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National Identity and Political Power

How Representation Breeds Patriotism

By Andreas Wimmer

Among liberal elites in the West, nationalism's [bad reputation](#) is getting worse. They associate it with white supremacy, the newly restrictive immigration policies of many Western countries, the resurgence of economic protectionism, or the illiberal populism of [U.S. President Donald Trump](#).

But nationalism also has a [positive side](#). National identities can encourage solidarity with fellow citizens and lead individuals to sacrifice personal gain for the common good. Patriotic individuals, for instance, are less likely to [cheat on their taxes](#), and politicians with a strong commitment to a [national cause](#) are more focused on providing public goods—such as infrastructure, health care, and schooling—and less inclined to narrowly cater to their base. Especially for developing countries struggling with political integration, building a sense of national solidarity above and beyond ethnic or regional identities is crucial.

An important question for both academics and policymakers, therefore, is why citizens develop much stronger attachments to their nation in some countries than in others. Why, for example, are Americans, Ghanaians, and Thai [more patriotic](#) than Germans and Taiwanese?

Scholars have offered a number of explanations, including a country's [ethnic diversity](#) (with more homogeneous populations more nationalistic than very diverse ones), integration into the global economy (with more nationalism in globalized countries), or record in war. Yet [my own research](#) suggests a different explanation: people identify with their country when they see their own ethnic group represented in the national government. Political representation, in other words, breeds national identification—in diverse countries as much as in more homogeneous ones.

A TANGLED WEB

Why is representation so important for national identification? Consider politics as a web of alliances: individuals are members of certain organizations, such as a professional association for nurses, that develop alliances with other organizations—

the association for nurses might join with one for doctors to create a national umbrella organization for health care workers. These alliances can in turn be associated with political parties and ultimately with the government. Within these networks of alliances, favors and resources are exchanged: for example, a party might promise to implement a certain policy favorable to health care workers in return for their votes.

Over time, individuals who have forged durable alliances with one another and who belong to the same network will develop a sense of commonality and shared purpose. This in turn forms the basis of meaningful group identities, such as those defined along ethnic, religious, or professional lines.

The same applies to national identities: the more encompassing the networks that connect citizens to national government, the more citizens will embrace the idea of the nation as a community of shared solidarity and political destiny. Conversely, groups that are [systematically excluded](#) from these networks will develop their own separate identities, often defined in ethnic or racial terms. They will find the nation a less meaningful category and identify less with it.

To illustrate, imagine one distributed a survey in the United States in 1900 and asked citizens how proud they were of their country. One would expect that African Americans, freed from slavery a generation ago but still without equal rights or meaningful political representation, would feel less patriotic than the white population in general. Conversely, one would expect Anglo-Saxon Protestants, who then dominated the country's politics, to express more national pride than whites from politically marginalized groups, such as the Irish and Italians.

POWER AND PRIDE

To more systematically examine the relationship between political power and national identity, I [combined](#) hundreds of surveys conducted by different research organizations around the world. In total I assembled, with a team of research assistants, the responses

of more than 750,000 individuals from 132 countries, collected in 582 representative surveys fielded in various years from the 1980s onward. These countries account for roughly 92 percent of the world population. The data set thus comes as close as possible to a global survey.

All surveys contained the same question: “How proud are you of your nation?” Many also asked about the ethnic background of respondents, such as “Asian American” in the United States, “Turkish speaker” in Bulgaria, Sikh in India, and Uighur in China. This allowed me to connect the survey responses to another data set listing which ethnic groups are represented in executive government (such as the presidency, premiership, and cabinet) in each country and each year and which ones are excluded from political power, as African Americans were until after the civil rights revolution and as Roma are in eastern Europe today.

The statistical analysis produced results consistent with the idea that national identification is a function of political representation. The larger the share of the population that is not represented in executive government, the less proud, on average, citizens are of their nation.

