

# Boundaries of American Identity: Evolving Understandings of “Us”

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## Abstract

This review examines empirical research about American national identity. It focuses on the social and political causes and consequences of (a) how people define what being American means and (b) their degree of attachment to being American. It explains why scholars increasingly view American identity as a social identity and reviews arguments for why political scientists should investigate American identity as both an independent and a dependent variable. Existing research documents a high degree of consensus across demographic groups regarding how American identity is defined. It also reveals both beneficial and harmful consequences of people strongly identifying as American. Empirical inquiries of American identity are motivated by demographic trends, especially the rise in immigration-driven diversity, but they are also deeply grounded in historical and philosophical assessments of the nature of American identity, and such scholarship is also discussed throughout the review.

## INTRODUCTION

For as long as the United States has existed, Americans have grappled with understanding what being American is all about. As a nation allegedly founded on ideas rather than culture or ancestry [Tocqueville 1835 (1990), Hartz 1955], the country has continually struggled to determine what the conceptual boundaries of membership in the political community should be. Myrdal (1944) famously wrote that American identity is based on a collection of ideals that he termed the American Creed. These ideals include individualism, the notion and promise of hard work, freedom, equality, and the rule of law. The conventional wisdom has long been that the Creed is a central component of what it means to be American and that America is unique among nations in being defined by the Creed instead of by culture or ancestry. According to this perspective, endorsement of the American Creed should be a sufficient condition for membership. As long as someone accepts and abides by these creedal principles, other factors such as race, gender, national origin, class, or religion should not be grounds for exclusion.

Reality, of course, has thrown wrenches into this creedal perspective on what being American means. First, even if we accept that American identity is largely based on ideas, there exists vibrant debate on the range of ideas at its foundation (e.g., Banning 1986, Smith 1993, Mills 1997, Smith 1997, Streich 2009). For instance, just as rugged individualism is a central tenet of how the nature of being American is understood, so is the civic republican call for virtuous and engaged citizenship (Pocock 1965, Bailyn 1967, Wood 1969, Schildkraut 2005a). Second, past practice—and enduring attitudes—reveal just how false it has been to assume that a person only needs to adopt the Creed in order to be welcomed into the American community. As Tocqueville [1835 (1990), p. 45] noted long ago, “The picture of American democracy has, if I may so speak, a surface covering of democracy, beneath which the old aristocratic colors sometimes peep out.” The list of inequalitarian limits to the full range of rights and opportunities that come with formal inclusion in the American political community is long, and public opinion continues to exhibit restrictive ideas about the factors that make someone American (Mills 1997, Smith 1997, Theiss-Morse 2009, Schildkraut 2011a, Wright et al. 2012).

Yet before we can explore these longstanding contradictions inherent in American national identity, we must first consider what scholars mean when they discuss national identities and why we investigate how people feel about them. In the sections that follow, I examine the concept of national identity and make the case for why it is an important topic for intellectual scrutiny. Then I discuss how several aspects of American identity in particular have been studied, both theoretically and empirically. These sections draw on research primarily from political science but also from psychology, history, philosophy, and sociology. I address debates about the normative content of American identity, the role that social categories such as race and religion play in delineating the boundaries of American identity, and the causes and consequences of having strong (or weak) psychological attachments to one’s identity as an American. Then I examine the concept of patriotism and discuss how it relates to American identity. Throughout, I offer observations concerning potentially fruitful directions for future research.

This review emphasizes empirical research regarding how Americans define, and are affected by, various conceptions of American identity. Empirical inquiries of this sort have expanded greatly in recent years, driven in large part by the rapid rise of immigration-related diversity among the American population. By 2010, it was estimated that foreign-born people constituted roughly 13% of the US population, with more than 16% of the population being of Hispanic origin (“Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably throughout this review) (Humes et al. 2011, Grieco et al. 2012). Asian Americans recently became the country’s fastest-growing ethnic group, making up a larger share of new immigrants than Latinos (Pew Res. Cent. 2012). Non-Hispanic whites are

expected to be a minority by 2043 (US Census Bur. 2012b), and in 2011, births to racial minorities (anyone who is not single-race, non-Hispanic white) outpaced white births for the first time (US Census Bur. 2012a). In the wake of such changes, more and more scholars, pundits, activists, and everyday Americans have become concerned with what it means to be American and with whether the concept of American identity is changing. Although empirical inquiries regarding American identity have been inspired by such trends, they are also deeply grounded in historical and philosophical assessments of the nature of American identity, and such scholarship is also discussed in this review.

## **NATIONAL IDENTITY AS A SOCIAL IDENTITY**

There is an increasing recognition among scholars that American identity, along with all other national identities, is not necessarily unique relative to other types of collective identities with regard to its attitudinal dynamics. Group identities are largely considered to be social in nature, deriving their power from contexts and from the extent to which people consider their group-based memberships to be an important part of how they conceive of themselves as individuals. This theoretical approach to collective identities is known as social identity theory (Tajfel 1982, Tajfel & Turner 1986, Spears 2011). In this perspective, one's national identity is viewed as a social identity, which refers to the part of a person's sense of self that derives from his or her membership in a particular group and the value or meaning that he or she attaches to such membership (Tajfel 1982). One's degree of attachment to the group and one's understanding of what it takes to be a member of that group are key factors that shape whether and how social identities affect attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Citrin et al. 2001, Theiss-Morse 2009). Social identity theory also maintains that perceiving that the group's status or value is threatened can condition the subsequent effects of that social identity (Dovidio & Morris 1975, Hayden et al. 1984, Flippen et al. 1996, Branscombe et al. 1999a,b). Viewing American identity through this lens has generated research into the conditions under which one's identity as an American becomes more or less salient, the ways in which people respond when they perceive that their American identity is threatened, the factors that shape whether certain types of people are more or less likely to be thought of as American, and the particular set of norms that people have in mind when they think about what being American means. In other words, the social identity approach has been useful for providing a theoretical roadmap for scholarship on the nuanced ways in which American identity operates as both a dependent variable and an independent variable.

