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# American football and national pride: Racial differences



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## 1. Introduction

Over the past four decades, scholars from diverse disciplines have consistently emphasized the role of sport in expressing, reflecting, or producing national sentiments (Abell et al., 2007; Bairner, 2001; Ehn, 1989; Gibbons, 2011; MacClancy, 1996; Marks, 1998; Solis, 1996; Sorek, 2007; Tuastad, 1997; van Hilvoorde et al., 2010). Both sport and national identity, however, are “contested racial terrains,” where constant struggles over the meaning and role of racial categories are taking place (Beamon and Messer, 2014; Buffington, 2005; Hartmann, 2000). American national identity has been shaped by a struggle between “racial nationalism,” a political world-view that associates American identity with whiteness and a more inclusive racially-blind “civic nationalism,” which links American identity to the adoption of certain values (Gerstle, 2001). Throughout American history these two perspectives had competed over the legal definition of citizenship, naturalization laws, distribution of resources, and the popular understanding of who and what is entitled to be considered “American”. At the same time, sports have been a sphere for major-race related dialectical tensions: segregation vs. integration, oppression vs. resistance, and the perpetuation vs. elimination of racial stereotypes (Carrington, 2010:88; Hartmann, 1996). This paper examines the intersection of these two contested terrains surrounding the most widely followed sport in contemporary America: football.

The football spectacle contains explicit displays of patriotism and discourses of opportunity and hard work, each contributing to narratives of national identity. Furthermore, while many sport events include singing the national anthem and displays of the flag, among the three American hegemonic sports (football, baseball, and basketball) the football spectacle is unique in explicitly incorporating displays of military strength and unity in its choreography. Our basic premise is that if football plays a role in shaping American national identity, this role should be expressed in a positive statistical correlation between being a football fan and indicators of national identification. At the same time, the importance of race in the construction of national identities, as well as in determining socio-political dynamics in the sport sphere raises the question whether any such influences may also differ by race.

The existing literature suggests at least two scenarios. The ideal of a color-blind meritocratic order that is ever-present in sport in general (Birrell, 1989; Hartmann, 2003) is especially salient in the hegemonic narrative of American national identity. For many spectators, displays of athleticism and successful teamwork may affirm the importance of meritocracy in their

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accounts of American exceptionalism. The over-representation of African–Americans among professional football players (between 65 and 69 percent of all NFL players since 1992 (Lapchick et al., 2014)) and their success on the field may further enhance the ‘civic’ image of American nationalism, which might be adopted by whites and African–Americans alike. The extreme underrepresentation of African Americans among CEOs, Presidents, and NFL owners is less relevant for the construction of public racial images because these positions gain far less media exposure than athletes. In addition, the racial distribution in these positions is more similar to most positions of power in the US, which make it even less noticeable. The black success in any public sphere is the exception that attracts public attention.

For whites, both the racial and the civic definitions of American nationalism are inclusive and the patriotic ambience of the football experience is likely to be associated with national sentiments, whether they interpret them as representing racial or civic nationalisms. Black fans may adopt the prevalent rhetoric about football as a sphere of racial integration where the “American dream” may be realized, adopting similarly favorable national sentiments albeit from the successes of African–American players and not only as the outward displays of patriotic symbols. In this case we should expect both white and black football fans to express stronger American national identification than non-fans even if such sentiments arise for different reasons.

However, the successes of African–American players may also be an opportunity for imagining black resistance. W.E.B Du Bois’ observation that a fundamental tension exists between American and black identities (Du Bois, 1903) was an early statement about the inseparability of racial and national identities. Ties between race and national identity continue to frame studies of American national identification where measures of black identification and in-group racial preference have been shown to negatively correlate with the strength of American patriotic sentiment (Sidanius et al., 1997; Citrin et al., 2007). We postulate that a sense of black collective pride experienced in the sphere of American football might be translated into aversion to American national pride. Rather than providing an endorsement of the meritocratic ideal, black success in football might serve as a reminder of the long distance to achieving a commensurate meritocratic order in the spheres of American life off the playing field where persistent racial inequalities can sharply limit life chances. If black football fans tend to associate American national identity with whiteness, the visibility of American national symbols may be interpreted as exclusionary and pose another source of antagonism. In this case, African–American fans may not just express weaker sentiments of national identification than white fans but in the extreme case, lower sentiments than African–American non-fans.

In any scenario, the symbolic power generated in the football sphere has potentially important political implications by generating sentiments of national unity, by having differential effects on the national identification of certain racial groups, or by making national pride a tool for distraction from other burning socio-political issues, including racial inequality. This is what makes the relation between football fandom, national pride, and race a vital scholarly topic of investigation.

We examine the relationship between fandom in football and national pride, as a specific dimension of national identity, with data that we assembled from nationally representative opinion surveys over the period 1981–2014. Aggregating seventy-five opinion polls with questions about football fandom, national pride and race we compare national pride and NFL fandom among white and black Americans in this period. We analyze the subsample of opinion polls with measures of both fandom and national pride to find out whether an association between the two exists and whether there is a difference between the direction and magnitude of this association among black and white Americans. We examine as well whether the national pride – football fandom nexus is affected by the interaction race and gender. Finally, we use these surveys to investigate whether our findings are unique to football among professional sports.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Race and national identity

Our conception of “national identity” relies on considering the nation as a socially constructed “imagined community” with limited boundaries (Anderson, 1983). The socially constructed boundaries do not always overlap with legal definitions of citizenship. The criteria for inclusion in the national community are under constant struggle with different actors aspiring to promote various ideal types of codes for inclusion (Eisenstadt and Giesen, 1995; Gerstle, 2001; Kimmerling, 1985; Sekulic, 2004). These codes of inclusion could theoretically rely on rigid “primordial” elements like race and ethnicity, civic elements like adoption of certain customs, or “sacred” elements such as religion or quasi-religious ideologies (Eisenstadt and Giesen, 1995). The hegemonic popular interpretations of national identities, therefore, are constantly changing and they depend on the political power balance between their respective supporters.

