

# Précis of Implicit Nationalism

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While the study of nationalism has received much attention throughout the social sciences and humanities, the experimental investigation of it lags behind. In this paper we review recent advances in the examination of implicit nationalism. In the first set of experiments we survey, the Palestinian, Israeli, Italian, and Russian flags were primed (or not, in the control conditions) and their effects on political thought and behavior were tested. In the second set the American or the Israeli flag was primed (or not) and prejudice toward African-Americans or Palestinians (respectively) was examined. The results of all experiments suggest that the implicit activation of national cues has far-reaching implications on political thought and behavior as well as on attitudes toward minorities. Under the assumption that the image of national flags is associated in memory with national ideologies, these results suggest that national ideologies can be implicitly pursued in a way that significantly affects our thoughts and behaviors.

**Key words:** national ideology; nonconscious; priming; flag

For better or for worse, the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the century of national ideologies: during this period these ideologies led to the formation and crystallization of many national entities but also to the occupation, oppression, and often destruction of many nations and to the killing of tens of millions of innocent civilians and soldiers. For better or for worse, the pursuit of national ideologies during the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought with it enormous changes to the history of humankind.

The word *ideology* is relatively new in our vocabulary. Originally it was designed to denote the *science of ideas*<sup>1</sup> but in modern times it has come to denote a *system of ideas*. One way to define an ideology in the latter sense is as “a systematic scheme of ideas, usually relating to politics or society, or to the conduct of a class or group, and regarded as justifying

actions” (Oxford English Dictionary [OED]; www.oed.com).<sup>a</sup>

Traditionally, national ideologies were studied from theoretical (e.g., philosophical) or societal (e.g., sociological) perspectives. In our recent work we adopted a social-cognitive perspective to the study of ideologies. Expanding the OED definition quoted above, we suggest that cognitions, motivations, emotions, and behaviors that relate to the nation and that together create what one may think of as a national perspective in the world can be considered a national ideology.<sup>2-6</sup> Furthermore, we suggest that ideologies can be conceptualized as hierarchical mental networks that consist of the above-mentioned factors, which together drive the individual in ideology-consistent ways.

So how do ideologies operate in minds? How does such a vast interrelated network exert its

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<sup>a</sup> Defining *ideology* is beyond the scope of the current paper. Hence, we adopt here the general definition of the OED.

influence? This question has many possible interpretations and, accordingly, an abundance of answers. We focus here on one question, namely whether ideologies only operate in an explicit conscious manner or whether they also do so implicitly and nonconsciously.

Theories in the social sciences suggest that ideologies may function like habits—behaviors, goals, and judgments—that often operate unintentionally and nonconsciously.<sup>2,7–11</sup> Michael Billig's<sup>12</sup> fascinating work on banal nationalism is one example of this conception. Billig suggests that subtle environmental stimuli (such as a national flag hanging from the entrance to a building) have the potential to bring to mind—or, in the jargon of cognitive sciences, to prime or to activate—one's national ideology. Furthermore, Billig explicitly endorses the idea that this activation may occur nonconsciously and that people are largely unaware of the downstream effects of this activation on their behaviors, thoughts, and emotions.

This view makes perfect sense when considered from the perspective of the cognitive sciences. Simply, it is well known that our capacity for conscious activities (e.g., thinking, feeling), technically referred to by cognitive scientists as *conscious resources*, is extremely limited.<sup>13</sup> *Reading the present sentence, for example, diminishes most of your available conscious resources* (e.g., you cannot think about other problems you faced earlier during the day or of other things you need to do; you do not feel your mood as strongly as you would had you not read the sentence). Thus, at any given point in time only a small subset of our myriad ongoing mental processes can receive *considerable* conscious attention (or many receive minute quantities of it). Nonconscious processes, however, do not suffer from this limitation. We can do multiple demanding tasks nonconsciously, without realizing that we do, and without feeling their costs.<sup>14,15</sup>

Given this state of affairs, if ideologies depended on conscious resources for their operation, they would have been much less efficient in controlling our behavior than if they did not

depend on these resources. It only takes a quick glance at the social world to realize how powerful ideologies are, and we hence hypothesize that ideologies and, more specifically, national ideologies can operate nonconsciously.

