

Economic Insecurity and the Causes of Populism, Reconsidered

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The rise of populist forces in many established democracies is undoubtedly one of the most notable political developments in recent years. Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election of November 2016 and the Brexit vote in June 2016 have perhaps received the most attention, but the populist phenomenon stretches across a wide range of countries and contexts. Examples include political advances by far-right parties in western and northern Europe, such as France and Sweden; ethno-nationalist parties in eastern and central Europe, like Poland and Hungary; and far-left movements in southern Europe, including Greece and Spain. The widespread and apparently growing appeal of populism has spawned intense debate over both its causes and its consequences.

"Populism" has no single definition (for discussion of different definitions, see Mudde 2004; Gidron and Bonikowski 2013). One difficulty in defining the term is that adherents of populism—unlike other "isms" such as communism or socialism—rarely describe themselves as such (Canovan 1981). But a common theme is that populism is characterized first and foremost by its claim to represent the will of the people versus some "other," commonly represented as a corrupt and self-serving elite. Many of the accounts put forward to explain the rise of populism have centered on its economic antecedents. While different causal factors are cited, they generally share a similar story line: a certain development, such as globalization, technological progress, or the financial crisis, has transformed labor markets and generated widespread dislocation and economic insecurity. Such changes, this argument holds, have eroded voters' trust in the political system and led the losers to opt for populist

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parties that represent a break from the status quo and offer seemingly appealing solutions to voters' economic malaise—be it trade protectionism, building a border wall, or exiting the European Union.

Versions of this economics-based explanation for populism have gained substantial traction among scholars and pundits, including many economists. As one example, Rodrik (2018) argues that “advanced stages of globalization are prone to a populist backlash,” which he describes as “perfectly predictable” by economic history and economic theory. By Rodrik’s account, the different variants of populism that we observe across countries are a function of the differences in the globalization-related shocks that those countries experienced. In a similar spirit, Roubini (2016) attributes the Brexit vote to a “populist/nationalist backlash” from a list of causes including “globalization, free trade, offshoring, labor migration, market-oriented policies, supra-national authorities, and even technological change.” He further attributes President Trump’s victory to his appeal as the “hero of angry workers threatened by trade, migration and technological change.” Guiso et al. (2017) analyze the role of economic insecurity in explaining support for populist parties and conclude that “the key reason for the unprecedented wave of populism on both sides of the Atlantic is economic.”

I will argue that these accounts overstate the role of economic insecurity in explaining the populist vote. My focus is on populism in Europe and the United States, though the argument may extend to other regions as well. The next section begins with a brief summary of the key economic explanations of the populist vote. In the subsequent three sections, I expand on three shortcomings of this line of explanation.

First, I contend that the empirical evidence put forth to date does not establish that populism is predominantly an outcome of a rise in economic insecurity. Specifically, my contention is that the discussion regarding the role of economic insecurity in explaining the populist vote conflates what I define as “outcome significance” and “explanatory significance.” As an example, consider the Brexit vote, which was decided by a margin of less than 4 percentage points. Economic insecurity and displacement caused by globalization may well have shifted the vote by a few points, enough to tip the referendum in favor of the “Leave” camp. The outcome significance was therefore high. However, the overall phenomenon to be explained is why 52 percent of the electorate voted to leave the European Union. Examination of the empirical evidence on the vote for populists in an array of countries reveals a similar pattern: economic insecurity affects the electoral outcome on the margin, sometimes in a highly consequential manner, but the overall explanatory significance for the level of support for populists is modest.

Second, I assess whether and how immigration—arguably the most salient issue for many populist parties—and its economic impact explain populist support. While immigration itself is often motivated by an economic rationale, studies using recent innovations in survey experimental research indicate that voters’ concerns about immigration have little to do with economic insecurity or immigration’s (real or perceived) impact on their economic standing. Thus, while immigration is often

a major concern of populist voters, treating immigration as an economic driver of populism seems misguided.

Finally, I discuss the role of cultural issues in fueling populism. Analyses that focus on the economic sources of populism tend to treat voters' cultural grievances and concerns largely as a by-product of economic ones. This approach underplays the important independent role of cultural issues in driving support for populists. It also ignores the reverse causal process: namely, that grievances about the economic changes presumed to fuel populism (such as globalization, immigration, and EU market integration) are driven in part by cultural and social implications of those changes, a pattern evident in much of the recent work on communities with high rates of support for populism. Thus, in seeking to explain the growing populist vote, greater attention should be paid to people's subjective assessments of economic change and the noneconomic influences underlying those assessments.

Economic Change and Populism

In what ways might populism be driven by economic change and resulting insecurities? This section briefly describes four of the arguments that have been proposed, related to increased import competition, technological change, financial crisis, and immigration. In the following sections, I will discuss several limitations of these arguments and why they should be assessed more critically.

