

The Cultural Origins of Populism

Yotam Margalit[†]

Shir Raviv[‡]

Omer Solodoch[§]

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Abstract

The electoral success of right-wing populist parties is often attributed to disaffection among certain voters. But while economic explanations for this disaffection are theoretically clear and quantifiable, explanations centered on cultural factors offer vaguer accounts that are harder to evaluate empirically. We address this problem by theoretically distinguishing between five different “storylines” about the cultural origins of populism, and then test them using extensive data from Europe and the United States. Our analysis indicates that concerns about ethno-cultural change induced by immigration are central to understanding the populist vote; so, but to a lesser extent, is rural resentment and status anxiety. In contrast, explanations centered on communal disintegration or an intergenerational values divide are pertinent in only specific cases. The analysis helps disentangle the cultural forces associated with the rise of populism and highlights the heterogeneous coalitions that form the populist base across different countries.

^{*}Online Appendix can be found [here](#).

[†]Department of Political Science, Tel Aviv University. ymargalit@tau.ac.il.

[‡]Department of Political Science, Tel Aviv University. shirraviv@mail.tau.ac.il

[§]Browne Center for International Politics, University of Pennsylvania and Department of International Relations, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. solodoch@sas.upenn.edu.

Introduction

Right-wing populism is omnipresent; from France to the Netherlands, from the UK to Denmark, a rising proportion of the electorate in a host of advanced democracies is opting for populist parties and candidates on the right. As commentators have noted, populism derives much of its impetus from the emotional force it evokes (Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza, 2017). In claiming to represent the true will of the people versus the interests of a self-serving and disconnected elite, populist forces have managed to mobilize the discontentment of many voters, those often described as the “left behind.” But what is the source of anger and resentment that have fueled the rise of populist parties? What developments underlie these sentiments among the populist electorate?

Perhaps the most prominent explanation points to increased economic insecurity as the key source of discontent underlying the rise of populism (e.g., Rodrik, 2018; Guiso et al., 2017). By this view, economic developments such as globalization, automation, and the global financial crisis have transformed the workforce of post-industrial countries, generating a widespread sense of dislocation, which in turn prompted the economic losers to opt for populist parties (e.g., Autor et al., 2016; Colantone and Stanig, 2018).

The economic grievance-based explanation is often pitted against a “cultural” explanation, which emphasizes the role of non-material concerns in driving public support for populism. Studies in this vein hold that populist rhetoric appeals to a sense of anxiety over issues such as collective identity, social status, moral values, and changing lifestyles, all of which are borne from social and cultural long-term structural changes that may have little to do with deteriorating economic circumstances.¹

A culture-centric account, while prominent in an array of studies, is hampered by a

¹Several recent studies attempt to bridge these approaches with explanations centered on the interaction between economic and cultural drivers. We discuss these explanations below.

number of issues. For one, there is an inherent difficulty in quantifying and empirically testing explanations centered on social-cultural factors as the explanatory variable. As a result, much of the stronger evidence in support of a cultural explanation of populism comes from several ethnographies of communities with high rates of support for populism (e.g., Lamont, 2009; Gest, 2016; Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2018). These ethnographies offer valuable insights into the concerns that animate voters in such places, but it is hard to assess how well they explain populist support in a broader context beyond the one they study. Moreover, given that the aim of these works is to provide a detailed and textured depiction of residents' experiences, they often describe an array of concerns and resentments that people harbor, and are less concerned with delineating a precise causal theory of why people vote for populism.²

As a result, attempts to tease out the drivers of the populist vote are at somewhat of an impasse: economic factors are better measured and easier to test, but exhibit limited explanatory significance (Margalit, 2019). Cultural accounts, on the other hand, tend to be less specified and, perhaps as a result, do not have as much systematic empirical grounding (see Guriev and Papaioannou, 2020, for a review).

This paper seeks to make headway on both of these issues. First, we seek to tease out and clearly describe a number of different potential culture-centric explanations of populism. These explanations, to be clear, do not necessarily hold cultural factors as the sole source of the populist appeal, but they do all assign a major role to such factors. We then draw testable implications from each of these explanations and empirically assess their usefulness in accounting for the populist vote. In doing so, the focus of our analysis is right-wing populism, the dominant strand in the populist surge over the past two decades, and hence

²Notable book-length attempts to offer a clear theory of how cultural factors shape populist support are Norris and Inglehart (2019), who focus on a values backlash between generations as the key driver, as well as Kaufmann (2018), who's study centers on the cultural implications of immigration. We discuss their arguments and evidence in more detail below.

the subject of most recent research on the topic.³

Our theoretical exposition of these potential explanations focuses on the deep-rooted societal changes that generated the alleged concerns among voters, the demographics of those who supposedly harbor those concerns, and on the “other” against whom the grievances are directed. In addition, we explore the mechanisms through which disaffection stemming from cultural factors translates into rising support for populism and the extent to which the purported cultural drivers overlap or interact with economic factors.

A systematic review of the literature reveals five “storylines” that represent the different concerns and targets of blame underlying the electoral appeal of right-wing populism: (1) Older cohorts who feel that traditional values have been trampled and overtaken by a post-materialist culture and politics; (2) Natives who fear that demographic changes and incoming waves of migration will change the country’s cultural identity; (3) Rural residents who feel shunned, and looked down upon, by urban elites and policy makers representing the interests and lifestyles of urbanites; (4) White men anxious about a decline in the privileged social status that their race, gender and occupational standing have traditionally afforded them; and (5) People who feel isolated and alienated due to the atomization of modern society and the absence of a cohesive local community to which they can belong or rely upon.

For sure, these five storylines are not mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, they focus on different social and cultural changes that Western countries have undergone, be it a growing intergenerational divide, an evolving rural-urban split, or mass inward migration and a changing ethnic composition of society. Each storyline offers a different way to conceive of the chief sources of anxiety, indignity and resentment, as well as the sentiments of pride and belonging that underlie the draw of populism.

After detailing these five accounts, we assess their empirical plausibility using cross-

³The concerns of right and left-wing populists often differ (Rodrik, 2018). Given space constraints, we restrict the analysis to the former.

national survey data covering ten European countries collected by the European Social Survey (ESS) between 2012 and 2018, and data from the American National Election Study (ANES). The countries we examine vary in terms of historical background, electoral systems and economic circumstances. And as Figure 1 shows, all have experienced substantial increases in the vote share for right-wing populists, but did so in varying levels and rates of change.

In our empirical analysis, the aim is not to causally identify the effects of a specific socio-cultural factor in bringing about the populist success. Rather, our objective is to assess the plausibility of the different explanations, by comparing the match between each storyline's observable implications and the populist support base. Where the match is weak, the explanatory usefulness of that account is necessarily limited. Moreover, this approach illuminates which of the accounts best fits the patterns of populist support in each country.

Specifically, we center on three questions regarding each of the storylines. First, how sizable is the group to which it pertains? Second, how well does the grievance associated with the storyline distinguish right-wing populist voters from voters of other parties? And third, to what extent are the findings consistent across countries? The analysis brings to the fore several findings of note.

First, it shows that—consistent across all countries—the most prominent cultural account of the populist vote is the storyline centered on ethno-cultural estrangement. Specifically, white natives who believe that their country's culture is being undermined represent a sizable share of the populist support base, and are far more likely than others to vote for a right-wing populist party. Put simply, our analysis points to disaffection with immigration as key to understanding the strong appeal of contemporary populism.

However, the results also indicate that this storyline represents, at best, just over half of the populist electorate on the right. Since a considerable share of these populist supporters—ranging from 44% in France to 80% in Poland—do not match the profile implied by this

storyline, it cannot account by itself for the overall phenomenon of support for right-wing populists. The data also point to the important role that geography plays. Namely, populism is a major draw among rural residents who feel they have no voice in politics, particularly in Sweden, Switzerland and the U.S.

The usefulness of the rest of the storylines varies by country. For example, anxiety over social status seems a pertinent source of populist support in France, Sweden, Switzerland, and Poland, but not so in the other countries we examined. In contrast, the evidence suggests that an intergenerational cultural backlash or concerns about community disintegration play, in most countries, a far more limited role in accounting for the right-wing populist vote. The observable implications implied by these explanations tend to either match only small shares of the populist base or fail to distinguish between populist supporters and voters of other parties.

Notably, while the five storylines are in theory not mutually exclusive, in practice we find only limited overlap in the characteristics of the people who match the different accounts. This indicates that the populist support base does not comprise of a narrow demographic grouping, but instead is composed of a more diverse cross-section of society that represents distinct sources of disaffection. In fact, this heterogeneity may help explain the rise of what are seemingly very different types of populist forces across countries, be it the ethno-nationalist forces in Sweden and Germany, to the more conservative, agrarian populist party in Poland.

We report a wide range of robustness checks, including replication of the results using different cross-national datasets and employing alternative measures of the key variables. Reassuringly, these robustness tests paint a similar picture and thus further substantiate the study's main conclusions.

Our study makes several contributions to the study of populism. First and most directly, by developing an analytic framework that distinguishes between, and delineates, the different

cultural explanations for the populist vote, the study clarifies the often conflated sources of disaffection that mobilize voters to support populist parties.

