

**Polarization or Backlash?**

**Anti-Prejudice Messaging and Acceptability of Explicit Group-Based Appeals**

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## **Abstract**

Recent studies demonstrate that explicit group-based appeals are increasingly accepted in American politics. The mechanisms that underlie this increase in acceptability, however, remain unclear. In this paper, we explore the previously ignored interplay between left and right messaging on the matters of race, ethnicity, and religion. Using two survey experiments in which respondents are exposed to the real tweets of Democratic and Republican politicians talking about white supremacy and radical Islam as security threat, we test two hypotheses. One is polarization: partisans diverging in their assessments of Republican anti-Muslim appeals in response to anti-prejudice messages from Democratic politicians. The other is backlash: white respondents increasing their acceptance of anti-Muslim messages in response to tweets discussing white supremacy as a threat. Overall, we find support for the backlash hypothesis: when tweets singling out Muslims as a threat are presented after ones condemning white supremacy, respondents find anti-Muslim messages more acceptable. Interestingly, this effect is driven by Democrats and those high in group empathy. Our results suggest that the growing acceptability of explicit racial rhetoric in American politics at least partly represents a backlash to the recent rise of progressive racial messaging.

*Keywords:* backlash, group empathy, polarization, prejudice, racial appeals

In the early days of his presidential campaign, Donald Trump called for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country’s representatives can figure out what is going on.” At the time, *Politico* reporters called this “a surprising escalation of rhetoric—even for him.”<sup>1</sup> Though Trump is now emblematic of such escalations of explicit political rhetoric, the phenomenon is not unique to him alone.

Indeed, in recent years, Americans have become more accepting of explicit group-based political appeals (Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek 2018), that might have been rejected as contradicting the norm of racial equality twenty years earlier (Mendelberg 2001).<sup>2</sup> Scholars have proposed several explanations for this important shift in American political communication. One concerns processes of demographic change and the growing importance of white identity (Jardina 2019). Group status threats make white Americans more likely to approve of explicit anti-minority appeals and see politicians making such appeals more favorably (Christiani 2021).

Another explanation emphasizes the impact of political figures that have defined U.S. politics in the past 15 years. For instance, election of Barack Obama, the first African American president, increased the salience of race in American public opinion, including in issues that were previously not racialized (Tesler 2016). Paradoxically, it coincided with decreased perceptions of discrimination, resulting in increased opposition to policies like affirmative action (Valentino and Brader 2011). The more recent “Trump effect” has likely contributed to this process as well: prejudiced speech at the elite level makes citizens see open expression of prejudice as more socially acceptable (Newman et al. 2021).

It is easy to notice that existing explanations consider only group-based political

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/12/donald-trump-shutdown-of-muslims-216504>

<sup>2</sup> Following the earlier studies, we define explicit messages as ones that openly express prejudice toward ethnic, racial, and religious groups or link them to social problems.

communication on the right. However, political messaging on matters of race and ethnicity has been changing on the left as well. During the last decade, opinions on racial issues have become more progressive on the American left, creating demand for anti-prejudice political messaging.<sup>3</sup> The news media has also increased coverage of race relations changing the way citizens, and especially liberal Democrats, think about these matters.<sup>4</sup> Democratic politicians have responded by modifying the way they talk about race, and this shift is now gaining the attention of scholars (English and Kalla 2021; Hanania, Hawley, and Kaufmann 2020).

The rise of anti-prejudice and antiracist messaging in U.S. politics, as well as its potential effects, have yet to be explored. In this paper, we address this gap by testing whether a more open discussion of racial issues on the left may contribute to the growing acceptability of explicit group-based appeals on the right. Building upon existing literature in political communication, we propose two mechanisms linking the growth of anti-prejudice messaging on the left and increasing acceptability of explicit group-based appeals on the right. One is partisan polarization: when Democrats and Republicans view partisan anti-prejudice messaging, they diverge even further in their assessments of explicit group-based political appeals. The other is white backlash: exposure to anti-prejudice messaging increases perceived acceptability of anti-minority appeals among whites. Discriminating between these two mechanisms is substantively important as it will allow us to understand whether the use of anti-prejudice messaging on the left is more likely to mobilize supporters or embolden opponents. We also explore how anti-prejudice messaging may amplify the effects of group empathy in political communication.

We test these mechanisms in two original survey studies, in which we ask respondents

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.vox.com/2019/3/22/18259865/great-awakening-white-liberals-race-polling-trump-2020>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/media-great-racial-awakening>

about perceived acceptability of anti-Muslim tweets by Republican politicians before or after exposing them to anti-prejudice tweets by Democratic politicians. We find strong evidence for backlash, which—surprisingly—is produced by Democrats and those high in empathy. In other words, anti-prejudice messaging has a potential to demobilize those who otherwise are the first to call out explicit group-based appeals. We discuss the implications of our findings for political communication and American politics more generally.

### **Partisan Polarization**

How does cross-exposure to group-based partisan messages impact citizens' opinions? The default prediction from existing literature in American public opinion is polarization. Citizens accept in-party cues by adjusting their political positions (for a review, see Leeper and Slothuus 2014), and simultaneously reject cues coming from the out-party (Goren, Federico, and Kittilson 2009), resulting in opinion polarization.

The polarizing effects of political communication should be particularly high under the current levels of elite partisan polarization in U.S. politics (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Theriault 2008). Indeed, elite-level polarization changes how citizens evaluate political issues by shifting the focus toward partisan endorsements and away from substantive information (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). Given affective polarization in the mass public (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012), which is largely driven by negative partisanship or hostility towards the other side (Abramowitz and Webster 2018; Bankert 2021), partisans' propensity to respond to messages from the out-party by doubling-down on their pre-existing beliefs can be even stronger. One issue where doubling-down on pre-existing attitudes can be observed is climate change: over the last three decades, the level of skepticism towards global warming among Republicans grew in response to the environment becoming a Democratic issue (Merkley

and Stecula 2021). Conversely, Trump’s “Muslim ban” led Democrats to mobilize in support of Muslim immigrants (Collingwood, Lajevardi, and Oskooii 2018).

