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What Type of American Are You? Universal, Cultural, Civic, and Commercial Accounts of American Identity

Jordon B. Barkalow



The Constitution of the United States is characterized, to a considerable degree, by ambiguity. This is evident in the debate over the extent of the President's implied powers. Specifically, does the "take care clause" (Article II, Section 3) allow the President to circumvent the system of checks and balances and the Bill of Rights in the name of national security? While this question has garnered most of our attention in the aftermath of September 11th, it is only one of a number of important constitutional ambiguities.

One of the least considered and misunderstood ambiguities concerns the question of what it means to be an American citizen. Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution provides that one of the qualifications for being a member of the House is to be a citizen of the United States for seven years. Senators (Article I, Section 3) must be citizens for nine years and the President (Article II, Section 1) must be a natural-born citizen. While the Constitution is clear that the status of citizenship is a necessary requirement for holding national office, it says nothing about what it means to be an American citizen. Even when one considers the first formal statement of American citizenship in the Constitution, the Fourteenth Amendment only provides that "All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state where they reside." Beyond specifying the mechanisms by which one becomes a citizen, the Fourteenth Amendment does little to help provide an answer to the question

Republican Vice-Presidential candidate Sarah Palin offered her thoughts on what it means to be an American while speaking in Greensboro, North Carolina during the 2008 presidential election. According to Palin, states like North Carolina, which have historically voted Republican, constitute "the real America" because the people who live there are more patriotic and "pro-American" than those who live in other states. Leaving aside the obvious political implications of Palin's comments, the connection she makes between the principles and values of the Republican Party and Americanism reminds us that the political battles between Republicans and Democrats are more than just posturing for electoral purposes. Republicans and Democrats have different and competing under-

standings of what it means to be an American and these understandings shape their positions of key issues of public policy.

This is readily evident in the differing answers Republicans and Democrats give with regard to immigration. Democratic proponents argue that immigration: reinvigorates American institutions and values by returning Americans to their first principles; is a boon to the American economy; does not lower wages; and keeps prices down across the economy. Republican critics of immigration see it as a threat to the American economy and social order. Immigrants are perceived as taking jobs from American citizens because of their willingness to accept lower wages and below-standard working conditions. The courts, according to immigration critics, have rendered the distinction between citizen and alien meaningless by interpreting the equality and due process clauses of the U.S. Constitution too broadly.

As the example of immigration attitudes shows, how we define what it means to be an American has significant political implications. Employing the concept of nationalism, which is defined as the cultural, linguistic, economic, and political dimensions of identity that allow members of society to feel that they belong, this article provides an overview of the four competing understandings of what it means to be an American and the challenge to these interpretations. As shown below, universal nationalism emphasizes the universal quality of American political principles while cultural nationalism defines American-ness in terms of an Anglo-Protestant cultural heritage. Civic nationalism, on the other hand, finds meaning in the social and political practices that develop the civic capacities of American citizenship whereas commercial nationalism focuses on the productive capacities of Americans as the key to the development of a flourishing commercial empire. This article concludes with an overview of the primary challenge posed to the four accounts of American national identity.

UNIVERSAL NATIONALISM

The universal understanding of American national identity sees America as a nation founded on a discreet

set of political principles. The universal principles are articulated in the form of a political tradition, the American Creed. Initially articulated in Alexis De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, the American Creed emphasizes universal principles that consist of rights and political structures that both secure and advance personal freedom and minority rights, and encourage civic involvement. The clearest expression of these principles is held to be the *Declaration of Independence* where it is written "that all men

are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." The Creed's emphasis on freedom, rights, and participation suggests that the Creed is inherently individualistic. The American Creed argument assumes the progressive elimination of group distinctions over time as individualism absorbs and displaces them. With group distinctions gone, America can move from an imperfect liberalism to one where the equal rights of all individuals prevail.

The connection between liberalism and universal nationalism is consistent with the idea that key liberal figures and texts are essential to any understanding of American political thinking. But even here, one is left asking how one is to understand liberalism. On one hand, the traditional view of liberalism focuses on avoiding the worst rather than realizing the best. Focusing on self-preservation and prosperity, the traditional account of liberalism is indifferent to the cultivation of character, hostile to human bonds that hold societies together and antagonistic to human excellence. On the other hand, some find in key texts and authors of the liberal tradition recognition that certain character traits are necessary for what they consider higher types of desires. Desires of this type would include self-denial, civility, liberality, justice, courage, endurance, humanity, curiosity, industry, truthfulness, vigilance, prudence and love of liberty. Arguments in favor of the revised liberalism reject the proposition that that the goal of protecting individual rights and achieving social solidarity are necessarily antagonistic. It is the revised understanding of liberalism that ultimately informs universal nationalism.

