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A Single Exposure to the American Flag Shifts Support Toward Republicanism up to 8 Months Later

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Abstract

There is scant evidence that incidental cues in the environment significantly alter people's political judgments and behavior in a durable way. We report that a brief exposure to the American flag led to a shift toward Republican beliefs, attitudes, and voting behavior among both Republican and Democratic participants, despite their overwhelming belief that exposure to the flag would not influence their behavior. In Experiment 1, which was conducted online during the 2008 U.S. presidential election, a single exposure to an American flag resulted in a significant increase in participants' Republican voting intentions, voting behavior, political beliefs, and implicit and explicit attitudes, with some effects lasting 8 months after the exposure to the prime. In Experiment 2, we replicated the findings more than a year into the current Democratic presidential term. These results constitute the first evidence that nonconscious priming effects from exposure to a national flag can bias the citizenry toward one political party and can have considerable durability.

Keywords

political psychology, priming, voting behavior, American flag

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How do people decide which political candidate to support, or whether their country goes to war? In the social science literature, it has traditionally been assumed that political behavior reflects a thoughtful and rational analysis of the pros and cons of the options (e.g., Baum & Jamison, 2006; Downs, 1959; Lau & Redlawsk, 1997). Recent work in social and cognitive psychology suggests, however, that political behavior can also be unconsciously influenced by contextual cues, such as voting location (Berger, Meredith, & Wheeler, 2008) and the facial characteristics of candidates (Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005).

But how robust and durable is the influence of such incidental cues on political decisions and behavior? In the research reported here, we examined one of the most iconic political symbols of a nation—its flag—and tested the direction and durability of its influence on political behavior, attitudes, and judgment.

National flags are pervasive cues in the political landscapes of many nations, appearing on houses, schools, government buildings, and the lapels of political candidates (Gellner, 2005). Flags constitute particularly powerful political cues because they may reinforce national sentiments without being consciously noticed by the citizenry (e.g., Billig, 1995). Although social scientists have speculated that national flags might exert an unnoticed influence on political thought and behavior, there is little empirical evidence to support this claim.

How might a national flag influence the political behavior of the citizenry? National flags have traditionally been seen as rallying symbols that bring citizens together (Baker & O'Neal, 2001; Mueller, 1970). For instance, citizens and members of government often intentionally display the national flag during wartime in an effort to unify the populace behind the war efforts (Skitka, 2005). Recent research has shown that even subtle exposure to a national flag can have unifying effects. Hassin, Ferguson, Shidlovski, and Gross (2007) found that subliminal exposure to a national flag led citizens to vote in a manner that reflected politically moderate views, such that participants at each end of the political spectrum moved

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toward the ideological center. This was the first evidence that national flags can change people's political behavior in a subtle, nonconscious fashion.

Yet the psychological effects of exposure to a national flag are likely to vary considerably according to a given country's characteristics, such as its culture, history, and political atmosphere. Although there may be cases in which a national flag unifies people by pushing them toward the center of the ideological spectrum, there may be other cases in which a national flag instead moves people toward one end of the spectrum. We argue that this possibility is particularly likely in a country in which the political landscape is polarized by what is largely a two-party system, and in which one of the two major parties has come to be more associated with the flag. In these cases, the flag may bias the citizenry toward a particular political party, potentially without their awareness (Billig, 1995).

We tested this prediction in the United States, a country in which the political system is sharply divided between Democrats and Republicans. To examine the associations between the flag and each political party, we conducted a pilot study in which we asked 51 participants which party "tends to brandish the American flag more often (e.g., by wearing it, waving it, holding it, having it on their house)." Participants in our sample strongly believed that the tendency to display the flag was more common among Republicans; responses differed significantly from the midpoint of the scale, $t(50) = 6.50$, $p = .001$ (see also Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008). The same sample of participants overwhelmingly (90.2%) believed that their voting behavior would not be influenced by the presence of a flag, and the few who thought it might did not agree on the direction of its influence. Thus, despite associating the American flag more strongly with one political party than with the other, participants in our pilot study did not believe that exposure to the flag would have any effect on their behavior.

