

**Socioeconomic Deprivation and the
Support for Populism:
A Study on Individual and Contextual
Determinants**

Michael Kolander

ISBN: 9789403657738

DOI: 10.26116/krx7-v627

Layout Design: Claudia Tofan, Open Press TiU

Cover Photo: Tom Barrett, UnSplash

Print: Open Press TiU

Naam drukkerij

This book has been made available Open Access under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0 license (CC BY-NC-ND): This license allows reusers to copy and distribute the material in any medium or format in unadapted form only, for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator.



Socioeconomic Deprivation and the Support for Populism: A Study on Individual and Contextual Determinants

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan
Tilburg University
op gezag van de
rector magnificus,

prof. dr. W.B.H.J. van de Donk,
en University of Trento

op gezag van de
rector magnificus,

prof. dr. F. Deflorian,

in het openbaar te verdedigen ten overstaan van een door het college voor
promoties aangewezen commissie in de Aula van de Universiteit

op vrijdag 22 april 2022 om 13.30 uur

door

Michael Wolfgang Werner Kolander

geboren te Ochsenfurt, Duitsland

Promotores: dr. A.R.C.M. Luijkx (Tilburg University)
prof. dr. G.A. Veltri (University of Trento)

Copromotor: dr. K. Abts (Tilburg University)

leden promotiecommissie: prof. dr. P.H.J. Achterberg (Tilburg University)
prof. dr. M. Diani (University of Trento)
prof. dr. M. Gebel (University of Bamberg)
prof. dr. M. Lubbers (Universiteit Utrecht)
prof. dr. B. Meuleman (KU Leuven)
dr F. Roosma (Tilburg University)

Outline

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Objective	17
1.2 Populism	22
1.3 Economic Deprivation	25
1.4 Theories on Economic Deprivation and the Populist Appeal.....	28
1.5 Structure of the Thesis and Contributions to the State of Research.....	31
1.5.1 Does the Socioeconomic Context Create a Breeding Ground for Populist Attitudes? Multilevel Evidence from Belgium	32
1.5.2 Social and Economic Predictors Favoring the Local Success of Right-Wing Populism: A Longitudinal Analysis on Municipal Elections in Flanders.....	34
1.5.3 The Effect of Individual Economic Deprivation on Populist Voting: Longitudinal Evidence from Dutch Panel Data	35
1.5.4 The Effect of Socioeconomic Vulnerability on Radical Populist Voting and Abstaining in the European Elections 2019	36

2 Does the Socioeconomic Context Create a Breeding Ground for Populist Attitudes? Multilevel Evidence from Belgium

2.1 Introduction.....	41
2.2 Theory and Hypotheses	45
2.3 Data and Methods	53
2.3.1 Data	53
2.3.2 Method	53
2.3.3 Measurement.....	54
2.4 Results.....	58
2.4.1 Descriptive Statistics.....	58
2.4.2 Linear Multilevel Regression Models	59
2.4.2.1 People-Centrism	60
2.4.2.2 Anti-Elitism	63
2.4.2.3 Anti-immigration views.....	65
2.5 Conclusion	67

3 Social and Economic Predictors Favoring the Local Success of Right-Wing Populism: A Longitudinal Analysis on Municipal Elections in Flanders

3.1 Introduction.....	75
3.2 Flanders as a Research Context.....	79
3.3 Theoretical Approach.....	80
3.3.1 Economic Approaches Explaining Right-Wing Populist Success....	80
3.3.2 Social-Structural Approaches Explaining Right-Wing Populist Success.....	83
3.4 Data and Methods.....	86
3.5 Results.....	89
3.5.1 Longitudinal Analysis.....	89
3.5.2 Method Comparison.....	92
3.6 Conclusion.....	96

