

Burning Down the (White) House: Partisan Attempts to Undermine American Exceptionalism

BRYAN MCLAUGHLIN
AMBER KRAUSE
Texas Tech University, USA

Although it is well established that U.S. politicians tend to promote American exceptionalism, we argue that partisans often attempt to undermine American exceptionalism when doing so improves the standing of their party. Results of three studies provide support for this expectation. Study 1, using American National Election Studies cumulative data, finds that evaluations of the United States' global standing are linked to evaluations of the political parties. Further, which party currently holds the White House affects partisans' appraisals of the nation's global standing. Study 2 employs an experiment where partisans are exposed to a news story proclaiming American exceptionalism to either be intact or in jeopardy. Results provide additional evidence that appraisals of the United States' global standing are more pessimistic when the president is from the opposing party. Study 3 uses a content analysis of presidential convention speeches and demonstrates that presidential candidates attempt to undermine American exceptionalism when the other party holds the White House.

Keywords: American exceptionalism, social identity theory, partisan identity, national identity, motivated reasoning, presidential discourse

In his final State of the Union address, Barack Obama unequivocally dismissed any concerns that the United States' position atop the global hierarchy had somehow weakened. Instead, he proudly proclaimed, "The United States of America is the most powerful nation on Earth, period. Period" (Obama, 2016). Obama's assertions are just one example of the widespread endorsement of American exceptionalism by U.S. politicians. American exceptionalism has been a regular fixture in political discourse since World War II (Domke & Coe, 2010). Indeed, citizens who follow politics have consistently been encouraged to hold the conviction that the United States is a unique and superior nation (Gilmore, Meeks, & Domke, 2013; Gilmore, Sheets, & Rowling, 2016; Rojecki, 2008).

Although previous literature has largely focused on the promotion of American exceptionalism, there is no shortage of examples of politicians expressing dire concern about the nation's prominence. For example, Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan was effectively used to rally citizens who

Bryan McLaughlin: bryan.mclaughlin@ttu.edu

Amber Krause: amber.krause@ttu.edu

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believed that the essence of their country had begun to slip away (Greenhouse, 2016). Previous election cycles are rife with similar examples. In 2008, Democrats lamented, "This is not our America," (Edwards, 2007) and warned, "Bush and the Republicans have undermined the greatness of America" (Clinton, 2008). Several years later, Republicans were sounding the alarm, portraying the United States as a "nation of crisis" (Cain, 2011) and claiming that "something was wrong in America" (Santorum, 2012).

This tendency to undermine America's greatness seems at odds with the widespread belief in American exceptionalism (see Gallup, 2010). Such disparate portrayals can be explained, in large part, by partisan politics. We argue that partisans become motivated to undermine American exceptionalism when doing so improves the relative standing of their political party. The United States' successes or failures reflect on the president and his or her party (Lobo & Curtice, 2014). The more dominant the nation's global standing, the more the president's partisans can justify in-group favoritism. Conversely, the opposing party should engage in more in-group favoritism when the country's superiority is questioned. Partisans should be motivated (a) to interpret information about the United States' global standing and (b) to portray the state of the nation's global standing in ways that best serve the interest of their political in-group. Thus, in many circumstances, Americans will actively or implicitly seek to undermine American exceptionalism.

Although it may seem obvious that partisans are willing to undermine American exceptionalism if it serves their party's interests, there is limited empirical evidence demonstrating this behavior. This study seeks to bridge the distinct conversations that proclaim (a) Americans are committed to viewing their nation as truly exceptional and (b) partisans are motivated to improve the relative status of their party. Specifically, we expect that how partisan citizens process political information, and how political elites talk about the United States, depends on which party currently holds the White House. We test these expectations by employing three studies. Study 1 uses American National Election Studies (ANES) cumulative data from 1984 to 2012 to test (a) whether evaluations of the United States' global standing are linked to evaluations of the political parties and (b) whether partisans are motivated to have a more optimistic or pessimistic estimate of the country's global standing depending on which party holds the White House. Study 2 examines how partisans process news stories about the United States' global standing by employing an experimental design where partisans are exposed to a news story proclaiming American exceptionalism to be either intact or in jeopardy. Study 3 uses a content analysis of presidential convention speeches from 1948 to 2016 to explore whether U.S. presidential candidates either promote or undermine American exceptionalism, depending on which party holds the White House.

Group Status and the Self-Concept

The United States' global standing is vitally important to many Americans, in part because people use the groups to which they belong to help define their self-identity. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), social groups provide cognitive categories that people use to construct a mental representation of the self. If a social identity is internalized as self-defining, then the status of that group impacts self-evaluation (Tajfel, 1982). Crucially, group status is relational—the value of a social group depends on how favorably it compares to other relevant groups. Positive evaluations of the in-group in

comparison to an out-group enhance self-esteem, while comparisons that favor the out-group will diminish self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Many Americans internalize their national identity as an important facet of their self-concept (Huddy & Khatib, 2007). The United States' global standing can, therefore, become important for self-perception. As a result, most Americans are motivated to embrace *American exceptionalism*, which is the idea that the United States is unique, a transcendent force of good, and the pinnacle of human progress (Rojecki, 2008). Embracing American exceptionalism assures citizens that they are a part of something meaningful and transcendent (Kane, 2003). If the United States is perceived to be the greatest country in the world, then Americans can perceive themselves to have more value and self-worth than citizens of other countries (Gilmore, 2014, 2015).

