

# Is Progressive Nationalism a Thing?

SEASON 2  
episode two

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Nicholas Lemann

Here we go. Hi, this is Nicholas Lemann. Welcome to Underreported, a podcast from Columbia Global Reports. Thanks for tuning in. On the eve of the 2016 presidential election, Columbia Global Reports published John Judis' *The Populist Explosion*, which predicted a worldwide wave of populist sentiment on the left and the right in reaction to the disruptions caused by globalization. *The Populist Explosion* has been our best-selling book so far in our four years in business. One of the standard places people go to try to understand the phenomenon of Donald Trump.

Now Judis has written a sequel, *The Nationalist Revival*, which takes his argument one step further from politics into governance. He makes a powerful and provocative case for nationalism as an inescapable aspect of politics everywhere in the world. He regards the idea that nationalism is merely a long running, transitional phase between local and global governance as absurd.

He also refutes the idea that nationalism is inevitably right-wing. In his view, the left has ceded nationalism to the right by declining to address working people's concerns about immigration and trade. The rise of leaders like Donald Trump in the United States and Viktor Orban in Hungary is the result.

Judis believes that nationalism should be recaptured, not wished away. This is a book meant to explain, and also to foment, a discussion that we are not having yet. It is indispensable reading for people who want to understand the current moment. And let me just add that we've just signed John to a contract to write a third book on socialism, which we won't talk about today. And then we're going to call these the -ism trilogy or the -ist trilogy or something like that. Hi John, welcome to the podcast.

John Judis

Thank you for having me.

Nicholas Lemann

So let's start by just trying to define what is nationalism and how is it different from populism.

John Judis

Well, the main thing is that populism is a kind of political logic. It's a way of describing a politics that differentiates between the people and the elites. Nationalism is really a sentiment basically, that can take political forms and different political forms. It's something that we get when we grow up. It's our sense of our identity of being a part of a nation that is greater than ourselves, and of being willing in extremities to die for our nation. Being happy when our nation does well, being embarrassed and mad when it doesn't do well.

So in that sense, national identity is an intrinsic part of Americans, Hungarians, French or whatever. And it only becomes – it takes different political forms. For instance, you can't really have a legislative proposal in Congress that somebody can say, well, that's against the national interest. It's a test that everything has to pass: being for the national interest. We don't even sometimes make it explicit.

But for instance, Forbes magazine ran a feature contesting Donald Trump, saying globalization is in the national interest. So it's again, it's a point of reference. But sometimes in some periods, what you get is an explicitly nationalist politics in which the central theme is that we have to defend our nation against an enemy. And sometimes the enemy can be foreign, sometimes it can be within. And it doesn't necessarily have to be on the right or the left. Abraham Lincoln was a nationalist. Theodore Roosevelt was a nationalist, but so was George Wallace, and so was Donald Trump.

So a can take different forms, this kind of explicit nationalism could take different forms. And we're in a period in the United States and in western Europe and central and eastern Europe, where we have an outburst of this kind of explicit nationalism.

Nicholas Lemann

Let me go back and then ask you why the outburst. So, you know, there's a famous book by Benedict Anderson called *Imagined Communities* that many of us read in our school days. And, you know, I'm oversimplifying, but it basically says that, as we say in universities, nationalism is socially constructed. That nations aren't naturally occurring entities, and nationalism as a sentiment is not a naturally occurring sentiment.

And a lot of people, especially on the left, take that to mean that it's just kind of a phase. It doesn't have to exist. It's not embedded in people's consciousness, it's just that they happen to have been, you know, imprinted with nationalism. And I'm curious, what's your take on that?

John Judis

Yeah, I think that there's an interpretation of Benedict Anderson which says that it's not just imagined, but imaginary. And what I'd say is that, I mean, all of our social institutions are, in that sense, imagined communities of some kind. Nations, we haven't always had nations. I mean, people were organized according to tribes and clans. They didn't necessarily have something called a nation or a state.

But beginning in the oh late, late 18th century, we did begin to have these kind of social communities that are national. And what it means is that people identify themselves as having something in common with this greater group. You can't have, for instance, a democracy unless somebody who votes thinks that it's okay for somebody else to have a vote and a control over your destiny whom you never are going to meet, you never know, who live 150 miles away, but what you have in common with them is that they're an American.

So it's absolutely essential in that way. You can't have a welfare state unless you have this common perception that it's okay for you to pay taxes to help somebody who's disabled in, you know, Reno, Nevada, or in Santa Fe, New Mexico, that you'll never meet in your life, but that that person is another, is also an American.

And when that kind of perception breaks down, then you get problems of governance. You get a governmental crisis. And you know, you obviously see that in secession crises like they're having in Spain or, you know, to some extent too the United Kingdom has had with Scotland. But you also see it with illegal immigration and issues like that where people say, well, my money's not going to really go to Americans, it's going to go to support the emergency room care for people who aren't Americans. So I don't want to this program to be passed.

Nicholas Lemann

So let me ask you something at the other end of the conceptual spectrum. So, you know, Steve Bannon's claim to fame, or one of them, is talking about globalists and using that as a sort of political device. Are globalists a thing? Are there actually such people?

