The prevalence and predictors of white nationalist views in the United States

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The salience of white nationalist ideology is rising in American public life. This ideology rests on the belief that shifting demographics in the US pose an existential threat to the white race, which is viewed as culturally superior and deserving of power over other groups. In explaining support for white nationalism, scholars have developed theories that emphasize social strain, status threat, and vulnerability to online mobilization. But we know little about the extent and correlates of support for these views due to lack of studies conducted with nationally representative samples. Here we present results from a first-ever survey measuring support for white nationalist ideology, conducted in 2021 with a nationally representative sample of 3,227 non-Hispanic white US adults. We find that 1 in 15 whites—including 1 in 6 young white men—endorse a short statement explaining white nationalist beliefs. Support for the movement is stronger among whites who claim stronger white identities and express racial grievances, opposition to minority power in the US, and explicit support for threats, harassment and violence against non-whites. White nationalist ideology finds more adherents among whites who are less educated, lower income, and more religious, and among two groups with distinct political orientations: white conservative Republicans and whites who are largely disaffected from politics. The ideology has sympathizers among whites experiencing hardships, those living in places under high societal distress, and whites whose social worlds are largely online. Contrary to expectations, white nationalist support is not related to levels or change in the share of local population that is white. White nationalist ideology's appeal to younger Americans, and its association with rising levels of political polarization, societal distress, and social isolation is cause for concern and vigilance.

white nationalism | identity | racial attitudes

In recent years, white nationalism has become more visible in American public life. Those who call themselves white nationalists believe that shifting demographics in the US pose an existential threat to the white race, which they view as culturally superior and deserving of power over all other groups in the United States (1, 2). White nationalist ideology underpins movements that represent grave threats to the nation's multiracial democracy while inspiring individual and collective acts of terroristic violence (3, 4).

How widespread are these beliefs in the US white population beyond these active participants who explicitly call themselves "white nationalists"? It is possible that many whites are unaware of this term, yet are nevertheless sympathetic to white nationalist ideology? Understanding the nature and depth of the appeal of these views in the American public is essential to gauge the reservoir of backers who may exist for white nationalist groups as they recruit supporters and participants, wade into electoral politics, and carry out acts of terrorism and violence. But we currently know little about the extent and correlates of support for white nationalist views in the U.S, as the rich scholarly literature on white nationalism has yet to include studies conducted with representative sample surveys.

Here we present results from the first-ever population-based survey measuring support for white nationalism, which we conducted in 2021 with a nationally representative sample of 3,227 non-Hispanic white US adults. In doing so, we contribute to a body of work employing representative sample surveys to examine the politicized nature of white identity in the US (5–8).

We provide an in-depth portrait of the demographic correlates of support for white nationalism in the American population. We examine the political correlates of endorsement of these views given the high levels of support both the presumptive Republican nominee for president in 2024 and the Republican Party receive from racially resentful whites (9–11).

We then assess the evidence for three sets of theoretically grounded explanations for why whites might endorse white nationalist beliefs: *strain*, *status threat*, and *online mobilization* theories. We draw these theories in part from scholarship tracing the process of radicalization into extremist groups (12, 13), as we hypothesize that this work helps identify who may be vulnerable to radicalization efforts due to the personal resonance of white nationalist ideology.

The first set of explanations are *strain* theories, which center on the individual and posit that various types of strain—including shocks such as personal health crises, crime victimhood, or the dissolution of a relationship or job—create vulnerabilities that make individuals more receptive to radicalizing messages (14). A second set of theories adopt a wider lens, focusing on groups. These *status threat* explanations hold that real or perceived diminishment of a group's relative power can fuel grievance narratives which cast blame on out-group members (15–18). A final group of hypotheses focuses on the role of the internet, and in particular how extremist groups exploit strain and status threat via *online mobilization* that disseminates their messages and recruits adherents (19, 20).

Decades-long trends in the United States have led to developments that all three sets of theories indicate may be conducive to the radicalization of segments of the non-Hispanic white population. Many Americans—including whites—are experiencing the individual and group-level economic hardships of the kind identified by strain theories as the nation's once widespread social and economic mobility has declined (21–

23). Automation and offshoring have reduced employment and wages for many whites—particularly white men without a college degree—who can no longer rely on jobs in manufacturing and related industries to pay a living wage (24, 25).

