Strangers and Settlers: Migration politics in a local's world

Bethany Lacina
UNCORRECTED
Forthcoming Oxford University Press, 2026

November 30, 2025

Do people have special rights in a place if they are one of the locals there? The belief that they do is common worldwide. Yet, entitlement to place has little role in most accounts of migration politics. Instead, accounts of migration politics are a showdown between culture and economics, in-group identities and material incentives.

In *Strangers and Settlers*, Bethany Lacina provides the first global study of nativism that features a unified account of the drivers of backlash against international and domestic migration. Drawing from over forty years of global public opinion surveys conducted in 146 countries; detailed census records from 70 countries spanning the mid-1950s to now; and a wealth of comparative information on both migration policy and nativist activism, Lacina describes a world of nested hierarchies of locals, offering new insights about migration politics. As she shows, both domestic and international migration politics take place within a nativist status quo. Being local is normative even within national and ethnic groups and when the material stakes of migration are low. Governments use a range of policies to ensure locals maintain political and economic superiority over newcomers, particularly international migrants.

An unprecedentedly comprehensive study, *Strangers and Settlers* shows that the status quo throughout the world is nativism, but the key to making sense of its variety is whether and how regimes, residents, and newcomers clash over controlling who is local.

CONTENTS

1

ALL POLITICS IS LOCALS

After all the success that anti-immigration populists have had—Donald Trump back in the White House, Brexit a reality—it would be easy to conclude that people care a lot about who has lived where and for how long. Most commentators on migration politics are pretty sure they don't, though. Not really. People care about mobility across lines of identity and political affiliation, especially national and/or ethno-racial lines. "If there were no borders, there would be no migration—only mobility."[1]

Since people do not really mind migration, anti-immigration politics must be about something else. The prime suspects are "economics" and "culture."[2] "Some denounce the upsurge of populism as little more than a racist, xenophobic reaction against immigrants and multiculturalism. Others see it mainly in economic terms, as a protest against the job losses brought about by global trade and new technologies."[3] Is anti-globalization sentiment anger at the cosmopolitan, knowledge-economy elite,[4] with traditional parties of the left splitting between their "beer drinkers" and "wine drinkers"?[5] Or is that populist rhetoric little more than "a euphemism for a racialized [White] identity politics?"[6]

Academics are on the case, asking is anti-immigration politics "culture or economics?"[7] Are "the main drivers of [populism's] recent (and past) rise mostly economic or cultural?".[8] "Could it be that populism is rooted not in economics but in a cultural divide?"[9] Of course, economics and culture might be in league: "desires for a welfare state and desires for a nation-state are not easy to distinguish in everyday life."[10]

Nation-states and welfare states impact immigration politics. Those facts should not obscure an more general truism: being local is normative.

This book is about the political implications of a belief: the conviction that places belong to locals who have rights there that newcomers and would-be migrants do not have. This belief is not reducible to

1 De Genova 2017, p. 6.
2 See also Berman (2021) and Hainmueller and Hopkins (2014).
3 Sandel 2018.
4 Calhoun 2016; Gusterson 2017, p. 210.
5 Bale 2014.
6 Bhambra 2017, p. 227.
7 Alesina and Tabellini 2024.
8 Guriev and Papaioannou 2022, p. 755.
9 Rodrik 2021, p. 133.
10 Brković 2016, p. 497.

nationalism, ethnocentrism, racism, or concern for state sovereignty. It is compatible with them. But pro-local beliefs are older than all of those ideas and lend them plausibility.

1.1 CATEGORIES OF MIGRATION POLITICS

I have a migration commentary pet peeve. It is a US pundit or academic marveling at the "cognitive dissonance"[11] of American descendants of immigrants opposing further immigration. I do see the contradiction. The trope irks me because it overestimates the uniqueness of American hypocrisy. It is common for people to claim a special right to a place that they also believe their ancestors migrated to—and I am not just referring to Canadians. Peter Geschiere (2009) begins his monograph *The Perils of Belonging* with this point:

> In Cameroon, for instance, Beti and Bulu people now proudly proclaim to be *autochtones*—"born from the soil"—of the forest area in the south of the country. Yet the same Beti/Bulu may clinch arguments over to whom the forest "really" belongs with the simple statement . . . "the forest is ours because we conquered it," referring to their epic immigration from the savannah southward into the forest 150 to 200 years ago. . . . [In the Netherlands], genealogy has become a favorite pastime, leading often to the proud discovery of some Huguenot ancestor who entered the country fleeing French "Papists" in the seventeenth century. Despite these roots, today many Dutch identify themselves as *autochtonene*.[12]

There are scores of examples of anti-migration movements among people who believe their ancestors were some combination of migrants, refugees, and conquerors. The cognitive dissonance is apparently tolerable.

Surprise over migrant-descended nativists is a symptom of how both popular and academic thinking about migration politics is taxonomied. Mobility is sorted relative to what kind of political or cultural line someone crosses. Episodes of migration politics are siloed accordingly. Movements across lines of nationality are a category of their own; backlash against international migrants is almost never compared to rancor over domestic migration.[13] Domestic anti-migration movements are called "separatism" or "sub-nationalism" if the locals seem nation-like, as in Quebec or Catalonia. If anger over migration involves indigenous identity, that is a separate category. Anti-migration activism that involves non-indigenous people in a poor country is a

11 Foley 2022, p. 296.

12 Geschiere 2009, pp. ix–x.

13 For an exception, see Fitzgerald (2018) who documents the European radical right's roots in railing against internal migrants.

"sons of the soil" movement. In a rich country, rancor over internal migration is, depending on the groups involved, anti-gentrification politics, segregationism, or nimbyism.

Within the narrow range of cases that the US is routinely juxtaposed against, its immigrant-descended population seems unique. Indeed, reading the reams of commentary on populists in the US and Europe, it would be easy to get the idea that anti-migration movements never involve domestic mobility, impoverished economies, non-democracies, or, really, anything but the US/Mexico border and the Mediterranean Sea.

Every episode of migration politics touches on the belief that places belong to locals who have rights to benefit from those places that non-locals do not have. Localness, like ethnicity, race, and nationality is a socially constructed category. It is, admittedly, not a literal record of who has lived where and for how long. It is tempting to go back to where we usually start: divide the concept of localness up based on what it is that the locals say makes them the locals, which is never the mere fact of their physical presence in a place. By dividing localness up we would likely recover the usual intellectual divisions of migration politics by categories of social and political identity.