Therefore, the *polarization hypothesis* is that Democrats should consider an anti-minority message coming from a Republican politician less acceptable after seeing an anti-prejudice message from a Democratic politician; meanwhile, we should see the opposite effect among Republicans. Polarization can still lead to growing acceptability of explicit group-based appeals, on average, if the effect for Republicans is stronger than the counter-effect for Democrats.

### **White Backlash**

Partisanship, however, is only one group identity that powerfully shapes Americans’ behaviors and opinions—another is race. The term “white backlash” has been used in the literature to describe the process of U.S. whites adopting more conservative politics and starting to vote Republican in response to immigration, changing demographics, and related group status threat (Abrajano and Hajnal 2015). In other words, the politics of white Americans is increasingly influenced by their racial identity—and it pushes them to the right (Jardina 2019).

In this political climate, whites can react negatively to anti-prejudice messages—especially when the message explicitly mentions whites as a group. Whites’ defensive reaction to conversations about racial issues has been popularized outside of academia as “white fragility” (DiAngelo 2018). There is evidence that attempts to remind respondents about anti-prejudice norms during the 2016 presidential election campaign may have backfired by increasing support for Trump (Conway, Repke, and Houck 2017).

Even though U.S. parties are increasingly sorted on the basis of race (Mason 2018; Zhirkov and Valentino 2022), whites still constitute a plurality of the Democratic coalition. And when white Democrats face cross-pressures with regard to their political identities, they often

follow race over party. For instance, racial resentment makes a better predictor of opposition to affirmative action among white Democrats than among white Republicans (Feldman and Huddy 2005). In addition, white Democrats report colder feelings to their own party after being exposed to Democratic political ads designed to court Latino voters (Ostfeld 2019). Most recently, white identity has been shown to be more strongly associated with opposition to immigration for white Democrats than for white Republicans (Perez et al. 2021).

Therefore, the *backlash hypothesis* is that whites, independently of their partisanship, should see an anti-minority message coming from a Republican politician as more acceptable after seeing an anti-prejudice message from a Democratic politician. In the aggregate, the backlash mechanism should lead to increased acceptability of explicit group-based political appeals—and, due to no counter-effect from white Democrats, this increase should be stronger than under the polarization mechanism.

**Table 1.** Summary of the polarization and backlash hypotheses: expected effects of exposure to anti-prejudice message on acceptability of anti-minority appeals among white partisans

Respondents	Effect on acceptability	
	Polarization	Backlash
White Democrats	–	+
White Republicans	+	+

### Group Empathy

Polarization and backlash are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They may coexist as individuals react to political messages differently depending on their psychological predispositions. Here we focus on group empathy, an individual-difference variable that explains willingness—or unwillingness—to side with outgroups when they are attacked or treated unjustly (Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2021). According to the evidence, the group empathy mechanism can be strong enough to override prejudicial and exclusionary reactions even when

the outgroups in question are seen as threatening (Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2016).

Derogatory speech directed at minority groups that already face prejudice provokes those high in group empathy to intervene in order to stop it (Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2017).

Therefore, the *group empathy hypothesis* postulates an interactive effect: there should be a negative relationship between group empathy and perceived acceptability of an anti-minority message from a Republican politician, and it should be stronger when it is seen after an anti-prejudice message from a Democratic politician. In other words, cross-exposure to group-based political appeals should reinforce the negative effect of group empathy on the perceived acceptability of anti-minority messages.

### **The Case of Anti-Muslim Appeals**

Historically, the study of group-based political appeals in U.S. politics has focused on anti-black messaging (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino 1999; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002). Recent evidence on the growing acceptability of explicit rhetoric also focuses on whites' reactions to political ads that attack African Americans (Valentino, Neuner, and Vandebroek 2018).

However, political rhetoric is also directed against other minority groups—for instance, Latinos and immigrants (Reny, Valenzuela, and Collingwood 2020).

In our tests, we specifically focus on anti-Muslim appeals. Muslims have been long perceived as a group located outside of the American cultural mainstream, resulting in heightened levels of prejudice against them (Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner 2009). Prejudice against Muslims is unique in both content and manifestations: it is rooted in orientalist notions of Islam and its effects extend beyond generalized ethnocentrism (Oskooii, Dana, and Barreto 2021). For instance, negative sentiment toward Muslims predicted support for Donald Trump as well as Republican presidential candidates beginning in 2004 (Jardina and Stephens-Dougan

2021; Lajevardi and Abrajano 2019). Even though Muslims as a group are defined on the basis of religion, they are often perceived as racially distinct from Anglos (Lajevardi and Oskooii 2018; Zhirkov 2021). The ideology of Christian nationalism, an increasingly potent force in U.S. politics, is constructed in opposition to Islam and Muslims (Shortle and Gaddie 2015).

The constellation of these factors makes Muslims a particularly attractive target of group-based political attacks. Coverage of Muslims in American media is more negative than other politically salient minority groups—with obvious implications for social acceptability of anti-Muslim appeals (Lajevardi 2021). Stereotypes in the American public prominently link Muslims to threats of violence, and these beliefs have been used to mobilize support for the “war on terror” (Sides and Gross 2013). Therefore, social media posts from Republican politicians overtly portraying Muslims as a security threat are relatively common. A research design that employs the kind of rhetoric that real-world politicians actually use in their social media communication will boost the external validity of our tests.

In selecting anti-prejudice messages from Democratic politicians, we choose ones that address white supremacy. This choice is motivated by the mirroring aspect of the two types of messages: both discuss the corresponding topics (radical Islam and white supremacy) as security threats. Whereas political appeals linking Islam and terrorism have a longer history in American politics, seeing extreme forms of white identity as a national security threat is a relatively new phenomenon in mainstream politics. In 2021, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence issued a report warning that threats from domestic violent extremists motivated by hatred of minority populations presented a major security threat.<sup>5</sup> These assessments are now reflected in the rhetoric of the most prominent Democratic politicians. For instance, Joe Biden in his first

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/UnclassSummaryofDVEAssessment-17MAR21.pdf>

address to Congress as an inaugurated president described white supremacy as a domestic terror threat that the country could not ignore.<sup>6</sup> Similar statements can be found in the social media posts of other Democratic politicians—making it possible to design externally valid treatments.

