

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76013-3 - Who Counts as an American?: The Boundaries of National Identity

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

The Need for a Social Theory of National Identity

Throughout the Iraq War, and even prior to its inception in March 2003, some Americans vigorously criticized the Bush administration for various aspects of the war, protesting that the reasons for starting the war were based on faulty intelligence; that the United States should have put together a strong, broad-based multinational force; that the administration had no real plan for what to do in Iraq once Saddam Hussein and his government fell. Counterprotesters and people who supported the Bush administration's foreign policy responded to these criticisms by calling the protesters "un-American" or "bad Americans" (O'Reilly 2007; "Pro-war Demonstrators Show Support for U.S. Troops" 2003; "Thousands Rally in Support of War" 2003). By implication, good Americans do not criticize, especially during times of war. If Americans do not like a policy being pursued by their government, they should remain silent or, at more of an extreme, move to another country, Canada perhaps, because they clearly aren't behaving like true Americans.

In the midst of the Iraq War, on August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina wreaked havoc on the Mississippi Delta region of the United States. Reactions to the U.S. government's response to the widespread destruction varied widely, with some people defending the government's response and others questioning whether the government would have responded as slowly if the majority of the hurricane's victims had been wealthy and white rather than poor and black. Some critics of the government's response focused on race, arguing that the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76013-3 - Who Counts as an American?: The Boundaries of National Identity

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse

Excerpt

[More information](#)

underlying racism in America explained the government's failure to deal with the catastrophic effects of the hurricane quickly and effectively. Others focused on poverty, arguing that "Poor people don't count as much as other people, and that didn't start with the hurricane" (Large 2005: M1). Whether race or poverty was at the root of the government's sluggish response, the concern was that people in America get treated differently, that some Americans don't "count" as much as other Americans.

About a year later, in the summer of 2006, the Gallup News Service released a *USA Today*/Gallup poll outlining Americans' attitudes toward Muslims and Arab Americans (Saad 2006). A large minority of respondents (39 percent) said they felt some prejudice toward Muslims, with the same percentage saying that Muslim Americans were not loyal to the United States. What ought to be done with Muslim Americans? About 40 percent of the respondents supported treating Muslims differently from other U.S. citizens by requiring them to carry special identification cards (39 percent) or by making them undergo more intensive security checks at U.S. airports (41 percent). In 2007, a *Newsweek* poll found that just over half of the respondents (52 percent) thought that the FBI should wiretap mosques in the United States to keep track of any radical preaching by Islamic clerics. In that same poll, a quarter of respondents favored the mass detention of U.S. Muslims if another attack like the one on September 11, 2001, occurred in the United States (*Newsweek* Poll 2007). Americans are guaranteed their basic civil liberties in the U.S. Constitution. Some Americans question, however, whether they apply to all Americans.

And in September 2007, Senator John McCain, in an interview with beliefnet, a web site covering religious issues, said that the United States "was founded primarily on Christian principles" and that "the Constitution established the United States of America as a Christian nation" (Labaton 2007: 22). While McCain later tried to clarify his comments, the views he expressed in the interview mimic those held by a majority of the American people. A poll by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2006) found that two-thirds of Americans see the United States as a Christian nation and would like to see more religion allowed in public spaces. The notion that the United States is a Christian nation could certainly reflect the simple acknowledgment that a large majority of Americans are Christian. It does not. Rather, a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76013-3 - Who Counts as an American?: The Boundaries of National Identity

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Need for a Social Theory of National Identity*

3

majority of Americans (55 percent) believe the Constitution explicitly establishes the United States as a Christian nation, according to a First Amendment Center poll (Stone 2007). Contrary to the Constitution and the framers' intent, a majority of Americans mistakenly believe the framers placed within the Constitution a declaration stating that the United States is a Christian nation. Many political leaders, including McCain, Lieutenant General William Boykin, and the Republican Party of Texas, have fostered the misleading view that the United States is a country of and for Christians.

