Whiteshift: demographic change, populism and polarization in the West

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There has been a dramatic increase in support for what Goodwin and Eatwell (2018) term national populism in the West, that is, a form of right-wing populism focusing on immigration and national identity issues. This is distinct from both left-wing populism, oriented toward economic disparities, or a religion-focused right populism, seeking religious revival and moral traditionalism. While the latter is not entirely absent from populist right discourse, it is a minor theme, and in some cases is entirely absent.

The 2010s national populist surge began when the UK Independence Party, Danish People’s Party and French Front National won nearly 30 percent of the vote in the 2014 elections to the European Union parliament. The following year saw the peak of the European Migrant Crisis, in which some 2 million people – many from Syria, fleeing the civil war – entered the EU. During the Migrant Crisis, immigration shot up the list of Europeans’ electoral priorities, and a number of populist right parties – notably Germany’s Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Sweden Democrats – saw their support soar. As the Eastern Mediterranean route closed due to an EU-Turkey deal to restrict crossings, numbers began rising in the western Mediterranean. In response, immigration concerns rose in Italy, and later in Spain. The Lega in Italy won 17.4 percent in the 2018 Italian elections, reaching 34 percent in the 2019 European elections. Moreover, Vox, a new Spanish populist party, won 15 percent of the vote in the November 2019 Spanish election. In the 2019 European elections, populist right parties did even better in than in 2014.

Meanwhile, Britain voted to leave the European Union in June 2016, a referendum in which immigration was the central issue for Leave voters (Clarke et. al. 2017). In early 2016, Donald Trump, an outsider to the party establishment, won the Republican primary, the only one of 17 primary candidates to make immigration central to his pitch. The same anti-immigration message helped him win the presidential election in November of that year. In New Zealand, a coalition between the Labor Party and the populist right New Zealand First came to power in 2017. One of their key planks was a pledge to cut immigration in half. Finally, in the Quebec provincial elections in 2019, the populist CAQ won a majority, promising to enact a historic cut in Quebec’s immigration intake. While the pro-immigration Justin Trudeau won the Canadian federal election in the same year, the country’s Conservative and Liberal voters had never been as polarized over questions of immigration and multiculturalism.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Political Demography

Why is this happening now? A glance at the data shows that in most cases, increasing immigration led to immigration rising up the list of voters’ election priorities, which created demand for the populist right, boosting their support. The connection between population change and politics is not automatic – ideology, media and national identity mediate it – but population dynamics are a key factor. More broadly, perceptions of demographic shifts have played a major role in world history, whether expressed as a fear of rising powers (such as Germany or the USSR) or of rising minority groups within countries, such as Catholics in Northern Ireland or Muslims in Cote D’Ivoire (Morland 2019; Nordas 2012).

As the chapters in this volume show, the study of political demography is an attempt to understand the role of population change in politics. The focus is on the uneven impact of the demographic transition between different politically-relevant units, whether civilizations, countries or ethnic groups. A major branch of political demography concerns demographic disparities between ethnic groups within countries, known as *differential ethnic population growth* (Teitelbaum 1998).

In many countries, power is at least partly contested along ethnic lines. In democracies, where numbers translate more readily into power, the competition between ethnic groups, and especially their political representatives, to ‘win the census’ shows the importance of demographic change (Horowitz 1985: 194-6). In Lebanon, the plunging Christian share of the population led to the removal of a question about religion on the census in order to preserve a political settlement premised on a Christian majority. But even in the United States, politically-charged questions have been raised over whether to characterize Hispanics as White, to create a separate category for Middle Easterners, and, more recently, to include a census question on a person’s citizenship status (Wang 2019).

This volume contends that the study of population change is often overlooked in political science. In this article, I show how population shifts – and the heightened threat perceptions these give rise to – are major forces shaping contemporary politics. Those who study right-wing populism or ethnic conflict often ignore population dynamics. Even those who consider the role of immigration for populism fail to situate this discussion in the wider literature on differential ethnic population growth in particular, and political demography more generally. With demographic and economic disparities set to increase in the decades ahead, I contend that more attention needs to be paid to the way migration and ethnic change are processed by host societies. How rapid and culturally-distinct are migration flows? To what extent are ethnic majorities and national identities absorptive or exclusive? How strong are cross-cutting, competing issues, which may distract political systems from focusing on problems of ethnic change? These are some of the questions that will need to be asked to better understand the politics of developed and developing societies in the twenty-first century.

