

Housing and Populism

Introduction

In the decade since the financial crisis, housing precarity has been rising across Europe (Feantsa, 2018). Housing instability and inequality have emerged as critical factors shaping contemporary political landscapes. The experiences of housing hardships, including repossessions, foreclosures, and evictions, profoundly impact individuals' lives (Kahlmeter et al., 2017). In the United Kingdom, insecure housing often involves legal proceedings allowing the claimant – mortgage lender or landlord – to repossess their property. Typically, the issuing process involves a county court judge granting an order for outright possession, a suspended order for possession (i.e. a possession order only enforced if the tenant does not comply with suspension terms, usually repayment), or no order for possession. If a tenant does not vacate the property despite a possession order, a warrant may be sought to have bailiffs enforce eviction.

Examining Britain's 2016 referendum on membership to the European Union, this paper investigates the relationship between housing insecurity and populist electoral outcomes. It seeks to address the questions: Does housing insecurity influence the likelihood of a populist electoral outcome? Does the relationship hold nationwide? And what are the regional and contextual factors behind any differences? A positive association is hypothesised, due to the financial, social and psychological burdens insecure housing arrangements present tenants (Byrne and McArdle, 2020) and their local communities (O'Brien, 2012). We posit that these stressors manifest as a protest vote, catalysing support in favour of populist movements.

Literature Review

Whilst there is compelling research into the influence of housing in the formation of populist movements, the field remains severely understudied. Dating back to the 1980s have argued that homeownership predicts support for right-leaning political parties (Studlar et al., 1990; Verberg, 2000) and higher voter turnout (Kingston et al. 1984). Similarly, Andre et al. (2018) find that housing wealth significantly influences party choice in multiparty systems with Ansell (2014) and Ansell et al. (2019) demonstrating a negative relationship between individuals experiencing rising house prices and their support for social insurance.

However, whilst this literature valuably considers the formation of political attitudes through housing it does little to address the increase in populist support as it is largely restricted to questions of the 'first dimension' of political outcomes. In the first dimension, housing may predict economic and material attitudes, which in turn structures voting along the economic left-right spectrum. Populism doesn't offer distinct policy and resists first-dimensional classification, with recent work emphasising populism as a 'logic' (Laclau, 1977), relying on two common rhetorical strategies: anger and nostalgia (Gest, 2016; Gest et al., 2017; Mudde, 2004).

Alternatively, urban political economy explores housing's role in capital accumulation and perpetual capitalist-induced inequalities (Aalbers and Christophers, 2014). Research considers housing's increased financialisation (Aalbers, 2017) and the neoliberal state enabling the transformation of housing into an investment commodity (Gotham, 2009; Montgomery and Büdenbender, 2014). Transformations in housing have had socio-spatial impacts hardening geographical borders between locations that benefit

from rising property values and accumulated wealth (Etherington and Jones, 2009), and locations that are excluded from housing wealth gains and experience deeper housing busts (Gordon, 2018).

Hirschman and Rothschild (1973) introduce the ‘tunnel vision’ model wherein relative inequality and feeling of being ‘left-behind’. This mechanism is asserted through Tubadji et al.’s (2020) ‘CultureBased Development’ model suggesting the 2016 Brexit outcome was driven by protest voting due to perceived relative deprivation. Similarly, Rodríguez-Pose (2018) demonstrates this association between relative regional deprivation and local radicalisation across different countries, with McCann (2019) and Dijkstra et al. (2019) demonstrating this association in the UK and Europe. This perspective is closely linked with literature that explores voting and discontent more deeply, starting with Collier’s (1963) and Bernstein and Crosby’s (1980) notion of mutiny, continuing into more recent work by Bénabou (1996), Rodríguez (1998), Barrow (2003) and Stiglitz (2021), and evidenced by Los et al. (2017), McCann (2018) and Billing et al. (2020).

In this context, Waldron (2021) emphasises housing as a key factor in populist appeal, proposing ‘housing discontent’ as an approach to capture how housing precarity and inequalities influence not only sociopolitical attitudes but socio-spatial dynamics generating cultural ecosystems in which a single dominant world view may become dominant (Cramer, 2016). This can be seen through Barcelona en Comu in Spain, which arose out of the city’s eviction protest movement (Gessen, 2018). Empirical analysis by Adler and Ansell (2019) highlights how housing discontent was a factor in the outcomes of the 2016 Brexit referendum and France’s 2017 presidential election.

Whilst research on housing discontent as a factor in populist politics remains useful it has yet to examine housing precarity through individuals who have experienced or are at risk of involuntary housing loss. Quarterly National Statistics on possession claim actions by mortgage lenders and landlords offer a novel approach to understanding the relationship between housing instability and populist electoral outcomes. Serious housing problems lead to a voter’s negative lived experience (Kahlmeter et al., 2018) and breed political cynicism (Robinson, 2013). Leveraging QNS data provides a robust empirical foundation allowing research to quantify a voter’s housing insecurity and its impact on electoral outcomes, whilst allowing essential localised analysis facilitating an understanding of the nuances of the relationship.

Methodology:

This research builds upon existing literature investigating the relationship between housing and populist electoral outcomes, by focusing on the impact of housing precarity on the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom. The methodology builds upon prior research by introducing new data sources and employing advanced statistical techniques.

