

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# How Politics Shapes State Identities in the US

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## Abstract

The increasing nationalization of state and local politics alongside polarization and gridlock at the federal level have led states to become sites where policymaking on national hot button issues occurs. This political climate calls for a reconsideration of existing accounts of state identities, which posit that state identities are generally weak and apolitical in their content. This study considers the following questions: To what extent do respondents identify with their state? How does their state identity compare with other politically salient groups, like national identity, partisanship, race, and gender? To what extent and under what conditions are political considerations associated with state identities? How do results compare across different measures of state identification? Results show that a majority of respondents say that being from their state is an important part of their identity and the proportion saying so is similar to the proportion saying their race, class, and political party are important. Although politics may not come to mind first when respondents consider why their state is important, it relates to general feelings of connectedness, particularly for people in the political majority in their state, and being in the political majority is associated with increased levels of state identification. Results are similar across different measures of state identity. Closed- and open-ended questions show politics emerges most clearly when people explain why their state is *not* important to their identity. I discuss the implications of these findings and offer thoughts for future research.

**Keywords:** state identities; state pride; belonging; partisanship; polarization

## Introduction

It has been well documented that American politics has become increasingly nationalized in recent years (Hersh 2020; Hopkins 2018). To say that politics has nationalized can refer to the increasing alignment in how people vote across federal, state, and local offices (Amlani and Algara 2021). It can refer to the increasing focus on national politics in local news as well as a decline in local news outlets and consumption patterns, such that Americans know more about what's going on in Washington, D.C., than about what's going on in their statehouse or city hall (Martin and McCrain 2019; Moskowitz 2021). Nationalization of politics can weaken the ability of citizens to hold state and local leaders accountable and deprive pressing local issues of attention and

resources (Hersh 2020; Hopkins 2018). And it can potentially weaken the connections people have to their states, which could have consequences for other important political outcomes, such as trust in government (Pears and Sydnor 2022a, 2022b).

The goal of this study is to explore people's psychological identification with their states given our current context of highly nationalized politics and to consider how political factors do or do not relate to state identity. Another goal is to illustrate the utility of different measurement strategies. On the one hand, state identity could be low, and when people think about their connection to their state, they think of nonpolitical factors, such as the people they know there, food, music, and nature (Hopkins 2018). On the other hand, our nationalized politics exists in a highly polarized environment marked by legislative gridlock that has been accompanied by increased state-level policymaking on hot-button issues such as immigration, abortion, guns, voting rights, and more (Cohen, Donley, and Rebouche 2023; Colbern and Ramakrishnan 2021; Grumbach 2022; Gulasekaram and Ramakrishnan 2015). As this study is being written, Texas is proposing to take unilateral enforcement action along its border with Mexico, and leaders of several other states have issued supporting statements. States have also become vibrant sites of policy activity with the help of national organizations using coordinated cross-state efforts (Hertel-Fernandez 2019). With states moving in different directions on such issues, people are increasingly witnessing national politics play out on the state stage (Caughey and Warshaw 2022; Shor and McCarty 2022; The Economist 2022).

Given this context, perhaps it is no coincidence that several states are having pitched battles over whether to redesign their state seals and flags and, if so, what images they should include. Mississippi adopted a new flag in 2021, replacing a flag that included confederate imagery with one that features a magnolia flower. Since then, flag redesign efforts have spread across the country. In early 2023, Utah lawmakers approved a new state flag, which promptly led to a referendum effort to bring back the old flag. Critics charge that the new flag, which features a beehive and mountains, is "too woke" (Andrews 2023). Debates about the redesign of Maine's flag have been described as a "proxy war" over concerns about demographic change, climate change, economic inequality, and, fundamentally, the state's identity (Cullen 2023). As this study was being written, Minnesota unveiled a new flag consisting of two shades of blue and a star, and a new state seal depicting a loon, and the state's Republican Party has since begun selling merchandise saying "Don't PC our flag" (Murphy 2024). Many other states, including Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Nebraska, South Carolina, and Michigan, are experiencing similar redesign soul-searching processes, with dialog that touches on race, history, tradition, and identity. Still other states, like Washington, have more nascent citizen-led efforts underway (Smith and Almukhtar 2023). Put simply, a significant number of Americans live in states where debates about the state's identity are increasingly visible.

These trends suggest it is plausible that state identities are indeed meaningful to people and that levels of state identity could vary with people's political contexts. Moreover, people may be becoming more likely to think of political factors when they think about their connection to their state, as opposed to primarily thinking about family, food, and nature. Consequently, people's sense of connection to (or alienation from) their states merits ongoing examination.

In the sections that follow, I review scholarship on state identities in the US. Then I lay out my research questions and describe my data. Next, I use a variety of measures to gauge people's psychological connections to their states and examine the

relationship of political factors to those connections. I find first that a majority of respondents say that being from their state is an important part of their identity and that the proportion saying so is similar to the proportion that says that their race, class, and political party are important to their identities. Other measures of connection to one's state show similarly high rates. Second, I find that being in the political majority is associated with an increased likelihood that people will cite seemingly apolitical feelings of belonging as the reason why their state is important to their identity; politics may not be the first thing that comes to mind when people are asked why their state is important, but general feelings of connectedness are higher among those in the political majority. Third, I analyze responses to open-ended questions, which illustrate that politics emerges more often when people discuss why they are proud of their state than when they discuss why they are proud of the US more generally. Using both closed- and open-ended questions, I show that politics emerges most clearly when respondents explain why their state is *not* important to their identity. Asking why the state is not important is not merely the converse of asking why it is important; it taps into a different set of considerations where politics looms larger. Finally, I use regression analysis to further document the association between being in the political majority and state identities. I conclude by discussing the implications of these findings and offering thoughts for future research.

