The Cultural Origins of Populism

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The electoral success of right-wing populist parties is often attributed to disaffection among certain voters. But while economic explanations for this disaffection are theoretically clear and quantifiable, explanations centered on cultural factors offer accounts that are more vague and harder to evaluate empirically. We address this problem by distinguishing theoretically between five different "storylines" about the cultural origins of populism and then test them using extensive data from Europe and the United States. Our analysis indicates that concerns about ethnocultural change induced by immigration are central to understanding the populist vote; so is rural resentment and status anxiety, but to a lesser extent. In contrast, explanations centered on community disintegration or an intergenerational values divide are pertinent in only specific cases. The analysis helps disentangle the cultural forces associated with the rise of populism and highlights the heterogeneous coalitions that form the populist base across different countries.

Right-wing populism is omnipresent; from France to the Netherlands, from the United Kingdom to Denmark, a rising proportion of the electorate in a host of advanced democracies is opting for populist parties and candidates on the right. As commentators have noted, populism derives much of its impetus from the emotional force it evokes (Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza 2017). In claiming to represent the true will of the people versus the interests of a self-serving and disconnected elite, populist forces have managed to mobilize the discontentment of many voters, those often described as the "left behind." But what is the source of anger and resentment that have fueled the rise of populist parties? What developments underlie these sentiments among the populist electorate?

Perhaps the most prominent explanation points to increased economic insecurity as the key source of discontent underlying the rise of populism (Guiso et al. 2017; Rodrik 2018). By this view, economic developments such as globalization, automation, and the global financial crisis have transformed the workforce of postindustrial countries, generating a widespread sense of dislocation, which in turn prompted the economic losers to opt for populist parties (e.g., Autor et al. 2020; Colantone and Stanig 2018).

The economic grievance–based explanation is often pitted against a "cultural" explanation, which emphasizes the role of nonmaterial concerns in driving public support for populism. Studies in this vein hold that populist rhetoric appeals to a sense of anxiety over issues such as collective identity, social status, moral values, and changing lifestyles, all of which are borne from social and cultural long-term structural changes that may have little to do with deteriorating economic circumstances.

A culture-centric account, while prominent in an array of studies, is hampered by a number of issues. For one, there is an inherent difficulty in quantifying and empirically testing explanations centered on social-cultural factors as the explanatory variable. As a result, much of the stronger evidence in support of a cultural explanation of populism comes from several ethnographies of communities characterized by high rates of support for populist parties or candidates (e.g., Cramer 2016; Gest 2016; Hochschild 2018; Lamont 2009). These ethnographies offer valuable insights into the concerns that

Published online March 19, 2025.

animate voters in such places, but it is hard to assess how well they explain populist support in a broader context beyond the one they study. Moreover, given that the aim of these works is to provide a detailed and textured depiction of residents' experiences, they often describe an array of concerns and resentments that people harbor, and they are less concerned with delineating a precise theory of why people vote for populism.

As a result, attempts to tease out the drivers of the populist vote are at somewhat of an impasse: economic factors are better measured and easier to test but exhibit limited explanatory significance (Margalit 2019). Cultural accounts, on the other hand, tend to be less specified and, perhaps as a result, do not have as much systematic empirical grounding (see Guriev and Papaioannou [2022] for a review).

This paper seeks to make headway on both of these issues. First, we seek to tease out and clearly describe a number of different potential culture-centric explanations of populism.[1] We then draw testable implications from each of these explanations and empirically assess their usefulness in accounting for right-wing populism, the dominant strand in the populist surge over the past two decades and, hence, the subject of most recent research on the topic.

Our theoretical exposition of these potential explanations focuses on the deep-rooted societal changes that generated the alleged concerns among voters, the demographics of those who supposedly harbor those concerns, and on the "other" against whom the grievances are directed. In addition, we explore the mechanisms through which disaffection stemming from cultural factors translates into rising support for populism and the extent to which the purported cultural drivers overlap or interact with economic factors.

A systematic review of the literature reveals five "storylines" that represent the different concerns and targets of blame underlying the electoral appeal of right-wing populism: (1) older cohorts who feel that traditional values have been trampled and overtaken by a postmaterialist culture and politics; (2) natives who fear that demographic changes and incoming waves of migration will change the country's cultural identity; (3) rural residents who feel shunned, and looked down upon, by urban elites and policymakers representing the interests and lifestyles of urbanites; (4) white men anxious about a decline in the privileged social status that their race, gender, and occupational standing have traditionally afforded them; and (5) people who feel isolated

and alienated due to the atomization of modern society and the absence of a cohesive local community to which they can belong or rely upon.

For sure, these five storylines are not mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, as we show below, they focus on different social and cultural changes that Western countries have undergone, be it a growing intergenerational divide, an evolving rural-urban split, or mass inward migration and a changing ethnic composition of society. Each storyline offers a different way to conceive of the chief sources of anxiety, indignity, and resentment, as well as the sentiments of pride and belonging, that underlie the draw of populism.

After detailing these five accounts, we assess their empirical plausibility using survey data covering 10 European countries collected by the European Social Survey (ESS) between 2012 and 2018 and data from the American National Election Study (ANES). The countries we examine vary in terms of historical background, electoral systems, and economic circumstances. And as figure SI-1 shows, all have experienced substantial increases in the vote share for right-wing populists but did so in varying levels and rates of change.

In our empirical analysis, the aim is not to causally identify the effects of a specific sociocultural factor in bringing about the populist success. Rather, our objective is to assess the plausibility of the different explanations, by comparing the match between each storyline's observable implications and the populist support base. Where the match is weak, the explanatory usefulness of that account is necessarily limited. Moreover, this approach illuminates which of the accounts best fits the patterns of populist support in each country.

Specifically, we center on three questions regarding each of the storylines. First, how sizable is the group to which it pertains? Second, how well does the grievance associated with the storyline distinguish right-wing populist voters from voters of other parties? And third, to what extent are the findings consistent across countries? The analysis brings to the fore several findings of note.

First, it shows that—consistent across all countries—the most prominent cultural account of the populist vote is the storyline centered on ethnocultural estrangement. Specifically, white natives who believe that their country's culture is being undermined represent a sizable share of the populist support base and are far more likely than others to vote for a right-wing populist party. Put simply, our analysis points to disaffection with immigration as key to understanding the strong appeal of contemporary populism.

The results also indicate that this storyline captures, at best, about half of the populist electorate on the right. Since a considerable share of these populist supporters—ranging

from 44% in France to 80% in Poland—do not match the profile implied by this storyline, it cannot account by itself for the overall phenomenon of support for right-wing populists. Indeed, the data also point to the important role that geography plays. Populism is a major draw among rural residents who feel they have no voice in politics, particularly in Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States.

The usefulness of the rest of the storylines varies by country. For example, anxiety over social status seems a pertinent source of populist support in France, Sweden, Switzerland, and Poland, but not so in the other countries. In contrast, the evidence suggests that an intergenerational backlash or concerns about community disintegration play, in most countries, a far more limited role. The observable implications implied by these explanations tend to either match only small shares of the populist base or fail to distinguish between populist supporters and voters of other parties.

While the five storylines are in theory not mutually exclusive, in practice we find only limited overlap in the characteristics of the people who match the different accounts. This indicates that the populist base does not comprise of a narrow demographic grouping but instead is composed of a more diverse cross-section of society that represents distinct sources of disaffection. In fact, this heterogeneity may help explain the rise of what are seemingly very different types of populist forces across countries, be it the ethno-nationalist movement in Sweden and Germany, to the more conservative, agrarian populist party in Poland.

Our study makes several contributions to the study of populism. First and most directly, by developing an analytic framework that distinguishes and delineates between the different cultural explanations, the study clarifies the often-conflated sources of disaffection that mobilize voters to support populist parties.