Interestingly, although the idea that ideologies can operate nonconsciously is not new in the social sciences literature (see above), there has been surprisingly little empirical investigation of this issue in general<sup>16</sup> and in the realm of *national ideologies* in particular.<sup>17–19</sup>

In the work we review below we assume that the mere exposure to a prominent national symbol brings to mind (consciously or nonconsciously) the corresponding national ideology. Thus, in all experiments we used nonconscious (or very subtle) exposure to the symbol that is most associated with national ideologies—the national flag—and examined its effects on political attitudes, voting behavior, and prejudice. To presage the general discussion, our investigation thus far spans three continents—Asia (Israel, Russia), Europe (Italy), and North America (USA)—and the results are unequivocal. The subtle activation of national symbols has profound, lasting, and sometimes unwelcome effects.

### Implicit Nationalism I: Political Thought and Behavior

As mentioned earlier, we adopt a social-cognitive perspective and propose that national ideologies can be conceptualized as structured networks of mental representations that include knowledge, motivations, emotions, and behaviors. To take a more concrete example, the mental representation of the (Jewish version of) Israeli national ideology (one of the few national ideologies that has a proper name—*Zionism*) may include relevant beliefs (e.g., Jews used to inhabit Palestine before they were expelled from it; there were very few Jews in Palestine between the expulsion and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; Jews were not very well liked in 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe); symbols (e.g., Israel's flag; the word *Zionism*, a picture of

Israel's first prime minister Ben Guryon); norms and goals (e.g., Jews should stick together; all workers should unite); attitudes (e.g., negative evaluation of the Palestinian national movement; positive evaluation of manual labor), or emotions (e.g., Israel's achievements are something to be proud of; strong Arab leaders arouse fear).<sup>b</sup>

Importantly, we postulate that this complex mental representation is not tantamount to an encyclopedia entry of *Zionism* written in mentales. In other words, it is not an inert text. It is a hierarchical network predisposed to action with the capacity to orchestrate perception, cognition, emotion, and motivation in ideology-promoting ways.

In the first series of experiments we examined the effects of the subliminal activation of the Israeli flag on Jewish-Israeli participants.<sup>20</sup> Given that one of the functions of national ideologies is to bring the nation together (see Zionism's goals/norms above), and, given our assumption that national symbols are incorporated into the mental representation of national ideologies, we hypothesized that subliminal presentations of the Israeli flag are likely to be able to bring about unity<sup>12,21</sup> in the minds and actions of the perceivers. Specifically, strongly nationalist right-wing participants should become less so and weakly nationalist left-wing participants should become more nationalist and right wing (but see further developments of this theme later on in this section).

We assessed subjective nationalism via the identification with Israeli nationalism (IWIN) scale, a simple measure that includes three questions: (a) When you think of yourself in general, how important to your personal identity is the fact that you are an Israeli? (b) When you think of yourself in general, how would you define your attitude toward Zionism? (c) When you think of yourself in general, how much

