The Case for an Expressive Logic of Action

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How can scholars theorize about phenomena like the eroding support, within the West, for the liberal democratic practices that once defined the post-1945 international order? Cumulative evidence shows that resentment toward out-groups shapes public attitudes toward issues like immigration and globalization, bolstering support for isolationist foreign policies in Western democracies. Yet, these findings contrast with the logics of action—based on means-end calculations, shared norms, practices, or habit—that IR scholars use to develop theory. Because existing logics provide a limited vocabulary to theorize about group processes with crucial symbolic and affective features, an important dimension of foreign policy behavior remains undertheorized. In this article, I draw on multi-disciplinary research to develop an expressive logic of action, whereby political behavior expresses an actor's social identification. Based on this logic, group attachment provides a compelling motivation for political behavior, whose activation depends on an interaction between issue framing and psychological dispositions. By focusing on the distinctive features of expressive behavior and specifying the mechanisms behind this behavior, an expressive logic encourages theory development and refinement across domains.

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Introduction

Social identities are more relevant to international politics today than they have been since the end of the last century. If a period of relative optimism after the Cold War led scholars to proclaim the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992) or the inevitability of a world state (Wendt, 2003), current assessments about the future of international order are much more sober in comparison. After a period of apparent retreat, nationalism has reemerged around the world—as evidenced by the 2016 election of Donald Trump as US president based on an "America first" platform, as well as analogous movements in the 2018 elections of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Viktor Orbán in Hungary. In Western countries, a backlash against globalization challenges the liberal international order from within its core (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol, 2021). Beset by economic inequality, political polarization and decreasing trust in democratic institutions, voters increasingly support populist leaders who portray globalization and multilateralism as antithetical to the national interest.

Compounding these challenges, the global reawakening of nationalism has precipitated the return of great power rivalry—leading Mearsheimer (2018, 3) to warn that "liberalism and nationalism can coexist, but when they clash, nationalism almost always wins." Seeking to restore national pride after the "100 years of humiliation," Xi Jinping's China has adopted an increasingly assertive foreign policy—more than doubling its military budget in the past decade amid border skirmishes with India and missile strikes aimed at simulating a blockade around Taiwan (Rudd, 2022). Claiming to protect ethnic Russians from Ukrainian leaders, Vladimir Putin led Russia to annex Crimea in 2014 and then attempt to take Kyiv in 2022, only to rally against Western hypocrisy once a clear military victory became elusive.[1] What is more, great power rivalry has bled into markets, putting an end to the so-called era of hyperglobalization. If an increase in US import duties under Trump induced an open trade war with China, the Biden administration has further led the country down a protectionist path, seeking to decouple the US economy from China's (Hanson, 2023). Leveraging its centrality in supply chains as well as communication and financial networks, Washington

[1] Mikhail Zygar, "Putin's New Story about the War in Ukraine: How Russian Propaganda Went from "Denazification" to Fighting the West." *Foreign Affairs*, November 10, 2023. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/putins-new-story-about-war-ukraine.

has also used economic sanctions to ward off competitors from China, effectively subordinating economic growth to geopolitical concerns (Farrell and Newman, 2023).

Taken together, these trends highlight that foreign policy behavior involves a crucial *expressive* dimension: Actors navigate the world based on their social identities, making decisions to engage in international cooperation or conflict based on the sympathies or resentments they feel toward social groups. I argue in this article that, because social identity shapes political behavior in distinctive ways, we need a new logic of action to theorize about the expressive dimension of political behavior in International Relations (IR). Such a logic of action would improve our understanding of central trends in contemporary international politics—such as the global reemergence of nationalism, the return of great power rivalry, and the weaponization of economic interdependence—with important implications for the future of international order. Drawing on research about identity-based political behavior across disciplines, I develop in this article an expressive logic of action, which focuses on group processes with distinctive symbolic and affective features.[2]

Based on an expressive logic, political behavior expresses an actor's social identification. What motivates action is the desire to attach oneself to a collective category. People have a powerful tendency, well documented across contexts, to categorize themselves into social groups. At the social level, group identification involves shared understandings about group boundaries—or who belongs in a group (or not), and who is a friend (or not). At the actor level, group attachment provides a compelling mechanism for behavior: the more an actor identifies with a group, the more they accept influence from the group, care about the group, and favor its members over outsiders. In particular, group attachment motivates behavior when actors see a connection between a group and a political issue, usually as a result of how elites frame the issue in public debate. An expressive logic departs from existing logics of action by assuming that: (1) group identification is a driving force behind political behavior; (2) affect shapes how actors process political information and

[2]The proposed logic of action builds off previous work on expressive or symbolic behavior in the study of law (Sunstein, 1996), economics (Hargreaves Heap, 1989), and voting behavior (Schuessler, 2000). While previous treatments of symbolic behavior in political science rely on formal theory (Schnakenberg, 2014), my approach is grounded on empirical research about identity-based behavior from a psychological perspective, placing more emphasis on the role of affect in shaping information processing and decision making.

make decisions; and (3) symbolic factors—how actors and political issues are framed in the political discourse—play a fundamental role in organizing group activity.

Rather than supersede existing logics, an expressive logic contributes to a fuller picture of political behavior. In particular, an expressive logic offers two payoffs to researchers. First, because the proposed logic reveals that expressive behavior follows systematic patterns, it removes this kind of behavior from the "error term," making it more amenable to theorization and empirical research. Second, because an expressive logic focuses on the distinctive features of expressive behavior, it provides a coherent set of building blocks to theorize about group-based politics in IR. An expressive logic implies that explanations of foreign policy behavior should look beyond norms or incentive structures to examine how identity attachments are construed in a given context. To be sure, expressive elements—such as identity, symbols, or culture—appear in previous research. However, these elements are not coherently integrated into a distinctive logic of action; neither has there been an attempt to specify the mechanisms behind this logic and to analytically distinguish them from those of existing logics. These are precisely my goals in this article. Rather than present new empirical evidence, this article unifies and organizes existing findings under a coherent logic of action, while specifying the distinctive mechanisms behind expressive behavior.