At the same time, a steady decline in whites' share of the US population, combined with change to America's racial and ethnic order (26, 27), have contributed to a diminishment of whites' once-dominant group status and near-absolute political power. Status threat theories hold that these group-level conditions—whether real or perceived, and which can often be based in perceptions of symbolic as opposed to material threats—are fertile ground for grievance narratives directed at out-groups (15–18).

In addition, we are living through a period of technological shifts that online mobilization theories hold can be ripe opportunities for groups seeking to spread radicalizing messages. These include the decline of broadcast television and print media—and the concurrent rise of the internet and social media—as sources of news about politics and public affairs. Many of the perpetrators of the most disturbing instances of white nationalist violence inhabit information ecosystems saturated with racist ideology in which they participate as both consumers and producers (20, 28, 29). A closely related concern is that online networks can be appealing to those who are estranged from offline communities and in many cases reinforce their alienation. In combination, we might suspect that those who inhabit portions of the internet that are rife with white nationalist content and rely on the internet for for their most important social relationships could be particularly susceptible to developing white nationalist sympathies.

This study

To probe these explanations and document the extent of white nationalist beliefs, we fielded an original survey to a nationally representative sample of non-Hispanic white Americans in November 2021 as part of the Cooperative Election Study (CES), conducted by the YouGov survey firm on the web. (See *Methods* for details; *SI Appendix*, Section A has the the full text of our survey.) All participants also responded to the CES Common Content questionnaire (30), which includes items about demographics, partisanship and vote choice, policy preferences, political knowledge, and related topics. *SI Appendix*, Section B reports descriptive statistics.

Our survey module began with questions about respondents' employment, recent hardships, social media use, friendships and conspiratorial beliefs. These were followed by three batteries of items measuring constructs related to white nationalism. The first battery contained six items assessing respondents' strength of white identity and their support for white collective action (adapted from items employed by (6) and (7)). The second battery measured respondents' evaluations of the level of power held in the US by different racial and religious groups. The third battery consisted of three items assessing support for intimidation, harassment and the use of violence to advance white political goals, adapted from items developed by (31) in their measurement of partisan political polarization.

Our module closed with a question we wrote to measure support for white nationalism. Because we anticipated that many respondents would be unaware of the meaning of the question and thus misinterpret it, we embedded a question-wording experiment in the survey. The design allows us to ascertain the impact of exposure to the meaning of the term "white nationalism" on expressed support for the movement while also collecting fully informed responses among the entire sample.

Half of our respondents were chosen at random to be in the "treatment" group, whose members read a brief description of the white nationalist movement focused on three intertwined tenets—demographic threat, the maintenance of power, and cultural superiority—that are commonly invoked by self-described white nationalists and have been identified by analysts as central to white nationalist ideology (1–3, 32). The statement was limited to beliefs, and did not discuss tactics (such as support for intimidation or violence) or behavior (such as respondents' participation in actions or movements).

The description read: "The white nationalist movement holds that whites are under threat in the United States and seeks to ensure the survival of the white race in this country. White nationalists believe that white people should hold more political and economic power than other groups. They believe that whites should maintain their majority in the US and that white culture is superior to all other cultures."

After being presented with the description, respondents in the treatment condition were then asked, "Are you a supporter of the white nationalist movement?" The other half of the respondents were assigned to a "control" group. They were first asked the question "Are you a supporter of the white nationalist movement?" and their responses were recorded. They were then presented with the short description originally offered to the treatment group and asked the question again.

Our study proceeds by first validating our measure of white nationalist views by comparing endorsement of the statement among respondents who score highly on a battery of questions about white identity; a battery of questions about minority groups having too much political power; and a battery of questions measuring support for violence and intimidation of non-whites. We then describe the correlates of support across demographic, political, and socioeconomic dimensions. We conclude with descriptive evidence pertaining to the three dominant theoretical frameworks developed to understand radicalization more generally.

