

# The Politics of “Place”: Community and Individual Precarity in Anti-System and Right Populist Views in France\*

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## Abstract

This paper evaluates the degree to which sociotropic and egotropic perceptions drive both political de-attachment and far-right populist parties support using historical survey data spanning 20 years of regional elections in France (1985-2004). It finds that negative sociotropic evaluations, net of egotropic perceptions, individual characteristics, ideology, department effects and common trends, have large positive effects on political de-attachment and support for the Front National. I complement these results with an original online survey experiment that assesses the degree in which populist and politically de-attached voters in economically lagging areas react to programmatic and “outsider” cues. A conjoint experiment (n=384) shows that respondents in high unemployment areas, abstainers and Le Pen voters are more favorable to outsider candidates, whereas programmatic stances only have positive effects among Le Pen voters. This indicates that the sociotropic effects of regional decline could favor outsider candidates even in the absence of a clear programmatic appeal.

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# 1 Introduction

What drives electorates towards anti-system parties? Why has the vote for so-called “populists” increased in the last rounds of elections across Europe? The scholarly literature has produced two different strains of economic and cultural explanations. Economic arguments emphasize secular economic changes, globalization, trade and the expansion of the knowledge-economy (Colantone & Stanig, 2018; Iversen & Soskice, 2019; Rodrik, 2017). Cultural and ideological explanations instead emphasize the dealignment of preferences between “materialists” and “post-materialists” (Inglehart & Norris, 2017), the increasing salience of an orthogonal cultural dimension (Beramendi et al., 2015; Bornschier, 2010), status threats (Gest, 2016; Gidron & Hall, 2020) like those faced by industrial working-class male breadwinners, and overall the authoritarian values of certain occupational groups (Kriesi, 2010).

Research focusing on material arguments has shown that geographically heterogenous economic shocks have effects on populist behavior and political de-attachment but it has not answered whether these effects happen through the individual level experience of actual economic hardship or through other mechanisms. In particular, in the literature it is still unclear to what degree these shocks operate through egotropic and sociotropic mechanisms. I propose that voters tend to behave sociotropically and develop their preferences with reference to their local community (Ansell & McNamara, 2018; Mansfield & Mutz, 2009), contrasting with purely individualistic material explanations, and present evidence partialling out the sociotropic and egotropic components.

I posit that sociotropic perceptions can be connected with voting behavior by two mechanisms: ideologically latent beliefs or cultural values whose salience is activated by certain shocks (a mechanism that is well-established in the literature) but also through a broad rejection of the political establishment with less clear programmatic connections. The latter is closest to the notion of “protest” votes and is more relevant in the case of sociotropic behavior because of the potentially diffuse linkage between the perception of regional or group-level decline and specific policies. This difference between programmatic stances and more diffuse rejection of the political establishment as causes of the populist vote is partic-

ularly important for what Ansell and McNamara (2018) have called the politics of “place”, which in contrast to the politics of “space” often lack a transparent link between specific policies and local economic effects.

Using a combination of historical survey data spanning 20 years of regional elections in France I am able to evaluate the degree to which sociotropic (rather than egotropic) perceptions drive both political de-attachment and far-right populist parties support. I find that negative sociotropic and egotropic views have effects that are similarly sized on the probability of not trusting the government and political parties, expressing dissatisfaction with democracy and on the probability of supporting the Front National. I also find that beyond their independent effects there is a large interactive effect of the two on the probability of supporting the Front National.

I complement these findings with a recent original survey experiment that allows me to explore the mechanisms and assess the degree in which populist and politically de-attached voters in economically lagging areas react to programmatic and to non-programmatic cues. I find that the effect of being presented with an outsider candidate instead of an establishment insider is much larger among respondents in high unemployment departments, an effect driven by abstainers and Front National voters, while the effect of programmatic positions does not present geographical heterogeneity and is driven entirely by Front National supporters. While the idea of “protest” votes as the motive behind populist electorates (and abstainers in particular) is not new, these findings suggest that sociotropic effects could induce a relationship between regional economic decline and favorability to political outsiders that does not necessarily reflect specific programmatic positions.

Since different geographical areas have shown different propensities to support anti-system parties, when these parties rise the party system becomes more spatially fragmented than in “normal” times. These patterns have repeated throughout history as certain geographical areas are structurally more vulnerable to globalization and secular economic changes. Recently, it has been established at an ecological level that certain economic shocks as well as secular trends with heterogeneous geographical effects can be related to the vote for far-right parties and to political polarization. But not enough evidence ex-

ists as to whether this reaction occurs because shocks impact directly on people’s private lives, or rather because people react with reference to what they observe happening in their immediate community.

Relatedly, material explanations of populism have not given enough attention to the mechanisms connecting economic shocks to actual voting behavior. Explanations coming from the cultural camp suggest that a natural first candidate is the activation of cultural or ideologically latent beliefs. For example, if the shock is related to immigration, this issue could gain salience among culturally conservative or xenophobic voters who might think immigrants are negatively affecting their community and make them gravitate towards far-right parties (Shehaj et al., 2021). Or if the shock is related to trade, affected electorates could gravitate towards protectionist parties (Colantone & Stanig, 2018). If the sociotropic channel is a relevant one then the interaction between ideological or cultural beliefs and economic shocks could extend beyond the individual-level effects of these shocks.

An alternative mechanism is that a negative sociotropic view could lead to a negative view of the political system even if it does not point out to any specific policy issue. This is particularly relevant in the case of sociotropic perceptions because they can be associated with abstract notions of community-wide decline that can exceed specific policy domains. For example, for an unemployed worker, there might be a strong egotropic reason to pay attention to unemployment as a policy issue, whereas for an economically secure sociotropic voter, community wide unemployment might reflect on several aspects of the social life for them to pinpoint any specific issue. In this case, frustrated or de-attached sociotropic voters could gravitate towards candidates or parties expressing broad anti-system views with some independence from their programmatic positions. In this paper I evaluate the programmatic and non-programmatic mechanisms and present results suggesting that they both matter.

The empirical analysis focuses on France, as a key case in which a large anti-system party has been electorally relevant since the 1980s. The Front National is both a classical and “new” far-right populist party. Classical because it belongs to a longstanding tradition in French politics (Berger, 2017; Fabien, 2005) and because it has the characteristics of a formally organized party spanning decades (unlike more recent “movements” whose fate is

still unclear), but “new” because, along with other major parties like the Lega Nord, it belongs to the wave that begun around the 1980s. This longstanding presence of a far-right party, grounded in a historical political tradition, combined with significant levels of geographical heterogeneity in voting behavior make France a key case for testing these claims. In addition, a unique dataset covering a long period of the Front National existence with a large enough number of cases for small area inference at the department level allows for the direct testing of the sociotropic hypothesis, while partialling out egotropic factors.

The evidence from this long survey from France shows that even after partialling out individual characteristics, egotropic perceptions and department and time effects there is a strong effect of sociotropic evaluations of one’s own community on political de-attachment, trust in the political system and in the probability of supporting the Front National. I also show that egotropic and sociotropic perceptions present strong interactive effects, but that each still has large independent effects on its own. These results hold after controlling for social conservatism and opposition to immigration, and show the relevance that sociotropic perceptions have both for having anti-system views and for being close to a radical right populist party like the Front National.

Through an original online survey experiment I also introduce evidence indicating that among de-attached and populist voters, particularly in economically lagging regions, among hypothetical candidates in a conjoint experiment outsiders receive significantly more support than establishment insiders, whereas programmatic cues attract only Front National voters. A vignette in the same survey shows that among Front National voters anti-system messages have effects that are almost as large as those of ideological cues, and the combination of the two has the strongest effects overall.

