



FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

[Home](#) > Why Nationalism Works

Tuesday, February 12, 2019 - 12:00am

Why Nationalism Works

And Why It Isn't Going Away

Andreas Wimmer

ANDREAS WIMMER is Lieber Professor of Sociology and Political Philosophy at Columbia University and the author of *Nation Building: Why Some Countries Come Together While Others Fall Apart*.

Nationalism has a bad reputation today. It is, in the minds of many educated Westerners, a dangerous ideology [1]. Some acknowledge the virtues of patriotism, understood as the benign affection for one's homeland; at the same time, they see nationalism as narrow-minded [2] and immoral, promoting blind loyalty to a country over deeper commitments to justice and humanity. In a January 2019 speech to his country's diplomatic corps, German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier put this view in stark terms: "Nationalism," he said, "is an ideological poison."

In recent years, populists across the West have sought to invert this moral hierarchy [3]. They have proudly claimed the mantle of nationalism, promising to defend the interests of the majority against immigrant minorities and out-of-touch elites. Their critics, meanwhile, cling to the established distinction between malign nationalism and worthy patriotism. In a thinly veiled shot at U.S. President Donald Trump, a self-described nationalist, French President Emmanuel Macron declared last November that "nationalism is a betrayal of patriotism."

The popular distinction between patriotism and nationalism echoes the one made by scholars who contrast "civic" nationalism, according to which all citizens, regardless of their cultural background, count as members of the nation, with "ethnic" nationalism, in which ancestry and language determine national identity. Yet efforts to draw a hard line between good, civic patriotism and bad, ethnic nationalism overlook the common roots of both. Patriotism is a form of nationalism. They are ideological brothers, not distant cousins.

At their core, all forms of nationalism share the same two tenets: first, that members of the nation, understood as a group of equal citizens with a shared history and future political destiny, should rule the state, and second, that they should do so in the interests of the nation. Nationalism is thus opposed to foreign rule by members of other nations, as in colonial empires and many dynastic kingdoms, as well as to rulers who disregard the perspectives and needs of the majority.

Over the past two centuries, nationalism has been combined with all manner of other political ideologies. Liberal nationalism ^[4] flourished in nineteenth-century Europe and Latin America, fascist nationalism triumphed in Italy and Germany during the interwar period, and Marxist nationalism motivated the anticolonial movements that spread across the “global South” after the end of World War II. Today, nearly everyone, left and right, accepts the legitimacy of nationalism’s two basic tenets. This becomes clearer when contrasting nationalism with other doctrines of state legitimacy. In theocracies, the state should be ruled in the name of God, as in the Vatican or the caliphate of the Islamic State (or ISIS). In dynastic kingdoms, the state is owned and ruled by a family, as in Saudi Arabia. In the Soviet Union, the state was ruled in the name of a class: the international proletariat.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the world has become a world of nation-states governed according to nationalist principles. Identifying nationalism exclusively with the political right means misunderstanding the nature of nationalism and ignoring how deeply it has shaped almost all modern political ideologies, including liberal and progressive ones. It has provided the ideological foundation for institutions such as democracy, the welfare state, and public education, all of which were justified in the name of a unified people with a shared sense of purpose and mutual obligation. Nationalism was one of the great motivating forces that helped beat back Nazi Germany and imperial Japan. And nationalists liberated the large majority of humanity from European colonial domination.

Nationalism is not an irrational sentiment that can be banished from contemporary politics through enlightening education; it is one of the modern world’s foundational principles and is more widely accepted than its critics acknowledge. Who in the United States would agree to be ruled by French noblemen? Who in Nigeria would publicly call for the British to come back?

With few exceptions, we are all nationalists today.

THE NATION IS BORN

Nationalism is a relatively recent invention. In 1750, vast multinational empires—Austrian, British, Chinese, French, Ottoman, Russian, and Spanish—governed most of the world. But then came the American Revolution, in 1775, and the French Revolution, in 1789. The doctrine of nationalism—rule in the name of a nationally defined people—spread gradually across the globe. Over the next two centuries, empire after empire dissolved into a series of nation-states. In 1900, roughly 35 percent of the globe’s surface was governed by nation-states; by 1950, it was already 70 percent. Today, only half a dozen dynastic kingdoms and theocracies remain.

