

# *Left Behind Whom?*

## Economic Status Loss and Populist Radical Right Voting

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### Abstract

Citizens' resentment at losing out to the rest of society is commonly regarded as the foundation of the demand for the populist radical right (PRR). Yet whether this motive has an objective economic basis remains disputed. Relying on ESS individual-level data from 23 elections across Western Europe, combined with Eurostat data, I demonstrate that the PRR polls better among social classes facing economic status loss. To do so, I leverage a novel positional measure of income. This approach allows me to gauge economic status loss as a distinct experience from worsening financial circumstances — which empirical research has chiefly focused on. Evidence that the former, rather than the latter, is the economic engine of PRR support is further corroborated by data on cultural stances and redistributive preferences. My study confirms the complementarity of cultural- and economic-based explanations of PRR voting and reveals one electoral consequence of rising economic inequalities.

## 1 Introduction

Decades of research on the demand for populist radical right (PRR) parties has documented their over-representation among the lower and lower-middle class, whether defined in terms of education, income, occupation, or marketable skills (Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Rydgren 2012; Minkenberg 2000; Kitschelt 1995; for reviews see Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2007; Golder 2016; Berman 2021). Scholars consider the reason for this pattern to lie in part in the penalties and rewards associated with major transformations in the economy and society, such as the post-industrial transition, the technological revolution, and globalization (Betz 1994; Kriesi 1999) – an argument that EU policymakers also support (Buti and Pichelmann 2017). These phenomena are said to exacerbate inequalities and create a divide between so-called winners and losers, to the extent that a new dimension of political conflict or even cleavage has emerged (Kriesi et al. 2008; for a review see Ford and Jennings 2020).

Nonetheless, whether PRR voters are objectively disadvantaged in the first place remains disputed. The argument that worsening material conditions may foster voting for the PRR has not been so far corroborated by empirical evidence (Gidron and Mijs 2019), which raises doubts regarding the alleged economic basis for PRR support. But financial resources may matter for their relative value too, beyond the absolute one. Pursuing this line, the PRR would perform better among citizens whose economic position within the social hierarchy is in decline. This has raised speculation among scholars about economic status loss being a key driver of PRR voting. Research based on voters' self-reported subjective perceptions tends to confirm such an argument (Gidron and Hall 2017; Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016; Bonikowski 2017). Yet objective evidence is scant (Lindh and McCall 2020), thus leaving the question of a possible economic root of PRR voting unanswered.

In order to address this shortcoming, the present research aims to assess whether facing economic status loss may induce voters to endorse the PRR. Going beyond subjective perceptions, I develop a novel positional measure of income, which I rely on to quantify changes in economic status over time. For this purpose, I choose social class as my unit of analysis, given the relevance the literature attributes to group deprivation for political behavior. By shifting the focus from absolute individual conditions to relative collective ones, my measure allows me to gauge economic status loss as a distinct – and equally salient – experience with respect to financial loss. Finally, I test how voters respond to changes in economic status by leveraging individual-level electoral data from the European Social Survey (ESS) from 23 elections held between 2008 and 2019 across 13 European countries, combined with information on class-level income dynamics from the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) survey provided by Eurostat.

## 2 Literature review

A voluminous literature investigates the reasons why the PRR enjoys broader support among the lower middle class (for reviews see Golder 2016; Rydgren 2007; Mudde 2007; Berman 2021).<sup>1</sup> Originally, this debate polarized along two axes. A first strand of scholarship contends that PRR voters are driven by cultural concerns (Norris and Inglehart 2019; T. Frank 2004; Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Achterberg and Houtman 2006). These are mainly the threat of mass immigration and the crisis of national identity. A second strand argues that, although PRR parties mostly compete on a cultural dimension, economic motivations of voting are worthy of consideration too. Since the advent of globalization and rapid technological change, in conjunction with welfare retrenchment, unemployment has become a more common experience, the demand for flexible and cheap labor has increased, and the wage-earning middle class has been “squeezed”. Ultimately, they are also responsible for the rise in PRR support, as a wealth of research argues (Kriesi et al. 2008; Autor et al. 2020; Colantone and Stanig 2018; Arzheimer 2009; Anelli, Colantone, and Stanig 2021; for reviews see Rodrik 2018, 2021; Walter 2021; Guriev and Papaioannou 2020).

