

The Contrasting Electoral Effects of National Identity: Evidence from White Working-Class Voters in Canada and the United States¹

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Can national identity ever be captured by non-right-wing parties? This paper examines this question with an underutilized comparison of white working-class voters in Canada and the United States. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, this paper combines insights from survey data, a conjoint experiment, and qualitative fieldwork in a pair of working-class communities. National identity has a strong association with Republican voting and partisanship among Midwestern white working-class voters, but is instead tied to support for the center-left Liberal Party among white working-class voters from Ontario. Behind these effects, conceptions of the nation differ greatly. American national identity is more closely tied to racial resentment, religiosity, and anti-government sentiment. Canadian national identity is more closely aligned with multiculturalism and is often defined in negative relation to the United States. This paper shows how the same social identity, among a similar group, can have starkly different political effects depending on national context.

¹ The [Anonymized] University IRB approved the interview and survey protocol (#Anonymized).

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Introduction

Nationalism and national identity have long been potent political forces across the world, both during periods of intense social change and during “settled times” (Bonikowski 2016). Politicians of almost every partisan stripe invoke calls to the national community in different forms (May 2025). A great deal of scholarship has focused on how national identity has been an effective electoral tool of the political right. Bonikowski et al. (2021) show how ardent nationalism was a significant predictor of support for Trump in 2016. Garand et al. (2020) uncover a strong relationship between American national identity, immigration attitudes, and right-wing voting. Mader et al. (2021) find that adherence to ethnocultural national identity is associated with support for the far right in Germany.

But there is less work on whether national identity can be electorally beneficial to more centrist or left-wing parties, and, if so, how conceptions of the nation might comparatively differ in these countries. This paper examines this topic with an underutilized comparison of Canada and the United States. Through this comparison, the goal is to leverage the similarities of the two North American countries to try to better understand how and why they are different, generating findings that help inform the broader field of comparative politics on the varying electoral role of national identity.

Canada and the United States are, like every pair of neighboring countries, different in important ways. But it is the extent of their similarities that make the two countries ideal for comparison. Citrin, Johnston, and Wright (2012) highlight the fundamental commonalities between Canada and the United States: both are former colonies, populated by waves of immigration, influenced by British legal traditions, with written constitutions, and formal protections of individual rights (Citrin et al. 2012). The two countries share a close trading

relationship and are highly integrated economies. Both countries were founded by European settlement, expanded westwardly, contended with indigenous populations “through a process of destruction and marginalization”, and established historical hierarchies between different ethnic groups (Citrin et al. 2012, p. 535).

Within this Canada-U.S. comparison, this paper goes further by specifically analyzing a geographically contiguous bloc of white working-class people in the Canadian province of Ontario and the Midwest region of the United States. Shayo (2009) shows that working-class people often strongly identify with the national community, but that this identity is often correlated with right-wing attitudes such as lower support for redistribution. By concentrating the regional inquiry and only examining white working-class voters, this paper aims to produce a focused study of the differential role of national identity among a comparable and influential group of voters that appear to be voting differently across the Canada-U.S. border. Research has shown that white working-class support for the Republican Party has grown over the last twenty years, peaking in 2016 with Trump’s first election and continuing through the 2024 campaign (Ternullo 2024). But while Trump and his brand of nostalgic nationalism picked up American white working-class support, in Canada there has not been a demonstrable shift of white working-class voters to the right. Scholarship has not examined if or how national identity might have different electoral effects between American and Canadian white working-class voters.

As a relatively young and multi-national country, Canada has long had a ‘fraught’ relationship with national identity (Dufresne et al. 2019). It has wrestled with defining its traditional ties to the British monarchy, recognizing the special status of French-speaking Quebec, and integrating increasingly diverse waves of immigration. From the mid-20th century onwards, Canada sought to construct a more accommodating national community, which officially embraced

the ideal of multiculturalism and recognized the formal equal status of the English and French language. By contrast, scholarship on American national identity has continued to highlight the endurance of ethnocultural attributes of membership, and a pervasive ‘Americans = White’ belief that reflects the dominant racial cleavage in American society (Devos & Banaji 2005). However, little is known empirically about whether these differences in conceptions of the nation have held up in the contemporary period, whether they exist between white working-class voters specifically, and whether these differences in national conceptions underlie contrasting electoral behavior.

This paper employs a mixed-methods empirical approach that combines insights from both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data comes from two sources. The first is an original observational survey of white working-class Americans and Canadians.² The survey was fielded to a sample of over 1,500 Americans and over 1,500 Canadians, who have not attained a four-year college degree, live in a non-rural setting, and are from either the Midwest United States or the province of Ontario.³ The second source of quantitative data is a novel candidate-choice conjoint experiment that was embedded in the survey. This experiment asks respondents to select their preferred political candidate, while varying different aspects of the candidates including their main policy positions, race, and gender. Qualitative data comes from 64 semi-structured interviews that were conducted in Windsor, Ontario and Macomb County, Michigan. These two working-class areas were selected as case studies based on the inferential logic of the most similar method (Seawright & Gerring 2008). Both Windsor and Macomb are major hubs for auto manufacturing in their respective countries, and share extensive socio-cultural ties based on their geographic proximity and the ease of crossing the border between Windsor and Metro Detroit.

² Here, working-class is defined as those who do not have a four-year college degree.

³ Midwestern states include: IA, IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, OH, SD, WI.

Utilizing regression and mediation analysis, this paper finds that national identity is strongly correlated with Republican partisanship and voting among white working-class voters from the Midwest. Those who more strongly identify as American are more likely to identify as Republicans and vote for Donald Trump. However, among white working-class voters from Ontario, national identity is instead linked with support for and affiliation with the center-left Liberal Party, a political party with starkly different policy and ideological leanings than the GOP. Experimental evidence demonstrates how white working-class voters with higher-than-average levels of national identity have starkly different political preferences between Canada and the United States. The sample of high national identifiers from the Midwest prefer white candidates from the Republican Party who advocate for lower taxes. The sample of high national identifiers from Ontario have little preference between candidates of different race but prefer those from either the Liberals or the NDP, and who advocate for greater access to education and healthcare.

In terms of why these differences are present, this paper explores the differing correlates of and meaning attached to the national community. Qualitative and quantitative evidence shows how conceptions of the nation are markedly different between white working-class Americans and Canadians. Racial resentment, laissez-faire attitudes, and religiosity are strong predictors of national identity among white working-class voters from the American Midwest, but are not linked whatsoever to Canadian national identity. Through interview evidence, I detail how national identity in Windsor is more closely tied to support for multiculturalism and is often defined in opposition to their American neighbors. At the community level, national identity is often conceived in terms of who does not belong to the national group. However, the relevant out-group is markedly different depending on whether you are talking to someone from Windsor or Macomb

County. In Windsor, people define themselves as not being American, whereas people in Macomb County are more inclined to think of non-white migrants as those who do not belong.

To the south, the Republicans own national identity. To the north, national identity is owned by the Liberal Party. These contrasting cases demonstrate how national identity can have strong effects on electoral behavior among similar groups of voters, but that it is not a given that these benefits accrue only to parties on the right of the ideological spectrum.

National Identity as a Social Identity

National identity is often defined as the extent to which individuals think of themselves as members of a nation (Schildkraut 2014). It is a subjective attachment to the nation and a sense of attachment with other members of the national community (Huddy 2023). A growing body of research recognizes national identity as one of several potentially important social identities (Huddy 2023; Schildkraut 2014). Among the many different social groups with which an individual can identify, national identity is likely one of the strongest attachments, especially among working-class people (Huddy 2023; Shayo 2009). National identity is conceived as part of a person's sense of self that derives from his or her membership in the national community, as well as the meaning that they attach to that membership. It is not a 'passive fact' of individuals but is motivationally powerful because it can entail a sense of an 'ethical community' (Johnston et al. 2010; Tamir 1993). Scholars have moved away from the idea of nationalism or national identity serving as a coherent ideology and towards the understanding of it serving as a "pervasive cognitive and affective orientation" (Bonikowski 2016).

The meaning of national identity can also be defined relationally, who is included in the national community and who is not (Thobani 2007). As Thobani writes: "the national subject is not only existentially but also institutionally and systematically defined in direct relation to the

outsider” (Thobani 2007, p.5). National identity is also something that can be malleable over time, shaped in part by elite rhetoric, implemented through institutions such as schools and churches, and passed down across generations (Gellner 1983). Yet, recent empirical work by Mader & Schoen (2023) suggests that conceptions of national identity among individuals appear stable at least over a five-year period.

