

From Categories to Context: Identity Meaning and Political Engagement*

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Objectives. The objective of this article is to set forth and test the identity meaning theory. Borne out of extant theories in sociology and social psychology, this theory posits that all individuals have a salient identity that is hierarchically superior, that individuals attach a subjective meaning to their salient identity that varies in an interpersonal-intergroup matrix, and that the subjective meaning of the salient identity ultimately guides behavior, in this context specifically political engagement. *Methods.* I operationalize the identity meaning concepts in a public opinion survey and test the reliability and validity of these new measures on a matched representative sample of 400 Americans. I then test whether these concepts predict individual political engagement. *Results.* I find strong support for the identity meaning theory as a predictive measure of political engagement. The meaning individuals attach to their salient identity has a significant impact on affective and behavioral political engagement. *Conclusions.* While a shared categorical identity (e.g., race or gender) impacts political behavior, this research shows that a shared meaning of a salient identity—regardless of what the salient identity is—can also have an impact on political behavior, even if the categorical identities are different. Thus, there is room for a new understanding and conceptualization of identity in political science.

The concept of identity is ubiquitous across broad swaths of literature in political science. Political scientists have long recognized that a variety of different identities and group identifications have political manifestations. For example, political science literature on race, gender, and religion places central importance on these categorical identities, and voting behavior scholarship has examined a myriad of demographic characteristics and primary and secondary group associations to determine the impact of these identities on partisanship, ideology, policy preferences, voting behavior, and political participation. Yet, despite the underpinnings of identity in these bodies of literature, there is no conceptual agreement on *what identity is and how it operates* to impact individual political behavior.

Borne out of extant theories in sociology and social psychology, this research offers the “identity meaning theory,” which suggests that all individuals have a salient identity that is hierarchically superior to all others, that individuals attach a subjective meaning to their salient identity that varies in an interpersonal-intergroup matrix, and that the subjective meaning of the salient identity ultimately serves as a schema that guides behavior.

In order to test these propositions, a unique survey is designed that operationalizes the identity meaning concepts. I test the reliability and validity of these new measures on a matched representative sample of 400 Americans. Finally, I estimate the impact of the

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identity meaning theory on political engagement. I find strong support for the identity meaning theory. Specifically, the identities that are traditionally studied in political science literature, such as race and gender, are not those that respondents report as being most important to them, but the meaning they attach to their salient identity does have a significant impact on political behavior. The results reveal that there is room for a new understanding and conceptualization of identity in political science.

The Limits of a Categorical Understanding of Identity

Identity, as understood in the identity literature in political science, can range from demographic characteristics fixed from birth (e.g., Hispanic, female, American) to self-selected identities that can be modified over time (e.g., Catholic, transcendentalist, Texan). As a general rule, they are categorical identities, in that scholars can easily categorize individuals into groups based on the fact that they possess a certain characteristic. The underlying assumption is that populations sharing some demographic characteristic should exhibit commonalities in their political behavior.

Studies on race and gender, respectively, have consistently shown that, for example, African Americans and women do exhibit generalizable patterns in level and type of political engagement; however, when contradictory results arise, these deviations from the norm are difficult to explain in the absence of a conceptual understanding of identity meaning. I will discuss examples of how this manifests.

Many studies investigating political engagement of African Americans focus on the role of descriptive representation. Scholarship investigating this over the course of the last few decades suggests that the presence of visible black political leadership increases the trust, efficacy, and political participation of African Americans (Banducci, Donovan, and Karp, 2004; Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Gilliam and Kaufman, 1998; Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson, 1989; Howell and Fagan, 1988; Tate, 1991; Vanderleeuw and Utter, 1993; Whitby, 2007). However, other scholarship presents contradictory results that the election of African Americans to Congress does *not* increase voter turnout among black citizens (Amy, 1993; Gay, 2001; Guinier, 1994). What accounts for the difference in results? One study provides an empirical explanation, arguing that black candidates for political office mobilize liberal African Americans to vote, but stifle conservative African-American votes (Griffin and Keane, 2006). At a minimum, this explanation suggests that there is in-group heterogeneity among African Americans.