One prominent account holds that the rise in imports from mid- and low-wage countries has hurt domestic workers employed in import-competing industries, mostly in manufacturing. In particular, the massive surge of imported goods from China following its accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001—henceforth the “China shock”—had major adverse effects on US industries with higher exposure to Chinese competition (Acemoglu et al. 2016). Local US labor markets with a high share of trade-exposed industries suffered from high rates of job loss, decreases in labor market participation, and an enduring rise in unemployment (Autor, Dorn, and Hanson 2013). This argument holds that these negative and persistent effects have had political repercussions by increasing support for a wide array of populist candidates, parties, and causes in both the United States and Europe (for example, Autor et al. 2017; Dippel et al. 2017; Colantone and Stanig 2018a, b).

A second and related argument holds that the populist vote is a response to a combination of technological advances and deindustrialization. Technology has contributed to a shift from manufacturing to service sector jobs, and has accentuated the gaps between low- and high-skilled occupations. Furthermore, automation has made a range of routine skills redundant and contributed to the decline in demand for middling-skilled occupations (Autor, Katz, and Kearney 2006; Goos, Manning, and Salomons 2014). In some cases, these changes were followed by growing geographic disparities in economic activity and depopulation of rural areas. These shifts proved fertile ground for populist forces (Tomlinson 2017; Frey, Berger, and Chen 2018).

A third claim is that financial crises and how governments respond to them can foster populism. In particular, a common recent claim is that the Great Recession led to widespread disillusionment with mainstream parties that were seen as responsible for the crisis and its aftermath (Algan et al. 2017). More generally, crises tend to make tensions between debtors and creditors salient, and to give rise to a popular sentiment that the “little man” is made to pay for the mistakes and corruption of the economic and political leadership (Mian, Sufi, and Trebbi 2014). This argument holds that populist parties seizing on this sense of disillusionment capture the voice of the discontented by promising a sharp break from the dominance of the old elites.

Finally, the economic repercussions of immigration are cited as offering an explanation of rising populism. This argument holds that competition posed by foreign workers, at least in certain sectors and labor market segments, has threatened jobs and wages of native workers. Furthermore, immigration’s fiscal costs and the strain these have added to already limited public services increased concerns about its impact on the welfare state. Such concerns have contributed to the appeal of right-wing populist parties, particularly in areas with high settlement rates of immigrants (Halla, Wagner, and Zweimüller 2017; Dustmann, Vasiljeva, and Damm 2018; Edo et al. 2019).

These four accounts of the populist vote are all individually plausible. Nonetheless, they also raise difficult issues, in terms of both theory and empirics. Do those adverse economic changes always bring about a populist response, and if not, on what other factors does the response depend? How substantial is the contribution of those economic changes to the populist vote? Are they deep causes of populism or merely triggers that activate other sources of grievance? When one digs into such issues, the strength of these accounts comes into question.

Levels and Changes in Explanations of Populism

Consider a case in which a certain factor contributes a couple of percentage points to one candidate’s vote share, thus handing the candidate an electoral victory in a tight election that otherwise would have been lost. The *outcome significance* of that factor—transforming loss to victory—is of course major. Yet if the candidate received over half the vote, the swing of 2 percentage points hardly amounts to “explaining” the phenomenon of the overall electoral backing for that candidate. Put differently, the *explanatory significance* of that factor is low.

However, discussion of populist success often conflates outcome and explanatory significance. For example, a common explanation for President Trump’s electoral victory in 2016 described how he appealed to globalization’s losers, thereby cracking the Democrats’ so-called “blue wall” in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Analysis by Autor et al. (2017) gives credence to this argument in terms of outcome significance by finding that the adverse effects of the China shock accounted for a vote share sizable enough to flip several states in favor of

Trump. Their estimates indicate that if the import shock had been half of what it was, the margin in favor of the Republicans in Pennsylvania would have shrunk by 1.7 percentage points, and the Democrats would have won the state by 0.5 percent. Likewise, the simulation indicates that the electoral impact would also have been sizable enough in Wisconsin and Michigan (2.2 and 1.8 points, respectively) to overturn the Electoral College results. It may therefore be correct that, without the impact of the massive trade shock, Trump would have lost.

But this outcome significance, based on a magnitude of several percentage points at best, should not hide the fact that the overwhelming majority of Americans voted in 2016 for the same party they had in 2012. After all, among voters who voted for one of the two major parties in both elections, 92 percent of those who voted for Barack Obama also voted for Hillary Clinton (according to a GfK survey described in Mutz 2018). Put differently, the effect of the trade shock had outcome significance and is therefore germane to any serious analysis of the 2016 elections. But if one's key interest is in explaining why people voted for Trump, the explanatory significance of the trade shock is peripheral. Instead, the overriding answer is long-standing partisan affiliation and the fact that Trump was the Republican nominee. (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002 provides a useful summary of the evidence regarding the extent to which party identification forms early in people's lives and remains stable over time, largely resilient to temporary events.)

