Christian no more: Christian Americans are threatened by their impending minority status

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ABSTRACT

Christian Americans are on track to become a minority of the U.S. population by mid-century. Research on racial demographic shifts shows majority-group members experience status threat when reminded of similar demographic changes. Public debate about religious freedom and the role of Christianity in America suggest that fast-changing religious demographics similarly elicit threat, and trigger defensive political stances, among Christian Americans. In two preregistered experiments (total $N = 766$ Christian Americans), reminders of religious demographic shifts evoked perceived threat to religious rights and freedoms, which in turn accounted for increases in Christian nationalism, conservative political ideology, and support for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election. Results illustrate how America's fast-changing religious landscape can evoke threat for Christians and how this threat may influence political reasoning.

"And if you look what's happened to religion, if you look at what's happening to Christianity, and you look at the number of people going to churches, and evangelicals know this also it's not on this kind of a climb, it's on this kind of a climb of slow and steady in the wrong direction."

– President Donald J. Trump.

"I think we all recognize that over the past 50 years religion has been under increasing attack."

– Attorney General William Barr.

For the first time in American history, both Protestants and White Christians now account for less than 50% of the United States (U.S.) population (Jones, 2016). Should current trends continue, Christianity itself could become a minority religion in the U.S. by mid-century (Pew Research Center, 2019). Research in the domain of race demonstrates that increasing diversity evokes threat among White Americans (Craig & Richeson, 2014a; Perkins, Toskos Dils, & Flusberg, 2020), who are projected to become a minority of the U.S. population by the year 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2020). In turn, rising racial diversity has been shown to lead White Americans to endorse negative attitudes toward racial minorities (Craig & Richeson, 2014a; Danbold & Huo, 2015; Outten, Schmitt, Miller, & Garcia, 2012), embrace a more conservative ideology and policies (e.g., opposition to

immigration; Craig & Richeson, 2014b), and even drive support for conservative politicians (e.g., Donald Trump in the 2016 election; Major, Blodorn, & Major Blascovich, 2018). While racial demographic shifts are at the forefront of academic discourse, considerably less attention has been dedicated to the steadily decreasing percentage of Americans who identify as Christian. We posit the transition from being a majority to a minority religious group can increase threat for Christian Americans, as they may perceive their status to be waning in an increasingly secularizing and religiously diverse country. We test whether ensuing threat promotes Christian nationalism—an ideology that advocates for the role of Christianity in American civic life.

1. Theoretical contributions

The present research is grounded in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals have a motivation to maintain a positive group image, and that threats to one's group, such as those posed by a perceived decline in status, can evoke defensive reactions. Prior research on social identity threat and status threat has focused on racial identity, leaving open questions about whether religious identity is similarly vulnerable to threat from demographic

decline. By explicitly testing whether religious identity is vulnerable to threat from demographic decline, this research advances our understanding of the role religion plays as a group identity (in addition to a belief system; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010) and adds to a nascent literature on the antecedents and consequences of religion-based social identity threats (e.g., Pasek & Cook, 2019; Wilkins et al., 2021). This work also adds to a growing multi-disciplinary literature on Christian nationalism (Whitehead, Schnabel, & Perry, 2018) by providing social psychological insights to explain why individuals may come to adopt Christian nationalist ideologies. Finally, the present research contributes to our understanding of the social psychological forces that undergird broader political movements in the U.S., where debates around religious freedom are often at the core of public discourse.

2. Changing religious demographics

To illustrate changing religious demographics in the U.S., consider the following. In 2007, 77% of the U.S. population identified as Christian. Today, that number has fallen to 69% (Pew Research Center, 2019; Public Religion Research Institute, 2021). Underlying this shift are two complementary forces: the rise of religious "nones" and, to a lesser extent, increasing religious diversity. The term religious "nones" refers to religiously unaffiliated Americans, including atheists, agnostics, and individuals who do not identify with any particular religious denomination. In 1996, 12% of Americans were religiously unaffiliated. That number has since doubled. Notably, sharp declines in the percentage of Americans who identify as Christian are not mirrored by other religious groups, suggesting that declining religiosity in the U.S. uniquely threatens Christians. These trends are on full display among those 18–29, among whom Christians comprise only 54% of the population (Public Religion Research Institute, 2021).

3. Demographic threat

Religious identities, like racial identities, should be sensitive to demographic threat. Religion is an important social identity because it simultaneously serves as a binding social group membership, a system of beliefs that guides moral behavior, and a culture (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). Because religion provides distinctive sources of meaning and security, some research suggests that threats to religious identity might even exert a stronger influence on ingroup identification and civic involvement than do threats to ethnic identity (Ysseldyk, Talebi, Matheson, Bloemraad, & Anisman, 2014), and that, in many contexts, religion tends to be a stronger source of intergroup bias than race (Grigoryan, Cohrs, Boehnke, van de Vijver, & Easterbrook, 2020). Our primary goal is to expand research on demographic shifts to the study of religion.

Although nascent, some recent research provides insights into the ways in which demographic shifts may evoke threat and trigger downstream psychological responses among Christian Americans. For example, highly religious Christians (and in particular, Protestants, who are facing the steepest demographic declines) in the U.S. perceive similar threat levels to religious minorities, and these threat perceptions in turn have been linked with more hostile intergroup attitudes (Pasek & Cook, 2019). However, this research is descriptive and correlational in nature, leaving open questions about what might drive religious threat perceptions.

To our knowledge, only one published study (Wilkins et al., 2021), conducted contemporaneously to the present research, tested whether changing religious demographics and secularization evoke threat for Christian Americans and promote LGBT bias. This work suggests changing religious demographics evoke threat, zero-sum thinking, and perceptions of anti-Christian bias. Importantly, Wilkins et al. (2021) manipulated demographic shifts while at the same time explicitly referencing shifts on culture wars between Christians and secular Americans, leaving open the possibility that perceptions of culture wars,

as opposed to changing demographics, accounted for effects.

We aim to expand upon this emergent research area in two ways. First, we seek to isolate the effect of demographic shifts by priming demographic change without specific reference to cultural changes. Second, we seek to expand our understanding of potential outcomes evoked by changing religious demographics. Specifically, we examine whether religious demographic shifts promote ideological shifts in the form of increased Christian nationalism, conservatism, and support for more conservative politicians who may more strongly advocate for Christianity's role in public life. We briefly explain our interests in these outcomes below.

