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“EVERYDAY NATIONALISM”: THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF  
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DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

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## Abstract

In the last century, a large body of scholarship has emerged on the subject of American national identity. I contend that another way of understanding what it means to be American might be found using the “everyday nationalism” approach, which examines quotidian, social practices in day-to-day life that produce and reproduce the nation. This paper specifically examines the ways in which the “everyday nationalism” approach allows researchers to understand how American national identity might be discursively constructed. This research also aims to correct for the possibility that researchers might accidentally “nationalize” participants through survey designs that impute a sense of national identity on to their research subjects. Findings from semi-structured interviews and participant observation experiences with residents of the Oklahoma City, Oklahoma metropolitan area suggest individuals possess conceptions of being American commonly found in existing literature, but these themes emerge in nuanced ways. Findings suggest that ordinary Americans have a difficult time defining what it means to be American but still possess a strong attachment to the identity. There also appears to be a strong relationship between how one discursively constructs being American and how one confronts issues about refugees, immigration, and foreign policy. Evidence also indicates that ordinary

individuals and elites use a multi-identity approach that activates salient identities in an instrumental way to legitimate discourse.

The research agenda pursued here aims to provide another look at what it means to be American by combining a comparative politics approach to a subject that has been discussed at length in the field of American politics. Findings from this study continue to lend support for the use of the “everyday nationalism” approach by researchers studying national identity and for comparative scholars interested in studying the ways in which different identities can be fluidly activated and switched between. Additionally, these findings confirm arguments in the American literature (Schildkraut 2007; Schildkraut 2011; Smith 1997; Theiss-Morse 2009) about what constitutive norms are present among those possessing American national identity, but they do suggest that these norms should not be seen as bounded categories, as they are both varied in meaning and importance among individuals.

## Chapter 1: the American identity literature

### American identity: a creed or ethos?

Early conceptions of American identity generally suggest that American identity is relatively unique compared to other national identities in the sense that it is largely based on ideas (Tocqueville 1835 (2004); Myrdal 1944; Hartz 1955; Huntington 1983). Gunnar Myrdal termed this ideational basis for identity the “American Creed” and argued it was the fundamental “cement in the structure of this great and disparate nation” (1944, 3). He argued that this creed was a common set of values that were generally defined as being rooted in equality and liberty. This Creedal conception became the dominant mode of thinking about American identity for at least the next forty years.

In *An American Dilemma* (1944), Myrdal examines the relationship between African- Americans and the rest of American society in the early 1940s. While primarily concerned with the status of African-Americans in all aspects of society, Myrdal opens the book by attempting to explain what it means to be American. He argues that the “American Creed” and its ideals are what bind together the heterogeneous American society. The Creed is loosely defined as recognizing “the essential dignity of the individual human being, of the fundamental equality of all men, and of certain inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and a fair opportunity” (Myrdal 1944, 4). Myrdal is careful to note, however, that the Creed is not always lived up to and is merely a standard all Americans ought to strive for. Myrdal alleges evidence for the

Creed can be found among African-Americans, who attach great significance to Creedal ideals while simultaneously suffering from the Creed's failures.

Furthermore, Myrdal suggests the Creed is fluid and thus the 20<sup>th</sup> century presents an opportunity for the Creed to expand into the social and economic spheres to a greater degree (1944). Myrdal takes the Creed and its values as a given attribute that all Americans possess but may not always live up to. This work is highly theoretical in nature and much of the evidence used in providing evidence of the Creed's existence comes from quotes from African-Americans and historians.

Expanding upon Myrdal's ideas, Samuel Huntington argues American national identity should not be viewed as "national character" but as national political values and beliefs (1983, 13). Huntington's basic argument is that the "American Creed" has existed in the United States since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, its ideals have broad support among the citizenry and it is central in defining American national identity. The Creed, according to Huntington, embraces liberty, equality, individualism, democracy and the rule of law as the basic political ideals of Americans. The Creed is argued to have originated in middle age ideas about law, Protestantism, Lockean ideas and other Enlightenment writings. From these various sources, Huntington argues the Creed has been imposed upon the American people through its articulation in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Furthermore, he suggests the Creed



should not be thought of as a coherent ideology but rather as a diffuse system of ideas that are more or less salient among all Americans (1983).

While Myrdal takes the Creed as a given identity amongst Americans, Huntington is slightly more rigorous in approach. His argument is first put in historical context by arguing that the American Creed is embodied in the institutional foundations of the country, but he then shows how various political minds throughout history have articulated this set of values. Huntington improves upon Myrdal's work in that he also provides public opinion data that show these values enjoy overwhelming support by Americans when they are broadly referenced (1983). As further evidence of American identity's reliance on such Creedal values, Huntington argues the lack of ethnic, class or regional identity is due to the inability of these cleavages to take root in American society. Thus Huntington's argument consists mostly of theory grounded in historical narrative and public opinion research.

With a much greater emphasis on public opinion, McClosky and Zaller articulate a similar argument about how to define American national identity (1984). They reduce their conception of American identity to what they believe to be its two prominent aspects: capitalism and democracy. The authors argue this "American Ethos" and the tension between these two values is what has truly influenced American development. These values are broken down further with democracy being associated with inherent equality, rule by consent, political liberties, rule of law, and equal opportunity. The authors associate

capitalism with the notion of private ownership, pursuit of profit, and individualism. All in all, these ideas are quite similar to the Creed but with slightly more emphasis attached to capitalism and the free market. McClosky and Zaller are also more concerned with showing how these values shape American political “culture” and do not refer to them as “identity”. They define political culture as “a set of widely shared beliefs, values, and norms concerning the relationship of citizens to their government and to one another in matters affecting public affairs” (17).<sup>1</sup>

Methodologically, McClosky and Zaller (1984) use a variety of survey measures conducted from 1958 through 1979 that sample both the opinions of the mass public and political elites. The two primary surveys used are the Opinions and Values of Americans (OVS) surveys conducted between 1975 and 1977 as well as the Civil Liberties Study conducted between 1978 and 1979. The format of these survey items uses a method in which the possible answers to a statement are mutually exclusive in order to force respondents to deliberately think through their opinion about the issue at hand. McClosky and

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<sup>1</sup> While the authors clearly define these values as pertaining to “culture,” I suggest that “culture” can be collapsed beneath the umbrella of “identity” in the sense that beliefs, attitudes, and values deeply affect the frame of vision through which Americans view the world. Culture also might be placed within the subcategory of content in social identity theory. In an everyday nationalism approach, culture might be viewed as the contested attitudes, beliefs, and values that affect national identity, or the frame of vision responsible for both how Americans see themselves, view others, and form opinion on issues. For more on American culture, see Elazar (1980), Lieske (2010), Morone (1996).

Zaller find that their disaggregated measures of democracy and capitalism prove to be prominent features of the American public and American elites.

The American Creed and the American Ethos are highly theoretical works with a similar conception of what it means to possess an American identity. Identity in this sense is constituted by shared political values and beliefs in liberty, equality, democracy and capitalism. Methods used in these studies tend to focus on historical narrative, elite opinion, and some public opinion in which general political attitudes are presented as evidence of this identity. While it is tempting to argue American identity is founded solely upon certain ideas and values, other scholars have pointed out the many flaws in this rose-colored view.

### Critiques of the Creed

Pointed criticisms of the Creedal argument come from scholars like Smith (1988; 1997) and Schildkraut (2002) who make strong cases for what is termed the “multiple traditions” approach to the content of American identity; this approach suggests the Creedal approach does not adequately account for ascriptive factors (e.g. ethnic, religious, racial characteristics) or civic-republican values that have been important historically in defining American national identity.

Smith, writing in reaction to Huntington (1983), argues that American politics has never been a fully liberal political system and that Creedal identity

has never been the only gauge for measuring American identity (1988). Smith argues Supreme Court cases from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century show how in many ways citizenship laws were restricted on basis of race and other ethnocentric concerns (1988). Instead of basing American identity on liberal values, Smith argues for a multiple traditions perspective in which liberalism, republicanism and ethnoculturalism are all recognized as constituting American identity (1988). In this way, Smith suggests that identity is created by recognizing the equality of multiple traditions without trying to “fit [them] into a standard Americanized mold” (1988, 246). This approach emphasizes the role played by citizenship laws in defining how American identity is constituted. For Smith, the idea that American identity is Creedal would ring true only if prospective citizens merely had to pledge allegiance to the values Americans have agreed upon (1988).

Smith’s *Civic Ideals* elaborates on his earlier work and argues that throughout U.S. history, “lawmakers pervasively and unapologetically structured U.S. citizenship in terms of illiberal and undemocratic racial, ethnic, and gender hierarchies, for reasons rooted in basic, enduring imperatives of political life” (1997, 1). *Civic Ideals* is similar to Smith’s earlier focus on Supreme Court cases, but he expands his evidence to include citizenship laws and cultural heterogeneity present throughout American history (1997). Smith again suggests that a far more accurate view of American identity in historical context is one in which it is recognized that American political elites have often

crafted “civic ideologies” or identities that blend liberalism, republicanism and “inegalitarian ascriptive” elements in order to appeal to the public (1997, 6).

While Smith’s criticism of Huntington does suggest that the Creedal view may be somewhat idealistic—a charge Huntington would certainly dispute, his criticisms misrepresent Huntington to some degree in that Huntington never argued the Creed was primarily about liberalism. However, Smith does importantly contribute to the literature in noting how American identity has a long history in which ethnocultural or ascriptive traits have played a role in determining what it meant to be American.

