

National Identity and Political Polarization

Eric M. Uslaner
Professor of Government and Politics
University of Maryland-College Park
College Park MD 20742

euslaner@umd.edu
<http://gvptsites.umd.edu/uslaner/>

- ▶ Donald Trump attributed his victory in the 2016 Presidential election in the United States to be “ the result of a Movement to put America first” The American voters concurred with his analysis. More than any other factor, a sense of nationalist identity was key to Trump’s victory over Hillary Clinton. While some observers held that Trump’s victory stemmed from economic distress in the Midwest, authoritarian attitudes among voters, or simple racism and anti-Muslim attitudes, the key factor in the election was a strong sense of identity that “true Americans” were Christians, whites, and people who were born and raised in the United States.
- ▶ Immigrants and minorities (more generally) threatened traditional American culture. Their worldview was different from “mainstream” Americans. They received benefits but did not put out the effort that “ordinary Americans” (mostly middle and lower middle class whites) did (Williams, 26). As their share of the American (voting) population has been declining, issues of identity became more important to their vote choices (Jones, 2016). Attitudes on race and immigration were important, but subsidiary to questions of identity. For many white Americans, Trump was defending the country against people who were “not like us.”

- ▶ What distinguished the Trump electoral coalition were: (1) the prominence of the the issues of national identity (and immigration) and (2) especially the linkage of identity and left-right ideology. More common is the weak link between issues of identity and ideology.
- ▶ Immigration has rarely been a central issue in recent American campaigns. There has been little difference between Democrats and Republicans on immigration in most elections. And the issue of national identity has largely been absent from elections. The dominant effect of American identity in the 2016 election is a sign of major change in American politics. Issues of identity not only loom large in American politics, but they divide supporters of each party more than in any recent election. When issues of identity have been central to American politics-in periods of “creedal passion”-they have generally superceded more traditional left-right issues based upon economics.

- ▶ The measure of identity I have employed (for the United States and elsewhere) is alternatively what makes for a “true American” (or a “true ____” for other countries) or how important is it for identity to be _____. These are commonly used questions tapping people’s sense of identity with their country. They have been used in the United States in many surveys: the 2016 American National Election Study, the 1991 ANES Pilot, the General Social Survey in 1996 and 2014, and surveys for the 2017 Democracy Fund, Elizabeth Theiss-Morse’s (2009), survey on Perceptions of the American People (2002), Deborah Schildkraut’s (2011) Americanism study, the International Social Survey Program (1995, 2003, and 2013), a Pew Research Center (2017) study in 2016, and an Associated Press/NORC study (2017).

- ▶ The Pew survey also included data from Canada, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The 1995, 2003, and 2013 ISSP covered: (with * indicating no data for 1995, ** no data 2003): Australia, Austria, Bulgaria**, Canada, Czech Republic**, Denmark*, East Germany**, Finland, France, Hungary*, India (only 2013), Ireland, Japan, Latvia (only 2013), Lithuania (only 2013), Mexico (only 2013), the Netherlands*, Norway, the Philippines (only 2013), Poland**, Portugal (only 2013), Russia (only 2013), Slovakia (only 1995), Spain, Sweden, Turkey (only 2013), the United Kingdom, Uruguay (only 2013), and Venezuela (only 2003). The European Values Survey (2008-2009) covered—in Western Europe-- Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Northern Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and (West) Germany. In Central and Eastern Europe, the countries included were Albania, Armenia, Belarus, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania,

- ▶ What constitutes a “true” American (British person, Pole, etc)? The alternatives vary from one survey to another. Speaking the national language, sharing customs and traditions, being a Christian (or an adherent of the dominant religion), being white, born in the country, lived there most of one’s life, having ancestry from the country, being a citizen, feeling a part of the culture, respect for political institutions, being involved in one’s community, carrying on traditions of one’s culture, blending with other cultures, and being hard working. For the 2016 ANES, I also included measures of feelings about the flag and whether it would be better if other countries were like the United States in the measure of American identity..

- ▶ In Western Europe, immigration and issues of identity have been salient in some countries (France, Hungary, Austria, Spain, Greece, . Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom), but not in others (Ireland, Portugal, Belgium). In no European country has the effect of national identity been as strong as in the United States. There are two key factors that shape whether issues of identity are polarized. First, how salient politically are issues of immigration and identity. Second, are these issues part of the agendas of the major parties or are they confined to fringe parties, as in France? Bornschneier (2012) argues that these issues are confined to the fringe National Front in France but divide supporters of the major parties in Germany. In 2017, however, the National Front moved from the fringe to the mainstream as the rightist alternative. By 2017 the party of French national identity was also the party of the right. Its candidate., Marine LePen, was the French political equivalent of Donald Trump.

