



Demographic Change and Group Boundaries in Germany: The Effect of Projected Demographic Decline on Perceptions of Who Has a Migration Background

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Abstract: In many Western societies, the current “native” majority will become a numerical minority sometime within the next century. How does prospective demographic change affect existing group boundaries? An influential recent article by Abascal (2020) showed that white Americans under demographic threat reacted with boundary contraction—that is, they were less likely to classify ambiguously white people as “white.” The present study examines the generalizability of these findings beyond the American context. Specifically, we test whether informing Germans about the projected decline of the “native” population without migration background affects the classification of phenotypically ambiguous individuals. Our results show that information about demographic change neither affects the definition of group boundaries nor generates negative feelings toward minority outgroups. These findings point to the relevance of contextual differences in shaping the conditions under which demographic change triggers group threat and boundary shifts.

Keywords: immigration; demographic change; group threat; survey experiment; group boundaries; replication

INCREASING immigration-related diversity in many Western societies has generated broad scholarly interest in the consequences of demographic change. Although much of this literature has focused on the effect of demographic threat on attitudes toward minorities and political preferences among dominant groups (Craig, Rucker, and Richeson 2018; Rios, Sosa, and Osborn 2018), a recent study in the *American Sociological Review* by Abascal (2020) explores whether projected demographic change may also lead to a redefinition of group boundaries. Specifically, Abascal examined how whites in the United States classified phenotypically ambiguous faces after viewing information about whites’ demographic decline. Findings from a survey experiment reveal that whites under demographic threat were less likely to classify phenotypically ambiguous individuals as “white.” Overall, these results suggest that the relative numerical decline of the majority group and projected demographic change can lead to boundary contraction among members of the dominant status group.

In line with the vast majority of studies exploring the consequences of demographic change, Abascal (2020) focuses on the case of whites in the United States. It remains unclear, however, whether these findings might also generalize beyond the American context to other immigration-receiving societies in Western Europe. As the “native” populations in countries such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany are also projected to become a numerical minority within the next century, the question of how Europeans perceive and adjust to coming demographic changes is of both sociological and political importance.

To address this gap, this article presents results from a replication of Abascal (2020) in the German context.¹ Specifically, we study whether information about the relative decline of the German population without migration background shapes who is seen as a “native” German. Importantly, in addition to replicating an influential study in a different context, our research contributes to moving the literature beyond its current focus on American racial boundaries to examine categories based on descent and migration background that are (at least in the official discourse) more salient in Europe (Alba 2005; Wimmer 2008).

To preview our results, we find a robust null effect of information about demographic decline on “native” Germans’ classification of phenotypically ambiguous individuals. In addition, and in contrast to studies focusing on U.S. whites, our results indicate that projected demographic changes have no effect on Germans’ feelings toward minorities. Further exploratory analyses reveal that these patterns are also robust within population subgroups (e.g., anti- vs. pro-immigration respondents). Viewed against the extant literature, our findings point to the relevance of national-level differences in responses to demographic change and call for a more nuanced theory spelling out the scope conditions under which demographic information triggers group threat and boundary shifts.

Demographic Change, Group Threat, and the Remaking of Group Boundaries

In predicting the reactions of dominant groups to demographic change, scholars largely draw upon classical theories of group threat (Blalock 1967). Specifically, growing numbers of minorities are often viewed as threatening to the interests of the majority because of increased competition for scarce resources. These may include economic (e.g., housing or jobs) and political resources, but also symbolic resources like cultural power or prestige, as in Blumer’s (1958) conception of “a sense of group position.” Extant studies also document a range of responses adopted by dominant groups faced with demographic threats. Most prominently, research highlights that group threats may generate negative attitudes toward growing minority groups (Craig and Richeson 2014), induce support for anti-immigration policies (Hopkins 2010; Newman 2013) and political ideologies (Craig et al. 2018), and even lead to anti-minority violence (Green, Strolovitch, and Wong 1998). Other studies demonstrate that threatened majority members may also adopt stronger in-group attachments and (self-)identify more with other whites (Abascal 2015; Outten et al. 2012).

