

## What makes nativists and populists distinct?

*With the growth of insurgent political parties that challenge the status quo, scholars are presented with a dilemma about how to categorise them. Takis S Pappas argues that nativist and populist parties are two distinct categories, and offers a set of criteria for classification.*



Marine Le Pen in the European Parliament. Picture: [European Parliament](#), via [\(CC BY-NC-ND 2.0\)](#)

The recent surge of various challenges to democracy in Europe has presented scholars, policy makers, journalists and other pundits with an empirical muddle. As we now try to make sense of Europe's fast-changing political landscape, we are faced with the following predicament: still lacking well-defined concepts and, therefore, unable to classify our empirical cases into mutually exclusive, jointly exhaustive, and empirically useful categories, the tendency is to lump together disparate challengers to contemporary democracy under the ill-defined 'populism' label. Yet, at the end, the result is data misgathering and the comparison of nonequivalent units under the erroneous assumption that they are equivalent. This amounts to wasteful research. It also eludes sensible responses to the various challengers.

In this short essay, I put forward the point that not all challengers to contemporary representative democracy are the same. And leaving apart those who explicitly militate against it (such as, for instance, Greece's Golden Dawn neo-Nazi party), I aim to provide a clear, empirically based differentiation between two other major party groups that are often treated as belonging in the same analytical category: populists and nativists. Who are they?

In the group of **populists**, I include the currently ruling Fidesz in Hungary; both leftist Syriza and rightist Independent Greeks (ANEL), which form Greece's coalition government; Poland's Law and Justice (PiS); Slovakia's Direction-Social Democracy (SMER-SD); and Spain's opposition Podemos, among a few other minor parties.

The group of **nativist** parties is larger and among its most important representatives one finds Austria's Freedom Party (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); the UK Independence Party (UKIP); the more recent Alternative for Germany (AfD); as well as the Italian League (La Lega), which is currently undergoing a transformation from regionalist and secessionist into a purely nativist party.

How are those two groups of parties distinct? I have identified ten specific characteristics, or conditions, which set a clear boundary line between nativists and populists. As my distinctions are based on empirical evidence, my hope is to lift the curse of misclassification for good, suggesting instead more meaningful categories of challenger parties, which in turn promises to open up important areas of robust comparative research.

1. **Ideologically**, nativist parties stand invariably on the conservative right, battling to conserve their countries' ethno-cultural identity, which they believe is threatened by modernity itself. They occasionally drift to the 'far' or 'extreme' right, but without violating constitutional legality. If they do, they have already turned into antidemocrats.
2. **Programmatically**, the nativists' appeal is based on specific right-wing conservative policy packages, specifically about anti-immigration policies and how to thwart further EU integration. Note, in passing, that all nativists' foes are either allegedly illiberal (such as the non-Christian heathen) or faultily liberal (for example, Polish or Greek economic migrants).
3. **Ideationally**, nativists discard the populist idea that society is ostensibly divided between 'the people' and some elite. Instead, they conceive their respective societies as culturally unified wholes (communities of native autochthons), whose unity is threatened by alien heterochthons, such as Muslims, illiberal Eastern Europeans or poor Southerners.
4. **Rhetorically**, nativists are not generally intent on using a socially and politically polarising discourse. Unlike populists, who exploit accumulated social resentment from economic inequality, political exclusion and social injustice to generate polarisation, nativist parties stick for the most part to their programme and, in general, refrain from causing extra adversity among natives.
5. **Electorally**, impeded as they are by liberal conservative forces, the nativists find it impossible to win electoral majorities and govern singlehandedly. Post-electorally, too, although in some cases nativist parties have been allowed into coalition governments as junior partners (and in the cases of SVP and Austria's FPÖ as major ones), the mainstream parties still forbid such coalitions (as shown by the cases of the Swedish SD, the French FN and the German AfD).
6. **Existentially**, being the programmatic parties that they are, the nativists' fate is intricately linked with the specific policies they espouse. There are two possibilities: if their policy programmes are achieved (as with anti-EU UKIP and the 2016 Brexit referendum), they are bound to disappear; if their programmes pertain to ongoing political issues, their fortunes will depend on developments related to such issues.
7. **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. Nor do they, unlike the populists, perceive politics as a battle between the moral and principled forces of good and those of corrupt and wrongful evil.
8. **Organisationally**, nativist parties are distinguished by their relatively weak – and certainly non-charismatic – leadership, factional conflicts and even open infighting. In many cases, leadership is collective rather than individual (as in SVP, the Finns and AfD), organisation structures are either nonexistent or hardly working (as in PVV or SD) and internal strife is conspicuous (as in the FN and UKIP, among others).
9. **Emblematically**, almost all nativist parties are led by members of their respective societies' elites: renowned university professors (Pim Fortuyn and Jörg Haider); a scion of political family (Marine Le Pen); a CEO (Christoph Blocher of Switzerland's SVP); a commodities trader in the City of London (Nigel Farage); an investment banking economist at Goldman Sachs (Alice Weidel of AfD), and even a recipient of the order of knighthood in Denmark (Kristian Thulesen Dahl).
10. **Psephologically**, as shown by the comparative study of trends in voting, the foremost characteristic uniting all nativist parties in a statistically significant way is their negative stance against immigration. No such specific characteristic, or group of characteristics has so far been detected in the study of populist parties.

In closing, when using the comparative method in a methodical and systematic way, we find an abundance of indicators that speak of a clear demarcation line between nativist and populist parties. Our neglect of such indicators betrays the unconscious ways we still perceive changes in the real world, and prevents us from distinguishing between the modern-day dangers to liberal democracy.

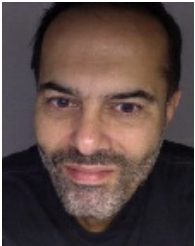
---

*This article represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. It is an adaptation from two previous works by the author: 'The Specter Haunting Europe: Distinguishing Liberal Democracy's Challengers,' Journal of Democracy, 27:4 (2016); and 'How to Tell Nativists from Populists,' published in the 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 Ben Margulies](#), also published today.

---

### About the author



**Takis S. Pappas** is an independent scholar studying comparative politics. His books include *Populism and Crisis Politics in Greece* (2014), *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession* (2015; coedited with Hanspeter Kriesi), and *On the Tightrope: National Crises and Brinkmanship in Greece from Trikoupis to Tsipras* (2017, in Greek).

---

### Similar Posts

- [Book Review | Other People's Politics: Populism to Corbynism by J.A. Smith](#)
- [Book Review | The New Populism: Democracy Stares into the Abyss by Marco Revelli](#)
- [Populist politicians on both sides of the Atlantic are plundering history for persuasive purposes](#)
- [Book Review | This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality by Peter Pomerantsev](#)
- [Do populist-leaning citizens support direct democracy?](#)