Due to the formal boundaries of a nation, and the set of institutional rules established by government, feeling a sense of belonging to the nation is different from other social group-based identities such as gender or race. Yet, it has been argued that national identity, like other social identities, influences how people engage with and feel about the world and other people (Schildkraut 2014). An individual’s level of attachment to the nation and their own understanding of what membership in the nation entails can correspondingly shape other attitudes and behaviors (Schildkraut 2014; Theiss-Morse 2009). National identity can be latent, but it can also be activated by media, political elites, and the information environment (May 2025). Similar to how racial identity and racial attitudes are likely to causally precede partisanship and vote choice, so should identification with the nation. As Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002) argue, individuals will often align their attachment to a political party with the social identity or identities that are most important to them. Accordingly, this should include how, and to what extent, an individual identifies with the nation.

Conceptions of the Nation and Measuring National Identity

One crucial question is how do most individuals conceive of group membership in the national community? The key fault line, with implications for political effects, is whether public conceptions of the nation are more inclusive of people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Is a country’s dominant conception of the nation derived more from the liberal nationalist tradition

and thus based more on a shared culture, or what has been termed ‘civic nationalism’ (Harell et al. 2022; Schildkraut 2014)? As Harell et al. put it, if national solidarity is to be liberal, then membership-based criteria must be accessible to ethnic minorities and immigrants (Harell et al. 2022). Alternatively, are conceptions of the nation more exclusive, based on ‘blood and soil’ arguments, and less accepting of newcomers and people of different heritage (Harell et al. 2022; Schildkraut 2014). This exclusive conception of the nation sets rigid boundaries on group membership, such that in order to be a true member of the national community, a person must be a white, English-speaking Protestant of northern European ancestry (Smith 1997).

Most empirical work on the electoral impact of national identity or nationalism analyzes specific conceptions of the nation. In a study of national identity in Germany, Mader et al. (2021) find that adherence to an ethnocultural national identity is strongly associated with support for right-wing parties, but adherence to a more liberal, civic conception of national identity is associated with higher levels of turnout and support for all parties in Germany except the far right AfD (Mader et al. 2021). In the United States, work by Bonikowski et al. (2021) finds that adherence to restrictive and ardent nationalism was a significant predictor of support for Trump over Clinton in the general election, and support for Trump over his competitors in the Republican primary (Bonikowski et al. 2021). Other work has confirmed the link between ethnonationalism and electoral support for Trump (Thompson 2021).

National identity has been measured in various ways across scholarship. Oftentimes, it is measured corresponding to particular conceptions of the nation and, specifically, according to the ethnic/civic framework (Mader & Schoen 2023). As Mader and Schoen (2023) discuss, this framework is helpful, but it represents an ideal type of classification where individuals either primarily base their conception of the nation as one based on genealogy, blood ties, and common

descent (ethnic framework), or on an acceptance of certain political values, norms, and institutions (civic framework). In the muddier reality of lived experience, most people do not correspond to ideal types and blend differing visions of the national community based in part on day-to-day interactions, elite discourse, and country context (Mader & Schoen 2023).

Here, I measure national identity more generally, using the standard ANES measure: “How important is being American/Canadian to your identity?” (five-point intensity scale). The advantages of this measure of national identity are that individual survey respondents are not primed by the construction of the question. Someone who believes that belonging to the national community is limited to white Protestants with European ancestry can identify as strongly with the nation as someone who believes instead that belonging to the nation is based mostly on civic duty. With this question construction, an individual’s conception of the nation is endogenous to how they answer the question. Consequently, the analysis here provides insights on which parties more broadly benefit from national identity, as it is conceived among the majority of the country sample, as opposed to specific pre-set constructs of national identity.

Situating the Cases: Legacies of Accommodation or Exclusion

Each national community is unique, with its own history, symbols, values, and attachments. The various characteristics of national identity can be contested and can evolve over time (Ozkirimli 2017). But for Canada and the United States, even though the two countries share a great deal in common, there are reasons to expect stark differences in conceptions of nationhood. These differences can best be theoretically framed as a national community built more on exclusion versus a national community built more on the idea of accommodation. Scholarship has shown how American national identity is one that is inherently more skeptical of others, while Canadian

national identity, to the extent that there is a singular Canadian national identity, is more accepting of differences and defined less by ethnocentric traits.

Canada is a country founded over a vast Aboriginal territory by two competing colonial groups in the English and the French. Over the twentieth century, increasingly diverse waves of immigration added new cultures, languages, and ethnicities. The challenge of recognizing the unique status of French-speaking Quebec, and strong pushes for Quebec independence, have been coupled with questions on how extensive ties should be to the British monarchy and how to protect against creeping influence from the much larger American neighbor to the south. As Dufresne et al. (2019) summarize, Canada “has always had a fraught relationship with nationalism” (Dufresne et al. 2019, pg. 330).

An argument can be made that Canada had to be more accepting of differences in order for a viable national community to exist. To keep a diverse country together, with a large national minority of French-speakers with their own history, heritage, and national conceptions, a unifying compromise could be multiculturalism. If to be Canadian could mean different things, then multiple images of nationhood could coexist within the same country.

In the mid-20th century, Liberal governments worked to construct a sense of national belonging that accommodated the special place of Quebec and new immigrant communities. A new national anthem replacing God Save the Queen, and a new national flag replacing the Union Jack, represented new sets of national symbols that are now widely accepted (McRoberts 1997). The patriation of the Constitution and the institution of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms provided further distance from Canada’s British heritage.

But perhaps the most significant changes were the passing of the Official Languages Act of 1969 and the official policy of multiculturalism in 1971. Kymlicka (1998) argues that multiculturalism policy, introduced only two years after the Official Languages Act, which affirmed the equality of the French and English language in Canada, was designed by the Liberals to emphasize that the country did not privilege the lifestyles, interests, or cultures of the descendants of the original English and French colonists (Kymlicka 1998, p. 56). Tracing federal immigration and multicultural policy over the 20th century, Wayland (1997) concludes that: “the ideology of multiculturalism has become part and parcel of Canadian identity.”

Empirical scholarship has supported the proposition that the dominant conception of national identity in Canada is one that endorses a multicultural image of the nation, and that multiculturalism policy has largely been a triumph (Berry & Kalin 1995; Kymlicka 2021). Kymlicka (2021) examines public support for multiculturalism in Canada, concluding that it remains a “cherished part of Canadian self-identity” (Kymlicka 2021, p. 123). Several studies have shown that support for multiculturalism is high in Canada relative to other countries (Berry & Kalin 1995; Kymlicka 2021). Johnston et al. (2010) contend that multiculturalism is now firmly a part of Canadian nationalism.

Scholars have also noted how resentment towards the rest of Canada and dissatisfaction with the country has faded in Quebec (Rocher 2023). Comparing national identity in Quebec to the rest of Canada, Bilodeau and Turgeon (2021) find that Quebeckers draw the boundaries of the national community in similar ways to the rest of the country. Quebeckers and other Canadians alike prioritize ‘attainable’ characteristics of membership, such as respecting institutions and laws, over ascriptive ones such as ancestry and place of birth (Bilodeau & Turgeon 2021).

Research analyzing conceptions of the nation in the United States find much different characteristics and a country still marked more by ethnocultural boundaries and a pervasive ‘Americans = White’ belief (Devos & Banaji 2005). Citrin, Johnston, and Wright (2012) compare national identification between Canada and the United States. They conclude that while Canadians are more divided than Americans over their nationality, they are also markedly less chauvinist, more accepting of newcomers, and multiculturalism is a key feature of Canadian national identity (Citrin et al. 2012). By contrast, they contend that the American public has embraced the ideals of assimilation, the ‘melting pot’, and are less supportive of multiculturalism (Citrin et al. 2012). In the United States, the authors argue that split national loyalties, a failure to speak English, and a reluctance to widely embrace accepted political values are strongly opposed (Citrin et al. 2012).

While there are civic elements to American identity, research has shown that there are ethnocultural boundaries to membership in the national community based on white ethnicity and northern European ancestry (Schildkraut 2014; Smith 1997). Ascriptive norms on who counts as being an American became more widely endorsed in the years following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (Schildkraut 2014). Research subjects make a ‘white equals American’ connection even when they are shown faces of famous white British actors, including Hugh Grant or Kate Winslet (Devos & Banaji 2005; Devos & Ma 2008). Scholarship found that some people implicitly believed that the former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, was more American than Barack Obama (Devos & Ma 2013). Other research has looked at which Americans most strongly identify with the nation, finding that Christians, whites, older Americans, and highly educated Americans tend to be more likely to say that being American is important to them (Huddy & Khatib 2007, Theiss-Morse 2009).

