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## Economic inequality as an opportunity structure for the success of right-wing populist parties in Western Europe

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### Abstract

During the past decades right-wing populism is a growing phenomenon even in the consolidated democracies of the Western world. Economic uncertainties like financial crises, unemployment, or globalization effects have been often found to have an impact on the success of right-wing populist parties in many countries. The focus of this study lies on the relationship between economic inequality and the support for right-wing populist parties. Using data of eight countries from the European Social Survey program, a social identity approach of right-wing voting under the condition of increasing economic inequality is tested. Results of a cross-sectional multi-level binary regression model show that economic inequality has a substantial main effect on general support for right-wing populist parties.

Keywords: economic inequality; social identity; right-wing populism; protest voting

### Ökonomische Ungleichheit als eine Gelegenheitsstruktur für den Erfolg rechtspopulistischer Parteien in Westeuropa

#### Zusammenfassung

Rechtspopulistische Parteien erfreuen sich heute in ganz Europa zunehmender Wählerzahlen. Schon lange gelten ökonomische Krisen und Negativ-Veränderungen in der makro-ökonomischen Struktur von Staaten als nahrhafter Boden für die Genese rechtspopulistischer und rechtsextremer Tendenzen in der Gesellschaft. Die vorliegende Studie testet unter Rückgriff auf Daten des European Social Survey Programms ein Social-Identity-Modell für den Zusammenhang zwischen ökonomischer Ungleichheit und dem Zuspruch rechtspopulistischer Parteien in acht westeuropäischen Nationen. Die Ergebnisse der durchgeführten Querschnitts-Mehrebenenanalyse weisen darauf hin, dass die Ungleichverteilung von Einkommen über verschiedene Einkommensklassen hinweg einen verstärkenden Effekt auf den Zuspruch rechtspopulistischer Parteien hat.

Schlüsselwörter: Ökonomische Ungleichheit; Soziale Identität; Rechtspopulismus; Protestwahl

## Kurzfassung

Rechtspopulistische Parteien erfreuen sich in jüngster Zeit auch in den meisten konsolidierten Demokratien des Westens zunehmender Wahlerfolge (vgl. Norris, 2005; siehe Anstiege des TIMBRO Authoritarian Populism Index, 2019). Während einige Autor\*innen diese wachsenden Wahlerfolge auf institutionelle Faktoren der politischen Systeme zurückführen wie zum Beispiel geringe Sperrklauseln in Vielparteiensystemen (vgl. Carter, 2002) oder das Vorausgehen großer Koalitionen (vgl. Arzheimer & Carter, 2006), betonen andere Stimmen, die Veränderungen der sozioökonomischen Rahmenbedingungen seien (mit-)verantwortlich für den zunehmenden Erfolg rechtspopulistischer Akteure (vgl. Dancygier & Walter, 2015; Han, 2016; Winkler, 2017). Auch psychische Dispositionen auf der Seite der Wählerinnen und Wähler wie fehlendes Vertrauen in die etablierte Politik oder geringe politische Selbstwirksamkeitsgefühle werden häufig als begünstigende Eigenschaften für die Genese rechtspopulistischer Tendenzen angeführt (vgl. Ivarsflaten, 2008; Coffé & Michels, 2014; Spruyt, Keppens, & van Droogenbroeck, 2016).

Der Anspruch des folgenden Artikels ist es, sowohl die Makro- als auch die Mikro-Ebene bei der Erklärung rechtspopulistischer Wahlabsichten zu berücksichtigen. In den Fokus der Analyse rückt dabei die derzeit zunehmende Ungleichverteilung der Einkommen in Europa. Während zwar die Einkommensunterschiede *zwischen* den Nationen in den vergangenen Jahrzehnten rückläufig waren, haben die Ungleichverteilungen *innerhalb* der Nationen verstärkt zugenommen (Piketty, 2014, pp. 98; Alvarado, Chancel, Piketty, Seaz, & Zucman, 2018, pp. 254). Vor allem Personen mit niedrigen Einkommen sind besonders negativ von den Konsequenzen wachsender ökonomischer Ungleichheiten betroffen (vgl. Myers, 1987; Mayer, 2001). Die bisherige sozialpsychologische Forschung hat

bereits bestätigen können, dass das Auseinanderrücken der sozialen Klassen innerhalb einer Gesellschaft einen besonders fruchtbaren Nährboden für die Entstehung und Akzentuierung von Vorurteilen und Stereotypen gegenüber Fremdgruppen darstellt (Andersen & Fetner, 2008; Durante et al. 2013) und auch das Risiko gewaltsam ausgetragener sozialer Konflikte in Staaten mit Ungleichverteilung erhöht ist (vgl. Cramer, 2003; Esteban & Ray, 2011).

