

Status Threat, Partisanship, and Voters’ Conservative Shift
toward Right-wing Candidates
(Pre-analysis plan)

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1 Study Information

1.1 Title

Status Threat, Partisanship, and Voters' Conservative Shift toward Right-wing Candidates

1.2 Authors

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1.3 Background

In recent years, a significant increase in support for right-wing and radical-right populist parties and candidates has been witnessed across the globe. Ideologically, these politicians advocate socially conservative policies, stringent immigration laws, and restrictions on minority rights. Examples include the election of Bolsonaro in Brazil, the rise of Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany, and the election of Trump in the United States. In these and other instances, public support for these leaders has been accompanied by backlash against the inclusiveness of social groups and demonstrations of disregard for established democratic institutional procedures. This has been illustrated by the insurrection on January 6th, 2021, in the United States, the invasion of Federal buildings in January 2023 in Brazil, and various violent protests in Germany by AfD sympathizers.

Previous research has attributed the recent electoral success of these right-wing leaders to their increasing support among white, male, and Christian populations, motivated by heightened perceptions among those groups that their social status is declining (Mutz 2018; Parker 2021; Craig and Richeson 2014; Gidron and Hall 2017; Parker and Lavine 2024). *Social status* in this research is understood in terms of prestige and respect the groups have in society. It cannot be reduced to class or economic status. This project investigates three open questions about the effects of status threat on public support of right-wing conservative leaders.

First, it is unclear whether one should expect a *generalized* or *restricted* effect of status threat on support for conservative leaders. The *generalized conservative shift hypothesis*, based on the motivated social cognition theory of support for conservative political ideology (Jost et al. 2003), predicts that various forms of threat, such as mortality threat, can situationally trigger psychological predispositions against changes in the status quo and against policies that seek to reduce social inequalities. A threat to social status should trigger similar reactions. For instance, this hypothesis predicts that if it becomes salient that the social status of African Americans is increasing while the status of whites is declining, this will increase support among whites for candidates who advocate not only for restrictions on race-based affirmative action policies but also restrictions on other policies that represent social change and can increase uncertainty about the status quo, such as abortion, immigration, wealth redistribution, and LGBT rights.

On the other hand, the *restricted conservative shift hypothesis*, which is also plausible under the motivated social cognition approach, predicts that status threat increases the electoral

appeal of specific conservative attributes of candidates, namely those whose conservatism functionally aligns with the source of the threat. This expectation is reinforced by reactions against status threat predicted by the social identity theory (Tajfel et al. 1979; Tajfel and Turner 1986) and the socio-psychological functional match model (Cottrell and Neuberg 2005). This hypothesis suggests that when the source of a status threat becomes salient, the status-preserving reactions among the threatened group will be directed toward the source of the threat. For instance, it suggests that if it becomes salient that the social status of African Americans is increasing while the status of whites is declining, this will increase support among whites for candidates who oppose race-based affirmative action policies, but it does not necessarily increase support if the candidates advocate other conservative policies that preserve the status quo, such as anti-LGBT and anti-abortion policies.

The second open question pertaining to the electoral politics of status threat, which has, to the best of our knowledge, not been investigated, refers to the role of party attachment. Typically, candidates appear to voters as a bundle of ideology, policy position, and party affiliation. The question then arises: does party attachment constrain the effect of status threat on support for conservative candidates, and if so, how much? In the US, party attachment heavily influences electoral behavior. We hypothesize, therefore, that voters' partisanship significantly constrains the effect of status threat on shifting partisan voters towards conservative candidates. For instance, while Democratic-leaning white voters might prefer more conservative candidates when under the effects of status threat, they will also be unlikely to cross party lines to vote for a Republican candidate. That is, voters' conservative shift should occur within party alignment boundaries.

Finally, although many observational studies have demonstrated the association between status threat and policy attitudes or support for right-wing conservative candidates (Gidron and Hall 2017; Mutz 2018; Parker 2021; Parker and Lavine 2024), experimental studies that can identify internally valid causal effects of status threat on support for conservative leaders remain rare. Thus, to answer those questions and evaluate the causal effect of status threat on the selection of candidates, we combine a vignette and a conjoint experiment. The experiment examines if messages that prime threat to the social status of white Americans make candidates with conservative and status-preserving positions more appealing among whites. We evaluate and compare two types of status threat: one based on racial group membership (being white) and another attached to national status (being an American).

