

Populism as a Problem of Social Integration

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Abstract

We argue that support for parties of the radical right and left can usefully be understood as a problem of social integration—an approach that brings together economic and cultural explanations for populism. With comparative survey data, we assess whether support for parties of the radical right and left is associated with feelings of social marginalization. We find that people who feel more socially marginal—because they lack strong attachment to the normative order, social engagement, or a sense of social respect—are more likely to be alienated from mainstream politics and to support radical parties. We also find an association between indicators for recent economic and cultural developments often said to affect social status and feelings of social marginalization, especially among people with low incomes or educational attainment. We conclude that problems of social integration and subjective social status deserve more attention from scholars of comparative political behavior.

Keywords

populism, radical parties, social integration, European politics

Rising support for anti-establishment parties of the radical right and left is one of the most prominent features of contemporary European politics. Radical right parties typically campaign on ethnonationalist platforms combined with

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populist appeals positing a moral opposition between a corrupt or incompetent elite and a virtuous but ignored populace (Aslanidis, 2016; Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Müller, 2016; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017; cf. Rydgren, 2017). Radical left parties also mount explicit challenges to mainstream politics even if they are not always overtly populist in their appeals (Gomez, Morales, & Ramiro, 2016; March, 2011; Ramiro, 2016; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017; Visser, Lubbers, Kraaykamp, & Jaspers, 2014). Together, they have been eroding the electoral base of established parties on the center-left and center-right over three decades.

The vote for radical parties, especially on the populist right, has been increasing steadily since the early 1980s, a period over which radical parties have gradually more than doubled their share of the vote in European legislative elections (Heinö, Caccavello, & Sandell, 2017). Therefore, although recent developments such as the Brexit referendum and the sudden success of the German AfD have attracted attention to the phenomenon, and contingent events such as surges of immigration in Germany or Sweden and austerity programs in southern Europe may increase the vote for radical parties (Rodrik, 2018), there is a case for asking whether growing support for radical parties might also have deeper, long-term roots.

That case is strengthened by the widespread observation that support for populist parties in Europe is not simply issue-based, but also stems from a deep and diffuse discontent that has been building for some time (Berger, 2017; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Gest, Reny, & Mayer, 2018; Spruyt, Keppens, & Van Droogenbroeck, 2016; Steenvoorden & Harteveld, 2018). The objective of this article is to inquire into the roots of that discontent, to provide a framework for understanding how it develops and comes to impinge on politics, and to provide some initial evidence for this assessment.

We argue that support for radical parties can usefully be seen as a reflection of problems in social integration—defined as the social relations linking individuals and promoting their sense of being valued members of society. Our core contention is that much of the discontent fueling support for radical parties is rooted in feelings of social marginalization—namely, in the sense some people have that they have been pushed to the fringes of their national community and deprived of the roles and respect normally accorded full members of it.

Of course, radical parties must exist if people are to vote for them, and they can increase their support with appeals that render particular issues more salient (Kitschelt & McGann, 1997; Rooduijn, van der Brug, & de Lange, 2016). However, we leave aside the problem of explaining why radical parties arise or the impact of their appeals to concentrate on the “demand side” of populist politics where our focus is on explaining long-term sources of the discontent that yields a reservoir of potential support for such parties (cf. Bornschieer,

2010; De Vries & Hobolt, 2012; Guiso, Herrera, Morelli, & Sonno, 2017; Tavits, 2007).

The existing literature about the sources of that discontent is bifurcated by a debate about whether economic or cultural developments are most responsible for it. On one side are scholars who suggest that support for candidates of the radical right or left is strongest among people facing adverse economic circumstances, attributable to rising rates of income inequality, high levels of unemployment, or job displacement as a result of skill-biased technological change and global outsourcing (Algan et al., 2017; Autor, Dorn, Hanson, & Majlesi, 2016; Ballard-Rosa, Malik, Rickard, & Scheve, 2017; Burgoon, van Noort, Rooduijn, & Underhill, 2019; Colantone & Stanig, 2018; Kurer, 2018; Rovny & Rovny, 2017). On the other side are scholars who argue that rising support for radical right parties in particular is inspired by shifts in cultural frameworks that have led social and political elites to embrace postmaterialist and multicultural values, generating a counterreaction from voters attached to more traditional attitudes associated with opposition to immigration and to greater racial or gender equality (Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Mutz, 2018; Oesch, 2008; for a skeptical review of this debate, see Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018).

There is something to be said for each side of this debate: good evidence documents the impact of economic and cultural developments on the vote for radical parties. But we think the debate itself is misplaced. As social science often does, it presents economic and cultural accounts as competing explanations of a phenomenon. But economic and cultural developments often interact and, instead of debating which is more important, we need better frameworks for understanding how the two types of developments might combine to generate the discontent fueling support for radical parties. We will argue that seeing support for those parties as a problem of social integration provides one way of doing so.

In the next sections, we situate our argument within wider literatures on social integration, provide a theoretical rationale for thinking that recent economic and cultural developments have generated problems of social integration, and outline why such problems should inspire support for radical parties. We then assess the contentions that emerge from this discussion against cross-national survey evidence from 25 European nations.

Support for Radical Parties as a Problem of Social Integration

The inspiration for our approach comes from an ethnographic literature that delves deeply into the lives and attitudes of some of the social groups most

open to populist appeals (Cramer, 2016; Eribon, 2013; Gest, 2016; Hochschild, 2016; Köpping, 2018; Wuthnow, 2018). Across a diversity of national settings, this literature reports that important segments of the population feel “left behind”—relegated to vulnerable economic and social positions, increasingly alienated from the values prominent in elite discourse, and lacking the respect accorded full members of society. Summarizing his study of British and American workers, Gest (2016, p. 15) observes that “white working-class people sense that they have been demoted from the center of their country’s consciousness to its fringe.” Of the Louisiana residents she interviewed, Hochschild (2016, p. 144) says “You are a stranger in your own land. You do not recognize yourself in how others see you. It is a struggle to feel seen and honored.” Considering why the voters of Reims have turned to the French National Front, Eribon (2013, p. 131) observes that “whole sectors of the most severely disadvantaged would . . . shift over to the only party that seemed to care about them.” These are reports of social marginalization.

