

Nativism as a Recurring Reaction to Immigration in US Democracy

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Introduction: Nativism in the 2016 Primary Contest

One of the more interesting features about the 2016 Republican primary was the degree of “anger” reported by Republican Primary voters. Much of the anger, generally directed at “The Establishment” was rooted in the apparent inability of a very conservative congress elected in the wave election of 2010 to push through a nebulous and ill-defined “conservative” agenda despite a substantial majority in the US House of Representatives and a slim majority in the US Senate. This “anger” was also tinted with frustration about the continuing weakness of the US economy following the Great Recession.

This “anger” unwittingly acknowledged the institutional failures of the US system of representative democracy, based on majoritarianism and its inability to serve a mobilized and motivated minority: Despite the majorities in the branches of the Legislature, the executive was constitutionally able to check the passion of the population, and the Court was constitutionally able to advance an agenda which ran counter to the will of these conservative activists. Conservative expectations, which had been repeatedly hyper-elevated during the first half-decade by right-wing radio and cable news pundits, were dashed upon the rocks of institutional checks of that popular passion, and by late 2015, it was clear that many on the political Right had “had enough.” Bucking conventional wisdom, millions of Americans were prepared to support candidates which spoke and acted as if their only goal was to blow the entire system up.

This frustration among voters led to the rather large turnout among the electorate during the primary contest in 2016, most especially on the Republican side of the political spectrum. Some would say that the record turnout was due to Trump’s participation in the contest, and there was some evidence to support this idea (Dinan, 2016). But others were quick to point out that trends among the American electorate, structural features which have nothing to do with candidates, such as the sheer number of options which activated many previously alienated voters, as well as choices made by State party officials to change the dates of their primaries to make their votes more relevant were also driving factors behind turnouts (Bush, 2016). The response of large numbers of voters to long-standing frustration and the populist rhetoric which stoked more anger and frustration in its wake, was to back Donald J. Trump in 2016 who implicitly promised to “blow the system up” by becoming the leader of that system, and these voters did not experience any sort of cognitive dissonance over this apparent contradiction. In doing so, a feedback loop was created which amplified fringe messaging over traditional messaging from the Republican Party, and became a platform for nativist appeals.

This feedback loop was deliberately created by “populist” frontrunners on the Right. It tapped directly into a deep well of distrust of foreigners and anger at what has been repeatedly characterized as a “broken immigration process”. Most importantly, this loop has strong overtones of nativism. Trump’s rhetoric, specifically, took on overtones of nativism and xenophobia very early in his campaign. In June 2015, he announced his candidacy with a speech which included the following words:

“When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best... They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people... It’s coming from more than Mexico. It’s coming from all over South and Latin America,

and it's coming probably— probably— from the Middle East. But we don't know. Because we have no protection and we have no competence, we don't know what's happening. And it's got to stop and it's got to stop fast." (Trump, "Presidential Announcement," 2015)

From there, Trump went on to promise: to build a wall between the US and Mexico, and make Mexico pay for it (Trump, "Immigration Reform," 2015), to force China to quit devaluing its currency and deploy the US Navy to the South China Sea to signal to China that "the US is back in the global leadership business"(Trump, "Reforming US-China Trade," 2015) and to deport 11 million undocumented immigrants from the US, and to ban Muslims from entering the US, "...until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on" (Trump "Muslim Immigration," 2015). What is important to note is that Trump's main rival during the final months of the 2016 nomination contest, Texas Senator Raphael "Ted" Cruz-- himself the son of a US citizen and a Cuban immigrant-- essentially agreed with many of these proposals (see, e.g., Bendery, 2016) and therefore offered no significant alternative to the nativist message coming from the front of the GOP pack. The nativist rhetoric used by both the Republican frontrunners virtually ensured that nativism would be a major campaign theme in the 2016 General election, and will therefore be a major force in Republican Party politics for years to come.

Why did nativism and distrust of immigrants suddenly gain traction in the 2016 election? What does the adoption of this ideology among populist politicians and their supporters in the electorate mean for the future of the Republican Party, and the US as a whole? To find answers to these questions, one need only briefly review the history of nativism in the United States. Doing so reveals that the turn against immigrants and toward nativism is a regularly recurring theme in the history of US democracy. We can also notice that from an historical perspective, those groups that adopt nativism soon disappear from the political scene in the US. But socially speaking, nativism is a tool of opportunistic demagogues who seek to stoke the fear and apprehension of people who suffer from unmet expectations. Nativism is a social problem which is a product of the democratic process itself.

