

**Americans, Not Partisans:
Can Priming American National Identity Reduce Polarization?**

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Argument and Hypotheses:

This project stems from an interest in finding ways to potentially reduce polarization, particularly mass political polarization. If polarization has at least some negative consequences, are there ways to reduce/ameliorate it?

Here, I focus on whether it is possible to reduce affective polarization, that is, dislike/distrust of the opposing party (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Mason 2013). Manifestations of affective polarization include lower feeling thermometer ratings, more negative trait evaluations of the other party (i.e., being more likely to rate them as dishonest, untrustworthy, etc.), and in some cases, more discrimination against the opposite party in various tasks (Iyengar and Westwood 2015). Note that affective polarization is theoretically and empirically distinct from ideological or issue-based polarization (see Mason 2015). Affective polarization is dislike of the opposition, ideological or issue-based polarization is a difference between the issue positions of Democrats and Republicans (on issue-based polarization, see Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005).¹

In this study, I examine a particular intervention that might reduce such affective polarization: priming national identity, rather than partisan identity, in order to reduce partisan hostility and competition. If subjects are primed as Americans—rather than as Democrats/Republicans—they will respond with less hostility to the other side. They will see the other party as closer to themselves: as common members of a shared identity (Americans) rather than as competing members of separate out-group (opposing partisans).

There is strong psychological evidence for this sort of a prime rooted in the Common Intergroup Identity Model (Gartner et al. 1989; Gartner and Dovidio 2000). This model argues that individuals have superordinate and subordinate identities. When the superordinate (American) identity is primed, they reduce their hostility to the opposing subordinate (partisan) group. This follows because of a pattern of reclassification: instead of seeing the other subordinate group as an outgroup, they now see them as a fellow member of a shared ingroup (the superordinate group), and attach a positive valence to them because of shifts “involving pro-ingroup bias” (Gartner and Dovidio 2000, 42; see also Brewer and Brown 1998, 580-1).

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¹ Indeed, as Levendusky and Malhotra (Forthcoming) show, affective polarization can increase while issue-based polarization decreases.

In this context, suppose a Democrat is asked to evaluate Republicans. If he sees the Republican as a Republican—and hence as a member of an outgroup—then he will tend to evaluate them quite negatively (consistent with Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012). However, if he primarily sees Republicans as Americans—a shared in-group—then he will evaluate them more warmly (likely still not as warmly as he evaluates other Democrats, but more warmly than when they are just Republicans). So by emphasizing a common identity, hostility toward another group decreases (see also Theiss-Morse 2009).²

What it means to be “American” is itself a difficult question, subject to much scholarly debate (see, among many others, Smith 1997; Schildkraut 2011). Here, by American identity, I mean American national identity: “a subjective or internalized sense of belonging to the [American] nation” (Huddy and Khatib 2007, 65). This conception grows out of social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), and represents group membership based on a psychological sense of group membership (in this case, a sense that one is an American). This is not tied, however, to an endorsement of a particular ideology or political belief, but rather reflects “being or feeling American” (Huddy and Khatib 2007, 65). Ordinary citizens think that this sense of belonging is an important part of being “American.” Schildkraut (2011) asks respondents which factors they think should be important to being an American. More than 90 percent say that “feeling American” and “thinking of oneself as American” should be important components of being an American (table 3.1, p.45). This sense of national identity transcends racial, ethnic, and partisan/ideological boundaries (Huddy and Khatib 2007; Citrin, Duff, and Wong 2001).

So the basic hypothesis is straightforward: priming American national identity will reduce affective partisan polarization. But the effect will not be equally efficacious for all respondents. Such effects should be more muted among those who are sorted (i.e., those whose overall ideological outlook matches their partisan orientation, see Levendusky 2009). As Mason (2015) illustrates, those who are sorted (in her words, have aligned identities) show more hostility toward the other party and see them as more of a threat. Given that party and ideology align and are quite strong in this group, their identity as a partisan is a strong and entrenched one, and should be more resistant to this type of priming. The same logic should apply equally well to those who identify most strongly with a party (i.e., strong partisans).