Critics of the universal account of American national identity make two primary arguments. First, they challenge the view of a gradual unfolding and expand-



ing of American citizenship. Instead, American citizenship can be understood in terms of the persistent restriction and denial of the rights, privileges and immunities of citizenship. A second criticism takes issue with the focus on individualism. Analysis of citizenship status in nineteenth- and twentieth-century America shows that proponents of a universal understanding of American national identity underestimate the endurance of group-based distinctions in American nationalism.

Ultimately, critics maintain that attachment to abstract political principles cannot provide the requisite homogeneity required to have a meaningful sense of what it means to be an American.

CULTURAL NATIONALISM

Cultural nationalism affirms America's distinctively Anglo-Protestant cultural heritage. Of critical importance are the centrality of the common English language, Protestant Christianity and British political traditions. The cultural similarities found here are said to have three primary consequences. First, this understanding of American culture is central to American identity even when the salience of this identity varies over time. Second, elements of the common culture are believed to unify Americans. Consequences one and two are thought to have the effect of creating the cultural homogeneity necessary for the emotional political attachment to the nation that makes free government possible. Cultural nationalists do not believe, as do their universalist counterparts, that shared political principles can manage the conflict invited by a multi-ethnic society.

Instead, cultural nationalism argues that it is the necessary role of religious, familial, social, and governmental forces to manage conflict. Of central importance is the role of religion. Seeing America as a New Jerusalem, cultural nationalists equate good citizenship with being a good Christian. This means that all Americans ought to imitate the life of Christ by walking in the path of the Lord. According to Scripture, walking in the path of the Lord is a continuous process and a habitual lifestyle. Thus, progress is defined by cultural nationalism not in terms of commercial prosperity or increased enjoyment of private property, but in terms of the community's and individual's abilities to respond to the commands of Scripture.

A problem with the Anglo-Protestant cultural argument is that it subsumes several smaller, more controversial arguments. Critics challenge the proposition that a national culture in the ethno-linguistic and religious sense is necessary for the formation of a successful democratic polity. They also challenge the assumption that the Anglo-Protestant culture is uniquely normatively good. Finally, critics doubt that the religious portion is a genuinely positive force in American national life. Altogether, critics contend that closer inspection of these arguments and a more accurate reading of American history undermine the argument that American democracy owes its existence to its ethno-linguistic and religious traditions.

CIVIC NATIONALISM

Civic nationalism holds out an alternative means for transcending the ethnocultural and linguistic differences that characterize America's multicultural society. Advocates of civic nationalism argue that it is the capacity for change and self-criticism that helps to explain the longevity of the American republic.

In place of adherence to universal political principles or sharing in a distinctly European cultural and political heritage, civic nationalism maintains that the development of civic capacities allows Americans to engage and shape their national identity. The development of civic capacities is not an end in itself. Instead, civic nationalism requires Americans, through civic participation, to shape their own national identity. Requiring Americans to shape their own self-understanding ensures that Americans will defend what they collectively value against the cultural, political and economic forces thought to undermine these values.

The emphasis on civic participation or self-governance requires citizens to understand the political principles that make free government possible. In short, the civic nationalism requires civic virtue, which suggests a similarity between civic nationalism and classical republican political thought. Classical republicanism is characterized by the themes of mixed government and, more important for the question of national identity, active citizen participation by equal and independent citizens. Following Aristotle, proponents of the civic understanding of American national identity argue that it is only possible to fully develop as person through political participation. This leads proponents of this interpretation to find the fundamental meaning of what it means to be an American in a particular interpretation of the American Revolution. The Revolution, accordingly, is seen as an act of civic participation that kept the American colonies from being corrupted. Pointing backward to classical republicanism and its commitment to public liberty and virtue, civic national-

ism serves as the most politically robust understanding of American national identity.

COMMERCIAL NATIONALISM

It is an open question whether or not the American Founders were committed to the active theory of citizenship that fosters the development of civic virtue. The Founders did not refer to government created by the U.S. Constitution as a civic republic; they referred to it as a commercial republic. Proponents of civic nationalism, universal nationalism and cultural nationalism, do not give the commercial quality of the American republic the attention it deserves. For example, their analysis of the admission and incorporation of immigrants into the polity relegates commercial concerns to a relatively minor role when compared to larger political concerns. Thus, commercial considerations play almost no role in structuring America's national identity. If we take the commercial vision of America's future seriously, the argument for commercial nationalism concludes that American national identity, at its core, focuses on industry and the individual's capacity to contribute to the creation of a flourishing, commercial empire.