Similar issues emerge in the literature on gender and political engagement. Empirical evidence has found that there are strong patterns of political behavior and interest among the categorical group of women. For instance, women have less political interest overall than men (Jennings and Niemi, 1981), are less knowledgeable about politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996), and these interest gaps remain after controlling for a variety of factors, including socialization, resources, and education (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba, 2001). Yet, there is no clear answer as to whether female descriptive representation changes these patterns of political knowledge and interest for women. Some have found that women's interest in and knowledge about politics increases with descriptive representation (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba, 2001:383; Campbell and Wolbrecht, 2006), while others have found null results for the impact of descriptive representation on the political engagement of women (Karp and Banducci, 2008; Lawless, 2004). This suggests that the impact of descriptive representation on women's political behavior may not be constant for all women—just as it is not the constant for all African Americans—and the reason may lie in in-group heterogeneity among women. Indeed, some gender scholars have pointed

out the problem with broadly categorizing women as a monolith. Carroll and Liebowitz (2003:5–6) state: “As empirical scholars we should be ever mindful that members of the category ‘women’ vary in the way in which, and the extent to which, they possess whatever characteristics or experiences are assumed to constitute commonality. Much variation and diversity exist within this category; it is hardly fixed.”

The identity meaning theory argues that the study of categorical identities may limit our understanding of how identity impacts political behavior. In particular, in-group heterogeneity may be explained, in part, by examining the relative weight and subjective meaning African Americans and women, respectively, place on these racial and gendered categorical identities. In other words, in-group heterogeneity—and by extension, contradictory findings in the literature—is rather confounding when an identity group is categorized. Shifting the unit of analysis from categorical identity (e.g., race or gender) to identity meaning may help explain heterogeneity within categorical identities.

Identity Meaning Theory

Identity meaning theory posits that political engagement may not be a function of specific categorical identities, but rather of the *meaning individuals ascribe to the one identity that they self-determine is hierarchically superior relative to all their other identities*. The conceptual definition of identity derived here is drawn from sociological and social psychological theories of identity. A prominent sociological theory of identity is identity salience theory (Stryker, 1968). Based on the work of James (1890)—who argued that each individual is composed of multiple “selves” that vary in degree of importance, and the partial selves that explain the largest share of the aggregate self are most salient—Stryker posits that human identities are hierarchically ordered, and those of highest ranking are the most salient.

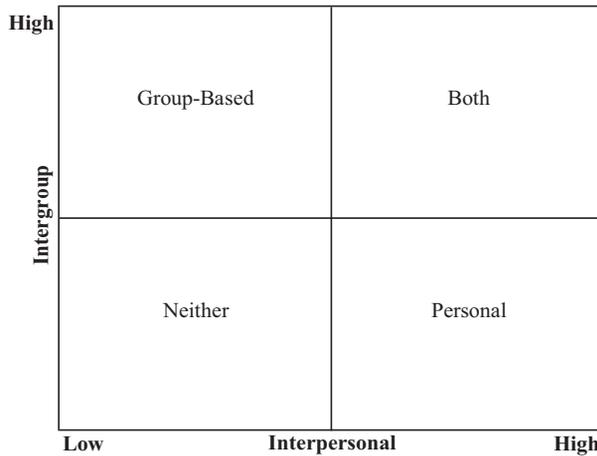
One of Stryker’s criteria for determining which identities are hierarchically superior is based on whether the identity is invoked in diverse settings and situations. This is similar to the concept set forth by Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje (2002:166) that there exists a hierarchy of identities that are subjectively defined by individuals, and those identities that are “chronically salient” are ranked higher in the hierarchy.¹ This concept has resonated with other social psychologists as well. DeBoeck and Rosenberg (1988) developed a hierarchical identity classification in recognition that the same identity can have different levels of importance for different people. Combined, this line of research motivates the first identity meaning proposition:

Proposition 1 (Salient Identity): *Every individual has a salient identity that is hierarchically superior relative to all other identities.*

In addition to merely possessing a salient identity, individuals ascribe certain meaning to their identities. The meaning of an identity is based on the subjective experiences of the individual, and since people have different experiences with different identities through space and time, the meaning attached to an identity will differ from individual to individual (Deaux and Ethier, 1998; DeBoeck and Rosenberg, 1988; Ethier and Deaux, 1990, 1994; Reid and Deaux, 1996).

¹The common understanding of identity salience in social psychology is based on how it is defined in social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), both of which understand identity salience to mean that an identity can *become* salient when invoked in different contexts or situations. Other social psychologists have built on this notion and have argued that an identity can be “chronically salient” across all situations or contexts. I argue that it is these “chronically salient” identities that are the most important identities to people.

FIGURE 1
Interpersonal-Intergroup Matrix



Turner (1999) argues that identities may be located anywhere along the “interpersonal-intergroup continuum” based on an individual’s level of subjective group attachment.² Social psychologists generally agree that there is an important distinction between group identification and group membership. While the former is based on subjectively held feelings, the latter is simply being oneself a member of a group based solely on possessing a particular categorical identity (e.g., race or gender), but not necessarily feeling an internal attachment to these groups (Huddy, 2003:513–14). Thus, it is not the specific identity itself that is of primary importance, but rather the relative importance of that identity vis-à-vis all other identities, and the subjective meaning, ranging from group based to personal, ascribed to the identity.