In the context of these struggles, a large body of work documents the inter-dependency between the construction of racial and national identities (Collins, 2001; Gerstle, 2001; Gilroy, 2013; Goldberg, 2002; Omi and Winant, 1994; Smith, 1988; Thobani, 2007). Collins (2001) illustrates how intersecting social hierarchies of race and ethnicity foster racialized understandings of American national identity, which assign African–Americans an inferior status with only partial membership in the nation-state. “Racial nationalism,” a perception that associates American identity with whiteness, was dominant in the formative years of the US in the 18th and 19th century and persists in many domains of the public sphere (Gerstle, 2001). While such expressions may currently solicit greater social sanction, African Americans still see themselves as less “typically American” than other races (Theiss–Morse, 2009:82–83) and implicit bias experiments with white college students underscore the pervasiveness of associations of American identity with whiteness (Devos and Banaji, 2005).

Sentiments of national identity are not easily amenable to empirical study. Differences in the meanings of belonging to a national community may be poorly expressed by survey respondents and highly dependent on context. Empirically, we focus

our analysis and discussion on national pride as one dimension of national identification. Our choice of using national pride as an indicator of national identity is due to the abundance of opinion polls over the last thirty-five years with a nearly identical question asking respondents to rate their level of national pride. No other measures of national identity have similarly consistent wording with sufficient frequency over long periods of time.

Studies examining sport or race frequently treat conceptions of national identification, patriotism, and national pride as equivalent. This conflation might conceal some differences between various dimensions of national identification. In addition, the sentiment of belonging to a nation may be only partly associated with the level of pride in belonging to the nation (Sorek and Ceobanu, 2009). Nevertheless, a sentiment of belonging is by definition a pre-condition for pride in belonging. We assume that the level of overlap between belonging and national pride is high enough to consider pride as a specific dimension of national identification.

National pride by itself is a multidimensional phenomenon because individuals can be proud in different aspects of their respective nation (Evans and Kelley, 2002; Hjerm, 1998; Smith and Kim, 2006). Nevertheless, a general sense of national pride is a measurable phenomenon that has been widely shown to correlate with demographic factors and measures of social and political attitudes (Ariely, 2012; Citrin et al., 2007; Cohen, 2008; Sorek and Ceobanu, 2009). The relation between national pride and a related concept, patriotism, varies according to scholars' definitions. Yet, prior empirical work examining the ties between national pride and an assortment of attitudes reflecting national attachments show how closely pride is related to patriotism in the American context (Kosterman and Feshbach, 1989). We assume that individual sentiments of national pride are partly related to their understanding of the hegemonic criteria for inclusion in the national community. Individuals who perceive higher compatibility of these hegemonic criteria with their own personal profile are more likely to feel proud in belonging to the national community.

Accordingly, empirical evidence from the United States is consistent with significant race differences in national identification and pride. Although Americans of all races express high levels of national pride and commitment to American identity in public opinion polls, African-Americans have been shown to report lower levels of national pride (Citrin et al., 2007; Harlow and Dundes, 2004; Huddy and Khatib, 2007; Sidanius et al., 1997; Stempel, 2006:101; Theiss-Morse, 2009:136–137). The most detailed examination of these gaps was demonstrated by Theiss-Morse (2009) who found that African-Americans score lower on a scale of American national identity based on cognitive, evaluative, and affective components of social identity. In-group identification and in-group racial preference have also been shown to positively correlate with American patriotism among whites but negatively correlate among African Americans (Citrin et al., 2007; Sidanius et al., 1997).

## 2.2. Football and American national identity

The literature examining the ties between sport and national identity in contexts outside of the United States has largely considered “external” tests of power: much of the European, Latin American, and Middle Eastern literature about sport and national identity refers to tests of power in international competitions (Ehn, 1989; Gibbons, 2011; Marks, 1998; Solis, 1996; van Hilvoorde et al., 2010) or in struggles between ethno-national groups in divided countries (MacClancy, 1996; Sorek, 2007; Tuastad, 1997). International sport competitions earn less public attention in the United States, especially for the hegemonic sports for which public following of local competitions is dramatically larger. Studies of national identity and sport in the United States instead emphasize the rituals of domestic competitions. This is not a trivial difference. Major international competitions occur in long intervals that are not part of the cyclic routine of fans' lives. Acting as a fan in these events may lead to only minor and temporary fluctuations in national pride (van Hilvoorde et al., 2010). For fans of domestic sport teams, the fandom experience is a weekly cyclic routine during long months every year occupying larger segments of their life and therefore more likely related to their world view in other spheres.

Football maintains an extended reach in American life. Over the last two decades it has emerged with the largest television viewership, the richest media markets and a deep fan-base. Comparing the rankings of “favorite” sports from the surveys in our dataset shows the rapid ascendance of football from well below baseball and basketball to the country's favorite sport by the 1990s. Football, like baseball and basketball, may be described as a “hegemonic sports culture” that “dominates a country's emotional attachment” (Markovits and Helleman, 2001:10). A hegemonic sport, while not necessarily practiced by the largest number of individuals, is followed the most widely. It is over-represented in popular culture such as film and literature and attracts followers from diverse social classes. Compared with other sports, a hegemonic sport then has the highest potential for shaping public discourse in general and hegemonic definitions of national identity in particular.

Football is also commonly considered to uphold many values that are consistent with popular narratives of American national identity. Early analyses of sport and American national identity conducted by anthropologists followed Clifford Geertz's rendering of sport as “Deep Play” (Geertz, 1973) that embodies values in the American collective ethos. In this manner, sport comes to serve as a metaphor for the national character not only for participants in the game itself but also the fans. Football's reliance on sophisticated technology, extreme specialization, and violent but legitimate territorial incursion are closely aligned with commonly understood attributes of American life (Real, 1975:42). Montague and Morais (1976) argued that “the football team looks very much like a small-scale model of American corporation: compartmentalized, highly sophisticated in the coordinated application of differentiated, specialized technology, turning out a winning product in a competitive market” (p. 39). Success in football is earned by the team whose players are the most skilled, hard-working, and self-sacrificing (p.49), further providing a model of the meritocratic ideal embedded in narratives of American

exceptionalism. This early scholarship attributed sport with a unifying power based on the assumption of a universal meaning of the game across race and class boundaries.