The subjects in these studies do not simply refer to personal economic distress but to their dismay at the direction of society as a whole. Gest et al. (2018) find that supporters of the radical right in Britain and the United States express a sense of “nostalgic deprivation” rooted in the belief that social conditions were better in the past. 58% of Britons who voted to leave the European Union in 2016 declared life worse today than it was 30 years ago (compared with 27% of those voting Remain; Ashcroft, 2016). Sociotropic concerns such as these are classic indicators of problems in social integration. They reflect discontent based not on the economic position of the individual but on concerns about the direction of society more generally, which play into the appeals many populist parties make for the revival of an imagined “heartland” that was much better in the past (Taggart, 2000; see also Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Spruyt et al., 2016).¹

Conceptualizing Social Integration

A deep vein of research in sociology considers issues of social integration. The *locus classicus* lies in the work of Émile Durkheim (1892/1984), who argued that the division of labor in market economies would yield social solidarity only if it provided people with occupations they deemed appropriate and if those people participated in a collective consciousness composed of shared norms, values, and beliefs. Absent such shared norms, society would be in a state of anomie. Emphasizing this point, Blau (1960, p. 545) argued that participation in the normative order depends on processes of social interaction whereby people acquire “acceptance as peers,” foreshadowing later work on the importance of engagement with family, friends, and

the community as the vehicles for social acceptance and the foundation of a common normative order (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1996; Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000; Etzioni, 1996; Putnam, 2000). In sum, this literature identifies social integration—at both the macro-level reflecting how well integrated a society is and at the micro-level reflecting how well integrated into society each individual is—as a multidimensional phenomenon based on (a) the degree to which individuals see themselves as part of a *shared normative order*, (b) their levels of *social interaction* with others, and (c) the extent to which they feel *recognized* or respected by others in society.

To assess at the individual-level how well people are integrated into society, we make central use of a synthetic concept, which is the *subjective social status* of citizens—defined as their beliefs about where they stand relative to others in society. It is important to note that subjective social status is conceptually and empirically distinct from social class and objective social status. As Weber (1918/1968) argued long ago, a person's social class is generally defined by the position the individual occupies within the economic system, and objective social status refers to the rank a person enjoys within the hierarchy of prestige characteristic of all societies. In modern societies, people derive much of their objective social status from their income, educational attainment, and occupation—the standard markers of “socioeconomic status” (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Ridgeway & Walker, 1995). Subjective social status is related to these objective conditions because the latter influence people's beliefs about their own status. But those beliefs are analytically and empirically distinct from objective markers of socioeconomic status (SES) because they embody subjective feelings about where one stands relative to others in society (Miyakawa, Mangusson Hanson, Theorell, & Westerlund, 2012; Singh-Manoux, Alder, & Marmot, 2003).

The Role of Economic and Cultural Developments

Understanding the social discontent that lies behind support for radical parties as a problem of social integration offers an important avenue for moving beyond the artificial debate about whether the roots of that discontent are predominantly economic or cultural. It becomes possible to see how economic and cultural developments might operate in tandem to generate such support—because feelings of social marginalization can follow either from the loss of a valued economic position or from the perception that cultural elites no longer attach value to one's views. When the same groups of people are affected by both types of developments, the corresponding discontent should be especially deep.

As we have noted, support for radical parties has been rising relatively steadily for three decades. Are there economic developments over those decades that are likely to have left some people in Europe feeling pushed to the sidelines of their society? There are good reasons for thinking that two sets of economic developments have done so: increasing income inequality and the loss of good jobs to global outsourcing and skill-biased technological change. When evaluating their social position, people typically compare their own situations with those of others, and there is evidence that, as their incomes stagnate relative to others, people begin to feel their social position has been eroded (Andersen & Curtis, 2012; Layte & Whelan, 2014; Lindemann & Saar, 2014; Schneider, 2019).² Income inequality increased across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries between the mid-1980s and the early-2000s, and Burgoon et al. (2019) find that precisely this type of “positional deprivation” is associated with stronger support for the radical right (see also Han, 2016).

At the same time, most developed economies have lost well-paid manufacturing jobs to global outsourcing and skill-biased technological change, with dramatic effects on people with modest skill levels, many of whom have been forced into less-remunerative or insecure employment (Goos, Manning, & Salomons, 2014; Oesch, 2013). And people in the regions or sectors most exposed to these developments are turning to more radical political candidates (Autor et al., 2016; Ballard-Rosa et al., 2017; Colantone & Stanig, 2018; Im, Mayer, Palier, & Rovny, 2019). Of course, this political reaction may follow from straightforward discontent with one’s material circumstances, but—because studies show that people use the quality of their job to evaluate their social standing—these experiences may also be generating feelings of social marginalization (Hout, 2008).

Shifts in cultural frameworks over recent decades are also likely to have left some people feeling socially marginalized. The most notable has been the rising prominence, within elite discourse and the mainstream media, of cultural frameworks promoting gender rights, multiculturalism, and LGBTQ rights (Banting & Kymlicka, 2013; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). As a result, most developed democracies are now more inclusive than they once were in terms that are advantageous for women, ethnic minorities, and people with diverse gender identities. But these steps toward inclusion have been double-sided: people who hold more traditional values no longer see those values reflected in elite discourse, and this gap can lead individuals to feel marginalized vis-à-vis mainstream society. People who depended on traditional gender or ethnic hierarchies to bolster their own sense of social status may be especially prone to feeling that shifting cultural frameworks have undermined their social standing (Pateman, 1988).

Of course, while people who feel socially marginalized for largely economic reasons might be drawn toward either radical left or radical right parties, those who feel marginalized for cultural reasons are much more likely to be drawn to the radical right, because radical right parties are the ones that take traditionalist stands on these cultural issues (Hall & Evans, 2019; Mudde, 2007; Rooduijn, Burgoon, van Elsas, & van de Werfhorst, 2017). But both the economic and cultural developments of recent decades have the potential to leave some people feeling that they have been relegated to the sidelines of society.

The Relevance for Politics

Although scholars of comparative electoral behavior have not devoted much attention to subjective social status (but see McClendon, 2018), there are grounds for expecting it to have political effects.³ Research in sociology and psychology identifies the quest for social esteem as a crucial motivation for action (De Botton, 2004; Ridgeway & Walker, 1995; Weber, 1918/1968). Social esteem is important to individuals because it is closely tied to the self-esteem vital to many dimensions of well-being (Fisk, 2010; Marmot, 2004). Summarizing an extensive body of work, Ridgeway (2014, p. 2) observes that “people care about status quite as intensely as they do about money and power.” Thus, concerns about a loss of social standing might influence people’s voting behavior just as considerations of material loss do.

Moreover, precisely because populism is not politics as usual, anxieties about social status are especially relevant to it. Feeling that one is not accorded much respect by society is likely to inspire resentment against elites, and populist appeals exploit this type of resentment with claims to speak for ordinary people who have been ignored by elites that are described as corrupt or incompetent (see Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). The populist rhetoric of politicians on both the radical right and left is often aimed directly at status concerns. Many adopt the plain-spoken language of the common man, self-consciously repudiating the sophisticated formulations of political elites (Moffitt, 2016). Radical politicians on the left evoke the virtues of working people, whereas those on the right emphasize themes of national greatness, which have special appeal for people who rely on claims to national membership for a social status they otherwise lack (Shayo, 2009). The “take back control” and “make America great again” slogans of the Brexit and Trump campaigns were perfectly pitched for such purposes. These efforts to celebrate the social standing of ordinary people often evoke deeply emotional responses. Hochschild (2016, p. 225) reports that, in the presence of their candidate, Trump

supporters who “have been in mourning for a lost way of life . . . now feel hopeful, joyous, elated.”

