The Role of Social Integration and Anti-Immigration Attitudes in Motivating Support for Brexit

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Abstract

Right-wing populism has experienced a surge in popularity among advanced democracies around the world. The success of right-wing populism has changed the course of history for the United Kingdom, which, due to the success of Brexit, will become the first state to ever leave the European Union. Recent research has identified several potential grievances that have motivated support for right-wing populism. The first theory points to the economic grievances that result from the economic displacement that accompanies modernization. The second theory emphasizes cultural grievances, with those that feel their traditional values have been challenged and displaced taking part in a "cultural backlash." The declinism theory states that populism is a result of people viewing society as declining, whether that be socially, culturally, or economically. The fourth and final theory states that those who lack social recognition and respect are the most likely to feel "left behind" and support right-wing populism. This analysis will focus on the "left behind" theory which accounts for educational and class differences that past theories have not been able to explain. We hypothesize that those who feel they are no longer respected or recognized in society are the most likely to support Brexit. Using an OLS regression, we find that those who perceive themselves to be part of a lower social class, feel they are not treated with respect, and maintain anti-immigration attitudes are more likely to support Brexit.

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Introduction

The electoral prevalence and persistence of right-wing populism in advanced democracies has reached an unprecedented level over the past two decades (Inglehart & Norris 2016). The longevity and success of populism is a byproduct of social modernization, where developed democracies have experienced significant technological and societal change (Arwine & Mayer 2013). These changes have led to a more informed electorate that is increasingly skeptical of the established political systems and politicians. Increased skepticism and mistrust of the establishment, coupled with new grievances generated by the economic transformations of globalization and post-industrialization, has left traditional mainstream parties unable and unwilling to satisfy the demands of citizens. Citizens' support has instead shifted towards anti-establishment populist parties and movements that recognize these new grievances.

Populist parties have entered legislatures throughout Europe often due to proportional electoral rules that provide opportunities for new, small, challenger parties to gain seats amidst larger and more centrist parties. The Netherlands' populist radical right party, the Party for Freedom, only received 13% of the national vote but won 20 seats and became the second largest party in the Dutch House of Representatives (*The Economist* 2017). It was once considered conventional wisdom that majoritarian electoral rules were a safeguard against PRR parties gaining power. This aligned with Duverger's Law, which stipulates that first-past-the-post electoral rules produce party systems with two broad and ideologically centrist catch-all parties. Under these conditions, it is very difficult for a new party to form and gain enough support to experience electoral success, even in countries that have simultaneously generated grievances among a significant proportion of the electorate due to economic and cultural modernization (Norris 2005). As it turns out, however, right-wing populism and identity politics are not prevented in majoritarian systems, they are simply forced to take a different route to enter and influence the system. On June 23, 2016, citizens of the United Kingdom voted to end their membership in the European Union by a vote of 51.9% to 48.1% (Clarke, Goodwin, & Whiteley 2016). Less than five months later on November 8, 2016, Americans elected Donald Trump to be the 45th President of the United States with 57% of the electoral college. Both of these votes made it clear that majoritarian systems are not immune to populism.

The electoral success of right-wing populism has led to a more divisive political climate, as citizens within majoritarian systems can typically be labeled one of two things: a supporter of the right-wing populist candidate or referendum, or not. Labels that have been attached to populist leaders and politicians, such as racist, xenophobic, homophobic, or sexist, have also been applied to their supporters. These broad, sweeping descriptions have done little to actually

account for the multi-faceted attitudes of the tens of millions of voters in each country that have supported right-wing populism.

The rise of right-wing populism in majoritarian systems indicates there is a significant segment of society that feels voiceless and angry as a result of the current political establishment. Populism is indicative of a deeper, more polarizing divide in society with little common ground between the two opposing parties. If these grievances are not addressed or recognized, Brexit and other forms of populism may only be the beginning of backlash movements (Goodhart 2017). The great divide among citizens should serve as warning to policy makers that there is something badly out-of-balance in our representative democracies and that a large segment of society is feeling "left behind." These grievances signal that politicians and policy makers alike must do more to address problems of social integration and address the ways in which citizens feel their demands are not being met. Support for right-wing populism is a force that cuts across age, income, education, and even political parties (Goodhart 2017). Understanding what drives populist support across a wide range of people is imperative to understanding how to strengthen liberal democracy and representative institutions.

