



## The politics of social status: economic and cultural roots of the populist right

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### Abstract

This paper explores the factors that have recently increased support for candidates and causes of the populist right across the developed democracies, especially among a core group of working-class men. In the context of debates about whether the key causal factors are economic or cultural, we contend that an effective analysis must rest on understanding how economic and cultural developments interact to generate support for populism. We suggest that one way to do so is to see status anxiety as a proximate factor inducing support for populism, and economic and cultural developments as factors that combine to precipitate such anxiety. Using cross-national survey data from 20 developed democracies, we assess the viability of this approach. We show that lower levels of subjective social status are associated with support for right populist parties, identify a set of economic and cultural developments likely to have depressed the social status of men without a college education, and show that the relative social status of those men has declined since 1987 in many of the developed democracies. We conclude that status effects provide one pathway through which economic and cultural developments may combine to increase support for the populist right.

**Keywords:** Populist vote; social status; working class

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Right-wing populism has become a prominent feature of contemporary politics in Western democracies. We define populist appeals as ones predicated on a moral opposition between an unsullied and unified people and a corrupt or incompetent political elite and focus on causes or candidates mounting the ethno-nationalistic appeals usually associated with the radical right (Mudde 2007; Hawkins 2009; Bonikowski and Gidron 2016a,b; Müller 2016). Their prominence is important because, even when populist candidates do not win elections, their electoral strength draws significant groups of voters away from mainstream parties on the centre-right or centre-left, thereby changing the

dynamics of party politics, government formation and public policy-making (Bale et al. 2009; Ford and Goodwin 2014; Hooghe and Marks 2017).

In any one case, such as the campaigns for Brexit or Trump, the electoral success of such causes or candidates turns on multiply motivated groups joining broad coalitions that are specific to each polity. As a transnational phenomenon, however, electoral support for right-wing populism has a common feature: at its core lie key segments of the white male working class.<sup>2</sup> Exit polls indicate that 64 per cent of manual workers voted for Brexit compared to 43 per cent of managers or professionals; 37 per cent voted for Marine Le Pen in the first round of the French presidential elections compared to 14 per cent of managers or professionals; and white Americans without a college degree voted for Donald Trump by a margin of almost 20 per cent over Hillary Clinton. The object of this paper is to contribute some new perspectives to the question: why is there so much support for populist candidates and causes on the populist right among white working-class men?

Contemporary discussion of this subject often focuses on whether working-class support for populism is based primarily on economic or cultural developments (cf. Oesch 2008; Blyth 2016; Baker 2017; Inglehart and Norris 2017; Guiso, Herrera, Morelli and Sonno 2017). Posing the question in this way, however, obscures what we contend is one of the most striking features of rising support for right-wing populism, namely, the likelihood that it is rooted in both economic and cultural developments, including economic changes that have depressed the income or job security of some segments of the population and shifts in the cultural frameworks that people use to interpret society and their place within it. There are at least two good reasons for this conjecture – one empirical, the other theoretical.

Empirical studies of recent elections in multiple countries, including Britain, the US and France, show that the attitudes of people who voted for right-wing populist causes or candidates reflect deep concerns about both their economic situation and recent cultural developments. Table I provides an example: compared to people who voted to remain in the EU, supporters of Brexit tended to be much more pessimistic about their own economic prospects and more hostile to cultural outlooks of growing prominence in mainstream culture associated with multiculturalism, social liberalism, feminism and protection of the environment.

For a theoretical basis for this conjecture, we can look to studies of one of the most significant features of post-war Europe, namely, the class-based electoral politics of the 1950s and 1960s. The underlying basis for that politics lay in objectively identifiable variation in the economic circumstances of people in different social classes. But those differences were rendered politically salient, and often potent, by appeals to distinctive cultural frames that constructed ‘class’ identities. Support for parties on the political left, in particular, was rooted in this intersection between economic circumstances and cultural frameworks that

**Table I:** Opinions of those voting to leave or remain in the EU in the 2016 British Referendum

|   | Leave voters (%) | Remain voters (%) |
|---|------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Economic situation</b>   |                  |                   |
| <i>Difference in positive/negative responses from each group (in % points)</i>      |                  |                   |
| Life in Britain is better (+) or worse (-) than it was 30 years ago                 | -16              | 46                |
| For most children life will be better (+) or worse (-) than for their parents       | -22              | 4                 |
| There will be more future opportunities (+) or threats (-) to my standard of living | -42              | -20               |
| <b>Cultural issues</b>  |                  |                   |
| <i>These are a force for good (% agree):</i>  |                  |                   |
| Multiculturalism  | 26               | 70                |
| Social liberalism   | 28               | 65                |
| Immigration   | 14               | 57                |
| Globalization   | 31               | 54                |
| Feminism  | 44               | 71                |
| Green movement  | 42               | 73                |

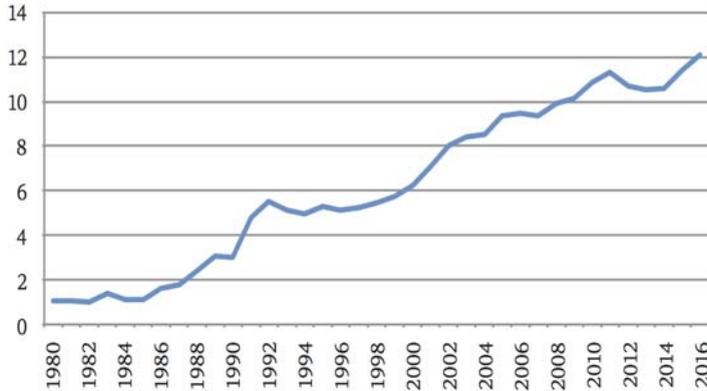
Source: Lord Ashcroft Polls, 21–23 June 2016.

defined the ‘working class’ and its political mission; and, just as the preceding class politics was not purely economic, so the populist politics of today is not purely cultural (Parkin 1971; cf. Shayo 2009; Savage 2015; McNamara 2017).

Ethnographic studies of communities supportive of right-wing populism confirm the contemporary relevance of these observations (Eribon 2013; Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016; Gest 2016). They suggest that people who see themselves as economically-underprivileged also tend to feel culturally-distant from the dominant groups in society and to envision that distance in oppositional terms, which lend themselves to quintessential populist appeals to a relatively ‘pure’ people pitted against a corrupt or incompetent political elite (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016a; Müller 2016). Indeed, one of the features of contemporary support for populism that points to its cultural as well as economic roots is the extent to which it is spatially segmented (Cramer 2016; McNamara 2017). Of course, this spatial concentration suggests that right populism has a basis in regional variations in economic prosperity (Autor, Dorn, Hanson and Majlesi 2016). But regional decline seems closely coupled to cultural resentment; and the weakness of support for right populism in large metropolitan centres may reflect, not only relative prosperity, but the extent to which the experience of life within big cities promotes distinctive cultural outlooks.

### A status-based theoretical perspective

The question, then, is how might economic and cultural developments intertwine to generate support for right populism among the white working class

**Figure I:** *Mean vote for right populist parties in European democracies, 1980–2016*

Source: Heinö 2016.