This book is an experiment in not dividing localness up. I do not aim to prove that it does not matter how locals define themselves, either empirically or normatively. But the existing siloing obscures patterns that hold across the silos. The differences may outnumber the similarities, but the similarities challenge what we think we know about migration politics.

1.1.1 *How do we know identity matters?*

We have extensive evidence that people care about mobility that transgresses lines of identity. How do we know, however, that there are no similar objections to mobility across lines of localness where identity is not particularly strong? After all, people could dislike foreigners *and* newcomers.

Migration commentary suggests two ways to know that mobility is politically unproblematic. First, we can observe the contrast between the unquestioned acceptance of immigration enforcement and the public's belief in equal rights to domestic spaces:

> The entire immigration apparatus is . . . based on some unquestioned assumptions about *countries*. It is not OK for a public park, a town, a county, or a state to discriminate regarding who is allowed to enter its space. But it's OK for a country to do that.[14]

14 Chomsky 2014, p. 206, original emphasis.

Inside a zone of shared national culture, people do not believe governments can restrict migration:

> The people of California wanted to keep out poor Oklahomans during the Depression. Now the people of Oregon would like to keep out the Californians. . . . Despite all this, we do not think these political communities should be able to control their borders.[15]

Migration "goes unremarked if it takes place within the borders of the state, but immediately raises moral questions when it involves crossing an international border."[16]

Such is the confidence that national identities are the last remaining parochialisms that when scholars complain about "methodological nationalism" in the study of migration, they mean that there is not enough attention to "common identity from supranational groups [or] effective coercive legal institutions [that] transcend the boundaries of the nation state."[17] The idea that migration politics might be shaped by pro-local ideals within nation-states is not even worth a mention.

Second and similarly, we supposedly know people are indifferent to mobility because they have no objections to migration by in-group members. For instance, in the EU, "the only 'foreigners' who pose a problem are those from non-Western countries."[18] The canonical definition of "welfare chauvinism" turns on ethnic membership, not migration per se. Such chauvinists believe that the "welfare state is [a] system of social protection for those who belong to the ethnically defined community."[19] Similarly, the classic definition of nativism is antipathy to an "internal minority on the grounds of its foreign" character.[20] Nativism is not concerned about migration—the objectionable minority is already internal. Nativism is preoccupied with foreignness. In fact, all anti-migrant politics is feelings about the Other in relation to the Self:

> "We" must secure our centrality and "they," those who disrupt our homely space, must be pushed out from the centre. . . . Our ambivalence towards strangers expresses both fear and fascination, which is also desire (including erotic desire) fused into one, and is thus doubly unsettling.[21]

There is no reason to object to the mobility of people within our homely space of shared identity.

---

15 Carens 1987, p. 267.
16 Sager 2016, p. 46.
17 Sager (2016, p. 53). See also Faist (2010) and Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002).
18 Fassin 2012, p. 154.
19 Kitschelt and McGann 1997, p. 22.
20 Higham 2002, p. 4.
21 Sandercock 2002, p. 206.

1.1.2 *The banality of pro-local norms*

Is it really true that most people think discrimination against migrants is wrong if the migrants share the locals' nationality and/or ethnoracial identity?

That contention is a bit surprising given that pro-local discrimination is the way most countries run their internal affairs. Spatially homogeneous national citizenship is a myth. "With the exception of Monaco (which consists of a single municipality) and Vatican City (a peculiar 'state' of less than 900 inhabitants), every state in the world contains multiple administrative divisions."[22] Sub-national political jurisdictions use time-in-residence to govern political participation, eligibility for public services, tax rates, and property rights.

Internal mobility is not severely regulated in most wealthy democracies. Yet, older and newer residents are treated differently. Subsidized housing in Britain uses local connection tests; so does public housing in New York City.[23] Non-locals can only buy limited amounts of land in Prince Edward Island, Canada. Germany's Basic Law allows restrictions on free movement within federal territory if "the absence of adequate means of support would result in a particular burden for the community."[24] You do not need to be a US citizen to be a Delaware state senator—provided you have lived in Delaware for three years.

Or take the EU, where the only foreigners who are thought to pose a problem are non-Westerners. Unproblematic though they might be, even EU citizens do not have fully portable access to public funds: "a person is free to *move* if they are an EU citizen, but they are not free to *stay* for longer than three months unless they are a worker, a student or of independent means."[25]

These restrictions are typically only nuisances for people of means. Yet, they imply that pro-local discrimination is hardly taboo in domestic and in-group contexts. In US state politics, discrimination against domestic migrants is a rare by recurrent feature of both major parties' platforms.[26] The ideas in these platforms echo themes familiar

22 Maas (2013, p. 10). Sources differ slightly on this. In the V-Dem dataset (Coppedge et al. 2024; Michael et al. 2024; Pemstein et al. 2024), there are three countries with more than five hundred thousand residents and no subnational political divisions, which are Kuwait, Qatar, and Singapore.

23 Freund 2018, p. 847.

24 Maas 2013, p. 15.

25 Anderson (2021, pp. 306–307). See also Blauberger and Schmidt (2014). Other international labor integration treaties also limit use of public services; e.g., see Osadchaya and Yudina (2016) on the Eurasian Economic Union.

26 I reviewed state party platforms, 1900 to 2017, compiled by Hopkins et al. (2022). In 139 out of 1908 platforms (7%) a party discusses adding, eliminating, or changing the length of a state residency requirement for voting, welfare benefits, in-state tuition, civil service jobs, state contracts or elected and appointed state offices. (This count does not include proposals regarding what proofs of state residency should be required.) State residency requirements feature in 8% of Democratic state party platforms and 7% of Republican state party platforms. Republican party mentions of state residency requirements are 71% in favor of increasing the requirements as

from immigration politics. For instance, the Minnesota Republicans in 1996 suggested limiting welfare for new state residents to "amounts to the equivalent of those afforded by the recipient's state of origin during the first year." In 2012, the Kansas Democrats promised that "instead of sending millions of dollars of work to out-of-state firms . . . contractors or subcontractors working on state contracts of a certain size will have to ensure that at least 70 percent of the employees working on the contract are Kansas residents." Obviously, domestic migration in the US is not a major political issue and these are not particularly vitriolic proposals. Yet, discrimination against internal migrants is hardly beyond the pale.

