

Immigration and the Social Construction of Race: Nativism and Identity Politics

SECTION ONE

How the 19th-Century Know Nothing Party Reshaped American Politics

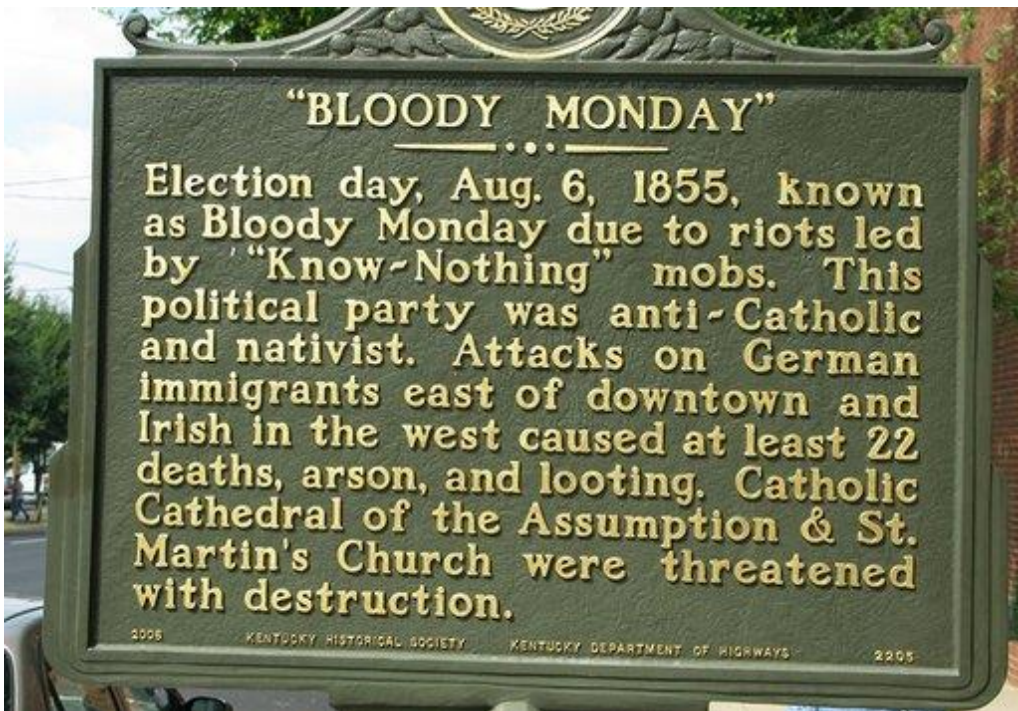
From xenophobia to conspiracy theories, the Know Nothing party launched a nativist movement whose effects are still felt today

By [Lorraine Boissoneault](#) / Smithsonian.com / 2017

SOURCE: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/immigrants-conspiracies-and-secret-society-launched-american-nativism-180961915/>

Like Fight Club, there were rules about joining the secret society known as the Order of the Star Spangled Banner (OSSB). An initiation rite called "Seeing Sam." The memorization of passwords

