


## Nationalism and National Identity in North America

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### Abstract

The study of nationalism in North America has focused heavily on national identity. Much of the scholarship in the region indicates that most individuals define their respective national identities as attainable and inclusive. In contrast to these findings, other evidence from nationalism and ethnic politics scholarship in North America suggests a strong racial link to national understandings. Focusing on national identity research in North America, primarily the United States, but also findings from Canada and Mexico, I try to address the connection between national identity, its political effects, and the boundaries of national identity content. This article identifies important findings from research in North America and proposes that scholars look beyond the current research to study national development – understood both historically and through the study of individuals’ constructive deployment of nationalism in everyday life.

**Keywords:** Nationalism; national identity; North America

### Introduction

Nationalism has become mainstream in North America in recent years. From Donald Trump’s promise to “make America great again” to Joe Biden’s 2020 campaign appeals to win back the soul of America (Dias 2020), presidential politics in the United States has increasingly appealed to voters’ national understandings of what America is and what it ought to be (Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck 2018, 35). However, the invocation of nationalist symbols and ideas is not limited to elites. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, protestors have used nationalist rhetoric and symbols across the United States and Canada to protest public health measures. We have also seen increased use of nationalist symbols in the more recent “freedom convoy” in Canada (Bogel-Burroughs and Peters 2020; Rider et al. 2022). These nationalist appeals and symbols from elites and ordinary citizens raise the question: what exactly do we know about nationalism and ethnic politics in the North American sphere?

In this article, I attempt to analyze existing scholarship on nationalist and ethnic phenomena in North America, predominantly the United States, but also Canada and Mexico. I focus primarily on national identity, the most common aspect of nationalism studied in this region. Conceptions of national identity are important, as research in North America and elsewhere has shown, because how nations are defined and identified with has effects on attitudes and behaviors related to a host of political issues. I argue scholarship suggests that while there are some differences amongst ethnic and racial groups, there are remarkable similarities in how individuals feel about and define their national identities in North America with most emphasizing attainable, inclusive characteristics.

Studies examining implicit attitudes and racial differences in national attachment, on the other hand, complicate these findings in showing how a strong racial bias towards Whiteness exists in Canada and the United States when it comes to who is considered a “true” national. These findings, combined with research on how definitions of nationhood have changed institutionally and socially over time, suggest that researchers should pay more attention to the historical underpinnings of national development as well as the individual-level experiences of nationalism in everyday life that have so far been left out of scholarship in North America. Comparatively, these findings also stress the importance of acknowledging how race continues to be a mediator in conceptions of national identity.

Given the practical limits of space and time, I prioritize some findings but surely miss out on other important research from the area. North American research on nationalism and ethnic politics often focuses on the United States, where scholarship has been most prolific, especially in the past thirty years. Nationalism is often conceptualized in two ways in North American scholarship. Studies by political psychologists generally treat nationalism as something akin to chauvinism and in opposition to patriotism, usually understood as love for one’s country. More broadly, nationalism is also studied through analyses of national identity. In these cases, national identity is typically conceptualized as a social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1986), in which a person’s sense of self is partly defined by the value or meaning attached to the national group (Schildkraut 2014, 443). I use the terms nationalism and ethnic politics broadly throughout so that relevant phenomena, such as national identity, nationhood, as well as political culture and race do not fall out of sight.