At the broadest level, this paper will analyze the drivers of support for right-wing populism by looking at the unlikely case of success in a majoritarian electoral context: the vote for Brexit in Britain. Can support be attributed to those that are classified as the "losers of modernization"? Is support linked to a "cultural backlash" against the progressive values that emerged in the 1970s to directly challenge traditional values and hierarchies among elites across developed democracies? Or, can support be better explained by a failure of social integration in affluent Western societies that causes a growing number of citizens to feel that they are "left behind"?

Populism: A Movement of Different Crises

The definition of populism over time has narrowed and widened in specificity. Despite the numerous variations, the most prominent definition treats populism as a thin-centered ideology with a clearly articulated, but narrow core (Mudde 2004). The two fundamental features of this restricted core are (1) the superior and moral status of "the people" over the identified "other" and (2) that politics should be a direct expression of the will of ordinary citizens (Mudde 2004). Populism is thin and vague in general, allowing for versatility in expression from state to state (Betz 1998). Inherent in this versatility is the country-specific definition of "the people" and the "Other," although the easiest way to identify who "the people" are is to identify who the "Others" are first (Mudde 2007). There is a Manichean distinction between the two groups, with the "Others," and the elites who protect and promote them, being seen as the evil enemy (Mudde 2007). "The people" are described, in direct opposition to the outgroup, as moralistic, good, and endowed with common sense (Mudde 2004; Mudde 2007). Though the thin ideology of populism may attach itself with ideologies of the right or left, for the purposes of this research, populism will be discussed only in terms of right-wing populism, the variance that has received the most attention in the literature.

The rise of right-wing populism is identified by Kriesi as "movements of crisis" that are related with societal displacement (Betz 1998). Populist movements therefore, are thought to be found when a society is experiencing significant change that disrupts traditional structures, whether they be cultural, social, or economic. Over the past two decades, there has been renewed interest in explaining the rise of right-wing populism throughout advanced democracies. One explanatory variable that research has examined has been on the "supply-side," which emphasizes the role of the parties within the political marketplace (Norris 2005). This approach

focuses on the actions of the party and party leaders, and analysis of party platforms, rhetoric used, and chosen placement on the ideological spectrum (Norris 2005). The opposing approach looks at public demand for political parties, emphasizing the development of specific grievances within society that precipitate the demand for populist right-wing parties (Norris 2005). Although the Leave campaign undoubtedly played some role in motivating support for Brexit on the supply side, the current research is interested only in the demand side. Specifically, what grievances motivated voters to support the Brexit referendum.

Populism has often been attributed to the psychological crises that result from modernization and de-industrialization. Commonly known as the "losers of modernization" thesis, Betz (1998) asserts that the societal changes that accompanied modernization have made blue-collar workers and employees doing routine work feel insecure, afraid, anxious, and uncertain of the future due to societal and economic displacement. Populist parties address these latent fears and economic insecurities, allowing those that feel displaced by modernization to feel protected by populist parties and leaders (Betz 1998; Golder 2016). This psychological crisis is most likely to be found in those that were affected by the economic shift from an industrial-based to service-based economy, primarily the less educated and those that were in the traditional "popular classes" (Betz 1998). Empirical results, however, have produced mixed results (Inglehart & Norris 2016). This hypothesis does not account for right-wing populist support beyond the social groups that were displaced by modernization and de-industrialization (Inglehart & Norris 2016).

