accentuated and deepened when Black Americans pushed back against segregation.

Segregationist violence was a response to black protest, a realization that the traditional tactics of Southern whites could no longer keep blacks 'in their place.' Segregationists murdered individuals active in protest, in response to school integration efforts, and in reaction to numerous protest campaigns. (Santoro 2008, 1394)

Anti-Black violence occurred throughout the Civil Rights Movement, and importantly, in a punctuated moment following a victory of the movement after the Voting Rights and Civil Rights Acts were passed. Actors and institutions ranging from the KKK to the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover sought to undermine the Black freedom movement. Among the highest profile among these anti-Black violent reactions were the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and of Fred Hampton (Chappell 2014; Nimtz 2016). The manifestations of violence again came after the perceived gain of rights for Black Americans. These perceptions were simple: Black Americans were encroaching on white power and it needed to be curbed at any cost. In light of the Civil Rights Era victories, Black leaders were killed as a means to tamp down the perceived threat of Black Americans. The modern white power movement began shortly after in the early 1970s, which subscribed to great replacement conspiracy theories that motivated acts of domestic terrorism:

White power activists claimed that the Zionist Occupational Government (ZOG) wanted to abort white babies, admit immigrants, allow people of color to have unlimited children on the government's welfare dime, allow black men to rape white women, and encourage interracial marriages—all of this, they said, to destroy the white race. (Belew 2019, 159)

A new era of mass incarceration followed, which ushered in other state-sanctioned violence through the police, somewhat mirroring the function of the system of Jim Crow in how Black Americans are relegated to second-class citizenry and are barred from a host of institutions (Alexander 2012; Weaver and Lerman 2010; Weaver and Prowse 2020).

The Long Arc of Anti-Black Motivated Violence

The connection between anti-Black sentiment and racial violence has long been institutionalized in American politics, and especially among the white American public. Recent examples of this abound in law enforcement, mass incarceration, higher education, and social media (Entman and Rojecki 2000; Wright 2021; Curtis et al. 2021; Casellas Connors and McCoy 2022). The core ideology that motivates these views—white supremacy or nationalism—is a set of beliefs that are wide ranging. They are not limited to the extreme wings of the American public because of the way that these ideas spread (Walters 2003). Walters writes that white nationalism is "a brand of radical Conservatism that is nativistic and espouses community violence as well as the making of authoritative choices with

respect to public policy … Radical Conservatism has expressed its nationalism in such a way as to clearly consider the question of radical advantage and the propagate actions which have had a deleterious impact upon Blacks and an empowering impact on Whites" (Walters 2003, 20). Walters and other scholars of white nationalism articulate that these ideas pervade the public, existing within white Americans who either knowingly or unknowingly hold these views. White nationalist ideology seeks to maintain white dominance through any means necessary, including force and violence.

The main contextual condition where political violence emerges is when white Americans perceive that Black Americans are encroaching on their relative status (Peterson and Riley 2022). Scholars have previously critiqued the way that racial violence has been defined by giving special and exclusive attention to the perpetrators, while failing to account for the historical legacies of violent tradition. That is, some general theory about instances of racial violence personalize the actions of perpetrators in ways that focus specifically on their intent: "Definitions [of racial violence] fail to encompass racial violence in which the perpetrators' intent is unclear, such as violence that is institutionalized" (Blee 2005).

In line with this criticism, we argue that anti-Black violent reactions are institutionalized in the American public because of the pervasiveness of white nationalism. Specifically, perceptions of racial demographic change in the United States tap into narratives of further political power of Black Americans and have increased violent sentiment across the mass public. Recent work has identified distinct anti-Black motivations in current American political attitudes (Mutz 2018; Hopkins 2021). These ideas do well to explain some actions of recent mass shooters that have directly targeted Black Americans and have had their motives described as conspiratorial thinking about the "great replacement" because they connect to the historically deep anti-Black violence pervading U.S. history that we described earlier.

Public discussions of recent anti-Black mass shootings have often given attention to the general racial diversification of the country by highlighting the "great replacement" conspiracy as an idea of racial minorities replacing white Americans. Interestingly, even the shooters in their own words have articulated that they were primarily motivated by anti-Black views. Following the 2022 mass shooting in a supermarket in Buffalo, New York, strong attention was given to the "great replacement" conspiracy. It was described as a "conspiracy theory that states that nonwhite individuals are being brought into the United States and other Western countries to 'replace' White voters to achieve a political agenda" (Jones 2022, 1).

Another example of these same ideas among white supremacist mass shooters is Dylann Roof. In his

manifesto he wrote that Black Americans were the "the biggest problem for Americans." He also went on to assert that "segregation was not a bad thing. It was a defensive measure. Segregation did not exist to hold back negroes. It existed to protect us from them" (Bernstein, Horwitz, and Holley 2015, 2).