By organizing disparate findings under a single framework, an expressive logic paves the way for theory development and refinement across domains. In the absence of a logic of action that adequately captures expressive behavior, IR scholars can adopt two approaches. On the one hand, scholars might dismiss important empirical patterns as anomalies that cannot be explained systematically, claiming that countries adopt policies on issues like immigration or free trade based on unpredictable passions beyond our understanding. However, this approach is dissatisfactory because it rules out by fiat the empirical evidence that does not comport with existing theory, rather than reformulating existing theoretical frameworks based on the empirical evidence available (see Boudon, 1998; Elster, 1989). Alternatively, scholars might try to subsume the anomalous cases into one of the existing logics of action by adding auxiliary assumptions. However, this approach is also dissatisfactory, for two reasons (see Boudon, 1998; Elster, 1989). First, because this approach

ultimately relies on ad hoc assumptions that are not directly grounded in existing logics, it leads to inconsistent explanatory frameworks. Second, because this approach neglects to specify theory about the distinctive features of the anomalous cases, an important dimension of political behavior remains under-theorized. By contrast, an expressive logic of action provides a coherent framework that focuses on the distinctive mechanisms behind expressive behavior.

In the first section below, I review existing logics of action, which highlight different dimensions of foreign policy behavior. In the second section, I discuss existing evidence of expressive behavior in international politics, ranging from instances of international cooperation—such as decisions to join intergovernmental organizations, adopt norms, or join international treaties—to instances of conflict, such as the current backlash against globalization within the West and the increasing weaponization of economic interdependence. In the third section, I draw on empirical research across disciplines like social psychology, sociology, and political science to develop an expressive logic of action. Using existing empirical research, I illustrate the key mechanisms behind an expressive logic, showing how this logic sheds light on phenomena of central interest to IR scholars. Finally, the last section concludes with directions for future research.

Logics of Action as Analytical Tools

Explanations of political behavior usually rely, either implicitly or explicitly, on a logic of action—or "a perspective on how human action is to be interpreted" (March and Olsen, 2011, 478). Logics of action differ from theories in that they are more general and abstract than theories. While a logic of action provides a set of assumptions about what drives human behavior, a theory aims to explain a particular phenomenon. We can therefore think of logics of action as meta-theoretical frameworks: Based on a logic of action, a scholar develops a theory to explain a given phenomenon. What defines a logic of action is the set of building blocks (or the vocabulary) it provides for theory development. Because different logics highlight distinct dimensions of human behavior, they provide the foundation for different kinds of theories of political behavior.

In IR, two logics of action are most commonly used to develop theory.[3] First, the most popular logic of action among IR scholars is a logic of consequences (March and Olsen, 1998, 2011). This logic assumes that actors have a set of well-behaved preferences and choose as best they can the means to realize those preferences (Lake and Powell, 1999; Snidal, 2002). It conceives of action as instrumental: what motivates action is the desire to achieve a goal, typically defined based on the actor's self-interest. According to an instrumental logic, actors make decisions based on means-ends calculations in pursuit of a goal. To select among the alternatives for action, actors apply a decision rule, such as goal maximization or satisficing. Originally developed in economics, a logic of consequences conceives of interactions in a stylized market, where actors have different resource endowments. Based on this logic, actors exercise influence through coercion (the use of force or its threat) or inducement (the manipulation of incentives) (Weber 1978, 943-46; Scott 1996, 25-30). According to this logic, conformity thus takes the form of compliance—that is, behavior motivated by a desire to obtain rewards or avoid punishments (Kelman, 1961, 62-63).

Second, another logic commonly used in IR is a logic of appropriateness, which assumes that actors share norms that delimit appropriate behavior within a community (March and Olsen, 1998, 2011).[4] This logic conceives of action as norm-guided: to make decisions, actors search for the norm that best applies to a situation, then follow its prescriptions (Sending, 2002, 447-50). When ambiguities arise, actors engage in principled argument to find the most congruent norm (March and Olsen 2011, 483; Risse 2000, 6-7). Norm-guided action involves (1) a cognitive component, as actors reason by analogy to find the norm that fits a given situation; and (2) an ethical component, as appropriate action implies a sense of virtue or moral obligation (March and Olsen, 1998, 951-52). Originally developed in organizational studies, a logic of appropriateness conceives of interactions

[3] For the sake of clarity, my discussion of existing logics focuses on the foundational statements of each logic—which clearly define it and explicitly lay out its mechanisms—rather than on theoretical applications aimed at explaining a specific phenomenon, which often refer to a given logic of action only implicitly, slightly deviate from that logic, or blend more than one logic to explain a given phenomenon.

[4] Since a logic of appropriateness was formulated, research on norm contestation has questioned the extent to which international norms are shared, suggesting that this logic applies only under specific conditions (Dixon, 2017; Wiener, 2018). Other research argues that actors can use norms strategically, to achieve their goals—suggesting that, in practice, a logic of appropriateness is often mixed with a logic of consequences (Krebs and Jackson, 2007; Terman and Byun, 2022). But while research on norms has advanced in IR, existing research has not proposed an explicit reformulation of a logic of appropriateness to replace the one discussed here.

within a stylized polity founded on the rule of law and on a spirit of citizenship (March and Olsen, 2011, 481). Based on this logic, influence depends on normative legitimation, as actors draw upon a system of shared norms to justify their positions (see Weber 1978, 943-46, 954; Scott 1996, 31); while conformity depends on internalization—that is, the integration of a belief into one's system of values, typically as a result of socialization (Kelman, 1961, 65-66).

In addition to the two traditional logics of action, two other logics developed in IR emphasize the practical or habitual dimension of human behavior. On the one hand, a logic of practicality assumes that an actor's practical sense guides action (Pouliot, 2008). Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice, this logic focuses on what people do rather than on what goes on in their heads. It posits that action depends on practical knowledge that is learned tacitly and taken for granted, remaining unconscious and inarticulate. On the other hand, a logic of habit assumes that actors respond habitually to circumstances (Hopf, 2010). Drawing on cognitive neuroscience, this logic posits that the automatic system in the brain leads actors to have unreflective perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. As such, actors enjoy less agency, rationality, and uncertainty than assumed in traditional logics; moreover, action ultimately tends to perpetuate the status quo.