4 The Effect of Individual Economic Deprivation on Populist Voting: Longitudinal Evidence from Dutch Panel Data

4.1 Introduction.....	103
4.2 Theory and Hypotheses.....	104
4.3 Methodological Impact.....	109
4.4 Data and Methods.....	110
4.4.1 Data.....	110
4.4.2 Operationalization.....	111
4.4.3 Method of analysis.....	114
4.5 Results.....	115
4.5.1 Longitudinal analyses (between-comparisons).....	115
4.5.2 Longitudinal analyses (within-comparisons).....	124
4.6 Conclusion.....	130
Appendix.....	133

5 The Effect of Socioeconomic Vulnerability on Radical Populist Voting and Abstaining in the European Elections 2019

5.1 Introduction.....	145
5.2 Theory and Hypotheses.....	147
5.2.1 Socioeconomic Explanations of Radical Populist Party Voting and Abstaining.....	147
5.2.2 Mediating Impact of Agreement with Issues owned by Radical Populist Parties.....	151

5.2.3 Mediating Impact of Political Disinterest and Perceived Powerlessness	152
5.2.4 Mediating Impact of Disapproval with Politics	153
5.3 Data and Methods	155
5.3.1 Data	155
5.3.2 Measurement	156
5.3.3 Method	158
5.4 Results	159
5.4.1 Descriptive statistics	159
5.4.2 Comparing radical populist voting and abstaining to mainstream party voting	160
5.4.3 Explaining differences across the chosen electoral outcomes	166
5.5 Conclusion and Discussion	172
Appendix	175
6 Conclusion	183
References	197
Acknowledgement	215
Curriculum Vitae	219

Figures

Figure 1: Framework of the research objective (by sub-studies)	32
Figure 2: Linear Multilevel Models Explaining People-Centrism	61
Figure 3: Linear Multilevel Models Explaining Anti-Elitism	64
Figure 4: Linear Multilevel Models Explaining Anti-Immigration Views	66
Figure 5: Populist Radical Right Voting (wave-specific OLS models, only significant effects reported)	116
Figure 6: Populist Radical Left Voting (wave-specific OLS models, only significant effects reported)	119
Figure 7: Populist Radical Right (1) vs. Populist Radical Left (0) Voting (wave-specific OLS models, only significant effects reported)	122
Figure 8: Populist Radical Right Voting (Fixed Effects Panel Regression, Linear Probability Models)	125
Figure 9: Populist Radical Left Voting (Fixed Effects Panel Regression, Linear Probability Models)	127
Figure 10: Populist Radical Right (1) vs. Populist Radical Left (0) Voting (Fixed Effects Regression, Linear Probability Models)	129

Figure 11: Average Marginal Effects of Unemployment on PRRP Voting, Dependent on the Previous Professional Situation.....	136
Figure 12: Average Marginal Effects of Unemployment on PRRP Voting, Dependent on Educational Attainment	137
Figure 13: Average Marginal Effects of Unemployment on PRLP Voting, Dependent on the Previous Professional Situation.....	138
Figure 14: Average Marginal Effects of Unemployment on PRLP Voting, Dependent on Educational Attainment	139
Figure 15: Average Marginal Effects of Unemployment on PRRP (1) vs. PRLP (0) Voting, Dependent on the Previous Professional Situation.....	140
Figure 16: Average Marginal Effects of Unemployment on PRRP (1) vs. PRLP (0) Voting, Dependent on Educational Attainment	141
Figure 17: Multinomial Logistic Regression (Hypothesis 1). Base outcome: Mainstream party voting. Results as relative log odds	161
Figure 18: Multinomial Logistic Regression (including political attitudes). Base outcome: Mainstream party voting. Results as relative log odds.....	165
Figure 19: Mediation analysis of anti-immigration attitude and favoring protectionism (Hypothesis 2). Only significant indirect effects included. Effects are Odds Ratio.....	167
Figure 20: Mediation analysis of political disinterest and political powerlessness (Hypothesis 3). Only significant indirect effects included. Effects are Odds Ratio.....	169
Figure 21: Mediation analysis of Euroscepticism, political distrust, and political dissatisfaction (Hypothesis 4). Only significant indirect effects included. Effects are Odds Ratio.....	171
Figure 22: Binary logistic regression for radical populist voting (1) vs. abstaining (0). Results as log odds.....	177
Figure 23: Binary logistic regression for radical populist voting (1) vs. abstaining (0), including political attitudes. Results as log odds	178