## **Study 1: Student Sample**

### **Data and Method**

To test our conjectures, we carried out an original online survey-experimental study in March and April 2020. Our participants were political science major undergraduate students from a large public university in the southeastern United States. The survey was completed by 460 non-Hispanic white respondents.<sup>7</sup> Male–female ratio was 41.7% to 58.3%. In terms of socioeconomic status, 27.0% of students described their families as upper class, 58.6% as middle class, 11.8% as working class, and 2.6% as lower class. Partisanship was 49.5% Democratic, 22.6% Republican, and 27.9% independent.

The survey experiment proceeded as follows. The questionnaire started with the group empathy battery. Respondents were presented with statements like: “I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person towards people of other racial or ethnic groups,” and then asked how well these statements described them. Each respondent rated the total of four statements using a scale from 1 = *Does not describe me* to 5 = *Describes me extremely well*.<sup>8</sup>

After completing the group empathy battery, respondents were presented with screenshots of real tweets by Democratic and Republican members of Congress. Tweets by Democratic representatives addressed white supremacy as a national security threat whereas

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2021/04/28/biden-calls-white-supremacy-terrorism-speech-congress/4884034001/>

<sup>7</sup> The questionnaire was also completed by 235 nonwhite respondents, including Hispanics. In the main analysis, we focus on non-Hispanic whites due to the content of our hypotheses. However, we present a comparison of effects among white and nonwhite respondents later in the paper.

<sup>8</sup> See Supplementary Materials for the full group empathy battery.

tweets by Republican representatives addressed radical Islam as a national security threat. Half of respondents saw a Republican politician’s tweet first (control condition) whereas the other half saw a Republican politician’s tweet after a Democratic politician’s tweet (anti-prejudice condition).<sup>9</sup> Tweets presented to respondents were drawn randomly from a predefined selection of six tweets by Democratic representatives and six tweets by Republican representatives. This was done in order to minimize potentially idiosyncratic effects of each specific tweet. Respondents were asked the following question: “Do you think that the language that the politician used in the tweet is appropriate for an elected official -- regardless of the point that they are trying to make?” Response scale was from 1 = *Completely inappropriate* to 7 = *Completely appropriate*.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 1.** Tweet examples

## Results

Results are presented in Table 2 by respondent partisanship. Hereinafter, for the purpose of the analyses we treat respondents who are party-leaning independents as partisans. We find a significant positive effect of the anti-prejudice condition for Democratic respondents. When respondents see a Republican politician’s tweet (on radical Islam as a security threat) after a

<sup>9</sup> In the control condition, respondents saw a Democratic tweet after a Republican tweet. We use the corresponding comparison (perceived appropriateness of a Democratic tweet on white supremacy before vs. after seeing a Republican tweet on radical Islam) to test whether any cross-exposure to out-party rhetoric, rather than anti-prejudice messaging specifically, can cause backlash.

<sup>10</sup> See Supplementary Material for the full list of tweets.

Democratic one (on white supremacy as a security threat), they rate a Republican politician’s tweet as more appropriate—compared to when the same Republican tweet is seen first. The effect is also relatively large in terms of magnitude: approximately 0.8 on a 7-point scale. These findings support the backlash hypothesis: instead of polarizing respondents’ opinions across party lines, exposure to anti-prejudice messaging leads Democrats to see rhetoric against Muslims from the Republican side as more acceptable. We find no significant treatment effects for Republican respondents. The average level of perceived acceptability of anti-Muslim tweets is substantially higher among Republicans than among Democrats—but the means are still low enough to not be concerned about potential ceiling effect.

**Table 2.** Mean levels of perceived appropriateness of anti-Muslim tweets by experimental condition and treatment effects by respondents’ partisanship, Study 1

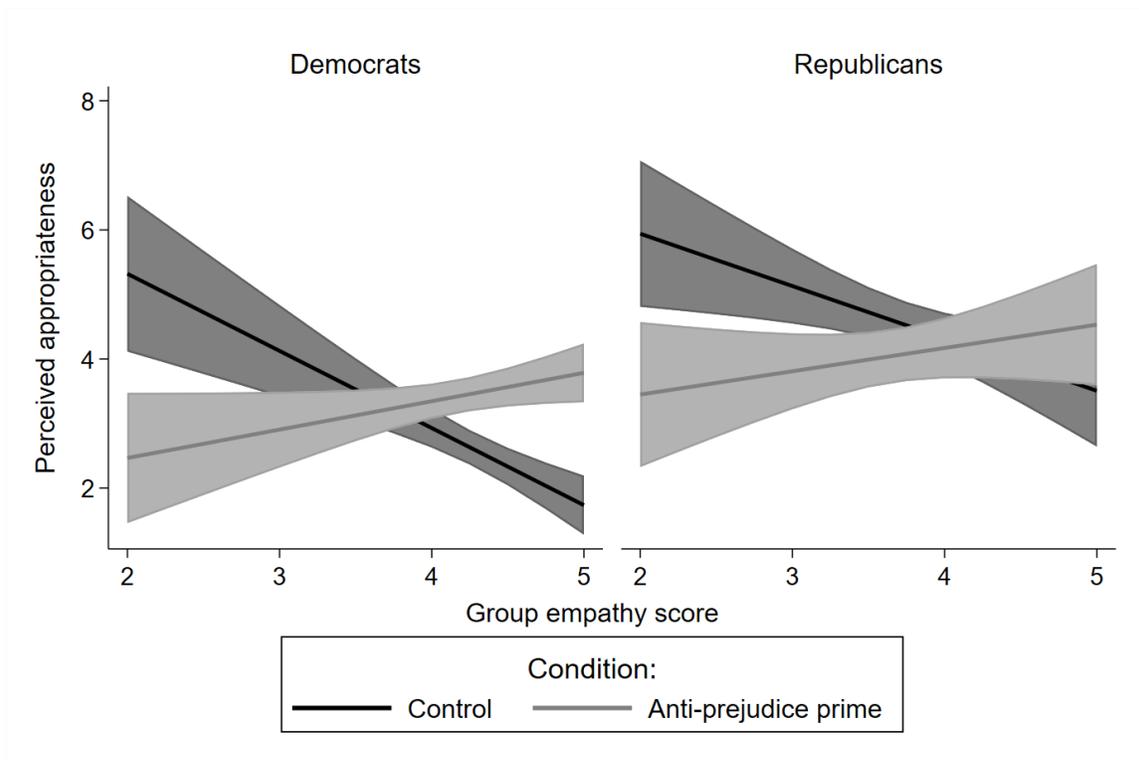
	Control	Anti-prejudice condition	Difference	<i>N</i>
Democrats	2.60	3.42	0.82 [0.44, 1.21]	284
Republicans	4.54	4.05	-0.49 [-1.05, 0.08]	147