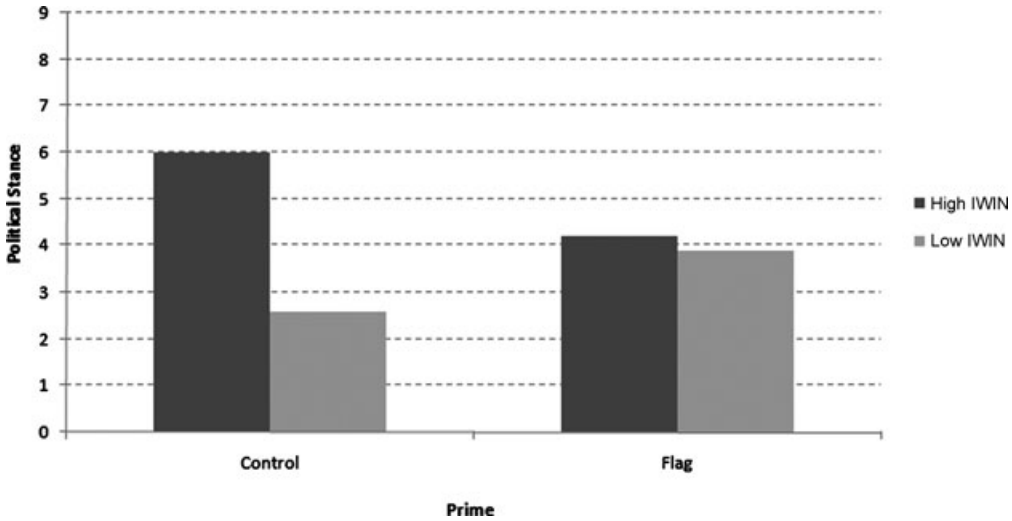
do you identify with Israeli nationalism? These questions correlate very highly, and hence we used their mean to divide participants into high and low IWINs. Not surprisingly, the former tend to be right wing, whereas the latter tend to be left wing.

Participants in all experiments came to our laboratory and were told that they would take part in an experiment in which sentences will appear in different locations on the screen, preceded by cues that mark the location of their appearance. The "practice phase," in which participants were to "practice responding to the cues" allowed us to prime images of the Israeli flag. Participants were asked to indicate, by pressing a key, whether each "cue" appeared in the upper or lower part of the screen. Unbeknown to them, each "cue" was immediately preceded by an image of the flag (or that of a control stimulus) that was presented for no more than 16 ms (Fig. 1). Using technical jargon, the stimuli that participants were able to consciously perceive served as *masks*. They prevented participants from consciously perceiving the *prime*, the image of the flag (or that of the control stimulus; see Fig. 5). After completing this "first experiment", participants went on to do a "second experiment" in which they were asked to answer questions that appeared either in the lower or the upper part of the screen. Prior to every question a flag (or a control stimulus) was once again flashed for up to 16 ms (followed by a mask).

To verify that this exposure to the image of the flag was indeed subliminal, we ran a separate experiment in which participants were explicitly asked to indicate whether they saw a flag or a control stimulus just before each mask. The results were clear. Participants' performance did not significantly deviate from chance, indicating that they could not discriminate between flag and control trials. We conclude, then, that our flag-priming manipulation was subliminal.

In the first experiment, we examined the effects of flag priming on participants' attitudes toward core issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To take a few examples, participants

<sup>b</sup> These characteristics of Zionism are based on the authors' beliefs regarding (old school) Zionism and are hence somewhat subjective. They are only meant to illustrate our point; their veracity is not critical to our argument.



**Figure 1.** Average attitudes toward central issues in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (with higher numbers indicating more right-wing attitudes), as a function of priming and identification with Israeli nationalism (IWIN).

were asked to indicate their agreement, on a nine-point scale, to the following questions: (a) “Do you support the formation of a Palestinian state?”, (b) “Should Israel negotiate with Hamas?”, and (c) “Today there are over 100 roadblocks that separate Palestinian territories from other Palestinian territories in the West Bank. Do you think that the Israeli government should reduce the number of these roadblocks?” (all materials may be found at <http://pluto.huji.ac.il/~hassin/>).