4. Demographic shifts, threat, and Christian nationalism

Our interest in Christian nationalism is driven, in large part, by the possibility that changing religious demographics may help to explain some of the broader political movements occurring in the U.S. To the degree that demographic shifts evoke prototypicality threat (Danbold & Huo, 2015), it follows that Christians aware of such shifts may attempt to project their ingroups' religion onto the superordinate American identity (Wenzel, Mummendey, & Waldzus, 2008). For example, in "*The End of White Christian America*," Jones (2016) argues that the inevitable decline of White Christianity in the U.S. is leading to a last-stand effort to preserve Christianity's dominant status in American society, which many Christian Americans perceive as being under threat, regardless of whether this status loss is objectively true. Whitehead & Perry, 2020 similarly suggest this threat may promote fervent Christian nationalism, which aims to preserve Christianity's place at the top of the American social hierarchy. These premonitions appear to be playing out in real time, whether illustrated by the renewed presence of White Christian hate groups (e.g., the Klu Klux Klan) coming out of the shadows in Charlottesville, VA (Seggara, 2017), strong appeals from politicians to fend off a "war on Christianity" (Eberstadt, 2016), or the strategic appointment of judges and justices who advocate for religious values (LaGraham & LaFraniere, 2020).

Christian nationalism is an evangelical form of civil religion (Gorski, 2019; Whitehead, Perry, & Baker, 2018), which idealizes and advocates for Christianity's role in American civic life. Those who endorse Christian nationalism are more likely to believe that America should be a Christian nation, religion belongs in the public sphere, and America has a special role in God's divine plan. Christian nationalism is undergirded by conservative and fundamentalist ideologies but is more than the sum of its parts. For example, Christian nationalism continues to account for variance in punitive action against lawbreakers (Davis, 2018), support for gun rights (Whitehead, Schnabel, & Perry, 2018), and voting for President Trump in the 2016 election (Whitehead, Perry, & Baker, 2018), over and above variance accounted for by religious and political variables alone.

To the extent Christian nationalism is undergirded by political conservatism (see Whitehead & Perry, 2020), and that conservatism is driven in part by threat (Duckitt & Fisher, 2003; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003), threat may similarly operate as an important antecedent to Christian nationalism. Consistent with this hypothesis, Christian nationalist rhetoric is heavily cloaked in threat narratives. For example, among Christian nationalists, opposition to marriage equality is justified by framing same-sex marriage as a threat to the traditional family (Whitehead & Perry, 2020) and threat perceptions help explain links between Christian nationalism and support for conservative policies, such as opposition to immigration. Whereas prior research focuses on how perceived threat from target outgroups (e.g., immigrants) mediates the association between Christian nationalism and anti-immigration attitudes (Al-Kire, Pasek, Tsang, Leman, & Rowatt, 2021), in the present work, we ask whether perceived threats to religion evoke Christian nationalist ideology. Although it is likely that the association between Christian nationalism and threat is dynamic—such that threat may promote greater Christian nationalism and those higher

in Christian nationalism are more sensitive to threat—here we focus exclusively on how threat may fuel Christian nationalism.

Like system-justifying ideologies (Jost & Hunyady, 2005), Christian nationalism may be a particularly effective response to religious threat because Christian nationalist beliefs, if realized, cement the status and influence of Christianity in American life. Thus, Christian nationalist policies could inoculate Christian Americans from threats they would otherwise incur based on declining group membership. To illustrate this, Christian nationalism is commonly measured through items such as "The federal government should advocate Christian values." In addition to promoting a Christian nationalist ideology, we posited that threat evoked by religious demographic shifts might also promote support for political conservatism and conservative politicians who advocate for Christian nationalist policies, as Christian nationalism was strongly associated with support for President Trump in the 2016 election (Whitehead, Perry, & Baker, 2018).

5. The present research

We address four primary aims in two preregistered studies. First, we experimentally test whether religious demographic shifts lead Christian Americans to feel as if their religion and religious beliefs are under threat. We hypothesized that it would. Second, we experimentally test whether making American Christians aware of changing religious demographics promotes Christian nationalism. We hypothesized that it would. Third, we test whether measured religious threat perceptions are positively correlated with the endorsement of Christian nationalist beliefs. We hypothesized that it would. And fourth, we test whether making religious demographic shifts salient indirectly increases Christian nationalism by evoking religious threat. Again, we hypothesized that it would.

We also explore a series of secondary research questions that, although not preregistered, draw from theory described above. Specifically, we examine whether religious demographic shifts evoke more conservative political ideology and support for conservative (vs. liberal) political candidates, as well as whether measured religious threat predicts, and helps to explain experimental effects on, these same political measures. To increase transparency, we refer to these non-preregistered analyses as exploratory throughout the manuscript.

6. Study 1

Data were drawn from a larger project that also investigated Christian nationalism and anti-immigrant attitudes (see also Al-Kire et al., 2021). Two preregistered hypotheses from this larger project directly pertain to the present research (see on OSF at https://osf.io/7umaq/?view_only=beb2a95f7ca24e0aa38ce687305680cd). The Study 1 pre-registration also includes separate research questions that relate to anti-immigrant attitudes, which are not addressed here and relate to interests published in Al-Kire et al. (2021). All preregistered analyses are reported in full on OSF.

Consistent with Aims 1 and 2, we predicted that making religious demographic shifts salient would lead Christian Americans to experience greater religious threat and endorse greater Christian nationalist beliefs. Consistent with Aim 3, we predicted that self-reported perceptions of religious threat would positively correlate with Christian nationalism. Finally, consistent with Aim 4, based on these predictions, we examined whether religious threat itself mediated the increase in Christian nationalism evoked by changing religious demographics. In addition to these core analyses, we conducted exploratory analyses to investigate whether making religious demographic shifts salient increases political conservatism and support for a conservative presidential candidate (Donald Trump); whether religious threat is positively associated with these political measures; and whether demographic shifts might influence these political measures indirectly by increasing religious threat.

Because we report results of mediational models, we briefly explain our reasoning and the inferences we draw from these models. We acknowledge that mediation analyses are causal models, and they only provide information about one of potentially several plausible models. Our independent variable in mediation analyses was the experimental condition, which provides reasonable justification for making causal inferences from these data. Moreover, according to our theoretical reasoning, exposure to religious demographic shifts should elicit perceptions of threat to religion and religious freedoms (religious threat), which in turn should influence outcome measures, including Christian nationalism, conservatism, and support for conservative politicians who advocate for Christian nationalist policies.