Schildkraut also takes issue with the Creedal approach and its neglect of ethnocultural and civic-republican norms. In an article addressing the prevalence of ethnocultural identity after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, she finds some Americans among the mass public have tendencies to be ethnocultural or ascriptivist but to a much lesser degree than the years following the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor (Schildkraut 2002). Schildkraut also finds evidence that incorporationism, or the idea that American identity is based on a common ancestry in immigration, to have increased in elite rhetoric and media coverage following the attacks. These findings suggest that while ethnocultural notions of identity seem to rise in public opinion slightly during modern crises, incorporationist rhetoric among elites and the media seems to drown out all ethnocultural division. For Schildkraut national identity can be thought of as an abstract symbolic attachment that is a strong predictor

of policy preferences and consists of ethnocultural, incorporationist, liberal, and civic-republican norms (2002). Other approaches to American identity have examined implicit attitudes and how civic or ethnic attributes operate.

#### Political psychology, implicit attitudes, and other approaches

Social psychologists tend to focus on the different identities that people prefer to associate themselves with, especially the competing ethnic and national attachments to groups. This area of research tends to be more experimental in nature and less reliant on traditional survey measures that political psychologists have made frequent use of.

Devos and Banaji (2005) approach the question of American identity in an attempt to understand how peoples' conceptions of ethnic identity compare to national identity. They particularly focus on differences in conscious and unconscious recognition of what it means to be an American (2005). They argue the importance of understanding automatic or unconscious associations is their ability to "bring to the fore the subtle but crucial ways in which sociocultural realities shape social cognition" (448).

These authors conducted six experimental studies in which they tested explicit versus implicit conceptions of how different ethnic groups were perceived under the label of "American" (2005). The studies used questionnaires to test explicit associations and implicit association tests (IAT) in order to detect unconscious associations. After conducting the studies, the authors concluded

that “to be American is to be White” (2005, 463). They found implicit associations reveal a robust connection between being white and being American, and these hold true across ethnic groups. They suggest these results stem from differences in power, “length of immersion” and other social factors (2005, 463-464). This research provides additional support to arguments that suggest American identity is somewhat defined by ethnocultural attributes.

Rodriguez et al. decided to study ethnic and national identity after concluding that the relationship seems to be more complex than has been so far theorized in modern research (2010). The authors suggest increased attention needs to be paid not only to how different ethnicities identify American national identity but also the positive or negative affect these associations evoke. Rodriguez et al. conducted the study by using an open-ended questionnaire to address American identity and a Multi-Group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) in order to assess ethnic identity; their findings suggest there is little difference among ethnic groups as to how they identify what American national identity means to them, but there are significant differences in how ethnic identity relates to how American individuals feel (2010). The authors also found evidence that values related to the American Creed, such as patriotism, freedom, democracy and individualism were frequently mentioned in the open-ended responses as symbols representative of the typical American but were not associated with why people felt American.

These authors additionally find that ethnocultural attributes, such as European heritage, speaking English and being born in the United States are related to how American identity is viewed (Rodriguez et al. 2010).

Another approach to studying American identity focuses on the concept of “civic” versus “ethnic” nations. Song argues that the distinction between whether or not being American is civic or ethnic is hard to determine (2009). She acknowledges that most civically-based nations are built around characteristics that were originally the basis of the predominant ethnic identity, but she argues that while language requirements within naturalization processes are said to be an example of attempts at preserving national culture, they can also be considered antithetical to a purely values-based national identity. Song ultimately concludes that an inclusive American identity should embrace the idea of “deep diversity”, which suggests that Americans are a diverse people and there is no single way to be a member of the political community (2009). The most prominent approach to studying American identity in recent years has focused on social identity theory.

### Social Identity theory

Recent studies of American identity have been eager to embrace the Abdelal et al. (2006) framework and social identity theory (Tajfel 1982; Spears 2011). Schildkraut suggests that a move to the social identity theory framework is not only necessary in order to build a broad research



conversation but would also help in creating a common vocabulary of concepts and measures (2014). This framework treats national identity as being quite similar to other group identities in its function and two dimensions: content and contestation. Content refers to the meaning of a collective identity and contestation refers to the level of agreement within the collective group over the content of the shared identity. Schildkraut argues that this framework is conveniently structured in a way that encompasses the majority of the literature already written on American identity and could make future research more coherent if researchers specified where their research falls within the framework (2014).

Schildkraut's research uses social identity theory by focusing on one aspect of American identity content, the constitutive norms. This approach has continued to lend support for the "multiple traditions" conception of American identity, even when oversampling minority ethnicities (2007; 2011). Schildkraut argues that constitutive norms provide the boundaries of what can be considered American identity and thus provide insight into the content of American identity (2007). In other words, focusing on the norms that make up identity allow for the meaning of the collective identity to be understood. Her findings indicate these norms include liberalism, civic republicanism, ethnoculturalism and incorporationism (2007). Using social identity theory as the foundation for understanding American identity, Schildkraut created the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Americanism Survey (21-CAS). This survey enabled Schildkraut

to overcome limitations of previous research and provided evidence that supports the multiple traditions theory. Additionally, the survey oversampled minority groups and found similar results in which a range of constitutive norms makeup conceptions about American identity.

Schildkraut's *Americanism in the Twenty-First Century* (2011) expands on her 2007 article but also relies heavily upon the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Americanism Survey. As for constitutive norms, Schildkraut again finds there is widespread support for all the constitutive norms present in the "multiple traditions" approach. There is less support for ethnoculturalism as a whole and more support for the norms of liberalism, civic republicanism and incorporationism (2011). With regard to identity attachment or what identity people primarily identify with, she finds most people in the United States identify as American in most situations. This does not hold true all the time for immigrants, but it seems that second and third generation immigrants have high levels of American identification as well (2011).

Other studies of American identity that use social identity theory find differences in policy preferences or responses among those with differing conceptions about the normative content of American identity (Wright et al. 2012). Using a variation of assigning importance to the norms associated with American identity, Wright et al. had respondents both rate and rank norms of national identity in order to see if there were any differences in the findings. The data they drew upon for this study is from a survey experiment within the

2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (2012). They theorized that when asked to rank instead of rate norms, respondents are forced to choose among questions and thus cannot give the same level of importance to a multitude of norms. Their results suggest that the method used to measure norms associated with national identity is indeed important in that it has a significant effect on the correlations between civic and ethnic norms in relation to policy positions, such as immigration. Wright et al. (2012) also find that those who classify American identity in “ethnic” or ascriptivist terms tend to support policies that favor decreasing immigration levels and selecting immigrants based on language rather than education or merit.

Attachment, or the degree to which people consider being American to be an important part of how they view themselves, is another area of focus in the American identity literature and might be placed in the “contestation” aspect of the social identity framework (Schildkraut 2014). After recognizing a strong theoretical framework was needed for measuring patriotism as a source of national attachment, Huddy and Khatib (2007) used social identity theory in order to create such a measure related to American identity. Typically measures of patriotism tend to be biased by conservative ideology and attachments to the Republican Party. In social identity theory, American identity is generally defined as “being or feeling American” and is more related to one’s association with the national group (Huddy and Khatib 2007, 65). Using this new measure of national attachment, the researchers found that

social identity theory is unrelated to political ideology and thus measures group membership without bias. Huddy and Khatib also found there was a significant correlation between the national identity variable and civic engagement when national identity was conceived of using social identity theory (2007). Their findings give further support to the idea that civic-republican norms are one aspect that many use to define American identity.

Citrin and Sears suggest that emotional attachment, which they refer to as patriotism or “in-group pride without out-group hostility” (2014, 59). They find vast support by white Americans with regard to patriotism or emotional attachment to country but less of an attachment for blacks and Latinos. Citrin and Sears also look at assimilation, or when immigrants retain the same amount of affection for the United States as groups that have a long history, but they find they are too limited by relevant data to come to any conclusive result since most data collected by surveys only sample American citizens (2014). One of the most comprehensive studies of American identity that embraces the social identity theory framework is that of Theiss-Morse (2009).

Theiss-Morse argues that American national identity is a social identity associated with feelings of belonging to the national group (2009). From this premise, she uses survey data, focus groups and experiments to make a strong argument that attachment to the American national identity is strongly correlated with two norms: individualism and patriotism. Furthermore, she argues that while people who strongly identify as American are more likely to

identify strongly with a norm that encourages helping the group, she finds that these strong identifiers tend to set more exclusive boundaries in defining who is part of the national group. On the other hand, weak national identifiers tend to be more likely to help the marginalized and those typically excluded from the national group (2009).

While the American identity field now has a clearer analytical focus and map on which social identity can be more soundly studied, another way American identity might be studied is through a method that studies the way social processes produce and give meaning to national identity. While social identity theory does not necessarily treat social identities as fixed or primordial, the literature does tend to suggest that the content of American identity is similarly conceived and acted upon. Furthermore, the literature on American identity tends to be more descriptive and does little to explain how conceptions of American identity are actually formed.<sup>2</sup> I suggest that the everyday nationalism approach provides researchers with a method to study how individuals produce and reproduce nationhood.

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<sup>2</sup> An important exception to this is James Morone's argument that American political culture is a "perpetual work in progress" that follows a recurring pattern whereby an influx of immigrants is often perceived as a threat to the existing social structure of American society (1996).

## Chapter 2: “everyday nationalism”, discursive construction, and method

How do individuals, both individually and collectively, come to understand and to feel part of a particular national identity—what is it that happens at the level of the ordinary, the everyday, that allows people to keep in touch with their roots, either consciously or unconsciously?

