

THE COMPLEX CAUSALITY OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM

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By Zehra Tunay

ABSTRACT This paper provides an overview of current qualitative and quantitative research on the primary causal factors of right-wing populism. Scholars generally emphasize supply-side or demand-side forces. Within the demand-side sphere, significant debate exists about whether economic or cultural factors are the predominant source of right-wing populism. The division between economic and cultural camps is complicated by competing quantitative evidence supporting economic insecurity on the macro level and evidence linking cultural factors on the micro level. I attempt to synthesize this data by arguing that economic stressors act as an independent, initial cause for non-partisan populist sentiment and that cultural factors further shape its left or right-wing manifestations. I defend this thesis against a supply-side rebuttal and suggest further study of non-Western right-wing populism.

INTRODUCTION

While most scholarly literature acknowledges the complex, multi-causal nature of electoral support for right-wing populism, there are several schools of thought regarding its key independent cause. The first area of debate concerns whether populism arises predominantly from demand-side (voter) factors or supply-side factors, such as political parties, politicians, or other institutions. Within the demand-side spectrum, one camp holds that economic insecurity, caused by various factors, is the primary source of right-wing populist sentiment and that cultural factors are either a by-product of this economic turbulence or serve as an intervening, lesser variable. The second camp holds that cultural factors are the primary source of right-wing populist success, while economic discontent is less significant. Right-wing populism has surpassed left-wing populism in the modern era, with little consensus on why this is the case.

CONCEPTS

Populism is difficult to define, and definitions are often amorphous and pejorative. This essay will use the following conception:

An ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites

and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, 3).

Common measures of populist sentiment include distrust of social institutions, such as the media, government, and judiciary, and holding views that divide society along antagonistic class, racial, or cultural lines. Right-wing populists may align with capitalist principles, and their economic policies range from laissez-faire to protectionist and from anti-welfare to redistributive. In this paper, right-wing populism will only require the presence of conservative social values combined with populist rhetoric.

Distinctions between right-wing and far-right thought can be useful but are often nebulous. Therefore, this paper will not delineate between mainstream right-wing and far-right politics. Right-wing populists sometimes incorporate religious beliefs such as Christian nationalism, Islamism, and Hindutva into their rhetoric. Left-wing populism has uniform manifestations; anti-capitalist (though not necessarily socialist) and redistributive

economic policies are mainstays, and liberal social policies are more common-- at least in theory. Some right-wing populists (in Western Europe) show support for progressive social stances, such as LGBT rights, though this is generally quite limited and used to further anti-immigrant or anti-Muslim rhetoric (e.g., Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom).

THESIS

This essay will examine leading theories regarding the causes of electoral support for right-wing populism using qualitative and quantitative data. On the macro level, there is strong quantitative evidence correlating economic insecurity with support for right-wing populism but few economic-based explanations as to why this populism has manifested as right-wing. Cultural theories tend to rely on intangible, qualitative evidence. However, analysis of religious and cultural social norms and values provides the clearest understanding of the current success of right-wing populists over left-wing populists. This essay will argue for a multi-causal theory wherein economic insecurity leads to increased demand-side populism while cultural factors determine the left-right manifestations of that populism.

SUPPLY-SIDE THEORIES

Supply-side theories present an institutionalist view wherein economic and cultural currents indirectly birth populist sentiment as a reaction from a populace disillusioned with traditional political and social institutions. The inability of political institutions to meaningfully cope with socioeconomic stresses and reflect voter preferences may fuel (as an intervening variable) anti-establishment populist movements (Berman 2021, 79). Supply-side theories may stress the actions of specific agents, such as incendiary politicians, that inflame and capitalize on discontent or broader structural issues. Financial crises (notably the 2008 crash) and the allegedly ineffective responses of governments and unelected central banks are considered significant sources of disillusionment (Berman 2021, 74).

DEMAND-SIDE THEORIES: ECONOMIC THEORIES

Economic grievance theories posit that globalization and modernization have created or amplified the division between haves and have-nots. Major economic stressors include financial crises, immigration, improved technology, and trade (Margalit 2019, 154-155). For example, the decline in Western manufacturing because of technological advances and increased off-shore production of consumer and industrial products has contributed to increased economic insecurity (especially for low-skilled workers) and rural depopulation. Technological advances have contributed to a decline in jobs that require easily automated skills, thus reducing economic opportunities for mid-skilled labourers (Goos, Manning, and Salomons 2014, 1).