Although most U.S. citizens generally hold an exaggerated opinion of the country's global standing (Gallop, 2010), this assessment can be complicated by partisan commitments. In the same way that national identity can be self-defining, so, too, can political affiliation. It has been well established that many Americans have a powerful psychological attachment to their political affiliation (Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012). For strong partisans, their political identity may be more salient and applicable to their self-concept than their national identity. Once an individual identifies with a political party, his self-concept becomes tied to the fate of that party (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002). Consequently, partisans become fixated on the status of their party in comparison to the opposition (Mason, 2015). Engaged partisans become emotionally invested in whether their party triumphs over the opposition (Green et al., 2002). These concerns can take precedence over pragmatic concerns about the nation's well-being (Gutmann & Thompson, 2012). For example, even though both parties constantly make overtures about wanting bipartisan achievements, when it comes down to it, partisans are simply unwilling to compromise on their partisan commitments and policy agendas (Harbridge, Malhotra, & Harrison, 2014). Similarly, partisans may become motivated to undermine American exceptionalism when doing so improves the relative standing of their political party.

The United States' Global Standing and Political Party Evaluations

The relative status of a social group can be literal (e.g., objective conflicts over resources), but it is often symbolic. Social identity theory emphasizes the central role perception plays in driving behavior. A social category only matters if a person or group determines it does (Oakes, 2002). For example, one citizen may take great pride in being Texan, while another citizen may care greatly about being from Chicago, but not view her Illinois residency as part of her identity. Further, group evaluations are always relative and negotiated (Hunter, 1991). Social identity categories are neither static nor fixed—they are socially constructed and dynamic (Jenkins, 2008). Thus, the relative status of a social group is determined, in larger part, by symbolic resources and the ability to influence perception (Alexander, 2010).

One of the most important symbols in determining the relative status of the U.S. political parties is the president. Because the president symbolically represents the United States (Coe & Neumann, 2011), the nation's successes and failures directly reflect on the president—even in many cases when the

president is not solely, or even partially, responsible (Iyengar, 1994). Presidents do not just provide a symbolic representation of the United States; they also symbolically represent their political party (Lobo & Curtice, 2014). Presidents serve as the figurehead for, and are normally seen as the "prototypical" member of, their party (Dow, 2001). As a result, evaluations of a president naturally transfer to evaluations of his or her political party. Thus, a president's approval rating will affect the evaluations of his or her party (Lobo & Curtice, 2014).

A successful president will boost the relative standing of his or her party, while a president mired in struggles and low approval ratings should dampen evaluations of the party. Even though people are motivated to view their in-group as superior, they can, at times, be forced to acknowledge and confront a marginalized social standing (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). For example, it is well established that the public's perception of the state of the economy guides evaluations of the president and the political parties (Vavreck, 2009). When a president presides over a poor economy, members of the president's party may be forced to acknowledge this poor performance and, thus, have a harder time blindly trumpeting the superiority of the in-group. Members of the opposing party, on the other hand, will be reassured of the relative superiority of their party (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). These partisans may gleefully point to these poor economic indicators as proof that their party would do a better job.

Thus, the United States' global standing will be seen as a reflection of the president's performance, which will, subsequently, be seen as a reflection of the president's party. We therefore expect that a partisan's evaluation of the United States' global standing will influence the degree to which partisans engage in in-group favoritism. Specifically, we expect that for a president's partisans, assessments of their party will rise and fall with their perceptions of the nation's global standing. For members of opposing party, on the other hand, assessments of their party will increase as they become more pessimistic about the United States' global standing, while in-group favoritism will decrease as they become more optimistic about the country's global standing. Thus, we present the following hypothesis:

H1: For a president's partisans, there will be a positive correlation between the United States' global standing and in-group favoritism; for members of the opposing party, there will be an inverse relationship between the nation's global standing and in-group favoritism.

Partisan Perceptions About the United States' Global Standing

As mentioned above, members of a social group are motivated to cognitively evaluate information in a way that favors the in-group over the out-group (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). People often engage in "motivated reasoning," where they interpret and process information in a manner that can help them achieve specific goals (Kunda, 1990). To reassure themselves that their social groups are superior, people may actively look for information that confirms existing beliefs, counterargue or dismiss discordant information, and interpret information in a biased manner (Taber & Lodge, 2006). This biased processing overemphasizes information that supports the standing of the in-group while undermining information that promotes the status of the out-group. For example, partisans tend to ignore or downplay information that presents their preferred politicians in an unfavorable light (Lebo & Cassino, 2007). Further, Democrats and Republicans often hold very different beliefs about

relatively objective information, such as the unemployment rate, inflation, or crime rates (Bartels, 2002). Given that the United States' global standing should affect the relative status of the political parties, partisans should be motivated to interpret the country's global standing in a way that will promote the status of their party. Democrats and Republicans should, therefore, have very different evaluations about the state of the union depending on which party holds the White House. We therefore present the following hypothesis:

- H2: (a) Members of the president's party will have a more optimistic appraisal of the United States' global standing, while (b) members of the opposing party will have a more pessimistic appraisal of the nation's global standing.*

News Media Coverage of American Exceptionalism

U.S. citizens' knowledge about the country's global standing is largely informed by mediated information (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015). Citizens cannot truly know about the essence of their nation, its people, or its relation to other nations through direct experience (Anderson, 1991). Instead, citizens often learn about social and political realities by listening to political speeches or consuming news media (Graber, 2001). The news media play a particularly important role in conveying information about the United States' current situation and/or its global standing.

In many cases, the news media engage in "uncritical patriotism"—that is, they hold an unequivocally positive evaluation of the country (while rejecting any criticism). Such an approach promotes an overly optimistic evaluation of the United States (Gilmore & Rowling, 2017). Some journalists, however, engage in "critical patriotism," which includes feelings of affection toward the country, but also a willingness to critique it when such criticism can help to improve the nation (Gilmore et al., 2013). These disparate news portrayals should encourage either a more or less favorable perception about the United States' global standing, respectively. On the whole, the more positive the media coverage, the more optimistic citizens should be about the country.

