SUBLIMINAL FLAG EXPOSURE AFFECTS VOTING BY ENHANCING SELF-STEREOTYPING

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The study investigates the mechanisms underlying the flag-priming effect on ideological positioning and voting behavior. The experiment, conducted in the context of the Italian elections, found that subliminal flag priming led to self-stereotyping, with participants assuming traits associated with the stereotype of the typical Italian citizen. Such self-stereotyping processes, in turn, mediated the effect of the priming on voting and ideological positioning. Specifically, the priming was responsible for a move toward ideological positions closer to the national prototype (which is centrist), both in terms of voting behavior and ideological positioning. Moreover, the effect proved to be moderated by the centrality of political identity for the individual. This finding helps elucidate previous results and holds practical implications for political communication.

It is now accepted that voting behavior results not only from deliberate thinking (Downs, 1959; Lau & Redlawsk, 1997) but is also influenced by factors that operate outside of conscious awareness, such as the facial appearance of candidates (Sussman et al., 2013; Todorov et al., 2005), environmental cues triggered by polling locations (Berger et al., 2008), and the perceived similarity between voters and politicians' characteristics (Caprara et al., 2007). Of particular interest for our current purposes are findings that exposure to pervasive national flags impacts voting in countries high in patriotism and nationalism. In this vein, a prior study conducted in Israel revealed that, when primed with the Israeli flag, the voting behavior of both low- and high-nationalism voters shifted toward center parties (Hassin et al., 2007). Similar findings arose in the United States. Subliminal priming of the American flag resulted in more pro-Republican attitudes, beliefs, and voting behavior (Carter et al., 2011). Remarkably, this effect was still present eight months later. Since the sample was rather left-wing, these results were interpreted as a shift toward the political center; however, other studies with ideologically-balanced samples found that flag exposure created a Republican advantage (Kalmoe & Gross, 2016), which calls into question the interpretation of previous findings as a move toward centrist positions. Therefore, although prior research highlighted a flag-priming effect in different political contexts, possible underlying mechanisms remained unexplored.

To fill this gap, we propose here an alternative account, consistent with all existing findings. Specifically, we hypothesize that flag priming would activate a superordinate level of categorization (i.e., the national category), resulting in a self-stereotyping process. As suggested by Jaskulowski (2016), the flag (vehicle entity) constitutes a metonymy for the nation, thus allowing for mental access to the abstract conceptual domain of the nation (see Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

When a self-relevant social category is activated, individuals perceive themselves as category members, accentuate within-category similarities, and underplay the distinctive characteristics of the self (Turner et al., 1987), causing assimilation of the self to the group prototype, or self-stereotyping (e.g., Hogg & Turner, 1987; Huntsinger & Sinclair, 2010). Moreover, prior research has demonstrated that national symbols (i.e., American symbols) are associated faster with White Americans (i.e., the American prototype) than with ethnic minorities (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Devos & Ma, 2008; see also Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2010). Hence, we assume that flag priming triggers self-stereotyping, causing individuals to assume traits, attitudes, and behaviors that are typical of the national prototype.

If the political national prototype is centrist, flag priming should, through the assimilation to the national prototype caused by self-stereotyping, result in more centrist voting. For this to occur, individuals must be willing to see themselves as members of the corresponding (national) social identity, which might be in competition with other levels of self-categorization. This recategorization process, however, especially among individuals for whom party affiliation is central to their identity, might be perceived as a threat to a valued social identity and thus paradoxically increase partisan identification itself (Brewer, 1991; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000; Moghaddam & Stringer, 1988). In fact, partisan identification correlates with the degree of perceived differentiation between one's own party and the opposite party (Greene, 1999; Kelly, 1988). Starting from these assumptions, the effect of flag priming might be moderated by the centrality of one's political identity. Only people who consider their political identity as not central to their sense of self will be sensitive to the flag-priming manipulation, and thus move toward the center. Those for whom political identity is central, may, on the contrary, resist and display the opposite trend.

We thus hypothesize that self-stereotyping mediates, and centrality of political identity moderates, the effect of flag priming. We tested these hypotheses in an experiment conducted in Italy, where the prototypical citizen is of moderate political opinion (Armingeon et al., 2019).[1] We thus expected flag priming to lead to more centrist political positions.