Note: Percentage of votes received in elections to national parliaments in all European countries deemed democracies by Freedom House.

today? The share of votes secured by right populist parties has increased substantially in the developed democracies over the past three decades, rising from less than 2 per cent of the vote in national elections in Europe in 1980 to over 12 per cent today (see Figure I); and support for right populism is notably strong at lower levels of the income and occupational hierarchies, especially a few rungs up from their bottom (Oesch 2008; Bornschieer and Kriesi 2012; Antonucci, Horvath, Kutiyiski and Krouwel 2017). Economic disadvantage is almost certainly an important driver of such support. But why do many people who find themselves in difficult economic positions not vote for parties on the political left that have generally made greater efforts to resolve their plight than parties on the political right? And why are many more people voting for the populist right now than did so in the past?

Part of the answers may lie on the ‘supply side’ of political competition, where recent movements in party platforms have made the populist right more attractive to many voters (cf. Kitschelt 2013; Guiso et al. 2017). A convergence over the past three decades in the economic platforms of the centre-left and centre-right toward the right have reduced the appeal of the centre-left to the working class (Iversen 2006). In this context, many voters now complain that no one speaks for them (Rydgren 2004; Berger 2017). At the same time, parties on the populist right have moved their economic platforms to the left, making them more plausible providers of jobs and social protection (Betz and Meret 2013; Lefkofridi and Michel 2017). Moreover, in order to mount distinctive appeals at a time when the differences between parties on economic issues has narrowed, many parties have put more emphasis on identity or values issues, which often draw middle-class voters to the left but working-class voters to the right (Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Inglehart and Norris 2017).

However, supply-side explanations supply only one piece of the puzzle. A right-wing populist candidate won the most recent American presidential election despite decades of polarization in the platforms of the two parties; and, as Rovny (2012) notes, the voice of radical right parties on economic issues has been relatively muted.<sup>3</sup> Their principal appeals lie in the realm of identity issues that are ethno-nationalist, anti-immigrant and anti-European (Mudde 2007). Thus, the related question must be: why does economic disadvantage seem to engender support for ethno-nationalist and anti-immigrant platforms? Why does the populist right win working-class support on identity issues?

For answers to these questions and a better understanding of how economic and cultural factors work in tandem to generate support for right populism, we look to the role that subjective social status might play in these political dynamics. A century ago, Weber (1968 [1918]) identified social status – understood as a person’s position within a hierarchy of social prestige – as a distinctive feature of stratification in all societies. Because the quality of a person’s occupation and level of income or education usually confer status, the distinctiveness of this dimension vis-à-vis standard definitions of social class has sometimes been obscured in the sociological literature; but, as Weber noted, social status is not synonymous with occupation or social class (cf. Blau and Duncan 1967; Chan and Goldthorpe 2007; Savage 2015). Similarly, the ingredients that combine to determine a person’s social status can be relatively diverse. What is sometimes termed ‘objective social status’ depends on ‘widely shared beliefs about the social categories or “types” of people that are ranked by society as more esteemed and respected compared to others’ (Ridgeway 2014: 3).

The focus of our analysis is on a similar, but by no means identical, variable, namely a person’s ‘subjective’ social status. We define it as the level of social respect or esteem people believe is accorded them within the social order. It reflects people’s own feelings about the levels of respect or recognition they receive relative to others in society. As such, subjective social status is a relational variable, that is to say, it embodies a person’s sense of where she stands in relation to the full social assembly and, in that respect, might be said to represent social integration, namely, whether or not the person feels herself to be a fully recognized member of society.<sup>4</sup> For our purposes, this is especially relevant because populist parties are often said to be appealing to people who feel ‘left behind’ by contemporary society (Hochschild 2016; Inglehart and Norris 2017).

Because this sense of recognition turns on the views, real or imagined, of others, it is likely to be influenced by various components of a person’s ‘objective’ social status. But, because it is a personal perception, subjective social status turns on an amalgam of such components that is not readily reducible to any one or two of them. Recent empirical studies of its determinants confirm this view. They show that subjective social status is largely determined by a person’s social situation rather than by attributes of personality; but, while usually

conditioned by a person's occupation, income and education, it is also sensitive to a wider range of social conditions, including people's satisfaction with their lives and material situation (Singh-Manoux, Adler and Marmot 2003; Miyakawa, Magnusson, Töres and Westerlund 2012). In short, subjective social status is likely to be conditioned both by material circumstances and by prevailing cultural beliefs about what is most valued in society.

Although scholars of comparative political behaviour have devoted attention to the impact of material interests and values on citizens' attitudes and votes, few have considered how concerns about social status might condition political preferences.<sup>5</sup> But sociologists and psychologists have long seen the desire for social esteem as a fundamental feature of social life and a critical factor motivating action (Weber 1968; Ridgeway and Walker 1995; de Botton 2004). On this point, there is ample evidence. Based on decades of research, Ridgeway (2014: 2) observes that 'people care about status quite as intensely as they do about money and power'. In part, that is because social esteem is closely coupled to self-esteem, a feature of personality consequential for physical health and mental well-being (Marmot 2004; Fisk 2010). Therefore, it stands to reason that concerns about social status might enter into the political decisions people make.

We see several channels through which status concerns might impinge on the decision to support one candidate or cause over another. Some of these are broadly instrumental. They might operate through a form of retrospective voting. If citizens often vote, as many scholars have argued, on the basis of judgments about how well they have fared under the incumbent government, such judgments may be influenced, not only by changes in the citizens' material conditions but also by changes in their social status during that time. A parallel possibility is prospective: just as citizens may vote for a party because they believe it will improve their material conditions, so they might support one because they believe it will improve their social status, either by altering socioeconomic conditions in ways that augur well for their social status or by promoting symbolic representations that enhance the status of the groups to which they belong.

There are reasons for thinking that instrumental concerns about social status are especially likely to animate working-class support for candidates on the populist right. If working-class voters feel that their social status has suffered along with their material circumstances during the term of the incumbent government, populist parties are likely to benefit from retrospective voting because they are anti-establishment challengers. And because national identity can be an important source of status, the appeals to national greatness that candidates on the populist right typically make may be especially attractive to voters who lack other sources of social status, as many in the working class do (Shayo 2009).

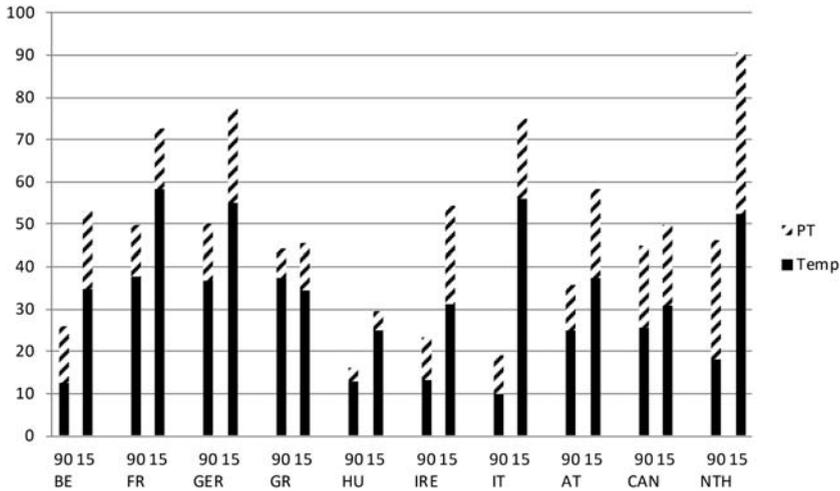
However, some of the channels through which status concerns might animate working-class support for the populist right are more indirect and based on

emotional reactions. An extensive literature in psychology has established that threats to a person's social status evoke feelings of hostility to outgroups, especially if the latter can be associated with the status threat (Tajfel 1978; Riek, Mania and Gaertner 2006; Leach and Spears 2008; Küpper, Wolf and Zick 2010; Jonas *et al.* 2014). Thus, the anti-immigrant, racially tinged and anti-Muslim appeals that are at the centre of most populist right platforms today are well configured to speak directly to people who feel that their social status is threatened. Overt or covert appeals that evoke threats to the status of white men potentially posed by moves toward greater gender or racial equality may have parallel power. There is some evidence that such appeals may be especially resonant within the working class by virtue of the importance they attach to social boundaries. Lamont (2000) finds, for instance, that men in the French and American working classes sustain their sense of dignity or status, in part, by drawing sharp boundaries between themselves and North African migrants or African Americans (cf. Mills 1999). Thus, working people who feel their social status is threatened should be especially susceptible to the appeals of the populist right.