In contrast to the beliefs of the participants in the pilot study, the results from the experiments reported here show that exposure to the American flag introduces a bias toward the Republican Party over the Democratic Party. In one experiment, we tested whether subtle exposure to the American flag shifted people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors toward the Republican end of the political continuum. We found that a single exposure to a small American flag during deliberation about voting intentions prior to a general election led to significant and robust changes in participants' voting intentions, voting behavior, and political attitudes, all in the politically conservative direction. In a separate experiment, we replicated these patterns more than a year into a Democratic presidential term.

We also tested the longevity of this priming effect on judgment and attitudes. Flag-priming effects may be especially potent if priming occurs while a person is consciously deliberating about politics and voting intentions. We exposed participants to the American flag once during such an arguably critical psychological window and found that the effects from this single exposure lasted up to 8 months later. This prolonged influence represents one of the most durable priming effects in the cognitive sciences literature, and shows not only that contextual effects can influence important political decisions, but also that this influence can be robust and long lasting.

Experiment 1

In this experiment, we tested whether a single exposure to the American flag would lead participants to shift their attitudes, beliefs, and behavior in the politically conservative direction. We conducted a multisession study during the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Starting in September 2008, we recruited American adults across the United States to participate in a paid online study of political beliefs and attitudes. We collected measures from the same sample of participants at four times over a period of 8 months.

Participants and recruitment

Between September 19 and October 10, 2008 (Session 1), 396 participants were recruited through advertising in online social-networking sites (e.g., Facebook.com) to participate in an online survey in exchange for a $10 Amazon.com gift certificate. In order to avoid the possibility that our priming manipulation might alter the outcome of the election, we used measurements from Session 1 to identify participants ($n = 235$) from the initial pool who planned to vote in a state where polling indicated that a significant margin separated Obama and McCain. These participants were randomly assigned to either the flag-prime or the control condition.

The participants who were in solidly Republican or Democratic states were contacted to complete questionnaires for Session 2 (starting on October 11, 2008, and ending on the day before the election, November 3, 2008) and Session 3 (November 5 through November 12, 2008) in exchange for a $15 Amazon.com gift certificate. Of the participants contacted, 197 completed Session 2, and 191 completed Session 3. More than 79% of participants completed Session 2 by October 21; thus, the vast majority of participants voted at least 2 weeks after their exposure to the prime. In early July of 2009, the participants who had completed Session 3 were contacted to complete Session 4 in exchange for a 1 in 20 chance to win a $25 Amazon.com gift certificate. Seventy-one participants completed this session (37.2%). We attribute this relatively high rate of attrition to the use of a lottery rather than guaranteed payment.

There were no significant differences on any variables of importance (e.g., political ideology, voting intentions, beliefs about specific political issues, religiousness, nationalism, need for cognition) between the participants who did and did not complete the 8-month follow-up.

We excluded 8 participants (4 in each of the two conditions) from the analyses because they completed the measures in Session 1 in less than 10 min (median time = 36 min).

Materials and procedure

Session 1. Measures directly or potentially relevant to our hypotheses were embedded within a larger set of personality measures that participants completed in Session 1. Relevant measures included the Patriotism and Nationalism subscales of the Patriotism and Nationalism Scale (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989), a measure of warmth toward the candidates, a demographics questionnaire, a measure of political orientation and exposure to news media, and a survey of attitudes regarding specific political issues (to view the survey, see Instrument Details in the Supplemental Material available online). Participants also completed measures of intention to vote for Barack Obama and Joseph Biden, and for John McCain and Sarah Palin, using separate 11-point scales (from 1, *definitely not*, to 11, *absolutely*). Surveys were presented in random order. None of these measures moderated the effects observed in subsequent sessions.

Session 2. In Session 2, all participants first reported their voting intentions, using the same 11-point scales used in Session 1. For participants assigned to the flag-prime condition, a small picture (72 × 45 pixels) of an American flag was present in the top left corner of the survey. For participants in the control condition, there was nothing in the corner of the survey (to view the survey, see Experimental Manipulations in the Supplemental Material). Except for this single presentation of the American flag on this particular survey, the procedure and materials in all sessions were identical for all participants.

Participants also answered several questions unrelated to the present hypothesis. They then rated their warmth toward the Democratic and Republican Parties, presidential candidates, and vice presidential candidates (using 500-point analog sliding scales); completed measures of political orientation, news-consumption habits, and exposure to specific news sources; answered the same questions about political issues asked in Session 1; and rated the importance of those political issues.

