Measuring Individual Identity

Experimental Evidence

Alexander Kuo and Yotam Margalit

"We have spoken to many people in this country [X], and they have all described themselves in different ways. Some people describe themselves in terms of their language, religion, and race, and others describe themselves in economic terms, such as working class, middle class, or farmer. Besides being [a citizen of X], which specific group do you feel you belong to first and foremost?"[1]

What determines the identity category to which people feel they belong? What is the political significance of one's proclaimed identity? The answers to these questions are important for understanding phenomena such as policy preferences, social cleavages, and political conflict. To address such questions, scholars are making increasing use of national and cross-national survey items that ask individuals about their identity. The question that appears above is a representative example included in popular surveys used in political science research (such as the Eurobarometer, the International Social Survey Program, and the World Values Survey). The potential intellectual contributions of such questions are clear. They are a simple way of capturing respondents' identity attachments, and of providing information that is useful for explaining political outcomes of interest.

For example, scholars have used identity survey data to explain people's preferences on issues such as tax policies, affirmative action, or political participation.[2] Some studies explicitly treat identity attachments as a causal factor explaining political preferences. For instance, Sean Carey finds "a clear indication that a strong national identity leads to a decrease in support for the European Union."[3] Similarly, Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks describe identity as a "more powerful influence" than material interests in shaping attitudes on EU ascension.[4]

However, a key problem with this approach is its assumption about the nature of attachment that people's identity responses convey. As James Fearon notes, both popular discourse and social science research use the term identity with two broad interpretations: first, as a "technical" term that denotes classification in a certain social

category; second, as a deep-rooted aspect of an individual that is the basis of one's self-respect or dignity.[5] Scholarly interest in identity largely derives from the implicit linkage of these two interpretations, that is, from treating the classification of one's own identity as capturing an essential aspect of people's perception of self. While survey questions about identity typically request information that is consistent with the first interpretation of identity, social scientists often treat the responses to these questions as informative about the latter interpretation of identity, that is, something that is more deeply rooted and fundamental to people's self-perception. As such, identity responses are seen as useful in explaining people's preferences or behavior.[6]

Yet this linkage between the two interpretations of identity rests on an empirical claim for which there is little evidence. Suppose an individual's self-described identity is located on a continuum of stability. At one extreme, a person's professed identity could be analogous to a specific surname; regardless of the situation in which the individual is asked her name, the response is likely to remain unchanged. At the other extreme, one's self-identification could be analogous to a general mood. At this extreme, external conditions or recent experiences could substantially alter her response. The location of self-identity on this continuum remains an open question. Is self-identity closer to the "name" (or fixed) end of the continuum, that is, a unique and stable characteristic; or does people's self-identity shift in response to situational conditions? Moreover, does the stability of self-identity vary across individuals in a systematic way?

To address these questions, scholars have given increasing attention to the fundamental issue of whether and how identity can be meaningfully measured for social scientific research. The recent framework described by Rawi Abdelal, Yoshiko Herrera, Alastair Johnston, and Rose McDermott substantially contributes to clarifying definitions of collective identity and offers guidance as to how social scientists should proceed in testing theories.[7] The analysis of Abdelal et al. demonstrates that a key challenge in the measurement of identity stems from the lack of agreement about its stability or its definition.

For example, the "primordialist" literature treats identity as deeply entrenched attachments, implying that such attachments should be stable over time.[8] In contrast, an increasingly influential rationalist approach to identity contends that individuals employ an instrumental calculation in their adoption of an identity. This perspective argues that individuals possess a repertoire of potential identity attachments, and that the dimension that becomes one's primary identity often reflects a strategic rationale. In other words, individuals are assumed to adopt certain identities because these offer perceived benefits, whether material or psychic.[9] This logic suggests that, given a change in the expected benefits a certain identity offers, identity attachments may shift over time. These studies generally focus on observed strategic behavior that follows from one's identity, although some studies explicitly test for self-identification in a survey context. An observable implication of the strategic account of identity is that individuals are likely to stay with a certain identity category, unless there is a clear incentive to shift.

The situationist literature in social psychology proposes an even more malleable view of identity. It argues that external stimuli can unconsciously influence people's

primary identity at a given moment, without requiring an instrumental consideration on one's behalf. Furthermore, situationists argue that such an unconscious influence can also lead to behavioral changes that are consistent with the assumed identity.[10] For example, stereotype-priming experiments demonstrate that exposing individuals to content associated with a certain identity (for example, a certain race or gender) can affect behavior in a manner consistent with the primed stereotype.[11] Another innovative study finds that priming individuals with their national versus racial identity affects their preferences on public spending on minorities.[12]

The research cited above reflects varying approaches to identity choice and provides different expectations regarding the kind of attachment that self-reported identity capture. We provide new evidence that advances this debate. We conduct a set of three studies that investigate three aspects of people's self-reported identity attachments: (1) their stability over time; (2) their susceptibility to situational factors; and (3) their causal role in shaping preferences. Taken together, these studies offer guidance on what can and cannot be inferred from self-reported identity data collected at a given moment in time.

These studies vary in terms of design, sample, and research instrument (face-to-face interviews, internet, and a telephone survey). The first is a panel study that tracks the stability of the identity category that individuals identify with "first and foremost." Using a nationally representative sample, we observe that individual self-identity varies significantly over time. Furthermore, the panel design enables us to quantify the degree of fluidity in self-identity. The second study, an experiment embedded in a nationally representative sample in the United States, builds on the first study and examines whether changes in self-identity can be explained by situational factors, and whether such sensitivity varies systematically across subgroups of the population. The final study, an experiment embedded in a household survey in the country of Georgia, examines the degree to which the strength of the situational triggers affects the degree of change in self-identity, and tests the link between shifts in people's purported self-identity and changes in their policy preferences. Furthermore, the Georgian study helps assess the replicability of the U.S. findings in a different national context.

Cumulatively, the studies demonstrate that the identity category that people identify with "first and foremost" shifts quite significantly over time and is strongly influenced by situational triggers. The effect of these triggers is conditioned by their salience, as well as by individual characteristics, most prominently education. Finally, the analysis offers little evidence to support the contention that changes in the professed primary identity category of an individual causes a corresponding shift in policy preferences.