At the same time, we expect that partisans will process positive or negative coverage of American exceptionalism through the lens of their political commitments. As suggested by partisan-motivated reasoning, partisans tend to fixate on information that makes their party look good (Taber & Lodge, 2006) and downplay information that makes their party look bad (Lebo & Cassino, 2007). We therefore expect that when partisans receive messages that question whether the United States is truly exceptional, the president's partisans will resist this message, while members of the opposing party will readily accept the message. Thus, we expect an interaction between party affiliation and news media coverage about the United States' global standing:

- H3: When partisans receive a news story that is pessimistic about the United States' global standing, perceptions of the nation's global standing will decrease at a lower rate among the president's partisans' than among members of the opposing party.*

Presidential Candidates and American Exceptionalism

National identity does not reflect an objective reality; nations are socially constructed and maintained through discourse (Coe & Neumann, 2011). As symbolic leaders of the country, U.S. presidents are particularly important in this construction (Hutcheson, Domke, Billeaudeau, & Garland, 2004). Presidents have been particularly invested in promoting the United States' global status as truly exceptional (Gilmore, 2015; Neumann & Coe, 2011). Strategically, it makes good sense for presidents to promote American exceptionalism (Domke & Coe, 2010)—the country's successes and failures symbolically reflect on the president. Presidents stand to benefit from increasing the perception that the United States is in a particularly exceptional position (Gilmore, 2014).

Although it has been well established that presidents tend to evoke American exceptionalism (Gilmore et al., 2016), such a view likely obscures another trend—the tendency for presidential candidates from the opposing party to bemoan the nation's failures and shortcomings. Other presidential candidates can also play an important role in shaping the nationwide discourse about the United States (Huddy, 2001). Presidential candidates should strategically strive to construct a portrait of the country (positive or negative) that will help boost their chances of being elected. Specifically, presidential candidates should seek to either uphold or undermine American exceptionalism, depending on who currently holds the White House. The party that holds the White House will be motivated to uphold an idealized version of the United States, while members of the party that does not hold the presidency stand to benefit by devaluing the nation's global standing. For example, in 2008, Democrats warned, "Bush and the Republicans have undermined the greatness of America" (Clinton, 2008), and in 2012, Republicans proclaimed, "something was wrong in America" (Santorum, 2012). Thus, we present the following hypothesis:

H4: Presidential candidates will express more pessimism about the United States' current status when the opposing party holds the White House.

Study 1

Study 1 examines whether there is a correlation between perceptions of the United States' global standing and in-group favoritism (H1) as well as whether partisan affiliation conditions appraisals of the country's global standing (H2). We tested these hypotheses by employing the American National Election Studies cumulative data for 1948 to 2012 to examine the associations between partisanship, pessimism about the United States' global standing, and in-group favoritism. This ANES file merges "into a single file all cross-section cases and variables for select questions from the ANES Time Series studies conducted since 1948" (ANES, n.d., para. 1). Analysis was limited to 1984 thru 2012, however, because previous years did not include all of the measures required to test our hypotheses.¹

¹ ANES data for the 2010 midterm election was not made available in this data set.

Measures

In-group favoritism. Favorability toward Democrats and Republicans was measured using a 100-point feeling thermometer. *In-group favoritism* ($M = 36.30$, $SD = 30.21$) was constructed by subtracting favorability scores toward the out-group ($M = 38.75$, $SD = 22.87$) from scores toward the in-group ($M = 75.05$, $SD = 16.91$).

Perceived global standing. Evaluations of the United States' global standing was measured by asking, "During the past year, would you say that the United States' position in the world has grown weaker, stayed about the same, or grown stronger?" (1 = *grown weaker*, 2 = *stayed the same*, 3 = *grown stronger*; $M = 1.83$, $SD = 0.76$).

Control variables. Various control variables, which are often related to political attitudes (e.g., Kaye & Johnson, 2002), were included in our analysis. To reduce the potential for confounding relationships, we controlled for variables that had a significant relationship with in-group favoritism and/or perceptions of the United States' global standing (see Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3). Control variables included *ideology* (7-point scale ranging from *extremely liberal* to *extremely conservative*; $M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.40$), *political interest* (3-point scale, "Would you say that you have been/were *very much interested*, *somewhat interested*, or *not much interested* in the political campaigns [so far] this year?"; $M = 2.11$, $SD = 0.75$), *education* (4-point scale ranging from *grade school or less* to *college or advanced degree*; $M = 2.45$, $SD = 0.96$), *household income* (5-point scale ranging from *0–16th percentile* to *96th–100th percentile*; $M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.16$), *age* ($M = 46.23$, $SD = 17.17$), *gender* (male = 44.7%, female = 55.3%), and a *race dummy variable* (White = 78.8%, other race/ethnicity = 21.2%).

Analytic Technique

Analysis was performed using ordinary least squares regression. Data files were merged based on who was currently president at the time of each survey. Thus, the "Reagan" variable included surveys from 1984, 1986, and 1988; "H. W. Bush" comprised 1990 and 1992; "Clinton" was based on 1994, 1996, 1998, and 2000; "W. Bush" included 2002, 2004, and 2008; and "Obama" was based on 2012.

Study 1 Results

In-Group Favoritism

As shown in Table 1, in years in which a Republican was president, among Democrats there was a significant negative relationship between *the United States' perceived global standing* and *in-group favoritism*. This includes the presidencies of Reagan, $\beta = -0.19$ ($SE = 1.04$), $p < .001$; George H. W. Bush, $\beta = -0.15$ ($SE = 1.09$), $p < .001$; and W. Bush, $\beta = -0.16$ ($SE = 1.96$), $p < .001$. Conversely, when a Republican held the White House, Republicans showed a significant positive relationship between *perceived global standing* and *in-group favoritism*: Reagan, $\beta = 0.13$ ($SE = 0.97$), $p < .001$; H. W. Bush, $\beta = 0.17$ ($SE = 1.14$), $p < .001$; and W. Bush, $\beta = 0.15$ ($SE = 1.57$), $p = .001$.