Where did nationalism come from, and why did it prove so popular? Its roots reach back to early modern Europe. European politics in this period—roughly, the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries—was characterized by intense warfare between increasingly centralized, bureaucratic states. By the end of the eighteenth century, these states had largely displaced other institutions (such as churches) as the main providers of public goods within their territory, and they had eliminated or co-opted competing centers of power, such as the independent nobility. The centralization of power, moreover, promoted

the spread of a common language within each state, at least among the literate, and provided a shared focus for the emerging civil society organizations that were then becoming preoccupied with matters of state.

Europe's competitive and war-prone multistate system drove rulers to extract ever more taxes from their populations and to expand the role of commoners in the military. This, in turn, gave commoners leverage to demand from their rulers increased political participation, equality before the law, and better provision of public goods. In the end, a new compact emerged: that rulers should govern in the population's interests, and that as long as they did so, the ruled owed them political loyalty, soldiers, and taxes. Nationalism at once reflected and justified this new compact. It held that the rulers and the ruled both belonged to the same nation and thus shared a common historical origin and future political destiny. Political elites would look after the interests of the common people rather than those of their dynasty.

Why was this new model of statehood so attractive? Early nation-states—France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States—quickly became more powerful than the old dynastic kingdoms and empires. Nationalism allowed rulers to raise more taxes from the ruled and to count on their political loyalty. Perhaps most important, nation-states proved able to defeat empires on the battlefield. Universal military conscription—invented by the revolutionary government of France—enabled nation-states to recruit massive armies whose soldiers were motivated to fight for their fatherland. From 1816 to 2001, nation-states won somewhere between 70 and 90 percent of their wars with empires or dynastic states.

As the nation-states of western Europe and the United States came to dominate the international system, ambitious elites around the world sought to match the West's economic and military power by emulating its nationalist political model. Perhaps the most famous example is Japan, where in 1868, a group of young Japanese noblemen overthrew the feudal aristocracy, centralized power under the emperor, and embarked on an ambitious program to transform Japan into a modern, industrialized nation-state—a development known as the Meiji Restoration. Only one generation later, Japan was able to challenge Western military power in East Asia.

Nationalism did not spread only because of its appeal to ambitious political elites, however. It was also attractive for the common people ^[5], because the nation-state offered a better exchange relationship with the government than any previous model of statehood had. Instead of graduated rights based on social status, nationalism promised the equality of all citizens before the law. Instead of restricting political leadership to the nobility, it opened up political careers to talented commoners. Instead of leaving the provision of public goods to guilds, villages, and religious institutions, nationalism brought the power of the modern state to bear in promoting the common good. And instead of perpetuating elite contempt for the uncultured plebs, nationalism elevated the status of the common people by making them the new source of sovereignty and by moving popular culture to the center of the symbolic universe.

THE BENEFITS OF NATIONALISM

In countries where the nationalist compact between the rulers and the ruled was realized, the population came to identify with the idea of the nation as an extended family whose members owed one another loyalty and support. Where rulers held up their end of the bargain, that is, citizens embraced a nationalist vision of the world. This laid the foundation for a host of other positive developments.

One of these was democracy, which flourished where national identity was able to supersede other identities, such as those centered on religious, ethnic, or tribal communities. Nationalism provided the answer to the classic boundary question of democracy: Who are the people in whose name the government should rule? By limiting the franchise to members of the nation and excluding foreigners from voting, democracy and nationalism entered an enduring marriage.

At the same time as nationalism established a new hierarchy of rights between members (citizens) and nonmembers (foreigners), it tended to promote equality within the nation itself. Because nationalist ideology holds that the people represent a united body without differences of status, it reinforced the Enlightenment ideal that all citizens should be equal in the eyes of the law. Nationalism, in other words, entered into a symbiotic relationship with the principle of equality. In Europe, in particular, the shift from dynastic rule to the nation-state often went hand in hand with a transition to a representative form of government and the rule of law. These early democracies initially restricted full legal and voting rights to male property owners, but over time, those rights were extended to all citizens of the nation—in the United States, first to poor white men, then to white women and people of color.