### What we know about state identities

Scholarly interest in state identities is emerging amid a surge of research on the politics of place-based identities more broadly. That research tends to focus on places that are “vernacular regions,” that is, places that exist in people’s minds but that are not typically marked by explicit political boundaries and that lack a clear policy-making apparatus (Cooper and Knotts 2017). Examples include research on rural and urban identities and connections to places like Appalachia or “the South” (Cooper and Knotts 2017; Cooper, Knotts, and Elders 2011; Cooper, Knotts, and Livingston 2010; Cramer 2016; Fudge and Armaly 2021; Jacobs and Munis 2019, 2020; Jacobs and Munis 2022; Trujillo 2022; Trujillo and Crowley 2022; Williams 2018). Work in this area highlights the important role that resentment plays in shaping the political importance of these place-based identities, marked by the feeling that resources, opportunities, and attention from politicians are unfairly distributed within a broader political unit. Resentment of this nature is less likely to have a role in shaping state identities, however, because it is often the state government that is the unit seen to be distributing resources, opportunities, and attention unfairly. State connections might lead people to feel pride or a sense of superiority relative to other states, which could be construed as the opposite of resentment, and that is a type of state identity examined in the present analysis (Jiménez *et al.* 2021).

When considering state identities in particular, Hopkins’ analysis is an important starting point. In documenting the nationalization of American politics, he argued that “Americans are far more attached to their nation than to their states and localities” and that “national identity has significantly more political content than do subnational identities” (2018, 171). The data he used to draw these conclusions are now nearly a decade old, and the level of contentious and polarizing state-level policymaking has increased (Shor and McCarty 2022). And as Bulman-Pozen writes

in developing her theory of partisan federalism, polarization leads more national policy battles to be fought at the state level, which “recasts the longstanding debate about whether Americans identify with the states. Democratic and Republican, not state and national, are today’s political identities, but the state and federal governments are sites of partisan affiliation. As these governments advance distinct partisan positions, individuals identify with them in shifting, variable ways” (2014, 1078). She goes on to posit that finding connection with a state can serve as a proxy for national identity in a time when people feel that the national government is deviating from their aspirational hopes for the country. She writes, “The states are not, for these Americans, something different in kind from the federal government; instead, they represent the ‘real’ America at a time when the federal government fails to do so” (2014, 1118). As states seemingly advance different partisan visions, an updated examination of Hopkins’ conclusions is warranted.

Additionally, Hopkins identified the largely apolitical content of state identities by asking people what made them proud about their state. As I illustrate here, far more political content emerges when asking people about what they do *not* like about their state. Perhaps people who feel strongly connected to their state do not think that politics has anything to do with it, but that is only because the politics of their state is working well for them. I propose that it is when politics is *not* working well for people that they become more aware of the significant role it plays in promoting (or hampering) a sense of belonging, identity, and connectedness with their state. Just as people might not appreciate the role of government programs and policies in their lives when they run smoothly, harmoniously, and with little administrative burden (Jiménez *et al.* 2021; Mettler 2011), perhaps people are unaware of how much partisan politics affects their place-based sense of self when those politics align with their own preferences.

In more recent work, Pears and Syndor find that levels of identification with one’s state are not as high as national identification, but that there are many people who feel strongly connected to their state and that such connections improve trust in government generally and in unelected government officials (2022b; 2022a). Importantly for the present inquiry, they also find that being in the political majority in one’s state (ex: being a Republican in a state that Trump won in 2016 or that had a Republican governor) increases state identification. Using state identification as an independent variable, Winburn and colleagues show that having a strong state identity improves evaluations of one’s governor, particularly for out-partisans (ex: Democrats in a state with a Republican governor) and independents (Winburn *et al.* 2024).

## Research questions and data

With this existing scholarship as a foundation, I consider several research questions: To what extent do respondents identify with their state? How does their state identity compare with other politically salient groups, like national identity, partisanship, race, and gender? To what extent and under what conditions are political considerations associated with state identities? When are such political considerations acknowledged by respondents? When are political considerations *not* mentioned but nonetheless associated with measures of identification? How do results compare across different measures of state identification?

These research questions are informed by social identity theory, which recognizes the social and contextual nature of identity (Tajfel 1982). One's social identity is that part of a person's sense of self that emerges from connections to salient groups, and a large volume of research has shown that the salience of groups can change as one's context (real or perceived) changes (Jardina 2019; Mohamed 2013; Pérez, Robertson, and Vicuña 2023; Sanchez, Masuoka, and Abrams 2019; Theiss-Morse 2009; Transue 2007; Wong *et al.* 2011). Perceptions of discrimination against oneself individually or against one's ethnic group are often important contextual barriers to feeling connected to a broader national group (Lien, Conway, and Wong 2004; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Schildkraut 2011). This research demonstrates that context can alter the salience of a group-based identity as well the relationship between that identity and other political attitudes and behaviors. Based on the expectations of social identity theory and on this existing scholarship, it is plausible that a setting where one's party is prevailing politically is one where a connection to that state is enhanced, for it can increase the sense that one is a prototypical group member (Theiss-Morse 2009). Likewise, being in a setting where one's party is struggling politically could contribute to feeling like an outsider and heighten an awareness of politics as a reason why one's state identity is not stronger (Jiménez *et al.* 2021).