To illustrate how the distinction between outcome and explanatory significance applies to the discussion about the causes of populist support, it is useful to examine the estimated electoral effects of the aforementioned economic drivers across a broader set of cases. I make no attempt to provide an exhaustive review of the literature and instead focus here primarily on studies that examine the electoral impact of trade openness, given the outsized attention that the role of globalization has received in the discussion of populism. The next section focuses on economic and noneconomic connections between immigration and populism.

Most analyses examining the electoral impact of trade have utilized the empirical strategy pioneered by Autor, Dorn, and Hanson (2013). To identify the causal effect of the China shock, they exploit variation across industries and commuting zones in the level of local exposure to Chinese import competition, and they use data on Chinese exports to other high-income markets to construct an instrumental variable for exogenous changes in local import penetration.

Colantone and Stanig (2018a) apply this empirical strategy to the study of the effect of trade exposure on the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom. They find that a standard deviation increase in the strength of the import shock at the regional level led to an increase of 2 percentage points in support of the Leave option. Comparing regions at two extremes of the distribution in terms of exposure to the trade shock (tenth and ninetieth percentiles), they find that the predicted effect would be a 4.5 percentage point difference in support of the Leave option. Given that the referendum was decided by a 3.8 percentage point margin, these results imply that the impact of trade exposure was a nontrivial factor in the Leave campaign's victory—perhaps even a factor that tipped the balance toward Leave. Nonetheless, in

accounting for the overall 52 percent who voted Leave, the explanatory significance of this account is clearly limited. This fact, however, often gets lost in the popular discussion: for example, consider the *Washington Post's* headline for an op-ed by the authors discussing these findings: “The Real Reason the U.K. Voted for Brexit? Jobs Lost to Chinese Competition” (Colantone and Stanig 2016).

Studies examining the effect of trade shocks in other countries report comparable effects. In France, an increase of one standard deviation in exposure to imports over the period 1995–2012 was associated with an effect that accounts for 7 percent of a standard deviation of the change in the vote share of the populist National Front party, or just under 3 percent of the party's overall vote share (Malgouyres 2017).¹ In Germany, a one standard deviation increase in a county's net import exposure to China and Eastern Europe saw its vote share for the extreme right grow by 0.12 percentage points (Dippel et al. 2017). This represents about 28 percent of the average per decade change in far-right voting in the period between 1987 and 2009. In a broader study analyzing variation in trade exposure across 198 regions of Europe, Colantone and Stanig (2018b) find that, *ceteris paribus*, voters in a region in Europe that lies at the seventy-fifth percentile of exposure to the China shock were 0.7 percentage points more likely to vote for a radical-right party than their counterparts in a region that was at the twenty-fifth percentile of exposure. Considering the baseline rate of support, this amounted to roughly a 15 percent increase in the probability of voting for the radical right.

Algan et al. (2017) analyze the impact of the Great Recession, particularly the rise in unemployment, on voting in Europe. They find that increases in unemployment (but not levels of unemployment) had a sizable effect on the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, whereby a one standard deviation (1 percentage point) increase in the unemployment rate led to a 4.3 percentage point increase in support for the Leave option. In national elections, the estimated effect on support for populist parties was smaller, about one-quarter of the magnitude, but still notable.

To obtain an estimate of the effect of economic insecurity on the populist vote, most of these studies are regressing differences on differences, where the chief explanatory variable is the contemporaneous change in exposure to the economic shock at the geographic unit (or rather, an instrumental variable of that exposure). The model specification also includes controls for start-of-period economic and demographic characteristics of the region. This strategy has implications for the interpretation of these findings.

First, this strategy allows one to estimate the impact of changes in an economic condition (such as trade) on the change in support for populist candidates. But these estimates do not tell us how the level of economic insecurity (as might be induced by trade) affects the level of support for populist candidates. For example, in observing how the China shock affected support for a certain populist candidate,

¹The bulk of the effect is concentrated in the years 2007 to 2012—that is, after the eruption of the financial crisis. Then the effect rises to 14.1 percent of a standard deviation, or 4.6 percent of the overall vote share for the National Front party.

we cannot say what share of the total vote for that candidate is caused by the impact of the overall level of trade on economic insecurity. (One can try to use the estimates from the effect of the trade shock on voting to extrapolate about the electoral effect of trade levels overall, but this requires making several strong assumptions. This perhaps explains why none of the studies described above attempted such a calculation.) The implication is that the estimates reported above may not be capturing the full effect of the economic cause in question. However, to change our conclusion about the limited explanatory significance of economic insecurity, the unmeasured effects need to be almost an order of magnitude larger than the effects reported in the aforementioned studies.