The study also makes a substantive contribution to the growing body of empirical research on populism. The typical approach in this literature is to use multivariate regression to examine the role of certain factors—cultural, economic or both—as predictors of vote for populist parties (e.g., Gidron and Hall, 2017; Guiso et al., 2017; Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Harteveld et al., 2021). Such regressions can shed light on the marginal effect of a given explanatory variable in accounting for the populist vote. However, this type of analysis offers little insight into the overall phenomenon of voter support for populist parties, as it says little about the relative prevalence of the different explanatory factors in the population under study (Margalit, 2019). The evidence we present expands our understanding of the populist phenomenon by providing insight on more than the marginal contribution of a given variable. Instead, we focus on the prevalence in absolute terms of each explanation among the populist base and assess how distinguishing it is when compared to the electorate of non-populist parties. This provides a necessary plausibility check regarding the relative explanatory usefulness of the different cultural accounts we put forth.

Finally, the study’s findings offer novel insight into the debate revolving the appeal of populism and the policies that may strengthen or lessen this appeal. To date, the discussion has largely centered on policies that alleviate economic insecurity, be it investment in worker retraining programs or income support and redistribution. By mapping and evaluating the relative prominence of various cultural concerns, this study points elsewhere, to specific social changes and attendant grievances as key for those concerned about the broad appeal of populism. Furthermore, our results indicate that these policies need be tailored to specific contexts, to reflect the composition of populist voters and the varying concerns that preoccupy them across different countries.

Five Explanations of Populism

This section lays out five prominent storylines that emerge from the numerous articles and books written about the rise of populism, and that offer an explanation for its underlying appeal among voters. Each of the storylines, or accounts, is centered on distinct processes of social change, with attendant concerns and targets of blame. As our description of these different accounts will make clear, they are not mutually exclusive, and at times overlap in some respects. This overlap perhaps explains why they are often conflated in the ongoing debate over the causes of populism. Yet as we describe below, the storylines center on different causes, point toward distinct observable implications and offer different insights into the potential sources of populist support.

In what follows, we briefly describe the five storylines, emphasize the key social processes prompting each of them and the disaffection they are alleged to have generated. To distill the sentiment that underlies each explanation, we precede it with a fictional ideal-type “quote”.⁴ Where relevant, we also describe how economic factors relate to these storylines. Finally, we link the storylines to a set of observable implications, and proceed to assess their empirical validity in the sections below.

⁴As we show in Appendix E, these short vignettes are largely based on interviews in ethnographies and newspaper reports. Rather than rely on any specific interview, we wish here to convey a prism through which to consider each of these storylines.

1. Intergenerational Backlash

When you were growing up, kids were taught to live an upstanding life: maintain a proper marriage, raise a family, be a patriot. That was many decades ago and the country has changed. Young people these days, have no appreciation for traditional values. And if you dare to protest or say something, they will attack you for being outdated, intolerant, bigoted. You miss the days when you could talk freely and call things as they are.

The cultural explanation that has perhaps received the most in depth articulation is the intergenerational backlash theory put forth by Norris and Inglehart (2019). According to this account, populist movements reflect a defensive reaction of older cohorts who feel that contemporary culture and politics are eroding the core values which have long informed their worldview.

This reaction is alleged to be the result of a gradual and long-term change in the culture and the moral norms guiding society—a shift described as “the silent revolution”—that took place in post-industrial societies over the second half of the 20th century. Specifically, this account holds that the unprecedented levels of existential security and continued prosperity in the post-WWII era led to an intergenerational shift from materialist to post-materialist values, which place greater emphasis on new issues such as environmental protection, gender equality, and respect for minority rights. This shift went counter to long-prevailing materialist and authoritarian values, which emphasize instead physical and economic security, and favor conformity to group norms over individual freedoms or ethnic and cultural diversity.

The core group that feels aggrieved by these changes consists mostly of older cohorts, some of whose formative years were shaped by two World Wars and their aftermath. Having grown up facing existential insecurity and scarcity, this environment cultivated authoritarian dispositions among those in their formative years, making them more likely to value group

conformity, as well as order and stability.

Such life circumstances and authoritarian dispositions also make these voters more intolerant of cultural change and deviations from long-established conventions. And as their share of the population declined over time, a perception that traditional norms are being overwhelmed by cultural change intensified, sparking a cultural and political backlash (Ford and Goodwin, 2014).

The observable implications of the intergenerational backlash account are that the base of right-wing populist parties consists of many older people with socially conservative attitudes who harbor authoritarian values. These voters are drawn to populist parties with the hope that they will defend traditional values and fight politicians who promote progressive-liberal policies. By this view, populist politicians' calls to protect, or restore, the country's traditional way of life can be seen as efforts to attract the older segment of the electorate using a nostalgic appeal to a mythical golden past (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again," the "Take Back Control" slogan of the Leave campaign in the Brexit referendum, and Geert Wilder's "[make] The Netherlands Ours Again" are exemplary of this electoral appeal.

2. Ethnocultural Estrangement

The country feels almost unrecognizable to you. It increasingly feels like you are in a foreign land, invaded by people who don't share your culture, your values, or even try to speak your language. And while masses of immigrants are flowing in, the detached elites are just letting them enter freely, belittling your concerns and instead, accusing you of being narrow minded and racist.

Another prominent explanation centers on the concern and anxiety of the white native majority in the face of changes in the ethnic composition of the population. In particular, disaffection from the perceived cultural implications of mass immigration—e.g., growing

presence of ethnic and religious minorities who cannot speak the native language, harboring socially illiberal views, failing to integrate into society—are seen as a key cause of the populist rise (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018).

Such sentiments are attributed to major demographic shifts that have taken place over the past few decades in both Europe and the US. These shifts are the result of continuous waves of labor migration induced by globalization, as well as an increase in the number of asylum seekers fleeing violence and persecution, primarily from the Middle East and Africa.

The combination of these trends together with the historically low birth rates among natives, created a sense of alarm among a segment of the native population, feeling that the country is changing its face and losing its identity. The fears were augmented by objective difficulties of some immigrant communities in assimilating, be it due to residential segregation and the creation of ethnic enclaves, poor control of the national language, or because of traditions that differ starkly from those of the native population (Caldwell, 2009). Together, such issues may contribute to a sense among natives of irrevocable change, and the demise of the national “way of life” (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Kaufmann, 2018).⁵

Anxious and disaffected, more and more white natives seek remedy in the form of restricting immigration, a policy fervently promoted by most, if not all, radical right populist parties (Ivarsflaten, 2008). And beyond strict policy, these voters are also drawn to the populist rhetoric which emphasizes nativism, the notion that the state should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). This rhetoric seemingly permits voters to express resentment and anger over immigration and the supposed erosion of national identity, without being judged as racist or intolerant. However, populist voters direct their anger not only toward immigrants of different ethnic and cul-

⁵To be sure, concerns about hyper-ethnic change are not always grounded in objective reality. This is demonstrated by the fact that they emerge not only in countries that experienced significant ethnic shifts such as Britain or Switzerland, but also in those that have much lower levels of immigration, such as Hungary or Poland (see Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) for a broader discussion).

tural backgrounds; they also blame the liberal elites for allowing mass immigration into the country, and embracing multiculturalism.

Taken together, this account suggests that the core group that turns to the populist right consists of white native voters who feel that their culture and way of life is being undermined by mass immigration. This group of voters is not limited to a specific age cohort and can be found in all geographic regions and socioeconomic classes.

3. Rural Resentment

People like you were the heart and soul of this country, the men and women who cultivated this land for generations. But for the condescending politicians in the capital, you are now just a bunch of hillbillies. All the money they give out goes to their cities, where they live and where their rich donors and media friends live. You want to wave your hands and tell them “there’s another half of the country out here!” But they don’t even look your way.

The increased resonance of populist claims is attributed by some to growing resentment among rural residents. Living away from the decision-making centers, goes the story, many rural folks feel that the mainstream political system has ignored, neglected, or outright worked against their interests and the values they hold dear.

This sentiment stems in part from the growing malaise that many rural areas have experienced in recent decades, and which consecutive governments were unable to arrest. Depopulation, loss of basic services, dwindling employment opportunities, and in some cases also rising poverty, have contributed to the growing sense of neglect and distributive injustice (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Wuthnow, 2019).

By this account, rural residents' sense of decline was further augmented by a shift in the way agriculture and the countryside are perceived in the national ethos. Rural communities used to be lionized as the embodiment of the true heartland, the torch carriers of the

nation's heritage. But the rapid growth of cities and the agglomeration of business hubs in large metropolitan areas caused not only an outflow of rural labor, but also eroded the prominence of farmers, peasants, and rural culture in the nation's identity. Instead, rural residents became something of a cultural punchline, often mocked in popular discourse for their perceived backwardness (Wuthnow, 2019).

Furthermore, widening differences between urban and rural regions—in terms of residents' socio-demographic characteristics, economic standing, as well as lifestyles—created growing distrust among rural residents of the political elites, who overwhelmingly live in large metropolitan areas. This mistrust is captured in two related sentiments: First, that “all major decisions are made in the urban areas, by urban people, and dictated outward” (Cramer, 2016, pp. 65); Second, that rural communities are not getting their fair share of resources. That while rural residents have the legal right to vote, in practice they lack influence and their voice is hardly heard. Instead, ‘others,’ such as city dwellers, public sector employees or people of color, are unfairly benefiting at their expense from the government’s attention and largess.

