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Nativism and Economic Integration Across the Developing World

**Rikhil R. Bhavnani and
Bethany Lacina**

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NATIVISM AND
ECONOMIC INTEGRATION
ACROSS THE DEVELOPING
WORLD

Collision and Accommodation

Rikhil R. Bhavnani

University of Wisconsin–Madison

Bethany Lacina

University of Rochester, New York



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Rikhil R. Bhavnani
University of Wisconsin–Madison

Bethany Lacina
University of Rochester, New York

Abstract: Migration and nativism are explosive issues in Europe and North America. Less well known is the tumult that soaring migration is creating in the politics of developing countries. The key difference between anti-migrant politics in developed and developing countries is that domestic migration – not international migration – is the likely focus of nativist politics in poorer countries. Nativists take up the causes of subnational groups, vilifying other regions and groups within the country as sources of migration. Since the 1970s, the majority of less-developed countries have adopted policies that aim to limit internal migration. This Element marshals evidence from around the world to explore the collision of internal migration and nativism. Subnational migration is associated with a boom in nativist politics. Pro-native public policy and anti-migrant riots are both more likely when internal migration surges. Political decentralization strengthens subnational politicians' incentives and ability to define and cater to nativists.

Keywords: migration, backlash, nativism, discrimination, violence, immigration, urbanization, sons-of-the-soil, ethnic violence, globalization

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1 Globalization versus Nativism in Unexpected Places

In Europe and North America, anger at globalization has reshaped politics. Populists blame free trade for deindustrialization and foreign entanglements for the decline of the welfare state. Their most potent grievance is against international migration and multiculturalism. The political power of anti-migration appeals became undeniable in 2016, when British voters narrowly opted to exit the European Union and Donald Trump won the US presidency. Hundreds of political observers have pointed out the backlash against global integration and against international migration in particular.¹

Developing countries play a role in the anti-globalist narrative. Poor states supply the migrants who overwhelm the West. Investment and manufacturing are diverted to less-developed countries, further pinching the working class in the West.

Ironically, migration and nativism are also explosive issues in *developing world* politics.² Economic growth and globalization have changed population flows within and among poorer countries. The numbers of migrants within the developing world are orders of magnitude larger than the flow of immigrants from poor to rich countries.

The key difference between anti-migrant politics in developed and developing countries is that domestic migration – not international migration – is frequently the focus of nativists in poorer countries. Nativists take up the cause of subnational groups defined by ethnicity, locality, or both. They rail against central government policies that promote domestic economic integration and vilify other regions and groups in the same country as sources of unwanted migration. Such domestic nativism is common in the developing world and is likely to strengthen as markets become more integrated within and across international borders. Market integration, surging population movements, and internal nativism are on a collision course.

1.1 Millions on the Move

In international statistics, an *internal migrant* is someone who has moved between the “largest zonal demarcations in a country” (UNDP 2009: 21).

¹ The scholarly literature on this issue is vast (Irwin 2002; Scheve and Slaughter 2001). On the backlash against international migration in particular, see Margalit (2011) and Williamson (1998).

² Our argument applies to nonindustrialized countries and postcommunist countries. Most of these countries have economies classified by the United Nations as “in transition” or “developing.” Our argument is least relevant in very rich states with large welfare programs, which ensure low spatial disparities in household income. These are countries in western and southern Europe, along with Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and the United States. We use “less developed,” “developing,” and “poorer” to refer to the countries to which our argument is applicable.

2 *Nativism and Economic Integration Across the Developing World*

By that standard, there are over 760 million internal migrants in the world, or 10 percent of the global population. International migration is far more modest: a little more than 210 million people, or 3 percent of global population.³ China alone may have more internal migrants than the total number of international migrants in the world (King and Skeldon 2010). Counting people who split their time between administrative regions in the same country would swell the statistics on internal migration further. For example, the 2007–8 round of India’s national unemployment survey found that just 1 percent of rural households had made a permanent move in the last year. However, 3 percent of rural males had spent between one and six months away from their village or town in search of work (NSS 2010).

Poorer countries have traditionally had less dynamic economies and lower rates of internal migration. However, the number of internal migrants in developing countries grew throughout the twentieth century, and that growth accelerated after 1990 (World Bank 2009).⁴ The boom in internal migration reflects some of the same forces that have driven the global integration of markets. Falling transport costs and expansion of infrastructure have eased migration. Increasing movement reflects the demise of central planning in countries such as China, Russia, and Vietnam, all of which relaxed restrictions on internal movement as they liberalized. Internal migration has increased in countries that abandoned import-substitution industrialization, shifting investment toward labor-intensive sectors (Lucas 2015). Climate change and environmental disasters will become increasingly important drivers of internal migration.