EXPERIMENT

Participants

One hundred sixty-six Italian citizens eligible to vote (111 females; $M_{age} = 21.4$ years; $SD_{age} = 2.9$ years) participated for course credit or in exchange for an eight-euro compensation. An a priori G-Power analysis (power = .95; a medium effect size $f^2 = .15$) for regressions with three tested predictors and their interactions (1 *dummy* and 2 *continuous* variables, namely flag priming, centrality of political identity, and identification with the national group) suggested $N = 153$, so we slightly over-recruited as is customary. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and the experiment was conducted in accordance with the guidelines laid down in the Declaration of Helsinki. It was reviewed by the Ethics Committee of the University of Milano-Bicocca and received approval (document # RM-2020-326).

Materials and Procedure

Participants were recruited for two sessions, one before (T_1) and one after (T_2) the Italian parliamentary election of 2013 and completed a series of tasks (Table 1).

TABLE 1
Tasks throughout the whole study

	Task	Number of questions/trials	Subliminal priming before each question/trial
Pre-election session (T_1)	Practice with stimulus location	50	Yes
	Political issues	25	Yes
	Voting intentions	1	No
	General political orientation (GPO$_1$)	1	No
	Centrality of political identity (CPI)	6	No
	Identification with the national group (IWNG)	7	No
	National stereotyping questionnaire	16	No
	Priming awareness: On-line test	64	Yes
	Priming awareness: Pen-and-paper questionnaire	7	No
Post-election session (T_2)	Actual vote	1	No
	General political orientation (GPO$_2$)	1	No
	Knowledge of current and political events	16	No
	Media exposure and media usage	15	No

Note. The pre-election (T_1) and post-election (T_2) sessions took place one week before and two weeks after the general election days (February, 24th and 25th, 2013), respectively.

Pre-Election Session (T_1)

Stimulus location task. Participants were randomly assigned to the flag (85 participants) or control (81 participants) condition, and completed the stimulus location task, which consisted in indicating whether the stimulus appeared on the lower or upper part of the screen, by pressing the N / U key. A mask (5.4 x 4 cm; 203 x 151 pixels) appeared for 100 msec and it was immediately followed by a stimulus (flag vs. scrambled flag; 4.6 x 3.4 cm; 173 x 128 pixels) for 16 ms, which, in turn, was followed by the initial mask for 300 msec. After the first 50 trials, the priming continued for 25 more trials, each of which was followed by one of 25 questions comprising the political issues task.

Political issues task. This comprised 25 questions about Italian political issues that were discussed by the main parties throughout the political campaign (e.g., "Give the right to have Italian citizenship to all the children who are born within the Italian borders, following the *ius solis* principle"). The order of the questions and their position on the screen was randomized for each participant. Each question was accompanied by a 6-point response scale ranging from *completely disagree* (1) to *completely agree* (6). The 25 political issues were drawn from the *Open polis* association (http://www.openpolis.it/eng/) which compiled

TPM Vol. 30, No. 4, December 2023
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them by analyzing parties' political programs, politicians' public speeches, and media coverage. On 10 issues, right-wing and left-wing parties were clearly polarized while the remaining 15 were not and thus were used as fillers. A composite index was computed by averaging the 10 relevant political issues. Scores on the left-wing issues were reversed so that low values indicate a left-wing political opinion and high values indicate a right-wing political opinion ($\alpha = .70$; $M = 3.04$, $SD = .73$).

Voting. Participants indicated their voting intentions by selecting one amid a list of 11 main political parties plus an "other party" option.[2] Responses were coded into a numerical scale that ranged from –2 (*very left-wing party)* to +2 (*very right-wing party*). The coding of voting intentions into a Likert-type scale was done by two independent judges on the basis of the parties' political program and their positioning in the Italian parliament. Consensus was very high and all disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Political orientation. Participants indicated where they would sit in the Italian parliament independently of the existing political parties. The scale ranged from 1 (*extreme left*) to 9 (*extreme right*). Then centrality of political identity (centrality) was measured via six items (e.g., "My political position is an important reflection of who I am"; "The fact that I have this political position comes rarely to my mind"; Cameron, 2004) and participants indicated their agreement with each on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*). An index was created by averaging responses ($\alpha = .85$; $M = 5.23$, $SD = 1.98$). High scores mean a stronger political identity.

Self-stereotyping. Participants indicated (on a scale from 1 to 7) the extent to which 16 personality traits, that were presented in random order, applied to themselves. Twelve were prototypical of Italians (four positive: creative, gourmet, romantic, friendly; four negative: plaintive, mama's boy, polemic, prejudiced; four neutral: chatty, shrewd, religious, traditionalist) and four were nonstereotypical neutral traits (competitive, on time, messy, eager).

