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Dom Pérignon Vs. Miller Lite: Investigating Anti-Elite Sentiment at the Individual Level

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Abstract

As right-wing populism has gained a stronger footing globally, so have the ideas that right-wing populists support. Developed democracies are exhibiting high levels of political distrust and anti-elite sentiment, which pose a serious threat to the health of democracy and existing political systems. While there are system-level trends that contribute to anti-elitism, there remain variations in individual anti-elite sentiment. Two broad schools of thought suggest explanations; one contending that the way an individual perceives and responds to their economic situation leads to anti-elite sentiment, and the other, that anti-elite sentiment has risen as a reactionary undercurrent to the “silent revolution” of the last half of the 20th Century. Using Round 7 of the European Social Survey (ESS), this research investigates a third approach which brings together insights of the cultural and economic explanations, the “left-behind” hypothesis. This study finds that those who perceive themselves as “left-behind” by economic and cultural trends express stronger anti-elite sentiments than even the poorest “losers of globalization,” or the most traditionally conservative.

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Introduction

“ ‘Howard Dean,’ the husband says, ‘should take his tax-hiking, government-expanding, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, New-York-Times-reading’ –at which point the wife interrupts to finish the sentence - - ‘body piercing, Hollywood-loving, left-wing freak show back to Vermont, where it belongs.’ ”

The last 50 years in international politics can be characterized by a steep decline in political trust and the rise of anti-elite and anti-establishment attitudes. Lower levels of political trust have many serious repercussions; scholars suggest that it can lead to the eventual dissolution of existing political systems and the downfall of modern liberal democracy (Dalton, 2004; Gidron and Hall, 2017; van der Meer and Hakhverdian; 2017). Within the overarching theme of “political distrust” there are various sub-categories to be identified; distrust of supranational organizations, government institutions, elites, and the media. This study will deal specifically with the decline of public trust in elites and the rise of anti-elite sentiment (Dalton

2004). Some academics suggest that anti-elite sentiment is one of the least important dimensions of trust as it has the least severe repercussions, because elites are subject to change and because anti-elite sentiment is not entirely surprising in a representative system (Dalton, 1988, 2004; Seyd 2008). This explanation, however, does not give due consideration to the consequences of widespread anti-elite sentiment. Scholars should be concerned when voters are distrustful of politicians and other political, economic, and cultural elites, because that distrust and cynicism is a defining characteristic of populism, and populism is often viewed as a threat to liberal democracy (Mudde 2007). Indeed the ideological core of populism involves a deep-seated distrust of elites and intellectuals, and the rhetoric so often used by populist parties and actors pits the pure, regular people against the corrupt and wicked elite. There is also evidence that as anti-elite sentiment rises, social capital declines, and citizen health and wellbeing worsens (Putnam 2000; Rothstein and Stolle 2008; Hilger 2016). This study seeks to address the question of why specific individuals develop anti-elite attitudes, and while distrust is embedded in a larger structural context, this cross-national European study will attempt to identify specific markers that influence anti-elitism at the individual level.

Anti-Elite Sentiment in Context

Scholarly literature suggests a variety of factors to explain why citizens are losing faith in their elites at the international, societal, and individual levels. While some scholarship emphasizes the role of just one level of influence, other academics, such as Russell Dalton and Arlie Russell Hochschild, suggest that the real explanation is a combination of influences. At the systemic level, explanations include: actual cases of corruption; the changing nature of the media; and the activities of politicians and elites themselves, which may reinforce and exacerbate perceptions that elites are untrustworthy, incompetent, or corrupt. At the individual level,

demographic variables associated with cultural change and a feeling of being “left behind” by mainstream society appear to play a definitive role (Hochschild, 2016). Before examining these two levels of explanation, it is important to define elites and what anti-elite attitudes are.

Who are the elites?