In this chapter, I will first discuss what nativism is, specifically in the context of the United States of America. Then I will recount the history of nativism among American voters throughout our 225 year history. Finally, I will draw parallels between historical nativist movements and the most recent example in 2016, and suggest some possible vectors for future development of the movement. In all, this chapter will demonstrate that the 2016 episode of nativism is more or less a response to unmet expectations following the financial crisis of 2008 and the election of the nation's first black President, but that if history is any indication, it will ultimately backfire on its practitioners and adherents in a way which will ensure more, not less openness to immigration and socially progressive policy in the US.

Theories of Nativism: Distrust and Unmet Expectations

Nativism, for the purposes of this discussion, is defined as "the active opposition to new immigrants and the changes they bring to the larger society" (Burghart and Zeskind, 2012). Within this definition, there are several key points which conceptually separate nativism from racism and xenophobia, though these two concepts are often undercurrents in nativism. In nativism, the focus is on *new* immigrants: the new immigrants could hypothetically come from the same country of origin as the nativist's own ancestors, and would therefore be of the same "race" and maybe even the same ethnicity or nationality, but the opposition to late arrivals is

what defines nativism. It is therefore, not correct to say that nativists are opposed to immigration, nor do they have any problem with the fact that their own ancestors were immigrants. They are actually opposed to *new arrivals*.

Additionally, the opposition is not necessarily based on a fear of foreigners who remain “at home” or the cultural and ethnic characteristics of foreigners, but on their arrival here and the changes which will result in the inevitable mixing of the culture of the recently arrived and the native population. Because of these important distinctions, it is not appropriate to confuse nativists with racists and xenophobes: A nativist may very well be a racial supremacist and/or have an enduring hatred or fear of those things which are foreign, but it is also possible that a nativist merely seeks to protect what s/he has from change which s/he believes will adversely affect his or her life.

We must also be very careful when using the term “nativism” itself, because this term is loaded with meaning and connotation. When we talk about nativism, we implicitly raise the matching questions about “Who is the native?” and “Who is the outsider?” More importantly, we must also ask what is the native culture, how did it get that way, and who decides this? To answer these questions, it is important to remember that culture itself is constructed by those who live it. What is “American” in 2016 has a completely different set of cultural characteristics than those belonging to people living in the 19th Century. Whether nativists wish to acknowledge it or not, our “culture” is the product of a nearly constant aggrandizement by people arriving from a different place. Nonetheless, nativists across the history of our country have asserted that 1) there is a specific “culture” in the US at any given time, and 2) recent arrivals who either will not conform to that culture, or those who have not had time and experience that would allow them to conform to it somehow diminish that “cultural experience” for those already living here. So while it may be very difficult for an outsider to nail down specifically what it is that nativists are attempting to defend, for the nativist, the thing they are attempting to protect is quite clear, and very real for them.

Nativism arises from lack of trust of people or groups which are perceived to be “outside” of the mainstream, as it is currently construed. Mutual identification and recognition of similar cultural traits aids in the building of trust between communities- the farther afield these characteristics between two groups are, the less likely the two groups are to trust one another (Crepaz, et al., 2014). This trust is important because it allows us to be at ease around those who we do not know personally: Trust leads to less anxiety among strangers. But this trust is an individual feature: An individual who tends to trust those like him or her more than those who are not part of his or her own group tends to be more inclined to adopt nativism. Conversely, those who tend to trust outsiders as much or more than member of their own group tend to be less inclined toward nativism. Another way to see this concept is a strong “particularized trust” in those who share many of the same cultural traits, or a more “generalized” type of trust in people who may or may not share the same cultural indicators: The particularized form of trust is indicative of high “in-group” trust, while the more generalized trust demonstrates high “outgroup” trust (Lei and Vesely, 2010).

This definition has important implications for nativism in an age of high uncertainty, both about domestic economic and social conditions and international insecurity being driven by militant religious groups with radical political motivations. We see that people who do not already possess strong outgroup trust tend to experience anxiety about people who are not “like them”. This anxiety stems from uncertainty: the social and cultural norms of the United States are rapidly changing around us, the economic outlook is no longer certain for large segments of

America's working poor, and terrorism and fanaticism is seemingly everywhere abroad. For those people who do not embrace the rapidity of the changes occurring, the turbulence can be disconcerting, and this can lead to great resentment and decreasing levels of trust among individuals toward people who do not look, act or think like them. It is this deep well of distrust that populist candidates tapped into during the 2016 primary contest when they opted to promote a nativist message and were in turn rewarded by voters.

