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# Nationalism: What We Know and What We Still Need to Know

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## Keywords

nationalism, patriotism, national identity, constitutive stories, nation building, everyday nationalism

## Abstract

Amid the global resurgence of nationalist governments, what do we know about nationalism? This review takes stock of political science debates on nationalism to critically assess what we already know and what we still need to know. We begin by synthesizing classic debates and tracing the origins of the current consensus that nations are historically contingent and socially constructed. We then highlight three trends in contemporary nationalism scholarship: (a) comparative historical research that treats nationalism as a macropolitical force and excavates the relationships between nations, states, constitutive stories, and political conflict; (b) behavioral research that uses survey data and experiments to gauge the causes and effects of attachment to nations; and (c) ethnographic scholarship that illuminates the everyday processes and practices that perpetuate national belonging. The penultimate section briefly summarizes relevant insights from philosophy, history, and social psychology and identifies knowledge gaps that political scientists are well-positioned to address. A final section calls for more comparative, cross-disciplinary, cross-regional research on nationalism.

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## INTRODUCTION

Nationalism is more relevant to the politics of our time than it has been in half a century. The global reawakening of nationalism has perhaps been most visible in the United States, where former President Trump was elected on a campaign to put “America first” and “make America great again.” While Trump may be the most visible avatar of this “new nationalism,” analogous movements have swept to power in every corner of the globe: Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro borrowed Trumpian nationalism, running a campaign to “make Brazil great again” that handily delivered him the presidency in 2018; Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán continually argues that “the millions with national feelings are on one side [apart from] the elite ‘citizens of the world’” (Orbán 2018); India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi decisively swept to power in 2014 and 2019 by proudly proclaiming Hindu nationalism; and Xi Jinping, trumpeting Han-based nationalism, has become the most powerful president of China since Mao Zedong.

Many observers are surprised by nationalism’s global re-emergence after decades of seeming retreat. Following the crumbling of the Soviet Union three decades ago, democracy, capitalism, and globalization seemed universally accepted as the best way to organize economies and govern societies. Global leaders largely accepted that “history” had ended because there was no longer a robust ideological alternative to this consensus (Fukuyama 1989). The assumption that the march of progress would leave nationalism behind was shown to be mistaken as early as the mid-1990s, when keen observers of the Balkans (Gagnon 1994, Snyder 2000), Central and Eastern Europe (Csörgő & Goldgeier 2004), the former Soviet Union (Suny 1993, Beissinger 2002, Bunce 2005), and Latin America (Yashar 1998) showed nationalism to be a crucial driver of regional political developments.

Today, no one can escape the ascendancy of nationalism, a trend that the coronavirus pandemic has only accentuated (Bieber 2020). Paradoxically, a pandemic that started globally and will ultimately end globally demonstrated the decidedly national nature of decision-making levers and citizen loyalty. Even within the supranational European Union, Italy was just the first among a long list of countries to close its borders—Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Poland, and Spain quickly followed suit. Even France’s President Emmanuel Macron and Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel, the European Union’s greatest cheerleaders, closed their countries’ borders. The response to the pandemic literally took on national colors, as leader after leader addressed their country with backdrops of national flags. As Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage quipped (2020), it seems “we are all nationalists now.”

Political scientists largely agree that the nation, etymologically traceable to “birth” in Latin, is an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) with an “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983) and that individuals qualify for membership by dint of certain practices, beliefs, and/or inheritable attributes. Nationalism, a celebration of the nation, involves a desire for political sovereignty exercised by a nation over a given territory and is thus the “political principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent” [Gellner 2006 (1983), p. 1]. Nationalism is both a “collective sentiment or identity bounding and binding together those individuals who share a sense of large-scale political solidarity” and a sentiment “aimed at creating, legitimating or challenging states” (Marx 2005, p. 6).

As nationalism gains popularity once again, prominent voices have decried it. French President Macron has argued that nationalism erases moral values (Dalton 2018). *The Guardian* columnist George Monbiot (2005) has equated nationalism with racism; celebrated author Arundhati Roy (2006, p. 15) has written that flags are “bits of colored cloth that governments use first to shrink-wrap people’s minds and then as ceremonial shrouds to bury the dead.” These reactions echo a twentieth-century consensus, which included Albert Einstein calling nationalism the “measles

of mankind” (quoted in Isaacson 2007, p. 386); Rabindranath Tagore (2020, p. 34) decrying the celebration of the nation as “the greatest evil”; Hannah Arendt (1945) linking nationalism to chauvinism; and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1953) observing that nationalism was a “false god.”

Yet nationalism—a broad term encompassing many varieties of national attachment—has not always been a force for destroying democracies, waging wars, or marginalizing minorities. Nationalism has featured centrally in some of the greatest movements for freedom and justice since the late eighteenth century, such as the many self-determination movements overthrowing absolute monarchies in the wake of the American and French Revolutions, as well as those overthrowing racially and economically exploitative colonial regimes. Mahatma Gandhi (1997, p. 86) called himself a fierce nationalist, though “not devised to harm any nation or individual.” Nelson Mandela (2018, p. 44) too called himself “a nationalist but by no means a racialist.” Today, most government leaders invoke historical narratives of national belonging to legitimate their power and policies. And some of them do so through a values-based narrative, from Indonesian President Jokowi (as quoted in Sapiie 2018) exhorting others to learn from Indonesia’s experience of “tolerance and building unity in the nation through *pancasila* [Indonesia’s official national narrative]” to Canada’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau (2017, p. 25) extolling a Canadian national identity “that is no longer based on ethnic, religious, historical, or geographic grounds. . . [but] based on shared values.” Because a strong sense of nationalism is a battery for powering a wide range of political projects (Canovan 1996), it is worth remembering that national attachments have sometimes inspired great sacrifice for the public good—from fighting in wars and national service to more mundane behaviors such as wearing face masks in pandemics.