The study also makes a substantive contribution to the growing body of empirical research on populism. The typical approach in this literature is to use multivariate regression to examine the role of certain factors—cultural, economic, or both—as predictors of vote for populist parties (e.g., Gidron and Hall 2017; Guiso et al. 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Such regressions can shed light on the marginal effect of a given explanatory variable in accounting for the populist vote. However, this type of analysis offers little insight into the overall support for populist parties, as it says little about the relative prevalence of the different explanatory factors in the population under study (Margalit 2019). Our empirical approach focuses on the prevalence in absolute terms of each explanation among the populist base and assesses how distinguishing it is when compared to the electorate of non-populist parties. This provides a necessary plausibility check

regarding the relative explanatory usefulness of the different cultural accounts we put forth.

Finally, the study's findings offer novel insight into the debate revolving the sources of populism's appeal and the policies that may strengthen or lessen this appeal. To date, the discussion has largely centered on policies that alleviate economic insecurity, be it investment in worker retraining programs or income support and redistribution. By mapping and evaluating the relative prominence of various cultural concerns, this study points elsewhere, highlighting certain social changes and attendant grievances as key for those seeking policies to counter the broad appeal of populism. Furthermore, our results indicate that these policies need to be tailored to specific contexts, to reflect the unique composition of populist voters and the varying concerns that preoccupy them across different countries.

FIVE EXPLANATIONS OF POPULISM

To identify and disentangle the key cultural explanations underlying the electoral appeal of right-wing populism, we develop a novel framework based on a set of predefined parameters that are central to the appeal of populism. Specifically, our framework focuses on (1) the key cultural concern, (2) the deep-rooted societal change that generated that concern, (3) the target of blame, (4) the demographics of those who supposedly harbor the concern, and (5) the perceived division between "us" versus "them."

Using this framework, we reviewed prominent recent ethnographies of communities with high rates of support for right-wing populists and drew out a set of explanatory drivers. We then cross-validated and refined this classification with a broader review of all academic articles centered on cultural factors as a driver of populist support.[2]

As table 1 demonstrates, each of the storylines is centered on distinct processes of social change and points toward distinct observable implications. However, these storylines are not mutually exclusive.[3] By pointing out substantive differences in their observable implications and highlighting

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2. See SI-E for more details about our approach in conducting the literature review and an example of our classification of selected quotes from ethnographic studies.

3. Indeed, this overlap perhaps explains why they are often conflated in the ongoing debate over the causes of populism. For example, Norris and Inglehart (2019) argue that anti-immigrant attitudes are part of the authoritarian values of older generations who feel threatened by the cultural shift induced by postmaterialism. Likewise, Gidron and Hall (2020) associate social status anxiety with discontent about the disintegration of the community.

Table 1. Explanations of Populism Compared Across Key Parameters

Storyline	Social Process	Cultural Concern	Targets of Blame	Us vs. Them	Economic vs. Cultural Factors	Observable Implications
Intergenerational backlash	A slow-evolving shift from materialist to postmaterialist values.	The erosion of the moral status of traditional—materialist and conservative—values.	No concrete targets of blame; the liberal elite represents younger generations but is not considered responsible for the intergenerational chasm. Resentment thus directed toward the values shift.	Generational division: older cohorts with authoritarian values vs. younger cohorts with liberal values.	Cultural concern stemming from cultural change; economic forces may have an accelerating role but are not a deep source motivating support for populism.	Older voters with socially conservative values and authoritarian predisposition.
Ethnocultural estrangement	Profound demographic shifts driven by waves of migration and low birth rates among the native population.	Fears about loss of national identity.	The elite, for facilitating or failing to stop the change in the country's ethnic makeup and subsequent cultural shift.	Ethnocultural division: native-born vs. immigrants and ethnic and religious minority groups.	Cultural concern stemming from changes in ethnic composition; economic forces have an accelerating role but are not the deep cause.	White native voters who feel that their culture is being undermined by mass immigration.
Rural resentment	Processes of urbanization leading to a change in lifestyles and ethics.	A perception that rural areas do not receive their fair share of public resources and that urban elites look down upon their	Blaming the urban elite, including decision-makers and public employees, who have neglected the concerns and interests of rural residents.	Geographical division: rural residents vs. urbanites and elites, who are concentrated in the large cities.	Concern stemming from both economic and cultural developments.	Rural residents who feel alienated form decision-making centers and urban elites.

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culture and life-style.

Social status anxiety	Gradual disappearance of semiskilled and secure jobs; cultural change affecting the public esteem afforded to previously privileged social groups.	Anxiety about a decline—objective or subjective—in social status.	(1) Political elites, who prioritize marginalized groups in society, and (2) social groups that were prioritized and that benefited from this social change.	White workers (especially males) who feel their social standing is diminishing as compared to that of other social groups (females, ethnic minorities, and immigrants).	Combination of cultural and economic changes; economic forces play an important interactive role.	People who perceive themselves as positioned the lower, but not the lowest, levels of the social status hierarchy and seek to maintain a respected position in society.
Community disintegration	Processes of de-industrialization urbanization and changes in communal leisure and cultural activities.	Sense of isolation and insecurity resulting from a lack of cohesive community.	No concrete target of blame for these processes.	No clear distinction between "us" and "them."	Concern stemming from both economic and cultural developments.	People who do not know their neighbors and are saddened by it; they usually do not live in large metropolitan cities.

specific areas of potential overlap between them, this framework offers a useful way to conceive of the major cultural sources of discontent as independent explanations, separating them from broader sentiments associated with populist rhetoric, such as xenophobia or Euroscepticism. In what follows, we describe the core features of the five storylines.

Intergenerational backlash

The cultural explanation that has perhaps received the most in-depth articulation is the intergenerational backlash theory put forth by Norris and Inglehart (2019). According to this account, populist movements reflect a defensive reaction of older cohorts who feel that contemporary culture and politics are eroding the core values that have long informed their worldview. This reaction is alleged to be the result of a gradual and long-term change in the culture and the moral norms guiding society—a shift described as "the silent revolution"—that took place in postindustrial societies over the second half of the 20th century. Specifically, this account holds that the unprecedented levels of existential security and continued prosperity in the post–World War II era led to an intergenerational shift from materialist to postmaterialist values, which place greater emphasis on new issues such as environmental protection, gender equality, and respect for minority rights. This shift went counter to long-prevailing materialist and authoritarian values, which emphasize instead physical and economic security and favor conformity to group norms over individual freedoms or ethnic and cultural diversity.

The core group that feels aggrieved by these changes consists mostly of older cohorts, some of whose formative years were shaped by two World Wars and their aftermath. Having grown up facing existential insecurity and scarcity, this environment cultivated authoritarian dispositions among those in their formative years, making them more likely to value group conformity, as well as order and stability.

Such life circumstances and authoritarian dispositions also make these voters more intolerant of cultural change and deviations from long-established conventions. And as their share of the population declined over time, a perception that traditional norms are being overwhelmed by cultural change intensified, sparking a cultural and political backlash (Ford and Goodwin 2014).

The observable implications of the intergenerational backlash account are that the base of right-wing populist parties consists of many older people with socially conservative attitudes who harbor authoritarian values. These voters are drawn to populist parties with the hope that they will defend traditional values and fight politicians who promote progressive-liberal policies. By this view, populist politicians' calls to protect, or restore, the country's traditional way of life can be seen as efforts to attract the older segment of the electorate using a nostalgic appeal to a mythical golden past (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again," is exemplary of this electoral appeal.

Ethnocultural estrangement

Another prominent explanation centers on the concern and anxiety of the white native majority in the face of changes in the ethnic composition of the population. In particular, disaffection from the perceived cultural implications of mass immigration—e.g., growing presence of ethnic and religious minorities who cannot speak the native language, harbor socially illiberal views, and fail to integrate into society—are seen as a key cause of the populist rise (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018).

