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What is American? Ideology and Cognition in American Politics

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Abstract Three hypotheses were investigated to determine whether perception of prototypical American and non-American values varied depending upon political ideology and whether the values were presented as brief images or word descriptors. Respondents were shown 40 images one at a time for 10 seconds each. Half of these images were in pictorial form and the remaining images were the corresponding textual representation. An analysis of results revealed general agreement in perception based upon political ideology and presentation form of stimuli. However, the context in which images appeared affected the ratings of respondents to some degree. Interpretations of these findings are discussed.

Keywords Political Psychology, Political Ideology, Perception, Cognition; Prototypes

1. Introduction

What is American? This seemingly benign question may invoke images of apple pie and baseball to the Statue of Liberty and "The Great Melting Pot." Alternatively, does it conjure up images of a house divided? Is being American a shorthand for saying that we are a culture of overindulgence and prosperity yet the poor and the homeless pass by on the streets as invisible to most Americans? Is America besieged from all sides by those seeking to dictate their point of view? Has a more romantic visage of America been replaced by an image of two Americas?

In this study, we are primarily interested in two separate, yet not unrelated, trends in American political culture. One trend shows the United States as an increasingly divided nation, a red versus blue state, where we battle each other at the polls for our candidate of choice to win the election. The other trend that is of interest to us is the widening of the economic divide between the rich and poor. When taken together, both of these trends may be converging to produce two very different definitions of what constitutes America and what values we support as a people.

When surveyed, Americans feel that the country has become divided politically where "two-thirds (66%) believe the country is more politically divided than in the past, and roughly half say the people they know are more divided" (Pew, 2005). This division may revolve around stereotypes reinforced by media that cater to either side. As one satirist sees it:

- Do we truly believe that ALL red-state residents are ignorant racist fascist knuckle-dragging NASCAR-obsessed cousin-marrying roadkill-eating tobacco-juice-dribbling gun-fondling religious fanatic rednecks; or that ALL blue-state residents are godless unpatriotic pierced-nose Volvo-driving France-loving left-wing communist latte-sucking tofu-chomping holistic-wacko neurotic vegan weenie perverts? (Berry,2004).

The American Dream is the focus of many discussions around the dinner table, just as it is a dialogue thread on the national political arena. Moreover, we are reminded that the American Dream may no longer be attainable and that this dream of our forefathers is rapidly changing. In generational terms, the standard of living experienced by the Baby Boom generation seems to be out of reach for their children. In fact, the standard of living as measured by real wages has stagnated and even declined in the last decade (see Bernstein et. al. 2007). Another Pew public opinion poll demonstrates that "today, Americans are split evenly on the two-class question with as many saying the country is divided along economic lines as say this is not the case (48% each). In sharp contrast, in 1988, 71% rejected this notion, while just 26% saw a divided nation" (Allen, 2007).

In light of a significant amount of research which illustrates a divided American populace, is it also possible that they literally perceived two different Americas? That is, would an image mosaic of what exactly is America and American differ between the divides? As images can be collective stores of values and goals, it is worthwhile to investigate if such a divide exists, and if found, what its impact on the future of the country might be.

1.1. Theory

A central question in our research is how people

categorize the information they take in from the world around them. Previous research has shown that when people consider the countless stimuli to which they are exposed, they organize these stimuli into concepts (Medin & Smith, 1984). Concept formation can help simplify a complex world by organizing stimuli into a hierarchy of categories. Furthermore, these groupings are formed around the best examples of a category called prototypes. For example, a sofa better represents what people consider to be furniture than a mirror. Studies have shown that the more closely information matches our prototypes, the easier we recognize them as examples of a concept. The prototypes we are interested in here would focus around the reference category of what is considered to be American and what is not.

One of the great debates in cognitive science centers around whether imagery is based on spatial mechanics involved in perceiving information or on language-related mechanics. The proponents of spatial coding propose that the mental representation of an image is a copy of the external stimulus. Others propose that images are stored symbolically in the brain. The origin of the debate can be traced back to the work of Kosslyn et. al. (Kosslyn, Ball, & Reiser, 1978) using image scanning experiments. Kosslyn found that the mental scanning of objects was proportional to the actual distance between locations. For example, it takes longer to mentally scan the distance between New York City (NYC) and Los Angeles (L.A.) than the distance between NYC and Albany. In terms of processing visual images, these cognitive scientists also point to evidence that the occipital visual cortex is activated when objects are imagined or physically present (Kosslyn, et al., 1993), that slower reaction times are found for tasks requiring increased spatial effort, and that faster reaction times are displayed when objects being compared are dissimilar in size. However, Pylyshyn (1981) pointed out that the results of Kosslyn's experiments can be explained by knowing about the world in making their judgments. For example, most people are aware that the distance between NYC and L.A. is greater. Proponents of language-based coding point out that when people process images they often rely on mental shortcuts, especially when the task is complex, abstract, or ambiguous.