One of the principal implications of this analysis is that rising support for the populist right within the white working class may be attributable, at least in part, to declines in subjective social status among members of this group. That provides, in turn, one way of understanding how economic and cultural developments interact to generate that support – because people's sense of subjective social status can be affected both by changes in their material situation and by changes in the collective cultural frameworks that bear on their social identities. Our conjecture is that, within the developed democracies, economic and cultural developments have combined over the past 30 years to shift the levels of social status enjoyed by people in manual, clerical and lower-level service occupations in ways that have especially deleterious effects on men without a college education.

The most important economic development has been the gradual disappearance of low-skilled decent jobs, understood as well-paid positions with some job security of the sort once associated with factory work. Although there is cross-national variation, compared to 30 years ago, many more workers are employed in service sector positions, often on temporary contracts and at lower rates of pay. If 95 per cent of French workers were on permanent contracts in 1982, by 2012 only 86 per cent were, and less than half of workers under the age of 25 were (see Figure II). Secular economic developments have been especially disadvantageous for workers with relatively low levels of skill. Technological progress has raised the demand for highly skilled employees and the wage premium to education, relegating many lower-skilled workers to jobs that offer poorer pay and less security than those going to their more highly educated counterparts (see also Mayer, Palier, Rovny and Im 2016). Since social status is closely associated with the quality of a person's occupation, these developments are likely to have depressed the social status of many workers.

**Figure II:** *The share of part-time employment and temporary employment contracts in employment in ten OECD countries in 1990 and 2015*



Source: OECD Statistical Database.

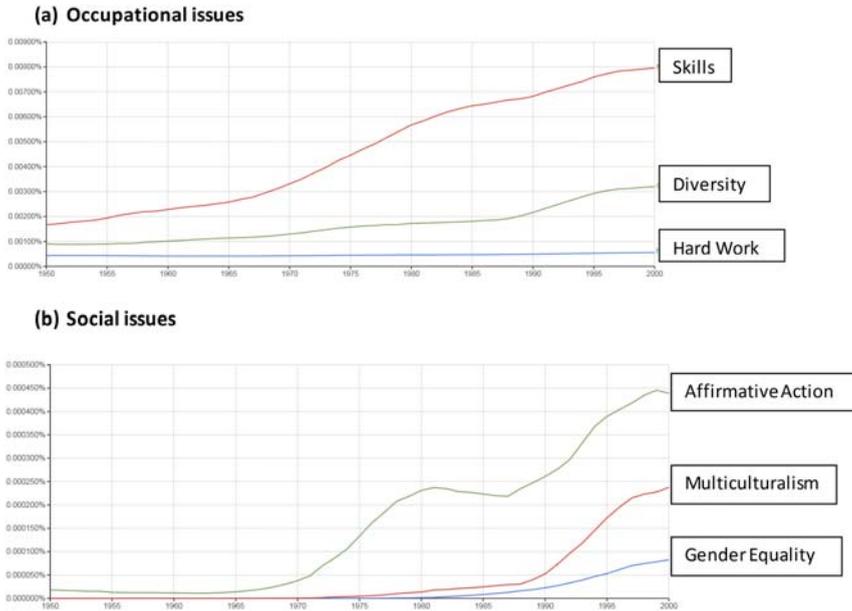
Note: Part-time employment is as a share of total employment; temporary contracts as a share of dependent employment. Data for Hungary, Austria and Canada from 1997.

Moreover, there is a spatial dimension to this phenomenon. The growth of a knowledge economy has moved more of the best jobs into a few large urban centres, potentially leaving residents of smaller cities and suburbs with a sense that their economic prospects and corresponding social status have been diminished (Moretti 2012; Florida 2017). That may, in turn, have fed disparities in regional cultures that seem to be a feature of populist politics (Cramer 2016; Gest 2016; Hochschild 2016).

Over the same period of time, changes in the cultural frameworks promoted by the narratives of the popular media and honoured by mainstream political discourse are likely to have intensified the impact of economic developments on subjective social status. The working men that Lamont (2000) interviewed often found a basis for self-esteem in the view that they were ‘hard workers’ who could be counted on to complete a job. But, in the context of technological revolutions in information technology and medicine, increasing social value is being attached to entrepreneurialism and high levels of skill. It is no longer enough to be a hard worker.<sup>6</sup> Thus, at the same time that people with lower levels of skill are being forced into poorly paid jobs, the social status associated with those jobs has been falling. Figure III (a), which tracks references in English-language books to three words often associated with occupations – ‘hard work’, ‘skills’ and ‘diversity’ – provides rough indicators for these changes in cultural frameworks.

Shifts in mainstream discourse during these years have also challenged the social boundaries on which some working men have relied to sustain their sense

**Figure III:** Cultural trends reflected in the incidence of references in English-language books from 1950 to 2000



Source: Google N gram.

of dignity and social esteem (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Although many of the political breakthroughs in civil rights occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, practices associated with the pursuit of racial equality have become institutionalized and a more prominent part of mainstream discourse in recent decades, as Figure III (b) indicates. School textbooks in Europe and North America now put much more emphasis on the celebration of diversity than they did in the 1970s and 1980s (Bromley 2009); and, despite some cross-national variation, Banting and Kymlicka (2013) show that multicultural policies have been pursued with more vigour in European countries since 1980 extending into the years since 2000. The institutionalization of these cultural frameworks threatens conceptions of social status built on racial boundaries, potentially raising status anxiety among those deeply concerned about such boundaries.<sup>7</sup>

Economic and cultural developments intertwine most deeply in the realm of gender relations, where they combine to increase the subjective social status of women relative to men. Because gainful employment raises a person's status, some of the strongest such effects flow from rising rates of female employment. Between 1980 and 2010, the share of women between the ages of 25 and 54 in gainful employment rose from 54 per cent to 71 per cent across the OECD; and, in many countries, women are taking a growing share of well-paid occupations, while men who move into occupations previously dominated by women

are moving mainly into lower-paid jobs (Roos and Stevens 2017). At the same time, the status effects of these developments have been reinforced by shifts within mainstream discourse toward cultural frameworks that attach a high priority to gender equality, backed up by changes in the practices of governments, firms and social organizations (Dobbin 2009).

