

# Nativists are populists and not liberals

Along with the growth of populist and anti-system parties there has been an explosion in academic research on how to categorise them. **Ben Margulies** argues that there is not a simple dichotomy between liberalism and populism. Since liberalism requires a commitment to a full range of principles, such as universal rights and anti-racism, nativist parties are also not liberals, even if they sometimes defend their policies with reference to liberal norms.



Anti-asylum demo led by Alternative for Germany leaders, Berlin. Picture: [James Rea](#), via [\(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0\)](#)

We live in The Age of Populism™. According to some commentators, this age is the successor to the liberal epoch that began with the demise of the Soviet Union and which, Francis Fukuyama [promised us](#), would last forever. As a result, political theorists and scientists tend to contrast and counterpoise populism and liberalism as diametrically opposed concepts. Liberalism believes in pluralism, constitutionalism, the rule of law and minority rights, while populism believes in a Manichean world-view and the will (or tyranny) of a united majority. However, an excessive focus on the liberal-populist dichotomy risks miscategorising political parties and actors. Not being 'liberal' does not automatically make a party 'populist', and not being 'populist' does not make a party liberal.

I first developed an interest in this subject when I observed that many parties that Cas Mudde classified as '[populist radical-right](#)' in fact claimed to be defending certain liberal institutions, rights and principles. Marine Le Pen's Front National (FN) claimed to be defending France's republican and secular traditions; Geert Wilders portrayed himself as the defender of Dutch liberties and tolerance against the Islamic threat. [I concluded](#) that these populists were in fact adopting these liberal stances out of electoral necessity, and that theirs was a 'bounded' or 'instrumental' liberalism, which existed mainly to a) define outgroups and b) demean them, creating a hierarchical order. This is similar to Roger Griffin's idea of an '[ethnocratic liberalism](#)' and Benjamin Moffitt's idea of an '[illiberal liberalism](#)'.

My thoughts on this matter diverge from those of Takis S Pappas. In 2016, Pappas published [an article](#) in the *Journal of Democracy* describing the main threats to liberal, constitutional democracy. He classified these as:

**Antidemocrats**, which 'wish to delegitimise representative democracy's normative foundations and subvert its legal-institutional structures' (24);

**Populists**, which 'have the specific characteristics of being at once democratic *and* illiberal' (28–29);  
and

**Nativists**, which support 'political liberalism *for the natives*'; that is, they believe in the liberal community of equal citizens with equal rights and plural interests, and they believe in constitutionalism, but only so far as they apply to members of the existing national community (27). Parties falling under the nativist rubric include the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ); the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV); the Danish People's Party (DF);

Norway's Progress Party (FrP); the Sweden Democrats (SD); the Finns (PS, formerly known as the True Finns); the Swiss People's Party (SVP); UKIP; ... the ...Alternative for Germany (AfD)' and the Front National under Marine Le Pen (27).

It is here that Pappas and I depart. In my *Journal of Democracy* [response](#), I challenge Pappas's classification schema on three grounds. Firstly, his categories are not sufficiently well-defined to be exclusive. Pappas's 'antidemocratic' category includes organisations like the British National Party or the Belgian Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang. However, both of these parties have also claimed at different times to be defending liberal values; the Vlaams Belang actually suggested deporting Muslim immigrants who didn't accept said values.

Secondly, 'nativist' parties are not especially liberal even towards members of the national community. Front National local governments regularly cut off funding to civil society groups they dislike; the Austrian Freedom Party sues its critics for libel and calls for sanctions against those Austrians who criticise Austria while abroad.

Finally, there is the instrumental nature of 'nativist' liberalism. Now, it is certainly possible to be a liberal and hold illiberal opinions, or favour certain hierarchies. Before World War II, [liberals often embraced](#) 'scientific' racism or 'liberal' imperialism. Liberals may genuinely fear that outsiders pose a danger to liberal values, and adopt a '[Schmittian liberalism](#)' that infringes individual liberty in defence against the imagined threat. Liberals may even be simply hypocritical or immoral (as Jordan Peele so [incisively argued](#)).

But there is a difference between an imperfect liberal and a nativist. Perhaps the greatest is in their approach to the concepts of *individualism* and *essentialism*. [Arun Kundnani](#) distinguished between a 'liberal Islamophobia' and a 'conservative Islamophobia' in his book *The Muslims Are Coming!* The key difference was that, while liberals tended to fear that *individual* Muslims might become radicalised by ideology, conservatives saw Muslims as uniformly hostile to Western values, and threatening so long as they remained Muslim.

With Pappas's 'nativists', we see that the purpose of liberal rhetoric is not to celebrate liberty, but to exclude and demean Muslims, whose individuality is usually denied. A Danish People's Party MEP stated after 9/11 that 'there was no real difference between ordinary Muslims and the 9/11 terrorists', while Wilders' PVV called for a blanket ban on Islamic schools and immigration from Muslim-majority countries. Islam is simply an undifferentiated, hostile mass, to be defended against and demeaned, creating the thick friend-enemy distinctions and hierarchical, domineering relationships that are intrinsic not to liberalism, but to conservatism.

In his [response](#) to my critique, Pappas argues that his nativists are not 'populists'. This can be proved, *inter alia*, by their commitment to 'constitutional legality', their rejection of people-elite cleavages, and by the fact that they 'do not encourage polarisation in the ways that populists do' (151). I do not agree with these specific arguments: many nativists do in fact speak in terms of people-elite cleavages, as [Ruth Wodak](#) and others point out in detail.

One can define liberalism and populism in such a way that they are opposites, and do so entirely accurately. But any such classification is narrow in scope: it only reflects partisan differences on questions of constitutionalism, majority versus minority rights, and the nature of political competition (pluralist versus Manichean people-elite struggles). Constitutionalism and pluralism are important parts of liberalism, but they are not their be-all and end-all – such a narrow definition ignores liberal commitments to universalism, to the sanctity and will of the individual, to egalitarianism and anti-racism.

Many non-populist actors do not automatically accept such commitments, or many other central commitments of liberalism like secularism. The Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland is not populist, but it is not liberal either. Many young democracies or competitive authoritarianisms provide excellent examples of illiberal non-populist parties that compete in elections and accept constitutionalism, from the Unión Demócrata Independiente in Chile and the Colorados in Paraguay to Golkar in Indonesia.

Populism may be a 'thin-centred ideology', and it is easy to define a party by its tendency to cast politics as a fight against elites. But liberalism is not 'thin-centred' – it has many principles and commitments, not all of which can be opposed to 'populism'. A party that accepts constitutionalism, but not equality, is not liberal. A party that accepts multiple parties and interest groups, but demeans Muslims as bad in essence, is not liberal. It might have been before World War II, when racism was 'scientific' and imperialism was thought a vehicle of progress, but not by any modern definition.

Adopting a scheme like Pappas's risks creating a simplistic typology that mirrors the populists' own binary opposition between 'elite parties' and 'the people' that only the populists embody. We live in an increasingly complex world, and part of the reason populism has won such purchase is because many populists promise to radically simplify that world precisely by excluding those outside the 'nation'. As academics and scholars, we gain nothing by joining in this trend.

*This article represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. It is an adaptation of his article ['Nativists are Populists, not Liberals'](#), published in the *Journal of Democracy*, *Journal of Democracy* 29:1 (2018).*

**Follow the debate:** This is one article in a debate on the distinctions between populism, nativism and liberalism, which also includes an [article by Takis S Pappas](#), also published today.

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### About the author



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