Insbesondere die in der Theorie der sozialen Identität (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; 1986) getroffenen Annahmen schaffen einen integrativen Erklärungsansatz, welcher die Verbindung zwischen ökonomischer Makro-Ebene des gesellschaftlichen Systems und der individuellen Mikro-Perspektive für die Erklärung rechtspopulistischer Wahlpräferenzen ermöglicht. Die zentralen Erwartungen, die sich aus diesem Ansatz ableiten lassen, betreffen zum einen den positiven Einfluss ökonomischer Ungleichheiten auf die elektorale Unterstützung rechtspopulistischer Parteien und zum anderen differenzierte Effekte dieses Einflusses auf unterschiedliche Einkommensklassen. Entsprechend sollten Geringverdiener\*innen stärkere rechtspopulistische Wahlabsichten unter dem Einfluss hoher ökonomischer Ungleichheit aufweisen als Personen mit sehr hohen Einkommen. Die empirische Überprüfung dieses Ansatzes erfolgt unter Rückgriff auf aktuelle Umfragedaten aus acht europäischen Ländern der letzten Runde des European Social Surveys (freigegeben 2018). Die Ergebnisse einer Mehr-Ebenen-Analyse weisen darauf hin, dass hohe ökonomische Ungleichheiten nicht nur für Personen mit niedrigen, sondern auch für Personen mit mittleren und hohen Einkommen verstärkende Effekte auf die Bereitschaft haben, rechtspopulistische Parteien zu wählen.

## 1 Introduction

Since the 1980s, economic inequality is rising in most Western European countries (Roine & Waldenström, 2015). While the distribution of income and wealth has converged *between* countries over time, it has become more and more unequal in a *within-country* perspective (Piketty, 2014, pp. 98; Alvaredo, Chancel, Piketty, Seaz, & Zucman, 2018, pp. 254). For a long time in economic history, it was claimed that there is an inverse-U shaped Kuznets relationship between rising income inequality and economic growth which increases the national income level in the long run (Kuznets, 1955). Recent research has shown that this relationship holds for historical data from Western European countries but not for the latest increases in income inequality (Aghion & Williamson, 1998; Deininger & Squire, 1998; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2002; Heyns, 2005). Today, many countries of the Western world have to fight with reinstating inequalities. As a result, economic inequality (in terms of diverging levels of disposable incomes measured by the standard Gini-coefficient) has on average increased by 20 percent in Western European countries during the past decades (Standardized World Income Inequality Database, SWIID, cited by Han, 2016, p. 54).

At the same time there is a growing body of research showing that rising economic inequality highly affects the everyday life of individuals and their social interactions. As economic inequality mainly describes a process through which economic resources are redistributed in a way that the rich parts of society become richer while the poorer become poorer, it is not surprising that especially the latter group is more negatively affected by this process (e.g. Myers, 1987; Mayer, 2001). In this context Wilkinson and Pickett (2007) also report that societies with higher economic inequality show a significantly lower social mobility compared to more equal countries. This implies that the chance of social advancement is highly re-

duced in unequal societies. Furthermore, educational systems within unequal countries tend to cement social inequalities by perpetuating the impermeabilities of social classes (Kaplan et al., 1996; Mayer, 2001; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2007). Wilkinson and Pickett (2007; 2009) were also able to show that countries where income is distributed very unequal have a significantly higher rate of physical and mental illnesses. This finding is in line with an earlier cross-country comparison by Rodgers (1979) who found that life expectancies and infant mortality rates highly differed between egalitarian and non-egalitarian countries.

