



UMEÅ UNIVERSITY

The Interplay between National Identity and Democracy

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Abstract

Background

National identity, the sense of belonging to a nation, significantly influences both unity and division within societies. It can be voluntary, based on shared beliefs, or non-voluntary, tied to ancestry. These aspects affect democracy in distinct ways. Further, national identity encompasses the attitudes and emotions that people hold towards their nation. This dissertation examines how national identity impacts democracy at both the individual and the societal level. Although the theoretical links between national identity and democracy are well-established, empirical research on these relationships remains scarce. This study seeks to address the gap by exploring the effects that various forms of national identity have on individual support for democracy and the level of formal democracy across different countries.

Data and Methods

This dissertation primarily uses cross-sectional data and employs a range of analytical techniques that include multilevel models, mediation analysis, and ordinary least squares regression. Data are sourced mainly from the European Values Study (EVS), the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem), and the Project Manifesto. The datasets offer comprehensive coverage of national identity and democracy, enabling a robust analysis of their interrelationships across various contexts and time periods.

Results

At the societal level, top-down nationalism driven by political elites and non-voluntary collective national identity among the populace negatively affect formal democracy. When top-down nationalism and non-voluntary national identity coexist, there is an interaction effect that further diminishes the level of formal democracy. At the individual level, a stronger emphasis on non-voluntary features of national identity correlates with lower support for democracy. Additionally, there is an interaction effect between the societal and individual levels, whereby higher levels of formal democracy amplify the negative relationship between non-voluntary identity and support for democracy. The negative impact of non-voluntary national identity on civic beliefs and participation largely explains its negative correlation with support for democracy. Taken together, the analyses underscore the detrimental impact of non-voluntary national identity on democracy, suggesting that fostering a democratic ethos requires promoting inclusive, voluntary aspects of national identity. No relationship was found between national attachment and the level of formal democracy.

Conclusion

These results challenge classical and liberal nationalist views. They suggest that strong, shared national identities do not necessarily lead to positive democratic outcomes. Promoting inclusive, voluntary aspects of national identity aligns with core democratic values, such as political equality, whereas non-voluntary aspects of national identity do not. Thus, non-voluntary national identity seems to be an obstacle to democratic trajectories.

Sammanfattning

Denna avhandling undersöker sambandet mellan nationell identitet och demokrati. Nationell identitet handlar framför allt om två saker: att se sig själv som en del av en viss nation och om uppfattningar om vem som tillhör den nationen. Det finns två olika former av nationell identitet. En frivillig nationell identitet kopplar nationstillhörighet till politiska värden, till exempel respekt för lagar och institutioner. En restriktiv nationell identitet kopplar nationstillhörighet till etniskt ursprung. Jag har undersökt hur dessa olika former av nationell identitet påverkar hur demokratiskt ett land är. De statistiska analyserna är baserade på enkät- och intervjudata som sträcker sig över tre decennier från över 60 olika länder. Fokus ligger på att observera hur olika former av nationell identitet påverkar graden av fria och rättvisa val samt respekten för individens fri- och rättigheter, vilka är centrala aspekter av en liberal demokrati.

Resultaten visar att en restriktiv nationell identitet har en negativ inverkan på demokratin. I länder där en stor andel av befolkningen har en restriktiv nationell identitet är demokratin generellt svagare. Detta samband gäller även när politiska ledare betonar en restriktiv nationell identitet; ju mer nationalism de politiska makthavarna ger uttryck för, desto lägre är graden av demokrati. På individnivå syns samma mönster. Personer med en restriktiv nationell identitet är mindre benägna att stödja demokrati som statsskick och föredrar i högre grad en stark ledare som inte förespråkar allmänna fria val. Beträffande den frivilliga nationella identiteten är sambandet det motsatta. En frivillig nationell identitet bidrar till att stärka demokratin.

Slutsatsen är att även om vi inte kan välja vårt nationella ursprung, så kan vi välja hur vi tänker om vem som tillhör den nationella gemenskapen. Detta val påverkar våra framtida möjligheter till att leva i ett demokratiskt samhälle. Ju mer restriktiv syn på nationstillhörighet bland medborgare och politiska makthavare, desto svagare blir demokratin. De negativa effekterna på demokratin blir särskilt påtagliga när både den politiska eliten och befolkningen har en snäv syn på nationstillhörighet. I det nuvarande politiska läget i världen växer nationalistiska partier som betonar en restriktiv nationell identitet. Denna avhandling bidrar till en ökad kunskap om de möjliga konsekvenserna av denna utveckling. Avhandlingen visar att ökad popularitet för dessa partier inte bara påverkar valresultat och politiska beslut, utan även demokratin som sådan.

List of original papers

- I. Gabrielsson, D. (2022). National identity and democracy: Effects of non-voluntarism on formal democracy. *Nations and Nationalism*, 28(2), 501–522.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/nana.12766>
- II. Gabrielsson, D., Bohman, A., & Hjerm, M. (2024). *National identity and democratic trajectories*.
- III. Gabrielsson, D. (2021). The role of actual democracy in the link between national identity and support for democracy. *Comparative Sociology*, 20(4), 473-500.
https://brill.com/view/journals/coso/20/4/article-p473_3.xml
- IV. Gabrielsson, D., Eger, M. A., & Hjerm, M. (2024). *National identity, support for democracy, and the mediating role of civic beliefs and participation*.

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Introduction

In today's interconnected world, where borders are sometimes mere lines on a map, the concept of national identity endures as a powerful force that can both unite and divide. A nation typically refers to a group of people who share common cultural features, with a specific territory that they consider home. National identity, then, is how individuals perceive themselves as part of this group – feeling emotionally connected and holding specific beliefs about what it means to belong to that nation. Having a national identity binds people together, creating a sense of unity. Given the role of the national identity as a unifying force, research on this topic often assumes theoretical connections to democracy, as unity fosters the solidarity essential for democratic governance.

The starting point in research on democracy is often an assumption of a unified populace subject to democratic governance. As national identity and democracy are profoundly intertwined, many political theorists and philosophers argue that democracy can only be achieved through the lens of national identity (Rousseau, 1762; Tocqueville, 1848/2000 Mill, 1856/1991; Miller, 2000; Verba, 1965). Empirical research on national identity rarely examines its direct impact on democracy, even though national identity affects various political outcomes, such as trust in government, resource distribution, and voting behavior. Democracy research has extensively explored factors related to societal unity, such as shared beliefs, power distribution among social groups, and the diversity of ethnic and language groups. However, it has not considered national identity as a factor contributing to the level of democracy in a country. This oversight leaves a substantial gap in understanding how national identity and democracy relate to and influence each other. The overall aim of this dissertation is to explore how national identity affects democracy, at both the societal and the individual level.

To investigate the relationship between national identity and democracy, it is important to acknowledge the different forms of national identity. National identity varies in its restrictiveness, creating different senses of unity. Some believe that national belonging is beyond one's control, based on factors like ancestry. Others view national belonging as a choice, grounded in a shared political creed and agreement on laws (Kohn, 1944). A bond to a nation that derives from choice represents a voluntary national identity, contrasting with the non-voluntary nature of a national identity dependent on the accident of origin. Hence, national identity as a “way of thinking” is a mode of representing or conceptualizing one's nation that can take on different forms. Its restrictiveness depends on whether national belonging is seen as voluntary or non-voluntary (Mišćević, 2020).

However, the relationship between national identity and support for democracy is complex. Within nations, voluntary civic stances coexist with ethnic group belonging and form essential parts of the nation-state, the governmental structure created around a nation. This suggests that neither voluntary nor non-voluntary national identities alone can solidify democratic governance (Lijphart, 1999). Although voluntary national identity theoretically aligns with democratic principles, the implications of non-voluntary aspects are more ambiguous and warrant further exploration. A non-voluntary identity presents several potential advantages, including promoting a natural sense of belonging and solidarity (Barrington, 1997). However, the restrictive view of nationhood may foster an "us versus them" mentality, leading to the marginalization and discrimination of citizens considered different from the majority. This challenges democratic principles such as equality, plurality, and minority rights, potentially undermining support for democratic governance. Thus, an intriguing question arises: although the nation is often seen as a precondition for democracy, identifying with features that mark the uniqueness of the nation might not always benefit democratic governance. Therefore, the impacts of non-voluntary national identity are especially compelling to explore empirically.

On the societal scale, other features of national identity beyond mere restrictiveness about national belonging can influence formal democracy. The "national identity argument" (Miller & Ali, 2014) suggests that a shared sense of belonging, marked by emotional bonds among citizens to their nation and each other, strengthens formal democracy. A strong collective identity is believed to foster trust and societal justice, thereby impacting the extent to which formal democracy is institutionalized (Lind, 1994; Moore, 2001; Gustavsson & Miller, 2020; Mill, 1856/1991). On the societal scale, democracy refers to the conditions of formal democratic rules, procedures, and institutions within a country. In this context, "country" refers to a political and geographic entity that may encompass multiple distinct national or ethnic identities within its borders, which thus coexist under the governance of a single state. Formal democracy refers to empirical evaluations of the current state of governance (Dahl, 1990). For example, we can compare Norway and North Korea by examining their constitutional and institutional conditions through the lens of their current democratic practices. In Norway, democratic principles are fully operational, with free elections, the rule of law, and protected civil liberties. Conversely, North Korea's democratic conditions are severely deficient, featuring a single-party system, restricted freedoms, and a lack of genuine electoral processes.

In summary, I will investigate how and why national identity influences support for democracy at the individual level. At the country level, I will investigate the effects of national identity on the degree of formal democracy.

Disposition

The introduction chapter is divided into six sections. In the first section, I define the concept of national identity at both the individual and societal levels, laying the groundwork for its operationalization. The second section focuses on democracy, discussing both individual support for democracy and formal democracy at the societal level. I review parts of the extensive research explaining support for democracy and levels of formal democracy. In doing so, I focus on factors present in the literatures of democracy and national identity, particularly civic beliefs and political culture. In the third section, I bridge the gap between the two literatures by reviewing how those same factors, such as civic beliefs, relate to national identity, particularly by recognizing national identity as crucial in creating a political culture.

The expectations for how different aspects of national identity affect democracy are derived from a thought experiment inspired by Rawls's idea of the "Veil of Ignorance" and then empirically tested. The fourth section describes the data, measurements, and methods. The fifth section summarizes the empirical findings, highlighting key insights from the articles. Lastly, the sixth section concludes with a comprehensive summary of my conclusions and initiates further discussion. This part integrates the findings with the previous research and proposes directions for future research.

National identity

In this section, I expand on the concepts of national identity introduced at the outset. I describe in more detail that national identity has two fundamental parts: self-classification as part of a nation and distinguishing those who belong to a nation from those who do not. Further, I acknowledge other aspects of individual national identity, which cover a variety of emotional bonds to the nation. At the societal level, my focus is on two aspects of collective national identity: the aggregate of individuals' self-classification and national attachment, and the sum of the voluntary and non-voluntary components of individual identities. I also discuss two other aspects of collective national identity and explain why they are not relevant for this thesis.

Defining national identity at the individual level

Self-classifications and national bonds

National identity is typically rooted in one's place of residence and constitutes a crucial part of an individual's identity (Massey, 1994). People normally view themselves as members of a group, defined by its association with a specific nation (Gellner, 1983). Accordingly, the most fundamental component of national identity is self-classification, which is one of the two components in the definition that I use in this thesis. National bonds involve attitudes and emotions that come to the fore when a person cares about her nation. National attachment is an emotional bond to the nation, which distinguishes it from attachment to a city, region, or the global community (Miller, 1995). National pride is another positive feeling towards the nation, often derived from accomplishments in various domains like sports and arts, or through symbolic acts such as respecting the flag or national anthem. Patriotism has dual aspects: uncritical and critical (Smith & Jerkko, 1998). Uncritical patriotism means support for one's nation, regardless of the moral implications of its actions. In contrast, critical patriotism means supporting your nation, or country, because it aligns with your values, like cheering for it when it does what you consider right (Primoratz, 2002). National chauvinism is a more assertive belief, thinking one's nation superior to all others (Van Evera, 1994).