To consider the role of politics in how people think about their relationship to their state, I examine how being in the partisan majority or minority in one's state is associated with state identification. I also consider responses to open-ended questions that asked half of the respondents to describe what it is about their state that makes them proud and what it is about their state that they wish were different. Following Hopkins (2018), I compare responses to those questions to similar questions asked to the other half of the sample about the US as a whole. I also examine responses to closed-ended questions that ask directly about whether politics has anything to do with why people do or do not identify with their state.

To address these questions, I conducted a survey on the Cloud Research Connect (CRC) platform in May of 2023. CRC operates similarly to other online surveys, where respondents opt into a participant network and are invited to complete surveys. Invitations for this survey were targeted to match ranges surrounding 2020 U.S. Census estimates for age, gender, education, race, and ethnicity (Hispanic or non-Hispanic). [Supplementary Table A1](#) in the appendix compares the CRC sample to the 2020 American National Election Study and to the 2023 American Community Survey. As I illustrate in the sections that follow, my findings are in line with theoretically grounded expectations and confirm findings in emerging research on state identities. Additionally, one goal of the present study is to convince readers that survey questions like the ones used here should be included in future data collection, which will undoubtedly employ different methodologies across different political contexts.

Participants were paid \$3 for completing the survey. The mean duration was 11.5 minutes. The sample size is 1203, with at least one respondent from each state and Washington, D.C. CRC vets participants to minimize inattentiveness, bots, and fraudulent accounts. Only one participant failed two out of three attention check questions embedded in the survey; none failed all three. Additionally, the open-ended responses did not contain any nonsensical entries. Once the survey was completed, the outcome of the 2020 presidential election in respondents' states and their governor's party in 2023 were appended to the dataset (American Governors Association 2024; MIT Election Data and Science Lab 2020).

## The prevalence of state identities

State identity was assessed using several approaches. Most straightforwardly, respondents were asked, “How important is [state of residence] to your identity?”<sup>1</sup> Response options were very important, somewhat important, not very important, and not at all important. They were also asked about how important being American is to their identity. Later, they were asked, “How important are each of the following to how you define yourself as a person?” and the subsequent list included political party, religion, gender, race, economic class, and geographic region. The order in which the items appeared was randomized.<sup>2</sup> Table 1 shows the mean responses on a 1–4 scale, where 1 = not at all important and 4 = very important, and the percentage of respondents who indicated that the identity in question was either very or somewhat important to their identity.

The mean levels of identification show that respondents have the strongest identification with being American (3.01) and with their gender (3.12). Besides those two, only race (2.65) has a higher mean than state (2.63), and state is well above the scale midpoint of 2.5. Using multiple measures in a scale, Pears and Sydnor also find that the mean level of state identification surpasses the midpoint (2022b). Table 1 also shows that over half of the respondents say that their state is very or somewhat important to their identity (58 percent), a level similar to race (56 percent), class (57 percent), and

**Table 1.** Importance of identities

Identity	Mean (1–4)	Percent very or somewhat important
State	2.63	58
American	3.01	72
Political party	2.51	53
Religion	2.29	45
Gender	3.12	77
Race	2.65	56
Economic class	2.61	57
Region	2.36	47

State Identification Survey 2023, available in supplementary materials.

<sup>1</sup>The one respondent from Washington, D.C., was asked about D.C. for all survey questions that referred to the respondents’ states. Pears and Sydnor (2022b) ask this question with “How important is being \_\_\_\_ to your identity?” and fill in the blank using a demonym (ex: Texan), while the present analysis asks, “How important is \_\_\_\_ to your identity?” and fills in the blank with the state name. When it comes to asking about state identities, there is no agreed-upon measure to use. One benefit of demonyms is that they allow the wording to be similar when one swaps in “American” in place of the state demonym, since “American” is also a demonym. I used “from Texas” instead of demonyms, however, because demonyms might work better for some states (ex: Texas = Texan) than others, where a nickname might be used instead of the state name (ex: Massachusetts = Bay Stater). I opted to always have the state name appear in the question. One contribution of the present study is that the one statistical analysis that is similar to Pears and Sydnor’s (using regression to see if being in the political majority is associated with state identity) finds a similar relationship, even though our measures differ in this regard.

<sup>2</sup>The wording “How important is \_\_\_\_ to your identity?” (or a close variation) has been used widely in existing work on national identity and on racial and ethnic identities (Citrin and Sears 2014; Fording and Schram 2023; Greene *et al.* 2020; Huddy and Khatib 2007; Jardina 2019; Jiménez *et al.* 2021; Pérez, Deichert, and Engelhardt 2019; Pérez, Robertson, and Vicuña 2023; Pérez *et al.* 2022; Theiss-Morse 2009). Some work uses this measure alone, while others include it in a scale with related questions. Since 2012, the American National Election Study has included this question to ask about American, racial, and ethnic identities.

**Table 2.** Typicality, pride, and shame

	State	American
Typical (% somewhat or very)	62	73
Proud (% agree somewhat or strongly)	60	69
Ashamed (% agree somewhat or strongly)	56	74

State Identification Survey 2023, available in supplementary materials.

political party (53 percent). Together, these statistics indicate that while Hopkins' observation that national identity is more important to people than their state identity still holds true, to say states are unimportant to people appears to be inaccurate; states seem quite important to many people's identities.

Other ways respondents' psychological connection to their state of residence was assessed were to ask them if they see themselves as a typical person from their state, if they are proud to be from their state, and if there are some things about their state that make them feel ashamed. Versions of these questions have been used in other research to assess elements of national identity, and here too respondents were also asked these questions about being American (Carter and Pérez 2016; Huddy and Khatib 2007; Pears and Sydnor 2022b; Theiss-Morse 2009). The proportions of respondents saying they are somewhat or very typical and that agree strongly or somewhat with the pride and shame questions are in Table 2.