Especially the poorer as well as members of the lower middle class of society have to fear the negative consequences of economic inequalities. The threat of social decline and losing an even low social status promotes the genesis of diffuse fears and thus increases the vulnerability to intergroup conflict and violent crime (Hsieh & Pugh, 1993; Kaplan et al., 1996; Cramer, 2003; Uslaner & Brown, 2005; Esteban & Ray, 2011). Earlier research has shown that intergroup relations become more difficult in non-egalitarian societies. Myers (1987), for example, has demonstrated that ethnic discrimination in sentencing increases in US states with high economic inequality. More recent research has also shown that stereotype ambivalence and prejudice between different ethnic and social groups become stronger in unequal countries (Durante et al., 2013). This implies that people tend to accentuate the differences between social groups more under the constraints of economic inequality. Similarly, Andersen and Fetner (2008) have found that intolerance and negative attitudes towards homosexuals are more prevalent in societies which suffer from economic inequality. In worst cases, economic inequality fosters the incidence of civil wars and violent intergroup conflicts (Cramer, 2003; Esteban & Ray, 2011).

Taken together, economic inequality can be seen as an environment which may

fertilize prejudice and mistrust between the different ethnic and social groups of society. In line with earlier research on the social consequences of economic inequality, the aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between economic inequality and right-wing populist voting preferences as one expression of intergroup difficulties in many Western European countries. My argumentation starts with a social identity approach of the social consequences of economic inequality. In a second step, the current success of right-wing populist parties in the Western world will be outlined and hypotheses on the relation between economic inequality and the genesis of right-wing populist voting preferences are drawn from the social identity perspective of intergroup relations. In the empirical part of the paper, the hypotheses are tested on the base of the latest European Social Survey (ESS) data (released in 2018) for eight Western European countries using a multi-level binary regression model. In the discussion section the results of the analysis will be placed in the context of earlier research on intergroup relations under the threat of economic inequality.

## 2 A social identity approach of intergroup relations under the threat of economic inequality

One of the central claims of social identity theory (hereinafter referred to as SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; 1986) is that people's identity is highly influenced by the characteristics of the social groups (e.g. social classes) they belong to. As social inequalities accompany human development at least since post-Neolithic times (see Kohler et al., 2017), disparities in wealth and status between the various social groups of societies seem to be as old as mankind itself. Following the social identity approach of inter-

group relations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), the appearance of intergroup conflict is highly associated with such differences of social status and wealth (see also Hsieh & Pugh, 1993; Cramer, 2003; Cramer, 2005 for a discussion). Social status in terms of social identity theory can be described as "[an] outcome of intergroup comparison [which] reflects a group's relative position on some evaluative dimension of comparison" (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, p. 43). Transferred to the economic sphere, an individual's socioeconomic status position can be described as a difference function between the socioeconomic status of the group or person of comparison (e.g. measured by income or property) and the individual of interest (see Shayo, 2009, p. 151). As economic inequality is mostly defined as an unequal distribution of income or wealth by which "the rich become richer" and "the poor become poorer", it builds an environment in which such social comparisons become more and more accentuated by the increasing (income and property) gaps between the social classes. In a macroeconomic perspective, a second phenomenon which is related to increasing economic inequality is the erosion of the existing middle class of society (see Goldsmith & Blakely, 2010; Atkinson & Brandolini, 2013; Frank, 2013). This has the effect that especially lower social classes or people at the bottom of the middle class of society are strongly affected by increasing income disparities.

According to SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and the social categorization theory (hereinafter referred to as SCT; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), there are several strategies to deal with such losses *in* or threads *of* social status. When faced with an inferior status position (*negative social identity*) people may, for example, (a) try to move up in a higher status group (*individual mobility*), (b) redefine or alter the dimensions of comparison (*social creativity*), (c) identify more strongly with a social group on a superior group-level than with the threatened social group (*recategoriza-*

tion), or (d) start *social competition* to reverse a group's relative position (see also Mummendy, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999, for a detailed discussion). Indeed, there is a lot of empirical evidence for the use of different identity-serving strategies in the context of economic inequality. For example, Solt (2011) has shown on the base of multi-level analyses for the data of five waves from the World Value Survey (WVS) between 1981 and 2007 and data of the International Social Survey Program (ISPP) between 2003 and 2004 that increasing income inequality has a strong effect on the genesis of national pride. Strengthening national pride can be interpreted as a protective factor against negative identity threats triggered by social decline. In line with this assumption, Shayo (2009, p. 148) claims strong recategorization shifts from class identification to national identification under the threat of increasing pretax inequality. In his model he proposes an increasing national identification for the poor in contrast to the rich under the constraints of growing economic inequalities.