The term elite once commonly referred to those with money or power, however, there has been a shift in the way that “elite” is used in common parlance. Now, elite not only includes the politically powerful or rich, but also carries a cultural connotation, and lifestyle has created a new strata of elitism. The cultural elite, sometimes referred to as the “metropolitan elite,” is an idea that has permeated many post-industrial societies around the globe (Tierney 2004). This emphasis is perpetuated by populist parties, pitting the regular, proper, and “pure” general citizenry against the “corrupt” and distant elite is a hallmark of populist platforms (Betz and Johnson 2004; Mudde 2007). Not only are elites different and disinterested, but they are publicized as being the antithesis of *good* government and the representation of the general will of the people. “Central to the contemporary radical right’s politics of resentment is the charge that in liberal capitalist democracies power has been usurped by a self-serving political and cultural elite that pursues its own narrow agenda without concern for the legitimate concerns and interests of ordinary citizens” (Betz and Johnson 2004). There are many contemporary examples of this rhetoric. The 2004 U.S. Presidential election offered a clear example of this definitional shift, when a right-wing political group known as the Club for Growth launched an advertising campaign that identified democratic presidential candidate Howard Dean as someone who, “should take his tax-hiking, government-expanding, latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, *New-York-Times*-reading, body-piercing, Hollywood-loving, left-wing freak show back to Vermont” (Tierney 2004). This bears a striking resemblance to a statement by a politician from

New Zealand First which categorizes elites as being, “the spa bath, Chardonnay sipping, social [i.e. left-wing] elitists who have more interest in the fine arts than they do in working class Kiwis” (Betz and Johnson 2004). Cas Mudde (2007) also considers this on an international scale when he identifies examples within the European context, for instance in Romania, the Greater Romania Party (PRM) published, “a list of top intellectuals who should be shot for the greater good of the country” (Mudde 2007). Given this, the discussion of anti-elite sentiment becomes very broad, but the political consequences remain severe.

System Level

Contemporary anti-elitism is nestled in a system-level, international context. Trends associated with changing media standards, globalization, the rise of internet technology, and the rise of right wing populism contribute to a wide-ranging suspicion of elites that is more generalizable than simply an increase in corruption (Dalton 2004). In *Democratic Choices, Democratic Challenges (2004)*, Dalton addresses this by stating that in the American case conversation focuses on, “...Vietnam, Watergate, Abscam,” and “Iran-Contra,” but, most places in the world have no experience of those specific incidents (Dalton 2004). While the Watergate scandal may have seriously changed thinking about politicians and the presidency in a U.S. context, it should not have affected trust in elites in New Zealand or Switzerland, yet people in New Zealand and Switzerland *do* exhibit declining levels of political trust (Dalton 2004). It is clear that “...coincidental unique political crises across a large and diverse set of nations is an improbable explanation of general patterns...” and as such, we need to look to the individual level to ascertain what truly drives anti-elite attitudes (Dalton 2004).

There is evidence to suggest that real cases of corruption do not carry as much weight as the perception of corruption, and there are many systematic influences on the prevalence of these

perceptions (Ziller and Schubel 2015; van der Meer and Hahkverdian 2017). People and organizations that have public platforms are able to influence how other people decide which issues are worth caring about; this agenda-setting ability has become more problematic since the large-scale introduction of the Internet, as now essentially anyone can have a visible platform there. Recently, there was even a case of a sub-reddit being the *first* Google result when searching for a mass shooting in the United States (Levin, 2017). This high level of accessibility poses problems on two fronts: firstly, it is easier than ever to spread misinformation, and secondly, the real facts and positions of experts and elites become diluted by the rest of the discourse. Similarly, politicians and experts themselves may contribute to the public view that elites shouldn't be trusted (CNN 2011; Vaccines 2015; Hochschil 2016; Lahren 2017). Increasingly, political campaigns are run on a platform of "cleaning up" government, and there is no lack of examples of experts contradicting themselves (Mudde 2007; CNN 2011; Tuttle 2015; Vaccines 2015; Hoschchild 2016; Beczak 2017). These contradictions and challenges to elites and the establishment work to reinforce ideas of anti-elitism. The public is constantly confronted by a discourse that suggests that there is indeed something inherent to politicians and elites of which they should be skeptical.