Of course, not all nationalisms lead to prosocial behavior. A key reason why the rise of nationalists such as Trump, Modi, Orbán, and Xi is causing broad consternation is that these leaders are employing a particular kind of nationalism to gain and maintain power. All nationalisms draw distinctions between a country’s obligations to its own citizens and noncitizens. But many newly ascendant nationalisms legitimate internal racial, religious, and ethnic hierarchies among citizens of their own countries. Examples include Donald Trump dog-whistling a white nationalism that ranks nonwhites as second-class citizens (Bonikowski & Zhang 2020), Narendra Modi trumpeting a Hindu nationalism that ranks Muslims as second-class citizens (Tudor 2018), and Xi heralding a Han nationalism that ranks Tibetans, Mongols, and Uighurs as second-class citizens (Zhao 2004).

As some political scientists are beginning to argue, it is not nationalism per se, but exclusionary nationalisms (also called ethnic or essentialist nationalisms) that are problematic for outcomes such as democracy (Tudor & Slater 2020), the prevention of genocide (Straus 2015), and the provision of public goods (Miguel 2004). These arguments raise broader questions: How and when are dominant national narratives formed? Does the invocation of national solidarity invariably presage the denigration of other nations, minority suppression, and external aggression? Under what circumstances does the rise of nationalism pose a problem for outcomes such as democracy, economic development, migration policy, human rights, or global peace?

Despite the growing import of such questions and their natural fit within political science, research illuminating the comparative modalities of nationalism has been historically sparse. This gap is especially notable because keen political observers and scholars have long argued that a common national identity is an essential mediator of at least one outcome of interest—democracy. Niccolò Machiavelli wrote that a spirit of “clear equality” pervaded unified republics [1996 (c. 1517), ch. 55]; John Stuart Mill argued that “[f]ree institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities” (1861, p. 289); and Alexis de Tocqueville declared, “there is nothing in the world but patriotism and religion that can make the universality of citizens advance for long toward the same goal” [2000 (1835), p. 89]. Influential political scientists such as

Dahl (1989) and Rustow (1970) also suggested that the only absolute prerequisite to democracy was a sense of national unity.

While there seems to be a consensus that democracies require a developed sense of political solidarity, political science has only just begun to turn nationalism into a robust area of scholarly inquiry. Single-country case studies of nationalism abound in political science. But while each country's national narrative is unique, a fundamental assumption of comparative political science is that trading away historical nuance for parsimony reaps insights. Indeed, some of our most foundational understandings of nationalism have come from sociologists explicitly engaging in comparisons (Wallerstein & Hechter 1970; Tilly 1975; Hechter & Levi 1979; Brubaker 1992, 1996; Hechter 2000; Wimmer 2002, 2013, 2018). The historical neglect of nationalism in political science, which is just beginning to change, arises out of historic and normative grounds (Nodia 2017, Tamir 2019). Even where political science research has been explicitly comparative, it has primarily sought to investigate the historic origins and spread of nationalism (Emerson 1960, Smith 1991, Greenfeld 1992), rather than nationalism's impacts upon other outcomes of interest. Furthermore, the empirical lens of this work has heavily privileged the European and American experiences (Lipset 1967, Greenfeld 1992, Spruyt 1994, Centeno 2002).

In this article, we call for more research that integrates the experiences of historically neglected regions and explicitly considers nationalism's effects. Below, we first critically assess the classic debates in nationalism scholarship and identify the origins of the current consensus that nations are socially constructed and historically contingent phenomena. Next, we identify three trends in contemporary nationalism scholarship: (a) comparative historical scholarship that treats nationalism as a macropolitical force and excavates the relationships between nations, states, constitutive stories, and political conflict; (b) behavioral scholarship that uses survey and experimental research to gauge the causes and effects of attachment to nations; and (c) observational and ethnographic scholarship that describes the everyday processes and practices that perpetuate national belonging. We then summarize insights from other disciplines and identify gaps in empirical knowledge that political scientists are well-positioned to address. A final section discusses promising avenues for further exploration and calls for more comparative, cross-disciplinary, and cross-regional research on nationalism.

## WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW: CLASSIC INSIGHTS REVISITED

Though prominent historians wrote on the subject (notably E.H. Carr, Carlton Hayes, Otto Hintze, Miroslav Hroch, Elie Kedourie, Hans Kohn, Friedrich Meinecke, Robert William Seton-Watson, and Eugen Joseph Weber), political scientists did not systematically study nationalism until the latter half of the twentieth century. Articles on nationalism published in political science journals were typically case studies authored by historians, sociologists, or psychologists. Karl Deutsch was a pioneer in the comparative study of nationalism, hypothesizing that changes in mass social mobilization and political communication were intimately related to the global rise of nationalism (Deutsch 1953, 1961, 1969).

With some exceptions (Arendt 1945, Bendix 1964, Coleman 1954, Emerson 1960, Shoup 1962, Rotberg 1962, Rosenblatt 1964, Rokkan 1971, Connor 1972, Young 1976), nationalism failed to become a topic of mainstream research in political science until after 1983, when three influential studies of nationalism were simultaneously published: Gellner's [2006 (1983)] *Nations and Nationalism*, Anderson's (1983) *Imagined Communities*, and Hobsbawm & Ranger's (1983) *The Invention of Tradition*. These scholars all shared a conception of the nation and nationalism as modern phenomena that grew out of industrialization, urbanization, print-capitalism, and resistance to colonialism. For example, Gellner [2006 (1983)] argued that industrialization necessitated an

adequately trained labor force that spurred elites to introduce standardized national educational curricula favoring a “high culture.” Gradually, the introduction of national education curricula was expanded and rural hinterlands became more integrated into a single national community. Anderson (1983) looked at non-European cases and explained the emergence of nationalism in colonized Latin America partially as the result of the blocked social mobility of colonizing settlers.

While these scholars did not suggest that nationalism was either inevitable or consciously developed by state elites, they did understand nationalism to be a by-product of the forces of modernization and were thus called modernists. Nationalism, they posited, grew out of the seismic changes of the Industrial Revolution, thus distinguishing nationalism from premodern social identities such as castes, clans, or tribes. Posner’s (2003) empirical work tracing linguistic homogenization in Zambia illustrates such structural arguments.