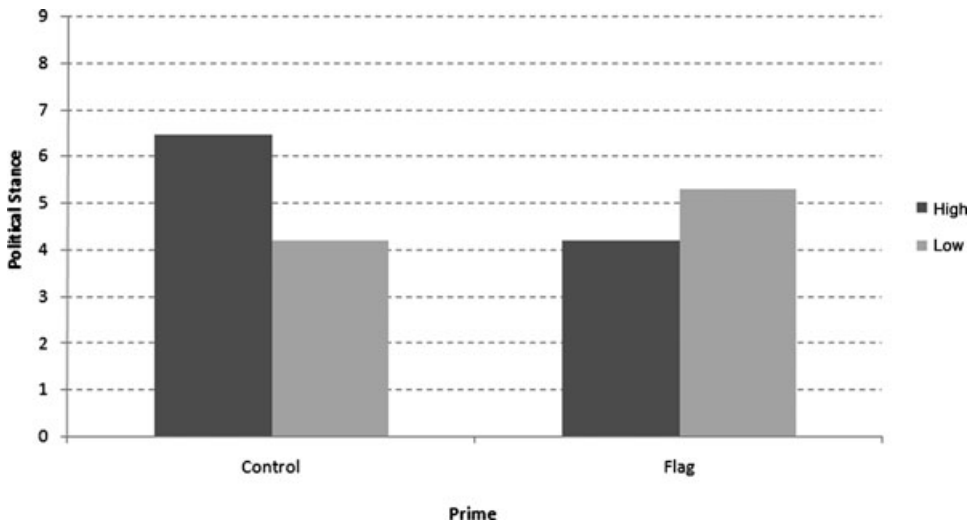
As hypothesized, the subliminal priming of the national flag brought about unity in the political center. Whereas significant differences between high and low IWINs emerged in the control condition, these differences disappeared in the priming condition. The interaction between IWIN and priming was highly significant (see Fig. 1).

The results of this first experiment were encouraging. They showed that the subliminal priming of a national symbol brings about significant changes in one’s attitudes toward central issues in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. In the second experiment, we attempted to replicate and extend this result by examining attitudes toward the illegal Jewish settlers in

the West Bank and Gaza Strip.<sup>6</sup> This experiment was conducted in the weeks that preceded Israel’s unilateral withdrawal from Gaza (August 15, 2005), a period in time in which these topics were hotly debated and highly emotional. Just as in the previous experiment, the questions we posed to participants were far from subtle and included, for example, “Do the settlers pose a threat to the democratic nature of Israel?”; “To what extent do the settlers’ activities in Gaza symbolize the [biblical] commandment to settle the land of Israel?”; and “How would you feel on the day of the disengagement?” (on a nine-point scale that ranged from *happy* to *sad*).

The results of this experiment were identical in nature to those of the first. Whereas significant differences between high and low IWINs occurred in the control condition, they were simply absent from the priming condition, leading to a highly significant interaction (see Fig. 2). Again, the subliminal priming of the Israeli flag led Jewish Israelis to unite around the political center.

<sup>6</sup> To dispel doubt, according to our understanding of international laws, all Israeli settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are illegal.



**Figure 2.** Political stance toward settlers (with higher numbers indicating more right-wing attitudes), as a function of priming and IWIN.