The media also plays a key role in the public perception of elites, and over the last two decades there have been global shifts in journalistic practices and the way that people receive their news (World 2007; Smith and Searles 2014; Sheets, Bos, and Boomgaarden 2016; Andersen 2017; Digital 2017). News media in general has become more partisan and sensational, and again the agenda-setting ability of the media comes into play by directing the political narrative (Klapper 1984; McCombs and Shaw 20984; McQuail 1984; Smith and Searless 2014; Sheets, Bos and Boomgaarden 2016). In the contemporary day, technology and social media

work together to exacerbate this effect, as it is increasingly easy to self-select confirmatory news sources and enter into a “filter-bubble” (Smith and Searless 2014).

While these systemic influences are plausible and can explain broad trends in anti-elite sentiment in the developed world, they cannot account for differences in the level of anti-elite sentiment across individuals in post-industrial democracies. It is then important to examine individual level influences to ascertain why some people are more likely than others to exhibit anti-elite sentiment.

Individual Level

One of the ways that scholars view individual attitudes toward politics and elites is through the lens of economic loss; scholars have used various names such as, “losers of globalization,” and “economic deprivation” to describe this framework. These theories contend that the economic problems that have arisen as a result of an increasingly globalized world, such as outsourced jobs and income inequality, are the main source of frustration for citizens (Hessami 2011; Gidron and Hall 2017). The economic perspective “emphasizes the consequences for electoral behavior arising from profound changes transforming the workforce and society in post-industrial economies” (Inglehart and Norris 2016). It is a very clear cut way to pit the “us” against the “them,” or, as Inglehart and Norris (2016) phrase it, the “haves” against the “have nots.” Those most likely to feel these economic impacts of economic insecurity are the low income earners; the unskilled, the “long-term unemployed;” those who are unable or unwilling to take advantage of the “travel and consumption” opportunities of increased globalization and modern openings in the job market; and the poorer sectors of society with vested interests in redistributive policy and economic stability (Hessami 2011; Gidron and Hall 2017). Those at the bottom of the income ladder are more likely to favor redistributive policy

and objectives, and as such, they are likely to be left-wing populists. The problems that these people face can be seen as the fault of the economically and culturally powerful; "...blaming 'Them' for stripping prosperity, job opportunities, and public services from 'Us' "(Inglehart and Norris, 2016).

The "cultural backlash" hypothesis provides an alternative explanation that focuses on the undercurrent of reaction in post-industrial societies to the liberalizing cultural shifts that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s (Inglehart and Norris 2016). This negative reaction to progressive cultural change builds on the idea that in the 1970s there was a silent revolution which resulted from high levels of economic security, education, peace-time, and a new emphasis on "new" politics and post materialist values (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). This rhetoric will be more appealing to right-wing populists as it focuses on the maintenance of the status quo and incorporates nativism and tradition. The populist radical right (PRR) is seen as a cultural backlash against the growing hegemony of post-modern values and New Left elites in top political, economic, and cultural positions. As stand-alone explanations, both the economic grievance and the cultural backlash schools offer important insights to the discussion surrounding anti-elite sentiment. Empirical studies tend to find that cultural values and attitudes are better predictors of an individual's level of populism than economic status and demographic indicators, however, the social and economic trends that lead to the backlash are not new and have been in play for decades. Considering this, it is not clear why some people have reacted to those systemic trends with anti-elitism while others have not. What makes some individuals more trusting of elites than others? To answer that question, it is necessary to bring economic grievances together with cultural reaction.

