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The salience of the Northern and Southern identity in Vietnam

Mai Truong | **Paul Schuler**

School of Government and Public Policy, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA

Correspondence
Paul Schuler, School of Government and Public Policy, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, USA.
Email: pschuler@email.arizona.edu

Abstract

This paper explores the salience of the north-south identity in Vietnam. Using focus groups and survey data, we argue that Vietnam is characterized by *asymmetric ingroup bias*, where southerners hold higher levels of ingroup favoritism and outgroup discrimination than the north. However, while north-south identity exists, its salience is limited because it crosscuts with other social identities. Survey data show little difference between the north and the south regarding nationalism, support for redistribution, trade, authoritarian values and traditional values. There are differences with the south exhibiting lower trust in the government and generalized trust. Also, within Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) and Hanoi more specifically, we find lower support for China and higher support for the United States in HCMC than in Hanoi. However, these differences are relatively muted, and combined with focus group evidence, suggest that while identity differences exist, they are asymmetric and not as salient as often presumed.

KEYWORDS

Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, identity, in-group bias, North Vietnam, South Vietnam

Resumen

La importancia de la identidad del norte y del sur en Vietnam: Este artículo explora la importancia de la identidad norte-sur en Vietnam. Usando grupos focales y datos de encuestas, argumentamos que Vietnam se caracteriza por un sesgo asimétrico dentro del grupo, donde

los sureños tienen niveles más altos de favoritismo dentro del grupo y discriminación exógena que el norte. Sin embargo, aunque existe la identidad norte-sur, su prominencia es limitada porque se cruza con otras identidades sociales. Los datos de la encuesta muestran poca diferencia entre el norte y el sur con respecto al nacionalismo, el apoyo a la redistribución, el comercio, los valores autoritarios y los valores tradicionales. Hay diferencias con el sur que muestra una menor confianza en el gobierno y una confianza generalizada. Además, dentro de la ciudad de Ho Chi Minh (HCMC) y Hanoi más específicamente, encontramos un menor apoyo para China y un mayor apoyo para los EE. UU. En HCMC que en Hanoi. Sin embargo, estas diferencias son relativamente silenciosas y, combinadas con la evidencia de los grupos focales, sugieren que, si bien existen diferencias de identidad, son asimétricas y no tan importantes como a menudo se supone.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Hanoi, Ciudad Ho Chi Minh, Identidad, sesgo dentro del grupo, Vietnam del Norte, Vietnam del Sur

摘要

越南北部和南部认同的凸显性： 本文探究了越南北-南部认同的凸显性。通过使用焦点小组法和调查数据，我们论证认为，越南存在非对称内群体偏见（*asymmetric ingroup bias*）特征，相比起北部，南部人民对内群体的偏好更高，对外群体的歧视也更高。然而，尽管存在北-南部认同，其凸显性却有限，因为同时还存在其他社会认同。调查数据表明，就民族主义、对再分配的支持、贸易、威权主义价值观、以及传统价值观而言，北部和南部之间几乎不存在差异。与北部相比，南部对政府的信任更低，普遍信任也更低。并且，就胡志明市（HCMC）和河内而言，我们发现前者对中国的支持更低，对美国的支持更高。然而，这些差异相对而言并不明显，并且结合焦点小组得出的证据，认为尽管存在认同差异，但这些差异是非对称的，并且不像假设那样显著。

关键词

河内，胡志明市，认同，内群体偏见，越南北部，越南南部

1 | INTRODUCTION

In late October 2019, the Ministry of Finance of Vietnam proposed a plan to merge the equity markets in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City into a single Vietnam Stock Exchange. Such a move stirred up discussion on where the new market should be located, leading many to suggest the existence of "hidden" tensions between the north and the south (Reed, 2019). These discussions are common in Vietnam. Ten years ago, the country witnessed intense virtual debates about the differences between the two regions after a southern blogger posted negative description of northerners as "rude, lousy, talking funny and having bad taste" (Stocking, 2007). However, despite those occasional flare-ups, open regional division between a "north" and "south" Vietnam, which has been the norm in Vietnam since Ngo Quyen's defeat of the Chinese Han in 939, has not emerged (Goscha, 2016). The recent quiescence of the regional tensions juxtaposed with frequent debates suggests a need to assess the nature of the north-south identity and to what extent it is politically and socially salient in Vietnam. In this paper examine whether or not Vietnam, like the case of Malaysia in this issue (Ostwald & Subhan, 2021), is a case of regional cleavage that has failed to politically activate.

Existing scholarly work suggests conflicting views on this topic. Research points out considerable differences between the regions, ranging from economic (Gainsborough, 2003; Malesky, 2004; Sanders, 2014), geographic (Chong et al., 2019; Rambo, 1973; Taylor, 1998; Zhang et al., 2006), to cultural (Li et al., 2017; Ralston et al., 1999). Those significant differences may suggest a salient north-south division. Despite those differences, social movements in Vietnam since unification in 1975 have not mobilized along regional cleavages. While large protests have occurred in recent years, most are concerned with environmental issues, Chinese involvement in the South China Sea, and land issues. Most importantly, southerners and northerners have protested together or in isolation to advance their claims, especially in nationalist demonstrations against China. Furthermore, the lack of clear ascriptive differences along ethnic, linguistic, or religions lines between north and south could mute any potential cleavage.

We contribute to this discussion by using different data to examine the extent to which the north-south division is salient in contemporary Vietnamese politics. To do so, we use survey data from the Asian Barometer as well as 14 focus group discussions conducted in July 2019 in Vietnam. In our focus groups, we find some evidence for the importance of the cleavage, but perhaps not to the degree suggested by those that draw the starkest contrast between the regions. Using social identity theory as our key analytical framework, we find that contemporary Vietnam is characterized by some degree of *asymmetric ingroup bias* between southerners and northerners, where the former hold higher level of ingroup favoritism and express stronger negative attitudes toward the latter. In contrast, northerners are less likely to identify themselves as a distinct ingroup vis-à-vis the south and are more likely to show positive attitudes toward southerners. In other words, some north-south identity does exist, but is more *intensely felt* among southerners. Additionally, we also find that while the north-south identity exists, it crosscuts other cleavages. Specifically, we find little difference between the north and the south regarding nationalism, attitudes toward China and the United States, support for redistribution, trade, regime reform, authoritarian values, and traditional values.

2 | DIFFERENCES BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH

Before exploring the possibility of distinct identities in the north and south, we should first discuss how we define the regions and how this cleavage fits in with a range of other potential regional cleavages in Vietnam. For the purpose of this paper, we loosely define the dividing line between north and

south in Quang Tri province. We choose Quang Tri as it contains the Ben Hai river, which divided the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) from 1954 to 1975. This border also makes sense as it is also about 100 km south of the Gianh River and the nearby Nhat Le walls, which divided the Nguyen-dominated southern domain from the Trinh-dominated north from about the 1520s until the Tay Son rebellion in the 1770s. As such, this region marks a clear political dividing line between north and south Vietnam for 300 years of recent Vietnamese history. In addition, this boundary proved significant even before the Nguyen-Trinh division. Prior to 1400, the area below present-day Quang Tri comprised the Cham Empire, which was culturally distinct from the Dai Viet Empire to the north.

