

Ethnic Xenophobia as Symbolic Politics: An Explanation of Anti-Migrant Activity from Brussels to Beirut

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Abstract : Global concerns about xenophobic activity are on the rise across developed and developing countries. And yet, social science scholarship has almost exclusively examined xenophobia as a prejudice of advanced western nations. This research argues that the fields of study related to xenophobia must be re-conceptualized within a framework of ethnicity in order to level the playing field for cross-regional inquiry. This study develops a new concept of ethnic xenophobia and integrates existing explanations of anti-migrant expression into theories of ethnic threat. We argue specifically that political elites convert economic, political, and social threats at the national level into ethnic xenophobic activity in order to gain or maintain political advantage among their native selectorate. We expand on Stuart Kaufman's theory of symbolic politics to underscore the methods of mobilization used against migrants and the power of elite discourse in moments of national crises. An original dataset is used to examine over 35,000 cases of ethnic xenophobic activity targeting refugees. Wordscores software is used to develop a unique measure of anti-migrant elite rhetoric which captures the symbolic discourse of elites in their mobilization of ethnic xenophobic activism. We use a Structural Equation Model (SEM) to test the causal pathways of the theory across seventy-two developed and developing countries from 1990 to 2016. A framework of Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) is also applied to two pairs of developed-developing country cases, including Kenya and the Netherlands and Lebanon and the United States. This study sheds tremendous light on an underrepresented area of comparative research in migration studies. It shows that the causal elements of anti-migrant activity are far more similar than existing research suggests which has major implications for policy makers, practitioners, and academics in fields of migration protection and advocacy. It speaks directly to the mobilization of myths surrounding refugees, in particular, and the nationalization of narratives of migration that may be neutralized by the development of deeper associational relationships between natives and migrants.

Keywords : refugees, ethnicity, symbolic politics, elites, migration, comparative politics

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