While it may be tempting to treat logics of action as accurate representations of human action, it is more fruitful to understand them as analytical tools, which may be more or less useful depending on the research problem at hand (see Elster 1989; Fearon and Wendt 2002, 60, 52-53; Ruggie 1998, 860-61; March and Olsen 1998, 953-54.) As the old aphorism reminds us, all models are wrong, but some are useful. Rather than promulgating a given logic as inherently better than the others, it is more productive to examine whether a given logic of action serves as a useful tool to explain a specific phenomenon. As analytical lenses, logics of action offer inexact representations of the complexities of reality, which serve as more or less useful foundations for theory building depending on the research question at hand. Each logic of action provides a different map for theory building, or a simplified representation of reality that focuses on certain aspects of action and leaves out the details it considers inessential. As such, whether a certain logic of action offers a useful framework to theorize about a given phenomenon is ultimately a matter of empirical investigation, rather than

a question that may be answered a priori or in absolute terms.

While existing logics provide useful frameworks to account for certain dimensions of foreign policy behavior—those that directly involve means-ends calculations, shared norms, practices, or habit—they neglect an important dimension. As I discuss next, a growing body of research indicates that social identity shapes countries' policies on issues ranging from membership in intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) to nuclear nonproliferation, free trade, and immigration. Foreign policy behavior involves a fundamental expressive dimension, which departs in important ways from those dimensions highlighted by existing logics of action.

The Expressive Dimension of Foreign Policy

Existing research demonstrates that foreign policy behavior in different areas, ranging from international cooperation to conflict, depends on social identity. For example, countries' decisions to join intergovernmental organizations involve an important expressive dimension: Countries choose whether to become IGO members based on how domestic actors conceive of national identity at home and abroad. Perhaps in no context is this clearer than immediately after the Cold War, when both the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) offered incentives for Central and Eastern European states to join each organization, conditional on the adoption of liberal-democratic policies. Based on a logic of consequences, we would expect states to at least seek accession to each organization, with a view to gaining access to the substantial benefits offered—such as economic aid or military protection against a potential foreign aggression. And yet, not all potential candidate states sought accession to begin with. Against expectations from an instrumental logic, certain countries eschewed accession despite its benefits.

As different studies suggest, countries' decisions to seek accession to the EU or NATO depended on social identification—that is, on whether decision-makers identified with Europe or the West, entities they perceived each organization as representing. In both the EU and NATO cases, inducements for accession only promoted liberalization among pro-Western states; by contrast, anti-liberal

countries like Belarus or Serbia defied Westernization, despite its material benefits (Schimmelfennig, 2005). As Subotic (2011) demonstrates in the EU case, countries' decisions to seek accession depended on whether decision-makers identified with Europe to begin with. On the one hand, candidate states like Croatia sought accession, even though they perceived the EU requirements as intrusive, because domestic actors strongly identified with Europe. But in candidate states where key domestic actors did not identify with Europe, such as Serbia, inducements were not enough to make accession an appealing option. Likewise, Gheciu (2005) reaches a similar conclusion in the NATO case. Although countries like the Czech Republic and Romania did not embrace liberal-democratic norms, they were open to adopting the liberal-democratic policies necessary for accession because they identified with the Western community NATO purported to embody. Social identification—that is, whether domestic actors understood their country as part of the West—thus played an important role in countries' decisions to pursue accession.

Related to these cases, other studies suggest that countries' decisions to adopt international norms more broadly also depend on social identification. Based on traditional logics of action, we would expect countries to adopt norms because decision-makers expect to increase their chances of remaining in power or to obtain certain benefits; or because decision-makers perceive the norms as appropriate or legitimate. But as Zarakol (2014) notes, countries often adopt norms their decision-makers do not accept as legitimate and do not intend to enforce; as such, norm adoption does little to increase the odds of implementing a desired policy. In the past century, countries like Turkey, Japan, and Russia adopted Western policies even though domestic actors had not internalized Western norms, and even though Western powers did not impose these policies by force. We also observe this pattern when it comes to human rights treaties. Since the end of the Second World War, an increasing number of countries have joined an increasing number of human rights treaties. In fact, repressive governments ratify human rights treaties at least as frequently as do non-repressive ones (Hafner-Burton, Tsutsui, and Meyer, 2008). Yet, treaty ratification often fails to improve human rights practices (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui, 2007; Hathaway, 2002).

As multiple studies indicate, non-Western countries have adopted Western norms in the past

century in an effort to assimilate into the European society of states, sometimes only for the sake of appearances (Zarakol 2011, 32-38; Okagaki 2013). As Hathaway (2002, 2002-2020) argues in the case of human rights treaties, countries sometimes ratify treaties for expressive reasons: by joining a human rights treaty, a country takes a position as member of the liberal international order, even if it does not accept the treaty's values. In addition, similar factors influenced countries' decisions to join the nonproliferation regime after the Cold War. In the 1990s, Ukraine relinquished the nuclear weapons it inherited from the Soviet Union, despite the history of Russian territorial expansionism in its region. As existing studies indicate, Ukraine did so in part because it sought recognition from Western powers of its national sovereignty and good standing (Budjeryn 2022; Chafetz, Abramson, and Grillot 1996; Sagan 1997, 80-82). Likewise, Brazil gave up its nuclear program in the 1990s as it sought integration into the liberal international order, even though key domestic actors considered the nonproliferation regime inherently unfair for institutionalizing the inequality between nuclear haves and have-nots (Patti 2021, 157-90; Spektor 2016). In both cases, identification with the West thus influenced states' decisions to join the nonproliferation regime.

While social identification may motivate countries to cooperate, it may also become an obstacle to international cooperation.[5] We can observe this trend in contemporary international politics, when the liberal international order faces important challenges from within its core (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol, 2021). Within the West, the past decade has witnessed eroding support for the liberal democratic practices that once defined the post-1945 international order. In the United States, a resurgent nationalist discourse has resonated with large swaths of the public, including the 74 million citizens who voted for Donald Trump's reelection in 2020. In 2016 and 2020 alike, Trump's presidential campaigns articulated the image of a nation threatened by immigrants, minorities, and their alleged accomplices among the elites. To make the nation great again, Trump proposed a set of isolationist policies—from closing national borders to withdrawing from international agreements in key areas such as climate change and nuclear proliferation. What is more, Trump's rise in the U.S. echoed long-term trends observed in other Western democracies. In European countries,

[5] As Pu and Schweller (2014, 148) suggest, for example, countries may acquire weapons for expressive or symbolic reasons—that is, "to express who they are or who they want to be," potentially triggering security dilemmas.

right-wing populism has typically involved leaders' appeals to restore the glory of a nation's past by scaling back international cooperation and supranational integration.