The Buffalo mass shooter specified his anti-Black intentions in a screed he posted online:

> [Black Americans] are an obvious, visible, and large group of replacers. From a culture with higher fertility rates and strong, robust traditions that seek to occupy my peoples [sic] lands and ethnically replace my own people. It would have eased me if I knew all the blacks [sic] I would be killing were criminals or future criminals, but then I realized all black people are replacers just by existing in White countries. (NPR 2022, 3; see also McCaskill and Sheets 2022)

Both of these white supremacists described the racial demographic changes underway in the United States, white Americans decreasing in population size and Americans of color increasing in size, to be a dynamic predominantly driven by Black Americans. They both asserted ideas that they had "no choice" but to kill Black Americans in order to prevent a "white genocide," which has gone mainstream in recent years (Clark 2020). These are two clear validations of the Black replacement misperception.

We expect that these sentiments are more widely held among the mass public than has been previously articulated and considered. The Black replacement misperception has a long history in American politics (Cosentino 2020; Chamie 2022; Ekman 2022). The central issue to the Black replacement misperception being held on a mass level is an increase in violent attitudes among the white American public. Increasingly violent attitudes are a normative problem for American democracy and society *not* only in how it can lead to more extremist acts of violence (Kalmoe and Mason 2022), but also in how it can lead to an increase in bystanders to racially-driven violence in the public, which we briefly describe next.

Racial Violence and Bystanders

Historically, racial violence is often considered to be about the people who perpetrated the violent actions *and* those who stood idly by while the actions happened, offering encouragement or tacit support. Bystanders can encourage more actions, bring in more legitimacy to the violence, establish further norms of violence, and outwardly rationalize the violence to others. The more bystanders who implicitly or explicitly endorse racial violence, the more likely racial violence is to occur.

When considering increased support for violence among the mass public, our normative focus is on the potential that anti-Black threat can create more bystanders, or those who give tacit support to political violence. Bystanders play a crucial role in facilitating violence due to their support or lack of engagement in contesting it. When we talk about increased support for violence, we are talking about an increase in the number of these potential bystanders. Extremists are people who engage in violent political actions. Bystanders are comfortable or ambivalent to the use of political violence (Kalmoe and Mason 2022). When we consider racial threat prompting violent attitudes, we argue that it is far more likely that potential bystanders increase, which itself is a direct form of democratic backsliding in the public.

Lynchings are clear examples of how bystanders factor into racial violence. Lynch mobs were comprised of white Americans who murdered Black American *and* white Americans who provided support and encouragement to the whites directly engaged in the murders. As events, lynchings functioned both to reinforce white power and supremacy in addition to Black subjugation. To this, Amy Louise Wood writes that:

> mobs performed lynchings as spectacles for other whites. The rituals, the tortures, and their subsequent representations imparted powerful messages to whites about their own supposed racial dominance and superiority. These spectacles produced and disseminated images of white power and black degradation, of white unity and black criminality, that served to instill and perpetuate a sense of racial supremacy in their white spectators. Lynching thus succeeded in enacting and maintaining white dominion not only because African Americans were its targets but also because white southerners were its spectators. (Wood 2011, 2)

In these violent spectacles, many white Americans attended to watch the brutal murder of Black Americans. Families planned trips around lynchings, celebrations of the murder were had before and after it occurred, and whites even took pieces of the person lynched as souvenirs. The following quote from the Massachusetts *Springfield Republican* newspaper reports on a lynching:

> Before the torch was applied to the pyre, the negro was deprived of his ears, fingers and genital parts of his body. He pleaded pitifully for his life while the mutilation was going on, but stood the ordeal of fire with surprising fortitude. Before the body was cool, it was cut to pieces, the bones were crushed into small bits, and even the tree upon which the wretch met his fate was torn up and disposed of as 'souvenirs'. (Ginzberg 1993, 24)

Those who took bodily souvenirs were not always directly participating in the killing of the Black American. Their tacit support for the event of the lynching worked to justify it as a form of legitimate political expression, under the guise of justice. This example illustrates the central role bystanders play for increasing violence.

Ultimately, we show that whites feel a strong sense of threat from Black Americans when they think of racial demographic change, which leads to increased tolerance of political violence *on the whole.* These threatened views are existential in their expression, in that they generate ideas among white Americans that concern their annihilation

through the changing demographics of the country. Due to the ultimate concern over the future existence of White Americans, this leads to an increased support of political violence, which sits in direct contrast to the function of democracy. Functioning democratic systems mitigate violence by channeling political disagreements into political contestation. In other words, citizens who have disputes with one another under democracy will seek to settle their difficulties through peaceful means (Mees 2003; Schwarzmantel 2010; Schwarzmantel and Kraetzschmar 2013; Weber 2019). Extending from this idea, we are directly testing the extent that anti-Black sentiment is driving democratic backsliding among white Americans.

