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National Self-Image as a Justification in Policy Debates: An International Comparison

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Abstract: In national policymaking speakers commonly refer to models and policies adopted elsewhere as a means to justify a bill. However, empirical analysis of parliamentary talk in eight national parliaments (Argentina, Canada, Chile, Finland, Mexico, Russia, Spain and the USA) reported in this article showed an interesting relationship between two types of justifications: of the eight countries compared, the ones that rank lowest in references to the international community as means to justify or criticize domestic legislation rank highest in the frequency with which national self-image is evoked. Yet these two types of justification exist in the same debates, because the occurrence of both of these discourses correlates with debate length. The variation is due to differences between political cultures: in countries like Argentina and the USA, where national self-image is employed most frequently, speakers have at their disposal stories that bolster beliefs about the country's uniqueness. In contrast, in the parliaments of Canada and Finland, where references to national self-image are most infrequent, references to the country's history are rare, and talk about national self-image is entwined with international references.

Keywords: national self-image, policymaking, parliamentary debates, cross-national comparison

Introduction

The recent decades have witnessed the so-called global turn (Darian-Smith and McCarty 2017; Hedetoft 2003), which has challenged the methodological

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nationalist (Chernilo 2006) view of nation-states as self-contained systems, allegedly following their own developmental trajectories. Instead, the global perspective underlines that the modern world is built on complex interdependencies. This is evident also in political decision-making, in which governments adopt new policies in response to what their counterparts in other countries are doing (Simmons, Dobbin, and Garrett 2008: 2).

The global turn questions the standard view of national sovereignty, but more research is needed to understand better how exogenous ideas and events are entwined with national decision-making, sustaining the lived experience of independence while simultaneously national policies are synchronized with each other, often ending up in policy fashions that spread across the globe (Alasuutari 2016). By approaching national policymaking from a comparative perspective, this article makes a contribution to the formation of a global sociology.

The bulk of the rapidly growing research approaches interdependent decision-making by studying policy diffusion (Braun and Gilardi 2006) or transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000), but it has also been tackled by analyzing the ways in which global ideas and trends are evoked in national policymaking (Alasuutari and Qadir 2013). This angle of vision shows that global interdependencies do not necessarily mean that all national states adopt the same models, although they react to others' moves and overall development. Rather, national politicians promote their views by referring to policies adopted in countries closest to them geographically, culturally and politically (Sellar and Lingard 2013; Tervonen-Gonçalves 2012; Waldow 2016). National policies do not necessarily converge but they are synchronized with each other (Alasuutari 2016).

But all countries do not seem to be equally responsive to what is happening outside their borders. There are, namely, interesting differences between countries in how commonly the international community is taken into consideration in national decision-making. When measured by the percentage of parliamentary debates on a new law that contain at least one reference to the international community, the United States ranks lowest of all countries compared thus far (Alasuutari and Vähä-Savo 2018, Alasuutari 2016). Does this mean that low-ranking countries are more self-sufficient in their policymaking, creating their own solutions to policy problems? Do they act as innovative leaders from which other countries copy policies? Such an interpretation would fit well with the received wisdom according to which globalization means Westernization (Schmidt 2003; Huntington 1996) or Americanization (Lervik and Lunnan 2004; Ritzer 1996; Beck et al. 2003; O'Dell 1997): a process in which models trickle down from the West to the rest. However, of the eight countries compared in this study, international references in parliamentary debates are also relatively rare in Chile, Russia and Argentina, whereas those references are most common in Canada, Finland, Spain and Mexico. One is hard-pressed to find any

simple structural explanation for these rankings; a country's affluence or position in world economy does not seem to predict how likely politicians are to refer to other countries' example when debating new legislation.

In this article, we stress that the frequency with which policymakers make international references when debating national policies cannot be read as a simple indicator of a nation-state's position in world society – for instance how isolated or open to international influences a country is. Rather, the eagerness or reluctance with which the international community is referenced reflects a country's political culture.

For instance, direct references to other countries' policies as examples work well as justification in some national parliaments, whereas in some other countries politicians avoid them. Politicians may avoid international references if, for instance, the public sentiment regards them as “cultural treason” (Meyer et al. 1997: 163), or if the common conviction is that “we” are a truly unique or leading country that cannot take lessons from others. Such an instinctual sentiment seems to be particularly strong in the US political culture (Alasuutari and Vähä-Savo 2018), which means that even when politicians introduce exogenous ideas, they avoid advertising their sources or influences. Yet the United States is not the only country in which citizens stress their country's uniqueness; it appears that there is variation in how commonly a nation's “true character” is evoked in domestic politics.

