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Is multiculturalism as American as apple pie? A survey of attitudes toward ethnic and religious diversity in the United States

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Abstract

What percentage of American citizens believe that the real America is a White Christian America? How many would prefer to live in a more homogeneous or singular country, one occupied primarily by members of their own ethnic, racial, or religious group? In the face of contemporary changes in the composition of the population, to what extent have the White Christian citizens of the United States become fearful of demographic replacement? Alternatively posed: To what extent is ethnic, racial, and religious diversity valued by American citizens? Is it or is it not a basic feature of their ideal of what America means? Those are the questions addressed in this study. A representative sample of American citizens (n = 986) was asked to estimate the actual and the desired distribution of ethnicities, races, and religions in the United States on the national level. We find that two-thirds of our respondents want a more ethnically/racially diverse United States than the current demographics and over half of respondents want a population that is more religiously diverse than the status quo in 2020. Only a tiny percent idealizes a country that is ethnically or religiously homogeneous. The survey results suggest that the ideal of a multicultural *country* composed of diverse ethnic, racial, and religious groups is widely accepted. The results also suggest that the supposed fear of a national "Great Replacement" of White Christian Americans by non-White or non-Christian minority groups may have been greatly exaggerated.

KEYWORDS
demographics, ethnicity, multiculturalism, pluralism USA, religion, replacement theory

INTRODUCTION

To what extent is ethnic, racial, and religious diversity valued by American citizens and a basic feature of their ideal of what America means? How many American citizens believe that the real America is a White Christian America? How many would prefer to live in a more homogeneous or singular country, one occupied (like many "ethnonational" European countries) primarily by members of their own ethnic, racial, or religious group? In the face of contemporary demographic changes in the United States, to what extent have the White Christian citizens of the United States become fearful of ethnic, racial, or religious "replacement"? Those questions are addressed in this study in which a representative sample of American citizens ($n = 986$) were asked to estimate the actual distribution of ethnicities, races, and religions in the United States and also asked to construct their ideal ethnic, racial, and religious demography for the United States as a whole. The main phenomenon of interest in our survey is what our participants report as their desired or ideal demographic composition of the ethnicities and religions of the United States *at the aggregate national level*, a concept we term ideal demography judgment (IDJ). The study also reports perceptions of the received demographic history of the United States and examines the way those perceptions might influence judgments of what is desirable looking forward in time. We emphasize that the survey is not about judgments of ethnic/racial and religious diversity within families, friendship networks, schools, local neighborhoods, or geographical regions of the country. It is about the prevalence of a socially accepted cultural model of the United States as a multicultural country. A cultural model refers to ideas about what is true, good, beautiful, and efficient that are shared by members of a social group or ancestral heritage community (Holland & Quinn, 1987; Shweder, 1991).

We begin this survey report with an anecdote. In the spring of 2002, one of the co-authors of this article (Richard Shweder) was invited to give a series of four public lectures at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris. He submitted prospective lecture titles, one of which contained the word "multicultural." He recalls receiving something like the following communication back from his academic host: "Multiculturalism" is an American concept, not a French concept. I would strongly discourage you from using that word in the title of any of your upcoming lectures. It is likely to be misunderstood.

What type of cultural misunderstanding might his French host have had in mind? At the time he (Shweder) was participating in the activities of a working group on "Law and Culture," sponsored jointly by the Russell Sage Foundation of New York and the American Social Science Research Council. All the participants in the working group were Americans, except for one scholar from Northern Europe who, at one meeting, made something like the following eye-opening observation to her American colleagues: I feel I can be candid with all of you. One of the things that has puzzled me for some time while listening to you Americans talk about "culture" is that you seem to speak about "difference" and "diversity" as though those words had positive connotations. Where I come from, "difference" does not have a positive connotation. Quite the contrary, it makes us nervous. We view it as a problem.

His Northern European colleague had noticed a contrast in country-level judgments of "difference," which has both historical and contemporary resonances. In a famous speech delivered to the French Assembly in 1789 during the French Revolution, Stanislas Marie Adélaïde, Comte de Clermont-Tonnerre[1] addressed the question of whether religious minorities, particularly Jews, should be permitted to be citizens in the new French state. The French count, a liberal aristocrat who supported the French Revolution in its early days and helped draft its Constitution, strongly advocated for citizenship for Jews but only under assimilative conditions that weakened their sense of Jewish communal identity, separation, and difference: "Every creed has only one test to pass in regard to the social body: it has only one examination to which it must submit, that of its morals," he proclaimed. "We must refuse everything to the Jews as a nation and

accord everything to Jews as individuals. We must withdraw recognition from their judges; they should only have our judges. We must refuse legal protection to the maintenance of the so-called laws of their Judaic organization; they should not be allowed to form in the state either a political body or an order. They must be citizens individually."

Around the same time, in 1787 in America, James Madison was writing his famous treatise (later published as Federalist #10 in The Federalist Papers) on the existence and potential problem of "factions" in American society—a faction being a subgroup of citizens, whether in the majority or the minority, who are bound to each other by shared interests, values, opinions, passions, or historical identity that sets them in contrast to the interests, values, passions, or historical identity of some other groups of citizens. Madison tried to solve the problem by multiplying and making space for factions, rather than trying to erase or hide their distinctive group identity.

That contrast between a pluralistic inclination to make demographic space for different ethnic, racial, and religious groups and an anti-pluralistic inclination to view such "differences" as politically threatening has a contemporary resonance in the difference between the way the governments of France and the United States reacted to school age Muslim girls wearing head scarves to their public schools. Head scarves were readily accommodated in public schools in the United States. They were banned in the French School of the Republic (Bowen, 2008; Lindkvist, 2008; Scott, 2009). The contrast is there as well in the way ethnic, racial, and religious differences in the voting behavior of citizens in the two countries are either played up or played down. In the recent presidential election season in the United States, the media publicized information about voting trends in the Black, Latino, Korean, Arab, and Jewish populations. After Donald Trump was elected, there was much discussion of an emerging multi-ethnic, multi-racial working-class alliance supporting his candidacy. Indeed, tracking political attitudes by ethnicity, race, and religion is routine for the American media. In France, polls are not allowed and are not taken on the political candidate preferences of different ethnic, racial, or religious groups. "A 1978 law forbids anyone, from government census-takers to private researchers, from counting citizens based on their ethnic, racial or religious background" (Keller, 2012). In the French political tradition and cultural consciousness, citizens are featured as individuals and their equality as citizens is profiled by downplaying or keeping hidden their factional (ethnic, racial, religious) identities, although this is not true of their sex.

From a descriptive historical point of view, the country we refer to as the United States of America has never been a single "nation" (see, e.g., Joel Garreau's "The Nine Nations of North America" 1981, Colin Woodard's "American Nations: A History of Eleven Rival Regional Cultures in North America" 2012, and David Fischer's "Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America" 1989). The United States is and always has been a multiethnic, multiracial, and multireligious society struggling to organize itself around multidimensional ethnic, racial, religious, cultural, and regional "differences."

It is also noteworthy that during the past decade or so, major media attention has made highly visible right-wing patriotic groups in the United States who want the country to become more like a European ethnonational state (e.g., "What is the Great Replacement" in the *New York Times*, 2019, and "The French Origins of 'You will not Replace Us'" in *The New Yorker*, 2017). Much has been written about the White Christian nationalists who stormed the Capitol, and the neo-Nazis who marched and engaged in violence in Charlottesville, Virginia (e.g., "The Capitol Insurrection Was As Christian Nationalist As It Gets" in the *New York Times*, 2021). The tumultuous and divisive earlier presidency of Donald Trump and his immigration policies have provided ample talking-points for extensive media coverage of, and publicity for, right-wing ethnonationalist aspirations and anxieties, including those associated with their belief in the "great replacement theory" (e.g., "What is Christian Nationalism, Exactly?" in the *New York Times*, 2024).