The findings have important implications for comparative research on both the causes and consequences of identity choice. Most pertinent, our findings suggest that one should be cautious about conflating the two broad interpretations of identity. People's purported self-identifications should not be casually equated with identity in the more profound sense conventionally assigned to the concept, that is, as a unique and fundamental aspect of one's dignity and self-respect. Although for some individuals these purported identifications may convey such a unique attachment, our evidence indicates that this is not the case for many in the population. We therefore conclude that

self-identification lies closer to the malleable ("mood") end of the stability continuum than has been previously demonstrated or implicitly assumed in many studies. Further, in finding that a change in people's self-reported primary identities does not imply a corresponding shift in policy views, the results cast doubt on claims in extant research that make causal statements about the relationship between identity and policy preferences.

Identity Stability Over Time

How stable is one's professed identity? Despite the abundance of studies that make varying assumptions about the fixity of identity and the many studies using survey data on identity attachments, there is a notable lack of empirical evidence on this question. We address this issue with a research design that examines the baseline stability of people's identity attachments over time. In Study 1, we incorporated a set of questions in a marketing survey administered to a national sample of Americans.[13] The first wave had 616 respondents. Two months later, we inserted the same set of questions into a new marketing survey which had 426 respondents. In total, 218 respondents participated in both waves, and the distribution of respondents in both surveys along various demographics was very similar (see online Appendix Table A1).[14] We included questions about participants' identity in both surveys. This research design enables us to examine whether individuals who professed to identify most by one category actually chose the same identity eight weeks later, or whether they switched to another category. The main identity question was:

> "Some people describe themselves by their {nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, or occupation}. How about you? Do you identify first and foremost by your {nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, or occupation}?"[15]

We use the phrases "strongest identity" or "primary identity" when referring to responses to this question.

The first question of interest is, given that an individual professes a certain identity attachment, how likely is that attachment to change? Table 1 provides evidence that such attachments are not stable over a period of two months. The table displays the percentage of people who chose the same identity category in the second wave of the survey as they did in the first wave. Regardless of what dimension individuals chose initially, a large percentage of individuals switched their choice in the second wave. Passage of time facilitated a significant change in the identity dimension individuals felt they identified with "first and foremost."

The numbers on the diagonal of Table 1 indicate the percentage of individuals in Wave 1 who chose the same identity dimension in Wave 2. The numbers on the off-diagonal indicate the percent of individuals who switched to other categories. Across all identity categories, only 58 percent of individuals self-identified the same way in both waves. The identity dimension from which there were the fewest deviations is gender (37 percent switched to a different identity dimension). Among individuals who

identified most by their gender initially but then chose a different primary identity in the second wave, about 13 percent switched to occupation, 13 percent to race/ethnicity, and 10 percent to nationality. Similarly, about 60 percent of the individuals who initially identified by occupation did so again in the second wave. Only 38 percent of individuals who identified by their race or ethnicity in the first wave did so in the second wave (although this result should be treated with caution since few identified by race/ethnicity in the first wave). More generally, the table indicates that self-identification is not stable, with anywhere between 40–60 percent changing between the two waves their primary identity category, depending on the original category of identification.

Table 1 Self-Identification Over Time

ID Wave 1	ID Wave 2					
	Nationality	Race/Ethnicity	Religion	Gender	Occupation	N
Nationality	**56%**	6%	0	25%	13%	16
Race/Ethnicity	31%	**38%**	0	31%	0	13
Religion	4%	13%	**48%**	17%	17%	23
Gender	10%	13%	1%	**63%**	13%	100
Occupation	11%	6%	6%	18%	**59%**	66

Note: This matrix reports the share of respondents identifying in the first wave by the category on the vertical axis who identified in Wave 2 by the identity category along the horizontal axis. For example, the upper left number means that 56 percent of individuals who identified by nationality in Wave 1 also identified by nationality in Wave 2. The two waves of the survey were administered in a time lag of two months in the beginning of July and September 2008.

Another aspect of identity attachment is whether the individual's professed *strength of attachment* to an identity is a predictor of whether the individual will maintain the same identity attachment over time. To examine this question, individuals in the second wave responded to the following additional survey item after the main question:[16]

> "Consider your response to the previous question. How strong would you say your attachment is to the identity you chose? Would you say your attachment is not strong at all, slightly strong, somewhat strong, or very strong?

If individuals vary in how strongly they feel about their identity, then one might expect them to differ also in the extent to which their purported identity category will change.[17] Table 2 provides clear evidence for this claim. The first column demonstrates that individuals vary greatly in their strength of attachment. Only 34 percent felt very strongly attached to their identity choice, whereas 36 percent felt slightly strong or not strong at all. This is *prima facie* evidence that the reported strength of people's own identity attachments differs greatly.

Turning to respondents who participated in both waves, we examine whether the self-perceived strength of the identity attachment is related to the probability that an individual switched her identity category. As the second column in Table 2 shows, 56 percent of individuals who felt "not strong at all" about their identity changed their self-identification from the first wave to the second wave. This figure decreases

monotonically as individuals report greater attachment to their professed identity. However, even among individuals who reported the highest degree of identity attachment ("very strong"), almost one-third of individuals changed their identification within a two-month period.
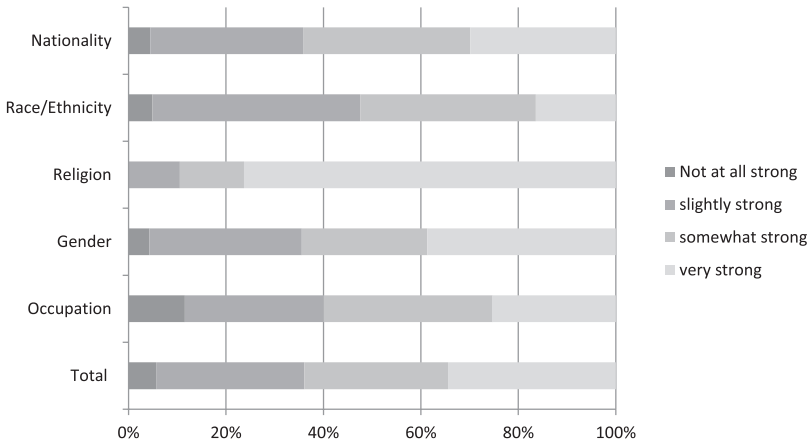
Table 2   Strength of Identity Attachment

	Wave 2		Both Waves	
Perceived Strength of ID	*N*	Percent	*N*	% Changed ID's
Very strong	146	34.4%	76	32.9%
Somewhat strong	125	29.5%	56	37.5%
Slightly strong	129	30.4%	68	51.5%
Not strong at all	24	5.6%	18	55.6%

Note: The two columns on the left pertain to respondents who participated in Wave 2. The other two columns pertain to respondents who participated in both surveys. "% Changed ID's" denotes the share of respondents that reported different identifications in the two waves, by the strength of identity attachment they reported in the second wave. For example, the upper right figure means that of all respondents who reported a "very strong" attachment to their identity choice, 32.9 percent of those individuals actually changed their identity response between Wave 1 and Wave 2.