Accordingly, in this paper we hypothesize that the frequency with which politicians appeal to a nation's “identity”—or *national self-image*, as we call this discourse here—is statistically linked with the rate at which references to the international community are used as justification when debating national policy decisions. The discourse of national self-image typically entails definitions, for instance values, that speakers attribute to the nation in order to justify their views of what policies are proper or improper for the country. In evoking this discourse speakers typically allude to stereotypical depictions of compatriots and “national culture,” and these depictions can be coupled with a nation's founding myth or other historic moments often used to define the country and the nation in question. But evoking national self-image can also be less eloquent. When, for instance, a Member of Finnish Parliament remarks that “it is part of democracy that all use of power is periodically submitted to a review by the citizens through elections” (Parliament of Finland 2006: 680) to make her point, she attributes democracy to the principles that the nation is expected to honor.

Politicians appeal to definitions of the nation in all national parliaments, but there are national differences in the frequency with which speakers employ this rhetorical strategy. One can speculate that references to the nation's “identity” are more common if there is a widely known story line used to define the nation and the values it cherishes. For instance, rather than justifying or

criticizing a policy by appealing to the moral authority of the United Nations (UN), a politician may point out how it is in line or in contradiction with the key values of the nation. In that way, a national self-image can be used as a yardstick by which the aptness of new legislation for the nation is assessed. The gist is that the world-cultural values corroborated by UN resolutions and the key values highlighted through references to the national self-image are seldom at odds. It is common to talk about a nation's uniqueness, but when it comes to defining its core values, the lists are practically identical (Meyer 2000).

To test the hypothesis that employing the discourse of national self-image correlates with the frequency with which the international community is alluded to in domestic political talk, we coded references both to the international community and to the national self-image in representative samples of floor debates from the eight national parliaments. We expect to find a negative correlation between these two forms of talk, so that the countries that ranked low in international references – that is, the United States, Chile, Russia, and Argentina – will rank high regarding references to the national self-image, and vice versa, the countries high on international references – that is, Canada, Finland, Spain and Mexico – will rank low on national self-image.

The paper proceeds in the following way. In the next section we relate the study to previous research and to our theoretical framework in more detail. Then, after presenting the data and methods of our study, we present the results of statistical analyses, which are then unpacked by elaborating on the different ways in which the national self-image is utilized by politicians in the countries studied here. By way of conclusion, we discuss the implications of our analysis for a better understanding of the synchronization of national policies.

National Self-Image and International References

Although modern nation-states have assumed the habit of copying models from one another more freely than has been usual in the past (Meyer et al. 1997: 163), previous research shows that there are certain rules that apply to successful political rhetoric by which policymakers justify reforms. A mere proposal to copy policies adopted in other countries or to follow the recommendation of international organizations does not work. Such suggestions would compromise the principle of national sovereignty, which is a core cultural script on which the institutional infrastructure of world society is built: independent countries are not supposed to take orders from other countries or from some higher instance. And even if they bend to external pressure, they need to save face and introduce such

decisions as their own choices. Besides, simply copying policies from other countries would seem to compromise another cultural script cherished in world society: national uniqueness. It is true that nations express uniqueness primarily in areas such as language, dress, food, and cultural traditions, while being quite uniform in the realm of instrumental culture, assumed to be governed by universally valid principles (Meyer 2000), but also in that realm nations retain a sentiment of originality: they do things their own way. That is why policymakers' proposals to learn from other countries or to adopt exogenous models are always embedded in certain discourses that make them approvable and marketable in political rhetoric. When, for instance, global models are "glocalized" (Robertson 2013) and celebrated as local creations, or when reforms are promoted as part of a universal quasi-evolutionary trajectory of modernization (Alasuutari 2011), they do not so easily raise the criticism of imitating others.

But even though these discourses make it normal to evoke international comparisons, rankings, and recommendations to defend or criticize national policies, how fruitful that is depends on national political culture. We emphasize at the outset that here we use the term in a way that differs considerably from the meaning that became common in the social-scientific literature of the 1950s and 1960s. Rather than conceiving of political culture in social-psychological terms (see e. g. Pye 1968), we approach it from a more linguistic and practice-oriented perspective. From such a perspective, as Keith Baker puts it,

politics is the activity through which individuals and groups in any society articulate, negotiate, implement, and enforce the competing claims they make upon one another and upon the whole. Political culture is, in this sense, the set of discourses or symbolic practices by which these claims are made. (1990: 4)

In this context, by a country's political culture, we refer to the ways in which political actors commonly justify and deliberate policies. How frequently politicians refer to international comparisons, on the one hand, and to definitions of national self-image, on the other, form one indicator of differences between national political cultures.

Previous research indicates that if prevalent discourses place the country in a self-evident reference group, comparisons and league tables get a lot of attention and can be used as political capital, especially when a report shows a surprisingly low ranking compared with general expectations. To take an example, the political turmoil witnessed in many countries, triggered by low rankings in the OECD PISA project (Martens and Niemann 2010; Takayama 2008; Pons 2012; Grek 2010), created a kind of "policy tourism" (González 2010) from abroad to top-ranking countries, with political actors eager to learn about the factors behind excellent results and to promote reforms based on them.

