

The Rise of Nationalism in the 21st Century: A Systematic Review of Political, Economic, and Social Drivers

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Abstract

In the twenty-first century, nationalism has re-emerged as one of the most influential forces shaping domestic politics and international relations. Across both developed and developing societies, nationalist narratives are increasingly influencing electoral behaviour, public policy, and geopolitical alignments. This research provides a systematic review of the political, economic, and social drivers behind the contemporary resurgence of nationalism today. By synthesising existing scholarly literature, policy analyses, and empirical studies, this paper investigates how escalating political polarisation, mounting economic insecurities and uncertainty, widening globalization-induced inequalities, evolving migration dynamics, and intensifying identity-based anxieties have collectively contributed to the revival of national sentiment.

The study argues that modern nationalism is not merely a reactionary phenomenon but a complex response to structural transformations within the global order. Politically, the erosion of public trust in institutions and the rise of populist leadership have amplified nationalist rhetoric. Economically, a widened income disparity, job displacement, and perceptions of uneven globalization have fostered public demand for protagonist and sovereignty-focused policies. Socially, cultural insecurity, demographic shifts, and the rapid spread of digital media have intensified identity politics and strengthened nationalist mobilization. Through a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective, this research highlights how these interconnected drivers reinforce one another, creating fertile ground for nationalist movements across diverse political contexts.

By mapping the underlying causes and patterns of the twenty-first-century nationalism, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of its implications for democratic governance, global cooperation, and the future of the international order. Ultimately, the research emphasises that the resurgence of nationalism reflects broader political tensions between globalization and national sovereignty, making it a defining political dynamic of our contemporary era.

Keywords

Nationalism; Political Drivers; Economic Nationalism; Social Identity; Globalization; Populism; Migration; Cultural Backlash; Institutional Trust; Automation; Trade Shocks; Digital Media; Identity Politics; Systematic Review; Comparative Politics

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, nationalism has re-emerged as a powerful and often transformative force in global politics. While many scholars once predicted that globalisation, economic interdependence, and the spread of liberal democratic values would gradually reduce the relevance of national movements, protectionist policies, and identity-driven political discourses have gained renewed prominence. This resurgence has not only influenced domestic political landscapes but has also reshaped international relations, trade dynamics, and patterns of global cooperation.

The rise of contemporary nationalism cannot be understood through a single explanatory lens. Instead, it is deeply rooted in a complex interaction of political, economic, and social factors. Politically, declining public trust in traditional institutions, the growing appeal of populist leadership, and increasing polarisation have contributed to the normalisation of nationalist rhetoric. Economically, the uneven distribution of globalisation's benefits, rising unemployment or job insecurity in certain sectors, and perceptions of economic marginalisation have fueled demands for policies that prioritise national interests. Socially, rapid technological change, migration trends, cultural anxieties, and the influence of digital media have intensified debates surrounding identity, belonging, and sovereignty.

This research project aims to provide a systematic review of the key drivers behind the resurgence of nationalism in the twenty-first century. By analyzing existing academic literature, policy reports, and comparative case studies, the study seeks to identify common patterns and contextual variations in nationalist mobilization across different political systems and regions. Understanding these dynamics is

essential, as the rise of nationalism carries significant implications for democratic governance, social cohesion, economic policy, and the future trajectory of the international order.

Ultimately, this study argues that modern nationalism should not be viewed merely as a temporary backlash against globalization but as a structural response to broader transformations in the global political economy and societal change. By exploring the interconnected political, economic, and social dimensions of nationalism's resurgence, the research aims to contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of one of the defining political phenomena of our time.

Literature Review

The resurgence of nationalism in the twenty-first century has generated extensive scholarly debate across political science, sociology, and political economy. Classical theoretical foundations continue to shape contemporary research. Ernest Gellner conceptualized nationalism as a political principle requiring congruence between national and political boundaries, emphasizing sovereignty and territorial control as central features of modern political organization. In contrast, Benedict Anderson argued that nations are socially constructed "imagined communities," sustained through shared narratives and symbolic cohesion rather than objective cultural homogeneity. These foundational perspectives remain relevant in explaining why debates over borders, sovereignty, and identity continue to provoke intense political mobilization in contemporary societies.