After completing all of the surveys, participants completed a number of Implicit Association Tests (IATs; Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2007), presented in random order. The IAT measures that were directly relevant to the current hypothesis included a Barack Obama/John McCain IAT, a Joseph Biden/Sarah Palin IAT, and a Democrat/Republican IAT. These tests were presented and scored in accordance with the procedures outlined by Nosek, Greenwald, and their colleagues (following Lane, Banaji, Nosek, & Greenwald, 2007). Higher scores represent greater positivity toward the Republican candidate or party.

Session 3. In Session 3, participants were first asked to report which candidate they voted for, selecting their choice from a list that included the major- and minor-party candidates who appeared on the ballots in most states, as well as "other" and "did not vote." Participants also answered questions about their vote choice and the attributes of Barack Obama and John McCain. They then rated how fairly they felt the media had treated each presidential and vice presidential candidate, using 9-point scales (−4 = *very unfairly negatively*, −2 = *somewhat unfairly negatively*, 0 = *accurately*, +2 = *somewhat unfairly positively*, +4 = *very unfairly positively*).

Finally, participants completed measures about their news-consumption habits and their exposure to specific television, print, and radio news sources. After completing Session 3, participants were referred to a Web site containing questions that probed for suspicion about the experiment. Once participants had answered these questions, they were debriefed on the nature of the study. No participants expressed any suspicion about the presence of the American flag during Session 2.

Session 4. In the final session, participants first answered a number of questions about their current feelings about President Obama and his job performance to date, using 11-point Likert scales. Next, participants indicated how warmly they felt toward a variety of liberal and conservative leaders using the same analog sliding scales used previously, and answered the same questions about political beliefs used in previous sessions. Participants were also asked to report their personal political ideology, their religiousness, the importance of being an American to their identity, their media-consumption habits, and their exposure to the same variety of news sources asked about in Session 3.

Participants were then thanked and presented with further debriefing information about the study.

Session 2 results

Voting intentions. We created composite measures of voting intentions for both Sessions 1 and 2 by calculating the difference between intentions to vote for McCain and intentions to vote for Obama; higher numbers indicate a greater intention to vote for McCain than for Obama. We then regressed the centered Session 2 intentions on centered Session 1 intentions and used the residuals from this analysis as our main measure of voting intentions. Thus, we measured the impact of the flag prime on voting intentions during Session 2 that could not be explained by voting intentions from Session 1.

As predicted, participants in the flag-prime condition (M = 0.072, SD = 0.47) reported a greater intention to vote for McCain than did participants in the control condition (M = −0.070, SD = 0.48), $t(181) = 2.02$, $p = .04$, $d = 0.298$ (see Fig. 1).

Explicit attitudes. We created a composite score of participants' ratings of warmth toward the Republican and Democratic Parties, presidential candidates, and vice presidential candidates, controlling for the same measures administered at Session 1. Higher scores indicate more positive feelings toward the Republican Party and candidates than toward the Democratic Party and candidates. As predicted, participants in the flag-prime condition (M = 0.424, SD = 2.73) felt relatively more warmth toward the Republican Party and Republican

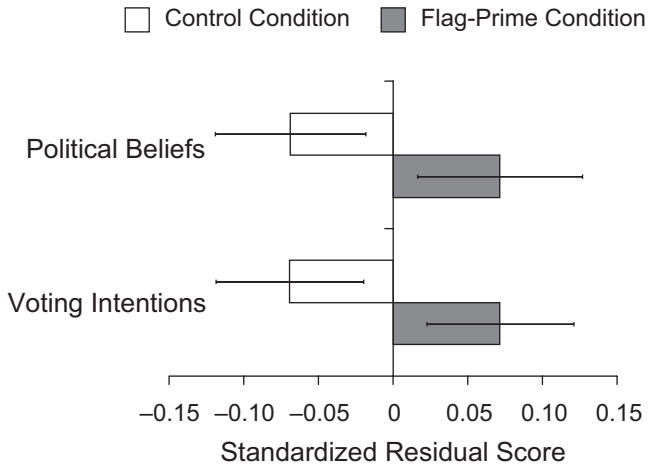

Fig. 1. Voting intentions and political attitudes at Session 2 in Experiment 1 as a function of condition (flag prime or control). The graph presents standardized residual scores that control for responses to the same measures administered at Session 1. Higher numbers indicate a greater intention to vote for the Republican candidates relative to the Democratic candidates and greater support for the politically conservative position relative to the politically liberal position. Error bars indicate ±1 *SEM*.

candidates than did participants in the control condition (M = −0.410, SD = 2.37), $t(181) = -2.21$, $p = .03$, $d = 0.354$ (see Fig. 2).