Empirical evidence for economic theories is mixed. There is strong quantitative evidence correlating economic stressors to increases in right-wing populism on the macro level (Berman 2021, 84). Studies often confirm a correlation between financial crises and increased support for right-wing political parties, but not left-wing parties (Funke, Schularick, and Trebesch 2015, 228). For example, increased regional automation with likely job losses was strongly correlated with increased support for Donald Trump in 2016 (Frey, Berger, and Chen 2018, 437). However, on the micro level, there is a weaker empirical correlation between individual economic hardship or concern and right-wing populist sentiment (Berman 2021, 74-75).

DEMAND-SIDE THEORIES: CULTURAL THEORIES

Inglehart and Norris (2017) provide the most notable iteration of the cultural explanation, wherein right-wing populism is a reaction from older conservatives against left-wing cultural changes wrought by younger progressives (444). The altered political landscape brought on by feminism, environmentalism, LGBT rights, and multiculturalism may foment a desire for a traditional morality in conservatives. Cultural theories often

acknowledge some limited or secondary role of economic stressors in this backlash but tend to downplay the empirical links between economic insecurity and right-wing populism.

Cultural theories have strengths and weaknesses. Schäfer (2021) notes that multinational generational analysis devoid of cultural context may be unhelpful (1981). While treated as a homogenous mass by Inglehart and Norris, the Western Baby Boomer generation has radically different cultural backgrounds depending on their country of origin and are thus likely to have some notable variation in political disposition. Schäfer also finds that while older generations support right-wing, though not necessarily populist, parties to a greater degree, younger generations exhibit comparatively stronger right-wing populist sentiment that may be rising throughout generations (1991). Inglehart and Norris briefly discuss rising cross-generational populist sentiment but fail to justify their emphasis on a generational value clash against it (446-47). Schäfer's critique of Inglehart and Norris' generational conflict theory reflects broader empirical trends: while cultural sentiment is strongly linked to support for right-wing populists on the micro level, macro correlations are lacking (Berman 2021, 76).

SYNTHESIS AND COUNTERARGUMENTS

Right-wing populism has a strong macro correlation with economic insecurity and is correlated with right-wing cultural beliefs on the micro level. Given these empirical trends and the commonalities in cultural (though less so economic) policies amongst right-wing populists, I argue that economic insecurity fuels demand-side support for anti-elite populism while cultural factors further refine it into a right-wing incarnation.

This theory could be contested on several fronts. Economic grievance theories do not account for right-wing populism among upper socioeconomic classes, nor do they explain why it fares better in developed countries. Mols and Jetten (2016) offer a supply-side, agent-based explanation for these points, arguing

that support for right-wing populism may be linked not just to feelings of relative deprivation but also to relative gratification, wherein one's personal or national status is both privileged and at risk (278). Mols and Jetten argue that right-wing populist politicians craft narratives designed to incite fear and maintain the illusion of an economic (and to a lesser degree, cultural) threat, providing evidence of several cases where economic prosperity coincided with right-wing populist electoral gains (276).

While Mols and Jetten offer convincing qualitative evidence drawn from analysis of the rhetoric of right-wing populists, their explanation suffers from the same weakness as demand-side theories that predominantly stress economic insecurity. Such theories cast reactionary social views as a natural phenomenon resulting from financially threatened voters. However, excluding immigration, polarizing cultural issues, such as abortion and LGBT rights, are often unrelated to economic insecurity yet do relate to socioreligious values. Also, there is greater variety in right-wing populist economic policies than in cultural policies. This alone suggests the independent importance of cultural issues to their supporters.

Regarding immigration, while anxieties are often linked to anticipated economic hardship, cultural (and especially religious) concerns form a major part of anti-immigrant rhetoric and perhaps eclipse economic concerns. Rodrik (2021) notes that right-wing political backlash against immigration is greater when immigrants differ culturally (148). Supply-side theories offer a strong theoretical foundation for populism's innate anti-elitism but do little to illuminate the left-right populist divide or, like demand-side economic theories, explain the relative success of right-wing populism. Supply-side theories especially run the risk of normative judgements, wherein all populism is cast as a pathological symptom of decaying societies.

CONCLUSION

The leading theories regarding electoral support for right-wing populism emphasize either supply-side or demand-side forces. Further debate between primarily economic or

cultural causes generally occurs within the demand-side sphere. This essay finds a compelling quantitative macro correlation between economic hardship and right-wing populism and a strong micro correlation between cultural attitudes and right-wing populist voting patterns—the latter providing insight into the relative lack of success of left-wing populism.

Potential areas for further study include a comprehensive overview of the economic policies of successful right-wing populists.

Comparing their economic policies with those of left-wing populist competitors would be useful for testing the relative importance of cultural policies. Furthermore, greater study of non-Western right-wing populism would be useful as most scholarly literature focuses on the Americas and Europe. The success of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, which differs from the Indian National Congress in its cultural policy (emphasizing Hindu ultra-nationalism), may prove an ideal case for the cultural camp if studied further.

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