In principle, increases in the status of women need not contribute to a decline in the subjective social status of men – many men have welcomed such developments without any apparent concerns about their own status. However, because social status is based on a rank ordering, it is somewhat like a positional good, in the sense that, when many others acquire more status, the value of one's own status may decline; and some scholars have argued that the subjective social status of many men is dependent on the belief that they are socially superior to women (Pateman 1988). This belief is most likely to matter to men who lack other sources of status. There is some evidence for such effects in the finding that two-thirds of American men responding to the 2012 national election study felt that they faced some discrimination as a result of their gender. Moreover, in a 2008 poll, while a quarter of American men earning more than \$60,000 a year agreed with the statement that 'with the rise of women in society and the workplace, men no longer know their role', a third of men earning less than that did so (Kimmel 2009, 2013; Cassino 2016; Jones and Cox 2016). In sum, increases in the social status of women may have induced some decline in the subjective social status of men, especially among those who lack other sources of status.<sup>8</sup>

These formulations yield several empirical propositions. First, we expect peoples' choices over political parties to be affected, not only by their material circumstances, but also by their subjective social status, understood as the level of social esteem they believe they enjoy in the eyes of others. Second, the lower a person perceives his social status to be, the more likely he should be to vote for right populist parties, on the premise that such parties have special appeal for people of low status and low social status provides grounds for negative retrospective voting. For several reasons, however, we expect the relationship between social status and support for right populist parties to be curvilinear. The literature in psychology suggests that attacks on outgroups, which figure prominently in the political campaigns of the populist right, are especially likely to appeal to people who feel their social status is threatened; and, while people at the very bottom of the social hierarchy may feel such status anxiety, those most prone to it are likely to be people a few rungs up that hierarchy, namely those whose social status is low enough to generate concern but who still have a significant measure of status to defend. Studies show that the people in this group tend to evince special concern for defending social boundaries; and they are particularly susceptible to last place aversion, namely, concerns about falling to the bottom of the hierarchy that are a highly powerful motivation (Kefalas 2003; Kuziemko, Buell, Reich and Norton 2014; Kurer 2017).

If our account of how social status matters is correct, we should also find a relationship between subjective social status and a variety of attitudes closely associated with the populist right, even in countries where there is no prominent party on the populist right. Because lower levels of subjective social status generate intense concerns about establishing and defending social boundaries, we expect them to be associated with greater hostility to immigrants; and, because low levels of status inspire a diffuse cultural resentment against people with higher status, we anticipate that they will be associated with negative views of social or political elites. Because they are associated with economic disadvantage, we expect lower levels of social status to inspire support for the types of protectionist positions espoused by populist right candidates.

Finally, if the role we ascribe to economic and cultural developments is correct, we should observe some distinctive movements in the subjective social status of different social groups over recent decades. We should see a relative decline in the subjective social status of the group whose economic and cultural situation has deteriorated the most, namely, white men with low levels of education. Over the same period, we should see increases in the subjective social status of women, including women who may have gained status with entry into the labour force. By virtue of these different trajectories in status, we should also see more support for populist parties among men than women, although that difference might vary across countries with the gender-specific content of populist platforms. On the premise that urban prosperity has been accompanied by cultural status, we also expect less support for the populist right in large cities compared to smaller cities and suburbs.

## **Empirical analysis**

Because the role of subjective social status has long been neglected in studies of comparative political behaviour, assessing the theory we have just outlined is difficult. We have found only one source providing comparable measures of subjective social status across countries and time. These are the surveys conducted periodically by the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). Beginning in 1987, many include a question asking respondents to place themselves on a ten-point social ladder reflecting their position in society.<sup>9</sup> This question is widely seen as a good measure of subjective social status with adequate test-retest reliability (Operario, Adler and Williams 2004; Evans and Kelley 2004; Lindemann and Saar 2014). It accommodates a diverse set of potential determinants and offers more cross-national comparability and greater independence from political context than alternate measures that ask respondents to express a 'working' or 'middle' class identity (cf. Jackman and Jackman 1973; Sosnaud, Brady and Frenk 2013).

In order to assess the trajectory of subjective social status over time, we have calculated the mean value of this indicator for various social groups at roughly five year intervals (1987, 1992, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014) for the 12 developed democracies for which it is available at most of these points in time.<sup>10</sup> In order to assess the relationship between subjective social status and partisan choice, we rely on the 2009 wave of the ISSP survey, the most recent wave with a complete set of relevant questions, and examine the full range of developed democracies in which it was administered. We use the 2013 wave to explore attitudes in greater depth. When appropriate weights are applied, each survey offers a representative sample of the adult population usually based on 1500–2000 respondents, although the sample size varies from 900 to 4000 respondents.

### ***The political import of subjective social status***

We begin by asking whether subjective social status is associated with support for parties of the populist right. This entails identifying parties of the populist right, an endeavour that can be controversial (cf. Inglehart and Norris 2017). Rather than devise an elaborate set of measures of our own, we rely on the classification provided in a standard literature (Mudde 2007; Van Kessel 2015).<sup>11</sup> The Appendix indicates the countries included in this analysis and the parties classified as right populist.

We examine representative samples of voters drawn from 15 countries in the 2009 ISSP survey, drawn from both Western and East Central Europe in order to secure findings of wide applicability to developed democracies. Table II reports the results of a linear probability model with country fixed effects and standard errors corrected for heteroscedasticity, in which the dependent variable is whether the respondent voted for a party of the populist right in the last election.<sup>12</sup> Figure IV uses model 1 in this table to display the relationship between subjective social status and support for parties of the populist right for typical voters in Denmark. In line with our expectations, when people have a lower sense of their social status, they are more likely to support parties of the populist right. The relationship is curvilinear, although we expected even stronger support for the populist right among those at medium-lower status compared to those at the lowest levels of the status hierarchy.<sup>13</sup>

Model 2 in Table II provides an especially stringent test for the association with subjective social status because this estimation conditions on a battery of other variables that can be expected to affect partisan support, including occupation, education, income and employment status, which are often also seen as determinants of social status.<sup>14</sup> The results suggest that, even after controlling for the status effects that might flow through these variables, a person's subjective social status is still associated at a statistically significant level with support for the populist right. Moving from medium-high to medium-low social status almost doubles the predicted probability of voting for the populist right (when

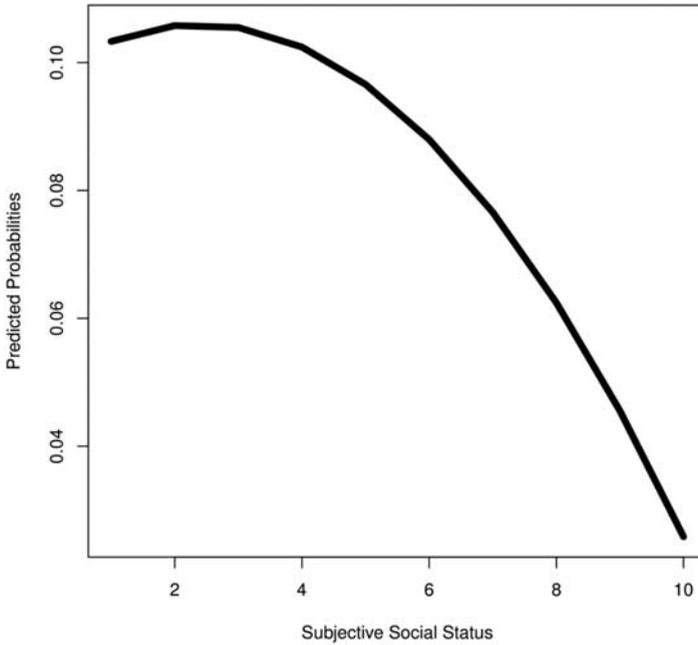
**Table II:** Subjective social status and vote for populist right parties