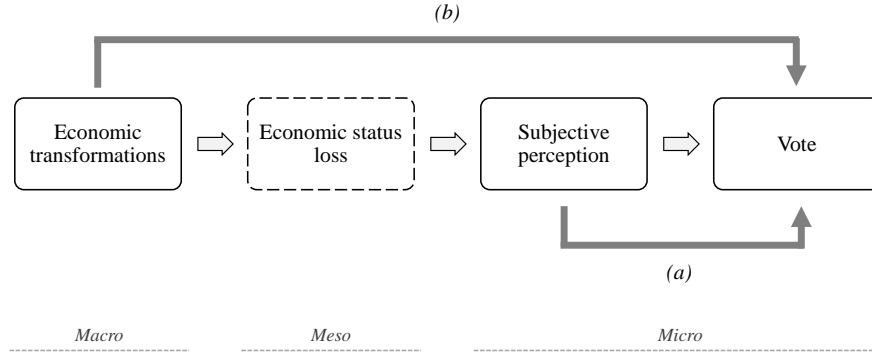
Yet this second explanation is challenged by evidence suggesting that individual-level economic disadvantage is barely associated with PRR voting (Stockemer, Lentz, and Mayer 2018). More precisely, citizens facing unexpected financial loss demand further redistribution and thus turn to left-wing parties (Gidron and Mijs 2019; Wiertz and Rodon 2019; Margalit 2013, 2019b; Naumann, Buss, and Bähr 2016). This emerged most clearly during the 2008 crisis (Hutter and Kriesi 2019; Bartels and Bermeo 2014). PRR voting is not more common among those facing higher job risk either (Iversen and Soskice 2001; Rehm 2009; see for a review Margalit 2019a). Overall, absolute economic disadvantage does not stand out as a driver of PRR voting.

This inconsistency has given rise to a third strand considering cultural and economic explanations as potentially complementary. This is because the aforementioned great socioeconomic transformations may produce outcomes that are not exclusively financial. More particularly, they might induce a loss in social status among voters who are relatively less rewarded by these transformations (Gidron and Hall 2017; Antonucci et al. 2017; Bonikowski 2017; Rydgren 2012). Puzzlingly, this may occur even if voters are not losers in absolute terms. Such a paradox can be explained by relative deprivation theory (Runciman 1966). Regardless of actual material deprivation, citizens may perceive themselves as facing a relative economic deterioration if the rest of society is improving its condition relative to them (Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018; Burgoon et al. 2019; Kurer and Staalduin 2022; Ciccolini and

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<sup>1</sup>I define the PRR based on Mudde (2007).

Figure 1: Theoretical approaches in extant research on status politics



Härkönen 2021).

Despite much debate around status politics, whether the PRR has greater success among voters facing economic status loss remains unproven (Lindh and McCall 2020). This is because the said debate has taken two approaches so far (see figure 1). On the one hand, extensive research – using mainly ethnographic methods, though not solely — has shown that voters of the PRR are more prone to considering that their supposedly rightful place in society is crumbling (Hochschild 2016; Gest, Reny, and Mayer 2018; Cramer 2016; Gest 2016; Eribon 2013; Lamont 2000; Williams 2017; Gidron and Hall 2020). Hence, these studies have focused on subjective perceptions of status decline as key drivers of PRR voting (arrow *a* in the figure). Scholars adopting this approach speculate that the origin of the said subjective experience may lie in the degradation of voters’ economic standing. More precisely, growing within-country inequalities in the Western world adversely affect the economic status of a significant portion of citizens (Jackson and Grusky 2018; Nolan and Weisstanner 2022). This eventually fosters feelings such as anger or resentment that are electorally beneficial for the PRR. Yet empirical investigation stops at subjective perceptions. Hence, whether these objectively draw on declining economic status remains an open question.