Of great interest to the purpose of this study is the current work being done in political psychology using brain scans and mappings of the visual cortex to infer political attitudes and beliefs. Pioneering work done by Nisbett (2003) and others demonstrated a literal connection between cognition and culture. That is, while looking at the same test images, subjects from different cultures looked at different aspects of the photos which then took a specific meaning for them. For instance, individuals from Asian cultures tended to look at the context of a photo whereas subjects from America focused primarily at the image in the foreground. Moreover, Cooper (2013) finds that Democrats and Republicans also look at test imagery in very different ways, suggesting they have different values at play when simply looking at a photograph. Carpinella et. al (2013) and Olivola et. al(2012) find that party identification is a strong predictor of what visual cues a participant is most likely to focus on when viewing a photograph of a real or potential political candidate.

So what we are investigating here is how the functional protoypes of individuals' definition of American varies given their political persuasions. Additionally, we are interested in whether or not it is possible to construct a visual mosaic of an individual's definition of what constitutes American as a reference category. Given the extant research we are also expecting differences to occur in how study participants rate photo images of America in comparison to word-based descriptions of elements that may or may not be considered American.

1.2. Hypotheses

Our general expectations are as follows:

1.2.1. Hypothesis 1

Conservatives will place images higher on the scale of American when the image contains elements that are more traditionally associated with patriotism (i.e. flags, military personnel, etc) than their liberal counterparts.

1.2.2. Hypothesis 2

Liberals will place images higher on the scale of 'American' than their Conservative counterparts when the image depicts low socioeconomic status.

1.2.3. Hypothesis 3

Word descriptors of American and non-American values will receive scores significantly different than their image counterparts.

Most of our expectations for the first two hypotheses follow what are considered traditional, albeit stereotypical, attitudinal differences between conservatives and liberals. Our thoughts behind Hypothesis 1 picks up on the fact that conservative philosophy places a higher value on tradition than does the liberal philosophy. Consequently, we believe that symbols that are generally considered to be American like flags, historic monuments, and those relating to the military will elicit stronger feelings from conservatives. Our second hypothesis is formed in accordance with the liberal tradition of a more level playing field when it comes to wealth and economic advantage. We expect the liberal participant to give higher ratings to images that depict the living conditions or other indicators of lower socioeconomic status than their conservative counterpart. Lastly, our final hypothesis underlies the possibility that words are potentially less open to interpretation than an image that attempted to convey the same thing. For instance, we believe there will be a difference between the phrase Statue of Liberty and a picture of a family standing in front of the statue.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Study participants included 99 adults. In order to participate, individuals had to be 18 years of age or older. Participants were students from psychology and political science courses from a small university in the southeastern United States. These students received extra course credit for their participation.

2.2. Materials

Each participant completed an informed consent form and a personal information survey, which asked participants to indicate their sex, age, classification in college (freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior), political party identification (Democrat, Independent, No identification, Republican, or Other), and how many times they attended religious gatherings, including church, in the past 30 days. Participants also indicated whether they considered themselves to be a liberal or conservative on a scale of 1 (very liberal) to 7 (very conservative) with a rating of 4 being moderate. A passion rating of liberal or conservative beliefs was obtained using a 1 = very strong to 7 = minimally strong rating scale, with 4 indicating moderate strength. A rating of one's allegiance to their political party identification was also secured using the same rating scale as the passion rating for liberal or conservative beliefs. In addition to personal information, responses to various statements regarding political beliefs were collected on the personal information survey. A cursory glance at these questions reveal that they are decidedly in the flavor of what is often described as the 'culture wars'. The usage of the phrase culture war was popularized in the early 1990's which depicted a sort of litmus test on the philosophical beliefs of those on the left and right of the political spectrum. We included these types of questions for two reasons. First, asking direct questions about economics or morality would allow us to see if there was a philosophical divide in the study population. The questions themselves would also be used for comparison with similarly themed images that were shown to the participants. The second reason for including this line of questioning was to provide some internal reliability to the survey itself. As no attempt was given in the survey to define categories such as conservative or liberal, participants may mislabel themselves in terms of their political leanings. Having both types of questions allows us to compare their answers to see if they are consistent in their self-labeling as well as actual policy positions. These statements, and the response options to them, are printed in Appendix 1.