On both sides of the Atlantic, right-wing populist leaders have leveraged the socio-political context to mobilize voters based on their identity attachments. In the United States, Trump first rose to Republican nomination in 2016 in a context marked by socio-political transformations such as China's economic rise, civil rights protests against police violence, and changing demographics—as the percentage of white Christians shrank and the first Black American president finished his second term. Leveraging this context, Trump's campaign articulated the image of a nation threatened by immigrants and minorities. Trump infused his campaign with exclusionary rhetoric, from questioning whether Barack Obama was a native-born citizen to calling all Mexican immigrants "rapists." Trump's rhetoric drew heavily from existing stereotypes about minority groups, earning himself the reputation of saying the quiet parts out loud. Defining the nation in ethnocultural terms, Trump's campaign laid out a set of isolationist policies meant to revert the effects of globalization. To make the nation great again, Trump proposed policies of high symbolic (rather than material) impact, from building a wall in the border with Mexico to increasing taxes on Chinese imports. Accordingly, Trump's rhetoric resonated the most with those citizens who held negative attitudes toward groups like women, racial minorities, immigrants, or foreign countries (Mutz, 2018; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta, 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck, 2018).

More broadly, we observe the same trend across the West, as right-wing populist leaders leverage the socio-political context to mobilize majoritarian segments of the population based on their identity attachments (Berman, 2021; Bonikowski, 2017; Golder, 2016; Noury and Roland, 2020). In the last decades, two factors have challenged the primacy of white men in longstanding social hierarchies within Western countries: rising immigration and the political mobilization of minority groups. In addition, wealth and income inequality have dramatically increased, as the wealthy or highly educated have disproportionately reaped the economic benefits from technological advances and globalization. And yet, mainstream leaders and established democratic institutions have done little to address the problem of inequality at home. Leveraging this context of socio-political

transformation, right-wing populist leaders have mobilized voters based on wedge issues such as immigration and Euro-skepticism—portraying themselves as political outsiders and true representatives of the people against the symbolic threats posed by immigrants, minorities, and their alleged accomplices among the elites. Drawing from negative stereotypes about immigrants and minority groups, right-wing populist leaders define the nation in ethnocultural terms. To restore the imagined glory of the nation's past, populist leaders propose isolationist policies, such as Brexit, of high symbolic (rather than redistributive) impact. Accordingly, populist appeals tend to resonate with those citizens who hold negative affect toward minority groups.

As a growing body of research shows, resentment toward out-groups drives opposition to international cooperation across Western countries. Right-wing populist appeals tend to resonate with citizens who resent minority groups both in the U.S. (Mutz, 2018; Schaffner, MacWilliams, and Nteta, 2018; Sides, Tesler, and Vavreck, 2018) and Europe (Berman, 2021; Noury and Roland, 2020). Similarly, citizens with negative attitudes toward out-groups are more likely to oppose globalization and free trade (Mansfield and Mutz, 2009, 2013; Mutz and Kim, 2017), two important pillars of the post-1945 international order. In Europe, skepticism toward European integration depends on negative attitudes toward out-groups (Hobolt and de Vries, 2016). Crucially, this tendency accounts for a consequential event: in 2016, British citizens with negative attitudes toward out-groups and immigration were more likely to vote for leaving the European Union (Hobolt, 2016; Iakhnis, Rathbun, Reifler et al., 2018). In addition, existing research consistently finds that opposition to immigration often stems from concerns about its cultural— rather than economic—impacts (Hainmueller and Hangartner, 2013; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014). Across the West, citizens are less concerned about competition in the job market or an increasing tax burden than with the imagined impact of immigration on national identity and culture.

How Expressive Behavior Departs from Existing Logics

Taken together, these empirical patterns contrast with expectations derived from existing logics of action. Based on a logic of consequences, one would argue that individuals form attitudes toward

a given policy based on its expected distributional consequences. Within high-income countries, for example, free trade has different distributional consequences depending on whether a worker is highly skilled versus low skilled, or whether an individual works in an export-oriented versus import-competing sector of the economy. Therefore, we should expect high-skilled workers (or workers from export-oriented sectors) to be more likely to favor free trade, whereas low-skilled workers (or workers from import-oriented sectors) should be more likely to oppose free trade. Likewise, immigration has different distributional consequences depending on whether a citizen pays more taxes or has a skill level similar to that of immigrants. Therefore, the more taxes a citizen pays, the more we should expect them to oppose low-skilled immigration out of concerns about public spending, especially in those areas that provide immigrants with more access to public services. In addition, we should expect citizens to oppose immigration out of concerns about competition in the labor market—that is, when their skill level is similar to that of immigrants.

However, existing empirical research departs from these expectations in important ways. To begin, citizens often form attitudes toward policies like free trade and immigration based on perceived group interest—or sociotropic concerns—rather than based on the policy's expected distributional consequences. In the U.S., for example, repeated studies find that citizens' attitudes toward free trade depend less on its expected distributional consequences than on perceptions of how free trade would affect the national economy as a whole (Mansfield and Mutz, 2009; Mutz and Kim, 2017). And importantly, sociotropic concerns do not stem from an objective assessment of the economic situation. As a long tradition of research in economics demonstrates, free trade typically has a beneficial impact on a country's national economy. If a citizen objectively considered the economic welfare of the country as a whole, they should therefore support free trade rather than oppose it. But in practice, sociotropic concerns do not depend directly on the objective impact of free trade policies; rather, they depend on the existing political discourse about free trade, especially as framed by political leaders and the mass media (Guisinger and Saunders, 2017).