On the other hand, if it is common to think of a country more as an outlier, as one of its kind, international comparisons and rankings call less attention and are less useful politically. For instance, constructions of Russian national self-image utilize a picture of Russia and the former Soviet Union following its own trajectory that differs from an alleged routine path of modernization.¹ When a country's identity is commonly constructed as being a special case, it can be assumed that international references are less useful in justifying domestic policies.

In similar vein, Norbert Elias' (2000) discussion of national self-image indicates that the utility of the modernization discourse in national politics depends on whether a people identify themselves as a self-confident embodiment of universal human progress. In this respect, Elias suggests, the German national self-image evolved differently from that of France and England. Related to the fact that in France and England the middle classes were more strongly bound to the courtly traditions, for the English and French the concept of civilization "sums up in a single term their pride in the significance of their own nations for the progress of the West and of humankind" (2000: 39). In contrast, the rising German middle classes, which were the driving force of the nationalist movement, associated the concept of civilization with the French: they "increasingly perceived as the national character of their neighbour those modes of behaviour which they had first observed predominantly at their own courts" (2000: 107). Consequently, the German national self-image was built around the concept of culture, which expresses national pride through stressing uniqueness: it refers to human products – for instance works of art, books, religious or philosophical systems – "in which the individuality of a people expresses itself" (2000: 41).

More generally, it has been noted that historical events and narratives are key elements in the formation of national self-images (Bilali 2013). A shared view of history defines a trajectory which helps construct the essence of a group's identity, but it also relates the people to other groups and ascertains what its options are for facing present challenges (Liu and Hilton 2005). Similarly, Reicher and Hopkins (2001: 24) argue that a nation's contemporary store of historical icons, historical myths and historical images are used as symbolic reserves in giving sense to situations, in legitimating actions and in designing futures. To use the concept coined by Liu and Liu (2003), shared symbols and representations function as "historical affordances" that are exploited politically to construct and legitimize national policies.

¹ On the other hand, the regimes of Italian Fascism, German National Socialism and the Soviet Union also promoted their systems as part of modernity (Joas 2000). Likewise, the Korean postcolonial military regimes were created in the name of "modernizing" the Korean nation (Moon 2005).

In all, it is important to note that differences between national political cultures must be conceived in relative rather than absolute terms. The particular narratives regarding a nation's past that compatriots tell about and refer to when trying to convince others about their views are unique in substance (even though not in kind in that heroic stories predominate). However, stories about the country's history are told and used to describe the nation and its values in all national states; national political cultures differ from one another regarding the frequency with which characterizations of the nation are used to justify policies. The same applies to international references: there is cross-national variation in utilizing them politically.

There are, of course, several other tactics that actors seeking to influence politics employ to convince others of the right or necessary decision to take; speakers in national parliaments may, for instance, refer to scientific evidence and to public opinion. Yet the number of potential discourses is rather small, and one cannot find discourses unique to a single country. That is, national political cultures differ from one another in how commonly those discourses are used. As exemplars of the global institution of national legislature, world parliaments are surprisingly isomorphic not only regarding the organizational structures but also concerning the rhetorical tactics politicians employ.

At a more general level, it can be said that debates in national parliaments are an instance of epistemic governance, in which actors involved seek to affect others' views and behavior through focusing on three objects: facts, morals, and identifications (Alasuutari and Qadir 2014). In this context it means that politicians act upon others' view of the situation at hand, conceptions of what is acceptable or desirable, and notions of who "we" are as members of the nation. From this perspective, national political cultures affect the discourses commonly used in tackling these three objects of epistemic work.

Data and Methods

The data analyzed in this article is composed of "second readings" of bills or "draft laws" from eight countries: Argentina, Canada, Chile, Finland, Mexico, Russia, Spain and the USA. What is called "second reading" in different countries is the introduction and the debate on a proposal for a new law or a revision to an existing law. The Russian data include sets of three readings of each bill, as in the Russian Gosduma the discussions take place at all stages of the consideration of the bill.

These eight countries were selected for the substantial variation in their economy, level of technological development, institutionalization of democracy and different cultural and historical background. For instance, our selection has

two big and powerful countries: the USA and Russia; it has countries that were former colonies such as the USA, Canada, Argentina, Mexico and Chile, but also countries with a colonial past such as Spain. Yet, it contains countries with a relatively long history and others with a relatively recent independence such as Finland and Canada. Furthermore, Chile, Mexico, Argentina and Spain have a past as dictatorships. All in all, the large variation within our selected countries allows us to better look for explanations for the differences in the frequencies with which politicians refer to national self-image, on the one hand, and to models and policies enacted elsewhere, on the other, when debating new legislation.