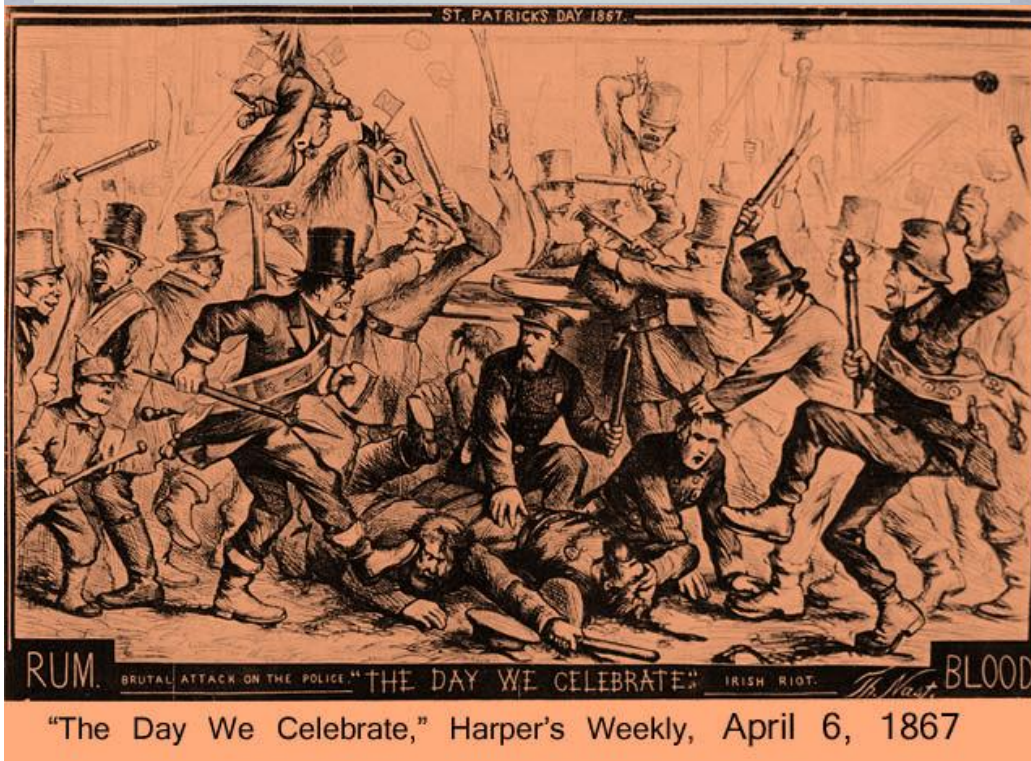
and hand signs. A solemn pledge never to betray the order. A pureblooded pedigree of Protestant Anglo-Saxon stock and the rejection of all Catholics. And above all, members of the secret society weren't allowed to talk about the secret society. If asked anything by outsiders, they would respond with, "[I know nothing.](#)"



So went the rules of this secret fraternity that rose to prominence in 1853 and transformed into the powerful political party known as the Know Nothings. At its height in the 1850s, the Know Nothing party, originally called the American Party, included more than 100 elected



Anti-immigrant cartoon showing two men labeled "Irish Whiskey" and "Lager Beer," carrying a ballot box



"The Day We Celebrate," Harper's Weekly, April 6, 1867

congressmen, eight governors, a controlling share of half-a-dozen state legislatures from Massachusetts to California, and thousands of local politicians. Party members supported deportation of foreign beggars and criminals; a [21-year naturalization period](#) for immigrants; mandatory Bible reading in schools; and the elimination of all Catholics from public office. They wanted to restore their vision of what America should look like with temperance, Protestantism, self-reliance, with American nationality and work ethic enshrined as the nation's highest values.

Know Nothings were the American political system's first major third party. Early in the 19th century, two parties leftover from the birth of the United States were the Federalists (who advocated for a strong central government) and the Democratic-Republicans (formed by Thomas Jefferson). Following the earliest



parties came the National Republicans, created to oppose Andrew Jackson. That group eventually transformed into the Whigs as Jackson's party became known as the Democrats. The Whig party sent presidents William Henry Harrison, Zachary Taylor and others

to the White House during its brief existence. But the party splintered and then disintegrated over the politics of slavery. The Know Nothings filled the power void before the Whigs had even ceased to exist, choosing to ignore slavery and focus all their energy on the immigrant question. They were the first party to leverage economic concerns over immigration as a major part of their



platform. Though short-lived, the values and positions of the Know Nothings ultimately contributed to the two-party system we have today.

Paving the way for the Know Nothing movement were two men from New York City. Thomas R. Whitney, the son of a silversmith who opened his own shop, wrote the magnum opus of the Know Nothings, [A Defense of the American Policy](#).