There is one final group for whom the treatment should be especially effective: immigrants. Immigrants effectively have “bought in” to the American ideal and American dream, and should see themselves as having a stronger attachment to American identity. Consistent with this, immigrants, particularly Hispanic immigrants, have stronger identity as Americans than other Americans (de la Garza, Falcon, and Garcia

² While the underlying theoretical argument is different, there is also a strong connection to models highlighting how priming one identity reduces the weight given to another identity (e.g., Klar 2013). Similarly, others have used the common intergroup identity model to study distinct political phenomena such as presidential approval or racial priming (Kam and Ramos 2008, Transue 2007), but no one has yet used it to study polarization.

1996; Citrin, Lerman, Murakami, and Pearson 2007). Given this, immigrants might be more responsive to this sort of superordinate American identity priming. Further, those who are more acculturated in the U.S., and have absorbed those norms of Americanism, should be more responsive to the prime. For example, those who have been in the U.S. longer, or are second or third (vs. first) generation immigrants, more strongly identify as Americans (e.g., Schildkraut 2011).

That gives the following 4 hypotheses to be tested:

H1: Priming American national identity will reduce affective polarization.

H2: Such effects should be weaker among those who are sorted (i.e., those whose general ideological outlook matches their partisan orientation).

H3: Such effects should be weaker among those who are strong partisans

H4: Such effects should be especially pronounced among immigrants to the U.S.

H4A: The effects among immigrants should be stronger among immigrants who are more acculturated.

One question that might arise is that if this is so useful, why don't politicians simply do this all the time? First, they do try, at least some of the time (for example, see Obama 2004, Obama 2011, Obama 2013). Second, it probably takes a genuine coming together from both sides to be effective: both Democrats and Republicans need to show they're coming together and prioritizing American national identity. If just one side tries to do this (like say Obama), then it's less compelling. And further, in the real world, there are many competing primes, of which this would just be one, so we shouldn't expect major shifts. This is an effect at the margin. That said, given the normative importance attached to mitigating the deleterious effects of partisanship, this sorting priming could be an important mechanism for reducing out-party hostility.

Proposed Study

I will test these hypotheses using an original survey experiment. In the pre-test portion of the study, subjects will be asked to state their partisan identity and some demographic attributes (see the specific study questions at the end of the file).

The treatment stimuli is a prompt asking people to first read an article about the strengths of America and Americans, emphasizing various positive traits of Americans, modeled on an actual news article (Novarro 2014). Subjects follow that by being prompted to write a brief paragraph explaining what makes them proud to identify as American. This gives a two-part prime: all subjects read the text-based news article, and its point is then reinforced in the open-ended prime. This ensures that subjects identity as an American has been effectively primed. Subjects in the control condition are asked to read a brief apolitical news story and write a short paragraph about an apolitical topic (to effectively mimic the style and length of the treatment).

The treatment therefore is somewhat stronger than other identity primes that simply ask people whether they identify with a particular group (e.g., Klar 2013). Because of the primacy and centrality of partisanship to people's belief systems, a simple prime like that would almost certainly have been ineffective here: priming American, rather than partisan, identity requires a stronger treatment. For example, some previous studies have attempted to prime patriotism by exposing subjects to the American flag (e.g., Carter et al. 2011). Such treatments, however, have failed to replicate in other contexts (Klein et al. 2014), perhaps partially because these more subtle primes have more transitory effects. My prime, will stronger, allows me to establish more conclusively whether such effects exist.