Such sentiments are attributed to major demographic shifts that have taken place over the past few decades in both Europe and the United States. These shifts are the result of continuous waves of labor migration induced by globalization, as well as an increase in the number of asylum seekers fleeing violence and persecution, primarily from the Middle East and Africa.

The combination of these trends together with the historically low birth rates among natives created a sense of alarm among a segment of the native population, feeling that the country is changing its face and losing its identity. The fears were augmented by objective difficulties of some immigrant communities in assimilating, be it because of residential segregation and the creation of ethnic enclaves, poor control of the national language, or traditions that differ starkly from those of the native population (Caldwell 2009).[4] Together, such issues may contribute to a sense among natives of irrevocable change and the demise of the national "way of life" (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Kaufmann 2018).[5]

Anxious and disaffected, more and more white natives seek remedy in the form of restricting immigration, a policy fervently promoted by most, if not all, populist radical right

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4. In some cases, the concerns center on fear that the immigrants bring with them less tolerant views on issues such as gender equality or sexual freedom (e.g., Akkerman 2005).

5. To be sure, concerns about hyper-ethnic change are not always grounded in objective reality. This is demonstrated by the fact that they emerge not only in countries that experienced significant changes in ethnic composition shifts, such as Britain or Switzerland, but also in those that have much lower levels of immigration, such as Hungary or Poland (see Eatwell and Goodwin 2018).

parties (Ivarsflaten 2008). And beyond strict policy, these voters are also drawn to the populist rhetoric that emphasizes nativism, the notion that the state should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). This rhetoric seemingly permits voters to express resentment and anger over immigration and the supposed erosion of national identity, without being judged as racist or intolerant. However, populist voters direct their anger not only toward immigrants of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds; they also blame the liberal elites for allowing mass immigration into the country and embracing multiculturalism.

Taken together, this account suggests that the core group that turns to the populist Right consists of white native voters who feel that their culture and way of life are being undermined by mass immigration. This group of voters is not limited to a specific age cohort and can be found in all geographic regions and socioeconomic classes.

Rural resentment

The increased resonance of populist claims is attributed by some to growing resentment among rural communities. Living away from the decision-making centers, goes the story, many rural folks feel that the mainstream political system has ignored, neglected, or outright worked against the interests and the values that their communities hold dear.

This sentiment stems in part from the growing malaise that many rural areas have experienced in recent decades, which consecutive governments were unable to arrest. Depopulation, loss of basic services, dwindling employment opportunities, and in some cases also rising poverty have contributed to the growing sense of neglect and distributive injustice (Rodríguez-Pose 2018).

By this account, rural residents' sense of decline was further augmented by a shift in the way agriculture and the countryside are perceived in the national ethos. Rural communities used to be lionized as the embodiment of the true heartland, the torch carriers of the nation's heritage. But the rapid growth of cities and the agglomeration of business hubs in large metropolitan areas caused not only an outflow of rural labor but also eroded the prominence of farmers, peasants, and rural culture in the nation's identity. Instead, rural residents became something of a cultural punchline, often mocked in popular discourse for their perceived backwardness (Wuthnow 2019). This account, therefore, views economic and cultural forces as playing an interconnected role in generating people's sense of being "left behind" and in mobilizing support for populism.

Furthermore, widening differences between urban and rural regions—in terms of residents' sociodemographic char-

acteristics, economic standing, and cultural lifestyles—created growing distrust among rural residents of the political elites, who overwhelmingly live in large metropolitan areas. This mistrust is captured in two related sentiments: first, that "all major decisions are made in the urban areas, by urban people, and dictated outward" (Cramer 2016, 65) and, second, that rural communities are not getting their fair share of resources. While rural residents have the legal right to vote, in practice they lack influence and their voice is hardly heard. Instead, "others," such as city dwellers, public sector employees or people of color, are unfairly benefiting at their expense from the government's attention and largess.

The notion that their interests are ignored by the decision-making elites, combined with the sense that their rural sensibilities are looked down upon by city residents, contributed to the creation of what Cramer labels as "rural consciousness": a perspective made up of an identity as a rural resident combined with a specific sense of distributive (in)justice.

The appeal of populism among rural voters, in this view, is explained by the animus exhibited toward the "elites" by populist politicians, their vilification of liberal city residents as morally corrupt, juxtaposed with a glorification of rural people as the embodiment of the nation's soul. The populist base, as implied by this account, consists of white rural voters who feel excluded from the decision-making processes.

Social status anxiety

A fourth explanation centers on people's concern about a decline in their social status, namely the degree of respect or recognition they receive, relative to others, for belonging to a certain social group. The rise of populism, according to this account, is a counter-reaction fueled by anxiety about the declining social position of some groups in society that had previously enjoyed a higher status by other members of the public (Gidron and Hall 2017).

This perceived decline in social status is mainly attributed to two historical developments. The first is the gradual disappearance of certain types of occupations and jobs, a result primarily of technological change and offshoring. Since the quality of people's job often serves as a marker of their standing in society (Lamont 2009), the slow evaporation of manufacturing and other mid-level jobs has generated not only economic hardships but also widespread angst about a decline in social status (Eribon 2018; Gidron and Hall 2020).

The second development is the progressive shift in the mainstream stance on social issues such as race, ethnicity, and gender roles. This cultural shift generated a sense among certain segments that the privileged social position traditionally associated with some of their defining characteristics—such as

being white, male, or native-born—is coming under threat (e.g., Mutz 2018). Thus, unlike the intergenerational backlash or the ethnocultural estrangement accounts that highlight cultural change as the dominant force underlying the populist appeal, the status anxiety explanation centers on the interconnected role of economic and cultural developments (e.g., Gidron and Hall 2017; Kurer 2020). Furthermore, anxiety about waning social status is not presumed to be unique to a specific generation or to residents of a specific geographic region (Gest 2016).

Hochschild (2018) has put forward a related explanation of the status anxiety account. Recounting the disaffection in certain parts of American society, she offers the analogy of people waiting in a long line for the American Dream that lies just over the brow of the hill. She describes the frustration of those standing patiently in line, waiting for their chance to finally fulfill that dream, only for others (e.g., beneficiaries of affirmative action programs, newly arrived immigrants) to seemingly cut in line. The frustration of those standing in line is thus directed not only toward the line cutters but also toward those in charge of the line, who demand that they not just remain patient but also show empathy toward those jumping ahead of them.

Note that by this account, status-anxious citizens are directing an accusatory finger both "up" and "down." Up toward the elites, who seem to care very little about their plight but also downward toward certain social groups—defined along ethnicity, race, and gender—whom they perceive as inferior but as being unfairly favored by the elites. These sentiments presumably mobilize support for populist parties, which seemingly recognize those grievances by emphasizing nostalgia for, and a promise to restore, the stable hierarchies of the past (Mutz 2018). The observable implication implied by this thesis is two-pronged. First, populist supporters perceive themselves as positioned on the lower, but not the lowest, levels of the social status hierarchy.[6] Second, they desire to be respected by society, since their discontent is strongly related to their sense of declining stature (Sandel 2018).[7]

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6. They are not at the lowest rungs, because the anxiety revolving their status stems exactly from the fear of dropping down the hierarchy, joining the class at the bottom.

7. These sentiments, and their association with support for populist parties, are likely to be stronger among men, whose traditional privileged social rank has been challenged in recent decades. However, low-status women can also share these sentiments and turn to far-right populist parties (Eribon 2018).

Community disintegration

The final explanation of the populist appeal focuses on the disintegration of communal life and the erosion of the social infrastructure as the main source of voters' disaffection. The literature attributes this development to profound changes in the structure of local communities in the modern era: mass urbanization, impersonal and bureaucratized relationships replacing informal communal systems of loyalty and local affiliations, and changes in leisure and cultural activities. Such changes have led to a continuing decline in the role that community plays in modern life, leaving people feeling isolated and increasingly alienated from their communities (Bolet 2021).