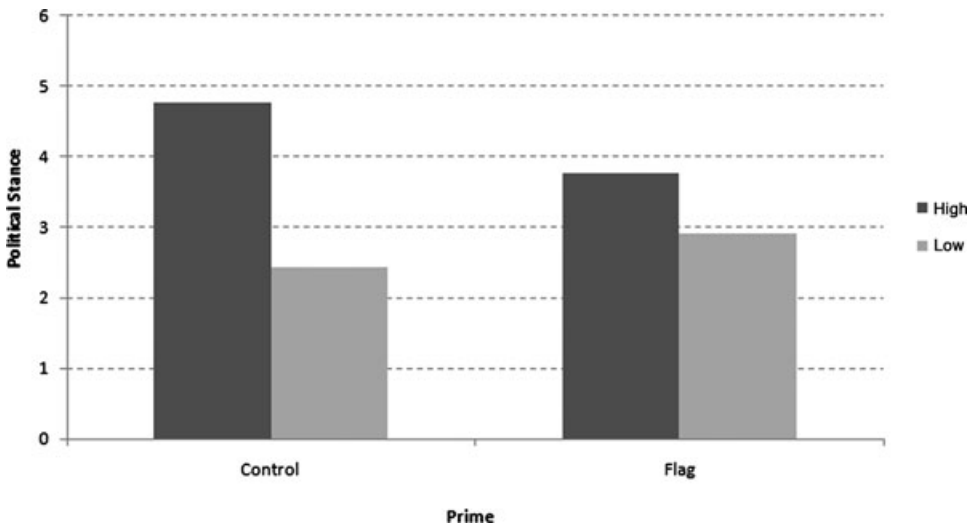
The next experiment was conducted in the week that preceded Israel's 2006 general elections (March 28). The design and procedure were highly similar to the first two experiments, and toward the end of the experiment we also asked participants about their voting intentions. It is important to note here that Israel has a multiparty political system, and so we transformed participants' answers into a six-point scale where one signified extreme left wing and six extreme right wing. Using this scale as our dependent measure, the results were strikingly similar to the first two experiments. The subliminal flag brought participants closer to the political center. Thus, whereas there were significant differences in voting intentions between high and low IWINs in the control condition, these differences disappeared in the priming condition, leading to a highly significant interaction (see Fig. 3).

In the weeks that followed the elections, we contacted our participants and asked them how they ended up voting. Their answers were again transformed using the same six-point scale and subjected to the same analysis. The results indicated that the subliminal exposure to the national flag affected participants' actual voting behavior, and the pattern was very similar to

the intentions data. Whereas significant differences in actual voting between high and low IWINs occurred in the control condition, these differences disappeared in the priming condition, leading to a highly significant interaction (see Fig. 4).

It is important to note here that regression analyses that included priming, IWIN, voting intentions, and their interactions as predictors of actual voting indicated that there were no direct effects from priming to voting. They suggest, instead, that priming affected voting intentions that, in turn, affected actual voting. However, it seems reasonable to assume that during the week before the elections our participants expressed voting intentions multiple times. Why the single time they did so in our laboratory affected them so strongly is not immediately clear to us. Yet, until we run an experiment in which we have a control group that is not asked about its intentions, we will not be able to confidently say whether priming has a direct effect on voting or only an indirect one.

The effects we described above are strong and easily replicable. But are they confined to the Israeli society with all its peculiarities or do they tap a more general process? To



**Figure 3.** Voting intentions (with higher numbers indicating more right-wing parties), as a function of priming and IWIN.

address this question we ran a replication of the last experiment in Italy just before their recent general elections (April 13, 2008).<sup>22</sup> Again, participants were either subliminally primed with the Italian flag or not, and they were divided into two groups: high versus low IWINs (where the second *I* now stands for *Italian*).

The results were strikingly similar. As predicted, whereas there were significant differences in actual voting between high and low IWINs in the control condition (low IWINs tended to be more left wing), these differences disappeared in the priming condition. Both groups tended to move toward the political center. The interaction between priming and IWIN was significant.