Political Demography: Theory and Group Boundaries

In biology, populations are clearly distinguished by taxonomic features. However, human groups are typically defined socially. There is often a considerable subjective component to group categorization, and boundaries between groups may be fuzzy and subject to social reconstruction. This includes ethnic categories—for example, at different times Germans have become Czechs and Czechs have assimilated into Germans (Deutsch 1966). The Pashtun of Afghanistan and Pakistan are a classic case, with the Baluchi-Pashtun line based on criteria that differ by region (Barth 1969). So too with Tatars and Bashkirs, Turks and assimilated Kurds in Turkey, or Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians in Eastern Ukraine. At other moments, whole categories spring up, reducing the salience of older boundaries. The emergence of unhyphenated White Americans out of a social milieu where the Protestant-Catholic-Jewish divide was central, is one example (Alba 1990).

Despite these examples of fluidity, proscriptions against intermarriage are often strong, especially where religion serves as an ethnic boundary marker and there is a history of violence. In Northern Ireland, there is little inter-ethnic marriage between Irish Catholics and British-Unionist Protestants; in India, Hindu-Muslim marriage is rare. Sometimes race is strongly tied to ethnic boundaries. In South Africa (as in the pre-Civil Rights US South), interracial marriage is uncommon. In addition, Andreas Wimmer argues that matrilineal descent lines produce less rigid ethnic boundaries than groups where descent is traced through the paternal line (Wimmer 2008). In sum, ethnic changes in tight-bounded societies are more likely to result in tensions than in places where assimilation or boundary redefinition overwhelms demographic change. The latter is no guarantee of comity: intermarriage was common prior to violent conflict in the former Yugoslavia and in many sub-Saharan African countries that have experienced ethnic violence. Yet fluidity does help reduce frictions arising from demographic change.

Theories of nationalism and ethnicity help to frame the dynamics visited above. One view, constructionism (sometimes referred to as modernism or instrumentalism) is that boundaries are fluid and under the sway of political or economic actors. The opposing view, ethnosymbolism, is that boundaries are relatively fixed, especially at any point in time, anchored by cultural understandings and traditions of where boundaries lie that change very slowly over time (Smith 1998). Primordialists go further, claiming that perceptions of difference are rooted in genetic distance and evolutionary psychology, though most allow that ethnic boundaries are set by social and political forces (van den Berghe 1979).

The two main theoretical camps disagree on the role of demographic change in ethnic conflict. Constructionist approaches suggest that demographic change itself has a limited effect. Demographics are used instrumentally by political actors who are motivated by a desire for wealth, power or status. Alarm at demographic change is therefore something that is manufactured by the media and politicians, bearing little relationship to demographic reality. Ethnosymbolists would aver that demographic change does in fact matter: group boundaries are rooted in tradition and change relatively slowly. Thus demographic change translates fairly readily into perceptions of loss or gain. This gives rise to anxiety among the losing group, and thence to demographic engineering techniques such as pronatalism, territorial demarcation, immigration restriction or harsher methods including ethnic cleansing and genocide (Morland 2016).

Geographic Differences in National Populism

The preceding theories try to help us understand the political and social consequences of demographic changes described elsewhere in this volume. Global migration is not simply a matter of material factors like demography, technology and economics. If it were, East Asia would likely be experiencing the same ethnic transformation - what David Coleman terms the ‘third demographic transition’ in which ethnic majorities transition to becoming minorities – as the West (Coleman 2006). Yet while the foreign-born share of the USA and major western European countries is in the 10-20 percent range, and over 20 percent for Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Switzerland, the corresponding figure is just 1.75 percent in Japan and 3.4 percent in South Korea. This difference is even more marked when we compare the share of *citizens* that are foreign-born across the eastern and western parts of the developed world. Japan’s new work permit system, for instance, is based on 5-year permits and does not confer citizenship. While Singapore and the Gulf Arab states have large foreign-born populations, these generally do not gain access to citizenship and, by extension, membership of the national community.