A second issue stems from the fact that the difference-in-differences strategy removes from the analysis all the important and stable differences across regions in levels of populist support. Yet these differences among regions represent the main variation in voting patterns (for example, states such as Oklahoma and Wyoming voted for Trump by about 30 points more than states such as California and Massachusetts, a gap observed also in the 2012 elections in the rate of support for the Republican candidate). While economic insecurity may explain some within-region variation in the temporal change in support for populism, it does a poor job in explaining the between-region variation in the level of populist votes. Since the variation between is much greater than the variation within, it seems problematic to argue that economic insecurity is central to understanding populism.

Analyses of individual-level data provide a similar picture: economic insecurity is positively associated with greater likelihood of support for the populists, but the magnitudes of the effects are limited. For example, Guiso et al. (2017) analyze survey data from 24 countries between 2002 and 2014 and measure economic insecurity using principal component analysis based on three items: unemployment in the past five years, reports of respondents claiming that they struggle to make ends meet, and employment in low-tech manufacturing. They find that a standard deviation in the insecurity measure is associated with a 0.3 percentage point increase in the likelihood of voting for a populist party, which represents 4.3 percent of the share of the overall populist vote (and rises to 7.4 percent when accounting for indirect effects of insecurity on political trust and fear of immigrants). The analysis finds that economic insecurity further enhances the populist vote share because economic insecurity causes people to abstain from voting at a higher rate, a pattern stronger among supporters of mainstream parties. This differential effect increases the overall impact of economic insecurity on the populist parties' vote share by an average of 6.6 percent.

Taken together, the effects of the economic factors studied above are pertinent for understanding populist success. In some cases, they may even have been decisive for the eventual electoral outcome. Moreover, one can readily imagine situations where the significance to the outcome refers to more than a marginal effect being decisive in an election. For example, it may refer to helping a populist candidate qualify for the second round of elections, as in the case of the National Front's Marine Le Pen in the 2017 election in France. It may also refer to when it becomes

politically impractical to form a governing coalition without a populist party, as in the case of the populist Five Star Movement in Italy in 2018. Or the outcome significance may refer to when a governing party is forced to make important policy concessions to populist demands: for example, the success of Germany's AfD (Alternative for Germany) in driving Chancellor Merkel to reverse her previous policy and instead to support a ban on wearing burqas in 2017. Nonetheless, even if we assume that some of the estimates are conservative, or that some of the economic causes described above had an additive effect, it seems fair to say that the explanatory significance of economic insecurity for the rise of populism is modest.

To be clear, most complex social phenomena are not caused by one factor alone. Widespread support for populism is no different in that respect. In addition to the economic factors discussed above, there are a host of other contributing factors—for example, anxiety about immigration and demographic shifts, disaffection with progressive cultural change, or opposition to EU integration—that underlie the appeal of populism. Thus, highlighting the limited explanatory significance of economic insecurity is not to dismiss its role as unimportant. Rather, it is to caution against the conventional wisdom forming around the idea that populism is inherently an outcome of growing economic insecurity.

Immigration as an Economic or Noneconomic Explanation of Populism

Immigration is often the signature issue of populist parties. Understanding its role in shaping public opinion is therefore key to the discussion of populism's mass appeal. While few would argue that immigration itself is often driven by an economic rationale, it is an open question whether the economic effects of immigration—real or perceived—are a major cause of populism. As noted, one possibility is that the appeal of populism stems from immigration's impact on native workers, by threatening their jobs or eroding their wages. The overall effects of immigration on the native population are still debated (for discussion, see Borjas 2003; Card 2009; Ottaviano and Peri 2012), but the key here is the perception by native citizens that immigrants pose an economic threat. Indeed, for quite some time, the finding that opposition to immigration is strongly and negatively correlated with education has been interpreted as evidence that low-skilled natives are concerned about labor market competition from immigrants (Scheve and Slaughter 2001; Mayda 2006).

Yet others have pointed to the correlation between education and immigration attitudes and posited that a sense of cultural threat is at the core of opposition to immigration, contending that lower levels of education also reflect higher levels of ethnocentrism and lower tolerance for outgroup members (Citrin et al. 1997; Kinder and Kam 2010). By this interpretation, opposition to immigration represents a broader concern many natives have about declining cultural homogeneity, which in most Western countries has traditionally meant the dominance of a white, Christian population.