When looking for the source of nativist appeals in society, it may be tempting to place the onus on economic hardship and dislocation associated with the regular boom-bust cycle of capitalism alone. Conventional wisdom and classic liberal economic theory holds that economic crises feeds nativism. According to the argument, during a contraction of the economy, a nativist appeal can be very attractive for a segment of the population which will be hurt most by increasing direct competition for fewer and fewer jobs (See, e.g., Goldstein and Peters, 2014; Rogowski, 1987).

A competing argument, however, which is borne out with empirical data consisting of actual voter behavior suggests that nationalist political appeals based on the fear of economic competition by themselves often fail to persuade native workers who see immigrant competition as suffering from the same set of circumstances that they are. When people believe that pain is being *shared* across society, rather than being borne disproportionately by themselves, the appeal of demagogues promoting a populist and nativist message tends to evaporate, because workers begin to see themselves as being "all in the same boat" (Bloom, 2012). But seeing this shared pain requires a sense of commonality, as well as the perception that the pain is indeed shared equally across all groups in society: if those two criteria are missing, the nativist appeal becomes more attractive.

Bearing this in mind, other data which demonstrates that perception of cultural assimilation or simply a prejudicial attitude toward immigrants has some bearing on an individual's susceptibility for nativist appeals (Goldstein and Peters, 5-6). The argument states that those who see a rapid and massive influx of new arrivals, bearing a culture which is seen to be either foreign or incompatible with the receiving society and who have not yet begun to assimilate into the larger society, will serve as a source of insecurity for the native population. This effect, which some argue overrides even economic competition, tends to be compounded further if the native population contains a strongly negative prejudice against the arriving population: if one is already prejudiced against other groups who are culturally distant from one's own group, their feelings of distrust and fear will be transferred onto all immigrant populations as well, who are viewed as being culturally distant as well. This effect would go to explain why, for example, some minority groups who have lived in the US for generations may nonetheless support nativism, even though they themselves might experience prejudice from the cultural majority (Dugan, 2015).¹

One other interesting feature of the strong ingroup trust is in willingness to participate in elections and expressed preference for adherence to laws: Those who are prone to nativism also tend to be more civically minded (Crepaz, *et al.*). Briefly, the GOP contest this year, which is marked by high nativism, also has record turnout among Republican primary voters. Donald Trump's candidacy was given most of the credit for the high turnout, but it is also just possible

¹ For example: the poll asks Latino respondents, half of whom said they were immigrants themselves, whether immigration has been good for the country, and 4 out of 5 said yes, but 1 in 5 said "no." Support for *increased* immigration among Latinos is only at 36%, while 21% of Latinos born in the US and 31% born outside the US reported said they wanted decreased levels of immigration.

that those who express nativist sympathies also have an affinity for using the existing process and institutions to protect the society that they view as being under threat (Dinan). In the 2016 primary contest, civic mindedness among nativist voters was expressed often as a view of strangers as “a threat to their way of life,” threats which clearly include functioning small-r republican government. Among groups targeted by nativists were refugees of the Syrian Civil War, who nativists opposed because Syrians held a culture which was believed to be completely incompatible with the American experience.

Civic-mindedness among nativists is also expressed through discussion of adherence to the law, specifically the preference among nativists for stronger immigration restrictions. In late March 2016, candidate Ted Cruz’ proposal to give law enforcement the power to patrol Muslim neighborhoods had the support of an astonishing 70 percent of Republicans, and 45 percent overall, according to a YouGov.com and Huffington Post survey of 1000 voters conducted following his statements to that effect (n.a., “Divide on Muslim,” 2016). A Pew Research Poll of 2254 voters taken a few days later showed that 84% of those who backed Trump and 64% of those voting for Cruz supported the building of a massive wall on the US-Mexico border to prevent overland immigration. 32% of Republicans overall supported the wholesale and unmitigated deportation of immigrants who are in the US illegally. Meanwhile, the vast majority- though certainly not all- of Democratic voters opposed these proposals (n.a., “Campaign Exposes”, 2016).

Nearly all the rhetoric surrounding the immigration debate in 2016 centered on securing both the US-Mexico border as well as a more virtual border which may potentially be crossed by political refugees from the Middle East. These calls referenced security threats from cartel-associated violence of Mexico’s drug war, potential terrorist infiltration via Mexico, or potential terrorist infiltration from Syria. During the 2016 campaign, both Cruz and Trump differentiated between immigrants who ostensibly followed the law and, in the words of Ted Cruz, “prioritize the interests and well-being of Americans”, and so-called “criminal immigrants”, for whom they advocate deportation (Cruz, 2016).