National identity is one of many social identities that influence how people engage with the world. Scholars have increasingly found it useful to derive their hypotheses about the causes and consequences of various aspects of American identity from expectations derived from this theoretical perspective. What makes national identities unique relative to other social identities is that they are associated with a government that can make formal demands of its members and set formal boundaries for membership. Other politically potent social identities, such as race or gender, lack such institutional, coercive, and legal authority. With this authority comes an explicit role for political institutions and actors to shape whether national identities do or do not become salient, politically consequential, or both. Incorporating the role of political institutions into our hypothesis testing is an area in which political science is well positioned to make unique contributions to social identity theory, though the realization of such potential is still in its infancy (Smith 2004, Elkins & Sides 2007).

## **WHY STUDY NATIONAL IDENTITY?**

Studying national identities empirically is important because of the many alleged benefits and harms that they can bring to individuals, groups, nations, and the international community. For

instance, it is argued that having a strong attachment to one's country can lead to hostility toward outsiders, feelings of superiority, diminished support for redistribution, and uncritical support for the policies and actions of one's government. At the same time, possessing strong national attachments could lead to greater willingness to make sacrifices for the public good, obey laws and pay taxes, and engage in more civic-minded behavior (Druckman 1994, Schatz et al. 1999, de Figueiredo & Elkins 2003, Huddy & Khatib 2007, Shayo 2009, Theiss-Morse 2009, Reeskens & Wright 2012).

Some theorists argue that a sense of a common national identity is essential in liberal democracies for a variety of reasons. Smith (1997, p. 480), for instance, writes that "if citizens feel that their most profound commitments go to a racial, ethnic, religious, regional, national, or voluntary subgroup, then the broader society's leaders may find that their government lacks adequate popular support to perform some functions effectively." He goes on to argue that liberal democratic societies such as the United States need to convince members of the "distinctive worth" of their national membership because only when people possess such feeling can the very liberal principles that make the society of value be nurtured (Smith 1997, p. 489).

Liberal nationalist theorists also argue that a shared sense of national identity is important. They maintain it prevents alienation from political institutions; promotes political stability; leads to trust in one's fellow citizens, which makes people willing to rely on compromise as a way to settle political disagreement; and generates a concern for the common good, which, in turn, leads to support for redistributive policies (Mason 1999, Miller 2008). Many other theorists likewise argue that some degree of common national identity is beneficial to modern democracies (Kymlicka 1995, Sandel 1996, Dahl 1998, Taylor 1998, Gutmann 2003, Song 2009). In short, it is widely believed that to be governable, stable, and able to provide the opportunities of liberalism to all of their people, modern democracies need their citizens to feel like they are in it together. Empirical examinations of national identities attempt to assess these arguments.

From a psychological perspective, understanding national identities is important because, like any group identity, they invoke a range of descriptive stereotypes, which can lead to many problematic intergroup and intragroup dynamics. For instance, people who more closely match valued group-based stereotypes are often treated better than supposedly atypical members of the group. Additionally, the more typical group members are, the more likely they are to display ethnocentrism and ingroup loyalty (Theiss-Morse 2009, Jacobs & Theiss-Morse 2013). At the same time, however, scholars have also shown that cooperation and group harmony are promoted when people recognize that they share an attachment to a common ingroup such as a national identity (Gaertner & Dovidio 2000, Transue 2007).

In addition to these perennial debates, there are also reasons why the early years of the twenty-first century are an important time in which national identities merit investigation. The end of the twentieth century saw the creation of many new nations across the globe. The growth of the European Union, the rise of globalization and transnationalism, and vast amounts of human migration have also set national identities in flux (Smith 2004). How elites and citizens react to these changes affects the degree of conflict or consensus that countries and communities will face as their economies and populations transform. Whether people of different backgrounds even agree on what being a member of the national community means has become a particularly pressing question (Huntington 2004, Schildkraut 2011a). Understanding the causes and consequences of perceiving that certain groups of people violate national norms has also become more important (Paxton & Mughan 2006, Schildkraut 2011a), as has questioning the factors that make some people more or less likely to feel strongly connected to their national group in contrast to regional, ethnic, or supranational groups (e.g., Medrano & Gutiérrez 2001, Barrington et al. 2003, Elkins & Sides 2007, Pichler 2008, Triandafyllidou 2008, Theiss-Morse 2009, Schildkraut

2011a, Masuoka & Junn 2013). The ways in which differing perspectives on national identity and differing levels of attachment affect policy debates, such as immigration policy, have also garnered attention (e.g., Sides & Citrin 2007, Wong 2010, Byrne 2011, Schildkraut 2011a, Reeskens & Wright 2012, Wright et al. 2012).

For all of these reasons, scholars have increasingly come to agree that investigating empirically the wide range of claims made about national identities (and about American identity in particular) is a worthwhile and timely task.