Perennialist and ethnosymbolism scholars alike reacted to modernist views by arguing that some form of nations and nationalism existed prior to the advent of modernity (Shils 1957; Geertz 1963; Smith 1986, 1991; Gorski 2000), at least in some cases (Roshwald 2006). Some perennialist scholars singled out religion as an important building block for nationalism (Hastings 1997, Gorski 2003). These scholars were not citing German Romantics such as Johann Gottfried von Herder or Johann Gottlieb Fichte, nor the organic intellectuals of various nascent national states who viewed nations as political entities awaiting awakening (also known as primordialists). Instead, they charged that nations were often or always built upon pre-existing ethnic and cultural building blocks. These debates over the origins of the nation were epitomized in the well-known Warwick Debates between Ernest Gellner and Anthony Smith.

Representing the perennialists, Smith contended that there is such deep continuity between ancient cultures and ethnic communities on the one hand, and modern nation-states on the other, that they are inseparable. All nations and nationalisms, Smith (1995, p. 18) argued, are ultimately ethnic: “History is no sweetshop in which its children may ‘pick and mix’... The challenge for scholars as well as nations is to represent the relationship of ethnic past to modern nation more accurately and convincingly.”

Representing the modernists, Gellner (1996) countered that nations do not always have ethnic pasts; therefore, ethnic building blocks are neither necessary nor sufficient for nations to emerge. Estonians, for example, possessed no ethnic consciousness nor even a name for themselves at the start of the nineteenth century, but they created a nation, national consciousness, and a nation-state within 100 years. Consequently, though nations may reflect cultural continuities with premodern ethnic sensibilities, this relationship is contingent and inessential.

These debates over nationalism’s origins have not entirely disappeared (Breuilly 2013, Gat 2013, Malešević 2013), but the accumulation of research has increasingly favored the modernist understanding of nationalism by verifying testable implications and by accumulating country studies that specify how industrialization, urbanization, and mass education both create and strengthen nationalism. Such scholarship has underlined nationalism’s modern origins by showing that perennialist theories struggle to explain the timing of initial national awakenings and the modifications of a country’s constitutive story [Renan 1995 (1882), Brubaker 1996, Gellner 2006 (1983), Smith 2003, Laitin 2007]. Scholars also argued that states themselves were active agents in creating nations and popularizing nationalism, both because nationalism secured internal legitimacy for increasingly centralized states (Weber 1976; Hobsbawm 1990, 1996) and because nationalism enabled the creation and perpetuation of more powerful mass armies (Posen 1993).

The broader constructivist turn in comparative politics reverberated into nationalism scholarship, demonstrating how peoples could be organized into a wide range of overlapping identity dimensions such as race, tribe, religion, ethnicity, region (see Horowitz 1985, Lieberman 2003, Brubaker 2004, Posner 2005, Chandra 2012). Such research showed that tribes, religious groups,

clans, and kinship groups existed long before modern nations emerged and that they did not always become politically activated. Only those groups that were motivated by a desire for political self-determination could be understood as nations (Hechter 2000). This research strengthened the modernist view that nations and nationalism were not inevitable but rather emerging out of contextual circumstances. Explanations for when and why nationhood emerges range from instrumental and coordinative to episodic and situational motivations (Brubaker 1992, 1996; Sewell 1996; Laitin 1998; Wedeen 2008). Classic and contemporary scholarship have thus converged to understand the nation-state as one possible outcome of macrohistorical, contingent social processes of identification (Brubaker 1996, 2004) rather than as an entity with fixed relevance or meaning.

## WHAT WE ARE GETTING TO KNOW

Comparative nationalism research has only recently begun in earnest to move beyond its twentieth-century Eurocentric bias. Recent research evinces greater concern with nationalism's effects through the exploration of cross-regional variation, with particular emphasis on causal identification. Below, we focus on three notable trends in contemporary nationalism research that illustrate nationalism as a causal phenomenon. Current research is exploring nationalism's macrohistorical effects on a range of political outcomes; its micro-level effects on individual political behavior; and how quotidian conceptions of nationalism—in contrast to elite conceptions of nationalism—reproduce national narratives. Each of these trends falls within a distinct methodological tradition, highlighting the potential for cross-methodological collaborations to foster new insights.

### Nationalism as a Macropolitical Force

Macropolitical nationalism research, much of it falling within the comparative historical methods tradition, can be grouped into three different types: research accounting for the contingent rise of particular national states; research investigating the constitutive national stories in each state and the circumstances under which such narratives get entrenched or change; and emergent research that explores the effects of national narratives on a variety of political phenomena.

Whereas there were fewer than 60 states in the world a century ago, there are nearly 200 today. This growth demonstrates a profound political transformation: the disappearance of a wide range of pre-existing forms of political organization in favor of the sovereign nation-state as the dominant actor in the international system (Spruyt 1994, Wimmer & Min 2006). Globalization and forces of hyperconnectivity notwithstanding, the nation-state remains the most powerful political actor in the twenty-first century—possessing the primary power to address our most important policy challenges, such as climate change, global pandemics, poverty, and wealth inequality. The nation-state's dominance in contemporary politics is so profound that some scholars have called its ascendancy the *sine qua non* of modern society (Greenfeld 1992, Wimmer 2002).

Scholars of nationalism have recently conducted more rigorous empirical studies that often revisit and extend classic insights. Andreas Wimmer (2012, 2018) notably revitalized the macropolitical study of nationalism. In *Waves of War*, Wimmer (2012, p. 3) notes the transformation from a world of “multiethnic empires, dynastic kingdoms, tribal confederacies, and city-states to a world of states each ruled in the name of a nation properly seated in the general assembly of the UN.” Asking how and why states became nation-states—i.e., states where citizens receive political participation and public goods in exchange for taxes and military support—Wimmer argues that gradually, in Great Britain, the United States, and France, elites and masses identified with each other and became a community of belonging worth defending. His argument, consistent with

Deutsch's (1953) functional understanding of nationality as a by-product of economic and social modernization, pays closer attention to the role of state centralization with dense networks of voluntary organizations, which provided a basis for alliances across culturally different actors.