**Validation of our measure
of support for white nationalist views**

Our experimental results indicate that many white Americans are unfamiliar with the term "white nationalism," but when informed of its meaning they endorse it (Figure 1a). Among respondents in the control group of our survey experiment (who were initially not provided any description of white nationalism), 3.8% called themselves supporters of the white nationalist movement. But this number nearly doubled among those in the treatment group (who were shown the description before being asked for a response), rising to 7.6% (treatment effect $p < .001$).

The gap between treated and control respondents is due to the fact that providing a description of white nationalism aligned the responses of previously uninformed whites with their expressions of racially resentful or overtly racist views. As shown in Figure 1b, this gap was larger among whites expressing strong white racial identity ($p < .01$), whites who think nonwhite and non-Christian groups have "too much power" ($p < .01$); and whites supporting acts of intimidation,
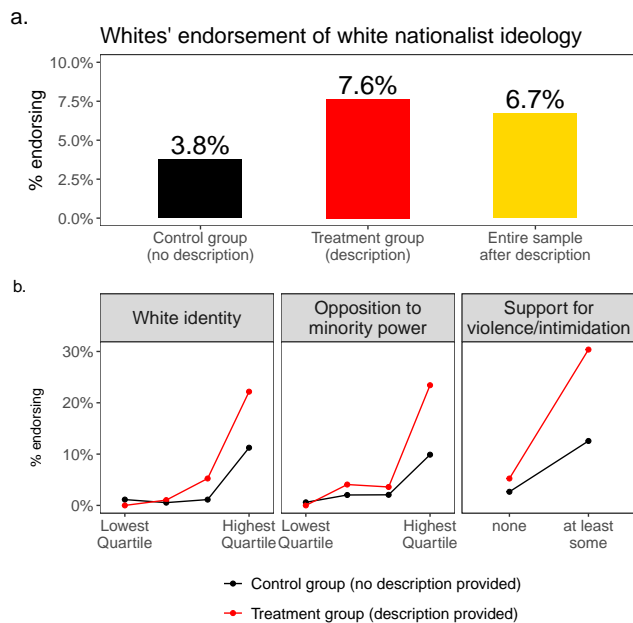
Fig. 1. Prevalence of support for white nationalist ideology and validation of our measure. *Top panel:* Endorsement of white nationalism in control group (to whom no description of white nationalism was provided) and treatment group (description provided), and among all respondents after being provided the description. *Bottom panel:* Heterogeneous treatment effects by strength of white identity (*left*); opposition to minority group power (*center*); and support for threats, harassment, and violence against non-whites (*right*). See *SI Appendix* Section C for details.

Fig. 2. Correlates of support for white nationalist views in the US. *Left panel:* Endorsement of white nationalism (x-axis) by demographic and political covariates (y-axis). Unweighted sample *N* indicated in parentheses along y-axis labels. *Right panel:* Predictive margins (with 95% confidence intervals) yielded by bivariate regressions of white nationalist views on covariates. Points indicate the estimated increase in probability of endorsing white nationalism associated with a shift across the range of the predictor from its minimum to maximum value. See *SI Appendix* Section E for details.

harassment and violence against nonwhites ($p < .10$); see *Methods* for measures and *SI Appendix* Section C for details of tests).

The fact that survey participants' support for white nationalism in the treatment condition was more strongly associated with measures of related outcomes corroborates the criterion validity of participants' fully-informed responses. In *SI Appendix* Section C, we provide suggestive evidence that these heterogeneous treatment effects were stronger for respondents lacking basic knowledge about politics and public affairs. While we did not experimentally manipulate the three dimensions of our description separately, we present descriptive evidence in *SI Appendix* Section J that individuals respond most strongly to the maintenance of political power dimension. Taken together, these findings indicate that informed responses were subject to less measurement error than uninformed responses, and thus help to address the concern that such error may artificially inflate estimates of support for low-prevalence extremist views (33).