We should note that the north-south cleavage is not the only regional cleavage that could potentially lead to strong identities in what is now called Vietnam. Some suggests that a potential cleavage between the lowland regions and the highland regions, where most of Vietnam's contemporary ethnic minorities groups live (Goscha, 2016, pp. 420–439; Hickey, 1982; Turner et al., 2015). Others have focused on divisions within southern Vietnam. For example, a recent paper demonstrates the persistant division in the south between Khmer-dominated areas and those controlled by the Nguyen Dynasty near Saigon could have had persistent effects to this day (Dell et al., 2018).

Others focus on cleavages within the north. Specifically, Taylor (1998, 2013) points out historical differences between the present-day northern provinces of Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, and Ha Tinh and the Red River Delta. Some Vietnamese scholars argue that such differences linger until today and create unique characteristics for people coming from these regions (Bui, 2020). One might also focus on the differences between the three French administrative regions, which featured a distinct central region (Annam) encompassing Hue. Finally, as we will discuss below, there are other important identities in Vietnam that exist in any country that may crosscut or cumulate on these regional identities. These include potential rural-urban cleavages, class cleavages, or religious cleavages.

With these competing cleavages, why do we prioritize the north-south division? Without dismissing the importance of other cleavages, the north-south division is the most persistant political division in Vietnam. This line defined conflict within the Vietnamese-speaking world from the 1500s until the Tay Son rebellion in the 1770s. It then reemerged after 1954 Geneva Conference that divided north and south Vietnam. Even in the intervening periods, particularly under unified Vietnam from 1802 until the French occupied Cochinchina in 1862, the importance of the cleavage remained. The French, for example, were able to exert direct rule over Cochinchina, while they officially ruled indirectly in Annam and Tonkin to the north. Even the Nguyen emperors, who emerged from the south to unify the country in 1802, could not completely quell loyalties to the Le Dynasty in the north. In short, politically, the division between north and south has proved an important one for all those who have attempted to rule a unified or divided Vietnam.

While the existence of a political division is clear, this paper questions whether this northern and southern cleavage constitutes an *identity cleavage* among the public. Some scholars point out different traits between the northerners and southerners, suggesting that a salient regional identity exists among the public in Vietnam. Taylor (2013, p. 624) lays out some of the dominant perceived differences between north and south Vietnam. As Table 1 below shows, the north is seen as having greater influence from China, which is manifest in the greater influence of Confucian norms. These Confucian norms include respect for hierarchy and communal values (Zakaria & Yew, 1994). Additionally, potentially due to the more open geography of the south and the open frontier, there were differences in worldviews (Taylor, 1998). In the north, reflecting the dense population pressures, the poetry "portrays the world as a dangerous place, full of human greed, violence, confusion, and competition." (Taylor, 1998, p. 961). By contrast, the "southern" poetry suggests freedom and self-confidence, the assertion of one's will without regard for convention, history, or ancestors" (Taylor, 1998, p. 962).

TABLE 1 Theorized distinctions between North and South Vietnam

	North	South
Cultural	Center of intellectual culture	More concerned with business and wealth
Foreign Policy	Suspicious of foreigners, but more welcoming of Chinese influence	More open to outside world, but more suspicious of Chinese influence
Economic	Communal	Entrepreneurial and individualistic
Authority Relations	More willing to submit to government authority	More individualistic and less willing to submit to government authority
Gender Norms	More conservative	More modern

Source: Taylor (2013, p. 624).

What influences could potentially have driven the aforementioned differences? We point to three different factors. The first is the influence of outside actors (Sambanis et al., 2019). The most obvious long-standing cultural influence is China, which brings the aforementioned Confucian norms more strongly to the north. An additional feature of Chinese influence is the tradition of the central, bureaucratic state as opposed to a patronage-based system, which predominated in Khmer and Cham ruled areas to the south (Goscha, 2016; Taylor, 2013).

Other outside actors may have also played a role. The United States and France, for example, had greater influence in the southern, due to the U.S. alliance with the Republic of Vietnam and the greater degree of French colonial penetration in Cochinchina. The most obvious effects of these systems would be to introduce a more market-based, trade-based economy (Gainsborough, 2003), suggesting that the long experience with the United States might have instilled a more business-friendly ethic in the south (Sanders, 2014). However, even here, it should be noted that the different orientations to trade potentially existed between the north and south even prior to French colonization (Taylor, 2013, p. 291).

Related to the influence of foreign actors, another source of difference between the south and north could be the political regimes. The Trinh and Nguyen had different ruling styles, with the Nguyen more open to the outside world. More recently, the influence of communism in the north may have acculturated the north to state influence in the economy and support for authoritarian state-society relations. Importantly, the policy of reeducation camps in the south after unification in 1975 may have created resentment in the south among those sent to the camps (Goscha, 2016, p. 377). As recent work notes, state repression targeted at a specific group could make an identity more salient than it would be otherwise (Blaydes, 2018).

Geography and population density may also have played a role in driving the differences between the north and the south (Collier & Hoefller, 2004; Fearon & Laitin, 2003). Geographically, the most obvious difference is the extremely high population density in the north compared to the south (Zhang et al., 2006), which some suggest leads to the north having a more conservative, structured society relative to the more open outlook in the south (Taylor, 1998). Others focus on the layout of the village, with northern villages built on slight elevations emerging from rice paddies and southern villages strung in a linear fashion along canals (Rambo, 1973). Nonlinear (versus linear) villages structures can facilitate greater sharing of information (Chong et al., 2019), though it may also lead to greater corruption. Furthermore, in the long-established and densely populated precolonial northern and central areas of coastal Vietnam, villages resembled "closed corporate communities" (Wolf, 1955). In a village, members were individually acquainted with most of the other families and formed village identity, which made it very challenging for outsiders to integrate into the village (Tsuboi, 1987).

While these factors could lead to distinct identities, there are factors that could mute potential regional differences as perceived by Vietnamese. Most importantly, despite differences in terms of dialect,

northerners and southerners speak the same language. Second, while there are a number of Catholics and Christians in Vietnam, these religious differences do not cumulate on the regional cleavage. That is, there are Christians in the north and south, and they represent a distinct minority in both regions. This leads to an additional important factor that may mute the differences between north and south. While what today comprises the southern part of Vietnam was by no means empty prior to Vietnamese migration into that territory, much of the present day population of South Vietnam migrated from the north over the span of the past centuries (Goscha, 2016, p. 84). Additionally, in recent years protests have not typically fallen on regional lines. Northerners and southerners have joined together in different protests, ranging from nationalist (Người Việt, 2018) to environmental protests (The Guardian, 2016).

