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The Interplay between National Identity and Democracy

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Abstract

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.

Keywords

National identity, national attachment, civic, nationalism, democracy, democratic support

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