Individuals who feel socially marginal may be drawn to parties of the radical right for more complex psychological reasons as well. There is evidence that people who are on the lower rungs of the social ladder are susceptible to a “fear of falling” even farther down it. This leads them to draw sharp social boundaries between “respectable” people like themselves and others to whom less social standing can be ascribed, and immigrants are prime targets for such boundary work (Ehrenreich, 1990; Kefalas, 2003; Kuziemko, Buell, Reich, & Norton, 2014; Peugny, 2009). Thus, low levels of subjective social status may be conducive to the anti-immigrant attitudes on which the radical right bases much of its appeal (Ivaresflaten, 2008). In pioneering studies, Lipset (1955, 1959) found that status anxiety promotes support for the radical right, and recent research in psychology confirms that people who believe their social status is threatened are likely to develop hostility to out-groups, such as immigrants, especially if they can be associated with the status threat (Küpper, Wolf, & Zick, 2010; Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

For these reasons, we expect people who report lower levels of subjective social status to be more alienated from mainstream politics than those with higher subjective social status and more supportive of radical parties challenging the established elites. This association should hold for radical parties of either the right or the left. And, although it is beyond the objective of this article to inquire deeply into why people who vote for radical parties choose the radical right or left, we will examine two broad propositions that emerge from a growing literature on this. The first is that ideology matters: voters who attach high value to redistribution tend to prefer radical left parties that echo such views, whereas those who hold strongly anti-immigrant attitudes prefer radical right parties (Rooduijn et al., 2017; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018; Visser et al., 2014). As education is a key determinant of such views, the corollary is that low levels of educational achievement should be conducive to radical right voting, whereas high levels should promote radical left voting (Hainmueller & Hiscox, 2007).

The second proposition is that people in the most disadvantaged labor-market positions tend to prefer radical left parties, presumably because they offer such groups more direct relief in the form of social benefits, whereas workers a few steps up the economic ladder gravitate toward the radical right, especially if their jobs seem threatened by outsourcing or automation (Antonucci, Horvath, Kutiyanski, & Krouwel, 2017; Gomez et al., 2016; Im et al., 2019; Oesch & Rennwald, 2018; Ramiro, 2016). We will ask whether our results correspond to these propositions.

In the sections that follow, we assess the empirical implications of this approach for understanding support for radical parties. Our objective is not to claim that feelings of social marginalization trump all other explanations for the radical vote. Where radical parties do well, they are elected by coalitions of diverse and multiply-motivated voters, and contingent events, such as surges of immigration in northern Europe or austerity in southern Europe, can increase support for such parties (Rodrik, 2018). The electoral strategies of radical candidates and their opponents, both radical and mainstream, also matter (Arzheimer, 2017; Gidron & Ziblatt, 2019; Guiso et al., 2017; Rydgren, 2005). However, our intuition is that electoral strategies take advantage of—and contingent events amplify—reservoirs of discontent that have been building up for some time. The limited objective of this study is to show that social marginalization, reflecting failures of social integration, contributes to these reservoirs of discontent and yields votes for radical parties. There is good ethnographic evidence for this proposition but only a few statistical analyses of it at the cross-national level.⁴ With that in mind, we turn to the empirics.

Empirical Analysis

Subjective Social Status as a Measure of Social Integration

We employ data drawn from Round 6 of the European Social Survey (ESS), which is based on hour-long in-person interviews conducted on representative samples of all adults over the age of 15 years in 25 European countries during 2012 to 2013 (for a list of countries, see Table A1 in Online Supplemental Information).⁵ As questions tapping subjective social status are rarely included in cross-national surveys, this is the only one we have found covering an adequate number of countries with the relevant variables.

To measure subjective social status, we use responses to a question asking people 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.” Although rarely used in political science, this question is widely accepted as a measure of subjective social status (Evans & Kelley, 2004; Lindemann & Saar, 2014; Operario, Adler, & Williams, 2004). Studies showing that lower scores on this ladder are correlated with more negative social emotions such as anger and resentment are consistent with our view that this measure taps into the discontent associated with feeling one is not accorded adequate social respect (Adler & Stewart, 2007).

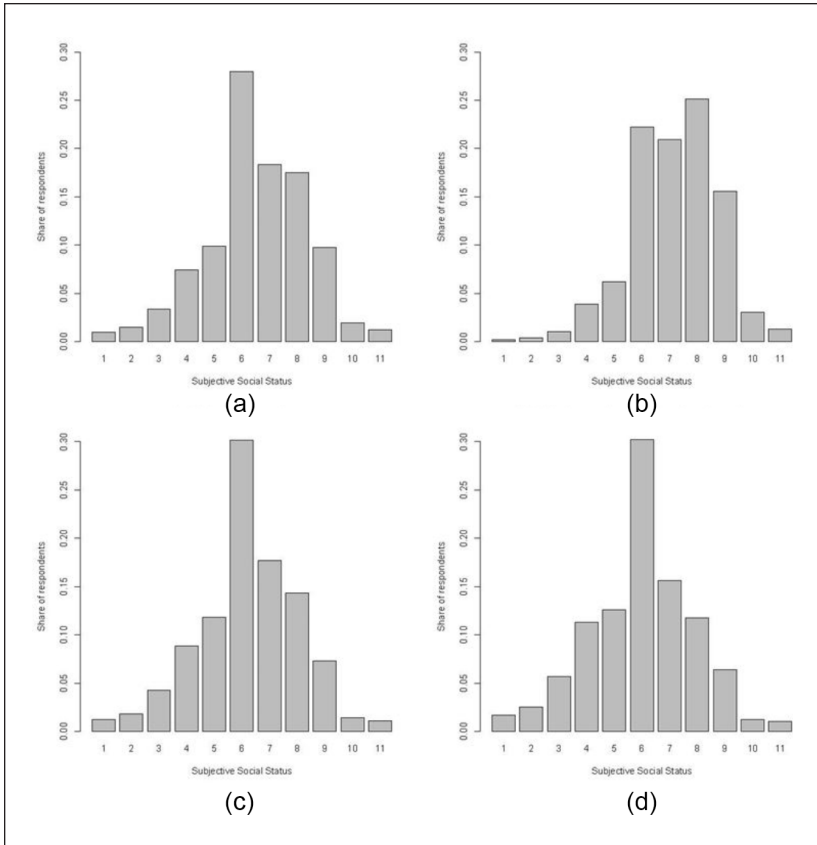


Figure 1. The distribution of subjective social status across the full sample and by occupational class: (a) full sample, (b) sociocultural professionals, (c) low-skill services, and (d) routine workers.

Source. Round 6 ESS.

Figure 1(a) displays the distribution of this variable in the 25 countries included in this analysis. If this is a good measure for whether people see themselves as mainstream members of society, we would expect most people to place themselves in the middle of this social ladder, and they do. But significant numbers of people report lower subjective social status, and our premise is that those who place themselves on lower rungs of this ladder believe that they have a more marginal social position than those located higher up on it.