Beyond these well-known findings, Abascal (2020) asks whether demographic changes might not only change relations between existing groups but also lead to a redefinition of group boundaries themselves. Building from existing theories of boundary-making (Wimmer 2013), Abascal proposes two types of boundary-altering strategies. First, members of the threatened majority group may *expand* their group by blurring the boundaries that separate them from minority groups. This strategy works to counteract numerical decline by reclassifying marginal or ambiguous individuals as part of the majority. Alternatively, the majority may *contract* the boundary and limit the number of people who can claim membership in the dominant group. Homogenization may be attractive to the extent that “heightened solidarity . . . allows groups to organize effectively against external threats” (Abascal 2020:301). Furthermore, “purifying” strategies may also drive up the value of “whiteness” as a scarce resource, thereby allowing whites to gain prestige in the face of demographic change.

To evaluate these possibilities, Abascal conducted a survey experiment where individuals were asked to racially classify photographs of people who appear ambiguously white or Latino. Prior to the classification task, respondents allocated to the treatment group were further prompted with information showing the numerical decline of the white population (see our description of the treatments below). Abascal’s experiment yields results consistent with the *boundary contraction hypothesis*: namely, respondents confronted with information about demographic change were significantly less likely to categorize people with a racially ambiguous appearance as “white.” Further subgroup analyses reveal that these treatment effects were particularly pronounced among supporters of Donald Trump—that is, individuals who are most likely to be threatened by growing minority populations. Recent work by Krosch et al. (2022) supports these conclusions, finding that group threat lowers the threshold for faces to be classified as nonwhite.

Abascal’s study represents an important contribution to the scholarship on immigration, diversity, and intergroup relations. However, more work is needed to establish the generalizability of these findings. In particular, like the vast majority of research on reactions to demographic change, Abascal’s study was conducted in the United States during a period in which issues of race and immigration—particularly from Latin America—have become the focus of intense political attention (Craig et al. 2018; Major, Blodorn, and Major Blascovich 2018). This begs the question of whether the majority might have responded differently under different circumstances. Indeed, a recent study by Fouka and Tabellini (2021) provides evidence in support of the *boundary expansion hypothesis*, with the twentieth-century migration of African Americans driving the assimilation of Southern and Eastern European “ethnic” immigrants into the white American mainstream.

Furthermore, although race remains a primary axis for boundary-making in the United States, it is largely absent (at least in official thinking) in the European context. Attention is instead focused on nationality and descent as alternative bases for classification. However, differences based on citizenship or migration background may not generate the same forms of group threat as racial differences. It therefore remains to be seen whether similar reactions to demographic change exist in immigration-receiving societies in Europe.

Migration and Demographic Change in Germany

German demographic development has been markedly shaped by migration in the post–World War II period. From the 1950s to the 1970s, West Germany invited guest workers from Turkey, Spain, Italy, Greece, Morocco, and Portugal to satisfy the great demand for labor as part of the country’s economic recovery from the war. Although guest worker recruitment ended in 1973, family reunification and natural growth continued to swell the size of the “foreign” population. Additional immigration “streams” followed the fall of Soviet Union, the breakup of Yugoslavia, and European Union enlargement. The most recent wave of large-scale immigration began in 2015 with the so-called “European migrant crisis.”

Currently, 13.5 percent of Germany’s population does not hold German citizenship, and approximately 27 percent has a migration background², with Turks, Poles, and Russians constituting the largest ethnic minority groups (Statistisches Bundesamt 2020, 2021). The share of individuals with migration background is likely to grow further in coming years, as evidenced by even larger shares (36 percent) among the student population (Blaeschke and Freitag 2021). This trend toward diversification has accelerated in the past decade; fertility rates among German “natives” have long been below replacement level, whereas in-migration has increased (Weber 2015).

