Chapter 13

Austerity and ethno-nationalism

The politics of scarcity in right-wing populism

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Fiscal austerity and right-wing populism are among the most salient political phenomena to rattle Western democracies since the global financial crisis of 2008, yet little research has asked how the two are linked (for exceptions see Clarke & Newman, 2017; Gietel-Basten, 2016). In contrast, the relationship between austerity measures and *left-wing* populism since the global financial crisis has been thoroughly studied (e.g., Della Porta, Fernández, Kouki, & Mosca, 2017). In this chapter, I ask whether fiscal austerity since the global financial crisis can help explain the growth in anti-immigrant sentiment that undergirds right-wing populism, focusing in particular on the United States and the United Kingdom. This empirical question also speaks to a theoretical issue central to populism scholarship: What explains the success of *right-wing* populism in particular?

Drawing on Thomas Edsall's (2012) idea of the *politics of scarcity*, I will suggest that fiscal austerity since the global financial crisis contributed to citizens' sense of scarcity of public goods and services, including in the areas of social housing, healthcare, and education. Nationalist political entrepreneurs found in this sense of scarcity an opportunity to scapegoat groups they define as falling outside the national community, simultaneously redirecting blame away from the project of austerity itself.

This hypothesis builds on, but is distinct from, the concept of welfare chauvinism. Welfare chauvinism is the idea that public benefits should only be available to legitimate and deserving members of the national community. A central debate in research about welfare chauvinism concerns whether increasing racial or ethnic heterogeneity diminishes public support for redistributive policies (Alesina & Glaeser, 2004; Kymlicka & Banting, 2006). But rarely is the question reversed: Does a sense of heighted competition for scarce public goods generate or exacerbate citizens' hostility toward newcomers? By framing the question this way, we can understand fiscal austerity as one "demand-side" condition for the success of right-wing populism, while the appeals of nationalist political entrepreneurs represent the "supply side" (Bonikowski, 2017; Golder, 2016; Rydgren, 2007).

Fiscal austerity and nationalism

Since the global financial crisis of 2008, policies of fiscal austerity across Western democracies have shared the ostensible goal of deficit and public debt reduction, predominantly by way of government spending cuts and, less often, broad-based tax increases (Blyth, 2013). In the United States and United Kingdom, austerity dominated political debate in the years following 2008, leading to chronic impasses over fiscal policy in both nations. In the United Kingdom, the coalition government that assumed control in 2010 quickly introduced an emergency deficit reduction plan. It set out to cut approximately £11 billion annually over the next Parliamentary session from welfare programs including child benefits, housing subsidies, and disability benefits, in addition to instituting a salary freeze and a higher retirement age for public employees (Hood & Himaz, 2017). The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that between 2010 and 2016, total public spending in Britain was cut by 3 percent, with the largest cuts in the area of grants to local authorities (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2015).

In the United States, general government spending as a percentage of GDP fell from 43 percent in 2010 to 38 percent in 2016, the steepest drop in any five-year period since at least 1970 (OECD, 2019). The real dollar amount in non-defense appropriations declined by about 16 percent over the same period (Reich, 2015). Much of this decline came from reductions to federal block grants to the states that fund programs for low- and moderate-income families, grants that comprise, on average, 30 percent of states' total revenue (Lav & Leachman, 2017). As a consequence, most austerity measures in the United States have been implemented at the state level. In 2011 alone, 30 states cut their budgets for public K-12 education below 2008 levels, before the financial crisis (Olif & Leachman, 2011). Some 20 states made significant cuts to subsidized health insurance for low-income households, freezing enrollment at a time when more families required it (Williams, Leachman, & Johnson, 2011).