Catherine Palmer poses this question in her study examining the mundane, or “banal” social acts that construct national identity (1998, 181). With roots in the banal nationalism approach, everyday nationalism is a complex process of meaning making through discursive construction, daily “flagging,” and ritual practice that allows individuals to create and understand their place in the “imagined community,” the nation (Billig 1995; Anderson 1991). Banal nationalism refers to the habits of everyday life that continually remind citizens of their nationality; Billig calls it “banal” to contrast this phenomena with the more easily recalled moments of nationalist outburst that characterize overtly nationalist politics or far right movements (1995). In the everyday nationalism approach, nationalism is defined as, “a frame of vision, a cultural idiom, and a political claim” (Brubaker et al. 2006, 358). Based in constructivist ontology, this approach rests on the notion that ideas and meaning making are sources of power that emerge through social processes (Goode and Stroup 2015). As a starting point, the everyday nationalism approach sees nations as “politically contested and historically contingent social constructs” with origins in bureaucratization, state creation and cultural indoctrination (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). Furthermore, as Goode and Stroup suggest, a constructivist

approach to studying nationalism goes beyond analysis of elite rhetoric or categorical groups and reintroduces the masses to the nation via the quotidian practices that create, reproduce and mediate national identity (2015).

One of the major conceptual advantages to using an everyday nationalism approach in studying American identity is that it does not take national identity as innate or primordial but attempts to examine the ways that national identity is constructed, reproduced and communicated by ordinary individuals. Since this approach is rooted in the idea that social processes are responsible for giving meaning to national identity, it is important to note that research must try and steer clear of attempting to nationalize through its use of methods (Brubaker et al. 2006). Methodologically speaking, this calls for researchers to pay careful attention to practices that may unnecessarily impute a concept of nationalism onto participants. Thus methods such as participant observation, informal or semi-structured focus groups and interviews allow researchers to observe quotidian practices without reifying national identity (Goode and Stroup 2015).

One of the earliest case studies to use an “everyday nationalism” approach is Catherine Palmer’s examination of how the body, food preferences and relations to the physical landscape can give meaning to identity (1998). Her theory is centered on what Michael Billig (1995) referred to as “banal nationalism,” which argues there are continuous, daily reminders that affirm a sense of nationalism among ordinary people. She argues that the

habits and social processes that help people organize and maintain their lives allow the nation and national identity to be conveyed in terms people can understand, even if at an unconscious level (Palmer 1998). Palmer uses three examples in which the body, food, and the landscape produce a sense of national connection. With regard to the body, she suggests it can be used as a symbol of society or culture that produces meaning with certain practices. Palmer notes that the Roma view the body as consisting of two distinct spheres, the pure inside and the outside skin, which is capable of being a source of “pollution.” Thus in Roma culture, it becomes necessary to keep daily practices of washing, eating, and using space that do not risk polluting the inner self. As for food, Palmer argues there may be no distinctly national foods but the mere notion that certain foods are representative of certain peoples, nationalities and ethnicities suggests that the mundane consumption habits of ordinary people are capable of creating and reproducing ideas of national belonging. Palmer also references the English landscape as a source of identity production by noting that its historical development and its daily interaction with people enables it to “create a link with their past that generates a sense of belonging in the present” (1998, 191).

Another example of everyday nationalism comes from Jon Fox’s research in Cluj, Romania on how Hungarian and Romanian students create and communicate national identity through national holiday commemorations and international football games (2006). Fox attended both Hungarian and



Romanian national holiday commemorations as a participant observer in order to observe the ways in which these events created meaning and feelings of national inclusion or exclusion. He found that some national holidays, such as the Romanian national holiday on December 1<sup>st</sup> seemed to produce little national meaning for Romanian students but did in fact create feelings of national consciousness for Hungarian students who felt alienated by the holiday, which they said commemorated Hungary's loss of Transylvania to Romania. On the other hand, the celebration of Hungarian independence on March 15<sup>th</sup> operated a little differently. On this day, Fox notes that the Hungarian students he interviewed commemorated rather than celebrated the holiday; this commemoration is argued to have inscribed the holiday with national meaning in which the students felt a collective Hungarian consciousness. Fox also observed reactions by both Romanian and Hungarian people during the European Championships football tournament. Fox finds that football matches in 2000 were especially effective in signaling inclusion in the Romanian nation through national paraphernalia that symbolically united Romanians while simultaneously excluding Hungarians living in Cluj, Romania. The Romanians' excitement and passion displayed for their football team effectively pushed the Hungarians living within Cluj to root for whoever was facing Romania in the football tournament. Fox argues that the commemorations and football games allowed Hungarians and Romanians

to not only consume national meaning through the events but to simultaneously produce national meaning as well (2006).

Cynthia Miller-Idriss (2006) also finds that using a method that probes the everyday understandings of how young Germans understand citizenship reveals that individuals conceive of German citizenship in markedly different ways than officials or academics. She finds that while German citizenship in the public and academic sphere is generally depicted as ethnic citizenship, semi-structured interviews with 60 young Germans express a conception of citizenship that varies throughout the sample and is generally associated with culture, birthplace, geography and economic aspects rather than ethnic or racial characteristics. Miller-Idriss argues that the meaning behind citizenship for ordinary individuals must be investigated in order to see how such policies are interpreted, reacted to, and acted upon by ordinary citizens in their everyday lives (2006). Furthermore, Miller-Idriss suggests that paying attention to the perspectives of ordinary people allows researchers to see citizenship as a dynamic process with considerable variation rather than a uniform and static concept. While the focus in this research is citizenship, she suggests that the relationship between citizenship and national identity appear to be very closely linked in the minds of ordinary individuals (2006).

More recent work by Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) makes a compelling case for the analysis of a variety of routine practices, which they argue can create ethnic and national meaning. Such practices include consuming,

choosing, performing and talking in ways that invoke the nation in day-to-day life. Consuming refers to the ways in which people's tastes or preferences reflect an expression of nationality solidarity and differentiation from others; such consumption can be characterized by food preferences (see Caldwell 2002), clothing styles and music tastes (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). These authors argue consumption occurs not only through nationally marked material items but also through the consumption of national myths, media, education and memories (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008).

Choosing refers to the practice whereby nationhood is salient in framing the choices of individuals. Such choices can be markedly affected by institutional structures that only allow a certain range of choices, but the future choices of individuals can also be quietly structured when they are already within national frameworks (2008). For example, Fox and Miller-Idriss recount the experience of one Transylvanian Hungarian history student who enrolled in a Hungarian line of study at a Romanian university not because it was Hungarian but because she resided within an "institutionally prescribed Hungarian universe" (544). They suggest this student's choice to enroll in a Hungarian line was the product of a series of previous national choices and seemed only natural to her.

Performing the nation alludes to the practices that ritualize national symbols through performance; these uncommon events, such as national holidays and sporting events, feature enactments of national symbols that

allow individuals to experience a feeling of collective belonging and serve to reaffirm the national conscience (Fox 2004; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008).

Lastly, talking refers to the process in which discourse constructs and gives meaning to nationhood.

### Talking “about” the nation

Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) argue that discourse analytical approaches to everyday nationalism allow “ordinary people to give concrete expression to their understandings of the nation” (539). Rather than examining elite political discourse for visions of the nation, this approach emphasizes that the actual degree to which these articulations are received is an area that needs increased scholarship. Moreover, they consider the way in which people create and give meaning to the nation is descriptive and simultaneously responsible for willing that object into reality (2008). In describing the power of discursive construction, Fox and Miller-Idriss draw upon Pierre Bourdieu, who states:

The act of social magic which consists in trying to bring into existence the thing named may succeed if the person who performs it is capable of gaining recognition through his speech for the power which that speech is appropriating for itself by a provisional or definitive usurpation, that of imposing a new vision and a new division of the social world: *regere fines, regere sacra*, to consecrate a new limit (1992, 223).

Thus the way in which people create and give meaning to the nation through discourse is descriptive and simultaneously responsible for willing their notions into reality (2008). Fox (2004) similarly finds that when people engage discursively on national issues, they frame the issues and themselves in terms that lead them to become momentarily national.

An excellent example of using critical discourse analysis in examining the construction of national identities comes from Cillia et al. (1999). These authors examine the creation of Austrian national identity through discursive interactions and examine the multitude of linguistic strategies that allow ordinary Austrians to create a sense of what it means to be Austrian. They emphasize that critical discourse analysis gives researchers a powerful tool to help understand how social and institutional processes affect discourse and, in turn, how discourse can work to shape social and political reality. Cillia et al. find that discourse analysis lends support to the idea that Austrians conceive of their national identity in disparate ways that blend legal and democratic institutions with more ethnic understandings of what it means to be Austrian (1999). These authors also argue that since the discursive construction of national identity is multidimensional, discourse analytical approaches that study everyday conceptions of nationhood are a necessary complement to approaches that focus on the discourse of elite sources.

Another important example of the power of discourse can be found in Melissa Harris-Lacewell's study of how everyday talk in black spaces helps

develop and reproduce understandings of the collective interests and ideologies among African Americans (2004). While this study does not focus on national identity, the author makes a persuasive argument that suggests that researchers must look beyond public opinion in order to understand the mechanisms that reproduce patterns of political belief among African Americans (Harris-Lacewell 2004). Just as ordinary talk among African Americans can help researchers better understand the nuances present in the creation of black public opinion, research that focuses on the relationship between everyday talk and the nation holds great promise for scholars of nationalism.<sup>3</sup>

#### Talking “with” the nation

Fox and Miller-Idriss contend that while ordinary people can be called upon to articulate what they believe the nation is and what it means to them, this does not indicate whether people actually talk about the nation outside of being directly probed (2008). Thus the contexts in which people talk about the nation can be elusive and likely intermittent in daily life, but the authors suggest the nation is something people talk “with” more frequently. Talking “with” the nation refers to the ways in which people unconsciously deploy a frame of vision that allows “social actors [to] become national actors, diverse phenomena [to] become national phenomena and everyday stories [to]

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<sup>3</sup> For examples of how national identity can be discursively constructed by ordinary, non-elite individuals, see Lyons et al. (2010), Phillips and Smith (2015), and Mann (2011).

become national stories” (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008, 540). As Billig explains, possessing a national identity not only involves giving meaning to the nation but likewise being situated in ways that allow individuals to relationally compare themselves to other homelands or nation-states (1995).