What do these stories about antiwar protesters, Hurricane Katrina victims, Muslim Americans, and Christian Americans have in common? They all share a concern with national identity and who the American people are as a national group. Who "counts" fully as an American? And how does being counted affect how Americans treat one another? This book explores the answers to these questions using a national random-sample survey, focus groups, and experiments. I develop what I call the social theory of national identity to explain Americans' behavior toward their fellow Americans. When Americans are considered "true Americans," fully included in the group "the American people," they have the opportunity to enjoy all of the benefits of group membership: being helped by fellow Americans during times of need, being treated fairly in the distribution of resources, and being listened to when they are critical of the group and its actions. Americans who are not accepted as fully part of the group, whom I refer to as marginalized Americans, are not given these same benefits of group membership. They are offered help only grudgingly, if at all, and their criticisms are rejected by those who consider themselves fully American. Whether a person is considered a prototypical, "true" American or a marginalized American has serious implications for how they are treated by their fellow Americans.

The social theory of national identity I propose explains why people treat fellow Americans the way they do. This theory rests on the notion that national identity, like other group identities, is inherently social and is centered on people's strong bond and sense of community with their fellow group members – in this case, their compatriots. It is this bond, this attachment, that is at the heart of national identity. People are deeply affected by their perceptions of fellow group members and by being part of a group of fellow nationals. To understand

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76013-3 - Who Counts as an American?: The Boundaries of National Identity

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse

Excerpt

[More information](#)

national identity and its effects, then, it is essential to examine the dynamics of social groups and how these dynamics affect members' attitudes and behaviors.

There are two aspects of national identity that are of primary importance to the social theory of national identity: the level of commitment people feel toward the national group and the boundaries they set to determine who is fully in the group and who is not. Group commitment is important because national identity concerns ascriptive groups; most people are born into a certain citizenship through no choice of their own and they retain that citizenship throughout their lifetime. Whether or not people like their national group, others label them as members and perceive them to be part of the group. Some people will be highly committed to their national group whereas others will do what they can to distance themselves from a group about which they feel ambivalent or which they disdain. How committed people feel to their national group can significantly influence their attitudes and behaviors.

Setting group boundaries is the second important aspect of group identity. All groups set boundaries between who is included in the group and who is excluded. A great deal of work has been done on the boundaries between ingroups and outgroups and the impact that these boundaries have on intergroup relations. A much less studied aspect of boundaries is the impact that the setting of boundaries has *within* the group. The setting of boundaries can be used to distinguish those who are full members of the group from those who are marginalized group members. Group members who fit the group prototype are fully accepted as members of the group and benefit from all of the positive ingroup behaviors, such as being helped by fellow group members in times of trouble. Group members who do not fit the prototype, however, are marginalized in the sense that often they are not fully accepted as full members of the group. They do not benefit from their group membership the way prototypical members do and must constantly struggle to be accepted by the group. These marginalized group members are still members of the group, but are not fully considered so.

When commitment and the setting of exclusive boundaries combine, the mixture is potentially explosive. Strong commitment to the national group can lead to a strong sense of community and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76013-3 - Who Counts as an American?: The Boundaries of National Identity

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Need for a Social Theory of National Identity*

5

fellowship, but when these strong identifiers set exclusive boundaries on their national group, the dynamics of marginalizing group members who don't fit the group prototype are invidious and detrimental. The sense of fellowship is powerful for those fully accepted as compatriots and is bitter for those not accepted as full members of the national community.

This chapter develops this social theory of national identity, drawing on political theory and social psychology to lay out the contours of national identity. But if this social theory of national identity is right, is the previous research on American identity all wrong? After developing the social theory of national identity, I address the contributions and limitations of past research on American national identity and place this research in the context of the social theory I propose. I finish the chapter by briefly discussing the consequences of national identity and by providing a road map for the rest of the book.

A SOCIAL THEORY OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

David Miller (1995) holds a social understanding of national identity, arguing that there are five aspects of this identity that play important parts in establishing the national community. The first is in many ways the most important, since without it the other four cannot follow, and it is the one I will focus on here.¹ According to Miller, national identity is based on people's belief that a national community exists and that the people within that national community share certain characteristics. People must "recognize one another as compatriots" (Miller 1995: 22) and share the belief that the members belong together as a group. As Miller says, "nations are not aggregates of people distinguished by their physical or cultural traits, but communities whose very existence depends upon mutual recognition" (Miller 1995: 23). It is people's shared belief that they constitute a group, a national group, that matters. Without that shared belief, there can be no national identity.