On the other hand, research has paid attention to the role of grand economic transformations on PRR support, including through the lenses of social status (arrow *b*). These studies investigate two sets of explanations. The first set regards the role of economic phenomena such as exposure to automation and international trade (Kurer 2020; Im et al. 2019; Gallego, Kurer, and Schöll 2021; Ballard-Rosa, Jensen, and Scheve 2022). Scholars speculate that these may matter more for the relative disadvantage they create, rather than a mere absolute one. For instance, workers affected by robotization may not feature a higher probability of experiencing unemployment or even financial loss (Cortes 2016). The aforesaid economic phenomena are also known to alter the distribution of economic resources in society, which leads us to the second set of explanations. Increasing inequality and the uneven distribution of economic growth are found to favor the PRR (Engler and Weisstanner 2020b, 2020a; Han 2016; Burgoon et al. 2019; Weisstanner 2020; Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018; Green, Hellwig, and Fieldhouse 2022). Once again, relative disadvantage is thought to be the key mechanism. Rising macro-level inequality is considered to undermine the economic status of certain citizens, since their position within the economic hierarchy gets devalued. Yet research adopting either set of explanations falls short of achieving two concurrent objectives: empirically identifying loss in economic status as distinct from (absolute) income loss, and testing whether the PRR is over-represented among those who lose economic status. In sum, it remains vague on the micro-level influence on voters of the above macro-level economic phenomena (Mudde 2007).

## 3 Theory

### 3.1 Conceptualizing economic status loss

In order to connect evidence on macro-level economic phenomena with individual-level disadvantage, I leverage the concept of *economic status*. I build on Gidron and Hall (2017, S61) that, in the vein of Ridgeway (2014) but explicitly deviating from Weber ([1921] 1968), develop the concept of *subjective social status*, defined as “the level of social respect or esteem people believe is accorded them within the social order”. In these terms, subjective social status consists of subjective perception of a more objective feature. I refer to that objective feature as *social status*. I define it as the “relative position” of a subject (i.e., an individual or a group) “in a social hierarchy”, where subjects “are ordered on an inferiority-superiority scale with respect to the comparative degree to which they possess or embody some socially approved or generally desired attribute or characteristics” (Benoit-Smullyan 1944, 151). Each attribute or characteristic involves a type of status that contributes to one’s overall social status (Lenski 1954). The attribute and the type of status I seek to analyze in the present paper are, respectively, *economic resources* and *economic status*.<sup>2</sup> I thereby define the latter as *the relative position within a social hierarchy ordering subjects on an inferiority-superiority scale with respect to the comparative degree to which they possess economic resources*. As Ridgeway (2014, 2) simply puts it, “people often want money as much for the status it brings as for its exchange value”. Thus, economic resources are pivotal to economic status, although the two concepts do not coincide. The same goes for (absolute) economic loss and economic status loss (Mérola and Helgason 2016).

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a long-standing tradition in heterodox economics has acknowledged the different logic underpinning economic resources and economic status (Marx [1847] 2008). Veblen (1899) and later Hirsch (1976), Sen (1983) and R. H. Frank (1985) developed the notion of positional goods, that is, goods where the value depends on their distribution among society. Under the label of *relative income*, the study of economic status has found various applications in economics (Duesenberry 1949; Luttmer 2005; for reviews see Clark, Frijters, and Shields 2008; Verme 2018; Genicot and Ray 2020). These contributions highlight that individuals evaluate their economic resources not only in absolute terms but also in view of those possessed by others.

Consequently, one main feature distinguishes economic status from economic resources. Because a subject’s economic status depends on others’ resources, the scale of economic status in a society is virtually inexhaustible (Milner 1994; Hirsch 1976). In layman’s terms, it is not possible for everyone to get richer and simultaneously acquire more economic status. This implies that economic status is structured as a zero-sum game. Someone’s gain in status coincides with someone else’s loss. It is thus clear that an improvement in material circumstances does not translate straightforwardly into a gain in economic status. If one’s positive economic performance is not accompanied by others’ equal economic performance, economic growth generates winners and losers in economic status terms.