6.1. Method

6.1.1. Participants and design

We recruited 500 U.S. Christians via Cloud Research in November 2019. We based this *N* on an a priori power analysis using G*Power. For a two-tailed independent samples *t*-test with alpha set at 0.05, a small-medium effect size ($d = 0.3$), and 80% power a minimum sample of 352 was suggested. We oversampled based on recommendations for samples 400 or greater to test for mediation effects (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007). Prior to analyses, data were cleaned using pre-registered exclusions (i.e., those who failed a manipulation check [$n = 70$], attention checks [$n = 13$], or were not Christian [$n = 86$]). We also excluded non-U.S. IP addresses identified through IP Hub [$n = 51$], as we were specifically testing predictions relevant to Americans. The final sample included 425 Christians ($M_{age} = 46.18$, $SD_{age} = 14.30$, 65.9% female, 34.1% male). Of these, 77.9% were white, 9.4% Black/African American, 5.4% Hispanic, 3.5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1.9% Native American, and 1.9% reported "Other". Additionally, 54.8% were Protestant, 32.0% Catholic, and 13.2% reported "Other-Christian".

Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two news articles (see below). After reading the article, participants completed a manipulation check (in which they were asked to identify the topic of the article they read) and responded to a series of questionnaires assessing perceptions of threat, political ideologies, and attitudes. All data exclusions and manipulations are reported, and full study materials are provided on OSF.

6.1.2. Materials and measures

6.1.2.1. Experimental manipulation.
In the demographic-shift condition, the article described how Christians were projected to become a minority of the U.S. population in the next 15 years. This article was based on real demographic trends (Pew Research Center, 2019). In the control condition, the article described how suburban Americans were projected to become the minority in the next 15 years (control condition). These articles were based on prior research (Craig & Richeson, 2014a). We note that our experimental condition was conceptually similar to that used in Wilkins et al. (2021; study 3), however Wilkins et al. also explicitly primed cultural threats, leaving the question open to whether or not demographic shifts alone evoke perceptions of threat to religion. In our experimental manipulation, we strictly manipulated demographic shifts to test this possibility.

6.1.2.2. Manipulation and attention checks.
Participants were asked to select the topic of the news article they read from a series of options (manipulation check). The two attention check items asked participants to select a specific option from a series (multiple choice format), and to indicate the color of most grass (short answer response).

6.1.2.3. Religious threat.
Participants rated their agreement with two items: "My religious freedom is often under attack", and "Religion is under attack in the U.S." (Pasek & Cook, 2019). Items were rated on a

scale from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*very true*; $r = 0.78$, $p < .001$), which we averaged to form a single religious threat measure.

6.1.2.4. Christian nationalism.

Six items assessed Christian nationalism (Whitehead & Perry, 2020). These items included: (1) "The federal government should declare the United States a Christian Nation"; (2) "The federal government should advocate Christian values"; (3) "The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces"; (4) "The federal government should allow prayer in public schools"; (5) "The success of the United States is part of God's plan"; and (6) "The federal government should enforce a strict separation of church and state" (reverse-coded item; $\alpha = 0.85$). Participants rated each item on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In addition to our core previously validated measure of Christian nationalism (Whitehead & Perry, 2020), we included 18 exploratory items for future scale creation. We planned to use the Whitehead and Perry (2020) 6-item Christian nationalism measure as our dependent variable, however we neglected to specify this in our preregistration. For more information on this unvalidated scale, see Supplemental Materials.[2]

6.1.3. Exploratory measures

6.1.3.1. Political conservatism.

Participants rated, "In general, how would you describe your political views?", using a 1 (*very liberal*) to 7 (*very conservative*) scale.

6.1.3.2. Support for President Trump in 2020 presidential election.

Participants rated how likely they were to vote for Republican incumbent President Trump in the 2020 election on a sliding scale ranging from 0 (*not at all likely*) to 100 (*highly likely*).

6.2. Results

6.2.1. Core analyses

6.2.1.1. Do religious demographic shifts increase self-reported perceptions of religious threat?.

We regressed religious threat on condition (religious demographic shift $= 0.5$, control $= -0.5$). Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants who read about changing religious demographics reported higher levels of religious threat ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.35$) than did those in the control condition ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 1.28$), $F(1, 422) = 8.47$, $p = .004$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$. See Fig. 1. Note that, although we hypothesized this effect, it was not preregistered.

6.2.1.2. Do religious demographic shifts increase Christian nationalism?.

Yes, although as described below, effects were driven by a small subset of scale items. As hypothesized and preregistered, consistent with Hypothesis 2, participants who read about changing religious demographics ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.04$) reported greater Christian nationalism than did those in the control condition ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.94$), $F(1, 423) = 4.04$, $p = .045$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$. See Fig. 1.

Due to the small effect of the manipulation on Christian nationalism, which met conventional significance cut-offs, we conducted exploratory item-level analyses to determine if the effect was driven by specific items. Indeed, the manipulation only significantly increased endorsement of two items: "The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation", ($p = .024$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$) and "There should be a separation of church and state" (reverse-keyed; $p = .047$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$).

6.2.1.3. Is measured religious threat positively associated with Christian nationalism?.

As hypothesized and preregistered, consistent with Hypothesis 3, participants who reported more religious threat reported greater Christian nationalism, $b = 0.34$, $F(1, 422) = 112.34$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.28, 0.41], $\eta_p^2 = 0.21$.

6.2.1.4. Do religious demographic shifts indirectly increase Christian nationalism by evoking religious threat?.

Indirect tests were conducted using PROCESS 3.0 in SPSS Version 26 using 10,000 bootstrap samples for percentile bootstrap confidence intervals. Consistent with Hypothesis 4, results revealed a significant indirect effect of condition on Christian nationalism through religious threat, see Fig. 2. We note that this analysis was not preregistered.

6.2.1.5. Do religious demographic shifts influence political ideology and likelihood of voting for President Trump?.

Although we did not preregister these analyses, we predicted that making religious demographic shifts salient should increase conservatism and support for President Trump. Contrary to our expectations, there were no significant differences in political conservatism between the religious demographic shift ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.78$) and the control conditions ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.76$), $b = 0.21$, $F(1, 423) = 1.55$, $p = .214$, 95% CI [-0.12, 0.55], $\eta_p^2 < 0.01$. Additionally, there were no significant differences between the experimental ($M = 45.12$, $SD = 43.64$) and control condition ($M = 43.38$, $SD = 43.37$) on likelihood of voting for President Trump, $b = 1.74$, $F(1, 415) = 0.17$, $p = .684$, 95% CI [-6.65, 10.13], $\eta_p^2 < 0.01$.