Teasing out which of the factors underlie people's attitudes or cause them to vote the way they do is a notoriously tricky business. Simply asking voters to explain their vote choice is problematic, both because voters are often unaware of the factors influencing their decision and because they sometimes struggle to admit—either to themselves or to the interviewer—why they voted as they did. However, researchers have employed some innovative methods to get around this issue and draw stronger inferences. Much of the evidence comes from survey experiments, an increasingly popular method among social scientists. This method entails embedding into a survey different treatments with variation in the explanatory variable. In the most frequent setup, a sample of respondents is randomly divided into treatment and control groups that differ solely in the information they receive prior to being asked the same survey question. For example, respondents all read the same text about a struggling plant facing closure and 1,000 resulting layoffs, but each treatment group is given a different reason for the closure—international outsourcing, automation, or poor management—while the control group is not told of a reason. All respondents are then asked whether they support government intervention to stave off the plant closure.² With the experimenter able to control the random assignment of respondents into the different conditions, differences observed in the mean responses provided to the survey question can be directly tied to the differences in the information provided and have a causal interpretation.

Examples of treatments in a survey experiment may include asking a question in different versions that include or exclude a pertinent detail; asking the same conceptual question using different frames; or, in the case of internet surveys, presenting different images as part of the stimuli. Technological advances, initially in computer-assisted telephone interviewing and later with software for administering online surveys, have made it possible to administer such experiments with relative ease on very large, diverse, and geographically dispersed pools of respondents, while using complex designs and numerous conditions. Mutz (2011) provides an extensive treatment of these methods.

In the case of immigration, as with other sensitive issues, survey experiments can help alleviate problems of what is known as “social desirability bias.” For example, people might worry that expressing negative attitudes on immigration would be seen as racially intolerant and thus may systematically underreport their opposition to it. People may also view economics-based arguments against immigration as more socially acceptable than ones couched in cultural terms and thus may overreport the former as the justification for their stance. Survey experiments help address such issues. Let me briefly describe several examples.

To address the first concern of people not revealing their real attitudes on immigration, one survey experimental method is a list experiment. In a study using this method, Janus (2010) randomly divided a national sample of US non-Hispanic whites into two groups and asked them to read a list of several statements. After

²This example is a simplified version of an experiment administered by Di Tella and Rodrik (2019).

reading the list, respondents in both groups were asked to report the *total number* of statements they “oppose or are against,” without having to report their view on each specific statement. For the control group, the list included three statements on issues on which concerns with social desirability are unlikely to be a problem, such as whether or not they oppose “Professional athletes making millions of dollars per year.” For the treatment group, the list contained the same three nonsensitive statements, but with an addition of a fourth statement: “Cutting off immigration to the United States.” In this experiment, the difference in the mean number of statements reported by participants in the control group (1.77) and the mean number reported by participants in the treatment group (2.16) is attributable only to the additional sensitive item and to sampling error. Thus, subtracting the means and multiplying by 100 provides an estimate of the percentage of respondents opposed to the sensitive item.

In the experiment conducted above, 61 percent of respondents were not opposed to cutting off immigration into the United States. But when a different sample was asked the same question openly, the corresponding rate was 42 percent. This gap of 19 percentage points indicates that opposition to immigration among non-Hispanic whites is in fact far greater than polls using direct questioning reveal. The high (unreported) degree of opposition to immigration helps explain why populists in most Western countries focus on this issue with such tenacity.

As another example, consider the claim that native-born populations that oppose immigration are concerned about foreigners competing with them for jobs. A chief prediction of a model that assumes high substitutability between native and immigrant workers is that an influx of low-skilled immigrants will lower the wages or employment of low-skilled natives, while raising the wages of high-skilled natives (and the opposite effect in the case of an influx of high-skilled immigrants). The finding noted above that associates lower-educated natives with support for restrictive immigration policies is therefore consistent with the model’s predictions. But rather than assume that respondents to questions about restricting immigration in general had low-skilled immigrants in mind, survey experiments allow researchers to prompt respondents with randomized scenarios that vary the characteristics of the immigrants in question. These experiments show that natives are not more likely to oppose immigrants with skills similar to their own. Moreover, individuals with higher levels of education consistently exhibit greater support for immigration of both high- and low-skilled individuals, a result that is inconsistent with key predictions of the model. These findings have been replicated in a wide range of countries (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Valentino et al. 2017).

Furthermore, my collaborators and I find that workers employed in very different segments of the labor market, such as meat-packing, education, and finance—differing in terms of skill specificity, penetration by foreign labor, and value added per worker—share remarkably similar preferences in terms of the skill profile of the immigrants they are willing (or not) to accept (Hainmueller, Hiscox, and Margalit 2015). This finding does not sit well with a prediction that natives will be more opposed to immigrants with skill levels similar their own, or indeed with

any model that predicts that different segments of native workers will have different preferences regarding the desired type of immigrants.