### The Content of National Identity in North America

Taken together, much of the research on national identities in North America shows that the way people conceive of and feel about their national identities is strikingly similar, with sub-national and racial groups coalescing around a shared definition of national identity that emphasizes predominantly attainable, or inclusive, attributes. In the United States, surveys have shown Americans across all ethnic and racial groups broadly endorse civic republican and liberal democratic values, though other ethnocultural or “ascriptive” attitudes continue to be important for some (Schildkraut 2007, 2014). Scholars repeatedly find that Americans tend to conceive of their national identity as a combination of what might be termed “civic” (liberal and civic republican) norms, such as freedom, equality, and civic participation, as well as “ethnic” norms, such as speaking English, being born in the United States, or being Christian (Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Schildkraut 2007). Additionally, “incorporationist” elements, or a belief in the notion that the United States is a “nation of immigrants,” is also commonly seen as an important aspect of American national identity (Schildkraut 2011, 2014). In terms of national attachment, Americans across all racial subgroups appear to be just as committed (Shelton 2010) and attached to their national identities (Greene et al. 2020). Despite fears that Latinx migrants might threaten key aspects of American culture (see Huntington 2004), research finds that Mexican Americans are just as likely to endorse individualistic values as the American public at large (de la Garza, Falcon, and Garcia 1996), and Latinx migrants have been shown to be just as hard-working, religious, and patriotic as native-born individuals (Citrin et al. 2007). Rather than discrete or coherent “civic” nationalists or “ethnic” nationalists, recent scholarship has argued that in the United States there are four distinct varieties of national understanding that emphasize various civic and ethnic components (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016). They find that roughly half of American adults are likely to endorse aspects of both civic and ethnic nationalism or are only lukewarmly committed to either form (25).

Similar findings about the content of the nation can be seen in Canada, where a policy of multicultural nationalism and the existence of a sub-national population of French-Canadians or Quebecers might theoretically complicate a shared sense of national identity. Research suggests, however, that the boundaries of Canadian and Quebec national identity are defined similarly for

most people with the majority favoring attainable, or inclusive, characteristics, such as feeling national or respecting institutions and laws over ascriptive characteristics such as ancestry, place of birth, or being Christian (Bilodeau and Turgeon 2021, 536). These findings hold true for both Canadians raised in Canada as well as those who immigrated as adults (Grant 2016). In terms of national attachment, Canadian findings parallel the United States with Canadians, even those who more strongly identify as Quebecers, possessing a strong attachment to Canadian national identity (Mendelsohn 2002).

Likewise, scholars find that national identity in Mexico is widely conceived of as a more “civic” national identity in that it typically emphasizes values, such as liberal democracy, property rights, and anti-clericalism, but also consists of ethnocultural aspects such as pride in past Indigenous civilizations as well as feelings of racial uniqueness embodied in the concept of *mestizaje*, with the *mestizo*, or combination of European and Indigenous ethnicity, being regarded as “the racial expression of the nation” by many (Morris 1999, 370). More recently, Mexican national identity has adopted a more explicitly multicultural national identity that celebrates Indigenous peoples, though this has been primarily through “softer” forms of multicultural recognition (de la Peña 2006).

However, while we see what seems to be widespread support in North America among the public for national identities that are defined inclusively rather than exclusively, it is important to address the glaring impact of race. There is a deep connection to race in North America in terms of who is considered prototypically national with White individuals most often being considered “true” nationals as opposed to other racialized minorities.

### The Racial Divide in National Identity

Experimental data from Canada and the United States from implicit association tests (IATs) consistently find a racial linkage to nationhood in the United States. Devos and Banaji (2005) assess implicit attitudes and find that the prototypical American national is implicitly thought of as a White American, even among Latinx and Asian American participants. These results showing true nationals = White have been replicated in the United States (see Devos, Gavin, and Quintana 2010; Devos and Ma 2008) and elsewhere in North America as well. Girling (2014) found Canadians were significantly quicker to associate White individuals with Canadian nationhood as compared to Indigenous or East Asian people (111). This echoes previous scholarship (Mahtani 2002) that finds being considered a “real,” or prototypical Canadian, means having White skin. For Mexico, data on implicit association tests linking race to national identity are lacking, but we know that race is often an important aspect governing social relations, even if it is formally disavowed (see Villarreal 2010). So, while survey-based research indicates that most individuals in North America claim national identities should be inclusive or attainable, implicit associations reveal that race is often a determining factor in how one sees the prototypical national, at least in Canada and the United States.