The survey can be generally described as follows. Participants were given an 8 ½ x 11 inch sheet of paper with a heading of "Instructions" centered at the top of the page. Below the header were the following instructions:

You will be shown 40 images one at a time. Each image will be shown for 10 seconds. For each image rate whether the image is American or not using the scale below. Please circle your ratings for each image below.

A…….B..……C……..…D……...E……
American Neutral Not American

The sheet was numbered 1-40 with the designated rating scale printed beside each number. All text was printed in 12 point, Arial font. It should be noted again that no attempt was made to define American within the confines of the survey itself.

2.3 Procedure

Each participant completed the informed consent form and then the personal information survey. Participants were then given the sheet of paper labeled with the "Instructions" heading. Next, participants were shown 40 images one at a time. Half of these images were in pictorial form such as an image of the White House. These images were obtained from internet searches of public domain images that ranged from the benign to more controversial images as judged during pilot testing. The remaining images were the corresponding textual representation of an image such as the words THE WHITE HOUSE. All text-based images were presented in 48-point font, Arial style and bolded. All images were presented using a Powerpoint 2010 slide show with a 10 second interval between slides, as pilot testing revealed that this was sufficient to allow participants to process and respond to images. A copy of the image slides can be found in Appendix 2.

The final set of materials was collected from a focus group of fifteen college students enrolled in an upper-level political science course. Here participants were asked similar questions as their general survey counterparts, but special attention was paid to providing open-ended questions and written prompts that corresponded to some of the images. Results of the focus group are mixed into the general results below when the group provided useful insight.

3. Results

3.1. Sample Characteristics

The sample included 50 females and 49 males. The mean age of the sample was 19.68 years (SD = 3.37). The range of ages represented in the sample was from 18 years (N = 20) to 34 years of age (N = 1). The majority of participants (60%) were self-reported freshman (N = 27) or sophomores (N = 33). The majority of participants (62%) chose Republican as their political party identification with no identification being the second most chosen option (15%). Nearly 80% of the sample indicated they were moderate to very conservative in terms of beliefs. Although not directly assessed, most participants were White.

The mean allegiance to one's identified political party was 3.97 (SD = 1.51) indicating that participants were moderately strong in allegiance. When asked to rate the passion level of their liberal or conservative beliefs, a mean strength rating of 3.48 (SD = 1.38) was given indicating a moderate strength rating.

Participants reported attending religious services, including church, 5.91 (SD = 6.17) times the past 30 days. However, note that zero attendance was reported more than any other number. A majority of participants (67%) indicated that following Biblical standards were important in their daily life (M = 2.43; SD = 1.61).

Half of participants chose that abortion should be either allowed, but more limited (25%) or illegal with few exceptions (25%). Abortion should be never permitted was endorsed by 43% of the sample. When participants were presented with the statement, "poor people have hard lives because government benefits don't go far enough to help them live decently," the mean agreement with the statement was 5.52 (SD = 1.34) indicating general disagreement with the statement. Participants were also asked to what extent they agreed with the statement, "I worry that the government is too involved in determining morality." Approximately 77% of participants chose an option indicating moderate to great agreement with the statement with a mean rating of 3.64 (SD = 1.38).

Finally, participants were asked, "to what extent do you think America is exceptional?" That is, is it uniquely placed to accomplish great things or are all countries important in their own way?" The mean rating was 2.98 (SD = 1.47). Nearly 85% of participants chose an option indicating America is moderately to very exceptional. Taken together, these findings suggest, in general, the sample supports the view that America is exceptional as defined by the survey question wording.

Our findings can be broken down into three major categories. First, we look at the beliefs of our participants themselves to see the accuracy of their self-labeling of their political philosophy. We conduct this reliability check by utilizing questions that have shown in the extant literature to elicit clear categorizations between liberals and conservatives. In short, the survey employs questions that pertain to the 'culture wars' as described above. Second, we analyze the results of the images that were seen as the most American and those that were seen as the least American in order to develop a working profile of what is perceived as American. Lastly, we present a number of image bundles that we expect to show keen differences in how conservatives and liberals view the world.