## ORGANIZING AMERICAN IDENTITY RESEARCH

Once we recognize that American identity is akin to other social identities and agree that studying it is important, the empirical challenge becomes determining the appropriate concepts to operationalize and measure. And here, consensus is lacking. This is not to say that there are competing camps with opposing views about what it is about American identity that should be studied and how best to do so; rather, there appears to be no overarching research conversation on the matter. The existing literature contains a wide array of concepts and measures. For instance, some studies focus on degrees of attachment to American identity and examine such attachment by assessing the extent to which people think being American is the most important part of how they see themselves relative to other groups (Schildkraut 2005b, 2011a, 2013), whereas others assess the extent to which people consider themselves to be typical Americans or say that being American is important (Huddy & Khatib 2007, Theiss-Morse 2009, Jacobs & Theiss-Morse 2013). Sociological approaches rely more on in-depth interviews to explore the extent to which people think of themselves as American (Zhou & Lee 2007, Jiménez 2010, Kasinitz et al. 2010, Massey & Sanchez 2010).<sup>1</sup>

Other studies concentrate on how American identity is defined. Here, the most common approach involves asking people to rate various aspects of the normative content of American identity in terms of their importance, such as asking if they agree that true Americans speak English (Citrin et al. 1990, Schildkraut 2005a, Theiss-Morse 2009, Shelton 2010, Wong 2010, Byrne 2011, Taylor et al. 2012, Jacobs & Theiss-Morse 2013), whereas others ask people what they think the normative content of American identity should be, such as asking whether true Americans should speak English (Schildkraut 2011a). Still others ask people to rank American norms in terms of their relative importance in making someone a true American, such as asking whether speaking English is more or less important than other factors, for example, treating all people equally (Citrin & Wright 2009, Wright et al. 2012). Additional approaches rely on levels of pride in various aspects of American society as indicators of how people conceive of American identity (Shelton 2010, Byrne 2011) or ask people if they associate certain factors, such as Christianity or immigration, with American society (Edgell et al. 2006, Merino 2010). Some scholars employ implicit association tests (IATs), a method used widely in psychology, to examine the degree to which people possess restrictive views of American identity, such as that race or religion denote Americanness (e.g., Cheryan & Monin 2005, Devos & Banaji 2005, Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta 2010, Yogeeswaran et al. 2012, Jacobs & Theiss-Morse 2013).

Although all of these avenues of inquiry are interesting and important, it can be difficult to organize them conceptually or to view them as a coherent body of scholarship because they are not situated within an overarching analytical structure. This great variety in concepts and

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<sup>1</sup> Other sociological approaches that relate to the process of becoming American concentrate on markers of status and mobility, such as educational attainment and English proficiency, rather than on psychological connections to the nation (e.g., Portes & Rumbaut 2001, Alba & Nee 2003, Telles & Ortiz 2008). Such investigations are more focused on assimilation than on identity and are therefore not discussed here.

methods is evident in studies of identity beyond those that focus on American national identity in particular (e.g., Brubaker & Cooper 2000). In response to critiques about the lack of coherence in the study of identities in political science, Abdelal and colleagues (2006) developed an analytical framework that they argue should be used for organizing and structuring inquiries regarding the political ramifications of identities. Their framework centers on two dimensions of collective identities. The first, content, focuses on the meaning ascribed to an identity and consists of four (nonexclusive) areas of inquiry: norms that constitute the identity (both formal and informal), social purposes (or shared member goals) of the identity, “relational comparisons” to outgroups (i.e., understanding what the group is by concentrating on what the group is not), and cognitive models (or “worldviews”) that group members use to make sense of their political, social, and economic context (Abdelal et al. 2006, p. 696). The second dimension, contestation, “refers to the degree of agreement within a group over the content of the shared category” (Abdelal et al. 2006, p. 696). This dimension reflects the reality that identities are fluid and that their meaning is constantly being debated and altered. The extent of contestation—and the passion it evokes—can vary greatly from group to group and over time within groups. How contestation unfolds and its consequences encompass the second dimension of this approach.

Although the Abdelal framework might not apply to all aspects of national identity that political scientists study, it nonetheless provides a valuable starting point. A majority of existing research about American identity could be mapped on it. This particular field of study would thus gain more coherence if scholars adopted the type of terminology offered by the Abdelal framework and specified how their own particular approach fits within it. Although there is no right way to study American identity, students of this scholarship would be well served by having an analytical architecture with which they could compare and synthesize the various strains of investigations. As Abdelal et al. (2006, p. 705) put it, the goal is to “encourage more coordination and explicit comparison among scholars working on identity.” In this vein, debates should continue over how to amend and expand this framework so as to make it even more comprehensive.

## **EMPIRICAL ANALYSES OF AMERICAN IDENTITY**

With this theoretical backdrop in place, we can review empirical scholarship about American identity. This discussion is divided into two broad sections. The first surveys research regarding the content of American identity, including the norms that people think of as defining being American and the roles that ascriptive features, notably race and religion, have played (and continue to play) in shaping how people understand American identity. The second concentrates on studies that examine the extent to which people feel that being American constitutes an important part of their sense of self. Throughout, American identity is analyzed both as a dependent variable and as an independent variable.

### **The Content of American Identity**

Studies that examine what people think being American means address both dimensions in the Abdelal framework. They examine how people conceive of the content of American identity (content) and the extent to which different segments of the population agree or disagree on those conceptions (contestation). The majority of research on the content of American identity emphasizes one area of inquiry covered by this dimension: constitutive norms, which are “the formal and informal rules that define group membership” (Abdelal et al. 2006, p. 696). When citizens contemplate the informal constitutive norms of American identity, they are thinking about what makes people American—and what they think should make them American. These norms can



encompass behaviors (such as political participation), beliefs [such as Myrdal's (1944) American Creed], and demographic characteristics (such as where a person was born or the language she speaks). This content approach includes such a substantial portion of research on American identity because scholars have been interested in determining if indeed people of different backgrounds have divergent views about what it means to be American and if particular ideas about American identity foster contentious policy debates. Most research has concentrated on investigating the lines along which consensus and contestation over content occur and has paid particular attention to the role of demographics in shaping how people define being American.