Further, the treatment also likely primes patriotism in subjects as well, given that the prime reminds them of positive dimensions of American identity. But this is not a weakness: given that patriotism is seen as a group norm among Americans (Theiss-Morse 2009), for most respondents, to prime their American identity is to prime their feelings of patriotism.³ This is borne out empirically: while national identity and patriotism are distinct concepts theoretically and empirically, they are strongly linked in respondents' minds. Huddy and Khatib (2007) report that the correlation between the two in their sample is 0.74 (table 1, page 68), suggesting a very strong empirical correlation.⁴

The post-test portion of the study includes the measures of the dependent variables: the feeling thermometers, likes/dislikes of the opposing party, and a trait battery for the opposing party. All of these measures have been used by previous scholars as measures of affective polarization and dislike toward the opposition: Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) use feeling thermometers, Levendusky and Malhotra (Forthcoming) use party likes and dislikes, and Garrett et al. (2013) use a trait battery (as do Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012).

To measure immigration status and acculturation, I ask respondents their nativity, their length of residence in the U.S., and language spoken at home. The first is an indicator of immigration status, and the latter two measure acculturation to the U.S.

In addition to the dependent variable, the post-test also includes a series of items that measure the respondent's identity as an American (items come from Huddy and Khatib 2007). These items effectively serve as the manipulation check for the study: if my argument is correct, then those in the treatment condition should identify as Americans more strongly than those in the treatment condition.

Results of a Pilot Study

³ Patriotism need not mean nationalism: one can be proud of one's country without degrading other nations (Li and Brewer 2004).

⁴ There is an empirical regularity that Republicans and whites show higher levels of patriotism than Democrats and racial/ethnic minorities do (Conover and Feldman 1987; DiFigueredo and Elkins 2003; note that this concern is about patriotism, not national identity). Given this difference in levels, I will also investigate treatment effect heterogeneity by party and race.

To test the efficacy of the proposed treatment, I undertook a pilot study in December 2014. The aim of the pilot study was to ensure that the treatment worked to actually change American national identity. N=615 subjects from Amazon's Mechanical Turk completed the study. I tested 2 versions of the treatment: one as described above, and another that omitted the news article but gave a slightly longer text prompt. To measure American national identity, I used the manipulation check item. Combining them into a scale ($\alpha = 0.89$), I find that both treatments significantly increase American national identity relative to the control. On the 1-5 scale, the sense of American identity is 3.81 in both treatment conditions, and 3.64 in the control condition, this is an increase of approximately $1/5^{\text{th}}$ of a standard deviation ($p < 0.05$).⁵

Both treatments were equally effective in this pre-test, but I prefer the one with both the article and the (shorter) text prompt. While all subjects in the pre-test were willing to complete the longer text prime, perhaps in other samples subjects would be less willing to do so. With the article + text treatment, even if subjects did not want to complete the text prime, at least they would see the article, which should prime their feelings of American national identity.

Power Calculations

Given the outcomes being tested here, the lowest power will be for the feeling thermometer item given its large dispersion. Using the 2012 NES as a guide, partisans rate the other party at approximately 25 degrees, with a standard deviation of roughly 23. If I assume that the treatment increases feeling thermometer ratings by approximately 3 degrees, with N=1600 total respondents, that gives a power of 0.74. Doing a simulation (using the code from EGAP),⁶ I find that approximately 72% of simulations would yield a significant result at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level, and 83% would yield a significant effect at the $\alpha = 0.10$ level. If I increase the effect size to 4 (i.e., the treatment would increase out-party feeling thermometers by 4 points), power rises to 0.94. Using the same simulation approach, 93% of simulations yield a significant effect at the $\alpha = 0.05$ level and 97% at the $\alpha = 0.10$ level. So while detecting effects of a 3 points or smaller would be difficult with this sample size, the design should allow me to find effects of 4 points or larger.

⁵ Given concerns about differential treatment effects by party (see footnote above), I examined the pre-test data to check for differences by party. I found that while Republicans had a slightly higher level of American national identity, there were no differences in the effectiveness of the treatment by party (i.e., the treatment worked equally well for both parties).

⁶ Code available at: <http://egap.org/resources/tools/power-analysis-simulations-in-r/>

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Survey Items:

[Instructions:] For statistical purposes, we'd like to begin by asking you a few questions about your background. Please click to the next page to begin this section.