Priming awareness. Participants' awareness of the priming was tested through established procedures (Hassin et al., 2007; see Appendix for details).

Post-Election Session (T$_2$)

Two weeks after the election, 165 out of 166 participants (99.4% return rate) completed the second part of the study (T$_2$). They indicated their political orientation and actual vote as in T$_1$; an option "I did not vote" was included. Participants also completed measures of identification with the national group (Hassin et al., 2007) and of knowledge of current and political events, media exposure, and usage (Ferguson & Hassin, 2007). These measures did not moderate any of the effects and are thus not discussed further. Participants were fully debriefed and thanked.

RESULTS

Eleven participants (seven in the flag-priming, four in the control condition) were excluded from the analyses because of prime awareness. Awareness of the prime did not vary according to condition, $\chi^2(1) = 1.45$, $p = .235$.

Neither voting (intentions at T$_1$, reported at T$_2$), $t(153) = 0.35$, $p = .723$, nor political orientation, $t(151) = –0.36$, $p = .725$, varied from T$_1$ to T$_2$. Political orientation at T$_1$ and T$_2$, political issues, voting intentions, and actual vote correlated (rs > .48, ps < .001). The sample, overall, was quite left-wing. Scale

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midpoint comparison revealed that participants were more prone to vote for left-wing parties (vote intentions: $M = -0.64$, $SD = 0.93$), $t(154) = -8.55$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.69$, to place themselves on left positions (political orientation T_1: $M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.89$), $t(154) = -5.31$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.43$, and to lean left on political issues ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 0.74$), $t(154) = -7.75$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.62$.

Flag-Priming Effect and Moderation Analyses

We tested moderation analyses using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013; Model 1, 5000 bootstrap resampling) with condition (0 = *control*, 1= *flag*) as IV, centrality as moderator, and political orientation at T_1 and T_2, political issues, voting intentions, and actual vote, as DVs. A significant interaction effect between condition and centrality emerged on political orientation T_1, $B = -0.36$, $SE = .15$, $t = -2.42$, $p = .022$, 95% CI [–.65, –.07], and T_2, $B = -0.30$, $SE = .14$, $t = -2.12$, $p = .032$, 95% CI [–.58, –.02], political issues, $B = -0.14$, $SE = .06$, $t = -2.49$, $p = .011$, 95% CI [–.25, –.03], voting intentions, $B = -0.15$, $SE = .08$, $t = -2.04$, $p = .043$, 95% CI [–.31, –.01], and actual vote, $B = -0.22$, $SE = .07$, $t = -3.24$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [–.35, –.09]. We thus standardized the five DVs ($\alpha = .88$), averaged them into a political attitude index, and used it as DV in the same model described above. As shown in Figure 1, a significant interaction effect emerged, $B = -0.20$, $SE = .06$, $t = -3.07$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [–.32, –.07]. At low centrality ($-1SD = 3.24$), flag prime resulted in more centrist political attitudes than control prime, $B = 0.38$, $SE = .18$, $t = 2.12$, $p = .031$, 95% CI [.03, .72]; at high centrality ($+1SD = 7.21$), flag priming resulted in more left-wing political attitudes, $B = -0.40$, $SE = .18$, $t = -2.25$, $p = .031$, 95% CI [–.76, –.05]. Low and high centrality did not differ in their political attitudes in the control condition, $B = -0.03$, $SE = .04$, $t = -0.75$, $p = .455$, 95% CI [–.11, .05], but they did in the flag-priming condition, $B = -0.23$, $SE = .05$, $t = -4.68$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [–.33, –.13].
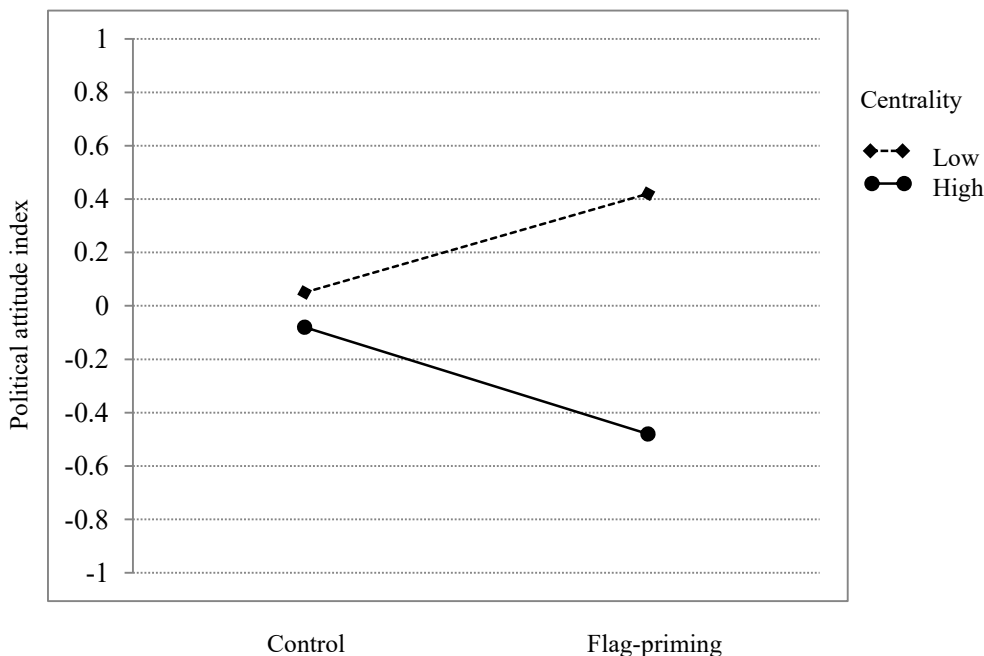