Also telling is the fact that, in a domestic context, opposition to migration is often associated with the political left. A pro-immigration activist, Harsha Walia, recounts being "bated" by a radio caller who asked "how can you say gentrifiers aren't welcome when you believe no one is illegal?"[27] Her rejoinder is to contrast immigrants who move to Vancouver's low income neighborhoods in order "to secure social housing, care for their aging family, and knit kinship networks in a vibrant oasis of low-income residents, Indigenous matriarchs, Chinese Canadian seniors, artists, drug users, sex workers, and cacophonous dissidents" with "rapacious hipster colonists."[28] The implied standard seems to be that newcomers should conform to the existing residents' values and political views, which sounds fairly nativist.

Philosophers struggle with whether arguments in favor of freedom of migration leave room for indigenous or minority place rights.[29] The existence of these debates alerts us to the fact that there is something about locals' rights that cuts across the ideological spectrum.

1.2 LOCALS' RIGHTS

Being local is normative even within national, ethnic, and racial groups. The first goal of this book is to show that the idea of locals' rights is common and that it is not quite the same idea as racism, ethnocentrism, or nationalism. I also refute the idea that pro-local thinking is nationalism on behalf of a nation that is not yet sovereign. Far from being hostile to nationalism, the norm of locals' rights lends plausibility to nationalism.

Domestic migration politics is the only arena where we can examine the widespread assumption that modernization and nationalism

are 59% of the planks in Democratic manifestos. Democrats' lower rate of restrictive proposals reflects many more platforms urging voting rights for out-of-state post-secondary students.

27 Walia 2021, p. 1.

28 Walia (2021, p. 1). For more on anti-gentrification movements and migration, see Owusu (2008) and Freund (2018).

29 Blackwell, Boj Lopez, and Urrieta 2017; Fujikane and Okamura 2008; Kukathas 1992; Kymlicka 2011; Mayblin and Turner 2021; Sharma 2020.

convinced most people—or at least most people in the West—that national space is to be equally shared among nationals.

That turns out to be wrong. Almost no one believes that nationals have equal place rights anywhere they go. In the US, people with the strongest national identities and immigration hawks are also the most likely to endorse the idea of discrimination among Americans based on sub-national localness. Pro-local discrimination cuts across the political space. Racial liberals who support affirmative action for underprivileged minorities are also especially likely to endorse sub-national place-based discrimination.

Locals' rights win similar levels of approval from people with very different concepts of the nation and even in contexts where national identity is weak, fragmented or controversial. I show that pattern with evidence from India, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Northern Ireland. Meanwhile, in Europe and in the United States, the only thing rarer than a no-borders cosmopolitan is a classical nationalist, i.e., someone who believes in national place rights but not sub-national place rights.

If the belief in locals' rights is so widespread, we need to ask some new questions. How can these norms have survived our age of mass migration? If people do not believe in equal rights to domestic places, why is domestic migration politically uncontroversial in most wealthy countries? What makes laissez faire internal migration acceptable but international immigration fraught? But, before any of that, what does being local even mean?

1.2.1 *Identity versus status*

"Place identity answers the question—Who am I?—by countering—Where am I? or Where do I belong?"[30] Localness is both an identity[31] and a claim about rights. Identity and status cannot be fully disentangled in practice. However, thinking about one rather than the other can be more or less helpful. Considering localness as a status unlocks new perspectives on migration politics.

The thinnest possible definition of the locals is that they are the people who successfully claim the right to special benefits from a place,[32] just as a sovereign is an organization that successfully claims

30 Cuba and Hummon 1993, p. 112.

31 Bonnett 2016; Casey 1993; Hillier and Rooksby 2002; Wong et al. 2020; Wood 2003.

32 "The exclusive link between a group of people and portion of the Earth is, in fact, not only activated in identity terms, but also in terms of exclusive territorial 'possession' or 'ownership."' (Antonsich 2010, p. 649). In liberal philosophy a "right to property ... incorporates claim rights (that confer duties on others not to trespass), liberty rights (that allow proprietors to do what they want on their property), powers (to sell or give away property), and immunities (from state confiscation)" (Attoh 2011, p. 671). Most versions of locals' rights are, in this nomenclature, claim rights, which confer a duty on non-locals to not impinge on the locals' place benefits without permission. Traditions of locals' rights frequently exclude the power of giving away or selling place rights. See Mills (2017) on Wauzhushk Onigum political philosopher Fred Kelly.

sovereignty. You know that you are one of the locals because the locals say you are, just as sovereigns are sovereign because other sovereigns acknowledge them. The advantage of being one of the locals is that it entitles you to certain benefits of a place, which has value even if you do not identify with the other locals. In fact, even if you have never met them.

Ideas about what makes the locals local and the nature of their special place rights are culturally specific. Norms about hospitality and guest obligations vary cross-culturally as well. However, we can use concepts from anthropology and sociology to sketch the bare minimum of what locals' rights entail.[33]

A claim to localness has two parts. First, it is a belief that locals have more right than non-locals to certain benefits of a particular place. Second, it is a claim that locals have the prerogative of defining who is local and how, if ever, non-locals can become locals.

Locals believe that they are descended from the founders of the prevailing order of localness and/or people who joined the community with the locals' permission.[34] In the quote above, the Beti and Bulu believe they are the descendants of the local founders. The Dutch Huguenot descendants believe their ancestors joined the local community in one of the locals' prescribed ways—specifically, being heroically expelled from France for Protestantism.

The founders are not typically perceived as indigenous in the colloquial sense of first inhabitants.[35] There are cultures whose traditions include the belief that they are descended from the first human inhabitants of a place. However, it is even more common for a culture to claim localness while recounting its own history of mobility. Kopytoff

---

For additional descriptions of prohibitions on alienating locals' rights see Bennett (2014), Frost (2019), Haaland (1969), and Siverts (1969).