**Theoretical bases of the content of American identity.** Assessments of the content of American identity typically start with observations of writers like Tocqueville [1835 (1990)], Myrdal (1944), and Hartz (1955) and then go on to contest assertions that American identity is largely based on a set of liberal principles and that acceptance of those principles is a sufficient condition for inclusion. Among contemporary scholars, Smith (1993), in his aptly titled article "Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz," forcefully laid out the foundations for what has been termed the multiple-traditions thesis. This perspective recognizes that American identity is rooted in a complex, and often contradictory, set of beliefs that includes, but is hardly limited to, the liberal creedal tradition of individualism, minimal government intervention into private life, hard work, equal opportunity, and political freedom. Scholars disagree over just how many additional normative dimensions constitute American identity, but there is broad agreement that to conceive of American identity solely in terms of the Creed is inadequate (e.g., Streich 2009).

At a minimum, the norms that delineate American identity involve two overarching classes: civic and ethnic (or ascriptive). Civic elements of American identity are inclusive and involve a set of beliefs that anyone can possess. These civic elements, however, include a broader array of concepts than those covered by liberalism. Notably, it is argued that civic republicanism has likewise long shaped both elite and popular interpretations of American identity. Civic republicanism focuses on the responsibilities of membership in the political community, as opposed to liberalism, which focuses on the rights that membership confers. This tradition calls upon the nation's citizens to be informed about and involved in public life and to act on behalf of the best interest of the political community rather than merely in pursuit of one's own self-interest (Banning 1986, Smith 1988).

More recently, additional civic beliefs have come to be viewed by some as defining elements that constitute American identity. In particular, incorporationist beliefs stem from the country's immigration history and involve accepting that a hallmark of being American is continually wrestling with the appropriate balance between assimilation and diversity (Schildkraut 2005a, 2011a). Whereas the notion that American society is defined by immigration-driven diversity is not new (Kallen 1998 [1924], Streich 2009), the extent to which this viewpoint is endorsed is (Higham 1993, Hollinger 1995, Glazer 1997).

Some scholars analyze American identity by grouping these inclusive perspectives together, calling them civic or soft boundaries and contrasting them with exclusive ones, whereas others take a more fine-grained approach and attempt to capture distinct perspectives within the civic tradition. What they agree on, however, is (a) that the liberal norms of the American Creed provide an important, but limited, lens through which to view American identity and (b) that the content of American identity also includes ascriptive or exclusivist norms, and that these norms are not just a set of unfortunate exceptions or aberrations from the nation's true civic identity. These ascriptive norms have been called ethnoculturalism or ascriptive Americanism. They denote a tradition that sets rigid boundaries on group membership, such as that in order to be a true American, a person must be a white, English-speaking Protestant of northern European ancestry (Smith 1997). Although it is true that some of these ascriptive characteristics can be acquired, in that one can

learn a new language or convert to a new religion, such cultural characteristics are transmitted through families and are fairly stable over one's life span. When joined with nativity and race, they form an image of an ideal American that is difficult to realize.

Over time this tradition has been increasingly discredited in popular and political discourse, but it nonetheless continues to shape policy debates and public opinion. Today, for instance, some commentators do not explicitly argue that Americans need to be white but maintain that the nation's cohesion is at risk because of immigrants who are not English-speaking Protestants (e.g., Huntington 2004). For many people who genuinely reject racial, ethnic, or religious boundaries to being American, ethnoculturalism can still operate beyond their awareness (Devos & Banaji 2005, Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta 2010, Yogeeswaran et al. 2012).

**Analyses of the content of American identity.** About the same time that Smith advanced his multiple-traditions thesis, Citrin and colleagues (1990) put the argument to the empirical test by asking Californians to rate the importance of certain factors in making someone a true American. The factors under investigation were both civic and ascriptive: believing in God, voting, speaking and writing English, trying to get ahead on one's own efforts, treating people of all races and backgrounds equally, and defending the country when it is criticized. Although they were primarily interested in these views of Americanism as an independent variable that could help explain attitudes on policies related to immigration, they found a high degree of consensus among respondents that both inclusive and exclusive factors denote the content of American identity. Some ascriptive factors, such as speaking English, generated more consensus than others, such as believing in God, whereas the civic factors were all rated highly (Citrin et al. 1990). Age, education, and partisanship were among the strongest predictors of how people defined American identity, with older respondents, Republicans, and those with lower levels of education more likely than younger respondents, Democrats, and people with higher levels of education to feel that the items in question were very important.

This initial empirical inquiry into how Americans view the constitutive norms of American identity led to further studies that either refined or expanded the range of items in use and that employed more diverse samples, including national samples and samples with larger numbers of racial minorities. Although such extensions of the original Citrin et al. (1990) study have resulted in some interesting and noteworthy insights, it is perhaps more important to recognize that the high degree of consensus revealed among Californians a quarter of a century ago has been replicated across time, space, sample configurations, and measurement strategies (Citrin et al. 2001, Theiss-Morse 2009, Wong 2010, Schildkraut 2011a, Fraga et al. 2012, Wright et al. 2012). Repeatedly, civic elements of American identity are widely endorsed and are more likely to be seen as important elements of American identity than ascriptive ones, though speaking English is also considered to be extremely important by most Americans. Additionally, ascriptive perspectives became more widely endorsed in the years following the domestic terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (McDaniel et al. 2008, Wong 2010). Variation among the public is often better explained by age, education, and political orientation than by race or ethnicity. The search for evidence to support the claim that America's increasing racial and ethnic diversity is eroding consensus on what being American means (e.g., Huntington 2004) consistently turns up little.