These politico-demographic facts, in my estimation, largely explain why we do not see right-wing populism and cultural polarization in East Asia but find it in the West. The case of Eastern Europe, which has few immigrants but strong populism, may appear anomalous, but comports with the wider pattern when bearing in mind that it is only East European states *inside* the European Union, and thus exposed to the ‘threat’ of migration and diversity, that are experiencing anti-immigration populism. This represents a larger-scale operation of the ‘halo effect’ in which relatively homogeneous places bordering on diverse ones respond with a heightened threat response (Rydgren and Ruth 2013).

The Liberal Revolution

Nations, especially developed countries, have high levels of control over demographic shifts. Thus political demographers must be able to explain why some countries open up to change while others don’t. Political culture – the dominant ideology of a state – is an important variable here. Liberalism in the West emerged in a context of low migration, but has altered its form in response to demographic pressure from without. It therefore makes sense to draw attention to an important evolution of liberal ideas, in which ideas of liberty and equality come to be extended to non-nationals, and conceptions of nationhood recast from a model based on ethnic homogeneity to one based on diversity.

The origins of these ideas arguably lie in the early twentieth century United States, whose northern cities had become majority Catholic and Jewish due to large-scale non-traditional immigration in the 1895-1925 period. Liberal Progressives like John Dewey, Israel Zangwill and Jane Addams, in the 1905-10 period, urged the country to embrace this new diversity and to construct a futuristic polyglot nation. Though the idea of America as a trans-ethnic melting-pot goes back to the eighteenth century, this always coexisted with an ethnocultural understanding that the country was simultaneously an Anglo-Protestant construct (Kaufmann 2004).

Central to this outlook was an opposition to the restrictive immigration laws of 1917, 1924 and 1952, and to the prohibition on the sale of alcohol during 1920-33 - measures which had the support of predominantly rural or working-class Protestant Americans. In the late 1960s, what I term ‘left-modernist’ cosmopolitanism expanded amongst a new knowledge class, and via a rising strata of educated young people. These processes continued from the 1970s through the 2010s. Those animated by this outlook were disproportionately located in elite institutions like the media, universities, courts, and the arts and culture industries. Once a critical mass of left-modernist decision-makers were in place, they were able to exercise moral leadership and policy change through an elite institutionalization strategy (Kaufmann 2004).

Liberalism is thus a key enabler of politico-demographic change. An early expression of the new cosmopolitan-liberal outlook was the removal of the nationally-selective, and in some cases racially exclusive, immigration systems of the United States, Canada and Australia. In the US this took the form of the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 which abandoned a quota system based on nations’ share of the US 1920 population. In Canada, there was a gradual removal of preference for British immigration after 1962, and in Australia an end to the so-called ‘White Australia’ policy in 1966. These moves were not undertaken with the intent to remake the ethnic composition of western populations, as far right ‘replacement’ ideologues accuse. Rather, as Robert Kennedy’s testimony during deliberations over Hart-Celler make clear, they expected family sponsorship provisions and established immigration patterns to keep the nation’s ethnic composition from changing whilst eliminating *de jure* ethnic preferences in policy.

Anglo settler societies opened their immigration regimes to high-volume, culturally non-selective inflows in the 1960s, and Europe followed suit soon after. Moral suasion and sensitivities over accusations of racism prompted guestworker programmes in northern and western Europe to transform into permanent settlement programmes, which in turn became the basis for ‘nation of immigrants’-style multiculturalism (Joppke 1998). In Europe and America, in the 1980s and beyond, non-specific international human rights law concerning terms such as ‘non-discrimination’ were reinterpreted by western courts to expand the definition of refugee, and the protections afforded to claimants and overstayers. Taboos made discussion of numerical restriction difficult due to the association between immigrants and nonwhites in a normative climate of heightened sensitivity to minorities. Together, the liberal-cosmopolitan drift of political norms made ethnic selection, and even numerical restriction, difficult to impossible – despite public opinion (Freeman 1994).