|                                | <i>Dependent variable: vote for populist right</i> |                        |
|--------------------------------|--|------------------------|
|                                | (1)  | (2)                    |
| Subjective social status       | 0.007<br>(0.006)                                   | -0.004**<br>(0.002)    |
| SSS squared                    | -0.001***<br>(0.001)                               |                        |
| Occupation: managers           |  | 0.008<br>(0.008)       |
| Occupation: office workers     |  | 0.033***<br>(0.010)    |
| Occupation: self-employed      |  | 0.047***<br>(0.011)    |
| Occupation: low skill services |  | 0.052***<br>(0.010)    |
| Occupation: Technicians        |  | 0.033***<br>(0.011)    |
| Occupation: Routine workers    |  | 0.047***<br>(0.010)    |
| Income                         |  | -0.003<br>(0.003)      |
| Gender (1=Female)              |  | -0.027***<br>(0.006)   |
| Age                            |  | -0.0005***<br>(0.0002) |
| Union membership               |  | -0.012*<br>(0.006)     |
| Above secondary education      |  | -0.037***<br>(0.007)   |
| Regular church attendance      |  | -0.011<br>(0.007)      |
| Unemployed                     |  | -0.001<br>(0.015)      |
| Rural-Urban: Countryside       |  | 0.010<br>(0.008)       |
| Rural-Urban: Suburb            |  | 0.020**<br>(0.009)     |
| Rural-Urban: Small city        |  | 0.016**<br>(0.008)     |
| Non-native (=1)                |  | -0.066***<br>(0.019)   |
| Constant                       | 0.146***<br>(0.020)                                | 0.180***<br>(0.025)    |
| Observations                   | 16,436   | 12,704                 |
| R <sup>2</sup>                 | 0.052  | 0.070                  |

*Note:* Reference categories: for occupations: socio-cultural professionals; for urban-rural: big cities. For a list of parties and countries included in the analyses, see the Appendix. Both models include country fixed effects.

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Figure IV:** *The relationship between subjective social status and the predicted probability of voting for parties of the populist right*



*Note:* This figure presents the predicted probabilities of voting for the populist right based on Model 1 in Table II, for a voter in Denmark.

other variables are held at their means), taking it from around 6 per cent to around 11 per cent.

As we have noted, there are good reasons for thinking that cultural and economic developments combine to produce this pattern of results. Changes in the economy that are disadvantaging male workers without tertiary education and those living outside big cities have occurred at the same time as shifts in dominant cultural frameworks that attach higher value to college education and urban lifestyles. Developments such as these are likely to depress the subjective social status of people who lack such attributes, creating resentments that parties on the populist right are cultivating in order to attack the social and political establishment (cf. Rooduijn, van der Brug and de Lange 2016; Berger 2017).

We can expect such effects even in countries that lack a party on the populist right. If our account is correct, we should find a relationship among citizens between subjective social status and the types of attitudes that figure prominently in the appeals of the populist right in a wide range of countries. To assess this, we examine the extent to which respondents in the 2013 wave of the ISSP survey across 21 countries agree with the propositions that immigrants take jobs away from people who were native born, that the national culture is

generally undermined by immigrants, and that the country should limit the import of foreign products to protect its national economy. Models 3–8 in Table III report the results of the relevant OLS estimations.<sup>15</sup> In each case, lower levels of subjective social status are associated with greater agreement with these propositions, both without controls and when conditioning on other social characteristics that might affect such views. Models 1 and 2 in that table indicate that people with lower levels of subjective social status are also receptive to the anti-establishment appeals characteristic of right populism: as subjective social status declines, people are more likely to agree that one needs to be corrupt in order to make progress in life.

With the caveat that associations of this sort cannot establish causation, these findings suggest that people who perceive their social status to be relatively low are drawn to the appeals of the populist right and more likely to vote for such parties. This implies that rising support for candidates and causes on the populist right among white working-class men may well have some roots in the declining social status of that group. That is an issue to which we now turn.

### *Changes in status over time*

We have argued that secular economic developments and shifts in contemporary cultural frameworks are likely to have affected some people's views about their social status. Have the changes in subjective social status we expect to see taken place? To assess this, we compare the mean level of subjective social status reported by people in various socioeconomic groups at six time periods (1987, 1992, 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014) across 12 developed democracies, including countries both in Europe and beyond to secure maximum generalizability.<sup>16</sup>

In the preceding estimations, we focused on variation in the absolute level of social status across respondents at a single point in time (namely, the level of social status they report on a ten-point scale), using fixed effects to adjust for variations in the national mean.<sup>17</sup> However, these national means vary considerably across countries and time in response to a wide range of factors, including most notably the aggregate performance of the economy; and, for the purposes of understanding why support for rightwing populism may have risen over time within some sub-groups of the populace, the most relevant factor is how the status of those groups has changed relative to the status of other groups (Lindemann and Saar 2014; Poppitz 2016). Therefore, in this diachronic analysis, we will focus on the *relative social status* of a group, namely, the distance between the average level of subjective social status reported by members of the group and the mean level of subjective social status within the society as a whole at that point in time.<sup>18</sup>

Since our objective is to explain why some working-class men are voting in increasing numbers for candidates and causes on the populist right, we focus

**Table III:** *Subjective social status and attitudes associated with right populism*

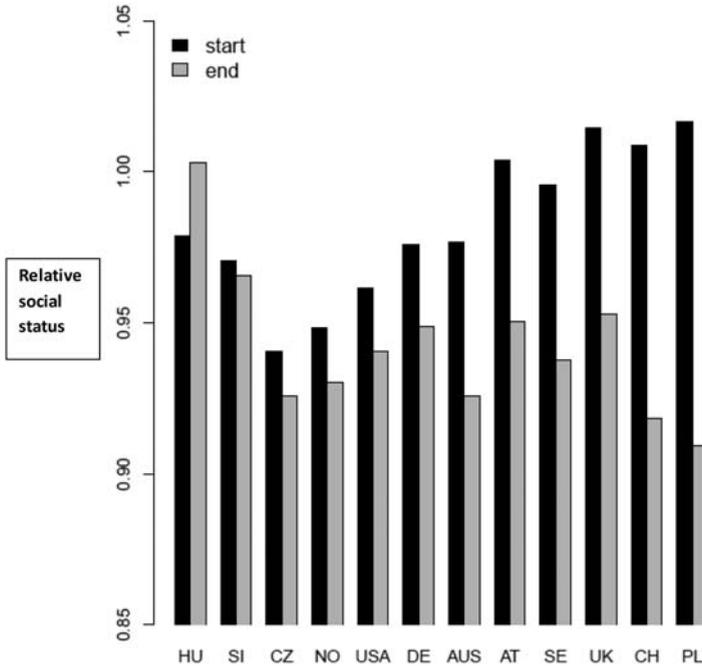
|                                | <i>Dependent variable:</i> |                      |                      |                      |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|                                | <i>Being corrupt</i>       |                      | <i>Im' take jobs</i> |                      |
|                                | (1)                        | (2)                  | (3)                  | (4)                  |
| Subj soc status                | -0.090***<br>(0.005)       | -0.082***<br>(0.006) | -0.081***<br>(0.004) | -0.043***<br>(0.005) |
| Occupation: managers           |                            | -0.084**<br>(0.035)  |                      | 0.075**<br>(0.029)   |
| Occupation: office workers     |                            | 0.014<br>(0.038)     |                      | 0.206***<br>(0.035)  |
| Occupation: self-employed      |                            | 0.078**<br>(0.039)   |                      | 0.177***<br>(0.040)  |
| Occupation: low skill services |                            | 0.043<br>(0.036)     |                      | 0.271***<br>(0.030)  |
| Occupation: Technicians        |                            | 0.001<br>(0.043)     |                      | 0.142***<br>(0.036)  |
| Occupation: Routine workers    |                            | 0.136***<br>(0.036)  |                      | 0.319***<br>(0.032)  |
| Income                         |                            | -0.031***<br>(0.011) |                      | -0.040***<br>(0.009) |
| Gender (1=Female)              |                            | -0.101***<br>(0.020) |                      | -0.044**<br>(0.018)  |
| Age                            |                            | -0.003***<br>(0.001) |                      | 0.004***<br>(0.001)  |
| Union membership               |                            | -0.025<br>(0.022)    |                      | 0.038*<br>(0.022)    |
| Above secondary education      |                            | -0.126***<br>(0.024) |                      | -0.218***<br>(0.021) |
| Regular church attendance      |                            | -0.103***<br>(0.027) |                      | -0.019<br>(0.026)    |
| Unemployed                     |                            | 0.091**<br>(0.041)   |                      | 0.106***<br>(0.034)  |
| Rural-Urban: Countryside       |                            | 0.084***<br>(0.026)  |                      | 0.162***<br>(0.023)  |
| Rural-Urban: Suburb            |                            | 0.038<br>(0.034)     |                      | 0.067**<br>(0.029)   |
| Rural-Urban: Small city        |                            | 0.070***<br>(0.026)  |                      | 0.064***<br>(0.023)  |
| Non-native (=1)                |                            | -0.073<br>(0.087)    |                      | -0.387***<br>(0.052) |
| Constant                       | 3.275***<br>(0.048)        | 3.310***<br>(0.076)  | 3.612***<br>(0.036)  | 2.998***<br>(0.063)  |
| Observations                   | 22,868                     | 16,454               | 24,153               | 17,925               |
| R                              | 0.184                      | 0.225                | 0.153                | 0.208                |