We focus our study around the concept of migration background. Although this constitutes a modification of Abascal’s original experiment, our design choice is driven by several considerations. First, as mentioned above, the concept of race is much less discussed in Europe than in the United States, and official racial classifications do not exist. In contrast, migration background plays a crucial role in the German public debate. Furthermore, this definition is not only used for statistical and academic purposes but also reflects popular notions of who is or is not “German” (Mäs, Mühler, and Opp 2005). Secondly, in contrast to other official categories such as citizenship or country of birth, migration background can more naturally be signaled via physical traits. Although such visual cues are admittedly imperfect (e.g., some individuals who appear “stereotypically German” might nonetheless have a migration background and vice versa), we maintain that migration background constitutes a readily accessible demographic category into which individuals can be sorted based on their physical appearance.

Combining these considerations with the above theoretical discussion, we test the *boundary contraction hypothesis*:

H1 “Native” Germans exposed to information about demographic decline will be *less likely* to classify phenotypically ambiguous individuals as in-group members.

Alternatively, the *boundary expansion hypothesis* predicts the following:

H2 “Native” Germans exposed to information about demographic decline will be *more likely* to classify phenotypically ambiguous individuals as in-group members.

Data and Methods

Respondents

Participants in the survey experiment were recruited via an online access panel over a period of six days in November 2021. Prior to data collection, a power analysis was conducted indicating that a sample size of 1,200 would be sufficient to detect a treatment effect of at least 3.2 percentage points (the effect size found in the original study).³ Based on this target, we recruited a sample that was roughly representative of the German adult population in terms of age, gender, education, employment status, and region. Respondents were further screened such that only those without migration background could take part in the experiment. After additionally excluding partial and multiple responses, our final analytic sample consists of 1,077 respondents. Descriptive statistics are provided in Table A1 of the online supplement.

Treatments

We employed a combination of graphical and textual information to manipulate the perception of future demographic decline (see Figure 1). Specifically, all respondents were shown a line graph depicting the actual share of German residents with and without migration background from 2005 to 2019. For respondents allocated to the treatment group, these trends were extrapolated to 2065 to give the impression of demographic decline (increase) for the population without (with) migration background. This graph was further accompanied by the following text (translated from German):

The graphic shows that people without migration background comprised the majority of the population (around 80 percent) in 2005. Since then however, this population share has decreased. Thus it is projected that there will be roughly the same number of people with and without migration background (each group around 50 percent) in the future (2065).

Respondents allocated to the control group were shown an analogous graph of population shares, but projected only to the year 2025. The graph thus aims to convey the numerical dominance of individuals without migration background. This impression is reinforced via the following text:

The graphic shows that people without migration background comprised the majority of the population (around 80 percent) in 2005. Since then, this population share has remained relatively stable. Thus it is projected that people without migration background will also make up the majority of the population in the future (2025).

To ensure that respondents carefully read and understood this information, respondents could only proceed with the survey after 60 seconds. We implemented a further manipulation check immediately following these treatments by asking respondents to indicate (i) the population share of both groups in 2005 and (ii) the