Implicit attitudes. We created a composite measure from scores on the three political IATs to represent the aggregate positivity toward the Republican Party and Republican candidates relative to the Democratic Party and Democratic candidates. Participants in the flag-prime condition (D = −0.006) showed significantly more positivity toward the Republican Party and candidates than did participants in the control condition (D = −0.102), $t(173) = 2.03$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.313$, an effect that was mirrored in each of the IATs separately.

Political beliefs. Participants' responses were reverse-scored when needed and then averaged into a composite measure of political beliefs ($\alpha = .84$). This index was correlated with self-reported party affiliation and political ideology ($r = .73$, $p < .001$), which confirmed that reported political beliefs did correspond with participants' reported political ideology.

Participants in the flag-prime condition reported marginally more conservative beliefs (M = 3.25, SD = 0.82) than did participants in the control condition (M = 3.03, SD = 0.79), $t(181) = 1.80$, $p = .07$, $d = 0.274$. This result held, and even increased slightly, when we controlled for responses to measures of political beliefs in Session 1, $\beta = 0.141$, $t(180) = 1.84$, $p = .06$ (see Fig. 1).

Session 3 results

Voting behavior. To maximize statistical power in measuring voting behavior, we analyzed data only from participants who reported voting for McCain or Obama (n = 166). Although participants in the control condition generally tended to vote for Obama (83.5% for Obama, 16.5% for McCain), this tendency was significantly reduced in the flag-prime condition (72.8% for Obama, 27.2% for McCain), $\chi^2(1, N = 166) = 2.81$, $p < .05$, one-tailed (see Fig. 3). This pattern held when we analyzed the data from all participants, although the significance level dropped. It is worth noting that voting behavior was highly predicted by voting intentions reported in Session 2. Indeed, when we included voting intentions and priming condition as predictors of voting behavior in a regression analysis, voting intentions remained reliably predictive, β = 3.26,

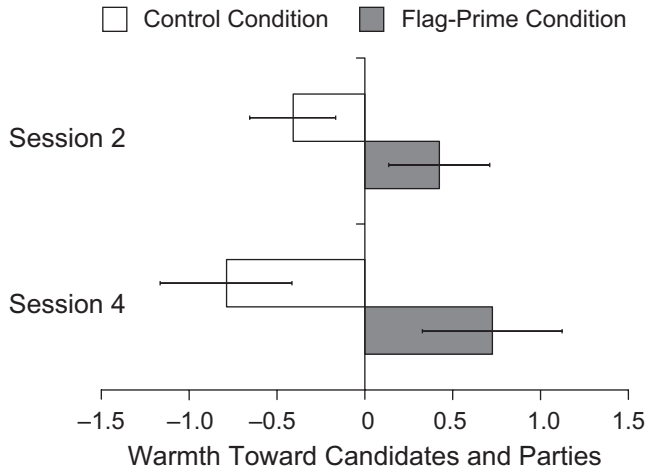

Fig. 2. Relative preference for the Republican and Democratic Parties and presidential and vice presidential candidates as a function of condition (flag prime or control), at Sessions 2 and 4 in Experiment 1. The graph presents standardized residual scores that control for responses to the same measures administered at Session 1. Higher numbers indicate greater preference for the Republican Party and candidates relative to the Democratic Party and candidates. Error bars indicate ±1 *SEM*.