In Figure 1 we examine whether self-perceived strength of identity attachment varies by identity category. That is, are individuals who identify with a category such as nationality more likely to feel strongly about that choice than those who identify by other categories? Figure 1 presents responses from the second wave of the study, and shows that variation in switching across identity categories is quite significant. For example, among respondents whose primary identity is their religion, 76 percent of them identified with it "very strongly," and none described their identity attachment as "not strong at all." In contrast, among those respondents whose primary identity is gender, only 39 percent described that identity attachment as "very strong"; instead, 35 percent described their attachment as either "slightly strong" or "not strong at all."

Strikingly, the variation in self-perceived strength of identity attachment is not highly correlated with the variation in the stability of identity attachments observed in Figure 1. For example, those who identified by gender were not less—in fact, slightly *more*—likely to maintain their identification than those identifying by religion (63 percent vs. 48 percent, respectively).[18] Clearly then, self-perceived strength of attachment conveys some measure of stability in one's identity affiliation, but even this measure is limited in predicting this stability.

The evidence from Study 1 supports several claims. First, people's purported identity attachments are not stable. Almost 40 percent of individuals changed the identity category they identified with "first and foremost" over a fairly short time span. This finding is consistent with claims in the literature about the multidimensional nature of self-identification. Second, individuals vary greatly in how attached they feel to the category by which they identify. One should therefore not assume that people feel strongly about the identity category they describe as the one they belong to "first and

Figure 1   Strength of Attachment by Category

Note: This figure presents the strength of identity attachment reported by individuals, as a share of the respondents that identified by that category.

foremost." Third, people's self-perceived strength of attachment to an identity varies across the different categories under consideration, but this variation does not necessarily predict actual stability in people's primary identity attachment over time.

Identity Priming Experiment

The first study demonstrates that the identity dimension people identify with "first and foremost" is not stable over time. Even among individuals who claim a strong attachment to their identity, changes in their primary identification still occur. The question that arises is what causes these changes. More specifically, how sensitive is one's professed identity attachment to the salience of situational or contextual features? The sensitivity of identity choice to such stimuli is important in the political context, as electoral competition often involves candidates' attempts to make a certain dimension of people's identity repertoires most salient.

To test whether the identity category people view as most important to them is susceptible to manipulation by external stimuli, we administered an experiment embedded in an omnibus survey to a nationally representative sample of 1,117 respondents in the United States.[19] The survey was carried out by the Center for Survey Research (CSR) at Indiana University in cooperation with Time-Sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences (TESS). Unlike Study 1 that was conducted online, this survey was administered over the telephone. Each respondent was randomly assigned to either the control group or one of three experimental groups. Each experimental group received a different treatment, which consisted of a series of four survey questions. The set of questions for

465

each treatment group was designed to unconsciously prime a specific dimension of identity: nationality, ethnicity/race, and occupation.

Group 1 (the control group) received no additional experimental questions. Group 2 received a set of questions that implicitly dealt with nationality, invoking memories of the 9/11 attacks and asking about respondents' concerns about travelling outside of the country. Group 3 was asked questions that implicitly dealt with race and ethnicity, raising issues such as language spoken at home or diversity in their neighborhood. Finally, Group 4 was asked a set of questions that implicitly dealt with occupation, prompting respondents to reflect about their workday schedule.[20] Appendix B contains the complete text of each treatment condition. The experimental priming questions were intended to subtly generate consideration of a certain identity dimension without explicitly referencing the identity itself.

After all respondents (except those in the control group) answered the series of priming questions, every respondent was read the same explicit self-identification question as presented in Study 1. Respondents again were asked to select one group with which he most identifies. As in Study 1, we label this the "main question."[21] The control group was asked this main question without being prompted with any priming questions beforehand. The only difference among the four groups in terms of completion of the survey is that the three experimental groups received four additional questions before the main question, and that each experimental group received a different set of four questions corresponding to the identity category of interest.

Since Study 1 demonstrated that identity choice is not stable over time, exposure to external triggers could unconsciously influence people's self-identification. The random assignment of respondents to experimental treatments enables us to assess whether respondents were affected by priming treatments by examining whether the average rates of self-identification by the primed identity category were greater in the treatment group than in the control group. This randomization of the treatment assignments enables us to draw inferences about the sensitivity of people's self-identifications to the primes without necessitating the panel study design used in the previous study.[22]

The experiment's findings support the hypothesis that self-identification is influenced by priming. They also demonstrate that the effect of the prime is moderated by people's level of education. We begin by examining the assignment of the respondents to the different experiment groups, comparing proportions of respondents in different categories, for demographic characteristics of importance. As the comparison demonstrates (online appendix Table A3), the randomized assignment to treatments produced balanced groups on all dimensions. One notable exception is education, where the control group has approximately 10 percent more highly educated respondents than the other groups ($p = .02$). As discussed below, existing literature finds that education moderates people's susceptibility to priming. Therefore, to assess the effect of the treatment, simple comparisons of proportions between the control and treatment groups are problematic because differences could be driven by the educational composition of the groups. We thus control for education in all analyses.[23]

To test whether the experimental primes affect self-identification, we estimate a logistic regression model. The dependent variable in each specification is binary: whether the respondent identified by the specific intended identity category or not. The model takes the form:

$$\text{logit}(Y_{ij}) = \alpha_j + \beta_1 TREATMENT_i + \beta_2 EDUC_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where Y_{ij} indicates the identity category choice j for respondent i, $TREATMENT_i$ is the dummy for either the "nationality," "race/ethnicity," or "occupation" treatment condition. Each treatment variable takes the value of "1" if the respondent was assigned the specific treatment and "0" otherwise. In all specifications the subscript j is binary, taking a value of "1" if the individual identifies with the "prime-intended" identity category and "0" otherwise. This is because we are interested in whether the treatment affected an individual's choice of a specific identity of the researcher's choosing. We estimate three different specifications, where each specification is estimated only for the sample of respondents in the control group and the treatment group of interest.

The results are presented in Table 3, where each model predicts self-identification with a different identity dimension. The table displays the results of estimations for each experimental priming group (nationality, race/ethnicity,[24] and occupation).[25] Each model considers just the sample of respondents from the control group and the experimental group of interest. The dependent variable is self-identification with the relevant identity dimension, and the key independent variables are the binary treatment variables that indicate whether the individual was subjected to the experimental prime of interest.