### 3 Economic inequality as an opportunity structure of right-wing populist parties in Western Europe

There has been much research on the structural conditions under which right-wing populist and extremist parties succeed. While some authors have found strong effects of institutional and party system related variables (e.g. Kitschelt, 1995; Carter, 2002; Arzheimer & Carter, 2006; Arzheimer, 2009), others highlight the influence of macroeconomic processes on the success of right-wing populist parties (e.g. Dancygier & Walter, 2015; Winkler, 2017; see von Beyme, 2010, pp. 179 for a general discussion). Economic crisis and changes in macroeconomic conditions have been often

discussed to be drivers for the development of ethnocentric and authoritarian attitudes in earlier literature (see Fritsche, Jonas, & Kessler, 2011 for a systematic review). With regard to voting and collective action research, such exogeneous environments can be seen as *opportunity structures* which facilitate the formation of social movements, public protests or even the formation of new party families (Kitschelt, 1986; Meyer & Minkoff, 2004; Arzheimer & Carter, 2006).

Increasing income inequality is expected to be a favorable economic opportunity structure for the strengthening of right-wing populist parties. Following Mudde (2004, p. 543), populism can be interpreted 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 *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.". In the case of right-wing populism this general thin-centered ideology is mostly combined with a nationalist and ethnocentric ideology which additionally separates between the "pure national society" and "amoral immigrants" (e.g. Priester, 2012; Rucht, 2017). Right-wing populist rhetoric is thus characterized by an increased use of self-enhancing and out-group derogating language (Lewandowsky, 2014; Bebnowski, 2015). By doing so, right-wing populist parties pave the way for recategorization shifts towards a strong national identity which may be combined with an increasing willingness of social competition between "*us* – the pure national society" and "*them* – the invading immigrants". Especially voters who suffer under economic status threats may be strongly attracted by right-wing populist campaigns as they have to cope with a (potentially) negative social identity. As a consequence, both ideological bases of right-wing populist parties – the *anti-elite* as well as the *anti-immigrant* dimension – might help right-wing populist parties to succeed in times of economic difficulties.

There is some first empirical evidence based on data of three international survey programs (European Social Survey, European Value Survey, and World Value Survey data between 2002 and 2012) confirming that right-wing populist voting preferences increase in times of high economic inequality – especially for members of the poor parts of society (Han, 2016). This new trend of right-wing voting clearly contradicts the traditional class voting hypothesis (e.g. Coffé, Heyndels, & Vermeir, 2007) which claimed especially left parties to be winners in times of economic inequality (see Han, 2016, pp. 61 for counter evidence on the class voting hypothesis). However, the time span under research mostly covered data of the so called “third wave of populism” (see von Beyme, 2010 for a historical overview). But especially during the past five years, right-wing populist parties have massively succeeded in national elections in Europe (see increases in the TIMBRO Authoritarian Populism Index, 2019). Investigating the relationship between economic inequality and the latest success of right-wing populist parties in Western Europe could therefore be of special interest. This paper has the aim to close this gap and focuses on latest survey data on this issue.

The main hypotheses that will be tested in the following refer to the relationship between economic inequality and right-wing voting:

- *Hypothesis 1* claims a positive relationship between economic inequality and

the emergence of right-wing populist voting preferences.

- *Hypothesis 2* refers to the interaction between economic inequality and socioeconomic status on right-wing populist voting behavior. It is expected that the probability of right-wing populist voting increases for people with low economic status when economic inequality is high as they are more strongly affected by economic status threats than the rich parts of society.

## 4 Data and variables

The cross-sectional analysis of this paper is based on data of the eighth round of the European Social Survey (ESS Round 8; available at: <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/download.html?r=8>; data released in 2018). The field work time of this round has been between 2016 and 2017. Overall the survey data covers information for 23 countries. For a better comparability of cases, eight countries with similar political systems and mostly current national elections were chosen for the empirical analysis. The countries included in the analysis are: Germany, Czech Republic, France, Austria, United Kingdom, Belgium, Poland, and the Netherlands. The survey data included in the empirical analysis contains information for 16.299 respondents ( $M_{age} = 49.14$ ,  $SD =$