Table 1. Predictors of Subjective Social Status.

	Dependent variable: Subjective social status		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Income decile	0.163*** (0.009)	0.090*** (0.006)	0.155*** (0.007)
Income: Coping		-0.456*** (0.034)	
Income: Difficult		-0.948*** (0.062)	
Income: Very difficult		-1.710*** (0.108)	
LGBT opposition			-0.063*** (0.017)
Occupation: Managers	0.022 (0.042)	0.029 (0.038)	0.034 (0.039)
Occupation: Clerks	-0.242*** (0.061)	-0.192*** (0.058)	-0.211*** (0.056)
Occupation: Low-skill services	-0.435*** (0.043)	-0.337*** (0.042)	-0.398*** (0.038)
Occupation: Technicians	-0.161*** (0.047)	-0.164*** (0.043)	-0.174*** (0.040)
Occupation: Routine workers	-0.504*** (0.045)	-0.419*** (0.042)	-0.469*** (0.035)
Female = 1		-0.043* (0.024)	-0.081*** (0.029)
Age		-0.0001 (0.002)	0.002 (0.002)
Union membership = 1		0.063* (0.037)	0.044 (0.043)
Church attendance = 1		0.174*** (0.067)	0.236*** (0.072)
Higher education = 1	0.209*** (0.049)	0.198*** (0.037)	0.220*** (0.042)
Unemployed = 1		-0.057 (0.059)	-0.290*** (0.073)
Rural-urban: Suburbs		-0.011 (0.056)	-0.015 (0.063)
Rural-urban: Small city		-0.056 (0.044)	-0.054 (0.047)
Rural-urban: Country village		-0.065 (0.050)	-0.051 (0.055)
Rural-urban: Farm and countryside		-0.064 (0.048)	-0.037 (0.053)
Foreign born = 1		-0.083** (0.039)	-0.125*** (0.042)
Constant	6.899*** (0.060)	8.086*** (0.124)	7.132*** (0.119)
Observations	33,699	32,065	31,037
R ²	.247	.295	.239

OLS regressions with country fixed effects and robust clustered standard errors. Reference group for occupations is “sociocultural professionals.” Reference group for rural-urban is big cities. Reference group for income is “living comfortably on present income.” OLS, ordinary least squares.

p* < .1. *p* < .05. ****p* < .01.

To assess whether this measure of subjective social status is not simply a proxy for objective SES, we can explore the relationship between it and standard markers for SES. In Table 1, Model 1 reports the results of an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with country fixed effects in which the dependent variable is our measure of subjective social status, and the explanatory variables are the respondent’s income decile, level of educational achievement, and occupational class.⁶ The results indicate that together these three standard components of SES explain only a limited amount of the variance in subjective social status. The important corollary is that, although levels of subjective social status are generally lower among people in manual or low-skill positions, even individuals within other occupational groups, such as sociocultural professionals or managers, can feel that they are accorded more or less social respect, as the other panels of Figure 1 indicate.

Is our measure for subjective social status a good indicator for the social integration or marginalization of individuals? To assess this, we examine the relationship between this measure and indicators that tap into the three dimensions the sociological literature associates with social integration, namely, the extent to which respondents express trust in other people, which we take as an indicator for the extent to which they feel part of a shared normative order; how often respondents meet others and engage in social activities with them, which are indicators for social interaction, and responses to a question asking respondents to what extent they feel other people treat them with respect, a good indicator for social recognition. We again use OLS estimations with country fixed effects and condition on other variables that might affect subjective social status (the estimations are in Table A2 in Online Supplemental Information).⁷

Figure 2 displays the relationships between these variables and subjective social status when the other attributes of individuals are held at their median levels in the United Kingdom, a country where average levels of subjective social status are close to the median for the entire sample.⁸ It shows that, even when conditioning on other factors, subjective social status is positively associated with all three indicators for social integration. The most variance is explained by people's feelings about whether others treat them with respect. These results suggest that our measure for subjective social status taps well into the extent to which people feel integrated into or marginalized from society.

An alternative approach to measuring subjective social status would be to combine the indicators for these three dimensions into a single index. We do so and report these estimations in Online Supplemental Information (Table A5). Our results remain valid using that index rather than the social ladder measure for subjective social status: to preview our findings, the composite index of social integration predicts political alienation, abstention, and voting for radical parties. In our view, however, the social ladder is a superior indicator. In theoretical terms, it captures better the relational qualities of subjective social status that are central to some of its political effects, such as the tendency of low subjective status to inspire last place aversion (Kuziemko et al., 2014), and, in methodological terms, it offers a single indicator that can be incorporated into surveys more readily than a battery of questions on social integration. Indeed, one of our objectives in placing this measure of subjective social status at the center of the inquiry is to encourage further research on the relationship between social integration and political behavior.

The Relevance of Economic and Cultural Developments

Are the economic and cultural developments that we have identified as potential sources of social marginalization likely to be having such effects?

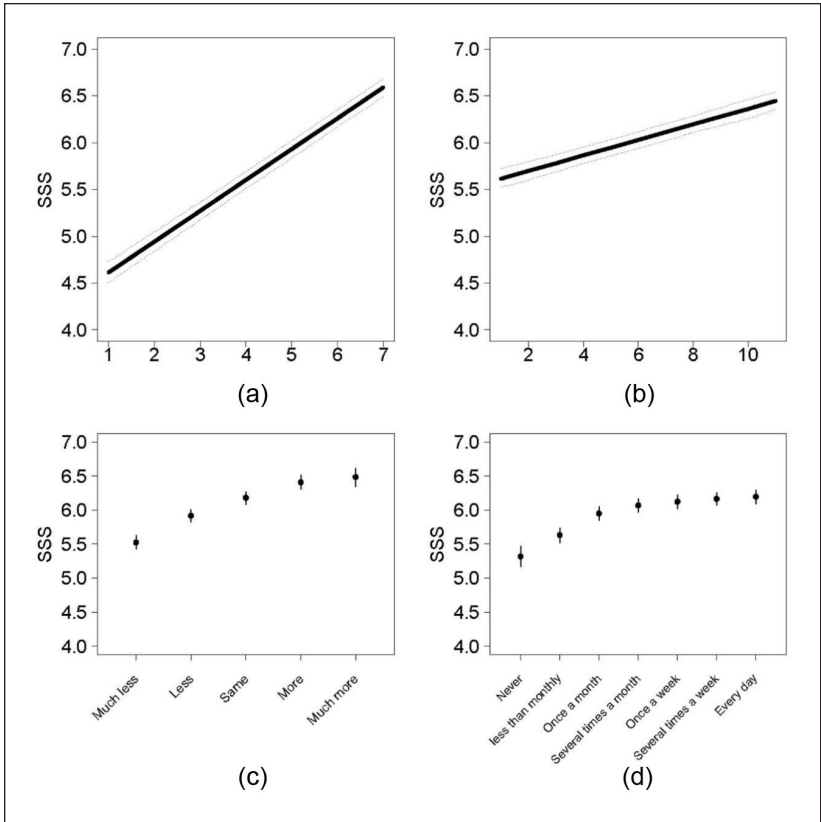


Figure 2. The relationship between subjective social status and indicators for social integration: (a) treated with respect, (b) trust in people, (c) social activities, and (d) social meetings.