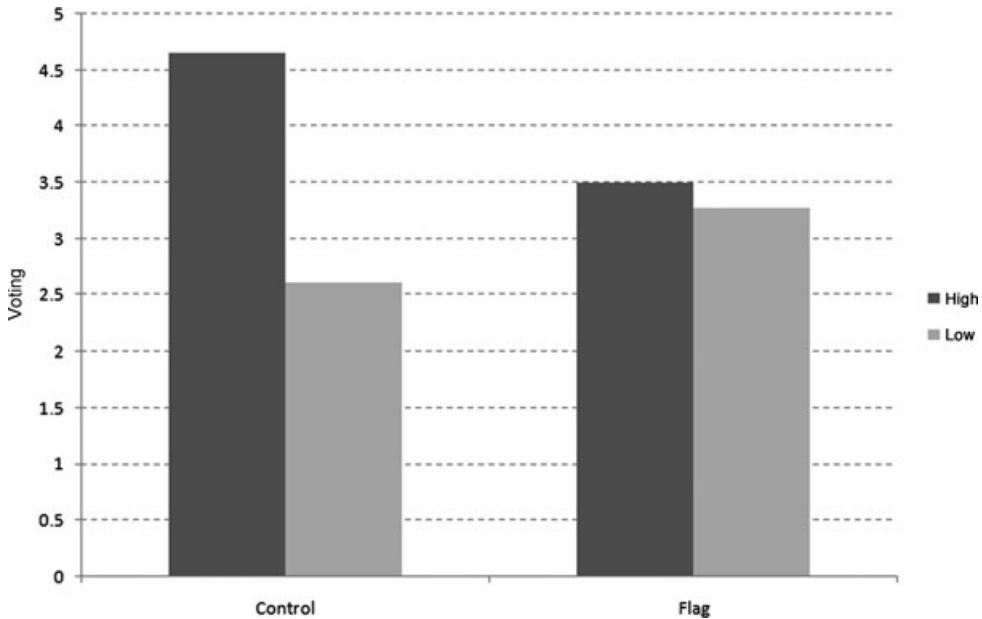
Recently we ran a flag-priming political attitude assessment experiment in Moscow. Participants were either subtly primed with the Russian flag (it appeared on a cover of a book that was placed on the desk on which participants signed in for the experiment) or not, and they were then asked political questions. Replicating the earlier results in Israel and Italy, strong and significant differences between high and low nationalists occurred in the control condition, but these differences disappeared in the priming condition: The subtle exposure to

the Russian flag brought high and low nationalists together.<sup>23</sup>

### **A Possible Mechanism: The Interaction of Cognition and Motivation**

The results described thus far portray a clear picture. Participants who are primed with a national symbol move toward unity in the political center in terms of their political judgments and behavior. But what is it that happens in our participants' minds from the time they are primed with the flag to the time they express their opinions or voting decisions? What is the underlying mechanism? In this section we sketch a possible mechanism that we have recently begun to investigate.

We think that two factors play a crucial role in the process—one cognitive and the other motivational. Let us begin with the cognitive. Recent research on culture and values suggests that people's mental representations of the typical member of a culture, or of the subjective common knowledge of the members of a culture, play a crucial role in implicit effects of culture.<sup>24</sup> Given the similarities between the



**Figure 4.** Voting data (with higher numbers indicating more right-wing parties), as a function of priming and IWIN.

constructs under investigation (i.e., ideology and culture), we think that their operating characteristics may be somewhat similar. We therefore postulate that participants' mental representation of "the typical nationalist" is an important determinant of implicit nationalism.

The second factor is motivational. We assume that while some people have an approach orientation toward the local nation, others have an avoidance orientation. The former should have the tendency to move toward their national group members when an opportunity presents itself, whereas the latter should have the opposite tendency. We hypothesize, then, that people with an approach orientation toward a certain ideology should move *toward* the ideology after having been primed with its symbol, whereas avoidance-oriented people should move *away* from it. More specifically, given the cognitive factor (succinctly) discussed above, we argue that national ideology priming should lead approach-oriented participants not toward their abstract ideology (e.g., toward textbook Zionism) but toward what they perceive as the typical instantiation of this ideology (e.g., their beliefs about the typical Zionist). In a similar

way, avoidance-oriented citizens should move away from the (subjective) typical nationalist.

