Nationalism Doesn't Fit the American Nation

No ethnic or religious group can expect to impose its view of American identity.

By
William A. Galston
Wall Street Journal, Digital Edition, July 16, 2019 6:57 pm ET

Supporters watch as President Trump visits the border in Calexico, Calif., April 5. PHOTO: SANDY HUFFAKER/REUTERS

Suddenly, it seems, nationalism is being discussed everywhere, as in the conference on "national conservatism" I attended this week in Washington. The term is used to explain, and often to justify, the success of the Brexit referendum in the U.K., the election of Donald Trump in the U.S., and increasing skepticism about international institutions and norms throughout the West.

Nationalism, proponents argue, has nothing to do with aggression against others. Instead it points inward, to the desire of every nation to be left alone and govern itself in accordance with its own traditions, says Yoram Hazony, a leading theorist of nationalism. Many nationalists condemn universal principles of political right for supposedly undermining sovereignty and justifying imperial interventions.

Nationalism is often conflated with patriotism, which simply means love of country. But nationalism rests on the idea of the "nation," a term derived from the Latin word for "birth." A nation is a distinctive collection of human beings connected by shared characteristics and mutual sympathies, and often by their belief—however doubtful—in common descent.

Nationalism is connected to political sovereignty through a compound idea—the nation-state. In this theory, each state is the political representative of a single nation, and the perimeter of the nation corresponds to the boundary of the state.

In practice, this ideal generates two opposed difficulties. First, some members of the nation may be outside the sovereign state that represents their collective identity. Treaties signed after World War I left millions of Germans and Hungarians beyond the boundaries of their respective nation-states, and the demand to overcome this separation has had reverberations down to the present day. Hitler's demand that Czechoslovakia yield the Sudetenland to the Third Reich was a critical step on the road to World War II. Today, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán does not hesitate to speak for the Hungarians in what is now Romanian Transylvania—or to lecture them on the political course they should follow.

Second, a state may include more than one nation, and it cannot give pride of place to any one of them without injuring the interests or the dignity of the others. The dominant nation within such a state often defines collective identity in ways that deny others full membership in the political community.

When researchers ask what it means to be "truly American," some of the responses are inclusive. In a 2016 Voter Study Group survey, strong majorities cited

characteristics like respecting American political institutions and laws, speaking English and possessing citizenship, all of which can be attained by nonnative people.

Yet other responses are more exclusionary. Sixty-three percent of Republicans, and 69% of voters who supported Donald Trump in the primaries, believe that you cannot be truly American if you haven't lived in the U.S. for most of your life. Sixty-three percent of Republicans and 72% of Trump primary voters go further: They say you aren't truly American unless you were born here. Fifty-six percent of Republicans and 63% of Trump primary voters assert that you cannot be truly American unless you are a Christian. Disconcertingly, nearly a third of early Trump supporters also think true Americans must be of European heritage or descent. It is hard to square these beliefs with full equality for naturalized citizens, or with the ethnic and religious diversity of the U.S. population.

To be fair, substantial numbers of Americans who do not support Mr. Trump also espouse these nationalist sentiments, which are anything but new. The share of Americans who believe that being Christian is part of being a true American is about the same as in the mid-1990s, and the share who think that being born here is essential to American identity is significantly lower. The difference is that in recent decades, these markers of national identity have returned to the center of political contestation, where they were a century ago.

In today's America, no ethnic or religious group, whether a majority or a minority, can hope to impose its understanding of American identity on everyone else. The effort to do so will yield only endless strife. But a purely civic, principle-based understanding won't suffice. Being fully American takes more than endorsing the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. It means accepting our history, with all its burdens, as one's own, and it requires special regard for the well-being of those with whom we share a national fate.

If you want to call this requirement "Americans First," I won't object, so long as you don't mean "Americans Only." Our shared membership in the human race matters too, which is why we cannot disregard oppression and genocide abroad. Unless

Americans are ready to accept the most vicious policies in other nations, national sovereignty must have its limits.

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Appeared in the July 17, 2019, print edition.

About this article

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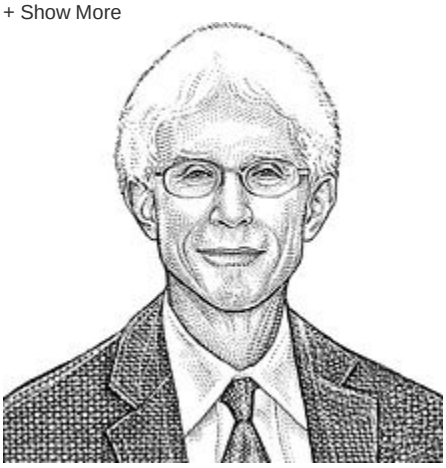

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William A. Galston writes the weekly Politics & Ideas column in the Wall Street Journal. He holds the Ezra K. Zilkha Chair in the Brookings Institution's Governance Studies Program, where he serves as a senior fellow. A former policy advisor to President Clinton and presidential candidates, Galston is an expert on domestic policy, political campaigns, and elections. His current research focuses on designing a new social contract and the implications of political polarization.

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Mr. Galston is the author of eight books and more than 100 articles in the fields of political theory, public policy, and American politics. His most recent books are Liberal Pluralism (Cambridge, 2002), The Practice of Liberal Pluralism (Cambridge, 2004), and Public Matters (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005). A winner of the American Political Science Association's Hubert H. Humphrey Award, he was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2004.

Galston has appeared on many television networks and is a frequent commentator on NPR.

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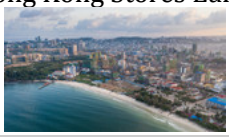

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