Wimmer's (2012) research cautions that the conditions that brought about the new social contract of the national state in Great Britain, the United States, and France did not exist in other regions of the world. Differences in contexts mattered enormously for the kinds of states and nationalism that emerged. Newer research has developed this insight, exploring how and why the territorial state prevailed over other forms of political organization (Acharya & Lee 2018). Works examining the adoption of nationalism among newer, geographically diverse, and typically post-colonial states across Asia and Africa provided additional verification that nations did not always build on pre-existing ethnic or linguistic bonds (Young 2012, Tudor 2013). Instead, nationalisms arose in the postcolonial states of Asia and Africa only when urban, educated elites found it expedient to borrow the rubric of nationalism to legitimate their narrow political goals and when the nation-state became a dominant political form in the region. Examining French colonial Africa and British colonial India, respectively, Lawrence (2013) and Tudor (2013) find that nationalist mobilization emerged when colonial regimes refused to cede rights to their increasingly well-educated colonial subjects, and indigenous elites strategically responded by adapting and espousing nationalism.

For example, though they set up a political organization to advocate for Muslim political interests in 1906, the educated Muslim elite in British India did not lobby for the nation-state of Pakistan until 1940. Instead, throughout the 1920s, a pan-Islamic nationalism sought the establishment of an international Muslim movement with a headquarters in Constantinople. This *khilafat* movement produced an alliance between the Indian nationalist movement and the Muslim political movement during the 1920s. Only after the 1935 provincial elections virtually guaranteed that the sovereign nation-state of India would be created as a successor to British India did the demand for a sovereign nation-state of Pakistan become the official policy of the Muslim League (Tudor 2013). Similarly, Leopold Senghor in Senegal and Sekou Toure in Guinea aspired to a pan-national French West Africa as late as 1957 (Cooper 2014). It was not until the nation-state proved an effective means of legitimating local political aspirations in the region that such urban, educated elites across colonial regimes embraced the project of nationalism and the building of a postcolonial state. And when they did so, the essential building-block identities that leaders chose varied dramatically, with important consequences for democracy (Tudor & Slater 2020).

The global diffusion of nationalism changed the very nature of political contestation around the globe, entailing geographically concentrated tidal effects (Beissinger 2002), local and regional power shifts in favor of nationalists that fueled inter- and intrastate wars (Wimmer 2012, Buhaug et al. 2008, Cederman et al. 2011), the rise of secessionist movements (Walter 2006, Brancati 2006, Griffiths 2015, Ahram 2019), ethnic bargaining (Jenne 2007), partitions (Chapman & Roeder 2007, Sambanis & Schulhofer-Wohl 2009), wars to redeem purported coethnics abroad (Saideman & Ayres 2008, Siroky & Hale 2017), and conflict over defining and delimiting homelands (Toft 2006, Carter & Goemans 2011, Shelef 2016). As the principle of nations and nationalism gained broad global acceptance, it was adopted and adapted through a process that was contingent upon domestic and international political structures (Coggins 2011).

While Tilly (1975, p. 42) quipped that "war made the state and the state made war," both the applicability of this argument beyond Europe and the nature of causality remained a source of debate (Centeno 2002, Mazucca 2021). Recent scholarship has also deepened our understanding of the relationship between war making and nation making. Sambanis et al. (2015) show that interstate wars significantly increase a state's international status and induce individuals to identify in national terms in ways that can reduce internal conflict. Leaders responding to pressures from

the international system and great power competition possess incentives to invest in war making in order to solve their internal nation-building problems. An important implication of their argument is that the higher anticipated payoffs of national unification actually make leaders more likely to fight international wars.

Bertoli (2017) and Gruffydd-Jones (2017) find, respectively, that participation in football's World Cup increases state aggression and that spikes in national celebrations have a direct impact on the likelihood of state disputes. Besley & Reynal-Querol (2014) exploit variation between and within countries to examine the legacy of recorded intercommunal conflicts in Africa in the precolonial period between 1400 and 1700, finding that historical conflict is correlated with lower levels of trust, a stronger sense of ethnic identity, and a weaker sense of national identity.

Classic nationalism scholarship proposed that at founding moments, nation-states sometimes build their national narratives around a core group's ascriptive ethnic attributes, sometimes around values and principles, and sometimes around a combination of the two (Brubaker 1992). What accounts for the nature of a nation's founding "constitutive story" (Smith 2003) or "national political community" (Lieberman 2003)? Scholars examining nationalism's spread beyond Europe emphasize that national identities most clearly grew out of the strategic interactions between colonial and indigenous elites during a nation's founding moments, i.e., the time that a nation is first established and the decades thereafter when such national narratives "settle" (Bonikowski 2016) or become "quiet" (Beissinger 2002, pp. 26–32).

Scholarship is accumulating to show that the narratives emerging from these founding moments deeply impact both the content of nationalism and the degree to which building-block religious and ethnic identities are absorbed into a superordinate national identity (Aktürk 2012, Lawrence 2013, Tudor 2013, Grzymała-Busse 2015, Liu 2015, Straus 2015, Wimmer 2017, Green 2020, Tudor & Slater 2020). While the classic distinction between ethnic and civic nationalism remains theoretically and empirically compelling, it is also being scrutinized (Shulman 2002, Marx 2005, Reeskens & Wright 2010, Koopmans & Michalowski 2016, Tamir 2019), in part because national narratives are rarely uncontested (Shevel 2010). In the United States, for example, national identity has long been thought of as primarily civic or "creedal" (Myrdal et al. 1944, Fukuyama 2018; cf. Huntington 2004). Yet Smith's (1997, p. 550) groundbreaking work emphasized that multiple, competing traditions existed, including "liberalism, republicanism, and ascriptive forms of Americanism," a finding that scholars of American politics continue to substantiate (Theiss-Morse 2009, Schildkraut 2011, Wright et al. 2012, LePore 2018).

Scholars have also recently begun to explore how a nation's founding stories get inculcated and reproduced beyond elites. Mass schooling is a key mechanism for transmitting foundational narratives to the broader population (vom Hau 2009, Balcells 2013, Darden 2022). Darden (2022) emphasizes that mass schooling can explain both the initial fluidity and the consequent fixity of national identities. National identity becomes fixed when mass schooling with national content is introduced for the first time to a largely illiterate population. The durability of this identity is safeguarded through consequent monitoring by parents to keep their children aligned with the national identity introduced in the initial round of schooling. Balcells (2013) finds support for Darden's thesis, showing that Catalan national identity is not as salient in French Catalonia today as it is in Spain, as the first round of mass schooling with national content took place under French rule. The systematic inculcation of identities, whether through mass schooling with national content (Darden & Mylonas 2016), through the reification of categories by enumeration in censuses (Lieberman & Singh 2017), or through state control over the cultural machinery (vom Hau 2019, Kyriazi & vom Hau 2020), causally influences the nature of national identification in a country.

