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American decline and anti-Asian American sentiment

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ABSTRACT

Does relative American decline lead to anti-Asian American sentiment? In this research note, I argue that messages related to the decline of the United States heighten anti-Asian American sentiment. National decline leads, I argue, to outgroup derogation in the name of in-group continuity and security. I test my argument using a survey experiment of 1,220 U.S. respondents. I find that respondents who are exposed to a prime that describes the United States in decline relative to China are more likely to express anti-Asian American sentiment relative to a control group. Further, using a placebo test of African American resentment, I find that respondents who are exposed to a decline prime are no more likely to express anti-African American sentiment. This research note provides new evidence about the dangers of racism and xenophobia in the context of US–China geopolitical competition.

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racism; international relations; public opinion; Asian American politics; great powers

1. Introduction

There is growing alarm in the United States about the rise of China and American decline. The Trump Administration made clear that it saw great power competition as the defining feature of its National Security Strategy. Trump tied anxieties around the rise of China to scapegoating at home. As Adam Serwer argues in *The Atlantic*, decline and racial scapegoating went together for Trump: “The slow and uneven recovery from the 2008 financial crisis left widespread economic suffering. Trump responded by heaping blame on religious and ethnic minorities as the cause of America’s decline” (Serwer 2021). Attention in Washington, D.C., more broadly, has turned to China’s rise and what it means for U.S. security. Such rhetoric (and, at times, threat inflation) may, Brenes and Jackson argue, have unintended effects: “every gesture toward ‘outcompeting China’ unintentionally buoys ethnonationalism at home and abroad” (Brenes and Jackson 2022), while Jeung and Lee observe that “periods of heightened geopolitical anxiety have long produced spikes in anti-Asian vitriol” (Jeung and Lee 2021).

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This research note tests the premise that American decline, coupled with the rise of China, leads to broad anti-Asian sentiment, beyond anti-Chinese American sentiment. What are the effects of messages of decline on anti-Asian American sentiment? I argue that messages related to the decline of the United States heighten anti-Asian American sentiment. I argue that dynamics of inter-group competition and status anxiety are triggered when individuals hear that the nation is in decline. National decline leads, I argue, to outgroup derogation in the name of perceived in-group continuity and security.

I test my argument using a survey experiment of 1,220 U.S. respondents. I present respondents with one of three vignettes which tell respondents that the United States is in decline vis-à-vis China. I vary the metrics through which the United States is said to be in decline by pointing to economic metrics, military metrics, or metrics related to U.S. prestige. Respondents are then asked a series of questions to measure their resentment toward Asian Americans and African Americans (Kim 2022; Kim 2023; Kinder and Sears 1981).

I find that respondents who are exposed to a prime that describes the United States in decline relative to China are more likely to express Asian American resentment relative to the control group, but no more African American resentment. Importantly, none of the vignettes on American decline point blame in any direction or against any group. This suggests that even the mere mention of national decline as an “objective” – and in the experimental vignettes, bipartisan – “fact” leads individuals to hold more anti-Asian American views.

2. Decline's effects

Recent scholarship in international relations has focused attention on the potential *domestic* political consequences of real – or perceived – international decline. One strand of this research has examined the *negative* consequences domestically of decline. For example, recent work has examined how status concerns deriving from international decline led to votes for Donald Trump (Mutz 2017) to how status concerns drove disintegrative forces as extreme as civil war in 1930s Spain (Ward 2022), or how status loss and the backlash politics of Brexit are intimately linked (Freedman 2020). This research suggests that decline—often understood as declining status internationally—can lead to detrimental effects domestically by creating status anxiety among subnational groups and by producing the conditions under which political actors can seize upon anxieties in core constituencies for political gain.