In *Strangers in Their Own Land*, Arlie Russell Hochschild identifies a feeling of left-behind-ness, which reconciles the economic and cultural explanations (Hochschild 2016). As post-materialist values have become entrenched in society, and levels of education, equal rights, and secularization have risen, those with more traditionalist values, and those who previously experienced status security have become sensitive to societal changes they see as threatening (Betz and Johnson 2004; Hochschild 2016; Gidron and Hall 2017). In a close ethnographic survey of a Louisiana community, Hochschild uncovers a feeling that the government does not work for all individuals, and that in some cases, leaders *have* ‘left’ traditional American society ‘behind’ (Hochschild 2016). There is evidence to suggest that the cultural cleavage is deeply seated, that it is present in more than just American society, and that it has led to a school of thought that identifies the “left behind” as a distinct group (Dalton 1988; Gidron and Hall 2017). “Important segments of the white working class are said to be alienated from societies whose main currents seem to have left them behind. They feel as if they are ‘strangers in their own land’ whose value goes unrecognized by the affluent elites...” (Gidron and Hall 2017). This distinction between the regular folk and the “affluent elites” who are responsible for the perversion of society leads to anti-elite sentiment among the left behind. It is the elite who are ushering in the very changes that are unwelcome. In their 2017 article, Gidron and Hall also look at the left-behind through the operationalization of social connectedness and standing. They model the ways employment status and skill levels have direct effects on social integration, and self-identified social status (Gidron and Hall 2017). Being left behind is the result of both cultural and economic factors, and the people who are likely to feel the most left behind are not necessarily the poorest or the culturally traditional, but rather they are those who feel they have a lot at stake in a shifting world (Gidron and Hall 2017).

We would anticipate that, in general, the population sectors that feel the most left behind would be majority racial males, with low skills and employment prospects, and who hold traditional values (Dalton 1988, 2004; Mudde 2007; Rothstein and Stolle 2008; Hochschild 2016; Gidron and Hall 2017; van der Meer and Hahkverdian 2017). Additionally, groups that have evolved to be the “butt of the joke” are likely to feel left behind and betrayed by their politicians and pundits (Hochschild 2016). These expectations come from societal changes during the last 50 years or so; theoretically, just as the rise of racial and gender equality puts men at odds with women and feminism, it puts the majority racial group at odds with the culture of multiculturalism and integration. There are, of course, nuances to consider here with this generalized model, specifically when considering gender and age. Women are not necessarily any less populist than men, and, as Stephanie Coontz explains in a 2016 interview, “women who have the fewest opportunities to compete successfully in the labor market are the ones who are much more likely to support the policies and values that reward a traditional division of labor in the household,” (Denvir 2016). Women also see themselves as losing in the face of new politics, and consequently, we should anticipate gender to be a relatively indefinite indicator (Denvir 2016). Similarly, the impact of age differs in scholastic literature; some suggest a substantial age-gap in anti-elite sentiment and PRR support, with the elderly feeling estranged as their generation is displaced, but other studies find that youth are particularly populist (Zhang 2017). Equal rights for the LGBTQA+ community elicits negative reactions from the very religious and traditional conservatives. The less educated may feel left behind due to the increase of tertiary education in developed post-industrial society and the resulting loss of status for secondary education (Gidron and Hall 2017). As the hub of economic activity has moved from rural areas to cities and towns, the rural and provincial, and those employed in the agricultural sector, will

feel left behind. Those who now face unemployment or underemployment due to brain drain or outsourcing will view themselves in opposition to the “big-wig” elites who made those choices. The left behind are those who have a social standing and status to protect that has been threatened by new cultural and economic trends.

The left-behind approach offers a set of hypotheses that will be tested; rather than following Gidron and Hall directly, this study investigates social integration and self-identified social status separately.

Hypothesis 1: The more socially integrated a person feels, the less likely they will be to hold anti-elite sentiments.

Hypothesis 2: The more secure a person’s self-identified social status, the less likely they will be to hold anti-elite sentiments.