The "great replacement theory" is an ethnonationalist worldview and ideology warning that White Christians of European origin in the United States are being replaced by immigrants of non-White, non-Christian, non-European descent (Obaidi et al., 2022; Schiff & Justice, 2023). The central idea is that lower birth rates among White Christian Americans (in contrast to birth rates of non-White, non-Christian, migrants to America) are changing the American demographic landscape and displacing or challenging American cultural values, beliefs, and practices. In its most extreme form, proponents believe in conspiratorial causes of demographic change (Ekman, 2022).

Some extremists have acted in ways that draw media attention (Gabbatt, 2017; Rosenberg, 2017; Sullivan, 2024). The Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, for instance, had members who chanted, "You will not replace us; Jews will not replace us," echoing the tensions and anxieties addressed by Count de Clermont-Tonnerre in France in 1789. The man who killed 11 Jewish worshipers in a Pittsburgh synagogue in 2018 referenced replacement theory to justify his murders (Maizels, 2022; Schiff & Justice, 2023). Anders Breivik, who killed 77 people in a terrorist attack in Norway in 2011, rationalized his actions as intended to prevent a "Muslim invasion" into what he perceived as a White and Christian nation (Bangstad, 2014). The Australian gunman who killed 49 people in two Mosques in New Zealand in 2019 titled his manifesto "The Great Replacement" (Besley & Peters, 2020).

Notably, the recent articulation of the "great replacement theory" originated in France, a European country where "multiculturalism" might well be viewed by many French citizens as "an American concept." In his book "*Le Grand Remplacement*" (the Great Replacement) (2012), Renaud Camus propounded the theory, arguing that White Europeans are being rapidly reverse colonized by Black and Brown migrants with a corrosive impact on French folkways and culture. His fears of a great replacement have their origin in recent European immigration trends.

Similar trends exist in the United States. For instance, in 1960, 84% of immigrants to the USA were born in other Western countries. In contrast, by 2018 this share went down to 13%, with a corresponding rise in migration from non-Western countries (de Haas et al., 2019; Moghaddam & Hendricks, 2022), whose values, beliefs, and behaviors might be seen as different from, or in fundamental moral opposition to, those held by dominant groups (Minow et al., 2008; Putnam, 2007; Shweder et al., 2002). One question we address in this article is whether the current ethnic, racial, and religious composition of the United States is experienced as threatening and subtractive (as the "great replacement theory" proclaims and encourages) rather than as enhancing and additive (Botelho & Power, 2022).

America has been multicultural all along (Fischer, 1989; Garreau, 1981; Woodard, 2012). The Native American nations were diverse in their customs and beliefs (Foner, 2003) long before Western colonization (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021). The European migrants who arrived later were also culturally and religiously diverse (Pew Research Center, 2015; Shweder, 2017). Nevertheless, in this article we offer a tentative assessment of the degree to which ethnic and religious diversity is judged as ideal among American citizens today. In the face of current debates about migration, the rise of ethno-nationalistic ideologies in the United States, and the media attention given to demographic "replacement," we raise some questions about contemporary American judgments of diversity. How are those "differences" perceived? Are they viewed as desirable? Would American citizens prefer to live in a country that is ethnically, racially, or religiously homogenous and consists of citizens who share a distinct unitary cultural, ethnic, or religious identity and where state, culture, ethnicity, and territory are coincidental? Such a picture is the ethno-nationalist ideal that was once more or less achieved by some ethnic groups in Europe, such as the Danes of Denmark, the Swedes of Sweden, the Germans of Germany, or the Hungarians of Hungary. It is an ideal that has not been entirely forsaken in Europe even today, as particular European ethnonational countries have become less ethnically, culturally, and religiously homogeneous and feel threatened by immigration. Below we tentatively offer some answers to those questions by reporting the results of a survey of a representative sample of American citizens who were asked to estimate the actual ethnic, racial, and religious composition of the United States and to design their ideal demography for the United States, with special reference to the population distributions of ethnic, racial, and religious groups at the country level. In sum, our aim is to consider the perceived and ideal composition of ethnic, racial, and religious groups in the United States to assess which prevails: the ethno-nationalistic ideal of what America means or a multicultural ideal.

METHODS

Participants

Respondents were recruited through the survey platform and panel provider Qualtrics. Table 1 below shows the socio-demographic makeup of the study sample and compares it to the General Social Survey

(GSS) (Davern et al., 2021) as a baseline. The GSS is a nationally representative survey of adults in the United States.

TABLE 1 Study demographics and baseline comparison (study and reference figures are percentages unless otherwise indicated).

Variable	*N*	Study	Reference	Difference	*p*
Age (in years)	986	48.6	47.8	0.8	0.237
Women	986	51.5	50.6	0.9	0.859
Hispanic	986	5.3	4.6	0.7	0.417
White	986	71.4	70.8	0.6	0.758
Black	986	10.8	11.5	−0.7	0.551
American Indian	986	1.6	0.5	1.1	0.000
Asian	986	3.9	5.5	−1.6	0.050
Native Hawaiian	986	0.0	0.1	−0.1	0.515
Other race	986	3.9	2.8	1.1	0.098
Multiple races	986	3.2	4.2	−0.9	0.205
Midwest	986	20.1	20.9	−0.9	0.584
Northeast	986	23.2	17.7	5.6	0.000
South	986	43.1	37.8	5.3	0.002
West	986	13.6	23.6	−10.0	0.000
Catholic	986	25.6	21.8	3.8	0.018
Protestant	986	29.6	36.8	−7.2	0.000
Muslim	986	2.3	1.2	1.1	0.015
Jewish	986	2.7	1.5	1.2	0.015
Other religion and nones	986	39.8	37.0	2.7	0.120
Political orientation(1 = Very left; 7 = Very right)	897	4.2	4.0	0.2	0.001

Qualtrics is an established online survey platform that enables researchers to field surveys to a large, pre-screened panel of respondents, who have agreed to participate in research studies in exchange for compensation. To ensure our sample approximated the demographic composition of the US population, we used quota sampling, a method that sets target quotas based on key sociodemographic characteristics such as age, gender, race and ethnicity, religious affiliation, and political orientation.

This approach is designed to yield a representative sample—a sample whose demographic distribution mirrors that of the broader population. Representative samples enable the external validity of survey research, allowing for generalizable conclusions about the attitudes and experiences of the national population. Growing evidence suggests that samples recruited through online panels can be as representative of the population as traditional recruitment methods (Heen et al., 2014). In our case, comparisons with the GSS indicate good representativeness across age, gender, ethno-racial, religious, and political dimensions. Only the portion of Protestants and the regional composition of participants deviates more markedly from the population baseline, with fewer participants identifying as Protestant and from the West and more from the Northeast and South.