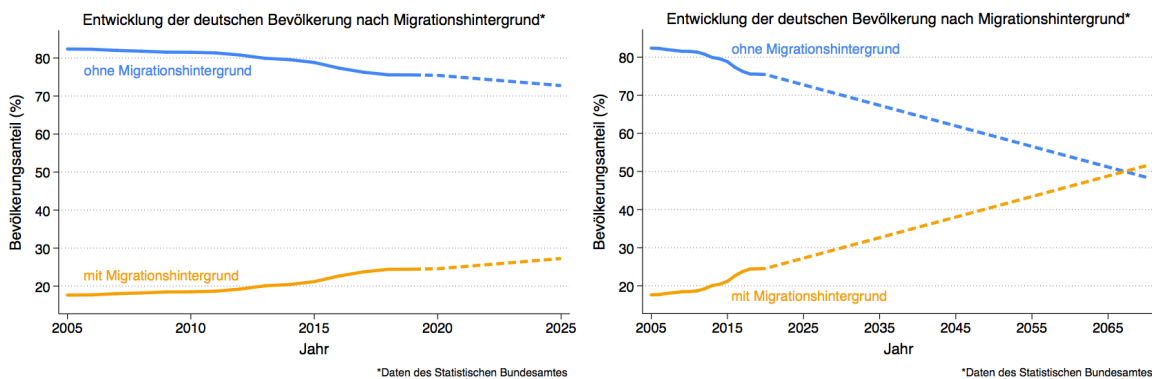


Figure 1: Control (left) and treatment (right) graphs showing actual and projected demographic change in Germany. Blue lines depict the percentage of the German population without migration background, and orange lines depict the percentage with migration background. The solid portion of the lines depict actual figures from the German Federal Statistical Office. The dashed portions of the line depict linear extrapolations to 2025 and 2065, respectively.

population share of both groups at the end of the projected time period. Eighty-six percent of the respondents assigned to the control condition answered both manipulation check questions correctly, as did 88 percent of those assigned to the treatment condition ($\chi^2(1) = 1.52, p = 0.22$). In the main text, we focus on analyses using the full analytic sample. However, results are substantively similar when restricting attention to respondents who correctly answered both understanding check items (see section S5 of the online supplement).

Outcome Measure

Respondents were shown a series of headshot-style photographs of real people residing in Germany and asked to rate whether the individuals pictured had a migration background. As experimental prompts, we employed photographs from a photo database maintained by the German Center for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM) (Veit and Essien 2022). Two pretests were conducted in October and November 2021 ($N = 256$) in order to select pictures that (a) the vast majority of respondents would perceive as “native” German without migration background, (b) the vast majority of respondents would perceive having a migration background, and (c) would generate substantial disagreement. In the end, we selected pictures of 18 individuals, of whom four were overwhelmingly classified as “native” German, six were overwhelmingly classified as having a migration background, and eight were “ambiguous.” Pictures were displayed to respondents in random order. Anonymized versions of our final selection of photos, as well as validation checks showing the distribution of ratings in the control condition, can be found in section S2 of the online supplement.

Additional Measures

Beyond an assessment of migration background, we included an additional item asking respondents how positively or negatively they perceived each of the 18 individuals pictured. This item was designed to directly test some of the more established findings in the literature linking demographic threats to negative out-group perceptions (as well as more positive perceptions of in-group members). Finally, our survey included a battery of standard sociodemographic questions. We also asked about the diversity of respondents' social networks, as well as their opinions about whether immigration to Germany should be reduced. Importantly, both of these items were administered pre-treatment.

Modeling Strategy

Given that multiple ratings are nested within respondents, we estimate mixed models with random effects for respondents. To facilitate interpretation, we rely primarily on linear probability models because some of our analyses include interaction terms (Mood 2010). Section S4 of the online supplement reports analogous results using logistic regression.

Results

Our main result is presented in Figure 2. As shown in the left panel, overall the probability of an ambiguous profile being classified as having a migration background is about 47.6 percentage points in the control condition. This probability rises slightly to 49.0 percentage points in the treatment condition. As shown in the right panel, this difference is not statistically significant ($\beta = 1.5$ percentage points, standard error = 1.4 percentage points, $p = 0.30$).

For robustness, we also examine the treatment effect separately for each ambiguous photograph by interacting the treatment with individual pictures. The relevant linear combinations are also shown in Figure 2. As before, the effects are substantively small, and none of the differences are statistically significant. To assess whether any individual profile has an undue influence on the overall findings, we conduct sensitivity analyses dropping each profile one at a time. We also estimate a model dropping both Amb1 and Amb2, as these are perceived to be significantly less ambiguous than the other six profiles. Results, reported in Table A10 of the online supplement, are substantively unchanged.