Tables

Table 1: Items Composing the Dependent Variables	57
Table 2: Municipality Characteristics	86
Table 3: Results from Fixed Effects Panel Regression (Linear Models)	89
Table 4: Results from Year-Specific OLS Regressions and a Pooled OLS Regression (Linear Models)	93
Table 5: Political cynicism and attitudes towards immigration.....	133
Table 6: Detailed overview on wave-specific OLS models (Interaction of previous profession and unemployment)	134
Table 7: Detailed overview on wave-specific OLS models (Interaction of vocational education and unemployment)	135
Table 8: Predicted Probabilities for various combinations of socioeconomic vulnerability on the three electoral outcomes (in percent)	163
Table 9: Parties categorized as radical populist (far-right and far-left)	175

Summary

Economic explanations vs. cultural concerns. These two branches of research have been established as the two major approaches in understanding the electoral success of radical populist parties. As for economic hardship, the feeling of neglect by established parties and political discontent are considered as mechanisms translating into the preference of anti-establishment parties with a people-centrist rhetoric. From a cultural perspective, radical populist voting has been linked to people holding on to more conservative viewpoints and rejecting the perceived predominance of trends such as multiculturalism and postmaterialism they assume established parties to focus on. While there is evidence suggesting that an unfavorable socioeconomic status does foster voting in favor of populist parties, multiple previous studies agree that cultural or political concerns surpass the explanatory power of economic insecurity in that regard (e.g. Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Oesch, 2008, Ramiro & Gomez, 2017). Nonetheless, economic approaches of populist voting should not be discarded. Instead, the inconsistency across previous studies in terms of evidence hints at the possibly crucial impact of the research design on the results to be obtained. In this respect, the predominant use of aggregate data in the field does not allow for conclusions on individual voting behavior whereas even the analysis of individual-level data often comes along with a static perspective on single-election years which makes the results context-dependent and limits their generalizability. Next to the substantial investigation on which aspects of socioeconomic hardship increase support for populism, it is another objective of this thesis to contribute to the state of research by illustrating the methodological impact on the evidence yielded. In order to achieve that, this thesis consists of four sub-studies, each approaching the research question from another perspective to provide a comprehensive overview on socioeconomic drivers of populist voting.

Relying on survey data from the Belgian Election Study 2014, for a start it is analyzed if socioeconomic deprivation shapes populist attitudes. For that, both the individual and the contextual situation are considered. Another deepening of knowledge pursued in the first empirical chapter is the disentanglement of three attitude dimensions which are part of the rhetoric used by populist parties

but have been cumulated in previous studies (i.e. anti-immigration views, people-centrism, and anti-elitism). The evidence suggests that populist views are stronger among persons with a lower level of education and a stronger sense of relative deprivation. The effect of relative deprivation on people-centrist views is furthermore stronger when the local surroundings are characterized by higher financial wealth.

In the second empirical study, the outcome to be explained is the actual voting behavior in favor of a populist party, using the example of Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang). Again, the analysis is taking place on a small-scale contextual level. The longitudinal perspective on Flemish municipalities covering the period from 2006 to 2018 is an additional contribution. Through the estimation of fixed effects panel regression models, possible sources of biased findings may be partially eliminated. This advantageous statistical method is not only exploited for substantial purposes but also to point out its benefits when contrasting it to other longitudinal strategies, such as separate year-specific and pooled models. Unexpectedly, the local unemployment rate is negatively related to the aggregate success of Vlaams Belang. Nonetheless, the comparison across analytical approaches underlines the relevance of advantageous statistical methods that reduce the risk of an omitted variable bias and allow to consider time trends. The third chapter also relies on a longitudinal design and illustrates the analytical benefits of panel data but gives attention to the individual level, using information from the Dutch LISS panel survey. Like in the previous sub-study, there is evidence illustrating the analytical potential of panel data. In substantial terms, however, multiple characteristics of individual deprivation do not significantly influence the support for radical populist parties.