As we make no attempt to define what a conservative or a liberal believes in the test environment itself, we included some reference categories in the experiment to gauge the participant's self-described political philosophy. In terms of political party affiliation, 38.5% of self-described liberals placed themselves in the Democrat category, whereas 54% do not consider themselves affiliated with any party. As far as moderates are concerned, 43% have no party affiliation, with another 40% identifying with the Republican Party. Conservatives were most likely to label themselves as Republican, with roughly 89% doing so. To determine whether political party identification was a significant factor in ratings a series of one-way ANOVA's were performed on participant ratings and personal information as obtained on the personal information survey. The only significant finding was for the abortion statement from the Pew (2008) survey, $F(3, 95 = 7.75)$, $p < .01$. A Tukey's post hoc test revealed that those identified as Republican and those who described themselves as conservative were significantly more likely to choose the option "abortion should be never permitted" relative to the other comparison groups. Looking at the aggregate numbers of this question on abortion, all of the conservatives (100%) and the majority of Republicans (87%) believed that abortion should be 'illegal with few exceptions' or 'never permitted'. What we find on the other side of the spectrum was a little unexpected as a sizable proportion of liberals, 46%, and 36% of Democrats placed themselves in the "few exceptions" or "never" categories. Our expectation was to find more of them leaning toward having more availability in abortions.

There was also a significant finding for number of religious gatherings attending, including church, the past 30 days, $F(2, 96 = 4.62$, $p < .05$. A Tukey's post hoc test revealed that those identified as Conservative attended a larger number of religious gatherings relative to the other two groups. The other reference questions behaved in a similar manner with self-identified conservatives and Republicans feeling that "government is too involved in determining morality" as well as disagreeing with the statement that 'government benefits don't go far enough to help them [poor people] live decently'. Liberals and Democrats were not as extreme in the opposite direction as their counterpart conservatives and Republicans were in answering these questions. What this means is that the behavior of the conservatives and Republicans fit with more of their stereotypical or expected positions on a variety of issues. The fact that the liberals and or Democrats were not equally as dogmatic in their position placement is not entirely a surprise. Given the fact that the survey was conducted on a Christian and generally conservative university campus, those self-labeled liberals and Democrats lean more toward the moderate side of the political spectrum and do not generally characterize the extreme positions.

3.2. Profiles of America

In terms of identifying the profile of what is American, we first look at images that received the highest scores, and whether or not liberals and conservatives had different ratings of those particular images. Images 7, 15, 26, and 39 were rated as most American with mean ratings of 1.81, 1.63, 1.64, and 1.88, respectively. Image 7 was in textual form and presented the words' Red, White, and Blue'. There is virtually no difference in how conservatives and liberals score this image, as they both judged it decidedly American. President Barack Obama is shown in Image 15 not holding his hand over his heart while other individuals in the photograph are holding their hands over their hearts. Among liberals , 92% found this image to be very American as did 82% of Democrats. The majority of moderates and independents also saw this image as exhibiting very

American qualities. What is a little surprising is that the majority of both conservatives (61%) and Republicans (57%) also rank this image as extremely American. While there is considerable distance between how the right and left view President Obama, we expected the gap to be even larger. One of the top persistent news stories at the time the survey was administered was whether or not President Obama was even a natural born American citizen, which did not seem to have as great of an impact on the results as expected.

The third highest American rating was a picture of George W. Bush and his wife taken during what likely is an image of them during the pledge or national anthem. Of the top four or five highest ranked images, this one had the lowest standard deviation (.936). Among liberals, 93 % gave the image the highest, or most American like, rating while only 61% of conservatives did. Our expectation was that conservatives would give the higher ranking of this image. The results garnered from this image, however, cannot be taken in isolation. Four slides before the picture of the former President and his wife appear, a slide was shown that stated "not holding hand over heart during pledge". There was little discernable difference between how liberals and conservatives rated this slide as the majority of both groups said that this practice was not American. This demand characteristic was expected to lower both groups rating of the Bush image, as the former President clearly has his hand over his stomach, not his heart like the rest of the people in the picture can be seen doing. Instead, what we found was a virtually identical outcome with both liberals and conservatives ranking the pictures of both Presidents consistently.