*Note.* 95% confidence intervals in brackets (difference estimates only)

Next, we move to explore the other hypothesized effect of anti-prejudice messaging: activation of group-empathic concerns. Specifically, we estimate OLS regression models that include interactive effects of empathy score and experimental treatment. Following the dominant guidelines (Brambor, Clark, and Golder 2005), we present results of the interactive model graphically in Figure 2.<sup>11</sup> Recall that we have expected the anti-prejudice message to reinforce the effect of group empathy: in this case, the negative effect of empathy score on perceived appropriateness of anti-Muslim rhetoric should have become even stronger compared to the

<sup>11</sup> Even though group empathy scores can potentially range from 1 to 5, there are no respondents with scores less than 2. Therefore, we limit the graph’s range to the empirically observed range (from 2 to 5).

control. However, the analysis returns an opposite result: the anti-prejudice message erases the effect of group empathy. The effect of empathy on perceived appropriateness of anti-Muslim tweets, which is negative as expected in the control condition, becomes insignificant in the anti-prejudice condition for both Democratic and Republican respondents.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 2.** Relationship between group empathy and perceived appropriateness of anti-Muslim tweets by experimental condition and respondents’ partisanship, Study 1  
*Note.* Predictions with 95% confidence intervals. See Table S1 in Supplementary Material for coefficients

Results of the interactive analysis have an important substantive interpretation. The overall increase in perceived appropriateness of anti-Muslim tweets is produced by those highest in group empathy. The apparent mechanism is demobilization: high-empathy respondents who otherwise would be the first to call out anti-Muslim rhetoric from Republican politicians are less

<sup>12</sup> Prediction lines for the anti-prejudice condition in Figure 2 may look like positive effects but the corresponding estimates are not significant on the 95% confidence level for both Democratic respondents ( $p = .122$ ) and Republican respondents ( $p = .319$ ).

likely to do so after being exposed to an anti-prejudice message from a Democratic politician.

## **Discussion**

The results of Study 1 have shown support for the backlash hypothesis. Exposure to anti-prejudice messaging does not polarize opinion between Democrats and Republicans. Instead, respondents who see the Democratic message against white supremacy first rate the Republican anti-Muslim message as more acceptable. We have also found an interactive effect for the anti-prejudice message with group empathy. However, it works differently from what we have hypothesized: instead of reinforcing the negative effect of empathy on perceived appropriateness of anti-Muslim rhetoric, exposure to anti-prejudice messaging erases it.

We have also implemented an additional test to see whether the increase in acceptability of Republican messaging is indeed a reaction to anti-prejudice messaging. Specifically, we have estimated the potential mirroring effect by comparing perceived acceptability of Democratic tweets depending on whether they are seen before or after Republican ones. We have found no significant effects (see Table S2 in Supplementary Material). In other words, the increase in acceptability is unique to the situation in which anti-minority messages are seen *after* anti-prejudice ones—it is not a result of mere cross-exposure to out-party messages.

The Study 1 sample limits the degree to which its findings can be generalized. First, it comes from college students who are known to differ from the general population on a number of important dimensions (Sears 1986; but cf. Druckman and Kam 2011). Second, our sample contains relatively few Republicans, making estimated effects for that group less reliable due to low statistical power. We aim to overcome these limitations in Study 2, which is effectively a replication of Study 1 on a general population sample.

## Study 2: General Population Sample

### Data and Method

We ran our replication study with a sample of U.S. adults in July 2020. Participants were recruited using the Lucid panel that was shown to approximate American national demographics (Coppock and McClellan 2019). The survey was completed by 700 non-Hispanic white respondents.<sup>13</sup> The sample characteristics were as follows. Mean age was 44 years old. Gender ratio was 48.4% male to 51.6% female. College education was reported by 40.1% of respondents. Median income was between \$40,000 and \$44,999. In terms of partisanship, 36.6% of respondents were Democrats, 38.5% were Republicans, and 24.9% were independents. Respondent demographics were supplied by the panel.

The experimental procedure replicated the one used in Study 1. Survey participants started by completing the group empathy battery and then were presented with the tweets. Similar to Study 1, half of respondents saw a Republican politician's tweet first (control condition) whereas the other half saw a Republican politician's tweet after that of a Democratic politician (anti-prejudice condition).<sup>14</sup> Tweets were rated in terms of perceived appropriateness.

A Democratic tweet and a Republican tweet presented to each respondent were, again, randomly chosen from predefined lists of real tweets (six for each party) by members of Congress. At the same time, the selection of tweets for Study 2 was different. In Study 1, all Democratic tweets were from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez whereas Republican tweets were from Louie Gohmert and Steve King. That selection was purposeful for the sake of external validity: these members of Congress were the ones who tweeted on the chosen issues (white supremacy

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<sup>13</sup> The questionnaire was also completed by 276 nonwhite respondents, including Hispanics.

<sup>14</sup> Similar to Study 1, respondents saw a Democratic tweet after a Republican one in the control condition.

for Democrats and radical Islam for Republicans) most often. However, this selection could raise concerns about respondents’ reactions to the specific politicians rather than to tweets’ content.

Therefore, for Study 2 we used tweets from four different Democratic members of Congress. The selection of Republican tweets also included tweets from more representatives.<sup>15</sup>

## Results

We, again, start by documenting the treatment effects (difference between the anti-prejudice condition and the control condition) for perceived appropriateness of anti-Muslim tweets. Results are presented in Table 3 by respondent partisanship. Estimates show that the findings of Study 1 are exactly replicated: anti-prejudice message impacts perceived appropriateness of a Republican politician’s tweet only when the respondent is a Democrat. And this effect is positive: exposure to a Democratic tweet on the threat of white supremacy leads respondents to rate a Republican tweet on the threat of radical Islam as more appropriate.