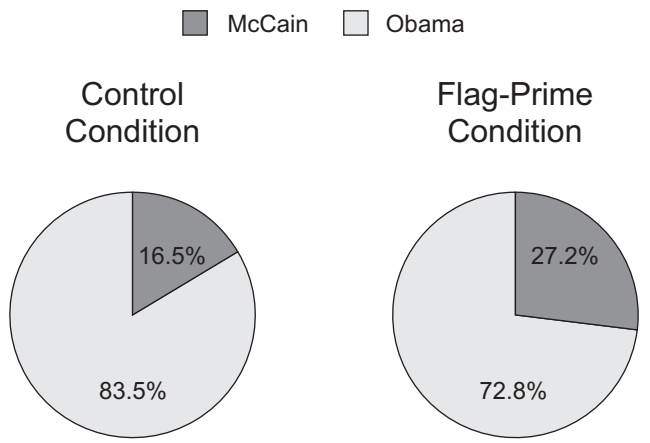

Fig. 3. Percentage of participants in the control and flag-prime conditions who reported voting for McCain and for Obama in Session 3 of Experiment 1 (n = 166).

$\chi^2(1, N = 166) = 27.67$, $p < .0001$, whereas the effect of priming condition dropped to nonsignificance ($p = .25$). These results suggest that the effect of priming condition on voting behavior was mediated by voting intentions, rather than that priming condition had an unmediated, direct effect on voting behavior (see also Hassin et al., 2007).

Treatment in the media. We created a composite index of how fairly participants believed the media treated the candidates; on this index, positive values indicate the belief that the media treated the Republican candidates better than they treated the Democratic candidates, and negative numbers indicate the opposite belief. Although participants in the control condition generally believed that the media were unduly harsh in their treatment of the Republican candidates ($M = -1.39$, $SD = 3.54$), this tendency was significantly greater in the flag-prime condition ($M = -2.69$, $SD = 4.43$), $t(181) = 2.20$, $p = .029$, $d = 0.370$.

Session 4 results

Obama's job performance. We averaged the ratings of Obama's job performance to create a composite measure ($\alpha = .97$). As predicted, participants in the flag-prime condition felt less positively about Obama's job performance at the 8-month follow-up ($M = 6.76$, $SD = 2.88$) than did participants in the control condition ($M = 8.01$, $SD = 2.25$), $t(69) = 2.04$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.44$.

Explicit attitudes. We created a composite attitude index by subtracting the average rating of warmth toward liberal leaders from the average rating of warmth toward conservative leaders. Participants in both conditions generally felt more warmth toward the Democrats than toward the Republicans, but participants in the flag-prime condition ($M = -54.76$, $SD = 182.18$) were less warm toward Democrats than were participants in the control condition ($M = -193.47$, $SD = 176.16$), $t(69) = 3.26$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.80$. We found the same pattern of results using the composite measure used in Session 2 (participants' ratings of warmth toward the political parties, presidential candidates, and vice presidential candidates, controlling for the same measures administered at Session 1), $t(69) = 2.77$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.71$ (see Fig. 2).

Political beliefs. As was the case in Session 2, participants in the flag-prime condition exhibited significantly more conservative beliefs ($M = 3.35$, $SD = 0.85$) than did participants in the control condition ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.88$), $t(68) = 2.43$, $p < .02$, $d = 0.60$.[1]

Discussion

Our results demonstrate that a single exposure to an unobtrusive American flag shifted participants' voting intentions, voting behavior, attitudes, and beliefs toward the Republican end of the ideological spectrum. It is important to note that political ideology and party affiliation did not moderate these effects. That is, both liberal and conservative participants were influenced by the flag prime, and in the same (conservative) direction. These effects lasted 8 months after the initial exposure. Why did they last so long? One possibility is that voting behavior (Session 3) had an especially influential effect on beliefs and attitudes reported in Session 4. Indeed, voting behavior did significantly predict beliefs about policy and warmth toward political leaders and parties at Session 4—beliefs: $t(60) = 4.71$, $p < .001$; warmth: $t(61) = 6.7$, $p < .001$. This pattern raises the question of whether the effects observed in Session 4 could be explained entirely by a self-perception account, whereby participants at Session 4 merely recalled their voting choice. The data do not support this account. Controlling for voting behavior at Session 3, priming condition still significantly predicted warmth toward Democrats and Republicans in Session 4 ($p < .01$), and marginally significantly predicted attitudes regarding political issues ($p < .09$). Moreover, analyses controlling for voting intentions as measured in Session 2 also showed that priming condition still significantly predicted warmth ($p < .01$) and marginally significantly predicted attitudes regarding political issues ($p < .08$). These results suggest that the flag prime's initial influence was not restricted to voting intentions but also extended to attitudes and beliefs more broadly, and that it was the accumulation and perhaps rolling influence of these influences that affected voting behavior at Session 3 and attitudes and beliefs at Session 4.