An alternate hypothesis suggests that support for right-wing populism is a result of the cultural crises in advanced democracies due to traditional values being challenged and supplanted by secular, progressive values (Inglehart 1977; Inglehart 1990; Inglehart & Welzel

2005; Inglehart & Norris 2016). The cultural backlash thesis goes beyond economic displacement to suggest that support can be seen as a reaction to the cultural value change that has accompanied modernization (Inglehart & Norris 2016). Elderly people, white men, and those that are less educated are expected to react most negatively to this cultural change and seek recognition and protection among populist right-wing parties and movements (Inglehart & Norris 2016). This thesis correctly acknowledges the shift in research that emphasizes values and attitudes as better predictors of populist right-wing support, rather than an individual's social and economic group characteristics (Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove 2014; Inglehart &Norris 2016; Gidron & Hall 2017). But the cultural backlash hypothesis fails to properly explain why those that are highly educated still support right-wing populist parties and additionally, why cultural backlash is just now taking place, considering progressive values developed in the late 1960s (Bartels 2017; Gidron & Hall 2017).

A theory that better explains what drives support for right-wing populism relates to a general societal crisis. The declinism theory suggests that populist support originates from individuals that perceive society as changing in a negative way and have a sense of relative deprivation (Elchardus & Spruyt 2014). Support for populism is not dependent on personal satisfaction, since perceptions are based on *societal* decline and not personal circumstances (Elchardus & Spruyt 2014). Related to this thesis, Gidron and Hall (2017) suggest that support for populism is related to a crisis of social integration. Gidron and Hall use level of social integration to operationalize feeling "left behind" and go to extensive lengths to show that subjective social status (SSS) is a reliable indicator of social integration (2017). This hypothesis states that those who feel "left behind," and therefore not socially integrated, are more likely to support populist parties (Gidron & Hall 2017). Individuals that are more concerned with respect

and recognition from society, rather than redistribution, are more likely to support right-wing populism (Gidron & Hall 2017).

Little research has been generated on what attitudes influenced support for the EU referendum in the United Kingdom. An aggregate-level analysis found that there were associations between education level and support for Brexit, with areas that have a higher proportion of people with no educational qualifications being more likely to support Brexit (Goodwin & Heath 2016). There was also an evident association between age and support for Brexit, with areas that have more constituents aged 65 and over being more likely to support Brexit. Areas with more people aged 18 to 30 were less likely to support Brexit. Another recent study found that economic and immigration benefit-cost calculations had a strong connection in influencing voters' decision to support Brexit, although this research does not follow any of the theoretical approaches outlined here (Clarke, Goodwin, & Whiteley 2016). Research concerning the attitudes among Brexit voters is in its infancy, indicating there is still significant investigation needed to understand what attitudes motivated voters to leave the EU.

The "left behind" theory articulated and tested by Gidron and Hall offers the most promising explanation for the motivations of Brexit voters. It may therefore be hypothesized that: the lower a person's social integration, the more likely they will support Brexit.

Research Design

The universe of cases for this research includes the core voters for right-wing populism in all advanced democracies. In particular, Brexit has been recognized as a signal of populism's undeniable presence in advanced democracies (Goodhart 2017). It is almost universally recognized as a case of Eurosceptic right-wing populism, although it was manifested through a referendum and not a legislative election. With Brexit serving as an example of the manifestation

of right-wing populism in advanced democracies, the theories advanced throughout the literature in relation to attitudes among voters ought to also apply to those that voted to leave the EU.

This paper will investigate the level of social integration among individuals in the United Kingdom that voted to leave the European Union. A face-to-face post-election survey completed in 2015 by the British Election Study (BES) will be used that includes occupation data and vote validation. The BES has conducted post-election surveys after every general election since 1964 and maintains its status as one of the longest running election studies in the world. The sample drawn from the BES 2015 survey includes 2,987 respondents, which is a large sample size that will offer results with high confidence levels. Despite the survey taking place a year prior to the EU referendum, the questionnaire specifically asks respondents about their intended vote in the referendum and whether they approve or disapprove of EU membership. The timing of this survey will allow for support for Brexit to be analyzed prior to the Leave campaign. This allows the supply-side effects to be minimized in our research, emphasizing the demand that was present prior to the Leave and Remain campaigns. These will serve as the proxy measures for "leave" and "remain" votes in the referendum. Based off of Gidron and Hall's research, questions that relate to social integration will be used. In order to analyze support specifically for right-wing populism, the social integration questions will deal with an individual's perception of recognition and respect from society. Based off of the associations found in past research, demographic measurements will be incorporated as controls for any influence these factors might have on voting behavior in the EU referendum.