Internal migration is also related to global urbanization. By 2030, urbanites will be in the majority in every region of the world (UNDP 2009). Almost all global population growth will occur in towns and cities of less-developed countries, which will reach a combined population of 5.3 billion people by 2050 (Montgomery 2008). Natural increase, not migration, is the number one source of urban growth.⁵ Migration is hugely important, however. In Asia,

³ Both domestic and international migration figures are likely underreported because states – particularly developing countries – lack the capacity to track people as they move across internal and external borders. This problem is worsened by the fact that people often have incentives to obfuscate whether they are migrants or not.

⁴ There is debate as to whether this acceleration continues (World Bank 2009) or has leveled off (UNDP 2009).

⁵ Statistics on urbanization tend to be based on government designations of certain areas as “urban” rather than criteria such as population density or nonagricultural employment. Potts (2012) points out that urban areas are sometimes defined using fixed population thresholds. If a country has a generally high birth rate, rural areas may pass the “urban” benchmark without taking on any other characteristics of urban settlements. Potts uses this point and other critiques to argue that urbanization in Sub-Saharan Africa is not increasing.

Africa, and Latin America, migration from rural to urban areas accounts for approximately 40 percent of urban growth (Faetanini and Tankha 2013: 3). Migration from rural areas to urban areas is a growing portion of all internal migration.

1.2 Discouraging Migration

Internal migration is generally thought to be good. Voluntary migrants benefit financially from their move and, in most cases, boost the host area's economy as well.⁶ Social scientists link migration to responsive government. The threat of citizen exit constrains the government's abuse of power. Interjurisdictional competition for migrants can improve public policies (Tiebout 1956). Freedom of movement is also a human right, enumerated in many constitutions and in Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Notwithstanding these benefits, most developing countries deploy a range of formal and informal policies to regulate internal migration. In 2009, Freedom House recorded moderate to high barriers to internal migration and/or emigration in 47 percent of middle-income countries and 80 percent of low-income countries.⁷ Governments tamp down on rural-to-urban migration in particular because of its myriad supposed negative effects:

[P]olicy makers in many developing countries – particularly in South Asia and in Sub-Saharan Africa – have been conditioned by an early literature on migration to worry about the specter of rising urban unemployment, overburdened city services, social tensions in economically vibrant areas, and a “brain drain.” (World Bank 2009: 147)

The threat of urban unrest also motivates restrictions (Bates 1981). The potential for collective action and contagion means that “large cities are dangerous for nondemocratic regimes” (Wallace 2013: 17). Kundu (2009) and Montgomery (2008) are skeptical that the world's urban population will ever reach the loftiest projections because governments are raising barriers to urban migration.

United Nations data suggest that official resistance to internal migration is increasing. Figure 1 is based on data from less-developed UN member states collected by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). DESA (2015) tracks which countries have central government policies that attempt to change patterns of internal migration. The dots in Figure 1 are UN estimates of the percentage of less-developed countries with policies aimed at

⁶ Lucas (2015); Mendola (2012); Zhu (2013); Housen, Hopkins, and Earnest (2013); World Bank (2009).

⁷ Reported in UNDP (2009: Table 2.3).