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) documents these processes in the American context, focusing on the decline in social capital and in the ways individuals interact with their neighbors and communities. This decline, in his telling, is evident in both formal and informal social connections. People are less likely to be active members of political parties or unions, participate less in civic associations, and attend the local church less frequently. But informal connections are also weakening: people are less likely to get together with friends, to hang out in the local bar with their neighbors, or join a reading group at the local bookstore.

Related to this view, Klinenberg (2018) describes a deterioration in "social infrastructure," namely the physical places and organizations that shape the way people interact, such as libraries, barbershops, community centers, and playgrounds. When social infrastructure is degraded, he argues, it inhibits social activity, leaving families and individuals to fend for themselves. This process of social atomization can lead to feelings of alienation, which may draw voters to the appeals of populism, as its us-versus-them message offers an alternative source of identification and belonging. Consistent with this argument, Bolet (2021) finds that British citizens who live in districts that experienced more closures of community pubs were, controlling for other factors, more likely to vote for the UK Independence Party (UKIP), formerly the largest populist party in the United Kingdom. Similarly, Giuliano and Wacziarg (2020) find that support for Trump in the 2016 presidential election was higher in counties with lower densities of memberships in civic, religious, and sports organizations (i.e., counties with lower levels of social capital).

To be sure, the link between social alienation and voting has been the focus of study long before the recent populist wave. In his famous analysis of the conditions that lead to the demise of democracy, Kornhauser (1959) argued that people respond to a breakdown of social ties by forming instead hyper-attachments to symbols and leaders. This view is echoed also in Arendt's (1951) work on the origins of

totalitarianism, where she concludes that "loyalty [to the totalitarian leader] can be expected only from the completely isolated human being who, without any other social ties . . . derives his sense of having a place in the world only from his belonging to a movement." Indeed, research on support for far-right parties often draws on these theoretical foundations.

Notably, unlike the rural resentment storyline, grievances regarding the fragmentation of the local community are not associated with a distinct group in terms of demographic characteristics, values, or lifestyles. Rather, people of all races and income levels may experience a sense of community decline and lament it. Importantly for our purposes, this sense is not limited to rural residents or farm workers (Kornhauser 1959). The observable implications of the community breakdown explanation are that people who are isolated—those who both experience low levels of social interaction with other members of their community and feel distant from them— will be more likely to vote for the populist Right.

To conclude, table 1 reveals some notable differences and similarities between the five storylines. For example, not all of them blame the elites for the current situation. In both intergenerational backlash and community disintegration, discontent is attributed to what is perceived as largely inevitable social change. However, unlike the community disintegration storyline, where the division between "us" and "them" is blurred, in the intergenerational backlash account, there is a clear distinction between "us"—the older generation, which holds traditional values—and "them"—young people who embrace postmaterialist values.

Interestingly, in the other three storylines, people focus their blame not only on elite decision-makers but also on their fellow citizens, whom they feel are benefiting at their expense: in the rural resentment account, it is the city folks; in the ethnocultural estrangement storyline, it is the immigrants; while in the case of social status anxiety, it is the groups benefiting from various affirmative action programs. The only storyline in which there is no clear distinction between "us" and "them" is the one centered on community disintegration, which focuses on the concerns of individuals who feel increasingly isolated from those around them. This stands in contrast to the rural resentment account, in which a particular collective seeks both symbolic recognition and material support from the urban elite.

Finally, we also examine the extent to which the cultural drivers central to each storyline overlap or interact with economic factors. As the comparison makes clear, there are substantial differences in this regard. For example, in accounts centered on ethnocultural estrangement and intergenerational backlash, concerns arising from economic change have played

an accelerating role but are not the deep source of support for populism. Yet, in the other storylines, especially rural resentment and social status anxiety, economic circumstances play an integral role in both the discontent people express and the historical changes that have led to their discontentment.

DATA AND MEASURES

Building upon this analytic framework, we now turn to an empirical assessment of these five culture-centric explanations of populism. In what follows, we begin the section by describing the data and the measures we use and then turn to discuss our empirical approach.

We employ individual-level data from the ESS, a cross-national study that is based on in-person interviews conducted with nationally representative samples. To expand the size of our sample, as well as minimize sensitivity of the results to peculiarities of a specific election, we pool the four most recent waves of the ESS, which cover the years 2012–2018.[8] The analysis focuses on 10 European countries that have been at the center of the public and scholarly debates around the causes of populism: Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.[9] Our analysis focuses on respondents who reported their party vote in the previous election, totaling 44,571 observations.[10]

The ESS has two notable advantages for our purposes. First, it uses a set of recurring questions over multiple rounds, allowing us to assess the consistency of the results across different samples. Second, the surveys include a wide range of items regarding cultural and social issues, allowing a relatively nuanced measurement of the various sources of cultural concern. Having said that, some of the items included in these surveys are imperfect proxies for the cultural concerns we seek to capture. To this end, we examine as part of the robustness checks the sensitivity of the results to the specific wording of the ESS questions. We do so by replicating the analysis using alternative cross-national datasets, which include the European Values Survey and several modules of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). Furthermore, we

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8. Previous ESS rounds did not include items central for operationalization of the five storylines.

9. Data on the five explanatory measures we construct is not available for all countries in the ESS. Furthermore, we chose to focus on 10 European countries that have experienced a significant increase in voting for populist right-wing parties in the last decade and have therefore attracted considerable media and research attention. Our sample represents 70% of the European Union's population.

10. These observations were weighted using the ESS weightings, which correct for sampling errors and nonresponse rates within each country. More details on sampling and dataset are provided in SI-A.

extend the analysis also to include the United States using survey data from the ANES and the World Values Survey (WVS). Our dependent variable in the main analysis is support for right-wing populism, which we capture by respondents' voting preference.

The sample we analyze therefore includes only respondents who reported how they have voted. To classify voters' support for right-wing populism in Europe, we rely on Mudde's (2007) definition of populist parties—parties that see society as ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the pure people versus the corrupt elite—coded by The PopuList and verified by more than 80 consulting experts (Rooduijn et al. 2019).[11] Figure SI-1 presents the vote share of right-wing populist parties from 1960 to 2020. As the figure makes clear, all 10 countries experienced increases in the populist vote, albeit at different degrees.

For each of the five cultural explanations outlined above, we construct an indicator measure based on the sociodemographic factors and attitudinal items that define the group, as described in the theoretical description. Below we describe our classification and the measures we use in each of the five storylines.[12]

Intergenerational backlash. We create an indicator variable denoting whether the respondent is older than 55 years and holds authoritarian values, as measured by an index of the five items used by Norris and Inglehart (2019). These include agreement with the idea that it is more important to (1) live in secure and safe surroundings, (2) do what is told and follow rules, (3) behave properly, (4) follow traditions and customs, and (5) believe that government is strong and ensures safety. SI-A provides details on the exact question wording. Specifically, we calculated the average score of the five items and coded a score lower than 2 to represent holding authoritarian values.

Ethnocultural estrangement. We use an indicator that takes the value 1 if the respondent (1) is a native; (2) does not belong to an ethnic minority; and (3) believes that "the country's cultural life is generally undermined by people coming to live here from other countries."

Rural resentment. We generate an indicator variable taking the value 1 if the respondent (1) lives in a "country village" or "farm or home in countryside," based on self-reported place of residence, and (2) feels that the political system allows little

or no say for people like her in what the government does. This variable is coded based on responses to the question: "How much would you say the political system in [country] allows people like you to have a say in what the government does?"[13]

Social status anxiety. The measure of social status anxiety is coded based on responses to two items. First, we use an item asking respondents to place themselves on an 11-point social ladder, after being told that "there are people who tend to be towards the top of our society and people who tend to be towards the bottom." In line with the logic articulated by Gidron and Hall (2020), we consider status-anxious individuals as those who place themselves in the lower rungs of the social ladder (positions 2–5) but not at the very bottom (0–1). Second, to capture the anxiety that a decline in status evokes, we include a second condition that is based on an item that measures the importance respondents assign to receiving "respect from others."[14]

Disintegration of community. We measure concern about the disintegration of one's local community by generating an indicator variable that takes the value 1 if the respondent (1) does not feel close to people in their local area and (2) does not live in a big city. We incorporate the latter category in order to exclude people who choose to live in less communal areas but for whom this aspect not a problem (or maybe even a draw).[15] SI-A.1 provides variable definitions and contains the original questions.