Empirical Approach: Mixed-Methods Analyses

This project employs a mixed-methods approach, combining insights from observational, experimental, and qualitative evidence. Original quantitative data comes from a cross-sectional public opinion survey of Americans and Canadians.⁴ The survey was fielded to respondents from Canada and the United States from December 2022 to January 2023.⁵ The sample includes a targeted oversample of white working-class respondents, who live in non-rural areas, in either Ontario or the American Midwest ($n > 1,500$ from each country). Embedded in the survey, I also examine a novel candidate-choice conjoint experiment that measures white working-class preferences in response to experimental stimuli. The design of the conjoint experiment was pre-registered at Open Science Framework, prior to it being fielded to respondents.⁶ The conjoint experiment asks respondents to choose their preferred political candidate in a hypothetical election, while varying the party, gender, race, received endorsement, major policy priority, and occupation history of the candidate.⁷

To account for what can be missed by purely quantitative work, I also conducted qualitative fieldwork in paired case studies of Windsor, Ontario and Macomb County, Michigan. Scholarship on political behavior has often underexplored the potential of qualitative methods. Contemporary work on national identity often does not include a qualitative account of how people think or feel about the national community. The qualitative component of this study seeks to test the findings

⁴ Survey respondents were recruited by Leger, a Canadian-based firm hired to conduct the online survey.

⁵ To maximize comparability, the wording of survey questions was virtually identical. Only country-specific names or spellings were different.

⁶ https://osf.io/x7k8a/?view_only=6d9fca1c958f47ff8a628cdbfbce3a76

⁷ See Appendix section A4 for the full design.

of this paper and provide a better contextualized understanding of national identity in two cross-border communities.

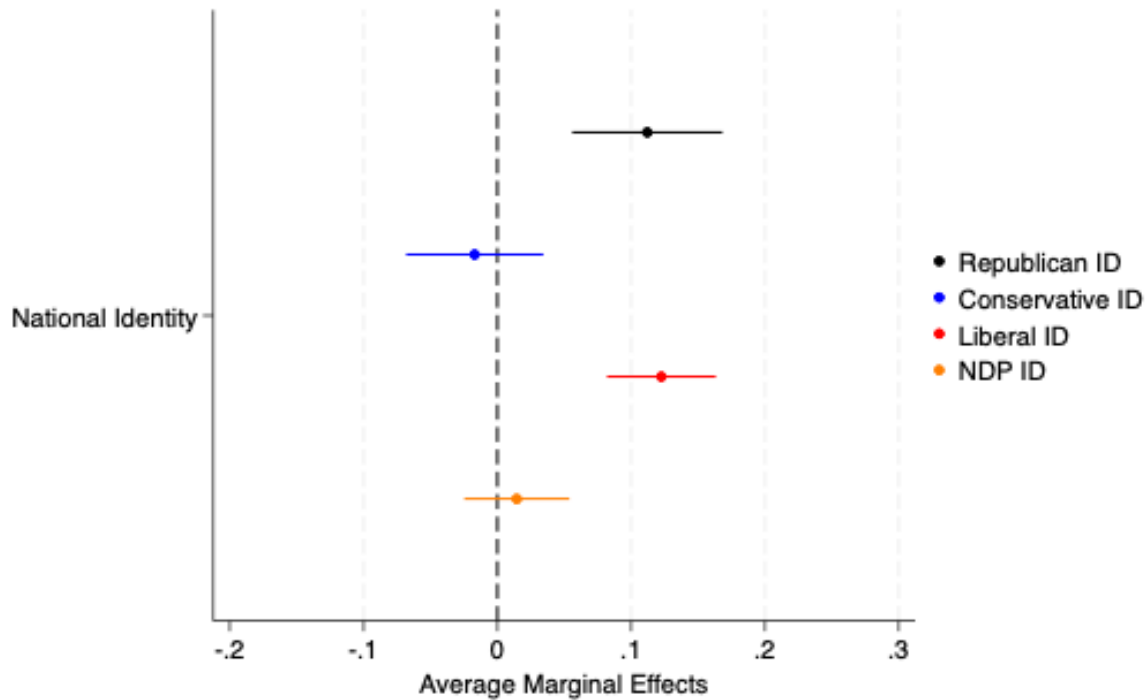
From May 2022 to September 2023, I conducted 64 semi-structured interviews that ranged in length from 1 to 3 hours with people on both sides of the Detroit River. These interviews were done over the phone, on Zoom, or in-person at various bars, cafes, and local union halls across the area. Interview subjects were recruited by leveraging initial connections, cold contacting individuals, and through a snowball sampling method with the goal of balancing perspectives across the communities (Ternullo 2024). To gain insights on the working-class background and dominant industry of Windsor and Macomb County, I intentionally sought to interview individuals who worked in the auto industry. The resulting purposive sample of interviewees includes local political leaders, union leaders, union members, political consultants/lobbyists, and other community members. The substantive focus of these interviews was explaining political behavior in Macomb County and Windsor, with a focus on national identity.

Contrasting Electoral Effects

To assess the comparative electoral effects of national identity, this section utilizes regression and mediation analysis, as well as evidence from this project's conjoint experiment. I first turn to regression analysis. The full models, with all controls included, are reported in the appendix (Section A3). Only the effect of national identity is shown for the sake of conciseness. Each regression model is estimated with robust standard errors to account for heteroskedastic errors. The key independent variable is national identity, measured on a five-point intensity scale and recoded between 0-1. Party identity, a key predictor of voting patterns, is the dependent variable. Figure 1 displays the average marginal effects of national identity derived from OLS models of party identity for the samples of white working-class Midwesterners and Ontarians.

Model 1 shows the effect of national identity on Republican ID among the American sample, models 2-4 show the effect of national identity on different major party affiliations among the Canadian sample.

Figure 1: National ID and Partisanship OLS Models

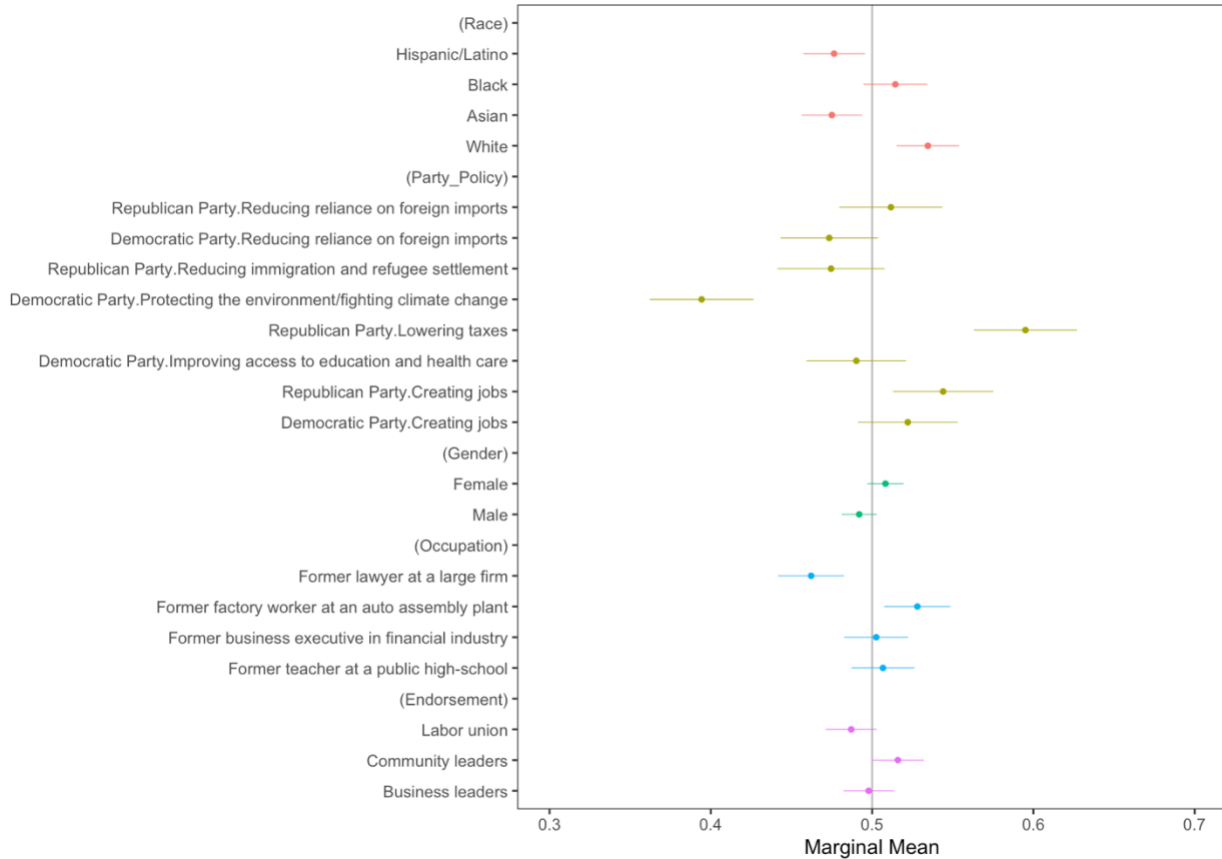


Average marginal effects of National Identity derived from four regression models (full controls included, reported in appendix Table A.4 and Table A.5); confidence intervals denoted with lines. Sample is non-rural, white respondents with less than a four-year college degree from either the American Midwest (model 1) or Ontario (models 2-4). Size of estimated effects for National Identity, with sample size in brackets: 1) Republican ID = .112 (N = 1,486), 2) Conservative Party ID = -.016 (N = 1,517); 3) Liberal Party ID = .123 (N = 1,517); 4) NDP ID = .014 (N = 1,517).