From the eight countries, a sample of bills was collected. The sampling technique applied to this dataset can be defined as stratified random sampling: the cases selected were divided as equitably as possible among both years and issue areas.² The number of debates collected from each country is roughly 120 and they comprise the time frame 1994–2013 (N = 955).

The decision to use parliamentary debates as data is due to their function as a public forum in which politicians try to justify their views in morally acceptable and convincing ways. From that perspective, they are ideal research material by which to study how policymakers try to convince majority of what is the right and rational thing to do. We are not interested in whether a bill comes through or gets rejected, but rather, our attention is on the ideals, principles, and other justifications that are applied to convince the public.

To scrutinize debates in these eight countries in a comparative perspective, the data were coded according to rationales used to justify why a bill is or is not needed or desirable. In the article at hand, we concentrate on two types of justifications: instances in which speakers refer to the international community, on the one hand, and those in which speakers allude to national self-image, on the other.

Referencing the international community is done in various ways in the debates. For instance, speakers may mention international comparisons or league tables, international standards or recommendations, or international treaties or laws. In addition, politicians may refer to policy models adopted in other countries, but they can also praise the bill being discussed—or the amendments they suggest to it—as a new model that other countries will or should also adopt. Moreover, speakers may raise the question of how passing a law will affect the nation's reputation or international image.³ It is important to note that

² The issue areas are civic policy, consumption, crime, education, fiscal policy, foreign and security policy, health, science and technology policy, and social policy.

³ For a longer discussion on different modes by which the international context is evoked, see Alasuutari 2016: 101–104.

politicians can use all these rhetorical tactics both to support or oppose a bill or to propose changes to it. For instance, politicians may refer to a policy adopted in a certain country as a bad example and something to stay away from, but they can also promote a policy by pointing out to how successful a model has been in the countries that have enacted it.

The same goes for references to national self-image, coded as occurrences in which a speaker constructs and appeals to the nature or identity of the nation as grounds to legitimate his or her view. Such references often entail characterizations of the values that the nation stands for or principles that it respects, and such affirmations are often substantiated by references to the country's history. The references to the national self-image can also be used both to promote and to oppose a bill. For example, politicians may invoke the dictatorship past to justify and warrant the audience that the country not take a certain path.

The occurrence of each type of references in the almost one thousand debates analyzed was coded as a dummy variable. This enabled us to make comparisons both between countries and between issue areas in terms of justification strategies.

In addition to the authors, several members of our research group participated in the coding process. Intercoder reliability was secured by establishing clear guidelines for coding each variable and by assessing reliability during the process with tests focusing on samples of the dataset. Each debate in the random sample of 5% of the total number of debates was coded by three individuals, and the test resulted in a sufficient average agreement level of 90% (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken 2002).

In addition to other background variables, the length of each debate was also coded. The length of the debates, evident in the number of characters of each debate, was transformed into average estimated speaking time in minutes.

The first task of the statistical analysis of the data was to study whether and how cross-national differences in the frequency of international references are associated with those in the frequency of references to national self-image. We also elaborated on these findings by analyzing how those two variables are related to each other when a debate is used as the observation unit: for example, does the existence of at least one international reference in a debate increase or decrease the likelihood that there will exist at least one reference to national self-image? We also searched for potential intervening variables, including debate length.

At the final stage of empirical analysis, these frequencies and associations were interpreted with the help of qualitative analysis of the different ways in which speakers construct and make use of national self-image in different national parliaments. In these analyses we applied different methods of

discourse analysis (Wood and Kroger 2000; Fairclough 2013). The task was to shed light on the differences in national political cultures and how they make the statistical relations between variables understandable.

International References and the National Self-Image: A Cross-National Comparison

When we look at national parliaments in a cross-national perspective, it is impressive how much they are alike. Studying the documents is like walking through an airport terminal: while you are aware that it exists in some identifiable country, with its standardized technical solutions, chain stores and indistinguishable infrastructure it seems more like a part of an international universe of its own. By looking closely, you can see signs of the current jurisdiction here and there, but they seem to affect the overall experience as little as your lack of knowledge of the local culture affects your ability to navigate through the system. In other words, variation in the ways proposals for new laws are processed through the national parliaments are minor; legislatures are lawmaking factories composed of the same concepts and organizations such as laws, ministers and ministries, committees, floor debates and ballots. The same goes for argumentation: across the board one finds similar problematizations coupled with solutions that look almost identical, as do the subsequent arguments by the opposing parties. Going through parliamentary debates one finds oneself being engulfed by world culture as much as at any airport.

Table 1 shows that parliamentarians in all eight countries refer to the national self-image and the international community.⁴ Thus, such references are a common feature of the parliamentary talks in all eight countries, which signifies their similarity in form, although the frequency of such references may vary from country to country.

