

The Effect of Race and the American Flag on Perceptions of Blind Patriotism, Constructive Patriotism, and American Identity

Sayem Kamal, Roslyn High School, Roslyn, NY

E-mail: skamal23@roslynschools.org

Abstract

The present study explores the effect of displaying an American flag on perceptions of blind patriotism, constructive patriotism, and American identity in White, Black, and Asian men. Participants ($N = 360$) were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk and redirected to Qualtrics to complete the survey in which race and the presence of the flag were manipulated. Men pictured with a flag were seen as more blindly patriotic and American, and a White man was seen as significantly more blindly patriotic than a Black or Asian man. Interestingly, constructive patriotism was not affected by either independent variable. The results support the belief that the flag has become associated with those who support the United States unquestioningly but suggest that constructive patriotism, the belief that we need to work to make our nation better, may unite many Americans.

Patriotism has long been linked to a nation's flag. The American flag was created to give the Thirteen Colonies a patriotic symbol around which to unite. Recent years have seen a rise in disagreement about what the flag represents as well as what it means to be a patriot (Venugopal, 2018). These disagreements have often been linked to issues tied to the United States' unequal treatment of marginalized groups. Many see the quintessential American to be White, leading to unwelcoming attitudes and discrimination toward minority groups (Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Schildkraut, 2007). This study sought to examine whether displaying a flag and an individual's race influences perceptions of people's patriotism and American identity.

The last decade has seen increasing conflicts over what it means to be patriotic. In the most general terms, patriotism can be defined as the attachment of citizens to the country in which they live or how much love and pride they have for the country (Bar-Tal, 1993; Kosterman & Feshbach,

1989). However, that love of country can be expressed in various ways. Symbolic patriotism, for example, is a love for national symbols, like the flag and national anthem (Huddy & Khatib, 2007). Blind patriotism can be described as an unquestioning evaluation and lack of criticism of one's nation while, in contrast, constructive patriotism is described as an attachment to one's country while questioning and criticizing the country in order to improve it (Schatz et al., 2003).

Literature Review

The American flag is, perhaps, the main symbol of the United States. Displaying the flag has been associated with feelings of blind patriotism, although there is limited research on this topic. Prior to September 11th, the definitions of blind and symbolic patriotism were far more distinct, with symbolic patriotism representing one's love for their nation through symbols and blind patriotism being an ideological perspective that unconditionally supports institutions and policies

(Schatz, 1999). However, one study that compared symbolic and blind patriotism after September 11th by analyzing a 2002 survey with 535 adult participants found that the line between blind patriotism and symbolic patriotism has blurred with the increased use of the American flag as a political symbol (Parker, 2009). Another national survey with 605 American adult participants examined flag-display behavior after the terrorist attacks on September 11th and found that displaying a flag after September 11th was largely motivated by the desire to express blind patriotism (Skitka, 2005). Additionally, a 2007 study using a sample of undergraduates found that blind patriotism is associated with national symbols, like the American flag (Huddy & Khatib, 2007).

White Americans express symbolic patriotism more than members of marginalized groups. One study that analyzed the 2002 California Patriotism Pilot Study found that wearing flag pins, flying the flag in front of one's house, and putting a flag on one's car is more common among White Americans than among members of marginalized groups (Parker, 2009). In fact, some have suggested that flags can be seen as threatening by members of marginalized groups. Venugopal (2018) wrote an article that described a Black man who felt unwelcome and unsafe in White-dominated neighborhoods that had a high presence of flags. Some have asserted that there is a cult of the flag in America in which people display the flag on every possible occasion, and many find the flag intimidating and a symbol of racial exclusion (Venugopal, 2018). Furthermore, an *NPR* article described a counter-protest to a Black Lives Matter protest in Illinois in which the American flag was weaponized by White Americans who drove by with American flags on their vehicles, thus using symbolic patriotism to combat and silence constructive patriotism (Mann & Daniel, 2020). Another study found that uneducated White people expressed higher levels of racial resentment linked to beliefs that Black people do not exhibit blind patriotism and do not respect American symbols and authority (Lacina, 2020). The belief that White Americans express more symbolic and blind patriotism than Americans of other racial groups leads to the question of how people would perceive

members of marginalized groups who display the flag.