Note that locals' rights are not equivalent to community land rights. On the one hand, locals' rights often include a right to political preeminence in a place, which is not implied by shared ownership of land as a functional asset (Vlavonou 2023). On the other hand, some cultures' understandings of locals' rights stop short of the typical liberal package of private land rights; e.g., Sillitoe, Alshawi, and Al-Amir Hassan (2010) describe nomadic local's rights traditions in western Qatar as including priority access to water but no right to exclude people from physical space.

33 This description leans heavily on anthropology of Africa and Central Asia. See Barth (1969a), Benmoussa (2013), J. Comaroff and J. L. Comaroff (1987), Ferguson (1992), Kopytoff (1987), Onoma (2013), and Shack and Skinner (1979).

34 Onoma 2013.

35 In international law and social science, the primary definition of indigeneity is as follows: "indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society." This definition is from the 1972–1982 "UN Study on the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations," quoted in Bleie, Lightfoot, and Stamatopoulou (2024, p. 10). The focus on present circumstances rather than original inhabitants is intended to frame indigeneity as "a human rights construct aimed at redressing specific violations of rights" (Bleie, Lightfoot, and Stamatopoulou 2024, p. 13).

(1987, p. 54) describes two general approaches to one's predecessors: "claim to have displaced them [or] recognize their early presence but redefine its significance."

1.2.2 *Why should locals have place rights?*

Defining locals' rights this vaguely precludes a normative defense of the concept. The world's various norms about who and where is local cannot all be correct; some are flatly incompatible. However, psychology, philosophy and anthropology all offer hints at what is appealing about locals' rights—beyond the human tendency to unconsciously justify the status quo.[36]

Humans tend to view themselves as living in communities of loyalty and obligation[37] and feel a greater responsibility to community members than to other people.[38] Localness is thus one manifestation of what the philosopher Cohen (2018) calls "the political value of time." Locals believe they have invested time in a physical place[39] and/or in relationships of care and reciprocity with each other.[40] In addition to the ethics of reciprocity, community obligation reflects our tendency to feel more sympathy for concrete rather than abstract targets.[41] Evolutionary psychology points out that having bounds on feelings of solidarity prevents a mismatch between the size of the community of obligation and the available resources.[42]

The idea of locals' rights is also compatible with believing that the founders were created by supernatural features of a place,[43] the caretakers of a natural moral order,[44] chosen by supernatural forces,[45] retrievers of a lost homeland,[46] keepers of the true faith,[47] glorious conquerors,[48] bringers of civilization or industry,[49] or of superior racial stock. The only wrinkle I would introduce is that people who believe they share a valorized common founder frequently also make local/non-local distinctions among themselves specifying localness at finer spatial and temporal resolutions.

There were drafts of this book that called place entitlements something other than "locals' rights." My hesitation was that "local" has a distinctly positive valence. When I argue that the belief in locals'

36 Jost and Toorn 2012.
37 Beitz 1983; Wong 2010.
38 Kustov 2021; Magni 2024; Margalit and Solodoch 2022.
39 Pevnick 2011.
40 Harell, Banting, and Kymlicka 2025; van Oorschot 2006.
41 de Waal 2008; Kustov 2024.
42 Kristensen, Ohtsuki, and Chisholm 2022.
43 Waterson 1997.
44 Piccolo 2024.
45 Boone 2000; Kamahele 2008; Murphy and Bledsoe 1987; Packard 1987; Waterson 2002.
46 Shelef 2020; Toft 2005.
47 Smith 2003.
48 Murphy and Bledsoe 1987; Thomas 2002; Thomson 2002.
49 Corcoran 2018; Murray 2022.

rights is different from nationalism, ethnocentrism or racism, it is not my intention to argue that it is better or more benign.[50] My goal in writing about locals' rights is not to make any points-of-view more or less sympathetic. My goal is to make them clearer.

Treating localness as a status rather than just a personal identity makes several aspects of migration politics more straightforward, as does stressing that localness is defined by prevailing rules about place rights rather than beliefs about original inhabitants. In the next section, I lay out puzzles and problems in the literature on migration that are helpfully reframed by the realization that we live in a local's world.

1.3 LOCALS ALL THE WAY DOWN

If being local is a status, it can readily telescope. "One of the definitional features of place is its concentric character: smaller places are incorporated within larger ones."[51] A belief that locals' rights are normative is a justification for holding on to privileges at infinitely-many levels of localness, even if the levels do not all carry emotional weight. If being local is about status and not self-concept, it need not imply out-group antipathy, although it also does not contradict such antipathy.

If claiming locals' rights does not require being invested in the local self against the non-local other, people with strong national identities can still feel an entitlement to sub-national locals' rights. Moscow[52] or Bishkek[53] urbanites can feel they are more entitled to city amenities than internal migrants without considering these cities to be proto-nations deserving self-determination. Conversely, sub-national identities and local affinities do not necessarily undermine the conviction that locals' rights are normative at the level of nations or beyond. If local is a status and not an identity the puzzle of why minorities and marginalized people are not more pro-migration resolves. So does the contrast between people reporting that they feel international identity but acting like nationalists.

In the next two chapters, I challenge the widest gulf in the study of migration politics: nations versus everything else. Nations are the intellectual basis for migration restrictions in international law and much of political philosophy. According to modernization theory, nationalism drove the transition from a world of internal migration controls to one of international migration controls. Various countries'

50 I also do not intend for "local" to be a reference to theories of the emancipatory potential of small-scale places (Fischer and Bak Jørgensen 2021, p. 1065), such as the literature on "a right to the city" (Attoh 2011) or Massey's (1991) idea of a "global sense of place." Whatever emancipatory potential small-scale localities have, that is not the focus of this book.

51 Lewicka 2011, p. 211.

52 Turaeva 2022.

53 Flynn, Kosmarskaya, and Sabirova 2014; Hatcher and Thieme 2016.

immigration policies bear the imprint of their different national histories. Individuals, meanwhile, dislike immigration in proportion to how nationalist they are, how ethnocentric their ideal nation is, and to the extent that particular immigrants seem unlike the nation. That is all true. However, what about the much stronger claim that runs through the literature on immigration: without nations, would people be indifferent to mobility?

One reason to be skeptical of that claim is that people who are unlikely nationalists do not typically reject the idea of countries limiting immigration. People with weak national identities, members of minority groups, naturalized citizens, people living outside the country of their birth, and people who report no disaffinity for immigrants are all mostly fine with the immigration status quo—that is, a government that limits and curates inflows. A wide-range of people in countries all over the world also mostly agree that nationals have priority rights to scarce resources over immigrants.