American national identity has a strong positive association with identifying as a Republican. Even while controlling for other major predictors, such as white identity and laissez-faire attitudes, a one-unit increase in national identity translates to respondents being over 11 percent more likely to identify as Republicans. Conversely, for white working-class voters from Ontario, identifying more strongly with the Canadian nation is instead associated with identifying with the center-left Liberal Party. A one-unit increase in national identity translates to white working-class Ontarians being over 12 percent more likely to identify with the Liberal Party and

is one of the strongest predictors of Liberal Party ID (see appendix section A3). Across the Midwest, white working-class voters who more strongly identify as American are more likely to identify as a Republican. By contrast, the picture in Ontario is much different.

Figure 2: MW WWC High National ID Subgroup



Marginal means of all candidate attributes. Outcome is a binary forced choice variable of which candidate you would vote for. Lines represent confidence intervals. Respondents (N = 1,550) completed four iterations of the experiment with two candidates (effective N = 12,402). Respondents split into sample above the mean of the National Identity measure (.682).

Experimental evidence further supports this finding. There was no randomized treatment in the conjoint experiment that varied or made salient a candidate’s position on national identity. However, we can compare how respondents with high levels of national identity assessed different candidate profiles, which demonstrates how white working-class voters with high national identity hold different political preferences depending on whether they are American or Canadian.

Following the approach advocated by Leeper, Hobolt, and Tilley (2020), Figure 2 displays the marginal means associated with each candidate attribute among white working-class Midwesterners with higher-than-average levels of national identity.⁸

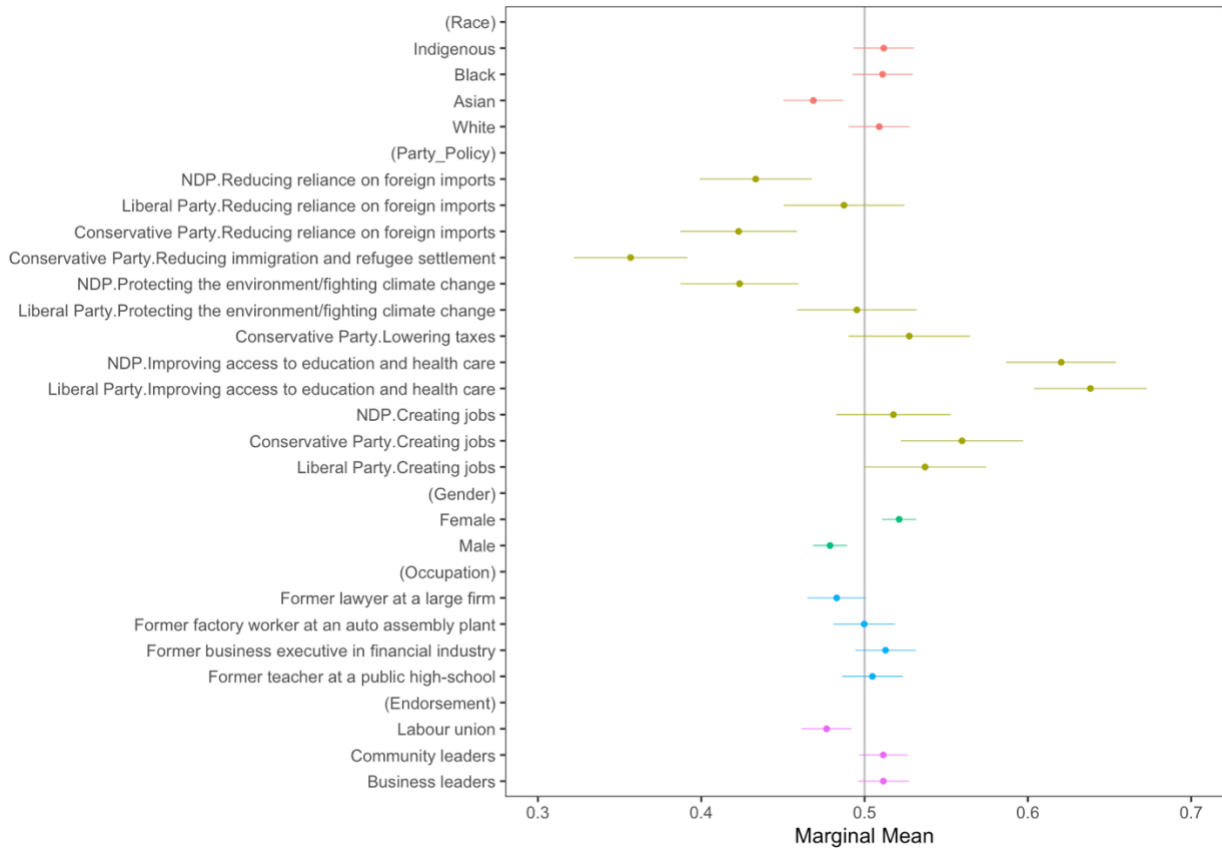
There are two notable results worth highlighting among white working-class Midwesterners with higher-than-average levels of national identity. First, this group is more likely to support Republican candidates and, specifically, Republican candidates who advocate for lowering taxes. Among all the possible party and policy treatments, the combination that generates the highest level of support among this sample are Republican candidates whose main policy priority is lower taxes, followed by Republican candidates whose main policy priority is creating jobs. These two combinations generated more electoral support than any of the policy treatments paired with candidates from the Democratic Party. Second, white working-class Midwesterners with higher levels of national identity are more inclined to support white candidates and penalize Asian and Hispanic/Latino candidates. White candidates outperform all other candidates by a considerable margin.

Figure 3 shows the corresponding results among white working-class Ontarians with higher-than-average levels of national identity. By contrast, this group is much more supportive of left-wing parties who are supportive of expansionary social policy. Of all the possible party and policy treatments, the combination generating the highest support is candidates from the Liberal Party who advocate for improving access to education and healthcare, followed closely by candidates from the NDP who advocate for the same policy. The combination generating the lowest support is a candidate from the Conservative Party on a platform of reducing immigration and

⁸ Section A1 in the Appendix conducts an additional marginal means comparison between high and low national identifiers among both country samples that demonstrates the same conclusions.

refugee settlement. Additionally, among the Canadian sample, white candidates perform roughly the same as Indigenous and Black candidates, while Asian candidates perform worse.

Figure 3: ON WWC High National ID Subgroup



Marginal means of all candidate attributes. Outcome is a binary forced choice variable of which candidate you would vote for. Lines represent confidence intervals. Respondents (N = 1,551) completed four iterations of the experiment with two candidates (effective N = 12,406). Respondents split into subsample above the mean of the National Identity measure (.737).

How does national identity affect vote choice? To answer this question, I turn to causal mediation analysis utilizing the estimator advocated by Imai et al. (2011).⁹ Figure 4 shows the results of a mediation model for voting for Trump in 2020, where the mediating variable is

⁹ Section A2 in the appendix displays the full results of the mediation analyses. The Imai et al. (2011) mediation estimator decomposes the total effects of a model into the indirect effect (that operates through the mediator, in this case right-wing party identity) and the direct effect (that operates through all other causal mechanisms). With continuous treatment variables (in this case, national identity), the analysis produces multiple estimates of the expected difference in the outcome (in this case, voting for a right-wing party) at different set values of the treatment.

Republican Party ID, and the treatment variable is national identity evaluated continuously at 0 (control), .25, .5, .75, and 1. This model accounts for how national identity, through partisanship (NIE), impacts the likelihood of voting Republican, as well as how it might affect Republican voting through other possible mechanisms (NDE).