But it is also possible that much of the opposition, especially in US Border States has to do with resentment at having to offer people who are in the country illegally a path to acquisition of legal protections and benefits. For example, Texas and 25 other Republican-dominated States filed suit in Federal Court against President Barack Obama’s executive orders which would provide some 4 million immigrants a temporary legal status. The plaintiffs in this case argued that temporary legal status would make undocumented immigrants eligible for federal and state benefits. Texas claimed that legal status would make immigrants eligible for driver’s licenses, which Texas claims would cost them millions of dollars (Totenburg, 2016). Driver’s licenses being the least of the benefits legalized undocumented workers would hypothetically acquire, opponents of reform also worry that legalized immigrants with the vote might use it to expand access to programs like social security, Medicaid, public schooling and unemployment protection in states which have been trying for a long time to roll those programs back (Nowrasteh, 2015).

For the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the GOP campaign, there were no corresponding calls to secure the US “Border” from Western European immigration or other nations which are sending the US highly skilled immigrants. In fact, the Republican Party struggled to find a policy which simultaneously expanded the use of H-1B visas, which encourage immigration from wealthy and highly skilled populations, while ending immigration from lower skilled and poorer places in Latin America (Trujillo, 2015). Both Trump and Cruz at one time advocated for

the expansion of H-1B visas (Zillman, 2016), which are also favored by tech companies and other companies who are short on native high-skilled labor. But as soon as the campaign began, both front runners changed their position on H-1B visas to fit the nativist narrative that they had adopted, calling for reform in the system to protect American workers from foreign competition. Cruz even went so far as to require an advanced degree for visa consideration and a statement from the hiring companies that detailed the efforts to hire American workers first (Cruz).

One final explanation for the appeal of nativism has to do with a famous theory about unmet expectations and relative deprivation. In his classic work on revolutions, James Davies described a scenario where individuals have constantly rising expectations (Davies, 1962). They match these expectations with their actual experience. Overall, there is likely to be a gap between the improvement in their life that they expect and the improvement that they experience, but most of the time, this gap is “tolerable”. Revolution, according to Davies, occurs when there is a brief setback in the meeting of these expectations, though expectations continue to increase, and the gap between expectation and reality becomes “intolerable”. Combined with Vanneman and Pettigrew’s theory of relative deprivation, where a person perceives that his or her own group is unfairly doing worse than some other out group (Vanneman and Pettigrew. 1972), nativist appeals suddenly become very salient, and therefore the rational tool of populist politicians aiming to direct the “anger” expressed by many people toward the ballot box.

There were plenty of examples of this explosive combination in the 2016 Primary contest: Many voters, especially among the Republicans, saw society as both “stacked against” white, lower-educated working class people (which it possibly is) and as favoring social advancement of people who do not fit into the white working class, who do not share the values of the white working class, and in many ways do not look like the white working class. Those susceptible to nativist appeals also resented the even meager economic advancement of non-white workers, particularly immigrants, and the social advancement of women, low income black people, and the LGBT community. This combination of unmet expectations on the part of undereducated white workers and a sense of relative deprivation made support for Trump look, in many ways like a revolutionary movement, being led by Trump against the unspecified “Establishment” and seemingly single-mindedly focused on ending immigration from Mexico and the Middle East as the solution to all of America’s economic woes.

It would seem that this environment would lend itself to the rise of nativism. But as we will see in the next section, nativism has been one constant feature of the democratic system in the US: it has never gone away, but was merely subsumed under other, more pressing social and historical events. Nor is this particular episode of nativism a recent development: The wave of nativism we observed during the Primary Contests in 2016 began appearing in the Reagan Administration, was saved from oblivion by the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001, and moved formidably into the mainstream following the election of Barack Obama.

Case: Historical Nativism in the United States

As long as the US has existed, there has been a segment of the population, themselves inevitably the descendants of previous waves of immigrants, who resented new arrivals and sought to develop policy designed to limit or eliminate further immigration. Nativist appeals are older than the United States itself. Benjamin Franklin, the early US statesman, complained that Pennsylvania was being overrun by Germans, who could “never adopt our Language and Customs, any more than they could adopt our complexion” (Franklin, 1751). Later, Thomas Jefferson complained about the arrival of foreign “monarchists” who would influence American

legislation in the direction of absolutism and “render [legislation] into a heterogeneous, incoherent, distracted mess” (Jefferson, in Peterson 1977, 125). Both statements by such crucial members of the founding generation, and people who were thought to be both liberal and enlightened demonstrate the deep roots of nativism in the experience of the country. Both statements were made concerning recent arrivals to the country, and demonstrated a sort of fear of the anticipated change that new arrivals would bring to the character of the fledgling country.

