“We cannot understand support for the populist right without accounting for its economic determinants.” Discuss.

1 - Introduction

The rise of the populist right is one of the defining political developments of the twenty-first century. From Trump to Le Pen, Orbán to Wilders, parties once dismissed as fringe have not only entered the mainstream but reshaped it – winning elections, reframing public discourse, and polarising electorates. Their ascent has prompted intense academic debate, especially over the question of why they have gained such wide and durable support. One prominent answer points to economics: that decades of stagnating wages, industrial decline, and welfare retrenchment have created a class of citizens who feel materially excluded, and who turn to populist movements as a reaction against the failures of neoliberal globalisation.

This essay argues that while economic conditions help set the stage for populist mobilisation, they do not explain the play itself. The support for the populist right is ultimately not driven by economic determinants, but by deeper cultural and social anxieties. These movements do not merely reflect material hardship; they reframe it. They politicise it through narratives of national decline, cultural betrayal, and demographic change – placing immigration, law and order, and social cohesion at the centre of their appeal. Economics provides the language, but culture provides the meaning.

To make this case, the essay proceeds in four analytical stages. It first outlines the structural conditions that enable populist right movements to emerge, including disaffection with mainstream parties, institutional openness to insurgents, and the presence of charismatic figureheads. It then examines economic demography, showing that while working-class and low-income voters are overrepresented among populist supporters, these movements also attract wealthier and socially secure groups – undermining a purely economic explanation. The third section explores populist economic policy, arguing that its incoherence and symbolic framing suggest it serves more as a cultural marker than a substantive agenda. Finally, the essay shows that immigration and social policy are the key determinants of support: they unify diverse voter groups around shared anxieties of identity, status, and belonging.

Ultimately, support for the populist right cannot be understood without reference to economics – but it cannot be explained by it alone. It is culture, not class; belonging, not budgeting; identity, not ideology, that holds the key.

2 – Structural Conditions for Populist Mobilisation

Understanding support for the populist right requires more than cataloguing grievances or tracing ideological preferences – it demands an account of the institutional and structural conditions under which such support becomes politically viable. In other words, why do some societies translate latent disaffection into mass support for populist right movements, while others do not? This section identifies three enabling factors – party system disaffection,

institutional permeability, and personalised leadership – that, while not sufficient explanations in themselves, are essential preconditions for support to be mobilised and sustained.

The first is disaffection with mainstream political parties. Across Western democracies, long-standing party systems have experienced what Mair (2013)[1] termed *party system closure*: a growing separation between governing elites and civil society. As traditional parties converge around centrist platforms, particularly in the economic domain, they often appear to voters as indistinguishable and unresponsive. This depoliticisation of substantive choice fosters what Hay (2007)[2] calls *disenchanted democracy*, in which citizens participate less because they feel excluded from meaningful political decision-making. The populist right has proven uniquely adept at exploiting this vacuum. In the UK, the Leave.EU campaign framed the Brexit referendum as a revolt against a "political establishment that no longer listens," a message echoed in Donald Trump's 2016 claim that only he could "drain the swamp." As Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017)[3] explain, populism thrives where citizens believe that elites have ceased to represent them – not simply because they disagree with policies, but because they question the legitimacy of the representative class itself.

The second enabling condition is the openness or vulnerability of political institutions to insurgents. In proportional systems with low thresholds – such as the Netherlands or Israel – new parties can gain legislative footholds with relative ease; in 2006, the Dutch Party of Freedom entered the House of Representatives for the first time on just 5.9% of the vote[4]. In majoritarian systems, where barriers are higher, success often depends on the ability to colonise existing parties or exploit referenda. Trump's hostile takeover of the Republican Party exemplifies the latter: despite holding no elected office and contradicting core GOP orthodoxy on trade, alliances, and decorum, he leveraged the party's internal primaries, weak central control, and saturation media coverage to secure the nomination. In the UK, populist parties such as UKIP and the Brexit Party have benefitted from first-past-the-post distortions not by winning seats but by holding key constituencies hostage in order to exert outsized influence on the Conservative Party. Populists succeed when they can circumvent elite gatekeeping, either by manipulating open systems or exploiting internal breakdowns.