While the “interpersonal-intergroup continuum” allows for individuals to attach a subjective meaning that is either mostly personal, mostly group based, or equally both, there is no space on the one-dimensional continuum for individuals whose salient identity is neither group based nor personal. If individuals can subjectively define the meaning they associate with their salient identity, then any meaning is possible, even one outside the continuum. Thus, while I adopt the notion that identities are subjectively defined and may range from interpersonal to intergroup, I depart slightly by suggesting that a two-dimensional interpersonal-intergroup matrix is the more appropriate classification system. This leads to the second identity proposition, visually represented in Figure 1.

Proposition 2 (Subjective Meaning): *Each individual ascribes a subjective meaning to his/her salient identity, which may be located anywhere within the interpersonal-intergroup matrix so that it is either group based, personal, both, or neither.*

The final question is how this salient identity, and its subjective meaning, operates to guide political behavior. Research has shown that the relative strength of a particular

²Turner states specifically: “Where social identity becomes relatively more salient than personal identity, people see themselves less as differing individual persons and more as the similar, prototypical representatives of their in-group category” (Turner, 1999:11).

identity produces different behavioral outcomes (Doosje, Ellemers, and Spears, 1995; Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje, 1997; Spears, Doosje, and Ellemers, 1997). An identity of greater relative importance will impact individual behavior to a greater degree than identities of lesser value. Thus, salient identities should impact behavior more than any other identity an individual possesses. Moreover, differences in behavior arise as a result of whether an identity is group based or personal (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). A group based subjective meaning will manifest behavior and beliefs prototypical of the group, whereas the more personal the subjective meaning of a salient identity, the less the individual is likely to exhibit behavior prototypical of others who share that categorical identity.

Schema theory sheds light on exactly how the process of moving from a salient identity and its subjective meaning to behavioral outputs operates. Schema theory suggests that the salient identity and its associated meaning serve as a schema, and this identity schema guides cognition about the self, and is thereby used to accept, reject, and filter information (Markus and Nurius, 1987). Once the information is filtered through the identity schema, behavioral decisions are made that comport with the notions of the self as defined by the schema. In this manner, the salient identity schema and behaviors guided by it must be consistent with each other, as well as with other identities and behaviors. This leads to the final identity proposition.

Proposition 3 (Behavior): *Salient identities and their associated meanings guide behavioral outputs.*

Methodology

In order to test the identity propositions, these concepts have been operationalized and fielded in a unique survey instrument that was fielded to a representative sample of 400 Americans. Next, I articulate how the concepts are operationalized.

Operationalizing Salient Identity

Although not completely new, many of the ideas derived in the identity meaning theory require thoughtful operationalization. First among these is the salient identity. The survey begins with a simple multiple-choice question regarding the respondent's salient identity. The specific question is: "Everyone has many personal and social identities. If you had to choose only *one* identity that is *more important to you than any other identity*, which of the following would you choose? (*Please make your selection thoughtfully—your response to this question significantly impacts your responses to the rest of the survey.* Choose only *one* identity; if none of these fit, feel free to write in.)" While the question text is unique to this survey, all of the response choices—with the exception of three—were derived from the 2004 General Social Survey (GSS) question SOCID1. I added to the GSS list intellectual/philosophical identity, hobby, and sexual orientation. Thus, the response options included 14 possible identities, with the option to write in if a salient identity was not listed.³

³The 14 identity options were current occupation/profession/job, intellectual/philosophical identity, region/city/state/neighborhood, hobby (e.g., music, dance, fishing, etc.), age group, religion/faith/denomination/spirituality, nationality, family/marital identity (e.g., parent, spouse, etc.), social class, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation/sexuality, and other.

There are two main benefits to approaching identity this way.⁴ First, it allows individuals to self-determine. While the identity literature indicates a strong relationship between specific categorical identities and political behavior, it falls short in providing a contextualized understanding of individuals in these identity groups. The assumption on which this literature is based is that all African Americans or all women should exhibit similar political behavior simply because they are a member of this demographic. In contrast, Proposition 1 states that individuals attach differential importance to their identities, meaning that some African Americans and some women may not place primary importance on their race or gender, respectively. It thereby removes the assumption and allows individuals to self-select the identity that is most important to them. This leads to the second benefit, which is that it expands the identity literature to include a much broader catalog of identities. The literature on race, gender, and religion has made tremendous headway in explaining the key role of identity in political behavior; however, there are a variety of other identities that this literature has overlooked, but that may also uniquely impact political behavior. An open-ended, self-deterministic approach to identity not only elucidates other consequential identities, but also is foundational to developing a more comprehensive—rather than compartmentalized—theory of identity and politics.