**Table 3** Effect of Primes on Identity Choice

	DV: Individual identifies by:		
	Nationality	**Race/Ethnicity**	**Occupation**
Nationality Prime	0.404**		
	(0.2)		
Race/Ethnicity Prime		0.177	
		(0.21)	
Occupation Prime			0.341*
			(0.2)
Education	−0.107	−0.401***	0.434***
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)
Constant	−0.946***	−0.283	−1.770***
	(0.36)	(0.36)	(0.36)
Observations	537	567	456

All estimates are logistic regressions, where the outcome value '1' denotes a respondent identifying by the primed category and '0' otherwise. Standard errors in parentheses. * significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%.

Figure 2 shows that in the three experimental groups (nationality, race/ethnicity, and occupation), the primes cause self-identification with the intended category at a higher rate than among the respondents in the control group. The coefficient for the nationality treatment is statistically significant and substantively large. An individual

exposed to the nationality prime is 8 percentage points more likely to self-identify by his nationality than someone not exposed to the prime (22 percent in the control group versus 30 percent after being primed; $p < 0.05$). The coefficient for the occupation treatment is also substantively large. A recipient of the occupation prime is also 8 percentage points more likely to self-identify by occupation (36 percent to 44 percent; $p < 0.1$).

Figure 2   Change in Identification Following Exposure to Prime, by Education Level
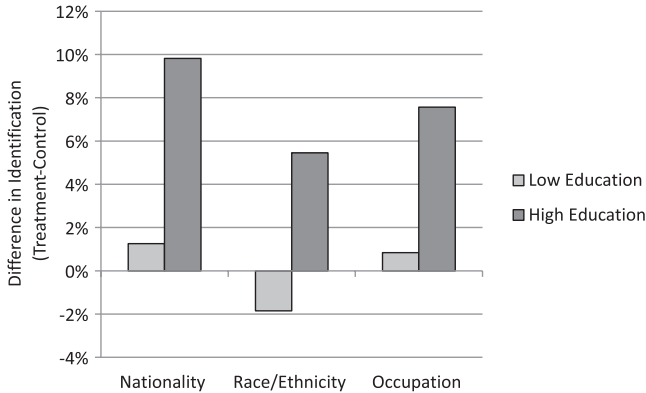
Note: Each bar in the figure denotes the difference between the treatment and control groups in the share of respondents identifying by the primed identity category. "High education" refers to individuals with college degree or higher.

Although the coefficient for the race/ethnicity prime for the above specifications of equation (1) is positive, it is not statistically significant. The reason for the statistically insignificant effect on the whole population becomes apparent when we examine the effect of the treatment on different racial groups: the race/ethnicity treatment condition has a large and statistically significant positive effect on white respondents, who are 7 percentage points more likely to identify by their race after being primed ($p < 0.05$). However, African-Americans are negatively primed—they are 27 percentage points less likely to identify by race when primed to do so.[26] The combination of these two strong, but directionally opposing, effects produces a statistically insignificant result in the complete sample.

Given that individuals can be primed to identify by a specific dimension, what explains why some individuals are more affected by the primes? Previous research in social psychology highlights the strong moderating effect of education on susceptibility to priming; in particular, studies find that higher educated individuals can be more susceptible to subtle primes.[27] We therefore estimate the same models for the three categories of identities (nationality, race/ethnicity, and occupation) separately for people with high and low levels of education. We code "high educated" individuals as those with at least some college experience, and "low educated" individuals as those with a high school diploma or less. The experimental results show that the self-identification of the more educated individuals was affected by the priming, but identification of the less

educated individuals was not. For educated individuals, the coefficient for the treatment prime is statistically significant and substantively large for all three identity dimensions: highly educated individuals were primed to identify by their nationality, race/ethnicity, or occupation. By contrast, among low educated individuals, none of the coefficients for the treatment conditions is substantively large or approaches statistical significance.

While this pattern is consistent with findings cited above from social-psychological literature that show educated individuals to be more affected by priming, we do not find the conditional effect of education on people's identity responses as obvious in any sense. In fact, ex ante, one might have also conjectured that the self-identification of low educated individuals would be more sensitive to priming, as some studies indicate. In the subsequent study we subject this finding to another test via replication, in a different national context.

Primes, Identity, and Policy Preferences

The results from Study 1 indicate that the identity dimension people identify with "first and foremost" often changes over time. Study 2 demonstrates that these changes can be influenced by subtle priming and are strongly conditioned by education. These results raise several pertinent questions. The first is whether the findings obtained in the social and political context of the United States also apply to other countries. A second issue is the comparability of the results across treatments. To what extent is the variation in the impact of the identity primes due to the strength of the specific primes used, or is the variation a reflection of the fact that some identity attachments are more stable? Finally, what is the relationship between respondents' primary identity category and their policy preferences? Does priming people's primary identity bring about a corresponding change in their policy views in a manner that is consistent with their ("new") proclaimed identity?

The third study addresses these questions by embedding an experiment in a household survey in Georgia. The survey was administered by the Caucasus Research Resource Center, a Program of the Eurasia Foundation, in face-to-face interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,538 respondents. The survey took place in March 2008, before the outbreak of conflict between Georgia and Russia in August 2008.

Georgia's ongoing tensions with Russia over political autonomy of South Ossetia and Abkhazia make debates over the country's territorial and cultural integrity a key feature of domestic politics. The explosive nature of this conflict suggests that Georgian nationality is an important issue and a salient identity category for many individuals in the country. Therefore, priming individuals in this context enables us to address the concern about whether the findings from Study 2 are generalizable to other contexts, while providing a more difficult test of the hypothesis that people's primary identification can change in response to subtle triggers.

Extant literature often assigns a causal role to people's identifications in explaining policy preferences. For example, recent literature uses self-identity to explain attitudes on ascension into the European Union.[28] Given that the previous two studies revealed a significant degree of fluidity in people's purported primary identity category, an important

question is whether a shift in one's primary identity also brings about a corresponding change in policy views. We therefore included in Study 3 not only the identity question, but also an explicit question probing respondents' views on Georgia joining the EU.