¹ Miller's five aspects of national identity are as follows: 1) a belief exists that a national community exists; 2) the identity embodies historical continuity; 3) the national community is an active community; 4) the identity is embedded in a geographical place; and 5) there is a common political culture with shared beliefs (1995: 22–6).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76013-3 - Who Counts as an American?: The Boundaries of National Identity

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse

Excerpt

[More information](#)

This understanding of national identity as a shared sense of belonging fits well Benedict Anderson's (1991) famous definition of nation as an "imagined community." Anderson defines nation as an imagined community that is both sovereign and limited. It is sovereign in the sense that the nation governs itself. It is limited in the sense that there are boundaries: Some people in the world are part of the community whereas others are not. Even though people within the nation have met only a small number of their fellow nationals, they can imagine the rest who fit within the boundaries of the national group. They feel a strong sense of comradeship even without the benefit of personal interaction. Again, it is the shared belief that one is a member of a group of compatriots that is at the core of the idea of a nation.

Miller (1995) and Anderson (1991) both think of national identity as an inherently social identity. People view themselves as entwined with other people in a community sharing a common bond, and it is this that defines the group. Most Americans share this sense of community with fellow Americans. Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, there was a dramatic increase in the number of flags one could see flying across the United States, but more important was the renewed sense of community these flags symbolized. As one commentator said, the American flag "evoked fellow feeling with Americans, for we had been attacked together" (Packer 2001: 15). Many people from across the United States claimed a deep connection with New Yorkers and, more broadly, with all Americans. But this sense of community with fellow Americans did not rise phoenix-like out of the tragedy. Americans have long felt a strong sense of attachment to their fellow Americans.

From the country's inception, astute observers have commented on the sense of fellowship among Americans. James Madison, in *Federalist* #14, warns his fellow citizens to beware of those who argue against a strong union:

Hearken not to the unnatural voice which tells you that the people of America, knit together as they are by so many cords of affection, can no longer live together as members of the same family; can no longer continue the mutual guardians of their mutual happiness; can no longer be fellow-citizens of one great, respectable, and flourishing empire. ... No, my countrymen, shut your ears against this unhallowed language. Shut your hearts against the poison

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76013-3 - Who Counts as an American?: The Boundaries of National Identity

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Need for a Social Theory of National Identity*

7

which it conveys; the kindred blood which flows in the veins of American citizens, the mingled blood which they have shed in defense of their sacred rights, consecrate their Union and excite horror at the idea of their becoming aliens, rivals, enemies (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 1961: 103–4).

Madison draws direct attention to the common bonds that hold Americans together as a people, the “cords of affection,” the “kindred blood.” The idea of breaking the union apart is repulsive because it would break the people apart.

This sense of fellowship among citizens is an important aspect of being part of the national community. Many people, though not all, feel a strong attachment to their fellow citizens. They feel part of a national community even though they have never met, and will never meet, more than a small fraction of compatriots in their lifetime. The ties that bind are strong and are reinforced by the history and culture citizens share. Charles Taylor even places the stability of democracies on this sense of attachment:

[A] nation can only ensure the stability of its legitimacy if its members are strongly committed to one another by means of a common allegiance to the political community. ... In other words, a modern democratic state demands a “people” with a strong collective identity. Democracy obliges us to show much more solidarity and much more commitment to one another in our joint political project than was demanded by the hierarchical and authoritarian societies of yesteryear (Taylor 1998: 144).

Democracies depend on a sense of cohesion among citizens because of the notion of popular sovereignty. A group of people – the citizens of a country – are the ultimate political authority and must therefore deliberate and make decisions. Taylor argues that to do so, people must feel a strong sense of commitment to one another, a collective identity.

What does it mean to have a collective identity? People can hold various identities, from the book group to which they belong to their racial group or national group. What these various identities have in common is that individuals place themselves within social groupings that are distinguishable from other social groupings. A person who identifies herself as an American establishes Americans as a group that is separate from other national groups, and one that makes up part of her sense of self. Identification with any group entails “the sense that one’s conception or definition of who one is (one’s identity)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76013-3 - Who Counts as an American?: The Boundaries of National Identity

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse

Excerpt

[More information](#)

is largely composed of self-descriptions in terms of the defining characteristics of social groups to which one belongs” (Hogg and Abrams 1988: 7). Social identity theorists argue that in the move from the individual self to the collective self, people take on the concerns and goals of the group as their own and act to increase the well-being of the group (Brewer 2001).

According to Henri Tajfel (1978: 63), social identity is “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups), together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.” A social identity therefore has three components: 1) a cognitive aspect, which refers to a person’s awareness of group membership or self-categorization; 2) an evaluative aspect, which is how good or bad the person considers the group to be; and 3) an emotional aspect, which is a person’s feeling of attachment to the group. National identity includes all of these components: People need to think they are a member of their national group, evaluate their national group positively, and feel attached to their national group.