The relevance of the distinction between economic status and economic resources goes well beyond the conceptual and methodological level, as zero-sum games are relevant for political action (Jackson and Grusky 2018). This is because individuals tend to think of the status quo, that is, the current distribution of resources among society and the corresponding hierarchy, as justified (for a review see Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004). This implies that changes in the extant hierarchy represent a deviation from a legitimate order and therefore are seen as unfair, thus spurring a feeling of resentment that is electorally consequential. Voters perceiving themselves as being treated unfairly are likely to turn

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<sup>2</sup>Another attribute fueling social status may be *prestige*, which comes closer to what Weber ([1921] 1968) means by “status”. I do not cover this attribute here.

to the PRR, as the latter promises to punish the rulers, re-establish the good ol' order, and restore dignity to those who have been deprived. This also reveals a fundamental divergence between the PRR and the radical left. They both seek deep social change, but do so on opposite normative bases, since the left considers the extant socio-economic order as unjustified (Rooduijn et al. 2017; March 2011). As a consequence, material concerns, rather than status concerns, are especially salient to far-left voting, as the experience of the 2008 crisis mentioned earlier has also demonstrated.

Overall, the distinction between economic resources and economic status appears more relevant than extant political science research has recognized so far in its empirical quantitative analyses. Accounting for such distinction may further contribute to explaining the paradox of why PRR supporters seemingly vote “unnaturally” and against their economic interests (Achterberg and Houtman 2006). The present study intends to test the empirical consequences of distinguishing economic resources (loss) and economic status (loss) for our understanding of PRR voting.

### 3.2 The political and economic relevance of class deprivation

The aforementioned tradition in economics of analyzing economic status has focused on individual circumstances. Yet research in social and political psychology demonstrates that loss matters (more) politically when it is lived as a group experience (for a review see Smith and Ortiz 2001). This is because individuals tend to blame themselves for misfortunes that are confined to their own biography, while they criticize the system and react politically when facing group deprivation (Miller et al. 1981; Verba and Nie 1972). Despite much interest in group deprivation, the consequences of between-group inequality have been an understudied topic for a long time, compared to individual disadvantage (Achen and Bartels 2016). In the last decade, this has begun to change (Cramer 2012). Scholars have increasingly paid attention to the electoral consequences of economic decline at the level of various social groups (Cramer 2016; Rodríguez-Pose 2018; Evans and Ivaldi 2021; Abou-Chadi and Kurer 2021; Ciccolini 2023). The present study complements extant approaches by considering a so-far neglected group: social class.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, contemporary mainstream research has paid little attention to class political deprivation. This was less the case in the past, as classics in political sociology evidence.<sup>4</sup> My concept of class economic status loss is akin to Bourdieu’s (1984; 1974) one of group trajectory or slope, utilized with reference to the declining petty bourgeoisie involved in the Poujadiste movement. Similarly, Lipset (1959, 1960) identifies the cause of fascism in the economic status anxieties of the German and Italian middle classes, squeezed by the expansion of large industries and the political empowerment of the working class.

My class-based approach is also grounded in recent evidence – which finds confirmation in my data, as explained later – that rising economic disparity between social classes is a critical factor driving current trends in income inequality (Albertini, Ballarino, and De Luca 2020; Wodtke 2016; Weeden et al. 2007; Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2020; Mouw and Kalleberg 2010). In other words, such trends result from the relative deterioration of the economic situation of one class vis-à-vis the others. These contributions complement well the burgeoning literature about the growing gap between the

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<sup>3</sup>By social class I understand a group of individuals sharing a common position on the labor market and therefore predictable life chances (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). Such a definition does not imply class consciousness or political engagement (Goldthorpe and Marshall 1992). My approach also does not imply that all individuals within a social class experience the very same individual-level economic change. It only posits that individuals are aware that workers in occupations with similar characteristics share relatively similar income dynamics across time, and that this is not the result of chance but precisely of their position on the labor market.