Materials and procedure

Respondents completed an online survey in August of 2021. Participants provided judgments on a selection of 41 cultural practices. The average response time for the entire survey was 33.6 min. We analyze

data from four batteries of the larger survey questions querying perceived and ideal distributions of ethnic, racial, and religious groups in the United States. First, participants were asked to estimate the actual composition of ethnicities and races in the United States ("Please estimate what percent of the American population is [followed by a selection of 7 ethnicities/races]"). After completing this question, they were then told the actual proportion of ethnicities and races in the United States. They were then asked to express their IDJ of the seven ethnicities and races in the United States ("What mix and distributions of races and ethnicities do you personally consider ideal for the United States?"). Next, participants were asked to estimate the actual composition of religions in the United States ("please estimate what percent of the American population is" [followed by a selection of 7 religions and atheism]). Respondents were then told the actual proportion of religions in the United States. They were then asked to express their IDJ of the 7 religions and atheism in the United States ("What mix and distributions of religions do you personally consider ideal for the United States?").

Participant demographics

We collected information on participant age, gender, race and ethnicity, religious affiliation, and political ideology (rated on a 1–7 scale from very left to very right) (see Table 1 above).

Perceived racial demographics

Participants were asked to estimate what percent of the American population is constituted by each of seven racial and ethnic groups. These groups consisted of: White, Hispanic/Latinx, Black/African American, East Asian, South Asian, American Indian/Native American, and Middle Eastern. Participants used sliders from 0 to 100 to give their answers for each group, where the overall total was required to sum to 100 (See Table 2 and Figure 1 below).

IDJ of racial composition

Next, participants were informed about the actual statistical breakdown of ethnic and racial demographics in the United States, over the seven ethnic and racial groups. Then, participants were asked what mix and distribution they personally considered ideal for the United States. Participants used sliders from 0 to 100 to give their answers for each group separately. Totals were not required to sum to 100, and in most cases did not. This was to reduce the burden on participants to meaningfully answer the question while still allowing them to rank and provide relative sizes for each group. Given a final distribution of desired ethnicities and races totaling more than 100%, we created a total percentage score by summing the percentages for each group. We then divided the desired percentage for each group (e.g., Asians) by the total percentage points. This yielded a customized proportion for each participant of each desired group that sums to 100 (see Table 3). These proportions were used as outcome measures that could be correlated with other factors such as political ideology or racial identity (e.g., predicting IDJ with participant political ideology or racial identity, which inform Figures 2 and 5, below).

Perceived religious demographics

Participants were also asked to estimate what percent of the American population is constituted by each of eight religious groups, including atheists. These groups consisted of: Protestant, Catholic, Atheist (no religion), Jewish, Mormon, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu. Participants used sliders from 0 to 100 to

give their answers for each group, where the overall total was required to sum to 100. (see Table 4 and Figure 4)

IDJ of religious composition

Participants were then informed about the actual statistical breakdown of religious demographics in the United States, over each of the eight religious' groups. They were asked what mix and distribution they personally considered ideal for the United States and the percentage of each group they would like to have in the United States. Participants used sliders from 0 to 100 to give their answers for each group. Totals were not required to sum to 100 to, again, minimize mental burden. Like the statistical measure noted above concerning the IDJ for ethnic and racial composition, we created a total percentage score by summing respondents' percentages for each group. We then divided the desired percentage for each group (e.g., Muslims) by the total percentage points. This yielded a customized proportion for each participant of each desired group. These proportions were used as outcome measures. (see Table 5 and Figure 5)

RESULTS

Below we present descriptive and inferential analyses of the perceived composition and IDJ of American society in terms of ethnic and racial as well as religious groups. For each set of groups, we start by showing descriptive statistics of peoples' estimates of the proportion of groups and how it compares to the actual demographics based on the American Community Survey and the 2020 Census of American Religion (Public Religion Research Institute [PRRI], 2021). Then we report the IDJ for the set of groups and investigate how these judgments hang together with respondent characteristics, focusing on the association with racial and religious identity.

Part 1: Ethnic and racial composition

Perceived ethnic and racial composition

TABLE 2 Perceived and actual ethnic and racial group proportions.

Group	Mean estimate %	Actual %	Discrepancy (estimate − actual)
White	37.7	61	−23.3
Hispanic	14.6	18	−3.4
Black	19.1	13	6.1
East Asian	7.9	4	3.9
South Asian	6.8	2	4.8
Native	7.5	0.8	6.7
Middle Eastern	6.4	0.6	5.8

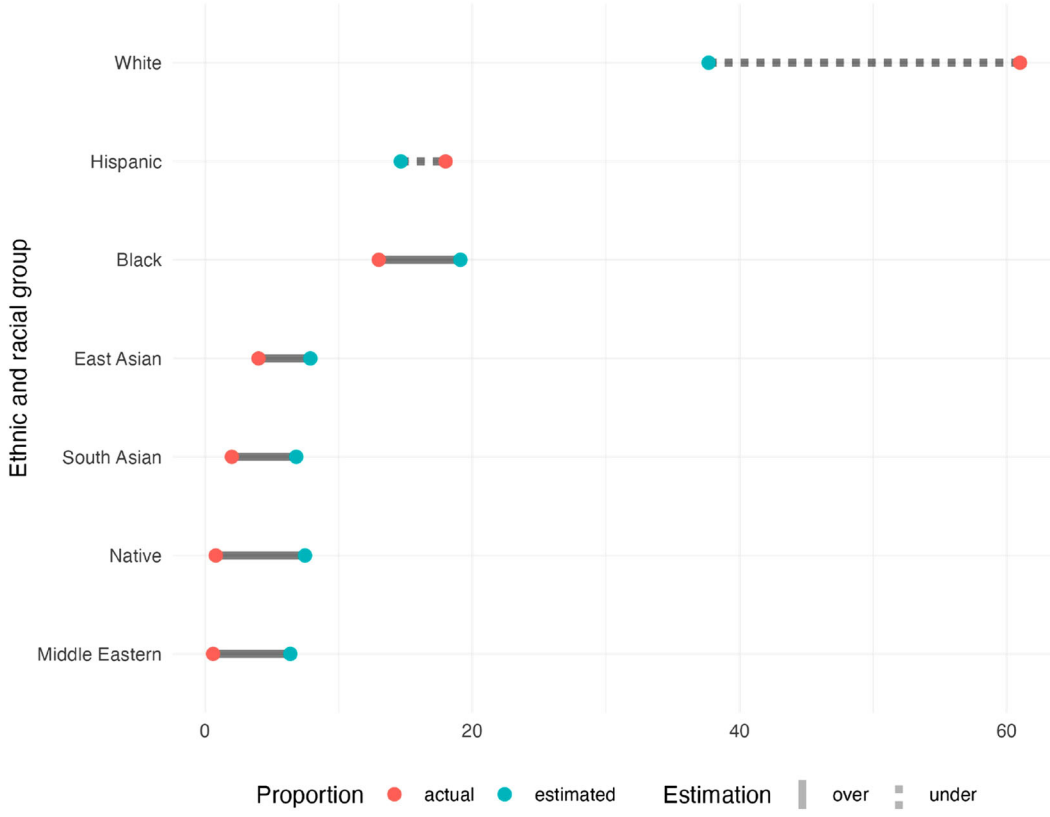

FIGURE 1 Estimated and actual share of ethnic and racial groups.

Participants' estimates showed a clear pattern of underestimating the prevalence of larger groups—White and Hispanic—and overestimating that of smaller groups—Black, East Asian, South Asian, Native American, and Middle Eastern. Average estimates for the proportion of Whites were more than 23% below their actual share in the population, while estimates for the remaining groups were between 3.4% and 6.7% off on average. Political ideology was significantly associated with misperceptions of the proportions of Whites in the population ($F(6, 876) = 2.72$, $p < 0.05$). Those respondents identifying as neither left nor right more strongly underestimated that share of the population (suggesting that right and left identifying participants were better informed about the actual proportion of Whites in the United States). With regard to the Hispanic share of the population ($F(6, 876) = 2.42$, $p < 0.05$), respondents identifying as slightly left underestimated the Hispanic share less. Respondents on the political extremes were more accurate in their demographic estimates.

