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## Socioeconomic Declinism and Right-Wing Populist Support

Kayley Rettberg

Illinois Wesleyan University, [krettber@iwu.edu](mailto:krettber@iwu.edu)

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## Socioeconomic Declinism and Right-Wing Populist Support

### Abstract

This paper focuses on resolving the false dichotomy between the economic grievance and cultural backlash theses commonly presented in the literature on Right-Wing Populist attitude formation. It elaborates on Gidron and Hall's social integration thesis by introducing the socioeconomic declinism thesis, which combines social, cultural, and economic factors when measuring Right-Wing populist attitudes. The interaction between the cultural backlash, social integration, and economic grievance theories provides a more holistic account of why right-wing populist attitudes form. This study pulls from the European Social Survey Round 8 to conduct a large-N statistical analysis of two compiled indices—the socioeconomic integration index and the right-wing populist attitude index. Findings reveal a correlation between feelings of socioeconomic decline and right-wing populist attitudes. Determining why people formulate sympathy to populist ideas and leaders can help to dismantle populist support and reintegrate marginalized individuals into society without demonizing an outgroup.

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**Abstract**

*This paper focuses on resolving the false dichotomy between the economic grievance and cultural backlash theses commonly presented in the literature on Right-Wing Populist attitude formation. It elaborates on Gidron and Hall’s social integration thesis by introducing the socioeconomic declinism thesis, which combines social, cultural, and economic factors when measuring Right-Wing populist attitudes. The interaction between the cultural backlash, social integration, and economic grievance theories provides a more holistic account of why right-wing populist attitudes form. This study pulls from the European Social Survey Round 8 to conduct a large-N statistical analysis of two compiled indices—the socioeconomic integration index and the right-wing populist attitude index. Findings reveal a correlation between feelings of socioeconomic decline and right-wing populist attitudes. Determining why people formulate sympathy to populist ideas and leaders can help to dismantle populist support and reintegrate marginalized individuals into society without demonizing an outgroup.*

**Introduction**

The ideology of populism is at its core a divisive one. It is centered on an “us versus them” rhetoric that characterizes the people as an in-group and identifies outgroups as enemies (Mudde, 2004). Populism exists on both ends of the ideological spectrum. Right-wing populism in particular, capitalizes on anti-immigrant, nativist values calling for a return to the glory days where the mythical “people” held power, emphasizing reactionary nostalgia (Muller, 2016; Betz, 1993).

Populist ideologies appeal to people who feel marginalized from society particularly on cultural and economic grounds (Gidron & Hall, 2018). Capitalizing on this sentiment, populist leaders incite emotional responses and gain quick support, rallying supporters to view them as the “savior.” For this reason, a growing number of scholars assert that populism is at its core exclusionary, illiberal, and anti-pluralist. Therefore, the rise of the populist radical right contributes significantly to the democratic recession and political apathy (Schmuck & Matthes,

2017; Muller, 2016). Determining why people formulate sympathy to populist ideas and leaders can help to dismantle populist support and reintegrate marginalized individuals into society without demonizing an outgroup.

This study will focus on how feelings of socioeconomic marginalization affect populist attitude formation, specifically whether feelings of “socioeconomic declinism” lead to higher levels of right-wing populist support among individuals. Socioeconomic declinism is an attempt to bridge the false dichotomy traditionally drawn between economic, cultural, and social factors as causal mechanisms for populist support by accounting for all of these factors at once. Hopefully, this will lead to a more nuanced understanding of populist attitude formation that allows this study to answer the question, how do feelings of socioeconomic declinism affect populist support?

### **Literature Review and Theory**

Cas Mudde defines populism as, “An ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people” (2004, 543). On the radical right, this usually takes the form of anti-elite sentiment, authoritarianism, and nativism (Mudde, 2004; Muller, 2016). Populism is inherently a “thin ideology,” meaning that it must syncretize with another ideology to provide a complete worldview and prescription for action. This helps to explain the existence of right-wing and left-wing populisms (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2014; Ivaldi, Lanzone, & Woods 2017; Muller, 2016; Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008). Another key component of populism is the moralistic dimensions. Essentially, this means that the ingroup is characterized by holding the moral high ground and

the out-group is characterized as morally inferior (Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove 2014; Hawkins, 2009; Mudde, 2004). By characterizing the outgroup as morally inferior, populists fuel division. This division is also in part due to the *ex negativo* characterizing the ingroup. Populists define the ingroup not by its own characteristics, but by stating that it is what the outgroup is not, resulting in scapegoating of the out-groups and valorization of the in-group (Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013; Muller, 2016). These characteristics render populism an ideology of exclusion.