Nationalism has grown in tandem with economic austerity; although, as mentioned previously, relatively few studies have examined the relationship. For the purposes of this chapter, I use a narrow but precise conception of nationalism: an ideology that defines and circumscribes legitimate membership in a national community (Miscevic, 2018). Nation is approached here along the lines of Anderson's (1983) "imagined" or Smith's (2009) "mythical-symbolical" communities. *Ethno*-nationalism refers to a configuration of attitudes that define membership in the national community according to ethnic characteristics, including such qualities as race, common ancestry, native birth, and even language, religion, or more-flexible cultural markers (Bonikowski, 2017; Brubaker, 1992; Connor, 1994).

Though ever-present in British and American politics, ethno-nationalist movements and political leaders have been on the rise in both countries recently. Far-right organizations like the British National Party (BNP, founded in 1982) and the English Defense League (EDL, founded in 2009) have made

significant inroads among Britain's working-class communities in recent decades (Goodwin, 2011; Winlow, Hall, & Treadwell, 2016). Nonetheless, these groups remain at the margins of British politics, having little influence over national policy. This stands in contrast to another nationalist party in Britain, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP, founded in 1993), which, under the leadership of Nigel Farage, was a driving force behind the campaign to leave the European Union.

While UKIP struck a more-professional tone than the fringe groups on its right, it appealed to similar concerns and absorbed some of their potential supporters (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). UKIP's electoral fortunes rose swiftly in the years preceding the E.U. referendum. In the 2014 European Parliamentary elections, UKIP won an astounding 27.5 percent of the vote and became the largest British party in Brussels at the time (*BBC*, 2014). In the 2015 general election, UKIP won 12.6 percent of all votes, gaining 128 seats on local councils and one seat in Parliament (*The Guardian*, 2014). In 2019, Nigel Farage broke with UKIP to establish his own party focused on interminable Brexit negotiations. A testament to his populist appeal, Farage's new Brexit Party went on to win 30 percent of the votes cast in the 2019 European Parliamentary election in the United Kingdom, making it not only the largest British party in the European Parliament but also the largest single party of any member country (*BBC*, 2019).

Unlike in the British case, nationalists in the United States have rarely forged an independent political party, although notable exceptions exist (Anbinder, 1994). More often, nationalist political figures have worked from within America's major parties. In the 1990s, for example, the "paleoconservative" wing of the Republican Party challenged the GOP's openness to global trade and immigration and raised alarm over cultural and demographic changes in America, as illustrated in Patrick Buchanan's (2006) *State of Emergency*:

> Three million people of Mexican ancestry today call L.A. County home, and half of all its residents—54 percent—speak a language other than English in their homes … When more than half the people of so vast a county do not speak English at home … do not share the same heroes, history, or holidays, how can we say we are all still one nation and one people?
>
> (Buchanan, 2006, p. 46)

Buchanan's complaint illustrates our understanding of nationalism as a circumscribed definition of who counts as legitimate members of the national community. For Buchanan, Mexican Americans are excluded from America's "one nation and one people" because of their ethnicity, their language, and their civic culture—the wrong heroes, history, and holidays.

One corollary of ethno-nationalist ideology is the conviction that public goods and services should only be available to "native" citizens and not squandered on undeserving or under-contributing outsiders. Known by scholars as welfare chauvinism, these attitudes have been found in public opinion research

throughout Europe and the United States (Kaushal, 2019; Van der Waal, de Koster, & Van Oorschot, 2013). And welfare chauvinism provides right-wing populist parties with a rhetorical tool to tie ordinary people's concern for scarce public benefits to an anti-immigrant agenda (de Koster, Achterberg, & Van der Waal, 2012; Rydgren, 2007). From this perspective, we can think of welfare chauvinism as one potential mechanism that would link austerity—or the threat of increased scarcity of public goods and services—to rising anti-immigrant attitudes.

