



# American Identity: The Political Consequences of Defining America Throughout the Nation's Most Formative Moments

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# What is National Identity?

- ★ Story that is the basis through which we understand ourselves
- ★ Beliefs and attributes
- ★ Mythic components; fluid
- ★ Paradoxical



# Why is National Identity Important?

- ★ Americans seeking to define boundaries for belonging
- ★ Authority of national identity
- ★ Political actors and institutions can shape the consequence and salience of identity



# Power and Potential of Identity

- ★ National identities can drive benefit or harm
- ★ Negative outcomes:
  - Hostility towards outsiders, feelings of superiority, diminished support for redistribution, and uncritical support for political leaders
- ★ Positive outcomes:
  - Greater willingness to sacrifice, obedience to laws and willingness to pay taxes, and voluntary civic-minded behavior



# Frameworks of Analysis

- ★ No overarching scholarly conversation
- ★ Abdelal Framework on political ramifications of identities
- ★ Content
  - Norms, social purposes, relational comparisons, cognitive models
- ★ Contestation



# Theories of Identity

- ★ Liberalism
- ★ Civic Republicanism
- ★ Ethnoculturalism
- ★ Incorporationism
- ★ Progressivism



# Liberalism

- ★ Private life of an individual should be free from arbitrary government intervention
  - ★ Tolerance, individualism, privacy, civil rights
  - ★ Lockean; enlightenment universal values
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- ★ Example: Enlightenment universalist principles at the nation's founding; economic progress of Gilded Age



# Civic Republicanism

- ★ Competes with classical liberalism
  - ★ Responsibilities rather than rights & privileges
  - ★ Highlights importance of participation in public life
  - ★ People identify their own well-being with that of the community
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- ★ Example: The Depression and New Deal Era and especially WWII offered a moment in American history dominated by emphasis on individual sacrifice for the common good; “patriotism”





# Ethnoculturalism

- ★ Less celebrated and implicit
  - ★ Certain ascriptive or immutable characteristics dictate citizenship potential
  - ★ Historical evidence and lingering sentiments implicit in Americans' beliefs
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- ★ Example: At the nation's founding ascriptive and ethnocentric boundaries on political membership were paramount; countless other examples such as slavery, treatment of Native Americans, immigration quotas, etc



# Incorporationism

- ★ Immigrant-based conception of American identity
  - ★ Symbolized by immigrants coming to the United States for a fresh start, freedom, and opportunity; American Melting Pot
  - ★ Finding a balance between the *many* and the *one*
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- ★ Example: In *memory*, the Gilded Age was the height of the American Melting Pot (but also a peak in ethnocultural reactions)



# Progressivism

- ★ Caveat: *not* progressive movement of late 1800s and early 1900s
- ★ Forward-looking, progress and improvement-oriented, experimental and bold embrace of change
  
- ★ Example: Extremely prominent in the early to mid 1800s in America; growth and change amidst dynamic and multifaceted efforts to define American identity; technological, intellectual, and cultural advancements



My thesis invites a broader chronological analysis of how each of these theories operates in different moments of American history, how these civic myths interact with one another, and how each informed our behavior in each respective political moment.



# Outline of Full Thesis

## **American Identity: What it is, Where it Comes From, and Why it Matters**

What is Our Identity?

Where Does it Come From?

What is Unique About National Identity?

Power & Potential

Existing Research

Theories of Identity

Liberalism

Civic Republicanism

Ethnoculturalism

Incorporationism

Progressivism

## **The Founding Era**

### **1800 to 1860**

#### **Civil War**

#### **Gilded Age and Progressive Era**

#### **The Depression and the New Deal**

#### **World War Two**

#### **Cold War and American Hegemony Entering the Twenty-First Century**

#### **21st Century and Trump**

(See uploaded thesis for works cited)