## Method

In order to assess the ways in which ordinary Americans create a sense of national identity through talking “about” and “with” the nation, I employed semi-structured interviews with ten residents of the Oklahoma City, Oklahoma metropolitan area and was a participant observer in two town hall meetings between November 2015 and April 2016. In line with previous interpretivist research, I chose a “discovery-oriented approach” that allowed me to see how ordinary American citizens conceived of their national identity within a natural, social context (Holt 2002, 73). The interview participants were between twenty-one and seventy-nine years old at the time of interview and were recruited through a snowball sampling technique that involved recruitment from university courses, word of mouth and referral by personal acquaintances. Following the path taken by Miller-Idriss (2012), the participants were not chosen at random but were intentionally chosen for their status as ordinary, non-elites who were U.S. citizens. Four of the participants were retired and three of the participants were students. Two of the retired couples were married and one of them chose to be interviewed together. None of the participants were extremely wealthy but most had some formal

education or training past the high school level. There were more men than women, and four of the participants were veterans of the military. Any categorical or demographic information gathered about participants is based on conversations or interactions before and during the interview. I avoided asking participants about their self-identified demographic information in order to avoid activating any ethnic or other social identity before or during the interview process. The data that follow come from participant observation and interviews, which assessed participants' views on a range of timely political issues as well as their thoughts on what being American means to them.<sup>4</sup>

Interviews were semi-structured and revolved around four main question areas: thoughts on life and politics, the Syrian refugee crisis, immigration attitudes, and questions about what it means to be American. Questions posed varied from interview to interview and participants sometimes led the interview in a different direction. For example, participants may say something related to what they feel it means to be American when asked about immigration, and in this case I would likely probe further in order to tease out their opinion on both issues. I generally kept the same question order with thoughts on life and politics starting off the interview in order to get people thinking about their general opinions before closing the interview with their thoughts on what it means to be American. I tried to ask more general questions on immigration policy and foreign policy before asking what it means

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<sup>4</sup> This project (IRB 6074) was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Oklahoma, 10/29/15.



to be American so that participants would not be tempted to align their thoughts on policy issues with a previously articulated view about their nationality.

In contrast to survey methodology that may impute a sense of national identity onto participants by implying that some things are said to be important in making someone American, semi-structured interviews and town halls have the benefit of avoiding this tendency (Schildkraut 2011; Brubaker 2006). The interview setting allows participants to articulate their own opinions with minimal prompting from the researcher, and the town hall setting affords an additional advantage in that the researcher plays no role in artificially prompting any sort of response from individuals. Town halls are especially advantageous for the researcher studying how people talk “with” the nation because ordinary individuals are given an opportunity to speak on behalf of the nation when confronting national issues. While town hall meetings are not necessarily everyday occurrences, there are few other settings in which ordinary people are called upon to voice their opinion about what should be done with regard to policy problems at the national level.

## Chapter 3: findings

### Talking about the Nation

Three themes emerged from the data when looking at the way people talk about being American. The most common and most explicitly stated notion was that the United States was an immigrant nation, shared an immigrant ancestry, or was a melting pot. Eight participants explicitly stated in one form or another that the United States was an immigrant nation or a melting pot, but there were important differences in the way people explained or qualified this concept. Another common theme repeated by seven of the ten participants was “freedom,” but its usage presented important nuances as well. Lastly, all participants found it rather difficult to articulate what it meant to be American when asked directly.

#### An Immigrant Nation

When asked about immigration policy in the United States, three of the participants responded to this question in similar fashion. Anthony, 34, Thomas, 40, and Justin, 32, all assert that the United States is an immigrant nation with a common shared ancestry of immigration for most individuals.<sup>5</sup> Anthony first suggested the United States was an immigrant nation after responding to a question about whether or not the United States should have an official language:

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<sup>5</sup> Participants’ names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Anthony: ((laughs)) There is a joke going around that says, "With all the problems going on around right now, you have to press 1 for English. That's the biggest concern you have that makes you that upset?" I don't think we should have English as an official language... because we are a nation of immigrants. I mean, yes, most immigrants that came over learned the language, but not all, and they did it for survival. They didn't do 'cause they wanted the Americans that were here feel more comfortable with them, they did it because they had to, to get by. There's sections of even Oklahoma City that are purely Hispanic that are... signs, and language, and everything is in Spanish. It doesn't hurt me that those areas are in place because I don't use them. The people that are there, they use them and are comfortable with them. It doesn't really affect me one way or another so I don't think it's necessary. I think it kind of tarnishes that belief that we are an open country to other cultures and traditions.

DB: Earlier, you said that we are an immigrant nation. What do you mean by that?

Anthony: Well we're made up of immigrants. I mean, unless you're a Native American, you're an immigrant to this country from the very beginning. We were English immigrants, Irish immigrants, Jewish immigrants, Russian immigrants. Every influx of population growth in this country has been from other countries so if you're here and you live here, and you work here, and you grow your family here...you're American. You may have come from somewhere else but you are an American regardless of the language you speak, the religion you teach or understand, or how you go through your daily life. It's...the reason we are so powerful and as economically strong as we are is because we allowed all those people here...because we opened our doors and said this is the place of opportunity, and that opportunity...all those people coming to seek that opportunity has made us how we are. To shut the doors now just because we think alright, limit, that's enough, in my eyes... is a little contradictory or a little hypocritical, I guess.

Anthony's response to the idea of an official language is that it runs counter to the ideal of an immigrant nation. He hints at the idea that an official language would indicate the United States is no longer inclusive. Additionally, he

emphasizes that a long history of immigration coupled with the inclusivity of American society has fostered opportunity and made the United States economically strong. Justin also asserts the immigrant nation idea after the question about an official language and makes a similar economic argument:

DB: The last question I have is: do you think the United States should have an official language?

Justin: No, I don't. We are, I think, a nation of immigrants and our differences and different cultures that combine and make whatever that culture is, or tradition, makes it good. I think those different cultures, point of views, and things like that make us stronger and make us more fluent in a globalized society. So I don't think there should be one type of language. That is saying there should be one type of culture, really, I think. I think that makes us weaker as a country.

DB: You think there should be multiple cultures?

Justin: Yeah. Whenever those help us succeed, that makes us a richer and better people.

DB: And why is that?

Justin: Why does...all of these coming together. I think, obviously, we live in a globalized world now. Through technology, you can have a business here, in Oklahoma, and you can communicate with someone in China. So you need those varying cultures. I think we need those to remain successful in the world, as we move forward and those traditional walls break down, really.

While Justin and Anthony both make arguments that suggest an official language runs counter to the ideal of an immigrant nation, Thomas sees the idea of an immigrant nation as an ideal to live up to or a “national myth.” He first echoes this idea in response to a question about immigration policy:

Thomas: I know, I grew up overseas, so I know that if you want to move to Germany or the U.K. or whatever, you have to have a job and kind of a sponsor or something like that. I don't know if you have to do that here. I think that would be fair, but...I mean we're supposed to be a country of immigrants so I don't have an issue with immigration.

DB: What do you mean we are supposed to be a country of immigrants?

Thomas: We...we're...we immigrated here, I guess, from [indecipherable] from just, you know, Europe or Africa or wherever. We all came...except for the people already here. So the whole melting pot thing, the tired and poor and huddled masses...that's the national myth and it sounds really good so I think we should kind of... you know I'm for that, but...again, I don't know what it takes to immigrate to the United States.

Thomas' response indicates a more disconnected view of the idea of an immigrant nation. His suggestion that it is a national myth and something that he supports is slightly different than the strong assertions made by Anthony and Justin. All three of these participants' other answers reflect a similar outlook that suggests that Americans should be open to a multitude of languages, not fear immigration, and be inclusive.

James, a 21-year-old student, first referenced the idea that the United States is an immigrant nation after a question about his thoughts on immigration policy. Following his opinion about there being serious reasons for controlling immigration, James remarked:

It's a similar conclusion that I would draw is that we have to...I mean, America is an immigrant nation. We have to remain committed to those values. But how? Finding smart ways, safe ways, that we can protect our borders but not lose sight of the fact that immigration is what makes America...America.

When probed further about this concept, James articulated that the United States was a "melting pot" and this was due to "cosmopolitan" American values that meant embracing a diverse culture. He used the example of Oklahoma City being a haven for immigrants fleeing the Vietnam War and their ability to create a diverse food culture in their newfound home. This process, he argued, was simply, "just American. That's just our culture." Later on in the interview, he further expands upon his idea of an immigrant nation after being asked a question concerning what characteristics might be considered American:

James:

And I feel like, again, we talked about an immigrant nation and America being an immigrant country. I don't actually have any figures, but it seems to me that the immigrants that come here...there really is an acceptance of, at least, that value of freedom. Of course, there's people who live their lives in very different ways across the country, but you know, we haven't had the kind of development of immigrant communities that in Europe, where there is almost these pockets. Like France, you know what's going on in France, and you think about the

way the immigrants—these people, these refugees—have settled there and kind of formed their own communities. They are so isolated that I think that might be contributing to part of the problem, the cultural friction, in those societies. Whereas America, for better or for worse, because it has been pretty bad... I mean segregation...it's been rough before because of this, but it's also...we are a lot more integrated than I think we think sometimes, especially compared to maybe other countries. We maybe have more to go, definitely, but I think that speaks to a lot of what their American identity is...is that it can be very conservative or very progressive in that way sometimes.”