It is noteworthy that the size of the priming effect was considerably larger in Session 4 than in the earlier sessions. Might this have been due to the selective attrition of participants? Of the participants who completed Session 4, those in the flag-prime and control conditions did not differ in their political ideology or voting intentions as measured in Session 1; this suggests that any between-condition differences in Session 4 were not the product of a particular coincidence of attrition of liberal participants from the flag-prime condition and attrition of conservative participants from the control condition. Furthermore, participants who chose to take part in Session 4 showed no baseline differences (on more than 20 variables) from those who did not. It is of course impossible to definitively rule out the possibility of selective attrition, as participants may have differed on some unmeasured variable. There is some evidence that people who have been exposed to persuasive appeals show increasingly strong effects of those appeals over time (i.e., "sleeper effects"; Kumkale & Albarracín, 2004; see also Cook & Flay, 1978; Pratkanis, Greenwald, Leippe, & Baumgardner, 1988), although the applicability of that evidence to the current findings remains speculative.

Experiment 2

Before concluding that exposure to the American flag produces a bias toward Republicanism, we tested whether the flag creates a shift specifically toward Republicanism, rather than toward whichever party currently controls the executive

branch of the government. Thus, we conducted Experiment 2 in the spring of 2010, more than a year after the election of President Obama and while the Democrats still had the majority in both houses of Congress.

Participants and recruitment

Seventy participants completed the experiment for either $5 or extra credit in a psychology class. Four participants were excluded from the analyses: 1 who had previously taken part in a highly similar experiment, 1 who did not complete the part of the experiment that contained the priming, and 2 who guessed the hypothesis.

Materials and procedure

Once participants arrived at the lab, they completed a task that they were told concerned the ability to discern the time of day that a photograph had been taken. They were presented with four photographs of buildings and asked to estimate whether they thought each photograph had been taken during the morning, afternoon, or evening (for examples, see Experimental Manipulations in the Supplemental Material). For participants randomly assigned to the flag-prime condition, two of the four photographs had American flags in them (on flag poles or hanging from the front of the building). For participants in the control condition, the flags were digitally removed. After this task, participants completed a short (eight-item) version of the political belief survey used in Experiment 1; responses were made on a 7-point scale.

Results and discussion

The responses were reverse-coded when needed and averaged together ($\alpha = .67$). Attitudes of participants in the flag-prime condition ($M = 3.10$) were significantly closer to the Republican end of the scale than were attitudes of participants in the control condition ($M = 2.65$), $t(64) = -2.04$, $p < .05$. This finding suggests that the American flag introduced a shift toward the Republican worldview, even during a Democratic administration. Again, the effect was not moderated by political ideology or any other measured variable, which suggests that the flag produced the same conservative shift for both liberal and conservative participants.

General Discussion

Although the American flag is assumed to represent the entire country, our findings suggest that the psychological processes put in motion by flag priming yield increased support for the beliefs of a particular political party. Subtle exposure to the American flag significantly shifted both Democratic and Republican participants' beliefs, attitudes, and voting behavior toward Republicanism.

These findings provide the first empirical evidence that a national flag can push citizens toward a specific end of the ideological spectrum, rather than having the unifying effect documented extensively in the social sciences literature (Baker & O'Neal, 2001; Hassin et al., 2007; Mueller, 1970). Why did a national flag have an ideologically specific effect (i.e., creating a bias toward Republicanism) in our study, even though previous research has shown a unifying effect? As we noted in the introduction, the American flag seems to be perceived (at least in our samples) as more closely linked with the Republican than with the Democratic Party, and this "flag branding" may be especially influential in a two-party system in which there are typically only two viable voting choices. In other words, the American flag conjures up Republican beliefs and attitudes, and these primes collectively push people in the Republican direction. By contrast, if any flag branding of a particular party or viewpoint exists in a political system that allows for multiple parties and viewpoints, such branding may be relatively diluted and thus less influential.