Recent data collected in Israel provide preliminary support for these ideas. In one experiment we showed that high and low IWINs have different mental representations of the typical Zionist. The typical Zionist of low IWINs is more right wing than that of the high IWINs. If flag priming indeed moves participants toward their representations of the typical Zionist, then, given these data, it should reduce the gap between low and high IWINs. As we have seen, these are indeed the results that we get. (Note that this analysis assumes that, by and large, our participants were approach motivated. Given that all of the subjects in the Israeli experiments we have described so far were Jewish, and given that the percentage of Jewish Israelis who oppose Zionism is negligible [e.g., in Tel Aviv, arguably the most liberal city in Israel, with a mix of Jews, Muslims, and Christians, only 2% voted for non-Zionist nonorthodox parties], this seems like a justified assumption.)

In order to begin testing the motivational part of our model, we examined a population

The experimental stimulus, the Israeli flag:



The control stimulus, a "scrambled" Israeli flag:



**Figure 5.** Experimental stimulus flag and control stimulus flag.

that may be assumed to be relatively more avoidant toward Zionism—Palestinian Israelis (i.e., Muslim and Christian Arabs who live within Israel's 1967 borders). The design and materials of the experiment were similar to the experiments we described above, with two main differences. First, the participants were Palestinian Israelis. Second, the experiment was conducted in their native language, Arabic.

As predicted, the results showed that there were significant differences between high and low IWINs in the control condition. Those who identified more with Israel and Zionism expressed more control attitudes than those low on this scale. Priming of the Israeli flag, however, pushed both high- and low-IWIN participants *away* from the typical Zionist—it elicited more pro-Palestinian attitudes. To the extent that Palestinian Israelis hold relatively more of an avoidance motivation toward mainstream Israeli Zionism, these results support one of our main contentions—that a person's motivation toward a given ideology plays an important role in the nature of the implicit effects of that ideology's cues.

The last two studies use individual differences as proxies and are hence correlational in nature. Our laboratories are currently conducting experiments in which we manipulate these factors in the hopes of establishing a firm causal relationship between the cognitive and motivational factors and the effect of implicit nationalism.

## Implicit Nationalism II: Prejudice

The experiments we reviewed thus far examined the effects of the implicit priming of national symbols on blatantly national issues, such as political stance and voting. In the current section we review experiments that examined the effect of the implicit priming of national cues on *prejudice*.

The reason we turned to examine prejudice is straightforward. The national ideologies of the USA and Israel may be thought of as egalitarian—in principle, that is. The founding documents of the American ethos stress equality and egalitarianism. Similarly, Israel's declaration of independence pledges to “ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its [Israel's] inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex.” Yet, the harsh political reality in both countries is oftentimes very different, and minorities are often discriminated against—a fact that may result in, or be reflected by, an association between the national ideology and prejudice.<sup>18,25–29</sup> In terms of the model we proposed above, while American or Israeli national ideologies may be unprejudiced in the abstract, the common knowledge regarding the prototypical nationalist may suggest that she *is* prejudiced (or at least more prejudiced than I am, for every possible “I”). Hence, in both countries national ideologies may be associated with prejudice, and thus the implicit pursuit of nationalism may increase prejudice (just to be fair to our own cultures, let us note here that this potential relationship between national ideologies and prejudice likely applies to any country with a history of prejudice against a minority group).



In the first pair of experiments, we used the implicit association test (IAT) to assess implicit prejudice.<sup>30</sup> Generally speaking, the IAT measures prejudice by comparing the strength of association between one group (say, whites) and positivity versus another group (say, blacks) and positivity. Similarly, it compares the strength of association between each of the two groups with negativity. The underlying assumption is that the more one is implicitly prejudiced, the more one would associate positivity with one group (e.g., whites) and negativity with the other (e.g., blacks), compared with the reverse pairings.

The first two experiments were identical in structure. Images of the national flag (or a control stimulus) were subliminally presented during a computer task, and participants then completed the IAT. In the first experiment, conducted in the USA, the IAT measured prejudice toward blacks (comparing them with whites). In the second experiment, conducted in Israel, we assessed prejudice toward Palestinians (comparing them with Jewish settlers). The results in both countries were identical. The subliminal presentation of national cues significantly increased implicit prejudice toward these minorities.