Beyond the average treatment effect, we also test for treatment heterogeneity. Specifically, we explore whether the treatment might be stronger for individuals who are more likely to be threatened by demographic change. We focus on several proxies for susceptibility to demographic threat: (1) strength of agreement with the statement that Germany should restrict immigration, (2) the number of "non-natives" in respondents' social networks as a measure of interethnic contact, (3) high educational attainment (*Abitur*), (4) residence in Germany's eastern regions, and (5) (logged) municipal population to capture rural–urban divides in anti-immigrant sentiment.⁴ Continuous variables are standardized, and interaction coefficients

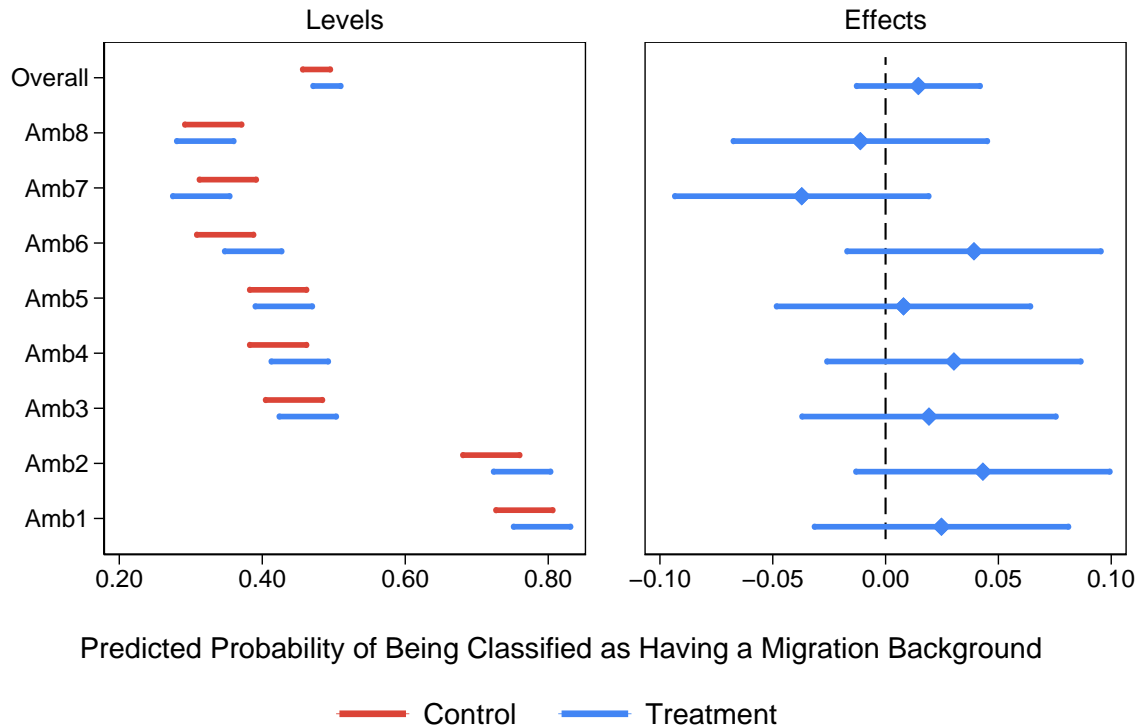


Figure 2: Ratings of migration background by treatment condition. The left panel displays the predicted probability that a phenotypically ambiguous profile is classified as having a migration background in the treatment and control groups. The right panel displays the estimated treatment effect and associated 95 percent confidence intervals. Full estimation results underlying these coefficients are reported in Table A2 of the online supplement.

are reported in Table 1. Here again we observe a consistent pattern of null effects, indicating that information about demographic decline does not influence who is classified as having a migration background, even among individuals who are most skeptical of immigration.

Null Effect on Classifications or No Group Threat?

The pattern of null effects uncovered so far is open to two potential interpretations. One possibility is that the treatment does indeed induce demographic threat, but threat has no effect on classifications. Alternatively, it may be that information about demographic decline—although correctly understood by the vast majority of respondents—does not trigger threatened responses in the German population.