Based on the estimations in Table A2 with other variables held at their means and country held constant on the United Kingdom.

We cannot causally identify such effects using the ESS data. However, we can use our cross-sectional data to conduct some preliminary assessments of the plausibility of these propositions. Within the Round 6 ESS, respondents were asked how they feel about their household’s present income and given the opportunity to say they are: living comfortably on it, coping, finding it difficult to live on it, or finding it very difficult to live on their present income. People who have suffered the most adverse effects of recent economic developments such as outsourcing or technological

change are more likely to have difficulty coping on their income. Accordingly, we expect people who report more such difficulty to express lower levels of subjective social status.

We assess this proposition with an OLS regression in which we condition the estimation on other variables that might affect subjective social status. The results in Model 2 of Table 1 report a strong relationship. Compared with those who are “living comfortably” on their income (the reference category), people who express greater difficulty report lower levels subjective social status.

Capturing shifts in cultural frameworks is more challenging, but we attempt to do so using a question that asks respondents to what extent they agree or disagree that “gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish.” In recent decades, elites have shown increasing support for this kind of tolerance (Andersen & Fetner, 2008; Welzel, 2013, p. 99). Thus, negative responses to this question provide a rough indicator for the extent to which a gap has opened up between the respondent’s attitudes and the values now prominent in mainstream elite discourse. Our premise is that, if shifts in cultural frameworks have led some people to feel socially marginalized because their views now diverge from those of mainstream elites, disagreement with the statement in this question should be associated with lower subjective social status. We examine this issue in Model 3 of Table 1. There is a strong and statistically significant negative relationship indicating that people who oppose LGBT rights are more likely to express lower levels of subjective social status than those who are supportive of such rights. This is consistent with the proposition that shifts in dominant cultural frameworks may be leading some people with discordant attitudes to feel more marginal to society.

We can also leverage the cross-national variation in this data set to look more closely at the ways in which two key economic developments, namely, rising income inequality and skill-biased technological change, might be increasing feelings of social marginalization among some groups of people. These are indirect tests and caution must be exercised in extrapolating from cross-national variation to longitudinal effects. However, if these two economic developments have led people to feel more socially marginal, subjective social status should be lower in countries where these developments have proceeded the farthest, and the decline should be steepest for people with lower levels of income and skill on whom the most adverse impacts of such developments fall.

We begin by comparing countries where income inequality is higher to countries where it is lower, using hierarchical linear models with random intercepts in which observations at the lower (individual) level are nested in

higher order units (countries). This allows us to condition on other variables that might be affecting subjective social status.⁹ Our dependent variable is subjective social status.¹⁰ Our measure of income inequality is the proportion of income going to the most affluent 10% of income earners. We include the individual-level correlates of subjective social status used in the prior estimations. The key results (without individual-level coefficients) are reported in Table 2. Model 1 indicates that the average subjective social status of the population declines considerably across countries as the top 10% share of income increases, and the interaction term in Model 2 indicates that subjective social status declines the most among people with lower incomes (for full results, see Table A4 in Online Supplemental Information).¹¹ Model 3 in Table 2 shows that these results are robust when the estimation is conditioned on GDP per capita (Lindemann & Saar, 2014; Poppitz, 2016). Using the top 20% of income as the measure for income inequality yields similar results (Models 4-6 in Table A4).

Figure 3(a) displays the decline in subjective social status of people at the third and eighth income deciles as income inequality increases, holding the other attributes of individuals at their means. To the extent that this cross-national variation can be extrapolated to variation over time, these results are consistent with the contention that recent increases in income inequality are depressing subjective social status with slightly stronger effects on people at low incomes.

We explore the impact of skill-biased technological change by comparing countries based on enrollments in tertiary education.¹² As tertiary enrollments generally rise in response to skill-biased technological change, we take enrollments as an indicator for the extent of such change. We expect them to depress the subjective social status of people with low levels of skill through two channels. First, the subjective social status of people with low-skill levels may decline because of the losses in income or economic security that follow from lower demand for their services. Second, this might also be an instance in which economic developments set in motion parallel changes in cultural frameworks that multiply their effects. As the demand for higher skills and corresponding tertiary enrollments rise, the social prestige accorded people who have only a secondary education may decline, leading them to feel more socially marginalized.

Model 4 in Table 2 indicates that average levels of subjective social status do not change with the size of tertiary enrollments; but, as the interaction term in Model 5 indicates, when tertiary enrollments rise, the subjective social status of people without a tertiary education declines. Figure 3(b) shows how the subjective social status of people with and without higher education changes as tertiary enrollments increase, holding other

Table 2. Estimates From Hierarchical Linear Models Predicting Subjective Social Status.

	Dependent variable: Subjective social status					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Individual-level covariates	+	+	+	+	+	+
GDP			0.00001*** (0.00000)			0.00002*** (0.00000)
Income \times Top 10		0.004*** (0.002)	0.004*** (0.002)			
Top 10	-0.144** (0.052)	-0.160*** (0.052)	-0.119** (0.047)			
Higher Education \times Tertiary Enrollment					0.026*** (0.003)	0.026*** (0.003)
Tertiary enrollment				-0.017 (0.022)	-0.029 (0.022)	0.004 (0.015)
Constant	8.991*** (1.255)	9.383*** (1.267)	7.931*** (1.208)	6.029*** (0.762)	6.426*** (0.765)	4.444*** (0.583)
Observations	29,717	29,717	29,717	30,568	30,568	30,568
Log likelihood	-59,151.820	-59,149.190	-59,145.720	-59,765.770	-59,734.040	-59,723.520

Source. GDP per capita data from Round 6 ESS data set; income inequality data from the World Bank; enrollment data from Eurostat. GDP = gross domestic product.