4 Nativism and Economic Integration Across the Developing World

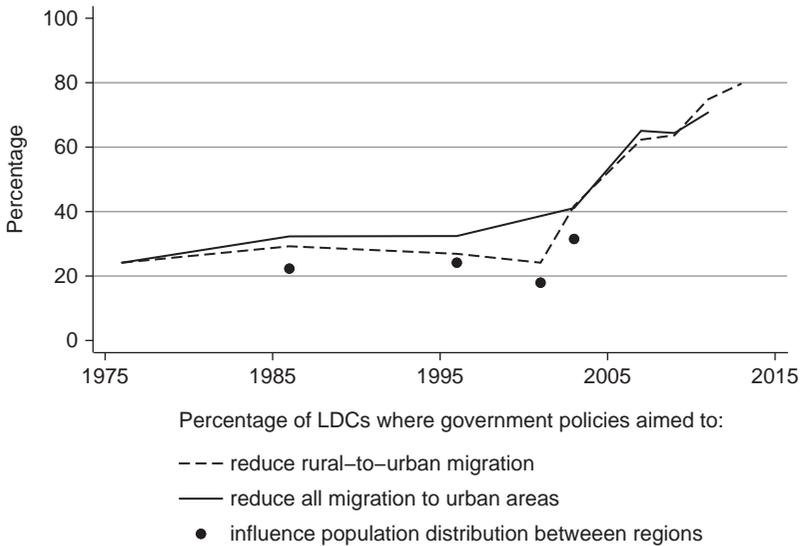


Figure 1 Internal migration policies in less-developed countries, 1976–2013

Source: Based on [DESA \(2015\)](#).

“influenc[ing] the spatial distribution of population between regions within the country.” The United Nations found these regimes in 22 percent of less-developed countries in 1986 and 32 percent in 2003. Restrictions on migration to urban areas – represented by the continuous line in [Figure 1](#) – have exploded. In 1976, 24 percent of medium- and low-income countries had policies designed to reduce immigration to cities and rural-to-urban migration in particular. The prevalence of both kinds of migration policies soared starting in the mid-1990s. In 2003, 41 percent of less-developed countries sought to slow migration to urban areas. In 2011, the United Nations reported that 70 percent of these states intended to curtail migration to urban areas.

The recent surge in migration restrictions reflects domestic nativism. *Domestic nativism*, or *sons-of-the-soil politics*, is an antagonistic political response to the stresses of internal migration. Nativists argue that the interests of longtime residents of a jurisdiction should take precedence over the interests of new arrivals. India’s Shiv Sena, one of the most famous sons-of-the-soil parties, encapsulates these ideas in its call for “Maharashtra [state] for Maharashtrians!”

The normative justification for anti-migrant policies is varied. Nativists may argue that longtime residents are indigenous, autochthonous, or claim religious

or historical precedence. Others argue that the longtime population deserves to enjoy the fruits of their previous efforts to enrich an area. The variety of justifications for sons-of-the-soil rights go along with widely disparate time scales for defining natives versus migrants. Sino-Thais in southern Thailand are not the sons-of-the-soil, politically speaking, although their presence dates from at least the fifteenth century. By contrast, Gorkhas in Darjeeling, India, are the sons-of-the-soil in local politics, although most are descended from late-nineteenth-century migrants to the area (Lacina 2014).

The political view that recent migrants should be deprioritized relative to previous residents might also be referred to as *pro-indigenous*, *pro-local*, *anti-settler*, or simply *anti-migrant politics*. We use the term *nativism* (and sometimes *sons-of-the-soil*) because, first, nativist politics is not limited to places where the self-styled natives are indigenous by anthropological standards or to places where migrants are recently arrived. Second, terms such as *pro-indigenous* and *anti-settler* carry an ethical presumption in favor of locals and imply that the state is aligned with pro-migration forces.

The term indigenous tends to be used for people who are already marginalised, while autochthonous is generally reserved for people who are dominant in a given area but fear future marginalisation. [Scholars] often sympathise with the former, while being highly critical of the latter. (Gausset, Kenrick, and Gibb 2011: 135)

Lastly, we argue that political institutions, including the degree of decentralization, influence whether migrants or nonmigrants are the marginalized population. For all these reasons, we try to avoid terminology that prejudices whether self-styled locals are marginalized or not.

1.3 Domestic Nativism

Local anxiety about internal migration is present across a variety of contexts: rural and urban, agrarian and industrialized, democratic and autocratic. In some instances, migrants are better off than natives and outcompete them in prestigious sectors. More often, migrants occupy a low place in the social and economic hierarchy. In either case, migrants embody change. Their presence feels to some like a threat to locals' way of life. Developers gobble up farmland. Laborers from the hinterland drive wages down. Squatters grab virgin lands. Shanty towns spring up and make city life squalid and crime-ridden. Strangers' children stuff public classrooms. Gauche condominiums overwhelm the water supply and power grid.

The stresses caused by subnational migration vary, but, on average, greater population inflows prompt the rise of nativist politics and policies. As migrants

enter cities and compete with locals, politicians increasingly appeal to natives. They may do so by adapting existing party platforms or by launching new political parties. These appeals are electorally successful because migrants are frequently small in number and unable or unwilling to vote. Politicians therefore have strong incentives to cater to locals at the expense of migrants.