The experimental studies indicate that when economic considerations do enter people's thinking about immigration, it is almost entirely in terms of its impact on broader society, not on one's pocketbook. Conjoint experiments, in which subjects are asked to evaluate hypothetical options with multiple, randomly varied attributes, can allow researchers to measure the relative importance assigned to different determinants in a multidimensional decision. For example, participants in the experiment are shown two profiles of candidates for immigration who differ in attributes such as their education, age, professional experience, and country of origin. The participants are then asked to evaluate the two immigrants and rate which, if any, they would support admitting into the country. By randomly assigning different characteristics to each immigrant profile, and by presenting respondents with multiple candidates to evaluate, researchers can then estimate how each feature influenced the respondents' evaluations (as well as potential interaction effects).

Results from such studies show that characteristics that speak to a candidate's earning potential and ability to integrate economically are influential considerations. Yet notably, these candidate evaluations hardly vary across respondents, irrespective of the respondent's own skill set or position in the labor market. Furthermore, the experiments reveal the importance of culture-related characteristics: holding constant a wide set of individual-level characteristics, immigrants' country of origin, and religion (particularly whether they are Muslim or not), as well as indicators of assimilation, also tends to have a large impact on native citizens' evaluations (Wright, Levy, and Citrin 2016; Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2016).

One obvious concern with survey experiments is whether they are also indicative of respondents' real-life choices and behavior. In one conjoint experiment, researchers were actually able to assess the external validity of the findings in a fairly direct manner. Between 1970 and 2003, over 40 municipalities in Switzerland used referendums to decide on naturalization requests of immigrants. Before casting a ballot, native citizens received a printed leaflet with information about each candidate, which they then voted on. Applicants with a majority of "yes" votes were granted citizenship. Researchers were thus able to observe the exact information available to participants in the referendum when casting their ballots. Comparing the estimates of votes cast in the real referenda with an experimental paired-conjoint design indicates that on average, the estimates of the experimental method were very close (within 2 percentage points) to the behavioral benchmark (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015). This finding suggests that for some questions, well-designed survey experiments can offer meaningful insight into real-world behavior.

Research has also looked into the claim that concerns over immigration's impact on public finance explain public attitudes on the issue, with mixed results. Observational studies using survey data from the 1990s from the United States and 17 other high-income countries find evidence to support this claim (Hanson, Scheve, and Slaughter 2007; Facchini and Mayda 2009). However, studies using data from the past two decades—both observational and experimental—do not find evidence that

individuals who shoulder a larger share of the costs of immigration are more likely to oppose it (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Tingley 2012).

In contrast, experimental studies indicate that anxiety over changing demographics and a declining predominance of white people underlies part of natives' opposition to immigration. For example, a survey experiment in the United Kingdom varied the information it provided to participants about the skill mix of immigrants coming into the country, their region of origin, and the impact of immigration numbers on the long-term share of white Britons. The study finds that even when controlling for the information about skill mix and region of origin, the very mention of the immigrants' impact on the share of white Britons almost halves support for current immigration levels (reducing it by 17–22 percentage points to about 20 percent of the public) (Kaufmann 2018). Experiments conducted in the United States find a similar effect, in which prompting (or reminding) white Americans about the impending racial shift and future loss of their majority status magnifies their racial bias, particularly toward Hispanics, and increases support for restrictive immigration policies (Craig and Richeson 2014; Major, Blodorn, and Blascovich 2018).

It is worth noting that nonexperimental studies, with the well-known limitations of analyzing observational data, also consistently find that cultural factors are far stronger predictors of attitudes on immigration. For example, Card, Dustmann, and Preston (2012) analyze cross-national European survey data and estimate the relative importance respondents attach to economic concern over future wages and taxes, as opposed to “compositional” concerns about the impact of immigration on local culture and social life. Their conclusion is that compositional concerns are two to five times more important than economic concerns. Even in cases where economic factors were found to be statistically significant predictors of attitudes on immigration, the magnitude of the effects was a good deal smaller than the effects associated with cultural concerns and prejudices (Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior 2004; Malhotra, Margalit, and Mo 2013).

Populist parties are often known for their vociferous opposition to immigration, and much of their appeal to voters is attributed to this stance. The research suggests that in Western countries, anti-immigration sentiments among natives center to a large degree on the social and cultural aspects. Where economic concerns do come into play, they rarely have to do with people's personal economic interests and mostly concern the way immigration affects society as a whole. Thus, while immigration is a salient concern for populist voters, economic insecurity directly related to immigration is not a key explanation for this concern.

The Cultural “Channel” and Economic Beliefs

For experienced analysts of public opinion data, the findings discussed so far—the low explanatory significance of economic insecurity and opposition to immigration not reflecting personal economic considerations—are not surprising. I shall briefly explain why, as the answer is pertinent for the main themes discussed here.

In much of the research examining individual preferences on a given policy, the starting point is a model of its distributive consequences, with the expectation being that those who gain from the policy will likely support it, while those who lose from the policy will oppose it. Yet this approach, intuitive as it may seem, often proves remarkably limited in explaining people's attitudes. Even when results are broadly consistent with the predictions of a model based on individual gains and losses, the share of variance explained is often decidedly low.