The politics of scarcity: right-wing populism's demand side and supply side

This section spells out what I call the politics of scarcity hypothesis for right-wing populism. I borrow the term from Edsall (2012), who has argued that austerity politics "are producing a set of wedge issues centered on fiscal conflict and budget shortages to create a new politics of scarcity" (p. 14). These wedge issues set up distributional conflicts among (often fictitious) social categories of people: old vs. young, taxpayer vs. welfare beneficiary, public employee vs. private (see also Williamson, 2017). In the United States and the United Kingdom, and likely across Western democracies, immigration is among the most-salient wedge issues deepened by the politics of scarcity.

The supply side: ethno-nationalist entrepreneurs

To reiterate the main argument, I suggest that fiscal austerity since the global financial crisis intensified citizens' sense of scarcity of public goods and services. Seizing upon this sense of scarcity, ethno-nationalist political entrepreneurs deployed a rhetoric of welfare chauvinism to justify an anti-immigrant agenda. A political entrepreneur is an actor, often regarded as purposive and resourceful, "whose creative acts have transformative effects on politics, policies, or institutions" (Sheingate, 2003, p. 185). Rhetoric produced by contemporary ethno-nationalist entrepreneurs commonly avoids referencing race and ethnicity directly, but rather deploys coded language to suggest ethnic otherness (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014). For example, in a December 2010 speech to Congress opposing the DREAM Act, House Republican Dana Rohrbacher distinguished "illegals" from groups deserving public services:

> It is not being cold-hearted to acknowledge that every dollar spent on illegal immigrants is one dollar less that's spent on our own children, our own senior citizens, and for all those who entered this society who played by the rules, who paid their taxes and expect their government to watch out for their needs before it bestows privileges and scarce resources on illegals.
>
> (quoted in Edsall, 2012, p. 80)

Rohrbacher was one among a new, more-extreme class of Republicans swept into office in 2010 with support from the Tea Party movement. Although the Tea Party movement was funded and steered in many respects by economic and political elites (Williamson, Skocpol, & Coggin, 2011), its populist messaging shows an early indication of how fiscal scare tactics can resonate in tune with nationalism. From its inception, Tea Party groups and protests around the country focused nominally on fiscal issues: taxation, the deficit, and spending, especially in connection with the Affordable Care Act. But a current of anti-immigrant sentiment ran just under the surface. Unauthorized immigrants constituted for many Tea Partiers a non-contributing population in stark contrast to "real," hard-working Americans. One study reports that:

> In general, Tea Partiers do not explain their opposition to unauthorized immigration in terms of a job threat … Most Tea Party activists couch their opposition to unauthorized immigration in terms of immigrants receiving undue government support, a concern that bleeds into a broader concern about representation.
>
> (Williamson et al., 2011, p. 33)

Although Tea Party leaders vigorously denied racism, ethno-nationalist sentiments permeated the movement. Racial resentment, "white victimhood," and conspiracy theories about Barack Obama's birthplace figured prominently at Tea Party rallies and predicted Tea Party support in opinion surveys (Hughey, 2012; Zeskind, 2012). The unofficial racism of the Tea Party was still taboo for most mainstream Republican leaders, but it signaled a widespread openness among middle-class whites to a discourse that linked anti-government anger to ethnic and racial anxieties. It is telling that Donald Trump's soft entrance into the field of potential Republican presidential candidates began with his support for the "birther" conspiracy theory, which put him at odds with GOP leadership but was received favorably by many one-time Tea Party supporters (Hochschild, 2016). Indeed, Trump's antipathy for so-called "political correctness" appealed to many disaffected Republican voters who for years have been converging on more-antagonistic feelings toward racial and ethnic minorities and immigrants (Manza & Crowley, 2018).

In the United Kingdom, Euroscepticism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and anger at the political class increased as more countries entered the E.U. fold. When Bulgaria and Romania gained full access to E.U. labor markets in 2014, suspicions mounted that migrants from these poorer countries would come to the United Kingdom seeking to exploit the generous welfare state. An article in the *Daily Mail* warned, "A new wave of immigration is about to take place that will place huge strain on our already stretched schools, hospitals and housing" (cited in Balch & Balabanova, 2016). Though infrequently explicit, this welfare chauvinism was also sometimes ethnically coded, as one opinion piece in *The Daily Telegraph* illustrates: "People with whom we have a damn sight

more shared history are booted out to make the figures look better …. Admit Bulgarians and turn away Aussies? It stinks, mate. It really stinks" (cited in Balch & Balabanova, 2016).

