**What Is a Nativist?**

And is Donald Trump one?

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**What is a nativist?**

There’s a reason the word “nativism” appears regularly in the U.S. media and not elsewhere: According to Mudde, a professor at the University of Georgia, nativism is an almost exclusively American concept that is rarely discussed in Western Europe. The term’s origins lie with mid-19th century political movements in the United States—most famously the Know Nothing party—[that](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/immigrants-conspiracies-and-secret-society-launched-american-nativism-180961915/) [portrayed](https://exhibits.library.villanova.edu/chaos-in-the-streets-the-philadelphia-riots-of-1844/know-nothings/) Catholic immigration from countries such as Germany and Ireland as a grave threat to native-born Protestant Americans. (Never mind that the Protestant “natives” were themselves migrants relative to another native population.) Nativism arose in a natural place: a nation constructed through waves of migration and backlashes to migration, where the meaning of “native” is always evolving.

Nativism, Mudde told me, is “xenophobic nationalism.” It is “an ideology that wants congruence of state and nation—the political and the cultural unit. It wants one state for every nation and one nation for every state. It perceives all non-natives … as threatening. But the non-native is not only people. It can also be ideas.” Nativism is most appealing during periods when people feel the harmony between state and nation is disappearing.

Eric Kaufmann, a political scientist at the University of London’s Birkbeck College, calls nativism a “crude” term and prefers something more precise: “majority-ethnic nationalism,” which applies to people who consider themselves native to or settlers of a country and want to protect their “demographic predominance in that territory.”

Some types of nationalism are concerned with ideology (America as the leader of the free world) or status (American as the most powerful country in the world). But ethnic nationalism is “less concerned with getting to the moon and being number one,” Kaufmann said. It’s a “boundary-based nationalism.”

Nativists typically spend more time defining “them” (non-natives) than “us” (natives), Mudde added, because the more specific the “us,” the more it raises thorny questions of national identity and excludes segments of the population who might otherwise support the nativist politician. The native is often depicted as the unspoken inverse of The Other: “The other is barbarian, which makes you modern. The other is lazy, which makes you hardworking. The other is Godless, which makes you God-fearing.”

Long before Trump [embraced](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/trump-america-first/514037/) the slogan “America First,” Elisabeth Ivarsflaten taught her students at the University of Bergen in Norway to think of nativist politicians as the “my-country-first party.” All political leaders should (theoretically) put their country’s interests first. But nativism goes beyond that logic. “The idea that these parties roughly engage is that too much emphasis is being put on internationalization and accommodating people who want to come into the country” but aren’t originally from there, Ivarsflaten said. Whether nativism involves opposing the European Union because Germans have to bail out Greeks, or opposing multiculturalism because it means accepting forms of Islamic dress, the idea is that “there is a native population or a native culture that should be given priority over other kinds of cultures.”

Ivarsflaten places nativism in the broader category of right-wing populism, an ideology [premised](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/02/what-is-populist-trump/516525/) on representing the virtuous “people” against a corrupt “elite.” She [has found](http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0010414006294168) that all the populist-right parties that performed well in Western European elections in the early 2000s had one thing in common: They tapped into people’s complaints about immigration. Other grievances—regarding the European Union, economic policy and the state of the economy, or political elitism and corruption—did not account for the success of these parties as consistently or powerfully as immigration issues did. “As immigration policy preferences become more restrictive, the probability of voting for the populist right increases dramatically,” she wrote at the time.

**Is Donald Trump a nativist?**

Mudde argues that nativism was one of the first features of Trump’s “core ideology” as a presidential candidate, though he acknowledges that Trump isn’t a consistent ideologue. (Mudde believes Trump adopted populism more recently, under the influence of White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon.)

And Trump quickly learned that nativism was *popular*; Mudde notes that Trump’s campaign speeches were initially quite boring—with [lengthy digressions](http://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/) about his real-estate deals—but that crowds erupted in applause when he spoke about building a border wall with Mexico or barring radical Islamic terrorists from the country.

Several top officials in the Trump administration, including [Bannon](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/02/23/stephen-bannons-nationalist-call-to-arms-annotated/?utm_term=.c582cb0bb0e8) and [Attorney General Jeff Sessions](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/02/jeff-sessions-has-long-feared-muslim-immigrants/516069/), could be described as nativist, Mudde added, and a number of the administration’s early policies, including [the travel ban](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/02/trump-travel-ban-court/516066/) and the creation of [an office](http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/28/politics/donald-trump-voice-victim-reporting/) focused on crimes committed by undocumented immigrants, could be as well.