3 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To explore the nature of north-south identity in contemporary Vietnam, we rely on social identity theory which suggests that personal identity is largely based on memberships in social categories. Critical to the theory is that individuals identify themselves with groups. Under this framework, individuals categorize themselves and others who share similar characteristics as ingroup members, and those with different characteristics as an outgroup (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Davis, 2011; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

One important factor that affects the salience of social identities is whether identities are cumulative or cross-cutting. Because individuals possess multiple identities (Hogg, 2006), the interaction of identities might affect intergroup dynamics. Roccas and Brewer (2002) argue that the level of social identity complexity matters for intergroup conflicts. Social identity complexity refers to how individuals *subjectively* combine different identities to determine the overall inclusiveness of the individual's ingroup memberships. One's identities are cumulative if, for example, a particular ethnic group also speaks a different language, supports a different political party, or follows a different religion, or is strongly linked to economic disparities. At the other end, one's identities may crosscut, meaning that an ingroup member in one identity can be an outgroup members for other identities (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Cross-cutting identities tend to decrease the salience of a particular identity and prevent subgroup conflicts (Brewer, 2008; Goodin, 1975; Selway, 2011b).

Based on the social identity theory, we aim to assess the salience of north-south identity in Vietnam by (1) evaluating how northerners and southerners categorize themselves in groups, and (2) whether identities are cumulative and cross-cutting. To do this, we need to identify some potential cleavages. Many important potential differences are known through census data, such as language, ethnicity, and religion, which in the context of northern and southern lowland Vietnam are largely similar.[1] With this in mind, we examine other potential cleavages such as potential differences in ideology, regime support, cultural attitudes, and more general feelings of ingroup and outgroup bias based on region. Indeed, based on the previous literature review, we might expect that southerners would be more associated with a greater preference for market-based economics, less support for the party, and more liberal cultural attitudes than those in the north. As such, in our analysis we will examine the degree to which these differences are manifested in the data and whether or not they lead to strong feelings of ingroup or outgroup bias.

4 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND FINDINGS

To address these questions, we rely on two sets of analyses. First, to provide an empirical starting point for our assessment of potential differences between the north and south, we rely on Asian

Barometer Survey data between the two regions to establish broad trends in public opinion data between the two regions with regard to attitudes toward the ruling Vietnam Communist Party, attitudes toward redistribution, traditional values, views on the role of the government, and attitudes toward the United States and China. The survey data are useful because it will establish the existence (if any) of the differences in attitudes that are supposed to underlie the identity difference. Because survey data does not explicitly address whether those attitudinal differences lead to distinct identities, we then add evidence from focus groups in the north and the south of Vietnam to assess the degree to which southerners and northerners categorize themselves in groups and others to an outgroup.

5 | SURVEY DATA

As a starting point for our analysis, we now turn to the Asian Barometer survey (ABS) data to examine several indicators that could relate to potential identity differences in the north and south. We assess whether residence in the north or south predicts *(1) the degree of trust and connection to the party and government*, *(2) nationalism*, *(3) attitudes toward the United States and China*; *and (4) economic ideology*, *(5) support for authoritarian institutions*, *and (6) traditional values*.

Given the party's greater historical legacy in the north as well as the fact that many southerners had family members that were on the other side of the conflict, one potential difference in identity may be with regard to connection to the party. Objective indicators on party membership further suggests this could be the case. Following Thayer (2015), using data gleaned from newspapers in Vietnam, we constructed a measure of party membership per capita. These data clearly show that party membership is greater in the north than in the south (see Figure 1). Using the ABS data, we assess whether this party penetration translates into feelings of closeness to the party. To address this, we analyze an ABS indicator asking how "close" citizens feel to the party [1 = a little close; 2 = close; 3 = very close]. With this data, we calculated the marginal effect from a linear regression of being in the south after controlling for other factors that might impact closeness to the party, such as education, income, gender, and ethnicity. Figure 2 clearly shows that northerners feel closer to the party than southerners. Southerners are .38 lower on the 3-point scale, which is lower than the north by half a standard deviation in the dependent variable (Table 2).

Because closeness to the party does not necessarily measure affinity, we address trust in the party and government using a range of indicators from ABS on trust for different institutions. Figure 2 shows the results of the estimated levels of trust from a linear regression controlling for a range of other potentially confounding factors, with the graphs suggesting less trust in the south across some indicators, but not for others. For the party, we can see a slightly lower level of trust among southerners, but not at conventional levels of statistical significance. However, for other indicators, such as trust in the national government, trust in the president, and trust in parliament we do see less trust in the south. However, it should be noted that while the differences are statistically significant, the differences are not dramatically different. For both the north and the south, respondents are on average trusting in all institutions. In addition, for the military, police, and the party, we do not see a difference between the north and south.

As discussed earlier, another key dimension of potential north-south difference is nationalism and orientation vis-à-vis China (Goscha, 2016; Ralston et al., 1999; Taylor, 2013). To assess this, the ABS survey asks whether citizens think China or the United States has a good influence on Vietnam on a 6-point scale (1 = very negative; 6 = very positive). In addition, ABS asked a 4-point question on how well being Vietnamese describes the respondent and how important Vietnamese national identity is to the respondent.