The fourth and final empirical chapter broadens the perspective in several regards as it gives up the previous focus on single countries in favor of a cross-country analysis on the election for the European Parliament 2019. What is more, another form of voting behavior is considered that is theoretically similar to populist voting, namely abstaining. With that alternative outcome being part of the study, additional analyses are conducted to identify attitudinal mechanisms which explain the preference for either

populist voting or abstaining. Both prove to be more likely than mainstream party voting among person with a low educational level and frequent educational difficulties. An unfavorable position on the labor market, however, comes along only with an increased tendency of abstention. If socioeconomic vulnerability translates into anti-immigration views, however, radical populist voting is more likely than mainstream party voting or abstaining whereas an emerging political disinterest and feeling of powerlessness explain why socioeconomically vulnerable persons rather choose not to vote at all. The tendency of mainstream party voting is reduced if unemployment or financial troubles translate into the disapproval of politics but neither radical populist party voting nor abstaining are boosted more than the other.

1

Introduction

1.1 Research Objective

The electoral success of populist parties in recent decades evoked scientific interest that aimed at explaining the support of these parties among certain groups of voters. While in some countries these parties have been trying for several decades to attract voters who are disappointed by the political establishment, their more recent emergence and immediate success in other political contexts seems to suggest a link to major societal changes that the countries underwent and that may have left parts of the electorate unsatisfied with governing political parties. In that regard, the populist appeal has been attributed to insecurities coming along with trends due to globalization or modernization (e.g. Betz, 1993a; Essletzbichler, Disslbacher, & Moser, 2018; Santana & Rama, 2018) but also more specifically to developments such as economic crises (e.g. Funke, Schularick, & Trebesch, 2016; Hernández & Kriesi, 2016; Magni, 2017) or the increasing inflow of migrants in the European Union since 2015 (e.g. Dustmann, Vasiljeva, & Damm, 2019; Vasilakis, 2017). These findings may also explain why by now countries that for a long time lacked this party type have an influential populist party focusing on migration and protectionism (e.g. Germany, Spain).

Similar to the mentioned contextual circumstances, predictors of populist voting on the individual level have commonly been distinguished between a cultural and an economic dimension. Especially with regard to populist parties from the right wing, cultural concerns and the opposition against predominant social developments such as multiculturalism and postmaterialism are considered driving forces of populist support among those voters holding on to more conservative positions on these issues (e.g. Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Oesch, 2008). Another branch of research links economic vulnerability due to trends of globalization, for instance an increased job insecurity among voters lacking the required formal skill-set, to populist voting in general (e.g. Im, Mayer, Palier, & Rovny, 2019; Rooduijn, 2018; Rovny & Rovny, 2017; Santana & Rama, 2018). However, there is some agreement in the literature that cultural or political concerns surpass the explanatory power of economic insecurity

when it comes to predicting populist voting (e.g. Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Oesch, 2008, Ramiro & Gomez, 2017).