* $p < .1$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

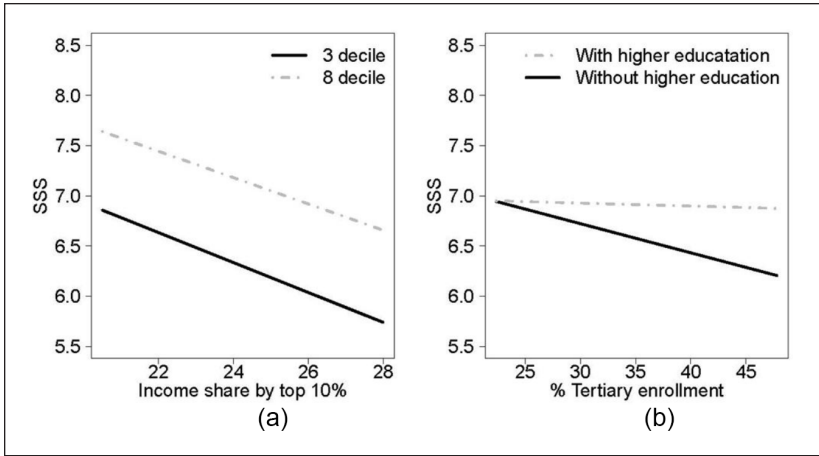


Figure 3. How subjective social status changes as (a) income inequality and (b) tertiary enrollments increase at the national level. Multilevel interactions based on Models 2 and 8 in Table A3 with other attributes of individuals held at their means.

variables at their means. These results are congruent with the view that, as tertiary enrollments rise in response to skill-biased technological change, people without higher education come to see themselves as more socially marginal.

In sum, our results are consistent with the contention that economic developments and shifts in cultural frameworks are leading some citizens to feel socially marginalized. Moreover, people with lower levels of education are most exposed to both sets of developments. On one hand, they are more likely to be adversely affected by economic processes such as skill-biased technological change and global outsourcing. On the other hand, people with lower levels of education are more likely to hold traditional attitudes that are increasingly at odds with those of mainstream elites (Weakliem, 2002). Economic and cultural developments may be reinforcing one another to generate the feelings of social marginalization that many people without a college education experience. If this is correct, we should see declines in the subjective social status of the group most likely to be affected by these twin sets of developments—men with no more than a secondary education—and, using data from the International Social Survey Program, Gidron and Hall (2017) show that between 1987 and 2014, this has been the case (see also Kurer, 2018).¹³

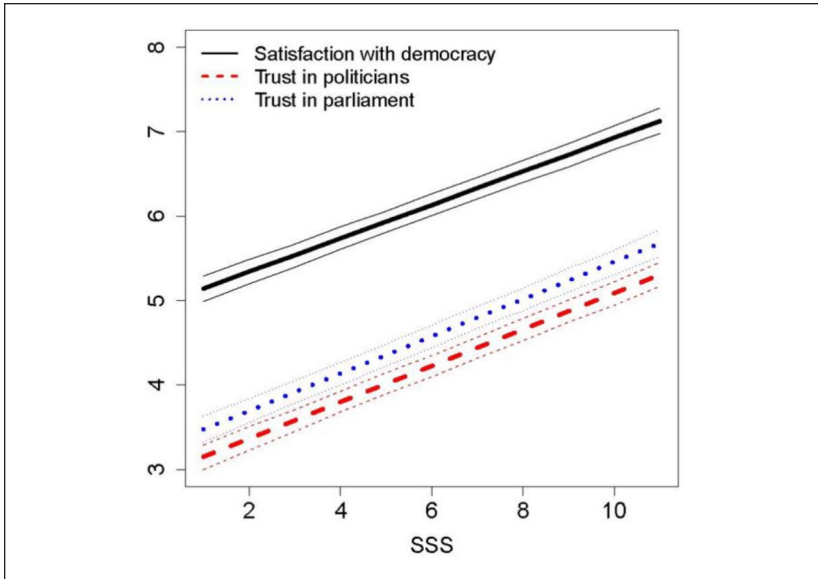


Figure 4. The relationship between subjective social status and indicators for political alienation.

Based on the estimations in Table A3 with other variables held constant at their means and country held constant on the United Kingdom.

Social Integration and Political Alienation

Following the ethnographic literature, we have argued that social marginalization is likely to be a source of political discontent. Is it? To assess this, we use OLS regressions to examine the relationship between subjective social status and attitudes to the political system, based on questions that ask respondents to indicate on 11-point scales how satisfied they are with the operation of democracy and how much they trust politicians and parliament. We condition the estimation on other variables that might affect such attitudes and country fixed effects. The results (in Table A3 in Online Supplemental Information) show that, as subjective social status declines, people are more likely to be dissatisfied with democracy and more distrustful of politicians and parliament. Figure 4 indicates that this relationship is consistent across our measures of political alienation.¹⁴ In sum, the more marginal people feel they are to society, the more likely they are to feel alienated from its political system—providing a reservoir of support for radical parties.

Lower subjective social status is also strongly predictive of abstention, as reported in Model 4 of Table A3 in Online Supplemental Information. This

finding establishes that lower subjective social status is linked to behaviors associated with political alienation, and it resonates with the results of Guiso et al. (2017) which show that radical parties attract voters who are otherwise likely to have abstained.

Social Integration and Voting for Radical Parties

Are feelings of social marginalization associated with voting for radical parties? For this analysis, we employ the categorization of parties commonly used in the literature (Mudde, 2007; Rooduijn & Burgoon, 2018; Van Kessel, 2015).¹⁵ We use estimations based on linear probability models, where the dependent variable indicates whether the respondent voted for the relevant radical party instead of a mainstream party in the last national election (excluding those who did not vote).¹⁶ Regressing the vote on subjective social status alone reveals a strong and statistically significant negative association between status and a vote for radical parties of the right and of the left (Models 1 and 5 in Table 3).

Even when conditioning on other variables likely to affect a person's vote, we find a statistically significant negative relationship between subjective social status and voting for parties of the radical right and left (Models 2 and 6 in Table 3).¹⁷ The magnitude of these associations is substantial. A downward movement of two standard deviations along the status variable increases the probability of voting for the radical right by 2.1 full percentage points and for the radical left by 3.7 percentage points, which is substantial given that in our sample the overall likelihood of voting for the radical right was about 10% and for the radical left about 7%. This association is just as great as the one Guiso et al. (2017, p. 25) find for being exposed to the impact of globalization. Moreover, because the estimations in Models 2 and 6 are conditioned on several attributes that influence a person's subjective social status, the coefficients on subjective social status are capturing the association with only a portion of the full variation in subjective social status, namely, the segment not associated with these background social attributes.¹⁸

Although this is not our principal objective, we turn to whether ideology and economic situation (the main factors emphasized in the literature) condition the choice citizens make between parties of the radical right or left. To assess whether ideology matters, following Rooduijn et al. (2017), we include in our estimations on vote choice indicators for support for redistribution and opposition to immigration. We measure support for redistribution with a question asking whether governments should take measures to reduce differences in income levels and opposition to immigration with a question asking whether respondents favor admitting more or fewer immigrants of a different

Table 3. Subjective Social Status, Ideology, Hardship, and Voting for Radical Parties.