1.4 Hypotheses

The hypothesis that status threat leads to generalized support for conservatism can be stated as follows:

- H_1 : Threats to the racial status of whites or the national status of Americans increase the electoral appeal of various candidates' conservative positions among white American voters, including conservative positions not directly related to the source of the status threat.

In contrast, we hypothesize that the effect of status threat is constrained by two mechanisms: party loyalty and the functional match between candidates' conservative policy and the salience of the source of status threat. The functional match hypotheses can be stated as follows:

- H_2 : Threat to the racial status of whites increases the electoral appeal among white Americans of candidates' conservative positions against racial inclusion, but not the appeal of other unrelated conservative positions.
- H_3 : Threat to the national status of Americans increases the electoral appeal among white Americans of candidates' conservative positions related to maintaining American culture and trade dominance, but not the appeal of other unrelated conservative positions.

The hypothesis regarding restricted effects due to party loyalties can be stated as follows:

- H_4 : Party attachment is the main driver of partisans' candidate evaluation and selection, mitigating the effect of policy positions of the candidate, even when status threat becomes salient.

And finally, Democrats will be more impacted by status threat than Republicans because of a ceiling effect: Republican voters already tend to support conservative candidates.

- H_5 : The effect of status threat on voters' candidate preference is stronger for Democratic than Republican voters.

2 Design Plan

2.1 Study type

Online survey with vignette and conjoint experiments.

2.2 Blinding

Online survey participants won't know their treatment group.

2.3 Is there any additional blinding in this study?

No

2.4 Study design

We will implement a combination of vignettes and conjoint experimental designs. Subjects will be randomly assigned to exposure either to a status-reassuring or a status-threatening vignette. Although all vignettes start in a similar fashion, underscoring the shift in contemporary society towards greater economic hardship, they diverge with respect to other current changes in group social status, emphasizing shifts in terms of prestige and societal respect. Our aim is to keep the same economic-related text across vignettes but change the social status component to make sure that the effects we are capturing are related to broader groups' prestige and social respect concerns, which is at the core of the social status hypotheses. Below are the vignettes:

Common initial text for all treatment groups Some Americans are doing worse than twenty years ago and may continue to lose wealth in the new economy. Median household incomes have decreased since 2019, while prices of many consumer goods have increased.

Status reassuring condition (T0) Despite these changes, research shows that Americans maintain the respect and esteem that they used to have in society. The United States remains the most prosperous and strong economy in the world. When compared to other nations, Americans remain leaders in innovation, education, and entertainment, and continue to exert a remarkable cultural influence on other nations.

Status threat condition (to whites) (T1) The structure of society as we know is also changing fast. The United States may soon become a 'majority minority' country in which white Americans are no longer the majority of the population. Rather, white Americans will be one of many minorities in society alongside Black Americans and other racial and ethnic groups. Alongside all these changes, the respect and esteem that white Americans used to have in society is declining, and many agree that white Americans are less valued today than they used to be.

Status threat condition (to nation status relative to China) (T2) The United States is losing its position as a world leader, while China is taking a more central role. Some businesses and foreign governments look to China first before the United States, demonstrating China’s growing influence. Overall, the global status of America has declined - Americans are no longer seen as leaders in innovation, education, and entertainment and may soon lose much of their cultural influence.

Status threat condition (to whites and nation status relative to China) (T3) show T2 and T1

After reading one of the vignettes and answering questions about perceived status shifts and self-reported status threat anxiety (see attached Questionnaire), the forced-choice paired-profile conjoint experiment starts. Participants will rate from 1 to 7 two candidates presented side-by-side and select the one they would vote for. They will repeat this task six times. Table 2.1 shows an example of the text they will see in the survey in each of the tasks.

The sentences in the highlights will be randomly selected from the list described in the Questionnaire attached to this document. The party affiliation to Democrats or Republicans will be shown only for part of the sample, while the rest will see candidates running as Independents. This will allow us to evaluate how the effects of exposure to status threat messages change when the candidates’ party affiliation is explicitly included in their profile.