He differentiates the United States from other countries again later on in the interview:

James: ...”America is more melting pot. It is more diverse. So it makes sense that someone could become an American in a way that you can't truly see becoming French...like truly French, you know? If someone is born in China but then they move here and live here, and if someone is born in the United States and they move to China, you know after ten years, this one is probably more American—the one that is in America.”

So James' idea of the immigrant nation seems to refer to an accessible and welcoming nation that is both willing and able to integrate other cultures, unlike European nations today. Furthermore, James links the notion of immigration with the idea that part of United States unique ability to assimilate immigrants is based on their willingness to embrace the idea of “freedom.” This section effectively illustrates how James employs a discursive technique that both implies a degree of homogeneity in the United States with regard to accepting other cultures but also emphasizes differences between the United States and France or other European countries. While it seems that James possesses

what might be called ideational constraint, or a consistency in thought regarding the idea of the immigrant nation being an American value throughout his interview, the interview with John and Margaret shows a remarkable lack of such constraint.

Margaret and John, 70 and 74, also made reference to the idea that the United States is a nation of immigrants. When asked about the Syrian refugee crisis, Margaret responded:

We kind of think, and understand that we're a nation of immigrants, that's for sure. We are certainly compassionate. We'd want to take care of them, but I just think with everything that has happened, we need to be careful. Surely there could be a way that we could help those people without just bringing them over here by the boatloads and not knowing what was going on with all of them. It just takes one or two to cause a lot of havoc. We're kind of the feeling that they should create the safe havens in...in their areas where they can kind of stay close to...

John: For example, Syria, those people.

Margaret: Yeah, and take care of them there. We want them taken care of, but...it's just kind of scary to think of opening the doors up to just anybody and everybody, and without them being...this new word, this "vetted" ((she gestures quotation marks)) word, which I'm not sure what it means but ((laughs))...

DB: What do you think, John?

John: Well I'm with her. Of course, we talk about. We've mentioned it every once in a...you know, if you're looking at... them coming in, whoever all of them. Well we had that mass where all the children came in, and what 60,000 of all those refugees that came in. Terrorists could have been with them. I mean, we're looking at it now like we need to



really watch it. Well, it's already happened in my opinion of course. But that's...now the Mexicans that are out here, they're great ((Margaret laughs)). They build these houses. They work hard.

While Margaret asserts the United States is an immigrant nation, she used the notion as a sort of caveat in which she identifies herself with the nation and its alleged compassionate history of taking care of those in need before engaging in remarks that are quite exclusionary. They go on to say that Mexican immigrants should go about getting citizenship but they generally have no problem with them. Margaret invokes the idea that her and her husband are not anti-immigration again before saying, "it's just that you have to use some common sense... 'cause it seems like the Muslim extremists really do want to do away with us if they have a chance to do it. I don't think the Mexican extremists want to do away with us. I think they just want to build our houses ((she laughs)) and mow our yards ((she laughs again))." Throughout the interview with John and Margaret, anti-Muslim rhetoric abounds and accusations of Barack Obama being a Muslim who cannot be trusted are present as well; while their rhetoric indicates a disdain for Islam, they do say that Muslims can be American. In a similar manner to James' earlier point about immigrant communities being isolated, Margaret states that [Muslim] immigrants in Europe have "kind of...isolated themselves. They've not blended." John reinforces this notion by stating there is an Islamic community in Paris that he believes the police are afraid to go into and is not being

patrolled. At one point in the interview, in a statement contrary to the ideal of the United States being a place where immigrants are welcome, John refers to the November 2015 Paris attacks and says, “That’s my answer to...as far as just open, just coming in here. It leaves wide open for that to happen to us. Just because of immigration, basically. ‘Cause they, England, France, all them, openly welcomed those people in to help them.”

Two of the respondents, Laura, 31, and Jennifer, 28, did not directly mention the idea that the United States was an immigrant nation but did reference it as a melting pot. Answering no to a question about whether the United States should have an official language, Laura remarked:

Because...to me, the founding principle of this nation is freedom of...American identity is bringing both old-world identity and new-world identity (motions hands together). So you become an American but you also have this other nation or other country or other region that you sort of have as half of your identity. So setting an official language is saying that...(pause) how do I explain it? I think it’s kind of racist in a way and I don’t like it. It’s saying that once you come here, you have to give up all else and not be anything else and that’s completely antithetical to what the American identity is. We’re a melting pot of people. We have...most everybody is German-American, or Italian-American, or Mexican-American. American is both what you are here and what your ancestry was there. To deny the language of any ancestry elsewhere, is the opposite of what it means to be American.

So Laura does not explicitly state the United States is a nation of immigrants, but her reference to American identity as being an incorporative community that celebrates diversity comes quite close. Moreover, the notion that being American means merging your past identity with your new American identity

shows a more reflexive approach to understanding what it means to be an American. Jennifer also mentions that Americans are “called” to be a melting pot:

I think Americans are very patriotic...sometimes to a fault. I think we're...I mean, we are a diverse country, not so much the melting pot that we're called.

DB: What do you mean “not so much a melting pot?”

Jennifer: If you talk about things just metaphorically, a melting pot is everything blended together. I think we're a mixture but not a blend. Everything...there's no homogenization. Everything is still very separate. We're a salad.

DB: How do you feel about that? Is that the right...way?

Jennifer: Umm...there should be some melting. There should be more melting than there is right now. I think that we're losing a little bit of tolerance. Hopefully that can change a little bit...the tolerance for that melting. I mean, Laura and Justin have talked about how when they travel to Alabama, they get dirty looks because Justin looks white and Laura looks Mexican, and people don't like that. I think that's a step backwards.

Interestingly, Jennifer's critique is not in response to questions about immigration or an official language, but is instead raised by asking what characteristics are associated with being American. Her response suggests that while diversity is something that exists, her vision of a melting pot is one that is inclusive and tolerant. Both Laura and Jennifer's responses suggest that the notion of a melting pot goes beyond simply embracing the idea that

the United States is an immigrant nation. They acknowledge the diversity of the United States but they question its inclusivity.

The notion that being an immigrant nation or a melting pot is an important aspect of being American is present in 8 of 10 interviews, but it usually did not emerge until participants were asked either about immigration policy, the merits of an official language, or their thoughts on the Syrian refugee crisis. Additionally, all participants showed differences in how they spoke about this supposed nation of immigrants. For Thomas, an immigrant nation that welcomes all is the national myth and he believes that is something Americans should embrace. Anthony and Justin also invoke this idea that Americans have a shared immigrant culture that should inform current immigration policy and responses to refugees, and they further suggest that anti-immigrant policies run counter to American values. James' notion of the United States being an immigrant nation was the richest in detail and meant that the United States not only shared an immigrant origin but was also representative of the diversity and inclusiveness that were quintessentially American in his eyes. Furthermore, James pointed out that the American ability to integrate and embrace diversity was something that set it apart from other nations. The interview with John and Margaret also featured this notion that the United States is an immigrant nation, but their rhetoric throughout the interview was in stark contrast to that of other participants. When they mentioned that the United States was an immigrant nation or that they were

not anti-immigrant, they seemed to use it as a way to qualify the rhetoric that followed. This rhetoric was generally exclusionary or somewhat condescending to Mexicans and Muslims, two groups they viewed as different from Americans like themselves. John was quite outspoken about the need to be cautious around Muslims but did ultimately conclude that Muslims could be American. Laura and Jennifer both referenced the importance of the melting pot ideal in the United States, but both felt it was an ideal that was either not present or should be striven for. Thus we are left with a common articulation of the United States being an immigrant nation or a melting pot but with remarkable divergence in what that idea means and how salient it is in framing the way that individuals process complex policy issues, such as the Syrian refugee crisis or immigration.

### Freedom

Seven of ten participants mentioned in one way or another that “freedom” was an important aspect of being American. As with the immigrant nation aspect, there were several different meanings assigned to the word “freedom.” The most common reference to freedom came from five respondents who referred to civil or political liberties that the participants felt were part of being American. Others mentioned freedom but classified it in the narrow sense that being American meant you could do what you want and move where you would like. Lastly, some respondents remarked that part of being American was having freedom of opportunity.

The association of freedom with political or civil liberties seemed to be the most popular way that participants conceived of what freedom entailed in the United States. James characterizes freedom in a few ways but ultimately settles on the term liberal ideals and associates it with such things as the Bill of Rights, freedom of religion, and freedom from unwarranted arrest. Timothy speaks abstractly about freedom in the sense that the United States is a “free country” and our forefathers fought for it, but he eventually elaborates on this and suggests that part of being American is clinging to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Justin and Laura both deliver a similar answer to questions about what it means to be American or what values are associated with Americans:

Justin: That’s very difficult, as America is very diverse, so I think just the traditional values that people I think maybe see broadly like freedom, liberty, capitalism, things like that.

Laura: These ideas of freedom, equality, advancement through work and meritocracy. Yeah, I think those are the main ones. And separation of church and state, which is my big one!

In roughly the same way, Jennifer refers to freedoms as “political freedoms.”

Thus it seems that approximately half of those interviewed tend to view freedom as pertaining to the realm of political or civil liberties, but their mention is usually brief and does not go into much detail. It is hard to tell whether or not this association with political or civil liberties has much meaning, especially for

Timothy, who used the term to characterize the United States as a “free country” as opposed to Syria, where the people allegedly did not “want to be free.”

James had the most to say about the subject and presented “freedom” with a variety of meanings. He first mentions freedom after being asked what characteristics might be associated with being American:

Yeah, we seem to have an infatuation with freedom. I say infatuation because I think that sometimes it isn't necessarily a good thing. I think it's a great thing in many ways but it's very...it's very knee jerk, the kind of freedom we have in America, which can be great or it can be kind of bad. We can be stubbornly free sometimes, especially economically. I think that we might benefit from more controlled markets at times, but our obstinate freedom might keep us from those benefits, but it's also part of what I think has maintained the degree of freedom in this country for almost 250 years or so. And I feel like, again, we talked about an immigrant nation and America being an immigrant country. I don't actually have any figures, but it seems to me that the immigrants that come here...there really is an acceptance of, at least, that value of freedom...