The results indicate again that while connections to the country are generally higher than connections to states, state attachments are strong, with at least 60 percent of respondents seeing themselves as a typical person from their state and being proud to be from their state. Additionally, respondents are far *less* likely to say there are some things about their state that make them ashamed than they are to say the same about the US (56 versus 74 percent). [Supplementary Table A2](#) in the appendix shows these results broken down by how long one has been a resident in their state and shows that typicality and pride increase with greater length of residence while shame declines.

Since many people live in a state where they were not born and raised, respondents were asked, "If someone asks you what state you are from, do you say [state of residence] or do you say someplace else?" Eighty-one percent said their current state of residence. The high percentage of people reporting that they say they are from their current state of residence helps validate the technique of filling in the blank with one's state of residence in other questions in the survey. In other words, when asked, "How proud are you to be from [state of residence]," most respondents are seeing a state name that they consider to be the place that they really are from.

The survey also asked if people think their state is better than, the same as, or worse than other states. Only 17 percent of respondents said their state is worse than other states; the remainder were equally divided between better (43 percent) and the same (41 percent). That so few people say their state is worse than other states helps round out the assessment that people's states are generally held in high personal regard. Finally, in an exploratory attempt to tap into just how deeply state connections run for some people, the survey asked if people have any clothes, decorations, or household items with the shape of their state or the state flag on them and if they have any tattoos with the shape of their state or state flag. Thirty-four percent of

**Table 3.** Reasons why states are or are not important to people's identities

Why is state somewhat or very important to your identity?	% Yes
I like the political leanings of the state government	48.4
I like the political leanings of the people here	50.6
Political leaders here seem to care about people like me	44.5
The food	79.6
The culture	84.7
The natural environment	91.6
It's the place that I know best	84.1
I feel like I belong here	87.0
There are lots of other people like me here	78.0
I'm a big fan of a sports team here	53.0
Why is state not very or not at all important to your identity?	% Yes
I don't like the political leanings of the state government	54.5
I don't like the political leanings of the people here	51.6
Political leaders here do not seem to care about people like me	56.4
I haven't lived here for very long	18.0
I don't feel like I belong here	37.7
There aren't lots of people like me here	33.8
A lot of people here speak a different language than me	7.3
A lot of people here have a different accent than me	18.9

respondents reported owning items representing their state, and 2 percent have a tattoo that represents their state.<sup>3</sup>

### How politics matters

*Why states are or are not important to one's identity:* If people said that their state was *very* or *somewhat important* to their identity, they were shown a list of potential reasons why and were asked to indicate if they thought each item on the list was or was not a factor that affected the importance of their state identity. The list included a mix of political and apolitical items. Similarly, if people said that their state was *not very* or *not at all important*, they were shown a list of potential reasons and were asked to indicate if they thought each item on the list was or was not a factor affecting the lack of importance of their state identity. In both cases, the order of the items was randomized. The goals for asking these questions were, first, to see the degree to which political concerns are indicated relative to apolitical concerns and, second, to see if political concerns are indicated more frequently as reasons for a *lack* of identification than as reasons *for* identification. Additionally, while examining the political content of "top of the head" open-ended response is insightful (Hopkins 2018), it is also instructive to see whether people select political considerations when given an explicit opportunity to do so. The results appear in Table 3.

When it comes to indicating why one's state is important to their identity, political considerations are not as commonly cited as factors such as food, culture, and the natural environment, as prior research would lead us to expect (Hopkins 2018). But

<sup>3</sup>Respondents with tattoos were in California, Florida, Louisiana, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, and West Virginia. Time restrictions prevented me from asking similar exploratory questions about the US as a whole.



**Table 4.** General feelings of state belonging, by partisan politics

	“I feel like I belong here”	“There are lots of people like me here”
Democrat in Biden state	91.5	80.2
Democrat in Trump state	75.4	70.3
Republican in Trump state	94.9	83.8
Republican in Biden state	86.1	79.6

State Identification Survey, 2023, available in supplementary materials.

**Table 5.** Partisan politics and state identity

	“I like the political leanings of the state government”	“I like the political leanings of the people here”
Democrat in Biden state	65.2	62.4
Democrat in Trump state	26.1	29.7
Republican in Trump state	68.4	72.1
Republican in Biden state	26.9	38.9

State Identification Survey 2023, available in supplementary materials.

politics is not irrelevant. Half of the respondents said the politics of the people was a factor, and nearly half (48 percent) said the politics of political leaders was a factor. What’s more, strong majorities said that their state is important to their identity because they feel like they belong there and that there are lots of other people like them there (89 and 78 percent, respectively). Further examination reveals that politics is related to whether people cite these reasons for why their state is important. For example, as indicated in Table 4, among Democrats living in states that Biden won in 2020, 92 percent say that their state is important to their identity because they feel like they belong there compared to 75 percent of Democrats living in states that Trump won. Democrats in Biden states are also more likely to say that “there are lots of people like me here” is a factor that promotes their state identification than Democrats in Trump states. The pattern is less stark for Republicans, but there too, being in the partisan majority is associated with a greater likelihood that people will say that seemingly apolitical factors about belonging are why their state is important to their identity.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, being in the partisan majority is heavily tied to whether people selected a political factor in Table 3, as can be seen in Table 5. For example, over 60 percent of respondents in the political majority in their state (both Democrats and Republicans) said that the political leanings of the state government and of the people are why their state is important to their identity. Respondents in the political minority were far less likely to select these factors.