Participants in this study were randomly assigned into one of four conditions. Each prime consisted of two survey questions, which were designed, as in Study 2, to unconsciously prime a specific dimension of identity. To address the second issue of prime "strength," namely, whether different kinds of primes have varying effects on self-identification, respondents in Group 1 were exposed to a "strong" nationality prime that addressed the highly sensitive issue of Georgia's response to the secessionist demands of Ossetia and Abkhazia. Respondents in Group 2 were exposed to a "weak" nationality prime that raised more peripheral issues of national concern. One question dealt with the appointment of the first non-Georgian as head coach of the national soccer team; the second question dealt with the proposal to change the national anthem, another topic that was in the Georgian news. The first nationality prime can be considered "stronger" because it references an explicitly nationalist issue that is politically charged. Respondents in Group 3 were exposed to a "religion" prime and were asked questions about abortion and the reaction to treatment of a prominent religious official. Group 4 served as a control and received no priming treatment.[29] Appendix B gives the complete text of each treatment condition.

After all respondents answered the priming questions (except for those in the control group), every respondent was read a similar identity question to the one posed in Studies 1 and 2:

> "Some people describe themselves by their nationality, their religion, their town, occupation, or their social class. How about you? Do you identify first and foremost by your nationality, your religion, your town of origin, occupation, or your social class?"

After answering the identity question, respondents were asked about their support for Georgia's entry into the European Union (EU):

> "If there was a referendum tomorrow about Georgia joining the EU, what would your position be?

Response options ranged from (1) "strongly oppose Georgia joining the EU" to (4) "strongly support Georgia joining the EU." As with the previous study, the only difference among the four groups in terms of completion of the survey is that before answering the main question, the three experimental groups received two priming questions that corresponded to the identity category of interest. But in this study, respondents were also asked a post-treatment question about policy preferences.

Table 3 presents the results of the treatment primes on self-identification. As with the previous study, we account for education as a moderating variable and examine the effects of the primes on individuals with high levels of education (post-secondary) and low levels of education (high school or less). The results indicate that exposure to the primes had a significant impact on respondents' identity choice. The primes affected the identity choice of low educated individuals more than they affected the highly educated. Moreover,

Figure 3 Effect of Religion and Nationality Primes on Self-Identification
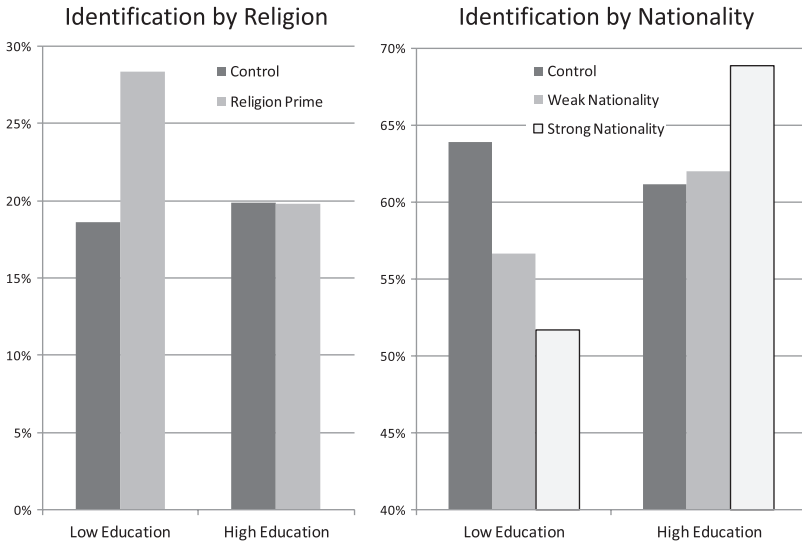
Note: Graph denotes the share of respondents that chose the category as the one they identity with "first and foremost" from a household survey in Georgia. Each bar represents a different experimental treatment. Note that the two graphs are scaled on a different y-axis.

the primes had opposite directional effects on individuals with low and high levels of education. Whereas exposure to the strong nationality prime increased identification by nationality among highly educated individuals (69 percent vs. 61 percent, $p < .09$), identification by nationality among the low educated decreased significantly (52 percent vs. 64 percent, $p < 0.03$). Identification also differed dramatically in response to the religion prime. Exposure to the prime increased identification along the religion dimension among low educated individuals (29 percent vs. 17 percent, $p < .02$), but had no impact on the highly educated.[30] As with Study 2, these results reveal a strong conditioning effect of education on the sensitivity to priming of identity. However, in contrast to the results obtained in the U.S. experiment, in Georgia it was low educated individuals on whom the effect of the primes was most notable.

The likelihood of people identifying with the primed identity appears also to be dependent on the strength of primes. As Figure 3 shows, highly educated individuals responded to "strong" priming of the nationality dimension, but almost not at all to the "weak" prime. Thus merely exposing respondents to a situational trigger of a given identity appears to be insufficient to produce a significant shift in people's self-identification. These results are further confirmed in columns (1) and (2) of Table 4, where the dependent variable is a binary measure of whether the respondent identified by nationality or by some other dimension. As the table shows, the strong nationality prime had large and directionally opposite effects on high and low educated individuals.

Table 4 also addresses the question of the relationship between people's primary identities and their policy views. In columns (3) to (8), the dependent variable is a binary measure of respondents' support for EU entry. These results support several conclusions. Some primary identities are significant predictors of policy views, in this case attitudes towards EU ascension. Column (3), which pertains only to low educated individuals assigned to the control group, shows that identification by nationality or occupation is associated with significantly greater support for EU entry than the (omitted) category of individuals whose primary identity is their "town of origin" (27 percent). The results also show that that the primes directly affected attitudes on EU ascension: columns (4) and (7) control solely for the exposure to the primes, and show that exposure to the "weak" nationality prime had a sizable effect on support for joining the EU, increasing support for ascension among low educated individuals by almost 8 percentage points and decreasing support among the highly educated at a similar magnitude.

Table 4 Primes, Identification, and Policy Preferences

	DV: ID by Nationality		DV: Support for EU Ascension					
	Low Education	High Education	Low Education			High Education		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Nationality ID			0.293**		0.142**	0.131		0.096**
			(.129)		(.058)	(.086)		(.046)
Religion ID			0.045		0.033	0.004		0.035
			0.118		0.057	0.072		0.042
Occupation ID			0.177**		0.200***	0.06		0.121***
			(.086)		(.029)	(.055)		(.028)
Social Class ID						0.042		0.073
						(.073)		(.052)
Religion Prime	−0.157***	−0.036		−0.007	0.001		−0.055	−0.051
	(.055)	(.048)		(.048)	(.05)		(.044)	(.043)
Weak Nationality Prime	−0.075	0.008		0.078*	0.087**		−0.079*	−0.080*
	(.055)	(.047)		(.043)	(.044)		(.044)	(.044)
Strong Nationality Prime	−0.125**	0.078+		0.012	0.022		−0.080*	−0.082*
	(.056)	(.045)		(.048)	(.049)		(.043)	(.043)
Observations	638	880	133	522	498	179	765	765
Pseudo R-squared	0.01	0.006	0.069	0.008	0.039	0.051	0.008	0.023

Standard errors in parentheses. * significant at 10%; ** significant at 5%; *** significant at 1%. In columns (3) and (5) the identity category "social class" was dropped because it perfectly predicts the outcome.