Support for white nationalist views in the US

Prevalence. Our estimates of support for white nationalist views reported throughout the remainder of this article are based upon the entire sample of fully informed responses (that is, responses from those in the treatment group pooled with those in the control group after they were provided the description of white nationalism). This yields our summary estimate of the share of non-Hispanic white US adults endorsing white nationalism to be 6.7% [95% CI: 5.5%, 7.9%], or slightly more than 1 in 15 white Americans (Figure 1a).
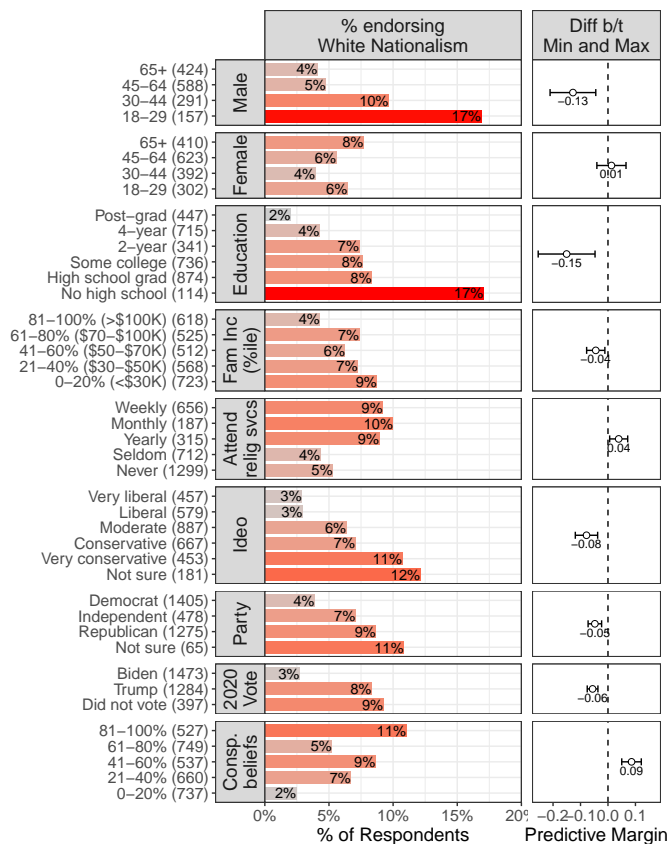
One potential concern is that these estimates may be biased upward by the responses of inattentive participants (33). The CES uses a number of techniques to identify and remove inattentive respondents from its samples, including those who complete the survey very quickly, those who skip a high proportion of survey items, and those who provide "straightline" answers (identical responses) to multiple consecutive survey questions. In *SI Appendix* Section D, we analyze the *ceteris paribus* relationship between response time (which previous work has shown is correlated with attentiveness (34, 35)) and support for white nationalism after controlling for the predictors described in this article. While statistically significant, this relationship is small in magnitude and non-monotonic in response time. The analysis yields conservative estimates of support for white nationalism robust to concerns about inattentiveness that are only slightly lower (ranging between 6.0% and 6.4%) than our summary estimate of 6.7%.

Demographic and political correlates. Figure 2 displays the relationships between white nationalist support and key demographic and political characteristics and estimates of their statistical significance. *SI Appendix* Section E has details about estimates and statistical tests.

We find a strong, significant ($p < .001$) negative relationship between age and white nationalist support among men, with 17% of young white men—that is, 1 in 6 white men aged 18 to 29—endorsing white nationalism. No such relationship between age and white nationalism is found among women. Support for white nationalism is significantly negatively associated with educational attainment ($p < .001$) and income ($p < .02$), and significantly positively associated with whites' attendance of religious services ($p < .001$).

White nationalism is significantly more appealing to white conservatives, Republicans, and supporters of Donald Trump than to liberals, Democrats, and voters for Joe Biden ($p < .001$ for all tests). However, white nationalism also appeals to a different set of whites who are largely disaffected from politics, as shown by the high rates of endorsement among nonvoters and whites not sure about their ideology or party affiliation. Relatedly, white nationalist views are significantly more prevalent among whites who engage in conspiracy thinking about politics and government ($p < .001$).

Assessing evidence for theories

Strain theories (Figure 3a). We measure strain at both the micro and macro level. To gauge individual-level strain, our respondents answered questions indicating whether they had suffered any of nine hardships in the previous 12 months, including the death of a loved one, job loss, crime victimization, divorce, or the end of a relationship. The number of recent hardships reported by respondents was positively associated with their endorsement of white nationalism ($p < .01$). *SI Appendix* Section F has details of all tests of strain, status threat and online mobilization theories.