Including all these attributes leads to a definition that states that "B has a national identity if and only if B has an emotional attachment to a nation, feels national pride, exhibits chauvinism, and demonstrates patriotism," which is inordinately narrow. According to this definition, many citizens will not qualify as having a national identity despite classifying themselves as part of a nation. However, determining the precise components that should constitute a definition of national identity is challenging. Nonetheless, I propose a broader definition that includes one additional defining characteristic beyond mere self-identification: criteria for national belonging.

This characteristic is crucial for distinguishing between members and non-members of a nation, emphasizing the attributes considered essential for an individual's connection to their nation. These distinctions can be either descriptive or normative. Descriptive traits serve as an outline for how one thinks about co-nationals. For instance, one might say that a large portion of those who live in Sweden are cultural Christians who speak Swedish. This thesis focuses on the normative aspect, emphasizing boundary maintenance, which is essential for capturing people's perceptions of who is a member of a nation (Conversi, 1995; Eger & Valdez, 2023). The normative approach captures the extent to which individuals prioritize specific attributes as essential for national membership. As such, some argue that only those born in Sweden can be considered authentic Swedes. This statement reflects a normative view of national identity, suggesting that true belonging in a national community is tied to birthplace.

National membership criteria: Voluntary and non-voluntary national identity

Different terminologies have been used when considering normative membership criteria. The most frequently cited idea refers to civic and ethnic national identity (Kohn, 1944; Smith, 1991, 9-12; Özkirimli, 2005). A person with an ethnic national identity view sees the nation as a web of common roots. Ethnicity is the fundamental basis for membership in a nation, implying a natural bond among its members. Civic national identity is grounded in a shared political creed and agreement on laws, including citizenship rights. This bond, deriving from choice, represents a voluntary alignment, contrasting with the non-voluntary nature of ethnic identity.

Further expanding on Kohn's seminal work (1944) and his distinction of ethnic versus civic identity, various scholars differentiate between objective/ascriptive and voluntary/civic identities (Jones & Smith, 2001), primordial versus instrumental views (Geertz, 1963; Bačová, 1998, p. 33), and inclusive versus exclusive nationalism (Tudor, 2018). These classifications refer to the voluntary or non-voluntary nature of national membership, with primordial and exclusive views highlighting birthright and early socialization, and instrumental and inclusive views seeing identity as a deliberate choice based on civic values. Mudde's (2017) distinction between nativist and non-nativist positions highlights the conflict between maintaining homogeneity by viewing nationhood as non-voluntary and embracing diversity by accepting nationhood as voluntary. Collectively, these perspectives illustrate the normative stances in determining national belonging, framing it within a spectrum ranging from non-voluntary to voluntary national identities.

Despite these classifications' differing terminologies, they touch on a central theme: is national identity voluntary or not? Based on the lowest common denominators of these

distinctions, accounting for the features that individuals consider essential in their connection to a nation, I stipulate¹ a definition of national identity as follows:

Person A has a national identity if, and only if, A believes that being a genuine member of a nation requires that she (i) classifies herself as a member of that nation, and (ii) embraces attributes of the nationality that distinguish members of the nation from non-members.

A less formal definition would be: "National identity means that individuals see themselves as part of their nation and have a way to distinguish those who belong to the nation from those who do not." The attributes used to distinguish people can include elements of personal commitment or choice (voluntary), elements beyond one's individual control (non-voluntary), or a mix of both. When both voluntary and non-voluntary elements are present, the national identity is considered non-voluntary due to the inclusion of factors that lie outside one's will. A voluntary national identity signifies that an individual believes membership in a nation is a choice, underpinned by personal decisions or beliefs, rather than determined by birthplace or family background (Habermas, 1996). For example, it includes adherence to legal frameworks and values like equality. It also encompasses active cultural engagement, such as learning a common language for effective communication and participating in national events, which foster a sense of belonging. In summary, the definition means that national identity starts with how one sees oneself (self-classification) and then extends to include how one differentiates members of the nation from non-members.

Some criteria are obviously voluntary, such as respecting institutions and laws, whereas others are clearly non-voluntary, such as ancestry. Regarding cultural markers like religion and language, it is less obvious whether the requirements of nationhood refer to voluntary or non-voluntary features. One could argue that religion is not completely non-voluntary, as people can convert; however, this does not negate its non-voluntary aspects. Belonging to a religious category is established in early childhood through family practices and traditions, making it less a personal choice and more an inherent part of one's identity (Boyatzis et al., 2006). The impact of early socialization makes religious belonging heavily lean toward a non-voluntary criterion

¹ Stipulative definitions are tools for constructing clear and unambiguous frameworks in science and philosophy. These definitions are about setting the terms for discussion, allowing for the establishment of a consistent language structure that can support logical and empirical investigation (Carnap, 1956). They are not about truth or falsity but about usefulness in a particular context (Britannica, 2023; Oxford Academics, 2024). Kripke (1980) has also used stipulative definitions to introduce new names through descriptions, fixing the reference of a name without making the description synonymous with the name. This concept aids understanding of contingent a priori truths. In this context, the wording "if, and only if," establishes a precise and exclusive condition. It ensures that the condition is both necessary and sufficient. If we simply use "if," this implies only a sufficient condition, not necessarily an exclusive one.

of nationhood. Moreover, historically and within contemporary nationalist rhetoric, religion has been tied to non-voluntary physical appearances connected to ethno-national origin (Brubaker, 1996; Hobsbawm, 1992; Geertz, 1973; Jensen, 2012).

A pragmatic approach supports viewing religion as a non-voluntary aspect of national identity. It is difficult to justify religion as both important and voluntary, given its deep ties to personal integrity and identity. Those who see national belonging as voluntary typically deprioritize religion, making its voluntariness secondary. Conversely, for those with a non-voluntary national identity, religion's role in social cohesion, rooted in early socialization, depends on its non-voluntary nature. As a result, it is challenging to find a standpoint where religion is defended as a voluntary criterion for national belonging. The practical significance of religion outweighs theoretical arguments for its voluntariness. Thus, it is reasonable to regard religion as largely non-voluntary, at least in relation to national identity.

However, as religion is not entirely non-voluntary, we must consider conditions that might challenge the pragmatic approach. In highly pluralistic societies, where individuals may view their religious identity as a personal choice rather than an inherited trait, the diversity of beliefs complicates the notion of religion as non-voluntary. Nevertheless, requiring adherence to a specific religion for national belonging undermines the equality that voluntarism presupposes. Therefore, if a religious requirement eliminates equality, it implies non-voluntarism. This logical conclusion reveals the tension between voluntarism and mandatory religious belonging, even within diverse societies. As a result, religious requirements largely function as non-voluntary in relation to national belonging.

Regarding language, one could argue that it is a non-voluntary criterion because it is learned through early socialization. However, compared with what is the case for religion, this argument falls short because the requirement to learn a new language does not clearly infringe on equality, as there may be a mutual desire for effective communication. There is a fundamental difference between the demand to convert from one religion to another and the demand to add a new language to one's existing repertoire.² Thus, religion remains a primarily non-voluntary criterion of nationhood, whereas new language learning leans towards voluntarism.

² In an analogy, picture when Mary embarks on a journey to a new community in her gleaming BMW, a testament to her admiration for German engineering. Her delight turns to dismay upon discovering that her prized possession is incompatible with the new community's regulations. Only bicycles are allowed on the streets there. She realizes she cannot use her BMW in the new community and it is promptly confiscated. She converts to cycling. The confiscation casts a shadow over Mary's once bright enthusiasm for exploring the new community. Each pedal stroke feels like an unwilling surrender to the reality of her circumstances, a reminder of what once was and now seems unattainable. Yet, despite her longing, Mary perseveres, driven by her determination to adapt, albeit with a bittersweet sense of resignation. In the realm of language, the analogy is

The advantages of using the voluntary versus non-voluntary distinction

I argue that building on the distinction between voluntary and non-voluntary features and acknowledging that the concept of national identity encompasses both descriptive elements and normative requirements, offers a clear, coherent, and precise framework for understanding said concept. Such precision aids in operationalizing of national identity and, in contemporary research and debates, enhances our ability to navigate the complexities of mixing non-voluntary ethnic items with civic beliefs.

Relying on Kohn's seminal work (1944) and his distinction of ethnic versus civic keeps one in dialogue with a large share of sociological research. However, as several commentators have pointed out (e.g., Özkirimli, 2005; Smith, 1971/1983), the ethnic/civic approach has its drawbacks. First, the criteria for these categories vary globally, leading to inconsistencies. At the country level, the distinction between ethnic/east and civic/west can be misleading. For instance, Spain, Belgium, and Ireland, despite being socially backward at the time (1944), belong to the ethnic/east camp. In some cases, such as Türkiye and Tanzania, the elite describe a blend of “voluntarist” and “organic” elements as making up nationhood. In contrast, the voluntary/non-voluntary approach avoids such inconsistency, as aspects like ancestry and birthplace are universally non-voluntary. In other words, the voluntary versus non-voluntary distinction provides consistency across global contexts.

Second, Kohn's seminal work explores whether a nation comprises ethnic or civic components. His work does not explicitly address how civic characteristics coexist with ethnic ones at the individual level (Brubaker, 2004). Within the context of national identity defined by voluntary/non-voluntary aspects, the presence of both features does not pose an issue, as mentioned above.

Third, national identity encompasses both descriptive elements and normative requirements. Kohn's distinction describes a nation's inherent properties, such as its predominant language and its ethnic composition or unique historical experiences, like Greece's classical heritage and its influence on national identity. The contents of a person's national identity become blurred when descriptive elements (such as language or ancestry) get entangled with normative stances (such as how important it is to be able to speak the native language and if one must have ancestral ties to be perceived as a true member of the nation). Such entanglement leads to ambiguous research outcomes, where normative stances are used as proxies to measure or theoretically assume a degree of cultural diversity or vice versa (e.g., Wright & Reeskens, 2013). Precision in terminology and categorization helps minimize overlap and confusion. By

different. Mary retains her BMW and gets a fair amount of money to procure a bicycle. With her new bicycle, she will avail herself of the new community's social fabric and amenities.

framing national membership within the voluntary/non-voluntary distinction, I aim to draw a more precise line between normative evaluations and descriptions of existing characteristics. The majority of available data capture normative stances of nationhood, meaning that the voluntary versus non-voluntary distinction is consistent therewith, whereas Kohn's civic/ethnic distinction is not. It is important to note that this criticism of the inconsistency between descriptive characteristics and operationalization based on normative criteria is not a criticism of Kohn's pioneering work. The importance of his contributions in this area of research should not be understated.

Lastly, the shift towards a distinction that directly addresses a normative approach resonates with contemporary debates, moving beyond the purely descriptive analysis provided by the ethnic/civic frameworks. In an era of global migration and pluralism, these normative questions are crucial – especially in discussions concerning immigration, multiculturalism, and integration.

In summary, utilizing the distinction between voluntary and non-voluntary features and concentrating on normative aspects provides a clear, coherent, and precise approach for understanding fundamental aspects of national identity. This analytical precision enhances empirical research and facilitates dialogue between political sociology and the broader field of nationalism studies, expanding beyond Kohn's pioneering work.

National identities at the societal level

In this thesis, I adopt an individualist approach to understanding collective national identity, meaning that I view it as made up of individuals and their interactions rather than being an entity of its own. In doing so, I view collective national identity as not being synonymous with a nation or the state of ethnocultural diversity (e.g., Dahl, 1990, p. 255; Hobsbawm, 1992; Smith, 1991; Mill, 1856/1991). Nor do I view it as something to be depicted in metaphorical terms or as “social facts,” which could result in expressions such as “the spirit of the people (Volksgeist)” (Herder, 1784-1791), “collective mentality” (Halbwachs, 1925/1992; Durkheim, 1893/1984), or “national characters” (Naim, 1997; Kamusella, 2008).