Our empirical investigation centers on two questions with regard to each of the five stories: First, how sizable is the group to which the story potentially pertains? Second, how distinct is its level of support for the populists as compared to the support exhibited by nonpopulist voters? To put it in more concrete terms, consider the explanation centered on the resentment of rural residents toward the urban elites, who allegedly look down on the former, ignore their hardships, and monopolize the decision-making powers in ways that prioritize other groups in society (e.g., Cramer 2016). To evaluate

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11. We also validate this measure using several alternative classifications. See SI-A.2 for more details.

12. We present additional results using alternative measures from the ESS in SI-C.

13. This item was asked only in rounds 7–9 and in two different versions. We code the bottom category of round 7's version and the bottom three categories in the version of rounds 8 and 9 as respondents perceiving themselves as having little say in politics.

14. Since this item about social status was asked only in round 6, the analysis of the role of this storyline is restricted to 2012. To assess its relevance over time, we replicate the results with data from the ISSP (2009 and 2017), also used by Gidron and Hall (2017). We also utilize data on the social status of the families in which respondents grew up as an alternative measure of status decline.

15. In the SI, we also analyze an alternative measure of communal disintegration, one that does include residents of large cities.
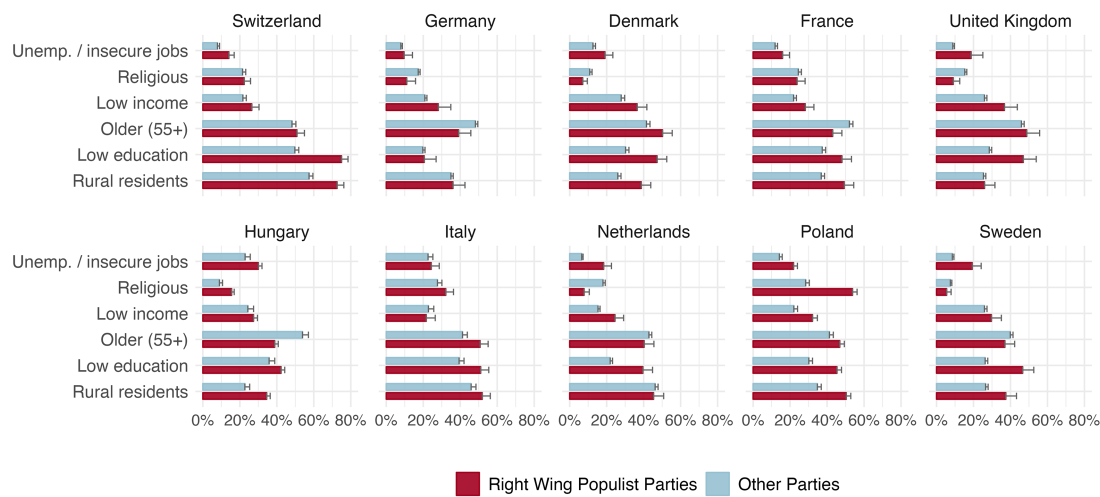
Figure 1. Sociodemographic characteristics, by voting. The figure presents the share of respondents who match each sociodemographic characteristic, calculated separately among populist and nonpopulist voters in 10 European countries. Data are weighted and pooled across ESS rounds 6–9. A detailed description of the demographic measures is provided in SI-A.

the potential usefulness of this explanation, the first question we ask is how large the rural population is in a given country. If its size represents, say, only one quarter of the overall share of votes that the populists received in the country, one can safely conclude that this explanation accounts at best for a limited share of the populist vote. However, even if the rural population accounts for a much greater share of the electorate (say, equivalent to the full size of the populist bloc), there is still the question of whether rural residents support the populists in significantly higher rates than residents of nonrural areas. If the voting pattern is very similar, it is unlikely that the alleged explanation—in this case, rural resentment—is central to understanding the drivers of the populist vote. As we show below, our investigation reveals distinct patterns regarding the explanatory usefulness of the five stories along these two dimensions, namely the size of the group in question and the distinctiveness of its support for right-wing populism.

We also analyze the sociodemographic characteristics of the populist electorate. To assess the relationship between labor market standing and voting preferences, we code the degree to which a respondent's occupation is insecure. We use an indicator that takes a value of 1 if the respondent has been unemployed at some point in the past five years, necessitating a search for a new job, or if the respondent is a blue-collar worker in the manufacturing industry, measured using the classification provided by Oesch (2006).[16] To measure subjective economic insecurity, we use an indicator

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16. In using these measures, we follow the approach of Guiso et al. (2017) in their analysis of the role of economic insecurity in explaining the populist vote.

for whether a respondent finds it difficult, or very difficult, to live on their current income. We also constructed indicators to capture low education (less than 12 years of education) and low income (earning less than two thirds of the median household income).

RESULTS

Before assessing the empirical support for the five storylines, we first examine the support base of populist-right parties by focusing on sociodemographic characteristics identified in the literature as key predictors of populist voting. The aim here is to examine both the absolute and the relative prevalence of these characteristics among the right-wing populist electorate, as compared to voters of other parties. To this end, we calculate the percentage of populist voters who share a particular sociodemographic trait and compare this to the proportion of nonpopulist voters who have the same trait. Figure 1 shows the results for each country and highlights several notable patterns.

First, in all countries, the share of respondents who are unemployed or working in insecure jobs is higher among populist voters than among voters of other parties. The difference is particularly stark in Sweden, Poland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (in all four cases, $p < .01$). In the United Kingdom, among the support base of the populist UKIP, the share of occupationally insecure voters is higher by 10 percentage points than among supporters of other parties. While this is a significant result, we also see that in absolute terms, the occupationally insecure and unemployed often represent less than a quarter of the populist electorate. This figure is far from trivial, but note that the proportion is

also similar among voters for nonpopulist parties in many countries. Thus, in contrast to the notion that globalization's economic losers are the stronghold of populist parties, the overall explanatory significance of this account for the level of populist support appears to be limited.[17]

Turning to age, we see that while the older population constitutes a significant share of the populist electorate, it is not over-represented among populist voters, except in Poland. Consistent with recent work (Schäfer 2022), in several countries (e.g., Hungary, Germany, and Italy) the proportion of older people is in fact lower among voters of populist parties than among voters of other parties. Yet this does not necessarily contradict the story of intergenerational backlash, as according to Norris and Inglehart (2019), it is a combination of older age and authoritarian values that makes the populist rhetoric especially attractive, a proposition that we will examine later.

Rural voters appear to constitute a sizable proportion of the populist support base in some of the countries, a pattern that is notable in both absolute and relative terms. For example, 50% of the populist voters in France are rural residents, compared to only 37% of nonpopulist voters. A similar pattern is evident in Poland and even more so in Switzerland. Yet this pattern varies widely: in Germany, Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Italy, the share of rural voters is almost indistinguishable between populist and nonpopulist voters.

Similar differences are observed between populist and nonpopulist voters in terms of education and, to a lesser extent, income. Specifically, we see that the constituency of populist voters is characterized by a higher share of individuals with low levels of education, a consistent pattern across almost all countries. In contrast, low-income individuals are only slightly over-represented among voters of populist parties. However, note that in contrast to being rural or older—characteristics that are clearly tied to specific explanations of the populist vote—education and income can be linked to a number of different explanations.

