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## Participation in national celebrations and commemorations: The role of socialization and nationalism in the Dutch context



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### ABSTRACT

National celebrations and commemorations are believed to increase national cohesion. It is unknown however who participates in these activities. In this contribution, we address to what extent socialization by the parents and school, and integration into religious intermediary groups affect participation in national celebrations and commemorations. With the strong reference to the relevance of the nation in national days, we also hypothesize about the association between nationalist attitudes and national day participation. We chose the Netherlands as test case, with its institutionalized national days to remember war victims, to celebrate freedom and to celebrate the Monarchy. Relying on a national survey (LISS; N = 4559), our findings show that the transmission of parental behaviours is crucial for taking part in national celebrations and commemorative events. Schooling and integration in religious groups only affect specific forms of national celebrations and commemorations. In line with US based research on flagging the Stars and Stripes, we find that national day participation in this European country is affected by patriotic attitudes rather than by chauvinistic attitudes.

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### 1. Introduction

Group celebrations and commemorations have taken place throughout the ages with the aim of strengthening cohesion within groups and reinforcing the “we-feeling” among members within a group (Turner, 2006). With the emergence of modern nation states in the nineteenth century, the nation itself often became the focus of such celebration. Not only the creation of national states was accompanied with the introduction of national days (Hobsbawm, 1990), also with constitutional changes, from kingdom to republic for example, national celebrations were institutionalized with the aim to strengthen national cohesion (Woods and Tsang, 2013). Accordingly, Germany celebrated the proclamation of the German Republic (1919) and Italy has since 1949 organized the ‘Festa Della Repubblica’.

Also today many nations know different national celebrations and commemorations, but research has hardly empirically addressed who is more likely to participate in these festivities and commemorations. With the focus on the nation in the national days’ literature, the question is not only whether participation stimulates national cohesion (Turner, 2006; Fox, 2006; Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008), but also whether people with nationalist attitudes are the ones who are more likely to participate in national days in the first place. Although we acknowledge the difficulty in the causal order of the relation, social scientists who examined causes and consequences of the variance in nationalist attitudes (e.g. Hjerem and Schnabel, 2010),

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have not addressed to what extent nationalist attitudes play a role in cohesion-enhancing behaviours such as the present-day participation in national celebrations and commemorations is thought to be. Perhaps this is due to the nature of national celebrations, where it is assumed that everyone participates. Yet, *if* national days do have cohesion enhancing forces it is relevant to know who joins in celebrating and commemorating the nation in these days.

One of the few empirical studies on this topic (Skitka, 2005) departed from the notion that flagging (Stars and Stripes after 9/11) is an expression of patriotism and might strengthen both nationalist sentiments and national cohesion further by the behavioural expression of the flagging. Although different from these more spontaneous actions of flagging behaviour, this study aims to answer the question to what extent nationalist attitudes are related to flagging – as a central aspect of many institutionalized national days – in a different context.

The Netherlands – the site of our study – observes, in addition to ‘King’s Day’ (celebrating the Dutch Monarchy – before the throne change of 2013 it was Queens’s Day), a Remembrance Day and a Liberation Day. Similar to days in other countries relating to war history in general and more specifically to days in other European countries involved in the Second World War (WWII), these latter two days were to commemorate the dead that fell during WWII and to celebrate the capitulation of Nazi Germany.<sup>1</sup> Building on Renan’s work (Smith, 2014), who argues that commemorations might be more strongly related to nationalist sentiments and national cohesion than celebrative events, this study examines both. The Netherlands – knowing celebrations and commemorations that refer to war experiences and liberation as well as to the monarchy – thus offers a relevant site to get an understanding of participation in these various national days. In the country national symbols are much less part of the everyday life than in the United States and the question is whether nationalist attitudes are related to flagging and participating in national days comparable as was found for the US in the study of Skitka (2005).

Since national days might strengthen cohesion (Turner, 2006), one of the central issues in research on celebrating and commemorating the nation is how these days are kept alive amongst *all* inhabitants. Often (but not necessarily) national days refer to events in a more distant past. Why would generations that have not experienced a war commemorate in a national day? In the Netherlands, the majority of the adult Dutch population observes Remembrance Day each year but particularly younger people and non-western immigrants do so to a lesser extent (Verhue and Koenen, 2010). The question of socialization of these national days is therefore a central focus in our research and an alternative to the explanation of participation in these days based on nationalist attitudes.

In this contribution we show for the first time empirically the role of parents, schooling and religious institutions in participation in these national celebrations and commemorations, indicating how family life and institutional socialization and integration might add to national cohesion. With a focus on socialization of national days and nationalist attitudes as two alternative explanations, this study is one of the few that does not depart from an ethnic minority perspective on socialization of ethnic and nationalist attitudes but instead provides empirical evidence for such socialization patterns among majority members. We employ a national dataset from 2011 with which we study participation in Remembrance Day (by observing two minutes silence) and Liberation Day (by flagging) as well as people’s interest in celebrating Queen’s Day (watching the Queen’s public tour through the country with the royal family on that day).

## 2. Expectations

Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) show that much of the literature on national days has taken a top-down approach, investigating the meaning and functioning of those days by focusing on the supply-side and top-down institutionalization of national days. Much less often have researchers focused on how these days are perceived by the population, let alone who actually participates in these days. To better understand who participates in this supposed national cohesion forming behaviour, we embed our research in related traditions that have empirically investigated participation in other forms of (national) cohesion forming behaviour such as social participation (e.g. contacts in the neighbourhood), community participation (e.g. volunteering, membership of associations) and civic participation (e.g. voting, demonstrations) (Putnam, 2000; Van der Meer, 2009), and formulate expectations that fit participation in national days. In this literature the role of socialization (Parsons and Bales, 1956) and integration theory (Durkheim, 1897) is highlighted. To this end we apply socialization theory by formulating expectations about national day socialization by parents and school. We consider parents and schools as socializing agents that transfer values and norms regarding national celebrations and commemorations. Since Protestantism and Catholicism have historically a different position in the Netherlands regarding how they were supported by the state and monarchy, we look at membership of religious groups as well. To this end, we apply integration theory, with expectations about norms applicable to religious groups (e.g. Lubbers et al., 2009) on participation in national celebrations and commemorations. Finally, we discuss nationalist attitudes that people support to in greater or lesser extent, and we formulate hypotheses about the influence of such attitudes towards the nation state, which may be an alternative explanation of national day participation as compared to expectations from socialization or integration.

<sup>1</sup> More recently, the Dutch Remembrance Day honours all killed – civilians and military – in the Netherlands or abroad since the outbreak of World War II, during war or peace operations (National Committee for 4 and 5 May, 2011). On May 5 of every year, the Dutch celebrate the fact that “we in the Netherlands, since 1945, live in freedom” and “we focus on the importance of freedom and the necessity to combat servitude” (National Committee for 4 and 5 May, 2011).

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