Of course, the power of a hegemonic idea like nationalism is that people agree with it reflexively. The critical test is domestic migration. Modernization theory suggests nationalism made discrimination based on localness unacceptable within countries. However, contrary to such claims, domestic pro-local discrimination is normative to most people in Europe and the U.S.. Classical nationalists who only support discrimination against non-nationals are rare. Most people support locals' rights all the way down.

I also show that support for locals' rights is not a function of weak nationalism. I use information from India, Africa, and Northern Ireland to make this point. In India, linguistic minorities and majorities with very different statuses per official nationalism have similar attitudes about within-India discrimination. In Sub-Saharan Africa, people with strong trans-national identities have unexceptional views about migration policy. In Northern Ireland, Nationalists and Unionists with opposite beliefs about who the locals are can agree that the locals are entitled to special place benefits.

1.3.1 *Can other locals discriminate?*

Localness as a status sets up the idea that localness is a reciprocal obligation owed to other locals when going abroad. Craig Womack argues that this norm is a part of Muscogee conceptions of sovereignty, illustrating the concept with a story of a young woman who:

> acts too freely in a distant geography. The irony is that [she], like all humans, must enter other geographies away from home. So the idea is not the stereotypical 'stay at home and listen to the elders' but more along the lines of how to act appropriately, given the inevitability of various

> departures and returns, and knowing how the rules change on new turf.[54]

I draw attention to this point because, as we will see below, some people endorse the idea that other locals have a right to discriminate against them. In the US, survey takers who are asked to review criteria for state scholarships typically recommend that even states where they do not live should discriminate in favor of in-state residents.

Localness as a reciprocal obligation also provides a natural explanation for why some migration is anti-normative. It is well known that there is special public antipathy for migration unsanctioned by governments.[55] That pattern may seem obvious but it is somewhat puzzling from the point-of-view of in-group identity. Physical presence is not membership. Unauthorized migrants' marginal status makes them less likely than authorized migrants to make claims on membership, which means they are less of a threat to group homogeneity, not more.[56]

If someone believes access to the benefits of a place requires the locals' consent, unauthorized migration is wrong regardless of its political or material consequences. John Howard, prime minister of Australia from 1996 to 2007, captured this sentiment in a campaign line that declared "We decide who comes to this country."[57] From the point of view of entitlement and status, the distinction between authorized and unauthorized migration is a question of norm violations.

1.3.2 *Migrants on migration*

Treating local as a status also helps explain why migrants have complicated views of migration policy. Pro-migration activists and politicians have often overestimated how liberal immigrants and their descendants are when it comes to immigration policy. These groups are typically more liberal than the rest of the population—just not as liberal as expected. The overestimation reflects the assumption that identity is the main driver of migration attitudes. Therefore, migrants

54 Womack 2006, p. 173.

55 Calavita 2007.

56 Ad hoc explanations for the special antipathy toward unauthorized migration include concern for the equal treatment of would-be migrants (Gelber 2003; Martin 2021); a belief that unauthorized migration cause crime; or the role of elites in demonizing unauthorized movement. The "criminalization of migration" hypothesis argues that labeling migration "illegal" is a rhetorical device that heightens antipathy to migration-related infractions, many of which are civil violations (Franko 2019). Using the term illegal instead of, say, "non-compliant" triggers public hostility because humans like order. One group of scholars has found that such terminology makes no immediate difference in the context of US opinion polling. Americans give the same answers to survey questions that ask about "undocumented," "unauthorized," or "illegal" immigration (Merolla, Ramakrishnan, and Haynes 2013).

57 Martin 2021.

and minorities will hold anti-immigration views only to the extent that they have absorbed the local majority's prejudices.

By opening up the possibility that local is a social status, we can allow for cross-pressure between the norm of locals' place rights and alienation from a particular group of locals. Most migrants come from places that have localness norms and go to places that have localness norms. Locals' rights are not an exotic institution.

Asking about pro-local discrimination in a domestic context makes it possible to gauge support for locals' rights independent of feelings about a specific nationalist project. In the US context, for instance, non-US nationals, naturalized US citizens, and minorities racialized as foreign (Latinx and Asian-American US-born citizens) endorse sub-national discrimination at about the same rate as other survey takers. These respondents' ambivalence is directed toward pro-national discrimination.

Racial conservatism does not explain anti-immigrant policy views among minorities and immigrants in the US. Among all US adults—regardless of migration status or race—racial liberalism is positively correlated with endorsing discrimination against domestic migrants in favor of locals. Among US-born Whites, racial liberalism is correlated with less support for discrimination against immigrants. In sharp contrast, racially liberal immigrants and minorities are a little more likely than their racially conservative counterparts to favor discrimination in favor of Americans over immigrants.

These results flip the conventional wisdom about a world without ethnic and racial identities on its head. Without nationalism, ethnocentrism, and racism, there would be fewer virulent nativists. But without virulent nativists making migrants, minorities, and racial liberals uneasy, pro-local norms might carry the day.

1.4 LOCALS IN THE GLOBALIZING WORLD

How can a belief in locals' rights still exist in this age of mass mobility and relentless globalization? Worldwide, 281 million people live outside the country of their birth. That corresponds to 3.6% of the human population, which is the highest rate the UN has recorded since it began collecting comparable data in the 1970s.[58] An even larger number of people will live away from their birthplace for a part of their life. Others are circular migrants, cycling regularly through

58 McAuliffe and Triandafyllidou 2021.

multiple places.[59] Meanwhile, the number of refugees and internally displaced people has doubled since 1991.[60]

Here, again, it is helpful to think about the nested levels of localness that carry status rights if not emotional weight. First, doing so reveals a pattern of migrants moving disproportionately to places where they retain some of their status as one of the locals. As a result, there is a large, persistent gap between international and domestic migration rates since the 1960s despite decades of falling transportation costs. Domestic migration likewise flows more readily within regions than between them.