Images that were rated as the top ten most American have some traits in common and are exhibited in Table 1.

Table 1. "Most American" Visual Cues

Identifiable Trait	Corresponding Image Number
Past or Former President	15, 26
A prominent American Flag	7, 15
Image includes word 'American'	27, 39
Value statements (freedom, liberty, etc)	13, 34
Rendering some form of aid or help	25, 39

Much like what was found with the images of the Presidents, the differences that do emerge do not necessarily follow our general expectations. Image 13, states "freedom of the individual," for which 72 % of conservatives gave the highest American rating, whereas 39% of liberals gave a similar rating. This result would be consistent with the conventional wisdom of conservatives placing a higher value on individual freedoms. On the other hand, Image 34 is simply composed of the word "Liberty". Eighty-five percent of the liberals find this word to be extremely American, while 67% of their conservative counterpart agree. We did not expect this difference between the two groups. These particular findings do not support Hypothesis 1.

Image 39 elicited a marked difference between conservatives and liberals. This image was a picture of a group of men unloading supplies that all said American Red Cross on the boxes, as well as the words and symbol of the organization appearing on one of the worker's vests. Of the conservatives, 83% found this image to be extremely American while only 54% of the liberals agreed with this ranking. The image itself does not give much to go on in terms of context. In the focus group, a participant noted that one of the aid boxes carried the traditional Red Cross symbol as well as the Red Crescent. The conversation then turned to trying to establish where this material aid was being distributed. Given the prominent Red Crescent, the focus group theorized that it was some sort of international mission. We physically zoomed the screen in on the image for a closer look where you could then see the truck that was being unloaded had a very American looking license plate, though the exact state could not be determined. So why the stark difference in rankings? Why does the location/ context matter for judging this image? Other survey questions may help in explaining this result. A question was asked of all participants of whether or not they believed America was exceptional. As was discussed above, the participants as a whole believe that America was indeed exceptional. The only attempt at defining what exactly this exceptionality was can be found in the question itself which goes on to state, '[t]hat is, is it uniquely placed to accomplish great things or are all countries important in their own way?' Over 55% of conservatives indicated that exceptionality was overwhelmingly American, while 31% of liberals indicated a similar response. American Exceptionalism has been injected into the national political dialogue in recent years, most often in the context of justifying a foreign policy of spreading democracy around the world. So in a way, this question was indirectly surveying the participants attitudes toward United States military operations around the world. It may have been the case that when conservatives viewed the original image, they were more likely to assume a foreign locale? This interpretation would be in alignment with how conservatives answered the question about exceptionalism. This finding also demonstrate marginal support to Hypothesis 1.

The other traits identified in Table 1 do not register a notable difference between liberals and conservatives. What do the top ten most 'American' images tell us about in terms of identifying a profile of 'what is seen as American'? What stands out at first glance, is how the American flag elicits strong responses from the survey participants. Flags play a prominent role in national identities in general, and that is certainly the case with the American Flag. Should there be any difference between liberals and conservatives when viewing the flag, as Hypothesis 1 may suggest? This was not the case when participants were shown an American flag that was on fire, as both sides clearly indicated such a demonstration was not to be considered American. Nevertheless, differences persisted in images where the flag

was in the background or was the likely focus of the subjects in the image. There are no differences between the ideological camps as to how the flag should be treated by those in its presence, at least in terms of body language. Yet, when political personalities are mixed in, it is the liberals that go the extra mile in terms of ranking the images as more American. It could be the case that liberals were more likely to associate the executive offices of the federal government to symbolize America. We expected conservatives to be the group that may define what is American in more traditionally defined ways, such as patriotism toward the flag. In fact, some research suggests there may be evidence to support our pre-survey expectations. Carter et. Al. (2011) finds that the mere exposure to an American flag has the effect of moving a respondent's attitudes toward more Republican oriented positions than Democratic ones.