Table 1. Relationship Between Perceptions About the United States' Global Standing and In-Group Favoritism During Republican Presidencies.

	Reagan		H. W. Bush		W. Bush	
	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
	β	β	β	β	β	β
Age	0.05 [#]	-0.05	0.02	-0.04	0.07	-0.04
Gender	0.02	0.00	0.05	-0.01	0.10 [*]	0.07
Education	-0.03	0.01	0.06	0.00	-0.09 [#]	-0.05
Income	-0.09 ^{**}	0.02	-0.21	0.08	-0.06	0.08
White	-0.09 ^{**}	-0.02	0.04	-0.06	-0.06	0.03
Interest	0.11 ^{***}	0.14 ^{***}	0.13 ^{***}	0.05	0.15 ^{**}	0.15 ^{**}
Ideology	-0.20 ^{***}	0.31 ^{***}	0.33 ^{***}	0.23 ^{***}	-0.18 ^{***}	0.29 ^{***}
Global standing	-0.19 ^{***}	0.13 ^{***}	-0.17 ^{***}	0.14 ^{**}	-0.16 ^{***}	0.15 ^{**}

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. # $p < .10$.

As shown in Table 2, when a Democrat held the White House, on the other hand, among Democrats there was a significant positive relationship between *perceived global standing* and *in-group favoritism* during the presidencies of Clinton, $\beta = 0.09$ ($SE = 1.08$), $p = .001$, and Obama, $\beta = 0.20$ ($SE = 0.96$), $p < .001$. Conversely, Republicans showed a significant negative relationship between *perceived global standing* and *in-group favoritism* when Clinton, $\beta = -0.14$ ($SE = 1.08$), $p < .001$, and Obama, $\beta = -0.16$ ($SE = 1.71$), $p < .001$, were president. H1, therefore, received strong and consistent support.

Table 2. Relationship Between Perceptions About the United States' Global Standing and In-Group Favoritism During Democratic Presidencies.

	Clinton		Obama	
	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
	β	β	β	β
Age	0.05	-0.04	0.00	-0.02
Gender	0.08 ^{**}	0.01	0.04 [*]	-0.01
Education	-0.10	-0.03	-0.01	-0.06 [*]
Income	-0.06 [*]	0.02	-0.04	-0.02
White	-0.10 ^{***}	0.06 [*]	-0.15 ^{***}	0.03
Interest	0.13 ^{***}	0.18 ^{***}	0.13 ^{***}	0.12 ^{***}
Ideology	-0.22 ^{***}	0.28 ^{***}	-0.22 ^{***}	0.35 ^{***}
Global standing	0.09 ^{**}	-0.14 ^{***}	0.20 ^{***}	-0.16 ^{***}

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Party and Perceptions of America's Global Standing

As shown in Table 3, Republicans were significantly more likely than Democrats to hold a more optimistic appraisal of the United States' global standing during the presidencies of Reagan, $\beta = 0.24$ ($SE = 0.03$), $p < .001$; H. W. Bush, $\beta = 0.18$ ($SE = 0.04$), $p < .001$; and W. Bush, $\beta = 0.38$ ($SE = 0.06$), $p < .001$. Conversely, Republicans were significantly more likely than Democrats to hold a more pessimistic

appraisal of the United States' global standing during the presidencies of Clinton, $\beta = -0.22$ ($SE = 0.03$), $p < .001$, and Obama, $\beta = -0.36$ ($SE = 0.03$), $p < .001$. $H2$ was therefore supported.

Table 3. Relationship Between Party Affiliation and Perceptions of the United States' Global Standing.

	Reagan β	H. W. Bush β	Clinton β	W. Bush β	Obama β
Age	-0.14***	-0.12***	-0.05**	-0.06 [#]	-0.03 [#]
Gender	-0.11***	-0.11***	-0.05**	-0.00	-0.01
Education	-0.04 [#]	0.02	-0.08***	-0.13***	0.01
Income	0.04 [#]	0.01	0.02	0.03	-0.01
White	0.01	0.01	-0.04*	0.02	-0.11***
Interest	0.04*	0.00	-0.17***	-0.04	0.04*
Ideology	0.09***	0.09**	-0.07***	0.07 [#]	-0.17***
Party	0.24***	0.18***	-0.22***	0.38***	-0.36***

Note. Party: 0 = Democrat, 1 = Republican.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [#] $p < .10$.

Study 1 Discussion

Study 1 provided evidence (1) that party evaluations are affected by perceptions of the United States' global standing, and (2) that perceptions about the nation's global standing are contingent upon party affiliation. Specifically, analysis of ANES data from 1984 to 2012 shows a clear pattern of partisan evaluations shifting depending on who holds the White House. As the United States' perceived global standing improves, a president's partisans hold higher levels of in-group favoritism. When the perceived standing drops, however, they hold more pessimistic evaluations about their group's standing. For members of the opposing party, the reverse is true—as perceptions of the United States' global standing become more pessimistic, they display more in-group favoritism. Further, evaluations of the country's global standing appear to be filtered through a partisan lens. Members of the president's party are more likely to hold an elevated perception of the United States' global standing, while members of the opposing party are more likely to hold a more pessimistic appraisal of the nation's standing. Although members of the president's party might demonstrate less in-group favoritism as they perceive the country's global standing to drop, they are less likely to hold such a pessimistic appraisal to begin with.