However, in contrast to existing literature that posits a causal relationship between identity and policy preferences, we find no evidence to support the hypothesis that policy preferences are mediated by one's self-proclaimed identity. If self-identity mediated the effect of primes on policy preferences, inclusion of identity controls (the mediator) in the

regression should substantially decrease the effect of primes on policy preferences. Yet a series of formal mediation tests using the procedure suggested by Kosuke Imai, Luke Keele, and Dustin Tingley finds no evidence that the impact of the prime on people's support for EU ascension is mediated by self-identification. The point estimate of the mediation effects of all three primes—among both low and high educated groups—is small and statistically indistinguishable from zero.[31] These results suggest that when identity-related cues affect policy preferences, they do so through some channel other than that of changing people's primary identity.

In sum, the results from Study 3 indicate that (1) identity can be explicitly primed, also in a non-U.S political context; that (2) people's primary identity is correlated with certain policy preferences, in this case degree of support for EU ascension; but (3) there is no evidence that the primes that influence policy preferences do so by operating through change in one's primary identity. It could be, for example, that primes make a certain aspect of a policy more salient and thus influence people's views on the given policy question. The key point is that it is misguided to assume that a statistical association—even a highly significant association—between people's purported identity and their stated policy preferences, necessarily reflects a causal relationship between identity attachments and a policy stance.

Discussion

The causes and consequences of identity choice is a fast growing research area in comparative politics. A central problem of this research is the measurement of the main concept of identity. The increasing availability of survey data, particularly of cross-national surveys, has spawned research that relies on self-identification in a survey context as the key measure of people's identity. The ease of obtaining this data, and the breadth of its geographical coverage, make it an appealing tool for research. In using such data, the critical assumption is that responses to survey questions about people's primary identity capture a meaningful response to the question "who I am." However, if people's self identifications are highly fluid and impressionable, one must be skeptical of the notion that they convey an attachment in this deep and fundamental sense.

The present results from three studies carried out in two different countries and employing three different survey instruments support several claims. First, people's proclaimed identity category is fluid; almost 40 percent of the individuals surveyed switched their primary identity over a short duration of two months. This trend occurred regardless of which identity category individuals initially chose. Recalling the continuum of stability discussed in the introduction, this finding suggests that one's primary identity, in the narrow form captured in a survey context, is closer to the "mood" end of the scale than much of the extant literature assumes.

Second, individual self-identification is susceptible to subtle primes. The primes, which may proxy for political cues that people confront in their daily lives, have a significant impact on people's choice of self-identification. This result is observed in the two very different national contexts examined. However, not any trigger can sway people's choices of their primary identity category. Rather, the experimental evidence from Georgia indicates

that "stronger" primes, such as those pertaining to salient and sensitive issues, produce a sizable shift in identity choice while weaker primes do not. Third, individuals are not equally influenced by such priming interventions. In particular, education is an important conditioning variable for such primes. But the different conditioning effect of education in the two national contexts highlights the need for exploring the psychological mechanism that leads to people's association with a certain identity group. Laying out such a mechanism is beyond the scope of this paper, yet it surely represents an important direction for future research.

Finally, we find no evidence that changes in self-identity bring about a change in policy preferences. Primes affect both self-identification and policy views, yet changes in self-identification do not cause changes in such views. As with any negative finding of this type, further experimental research in other policy domains is needed to establish this result. If replicated, this result provides a challenge to existing work that attributes a causal relationship between identity and policy views.

These findings have both substantive and methodological implications. Substantively, if people's self-identification in a survey context were to be equated with their "identity," one might conclude from the article's findings that both primordialist and rationalist theories of identity formation are incorrect, since people's primary identity (in the survey context) is found to be neither permanently fixed nor based on a strategic rationale. However, this interpretation of the results would be misguided. Rather than discounting these scholarly approaches to the study of identity, our analysis suggests that self-identification in a survey context is perhaps not synonymous with "identity," in the deeper sense people conventionally attribute to it.

Both the situationist and strategic theories share the view that individuals self-identify with a category that is part of their repertoire of existing meaningful identities. The strategic perspective dictates that certain incentives lead to specific self-identifications; in the situationist account, self-identification is less determined and bounded only by the repertoire of one's "meaningful" identities. Within these bounds, any identification could theoretically become salient depending on the surrounding circumstances or external stimuli. Of course, both mechanisms can function for the same individual, yet the results presented here affirm the need to take more seriously the situational account, which up to now has been relatively peripheral in political science research on identity.

Importantly, the paper's findings do not imply that survey data on people's identification is meaningless. While not representing deep-rooted attachments, the data may nonetheless indicate general trends in public opinion or "national mood." Cross-national differences in average self-reported identity attachments may indicate the presence of certain conditions (for example, tensions with a bordering state, victory in a recent sporting event). These comparative data can be illuminating and predictive of other outcomes, but it would be mistaken to infer that differences in these reported national identities will remain.

Methodologically, the results suggest several guidelines for designing surveys with questions about identity. First, if researchers are interested in comparing identity responses across countries, they should be sure that the national level surveys in different countries place identity questions within the survey at similar intervals, and that preceding questions

are similar. This approach would help minimize the possibility of differential influences on respondents in different countries. The experimental results of Studies 2 and 3 indicate the existence and significance of such priming effects. Second, scholars should include follow-up questions about the strength of identity attachment. As Study 1 shows, this information is an imperfect proxy for the stability of self-identifications, yet nonetheless individuals that strongly identify by a certain category are substantially less likely to switch identification over time. For some questions of interest, focusing the analysis on those individuals with strong (self-reported) identity attachments may yield more reliable inferences. Finally, scholars should be attentive to the context in which the survey is fielded, and be aware that recent events may raise the salience of a specific identity dimension over others. Statements about the importance of a given identity in a certain country should thus be made with particular caution and recognition of context.