The earliest anti-immigration measures, signed into law in 1798 by President John Adams, were the “Naturalization Act”, the “Alien Friends Act” and the “Alien Enemies Act”. These were more famously known as the “Alien and Sedition Acts”. These laws aimed to make it more difficult for a foreigner to become a citizen of the United States and gave the President the power to exclude, imprison and deport foreigners who were deemed to be “dangerous” to the government (National Immigration Forum, 2001). Ostensibly passed to enhance US national security during the early “Undeclared War” with France, some (then-Vice President Thomas Jefferson among them) also saw them as an effort to limit political opposition to the Federalist Party, and argued that the Government of the United States had no power to limit the migration of individuals nor to deport them, under the Constitution (Jefferson, 281-289). When Jefferson became President in 1801, he allowed the Naturalization and Alien Friends Act to expire, though the law for deportation of “enemies” of the country, known as the “Alien Enemies Act” remained on the books with some slight modification, and was used in later episodes of deportation of foreigners.

During the 1830s, the US experienced a massive influx of desperately impoverished immigrants from Catholic areas in Europe, specifically Ireland and Germany. Beginning in 1845, the Great Famine in Ireland, combined with various restrictive British land laws, drove nearly an eighth of the population out of Ireland, many of whom came to the United States: By the early 1850s, a quarter of the population of Boston was Irish. Land hunger was the main driving factor in German immigration during this period, though most Germans quickly moved off the east coast onto newly opened lands of the Louisiana Territory and the old Northwest.

Nativism was the response to the large influx of Catholics from Northern and Central Europe. Nativist and “anti-Papist” political organizations soon formed, arguing that the American culture was essentially protestant and the new arrivals owed their allegiance to the monarchical Pope in Rome rather than to the republican institution in Washington, a claim which echoed the sentiments of Thomas Jefferson. These Nativist organizations merged Protestantism with politics, and sought to generate exclusionary laws designed to protect an insecure population against forces over which they had no other form of control. The irony of this Nativist movement was that it occurred against a backdrop of Jacksonian populism: During Andrew Jackson’s administration, “the common man” was generally promoted, and the perceived leveling of American society masked a turbulent shift in the American economy from a largely land-based rural agricultural economy to a factory-based urban society in much of the North, while the south was being transformed from a largely small-farm subsistence agriculture economy to one dominated by cotton and heavily reliant on slavery.

One of the most significant critiques of immigration therefore was that foreign influences were coming to the US and served to undermine this rise of populism and shared identity among the white protestant population of the United States. Forgotten were the warnings about Germanization of the state of Pennsylvania and the “heterogeneous, incoherent, distracted mess” in Virginia caused by earlier waves of immigrants. The grand-children of those immigrants now sought to use the democratic institutions and traditions of the nation to exclude others who were

now coming for many of the same reasons that their grandparents did. The wave of anti-Catholic nativism which began in the 1830s as a result of Jacksonian populism resulted in the rise, by the 1840s, of the Native American Party, known to history as the “Know-Nothings.”

The Know-Nothings took their name from a nativist secret society: if asked about the society, members were instructed to answer that they “know nothing” (Levine, 2001). The Know-Nothings entered politics as the “Native American Party” and later shortened it to the “American Party” and were one of the beneficiaries of the disintegration of the old Whig Party over the issue of slavery in territories recently acquired from Mexico. The Know-Nothing Party was composed primarily of conservative anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant former Whigs, who nominated former President Millard Fillmore, himself not a member of the American Party, *in absentia* in 1856 to run for President. Fillmore finished third in the election, behind the Democratic Party and the newly formed anti-slavery Republican Party. The Know-Nothings, however did manage to elect governors in six states, as well as majorities in the State legislatures of nine states (NIF, 1). This tactic of winning at the State level what they could not win at the national level became one of the keys to nativist success ever since.

The defeat in the 1856 general election did not at the time appear to be a fatal blow to the Know-Nothings, but very soon, all concerns about Catholics and immigrants were pushed aside while the country descended into bloody fraternal apocalypse of the Civil War, and the issue of slavery exploded as the primary cultural cleavage in American society. Following the 1857 *Dred Scott* decision, the anti-slavery Know Nothings, who opposed slavery because slaves, like immigrants, competed with free white labor for jobs, joined the Republican Party while the pro-slavery nativists first backed John Bell’s Constitutional Union bid for President in the 1860 election, and then disappeared as an organized political force, fading into the opposition, pro-slavery Democratic Party.