Operationalizing Subjective Meaning of Salient Identity

The next task of the survey is to operationalize the subjective meanings as being group based, personal, both, or neither. There is vast and varied literature across a number of disciplines on group based identity and behavior, and these theories are often accompanied by scales that measure aspects of group based identity. Many scales have been designed to gauge overall individualistic versus collectivistic values (Hui and Triandis, 1986; Triandis et al., 1988; Triandis, McCusker, and Hui, 1990). There are a number of other scales that measure the extent to which an individual identifies with a specific group, including social identity scales (Bond and Hewstone, 1988; Brown et al., 1986; Hinkle et al., 1989) and group attitude scales (Evans and Jarvis, 1986; Karasawa, 1991; Stokes, 1983). I replicated

⁴On the other hand, this approach is not without its limitations. First is the issue of identity intersectionality. What if an individual's most salient identity is being an African-American female (race and gender), an Asian American (ethnicity and nationality), or a low-income senior citizen (social class and age group)? To best overcome this problem, I allowed individuals to write in an identity if their specific identity was not listed. There were a few instances where respondents took advantage of the write-in option to express an intersectional salient identity. One respondent wrote that her salient identity is a "single parent" and another chose "race" as his most salient identity, but then wrote in "Irish black." Thus, respondents who genuinely felt they could not classify their salient identity as falling squarely in one of the multiple-choice options were provided an outlet to more accurately classify themselves, and some respondents utilized this option for different combinations of identities. A second concern is that a multiple-choice response list can cue identities that might not otherwise be considered salient, but are selected because it is an available option. There are at least two responses to this problem. First, if the list cued an identity a respondent may not have immediately chosen, and if the respondent then chose that identity, then the list did its job in terms of offering comprehensive groupings of identity categories. Second, in the survey instrument, the identity salience question was followed up with a battery of questions that help verify that the identity the respondents chose is, indeed, their most salient identity (as defined by the identity propositions). A final issue relates to the possibility of a primacy or response order effect given the specific order of the identity list provided (Groves et al., 2004:144, 158). Specifically, the order of the response options may lead to a bias in the results whereby respondents choose the earliest, most convenient answer as a means of satisficing. The solution here was to randomize the response options such that none of the answer options occurred first or last for every respondent. The randomization appears to have worked well to minimize this problem. A minimum of three individuals chose all 14 answer options, and the answer choices are normally distributed across all 14 identities, which would be expected to be the case. In other words, some identities (e.g., religion) are expected to be most important to a larger number of individuals, while others (e.g., region) are expected to be less important.

a partial scale from Brown et al. (1986).⁵ It was the scale that most closely measured the group based salient identity concept and that required no modifications or revisions. The five questions comprising this scale contain Likert scale response choices ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Prior to reading these questions, respondents had specific instructions that stated: "Think again about your most important identity and the larger group of people that share this identity. (Write in the identity again:____.) In the next set of questions, the phrase "___ group" refers to the *larger group that shares your most important identity.*" These instructions not only forced respondents to recall their most salient identity as recorded in the first question of the survey, but also defined the term "group" in a clear manner.

In addition to whether an individual's salient identity is group based, it is also necessary to separately test the extent to which an individual's salient identity is personal. This requires a separate scale, as the absence of group based meaning is not synonymous with personal meaning. Unlike the plethora of group based scales that exist, there is a dearth of scales designed to measure the personal aspects of an identity. Thus, I constructed a scale for this purpose, with answer choices on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). As with the group based identity instructions, the instructions on the survey associated with the personally-based identity questions forced respondents to recall their most salient identity, write it in the blank, and think about it when answering the questions.

Dependent Variables

In order to determine whether the meaning of the salient identity impacts political behavior and attitudes, I model the impact of identity meaning on two different dependent variables. The first is "affective political engagement," defined as an individual's *psychological attachment to a political party*. Classic voting behavior scholars defined party identification itself as an "affective attachment to an important group object in the environment" (Campbell et al., 1960:143). More recently, much has been made of party identification as being itself a social identity to which individuals strongly adhere. Greene (1999) argues that social identity theory applied to party identification helps explain the "bipolar" nature of individuals wherein they love their own party and demonize the opposing party. The implication of this is that party identification becomes its own social identity. In seeking to explain micro- and macropartisan stability among the electorate, Green, Palmquist, and Schickler (2002:21) find that "[t]he evidence suggests that partisan affiliation is best understood as a form of social identity and that partisan stability is traceable to constancy in citizens' primary group environment and their mental images of partisan groups, which in turn reflects stability in the structure of party competition within the electoral system." They compare the social identity of partisanship with those of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and religion (204).