The notion that their interests are ignored by the decision making elites, combined with the sense that their rural sensibilities are looked down upon by city residents, contributed to the creation of what Cramer labels as “rural consciousness:” a perspective made up of an identity as a rural resident combined with a specific sense of distributive (in)justice.

The appeal of populism among rural voters, in this view, is explained by the animus populist politicians exhibit toward the “elites”, the politicians’ vilification of liberal city residents as morally corrupt, juxtaposed with a glorification of rural people as the embodiment of the nation’s soul. The populist base, as implied by this account, consists of white rural voters—male and female, young and old—who feel excluded from the decision-making processes.

4. Social Status Anxiety

You used to feel that things were going okay, that people respected you. But nowadays, it seems that folks like you are less and less valued. It's not that you need anyone's charity, or pity. You just want to be able to support the family with some dignity, and provide your kids with better opportunities than what your parents could offer you. But instead of moving up the ladder, you fear you're slipping down, barely holding on.

A fourth explanation centers on people's concern about a decline in their social status, namely the degree of respect or recognition they receive, relative to others, for belonging to a certain social group. The rise of populism, according to this account, is a counter-reaction fueled by anxiety about the declining social position of some groups in society that had previously enjoyed a higher status by other members of the public (Gidron and Hall, 2017).

This perceived decline in social status is mainly attributed to two historical developments. The first is the gradual disappearance of certain types of occupations and jobs, a result primarily of technological change and offshoring. Since the quality of people's job often serves as a marker of their standing in society (Lamont, 2009), the slow evaporation of manufacturing and other mid-level jobs has generated not only economic hardships, but also widespread angst about a decline in social status (Eribon, 2018; Gidron and Hall, 2020). The second development is the progressive shift in the mainstream stance on social issues such as race, ethnicity and gender roles. This cultural shift generated a sense among certain segments that the privileged social position traditionally associated with some of their defining characteristics—such as being white, male, or native born—is coming under threat (e.g., Mutz, 2018; Abramowitz and McCoy, 2019).

Thus, unlike alternative accounts that highlight cultural change as the dominant force underlying the populist appeal, the status anxiety explanation centers on the interconnected role of economic and cultural developments (e.g., Gidron and Hall, 2017; Kurer, 2020; Baccini

and Weymouth, 2021). Furthermore, anxiety about waning social status is not presumed to be unique to a specific generation or age group, nor to residents of a specific geographic region (Gest, 2016).

Hochschild (2018) has put forward a related explanation of the status anxiety account. Recounting the disaffection in certain parts of American society, she offers the analogy of people waiting in a long line for the American Dream that lies just over the brow of the hill. She describes the frustration of those standing patiently in line, waiting for their chance to finally fulfill that dream, only for others—e.g., beneficiaries of affirmative action programs, newly arrived immigrants—to seemingly cut in line. The frustration of those standing in line is thus directed not only towards the line cutters, but also toward those in charge of the line, who demand that they not just remain patient but also show empathy toward those jumping ahead of them.⁶

Note that by this account, status-anxious citizens are directing an accusatory finger both “up” and “down.” Up toward the elites, who seem to care very little about their plight, but also downward toward certain social groups—defined along ethnicity, race and gender—whom they perceive as inferior but as being unfairly favored by the elites. These sentiments presumably mobilize support for right-wing populist parties, which seemingly recognize those grievances by emphasizing nostalgia for, and a promise to restore, the stable hierarchies of the past (Mutz, 2018).

The observable implication implied by the status anxiety thesis is two pronged. First, voters of populist parties perceive themselves as positioned on the lower, but not the lowest levels of the social status hierarchy.⁷ Second, they desire to be respected by society, as much

⁶Conducting ethnographic fieldwork in East London and Youngstown, Ohio, Gest (2016, p.16) finds, consistent with Hochschild’s analogy, that many white working class people feel as victims of discrimination and believe that “ethnic minorities have been given social advantages at the expense of white working class people.”

⁷They are not at the lowest rungs, because the anxiety revolving their status stems exactly from the fear of dropping down the hierarchy, joining the class at the bottom.

of their discontent is related to their sense of declining stature and social esteem (Sandel, 2018).⁸

5. Community Disintegration

Growing up, you knew everyone in your neighborhood. It felt like a close, tight-knit community, in which people helped each other. Today, you barely know who lives across the street. Each to his own. You feel like the social glue that used to hold this country together has come undone.

The final explanation of the populist appeal focuses on the disintegration of community life and the erosion of the social infrastructure as the main source of disaffection mobilizing voters. The literature attributes this development to profound changes in the structure of local communities in the modern era: mass urbanization, impersonal and bureaucratized relationships replacing informal communal systems of loyalty and local affiliations, as well as changes in leisure and cultural activities. Such changes have led to a continuing decline in the role that community plays in modern life, leaving people feeling isolated and increasingly alienated from their communities (Bolet, 2021).

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) documents these processes in the American context, focusing on the decline in social capital and in the ways individuals interact with their neighbors and communities. This decline, in his telling, is evident in both formal and informal social connections. People are less likely to be active members of political parties or unions, participate less in civic associations and attend the local church less frequently. But informal connections are also weakening: people are less likely to get together with friends, to hang out in the local bar with their neighbors, or join a reading group at the local bookstore.

Related to this view, Klinenberg (2018) describes a deterioration in “social infrastruc-

⁸These sentiments, and their association with support for populist parties, are likely to be stronger among men, whose traditional privileged social rank has been challenged in recent decades. However, low-status women can also share these sentiments and turn to far-right populist parties (Eribon, 2018).

ture,” namely the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact, such as libraries, barbershops, community centers and playgrounds. When social infrastructure is degraded, he argues, it inhibits social activity, leaving families and individuals to fend for themselves. This process of social atomization can lead to feelings of alienation, which may draw voters to the appeals of populism, as its us-vs-them message offers an alternative source of identification and belonging. Consistent with this argument, Bolet (2021) finds that British citizens who live in districts that experienced more closures of community pubs were, controlling for other factors, more likely to vote for UKIP, formerly the largest populist party in the UK. Similarly, Giuliano and Wacziarg (2020) find that support for Trump in the 2016 presidential election was higher in counties with lower densities of memberships in civic, religious and sports organizations (i.e., counties with lower levels of social capital).

To be sure, the link between social alienation and voting has been the focus of study long before the recent populist wave. In his famous analysis of the conditions that lead to the demise of democracy, Kornhauser (1959) argued that people respond to a breakdown of social ties by forming instead hyper-attachments to symbols and leaders. This view is echoed also in Arendt’s (1951) work on the origins of totalitarianism, where she concludes that “loyalty [to the totalitarian leader] can be expected only from the completely isolated human being who, without any other social ties... derives his sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement.” Indeed, research on support for far-right parties often draws on these theoretical foundations.⁹

Notably, unlike other explanations presented above, grievances regarding the fragmentation of the local community are not associated with a distinct group in terms of demographic characteristics, values or lifestyles. Rather, people of all races and income levels may experience a sense of loss of community. It is also not unique to rural residents or farm workers (Kornhauser, 1959). The observable implications of the community breakdown explanation

⁹For a critical review of this literature see Rydgren (2007).

are that isolated voters—those who both experience low levels of social interaction with other members of their community and feel distant from them—will be more likely to vote for the populist right.

To conclude, Table 1 reveals some notable differences, and similarities, between the five storylines. For example, not all of them blame the elites for the current situation. In both the intergenerational backlash and community disintegration accounts, disaffection stems from what is perceived as largely inevitable social change. Yet contrary to the community disintegration storyline, where the division between “us” and “them” is blurred, in the intergenerational backlash account there is a clear distinction between “us”—the older generation, which holds traditional values—and “them,” young people who embrace post-materialist values.

Interestingly, in the three other cultural accounts, people focus their blame not only on elite decision-makers but also on their fellow citizens, whom they feel are benefiting at their expense: in the rural resentment storyline, it is the city folks; in the ethnocultural estrangement storyline, it is the immigrants; while in the case of social status anxiety, it is the groups benefiting from various affirmative action programs.

The only storyline in which there is no clear distinction between “us” and “them” is the account centered on the disintegration of communal life. Specifically, unlike the rural resentment account, where cultural grievance is expressed by a distinct collective seeking both symbolic recognition and material assistance, the community disintegration account focuses on concerns held by individuals feeling increasingly isolated from those around them.

