

What is fascism?

<https://www.taxresearch.org.uk/Blog/2023/03/12/what-is-fascism/>

Published: January 12, 2026, 8:25 pm

I was asked recently to add a definition of fascism to the glossary and in light of the current debate felt it useful to do so.

Having accepted the challenge, I have also referred extensively to others' definitions, whilst also accepting the difficulty of defining something so amorphic.

The resulting entry is as follows:

Defining [fascism](#) is challenging for three reasons.

The first is that unlike, for example, communists, fascists have been very reluctant to use the term to describe themselves. That means that even agreeing on which groups are fascist is open to controversy.

Second, those groups which have been described as fascist are not all consistent in their attitudes or behaviour. This inconsistency has to be dealt with as a consequence.

The third reason is that the term is usually actively resisted by those to whom it is applied. Rather as one of the surest signs that a place is a [tax haven](#) is its vehement denial that it is a tax haven, so is it the case that a [group](#) that appears fascist in inclination is absolutely vehement in its denial of the fact. It is, in fact, commonplace for those accused of being fascist to use [DARVO](#) (deny, attack, and reverse victim and offender) gaslighting techniques on those accusing them of being so.

In this situation definitions of fascism have either to be broadly based or describe the common characteristics of the groups that are suggested to be fascist in orientation.

One [broadly based definition](#) is that fascism is a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist

ultra-nationalism where palingenetic refers to the revival or rebirth of a national spirit, culture and religion in society. The essence is clear: the idea of national superiority to the exclusion of others is promoted by populist means.

The [Cambridge Dictionary defines fascism](#) as 'a political system based on a very powerful leader, state control, and being extremely proud of country and race, and in which political opposition is not allowed'.

McGill University, [in its Wikispeedia](#), has defined fascism as 'a radical political ideology that combines elements of corporatism, authoritarianism, nationalism, militarism, anti-liberalism and anti-communism'. Doing so, it moves from being broadly based towards listing characteristics.

The most commonly quoted of these lists of characteristics was developed by Umberto Eco in an article entitled [Ur-Fascism for the New York Review of Books](#) in 1995. This list has been summarised in various ways, [this being one of them](#):

- * **The cult of tradition.** "One has only to look at the syllabus of every fascist movement to find the major traditionalist thinkers. The Nazi gnosis was nourished by traditionalist, syncretistic, occult elements."
- * **The rejection of modernism.** "The Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, is seen as the beginning of modern depravity. In this sense Ur-[Fascism](#) **can be defined as irrationalism.**"
- * **The cult of action for action's sake.** "Action being beautiful in itself, it must be taken before, or without, any previous reflection. Thinking is a form of emasculation."
- * **Disagreement is treason.** "The critical spirit makes distinctions, and to distinguish is a sign of modernism. In modern culture the scientific community praises disagreement as a way to improve knowledge."
- * **Fear of difference.** "The first appeal of a fascist or prematurely fascist movement is an appeal against the intruders. Thus Ur-Fascism is racist by definition."
- * **Appeal to social frustration.** "One of the most typical features of the historical fascism was the appeal to a frustrated middle class, a class suffering from an economic crisis or feelings of political humiliation, and frightened by the pressure of lower social groups."
- * **The obsession with a plot.** "Thus at the root of the Ur-Fascist psychology there is the obsession with a plot, possibly an international one. The followers must feel besieged."
- * **The enemy is both strong and weak.** "By a continuous shifting of rhetorical focus, the enemies are at the same time too strong and too weak."
- * **Pacifism is trafficking with the enemy.** "For Ur-Fascism there is no struggle for life but, rather, life is lived for struggle."