This paper expands the literature on sociotropic explanations for the rise of populism (Ansell & McNamara, 2018) by presenting empirical evidence partialling out the sociotropic and egotropic components, showing that both channels matter for the development of anti-system views and for the selection of radical right populist parties. At the same time, the experimental section shows that in places experiencing economic hardship (proxied by unemployment levels) respondents are more likely to favor outsiders or express anti-system

views. Through a quantitative individual-level empirical approach this paper adds new insights to the literature on the effects of economic shocks (Autor et al., 2020; Colantone & Stanig, 2018) and how these translate into feelings of community-wide decline and frustration leading to anti-system political behavior (Cramer, 2016; Gest, 2016). While the link between economic shocks and populist support is well-established at the ecological level, the evidence on how these shocks lead to negative sociotropic perceptions, frustration and political alienation among those who are not immediately affected by shocks has mainly been identified through ethnographic work. This paper confirms the presence of this link connecting negative sociotropic perceptions with anti-system views and the selection of radical right populist parties combining observational results from a long survey in France and a survey experiment.

## 2 Theory

Academic production on populism has grown in parallel to the electoral surge of populist parties in advanced democracies. An expanding literature tries to explain why voters support radical anti-system and often authoritarian political factions. The field has broadly split between cultural and economic explanations, though there have also been interesting efforts seeking to bridge the two by focusing on relative, rather than absolute decline, and by emphasizing the role of status threats (Burgoon et al., 2018; Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2020; Kurer, 2020; Mutz, 2018). This article adds to this effort by exploring the sociotropic and egotropic dimensions of voting behavior.

Exploring the differences between these two mechanisms is important for determining how cultural and economic factors interact in the production of anti-system political behavior. Gidron and Hall (2017) have shown that perceptions of “status” decline among in-groups even in the absence of actual economic hardship can lead to support for the populist right. In a similar line, Kurer (2020) and Burgoon et al. (2018) have shown that relative decline within certain occupational and income groups, and the perception of relative economic deprivation, rather than actual economic hardship or absolute material decline, have

important effects leading individuals with these perceptions to support the populist right. Mutz (2018) shows that high-income groups feeling under threat by economic changes and increasing racial diversity, rather than low-income ones, were the most inclined to support Trump in the 2016 election. Relatedly, Ogorzalek et al. (2020) show that in Trump’s election the vote was concentrated among nationally poor and locally rich voters, highlighting the role of relative rather than absolute economic position. In addition, using a panel setup covering the Great Recession, Gidron and Mijs (2019) show that individual economic loss led to a higher support for the radical left, but not the radical right, questioning the role of direct material losses in producing support for the populist right.

Scholars working within the material interests paradigm have developed robust identification strategies exploiting shocks that are exogenous to the local economy (Autor et al., 2020; Colantone & Stanig, 2018). Good examples of these are the opening up of trade with China (Autor et al., 2020) and decisions on social policy taken at the European level (Cavaille & Ferwerda, 2017). In addition, most of these results are based on ecological inferences, though it has been recently shown that economic hardship translates into more tenuous or even null effects on the populist vote once we evaluate shocks at the individual level (Gidron & Mijs, 2019; Mutz, 2018). While aggregate economic decline seems to lead to higher vote shares for far-right populists, individual economic hardship often does not seem to be a direct cause of radical right populist vote. Relative decline - which requires some delimitation of in-groups and out-groups - on the other hand does seem to play a role in far-right support (Kurer, 2020)

These findings indicate that there might be a large sociotropic component connecting economic trends with their causal political effects. Though some voters could be attracted to the populist right by their individual-level experience of economic shocks related to policies they can attribute to mainstream parties (as it could be the case of the bundle of policies voters could relate with globalization), the literature indicates that there are good reasons to think voters are making in-group or “community of fate” evaluations in perceiving a decline that leads to their alienation from the mainstream political system.

Cultural explanations have drawn on a longstanding theoretical tradition dating back

to works like *Democracy and Working-class Authoritarianism* (Lipset, 1959) and *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al., 1950). Even though the causal effects of culture are generally hard to identify, observational data provides relatively strong support for this set of explanations (Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007; Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Kriesi, 2010; Oesch, 2008). At the same time, some clever research designs have been able to identify the determinants of support for immigration (Hainmueller & Hangartner, 2013), the typical policy domain of right-wing populists. This literature provides reasonable guidance for predicting which voters are more likely to become populist right voters, in the sense that latent ideology (measured through dimension reduction techniques applied to batteries of policy positions and attitudinal questions) is a stable trait with a strong correlation with populist vote. Yet in order to determine when these voters will spouse a far-right party (rather than some other mainstream alternative on the same side of the ideological spectrum) this literature points to the salience of certain issues raising the relevance of latent beliefs or values and leading to support for populist parties.

Similar to economic shocks, an open question for cultural explanations is what raises the salience of certain beliefs. For example, in the case of immigration as a factor raising the political salience of authoritarian values (Shehaj et al., 2021), is it the actual individual-level experience of what xenophobic voters might perceive as “threats” or is it more a reaction to how they perceive immigration is affecting their “community of fate” even if they have little to no interaction with immigrants?

Both the cultural and material frameworks have recently started to pay attention to spatial dynamics in voting behavior (McNamara, 2017). Gest’s (2016) ethnographic work on East London as well as Cramer’s (2016) on Wisconsin have shown the impact of economic changes in former industrial neighborhoods and peri-urban areas. Using China’s trade shock, Autor et al. (2020) have shown the local effects of the import shock in the US, and Colantone and Stanig (2018) have found similar effects in Europe. In a similar line, there has also been some evidence ratifying the classical finding by Mansfield and Mutz (2009) that voters tend to behave sociotropically and vote in reaction to local conditions independently of whether their own welfare is affected (Colantone & Stanig, 2018; Heath & Goodwin, 2017).



It is an established empirical regularity in the literature that location seems to matter for the rise of populism. But it is not fully clear whether this is entirely the product of individuals in some locations experiencing the bulk of the negative effects of economic changes and globalization-related shocks (a compositional fact) or whether there is a proportion of individuals who react to these shocks not by the direct effects they have on their own individual well-being but based on what they perceive these shocks are doing to their communities (a sociotropic cause). In line with Mutz (2018), McNamara (2017), and Ansell and McNamara (2018), and with the ethnographic evidence from Cramer (2016) and Gest (2016), I argue that there are strong sociotropic effects in the rise of far-right populist parties. I expand this literature by identifying and measuring the relative strength of sociotropic and egotropic causes of anti-system political views at the individual level and by exploring the non-programmatic mechanisms that can link negative sociotropic perceptions with the selection of political outsiders.

## 2.1 Spatial Heterogeneity

The argument that I present is grounded on two central assumptions. First, secular economic changes, globalization and skill-biased technological change have spatially heterogeneous effects (Ganong & Shoag, 2017; Iversen & Soskice, 2019; Moretti, 2012). Second, voters behave sociotropically, casting votes as a form of response to their perception of the situation of their local community (Ansell & McNamara, 2018; Mansfield & Mutz, 2009).

Structurally, there are certain areas that are more vulnerable to economic changes and liberalization. Different endowments of human capital (Florida, 2005; Moretti, 2012), the structure of industrial complexes and local production profiles (Fujita et al., 1999), the persistence of the traditional sector (Berger, 1981), as well as institutional legacies that make some areas more suitable for competition (Helliwell & Putnam, 1995), might all be mechanisms by which liberalization has heterogeneous impacts on the same regions over time.

When determining the presence of sociotropic behavior it might not always be easy to distinguish altruistic and self-interest motivations (Ansell & McNamara, 2018). Under

altruistic mechanisms, individuals who are not directly affected by secular economic changes react as a form of solidarity to the perception that other in-groups are being negatively affected. Self-interest can also induce a response that appears as sociotropic due to economic changes that impact only indirectly in certain segments of local constituencies. A typical case of this indirect impact is that of assets’ devaluation, which leads to a relative decline with respect to other communities and out-groups (Burgoon et al., 2018; Kurer, 2020). This is particularly relevant for fixed-assets tied to place, like housing (Ansell & McNamara, 2018). Another case of asset devaluation is the declining value of certain skills due to skill-biased technological change and occupational polarization (Ansell & Gingrich, 2017), a problem that is more acute in less diversified areas.