Recent scholarship increasingly treats nationalism as a multidimensional phenomenon rather than a singular ideology. Researchers distinguish between exclusionary or nativist nationalism, sovereignty-driven nationalism targeting supranational institutions, ethnoreligious nationalism rooted in majority identity claims, and economic nationalism emphasizing protectionism and redistributive preference for citizens. Cas Mudde characterizes radical-right mobilization as a combination of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, highlighting how nationalist narratives are often intertwined with anti-

elite discourse. These variations demonstrate that nationalist movements do not always emerge from identical social conditions nor produce uniform political outcomes.

A central explanatory divide in the literature concerns demand-side and supply-side perspectives.

Demand-side scholars focus on voter grievances such as economic insecurity or identity threat, while supply-side research emphasizes elite framing strategies, party competition, and issue entrepreneurship. Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks propose that globalization and regional integration have produced a “transnational cleavage,” reshaping political alignments beyond the traditional left–right spectrum. This framework helps explain why nationalist parties gain traction in contexts where immigration, trade liberalization, and supranational governance become electorally salient issues.

Political Drivers

Scholarly work on political mechanisms highlights the complex relationship between nationalism and populism. While populism constructs a moral divide between “the pure people” and “corrupt elites,” nationalism emphasizes boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Contemporary movements frequently combine these logics, producing what Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart describe as nationalist populism. This fusion complicates measurement, as datasets capturing populist attitudes may not fully account for nationalist sentiment.

Institutional trust represents another major political variable. Research indicates declining confidence in representative institutions such as parliaments and political parties, while trust in implementing institutions like law enforcement often remains stable. Nationalist actors frequently exploit this divergence by portraying elected elites as disconnected while presenting state authority—particularly border enforcement—as legitimate protection of national sovereignty. In parallel, the weakening of mass party structures and partisan dealignment, discussed by Russell J. Dalton and Peter Mair, has lowered barriers for challenger parties to politicize identity-based issues.

Despite broad agreement that dissatisfaction with democratic performance correlates with nationalist voting, the causal direction remains contested. Some scholars argue declining trust drives nationalist mobilization, while others suggest nationalist discourse itself erodes institutional legitimacy over time.

Economic Drivers

Economic explanations emphasize the uneven distributional consequences of globalization. Empirical studies by Italo Colantone and Piero Stanig demonstrate that regions exposed to import competition—particularly from China—display higher electoral support for nationalist and radical-right parties. These findings suggest that community-level economic decline, rather than individual job loss alone, shapes political responses.

Similarly, research by David Autor and collaborators identifies trade-induced labor market shocks as drivers of ideological polarization in the United States. The causal chain often described in this literature links global economic integration to localized employment disruption, which then fuels demands for protectionist and sovereignty-focused policies. Manufacturing decline and automation further intensify these dynamics. Studies by Daron Acemoglu and Pascual Restrepo show that robot adoption reduces employment and wages in affected regions, contributing to perceptions of status loss and diminished political efficacy.

Scholars also highlight the importance of place-based inequality. Research indicates that disparities between prosperous urban centers and economically marginalized regions predict nationalist voting more consistently than individual income measures. Austerity policies provide an additional mechanism: evidence from Thiemo Fetzer suggests welfare retrenchment increased support for nationalist parties in the United Kingdom, illustrating how economic grievances interact with institutional distrust and immigration politics.

Social Drivers

Social explanations focus on identity, migration, and cultural change. Migration is frequently less a direct cause of nationalist mobilization than a political arena through which economic and institutional grievances are articulated. Survey research demonstrates that sociotropic concerns—perceptions about national culture, security, and collective economic future—shape attitudes toward immigration more strongly than personal labor market competition.