A burgeoning research agenda is treating a nation's foundational national narratives as its own causal force for a range of political outcomes. Constitutive stories of national belonging are



crucial for state capacity as measured by the capacity to tax (Lieberman 2003) or by the ability to build roads and extract resources (Thies 2009). Such stories also shape the nature of distributional politics (Miguel 2004, Singh & vom Hau 2016), fairness and inclusivity in society (Liu 2015), political ideology and voting behavior (Darden & Grzymała-Busse 2006), educational systems (Martin 2018), social capital (Reeskens & Wright 2012), foreign policy (Mearsheimer 2018, Mylonas & Kuo 2018), nation-building policies (Mylonas 2012, 2020), civil war dynamics (Kuo & Mylonas 2019), and the likelihood of genocide, especially when excluded groups are viewed as subordinate and dangerous (Straus 2015).

National narratives and reimaginings are also important for democracy (Kopstein & Wittenberg 2010, Tudor 2013, Tudor & Slater 2020). As Bunce (2001, p. 794) observes, “nationalism is a problem for democracy, but only sometimes. While it compromised democracy in Croatia, it supported democracy in Poland. In the latter setting, nationalism provided the foundations for not just the collapse of state socialism, but also the construction and sustainability of both democracy and capitalism.” Further understanding when, why, and how national narratives of which types hinder or help democracy is an important area of future research.

An emergent research agenda is also examining the conditions under which a nation’s constitutive story can alter. While change in national narratives is possible, it is rarely easy (Aktürk 2012, Brand 2014, Martin 2018). Founding narratives are sticky (Darden 2022) and changeable only through sustained effort, often through the forces of political leadership combined with robust political organization in contexts of existential crises (Aktürk 2012). Irrespective of the original conditions that produced a particular national story, the story tends to become entrenched and difficult to replace (Harari 2014). Because scholarship concurs that changing national narratives is difficult, investigating the rare circumstances under which national narratives do change is a welcome area of further research.

States today are self-conscious actors in the process of nation building, often systematically attempting to make national attachments primary. Why do some states heavily invest in nation building while others do not? The nature of international threats and the degree of state centralization are important determinants of a developed national identity. Darden & Mylonas (2016) build on work by Tilly (1990) and Posen (1993) to argue that a threatening international environment leads to public goods provision in the form of nation-building policies (in particular, public mass schooling with national content). When successful, nation-building policies can account for variation in both linguistic homogeneity and national cohesion.

Through controlled comparisons of different international environments, Darden & Mylonas (2016) find that states that did not face external threats to their territorial integrity were more likely to outsource education and other tools for constructing identity or to not invest in assimilation at all. Conversely, states developing in higher-threat environments were more likely to invest in nation-building strategies to homogenize their populations. Relatedly, Wimmer (2018) argues that nineteenth-century state centralization created the conditions for the linguistic homogenization of populations and the construction of central governments able to provide public goods. These two factors, along with a civil society that spans ancestral/ethnic divisions, lead to successful nation building.

Mylonas (2012) and Bulutgil (2016) offer international and domestic theories, respectively, accounting for variation in nation-building policies. Mylonas identifies three broad strategies that governing elites of a state can pursue toward a noncore group—that is, any ethnic group perceived as unassimilated by the governing elites—assimilationist policies, granting minority rights, or exclusion of a group from the state. Mylonas (2012) argues that a state’s nation-building policies toward a noncore group are driven by its own foreign policy goals (revisionist versus status quo) and its interstate relations (rival versus ally) with the external patrons of these noncore groups.

Bulutgil (2016) suggests that cross-cutting cleavages in a society operate as an obstacle to the emergence and political success of actors who want to perpetrate ethnic cleansing against ethnic minorities, while territorial conflict increases the salience of ethnicity and the likelihood of ethnic cleansing—especially because of the nonrepetitive nature of ethnicity across space.

Finally, scholarship examining the success of national integration projects often omits unsuccessful state- and nation-building projects (Mylonas & Shelef 2014, 2017). The antecedent conditions for a successful national project continue to be relatively neglected, though exceptions exist [Hroch 2000 (1968)]. Further scholarship on the prerequisites needed to articulate, popularize, and mobilize around cohesive national narratives would helpfully advance the comparative study of nationalism.

## Nationalism as Behavior

Nationalism is not only a macropolitical force and political principle but also a component of individual identity that can be impacted by and causally influence political behavior. Some insights developed through macro-level comparisons have been tested through surveys and experimental designs. It is clear that a sense of national belonging *can* transcend other group boundaries, but whether it actually does so hinges upon the type of national narrative being invoked (Li & Brewer 2004). Various experiments show that invoking national identity can promote civic involvement (Huddy & Khatib 2007) and decrease other intragroup biases (Transue 2007, Charnysh et al. 2014). Sambanis & Shayo (2013) suggest that violent conflict and resource competition for status and power lock groups into what the authors call bad equilibria, characterized by strong ethnic identification, low national identification, and vicious cycles of conflict.

Extant research has examined the relationship between changing political and economic structures on the one hand and an individual's identification with the nation on the other. Globally, we know that members of ethnic groups are more likely to report pride in their nations when their groups have access to power, possess a sense of group inclusion, and experience little ethnopolitical conflict (Wimmer 2017). The institutionalization of a dominant ethnic culture negatively affects tolerance of ethnic minorities (Weldon 2006), while ethnic majorities manifest more attachment to the state than ethnic minorities do (Elkins & Sides 2007).

Across sub-Saharan Africa, Green (2020) finds that a sense of national belonging is mediated by ethnic identity. He shows that when the core ethnic group is in power, members of this group identify more with the nation, but when this group is out of power, members identify more with their ethnic group. Green's argument suggests that the ethnic identity of leaders matters only for core groups, but Koter (2019) finds that the election of one's coethnic increases the sense of belonging to the nation for noncore groups as well. Overall, based on Robinson's (2014) analysis, living in urban areas, having more education, and being formally employed are all positively correlated with identifying with the nation above one's ethnic group.