Nationalism also helped establish modern welfare states ^[6]. A sense of mutual obligation and shared political destiny popularized the idea that members of the nation—even perfect strangers—should support one another in times of hardship. The first modern welfare state was created in Germany during the late nineteenth century at the behest of the conservative chancellor Otto von Bismarck, who saw it as a way to ensure the working class' loyalty to the German nation rather than the international proletariat. The majority of Europe's welfare states, however, were established after periods of nationalist fervor, mostly after World War II in response to calls for national solidarity in the wake of shared suffering and sacrifice.

BLOODY BANNERS

Yet as any student of history knows, nationalism also has a dark side. Loyalty to the nation can lead to the demonization of others, whether foreigners or allegedly disloyal domestic minorities. Globally, the rise of nationalism has increased the frequency of war: over the last two centuries, the foundation of the first nationalist organization in a country has been associated with an increase in the yearly probability of that country experiencing a full-scale war, from an average of 1.1 percent to an average of 2.5 percent.

About one-third of all contemporary states were born in a nationalist war of independence against imperial armies. The birth of new nation-states has also been accompanied by some of history's most violent episodes of ethnic cleansing, generally of minorities that

were considered disloyal to the nation or suspected of collaborating with its enemies. During the two Balkan wars preceding World War I, newly independent Bulgaria, Greece, and Serbia divided up the European parts of the Ottoman Empire among themselves, expelling millions of Muslims across the new border into the rest of the empire. Then, during World War I, the Ottoman government engaged in massive killings of Armenian civilians. During World War II, Hitler's vilification of the Jews—whom he blamed for the rise of Bolshevism, which he saw as a threat to his plans for a German empire in eastern Europe—eventually led to the Holocaust. After the end of that war, millions of German civilians were expelled from the newly re-created Czechoslovakian and Polish states. And in 1947, massive numbers of Hindus and Muslims were killed in communal violence when India and Pakistan became independent states.

Ethnic cleansing is perhaps the most egregious form of nationalist violence, but it is relatively rare. More frequent are civil wars, fought either by nationalist minorities who wish to break away from an existing state or between ethnic groups competing to dominate a newly independent state. Since 1945, 31 countries have experienced secessionist violence and 28 have seen armed struggles over the ethnic composition of the national government.

INCLUSIVE AND EXCLUSIVE

Although nationalism has a propensity for violence, that violence is unevenly distributed. Many countries have remained peaceful after their transition to a nation-state. Understanding why requires focusing on how governing coalitions emerge and how the boundaries of the nation are drawn. In some countries, majorities and minorities are represented in the highest levels of the national government from the outset. Switzerland, for instance, integrated French-, German-, and Italian-speaking groups into an enduring power-sharing arrangement that no one has ever questioned since the modern state was founded, in 1848. Correspondingly, Swiss nationalist discourse portrays all three linguistic groups as equally worthy members of the national family. There has never been a movement by the French- or the Italian-speaking Swiss minority to secede from the state.

In other countries, however, the state was captured by the elites of a particular ethnic group, who then proceeded to shut other groups out of political power. This raises the specter not just of ethnic cleansing pursued by paranoid state elites but also of secessionism or civil war launched by the excluded groups themselves, who feel that the state lacks legitimacy because it violates the nationalist principle of self-rule.

Contemporary Syria ^[7] offers an extreme example of this scenario: the presidency, the cabinet, the army, the secret service, and the higher levels of the bureaucracy are all dominated by Alawites, who make up just 12 percent of the country's population. It should come as no surprise that many members of Syria's Sunni Arab majority have been willing to fight a long and bloody civil war against what they regard as alien rule.