William "Bill the Butcher" Poole was a gang leader, prizefighter and butcher in the Bowery (and would later be used as inspiration for the main character in Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York*).

Whitney and Poole were from different social classes, but both had an enormous impact on their chosen party—and their paths crossed at a pivotal moment in the rise of nativism.

In addition to being a successful engraver, Whitney was an avid reader of philosophy, history and classics. He moved from reading to writing poetry and, eventually, political tracts. "What is equality but stagnation?" Whitney wrote in one of them. Preceded in nativist circles by [such elites](#) as author James Fenimore Cooper, Alexander Hamilton, Jr. and James Monroe (nephew of the former president), Whitney had a knack for rising quickly to the top of whichever group he belonged to. He became a charter member of the Order of United Americans (the precursor to the OSSB) and used his own printing press to publish many of the group's pamphlets.

Whitney believed in government action, but not in service of reducing social inequality. Rather, he believed, all people "[are entitled to such privileges](#), social and political, as they are capable of employing and enjoying rationally." In other words, only those with the proper qualifications deserved full rights. Women's suffrage was abhorrent and unnatural, Catholics were a threat to the stability of the nation, and German and Irish immigrants undermined the old order established by the Founding Fathers.

From 1820 to 1845, anywhere from 10,000 to 1000,000 immigrants entered the U.S. each year. Then, as a consequence of economic instability in Germany and a potato famine in Ireland,



those figures turned from a trickle into a tsunami. Between 1845 and 1854, [2.9 million immigrants](#) poured into the country, and many of them were of Catholic faith. Suddenly, more than half the residents of New York City were born abroad, and Irish immigrants comprised [70 percent of charity recipients](#).

As cultures clashed, fear exploded and conspiracies abounded. Posters [around Boston proclaimed](#), "All Catholics and all persons who favor the Catholic Church are...vile imposters, liars, villains, and cowardly cutthroats." Convents were said to hold young women against their will. An



"exposé" [published by Maria Monk](#), who claimed to have gone undercover in one such convent, accused priests of raping nuns and then strangling the babies that resulted. It didn't matter that Monk was discovered as a fraud; her book sold hundreds of thousands of copies. The conspiracies were so virulent that churches were burned, and Know Nothing gangs spread from New York and

Boston to Philadelphia, Baltimore, Louisville, Cincinnati, New Orleans, St. Louis and San Francisco.