FIGURE 1
Moderation model. Interaction effect between condition and centrality on the political attitude index

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Self-Stereotyping and Mediation Analyses

An index of self-stereotyping was computed by averaging the attribution to the self of the stereo-typical traits of Italians and used as DV in the same moderation analysis described above. In this case, too, an interaction between condition and centrality emerged, $B = -0.13$, $SE = .05$, $t = -2.45$, $p = .012$, 95% CI [$-.23$, $-.03$] (see Figure 2). At low centrality, greater self-stereotyping occurred in the flag-priming condition than in the control condition, $B = 0.32$, $SE = .14$, $t = 2.17$, $p = .034$, 95% CI [$-.03$, $.60$]. At high centrality self-stereotyping did not vary between conditions, $B = -0.20$, $SE = .15$, $t = -1.34$, $p = .184$, 95% CI [$-.49$, $.09$]. Self-stereotyping of low and high identifiers did not differ in the control condition, $B = 0.05$, $SE = .03$, $t = 1.38$, $p = .171$, 95% CI [$-.02$, $.11$], but it did in the flag-priming condition, $B = -0.08$, $SE = .04$, $t = -2.06$, $p = .042$, 95% CI [$-.16$, $-.00$].

A moderated mediation (Hayes, 2013; Model 8, 5000 bootstrap resampling) using condition as IV, the political attitude index as DV, self-stereotyping as mediator, and centrality as moderator was computed. In line with our hypothesis, the model proved to be significant, $B = -0.06$, $SE = .03$; CI = LL $-.12$; UL $-.01$; model summary: $R^2 = .25$, $F(4, 150) = 12.38$, $p < .001$.
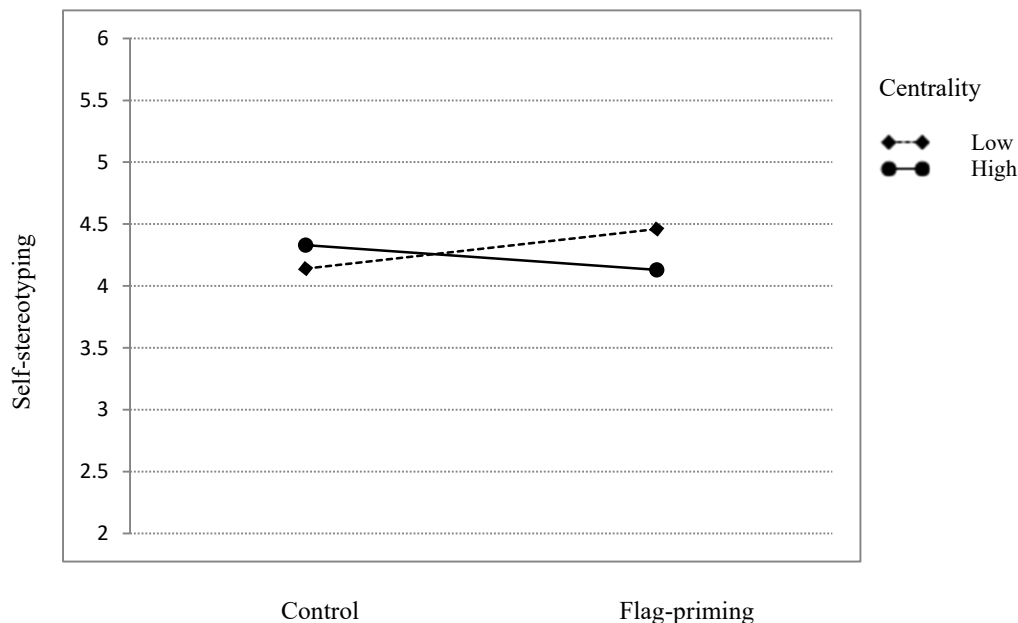

