

The Future Of The (Scared, White) GOP

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When President Obama defeated Mitt Romney in 2012, handily winning a second term, he did so with only 39 percent of white voters. White men made up only a quarter of his votes.

Even staunch Republicans had to take notice of these stark demographics. Some questioned the longtime GOP strategy of appealing to white voters, and others went so far as to question the party's future. Have white voters, and the Republican Party itself, become irrelevant in the nation's shifting 21st century political landscape?

The 2012 election, according to sociologist Michael Kimmel, merely crystallized a much larger cultural and economic shift already taking place in the country. In his top-selling new book, *Angry White Men*, Kimmel describes the gradual but profound changes that have marginalized—and continue to marginalize—white men in America. These changes, Kimmel argues, have left the country's once dominant group with a sense of “aggrieved entitlement”—the sense that their rightful place has been usurped.

If white voters are angry now, just wait. The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that, by the year 2042, racial minority groups will make up the majority of the nation's population—and voters. Nobody really knows how this so-called “majority-minority” shift will affect Americans' attitudes and actions, although many believe it will spell even further trouble for conservatives and Republicans.

Others aren't so sure. Those include Northwestern University psychological scientists Maureen Craig and Jennifer Richeson, who raise another possibility. Might this demographic shift have the opposite effect, leading to greater endorsement of conservative political ideology, at least among white Americans? Psychological theory supports the idea that conservatives, if threatened, will circle the ideological wagons, embracing rather than moving away from conservative values. Craig and Richeson decided to explore this idea empirically, to see if the likelihood of an increasingly diverse racial landscape influences the politics of white Americans, and if so, how.

They recruited a group of white Americans who identified themselves as independent and unaffiliated, and randomly assigned them to two groups. All of the respondents filled out survey forms, but the questions were slightly different for the two groups. Specifically, some respondents were asked if they had heard that California was now a majority-minority state. The others, the controls, were asked if they had heard that Hispanics were about equal in numbers to Blacks. All were then asked about their political ideology and which party they leaned toward.

The scientists wanted to see if the prospect of greater racial diversity nudged the white respondents to the right. It did, in both a national sample and (much more strongly) in a sample of western voters. These self-described independents also showed a slight shift toward conservative values, compared to controls. In short, those white Americans who were made aware of the country's racial shift did move

toward more conservative politics—especially when evidence of that racial shift came from their own region of the country.

These findings are compelling, but they do not illuminate just why such a political and ideological shift is taking place. Craig and Richeson wanted to drill down on the motives underlying this shift, in particular the notion that white Americans feel that their values and beliefs are being threatened. They also wanted to see if the whites' shift to the right involved only policies directly connected to race—immigration reform, for example—or if it was a broader ideological shift, encompassing military spending and other non-racial issues.

So in another experiment, some white Americans read a press release about projections of a majority-minority population in 2042. The controls read about increasing geographical mobility. Then all respondents answered questions about their perceptions of threat: Is the American way of life being threatened? Is the country on the right track? How do you feel about the nation's future? Is the status of white American in peril? And so forth. They then answered questions about various political issues, some (like affirmative action) related to race, and others (like health care reform) unrelated.

Again, the scientists found that those who were thinking about the changing racial landscape of the country—these white Americans were more likely to endorse conservative policies. What's more, as described in a forthcoming article in the journal *Psychological Science*, this move to the right was clearly motivated by white fears of losing status. Intriguingly, the conservative shift affected both race-related policies and policies unconnected to race—suggesting that psychological threat is capable of triggering a broad political shift.

Think about this. We're not talking about threats to life and limb here, but rather abstract concerns about a loss of status. And not even an imminent loss of status, but instead one that's coming three decades down the road. These results suggest that predictions about the decline of the Republican Party may be premature, indeed that more white Americans may join the conservative, Republican ranks as this threat gets closer. But the GOP they join will be whiter and whiter, and the political landscape will be more and more racially polarized.

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