These findings provide context for contemporary scholarship investigating whether the interaction of demographic changes and voters' attitudes toward globalization can explain the rise of new nationalisms in economically developed countries. Miller-Idriss (2018) has investigated the relationship between economic marginalization and support for nationalist movements in Europe, showing that these nationalist movements combine elements of antielite (populist) and antiglobalization attitudes. Colantone & Stanig (2018) suggest that stronger import trade shocks lead to an increase in support for nationalist and isolationist parties in Western Europe.

Specifically, nationalist movements respond to economic dislocation by proposing to protect ordinary citizens from both the vicissitudes of globalization and the out-of-touch elites that promote it (Zaslave 2008). Narratives of culture and identity are found to be at least as important as economic changes in raising support for right-wing populist parties (Gidron & Hall

2017, Kaufman 2018, Norris & Inglehart 2019). These works agree that the migration- and generational-driven demographic changes are effecting a transition away from a white dominant ethnic grouping in Europe and the United States and raising vote shares for right-wing populism and nationalism.

Short-term events can also affect individual attitudes toward national belonging. Blouin & Mukand (2019) find that exposure to government propaganda emphasizing national unity decreases the salience of ethnicity, increases interethnic trust, and strengthens willingness to interact face-to-face with non-coethnics in Rwanda. Depetris-Chauvin and coauthors (2020) find that national football teams' victories not only make national identification more likely but also boost trust in other ethnicities and reduce intrastate violence. Interestingly, flag-burning during football matches both increases in-group favoritism and decreases favoritism toward out-groups, irrespective of who is burning flags (Marinthe et al. 2020). An important area of future research is to understand whether these short-term attitudinal changes endure in the long term.

The solidarity effects of invoking a common national identity are contingent upon the contextual meaning of the national identity. Specifically, invoking a national identity can actually serve to exclude ethnic minority groups when the national identity is equated with or dominated by an ethnic majority (Dach-Gruschow & Hong 2006). Whether parochial group identities such as ethnicity are necessarily at odds with a sense of national belonging is also highly likely to be context dependent. More research interrogating tensions between ethnic and national identities, such as the kind that has distinguished between in-group love and out-group hate in social psychology, would form a welcome contribution to this research agenda.

The nature of national identity is particularly relevant in influencing individual attitudes toward immigration. Sniderman et al. (2004) show that considerations of national identity dominate economic considerations in experiments that are designed to evoke reactions to immigrants, while Haidt (2016) argues that urban elites in Europe and the United States typically make immigration into a kind of cultural litmus test for moral responsibility.

The invocation of nationalism, and especially the reflection of national ideas in immigrant integration policies, has mediated attitudes toward immigration in both the United States and Canada (Pickus 2005, Bloemraad 2006). Turning her focus to immigrant behavior, Fouka (2019) finds that discrimination against German immigrants in the United States during World War I spurred immigrant assimilation efforts, while state-sponsored assimilation policies, such as language restrictions in elementary schools, had counterproductive effects (Fouka 2020). Overall, Fouka finds that nation-building policies that provide unmediated benefits for integration are more successful in promoting citizenship acquisition, linguistic homogeneity, and mixed marriages with the native born, while prescription-based policies—where a reward is tied to a specific level of effort—are either ineffective or counterproductive.

## Nationalism as Practice

While most nationalism scholarship focuses on the creation and perpetuation of national identities, far less research examines how individuals understand and practice national belonging. The study of nationalism as practice is now a rapidly growing arm of scholarship, which builds on anthropological methods of participant observation to reveal the quotidian practices underpinning a sense of national belonging (Billig 1995, Schildkraut 2011). Research on everyday nationalism shifts our analytical gaze away from elites and takes seriously the lived experiences of citizenship by non-elites (Knott 2016, Goode 2020), in which some researchers question the central role of the state (Wedeen 2008) or social structure (Billig 1995). Such research also often critiques political science's methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002).

Nationalism-as-practice scholarship contends that nation building grows out of elite–mass negotiation and that elites are constrained by popular understandings of the nation (Brubaker et al. 2006). Scholars have increasingly drawn a distinction between elite and mass nationalism (vom Hau 2009, Bonikowski 2016, Tudor & Slater 2020). Isaacs & Polese (2015) propose a dynamic understanding of the nation-building process, with elites implementing policies that are typically accepted, renegotiated, or rejected by their targets. The central dynamic of nationalism as practice is a dialectic between, on the one hand, “the political elites [who] create, develop, and spread/popularize the idea of the nation and the national community” and, on the other hand, the “nonstate actors such as the people, civil society, companies, and even civil servants” (Isaacs & Polese 2015, p. 372). As Beissinger’s (2002) pioneering work showed, elites are not always in control of the national narrative. Nationalist mobilizations in the geographical neighborhood can spur on mobilization from below by raising expectations that official narratives of nation are vulnerable and by providing focal points for collective action in the street.

Research on nationalism as practice also examines how national attachments emerge and transform in places where a state did not systematically pursue nation building. This work reveals bottom-up processes of national identification that often assume their own causal relevance to politics. Narratives of belonging were often structured and restructured by historical and institutional contexts (Suny 1993) that imbued social action with distinct meanings. Wedeen (2008) demonstrates how quotidian social practices, especially oral traditions, created and reproduced a sense of national belonging in the near-absence of a state in Yemen. Hale (2008) argues that ethnic identity served as a mechanism to reduce cognitive uncertainty during the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Young (2012) suggests that once-arbitrary territorial borders have now become a meaningful component of national identity in sub-Saharan Africa, while Zubrzycki (2016) uses visual interpretations of a Quebecois festival to demonstrate the everyday secularization of Quebec nationalism. Everyday understandings of national belonging are also modified by unexpected shocks such as sports victories (Depetris-Chauvin et al. 2020), cinematic depictions of sports victories (Wise 2014), or implicit comparisons with neighbors (Koter 2020).