FIGURE 2
Moderation model. Interaction effect between condition and centrality on self-stereotyping

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We investigated how voting behavior and political attitudes are affected by subliminal exposure to the national flag. Previous findings showing that subliminally flag priming led a left-leaning sample to move toward a more right-wing position were interpreted as evidence that the flag causes a push toward a more centrist position (Carter et al., 2011; Hassin et al., 2007), but more recent evidence casts doubts on this interpretation (Kalmoe & Gross, 2016). We proposed that exposure to the national flag enhances self-

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stereotyping at the national level, a process through which individuals assume traits, attitudes, and behaviors that are typical of the national prototype. In contexts where the national prototype is politically centrist, exposure to the national flag should lead to more centrist positions through enhancing self-stereotyping. We further hypothesized that this effect would be moderated by the centrality of one's political identity. Specifically, we hypothesized that for those low in centrality, flag priming would produce a movement toward a more centrist position, while for those high in centrality the flag would produce no effect, or a boomerang effect, pushing them toward more polarized political attitudes and voting behavior. We tested these hypotheses in an experiment conducted in Italy, where the national prototype in terms of political ideology is centrist. The results of our experiment provide support for both of our hypotheses.

The national flag priming affected political opinion, voting intentions, and the actual vote (at least as self-reported); and this occurred through the mediation of the self-stereotyping process. This finding, and particularly the effect of the prime on self-stereotyping, is in line with the Active-Self Account (Wheeler et al., 2007), according to which the effects of primed constructs on behavior is due to a temporary influence on the active-self concept: the active-self is flexible and changes promptly in response to external stimuli such as primed inputs.

In line with our hypothesis of a moderating role of the centrality of political identity, this effect emerged only among individuals with low centrality. For high-centrality individuals, things are different. The activation of a superordinate identity (through flag priming), particularly in the context of a national election, led to, as anticipated, a polarization of their political attitudes. This interpretation is consistent with rebound effects in the presence of cues that make a superordinate identity salient (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000).

These results shed light on the underlying mechanism for the flag-priming effects and suggest one possible boundary condition, namely the centrality of political identity. They also extend prior research by highlighting similar patterns in Italy, which differ from Israel and the USA in terms of level of nationalism, patriotism, and flag exposure (Tarozzi & Vecchio, 1999). Patriotism is generally weak in Italy, and the level of flag exposure is significant only during national occasions such as national holidays and sports events (i.e., the Olympics or the soccer World Cup tournament or, most recently, a pandemic; see Marchesini, 1999; for the US context see Billing, 1995; Skitka, 2005). Thus, our results show that national symbols impact citizens' thoughts and behaviors also in contexts in which their exposure in private and public contexts is not pervasive (Marchesini, 1999) and the public discourse is not particularly nationalistic and patriotic. These differences could account for the different role played by national identification in the present study (Italy) compared to prior research (Israel).

The present study also has limitations. The most important one is related to the political leanings of our sample. Just as in the previous studies in the American context (Carter et al., 2011), the use of university students as participants resulted in a left-leaning sample. In our view, however, this limitation is at least partially outweighed by the emergence of the predicted mediational role of self-stereotyping, which sheds light on the mechanism behind the effects of flag priming. Future studies with more diverse samples, ideally representative samples of the national political landscape, are needed to provide a better picture of the effects described in this article. Such studies would be particularly informative if cross-national in nature.

In the Italian context, the prototypical citizen is perceived as politically moderate and the national flag has traditionally represented a centrist political ideology (Armingeon et al., 2019). Hence, the self-stereotyping related to the national category activation, and the unifying process triggered by the national symbol, work synergistically. Exploring the role of self-stereotyping in a different context may be crucial to more firmly establish the correct interpretation of the effect. Specifically, it would be beneficial to directly compare the effects of flag priming in countries where the ideology represented by the national flag and the

image of the typical citizen are divergent (Becker et al., 2017; Kariryaa et al., 2020). Another direction for future research is to look at differences between the effect of subliminal and supraliminal flag priming on self-stereotyping and voting. The accessibility of the information and the consciousness of the priming may be crucial in tailoring the priming effect, determining assimilation or contrast (Lombardi et al., 1987; Strack et al., 1993).