As can be seen in Table 1, there is variation in the frequency with which MPs evoke the international community in their arguments: in Canada such references are most common, whereas the US congress is bottommost in this respect. Interestingly, the ranking order of the eight countries concerning references to national self-image is almost exactly inverse: the four bottommost countries in

⁴ As the purpose of this paper is to compare and study the use of references to national self-image and the international community as two broad rhetorical strategies when justifying policies, we have not shown the breakdown of international references to its different types.

Table 1: References to national self-image and international community by country.

National self-image % (N)	International community % (N)
1 Argentina 64,2 (77)	1 Canada 87,9 (102)
2 USA 58,3 (70)	2 Finland 84,9 (101)
3 Mexico 46,7 (56)	3 Spain 84,2 (101)
4 Russia 46,7 (56)	4 Mexico 81,7 (98)
5 Chile 45,0 (54)	5 Russia 68,3 (82)
6 Spain 40,8 (49)	6 Chile 67,5 (81)
7 Finland 38,7 (46)	7 Argentina 67,5 (81)
8 Canada 18,1 (21)	8 USA 55 (66)

international references, the USA, Russia,⁵ Mexico and Argentina, are topmost regarding national self-image.

This does not mean, however, that references to the international community and national self-image are alternative justifications or that the occurrence of one excludes the other. When we study the uses of those forms of justification by using a debate as the observation unit, we can see that it is almost as typical for both justifications to appear in the same debate (44,1%, N = 349) as it is for them to appear separately (55,9%, N = 442). In that sense we can say that, on average, the existence of either one of these modes of justification increases the likelihood of the other.

This implies that the two types of justification studied here are common in similar debates. In other words, there must be a common denominator—or independent variable, if you like—that increases the probability that a debate includes a reference either to the international community or national self-image, or both. How the lengths of the debates relate to these types of justification gives us a clue. As can be seen in Table 2, debate length is positively correlated with the occurrence of these types of justification, and the relation is highly significant. The average length of debates that do not contain either of

⁵ The case of Russia is especially paradigmatic as the beginning of Putin's regime in 2000 has denoted a shift in Russian politics (Neumann 2008). In that sense, one could assume that Russia's opposition to Western countries would reduce the frequency of references to the international community (Tiaynen-Qadir et al. 2018) and increase references to national self-image. However, from 2000 until 2013 83% of the debates contained references to the international community and 49% included references to the national self-image, which was quite close to the numbers from the previous period (1994–1999), wherein 42% of the debates contained an invocation to the national self-image and 72% of the debates had international references. As Tiaynen-Qadir et al. (2018: 9) also point out, Putin's government 'did not significantly affect the form of parliamentary talk'.

Table 2: Relation between the length of the debates and references to national self-image and international community.*

Types of references used	Mean length of the debate (minutes)	N
Neither one appears	98,55	163
Appear separately	109,87	439
Appear in a same debate	158,06	348
Total	125,58	950

* $p < 0.01$, $F = 18,469$, $\eta^2 = 3.8\%$ *Equal variances not assumed, ANOVA

these types of justification is 99 minutes; if one of them exists, the average length is 110 minutes; and if both occur in the debate, the average length is 158 minutes.

This indicates that the debates more likely to contain references to the international community and national self-image are more controversial than others. When the bill being discussed concerns only technical matter about which the government and the opposition have little disagreement, the discussion tends to be shorter than average. But when there are contradictions and conflicting opinions, parliamentarians do their best to convince other MPs and their constituency of the legitimacy of their views, and it is in these longer, more controversial debates that these two types of justification are more likely to occur. That seems to be the case because appealing to the international community and national self-image are means to evoke key values.

Yet there are differences between the countries compared here how commonly these two types of justification are employed in parliamentary debates. In countries like Argentina and Chile justifications drawing on national self-image and on the international community commonly appear within the same debates. These are countries which also rank high in references to national self-image and have a relatively low amount of references to the international community, as was shown in Table 1. Then again, these two forms of justification are very rarely used in the same debates in Canada and Finland, where references to the international community are prevalent and national self-image is evoked quite seldom.

In conclusion, it can be said that although both types of justification are commonly used in the countries compared, there are cross-national differences in how likely politicians are to resort either to referencing either the international community or national self-image. That is obviously because politicians want to use the rhetorical tactics that they assume to work best in their country. We can presume that the variation between countries is due to differences in

national political cultures. To better understand these differences, we need to scrutinize how the national self-image is constructed in the countries compared.

National Self-Image as a Mode of Justification

Why is it that national self-image is brought up frequently in some countries and rarely in others? To address that, we compare different ways of referring to, and hence defining, the nation and its values in these eight countries. Is there something different in that talk in countries where it is more frequent, compared with those countries in which it is less frequent?