Nativism, however did not disappear from the US- it was merely forced underground for a while. Anti-immigrant sentiments reappeared just five years after the Civil War, as slavery receded from the national discussion following its abolition by the 13th Amendment. Anti-Catholic nativist sentiment, mixed with white supremacism inherent in neo-Confederate sympathy took hold of the Democratic Party in the US South, and formed the nucleus of the Ku Klux Klan. Meanwhile, in California, nativists in the newly formed and tremendously popular Workingman’s Party led the populist movement which successfully promoted a new State Constitution for the state and various acts designed to exclude recent Chinese immigrants from legal protection and from opportunities to work.

Chinese immigrants had begun arriving in California in 1850, to participate in the Gold Rush, and soon began finding other types of work. Generally they prospered, and this prosperity led to the resentment by Americans who arrived from the eastern States (Kanazawa, 2005). White laborers, and the politicians who represented them, argued that Chinese immigrants depressed wages, practiced strange, un-American customs in their closed communities, and debased white manhood through opium addiction. By the late 1870s, the California legislature passed laws designed to exclude Chinese labor from most workplaces in California, and the US Congress passed the first Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. The act was designed specifically to prevent any additional Chinese immigration, and remained in force in one form or another for 61 years.

Cultural nativism experienced another major moment in the first decades of the 20th Century. In 1906, the Congress required new immigrants to possess the ability to speak and understand English as a condition of naturalization. A Federal study conducted in 1911 found

that immigrants which had been arriving since the 1870s from Eastern and Southern Europe- as opposed to those who had arrived from northern and Central Europe earlier in the decade- possessed a substantially different “character”. The new immigrants “were less skilled and educated, more clannish, slower to learn English, and generally less desirable than the ‘old immigrants’” (Schmid, 2002). The report echoed the distrust of people who were culturally further from the predominant western and Central European stock which now composed much of the American population. Other concerns once more repeated Jefferson’s fear: Many of the new immigrants came from despotic monarchies, and their arrival in the US raised not only a fear that the republicanism of American society would be undermined, but also that radical ideas would spread and socialism and anarchism would take root in the US. In 1917, the Congress required a strict literacy test for all immigrants and specifically barred immigrants from Asia, which was seen as the most unlike US culture of any places in the world currently sending immigrants to the US.

National quotas were established in the 1920s, which served to greatly limit immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe. Nativists in the United States saw people from these areas as genetically inferior to the Anglo-Saxon “race”- by which they meant, western and Northern Europeans, and felt that these inferior people would never assimilate into a more dominant US culture. As World War II loomed for the United States, all alien residents in the United States were required to register with the Government, and many US citizens whose ancestors had come from Japan, Germany or Italy were forced into internment camps for the duration of the war. Meanwhile, their property was infamously expropriated by their white neighbors, who offered the owners no compensation for the acquisition.

Those who sought exclusion based on cultural characteristics were not the only people who supported restrictive new laws. Organized labor was a major force in pushing for restriction at the end of the 19th Century and most of the 20th Century. The American Federation of Labor (AFL), led by immigrant Samuel Gompers, championed Chinese exclusion on grounds that non-unionized Chinese labor competed with higher paid American labor who had the right to organize in unions (Briggs 2001, 3). In the 20’s the AFL advocated for a zero-immigration policy from Asia and Eastern and Southern Europe, for many of the racialized reasons that other non-Union nativists did. The AFL joined nativists in the Legislature and in States in the west in seeking to end competition with Mexican labor during the 1940s and opposed any guest worker provisions. AFL-CIO supported strong anti-hiring laws in the 1980s, but by the 1990s, had switched to support of immigration for the opportunity to unionize immigrant labor, because the white working class was being decimated by Regan era anti-union policies. The switch for the AFL-CIO was a matter of survival, rather than a strong desire for inclusion.

Following the war, nativist sentiment sunk once more below the surface, as the threat of atomic annihilation loomed over the world. Beginning in 1943, the first guest worker programs which applied to immigrants from Latin America was passed. This led to the third major wave of immigration into the US, as low skilled workers from Central America joined the Latinos who had lived in the United States for generations, since before Mexican losses in 1848. It is the height of irony that Latinos in the US had always experienced discrimination from white North Americans who had first flooded into their territory, and then seized it by force, meanwhile promoting laws which denied legal protection to Latinos who had lived in the new territories, using nativist appeals to do all of this. Those laws were based, as we expect, on the notion that Latinos would never assimilate into mainstream American culture: They spoke a different language, were devoutly Catholic, and were not white. Also, because they were systematically

denied any sort of legal protection against discrimination, they were treated as competition for jobs, and therefore, were resented by white workers. The new arrivals from the South had these same characteristics, and often experienced discrimination from the older, long-settled Latino population as well as the white population when they arrived.