In the next experiment (conducted in the USA in January and February 2008) we examined the implicit effects of the American flag on participants' support for the African-American Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama. Participants were asked to express their intentions to vote for the candidates for the Democratic and Republican nomination for president, including Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, John Edwards, John McCain, Mike Huckabee, Rudy Giuliani, and Mitt Romney. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In one condition a small American flag appeared on the upper corner of the survey and in the other condition it did not.

The results showed that the priming manipulation influenced support for Obama—and only for Obama. As predicted, those who were implicitly primed with the American flag

were significantly less likely to support him for president compared with those in the control condition.

In the next experiment conducted in the USA, we examined the effect of American flag priming on the support for Obama much later in the electoral process, during late summer to early fall of 2008 (the elections were held on November 4, 2008). The experiment was similar to the one described above except for the candidates. It included only the two candidates for presidency: Obama and McCain. As predicted, a significant interaction between priming condition (implicit flag condition, control condition) and candidate (Obama, McCain) emerged. The American flag significantly *decreased* support for (the African-American) candidate Obama but *increased* support for (the Caucasian) candidate McCain.

To summarize, a series of experiments conducted in the USA and Israel suggest that implicit nationalism enhances prejudice toward minorities—on implicit as well as relatively explicit measures.

## General Discussion

We reviewed two sets of experiments in which we examined the effects of subtle reminders of one's nation on political behavior and prejudice. The first set of experiments showed that the subliminal or very subtle activation of the national flag has far reaching implications in terms of political thought and overt political behavior. Implicit nationalism gathers all approach-oriented citizens around the tribal campfire, so to speak. This was true when Jewish-Israeli participants were asked to express political attitudes toward Palestinians and when they were asked about their attitudes toward the settlements and the settlers. The subliminal priming of flags, we further showed, affected how participants intended to vote in general elections and how they actually voted in these elections, both in Italy and in Israel.

The second set of experiments showed that the subtle activation of a national flag also has far-reaching implications in terms of prejudice. Participants in the USA and Israel, who had been implicitly primed with their (respective) national flag, showed *increased* prejudice against minorities (African-Americans in the former; Palestinians in the latter). Furthermore, this flag-induced prejudice translated into reduced support for the African-American candidate for president Barack Obama and increased support for the Caucasian candidate John McCain.

If one assumes that the priming of a national flag activates in memory one's national ideology, then the results we surveyed thus far show that (a) subtle cues in our environment have the potential for activating our ideology and (b) that the activation of this national ideology, and the ensuing (implicit) pursuit of nationalism, has far reaching, oftentimes unwanted, effects on our behavior.<sup>31</sup>

We also sketched a preliminary model of how implicit nationalism operates, suggesting that cognition and motivation work in tandem to produce the effects we have identified thus far. Specifically, we suggested that the priming of national symbols activates in memory the mental representation of the typical nationalist and either an approach or avoidance motivation. Depending on the latter, priming will either result in people *approaching* the attitudes and behaviors of the typical nationalist or *avoiding* them.

At present, this research yields more questions than answers, but the answers it does provide are interesting for at least two different fields of study. First, they improve our understanding of how socially constructed constructs, such as national ideology, implicitly affect individual thought and behavior. For those interested in ideologies in general and national ideologies in particular, it provides a first glance at the unconscious processes that moderate what Michael Billig<sup>12</sup> called *banal nationalism*—the everyday endemic manifestations of nationalism.

Second, these results provide new evidence for those in the cognitive science community

who examine the capacities and capabilities of the unconscious. On top of documenting one of the most significant real-life effects of subliminal priming (i.e., its effects on voting intentions and actual voting), understanding the intricacies of implicit nationalism promises to teach us new lessons about the nature of possible nonconscious interactions and their effects on motivation, emotion, and cognition.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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