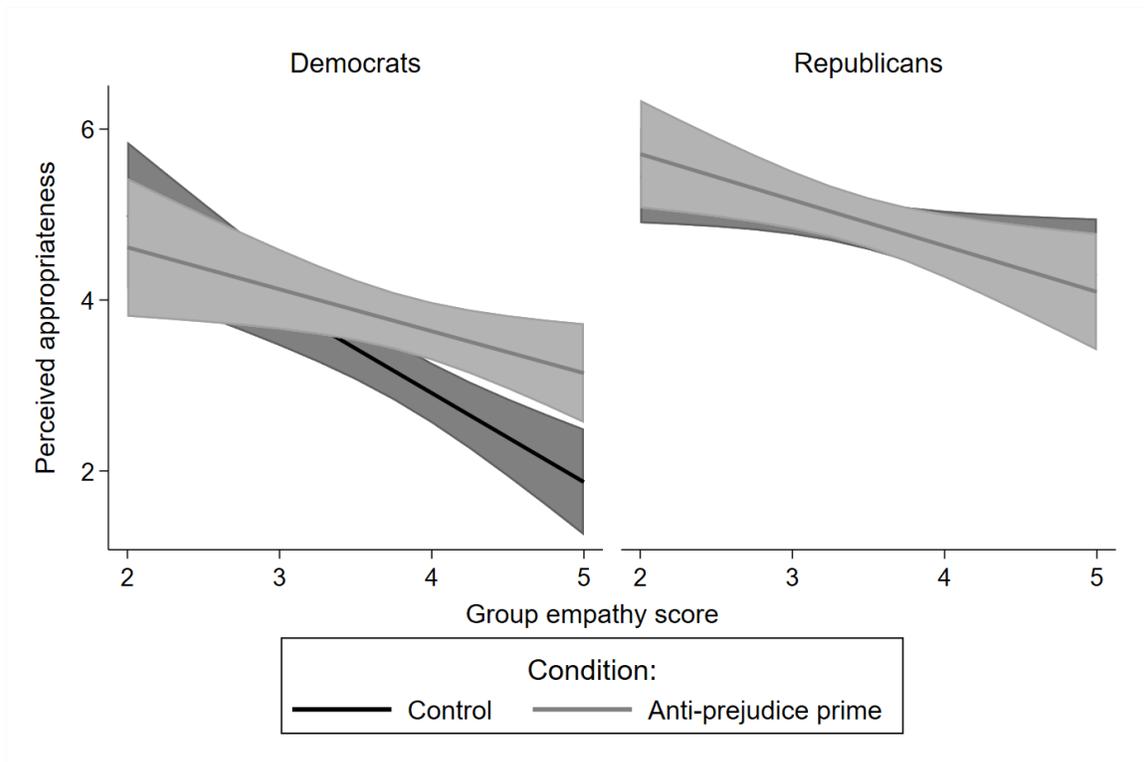
**Table 3.** Mean levels of perceived appropriateness of anti-Muslim tweets by experimental condition and treatment effects by respondents’ partisanship, Study 2

	Control	Anti-prejudice condition	Difference	<i>N</i>
Democrats	3.11	3.72	0.61 [0.10, 1.11]	231
Republicans	4.94	4.94	<0.01 [-0.41, 0.42]	299

*Note.* 95% confidence intervals in brackets (difference estimates only)

Next, we replicate the interactive analysis. Results are presented in Figure 3. They, again, replicate those reported in Study 1: the negative effect of group empathy on perceived appropriateness of anti-Muslim tweets from Republican representatives turns insignificant in the cross-exposure condition. Importantly, the significant interaction is found only among Democrats. Among Republicans, group empathy does not show an effect.

<sup>15</sup> See Supplementary Material for the full list of tweets.



**Figure 3.** Relationship between group empathy and perceived appropriateness of anti-Muslim tweets by experimental condition and respondents’ partisanship, Study 2  
*Note.* Predictions with 95% confidence intervals. See Table S3 in Supplementary Material for coefficients

In other words, the increase in perceived appropriateness of Republican tweets about Islam or Muslims in the cross-exposure condition is indeed produced by those high in group empathy. And this effect seems to be mostly produced by high-empathy Democrats.

**Discussion**

The results of Study 2 have replicated the findings of Study 1. First, our experimental results show backlash rather than polarization: respondents who see the anti-prejudice message first rate the anti-Muslim message as more acceptable. Second, this effect is largely produced by Democrats high in group empathy. These Democrats are less likely to call out anti-Muslim rhetoric from Republican representatives as inappropriate after being exposed to anti-prejudice messages coming from in-party members of Congress. We have also confirmed that, similar to

Study 1, an increase in perceived acceptability is not found when a Democratic tweet is seen after a Republican one (if anything, Democrats rate tweets about white supremacy as *less* acceptable after seeing ones about radical Islam; see Table S4 in Supplementary Material).

### **How White is the Backlash?**

Studies 1 and 2 have shown support for the backlash hypothesis: respondents see an anti-Muslim message coming from a Republican politician as more acceptable after seeing an anti-prejudice message from a Democratic politician. Recall that the hypothesis has been formulated following the notion of “white backlash” and tested for non-Hispanic white respondents. It follows the existing literature on the growing importance of white identity and the related conservative shift among white Americans. However, the corresponding effect is found among white Democrats but not white Republicans—potentially complicating the backlash story. It is possible that, being cross-pressured by partisan and racial identity, white Democrats are particularly sensitive to political communication on race issues.

To provide at least a preliminary evaluation of this conjecture, we implement a relatively simple set of analyses comparing the effects found in Studies 1 and 2 for white and nonwhite Democrats. Such comparisons are possible because, even though up to this point our analyses have exclusively considered non-Hispanic whites, the questionnaires for both studies were completed by substantial numbers of nonwhite respondents.<sup>16</sup>

We start by comparing the treatment effects: impact of the anti-prejudice condition on perceived appropriateness of anti-Muslim tweets by Republican politicians. Results are presented in Table 4. We find a significant backlash effect for nonwhite Democrats in Study 1, although it is somewhat lower than that for white Democrats. In Study 2, the effect of the anti-prejudice

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<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the samples do not allow us to implement more fine-grained analyses of respondents from various ethnic and racial groups collapsed under the “nonwhite” umbrella.