In this instance, James suggests that freedom can refer to regulation of markets and that it can be a positive or negative attribute, but he also shifts and suggests that this “obstinate freedom” is what has maintained a certain level of freedom in the United States. While this first mention of freedom is not clearly articulated, James clarifies himself throughout the interview and eventually shifts to using the term “freedom values” in reference to personal freedom, a belief system, or a way of seeing the world:

I guess that is what I am kind of trying to talk about here is that... you know, there is this kind of feeling that you can do what you want in America. It's not even really a feeling, I think that it's a reality in many ways. You can talk about how the society... and it's not necessarily even that this is how the society actually functions, it's more of the way we see it I guess. We are talking about like the ideas, the values... this is kind of hard to say exactly what they are, but I mean, if you were to ask people, "would it be better to live in a democracy that can be anarchical or would you rather have consistency and a dictator?" It seems like a stupid question to our American mindset. It's like "of course." I'd almost like...what do they say? There is a Bruce Willis movie called "Live Free or Die Hard" and I feel like maybe that is kind of what I am talking about here. Like I said, it is kind of pig-headed like that though, it's a Bruce Willis movie kind of mentality but it also kind of gets things done sometimes. It can add to the resolve of it though.

While Americans may not agree on what it means to be American, James argues part of being American is that everyone engages with these "freedom values" or what he eventually terms "liberal ideals." Moreover, he constructs a discourse that speaks for all Americans by suggesting that the American mindset is stubbornly "free." He goes on to explain that these "freedom values" are political ideas based on things, such as the Bill of Rights, self-determination, freedom of religion, freedom from unwarranted arrest, and capitalism. While James elaborates a great deal on what freedom means to him and why this is so important, John and Margaret have much simpler notions of what this means to them.

Margaret first brings up the concept when talking about the San Bernardino mass shooting, which had just taken place prior to our interview and was being covered on the muted television in the room. She suggested



that one of the reasons mass shootings take place in America more often was due to the amount of freedom Americans enjoy:

We don't realize...it's just like the shooting here (gestures to the television) and they were saying that these things happen more here than in other countries. That's because we're so free. That's a part of freedom that crazy people can do crazy things because they have that freedom, and I don't know, at some point we are going to decide how many of our freedoms we have to keep in order to stop things like that. But crazy stuff like that has always happened...we're not opposed. We're not gun people. We're not opposed to gun...to people having guns. We don't have guns. We don't want guns, but I don't like the idea of everybody walking around with a gun (she laughs). I don't, but...

In this instance, Margaret suggests that part of being American is this high level of personal freedom accorded to people. She speaks about it in a positive way but suggests that one of the byproducts is the potential for tragedies to happen. Margaret and John only mention freedom once more in the interview and it comes after they are asked to explain why they are proud to be American:

Margaret: Land of the free and home of the brave ((laughs)).

John: Just...

Margaret: I always say every time we go to Sam's [grocery store] and we're walking around, I say now this is just what being an American is all about. You're here in the land of plenty ((laughs)). All this stuff to pick from and...

John: Well freedom of going anywhere we want to, to go eat.

Margaret: ((laughs)) You can tell where he puts his...

John: Got us into a little trouble. We're from Ada and we moved up to Oklahoma City after her aunt died at 97 years old and we lost our son. We bought him a house here, and our daughter wanted us to come up here. It's just...we could do it. We could do it. Just free to do it, basically, I guess.

Thus Margaret suggests she is proud to be an American because it is the "land of the free and home of the brave," but freedom is spoken about abstractly in this sense. Both Margaret and John seem to define freedom as simply the ability to do what one wants rather than an association with political or civil liberties. Two other participants who also possessed a slightly different take on freedom were Laura and Jennifer.

While both Laura and Jennifer generally referred to freedom as being associated with civil and political liberties, they emphasized that freedom of religion and freedom of opportunity were especially important to them. In responding to a question about what values Americans hold, Laura responded:

These ideas of freedom, equality, advancement through work and meritocracy. Yeah, I think those are the main ones. And separation of church and state, which is my big one!

Jennifer mentioned freedom of religion in a similar way when asked about campaign rhetoric coming from Donald Trump:

Jennifer: I think that's disgusting. I think going back to...that uses the assumption that all Muslims are terrorists, in my mind. That's what that is saying without actually saying it. There has been a lot of talk about religion in this election, and things like saying...making comments like that and using religion as an excuse for making laws about abortion. That goes against everything that we stand for as a country in separating church and state, and that angers me so much.

DB: what do you mean everything that's "stood for?"

Jennifer: I mean, I think part of what we were built on is separating church and state, getting away from the Church of England, and allowing for religious freedom. None of those things are being upheld when you use religion as an excuse for making certain laws. Maybe that's not what it actually is, but the rhetoric goes back to religion and it's not what we're supposed to be basing our political opinions on, even if it is important to most people.

In addition to suggesting that religious freedom was something very important to Americans, both participants mentioned that "freedom to take advantage of opportunity" or "freedom to pursue the things that you think will better your life" were part of what it means to be American.

Half of the participants interviewed concluded that freedom was associated with political or civil liberties, but there is still some doubt about whether these participants all view freedom in a similar light; four of the five who did mention political or civil liberties only referenced the idea briefly and

did little to explain what it meant to them. James uses the term freedom with the most variation in referring to regulation, political liberties, a worldview, and a belief system that is allegedly inherent to being American. Margaret and John's definition of freedom pertains to the ability of a person to eat what they want, move where they please, and generally do as they wish. As for Jennifer and Laura, freedom was strongly associated with both freedom of religion and freedom of opportunity in the United States. It is clear from the variation in responses that freedom is something deeply associated with what it means to be American but this is not conceived of in a similar manner. It is also unclear as to how important it is to people with regard to how they see themselves and how their conception affects the way they see the world. If American national identity is a frame of vision, it would seem that the vision contains incredible variation with regard to what it means to be free.

### Struggling to Define the Nation

One aspect that becomes immediately apparent in all of the interviews is that individuals have trouble defining what it means to be American when asked directly. There was only one respondent, Justin, who was able to give a substantive response with apparent ease, but he also stressed the difficulty in defining what it means to be American:

That's very difficult, as America is very diverse, so I think just the traditional values that people I think maybe see broadly like freedom, liberty, capitalism, things like that. But there are so many other values. You have people...migrate here from, you think of the Scottish, Irish,

things like that, and also Latinos from South America and Mexico, and Asian people who come from East Asia. There are so many other values I think there. I think that's really hard to answer and I am not sure if I am answering that...like what type of values. If I was trying to tell someone from another country what values America has, I think it's acceptance...I would hope.

James, Laura, and Jennifer were also able to answer this question with a relatively substantive definition but it still took quite a bit of prying and several minutes of thinking through what they were saying before they could articulate what the nation meant to them. Most answers typically consisted of political freedoms, opportunity to work and better your situation (the American dream), equality, capitalism, and patriotism. Anthony suggested he held a somewhat negative association with the term American:

Well...I have probably a looser definition of it than a lot of people. Like I said, I don't think religion, or language, or race, or any of that defines being an American. I think being a citizen is obviously an important part of it, or really the legally defining part of it because that does mean you're a citizen so you're paying taxes, so you're putting into what you get back. But I also don't think that means that people who are living here illegally and for that reason aren't putting into the system as much as say someone else...I don't think that makes them un-American. They are just doing things how they have to do it to get by. I don't know that the term of being American I think is...it has...kind of been deluded, I guess. And unfortunately, in my opinion, when you hear the chanting of "we're American" it's usually for a negative reason.

Others, such as Thomas, were clearly flustered by the question and frustrated with their inability to come up with an answer:

Thomas: Oh God! I have no idea, man. What does it mean to be an American? Gosh...

DB: Do you think there are certain beliefs that Americans hold?

Thomas: Geez, I don't know. That's a tough question.

In a similar fashion to Anthony, Thomas suggested that current events, such as the San Bernardino mass shooting, made him feel that there were times he felt a negative association with being American and wished he could be something else.

There was also a tendency for some respondents to respond to the question of what it meant to be American with a response that emphasized their feelings of being "blessed" or proud. This was true for the four participants who were 70 years of age and older. After struggling to think of a substantive response that defined what it meant to be American, participants tended to affirm their pride, their feelings of happiness that they were American, or how much they enjoy living in the United States. Responding to a question about what it means to be an American, John and Margaret said:

Margaret: That's a real good question.

John: Well...okay, I have been overseas a lot. Around Germany, I've been in Germany. Belgium! I've been to Belgium. In Belgium, I was there secretly to see how they live... and see how we live here, this has

to be great. 'Cause I've seen it. We...well a secret mission, it was fine too (Margaret laughs), you know, that sort of thing...

Margaret: Yeah, but I think that we're so blessed. So much more than...any place else and we don't appreciate it. We don't.

John: Yeah, that's true

After rephrasing the question to see if they would attempt to differentiate Americans and the characteristics they might possess through a comparison with someone from another country, they responded:

Margaret: That's a good question too.

John: That's a very good question. Maybe I'd express just how we love it here. Just let them know that we enjoy living here. We try to be friendly and try to welcome them and when they come, if possible...that's a hard question ((taps hands on table)). I don't know.