Next, we combine demographic characteristics and attitudinal measures in an attempt to better capture the observable implications of the different storylines. Using those combined measures, we assess how well they help distinguish between the voting constituencies of populist and nonpopulist parties.

EMPIRICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE FIVE STORYLINES

To assess the empirical plausibility of each of the five storylines, we generated a set of five indicator variables, each

denoting whether a respondent meets the demographic-attitudinal profile implied by a given explanation. As noted, these profiles are not mutually exclusive. For example, rural people—often older, white natives—could feel alienated from the urban elites while simultaneously worrying that a change in society's ethnic complexion is leading to the demise of the local culture. However, in practice, the overlap between the different storylines is limited. Figure SI-5 shows the distribution of populist voters, by the number of different storylines that their demographic-attitudinal characteristics match (conditional on having at least one match). As the figure indicates, in all countries in the sample, very few voters exhibit characteristics that match more than two storylines: nearly 70% of populist voters match a single storyline, while about 26% match two. In other words, the overlap between explanations, while theoretically plausible, is in practice not very prevalent.

Next, we compare the share of populist voters and nonpopulist voters that match the criteria implied by each of the storylines (see fig. 2). As with the analysis of the demographic factors above, we evaluate the different explanations by focusing on three parameters: (1) the prevalence of a story's implied characteristics among voters of populist parties, (2) the degree to which those characteristics are over-represented among the populist constituency, and (3) the extent to which these findings are consistent across countries.

Figure 2 shows clearly that the most prominent account is the one centered on ethnocultural estrangement, namely the sentiment of white native-born voters that their culture is being eroded by immigration. The segment of the electorate with these characteristics is particularly receptive to the populist rhetoric, a pattern that stands out in both absolute and relative terms. Not only is this segment located overwhelmingly within the ranks of populist party supporters, but it also represents a sizable share of the overall populist voter base. In Germany, for example, a country that experienced a massive influx of refugees during the 2015 crisis, the share of respondents with these characteristics is four times greater among voters of Alternative for Germany than among voters of other parties.

Yet as explained, concerns about a hyper-cultural shift are subjective in nature and do not necessarily stem from actual demographic shifts. Indeed, the evidence suggests that ethnocultural estrangement is key to understanding the populist vote even in countries with relatively few immigrants and a high degree of ethnic homogeneity. In Hungary, for instance, 37% of populist voters feel that the country's culture is undermined by immigration (a figure 80% higher than among nonpopulist voters), despite the fact that immigrants represent less than 4% of the country's population. Indeed, this sentiment is frequently reflected in the rabid antiforeigner

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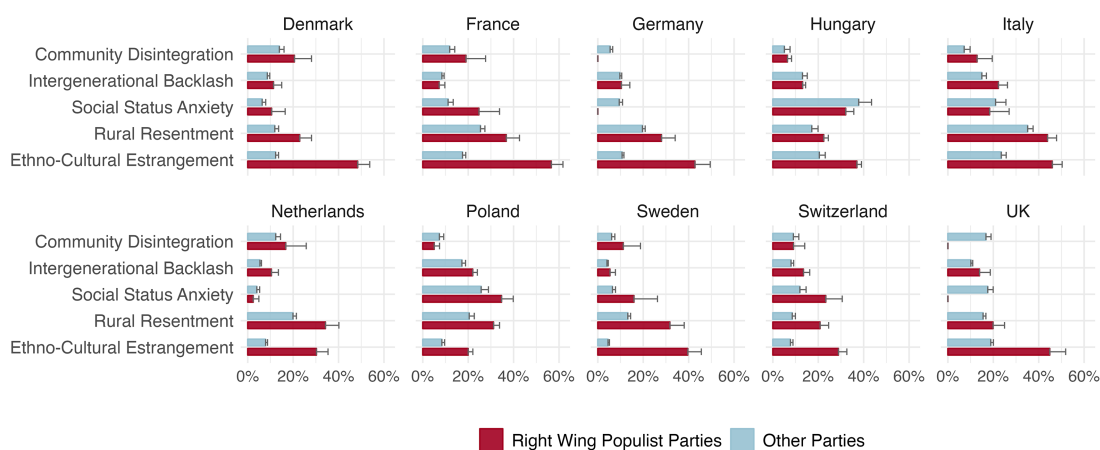17. For further discussion of the relative weight of economic factors, see fig. SI-3.

Figure 2. Share of voters whose characteristics match each storyline, by vote. The figure presents the share of respondents who match the implied characteristics of each of the five cultural stories among voters of right-wing populist parties and voters of other parties, by country. The data are weighted and pooled across ESS rounds 6–9. Due to data limitations, the rural resentment measure relies on data pooled from the last three rounds, while the measures of social status anxiety and community disintegration are based on data from round 6.

rhetoric of Viktor Orbán, Hungary's populist prime minister, and echoed in his contentious decision in 2015 to construct a fence on the Hungarian-Serbian border to halt the flow of refugees.

Despite the evidence regarding the ethnocultural estrangement storyline being strong and consistent across all countries we examined, the figure also indicates that, at best, only about half of populist voters match the profile implied by this explanation. Significant as it may be, this explanation therefore cannot account by itself for the overall phenomenon of right-wing populist support.

Another factor that appears to contribute to the electoral backing of populist parties is resentment among rural voters. As the figure makes clear, in France, Poland, the Netherlands, and Germany, this sentiment appears to be pervasive, matched by almost 30%–40% of populist voters, as compared to about one tenth to a quarter among nonpopulist voters. The difference is even more notable in Switzerland and Sweden, where the share of rural residents who feel they lack voice is 2.5 times greater among supporters of populist parties.

While the evidence suggests that concerns about community disintegration are peripheral in explaining the populist vote, figure 2 reveals cross-national variation in terms of the remaining cultural accounts. Social status anxiety appears to be a strong distinguishing feature of the populist constituency in France, Sweden, Switzerland, and Poland, but this is not the case in other countries.

We observe even greater variation in the explanatory usefulness of the account centered on intergenerational backlash. In some countries, we find little evidence that older people with authoritarian values are a distinct or important

component of the populists' support base. However, in a few countries we do find evidence consistent with this account. In Poland, for example, 22% of populist voters are older people with authoritarian values, compared to only 17% of nonpopulist voters; this may help explain the appeal of the ruling populist Law and Justice party (PiS), which promises to uphold religious and traditional values. Older authoritarians in the Netherlands are also more likely to back the populists (10% vs. 5%, respectively), yet note that voters who match this profile represent a much smaller segment of the electorate. Consistent with this difference, the Dutch populist Party for Freedom expresses a much more liberal stance on issues such as women's rights, abortion, and gay marriage than the views espoused by the Polish PiS.[18]

To assess these findings further, we also examine the independent predictive role of each of the five cultural accounts by including all five indicators in the same linear probability model, where the outcome of interest is whether or not a respondent voted for a right-wing populist party in the last national election. The results are presented in figure 3.[19]

The largest marginal differences, as shown in figure 3, are associated with ethnocultural estrangement, where respondents who match this concern are between 3 percentage points (Hungary, 2012) to 42 points (Sweden, 2018) more likely to vote for populist parties than their counterparts who do not

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18. As fig. S-12 shows, the findings are similar when we use alternative measures of older age, including Norris and Inglehart's (2019) original definition.