We move next to describing our pre-registered expectations.

Expectations

Our central expectation is that racial diversification of the United States will be mischaracterized as another moment of an increase in Black Americans' political power. We expect that white Americans infer that the diversification of the United States will lead to increased Black power, similar to reactions to the Reconstruction and Civil Rights Movement. This connection leads to a set of hypotheses about priming ideas about the diversification of the United States. First, we expect that non-Hispanic white[1] Americans who are primed to think about the diversification of the country will express significantly more support for political violence (H1).[2] The main mechanism in increasing support for violence is the inference that racial demographic changes are leading to the growing social power of

Black Americans (H2). Ironically, these changes are not happening for Black Americans, so the main mechanism behind our expectation rests on this public misperception (Vespa, Armstrong, and Medina 2020).

Study Design

As a hard test of our expectations, we design a priming experiment which allows us to capture the top of mind inferences about the diversification of the United States and their impact of priming on support for violence. Across three studies of diverse samples of the American public conducted between early 2022 to mid-2023. including two probability samples, we randomly assign the following open-ended question to half the sample of each study:

> You may have heard about the diversification of the United States. Tell us what immediately comes to mind when you think about racial demographic change within the U.S. (Please tell us in at least 2 sentences).

There are no additional conditions. The only difference between treatment and control is the prime. The open-ended format of the prime allows us to assess the ideas about diversification that come as top of mind. Importantly, there are no other primes on politics present within this question. This is a strength of our design in that it allows us to assess the pervasiveness of sentiments connected to Black threat and the great replacement without overdetermining them. In order to more thoroughly assess how pervasive threatening ideas about Black Americans exist among white Americans we do not utilize inflammatory terms. Although

Table 1
Sample composition

	Study 1, NORC, N = 1,001 March 2023	Study 2, Lucid Fulcrum, N = 1,724 April 2022	Study 3, YouGov, N = 2,000 March 2023	U.S. Census
Gender				
Female	51%	52%	55.5%	50.5%
Male	49%	48%	44.5%	49.5%
Party Identification				
Republican (includes leaners)	36.6%	30.1%	27.5%	—
Independent	15.4%	22.5%	27.1%	—
Democrat (includes leaners)	47.9%	42.1%	34.6%	—
Median Household Income	$60,000 - $74,999	$60,000 - $69,999	$60,000 - $69,999	$71,992
Average Age	54	45	50	40.2
Race				
White	72.3%	66%	69.1%	71%
Black	9%	12%	12.2%	14%
Asian	3.8%	5%	2.8%	6%
Region				
Northeast	16.3%	20.5%	—	17.4%
Midwest	29.5%	25.6%	—	20.8%
South	32%	33.9%	—	38%
West	22.3%	20.8%	—	23.7%

white Americans who participate in this study could have been exposed to rhetoric about the great replacement (Miller 2020), for example by former Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson, we can say with more certainty through our mild test, using no inflammatory language, that we are assessing these extant attitudes rather than prompting further ideas about threat from the diversification of the United States.

We assess the written responses to the prime to detect the detail of how respondents express their sentiments of threat. Our design is an open-ended approach to studying attitudes toward racial demographic change that follows from Craig and Richeson (2014), among a series of other works on perceptions of demographic change and threat among the public (Craig, Rucker, and Richeson 2018; Abascal 2020; Brown, Rucker, and Richeson 2022).

Following this prime, we test support for political violence (testing for H1) and anti-Black sentiment (testing for H2) using closed-ended response items. Given the two conditions within this study, we have more than enough statistical power within each of our studies to detect small effects (online appendix 1).

We use three experiments to test our hypotheses (Thompson 2024). We test the direct role of priming racial demographic change in support for political violence on a five-point Likert scale in the aggregate (testing for H1) using a probability sample and diverse convenience sample, conducted nearly a year apart. The open-ended format of the prime allows us to assess responses for the extent that they reference violence (H1) and call to Black Americans (H2). We next evaluate these responses throughout our analyses.

Increased Support for Violence from a Light-Touch Prime

Directly in response to our prime, many respondents reacted in violent anti-Black ways. One respondent asserts that they understand why others supported eugenics in the past, as a means to curb threats to the white race:

> America is 'Browning'. While that is not necessarily a bad thing, it may cause the slow extinction of the white race. While I disagree with eugenics, I understand why it was implemented in the past. (Lucid, Study 2)

This respondent echoes a similar sentiment that former U.S. Representative Steve King tweeted in 2017 about racial demographic change (Bump 2021). While the reaction the respondent provides does not call to Black Americans, a host of other respondents do. In the same study, one respondent asserts that "the balance is being tipped toward Blacks. The violence of Blacks in this society accomplishes little. All it does is ruin people's lives" (Lucid, Study 2). This statement touches on our exact expectation for H2, which is that the diversification of the country leads Americans to infer that Black Americans are gaining power.