<sup>4</sup>Despite the compelling reasons the literature provides, other groups might be likewise important and further research on them is warranted.

rich and the rest of society and its electoral consequences (Piketty 2020; Gethin, Martínez-Toledano, and Piketty 2021). Yet they also exceed it to a certain extent, since they employ as the analytical unit occupational social classes, which are social groups, rather than income groups, which are statistical units (Goldthorpe 2010). I contend that such a class-based approach may be especially fruitful in political science to study voters’ reactions to the said inequalities (Jackson and Grusky 2018).

## 4 Methods

### 4.1 Data and case selection

The study of class-level economic status and its implications requires detailed individual-level information on occupation, income and voting choice. For this purpose, I draw on two separate sources.<sup>5</sup> My core analysis relies on data from the European Social Survey (ESS), a cross-country study at the European level conducted biannually. It has been extensively used in electoral studies in Europe because it gathers data on relevant socio-economic characteristics (e.g., employment status, occupation) and voting behavior. I restrict my interest to voters who either actively work or are unemployed but have ever worked. Because ESS does not provide sufficiently detailed information on income, I leverage high-quality data from the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) provided by Eurostat. EU-SILC is the most suitable dataset for my purpose given the accuracy of its individual-level data on income and occupations, the yearly and cross-country coverage, as well as the remarkable sample size. Both sets of data are collected based on random sampling. Further information on my data choice is provided in the Online Appendix A.

In my main analysis, I study electoral outcomes from 2008 until 2019 from eleven European countries: Austria, Belgium, Switzerland, Spain, Finland, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. For each national election, two criteria guide my case selection strategy: data availability constraints and the presence of relevant PRR options in the political space.<sup>6</sup> I provide further information on this matter in the Online Appendix A, and test the sensitivity of this strategy for my conclusions in the robustness checks. Ancillary analyses additionally cover previous elections and the following West-European countries: Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Iceland, and Luxembourg.<sup>7</sup> For the sake of external validity, I also include four countries from Central and Eastern Europe as a robustness check: Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. PRR parties are identified using the PopuList classification, which follows Mudde’s (2007) definition. I provide a list of examined parties in the Online Appendix B. ESS respondents’ voting choices are classified by means of the dataset PartyFacts. Overall, my main analysis covers 23 elections relying on ESS data from rounds 4-9 ( $N = 34185$ ) and on EU-SILC income data from 2003 to 2019. The sample of the main regression analysis includes voters who declared having voted and who disclosed their choice.

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<sup>5</sup>Testing whether my objective measure of economic status loss correlates with a subjective one would go beyond the scope of this paper and would require an additional data source that – to the best of my knowledge – is lacking, but it is desirable for future investigations.

<sup>6</sup>Regarding the second criterion, I only select elections where PRR parties scored above an arbitrary 5% threshold. This allows a balance between having enough variation in the dependent variable and not excluding a too large number of cases. Disregarding cases where the PRR is unsuccessful is consistent with the theoretical focus of the present study – that is explaining between-voters variation in PRR support by investigating one single demand-side driver.

<sup>7</sup>While these countries feature no elections meeting the said selection criteria, I include them in the analysis of non-electoral outcomes, that is, citizens’ political attitudes, positions, ideology, and preferences. Whenever possible, I also include them in the robustness checks when testing different selection criteria or different time spans to compute income change.

## 4.2 Measuring economic status

I test the relation between economic status and voting by employing a novel measure I term *positional income*. It indicates the relative economic position of a subject – a social class in our case – in the social hierarchy. It does so by quantifying her distance from the richest and the poorest in society, that is, from the top and the bottom of the overall income distribution.<sup>8</sup> To compute this distance, my measure draws on and synthesizes existing approaches in the literature on relative measures of income (Verme 2018; Sen 1983); like Jenkins (2011) it acknowledges that social positions are ranked, and like Burgoon et al. (2019) it recognizes that positions within the ranking are not equidistant (see the Online Appendix C for a more thorough comparison with the two approaches). However, the next of kin of positional income is clearly Lupu and Pontusson’s (2011) measure of *skew*, which is itself an extension of the 90:10 ratio commonly used in economic inequality research.