These kinds of anxieties helped carry UKIP to unprecedented electoral success in 2014 and 2015 and gave Farage greater visibility and the opportunity to articulate his nationalist-populist message. Even as he disavowed racism within his party, Farage stoked fears about parts of Britain made "unrecognizable" by immigrants, complained of non-English speakers on the Tube, and advocated repealing nationality- and race-based anti-discrimination laws (Mason, 2015). UKIP's greater visibility also helped push the Conservative Party rightward, ultimately forcing Prime Minister David Cameron to make good on his promise to call a referendum on E.U. membership.

In the campaigns leading up to the referendum, most establishment politicians called for the United Kingdom to remain in the European Union, but a number of Conservative and even Labour MPs joined the Brexit cause. The most prominent among these was former London Mayor and Conservative MP Boris Johnson. In his first speech at the helm of Vote Leave, the leading pro-Brexit coalition, Johnson tied the Eurosceptic call for national sovereignty to claims that immigration threatens Britain's public services:

> As a country we have ceded far too much control to the EU—control over our economy, our public services, and over key decisions that affect our daily lives. In return we get uncontrolled immigration, which puts unsustainable pressure on our vital public services as well as on jobs, housing and school places.
>
> (quoted in Swinford & Donnelly, 2016)

Johnson appealed to ordinary people's sense of scarcity of public goods and services, but did not place the blame on his own party, which had been subjecting these services to austerity measures since 2010. Instead, Johnson targeted the European Union—faceless elites in Brussels superseding British sovereignty— and immigrants devouring scarce public resources.

The demand side: linking austerity to anti-immigration attitudes

The narrative so far has laid out the supply side of right-wing populism, the part played by ethno-nationalist political entrepreneurs. But, to understand why these appeals resonated with voters, we must also consider the demand side. Toward that end, I present quantitative evidence from the United States and United Kingdom that suggests a link between individuals' local exposure to austerity and their ethno-nationalist attitudes.

For the U.K. case, I use linear regression to predict two individual-level dependent variables measured in the British Election Study's (BES) Wave 8, which was fielded in the month preceding the Brexit referendum. In the first

model, the dependent variable is a BES item that asks respondents whether they think immigration enriches or undermines cultural life in Britain, the closest available measure of ethnic or cultural anti-immigrant attitudes. I reverse-code the seven-point scale so that higher values indicate a more-negative response. In the second model, the dependent variable measures whether the respondent likes or dislikes UKIP on an 11-point scale ranging from strongly dislike (0) to strongly like (10). Although UKIP's fall from grace has been as swift as its rise, I take this measure as a proxy for voters' willingness to support right-wing populist parties.