- * **Contempt for the weak.** "Elitism is a typical aspect of any reactionary ideology."
- * **Everybody is educated to become a hero.** "In Ur-Fascist ideology, heroism is the norm. This cult of heroism is strictly linked with the cult of death."
- * **Machismo and weaponry.** "Machismo implies both disdain for women and intolerance and condemnation of nonstandard sexual habits, from chastity to homosexuality."
- * **Selective populism.** "There is in our future a TV or Internet populism, in which the emotional response of a selected group of citizens can be presented and accepted as the Voice of the People."
- * **Ur-Fascism speaks Newspeak.** "All the Nazi or Fascist schoolbooks made use of an impoverished vocabulary, and an elementary syntax, in order to limit the instruments for complex and critical reasoning."

This list is not the same as that published later by [Laurence Britt in 2003:](#)

- * **Powerful and Continuing Nationalism**
Fascist regimes tend to make constant use of patriotic mottos, slogans, symbols, songs, and other paraphernalia. Flags are seen everywhere, as are flag symbols on clothing and in public displays.
- * **Disdain for the Recognition of Human Rights**
Because of fear of enemies and the need for security, the people in fascist regimes are persuaded that human rights can be ignored in certain cases because of "need." The people tend to look the other way or even approve of torture, summary executions, assassinations, long incarcerations of prisoners, etc.
- * **Identification of Enemies/Scapegoats as a Unifying Cause**
The people are rallied into a unifying patriotic frenzy over the need to eliminate a perceived common threat or foe: racial , ethnic or religious minorities; liberals; communists; socialists, terrorists, etc.
- * **Supremacy of the Military**
Even when there are widespread domestic problems, the military is given a disproportionate amount of government funding, and the domestic agenda is neglected. Soldiers and military service are glamorized.
- * **Rampant Sexism**
The governments of fascist nations tend to be almost exclusively male-dominated. Under fascist regimes, traditional gender roles are made more rigid. Opposition to abortion is high, as is homophobia and anti-gay legislation and national policy.
- * **Controlled Mass Media**
Sometimes the media is directly controlled by the government, but in other cases, the media is indirectly controlled by government regulation, or sympathetic media spokespeople and executives. Censorship, especially in war time, is very common.
- * **Obsession with National Security**
Fear is used as a motivational tool by the government over the masses.
- * **Religion and Government are Intertwined**
Governments in fascist nations tend to use the most common religion in the nation as

a tool to manipulate public opinion. Religious rhetoric and terminology is common from government leaders, even when the major tenets of the religion are diametrically opposed to the government's policies or actions.

* **Corporate Power is Protected**

The industrial and business aristocracy of a fascist nation often are the ones who put the government leaders into power, creating a mutually beneficial business/government relationship and power elite.

* **Labor Power is Suppressed**

Because the organizing power of labor is the only real threat to a fascist government, labor unions are either eliminated entirely, or are severely suppressed .

* **Disdain for Intellectuals and the Arts**

Fascist nations tend to promote and tolerate open hostility to higher education, and academia. It is not uncommon for professors and other academics to be censored or even arrested. Free expression in the arts is openly attacked, and governments often refuse to fund the arts.

* **Obsession with Crime and Punishment**

Under fascist regimes, the police are given almost limitless power to enforce laws. The people are often willing to overlook police abuses and even forego civil liberties in the name of patriotism. There is often a national police force with virtually unlimited power in fascist nations.

* **Rampant Cronyism and Corruption**

Fascist regimes almost always are governed by groups of friends and associates who appoint each other to government positions and use governmental power and authority to protect their friends from accountability. It is not uncommon in fascist regimes for national resources and even treasures to be appropriated or even outright stolen by government leaders.

* **Fraudulent Elections**

Sometimes elections in fascist nations are a complete sham. Other times elections are manipulated by smear campaigns against or even assassination of opposition candidates, use of legislation to control voting numbers or political district boundaries, and manipulation of the media. Fascist nations also typically use their judiciaries to manipulate or control elections.

Neither list is perfect. It is also not true that all characteristics need be found for fascism to be identified. Precisely because fascism is amorphous the lists should be seen as indicative. They are, nonetheless, considered helpful in association with the more broadly based definitions.