The cultural backlash thesis advanced by Norris and Inglehart argues that nationalist movements gain momentum when traditionally dominant groups perceive threats to their social status due to demographic change and liberal value shifts. Complementary research by Diana Mutz emphasizes status anxiety and perceptions of national decline as key predictors of nationalist voting behavior in the United States, although scholars such as Stephen L. Morgan caution that economic and cultural variables are empirically difficult to disentangle.

Digital communication represents a newer dimension of nationalist mobilization. Studies by Soroush Vosoughi and colleagues demonstrate that misinformation spreads more rapidly than verified information on social media platforms, potentially shaping political agendas and reinforcing polarization. However, researchers emphasize that online exposure often amplifies pre-existing attitudes rather than transforming them independently.

Comparative Regional Patterns

Comparative scholarship shows that similar structural pressures produce varied nationalist outcomes across regions. In Europe, supranational governance structures provide a clear institutional target for sovereignty-focused nationalism, as evidenced in Brexit-related studies. In the United States, nationalist mobilization reflects interactions between trade exposure, racial status anxieties, and polarized media environments. Cases such as India highlight ethnoreligious nationalism operating alongside economic liberalization, while China illustrates state-managed nationalism within a non-competitive political

system. These variations underscore the importance of institutional context in shaping how economic, political, and social drivers translate into nationalist movements.

Research Gap

Although substantial research exists on individual drivers of nationalism, the literature remains fragmented. Many studies focus either on economic grievances or cultural backlash without fully integrating political institutional dynamics and technological change. This research project addresses this gap by providing a systematic synthesis of political, economic, and social explanations, offering a more comprehensive framework for understanding nationalism's resurgence in the twenty-first century.

Research Questions

This research seeks to systematically examine the resurgence of nationalism in the twenty-first century by focusing on its underlying drivers. The central research question guiding this study is:

- What are the key political, economic, and social drivers behind the rise of nationalism in the 21st century?

To further explore this central inquiry, the study is guided by the following sub-questions:

- How do political factors, such as populism, declining institutional trust, and party system transformations, contribute to the rise of nationalism?
- In what ways do economic factors, including globalization, inequality, trade shocks, and automation, influence nationalist sentiments and political behavior?
- How do social factors, particularly migration, identity politics, cultural change, and digital media, shape contemporary nationalist movements?
- How do political, economic, and social drivers interact with each other in reinforcing nationalist narratives?
- How does the manifestation of nationalism vary across different regional and institutional contexts?

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to provide a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the resurgence of nationalism in the contemporary era. Specifically, the study aims:

- To analyze the political drivers of nationalism, with a focus on populism, institutional trust, and changes in party systems.
- To examine the economic causes of nationalism, including the effects of globalization, economic inequality, deindustrialization, and technological change.
- To explore the social and cultural dimensions of nationalism, particularly the roles of migration, identity, and digital communication.
- To assess the interaction between political, economic, and social factors, highlighting how these drivers reinforce and amplify each other.
- To provide a comparative perspective, identifying how nationalism emerges differently across regions and political systems.
- To contribute to existing literature by offering an integrated framework that connects fragmented explanations into a unified analysis.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a systematic literature review approach to examine the rise of nationalism in the twenty-first century, with a particular focus on its political, economic, and social drivers. A systematic review method is selected because it allows for a structured, transparent, and comprehensive synthesis of existing scholarly work, enabling the identification of patterns, debates, and gaps within the literature. Unlike a traditional narrative review, this approach ensures methodological rigor by following a clearly defined process of source selection, evaluation, and analysis.

Research Design

The research is qualitative in nature and is based on secondary data. It employs a thematic and comparative analytical framework to examine how different strands of literature explain the resurgence

of nationalism. The study is organized around three primary themes—political, economic, and social drivers—which reflect the central research questions and provide a coherent structure for analysis.

Data Sources

The data for this study is drawn from a wide range of credible academic and policy-oriented sources.

These include peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, working papers, and institutional reports.