Instead of being connected by reasoned attachment to abstract political principles, a common cultural and religious heritage or civic activity, commercial nationalism holds that Americans are held together as a people by the spirit of commerce. Guided by a belief in the centrality of financial reward for one's toils, commercial nationalism maintains that it is the responsibility of government to pursue policies that multiply the range of economic opportunities available to Americans. Freed from the rigorous political responsibilities of civic nationalism and the social, cultural, and religious restrictions of cultural nationalism, commercial nationalism concludes that the defining characteristic of what it means to be an American is in the pursuit of gain.

CHALLENGE AND DISCUSSION

Despite their differences, the competing interpretations of what it means to be an American must respond to a common challenge—they lack coherence. Instead of a core set of American principles or a progressive logic to its development, American national identity may best be understood as emerging from a series of incoherent compromises. Thus, what it means to be an American is



Ellis Island.

a mixture of the universal, cultural, civic, and commercial understandings that are antagonistic to one another because of their differing assumptions about human nature, the good and the ends of government. This is, however, only part of the picture. In addition to this incoherent mixture are a set of ideas that attempt to justify inequality on characteristics that are said to be natural or ascribed, such as race, ethnicity, and gender. The denial of equal status on these bases has had recurring power in American history because they have been used by Americans to justify the belief that we are a unique people and part of a special political community ordained by God. To the extent that not every American is given equal legal, social or economic status in the four understandings of American national identity discussed above, it can be said that they all betray America's democratic legacy and democracy's moral requirement of equality.

This challenge is particularly poignant for women and African-Americans. Writing to her husband John Adams on the eve of American independence, Abigail Adams requests that those given the responsibility for making "the new code of laws...remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors." Critics of a single, coherent understanding of American national identity point out that the Revolution's universal principles failed to fulfill the promise of political and social equality. With regard to the former, women were not granted the promise of equality in terms of voting and holding office. More problematic is the fact that the Revolution's principles were not used to remove some of the social and legal practices used to deny women equal status.

One such example is coverture. Coverture is a common law tradition that interposes husbands between their wives and the political community. By placing husbands in this position, they were allowed to absorb the property of their wives into their control during the life of their marriage. Now void of any property, women were rendered dependent and without the requisite independence believed to be unfit for political participation. Justified, in part, by the belief that the extension of the husband's control over his wife's property was consistent with the great bond of family union, coverture masked the far more serious assumption that women needed to be protected from both the world and their husbands.

This is not to say that women had no political role. Of particular importance is the notion of republican motherhood. According to this doctrine, women served the American republic and their families by raising virtuous sons, disciplining their husbands to the standards of republican virtue and, in general, serving as guardians of civic virtue. In this sense, women were providing the necessary encouragement and education that made civic

nationalism possible. From the perspective of women, however, the notion of republican motherhood continued to marginalize status of women in America.

The denial of basic, fundamental rights to African Americans is both explicit and implicit in the U.S. Constitution as originally adopted. Explicitly, the three-fifths clause, the 1808 slave-trade provision, the electoral College (giving slave-holding states an advantage in presidential elections as a result of the increased electoral votes received from the three-fifths clause) and the fugitive slave clause are all alleged to have the effect of protecting slavery and giving the South the necessary political leverage in national politics to defeat anti-slavery legislation. Indirectly, certain provisions in the Constitution have the same effect. For example, clauses empowering Congress to suppress domestic insurrections could be used to suppress slave rebellions and the ban on federal taxation of exports prevents Congress from taxing products produced through slave labor. In the first case, the power of the national government was used to directly benefit slave holders and in the second, Congress was prevented from using its power to tax in an attempt to make slavery an unviable mode of economic organization. From this perspective, the Constitution could once be seen as a proslavery document that both explicitly and implicitly embodied the racist beliefs thought to characterize many of the American Founders.

The examples of women and African-Americans call one's attention to the possibility that the American founding and what it means to be an American is fundamentally different for the educated elite, whose writings inform the four competing visions of American national identity discussed above, and the average American or members of dispossessed groups. An objective of scholarship in this area is to expand the definition of the American Founders to include ordinary laborers, women, slaves, and Native Americans. Focusing on the arguments and axioms that informed the daily lives of Americans, the challenge to the overarching, coherent understandings of American national identity lies in the discovery of another set of intellectual traditions that constitute the popular, more democratic, political culture. Assuming, perhaps incorrectly, that America is a democratic society, critics of a single, coherent understanding of what it means to be an American posit that the term American is best seen as a mosaic.

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