Study 2

Having found initial support for $H1$ and $H2$, we set out to more clearly establish causality and directly test how partisans process communication messages proclaiming American exceptionalism to be either intact or in jeopardy. Specifically, Study 2 employs an experimental design to more directly test whether perceptions of the United States' global standing are conditioned by party affiliation ($H2$) as well as to examine how partisans process news media messages that offer either optimistic or pessimistic portrayals of American exceptionalism ($H3$). Data for Study 2 were collected in 2014, when Barack Obama was president of the United States. We therefore expected that Democrats would have a higher evaluation

of America's global standing, while Republicans would be more pessimistic about the current state of the union.

Participants

A sample of Republican and Democrat participants was recruited through Survey Sampling International (SSI). SSI uses quota sampling to recruit samples whose demographic profiles closely mirror those of the target population. A comparison of study participants ($N = 196$) to the national population shows that the sample provided a good representation of Republican and Democrat identifiers (see Table 4).

Table 4. Comparison of Study Samples to National Party Populations (in percentages).

	National Democrats	Study Democrats	National Republicans	Study Republicans
Gender				
Male	43	49	52	48
Female	57	51	48	52
Age ^a				
18–29	17	19	13	16
30–49	32	36	33	37
50–64	31	28	30	27
≥ 65	19	17	23	20
Racial identity				
White	61	70	87	92
Black	21	21	2	1
Hispanic	10	7	5	6
Income				
≤ \$30,000	29	23	19	14
\$30,001–\$75,000	32	50	34	48
≥ \$75,001	29	27	34	14

^a Excluding those under age 18.

Experimental Procedure

Study 2 employed a two-cell between-subjects experimental design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two versions of a constructed op-ed news article that participants were told "appeared in a recent issue of *USA Today*." The article was either (1) optimistic or (2) pessimistic that the United States' status as the greatest country in the world would remain intact. The optimistic American exceptionalism story argued that the United States has always overcome the challenges it has faced, pointed to signs of an economic rebound, claimed that U.S. values were as strong as ever, and asserted that "without hesitation we are the world's lone superpower." The pessimistic story argued that the United States was experiencing a long-term decline, pointed to signs of economic stagnation, questioned whether

Americans still hold exceptional values, and asserted “we can no longer claim without hesitation that we are the world’s lone superpower.”

Measures

Partisan affiliation. Participants were asked, “Which of the following best describes your party affiliation?” (*Democrat, Republican, Other, None*). Participants who did not answer Democrat or Republican were redirected out of the survey.

Perceived global standing. Participants were asked on a 7-point scale ranging from *grown much weaker* to *grown much stronger*, “During the past year, would you say that the United States’ position in the world has grown weaker, stayed about the same, or grown stronger?” ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.44$).

Random assignment check. In total, 97 participants (49 Democrats, 48 Republicans) were assigned to the pessimistic condition, and 99 participants (52 Democrats, 47 Republicans) were assigned to the optimistic condition. There were no significant differences in the distribution of demographic variables such as age, $\chi^2(54) = 54.134$, $p = .469$; education, $\chi^2(4) = 6.14$, $p = .189$; income, $\chi^2(7) = 4.787$, $p = .686$; gender, $\chi^2(1) = 0.516$, $p = .473$; White, $\chi^2(1) = 0.209$, $p = .648$; or party, $\chi^2(1) = 0.079$, $p = .778$.

Analytic Technique

The interaction between political affiliation and news coverage about American exceptionalism on perceived global standing was assessed using a two-way analysis of variance. Planned comparisons, using the Sidak correction to control for Type I error, were used to examine the effects of the manipulation within parties.

Study 2 Results

Contrary to expectations, there was not a significant interaction between the news coverage and political party, $F(1, 192) = 0.48$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$, $p = .49$. There were, however, main effects for the news coverage manipulation, $F(1, 192) = 5.99$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$, $p = .015$, and for party, $F(1, 192) = 34.39$, $\eta^2 = 0.15$, $p < .001$. Pairwise comparisons show that among Republicans, appraisals of the United States’ global standing were significantly lower in the pessimistic ($M = 2.51$, $SE = 0.19$) than in the optimistic condition ($M = 3.10$, $SE = 0.19$), $p = .03$. Among Democrats, however, there was not a significant difference between the pessimistic ($M = 3.75$, $SE = 0.19$) and the optimistic condition ($M = 4.08$, $SE = 0.18$), $p = .21$. Additionally, pairwise comparisons show that Republicans held significantly lower appraisals than Democrats in both the pessimistic ($p < .001$) and optimistic ($p < .001$) conditions (see Figure 1). We therefore found partial support for H3.

Study 2 Discussion

Although there was not a significant interaction between political party and the experimental manipulation, we find evidence that partisans' assessments of the United States' global standing are conditioned by their political affiliation. First, there was a main effect of party. Democrats, on the whole, were much more optimistic about the nation's global standing than Republicans. This was expected, given that Obama was president at the time of data collection. The key importance of party affiliation may have accounted for a lack of significant two-way interaction. Regardless of whether the news story promoted or undermined American exceptionalism, there was a fairly consistent gap in how optimistic Democrats and Republicans were about the United States' global standing.