Table 1. Distribution of respondents over countries

Country	Proportion of respondents (in percent)
Germany	2.852 (17.5 %)
Czech Republic	2.300 (14.1 %)
France	2.070 (12.7 %)
Austria	2.010 (12.3 %)
United Kingdom	1.959 (10.4 %)
Belgium	1.766 (10.8 %)
Poland	1.694 (10.4 %)
Netherlands	1.681 (10.3 %)

18.42, 52.2% female; see table 1 for the distribution of participants over countries). *Dependent variable.* As mentioned above, participants in the ESS program are asked to report their latest voting decisions within national elections. Of course retroactive reports of voting behavior have the problem of systematic biases (e.g. “the winner takes it all” effects) and false memories (Weir, 1975; Sigelman, 1982). For this reason, the chosen countries cover most actual national election data. Right-wing populist voting intentions were coded as a binary variable following the coding system of the Comparative Political Data Set (Armingeon et al., 2018).

*Individual-level variables.* Because right-wing populist and extremist voting behavior has been shown to depend highly on social milieus and is strongly influenced by political attitudes and social values (Lubbers, Gijsberts, & Scheepers, 2002; Arzheimer & Carter, 2006; Arzheimer, 2009), a set of individual level variables was included in the model. Gender effects have been often found to appear in the context of right-wing populist and extremist voting behavior (Lubbers, Gijsberts, & Scheepers, 2002; Gidengil, Hennigar, Blais, & Nevitte, 2005). Therefore gender has been included as a binary variable. As previous research does not confirm consistent effects of age (see Arzheimer & Carter, 2006 for an U-shaped relationship; see Lubbers, Gijsberts, & Scheepers, 2002; Han, 2016 for linear negative effects), age was added as a discrete variable and not as a categorical one. Following Lubbers, Gijsberts, and Scheepers (2002), educational attainment was proxied by the years of full-time education a respondent completed. Socioeconomic status was measured by income categories reaching from 1 (*lowest decile*) to 10 (*highest decile*). As it is often claimed that the formation of right-wing populist sentiments is strongly related to an increased political dissatisfaction or disinterest and a lack of political efficacy feelings (Lubbers, Gijsberts, & Scheepers, 2002; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Coffé &

Michels, 2014; Spruyt, Keppens, & van Droogenbroeck, 2016), it was also controlled for political interest and the political efficacy dimensions (see Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 2015). Interest in politics was assessed with a 4-point Likert scale item from 1 = “*not at all interested*” to 4 = “*very interested*” (recoded from original source). Political efficacy was assessed with two single items. One measuring the perceived responsiveness of the political system by asking whether the “political system allows people to have a say in what government does” reaching from 1 = “*not at all*” to 5 = “*a great deal*”. The second item assessed a respondent’s internal efficacy beliefs by asking how confident the respondent is in his or her own ability to participate in politics (1 = “*not at all confident*” to 5 = “*completely confident*”). Furthermore, political trust was assessed by three items measuring trust in the country’s parliament, political parties, and politicians on a 11-point Likert scale from 0 = “*no trust*” to 10 = “*complete trust*” (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .91$ ). Anti-immigrant attitudes have been also found to be very important predictors of support for right-wing extremist parties (Lubbers & Scheepers, 2000; 2002). To control for the influence of anti-immigrant attitudes, two separate measures of anti-immigrant sentiments were included in the model. One assessing for anti-immigrant sentiments on an economic dimension asking whether a respondent would say that immigrants are “*bad or good for a country’s economy*” (11-point Likert measure from 0 = “*bad for the economy*” to 10 = “*good for the economy*”). The second item measured socio-cultural anti-immigrant attitudes asking whether a respondent thinks that immigrants make the country “*a worse or better place*” (11-point Likert measure from 0 = “*worse place to live*” to 10 = “*better place to live*”).

*Country-level variables.* Economic inequality was measured by the World Bank Gini coefficient for post-tax income inequality (data available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>). As migra-

tion flows have been also discussed to be important societal and macroeconomic drivers for the support of right-wing populist parties (Arzheimer & Carter, 2006; Geiges, 2018), migrant stock changes between 2010 and 2015 in percent of the total migrant stock values were included in the statistical model (data downloaded from: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.TOTL>). Furthermore it was controlled for a country's wealth proxied by the cross domestic product (in USD) and for national unemployment measured by the unemployment rate in percent of the total national labor force in 2015, both world bank estimates (available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD>; <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.NE.ZS>).