Figure 4: Mediation Analysis Republican Vote, Partisanship and National ID, U.S. WWC

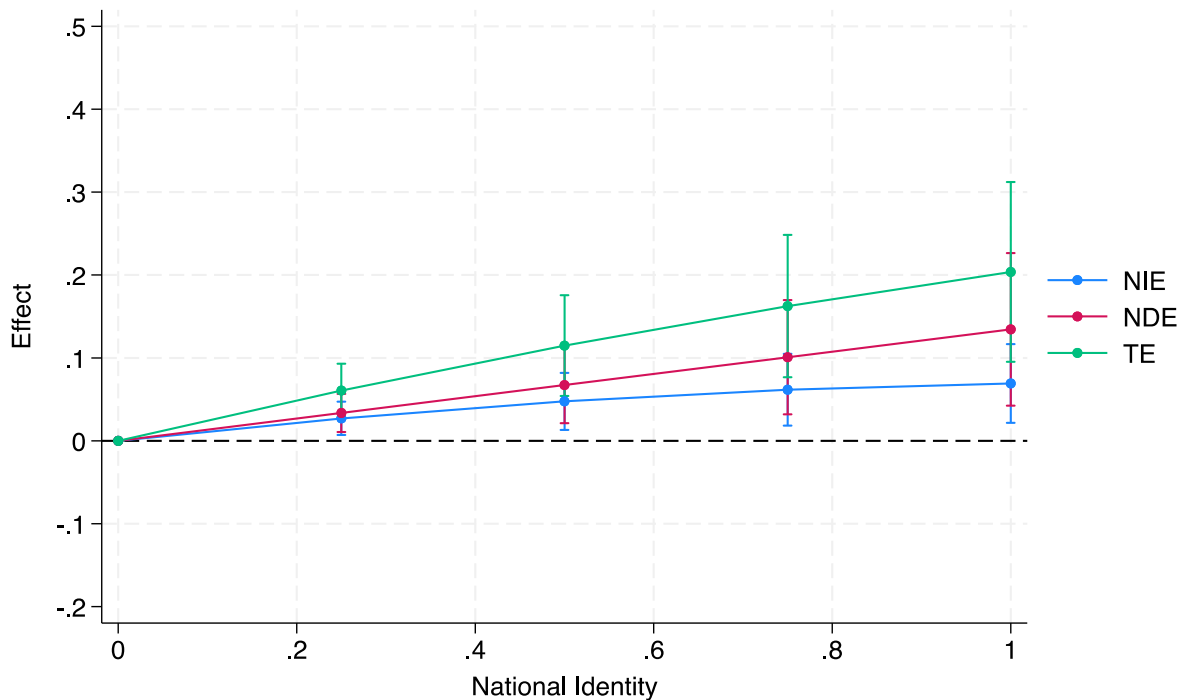


Figure shows the effects of a mediation analysis, confidence intervals denoted with lines. TE = Total Effect (effect values at estimation points: .061, .115, .162, .203); NDE = Natural Direct Effect (effect values at estimation points: .034, .067, .101, .134); NIE = Natural Indirect Effect (effect values at estimation points: .027, .047, .062, .069).

Figure 4 shows that there is a strong and statistically significant Total Effect of national identity on the likelihood of voting for Trump. Relative to respondents with very weak levels of national identity, those with moderate levels of national identity (.5) are over 11 percent (TE = .115) more likely to have voted for Trump, those with high levels of national identity (.75) are over 16 percent (TE = .162) more likely to have voted for Trump, and respondents with the highest levels of national identity (1) are over 20 percent (TE = .203) more likely to have voted for Trump.

Figure 4 shows how this effect is decomposed into the NIE and NDE, with a larger percentage of the total variance explained by other mechanisms (NDE) than through the mechanism of greater attachment to the Republican Party (NIE).

Figure 5: Mediation Analysis Conservative Vote, Partisanship and National ID, ON WWC

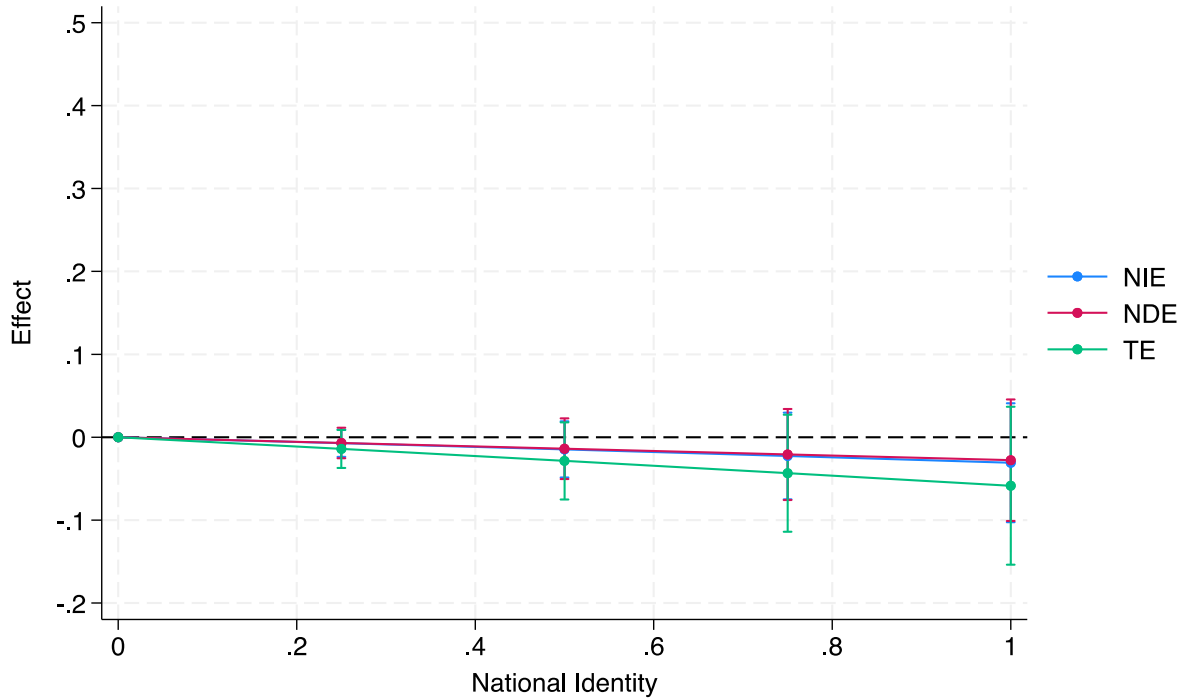


Figure shows the effects of a mediation analysis, confidence intervals denoted with lines. TE = Total Effect (effect values at estimation points: -.014, -.028, -.043, -.058); NDE = Natural Direct Effect (effect values at estimation points: -.007, -.014, -.021, -.028); NIE = Natural Indirect Effect (effect values at estimation points: -.007, -.015, -.023, -.031).

Figure 5 displays the corresponding mediation model for Conservative voting among the sample of white working-class Ontarians. The outcome variable is whether respondents voted for the Conservative Party in the 2021 Federal Election, the mediating variable is Conservative Party ID, and the treatment variable is national identity, similarly evaluated at 0 (control), .25, .5, .75, and 1. Unlike the American results, there is no positive relationship between national identity and Conservative voting among white working-class voters from Ontario. As national identity rises, respondents are slightly less inclined to report that they supported the Conservative Party.