In light of this research, party identification may be more aptly operationalized in an increasingly nuanced manner, as opposed to simple placement on a seven-point scale ranging from strong Democrat to strong Republican. Greene (2002) argues that the typical NES measure of party identification conflates the group identification aspect with the attitudinal aspect of party identification. He therefore recommends different measurement approaches based in social psychology, which more suitably capture the group identification aspects of party identification. One such measurement is the Identification with Psychological Group

⁵See online appendix for all survey questions.

(IDPG) Scale (Mael and Tetrick, 1992). Greene (1999) used this full 10-item scale, relating it to party identification, and found the scale to be valid and reliable and to contribute explanatory power beyond the NES measure of partisanship in explaining party feeling thermometers, ideology, and party voting. Weisberg and Hasecke (1999) used a truncated version of this scale (four questions rather than 10) and find that it significantly predicts voting behavior, candidate assessment, and presidential approval. I have adopted the four-question IDPG scale used by Weisberg and Hasecke (1999) to measure affective political engagement. The answer choices to these IDPG questions vary along a seven-point Likert scale. I averaged the answers across all four questions and then divided by seven in order to normalize the variable as continuous between 0 and 1.

The second dependent variable is “behavioral political engagement,” defined as an individual’s level of political participation. Although there are a variety of ways individuals can choose to participate politically, I operationalized political participation using questions replicated from Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001:65). The questions are inclusive of a variety of different types of political participation. In particular, they ask not only about voting behavior, but also about other forms of civic engagement, such as volunteer work, monetary contributions to political campaigns, and attending protests.

The answer choices for the behavioral political engagement questions are either “yes” or “no.” If respondents participated in a particular political activity, they were coded 1; if they did not participate, then they were assigned a value of 0. The scores of all eight of the behavioral political engagement questions were averaged, and then divided by eight in order to normalize the variable between 0 and 1. Thus, this variable is continuous.⁶

Sample Population

I tested the validity and reliability of the new measures, as well as the impact of identity meaning on political behavior on a matched representative sample of 400 Americans, obtained by contracting with YouGovPolimetrix in December 2009. YouGovPolimetrix employs sample matching as a method to attain representative samples using nonrandomly selected pools of respondents. For general population studies, they use recent high-quality surveys (such as the American Community Survey) to determine the target population. The sample matching process then entails two steps. First, a random sample is drawn from the target population to create the target sample (the target sample has the same number of individuals as the number of interviews in the study). Second, for each member of the target sample, they select one or more matching members from their pool of opt-in respondents to interview. This is called the matched sample.⁷

Findings

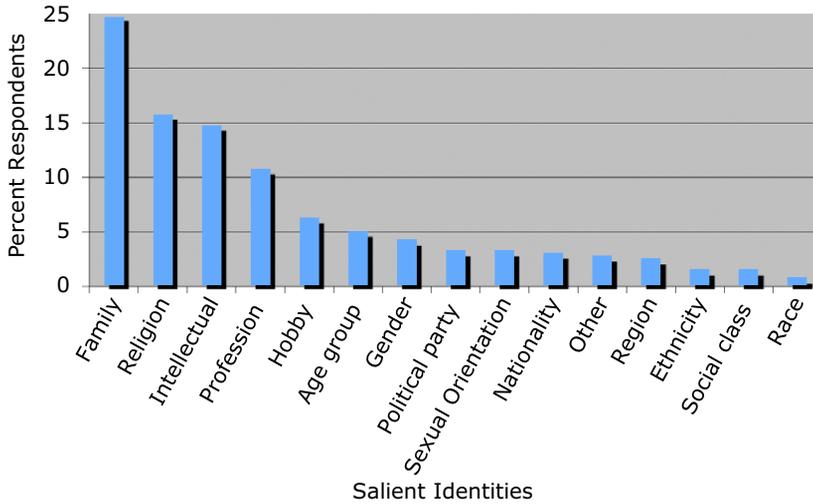
First, the responses to the salient identity question can be found in Figure 2. Family/marital status is the number one identity among the survey respondents, followed by

⁶The types of participation that were most popular among respondents were voting and contacting a government official. The least popular were serving on a local governing board and working on a political campaign, but attending a protest and being affiliated with a political organization were also not very common forms of participation.

⁷Although there has been some criticism of opt-in survey methods (e.g., Yeager, Krosnick, and Javitz, 2009), data obtained from YouGovPolimetrix have been used by serious scholars and published in a variety of reputable journals (e.g., Berinsky, 2007; Jerit, 2009; Jessee, 2009). A defense of the sample matching method for opt-in surveys is provided by Rivers (2007).