In testing these hypotheses, we can organize independent variables by the hypothesis that they most closely relate to. Variables of social integration are: rural or urban living, new political ideas, social trust, political trust, employment, and social interaction. The socially integrated person will be an employed, urbanite with new political ideas, high levels of social and political trust, low nativist feelings, and will meet with friends and family regularly. Variables of self-identified social status (SSS) are: years of education, gender, resentment, and age. A person who is vulnerable because of their SSS will have lower levels of education and resentful feelings. They will *probably* be an elderly male, however, as was previously discussed, there are variations in results regarding both age and gender.

Research Design and Methodology

This study will draw upon data from Round 7 of the European Social Survey (ESS). The use of responses from European voters is logical as it builds upon the theoretical framework

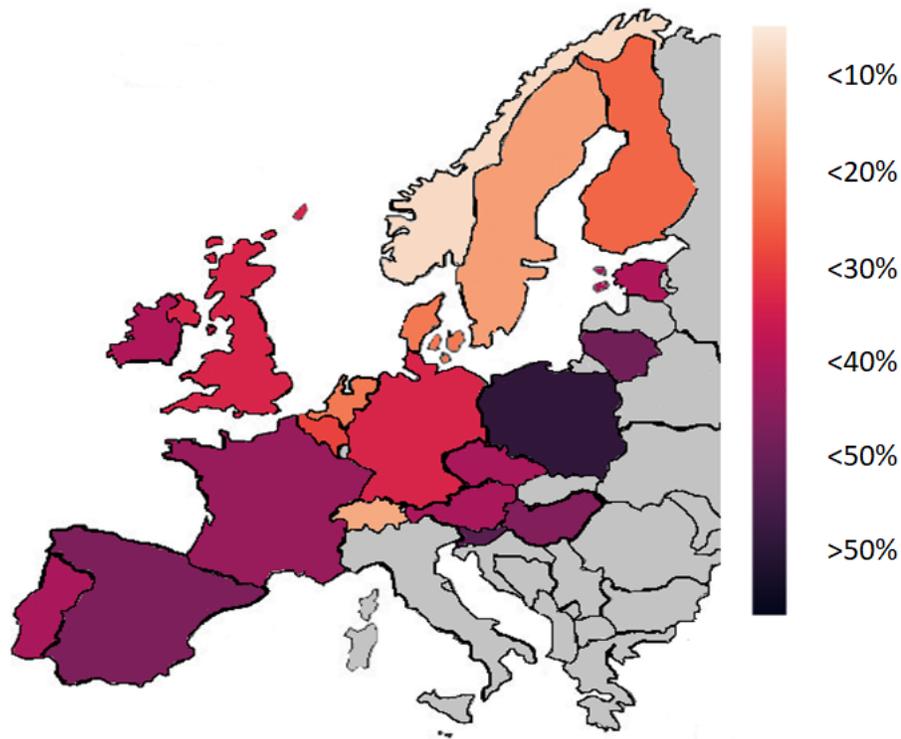
which suggests that developed democracies that have undergone post-material values change will be the most likely to exhibit anti-elite sentiments, where the elites are defined as political and cultural elites, as much as, or more than, purely economic elites. This is not to dismiss the rise of distrust and populism in other areas of the world, but the literature suggests that manifestations of populism and political distrust and cynicism outside of post-industrial liberal democracies represent different phenomena (Inglehart 1977; Dalton 1988, 2004; Mudde 2007; Seyd 2008; Ziller and Schübel 2015; Hochschild 2016; Inglehart and Norris 2016; Gidron and Hall, 2017; van der Meer and Hahkverdian 2017). The European selection allows control over the basic systemic influences that can be identified from the literature, such as post-materialist value change, modern media practices, and the shift to an information economy. By controlling for these for variables, we can better look at what influences attitudes at the individual level.