Looking at the bottom panel of Table 3 provides further insight into how political factors relate to state identities by allowing us to examine factors that people say render their state unimportant to how they see themselves. It shows that overtly political considerations are selected by over half of the respondents who said that their state was *not very* or *not at all important* to their identity. Indeed, the political

<sup>4</sup>Partisan respondents were fairly evenly split when it came to being in the partisan majority or minority in their state: 57 percent of Democrats lived in a state Biden won, and 43 percent lived in a state that Trump won; Republicans were split 50–50 between states Trump won and states Biden won.

**Table 6.** Reasons why people feel attached to another state

Why do you feel an attachment to another state?	% Yes
I like the political leanings of the state government there	42.7
I like the political leanings of the people there	46.2
I used to live there	80.8
I have family or friends who live there	89.2
I go on vacation or own property there	47.6
I have traveled there for work	26.4
The food	74.8
The culture	80.7
I feel like I belong there	74.8
There are a lot of people like me there	79.1
I'm a big fan of a sports team there	42.0

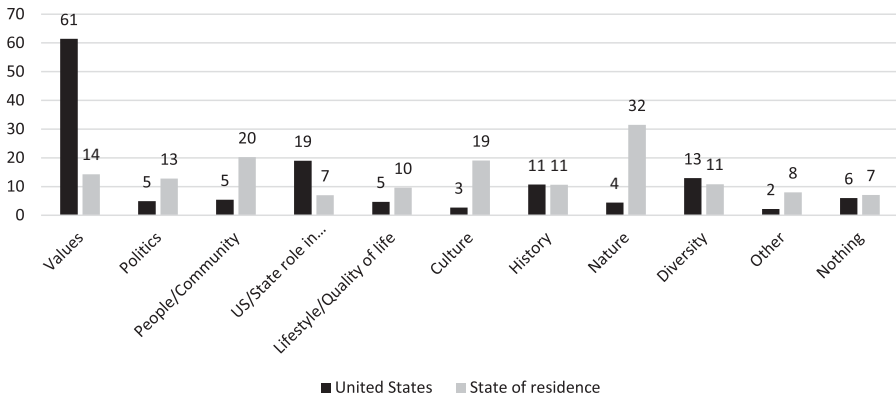
State Identification Survey 2023, available in supplementary materials.

considerations were more likely to be selected than general statements about not belonging or about the state not having lots of people like them.

*Connections to other states:* Recognizing that people might have strong psychological connections to states where they do not currently live, respondents were asked, “Do you feel like you have a strong attachment to another state besides [state of residence]?” Thirty-five percent of respondents said yes. Those respondents were asked to indicate one such state. Then they were asked to indicate whether several items in a list had anything to do with their attachment to that state. The order in which the items appeared was randomized. Table 6 shows that political considerations are not selected as often as “I feel like I belong there” and “there are lots of people like me there,” and they are certainly not selected as often as having once lived there or having family or friends there. Yet they are selected often enough (by over 40 percent of respondents) that they cannot be dismissed as irrelevant. As Bulman-Pozen puts it in her discussion of partisan federalism, “by instantiating different partisan positions, moreover, states generate a federalist variant of surrogate representation: individuals across the country may affiliate with states they do not inhabit based on their partisan commitments” (Bulman-Pozen 2014, 1078). Not only can a like-minded political environment in another state help foster a place-based connection, but also people can get involved in out-of-state politics fairly easily these days through donations and online mobilization (Sievert and Mathiasen 2023).

*In their own words:* As in Hopkins’ analysis (2018), respondents were given an opportunity to explain in their own words what makes them proud when they think of their state. Following Hopkins’ approach, half of the respondents were asked, “Thinking about [state], what are you most proud of?” The other half of the respondents were asked about the US. Responses were coded to measure how often comments related to politics appeared and to compare the rate of political responses across the two measures. Going beyond Hopkins’ study, respondents were also asked, “Thinking about [state]/the United States, what do you wish were different?” This new question was included to see if political considerations emerge more frequently when people think about obstacles to state identification.

For the pride responses, I relied on the same categories employed by Hopkins: values, politics, community/people, the role of the US/state in the world/country, lifestyle/quality of life, culture, history, and nature. Examining responses before coding began led me to add a category for “diversity” as well as a category for people



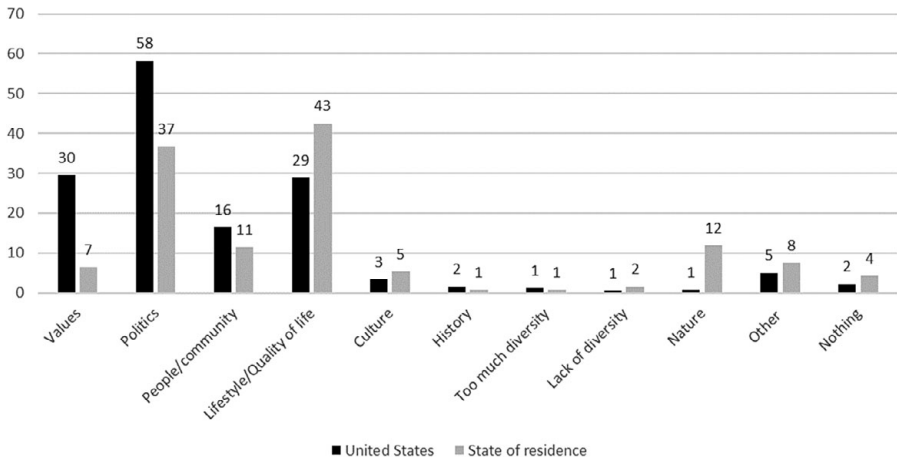
**Figure 1.** Percent of times the topic in question appeared in an open-ended response to “What are you most proud of?”

who said, “Nothing.” The categories representing values and politics are considered to be explicitly political: Comments about values invoked broad political themes such as freedom, equality, and rights, while comments about politics invoked parties, candidates, elections, and public policies. For the responses to the question about what people wish were different, many of the categories were repeated from the pride question: values, politics, community/people, lifestyle/quality of life, culture, history, nature, and “nothing.” There were also two categories for comments about diversity: one for comments that lamented a lack of diversity and one for comments that claimed the state/country has too much diversity.