Among those that have their wealth tied to a local community, like homeowners or business owners with immobile capital, a lagging local labor market implies the collapse of real state prices and a depressed demand for local products and services. While most surveys will not be able to capture an experience of actual individual “economic hardship” among the locally rich, their experience of relative decline and economic threats may lead them to vote based not on their immediate observable material well-being but on the broader trend affecting their community. This signals the difficulties that sociotropic arguments have for distinguishing between what Ansell and McNamara (2018) have called the politics of “place” and “space”, as wealth-effects of declining local real state prices have an explicit material space-based logic whereas these might also be correlated with more subjective perceptions of decline tied to emotional value and to the “meaning of home”.

While in this article I do not focus on the specific economic mechanisms, it is important to recognize the empirical regularity that some areas are persistently vulnerable to globalization. Below, I use data from the European Social Survey to show the significant within-country geographical heterogeneity in ideological preferences and levels of support for populist parties that exists in Europe. Consistently with the literature, there are large effects of location on the support for particularistic positions and closeness to populist parties at the individual and sub-national level. This confirms the geographical heterogeneity that motivates the question on whether these differences are due to compositional differences on

individual level characteristics (i.e., driven mainly by egotropic perceptions) or if they are also driven by sociotropic perceptions.

Pooling data from the ESS and combining fixed-effects with cluster bootstrapped standard errors I am able to provide point estimates and confidence intervals for the “effects” of location. I use the ESS because it has more frequent data than the European Values Survey and it has data on regions at the NUTS2 level (the second degree of sub-national statistical aggregation defined by the European Union, generally at the level of state, region or province). I evaluate whether sociotropic effects exist for two outcomes: support for immigration (as a central issue in the universalism-particularism dimension) and support for populist parties. In both models I use region, year and occupation fixed effects, along with income, years of education completed, nationality, gender and age. Figure 1 and Figure 2 present the sub-national region fixed effects for each country, which show significant within-country spatial heterogeneity.

Using a linear probability model with the same specification I estimate the support for populist parties, a dummy variable based on whether a respondent feels close to a populist party. The results from the LPM (in Figures 3 and 4) also confirm the notion that support for populism is spatially heterogeneous across similar individuals. Though this notion has been supported by ecological inferences made with electoral data, these results show that after controlling for usual individual characteristics there remains a large effect of location on support for immigration and closeness to populist parties. While the results could be driven by unobserved individual characteristics that remain unbalanced across regions due to compositional differences, they establish the relevance of answering whether sociotropic behavior is a relevant cause.

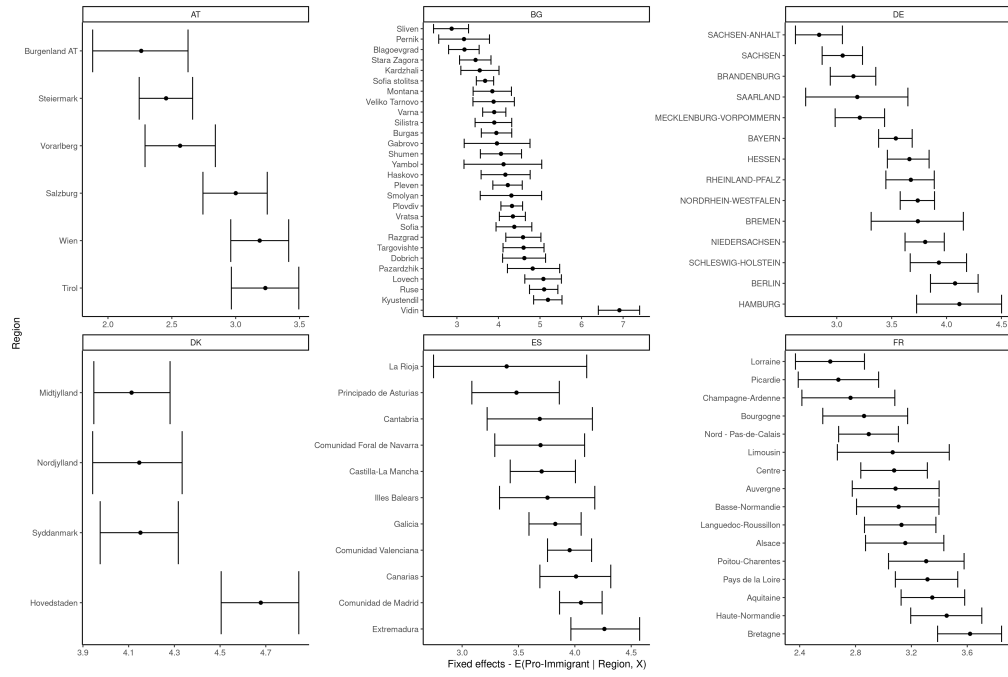


Figure 1: Region fixed effects - DV: Support for immigration - 95% within-cluster bootstrapped confidence intervals.

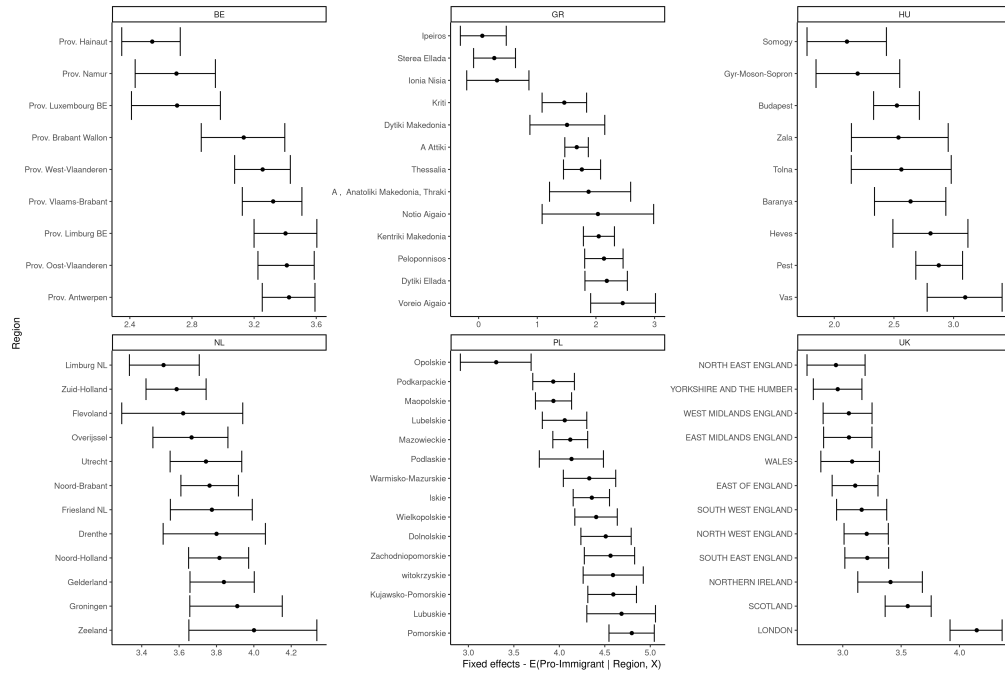


Figure 2: Region fixed effects - DV: Support for immigration - 95% within-cluster bootstrapped confidence intervals.