6.2.1.6. Is self-reported religious threat associated with political conservatism and likelihood of voting for President Trump?.

As hypothesized but not preregistered, participants higher in religious threat reported higher political conservatism, $b = 0.59$, $F(1, 424) = 101.24$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.70, 0.19], $\eta_p^2 = 0.19$, and stronger intentions of voting for President Trump, $b = 10.77$, $F(1, 414) = 50.78$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [7.80, 13.74], $\eta_p^2 = 0.11$.

6.2.1.7. Do religious demographic shifts indirectly influence political conservatism and likelihood of voting for President Trump through religious threat?.

As hypothesized but not preregistered, there was a significant indirect effect of condition on political conservatism through religious threat, $\beta = 0.22$, BootSE $= 0.08$, BCA 95% CI: [0.07, 0.37]. There was also a significant indirect effect of condition on intention of voting for Trump through religious threat, $\beta = 0.10$, BootSE $= 0.04$, BCA 95% CI [0.03, 0.17].

6.3. Discussion

These results provide strong evidence that demographic shifts evoke threat for American Christians (consistent with Wilkins et al., 2021),[3] weak evidence in favor of the hypothesis that demographic threats increase Christian nationalism among Christian Americans, and strong evidence that self-reported religious threat perceptions are associated with Christian nationalist beliefs. Results also suggest that increased threat indirectly accounts for heightened Christian nationalism. Finally, results documented that perceptions of religious threat are associated with greater political conservatism and support for conservative politicians.
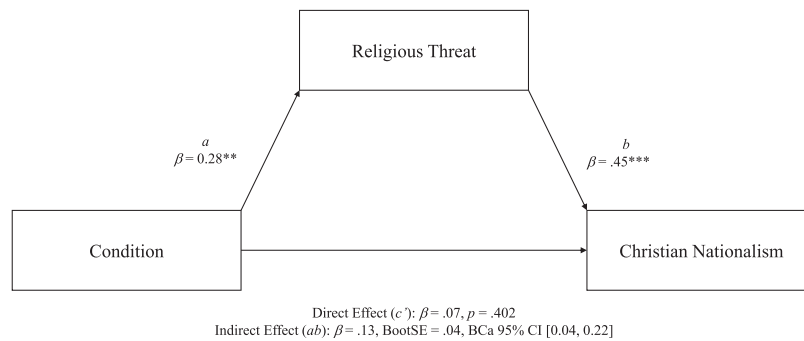
The observed effect of learning about religious demographic shifts on Christian nationalism was driven by two items, which assessed the belief there should be a strict separation of church and state (reverse-keyed), and that the federal government should declare the U.S. a Christian nation. This pattern raises questions as to whether changing religious demographics broadly increase Christian nationalism or whether effects

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[2] We report additional exploratory measures in Supplemental Materials.

[3] As we report in Supplemental Materials, reading about religious demographic shifts also evoked general perceptions of threat in addition to religious threat.
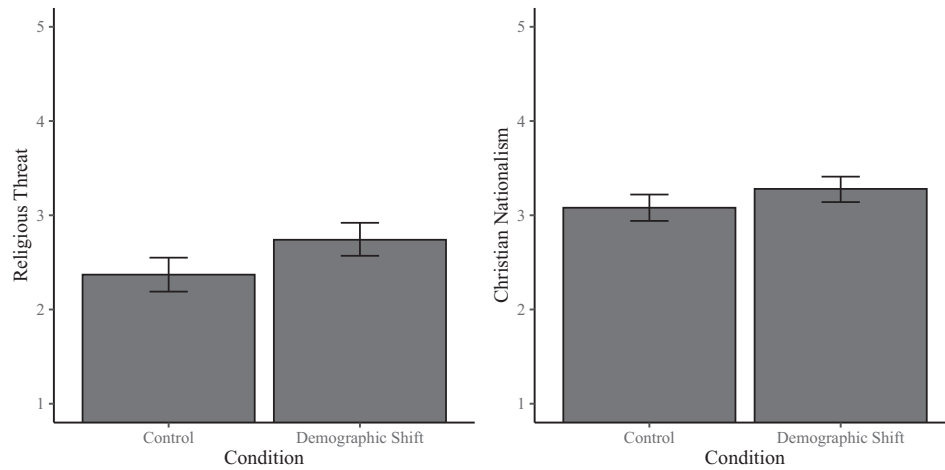
Fig. 1. Mean differences between experimental (Religious Demographic Shift) and Control condition on religious threat and Christian nationalism in Study 1
Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Direct Effect (c'): $\beta = .07$, $p = .402$
Indirect Effect (ab): $\beta = .13$, BootSE = .04, BCa 95% CI [0.04, 0.22]

Fig. 2. Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between experimental condition and Christian nationalism as mediated by religious threat in Study 1.
Note. **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

may be limited to policy outcomes that most directly relate to cementing Christianity's legal privilege.

Closer inspection of our study protocol also revealed three potential limitations that might have counteracted our manipulation, limiting our ability to draw clear conclusions. First, we measured religious threat directly after the manipulation. These items were not nested with other unrelated questions and may have evoked religious threat among control condition participants, undercutting our threat manipulation. Second, directly after the religious threat items—before we measured Christian nationalism—we administered a manipulation check in which participants were asked to select the title of the news article that they read. Both the control and experimental titles were included in this list for all participants. Thus, this manipulation check may also have inadvertently evoked threat for control condition participants.

7. Study 2

Study 2 was a preregistered replication of core findings from Study 1. Based on limitations discussed in the Study 1 Discussion, we made four key modifications to strengthen our study procedure. First, we disguised our religious threat items with items assessing attitudes about other rights, freedoms, and identities, which also used to tease apart whether our manipulation uniquely threatened religious (as opposed to other domains of) threat (Chester & Lasko, 2021). Second, we only included Whitehead and Perry's (2020) Christian nationalism scale (and specified this in our preregistration document). Third, to strengthen our manipulation, we framed the reading task as intended to measure how people

read articles and graphs, and included follow-up questions which presented the graphs again, encouraging active reflection on the article. Fourth, we modified our manipulation check to ensure participants did not see the title of the article from the opposite experimental condition.