FIGURE 2

Distribution of Salient Identities in Matched Representative Sample



religion and intellectual/philosophical identity.⁸ What is surprising is that identities that have been considered highly salient in vast bodies of political science literature, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and political party, appear less important to individuals in this sample. For instance, only three individuals selected “race” as their most important identity, while only six chose “ethnicity.”

As a point of comparison, the overall frequencies of salient identities reported in the matched representative sample were similar to those from the 2004 GSS sample. The top three identities in the GSS sample are family/marital status (51 percent), current occupation (15 percent), and religion (10.4 percent). Thus, two of the three are the same (though with different frequencies). Given that the GSS response choices did not include “intellectual/philosophical” identity, there is no point of comparison for that variable. Moreover, where my survey instrument specified the choice “religion/faith/denomination/spirituality,” the GSS simply stated “religion.” The broader definition of religion in my survey may have appealed to a broader cross-section of the population, thereby leading to higher frequencies. And where “current occupation” was second in the GSS sample, “current occupation/profession/job” was still very important in my sample, ranking fourth directly behind “intellectual/philosophical” identity. Overall, the results are consistent with the GSS sample, increasing the reliability of this question. The implications of these results are that, when people are asked what their most important identity is, notably absent are the categorical identities that political scientists tend to study.

Next is the test of the interpersonal-intergroup matrix. Although the group based salient identity questions are replicated from prior research, they have never been applied specifically to groups that represent the salient identity. The results of the factor analysis show that

⁸The answer choice for “intellectual/philosophical” identity could mean any number of things. For some people, it may take on a sort of religious meaning, such as a secular humanist. For others, it may intersect with a political or economic identity, such as a socialist, libertarian, capitalist, or objectivist. For others, it might revolve around such things as Darwinism or environmentalist. Although beyond the scope of this study, future research could more precisely define “intellectual/philosophical” identity and explore its specific impact on political engagement.

all of questions are tapping into the same underlying concept, and the scale is valid. The five-item scale is also highly reliable with Cronbach's alpha of 0.88.⁹ Therefore, I created an index value for group based salient identity by summing the answers to the five-item scale and dividing by five to generate a continuous variable ranging from 0 (salient identity has no group based meaning) to 5 (salient identity has a strong group based meaning), then I divided again by five to normalize the variable between 0 and 1.¹⁰ The mean of the group based salient identity variable is 0.78, meaning that over three-quarters of the sample has an attachment to the salient identity based on a subjective attachment to the group. This provides a baseline by which to understand the group based meaning associated with a salient identity. All the respondents above the mean are then placed in the "high intergroup" quadrants, while the respondents below the mean comprise the "low intergroup" quadrants.

The personal-based salient identity questions were also examined for validity and reliability. All six of the personal-based salient identity questions loaded highly on the same factor, and Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.88. Thus, this is both a valid and reliable index for examining the extent to which a salient identity holds very personal meaning. This is particularly important because there has never been a measure of the extent to which an identity holds intimate, personal meaning. Identity measures have historically examined the extent to which individuals identify with the group or collective. The results show that this is an important contribution because most people report that their salient identity carries very personal meaning. In order to test this, I generate an index by adding the scores to the six questions, then dividing by six to generate a continuous variable that ranges from 0 (salient identity has no personal meaning) to 7 (salient identity has very personal meaning). I then divide by seven in order to normalize this variable between 0 and 1, putting it on the same scale as the group based variable. The mean of the personal-based salient identity variable in the matched representative sample is 0.79, meaning that almost 80 percent of the sample has an attachment to the salient identity based on a subjective meaning that is very intimate and personal. As with the group based salient identity variable, I place respondents above the mean in the "high interpersonal" quadrants, and those below the mean in the "low interpersonal" quadrants.

The results reveal that the plurality of respondents has a salient identity that they define as both group based and personal. Specifically, 46 percent of the sample is in the quadrant for high interpersonal and high intergroup. Interestingly, another 32 percent of the sample has a salient identity that is neither interpersonal nor intergroup. For 13 percent of the sample, the salient identity has high group based meaning, but low personal meaning. Finally, the remaining 10 percent of the sample has high personal meaning but low group-based meaning associated with their salient identity. Regardless of what the specific salient identity is, people attach very different meaning to these identities.

However, the question is whether identity meaning impacts political behavior and attitudes. In order to answer this question, I conduct two different regression analyses to discern the extent to which identity meaning significantly impacts affective and behavioral political engagement. The results of the regression analyses are presented in Table 1. In these models, I also control for a variety of categorical identity variables that research has shown impact affective and behavioral political engagement, including age, income, education, gender, race, and party identification.

⁹Generally speaking, Cronbach's alpha (which tests the internal consistency of a scale) should be at least 0.70 in social science research to be deemed acceptable.