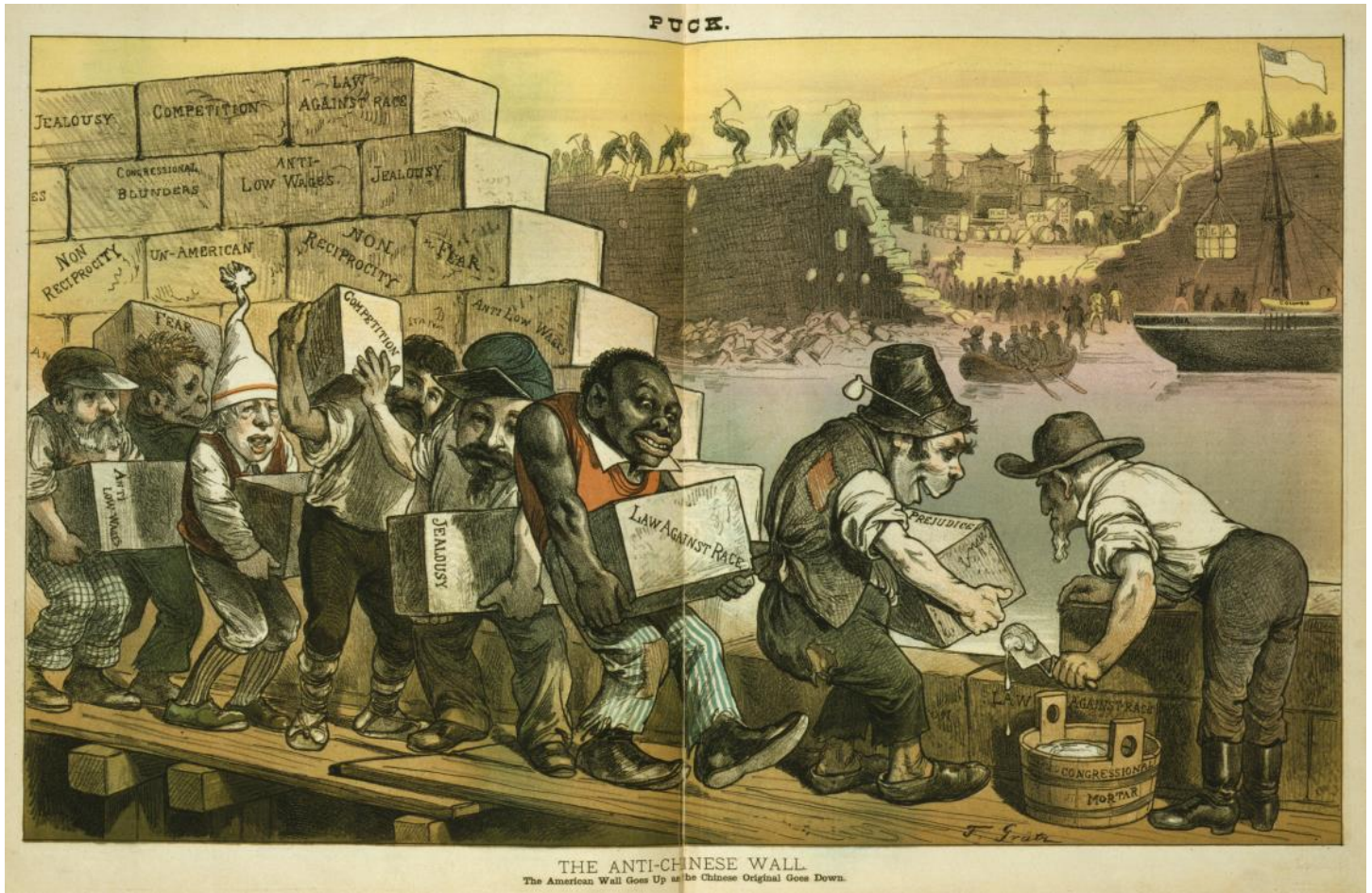
At the same time as this influx of immigrants reshaped the makeup of the American populace, the old political parties seemed poised to fall apart.

"The Know Nothings came out of what seemed to be a vacuum," says Christopher Phillips, professor of history at University of Cincinnati. "It's the failing Whig party and the faltering Democratic party and their inability to articulate, to the satisfaction of the great percentage of their electorate, answers to the problems that were associated with everyday life."

Phillips says the Know Nothings displayed three patterns common to all other nativist movements. First is the embrace of



nationalism—as seen in the writings of the OSSB. Second is religious discrimination: in this case, Protestants against Catholics rather than the more modern day squaring-off of Judeo-Christians against Muslims. Lastly, a working-class identity exerts itself in conjunction with the rhetoric of upper-class political leaders. As historian [Elliott J. Gorn writes](#), “Appeals to ethnic hatreds allowed men whose livelihoods depended on winning elections to sidestep the more complex and politically dangerous divisions of class.”



No person exemplified this veneration of the working class more than Poole. Despite gambling extravagantly and regularly brawling in bars, Poole was a revered party insider, leading a gang that terrorized voters at polling places in such a violent fashion that one victim was later reported to have a bite on his arm and a [severe eye injury](#). Poole was also the Know Nothings' first martyr.

On February 24, 1855, Poole was drinking at a New York City saloon when he came face to face with John Morrissey, an Irish boxer. The two exchanged insults and both pulled out guns. But before the fight could turn violent, police arrived to break it up. Later that night, though, Poole returned to the hall and grappled with Morrissey's men, including Lewis Baker, a Welsh-born immigrant, who shot Poole in the chest at close range. Although Poole survived for nearly two weeks, he died on March 8. The last words he uttered pierced the hearts of the country's Know Nothings: “Goodbye boys, I die a true American.”



