

Economic Insecurity and Populist Radical Right Voting

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The populist radical right (PRR) continues to grow in terms of its electoral success and its impact on politics around the globe. As a result, the literature seeking to explain the roots of its appeal has blossomed. Rather than giving in to the lure of proposing yet another class of explanations, Take Sipma observed that some of the existing accounts have not been scrutinised – and hence have not been understood – properly. His PhD thesis takes up the task of assessing the impact of economic insecurity on PRR support. By taking previous null-findings seriously, he opens up (and answers) new research questions that improve our understanding of the roots of PRR support. Take Sipma shows that an effect of economic insecurity on radical right support exists, but in conditional ways. Rather than following an easy dichotomy of ‘economy’ versus ‘culture’, this thesis shows that all explanations are multifaceted. The result is a rich thesis that will be of interest to many.

The claim that PRR support would be somehow rooted in economic insecurity is an old one, but Take Sipma argues that the theoretical mechan-

isms are insufficiently understood and that previous evidence remains shaky at best. Theoretically, his thesis argues that it is possible to synthesise the mechanisms proposed in previous work, in particular ethnic competition, losers of modernisation or economic voting theories. What these have in common is that economic insecurity is expected to foster *grievances towards both immigrants and mainstream politics*, bolstering, in turn, support for the radical right, which is seen as most capable of dealing with these grievances. This is the central hypothesis of the thesis.

Empirically, previous contextual-level studies have found mixed evidence (at best) for a relationship between worsening economic conditions and PRR support across regions or countries. At the individual level, PRR support does tend to be higher among those with (among other factors) lower status jobs and lower levels of education. But while such structural conditions arguably involve more economic insecurity, they might also foster PRR support through alternative mechanisms. In short, the jury is

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still out. Why does the literature not find more unequivocal evidence for a relationship between insecurity and PRR support, and what does this tell us about the mechanisms involved?

Before setting out to study this question in more detail, the second chapter of the thesis takes more systematic stock of the existing literature through a meta-analysis of the relationship between contextual-level unemployment and the fortunes of PRR parties. This includes 49 studies that estimated the effect of either the level of or the change in unemployment on the fortunes of PRR support across the globe. Take Sipma shows that while the correlation is positive, it is very small ($r = 0.04$). Tellingly, significantly positive coefficients almost exclusively appeared in studies that explicitly hypothesised an effect of unemployment, pointing to publication bias. Next to underlining how valuable meta-analyses are, this exercise confirms that economic insecurity is an unsteady correlate of PRR support.

Starting with this puzzle, the thesis posits three modifications of the theoretical framework, each of which is discussed and tested in an empirical chapter. The thesis does not formulate an elaborate overarching theoretical rationale for continuing the search in these rather than other potential directions. Still, all share the intuition that the relationship between insecurity and radical right support is reinforced or (often) dampened by other factors and that by omitting these our previous picture is incomplete. The empirical analysis provides convincing evidence that this intuition is a very fruitful one.

The first contribution is to problematise the assumption (often left implicit in extant theoretical accounts) that PRR parties would be deemed most capable of addressing grievances resulting from economic insecurity. While such insecurity can heighten tensions between majority-group populations and immigrants (to the benefit of the PRR), it also increases the salience of economic issues. This, in turn, is not an issue owned by the PRR. The third chapter compares individual and regional data from the European Social Survey (ESS) in 2014 (after the worst period of the economic crisis) with that in 2009. The worse the economic conditions in a region, the more salience citizens attach to the economy, which subsequently suppresses PRR support. This shows that while there might be some merit to 'scapegoating' theories that objective economic conditions bolster ethnic prejudice, their effects can be balanced out by citizens' concern that the radical right is not the safest pair of hands with which to salvage the economy.

Secondly, the thesis argues that insecurity should be operationalised beyond class or occupational status. More specifically, it raises the possibility that class and occupation interact to shape precarity. Those in lower classes with temporary employment should be more easily attracted to the PRR than those in the same class with relatively stable jobs. The thesis argues that, after all, ethnic competition in most countries is fiercest in lower-paid jobs, and so is the impact of modernisation shocks (one might instead emphasise globalisation in this respect). Relying on seven waves of the ESS, the fourth chapter finds no evidence that having an insecure job posi-

tion matters more among lower class voters. Importantly, *perceived* job insecurity does lead to PRR support, through perceptions of immigrants' threat to one's job. By pitting subjective and objective conditions against each other, this chapter argues that the two are often weakly related at best. This suggests that such perceptions are endogenous to radical right support.

Third, the thesis argues that the study of insecurity has overlooked the important role of households in creating or dampening insecurity. Couples not only share resources but also tend to discuss and interpret politics together. In other words, the structural position of partners might matter through either or both of the couple's experiences and attitudes. Hence, the fifth chapter studies the role of partners in nine waves of the Dutch LISS panel (2007-2019). It shows that especially women's vote choices tend to align with those of their husbands. Regardless of one's own precarity, having a partner in a better socioeconomic position reduces support for the *Party for Freedom* (PVV). The partner's position does so both directly and indirectly through the partner's attitudes. Even if this chapter does not make full use of the inferential benefits of longitudinal data – for instance, by zooming in on changes in a partner's positions – it convincingly shows that voting does not take place in isolation. This means that previous studies taking an individual perspective to insecurity probably underestimated the role of economic insecurity.

In short, Take Sipma's thesis makes a significant contribution to the field by, first, providing a more systematic overview of the association

between economic insecurity and PRR support, both through a valuable meta-study and through its own analysis of a range of secondary data sources. This shows that the association is weak across the board. The second aspect of the significance of its contribution is in its identification of the complexity underlying this weak association, in particular the moderating roles of salience perceptions and household composition. The thesis thus provides evidence that insecurity does matter in more conditional ways, enriching our understanding of the roots of PRR support. In particular, the possibility that previous null-findings are due to counterbalancing effects casts the existing literature in a new light.

Like all theses, this work also leaves some questions unanswered. First, while the thesis plausibly calls for a synthesis of the various proposed theoretical mechanisms, the analysis mostly cannot disentangle which psychological or structural processes are involved in linking insecurity to PRR support. What is the nature of the grievances that those in insecure positions develop towards both politicians and immigrants? What role does more objective competition with immigrants play compared with projected scapegoating? Does a rejection of mainstream politics follow from this, or does it develop in tandem? Now that the thesis has uncovered conditions under which we should look for an effect of economic insecurity, these questions can be answered more fruitfully.

Secondly, while taking important steps to fine-tune the measurement of economic insecurity at the individual level, the thesis operationalises contextual insecurity in a relatively crude

way (mostly through unemployment) and at a very high geographical level (mostly by comparing countries). Chapter 3, which includes a comparison between regions, tellingly finds stronger associations, even if these regions still cover vast areas. Recently, the literature on context effects has taken a promising turn towards studying more local conditions (for instance in municipalities or neighbourhoods) and towards operationalising economic conditions in alternative ways (such as directly observing globalisation shocks). With these innovations, economic insecurity might or might not turn out to matter somewhat more than currently meets the eye. Nevertheless, all follow-up studies will benefit from Take Sipma's careful and thorough analysis, which convincingly shows that economic insecurity shapes PRR fortunes in ways that are more complicated than previously suggested.