An elimination of “nation of origin” quotas in 1964 was accompanied by a return of nativism, this time in the form of the English-Only Movement. The movement gained steam throughout the 1960, and focused primarily on Latin American Immigration. In 1979, the anti-immigrant cause organized into the Federation of American Immigration Reform (FAIR). FAIR had seven main principles: They sought to strictly limit the number of legal immigrants coming into the United States, oppose all amnesty and guest worker measures, tie any immigration to high wages for native labor, enforce anti-hiring restrictions and harsh penalties on American employers who hired illegal immigrants, cut down on refugee and asylum-seeking immigration, limit immigration to merely “stabilize” American population, and eliminate special preferences for immigrants from certain countries (Federation for American Immigration Reform).

While on the surface, this seven-point program might have seemed moderate compared to past restrictions, FAIR represented a new organized movement designed to promote “enforcement-only” immigration policies. In other words, FAIR promoted, and won, legislative battles designed to specifically limit immigration, and strengthen and enforce existing immigration policy, without any path for those who were in the US illegally to remain here under any circumstances. In addition to their strict anti-immigration position, FAIR, and other nativist organizations, often expressed strongly racist and white supremacist overtones in the way they discussed immigration. The organization’s founder was reportedly animated by racist concerns (Burghart and Zeskind, 3). FAIR worked closely with the Minuteman movement, who patrolled the border with Mexico, and were implicated in a number of fatal shootings of individuals attempting to enter the US from Mexico. But this nativist impulse, like others in the past was overshadowed by crisis: The terrorist attacks of 9/11 overshadowed other concerns, and as the focus of the nation shifted from the border with Mexico to the Middle East, border control shifted to an emphasis on national security, rather than culture.

FAIR, for its part, simply adapted. During the George W. Bush administration, this anti-immigration “establishment” exercised an effective veto on immigration reform. By 2008, the anti-immigrant “establishment” counted more than 1.2 million Americans as members (ibid.). The election of Barack Obama, a son of a Kenyan immigrant and an American woman, gave new impetus to the nativist movement. The President was a constant reminder that someone whose name did not sound like, and who did not look like the majority of the population of the US had still acquired tremendous power and influence over the direction of American life. Before Obama was elected, efforts were launched to delegitimize his candidacy for the Office of President, to paint him as some sort of “other”, and to represent him as a threat to the American way of life. A liberal President with an immigrant father also posed an existential threat to the “anti-immigrant establishment.” But the nativists remained undaunted: Following Obama’s election, the TEA Party appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and the rise of TEA corresponded to the decline and replacement of FAIR and organizations of the anti-immigrant “establishment.”

Ostensibly, TEA was opposed to being taxed to pay for the housing bailout following the financial crisis of 2008, but the nativists in the TEA Party quickly took over the faltering anti-immigrant, anti-foreigner movement. TEA did not start out as a nativist organization, but it soon began attracting nativist Americans, away from the “establishment” organizations. In 2010, TEA ran a string of populist candidates on the national, but more importantly, on the state and

local level, dedicated to, among other things, “enforcement only” immigration policy, and experienced large victories all across the US. Arizona’s nativist governor, Jan Brewer, in league with nativist Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, passed incredibly restrictive laws which gave state and local police the power to detain people who could not prove that they were American citizens, and seek their deportation (ibid., 13-15). These State Laws were seen as more stringent than the Federal Law and were challenged in Federal court.

Other states also passed very strict anti-immigrant laws, and nearly a dozen states went so far as to explicitly ban “Shari’a Law” (Schachtel, 2016). Immigration reform stalled out in the Congress in the face of this strong anti-immigrant impulse, and Obama’s executive actions taken on behalf of illegal immigrants were roundly criticized and challenged by the Republican Party, who had fully absorbed, and were largely under the dominance of TEA following the 2014 midterm elections.

Conclusion: Nativism in 2016

Nativism was in full swing during the 2016 Primary election contests. A combination of economic and cultural insecurity drove the largest number of Republican primary voters to the polls since 1980. Much of that turnout was due to Donald Trump’s candidacy: His populist message was one of restoration of American “greatness” and anti-immigrant nativism. This message resonated with millions of American voters, who sought some explanation for the large scale marginalization and alienation that they felt when economic gains of the widely touted “economic recovery” went to people who did not live like them, and social gains were made among groups who had previously been largely excluded from mainstream American society. For his part, Trump’s preferred targets was either Latin American or Chinese. These scapegoats were convenient for Mr. Trump and his supporters: Those who had possibly never met an immigrant from Latin America, and like most Americans, knew very little about how the value of the dollar or the effect of trade agreements on the relative balance of power between the US and China, were suddenly convinced that the solution to America’s woes was a physical barrier between the US and Mexico and a militaristic stance toward China.

