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LIBERAL DEMOCRACY, NATIONAL IDENTITY
BOUNDARIES, AND POPULIST ENTRY POINTS

ABSTRACT: *The politics of populism is the politics of belonging. It reflects a deep challenge to the liberal democratic state, which attempts to maintain social boundaries (as an imperative of state capacity) but also allow immigration. Boundaries—established through citizenship and norms of belonging—must be both coherent and malleable. Changes to boundaries become sites of contestation for exclusionary populists in the putative interest of “legitimate” citizens. Populism is an inevitable response to liberal democratic adjustment; any liberal democracy that redefines citizenship opens itself to populist challenge.*

Keywords: *borders; citizenship; comparative politics; immigration; national boundaries; nationalism; populism*

The recent resurgence of national populist parties amidst large-scale immigration and social change has fixed the question of national belonging at the center of contemporary politics. Populist parties across Europe, together with such unexpected political earthquakes as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, amount to a forceful rebuke of liberalism across advanced democracies. The populists are asking two questions: “Who belongs?” and “Who decides?” I will primarily focus here on the

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question of who belongs, as the answer to “Who decides?” is less complicated and more direct.

In liberal democracies, elected governments decide who belongs when they enact and amend immigration and citizenship laws—the rules and procedures that regulate how outsiders become insiders. In addition, policies of representation and accommodation, such as multiculturalism, extend the “us” group to include the formerly excluded. Such policies are motivated and guided by liberal democratic norms such as pluralism, tolerance, equal protection, individual rights, and state neutrality. That the boundaries of the national in-group should change in response to changing social values¹ is a thoroughly modern notion; however, that this process of change occurs in the contemporary order of unprecedented migration raises unique problems.

As a physical and social delineation between insiders and outsiders, boundary maintenance is a necessity of states and democratic governance alike. States require coherent boundaries—a prerequisite for a state’s administrative, extractive, and distributive capacities—but where those boundaries are set is always contestable and is now increasingly contested.

The imperative to maintain boundaries is complicated by the values and imperatives of liberal democracy. Liberal democracy in an age of demographic change is compelled to expand its definition of “the people,” guided by norms of democracy (identifying a citizenry for participation and representation) and liberalism (ensuring that the criteria of inclusion and exclusion are just). This puts liberal democracy and populism on an inevitable collision course: any liberal democracy that redefines citizenship opens itself to populist challenge. By definition, populists claim to speak on behalf of the people—the *populus*. Acting on behalf of the “general will” of the “pure people” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), exclusionary populist politicians represent the interests of those whom they view as the “legitimate” in-group, excluding those that have been “othered.”

In sum, boundary maintenance is both a necessity and a source of vulnerability; the liberal democratic state needs to flexibly maintain boundaries, while populists contest both the malleability and legitimacy of those boundaries.

The Populist Revolt and the Immigrant Threat

Immigration has been a consistent feature of the post-World War II political landscape, but only in the past few decades have anti-immigrant attitudes

emerged as a core component of cleavages in Western party systems (Kriesi et al. 2006, Hooghe and Marks 2018). Right-wing populist parties have benefited from the increasing salience of the immigration issue, as “elites’ preference for open societies is running up against growing public demands for new forms of economic, cultural, and political closure” (Galston 2017, 23). Exclusionary far-right populists have employed nationalism as a trope to protect the “pure people” from immigrant “outsiders.” However, the preservation of pluralism is an “axiological principle” of liberal democracy (Mouffe 2000, 19), such that populist opponents of liberalism must be treated as legitimate. Liberal democracies are not merely accustomed to contestation but *enable* it² by promoting tolerance, neutrality, and personal autonomy.

The particulars vary across each European case and that of the United States. Common to the populist far-right parties, albeit not to the U.S. case, is an attack on institutions of identity through the vilification of immigrants as posing an existential threat to an ethnically defined nation. French National Front leader Marine Le Pen describes French “civilization” as under threat because of immigration.³ Geert Wilders, of the Dutch Freedom Party, ran on a campaign to “de-Islamize” the Netherlands by accepting no asylum seekers, closing mosques, and banning the Koran so as to make “The Netherlands Ours Again.”⁴ Heinz-Christian Strache of Austria’s Freedom Party has also made Austria’s “Islamification” the centerpiece of its most recent electoral campaign. These are not valence issues or narrow appeals to swing voters; as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban observed at a January 10, 2019 press conference, “The division of party structures as left or right is being overtaken by a different dimension: those for migration and those against migration” (Hopkins 2019). In short, populist parties claim to protect and promote the in-group by vilifying an out-group. To understand how out-groups become framed as threats, we need to consider what is under threat and why.