Billig’s (1995) work on banal nationalism—the everyday representations of the nation that aim to reproduce a shared sense of national belonging—is also pertinent here, since pride in victory in sports or prominence in cultural affairs could be the source of a bottom-up nation-building process. While it cannot account for the emergence of nationalism, it can certainly account for its reproduction.

In summary, scholarship in the nationalism-as-practice tradition shares with other new nationalism scholarship a conception of national belonging as growing out of partially contingent social processes of identification and a recognition that quotidian ideas and practices can reflect multiple, even contradictory, strands of national identity. Nationalism-as-practice scholarship emphasizes that village squares and public streets, in addition to the capital’s corridors of power, are important spaces for defining nationalism in their own right.

## WHAT OTHER DISCIPLINES KNOW

Just as political science is witnessing a growth in research treating nationalism as an important causal force, similar debates are growing out of other disciplines. While political science and sociology have always seen a good deal of cross-fertilization, the gains of engaging with other disciplines are evident when research trends and debates in other social sciences are considered. In this section, we highlight some of these debates, which underscore the need for comparative, cross-regional, cross-disciplinary nationalism research.

Philosophy has long debated the merits of nationalism through normative lenses, debating human nature and human rights through the lenses of concepts such as freedom, autonomy, identity, and self-respect. Following the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, war and ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia, and the Rwandan genocide, philosophers began anew to scrutinize the claims articulated on behalf of nations and nationalism. Philosophers such as John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau made moral claims in favor of territorial sovereignty and an accompanying political solidarity but articulated few coherent claims regarding national solidarity (cf. Abizadeh 2012). Contemporary philosophical discussions of nationalism can be conceptually divided into descriptive claims (which mirror early political science research) and normative claims. The descriptive approach asks, “What is a nation? What is the nature of belonging to a nation?” while the normative approach asks, “Does national membership have moral worth? How much should one value national belonging relative to other identities?”

Normative philosophy on nationalism is cleaved by debates over whether nationalism is a moral good and whether there is a valid distinction between nationalism and patriotism (Viroli 1995). The most celebrated contemporary philosophers—Isaiah Berlin, Martha Nussbaum, John Rawls, Charles Taylor—have recognized the importance of nationalism without making it a central object of inquiry. Some theorized that a shared national identity promotes the legitimacy of political institutions and political stability; conduces trust and the ability to compromise among fellow citizens; and calls into being social solidarity, which, in turn, leads to support for redistributive policies that undergird a successful society (Tamir 1993; Miller 1995, 2000; Canovan 1996; Mason 1999).

Yet other philosophers such as Habermas (1996) have drawn a firm conceptual line between two kinds of nationalism: one based upon real or imagined ethnic ties and another based upon a set of ideas and institutions—such as constitutions embodying those ideas and becoming the basis for a positive national identification (Markell 2000). These philosophers argue that only the latter is morally worthy. This Kantian view of the nation is also in tension with a Burkean, organicist conception of a people, which sees society as an indivisible whole, united through time as well as across a particular generation. Such debates could and should link more closely to empirical and methodologically rigorous investigations within political science (Tamir 2019). For instance, Stepan et al. (2011) examine processes through which political identification is achieved, noting that some nations seek to align the political project of the state with a dominant cultural identification (the “nation-state”) but that the great diversity of social groupings in newer nations necessitated recognizing that a single sovereign state may preside over strong cultural identifications that may not be at the national level (state-nations).

A related philosophical debate asks whether nationalism is ultimately compatible with cosmopolitanism—the view that “one’s primary moral obligations are directed to all human beings (regardless of geographical or cultural distance), and political arrangements should faithfully reflect this universal moral obligation (in the form of supranational arrangements that take precedence over nation-states)” (Miscevic 2018). Appiah (2018) argues that cosmopolitanism and nationalism are fundamentally intertwined, suggesting that there is no structural tension between these two, much in the way that there is not necessarily a contradiction between feeling attached to New York City and feeling attached to the United States. Others, such as Krastev (2017), argue that there is a structural tension between cosmopolitanism and nationalism that the recent migration crisis in the European Union has underscored.

Appiah (2018) reasons that many of us already simultaneously accept the tenets of cosmopolitanism’s emphasis on equal worth of humans and embrace our own individual commitments to particular communities. A tempting line of thought is that if everyone matters, then they must

matter equally, and it must follow that each of us has the same moral obligations to everyone. What this reasoning misses, argues Appiah, is that “the fact of everybody’s mattering equally from the perspective of universal morality does *not* mean that each one of us has the same obligations to everyone. . . . [I]t would be morally wrong *not* to favor my relatives when it comes to distributing my limited attention and time.” (Appiah 2019, p. 25, emphasis added).

Comparative cross-disciplinary work can explore this tension empirically in cases when an individual is facing a trade-off between national and cosmopolitan imperatives or identities. For instance, the influx of refugees resulting from African and Middle Eastern conflicts into European countries would be dealt with differently by a cosmopolitan who believes in fundamental human rights as absolute than by a nationalist who puts the rights of co-nationals above all else. Is the contemporary nation-state indispensable in the pursuit of social justice and good governance? What institutional structures would render national attachments unnecessary or only secondary to cosmopolitan ideology to achieve these goals?

Historians also debate these issues. Yuval Harari (2014, p. 38) argues that human society evolved beyond small face-to-face groups only following a “cognitive revolution.” Believing in shared myths or “imagined orders” was crucial to cooperation between strangers. Today, “the very survival of rivers, trees and lions depends on the grace of imagined entities such as the United States and Google” (p. 38). While historians are generally more attuned than political scientists to the role of contingency, much historical research into nationalism has made generalizations about the concept from single-country studies, with very narrow time frames, and often using contradictory definitions that impede cross-country comparisons.

Comparative and empirically grounded research is especially important because normative biases often shape such scholarship. For example, historians such as Kedourie (1960) and Kohn (1944) viewed nationalist myths as normatively impeding progress. Early American scholarship has suggested that American national identity was primarily creedal (Myrdal et al. 1944), whereas more recent scholarship (Smith 1997, 2015; Lepore 2018) recognizes that even in the United States—a nation of immigrants—civic and ethnic national narratives coexist. How unusual is this experience? Political science is well-situated to take up comparative and empirically informed investigations of such questions.