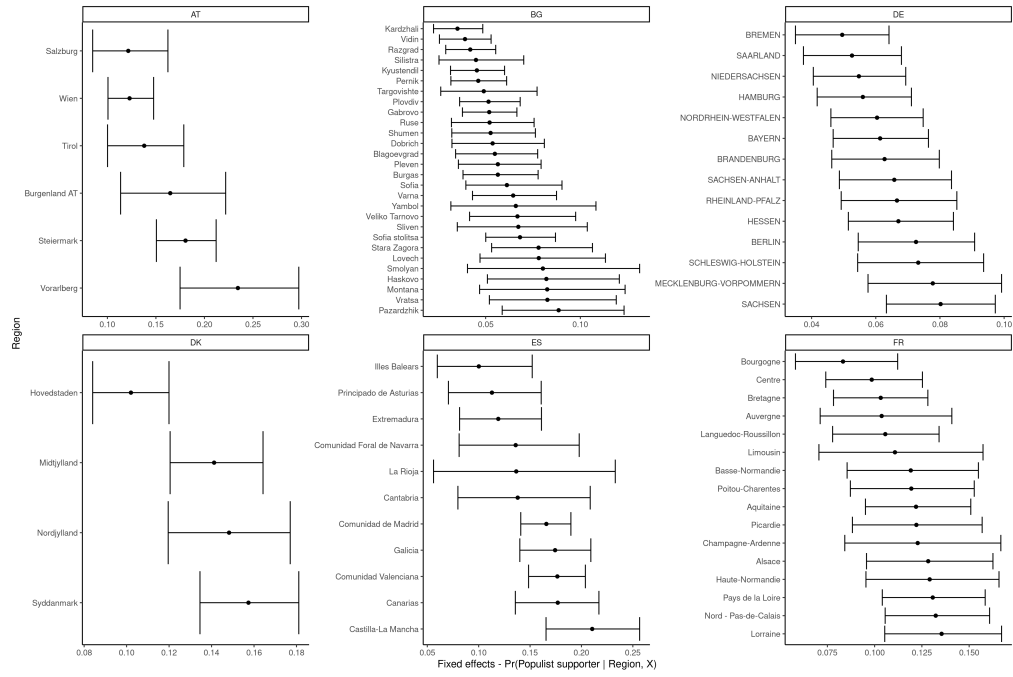


Figure 3: Region fixed effects - DV: Feeling close to a populist party - 95% within-cluster bootstrapped confidence intervals.

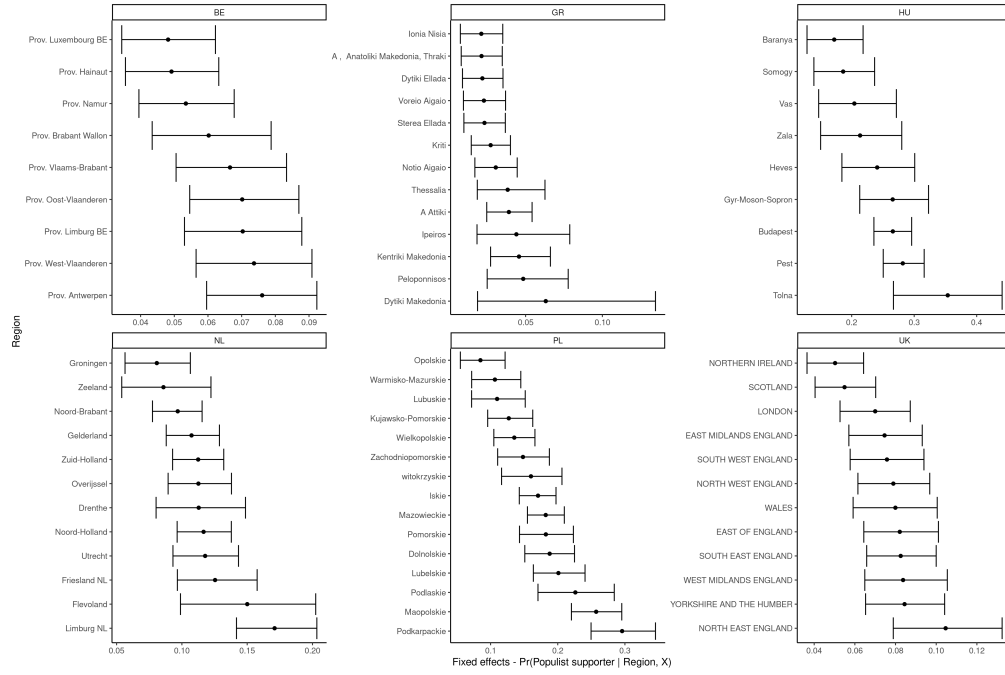


Figure 4: Region fixed effects - DV: Feeling close to a populist party - 90% within-cluster bootstrapped confidence intervals.

## 2.2 Mechanisms

In models that focus on material interests, welfare and secular economic changes, it is often unclear whether the exact driver happens through individual economic hardship or something else. In some formulations of the material arguments voters react to changes in economic conditions by punishing incumbents who are associated with policies promoting globalization and secular economic changes (Rodrik, 2017). Policy content and issues in general have been less central to arguments focusing on economic hardship and declining material conditions, emphasizing instead the populist vote as reactions against the establishment.

Often, these explanations resemble sanctioning models, which are generally agnostic with respect to the identity of the politician that is selected when there is a “bad” incumbent. This is a literature that is relatively silent as to why a particular kind of replacement (in this case far-right populists) is preferred by frustrated voters. Accountability theories argue

that voters punish politicians when the economy performs badly and reward them when it performs well (Powell & Whitten, 1993). Yet these are theories about changes of government, not about the selection of anti-system parties.

In some cases, authors proposing economic explanations have addressed the policy content of populist parties, for example by arguing that far-right votes are driven by economic nationalism as a reaction to trade (Colantone & Stanig, 2018; Rodrik, 2017), yet trade is not the only economic determinant of populism and is not as central to populist programmes as other issues like immigration. Recently, automation has been shown to be related to support for radical-right parties though there is no substantive logic that can link robots with economic nationalism (Anelli et al., 2019).

Theories centered on culture or ideology would emphasize the programmes spoused by each party, so that the link between dissatisfaction and populist vote is a programmatic one. Yet, since at least in advanced economies the trends associated with globalization and economic change have continued under mainstream parties of different political signs, it could also be the case that voters are actually attracted by broad anti-system claims even if they lack a clear programmatic articulation. In fact, Guiso et al. (2017) has shown that to a large degree populist voters are previously de-attached or alienated voters who abstain until there is a populist offer that caters to their rejection of the political system.

The sociotropic channel can explain why we often fail to find a link between the individual experience of economic hardship and anti-system behavior, but it is not sufficient for explaining why radical candidates are selected by dissatisfied voters. Many of the changes that accelerate or mitigate the effects of globalization are the result of policy decisions and processes that voters could associate with governments on both sides of the political center. Either because parties of different labels have been in government as secular changes unfolded or because their policies actively promoted them.

If voters perceive that established parties have converged in a bundle of policies that they think harm their specific community or relate them to those processes, they might lose partisan attachments or interest in the existing political system, and eventually prefer an anti-system contender. This does not preclude that there is also a reaction against specific



policies, which would lead to a programmatic selection of parties spousing positions outside the mainstream around those policies. For simplicity I refer to these as the “anti-system” and “programmatic” mechanisms connecting sociotropic perceptions with political behavior.

Theoretically, egotropic and sociotropic causes could be connected with voting behavior through programmatic or anti-system mechanisms. But due to their loose nature, anti-system messages could potentially be more fertile among sociotropic voters because when there are egotropic “pocket-book” causes it might be easier for voters to pinpoint to specific policies affecting their well-being whereas it might be harder to do so when the sociotropic cause is a broad perception that one’s own community is in decline. If sociotropic causes are important for explaining the rise of far-right populist parties, it is then reasonable to also ask whether there is an “anti-system” mechanism linking “place”-based Ansell and McNamara (2018) perceptions to political behavior that is comparable in importance to the programmatic mechanism.