It is possible that the American flag does indeed have a unifying influence that can manifest itself as increased Republicanism. In other words, the flag might trigger concepts of unity or political moderation that move people toward the center of the ideological spectrum, but because the samples in our studies were relatively Democratic and liberal, their movement toward the center was a move toward Republicanism. The effects of the American flag observed in our experiments are therefore consistent with the flag either having a unifying effect or inducing a movement toward conservative beliefs and attitudes. If the former explanation is correct, exposing a highly conservative sample to an American flag prime would lead to a shift toward the Democratic end of the spectrum. If the latter explanation is correct, participants already located at the Republican end of the ideological spectrum would show little movement toward the center if exposed to an American flag prime.

The mechanism may be more nuanced than either of these possibilities, however. As we have argued elsewhere (Hassin et al., 2009), national flags may be strongly associated specifically with prototypes of national citizens and may influence people by shifting their attitudes toward those of the (imaginary) prototypical citizen. The direction of the shift for a given sample of people would depend on whether those people believe the prototypical citizen is more liberal or more conservative than they are themselves. In a way, this would be a unifying effect, because the flag would move people toward what they perceive to be the typical or average citizen. And yet, as long as people believe that the typical American is more conservative than they are, this "unifying" effect would result in a shift toward Republicanism. We do have some evidence that our participants generally believed that the prototypical American is more conservative than they are themselves. At the end of Session 4, we asked participants in Experiment 1 about their views of the "typical American." Although participants generally anchored on their own beliefs in estimating those of the

typical American, they felt that the typical American would feel more warmly toward Republican politicians than they did themselves, paired $t(68) = 2.34$, $p < .03$, and that the typical American would give more Republican answers to the specific policy questions than they had themselves, paired $t(68) = 7.07$, $p < .001$. Future research can test more directly how people's beliefs about the prototypical citizen predict the effect of flag priming on political thought and behavior (see Hassin et al., 2009, for a more detailed discussion).

Our results also demonstrate that a single exposure to a national flag can have wide-ranging effects. Why did a single, brief exposure to the American flag in Experiment 1 have such an enduring impact? Indeed, considering how often Americans are exposed to their flag, why would this one exposure have any impact at all? In contrast with the vast majority of instances in which people are exposed to the American flag, this particular exposure occurred when participants were reporting their voting intentions, an act that has been shown to strongly predict and shape voting behavior (Greenwald, Carnot, Beach, & Young, 1987). For some participants, explicitly declaring voting intentions may have been a rare event that further crystallized their stated intentions and attitudes, incorporating any bias introduced by the presence of the flag at that critical moment. Indeed, when we controlled for participants' voting intentions at Session 2, the effect of the flag exposure on voting behavior dropped to nonsignificance (see also Hassin et al., 2007). Thus, exposure to the American flag may have an especially strong influence when it occurs immediately before or during a person's consideration of political issues or declaration of political decisions (e.g., in the voting booth).

It is also important to note that exposure to the American flag can have a range of short-term effects that are not dependent on conscious declarations, and are not even overtly political (Carter, Ferguson, & Hassin, 2011; Ferguson & Hassin, 2007). For example, Ferguson and Hassin (2007) found that brief exposure to the American flag increased aggressive thoughts and behavior, specifically among people who followed news about politics.

Our data suggest that American people are not aware of this effect: Participants in our pilot study erroneously believed that exposure to the American flag would not influence their political behavior or attitudes. This mistaken belief is in line with the standard claim in psychology and political science that important political behavior results from careful and rational deliberation (Baum & Jamison, 2006; Downs, 1959; Lau & Redlawsk, 1997). Thus, our findings challenge laypeople's assumptions as well as the standard claim in the literature, and extend recent research showing that subtle cues in the environment—from polling locations (Berger et al., 2008), to the facial characteristics of political candidates (Greenwald, Smith, Sriram, Bar-Anan, & Nosek, 2009; Rule et al., 2010; Todorov et al., 2005), to the presence of national flags (Hassin et al., 2007)—can significantly influence how people vote.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information may be found at http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data

Note

1. In Session 4, participants responded to an additional item about extreme interrogation techniques that was not included in previous sessions. Including this measure in the composite measure did not change the results.

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