Adopting an individualist view means that a collective national identity is considered to refer to individuals, their interactions, and how they choose to act in the light of their thoughts (Miller, 1995, p. 92; see Weber, 1922; Simmel, 1903; Elster, 1989). For a collective national identity to be considered real, the actions of the individuals that constitute this identity must have an observable impact on society. This ensures that the collective identity is not just a theoretical concept, but rather a reference point

manifested through the real-world actions and behaviors of individuals. For example, individuals who identify with a collective national identity might support each other through community programs or mutual aid. Such support can strengthen social cohesion and provide tangible benefits like disaster relief or social welfare.

Accordingly, a collective national identity as the sum of individual preferences means that changes in individual perceptions of nation-oriented properties result in an altered collective national identity. In this thesis, collective identities drawing on individual perceptions are viewed as taking on two forms. They are the results of my definition of an individual's national identity:

- (i) Aggregations of self-classification and national attachment.
- (ii) Aggregations of attributes that distinguish members of the nation from non-members.

Aggregates of self-classification and national bonds (i) and normative stances of nationhood (ii) represent collective preferences among individuals. These two aspects – at what level of detail people classify themselves and the prevalent beliefs about national belonging – converge to form collective preferences. These are the shared tendencies among people within a nation, such as a shared sense of identity or shared values. The individualist approach also allows for measuring the extent to which the contents of the national identity are shared. Consensus on what constitutes national belonging indicates complete homogeneity of national identity, whereas disagreement indicates heterogeneity.

I argue that recognizing how collective identities originate from individuals and their interactions helps us better understand the mutual interaction between individual and collective identities. Collective national identities cannot exist without individual national identities. The collective national identity is the sum of individual preferences. This perspective underscores two key dynamics:

First, individuals who identify with a nation inherently perceive and contribute to the collective national identity. Second, individuals cannot simply adopt an existing collective identity and then perceive their unique national identity from this standpoint. Doing so would ignore personal and nuanced aspects of identity.

Thus, although collective national identities exist as reference points, each individual identity – although contributing to the collective – retains its unique characteristics, essence, and significance, rather than merely being part of a collective preference. This

interplay ensures that though the collective national identity is significant, it does not overshadow the diverse identities of individuals.

Accordingly, an individual's national identity cannot fully merge with the collective identity, nor can the collective identity entirely define an individual's perception of their national identity. Collective identity serves as a reference point, embracing and integrating individual national identities. In that capacity, a collective identity does not oppose one's individual identity. In fact, this relationship illustrates the mutual interplay between the unique personal aspects of an individual's identity and the broader, shared elements of the collective national identity. Each individual identity contributes to and is influenced by the collective identity, although both preserve their distinctiveness. This suggests that it is meaningful to empirically examine the consequences of national identity at both the individual and the societal level. It seems more useful than suggesting that demographics or metaphors, which lack agency, can on their own cause anything to occur in society.

In summary, I conceptualize collective national identity in two forms: aggregations of self-classification and national attachment and aggregations of voluntary and non-voluntary features. The individualist view clarifies the connection between individual and societal identities, making their interrelation easier to explain. This approach enables a coherent analysis of the relationship between national identity and democracy at both the individual and the societal level.

Democracy

Democracy refers to both individual beliefs and a societal condition. This section explains these two aspects in more detail. Given the extensive body of research on these topics, it is important to note that it is almost impossible to fully do justice to all the existing studies. At the individual level, the choice of factors explaining support for democracy is informed by beliefs and behaviors that also relate to national identity in various ways, such as authoritarianism, trust in strangers, and involvement in organizations that serve the nation's or society's interests. Reviewing these overlapping properties will later help clarify the relationship between national identity and democracy. At the societal level, I review factors that will serve as control variables, such as economic wealth and the consolidation of democratic institutions, and the role of political culture.

Individual support for democracy

Support for democracy refers to both diffuse support for the idea of having a democratic regime and specific opinions about the performance of current regimes. Easton (1975) presented the crucial roles of both specific and diffuse support in maintaining the stability of a political system. Specific support relates to public satisfaction with government performance and the direct benefits received. Diffuse support acts as a fundamental pillar for a system's resilience in the face of challenges or contentious decisions. This thesis focuses on diffuse support for democracy. However, current research shows that diffuse support is generally strong worldwide and serves as a poor predictor of formal democracy. This leads to the assumption that the underlying factors of support for democracy are crucial.

In response to socioeconomic challenges such as “government overload,” where democracies are overwhelmed by increasing demands, fostering public cynicism (Crozier et al., 1975), Norris (1999) conducted systematic research to explore various dimensions of support for democracy. The aim was to better understand citizens' diffuse support for democracy, their satisfaction with government performance, and their engagement in democratic processes. Norris investigated the potential decrease in diffuse support for democracy and found little empirical evidence of such a decline in Western European countries during the 1970s and 1980s (Klingemann, 1999). Overall, EU citizens maintained their support for the idea of having a democratic regime. Hence, contrary to concerns at the time, there was no evidence of a decline in support for democracy as a preferred form of governance. Instead, Klingemann introduced the concept of “dissatisfied democrats” – individuals who continue to firmly support democracy in the abstract, despite criticism of concurrent governmental performance. Dalton (1998) performed a multi country comparison of opinions on the performance

of current regimes and support for the idea of having a democratic regime. He noted that opinions about the performance of current regimes often depended on immediate circumstances, whereas diffuse support for democracy allows for a broader, cross-national analysis. Similarly, Mishler and Rose (1994, 1999) investigated diffuse support for democracy in seven Central and Eastern European countries transitioning from communism. They found strong diffuse support for democracy, even amid the challenges of transitioning from authoritarian rule.

Today, we see a similar discussion about “democracy’s fading allure” (Plattner, 2015). Some researchers raise concerns about decreased diffuse support for democracy, but there is no clear evidence to confirm this. Foa and Mounk (2017a, 2017b) argue that the youngest generations in consolidated democracies are less supportive of the idea of having a democratic regime. However, critics of these studies assert that diffuse support for democracy is still prevalent in younger generations, especially among those who have grown up in secure material environments. The young generation may be critical of political authorities but they remain committed to democratic beliefs (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Kirsch & Welzel, 2019; Voeten, 2017). Wuttke and colleagues (2020) analyzed survey data from eighteen European countries, studying cohort, life cycle, and period effects. Their results showed that citizens still support the democratic system as their preferred form of governance. The observation that most countries display high levels of diffuse support for democracy yet vary in their actual democratic practices raises important questions.

Authoritarianism, trust, and civic engagement

An authoritarian mindset has been identified as a relevant factor for explaining lower levels of support for democracy. According to Adorno and colleagues (1950), authoritarian-minded individuals – who view people as types rather than as constantly shifting and dissolving groups – score low on support for democracy. The authoritarian mindset, characterized by a belief in obedience, is not consistent with democratic beliefs (Allport, 1954, pp. 395–408; Dahl, 1990, pp. 66–68). Extreme views on either the left or the right (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003) and religiosity (Altemeyer, 1996) are indicative of authoritarianism and thus correlate negatively with support for democracy.

Social trust and civic engagement are key predictors of both the functionality of actual democracy (Almond & Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 1990; Muller & Seligson, 1994) and individual support for democracy (Mishler & Rose, 2005; Uslaner, 2002). Trust in people's fairness and integrity facilitates conflict resolution while upholding democratic principles. At the individual level, it fosters citizens' commitment to

democracy and rejection of authoritarianism. At the societal level, social trust enables the reciprocal cooperation necessary for effective governance.

Regarding civic engagement, voluntary associations play a crucial role in establishing and sustaining formal democracy in countries. Tocqueville (1948/2000, p. 517) considers civic engagement fundamental to democracy, as it encourages cooperation among citizens. Voluntary associations foster democracy by promoting understanding, civic-mindedness, and prosocial behaviors (Tocqueville, 1848/2000). Scholars such as Newton (2001), Skocpol (2010), Teorell (2003), Dodge & Ospina (2016), and Paxton (2002: 257) support this view, noting that group participation strengthens democracy by teaching tolerance, promoting compromise, and stimulating political participation. However, the extent to which participation in voluntary associations positively contributes to support for democracy depends on the normative contents of said associations (e.g., Fiorina, 1999; Hooghe, 2003). As a result, some types of civic engagement might not lead to exposure to democratic norms that encourage support for democracy.

Moreover, Welzel and colleagues (2005: 122, 124) suggest that elite-challenging activities such as protests and boycotts contribute to support for democracy. Although these activities are not organized in traditional voluntary organizations, they rely on network ties and collective action. They play a crucial role in social movements aiming to foster a democratic mindset, as evidenced by advocacy for minority rights (McAdam et al., 2001). Such liberating activities may offer greater civic benefits than participation in traditional voluntary associations (see also Levi, 1996; Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Stolle, 2003; Zarwell & Robinson, 2018; Wu, 2021). Protests and boycotts foster a more active form of civic engagement, compared with traditional voluntary associations, thus increasing support for democracy. These findings suggest that support for democracy, underpinned by civic beliefs and civic engagement, is important as a link to the level of democracy in a country.

Formal democracy

At the societal level, democracy is understood in different ways within different theoretical perspectives. For example, folk democratic theories prioritize "the will of the people" (e.g., Rousseau, 1762; Achen & Bartels, 2016) and emphasize that democratic systems should reflect and respond to the common will and interests of the public. Another perspective attaches more value to fair procedures (Schumpeter, 1942). Pure proceduralism focuses on the process rather than the outcome, asserting that as long as the electoral process is fair and competitive, democracy is functioning as it should. In contrast, epistemic democracy (e.g., Estlund, 2008) emphasizes that the

value of democracy lies in its ability to track the truth, even when dealing with normative issues. Democratic processes are likely to lead to more informed and accurate decisions. Deliberative democracy, as theorized by Habermas (1984, 1987, 1996), means that democracy is strengthened when citizens engage in open, inclusive, and reasoned debates to reach reasonable outcomes. Democratic legitimacy is derived from rational deliberation and inclusive dialogue (O'Neill, 2002).

The protection of minorities is essential in the theories of Tocqueville (1848/2000), Mill (1856/1991), and Rawls (1971). Democratic governance should not simply be about majority rule, but also about ensuring that the rights and interests of minorities are safeguarded. This thesis builds primarily on this approach. More precisely, formal democracy refers to the concept of polyarchal democracy (Dahl, 1971, 1990). In this regard, to be recognized as democratic, a nation must uphold institutions that conform to specific arrangements and practices. Briefly, the political institutions of modern liberal representative democracies can be summarized by six criteria: (1) Policy control vested in elected officials; (2) Frequent and fair elections with minimal coercion; (3) Freedom of expression for effective political participation; (4) Access to alternative information sources; (5) The right to form independent associations; and (6) Inclusion of all persons subject to laws (excluding only transients and those incapable of self-care). The moral foundation that justifies and enables formal democracy is intrinsic equality. As Dahl (1990: 9, 10) states: “We ought to regard the good of every human being as intrinsically equal to that of any other.” Intrinsic equality, or political equality, holds that the life, liberty, and happiness of one person are not intrinsically superior or inferior to those of any other. All deviations from this standard need to be justified (Dahl, 1990; Christiano, 2008; Rawls, 1997).