Similarly, existing studies find that public attitudes toward immigration depend on concerns about its cultural, rather than economic, impacts (Hainmueller and Hangartner, 2013; Hainmueller

and Hopkins, 2014). In particular, opposition to immigration increases when prospective immigrants do not speak the national language or are not expected to fit well with the national culture. Attitudes toward immigration thus depend on concerns over intangible social constructs—that is, remote and abstract symbols like national identity or culture. And importantly, concerns over intangible social constructs do not derive from an objective assessment of the situation; rather, perceived threats to national identity and culture tend to be imagined and inflated, involving a central affective component (Kinder, 1998, 805-807). As existing studies demonstrate, opposition to immigration often stems either from negative affect toward specific groups of immigrants, grounded in negative stereotypes about these groups or negative media portrayals of them; or from psychological predispositions, such as ethnocentrism (a generalized prejudice toward out-groups), that become activated in a given context (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014, 230-34).

In addition, the observed empirical patterns also depart from other logics of action. While a logic of appropriateness emphasizes norms, the formation of attitudes toward issues like trade or immigration depends on identity attachments. Not fortuitously, a logic of appropriateness is not commonly used to theorize about public attitudes toward either issue. Likewise, a logic of practicality or habit offers a limited vocabulary to theorize about these trends. On the one hand, a logic of practicality (1) assumes that action depends on practical knowledge that is learned tacitly and taken for granted, thus remaining unconscious and inarticulate; and (2) focuses on what people do rather than on what goes on in their heads. But in practice, existing research contrasts with each of these assumptions: opposition to free trade and immigration results from (1) the existing political discourse—that is, from what elites articulate in the public arena, framing political issues as a matter of identity politics; and (2) psychological factors, such as resentment toward out-groups—that is, from what goes on inside people's heads. On the other hand, a logic of habit assumes that actors respond habitually to circumstances, as the automatic system in the brain leads them to have unreflective attitudes and behaviors. As such, action tends to perpetuate the status quo. While this logic does a better job at capturing the impact of psychological predispositions on political attitudes and behaviors, it neglects the role of elite discourse in mobilizing public resentment. In addition,

while a logic of habit emphasizes stability, the backlash against globalization is a relatively recent trend, which results from a set of socio-political transformations. It is therefore no coincidence that neither logic is commonly used to theorize about the phenomena above.

In sum, existing empirical research contrasts with existing logics of action in two crucial ways. First, symbolic factors shape political attitudes. Actors form attitudes toward issues like free trade or immigration based on concerns over intangible social constructs, like national identity or culture, that are typically imagined and inflated. From an objective standpoint, both free trade and immigration tend to increase national welfare. However, citizens often form attitudes toward these policies based on perceived national interest, which depends primarily on the existing political discourse rather than on the facts on the ground. Second, affect shapes how actors process information and make decisions. Motivated to defend the group against symbolic threats, actors ignore information about the actual impact of free trade and immigration on national welfare. Group loyalty involves an emotional attachment to a group and implies group-based discrimination. Within Western countries, the current backlash against globalization results from a motivation to defend one's group—narrowly defined based on ethnocultural traits—from symbolic threats.

While one could attempt to account for the observed patterns using existing logics of action, such a move would leave expressive behavior under-theorized. To be sure, existing logics provide useful frameworks to account for certain dimensions of political behavior—those that directly involve means-ends calculations, shared norms, habits, or practices. However, a focus on these dimensions would obscure theoretically important questions that emerge from existing research. At the social level, a group and its interests can be defined in different ways, and its political relevance varies over time. How are the group and its interests defined in a given political context? At the actor level, an actor belongs simultaneously to multiple social categories, and group members display varying levels of group attachment. When does a group's interest, however defined, become relevant to an actor (or to an actor's attitudes toward a given foreign policy issue)? In addition, actors have multiple psychological dispositions. When does a given psychological disposition become mobilized in connection with a given foreign policy issue? To effectively capture the expressive dimension

of foreign policy behavior, we need a logic of action that focuses on questions like these—that is, a logic of action that accounts for group processes with crucial symbolic and affective features. In the next section, I draw on multi-disciplinary research to develop such a logic.

An Expressive Logic of Action

To develop an expressive logic of action, I rely on a multi-disciplinary body of empirical research on (inter)group processes and political behavior. I start with two empirical observations. First, people have a powerful tendency, well documented across contexts, to categorize themselves into social groups. Humans are hard-wired to connect and form social groups, ranging from families to nations. Second, social identification provides a powerful motivation for political behavior. As a long tradition of empirical research demonstrates, people navigate the political world based on their social identities—choosing candidates during elections and taking positions on key political issues based on the sympathies and resentments they feel toward social groups (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2002; Kinder, 1998; Sears, 1993). Based on these assumptions, an expressive logic conceives of behavior as *expressive*. According to this logic, what motivates action is the desire to attach oneself to a social category. By adopting a pattern of behavior associated with a group, an actor expresses their social identification to themselves and to others.

Expressive behavior differs from other types of political behavior because it depends on the actor's identification with a social group. In an expressive logic of action, conformity depends on *identification*, rather than on compliance or internalization. As a conformity mechanism, identification differs from both compliance and internalization (Kelman, 1961, 63-65). On the one hand, identification is more stable and enduring than compliance because it does not rely on external enforcement. On the other hand, identification is less stable and enduring than internalization because it hinges on the actor's identity attachments rather than on their intrinsic beliefs. Based on identification, behavior tends to persist as long as the group remains important to the actor, the actor's beliefs about the group persist, and no alternative source of identification challenges the behavior.

By the same token, if any of these conditions changes, so does the behavior.

As I discuss next, a multi-disciplinary body of research shows that social identification involves distinctive psychological processes and shapes behavior through distinctive pathways. Because expressive behavior depends on social identification, it involves two fundamental (and distinctive) components I explore next: an affective component, and a symbolic component.