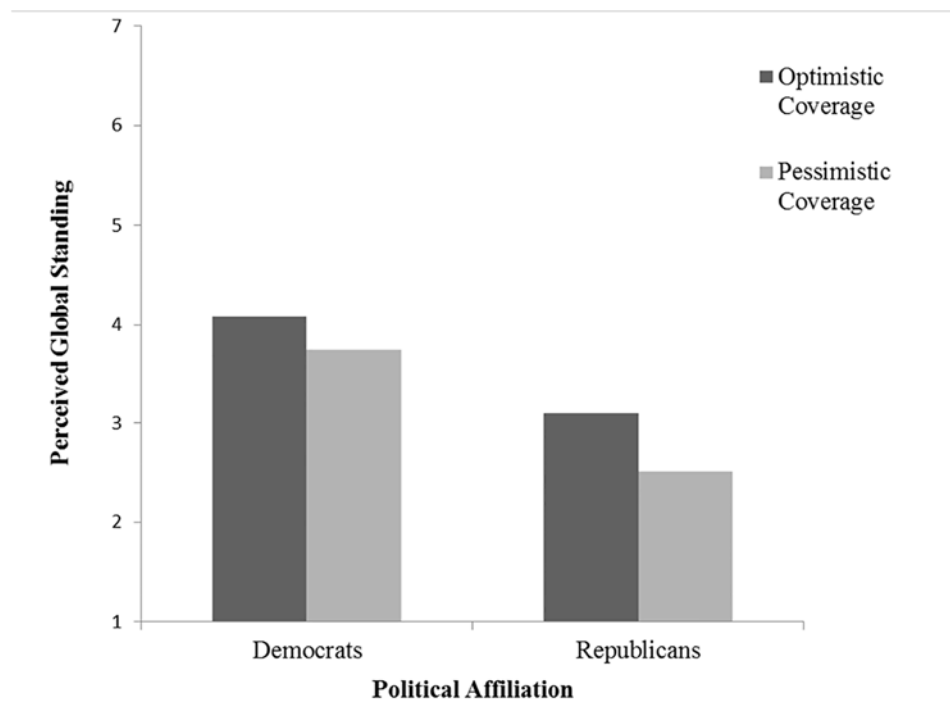


Figure 1. Interaction between political affiliation and news coverage about American exceptionalism.

We did expect that the pessimistic news coverage would lower perceptions about the United States' global standing at a more dramatic rate among Republicans than among Democrats. Pairwise comparisons do provide some evidence of this trend. The manipulation significantly lowered Republicans' perceptions of the country's global standing. Among Democrats, however, the effects of the manipulation were nonsignificant. These results provide evidence that news coverage about the United States' global standing can influence citizen perceptions, but we only see clear evidence of this trend among members of the party that does not currently hold the White House.

Study 3

Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate that evaluations of the United States' standing in the world are filtered through a partisan lens. Partisanship should not only come into play at the level of individual psychology, however. National identity is constructed through communication processes (Coe & Neumann, 2011; Hutcheson et al., 2004). Presidential candidates should strategically strive to construct a portrait of the United States (positive or negative) that will help boost their chances of being elected. The party that holds the White House should be motivated to uphold an idealized version of the United States, because they wish to be positively associated with national pride. These partisans need to convince citizens that things are going well in the country and that voting to keep the same party in power will ensure the country's continued prosperity. Alternatively, the party that does not hold the presidency should benefit by undermining American exceptionalism. The more they can convince potential voters that things are not going well, the more likely citizens will be to vote for change. Study 3 tests our expectations that presidential candidates will express more pessimism about the United States' current status when the opposing party holds the White House (H4). We do so by examining the acceptance speeches of presidential nominees.

Data

To examine whether presidential candidates attempt to undermine American exceptionalism strategically, we examined the convention speeches of every Democratic and Republican presidential nominee from 1948 to 2016. We use convention speeches because they serve as the symbolic kickoff for the general election, where each presidential candidate has the opportunity to unite his or her party and highlight the key themes that will be persistent throughout the general election (Benoit, Blaney, & Pier, 2000). Thirty-four speeches were retrieved from the American Presidency Project (see Table 5 and Table 6). We then performed a content analysis to count the number of times each candidate explicitly mentioned a concern about the United States' current status.

Measures

Pessimism about the United States' standing was conceptualized as any statement that suggests the nation's greatness, standing, or well-being is *not currently* what it once was or should be. This includes discourse about (a) economic, social, or political challenges and shortcomings; (b) concerns about the direction of the country; (c) the erosion of U.S. values; (d) a lessening of the nation's greatness and/or standing in the world; (e) the need to change or rebuild the United States. Each speech was coded for the number of distinct times these concepts appeared. Intercoder reliability was assessed on a roughly 10% subsample (four randomly selected speeches). Results demonstrated very strong reliability (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .97$).

Pessimism about the United States was then operationalized for analytic purposes as a ratio of the total counts of concerns about the United States ($M = 10.56$, $SD = 10.29$) divided by the number of words in the speech ($M = 3,817.32$, $SD = 1,350.26$). This proportion measure accounts for the variance in

length of each speech. For ease of interpretation, this ratio was presented as number of threats per thousand words ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 2.53$).

Party status. Each speech was coded based on whether the White House was currently held by the candidate's political (1) in-group or (2) out-group.

Party. Each speech was coded as presented by a (1) Democrat or (2) Republican.

Study 3 Results

Consistent with expectations, results of an independent-samples t test were significant, $t(34) = 7.61$, $p < .001$. Specifically, out-group candidates were more likely to evoke pessimism about the United States' standing ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 2.37$) than in-group candidates ($M = 0.90$, $SD = 1.08$). H4 was therefore supported. Tables 5 and 6 display the results for each presidential candidate.

Table 5. Republican Presidential Nomination Acceptance Speeches.