On the other hand, constructive patriotism has been found to be associated with membership in or sympathy toward members of marginalized groups. One study that reviewed over 400 social media posts regarding protests from Black NFL players found that Black players were associated with expressing more constructive patriotism than blind patriotism (Montez de Oca & Suh, 2019). Another paper that analyzed the existing literature on blind and constructive patriotism found that blind patriotism is linked to majority groups' opposition to minority groups, such as Middle Easterners, African Americans, and Jews. While constructive patriotism is associated with minority groups' inclusion and empowerment of these opposed groups (Schatz, 2018).

Research also indicates that Americans of all races, although primarily White Americans, tend to view members of marginalized groups as less "American" than White people. One study that measured how Americans of all races view American identity through responses to a survey found that being born in the United States, being White, respecting the law, blending into society, and being able to speak English were among the top factors that the 2,800 American participants from various races found important in determining American identity. As a result, people who do not fit into these criteria, are seen as less American (Schildkraut, 2007).

Hypotheses

Several studies have documented implicit biases that equate being American and being White. In one study using an implicit association test, Stanford students rated White American faces as significantly more American than Asian faces (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). In another study, undergraduates at Yale University were shown eight images in a random order that are associated with being American such as Mount Rushmore. They then had to associate the image with either White, Asian, or Black people. The participants then had to answer both explicit and implicit questions about the ties between the three ethnic groups and American culture. The study revealed

that participants implicitly associate White people with American symbols. However, in explicit questions about the “Americanness” of different groups, there was no significant difference (Devos & Banaji, 2005). Since displaying the American flag is an expression of symbolic patriotism and is linked to being perceived as more American and blindly patriotic, I wondered how such displays would affect the perceptions of members of marginalized groups. I also was curious about whether these biases would be found in a more explicit measure of blind patriotism, constructive patriotism, and American identity. This study tested the following hypotheses: *Hypothesis 1*: Compared to a person pictured on a neutral background, a person pictured with a flag in the background will be perceived as: a) more American b) more blindly patriotic c) less constructively patriotic. *Hypothesis 2*: Compared to an Asian and Black person, White person will be as depicted will be perceived as a) more American b) more blindly patriotic c) less constructively patriotic.

Method

Design and Procedure

The design of the study was a 3 (Race: Black, Asian, White) x 2 (Flag vs. No Flag) between-subjects factorial design, resulting in six conditions. Participants were shown a holiday card supposedly sent out by a local political candidate to increase his name recognition. The participants were randomly assigned to view a card that pictured either a Black, Asian, or White male candidate for public office; the card either had an American flag background or a neutral beige background. The two versions of the card can be seen in Appendix A. Participants were then asked to complete a survey evaluating the candidate and expressing perceptions of his blind patriotism, constructive patriotism, and American identity. Participants reported their demographic information and then completed a manipulation check which asked about the race of the person shown.

Participants

A power analysis showed the need for a sample of at least 158 participants in order to provide 80% power, assuming a moderately sized effect. After omitting those who failed the manipulation check, 190 participants remained for data analysis. Anyone who lived in the United States and was 18 or over on Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online platform, was able to enroll in the study. Due to online surveying, participants were recruited from a wide range of ages, genders, races, and ethnicities. In the sample, 72% of participants in the analysis were White, 8.1% were Asian, 7.6% were Black, 7.1% were Hispanic/Latinx, and the remaining 4% picked the option of “Other.” For participant gender, 43.7% of participants were male, 54.8% were female, and the remaining 1.5% identified as another gender. The mean age of participants was 32 years.

Experimental Stimulus

Six versions of a holiday card were created for this study (see Appendix A). It included a photo of a man holding his dog against a background of either an American flag or a beige background. The application Faceapp was used to manipulate a photo into a Black, Asian, or White version. All other information was consistent across conditions, such as the background, dog, and text at the bottom of the holiday card. Alongside the holiday card were identical vignettes describing the person as someone running for public office in their local government who sent holiday cards to increase recognition.