A key feature of all talk about the nation and its values is that – although it often expresses national pride – in evoking this mode of talk speakers ignore what “we” as a nation look like in others’ eyes. Instead, the nation itself is presented as the judge who needs to give a verdict on its own behavior; has it stayed true to the principles it has allegedly sworn to live by? It is not the judgmental gaze of the international community that is supposed to pressure MPs into making specific decisions. It is the defining features of the nation itself that compels its representatives to make the appropriate calls, as seen from the following excerpt:

It is important to repeat that following the attacks on September 11, the Prime Minister and Canadians with him have called for a renewed commitment to Canadian values of respect, equality, diversity and fairness. [...] The anti-terrorism act reaffirms Canadian values and ensures that the Canadian respect for justice and diversity is reinforced. [...] We are a free and democratic society. We must remain a free and democratic society. The anti-terrorism act introduced by the government yesterday has as its first goal to keep Canada free and democratic. (Parliament of Canada 2001: 6240)

The point is that if the MPs are not prepared to take the proper action, the whole country is letting itself down. The nation is not living up to its own standards. It makes no difference whether other people take notice or not.

To be employed frequently, referencing the national self-image requires that there is at least moderate public agreement on what are the essential features defining the nation; how the people of the country want to perceive themselves. One needs a widely-known story of “the nation,” which is then reinforced and possibly modified by every use of this rhetorical tactic. It is of course possible for speakers to propose key features and values of the nation as grounds for supporting or opposing a law, but its rhetorical force depends on how recognizable the listeners find the depiction.

Analysis of the ways in which national self-image is referenced in different parliaments shows that this is indeed the critical point. In the two topmost

countries, Argentina and the USA, speakers reference and construct the nation as a unique, idiosyncratic community, with its peculiar heroic history that attests to the values that the compatriots cherish. In the middle group, parliamentarians also utilize stories of the nation's history, but the narratives are contradictory and contested; they may be used to speak about the nation's values only through contrasting the past with the present, and those values do not sound very original as compared with any other country. Finally, in the two bottommost national parliaments regarding references to national self-image, Finland and Canada, references to the country's history are rare. Instead, the national self-image is primarily built by giving universal characterizations such as “democratic” and “civilized” or by placing the country in a reference group, so that the discourse of national self-image is mixed with discourses of international references.

To start from the topmost group, in the Argentinian parliament, there are references both to the country's early history and to more recent history. Indeed, in the history of Argentina there are plenty of periods or turning points to which speakers refer. Most of the references deal with Peronism and with dictatorship and military rule, of which there is much experience in Argentina's colorful history. Here is one example:

With the same tranquility with which I look at my own family, I honor the memory of my father, and with the same tranquility that fulfilled the platform of General Perón, Comrade Evita and the Justicialist doctrine. (...) We are not interested in the divisions of Justicialism because we are able to discuss them, solve them and transform Argentina as we have twice done in our history. That is why we do not fail to recognize the things we did and those that did not work for us. (National Congress of Argentina 2000: 104–105)

Characteristic of this talk is that political rhetoric in the Argentinian parliament is filled with terms by which speakers can refer to doctrines or programs and movements that are distinctly Argentinian. For instance, Peronism, or Justicialism, has been declared as a third position ideology that rejects both capitalism and communism. In that way, speakers can assess the aptness of a reform by using such ageless principles as social justice, economic independence and political sovereignty (the three “flags” of Peronism) as their yardsticks, and yet they simultaneously take part in defining what Argentina is. In other words, these principles are domesticated (Alasuutari and Qadir 2013). The same is very much true of US political rhetoric, in which it is common to refer to the nation's legacy. In this kind of portrayal, real historical developments can be considered irrelevant. A prime example would be the United States. In the US parliament the actual “Founding Fathers” and the Constitution are typically infused to create an idealistic and quasi-historical account of the founding of the nation and the principles guiding it, which all following decision-makers should adhere to (Alasuutari and Vähä-Savo 2018).

It is quite insignificant whether it was slaves that handed the Founding Fathers a pen to write “all men are created equal”, as the emphasis is put on what the Founders meant and how the nation should behave to stay true to those ideals, as seen in the following excerpt:

The Federal Government provides less than 6 percent of all money spent on education but wants its fingers in every part of the State and local education pie. This makes the Federal Government the judge, juror, and executioner over local choices like curriculum quality and resource allocations. This is not what the Founding Fathers had in mind. (U.S. Congressional Record 1994a: H823)

In addition to assessing a law’s fittingness with the key principles expressed in the US Constitution, US congressional talks contain plenty of mentions about the nation’s uniqueness.