We preregistered the following research questions and hypotheses. Consistent with Aims 1 and 2, we asked whether making religious demographic shifts salient would increase religious threat and Christian nationalism. We hypothesized it would. Consistent with Aims 3 and 4, we asked whether self-reported religious threat would be positively associated with Christian nationalism and whether religious threat would mediate this experimental effect. We hypothesized that the answer to both questions would be yes. In addition to these preregistered research questions and hypotheses, we again tested whether religious demographic shifts influence political conservatism and voting preferences either directly or indirectly through religious threat.

7.1. Method

7.1.1. Participants and design

Participants ($N = 506$ Christians) were recruited on Cloud Research in June 2020. This sample size was determined using Power Analysis with Mediation Models, through which we conducted an a priori Monte Carlo power analysis for indirect effects (Schoemann, Boulton, & Short, 2017). Results from this analysis suggested a sample size of 400 would yield 80% power to detect an expected effect. We oversampled by 25% in anticipation of data exclusions. Participants were randomly assigned to read either an article about changing religious demographics in the U.

S. (religious demographic threat condition) or about changing residential trends in the U.S. (control condition). After reading the article, participants responded to a series of questionnaires assessing perceptions of threat and political ideologies and attitudes. All data exclusions and manipulations are reported, and full study materials are provided, on OSF.

Prior to analyses, data were cleaned using pre-registered data exclusions (e.g., those who failed the manipulation or attention checks [$n = 70$], were outside of the United States [$n = 18$], had unidentifiable IP addresses [$n = 33$], or were not Christian [$n = 67$]).[4] Power Analyses with Mediation Models app in R (Schoemann et al., 2017) suggest our final sample of 341 provided 75% power to detect a small effect. This sample ($M_{age} = 44.11$, $SD_{age} = 14.59$, 57.5% female, 42.5% male) was 71.3% White, 13.2% Black, 5.9% Hispanic, 5.6% Asian or Pacific Islander, 1.5% Native American, 1.5% Bi-Racial, and 1.2% "Another race or ethnicity". Participants were primarily Protestant (44.3%) and Catholic (42.2%), and the remaining were 10.9% Christian (General), 2.1% Latter Day Saint, and 0.6% Orthodox. Of these participants, 34% identified as Evangelical.

7.1.2. Materials and measures

7.1.2.1. Manipulation and attention checks.
We included a manipulation check, where participants were asked to identify the topic of the article they read, as well as the same two attention checks from Study 1 (short answer and multiple choice).

7.1.3. Preregistered measures

7.1.3.1. Experimental stimuli.
We used the same articles from Study 1.

7.1.3.2. Religious threat.
We administered the same items to measure religious threat from Study 1 ($r = 0.78$, $p < .001$).

7.1.3.3. Christian nationalism.
We used the same six-item Christian nationalism scale from Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.85$).

7.1.4. Exploratory measures

7.1.4.1. Political conservatism.
Participants rated their general level of political conservatism on a scale from 1 (*very liberal*) to 7 (*very conservative*).

7.1.4.2. Voting.
Participants reported how likely they were to vote for President Trump and former Vice President Biden in the 2020 presidential election on a scale from 0 (*not at all likely*) to 100 (*very likely*).

7.2. Results

7.2.1. Preregistered analyses

7.2.1.1. Does making religious demographic shifts salient elicit religious threat?.
Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants in the demographic shift condition reported significantly higher religious threat ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.35$) than those in the control condition ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.27$), $b = 0.35$, $F(1, 336) = 6.10$, $p = .014$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.64], $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$. See Fig. 3.

7.2.1.2. Does making religious demographic shifts salient increase christian nationalism?.
Inconsistent with Hypothesis 2, there was no significant effect of condition on Christian nationalism, $b = 0.16$, $F(1, 336) = 2.35$, $p = .126$, 95% CI [−0.05, 0.36], $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$, although condition means mirrored those from Study 1. See Fig. 3.

7.2.1.3. Is religious threat associated with Christian nationalism?.
Consistent with Hypothesis 3, respondents higher in religious threat reported significantly greater Christian nationalist beliefs, $b = 0.41$, $F(1, 336) = 166.52$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.35, 0.48], $\eta_p^2 = 0.33$.

7.2.1.4. Does making religious demographic shifts salient indirectly increase Christian nationalism through religious threat?.
Consistent with Hypothesis 4, reading about religious demographic shifts indirectly increased Christian nationalism by increasing religious threat, see Fig. 4.

7.2.2. Secondary analyses
Analyses reported here were not preregistered and are thus considered exploratory.

7.2.2.1. Do religious demographics shifts increase (and is religious threat associated with) conservatism and voting intentions?.
There was no effect of condition on political ideology, $F(1, 341) = 1.80$, $p = .180$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$, nor was measured religious threat associated with conservatism, $b = 0.08$, $F(1, 336) = 2.47$, $p = .117$, 95% CI [−0.02, 0.18], $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$.

Results revealed significant effects of condition on both an increased likelihood of voting for Republican incumbent Trump, $b = 0.71$, $F(1, 336) = 6.28$, $p = .013$, 95% CI [0.15, 1.27], $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$, and a decreased likelihood of voting for Democratic candidate Biden, $b = -0.73$, $F(1, 336) = 7.63$, $p = .006$, 95% CI [−1.26, −0.21], $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$. Self-reported religious threat was significantly associated with greater intentions to vote for Trump, $b = 0.88$, $F(1, 336) = 81.23$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.68, 1.07], $\eta_p^2 = 0.20$ and lower intentions to vote for Biden, $b = -0.65$, $F(1, 336) = 46.53$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.83, −0.46], $\eta_p^2 = 0.12$. Both of these effects were mediated by perceived religious threat (see Fig. 5).