One set of norms on which racial and ethnic differences emerge involves those that relate to incorporationism. Blacks and Latinos are significantly more likely than whites to think that American identity is defined by its balance of assimilation and immigration-driven diversity (Schildkraut 2011a). They are most likely to think that blending into the larger society and maintaining the cultural traditions of one's ancestors are not mutually exclusive and that both are very important factors that define being American. As the nation's population continues to diversify,



it will be important to track whether incorporationist norms become endorsed among a wider segment of the American population or whether backlash against the country's immigrant legacy is generated.

Citrin & Wright (2009) and Wright et al. (2012) have argued that asking respondents to rank constitutive norms is a more effective strategy than asking them to rate each one independently in terms of its importance. When this alternative method is used, the overall picture of how people define American identity is similar to the picture one gets by looking at ratings, but ranking measures appear to work better as independent variables when predicting attitudes on immigration policy. In particular, their findings with regard to how America's civic norms shape policy attitudes are more consistent with theoretical expectations: Rankings, more than ratings, demonstrate that an ethnic conception of American identity promotes support for restrictive immigration policies, whereas a civic conception promotes opposition. Whether racial or ethnic differences emerge regarding the content of American identity when using ranking measures has yet to be investigated.

**Christianity as a constitutive norm.** One of the more curious findings that consistently appears in this line of work is that racial minorities are more likely than whites to say that the ethnic dimension is important in making someone a true American. This pattern persists even when the survey asks respondents whether they think the item in question should be important instead of whether it is important (Citrin et al. 1990, Theiss-Morse 2009, Wong 2010, Schildkraut 2011a). One possibility is that this finding emerges because of the high degree of religiosity among blacks and Latinos (see Schildkraut 2011a, p. 52, fn. 18). The Pew Research Center reports that both blacks and Latinos are more religious than whites when it comes to factors such as praying every day, attending religious services regularly, and holding various religious beliefs, such as that the Bible is the Word of God or that there is life after death (Pew Hisp. Cent. 2007, Pew Forum Relig. Public Life 2009). Shelton (2010) finds that Evangelicals are more likely to endorse both civic and ascriptive definitions of American identity compared with mainline Protestants, and that black Protestants are especially likely to endorse the ascriptive measures. He also finds that people who view themselves as religiously unaffiliated are less likely to endorse either definition. Taylor and colleagues (2012) find that among Latinos, being Evangelical and Protestant significantly increases the likelihood of believing that true Americans are Christian. It is worth noting that this high degree of Christian religiosity among racial minorities is often insufficient for being viewed as fully American (see discussion of implicit attitudes in the following section).

Another possible explanation for this finding comes from social identity theory, which posits that, on the one hand, peripheral group members (i.e., group members who are atypical in some way) may feel a need to assert their belonging and thus have incentives to support rigid rules for membership. Core (or typical) members, on the other hand, are more comfortable with their own sense of belonging to the group, which means that they feel less of a need to draw lines in the sand (Pickett & Brewer 2005, Masuoka & Junn 2013). At the same time, however, other studies show that people who consider themselves to be typical Americans are more likely than others to identify strongly with the country, which in turn makes them more likely to define American identity in an ascriptive manner, and that whites are more likely than blacks to consider themselves typical Americans (Theiss-Morse 2009, Schildkraut 2011a). Given that most surveys that examine attitudes about the content of American identity rely on majority-white samples, amassing additional data on other racial groups is important if we seek to further understand the dynamics among race, ethnicity, religion, perceived typicality, and beliefs about ascriptive Americanism.

At a minimum, consideration of this dynamic raises the point that religious belief, and Protestantism in particular, has long been considered a central element of American identity (Eck 2001,

Edgell et al. 2006, Hecla 2007), a fact that some see as fully compatible with the creedal perspective. Huntington (2004), for instance, argued that the American Creed developed as it did precisely because the country was settled by Protestants. Their religious doctrine shaped their political outlook and approach to rights and freedoms. Without Protestantism, he asserted, there would be no Creed. Over time, the social and political distinctions among Protestants and Catholics have diminished, such that both elements of Christianity are often considered more American than alternatives to Christianity, though Protestantism still remains at the nation's religious core. Long ago, Tocqueville [1835 (1990)] remarked extensively on the degree to which Protestantism informed the country's democratic character, and today, most Americans continue to believe that the United States is a Christian nation (Merino 2010).

Yet the role of religion in American life has undergone great and complex transformation in the last few decades. Immigration has led to an increasing segment of the population that is Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist (including current senators and representatives); evangelical Protestantism has garnered an ever-growing presence in electoral politics; and more and more Americans, including a former member of Congress, report that they do not have a religion (Eck 2001, Huntington 2004, Weiner & Wilcox 2010, Pew Forum Relig. Public Life 2012). As Eck (2001, p. 6) observes, such transformations challenge us "to make good on the promise of religious freedom so basic to the very idea and image of America." The question of whether the American public is poised to consider that people of non-Christian faiths—and people of no faith—can be considered fully American can only be answered with continued research. Thus far, the evidence suggests that the linkage between Christianity and American identity remains strong.

Merino (2010) reports that a majority of Americans feel that religious diversity is good for the country and that people who have had prior contact with those who are not Christian exhibit more positive attitudes regarding religious diversity. As the country's religious landscape becomes more varied, more and more Americans will have such contact. Support for religious diversity, however, appears to be confined to acceptance of those who believe in something. Edgell and colleagues (2006) find that when asked about groups that do not agree with their vision of American society, respondents were more likely to name atheists than any other group, including Muslims, immigrants, and gays and lesbians. They also find that "out of a long list of ethnic and cultural minorities, Americans are less willing to accept intermarriage with atheists than with any other group" (Edgell et al. 2006, p. 216).