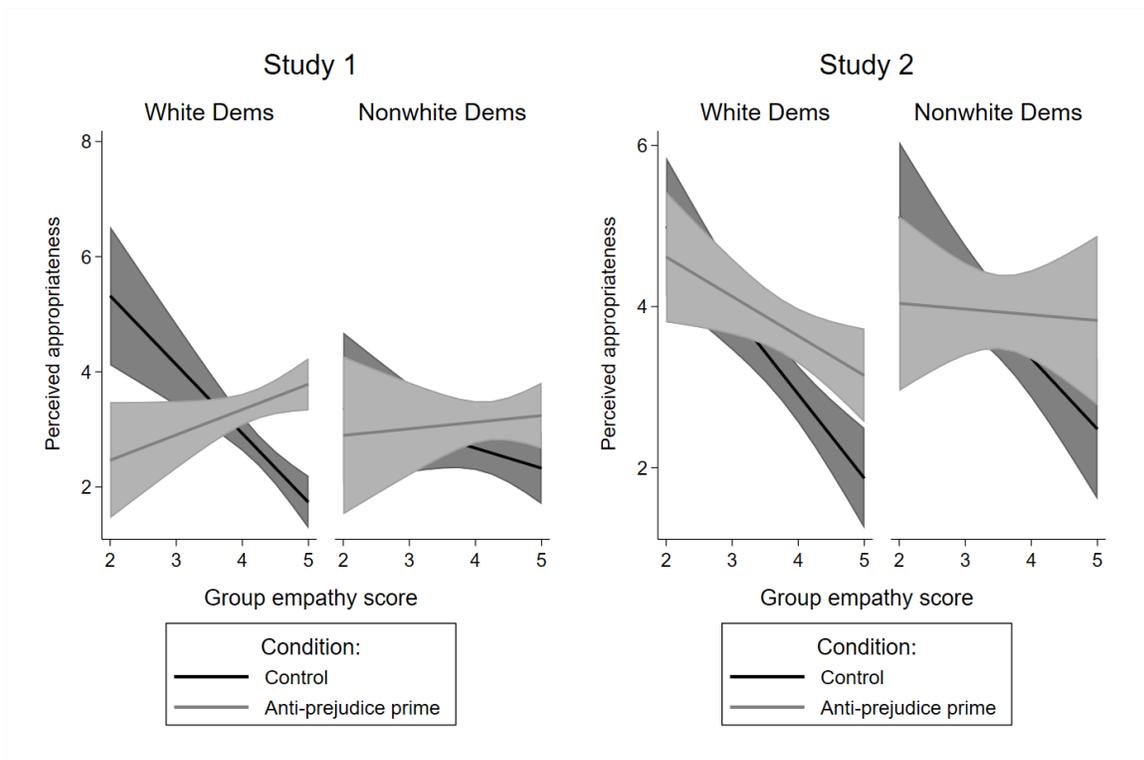
message on perceived appropriateness of anti-Muslim tweets is not significant (the point estimate is slightly positive). It is also necessary to note that the perceived acceptability of anti-Muslim appeals among nonwhite Democrats in Study 2 is relatively high even in the control condition. Since the main differences between the two samples are age and education (Study 1 participants are college students), this result potentially reveals interesting generational differences among nonwhite Democrats—but this conjecture needs further testing.

**Table 4.** Mean levels of perceived appropriateness of anti-Muslim tweets by experimental condition and treatment effects among white and nonwhite Democrats, Studies 1 and 2

	Control	Anti-prejudice condition	Difference	<i>N</i>
<b>Study 1</b>				
White Dems	2.60	3.42	0.82 [0.44, 1.21]	284
Nonwhite Dems	2.63	3.15	0.53 [0.02, 1.03]	182
<b>Study 2</b>				
White Dems	3.11	3.72	0.61 [0.10, 1.11]	231
Nonwhite Dems	3.75	3.93	0.19 [-0.47, 0.84]	126

*Note.* 95% confidence intervals in brackets (difference estimates only)

Then, we turn to comparing the interactive effects of the anti-prejudice message and group empathy for white and nonwhite Democrats. Results are presented in Figure 4. Overall, the pattern is the same: exposure to an anti-prejudice frame almost reverses (in Study 1) or at least significantly decreases (in Study 2) the effect of group empathy on perceived acceptability of anti-Muslim tweets. This interactive effect for nonwhites is somewhat smaller in Study 1 and slightly larger in Study 2. In other words, demobilization of those highest in group empathy is found among nonwhites as well.



**Figure 4.** Relationship between group empathy and perceived appropriateness of anti-Muslim tweets by experimental condition among white and nonwhite Democrats, Studies 1 and 2  
*Note.* Predictions with 95% confidence intervals. See Table S5 in Supplementary Material for coefficients

Although results from the two studies are mixed, they suggest that the backlash effect we find is not exclusively white. Nonwhite Democrats also can react to anti-prejudice messaging by rating anti-Muslim appeals as more acceptable—but effect magnitudes are lower than those among whites. Similar to whites, the effect for nonwhites is driven by those high in empathy.

### Conclusion

Our goal in this paper has been to explore the potential causes of the growing acceptability of explicit anti-minority appeals in U.S. politics. The increased prominence of anti-prejudice and antiracist political messaging partially explains the acceptability of explicit racial messaging from both parties. We have outlined two potential mechanisms—partisan polarization and white backlash—that, on the aggregate, can produce higher acceptability of anti-minority appeals as a result of exposure to anti-prejudice messages. We have also hypothesized that exposure to an

anti-prejudice message can reinforce the relationship between perceived acceptability of anti-minority appeals and group empathy.

We have tested these conjectures in two survey-experimental studies, one using a student sample and one using a general population sample. Results of both studies show that exposure to anti-prejudice messages from Democratic politicians addressing white supremacy as a security threat increases perceived acceptability of explicit appeals from Republican politicians linking Muslims to terrorism. In terms of the hypothesized mechanisms, we find evidence of backlash, which is driven by Democrats and those high in group empathy. Meanwhile, we find no evidence supporting the polarization hypothesis.