Data and Measures

Building upon this analytic framework, we now turn to an empirical assessment of the five cultural explanations of populism. Given that our aim is to compare the impact of several

Table 1: Five Explanations of Populism

Storyline	Underlying Social Process	Cultural Concern	Targets of Blame	Us vs. Them	Observable Implications
Inter-generational Backlash	A slow-evolving societal shift from materialist to post-materialist values.	The erosion of the moral status of traditional -- materialist and conservative -- values.	No concrete targets of blame; the liberal elite represents the values of younger generations but is not considered responsible for the intergenerational chasm. Resentment thus directed toward these value shifts.	Generational division: older cohorts with authoritarian values vs. younger cohorts with liberal values.	Older voters with socially conservative values and authoritarian predispositions.
Rural Resentment	Processes of urbanization leading to a change in lifestyles and ethics.	A perception that rural areas do not receive their fair share of public resources and that urban elites look down upon and denigrate their culture and lifestyle.	The urban elite, including decision makers and public officials, who have neglected the concerns and interests of rural residents	Geographic division: rural vs. urban elites and their supporters, who are concentrated in the large cities.	Rural residents who feel alienated from decision-making centers.
Ethnocultural Estrangement	Profound demographic shifts driven by waves of migration and low birth rates among the native population.	Fears about loss of national identity.	The elites, for facilitating or failing to stop the shift in the country's ethnic makeup and the subsequent cultural shift.	Ethno-cultural division: native-born versus immigrants and ethnic and religious minority groups.	White native voters who feel that their cultural lifestyle is being undermined by mass immigration.
Social Status Anxiety	Gradual disappearance of semi-skilled and secure jobs; Cultural change that diminishes the public esteem afforded to previously privileged social groups.	Anxiety about a decline -- objective or subjective-- in social status.	1) Political elites, who prioritize marginalized groups in society, and 2) Social groups that were prioritized and that benefited from this social change	White workers (especially males) who feel their social standing diminishing compared to other social groups (females, ethnic minorities and immigrants)	People who perceive themselves as positioned on the lower levels, but not the lowest end, of the social status hierarchy, and seek to maintain a respected position in society.
Community Disintegration	Processes of de-industrialization, urbanization, and changes in leisure and cultural activities.	Grievances about an isolated and insecure life without a cohesive community.	No concrete target of blame for these cultural changes.	No clear distinction between "us" and "them".	People who have little social contact with their neighbors and lament the situation; usually reside outside of large cities.

causes, using quasi-experimental methods for causal identification with observational data is not a viable option, as these methods typically enable the evaluation of only a single cause. In what follows, we begin the section by describing the data and the measures we use and then turn to discuss our empirical approach.

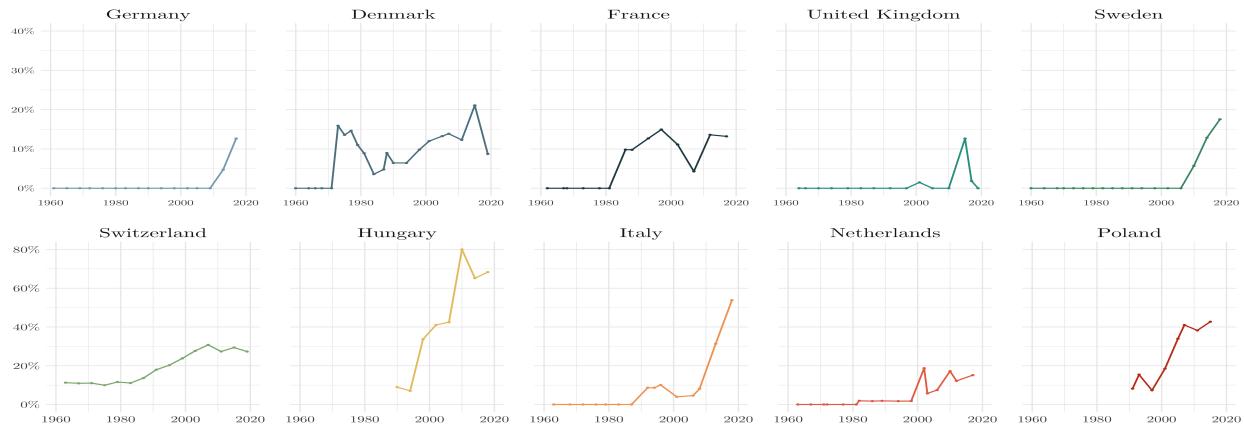
We employ individual-level data from the European Social Survey (ESS), a cross-national study that is based on in-person interviews conducted with nationally representative samples. To expand the size of our sample, as well as minimize sensitivity of the results to peculiarities of a specific election, we pool the four most recent waves of the ESS, which cover the years 2012 to 2018. The analysis focuses on ten European countries that have been at the center of the public and scholarly debates around the causes of populism: Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Our analysis focuses on respondents who reported their party vote in the previous election, totaling 44,571 observations.¹⁰

The ESS has two notable advantages for our purposes. First, it uses a set of recurring questions over multiple rounds, allowing us to assess the consistency of the results across different samples. Second, the surveys include a wide range of items regarding cultural and social issues, allowing a relatively nuanced measurement of the various sources of cultural concern.

Having said that, some of the items included in these surveys are imperfect proxies for the cultural concerns we seek to capture. To this end, we examine as part of the robustness checks the sensitivity of the results to the specific wording of the ESS questions. We do so by replicating parts of the main analysis using alternative cross-national datasets which include the European Values Survey (EVS) and several modules of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). Furthermore, we extend the analysis also to include the US using survey

¹⁰These observations were weighted using the ESS weightings, which correct for sampling errors and non-response rates within each country. More details on sampling and dataset are provided in Appendix A.

Figure (1) Vote Share for Right-Wing Populist Parties Across European Countries, 1960–2020



Notes: Shares of votes gained by populist party/parties over time, based on data from the MARPOR project. Classification of populist parties is based on the Global Party Survey Dataset. See Appendix SI-2 for the list of parties.

data from the American National Election Study (ANES) and the World Values Survey (WVS).¹¹

Our dependent variable in the main analysis is support for populism, which we capture by respondents' voting preference. The sample we analyze therefore includes only respondents who reported how they would vote. To classify voters' support for populism, we rely on the typology of the Global Party Survey, which categorizes the degree of populist versus pluralist rhetoric of political parties across the world. We define populist parties as those classified in the GPS as "strongly populist" in this index. We also validate this measure of populist parties using several alternative classifications from the literature.¹²

Figure 1 presents the vote share of the populist-right from 1960 to 2020. As the figure makes clear, all ten countries experienced increases in the populist vote, albeit at different degrees. A similar pattern is observed also when relying on the self-reported voting preference from the ESS (See Appendix Figure SI-1).

¹¹See Appendix D.

¹²The differences are fairly minor, and as we show in Appendix A.2, have little impact on the findings we subsequently report.

For each of the five cultural explanations outlined above, we construct an indicator measure based on the socio-demographic factors and attitudinal items that define the group, as described in the theoretical description. Below we describe our classification and the measures we use in each of the five storylines.¹³

Intergenerational backlash: In line with Norris and Inglehart's (2019) approach, we create an indicator variable denoting whether the respondent is older than 55 years and holds authoritarian values, as measured by an index of the five items used by Norris and Inglehart (2017): agreement with the idea that it is more important to (1) live in secure and safe surroundings (2) do what is told and follow rules; (3) behave properly; (4) that government is strong and ensures safety; and (5) to follow traditions and customs. Appendix A provides details on the exact question wording. Specifically, we calculated the average score of the five items and coded a score lower than 2 to represent holding authoritarian values.¹⁴

Ethno-Cultural Estrangement: We employ an indicator that takes the value '1' if the respondent (1) is a native; (2) does not belong to an ethnic minority; and (3) believes that "the country's cultural life is generally undermined by people coming to live here from other countries."¹⁵

Rural Resentment: We generate an indicator variable taking the value '1' if the respondent: (1) lives in a "country village" or "farm or home in countryside", based on self-reported place of residence; and (2) feels that the political system allows little or no say for people like her/him in what the government does. This variable is coded based on responses to the question: "How much would you say the political system in [country] allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?"¹⁶

¹³We present additional results using alternative measures from the ESS in Appendix C.

¹⁴In Appendix SI-11, we replicate the results using alternative measures of authoritarian values and using several other thresholds for "older age".

¹⁵Responses were coded on a 10-point scale; we recoded the top 4 categories as representing an agreement with the sentiment.

¹⁶This item is asked only in rounds 7-9 in two different versions. In round 7, response categories to this question form a 5-point scale ranging from 1 'Not at all' to 6 'A great deal'. In rounds 8-9, response categories

Social Status Anxiety: The measure of social status anxiety is coded based on responses to two items. First, we use an item asking respondents to place themselves on an 11-point social ladder, after being told that “there are people who tend to be towards the top of our society and people who tend to be towards the bottom.” In line with the logic articulated by Gidron and Hall (2020), we consider status anxious individuals as those who place themselves in the lower rungs of the social ladder, but not at the very bottom (i.e., positions 2-5 on the scale). Second, to capture the anxiety that a decline in status evokes, we include a second condition that is based on an item that measures the importance respondents assign to receiving “respect from others.” As we explain, this concern is especially resonant for those who have previously enjoyed social dominance.¹⁷

Disintegration of Community: We measure concern about the disintegration of one’s local community by generating an indicator variable that takes the value ‘1’ if the respondent: (1) Does not feel close to people in their local area;¹⁸ and (2) does not live in a big city. We incorporate the latter category in order to exclude people who choose to live in less communal areas but for whom this aspect not a problem (or maybe even an draw).¹⁹ Appendix A.3 provides variable definitions and contains the original questions.

Our empirical investigation centers on two questions with regard to each of the five stories: First, how sizable is the group to which the story potentially pertains? Second, how distinct is its level of support for the populists as compared to the support exhibited by non-populist voters? To put it in more concrete terms, consider the explanation centered on the

to this question form a 10-point scale ranging from 1 ‘Not at all’ to 10 ‘Completely’. We code the lower category in the version of round 7 and the three lower categories in the version of rounds 8-9 as representing a sense of no say in politics.

¹⁷Since the item about social status was asked only in round 6, the analysis of the role of this story is restricted to 2012. We replicate the results with data from the ISSP (2009 and 2017), used also by Gidron and Hall (2017). In addition, we utilize data on the social status of the families in which respondents grew up as an alternative measure of *decline* in social status.