Migration prompts politicians to pursue sons-of-the-soil policies, especially in the labor market. Development experts recommend some policy responses to migration as best practices: investment in infrastructure, reduction of regional disparities in services, and natural disaster mitigation. Nativist policy is more narrowly tailored to privilege the interests of longtime residents over migrants and of members of ethnic groups that are ostensibly local over others. In spirit, sons-of-the-soil policies should be viewed “not as an attempt by government to find a solution to the tension between natives and migrants, but rather as an instrument by one group or another in the struggle to maintain or transform the ethnic division of labor” (Weiner 1978: 11). Sons-of-the-soil enthusiasts demand affirmative action and targeted spending in their favor, government discrimination against migrants, barriers to migration, and official harassment of migrants. Governments persecute or deport migrants and confiscate their houses or land. Some nativists will be anxious to deter, ban, or reverse migration. People who compete directly with migrants for jobs or natural resources are the most motivated to curtail migration. Others will simply want to ensure stable stratification of locals over migrants. This kind of nativism is attractive to people who purchase labor (e.g., day laborers, domestic employees) and benefit from a stream of migrants living at the margins of the economy and the political community.

Nativism manifests outside the realm of government policy as well. Firms may choose to favor locals in hiring. Consumers may direct spending toward local businesses and entrepreneurs. Property owners may refuse to sell real estate to outsiders. Nonstate discrimination against migrants is largely beyond the scope of this Element with the exception of one particularly costly phenomenon: the anti-migrant riot.

Riots against migrants can happen with or without the encouragement or forbearance of government actors.⁸ There are clear instances of anti-migrant riots happening in defiance of the wishes of the state, for example, rioting by Tibetans against Han Chinese in 2008. There are enough cases of nativist violence by nonstate actors that, according to Fearon and Laitin (2011), almost a third of ethnic civil wars stem from such violence.

⁸ A question that we cannot address in this Element is how a government that has decided to target migrants with violence decides what mix of official security forces and mob action to deploy.

[T]he spark for the war is violence between members of a regional ethnic group that considers itself to be the indigenous “sons-of-the-soil” and recent migrants from other parts of the country . . . The violence often begins with attacks between gangs of young men from each side, or in pogroms or riots following on rumors of abuse (rapes, thefts, insults) or protests by indigenous against migrants. State forces then intervene, often siding with the migrants, and often being indiscriminate in retribution and repression against members of the indigenous group. (Fearon and Laitin 2011: 199)

Given this pattern of unrest in the developing world, it is important to examine whether growing domestic migration is associated with higher levels of rioting and violent protests. In coming sections we theorize about and investigate anti-migrant rioting by nonstate actors. In practice, the available data do not pinpoint the motives of rioters, whether migrants or locals initiated the violence, or the role of the state in encouraging, tolerating, or repressing violence.⁹ While our empirical evidence on violence is broad-brush, our theorizing is explicitly about the relationship between migration and anti-migrant rioting by nonstate nativist actors. There is simply not room in this Element to cover all the forms of political violence that domestic migration might influence.

In the next subsection we argue that anti-migrant policies and riots are particularly relevant to this Element in light of an increasingly common institutional feature of developing countries: political decentralization. As we argue there, political decentralization enables nativism.

1.4 How Decentralization Enables Nativism

In [Section 2](#) we explain why domestic nativism is a powerful force in the developing world. Compared with richer countries, developing countries tend to be more internally diverse and have stronger regional identities and greater spatial disparities in household incomes. Also, governments frequently cannot distinguish internal and international movement as a practical matter. Attacks on foreigners become attacks on domestic migrants and vice versa.

Internal migration creates opportunities for nativist politicians within new or existing political parties or factions. An increasingly common institutional feature in the developing world, political decentralization, enables this nativist boom. In the past fifty years, both developed and developing countries have undertaken extensive decentralization of policymaking, policy administration, and revenue collection. Political decentralization creates arenas where ambitious politicians can profitably appeal to local rather than national cleavages

⁹ We are skeptical that these are useful questions to pursue through large-*n* empirical work.

(Posner 2005). Electoral arenas define politicians' constituents and nonconstituents. A useful way for politicians to capitalize on the stresses caused by internal migration is to call their constituents natives and to define interlopers as those who cannot vote locally. Decentralization strengthens the connection between migration and both the success of domestic nativist politicians and the implementation of sons-of-the-soil policies.