To assess whether occupational precarity was associated with support for white nationalist views, we asked respondents to provide an open-ended description of the nature of their work. Research assistants matched these job descriptions to standard occupational codes. We then used employment projections over the next 10 years (O*NET projections for 2019 to 2029) by occupational code to characterize each respondent's degree of labor market risk (*SI Appendix* Section G has details). We found no relationship between vulnerability to job loss and endorsement of white nationalist views (Figure 3a).

To estimate strain at the macro-level of one's community, we used official county-based estimates of poverty rates, unemployment rates, population loss, and mortality rates attributed to drugs and alcohol to generate a social distress index with scores assigned to each county in the US (see *SI Appendix* Section H). This is a measure of the local incidence of the kinds of strains attributed by researchers to stressors such as deindustrialization, trade shocks, and the opioid epidemic (22, 24, 25). The level of social distress in respondents' counties was a significant predictor of their number of individual hardships ($p < .01$), and local social distress was significantly associated with respondents' endorsement of white nationalism ($p < .03$). Importantly, individual hardship and local social distress both remained significant predictors of respondents' endorsement of white nationalism while controlling for the other in a multiple regression analysis.

Status threat theories (Figure 3b). Using recent US Census data, we developed measures of levels and recent change in the share of the non-Hispanic white population at the county

level (*SI Appendix* Section H has details). Our expectation from status threat theories was that whites living in places with substantial non-white populations—and in places with recent declines in the white population—would be more likely to experience status threat and thus endorse white nationalist ideology. This was not the case; if anything, support for white nationalist views was higher in places with less racial diversity ($p < .08$) and smaller declines in the white population ($p < .08$). These findings are more aligned with expectations from optimal intergroup contact theory in which, under certain conditions, contact can improve attitudes toward outgroup members (36). Our results also echo recent work finding mixed results on the association between local demographic context and racial attitudes (37, 38), in part because people's perceptions of local racial and ethnic diversity can differ sharply from reality (39). Further, no relationship was found between the rural-urban status of whites' county of residence and their support for white nationalist views.

Online mobilization theories (Figure 3c). We asked respondents about their frequency of general social media use and their political activity on social media. Neither of these behaviors was associated with endorsement of white nationalism. It is difficult to draw conclusions about the prevalence of white nationalist ideology among those using specific social media platforms given the small sample sizes of users on many of these platforms (see *SI Appendix* Section I).

We also asked respondents to list their three closest friends and whether they knew the friend "only online," "only offline," or "both online and offline." In contrast to social media usage generally, here we found that whites' endorsement of white nationalism was significantly higher among those whose closest friends were those they knew primarily online ($p < .02$). Among respondents whose three closest friends are all online, support for white nationalist views is almost 20%.

Discussion

Our findings on support for white nationalist views from a first-ever representative sample of white Americans are cause for both reassurance and concern about the threat posed by white nationalism in the US. White nationalist beliefs remain largely at the margins: just 1 in 15 white adults declared themselves supporters of the movement after being fully informed of its core precepts. But these numbers are nevertheless substantial, indicating that nearly 8 million white US adults are sympathetic to white nationalist ideology. The rate rises to 1 in 6 among young white men, who have long been a target for organized hate groups (40). The prevalence of white nationalist sympathy among young white men is even more concerning if—rather than being a life-cycle effect that fades with age—it emerges as a cohort effect that persists as this generation matures further.