The other couple, Susan and Timothy, struggled to come up with a substantive response as well. Susan tended to emphasize the notion of being patriotic as important in defining what it means to be American, and Timothy stressed that he feels fortunate to live in the United States:

Susan: Oh, I think to me. See, I have always been because I was taught from very a very young child in school, we were taught patriotism. I mean, I still don't hear the national anthem...that my heart, you know, I am just very proud. I'm just...like I said, it still touches me when I hear the national anthem played because I'm very patriotic and I

believe in our country. Basically, there's a lot of things that need to be changed but then we still live in the best country ever.

Timothy: To be an American...it's great to be American. We have the best country in the world, the most God-blessed country that's ever been on the Earth.

Susan and Timothy also stressed that one thing that defined being American was the idea of the Christian nation and that God needed to be put back into schools and back into the government. Susan referenced that Oklahoma had taken the Ten Commandments down at the state capitol building, and Timothy insisted that it was important to have "God at the center of your hearts because the laws, the Constitution, and all that is based on the Bible."

Comparing the findings with interview participants speaks to a broader problem within much of the American identity literature in that surveys tend to impute notions of what it means to be American onto individuals. I asked ten participants what it meant to be American in an informal setting and allowed them all to come up with an answer in an unstructured way, but it was still quite difficult for them to think of something. Most did not think of the type of answers that surveys show. No one answered in a strong "multiple traditions approach" though many hit on certain aspects, such as facets of liberalism. The overwhelming tendency when asked what it meant to be American was to struggle, attempt to think about things that have been iterated in the past, and then concede it was difficult but they still felt really proud to be American.



One interesting aspect about the difficulty people have in defining what it means to be American is that nearly all of those interviewed were unabashedly proud to be American. Participants may not be able to articulate why they are proud or what it even means to be American, but they responded strongly when asked. For example:

Thomas: Yeah, I think so. I mean...in kind of a...sure... in an ephemeral sense. Yeah, I'm proud to be an American. But again, I don't know... I couldn't tell you why...because Coca-cola, rock and roll, jazz, awesome movies, John Wayne again. Yeah, I'm proud to be an American.

Susan: Well because of course I was born here and I just...I don't know. It's hard to put in words what I really think. I am just proud to be American, you know?

Laura : Yeah, definitely. I dislike this sort of uber patriotic, people shouting "USA, USA" all the time. It makes me really uncomfortable because I think it sparks of like Nazi nationalism and it makes me cringe, but I think that despite all of our faults, as long as you're kind of humble about a situation, there is a lot of things that we do here that are good.

Timothy: Me? Yes, I am proud to be an American.

In many ways this speaks to the idea that maybe these values, this connection to the "imagined community", is something that runs deeper than simply constitutive norms (Anderson 1991). It also echoes findings from

Theiss-Morse (2009) and Citrin and Sears (2014) that suggests there is a correlation between patriotism and emotional attachment to the nation.

Data from the interviews here are also closely related to the ambivalence and complexity in rendering individuals' relationships to nationhood that Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg find among German citizens (2012). Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg argue that many statements that appear to be clear expressions of national pride and relation to the German nation are generally more complex than they appear (2012). The interviews conducted here also suggest Americans face this same difficulty in conceiving of the relationship between the individual and the nation. As Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg write, "in a myriad of ways, individuals' constructions of national identity happen throughout a lifetime and reflect an ongoing struggle to reconcile contradictory emotions about the nation" (2012, 148) It seems that American national identity is also constructed in complex ways that wrestle with contradictory emotions and resist categorization.

### Talking with the Nation

As Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) suggest and these research findings show, people can somewhat articulate what being American means to them when asked, but it is more common for people to talk "with" the nation than about it. While the responses in these interviews did not come easily for most, participants had no difficulty in talking 'with' the nation when asked about

certain issues, especially the Syrian refugee crisis and questions about immigration. Cillia et al. refer to this linguistic strategy as “presupposing intra-national sameness or similarity,” which allows the speaker to speak on behalf of all members of that nation (1999, 161); these authors find this strategy is frequently used among the sample of Austrians they interview. In showing how this strategy can be used to construct and reproduce an idea of what it means to be Austrian, they cite the following passage: “that we are in the mentality – umm really umm – very broad on the one hand: that I think we are quite hard-working: but then on the other hand that we also umm know how to relax and enjoy holidays in Austria” (Cillia et al. 161). Thus the authors show how an Austrian can discursively identify with their national identity, emphasize sameness, and then attribute or reproduce a new meaning to their national identity. It was evident from my interviews that people began to take on a national frame of vision when addressing questions about these issues. In all of the interviews, participants overwhelmingly use “we” language that personalizes the nation to them. Examples of this include:

James: I think that is something we have to be careful of, but I think there is also, you know, we are undoubtedly a very powerful country—economically, politically.

Thomas: I don’t know if we necessarily need to...I guess we’re a superpower. I am not sure anymore.

Margaret: We don’t realize...it’s just like the shooting here (gestures to the television) and they were saying that these things happen more here than in other countries. That’s because we’re so free.

Susan: Well, I think we have taken God out of a lot of things. I think that started really a lot of our problems.

Jennifer: I mean, I don't exactly know what we're doing other than I know that in certain states they said that they would let people...that they would let refugees in...

Not only does the language of participants reflect their “unselfconscious disposition about the national order of things”, but it also indicates that the way each participant discursively constructs the nation is salient in the way they frame national issues (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2006, 540). All of the interview participants, aside from Susan and Timothy, mention that the United States is an immigrant nation. The idea that the United States is an immigrant national generally entails a certain notion about a common history of immigration, a willingness to accept those in need, and an ability to embrace diverse peoples and cultures (Schildkraut 2001; 2007). This aspect of American national identity generally played out in the way that each talked about the Syrian refugee crisis and immigration policy. Thus the meaning people associate with their national identity seems to be a powerful indicator of how that person will process and make sense of complex issues (Gamson 1992).

John and Margaret were an exception to this finding. They also mentioned the United States was a nation of immigrants, but their rhetoric was opposed to the view held by the other participants of what an immigrant nation

stood for, and thus their assertion of being a nation of immigrants seems to be more of an apologetic attempt to excuse their more exclusionary and somewhat ascriptive remarks. One aspect of being an American that John and Margaret also mention is that being American grants a person a certain amount of personal freedom. From their interview, it becomes apparent that this belief that “freedom” is an American value does play a role in how they talk with the nation. One example of this is how Margaret explains the San Bernardino mass shooting as something that comes as no surprise to her because that sense of freedom, which she would argue is quintessentially American, allows people the ability to do what they want in the United States. In a similar fashion, Susan and Timothy emphasized their feeling that Christianity was an especially important part of being American and this became salient in the way they perceived policy issues. When asked about their thoughts on the Syrian refugee crisis, they tended to respond in ways called upon their constructed, frame of vision. For Susan, the Syrian refugee crisis was a result of the “last days here on Earth” and concerns about Muslim terrorists made her less open to refugees and immigrants. Timothy felt that too many immigrants were coming in illegally and that the current problems the United States faced were a result of a lack of morality: “When you take God out of the schools, take God out of society, when you don’t have rules...you have anarchy if you don’t have rules and enforce them.” These interview findings thus suggest that differing conceptions of American national identity

play a strong predictive role in how individuals perceive and respond to policy issues.<sup>6</sup>

### Town halls and talking “with” the nation

In an attempt to correct for the artificial nature of an interview setting and probe further into the ways people identify with the nation, I became a participant observer at two town hall meetings in Oklahoma City set up by an Oklahoma House of Representatives member and a member of the United States House of Representatives. Town halls were chosen because this setting offers great potential to reveal both the context in which discursive construction of national identity takes place and rich accounts about what that identity means. Additionally, a town hall meeting presents a unique opportunity in which ordinary individuals can talk “with” the nation and express these ideas to elite political actors. Town halls possess the unique advantage of putting ordinary individuals in a setting in which they are asked to voice their opinions on complex issues to political elites. As a participant observer, this setting is particularly conducive to studying the ways in which individuals deploy a

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<sup>6</sup> Additional consideration might be given to the idea that Islam may seem incompatible with American values for some individuals. The interviews with John, Margaret, Susan, and Timothy all point to a depiction of Muslims as an “other.” This rhetoric is quite similar to the pattern that Morone argues cultural conflicts tend to follow. He suggests that when immigrants come to the United States with their differences, older Americans that are well-established tend to feel these groups pose two threats: they undermine American values and they are morally corrupt (Morone 1996, 428). This “otherness” and its threat to ethnocultural norms might be salient in the way that these older participants respond to policy issues that involve Muslims.

national frame of vision that allows them to speak on behalf of the nation (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008).

In the town hall meeting sponsored by the Oklahoma state House member, people were allowed to ask questions and propose ideas. When individuals spoke in this setting, they tended to refer to themselves as “Oklahoman” and made frequent use of statements, such as “we have got to do something” and “our kids.” However, it was clear from this first town hall meeting that the identity most appropriate for this situation was that of an Oklahoman and not an American. The second town hall meeting that was put on by a member of the United States House of Representatives presented those in attendance the opportunity to engage with issues taking place at the national and international level.<sup>7</sup> The Congressman spoke at great length in this meeting and did not take nearly as many questions or comments from the audience. The topics that were discussed throughout the meeting included immigration, veterans’ services, omnibus bills, and the Syrian refugee crisis. Throughout the town hall meeting, the term “we” was used frequently by the

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<sup>7</sup> This town hall meeting took place at a city council chamber in Northwest Oklahoma City. The chamber is set up in a way that makes symbolic use of state and national imagery. When an audience member is seated and looking toward the front of the room, they have a vision of a large pentagonal window that opens to a view of the large United States flag that is flying in front of the building. The room is also framed by the state flag of Oklahoma on the right and another United States flag on the left. There is a sense when one enters the room of a feeling of collective belonging to both the state and the nation, which echoes the idea put forth by Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) about how symbolic performance of national symbols can produce such a feeling. While this atmosphere might be somewhat related to “performing” the nation, interviews and town halls generally fall outside the realm of “choosing” and “consuming” the nation.