Asked whether Trump qualifies as a nativist, Kaufmann focused on Trump’s supporters rather than the man himself. He cited [findings](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/02/more-warmth-for-trump-among-gop-voters-concerned-by-immigrants-diversity/) that Americans who were worried about immigrants threatening U.S. values and eroding the white majority in the United States were more likely to enthusiastically back Trump during the campaign. Kaufmann interprets Trump’s “Make America Great Again” nationalism as less about reasserting American power in the world than “about restoring a kind of cultural particularism and identity.” Trump’s core supporters, in Kaufmann’s view, are “people who feel that they’ve become disoriented culturally,” not people who are alarmed by a loss of American prestige overseas.

Still, Trump is the leader of the Republican Party, not some small, European-style nativist party, Ivarsflaten points out. “He can’t really reinvent the whole Republican ideology through a nativist lens.” She also suggested that Trump isn’t so much an ideologue as a blank canvas onto which others project ideologies. The president’s decision to bomb the Syrian military for using chemical weapons against civilians, for example, [seems to represent](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/on-syria-which-trump-will-win-out/522261/) a victory for traditional Republican internationalists over the Bannonite wing of the Trump administration, though the triumph might prove temporary. It’s also [difficult to square](http://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/steve-bannon-is-losing-to-the-globalists) Trump the America-First nativist with Trump the globe-trotting businessman.

“I have no idea what the ideological lens of Donald Trump is actually,” Ivarsflaten said. “You tell me.”

**So what if Trump is a nativist?**

One reason Donald Trump’s presidency is so momentous is that, if he is indeed a nativist, he would be one of the first of his ilk to come to power in the West since 1980. In a [2012 paper](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/Immigration-Nativism.pdf) on nativism in Europe and North America, Mudde observed that in the rare instances in which nativist parties had been part of government—in European countries such as Austria, Italy, and Switzerland—they had played a significant role in introducing restrictive immigration policies. But the story was different in the United States and Canada.

“In the United States,” Mudde wrote at the time, “nativist actors have had indirect effects on policy at best, as the nativist voices within the Republican Party, for example, have not made it into prominent positions in government.” The closest America had come to having a viable nativist party, Mudde noted, was with Pat Buchanan’s Reform Party in the 2000 presidential election. (Buchanan’s [slogan](http://www.npr.org/2017/01/21/510877650/trump-vows-policy-vision-of-america-first-recalling-phrases-controversial-past)? “America First!”)

Now nativism, conceived in the United States and revived in Europe, has returned with force to its native land.

“Nativism is the core feature of the radical right today,” Mudde told me, and the other ideological dimensions of contemporary radical-right politicians—like populism and authoritarianism—tend to pass through a nativist filter. In terms of populism, he said, “the elite is considered to be corrupt because it works in the interest of the non-natives or it undermines the native group.” In terms of authoritarianism, which emphasizes the enforcement of law and order, “crime is almost always linked” to outsiders. While nativist movements have long argued that immigrants pose a multifaceted threat to the culture, security, and economic well-being of natives, Mudde writes in his 2012 paper, in the post-9/11 era the cultural and security threats have become intertwined with religion. “Increasingly the immigrant is seen as a Muslim, not a Turk or Moroccan,” he notes.

[Some studies](http://arxiv.org/pdf/1612.00270v2.pdf) indicate that as levels of immigration to a country rise, so does support for nativist, radical-right politicians. But Mudde [contends](http://file/Users/ufriedman/Downloads/Immigration-Nativism%20(3).pdf) that the connection is more complicated than that: It’s not sufficient for the ranks of the foreign-born in a nation to swell; immigration also has to be *turned into* a political issue. It has to be [made visible](http://file/Users/ufriedman/Downloads/Immigration-Nativism%20(3).pdf) to a large part of the population. He pointed out that labor-migration flows to Western Europe [increased](http://oecdobserver.org/news/archivestory.php/aid/337/Immigration_in_the_European_Union:_problem_or_solution_.html) in the years before the 1973 oil crisis, but that immigration wasn’t politicized there until the 1980s and ’90s, when asylum-seekers [flocked](http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/08/02/number-of-refugees-to-europe-surges-to-record-1-3-million-in-2015/) to the region, efforts to integrate immigrants and their children into society and the labor market [sputtered](https://www.nuffield.ox.ac.uk/politics/papers/2006/ivarsflaten_CPSforthcoming.pdf), and radical-right parties like the National Front in France began achieving political success.

Trump, for his part, rose to power at a time when more Mexican immigrants [were leaving](http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/11/19/more-mexicans-leaving-than-coming-to-the-u-s/) than arriving in the United States, and when the number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. [was flatlining](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/03/5-facts-about-illegal-immigration-in-the-u-s/). “This doesn’t mean that Trump [made] people xenophobic or nativist,” Mudde said. “A large portion of the population everywhere in the world is nativist.” But those people might have based their vote in previous elections on other issues. When a politician manages to shift the debate to matters of security and immigration, it can change how people vote.