That is what is meant in the 'balance being tipped toward Blacks.' One potential place that this could be coming from is prolonged reaction to Obama's presidency. The motivation for this perspective is that threat from Black Americans was embodied in Obama, and threatened Americans projected these concerns onto the future of the country. That is, Obama was an indicator for how other areas of society could look—namely, with Black Americans being in more direct competition with white Americans, in effect threatening to "take their jobs" and other positions. Other scholars have identified how anti-Black ideas have strongly motivated support for Donald Trump (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018; Hopkins 2021).
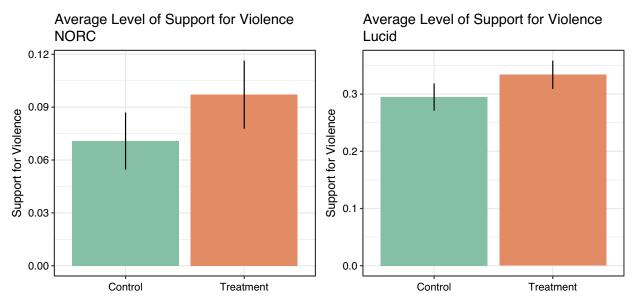
Using a closed-ended measure of support for political violence,[3] we confirm that these violent attitudes increase in aggregate and are not limited to the select respondents who assert violent views. We opt for general measures of support for political violence as a test of how far-reaching threatened reactions can become. Importantly, white supremacist reactions to the changing demographics of the United States are not limited to violent reactions against Black Americans. They can motivate violence toward other groups and institutions because the threat is seen to pervade the entire United States. Part of this connects closely to the view that the United States will *no longer* be a country for white Americans. For example, supremacists have recently advocated for a "hard reset" using violence in widespread ways, wherein they plan to engage in domestic terrorism aimed at a variety of Americans and infrastructure (National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center et al. 2022). Another crucial component to why we measure support for violence in a more general fashion stems from the role of bystanders and democratic norms. A white public that is more accepting of violence will be more likely to explain away violence used against those they perceive to be political opposition; this is antithetical to functions of democracy.

We examine here if these violent views, out of existential threat, are expressed across the white mass public. This is our most comprehensive test of shifting violent attitudes (testing for H1).

Comparisons between Treatment and Control Scores for Average Level of Support for Political Violence across the Entire Sample
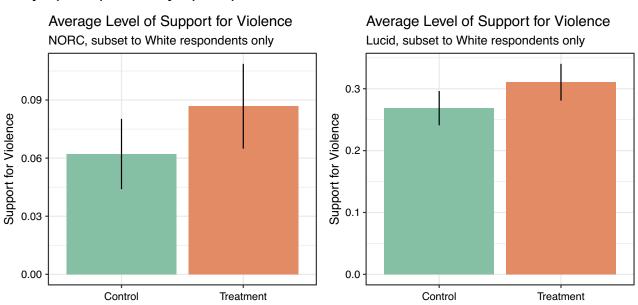
We detect similar effect sizes across these two studies, replicating the effect of anti-Black threat on violent sentiment. Using two-sided t-tests, Study 1 finds an increase in support for violence by 3 percentage points (p = 0.04), and Study 2 finds an increase in 4 points (see figures 1 and 2 below). Americans are expressly more violent after a light-

Figure 1
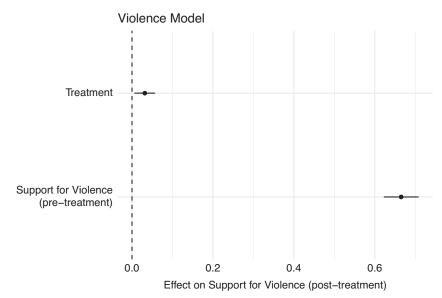**Study 1 (NORC) and Study 2 (Lucid)**

Notes: NORC study conducted February 19-21, 2023. Lucid study conducted April 20-23, 2022. This sample has a significantly higher baseline for support for violence. We interpret this to be the result of Lucid respondents having more extreme political views, which has been discussed in Westwood et al. 2022a and 2022b; Bright Line Watch n.d.). Importantly, we find similar treatment effects across samples despite different baselines of support for violence, providing further validity to the causal impact of anti-Black threat on support for violence.

Figure 2
Study 1 (NORC) and Study 2 (Lucid)

Notes: This sample has a significantly higher baseline for support for violence. We interpret this to be the result of Lucid respondents having more extreme political views, which has been discussed in previous work (Westwood et al. 2022a, 2022b; Bright Line Watch n.d.). Importantly, we find similar treatment effects across samples, despite different baselines of support for violence, providing further validity to the causal impact of anti-Black threat on support for violence.