Attitudes about Muslims and Muslim Americans likewise indicate a continued union of Christianity and American identity. Kalkan and colleagues (2009), for instance, illustrate that Muslims are continually viewed as outside the cultural mainstream. Edgell et al. (2006) find that Muslims are second only to atheists as the group that respondents feel does not share their vision of American society. And people who endorse the ethnic conception of American identity are very likely to support both ethnic profiling and internment of Muslim Americans as policy responses to terrorism (Schildkraut 2011a).

**Implicit attitudes about the content of American identity.** In recent years, scholars (mainly social psychologists) have used IATs in their investigations into how Americans define being American. People might not be aware of their implicit attitudes, which means that they do not report them on surveys, but these attitudes still exist and can shape subsequent attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, other people might be aware that they hold socially undesirable attitudes (such as that a true American is white), but are reluctant to reveal this attitude on a survey. The IAT is a tool that attempts to overcome both of these measurement problems. It relies on reaction times to determine if people hold implicit or automatic associations: People can identify words grouped with images they view as compatible more quickly than they can identify words grouped

with images they view as incompatible. With regard to the relationship between race and American identity, an IAT would capture whether people are quicker to identify faces as white when they appear on-screen along with words or images associated with the United States (such as the Capitol building or the American flag) than they are to identify faces as not white when they too appear on-screen with American imagery (Ashburn-Nardo et al. 2011).

IATs have demonstrated the continued relevance of race and religion in shaping how people think about the boundaries of American identity. For example, Asian Americans as well as whites identify white faces as white quicker when they are paired with American imagery and identify Asian American faces slower. Subjects even make the white-equals-American link when they are shown the faces of famous white foreigners, such as Hugh Grant or Kate Winslet (Cheryan & Monin 2005, Devos & Banaji 2005, Devos & Ma 2008). One study found that people implicitly think of Tony Blair as being more American than Barack Obama (Devos & Ma 2013). Likewise, both Christians and people who are not Christian identify American imagery quicker when it is paired with Christian imagery than when it is paired with non-Christian religious imagery even though on explicit measures, Christians and people who are not Christian disagree over whether being Christian is important in making someone a true American (Jacobs & Theiss-Morse 2013).

An important direction for future research using IATs with regard to the content of American identity is to examine how such implicit associations affect views on contentious policy debates, such as immigration, and to see if the impact of such associations differs across people of different backgrounds. We know, for instance, that people who explicitly endorse ascriptive views of American identity are more likely to support restrictive immigration policies. But what about people who link race, religion, and national identity implicitly? Do implicit attitudes provide additional support for restrictive measures, even among people who explicitly reject the ascriptive tradition? Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta (2010) find that people who implicitly link whiteness and Americanness exhibit discriminatory attitudes and behavior, and Pérez (2010) finds that implicit bias against Latino immigrants generates restrictive immigration policy preferences. Other scholars, however, argue that implicit attitudes might be more appropriate to investigate with regard to social interaction and subtle behavior but are less useful for predicting conscious policy preferences about which one has time to deliberate (Ditonto et al. 2013). Additionally, if implicit associations between race, religion, and American identity exist for racial and religious minorities as they do for racial and religious majorities (Cheryan & Monin 2005), is the impact of such associations on political outcomes uniform? We still know little about questions such as these.

## **Attachment to Being American**

Another significant aspect of American national identity that scholars investigate concerns attachment, which generally refers to the extent to which people consider being American to be an important part of how they see themselves. The literature includes multiple approaches to capturing the phenomenon of attachment to being American, including asking people outright if being American is important to them and asking if they consider themselves to be typical Americans. As noted earlier, pundits and theorists alike have made many claims over the years regarding the benefits and drawbacks of having strong (or weak) attachments to being American. In our contentious era of rapid population diversification, assessing such claims empirically has become a pressing goal.

It is not immediately obvious where to place studies of attachment in the research framework put forth by Abdelal and colleagues (2006). Perhaps such scholarship relates to contestation given that such research engages with the broad debate about whether we should even care if people have strong attachments to their national identity. One could also argue that research regarding attachment falls under the content dimension of cognitive models (or worldviews), in that feeling

American may be a product (and predictor) of different factors, depending on a person's place in the social hierarchy (Masuoka & Junn 2013). In other words, the reasons why a fourth-generation European American thinks of herself primarily as American may be different from the reasons why a second-generation Mexican American does. And once that attachment to being American is in place, it may have different attitudinal and behavioral consequences (or not) for each of those individuals. Studying attachment to being American therefore relates to cognitive models because such investigations are often about understanding how a psychological connection to being American (or a lack of such connection) is a consequence—and a predictor—of how people make sense of political, social, and economic phenomena.

**Importance of being American.** One approach to studying American identity attachment is to ask people questions about how important being American is to them. Such studies to date generally involve mostly white samples and find a high degree of attachment, or commitment, among Americans (Huddy & Khatib 2007, Theiss-Morse 2009). Christians, whites, older Americans, and highly educated Americans tend to be more likely than others to say that being American is important to them. As Theiss-Morse (2009, p. 52) puts it, “people who fit the stereotype of the prototypical American identify more strongly with the American people than those who do not.” Among African Americans and Latinos, a sense of subgroup respect, which is feeling “that one's subgroup is recognized, accepted, and valued among members of the common group” (i.e., by most Americans) is positively correlated with American identification (Huo & Molina 2006, p. 360).

Such sentiments can lead to both positive and negative outcomes. On the positive side, people who say that being American is very important to them are generally more likely to feel that they have obligations to help their fellow Americans, to be proud of the country's achievements, to pay more attention to politics, to be more politically active, to trust the judicial system, and to support international cooperation over militarism. However, they are also more likely to endorse ascriptive Americanism, to say they should support the country even if it is wrong, and to deny basic rights to people who disagree with the country (Huo & Molina 2006, Huddy & Khatib 2007, Herrmann et al. 2009, Theiss-Morse 2009).