Using SPSS Statistical Analysis Software, a linear regression model will be employed to analyze the relationship between support for Brexit and feelings that relate to social integration. Support for Brexit will be the dependent variable with feelings of social integration being the key

hypothesis variables. Using a linear regression method of analysis is the appropriate statistical modelling technique when analyzing a scaled dependent variable. The significance of each variable along with the coefficients will create an equation that estimates an individual's level of support for Brexit.

Operationalization and Measurement

Following the work of Gidron and Hall (2017), economic factors, cultural factors, and the interaction between these two factors, all influence feelings of social integration among individuals. It is broadly accepted that the societal shift towards higher education has economically displaced those that benefitted from an industrial society who are now considered low-skilled with low levels of education and therefore, minimal opportunities to change jobs or relocate (Gidron & Hall 2017; Goodhart 2017). Those who feel they have been economically displaced or that their values have been rejected by society are most likely to have their social statuses altered and perceive to receive less respect from society. These feelings of economic displacement and societal rejection of values culminate to feeling "left behind" (Gidron & Hall 2017). Subjective social status is therefore used to operationalize feeling "left behind." Proxy measures used by Gidron and Hall to capture subjective social status included level of social contact; degree to which people see themselves as part of a shared normative order; and the level of respect or recognition people perceive to be given by others.

Due to the limitations of the dataset used in this research, subjective social status will be captured through the survey question that asks respondents whether they feel that they belong to the working class, middle class, or upper class. According to the work of Gidron and Hall, those that are more concerned with respect and recognition from society are more likely to support right-wing populism, while those that are more concerned with redistribution are more likely to

support left-wing populism. Respect and recognition from society will be captured with a question that asks whether respondents agree or disagree with the phrase "politicians don't care what people like me think." Support for redistribution will be captured by asking whether respondents believe the government should (1) cut taxes and spend less on social services or (2) increase taxes and spend more on social services. Anti-immigration attitudes will also be incorporated as an independent variable to capture those that perceive immigrants and immigration negatively. Anti-immigration attitudes will be measured by asking respondents whether they think there have been too many immigrants let into the country or not. Additional independent variables that will serve as controls include gender, working status, union membership, age, income, and education level to control for any differences in demographics that may influence an individual's decision to support Brexit. These controls will allow for the significance and strength of attitudinal measures to be accurately identified. For further explanation of each independent variable included in the analysis, please reference the Appendix.

For the dependent variable, two questions selected from the BES survey were coded in the same direction and combined to create an additive scale. The first question asked respondents if they approved of EU membership, while the second question asked whether the respondent would vote to leave or remain in the EU if the election were held that day. Support for Brexit is therefore measured along a continuum from 0 to 4, with 0 capturing those that fully support EU integration and want to remain in the EU and 4 representing those that do not approve of EU membership and would vote to leave in the referendum.

Before applying a regression analysis, a bivariate correlation was employed to determine if significant correlations exist between the dependent and independent variables as well as between different independent variables.