A Theory of National Boundary Coherence

Political scientists recognize the importance of coherent national boundaries, or “conceptual distinctions that we make to categorize objects, people, practices and even time and space” (Lamont 1992, 9). Boundaries can be physical or symbolic, reflecting in status, resources, behavior, etc., widely accepted understandings of “us” and “them.”⁵ The identity constructed from this distinction conveys legitimacy to a regime and establishes community among a population (e.g., Weber 1976). Thus, the

central condition for boundedness is that rules for inclusion and exclusion are clear; but this does not entail that they are permanent or impermeable.⁶

In the international-relations literature, coherent national boundaries are established geographically. Borders in the international state system delineate where political authority and sovereignty begin and where they end.⁷ Essential to Weber's definition of the state is establishing boundedness around a "given territory" in a physical sense, maintained through the use or threat of force. Thus, physical borders are a part of core state powers, as is the right to surveil who comes and goes (Torpey 2000) and the right to outsource or pool authority when desired (as with free internal movement among member states of the European Union). In this way, borders play a critical role in the formation of national group identity (e.g., Sahlins 1989) by coordinating the expectations of those within a circumscribed area (Carter and Goemans 2011).

Borders can also be constructed symbolically. Here, citizenship is a type of social border, establishing community coherence as an "instrument and object of social closure" (Brubaker 1992). From this insight stem several different branches of inquiry. Political sociologists examine overlaps of status, identity, and rights (Marshall 1950, Joppke 2010), considering the role of status as a vehicle for rights-claiming. Political theorists mostly take as a given that such liberal principles as personal autonomy, state impartiality, and tolerance can be realized only in bounded settings (Kymlicka 1991, Benhabib 2002).⁸ John Stuart Mill spoke of a democratic people as having "fellow feeling," such that "it is in general a necessary condition of free institutions that the boundaries of government coincide in the main with those of nationalities" (Mill [1861] 1993, 384).⁹ Meanwhile, economists sometimes describe citizenship attribution by invoking the logic of clubs (Buchanan 1965, Sandler and Tschirhart 1997), where ascription regulates access to the national club, permitting access to public goods. In this view, cultural and residency requirements act as "entrance fees" for membership.¹⁰

Comparative politics combines these ideas, such that coherent boundaries are seen both as designating insider status (and, thus, a state's constituency) and as establishing tangible links between individuals and an otherwise opaque regime through a social contract (Tilly 1996 and 1997) that extends rights and protection in exchange for obligations and service. Whether this circumscribed social status also confers identity is a matter of debate. Goodman 2014 argues that states can maintain many

categories of membership to denote belonging that often, but do not always, overlap with citizenship as a status. Sadiq 2009 traces a phenomenon of “documentary citizenship” in the Global South, where obtaining paperwork is transactional and entirely de-coupled from identity.

National group coherence is not simply a mechanism for differentiation. States need political boundaries for administrative purposes. National coherence is necessary for the distribution of goods,¹¹ taxation, and registering the population—a process that makes citizens “legible” to the state (Scott 1998). In this, democracies’ need to demarcate an ingroup is similar to more generic, administrative needs of the state. However, the *democratic* state also requires, at minimum, consensus about who is empowered to participate in politics and who has legitimate claim to finite goods, such as redistributive resources. In other words, the state designates citizenship in order to identify constituents.

Constituent designation is one of the fundamental imperatives of democratic citizenship. Aristotle (*Politics* 1247b) defined the city-state as “a compound made of citizens,” and Robert A. Dahl (2005) argued that “inclusive citizenship” (the inclusivity of national identity) is an essential prerequisite for democracy. Dankwart A. Rustow (1970) even argued that national unity is the sole prerequisite for democracy, while Juan J. Linz and Alfred C. Stepan (1996) highlight “inclusive and equal citizenship,” which gives all citizens “a common ‘roof’” of rights—particularly essential in consolidating multiethnic populations. These boundaries do not need to include everyone and the process of boundary-drawing may be exclusionary (Marx 2005), but the delineation between insider and outsider must be clear, and the rights granted to insiders must be equal. Establishing boundaries around an ingroup creates a linkage of legitimacy between what the state is doing and what people want and need; it establishes criteria and norms of representation, channels for participation, and a foundation for legitimate lawmaking.