Others, however, understand relative decline in a more positive light. For example, the “external threat hypothesis” suggests that external threats increase domestic willingness to work together to face challenges. This literature produces divergent expectations. For example, Bafumi and Parent predicted in 2012 that “as China becomes a peer competitor polarization will gradually diminish, institutional stalemates will abate, and American foreign policy will regain its luster” (Bafumi and Parent 2012, 27). Recent work, however, has cast doubt on the external threat hypothesis, suggesting that, “claims that crisis events or emergent threats from rival powers will automatically bind the United States together should be met with a healthy dose of skepticism” (Myrick 2021, 953).

3. Decline, in-group favoritism, and outgroup derogation

Drawing upon social and political psychology, I argue that talk of national decline increases hostility toward outgroups in the name of in-group preservation. Dynamics of inter-group competition and status anxiety are triggered when individuals hear that the nation is in decline. National decline produces insecurity and negative feelings toward perceived outgroups.

Research supports the contention that feelings of social decline, in-group threat, and other forms of decline produce psychological impulses to blame, denigrate, and harm outgroups (Gidron and Hall 2017, S63; Tajfel and Turner 1979). A meta-analysis of inter-group threat and outgroup attitudes has found that, in a variety of contexts, “as people perceive more inter-group competition, more value violations, higher levels of inter-group anxiety, more group esteem threats, and endorse more negative stereotypes, negative attitudes toward outgroups increase” (Riek, Mania, and Gaertner 2006, 345). Similarly, Steven Ward argues that decline leads to disintegration by both eroding the state’s appeal as a collective identity category and by producing material and non-material incentives for subnational groups to denigrate each other (Ward 2022). Research demonstrates that fear of ingroup elimination – existential threats – predict increased racial bias (Bai and Federico 2020; Craig, Rucker, and Richeson 2018). There is a strong basis from which to expect that feelings of decline may produce incentives to denigrate perceived outgroups.

Moreover, I expect that decline will produce negative feelings directed at a specific minority perceived outgroup: Asian Americans.¹ Importantly, many Americans, particularly White Americans, associate “Americanness” with Whiteness. Studies have linked notions of the category “American” with White Americans. For example, Devos and Banaji explore whether people “differentiate ethnic groups in their inclusion into the category “American”” and find that “to be American is to be White,” according to their studies (Devos and Banaji 2005, 463; see also Zou and Cheryan 2017; Theiss-Morse 2009). Therefore, the decline of the United States relative to China increases hostility toward perceived outgroups in the name of in-group (in this case, White) preservation and security.

The most relevant rising power vis-à-vis the United States is China. I expect that the dynamics of outgrouping during periods of decline will spillover from the specific relationship between the US and China’s position in the world to so-called “relevant” minority groups. Additionally, research on anti-Asian American sentiment has shown that Asian Americans, relative to African Americans, remain “perpetual outsiders,” while Claire Jean Kim has noted such a perpetual “foreignness” but relative valorization has left Asian Americans “racially triangulated” relative to White and Black Americans (Kim 1999, 107; see also: Ancheta 2006; Lee et al. 2009; Tuan 1998; Wu 2015). Similar stereotyping, discrimination, and othering dynamics of Asian Americans have been at play during the Covid-19 pandemic (Abascal, Makovi, and Xu *forthcoming*; Dionne and Turkmen 2020; Kim 2023; Nam, Sawyer, and Style 2022; Reny and Barreto 2022; Tessler, Choi, and Kao 2020).

Hypothesis 1: Respondents who receive a decline prime (economic, military, prestige) will be more likely to be resentful toward Asian Americans than those who do not receive a decline prime.

Further, Hypothesis 2 predicts that there will be *no* effect between decline and resentment toward African Americans, because African Americans are a “less relevant” minority group in the context of US geopolitical competition.

Hypothesis 2: Respondents who receive a decline prime (economic, military, prestige) will be no more resentful toward African Americans than those who do not receive a decline prime.

4. Research design

4.1. Data

I surveyed a national sample of 1,220 US-based adults through Lucid’s “Theorem Academic Platform.” Respondents were invited to participate in the survey from Lucid’s online opt-in general population panel. The Theorem service used quota sampling to reflect known population benchmarks on age, race, sex, educational attainment, income, and geographic region.² Although these data are not formally representative of the US adult population, previous research has found that data from Lucid closely resemble Census population benchmarks (Coppock and McClellan 2019).