- ▶ Where there is a strong effect for nationalism on the left-right vote-or on left-right party identification-- this issue has become central to political polarization. When there is not a strong relationship between nationalism and left-right voting (or partisan identification): either (1) nationalism is not a salient issue in a country's politics (the United States before 2016, Central and Eastern Europe and Asia today); or (2) nationalism may be salient to some voters, but only to voters of fringe extremist parties (France before 2017, most northern European countries before 2017). The strong effects for nationalism in the United States in 2016 indicate that these cultural concerns have become more salient and divided the voters of the major parties.

- ▶ Lower-middle class whites, the core Trump supporters, saw their social *and* economic situations as vulnerable. White Christians were no longer a majority and their share of the population was decreasing (Jones, 2016). And their economic situation was more vulnerable (Williams, 2017, 67) argues:
- ▶ In the past roughly 20 years the proportion of whites who felt their standard of living is worse than their parents' increased from 13% to 21%. [as] liberal "feeling rules" -mandated sympathy for the poor, people of color, women, refugees, LBGTO individuals.
- ▶ The chief beneficiaries of these government programs, especially African-Americans, were perceived to be less deserving of assistance (see Figure 1). In Schildkraut's Americanism survey, 93 percent said that pursuing success through hard work is important to making someone a "true American." In the 2016 ANES, only 26 percent of white Trump voters saw African-Americans as hardworking (compared to 67 percent who saw whites as industrious).

- ▶ The impetus for this project came from an interest in estimating the Trump vote from the 2016 American National Election Study. Trump has made “America first” a central theme of his campaign (and administration) yet I saw little in the developing literature that focused on issues of identity (but see Sides, 2017, which was not published when I started this study) I constructed the national identity measure by constructing an index of factors people believe to be central to American identity: other countries should be “more like us”; how one feels when one sees the American flag; whether identity is based upon ancestry, speaking English, adhering to American customs, and identifying as an American. National identity overwhelms other factors believed to be central to Trump’s victory: perceptions of the economy, authoritarianism, racial attitudes, and positions on trade and immigration. Negative attitudes toward immigrants and Muslims and the belief that there is too much emphasis on inequality did shape the vote-but mostly through nationalistic sentiments. (Negative attitudes toward immigrants did lead to voting for Trump, but had a much stronger effect on national identity.) The sharp split on nationalism between Republican and Democratic voters indicates that political polarization extends well beyond economic concerns. The model I estimated by instrumental variable probit is in Table 1. Other variables such as party identification, Christian fundamentalist identification, and opposition to free trade also shaped vote choice, but none were anywhere close to national identity in shaping vote choice.

- ▶ National identity has had sporadic significant effects on vote choice-and party identification-in the United States. A measure of identity had significant effects on the 1988 vote in the 1991 ANES Pilot Study-and this strikes me as surprising, perhaps attributable to the smaller sample size of the Pilot Study (N = 175 in the instrumental variable regression). The Theiss-Morse and Schildkraut studies had multiple measures of what constitutes a true American, leading to two factors for the former (a cultural dimension and another for support of institutions) and three for the latter (one on race, a second on political activity, and a third on feeling Amerrican). Neither of the factors had a significant effect on vote choice in 2000 for the Theiss-Morse data and only the “feeling” factor was significant for the Schildkraut survey.

- ▶ The entries for other countries in Table 3 are minus signs for significant coefficients that are negative (national identity leads to greater support for right-wing parties) or plus signs positive (for left-wing parties). A zero indicates an insignificant effect. No entry means that there was not a survey for that country in the data set. An asterisk indicates that the coefficient is significant, but barely. A strong sense of national identity should be associated with support for rightist parties.



- ▶ The patterns do seem to make sense. The strongest impacts are for Western European countries. In the European Values Survey (2008/2009), strong national identity leads to support for conservative parties in most Western European and Anglo-American countries. There is a similar pattern for party support in the ISSP modules for 1995, 2003, and 2013 as well as the Pew survey in 2016. National identity leads to voting for or political identification with conservative parties in most Western European countries. There are sporadic insignificant coefficients (notably for Portugal, but also for Austria, Ireland, New Zealand, Spain, and the United Kingdom in the 1995 ISSP) but most Western European and Anglo-American countries (other than the United States) have significant negative coefficients. And there is evidence of ideological polarization from national identity in Western Europe well before we observe it in the United States.