Anti-Chinese cartoon published in a California labor union newspaper. Caption reads: "Why they can live on 40 cents a day.....and They can't."

Approximately 250,000 people flooded lower Manhattan to pay their respects to the great American. Dramas performed across the country changed their narratives to end with actors wrapping themselves in an American flag and quoting Poole's last words. An anonymous pamphlet titled *The Life of William Poole* claimed that the shooting wasn't a simple barroom scuffle, but an assassination organized by the Irish. The facts didn't matter; that Poole had been carrying a gun the night of the shooting, or that his assailant took shots to the head and abdomen, was irrelevant. Nor did admirers care that Poole had a prior case against him for assault with intent to kill. He was an American hero, "battling for freedom's cause," who sacrificed his life to protect people from dangerous Catholic immigrants.

On the day of Poole's funeral, a procession of 6,000 mourners trailed through the streets of New York. Included in their number were local politicians, volunteer firemen, a 52-piece band, members of the OSSB—and Thomas R. Whitney, about to take his place in the House of Representatives as a member of the Know Nothing Caucus.

Judging by the size of Poole's funeral and the Know Nothing party's ability to penetrate all levels of government, it seemed the third party was poised to topple the Whigs and take its place in the two-party system. But instead of continuing to grow, the Know Nothings collapsed under the



pressure of having to take a firm position on the issue the slavery. By the late 1850s, the case of [Dred Scott](#) (who sued for his freedom and was denied it) and the raids led by abolitionist [John Brown](#) proved that slavery was a more explosive and urgent issue than immigration.

America fought the Civil War over slavery, and the devastation of that conflict pushed nativist concerns to the back of the American psyche. But nativism never left, and the legacy of the Know Nothings has been apparent in policies aimed at each new wave of immigrants. In 1912, the House Committee on Immigration debated over whether Italians could be considered "[full-blooded Caucasians](#)" and immigrants coming from southern and eastern Europe were considered "[biologically and culturally less intelligent.](#)"

From the end of the 19th century to the first third of the 20th, [Asian immigrants were excluded](#) from naturalization based on their non-white status. "People from a variety of groups and affiliations, ranging from the Ku Klux Klan to the

Progressive movement, old-line New England aristocrats and the eugenics movement, were among the strange bedfellows in the campaign to stop immigration that was deemed undesirable by old-stock white Americans," writes sociologist [Charles Hirschman](#) of the early 20th century. "The passage of immigration restrictions in the early 1920s ended virtually all immigration except from northwestern Europe."

Those debates and regulations continue today, over refugees from the Middle East and immigrants from Latin America.

Phillips's conclusion is that those bewildered by current political affairs simply haven't looked far enough back into history. "One can't possibly make sense of [current events] unless you know something about nativism," he says. "That requires you to go back in time to the Know Nothings. You have to realize the context is different, but the themes are consistent. The actors are still the same, but with different names."

SECTION TWO

What Is a Nativist? And is Donald Trump one?

[Uri Friedman](#) 2017 / The Atlantic

SOURCE: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/what-is-nativist-trump/521355/>

To understand the ideas shaping the Trump administration, the political scientist Cas Mudde [once told me](#), you have to understand populism, authoritarianism, and nativism, because Donald Trump “fires on all three cylinders.” I’ve previously explored the definitions of [populism](#) and [authoritarianism](#). But what is nativism? How is it different from “[nationalism](#)” or “[patriotism](#)”—words that the alleged nativists themselves typically use to describe their ideology? Is Trump, the man



who [just ordered](#) air strikes against a foreign leader for attacking people in a foreign country, really a nativist? And why, when it would seem to raise valid questions about the rights of natives versus non-natives, does nativism have such negative associations?

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 portrayed](#) 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.