Figure 3
Study 2—Effect of prime on pre-post test of support for violence

Violence Model

touch prime about racial demographic change. These two studies were conducted nearly a year apart, showing robustness in the efficacy of the prime and also assuaging concerns of context changes altering Americans' senses of threat. Although anti-Blackness pervades American political culture, we subset on non-Hispanic white Americans in our next tests because of how frequently it is expressed among white Americans.[4] Ultimately through these tests we find that this same racial threat has a direct effect upon support for political violence.

As a further test for the strength of the prime on support for political violence, we use a pre-post experimental design in Study 2 (figure 3 above). This tests support for political violence before and after the treatment. We use this design technique to further validate the precision of our test of the causal effect of the prime (Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston 2021). Again, we confirm that the racial demographic change prime increases violent sentiment in a robust way.

This set of results closely connects the open-ended responses to the prime. Connecting this to the first respondents' assertion, violent attitudes are also drawn out for some, driving eugenic support in the most extreme cases. Another respondent within this same sample intimates supporting violence on a mass level: "I do not agree with the diversification. US is going to hell. If people don't get together and fight for what is right we will go to war" (Lucid). The 'we' in this statement is racialized, likely in reference to white Americans. In another study, over a year later, another respondent articulates a similar anti-Black

sentiment, providing a large amount of context to their sense of threat.

> The ongoing decline of the United States across the board is directly proportional to the rise in racial demographic change. Black racism and extremism has been mainstreamed as something to be celebrated and is regarded generally as something noble and good. Scott Adams IS right. (YouGov)

Scott Adams is the creator of the widely known *Dilbert* comic strip and hosts a YouTube channel, *Real Coffee with Scott Adams*, where he mainly posts political commentary that has amassed 50 million views and 150,000 subscribers. The reference to Scott Adams is about a recent controversial, anti-Black statement that he said in a YouTube video. Coverage of this incident describes the statement, "Scott Adams called Black Americans a 'hate group' and suggested white Americans 'get the hell away from Black people' in response to a conservative organization's poll purporting to show that many African Americans do not think it's OK to be white" (Bernstein 2023). His comments embody Black racial threat and found resonance among his audience and sections of the public as shown in the survey response. The overarching expression within responses to our prime is the idea of racial demographic change leading to a shift in the United States wherein white Americans have less influence *and* a shift where Black Americans are slated to benefit, functioning again in a zero-sum dynamic (Norton and Sommers 2011). Given the connection to cultural elites shown in the response

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above, on a mass level, these views are also likely emboldened by Donald Trump and other political elites using similar rhetoric, as other scholars have shown (Newman et al. 2021).

Anti-Black Sentiment in the Aggregate

The open-ended responses that we document express anti-Black views across a larger subset of respondents in our sample. However, one might assert that these responses could be cherry-picked or not comprehensive expressions of activated anti-Black attitudes, thereby not showing the extent of anti-Black sentiment in light of the prime.

To provide more evidence for how systematic racial demographic change taps into anti-Black ideas, we turn to a very commonly used measure of anti-Black attitudes —the racial resentment scale (Kinder and Sanders 1996). This measure captures perceptions of discrimination and resentment toward Black Americans in this scale that have been frequently used and validated among political scientists (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Neuner, and Vandenbroek 2018; Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingwood 2020; Thompson and Busby 2021). Importantly, we choose to use this measure because of the relevance of the question wording. The framing of the racial resentment scale connects closely with our expectations about historical anti-Black sentiment, because many of the measures explicitly capture historically pertinent ideas

of how Black Americans have been discriminated against since slavery. For this reason, we use the measure on Black social mobility affected by discrimination in Study 2.
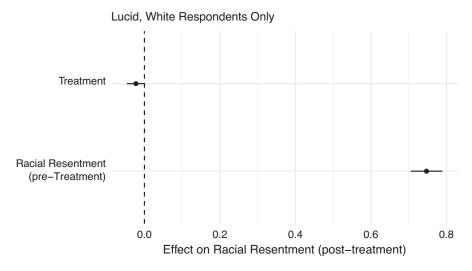
In Study 2, due to limitations of space, we test for one item of the racial resentment scale that most closely aligns with our theory of the Black replacement misperception. This measure concerns how the social mobility of Black Americans has been affected by slavery and discrimination. Specifically, the wording is, "Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class." We use a pre-post design that captures support for the idea before and after the prime for significantly increased accuracy of the causal effect of the treatment (Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston 2021). We find the same prime in Study 2 that generates more support for political violence, also decreases support for the idea that Black Americans have been hindered by slavery and discrimination[5] over years ($p = 0.06$), shown in figure 4. This is consistent with H2.