A response could be coded as belonging to more than one category. Some responses were politics adjacent, particularly for the question about things people wish were different, but they were not coded as being political unless people explicitly connected their view to politics. For example, one person might say that they wish it did not cost so much to live in their state, while another person would say they wish that it did not cost so much and that they wish politicians would enact policies to provide more affordable housing. The first would be coded as referring to quality of life, while the second would get that code *and* be coded as mentioning politics. Similarly, one person might say that the state is experiencing too much flooding, while another person would lament flooding and say that the state needs to do more to address climate change. The first would be coded as referring to nature, while the second would get that code *and* be coded as mentioning politics. To the extent that people had politics in mind when they mentioned flooding or housing but did not explicitly say so, the political category may therefore be an underestimate of the degree to which politics drives people’s answers to this question.

Figure 1 shows that when people are asked about what makes them proud when they think of the US, values come up most often, a topic that does not come up much when people are asked about their states. This finding is similar to what Hopkins found. Examples of comments here include, “I’m proud that we are free,” and “I’m proud of the United States commitment to democracy and freedom and standing up for human rights.”

Explicitly political comments were not made often when people were asked about pride in the US or their state, but they were more common for the state than for the



**Figure 2.** Percent of times the topic in question appeared in an open-ended response to “What do you wish were different?”

US. Examples include, “I am most proud that California is taking substantial action to address climate change,” “I’m proud that Kansas voted to keep abortion legal last fall,” and “I am most proud that it was the launching pad for one of America’s greatest presidents – Donald Trump.” Notably, the higher level of political comments at the state level is different from Hopkins’ analysis, where political comments explaining one’s pride were more common at the national level.

Finally, as with Hopkins’ analysis, people’s love of the scenery and natural resources in their state really stands out. References to culture (such as food and music) and the people (being nice, for example) were also more common when people were asked about their state than when they were asked about the US.

Figure 2 shows that people mentioned politics far more often when asked what they wish were different about the US or about their state. Political content was more common for the US, but it is high for the state as well and was second only to comments about the quality of life. And as noted earlier, many quality-of-life responses skirted the edge of being political. Examples of comments wishing the politics were different in one’s state include, “I wish Kentucky was a little more moderate,” and “I wish it were more conservative. Too much woke going on. This comes as Californians have been moving here for decades now and bring their politics and foolishness with them.” For the US, political comments included, “I wish there were not such a division between the parties and stricter gun laws,” “I wish the country were a lot less polarized than it is today. People would rather fight with each other than to find some compromise,” and “I wish Trump hadn’t become president and starting the continuing slide into fascism.”

The political leanings of the respondent had a lot to do with whether they mentioned politics when discussing what they wish were different about their state. Democrats in states Trump won and Republicans in states Biden won were far more likely to have political mentions in their comments when discussing what they wish were different about their state compared to their co-partisans in other states. Republicans in states Biden won had political content in 41 percent of their comments compared to only 17 percent of the comments for Republicans in states Trump

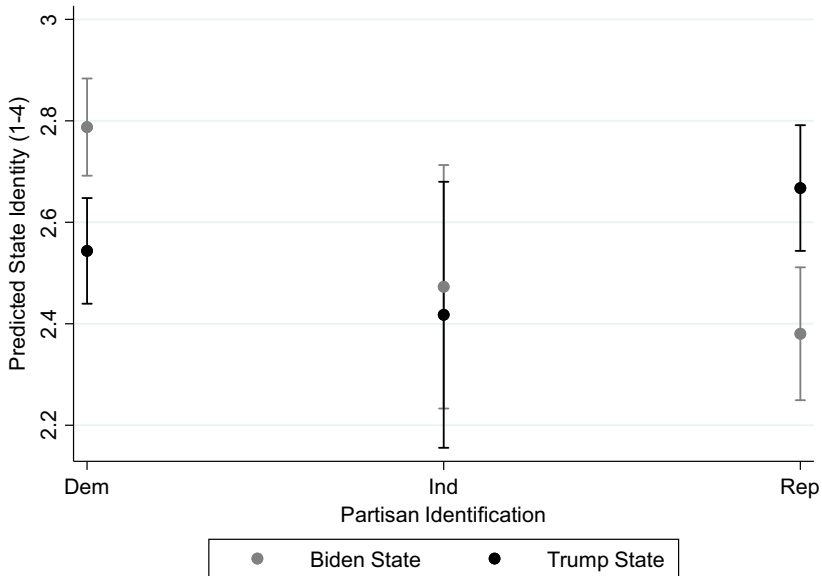


Figure 3. Match between party and 2020 election in state affects state identity.

won, a difference of 24 points. Among Democrats, those in states that Trump won had political content in 57 percent of their comments compared to 30 percent for Democrats in states that Biden won, a difference of 27 points. To a lesser degree, being in the political majority or minority was also associated with whether politics was mentioned when asked about state pride. Politics came up as a source of pride in 25 percent of responses for Democrats in Biden states but only in 7 percent of responses for Democrats in Trump states. Likewise, politics was a source of pride in 11 percent of responses for Republicans in Trump states but only in 3 percent of responses for Republicans in Biden states.

