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978-0-521-76013-3 - Who Counts as an American?: The Boundaries of National Identity

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse

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## Who Counts as an American?

### *The Boundaries of National Identity*

Why is national identity such a potent force in people's lives? And is the force positive or negative? In this thoughtful and provocative book, Elizabeth Theiss-Morse develops a social theory of national identity and uses a national survey, focus groups, and experiments to answer these important questions in the American context. Her results show that the combination of group commitment and the setting of exclusive boundaries on the national group affects how people behave toward their fellow Americans. Strong identifiers care a great deal about their national group. They want to help and be loyal to their fellow Americans. By limiting who counts as an American, though, these strong identifiers place serious limits on who benefits from their pro-group behavior. Help and loyalty are offered only to "true Americans," not Americans who do not count and who are pushed to the periphery of the national group.

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse is Professor and Chair of Political Science at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where she has taught since 1988. She is the coauthor of two award-winning Cambridge University Press books: *Congress as Public Enemy: Public Attitudes toward American Political Institutions* (with John R. Hibbing), winner of the American Political Science Association's (APSA) Fenno Prize in 1996 for the best book on Congress, and *With Malice toward Some: How People Make Civil Liberties Judgments* (with George E. Marcus, John L. Sullivan, and Sandra L. Wood), winner of the APSA's Best Book in Political Psychology Prize in 1996. A second book written with John Hibbing, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge, UK, 2002), was named an "Outstanding Academic Title" by *Choice* magazine in 2003. She also co-edited with John Hibbing *What Is It about Government That Americans Dislike?* (Cambridge, UK, 2001). She has published articles in the *American Journal of Political Science*, *American Political Science Review*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *Political Psychology*, and *Political Behavior*, among others, and she has received five National Science Foundation grants.

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ELIZABETH THEISS-MORSE

*University of Nebraska–Lincoln*



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*To Randy, with love*

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## Preface

In 1986, my husband Randy and I took a trip to New Zealand. We spent a couple of days in Queenstown, located in a breathtakingly beautiful spot on the edge of Lake Wakatipu looking out at The Remarkables mountain range. The area's natural beauty has made Queenstown a popular tourist destination, so it was no surprise that upon arriving in Queenstown we saw many tourists, like ourselves, from around the world. We especially noticed a lot of Americans, including a group of Americans singing "If You're Happy and You Know It Clap Your Hands" very loudly in the Skyline Restaurant atop Bobs Peak and another group of Americans emerging from a tourist bus complaining loudly that New Zealand sure wasn't like America ("And you have to ask for water in a restaurant and when they bring it, it doesn't even have ice in it, of all things!").

Sitting in The Cow, a pizza restaurant where multiple parties were seated together at each table, we heard some Americans at the next table complain that they didn't like having to sit with strangers. Shortly thereafter, our server came to our table and engaged us in a conversation. She asked us what we had seen and done in New Zealand thus far. After a pleasant conversation, she asked if we were Canadians. Since Randy and I at the time had more pronounced Minnesota accents, this question was not far-fetched, but it raised something of a dilemma. Did we want to tell the server we were Americans, fully placing ourselves within the group "the American people," or did we prefer not having that identity placed on us at that time? What did we

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think of the American people, and did we want to be seen as part of that social group?

A decade later, when John Hibbing and I began work on our book *Stealth Democracy*, I became intrigued with a particular aspect of our work on people's perceptions of democratic processes: What do Americans think of the American people? And what does it matter? John and I found in our research that people's desire to remove power from elected officials is in part a reflection of their views of "the American people." At the same time, however, these same people fully recognize the limitations of their fellow Americans – that they do not care much about politics, that they are not very well informed, and that they are too busy to pay much attention to politics in the first place – which leads to not wanting to put too much power in the people's hands. So Americans do not want elected officials to have too much power but they also are unwilling to endorse giving a lot of power to the American people. Many Americans therefore turn to "stealth democracy" as a viable alternative to a people-centered direct democracy and to the politician-centered representative democracy we currently have.

After finishing the work on *Stealth Democracy*, I began to think more deeply about Americans' perceptions of the American people. This thinking led me to research on national identity, which subsequently led me to engage more fully with what it means to hold a national identity. I was struck by the disjuncture between how European scholars think and write about national identity and how American scholars think and write about the concept. Is American identity really a different animal from, say, British identity or French identity or Polish identity? Is American identity "exceptional"? I don't think so. I therefore tried to draw out a theory of national identity that could encompass the American case along with any other case, which I call a social theory of national identity. National identity is about feeling part of a national group, being part of the "American people" or the "French people" or the "Polish people." National identity does not differ depending on from which country one comes.