In determining what factors motivate right-wing populist attitudes, two primary schools of thought prevail. The first is the cultural backlash thesis and the second is the economic grievance thesis (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Essentially, the cultural backlash thesis purports that individuals are prone to populist ideologies when they feel that their culture is threatened by the New Left ideas generated in the Silent Revolution. This perceived threat leads to a backlash response in the form of adopting right-wing populist ideas, in an effort to preserve the “pure people” (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Muller, 2016; Schmuck & Matthes, 2017; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). For right-wing populist parties, an example of this is the appeal to anti-immigrant sentiments (Charitopoulou & Garcia-Manglano, 2017; Schmuck & Matthes, 2017). The economic grievance thesis, on the other hand, places primacy on perceptions of economic marginalization (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Lechler, 2019). In her analysis of right-wing populist support for anti-globalization policies, Marie Lechler uses employment shocks to show how economic destabilization makes individuals more prone to populist support (2019).

Some of the earliest work on contemporary right-wing populism highlighted economic grievances and resentments generated among the so-called “losers of modernization.” Essentially, this theory proposed that the individuals most harmed by economic globalization and modernization would be the most prone to adopting populist ideologies (Betz 1993). This theory is also framed in terms of economic modernization more generally, particularly with the shift away from a production-based economy to a service economy. The empirical economic shift also creates a shift in values to “post-modernist values,” which can create a devaluing of production based jobs (Arwine & Mayer, 2013; Marks, Attewell, Rovny, & Hooghe, 2017).

Empirical findings on this source of economic grievance have been mixed and generally less robust than cultural variables (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Mudde, 2007; Mudde, 2009). For example, Inglehart and Norris found that backlash against cultural change was a stronger driving factor of populist attitudes than economic insecurity (2016). This version of a much older modernization approach to understanding the rise of fascism has become so deeply ingrained in the popular and scholarly understandings of right-wing populism that many studies simply assume that those who support right-wing populist ideas and parties are hurting or perceive themselves as hurting economically. It would appear that the actual reasons are more complex. Mudde even contends that the economy is often a secondary issue for populists, falling behind the core notions of nativism, authoritarianism, and anti-elitism, suggesting a departure from the traditional understanding of the left-right spectrum (2007). For these reasons, bridging the dichotomous understanding of the cultural backlash and economic grievance theses may be the most useful in determining populist attitudes.

In an attempt to reexamine the economic grievance thesis, scholars developed the relative economic deprivation thesis. Relative economic deprivation is the perception individuals hold that their economic situation, regardless of actual socioeconomic status, is worse off than their peers, particularly due to structural inequalities and how valued an individual feels in society (Elchardus & Spryut, 2016; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Gaffney, Hackett, Rast, Hohman, & Jaurique, 2018). On the other hand, declinism focuses on the perception of the functionality of the economy as a whole. When people feel that society is on the decline, culturally and economically, they are more susceptible to populist sympathy (Antonucci, Horvath, Kutiyski, & Krouwel, 2019; Elchardus and Spryut 2016). Effectively, relative deprivation is the perception of the individual's status, and declinism is the perception that an individual holds about the direction of the economy overall.

Relative deprivation theory is stronger than the traditional economic grievance theory as it accounts for *perceptions* of economic deprivation, encapsulating feelings of wrong-doing by traditional socio-economic institutions and helping to explain why populist parties continue to thrive even when the economy is prospering (Elchardus and Spryut 2016; Mols and Jetten 2016). Frank Mols and Jolanda Jetten argue that right-wing populist parties twist rhetoric to lead voters to believe that “objective relative gratification” is actually relative deprivation (2016). The upshot of this is that even people who hold objectively high socioeconomic statuses may sympathize with populism so long as they feel that they are not as well off as they *should* be.

