

Nostalgia—a rhetorical tool for populists and the radical right

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Nostalgic rhetoric is used by parties and political movements on both the right and the left, as they imagine and make use of different versions of the past. Research shows that ideas of a homogeneous population are central to the idealization of the past by right-wing populists and the

radical right.

Globalization, digitalization, war, inflation, changes in the labor market, and growing inequalities are some of the modern trends that make [political groups](#) turn towards [nostalgia](#) today. Trump's 'Make America Great Again' and 'Take Back Control' by the Brexit "Leavers" are two of several contemporary examples of campaigns marked by nostalgia.

"When it comes to orienting ourselves in a changing world, many look backwards rather than to the future because it feels safer. This is when nostalgic rhetoric become easily accessible and important," says Gabriella Elgenius, Professor in Sociology at the University of Gothenburg.

Together with Jens Rydgren, Professor in Sociology at Stockholm University, she has studied the role of nationalist nostalgia in politics. The focus of their research has been on how nostalgia becomes a rhetorical tool for populists and the radical right. They have examined this by looking at [political campaigns](#) in the UK, Poland, the Netherlands, Lebanon, the US, and Sweden, among others.

In Sweden, they have also analyzed party and policy manifestos, as well as and articles from party newspapers, to see how the rhetorical framing of problems and solutions changes over time.

According to the researchers, the hallmark of nationalist nostalgia is the notion of the past being superior to the present. Nationalists look back towards a golden age, that compare favorably to the present. At the same time, today's society is understood as falling apart and that we have lost something vital. The discourse of loss can be centered around things such as welfare, safety, security, identity, or opportunities. The focus of nostalgia varies depending on the local context, [political party](#), and political orientation.

"Among the radical right, nostalgia is often linked to the idea of decadence, that the nation is in decay, mainly due to non-European immigration, and that immediate political action is needed to avoid an impending catastrophe," says Jens Rydgren.

The nostalgia of the radical right is characterized by ethnic nationalism

In Sweden, it is often the period around the 1950's and the implementation of the political concept *The People's Home* that is idealized. Even though The People's Home was a project driven by the Swedish Social Democrats, the researchers argue that the period becomes attractive to the radical right because it embraces the idea of a united people and a Swedish identity.

Gabriella Elgenius and Jens Rydgren show that it is ideas about who constitutes the people, channeled through ethnic nationalism, that distinguishes the nostalgic rhetoric used by right-wing populists and the radical right from other parties and populist movements.

"Ethnic nationalism refers to the understanding of the nation as consisting of shared components and that people share history and origins, perhaps also religion and language," says Gabriella Elgenius.

This type of nostalgia enforces the idea that there was a time when we were more similar and that it was a good thing, while now we are becoming more different and that it's a problem.

Polarizes and overlooks real issues

Using nostalgia to exaggerate similarities of population can be both exclusionary and polarizing, the researchers say.

"It becomes a danger if the notion of similarity is used against other groups, which is happening today. Nostalgia helps to formulate a rhetoric that targets migrants, saying they shouldn't really be here, that they take resources from the welfare state and commit crimes. It fuels bitterness and resentment in the present," says Gabriella Elgenius.

The nostalgic rhetoric is also misleading in other ways, she continues.

"It offers an over-simplified explanation to complex modern issues instead of addressing the real social problems, such as socio-economic inequality."

The paper is published in *Sociological Forum*.

More information: Gabriella Elgenius et al, Nationalism and the Politics of Nostalgia 1, *Sociological Forum* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/socf.12836](https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12836)

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