Britain, which technically allowed all imperial subjects to immigrate during the days of the British Empire, was suddenly faced with this potential becoming reality due to cheaper transport, the lower cost of imported labour and population growth in overseas possessions. In response, it enacted restrictions on Commonwealth immigration – at the time mainly from the Caribbean and Indian subcontinent – in 1961. This was consolidated in policy by 1970. This led to comparatively low immigration from the late 1960s through the late 1990s. This is a departure from the pattern in North America and Australia, but is ultimately less of an exception to the liberal rule than one might presume. The ‘cultural turn’ of the left gradually began to break through the country’s class-dominated political discourse, embedding itself in the modernizing New Labour project in the 90s (West 2013). This ‘cultural turn’ sought to take the party beyond its working-class trade union base to appeal to a rising segment of well-educated, capitalist-friendly metropolitan liberals. As soon as Tony Blair’s New Labour government took office, net immigration rapidly expanded from its historic limit of 50,000 per year to 150,000, approaching 300,000 during Blair’s second term. The well-established association between racism and immigration restriction made it difficult to criticize the surge of refugee claimants, with successive conservative leaders like William Hague and Michael Howard routinely attacked as racist for raising the subject of ‘bogus asylum seekers’(BBC 2000). This again shows the power of the new liberalism to open a country up to demographic changes that were to be highly consequential for politics.

Labour acted precipitously in 2004, making Britain one of just three countries to waive all restrictions on migration from the new A8 East European accession states that had gained membership to the European Union. This resulted in 1.5 million new immigrants by 2010, nearly 10 times the number the government predicted (West 2013). The arrival of large numbers of white Eastern European immigrants muddied the antiracism-immigration equation sufficiently for politicians to address it. This began with the extreme right British National Party in the mid-2000s and populist UK Independence Party in the later 2000s. The Tories under David Cameron, sensing pressure on their right flank, promised to cap numbers at the ‘tens of thousands’ in the 2010 election, winning that contest decisively over Labour.

Despite the European increase, non-EU immigration was higher than EU migration in all years up to the Brexit referendum in 2016. The non-European share of the population of England and Wales more than doubled between 2001 and 2011, from 3 to 8 million (7 to 14 percent of the total). In combination, EU and non-EU immigration levels were by far the most important reason people gave for voting to leave the European Union in June 2016 (Clarke et. al. 2017). The British case, like that of Europe more generally, illustrates how actual demographic change through immigration had serious effects on politics. Demographic change interacted with a pre-existing political divide over membership of the European Union. This Euroskeptic political grievance was invigorated by cultural threats arising from large-scale immigration, resulting in Brexit. Here we see the theoretical importance of marrying demographic and political perspectives, and how political demography often works through the interaction effects between demographic and political (or economic) variables.

Immigration Politics Outside the West

Ethnosymbolist and instrumentalist theories can also explain the political demography of immigration outside the West. Some point to the relative openness of Latin American countries to Asian immigration during periods of restriction in North America, though the pull of Latin America was considerably weaker and numbers never reached a high level (FitzGerald and Cook-Martin 2014). More recently, Afro-Creole and Anglophone Belize and Antigua have accepted significant Latin American immigration from Guatemala. Brazil and Colombia have accommodated Venezuelan refugees from the Maduro regime and Turkey shelters over 3 million Syrians within its borders. Even so, Latin American countries such as Chile and the Dominican Republic have taken a much tougher approach to more culturally-distinct migrants from Haiti (Liang, et al. 2018). It seems that in many cases, tolerance for large-scale immigration or asylum-seeking extends only to immigrants of a similar culture and religion (i.e. ‘white’ Venezuelans in Colombia and Brazil, or Sunni Syrians in Turkey). In Africa, pan-African sentiment helped legitimate a generous immigration policy in countries such as South Africa. It also underlay Kenya and Tanzania’s welcoming approach to refugees from Somalia, Sudan and elsewhere. However, since the 1990s, pan-African sentiment has waned and the number of refugees has risen. Anti-immigration sentiment has become endemic in South Africa, leading to periodic pogroms against immigrant groups (Polakow-Suransky 2017: 246-7). In Kenya and Tanzania, the pan-Africanism which originally permitted refugees free movement has given way to a containment strategy in which refugees are barred, or not permitted to leave their camps without a permit (Maple, 2016:11; Rutinwa, 1999:2; Daley 2013).

In addition to these examples, there is an established pattern of ‘Sons of the Soil’ migration from relatively advanced, densely-populated parts of countries to their ethnic peripheries. Han Chinese have become the majority in Xinjiang in the 1990s, and have also migrated to Tibet. Javanese have migrated to West Papua, Kikuyu from coastal Kenya have moved inland to the (ethnic Luo and Kalenjin-dominated) Rift Valley, and Sinhalese have migrated to Tamil areas in the north and East of the country (Côté et. al. 2018). These flows typically result in resentment or even violent resistance from local majorities, sometimes contributing to civil war, as in Cote D’Ivoire (Nordas 2012). Many of the dynamics found in South-North migration seem to be replicated in the South-South migration of ethnically-distinct peoples across ethnic or national borders. Given the rapid growth of population in the developing world, and the fact most migration is intra- rather than inter-continental, national populism in the global South could eventually become more important than dynamics in the global North.