IDJ of ethnic and racial composition

Next, we examine the IDJ of ethnic and racial groups in the United States in the full sample and then as a function of participants' own racial identity.

TABLE 3 Desired racial and ethnic group proportions.

Group	Mean (SD)
White	39.5 (20.2)
Black	15.5 (7.7)
Hispanic	14.6 (6.0)
East Asian	8.1 (5.1)
South Asian	6.9 (5.7)
Native	8.9 (8.0)
Middle Eastern	6.5 (5.7)

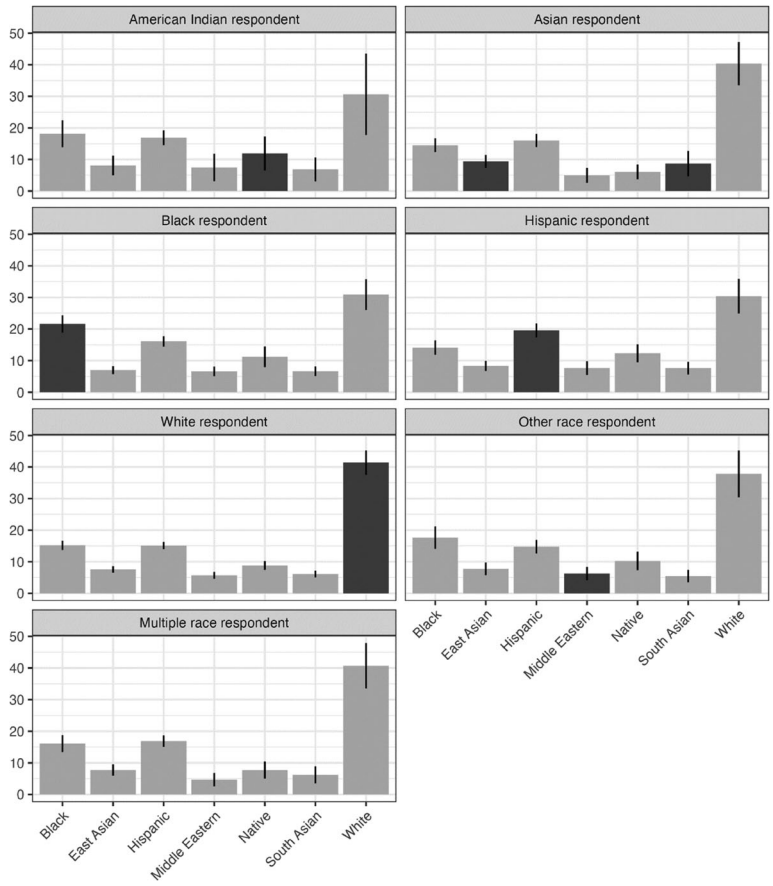

FIGURE 2 Predicted desired share of ethnic and racial groups and 95% confidence intervals by racial identity from OLS models also controlling for respondent age, gender, region, religion, and political orientation. Light gray bars indicate racial outgroups, and dark gray bars indicate racial ingroups (i.e., respondents' own racial identity). OLS, ordinary least squares.

We conducted a series of multiple linear regression (ordinary least squares, OLS) models investigating the covariates of the desired proportion of each ethnic and racial group. These models—shown in full in Figure A1 in the *Appendix*—regress the reported IDJ of each group on the age, gender, race, region, religion, and political ideology of the participants. Figure 2 above presents the IDJ for each group by respondent's own racial identity based on the models of the full analytic sample, as facets (the labels on the top of each box), in visual form. These predictions illustrate the patterns in the IDJ of ethnic and racial groups by respondent's own racial identity in an exemplary case of a respondent with the median (for continuous variables, i.e., age) or modal (for categorical variables, i.e., the rest of the variables) responses

in the data. In our data, this is a respondent who is 51 years old, a woman, Protestant, from the Northeast, and neither left nor right politically oriented. This allows for comparison across racial and ethnic groups net of other differences between groups.

Figure 2 highlights the associations between an individual's own racial identity and their IDJ of the seven racial and ethnic groups, controlling for political ideology and the previously mentioned covariates. For each unique racial identity represented in the data, the predicted IDJ of the ethnic or racial ingroup is highest, though not necessarily statistically significantly so. To focus just on the three largest groups, (1) the results for Whites' IDJ of their own group are approximately 10 percentage points higher than what Black, Hispanic, or Native Americans see as ideal for the percentage of Whites, (2) Black participants would prefer an ingroup share that is about four to 6 percentage points higher than what other groups judge ideal for them, and (3) Hispanic participants' IDJ of their own group is about 3 to 4.5 percentage points higher than other participants' IDJ of Hispanics. Overall, though, the IDJ across the different racial and ethnic identities are more similar than different, especially in terms of the relative ranking of groups, and no predictions show an IDJ of a country completely excluding any of the other groups.

Desired ethnic and racial diversity

A last aspect we examine is the desired amount of ethnic and racial diversity on a national level. We calculate the diversity index used by the Census Bureau, which quantifies the chance that two individuals picked at random would come from different ethnic and racial groups, revealed in our respondents' answers, and contrast it with the actually existing diversity per the 2020 Census (U. S. Census Bureau, 2020). Figure 3 below shows the distribution of desired ethnic and racial diversity, which ranges from a low of 0% to a high of 85.7% chance of picking two different-group individuals at random. The figure shows that more than three quarters of the respondents want a population that is more diverse along ethnic and racial lines than the status quo in 2020 [US (2020): 61.1%], and more than 40% want a more diverse United States than its most diverse county in 2020 [Hawaii County (2020): 77.7%]. While there are some respondents who report an IDJ of a country entirely made up of one ethnic or racial group, that is, a diversity index of 0, they only account for 1.1% of responses (11 respondents, 9 desiring a 100% White, 1 a 100% Black, and 1 a 100% Native American population). Even among the cultural majority (White Christians) most respondents have a diversity index above the 2020 status quo (66.3%, N = 407), even though this is below the share among everyone else (82.2%, N = 556), $\chi 2 = 31.1$, p<.001).

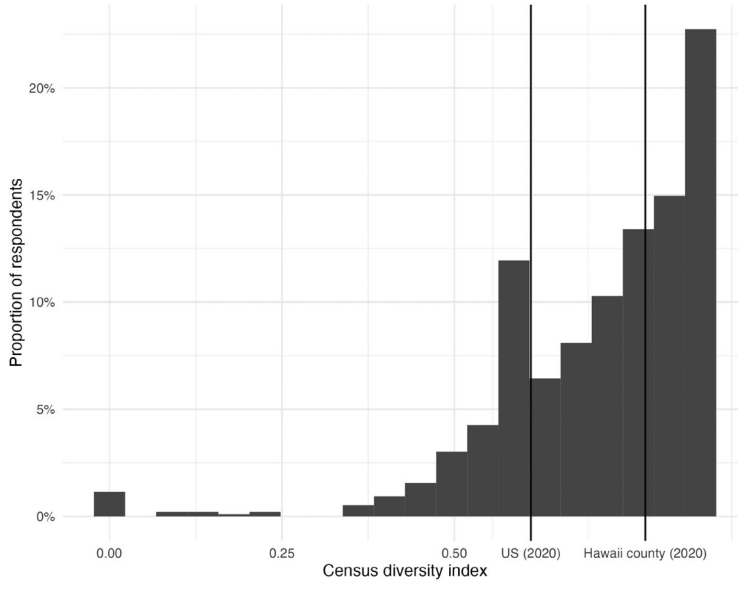

FIGURE 3 Desired ethnic and racial diversity.