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In extreme cases, the ruling coalition consists of a small demographic minority. This is the case in Syria, where Alawites [dominate executive government](#), the army, and the secret services despite accounting for only 12 percent of the population. In such countries, members of excluded ethnic groups identify far less with the nation than do members of groups that have captured the state. And indeed, Alawites are markedly more proud of being Syrian than are Kurds and Sunnis. Conversely, in more inclusionary countries such as Switzerland, where each of the three major language groups (French, Italian, and German speakers) is represented in the highest levels of government, members of all groups take pride in their country. The French- and

Italian-speaking minorities are even more proud to be Swiss than the German-speaking majority.

As one might expect, the groups that show the least amount of national pride are those that are actively discriminated against by political elites and the society at large. Examples include the Roma in eastern Europe, Russians in Latvia, and Muslims in Serbia. And contrary to those who have argued that majorities are by default more patriotic than minorities, the data suggest that political representation, not demographic size, is what really matters. Minorities in power, such as Arabs in Jordan, show as much national pride as do majorities such as ethnic Albanians in Albania. Conversely, large marginalized groups—ethnic Russians in Latvia, for instance—identify as little with the nation as do smaller ones, such as the Roma. Finally, more diverse populations are not less proud of their nation than are citizens of homogeneous countries. What matters is not diversity per se but how it is connected to political representation and power.

National pride, however, is not static over time. Consistent with my argument, I found that groups will identify more positively with the nation when they gain power and less positively if they lose it. Whites in the United States, for instance, became on average less proud of their country after [Barack Obama's election as president](#) in 2008, and so did Taiwanese whose grandparents were born on the island after the Kuomintang, whose leadership originated from the Chinese mainland, returned to power in 2008. In South Africa, Asian and black citizens expressed more national pride after the end of apartheid, while the trend for whites, after a brief bump in pride immediately after the transition, went in the opposite direction.

Whether citizens identify with the nation also depends on their evaluation of the future. If they cannot trust that they will continue to be represented in national government, they tend to be less proud of their nation. This is especially the case in countries with a history of civil war—past conflict makes it more difficult for elites from different backgrounds to trust one another and form durable coalitions. In countries with a history of ethnic conflict, such as Myanmar, the average citizen is therefore less proud of the nation than in peaceful countries, such as Ghana. The same applies to members of specific subnational groups, such as the Iraqi Kurds, who have fought many violent conflicts with Baghdad over the past generations.

Trust in future representation is also reduced if a country is ruled by a multiethnic coalition, as in Belgium or in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Such coalitions are less stable than more monolithic regimes. In such situations, individuals may worry whether their group will still be represented in the national government in the future or whether elites from another ethnic group will have pushed their own representatives out of power.

In nation building as in much else, political substance matters more than symbolic form.

BUILT TO LAST

If political representation drives national identification, what does that mean for nation-building policies? Citizens will not embrace the nation as a community of shared solidarity if they have not established beneficial exchange relations with the state. Policies designed to foster a sense of national belonging in severely divided societies should therefore focus on issues of power, representation, and governance. Power sharing remains the most effective tool for fostering national identity, even if coalition regimes face challenges building trust. South Africa's post-apartheid regime, for example, managed to integrate the formerly dominant whites into a coalition including all major African groups under the umbrella of the African National Congress. And indeed, despite lingering resentments and hostilities, a sense of common national purpose has spread among the citizenry.

Fostering power-sharing arrangements, as the United States did in Ireland and tried to do in Iraq, remains the best foreign policy to help nation building. International development agencies should strengthen the capacity of national governments to deliver public goods and thus forge ties of alliance and support with their citizens—rather than outsourcing these tasks to nongovernmental organizations or private companies.

Conversely, mere nationalist propaganda conveyed in school textbooks or through anthems, public rituals, and the like is less effective than many politicians around the world believe. An extreme example is apartheid South Africa's promotion of "Bantustans"—nominal black homelands—which failed to inculcate a sense of national pride in their citizens. Symbols are not enough for citizens to develop a strong sense of national community if not accompanied by political representation and effective integration into the power structure. In nation building as in much else, political substance matters more than symbolic form.