	Radical right				Radical left							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)				
SSS	-0.011***	(0.002)	-0.006**	(0.003)	-0.005**	(0.002)	-0.011***	(0.003)	-0.008***	(0.002)	-0.009***	(0.002)
Redistribution			0.004	(0.006)					0.035***	(0.007)		
Immigration			0.051***	(0.010)					-0.019**	(0.008)		
Income: Coping					0.013*	(0.007)					0.013**	(0.005)
Income: Difficult					0.039**	(0.018)					0.059***	(0.010)
Income: Very difficult					0.024	(0.021)					0.075***	(0.025)
Income decline												
Occupation: Managers	-0.002	(0.001)	-0.001	(0.001)					-0.007***	(0.001)		
Occupation: Clerks	0.008	(0.008)	0.003	(0.007)	0.002	(0.009)			-0.035**	(0.014)	-0.027**	(0.013)
Occupation: Low-skill services	0.019***	(0.007)	0.009	(0.007)	0.016**	(0.007)			-0.030**	(0.013)	-0.023**	(0.011)
Occupation: Technicians	0.021**	(0.008)	0.014	(0.008)	0.030***	(0.011)			-0.018*	(0.010)	-0.012	(0.009)
Occupation: Routine workers	0.051***	(0.015)	0.033**	(0.014)	0.021***	(0.007)			-0.007	(0.014)	0.002	(0.013)
Female = 1	-0.023***	(0.008)	-0.024***	(0.009)	0.044***	(0.014)			-0.017	(0.015)	-0.010	(0.013)
Age	-0.0003	(0.0003)	-0.001**	(0.0003)	-0.021**	(0.009)			-0.002	(0.006)	-0.007	(0.006)
Union membership = 1	0.009	(0.011)	0.013	(0.009)	-0.001	(0.011)			-0.00004	(0.0003)	-0.0002	(0.0003)
Church attendance = 1	0.019	(0.044)	0.021	(0.043)	0.025	(0.047)			0.025***	(0.006)	0.020***	(0.006)
Higher education = 1	-0.034***	(0.006)	-0.028***	(0.006)	-0.032***	(0.007)			-0.045***	(0.008)	-0.041***	(0.007)
Unemployed = 1	-0.008	(0.014)	-0.007	(0.014)	-0.009	(0.016)			0.011	(0.009)	0.010	(0.009)
Rural-urban: Suburbs	-0.001	(0.009)	0.001	(0.009)	0.001	(0.010)			0.015	(0.021)	0.018	(0.022)
Rural-urban: Small city	-0.007	(0.009)	-0.010	(0.008)	-0.007	(0.009)			-0.019	(0.014)	-0.017	(0.012)
Rural-urban: Country village	0.013	(0.012)	0.009	(0.010)	0.015	(0.012)			-0.005	(0.014)	-0.003	(0.014)
Rural-urban: Farm and countryside	0.033**	(0.016)	0.027	(0.016)	0.038***	(0.015)			-0.014	(0.012)	-0.013	(0.011)
Foreign born = 1	-0.055***	(0.015)	-0.051***	(0.013)	-0.058***	(0.016)			-0.026	(0.016)	-0.024	(0.017)
Constant	0.110***	(0.017)	0.105***	(0.021)	-0.020	(0.036)	0.072***	(0.017)	-0.020*	(0.010)	-0.024**	(0.012)
Observations	18,452	15,004	14,632	16,813	17,427	12,273	12,009	14,387				
R ²	.157	.174	.194	.185	.024	.040	.061	.041				

OLS regressions with country fixed effects and robust clustered standard errors. Reference group for occupations is sociocultural professionals. Reference group for rural-urban is big cities. Reference group for income is "living comfortably on present income." SSS = subjective social status; OLS, ordinary least squares. * $p < .1$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

race/ethnicity into their country.¹⁹ Our expectations are that voters who are strongly opposed to immigration should move toward the radical right, whereas voters who strongly favor redistribution should gravitate toward the radical left. The coefficients on these terms conform to those expectations (Models 3 and 7 in Table 3).

As attitudes about immigration are strongly conditioned by education, we also expect to see a relationship between level of education and radical party vote choice, and we do: having less than a tertiary education is associated with voting for the radical right at a statistically significant level, whereas having a tertiary education is associated with voting for the radical left, albeit at a level that lacks statistical significance (Models 2 and 6 in Table 3). Figure 5 displays the predicted change in the outcomes of interest—voting for the radical right in Figure 5(a) and for the radical left in Figure 5(b)—when moving across the full range of (a) support for redistribution, (b) opposition to immigrants, and (c) the education variable (from not having to having an academic degree) when other variables are held at their means (as well as confidence intervals for $p = .05$).

To explore whether a person's economic situation is associated with this vote choice, we use the question asking whether people are "living comfortably," merely "coping," finding it "difficult," or "very difficult" to live on their present household income. Based on the literature, our expectation is that people in the most economic difficulty will gravitate toward the radical left, whereas support for the radical right is likely to be strongest among those in a somewhat better but still difficult economic position. We evaluate these propositions with estimations that condition again on a variety of variables likely to affect the vote (Models 4 and 8 in Table 3). The results are also displayed in Figure 5. As expected, the more difficulty people report living on their current income, the more likely they are to vote for radical left parties. But the relationship with voting for the radical right is not monotonic. Support for the radical right is strongest among those who report it is "difficult" to live on their current income. This suggests that people facing the most difficult economic circumstance are most likely to vote for the radical left, but support for the radical right is strongest among those whose economic situation is slightly better. As the literature predicts (Gidron & Mijs, 2019; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018), ideology and economic situation seem to condition whether people who are discontent turn toward the radical left or right.

Conclusion

We have used a cross-national comparison of European democracies to provide a statistical assessment of the key observation from many ethnographic

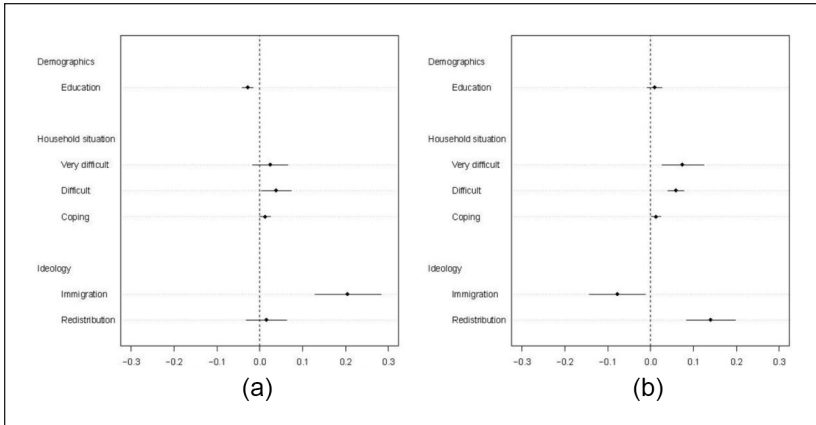


Figure 5. Factors associated with voting for the (a) radical right and (b) radical left.

Based on the estimations in Table 3. Reference group for income is “living comfortably on present income.”

studies, namely, that people in the developed democracies are more likely to vote for radical parties when they feel socially marginalized by economic and cultural developments. Although our estimations do not establish causal relationships, the evidence we have presented is consistent with the contention that support for radical parties in Europe is rooted in failures of social integration.

