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## Exchange

# HOW TO TELL NATIVISTS FROM POPULISTS

*Takis S. Pappas*

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When I wrote “The Specter Haunting Europe: Distinguishing Liberal Democracy’s Challengers” for the October 2016 issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, I had three aims. The first was to give an early and clear warning about the propensity—in academia, the press, and public discourse—to lump together disparate challengers to contemporary democracy under the ill-defined label of “populism.” My second aim was to distinguish democracy’s major internal challengers from one another by sorting them into a few mutually exclusive, jointly exhaustive, and empirically useful categories, which I specified as *populists*, *nativists*, and *antidemocrats*. My final aim was to press home the point that, just as each group of challengers has its own distinct set of characteristics, causes, normative assumptions, and practical consequences, each requires a different approach from democratic political leaders and policy makers.

Ben Margulies objects to my “populists, nativists, and antidemocrats” categorization on two grounds: First, he deems the boundaries between the three to be insufficiently clear. Second, he contends that nativist parties do not really espouse liberal values, either “ignoring” them or concealing opposition to them. “At best,” he proclaims, “nativist parties have a conflicted attitude toward liberal values; at worst, these parties deploy such values instrumentally to serve ethnonationalist and illiberal purposes.”

Margulies’s true objection, therefore, has nothing to do with whether antidemocrats and nativists are genuine challengers to liberal democracy (he and I agree that they are). Instead, his objection has to do with whether antidemocrats and nativists constitute political phenomena that

can be meaningfully distinguished from populism understood as equivalent to *democratic illiberalism*. In the end, Margulies advises against further conceptual and theoretical elaboration since, in his words, “[Pappas’s] nativists are just as populist as his populists.” Take this advice, though, and you are back to square one, where concepts are still blurred, categories hopelessly fuzzy, and data haphazardly collected—often failing to make any sense.

In what follows, I take a fresh approach to the conceptual, classificatory, and comparative theoretical issues put forward in my original essay, in an attempt to strengthen some of the points I made there. I begin by clearly demarcating the boundary between antidemocrats and democrats (nativists included) before I continue with the even more important distinction between nativists and populists. In the end, I hope to have fully clarified my analytical categories, thus rendering them conceptually distinct, empirically valid, and theoretically useful.

### Antidemocrats versus Nativists

Margulies writes that my distinction between antidemocrats and nativists “does not quite work in practice” since antidemocrats also “often claim to be defending liberal values.” Margulies is flatly wrong here: In fact, the evidence is overwhelmingly against the notion that antidemocratic parties claim to defend liberal values. This evidence, moreover, comes from authoritative sources—namely, courts of law in various countries that have decided cases on the basis of actual political deeds rather than trite verbal claims.

Recall that my category of “antidemocrats” includes parties that openly espouse fascism, neo-Nazism, racism, or orthodox communism. All these parties intend to delegitimize the normative foundations of representative democracy and to subvert its constitutional structures. When such antidemocratic parties have acted against political pluralism and constitutional legality, liberal democrats (including nativists) have taken the offensive against them, first and foremost through legal action. Consider the evidence provided by court decisions:

In France, former National Front (FN) leader Jean-Marie Le Pen has been repeatedly convicted of inciting racial hatred and denying the Holocaust. In 1997, the European Parliament stripped him of his parliamentary immunity so that a German court could try him for remarks (made while he was in Germany) that minimized the Holocaust. Le Pen was found guilty and fined in 1999.

In Belgium, an appeals court effectively banned the Vlaams Blok in 2004 for violating the country’s 1981 antiracism law.

In Britain, the British National Party’s then-leader, Nick Griffin, received in 1998 a fine and suspended jail sentence for inciting racial hatred. Several other senior party figures have faced criminal charges.

In Hungary, Jobbik saw one of its affiliates (the paramilitary Magyar Guard) dissolved by the Budapest Tribunal in 2009 for threatening the constitutional rights of minorities.

In Greece, the leader and some senior members of the openly fascist Golden Dawn party were arrested on suspicion of involvement in a 2013 murder. Their trial began in 2015, and continues as of this writing in December 2017.

In Germany, portions of the leftist party known as Die Linke remain under the legal surveillance of domestic-intelligence authorities charged with protecting the country's "basic democratic order."

In the Czech Republic, the Senate in 2008 formally asked the Supreme Administrative Court to dissolve the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia on the grounds that its political program does not disown violence and is therefore unconstitutional.<sup>1</sup>

Even this cursory review shows that whatever their denials, parties and party leaders can be officially deemed hostile to liberal democracy and even found guilty in court of violating liberal-democratic norms. Such findings demarcate a class of clearly antidemocratic parties that can be distinguished from all those parties that accept the democratic system. There is no ambiguity about that.

### Nativists versus Populists

If the distinction between antidemocrats and nativists works perfectly well in practice even if we merely ask whether or not a party complies with democratic constitutional legality, when it comes to sorting nativists from populists, the situation grows more complicated. The difficulty lies in explaining their contrasting relations with liberalism.

Many people, including Margulies, think of liberalism as a set of supranational "universal values [that are] the common heritage and right of all humanity." For my part, I see liberalism in a way that is perhaps more mundane, but easier to perceive empirically and to measure across time and space. In my view, a party counts as "liberal" if it *a*) acknowledges that modern society is divided by many, often cross-cutting, cleavages; *b*) strives to bridge those cleavages by promoting political moderation, consensus, and negotiated agreements; and *c*) is manifestly committed to the rule of law and the protection of minority rights.