19. Tables SI-7–SI-10 in the appendix present the complete results in tabular form. Results remain substantively similar without poststratification and population weights (see fig. SI-9).
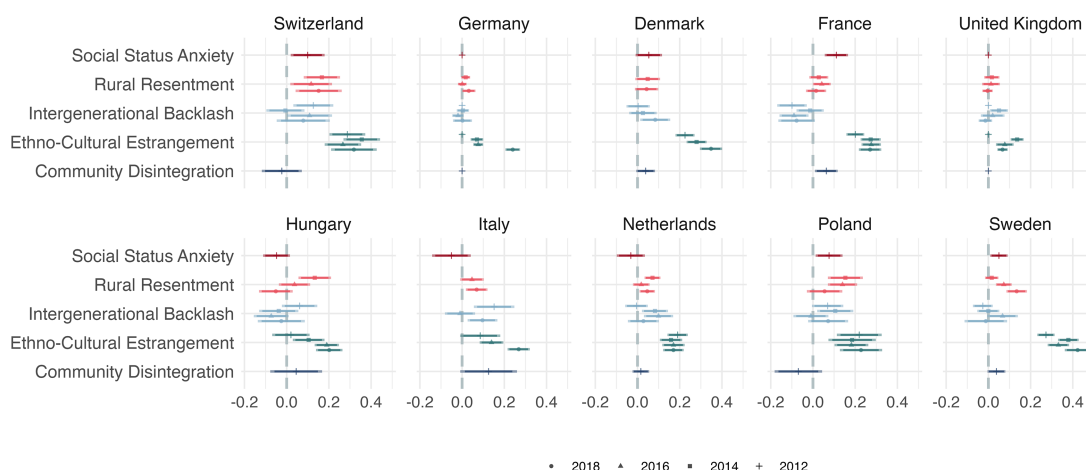
Figure 3. Cultural predictors of voting for right-wing populist parties. The figure reports the results of linear probability models estimated separately for each country and ESS round. The dependent variable is whether the respondent voted for a populist party in the last election, and the explanatory variables are the measures proxying for each of the five explanations. As the measures of social status anxiety and the community disintegration are based on items asked only in ESS round 6, the figure includes a single coefficient for each of these explanations. Italy and Denmark did not participate in ESS rounds 7 and 8, respectively. Thick bars represent 90% CI; thin bars represent 95% CI.

share this sentiment. Notably, the association between ethnocultural estrangement and support for populist parties grew stronger over time in destination countries that admitted large numbers of asylum seekers during the 2015 global refugee crisis such as Germany and Sweden. This was also the case in front-line countries such as Hungary and Italy, through which many asylum seekers entered Europe.

Yet the figure indicates that some of the other explanations also exhibit strong associations with populist support, particularly in countries where the share of populist voters worried about ethnocultural changes does not exceed 30%. Controlling for all other factors in 2012, social status anxiety was associated with a 10-point increase in the likelihood of voting for right-wing populists in Switzerland and France and an 8-point increase in Poland ($p < .01$).

Indeed, even in countries where evidence suggests that ethnocultural estrangement is the dominant story, other cultural accounts still appear pertinent. For instance, in Italy in 2018, rural resentment was associated with a 6-point increase in the likelihood of voting for a populist party ($p < .1$). Although the magnitude of this estimate is modest compared to the coefficient of ethnocultural estrangement, it may still have high "outcome significance," as even small shifts in the populist vote can be politically consequential (e.g., limit mainstream parties' ability to form a coalition without including the populist party; Margalit 2019).

Overall, this analysis indicates that the widespread support for populism is shaped by multiple factors. Populist voters are not a homogeneous, demographically distinct group, nor do they all share the same concern or source of grievance.

Having said that, the evidence does indicate that some cultural storylines have far greater explanatory potential than others.[20]

Figure SI-8 in the appendix compares the prevalence of each cultural concern in the overall population and provides an upper bound for its impact on voters' support for populist parties. The figure indicates that ethnocultural estrangement is the cultural storyline with the highest match among the populist vote but that it nonetheless represents only a limited portion of the overall voting population. In Sweden, for example, only 15% of the overall electorate are white natives who feel that immigration undermines their culture. In France, the respective figure is 22%. Yet those who matched the ethnocultural estrangement profile and had voted for the National Front (8% of all voters) represented a whopping 56% of the party's electorate.

ECONOMIC VERSUS CULTURAL GRIEVANCES

The focus of this study is on explanations for the populist vote in which cultural factors play a central role. These explanations are often pitted against alternative accounts that emphasize the role of economic drivers. In some instances, those who emphasize economic factors view discontent surrounding cultural issues as a by-product of adverse economic change: for example, rural resentment may be the result of economic decline in rural regions, antipathy toward

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20. In fig. SI-6, we show the association between the five profiles and voting for populists when using the pooled cross-national data and controlling for regional unemployment, migration, and gross domestic product per capita.
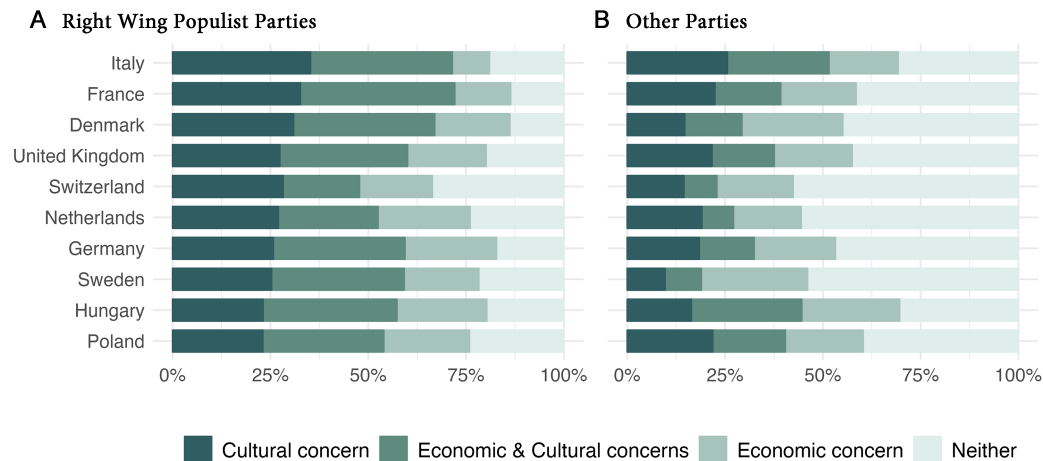
Figure 4. The overlap between cultural and economic concerns. The figure divides each country's electorate into two groups: right-wing populist voters (left panel) versus voters for other parties (right panel). Bars represent, from darker to lighter shades, the proportion of voters whose characteristics match only cultural concerns, both the cultural and economic concerns, only economic concerns, or neither cultural nor economic concerns.

immigrants may reflect their perceived impact on native workers' jobs and wages (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2020), and so forth. In this section, our aim is not to adjudicate between these divergent views. Rather, we seek to assess the extent of overlap between economic and cultural concerns at the individual level. To do so, we first code whether a respondent exhibits any of the characteristics used to measure economic insecurity.[21]

Figure 4 compares the prevalence of these combinations among populist and nonpopulist voters, separately for each country. The figure gives rise to several findings. First, supporters of populist parties are much more likely to exhibit at least one of these concerns, economic or cultural, than voters of nonpopulist parties. Second, a considerable share of populist voters is characterized by at least one of the cultural concerns, without feeling economic insecurity. In all countries but Poland, this share is a good deal higher than that observed among nonpopulist voters. Third, in stark contrast, there are no significant differences in the share of populist and nonpopulist voters who feel economically insecure and match none of the cultural accounts. In fact, in the few countries where there is a notable difference (e.g., France, Denmark, and Sweden), we observe the opposite pattern, whereby respondents with this profile are more prevalent among nonpopulist voters.[22]

However, this is not to say that cultural concerns always have a singular influence on support for populist parties. In fact, as the figure shows, the most significant difference between right-wing populist voters and others is in the share of people who exhibit both sources of concern. Here we find a stark difference; voters in the populist base are twice as likely to be characterized by both economic and cultural concerns.

THE AMERICAN CASE

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election was a major event in the recent populist wave. His victory drew a great deal of scholarly attention, and a considerable share of research on right-wing populism has been motivated by the American case. Consequently, some of the cultural accounts we have tested using the European sample were developed with the American experience in mind. Yet European countries differ from the United States in many ways (e.g., the prevalence of immigration, the degree of ethnic diversity, the prominence of religiosity) that might be consequential for the type of anxieties and concerns that populist voters harbor.