Major academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and other reputable online repositories have been utilized to access relevant literature. Priority has been given to high-impact journals in political science, international relations, and political economy to ensure the reliability and academic quality of the sources.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To maintain consistency and relevance, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria have been applied during the selection of sources.

Inclusion criteria include:

Studies published primarily in the twenty-first century, with emphasis on recent developments

Research directly addressing nationalism, populism, globalization, or related themes

Empirical and theoretical works that contribute to understanding political, economic, or social drivers

Peer-reviewed and academically credible sources

Exclusion criteria include:

Studies lacking direct relevance to the research topic

Non-academic or unreliable sources, including opinion-based or unverified materials

Outdated works that do not contribute to contemporary analysis, except for foundational theoretical texts

Data Analysis Approach

The selected literature is analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. This involves categorizing and synthesizing findings under the three main dimensions: political, economic, and social drivers of nationalism. Within each category, key arguments, empirical findings, and theoretical perspectives are compared and critically evaluated.

In addition, a comparative approach is employed to examine how nationalism manifests across different regional and institutional contexts. This allows the study to identify both common patterns and contextual variations in nationalist mobilization.

Limitations of the Study

While the systematic review approach ensures comprehensive coverage of existing literature, it is limited by its reliance on secondary data. The study does not incorporate primary data collection, which may restrict the ability to capture emerging or localized dynamics of nationalism. Additionally, variations in methodologies across different studies may pose challenges in direct comparison. However, these limitations are mitigated through careful source selection and critical analysis.

Analysis and Discussion

The resurgence of nationalism in the twenty-first century cannot be attributed to a single causal factor; rather, it emerges from the dynamic interaction of political, economic, and social drivers. This section synthesizes the findings of the literature to provide a structured and critical analysis of how these forces operate both independently and in combination across different contexts.

Interconnection of Political, Economic, and Social Drivers

The analysis reveals that political, economic, and social factors do not function in isolation. Economic disruptions—such as globalization, trade shocks, and automation—often act as initial triggers by creating material insecurity and perceived marginalization. However, these economic grievances rarely translate directly into nationalist support. Instead, they are mediated through political narratives and social identities.

Political actors play a crucial role in framing economic discontent as a question of national sovereignty and control. Through populist rhetoric, economic anxieties are reframed into broader narratives of “us versus them,” linking domestic hardship to external actors such as immigrants, international institutions, or global markets. This process transforms economic dissatisfaction into politically mobilized nationalism.

At the same time, social factors—particularly identity, culture, and belonging—shape how these narratives are received. Individuals experiencing economic uncertainty are more likely to respond to messages that emphasize cultural threat or national decline. Thus, the interaction between economic shocks, political framing, and social identity creates a reinforcing cycle that strengthens nationalist movements.

Political Dynamics and Institutional Context

Political structures and institutional conditions significantly influence the extent and form of nationalist mobilization. In contexts where trust in representative institutions is declining, nationalist movements gain legitimacy by positioning themselves as alternatives to a perceived disconnected elite. The weakening of traditional party systems further facilitates this process by lowering barriers for new political actors.

However, the impact of these political dynamics varies across regions. In democratic systems with competitive party structures, nationalism often emerges through electoral mobilization and policy platforms. In contrast, in more centralized or authoritarian systems, nationalist sentiment may be shaped and controlled by the state itself. This demonstrates that while political dissatisfaction is a common driver, institutional context determines how it is expressed.

Economic Dislocation and Perceived Inequality

Economic analysis highlights that the effects of globalization are unevenly distributed, with certain regions and communities experiencing disproportionate disadvantages. Areas affected by

deindustrialization, automation, and reduced economic opportunities tend to exhibit higher levels of nationalist support. Importantly, the findings suggest that collective or place-based economic decline is more politically significant than individual income loss.

Moreover, the perception of inequality and unfairness plays a critical role. It is not only material deprivation but also the belief that economic systems are unjust or unresponsive that drives political reactions. This perception often leads to demands for protectionist policies and a reassertion of national economic control.