1. In what year were you born? [pull down menu of years]

2. What is your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female

3. Which of the following best describes your race?
 - a. Caucasian (White)
 - b. African-American/Black
 - c. Native American/American Indian
 - d. Asian or Pacific Islander
 - e. Other

4. Are you of Latino, Hispanic, or Spanish origin?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

5. People use a variety of sources for the news. Some people read the newspaper, others watch TV, and others go online to get the news. Some people also don't pay attention to survey questions. To show that you're paying attention, in the response options below, ignore the question and just select "read a newsmagazine" as the answer to the question.

How do you most often get news and information about politics and current events?

- a. Reading a newspaper
 - b. Going online
 - c. Watching television
 - d. Listening to the radio
 - e. Read a newsmagazine

6. Generally speaking, I think of myself as a:
 - a. Democrat
 - b. Republican
 - c. Independent

7. [IF Q5 == DEMOCRAT] Would you call yourself a strong Democrat or a not very strong Democrat?
 - a. Strong Democrat
 - b. Not very strong Democrat

8. [IF Q5 == REPUBLICAN] Would you call yourself a strong Republican or a not very strong Republican?
 - a. Strong Republican
 - b. Not very strong Republican

9. [IF Q5 == INDEPENDENT] Do you think of yourself as closer to the Democratic Party or the Republican Party?

- a. Closer to the Democratic Party
- b. Closer to the Republican Party

10. We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Here is a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale?

- a. Extremely liberal
- b. Liberal
- c. Slightly liberal
- d. Moderate; middle of the road
- e. Slightly conservative
- f. Conservative
- g. Extremely conservative

[IF ASSIGNED TO THE TREATMENT PRIME]

[Instructions:]

No we'd like you to read a brief article that recently appeared in the news. Please read it carefully, and then we'll ask you a few about it.

To give you time to read the article, the 'next screen' button will not appear right away. When you are ready to begin reading the article, please click to advance to the next screen.

[Article:]

America: What Makes It Great

The Declaration of Independence, whose signing we celebrate every July 4th, established America as one of the first representative democracies in the world. As we begin America's 239th year, we wanted to reflect on some of the factors that continue to make America a great nation. Here are some of the top reasons we love America.

INNOVATION — Edison, Gates, Jobs: they and we are known for thinking outside the box. As a people, we create and innovate; we don't wait for others, then appropriate their creations. From search engines to social networks — Google, Yahoo, Twitter and Facebook — it all started here.

TECHNOLOGY — From cotton gin to light bulb, records to movies, rockets to Internet, the gadgets and discoveries originating from the U.S. have changed the world, and continue to do so today.

DIVERSITY — “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...” So says the inscription on the Statue of Liberty in the middle of New

York Harbor. We are a nation of immigrants whose spirit of hard work and desire for a better life have been a hallmark since the first settlers arrived here more than 400 years ago.

ECONOMY — Despite the spotlight on China and other Asian countries, the United States still possesses the world's richest economy and consumer base — larger than Japan, Germany, China and Great Britain combined. The economy of a single U.S. state--California--would be among the top 10 economies in the world if it were a country.

INDIVIDUAL SPIRIT VS. CLASS SYSTEM — Unlike other countries such as India, China or much of Europe, where one's station in life is determined by a caste system, government monolith or an outdated monarchy, in America you are free to carve out your own destiny. Wealth carries huge influence, but unlike most countries, where one's fate is determined by others, in the U.S. you are free to chart your own course.

TOLERANCE — While other cultures in Syria, Iraq and Africa are slaughtering each other in the name of religion, in America Jews, Catholics, Sikhs, Protestants, Hindus, Muslims — and Atheists — live and work together in peace.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP — The U.S., by far, has more self-made millionaires and billionaires proportionally than anywhere in the world. Much has been said of late about the rapid rise of a millionaire class in China and Vietnam. But that's still — pardon the cliché — a drop in the ocean.