Pro-native public policy and anti-migrant violence are both more likely as internal migration surges. To some extent, however, resources for natives and state discrimination against migrants have the potential to substitute for violence against migrants, especially nonstate violence. If a government enforces a ban on migration, nativist violence by nonstate actors is unlikely. Such an effort is redundant. This logic is why Fearon and Laitin (2011) argue that nativist rebellions against the government do not occur when security forces side with locals against migrants.

Because policy and violence are alternative means of controlling and expelling migrants, decentralization has an ambiguous role in sons-of-the-soil violence. Decentralized political competition promotes sons-of-the-soil campaigning. Politicians who "own" the nativist issue have an incentive to sponsor violence to increase anti-migrant fervor (Wilkinson 2004). By contrast, political decentralization increases the odds that the government will implement sons-of-the-soil policies. Such policies deter future migration and signal to migrants that they will receive no help from the state. Nativists have less reason to organize migrant expulsions. The net effect of decentralization on nativist violence is therefore ambiguous. Decentralization unambiguously strengthens the relationship between migration and government adoption of sons-of-the-soil policies.

1.5 The Rise of Sons-of-the-Soil Politicians and Policies

The goal of this Element is to show a fraught confluence in the developing world. Internal migration is surging and being met with a rising tide of domestic nativism. The resistance to internal migration is a barrier to realizing the economic gains associated with labor mobility. Sons-of-the-soil pressures lead governments to restrict the human right of free movement. Domestic nativism can also be the impetus to discrimination, riots, pogroms, and civil war.

A substantial literature in international political economy focuses on the effects of international migration, but the effects of domestic migration are relatively understudied. Yet, in the developing world, such migration has an impact frequently akin to the effects of international migration in developed countries.

How does internal migration shape developing-world politics? In this Element, we use cross- and subnational data from a number of sources to show that internal migration prompts nativist reactions. Almost all existing works on this issue are single-country studies of contexts where internal migration does indeed prompt a nativist reaction. The sons-of-the-soil literature therefore “selects on the dependent variable,” weakening our confidence that internal migration is truly met by a backlash across the developing world. To overcome this issue, we employ practically *all* the data on internal migration and the backlash to it that we can find. [Figure 2](#) displays the twenty-eight countries with 650 subnational units on which the various analyses in this Element draw.¹⁰

In [Section 3](#) we show how the Shiv Sena – India’s most famous sons-of-the-soil party – grew in response to internal migration. The Shiv Sena endorses the right of Marathi speakers to be preeminent in the Indian state of Maharashtra, which has a population the size of Japan and contains the world’s eighth largest city, Mumbai. Looking district by district, we find that population flows from other Indian states lead to more Shiv Sena candidates running in subsequent elections, a higher share of the vote won by the Shiv Sena, and a greater portion of seats captured by the Shiv Sena. In past research, we have shown that migration to one area of India can be predicted by natural disasters in other areas, weighted by the population affected and the distance between the disaster and the potential destination ([Bhavnani and Lacina 2015](#)). We use disasters in migrant-sending areas as an instrument for migration into the districts of Maharashtra to better isolate the causal effect of migration on Shiv Sena success.

In addition to examining the notorious Shiv Sena, we consider the growth of indigenous peoples’ parties in South and Central America. Latin American indigenous parties are best known to foreigners for rejecting neoliberalism, but the most tangible elements of their party platforms are strengthening indigenous property rights ([Plant 2002](#)) and “state recognition of indigenous communities as politically autonomous units” ([Yashar 1999](#): 92, 94). These measures help the local community manage its relationship with the central state, commercial interests, and migrants. Development and settlers have gone hand-in-hand in many indigenous areas. Has anxiety regarding internal migration played any role in the success of indigenous party appeals?

Building on a study by [Rice and Van Cott \(2006\)](#), we measure the growth in vote share of indigenous parties in Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala,

¹⁰ Depending on the constraints of the data, different parts of our analysis use different subsets of these data.

Nicaragua, Peru, and Venezuela between the early 1990s and early 2000s. Indigenous parties grew most in areas that had higher levels of in-migration. This relationship is strongest in countries with elected subnational governments at the beginning of our period of study. This pattern is consistent with the expectation that political decentralization amplifies the relationship between migration and the growth of sons-of-the-soil parties.

