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## POPULISM AND SOCIAL STATUS

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*What aspects of populism interest you particularly, and why? Can you point to an author or work that inspired you and made you consider populism under a different light?*

At first, I was drawn to the debate about what is populism and how we can measure its fluctuations over time and across political contexts (Gidron and Bonikowski, 2013; Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016). Later on, another debate emerged – this time regarding the drivers of populism. In the aftermath of Trump’s victory in the US presidential elections and the Brexit referendum in 2016, a growing body of literature investigated whether support for populism is rooted in economic or cultural developments (Margalit, 2019). On the one hand, we have those who argue that populism is a reaction to economic factors such as growing economic inequalities (Han, 2016), exposure to trade shocks (Colantone and Stanig, 2018) and financial crises (Algan et al., 2017). On the other hand, we have scholars who make the case that support for populism – particularly on the right – draws on cultural concerns regarding national identity and traditional gender norms (Norris and Inglehart, 2019; but see Schafer, 2021). Together with Peter Hall, I wanted to better understand the electoral growth of right-wing populist parties, but also to consider the broader issue of how economic and cultural forces intersect in shaping electoral politics.

In thinking about this ‘economy vs culture’ debate, we found much interest in research that approaches this phenomenon from a different perspective from what we usually find in the electoral politics literature. In particular, ethnographic studies that are based on listening to stories of people who support right-wing populists suggested a different lens for approaching this issue. In this regard, I was influenced by Justin Gest’s (2016) work on white working-class support for right-wing populism

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in the United States and the United Kingdom. This work elegantly documents populist radical-right voters' sense of alienation and lack of social recognition. Didier Eribon's discussion of support for the populist radical right in France points in a similar direction (2018). In a different political context, Arlie Hochschild's conversations with populist right supporters in the American South capture a sense of declining social status (2018) – similar to what we find in Kathrine Cramer's work on rural consciousness in the American Midwest (2016). So, we have these studies that examine support for right-wing populism in different contexts but come up with common themes: supporters of populist radical-right parties and candidates feel that their contribution to society is no longer recognised and acknowledged, their social standing is diminished and their lifestyles are discredited by mainstream society. This work impacted my thinking about the role of social status in shaping political developments, including voting behaviour.

***Engaging in a gruelling tug of war, different schools of thought claim that the reasons behind the success of right-wing populism are either cultural or economic. However, you propose to combine both sides: why do you think that right-wing populism is rooted in both economic and cultural developments?***

Indeed, important research has analysed both economic and cultural indicators that explain support for right-wing populist radical parties, trying to determine which factors more strongly predict voting for the populist radical right. However, over time there was also a growing agreement that we need an alternative framework, one that goes beyond this horserace between economic and cultural variables. In my work with Peter Hall (Gidron and Hall, 2017; 2020), we argue that focusing on social status is a promising avenue for research on right-wing populism – among other things, since people can derive a sense of social standing from both economic and cultural aspects of their lives. And indeed, analysing survey data collected across Europe, we show that a lower sense of social status predicts voting for populist parties.

Of course, we are not the first to suggest that social status is crucial for explaining support for the radical right. Lipset's work on this topic is foundational (1955). To some extent, we wanted to rethink this notion of status politics that Lipset developed already in the 1950s in light of more recent work in sociology about status (Lamont, 2000; Ridgeway, 2014) and then apply it to contemporary research on populism in Western democracies. In research on electoral politics, we have research on how various economic factors – such as income or occupations – are associated with voting. Yet in my reading of this literature, at least until recently, we pay less attention to how people's sense of their social status relates to voting – although this is changing (Carella and Ford, 2020; Engler and Weisstanner, 2021; Kurer, 2020; Bolet, 2021).

