

Nativists, racists and other nasty people?

Understanding who populists are and what they really want



The rise of national populism continues to be a core theme in European politics, but have mainstream politicians and commentators still failed to grasp who populists are and what they want? Drawing on a new book, co-authored with Matthew Goodwin, [Roger Eatwell](#) argues that viewing populist movements as expressions of nativism or racism is highly problematic. There needs to be a greater understanding of the views of populist supporters, coupled with an open and frank debate about how immigration stands to influence European societies in the decades to come.

In his September 2018 final State of the Union address, Jean-Claude Juncker warned of a growing 'unhealthy nationalism', 'riddled with both poison and deceit'. In his sights were parties like the French National Rally (formerly National Front), the Italian League, the Alternative for Germany, the 'Freedom Parties' in Austria and the Netherlands, the Sweden Democrats, the Danish People's Party, Fidesz in Hungary and Law and Justice in Poland. All these parties share a common feature: they are widely damned as exclusionary 'nativists' and/or 'racists', even latter-day 'fascists'.

In our new book [National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy](#), Matthew Goodwin and I argue that both nativism and racism can be problematic terms in the context of contemporary European and American politics, while the fascist tag is inappropriate for this family of parties (though not extremist ones like the Greek Golden Dawn). 'Nativist' was coined in 19th century America to refer to those who sought to restrict new immigration to just Protestants, but today the term is typically used to refer to anyone who raises questions about the need for extensive new immigration and/or who seeks to defend national culture and traditions. The term 'racist' entered common usage in the 20th century, initially referring to the belief that the world was divided into hierarchically ordered races (a view for a time reinforced by racial science), and to a belief in dangerous Jewish conspiracies. Today the scholarly focus is more on a widespread 'new racism', which is based on allegedly irreconcilable cultural differences, together with 'institutional' and 'implicit' racism that do not require any conscious bias or prejudice.

Whilst national populists are linked by their 'thin' nationalist and populist ideologies, if we look at specific examples of their discourse and policies we find notable differences. In Central and Eastern Europe it is still possible to find clear traces of anti-Semitism and anti-Roma sentiment, together with a nativist defence of culture in parties such as Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's Law and Justice, which rules in a country where well over 90 per cent of people claim Polish nationality. The latter is a major reason why both have resisted EU efforts to distribute refugees since the arrival in Southern Europe of large numbers from the Middle East and beyond after 2014.

In contrast, whilst we can occasionally find old-style racist comments from prominent West European national populists, opposition to new immigration now focuses far more on the need to match new arrivals with skill shortages. A growing concern has also been the perceived dangers of Muslim immigration, which has led to widespread charges of Islamophobia and the claim that national populists fail to distinguish between Muslims and Islamists. Certainly their language can be alarmist, but they also pose legitimate questions about Islam's attitudes to issues like gay rights, female equality and the separation of church and state, issues which relate to interpretations of culture not pseudo-scientific racial typologies. Thus, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands attacks 'atavistic' and 'totalitarian' Islam in the name of Dutch equality and freedom, but ethnic minorities like Indonesians have not been subject to collective attack by his Party for Freedom. The party is also not anti-Semitic and strongly supports Israel, with about 10 per cent of Jews voting for it in the 2017 general election.



Marine Le Pen, speaking during a debate on Brexit in the European Parliament, Credit: © European Union 2016 – European Parliament (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Turning to the views of national populist voters generally, although a minority wear the racist badge with pride, we find that large numbers reject the white supremacism and narrow ethnic nationalism that is often associated with them by critics. In Western Europe and the US, few seek to restrict immigration to those who would immediately fit into the dominant culture, though fears about Islam are widespread and many seek to restrict the welfare rights of new economic migrants (a policy which has helped national populists appeal to former social democratic voters in countries like Denmark and Sweden, where such budgets have been under strain).

Moreover, many of the issues raised by national populists address larger questions, such as the importance of a sense of belonging and community in the face of often unprecedented rates of ethnic change. Some European countries have close to, even a higher, percentage of foreign-born population than the US, ranging from 11-17 per cent in Austria, Sweden, Britain, Germany, France and the Netherlands, while in France the number of Muslims is projected to rise from 9 to 17 per cent by 2050. Surveys show that across Europe and the US overwhelming majorities say that they feel strongly attached to their nation (an average of 82 per cent). It is, therefore, hardly surprising that many are concerned about the implications of growing hyper-diversity, and linked issues such as maintaining the trust which is so central to stable political and social life.

But mainstream politicians and commentators typically show little empathy for such feelings. To take two notable examples: in 2006 David Cameron derided supporters of the rising United Kingdom Independence Party as ‘fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists’, while during the 2016 Presidential campaign Hillary Clinton dismissed half of Donald Trump’s supporters as ‘a basket of deplorables’, people whose views were ‘racist, sexist, homophobic, Islamophobic – you name it’. These comments reveal much about the elitism of the contemporary mainstream politicians, which helps drive the populist side of national populism. Indeed, there is evidence that charges of ‘racism’ alienate the many national populists who see themselves as motivated by legitimate concerns, rather than bias and hatred.

Although the national populist revolt is driven by far more than concerns about ethnicity and immigration, our main argument in this context is that there needs to be a greater understanding of the views of most of its supporters. In particular, there needs to be an open and frank debate about the size and type of immigration which is acceptable, and how this will affect the nation and different communities, including ethnic minorities, in decades to come.

For more information, see the author’s book, [National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy](#) (co-authored with Matthew Goodwin)

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics.

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