This proposal speaks to our longstanding linkage of favorable trade access to this Nation and respect for human rights. Breaking this link would be giving up something that is fundamental to this Nation—something that makes us unique and successful in the world. We would be sacrificing our principles for short-term economic gains. (U.S. Congressional Record 1994b: H7244)

Let me say this. We do not put people in jail for political crimes in this country. This is what is so great and unique in America. We do not put people in jail for political crimes. (U.S. Congressional Record 1995: S16751)

In addition to arguing that the USA is indeed the only truly free country, this talk about American uniqueness depicts the conviction that the USA leads the way to the rest of the world: that it is the country whose principles and practices others imitate. Since that is an essential part of the national self-image, it is understandable that international references are least frequent in the US.

Talk about national self-image in the Parliament of Mexico, which is third highest on the list, also contains plenty of talk about what “we” are as a nation. Compared with the two topmost countries, in the Mexican talk, however, there isn’t any clear master narrative that would provide the elements for the “founding myth” of the nation. If the information would be removed, readers – including Mexicans – would have a hard time guessing which country we are talking about. Let us take an example.

Year 1994 ends and leaves a trail of disappointments and tragedies, but it has also been a year that has allowed us to reassess what we have. We are a country of contrasts, we are a living country that relies on peace, a country that suffers and wants to get ahead. We are a country that does not shy away from the conjunctural events but prefers to see the future with optimism. We are a country that refuses apocalyptic visions of reality, in which everything is wrong and failure is inevitable. (General Congress of the United Mexican States 1994: 35)

Similarly, in some other countries below the topmost positions in our ranking there are several references to the country's past, but there isn't a self-evident heroic story, or its lesson regarding the key values of the nation is unclear and contested. The experience of authoritarian regimes in the history of Chile and Spain provide possibilities to contrast the present with the past, arguing that now the nation is finally able to live up to its true values, but those values are not constructed as genuinely national; they are the same values that are respected in other democratic societies.

In this respect Russia is somewhat different, though. Its socialist past provides elements for many kinds of arguments, in which the present is compared with the past also the other way around. As authoritarian and anti-democratic as the Soviet Union was, speakers argue, its underlying ideology cherished equality, solidarity, and the state's concern for the well-being of all citizens. In this way, references to the past are utilized particularly by MPs who criticize the present-day policies and social system. Here is one example:

The essence of the matter, apparently, is the anti-national course which our Government is now holding, and the president as well. And today the notions of "patriotism", "Motherland", "civil duty" have become, as it were, commonplace, today all official propaganda is directed at this. Today, other values have become central – it is a cult of profit, a cult of money, and at the same time both at any cost. This is promoted by means of mass media, and this, unfortunately, has become, in general, an official policy of our present state. (State Duma of Russia 1996: 2090)

In the case of Russia, we could talk about a negative national self-image, according to which the current regime has forsaken the core values of the nation, evident during the Soviet past. Then again, speakers who approve of the policies of present-day Russia utilize the Soviet past in a positive way, arguing that Russia lives up to its true values. However, similar to Chile and Spain, references to the authoritarian and violent Soviet past are also made by some MPs to remind others that the same should never happen again.

In the two countries where alluding to the national self-image was the least frequent, the nation's character is primarily described by listing either characteristics of the individuals that formed the nation or generic values that the country respects. Here are examples from Canada and Finland:

Last night the Prime Minister reminded us once again that Canada is a land of immigrants, a place where people from almost every nation and faith on earth have come to find freedom, respect, harmony and a brighter future. Therefore as part of its anti-terrorism act the Government of Canada is proposing changes that address the root causes of hatred, reaffirm Canadian values and ensure that Canada's renowned respect for justice and diversity is reinforced. (Parliament of Canada 2001: 6181)

We must always remember that this is a democratic system in which everyone needs to have a chance, and we must create such a system that the support of the citizens is decisive. (Parliament of Finland 1997: 3727)

When the nation is described by such universal characteristics, talk of national self-image slides toward international comparisons and to the nation's image in the eyes of the international community.

If we intend to preserve ourselves as a Nordic civilized state, I think it is absolutely necessary that there is programming in Swedish, that it stays and is not reduced from the present amount. (Parliament of Finland 1999: 2044)

As to how the discourse of national self-image is employed in the debates as compared with international references, no clear patterns can be identified. Both types of justification are used either to support or criticize a bill or to suggest changes to it. Furthermore, even though these discourses occur commonly in the same debates, they are seldom part of a dialogue in which, for example, a speaker's reference to an international comparison would make the next speaker evoke the national self-image as a response. That is because parliamentary debates are seldom true dialogues. They are, rather, series of monologues in which speakers representing the government and the opposition give long statements in which they present and justify their views. International references and invoking the national self-image are both means to appeal to core values and principles and these types of justification belong to the rhetorical tactics of all political parties and ideologies.