4.2. Experimental design and key variables

The experiments feature a design in which each respondent, other than those who are in the control group, were randomly presented one of three possible vignettes which described the United States as declining with respect to its economic performance, military, or prestige vis-à-vis China (Figure 1). The vignettes take the form of a hypothetical news article that describes a bipartisan panel providing expert testimony to the United States Congress. Because politics in the United States is highly polarized, the vignettes were designed to try and mitigate such polarization. These vignettes were designed to appear like news stories that often arise in the media. After the article, respondents were asked whether the article discussed the U.S. as a rising or declining power as a comprehension check.³

Crucially, the vignettes do not suggest a source of blame for decline. If blame was assigned in the vignettes, it would be intuitive that respondents would then direct their ire at those identified as complicit in the nation’s decline. Instead, the vignettes do not attribute a source of the decline. If talk of decline without blame attribution still generates backlash against Asian Americans, we should be more confident that heated rhetoric that lays blame squarely on these groups has a pernicious effect. Indeed, research shows that racist rhetoric and blaming increases prejudice in the public (Lajevardi and Oskooii 2018; Newman et al. 2021).

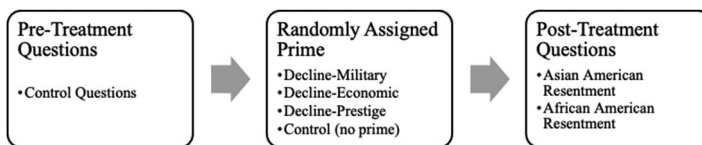


Figure 1. Experimental Design.

Note: the prime is between-subjects, while the post-treatment questions are within-subjects.

The decision to focus on three metrics of US power – economic, military, and prestige – is justifiable for two reasons. First, in terms of external validity, these metrics are commonly cited in the rising China and declining America discourse. Second, scholars of international relations who study decline typically focus on such factors. The study is agnostic regarding whether the US is in actual relative international decline vis-à-vis China. Instead, it is focused on how the politics and discourses of decline may produce negative outgrouping effects for Asian Americans.

4.3. Outcome variables

To measure Asian-American resentment, I utilized a series of 6 questions developed by D.G. Kim (Kim 2023). The questions ask respondents whether they agree or disagree with the following statements: “Asian Americans think they are smarter than others;” “Asian Americans are often overly competitive for their success;” “When it comes to education, Asian Americans strive to achieve too much;” “Asian Americans make the job market too competitive;” “Asian Americans need to embrace American values more;” and “It is annoying when Asian Americans speak in their own languages in public places” (Kim 2023).⁴ As a placebo test, I also asked respondents to answer 4 questions that are typically used by scholars and the American National Election Study (ANES) to measure racism toward African Americans (Kinder and Sears 1981).⁵

4.4. Control variables

The survey instrument included questions measuring common individual-level covariates, all asked pre-treatment. Respondents reported their political ideology on a 7-point scale ranging from very liberal to very conservative. Respondents were asked a series of questions which measured their “blind patriotism” (Schatz, Staub, and Lavine 1999, 153) and a question which gauged their feelings toward China (among other countries). Respondents were also asked their gender, race, age, level of education, and income.

5. Results

Hypothesis 1 expected that respondents who received any decline prime, relative to the control group, would be more resentful toward Asian Americans. I find strong support for this hypothesis. Relative to the control group, respondents who received the economic decline prime ($\beta = 1.08$; $p = 0.008$), the military decline prime ($\beta = 1.15$; $p = 0.005$), and the prestige decline prime ($\beta = 0.63$; $p = 0.12$) were all more likely to score higher on the Asian American Resentment scale relative to the control group. The coefficient for the military decline prime, for example, suggests that respondents who received the military decline prime score 1.15 points higher on the Asian American racial resentment scale (which ranges from 0–24) than respondents in the control group, a 5% increase. The coefficients for each of the primes remains statistically significant after the introduction of control variables, including ideology, blind patriotism, and negative feelings toward China (Figure 2).