Figure 6: Mediation Analysis Liberal Vote, Partisanship and National ID, ON WWC

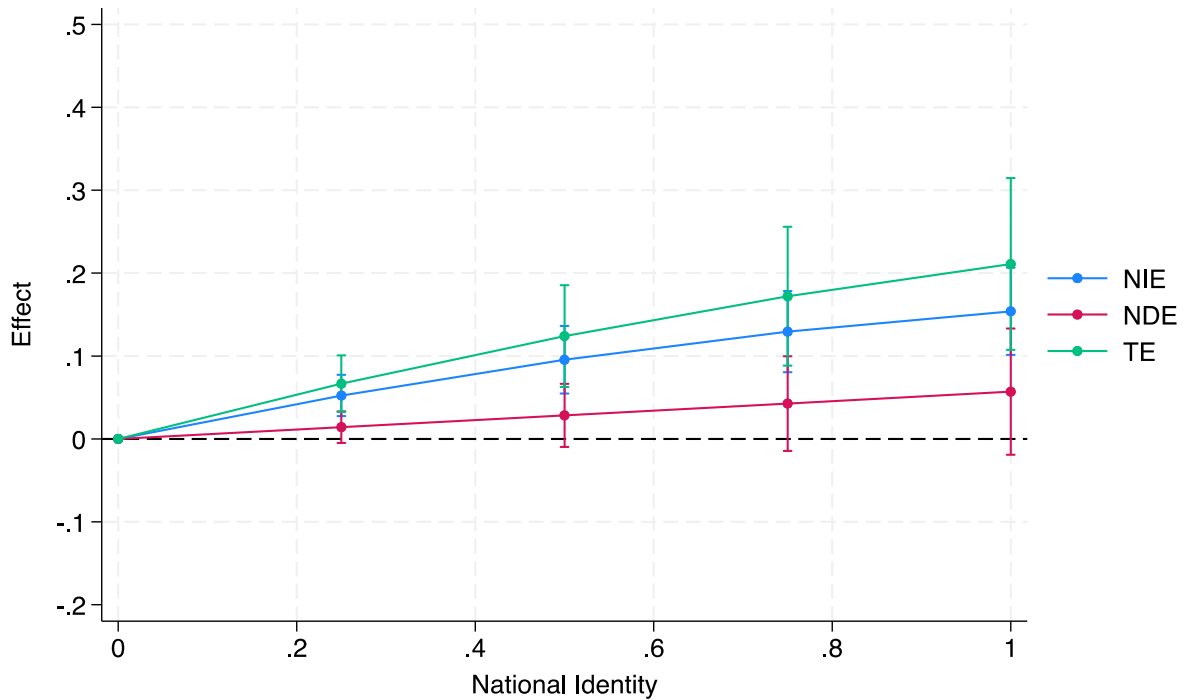


Figure shows the effects of a mediation analysis, confidence intervals denoted with lines. TE = Total Effect (effect values at estimation points: .066, .124, .172, .211); NDE = Natural Direct Effect (effect values at estimation points: .014, .028, .043, .057); NIE = Natural Indirect Effect (effect values at estimation points: .052, .095, .129, .154).

But national identity is strongly associated with the likelihood of voting for the Liberal Party. Figure 6 conducts a mediation analysis where the outcome variable is voting for the Liberal Party in 2021, the mediating variable is Liberal Party ID, and the treatment variable is national identity (evaluated at the same points as above). Relative to respondents with the lowest levels of national identity, respondents with moderate levels of national identity (.5) are 12 percent more likely to vote for the Liberal Party (TE = .124), respondents with high levels of national identity (.75) are over 17 percent more likely to vote for the Liberal Party (TE = .172), and respondents with the highest levels of national identity (1) are 21 percent more likely to vote for the Liberal Party (TE = .211).

The electoral effect of identifying with the nation has starkly different electoral consequences for white working-class voters on either side of the Canada-U.S. border. Across the American Midwest, white working-class voters who more strongly think of themselves as being American are much more likely to vote for Trump and identify with the Republican Party. Even when controlling for factors such as racial identity, trade attitudes, religion, and economic resentment, this association still holds. By contrast, the picture in Ontario is much different. White working-class voters who more strongly think of themselves as being Canadian are much more likely to support the center-left Liberal Party.

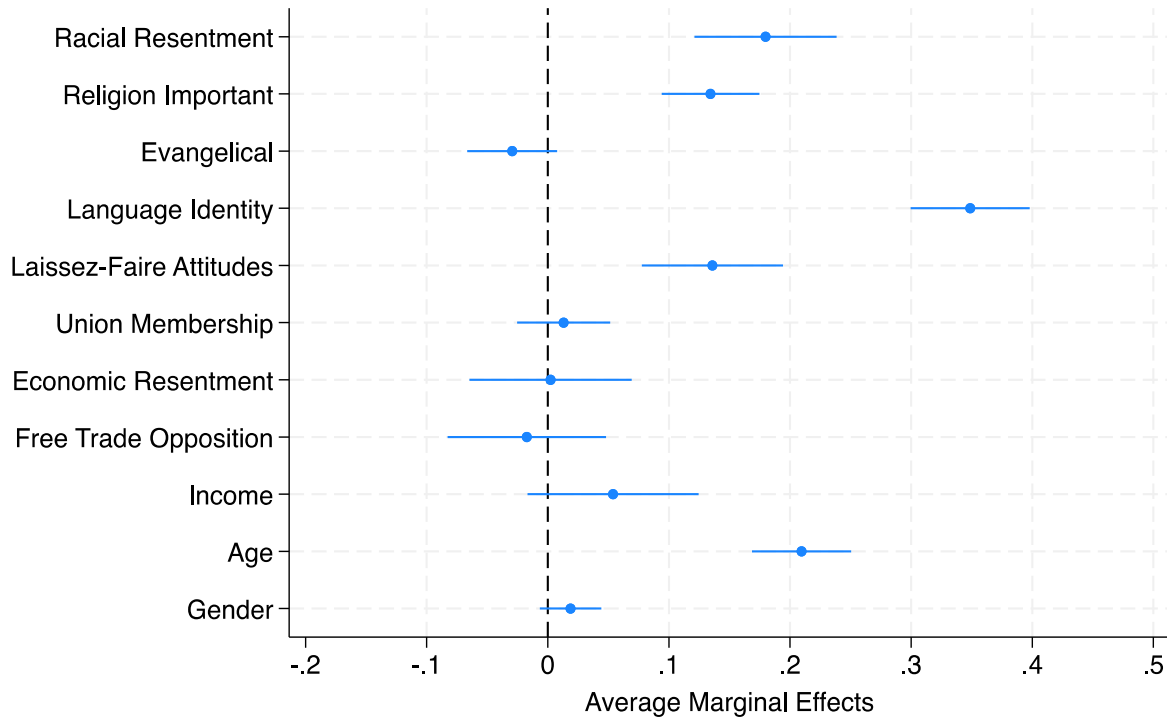
The Differing Basis of National Identity: Quantitative Evidence

Why might national identity have different electoral effects between white working-class voters in the Midwest and Ontario? This paper empirically investigates the extent to which conceptions of the nation differ, asking whether Canadians are truly more accommodating of those from different backgrounds while Americans are more exclusionary in terms of who belongs to the national community. This paper examines the predictors of attachment to the national community, and how national identity is related to different sets of attitudes and beliefs between the two cross-country samples of voters.

I first estimate an OLS regression model of national identity among the sample of white working-class voters from the American Midwest. I include a wide array of predictor variables to capture what motivates identification with the American nation, including racial resentment, laissez-faire attitudes (index measure), age, income, male gender (0-1 dummy), religious affiliation, religiosity, language identity (index measure), union household membership (0-1 dummy), economic resentment (index measure), and attitudes toward free trade (index measure).

Each variable was recoded between 0-1 for ease of analysis. Figure 7 displays the average marginal effects derived from this regression model.

Figure 7: Predictors of National Identity, Midwest WWC

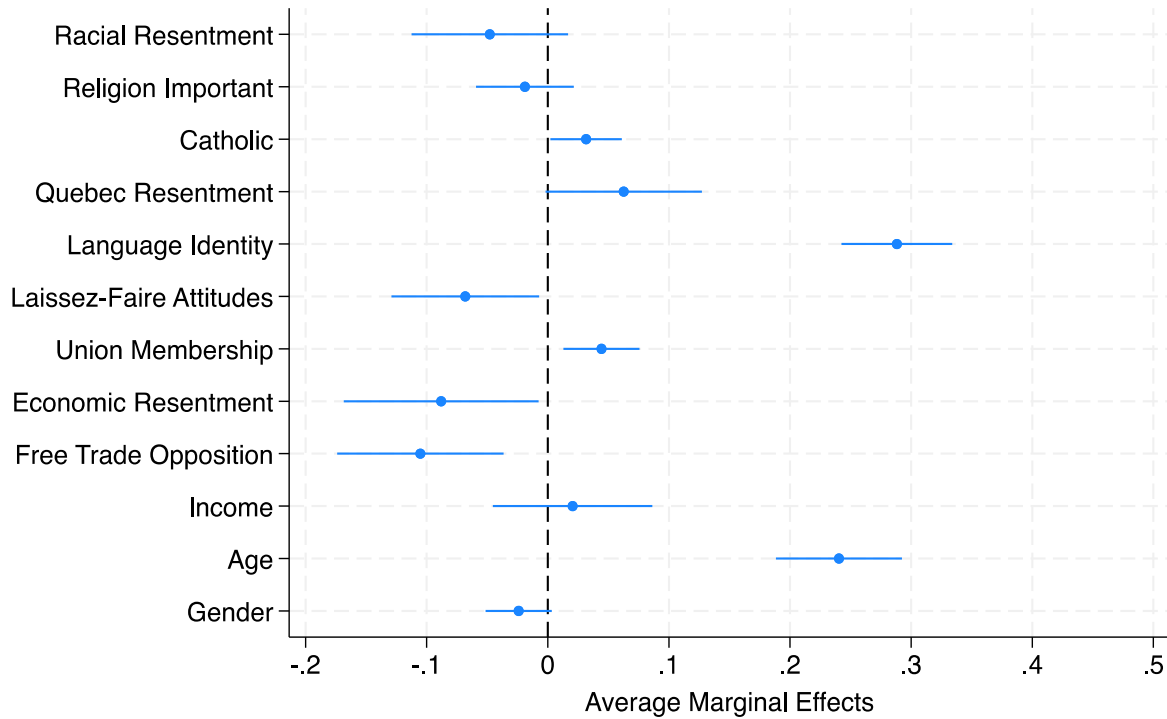


Average marginal effects derived from a regression model of national identity; confidence intervals denoted with lines. Sample is non-rural, white Americans from the Midwest with less than a four-year college degree (N = 1,535).