This issue repeatedly came up in my own research on the “losers of globalization,” analyzing the characteristics of those who perceive themselves as harmed by trade openness and those more likely to favor protectionist trade measures (Margalit 2008, 2012). As I and others find, predictions based on occupational characteristics, employment status, and the vulnerability of one's industry to foreign competition have small effects (if any) and explain little of the variation in individual attitudes on international trade (Mansfield and Mutz 2009; Blonigen 2011; Rho and Tomz 2017). Researchers have thus concluded that a model that assumes voters' opinions about trade are shaped by their position in the labor market and the fortunes of their industry (as one might expect from a Ricardo–Viner specific factors model of international trade) is of little use in explaining mass attitudes on trade. A model that assumes voters' opinions on trade are shaped by labor endowments and skills (as one might expect in a Heckscher–Ohlin model of trade) fares only slightly better. But on closer examination, the better performance of this approach is almost entirely related to the fact that education is used as the proxy for skills. Indeed, education is the one “economic” factor that is robustly associated with trade attitudes, yet it of course also captures other potentially influential factors, such as individuals' levels of cosmopolitanism or ethnocentrism. Other attempts to apply newer models of trade and offshoring to explain public attitudes on trade-related questions produce similarly weak results (Blonigen and McGrew 2014).

The explanatory weakness of measures of personal economic circumstances is also evident in recent analyses of support for populist parties. As Gidron and Hall (2017) report in a study of vote choice in 20 developed democracies, even after throwing into the regression a wide array of economic predictors, the share of the variation explained is 0.07.³ Another study of individual-level support for populist parties in six western European countries (Oesch 2008) finds that employment characteristics and sociodemographics exhibited a similarly weak empirical relationship with the populist vote (R^2 ranging from 0.019 in Switzerland to 0.078 in Norway). Some of the low explanatory power is probably due to attenuation bias resulting from measurement error. But this result is not merely an artifact of survey

³The share of variation explained is a problematic measure when the dependent variable is a binary outcome. But other, more suitable tests—such as ROC (“receiver operating characteristic”) or precision-recall tests—also show a poor fit for these models. For example, when predicting whether an individual voted for the populist party (in 14 countries included in the European Social Survey) using a model with respondents' level of exposure to the import shock and a host of variables pertaining to employment status, the model produces an ROC area of 0.52. This is only slightly better than a random prediction.

design. It reflects a broader point, which is that people's understanding of issues such as immigration, trade openness, or EU market integration—frequent targets of populist ire—are shaped by more than just their economic impact on individuals. Specifically, public disaffection about those issues also reflects concerns related to their social and cultural consequences.

Indeed, an alternative explanation for widespread populist support views it as a backlash against cultural change (for a comprehensive discussion, see Inglehart and Norris 2016). On this view, long-term structural social developments—increased access to higher education, growing ethnic diversity, urbanization, more equal gender roles—have led to greater acceptance of diverse lifestyles, religions, and cultures. These changes, and the perceived displacement of traditional social values, have caused a sense of resentment among segments of the population in the West, particularly among white men, older people, conservatives, and those with less formal qualifications. Increased exposure to foreign influences that comes with globalization, and even more so the effects of waves of immigration, has exacerbated the sense of a cultural and demographic threat. As a result, formerly predominant majorities have felt their social standing erode and have become increasingly receptive to populist charges against a disconnected, cosmopolitan elite that has turned its back on them. They have also bought into the populist nostalgia for a “golden age” of cultural homogeneity, traditional values, and a strong national identity. Hard economic times undermine the perceived competence of the economic and political elites and thus help fuel the populist distrust in them. Yet by this account, adverse economic change is a contributing factor and possibly a trigger. However, is not the root cause of widespread populist support.

There's an obvious, and understandable, reluctance to accept such “soft” explanations. A cultural explanation of populism is hard to test quantitatively, let alone to identify causally. Yet that doesn't mean that a cultural explanation is incorrect. Indeed, some of the economics-centered studies cited above acknowledge the potential role of cultural concerns in explaining the populist vote but treat them as outside the purview of their analysis. Others contend that cultural concerns are simply a by-product of adverse economic changes. As one recent study put it: “Populism does not have a cultural cause, but rather an economic insecurity cause, with an important and traceable *cultural channel*” (Guiso et al. 2017, emphasis in original). I disagree. Subsuming of cultural concerns as part of an economic reaction wrongly dismisses the independent impact of cultural factors in driving support for populism. Moreover, it ignores evidence of a causal relationship that runs also in the opposite direction: namely, that cultural concerns and grievances shape people's beliefs about economic change and its adverse impact on their standing. Some of the economic issues that populists rail against reflect this process.