Democracy today: the influences of media, polarization, and climate change

Tufekci (2017) explores how social media support activism by enabling rapid organization and broad information sharing, yet also highlights their challenges in sustaining movements. She emphasizes the need for adaptability and integrating online efforts with grassroots actions, to ensure lasting democratic change. Political polarization, intensified by changes in media, political tactics, and demographics due to immigration, poses a significant challenge to democracy (Klein, 2020; Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2020; Nai, 2021; Kaufmann, 2018). Achen and Bartels (2016) suggest that elections in the US often reflect entrenched social identities more than informed policy choices, thereby intensifying polarization and impacting democratic outcomes negatively.

The climate crisis presents another challenge for democratic governance. Historically, climate fluctuations have impacted global political stability and governance

(McMichael, 2017). The urgency of climate change demands coordinated and sustained action, which can be difficult to achieve in democratic systems, as they are often characterized by short political cycles and competing interests (Held et al., 2011). Democracies might struggle to respond effectively and fairly to climate change and its cascading effects, such as increased migration and resource conflicts. The tension between national interests and global solutions speaks to the heart of this challenge.

The V-Dem Democracy Report 2024 describes trends and changes in democracy globally. Their measurands are derived from Dahl's notion of polyarchical democracy. For the average global citizen, liberal democracy is at its lowest level since 1985. Since 2009, the proportion of the world's population living in autocratizing countries has exceeded that in democratizing nations. Eastern Europe and South and Central Asia are seeing notable declines in democratic practices, whereas Latin America and the Caribbean are experiencing improvements. This shift towards autocratization affects 2.8 billion people, primarily due to India's significant influence. In contrast, democratization impacts about 400 million people, with Brazil being a notable contributor. In autocratizing countries, election management bodies are losing their autonomy, which undermines the electoral process. Meanwhile, democratizing countries are seeing improvements in freedom of expression and media. Looking ahead, the report suggests that many countries are at risk of future autocratization, whereas fewer countries show potential for future democratization.

Although the influences of media, polarization, and climate change illustrate some of the challenges facing democracy today, the role of national identity in these issues cannot be understated. As we navigate globalization, political polarization, and climate challenges, national identity plays a crucial role. Understanding the dynamics between national identity and democracy is essential for crafting a democratic system resilient enough to face contemporary challenges.

Effects of political culture, economic wealth, and path dependency on formal democracy

Political culture

Political culture is a bridge between individual support for democracy and formal democracy. Contrary to common assumptions, there is strong democratic support in many countries. However, the underlying values of democratic support vary widely. As I will explain in greater detail, only support for democracy-rooted specific beliefs creates a political culture strengthening formal democracy.

Almond and Verba (1963) examine the cultural foundations of formal democracy, presenting civic culture as essential for democratic stability. They characterize civic culture as a blend of participatory practices and positive attitudes towards democratic governance. They argue that political systems depend on the citizenry's attitudes and behaviors, where a certain blend of civic beliefs and engagement and trust in governance reinforces democracy. This discussion on the civic culture's role in democracy has been expanded by scholars such as Putnam (2000) and Tilly (2007), who affirm that democracy flourishes under conditions rich in democratic values. Dahl (1990) underscores the significance of a democratic political culture – marked by values rooted and transmitted across generations – as crucial in shaping a democratic state. Central to this culture is the principle of political equality (Christiano, 2008; Rawls, 1997), suggesting that certain foundational values can bring democracy into existence. National identity plays a crucial role in this context (DiMaggio, 1997; Smith, 1991), something that I will explore further in the section on the relationship between national identity and democracy.

Empirical research has examined how political culture affects formal democracy by investigating the relationship between individual support for democracy and the level of formal democracy (Dalton, 2004; Welzel & Inglehart, 2008). Tai and colleagues (2024) challenge earlier findings, such as those of Claassen (2020a; 2020b), who suggests a positive correlation between support for democracy and formal democracy. Their analysis, assessing support for democracy across 144 countries over 33 years (1988–2020), shows no direct effects of support for democracy on formal democracy. Therefore, they advocate for refined metrics of democratic support that can more accurately capture the relationship between individual civic beliefs and formal democracy.

In that regard, Inglehart (2003) challenges conventional measures of public support for democracy. As there is nearly universal high support for democracy, this is a poor predictor of formal democracy. Instead, Inglehart identifies "self-expression values" – encompassing tolerance, trust, political activism, and postmaterialist values – as more

potent indicators of formal democracy (ibid., 2003: 53; see also Inglehart & Baker, 2000). The correlation between self-expression values and formal democracy is closely tied to economic development. The argument goes like this: Economic wealth shifts societal focus from survival to self-expression values. Policymakers can promote these values by improving education and enhancing civic beliefs and participation, thus fostering a political culture that supports formal democracy.

In conclusion, even if democracy is universally esteemed as an ideal, foundational values such as tolerance, trust, political activism, and postmaterialist values differ across different cultures and stages of economic development. This suggests that levels of democracy depend on profound cultural and economic shifts rather than on diffuse support for democracy. Alternatively, support for democracy effectively fosters a political culture conducive to formal democracy only when it is rooted in specific forms of national identities that uphold civic beliefs and participation.

Economic wealth, path dependency, and other factors

Exploring democracy's underpinnings has revealed many factors that contribute to formal democracy. Scholars like Rueschemeyer and colleagues (1992) have emphasized the balance of power between social classes. Additionally, research has looked into issues like ethnolinguistic fractionalization (Reilly, 2000), the influence of international actors and organizations (Mitchell, 2016), the democratic impact of neighboring nations (Brinks & Coppedge, 2006), and the effects of military interventions (Therborn, 1977), urbanization (Glaeser & Steinberg, 2016), education (Alemán & Kim, 2015), and climate change (McMichael, 2017). Among these varied factors, economic wealth frequently emerges as a central correlate of democracy (Lipset, 1959; Barro, 1999; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Consistent with the argument about “self-expression values,” economic wealth plays a crucial role in facilitating a transition to democracy and strengthening developing democratic systems (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012; Boix, 2003; Houle, 2009). However, the theoretical pathways through which increased gross domestic product (GDP, the monetary value of all finished goods and services produced within a country during a specific period) fosters democracy remain debated (Przeworski, 2000). It is not obvious if economic wealth causes democracy or if democracy drives wealth. Acemoglu and colleagues (2008) highlight the intertwined nature of political and economic developments, noting that although some nations have paired democracy with economic growth, others have chosen paths marked by dictatorship and limited growth.

From a critical viewpoint, economic growth challenges national sovereignty and pluralism (Rodrik, 2011). "The Globalization Paradox" illustrates a dilemma: the need for cross-border policy harmonization to enable the free flow of trade, capital, and information is juxtaposed with the limitations of national policy autonomy. As

countries become more integrated into the global economy, their capacity to implement policies that reflect the preferences of their citizens grows more constrained by international agreements and the imperatives of the global market. This paradox holds particular significance in the realm of economic policies concerning trade, investment, and labor standards, highlighting the challenge of balancing global economic participation with the preservation of democratic integrity.

Path dependency underscores how historical decisions guide contemporary choices, often locking political systems into existing routines and structures (Pierson, 2000). This concept highlights the lasting influence of past preferences, leading to continued reliance on certain political institutions and making it difficult for nations to change direction. Path dependency illustrates how historical legacies and institutional inertia shape the course of political and economic development (Mahoney, 2000). For example, the choice of an electoral system can solidify over time, influencing the evolution of political parties, voter behaviors, and national identity, thereby limiting the feasibility of adopting alternative systems.

Research on path dependency indicates that the age of a democracy significantly influences its level of development; older democracies tend to have more stable institutions (Huntington, 1991; Lijphart, 1999). This stability derives from years of refining democratic processes and learning from both successes and failures. Countries with mature democracies enjoy political stability, characterized by established practices for managing conflicts and transitioning power (Linz & Stepan, 1996; Robinson, 2012). Furthermore, their extensive democratic history typically fosters a robust civil society, which plays a crucial role in supporting democratic norms and balancing governmental power (Tocqueville, 1848/2000; Putnam, 2000).

With this in mind, it is reasonable to use economic wealth and age of democracy as control variables when investigating the relationship between collective national identity and formal democracy. If the relationship between national identity and democracy persists even after accounting for these strong factors, it suggests that national identity is a significant factor in explaining the levels of democracy in a country. In simpler terms, this means that how people see themselves as part of a nation could be just as important for a country's democracy as its economic wealth and historical background with a democratic constitution.

National identity and democracy

To outline expectations regarding the relationships between various aspects of national identity and democracy, I employ a two-step approach. First, I integrate insights from the political culture framework with research on national identity. National identity fosters unity, transmits values, and legitimizes institutions – all of which are crucial in shaping political culture (DiMaggio, 1997; Smith, 1991). However, different national identities lead to different political cultures. The political culture framework suggests that support for democratic governance, underpinned by civic beliefs tied to self-expression values, strengthens formal democracy. Taken together, this means that:

Different features of national identity (X) have varying capacities to uphold civic beliefs (Z), which in turn promote support for democracy (Y), ultimately aggregating to create a political culture (P) that affects formal democracy (Q).

In step two, I will use a thought experiment inspired by Rawls' idea of the “Veil of Ignorance” (Rawls, 1971) to determine how and why different forms of national identity affect democracy. In the thought experiment scenario, individuals are asked to make decisions about the ideal form of society while unaware of their own personal attributes. They do not know their birthplace, ethnicity, ancestry, religion, or any other criteria that could be linked to national membership, which leads to decisions free from the biases of group belonging. Here, the ideal democracy is a condition where the moral foundation of democracy is completely actualized. Intrinsic equality is completely integrated into the formal democratic rules, procedures, and institutions. To be behind the veil of ignorance is similar to designing a game you intend to play without knowing whether you will be one of the strongest or weakest players – encouraging fair rules for everyone. In such a scenario, the following question arises: How would different criteria for belonging to a nation be weighed into crafting an ideal democracy? Using this hypothetical situation and my empirical findings, I will conclude how and why different forms of national identity affect democracy. To be clear, the respondents providing data are not situated behind the veil of ignorance when they conceptualize the nation. The point of the thought experiment is to illustrate how they *ought* to respond in order to contribute to an ideal democracy.

The relationship between national identity and democracy through the veil of ignorance

Voluntary national identity and democracy

A voluntary civic national identity is inherently political, as it involves respect for laws and institutions and implies political equality. If a person wishes to live under laws of

their choosing, they must accept that these laws should be justifiable to all citizens (Rawls, 1997). It would be inconsistent to support democracy while simultaneously disrespecting laws that result from collective decisions. Accordingly, many scholars argue that voluntary national identity is fundamental to supporting democracy (Habermas, 1992; Viroli, 1995). Additionally, voluntary national identity enhances civic beliefs and participation, which are crucial for supporting democracy. A political culture built on strong support for democracy rooted in civic beliefs and mutual commitments to laws and institutions is essential for formal democracy (Easton, 1965; Verba, 1965; Habermas, 1992, 1999).

Evaluating voluntary national identity and its relationship with democracy behind the veil of ignorance underscores the compatibility of voluntary national identity and political equality. When stripped of personal biases, individuals would likely favor voluntary membership criteria centering on political equality, mutual respect, and voluntary participation in civic society. These qualities are implied in the ideal democracy. Accordingly, if these voluntary features are necessary but not sufficient, empirical investigations should focus on the effects of non-voluntary national identity and shared national bonds. Empirical research into the voluntary features is redundant as they already align closely with democratic ideals.

The role of national attachment in democracy

In contrast to voluntary national identity, self-classification and national bonds are not inherently political. Proponents of liberal nationalism (e.g., Kymlicka, 2001; Lind, 1994; Miller, 1995; Moore, 2001) argue that attachment to the nation fosters solidarity and trust, thereby enhancing democracy. Although they do not describe such attachment in detail, they emphasize the importance of a bond that goes beyond primary voluntary civic ties.

By aggregation, support for democracy, reinforced by solidarity, trust, and attachment to the nation, may cultivate a political culture imbued with a sense of unity that goes beyond formal organizational ties. As articulated in Miller's "national identity argument", a shared national identity is expected to override other affiliations and promote social cohesion, empathy towards co-nationals, and confidence in cooperation, thus strengthening formal democracy.