**American versus (or in addition to) ethnic identity.** Another approach to studying American identity attachment involves asking people about the extent to which they think of themselves as American. This line of research is more likely to examine the views of racial minorities and engages explicitly with the question of whether people, especially immigrants and the second generation, are more likely to think of themselves in ethnic or national-origin terms instead of as American. Recent large surveys of racial minorities, including the 2001 Pilot National Asian American Survey, 2006 Latino National Survey, and 2008 National Asian American Survey, all asked respondents some version of this question (Lien et al. 2004, Fraga et al. 2006, Ramakrishnan et al. 2008). The 2004 21st Century Americanism Survey posed these questions to large numbers of white, black, Asian, and Latino respondents (Schildkraut & Grosse 2010). The General Social Survey has also asked people if they prioritize an American or ethnic identification.

Not surprisingly, whites born in the United States are extremely likely to say they think of themselves as American most of the time and to identify as American more so than with a racial or ethnic group. Among racial minorities, identifying as American most of the time is also prevalent. Factors associated with assimilation and acculturation affect American identification, such as generational status, length of time in the country, knowledge of English, and naturalization, with acculturation leading to a greater propensity to identify as American. More troubling is that perceiving that one or one's ethnic group has suffered discrimination makes it less likely that an American who is not white will identify primarily as American, and such perceptions are hardly

uncommon (Lien et al. 2004, Pearson & Citrin 2006, Citrin et al. 2007, Read 2008, Schildkraut 2011a, Fraga et al. 2012). More qualitative investigations of immigrant incorporation conducted by sociologists tend to confirm these survey findings (Portes & Rumbaut 2001, Zhou & Lee 2007, Jiménez 2010, Kasinitz et al. 2010, Massey & Sanchez 2010).

One recent study, however, demonstrates that in some instances, perceptions of poor treatment could ultimately enhance American identification. Specifically, Silber Mohamed (2013) found that Latinos who were surveyed during and after the nationwide rallies in 2006 against restrictive immigration legislation and in favor of better treatment of immigrants were more likely to identify as American than Latinos who were surveyed before the rallies; this effect was most noticeable among Mexican Americans and among Spanish speakers. She argues that the heightened American identification was due to Latino elite messaging about the nature and purpose of the protests. It is also possible that the participatory act itself symbolized a very civic republican idea of American identity, which in turn promoted national attachment (Meyerson 2006). How best to interpret such an intriguing finding will only be made possible with continued measurement of American identification among racial minorities and with additional incorporation of situational political factors such as mass mobilization, prominent legislation, elite leadership, and elections. As noted earlier, bringing such forces to bear on the study of American identity is an area in which political scientists are particularly well suited to make contributions.

**The impact of attachment to being American.** Political scientists also care about whether people think of themselves primarily as American because of the alleged political outcomes that such sentiment could yield. The effect of identifying primarily as American among racial minorities is often conditional in nature, typically only becoming consequential if people also feel that either they or their group is been discriminated against. Once a sense of discrimination is present, identifying as American can actually cause people to withdraw from attitudinal and behavioral engagement with the national community. For instance, Latinos and Asian Americans who perceive discrimination and identify primarily as American are less likely to vote and trust government than their counterparts who perceive discrimination but who identify primarily with their ethnic or national-origin group (Schildkraut 2005b, 2011a). In such cases, identifying with the aggrieved group can provide psychological capital (García Bedolla 2005), can inoculate against the damaging effects of discrimination, and can promote collective action (Miller et al. 1981, McClain et al. 2009).

Other times, however, identifying primarily as American appears to decrease alienation relative to identifying primarily with an ethnic group. Agreeing that one has obligations to the national community, such as volunteering and donating to charity, is less likely among Latinos and Asian Americans who perceive discrimination and who do not identify primarily as American, but beliefs about these obligations are unaffected by discrimination perceptions among American identifiers (Schildkraut 2011a). Here, it seems, identifying with the aggrieved group causes people to close ranks and withdraw from engagement with the broader national community, whereas identifying as an American does not. Still other research suggests that identifying primarily as American—regardless of perceptions of discrimination—reduces how much Latinos and Asian Americans care about having elected representatives who share their ethnicity (Schildkraut 2013).

Research to date thus indicates that identifying primarily as American relative to an ethnic or national-origin subgroup is often, but not always, of little political consequence just as long as people do not feel that they or their group is mistreated. Once perceptions of discrimination are added to the mix, however, the impact of American identity can become a lot more complicated. Studies that rely on measures that ask people how important being American is to them tend to find more direct and unconditional effects of identity attachment and point to both positive and negative outcomes from such attachment. To return to Abdelal's conceptual framework for the

study of identity, it appears that contestation over whether and why we should care if people do or do not identify strongly as American remains far from settled. In some cases, attachment leads to a distinctive worldview, whereas in others it does not. Whether such attachment is present or not is itself a product of how people derive meaning from their social, political, and economic context.