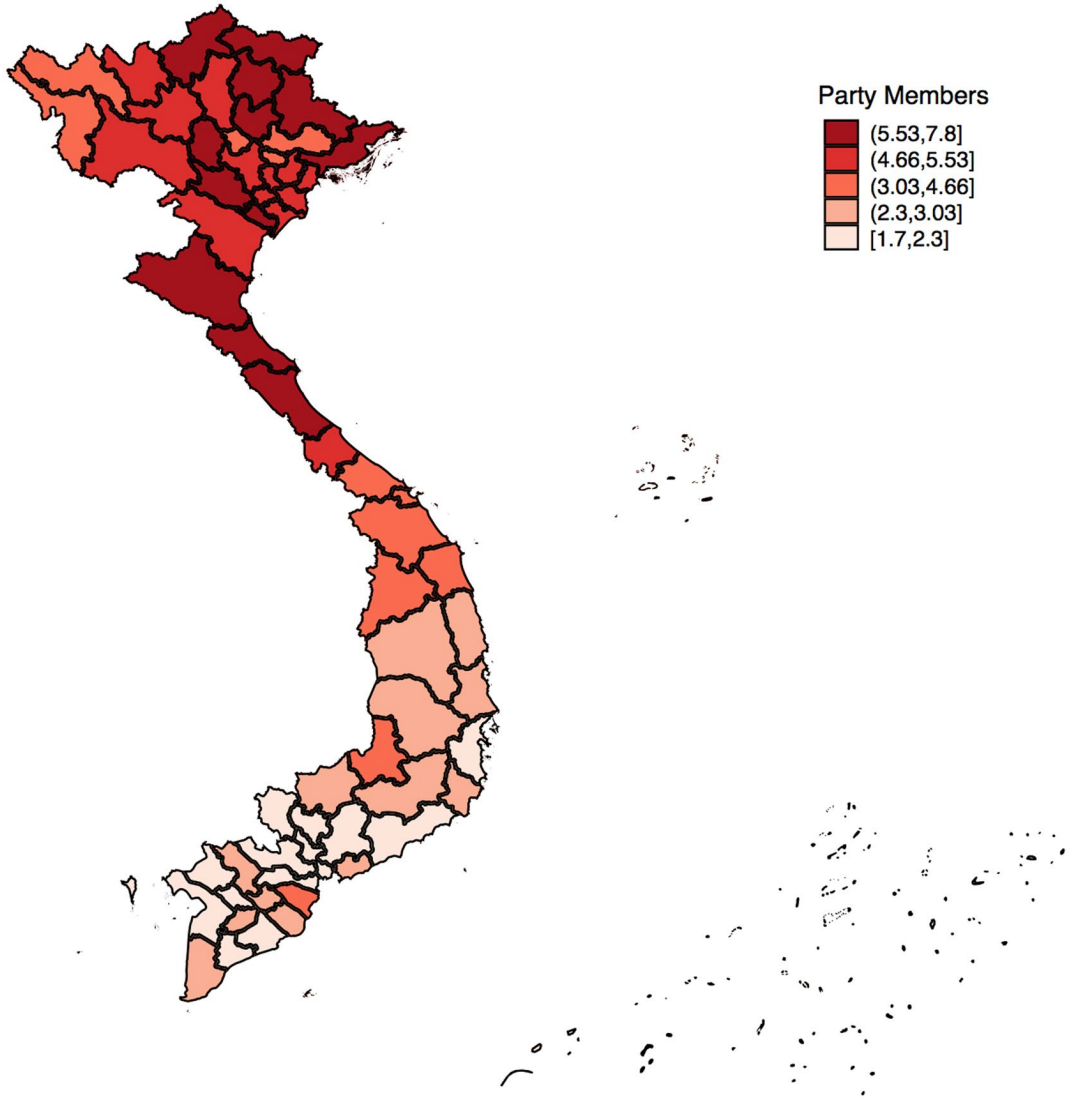

FIGURE 1 Party members per capita [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

As Figure 3 shows, there is little difference between the north and the south with regards to pro-US or pro-Chinese sentiment. Across the country, respondents are much more pro-US than pro-China, with the difference between the north and south not significant. Similarly, as Figure 4 shows, Vietnamese respondents from the south are no less nationalistic than in the north, at least with regards to feeling "Vietnamese." This is important because it speaks to the nonascriptive nature of identity differences in the north and the south. In short, Vietnamese in the north and the south feel Vietnamese and are more supportive of the United States than they are of China.

Another set of questions concerns *political ideology*. Some contend that the history of communism in the north and capitalism in the south may have rendered the north more supportive of redistribution and the south more open to capitalism. To assess this, the ABS survey asks a range of questions pertaining to openness to trade and support for redistribution. We also assess ABS questions concerning

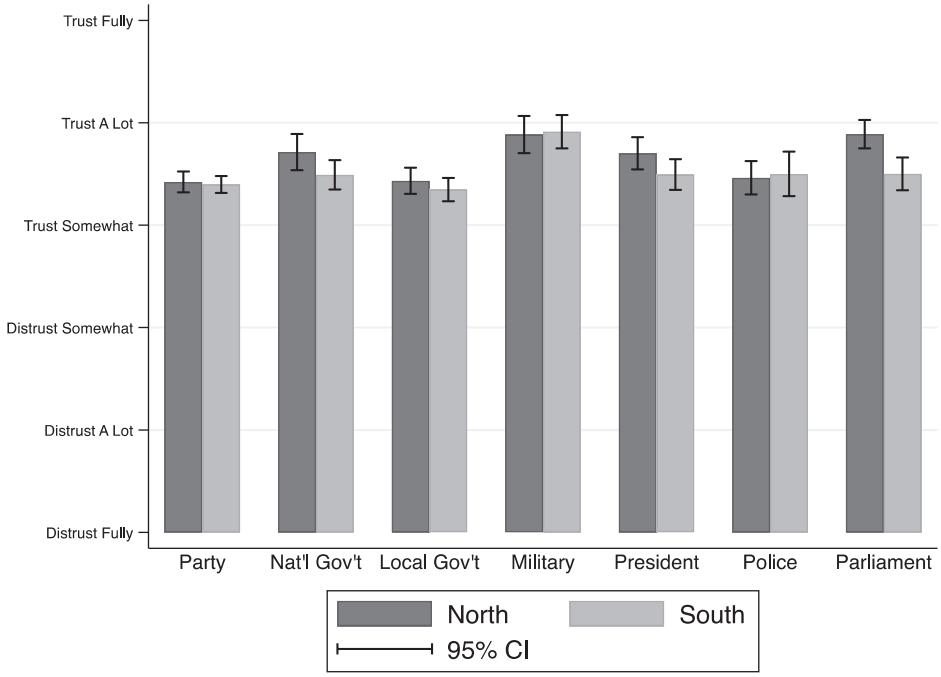

FIGURE 2 Differences in north vs. south regarding trust in institutions. *Note:* Estimates of trust by north versus south are from an OLS regression including a number of controls where the dependent variables is a 6 point measure of trust ranging from 1 "Distrust Fully" to 6 "Trust Fully." The differences between region for national government, parliament, and the president are statistically significant

TABLE 2 Closeness to the party

	Estimated mean	Standard error	95% Confidence interval	
North	2.21	0.07	2.06	2.36
South	1.83	0.06	1.71	1.94

Note: Closeness is a 3-point scale (reversed to make higher numbers closer where 1 = Just a Little Close; 2 = Somewhat Close; 3 = Very Close.

support for authoritarian values and whether there should be reform to the regime. The ABS data suggest that north-south identities do not cumulate on economic ideologies, especially openness to trade and support for redistribution. As Figure 5 shows there is some weak evidence that respondents in the north are more supportive of redistribution and less supportive of trade. However, the differences are not significant at conventional levels. Regarding traditional values, if anything the south is higher in terms of traditionalism.

A final potential difference is trust in neighbors and relatives. As recent work suggests, northern institutions are associated with higher levels of interaction within villages, which creates higher levels of social trust (Dell et al., 2018). To assess potential differences, we assess the degree to which citizens trust relatives, neighbors, and strangers in the north and south. Figure 6 displays the differences between the north and south with regards to social trust. As it reveals, in contrast to many of the other indicators, there is variation in the degree to which citizens trust neighbors, relatives and strangers with the north exhibiting higher levels of trust. This suggests that the village structure has led to different levels of trust in the north as compared to the south.