¹⁰I use a five-point Likert scale for this measure because that is the scale used in the previous studies from which the scale is partially replicated.

TABLE 1

Impact of Identity Meaning on Affective and Behavioral Political Engagement

	Affective Political Engagement	Behavioral Political Engagement
Group salient identity meaning	0.07** (0.03)	0.14*** (0.06)
Personal salient identity meaning	0.11*** (0.04)	0.12** (0.07)
Group × Personal	-0.08* (0.05)	-0.15* (0.09)
Age	0.11** (0.06)	0.57*** (0.10)
Income	0.04 (0.04)	0.17*** (0.07)
Education	-0.06 (0.04)	0.45*** (0.08)
Ideology	-0.01 (0.06)	0.05 (0.11)
Female	-0.00 (0.02)	-0.07** (0.04)
White	-0.05** (0.02)	-0.02 (0.04)
Party identification	-0.01 (0.04)	-0.05 (0.07)
Constant	0.46*** (0.05)	2.29*** (0.09)
<i>N</i>	400	400
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.06	0.21

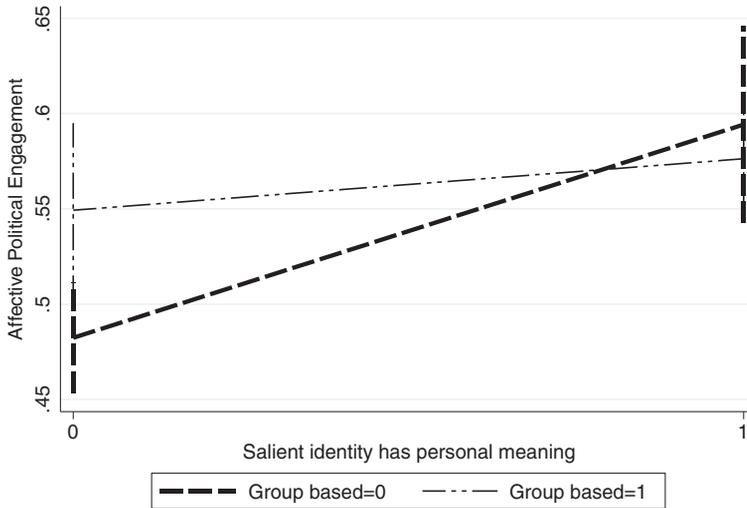
NOTE: Results of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Dependent variable in both models is continuous between 0 and 1. Coefficients reported: standard errors in parentheses. ****p* ≤ 0.01; ***p* ≤ 0.05; **p* ≤ 0.10.

The first thing to note is that all the identity meaning variables, both group based and personal, are significant in both models. This is true even after controlling for the various categorical identities that generally predict political engagement. In fact, the impact of the identity meaning variables is statistically greater than most of the categorical identity variables when predicting affective attachment to a political party. Also, the identity meaning variables are as significant in the behavioral political engagement model, even though many of the other common predictors of political engagement—including age, income, education, and gender—are also highly significant. Thus, the takeaway is that identity meaning does have a significant impact on political attitudes and behavior, *regardless of what the specific categorical identity is*. Whether the meaning of one’s salient identity is highly group based, highly personal, both, or neither has a significant impact on one’s political attitudes and behavior.

More specifically, when the salient identity is group based (vs. not group based), the impact of identity meaning on affective and behavioral political engagement is positive and statistically significant as evidenced by the coefficients on the group based variables in both models. The results of the personal meaning variable reflect something similar. Specifically, when a salient identity has personal meaning (vs. when it does not have personal meaning), the effect of the identity meaning on affective and behavioral political engagement is statistically significant and positive. These results are very important because they support the notion that the group based or personal *meaning* of one’s salient

FIGURE 3

Conditional Effect of Personal-Based Meaning on Affective Political Engagement Given group based Meaning



NOTE: Ninety percent confidence interval reported.

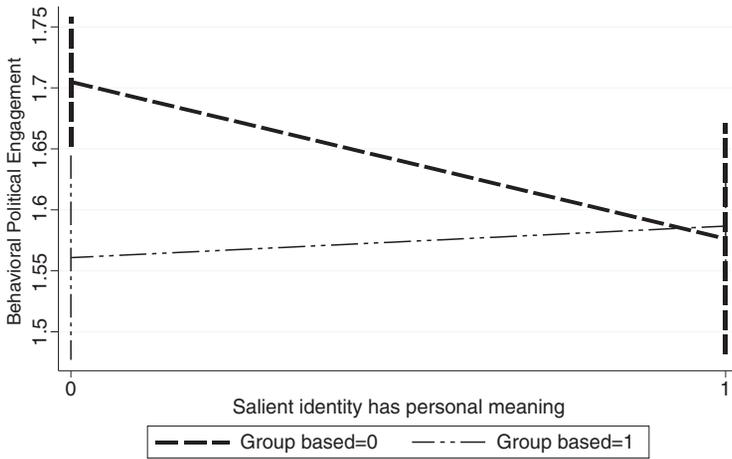
identity significantly impacts political engagement, regardless of what that specific salient identity is.