The third factor is the presence of a charismatic leader capable of performing the role of tribune – a symbolic representative of "the people" who channels grievances into a personalised political vehicle. Laclau (2005)[5] theorised this dynamic as *the empty signifier*: successful populist leaders unify a wide array of disparate demands into a single antagonism – the people versus the elite – while remaining ideologically flexible enough to accommodate conflicting grievances. This helps explain why populist right movements are so often inseparable from their leaders: Nigel Farage, Marine Le Pen, and Donald Trump are not merely party figureheads but embodiments of a narrative. As Camus and Lebourg (2017)[6] argue, this *personalisation* of populism serves two functions: it simplifies complex political terrain and reinforces authenticity, allowing leaders to claim direct, unmediated connection with their base. The leader becomes the axis around which otherwise incoherent political demands are organised and mobilised.

Together, these factors create the political infrastructure through which support for the populist right is rendered possible. They do not explain *why* citizens support these movements – whether out of economic anxiety, cultural alienation, or status threat – but they do explain *how* those motives are translated into political action. A society may be economically polarised or culturally divided, but without institutional access, elite distrust, and a unifying figure, populist sentiment is likely to remain dormant or diffuse.

Still, these preconditions should not be overstated. They are necessary but not sufficient. Left-populist movements, too, have operated under similar institutional conditions and often failed to secure mass support. What differentiates the populist right is not simply the structure through which it mobilises, but the content of its appeal – its emphasis on national identity, immigration, and traditional values. The next section will examine one proposed content-based explanation: that economic disadvantage and class-based marginalisation are the primary drivers of support. But, as we shall see, that explanation is incomplete on its own.

3 – Economic Insecurity and the Limits of Class-Based Explanations

One of the most persistent explanations for the rise of the populist right is economic: that support stems from voters who have lost out materially under globalisation. According to this view, the long-term effects of deindustrialisation, wage stagnation, job insecurity, and declining social mobility have produced a politically dislocated class of citizens who no longer trust mainstream parties to represent their interests. This thesis contests that the economic restructuring of Western democracies has created a cleavage between the globally integrated and the locally rooted, the mobile and the marginalised. It is this latter group, the argument goes, that forms the core electoral base of the populist right.

Empirical evidence initially appears to support this thesis. In the British context, research shows that support for Leave in the Brexit referendum was significantly higher in areas exposed to economic shocks from trade and automation. Analysis from Colantone and Stanig (2016)[7] found that "a one standard deviation increase in the strength of the import shock at the regional level leads to an increase by two percentage points in support for the Leave option." There is also support for this argument across Europe. Inglehart and Norris (2016)[8], analysing data from an array of European countries, found that working-class voters, those with low educational attainment, and those living in economically depressed regions were disproportionately supportive of parties like the French National Rally and the Austrian Freedom Party.

Yet while this evidence cannot be dismissed, its explanatory power is limited. Most notably, the "left behind" thesis fails to account for the broad class coalition that characterises many populist right movements. In Britain's 2019 general election, for example, the Conservative Party – having absorbed much of the populist right through its embrace of Brexit – won 41% of the vote among the lowest social grade (DE) but also 45% among AB voters, according to Ipsos MORI.[9] Similarly, the most recent YouGov voting intention data[10] at time of writing (July 2025) shows Reform UK polling at 37% among C2DE voters but still registering 21% among ABC1s – a clear divide, but a solid base in both cases. In the United States, Trump won a majority of voters earning above $100,000 in both 2016 and 2020, according to CNN exit polls[11, 12]. In those elections, his strongest margins came not from the most economically insecure, but from white homeowners, business owners, and retirees – groups more culturally defensive than materially deprived.