Congressional member and those in attendance. This term was used to reference three different identities: Christian, conservative, and American. At one point, the Congressman linked “we” to “people of faith” in his appeal for making the United States a more moral country. At other times, especially in reference to the budget, the Congressman and members of the audience used “we” to reference to their identity as political conservatives. Lastly, the term “we” was referenced in nearly every question about policy issues by saying, “what are we going to do?” In this instance, the member of Congress or the audience member was emphasizing their national sameness as Americans and speaking on behalf of the nation.

These town hall meetings suggest that a strategic use of group identities seems to be employed in various settings. In the first town hall meeting where issues of importance that concerned the well being of those living in the state were put forth, both the representative and those in attendance activated their identity as Oklahomans. The second town hall meeting suggested an even more strategic use in which multiple identities were referenced in order to appeal to those in the room. Moreover, these identities were activated briefly and those in the room seemed to understand the different identity appeals. The Congressman referenced his identity as a Christian, a conservative, a Republican, and an American when trying to make a case for his stance on policy issues. Likewise, members of the audience tended to reference either their identity as conservatives or Americans when



discussing policy issues. This fluid switching between identities seems to occur in a manner similar to that of ethnic identity in which a repertoire of different ethnic identities exists and can be activated depending on the setting (Chandra 2012). In this case, only the Christian and American national identity might be classified as ethnic, but those attending made use of several group identities within the confines of one setting in order to appeal to multiple identity dimensions. Evidence from town halls thus suggests that there is a natural tendency of individuals to appeal to multiple identities in order to legitimate their position, and there is a strong tendency to “talk with the nation” when confronting national and international policy problems.

## Chapter 4: conclusion

The evidence gathered from interviews and participant observation suggests there is great promise in studying national identity using the “everyday nationalism” approach. While two of the major themes, freedom and the concept of an immigrant nation, are found in the American identity literature (Huntington 1983; Schildkraut 2014), this approach reveals richer detail about the nuances present within these common themes. Being American may indeed have roots in “multiple traditions” but this does not necessarily suggest that all of these norms or values are understood in similar ways, if at all (Smith 1997; Schildkraut 2007). More importantly, these findings indicate that the meaning behind national identity is not only varied but also functions to frame understandings of complex issues and phenomena.

An “everyday nationalism” approach to studying American national identity reveals some conceptual advantages. The foremost advantage is that national identity is allowed to emerge naturally from social processes. In this research, an examination of the discursive construction of the nation revealed that conceptions of American national identity are not clear-cut. The one facet linking nearly every interview was the notion that the United States is an immigrant nation, but even this concept possessed varied meaning for each participant in both how they constructed their notion of American identity and the subsequent framing of national issues. The “everyday nationalism” approach thus possesses an important advantage in that it goes beyond the

“uniform and categorically bounded views” that Fox suggests are an “artifact of research instruments that implicitly or explicitly provide their respondents with uniform or categorically bounded questions” (2004, 378-379). When studying how social processes construct a sense of collective belonging to the nation, the researcher must be methodologically careful to avoid nationalizing those they are studying (Brubaker 2006). Additionally, an “everyday nationalism” approach that employs discourse analysis allows researchers to move beyond elite rhetoric and examine how ordinary individuals express their understanding of the nation (Goode and Stroup 2015; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008).

Semi-structured interviews with ordinary Americans point to three common themes: the United States is thought to be an immigrant nation, “freedom” is commonly spoken of but understood in varied ways, and individuals struggle to define what it means to be American but are nonetheless proud. Interviews also revealed that there were strong differences in the way people conceived of the United States as an immigrant nation. For most individuals, this meant that part of being American was accepting diverse cultures and taking in refugees. Other individuals, like Margaret and John, suggested the United States was an immigrant nation, but their use of the term functioned as an apology for rhetoric that was consistently exclusionary and somewhat demeaning towards Mexicans, Muslims, and other immigrants. The concept of “freedom” was also commonly articulated but used with meanings

that ranged from civil and political liberties to freedom to eat where one wants. Lastly, interviews strongly pointed to a difficulty in defining what exactly it meant to be American. However, this difficulty did not impede individuals from overwhelmingly agreeing that they were proud to be American.

Evidence from interviews and participant observation experiences also suggests that individuals may have difficulty “talking about” the nation but are still able to “talk with,” or speak on behalf of, the nation about issues of national concern (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). Language that emphasizes “intra-national sameness or similarity,” such as “we” and “our” is frequently used by individuals when talking normatively about policy issues (Cillia et al. 1999). Furthermore, there seems to be a strong relationship between how being American is constructed and how individuals process policy issues. Individuals that emphasize the idea that the United States was an immigrant nation tend to offer solutions to policy problems, such as the Syrian refugee crisis and immigration reform, which are inclusive and embrace the idea of cultural diversity. Those individuals that emphasize the United States is a Christian nation tend to process similar issues with solutions that serve to exclude others they see as contrary to American ideals, such as Muslims. They also tend to emphasize solutions to policy issues that center around “putting God back into” government, schools, and society. These findings contribute to the American politics literature on American identity in that they seem to confirm that while participants consistently repeat some norms, there

is significant variation in assigned meaning. Additionally, findings that suggest individuals have a difficult time defining what it means to be American call into question assumptions made by others in the field about how similarly American identity is constituted; these findings suggest that survey methodology may be imputing certain norms onto participants through a process in which people are asked how much they agree with certain norms that are said to be an important part of how Americans see themselves. Lastly, the observations here that suggest there is an important connection between the context and the identity that is activated contribute to both the American politics field and the field of comparative politics. This finding suggests that while some research shows that people tend to think of themselves as primarily American (Schildkraut 2007; 2011), it is unlikely that this identity is truly salient unless they are confronting issues of national importance. For the comparative politics field, these findings further contribute to the idea that American national identity is only one of many identities that make up a repertoire and can be activated and fluidly switched from and to depending on the context (Chandra 2012). Participant observation experiences further confirm existing literature that describes this fluid shifting between identities (Chandra 2012), but findings here contribute further to that literature by suggesting that individuals and elites tend to fluidly move through group identities that serve to legitimate their argument. Thus individuals emphasize multiple group identities in an attempt to add power to their claim.

There are benefits and weaknesses to the research design used here. As explained by Miller-Idriss (2012), a major advantage of formal interviewing is that recorded transcripts allow researchers to capture the potential contradictions that might be overlooked in participant observation. On the other hand, one of the weaknesses in this research design is that semi-structured interviews probe issues in an artificial way. People do not normally meet with strangers and answer interview questions. One way to correct this weakness and another benefit of the “everyday nationalism” approach lies in its ability to not only find rich meaning behind nationhood but also in its ability to find the contexts in which that nationhood matters. Participant observation experiences, such as town hall meetings, allow ordinary people to voice their opinions and concerns to politicians. This setting has great potential to reveal both the context in which such discursive construction takes place and rich accounts about what it means to be American. Additionally, a town hall meeting presents a unique opportunity in which ordinary individuals can take on a national frame of vision and express these ideas to elite political actors. Further ethnographic study that includes repeated interviews with a larger, more diverse sample of the population has the potential to reveal much more about how American national identity is constructed, the contexts in which it is deployed, and how individuals make sense of their relationship to the nation. Additionally, survey methodology that is less structured and allows individuals to express their opinions freely would greatly complement this study. The

“everyday nationalism” approach thus appears to be an especially appropriate strategy to understand these dynamics.

Future projects that intend to use an “everyday nationalism” approach to studying American identity could examine the ways in which Americans “consume”, “choose”, and “perform” the nation. Research that focuses on the consumption and eating habits of Americans could reveal how ordinary decisions about what products to purchase and what types of food are associated with being American have the power to construct a sense of national belonging. Furthermore, the interview between John and Margaret in this study suggests that interviews or focus groups that occur with multiple people may be promising for future research on how opinions become a social and political reality to ordinary individuals. The interview with John and Margaret featured an interesting signaling process in which one individual would reveal their opinion on a topic of conversation and the other would affirm the sentiment and occasionally elaborate further. Further research on how individuals invoke the nation and construct American identity might help researchers better understand the mechanisms that facilitate this process.

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## Appendix A: Interview Prompts and Question Domain

### 1. Views on life and politics

- What do you think about politics, in general?
- What are things that you think about on a daily basis?
- Is politics something important to you?
- Do you think politics affects your everyday life?
- What do you think about the current election cycle?
- What do you think about world politics?

### 2. Syrian refugee crisis

- What do you think about the Syrian refugee crisis?
- Do you think the US is responding correctly?

### 3. Immigration

- What do you think about immigration?
- What do you think about illegal immigration?
- Do you think it is too difficult or too easy to gain citizenship in the United States?
- Do you think the United States should have an official language?

### 4. Being American

- What do you think it means to be American?
- How would you describe being American to a citizen from another country?
- What values would you say are American?
- What does it mean to be a good US citizen?
- What does it mean to be a bad US citizen?
- In what ways do you think being American is different from being a citizen of another country?

## Appendix B: Participant information

Name	Age	City	Information
James	21	Norman, OK	Student
Anthony	34	Norman, OK	Student, Veteran
Thomas	40	Norman, OK	Veteran
Margaret	70	Norman, OK	Retired schoolteacher, Married to John (interviewed together)
John	74	Norman, OK	Retired civil servant, Veteran, Married to Margaret (interviewed together)
Susan	75	Piedmont, OK	Retired, Married to Timothy
Timothy	79	Piedmont, OK	Retired, Veteran, Married to Susan
Justin	32	Norman, OK	Student
Laura	31	Norman, OK	Lawyer
Jennifer	28	Norman, OK	Hispanic