The current study will analyze survey responses from approximately 37,500 core voters between the ages of 18 and 100, from twenty European countries. Countries included in the survey and the number of respondents from each country can be found in Appendix A. SPSS statistical software will be used to conduct OLS Linear Regression to model individual level anti-elite sentiments, where elites are defined as politicians, and level of trust and support is measured on a 4 point scale. Independent variables used will be age, gender, employment status, years in education, and various composite measures including social trust, political trust, nativist sentiment, and social interaction. For the operationalization of the variables used, please see Appendix B.

Analysis and Results

Map 1 shows international dispersal of anti-elite attitudes across Europe. The heat map is based on the percentage of respondents who scored a 1 on the scale of anti-elite sentiment, and thus have the least favorable attitudes towards elites. Generally, the results indicated on the map are satisfying and fit with popular epistemology about attitudes in different groups of nations. For example, Scandinavian states exhibit the lowest levels of anti-elite sentiment, with Norway reporting less than 10% of people at the lowest operationalized level of anti-elite sentiment. Similarly, former Soviet states have some of the highest levels of distrust, where in Poland, over 50% of respondents reported the lowest distrust in their elites. As a whole, the heat map does show the overall trend of rising anti-elite sentiment in advanced democracies, and the variation across states suggests different historical and cultural influences effecting anti-elite sentiment at the national level.

The first stage of analysis for the individual level employs bivariate correlations in order to assess the relationships among variables and the degree and direction of association between each independent variable and the dependent variable (anti-elite sentiment). To assess H1 (“The more socially integrated a person feels, the less likely they will be to hold anti-elite sentiments”) we will use the independent variables previously labeled “indicators of social integration.” Similarly, to test H2, (“The more secure a person’s self-identified social status, the less likely they will be to hold anti-elite sentiments,”) the SSS indicators were used. The bivariate correlation results are presented in Table 1. All variables are significant, and the most robust relationship is between anti-elite sentiment and political trust (.735**), followed by social trust (.401), and nativist sentiment (.287**).

Map 1: Heatmap of anti-elite sentiment across Europe

Most of the measures of social integration: social interaction, political trust, social trust, urban living, and employment, do correlate in the anticipated direction; new politics, however, does not. This could be due to the deference to authority that is common in traditional politics. H2 is partially supported, and both age and gender do correlate as anticipated. The gender result suggests that men are slightly *more* trusting of elites than women, and that the elderly exhibit more anti-elite sentiment than the young. One interesting indicator is years of education, as it is significantly correlated with every other variable in ways that make intuitive sense.

Table 1: Correlation Matrix of Variables

| Variables | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. | 9. | 10. | 11. | 12. |
|-------------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
| 1.Anti-Elite Sentiment | - | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2.Rural/Urban | .047** | - | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3.New Politics | .193** | .049** | - | | | | | | | | | |
| 4.Social Trust | .401** | .027** | .203** | - | | | | | | | | |
| 5.Political Trust | .735** | .056** | .200** | .413** | - | | | | | | | |
| 6.Employment | .075** | .030** | .123** | .054** | .067** | - | | | | | | |
| 7.Nativism | .131** | .014** | .186** | .152** | .135** | .101** | - | | | | | |
| 8. Interaction | .150** | .117** | .203** | .139** | .133** | .004 | .125** | - | | | | |
| 9.Years of Education | .038** | .002 | -.026** | -.003** | .057** | .261** | .207** | .057** | - | | | |
| 10.Gender | .141** | .073** | .176** | .132** | .139** | .076** | .017** | .023** | -.021** | - | | |
| 11.Resentment | .287** | .091** | .300** | .280** | .305** | .050** | .270** | .088** | .138** | -.025** | - | |
| 12.Age | -.068** | -.026** | -.170** | .003 | -.059** | -.247** | .046** | -.201** | -.163** | -.037** | -.063** | - |
| 13.Income Feeling | -.275** | -.008 | -.194** | -.276** | -.264** | -.171** | -.195** | -.170** | -.187** | -.066** | -.141** | .046** |