However, using a strong emotional attachment to a nation as the sole criterion for national membership, or as an imposed characteristic, becomes contentious when viewed from behind the veil of ignorance. Without foreknowledge of one's future national affiliations, such an emotional basis can appear arbitrary when the veil is removed and might risk excluding many. Although emotional attachment has merits, such as positive attitudes towards income redistribution (Miller & Ali, 2014), it does

not inherently align with political equality. Feeling close to one's nation or fellow citizens does not necessarily imply a connection to everyone within the nation. As the specific target of these emotions is unclear, citizens can feel attached to their nation without feeling mutually interconnected. Without clarity on the nature of one's emotional ties, such criteria for membership or imposed characteristics, are random and carry the risk of being exclusionary. When national belonging depends solely on the intensity of emotional connection, it risks excluding those who feel less attached. In an unbiased setting, self-classification retains its foundational role in shaping national identity, being a necessary component for the existence of democracy, but the strength of national attachment is less relevant. Ultimately, the issue returns to the perception of who constitutes “the people.” As forming a connection with every individual is unrealistic (Anderson, 1983), attachment relates to the conceptualization of “the people” through the lens of perceived similarity (Van den Berghe, 2001, 2005; Gustavsson & Stendahl, 2020). In other words, this leads us to the fundamental question of whether the perceived traits are voluntary or not. Accordingly, I expect no correlation between the strength of national attachment and the level of democracy.

The role of non-voluntary national identity in democracy

As noted earlier, although voluntary national identity theoretically aligns with democratic principles, the implications of non-voluntary aspects remain more ambiguous. Therefore, this section is given more space than the previous one.

According to classical nationalism stances, inherited cultural affiliations and phenotypical traits foster perceived similarity. This similarity, in turn, engenders feelings of belonging, solidarity, and loyalty between individuals (Hastings, 1997; Margalit, 1997). The sentiment towards the nation's well-being is believed to inspire citizens to actively participate in society. Such participation underscores a sense of duty towards the nation's welfare. Concern about the nation can spur individuals to engage in societal activities, which is important for dedication to democracy (Greenfeld, 1992).

In classical nationalism, strong social cohesion through identification with non-voluntary features fosters cooperation among like-minded individuals, benefiting the in-group. When aggregated, this can strengthen a political culture centered on national belonging. A political culture built on inherited traits and cultural heritage, enhanced by cohesion, loyalty, and duty, may promote formal democracy (Barrington, 1997). Intuitively, a political culture bolstered by ancestral and cultural similarities does not infringe on fair procedures. Rather than restricting democracy, strong social cohesion, loyalty, and duties could strengthen formal democracy.

Identification with non-voluntary attributes, passed down through generations, may also ensure a nation's long-term stability (Goetze, 2001; Salins, 1997). The stability stemming from a non-voluntarist identity could strengthen formal democracy by reinforcing the collective will (Hayes, 1931). This reduces the need for restrictions against or exclusion of ethnic minorities. The emphasis on non-voluntary features enables preservation of distinctive identities (Smooha, 2002; Horowitz, 1985). Thus, the unity resulting from a political culture, as described in classical nationalism, is believed to bolster the development of formal democracy (Kedourie, 1960).

However, non-voluntary features contradict and undermine the principle of political equality. The empirical findings on authoritarianism and support for democracy (Greenberg & Jonas, 2003) align with this assertion. The authoritarian mindset, which views people as fixed types, aligns with non-voluntary national identity. In a broader sense, the loyalties and duties attached to the non-voluntary identity tend to reduce the importance of other claims by prioritizing the nation's interests above individual rights (Greenfeld & Eastwood, 2005, p. 259). As a result, obligations to the nation supersede individuals' rights to autonomy (cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book II, section 1261a). For instance, nationalists may claim that women have a moral duty to give birth to and raise children for the benefit of the nation (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Similarly, the belief that "the will of the nation" should remain unchallenged by individual citizens or foreigners undermines political equality by limiting the possibilities for expression of dissent (Sata & Karolewski, 2019). The obedience to "the will of the nation" constrains the moral foundation of democracy by silencing diverse viewpoints and open debate. This marginalizes minority viewpoints and erodes political equality.

Empirical research on this topic consistently strengthens the assumption of negative effects of non-voluntary national identity on democracy. Starting with the big picture, populist nationalist parties and their supporters, who prefer a homogeneous nation, reflect a broader pattern in which matters like globalization and immigration are fundamental (Betz, 1994; Mudde, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). Such parties, which challenge the moral foundations of liberal democracy (Miller-Idriss, 2020), advocate for a conception of national identity as non-voluntary (Eger & Valdez, 2015, 2019, Filsinger et al., 2021).

In psychology research, both secure and narcissistic national identities have been linked to support for democracy as well as specific voting behaviors (Marchlewska et al., 2022; Federico, et al., 2018). Secure national identity, characterized by a positive, non-narcissistic connection to one's nation, generally supports democratic governance. In contrast, national narcissism is defined by a belief in the nation's exceptionalism and a need for constant recognition and approval from others. This trait has been

linked to lower support for democracy. Narcissistic national identity also relates to support for populist leaders and movements that often challenge democratic norms. Notable examples include support for Trump and the alt-right in the US (Neiwert, 2017), the Law and Justice Party in Poland (Marchlewska et al., 2018), and Brexit in the UK (Golec de Zavala et al., 2017). Such narcissism creates a division between “us” (the perceived true nationals) and “them” (everyone else), contradicting the principle of political equality. Both non-voluntary and narcissistic national identities promote in-group superiority, thereby infringing on political equality.

The section on democracy, above, highlighted the importance of trust for democratic systems. Therefore, it is informative to review research on the relationship between national identity and trust, as this could provide further insights into the connection between national identity and democracy. Amid growing interest, research has explored how national identities influence variants of trust, revealing varied impacts. Indeed, one's conceptualization of the nation affects one's perceptions of others. National identity can both enhance and impede social trust, depending on its nature. National attachment seems to increase trust, whereas national pride and chauvinism have a mixed impact (Wright & Reeskens, 2013; Gustavsson & Stendahl, 2020). Broader research covering 30 European countries categorizes social trust into particularized trust in known individuals, trust in strangers, and identity-based trust, founded on a shared identity (Wamlsler, 2023). Unexpectedly, Wamlsler found that non-voluntary national identity negatively correlated with particularized trust, whereas voluntary national identity showed a positive correlation. In line with existing literature (e.g., Wright & Reeskens, 2013), non-voluntary national identity negatively impacts trust in strangers and is positively correlated with identity-based trust. This pattern even extends to political trust. Studies from such diverse contexts as urban China (Zhong & Zhong, 2018), Ghana (Godefroidt et al., 2017), and Iran (Sarabi & Ghiaskhani, 2017) confirm that whereas civic voluntary national identity supports political trust, ethnic non-voluntary national identity undermines political trust (Berg & Hjerm, 2010). Similarly, in a case study conducted in Denmark, Bredahl and colleagues (2018) found that conservative and liberal nationalism negatively correlated with trust and solidarity, whereas liberal citizenship and multiculturalism demonstrated positive correlations.

Taken together, these findings suggest a negative impact of non-voluntary national identity on democracy. However, it is important to note that the studies do not provide evidence or reveal mechanisms that establish a negative relationship between non-voluntary national identity and democracy. Therefore, exploring how voluntary and non-voluntary aspects of national identity explicitly influence support for democracy and formal democratic systems would further enrich this field of research.

Lastly, in an impartial context, the classical nationalist stance of "one people, one nation" faces setbacks. If one's origin and lineage are unknown, the guiding principle should be equality among all ancestries. Favoring one lineage over others challenges the notion of political equality. From an impartial perspective, such favoritism is considered inadvisable. Instead, reducing emphasis on non-voluntary features like ancestry and birthplace helps avoid marginalizing groups in a democracy. In this regard, we can also add hereditary cultural contents, such as religion and requirements of perceiving a nation's history as one's own, which are embedded in the ancestral heritage. If a nation assigns undue weight to such cultural heritage, it paves the way for exclusion, potentially jeopardizing democratic tenets. The drawbacks of non-voluntary national identity become evident in an unbiased setting, clearly showing that achieving political equality requires moving away from such attributes. Although non-voluntary national identity fosters a natural sense of belonging to a nation, it is fundamentally incompatible with political equality. Therefore, non-voluntary features of national belonging should be avoided when crafting a political culture aimed at achieving an ideal formal democracy. Consequently, I expect a negative effect of non-voluntary national identity on both support for democracy and the overall level of democracy.

In summary, bridging political culture and national identity research suggests that national identity fosters unity, transmits values, legitimizes institutions, and encourages civic participation – all aspects that are crucial for shaping the political culture essential for formal democracy. However, different features of national identity vary in their capacity to do this. There is no reason to believe that voluntary national identity would not achieve these ends. Therefore, my empirical investigations focus on how shared national bonds and non-voluntary national identity impact democracy. I expect no correlation between the strength of national bonds and the level of democracy. Although non-voluntary national identity may foster social cohesion and loyalty, thereby strengthening formal democracy, it contradicts the moral foundation of democracy. Consequently, I expect a negative impact of non-voluntary national identity on both support for democracy and the overall level of democracy.

Data, measurements, and methods

Data sources

To investigate the relationship between national identity and democracy, I utilize comprehensive survey data spanning all continents and covering a period of approximately 30 years.

For the country level analysis, I use data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), renowned for its expansive coverage of national identity across multiple nation-states over several years. The ISSP module on nationalism, often employed in cross-national analyses of national identity, stands out for its comprehensive scope. This dataset encompasses perceptions of various aspects of national identity and was gathered in 23 nation-states in 1995, 33 in 2003, and 33 in 2013. In each of these surveys, a representative sample of adults aged 18 years and older was surveyed using a consistent set of standard survey items. The 2013 sample encompassed approximately 41,000 observations.

To capture the relationship between national identity and formal democracy over time, I rely on data compiled by the ONbound project (Old and New Boundaries: National Identities and Religion). The project aims to deepen the understanding of national and religious identities in the contemporary world. To this end, the project has compiled a vast array of existing individual-level and contextual data into a database that facilitates research on these topics in a global context. The timeframe for the individual data extends from 1970 to the present. ONBound provides a set of customized syntax files for the cumulation and harmonization of data across the number of countries of one's choice. I utilize all available data measuring relevant aspects of national identity. This includes data from the European Values Study (EVS), the European Social Survey (ESS), the ISSP, the Eurobarometer (EB), the Pew Global Attitudes Project (PewGAP), the World Values Survey (WVS), the Asian Barometer Survey (ASES), and Integrated and United? A Quest for Citizenship in an 'Ever Closer Europe' (IntUne). The Project Manifesto is also used, focusing on political manifestos to decipher the articulation of policies, ideologies, and national sentiments.

Regarding the level of democracy at the societal level, I primarily employ the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (LDI). This index captures the degree of democracy across countries and time periods. The dataset is constructed by aggregating responses related to over 400 indicators. These indicators are based on the expert judgments of a large, diverse panel, covering each country and year, extending back to 1900. The V-Dem

project ensures transparency in its data collection and aggregation processes. It provides clear documentation of how indicators are selected and weighted, and it regularly updates the dataset. This method, combined with input from around 3,500 country experts, ensures a reliable and comprehensive measure of democracy. Consequently, the LDI is extensively referenced in empirical research that investigates democracy at the country level (Lindberg et al., 2014; Coppedge et al., 2024).

For the analysis at the individual level, revealing the relationship between national identity and support for democracy, I use the EVS (2017). This dataset, with its wide-ranging survey data from several European countries and large representative sample sizes, is instrumental for robust statistical analysis of individual preferences in 30 countries.