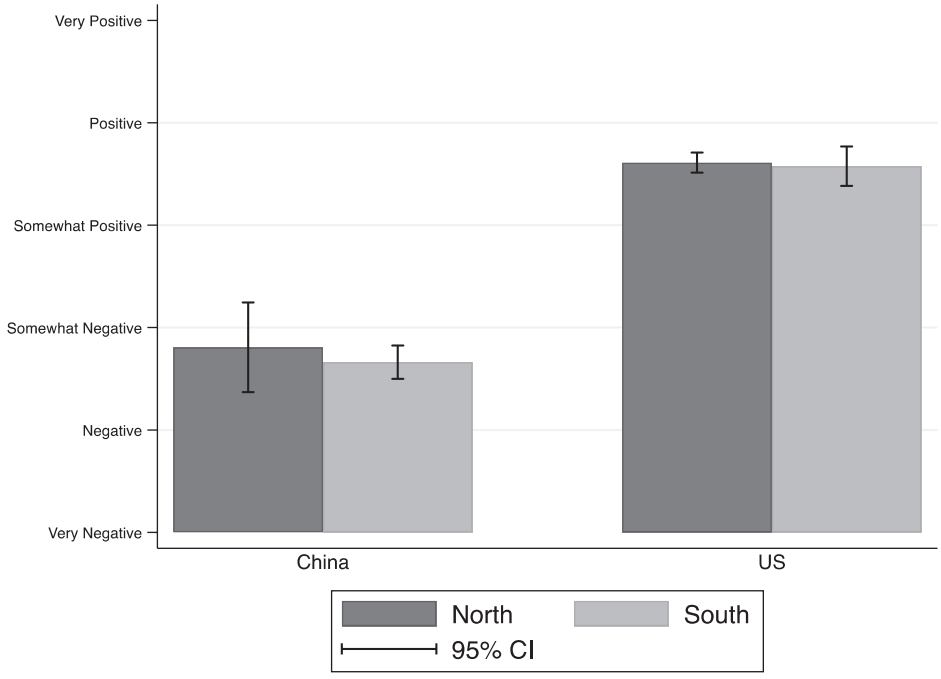

FIGURE 3 Feelings toward the United States and China by region. *Note:* Estimates of trust by north versus south are from an OLS regression including a number of controls where the dependent variables is a 6 point measure of trust ranging from 1 "Very Negative" to 6 "Very Positive."

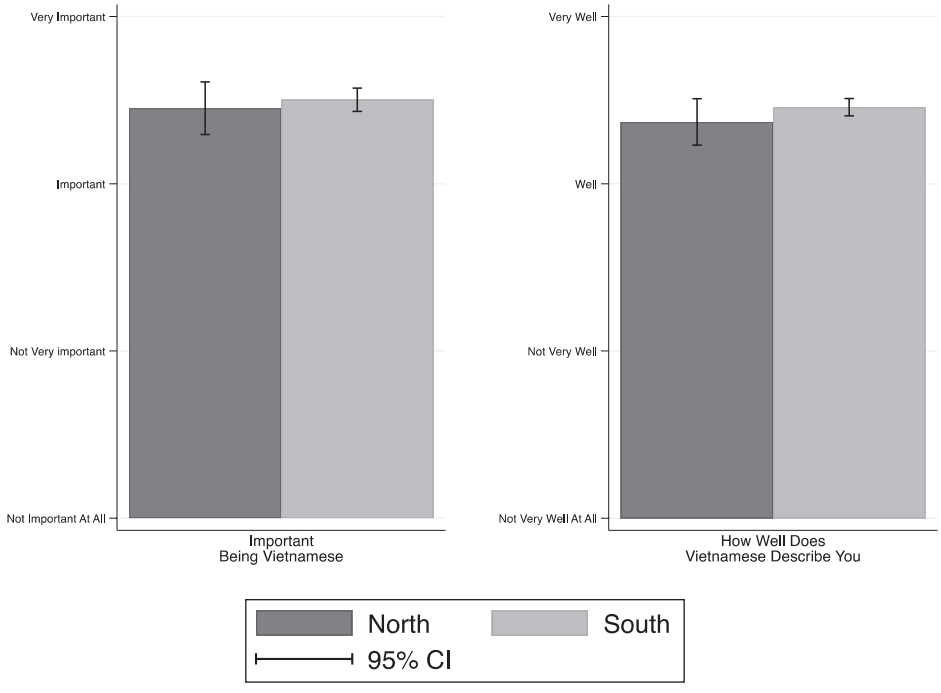

FIGURE 4 Nationalist sentiment by region. *Note:* Estimates of trust by north versus south are from an OLS regression including a number of controls where the dependent variables is a 6 point measure of trust ranging from 1 "Very Negative" to 6 "Very Positive."