If national identity is a social identity, which I am convinced it is, then much of the research from social psychology on group dynamics can be used to understand what national identity is and what its consequences will be. Many people identify with their national group,

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often strongly, and being part of that group affects their attitudes and behavior. This social group understanding of national identity opens up all sorts of interesting questions. What explains differences in how strongly people identify with their national group? How do people define who is in their national group and who is not? If there are differences in people's commitment to their national group and in the boundaries they set on that group, what are the consequences? I am especially interested in consequences that arise from group-oriented attitudes and behaviors. Who helps and who gets helped in the national group? How does national identity affect reactions to criticisms coming from fellow group members? In broad terms, how does national identity help or hurt the group – in this case, the American people?

My research on national identity has had a significant impact on my own thinking about American identity and the American people. In many ways, the negatives of a strong national identity outweigh the positives. Strong identifiers define their national group more narrowly than weak identifiers, setting strict boundaries on who is included in the group and who is excluded. They are also more likely to marginalize group members who aren't prototypical. Marginalized group members are less likely to be helped and less likely to be listened to when they raise concerns about the national group. The result is a large number of marginalized compatriots who feel tremendously frustrated and angry and strong identifiers who refuse to acknowledge the need to make changes that would actually strengthen the group in the long run.

But the positives are important and cannot be readily dismissed. The most positive consequence is strong identifiers' sense of responsibility to their national community. Strong identifiers are much more likely than weak identifiers to be motivated by concerns about what is in the best interest of the national group. Weak identifiers are not so motivated. Having group members who care deeply about their group and its well-being is essential to any group. The group is strengthened by having members who help each other, who willingly move beyond their own self-interests to think about the group's interests, who defend the group when it is under attack. Without these strong identifiers, groups are not really groups at all. They are simply a collection of atomistic individuals. The positives of national identity are

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unfortunately undermined by the strong tendency of strong identifiers to set hard, exclusive boundaries on their national group. When a strong commitment to the group combines with a narrow understanding of who counts as a “true American,” the results are devastating for marginalized Americans and for the national group as a whole.

This project on national identity has benefited greatly from the help offered by several organizations and people. I am deeply grateful to the National Science Foundation, which provided most of the funding for this research (SES-0111887). It is such a luxury to be able to use original data collected specifically for the purposes of this research, and I thank the National Science Foundation for giving me this opportunity. I am also grateful to the U.S. Congress Fund, the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) Research Council, and the Gallup Research Center, all at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, for providing me with additional resources to work on this project.

The multiple methods used in this study necessitated the help of many individuals. I thank the Ohio State University’s Center for Survey Research, and especially Matthew Courser, for doing such a good job helping with and administering the national survey. Focus groups are great fun to conduct, but putting them together entails a tremendous amount of work. The focus groups used in this research could not have happened without the impressive efforts of Nelson Okuku Miruka, from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, and Emily Sharum, from the University of Arkansas. Thank you for all of your help. And thanks to Todd Shields for recommending Emily to me.

The experiments demanded the services of the greatest number of people, often during odd hours and on weekends. I thank Dan Braaten, Eric French, Travis French, Eric Heinze, Mitch Herian, Brian Hernandez, Seema Kakran, Tina Mueller, Aaron Peeks, Ala’ Qadi, Bennie Shobe, and Tyler White for all of the work they put into the experiments. I am especially grateful to Eric Whitaker, who served as my research assistant for much of this project. Eric’s hard work and innovative approach to dealing with various problems that arose were extremely impressive. I was often able to focus my attention on other matters knowing that Eric was taking care of the everyday details of this project. Thanks to Ryan Lowry for his work on the final stage of this process. Finally, I am deeply indebted to Helen Sexton, the administrative assistant in the Department of Political Science at the

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University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Helen made sure everyone got paid on time and always knew whom to call when a crisis arose or information was needed. I was also helped tremendously throughout this project with advice, suggestions, and insights from colleagues both at Nebraska and around the country. Some gave helpful feedback on conference papers that developed into chapters. Some read a part or all of the book manuscript. And some gave useful advice during the data-gathering phase of the project. The book was much improved by all of the intelligent and constructive comments I received. Thanks to the two anonymous reviewers at Cambridge University Press, John Fulwider, John Hibbing, Leonie Huddy, Debbie Schildkraut, John Transue, and Eric Whitaker. I am especially grateful to Jeff Spinner-Halev and Amy Fried for their time, effort, and extremely helpful comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript.

Finally, my life would be much less enjoyable and full without my family. My two kids, Nicholas and Christopher, always make me keep my work in perspective. Any feelings of frustration or anxiety I experienced working on this book were quickly washed away as soon as we were together and they regaled me with stories from school or the latest joke they had heard or the funny things their friends had done that day. I love them very much. My husband and best friend, Randy, is always there for me. I consciously tried very hard not to bring questions and concerns about this project home with me, and I never once asked him to read any part of the book. I wanted this book to be purely my gift to him.