7.3. Discussion

In Study 2, we aimed to replicate and extend results from Study 1. Our core questions tested the effects of priming a religious demographic shift on religious threat and Christian nationalism. Consistent with Study 1, priming Christian Americans with information that Christians would become the minority in the U.S. increased religious threat and indirectly increased Christian nationalism. However, we did not replicate the finding that a religious demographic threat directly influenced Christian nationalism.
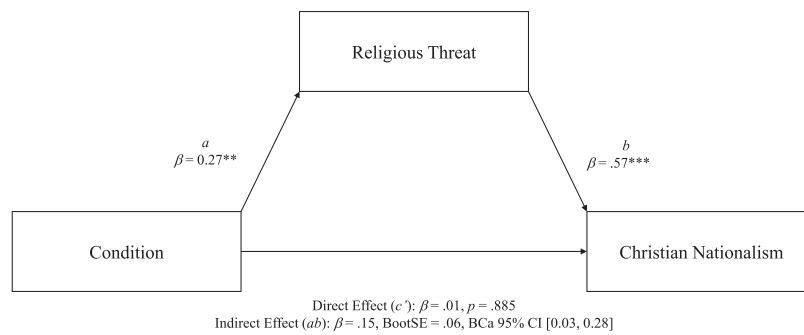
In addition to our Christian Nationalism scale, we administered four items intended to assess support for the separation of church and state. Items did not form a good scale. Item level analyses do not reveal significant direct effects of our experimental manipulation, but do reveal significant correlations between items and religious threat, as well as significant indirect effects, through threat, of our manipulation. Thus, results are partially consistent with Study 1 findings. See Supplemental Materials.

In exploratory analyses, we aimed to conceptually replicate previous findings which showed that demographic increases political conservatism and support for conservative candidates (Craig & Richeson, 2014b; Major et al., 2018). After making religious demographic shifts salient, we did not find a significant increase in political conservatism itself, but we did find an increase in voting support for President Trump (the conservative presidential candidate) and a decrease in support for former Vice President Biden (the liberal presidential candidate). In ancillary analyses reported in Supplemental Materials, we also tested the domain specificity of religious demographic threat on perceptions of general threat as well as threats to other rights and freedoms, finding
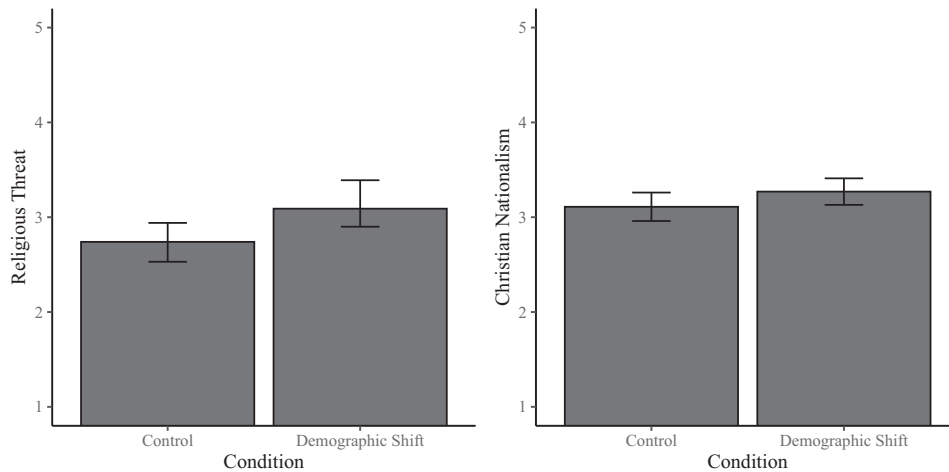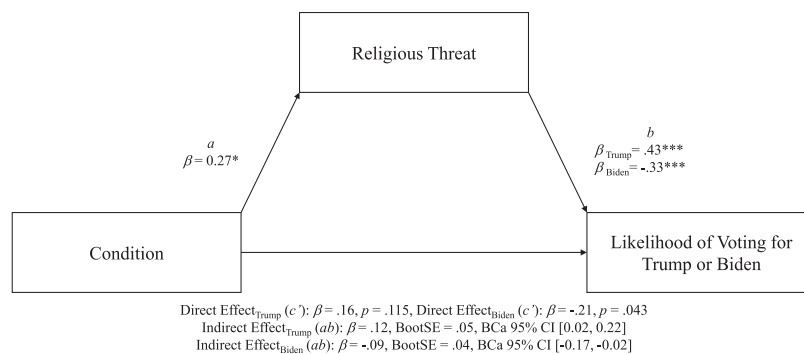
Fig. 3. Mean differences between experimental (Religious Demographic Shift) and Control condition on religious threat and Christian nationalism in study 2.
Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Direct Effect (c'): $\beta = .01$, $p = .885$
Indirect Effect (ab): $\beta = .15$, BootSE = .06, BCa 95% CI [0.03, 0.28]

Fig. 4. Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between experimental condition and Christian nationalism as mediated by religious threat in Study 2.
Note. **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Direct Effect$_{Trump}$ (c'): $\beta = .16$, $p = .115$, Direct Effect$_{Biden}$ (c'): $\beta = -.21$, $p = .043$
Indirect Effect$_{Trump}$ (ab): $\beta = .12$, BootSE = .05, BCa 95% CI [0.02, 0.22]
Indirect Effect$_{Biden}$ (ab): $\beta = -.09$, BootSE = .04, BCa 95% CI [-0.17, -0.02]

Fig. 5. Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between experimental condition and likelihood of voting for trump and biden as mediated by religious threat in Study 2.
Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

that religious demographic changes increased general perceptions of threat and threat to religious rights and freedoms, but not threats to other identities and freedoms. This provides further evidence that religious demographic changes may influence political decision making by leading Christian Americans to see their religion and religious freedom as being under attack, and that religious threat perceptions may be internalized as an important and consequential source of threat.

8. Pooled analyses

Given inconsistent findings across studies with respect to the effect of religious demographic changes on Christian nationalism, and the potential that we may have been underpowered to observe experimental effects in Study 2 due to larger than expected exclusions, we conducted a series of pooled analyses. Combining data from both studies allowed us to test whether reminders of religious demographic changes reliably elicited perceptions of threat, religious threat, and Christian

nationalism, and if these effects differed across studies.

Pooled analysis also increased our statistical power to explore new questions relating to subgroup differences in experimental effects. As might be expected if prototypicality threat (Danbold & Huo, 2015; Wagoner & VanCuren, 2021) drove results, we tested whether Protestants, who are the largest and most prototypical Christian group in the U. S., might display a stronger threat response to religious demographic shifts than Christians from other denominations (e.g., Catholics). We also tested whether White Christians, who have a double-majority status but are already outnumbered as an intersectional identity (Jones, 2016), reported stronger threat responses than ethnic and racial minority Christians.

8.1. Results

To conduct pooled analyses, we included interaction terms between study (contrast-coded: $-0.5 =$ Study 1, $0.5 =$ Study 2) and condition. For mediational models, we tested whether study moderated indirect paths and collapsed across simple indirect paths for each study obtain overall effects. Codes for subgroup analyses are described below.