If the hypothesis H_1 is correct, we should observe an increase in the positive effect of all candidates’ conservative positions on their electoral support among people exposed to the status threat conditions. However, if the hypotheses H_2 and H_3 are correct, we should observe that increase only in the effect of the candidates’ positions connected to the threat. If H_4 is correct, partisans should be more likely to select co-partisan candidates over cross-party ones, regardless of candidates’ conservative positions, but select more in-party conservatives when exposed to status threat. Finally, if H_5 is correct, Democrat candidates should be more affected by status threat than Republican candidates.

Table 2.1: Conjoint table example

Candidate A	Candidate B
<p>Party affiliation:</p> <p>Democratic Party</p>	<p>Party affiliation:</p> <p>Republican Party</p>
<p>Campaign highlights:</p> <p>I maintain that affirmative action rectifies historical injustices and systemic discrimination against minorities like African Americans and Latinos.</p> <p>In my view, choice over abortion should be a fundamental human right.</p> <p>I believe that celebrating diversity means standing for LGBT rights.</p> <p>Immigration is the backbone of our nation's history and should be celebrated.</p> <p>I am convinced that tax policies should not unduly penalize the wealthy for their success, so I oppose increasing taxes to pay for welfare programs.</p> <p>I have no doubt that promoting free trade with China encourages economic activity and job creation.</p>	<p>Campaign highlights:</p> <p>I firmly believe that selection should be based on individual merit, not affirmative action because affirmative action hurts white American majorities.</p> <p>In my view, abortion is not a solution but another problem. I am in favor of protecting human life at all stages.</p> <p>I strongly believe that equal rights and protections must include the LGBT community.</p> <p>I am certain that immigrants contribute enormously to our economic growth and cultural diversity.</p> <p>I have no doubt that increasing taxes on the wealthy might drive them to invest elsewhere, which will hurt our economy. We should reduce government spending on welfare, not increase it.</p> <p>Increasing tariffs on Chinese products is needed to protect domestic jobs and our great economy.</p>

2.5 Randomization

The vignettes will be randomly assigned with equal probability. The attributes of the candidates in the conjoint experiment will also be randomly assigned with equal probability.

3 Sampling Plan

3.1 Existing data

No data has been collected yet.

3.2 Explanation of existing data

N/A

3.3 Data collection procedures

We will collect data using an online survey. The survey will take 10-15 minutes to complete. Respondents will first read the informed consent form, which follows standard IRB requirements. The recruitment will be via an e-mail message from Prolific¹, which will use its respondent list for recruitment. Respondents can opt-in after they read the invitation message. Following standard procedures for this type of survey, participants will receive payment for their participation in the amount that they voluntarily agreed upon with the survey firm. The survey will be available for any person who self-identifies as white, was born in the US, and is 18 years old or older. The reason we are collecting only self-identified white individuals born in the US is that our hypotheses focus on reactions among that group.

We will use a representative sample with "soft" quotas to match the census proportion of the population by levels of education, income, age, and gender. The "soft" quota means that the proportions can be flexible at the tail of the data collection if some groups prove difficult to reach. We will also impose soft quota by partisanship, seeking to have a sample with 50% of Democratic voters and 50% of Republican voters. Independents will be excluded to increase the sample size of partisans to test H_4 and H_5 .

Participants will complete a brief attention check before the vignettes. Those who fail this attention check will be given a second check, and dropped from the survey if they fail again.

3.4 Sample size

See section [Sample size rationale](#).

3.5 Sample size rationale

According to a power analysis for conjoint experiments (Schuessler and Freitag 2020), we need 65 observations to identify an average marginal component effect (AMCE) of 0.1 with 80% power at an α -level of 0.05, for a six-tasks forced-choice paired-profile conjoint experiment with two attribute levels. The effect size is based on previous research (Mummolo, Peterson, and Westwood 2021) and budget limits. We will evaluate the Conditional Average Marginal Causal Effect (CAMCE) by treatment groups (four conditions) and party identification (two groups). Hence, we will collect $4 \times 2 \times 65 = 520$ interviews using a conjoint table without information about the party affiliation of the candidate.