So are we to believe the presence or reference to an American flag is to be associated with a profile of what is American? Maybe, and maybe not. At least three other images had American flags displayed in them in some form or another and did not drum up strong feelings of American-ness. Two images in particular, Image 3 and 37, had prominent flags displayed, yet received only neutral ratings. Both conservatives and liberals alike gave neutral scores to swearing in ceremonies of new American citizens. The people in both images were not of European descent and were shown holding American flags or displaying them prominently while raising their hands as they became new legal citizens. Another image, number 33, depicts two American soldiers atop a tank placing an American flag over the face of a statue of Saddam Hussein. This image was given a neutral score overall, though 50% of conservatives found the image to be extremely American while 30% of liberals did as well. One conclusion that can be drawn is that the mere presence of or a reference to an American flag does not necessarily have the participant seeing "American". It is the context of such a presentation that matters.

Potentially just as important as building a visual profile of what it is to be American, looking at those images deemed strongly non-American could prove fruitful as well. Images 12, 16, and 21 were rated most strongly as being Not American with mean ratings of 4.39, 4.13, and 4.04, respectively. Image 12, as noted above, depicted an American flag in flames. Image 16 presented "Terrorism" in textual form. Neither of these images provided a marked difference between our two ideological groups. Both conservatives and liberals were more likely to agree together that these images did not exude the qualities of American. Finally, Image 21 showed a copy of the Koran. Note that a textual representation of "The Koran", Image 32, was generally rated as Not American as well (M = 3.85). It is with both these images that some distinctions become noticeable. While both camps rated them as non-American, conservatives were significantly more likely to apply the least American rating, whereas liberals were more muted in their response. This result does not come as any surprise and fits with our expectations.

3.3. Issue Bundles

To capture more of the contours of what is seen as American, we developed a few issue packets or bundles that were embedded into the survey. These images were connected by some sort of theme that was designed to test the range of attitudes toward images and to provide some internal reliability within the study itself. One such bundling of issues has already been discussed at some length, the American flag. We also attempted to see if there were any differences between the two groups when shown images that depicted socioeconomic status. This status was indicated by using stereotypical images of the homes of the wealthy, the middle class, and the poor. To embody the rich, Image 1 shows a home that has been labeled in the media as a McMansion. Seventy percent of liberals believed this home was very American, while 83% of conservatives agreed. As far as a picture of middle America, a typical ranch style home, set in a suburban setting, was utilized- Image 29. Conservatives were much more likely to rate this home as very American, 89%, whereas liberals agreed that it was American though only 62% of them felt this way. To represent the poor, a picture of a mobile home that is in rough shape was used. While the slight majority of both groups found this image to exhibit qualities of America, there was no discernible difference between the two. In the end, Hypothesis 2 could not be substantiated to any great degree. We expected liberals to more quickly apply "American" to images depicting lower socioeconomic status, and likewise conservatives placing higher value on middle class and higher images, though this did not prove to be the case.

Another bundled issue was that of attitudes toward firearms. Five different images were used in the survey in a variety of contexts. Surprisingly, all of these issues were scored rather neutrally, to leaning toward "American" in general. Moreover, we expected to find gross differences as to how the two groups rated these images, though the survey did not match these expectations. The context of the images of firearms covered military and police usage to hunting scene and just the guns themselves without any background. One of the images that did have the two groups giving different ratings was a simple picture of an AR-15 (a semi-automatic version of the long arm carried as standard issue among our military) without any context was more likely to be seen as "American" by conservatives by a margin of 20%. That same weapon, though pictured in the hands of a US Army soldier, was rated in an identical way.

3.4. Images vs. Words

A series of analyses were conducted to determine whether textual versus pictorial representation of stimuli affected the ratings of participants. There were an equal number (N = 20) of images presented in textual versus pictorial form. All of the ratings were summed for each image form yielding a mean composite rating of 56.40 (SD = 15.40) for pictorial presentation and a mean composite rating of 58.55 (SD = 11.

91) for textual presentation. Nonetheless, inferential statistical analyses revealed this difference was not significant. In addition, other analyses did not reveal meaningful, omnibus differences based on how stimuli were represented. Therefore, further analyses based upon this independent variable manipulation were not conducted, and Hypothesis 3 did not have any support.

4. Discussion

One major objective for the study was to determine whether an image profile of what is deemed American differed across political ideology. Surprisingly, there was considerable agreement in ratings regardless of where participants fell on the political spectrum. The prominent exception to the trend was the rating of the image depicting Red Cross personnel unloading supplies, which may have been driven by differing perspectives on American exceptionalism. While Hypothesis 1 has some slight support-conservatives view traditional images (flags, military personnel) nonetheless, our sample did not generally reflect a divided America in their interpretation of most images. The fact that our sample tended to be homogenous in terms of demographic characteristics is one plausible explanation for the general agreement of participants. This homogeneity was also present on the campus and surrounding community where the study took place,

Republicans, conservatives, and moderate Democrats characterize the vast majority of citizens. Future studies might benefit from actively pursuing a more heterogeneous sample.