Dependent Measures

The study had three different dependent measures: perceived blind patriotism, perceived constructive patriotism, and perceived American identity. Participants were asked to reflect upon several statements on a 5-point Likert scale with numbers ranging from “1” = “totally disagree” to “5” = “totally agree.” For the blind and constructive patriotism scales, five items for each variable were used from the “Varieties of National Attachment” scale (Schatz et al., 1999); the scale can be found in

Appendix B. With a Cronbach’s alpha of .84 for blind patriotism and .85 for constructive patriotism, these scales were reliable in this sample. Lastly, six items from the 5-point Likert “American Identity Measure” (AIM) scale were used such as 1) “This person understands pretty well what being American means to them” (Schwartz et al., 1992). This scale was reliable in this sample with a Cronbach’s alpha of .87. Three items appeared immediately after the stimulus to measure participants’ perception of the candidate. These results are not reported because this variable was not the focus of the study, and no significant differences among groups were found on it.

Data Analysis

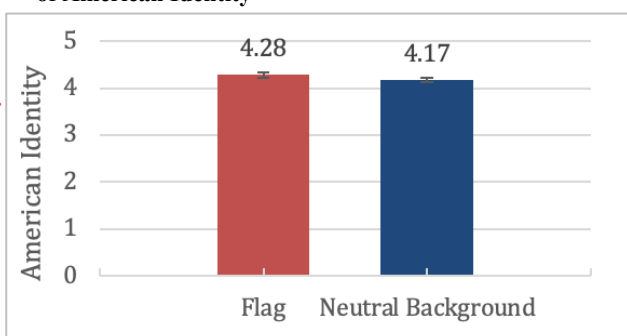
Two-way ANOVAs were conducted to determine the effect of race and the presence of a flag on perceived American identity, blind patriotism, and constructive patriotism. Post hoc tests were conducted to explore whether there was a significant difference between the White, Black, and Asian males on the dependent variables. These analyses were run on the whole sample and on White participants only; because the results from the two analyses were so similar, only the data from the whole sample is reported in the paper.

Results

The Effect of an American Flag Background

The presence of the American flag significantly increased perceptions of the candidate’s American identity, $F(1, 190) = 3.77, p = .05, \eta_p^2 = .02$. Figure 1 demonstrates that candidates who were pictured on the background of an American flag were perceived as significantly more American by participants compared to those with a neutral background.

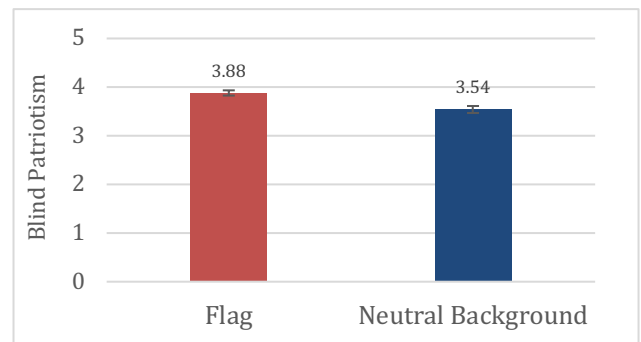
Figure 1. The Effect of the American Flag on Perceptions of American Identity



Note: Error bars represent ± 1 Standard Error

As hypothesized, there was also a significant effect of the presence of a flag on perceptions of blind patriotism, $F(1, 190) = 3.68, p = .04, \eta_p^2 = .03$. As shown in Figure 2, those who had the American flag in the background were seen as significantly more blindly patriotic than those with a neutral background.

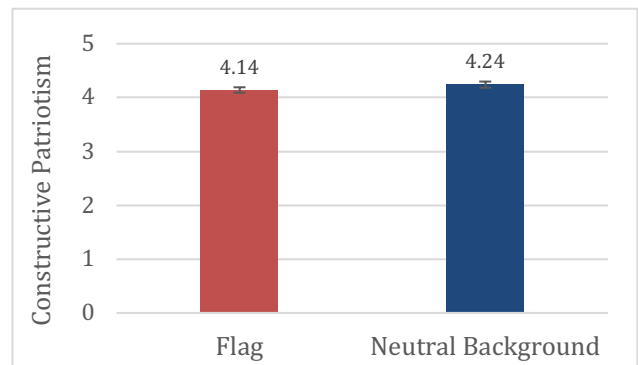
Figure 2. The Effect of the American Flag on Perceptions of Blind Patriotism



Note: Error bars represent ± 1 Standard Error

However, the effect of the flag on constructive patriotism was not significant, $F(1,190) = -0.35, p = .56, \eta_p^2 = .00$. Those depicted with an American flag in the background had a mean constructive patriotism perception of 4.1, compared to those with a neutral background, who had a mean of 4.2.