We turn back to India for stronger evidence that decentralization strengthens nativists' influence over local policy. In 1993, the Indian central government adopted legislation that required the states to devolve greater power to district, subdistrict, municipal, and village governments and to create elected councils overseeing these substate governments. This experiment in decentralization, known in India as *Panchayati Raj*, was gradually rolled out across India's states over the next thirteen years, over hundreds of districts, and over hundreds of millions of people. The staggered introduction of district elections was due to the existing state election calendars, as well as lawsuits and budget shortfalls (Iyer et al. 2012). The timing of the introduction of substate elected governments was not related to the politics of internal migration.

Once a state established district-level elections, local bureaucrats became more accountable to sons-of-the-soil politicians. We use employment surveys – with almost a million native and migrant respondents from before, during, and after decentralization – to examine whether decentralization attenuated or magnified anti-migrant discrimination. Decentralization increased discrimination against migrants in government hiring. Prior to decentralization, migrants were as likely as nonmigrants to be employed by government. Once decentralization was in place, a gap in the rate of government employment between natives and migrants appeared. Decentralization shifted power in the local bureaucracy and the local economy to the sons-of-the-soil.

1.6 Migration and Violence

Nativists may adopt policies that restrict human freedom and economic development. Tensions over migration also carry the risk of violence. Section 4 shows that internal migration is positively correlated with rioting using a new sub- and cross-national database of internal migration spanning 526 regions in twenty-one countries in Asia and North and Sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, this correlation is particularly strong in places without decentralization, where local politicians arguably lack nonviolent means to assuage nativist demands.

There are reasons to be skeptical of a correlation between migration and rioting, not least because migrants take security into account when they make their moves. To address this issue, we use adverse monsoons in migrant-

sending states to instrument for migration into India's states. When drought or deluge in other Indian states swells in-migration, the odds of rioting increase in the host state.

Lastly, we explore the ambiguous effects of decentralization on violence in India. Decentralization might incentivize politicians to rally natives against migrants, but local elections also enable pro-native policies. These policies can substitute for nonstate, anti-migrant violence, which is a more costly means of ensuring native primacy. We reexamine the staggered rollout of decentralization across Indian states, asking whether local elections changed the relationship between migration and violence. As described in the preceding subsection, this reform increased government discrimination against migrants, perhaps reducing the "need" for violence. Consistent with this argument, we find that the correlation between migration and rioting in India is weaker after political decentralization.

1.7 Conclusions

The collision between growing economic integration and nativism is destabilizing the developing world. It is easy to miss the parallel between these controversies and the anti-globalist populism of the West. The stress in developing countries is due to domestic migration and urbanization rather than international immigration. Anti-migrant sentiment is often labeled *nationalism* in rich countries, but this term is inapt in the politics of internal migration. By contrast, the term *sons-of-the-soil* commonly refers to nativism in poorer countries but not rich ones. We bring to light a common global struggle to accommodate the changes wrought by greater economic integration between and within countries. Everywhere, that transformation creates tensions between locals and new arrivals because these groups rarely play the same role in the economy or experience the same gains and losses from change.

One of the themes that runs throughout this Element is that nativism flourishes in diverse political contexts. The developing countries where we find examples of nativism vary on every dimension: size, diversity, region, urbanization, democratization, and recent economic trajectories. It is ironic that we find sons-of-the-soil politics in countries undergoing rapid economic growth and industrialization. Vignettes on nativist politics in the West emphasize the stagnation and deindustrialization of places such as western Pennsylvania and Manchester, England. We find nativist politics in the countries that have supposedly benefited from that decline. Economic change and economic competition are sufficient to produce nativist anxieties, even if the economy is not in an overall decline. Trends such as greater human migration

and tighter integration of markets are truly global in scope, and the stress of responding to those changes is apparent in politics almost everywhere.

Nativism is a political barrier to development and a human security threat. This Element is a call for more attention to the conditions under which a backlash against internal migration can be avoided. Developing countries have a wider range of political institutions than rich countries, so the answer to the problem is unlikely to be simple. Our past research suggests that political parties play a role in mitigating nativism in India (Bhavnani and Lacina 2015, 2017), but parties are weak or irrelevant in many other countries. Even in India, the meaning and role of parties are in rapid flux. Finding the means to defuse internal nativism is both a complicated research problem and an urgent policy issue. In the developing world, surging population movements and economic integration are on a collision course with the politics of domestic nativism.