Later studies, especially since the late 1980s, emphasized the instrumental aspect of the construction of national pride. Teams and broadcasting networks create the imagery and symbols that associate football with patriotism, including frequent appearances of the American flag, celebrity productions of the national anthem, military flyovers, and collective expressions of support for the military (Fischer, 2014; King, 2008). Rhetoric about player biographies, team histories and even play-by-play analysis explicitly emphasize racial and ethnic integration, national and family unity, and the links between football success and the “American dream” based on hard work following the rules of fair play (Butterworth, 2008; Sage, 1996; Wenner, 1989).

Existing sociological studies of American football analyze public images, symbols, and form of discourse, but they rarely investigate the point of view of the wider circle of individuals who are exposed to these representations and are emotionally involved in them: the fans. We adopt Amenta and Miric’s (2013:312–313) conception of a fan as anyone who regularly follows a given sport and maintains a significant emotional attachment to the team or its players. It is this emotional attachment that enables the sport field to generate such a symbolic power.

Studies of sports fans are prolific outside of the U.S. but neglected by U.S. sociology. Furthermore, among the rare exceptions to this rule we could identify only one study that analyzed issues of racial identity (Tripp, 2003) and none of these studies used nationally representative samples nor considered the importance of national pride. The only study that came close to examining these questions was conducted by Stempel (2006), who found that the intensity of watching certain televised sports (baseball, tennis, golf, car racing, extreme sports, NFL, college football, and boxing) was positively correlated with self-reported sentiments of American patriotism including support for US intervention in Iraq. This study, though, did not present separate calculations of the correlation between patriotism and spectatorship by race.

Scholars of fandom have suggested important typologies of fans and identified meaningful classificatory continuums (Crawford, 2003; Giulianotti, 2002). Our dataset, however, limits us to a very minimalistic and highly inclusive definition of fandom. As Crawford wrote, the general public has varying levels of interest or knowledge in a given subject matter, and the “career” of a fan “will start to move towards the ‘interested’ position when the individual begins to take more of a specific interest in the subject” (Crawford, 2003:230). Our operational definition of this “specific interest” is self-identifying as a football fan in response to a survey question.

### 2.3. Gender, race, and nation in football

The discourses of masculine domination has long been prevalent in the sport sphere (Birrell and Cole, 1994; Burstyn, 1999; Hargreaves, 1994; Messner et al., 2000; Messner, 1988) and national ideologies tend to be gendered and to reproduce masculine superiority (Enloe, 1989; Nagel, 1998; Yuval-Davis, 1997). We know also that women and men have different motives for watching football and for being a fan and they differ in their attitudes toward the game (Clark et al., 2009; Dietz-Uhler et al., 2000). Therefore, it is worth examining not only race as an independent variable but also the interaction of race and gender. If the linkage between football and national pride is meaningful for enhancing masculine supremacy, and if this linkage has inverse implications on black and white Americans - then the statistical association should be stronger among men. In this case, football may provide a more attractive venue for imagining resistance for black men than for black women. At the same time, a positive correlation between football fandom and national pride among white Americans might be stronger among men than among women.

## 3. Materials and methods

We begin our assessment of the relationship between enthusiasm for football and national pride by examining the trends in national pride and interest in the NFL (sparse available data about fandom for college football prevent a broader consideration of the trend in football fandom). It is noteworthy that we are not trying to explain the fluctuations in national pride (as this topic deserves a separate article) but rather examine race differences and their association with trends in football fandom. The second stage of our analysis examines the association between individual fandom and national pride in the years for which both measures are available.

We contacted polling firms and searched several archives of public opinion and survey data and identified 166 surveys that include questions about national pride or interest in sports that date back to the late 1970s. We selected from these studies the nationally representative surveys with questions pertaining to interest in football and adequate sample sizes of African-Americans for estimating race differences in responses. Few of the surveys that we identified had sufficient sample sizes of Asians or Hispanics for including these groups in our analysis. For this reason, we limited the samples of each survey to white and black respondents who self-identify as U.S. citizens. The selected surveys include opinion polls and in-depth studies initiated by academic centers and are listed in Table 1.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The surveys were received by direct request to major polling firms or retrieved from the Roper Center Public Opinion Archives at the University of Connecticut, the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan, and the Odum Institute Data Archive at the University of North Carolina.

**Table 1**  
Data sources.

Source	Year (number of surveys)
ABC	1982, 1987, 1988, 1992, 1994 (2), 1998, 2002 (3), 2006
Associated Press	1982 (2), 1991, 2007, 2011, 2013, 2014 (2)
CBS	1985, 1986, 1987, 1995, 2007, 2011, 2012
Chicago Council on Global Affairs <sup>a</sup>	2008
Citizenship Involvement and Democracy	2005
CNN	2008, 2009, 2013
Gallup	1994, 1998, 1999 (2), 2000 (2), 2001 (4), 2002 (2), 2003 (2), 2004, 2005 (2), 2006 (2), 2007 (2), 2008, 2009 (2), 2011, 2012, 2013
General Social Survey	1994, 2004, 2014
Kaiser Family Foundation	2004
PEW <sup>b</sup>	2009, 2010, 2014
Public Religion Research Institute	2013
Roper	1981, 1982
Scripps Howard News Service <sup>c</sup>	2003 (2)
Washington Post	2004
World Values Survey	1981, 1995, 1999, 2006, 2011

N = 76. Multiple different surveys completed in a single year are indicated by the number of surveys in parentheses. Surveys undertaken by two or more organizations are attributed here to the first listed organization in the published authorship.

<sup>a</sup> Reporting “very proud” in reference to “our history” or “our political system” and “somewhat proud” in reference to either subject is coded as high national pride.