Figure 3. The Effect of the American Flag on Perceptions of Constructive Patriotism



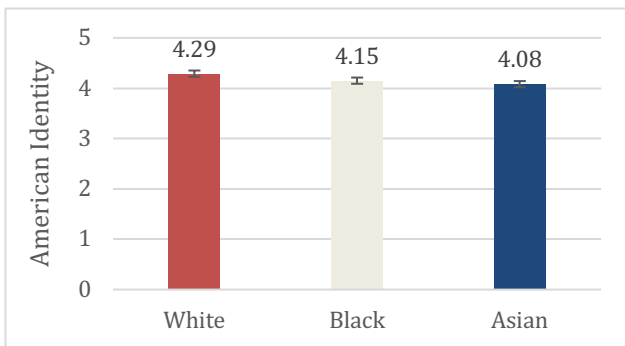
Note: Error bars represent ± 1 Standard Error

The Effect of Race

Contrary to the hypothesis, race did not have a significant effect on perceptions of American identity, $F(2, 190) = 1.25, p = .29, \eta_p^2 = .01$. Figure 4 shows that although the White candidate had the highest perceived American identity, there were no

significant differences between any of the race conditions.

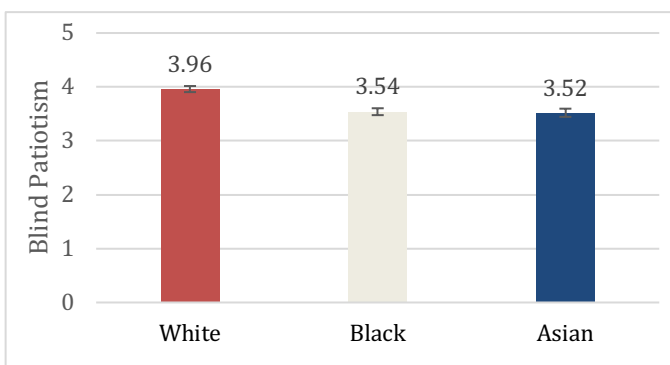
Figure 4. The Effect of Race on Perceptions of American Identity



Note: Error bars represent ± 1 Standard Error

On the other hand, race did affect blind patriotism, $F(2, 190) = 7.95, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .08$ (See Figure 5). Post hoc tests showed that the White candidate was seen as significantly more blindly patriotic than the Black candidate ($p < .01$) and the Asian candidate ($p = .013$); there was not a significant difference between the Black and Asian candidates, $p = .99$.

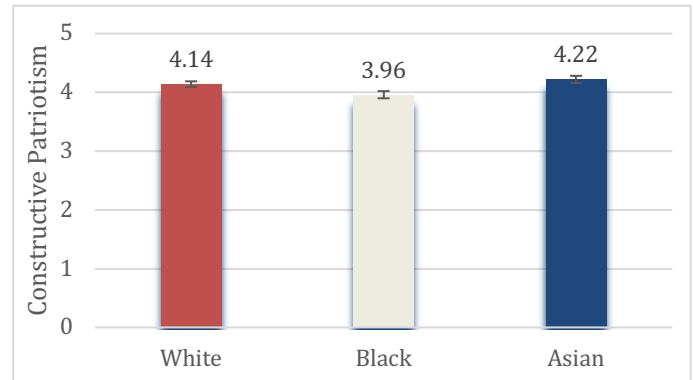
Figure 5. The Effect of Race on Perception of Blind Patriotism



Note: Error bars represent ± 1 Standard Error

The effect of race on perceptions of constructive patriotism neared significance, $F(2, 190) = 2.93, p = .06, \eta_p^2 = .03$ (See Figure 6). A post-hoc revealed that the Black candidate was seen as having significantly lower constructive patriotism than the White candidate ($p = .05$) but not significantly different from the Asian candidate ($p = .99$).