Part 2: Religious composition

Perceived religious composition

TABLE 4 Perceived and actual religious group proportions.

Group	Mean estimate %	Actual %	Discrepancy (estimate − actual)
Protestant	21.6	47	−25.4
Catholic	27.1	22	5.1
Atheist	12.4	3	9.4
Jewish	11.6	2	9.6
Mormon	7.7	1.6	6.1
Muslim	8.9	1.4	7.5
Buddhist	5.3	0.7	4.6
Hindu	5.4	0.7	4. 7

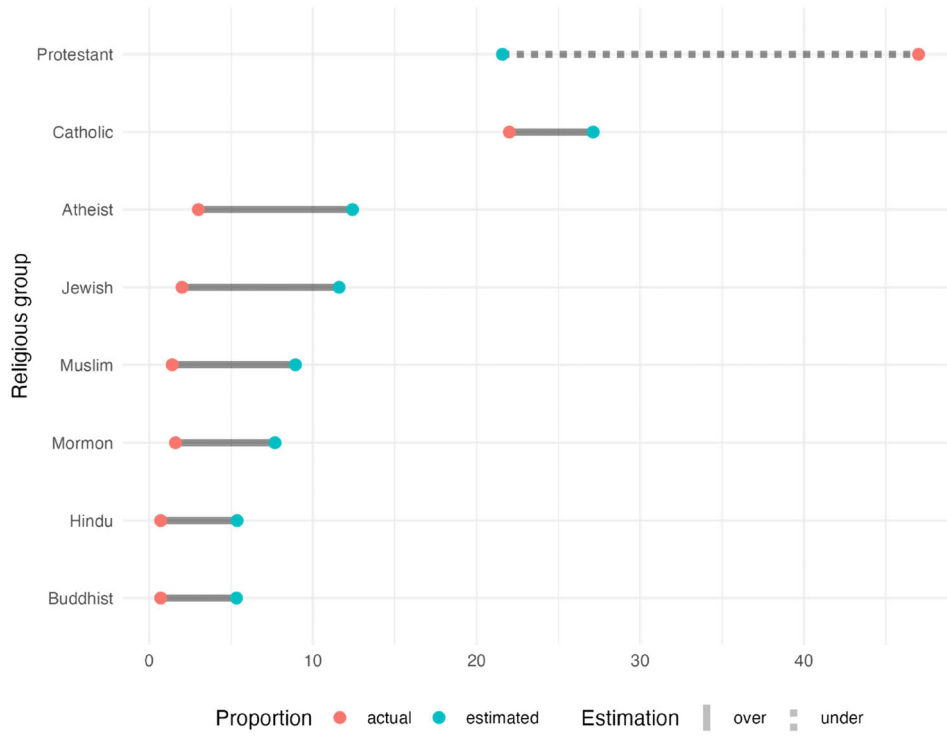

FIGURE 4 Estimated and actual share of religious groups.

Participants markedly underestimated the number of Protestants. They tended to overestimate each of the other group's prevalence. Notably, participants estimated the proportion of Catholics to be almost a third larger than the proportion of Protestants, even though the latter is more than twice the size of the former. Political ideology was only significantly associated with misperceptions of the proportions of Protestants ($F(6, 880) = 3.7$, $p < 0.01$), where again participants identifying as neither left nor right more strongly underestimated the Protestant share. Those who self-identify as on the political left or right were more informed about the proportion of Protestants in the United States. The tendency of people on the

left or right to be more accurate in their estimations of actual demographics is noteworthy. In contrast to those in the center, they appear to be better informed about the actual statistics. One might also wonder whether the underestimation of Protestants in the population results from a tacit (and biasing) assumption that Protestantism means White Christians, which leads a respondent to overlook the substantial proportion of Black Protestants in the United States.

IDJ of religious composition

TABLE 5 Desired religious group proportions.

Group	Mean (SD)
Protestant	32.2 (22.0)
Catholic	22.4 (13.6)
Atheist	10.8 (16.5)
Jewish	8.9 (7.0)
Mormon	6.5 (6.5)
Muslim	7.0 (7.6)
Buddhist	6.6 (6.5)
Hindu	5.7 (5.1)

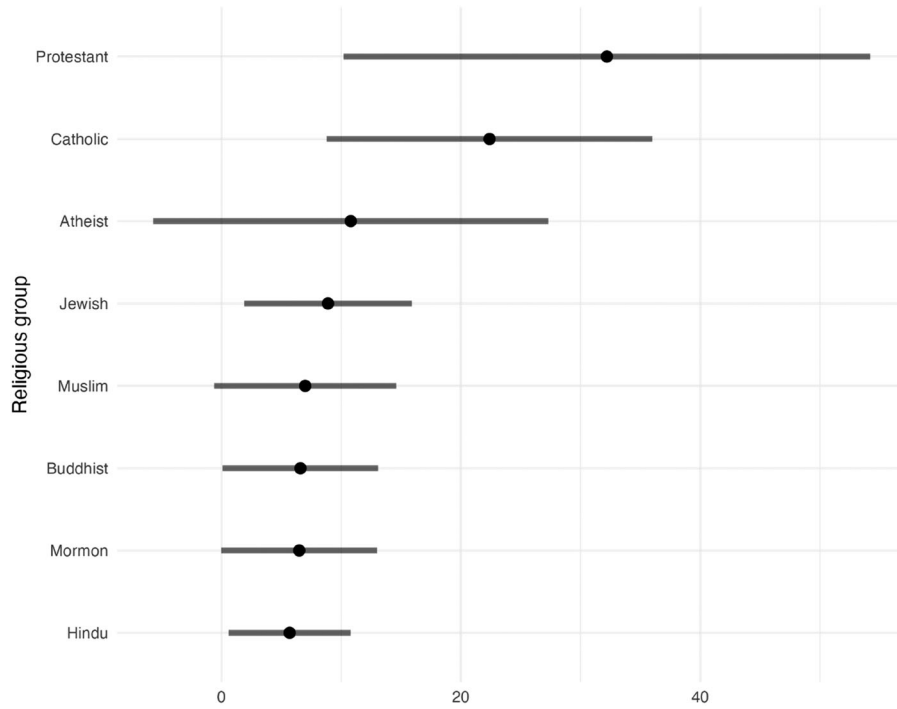

FIGURE 5 Desired share of religious groups (point estimates and standard deviations).

In the full sample, the average IDJ for each religious group was above 5% and within a standard deviation of their perceived proportion. Notably, atheists were the only religious group where the standard deviation exceeded the mean estimate by more than 50%.