Social Identity, Migration, and Cultural Backlash

Social drivers further intensify nationalist tendencies by shaping how individuals interpret political and economic change. Migration, in particular, acts as a focal point for nationalist discourse. While empirical evidence suggests that direct economic competition from immigrants is not always the primary concern, migration becomes symbolically linked to issues of cultural identity, security, and national cohesion.

The concept of cultural backlash provides additional explanatory power. As societies undergo demographic and value-based transformations, segments of the population may perceive a loss of status or cultural dominance. This perceived threat fosters support for nationalist movements that promise to restore traditional values and national identity.

Digital media also plays a significant role in amplifying these dynamics. Online platforms facilitate the rapid spread of nationalist narratives, reinforce ideological echo chambers, and increase political polarization. However, rather than acting as an independent cause, digital media primarily accelerates and intensifies pre-existing attitudes.

Comparative Insights and Variations

A comparative perspective demonstrates that while the drivers of nationalism are broadly similar, their manifestations differ significantly across regions. In Europe, nationalism is often directed against supranational institutions and immigration policies. In the United States, it reflects a combination of

economic dislocation and identity-based polarization. In other contexts, such as emerging economies, nationalism may be closely tied to ethnoreligious identity or state-led narratives.

These variations highlight the importance of context-specific factors, including historical legacies, institutional frameworks, and political leadership. Consequently, nationalism should be understood as a flexible and adaptive phenomenon rather than a uniform global trend.

Synthesis of Key Findings

Overall, the analysis indicates that nationalism in the twenty-first century is best understood as a multi-causal and interactive phenomenon. Economic insecurity creates the conditions for discontent, political actors shape and mobilize that discontent, and social identities determine its direction and intensity. None of these factors alone is sufficient; their interaction produces the contemporary resurgence of nationalism.

Conclusion

The rise of nationalism in the twenty-first century is not a sudden or isolated development; it is the result of deeper and long-term changes taking place in politics, the economy, and society. This research shows that nationalism grows strongest where people feel economically insecure, politically unheard, and socially uncertain about their identity and future. It is not driven by one single factor but by the combination of these pressures working together.

Economic challenges such as globalization, job insecurity, and inequality create frustration, especially in communities that feel left behind. However, these frustrations do not automatically become nationalism. Political actors play a key role by shaping these concerns into narratives about national control, sovereignty, and “us versus them.” At the same time, social factors—like migration, cultural change, and identity concerns—give emotional strength to these narratives, making them more powerful and easier to mobilize.

Another important finding is that nationalism does not look the same everywhere. In some regions, it is focused on immigration and borders; in others, it is connected to religion, culture, or resistance to global institutions. This shows that while the drivers may be similar, the outcomes depend heavily on local political systems, leadership, and historical context.

Overall, this study makes it clear that nationalism is not just a reaction to globalization, but a broader response to how people experience change and uncertainty in the modern world. Ignoring these underlying issues will likely allow nationalist movements to grow stronger in the future.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this research, several important steps can be considered:

Strengthening trust in political institutions should be a priority. Governments need to become more transparent, accountable, and responsive so that people feel their voices are heard.

Addressing economic inequalities is essential. Policies should focus on supporting regions and communities that are negatively affected by globalization, automation, and economic restructuring.

Promoting social cohesion and inclusive identity can reduce the appeal of exclusionary nationalism. This includes encouraging dialogue, tolerance, and understanding across different cultural and social groups.

Managing migration more effectively is important, not just through control, but through balanced and fair policies that reduce fear and misinformation.

Regulating digital spaces and misinformation should also be considered, as online platforms can amplify division and spread false narratives that strengthen nationalist sentiments.

In the end, nationalism cannot simply be reduced or eliminated through policy alone. It must be understood, addressed, and managed by dealing with its root causes. A balanced approach that combines economic fairness, political accountability, and social inclusion offers the best chance of reducing extreme forms of nationalism while maintaining healthy national identity.

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