How Social Identification Shapes Behavior

To begin, social identification involves a crucial affective component: it is "not just a form of self-definition (the cognitive level of analysis), but also a source of emotional attachment, meaning, and motivation that helps to explain group behavior" (Spears, 2011, 220). Crucially, social identification provides individuals with a meaningful sense of self. As the social identity perspective tells us, individuals derive part of their identities from their group attachments (Spears, 2011; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). As Tajfel (1974, 69) puts it, a social identity is "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from [their] knowledge of [their] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership." As research on optimal distinctiveness theory indicates, social identification involves a compromise between two psychological needs: (1) assimilation (or the need to be validated and similar to others), which we satisfy by belonging to social groups; and (2) differentiation (or the need to be unique or different from others), which we satisfy by comparing ourselves to out-groups (Brewer, 1991).

More than "objective" group membership, social identification implies a psychological sense of belonging to a group (Huddy, 2001). Across contexts, empirical studies find variations in identity strength, or the extent to which people identify with a given social group. For example, research on national identity in the United States finds that Americans report different levels of national attachment and love of country (Huddy and Khatib, 2007; Theiss-Morse, 2009). But importantly, variations in attachment do not imply that social identities are simply a matter of individual choice. On the contrary, group attachments are strongly influenced by early socialization, especially in the family environment, and remain enduring features of an actor's self-conception thereafter. In fact,

group attachments often depend on ascriptive or involuntary traits. For example, common sense associates nationality with a person's place of birth or family descent—two attributes ascribed at birth rather than chosen by individuals. What is more, an actor's sense of belonging depends in part on the group's recognition, rather than being determined exclusively at the actor level. As cross-national research shows, people report lower levels of national attachment and pride when they perceive that their ethnic group is discriminated against or lacks representation at national government (Schildkraut 2011, 854-55; Wimmer 2018, 209-28).

Given its affective nature, social identification shapes perceptions and behaviors in distinctive ways. Once people categorize themselves as members of a group, their identity becomes attached to the group—such that they experience whatever happens to the group as if it had happened to them. As Sasley (2011, 454) notes, social identification leads individuals to experience emotions on behalf of the group: "the group becomes part of the individual, who then reacts not as that individual but as a member of the group, and individual members of the group converge on the same emotions." Social identification serves as a lens through which individuals interpret politically relevant information, providing a motive for directional or biased reasoning. As Herrmann (2017) shows, for example, Americans who report higher levels of national attachment are more prone to associate globalization with significant threats to the nation. Rather than considering information evenhandedly, group members are motivated to defend the group, especially when they perceive it to be under threat. These processes became especially evident after the 9/11 attacks. As Americans experienced fear and anger following the attacks, they supported an unprecedented increase in homeland security spending, limitations on their own civil liberties, the use of torture and even extrajudicial killings abroad, culminating in the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan (Hall and Ross, 2015).

Besides shaping perceptions, social identification also shapes political behavior through distinctive pathways. According to an expressive logic, actors exercise influence via persuasion and example, rather than via coercion, inducements, or normative legitimation (see Weber, 1978, 950-54). Because social identity extends the self beyond the individual, it provides a powerful mechanism for collective behavior (Brewer, 1991). In particular, existing research indicates that social identifica-

tion shapes behavior through three different pathways. First, identification provides an important channel for social influence: The more an actor identifies with a group, the more they accept influence from the group and adopt the attitudes and behaviors associated with it (Spears, 2011, 211-14). By enacting the attitudes and behaviors associated with a group, an actor affirms their social identity not only to themselves but also to others. In fact, actors sometimes enact behaviors associated with a social identity even at the expense of their own health and survival. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, individuals' decisions to protect themselves against the coronavirus in the US—by wearing face masks, practicing social distancing, or getting vaccinated—consistently depended on party identification. Following partisan cues, Democrats were more likely to adopt prohealth behaviors than Republicans (Gadarian, Goodman, and Pepinsky, 2022).

Second, social identification shapes behavior toward the in-group: The more an actor identifies with a group, the more they care about the group and are willing to help its members, even when such actions provide no personal gain to the actor (see Charnysh, Lloyd, and Simmons, 2015). For example, the more strongly Americans identify with the nation, the more likely they are to demonstrate civic engagement by voting in elections, paying attention to politics, and acquiring knowledge about the political issues of the day (Huddy and Khatib, 2007, 72-74). In addition, the more strongly Americans identify with the nation, the more willing they are to help fellow Americans in a variety of situations, especially when the beneficiaries of this help are prototypical group members—that is, white Americans (Theiss-Morse, 2009, 94-129). Overall, social identification thus implies an increased tendency to cooperate with members of the in-group. It is this tendency that, to Posen (1993), links nationalism to the creation of the modern mass army: as nationalism inspires commitment and sacrifice on behalf of the nation, it enables states to mobilize soldiers. As Mylonas and Tudor (2021, 111-12) note, moreover, political theorists have long placed a common national identity as a prerequisite to democracy, while nationalism has motivated the overthrow of absolute monarchies and colonial regimes around the world since the eighteenth century.

Finally, social identification also shapes behavior in intergroup contexts. The more an actor identifies with a group, the more they favor their group over other groups, especially when they

perceive the in-group to be under threat. The tendency toward in-group favoritism was first detected in the minimal group studies conducted by Tajfel, Billig, Bundy et al. (1971). In these studies, participants assigned to groups based on arbitrary characteristics, like their preference between two abstract painters, tended to allocate more resources to in-group members than to out-group members. As subsequent studies in this tradition consistently show, in-group favoritism is so deeply rooted that it can emerge even without a previous history of group attachment, and even in the absence of a conflict of interest—that is, independently from disputes over material resources (Spears, 2011, 204-205). Social identification thus entails a tendency to favor one's group over others, which becomes exacerbated when one's group is perceived to be under threat.

In-group favoritism has important implications for foreign policy attitudes and behavior. For example, in-group favoritism shapes willingness to hold accountable those who violate international norms. In both the UK and the US, willingness to punish soldiers for the murder and abuse of civilians abroad depends on the identity of the perpetrators: when a co-national (versus a foreigner or a person of unspecified nationality) is charged for a violation, public support for prosecution decreases (Dasandi and Mitchell, 2023). Similarly, Americans who report higher levels of national attachment are more willing to punish countries that are disliked (but not those that are liked) for using force against individuals who allegedly conducted terrorist attacks (Herrmann, 2017).What is more, in-group favoritism shapes willingness to accept casualties during war. As Sagan and Valentino (2020) show, Americans are more willing to risk soldiers' lives to save co-nationals (versus foreigners) and more willing to accept civilian casualties if those killed are (1) foreign (versus co-nationals); or (2) from a rival (versus neutral) country.