Gidron and Hall offer a more nuanced view and potential resolution of this debate with their social integration thesis, arguing that individuals are more prone to populist ideologies when they feel socially marginalized. The traditional understanding of the cultural backlash and

economic grievance theses as competing theories presents a false dichotomy, neglecting important insights into the factors behind populist support. Accounting for the fact that economic grievance interacts with cultural insecurities and understandings captures the individual's perspective that they have been "left-behind" by traditional political, cultural, and economic structures, alienating them to the populist margins (Antonucci et. al, 2019; Gidron & Hall, 2018; Hochschild, 2016; Gest, 2016; Wuthnow, 2018). Antonucci et. al argue that the "left-behind" feelings stem primarily from economic declinism (2019). Declinism can be expressed in a "nostalgic deprivation," where individuals desire a return to a (mythical) time when socioeconomic conditions were believed to be more promising and there was a cultural consensus that valued who they were and what they did. For right-wing populists, this usually refers to a time of greater homogeneity of "the people" (Marks et. al, 2017; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Arwine & Mayer, 2013). Individuals feeling nostalgic deprivation often have dismal hopes for the future (Gest, Reny, & Mayer, 2018; Gidron & Hall, 2018). The left-behind thesis elaborated by Gidron and Hall bridges the divide between the cultural backlash and economic grievance theories, resulting in a more encompassing thesis (2018).

In order to have a complete understanding of populist attitude formation, this research seeks to build on Gidron and Hall's attempt at solving the false dichotomy of the cultural backlash and economic grievance theses by introducing the socioeconomic declinism thesis. The socioeconomic declinism thesis suggests that due to the complexity and nuance in people's lives, it is impossible to achieve a complete and accurate understanding of right-wing populist attitude formation without examining cultural factors, social integration, and relative economic deprivation *together*. Unlike Gidron and Hall, this theory utilizes subjective economic measures

rather than empirical ones. Gidron and Hall use economic markers like income, occupation, and comfortability with income, which do not measure subjective perceptions of economic well being (2018). That being said, as noted earlier, subjective economic factors are more successful at explaining Right-Wing populist attitude formation (Antonucci et. al, 2019; Elchardus & Spryut, 2016; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Gaffney et. al, 2018). The socioeconomic declinism thesis accounts for this and will examine subjective markers of economic well-being. Based on the development of the socioeconomic declinism thesis, the following hypothesis can be formed:

**Hypothesis:** As feelings of socioeconomic declinism increase, populist support will also increase.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

This paper will use a large-N statistical analysis of the European Social Survey (ESS) Round 8<sup>1</sup>. By utilizing individual survey data across all of the countries surveyed by the ESS<sup>2</sup>, the analyses produced will be generalizable and account for right-wing populist attitude formation across Europe. Unfortunately, the cross-national nature of this study limits the amount of cultural nuance captured. Since the sample consists of cases from all of the European nations surveyed in the ESS Round 8, the individual conditions of every country are not controlled for. The sample size is 44,349 survey responses.

The dependent variable is right-wing populist support, operationalized as support for right-wing populist ideas, rather than electoral support for parties or leaders. This is measured through an additive index combining ESS survey questions that assess an individual respondent's

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<sup>1</sup> The ESS is an international academic survey conducted every two years. It catalogs information on social, cultural, and economic conditions in Europe to track changes over time. The data collected is highly trusted among scholars.

<sup>2</sup> Countries Included: Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Czechia, Germany, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russian Federation, Sweden, and Slovenia.

attitudes towards the core populist concepts of nativism, anti-elitism, and authoritarianism. Appendix A provides a complete list of questions included in the index. Correlational analysis tested the degree and direction of individual measures. These findings suggest that the question items cohere in the ways predicted in the literature, creating a valid measure of the concept. By combining multiple questions on the various core topics, this study accounts for the multi-faceted appeal of right-wing populism.

The independent variable, socioeconomic declinism, is also constructed as an additive index that particularly captures *perceptions* of socio-economic well-being, including social declinism, cultural anxieties, and relative economic deprivation. The index intentionally leaves out questions regarding an individual's actual socioeconomic status, because relative economic deprivation is concerned with perceptions. The index includes questions falling into three categories; social, cultural, and economic. Once again, correlational analysis confirmed that the degree and direction of the individual measures cohered in line with the literature. Please see Appendix B for a complete list.