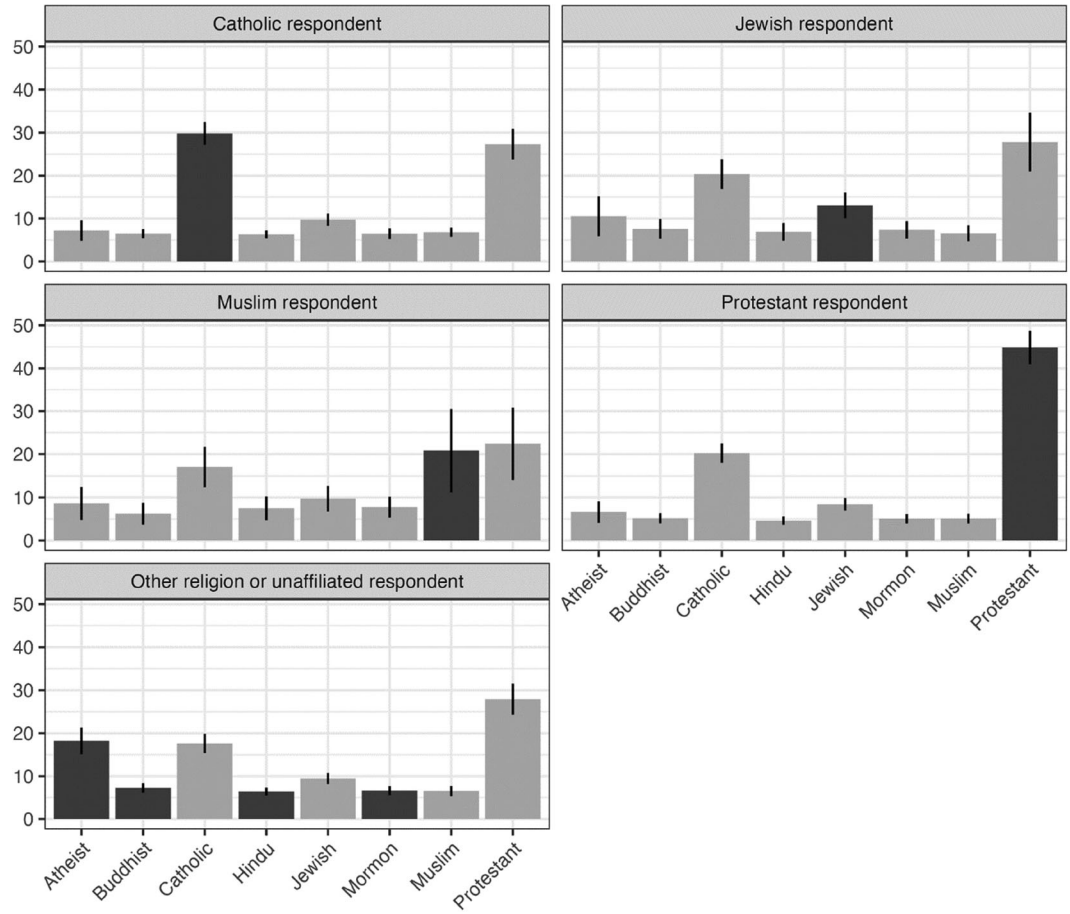

FIGURE 6 Predicted desired share of religious groups and 95% confidence intervals by religious identity from OLS models also controlling for respondent age, gender, region, racial identity, and political orientation. Light gray bars indicate religious outgroups, and dark gray bars indicate religious ingroups (i.e., respondents' own religious identification). OLS, ordinary least squares.

We conducted a series of multiple linear regression (OLS) models investigating the covariates of the IDJ of each religious group. These models—shown in full in Figure A2 in the Appendix—regress the reported IDJ of each group on the age, gender, race, region, religion, and political ideology of the participants. Figure 6 above presents the predicted IDJ for each group and 95% confidence intervals by respondents' religious identity (as facets) based on the models of the full analytic sample. These predictions show the IDJ of religious groups by respondent's own religious affiliation for an exemplary case of a respondent with median (for continuous variables, i.e., age) or modal (for categorical variables, i.e., the rest) responses in our data. In our case, this type of person is a respondent who is 51 years old, a woman, White, from the Northeast, and neither left nor right politically oriented. This allows for comparison across religious groups net of other differences between groups.

Figure 6 illustrates that the pattern for IDJ of religious composition parallels the pattern for IDJ of racial and ethnic composition. Specifically, the results show that individuals from a given religious group have the largest IDJ of their own group compared to individuals from other religions. Like the pattern of IDJ of racial and ethnic groups before, the results for IDJ of religious groups highlight that there is more agreement than disagreement on the general ranking of group sizes across individuals from different faiths. Similarly, we do not find, for any groups, a desire for the complete exclusion of any religious group from the ideal religious landscape of the United States on the national level.

Desired religious diversity

Finally, we examine the desired religious diversity in a way that is analogous to the analysis of desired ethnic and racial diversity presented earlier. We calculate the Census Bureau diversity index for our respondents' answers and contrast it with the existing diversity per the 2020 Census of American Religion (Public Religion Research Institute [PRRI], 2021). Figure 7 below shows the distribution of desired religious diversity ranges from 0% to 87.5% chance of picking two individuals from different religious groups at random. The figure shows that almost 60% of respondents want a population that is more religiously diverse than the status quo in 2020 [US (2020): 69.0%], and more than 9 in 10 want a United States where picking two individuals from different faiths at random is more likely than a coin toss. Only 3.2% (31) report an IDJ of a country entirely made up of one religious' group, that is, diversity index of 0. Half of those (15) report an IDJ of a completely non-religious/atheist US, 9 of a pure Protestant, 5 of a pure Catholic, and 1 each of a pure Muslim or Mormon US. Even among the cultural majority (White Christians) half of all respondents have a diversity index above the 2020 status quo (49.9%, N = 411), even though this is below the share among everyone else (67.3%, N = 556), ($\chi 2 = 29.0$. p<.001).

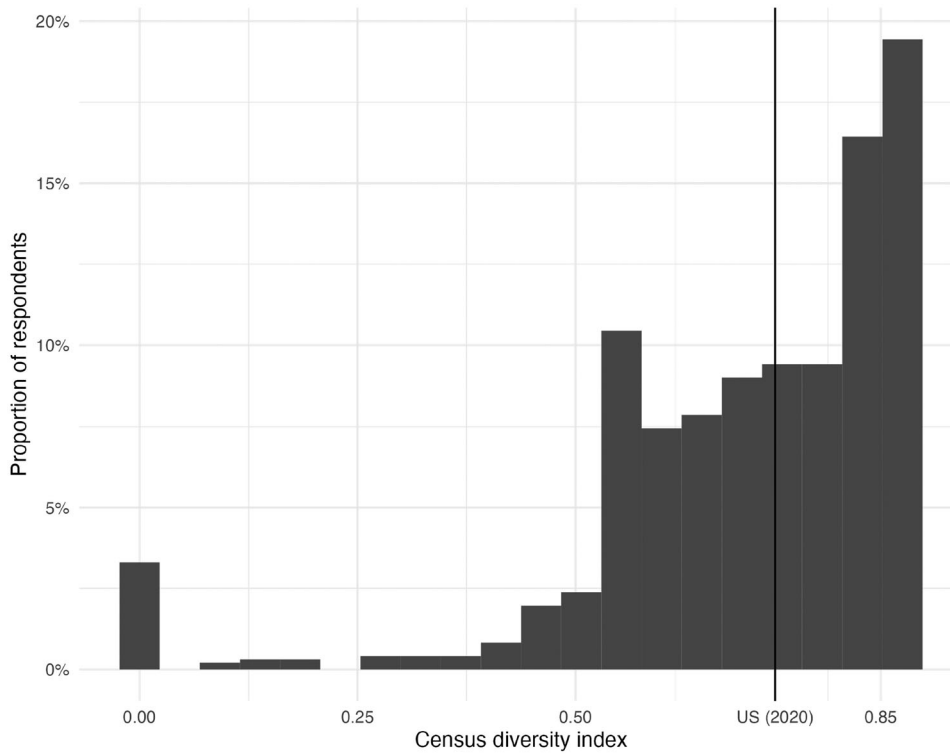

FIGURE 7 Desired religious diversity.