Collapsed across studies, compared to participants in the control condition, those in the religious demographic change condition reported greater religious threat ($b = 0.36$, $F[1, 758] = 13.92$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.175, 0.552], $\eta p2 = 0.02$) and Christian nationalism ($b = 0.18$, $F[1, 759] = 6.15$, $p = .013$, 95% CI [0.037, 0.316], $\eta p2 = 0.01$). Study did not moderate the effect of experimental condition on religious threat ($F[1, 758] = 0.01$, $p = .924$) or Christian nationalism ($F[1, 759] = 0.06$, $p = .803$).

Results also showed a significant indirect effect of experimental condition on Christian nationalism through religious threat, $b = 0.14$, BootSE $= 0.05$, 95% CI [0.034, 0.243], which was also not moderated by study, $b = -0.06$, BootSE $= 0.12$, 95% CI: [-.30, 0.18]. Thus, across studies, the effect of religious demographic shifts on Christian nationalism was mediated by an increase in religious threat.

To test whether White Christians demonstrated a stronger response to changing religious demographics, we entered race as a moderator (White $= 0.5$, non-White $= -0.5$), including race x condition, race x study, and race x condition x study interactions. Race did not moderate the effect of condition on religious threat ($b = 0.11$, $t(754) = 0.51$, $p = .614$, 95% CI: [-0.32, 0.55], $\eta_p^2 < 0.01$) or Christian nationalism ($b = 0.20$, $t[755] = 1.49$, $p = .222$, 95% CI: [-0.12, 0.52], $\eta_p^2 < 0.01$).

To test whether Protestant Christians reported greater religious threat in response to changing religious demographics, we entered religious affiliation (dummy coded with Protestant as comparison group and Catholic and other-Christians) as a moderator, including all two- and three-way interactions. Adding religious affiliation x condition interactions did not improve model fit for either religious threat (F_{change} [2, 750] $= 2.11$, $p = .122$, $R^2_{change} = 0.01$ or Christian nationalism (F_{change} [2, 751] $= 0.39$, $p = .679$, $R^2_{change} < 0.01$).

9. General discussion

In two studies of Christian Americans, we tested whether the salience of a religious demographic shift would evoke religious threat and Christian nationalism. In both studies, participants who were primed with information that Christians would become a minority were more likely to believe that their religion and religious freedoms were under attack. Additionally, participants who reported feeling their religion and religious freedoms were threatened also reported stronger endorsement of Christian nationalist beliefs, such as believing the United States should be declared a Christian nation, and were more supportive of conservative politicians, who advocate for Christianity's role in public life.

Through this work, we demonstrate that status threat applies not just to racial identities but to other advantaged group memberships, namely religion—an important and understudied social identity (Ysseldyk et al.,

2010). These findings also contribute to the existing body of research on identity threat and demographic shifts (which mostly centers on race) and provide evidence, consistent with Wilkins et al. (2021), that changing religious demographics evoke perceived threat to religion and religious freedoms. We note that unlike Wilkins et al. (2021), our experimental manipulations did not explicitly mention culture wars or related themes. This suggests that demographic shifts alone are sufficient to evoke threat among Christian Americans. Our results also provide novel evidence that, by evoking religious threat, demographic shifts may promote an ideological shift among Christian Americans by increasing Christian nationalism.

At the study level, we found somewhat mixed evidence for the direct effect of demographic threat on Christian nationalism. In Study 1, we found a small experimental effect on Christian nationalism. Mean differences between the experimental and control conditions were mirrored in Study 2, however, this effect was not significant. One possibility is that our Study 2 sample, which was smaller than we had originally planned due to data exclusions, was underpowered to detect this small effect. Notably, results of pooled analyses suggest reminders of religious demographic shifts significantly increased endorsement of Christian nationalist ideology, and this effect did not differ across studies. Additionally, we found an indirect effect of demographic shifts on Christian nationalism through religious threat, which replicated across studies and was significant in the pooled analysis. These analyses provide some assurance of the robustness of our Study 1 effect.

We found mixed effects of religious demographic shifts on political attitudes. We did not find evidence that religious demographic shifts affect political conservatism, failing to conceptually replicate findings from studies on racial demographic change (Craig & Richeson, 2014b; Major et al., 2018). However, in Study 2, reminding Christian Americans of religious demographic shifts increased their intention to vote for Trump and decreased their intention to vote for Biden, each of which were explained by an increase in perceived religious threat. This suggests that threats triggered by religious demographic changes may not directly influence political conservatism, but that these threats are associated with, and can trigger changes in, support for pro-Christian nationalist political candidates (i.e., Trump).

While Study 2 offered weaker support for the idea that religious demographic shifts evoke Christian nationalism, it is possible that the null effect in Study 2 is an artifact of higher baseline threat levels observed in this study. Study 1 was conducted in November of 2019, well before the COVID outbreak, whereas Study 2 was conducted in June 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. Perceptions of religious threat in the control condition were higher in Study 2 ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.27$) than in Study 1 ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 1.28$), $t(311) = -2.75$, $p = .006$, $d = 0.29$. Recent work shows that religious individuals perceived many COVID mandates, such as bans on religious gatherings, including church services, as a threat to their religion (DeFranza, Lindow, Harrison, Mishra, & Mishra, 2020). Additionally, Study 2 data were collected alongside active and divisive political campaigns, during which public debate about the role of religion in society was frequent. Given the political relevance of the variables under study here, this is important to note, though we acknowledge that these post-hoc explanations are speculative and we do not have data to adequately test them. Importantly, although the effect of the manipulation on religious threat was weakened, we still observed an increase in threat in Study 2.

9.1. Limitations and future directions

While pooled analyses provide strong evidence that religious demographic shifts evoke Christian nationalism, mean differences between conditions were still small. It is important to acknowledge the possibility that observed effects may be too small to be practically significant. For example, small experimental effects may indicate this set of beliefs to be relatively stable. As such, Christian nationalism may have been somewhat resistant to immediate influence by acute threats such as the threat

we introduced in our experiment. In these studies, we focused on short-term changes, but research shows that identity and ideologies are long-term processes (Huddy, 2001). Longitudinal work may be beneficial to further test these ideas. It is also possible that frequent discussion about changing religious demographics in the news, and culture wars between Christians and non-Christians in the run-up to the 2020 election may have reduced the purity of our control condition. Future work should test whether increased support for certain political candidates is driven in part by the candidate's perceived endorsement of Christian nationalism.