¹⁸Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement: “I feel close to the people in my local area.”

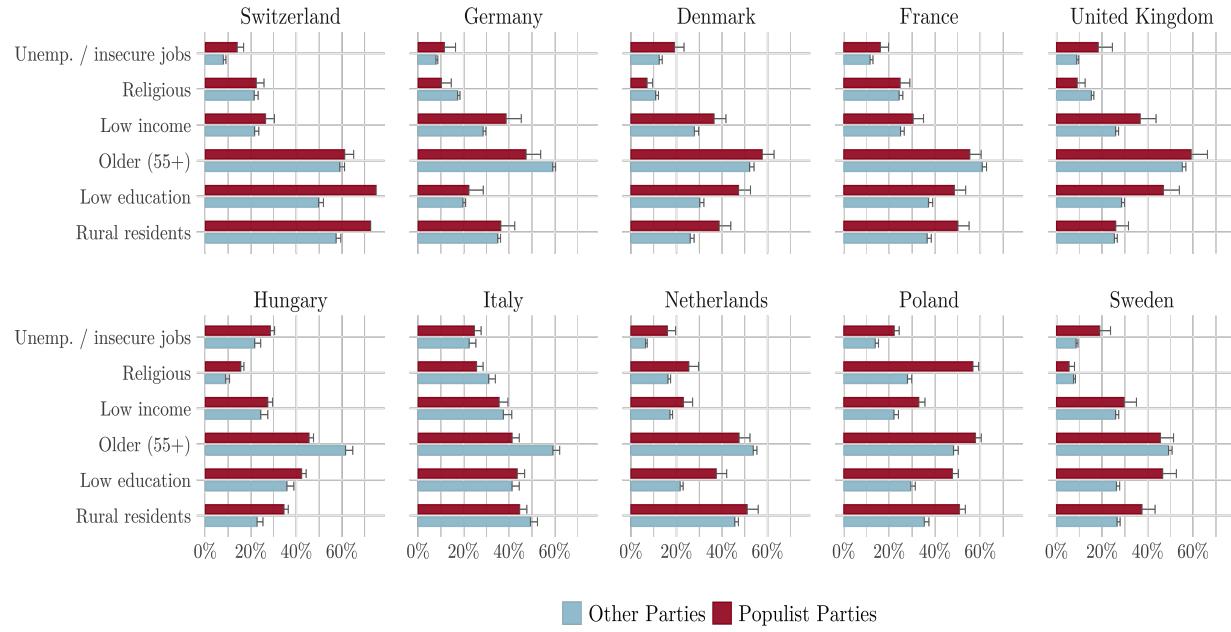
¹⁹In the appendix, we also analyze an alternative measure of communal disintegration, one that does not include residents of large cities.

resentment of rural residents toward the urban elites, who allegedly look down on the former, ignore their hardships and monopolize the decision making powers in ways that prioritize other groups in society (e.g., Cramer, 2016). To evaluate the potential usefulness of this explanation, the first question we ask is how large the rural population is in a given country. If its size represents, say, only one quarter of the overall share of votes that the populists received in the country, one can safely conclude that this explanation accounts *at best* for a limited share of the populist vote. However, even if the rural population accounts for a much greater share of the electorate (say, equivalent to the full size of the populist bloc), there is still the question of whether rural residents support the populists in significantly higher numbers than residents of non-rural areas. If the pattern of votes is very similar, it is unlikely that the alleged explanation—in this case, rural resentment—is central to understanding the drivers of the populist vote. As we show below, our investigation reveals distinct patterns regarding the explanatory usefulness of the five stories along those two dimensions, namely the size of the group in question and the distinctiveness of its degree of support for populism.

In addition, we analyze the sociodemographic characteristics of the populist electorate. To assess the relationship between labor market standing and voting preferences, we code the degree to which a respondent's occupation is insecure. We use an indicator that takes a value of '1' if the respondent has been unemployed at some point in the past five years, necessitating a search for a new job; or if the respondent is a blue-collar worker in the manufacturing industry, measured using the classification provided by Oesch (2006).²⁰ To measure subjective economic insecurity, we use an indicator for whether a respondent finds it difficult or very difficult to live on their current income. We also constructed indicators to capture low education (less than 12 years of education) and low income (earning less than two-thirds of the median household income).

²⁰In using these measures, we follow the approach of Guiso et al. (2017) in their analysis of the role of economic insecurity in explaining the populist vote.

Figure (2) Sociodemographic Characteristics of Populist and Non-Populist Voters, by Country



Notes: The figure presents the share of respondents who match each sociodemographic characteristic, calculated separately among populist and non-populist voters in ten European countries. Survey data are weighted and pooled across ESS rounds 6-9. A detailed description of the demographic measures is provided in appendix A.3.

Results

Before assessing the empirical support for the five storylines, we first examine the support base of populist parties by focusing on sociodemographic characteristics identified in the literature as key predictors of populist voting. The aim here is to examine both the absolute and the relative prevalence of these characteristics among the populist electorate, as compared to voters of other parties. To this end, we calculate the percentage of populist voters who share a particular sociodemographic trait and compare this to the proportion of non-populist voters who have the same trait. Figure 2 shows the results for each country and highlights several notable patterns.

First, in all countries, the share of respondents who are unemployed or working in insecure

jobs is higher among populist voters than among voters of other parties. The difference is particularly stark in Sweden, Poland, the Netherlands, and the UK (in all four cases, $p < 0.01$). In the UK, occupationally insecure voters were ten percentage points more likely to vote for the populist UK Independence Party (UKIP) than were secure voters. As evidenced by the Brexit referendum—which was decided by a margin of less than four percentage points—such marginal differences can be highly consequential in terms of political outcomes (Hobolt, 2016). Having said that, we also see that, in absolute terms, the unemployed and occupationally insecure represent only a moderate proportion of the populist constituency, below 25 percent in most countries. Thus, in contrast to the notion that globalization’s economic losers are the stronghold of populist parties, its overall explanatory significance for the level of populist support is, in fact, very modest.²¹

Turning to age, we see that while the older population constitutes a significant share of the populist electorate, it is not over-represented among populist voters, except in Poland. Consistent with recent work (Schäfer, 2021), in several countries (e.g., Hungary, Germany, and Italy) the proportion of older people is in fact lower among voters of populist parties than among voters of other parties. However, this does not necessarily contradict the story of intergenerational backlash, as according to Norris and Inglehart (2019), it is a combination of older age and authoritarian values that makes the populist rhetoric especially attractive, a proposition that we will examine later.

Rural voters appear to constitute a sizable proportion of the populist support base, a pattern that is notable in both absolute and relative terms in some European countries. For example, 50% of the populist voters in France are rural residents, compared to only 36% of non-populist voters. A similar pattern is evident in Poland and, to an even greater extent, in Switzerland. Yet the evidence varies widely across countries. In Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, and Italy, the share of rural voters is almost indistinguishable between populist and

²¹For further discussion of the relative weight of economic factors, see Appendix SI-3

non-populist voters.

Similar differences are observed between populist and non-populist voters in terms of education and, to a lesser extent, income. Specifically, we see that the constituency of populist voters is characterized by a higher share of individuals with low levels of education, a consistent pattern across almost all countries. In contrast, low-income individuals are only slightly over-represented among voters of populist parties. However, note that in contrast to being rural or older, characteristics that are clearly tied to specific explanations of the populist vote, education and income can be linked to multiple explanations at once.

Next, we combine demographic characteristics and attitudinal measures, in an attempt to better capture the observable implications of the different cultural accounts. Using those combined measures, we assess how well they help distinguish between the populist and non-populist constituencies.

Empirical Assessment of the Five Storylines

To assess the empirical plausibility of each of the five stories, we generated a set of five indicator variables, each denoting whether a respondent meets the demographic-attitudinal profile implied by a given explanation. As noted, these profiles are not mutually exclusive. For example, rural people—often older, white natives—could feel alienated from the urban elites while simultaneously worrying that a change in society’s ethnic complexion is leading to the demise of the local culture. However, in practice, the overlap between the different storylines is limited. Figure SI-4 in the Appendix shows the distribution of populist voters, by the number of different storylines which their demographic-attitudinal characteristics match (conditional on having at least one match).²²

As the figure indicates, in all countries in the sample, very few voters exhibit charac-

²²Figure SI-5 shows that the overlap between the different storylines remains limited when we re-run the analysis using pooled data from ESS rounds 7 to 9.

teristics that match more than two storylines: nearly 70 percent of populist voters match a single storyline, while about 26 percent match two. In other words, the overlap between explanations, while theoretically plausible, is in practice not very prevalent.

Next, we compare the share of populist voters and non-populist voters that match the criteria implied by each of the storylines (see Figure 3). As with the analysis of the demographic factors above, we evaluate the different explanations by focusing on three parameters: 1) The prevalence of a story's implied characteristics among voters of populist parties; 2) The degree to which those characteristics are over-represented among the populist constituency; and 3) The extent to which these findings are consistent across countries.