For the conjoint table with information about the party affiliation of the candidate, we need enough cases in which candidates are both Democrats, both Republicans, and one is Democrat, and the other is Republican. These cases allow us to compare how partisans evaluate the

¹<https://www.prolific.com/>

candidates in each case under exposure to status threat. This means a sample of $4 \times 2 \times 3 \times 65 = 1560$. Therefore, the final sample size will have $520 + 1560 = 2080$ respondents.

4 Variables

4.1 Manipulated variables

See section 2.4

4.2 Measured variables

All the measured variables are indicated in the Questionnaire attached to this document.

4.3 Indexes

We will create the following indexes using the questions in the respective sections of the Questionnaire:

White identity average across questions, rescaled to the 0-1 interval.

National identity average across questions, rescaled to the 0-1 interval.

Party identity (ANES) ranging from strong Democrat (-1), to weak Democrat (-.5), weak Republican (.5) and strong Republican (1).

Party identification (social identity) average across questions, rescaled to the 0-1 interval.

Generalized prejudice (thermometer) average across questions about whites, blacks, Latinos, and Asian Americans rescaled to the 0-1 interval.

The indexes will be used for exploratory analyses.

5 Analysis Plan

5.1 Statistical models

Our main outcome variable will be a binary indicator of people's choice of candidate. The explanatory variables will be the candidates' features, and the conditioning variables will be the status threat exposure.

First, we will estimate two sets of logistic regression models with interactive terms between the treatment conditions and the candidates' issue positions, using the status-reassuring condition as a baseline. In all cases, we will use a binary variable for each issue, with 1 indicating a conservative position of the candidate on the respective issue. For the first set of analyses, we will use the conjoint tables without the candidates' party affiliation information. We will estimate the models using pooled data and subsamples divided by voters' party identity as captured by the ANES question.

Second, we will re-estimate the models using the conjoint tables with candidates' party affiliation information. Here, we will estimate the models using six different subsamples, divided by voters' party identification and by the party affiliation of the comparison pair in the conjoint table (either both Democratic candidates, both Republican candidates, or one Democrat versus one Republican).

In all cases, we will use the null hypothesis significance testing (NHST) framework and provide the 95% confidence intervals of the regression interaction term estimates and their p-values. We will use a significance level of 0.05 for all tests.

We will test our hypothesis in two ways. First, we will examine the coefficients of the interactive terms in each regression. If H_1 is correct, we should observe significant interaction effects for all candidates' features. On the other hand, if H_2 and H_3 are correct, we should observe stronger interaction effects for candidates' features that align with the source of status threat. For instance, under threat to the social status of whites, the effects of candidates' positions against affirmative action on candidates' support should increase, but we should see relatively weaker effects for conservative features directly unrelated to the threat group, such as abortion or LGBT rights. If H_4 is correct, we should notice distinct patterns among partisans' choices depending on the party affiliation of the pair of candidates being compared. For example, a Democratic voter exposed to status threat should support more conservative Democratic candidates when only Democrats are compared but should prefer a Democrat over a Republican, regardless of the ideological positions of the candidates. We should see a similar reaction among Republicans: they should prefer a liberal Republican over a conservative Democrat but favor more conservative Republicans when only Republican candidates are compared. This would indicate that party loyalty, at least in the short term, constrains any conservative support induced by status threat within co-partisan boundaries.

Lastly, we will conduct a statistical test of differences in regression coefficients to assess if the differences in interactive effects across subsamples are significantly different from zero. If H_5 is correct, the impact of status threat should be stronger among Democrats than among Republicans. We will not apply any corrections to multiple tests in the analyses.

5.2 Transformations

N/A

5.3 Inference criteria

P-values at 0.05 significance level.

5.4 Data exclusion

We will exclude cases automatically if they fail the attention checks.

5.5 Missing data

We will assume missing at random.

5.6 Exploratory analysis

We will use indexes for exploratory data analyses. They will include robustness checks excluding participants who completed the survey 50%, 40%, and 30% faster than the median response time in order to assess whether survey 'speeding' impacts our results, excluding participants who failed a final attention check after the conjoint task, and associations between the identities discussed in the section [Indexes](#), reactions to the treatments, choice of candidates, and perceptions of threat.

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