<sup>b</sup> In the 2014 Pew study (the American Trends Panel Wave 3), respondents who indicate “Applies” in answering the question “Which of these describes you well ... Often feel proud to be American” are coded as high national pride. The alternate response category in this study is not selecting the item.

<sup>c</sup> High pride is reporting “extremely patriotic” when asked to “describe your own feelings of patriotism towards the United States”.

Our search identified 40 surveys with a measure of national pride with the earliest available question appearing in 1981 and the latest in 2014. We identified 37 surveys with a measure of interest in professional football occurring since 1981, resulting in a total sample size of 76 unique surveys. The measure of national pride is taken from the question “How proud are you to be an American?” The wording of this question and the five possible response categories ranging from “Not at all proud” to “Extremely proud” are largely consistent across surveys. Although a small number of surveys include only four response categories in which the highest level is “Very proud,” we found only modestly higher proportions reporting the highest response category in these surveys when they occurred at the same time as surveys with the five response categories.<sup>2</sup> This measure is the only available measure of national pride spanning the period of time that we consider which also displays near identical question wording across surveys. While responses in the top and bottom response categories may be more subject than intermediate responses to the influences of cultural norms pertaining to civic duty, this measure presents a unique opportunity to study long-term trends in national pride.

The measure of football fandom is taken from questions asking respondents to indicate the level of their interest in football. Questions either specifically ask about football or ask “For each of the following, please say whether you are a fan of that sport or not” and then provide a list of up to fifteen response categories that includes football. Nearly all questions indicate three possible response categories with the most common categories specifying “Yes, a fan”, “Somewhat of a fan” and “No, not a fan.” We estimate the proportions of white and black respondents in each survey reporting the highest levels of national pride and of interest in football from 1981 to 2013. The proportions for each survey are weighted using the survey’s published weights. For each of the series, a smoothed trend is estimated using a kernel-weighted local polynomial regression.<sup>3</sup>

The absence of any single survey with the two key questions about national pride and fandom for professional football prevents directly examining the relationship between these two constructs. However, we identified three surveys with the national pride question which also ask questions about enthusiasm for football in general that highly correlate with NFL fandom. In addition to asking about national pride, Gallup surveys in 2000 and 2006 ask “Are you a fan of college football, or not?” A 2013 Gallup survey asks respondents to indicate whether “football” is “your favorite sport to watch?” from among a list of eighteen different sports. While these two measures may be more sensitive to individual educational attainment and region of residence than reports of interest in the NFL, we found in separate surveys that each of these measures is highly correlated with self-identifying as a NFL fan. A fourth survey (Howard Scripps News Service 2003) includes the question about NFL fandom and a question that asks respondents to “Describe your feelings of patriotism.” We code individuals reporting

<sup>2</sup> Separate trends of high pride calculated from questions using five- and four-item response categories showed little difference over the period of time when both types of questions were asked. There were also no differences in the size of the race gap. Two additional surveys are included that ask “Describe your feelings of patriotism” (Scripps 2003) and “Which of these describes you well? Often feel proud to be American” (Pew American Trends Panel 2014 Wave 3.) Estimates from the Pew study were provided by the Pew Research Center.

<sup>3</sup> This smoothing method is similar to a least squares regression that applies differing weights to observations depending on their distance from each focal observation. While weighted polynomial regression is more sensitive to outliers it is also less subject to the bias in the overall trend estimates inherent in more general smoothing techniques.

“Very Patriotic” as proud. This question is comparable to the question used in the studies we cite above showing sizable race gaps in patriotism.

We pool these four surveys in order to assess the individual-level relationship between football fandom and national pride independent of well-known correlates with national pride which are available in these surveys. Analyzing this pooled dataset allows greater precision in examining not only the strength of the relationship between fandom and pride but also the degree to which any race differences in this relationship may be attributable to race differences in predictors of national pride.

We estimate logistic regressions of high national pride – the highest response category of the pride measures in these four surveys. The regression models include covariates for age, sex, region of residence, survey year, conservatism and educational attainment. The three demographic measures have no variation in question wording or response categories across the four surveys. The measure of conservatism is a continuous measure based on a question asking respondents to specify their political views using a five point scale ranging from very conservative to very liberal. This question commonly displays large race differences in national surveys and has identical wording across the four surveys.<sup>4</sup> Educational attainment is measured with similar uniformity across the surveys. We use a set of indicators of educational attainment to account for the potentially sizable differences in national pride between high school drop-outs, non-college educated high school graduates and respondents with college degrees or greater schooling. The absence of any additional measures which are comparable across these four surveys prevents accounting for other attributes such as socioeconomic status or veteran status which have been shown to correlate with high national pride. The key explanatory variable in the model for assessing race differences in the importance of fandom for national pride is an interaction between race and fandom. We interact the indicator of being a fan with the race indicator to evaluate the difference in the importance of fandom for the probability of reporting high national pride. We then stratify the sample by sex to test for gendered race differences in order to account for any gender differences in both national pride and our model covariates.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. The decline in national pride and rise of the NFL

Fig. 1 plots the smoothed trends in pride and fandom using the full sample of surveys. In both the full sample and the subsample of men, African–Americans consistently report lower rates of high national pride than whites over the entire period. This race difference is consistent with the prior studies of related measures of national pride discussed above. However, a striking feature of the trend in national pride for both whites and African–Americans is the sharp decline between 1994 and 2007. This result stands in contrast to previously published studies of trends in national pride. A 2013 Gallup report indicated no change in national pride over 2001–2013.<sup>5</sup> The Pew Research Center’s long-running polls of political and social values include a related measure of patriotism from a question that asks respondents whether they are “very patriotic.” The trend in this measure is substantially higher than our estimates of high pride and shows a similar race gap, averaging approximately 13 percentage points over the period 1987–2012. However, the trend remains steady over this entire period, ranging between 88 and 92 percent.<sup>6</sup>