To address the research questions, we begin with the percentage of Leave voters at the local authority level. LADs are sizeable administrative units averaging around 100,000 people in terms of their electorate for the EU referendum. LADs as a unit of analysis provides a comprehensive voting record on Brexit across as well as the number possession actions taken across England and Wales – Scotland and Northern Ireland are omitted due to a lack of possession data. The choice of possession actions as a proxy for housing precarity provides a novel and granular measure, capturing the experiences of individuals at risk of involuntary housing loss. This data, provided by the Ministry of Justice, is used to create a variable that

measures the percentage change in the number of possession actions taken in the LAD between 2008 and 2015.

Two models are then employed. The first model examines the impact of the percentage change in possession actions on the likelihood of voting Leave, using a simple linear regression. The second model extends the analysis by incorporating additional variables drawn from the 2011 Census, such as the size of the LAD (measured by the number of households), the proportion of households owned outright, the unemployment rate, and the percentage of residents born outside the UK. Both models aim to identify the key factors influencing the relationship between housing insecurity and populist electoral outcomes.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable/Statistic	Mean	P50	SD	IQR	Min	Max	N
Percentage Leave Voters	54.45965	55.31	9.788398	10.485	21.38	75.56	347
Possession Actions Percentage Change	96.86478	92.31102	57.00472	69.4771	-15.4701	293.1217	347
Households	67334.45	53426	44290.67	42922	4385	410736	347
Proportion of Households Owned Outright	0.327301	0.334431	0.07121	0.086917	0.084541	0.479635	347
Unemployment Rate	0.067353	0.062201	0.027185	0.036125	0.000524	0.161937	347
Percentage of Residents Born Outside the UK	10.48617	7.1	9.945376	6.95	2	53.1	347

Summary statistics in Table 1 provide a snapshot into the variables within each LAD. For instance, the mean percentage of leave voters is 54.46%, with a standard deviation of 9.79% and the mean percentage change of possession actions is 96.86% with a standard deviation of 57%. This highlights the substantial variation across different localities. Other variables, such as households, the proportion of households owned outright, unemployment rates, and non-UK-born residents, also exhibit significant variability, providing a rich dataset for analysis at the local level.

Results:

The regression models, presented in Table 2, unveil a compelling relationship between possession actions' percentage change and the percentage of leave voters. In both Model 1 and Model 2, possession actions exhibit a positive and statistically significant effect on the likelihood of supporting the leave campaign.

Specifically, in Model 1, for each percentage point increase in the percentage change of possession actions, there is an associated 6.5% increase in the percentage of leave voters.

Table 2: Possession Actions Percentage Change Impact on Brexit Leave Voters

	(1)	(2)
(Intercept)	48.135735*** (0.960655)	49.41665719408*** (3.686099)
Possession Actions Percentage Change	6.528605*** (0.855041)	1.4598447173** (0.741045)
Households		-0.000035*** (0.000009)
Proportion of Households Owned Outright		5.235139 (7.994632)
Unemployment Rate		150.49947353736*** (15.057270)
Percentage of Residents Born Outside the UK		-0.55781778919*** (0.055787)
N	347	347
R Square	0.144557	0.52684

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$

Model 2, incorporating additional control variables, demonstrates the robustness of the relationship whilst offering a more nuanced understanding of the local dynamics. The proportion of households owned outright, an indicator of housing stability, exhibits a positive coefficient but is not statistically significant. This implies that outright homeownership alone might not be a decisive factor in influencing local support for populist movements. In contrast, the unemployment rate emerges as a strong predictor of local populist sentiment. A one-unit increase in the unemployment rate corresponds to a substantial increase in the percentage of leave voters. This underscores the socio-economic dimension of populist support, where economic uncertainties at the local level contribute significantly to the political landscape (Tubadji et al., 2020). Furthermore, the percentage of residents born outside the UK exhibits a negative and statistically significant coefficient. This suggests that areas with higher proportions of foreign-born residents tend to lean towards remaining in the EU. The interplay between immigration patterns and political attitudes provides insight into the complexity of local dynamics shaping the Brexit outcome.

The second model's enhanced explanatory power, with an R-squared of 52.68%, emphasises the importance of considering local socio-economic factors when assessing the impact of housing insecurity on populist outcomes. The variables included in the model collectively explain more than half of the variability in the percentage of leave voters at the district level.

Comparing these findings with existing literature, the study contributes to the understanding of the "second dimension" of politics, and whether housing insecurity plays a crucial role in shaping political attitudes. The analysis extends beyond traditional economic left-right spectra and delves into the unique dynamics of populist movements, characterised by anger and nostalgia. The results align with Waldron's (2021) emphasis on housing discontent as a key

factor in populist appeal, highlighting the socio-spatial dynamics that influence cultural ecosystems. The results add to Adler and Ansell's (2019) empirical analysis on house prices and the outcomes of the 2016 Brexit referendum and France's 2017 presidential election by introducing a novel data source that effectively quantifies a voter's housing insecurity.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this study employs a comprehensive methodology to investigate the relationship between housing insecurity and populist electoral outcomes at the Local Authority District (LAD) level in England and Wales, providing empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis that housing insecurity significantly influences the likelihood of a populist electoral outcome, as evidenced by the case of the 2016 Brexit referendum.

By combining established methodologies with new data sources and advanced statistical techniques, this research offers a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing populist outcomes within distinct localities, contributing to the limited literature on the intersection of housing and populism. The findings emphasise the importance of considering housing-related variables when analysing political shifts and the need for nuanced policy responses to address housing instability and its potential consequences. Ultimately, this study advances our understanding of the complex relationship between housing, socio-spatial dynamics, and populist movements, offering valuable insights for policymakers and researchers alike.

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