The first clear finding in Table 1 is that all of the independent variables correlate with the dependent variable in the direction we would expect besides union membership, those aged 65 and up, and the underemployed variable. Consistent with Gidron and Hall's work, subjective social status and treated with respect are also significantly and negatively correlated. This finding indicates that those who feel they are not recognized or respected are more likely to feel that they are part of a lower social class. Anti-immigration sentiments are significantly correlated with subjective social status and treated with respect, which is what we would expect in the UK context given the negative rhetoric surrounding immigration issues. This indicates that those who do not support immigration also feel that they are part of a lower social class and do not feel socially respected. Additionally, there were number of variables significantly correlated with the declinism variable.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Support Brexit	-											
2. Subjective class	-0.10**	-										
3. Treated with Respect	0.168**	-.197**	-									
4. Support for redistribution	-.079**	-.053	0.009	-								
5. Declinism (economy)	-0.028	0.181**	-0.304**	-0.106**	-							
6. High Income	-.131**	0.253**	-0.310**	-0.056**	0.200**	-						
7. Union Membership=1	-0.026	-0.044	-0.044*	0.042*	-0.006	0.141**	-					
8. Male=1	0.013	0.001	0.015	-0.062**	0.110**	0.118**	-0.008	-				
9. Tertiary Education=1	-.194**	0.283**	-0.22**	-0.001	0.098**	0.354*s*	0.150**	-0.013	-			
10. Ages 18-30=1	-.140**	-0.088**	0.027	-0.068**	-0.049**	-0.043*	-0.041*	-0.016	0.026	-		
11. Ages 65+ =1	-.125**	0.079**	0.011	0.078**	0.062**	-.252**	-.150**	0.020	0.174**	-0.254**	-	

12. Underemployed	-.010	0.050	0.012	0.087**	-0.088***	-.267**	-.101**	-.251**	-.096**	0.014	0.143**	-
13. Anti-immigration =1	0.309**	-0.071*	0.110**	-0.078**	0.016	-0.142**	-0.044**	-0.015	-0.281**	-0.123**	0.160**	0.015

Table 1: Bivariate correlations among the dependent variable and independent variables

Dependent Variable: Support for Brexit	Unstandardized Coefficients (β)	Standard Error
Constant	2.176*** (0.00)	0.538
Anti-immigration=1	0.462*** (0.002)	0.147
Treated with Respect	0.166* (0.079)	0.094
SSS	-0.274* (0.072)	0.152
Support Redistribution	-0.007 (0.829)	0.034
Declinism	-0.008 (0.914)	0.075
Underemployed	-0.023 (0.886)	0.157
High Income	-0.011 (0.590)	0.020
Union Membership=1	0.066 (0.686)	0.163
Male=1	-0.013 (0.925)	0.141

Tertiary Education=1	-0.122 (0.434)	0.156
Ages 18-30=1	-0.265 (0.186)	0.200
Ages 65+=1	0.247 (0.451)	0.327
Adjusted R^2	0.088	
Note:		*p<0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01 (p-value in parentheses)

Table 2: Full model of variables associated with support for Brexit

There was a significant and positive correlation between subjective social status and declinism, indicating that an individual was more likely to believe society had declined if they perceived themselves to be in a lower social class. Those that agreed they were not respected socially were also more likely to believe society had declined. This demonstrates that feeling as though society is in general decline may have a significant but indirect effect in motivating support for Brexit.

Since the dependent variable is measured using an additive scale, ordinary least squares (OLS) is the appropriate method to use in this analysis. Using OLS, a linear regression is estimated to determine what attitudinal and demographic factors influence support for Brexit. Table 2 indicates that all of the independent variables included in the bivariate correlations were included in the first estimated regression. All of the independent variables behaved in the direction predicted besides gender and working status. This indicates first that being a male does not increase support for Brexit and that being underemployed or unemployed does not lead to an increase in support for Brexit either. Besides these variables not behaving in the expected direction, they were also not significant, which further indicates that they are not a reliable measure for determining an individual's level of support for Brexit. The only significant variables identified, in order of significance, were anti-immigration attitudes, treated with respect, and subjective social status.

An additional linear regression was estimated in order to eliminate all independent variables that were not statistically significant in the full model. Thus, the final model only includes variables that have a significant relationship with support for Brexit at the .01 or .05 levels.