We note that these estimates may in fact be lower bounds on the true rate of these beliefs in the white population. On the one hand, our estimates may be biased upward by respondent inattentiveness (as discussed above). But on the other, rates of general survey response at the time when our study was fielded have been found to be lower among Republicans (41) the less politically active and civically engaged (42). These are characteristics we show are strong predictors of holding white nationalist views (Figure 2). Further, while the relative
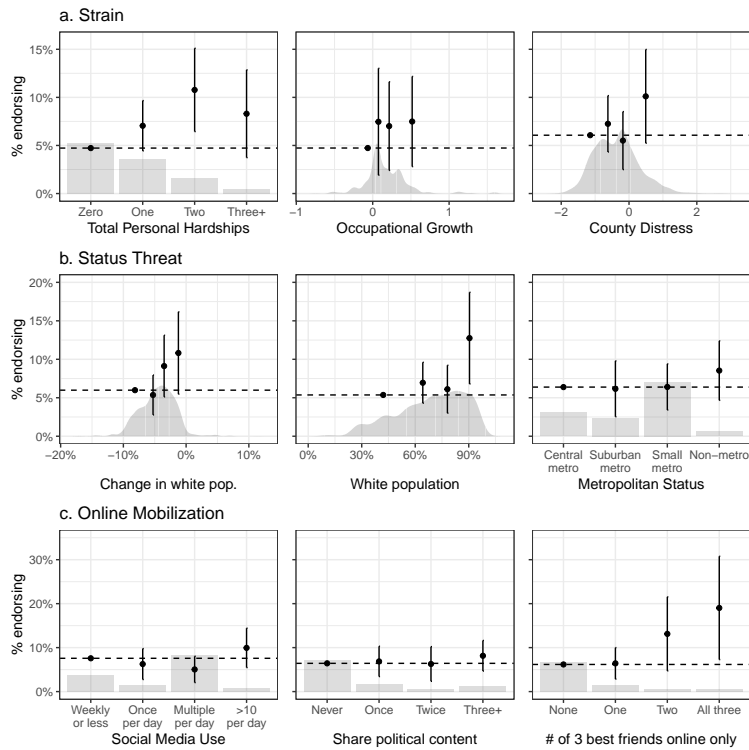
Fig. 3. Assessing evidence for theories. Endorsement of white nationalism across covariates associated with strain (*Top row: A*), status threat (*Middle row: B*), and online mobilization (*Bottom Row: C*). Bars indicate 95% confidence intervals relative to covariate baseline levels (in each case, the baseline is the point furthest to the left with no error bar), indicated with horizontal dashed lines. Predictions are generated by quartile (for continuous covariates) and by category (for ordinal covariates). Distributions of covariates plotted in gray. See *SI Appendix* Section F for details.

anonymity provided by an online survey generally reduces social desirability bias regarding sensitive questions, such bias is not completely eliminated in these settings (43). Thus it is possible that both non-response bias and social desirability bias were present in our study, yielding an estimate of support for white nationalism lower than its true value.

It is of concern that more whites in the treatment condition of our survey experiment endorsed white nationalism after hearing about its core precepts than whites in the control condition who were not provided this description. This indicates that there are many white Americans who could potentially be drawn to the racist ideologies espoused by white nationalist groups once they become aware of them. Determining which dimensions of these ideologies are most attractive to those who endorse white nationalism is beyond the scope of this paper. However, in *SI Appendix* Section J we show that the whites' desire for political power is a particularly strong predictor of white nationalist views. Multiple regression and variable importance analyses find that support for the formation of a white political party and approval of harassment, threats and violence to advance whites' political goals are among the most powerful indicators distinguishing white nationalist supporters from the rest of the white population.

Of particular note are two political profiles associated with these beliefs, the first consisting of Republicans and conservatives and the second made up of whites who are largely disaffected from politics. The appeal of white nationalism to this latter group is reflected in our discovery that white nationalism finds fertile ground in areas under social strain,

where poverty, unemployment and "deaths of despair" create and sustain environments where white grievance can thrive. Efforts to forestall the appeal of white nationalism may be made stronger to the extent that they include economic and other initiatives aimed at reversing these trends (22, 25). Further evidence of a relationship between the conditions for alienation and white nationalism is found in the fact that the movement's ideas are particularly appealing to whites whose primary friendships are mostly—or entirely—online.

Also noteworthy is that support for white nationalist ideology does not appear to be driven by the local, contextual demographic factors thought to play strong roles in shaping attitudes about race. To the extent that America's diversifying national population is catalyzing support for white nationalist views, our study does not find evidence that local demographic change is the mechanism for this effect. A set of exploratory regressions where we interact strain theory proxies with partisanship, ideology, and age-by-gender find no evidence that strain theory is more prognostic of white nationalist support among these groups.

Finally, while we find that more frequent use of social media is not correlated with increased support for white nationalist ideas, we did find that people whose closest friends come from the online world are significantly more likely to support white nationalist ideology. This finding points suggests a potentially complex relationship between what one sees online and the counter-veiling effects of offline experiences that warrants further investigation.