## 5 Results

Following the instructions of Heck, Thomas, and Tabata (2012), a fixed effects multi-level binary regression model with a maximum of 100 iterations using IBM SPSS 25 was conducted. Table 2 presents the main results of the study. As expected in hypothesis 1, there is a substantial main effect of income inequality on the development of right-wing populist voting preferences ( $\beta = .65, p < .001$ ). However the interaction between economic inequality and socioeconomic status misses statistical significance ( $\beta = -.02, p = .148$ ). Figure 1 shows the conditional effects of income inequality for different income classes on the probability of right-wing populist voting. As the course of the graphs shows, there is an overall effect

Table 2. Results of a multi-level binary regression model for right-wing voting

Independent variables	Fixed regression coefficients
<b>Individual-level variables</b>	
Age	.001 (.003)
Gender (female)	-.16 (.10)
Education	.03* (.02)
Socioeconomic status (SES)	-.53 (.35)
Political interest	-.15* (.06)
External political efficacy	.11 (.06)
Internal political efficacy	-.10 (.05)
Political trust	-.007 (.03)
Economic anti-immigrant sentiments	.17*** (.03)
Cultural anti-immigrant sentiments	.14*** (.03)
<b>Country-level variables</b>	
Economic inequality	.65*** (.07)
Economic inequality X SES	-.02 (.01)
Migrant stock changes (2010-2015)	12.68*** (1.78)
Unemployment rate (2015)	.30*** (.04)
GDP per capita in USD	-.0001*** (.00001)
Constant	14.65*** (2.08)
<b>Number of observations</b>	
Individuals	16,299
Countries	8
Substantive model sensibility	92.5%
-2 x Log-likelihood difference	4,876.92

Note. \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*  $p \leq .05$



of increasing inequality on all income classes.

With regard to the control variables added in the statistical model, there are strong effects of both anti-immigrant sentiments ( $\beta_{\text{economic dimension}} = .17, p < .001$ ;  $\beta_{\text{cultural dimension}} = .14, p < .001$ ). The effect of political interest also showed the expected direction, indicating that politically interested citizens report fewer intentions to vote for right-wing populist parties ( $\beta = -.15, p < .05$ ). Unexpectedly, there was an opposite effect of education ( $\beta = .03, p < .05$ ) showing that right-wing populist voting preferences are positively affected by increasing years of full time education.

Regarding the effects of contextual country-level controls, it becomes obvious that especially migrant stock changes have a strong additional effect on the increase of right-wing populist voting preferences ( $\beta = 12.68, p < .001$ ). Unemployment rate also seems to foster right-wing voting ( $\beta = .30, p < .001$ ), GDP per capita has a small dampening impact on support for right-wing populist parties ( $\beta = -.0001, p < .001$ ).

## 6 Discussion and conclusion

The present study provides new insights for the current relationship between economic inequality and the success of right-wing populist parties in Europe. The results of the multi-level analysis strongly confirm that the success of right-wing populist parties is highly pushed by increasing economic inequality (hypothesis 1). Further changes in the socio- and macroeconomic circumstances (e.g. migrant flows, or unemployment) are building an additional driving force for right-wing populist party success. In contrast to hypothesis 2, there was no significant interaction effect between economic inequality and socio-economic status. However, there was a strong main effect of economic inequality across all income groups.

This main effect can be interpreted in different ways. At first glance, it seems to be surprising that right-wing populist voting preferences increase even for higher income classes under the condition of rising economic inequality. However, with regard to the increasing threat of the decline of the middle class of society due to economic in-