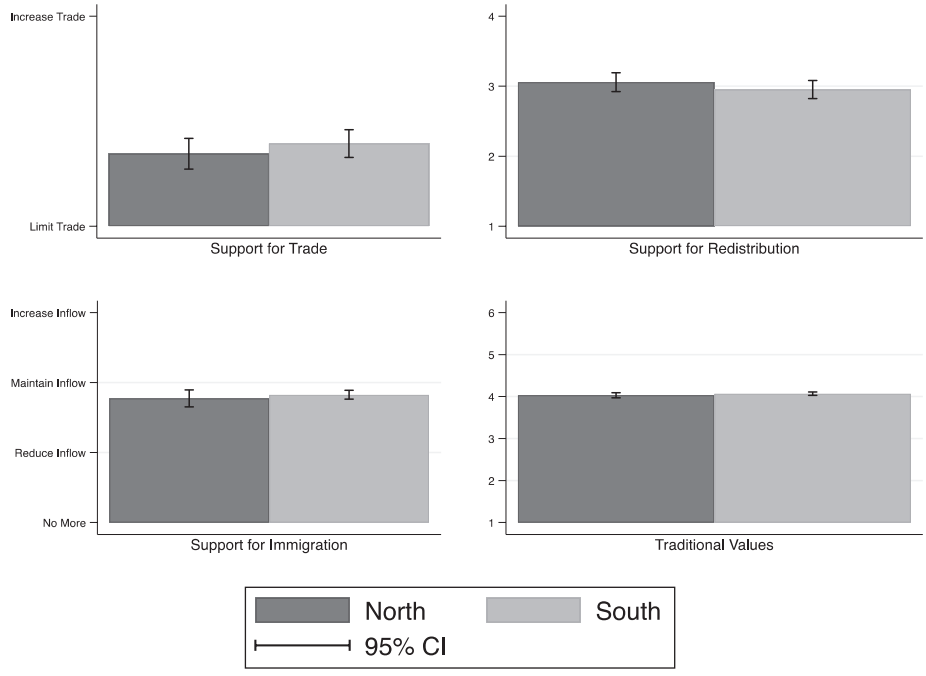

FIGURE 5 Support for redistribution, free trade

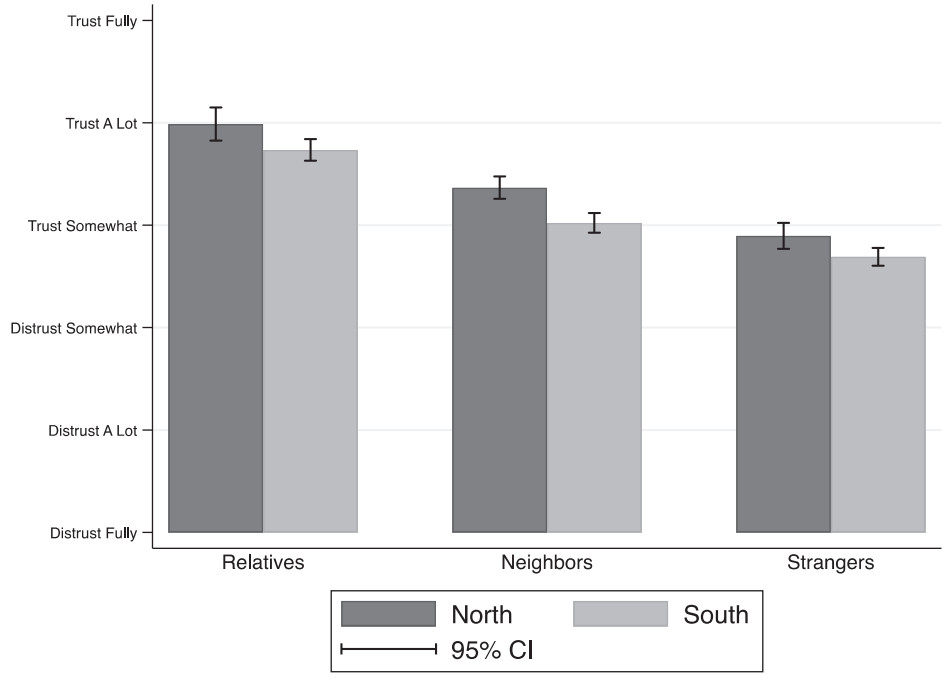

FIGURE 6 Social trust

In short, the ABS survey data does not reveal any striking ideological, nationalistic, or political differences between the north and south. One important difference is the penetration of the party. Party membership is more prevalent in the north, and citizens report a closer relationship with the party.

This, however, does not translate into a feeling of greater trust in the party in the north. Social trust is also higher in the north than the south.

One additional possibility we consider is whether differences in identity are not between the north and south broadly conceived, but rather the difference is stronger between Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC). Indeed, as the review above suggests, even within the north, the Red River Delta and Hanoi has a closer linkage to China and Confucianism than Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, and other parts of the north (Goscha, 2016). Similarly, in HCMC, French and U.S. presence was stronger in the urban areas than the rural areas of the south. Taylor suggests that the contrast between the south and north may be most clearly "epitomized by the cities of Hanoi and Saigon." (Taylor, 2013, p. 624).

Therefore, we reran the above analyses looking more specifically at the difference between Hanoi and HCMC. Across many of the indicators, the results are similar between the results found above and the subanalyses that just use Hanoi and HCMC. In particular, with traditional values and economic attitudes, there is little difference between HCMC and Hanoi. However, for several of the outcomes, we see more pronounced differences between Hanoi and HCMC. For political institutions, as Figure 7 shows, HCMC residents are strikingly less trusting in the national government than Hanoians. Similarly, they are less trusting in the president than Hanoians. Perhaps more striking is the difference between HCMC and Hanoi with regard to attitudes toward China. While the differences between the north and south with regard to attitudes toward China were more muted, there is a difference between HCMC and Hanoi. As Figure 8 shows, the difference is mainly driven by Hanoians, who seem to have a less negative view of China than either those in the north or those in HCMC and the south.

These findings paint a complicated picture that hints at some important potential sources of identity differences between the north and south generally and HCMC and Hanoi more specifically. The strongest difference is in closeness to the party and trust in the national government and president. These differences are extremely pronounced when assessing Hanoi and HCMC in isolation. The north

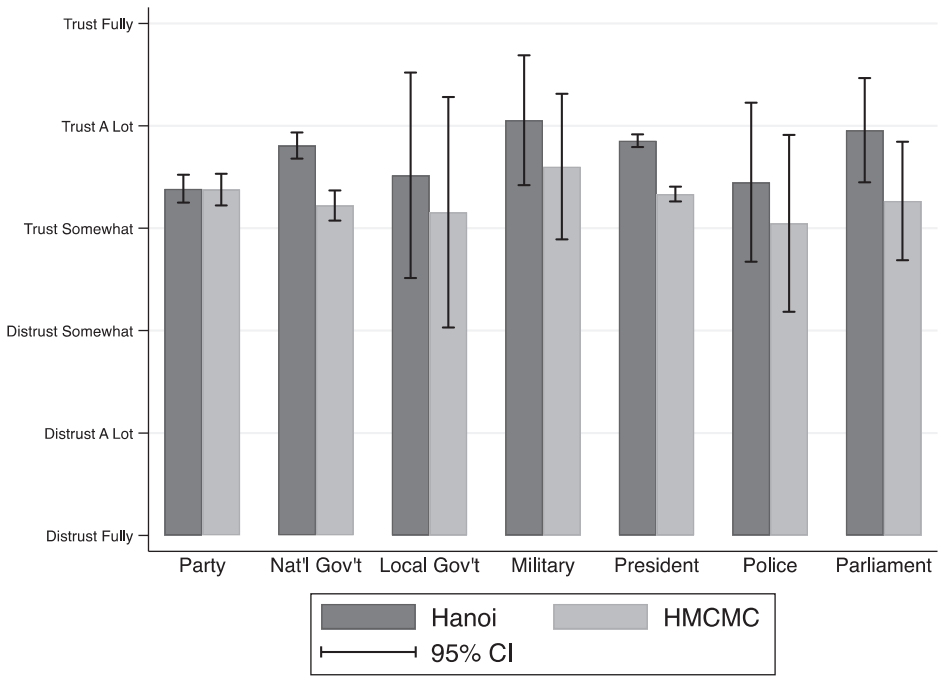

FIGURE 7 Differences in HCMC and Hanoi regarding trust in institutions

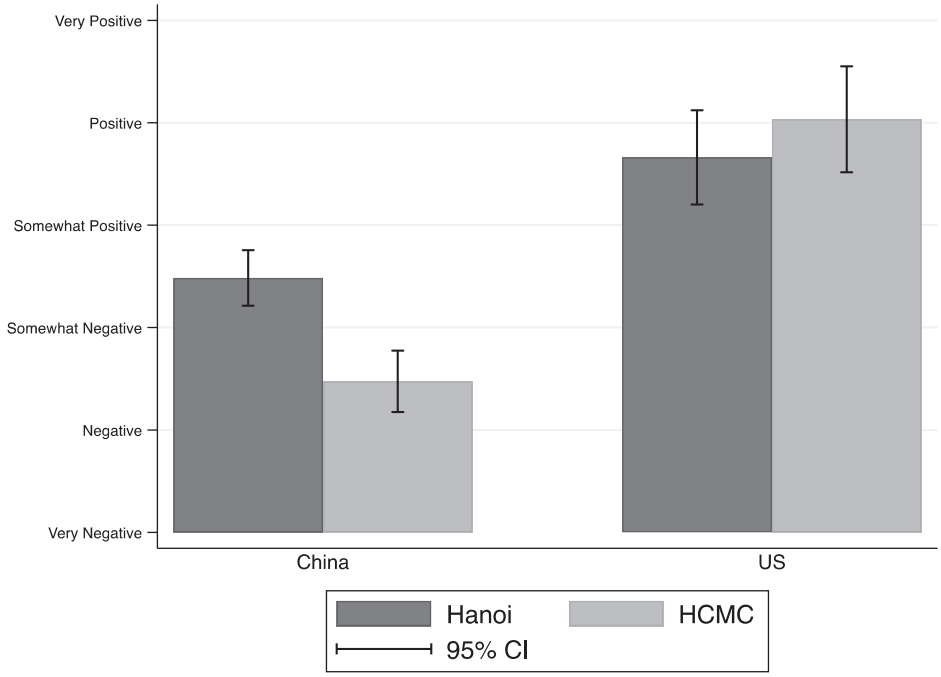

FIGURE 8 Feelings toward the United States and China in HCMC and Hanoi

and south also differ in their levels of social trust, with the north being more trusting and the south less trusting.