Second, a broader concept of localness makes it clear that even at the height of globalization, institutional changes were moving neither uniformly toward nor away from the liberalization of mobility. A well known pattern since the end of WWII is the creation of international treaty areas for labor mobility, like the European Union (EU). Yet, there are simultaneously worldwide trends in institutional design discourage migration. One is the push for political decentralization.[61] Another is increased codification of community land customs. Trends in governance have not been inexorably toward liberalization of movement.

Thus, locals' rights have survived as a norm because not migrating remains much more common than migrating; migration routes tend to be localness-preserving; and institutions governing locals' rights have changed in ambiguous ways.

The final but most important reason that locals' rights remain normative is that they are compatible with the reality that migration has always occurred and will continue to occur. Most regimes of localness are migrant-founded. Most migrants intend to end up living as locals—via return to their point of origin, integration into an adopted

59 "Circular" migration refers to individual(s) moving through a routine circuit of places. "Nomadic" or "transhumant" communities move as a whole, either periodically relocating or making a repeating cycle. Unusual migration in a nomadic context means a shift in the group's traditional route or geographic range.
Throughout this book, I use "immigration" and "immigrant" to refer to migration between sovereign countries and "migration" and "migrant" to refer to mobility within or between countries.

60 UNHCR 2022. A "refugee," according to the 1951 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, is someone who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." If a refugee is given "asylum" by a host country, that means the country agrees not to return them involuntarily to the country of their nationality. An "asylum-seeker" has crossed an international border and is applying for recognition as a refugee. Involuntary migrants who have not crossed an international border are called "internally displaced people." The terms "internationally displaced people" and "person in need of international protection" refer to all migrants across international borders who are unable to return to their country of nationality due to risks or refusal, including refugees as well as people at risk who do not meet the legal criteria for refugee status. See UNHCR (2025) for complete definitions.

61 Bhavnani and Lacina 2019.

place, or founding a new order of locals' place rights. Migration has a routinized place in a local's world.

1.5 LOCAL, SETTLER, AND STRANGER

Migrants have two archetypical roles: they are settlers who create a new regime of localness or they are strangers who abide by an existing regime of localness.

People who found—or try to found—a regime of localness are settlers.[62] Settlers redefine who the locals are. Typically, they move the starting moment against which localness is measured closer to the present. Settlers often need military force—or at least the threat of force—to establish this new normal. As already noted, it is not unusual for locals to believe they live in a regime of localness created by settlers.

All self-styled locals believe they have a right relationship with the founders of the prevailing regime of localness. They are the founders' descendants, the descendants of area predecessors who were folded into localness by those founders, or they joined the community through the locals' established channels.

This last group of locals—those who believe they or their ancestors joined the community in locally-prescribed ways—trace their origins to migrant "strangers." Strangers are a routine feature of locals' lives, whatever confusing fears and desires they might provoke.[63] Strangers can be helpful or harmful, highly sought or unwelcome, short-term visitors or eventual locals. Their defining feature is that they can only become locals on the existing locals' terms. A quintessential strangers-to-locals pipeline was New York City's Tammany Hall, a political machine recruiting Irish and Jewish newcomers to the role of American Democratic voters. This pipeline was governed by existing locals on behalf of their own interests. While individual strangers

62 Here, a settler is defined by establishment of new parameters of localness in an already inhabited place. This usage contrasts with the use of "settler" to refer to any long-term migration or to a pro-immigration ethos of non-ethnic nationalism (Dauvergne 2016). See also Veracini (2013) on the history of the term "settler colonialism."

63 "Strangers" has multiple meanings in social science (Levine 1977). Strangers can refer to marginalized people, excluded from the full benefits of in-group membership: minorities, heretics, slaves, untouchable castes, criminals, or pariahs who are socially and often physically separated from the core society (Barth 1969b, p. 31). People in these ostracized categories may live in the same place their whole life and always be strangers there. Alternatively, "stranger" can refer to a newly-arrived person, who might then be further classified as a sojourner, if they intend to leave soon, or a migrant, if they plan to stay. The least common but original usage of "stranger" in social science refers to people who are fixtures of a community but socially distinctive thanks to their frequent comings-and-goings. This kind of stranger might hold an especially prestigious role, like a circuit judge. In the same vein is the figure of the "stranger king," who is invited to lead the locals because they bring valued attributes—e.g., Oedipus becoming king of Thebes after solving the riddle of the sphinx (Honig 2001).

became locals, the role of stranger was an enduring social category filled by later arrivals.

Normal migration politics is locals debating among themselves about how to structure stranger migration in ways that most benefit the locals. Locals do not necessarily want the same mix or number of newcomers. They may disagree on whether and how strangers should achieve localness. Some locals question whether existing procedures are overzealous in their protections of locals' place rights, although few doubt that those rights exist.

The vast majority of migrants necessarily act as strangers and not settlers. Nonetheless, the distinction may not always be clear. Even in hindsight, not everyone will agree on whether past migrants joined a community on locals' terms or subverted localness in order to disadvantage prior inhabitants—that is, whether newcomers acted as strangers or settlers. For example, consider the competing narratives about migration in the Oromo region of what is now Ethiopia:

> For ethno-nationalists, Oromo territories were conquered by the Shewan Abyssinian emperor Menelik II, in his 'colonial' move south [in the 19th century]. Oromo farmers were divested of their land and their labour under northern settlers (historically referred to as *neftegna*, or 'rifle carriers'), who were the primary instruments of imperial expansion. For pan-Ethiopian nationalists, meanwhile, the modern Ethiopian state merely consolidated the unity of a long-standing natural 'culture area' under a process in which Oromos were also protagonists.[64]

These competing narratives are possible because settler and stranger are not two objectively distinguishable species of migrant.

Despite that ambiguity, these contrasting archetypes usefully highlight the most politically fraught question that existing populations ask about newcomers: what is their relationship to the prevailing regime of localness? Also, the figures of stranger and settler reveal why migration and pro-local thinking can survive in parallel. At most, migration changes who the locals are. It does not create a world without locals.

Locals, strangers, and settlers predate states, let alone the modern nation-state. Still, in the contemporary world, the state is the arena for claims about localness and debates over how to manage strangers. Any attempt to refound an order of localness needs at least state passivity and probably state acquiescence. As a result, states are the primary sponsors of settlers, just as they are the primary sponsors of territorial conquest.