The exact reasons for these findings are unclear. It is possible that white Democrats are particularly sensitive to this kind of messaging because of partisan and racial identity cross-pressures—whereas, for white Republicans, political implications of these identities are aligned. However, the analyses in which we compare white and nonwhite respondents suggest that the same kind of backlash can be also happening among nonwhite Democrats. Erasure of the group empathy effect on perceived acceptability of anti-minority rhetoric in the anti-prejudice condition—replicated in both student and adult samples—is no less interesting. Reminding respondents about white supremacy demobilizes those high in group empathy by making them less willing to call out anti-Muslim appeals. Future studies may try to replicate this effect using other instances of explicit group-based political messages as well as investigate the exact mechanism behind demobilization.

The main limitation of our study is the content of the stimuli (social media posts) used in the survey experiments. They concern only two issues, white supremacy and radical Islam, both of which are framed as security threats. At the same time, this relatively narrow focus has

allowed us to maximize external validity by using the real tweets by both Democratic and Republican members of Congress.

It is also necessary to emphasize that the choice of white supremacy threat as the anti-prejudice message and politicians' tweets as the stimuli should have made our test favorable to the polarization hypothesis and conservative for the backlash one. First, white supremacy belongs to the most extreme forms of white identity that are rejected by white Democrats (Jardina, Kalmoe, and Gross 2020), making backlash against this particular message more difficult to find. One can expect even stronger backlash against racially progressive rhetoric that is more actively contested in the public sphere. Second, cues coming from specific politicians tend to be more polarizing than ones simply associated with party labels (Nicholson 2012). Thus, it should have been particularly difficult for Democrats to find anti-Muslim tweets from named Republican politicians acceptable, especially ones coming from such controversial figures as Steve King. Still, we find backlash among Democrats—and no polarization.

Importantly, our design is different from some recent studies that have shown potential effectiveness of certain types of anti-prejudice messaging, such as calling out racial political appeals (Banks and Hicks 2019; Tokeshi and Mendelberg 2015), or framing specific minority groups in a positive way (Zhirkov, Verkuyten, and Ponarin 2021). Progressive racial messaging can also empower members of minority groups and increase their political participation (Garcia and Stout 2022). At the same time, our results demonstrate that anti-prejudice rhetoric can backfire. An investigation of why and when different anti-prejudice strategies in political communication are most effective can be a promising direction for future research.

Our findings have important implications for American politics more broadly. We show that growing acceptability of explicit anti-minority appeals is at least partly explained by reaction

to the increased prominence of anti-prejudice and antiracist political messaging. Exposure to such messages, even ones mentioning white supremacy that is almost universally condemned across the political spectrum, makes voters more accepting of attacks against marginalized groups. Moreover, this backlash is produced exclusively by Democrats. This result suggests that partisan sorting on the basis of race and racial attitudes is not complete. Despite racial conservatives abandoning the Democratic Party (Valentino and Sears 2005), while those who remain turning more racially liberal (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018), there are still enough Democrats who react negatively to progressive racial messaging. And the presence of such people in the Democratic coalition is an important reason why rhetoric that collects a lot of likes on Twitter can cause backlash outside of it.

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## Supplementary Material

### Group Empathy

“We have a couple of questions about your thoughts and feelings in a variety of situations. For each statement, indicate well it describes you.”

1. When I'm upset at someone from another racial or ethnic group, I usually try to “put myself in their shoes” for a while.
2. Before criticizing somebody from another racial or ethnic group, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.
3. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the “other person's” point of view, particularly someone from another race or ethnicity.
4. If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to the arguments of people, particularly those of other racial or ethnic groups.
5. I often have tender, concerned feelings for people from another racial or ethnic group who are less fortunate than me.
6. I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person towards people of other racial or ethnic groups.
7. The misfortunes of people from other racial or ethnic groups do not usually disturb me a great deal.
8. Sometimes I don't feel very sorry for people of other racial or ethnic groups when they are having problems.

Respondents were randomly presented with four statements, one from each following pair: (1) and (2), (3) and (4), (5) and (6), (7) and (8). Statement order randomized. Answers given on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 = *Does not describe me* to 7 = *Describes me extremely well*

## Democratic tweets, Study 1



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
@AOC

White supremacy has quickly turned into a domestic terror crisis in the US.

They rely on you thinking "it's not a big deal." It is a big deal.

White supremacy now makes up the majority of domestic terrorism in the United States. They radicalize online.



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
@AOC

& again, this time asking the FBI.

It seems easier to label domestic, self-radicalized shooters who are Muslim as terrorists.

Yet white supremacists, who are responsible for far more violence in the US, often escape these charges.

Now they're the #1 source of domestic terror ↓



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
@AOC

Video games aren't causing mass shootings, white supremacy is.

Sadly the GOP refuse to acknowledge that, bc their strategy relies on rallying a white supremacist base.

That's why the President hosts stadiums of people chanting "send her back" & targets Congress-members of color.



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
@AOC

White supremacists were responsible for \*ALL\* race-based domestic terrorism in 2018. 100%.

Trump's DoJ & Barr then worked \*\*to hide that report from Congress\*\*--all while defunding federal programs to combat white supremacist violence.

This is a white supremacist administration.



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
@AOC

When a mass shooting is committed by a Muslim, the crime is almost automatically labeled as Domestic Terrorism.

But when White Supremacists like Dylann Roof shot up a black church, or attack the Tree of Life Synagogue, the FBI declined to charge them w/ Domestic Terrorism.

Why?



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
@AOC

White supremacy is a fundamentally violent ideology that's been growing at an alarming rate, fueling one mass shooting after another.

It's about time we recognized white nationalism for the major terrorist threat that it is.

## Republican tweets, Study 1



Louie Gohmert  
@replouiegohmert

Could Someone Please Inform the Federal Judiciary That Jihadists Are Muslim? - [bit.ly/2nvvlpF](http://bit.ly/2nvvlpF) via @NRO



Steve King  
@SteveKingIA

The #Muslim Invasion of Europe: a clear concise description of transformation of Western European Culture by hijrah.