Year	Presidential candidate	Party in		Number of threat codes	Total words	Threats per 1,000 words
		White	House?			
1948	Thomas Dewey	No		6	1,371	4.38
1952	Dwight Eisenhower	No		6	1,331	4.51
1956	Dwight Eisenhower	Yes		3	4,342	0.69
1960	Richard Nixon	Yes		4	5,356	0.75
1964	Barry Goldwater	No		20	3,186	6.28
1968	Richard Nixon	No		30	4,664	6.43
1972	Richard Nixon	Yes		0	4,348	0.00
1976	Gerald Ford	Yes		2	2,895	0.69
1980	Ronald Reagan	No		42	4,640	7.03
1984	Ronald Reagan	Yes		0	4,926	0.00
1988	George H. W. Bush	Yes		0	4,139	0.00
1992	George H. W. Bush	Yes		9	4,511	2.00
1996	Robert Dole	No		17	5,771	2.95
2000	George W. Bush	No		16	4,118	3.89
2004	George W. Bush	Yes		7	5,012	1.40
2008	John McCain	Yes		10	3,971	2.52
2012	Mitt Romney	No		23	4,087	5.63
2016	Donald Trump	No		67	5,096	13.15

Table 6. Democratic Presidential Nomination Acceptance Speeches.

Year	Presidential candidate	Party in White House?	Number of threat codes	Total words	Threats per 1,000 words
1948	Harry Truman	Yes	2	2,687	0.74
1952	Adlai Stevenson	Yes	1	1,723	0.58
1956	Adlai Stevenson	No	17	2,449	6.94
1960	John Kennedy	No	13	2,561	5.08
1964	Lyndon Johnson	Yes	0	2,297	0.00
1968	Hubert Humphrey	Yes	1	2,862	0.35
1972	George McGovern	No	15	2,123	6.78
1976	Jimmy Carter	No	20	2,932	6.82
1980	Jimmy Carter	Yes	1	4,660	0.21
1984	Walter Mondale	No	10	2,418	4.14
1988	Michael Dukakis	No	7	3,194	2.19
1992	Bill Clinton	No	26	4,426	5.87
1996	Bill Clinton	Yes	0	6,991	0.00
2000	Al Gore	Yes	3	5,411	0.55
2004	John Kerry	No	20	5,212	3.84
2008	Barack Obama	No	21	4,697	4.47
2012	Barack Obama	Yes	7	4,478	1.56
2016	Hillary Clinton	Yes	22	5,389	4.08

There are some notable examples that exemplify these trends. In particular, several candidates evoked numerous displays of pessimism when the opposing party held the White House, but this pessimism disappeared the following election when they were incumbents (Richard Nixon: 30 instances in 1968, none in 1972; Jimmy Carter: 20 instances in 1976, one in 1980; Ronald Reagan: 42 instances in 1980, none in 1984; Bill Clinton: 26 instances in 1992, none in 1996). Conversely, in 1952, following Harry Truman's (D) presidency, Adlai Stevenson (D) expressed little pessimism (one instance). Stevenson lost the election, and the following year, running as a challenger, expressed much more pessimism (17 instances). It is also worth noting that Donald Trump displayed far more pessimism than any other candidate.

Additionally, we considered other factors that may have influenced the displays of pessimism (party affiliation and temporality). First, we checked whether these results were contingent upon party affiliation. Results of a two-way analysis of variance revealed no significant interaction between party status and party affiliation, $F(1, 32) = 0.53$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$, $p = 0.47$; nor was there a main effect of party affiliation, $F(1, 32) = 0.52$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$, $p = 0.47$. Next, we used ordinary least squares regression to check whether the displays of pessimism had changed over time. Results did not provide any evidence of a time effect $b = 0.02$ ($SE = 0.02$), $p = .382$. This suggests that these trends are not contingent upon party or time period.

Study 3 Discussion

The results of Study 3 reveal a long-standing tradition of the party that does not hold the White House attempting to undermine American exceptionalism, while members of the party that holds the White House are much less likely to paint such a dire portrait. These findings provide evidence that politicians evoke concerns about the United States' current standing for strategic reasons. It appears to be understood that whichever party holds the White House will be directly associated with the country's successes or failures. These cognitive associations, along with the desire to promote the interest of the in-group and derogate the out-group, lead to politicians emphasizing the problems in the United States when they do not hold the White House, while downplaying or ignoring these issues when they do.

General Discussion

Although there is no doubt that American exceptionalism is an important and widespread belief in the United States, there is also a clear trend of U.S. partisans casting doubt about the greatness of the country. This tendency to undermine American exceptionalism seems at odds with what we know about the impetus for people to hold elevated opinions of their national identity. We argue that partisans are willing to undermine American exceptionalism when it helps improve the relative standing of their party. Specifically, the United States' successes or failures reflect on the president and, in turn, on his or her political party. Thus, the more citizens perceive the United States to have a dominant global standing, the more the president's partisans can justify in-group favoritism. Conversely, members of the opposing party stand to benefit when the nation's global position is perceived to weaken. Given this context, we expected partisans to employ both cognitive and discursive strategies to improve the relative standing of their party. Specifically, we predicted that partisans will process political information and political elites will talk about the United States in a way that either upholds or undermines American exceptionalism, depending on which party currently holds the White House.

Results of three studies provide clear support for these expectations. First, Study 1 provides evidence that evaluations of the United States' global standing are linked to evaluations of the political parties. Additionally, it demonstrates that partisans' appraisals of the country's global standing are affected by which party currently holds the White House. Study 2 provides additional evidence that appraisals of the United States' global standing are more optimistic when the president is identified as an in-group member and are more pessimistic when the president is a member of the out-group. Finally, Study 3 demonstrates that the degree to which U.S. presidential candidates promote or undermine American exceptionalism depends on whether their party currently holds the White House. We elaborate on these findings below.