Beyond this experimental data, we also have observational data detailing widespread racial gaps in policy attitudes and national understandings in the United States. There are stark differences between racial groups on issues such as government spending on social services, optimal size of government, guarantees of equal opportunity (Hutchings and Valentino 2004) as well as differences in how various racial groups conceive of their national identities. Scholars have found that Black Americans are less likely to express positive feelings or express pride in the country compared with White Americans (Citrin and Sears 2014). They are also on average less likely to emphasize the importance of “respect for US political institutions and laws” than White Americans (Graeber and Setzler 2021, 183). Additionally, Black and Latinx Americans are more likely than White Americans to possess a conception of American national identity that balances the importance of assimilation with cultural diversity (Schildkraut 2014). Furthermore, we know ascriptive characteristics shape immigrants’ self-identification with the nation, with those of darker skin and less knowledge of

English less likely to identify as American, especially if having experienced discrimination (Jones-Correa et al. 2018).

These racial linkages also seem to be less than benign. When implicit attitudes are linked to behavior, we see prototypes about who is national can result in discriminatory actions and judgments such as refusing to hire qualified, racialized candidates for national security jobs or dismissing immigration policies proposed by those seen as not prototypically national (Yogeeswaran and Dasgupta 2010). Likewise, racialized understandings of nationalism in the United States have been linked to support for harsher immigration policies. Bracic, Israel-Trummel, and Shortle (2022) find those embracing ethnocultural understandings of American nationalism, particularly those that hold exclusive views regarding who is a “true” American, are much more likely to support immigration policies such as separating children from their parents at the border.

In part, we can explain these racial gaps through social identity theory and social dominance theory (Peña and Sidanius 2002) frameworks, which predict higher status groups will seek to reinforce their privileged position. As Carter and Perez (2016) argue, we can look at race in the United States as a marker of status with Whites seeing themselves as occupying a higher place in the racial order. In turn, this causes Whites to construct national attachments that bolster their station such as creating racial restrictions on who can be a “true” national, expressing outgroup hostility, and projecting an image of other Americans being like themselves. Conversely, non-Whites’ perceived lower status in the racial order leads them to avoid projecting their traits onto national attachments, resulting in lower levels of attachment to the nation, seeing the higher-ranking racial order (i.e., White Americans) as more prototypical, and constructing national attachments that are more inclusive and less racially restricted (Carter and Perez 2016, 500). Others have also found that White racial identity is a motivating factor for many in the United States, causing individuals to behave in ways that will maintain the White ingroup’s higher status in the racial order (see Jardina 2021).

### The Effects of National Identity

In North American scholarship on nationalism, how people set the boundaries around the national group and how they identify with the nation has been repeatedly shown to have effects on important metrics. Individuals that strongly identify with the nation seem to be more civically engaged but also more likely to set hard, sometimes ascriptive, boundaries around the national group. Additionally, how one defines the national group impacts their attitudes toward immigration, cultural diversity, and race.

Scholarship on the effects of strength of identification suggests those who more strongly identify with the nation are more likely to be civically involved. Huddy and Khatib (2007) find that stronger national identification in the United States was associated with paying more attention to politics, greater knowledge about current events, and a greater likelihood to vote. However, strong identification with one’s national identity can also mean setting strong, sometimes ethnocultural, group boundaries around membership. Theiss-Morse (2009) finds that those who strongly identify as American are more likely to identify as “typical Americans,” or prototypical members, and are more likely to hold less inclusive, more ascriptive views of American national identity (e.g., emphasizing attributes, like being born in the United States, being Christian, and speaking English) since erecting hard boundaries to separate the national group from others is of great importance to strong group identifiers (84, 87). The types of boundaries people set around their national identity also correlate with political attitudes.