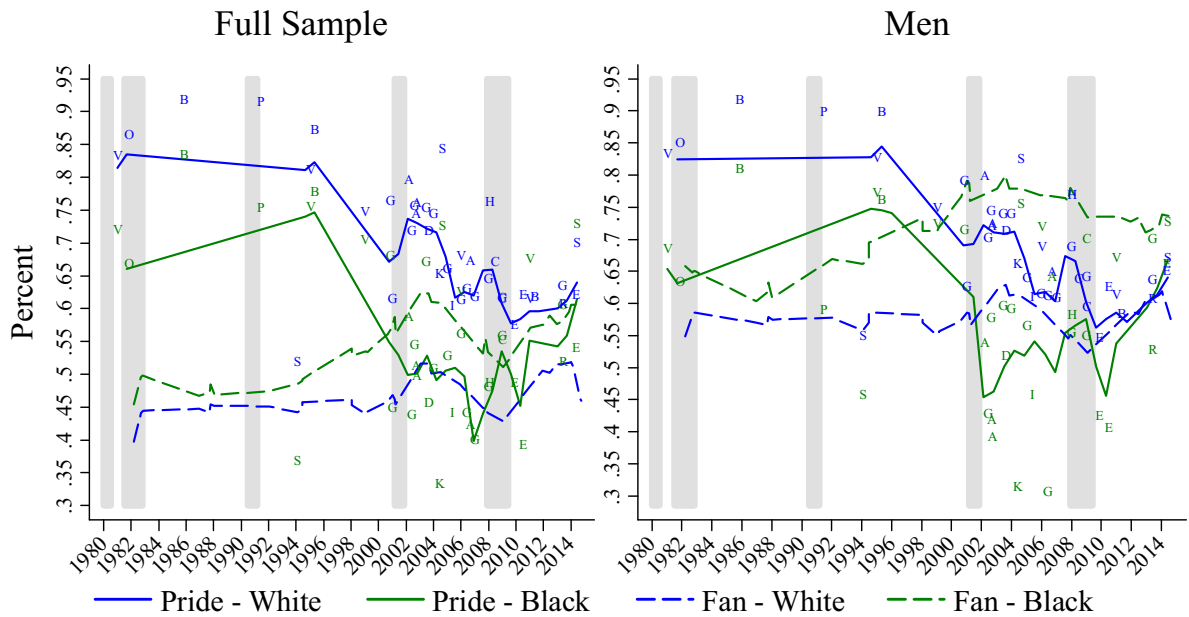
Fig. 1 also shows a substantial widening in the race gap in national pride following the 2001 recession. By 2007, the race gap in pride was not only at its widest but the share of African–Americans reporting high pride had fallen to nearly half the level of the high in 1986. While there is an apparent closing of the gap by 2014, this result is due to the imprecision of the smoothing method at the endpoints and the availability of only two surveys during this period, one of which (the General Social Survey) appears outlying from the prior trend.

In contrast to national pride, African–Americans consistently show higher rates of fandom for football than whites. Viewing both trends in Fig. 1 suggests an inverse relationship between the trends in fandom and national pride among African–Americans. A key feature of the trends in fandom is that fandom among blacks begins a gradual increase in the mid-1990s. This inflection upwards coincides with the start of the decline in national pride. Alongside the largely flat trend in whites’ fandom, the increase in fandom among African–Americans amounts to a widening race gap in fandom that similarly corresponds with the widening race gap in national pride until the early 2000s. The inverse relationship between the trends in pride and fandom are especially pronounced among men. The right plot in Fig. 1 limits the samples to men and shows comparable levels in national pride and unsurprisingly, substantially higher levels of fandom. There are larger fluctuations in national pride among men, especially following the 2001 recession, and a substantially wider race gap in fandom. The trend in black men’s fandom also follows a sharper increase following the 1991 recession that not only crosses-over the national pride trend earlier than in the full sample but also reaches a higher apex in 2004. The magnitude of this increase in fandom mirrors the magnitude of decline in national pride.

<sup>4</sup> “Most in U.S. Still Proud to be an American.” <http://www.gallup.com/poll/163361/proud-american.aspx>, accessed March 16, 2015. The measure of pride in this study combined reports of “extremely” and “very” proud. Estimates of the sample proportions of “very” proud in all of the surveys used in this report were provided to us by Frank Newport and are included in Fig. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Shares calculated from the Pew Research Center’s online data tool, <http://www.people-press.org/values-questions/q40i/i-am-very-patriotic/#all>, accessed February 11, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> All estimates are weighted to be nationally representative using each survey’s published weights for the national population.



Note: Recessions are indicated by vertical shaded areas. Pride N = 40 Fan N = 37. Data sources for proportions reporting high pride indicated with labels. Key: A-ABC, B-CBS, C-CNN, D-Scripps, E-PEW, G-Gallup, H-Chicago, I-CID, K-Kaiser, N-NES, O-Roper, P-AP, R-PRRI, S-GSS, W-Wash Post, V-World Values.

Fig. 1. National pride and NFL fan enthusiasm.

#### 4.2. Individual fandom and national pride

Table 2 reports descriptive statistics of four surveys for national pride, fandom, and the key correlates with national pride that were available in each of the surveys. Large race differences are evident in both national pride and football fandom that are comparable to the differences plotted in Fig. 1 for these survey years.<sup>7</sup>

Model comparisons in Table 3 show that the correlation between fandom and national pride, as well as the race differences in this correlation are robust to common predictors of national pride. In the model without controls for individual attributes (model 1) white football fans have an approximately 42 percent higher odds of reporting high national pride compared with white non-fans. The large negative effect of the interaction term shows that in contrast to whites, fandom among blacks is negatively associated with reporting high national pride. African-American football fans have a 23 percent lower odds ( $\exp(0.35-0.613)$ ) of reporting high pride compared with African-Americans who do not identify as football fans. While the covariates included in model 2 display the expected signs and are nearly all highly statistically significant, including these measures has little effect on the magnitude of the fandom effect for whites and gives rise to a modest increase in the negative association between fandom and national pride among blacks (to -26 percent). The large magnitude of the fandom effects for both whites and African-Americans – comparable to the effect of southern residence – underscores the potential importance of football fandom for national pride.