The main independent variable and two control variables are measured at the local authority level. The predictor of interest here is the pound amount per working adult in total fiscal reductions from 2010 to 2015, which include cuts to housing benefits, disability living allowances, and child benefits and tax credits (Becker, Fetzer, & Novy, 2017). Because the variable measures budget cuts, a higher value indicates larger cuts. I standardize this variable to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. Both models control for the percentage change in migration from E.U. member countries between 2001 and 2011 and the unemployment rate in 2015.[1] Figure 13.1 plots the predicted values from the
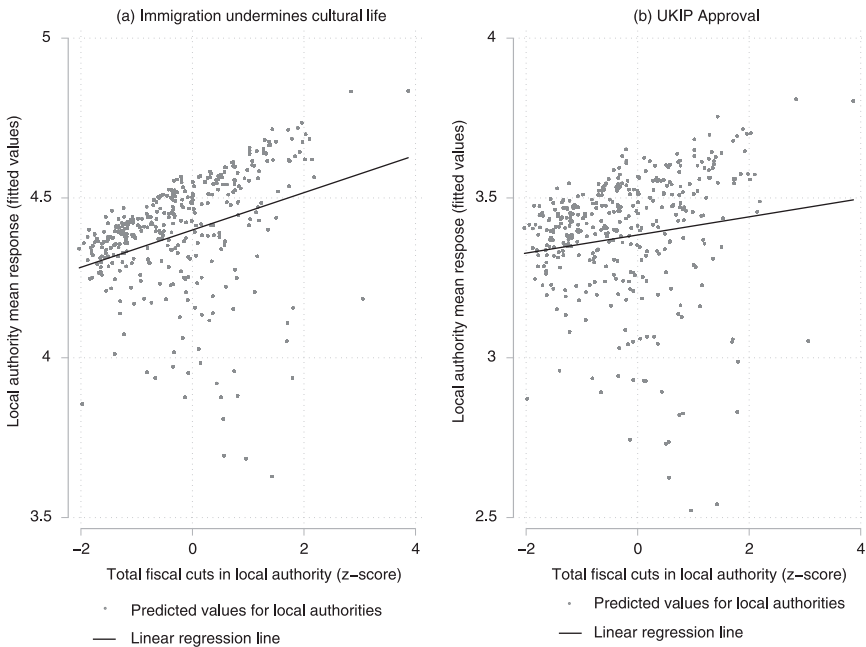

Figure 13.1 Total fiscal cuts in a local authority and (a) anti-immigrant attitudes and (b) approval of UKIP

two regression models. The results illustrate that fiscal cuts in a local authority predict a significant increase in both the cultural anti-immigration scale (p > .001, panel a) and the UKIP favorability scale (p > .005, panel b) among respondents living in those authorities.

For the U.S. case, I use public opinion data from the American National Election Survey's (ANES) 2016 time series. The dependent variable is an additive scale composed of four related questions. These ask respondents how important each of the following characteristics is to being "truly" American: speak English, have been born in the United States, have American ancestry, and follow America's customs/traditions. Each of these takes four values between "Not important" (0) and "Very important" (3). The full scale therefore runs between 0 and 12, where 12 indicates very strong ethno-nationalist ideas about American identity. I operationalize exposure to austerity using the percent reduction in per-pupil higher education spending in each state between 2010 and 2016.[2] Like the fiscal cuts measure in the preceding analysis, a more-positive value indicates larger cuts. While this captures only one dimension of austerity, public education funding was hotly debated in state legislatures over this period, especially as to whether it ought to be available to undocumented people.

I regress the measure of ethno-nationalist attitudes on the state-level cuts in public higher education, controlling for individuals' party identification and the percent change in immigrant population in each state between 2008 and 2016. Figure 13.2 depicts the results, which show a clear relationship between the state-
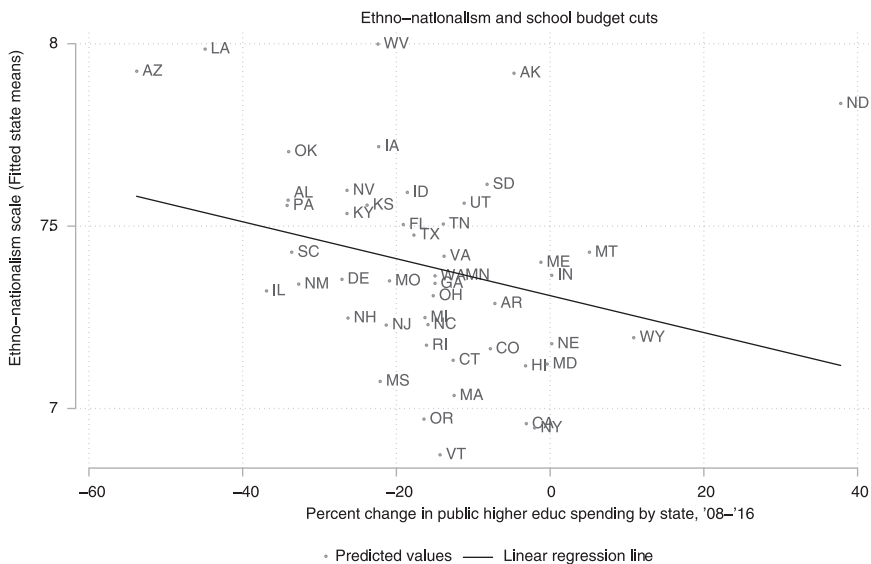