The Decline of White Majorities

A central focus of this book is to foreground demographic developments in the study of politics. One of the political-demographic ‘megatrends’ noted by political demographer Jack Goldstone is ethnic change in the West, arising through immigration (Goldstone 2012). Though developments in the global North have their counterparts in the global South, the big change in the past fifty years has been the rise in South-to-North long distance migration. Large western societies remain important due to their economic clout, military power and cultural ‘soft’ power – even if these advantages are waning. They are also central to the post-2014 ‘populist moment’ which is reconfiguring the basis of politics and may even be altering alliance behaviour along ‘nationalist-globalist’ lines.

One of the most important demographic-perceptual dynamics in the West today concerns the rise of the non-European share of the population, which encompasses, but is not restricted to, concern over Islam. Research shows that minority, immigrant, and Muslim share is generally overestimated by a factor of two or three – in some cases fivefold (Ipsos Mori 2018). Part of this reflects the fact that minorities stand out more and hence draw more attention from voters - including from minorities, who overestimate immigrant share at higher rates than whites. (Alba et. al. 2005; Herda 2019). However, those who favour lower levels of immigration or vote for populists also overestimate minority share, following a more general observation in public opinion research that people tend to overstate things they care deeply about (crime, for example). This comports with constructionist theories that emphasize perceptions over demographic realities, but the story is not so simple,.

On the ethnosymbolist side of the ledge, there is an important distinction to be drawn between concern over levels and worry over changes. Minority *levels*, as noted, tend to be overestimated, suggesting a role of social construction. Yet it is less clear that people misperceive *changes* over time: concern over immigration tends to correlate fairly well with actual shifts in the quantity of immigration over time, suggesting that people are able to accurately gauge shifts (Kaufmann 2017). In empirical work, changes in immigration tend to almost always result in greater opposition to immigration and higher populist right voting, at all geographic scales. However, higher minority *levels* – especially where well-established for over a decade - exhibit a nonlinear effect that is moderated by geographic scale. That is, at the local level, a high minority presence can lead to more interethnic contact, reducing majority-group concern. Whites in diverse urban neighbourhoods are typically more tolerant than those in rural areas or exurbs.

However, at the city, state or national scale, higher minority levels seem – all else equal – to be associated with heightened majority concern (Kaufmann and Goodwin 2018). Demographic indicators that capture both size and change in the Muslim share are especially useful in predicting the potential demand for the populist right. Figure 1, for example, plots the highest populist right poll or vote in a West European country against Pew’s medium projection for Muslim share in 2050. The correlation is .47, rising to .59 when we consider Muslim share in 2030. Populist right parties are highly volatile because their brands tend to be weak, not well established or institutionalized, and thus centred around a charismatic leader. Leadership succession and factionalism can lead the party to experience a sudden loss of popularity, but this is deceptive. The emergence of a viable leader or an immigration crisis can boost its support equally quickly. Too often observers have counted a party like the Austrian Freedom Party out when it loses a popular leader. It is more useful to look at high water-marks as they give a sense of the strength of demand in the electorate.

Figure 1.



Source: Election results and Pew 2011.

While the foregoing would suggest an ethnosymbolist demography-to-politics causal path, constructionism is also important, especially in Eastern Europe,which has little immigrant diversity but strong national populism. Yet I maintain that it is erroneous to include Eastern Europe, which has few Muslims, in this analysis. Eastern European countries inside the EU (not outside it), tend to manifest a ‘halo effect’ in which the presence of diversity and free movement is close enough to unsettle identities without bringing people into direct contact with Muslims so as to allay unreasonable fears. The term ‘halo effect’ stems from work on the local dynamics of populist right voting in which Rydgren and Ruth (2013) show that the highest local threat perceptions occur in relatively white ‘halo’ areas that immediately surround diversity, such as exurbs. Examples include the outer suburbs of cities as variegated as Amsterdam, Montreal, Stockholm and London. Donald Trump performed exceedingly well in the exurban belt of small communities in major US metropolitan areas (Orfield 2017).