John Judis

Well, I think that there have been, there was in the 19, particularly in the 1990s, an argument that if we open our markets internationally, if we allow corporations to move wherever they want, if we have relatively uncontrolled immigration with family reunions and stuff, so we have like, you know, over a million people coming each year, that in the end that's going to benefit nations.

I don't think that there are globalists in the sense that – I mean, you find some people on the extreme left who say, who really deny that we should do anything national, that we should even worry about the nation. But I think for the great, great majority of people, they do think of themselves as worried about the nation, including the president of Exxon or whatever.

But I think that there was an argument in the nineties, particularly in the 1990s and to some extent today, that if we allow capital and labor to move wherever they want, it will in the end benefit the United States. And that kind of argument is now contested. And that's part of what again was the basis of a lot of Trump's popularity in places like the Midwest and the South that had lost a lot of jobs and who attributed that to this kind of global economic perspective.

Nicholas Lemann

And you also have Europe. So let's talk in a broader way about what is driving this, you know, surprising to the pundit class, at least, nationalist revival of the last five years or so.

John Judis

In Europe, it goes back to the, oh the early 2000s, if not to the 1990s. And a lot of what's driving it in both the United States and western and eastern, central Europe is a fusion of fears about immigrants coming into the country and threatening the existing culture with the fear of terrorism.

So, you know, when a country like Denmark that has relatively few immigrants, but since the 1880s have had people come into the country who are not Lutherans, who are not, you know, whose lineage doesn't go back to the eighth century, and which has this incredibly generous welfare state, four years of unemployment insurance. Again, there's a kind of, there's a feeling that that bolstered the rise of a right wing party there, that in order for these welfare benefits to work, people have to be like Danes, they have to be like us.

They have to be completely committed to working, for instance. They can't come in and try to live off our generous welfare system. So that kind of fears fed a lot of the nationalist movements, particularly in Europe. I think there you don't have as much concern itself about trade, it's more about the reign of the euro. So you have immigration, terrorism, plus the euro, and particularly in southern Europe, the idea that the northern countries are making out like bandits under this system, but we're all getting screwed.

Nicholas Lemann

Do you think that if the particularly Syrian-driven part of the migration crisis in Europe were to moderate, that would reduce nationalism in Europe?

John Judis

Well, if you add North Africa to that, that's a big deal. And that's not going to stop with the cessation of wars, because a lot of it's based on famine and things like that. I would expect that there will be some mitigation of the of those nationalist movements within the next five or ten years if things settle down in the Middle East. I think that was, I mean, the first wave was in the nineties in the Balkans from Bosnia and Croatia, and that started it off. Then you have this enormous wave from the Middle East and then North Africa. So yeah, I would say so.

Nicholas Lemann

Now, in the US, and to some extent in Europe too, in conversation, nationalist and far-right are used as kind of synonyms. And so I want to explore that a little because your book pushes back against that.

So let's start with this. In the US, on immigration issues, Donald Trump being president and all the things he does around immigration, all of his rhetoric essentially creates an atmosphere where Democrats don't have to have an immigration policy. Their immigration policy can be, "I am horrified, justifiably, by Donald Trump's immigration policy, and I oppose it."

Where do you see this going as we head into the next election cycle? Do you see any of the Democratic candidates actually having an immigration policy? What is it? Is, you know, abolish ICE and have relatively open borders out there as a serious policy among American liberals and Democrats? Talk about that a little, if you would.

John Judis

Well, I, you know, I have a few thoughts about that. The first thought is that in a time of prosperity, like we're having with less than 4% unemployment, I'm not sure if Trump's appeals on immigration, and he's clearly gone batshit over immigration these days, is...

Nicholas Lemann

Especially this week as we're talking.

John Judis

Yes. Right. Is going to resonate the way it did in 2016, W\where you had both immigration, you still had the continuation, to some extent, of the Great Recession, and you had these two big terrorist incidents: San Bernardino and Orlando. So I'm just not sure whether it's going to be a big selling point. And clearly, the closing the border thing didn't help him at all and didn't help the Republicans. The shutting down Congress over the border crisis.

So that's one point. Democrats, though, I think if they go to the opposite extreme and have policies like abolish ICE, which means it really affects again, our ability to combat terrorism in the United States, crime, I think, again, they'll open the door to Trump's kind of appeal.

And the comprehensive kind of reform that the Democrats were advocating in 2008, 2013, you know, I think it still has a lot of point to it. The problem in 2016 with Hillary Clinton was that all she did was talk about a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants. That she didn't give any indication that she wanted to have a policy that would control immigration, legal and illegal, into the country. And I suspect that that's going to be, again, the case in 2020 with the Democrats.

Nicholas Lemann

Part of what's going on with the Democrats, and to some extent, the farther to the left parties in Europe, is a political calculus. Which is that, you know – I should tell listeners who don't know this, that John is the coauthor of a book called *The Emerging Democratic Majority*, for which he's semi-renowned, or something. But in that book, you argued that changing demographics, particularly in southwestern states, would lead, you know, states who were part of the Reagan coalition to go blue, if I'm if I'm getting the argument right.