We expand this same test in our third and final study, which uses a representative probability sample of the American public (N = 2,000). We do this to expand our investigation onto the entire racial resentment scale and to allow us to make inferences across white Americans. The anti-Black elicitation from the demographic prime carries over the white public in Study 3.

Figure 4
Study 2—Effect of prime on pre-post test of racial resentment

Note: Racial Resentment Model: Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class (Lucid, white respondents only).

Here we show that the diversification prime generates more racial resentment (p = 0.01) *and* more support for political violence (p = 0.07) among white Americans (refer to online appendix 4). Overall, we reconfirm H1 and H2. Responses to our prime in Study 3 also call to similar anti-Black themes as in Studies 1 and 2, adding further context to this strong, anti-Black interpretation of diversification. Two respondents express direct concern with what they perceive to be Black political power increasing too much across the American polity:

> Racism goes both ways. Anyone can be racist. I'd like to know why some in the left think they alone can define racism? And why does it seem to me that they want to impose some sort of black supremacy in people as a way of getting even for past crimes committed against their ancestors? (YouGov)

> It would appear the current players are not being treated with equanimity. For instance, people with black skin are by a substantial margin represented on TV ads by 80%–90% while being a mere 13% of the U.S. population. The current black authorities whose responsibility is to maintain existing law and order, on balance, seem to have no interest in that job. There appears to be a strong incentive to treat young people with black or dark skin for some unknown reason which would seem to distort the legal situation for serious/violent crimes. It seems to be born of a high level of stupidity or veniality. (YouGov)

In Studies 1 through 3, we consistently validate that the prime we utilize on the diversification of the United States generates a distinct anti-Black prejudice. We assert that this is evidence that perceptions of Black political power extend among white Americans from ideas of racial demographic change. As we show from the outset, anti-Black threat motivates strong support for violent attitudes, connecting to recent work on the role of dehumanization of Black Americans driving white Americans' violent views (Jardina and Piston 2021; 2022). Then through open and closed-ended responses, we show that the Black replacement misperception increasing whites' violent attitudes echoes earlier periods in the United States where Black political threat was also expressed on mass levels. Over three studies with three samples, over the span of a year (prior to the Buffalo shooting where the "great replacement" conspiracy caught fire in the general public in Study 2 and after in Studies 1 and 3) that these same ideas about racial demographic change have been consistently potent. All of these dynamics demonstrate that the threat from Black Americans is strongly grounded among white Americans, and can be a motivator for increasingly violent views across whites.

Alternative Measures of Anti-Black Threat

Racial resentment has recently come under scrutiny as a helpful measure of anti-Black attitudes in the American public (Wilson and Davis 2011; Davis and Wilson 2021). We acknowledge that, although the measure has flaws, it is useful in capturing historical attitudes and being used as a point of comparison from our studies to others. In Study 2, we use an additional set of measures to capture anti-Black threat generated by the prime. These measures capture threat from Black Americans in the present and future. Present threat is measured as, "To what extent do you believe that Black Americans are threatening to Americans like yourself presently in 2022? From not a threat at all to a very serious threat." Future threat is measured as, "To what extent do you believe that Black Americans are threatening to Americans like yourself years from now in 2050? From not a threat at all to a very serious threat." Present threat captures the immediate concern, while future threat captures how the perception of Black Americans as a threat will develop over time.

The prime in Study 2 causes a sizable increase in both present (~6 percentage point increase, p = 0.01) and future (4 percentage point increase, p = 0.04) Black threat among non-Hispanic white Americans. This confirms that anti-Black threat is *not* limited to racial resentment, which has measurement issues. Moreover, our threat measures here capture direct sentiments of threat from Black Americans in variant temporal contexts. As one final, crucial test of the effect of threat, we comparatively assess anti-Black threat relative to threat from other minority groups.
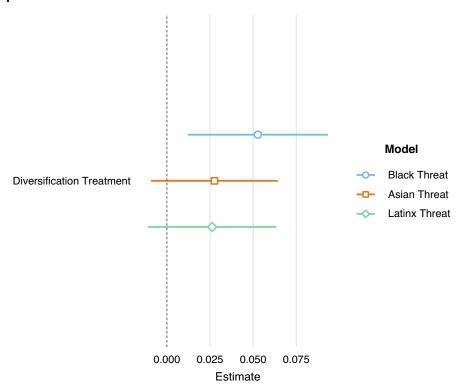
Foundationally Anti-Black Threat

As another check on the efficacy of anti-Black threat generated from the diversification prime we use, we test for anti-Black threat expressed relative to anti-Asian and anti-Latinx threat which we measure as manipulation checks in Study 2. In figure 5, we show that the prime we utilize generates distinctly anti-Black reactions in comparison to anti-Asian (p = 0.18) and anti-Latinx (p = 0.21) senses of threat.