First, because the president symbolically represents the United States, as well as his or her political party, we expected that a partisan's evaluations of the country's global standing would influence the degree to which partisans engage in in-group favoritism. Analysis of ANES data from 1984 to 2012 shows a clear pattern of partisan evaluations shifting depending on who holds the White House. As the United States' perceived global standing improves, a president's partisans hold higher levels of in-group favoritism. When the perceived standing drops, however, they are likely to hold less optimistic evaluations

about their group's relative standing. For members of the opposing party, the reverse is true—as perceptions of the nation's global standing become more pessimistic, they display more in-group favoritism. These findings are important because they demonstrate a widespread connection between the United States' global standing and the relative status of the political parties.

Such a connection would provide the necessary motivation for partisans to evaluate and/or discuss the state of the union in a way that promotes the interest of the political in-group. Committed partisans may be so caught up in political competition that they would prefer to see the United States look bad if it also makes the opposing party look bad. It is not surprising for anyone who has followed U.S. politics in recent years that partisans would employ such a tactic. For example, during Obama's first term, Republican leaders made it clear that one of their primary objectives was making sure Obama did not succeed as president—even if it came at the cost of U.S. success (Lillis, 2011). Similarly, many Democrats are openly hoping that Trump's legislative plans fail miserably (Ferrechio, 2017).

Although it may seem obvious that partisans are willing to put their party's interest over the country, there is limited empirical evidence demonstrating this behavior. Thus, this study provides important evidence that Americans are willing to undermine American exceptionalism when it serves their party's interests. We sought to demonstrate these patterns in two ways. First, we examined the degree to which partisans had optimistic or pessimistic appraisals about the United States' standing in the world. Second, we investigated the discursive strategies employed by presidential candidates to discover whether they were likely to express concerns about the United States when the other party holds the White House.

Studies 1 and 2 provided evidence that perceptions about the United States' global status are contingent upon party affiliation and are filtered through a partisan lens. In both studies, we found that members of the president's party are more likely to hold an elevated perception of the United States' global standing, while members of the opposing party are more likely to hold a more pessimistic appraisal. Although members of the president's party might be likely to engage in less in-group favoritism as they perceive the country's global standing to drop, they are also less likely to hold such a pessimistic appraisal to begin with. Finally, we expected that politicians would discuss the United States' global standing in a way that was most conducive to promoting the relative status of their party. The president will clearly benefit from promoting American exceptionalism, because the nation's successes and failures are used to evaluate the president. At the same time, the candidates from the opposing party would benefit from convincing citizens that the United States is not currently all it is supposed to be. The results of Study 3 reveal that presidential candidates strategically undermine American exceptionalism when their party does not hold the White House, while in-group candidates shy away from expressing concern about the United States. These findings provide evidence that politicians evoke concerns about the country's current standing for strategic reasons. These strategic calculations are patently clear when looking at presidential candidates such as Nixon, Carter, Reagan, and Clinton, who all expressed high levels of pessimism about the country when they were running as challengers but abandoned such dire portrayals four years later when they were campaigning for reelection.

More recently, the strategy of undermining American exceptionalism proved effective for Donald Trump, whose convention speech was far more pessimistic about the United States than any other speech

in our sample. Trump's slogan, "Make America Great Again," clearly conveys that the United States has lost its exceptional status. Throughout his campaign, Trump lamented the erosion of the United States' economy, political institutions, and world standing. This message resonated with many disaffected voters who were ready to try something different (Greenhouse, 2016). Now that Trump is president, however, the responsibility for the country's success symbolically falls on his shoulders. Unsurprisingly, he began touting his "tremendous success" early in his presidency (Freeman, 2017). We should, therefore, expect that Trump's 2020 campaign will shy away from critiquing the current state of the country.

It is important to note some limitations to these studies. First, Studies 1 and 2 relied on single-item measures for perceived global standing. This was a result of using ANES measures. Clearly, perceived global standing is a more complex concept that would be better measured with a range of items. A similar issue arises in Study 3, where we coded "pessimism about America" as a homogeneous variable, even though politicians can express pessimism about many different aspects of the United States. In short, this study operationalizes some of our concepts in a way that simplifies their complex nature. Study 3 also relied solely on convention speeches. While convention speeches provide a good representation of the type of campaign a presidential candidate will run (Benoit et al., 2000), a lot happens during presidential campaigns that we did not capture. Examining a wider range of presidential speeches, as well as the types of pessimism expressed by different candidates, and placing that discourse in historical context could provide some valuable insights into the ways U.S. politicians seek to construct more pessimistic or optimistic portrayals of the nation.

Despite these limitations, taken together, the results of these three studies provide some important additions to the American exceptionalism literature. Specifically, we have demonstrated that, in many cases, partisans are willing to undermine American exceptionalism if it promotes the interest of their political party. Such findings lend credence to the concerns that partisans are unwilling to find pragmatic solutions that can benefit the country (Gutmann & Thompson, 2012; Harbridge et al., 2014). Part of the problem is likely that partisans truly believe the United States can only be great if *their version* of the United States is enacted. Partisans get so caught up in a symbolic war to define social reality (Hunter, 1991) that they may have a hard time viewing the United States as exceptional if it does not promote the policies and values that they believe to be at the essence of U.S. identity. That is, partisans desire to construct a version of U.S. identity that is synonymous with their partisan identity. Such a struggle demonstrates that even though most Americans can agree there is something special about American identity, partisans do not hesitate to throw the United States under the bus if it helps them achieve their partisan goals. This article provides important empirical evidence that partisan commitments can motivate Americans to both evaluate and discuss the nation's status less favorably if it serves the interest of their political party. Even though there is widespread agreement that the country would be better served if the political parties put aside their differences, there is little evidence that partisans are willing to prioritize the country over their party (Gutmann & Thompson, 2012; Harbridge et al., 2014). Ultimately, partisans appear willing to undermine American exceptionalism if it benefits their party. This suggests that until Americans come to see their national identity as more important than their partisan identity, pragmatic solutions that benefit the country may be in short supply.

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