Still, the focus of future research should not be exclusively on cultural predictors of populist voting, despite the scarce evidence of economic hardship fostering populist voting. Instead, economic and cultural developments are often interdependent. For instance, an insufficient social integration as expressed by the feeling of being “left behind” can be induced by both a decline in personal wealth as well as by the impression that one’s opinions and concerns are not deemed important by elites (Gidron & Hall, 2020). The interrelation of cultural and economic issues can be illustrated by preoccupations about the cultural or ethnic homogeneity in persons’ surroundings translating into the additional belief that globalization and immigration have adverse effects on the economic situation (see Margalit, 2019). Jointly, economic and cultural worries may shape status anxiety among voters which may furthermore explain why populist parties from the right wing gain support from economically disadvantaged voters although these parties emphasize cultural (i.e. nativist) stances rather than economic (e.g. labor market or redistributive) policies (Gidron & Hall, 2017). Hence, both the educational level and the occupational status can be attributed to the cultural or the economic sphere and they both will be central characteristics in the following analyses on economically motivated populist voting as they are crucial predictors of economic security and wealth. Nonetheless, it is aimed at distinguishing this economic explanation from other possibly underlying mechanisms. This is done, for instance, by analyzing how the support for populism is influenced by the educational or occupational status, depending on actually experienced deprivation. In line with this and instead of discarding economic explanations of populist voting, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2018) recommend to pursue research approaches providing deeper insights, for instance through the use of refined measurements of economic hardship, by the consideration of a subjective economic dimension or by considering potential mediators.

Besides, considering economic predictors of populist voting is advisable as it applies the widely spread concept of economic voting to the rather new – or less established – political approach

of populism. Economic voting theory assumes that – mainly non-populist – governing parties are “punished” by voters who perceive an economic downturn to have occurred. Although this perspective suggests a worsening of the macro economic situation (*sociotropic voting*) to be more predictive for the rejection of the incumbent than the personal economic status (*egotropic voting*), there is also evidence indicating that individual economic hardship is more influential than the assessment of the contextual economy (see Lewis-Beck & Paldam, 2000). In that regard, it is contributive to the state of research to further ascertain to what extent the anti-establishment and scapegoating rhetoric of populist parties makes them beneficiaries of economic concerns within the electorate and which explanatory role can be attributed to the individual and the contextual situation as well as to the interplay of both levels. Moreover, since populist parties from both the left and the right wing can be assumed to take advantage of economic vulnerability (through an either redistributive or scapegoating and nativist rhetoric), detailed insights should be gained into what particular aspect of socioeconomic deprivation (for instance, educational or occupational disadvantage) translates into an increased support for each type of populist parties.

In line with the presumed impetus of “punishing” the political establishment as it is theorized by the economic voting approach, the wish to express one’s discontent with politics is commonly considered an explanatory factor of populist voting (e.g. Ramiro, 2016; Rooduijn, 2018). Accordingly, another contribution of this study is disentangling the pure effect of socioeconomic vulnerability on populist voting from the influence that attitudes related to populism have on voters’ preferences. Therefore, dissatisfaction with politics in general is studied same as views reflecting the ideological divide across left-wing and right-wing populist parties. In one sub-study, these positions are used as control variables in order to obtain the pure effect of socioeconomic deprivation. In another empirical chapter, a mediation analysis is conducted that allows distinguishing the direct effect of socioeconomic vulnerability on voting behavior from the indirect effect via various attitudinal aspects that are possibly enhanced by socioeconomic hardship.

Aside from a scientifically motivated deepening of research on the economic branch of explaining populist voting, the findings obtained in this study entail societal relevance. As the electoral success of anti-establishment parties has been increasing recently in numerous countries, their political influence and their possibilities of blocking political decision-making has been growing likewise. The *cordon sanitaire*, a self-imposed restriction to cooperate with radical populist parties in many Western European democracies, reduces the options for parties that received the highest share of votes but are in need of one or more coalition partners. In some cases, this may lead to the formation of a minority coalition as the only option left which, however, requires the approval of the parties not involved in the government – including populist parties in the opposition. If these parties decide not to condone a minority coalition any more this may lead to the dissolution of the government, as happened in the Netherlands in 2012. Still, even if a majority can be obtained without being dependent on populist parties, their relative amount of seats in parliament reflects the share of voters who supposedly reject the political establishment and, along with the deliberate abstainers, may question the legitimacy and representative nature of political decisions.