Another major objective of the study centered around potential differences in judgment regarding issues that tend to be polarizing across political party lines. Again, there was general agreement across the ideological camps. However, it is important to note that the context in which images appeared affected the ratings of respondents to some degree. For example, the context of the AR-15 rifle affected the degree to which the image was perceived as American. In future investigations, strategic manipulations of contextual factors could be done to determine whether these changes affect interpretations of images presented in a short time frame. Moreover, investigations of these factors may provide further insight into how individuals determine political party affiliation, voting behavior, and policy decision-making.

A third study objective concerned whether the presentation form of stimuli affected ratings of “American”, especially when stimulus information appears for a brief time. Based on previous research in cognitive science, we predicted that a pictorial versus textual representation of information would impact the dependent variable. Once again, respondents gave relatively similar ratings regardless of presentation. The homogeneous sample is likely a major factor in rating similarity across groups here as well.

5. Conclusion

Despite our findings, more research is needed in the domain of the cognitive processes involved when individuals determine whether information is congruent with internalized standards regarding politics. In today’s political environment, marked by complexity and rapid change, it behooves basic and applied researchers to understand how people arrive at the answer to questions such as, what is American? One tentative conclusion we may be able to make is that America is not as divided as we first thought. To further test this conclusion a more heterogeneous, representative sample is needed in terms of political ideology and background is warranted. Moreover, incorporating methods successfully used in previous studies to examine perception of visual cues in political domains such as brain imaging technology (Nisbett, 2003) and viewing photographs (Olivola et. al(2012; Carpinella et. al (2013) would advised to determine whether study findings can be replicated.

Appendix 1

1. Personal Information Survey

_____ Age _____ Major _____ Home town _____

Classification (circle one): FR SO JR SR GRAD

1) What is your political party identification? Circle one

A. Democrat
B. Independent
C. No identification
D. Republican
E. Other (please explain below)

_____

2. How strong is your allegiance to your party identification? Circle one

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7

Very Moderately Minimally Strong Strong Strong

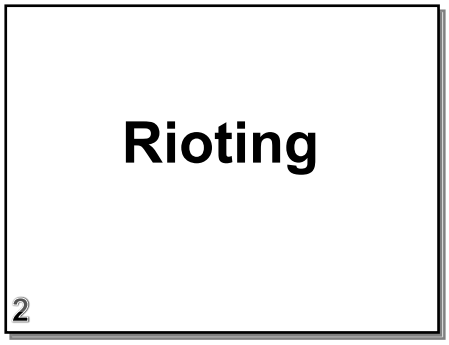
3. How many times have you attended religious gatherings, including church, the past 30 days? _____

4. Is following Biblical standards important in your daily life? _____ yes _____ no
If yes, to what extent?
1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7
Greatly Moderately Minimally
5. Complete the following sentence (Pew,2008): Abortion should be…
1. Generally available
2. Allowed, but more limited
3. Illegal with few exceptions
4. Never permitted
6. To what extent do you agree with the following statement? "Poor people have hard lives because government benefits don't go far enough to help them live decently."
1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7
Greatly Moderately Minimally
7. To what extent do you agree with the following statement? "I worry that the government is too involved in determining morality."
1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7
Greatly Moderately Minimally
8. Do you consider yourself a liberal or a conservative?
1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7
Very Liberal Moderate Very Conservative
9. How passionate are you about your conservative or liberal beliefs?
1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7
Very Moderately Minimally
Strong Strong Strong
10. To what extent do you think America is 'exceptional'. That is, is it uniquely placed to accomplish great things or are all countries important in their own way?
1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7
America is very Moderately Minimally
Exceptional Exceptional Exceptional