East European EU nations like Hungary, Poland or Slovakia also tend to be more conservative on a range of social issues because of their history of subordination and especially because the liberal value shifts of the 1960s – notably on race and immigration - largely bypassed the communist world. In Germany, for example, immigrant share is correlated with Alternative for Germany (AfD) voting in the West but not in the East, where the Eastern European pattern of cultural conservatism interacts with the halo effect to boost the populist right (Schwander and Manow 2017: 12).

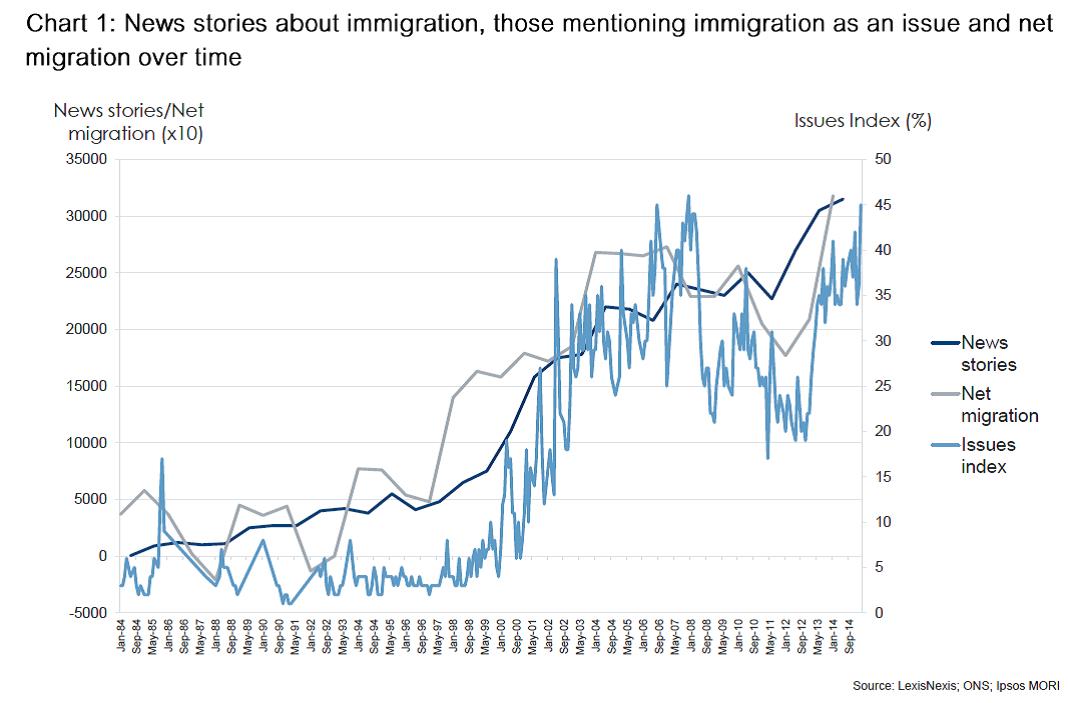
Nationally, there seems to be a nonlinear effect in that highly homogeneous nations tend to be xenophobic. Initial fears pass when minority share rises above a low threshold of 1-2 percent minority, leading to habituation and comfort. However, as minority levels rise above 4-5 percent minority, concern appears to grow once more. We see this in Europe, where low and high national Muslim share both predict a more restrictionist value public than is true when a country has a moderately low share of Muslims, i.e. in the 2-4 percent range (Kaufmann 2018: 253).

It is also the case that more diverse settings appear to result in more attitudinal polarization as liberal and conservative-minded voters respond in diametrically opposite ways to ethnic diversity. A good example of this is the way attitudes to illegal immigration in the United States polarize by political party the closer one gets to the US border. Higher proportional Latino increase in a county is correlated with a larger opinion divide between Republican and Democratic voters over whether a path to citizenship or deportation is the best way to deal with the undocumented. At the border, partisans are nearly 50 points apart on whether the undocumented should be allowed to stay in the United States, while 2,000 kilometers to the north there is no partisan difference (Gravelle 2016).

Immigration Attitudes or Salience?