Models 3 and 4 show that race differences in the importance of fandom are especially pronounced among men. Among white men, fans have a 63 percent higher odds of reporting high pride compared with non-fans. White women also show a positive fan effect, although it is less than half the size of the effect among men. By contrast, black male football fans have a 37 percent lower odds of reporting high national pride compared with non-fans. Black women also display this negative association between fandom and national pride but like white women, the magnitude of the effect is smaller than the effect among black men (29 percent). To better illustrate these differences, Fig. 2 displays in the left panel the odds of reporting high pride calculated from the estimated coefficients in models 4 and 6. The sharp contrasts illustrate a clear intersection between race and gender in the effects of fandom for national pride.

To further illustrate the magnitude of the differences in the ties between fandom and national pride, we calculate the predicted marginal effects of becoming a football fan in the probability of reporting high national pride. The estimated differences we report in Table 3 imply that among men with a high school level of education living outside of the south-eastern

<sup>7</sup> Missing values for conservatism ( $n = 105$ ) and for age ( $n = 47$ ) are imputed with separate regression imputations by year and by race. Imputed values for both of these covariates are included in all models.

**Table 2**  
Descriptive statistics (Gallup surveys 2000, 2006, 2013 and Scripps News 2003.).

	Whites			Blacks			Difference SE	
	N	Mean	SE	N	Mean	SE		
<b>Proud – high</b>								
2000	635	0.746	0.017	48	0.671	0.060	–0.075	0.062
2003	534	0.699	0.017	54	0.436	0.046	–0.263***	0.049
2006	519	0.608	0.020	33	0.431	0.066	–0.177*	0.069
2013	763	0.589	0.017	68	0.600	0.052	0.010	0.055
<b>Moderate</b>								
2000	181	0.212	0.016	19	0.225	0.051	0.013	0.053
2003	177	0.242	0.016	51	0.404	0.045	0.162***	0.048
2006	200	0.245	0.018	25	0.365	0.065	0.120	0.067
2013	327	0.280	0.016	32	0.216	0.040	–0.063	0.043
<b>Low</b>								
2000	35	0.042	0.008	6	0.103	0.043	0.061	0.044
2003	45	0.059	0.009	20	0.159	0.034	0.100**	0.035
2006	116	0.147	0.015	18	0.204	0.052	0.057	0.054
2013	162	0.131	0.012	22	0.184	0.043	0.053	0.045
<b>Football fan</b>								
2000	361	0.398	0.019	36	0.508	0.065	0.110	0.067
2003	365	0.509	0.019	77	0.646	0.043	0.137**	0.047
2006	409	0.466	0.020	45	0.520	0.067	0.054	0.070
2013	490	0.406	0.017	52	0.439	0.054	0.033	0.056
<b>South</b>								
2000	236	0.303	0.018	33	0.490	0.065	0.187**	0.067
2003	252	0.340	0.018	52	0.419	0.045	0.079	0.049
2006	274	0.310	0.019	40	0.482	0.067	0.172*	0.069
2013	423	0.334	0.016	55	0.403	0.052	0.069	0.055
<b>College or more</b>								
2000	335	0.264	0.015	19	0.152	0.036	–0.113**	0.039
2003	304	0.428	0.019	29	0.246	0.040	–0.182***	0.044
2006	346	0.298	0.016	25	0.198	0.042	–0.100*	0.045
2013	539	0.321	0.015	44	0.226	0.039	–0.094*	0.041
<b>Conservatism</b>								
2000	851	3.269	0.037	73	3.222	0.146	–0.047	0.150
2003	754	3.369	0.041	121	3.376	0.117	0.007	0.124
2006	835	3.289	0.040	76	3.115	0.141	–0.173	0.147
2013	1252	3.284	0.036	122	2.959	0.114	–0.324**	0.120
<b>Age</b>								
2000	851	46.797	0.721	73	40.745	1.806	–6.052**	1.944
2003	756	46.952	0.626	125	42.376	1.630	–4.575**	1.746
2006	835	49.250	0.731	76	41.378	2.065	–7.872***	2.190
2013	1252	48.600	0.583	122	42.541	1.906	–6.059**	1.993

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  All statistics reflect weighted population estimates. Counts represent response frequencies for each item. In the 2000 and 2006 surveys, fans are identified by their response to the question “Are you a college football fan?” In 2003, fans are indicated by their response to the question “Are you a NFL football fan?” In 2013, fans are indicated by specifying football in response to the question “What is your favorite sport to watch?” The pride measure in 2003 is taken from the question “Describe your feelings of patriotism.” The highest response category “very patriotic” is coded as high national pride.

United States, becoming a football fan increases the probability of reporting high pride by 10% for whites but decreases the probability of reporting high pride among African–Americans by approximately 11%. The right panel in Fig. 2 displays these differences and further shows that football fandom is not only less important for women’s national pride but that the race gap among women (13 percentage points) is nearly half the size of the race gap among men.<sup>8</sup>

The relationship between football fandom and national pride displayed in these model estimates may reflect the attributes of enthusiastic sports fans, rather than any unique features of professional football fans. For instance, Theiss–Morse (2009) showed that a general tendency toward group identification is by itself a predictor of American national pride, raising the possibility that the effect of football fandom reflects the strength of group identification among sports fans rather than any unique ties between football fandom and national pride. The availability in the Scripps 2003 and Gallup 2013 surveys of a large number of response categories for the question concerning one’s favorite sport to watch allows assessing whether these ties are unique to football. While this measure differs from self-identifying as a fan of a given sport, we found it is highly correlated with self-identifying as a football fan in the surveys where both of these measures are available suggesting fandom

<sup>8</sup> Average marginal effects are calculated using the model estimates from models 4 and 6 in Table 3. The effects are calculated for non-southerners with a high school degree only and are evaluated at the mean values of age and conservatism for each of the subgroups defined by race and gender. The reported values reflect the average of these marginal effects calculated for each of the four surveys in the sample.