Discussing politics when asked about one's state is also associated with the importance people place on their state identity. When asked what they wish were different about their state, political content was present for 46 percent of people who said that their state is not very or not at all important to their identity, while it was present for 30 percent of people who said that their state is somewhat or very important to them, a difference of 16 points.

Overall, the examination of open-ended responses reveals that politics is a notable factor when people discuss pride in their state and a dominant factor when people discuss what they wish were different. Further, it suggests that being in the political majority or minority has something to do with the degree to which political considerations come to mind when people think about what they like and dislike about their state. Finally, it illustrates that political considerations loom far larger when people assess negative rather than positive considerations of their state. Combined with findings from the closed-ended questions examined earlier, these patterns suggest that people are less likely to recognize that politics is related to their connections to their state when the political climate is favorable and arises as a salient barrier when the climate is unfavorable (Jiménez *et al.* 2021).

**Table 7.** Predicting state identity

Variables	State identity importance	State pride	Typical state resident
American identity	0.506*** (0.029)	0.576*** (0.037)	0.368*** (0.029)
Nonwhite	0.055 (0.056)	-0.021 (0.068)	-0.129** (0.056)
Independent	-0.315** (0.124)	-0.468*** (0.165)	-0.225* (0.128)
Republican	-0.407*** (0.072)	-0.377*** (0.098)	-0.271*** (0.070)
Trump state	-0.244*** (0.061)	-0.746*** (0.082)	-0.451*** (0.063)
Independent × Trump state	0.189 (0.184)	0.937*** (0.234)	0.363* (0.189)
Republican × Trump state	0.531*** (0.102)	1.273*** (0.132)	0.565*** (0.101)
Woman	-0.017 (0.047)	-0.023 (0.060)	0.079* (0.046)
Age	-0.013*** (0.002)	-0.010*** (0.002)	-0.012*** (0.002)
Education	0.061*** (0.019)	0.030 (0.024)	0.004 (0.019)
Economic security	0.011 (0.020)	0.073*** (0.026)	0.053*** (0.020)
Years in state	0.013*** (0.001)	0.012*** (0.002)	0.016*** (0.001)
Constant	1.148*** (0.137)	1.988*** (0.185)	1.709*** (0.144)
R-squared	0.317	0.3216	0.2781
Observations	1151	1151	1151

Note. Cell entries are OLS regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\*indicates significance at  $p < 0.01$ .

\*\* $p < 0.05$ .

\* $p < 0.10$ .

State Identification Survey 2023, available in supplementary materials.

*The role of partisan politics:* Finally, I examined the association between politics and state identities by employing ordinary least squares regression and controlling for a set of other factors that might shape state identities. Three dependent variables are examined: the importance of one's state to one's identity, one's level of agreement with "I am proud to be from [state of residence]," and whether one feels like a typical person from one's state. For all three, a higher score indicates a stronger connection to one's state. The central independent variable is an interaction between a respondent's partisan identification (with independent leaners counted as partisans) and whether Donald Trump won the state in the 2020 presidential election, with Democrats serving as the reference category. This approach is modeled after the analysis used by Pears and Sydnor (2022b). Other demographic characteristics included in the model are race, gender, age, education, economic security, and the number of years the respondent has been living in their state. Based on findings by Pears and Sydnor, I also include the importance of being American to one's identity as an independent variable (2022b).<sup>5</sup> The results appear in Table 7.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Economic security is assessed by asking respondents how often they worry about being able to pay their monthly bills, with a higher score indicating greater economic security.

<sup>6</sup>The substantive results remain the same when ordered probit is substituted for ordinary least squares regression (OLS). OLS is presented here for ease of interpretation. The substantive results also remain the

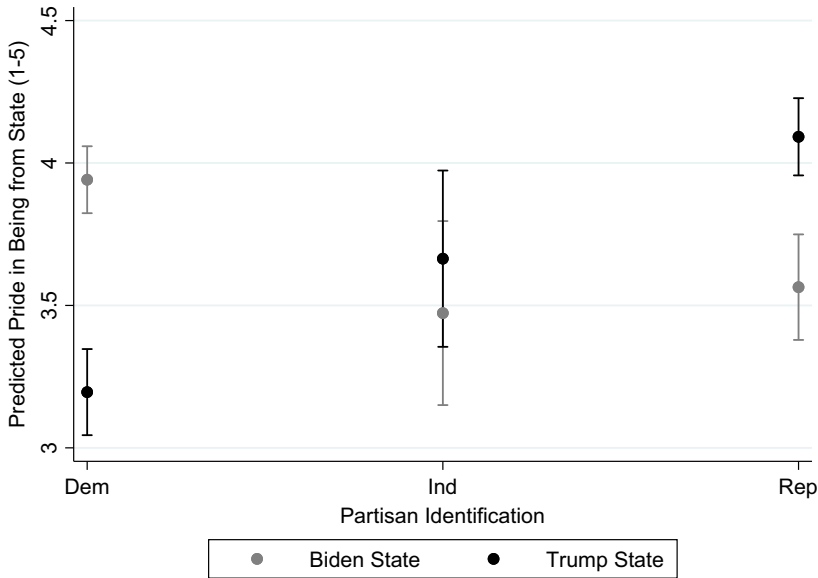


Figure 4. Match between party and 2020 election in state affects state pride.