Creating a national group is no easy task. Despite populist rhetoric, national political communities are not natural entities.¹² War and decolonization create national ingroups through “othering” (Colgan 2017), and nationalist states often deliberately create group identity by teaching it to children (Weber 1976). As a central component in constructing the modern state, ideas of who “we” are get defined and replicated in myriad interactions, from the influence of religious institutions (Grzymala-Busse 2015) to the construction of national symbols (Zerubavel 1995). Everyday nationalism, described by Michael Billig (1995) as the

“banal” form of it, hides the real work of creating the “imagined community” (Anderson 1991), as ordinary citizens draw on conceptions of national belonging for meaning. National belonging has direct consequences for those seen as outside the “we” group (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016, Kunovich 2009).

Immigration presents an exceptional challenge to these institutions of identity, as it tests the elasticity and coherence of national belonging. While the differentiation of “us” and “them” may be a core feature of “stateness,” it presents clear challenges for liberal democratic states that are exacerbated by immigration controversies. Such states must be flexible and responsive to changing demographic realities, balancing the needs and wants of an increasingly diverse constituency and attempting to ensure that liberal impartiality does not undermine the particularity of the coherent group. Liberal democratic states must be inclusive enough to allow for myriad immigrants to achieve recognition and rights within the national political community, but they must also strongly protect those boundaries, as the well-defined, coherent ingroup provides legitimacy for representative decision-making and policy. How can this be done?

Boundary Contestation and Populist Entrées

Once immigration becomes a feature of advanced democratic economies, boundaries can be maintained through legal means such as citizenship (Howard 2009) or through cultural and integration requirements (Goodman 2014),¹³ sometimes slowly; the United States took two centuries to consolidate democracy by expanding the franchise and civil rights. States can be liberal and not fully democratic (e.g., the prevalence of voter suppression and gerrymandering suggest that the United States is still not fully democratic). States can also be democratic yet illiberal (e.g., Hungary), exhibiting intolerance and state preferences for certain groups over others.¹⁴ Immigrants and minorities suffer in any of these combinations.

The balance between pluralism and particularism is inherent to what Habermas (1998, 115) calls the “Janus face of the modern nation,” where states act in the name of universal principles but within the boundaries of particularistic national communities. Hollifield (1992) grounds the “liberal paradox” in more particular motives, namely the push for economic openness that runs counter to the push for political and social closure.¹⁵ The balancing act does not occur in a vacuum; demographic

and political change force liberal democracies to adapt institutions of identity over time.

This is where populists have an “in.” In representing the “general will,” they hold as self-evident that new conceptions of national belonging represent moves away from “the people” and their interests. Thus, their focus on immigration is politically strategic. Outgroup antipathy is essential to strengthening ingroup affinity. Social psychology suggests that building loyalty toward the ingroup can “lead to hostile reactions toward other groups” (Druckman 1994, 44). The power of populist politics is in generating a shared, alternative vision of belonging that *necessarily* opposes others. Whether horizontally, by excluding outsiders, or vertically, by rejecting elites, populist parties protect and promote the ingroup by vilifying an outgroup. The examples are innumerable and range from the disorganized and local—in the form of anti-immigrant and anti-refugee violence (Benček and Strasheim 2016)—to the mobilized and national, evidenced in both anti-Brussels elitism and the outright antipathy to immigrants within Brexit’s Leave campaign (Hobolt 2016).

Thus, the very thing that can allow liberal democracies to meet the challenges of diversity—the ability of the national community to encompass and promote tolerance and unity—is also the thing that makes them vulnerable to populist assault. When populists contest immigration they are also contesting the boundaries of national belonging. But in their estimation, they are defending these boundaries.