We have found that people who believe they are more marginal to society, typically because they feel less social respect, have less trust in others or are less engaged in social activities, are more likely than people with higher levels of subjective social status to be alienated from mainstream politics, to abstain from voting and to vote for parties of the radical right or left. We have also presented evidence consistent with the proposition that several long-term economic and cultural developments have increased feelings of social marginalization among people with low levels of income or skills.

Because there are significant differences in the conditions behind support for radical parties in the developed and developing world, we expect these findings to generalize only to the developed democracies (Hawkins, Read, & Pauwels, 2017; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), and, even there, we are not arguing that problems of social integration fully explain support for radical or populist parties. The very advent and appeal of such parties, along with contingent events that highlight the issues they emphasize, are clearly important to the number of votes they receive. But we think the ethnographic

literature is correct that these parties are also responding to a deep-seated discontent that has long-term roots and has grown over decades in tandem with support for such parties (Gest et al., 2018), and we see value in conceptualizing that discontent as a problem of social integration, not least because that lens provides a framework for understanding how economic and cultural developments might work together to yield political effects.

In more general terms, this analysis indicates that studies of comparative political behavior might benefit from taking issues of social integration more seriously. These types of issues figured prominently in the works of an earlier era, when political scientists were seeking explanations for the radical right of the 1950s, but they receded from view as decades of prosperity seemed to cement social integration (Bell, 1964; Lipset, 1955, 1959). However, at a time when support for populist candidates is again increasing, mainstream parties are losing supporters, and political trust is declining, it is worth reconsidering how issues of social integration impinge on contemporary political challenges. One concrete step in that direction would be to include more questions tapping subjective social status in national and cross-national opinion surveys.

Our findings also have implications for how populism might be addressed. Some who view populism as a “revolt against globalization” propose to cope with it by providing more compensation to people on whom international trade has imposed concentrated losses (cf. Asatryan et al., 2014). Colantone and Stanig (2018, p. 936) suggest, for instance, that globalization might not be sustainable “in the absence of appropriate redistribution policies.” There is a rationale for this because support for radical candidates is prevalent in regions most exposed to the strains of globalization. However, our analysis suggests that compensation in the form of social benefits may not be enough to assuage voters for radical right parties, because they are not especially strong supporters of redistribution. But they are characterized by concerns about recognition—the feeling that they have been pushed to the margins of society by economic and cultural forces.

To the extent that failures of social integration lie behind support for radical parties in Europe, stemming the rising tide of support for populism is unlikely to be accomplished quickly or by any single set of policies, whether oriented to the restriction of immigration, compensation, or the expansion of education. Because societies become integrated (or disintegrate) gradually, addressing problems of social integration is a long-term endeavor. And, because there are both economic and cultural dimensions to social integration, addressing it will require *both* economic measures aimed at improving the material situation of people disadvantaged by the current technological revolution and a sustained symbolic politics built on national narratives that

accord respect to all groups and regions within the national community (Bouchard, 2017; Edelman, 1985). Accomplishing such tasks is not easy, but that fact should not blind us to the complexion of the challenge. The fortunes of any one radical party may ebb and flow, but draining the reservoir of discontent on which populist movements depend may require multifaceted efforts to foster social integration.

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Notes

1. For an analogous argument emphasizing feelings of relative deprivation, see Elchardus and Spruyt (2012).
2. In modern societies, national frames usually provide the reference groups for these social comparisons. See Passas (1997) and Merton (1968), pp. 353-359. On relative deprivation, see the classic work by Runciman (1966) and recent reviews in Walker and Smith (2002).
3. A small literature explores the political effects of subjective social status but defined in terms of self-assigned class category, thereby tapping into class politics and a rather different set of issues. (cf. Jackman & Jackman, 1973; Sosnaud, Brady, & Frenk, 2013). See also Brown-Iannuzzi, Lundberg, Kay & Payne (2015).

4. The most closely related works are by Elchardus and Spruyt (2012) who explore how feelings of relative deprivation relate to support for radical parties, Gest et al. (2018) focused on “nostalgic deprivation,” and Burgoon et al. (2019) on “positional deprivation.” Kurer (2018) also reports changes in subjective social status.
5. For the countries included see Table A1 in Online Supplementary Information. To confine the analysis to stable European democracies, we dropped Russia, Ukraine, Kosovo, and Israel.
6. Level of education is measured by whether the respondent has some *tertiary education* (1) or *not* (0), and for occupational class, we use the influential categories of Oesch (2006).
7. In addition to income, education, and occupation as previously defined, these estimations include age, gender, employment status, foreign birth, residential location, union membership, and church attendance.
8. Individual-level covariates are held constant at their median (for numerical variables) and at the following values: female routine worker, age of 49 years, fifth income decile, not a union member, not a regular church attendant, without a higher education degree, not unemployed, living in a town or a small city, not foreign born.
9. There is debate about the number of country cases required for such estimations. In general, the coefficients in such models should be unbiased, but the standard errors, especially on cross-level interaction terms, may be biased downward. Bryan and Jenkins (2015) recommend using such models only if there are about 25 cases, where the standard errors should be biased by less than 2%, but Elff et al. (2016) argue that unbiased estimates are available from considerably fewer country cases (cf. Stegmueller, 2013). We have an N of 22 to 25 country cases, but, in line with these concerns, the results should be treated with caution.
10. Examination of the intra-class correlation in the null model shows that about 10% of the variance in subjective social status occurs between countries.
11. In a comparable study, Schneider (2019) finds that higher levels of income inequality reduce life satisfaction along with subjective social status.
12. Our measure is the number of students enrolled in tertiary education as a percentage of the country’s population between 20 and 24 years of age.
13. The subjective social status of women, even without a college education, did not decline over this period, probably because they benefited from rising rates of labor force participation and shifts toward cultural frameworks attaching more value to gender equality.
14. The other variables in this estimation are held constant as in Figure 2.
15. For the list of parties, see Table A1 in Online Supplementary Information memo.
16. In these estimations, *vote for a radical party* is coded as 1 and *vote for a mainstream party* is coded as 0. Of course, the estimations cover only those countries in which there is such a party.
17. These estimations are conditioned on income measured in deciles, level of educational attainment measured by whether the respondent has some tertiary education, occupation in the categories of Oesch (2006), age, gender, employment

- status, birthplace, residential location, and whether the respondent belongs to a trade union or attends church regularly.
18. We considered using structural equation models to parse out the paths among these variables, but it is impractical to estimate these paths without dropping the country fixed effects, and doing so would introduce enough omitted variable bias into the estimations to render the accuracy of the coefficients questionable (cf. Bullock et al., 2010).
 19. For question wording, see Online Supplemental Information. Higher scores on the two measures indicate support for redistribution and opposition to immigration.

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