On other indicators, such as sentiment toward China, we see the predicted differences, but only in the HCMC and Hanoi subanalysis. While the north is not substantially more pro-China and anti-US than the south, when restricting the analysis to Hanoi and HCMC we see a significant difference. Hanoi has a much more positive view than the south, HCMC, and indeed the rest of the country. The preceding analysis is useful in suggesting some potential sources of identity differences between the north and south. The north is generally more trusting of the government. The party has greater penetration in the north than the south. There is evidence of distinct social patterns leading to greater generalized trust in the north. Finally, in Hanoi, there is less negative sentiment toward China than in the rest of the country, including the south and HCMC.

However, we should be cautious in inferring from these survey data that such differences or lack of differences do or do not correspond to an identity difference. First, while attitudes may be different, they may not lead to a distinct sense of group identity. As such, the differences we see may not translate into an identity. From the other side, it is possible that respondent are unwilling to answer some survey questions truthfully, thus, masking potential differences. Additionally, it is also possible that the questions do not fully capture the dimensions that might lead to distinct senses of group identity. To address these possibilities, the next section uses focus groups to assess more fully the sense of group identity in the north and south.

6 | FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS

Focus groups may provide a few advantages in examining identity differences over survey research. First, participants are encouraged to speak freely in a social setting about groups they feel closest

to. This means that focus group methods allow a participant to *subjectively* choose their identities, which is critically important for social identity theory. This helps reveal potential identities beyond questions in the survey, especially in contexts in which social identities are rarely discussed. Second, focus groups have been effective in measuring socially constructed concepts, especially social identities, which are highly contextualized and often established through social processes (Cyr, 2019b). Finally, focus groups are useful for exploring topics where we have little to guide us in formulating valid survey questions (Cyr, 2019a; Kidd & Parshall, 2000). Though there is some work on ideology under single-party rule (Pan & Xu, 2017; Wu & Meng, 2018), single parties tend to suppress discussion of social identities and cleavages (Ufen, 2012), thus, research in these topics lacks theoretical and empirical foundations. To supplement some of these potential shortcomings of survey analysis, we therefore conducted 14 focus groups in Vietnam in July 2019.

Of course, the pitfall of focus groups is selection. To gain regional representation, we attempted to survey participants from a range of backgrounds in the north and the south. However, we were better able to achieve this in the north. In the north, we were able to conduct groups with urban professionals and students in urban and rural areas. Additionally, in the rural areas we were able to interview farmers and factory workers as well. In the south, although we attempted to set up groups outside Ho Chi Minh City, we quickly found that conducting political focus group research to be more challenging. Therefore, we were only able to set up groups with students and professionals in Ho Chi Minh City. We were able to partially rectify this by including participants originating from outside of Ho Chi Minh City in the sample, but of course these opinions may differ from those who remain in the countryside. This has important implications for our research. First, it does not address southern Vietnamese identity for the large Vietnamese population living overseas, many of whom are from the south. It is quite possible that a southern identity could be stronger among this population. Additionally, by not sampling those outside of Ho Chi Minh City, we leave ourselves open to the possibility that southern identity could be stronger outside the more diverse metropolis (Table 3).

Our primary unit of analysis within the group is the individual (Cyr, 2019b). However, we believe that the group setting, and the informal nature of the discussion facilitates greater openness and less preference falsification than in a standard survey. The focus groups were conducted within a broader research project aimed at assessing the strength of various identities, not just north-south identity. This is useful for the purposes of this article as it will ensure that our groups did not prime north-south identity in a way that would make it seem stronger than it really is. With that in mind, each group lasted about one hour with an average of five participants per group.

TABLE 3 Summary of focus groups

Region	Provinces	Focus group
South	Ho Chi Minh City	2 groups with students
		2 groups with professionals
North	Hanoi	2 groups with students
		2 groups with professionals
	Thai Nguyen	1 group with students
		1 group with farmers and workers
		1 group with former party members
	Thai Binh	2 groups with students
		1 group with farmers

Our focus groups allow us to examine (1) *how respondents categorize themselves*, (2) *their attitudes toward their ingroups and outgroups*, and (3) *the degree to which any north-south identity crosscuts or cumulates on other identities*. With these goals in mind, our key question was an open-ended question asking participants to choose three identity groups that were important to them. Participations were then asked to participate in a decision-making game, where they were asked if they would want their daughter to marry someone from different backgrounds, including urban, rural, north, south, or the government. Such marriage questions have been used effectively to measure the salience of political identity in the United States (Iyengar et al., 2010; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001).

6.1 | Findings from focus groups

We started each focus group by asking participants to list three groups they feel that they strongly belong to. Interestingly, southern participants strongly identified themselves with their ingroup. Specifically, 50% of our southern participants *subjectively* categorized themselves in the southern group. Those participants felt proud of being a southerner because of the southern culture, economic situation and personality. For example, one southern respondent shared that "I am proud of being a southerner for our language, the way we talk, the way we live."[2] Another said: "I am proud of being a southerner because we are more generous, we are richer and we have more moderate weather." For those who did not list the southern group when given an open-ended question, we asked if being southerner mattered to them.[3] Once the identity was made salient, they became more attached to their ingroup. In stark contrast, *none* of our northern participants categorized themselves in the northern group. Even when this identity was made salient, we did not see any changes in how our northern respondents identified themselves. For example, when asked whether being a northerner mattered to respondents, one said that: "For me, being a northerner is not very important to me. It is not important at all."

It turns out that northern participants were much more likely to identify themselves with being Vietnamese and/or from a specific province. It is worth noting that we do not suggest that southerners do not think they are Vietnamese, or do not feel Vietnamese. In contexts where national identity is activated, our respondents would identify themselves as Vietnamese. This is in line with the ABS survey responses, which show high levels of Vietnamese nationalism in the north and south. Indeed, many students who study or settle down abroad, regardless of whether they come from the north or the south, identify themselves as Vietnamese.[4]

This is interesting, because from the "group dominance" perspective (Sidanius et al., 1997), the fact that the north could be seen as politically dominant, might lead to a higher nationalist identification in the north. Both the survey and focus group evidence suggest this is not the case. Interestingly, the idea of the north as a dominant group does not completely align with self-perceptions, given that southerners have *more* ingroup bias, which contradicts the predictions of social dominance theory (Pratto et al., 2006). It does align with other social identity theories (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), in particular the idea that the less dominant group (although, in this case not clearly a "minority") might be more likely to identify with their ingroup than those in the dominant group.