DISCUSSION

To what extent is ethnic, racial, and religious diversity valued by American citizens and baked into their ideal of what America means? Our research reveals that most people—even White Christians—seem to judge a multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-religious nation as the ideal demographic societal make-up. In a study of this sort, the phenomenon of interest is the degree of social acceptability and social desirability of the multicultural ideal when making judgments about the desired demographic make-up of one's country.

Judgments about what the population of one's country ought to be are anchored in perceived facts about the demographic history of the country. IDJ (e.g., responses to the question "what mix and distribution of [religions, ethnicities] do you personally consider ideal for the United States") are likely the product of some ratio (which may vary from person to person) of a person's preferences (his or her desired outcome in a world free of constraints) and perceived constraints (his or her perception of the costs involved in achieving the desired outcome). Given the anonymous survey methodology used in this study, we were unable to differentiate respondents whose IDJ was generated free of perceived constraints (as if one might design the demography of the USA anew, cost free) and those for whom their IDJ was the product of a compromise between true desire—for example, an egalitarian or equity preference for equal numbers of people in each ethnic or religious category—and a concern about the real world costs of arriving at that outcome—for example, the deportations necessary to arrive at the desired outcome. In a study of this type, what are sometimes called social desirability and anchoring effects are the signal not the noise and can be thought of in part as the study of preferences and constraints.

The findings of our survey should not be read to imply that in the United States "birds of a feather" do not flock together or that citizens do not sort themselves out (or get sorted out) by race, ethnicity; or religion at local, community, or regional levels; or in their marriage choices or personal friendship networks. Ethnic, racial, and religious enclaves do abound (e.g., Putnam, 2007). In major American cities, one will find a Chinatown, Greek Town, or Little Italy (although, unlike many Northern European countries, their existence will not be viewed as inherently problematic, e.g., Madsen et al., 2024). But our finding does contrast with the urgent narratives that exaggerate or amplify fears of, or anxieties about, "a great replacement," and tell stories that selectively focus attention on right-wing nationalistic groups and their disturbing ideologies. Our findings seem to suggest that, for American citizens reporting their estimated and ideal judgment of the composition of races, ethnicities, and religions on a national level, a multicultural ideal is a basic feature of their image of their country. This was the phenomenon we sought to explore. This finding is congruent with previous conceptualizations of the United States as being multicultural from the beginning (Fischer, 1989; Garreau, 1981; Woodard, 2012). It is also broadly congruent with recent survey results from PEW that indicate the United States is becoming more multiracial (Pew Research Center, 2021), that young Americans are on track to be the most diverse and best educated generation (Pew Research Center, 2018), that this increased diversity is seen as advantageous (Pew Research Center, 2019), and that there is considerable support for this diversity despite people underestimating how much support there actually is (Isenberg & Brauer, 2024). Our finding is not meant to deny the possibility that a small number of individuals acting in violent ways based on their fears of "replacement" can have influential consequences (Maizels, 2022; Obaidi et al., 2022; Schiff & Justice, 2023).

How many American citizens hold to the idea that the real America is a White Christian America? While we report evidence that conservative White Christians want more White Christians in the country, the evidence suggests that all groups endorse an ideal of an America that contains more of their own ingroup. Nevertheless, the results of the survey reveal that no racial, ethnic, or religious group on average sees demographic uniformity or even just an overarching dominance by one single racial, ethnic, or religious group on the national level as ideal. Even as the proportion of Whites was underestimated by many respondents, there was a broadly shared ideal of a more diverse ethnic and racial composition of the United States. While it is not hard to imagine how some White people in the United States might feel threatened by this pattern (e.g., Craig & Richeson, 2014, 2017), especially when the pattern is represented as negative and threatening by mainstream media (e.g., The New Yorker, 2017; The New York Times, 2019), one of our main findings is that most Americans, including White Christians, have a multicultural conception of what "America" means. Future research could fruitfully examine the patterns of perceived and ideal demographic judgments of races, ethnicities, and religions at the local community and regional levels in the United States. One way to do so would be to present people with a variety of hypothetical types of societies, which vary in racial, ethnic, and religious composition, and assess people's preferences for wanting to live in each one. By drawing on a mixed method design (Power et al., 2018), future research could also involve interviewing participants about their logic and reasoning about the composition of the societies in which they would want to live. The present research design could also be meaningfully applied

to different Western liberal democracies to examine the underlying cultural models in nations like France, Denmark, the United Kingdom, and Australia, where issues with immigration, cultural collisions, and fears of "replacement" are salient.

What percent of American citizens would really prefer to live in a more homogeneous or singular country, one occupied primarily by members of their own ethnic, racial, or religious group? Our results indicate that very few people judge an ethnonationalist United States to be ideal. Only 1.1% of our respondents indicate their IDJ is of a mono-racial United States; of these outlying respondents, most were White (as were most respondents in the sample), but a couple were Black or Native American. Similarly, only 3.2% of respondents indicated that a mono-religious United States was their ideal. Not all of these, however, were Christian. The modal proponents of a mono-religious United States were atheists who reported a country completely occupied by atheists as ideal. One respondent wanted the country to be 100% Mormon.

There were a few extreme respondents in our sample. One should not, of course, underestimate the significance of these extreme views or their impact at a community level, especially when those small percentages are scaled up to the entire population of the United States. Still, we wish to draw the reader's attention to this striking finding: When examining the IDJ of racial/ethnic composition of the United States, two-thirds of our respondents see a *more* diverse United States than the current demographics as ideal. A substantial number, around 40% of respondents, judge a multi-ethnic United States *more* diverse than the current most multi-ethnic county (Hawaii) in the United States as ideal. This pattern holds for judgments of a multi-religious United States too. Over half of our respondents report an even greater religiously diverse composition of the United States than the current composition as their ideal. Our results do not accord with the often hyperbolic and polarized discourse emphasizing the fears of White Christian Americans about ethnic, racial, and religious replacement. Despite concerns about immigration, "multiculturalism" is indeed an "American concept" threaded into the stars and stripes. It may be as American as apple pie.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data and code used to generate the results are available at https://osf.io/mxej5/ and the NORC General Social Survey site https://gss.norc.org/us/en/gss/get-the-data/stata.html.

