

# The United States is relapsing into nativism

By WANG YOURAN

Immigration is a hotly debated issue in the United States. President Trump recently issued two executive orders—one that limits entry to the United States from certain Islamic countries and another that suspends the US Refugee Admission Program for 120 days—intensifying the discussion on US immigration policy. Some say that the United States is relapsing into nativism. What is nativism and how did it come into being and evolve in the United States? Why is it coming to the forefront again? A CSST reporter interviewed Paul A. Kramer to learn about his opinion on American nativism.

**CSST: What are the origins of nativism in the US? When did it begin?**

**Kramer:** Nativism is a xenophobic sense of superiority over “foreigners,” and a sense that the nation needs to be protected from menacing “outsiders.” Nativism has been there since early in American history—Benjamin Franklin worried about German immigrants in the 1750s—but it did not really take off as a coherent project until the mid-19th century, when a mass movement directed against Irish Catholic immigrants began on the grounds of their religion, poverty and presumed allegiance to the Pope. For them, the United States was and should always remain a distinctly Protestant and Anglo-Saxon country.

But what’s striking is what little headway nativists have made in terms of closing America’s gates to immigrants legislatively. Before the late 19th century, US national policy, to the extent that there was one, was oriented toward encouraging mass European immigration to the United States on the grounds of the US population’s needs for continental conquest, and the labor demands of a rising industrial pow-

er. Nativists’ first political victories were at the state level, where most immigration control was happening in the 19th century, and at the national level with Chinese exclusion, which began in 1882. But nativists didn’t succeed in achieving a truly comprehensive, global system of restriction before World War I.

Between 1924 and the 1965, the United States established what is called the “national origins quota” system. It reaffirmed the exclusion of Asians and shut off entry to nearly all Southern and Eastern Europeans while allowing Northern and Western Europeans to enter in large numbers and permitting entry to migrants from the Western hemisphere.

**CSST: Who are the “natives” when we talk about nativism?**

**Kramer:** In its narrowest, “natives” refer to the citizens of a nation, and in this case, the United States. But nativists often make distinctions between “real” citizens and naturalized citizens, who are not seen as authentic or “fully” national members. Often the distinction here isn’t just a legal one, but one based on physical appearance, language or religion.

American nativists, for example, have often argued that the American nation is white and Protestant and that only these groups should be allowed to naturalize. The 1790 Naturalization Law only allowed white people to naturalize, and after the Civil War, when African-Americans were granted naturalization rights, Asians were explicitly kept out, despite protests at the time. There is also a long tradition of recent immigrants—especially ones of European descent—recasting themselves as American “natives” as they assimilate and trying to block entry to more recent waves of immigrants, often using the same disparaging stereotypes that were once applied to them, e.g. they don’t work hard enough, they drive down wages, they use the US welfare system irresponsibly, and that their cultures will “overrun” American culture.

Here it’s important to recognize that the United States has a long tradition of birthright citizenship, so anyone born on American soil, regardless of the parents’ original homeland, becomes a US citizen. This legal tradition has led directly to a more diverse citizenship, as the second generation of immigrants possesses full political and civil rights, although in many cases, the children of immigrants are still subjected to harassment and stigma. Birthright citizenship has been under attack by nativists in the United States on and off, but with particular intensity in the last 20 years.



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**CSST: What are the features of nativism and the most important nativist movements in the US?**

**Kramer:** Nativism involves xenophobia towards “outsiders” and the celebration of the national self as superior. But it also characterizes the national self as vulnerable to “invasion” or “contamination” and thus in need of protection, whether this takes the form of laws restricting immigration or immigrants; physical structures, like walls or border fences to prevent migration, or violence to push back, suppress or kill threatening immigrants.

Nativism has often been used by political and economic elites to redirect blame and dissent away from themselves and toward the politically, socially and economically vulnerable, who can serve as scapegoats for social problems. The most important nativist movements in US history involved the “Know-Nothing” movement in the mid-19th century, which fought against Irish-Catholic immigration; the late 19th century anti-Chinese movement, which was particularly strong on the West Coast; the early 20th century nativist movement directed against Southern and Eastern European immigrants; the late 20th century nativist movement from the 1980s forward, which focused especially on Mexican and Central American immigrants and refugees, and the post-9/11 Islamophobic backlash directed at Middle Eastern

and South Asian immigrants on the grounds of their presumed association with “terrorism.”