To evaluate this possibility, we examine respondents' feelings toward natives and minorities as an alternative outcome variable. These ratings are provided on a five-point scale ranging from very negative to very positive, with higher scores

Table 1: Interaction coefficients of the treatment with respondent characteristics

	β	<i>p</i> value
<i>Individual level</i>		
x Should restrict immigration	−0.009 (0.014)	0.536
x Non-natives in social network	0.014 (0.014)	0.317
x Abitur	0.032 (0.028)	0.264
<i>Postal code level</i>		
x East German	0.037 (0.037)	0.318
x (log) Municipal population	−0.015 (0.014)	0.273

Notes: This table reports coefficients from mixed linear probability models interacting the treatment with respondent characteristics. Full estimation results are reported in Table A3 of the online supplement.

Table 2: Treatment effects on feelings toward natives and minorities

	β	<i>p</i> value
<i>Treatment effect for</i>		
Ambiguous profiles	−0.021 (0.029)	0.465
Unambiguous German profiles	−0.016 (0.032)	0.618
Unambiguous foreign profiles	−0.035 (0.030)	0.246

Notes: This table reports coefficients from mixed models interacting the treatment with the “type” of profile. Full estimation results are reported in Table A4 of the online supplement.

indicating more positive feelings. In addition to our phenotypically ambiguous profiles, we now also consider feelings toward unambiguously “foreign” profiles with the expectation that a threatened response should be most directed against this group. Finally, in light of prior evidence linking demographic threat to the strengthening of white identity in the United States, we examine unambiguously “German” profiles to test whether demographic information generates more positive in-group evaluations. We estimate mixed linear models interacting the treatment with the “type” of profile. The relevant linear combinations are presented in Table 2. Full results are available in Table A4 of the online supplement.

Overall, we observe no statistically significant effect of the treatment on feelings toward any group. Although the treatment appears to operate least negatively for ratings of unambiguously German profiles, and most negatively for unambiguously “foreign” profiles, the substantive effect sizes are also tiny (equivalent to at most about five percent of the standard deviation for all ratings). We thus read this

evidence to indicate that projections of demographic decline among the “native” German population does not trigger threatened responses among the majority group.

Discussion and Conclusion

How does projected demographic decline affect the shape of in-group boundaries for members of the majority mainstream? In an influential recent article, Abascal (2020) reports that whites in the United States react to demographic threat by contracting the boundaries of “whiteness.” Specifically, respondents were less likely to classify people who are ambiguously white or Latino as “white” when primed about the demographic decline of the white population. The present article examines the extent to which these patterns generalize beyond the American context by investigating reactions to demographic projections among “native” Germans.

To summarize our results, we find that information about the demographic decline of the dominant group has no effect on whether phenotypically ambiguous individuals are seen as having a migration background. This pattern of null results also holds in subgroup analyses examining treatment heterogeneity across respondents with diverging immigration-related attitudes and living in different geographic contexts. We also find that demographic information has no effect on feelings toward minorities, regardless of how obviously “foreign” they appear. Overall, we interpret our findings to indicate that information about the demographic decline of the German population without migration background is not perceived as threatening by the “native” majority.

These findings raise an obvious question: why does projected demographic change generate group threat and group boundary shifts in the United States but not in Germany? Because there is limited comparative research in this area, we can only offer several conjectures.

One potential difference lies in the timescale of projected demographic change. Specifically, whites are anticipated to become the numerical minority in the United States around the year 2040, whereas our projections foresee this “majority-minority shift” occurring in Germany around 2065. As a consequence, the threat of demographic decline may be less powerful in the German context. That said, we believe it is rather unlikely that our diverging results stem from this difference in timing, as a Canadian study by Outten et al. (2012) employing a similar treatment manipulation over a roughly 50-year time horizon nonetheless reported increased threat as well as fear and anger toward outgroups.