**Table 3**  
Logit regression estimates for high pride.

	Full sample		Men		Women	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Football Fan	0.350*** (0.072)	0.353*** (0.075)	0.490*** (0.103)	0.491*** (0.105)	0.247* (0.105)	0.240* (0.109)
Black	–0.355* (0.157)	–0.252 (0.163)	0.043 (0.290)	0.153 (0.299)	–0.551** (0.188)	–0.430* (0.198)
Fan X Black	–0.613** (0.217)	–0.655** (0.223)	–0.889* (0.358)	–0.950** (0.367)	–0.520 (0.288)	–0.585* (0.298)
Survey 2003	–0.318** (0.106)	–0.393*** (0.108)	–0.457** (0.161)	–0.528** (0.164)	–0.230 (0.141)	–0.319* (0.146)
Survey 2006	–0.637*** (0.102)	–0.745*** (0.105)	–0.744*** (0.149)	–0.803*** (0.153)	–0.539*** (0.140)	–0.695*** (0.145)
Survey 2013	–0.614*** (0.094)	–0.754*** (0.098)	–0.616*** (0.136)	–0.702*** (0.140)	–0.603*** (0.131)	–0.815*** (0.138)
Age		0.014*** (0.002)		0.009** (0.003)		0.019*** (0.003)
Male		–0.024 (0.070)				
South		0.235** (0.082)		0.186 (0.119)		0.316** (0.114)
High School Graduate		0.356* (0.150)		0.234 (0.230)		0.458* (0.200)
Some College		0.427** (0.153)		0.197 (0.233)		0.627** (0.207)
College or More		0.270 (0.146)		0.060 (0.223)		0.507* (0.198)
Conservatism		0.295*** (0.034)		0.303*** (0.050)		0.300*** (0.048)
N	4051	4051	1941	1941	2110	2110
Chi2	116	280	64	124	60	177
BIC	5195	5089	2502	2488	2733	2662

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$  All models are estimated including the available nationally representative sample weights. Additional controls for the two remaining regions (East and Midwest) are included in Models 2, 4 and 6 but are not significant and are excluded for ease of presentation. Reference categories for survey year, education and region are 2000, high school dropout and West region respectively. Survey 2003 indicates observations from Scripps Howard News. Missing values for age and conservatism are imputed with mean predicted values conditional upon survey, race and sex. Imputed values for conservatism are also conditioned upon the imputed and observed values of age.

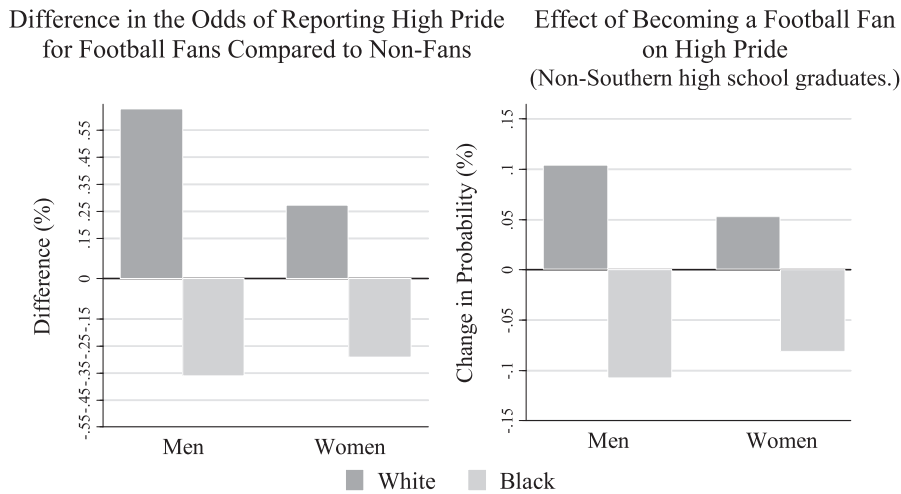
and sports viewing preferences may be similarly linked for other sports. Table 4 reports the estimated odds ratios for the fandom effect from separate models varying in the favorite sport to watch from a sample pooling the Scripps 2003 and Gallup 2013 surveys. The insufficient counts of African–Americans reporting a favorite sport to watch other than baseball and basketball, the second the third ranked most popular sports to watch reported in these surveys, prevents comparisons with additional sports. In contrast to the NFL fandom effect, fandom for neither baseball nor basketball show significant relationships with national pride in the full sample, as well as in the subsamples of men and white men. While the negative NFL fandom effect for black men is not significant, its sizable difference in comparison with the fandom effects for black baseball and basketball fans is consistent with the unique relationship between football fandom and national pride among black men.

## 5. Conclusions

Our findings suggest that football enthusiasm and national pride are interrelated and that the nature of their relation depends on race. We find that since the early 1980s, national pride has been in decline among American men and women of all races. Among black men, this decline has been especially sharp and it accompanied a marked increase in interest in the NFL. While these findings by themselves may be interpreted as coincidence, our analysis of individual fandom and national pride demonstrates a close relationship that is independent of the well-known predictors of national pride, implying a much deeper affinity. We also find that these ties are strikingly different between whites and African–Americans. The sizable positive association between football fandom and national pride among whites suggests that the football spectacle may facilitate more favorable national sentiment among white fans. The *negative* association among African–Americans suggests black fans may experience a very different game.

Given the limited data available, our interpretation of this statistical association is speculative by its nature. Further investigation is required in order to more closely test our hypothesis that the negative association between fandom and national pride among black Americans is mediated through latent sentiments of black resistance. For these reasons, our interpretation remains tentative and serves as a call for future research.

Our results may reflect black football fans rejecting the popular discourse that links football to a wider ethnically blind meritocratic character of America. It may be likely that both white and black fans identify American patriotism with



Note: Estimated odds ratios from Table 3 models 4 and 6. Average marginal effects are calculated for non-southerners with a high school degree only at each subgroup's sample mean values for age and conservatism. Reported values reflect the average of the marginal effects calculated for each of the three years.