Table III: Continued

|                                | <i>Dependent variable:</i> |                      |                        |                      |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
|                                | Im' undermine culture      |                      | Limit foreign products |                      |
|                                | (5)                        | (6)                  | (7)                    | (8)                  |
| Subj soc status                | -0.051***<br>(0.004)       | -0.018***<br>(0.005) | -0.077***<br>(0.004)   | -0.041***<br>(0.005) |
| Occupation: managers           |                            | 0.174***<br>(0.030)  |                        | -0.113***<br>(0.030) |
| Occupation: office workers     |                            | 0.336***<br>(0.036)  |                        | 0.007<br>(0.036)     |
| Occupation: self-employed      |                            | 0.200***<br>(0.041)  |                        | 0.132***<br>(0.041)  |
| Occupation: low skill services |                            | 0.365***<br>(0.031)  |                        | 0.075**<br>(0.031)   |
| Occupation: Technicians        |                            | 0.126***<br>(0.037)  |                        | 0.006<br>(0.037)     |
| Occupation: Routine workers    |                            | 0.397***<br>(0.032)  |                        | 0.174***<br>(0.032)  |
| Income                         |                            | -0.004<br>(0.009)    |                        | -0.064***<br>(0.009) |
| Gender (1=Female)              |                            | -0.099***<br>(0.019) |                        | 0.155***<br>(0.018)  |
| Age                            |                            | 0.003***<br>(0.001)  |                        | 0.005***<br>(0.001)  |
| Union membership               |                            | -0.009<br>(0.022)    |                        | 0.119***<br>(0.022)  |
| Above secondary education      |                            | -0.230***<br>(0.021) |                        | -0.193***<br>(0.021) |
| Regular church attendance      |                            | 0.010<br>(0.027)     |                        | 0.061**<br>(0.027)   |
| Unemployed                     |                            | 0.013<br>(0.035)     |                        | -0.092***<br>(0.034) |
| Rural-Urban: Countryside       |                            | 0.160***<br>(0.023)  |                        | 0.222***<br>(0.023)  |
| Rural-Urban: Suburb            |                            | 0.112***<br>(0.030)  |                        | 0.064**<br>(0.030)   |
| Rural-Urban: Small city        |                            | 0.058**<br>(0.023)   |                        | 0.135***<br>(0.023)  |
| Non-native (=1)                |                            | -0.318***<br>(0.053) |                        | -0.206***<br>(0.054) |
| Constant                       | 3.468***<br>(0.038)        | 2.914***<br>(0.064)  | 3.946***<br>(0.037)    | 3.245***<br>(0.064)  |
| Observations                   | 23,706                     | 17,629               | 23,906                 | 17,763               |
| R                              | 0.044                      | 0.090                | 0.124                  | 0.166                |

Note: Models 1 and 2 based on data from the ISSP 2009 wave, the remainder from ISSP 2013. Reference categories are: for occupations: socio-cultural professionals; for urban-rural: big cities. All models include country fixed effects.

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Figure V:** *The relative social status of men without a college education circa 1990 and 2014*

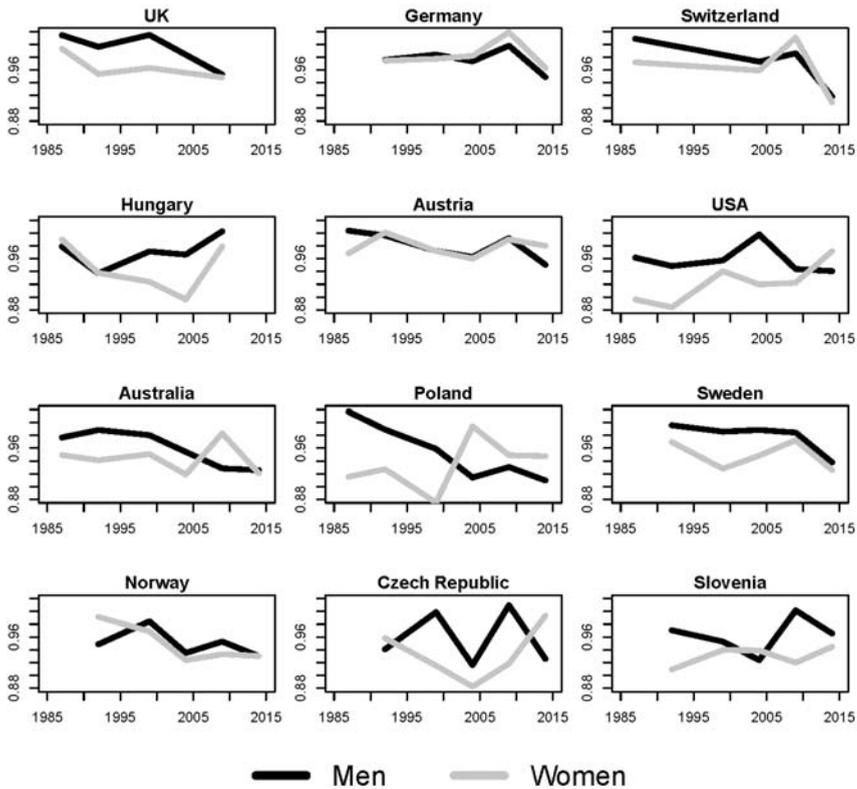
Source: ISSP Surveys.