Based off of the three statistically significant variables identified, the final estimated equation can be represented by:

Support Brexit=1.850 + 0.521(Ant-immigration=1) + 0.201(Treated with Respect) – 0.302(SSS)

Anti-immigration attitudes are statistically significant at the 0.01 level, which means we can be more than 99% confident in its relationship with support for Brexit. Feeling treated with respect was statistically significant at the 0.02 level, which means we can be more than 98% confident in its relationship with support for Brexit. Subjective social status was statistically significant at the 0.05 level, which means we can be more than 95% confident of its relationship with support for Brexit.

Table 3: Significant variables associated with support for Brexit

Dependent Variable: Support for Brexit	Unstandardized Coefficients ( )	Standard Error
Constant	1.850*** (0.000)	0.338
Anti-immigration=1	0.521*** (0.000)	0.139
Treated with Respect	0.201** (0.016)	0.083
SSS	-0.302** (0.025)	0.134
Adjusted R^2	0.106	
Note:		*p<0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01 (p-value in parentheses)

Treated with respect, subjective social class, and anti-immigration attitudes were the three statistically significant variables in the final estimated regression as seen in Table 3. The coefficient for anti-immigration attitudes still behaves in the direction expected, indicating a positive relationship with support for Brexit. This positive relationship means that if an

individual believes too many immigrants have been let into the country, their support for Brexit increases by 0.52 points on the scale for support for Brexit. The coefficient for treated with respect is in the direction predicted, demonstrating a positive relationship with voting for Brexit. This means that if an individual "strongly agrees" that they are not recognized or respected, which is coded as a "4," support for Brexit will increase by 0.804 points (0.201*4). Also behaving in the expected direction, subjective social status has a negative relationship with support for Brexit. If an individual perceives to be part of the middle class, coded as "2," then their support for Brexit decreases by 0.604 (-0.302*2).

The coefficients identified for treated with respect and subjective social status support hypothesis 1. The coefficient for treated with respect indicates that the more an individual believes their voice is not heard or recognized, the greater their support for Brexit will be. The coefficient for subjective social class indicates that those who perceive themselves to have a higher social class are less likely to vote for Brexit. Both of these findings are consistent with the findings of Gidron & Hall's research. The identification of anti-immigration attitudes as statistically significant is a valuable finding that was not directly included in the hypothesis. But based off of the significant correlations between treated with respect and subjective social status, anti-immigration sentiments seem to play a significant role in feeling socially integrated and valued or respected within society. Understanding the significance of feelings towards immigration in the UK can thus expand our understanding of what determines feeling socially integrated in the UK.

The adjusted R-squared value for this model is 0.106, which indicates that roughly 11% of the behavior of the dependent variables can be explained by these three independent variables. Although this explanatory value seems low, it is to be expected considering other significant

variables such as party identification and support for the UK Independence Party were not included. Therefore, this model can still be considered a reliable source for determining an individual's level of support for Brexit when only examining attitudinal measures.

These findings suggest that there is a significant issue of social integration in the United Kingdom, with a significant segment of the population feeling "left behind," and therefore not recognized, or socially respected. This indicates that many people feel voiceless and believe they that they are not fully valued members of society. One potential reason for not feeling socially recognized may be that British citizens feel their demands are overlooked by the EU and political establishment in comparison to immigration issues. The same findings are likely applicable to the success of Donald Trump in the United States with many Americans not feeling socially respected or valued by society. Immigration issues potentially played a significant role in this election, too. More broadly, these findings suggest that there is a crisis of social integration across Western society that is giving rise to right-wing populism in many different forms. The Leave campaign and Brexit vote resonated with many grievances in the UK for the time being, but if measures that address social recognition are not undertaken, these grievances may only intensify over time. It is unclear what form these grievances may take if they intensify, but we can only expect them to be more polarizing and more extreme if not addressed within the political realm.

Limitations to this research include not incorporating measures of ethnicity, foreign status, controlling for rural and urban regions, controlling for areas such as Scotland and London that were heavily "remain" in Brexit, and feelings of English nationalism. These variables were all identified as statistically significant in past research but could not be implemented in this analysis due to survey limitations. Further research on Brexit may offer us a more detailed and

complete explanation about who supported Brexit and the different grievances that motivated this support.

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