Findings from North America have shown that how individuals conceive of national identity affects their support for immigration. More exclusive definitions of national identity have been linked to lower levels of support for immigration and greater in-group favoritism in the United States (Citrin and Wright 2009, 15). Evidence also indicates that more inclusive conceptions of national identity enhance support for immigration. Using what they argue is a more accurate,

quasi-ranking system, Wright, Citrin, and Wand (2012) find a positive link between civic conceptions of nationhood and more inclusive positions on issues such as immigration. Comparable findings from Canada, including Quebec, exhibit a similar pattern with more exclusive or ascriptive national identities linked to greater distrust in people and negative attitudes toward immigration (Bilodeau and Turgeon 2021). The relationship between national identity conceptions and attitudes also affects attitudes related to cultural diversity.

Goodman and Alarian (2021) use data from 35 advanced democracies, including Canada, Mexico, and the United States to analyze the relationship between national identity and multiculturalism. They find more inclusive national identities are associated with greater support for multiculturalism. In the United States, Citrin and Sears (2014) have shown Americans with more civic conceptions of national identity by and large support aspects of soft multiculturalism (i.e., blending cultural preservation with assimilation). When we compare the United States and Canada, we see some interesting differences that suggest the relationship between national identity conceptions cannot be boiled down to simply civic versus ethnic identities. For instance, when analyzing the relationship between pride and anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States we see that pride in the nation has no effect on anti-immigrant sentiment. In Canada, however, pride in the nation appears to decrease anti-immigrant sentiment across all Canadians, including Quebecers (Citrin, Johnston, and Wright 2012, 541). When looking at support for multiculturalism in the two countries, the authors find that greater pride in the United States is associated with decreased support for multiculturalism while greater pride in Canada is associated with increased support for multiculturalism. What this suggests is that national identity conceptions, even Canadian and American ones that are widely defined as inclusive, are also shaped by specific national understandings, such as Canadians' perceptions of themselves as a humanitarian, multicultural people (Citrin, Johnston, and Wright 2012, 540, 544; Kymlicka 2003).

One of the clearest takeaways we see from research on nationalism and national identity in North America is that the way one perceives the nation has potentially significant implications in terms of political attitudes and behaviors. Inclusivity and the setting of group boundaries affects attitudes, but attitudes are also affected by the idiosyncrasies of how national identities are framed by elites and non-elites alike.

### Explaining Differences through Historical Development

We see then that national identities in North America exert powerful effects on political attitudes and behavior, but the reasons for this are not always clear. Historical scholarship on national development has been an important source of information hinting at how identities have shifted in response to elite intervention and why they look the way they do. Such research provides a much-needed context for making sense of the findings we see in survey-based data.

In Canada, immigration policies that emphasized Britishness, Whiteness, and assimilation were foundational to national identity from the late 19th century into the 1960s (Edwardson 2008) before being replaced by a multicultural immigration policy and philosophy in the 1970s (Mann 2012). This change to a multicultural nationalism due to the existence of a sub-national community of French descendants and a large influx of non-British migrants made a national identity centered on Britishness or Whiteness problematic. Furthermore, Canada's choice to highlight its diversity through celebrating its accommodation of multiculturalism, indigenous communities, and a sub-national group make its identity distinct (Kymlicka 2003). These top-down changes in Canadian national identity have been successful in altering national understandings, according to survey data showing a marked shift in national identity with Canadians emphasizing a more inclusive conception of national identity in the decades following these changes (see Breton 1988; Bilodeau and Turgeon 2021).

Like Canadians, Mexicans have gone from defining national identity in ways that encouraged cultural assimilation in the early 20th century before turning to more recent multicultural nation-

building efforts. Mexican national identity has changed over time with regimes in the 19th and 20th century emphasizing a progression toward a national *mestizo* identity (Morris 1999), though by the turn of the 21st century the tide had changed in favor of a more tolerant multiculturalism (de la Peña 2006, 293). However, despite the existence of a more multicultural nationalism, the legacy of previous nation-building efforts continues to have an impact on the lives of Mexicans through the continued salience of race in social relations (see Saldívar and Walsh 2014).