Utilizing multiple datasets from various countries has both advantages and disadvantages. The primary advantage lies in the enhanced generalizability of results. For instance, observing consistent results across different nations strengthens the likelihood that these findings are applicable globally. However, the principal drawback of employing datasets from multiple countries is the restricted depth of analysis within any single country. A detailed case study in one country, using diverse datasets spanning several periods or examining various dimensions of national identity – such as pride, patriotism, chauvinism, and narcissism – could yield more nuanced insights and ensure higher internal validity.

Moreover, focusing on transitions to democracy, studying support for a current regime or support for democracy in the abstract within one country can provide multifaceted insights. However, this approach would fail to identify broader global social patterns, which could potentially reveal fundamental “social laws” (Durkheim, 1895/1982). Nevertheless, analyses conducted at individual and societal levels can reveal the fundamental processes that drive the evolution of democratic systems. Such a dual-level approach enables researchers to explore how personal beliefs and behaviors align with and are influenced by broader social structures and institutional norms (Weber, 1905, 1922; Merton, 1968). By merging these two levels of analysis, I can develop a more detailed understanding of the dynamics involved. This method helps trace how individual beliefs and societal conditions interact to influence social outcomes, thereby helping to clarify the “cogs and wheels” of social issues.

Table 1 provides an overview of the data, measurements, and methods used in this thesis. It categorizes the articles by societal and individual levels of analysis and the specific dimensions of national identity and democracy investigated.

Table 1. Overview of data sources, measurements, and methods.

	Societal level		Individual level	
	Article I	Article II	Article III	Article IV
<i>Independent variables</i>				
Sources	ISSP	ONBound Project Manifesto	EVS	EVS
Measurements	Collective NI Homogeneity	Collective NI Top-down nationalism	Individual NI	Individual NI
<i>Dependent variables</i>				
Sources	V-Dem, Economist	V-Dem	EVS	EVS
Measurements	Formal dem.	Formal dem.	Support for dem.	Support for dem.
<i>Methods</i>	OLS, RSD	Multilevel repeated measurement	Multilevel models	Mediation analysis

Note: NI = National identity

Methods

In each article, I used linear modeling techniques. In Article I, I also incorporated the relative standard deviation (RSD) to capture preference homogeneity. Article II utilized multilevel repeated measurement models, which are suited for data with nested hierarchies where time constitutes one layer. In Article III, I apply multilevel modeling to investigate hierarchical data interactions. Article IV focused on mediation analysis to explore indirect relationships among variables. To ensure the methods are accessible, I have provided concise and clear descriptions below for readers less familiar with these statistical techniques. For more in-depth technical information, please refer to the articles.

Ordinary least squares (OLS)

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was used to understand how different kinds of national identity relate to different levels of democracy. The method calculates a straight line that in this case represents how national identity and democracy are connected. OLS helps us find this line by ensuring that the differences between what we actually observe in the data and what the line predicts are as small as possible. This method is like drawing the most accurate line through a scatterplot of points representing national identity and democracy levels.

A limitation of OLS regression is its assumption that all observations are independent of each other. This assumption fails to account for possible clustering within the data, where observations could be correlated when grouped by certain factors, such as geographical location or time. In the analyses conducted using OLS, each observation

of the dependent variable is treated as independent and measured for individual units. In this setup, the dependent variable is the outcome that the model aims to predict or explain, and each observation corresponds to the observed value of this variable for a specific unit or individual in the study. This approach does not recognize any hierarchical nesting that might exist within the data, potentially leading to inaccurate estimates and inferential errors if such clustering effects are present. To address these limitations, I have also carried out analyses where I have taken into account that the observations came from different geographical locations at different timepoints.

Mediation analysis

I used mediation analysis to explore the social mechanisms linking non-voluntary national identity and democracy. This approach investigates how mediating properties explain the connection between national identity and support for democracy. To conduct this analysis, I proposed a chain of relationships in which X influences mediating variables (M). These mediating variables, in turn, influence Y. In other words, the mediators (M) are hypothesized as social mechanisms explaining the relationship between X (national identity) and Y (support for democracy).

Multilevel models

When data have a hierarchical structure (individuals within countries), this necessitates the use of multilevel models, as the assumptions of OLS regression are violated. Random intercept models, with X (national identity) and Y (support for democracy) constituting level 1 and the country level Z (formal democracy) constituting level 2, account for this dependency between individual observations and national contexts (Hox et al., 2017). Multilevel models also provide opportunities to investigate cross-level interactions: how Z moderates the individual-level relationship between X and Y. In simple terms, this method is suitable for analyzing data with multiple layers, like individuals within countries. It aids understanding of how individuals' perceptions of their nation affect their views on democracy, and how the democratic environment of their country influences this relationship.

Multilevel repeated measurement

In studying how the relationship between national identity and democracy evolves over time, I relied on multilevel repeated measurement models. These models make it possible to include information from different analytical levels while controlling for statistical dependence between repeated observations of the same subjects. Such an approach was essential in analyzing the longitudinal associations between X (national identity) and Y (democracy). The dataset exhibited a two-level structure, with timepoints (level 1) nested within countries (level 2). All models were random intercept models, where the variance is partitioned between and within countries. To

account for the resistance to institutional change, I lagged the outcome variable by five years relative to the main independent variables. Put simply, this method demonstrates how X and Y evolve together over time (Z). It tracks annual changes in X on Y, also comparing these trends across different countries.

Measurements

Independent variables

Researchers have adopted different approaches to measuring national identity, often dichotomizing it into civic and ethnic components (e.g., Berg & Hjerm, 2010; Hjerm, 2000; Jones & Smith, 2001). For instance, Larsen (2017) found the civic/ethnic distinction relevant. Using ISSP data (1995, 2003, 2013), Larsen investigated membership criteria through seven distinct items, leading to a multi-classification analysis that revealed a two-dimensional structure of national identity, combining civic values and ethno-cultural emphasis with varying levels of nationalistic mobilization.

Another approach categorizes national identity into civic, cultural, and ethnic dimensions (Pehrson, Vignoles, & Brown, 2009; Shulman, 2002). Janmaat (2006) employed Eurobarometer 2002 data, advocating for a tri-dimensional model encompassing political, cultural, and ethnic aspects. This approach revealed notable differences between Eastern and Western Europe in terms of the significance of cultural and ethnic (non-voluntary) criteria in perceptions of nationhood.

Regarding the limitations of the civic versus ethnic framework, recent studies have explored alternative approaches. For example, latent class analysis has been employed to identify distinct national identity types (Bonikowski & DiMaggio, 2016; Soehla & Karim, 2021), though its efficacy has been debated (Eger & Hjerm, 2022a, 2022b).

In this thesis, I initially adopted a tri-dimensional approach to operationalize collective national identity, focusing on voluntary and non-voluntary aspects, as well as cultural markers. The non-voluntary components include ancestry and birthplace. Requirements on religious affiliation and proficiency in a certain language capture the cultural dimension. Voluntary aspects were operationalized through membership criteria such as citizenship, duration of residence, and adherence to laws.

The question was worded as follows: “Some people say that the following things are important to be a true [Nationality]? Others say they are not important. How important do you think each of the following is...” “Having [country nationality] ancestry/Being born in [country]/Being a [religion]/Being able to speak [national language]/Respecting [country nationality] political institutions and laws?” Possible responses for each item were 1 = not important at all, 2 = not very important, 3 = fairly important, 4 = very important.

To measure national bonds (national attachment), I used an item that assessed the extent to which citizens felt a sense of closeness to their country. This approach posits that the intensity of an individual’s affinity towards their nation captures the strength of the collective national identity (Huddy & Khatib, 2007). The respondents answered the question “How close do you feel to your country?” with the response options 1 = very close, 2 = close, 3 not very close, 4 = not close at all. A higher average response to this item would indicate a stronger collective national identity, particularly in terms of emotional ties to the nation. I used the mean of the population's responses to measure the collective national identity. The RSDs of these items were also used to gauge preference homogeneity within each aspect in each country. RSD was used to assess the variability of responses in relation to the population's mean, calculating how spread out these responses are compared with the average of the group. A lower RSD would indicate a higher degree of consensus on what defines national belonging, reflecting a more homogeneous national identity. The indicators for capturing non-voluntary aspects of national identity include the variables “ancestry” and “birthplace”; “ancestry,” “birthplace,” and “religion”; or, “religion” alone.

Based on the mean values for “ancestry,” “birthplace,” and “religion” for each country, Cronbach’s alpha was 0.86. Overall, the index was normally distributed and would serve as a reliable empirical measure for quantifying non-voluntary aspects of national identity. When the countries are grouped as Western versus non-Western, Cronbach’s alpha was 0.90 for Western countries and 0.78 for non-Western countries.

Dependent variables

Measuring levels of formal democracy

This thesis primarily employs the V-Dem LDI, which aligns with the theoretical definition of formal democracy as outlined by Coppedge and colleagues (2024). This was discussed in the section on democracy, above. The LDI comprises two components: fair elections and liberal principles. Fair elections encompass freedom of association and expression, access to diverse information sources, universal suffrage, and the influence of elected officials on government policy. Liberal principles

encompass the safeguarding of individual and minority rights, the robustness of the rule of law, constitutionally guaranteed civil liberties, and the independence of the judiciary.

It is important to recognize the limitations of the LDI. This index predominantly focuses on liberal democracy and does not encompass all aspects of formal democracy. Additionally, its reliance on expert opinions could introduce bias. A notable challenge in country-level analysis was the limited number of countries available for study, typically ranging from 30 to 60 out of approximately 240 globally. This small sample size could result in less robust findings compared with individual-level analyses, where data are sourced from hundreds or thousands of individuals per country.

To address these issues, several robustness checks were conducted. I explored different aspects of democracy, such as deliberation, participation, and egalitarianism. Additionally, the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index was employed as an alternative measurement of democracy. I used six alternative dependent variables based on 60 indicators across five categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture, along with an overall score (Economist, 2016).

Measuring individual support for democracy

I used two different operationalizations to measure support for democracy. One of them comprised two indicators: "Having a democratic political system" was measured with responses on a scale of 1 = very good, 2 = fairly good, 3 = fairly bad, 4 = very bad. The second indicator asked "How important is it for you to live in a country that is governed democratically?". Responses were given on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 meant "not at all important" and 10 meant "absolutely important." The two items ($r = .41$) were combined into an index, "support for democracy," with total values calculated through summation. To increase construct validity, I also used an alternative operationalization of support for democracy. Although I was still utilizing two indicators, this meant that one measured support for authoritarianism. Hence, this operationalization captured preferences regarding 1) having a democratic political system and 2) having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections. Possible responses to each question were 1 = very good, 2 = fairly good, 3 = fairly bad, 4 = very bad, with coding of the first indicator being reversed. Using two different operationalizations of support for democracy broadened the scope to capture both the preference for a democratic political system and the rejection of having a "strong leader."

Results - Summary of articles

Article I

Title: National identity and democracy: Effects of non-voluntarism on formal democracy

Published in *Nations and Nationalism*, 2021.

In this article, I explored whether national identity affects the level of formal democracy in a country, and – if so – how. I theorized and then investigated several assumptions: (i) Classical nationalist stances hold that national membership depends on the accident of origin and cultural markers learned through early socialization. This type of non-voluntary identity gives individuals a natural sense of belonging in society and fosters solidarity and trust, which can lead to better democracy. (ii) Drawing on ideas about the moral foundation of democracy, a non-voluntary national identity exhibits an inherent contradiction between in-group bias and intrinsic equality, which leads to lower levels of democracy. (iii) Homogeneity in beliefs about what constitutes national belonging eases the dynamics between majority and minority, which benefits democracy. (iv) A strong national attachment, characterized by a shared sense of belonging, enhances trust and solidarity, thereby benefiting democracy. I used data from the ISSP to measure collective national identity, and data from V-Dem and The Economist to measure formal democracy.