The findings are more nuanced when we examine the interaction of group based and personal identity meaning. The coefficient on the interaction terms in both models is negative and statistically significant ($p < 0.10$). When this result is coupled with the results from the coefficients on the unconditional identity meaning variables, it becomes clear that the impact of identity meaning on affective and behavioral political engagement depends on which intergroup-interpersonal matrix quadrant the identity meaning lies. The impact of the salient identity on political outcomes varies based on the meaning one attaches to the identity: whether it is personal, group based, both, or neither. It is critical to note that identity meaning theory is silent regarding directionality of the political outcomes; rather, the theory posits that there are different effects given different identity meanings.

Figures 3 and 4 depict the conditional effects given different quadrants of identity meaning. They both reveal that the effect of a group based salient identity on affective and behavioral political engagement does not change significantly given whether the salient identity also holds personal meaning. The linear predictions for group based identity are relatively flat lines in both graphs, and the 90 percent confidence intervals show that there is no statistically significant difference. However, for those who do *not* have a salient identity that holds group based meaning, whether the salient identity has personal meaning matters significantly for affective and behavioral political engagement. When group based meaning equals zero, a personally-based salient identity leads to significantly *more* psychological attachment to a political party than not having a personally-based salient identity, but a personally-based salient identity leads to significantly *less* political participation than not having a personally-based salient identity. In other words, not only do different salient identity meanings translate into different political engagement outcomes, but also the

FIGURE 4

Conditional Effect of Personal-Based Meaning on Behavioral Political Engagement Given group based Meaning



NOTE: Ninety percent confidence interval reported.

same meaning can lead to different political outcomes, depending on the type of political engagement.

Discussion

This article sets forth the identity meaning theory for understanding political engagement. The identity meaning theory is based on a conceptualization of identity that goes beyond demographic categories, and peers more deeply into human self-definitions. It posits that all individuals have a salient identity that is more important to them than any other identity. This salient identity carries meaning to the individual that is either highly group based, highly personal, both, or neither. And the meaning associated with this salient identity can help us understand and predict political engagement, including things as diverse as psychological attachment to a political party and level of political participation.

There are several key findings. First, when individuals are asked to define for themselves who they are and what identity is important to them, the identities that are most important to most people are not those that are heavily studied in political science (e.g., family, intellectual/philosophical identity, and profession). The categorical identities that are studied perhaps the most in political science are not reported as being the most important to people. Studying categorical identity groups in the absence of examining the relative importance of that identity for the individual may continue to lead to contradictory and confounding results that will be increasingly difficult to explain under a simple categorical conception of identity. Identity meaning theory breaks people out of these categorical boxes and examines the impact of identity on political behavior in a more nuanced and subjective manner.

A second key finding is that salient identities carry different meanings for different people, and that the subjective meaning does impact political attitudes and behavior.

Different salient identity meanings translate into different political engagement outcomes, *and* the same salient identity meaning can lead to different political outcomes, depending on what the type of political engagement is. This is very significant. While a shared categorical identity (e.g., race or gender) can have an impact on political behavior, this research shows that a shared meaning of a salient identity (group based, personal, both, or neither)—regardless of what the salient identity is—can also have an impact on political behavior, even if the categorical identities are different. In other words, someone's salient identity could be family and another person's could be religion, but they may both feel strongly about the group based and personal aspects of these different salient identities. On the basis of the shared meaning, they may exhibit similar political behavior, regardless of whether they have any categorical identities in common, and despite the fact that the salient identities differ.

The results suggest that there is room to reconceptualize identity, and perhaps rethink simple categorical segmentation. The identity meaning theory may help us better understand heterogeneity within categorical identity groups. Yet, there are other questions that identity meaning theory raises that future research can help address. What predicts the meaning that individuals ascribe to a salient identity? Are their commonalities in meaning based on what the salient identity is? Or is the meaning of a salient identity a function of individual personality, where some people are more or less enthusiastic in general? Thus, exploring the mechanisms of identity meaning is a ripe avenue for future research. While many questions remain, identity meaning theory is among the first attempts to clearly define identity and provide an overarching framework for how identity operates—outside the context of categories—to impact political engagement. By advancing a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of identity, the identity meaning theory seeks to view individuals the way they view themselves.

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