Recent research in comparative politics has made impressive progress in understanding the sources of identity formation. The widely shared sense that identity matters in politics, particularly for individual policy preferences, is bound to produce continued interest in research on this topic. In this endeavor, the findings here demonstrate that attempts to reduce the measurement of the concept of "identity" to survey responses are misguided. For learning about the role of identity in politics, perhaps, unfortunately, there are no easy shortcuts.

Appendix A   Text of Treatment Group Primes in Study 2

Group 1: Control Group – No priming questions

Group 2: Nationality

- Where were you when you found out about the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States? Were you at home, at work, commuting, or someplace else?
- During the week after September 11th. how closely did you follow the media coverage of the attacks? Did you follow it very closely, closely, not very closely, or not at all?
- Some people are very concerned about the prospect of another terrorist attack on U.S. soil. In your opinion, how likely is it that a large-scale terrorist attack will occur in the United States in the next twelve months? Is it very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely, or not likely at all?
- Overall, how concerned have you been about traveling outside the U.S. to other countries since the September 11th terrorist attacks? Have you been very concerned, somewhat concerned, not too concerned, or not concerned at all?

Group 3: Race / Ethnicity

- How often do you speak a language other than English at home? Would you say always, usually, sometimes, or never speak a language other than English at home?

- As a child, how often did you speak a language other than English with your parents? Would you say always, usually, sometimes, or never spoke a language other than English with your parents?
- The following question concerns the diversity of the neighborhood in which you grew up. Overall, how similar was your childhood to that of the other children in your neighborhood? Would you say your childhood was very similar, somewhat similar, or not similar to that of the other children?
- How diverse is your current neighborhood: Would you say it is very diverse, somewhat diverse, not very diverse, or not diverse at all?

Group 4: Occupation

- At what time do you typically begin work? Between midnight and 6 in the morning, 6 in the morning and noon, noon and 6 in the evening, or between 6 in the evening and midnight?
- In a TYPICAL working WEEK, how many hours TOTAL do you spend commuting back and forth to work?
- How often do your co-workers work long hours? Would you say they work long hours very often, sometimes, rarely, or never?
- In your place of work, how often do you have meals with co-workers during working hours? Would you say almost always, sometimes, rarely, never, or do you not eat meals during work hours?

Appendix B   Text of Treatment Group Primes for Study 3

Respondents in Georgia were read and shown the following cards.

Group1: Control, No Priming Questions

Group 2: Religion

There has been some discussion about abortion during recent years. Which one of the opinions listed below best agrees with your view?

1. By law, abortion should never be permitted
2. The law should permit abortion only in case o rape, incest, or when the woman's life is in danger
3. The law should permit abortion for reasons other than rape, incest, or danger to the woman's life, but only after the need for the abortion has been clearly established
4. By law a woman should always be able to obtain an abortion as a matter of personal choice

Basil Mkalavishvili, the former Georgian priest, was sentenced to six years in prison for inciting violence against evangelical Christian groups in Georgia. When he is released

from prison in 2011, he is expected to appeal to the Georgian Orthodox Church to re-instate his membership in the clergy. Do you support his reinstatement as a clergy?

1. Strongly oppose his reinstatement
2. Somewhat oppose his reinstatement
3. Somewhat support his reinstatement
4. Strongly support his reinstatement

Group 3: Strong Nationality

Some people are very concerned about the prospect of recurring hostilities between Georgia and both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the next two years, what do you think is most likely to occur?

1. I expect neither conflict to resume
2. I expect only the conflict between Abkhazia and Georgia to resume
3. I expect only the conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia to resume
4. I expect both conflicts to resume

Some members of the international community have criticized Georgia's handling of the conflict with Abkhazia. In your opinion, how important should it be for the government to be responsive to the concerns of the international community when conducting its internal affairs?

1. Not important at all
2. Not very important
3. Somewhat important
4. Very important

Group 4: Weak Nationality

Some believe that the appointment of the German coach Klaus Toppmoeller in 2006 as head of the national football team was a good decision. Others believe that it would have been better to hire a coach from Georgia. If you had to pick one of the two statements, which comes closer to you view?

• Statement 1: The Georgian Football Federation should have appointed a Georgian coach
• Statement 2: The Georgian Football Federation was correct in appointing Toppmoeller.

In 2004, *Tavisupleba* replaced "*Dideba zetsit kurtkhelus*" as the Georgian anthem. People have expressed various opinions about this choice of song. In general, how satisfied do you think most people in the country are with *Tavisupleba* as the anthem?

1. Very satisfied
2. Somewhat satisfied
3. Somewhat dissatisfied
4. Very dissatisfied

NOTES

1. Afrobarometer Surveys, 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002.

2. Numerous studies use data on self-reported identity attachments as either an independent or dependent variable. See, for example, Michael Barnett, "Culture, Strategy, and Foreign Policy Change: Israel's Road to Oslo," *European Journal of International Relations*, 5 (March 1999): 5–36; Jack Citrin, Beth Reingold, and Donald P Green, "American Identity and the Politics of Ethnic Change," *The Journal of Politics*, 52 (November 1990): 1124–54; Michael Hooper, "The Structure and Measurement of Social Identity," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 40 (Summer 1976): 154–64; Leonie Huddy and Nadia Khatib, "American Patriotism, National Identity, and Political Involvement," *American Journal of Political Science*, 51 (January 2007): 63–77. See Sean Carey, "Undivided Loyalties: Is National Identity an Obstacle to European Integration?" *European Union Politics*, 3 (December 2002): 387–413; Karen E. Ferree, "Explaining South Africa's Racial Census," *Journal of Politics*, 68 (November 2006): 803–15; Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks, "Does Identity or Economic Rationality Drive Public Opinion on European Integration?" *PS* (July 2004): 415–20; Huddy and Khatib, "American Patriotism, National Identity, and Political Involvement," Rick Kosterman and Seymour Feshbach, "Toward a Measure of Patriotic and Nationalistic Attitudes," *Political Psychology* (June 1989): 257–74; Benn Eifert, Edward Miguel, and Daniel N. Posner, "Political Competition and Ethnic Identification in Africa," *American Journal of Political Science*, 54 (April 2010): 494–510; John E Transue, "Identity Salience, Identity Acceptance, and Racial Policy Attitudes: American National Identity as a Uniting Force," *American Journal of Political Science*, 51 (January 2007): 78–91.