INSTITUTIONS AND LAW — We are a nation of laws and equality under the law; those laws provide stability, continuity, structure and protect against intellectual theft.

EDUCATION — Students from everywhere in the world come here for their education, not the opposite.

ENTERTAINMENT — OK, we didn't invent classical music, but we created Dixieland, ragtime, jazz, swing, big band, bluegrass, Hawaiian, pop, rock 'n' roll, hip-hop, rap and even disco; then there's radio, television, movies, video games, hula hoops, Hollywood and Disneyland.

NATURAL BEAUTY — From the California coast, through the Rocky Mountains to the forests of Maine and Vermont, and including our national parks, we are a nation of contrasts, with two oceans, numerous lakes and rivers, gargantuan mountains, vast plains and spacious deserts, all with their individual charm.

GENEROSITY — Americans are the most generous nation in terms of donating to charities, both in total dollars given and total hours. No other nation has America's generosity of spirit and willingness to help their fellow man.

ENDURANCE — After 238 years, we are still here in, basically, the same form. No nation in modern times has come close when it comes to longevity. And that goes for our

human life span — longer than anywhere else but Okinawa.

STANDARD OF LIVING – The highest in the world; nothing more to be said.

[Text Prime:]

In the article you just read, the article gave a number of reasons why many people love America and think it is a great country. Now we'd like to know what you think. What do you think is the most important reason people like America and are proud to be an American?

You should try your best to be as thorough and convincing, because we want to use these answers to explain to people who have never been to America why Americans are proud of their country.

Please take your time and do not rush. To help with that, the next screen arrow will not appear for a few moments to give you time to write out your answer.

[Text box for subject responses included here]

[IF ASSIGNED TO THE CONTROL PRIME]

New Mexico Cat Library Allows Office Workers to Check Out Kittens

If you work in an office building, you've probably wanted an escape from time to time.

The Doña Ana County Office in Las Cruces, New Mexico, has devised a genius solution to this sort of office ennui: a cat library.

Since 2012, employees have been able to check kittens out of a Kitty Kondo and then return to work with the company of a furry, mewling buddy. Document technician Martha Lopez told [the Las Cruces Sun-News](#) that the program was more than just entertainment for her and her coworkers.

"People should consider them as therapeutic help instead of just pets," Lopez said.

Speaking to [CBS News](#), which profiled the program last week, community planner Angela Roberson sang its praises.

"It definitely relieves stress," Roberson said. "I mean how can it not when you have a little fuzzy thing that you can take back to your office?"

And that's not the only purpose the Kitty Kondo serves. Since being implemented by the Doña Ana County Coalition for Pets and People, the program has resulted in the adoption of 100 cats, because all the Kondo inhabitants are rescues in need of homes.

[Text Primes:]

When you go out to restaurants, what types of restaurants do you prefer and why? Please explain briefly in the space below.

[Text box for subject response]

Think about the next place you would like to go on vacation. Where would you like to go and why?

[Text box for subject response]

[POST-TREATMENT ITEMS]:

1. I'd like to get your feelings toward some groups or individuals who are in the news these days. Below, you'll see the name of a group next to a feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 and 100 degrees mean that you feel favorably and warm toward that group; ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favorably toward that group. You would rate the person at the 50 degree mark if you don't feel particularly warm or cold toward the group. Please use the feeling thermometer to indicate your feeling toward the following groups.
[respondents are shown a separate feeling thermometer for each group]
 - a. The Democratic Party
 - b. The Republican Party
 - c. President Obama

[\$PARTY is the opposite party (i.e., if subject is a Democrat, \$PARTY=Republican(s))

2. Now we'd like to know what you think about \$PARTY. Below, we've given a list of words that some people might use to describe \$PARTY. For each item, please indicate how well you think it applies to them: extremely well, very well, somewhat well, not too well, or not at all well.