One major finding in the literature is that more rapid immigration tends not to alter attitudes to immigration very much. A person’s views on whether immigration should be reduced, increased, or stay the same is given by their psychology and ideology, as well as party affiliation. The increased social liberalism of the post-1960s West contributed to a liberalization of attitudes in immigrant-receiving countries like the United States, Canada and Australia. Thus, even as unprecedented levels of non-European immigration entered these countries (initially, more so North America), attitudes did not become more hostile. As the Baby Boom generation increased its presence in the electorate in the 1990s, immigration opinion was softening, even as higher diversity was stimulating threat. The two forces largely offset each other in America, but from the mid-1990s, liberalization was the order of the day. Based on an index of 72 indicators in US social surveys, liberalization of attitudes among whites took place exclusively among Democrats rather than Republicans (Goldberg 2020).

Yet it is one thing to want less immigration, as a majority of Europeans and near-majority of North Americans do, and quite another to say immigration is the most important issue facing one’s country. This latter measure, known as immigration salience, is what creates the demand conditions for national populism in the West. Figure 2 shows how in Britain, the sharp rise in immigration after Tony Blair’s Labour government took office in 1997 broke with a longstanding period, since the late 1960s, of low net migration in a range between zero and 50,000. As immigration rose, the number of media stories increased and the share of Britons saying immigration was the top issue facing the country (i.e. immigration salience) climbed along with it.

Figure 2.

Source: Ipsos Mori 2015: 5.

In Europe, we see a very similar pattern. Immigration into Europe began to rise sharply in 2014, peaking in late 2015 with the Migrant Crisis of asylum seekers from the Syrian conflict and elsewhere, and national populism rose along with the flows. One study showed that in 9 of 10 major West European countries between 2005 and 2016, immigration, immigration salience, and the populist right vote were significantly correlated.

Nevertheless, demography, which affects the demand side for national populism, is not the only story. Political supply is also important, and here there is scope for politicians and, to an extent, the media, to frame perceptions of ethno-demographic change and immigration. In the United States, rapid growth in the illegal immigrant population to around 12 million, and a quick increase in ethnic diversity due both to immigration and a considerably higher Hispanic total fertility rate (2.84 compared to 2.01 for whites in the early 2000s), created the demand conditions for a politics of immigration as early as the 1980s. Even as net migration from Mexico largely ceased and Hispanic fertility converged toward that of the white ‘Anglo’ majority by the late 2010s, the demographic momentum and cultural response from the post-90s period shaped attitudes on the right (Valentino et. al. 2013).

While immigration was an important issue for whites in specific locales (South Florida, Southern California), as exemplified by the 1994 Proposition 187 vote in California denying services to illegal immigrants, the issue did not gain traction at federal level until the 2010s. This was mainly due to political supply constraints on the right. In both the right-wing media and in the Republican party, a universalist brand of conservatism blended conservative family values, libertarian economics and a muscular foreign policy together with a liberal approach to immigration and an appeal to Latino voters. This ‘neoconservative’ blend was, however, challenged by an older ‘paleoconservative’ tradition focused on conserving white, Anglo-Protestant ethnic traditions. This first emerged in Pat Buchanan’s 1992 and 1996 primary campaigns, in which Buchanan did relatively well and included a tough message about border control in his pitch. It subsequently gained ground with both Proposition 187 in California and local anti-immigration ordinances, beginning in the mid-2000s and later including Arizona’s Senate Bill 1070 of 2010.

In 2014, a bipartisan immigration reform bill was scuttled by grassroots restrictionist pressure, and this was accompanied by the defeat of House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, a pro-immigration figure within the Republican establishment, in a local republican primary. In his place rose upstart Dave Brat, a relative unknown whose attacks on Cantor’s immigration credentials helped win him the seat. In the middle of that year, a wave of tens of thousands of Central American mothers and children came across the border seeking asylum, raising the profile of the immigration issue and demonstrating how demographic changes can shape politics.

So began a new chapter in US immigration history in which the issue came to be ranked as the top priority by 10-20 percent of Republican voters, an unprecedented development since records began in the 1930s. This set the stage for Donald Trump’s successful 2015 Republican primary bid. In his opening speech announcing his new campaign, on June 16, 2015, Trump broke a number of taboos that had been observed by both the Republicans and the right-wing media to that point. The first was to campaign explicitly on immigration, which none of the other sixteen primary contenders did. The second was to use direct, sometimes racist, language: ‘When Mexico sends its people,’ he began, ‘they’re not sending their best….They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are fine people’ (Washington Post 2015).