Figure 3 shows clearly that the most prominent account is the one centered on ethnocultural estrangement, namely the sentiment of white native-born voters that their culture is being eroded by immigration. The segment of the electorate with these characteristics is particularly receptive to the populist rhetoric, a pattern that stands out in both absolute and relative terms. Not only is this segment located overwhelmingly within the ranks of populist party supporters, it also represents a sizable share of the overall populist voter base. In Germany, for example, a country that experienced a massive influx of refugees during the 2015 crisis, the share of respondents with these characteristics is four times greater among voters of Alternative for Germany (AFD) than among voters of other parties.

Yet as explained, concerns about a hyper-cultural shift are subjective in nature and do not necessarily stem from actual demographic shifts. Indeed, the evidence suggests that ethnocultural estrangement is key to understanding the populist vote even in countries with relatively few immigrants and a high degree of ethnic homogeneity. In Hungary, for instance, thirty-seven percent of populist voters feel that the country's culture is undermined by immigration (a figure 80% higher than among non-populist voters), despite the fact that immigrants represent less than 4% of the country's population. Indeed, this sentiment is frequently reflected in the rabid anti-foreigner tone of Viktor Orbán, Hungary's populist

prime minister, and echoed in his contentious decision in 2015 to construct a fence on the Hungarian-Serbian border to halt the flow of refugees (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018).

Despite the evidence regarding the ethno-cultural estrangement storyline being strong and consistent across all countries we examined, the figure also indicates that, at best, no more than 56 percent of populist voters match the profile implied by this explanation. Significant as it may be, this explanation therefore cannot account by itself for the overall phenomenon of right-wing populist support.²³

Another factor that appears to contribute to the electoral backing of populist parties is resentment among rural voters. As the figure makes clear, in France, Poland, the Netherlands, and Germany, this sentiment appears to be pervasive, matched by 30 to 40 percent of populist voters, as compared to about 10 to less than 25 percent among non-populist voters. The difference is even more notable in Switzerland and Sweden, where the share of rural residents who feel they lack voice is 2.5 times greater among supporters of populist parties.

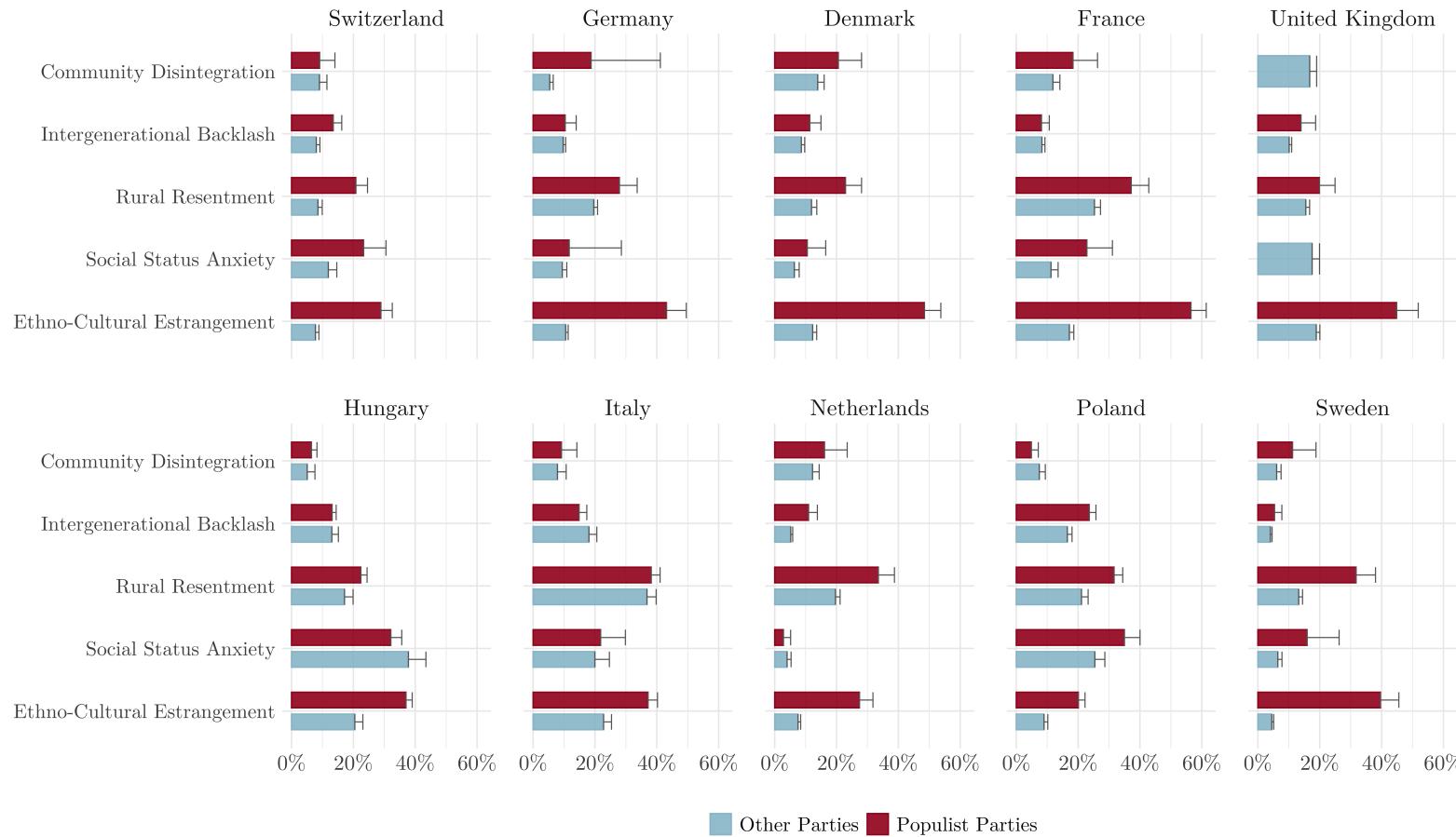
While the evidence suggests that concerns about community disintegration are peripheral in explaining the populist vote, Figure 3 reveals cross-national variation in terms of the remaining cultural accounts. Social status anxiety appears to be a strong distinguishing feature of the populist constituency in France, Sweden, Switzerland, and Poland, but this is not the case in other countries.²⁴

We observe even greater variation in the explanatory usefulness of the account centered on intergenerational backlash. In some countries, we find little evidence that older people with authoritarian values are a distinct or important component of the populists support base. However, in a few countries we do find evidence consistent with this account. In Poland, for example, 23% of populist voters are older people with authoritarian values,

²³ See Figure SI-8 for a more in-depth analysis of this issue.

²⁴ We replicate the analysis using an alternative measure from the ISSP data, which includes items that tap more directly into the issue of status decline. As we show in Figure SI-17, the findings from the ISSP provide weaker support for the social status account when using this measure.

Figure (3) Share of populist versus non-populist voters whose characteristics match each of the cultural accounts



29

Notes: The figure presents the share of respondents who match the implied characteristics of each of the five cultural stories among populist and non-populist voters, by country. The survey data are weighted and pooled across ESS rounds 6-9. Due to data limitations, the rural resentment measure relies on data pooled from the last three rounds, while the measures of social status anxiety and community disintegration are based on data from round 6. As we show in Figure SI-6, the results are robust to the inclusion of nonvoters.

compared to only 16% of non-populist voters; this may help explain the appeal of the ruling populist Law and Justice party (PiS), which promises to uphold religious and traditional values. Older authoritarians in the Netherlands are also more likely to back the populists (10% vs. 5%, respectively), yet note that voters that match this profile represent a much smaller segment of the electorate. Consistent with this difference, the Dutch populist Party for Freedom expresses a much more liberal stance on issues such as women's rights, abortion and gay marriage than the views espoused by the Polish PiS.²⁵