The OLS regression revealed that the hypothesized impact on democracy of classical national stances (i) was not supported. On the contrary, the inherent contradiction between purely non-voluntary items resulted in a negative impact on the level of democracy. Regarding cultural traits, the requirement for religious affiliation had a strong negative relationship to the level of democracy, whereas language proficiency appeared to have a weak positive and insignificant effect on the levels of democracy.

Regarding homogeneity (iii), I used RSD to determine whether the collective identity was homogeneous or heterogeneous, that is, to what extent citizens agreed upon who “the people” are. The idea that a homogeneous national identity simplifies the dynamics between majority and minority groups, thereby benefiting democracy, was rejected. Homogeneity in beliefs about national belonging – stemming from a sense of unity and the notion that “we are one people” due to common origins and early socialization in religion – correlated with lower levels of democracy. In other words, heterogeneity in beliefs about what constitutes national belonging does not pose an obstacle to achieving higher levels of formal democracy.

Contemporary liberal nationalists argue for the necessity of a shared national identity in democracy (iv). They posit that the intensity of an individual's emotional ties to their nation reflects the strength of the collective national identity. Such an emotional connection to the nation and its citizens is believed to bolster trust, solidarity, and social cohesion, thereby benefiting democracy. However, my empirical analysis did not support this hypothesis. Aggregated national attachment had a weak, insignificant and negative relationship to formal democracy.

Hence, the crucial factor in explaining the level of formal democracy appears to be the content of national identity (ii). In crafting an ideal democracy from behind a veil of ignorance, I explored whether non-voluntary traits such as ancestry or religion would be prioritized if individuals were unaware of their personal backgrounds.

Theoretically, in an unbiased scenario, non-voluntary attributes are exclusionary and do not align with political equality. Thus, the formation of an ideal democracy would favor universal principles of equality over inherited cultural attributes and ancestral lineages. The findings from Article I validated the theoretical expectations derived behind the veil of ignorance. Given the lack of empirical support for the arguments advocating homogeneity and considering that democracy implies voluntary civic characteristics, the subsequent articles explored the relationship between non-voluntary national identity and democracy in more detail.

Article II

Title: National Identity and Democratic Trajectories

Co-authored by Andrea Bohman and Mikael Hjerm

Under review in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*

Building on the results of Article I, this study examined the negative effects of non-voluntary national identity. It included a diverse range of countries, thereby enhancing the global relevance of the findings. The dataset also spanned three decades, allowing for analyses of how the relationship between national identity and democracy had evolved over time. The study investigated the impact of political leaders' articulations of nationalism on formal democracy. It also examined whether the effects of top-down nationalism became more powerful when non-voluntary aspects of national identity were common in a population.

To conduct these analyses, I used data from the ONBound Project to measure collective national identity globally, the Project Manifesto to gauge top-down nationalism, and V-Dem data to capture levels of formal democracy. The analytical

strategy, which aimed to capture the evolution of these relationships over time, confirmed a negative correlation between non-voluntary national identity and levels of democracy. Moreover, the effects of top-down nationalism mirrored the patterns observed in bottom-up approaches built on aggregates of non-voluntary features of national identity. However, the effect of top-down nationalism was smaller than that of bottom-up influences, especially when GDP was included in the model.

The examination of changes in each country's democratic levels over time revealed that variations in non-voluntary national identity did not significantly influence the level of democracy. However, an analysis of growth curves presented a different picture. These curves indicated that bottom-up national identity influenced the trajectory of democracy. Thus, the way in which the populace perceives their nation can significantly impact the evolution and development of a democratic system. Regarding the interaction effects, this study posits that bottom-up effects erode democracy by creating expectations and opportunities for the political elite to enact policies and laws that undermine political equality. Concurrently, top-down nationalism privileges individuals whose traits align with the nation's distinctive characteristics, including non-voluntary features of national identity. Such favoritism marginalizes other segments of the population, further eroding political equality. When these biases are codified into legislation, they negatively affect the level of democracy. When these two factors converge, they reinforce one another, amplifying the detrimental impact on formal democracy. Consequently, democracy levels are significantly lower in countries where political elites promote nationalism, and the population exhibits high levels of non-voluntary national identity.

Although changes in formal democracy and national identity distributions occur slowly, indicating the need for longer study periods, the cross-sectional analysis with time-based indicators supported a link between non-voluntary national identity and formal democracy. In light of these empirical findings, I propose that a fair and inclusive democracy might be more effectively achieved by relying on characteristics rooted in voluntary features rather than the classical or liberal nationalist view of national identity.

To further establish causality, it is important to examine whether the relationship between non-voluntary national identity and democracy also exists at the individual level. The remaining two articles investigated this issue in detail.

Article III

Title: The role of actual democracy in the link between national identity and support for democracy

Published in *Comparative Sociology*, 2021

This study explored the interplay between national identity and democracy. The study used multilevel models to examine how non-voluntary national identity relates to support for democracy and how the level of formal democracy influences this relationship. Data from the EVS (2017), which includes 30 countries, were used for the individual-level analysis. Country-level data from V-Dem (2017) captured the degree of formal democracy in each country.

The empirical analysis revealed that the relationship at the individual level mirrored the findings at the societal level: a greater emphasis on non-voluntary national identity correlated with lower support for democracy. However, the moderating role of formal democracy presented a more complex picture. The literature suggests that in higher levels of democracy, individuals with strong non-voluntary national identities might still support democracy because democratic beliefs are internalized through education, participation in democratic processes, and exposure to democratic norms. Contrary to this expectation, the findings indicated that higher levels of formal democracy actually strengthened the negative relationship between non-voluntary national identity and support for democracy.

To explain this, I argue that the conditions of liberal democracy threaten the congruence between the nation and non-voluntary national identity. This occurs because the laws and policies of formal democracy broaden national group boundaries, thereby challenging the undisputed link between non-voluntary identity and the nation. Furthermore, liberal democracy rejects the justification of inequality based on favoritism tied to non-voluntary nationhood. By undermining the congruence between the nation and non-voluntary national identity, higher levels of formal democracy intensify the inherent contradiction between non-voluntary national identity and the moral foundation of democracy. Consequently, higher levels of formal democracy strengthen the negative relationship between non-voluntary national identity and support for democracy.

These findings, combined with those of previous studies, suggested that societies with a smaller proportion of non-voluntary national identity would tend to exhibit higher levels of formal democracy. In highly democratic societies, individuals with a strong non-voluntary national identity would be less supportive of democracy compared with

those in less democratic societies. Thus, when a non-voluntary national identity is prevalent, democracy would tend to be weaker. In societies with robust democracies, the non-voluntary identity is rarer, and those who have such an identity would be less inclined to support democratic principles. Thus, it would seem that a non-voluntary national identity rooted in accidental origins undermines the stability of democratic systems.

In the final article, I searched for empirical evidence on why there is a negative correlation between non-voluntary national identity and support for democracy. The empirical tests addressed the key mechanism: the incompatibility between non-voluntary national identity and political equality.

Article IV

Title: National identity, support for democracy, and the mediating role of civic beliefs and participation

Co-authored by Maureen A. Eger and Mikael Hjerm

Under review in *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*

This study explored the social mechanisms connecting national identity and support for democracy. The investigation centered on the mediating role of civic beliefs and participation, employing data sourced from the EVS (2017), which (at the time of writing) encompassed a total of 37 countries.

By employing mediation analysis, this study explored how and why voluntary and non-voluntary national identities influence democratic support. The focus on civic beliefs and participation as mediators was grounded in the literature on civic competence and social capital. Civic competence encompasses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for active and effective participation in civic life, thereby promoting societal progress. Social capital refers to the collective benefits derived from social networks, relationships, and norms within a community. It plays a crucial role in fostering citizen engagement, political participation, and the development of civil society, all of which are essential for a thriving democracy.

Tolerance and social trust were used as indicators to capture civic beliefs. Tolerance reflects an individual's willingness to regard fellow citizens as moral and political equals. This notion of tolerance verifies the mechanism assumed throughout all four articles: the inherent incompatibility between non-voluntary national identity and the

moral foundations of democracy. A second set of indicators represented civic behaviors, including participation in volunteer groups and protest activities.

The empirical analysis revealed a link between non-voluntary national identity and reduced levels of social trust, tolerance, and civic participation. Citizens who prioritized non-voluntary aspects of national membership typically exhibited lower levels of tolerance. This inclination towards less tolerance is not an isolated phenomenon; it is part and parcel of the rigid boundaries that a non-voluntary national identity entails. Such rigid boundaries further erode the capacity for social trust, consequently weakening support for democracy. In contrast, voluntary national identity exerts a distinctly positive influence on civic beliefs and engagement, thereby bolstering support for democracy. The connection is clear: the contents of national identity, mediated by civic beliefs and participation, effectively explains support for democracy.

The findings underscored the crucial role of the contents of national identity in shaping democratic outcomes. They resonate with and contribute to the extensive body of literature on social capital and civic competence. Parallels can be drawn to historical philosophical discussions about citizenship, emphasizing how the concepts of civic competence and social capital are intertwined with national identity constructs. This connection between national identity and civic beliefs and participation not only advances the theoretical understanding of democracy, but also has practical implications. My empirical results indicated that fostering a democratic ethos would be more effectively achieved by deemphasizing the non-voluntary aspects of nationhood, as this would promote inclusivity and participation in the democratic fabric.

Figure 1. Summary of empirical analysis.

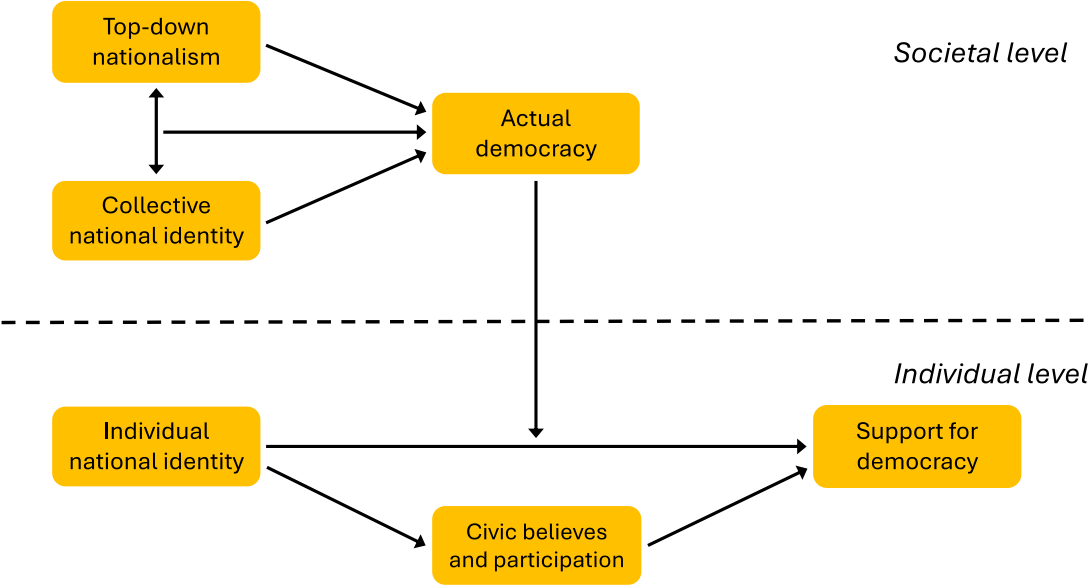


Figure 1 shows the key findings from the articles and the relationships indicated. At the societal level, top-down nationalism and a non-voluntary collective national identity negatively affect formal democracy. When top-down nationalism and a non-voluntary collective national identity coexist, there is an interaction effect that further diminishes the level of formal democracy. At the individual level, a stronger emphasis on non-voluntary features of national identity correlates with lower support for democracy. Additionally, there is an interaction effect between the societal and individual levels, such that higher levels of formal democracy strengthen the negative relationship between non-voluntary national identity and support for democracy. The negative impact of non-voluntary national identity on civic beliefs and participation largely explains its negative correlation with support for democracy. Taken together, the analyses underscore the detrimental impact of non-voluntary national identity on democracy, suggesting that fostering a democratic ethos requires promoting inclusive, voluntary aspects of national identity.