This finding in tandem with our findings among the open-ended responses to the prime across studies provides a vital contextual idea about interpretations of white views of racial demographic change.

Coding for mentions of Black Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinx Americans across all three studies, we find mentions of Black Americans outnumber the other two groups in comparison. Overall, across these three studies we find that when racial minority groups are mentioned, Black Americans are mentioned 51%, while compared to Latinx and Hispanic Americans who are mentioned 33% and that Asian Americans are mentioned 15% to the prime.[6]

On a more granular level, within Study 1, we find 46% percent mention Black Americans, 40% mention Latinx or Hispanic Americans, and 14% mention Asian Americans. In Study 2, roughly 60% percent mention Black Americans, 29% mention Latinx or Hispanic Americans, and 10% mention Asian Americans. Study 3 shows that

Figure 5
Comparing expressions of threat

44% percent mention Black Americans, 34% mention Latinx or Hispanic Americans, and 22% mention Asian Americans.

We assert that our results are indicative of the idea that it is *foundationally* anti-Black—which also connects to recent work on the interpretation of who people of color are perceived to be predominantly Black (Thompson et al. 2023). Importantly, we do not mean to imply that certain interpretations of racial demographic change do not also generate sentiments that are also expressively anti-Asian or anti-Latinx American. However, we show that they are most potently anti-Black because they emerge from the historical ideas of Black encroachment on white's power. This anti-Black foundation of political threat, we find, does well to explain white Americans' expressions of political threat that are connected to other racial and ethnic minority groups.

One example of how anti-Black foundations of political threat can motivate ideas about other groups comes in expressions from respondents about the future of American politics. The following are four response that call to these sentiments:

> I'm tired of the 'victim', 'Entitled' mentality. I'm tired of 'racial' garbage. Tired of democrats buying votes.

> Good Lord gave us two ears and one mouth. Tells me we should listen and not judge those we disagree with. I believe the democrats party does not listen or do what is good for the country but for themselves, poor and weak so they can get votes. This woke stuff and gender identity is a bunch of nonsense. Just look at LAX, SEA, SFO, ORD, NY, Michigan, MN etc, etc etc Our country is in a serious decline of which I do not think we can recover from.

> "The democrats are causing a racial divide in our country. The media these days are calling anything that they don't agree with racial. Finding ways to cheat the American people has become common place with the democrats."

> The increase of minority groups. The Democrats will be pandering to the minorities and be accusing all republicans of being racist no matter what. The media will act like the Republicans only like white people.

These responses connect to recurrent discussion on the political intention of the great replacement conspiracy, asserting that the Democratic Party is attempting to increase their influence through the diversification of the country. This inference of Democratic advantage, we assert, connects closely to Black Americans' relationship to the Democratic Party (Frymer 2011; White and Laird 2020) and stereotypes that are extended onto other racial minorities. That is, political threat can and is expressed about other racial groups

but is likely filtered through understandings and interpretations of Black Americans' political position.

Scholars have theorized that the senses of threat from racial demographic change have come from white Americans' concerns about racial minorities increasing in size; projections about the racial and ethnic groups increasing in size have either emphasized Latinx/Hispanic Americans as the largest ethnic group, or Asian Americans as the fastest increasing group (Frey 2012; Thompson 2023). Public discourse has focused on these same themes, often underemphasizing perceptions of Black Americans (Serwer 2021). This discourse leads to the question, "Why would white Americans think about Black Americans at all when they think about racial demographic change?" As we have shown, the Black replacement misperception sits at the heart of these interpretations and, as we will elaborate next, is a crucial aspect of democratic backsliding and erosion in the United States.

Implications and Conclusion

We find that the Black replacement misperception is central to how white Americans process racial demographic changes and the future demography of the United States. When we prime ideas of the diversification of the country,[7] it specifically generates anti-Black threat and increases support for political violence.

The implications from our results abound. First, as we emphasize from the outset, Black Americans are not increasing in numbers nor are they making socioeconomic gains that would threaten white Americans. Compared with earlier moments of perceived Black encroachment on white dominance—Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement—there have been no recent gains for Black Americans that could be used to justify these sentiments of threat. As such, the threat expressed by white Americans is unfounded; it is a *phantom threat.* However, despite this lack of empirically grounded sentiments of threat, the misperception still exists prominently among the white American public. From this, we assert that the misperception needs to be taken seriously. So far, scholars have focused upon shifting racial demographics and the threat that white Americans express as coming from the declining numbers of whites (Abascal 2020; Danbold and Huo 2015; Brown, Rucker, and Richeson 2022). Here, we assert that there is a distinctly anti-Black component to these perceptions that has been underemphasized, likely because a great deal of attention has been given to the empirical predictions from the U.S. Census.