What about "American"? Does that apply to \$PARTY extremely well, very well, somewhat well, not too well, or not at all well?

- a. Extremely well
 - b. Very well
 - c. Somewhat well
 - d. Not too well
 - e. Not at all well
3. What about "intelligent"? Does that apply to \$PARTY extremely well, very well, somewhat well, not too well, or not at all well?
 - a. Extremely well
 - b. Very well
 - c. Somewhat well
 - d. Not too well
 - e. Not at all well
 4. What about "honest"? Does that apply to \$PARTY extremely well, very well, somewhat well, not too well, or not at all well?
 - a. Extremely well
 - b. Very well
 - c. Somewhat well
 - d. Not too well
 - e. Not at all well
 5. What about "open-minded"? Does that apply to \$PARTY extremely well, very well, somewhat well, not too well, or not at all well?
 - a. Extremely well

- b. Very well
 - c. Somewhat well
 - d. Not too well
 - e. Not at all well
6. What about “generous”? Does that apply to \$PARTY extremely well, very well, somewhat well, not too well, or not at all well?
- a. Extremely well
 - b. Very well
 - c. Somewhat well
 - d. Not too well
 - e. Not at all well
7. What about “hypocritical”? Does that apply to \$PARTY extremely well, very well, somewhat well, not too well, or not at all well?
- a. Extremely well
 - b. Very well
 - c. Somewhat well
 - d. Not too well
 - e. Not at all well
8. What about “selfish”? Does that apply to \$PARTY extremely well, very well, somewhat well, not too well, or not at all well?
- a. Extremely well
 - b. Very well
 - c. Somewhat well
 - d. Not too well
 - e. Not at all well
9. What about “mean”? Does that apply to \$PARTY extremely well, very well, somewhat well, not too well, or not at all well?
- a. Extremely well
 - b. Very well
 - c. Somewhat well
 - d. Not too well
 - e. Not at all well
10. Is there anything in particular you like about the \$PARTY Party? Please list as many responses as you wish, but please list each thing you like in a separate field. If there’s nothing you like about the \$PARTY Party, please proceed. [Six text boxes are provided for respondents to use]
11. Is there anything in particular you dislike about the \$PARTY Party? Please list as many responses as you wish, but please list each thing you dislike in a separate field. If there’s nothing you dislike about the \$PARTY Party, please proceed. [Six text boxes are provided for respondents to use]

12. How strongly do you identify as an American?
- Extremely strongly
 - Very strongly
 - Somewhat strongly
 - Not too strongly
 - Not at all strongly
13. How important is being an American to you?
- Extremely important
 - Very important
 - Somewhat important
 - Not too important
 - Not at all important
14. How well does the term “American” describe you?
- Extremely well
 - Very well
 - Somewhat well
 - Not too well
 - Not at all well
15. To what extent do you see yourself as a typical American?
- A great deal
 - Somewhat
 - Not too much
 - Not at all
16. When talking about Americans, how often do you say “we” instead of “they”?
- Always
 - Most of the time
 - Sometimes
 - Not too often
 - Never
17. In what state, country, or territory were you born?
- In a U.S. state or the District of Columbia
 - Puerto Rico
 - Another U.S. territory, such as Guam, America Samoa, or the U.S. Virgin Islands
 - Another Country

[IF Q17 != A/B/C:]

18. How long have you lived in the United States? [show a drop down menu of years]

19. Do you primarily speak a language other than English at home?

- a. Yes
- b. No

20. There are many important issues facing our country today. Research shows that issues people think are important can affect their views on other issues. We also want to know if you are paying attention. Please ignore the direction below and put "crime" in the top position and "unemployment" in the bottom position. Leave the rest of the issues in the same order.

Please rank the following issues facing the nation from 1 (most important) to 7 (least important). You can change your rankings by dragging and dropping different issues. [Issues shown are health care, unemployment, the federal budget deficit, the war in Afghanistan, Crime, Education, Foreign Affairs]