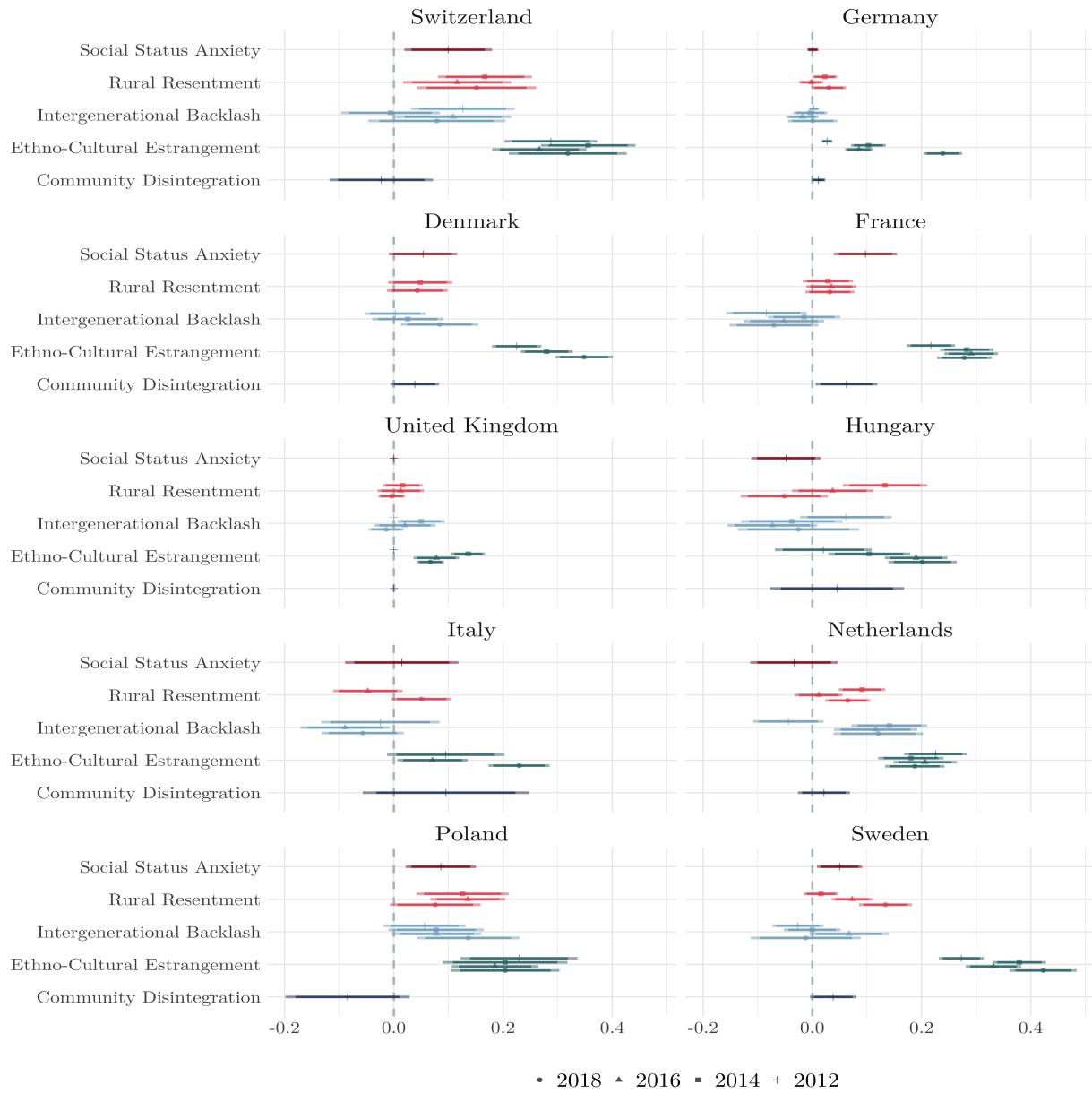
To assess these findings further, we also examine the independent predictive role of each of the five cultural accounts by including all five indicators in the same OLS regression model, where the outcome of interest is whether a respondent voted for a right-wing populist party in the last national election. The results are presented in Figure 4.

The strongest marginal differences, as implied by Figure 4, are associated with ethnocultural estrangement, where respondents who match this concern are between 3 percentage points (Germany, 2012) to 41 points (Sweden, 2018) more likely to vote for populist parties than their counterparts who do not share this sentiment. Notably, the association between ethnocultural estrangement and support for populist parties grew stronger over time in destination countries that admitted large numbers of asylum seekers during the 2015 global refugee crisis such as Germany and Sweden. This was also the case in front-line countries such as Hungary and Italy, through which many asylum seekers entered Europe.

Yet the figure indicates that some of the other explanations also exhibit strong associations with populist support, particularly in countries where the share of populist voters worried about ethnocultural changes does not exceed 30 percent. Controlling for all other factors, we see that in 2012, social status anxiety was associated with a 10 points increase in the likelihood of voting for a populist party in Switzerland and France, and 8 points in

²⁵ As Figure SI-11 shows, the findings are similar when we use alternative measures of older age, including Norris and Inglehart's (2019) original definition.

Figure (4) Cultural Predictors of Voting for Populist Parties, by Country and Year



Notes: The figure reports the results of OLS regressions estimated separately for each country and ESS round. The dependent variable is whether the respondent voted for a populist party in the last election, and the explanatory variables are the measures proxying for each of the five explanations. As the measures of social status anxiety and the community disintegration are based on items asked only in ESS round 6, the figure includes a single coefficient for each of these explanations. Italy and Denmark did not participate in ESS rounds 7 and 8, respectively. Thick bars represent 90% CI; thin bars represent 95% CI. Results remain substantively similar without post-stratification and population weights (see Figure SI-9)

Poland ($p < 0.01$).

Indeed, even in countries where evidence suggests that ethnocultural estrangement is the dominant story, other cultural accounts still seem relevant. For instance, in Italy in 2018, rural resentment was associated with a 5-point increase in the likelihood of voting for a populist party ($p < 0.1$). Although the magnitude of this estimate is modest compared to the coefficient of ethnocultural estrangement, it may still have high “outcome significance,” as even small shifts in the populist vote can be politically consequential (e.g., limit mainstream parties’ ability to form a coalition without including the populist party) (Margalit, 2019).

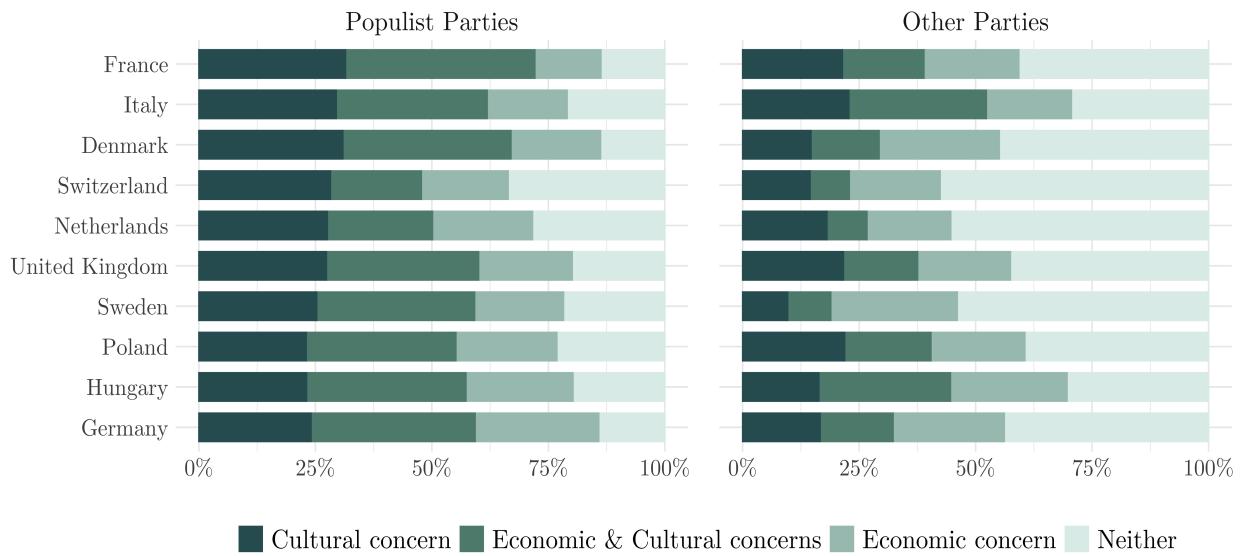
Overall, this analysis indicates that the widespread support for populism is shaped by multiple factors. Populist voters are not a homogeneous, demographically-distinct group, nor do they all share the same concern or source of grievance. Having said that, the evidence does indicate that some cultural storylines have far greater explanatory potential than others. Next, we compare this potential to that of some of the main economic factors put forth in the literature as central to understanding support for populism.

Economic versus Cultural Grievances

The focus of this study is on explanations for the populist vote in which cultural factors play a central role. These explanations are often pitted against alternative accounts that emphasize the role of economic drivers. In some instances, those who emphasize economic factors view discontent surrounding cultural issues as a by-product of adverse economic change: for example, rural resentment may be the result of economic decline in rural regions, antipathy toward immigrants may reflect their perceived impact on native workers’ jobs and wages, and so forth.

In this section, our aim is not to adjudicate between these divergent views. Rather, we seek to assess the extent of overlap between economic and cultural concerns at the individual level. To do so, we first code whether a respondent exhibits any of the characteristics used to

Figure (5) The Overlap between Cultural and Economic Concerns



Notes: The figure divides each country's electorate into two groups: populist voters (left panel) and non-populist voters (right panel). Bars represent, from darker- to lighter-green, the proportion of voters whose characteristics match only cultural concerns, both the cultural and economic concerns, only economic concerns, or neither cultural nor economic concerns.

measure economic insecurity: The respondent (1) earns less than 2/3 of the median income; (2) was unemployed at some point over the past five years and searched for a new job; (3) reports that they find it hard to live on their current income; or (4) is a blue-collar worker in the manufacturing sector. We then classify the respondents by whether they exhibit any of the aforementioned economic and cultural concerns, or a combination of them.

Figure 5 compares the prevalence of these combinations among populist and non-populist voters, separately for each country. The figure gives rise to several findings. First, supporters of populist parties are much more likely to exhibit at least one of these concerns, economic or cultural, than voters of non-populist parties. Second, a considerable share of populist voters are characterized by at least one of the cultural concerns, without feeling economic insecurity. In all countries but Poland, this share is a good deal higher than that observed among non-populist voters. Third, in stark contrast, there are no significant differences in the share of populist and non-populist voters who feel economically insecure and match none

of the cultural accounts. In fact, in the few countries where there is a notable difference (e.g., France, Denmark, and Sweden), we see the opposite pattern, whereby respondents with this profile are more prevalent among *non-populist* voters.²⁶

However, this is not to say that cultural concerns always have a singular influence on support for populist parties. In fact, as the figure makes clear, the most significant difference between populist and non-populist voters is in the share of people who exhibit both sources of concern. Here we find a stark difference, whereby the share of respondents characterized by both economic and cultural concerns is, on average, about twice as high among the populist support base.