Note: Start period for Germany, Sweden, Norway, the Czech Republic and Slovenia is 1992; end period for UK and Hungary is 2009. Otherwise start period is 1987 and end period is 2014.

initially on changes in subjective social status among the members of that group most susceptible to the economic and cultural changes we have outlined. For this purpose, we look at males between the ages of 30 and 65 with no more than a secondary education. In the US case, we include only white respondents.<sup>19</sup> Figure V indicates how the relative social status of this group has changed in 12 countries from around 1990 to 2014.<sup>20</sup> There is some interesting cross-national variation but, in all but two of these countries, the relative social status of men without a college education is lower today than it was 25–30 years ago. Indeed, some of the most pronounced declines in status came between 2009 and 2014 (see Figure VI).<sup>21</sup> Since lower status inclines a person to support the populist right, these declines in status may well be partly responsible for the growing support such parties have secured among the working class.

The social significance of this decline in the subjective social status of low-educated men is thrown into sharp relief by the trajectory in social status of women over the same time period. In order to abstract from other factors and concentrate on the gender difference, Figure VI also compares changes in the relative social status of women between the ages of 30 and 65 with no more

**Figure VI:** Changes over time in the relative social status of men and women without a college education

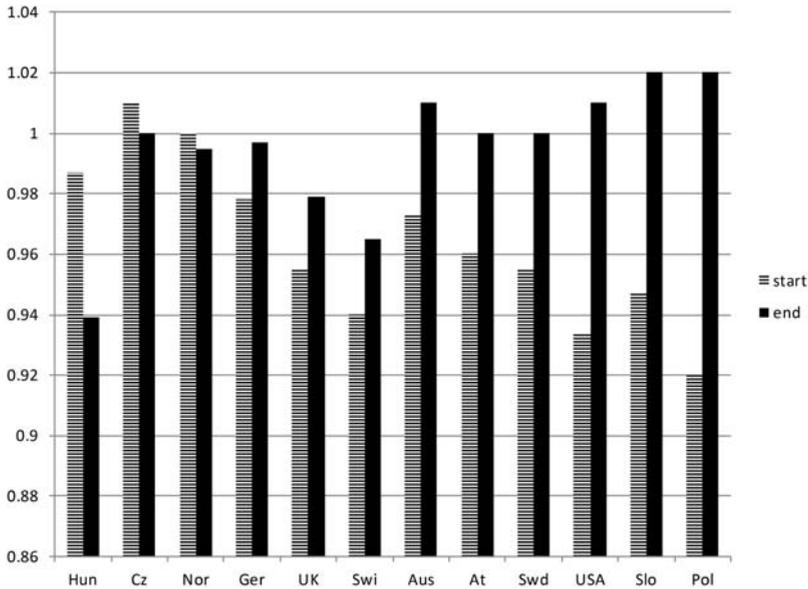


Source: ISSP Surveys.

Note: Relative social status is subjective social status of each group as a percentage of mean social status in the country/wave.

than secondary education (the light grey line) with those of men in that age and educational group (the black line). In all but three countries (Hungary, Norway and the Czech Republic), the subjective social status of these women at the beginning of the period was lower than that of similarly educated men, but this gap narrows dramatically everywhere. Indeed, by 2014, low-educated women report levels of subjective social status that are *higher* than those of their male counterparts in Germany, Austria, the US, Poland and the Czech Republic. As Figure VII indicates, we find parallel trends for the adult population as a whole. Over the past 25 years, the average subjective social status reported by women has risen relative to that social status reported by men in 9 of the 12 countries for which we have data. These results are broadly congruent with our account of how rising rates of female labour force participation and the diffusion of cultural frameworks that prioritize gender equality have combined to raise the social

**Figure VII:** Ratio of average subjective social status reported by all women to the average reported by all men, 1987–2014



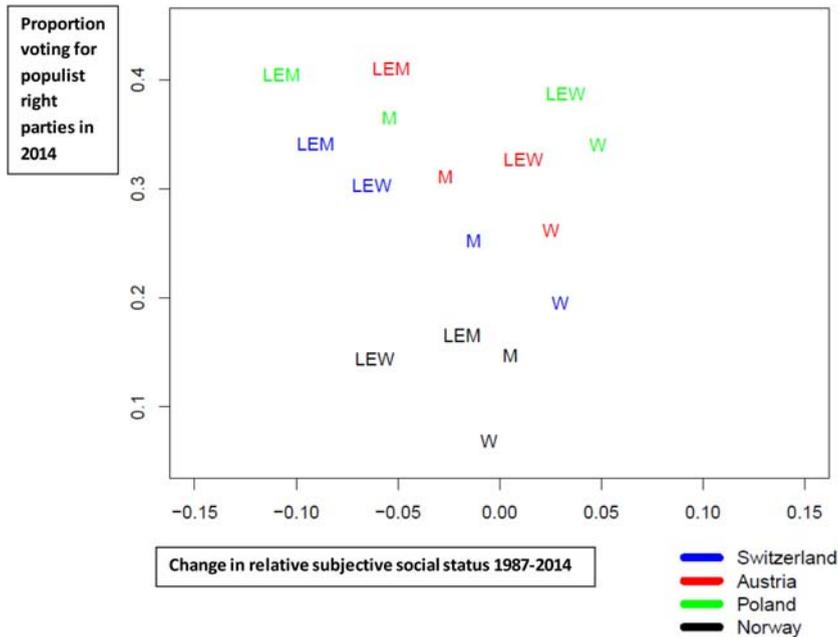
Source: ISSP Surveys.

Note: Start period for Germany, Sweden, Norway, the Czech Republic and Slovenia is 1992; end period for UK and Hungary is 2009. Otherwise start period is 1987 and end period is 2014.

standing of women over these decades.<sup>22</sup> If declining levels of subjective social status may have rendered working-class men easier targets for the populist right, the rising status of women may be one factor limiting its appeal for them.

Without panel data, we cannot establish the precise impact that changes over the past 25 years in subjective social status might have had on the propensity of various groups to support candidates and causes on the populist right. However, the estimations reported in Tables II and III indicate that lower levels of subjective social status are associated with voting for the populist right, and Figure VIII, which compares the changes in subjective social status of various sub-groups within the electorate since 1987 with their propensity to vote for parties of the populist right in 2014, provides some additional support for the proposition that declines in subjective social status are associated with voting for the populist right. This evidence is at best suggestive, since we have the relevant data for only four countries and the sample sizes of the sub-groups are small, but Figure VIII indicates that the more the subjective social status of a group declined in the preceding 25 years, the more likely the members of that group were to support for the populist right in 2014.

**Figure VIII:** The relationship between changes in subjective social status from 1987 to 2014 and vote for right populist parties in 2014



Source: ISSP Surveys.

Note: LEM = low educated men; LEW = low educated women; M = all men; W = all women. Period for Norway is 1992–2014; otherwise 1987–2014.  $r^2 = -0.26$  ( $p = 0.34$ ).

## Discussion

We have made a theoretical case for why changes in subjective social status might engender support for the populist right among the white working class. We have shown that subjective social status is associated with voting for the populist right in terms congruent with this theory and that the relative social status of white working-class men without tertiary education has declined in the developed democracies over the past 30 years, while the social status of women has improved. We have noted how economic and cultural developments over the past 30 years might explain these trends.

We are not claiming that changes in subjective social status are the only factor responsible for growing support for the populist right among working-class men. However, they constitute a pathway illuminating the ways in which long-term economic and cultural developments might combine to impinge on partisan choices. There are several forms that combination might take. It can take the form of *additive* effects, that is, where economic and cultural developments operating somewhat independently of each other affect levels of subjective social status and, through it, political preferences. For instance, the subjective

social status of women might be enhanced both by their movement in larger numbers into gainful employment and by the emergence of new cultural frameworks that emphasize their social equality.