According to Guiso et al. (2017) there are two different outcomes in terms of political behavior that could function as substitutes: abstention and voting for populist parties. While the programmatic mechanism is more likely to lead to a partisan stance, conditional on the political context a higher proclivity to manifest de-attachment from politics or anti-system views could lead either to abstention as to casting votes for candidates expressing anti-system views. Empirically, abstention and populist votes would look as substitutes if they share the same causes. Negative sociotropic perceptions would make voters more likely to abstain, reject the political system and support populist parties.

The case of voters in lagging regions in advanced economies could be one in which voters find the usual pool of politicians only returning “bad” types. If voters perceive that outcomes are the same regardless of what party gets in power, they could reach a point in which they no longer want to draw a new candidate from the same pool of “mainstream” politicians. Regardless of what specific economic policy they would have preferred as an alternative to the *status quo* (protection of local jobs, better wages, better public services, less competition in the labor market, a smaller gap in assets valuation between regions, more status or less immigration), the results for those in declining regions might not be those they expect. At

this point it might become rational to select someone “different”. In Fearon’s words:

Thus, many people who would have preferred less conservative policies than Reagan espoused nonetheless appear to have been won over by the sense that he was a man of principle and that they ‘knew where he stood’ (1999, p. 62)

This argument highlights the relevance that the signals that outsider or anti-system candidates can send to voters to “look” different. Voters might have other alternatives to manifest their anti-system beliefs, one of them is abstention, as Guiso et al. (2017) have argued. Naturally, the electoral system varies the cost of opting for these candidates as well as the availability of anti-system options, so that abstention or voting for a populist can be substitutes depending on the context as well as on latent ideological positions or values of a given voter.

In the empirical section I show that in fact both abstention and radical right populist support have similar causes in terms of sociotropic perceptions, which is consistent with the substitutes argument from Guiso et al. (2017). In the experiment presented in the last section I also show that when treated with an “outsider” candidate abstainers and populist voters are equally likely to react positively, while abstainers are unmoved by anti-immigration and trade policy positions.

## 2.3 Hypotheses

The reasons that make a given community better or worse off when facing globalization are plenty. They can be related to stocks of social and human capital, their formal and informal institutions, the clustering of certain industries and activities, production profiles, tradition and dominant culture. For this argument it is sufficient to note that such differences exist. The argument proposed in this article posits that a negative sociotropic evaluation, in spite of the specific causes of that perception and independently of egotropic perceptions about the individual situation, can lead individuals with those perceptions to become alienated from the mainstream political system and to the support of radical right populist alternatives.

Two alternative mechanisms can then link negative perceptions with political behavior.

In a programmatic mechanism, voters select those parties with policy positions that could revert or alter the *status quo* in areas in which voters feel that policies advanced by mainstream parties harm their communities. In an anti-system mechanism, voters are attracted by candidates that look like outsiders and that present an anti-establishment rethoric, independently of specific policy issues. While both mechanisms can link egotropic and sociotropic perceptions with partisan selection, the less concrete nature of the perception of a community-wide place-based decline makes the second mechanism potentially relevant for sociotropic drivers.

The argument laid out above leads to the following observable implications:

1. First, sociotropic beliefs about the status of one's own community, independently of individual characteristics, experience of individual-level material hardship and perceptions of one's own well-being, should impact:
  - Beliefs about the political system and democracy in general and the likelihood of experiencing political de-attachment (H1).
  - The probability of expressing support for a radical right populist party (H2).
2. Second, the link between beliefs and political behavior can go through (a) a programmatic mechanism, but also through (b) a higher attraction towards outsider or anti-system cues. If mechanism (b) holds, voters in lagging regions should have a higher preference for political outsiders (H3).

## 3 Data & Methods

### 3.1 Regional Survey

I use data from the *Enquête interrégionale des phénomènes politiques* (Regional Survey on Political Phenomena), a large survey that was run for twenty years (1985 to 2004) by the *Observatoire interrégional du politique* to track public opinion preferences regarding regional policies in France. The survey was large enough to make inferences at the level

of the 96 departments, with an average survey size of 13,136 cases and a total of 262,729 cases over the entire period. Since the survey had different modules over the years, not all questions are available for all rounds, though in all editions there was a sociotropic question on expectations for the region. Until 1993, there was a rotating module asking about comparisons of the respondent’s own region with other regions in a series of dimensions: wages and income, dynamism of industry and on opportunities for finding a job. This leaves two key set of questions that can be used to operationalize sociotropic perceptions of the region:

- Faith (*Confiance*) in the future of one’s region.
- Comparison of your region with respect to other regions regarding the [quality of life, possibility of finding a job, dynamism of the industry]

I consider lack of partisan attachment and proximity to the Front National as operationalizations of the outcomes in H1 and H2 respectively. To evaluate other outcomes in H1 I also consider political questions that can capture anti-system views as long as the questions were included in enough rounds. These questions are trust in institutions (the government and political parties), as well as a question asking whether the respondent thinks democracy works well. Most questions are in three or four point scales, which I recode to dummies for ease of interpretation.

Since my interest is on the relationship between sociotropic perceptions and anti-system behavior, net of egotropic perceptions, to evaluate the hypotheses the model needs to partial out any connection between individual hardship and political views. The main control is the same question regarding trust in the future but asked at the individual level (*confidence* in one’s own future). As sociotropic and individual perceptions might reinforce each other and be tied in complex ways, in one of the specifications I interact them to separate the individual, sociotropic and their joint effects. Since economic trends could be affecting specific sectors or occupations, I include a control for the respondent’s occupation (18 categories). I also control for educational level, age and gender, all variables that could capture differential economic trends. All specifications include department fixed effects to account

for department-wide characteristics and year fixed effects to control for common trends.

In three rounds, the survey included a battery of questions on social values, which allows me to partial out the role of ideology or programmatic positions to some degree. I create an average of conservative views and include it in one of the specifications as a robustness check. A question regarding the integration of immigrants was only included in two rounds, but I also include a model with this control to partial out the potential mechanism that xenophobia towards recent immigrants rather than a broader perception of regional trends could be driving respondents towards anti-system preferences. These controls and outcomes allow for evaluating the hypotheses H1 and H2 with rich observational data.

To address concerns regarding incidental parameters bias and for ease of interpretation, I prefer a linear probability model and cluster the standard errors at the department level.<sup>1</sup> Below I present the preferred specification of the model, where  $\tau$  captures the effect of respondent's  $i$  sociotropic views on the region ( $R_{ijt}$ ) on the probability of choosing the Front National, not being close to an existing political party, or answering with an anti-system view (manifesting lack of trust in institutions or in democracy) in department  $j$  in round  $t$ , and  $\lambda_2$  captures the joint effect of sociotropic and individual perceptions ( $I_{ijt}$ ).  $X_{ijt}$  represents the remaining individual level controls (occupation, education, ideology, age and gender) and  $\theta_j$  and  $\gamma_t$  capture department and time effects.

$$Pr(Y_{ijt}) = \alpha + \tau R_{ijt} + \lambda_1 I_{ijt} + \lambda_2 R_{ijt} * I_{ijt} + \beta X_{ijt} + \theta_j + \gamma_t + \epsilon_{ijt}$$

The key threat for the identification of the effects claimed in the theory is that unobserved individual characteristics are causing both a pessimistic view of the region (but not of the reported individual situation) and political views. In other words, a theoretically complete model would be able to separate the sociotropic (those that depend on observing the community but not oneself) and the egotropic components of political views. That said, by partialling out most variables that could be related to individual-level economic trends

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<sup>1</sup>Binary fixed effects specifications with an incidental parameter bias correction are included in the Appendix.

and the respondent’s views on their own welfare, the remaining variation on regional views is most likely capturing a sociotropic component. Substantively, it is difficult to conceive a variable that has effects on political views through egotropic mechanisms, at the same time affects sociotropic perceptions, and is not captured by the respondents’ reporting of their own situation. One potential concern could be a social-desirability bias towards underreporting individual concerns about one’s own future and avoiding “blame” by reporting that the region is not doing well. While not possible to mitigate this concern by design in an old survey, the remaining individual-level controls should be capturing most factors that could be causing perceptions of an “egotropic” decline.