An alternative possibility is that the growth of the population with migration background is simply not perceived as threatening to “native” Germans. Several considerations support this interpretation. First, the concept of migration background may represent a more permeable boundary than race. For instance, the category encompasses “ethnic” Germans from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, as well as individuals born in Germany (as long as they have one non-German parent).⁵ Secondly, in the context of significant intra-European migration, many individuals with migration background may be perceived as culturally or economically similar to the “native” German population. For this reason, im-

migration to Germany may not generate the same types of negative reactions as Latino population growth does in the United States.

Along these lines, it is noteworthy that the most threatening “bright-line” boundary in Europe is not nationality or descent, but rather religion (Adida, Laitin, and Valfort 2016; Alba 2005; Di Stasio et al. 2021; Foner and Alba 2008; Zolberg and Woon 1999), reflecting the perceived incompatibility between Islam and Western values (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009). Notably, the idea of Germans becoming outnumbered by Muslim immigrants has also entered the public debate, as evidenced by the debate surrounding Thilo Sarrazin’s best-selling book *Deutschland schafft sich ab* [*Germany Abolishes Itself*] (Bracke and Hernández Aguilar 2020). However, this religious dimension is not a salient aspect of the present study. Future research might thus fruitfully investigate the specific effects of Muslim population growth—as distinct from the population with a migration background—in European societies.⁶

More broadly, these considerations underscore the importance of national political contexts in shaping popular responses to migration-induced demographic change. Indeed, the U.S. Census Bureau’s racial projections may have led many Americans to believe that a “majority-minority society” is inevitable (Alba 2018; Myers and Levy 2018) and contributed to whites’ fears of “demographic replacement.” In contrast, no such official predictions have been made in Germany, not least because information on race is not collected by the government. As a result of this statistical lacuna, it is more difficult to mobilize racial concepts as objects of political contestation. At the same time, the available categories—nationality and migration background—are arguably more malleable and less threatening. As a consequence, Germans’ understanding of demographic changes may follow wholly different contours in comparison with the “racialized” society of the United States.

Notes

- 1 The design, data collection, and analysis of our study were conducted as part of the graduate seminar “Replication and Reproduction of Experimental Social Research” at the University of Mannheim. All course participants are authors of this article.
- 2 Individuals are classified as having a migration background if they or at least one of their parents were born without German citizenship.
- 3 The design of this study was pre-registered on the Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/2ygjd>. Prior ethics approval was obtained via the University of Mannheim. At the conclusion of the survey, all respondents were debriefed about the purpose of the study. The data and code to replicate our analyses are available at <https://osf.io/kte4f>.
- 4 Contextual measures are from Budde and Eilers (2014) and Statistisches Bundesamt (2011, 2017) and are merged to respondents’ self-reported postal code. We are grateful to Max Schaub for providing us with these data, which were used in Schaub and Morisi (2020). Eleven respondents reported nonexistent postal codes and are therefore dropped from analyses employing contextual measures.
- 5 These considerations point to a potential limitation of our design, which relies upon physical markers to differentiate “native” Germans from individuals with a migration background. As noted by a reviewer, an alternative design could have included biographical information on birthplace and parents’ country of origin and tested whether the

treatment affects judgments of individuals with mixed ancestry (e.g., born in Germany but with one immigrant parent). That said, however, we believe that the addition of biographical information would have *increased* the chances of a null finding. Specifically, we conducted pretests using profiles with biographical information but found that respondents then tended to treat the rating task as a “test” with a right and wrong answer—that is, they would apply the definition of migration background (which was provided earlier in the survey as part of a screening question) to the biographical information in an attempt to arrive at an “objectively correct” classification. As such, we would not expect the treatments to have any effect under this alternative design because all of the decision-relevant information is contained in the profile itself. In contrast, our current design intentionally withholds this biographic information and thereby allows the treatments to *potentially* influence judgments of who has a migration background.

6 For instance, such a design could include a treatment about the projected growth of the Muslim population and focus the rating task on pictures of individuals who could possibly appear to have roots in Muslim-majority countries.

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