When people identify with a group and their sense of self shifts from the personal to the collective, certain group dynamics come into play that explain much of group behavior. The group dynamics that play a key role in the social theory of national identity are group commitment and the setting of group boundaries. How strongly people feel committed to their group and how exclusively they set their group’s boundaries are natural group processes that heavily influence group members’ attitudes and behaviors toward other group members. These two group dynamics are the focus of this book. But groups also promote certain norms that play an important part in understanding group behavior. The norms tell group members what they ought to believe and how they ought to behave as group members. Americans, for example, hold strongly the norms of individualism and patriotism. I will discuss these various group dynamics in turn.

Level of Commitment to the Group

While people hold all sorts of social identities, a key component for understanding the effects of these identities on attitudes and behaviors is the extent to which they feel committed to the group. Differences in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76013-3 - Who Counts as an American?: The Boundaries of National Identity

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The Need for a Social Theory of National Identity*

9

feelings of attachment drive many intergroup and intragroup processes, such as perceiving exaggerated differences between one's ingroup and the outgroup and seeing one's ingroup in a highly positive light (Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje 1999a). People who are "die-hard" group members are much more likely to merge their group membership with their sense of self, to behave in a group-oriented manner, and to hold and follow group norms than are people who are "fair-weather" group members (Doosje, Ellemers, and Spears 1999: 85). Because people are motivated to feel good about their group membership, they have an incentive to enhance the success of their group and to view their group positively. Being strongly committed to the group leads people to promote vigorously the well-being of the group.

People vary in how strongly they identify with any given group. Some groups command a tremendous amount of commitment and loyalty from group members whereas others do not. For example, groups that are more exclusive and that make prospective members experience more hardships to get into the group tend to command strong attachments (Brewer 2001). The more difficult it is to become a member of a group, the more people will want to become a member, the more strongly they will identify with the group, and the more the group will influence their behavior. A group that makes its new members go through initiation rites or pass difficult tests, for example, can command tremendous loyalty and extreme actions from members. It is no surprise that people who enter the military must go through grueling basic training. The notion is that once through the ordeal, a soldier will do almost anything for the good of the group, including giving his or her life.

Similarly, group memberships that are voluntary can expect to generate greater attachments than group memberships that are involuntary (Andrews 1991). People can choose to be members of groups they especially like, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will feel strongly attached to the group. When people are members of a group involuntarily, however, such as when they are born into their racial, gender, or national group, they may or may not like the group and they may or may not feel an attachment to that group. People who are born in the United States are Americans whether they want to be or not. Only taking the large step of emigrating to another country breaks this involuntary national group membership.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76013-3 - Who Counts as an American?: The Boundaries of National Identity

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Recognizing the predominantly involuntary nature of national group membership opens up our understanding of group commitment. When group membership is voluntary, people can choose not to join a particular group. Voluntary group commitment levels are therefore likely to be consistently high. Involuntary group membership, on the other hand, means there will be wider variation in group commitment. Some people will feel strongly part of the group into which they were born, others will simply not think much about it, and still others will actively reject their group membership. They do not want to be a member of the group but are still members involuntarily, and they will be perceived by others to be part of the group. Many group memberships, including gender, race, and nationality, cannot simply be shaken off.

But some have suggested that national identity is a special case, that it commands greater commitment than other identities because it is so potent. While nationality is derived ascriptively, it is constantly reinforced through symbols, culture, language, and politics (Billig 1995). Politicians make frequent reference to “the American people” as a unified group and call on Americans to behave or think in certain ways or to make sacrifices for the good of the country. Unlike other identities, national identity is one for which people are willing to give their lives (Miller 1995). The ascriptive nature of national identity means that people will vary in their level of commitment to the group, but the potent nature of this identity means that many of those who identify with their national group will feel that commitment strongly.

National identity, like any social identity, is a continuum running from no sense of identity with the group to having the identity be fully and completely part of one’s sense of self. The more strongly people identify with their group, the more the group affects their attitudes and behaviors. The less people identify with their group, the more they will act in idiosyncratic, and perhaps self-interested, ways. We therefore need to take level of commitment into account when examining the consequences of national identity.

The Setting of Group Boundaries

The second group dynamic relevant to the social theory of national identity is the setting of group boundaries. Making one’s ingroup