Our discussion, so far, suggests that southern respondents were more likely to categorize themselves as a distinct group while northern respondents did not. We further explored the intergroup dynamics between the north and the south, and respondents' attitudes toward regional groups, by asking how they would react if their daughter wanted to marry a man from the other region. Responses to this answer reveal that southern respondents held much higher levels of ingroup bias and were much less likely to accept inter-regional marriage compared to northern respondents. Most northern participants

found it acceptable to have a son-in-law from the south, even though they acknowledged that differences between the two regions exist. However, they tended to associate southerners with positive characteristics, especially in terms of personality, attitudes toward women and attitudes toward life.

It is also important to note that consistent with general migration patterns, our southern sample included some northerners that migrated to the south. The reverse is far less common, and thus, did not show up in our sample. Our interviews with northern migrants reveal three main factors that motivate people to settle in the south. These factors include (1) a wider range of economic opportunities; (2) a culture which values individual freedom; and (3) a more moderate climate.

With that said, northerners did carry some stereotypes about the south. Attitudes toward money and politics were two dimensions which our northern participants perceived they were different from the south. Our participants thought that southerners save less and care less about the future, partly because of better economic opportunities. Additionally, northern participants thought their southern counterparts trust the Communist Party less and are more willing to express radical views. From their perspective, southerners do not possess a "firm political ideology." This view was more prevalent among older generation and those who work for the government.

But these differences were not mentioned even once as main factors affecting their preferences toward their daughter's marriage. Very interestingly, even participants who associated their self-identity with membership in the Party, and who were most critical of southerners' political views, did not consider this an important factor. Specifically, 5% of our northern participants did not want their daughter to marry someone from the south, and even then, their hesitance came from the distance not because of anything to do with identity. Many participants said that "Letting my daughter marry a southern fellow seems risky because I might lose her." A few participants shared that "If I get old and sick, she (my daughter) cannot come to see me frequently if she marries a southern man." One participant even said that if the couple lives near home, it does not matter whether their son-in-law comes from the north or the south.

Critically, distance is not mentioned even once, when the same question was asked of southern participants. Given that a high percentage of population in Ho Chi Minh City consists of northern immigrants, some participants are willing to accept such a marriage. However, a majority of our southern participants were reluctant, and they showed strong concerns. Their concerns come from strong differences in lifestyle, personality, culture and political attitudes between the two regions. Our southern participants associated the north with being close to the party and less critical of the party propaganda. One participant even suggested that if a northerner shows some political independence, he is willing to accept the marriage.

Our analysis, so far, suggests north-south *asymmetric* ingroup bias, in which southerners hold a higher level of ingroup favoritism and show more negative attitudes toward the north. On the contrary, northern respondents tended to think fondly of the south. In line with our previous discussion, one possibility is lingering resentment from the war. Consistent with this, one southern participant shared that: "My grandparents/parents had high hopes for the Party but what they did after taking over the country was really disappointing." Stories about how northern party officials and immigrants behaved toward southerners are still being told in many respondents' families. Thus, it is not surprising that southerners even divided the northern population in the south into two categories: Northerners 1954 and Northerners 1975. Northerners 1954 receive greater affinity from some respondents. From the perspectives of our southern participants, they have lived in the south long enough to "absorb the southern culture," and importantly, they are not "products of the Communist regime" as Northerners 1975.

The focus groups yield important cultural and political identities in the south relative to the north. *To what extent does this asymmetric regional identity cumulate or crosscut with other identities?*

Surprisingly, although our southern participants are more likely to identify themselves with their ingroup and express outgroup discrimination against northerners, they share surprisingly similar identities with their counterparts from the north. Specifically, our students and professionals from both regions consistently categorize themselves in a "young group" who value education, independence, honesty and responsibility. This means that among the south's younger generation, northerners can be an outgroup in terms of regional identities, but these same northerners can also be their ingroup regarding ideologies. This signals that the north-south identity is cross-cutting with others, which potentially limits the division further.

Another piece of evidence that the north-south identity crosscuts with other identities is that when we asked our focus group participants how they would feel if their daughter wanted to marry someone from the governmental sector, we find similar answers from participants who do not work for the government in both the north and the south. This is important because given the differences in closeness to the party, it is possible that northeners would be more positive toward having a government official in the family. Our participants from both regions showed strong concerns about having their daughter marry a government employee due to concerns over his personalities and his attitudes toward novelty and challenges.

In short, our focus groups suggest that an asymmetric regional identity does exist in Vietnam, in which southerners hold a higher level of ingroup favoritism and express stronger discrimination toward northerners. However, while the regional identity exists, it is not strongly salient because similar to survey findings, it crosscuts with other identities.

7 | CONCLUSION

Our paper examines the degree to which the north-south identity is socially and politically salient in Vietnam. Relying on the social identity theory, we find that Vietnam is characterized by asymmetric ingroup bias in which southerners hold higher levels of ingroup bias favoritism and outgroup discrimination against their northern counterparts. This means that the north-south identity is more intensely felt among southerners. However, we believe that the political salience of such a regional identity is not strong in contemporary Vietnam. Survey evidence suggests that there are some differences with the south exhibiting lower trust in the government and generalized trust. Also, within HCMC and Hanoi more specifically, we do find lower support for China and higher support for the United States in HCMC than in Hanoi. However, the differences are not pronounced and only appear with certain items. The broad patterns is more of agreement than disagreement.

Given the large literature suggesting cleavages between the north and south, what could explain these muted differences? One important factor is likely the significant degree to which ascriptive identities such as language, ethnicity, and religion are the same in both regions. In short, the political divisions between north and south likely result more for reasons of geography and international involvement than due to distinct identity differences between the regions.

ORCID

Paul Schuler https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5571-0956

ENDNOTES

[1] These are obviously crude measures that may hide more nuanced cultural differences between north and south. Our focus group and survey evidence should tease out these more nuanced differences.

[2] By language, he focuses on the regional vocabulary used in the south.

[3] Specifically, we asked "In addition to these three groups, do you feel being a southerner is important for you?

[4] In 2019, a group of oversea Vietnamese students from both the north and the south collectively wrote the book "Gần như là nhà" (Almost home), sharing their thoughts on being Vietnamese in face of identity conflicts while living abroad.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Mai Truong is a doctoral candidate in political science at the University of Arizona. She studies social movements and protests in authoritarian regimes. Her regional focus in Southeast Asia.

Paul Schuler is an Assistant Professor at the University of Arizona, where he studies Southeast Asian politics, Vietnamese politics, and authoritarian institutions. His first book, United Front: Projecting Solidarity Through Deliberation in Vietnam's Single-Party Legislature was published by Stanford University Press in 2021. Earlier scholarship has appeared in the American Political Science Review and Comparative Politics, among other outlets. Schuler earned his Ph.D in political science at the University of California-San Diego.

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