To gauge empirically the relevance of the five storylines in the US context, we utilize the 2016 ANES data to predict the vote for Trump (see fig. 5).[23] The results are very much consistent with our analysis of the European sample. Voting for Trump was most strongly associated with the measure of ethnocultural estrangement: white natives who thought that

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21. The respondent (1) earns less than two thirds of the median income, (2) was unemployed at some point over the past five years and searched for a new job, (3) reports that she finds it hard to live on her current income, or (4) is a blue-collar worker in the manufacturing sector. We then classify the respondents by whether they exhibit any of the aforementioned economic and cultural concerns or a combination of them.

22. Results are presented in fig. SI-10.

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23. With regard to status anxiety and community disintegration, the ANES does not include items that closely mirror those we used in the European context. We therefore code two indicator variables that aim to capture at least some of the logic underlying the two storylines. See SI-D for more details on the US data and analysis.
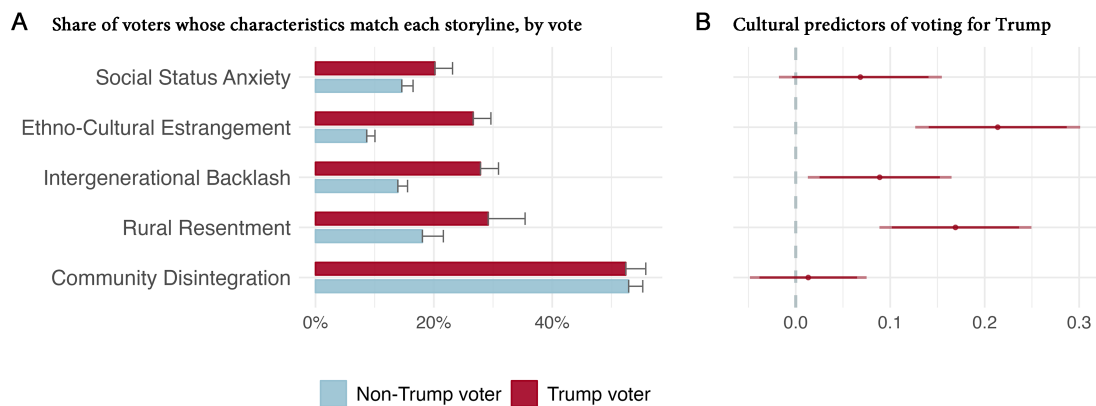
Figure 5. Cultural predictors and support for Trump, ANES 2016. The left panel presents the share of Trump and non-Trump voters that match the implied characteristics of each of the storylines with 95% CI, based on weighted data from 2016 ANES. The right panel presents results of a linear probability model. Dots with horizontal lines indicate point estimates with 90% and 95% CIs.

"America's culture is generally harmed by immigrants" were more than three times as likely to vote for Trump than respondents who did not share those characteristics (holding constant other variables). Yet, as we found in the analysis of the European countries, while the marginal difference is statistically significant and sizable, it is not the case that ethnocultural estrangement characterizes all, or even a majority, of the voters for right-wing populism.

When assessed separately, one can find empirical support for all five accounts. Yet, as with most European countries we examined, when all five measures are considered jointly in a multivariate regression, status anxiety and community disintegration are not associated with populist voting in a statistically significant manner.[24] In contrast, we find that older people with authoritarian leanings were substantially more likely than others to vote for Trump, in line with the intergenerational backlash theory. Notably, this explanation seems to find much stronger empirical support in the United States than in most European countries. It seems fair to conclude then that this explanation has merit, albeit in a narrower context than suggested in the account put forth by Norris and Inglehart (2019).

CONCLUSION

The growing electoral appeal of populist parties has spawned heated debate over its causes (De Vries and Hobolt 2022). Scholarly and media accounts often portray voters of right-wing populist parties as driven by discontent and angst, as people who feel ignored, looked down upon, left behind. This assortment of adjectives and labels is particularly prom-

inent in what is often referred to as the "cultural backlash" explanation of populism's rise. For observers of contemporary politics, elements of this explanation probably ring true, or at least seem plausible. Yet even for those who find merit in this explanation, it is frustratingly "soft" in a number of ways. First, it is all-encompassing, an amalgam of different social processes that are difficult to distill into a clear theoretical argument. Second, arguments centered on cultural factors as a distal cause are often harder to quantify or subject to a meaningful empirical analysis. This article sought to make headway in the study of the cultural underpinnings of right-wing populism by theoretically distinguishing between five different "storylines," all of which offer potential explanations for populism's rise.

A key finding is that the storylines differ greatly in terms of their explanatory usefulness. The match between some accounts—particularly the one centered on ethnocultural estrangement and, to a lesser extent, on rural resentment—and the populist electorate is substantial and far exceeds the match with other storylines. This pattern is a necessary-but-insufficient condition for an explanation to hold: while it does not "prove" that voters supported populist parties because of this source of disaffection, in cases where the match between the storyline's observable implications and the stock of populist voters is weak, the explanatory usefulness of the account in question is necessarily limited.

Yet even in those countries where the match is widespread and is strongly predictive of support for the populist Right, we find that no single explanation can account by itself for the majority of these parties' electoral support. Rather, a consistent result across cases is the fact that the populist support base consists of different groupings that match different storylines. This suggests that the populist base of support should be thought of as a coalition of several groups, each

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24. As figs. SI-17–SI-20 show, results remain substantively similar when we use alternative measures from 2020 ANES, WVS, or ISSP.

characterized by different demographics and distinct sources of discontentment. Put differently, what Donald Trump called the "silent majority," Nigel Farage "the people's army," and Marine Le Pen "the forgotten France" is far from a homogeneous group of disaffected voters.

Moreover, our framework implies—and indeed, is supported by the analysis—that the composition of this coalition can vary significantly across countries. These insights point to promising avenues for study, connecting the demand and supply sides of populism across different countries. Specifically, future work would do well to explore how the different coalitions are formed, what characteristics or issues tend to "go together," and tease out the core concerns that allow the different groups to coalesce into an effective political force.

As the framework and analysis show, economic and cultural factors are deeply enmeshed. Recognizing this interrelation, the key questions are therefore the nature of the interaction, the pace of change implied by cultural and economic factors, and the relative importance of the different sources of influence. For example, in the accounts centered on ethnocultural estrangement and intergenerational backlash, concerns stemming from economic conditions may have played an accelerating role but are not a deep source of support for populism. Yet in the other storylines, especially in the accounts centered on rural resentment and social status anxiety, long-run economic changes play a very integral role, both in the discontent people express and in the historical changes that have brought about their discontentment.

Correctly detecting the role of economic and cultural drivers is important partly because of the policy implications that different explanations of populism imply. For those who wish to counter the populist rise, there is a great difference if rising economic insecurity is the key driver of the populist surge or if instead the main cause is a sense that foreigners are overtaking the country. If economic insecurity is the dominant factor, investment in creating a tighter social safety net or in labor retraining programs might be the most effective approach. But if anxiety about immigration and racial diversity is key, a very different set of policies would be warranted, be it investing in integration programs (Bansak et al. 2018), advancing public information campaigns (Facchini, Margalit, and Nakata 2022), or introducing changes to the immigration policy itself (Solodoch 2021).

Our study highlights the need for more accurate measurement of the concerns associated with the five cultural accounts of populism. In assembling the data for our empirical investigation, it became apparent that unlike the many survey items that capture economic concerns, items tapping cultural grievances are far less prevalent in cross-national surveys. Our theoretical framework, and the observable implications we draw from it, should hopefully serve as a springboard for future researchers to compile new, and more nuanced, survey instruments that will better capture the cultural anxieties that underpin contemporary voting behavior.

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