Early attempts to explain American political culture emphasized its “creedal” nature, or the notion that Americans had always been bound together by shared adherence to liberal and democratic values rather than through other ethnic or cultural ties (de Tocqueville 2003; Hartz 1983), even if this was something they often failed to live up to regarding the treatment of minority racial groups (Myrdal 1962). Subsequent accounts provided a more accurate picture by showing how elites in the United States, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th century, developed illiberal ethnic, gender, and racial hierarchies in the United States and deliberately embedded these in laws concerning immigration, naturalization, voting rights, and citizenship (Smith 1993; 1997). Indeed, what it means to be American has often been shaped by explicitly ascriptive, or ethno-cultural, factors, such as language, religion, and most of all, race.

Enslaved, enfranchised, and then subsequently disenfranchised in Southern enclaves of authoritarianism (Mickey 2015), Black Americans had to fight for basic civil rights in the 20th century (McAdam 1982; Valelly 2004). Looking at survey data, scholars have concluded that a history of racial discrimination is the most convincing explanation for the ethnic differences we see in the racial divide between Black Americans and others (Theiss-Morse 2009; Citrin and Sears 2014). When we examine American national identity from a development perspective, it becomes obvious why we see this curious mix of widespread adherence to creedal values alongside the belief that “true” Americans are in fact White.

This scholarship on the historical development of national identity is especially insightful when analyzed comparatively. While the differences between Canadian and American national identities, such as the relationship between pride and support for multiculturalism (Citrin, Johnston, and Wright 2012), seem puzzling on the surface, we can explain such differences by looking to how these identities developed and changed over time. In the United States, support for multiculturalism largely took hold as an ideological defense of institutionalizing minority rights in the aftermath of the civil rights movement and remains politically divisive (Citrin and Sears 2014). In contrast, explicit adoption of a multicultural national philosophy in Canada entailed a change in culture among Canadians from a more ascriptive nationalism in the mid-20th century (Iguarta 2006; Mann 2012) to a more inclusive one today (Bilodeau and Turgeon 2021).

Thus, historical development is a potentially fruitful way to interpret and understand the trajectory of national identities we observe today. However, there are few historical development studies in North America that focus explicitly on the development of nationhood, especially from a comparative perspective. One noteworthy exception, Marx’s comparative analysis of South Africa, the United States, and Brazil (1998) does this with great effect. Marx argues race in the United States and South Africa was an important aspect of nation-building and was used instrumentally to unify Whites through Black exclusion. Alternatively, a more unified national structure in Brazil did not require such top-down racial ordering.

## Discussion

Despite the somewhat parochial nature of scholarship on nationalism in North America, what comes through most clearly is that race remains a salient aspect of national identity and this is unlikely to be an exceptional feature limited to North America. As Rutland (2021) notes, the scholarly communities studying race and nationalism have rarely cross-fertilized. While the contexts shaping nationalism and race are likely to vary dramatically between countries and regions, further research into the relationship between the two is likely to yield important insights.

In North America, we see that race continues to be an important aspect of nationalism, shaping national identities, punctuating politics, and altering the social realities of ordinary people both explicitly and implicitly.

National identities, especially in Canada and the United States, seem to be broadly inclusive and based around support for “civic” or attainable values. We should, however, take these findings with a grain of salt. Most people in North America adhere to more inclusive or attainable national identities, according to survey data, and this has been replicated across time. However, these inclusive identities do not always result in the predicted attitudes we might expect. North Americans seemingly embrace cultural diversity while still holding fast to ethnic and racial boundaries concerning who is “truly” national. This becomes apparent when looking at the racial divide in conceptions of and attachments to national identity in the United States, the implicit associations linking White skin to prototypical nationality among Americans and Canadians, and the ways in which race impacts social relations among Mexicans. It seems likely that many of the metrics used to delineate the boundaries of national identity in North America are impacted by social desirability bias (Gaia 2020) that has the effect of concealing exclusionary impulses and amplifying inclusive conceptions due to respondents answering in ways they believe to be more socially acceptable. Additionally, given the stark racial divides in national attachments and the findings from IATs, these allegedly civic conceptions of national identity may in fact be a race-neutral artefact of surveys. We see a similar phenomenon in attitudes toward immigration, where certain supposedly race-neutral concerns about threats from immigrants, for example societal change (Huntington 2004) are really veiled prejudice translated into more socially and politically acceptable positions (see Hartman, Newman, and Bell 2013, 123). Greater attention to exclusionary impulses in national identity in North America would give us better insight into routine political behavior, but it would also be critical in helping assess the role that national identity conceptions play in promoting or dampening political violence. As Kalmoe and Mason (2022) have shown, political violence has been rising in the United States in recent years, and one of the key factors affecting this predisposition is the alignment of social identities and identity-based nationalism with political parties.