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Populism is not an aberration; it is a response to a system designed to define national boundaries and sustain pluralism, with limited means to regulate the beliefs of those within those boundaries. As robust liberalism continues to accommodate immigration with clear definitions of achievable citizenship, we also observe how threats to the liberal order—particularly the successful rise of domestic populism and right-wing extremism—can upset delicate balances, reframing inclusive nationalism not as a solution but as part of the problem. Pluralism allows and encourages diversity. Yet the liberal democratic state has little power to quell the illiberal voices that contradict it from within. It has a wide berth when it comes to controlling and conditioning illiberal views from outsiders—it can, for instance, make democratic loyalty oaths a condition of naturalization

and can render illiberal views or practices (e.g., Nazi affiliation) disqualifying—but it can say little and do less about the illiberal ideas of natives, who are never compelled to fidelity and are free to embrace ideologies of their choosing.

Short of providing a competing narrative, mainstream political figures have decided to debate populists on their terms.¹⁶ Orban is correct in identifying attitudes toward immigration as the key distinction among European political parties, together with protectionist and Euroskeptical positions. But when such centrist political figures as Tony Blair, Matteo Renzi, and Hillary Clinton suggest that “Europe needs to get a handle on migration because that is what lit the flame” of right-wing populism,¹⁷ they go along with the type of framing that advantages populists and puts mainstream liberals on the defensive.

If states want to continue to benefit from immigration while mitigating its social and cultural costs, they need to counterbalance openness with the stability-signaling and legitimacy-bolstering policies of immigrant integration. Yet this, too, can hand a powerful tool to populists. Make identity too monocultural and narrow, and it will either be rejected by the public at large or, in being ethnocultural, will expose immigrants, ethnic minorities, and other vulnerable populations to real harm. Make identity too multicultural, and it is subject to derision and populist capture. Make identity too thin, and it becomes nothing at all. Whether governments are able to navigate these dilemmas of policy design has direct implications for social cohesion, minority rights and recognition, immigrant accommodation and, ultimately, the very fate of the liberal democratic state.

NOTES

1. That is, when it stems from a political will not enforced by courts (which is, itself, a reflection of the norm of upholding rule of law).
2. Rawls (2005) argues that those that refuse the principles of liberalism have exceeded the bounds of “reasonable pluralism,” though this does not change the fact that the state lacks little in the way of instruments to counter them.
3. “In France,” according to Le Pen, “we drink wine whenever we want. In France we do not force women to wear the veil because they are impure. . . . In France, we get to decide who deserves to become French.” Agnew and Cassany 2017.
4. “Nederland Weer Van Ons!” See <https://www.pvv.nl/nederland-weer-van-ons.html> (accessed 24 May 2018)
5. Alba 2005 permits these boundaries to be “bright” or “blurred.”
6. Billig 1995; Bonikowski 2016.
7. See, for example, Agnew 1994.

8. Walzer 1983 notes that political membership is the first “good” distributed to individuals in a society; other goods, like income or benefits, depend on that prior status of eligibility. Similarly, Benhabib 2002 criticizes Rawls for failing to recognize immigration in considering only birth-based roots of civic membership.
9. The substantial literatures in political theory (e.g., theories of multicultural citizenship) and comparative politics (e.g., studies of consociationalism) preserve the importance of coherence but allow for ethnic heterogeneity.
10. Thus, where these “fees” are high (e.g., language tests, long residency durations), acquisition of citizenship is a costly signal to the state and the public that the membership criteria have been met.
11. Miller 1999 acknowledges that this “coherence” can take many forms: associations can be “solidaristic,” “instrumental,” or based on “citizenship.”
12. Even in the quintessential ethnocultural German case, Brubaker (1992) shows that instrumental choices were made by Romantic elites who deliberately selected German ethnoculturalism as the founding script for the new state in the late nineteenth century.
13. This boundary redefinition has been part of a broader phenomenon, described by British Prime Minister David Cameron as “muscular liberalism,” whereby a genuinely liberal country “believes in certain values and actively promotes them” (Cameron 2011).
14. In addition to other institutional features, such as the lack of an independent judiciary.
15. Some political theorists have interpreted these not as competing but complementary interests, e.g., liberal nationalists (Tamir 1995) and constitutional patriots (Müller 2007).
16. Hopkins 2019.
17. Clinton 2018.

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