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ENDNOTE

[1] https://revolution.chnm.org/d/284/

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APPENDIX

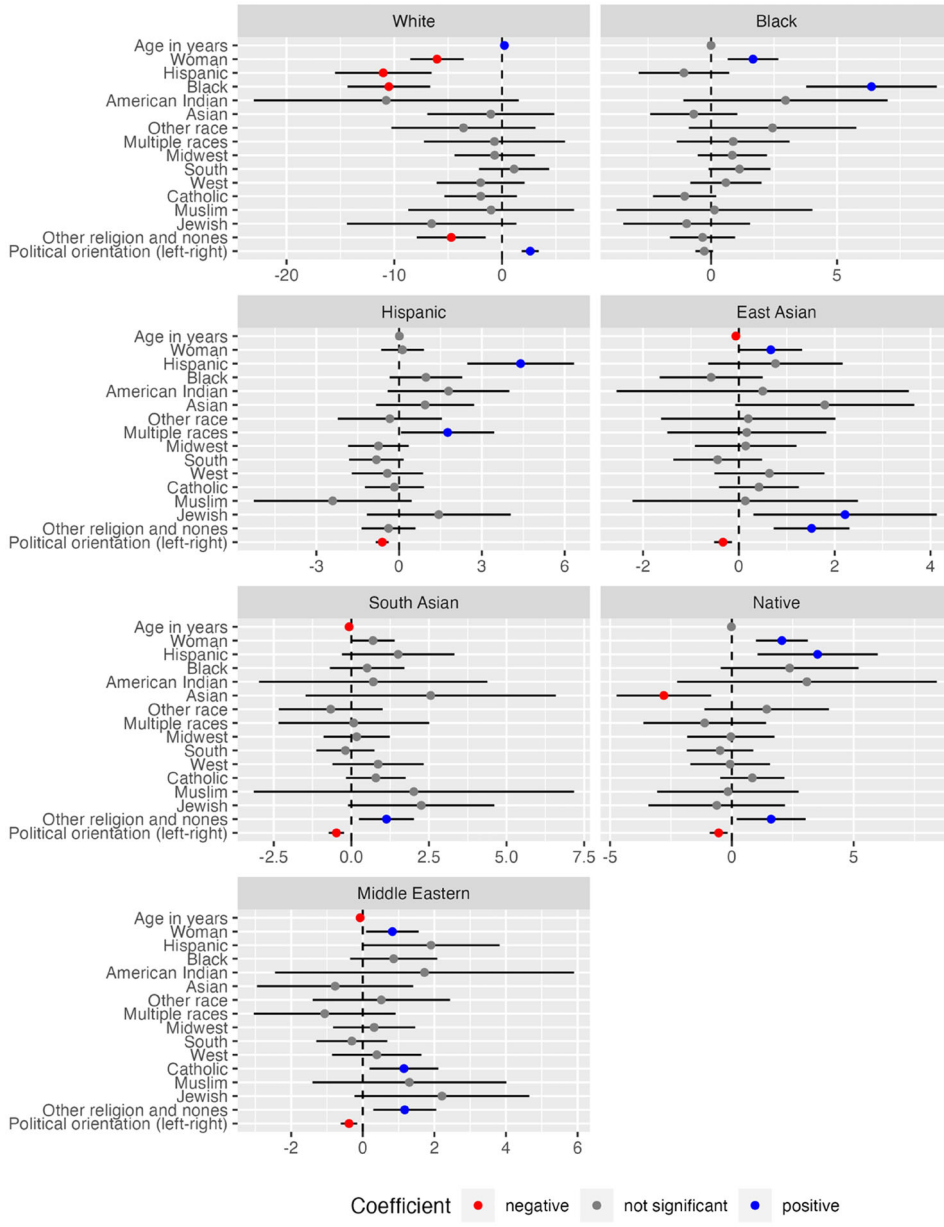

FIGURE A1 Coefficients and 95% confidence intervals from OLS models predicting desired share of ethnic and racial groups.

Figure A1 visually presents the regression coefficients and 95% confidence intervals of the ordinary least squares regression models predicting the desired proportion of each ethnic and racial group in visual form. These models are the basis for the predictions in Figure 2 in the main manuscript. Red dots represent significant negative, blue significant positive (both at least $p < 0.05$), and gray dots not significant point estimates.

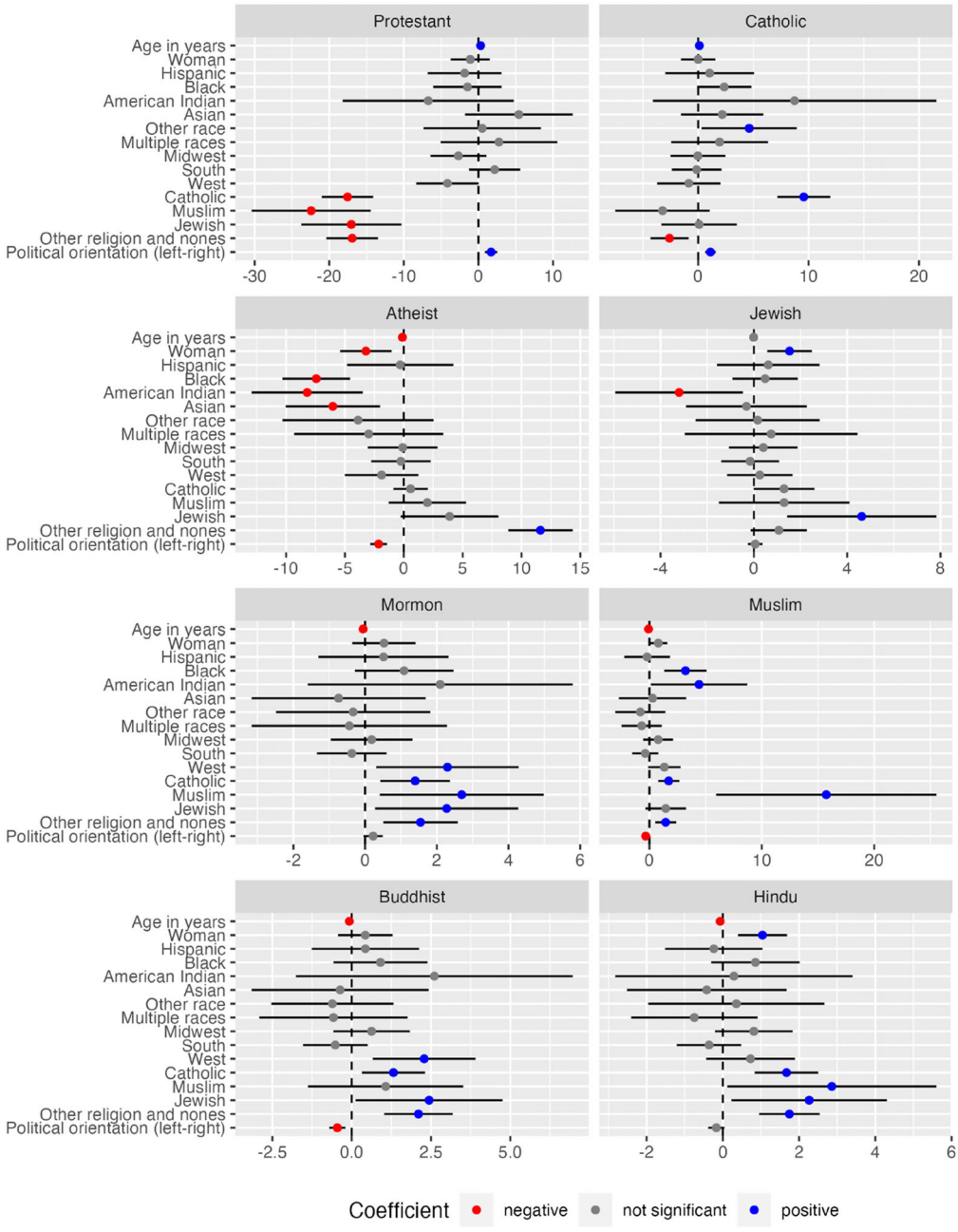

FIGURE A2 Coefficients and 95% confidence intervals from OLS models predicting desired share of religious groups.

Figure A2 visually presents the regression coefficients and 95% confidence intervals of the ordinary least squares regression models predicting the desired proportion of each religious group in visual form. These models are the basis for the predictions in Figure 6 in the main manuscript. Red dots represent significant negative, blue significant positive (both at least $p < 0.05$), and gray dots not significant point estimates.