## A WORD ON PATRIOTISM

Although some scholars include pride in being American in their measures when assessing people's attachment to being American, others caution that patriotism is a distinct analytical construct. On the one hand, it is argued, American identity is primarily a social identity in which the national group constitutes a component of one's sense of self, to greater or lesser degrees. Patriotism, on the other hand, is defined as "love of country" and, as Theiss-Morse (2009, p. 24) argues, should be understood more as a group norm. She further argues that "the target of patriotic feelings is the country," whereas the target of national identity is the group and, importantly, its people (Theiss-Morse 2009, p. 24). Because patriotism is a group norm, however, social identity theory suggests that people who identify strongly with the national group should be more likely than others to be patriotic, because high-identifiers are more likely to realize group norms in general; that is indeed what scholars find (Schatz et al. 1999, Huddy & Khatib 2007, Theiss-Morse 2009).<sup>2</sup>

Just as data reveal widespread consensus on the normative content of American identity, pride in being American is also ubiquitous. Americans are a highly patriotic group of people, and a key source of that patriotism is the set of ideals embodied in the country's political system: freedom, individualism, and egalitarianism. Americans consistently report that they are very or extremely proud of their country and its achievements. Recent surveys sponsored by the Pew Research Center found that 88% of Americans consider themselves very patriotic and 75% say they display the American flag in their home, office, or car (Princeton Surv. Res. Assoc. 2011, 2012). Similarly, a 2011 CBS poll found that 86% of Americans say they are very or extremely proud to be American (CBS News & New York Times 2011). These figures are fully in line with historical trends (Schildkraut 2011b). Although Americans are hardly unique in their high degree of patriotism (see <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>), they have been remarkably consistent over time.

There are debates in the literature regarding the different manifestations of patriotism, how to measure its variations, and whether certain types—such as blind patriotism—are more worrisome than others—such as constructive patriotism (Schatz et al. 1999). Blind (or uncritical) patriotism does not allow room for criticism and is characterized by an unquestioning loyalty to the nation. When someone tells a critic to "love it or leave it," he or she is exhibiting this kind of patriotism. Constructive patriotism, though, is motivated by a desire to improve the nation and therefore permits criticism (Schatz et al. 1999). Protestors of domestic and/or foreign policy who see their actions as trying to help the country live up to its ideals embody this type of patriotism. Both blind and constructive patriotism are often contrasted with symbolic patriotism, which entails the more diffuse feelings of pride and attachment to the flag discussed above (Parker 2010).

Despite generally high levels of patriotism among the American population, systematic differences exist. For example, conservatives, Republicans, and Americans with lower levels of education tend to score higher on various measures of patriotism than liberals, Democrats, and Americans with higher levels of education. Whites and Latinos also tend to report higher levels of patriotism relative to black and Asian American respondents (Schatz et al. 1999, Huddy & Khatib 2007, Theiss-Morse 2009, Parker 2010). When both patriotism and attachment to being American

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<sup>2</sup>Although see Schildkraut 2011a for null effects.



are included in examinations of political attitudes, they exhibit distinct effects. Huddy & Khatib (2007), for example, find that national attachment leads people to be more politically engaged, whereas several measures of patriotism do not, and blind patriotism actually discourages political engagement. Attachment is also a better predictor of pride in specific US accomplishments than patriotism (Theiss-Morse 2009).

There exists a vibrant corpus of cross-national research examining the impact of patriotic sentiment on a wide range of political outcomes, often comparing and contrasting patriotism with nationalism. That literature, however, is beyond the scope of this review. The main point for the present purposes is that although scholarship confirms that American identity and patriotism are intricately related, they are sufficiently distinct conceptually and empirically that they should not be conflated.

## CONCLUSION

Upon reviewing existing empirical scholarship on American identity, one finds evidence to support both optimistic and pessimistic perspectives. On the one hand, there is wide agreement across a range of social groups regarding the normative content of American identity, and civic norms are much more widely endorsed than ascriptive ones. Moreover, having a strong attachment to being American can promote civic engagement and a sense of obligation toward one's compatriots. On the other hand, ascriptive ideas about being American are still endorsed by nontrivial segments of the population. Identifying strongly as American makes such attitudes more likely. Studies of implicit attitudes reveal even more widespread associations between whiteness, Christianity, and being American.

Throughout this review, several questions for future research have been highlighted: Why is it that racial minorities routinely rate ethnocultural factors as a more important aspect of being American than whites? How do implicit attitudes about being American affect policy preferences? Are racial minorities affected by implicit attitudes in the same way as whites? Will more inclusive national norms, such as incorporationism, become more prominent as whites become a minority? As the proportion of whites declines, will there be a backlash among whites regarding their definitions of and attachments to being American? Will they become more accepting of an incorporationist conception of American identity, or will they become even more likely to define American identity in ascriptive terms? How will the continued diversification of the country's religious landscape affect ideas about being American? A common thread uniting these questions is the importance of continuing to acquire data from larger numbers of racial minorities than traditional random sampling affords.

In all of these future inquiries, political scientists should be diligent about systematically paying attention to contextual factors, particularly the role of political institutions and actors, in conditioning relationships that cross-sectional analyses uncover. Finally, this research agenda would benefit from scholars making a more concerted effort to adopt a common set of analytical terms in order to facilitate synthesis across its many trajectories. Empirical research on American national identity is rich and sophisticated but thus far has largely been focused on the trees rather than the forest. Trying to situate our work within a broader framework would force us to be more thoughtful about how our work comes together, would facilitate debates about the tradeoffs associated with different measurement strategies, and would make it easier to highlight the contributions that each study offers.

Political theorists have long argued that the stability of diverse democracies rests on the ability of the country's people to feel like they share and value a common identity. Only recently have we begun to assess such claims with rigorous empirical analysis. The questions investigated in the

research discussed here are profound, timely, and complex. The relationship between American identity and political outcomes can depend on one's place in the social hierarchy, perceptions of discrimination, the types of measures used to capture identification, and contextual political realities. To date, the scholarly community has devised a wide and sophisticated array of measures for assessing how people define and feel about being American, and they have made gains in ensuring that such measures are assessed from Americans of many ethnic backgrounds. Future research will undoubtedly build on these gains, and our understanding of the evolution of American identity will broaden and deepen in the years to come.

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