Figure 13.2 Ethno-nationalist attitudes and public education spending cuts

level measures of austerity and respondents' scores on ethno-nationalism. For every 10 percent of additional cuts to their state's public education budget, respondents experience a 1.2 point increase on the ethno-nationalism scale (p > .005).

These sets of analyses show only a correlation between individuals' local exposure to austerity measures and their ethno-nationalist attitudes. However, the correlation is robust to important potential confounders, including changes in the local level of immigration, unemployment, and individual partisan identification. Further analysis is required to show that this correlation is not a result of other sources of selection bias, including the possibility that individuals predisposed to anti-immigrant attitudes are more likely to live in areas exposed to greater austerity measures. Nonetheless, these results suggest that austerity measures may be an important condition for the growing appeal of right-wing populism.

Conclusion

This chapter has proposed that one explanation for the rising tide of populism, and especially *right-wing* populism, across Western democracies can be found in the link between fiscal austerity and ethno-nationalism. Through what I have called the politics of scarcity, austerity after the global financial crisis led to a heightened sense of scarcity of public goods and services. In this context, nationalist political entrepreneurs in the United States and United Kingdom seized the opportunity to create a zero-sum politics of scarcity that casts a national community of deserving left-outs in competition with an extractive, foreign "Other."

Here, austerity represents a contributing factor in the "demand side" of right-wing populism, a demand filled by ethno-nationalist political entrepreneurs in the mold of Farage and Trump. At the micro-level, this process depends on the resonance of welfare chauvinist rhetoric among parts of the public. While there is substantial evidence that many do hold welfare chauvinist attitudes, we do not yet know whether the scarcity brought about by austerity intensifies those sentiments. If that is the case, then we can expect austerity and anti-immigrant attitudes to go hand in hand.

In addition to better mapping of the causal process, a deeper look into the politics of scarcity must account for heterogeneity in the material and lived experience of austerity itself. Not all people are equally vulnerable to cuts to public benefits and services; these fall hardest on the economically worst off. And yet, the electoral base for the likes of Donald Trump and UKIP is largely middle class, albeit with somewhat lower education than voters for establishment conservatives (Manza & Crowley, 2017; Mellon & Evans, 2016). Thus, although the findings in this chapter suggest a relationship between austerity and ethno-nationalist attitudes, this is by no means a deterministic relationship. On the contrary, an array of factors—from race to gender to the strength of leftist parties or labor organizations—may intervene in the cognitive and cultural processes by which people come to attribute responsibility and blame for scarcity on immigrants and minorities, rather than the project of austerity itself.

Notes

1 I use replication data from Becker et al. (2017). Local authority budget data were compiled by the *Financial Times*. Immigration and employment data come from the Annual Public Survey available from the Office of National Statistics. Alternate models included percent change in migrants from non-E.U. countries and combined immigration, with no substantive changes to results. The first model includes respondents from England, Scotland, and Wales (n = 20,492). The second model only includes respondents from England (n = 12,922), because UKIP is predominantly active in that country. All models include BES survey weights.

2 The change in state spending on public higher education comes from the University of Illinois' Grapevine database. Foreign-born population by state comes from the Migration Policy Institute's (MPI) tabulation of data from the 2010 and 2016 American Community Surveys and 1990 and 2000 Censuses.

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