Fig. 2. Race and gender differences in the effects of football fandom.

whiteness. Symbols of American national pride, which are so visible in the football sphere, allows white fans to experience congruence between their national sentiments and the fandom experience. The over-representation of African Americans as players does not contradict the cognitive connection between whiteness and American national identity. For example, studies in other contexts have shown how journalists who belong to the dominant ethnic group can suspend their acknowledgment of the demographic attributes of athletes when reporting on sports if the attributes do not fit the criteria for inclusion in the nation as they imagine it, while simultaneously nurturing ethno-national pride around the sport spectacle (Shor and Yonay, 2010). One study of American football fans similarly shows how white fans can simultaneously cheer for black players on the field and employ exclusionary practices toward blacks as fans (Tripp, 2003). For black fans, though, the over-representation of African-American athletes may present an opportunity to imagine black collective prowess that serves to underscore the distance to achieving the ideals represented in an American national identity centered on pure meritocratic order.

The importance of sport in general in shaping racial identity positions makes it as an ideal setting for racial conflict (Birrell, 1989; Carrington, 2010; Carrington and MacDonald, 2001; Hoberman, 1997; Tripp, 2003; Van Sterkenburg and Knoppers, 2004). The negative association between fandom and national pride among blacks is compatible with scholarship that emphasizes sports as a field of black resistance (Carrington, 1998; Zirin, 2005). In Carrington and Zirin's view, sport provides a spectacle of black prowess that undermines popular convictions regarding black inherent inferiority and boosts the self-confidence of African-Americans.

Although Carrington and Zirin focus on other sports rather than football, it may be most relevant to football. Carrington argued that "The display of black bodies ... becomes a contested fetishized ritual of racial spectacle and (homosocial) desire that is capable of producing both narratives of freedom as well as subjugation" (Carrington, 2010:88). The "display of black bodies" is a prerequisite for developing "narrative of freedom." Different sports differ in the level of black representation or

Table 4  
Fandom Effects for High Pride by Sport (Odds ratios).

	NFL	Baseball	Basketball	N
Full Sample	1.260* (0.119)	1.045 (0.115)	1.062 (0.134)	2217
Men	1.343* (0.181)	0.994 (0.157)	1.049 (0.200)	1069
Women	1.224 (0.166)	1.092 (0.171)	1.061 (0.182)	1148
White Men	1.437* (0.206)	0.976 (0.164)	0.899 (0.190)	966
Black Men	0.925 (0.438)	2.226 (1.310)	2.055 (1.024)	103

Note: \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001 Pooled sample of Scripps 2003 and Gallup 2013. Fandom for each sport is defined by identifying the sport as the "favorite sport to watch on television." All models control for age, region of residence, education, conservatism and survey year. The full sample includes additional controls for male and race.

success, and therefore in their potential to serve as platforms for questioning hegemonic ideologies. For example, the patriotic and militaristic ambiance in football shares much with another contemporary American spectacle, NASCAR. NASCAR has been described as a setting in which American national identity is constructed as white (Newman and Giardina, 2011:53). Yet, the racial homogeneity among NASCAR drivers and spectators precludes it as a field of resistance. On the other edge of the racial spectrum, boxing has extreme over-representation of black athletes, but a relatively low level of public following and is less likely to be packaged as an embodiment of American patriotism like football or NASCAR. Football, in its turn, maximizes the combination of media coverage, patriotic messages, and black over-representation and success. Juxtaposing American patriotism and black prowess provides the opportunity for the latter to question the former and the supreme exposure of football enables broad exposure of this questioning.

If African-Americans share a common understanding of national identity as corresponding with whiteness, then the success of black players may generate stronger sentiments of in-group identification and preference, consistent with the negative associations between these measures of racial identity and national pride reported in previous studies (Citrin et al., 2007; Sidanius et al., 1997). The experience of fandom for football may instead lower national pride among African-Americans, both because national pride might clash with black pride and because successes of black players sharpen the contrast between the meritocratic order of athleticism on the field and the everyday experiences of racial injustice outside the stadium. Since Miller's (1974) early speculation that perceptions of injustice may underlie race gaps in trust in government, individual assessments of racial (Hetherington, 1998; Perrin and Smolek, 2009; Wilkes, 2011) and economic inequalities (Rahn and Rudolph, 2005; Fairbrother and Martin, 2013; Citrin and Sears, 2014) remain important features in accounting for variations in political trust. Whether it is the growing contrast between the stated ideals of governance and perceptions of everyday inequalities that contribute to declining trust (Smith, 1997; Clark and Eisenstein, 2013), similar contrasts drawn in far sharper relief among African-American football fans may have a lasting effect on national pride. Under these circumstances, the latent coding of symbols of American national identity in the football stadium as white may provoke black fans to disassociate themselves from American national pride – more than blacks who have less exposure and commitment to the football sphere.

And yet, visible black protest in the football stadium is a rare phenomenon. Sporadic cases of protest by athletes (such as the 'don't shoot me' gesture of five NFL player in November 2014), are rightfully considered as rare exceptions of the rule. We suggest, however, that the scarcity of explicit political statements by the players does not tell us how the fans experience the field. Even without talking, by only providing a model of black prowess the black players may create the conditions for questioning national ideology.

Finally, our finding that racial differences are more extreme among men, and that positive correlation between football following and national pride among white Americans only occur in football (when compared with baseball and basketball) is a reminder of the importance of discourses of masculine domination in the sport sphere as well as of the gendered character of national ideologies. Together they imply that the association between sport and national pride may be related to the prevalence of masculinist discourse in this sphere whereby more blatant masculinist discourse strengthens the ties between sport and national pride. Therefore, while the football sphere is connected to national pride in opposite directions among whites and blacks, because this link is accompanied by celebrating masculinity in the football sphere it has more extreme implications for men than for women. While the hyper-masculinist character of football allows white men to link the sport to American national pride (a link which is explicit in the football stadium and media coverage), for black men it is an opportunity to rehabilitate black masculine pride and contradict the explicit patriotic messages of the sport media.

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