Europeans tend to talk about “ultra-nationalism” or “xenophobia” or “racism” rather than nativism, said Mudde, who is Dutch. But this language, in his view, doesn't fully capture the phenomenon, which “isn't just a prejudice [against] non-natives” but also “a view on how a state should be structured.”

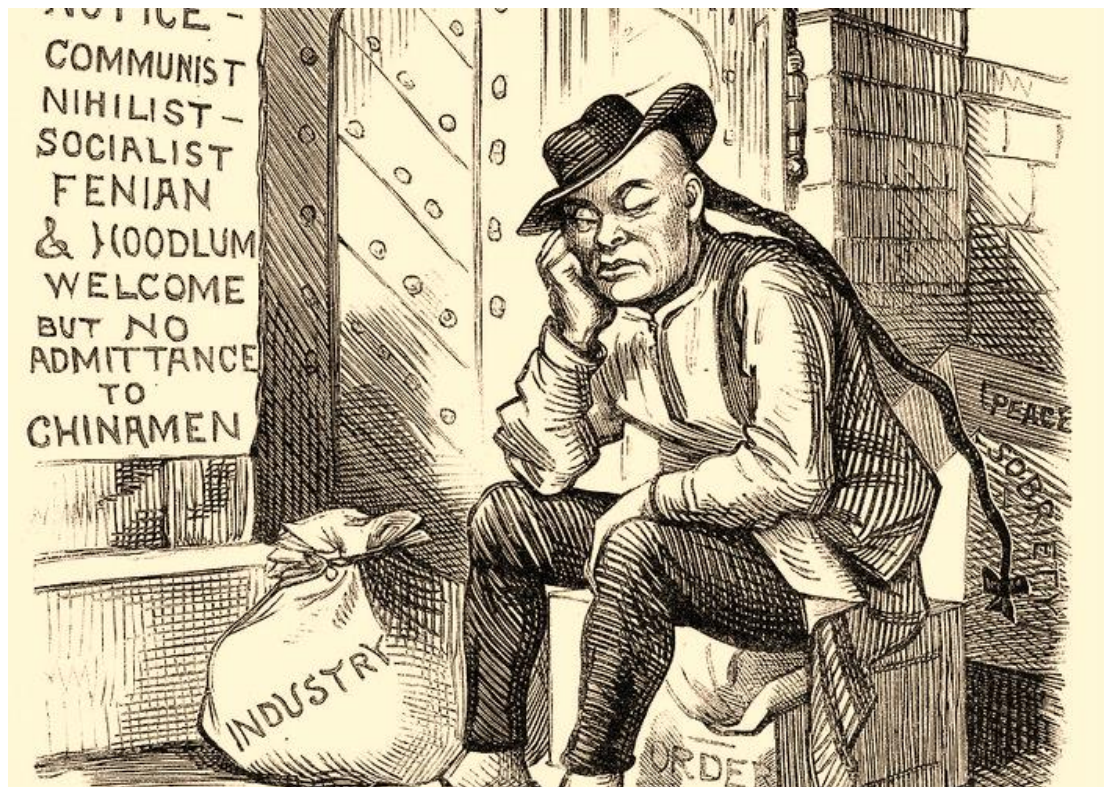
Nativism, Mudde told me, is “xenophobic nationalism.” It is “an ideology that wants congruence of state and nation—the political and the cultural unit. It wants one state for every nation and one nation for every state. It perceives all non-natives ... as threatening. But the non-native is not only people.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