The profound questions posed by these debates—such as whether the distinction between civic and ethnic nationalism is even real and whether nationalism is intrinsically incompatible with cosmopolitanism—not only have serious contemporary policy implications but also can be advanced by articulating testable hypotheses that could inform a coherent intellectual and policy-relevant discussion (Haas 1997, 2000). Richer comparative, cross-disciplinary, and cross-regional investigations informed by these debates could helpfully advance our understanding of a range of political outcomes while also informing policy debates (Brubaker & Kim 2011, Ahram et al. 2018). For example, if cosmopolitan, national, subnational, and local identities are endemic to modern human identities, then polling that presumes a tension between globalism and nationalism can create or sustain false dichotomies.

Social psychology is another discipline with key insights into nationalism. While the majority of political science scholarship on nationalism implicitly normatively favors the predominance of a state-level group identity, social psychologists emphasize “groupness.” Generally speaking, contemporary social psychology builds upon an assumption that social behavior is driven not by individual characteristics but by the contingent nature of social situations and group behavior (Ross & Nisbett 2011). Classic research into social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1979) showed that some degree of in-group bias is crucial to creating a positive identity and fostering individual self-esteem. At the same time, optimal distinctiveness theory postulates that humans need both to be connected with and differentiated from others and that the balance between groupness and

distinctiveness is best served by identifying with a range of groups (Brewer 1991). Though trust, positive affect, and empathy toward and cooperation with members of in-groups may well be a form of discrimination, it can and should be distinguished from the kinds of bias that actively encourage aggression and hate (Brewer 1999; see also Levin & Sidanius 1999). Moreover, strong group identification can lead individuals to prioritize the collective well-being of that group (Brewer 1991, De Cremer & Van Vugt 1999) even at the expense of individual interest (De Cremer & van Dijk 2002).

On nationalism specifically, psychological research has drawn a distinction between a love of one's own country (Bar-Tal 1993, Bar-Tal & Staub 1997), associated with healthy in-group identification (Druckman 1994), and discrimination against out-group members. The distinction between "good" nationalism and "bad" nationalism (denigration of other countries and desire for national dominance on the global stage) has been called into question by psychological research. Good and bad nationalism both share high degrees of positive group affect and are conceptually and empirically correlated (Kosterman & Feshbach 1989). Political psychology further supports the contention that the distinction between good and bad nationalism can be situationally primed away. Patriotism and nationalism are highly correlated, and the distinctions between them, while empirically discernible, are nonetheless precariously prone to change under circumstances of threat. According to Li & Brewer (2004, p. 728), "it is possible that 'love of nation' can be associated with benign patriotic attitudes under some circumstances or with more malign nationalistic attitudes in other circumstances, within the same individual. Which conceptualization of national identity is activated may vary as a function of the perceived intergroup context, the salience of different national symbols, or the behavior of national leaders." With notable exceptions (de Figueiredo & Elkins 2003), political science has not absorbed and tested these insights.

Though group identities do not have to be in conflict with each other, perceived threat often evokes out-group denigration. For example, individual identification as a Hong Konger long peacefully coexisted with identification as Chinese. However, economic and political changes associated with the new Hong Kong government (particularly its increasing alignment with Beijing) have turned the Hong Kong government from a source of loyalty to a source of threat. This kind of research, pinpointing events that change the nature of national identification, is sorely needed. Political scientists can help investigate why some national identities perpetuate a zero-sum understanding of in-groups in some cases and not others.

Finally, historians and evolutionary biologists add further reason to think that narratives of national belonging should be taken seriously—because human cognitive psychology has been shaped over millennia to be finely attuned to narratives of belonging. Evolutionary biologists similarly contend that a Darwinian natural selection process governed the transmission of culture for such a prolonged period of time that the group-oriented psychological makeup of human beings has been selected for over thousands of years: "Ethnographic evidence of the prerequisites for and operation of [cultural group selection (CGS)] in the simplest societies suggests that CGS has operated in our lineage for a few tens of millennia, if not longer. If so, the cooperative imperatives produced by rudimentary culturally transmitted institutions may well have shaped our innate social psychology. This is reflected by the observation that young children learn norms and act on them, but chimpanzee societies have, at best, rudimentary norms" (Richerson et al. 2016, p. 16).

## CONCLUSION: WHAT WE STILL NEED TO KNOW

Political science has much to gain from further cross-disciplinary, cross-regional, and coauthored research into nationalism. Cross-disciplinary nationalism research focusing on the gaps identified above can provide a richer and more accurate understanding of nationalism. For example, political

science research could empirically dialogue with the philosophical debate over whether heightened national attachment always impedes progress toward social justice or whether national and cosmopolitan identities must necessarily be antagonistic. Cross-disciplinary nationalism also has the potential to expose the disciplinary biases that shape scholarship. For example, liberal multicultural philosophers have often supported minority claims to limited self-determination while withholding support for black nationalism (Valls 2010). Comparative research into nationalism could helpfully dialogue with normatively oriented philosophy to empirically inform these debates.

Cross-regional research has the potential to provide a more complete picture of how nationalism has metamorphized across time and space to fuse with local traditions and struggles. For example, while Eurocentric theories of nationalism have long focused on the role of mass schooling in shaping national consciousness or the role of indigenous elites in shaping anticolonial nationalisms, national awakenings in much of the postcolonial world took shape amid mass illiteracy. In such contexts, nationalism was imported and adapted in new ways, with national solidarity forged through the wearing of traditional clothing and the burning of official colonial documents (Trivedi 2003). As the European concept of the nation-state diffused across the globe, it was reconstructed in ways that simultaneously legitimized political struggles against colonialism and racism, and knitted together local socioeconomic struggles (Sealey 2020). Finally, because effective comparative research often requires a rich understanding of historical context and local languages, effective cross-regional research is usually coauthored.

Considering the enduring relevance of nationalism, the questions posed by the scholarly debates discussed above have critical policy implications. Nationalism is a conceptual lens through which political scientists can better understand the interactions of institutions, demographics, and individual behavior. At a time of heightened identity politics across the globe, more comparative, cross-disciplinary, cross-regional, and coauthored research has the potential to discern the mechanisms through which political identities become meaningful, facilitate cooperation, and evolve.

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