In order to get a comprehensive picture of the socioeconomic profile of this population group, studies focusing on economic deprivation from various perspectives are necessary for politics and society if they want to “win back” those voters that give in to the appeal of populism. Empirical evidence supporting the claim that struggling to keep up with transformations on a globalized labor market or suggesting that the impression of being neglected compared to others may be the foundation of adjusting policies to the needs of these voter groups. Alternatively, if the findings show that political discontent and an ideological agreement with populist parties are the main drivers of support for these parties instead of socioeconomic hardship, conclusions may be drawn on the informative and rhetorical efforts for established parties if they want to disenchant populist parties and convince voters feeling “left behind”. Obviously, it is unrealistic to assume that the further evolvement of globalization can be stopped or that every person distrusting politics is receptive for endeavors to improve

the exchange between politicians and voters. Nonetheless, an evidence-based adaption of policy-making may decrease the use of populist parties as a gathering place of dissatisfied persons and foster the approval of actions taken by governing parties.

In the following, four sub-studies address this need for further research. The main research question of this study is:

How does socioeconomic deprivation affect the appeal of populism?

Building on this, there are several subgoals pursued:

- 1. Which attitudinal aspects addressed by populism benefit from individual and contextual socioeconomic hardship?*
- 2. Does populist voting flourish under unfavorable economic conditions on the local level?*
- 3. Does the use of advantageous panel data possibly explain the inconsistent findings on economically motivated populist voting in the literature that mainly relied on (pooled) cross-sectional data?*
- 4. To what extent do socioeconomic difficulties foster populist voting and abstaining in a "second-order" election? Moreover, how can the preference for either outcome be explained?*

Accordingly, each of the four empirical chapters pursues certain research objectives and adds another perspective in order to provide a comprehensive overview on socioeconomic drivers of supporting populism. For that, various research designs are used that all aim at introducing analytic gains compared to other studies: the individual and the contextual level are considered both separately and jointly, single-country studies as well as cross-country analyses are applied, and statistical models that allow to take into account the context dependency of individual political preferences are estimated same as regression analyses eliminating the distorting impact of unobserved heterogeneity. Like that, a partial advancement for each sub-study can be achieved that goes beyond the previous state of knowledge. Before the particular advantages and contributions of each sub-study are outlined in detail, the main concepts used in

them are defined same as an overview on the different theoretic approaches is given.

1.2 Populism

In the literature, there is no generally accepted definition of populism (Pappas, 2016). Besides, previous conceptualizations of populism vary widely and range from identifying it for instance as a communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), a political style (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014) or a mode of political mobilization (Jansen, 2011). However, a conceptualization by Mudde (2004) has been established as a common definition of the term. Accordingly, populism views society as divided in two main antagonistic groups, namely “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” and furthermore suggests that politics should reflect the “*volonté générale*”. More precisely, populism has been defined to consist of four crucial elements which are (1) the presence of two homogenous societal units, namely “the people” and “the elite”, (2) an appreciation of “the people” while “the elite” is devaluated, (3) an antagonist relationship between these two societal units, and (4) the vision of popular sovereignty (Stanley, 2008).

Being a thin-centered ideology, populism can adopt various other ideologies, such as nationalism or socialism, and consequently different party types may utilize it (Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008). Beyond the anti-establishment and people-centrist stance, populist parties from the (radical) left are furthermore characterized by a democratic socialist ideology and by their self-portrayal as speaking not just on behalf of the proletariat but being the voice of the people (Mudde, 2004). The left-wing populist rhetoric of “the people” versus “the elite” is mainly of a socioeconomic nature and advocates for those who are economically disadvantaged by requesting a decrease in social inequality. By that, left-wing populism is inclusionary as it also considers social out-groups as its clientele and calls for material support through state resources for all those facing unfavorable economic conditions, regardless if they are a part of the majority population or not. Also politically and symbolically, left-wing populism is rather inclusionary. Right-wing populism, on the contrary, not only disparages “elites” but also excludes cultural out-groups (e.g. immigrants) from the “common