But most importantly, and more cynically, the nativism expressed by Trump deflected any criticism of the socio-economic system which largely benefitted Trump himself, as one of the wealthiest men in the US, and many individuals like him. And in return for their political loyalty, Trump’s supporters got simplistic solutions to very complex problems which seemed to clarify the apparent cause of their deep apprehension about the systemic socio-economic changes they experienced. Trump seemed to speak directly to his supporters’ deepest fears and distrust of people not like them. By May 2016, as his last competitors dropped out of the race, Trump became the apparent nominee of the Republican Party with a clear path to nomination on the first ballot at the July Convention. He was backed by a deeply loyal and significantly large crowd of primary supporters, who viewed any criticism of him as evidence of his correctness, and the future of the Republican Party as a membership organization was more uncertain now than it has ever been, especially among some conservative thinkers (Kasimar 2016).

The exploration of nativism and its history in the US above demonstrates that there really is nothing new about the Republican Party’s nativist appeal. Nativism in the 2016 Primary contest is just the latest episode of a long debate between those who oppose the arrival of new immigrants and those who embrace it. One interesting trend that history shows is that nativism is always pushed aside during a war or a major national crisis. The rise of Jefferson, the Civil War, the World Wars, and the Cold War are all examples of events which occurred in the middle

of a nativist wave which pushed anti-immigration sentiment beneath the surface. It always rose again, however, at a later date, when the emergency was over, and even if this wave is, like the others, subsumed below some great national crisis, it is always likely that it will be resurrected a few years later. I argue that nativism is, itself, the response to style of democracy in this country, where people are asked what they want to do with people who themselves have no say in their fate. Of course people will fight to defend what they have, especially when they can be convinced that others are attempting to take it away from them! This is more the case when there is also an extremely limited social safety net, through which any given worker can, at any given time, and for any reason or no reason, fall through and end up in abject poverty. When combined, political franchise, acute economic insecurity, and fear-mongering demagogues who play on distrust of an “other” lead to nativism. Only a distraction of a catastrophic level can serve to take people’s minds off the fear they experience in such an environment.

More interestingly, the adoption of a hardline toward immigration by a Party appears to lead to that Party fracturing and collapsing. The result has been either Party disintegration, as in the case of the Federalist Party following the Alien and Sedition Acts, or the Whig Party following the Compromise of 1850 and the rise of Free Soil, or Party impotence, as was the case of the Democratic Party in the second half of the 19th Century, or the Republican Party after the anti-immigration measures of the 1920s. This is not to say that there is hard empirical evidence which demonstrates a causal relationship between nativism and Party irrelevance, but the historical trend seems to suggest that there may be at least a non-random relationship between the two phenomenon, if someone should ever run a rigorous empirical test.

What is less clear is whether nativism hastens Party demise, or the adoption of nativism is the result of Party decay and collapse which is already occurring. Given the susceptibility of at least a significant portion of the electorate at any given moment to the appeals of nativism and immigrant scapegoating, politicians may adopt this platform plank as a measure of securing otherwise uncertain political support. But if this is the case, it is possible that nativism does not make for a sustainable platform, and its adoption for short term gains undermines a Party’s long term base, many of whom must not be susceptible to nativist appeals, and many of whom may decide to actively oppose it. Such a split along ideological lines is fatal to a Party, and at best will doom it to the political “wilderness” for a generation or more.

What is clear is that by Spring 2016, nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment was alive and well in the United States, specifically in the TEA Party-era Republican Party. The Republican Party leadership appeared to have largely lost all control over their Party, as populist forces stormed the gates and threatened to upend the fiscal and social conservative coalition that the Republican Party built in the 1970s. Whether the Republican Party will survive this “populist revolution” being led, ironically by the Party’s nominee for President is entirely uncertain. But what is clear is that Trump’s success was due to this fear and uncertainty, much of it nativist opposition to new arrivals. This is nothing new, nor is it the last time it will likely happen. This is just another episode of voters expressing their desire to keep the blessings of American democracy and the goods provided by American economic predominance for themselves, to ensure that they get what they believe they are entitled to, and that people they do not believe are entitled to a share do not come and attempt to take a share of it anyway.

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