Conclusions and discussion

In this dissertation, I have examined the relationship between national identity and democracy. Having used the "Veil of Ignorance" thought experiment, I propose a framework to assess the impact of national membership criteria on democratic ideals. The empirical analyses supported the theoretical predictions and revealed a negative relationship between non-voluntary national identity and formal democracy. These findings cast doubt on classical nationalist arguments that link origin-based national membership to democratic outcomes. Moreover, the results call into question the assumptions of liberal nationalists arguing that strong, shared national identities – whether rooted in cultural cohesion or national attachment – do not necessarily correlate with the level of formal democracy. Notably, nationalism driven by political elites appears to undermine formal democracy, a trend that is worsened in contexts where economic standards are not sufficient to counterbalance these effects. The worsening effects when top-down nationalism aligns with prevalent non-voluntary national identities among the populace highlight the potential risks of political strategies that leverage exclusive notions of nationhood. This interaction underscores the need for vigilance in how national identities are articulated within and by political elites.

At the societal level, the drawback of liberal nationalist stances becomes apparent. Building on the insights from behind the veil of ignorance, it is suggested that self-classification is important, whereas strong emotional attachment to the nation is less so. Individuals must classify themselves as part of a group to achieve formal democracy. A shared national identity is essential for effective governance and the stability of democratic institutions. However, self-classification might be considered redundant as a predictor of the level of democracy, as all nations can achieve this property. The ambiguity of national attachment leads to the same end. It fails to reveal how individuals conceptualize national boundaries related to those feelings. It is not obvious whether national attachment refers to a single in-group, especially when the target of these emotions remains unidentified. Furthermore, the extent to which emotionally driven self-classification generates affiliation is unclear. Pro-nationalists sometimes argue that citizens are not emotionally close to the nation (Gans, 2003). In an extreme scenario, all citizens might perceive that they are the only ones who feel close to the nation and their co-nationals. This means that citizens can be attached to a nation without their attachment being mutual. Such vagueness regarding emotional directedness and uncertain reciprocity might help explain why national attachment, as advocated by liberal nationalists, is not associated with the level of democracy established in a country.

Casting doubt on the classical nationalist argument that emphasizes "one people, one

nation" as beneficial to democracy might initially seem overstated, as few researchers argue that nationalism benefits democracy. To provide a nuanced understanding here, some reflections need to be addressed. The bottom-up approach to how a non-voluntary national identity affects formal democracy has not been empirically tested before, and doing so contributes significantly to the literature. The bottom-up effects appear stronger than those of top-down nationalism, which is not immediately obvious. Furthermore, the bottom-up approach reflecting the classical nationalist stance does not include welfare chauvinism (Eick & Larsen, 2022), populist anti-elitism, authoritarian elements, or national chauvinism. All of these are prominent in current nationalist movements, exemplified by populist political parties and their followers (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Therefore, the modest conservative view on nationhood should not be conflated with the ardent nationalism articulated by nationalist parties in Western democracies, Modi's India, Bolsonaro's Brazil, and Putin's Russia – all of which pose or have posed clear threats to liberal democracy. Further, the bottom-up effect on the level of democracy is profound regardless of whether a political elite articulates nationalism. It is also important to note that this modest conservative view on nationhood, in contrast to ardent top-down nationalism, is not a marginalized or extreme phenomenon: it was seen in the majority of respondents. As the effect of non-voluntary national identity overshadows the positive effects of voluntary features when these coexist, even in relatively ethnically homogeneous countries, casting doubt on classical nationalist stances and highlighting their negative effects is crucial. On that note, the need for a common national identity in terms of content is not empirically supported. Diverse views on what constitutes national belonging are not a challenge for contemporary democracies – in fact, heterogeneity is associated with higher levels of formal democracy. Recognizing a plurality of opinions about nationhood and voluntarism seems essential to democratic societies. Overall, a homogeneous non-voluntary national identity correlates with lower levels of democracy.

The findings on the societal scale were reflected at the individual level, where a stronger emphasis on non-voluntary national identity correlated with lower support for democracy. Most significantly, contextual characteristics in the countries under study impacted this individual relationship. A high level of formal democracy increased the likelihood that individuals scoring high on non-voluntary national identity scored low on support for democracy. For example, a non-voluntary national identity in Sweden is less supportive of democracy than a corresponding non-voluntary national identity in Hungary. This observation challenges the notion that well-established democratic institutions can mitigate the adverse effects of such identities, as suggested in the literature. Drawing inspiration from Gellner (1983), who argued that nationalism arises when the congruence between the nation and the state is violated, I hypothesize that

liberal democracy, along with factors such as immigration, multiculturalism, and globalization, makes the non-voluntary identity salient. This is because higher levels of formal democracy widen group boundaries, posing a threat to the inviolable link between the nation and non-voluntary national identity. The salient non-voluntary national identity reinforces the key mechanism: the incompatibility between a non-voluntary national identity and political equality. Therefore, higher levels of formal democracy amplify the negative effects on support for democracy.

These findings at the individual level indicate that a non-voluntary national identity poses an obstacle to the development of democratic governance within a country. This interaction with formal democracy works in two ways: when fewer people hold a non-voluntary national identity, formal democracy becomes stronger. However, when the number of people with a non-voluntary national identity decreases as a result of higher levels of formal democracy, their support for democracy goes down. As an example, consider a country like Sweden, where democratic governance is well-established, as are voluntary national identities. In this environment, few individuals identify with a strictly non-voluntary national identity rooted in origin. However, such inclusivity can decrease the prevalence of non-voluntary national identities. For those who maintain such identities, an inclusive democracy can feel threatening, as they may perceive their identity as being diluted or marginalized. Consequently, this can lead to feelings of alienation from the democratic system and decreased support for democracy, as such governance no longer seems to safeguard their identities and interests. In essence: non-voluntary national identities weaken democratic governance. Their decline boosts democracy, but reduces support for democracy.

Expanding on the main mechanism (the incompatibility between a non-voluntary identity and political equality), civic beliefs and participation appear to mediate the connection between national identity and support for democracy. More precisely, the mediating roles of tolerance, trust, and participation in voluntary associations and protest activities largely explain this relationship. A non-voluntary national identity correlates with lower levels of social trust, tolerance, and civic participation. Conversely, a voluntary national identity has a distinct positive influence on civic beliefs and participation. Fundamentally, the very nature of national identity, coupled with civic values and proactive participation, underpins endorsement of democracy. This dual impact underscores the importance of the contents of national identity in shaping democratic outcomes. Thus, the role of national identity ties into the extensive literature on the mediators social capital and civic competence. This literature emphasizes the role of civic virtues, social trust, and community engagement – elements central to these mediators – in developing and sustaining a thriving democracy. Demonstrating that civic competence and social capital are closely linked

to national identity enhances our theoretical understanding of democracy. It also provides practical insights for fostering a democratic ethos. The empirical verification of the assumed social mechanism underscores the importance of maintaining political equality without compromise.

Bridging my empirical findings at both the societal and individual levels with democracy research promotes an understanding of why and how different national identities accumulate into a political culture that impacts formal democracy. Although the impact of non-voluntary national identity on support for democracy is strongly negative, support for democracy remains robust worldwide. This paradoxically means that even people with non-voluntary national identities score relatively high on support for democracy. At the same time, there is a strong negative relationship between non-voluntary national identity and the level of democracy at the country level. However, as proposed by Inglehart, it is not merely aggregate support for democracy that is crucial, but rather the specific values underpinning this support. When support for democracy is rooted in a sense of duty towards the nation stemming from a non-voluntary national identity, this undermines civic beliefs and participation, and fosters a political culture detrimental to democracy. A political culture based on non-voluntary aspects of national identity enables authorities to implement policies compromising political equality. Consequently, policies and laws can unfairly benefit the segment of the population that possesses non-voluntary characteristics. Such favoritism leads to reduced levels of formal democracy or even the absence of democracy.

There are several shortcomings that need to be addressed. The analysis of the relationship between national identity and support for democracy at the individual level faces certain limitations. First, using cross-sectional data limits the ability to establish causal relationships. Second, the abstract nature of “support for democracy” in surveys can lead to varied interpretations among respondents. Improving measurement might involve operationalizing value judgments about political equality or considering psychological predispositions associated with a “democratic personality,” characterized by mental flexibility and empathy (Allport, 1954). Additionally, the empirical tests were based on European datasets, which constrains the possibility to generalize to a global context.

The analysis at the societal level also had limitations. First, due to the slow change in both the level of formal democracy and national identity within populations, even a long study period does not fully capture the changes within countries. This is particularly relevant given the recent declines in democratic features and the rise of populist movements. Second, the reliance on data from ONBound, which comprises

various cross-sectional surveys with varying total survey errors between countries and years, presents challenges. Despite these limitations, the establishment of a cross-sectional relationship with indications of change over time provided some empirical support for an association between non-voluntary national identity and formal democracy. Moreover, these findings at the societal level were mirrored at the individual level.

There are some theoretical contributions worth mentioning. Adopting, developing, and operationalizing the voluntary and non-voluntary distinction, originally presented by Mišćević (2001), contributes to the research area. To ensure its accuracy in empirical research, I reviewed previous studies demonstrating that the voluntary versus non-voluntary distinction is a fundamental component across various terminologies. Being explicit about this distinction creates a more precise and universally relevant framework. This approach clearly separates the descriptive elements of nationhood from the normative ones. Applying the voluntary versus non-voluntary distinction not only extends our understanding, but also enables clearer debates and policy proposals in political discourse.

Future research should address some of the limitations identified in this research. Longitudinal studies on national identity and democracy are needed to reveal the causal relationship between national identity and support for democracy. The individual-level analysis should be broadened to include diverse global contexts. Immigration, social policies, and multiculturalism could be included as moderators to further investigate the relationship between national identity and democracy. At the societal level, it would be interesting to link collective national identity to other democracy-related outcomes such as deliberation, egalitarianism, and the quality of government.

Regarding policy implications, such as naturalization (Hedegaard & Larsen, 2022), international organizations and governments can collaborate to design programs that emphasize the importance of voluntary, inclusive national identities and their compatibility with democratic principles. Efforts should focus on bridging the gap between national identity and democratic values by highlighting how inclusive, voluntary identities can coexist with national pride and a sense of unity. Considering that democracy helps citizens avoid the tyranny of autocrats, guarantees essential rights and general freedom, and tends to yield a more prosperous society than other alternatives, the normative validity of classical and liberal nationalist stances should be contested.

Lastly, we can focus on the following intriguing question: if the nation is a precondition for democracy, how should we address the fact that identification with features that mark the uniqueness of the nation do not benefit democratic governance?

In accordance with the principles of practical reason, we are bound by the circumstances of our birth, unable to choose the conditions into which we are born. However, the power to define our national identity – our concept of the nation to which we belong – rests within our will. This freely made choice significantly influences the environment in which democratic sentiments and governance can thrive or decline. In this regard, it becomes clear that a national identity heavily reliant on non-voluntary characteristics diminishes the essence of democracy. The more we limit identity to involuntary traits, the more we reduce the breadth of democratic freedoms. Contrary to the classical or liberal nationalist view that ethnic loyalties and a shared national attachment benefit democracy, my empirical findings suggest that a focus on voluntary identity aspects and shared civic beliefs and participation would build more inclusive and resilient democratic systems. The democratic national identity signifies the capacity to succeed in being a national citizen in an imperfect nation-state and still remain a free person.

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