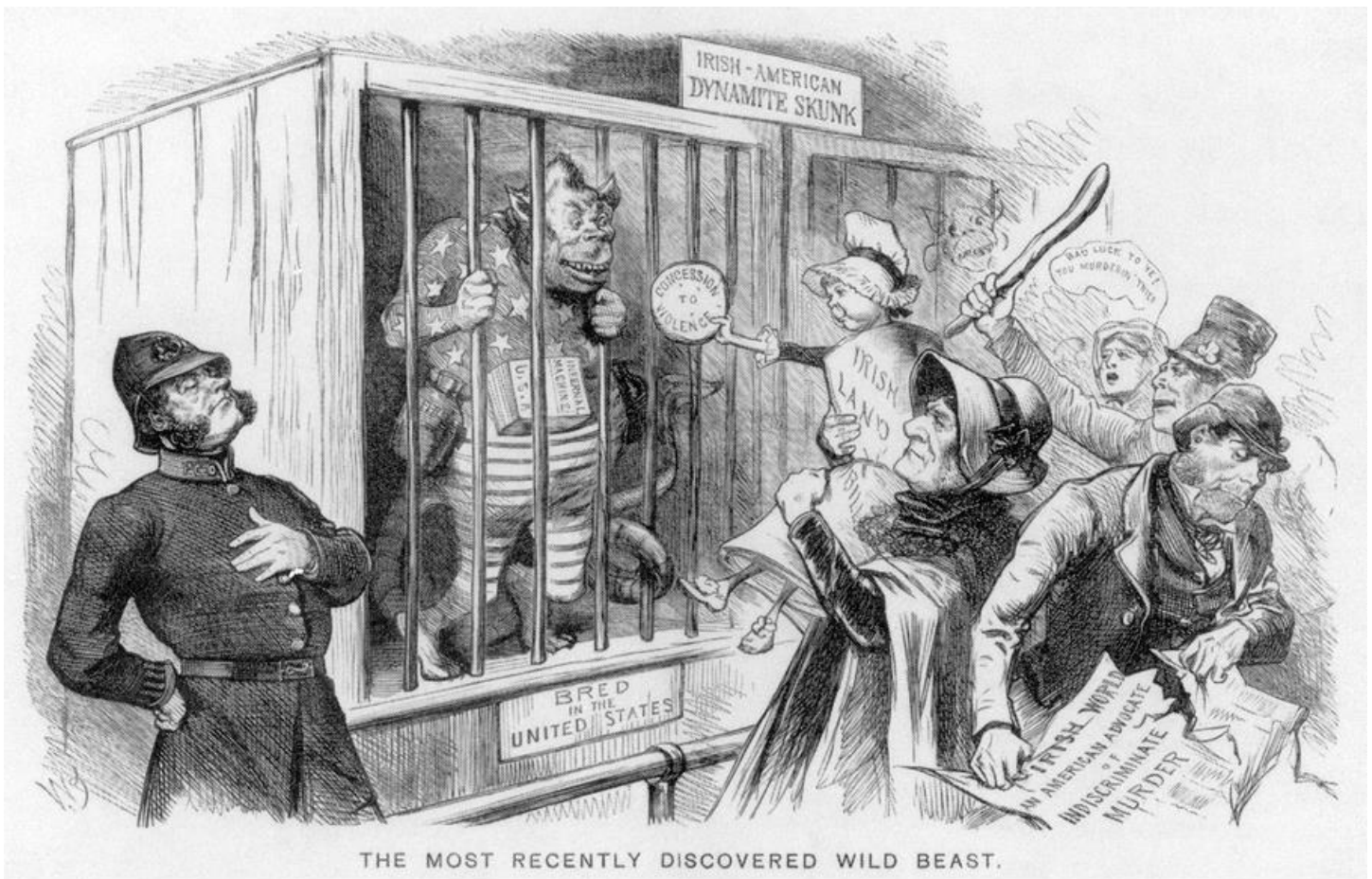
Eric Kaufmann, a political scientist at the University of London's Birkbeck College, calls nativism a “crude” term and prefers something more precise: “majority-ethnic nationalism,” which applies to people who

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](#) 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](#) on representing the virtuous "people" against a corrupt "elite." She [has found](#) 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](#) 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](#) and [Attorney General Jeff Sessions](#),

could be described as nativist, Mudde added, and a number of the administration's early policies, including [the travel ban](#) and the creation of [an office](#) 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](#) 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](#) a victory for traditional Republican internationalists over the Bannonite wing of the Trump administration, though the triumph might