There are three notable takeaways from this analysis. Racial resentment is one of the strongest correlates of American national identity among white working-class voters from the Midwest. A one-unit increase on the racial resentment scale corresponds to respondents being 18 percent more likely to strongly identify with the American nation. Religious importance and laissez-faire attitudes are also strong and statistically significant predictors of American national identity. A one-unit increase on the scales of religious importance and laissez-faire attitudes translates to white working-class Midwesterners being roughly 15 percent more likely to identify

as American. Among white working-class Midwesterners, the more racially resentful, the more religious, and the more anti-government are more inclined to identify with the American nation.

Figure 8: Predictors of National Identity, Ontario WWC



Average marginal effects derived from a regression model of national identity; confidence intervals denoted with lines. Sample is non-rural, white Canadians from Ontario with less than a four-year college degree (N = 1,519). Size of estimated effect for racial resentment = -.047.

Figure 8 presents the average marginal effects derived from an OLS model of Canadian national identity among white working-class Ontarians. A similar array of variables is used in this model as the preceding American model, with an added variable for Quebec resentment and a dummy variable for Catholicism instead of the Evangelical variable used in the American models.¹⁰

¹⁰ Substituting a variable for Catholicism in place of Evangelicalism is done to better account for the relevant political dynamics in Canada. The divide between Catholics and Protestants in Canada has been shown to be a long-running element of electoral politics (Johnston 2017).

For Americans, racial resentment is a strong predictor of national identity (an effect of .18). Yet, Figure 8 shows that for white working-class voters from Ontario, racial resentment has no statistically significant effect on national identity. Second, religious importance has no discernable effect on Canadian national identity among white working-class Ontarians. Third, laissez-faire attitudes have a negative correlation with national identity among the Canadian sample. This stands in contrast to the American results where opposition to government was strongly associated with national identity. Among white working-class voters from Ontario, laissez-faire attitudes have the opposite effect. The variables that do have a positive effect on national identity among white working-class voters from Ontario are language identity and age. These findings underscore the divergent political effects of national identity across the border, suggesting why it tends to the right in the U.S. but to the left in Canada.

Conceptions of the Nation Across the Detroit River

In the qualitative interviews I conducted in Windsor and Macomb County, I asked respondents how important national identity was to them, how much they thought national identity mattered in their communities, and what they thought this looked like, or how they thought it was expressed. This section explores the conceptions of national identity in Windsor and Macomb County, finding that multiculturalism is more closely tied to national identity in Windsor, but much less so in Macomb County. Interviews with Americans across Metro Detroit suggested that the Republicans are the ‘flag-waving’ party, have capitalized on pride in the American military, and that conceptions of the nation have come to be more closely tied with religiosity, individualism, and the leadership of Donald Trump. In Windsor, the interviews illustrate how Canadian national identity is defined more in relation to not being American, and tied to a more multicultural view of national belonging.

From most parts of Windsor, Ontario, you can drive to downtown Detroit in as little as fifteen minutes. People in Windsor watch American television, listen to Detroit radio, and cheer for the same sports teams as their American neighbors. The city of Windsor is one of the most Americanized places in Canada. Yet, most people in Windsor nevertheless exude a strong attachment to the Canadian nation and are proud to be Canadian. In some ways, the proximity to the United States reminds people of who they are and who they are not. Consistent with the findings of Cameron and Berry (2008), many of the people in Windsor that I spoke with framed their national identity in terms of not being Americans.¹¹ The most common out-group delineated by Windsorites that I spoke to were Americans, and not other Canadians who do not meet certain ethnocentric standards of national group membership.

Derek Gungle is a member of Unifor Local 444 and an employee at the Stellantis Assembly Plant in Windsor, which produces the Chrysler Pacifica. Mr. Gungle has been a lifelong resident of Windsor. He has worked at Stellantis for the past ten years and considers himself a proud Canadian. To Gungle, national identity in Windsor is in part an opposition to being thought of as American and that, even if national pride is not as evident on the surface as it is in the United States, you can find a Canadian flag many places in Windsor.

“Yes, almost everyone has a Canadian flag somewhere. Whether that’s on a piece of clothing or hanging up on the front yard or in a room somewhere. There’s a lot of national pride here. Maybe it’s not worn on our sleeves as much as the Americans. But you know it when you see it. Hell, you just got to go to Europe once and be called an American and quickly make the distinction that you’re not American, you’re Canadian.”

- Derek Gungle. Member, Unifor Local 444. Windsor, ON.

¹¹ Given that 90% of Canadians live within 100 miles of the U.S. border (Jacobs 2023), this finding is applicable beyond Windsor.

Dan Bolton is an organizer for LiUNA Local 625 in Windsor, the local union representing construction workers across Windsor-Essex County. Growing up in Windsor, he said that you are constantly in the shadow of the United States: “America is in your face more than it would be anywhere else. Here you go downtown and you’re looking at Detroit across that border.” Bolton argued that Canadian identity in Windsor is even stronger because of this proximity and that you only have to watch a hockey game between Canada and the U.S. to notice its significance.

“When I travel to northern Ontario it is a different feel. We did grow up on Detroit TV, we grew up on American politics, but there’s still that line that runs right down the middle of the Detroit River...that we know we’re our country, they know that they’re their country. I used to have this feeling crossing back into Canada on the Ambassador Bridge, it was just like ‘phew, I’m relaxed, I’m home’. I don’t know how to describe it, but it happened every time. I think Windsor is still very proud to be Canadian. I remember putting on US-Canada Olympic hockey games at the bar and it would be a rowdy night, that’s for sure.”

- Dan Bolton. Organizer LiUNA Local 625. Windsor, ON.

Several interviewees in Windsor directly tied Canadian identity to support for multiculturalism. Joe Comartin, the former Consul General of Canada in Detroit, spoke emphatically about how one of the key differences in terms of national pride in Canada relative to the United States is the importance of multiculturalism.

“One of the differences is one of pride on the Canadian side in the importance of multiculturalism. Not only are we tolerant of new Canadians coming in, but we celebrate that. Not as well as I have always wanted us to, but we do. I don’t have any sense of an equivalent level of pride in that on the US-side. The fact that that it is a legal policy in Canada, and it is one that we practice, if not perfectly but fairly extensively. We don’t have a similar sense of pride on the US side, because frankly it’s not as true on the US-side as on the Canadian-side.”

- Joe Comartin. Former NDP MP for Windsor – Tecumseh (2000 – 2015). Consul General of Canada in Detroit (2018 – 2022).

In June 2023, I interviewed Brian Masse over Zoom. Masse was born and raised in Windsor and was the NDP MP for Windsor West from 2002 to 2025. I asked Masse about national identity

in Windsor and how it is expressed across the community. In addition to highlighting how Windsorites are proud to be different from Americans, Masse noted that it is multiculturalism that people in Windsor identify with the most.

“I think here we see ourselves as multicultural, that aspect of being Canadian. It’s okay to love the home you came from or your heritage of where you came from. But you’re glad you’re here and glad you’re Canadian. We live in the shadow of the United States. We’re very proud of being good friends, neighbors, but we’re also really proud of being different, having a different culture and society and a way of viewing the world. Most people here are confident and self-assured in ourselves. Here [in Windsor], we’re Canada’s oldest European settlement west of Montreal. We have all kinds of different ethnic backgrounds and organizations, we’re extremely proud of that and we celebrate that. It’s really strong here. It doesn’t matter if you’re of Lebanese background, Iraqi background, or United Kingdom background. I don’t feel like we tier places of origin at any point in time.”

- Brian Masse. Former NDP MP for Windsor West.

This stands in contrast to how national identity is conceived in Macomb County. None of the interviewees I spoke with about American identity highlighted its connection with support for multiculturalism. Most American interviewees stated that national identity and pride in being American was significant in Macomb County. Yet, unlike in Windsor, people told me that this identity is commonly associated with right-wing values, religion, the military, and ethnocentrism.