Illiberal populist parties, by contrast, will *a*) see the ostensible cleavage between "ordinary people" and "the elites" as the only one that matters; *b*) reject compromise; and *c*) dismiss minorities and disregard institutional legality while favoring raw majoritarianism.

Why should we categorize nativist parties as "liberal" rather than illiberal and populist? Margulies claims that nativists are *not* liberals, but instead "advocate authoritarian or repressive policies." For support, he cites a number of rather marginal incidents, including Jörg Haider's

libel suit against a professor, Geert Wilders's outlandish idea of selling the Netherlands Antilles, and the decision of an FN-controlled municipal government in France to cut funds that were being used to work with local Muslims. But surely the study of comparative politics cannot be based on a casual grab bag of scattered observations or incidents such as these. Instead, we need systematic comparisons in order to make full sense of things, to discern real differences, and ultimately to provide compelling and practical explanations.

On those principles, I will attempt in the remainder of this brief response to supplement my original contention that Europe's nativists "support liberalism for the natives." I will do this by providing extra empirical evidence for distinguishing nativist from populist parties. In honor of two great scholars, I call this approach "Linzian-Stepanian." Following a trail blazed by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, it seeks to study its units of analysis from several empirical vantage points.<sup>2</sup> Here, then, is a list of ten specific features, or conditions, which set the boundary line between nativists and populists.

First, *ideologically*, a nativist party will invariably stand on the conservative right, battling to conserve its country's ethnocultural identity. Such parties may drift farther right, but without violating constitutional legality. If they do violate it, they will by definition have become antidemocratic.

Second, *programmatically*, the nativists' appeal is based on specific right-wing policy packages, typically aimed at thwarting both immigration and further EU integration.

Third, *ideationally*, nativists reject the populist idea that society is ostensibly divided between "the people" and some elite. Instead, they conceive of their respective societies as having a certain cultural unity that is jeopardized by the arrival of aliens (be they East Europeans, Muslims, or migrants from the global South generally).

Fourth, *rhetorically*, nativists do not encourage polarization in the way that populists do. The latter exploit pent-up resentment at economic inequality, political exclusion, and social injustice in order to mobilize supporters. Nativist parties for the most part refrain from trying to rouse any "extra" mutual hostility within the community of natives.

Fifth, *electorally*, impeded as they are by large center-right parties, nativists find it impossible to win electoral majorities and govern single-handedly. With the sole exception of the Swiss People's Party (SVP), nativists are stuck in opposition or at best as junior partners in coalitions. And even junior-partner status is out of the question in France, Germany, and Sweden, where the center-right locks nativist parties completely out of government as a matter of course.

Sixth, *existentially*, nativist parties are programmatic and hence rise or fall with the specific policies that they espouse. If their desired policy goal is achieved (as with the U.K. Independence Party [UKIP] in 2016 when Brexit won), they will wane. If their program focuses on a current

issue, their fate will hinge on what happens in terms of that issue (consider the Alternative for Germany [AfD] and the refugee crisis there).

Seventh, *prospectively*, nativist parties do not tend to promise redemption—in the form of social justice, economic equality, the people’s sovereignty, or national independence from the EU. Moreover, unlike populists, they do not perceive politics as a battle between good and evil.

Eighth, *organizationally*, nativist parties are distinguished by their relatively weak and uncharismatic leaders, who can do little to stop factional conflicts and even open squabbling within party ranks. Leadership may well be collective (as in the SVP, the Finns, and the AfD); organizational structures may be weak or nonexistent (as in the Dutch Party for Freedom and the Sweden Democrats); and internal strife may flourish (as it does in the UKIP and the FN).

Ninth, *emblematically*, almost all nativist parties are led by members of their respective societies’ elites, whether college professors (Pim Fortuyn and Jörg Haider), a scion of a political family (Marine Le Pen), a corporate CEO (Switzerland’s Christoph Blocher), a City of London commodities trader (Nigel Farage), a former Goldman Sachs economist (Alice Weidel of AfD), or even a recipient of a Danish knighthood (Kristian Thulesen Dahl).

Tenth, *psychologically*, the comparative study of voting trends shows that the main thing uniting all nativist parties in a statistically significant way is their negative stance on immigration.<sup>3</sup> Nothing like this one master issue has so far been detected in the study of populist parties.

In closing, when using the comparative method in a systematic way, we find an abundance of indicators bespeaking a clear demarcation line between nativist and populist parties. Our neglect of such indicators betrays the unconscious ways in which our assumptions limit how we perceive changes in the world, including the rise of modern-day domestic dangers to liberal democracy.

## NOTES

1. The Czech Senate’s request was symbolic since by law only the cabinet can file such a motion with the Supreme Administrative Court.

2. Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). In this work, the authors held that young democracies, in order to demonstrate that they had become consolidated, had to meet conditions that obtained “behaviorally, attitudinally and constitutionally,” (p. 6 and *passim*).

3. See Elisabeth Ivarsson, “What Unites Right-Wing Populists in Western Europe? Re-Examining Grievance Mobilization Models in Seven Successful Cases,” *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (January 2008): 3–23. See also Matthijs Rooduijn, “What Unites Voter Bases of Populist Parties? Comparing the Electorates of 15 Populist Parties,” *European Political Science Review*, online 20 July 2017, Tables 1 and 2, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773917000145>.