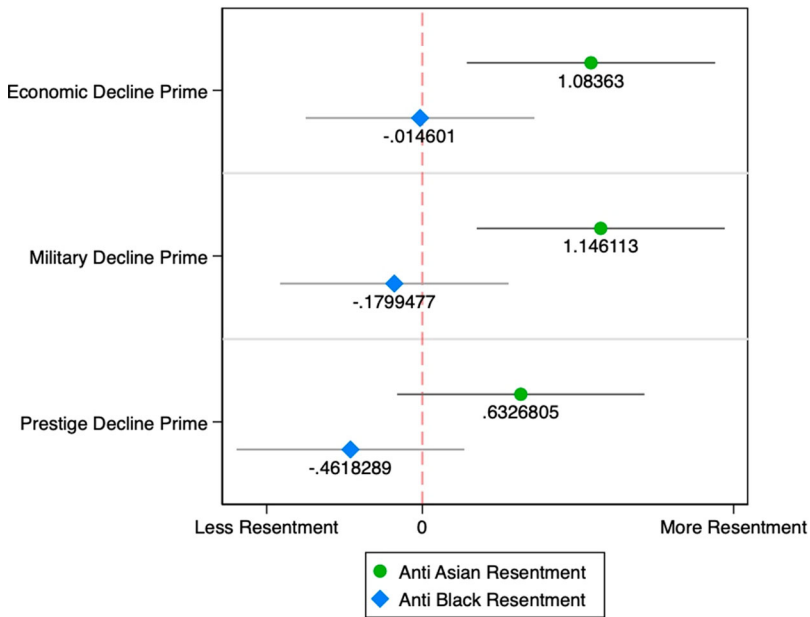


Figure 2. Placebo Test – Decline Produces More Resentment Toward Asian Americans but No More Resentment Towards African Americans (constant dropped from figure).⁷

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, decline primes did not produce African American resentment. Regarding the placebo test, H2 expected that the effect of decline on Asian American Resentment should not obtain on the African American Resentment Scale. The coefficients for African American Resentment (marked by blue diamonds in Figures 2 and 3) are not statistically significant with respect to any of the decline primes, whereas the coefficients for the decline primes on the Asian American Resentment scale were positive and statistically significant.⁶

The results are also robust to restricting the sample to only those who may be perceived to be in the “in-group:” White respondents (Appendix 1, Table A3). In other words, we might expect that Asian American respondents would not show resentment toward Asian Americans, or African Americans to show resentment toward African Americans when primed to think about American decline, if the notion of American identity, as discussed in Section III, is associated with Whiteness. The results are also robust to limiting the samples to non-Asian Americans with respect to Asian American resentment and non-African Americans with respect to African American resentment (Appendix 1, Table A4).

There are several significant control variables. First, blind patriotism is associated with both more anti-Asian American sentiment and anti-African American sentiment. Perhaps as a measure of “foreignness” relative to the two groups, blind patriots are more resentful toward Asian Americans than African Americans. Conservative respondents are far more likely to score highly on the African American resentment scale than they are the Asian American resentment scale, and this again gestures to notions mentioned in Section III of racial triangulation: there is a degree of valorization of Asian Americans among conservatives relative to African Americans (see, e.g., Kim 2000).