Mirroring earlier moments in American history, we find that anti-Black threat leads to upticks in support for political violence. We importantly find this to operate on a mass level, with white Americans becoming significantly more supportive of violence after they are primed to think about diversification in the United States. The direct increase in violence has many crucial implications. The support for violence is on a general level, meaning anti-Black threat leads to increases in general forms of violent attitudes. A way to interpret this on a larger scale is that, as perceptions about the changing United States occur in the minds of white Americans, they will become more accepting of violence on the whole. This dynamic is categorically antithetical to democracy because the system necessitates the peaceful resolution of conflict.

Increasing support for violence in and of itself has major implications for democratic backsliding because more violent support could result in more permissive use of force in disputes. Understandably, some might argue that more support for political violence could be interpreted as a higher likelihood that certain white Americans engage in violence. This is true, but it would likely be a small minority of all people who become more expressively violent. We seek to emphasize how becoming more accepting of violence, on an attitudinal level, is a crucial dynamic to backsliding among the public. Increased public support of violence could look like explaining away domestic terrorism or underemphasizing efforts to violently overturn elections, especially against political opposition, due to how they are dehumanized in the midst of backsliding (Graham and Svolik 2020; Cassese 2021). Moreover, increased support for violence could also appear as not sanctioning violence against other racial minority groups, such as the motivations for the El Paso massacre where a mass shooter killed 23 Latino Americans at a local Walmart (Taladrid 2023). Our findings here are also noteworthy given recent work showing that whites often think of racial minority collusion (Knowles, Tropp, and Mogami 2022). Anti-Black threat then could likely be generalized onto other racial minority groups due to this perception of collusion among them.

Our final two points pertain to the role of elites, media, and the question of the future of multiracial American democracy. We utilize a treatment that simply asks respondents to articulate what comes to mind when they think of the diversification of the United States. This prompt was not framed to inflame anti-Black sentiment, yet it does so consistently. Messages that are more specifically tailored to target Black senses of threat will likely do even more to increase anti-Black and violent sentiment, meaning on the whole that we are picking up on latent sentiments in the public that can be even further exploited. Elites can utilize more racially inflammatory messages, which can significantly accelerate backsliding among the public, as if having more support for violent campaigns against political opposition.

Finally, we find that our studies reveal a grim picture on the future of multiracial democracy in the United States. Anti-Blackness pervades ideas about the country changing, despite the fact that there is no evidence for Black Americans changing in population size nor for making gains along other lines (Vespa, Armstrong, and Medina

2020). The recurrent anti-Black sentiment that is generated among white Americans when they think about racial demographic change extends from the historical and institutional function of race in the United States. The contemporary connection between Black threat and violence is a reaffirmation of the deep-seated, historical relationship of these dangers. When conversations and speculations are made about the changing country, we assert that more attention needs to be given to the inferences that Americans make about Black Americans. We show that empirics do *not* and need not mirror perceptions. We show that in order to affirm multiracial American democracy, we must also address the pervasive tendency to anti-Blackness within the public. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote of substantive democracy borne out of nonviolence, stating that "the aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community, while the aftermath of violence is tragic bitterness" (Patterson 2018, 128). We cannot realize this democracy if we do not address the deep anti-Blackness revealed by the public, given its current inextricable connection to anti-democratic views. In a similar way to the origins of American democracy, the status today and the treatment of Black Americans is central to the American experiment. By reflecting on such deep-seated anti-Blackness and by substantively acknowledging its existence among white Americans' sense of politics we might yet see a crucial hopeful component of that experiment.

Supplementary Material

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724000045.

Notes

1 Through the analyses, we define "non-Hispanic White Americans" as respondents who self-identified as white.
2 We pre-register this hypothesis (refer to the online appendix).
3 The wording of the measure is: "How much do you support the following statement 'It is reasonable to use violence against people who are politically opposed to me,'" measured using a 1-5 Likert scale, with 1 as strongly oppose and 5 as strongly support.
4 Our focus here is on white Americans, but it is important to acknowledge that anti-Blackness is a sentiment that can be and is often held among non-white Americans, including Black Americans. More research on these ideas is needed.
5 This item is traditionally reverse-coded when constructing the full racial resentment scale. For clarity, we have presented it with disagreement coded 0 and agreement coded 1. In later analyses, this item is reverse-coded when the scale is constructed.

6 We code Black American mentions as "black | africa"; Latinx and Hispanic Americans as "hispani | mexi | latin"; and Asian Americans as "asia | china | chinese."
7 Importantly, a limitation of this design is that treated respondents engage in a writing task while the control does not. Future studies might parse this out for further causal identification, as well as test the extent to which diversification or racial demographic change as terms generate more anti-Black sentiment.

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