For instance, Jim Pedersen, a retired UAW leader, told me that: “There’s a lot of pride in being an American, but we have to be on guard for that turning into jingoism.” Pedersen believes that Trump effectively gained support based on his messages pertaining to American pride, but that the nature of these appeals was far from admirable. Pedersen directly tied Trump’s appeals to national pride with appeals based on race or the threat of foreign immigration.

“Trump tapped into American pride malevolently. He crossed the line into the unhealthy nationalism, the jingoism. Not that sense that we’re good people. But that ‘they aren’t’. Detroit is on the border with a foreign country. You say it that way and they go ‘what Canada? I used to go over there and drink beer and go see the Windsor ballerinas.’ But we don’t think of Canada as a foreign country. When we talk about foreigners on the border

it's never about Canada, and it's like don't you understand how racist that sounds? Trump did that. He tapped into nationalism and jingoism that is the bad side of Americanism and patriotism. The sense that we're great people and that there's something wrong with those other people. That there's no sense of comparing those Guatemalans huddling at the border with the Irish that came to this country."

- Jim Pedersen. Retired UAW leader in Michigan.

UAW Local 2280 represents the workers at the Ford plant in Sterling Heights, Michigan, which produces rotors for the electric motors in the Ford Lightning and the Ford Maverick. I spoke to Nicole Didia in the summer of 2023, the Vice President of the local. Didia identifies as a Democrat but told me that some people in her plant support the Republican Party and Donald Trump. I asked her about some of the reasons for Trump's electoral support among the membership. Didia stated confidently that Trump tapped into a sense of American pride, the American military tradition, and that this helped him gain support in Macomb County.

"100 percent Trump tapped into American pride. We have a huge veteran population. Overall, this county has a lot of Vietnam vets, a lot of Desert Storm vets. So that patriotism there, military support, he definitely tapped into that. Don't really know how he did, other than wearing the hat that says: 'Make American Great'. I don't see personally what he did for the nation. But that was huge."

- Nicole Didia. Vice President, UAW Local 2280. Macomb County, MI.

The Trump supporters I talked to in Macomb County held a different position about what it means to be American. This was best exemplified by Brian Pannebecker, a retired autoworker and UAW member who now leads the group Autoworkers for Trump. Pannebecker's conception of the nation had two main elements: Christianity and individualism.

"Barack Obama ran for president twice, and he won Macomb County twice. He apologized for America. He said that we are not a Christian nation. But guess what, we are a Christian nation. We're not a Muslim nation. He made the claim that Muslims helped build this country. That's 180 degrees wrong. This is a Christian nation. All you need to do is go to Washington, D.C. and look at the monuments that they haven't torn down and see the religious verses and biblical themes that run through everything. When Trump came along in 16', on the tails of Barack Obama, he said I'm going to return this country to America

first, putting America first, believing that we are an exceptional country, a great country, founded on great ideas by great men. He wanted to return us to that patriotism, that love of country, the love of liberty and freedom.”

- Brian Pannebecker. Retired UAW member, head of Autoworkers for Trump. Macomb County, MI.

Another Republican leader in Michigan that I spoke with was Eric Castiglia, a former chair of the Macomb County Republican Party. Castiglia stated that he thought Trump’s appeal to American pride helped him win because it gave Americans something that they wanted and that “it made people feel good.”

“I believe national pride was a big factor. People were so beat up over the years. People were getting tired of America. Then Trump came in and said let’s be proud to be Americans. Let’s stop all of this foreign aid, make China pay their fair share, America first, let’s have America lead, let’s make America great again. I think the whole country wanted this again. The nationalism really did make American feel great, it made people feel good.”

- Eric Castiglia. Republican Party official. Head of Brighter Michigan Super PAC. Macomb County, MI.

Public conceptions of the nation are markedly different in Macomb County than in Windsor. The interviewees I spoke to in Metro Detroit highlighted how the Republicans have become the party of patriotism, national identity, and capitalized on this support despite the fact that most Democrats believed that this was not what America should represent. Those on the left argued that patriotism and national identity in America have become too closely aligned with jingoism and ethnocentrism. Those who endorsed Trump’s version of national identity argued that it represented a return to the true Christian values of the country. Unlike in Windsor, not once was I told by interviewees that national pride in Macomb County meant to be welcoming of others.

Conclusion

From the success of Trump to far-right parties across Europe, most research has analyzed how national identity has been electorally captured to the benefit of the political right. But can

national identity ever instead be a force that electorally benefits non-right-wing parties? Under what conditions can more centrist or center-left parties be the main electoral beneficiary of national identity? This paper examines these questions within an underutilized comparison of Canada and the United States, as well as a specific analysis of white working-class voters. It leverages multiple methods and complementary pieces of empirical evidence. This includes original survey data, which contains a large sample of non-rural, white working-class voters from both Ontario and the Midwest U.S., a novel candidate-choice conjoint experiment, and qualitative fieldwork in Windsor and Macomb County.

This paper finds that there are starkly different political effects of national identity between white working-class Americans and Canadians. For white working-class Americans in the Midwest, national identity has a strong positive effect on identifying with and voting for the Republican Party. However, for white working-class Ontarians, national identity is instead correlated with Liberal Party identity and electoral support. Those who say that being Canadian is more important to their sense of identity are much more inclined to identify with, and vote for, the center-left Liberal Party.

These findings are supported by experimental evidence. Subgroup analysis of the conjoint experiment reveals how white working-class voters from the Midwest with high national identity are more supportive of Republican candidates that advocate for lower taxes, and they are more likely to penalize the vote share of non-white candidates. By contrast, white working-class voters from Ontario with high national identity are more inclined to support left-wing party candidates that support greater access to education and healthcare, and they are less likely to penalize non-white candidates. In the Midwest, national identity is associated with racially conservative values

and the Republican Party. In Ontario, national identity is associated with left-wing parties and support for expansionary social policies.

Past scholarship has identified reasons to expect that conceptions of the nation differ greatly between Canada and the United States. As a multi-national country with an evolving relationship with national identity, Canada has had to balance its traditional ties to the British monarchy, recognize the unique linguistic and cultural status of Quebec and its residents, and integrate increasingly diverse immigrants to the country (Dufresne et al. 2019). From the mid-20th century onwards, Canadian nationalism could be described as one that has sought an accommodation of differences through its embrace of the ideal of multiculturalism. On the other side of the border, scholarship on American nation identity has highlighted the ethnocultural attributes of membership, namely the pervasive ‘Americans = White’ belief that has endured across time (Devos & Banaji 2005).

In investigating the reasons why national identity has starkly differing political effects among white working-class Canadians and Americans, this paper empirically examines whether these differences in conceptions of the nation have held up in the contemporary period. Through both quantitative and qualitative evidence, this paper confirms that the correlates of national identity, ideals of the nation, and definitions of membership in the national community differ greatly between Americans and Canadians. Survey data shows how American national identity is more closely tied with racial resentment, religiosity, and support for laissez-faire attitudes. But Canadian national identity has no association with these attitudinal constructs.

Qualitative evidence from paired case studies in Windsor, Ontario and Macomb County, Michigan illustrate how the dominant public conception of the nation is different at the community-level. In Windsor, despite the proximity to the United States, Canadian national pride

is widely endorsed and is expressed more subtly than American pride. People in Windsor often think of themselves in terms of what they are not: Americans. Accordingly, the most prominent out-group for Windsorites who feel an attachment to the Canadian nation are Americans, not others who differ from them on ethnocultural dimensions. Many believed that national identity in Windsor is based in part on being accepting of others. Conversely, national identity in Metro Detroit is more closely aligned with religion, individualism, the military, and right-wing politics. The fear among some American interviewees is that pride in being American has become something closer to jingoism and is based in part on ethnocultural restrictions. For others, Trump's version of American identity is exactly what they want, one that endorses Christianity, dispels notions of Muslim influence, and champions the principle of individual freedom. Not once did I hear from American interviewees that national pride was based on multiculturalism or the inclusion of people from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

The conclusions of this paper show how and why national identity is not always a force that is captured by the political right. The Republicans own national identity among white working-class voters across the American Midwest. But among white working-class voters to the north, national identity is instead owned by the center-left Liberal Party. These contrasting cases demonstrate how national identity can have strong effects on electoral behavior among similar and geographically contiguous groups of people, but that it is not a given that these benefits accrue only to right-wing parties. Future research should examine the extent to which these contrasts travel to additional cases across the globe, and whether differing foundational conceptions of the national community might lead to divergent connections between national identity and political parties from different ideological schools.

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