***The support for the populist right comes especially from a core group of white working-class men. How do you explain this phenomenon? And does this mean that the populist right plays the role of a modern-day Robin Hood, taking from the rich to distribute to the poor?***

Whenever populist radical-right parties, candidates and movements gain broad support, it is because they succeed in building a diverse coalition. That being said, at the core of these diverse coalitions we oftentimes find white working-class men with lower levels of formal education (Bornschieer and Kriesi, 2013). One reason for that is likely the relatively low status of this group. In line with other studies, we found suggestive evidence of a sense of status decline among this group (Gidron and Hall, 2017) – although more recent work challenges this claim (Oesch and Vigna, 2021). In any case, white working-class men without formal education often report relatively low status, coupled with nostalgia for when they enjoyed higher social standing (Gest, Reny and Mayer, 2018) – and this provides fertile ground for populist radical-right mobilisation.

With regard to the alleged ‘Robin Hood effect’, I think it is important to stress that the core constituency of the populist radical right is not the poorest of the poor. That is, supporters of the populist radical right are not those at the bottom of the income distribution but rather those who are a few rungs above the bottom: those who experience a certain degree of economic hardship, but not the most acute hardship (Gidron and Hall, 2020). Research by Simon Bornschieer and Hanspeter Kriesi (2013) as well as Thomas Kurer (2020) reports similar findings. To go back to what we talked about earlier: white working-class men without academic education are among the core supporters of the populist radical right and have seen their economic opportunities diminish, but they are not necessarily the least well-off. This questions the image of radical-right parties as a modern-day Robin Hood.

***In 1980, right-wing populist parties secured less than two percent of the vote in national elections in Europe; today this number is six times higher: 12 percent. Why are many more people voting for the populist right now than did so in the past?***

It is often assumed that support for the populist radical right is growing because people have changed their attitudes, moving closer to the nativism and authoritarianism of the populist radical right. However, the political scientist Larry Bartels (2017) argued several years ago that this is a myth. We do not really see such a major shift in public opinion. Instead, Bartels proposes considering the growing success of the populist radical right not as the result of a change in public opinion, but rather as resulting from the activation of pre-existing worldviews and sentiments. According to this line of argument, people did not change their views as much as they changed the importance they attach to different views. That is, people’s opinions did not move closer to the populist radical right – instead, they now put more weight on the issues on which radical-right parties campaign. If this is correct, when trying to explain the rise of the populist radical right, instead of asking why people changed their minds – we need to examine why the emphasis they put on

different issues has shifted to the benefit of the populist radical right (Bonikowski, 2017). Status concerns have likely played a role here: those who think that their social status is declining may put additional weight on consolidating traditional hierarchies. I hope we see more work on this topic in the near future.

***In your research, you find that people feeling socially marginalised are often alienated from mainstream politics and more likely to support radical parties. This deep-seated discontent is mostly channelled through a populist and radical choice. How can institutions and mainstream parties channel part of this discontent?***

Indeed, we find that social disintegration – that is, people’s sense that they are not being treated with respect and cannot trust those around them – is predictive of lower status, which is in turn associated with support for populist parties (Gidron and Hall, 2020). This proposes another way of thinking about support for populist parties compared to existing arguments about economic and cultural factors – and also another way of how mainstream parties may deal with this challenge.

Those who emphasise the cultural drivers of right-wing populism – such as concerns over multiculturalism – may suggest that mainstream parties, including those on the left, should consider adopting more conservative positions on cultural issues (Hjorth and Larsen, 2020; but see Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2019). Alternatively, those who see support for populism as driven by economic developments may call for welfare policies to compensate economic losers (Colantone and Stanig, 2018). Yet when you listen to supporters of populist radical-right parties, they do not ask so much for more welfare spending but rather for social recognition and respect.

Interestingly, the issue of respect played a key role in the successful campaign of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) in 2021. It remains to be seen whether and how this emphasis on respect will be translated into specific policies. The economist Dani Rodrik, for instance, emphasises the idea of ‘good jobs’ – jobs that provide middle-class living standards, economic security and career opportunities in ways that provide workers also with a sense of social recognition (Rodrik and Stantcheva, 2021; Rodrik and Sabel, 2019). I think there is an emerging conversation about how labour market reforms may – directly and indirectly – address concerns about social disintegration and I hope political scientists contribute to this conversation.

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