The Politicization of Group Attachments

Besides its affective component, social identification also involves a crucial symbolic component. While in principle any combination of traits could provide a basis for social categorization, which traits become relevant for distinctions depends on the social context. Via socialization in a given context, individuals learn to recognize certain social categories as meaningful. In the current world

of nation-states, for example, we commonly categorize individuals based on nationality. Yet, nationality would not be a meaningful category a few centuries ago, when people relied on more local dimensions, such as region, to categorize themselves. In fact, nationality only became a meaningful category in the nineteenth century, in part as a result of nation-building efforts such as the introduction of national education curricula (Gellner, 1983). Elites played a fundamental role in the institution of national identity: As a Risorgimento leader famously proclaimed in 1861, "We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians" (Hobsbawm, 1992, 44).

At the social level, social identities involve shared understandings about group boundaries—or who belongs in a group (or not), and who is a friend (or not).[6] Group boundaries are socially constructed and inherently contested. In the U.S., for example, people have different ideas of what it means to be American. While some people define national identity based on ethnocultural ancestry, others define national identity based on respect for liberal principles, being active and engaged citizens, or sharing in the immigration experience (Schildkraut, 2011, 858-61). Definitions of national identity range from least exclusionary (e.g., those based on civic engagement) to most exclusionary (e.g., those based on ethnocultural ancestry), much like definitions of a country's role in the world, which may emphasize sovereign equality or great power hierarchies. Given the contested nature of group boundaries, Brubaker (2002) notes that it is more fruitful analytically to treat groups as schemas or discursive frames—simplifications of reality with important political implications—rather than as discrete, sharply differentiated, or internally homogeneous entities that match commonsense understandings of group boundaries. Drawing on this insight, an expressive logic highlights the process of *group-making*: how are group boundaries construed in connection with political issues, and what kind of affective response do they evoke as a result?

While group attachment provides a powerful mechanism for collective behavior, there is nothing automatic or inevitable about this process. Different groups may be connected to the same political issue. In the United States, for example, free trade may be perceived as an issue that impacts a given

[6] A rich tradition of sociological research examines the formation and effects of symbolic boundaries—that is, "the lines that include and define some people, groups, and things while excluding others" (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki, 2015).

social class (the working class), a given geographic region (the Rust Belt), or rather the country as a whole. Likewise, multiple connections (positive or negative) may exist between any given political issue and a given group. For example, free trade may be framed as an opportunity to grow the U.S. national economy, in line with extensive research in economics; or instead as a threat to national industry, as claimed by Trump during his presidential campaigns. For group attachment to motivate attitudes toward a political issue, actors need to see a clear connection between a given social group on the one hand, and a given political issue on the other (Kinder, 1998, 807). That is, actors need to perceive a given political issue through the lens of group membership.

In particular, existing research indicates that the politicization of group attachments hinges on a combination of three factors: the socio-political context, elite framing, and psychological predispositions. First, while actors form attachments to multiple social groups, which group attachment becomes relevant for a given issue depends on *the socio-political context*. For group identification to shape behavior, it needs to become salient in a given context. Dramatic events—such as a terrorist attack or an economic crisis—can serve to galvanize group identifiers into collective action (Brubaker, 2002, 171). Contested definitions of group boundaries become especially salient during periods of socio-political transformation, when actors may perceive their group to be under threat. Because identifiers are motivated to defend the group, in-group favoritism becomes especially potent when actors perceive a threat to the group. For example, as the 9/11 attacks created a sense of imminent threat across the US (including areas far from the sites of the attacks), they galvanized Americans to support significant policy changes to combat terrorism (Kam and Kinder, 2007). Similarly, as global inequality substantially decreased in the past twenty years, lower-income groups within Western countries have felt that they were left behind, while emerging countries disproportionally reaped the benefits of globalization (Milanovic, 2023).

Second, shared perceptions of a given political issue also depend on *elite framing*—that is, how political leaders and the mass media discuss the issue. Elites often act as identity entrepreneurs, shaping definitions of the group, its friends, and its enemies in connection with political issues. Elites shape national identity, for example, by promoting linguistic homogeneization. As Posner

(2003, 127) shows using the case of Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia) in the colonial era, "colonial administrative practices were responsible for creating not just groups, but also the landscape of ethnic cleavages that structure contemporary political and social life." Elites have shaped national identity via linguistic homogeneization not only during the colonial era, but also in contemporary cases such as China—where the central government actively suppresses language diversity not only in the mainland but also in special administrative regions like Hong Kong.[7]

Elites compete in the framing process, offering different interpretations of group boundaries that resonate more or less with the public in a given context (Bonikowski, 2016). In democratic contexts, elites help define what it means to be a group member through their actions and words, shaping group boundaries via persuasion and example. At the same time, elite framing relies on existing stereotypes about social groups and the affect associated with them. Because shared conceptions of group boundaries are relatively stable over time, elites do not invent these boundaries out of thin air; rather, elite framing is typically constrained by the existing discursive frames (Huddy, 2001, 147-49). Trump's campaign rhetoric, for example, relied heavily on existing stereotypes toward social groups in the United States. Leveraging existing resentment toward groups like Mexicans or Muslims, on the one hand, Trump portrayed the former as criminals and proposed banning immigration by the latter. Leveraging existing sympathy toward (white) Europeans, on the other hand, Trump wondered why the US was not "letting people in from Europe."[8]

Besides acting as identity entrepreneurs, elites also shape perceptions of group salience and group threat. As Brubaker (2002, 166) notes, elites may frame issues as "primordial conflicts between groups," evoking group identity to motivate members to defend the group. For example, members of the Bush administration mobilized public support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq by claiming that Saddam Hussein's regime not only was connected to al Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks but also possessed weapons of mass destruction (Hall and Ross, 2015, 866-72). Framing the invasion of Iraq as part of the "War on Terror"—or an "us-versus-them" situation—the Bush admin-

[7]Gina Anne Tam, "China's Language Police." *Foreign Affairs*, September 19, 2023. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/chinas-language-police.