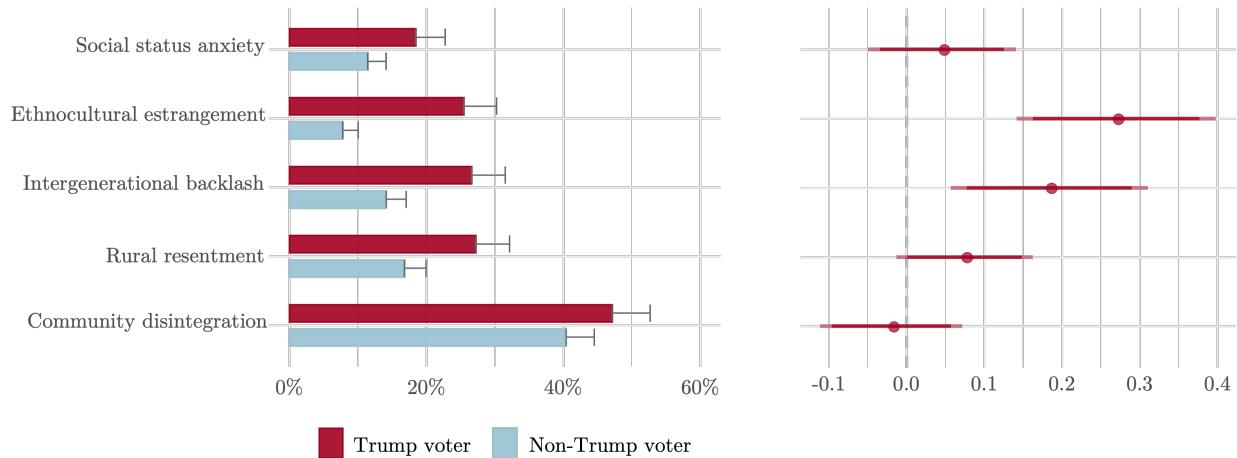
The American Case

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 U.S. presidential election was a major event in the rise of the recent populist wave. His victory drew a great deal of scholarly attention, and a considerable share of research on right-wing populism has been motivated by the American case. Consequently, some of the cultural accounts we have tested using the European sample were developed with the American experience in mind. Yet European countries differ from the U.S. in a number of ways—e.g., the prevalence of immigration, the degree of ethnic diversity, the prominence of religiosity, the share of the population residing in rural areas—that might be consequential for the type of anxieties and concerns that populist voters harbor.

To gauge empirically the relevance of the five storylines in the U.S context, we utilize the 2016 American National Election Study (ANES) to predict the vote for Trump. We selected this specific survey because it provides measures that are sufficiently consistent with the European data on three of the cultural accounts—ethnocultural estrangement, intergener-

²⁶Results are presented in Figure SI-10.

Figure (6) Cultural Grievances and Support for Trump, ANES 2016



Notes: The panel on the left presents the share of Trump and non-Trump voters that match the implied characteristics of each of the five cultural storylines (with 95% confidence intervals). Weighted survey data are taken from the 2016 ANES. The right panel presents results of a linear probability model in which the dependent variable equals 1 for respondents who reported voting for Trump in the 2016 presidential election, and 0 otherwise. Dots with horizontal lines indicate point estimates with 90 and 95% confidence intervals.

ational backlash, and rural resentment.²⁷ With regard to status anxiety and community disintegration, the ANES does not include items that closely mirror those we used in the European context. We therefore code two indicator variables that aim to capture at least some of the logic underlying the two storylines.

The results are very much consistent with our analysis of the European sample. Voting for Trump was most strongly associated with the measure of ethnocultural estrangement: White natives who thought that “America’s culture is generally harmed by immigrants” were more than three times as likely to vote for Trump than respondents who did not share those characteristics (holding constant other variables). Yet, as we found in the analysis of the European countries, while the marginal difference is statistically significant and sizable, it is not the case that ethnocultural estrangement characterizes all, or even a majority, of the voters for populism.

When assessed separately, one can find empirical support for all five accounts, as shown by the panel on the left. Yet, as with most European countries we examined, when all five

²⁷See Appendix D.3 for a detailed description of the measures and the exact wording of questions we use.

measures are considered jointly in a multivariate regression, status anxiety and community disintegration are not associated with populist voting in a statistically significant manner.²⁸

Finally, we find that older people with authoritarian leanings were substantially more likely than others to vote for Trump, in line with the intergenerational backlash theory. Notably, this explanation seems to find much stronger empirical support in the US than we observed in most European countries. It seems fair to conclude then that this explanation has merit, albeit in a narrower context than suggested in the account put forth by Norris and Inglehart (2019).

Conclusion

Scholarly and media accounts often portray voters of right-wing populist parties as driven by discontent and angst, as people who feel ignored, looked down upon, left behind. This assortment of adjectives and labels is particularly prominent in what is often referred to as the “cultural backlash” explanation of populism’s rise. For observers of contemporary politics, elements of this explanation probably ring true, or at least seem plausible. Yet even for those who find merit in this explanation, it is frustratingly “soft” in a number of ways. First, it is all-encompassing, an amalgam of different social processes that are difficult to distill into a clear theoretical argument. Second, as is often the case with arguments centered on cultural factors as a distal cause, they are harder to quantify or subject to a meaningful empirical analysis.

This article sought to make headway in the study of the cultural underpinnings of populism by theoretically distinguishing between five different “storylines” present in the literature, all of which offer potential explanations for the rise of populism. These storylines share a focus on cultural factors as a key driver, but differ in several important respects,

²⁸ As Figures SI-18 and SI-16 show, results remain substantively similar, when we use alternative measures from the WVS and the ISSP.

ranging from the implied characteristics of the core constituency of populist parties, the alleged grievances of their voters, as well as their targets of blame. Importantly for our purposes, these accounts also point toward divergent observable implications that one can investigate empirically. Thus, beyond the study’s theoretical contribution, it also offers a first-cut empirical examination of the five accounts, giving rise to several findings of note.

A key finding is that the storylines differ greatly in terms of their explanatory usefulness. The match between some accounts—particularly the one centered on ethnocultural estrangement and, to a lesser extent, on rural resentment—and the populist electorate, is substantial, and far exceeds the match with other storylines. This pattern is a necessary-but-insufficient condition for an explanation to hold: while it does not “prove” that voters supported populist parties *because* of this source of disaffection, in cases where the match between the storyline’s observable implications and the stock of populist voters is weak, the explanatory usefulness of the account in question is necessarily limited.

Yet even in those countries where the match is widespread and is strongly predictive of support for the populist right party, we find that no single explanation can account by itself for the majority of the party’s electoral support. Rather, our results suggest that its support base typically encompasses diverse segments of the electorate that feel aggrieved by different issues. Put differently, what Donald Trump called the “silent majority,” Nigel Farage “the people’s army,” and Marine Le Pen “the forgotten France” is far from a homogeneous group of disaffected voters.

The scholarly debate regarding the antecedents of populist support is often pitted as a horse race between economic and cultural explanations. Yet as this debate has evolved, studies have increasingly shifted focus to the interaction between economic and cultural drivers. In focusing on five culture-centric explanations of populism, we are not arguing that economic factors are irrelevant in explaining the populist vote, nor are we downplaying the aforementioned interactive relationship. On the contrary. As the storylines we describe

clearly show, economic and cultural factors are deeply enmeshed. Recognizing this interrelation, the key question is therefore the nature of the interaction and the relative importance of the different sources of influence.

For example, in the accounts centered on ethnocultural estrangement and intergenerational backlash, concerns stemming from economic shifts may have played an accelerating role, but are not a deep source of support for populism. Yet in the other storylines, especially in the accounts centered on rural resentment and social status anxiety, economic circumstances play a very integral role, both in the discontent people express and in the historical changes that have brought about their discontentment.

Correctly detecting the role of economic and cultural drivers is of import partly because of the policy implications that different explanations of populism imply. For those who wish to counter the populist rise, there is a great difference if rising economic insecurity is the key driver of the populist surge, or if instead the main cause is a sense that foreigners are overtaking the country. If economic insecurity is the dominant factor, investment in creating a tighter social safety net or in labor retraining programs might be the most effective approach. But if anxiety about immigration and racial diversity is key, a very different set of policies would be warranted, be it investment in integration programs, advancing public information campaigns, or introducing changes in the immigration policy itself.

Our study highlights the need for more accurate measurement of the concerns associated with the five storylines. In assembling the data for our empirical investigation, it became apparent that unlike the many survey items that capture economic concerns, items tapping cultural grievances are far less prevalent in cross-national surveys. Our theoretical framework, and the observable implications we draw from it, should hopefully serve as a springboard for future researchers to compile new, and more nuanced, survey instruments that will better capture the cultural distress and anxieties that underpin contemporary voting behavior.

Finally, as noted, a consistent result across cases is the fact that the populist support base consists of different groupings that match different storylines. This suggests that the populist electorate should be thought of as a coalition of several groupings of voters, characterized by different demographics and sources of disaffection. Future work would do well to explore how these different coalitions are formed, what characteristics or issues tend to “go together”, and tease out the core concerns that allow the the different groups to coalesce into an effective political force. Such work would also help explain the cross-national variation in the offerings of the parties currently spearheading the populist surge.

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