The results across all three models confirm that having a strong identification with the US is associated with a strong identification with one's state (Pears and Sydnor 2022b). As expected, they also confirm that being in the political majority is an important component of state identification. Figures 3–5 illustrate this finding. These figures show the predicted outcomes of the dependent variables across partisanship and 2020 election outcome while holding all other variables at their means and with the remaining dummy variables set to *white* and *woman*. The dots represent the point estimates (gray for Biden and black for Trump), and the bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals. The figures show that Democrats are more likely to say that their state is important to their identity, that they are proud to be from their state, and that they consider themselves a typical person from their state if they live in a state that Biden won in the 2020 election. For Republicans, being in a state that Trump won boosts their connection to the state in the first two of the three models. The connections that independents feel for their state are not affected by which candidate won the 2020 election there. This analysis confirms that being in the partisan majority is a significant component of state identities, as indicated by Pears and Sydnor, and it does so using a different dataset, different measures of state identities, and a different election (Pears and Sydnor 2022b).

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same when using whether people think their state is better than other states as one of the dependent variables. Pears and Sydnor also consider whether being in the racial minority in one's state affects state identities. In most of their models, it does not (Pears and Sydnor 2022b). Preliminary analysis of the present survey confirmed a lack of significance.

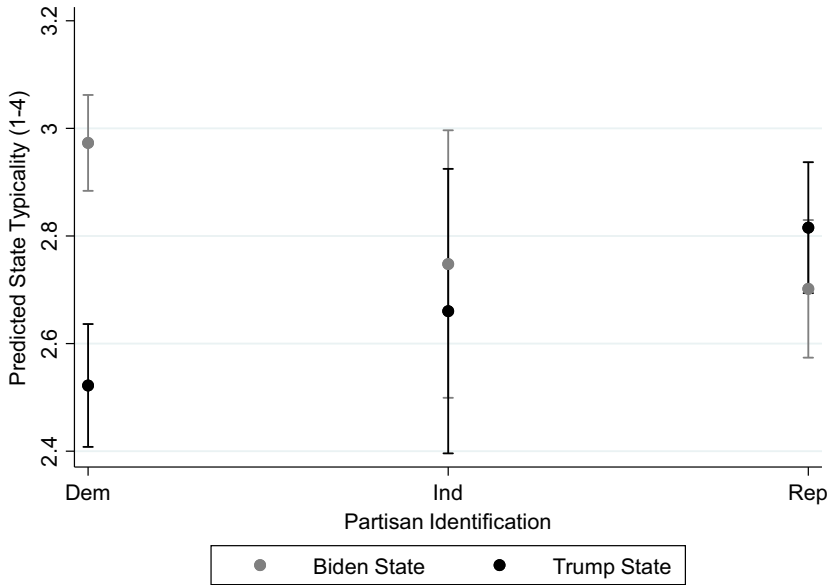


Figure 5. Match between party and 2020 election outcome affects perceptions of typicality.

To verify the effect of being in the political majority or minority, the analyses in Table 7 were also run using the partisanship of the state's governor in 2023 in place of the Electoral College winner in 2020. The results, in Supplementary Table A3 in the appendix, are the same as the results in Table 7 and are in line with findings from Pears and Sydnor, who likewise test for the role of the party of the governor using a different sample and different year (2022b).

## Discussion and conclusion

Political scientists have long paid attention to how certain identity attachments, such as race, gender, partisanship, and being American, shape political outcomes. Our discipline is also increasingly paying attention to place as a politically potent identity, but that attention has largely concentrated on vernacular regions without well-defined political boundaries. The research presented here makes the case that Americans' connections to their states also merit scholarly attention. State identities are quite salient for respondents in the survey used here, on par with other important politically relevant social identities. Levels of connection are high and are associated with political considerations in a variety of ways. These findings also make the case that state identification should be added to the long list of outcomes associated with increasing polarization, gridlock, and the nationalization of politics. These forces may have the curious consequence of rendering state identities more rather than less salient as national political battles play out locally.

The work presented here affirms the ideas Bulman-Pozen presents in her conceptualization of partisan federalism: State residence could be taking on newfound importance as many people may feel that national politics are failing (Bulman-Pozen 2014). People may look to their state as a beacon where their national political



aspirations are being met, or they may be frustrated that their state is taking stances on national issues that they oppose, a frustration that promotes alienation. When we consider state identities, we should take the lack of an identification seriously, and we should delve more deeply into people's lack of psychological connection to their states.

There is more work to be done on state identities. My results suggest that it may be sufficient to ask about the importance of one's state to one's identity as a first step for gauging the presence or absence of the identity, yet when exploring the dynamics of that identity, scholars should use measures that treat presence and absence distinctly. It is my hope that academics begin including questions like these on a more routine basis. In addition to considering the degree of attachment people have to their states and the factors that shape it, it is important to consider when and where state identities shape political outcomes. It has already been demonstrated that state identities can boost trust in government and in government officials (Winburn *et al.* 2024; Pears and Sydnor 2022b). Other political outcomes, such as political participation, civic engagement, attitudes about democratic backsliding, decisions about whether to move to other states, and more, should be next on this research agenda, along with case studies in particular states where state identities appear to be more or less salient to the population. Ongoing debates states are having about redesigning their flags could also provide excellent opportunities for a deeper understanding of the dynamics of state identities.

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <http://doi.org/10.1017/spq.2024.20>.

**Data availability statement.** Replication materials are available on SPPQ Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.15139/S3/L91UDC> (Schildkraut 2024).

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