### 3.2 Results

The results from the linear probability models with repeated cross-sections at the individual level present a consistent pattern: after most individual characteristics, including ideology and perception of individual well-being are considered, there remains a large effect of regional sociotropic perceptions on views on the government, political parties, and the democratic system (H1), and in the likelihood of supporting the Front National (H2). The model in Table 1 presents the results for the 20 years of surveys, using questions that were included in all rounds. Since both regressors of interest and outcomes are expressed as dummies the effects are changes in the probability of the outcome when the explanatory variable is switched. There is a large and positive effect of having a pessimistic view of the region and the likelihood of supporting the Front National. The 1.56% coefficient on the specification in Column (2), which controls for individual views, is large when we consider that over all rounds the average probability of supporting the Front National was 4%. Pessimism about the region and the individual fate also have a joint negative effect that adds up to their own positive independent effects, so the overall effect is larger among those who are pessimist both about their situation and that of their region.

Tables 2 and 3 regress views on the government and political parties in general on the sociotropic variables disaggregated into different dimensions. In this case, instead of an absolute question (future of one’s region) respondents were asked to compare their region

Table 1: LPM - Robust standard errors.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Close to Front National	
	(1)	(2)
Pessimist about region * Own future		0.0072*** (0.0025)
Pessimist about region's future	0.0242*** (0.0011)	0.0155*** (0.0014)
Pessimist about own future		0.0134*** (0.0016)
Educational level	-0.0061*** (0.0003)	-0.0058*** (0.0003)
Gender: Male	0.0159*** (0.0011)	0.0163*** (0.0011)
Age	-0.0008*** (0.00003)	-0.0008*** (0.00003)
Occupation Effects	Yes	Yes
Year Effects	Yes	Yes
Departement Effects	Yes	Yes
Observations	170,827	160,779
Residual Std. Error	0.1952 (df = 170691)	0.1955 (df = 160642)
<i>Note:</i> *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01		

with others in three aspects. The variables are coded such that a positive value is a negative view of the region with respect to others. Respondents with a negative view of their region in terms of the local industry dynamism, the quality of life and the possibility of finding jobs are significantly more likely to distrust the government and political parties in general. For example, thinking that one's region has a worst quality of life with respect to other regions lowers the probability of trusting the government by 6% and of trusting political parties by 2.8%.

Table 2: Comparison of the region with others - Negative view.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Trust in government		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Industry	−0.0494*** (0.0078)		
Quality of life		−0.0620*** (0.0085)	
Jobs			−0.0395*** (0.0078)
Pessimist about own future	−0.0679*** (0.0078)	−0.0697*** (0.0076)	−0.0695*** (0.0076)
Education level	−0.0112*** (0.0024)	−0.0121*** (0.0023)	−0.0125*** (0.0023)
Gender: Male	−0.0007 (0.0082)	−0.0050 (0.0080)	−0.0072 (0.0080)
Age	0.0047*** (0.0002)	0.0045*** (0.0002)	0.0045*** (0.0002)
Occupation Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Departement Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	18,706	19,608	19,627
Residual Std. Error	0.4867 (df = 18599)	0.4862 (df = 19501)	0.4871 (df = 19520)

*Note:*

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



Table 3: Comparison of the region with others - Negative view.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Trust in political parties		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Industry	−0.0137** (0.0064)		
Quality of life		−0.0278*** (0.0065)	
Jobs			−0.0144** (0.0063)
Pessimist about own future	−0.0391*** (0.0061)	−0.0387*** (0.0059)	−0.0378*** (0.0059)
Education level	−0.0072*** (0.0019)	−0.0072*** (0.0018)	−0.0067*** (0.0018)
Gender: Male	0.0183*** (0.0065)	0.0182*** (0.0063)	0.0168*** (0.0063)
Age	0.0025*** (0.0002)	0.0024*** (0.0002)	0.0024*** (0.0002)
Occupation Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Departement Effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	18,227	19,082	19,078
Residual Std. Error	0.3833 (df = 18120)	0.3819 (df = 18975)	0.3813 (df = 18971)

*Note:*

\*p&lt;0.1; \*\*p&lt;0.05; \*\*\*p&lt;0.01

There is also a large negative effect of having a pessimist view of the region on the probability of thinking that democracy does not work well (this question was included in four rounds: 1998 to 2001). Being a pessimist with respect to the region alone, even when a respondent is not pessimist about their personal situation, net of individual characteristics that might confound sociotropic views, increases the probability of having a negative view of democracy by 16%. Though the coefficient on the interaction is positive, as before, the total negative effect is considerably larger among those who are pessimists both about their personal situation and that of their region.

As shown in the Appendix, none of these effects are altered by adding controls for average social conservatism or opposition to the integration of immigrants. Even after controlling for egotropic perceptions, individual characteristics, conservative views and opposition to immigration, respondents with negative views of their own region or who think their region is declining with respect to others are more likely to express lack of trust in the government and political parties, to be de-attached from existing political parties or to feel close to the Front National.

To complement these findings, exploiting the fact that there is a large number of responses in most departments, in the Appendix I present a pseudo-panel of departments with two-way fixed effects. Due to the fact that some clusters are relatively small there is some risk of classical error on variables leading to attenuation bias. In this pseudo-panel specification the effects remain significant and in the expected direction for lack of partisanship and lack of interest in politics (H1) but the proportion of individual level pessimism absorbs most of the variation in support for the Front National (H2), though the effect of the sociotropic component remains in the same direction. One potential interpretation of these results is that sociotropic discontent at the aggregate level tends to manifest primarily as political deattachment rather than as a radical right partisan identification. In fact, individual pessimism has almost no effect on political de-attachment at the aggregate level. As the experiment in the next section indicates, outsider and anti-system messages have a lot of traction among populist voters and politically de-attached citizens, but the effect is even larger among the latter. As discussed in the theoretical section, a significant proportion of

Table 4: LPM - Robust standard errors.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>
	Democracy works well
Pessimist about region * Own future	0.0672*** (0.0114)
Pessimist about region's future	-0.1612*** (0.0073)
Pessimist about own future	-0.1881*** (0.0074)
Educational level	0.0235*** (0.0013)
Gender: Male	0.0448*** (0.0049)
Age	0.0012*** (0.0001)
Occupation Effects	Yes
Year Effects	Yes
Departement Effects	Yes
Observations	46,287
Residual Std. Error	0.4702 (df = 46174)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

stable populist voters are ideologically committed partisans but the politically de-attached are “available” constituencies that can be catered by populist parties (Guiso et al., 2017).

### **3.3 Survey Experiment: Non-Programmatic Mechanisms**

In order to assess the mechanisms linking sociotropic views with political behavior, I developed a small online survey instrument testing the hypothesis that “populist” voters, and particularly those living in areas experiencing economic hardship, are likely to react to signals indicating that candidates are outsiders with respect to the political mainstream (H3).

The survey was fielded through social media ads and asked potential respondents for a few minutes in exchange for taking part in a raffle. Since the attention in surveys fielded through social media tends to be lower than in recruited samples, the survey needed to be short. The survey was ran in the last week of August 2019 and 384 respondents completed a conjoint experiment. To mitigate concerns about the representativeness of the sample, I used quota sampling with quotas by gender and age. Even though online survey experiments optimize internal validity rather than external validity, this fieldwork strategy combined with quota sampling has been shown to be as effective as a high quality probability sampling (Zhang et al., 2020).