Indeed, while anti-globalisation backlash – coined the *losers of modernisation* by Spier (2010)[13] – became the dominant popular explanation for populist insurgencies after 2016, the empirical evidence suggests that this is an oversimplification; many voters drawn to the populist right are not those at the very bottom of the income distribution, but those who feel they have something to lose – status, identity, or privilege. The phenomenon of *status threat,* as articulated by Mutz

(2018)[14], captures this dynamic. Her research finds that cultural insecurity – not just economic decline – was the dominant predictor of Trump support, especially among white voters who believed that "Americans like them" were losing influence in society.

The central weakness of the economic determinist account is thus its inability to explain why wealthier or economically secure voters, many of whom benefited under neoliberalism, are also drawn to the populist right. Economic hardship may provide the kindling, but it is not the spark. To fully account for the breadth and depth of support for these movements, we must look beyond class or income to the symbolic realm – where issues of identity, recognition, and national belonging are fought over and politicised. This is the essence of Norris and Inglehart's (2019)[15] *cultural backlash theory*, which posits that the primary driver of support for the populist right is a rebellion against rapid social and cultural change, perceived to be imposed by a metropolitan liberal elite without the consent of ordinary people. The populist right, in other words, is not a class movement but a cross-class coalition – one that binds economically insecure voters together with culturally conservative, economically secure ones in a shared reaction against liberalism, immigration, and social change.

The next section will examine how populist movements have responded to this ambiguity through their own economic policies – often incoherent yet strategically deployed – to appeal to both sides of this fractured coalition.

4 – The Role of Populist Economics

Populist right movements frequently present themselves as insurgents not only against cultural liberalism but also against economic orthodoxy. Their manifestos often blend economically interventionist rhetoric with nationalist framing – offering promises to protect domestic workers, revive manufacturing, or reclaim fiscal sovereignty. Yet this economic agenda is rarely coherent in ideological terms. Instead, populist economics tends to operate as a flexible toolkit: selectively combining state spending, market hostility, and tax-cutting rhetoric in ways designed less to reflect a vision of political economy than to signal opposition to perceived elites. To understand its role in generating support, we must therefore ask not only what populist economics proposes, but *why* it appeals – and whether it genuinely motivates voters or merely refracts deeper cultural anxieties.

In form, the economic programmes of populist right parties often borrow from the left. This phenomenon – what Andreson and Bjørklund (1990)[16] termed *welfare chauvinism* – refers to the appropriation of redistributive language, directed not toward universal provision but toward the "deserving" national in-group. In France, Marine Le Pen has promised generous public spending while pledging to exclude immigrants from welfare benefits.[17] In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz government has implemented pro-natalist subsidies, tax incentives for families, and protectionist industrial policy, all couched in explicitly nationalist terms.[18] Reform UK's 2024 manifesto similarly proposes sweeping cuts to net migration and foreign aid, alongside increased spending on health, police, and pensions.[19] Such policies are less about designing viable economic futures than performing a moral boundary between insiders and outsiders.

Even populist rhetoric that appears rooted in economic theory often functions symbolically. Donald Trump's trade war with China was framed as a defence of American industry, but its reception was deeply ambivalent. Amiti, Redding and Weinstein (2019)[20] found that Trump's first

term tariffs had a net negative impact on employment welfare, raised consumer prices and provoked retaliatory tariffs that hurt US exporters. Yet politically, the tariffs remained popular among his base (56% were in favour of Trump's tariff pitch prior to his re-election)[21], indicating that the appeal of protectionism was more about expressing hostility to globalism than securing specific material gains. This disjuncture – between economic effect and political affect – is a defining feature of populist economic policy.

The appeal, in many cases, lies in its ability to recode cultural anxiety as fiscal responsibility. Consider again the priorities laid out in Reform UK's 2024 policy agenda. Its flagship fiscal commitments include cutting the asylum bill, defunding net zero, and reducing foreign aid[19] – policies that purport to save money, but whose main resonance is symbolic. They play on narratives of national betrayal and displacement: the idea that British citizens are paying for "others" while their own communities suffer. Similarly, the promise to divert spending toward law and order – often framed in terms of police recruitment or harsher sentencing – responds less to rising crime statistics than to a diffuse sense of social breakdown.