Nativists, like populists, “raise some important questions,” Mudde said. “The argument that borders should be controlled” shouldn’t be controversial, “and it’s definitely not undemocratic. It’s the democratic right of a state and its population to decide who can come in [to the country] and under which conditions.”

But nativists, like populists, give “highly problematic” answers, according to Mudde. “Populism sees the people as one and pure. Nativism sees the people as one in a cultural, ethnic, predetermined sense. And that nation doesn’t exist. The nation is changing virtually on a daily basis.” This singular vision threatens a central component of liberal democracies like the United States: pluralism, which holds that society is composed of different groups with different interests that must all be considered legitimate.

Yet what is *also* legitimate, according to Kaufmann, is for people to try and shore up their ethnic group’s culture and share of the population, so long as they are open to processes like assimilation and intermarriage. He cited the contrast that the Brookings scholar Shadi Hamid [has made](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2016/11/18/theres-no-good-or-bad-america/?utm_term=.b540cd68502f) between racism and racial self-interest. “There is an important distinction between disliking other groups, treating them badly, or seeking some kind of racial purity, all of which would be dangerous and things that I think you’d call racism, from racial self-interest, which could be just trying to maintain the vitality of your group and even perhaps seeking for your group not to decline,” Kaufmann said. “If the majority feels that it can’t express those views without being tarred as racist, I’m not sure that’s a good state of affairs.”

Kaufmann referenced [a poll](https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/racial-self-interest-is-not-racism/) he helped conduct showing that 73 percent of white Hillary Clinton voters say a white American who wants to reduce immigration to maintain his or her group’s share of the population is being racist, while only 11 percent of white Trump voters agree. (A similar but narrower difference was observed between white British “Remain” and “Leave” voters in the United Kingdom’s recent referendum on the European Union.) “There’s a much wider definition of racism among Clinton voters and a much narrower definition among Trump voters,” Kaufmann told me.

Nativism is currently gaining traction across the Western world because ethnic majorities are [under demographic pressure](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/11/opinion/campaign-stops/the-rage-of-white-christian-america.html), Kaufmann explained. Fertility rates are falling, which, in aging societies, creates a need for immigration. (This is the dynamic the Republican congressman Steve King recently referred to in his [widely condemned](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/13/us/politics/steve-king-babies-civilization.html) [tweet](https://twitter.com/SteveKingIA/status/840980755236999169?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.washingtonpost.com%2Fnews%2Fpolitics%2Fwp%2F2017%2F03%2F12%2Frep-steve-king-warns-that-our-civilization-cant-be-restored-with-somebody-elses-babies%2F) that “culture and demographics are our destiny” and that “we can’t restore our civilization with somebody else’s babies.”) And the message from political leaders, Kaufmann said, is often, “‘If you’re the majority, you’re kind of the past. And you’ve got to embrace diversity.’ The subtext of that is, ‘You’re shrinking.’”

If politicians want to blunt the appeal of nativism, Kaufmann argued, they need to highlight the successes of assimilation—the signs of continuity and not just change—and tone down the diversity talk (he believes this rhetoric about multiculturalism is in part responsible for people [overestimating the size](https://www.theguardian.com/society/datablog/2016/dec/13/europeans-massively-overestimate-muslim-population-poll-shows) of minority populations in their country). They need to reassure ethnic majorities that they have a future and offer a vision of what that future might look like.

Leaders of liberal democracies are accustomed to discussing the rights of minorities, not the rights of majorities. But now they’re being forced to rethink that approach. “[F]rom Belgium to Norway and from Spain to Denmark, countries are debating what the rights and duties of the host population and immigrants are, with an increasing emphasis on the duties of the immigrants,” Mudde wrote in 2012.

“If the government is exclusively governing on behalf of the ethnic majority … that’s problematic,” Kaufmann said. “But that doesn’t mean that ethnic-majority concerns have no value. … [Many liberals say], ‘The ethnic majority—they’ve got the state, so we can just focus on ethnic-minority rights. But if the state defines itself as neutral and [as] a civic-liberal state, that’s not really a state for the ethnic majority. [Members of the ethnic majority] also continue to have cultural and demographic interests. If they don’t see those being represented, then you might see this movement toward populism.”

The key question posed by the rise of nativism at a time of demographic upheaval, according to Kaufmann, is “What is the future of ethnic-majority communities in the West?” The question isn’t “Who are we as a nation-state?” he said. It’s “Who are we as an ethnic majority?” It’s not, What does it mean to be British or American? It’s, What does it mean to be *white* British or *white* American?