64 Plaut and Vaughan 2023, p. 172.

1.6 PEASANTS INTO TOULOUSAINS

The final aim of this book is to use the concepts of locals, settlers, and strangers to shed light on the material and political stakes of migration. If, as this book has argued, domestic migration politics is not characterized by a belief in equal rights to space among all nationals, what explains the qualitative differences between internal and international mobility politics?

First, I turn to the question of why, if a belief in locals' rights exists even within nation-states, most governments are relatively laissez faire about internal mobility. What explains the transition from a world of high domestic barriers to migration and low international barriers to the reverse? Why were internal movement controls disassembled when they were, even as international migration became more restricted? Asking those questions clarifies the role of the nation-state in a local's world and reveals the materialist foundations of migration politics.

Territorial states, especially national territorial-states, achieved dominance through extermination, resettlement, and homogenization of their subjects and lands. That history encourages political observers to assume locals' rights are anachronistic. A belief in place rights below the level of the nation-state was supposedly killed off by nationalist leaders who believed parochial identities threatened their power. The peasants were turned into Frenchmen.[65]

Nationalist and modernizing states did repress, destroy, and displace localities. However, by thinking of localness as a status it becomes possible to reconcile the strengthening of national identity, the weakening of local identity, and the survival of pro-local norms. The history of state-building shows regimes making themselves relevant by taking over administration of locals' rights to community property, natural resources, and, eventually, public services. Regimes sponsored settlements by promising locals' rights. They also offered existing populations ways to balance the benefits of economic integration with the norm of local place rights. For example, "welfare chauvinism"—the belief that services should be rationed in favor of locals over migrants—was pioneered domestically as a means to enable labor mobility without undermining public amenities. Taking over stranger management made the administrative national state relevant and legitimate.

Most contemporary states conduct internal stranger management via passive surveillance and pro-local institutions but do not ban internal mobility. Why, then, do they rely on immigration limits to control non-national strangers? Economists think we would all be better off if countries adopted a more laissez faire approach with respect to international labor migration. It is canon in economics

65 Weber 1976.

that migration restrictions are puzzling from a materialist point-of-view: "Why are migration policies getting stricter and stricter in spite of . . . potential gains from migration?"[66] If labor mobility were only liberalized, wages would converge and we would all be wealthier. Only the irrationality of culture can explain why borders even exist.

Contrary to economic canon, the materialist logic of migration restriction is straightforward. All that is needed is to recognize that labor market protectionism is not the origin of states' mobility rules. The story of state migration controls begins domestically. Regimes have always had three major goals for both their settlement schemes and their mobility restrictions: secure the regime against political rivals, secure the regime's tax base, and, as a distant third, insert the state into the adjudication of locals' place rights. These three considerations—political violence, state finances, and geographic inequality in locals' amenities—explain the decline in states' use of domestic mobility restrictions. Measures that made laissez faire internal migration possible include seamless internal surveillance, changes in state revenue streams, and nationalization of the welfare state. No analogous changes facilitate international mobility. Instead, states make limited forays into liberalizing international movement—e.g., visa waiver programs and labor integration treaties—to the extent that they can do this without risk to regime security, taxation, and the enforcement of locals' privileged access to place amenities.

This history should lead us to reevalutate the claim that materialist variables do not explain much about migration politics—i.e., "that there is little accumulated evidence that citizens primarily form attitudes about immigration based on its effects on their personal economic situation."[67] It is true that labor markets do not explain very much about how people feel about immigration. But the materialist logic to public opinion about immigration is not particularly subtle: it is rooted in concerns about security and locals' place amenities. It is unhelpful to think about labor protectionism—a peripheral concern in the history of migration control—as the sum total of what a materialist account of migration politics might be. That is not to say that material considerations are the most important causes of anti-migration populism. However, by ignoring locals' place amenities and focusing only on labor markets, migration scholarship has convinced itself that borders are economically puzzling when, in fact, their materialist logic is obvious.

1.7 THE REPLACEMENTS

Contemporary states have set themselves up as guarantors of locals' place rights at all geographic levels. In that role, governments are

66 Boeri and Brücker 2014, p. 630.

67 Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014, p. 227.

supposed to manage the flow of strangers in ways that benefit the locals. What happens if the public doubts the government can or will do so?

Turkey's anti-immigrant Victory Part dramatized such doubts in a 2022 YouTube short called *Silent Invasion*. The film opens in 2011 at the house of a young couple:

> They glance at the anchorman on TV reporting that the first Syrian refugees have crossed the border into Turkey, as they discuss the future of their expected son, whom they want to be a doctor. In the next scene, we flash forward to 3 May 2043, Istanbul. First, we see two Arabic-speaking men chasing a young man in a narrow street. Then we . . . see the older version of the woman. . . . [She] watches [on TV] a Syrian politician celebrating his election success and addressing his fellow citizens, saying his party took 55% of the votes and came to power alone in Turkey. Furthermore, he declares that the official language of the Turkish Republic will be Arabic soon. [Her son is the man who was being chased by Arabic-speakers.] From his story, we learn that he works not as a doctor, but as a cleaner in a hospital where speaking Turkish is not allowed. . . . Arab culture in Turkey has become so dominant that even his Turkish friends are dressed the same as "them," and listen to the same music that "they" listen to.[68]

This propaganda hits on all the fears that go under the heading "replacement." The Turkish locals are at risk of being eclipsed culturally, economically, and politically. In the near future, Arabic music and clothing will be all the rage. Turkish young people will be disappointed in their career aspirations and live in fear of Arab miscreants. An Arab Prime Minister will take power without so much as a Turkish coalition partner. Arabic will be the normative language. In short, Arabs will be the locals.

The film is meant for Turkish people who want continued Turkish cultural and linguistic preeminence. The Victory Party presumably knew it was not winning over anyone who would prefer a cultural fusion future.

With its vision of Istanbul's new locals, *Silent Invasion* captures a gap between New Right ideology as an intellectual project and anti-immigration politics in practice. The literati-facing side of the far right is a:

> campaign against the elite nature of globalization, arguing that financial and political elites, American hegemony,

68 Türk 2024, 271–2, quotation marks in the original.

> and the growing influence of the European Union destroy the natural fabric of civil society.[69]

It preaches a "right to difference" in opposition to cosmopolitanism and Samuel Huntington's "Davos Man." The foil is a world where no one is a local.