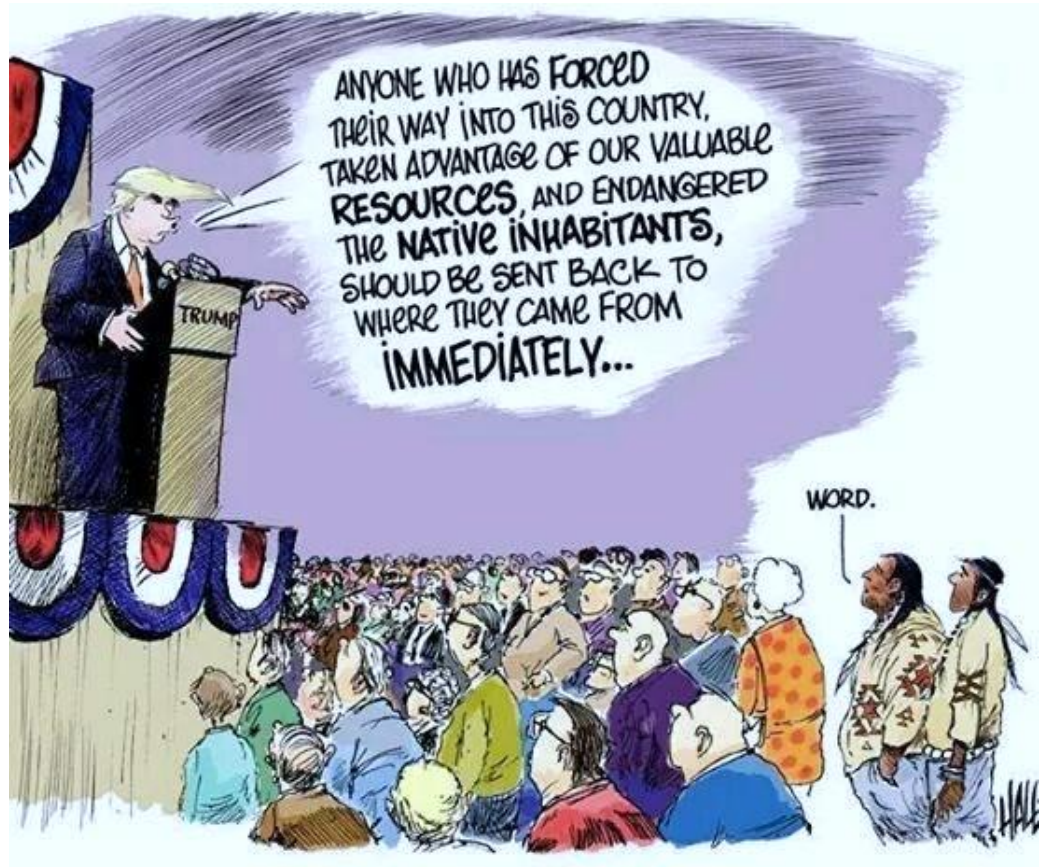
prove temporary. It's also [difficult to square](#) Trump the America-First nativist with Trump the globe-trotting businessman.

"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](#) 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](#)? "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](#) indicate that as levels of immigration to a country rise, so does support for nativist, radical-right politicians. But Mudde [contends](#) 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](#) to a large part of the population. He pointed out that labor-migration flows to Western Europe [increased](#) in the years before the 1973 oil crisis, but that immigration wasn't politicized there until the 1980s and '90s, when asylum-seekers [flocked](#) to the region, efforts to integrate immigrants and their children into society and the labor market [sputtered](#), 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](#) than arriving in the United States, and when the number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. [was flatlining](#). "This doesn't mean that Trump [made] people xenophobic or nativist," Mudde said. "A

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?

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](#) 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](#) 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](#), 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 tweet](#) 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](#) 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."

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