

We have been left behind, haven't we?
Status loss experience, class voting and
the populist radical right

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Abstract

Political sociologists increasingly devote attention to the role of status anxieties in explaining current patterns of class voting, especially with regards to the populist radical right (PRR). Nonetheless, extant research fails to provide compelling evidence that such anxieties spurring PRR voting have any economic origin – as scholars and policymakers often assume. Our contribution aims at assessing whether the social classes supporting PRR parties have experienced a tangible loss in relative economic standing.

To do so, it introduces a novel measure of class-level positional income, drawing on Lupu and Pontusson's skew index. Our measure is intended to quantify the average income distance of each social class from the richest in society (the last income decile) compared to the poorest (the first income decile). Subsequently, we track changes in class positional income to predict voting behaviour. A decrease in positional income thus depicts a collective downward trajectory, which is expected to favour PRR voting – presumably through status concerns. In other words, we expect PRR parties to be more successful among those voters whose class has moved closer to the bottom of the social ladder than to the top, net of material impoverishment. We contend that the said measure arguably outperforms extant ones in tracking changes in citizens' objective relative socio-economic standing.

Testing the effect of status loss experience on voting behaviour in the above-described fashion requires detailed individual-level information on occupation, income and voting choice. Unfortunately, no existing dataset fulfils these highly demanding criteria. For this reason, we draw on two separate sources. Our main analysis relies on data from the European Social Survey (ESS). ESS has been extensively used in electoral studies in Europe because it gathers data on relevant socio-economic

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characteristics (e.g. employment status, occupation) and voting behaviour in each last election. We analyse voters' choices in 19 elections from 2008 till 2017 from nine European countries: Austria, Switzerland, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Italy, the UK and Sweden. Disappointingly, ESS does not provide sufficiently detailed information on income, which is a requirement to compute our main explanatory variable. For this purpose, we leverage high-quality data from the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). EU-SILC is the most suitable dataset for our purpose given the accuracy of individual-level data on income and occupations, the yearly and cross-country coverage, as well as the number of respondents. We rely on EU-SILC data from 2009-2018 operations, as the income reference period is usually the calendar year prior to the survey.

We perform a logistic multilevel model, since political behaviour is observed at the individual level while positional income (change) is measured at the class level. Our dependent variable is populist radical right vote. PRR parties are identified using the PopuList classification, while ESS respondents' voting choices are classified by means of the dataset PartyFacts. In our model, we control for two class-level confounders (income level, absolute income growth) and a set of individual-level ones (age, gender, education and migration background). We also include country and year fixed effects.

Our analysis demonstrates that changes in positional income are critical to voting choice, net of material deprivation. Specifically, PRR parties are overrepresented among those classes that have moved farther away from the affluent than from the poor, holding absolute income growth constant. A one-percentage-point decrease in positional income increases the probability of voting a PRR party by 8,7 pp ($p < 0,001$), holding other variables constant. On the one hand, in the case of a very positive positional income change, the probability of voting a populist far-right party is around 7,6%. On the other hand, the probability increases up to circa 10,2% in the case a very negative change. By contrast, a separate model shows no statistically significant effect of absolute income growth, consistently with previous studies. Results are robust to a restricted sample excluding abstentions.

Our research empirically corroborates the widespread (though previously unproved) statement that the inequality trends observed in post-industrial economies do foster (individual-level) disadvantage thereby creating breeding ground for PRR support. Nonetheless, it also clarifies that such disadvantage has not a mere financial nature, as previous studies already suspected. On the contrary, PRR parties enjoy broader support among those classes suffering a downgrade of their social standing. On the whole, our work lends support to previous warnings that social anxiety, not economic disadvantage per se, spurs PRR voting.

Hence, the present study advances two theoretical contributions. On the one hand, it expands the debate on the economic explanations of current patterns of class voting. In this respect, it provides compelling evidence that class alignment to PRR parties should not be interpreted solely as a cultural phenomenon. Conversely, we demonstrate that such alignment is the direct result of

economic circumstances. In short, the vagaries of the economy seem to motivate a cultural reaction among the electorate. On the other, our research provides insight into the political consequences of economic inequalities. To do so, it introduces a novel relational measure of income, which more plausibly captures how tangible economic capital may fuel subjective social status.