In November 2016 he stunned the country by winning the presidential election in a campaign characterized by blunt language on immigration. The immigration issue was the most statistically significant predictor of both Trump support in the Republican primary and vote-switching in the presidential election. It was central to explaining the shift of a number of blue-collar white Obama Democrats to the Republican banner – a key constituency of swing voters in battleground ‘blue wall’ states in the Midwest such as Wisconsin and Michigan, with their large working-class white electorates. A number of tough immigration measures followed once Trump took office, including a travel ban targeting a number of Muslim-majority countries and a sharp cut in refugee admissions. Among white Americans, immigration opinion split dramatically along partisan lines between 2012 and 2016, a major change from previous decades, in which Republican and Democratic opinion on the question was relatively similar and the issue was not politicized to a major degree.

In liberal societies, ethno-demographic change frequently leads to partisan divisions over immigration. This shifts the basis of politics away from more materialist left-right divisions to cultural cleavages based on attitudes to ethno-cultural change, immigration and national identity. The American case shows that demographic change is important, but that ethnic change and immigration rates do not always translate immediately into restrictionist populism. In Western Europe, by contrast, the relationship between migration and populist support was closer, perhaps because of the multiplicity of parties (aside from Britain) and diversity of media outlets (as in Britain) which served as a conduit for local discontent to break into the national conversation. In the US, the two party system and the sway of neoconservatism within much of the right-wing media helped deflect opinion toward other issues prior to 2015. Political supply factors, including politicians and the media, therefore have some leeway in directing attention towards, or away from, demographic shifts, and framing how voters should respond.

Conclusion

The unevenness of the demographic transition, both between and within countries, is altering the ethnic makeup of the globe. In western nation-states, the combination of relative wealth, demographic maturity and a cresting of post-1960s liberal-egalitarianism has created the conditions for rapid ethnic change. East Asia and East Europe are relatively rich and demographically mature, but have much weaker liberal-cosmopolitan movements, and are thereby opting for a path of population stagnation which preserves their nation’s historic ethnic composition. In the global South, state capacity is weaker, but a number of countries have acted to restrict or contain immigration and refugee flows after an initial period. When migration is from co-ethnic sources, or from religiously-similar populations, as in Turkey with Syrians, or in Colombia and Brazil with Venezuelan refugees, this is considered more acceptable than when inflows are from more culturally-distant groups, as with Haitians in Latin America.

Liberalism interacts with demography in important ways in the West. First, liberalism has opened the doors of western countries to larger inflows of culturally-distinct immigrants than is the case in many other wealthy parts of the world. Second, liberal norms constrained mainstream parties and the media from responding to popular concerns over ethnic change. This process created unmet demand, which opened the way for the rise of populist parties or leaders. In many cases, mainstream parties have accommodated populists, which has eroded populist support but also led to liberal-cosmopolitan blowback. The result is polarization, partly along ethnic lines between white majorities and minorities, but mainly within the white population, between liberals and conservatives. Thus demographic change is shifting the dominant cleavage of politics in western countries from left-right economics to the ‘globalist-nationalist’ or ‘open-closed’ cultural dimension. This has even gained an international dimension, with nationalist actors in the West forming alliances with East European (or even Brazilian and Indian) counterparts as well as Putin’s Russia (Teitelbaum 2020). Meanwhile globalist-liberals in western countries forge connections with liberals in Eastern Europe and Asia.

The rise of national populism is connected to immigration and ethnic change, what David Coleman terms the ‘third demographic transition.’ Political supply factors mediate the relationship between demographic change and political response. This can take the form of discursive taboos or alternative framings which draw attention away from, or towards, immigration-led ethnic change towards other issues. The fluidity or fixedness of group boundaries also affects how consequential demographic changes are. Having said this, demographic shifts act as conditioning factors, creating fertile soil on the demand side which make it increasingly likely that populist entrepreneurs can break through. Like most political-demographic phenomena, immigration and ethnic change tend to affect politics in interaction with other social variables, in second- or third-order ways, to produce political effects. (Hout 2006; Kaufmann and Toft 2012: 9)

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