Steve King  
@SteveKingIA

Our hearts and prayers go out for the French victims of yet another terrorist attack. We must defeat the ideology of Islamic Jihad.



Louie Gohmert  
@replouiegohmert

Coming soon: More immigrants from Muslim nations than population of D.C. -- 680,000 [washex.am/1QlwUB5](http://washex.am/1QlwUB5) via @DCExaminer



Steve King  
@SteveKingIA

Sweden: What America is becoming. 12 terrorist bombings in 24 days. Sweden, highest per capita immigration in world. [pgj.cc/dKgZJP](http://pgj.cc/dKgZJP)



Steve King  
@SteveKingIA

Are shop manuals for Boeings written in Arabic? A 30 year Arabic\only mechanic, whose brother is ISIS, sabotages a plane & NO terrorist consequence? "I do admit the guilt," Abdul-Majeed Marouf Ahmed Alani, 60, said through an Arabic interpreter...

## Democratic tweets, Study 2



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
@AOC

& again, this time asking the FBI.

It seems easier to label domestic, self-radicalized shooters who are Muslim as terrorists.

Yet white supremacists, who are responsible for far more violence in the US, often escape these charges.

Now they're the #1 source of domestic terror 📉



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
@AOC

When a mass shooting is committed by a Muslim, the crime is almost automatically labeled as Domestic Terrorism.

But when White Supremacists like Dylann Roof shot up a black church, or attack the Tree of Life Synagogue, the FBI declined to charge them w/ Domestic Terrorism.

Why?



Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez  
@AOC

White supremacy is a fundamentally violent ideology that's been growing at an alarming rate, fueling one mass shooting after another.

It's about time we recognized white nationalism for the major terrorist threat that it is.



Congressmember Bass  
@RepKarenBass

Today the House Judiciary Committee held a hearing on the rise of hate crimes and white nationalism in this country.

This country DOES have a problem with domestic terrorism. We DO have a problem with White Supremacy. Congress should work to address it.



Hakeem Jeffries  
@RepJeffries

Mother Emanuel AME Church. Tree of Life Synagogue. Cielo Vista Massacre.

White Supremacy = Domestic Terrorism.

It must be crushed.

Not coddled.

There are not very fine people on both sides.



Rep. Don Beyer  
@RepDonBeyer

Check out my latest, in [@businessinsider](#):

"America has a serious white-supremacy problem, which is helping fuel a rise in hate crimes, violence, and domestic terrorism, and it's time for Congress to do something to combat this growing threat to our nation."

## Republican tweets, Study 2



Steve King  
@SteveKingIA

Our hearts and prayers go out for the French victims of yet another terrorist attack. We must defeat the ideology of Islamic Jihad.



Steve King  
@SteveKingIA

The [#Muslim](#) Invasion of Europe: a clear concise description of transformation of Western European Culture by hijrah.



Kevin McCarthy  
@GOPLeader

Islamic terrorism must be stopped, and we must make changes to defend our nation & destroy terrorism at the root. [majorityleader.gov/2016/06/13/the...](http://majorityleader.gov/2016/06/13/the...)



Steve King  
@SteveKingIA

Are shop manuals for Boeings written in Arabic? A 30 year Arabic\only mechanic, whose brother is ISIS, sabotages a plane & NO terrorist consequence? "I do admit the guilt," Abdul-Majeed Marouf Ahmed Alani, 60, said through an Arabic interpreter...



Louie Gohmert  
@replouiegohmert

Could Someone Please Inform the Federal Judiciary That Jihadists Are Muslim? - [bit.ly/2nvwlpF](http://bit.ly/2nvwlpF) via [@NRO](#)



Mo Brooks  
@RepMoBrooks

Koran: "We shall certainly strike terror into the hearts of those who have disbelieved" (3:151) & "Verily, the disbelievers are your open enemies." (4:101).

On 9/11/01, fundamentalist Muslims attacked America, killing 2,996.

We must remember & learn. History must not repeat. Mo

**Table S1.** Interactive model coefficients for Democrats and Republicans, Study 1

	Democrats	Republicans
Anti-prejudice condition	-6.13*** (1.48)	-4.84** (1.67)
Group empathy	-1.20*** (0.26)	-0.81* (0.31)
Anti-prejudice × Empathy	1.64*** (0.35)	1.17** (0.45)
<i>N</i>	284	147

*Note.* Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Table S2.** Mean levels of perceived appropriateness of Democratic tweets by condition and estimated differences by respondents' partisanship, Study 1

	Seen first	Seen second	Difference	<i>N</i>
Democrats	5.68	5.65	-0.03 [-0.34, 0.29]	284
Republicans	3.46	3.83	0.37 [-0.19, 0.93]	147

*Note.* 95% confidence intervals in brackets (difference estimates only)

**Table S3.** Interactive model coefficients for Democrats and Republicans, Study 2

	Democrats	Republicans
Anti-prejudice condition	-1.48 (1.18)	0.55 (0.94)
Group empathy	-1.04*** (0.22)	-0.39* (0.19)
Anti-prejudice × Empathy	0.55 (0.30)	-0.15 (0.27)
<i>N</i>	231	299

*Note.* Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Table S4.** Mean levels of perceived appropriateness of Democratic tweets by condition and estimated differences by respondents' partisanship, Study 2

	Seen first	Seen second	Difference	<i>N</i>
Democrats	5.34	4.79	-0.53 [-1.01, -0.06]	231
Republicans	3.92	3.99	0.07 [-0.43, 0.57]	299

*Note.* 95% confidence intervals in brackets (difference estimates only)

**Table S5.** Interactive model coefficients for white and nonwhite Democrats, Studies 1 and 2

	Study 1		Study 2	
	White Dems	Nonwhite Dems	White Dems	Nonwhite Dems
Anti-prejudice condition	-6.13*** (1.48)	-1.40 (1.80)	-1.48 (1.18)	-2.70 (1.52)
Group empathy	-1.20*** (0.26)	-0.35 (0.30)	-1.04*** (0.22)	-0.88** (0.27)
Anti-prejudice × Empathy	1.64*** (0.35)	0.46 (0.43)	0.55 (0.30)	0.81 (0.42)
<i>N</i>	284	182	231	126

*Note.* Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$