We further acknowledge that theory derived mediational models present only one of potentially several plausible models, and other competing theoretical models cannot be ruled out. For example, it is possible that perceptions of religious threat are a byproduct of Christian nationalism, or there may be a dynamic relation between threat and Christian nationalism, which was not reflected in our models.

We suggested religious demographic changes may be especially important to consider as research shows religion may be especially sensitive to threats (Ysseldyk et al., 2014) and an especially strong source of intergroup bias (Grigoryan et al., 2020). An important and open question is how religious and racial demographic threats compare to each other, both in terms of magnitude as well as outcomes. Although religious demographic shifts are frequently discussed in the media, religion is often a concealable identity, meaning that people may be less aware of these shifts in everyday life. At the same time, policies associated with Christian nationalism may be more socially acceptable than policies associated with White nationalism. For example, opening a public meeting with a Christian prayer is likely more socially acceptable than opening a public meeting with an ode to Whiteness. As such, it is possible that compared with racial demographic shifts, threat evoked by religious demographic shifts may result in less controversial policies.

Religious and racial demographic shifts may also exert a complementary influence for White Christian Americans. Indeed, together, White Christians are already a minority (Jones, 2016). Because White Christians can be seen as prototypical Americans, the confluence of these two identities may evoke a particularly strong sense of threat. In pooled analyses, we examined whether White Christians were more sensitive to racial demographic threats and did not find evidence to support this claim. Future work should continue to examine how demographic shifts based on race and religion interact with each other and whether and how these shifts exert similar or different influences for racial minority and majority Christians.

There may also be other ideologies that are activated in response to group status threat that we did not examine in our studies. For example, the dual process model of prejudice and ideology (Duckitt & Sibley, 2017) suggests that social dominance orientation may increase in response to perceptions of intergroup competition that might increase with threat. Additionally, and consistent with this model, to the extent that the world is perceived as dangerous or threatening, right wing authoritarianism may also increase. Future studies should examine whether religious demographic shifts are associated with these motivational drives and ideologies, and particularly how they unfold and interact with experiences of threat over time.

Prior research suggests stereotypes about the growing groups can moderate the relation between anticipated increases in diversity and perceived threat (Craig, Rucker, & Richeson, 2018). In our manipulation, we suggested the religiously unaffiliated were the fastest growing group (consistent with reports by Pew Research Center and others; Cox & Jones, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2019). Future work should also test whether increases in some outgroups (e.g., Muslims or atheists) may be more threatening than increases in others (e.g., Jews). This may be particularly important in helping to elucidate how changing demographics effect political beliefs relevant to different outgroups. For example, perceptions of Muslims population growth may uniquely predict opposition to expanding refugee limits among Christian Americans.

Relatedly, different outgroups may evoke different forms of intergroup threat. Recent research suggests threat from increasing secularization is more strongly related to symbolic threat than realistic threat (Wilkins et al., 2021). We suspect our measure of religious threat is more strongly associated with symbolic threat (i.e., non-tangible threats to beliefs and values), though this remains to be tested. To the extent Christian Americans—or even more specifically, Protestant Americans—worry that they will no longer represent the typical American, prototypicality threat may also be at play (Danbold & Huo, 2015). Consistent with this, recent research suggests the links between religious fundamentalism and opposition to church-state separation manifests only when Christian Americans perceive Christianity to no longer represent the prototypical American identity (Wagoner & VanCuren, 2021). Future work should explicitly test whether religious demographic shifts evoke prototypicality threat for Christians and examine whether certain forms of threat explain more resulting variation in Christian nationalism. We note however, that prototypicality threat is highly correlated with other threat perceptions (Bai & Federico, 2021), which may also make it hard to directly tease apart effects.

It is also important to note that religious demographic change is dynamic. At the time our studies were conducted, unaffiliated Americans were on the rise, and Christians as a whole were shrinking. More recent data shows the decline of Christianity in the U.S. has slowed down compared to the previous projections, with more recent demographic declines pronounced among evangelical Christians (Public Religion Research Institute, 2021). This is important to note given that evangelical Christians are among the most likely to endorse Christian nationalist beliefs (Whitehead, Schnabel, & Perry, 2018). Conversely, demographic shifts have plateaued for mainline (non-evangelical) Christians and unaffiliated Americans. The dynamic nature of America's changing religious landscape suggests that our findings should be contextualized at the time in which our studies were conducted. It is possible that demographic shifts may now exert greater influence on evangelical Christians—who are steadily losing population—and may exert weaker, or even no influence today, on mainline Christians. An open question is whether mainline Christians will still be threatened by the possibility that Christians, as a whole, may lose their majority-group status, or conversely, if some mainline Christians—and in particular, those who are more liberal—may be pleased that their subgroups' representation within the broader group of American Christians is on the rise.

9.2. Constraints on generality

We focused exclusively on Christian participants. This specification in sampling was intentional, as we did not expect our manipulation to threaten members of other religious groups. Additionally, as Christians have historically been the majority religious group in the U.S., it made sense to begin testing this research question in this sample. The patterns found in the present study may not replicate in other countries, particularly where Christians are not the majority. However, similar effects may emerge in other countries where religious demographic changes are similarly at play. For example, in India and Israel, Hindus and Jews, respectively, may report heightened perceptions of threat to their religion and religious freedoms when reminded of the increase in Muslims in each country. Similar to findings among Whites in the U.S. when reminded of racial demographic shifts (see Outten et al., 2012), this may result in increases in prejudice toward outgroups and religious and ethno-nationalism. More research is needed to address this possibility.

10. Conclusion

Two studies show that making Christian Americans aware of the fact that their religious group represents a declining share of the U.S. population led Christians to perceive their religion and religious freedom as being under attack and increased Christian Americans' endorsement of

Christian nationalism. Changes in Christian nationalism were also explained by increases in religious threat, providing a psychological window into potential drivers of Christian nationalist ideology. Exploratory analyses further show that religious threat perceptions were associated with political conservatism and support for Donald Trump in the 2020 election. As the U.S. continues to experience profound shifts in its religious makeup, and Christians—particularly White evangelical Christians—continue to decline as a percentage of the U.S. population, understanding how members of a once dominant religious groups perceive and react to change will continue to be of the utmost importance.

Appendix A. Supplementary materials

Supplementary tmaterials to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2021.104223.

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