So, you know, if you're a Democrat, why wouldn't you say let's have a laxer immigration policy? Because those people are going to be Democratic voters and that's what's going to lead to the promised land that the John Judis and Ruy Teixeira promised us we'd get to with Texas and New Mexico and Arizona and Colorado and Nevada as Democratic states.

John Judis

Well, look, a few things about that. When Rudy and I wrote that book, and, you know, continuing through that early 2000s, we always said that in order for that kind of majority to work that we described – a certain percentage of minorities,

professionals and so on – Democrats would have to hold on to about 40% of the white working class. And that meant majorities in states like obviously West Virginia, but Wisconsin would be another one. And if you adopt the policies on immigration that alienate that many voters, that formula is not going to work.

So that's one thing. And that's really, I mean, that's, I guess, been our disappointment in terms of the building, that the coalition that the Democrats haven't been able to maintain what used to be their traditional hold over these voters.

The second thing is that in the long run, I've been very influenced by Richard Alba, the demographer at NYU. The whole category of who is white and who is not is going to shift. And there's a lot of intermarriage, especially among Hispanics and Asians. And so the politics based upon it is going to be undermined.

Nicholas Lemann

Just to interject a note of agreement. It's such a truism now that the US is going to be majority-minority in 2050 or whatever year. But that assumes, you know, something that's ahistorical. Throughout American history, first of all, the way we define minority has changed radically. So it assumes that the current definition in 2019 will be sticky enough to prevail in 2050.

And second of all, as you said, it assumes that minority voters will behave in a certain way just because they're minority voters. So, you know, if you went back a hundred years, people would say Italian-Americans are minority voters, they're not white, you know.

John Judis

Jews as well.

Nicholas Lemann

Yeah, and Irish, and so on. And the whole idea that these people are a sort of congealed mass called white people who are conservative, was not part of the conversation or the political reality. So people move in and out of majority-minority status and they change their ideology as a lot of those white ethnic voters did. So that's just by way of agreeing with you. If you were to construct a liberal or left version of nationalism, what would that look like?

John Judis

Well, a few things. I think it would have some kind of concern about trying to address the uneven development within our country. The fact that there really are these areas of the country that have been de-industrialized over the last 30 or 40 years, and they've been the source of a lot of the discontent...

Nicholas Lemann

And the same in Europe.

John Judis

Yes, exactly the same in Europe.

Nicholas Lemann

We have red states and blue states. Every state has a red and blue state inside it. And every European country has a red and blue, and they all look sort of alike.

John Judis

Right.

Nicholas Lemann

You know, Copenhagen is blue, etcetera.

John Judis

Right. Paris versus the northern France, which is again, very affected by the loss of industry. So that's one aspect of it. And don't ask me exactly how that's going to be done.

But the other aspect is a kind of combination of the need for a much more advanced welfare state in terms of economic security and, say, Medicare for all, or Medicare for anyone, but a real national health insurance system that we don't have. Much more attention to pensions and to access to education.

In order for that to happen, though, I think we have to restore a sense that we are one nation and that the people who live here are all Americans and that we're not a set of different nations. And a part of what is involved there is that, now we're getting back to the last point, is having a real immigration policy that addresses that,



that encourages assimilation of immigrants, that doesn't keep recreating a kind of underclass, that brings the people who are here, who are illegal or undocumented, into the nation as citizens.

So I think that that's, without doing that, it's going to be hard to have the advanced welfare state. But if we do, again, that would be part of my, that would be part of my nationalist agenda.

Nicholas Lemann

By the way, you know, we're getting toward the end of our time, but I just want to note, and you'll probably want to respond. It's been very striking to me with this book how it took weeks or months for liberal reviewers to sort of get themselves comfortable with engaging with what you're saying. And now there's a lot of wonderful reviews.

But right out of the box, we were getting reviews in Breitbart and everyone else was saying, hmm. And, I do feel like you've really made a contribution to bringing this idea that nationalism isn't necessarily automatically right wing back into the conversation and forcing, you know, liberal reviewers and others to grapple with it.

John Judis

Yeah, I was, as you remember, I predicted to you that this would happen. And what I heard from friends, for instance, one professor who recommended the book to his left-wing students, was that people just identify nationalism with Trump at this point, and they don't want any part of it. So that's been a big obstacle.

Nicholas Lemann

Yeah, but I do think, going into the next presidential election cycle, the more attention liberals and Democrats pay to your book, the better they'll be likely to do in the next election. So I think you're doing something that ought to be helpful to that camp by calling attention to it.

John, thanks so much for being with us and thanks for writing the book. Just to remind everyone, John's two Columbia Global Reports books are the Nationalist Revival: Trade, Immigration, and the Revolt against Globalization, and the earlier The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics. Find them now wherever you buy books. Thank you for speaking

to us. And after you've devoured those books and you're hungry for more, wait about a year and a few months and we'll have another book by John for you. Thanks, John.

John Judis

Thank you.