This helps explain why populist economic platforms are frequently inconsistent. Parties may advocate both tax cuts and expanded spending, reduced government and economic protectionism. Trump's Republican Party slashed corporate taxes while simultaneously expanding discretionary spending and widening the deficit.[21] The National Rally in France have made similar commitments, pledging to cut an array of taxes whilst also lowering the retirement age and making unemployment benefits more generous.[17] These contradictions rarely alienate core voters, because the content of economic policy is less important than the narrative it supports. It is clear that populist movements gain traction not by offering consistent economic programmes but by articulating an encompassing account of why social and political institutions appear to no longer serve the people. Economics becomes a vehicle for expressing betrayal, exclusion, and decline.

Moreover, survey data suggests that populist right supporters are not especially ideological in their economic views. YouGov polling[23] in 2024 found that 89% of Reform UK voters agreed that young people do not have enough respect for traditional British values, and 85% believed that sentencing is too lenient, demonstrating overwhelming alignment on social and cultural issues. Meanwhile 73% believed ordinary people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth, at the same time as 42% believed government should not redistribute income from the rich to the poor. Evidently, the economic picture is much more mixed, and Reform voters are not united by an economic vision in a way that traditional social democrat parties might be. Instead, the central force of the populist right is cultural, as despite financial differences, Reform supporters are almost universally traditionalists.

None of this is to suggest that economics is irrelevant. Populist movements rely on a sense of economic grievance to legitimate their broader arguments. But economic policy itself is rarely the source of mobilisation. Instead, it functions as a narrative accessory – one that validates resentment, reframes identity conflict as fiscal injustice, and allows voters to express cultural opposition in economic terms. The populist right, in this sense, does not present an alternative economic model so much as an emotional one: one in which restoring national pride, securing borders, and punishing the undeserving are treated as budgetary imperatives.

The next section will examine this cultural logic more directly, turning from the fiscal to the symbolic – where immigration, sovereignty, and social cohesion take centre stage.

5 – Immigration and Cultural Drivers

If economic insecurity and institutional dysfunction provide the conditions for the populist right to flourish, it is immigration and social policy that provide its core ideological substance. Time and again, when voters are asked why they support populist right movements, cultural and identity-based concerns – particularly around immigration, integration, and crime – are ranked higher than material considerations. These are not fringe anxieties but central motivators, deeply embedded in how populist right parties define the nation and its enemies. To understand support for these movements, we must recognise that the most potent appeal is not economic grievance but cultural defence.

The salience of immigration as a political issue is well-documented. IPSOS polling[24] from April 2025 suggests 67% of the British public think immigration is too high, and of those 43% think it is much too high. Similarly, in the US, Gallup[25] found that 63% of voters are dissatisfied with the level of immigration, and of those 41% are very dissatisfied. In a comparative study of 11 European countries, Dennison and Geddes (2018)[26] found that the salience of immigration as a political issue was reliably correlated to the level of support for the populist right in that country. Combining these paints a resoundingly clear picture. Immigration is a central issue facing Western countries, and the parties most trusted to deal with it are the populist right. Across contexts, these voters perceive immigration not as an economic opportunity or even a neutral administrative issue, but as a symbol of social disorder, political betrayal, and cultural decline. This anger is channelled into support for populist parties, who are perceived to be the only ones willing to challenge "the establishment" and break taboos and social norms around immigration discourse.

Social policy – broadly construed to include crime, education, and welfare conditionality – functions similarly. Populist right movements consistently foreground themes of law, discipline, and cultural coherence. In Britain, Reform UK's 2024 manifesto pledged to "crack down on woke policing," expand prison capacity, and increase surveillance powers.[19] These are not costed economic policies but symbolic gestures toward a vision of national order. The populist right's appeal lies in its promise to restore a monocultural, orderly community, the existence of which is perceived to be under threat from enemies both internal (obstructionist civil servants, judges, and campaigners) and external (immigrants from developing countries). Calls for tougher policing or limits on public spending for immigrants are popular not because they promise efficiency but because they reinforce the boundary between the in and the out group – in their view, the deserving and the undeserving.