For example, people who worry about cultural homogeneity or changing ethnic composition of their communities are more likely to adopt the view that immigration has negative economic consequences (Sniderman and Hagendoorn

2007; Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008). Similarly, individuals who are anxious about the cultural aspects of globalization are more likely to believe that trade is economically harmful (Margalit 2012; for findings consistent with this view, see O'Rourke and Sinnott 2001; Mansfield and Mutz 2009). Using an experiment, I sought to bring some evidence to bear on the direction of causality. I found that when individuals, particularly the less educated, were exposed to a set of four questions designed to trigger preoccupation with cultural change—for example, whether or not they agree with the statement “our traditional way of life is getting lost”—they expressed a substantially more negative view about the impact of trade than a control group that wasn't exposed to the treatment. Other experimental work provides additional examples of ways in which cultural factors shape beliefs and attitudes about economic issues such as welfare, antipoverty policy, and health care (Gilens 2009; Tesler 2012).

Sociological and ethnographic work looking at communities supportive of the populist right provides a more vivid illustration of this causal pathway. These ethnographies—of the French working-class town of Riems (Eribon 2013), of rural communities in Wisconsin (Cramer 2016) and Louisiana (Hochschild 2016), and of declining industrial enclaves in Britain (Dagenham) and the United States (Youngstown, Ohio) (Gest 2016)—document compellingly the ways in which perceived threats to social status play out politically. In doing so, they show how cultural distance and estrangement from the dominant groups in society are intertwined with people's perception of being economically left behind. For example, these studies detail how people who live in rural areas often harbor deep cultural resentment toward political and economic elites for their perceived disregard, disrespect, or condescension. This resentment then often feeds certain beliefs about the economy, such as the idea that government resources are allocated unfairly, the notion that urban residents (and particularly minorities) get more than their fair share of resources, or the strong conviction that immigrants are a major drain on the government budget.

Thus, while economic change can be a source of grievance expressed along cultural lines, in the form of antipathy toward a certain ethnic group, it is also the other way around: cultural changes generate discontent around economic issues. Consequently, when populist politicians address issues such as immigration, trade, or rural-urban disparities, they tap into public disaffection that goes beyond voters' concern with the material impact of those issues.

With these studies and evidence in mind, two avenues for future research strike me as promising. The first is to develop a better understanding of the disaffection underlying the populist vote. The notion that the losers from economic change are the basis of populist support conceives of “losers” too literally and narrowly. As I argued, the grievances of constituencies voting for populists have a broader set of causes. Thus, an important avenue for research on populism is to investigate the way people form their beliefs about the impact of aforementioned issues that are often the targets of populist anger, such as globalization, immigration, and EU integration. What do people know about those issues, what information and news

sources do they rely upon in forming their beliefs, and what factors underlie their sense of being harmed by these changes? Addressing these questions is central to explaining the broad support base of populism.

A second avenue is to refine and to test more rigorously the cultural explanations of populism. Recent work in economics on social identity provides a useful example of how culture can be theorized as an independent variable in a way that lends itself to more systematic empirical investigation. For example, Shayo (2009, forthcoming) formalizes the way in which in-group bias and conformity to group norms, two key components of social identity, can be used to explain how cultural affinities account for a range of economic and political outcomes. These include the link between nationalism and redistribution (see also Holm 2016) or between nationalism and trade policy (Grossman and Helpman 2018). A similar approach can be usefully applied to study when cultural affinities and concerns are likely to generate support for populism.

Survey experiments can be a useful tool for testing predictions about the potency of cultural concerns in triggering support for populist candidates, as well as assessing which type of individuals are responsive to those cultural issues (those with low education levels? the economically insecure? residents of rural areas?). By also including treatments that center on economic insecurity, survey experiments can help assess the relative strength of cultural and economic issues in stirring populist sentiments across different segments of the electorate. Another empirical approach can be to study settings in which exposure to varying levels of cultural threat is exogenously determined, and assess its impact on voting outcomes. Such exposure can be due to quasi-random proximity to refugees' path of travel (Dinas et al. 2019), or to shocks such as World War I and the Immigration Acts of the 1920s, which affected both the volume and the type of immigration that settled in different geographic areas of the United States (Tabellini forthcoming). In the US case, Tabellini is able to exploit the uniquely large variation in the cultural background of the arriving immigrants (looking at dimensions such as religion and language) and finds that a populist-like political backlash was strongly and positively tied to the cultural distance between immigrants and natives. This occurred despite the fact that the economic impact of the migrants was neutral or positive. Brunner and Kuhn (2018) report a similar finding regarding the impact of cultural distance on the support of Swiss natives for the populist party SVP. Additional work of this kind can help assess the impact of both economic and cultural factors in shaping support for populism.

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