[8]Nicholas Confessore, "For Whites Sensing Decline, Donald Trump Unleashes Words of Resistance." The New York Times, July 13, 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/14/us/politics/donald-trump-white-identity.html.

istration curtailed political dissent, which became equated with unpatriotic behavior (Krebs and Lobasz, 2007). Similarly, in the Balkans during the 1990s, elites promoted violent conflict by framing the breakup of the former Yugoslavia as an existential threat to the nation, defined by Serbian leaders in ethnocultural terms (Gagnon, 1994; Mylonas, 2012). As Kaufman (2019) notes, leaders play an important role in mobilizing supporters for war—by framing issues to evoke hostility and aggression, inflating perceptions of threat, and then providing the means to fight.

Importantly, perceived threats to the group need not be objective or physical threats in order to trigger a response from group members; rather, they can also be symbolic threats to the group's culture or its way of life (Sears, 1993). This is often the case, for example, in contemporary public debates about issues like free trade or immigration. When leaders frame interactions with outsiders as detrimental to the nation's culture or way of life, as right-wing populist leaders in Western countries often do, this motivates domestic audiences to retreat from international interactions, favoring isolationist foreign policies like trade protectionism.As Mutz (2021) notes, Americans tend to to view trade as competition rather than cooperation, in part as because of the public discourse about trade. Perceiving an us-versus-them situation, Americans are more likely to adopt a defensive posture, especially when they see trading partners as different from them.

Finally, the impact of elite framing on political behavior depends on *psychological predispositions*—relatively stable traits that inform how each actor approaches relations with other groups. As public opinion research demonstrates, individuals exhibit different affective dispositions that inform their reactions to issue framing. Not all individuals react in the same way to elites' attempts to frame political issues in connection to social identities. Within Western countries, for example populist appeals and the corresponding isolationist policies, such as trade protectionism, tend to resonate more with those citizens who hold negative affect toward out-groups. Overall, citizens who resent out-groups are more likely to answer leaders' calls to defend the nation against external threats. The more resentment toward out-groups a citizen harbors, the more likely they are to oppose immigration (Hainmueller and Hangartner, 2013; Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2014), free trade (Mansfield and Mutz, 2009, 2013; Mutz and Kim, 2017), and supranational integration (Hobolt,

2016; Hobolt and de Vries, 2016; Iakhnis, Rathbun, Reifler et al., 2018) in the current context of decreasing global inequality and relative US decline. Similarly, members of the US public who reported higher levels of ethnocentrism were more likely to support the homeland security policies of the Bush administration after the 9/11 attacks (Kam and Kinder, 2007).

In sum, elite mobilization attempts succeed when issue framing taps into deeply felt attachments among the public in a given context. Group attachments become politically relevant when elites frame political issues based on existing stereotypes toward social groups, especially in contexts marked by socio-political transformations or perceptions of threat to the group.

Conclusion

Drawing on multi-disciplinary research, this article develops an expressive logic of action, which provides a new vocabulary to theorize about group-based politics in IR. Based on this logic, what motivates action is the desire to belong in a social category. Social identification provides a compelling mechanism for behavior: the more an actor identifies with a group, the more they accept influence from the group, care about the group, and favor its members over outsiders. Identification motivates behavior when actors see a connection between a group and a political issue, based on how elites frame this issue in a given context. Focusing on social and psychological processes, an expressive logic involves distinctive mechanisms. It assumes that: (1) group identification—rather than self-interest, shared norms, practices, or habit—is a driving force behind political behavior; (2) affect, rather than cost-benefit calculations or pure cognition, shapes how actors process information and make decisions; and (3) symbolic factors—that is, how actors and issues are framed in the political discourse—play a fundamental role in organizing political activity.

An expressive logic improves our understanding of consequential phenomena in international politics, such as the current backlash against globalization across the West and the resulting increase in trade protectionism among the world's leading economies. Existing explanations of foreign policy behavior in different areas, ranging from international conflict to cooperation, involve expressive

elements. However, these disparate instances of state behavior are not recognized yet as expressive action. The proposed logic helps us understand these phenomena not as empirical anomalies, as we are wont to do based on existing logics of action, but rather as part of a distinctive class of phenomena—that is, as cases of expressive behavior. By focusing on the distinctive features of expressive behavior, an expressive logic promotes theory development and refinement across domains. While existing explanations involve expressive elements, an expressive logic differs in scope from existing explanations: it unifies and organizes much evidence on political behavior with a limited set of assumptions, providing a coherent set of building blocks to theorize about group processes with crucial affective and symbolic features. For each instance of foreign policy behavior, this logic invites us to ask: How do elites construe the nation, its friends, and its enemies? How do they frame foreign policy issues, and what affective responses do they evoke as a result? Rather than supersede existing logics, an expressive logic contributes to a fuller picture of foreign policy behavior. There is little reason to expect that any logic captures the entirety of human behavior. As analytical tools, logics of action offer inexact representations of reality, which serve as more or less useful foundations for theory building depending on the research question at hand. A flexible approach, devoid of paradigmatic commitments, is therefore more promising in this context.

Future research could use the building blocks provided in this article to theorize about specific phenomena, derive observable implications from theory, and assess the empirical validity of these observable implications. For example, researchers could investigate whether appeals to more inclusive identity attachments or issue framing that highlights commonalities (rather than divisions) across national boundaries could increase public support for free trade and immigration in Western countries. A mixed-methods approach (Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston et al., 2009) would be especially useful to that end. Researchers could use discourse or content analysis to uncover shared understandings of group boundaries in different countries; conduct surveys to gauge the appeal of different discursive frames among different publics; run survey experiments to estimate the impact of issue framing on public attitudes and behaviors toward foreign policy issues like free trade and immigration; or use methods such as network analysis and agent-based models to further probe

into the emergent aspects of expressive behavior. IR scholarship would also benefit from research that identifies the scope conditions for each logic of action and investigates how different logics interact to produce specific outcomes of interest. This article takes a first step in that direction by developing an expressive logic and distinguishing it analytically from existing ones.

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