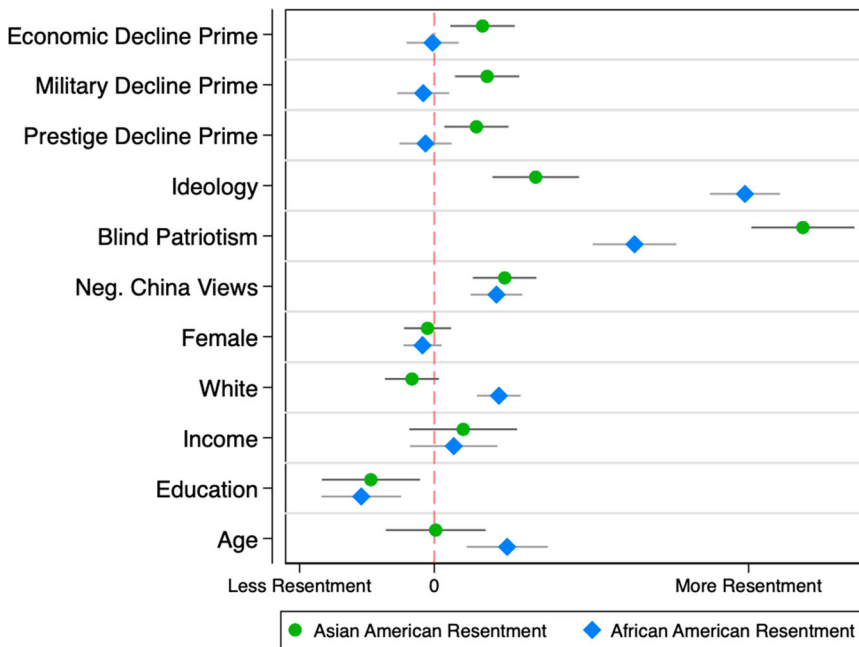


Figure 3. Placebo Test – Decline Produces More Resentment Toward Asian Americans but No More Resentment Towards African Americans (constant dropped from figure).⁸

Education is the only variable associated with *less* resentment toward *both* African Americans and Asian Americans.

In terms of the different primes (economic, military, and prestige), the prestige prime's coefficient was weaker than the military and economic primes, respectively in terms of the statistical significance in Figure 2. However, the differences between the coefficients are not statistically significant. The results show that decline primes produced Asian American resentment, but there were not significant differences between the primes. Decline, framed in military, economic, or prestige terms is related to Asian American resentment.

6. Conclusion

Messages of decline – even absent direct blame – can have pernicious effects on domestic politics and society. My findings show that messages of international decline increase resentment toward Asian Americans. Given past research on the power of vitriolic discourse, we should expect that as concern over decline is coupled with direct blaming of perceived outgroups, more hostility should follow (Lajevardi and Oskooii 2018; Newman et al. 2021).

Future research could present more politicized messages from political leaders or public figures. The survey, as designed, presents respondents with information purportedly from a bipartisan panel. Messages from co-partisans may be even more powerful or have the opposite affect among those of a different party than the speaker. Moreover, future research could examine the effects on other minority groups who are often

treated as “foreign,” such as Latino Americans. Further, a general limitation of this kind of study is that it is a snapshot of a single point in time with specific vignettes amidst a much richer set of discourses that permeate political life. Future research should replicate these findings with different experimental vignettes which assign blame for the nation’s decline as well as which explore other manifestations of xenophobia, outgroup derogation, and othering.

Notes

1. Due to recent observations regarding the conflation of different national origin identities among Asian Americans by non-Asian Americans, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, I chose to focus on Asian American resentment writ large. See Flores and Huo (2013).
2. See Appendix 1, Table A1.
3. 85% of respondents assigned a substantive treatment (i.e., not the control group) responded correctly. Analyses in Appendix 1, Table A2, Models 5-8 utilize this group of respondents alongside those in the control group ($N = 1,082$).
4. In terms of the internal consistency of the scale, the Cronbach’s alpha score for the six items is 0.84. An exploratory factor analysis suggests that the items of the scale load onto one factor. See Appendix Figure A2 for the associated scree plot.
5. The Cronbach’s alpha score for the four items is 0.86. An exploratory factor analysis suggests that the items of the scale load onto one factor. See Appendix Figure A3 for the associated scree plot.
6. See Appendix 1, Figure A4, for the effect of the prime on each individual question.
7. See Appendix 1, Table A2 (Models 1 & 2).
8. See Appendix 1, Table A2 (Models 3 & 4).

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