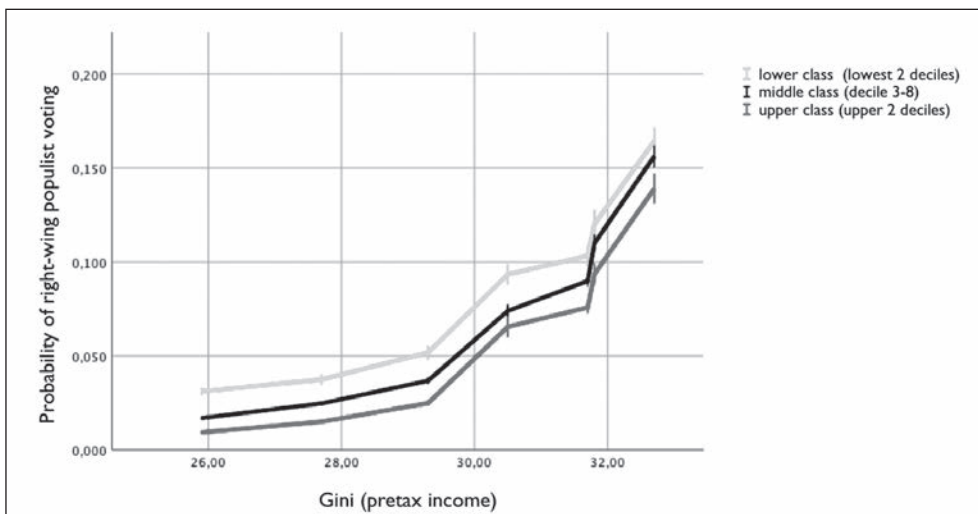


Figure 1. Conditional effects of Gini on different income classes

equality (Frank, 2013), there might be rational reasons for this development. Feelings of relative deprivation (Crosby, 1976) may thus explain the similar reactions to increasing inequality for both “the poor” and “the rich”.

Furthermore, it might be also possible that different social and psychological processes lead to this parallel support for right-wing populist parties. While lower income classes might react more negatively to the economic status threats triggered by increasing economic inequality, higher income classes might be more concerned about losses in quality of life due to macroeconomic processes and additional migration flows (see Manevska & Achterberg, 2013, p. 443; Lance & Pardos-Prado, 2013, pp. 118-122 for the relation between income, unemployment, dismissals, and perceived ethnic threat). These are possible pathways that could be better addressed by more specific research with a stronger focus on the individual-level and individual coping strategies with macroeconomic changes.

For many “protest”-voters voting for right-wing populist parties might not necessarily be a choice of conviction but a possibility to personally deal with different types of status threats (Fritsche, Jonas, & Fankhänel, 2008; Shayo, 2009) and to send a symbol to the established political parties (Mayer & Perrineau, 1992). In the long run, the support for right-wing populist parties might effectively change the composition of party systems. When right-wing populist parties become strong enough to build or participate in governments (like it is the case in Hungary, Poland, Austria, Italy, Norway, or Latvia), this might be a danger to the maintenance of civil rights, the liberty of press, and cultural diversity, but must not necessarily be accompanied by such restrictions. As trackable in the Freedom House ranking from 2018, except Hungary, none of the countries mentioned in brackets showed alarming declines in freedom during the past years (Freedom House,

2018). However, the threat of right-wing populist party success can be a real appeal to the established parties in government to improve social policies with regard to the concerns of the “small people” – what can be observed, for example, in the actual tendencies of the German Social Democrats to regain lost voters (see Jakobs & Jun, 2018, p. 273). Real improvements in the socioeconomic circumstances of voters may be a country-level strategy to fight against right-wing populist party success. In this context, Margalit (2011) also found that knowledge about national welfare programs decreased right-wing populist tendencies. Especially with regard to modern conceptions of democracy and good governance, some authors claim that guaranteeing for economic stability and an egalitarian distribution of material and cognitive goods can serve as a “shield for democracy” (Groeben & Schnepf, 2019; Merkel, 2004, p. 45).

However, such strategies do not necessarily hold for irrational or diffuse fears. With regard to the individual-level, restoring civic empowerment and feelings of control might help to overcome times of socioeconomic crisis (Fritsche et al., 2008). A further strategy to deal with the increasing transnational cleavage (see Hooghe & Marks, 2018) could be the enhancement of a common global identity. In this context, Giannakakis and Fritsche (2011) found that nationalist out-group derogation between English and French participants has been reduced when participants were told to think about the similarities between English and French people. Similarly, Zárte and colleagues (2004, p. 103) have demonstrated that out-group evaluations on work related traits could be increased when similarities between the national in-group and foreign immigrants were highlighted. Especially with regard to the most recent European developments, like Brexit or the latest EU parliament elections in which the number of anti-European representatives has reached a new record level in the history of the European Union, it seems to be one of

the most urgent issues to deal with and find solutions for the various social, economic, and ecological crises at present.

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