

News & views

Social science

Why some US voters might support white nationalism

Jennifer Chudy

Three national surveys reveal how factors such as gender, age, political alignment and income are correlated with support for white nationalism in the United States.

Ahead of the 2026 US midterm elections in November, there has already been much discourse in the popular media around the rightward political shift of Latino US voters. A similar shift was seen during the 2024 US election. Writing in *Nature*, Egan *et al.*¹ report a trend among white US voters that deserves equal, if not more, attention: the prevalence of support for white nationalist views. The authors find that a non-trivial proportion of US voters surveyed (4.9% of white adults overall; 13.5% of young white men) support white nationalism, agreeing with the statement that “shifting demographics in the US pose an existential threat” to their race, which they view as “culturally superior and deserving of power over all other groups”.

The authors took on the challenging task of identifying and measuring the concept of white nationalism, which they linked to outcomes such as opinions about political violence and immigration, and support for US President Donald Trump. This was a delicate undertaking because egalitarianism² and racial ‘colour blindness’³ – which extol racial equality or ignore race altogether – are US cultural norms, so voters might be reticent to express support for white nationalist views. Previous studies have surveyed white nationalist attitudes by asking indirect questions that do not use the phrase white nationalism. By contrast, Egan *et al.* took a direct approach by fielding three large national Internet surveys in which participants were given a definition of white nationalism and asked whether they agreed with it.

The authors found mostly convergent patterns across the three independent studies and quantified the subset of white US voters who support white nationalism. The prevalence of this attitude was correlated with low levels of education and income as well

as with conservative or Republican political identification. The interaction of age and gender emerged as a significant correlate: young men (aged 18–29 years) were more likely to endorse white nationalist views than were men older than 29 years or women of any age (Fig. 1). The authors made efforts to address biases, such as the fact that survey respondents are more likely to give a positive than a negative response to questions.

Why would white US voters endorse white nationalism? Egan and colleagues provide three potential explanations that draw on a diverse and sizeable academic literature that explores the racial attitudes of white US voters and covers topics such as racial prejudice⁴,

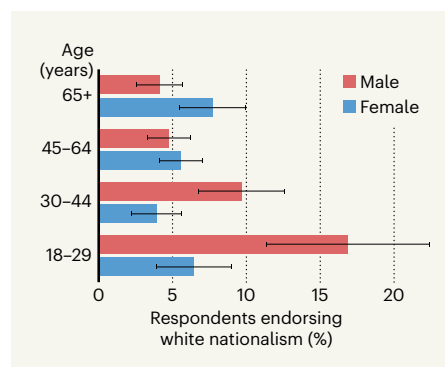


Figure 1 | Age and gender are predictors of support for white nationalism among white voters in the United States. Egan *et al.*¹ report the results of three national surveys in which white US voters were presented with a definition of white nationalism and asked whether they supported it. The authors measured the extent to which demographic and political variables are correlated with support for white nationalism. The graph shows results from one of the three studies, broken down by age and gender. (Adapted from Fig. 2 of ref. 1).

racial sympathy⁵ and fear of displacement⁶.

One possibility is that white US voters under strain – experiencing a personal health crisis or the loss of a relationship or job, for instance – are especially vulnerable to radicalizing messages, including suggestions of white superiority. Another possibility concerns perceptions of diminished status: as populations of minority ethnic groups expand and, in places, individuals from these backgrounds take up positions of power, some white people fixate on perceived loss and look for someone to blame. Finally, the Internet might have given white nationalist views room to blossom, particularly through online mobilization by extremist groups.

The authors explore these three theories as predictors of white nationalism and their results offer mixed support for each. Support is strongest for strain and online mobilization. White nationalism is higher among people facing personal hardship and living in distressed communities – such as those with high rates of poverty and unemployment – and among white people who have close friendships that are exclusively online. Local racial diversity, which was used as a measure of status threat, showed no relationship with support for white nationalism.

The authors’ statistical analysis is thorough and their use of several high-quality, representative Internet surveys lends validity to their results. Survey respondents will often present favourable pictures of themselves, even in anonymous settings. In light of this, the authors’ findings are probably conservative, meaning that at least one in seven young white men in the United States support white nationalism.

However, as Egan *et al.* note, analyses of this kind cannot establish cause and effect. Does alienation make white people lean towards white nationalism, or does white nationalism cause them to retreat into online networks with like-minded individuals? It is also not clear whether young men who are attracted to white nationalism are motivated mainly by political ideology, or by the prospect of joining a movement with their peers. Furthermore, this type of survey cannot speak to individual-level changes over time. If similar levels of white nationalism existed in the 1980s, for example, the online mobilization finding would need to be reconsidered: much of modern life takes place on the Internet, so the online aspects of the current white nationalist movement might not be fundamental to its appeal.

The study also raises questions about how

white nationalism relates to other concepts. There is a modest correlation between white identity and nationalism⁷, but this doesn't tell social scientists about the link between white US voters who identify as nationalists and white nationalism. If white identity is separable from nationalism, messages to white US voters that affirm positive self-regard – appeals to Anglo-American heritage, say – should not promote nationalist views. If they do, it suggests that even appeals to pride that read as benign in fact function as appeals to superiority.

Egan and colleagues' results highlight an important social phenomenon: although many indicators show that white US voters remain numerically and socially advantaged^{8,9}, some

white US voters have attitudes of in-group protection that manifest as support for white nationalism. As pundits and researchers try to make sense of white voters' behaviour, debates about 'wokeism' should be paired with discussions about white nationalism and related concepts. The potential causes identified by Egan *et al.* – such as the prevalence of Internet culture and economic hardship – show no sign of reversing, so this worrying finding deserves urgent attention.

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