It is even more likely, however, that these developments have *interactive* effects. Economic developments might set in motion cultural developments that multiply their initial effects. Increases in the number of women entering the workforce, for instance, were conducive to the adoption of workplace practices focused on gender equality – potentially enhancing the subjective social status of women more than entry into the workforce alone might have done. Conversely, the rising demand for more highly skilled workers may not only have reduced the subjective social status of low-skilled workers by rendering their job prospects more precarious; it might also have raised the social value attached to the possession of skills, thereby lowering the subjective social status of low-skilled men even more than their precarious job situation might have done.<sup>23</sup>

In these cases, economic developments set in motion a cultural mechanism that intensifies the effects. However, it may well be that cultural developments engender corresponding economic developments with similar results. The growing prominence of cultural frameworks emphasizing gender equality, for instance, encouraged more women to enter the workforce; and cultural trends that have raised the social prestige associated with urban life have drawn firms offering good jobs and employees seeking them away from smaller cities and the countryside, intensifying the regional economic disparities that may have fed cultural resentment and support for right populism (cf. Florida 2002; Pfau-Effinger 2004). These examples are simply tips of larger social icebergs in which economic and cultural developments may combine to intensify each other's effects.

Although we have emphasized parallel developments across the developed democracies, the trajectories of subjective social status identified here are undoubtedly also influenced by cross-national variations in the economies, societies and politics of these 12 countries. We have neither the space nor the comparative leverage in this sample to explore the impact of these variations, but we want to signal their importance. The subjective social status of men and women is likely affected, for instance, by the occupational opportunities offered in different types of political economies; and it is surely not coincidence that the subjective social status of women rises dramatically in countries, such as the United States and Sweden, where efforts to promote gender equality have been especially prominent features of public policy and political discourse. These observations underline the fact that this is not a story about inexorable economic or cultural developments. The choices each nation makes about how to organize skill formation or which social causes to prioritize can condition movements in relative social status over time; and those choices matter because such movements may be more consequential for politics than standard accounts of comparative political behaviour usually admit.

(Date accepted: September 2017)

**Appendix: Political parties classified as populist right**

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|             |  |
|-------------|--|
| Austria     | FPO (Mudde 2007)<br>BZO (Mudde 2007)   |
| Belgium     | Vlaams Blang (Mudde 2007)  |
| Bulgaria    | ATAKA (Mudde 2007)   |
| Croatia     | HSP (Mudde 2007)   |
| Denmark     | Danish People Party (Mudde 2007)   |
| Finland     | True Finns (Van Kessel 2015)   |
| France      | National Front (Mudde 2007)  |
| Hungary     | Jobbik (Van Kessel 2015)   |
| Italy       | Lega Nord (Mudde 2007)   |
| Norway      | Progress Party (Van Kessel 2015)   |
| Poland      | PiS Law and Justice Party<br>(Van Kessel 2015)<br>LPR League of Polish Families (Mudde 2007) |
| Slovakia    | SNS Slovak National Party (Mudde 2007)   |
| Slovenia    | SNS-Slovenian Nation (Mudde 2007)  |
| Sweden      | Sweden Democrats (Mudde 2007)  |
| Switzerland | SVP, Swiss Democrats (Mudde 2007)  |

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**Notes**

1. For comments on an earlier draft we are grateful to Shaked Afik, James Conran, Chase Foster, Silja Häusermann, Mike Savage, Luis Schiumerini, Rosemary Taylor, Melissa Williams and the participants in workshops at the LSE and Nuffield College.

2. Although it admits of many definitions, we use the term here to refer to people in the occupations that Oesch (2006) classifies as clerks, routine workers and workers in low-skilled services and focus the over-time analysis on workers with lower levels of skill defined as those with less than 13 years of education.

3. However, note that polarization masks a long-term move to the right by the Democratic Party on economic issues parallel to movements in Europe.

4. In this we follow Ridgeway (2014) and other scholars, although it should be noted that some other studies treat recognition as a categorical variable that does not necessarily reflect a social ranking.

5. For an exception, see Brown-Iannuzzi, Lundberg, Kay and Payne (2015).

6. For an example, see Ryan 2016.

7. Issues of race seem to have played an especially important role in populist politics in the United States (McElwee and McDaniel 2017).

8. We are indebted to Melissa Williams for conversations on this point.

9. The precise wording of this question varies across national surveys but a typical example would be: In our society, some groups are more on top and others are more at the bottom. Thinking about yourself, where would you place yourself in this scale?

10. Those countries are the UK, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the United States, Australia, Poland, Sweden, Norway, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary (although it was not a democracy in 1987).

11. As van Kessel (2017) does, we include parties that Mudde (2007) classifies as neo-liberal populist.

12. For the 15 countries included in the sample, see the Appendix. Because we are comparing people who voted for the populist right to people who voted for other parties, these estimations do not include people who did not vote or expressed no party preference. Separate estimations (not reported here) show that the determinants of the latter parallel those for the vote for right populist parties. We use linear probability models rather than logistic regression to accommodate fixed effects, although logistic regressions yield similar results.

13. We see little reason to think the direction of causality in these estimations goes in the opposite direction, that is, that support for a populist right party reduces a person's sense of subjective social status. The latter is determined by a broad range of factors, amongst which party appeals are likely to be of minor importance; and, to the extent right party appeals have any effect, they are likely to raise rather than depress the subjective social status of their supporters because one of the key claims of these parties is to be offering their supporters political recognition (cf. Hochschild 2016: 225).

14. We have recoded the occupations reported in this survey into the influential categories devised by Oesch (2006). Income is household income. To account for different coding scales across countries, we normalize the income variable at the country level.

15. These include all the developed democracies for which the relevant 2013 data was available encompassing: Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Great Britain. Responses to this question range between 'agree strongly', 'agree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree' and 'disagree strongly'.

16. This is the largest number of countries for which we have data over an adequately long time period, although some countries are missing from some waves.

17. As a result of these fixed effects, the operative variable in these estimations is the subjective social status of the individual relative to the national mean.

18. In short, in any society, everyone's reported status may rise or fall over time (e.g. as a result of national economic performance) but, independent of this, the status of some groups may fall or rise relative to other groups and to average levels of status in that society as a whole.

19. Outside the US, the number of non-white respondents in the sample is negligible. We concentrate on an adult age group in order to avoid the difficulties associated with measuring a person's social position amidst the school-work transition. The developments we describe have often affected people of other races, who are important constituents of the working class, but we do not consider them here because they are much less likely to support populist right parties given the racist aspects of their platforms.

20. Relative social status here is the average level of subjective social status reported by the sub-group taken as a percentage of the average level of subjective social status reported at that time in the entire national sample. Measured in absolute terms, the subjective social status of low-educated white males also fell over this period in half of these countries, namely, Britain, Australia, Poland, Hungary, Sweden and Norway.

21. The exceptions are Hungary and Slovenia (where the subjective social status of men without a college education was virtually flat), two countries that both made a transition from communism to capitalism over these years.

22. Estimations on the 2009 dataset (not reported here) confirm that gainful employment significantly increases a woman's subjective social status.

23. In this respect, the expansion of enrolments in higher education, while generally favourable for those who enroll in it and for the economy as a whole, may also increase status anxiety among some

segments of the populace. This may be a case in which a development that is in

aggregate economically advantageous is socially disruptive.

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