In addition to contributing to psychological theory, and keeping in mind the limitations outlined above, our results have important implications for political life. First of all, they further show that political behavior may not be fully deliberate; it is influenced by subtle aspects that may act below the threshold of awareness and in automatic ways. The symbols used by political parties (such as the inclusion of the national flag in their logo) appear at polling stations, may affect voters' attitudes in ways that may be very different from what is intended or simply in ways that had not been anticipated.

Second, our results suggest that people for whom political identity is not very central to their sense of self, are more likely to shift toward the "prototypical" citizen's position. Since low-centrality citizens are likely to largely overlap with the undecided voters' group, and this group has become an increasingly decisive factor in the outcome of an election (Arcuri et al., 2008; Galdi et al., 2008), the processes investigated here may play a significant role in the context of political behavior and voting.

NOTES

1. The Comparative Political Data Set 1960-2017 is a collection of political and institutional data. This data set consists of annual data for 36 democratic countries for the 1960-2017 period. We analyzed the Government composition index for Italy. The mean score for right-wing parties is = 15.63, for left-wing parties is = 25.99, and for centrist parties is = 48.19 (Armingeon et al., 2019; see also https://www.youtrend.it/m/mappa-elettorale/index.html#/c/2008-04-13/r/italy). As a further check that the typical Italian citizen is centrist, we asked a sample of 50 participants recruited through the snowball sampling strategy and not involved in the main experiment (all Italians, 21 females, M_{age} = 25.92 years, SD_{age} = 6.43 years) to evaluate whether Italians and the Italian flag were left- or right-wing on a 7-point scale. At the end of the questionnaire, we asked participants to report their political orientation. Then, we computed a one-sample t-test to compare the evaluations given to Italians and to the Italian flag with the mid-point of the scale (i.e., 0) which represents a centrist political orientation. The analysis showed that the score of Italians and of the Italian flag evaluation (M = –0.15, SD = 1.24 and M = –0.13, SD = 1.38, respectively) did not differ from 0 points, $t(41)$ = –0.76, p = .451 and $t(39)$ = –0.59, p = .562. The evaluations did not differ from each other, $t(39)$ = 0.10, p = .922. Participants' political orientation did not predict the evaluation of Italians (β = .09, p = .591) or of the flag (β = .16, p = .362).
2. The 11 parties were:
3. Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà (SEL) [Left, Ecology, Freedom]
4. Partito Democratico (PD) [Democratic party]
5. Unione di Centro (UdC) [Centre Union]
6. Con Monti per l'Italia [With Monti for Italy]
7. Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia (FLI) [Future and Freedom for Italy]
8. Popolo della Libertà (PdL) [The People of Freedom]
9. Lega Nord [Northern League]
10. La Destra [The Right]
11. Movimento 5 Stelle [5 Stars Movement]
12. Rivoluzione Civile [Civil Revolution]
13. Fare (fermare il declino) [Act to Stop the Decline]

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APPENDIX

To check for prime awareness, participants went through 64 trials where they were faced with the priming procedure followed by a question, which could be either "Where did the image appear?" (participants were to press 1 for *up* and 2 for *down*) or "Was the image a flag or a scrambled flag?" (participants were to press 1 for *flag* and 2 for *scrambled flag*). Irrespective of the experimental condition, all participants completed the same task. The total visual stimuli for priming were 32 Italian flags and 32 scrambled flags, presented in a random sequence. Finally, participants were handed a questionnaire that assessed their awareness of the priming manipulation and its effects. Six questions asked (i) what stimulus/stimuli they saw before each question; (ii) whether there was one or more of such stimuli; (iii) if there were more than one, what they were; (iv) whether there was any connection between the visual stimulus/stimuli that appeared before the question and their responses; (v) whether they used a certain strategy during the experiment; and (vi) what they thought the study examined. Each question was followed by a measure of confidence in their response, ranging from 1 (*minimum*) to 7 (*maximum*). To assess if the priming procedure was subliminal in both conditions, we computed the overall accuracy for each participant (errors were coded as 0 and correct responses as 1) and classified participants as globally aware (i.e., average awareness $\geq$ 0.51) or nonaware (i.e., average awareness $\leq$ 0.50) of the primes. Awareness of the prime did not vary according to condition, $\chi^2(1) = 1.45$, $p = .231$.