Whether the configuration of power in a specific country developed in a more inclusive or exclusive direction is a matter of history, stretching back before the rise of the modern nation-state. Inclusive ruling coalitions—and a correspondingly encompassing nationalism—have tended to arise in countries with a long history of centralized, bureaucratic statehood. Today, such states are better able to provide their citizens with public goods. This makes them more attractive as alliance partners for ordinary citizens,

who shift their political loyalty away from ethnic, religious, and tribal leaders and toward the state, allowing for the emergence of more diverse political alliances. A long history of centralized statehood also fosters the adoption of a common language, which again makes it easier to build political alliances across ethnic divides. Finally, in countries where civil society developed relatively early (as it did in Switzerland), multiethnic alliances for promoting shared interests have been more likely to emerge, eventually leading to multiethnic ruling elites and more encompassing national identities.

BUILDING A BETTER NATIONALISM

Unfortunately, these deep historical roots mean that it is difficult, especially for outsiders, to promote inclusive ruling coalitions in countries that lack the conditions for their emergence, as is the case in many parts of the developing world. Western governments and international institutions, such as the World Bank, can help establish these conditions by pursuing long-term policies that increase governments' capacity to provide public goods, encourage the flourishing of civil society organizations, and promote linguistic integration. But such policies should strengthen states, not undermine them or seek to perform their functions. Direct foreign help can reduce, rather than foster, the legitimacy of national governments. Analysis of surveys conducted by the Asia Foundation in Afghanistan from 2006 to 2015 shows that Afghans had a more positive view of Taliban violence after foreigners sponsored public goods projects in their districts.

In the United States and many other old democracies, the problem of fostering inclusive ruling coalitions and national identities is different. Sections of the white working classes in these countries abandoned center-left parties after those parties began to embrace immigration and free trade. The white working classes also resent their cultural marginalization by liberal elites, who champion diversity while presenting whites, heterosexuals, and men as the enemies of progress. The white working classes find populist nationalism attractive because it promises to prioritize their interests, shield them from competition from immigrants or lower-paid workers abroad, and restore their central and dignified place in the national culture. Populists didn't have to invent the idea that the state should care primarily for core members of the nation; it has always been deeply embedded in the institutional fabric of the nation-state, ready to be activated once its potential audience grew large enough.

Overcoming these citizens' alienation and resentment will require both cultural and economic solutions. Western governments should develop public goods projects that benefit people of all colors, regions, and class backgrounds, thereby avoiding the toxic perception of ethnic or political favoritism. Reassuring working-class, economically marginalized populations that they, too, can count on the solidarity of their more affluent and competitive fellow citizens might go a long way toward reducing the appeal of resentment-driven, anti-immigrant populism. This should go hand in hand with a new form of inclusive nationalism. In the United States, liberals such as the intellectual historian Mark Lilla and moderate conservatives such as the political scientist Francis Fukuyama have recently suggested how such a national narrative might be constructed: by embracing both majorities and minorities, emphasizing their shared interests rather than pitting white men against a coalition of minorities, as is done today by progressives and populist nationalists alike.

In both the developed and the developing world, nationalism is here to stay. There is currently no other principle on which to base the international state system. (Universalistic cosmopolitanism, for instance, has little purchase outside the philosophy departments of Western universities.) And it is unclear if transnational institutions such as the European Union will ever be able to assume the core functions of national governments, including welfare and defense, which would allow them to gain popular legitimacy.

The challenge for both old and new nation-states is to renew the national contract between the rulers and the ruled by building—or rebuilding—inclusive coalitions that tie the two together. Benign forms of popular nationalism follow from political inclusion. They cannot be imposed by ideological policing from above, nor by attempting to educate citizens about what they should regard as their true interests. In order to promote better forms of nationalism, leaders will have to become better nationalists, and learn to look out for the interests of all their people.

Copyright © 2019 by the Council on Foreign Relations, Inc.

All rights reserved. To request permission to distribute or reprint this article, please visit [ForeignAffairs.com/Permissions](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/Permissions).

Source URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2019-02-12/why-nationalism-works>

Links

[1] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2008-03-02/us-and-them>

[2] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-05-29/nationalism-makes-bad-foreign-policy>

[3] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-01-20/jacksonian-revolt>

[4] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1994-05-01/defense-liberal-nationalism>

[5] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-04-16/national-identity-and-political-power>

[6] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2013-12-06/americas-social-democratic-future>

[7] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/interviews/2012-04-16/former-syrian-general-akil-hashem-uprising-syria>