Appendix 2

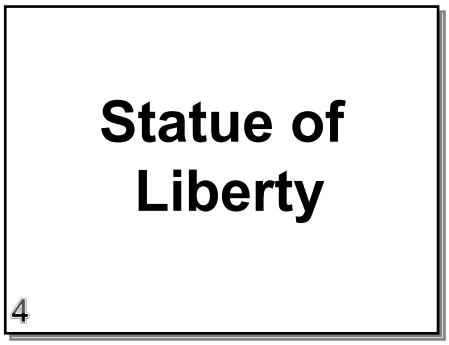
Images Shown to Respondents

Slide 1



Slide 2

Slide 3



Slide 4

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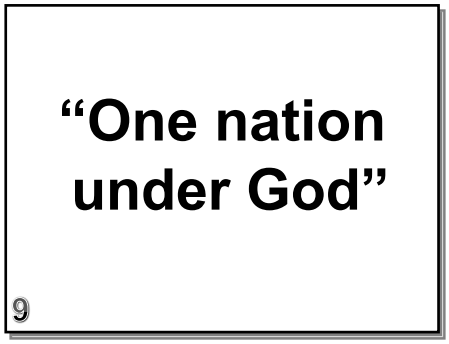

Slide 9

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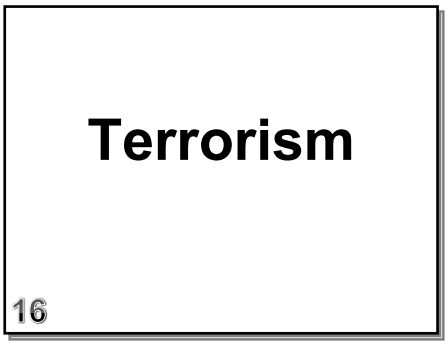
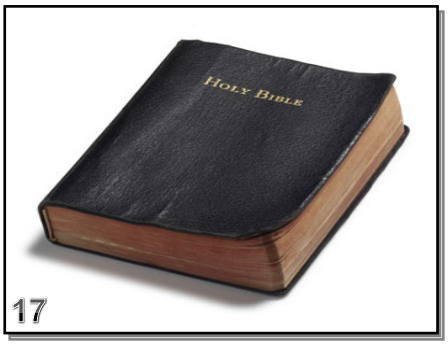
Slide 15

Slide 12



Slide 16

Slide 13



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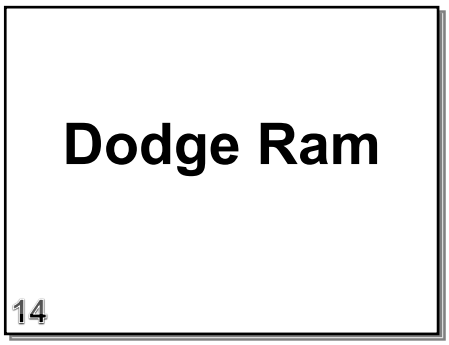

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Torture

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Slide 23

Migrant workers

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Slide 20

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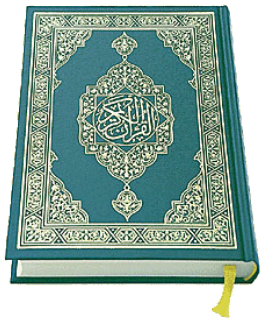

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Slide 21

Humanitarian Relief

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Not holding hand over heart during pledge

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Defending America's freedom wherever it comes under siege?

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The Bible

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The Koran

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Vehicle with American-made parts

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Slide 30

Liberty

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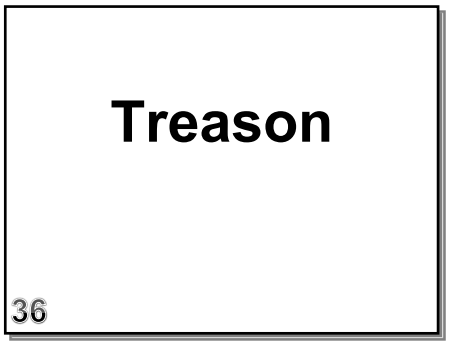

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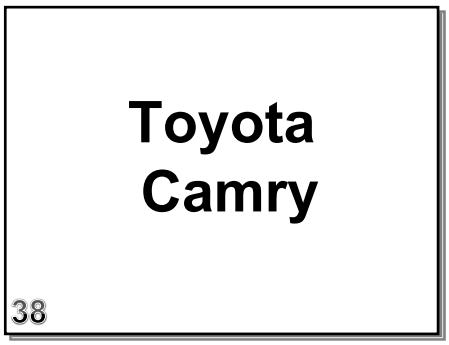
Slide 37



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