3. Carey, p. 397.

4. Hooghe and Marks, p. 418.

5. James D. Fearon, "What Is Identity (as We Now Use the Word?)," (Stanford University 1999).

6. Barnett; Carey; Hooghe and Marks; Hooper; Smith and Jarkko.

7. Rawi Abdelal, Yoshiko Herrera, Alastair Iain Johnston, and Rose McDermott, "Identity as a Variable," Perspectives on Politics, 4 (December 2006), 695–711; Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston, and McDermott, eds., Measuring Identity: A Guide for Social Scientists (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

8. Samuel P Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1996); Edward Shils, "Personal, Primordial, Sacred and Civil Ties," *British Journal of Sociology*, 8 (June 1957): 130–45.

9. Ferree; David Laitin, *Identity in Formation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Miguel Eifert and Daniel N. Posner, "Political Competition and Ethnic Identification in Africa"; Daniel N. Posner, *Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

10. Margaret Shih, Todd L. Pittinsky, and Nalini Ambady, "Stereotype Susceptibility: Identity Salience and Shifts in Quantitative Performance," *Psychological Science*, 10 (January 1999): 80–83; S. Christian Wheeler and Richard E. Petty, "The Effects of Stereotype Activation on Behavior: A Review of Possible Mechanisms," *Psychological Bulletin*, 127 (November 2001): 797–826.

11. Thierry Devos and Mahzarin R Banaji, "Implicit Self and Identity," *Annals of New York Academy of Sciences*, 1001 (October 2003): 177–211; Wheeler and Petty, "The Effects of Stereotype Activation on Behavior: A Review of Possible Mechanisms." These accounts are part of the substantial research tradition in social psychology about the sources of individual self-identification. Henri Tajfel, "Social Identity and Intergroup Behaviour," *Social Science Information*, 13 (April 1974): 65–93; John C. Turner, "Social Categorization and the Self-Concept: A Social Cognitive Theory of Group Behaviour," in E. J. Lawler, ed., *Advances in Group Processes: Theory and Research* (Greenwich: JAI, 1985).

12. Transue.

13. The survey was a marketing study conducted by The Graduate School of Business at Stanford University. The study was administered to a national sample and included questions about consumer preferences on a number of products (such as magazine subscriptions, coffee drinking habits). The first study also included a memory test between the various sections of the study.

14. The online appendix is found in the online version of this article following the endnotes, at www.ingentaconnect.com/content/cuny/cp.

15. The order of the response options in all studies was randomly altered.

16. This question was included only in the second survey to minimize respondents' attention to the topic of consistency in identification.

17. In their influential paper, Sniderman, Hooghe, and Prior use a similar approach to gauge people's strength of attachment to their national identity. Paul M Sniderman, Louk Hagendoorn, and Markus Prior,

"Predisoposing Factors and Situational Triggers: Exclusionary Reactions to Immigrant Minorities," *American Political Science Review*, 98 (February 2004): 35–49.

18. The limited sample sizes mean that these differences are only significant at the $p < 0.1$ level in a one tailed test.

19. Demographic data from the respondents were collected at the conclusion of the survey.

20. The composition by experimental group for respondent assignment was: Group 1 Control (306); Group 2 Nationality (267); Group 3 Race/Ethnicity (299); Group 4 Occupation (245).

21. One question from another researcher's survey preceded the main question. The content of the filler question was unrelated to either the priming questions or the main self-identification question. We used four questions as the treatment prime due to constraints on time allotted for the entire experiment.

22. One cannot infer from this experimental design whether the identification of a specific individual has been affected by the prime or not. A critical aspect of this study is that the experimental primes are not explicit primes (as is the case with previous studies on ethnicity or stereotype triggers). The concern is that if respondents are given explicit primes, they may respond to questions consistent with the prime due to acquiescence bias or inference of the objective of the survey. None of the priming questions mentions the labels of the identity groups that they are intended to prime. The priming questions were intentionally worded so that respondents would reflect on issues related to the identity category, but also so that the answers to the questions would not be explicitly related to the relevant category. In a pilot study of fifty respondents as well as in the telephone survey, after which respondents received a standard debriefing questionnaire, none of the respondents noticed any conceptual link between the priming questions and the main question.

23. There was also an imbalance in gender, where the occupation treatment was assigned a relatively smaller number of females. We re-ran our analysis with and without controlling for gender and found no effect. We therefore report the results without this control.

24. For both substantive reasons and ease of data interpretation (e.g. the blurred distinction between identification as "Asian"), we combine self-identification data for race and ethnicity to create the binary dependent variable "identification by race or ethnicity."

25. There are fewer observations in the analyses that examine identification by occupation because the occupation prime was not applicable to some respondents (unemployed individuals, students, and homemakers). In the comparison of the control and treatment group 4 we exclude these respondents from both the control and the treatment group.

26. The existence of negative priming is consistent with previous studies in social psychology which find that some individuals may internalize negative stereotypes about a primed identity. Wheeler and Petty.

27. Duane T. Wegener and Richard E. Petty, "Effects of Mood on Persuasion Processes: Enhancing, Reducing, and Biasing Scrutiny of Attitude-Relevant Information," *Striving and Feeling: Interactions Among Goals, Affect, and Self-Regulation* (1996); Joseph P. Forgas, "Mood and Judgment: The Affect Infusion Model (Aim)," *Psychological Bulletin*, 117 (January 1995): 39–66; Richard E. Petty, David W. Schumann, Steven A. Richman, Alan J. Strathman, "Positive Mood and Persuasion: Different Roles for Affect under High- and Low-Elaboration Conditions," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 64 (January 1993): 5–20; Richard E. Petty and Duane T. Wegener, "Thought Systems, Argument Quality, and Persuasion," *The Content, Structure, and Operation of Thought Systems* (1991); Norbert Schwarz, Herbert Bless, and Gerd Bohner, "Mood and Persuasion: Affective States Influence the Processing of Persuasive Communications," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 24 (1991): 161–99.

28. Carey; Hooghe and Marks.

29. The identity dimensions that we prime differ from those used in the American context. This is largely because our experiment had to be aligned with the theme of the study that our Georgian counterparts were conducting. As in Study 2, the priming questions were placed early in the survey, while the demographic data were collected only at the conclusion of the survey.

30. Testing for the differential effects of the religion and nationality primes is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we speculate that differences in the political salience and relevance of the issues related to each prime might vary across educational groups.

31. Kosuke Imai, Luke Keele, and Dustin Tingley., "Advances in Social Science Research Using R (Ed. Hd Vinod), Chap. Causal Mediation Analysis Using R, 129–154," *Lecture Notes in Statistics. Springer, New York*. See online Appendix B and Table B1 for complete discussion and results of the mediation tests.