Discussion

The results of the empirical analysis introduced in this chapter show that the frequency with which national self-image is evoked in different parliaments illustrates differences in political cultures. Of the eight countries compared, definitions of the nation's central features and values are referenced most frequently in Argentina and the USA and least frequently in Finland and Canada. Interestingly, another indicator of differences between national political cultures, the rate at which the international community is evoked as a means to justify or criticize domestic legislation, puts the countries in almost exactly reverse order. Analysis of the data at the debate level however shows that these two types of justification do not exclude each other. Instead, they often exist in the same debates: the occurrence of one increases the likelihood of the other. That is because the occurrence of both of these discourses is affected by

debate length: they are likely to occur in longer, controversial debates, in which speakers allude to key values and principles.

These results do not imply that decision-making is less interdependent in countries that rank low on international references and high on allusions to national identity, or that those countries are more original, following their own path regardless of the rest of the world. Evoking national self-image is another means to evoke the key principles authenticated by the UN and other international institutions. By proposing that those principles are characteristic of the nation, speakers claim national ownership of world culture, even imply that cherishing those values makes the country unique amongst the nations. In other words, these two rhetorical strategies are alternative ways to evoke world-cultural scripts, which also make the creation and spread of international policy trends understandable: when actors conceive of the world similarly, they are receptive to the same fashions.

Talk about national self-image appeals to national pride and patriotism: speakers construct and appeal to the nation's sovereignty and integrity in respecting the values that define the nation and guide its policies regardless of what others might think. Yet references to the national self-image cannot be regarded as a simple measure of the citizens' national pride. Interview studies of national pride based on the data of the International Social Survey Program (Smith and Kim 2006), show that the United States ranks number one, but Canada, which ranks lowest regarding national self-image among the eight countries compared here, also ranks high (6th) in this comparison of 34 countries, which is much higher than Finland Spain, and Russia (16th, 17th, and 21st, respectively). This suggests that the propensity of politicians to evoke national identity in their talk is not directly dependent on how proud the citizens on average are of the country and its achievements; frequent references to the international community in national policymaking do not imply low national self-esteem.

Qualitative analysis of the data showed that the likelihood of politicians to resort to referencing the national self-image depends on what beliefs of the nation people share and how well different modes of talk resonate with the listeners. A rich repertoire of ways to talk about national identity will increase the odds that speakers resort to it. Hence, in the countries where national self-image is employed most frequently, speakers have at their disposal stories about the country's past that can be used to attest to the nation's values in such a way that the narratives also bolster beliefs about the country's uniqueness. In the countries further down the list, stories of the past are more contradictory and contested, and speakers use those stories to evoke universal values. Finally, in the parliaments where references to national self-image are most infrequent, references to the country's history are rare, and talk about national self-image is

entwined with international references. On that basis, it can be suggested that the more commonly popular discourses foster beliefs about the nation's unique character, the more prone politicians are to avoid mentioning international recommendations and exogenous models, because they could be criticized for questioning the nation's exceptionality.

This brings us back to Norbert Elias's (2000) discussion of the different variants of national self-image. Elias seems to suggest that in countries like France and England national identity can be grounded on a cosmopolitan view of the world because citizens have a strong conviction that their nation is at the fore front of the universal civilizing process. In contrast, it could be deduced that according to him, in a "laggard" country the national self-image tends to stress national and individual uniqueness and creativity. Based on this study, these two aspects of national self-image are entwined. It is certainly true that in the USA there is a prevalent conviction of that nation leading the development of the entire world; a conviction that was famously put to words in Talcott Parsons' modernization theory (Parsons 1966, 1964). But simultaneously, the US political culture also contains a strong emphasis on the nation's uniqueness, even though the features considered as emblems of that exceptionality are hardly original. The same is true of the ways Argentinian national self-image is evoked in the national parliament. The terms – Peronism and Justicialism – make the policies promoted by using them recognizably national, but they are defined by relating them to the global discourse on alternative political ideologies and social systems. Peronism only claims to propose a thus far missing "third position" between capitalism and socialism, an ideological niche that could then be promoted and exported to other countries, thus becoming an additional element of world culture.

This kind of entwinement of the ideas of uniqueness and universalism seems to be a core feature of policymaking throughout world parliaments. Although we have in this article focused on explaining differences in the frequency with which speakers in different national contexts resort to evoking international comparisons and national self-image, it is important to bear in mind that these modes of talk can be found in all these eight countries; the cross-national differences are differences in quantity rather than quality. Even though in these countries speakers appeal to the same values, their arguments cherish uniqueness; because those values and principles are internalized, defined as something that defines "us" as a nation, they are "our" values, regardless of how similar or different they are from those of other nations. Such glocalization (Drori, Höllerer, and Walgenbach 2013; Robertson 1995), or domestication of global ideas and trends (Alasuutari and Qadir 2013), is an essential feature of world society.

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