This study will control for income to capture individuals' empirical socioeconomic status. Appendix C has a complete list of control variables. Income in particular was an important control, because the social integration index aims to capture only an individual's perceptions of their economic deprivation and social declinism, which makes their empirical socio-economic status less relevant. That being said, one might expect there to be some independent relationship between socio-economic status and populist attitudes. Other controls have been identified in the literature as independent drivers of right wing populist support (e.g. age, education, gender, and

rural residence), and so they are included in the OLS regression model presented here as controls.

This study will use SPSS statistical software to run an OLS linear regression model on the dependent variable, Right-Wing Populist support. Using an OLS linear regression model allows this study to analyze how each variable interacts with the dependent variable while holding all other variables constant. This shows which variables have a stronger effect on the dependent variable

### **Findings and Analysis**

Before setting up the regression model for Right-Wing populist attitudes, this study conducted a bivariate correlational analysis of the variables. Conducting a bivariate analysis first allows this study to see the direction of the relationship between each variable and which independent (Socioeconomic integration) or control variables correlate with the dependent variable (Right-Wing populist attitudes).

Table One shows the bivariate correlations between the variables. At the bivariate level, the socioeconomic declinism index and the Right-Wing populist attitude index correlated at  $-.599$ , which was the strongest correlation between the variables. This indicates that at the bivariate level, the less socially integrated one feels, the more likely that individual is to hold Right-Wing populist attitudes. Another interesting correlation is the correlation ideology and Right-wing populist attitudes. This correlation was not significant and was also negative, when we would have expected it to be significant and positive, suggesting that Right-Wing populist ideas do not appeal to individuals based on traditional liberal-conservative lines. This is not entirely surprising, as research suggests that Right-Wing populist ideas appeal to individuals

from the Old-Left as well as the far right, which may explain the lack of significance in this correlation (Arewine & Mayer, 2013). Similarly, gender had an insignificant correlation as well and also correlated in the negative direction when it was expected to correlate positively. This suggests that contrary to the popular assumption that women are inherently “less Right-Wing populist than men are,” while women may be less likely to vote for Right-Wing populist parties and leaders, they are just as likely to hold Right-Wing populist attitudes as men are. Simply put, being a woman does not inherently serve as a firewall against Right-Wing populist ideologies (Spierings & Zaslove, 2015).

**Table One**  
**Bivariate Correlation Matrix of Variables**

Variable	Populist Attitudes	Socioeconomic Integration	Gender	Ideology	Education	Income
Socioeconomic Integration (IV)	-.599* .000					
Gender (0=F, 1=M)	-.008 .105	.099* .000				
Ideology (1-10 scale, 10=Most Right 1=Most Left)	-.008 .117	.055* .000	.044* .000			
Education (0=Under Tertiary, 1=Tertiary or Above)	-.180* .000	.183* .000	-.040* .000	-.032* .000		
Income (by decile)	-.203* .000	.267* .000	.086* .000	.051* .000	.301* .000	
Urban or Non-Urban (0=Urban, 1=Non-Urban)	.039* .000	-.024* .000	.002 .647	.007 .152	-.142* .000	-.053* .000

\*Correlation is significant at the .01 level.

N=44,349

Table Two shows the results from the OLS linear regression model. Even after accounting for the influence of the other control variables, socioeconomic integration correlated the strongest, with a Beta value of  $-.575$ . Even when controlling for income (Beta value  $-.031$ ), socioeconomic integration held strong, suggesting that it is, in fact, subjective measures of economic security that matter towards individuals' formation of right wing populist attitudes more so than empirical measures of economic security. The second strongest Beta value was education at  $-.067$ , which is in line with the literature that education is a highly important factor in the formation of Right-Wing populist attitudes. That being said, socioeconomic integration had a much higher beta value, suggesting that the cultural, social, and subjective economic factors are the primary drivers. The adjusted  $r^2$  value was  $.358$ , which means that the linear regression model accounts for 35.8% of the variance. According to this model, it is possible to reject the null hypothesis, as a relationship exists between socioeconomic integration and Right-Wing populist attitudes.