Unlike New Right philosophers, anti-immigration populists rarely threaten people with the prospect of a world without locals. Like *Silent Invasion*, their rhetoric assumes there will always be locals. The question is who they will be. The nightmare scenario is that migrant settlers will turn locals into "strangers in their own land."[70]

The "Great Replacement" is one version of this fear, credited to Renaud Camus, who argued France was being colonized in reverse by Muslims from Francophone Africa.[71] In 2017, the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) leaned into such conspiratorial rhetoric in its election platform:

> The secret sovereign in Germany is a small, powerful political oligarchy that has formed within the existing political parties. . . . This oligarchy holds the levers of state power, political education and informational and media influence over the population. The constant violations of the principles of German statehood culminate in the refugee policy of the federal government of CDU/CSU and SPD.[72]

AfD's reference to multiple parties taps a populist talking point: all centrist incumbents offer a single, discredited globalist vision of the future.[73] Alternately, immigrants can be portrayed as the key to one faction's electoral power. For instance, in 2021 US Republican Senator Ron Johnson opined: "[The Biden] administration wants complete open borders. And you have to ask yourself why? Is it really, they want to remake the demographics of America to ensure their —that they stay in power forever?"[74] Similarly, the British National Party's 2010 platform argued that "in pursuit of Labour's globalist ideals, the white working class has been abandoned, replaced and displaced by a new ethnic electoral power base."[75]

These conspiracy theories emerged in the context of commentary across the political spectrum arguing that immigration is an unavoidable fact of our globalizing world. Thirty years of popular and academic writing on immigration imply that people in favor of liberalized immigration just had to wait. Their preferences were inevitable. Thanks to economic globalization, international law, client politics,

69 Zaslove 2008, p. 171.
70 Hochschild 2018.
71 Ekman 2022.
72 Translation from Lehmann et al. (2024, np).
73 Miklin 2024, p. 46.
74 Ekman 2022, p. 1132.
75 BNP 2010, p. 22.

the logistical difficulty of enforcing borders, the aging population of the West, or pro-immigration voters, governments would eventually be unable or unwilling to control international mobility. As anti-immigration populism has gained ground, the narrative of inevitable mobility has taken on a panicked tone even among commentators sympathetic to immigrants. The emerging fear is that liberal democracies cannot satisfy public appetite for closed borders.[76]

The death of states' capacity to limit immigration may be overstated. However, it is still useful to ask what is likely to happen to anti-immigrant nativism if international mobility is increasingly beyond the control of many states. Domestic migration politics suggests some answers. Domestic migration rates far exceed international mobility. The policies that are said to be increasingly impractical for wealthy sovereign states are already off the table for most domestic anti-migration movements. Anti-migration activists who object to domestic mobility typically have no realistic prospects for sovereignty, physical bordering of space, or even control over mobility. The supposed future of immigration politics is where domestic migration politics already lives. Also, in a domestic context, we can observe the full range of government attitudes toward migrants versus locals. In the study of international immigration, politically-powerful migrants are so rare that the possibility of locals being marginalized by newcomers is a conspiracy theory. In domestic politics, migrants with enough political power to act as settlers are rare but they do exist.

1.7.1 *Migration populism compared*

Domestic migration politics suggests that severe political crisis due to migration is uncommon, primarily because there are many forms of pro-local institutions. Populists can demand something other than walls and deportation if those are not on the menu. People do not seem to have a boundless appetite for migration restriction per se. The norm is locals' rights rather than autarky. As a result, regimes have a wide variety of tools available to manage stranger migrants and shore up locals' privileges.

On the one hand, the existence of that wide menu of pro-local policies means that anti-migration populism will not go extinct no matter how untenable sovereign territoriality becomes. On the other hand, migration populism will often be deescalated with pro-local measures that do not require control of mobility. Domestic migration politics only tends to escalate to severe crisis when a regime is politically beholden to a group of migrant settlers and cannot credibly implement pro-local policies. For a regime to end up in an analogous situation with respect to international immigrants would require an unlikely configuration of circumstances. Rhetoric about international immi-

76 Fumarola 2021; Hollifield 2004; Hoskin 2017.

grants acting as settlers traffics in the paranoia typical of conspiracy theories.

A second insight from domestic politics is that even in contexts of high mobility and shared identity, migration politics is more often about competing kinds of localness rather than attacks on the legitimacy of locals' rights or appeals to universalism. Migration politics easily stays within the envelope of pro-local thinking because localness is a telescoping concept. Migration activists maneuver to settle questions of localness in forums where they have the strongest political position. For anti-migration populists, that often means trying to move the debate over migration to a relatively homogeneous regional or national context instead of a smaller, diverse geography where migrants have more sway. The reverse can occur as well, however. Some migrants have latent political power thanks to ties with regional and national regimes. In such cases, pro-migration activists try to draft those allies while their rivals try to keep migration policy more decentralized. Thus, migration activism is often less about disputing whether locals have special rights and more about which kind of localness will carry the day.

1.8 PLAN OF THIS BOOK

This book aims to reorient the study of migration politics by comparing migration across different kinds of political and cultural boundaries, especially comparisons of domestic and international migration. I use the concept of "local" as a bridge linking the study of migrants whose distinctiveness from non-migrants is variably defined.

The next three chapters of this book demonstrate that a belief in locals' rights exists. It is compatible with but distinct from nationalism, ethnocentrism, or racism. Chapter 2 turns to what nationalism can and cannot explain about migration politics.[77] Chapter 3 uses domestic migration as a critical test of whether pro-local norms exist apart from national identities. Chapter 4 turns to how migrants and ethnic minorities think about place rights.

Chapters 5 to 7 lay out the political implications of pro-local norms. Chapter 5 examines migration patterns in light of the pressure to stay local. Chapter 6 considers how locals' rights interacted with historical state building. It asks why domestic migration controls became less common during the age of modernization but international barriers to movement did not fade. That history challenges the economists' refrain that there is little materialist logic to states' migration rules. Finally, Chapter 7 compares anti-migration populists in domestic and

77 Unless otherwise noted, replication data for quantitative analysis in the following chapters is available at https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/strangersandsettlers.

international settings to better understand what growing mobility and interconnection portend for our local's world.