Future work can further explore the extent of white nation-

alist views in the US and the factors that lead to its appeal among some groups of whites more than others. For example, inferential leverage could be gained with longitudinal studies that follow white people—particularly young white men—over time to see who radicalizes and why. Our short description of white nationalism focuses on purported demographic threats, claims about superiority of white culture, and the maintenance of white political power as the three main tenets of the movement. Further research might explore the relative attraction of each of these ideas (as well as others)—and perhaps employ survey experiments to identify interventions that disrupt their appeal.

Methods

Survey administration and design. We fielded our survey to 3,227 non-Hispanic white American adults in November 2021 via the internet as part of the Cooperative Election Study (CES). Conducted by YouGov on a web-based interface, the CES employs a sample matching and weighting methodology that yields estimates approximating those obtained from nationally representative probability samples of US adults, as validated by the close correspondence of CES vote-choice estimates across the 50 states with actual election results ([30]). All results reported here employ CES survey weights.

The CES is made up of modules with original questionnaires developed by teams of university-based researchers fielded to 1,000 respondents each. All respondents also respond to the CES Common Content questionnaire, which includes items about demographics, partisanship and vote choice, policy preferences, political knowledge, and related topics.

We contracted with the CES to purchase questionnaire time for our study on five modules, which yielded a total of 5,000 respondents. Our questionnaire was fielded only to respondents who indicated they were white on the Common Content item about racial identity, a question that also included response choices of "Black," "Hispanic," "Asian," "Native American," "Two or more races," "Other" and "Middle Eastern." We further restrict our analysis to whites who answered "no" to a subsequent CES question asking all those who did not indicate "Hispanic" on the race item whether they identified as Hispanic or Latino. Our resulting sample ($N = 3,227$) is designed to be representative of the 161 million people the Census Bureau estimated to be the size of the non-Hispanic white US adult population in 2021 (62.1 percent of all adults). Demographic, political and other relevant characteristics of our sample can be found in the *SI Appendix*, Section B.

Wording of key survey items. The entire questionnaire for our module may be found in the *SI Appendix* Section A. Here we describe key question batteries used in the analysis.

White identity and support for white collective action. Adapted from items employed by by ([6]) and ([7]). Items presented in random order.

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:

- Being white is important to my identity.
- White people in this country have a lot to be proud of.
- Whites in this country have a lot in common with each other.
- Whites need to do more to remind the world about the challenges that white people face.

- Whites need to start looking out more for one another.
- We need a political party focused on advancing white power.

Items accompanied by a five-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Group power. Items presented in random order.

Please say whether you think the following groups have too little, too much, or the right amount of power in the US today.

- Whites
- Blacks
- Asians
- Hispanics
- Evangelical Christians
- Jews
- Muslims

Items accompanied by three-point scale "too little power," "the right amount of power" and "too much power."

Threats, harassment and violence against non-whites. Adapted from items developed by ([31]) in their measurement of partisan political polarization.

Please indicate your stance on the following questions.

- When, if ever, is it OK for whites to send threatening and intimidating messages to non-white leaders?
- When, if ever, is it OK for an ordinary white person in the public to harass an ordinary non-white person on the internet, in a way that makes that person feel unsafe?
- How often do you feel it is justified for whites to use violence in advancing their political goals these days?

Items accompanied by the four-point response set "never," "occasionally," "frequently," and "always."

Endorsement of white nationalist ideology. Half of respondents were each randomly assigned to "treatment" and "control" groups.

The treatment group was given the following description of the white nationalist movement: "The white nationalist movement holds that whites are under threat in the United States and seeks to ensure the survival of the white race in this country. White nationalists believe that white people should hold more political and economic power than other groups. They believe that whites should maintain their majority in the US and that white culture is superior to all other cultures."

These respondents were then asked, "Are you a supporter of the white nationalist movement?" and were instructed to indicate "yes" or "no" on their screen.

The control group were first asked this question, their responses recorded, and then asked the question again after reading the short description of white nationalism. Except where noted, throughout this paper we combine the fully informed responses from the control group with responses from the treatment group when reporting support for white nationalism in our study.

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