Figure 6. The Effect of Race on Perceptions of Constructive Patriotism



Note: Error bars represent ± 1 Standard Error

Discussion

The Effect of an American Flag Background

In support of the hypothesis, those pictured with an American flag were seen as more American than those with a neutral background. This finding suggests that expressions of symbolic patriotism such as displaying the flag result in people being seen as more American. Previous research has demonstrated that Americans see American identity as being able to blend into society, respecting laws, and being involved in politics, among other less important factors (Schildkraut, 2007). It is possible that people perceive those who raise the flag to embody these qualities. Additionally, people may equate displays of symbolic patriotism with having an American identity, and this interpretation creates a much broader definition of who can be seen as American. Immigrants can still be seen as American because American identity is not solely based on being born in the United States but through expressions of symbolic patriotism like raising the flag.

Those who raise a flag are not only seen as more American but also significantly more blindly patriotic than those with a neutral background, supporting hypothesis 1B. This finding is in line with previous literature which has demonstrated that blind patriotism is associated with a love of national symbols, such as the American flag (Huddy & Khatib, 2007). This result also suggests that the American flag has been co-opted by blind patriots. In the past, the flag anecdotally has been perceived as a symbolic weapon by blind patriots against protests (Mann, & Daniel, 2020), and the

present study provides some empirical support for this idea.

Interestingly, the presence of a flag did not affect perceptions of constructive patriotism. I hypothesized that displaying a flag would lead to lower perceptions of constructive patriotism. While constructive and blind patriotism are often viewed as opposites (Schatz et al., 2003), it seems that they are merely different. The results suggest that while displaying the flag does demonstrate blind patriotism, it does not affect perceptions of constructive patriotism. Not displaying a flag does not necessarily make someone more or less constructively patriotic.

The Effect of Race

Contrary to the hypothesis, race did not affect perceptions of American identity. Older studies demonstrated that White people are seen as the most American, followed by Black people and then Asian people (Cheryan & Monin, 2005; Devos & Banaji, 2005). One possible reason for the difference in findings may be due to how the attitudes were measured. Most of the earlier studies focused on implicit associations using an implicit associations test. One study found that participants implicitly linked being American with being White, but the participants did not explicitly hold these beliefs (Devos & Banaji, 2005). While the questions in the present study explicitly ask about participants' perceptions of the target person, the goal in asking them is less obvious due to the fact that participants only saw one version of the stimulus, which called less attention to racial differences. Alternatively, it may be that the last two decades have seen progress in racial equality in the United States.

On the other hand, the White candidate was seen as more blindly patriotic than the Black and Asian candidate. Studies have shown that Americans believe that members of marginalized groups do not blindly support their country and instead seek to change it (Lacina, 2020). Especially with the recent polarization of American society following the Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate protests, there is a growing consensus among many White Americans on the idea that minorities

do not support their country unwaveringly (Lacina, 2020).

However, no differences were found in constructive patriotism due to the race of the candidate. This finding also suggests that constructive patriotism is not necessarily inverse to blind patriotism. It may be that although people who are blindly patriotic are generally assumed to be White, constructive patriotism is far more racially inclusive. Recent protests (e.g., BLM, Stop Asian Hate, pro-choice) have had a racially diverse group of supporters (Horowitz et al., 2020).

One potential limitation of this study is that the experimental stimulus was only of one specific male candidate (with race manipulated). The results of the study could be generalized to a larger population if I examined the perceptions of a woman, someone of different age, or someone who was not presented as a political candidate. Further study could include examining different presentations of the American flag, such as a flag pin or flying an American flag in front of one's house. Given the polarization of political parties in The United States and the potential co-opting of the flag by conservatives, it would be interesting to see how one's political party relates to flag-raising tendencies or perceptions of blind and constructive patriotism.

The results provide insight into how one's patriotism can be perceived based on one's race and flag-raising tendencies. While blind patriotism was associated with displaying the American flag and being White, constructive patriotism was equally likely to be associated with members of different racial groups and was not related to whether someone was pictured with the flag. In a time when our country is so polarized, this study suggests that a belief in the ability for our nation to grow and improve may be a value that unites many Americans.

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