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Results from the multivariate regression can be seen in Table 2, which indicates that many variables become statistically insignificant, with social trust, political trust, social interaction, nationalism, age, and income perception remaining significant. A significant regression equation was found ($F(12,28854)=3014.806$, $p<.000$), with an adjusted R^2 value of .556. This means that the model can account for roughly 55% of the variance in the dependent variable (anti-elite sentiment). Analysis of a step-wise regression indicates that much of the variance can be explained by a single indicator, i.e. political trust. Political trust, social trust, and attitudes toward income together account for 55.4% of the variance in the model. In the regression, both education and nativism become much weaker than bivariate correlations indicate in Table 1. Despite this, education is substantively significant as it is so correlated with other measures. Similarly, nativism seems to become less robust in the regression model than in the bivariate correlations.

Table 2: Multi-variate Regression Model

| Variable | B | Std. Error | Beta | Sig. |
|---------------------------|----------|-------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Rural/Urban | .055 | .008 | -.001 | .797 |
| Social Trust | .067 | .004 | .079 | .000 |
| Political Trust | .487 | .003 | .667 | .000 |
| New Politics | -.003 | .002 | -.006 | .145 |
| Employment | -.005 | .008 | .003 | .474 |
| Social Interaction | -.005 | .002 | .009 | .037 |
| Years of Education | .016 | .008 | .009 | .036 |
| Gender | .001 | .007 | .000 | .929 |
| Resentment | .008 | .008 | .004 | .340 |
| Nativism | .043 | .005 | .041 | .000 |
| Age | -.018 | .005 | -.016 | .000 |
| Income Feeling | -.053 | .005 | -.046 | .000 |

In Table 1, we see that nativism is significantly correlated with every other variable at the .01 level and could be washed out in the control model. For both H1 and H2, it is possible to reject the null hypothesis: there are relationships between SSS and anti-elite sentiment, and between

social integration and anti-elite sentiment. We also see that findings are consistent with the idea that attitudinal measures are more telling than demographics. Furthermore, data analysis lends support to the direction and causal relationship between the independent variables and dependent variable.

Conclusion

The last half-century has been characterized by rising anti-elite sentiment and general political distrust among the public in Western nations. These broad trends can be explained at the system-level by the rise of globalization, the rise of Internet technology, mass education, and changing media and political practices. Map 1 indicates that there is an international trend toward anti-elite sentiment, and that there are differences in attitudes at the level of the individual: some states, despite living under the same international trends, are more anti-elitist than others, and some individuals are anti-elitist where others are not. This study sought to understand why individual Europeans have adopted anti-elite attitudes to a greater extent than others. Scholars have proposed explanations involving feelings of economic insecurity and a sense of impending cultural threat. The “left-behind” hypothesis incorporates both cultural and economic insecurities in its explanation. This study indicates that an individual’s levels of social and political trust are the most telling indicators of their attitude toward elites, which is in keeping with the trend for attitudes to be more important explanatory indicators than demographic measures. This study also finds that the left behind theory is useful for explaining anti-elite sentiment, as both economic and social variables emerge as significant.

There are limitations to this study that future research could address. One such limitation was that Round 7 of ESS did not include a question about race. Existing literature suggests that race and race-driven resentment is an important indicator of anti-elite attitudes and distrust; as

multi-culturalism and equal-rights for minorities become more important and gain more attention, majority-race groups may feel angry and out of step with society. Another limitation relates to the type of elite the study was able to address. This study was only able to evaluate attitudes towards political elites because of the questions in the data set. Without questions addressing attitudes towards academics and cultural elites, this study remains incomplete, and it cannot consider the full range of elites. Future research could include questions that tap into attitudes toward academics, experts, and cultural elites such as television hosts and news anchors. Similarly, future research should seek to include a specific marker for race. Also, because of the differences in trust level across Europe that is indicated in Map 1, it may be interesting to use dummy variables and control for state. This study contributes to a question of growing importance in the international community. Growing anti-elite sentiment is a phenomenon with severe consequences for existing social and political systems and getting to the heart of these attitudes could help to quell them.

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