To evaluate responses to outsider and anti-system cues I included a conjoint experiment embedded in a vignette. To assess whether anti-system cues had differential impacts across mainstream and populist electorates, I also included a list experiment in which alternatives were varied between Macron and Le Pen voters. Since I expected the number of respondents to be below 500 cases, I had to keep the number of arms low and therefore the conjoint only varies two characteristics (ideology and career) that allowed me to compare two possible mechanisms directly, resulting in a two-by-two factorial experiment. In particular, I was interested in evaluating whether a career inside the economic and political establishment had more traction than ideological messages.

The experiment started with a vignette that indicated that a new election for the representative for their constituency in the Assembly was called, followed by a description of

an hypothetical candidate out of three alternatives: an experienced politician opposing immigration, a locally prestigious outsider (teacher), and the same locally prestigious outsider adding the same anti-immigration message. Concerns about power led me to prioritize the comparison between insider-outsider rather than all possible combinations of treatments in the vignette. Then, the vignette was followed by a message saying that there was a runoff between two candidates and the respondent had to choose one, introducing the conjoint experiment. The following components were randomly varied among the two candidates. The potential careers describe a working-class political outsider and a stereotypical political insider working in finance and as a consultant in Brussels. The programmatic cue covers two key issues that the literature relates to populist politics, immigration and trade.

The purpose of this design was to capture, on the one hand, a usual topic of the populist rhetoric as populist leaders being a “common man” without any connection to the establishment, as opposed to a political and economic insider. On the other, it focuses on two key policy issues that the literature associates with support for the populist right.

He has been never been in politics before. Before running for election [*he worked in a local factory as a mechanic and his wife works as a cashier in a local supermarket*][*He has been in politics most of his life. He has previously worked in the financial sector and as a consultant in Brussels*]. He [*rejects*][*supports*] having open borders and [*proposes to stop the flux of*][*receiving*] refugees and economic migrants from countries at war. He [*rejects*][*supports*] free trade agreements and proposes to revise them.

Among respondents who answered that they had voted in the presidential runoff election (which reduces the number of cases significantly due to abstention), I also included a list experiment to test whether Le Pen voters were more likely to choose anti-system cues. The list experiment had six “neutral” options for having voted for Macron or Le Pen that were shown to the control group, and one of two reasons were randomly added to two treatment groups: that they voted for Macron / Le Pen because all other politicians are the same, or that because that will teach all the other politicians a lesson.

In order to link respondents’ regional context with the experimental effects, they were asked for the department in which they lived and this was used to merge responses with department level unemployment rates in the third trimester of 2019. While local material conditions are multidimensional, the unemployment rate is a sensitive proxy that is periodically reported at a highly disaggregated level. The key target estimands in the conjoint are the conditional average marginal component effects, and the conditional average treatment effects in the vignette and list experiments.

### 3.4 Results

The effects found in the conjoint experiment indicate that respondents in a region experiencing economic hardship are more likely to react positively to outsider signals (H3). This matches the results from the previous section in the sense that voters who perceive their region to be in decline are less likely to express pro-system views. Consistently with the theory, the outsider component has much more traction in departments suffering a higher level of unemployment, while the effect of the ideological component does not vary across departments. The conditional ACME for respondents in high unemployment departments is 55% higher (0.14 vs. 0.09) than in low unemployment ones.

While programmatic positions on immigration and trade do have a large effect among Le Pen voters, the outsider cue also has a relatively large effect among Le Pen voters and an even larger one among non-voters. This is important because given that the component is partly signalling social class origins of the candidate, if only abstainers favored this component it could be because they favor a working class identification and support the populist left, that had no candidate in the second round of the presidential election.

Even though the unconditional ACME of the outsider component has a large positive effect in the pooled sample of respondents, this shows that the effect is heterogeneous and it is driven by Le Pen voters and non-voters, but not by Macron voters. These results indicate that the mechanism linking sociotropic perceptions of voters in declining areas and their electoral behavior might be related to their backing of “outsider” candidates, beyond the attraction a share of these voters might have for the specific policy content of some of these

candidates.

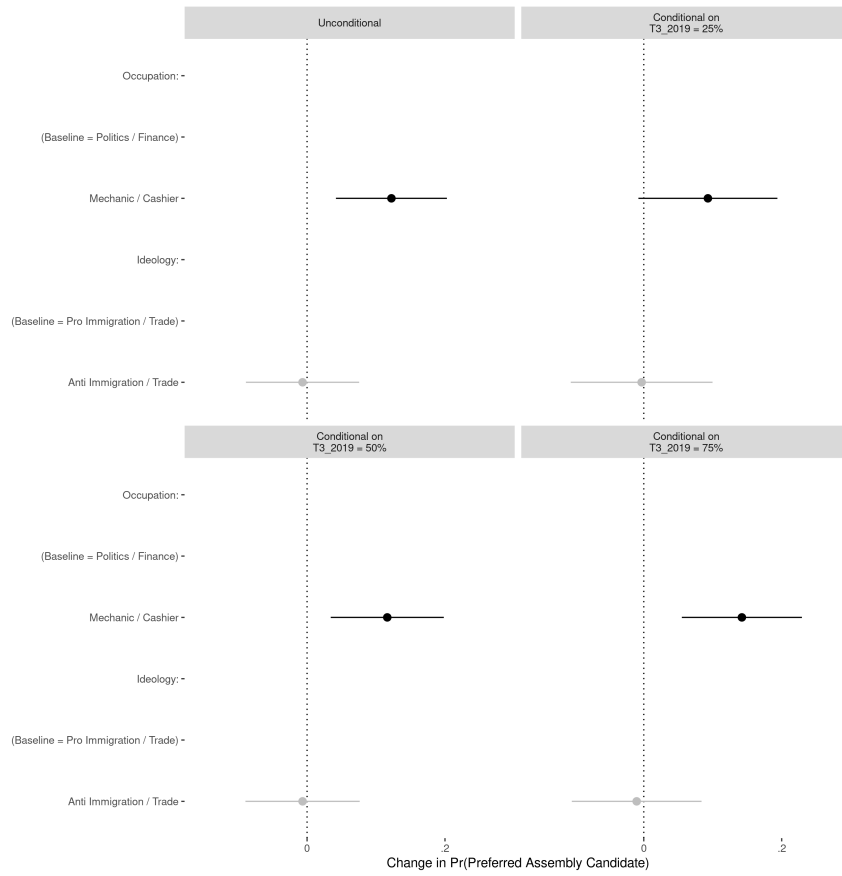


Figure 5: Conditional Average Component Marginal Effects, by unemployment level of the respondent's department in the third trimester of 2019.