This helps explain the cross-class appeal discussed earlier. To recap, support for the populist right is most strongly predicted not by income but by perceived *status threat*. Cultural and demographic change – often symbolised by immigration, but also by changing attitudes among young people, for example – threaten voters' sense of positional security, regardless of their actual material circumstances. In this context, even modest economic grievances can become politically incendiary when framed as part of a broader pattern of national decline. Support for the populist right is not necessarily about the cost of living – it is about the loss of meaning, hierarchy, and belonging.

The strength of this cultural appeal is evident in the electoral resilience of populist right parties, even when their economic platforms are inconsistent or underdeveloped. In Sweden, the Sweden Democrats surged in 2022 not because of perceived economic expertise but because of their hardline stance on refugee crime and cultural integration. The same can be said of the

Leave campaign in the EU referendum: the entire weight of the British economic establishment was simply not capable of overwhelming the cultural and emotive argument in favour of Brexit. These campaigns succeed not by solving economic problems but by narrating them – casting every fiscal strain, from school overcrowding to NHS waiting lists, as evidence of a state overwhelmed by foreign presence or, increasingly, ideologically-driven "woke" bureaucracy.

This narrative cohesion is what gives social policy its primacy. Economic concerns come and go; inflation recedes, GDP grows. But the sense that one's cultural world is being lost – that one's language, customs, and community are under siege – produces a deeper, more enduring form of political loyalty. Populist right parties succeed when they can translate diffuse discontent into a story of demographic and moral betrayal. Their policy platforms matter not for their technocratic detail but for their emotional resonance: they affirm a vision of who belongs, who deserves, and who threatens the imagined nation.

In short, while economic determinants may condition the terrain, it is immigration and social policy that shape the battle. The next and final section will conclude that any attempt to understand support for the populist right must foreground this cultural logic – not as a secondary factor, but as its driving force.

6 – Reframing the Appeal of the Populist Right

The populist right does not draw its strength from one singular cause, but from the convergence of several: institutional openness, charismatic leadership, economic grievance, and a widespread loss of faith in mainstream political representation. Yet if we are to prioritise among these, the conclusion is unambiguous: economic determinants are not the principal drivers of support for the populist right. They are contributory, not causal – important catalysts, but not the substance of the fire.

Across contexts, populist right movements have built broad electoral coalitions that cannot be explained by material hardship alone. Their support stretches across income brackets, occupational classes, and geographic divides. Their economic policies are often contradictory, their fiscal promises unsustainable. Yet their appeal endures, because it is not grounded in economic ideology but in cultural reaction. What unites their supporters is not a shared vision of political economy, but a shared sense of cultural dispossession – a belief that national identity, social order, and familiar norms and values are under threat.

This is why immigration, not inflation, dominates their messaging. Why slogans like "take back control" or "make America great again" carry more weight than any tax reform. It is why support remains strong even in times of economic growth or among voters with no immediate financial hardship. Economic narratives may shape the language of populism, but the emotional charge – the engine of mobilisation – comes from elsewhere. It comes from a perceived loss of control, of voice, of culture. The populist right interprets these trends not as natural evolution, but as cultural imposition – recasting pluralism as exclusion, and social change as elite overreach.

In this light, how we frame the discourse matters. Analyses that treat the populist right as merely an economic rebellion miss the cultural dimension that animates it, and risk reinforcing its narrative by appearing indifferent to the deeper anxieties it mobilises. To effectively challenge these movements, it is not enough to alleviate material inequalities or dismiss their supporters

as misinformed. It requires engaging with the symbolic terrain on which these battles are fought: questions of identity, legitimacy, and voice.

In the end, we cannot understand support for the populist right without examining the economic landscape in which it operates. But nor can we explain it if we stop there. The grievances that fuel populist politics are economic in form but cultural in content. They are not simply demands for more money or better jobs, but for recognition, belonging, and symbolic restoration. To understand the populist right, we must look not just at what people have lost, but at what they feel has been taken from them – and at who they believe is to blame.

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