Furthermore, findings from North American scholarship caution against making overly presumptuous claims about national identity’s alleged impact on attitudes. Research from North America broadly suggests that more inclusive identities are in fact correlated with more inclusive positions on political attitudes related to immigration or multiculturalism. Yet this relationship may not always hold, as we see when it comes to differences in support for immigration and multiculturalism among Americans and Canadians, two similarly inclusive national identities (Citrin and Wright 2012). Furthermore, Bonikowski and DiMaggio (2016) suggest national identities are more likely to approximate combinations of “civic” and “ethnic” attributes (e.g., liberal democratic, civic republican, and ethnocultural beliefs) rather than coherent “civic” or “ethnic” ideal types. They find varieties of nationalism in the United States combine these various aspects in distinct combinations, which suggests that our understandings of the relationship between how “civic” a nation is and its support for an issue, like multiculturalism, is functionally out of step with the reality of how these identities operate for most individuals. Scholars might look to Cramer’s (2020) call to examine how racism functions as a perspective rather than just an attitude when seeking to understand how individuals incorporate racial understandings or identities into national ones. Understanding the contours of these national identities and their role in everyday life should be a priority for comparative researchers seeking to better understand nationalism at large. Two, different methodological avenues seem likely to be fruitful in this regard: historical development research and everyday nationalist approaches.

Historical development in North America explains much of the variation we see between Canadian and American national identities in terms of attitudinal differences. For instance, in Canada, it seems that elite efforts at promoting a multicultural national project have uniquely altered national understandings to make them more inclusive, and this has resulted in mass shifts in

attitudes since the mid-20th century. In contrast to this inclusive, multicultural project, the United States' long history of racial inequality has altered the national understandings of Black and White Americans alike. Further research on historical national development and its effects on national identity content would be helpful in each of these countries. However, more comparative research on nation-building and historical development would also serve to take this research out of its provincial box.

Another area of research conspicuously absent in North America is scholarship on how national identities and self-understandings are employed in day-to-day life. Researchers have pointed out that while public opinion surveys are invaluable, a comprehensive research program should also seek to understand how nationalism is deployed by individuals in social interaction and received via symbols in the larger social environment (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016, 28). One method of doing this is by treating nationalism as a frame of vision (Brubaker et al. 2006), or a perspective through which people make sense of the world. Analyses of everyday nationalist practices have been successful in other comparative contexts in this regard. Everyday nationalism has sought to understand how ordinary people use social practices, such as consuming, performing, or even talking, that make nationhood consciously meaningful (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008; Knott 2015; Goode and Stroup 2015). Most often this type of research is conducted with an ethnographic sensibility (Schatz 2009), meaning researchers attempt to capture the various meanings people attribute to the nation in their social and political lives. Examples of everyday nationalism include Surak's (2012) study of how the Japanese tea ceremony functions as a practice that produces a sense of "Japaneseness" among its practitioners or Wallem's (2017) analysis of how ethnic German migrants from Russia engage in identity management practices by strategically using their German name in some situations and their Russian name in others. While existing research has thus far made clear how individuals in North America broadly see the nation and the importance of national identities to a range of political behaviors, clarifying how these conceptions are used in the course of everyday life might help us better understand the formation of national identities, their interactions with other social identities, and how changes in context, such as perceptions of threat or unsettled times, might cause individuals to behave differently or alter their self-understandings.

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