During the period from 1924-1965, interestingly, there was not an especially strong nativist movement in the United States precisely because the US government kept nearly all immigrants out during these years. There was little popular mobilization, in other words, because the nativists had won. There are strong correlations between surges in nativism and economic downturns, like post-2008, when immigrants were thought to be taking “American” jobs; mass protest, when elites associate radicalism with “foreign” intruders, and wartime mobilization, when immigrants are often cast as possible agents of foreign powers.

Nativists’ political opponents have been varied. Immigrant communities who have pushed for more expansive and inclusionary immigration policies, employers who want to maximize their access to workers, and diplomats and foreign policy elites concerned with international backlash have all, at different times, challenged nativist forces, often with success.

**CSST: Is nativism in the 21st century different from what happened in the past? In what ways? What is the focus of nativism today?**

**Kramer:** In terms of its ideological content, there is not so much that is new in present-day nativism: Concerns about immigrants taking “American” jobs and draining American welfare resources have been the dominant themes in nativist politics since its 1980s-1990s resurgence, and these themes were also present in the 19th and early 20th centuries in modified forms. And there have also been earlier moments when nativism targeted groups perceived as the nation’s “enemies” in war, such as the repression of German immigrants during World War I, and people of Japanese descent during World War II.

That said, there are a few things that strike me as new in this recent wave of nativism. One is the political centrality to nativism to the successful candidate in the presidential race. Donald Trump’s use of nativism during the 2016 presidential race was the most intense and virulent of any US presidential candidate that I am aware of. In many ways, alongside promises to renegotiate trade deals, promises to curtail immigration in order to protect the nation were in many ways the centerpiece of his appeal to American voters. Trump used rhetoric associated with wartime while targeting a group—Muslims—with which the United States is not at war. He also explicitly targeted refugees, who are most among the most highly screened

entrants in the United States, and historically, those the United States has been most likely to welcome, especially during the Cold War, when many anti-communist refugees sought entry.

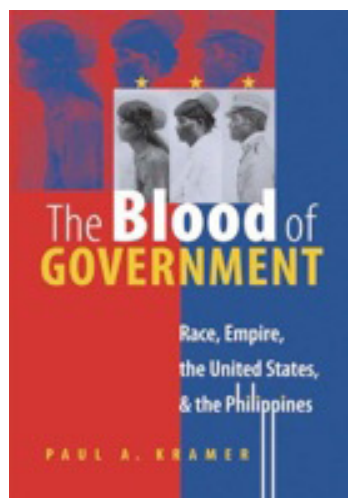
Finally, Trump’s executive order violated many US immigration laws, including laws prohibiting discrimination in the issuing of visas that date back to the 1960s. While the Muslim ban—both the current and previous versions—updates many common themes in the history of nativism, it is the most racist and religiously biased use of presidential power in the history of US immigration policy that I am aware of, involving the use of executive power to shut out groups of people on the basis of their origin in majority-Muslim countries.

**CSST: What are the major impacts of nativism on the United States? Do you think nativism presents a threat, politically, economically and culturally, to the future of the US?**

**Kramer:** Nativism has had a number of powerful effects on the United States. On the one hand, it has achieved restrictive and exclusionary laws that have kept both certain immigrant groups out and, in some cases, nearly all immigrants, for long periods of time. Just as importantly, nativism has played a role in stigmatizing immigrants within American society itself and jeopardizing their wellbeing through forms of social exclusion and violence. Those immigrants who make it into the United States, legally or illegally, are far more vulnerable to exploitation by employers, landlords, the police and other institutions because of a nativist climate that makes them fearful of asserting their rights.

Finally, nativism has sometimes played an important role in the outcomes of electoral contests at the state and even national level. Nativism may hurt the United States politically and economically. Immigrant workers have always powered the US economy—from 19th century railroad workers to 21st century programmers—and the United States’ openness to immigrants, however qualified, has often been celebrated abroad as a symbol of America’s greatness and legitimacy as a world power. If the closing off of the United States proceeds, the US may face rising criticism abroad not only of its immigration controls but of the broader values, policies and institutions they are seen to symbolize. And, of course, millions of foreign-born workers may ultimately seek to migrate, along with their skills, labor power and incomes to other countries.

*Wang Youran is a CSST reporter based in Washington DC.*



**The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States and the Philippines** (Chapel Hill University of North Carolina Press, 2006) authored by Paul A. Kramer