**Table Two**  
**OLS Regression Model of Right Wing Populist Attitude Formation**

Variable	Unstandardized B	Standard Error	Beta	Significance
Urban/Non-Urban	.291	.224	<b>.013*</b>	.000
Education	-1.555	.098	<b>-.067*</b>	.003
Gender	1.080	.110	<b>.053*</b>	.000
Ideology	.091	.020	<b>.020*</b>	.000
Income	-.116	.018	<b>-.031*</b>	.000
Socioeconomic Integration	-.835	.007	<b>-.575*</b>	.000

\*Significant at the .01 level.

Adjusted  $r^2 = .358$

N=44,349

## **Conclusion**

The traditional compartmentalization of theories regarding Right-Wing populist attitude formation into the cultural grievance or economic backlash schools of thought has neglected to capture the nuance with which individuals formulate their political opinions. By developing the Socioeconomic Declinism thesis, this study has introduced nuance into the conversation surrounding Right-Wing populist attitude formation. The regression model shows that even when accounting for control variables like income, socioeconomic integration had the greatest effect on an individual's attitude formation. This allows us to accept the hypothesis that greater feelings of socioeconomic decline will lead to higher levels of Right-Wing populist support.

Looking forward, this research presents a few areas for exciting future research. In the future, it would be useful to control for the country by creating a dummy variable for each country and including them as controls. This would help capture some of the cultural nuances that can not be expressed without doing so. It would also be interesting to conduct the same study in the United States (controlling for race, of course), to see if Right-Wing populism in the US has a similar appeal to that in Europe. It would also make for interesting research to look more deeply into the relationship between gender, ideology, and Right-Wing populist attitudes, as those relationships were fairly unexpected for this research.

## Appendix A: Dependent Variable: Right-Wing Populist Attitudes Score

Questions Included in Right-Wing Populist Attitude Score		
Category	Questions	Coding
Nativism	“Would you say that [country]’s cultural life is generally enriched or undermined by people coming to live here from other countries?”	1-10 Scale 1 = Cultural life undermined 10 = Cultural life enriched
	“Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?”	1-10 Scale 1 = Worse Place 10 = Better Place
Anti-Elitism	“On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?”	0-10 Scale 0 = Extremely Dissatisfied 10 = Extremely Satisfied
	“Please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust... political parties?”	0-10 Scale 0 = No Trust at All 10 = Complete Trust
	“Please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust... politicians?”	0-10 Scale 0 = No Trust at All 10 = Complete Trust
Authoritarianism <sup>3</sup>	“Please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust... the police?”	0-10 Scale 0 = No Trust at All 10 = Complete Trust

<sup>3</sup> Only one question was included for authoritarianism, because as a category, these questions did not correlate as strongly with the other Right-Wing Populist categories. After beginning with three authoritarianism questions, this study narrowed the questions down to one to include in the index, with the chosen question being the one that correlated the most strongly with the questions from the Anti-elitism and nativism categories. Interestingly, the authoritarianism questions all correlated strongly with each other, which presents an opportunity for further research.

**Appendix B: Independent Variable: Socioeconomic Integration Score**

Questions Included in Socioeconomic Integration Score		
Category	Question	Coding
Economic	“On the whole, how satisfied are you with the present state of the economy in [country]?”	0-10 Scale 0 = Extremely Dissatisfied 10 = Extremely Satisfied
	“Of every 100 people of working age in [country] how many would you say are unemployed and looking for work?”	1: 50 or more 2: 49-45 3: 44-40 4: 39-35 5: 34-30 6: 29-25 7: 24-20 8: 19-15 9: 14-10 10: 9-5 11: 4-0
Social	“Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?”	0-10 Scale 0 = You can't be too careful 10 = Most people can be trusted
	“How often do you meet socially with friends, relatives or work colleagues?”	1: Never 2: Less than once a month 3: Once a month 4: Several times a month 5: Once a week 6: Several times a week 7: Every day
Cultural	“What do you think overall about the state of education in [country] nowadays?”	0-10 Scale 0 = Extremely Bad 10 = Extremely Good

## Appendix C: Control Variables

Control Variable	Measure	Expected Direction
Income	By Decile	+/-*
Age	Respondent self-reported age	+/-*
Gender	0=Female 1=Male	+
Ideology	0-10 0= Far Left 10=Far Right	+
Education	0= Tertiary or Above 1=Under Tertiary	+
Urban vs. Non-Urban	0= Urban 1= Non-Urban	+

\*+/- indicates that the literature is uncertain as to if the expected relationship should be positive or negative.

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