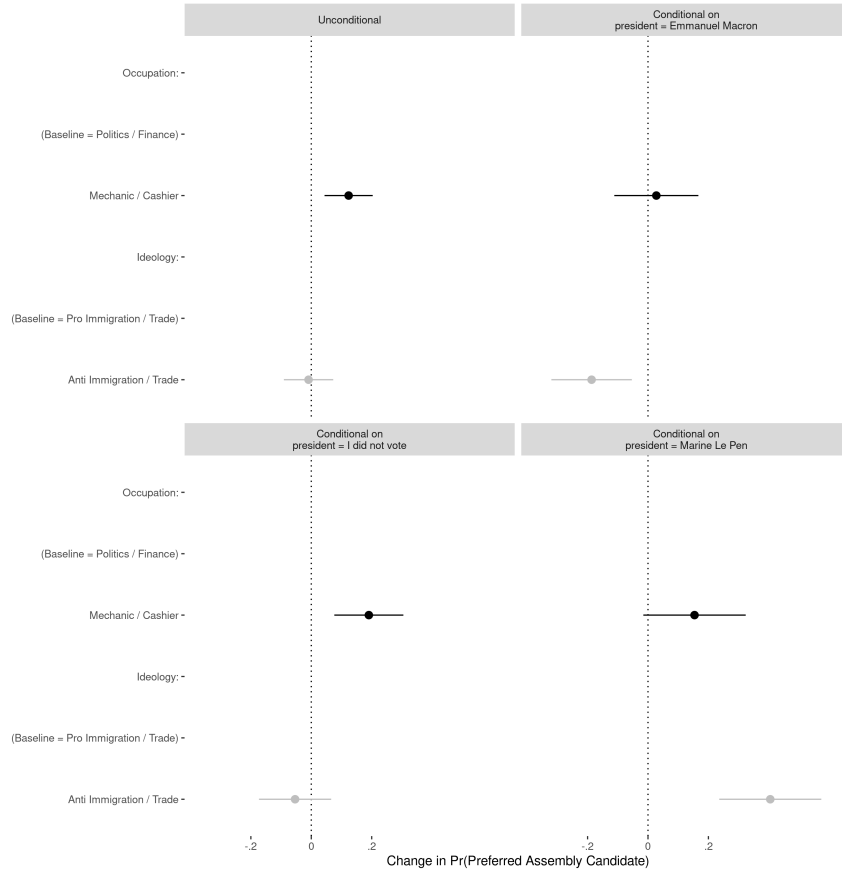


Figure 6: Conditional Average Component Marginal Effects, by vote in the second round of France's 2017 presidential election.

Attribute	Level	Estimate	Std. Err	Pr(> z )	Unempl. perc.
Occupation	Mechanic / Cashier	0.09	0.05	0.071__	25%
Ideology	Anti Immigration / Trade	-0.00	0.05	0.953__	25%
Occupation	Mechanic / Cashier	0.12	0.04	0.005**	50%
Ideology	Anti Immigration / Trade	-0.01	0.04	0.878__	50%
Occupation	Mechanic / Cashier	0.14	0.04	0.001**	75%
Ideology	Anti Immigration / Trade	-0.01	0.05	0.83__	75%

Table 5: Conditional Average Component Marginal Effects, by unemployment level of the respondent's department in the third trimester of 2019. Number of respondents = 384.

The estimates from the vignette presented in the Appendix are consistent with these results and show that Le Pen voters are very sensitive to both anti-system as well as programmatic cues. Both a speech opposing immigration and trade as well as being an outsider



with a message against the political system have large and significant effects among Le Pen voters. The conditional average treatment effect of being treated with an outsider with an anti-system message among Le Pen voters with respect to Macron supporters treated with an anti-immigration message is 1.47 (on a seven point scale), while the same conditional effect for being treated with an insider with an anti-immigration and trade message is 1.84. Both effects are low and statistically non significant among Macron voters and abstainers. While the latter could be due to a lack of power, it might also be because the specific cues chosen for the vignette were too ideologically charged for indifferent non-voters, something that could be detected with more combinations of treatment arms and a more neutral control.

Estimates from the list experiment present a similar pattern. Among the two anti-system items in the treatment groups, the item saying that they voted Le Pen because “all other politicians are the same” has a lot of traction among Le Pen respondents (the estimated effect is 1.14), but the effect of this item is non-significant among Macron voters. The item saying that they did it to “teach a lesson” to politicians is non significant among both groups (though higher among Le Pen supporters). Consistently with the conjoint, this would indicate that some voters are inclined to select populists because they “look” different to other politicians.

The survey results presented in the first section indicate that individuals who perceive their region to be in decline, be it because they evaluate the future negatively or because they think that their region is subpar with respect to other regions in the country, are more likely to be politically de-attached. More importantly, to a significant degree these views also seem to increase dissatisfaction with democracy and the likelihood of supporting a far-right populist party like the Front National. These conclusions hold after controlling for egotropic perceptions and individual-level characteristics that could be masking hidden economic trends experienced at the individual level by certain groups. The relationship between negative sociotropic perceptions and anti-system views expressed as lack of trust in institutions and democracy also hold after controlling for questions capturing social conservatism and opposition to immigration.

Table 6: List experiment - Conditional ATEs

	N of reasons	
	Voted for	
	Macron	Le Pen
Teach a lesson	0.077 (0.354)	0.310 (0.496)
All the same	0.509 (0.375)	1.136** (0.556)
Baseline	2.896*** (0.215)	2.500*** (0.277)
Observations	127	65
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

In addition, the survey experiments show that both abstainers and populist voters favor candidates who do not have careers related to the political and economic establishment. More importantly, these effects seem to grow with regional economic hardship, as the subset of the sample from departments experiencing higher levels of unemployment present larger effects in favor of outsiders than that from departments with low unemployment. These empirical conclusions go in line with the hypotheses presented in the theory and hint that negative place-based sociotropic perceptions might induce political dissatisfaction, which in turn tends to make voters more prone towards anti-system messages.

Under this perspective, the populist reaction is the last step of a causal chain that begins with a declining “community of fate”, perceived from the perspective of individuals who themselves might not be experiencing the consequences of this decline in very direct or explicit ways. First, as seen in the survey data from France, regional dissatisfaction manifests as deattachment from the political system, lack of trust in institutions and a higher support for a populist party like the Front National. While the evidence from the survey experiment cannot be taken as conclusive due to its small size and potential external validity concerns, it hints that the interaction of local conditions and the anti-system mechanism are a potential avenue for explaining the geographically heterogeneous sources of the populist vote.

## 4 Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that political de-attachment and populist votes can be disaggregated into egotropic and sociotropic causes. I have also argued that the dissatisfaction with the state of the local “community of fate” can result in populist votes through two different mechanisms, a programmatic one, emphasizing policy issues that voters think might affect their community, and an anti-system one, in which voters prefer candidates that appear as outsiders opposed to the established political system. To evaluate these claims, I focused the empirical analysis on France as a key case due to the longstanding presence of far-right populist party with significant degrees of geographical heterogeneity in its electoral support.

Using a large dataset comprising 20 years of surveys in France designed to make inferences at the department level I have found that both egotropic and sociotropic components have large effects on anti-system political beliefs expressed through lower trust in institutions, democracy and political parties, political de-attachment and support for the Front National. The results confirm both the importance that sociotropic perceptions have on political behavior, as well as on developing anti-system views that might lead to the selection of anti-system candidates.

To evaluate how the anti-system mechanism compared to programmatic messages I presented a survey experiment showing that respondents in high unemployment regions are much more likely to react positively to political outsiders, and that this effect is entirely driven by politically de-attached respondents (abstainers) and populist voters (Front National supporters). In addition, populist respondents who claimed they had voted for Marine Le Pen and non-voters react positively to outsider cues, while there is no effect of these cues among Macron voters. Even though ideology does have a lot of traction among Le Pen supporters, the effect of outsider cues is important among both populist voters and abstainers.

This paper addressed an issue that is central to the literature on the rise of populism which is to what degree the effects of economic trends and globalization, once established as important, occur through sociotropic or egotropic mechanisms. The evidence presented here indicates that both channels independently and equally matter, and that they also have

large joint effects. This shows why we might often fail to find effects from actual economic hardship on the populist vote, but it also opens up the question of how those sociotropic place-based Ansell and McNamara (2018) views are formed and how they translate into political behavior.

While the production of these views might be better explored in ethnographic work like those of Gest (2016) and Cramer (2016), the experiment in this paper has presented some preliminary evidence showing that a higher attraction towards anti-system or outsider candidates could motivate de-attached voters in economically lagging regions. Importantly, while the ideological channel is shown to matter, specially among partisans, this paper indicates a second channel that requires further empirical exploration, in which negative sociotropic perceptions are formed and then translated into votes through a non-programmatic mechanism. Since both egotropic and sociotropic perceptions are relevant and programmatic and anti-system mechanisms could connect these with votes, exploring these alternative channels can provide ways outside the stalemate between cultural and economic explanations for the rise of populism.

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