Skew was originally developed to measure the relative position of the middle class. It does so by quantifying the distance of the median citizen, i.e., the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile of the income distribution, from the richest (i.e., the last decile) and the poorest (i.e., the first one) in a given society. It consists of dividing the 90:50 ratio by the 50:10 ratio. I build on the intuition that this method can be arguably used to measure the relative position of any group in society, not just the middle class.

While I refer to the Online Appendix C for a more extensive theoretical and methodological discussion on the subject, the computation of positional income for a given class in a given context can be succinctly described as follows:

$$\text{Positional Income} = \ln \left( \frac{\text{distance from the poor}}{\text{distance from the rich}} \right) = \ln \left( \frac{\text{class income} / 10^{\text{th}} \text{ percentile}}{90^{\text{th}} \text{ percentile} / \text{class income}} \right) \quad (1)$$

Positional income of one class is computed as the logarithm of the ratio of its distance from the poorest (i.e., the first income decile) to its distance from the richest (i.e., the last income decile), where each of these distances is itself expressed in terms of ratio. Hence, it is expressed in a metric that represents the logarithm of the ratio of one distance to another. Concretely, a value of 0 indicates equidistance from the two poles (i.e., *ratio* = 1). If a given social class is twice as distant from the poor as from the rich (i.e., *ratio* = 2), its positional income is roughly 0.7 ( $\simeq \ln(2)$ ); conversely, if the distance from the poor is half the distance from the rich (i.e., *ratio* = 0.5) positional income is equal to roughly  $-0.7$  ( $\simeq \ln(0.5)$ ). The logarithmic transformation ensures that the index has desirable properties: the zero point is meaningful, and positive and negative values are symmetric. In short, positional income measures the relative position of a social class with respect to the wealthy and the have-nots.

Subsequently, I assess economic status change by computing unit changes in positional income over a given time span of  $T$  years. Specifically, positional income change at a given time point  $t_0$  is computed as the unit difference in positional income between the said time point  $t_0$  and  $T$  years earlier:

$$\Delta \text{ Positional Income }_{t_0} = \text{Positional Income }_{t_0} - \text{Positional Income }_{t-T} \quad (2)$$

Therefore, it is a difference score measure and it is expressed as a unit change. Its interpretation is rather intuitive. It takes value 0 if there has been no change in positional income for a given class. It takes a positive value if the said class has moved closer to the rich than to the poor, meaning that its economic status has improved.<sup>9</sup> Contrarily, if it has moved closer to the poor than to the rich,

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<sup>8</sup>While this study focuses on income owing to space and data constraints, I also acknowledge the possible electoral relevance of wealth as an additional source of economic status, which might prove an important area for future research. The same goes for considering additional “reference points” on top of the richest and the poorest, which I focus on consistently with the literature.

<sup>9</sup>For instance, a change of 0.05 – which happens to be the upper quartile of the distribution in my main sample –

its position has devalued, and positional income change is negative. In short, a decrease in positional income over time substantively indicates an economic status loss.

Such a method ensures that positional income remains constant over time if, despite income growth, distances between positions within the social ranking remain unaltered – as all the quantities of equation 1 would be multiplied by the same number. If such distances change, winners and losers emerge. This is consistent with my theoretical distinction between economic status change and economic growth discussed above.

### 4.3 Operationalization of positional income change

The units of analysis for measuring economic status are social classes. These are operationalized following Oesch’s (2006) class scheme, consistent with the definition I provide earlier. Contrarily to competing measures, it effectively accounts for two important features of post-industrial economies that are relevant for electoral politics: the increasing heterogeneity within the middle class as well as the emergence of non-industrial lower-skilled occupations. It does so by drawing group boundaries based on the required level of marketable skills and the different work logics involved. In my data, I distinguish fifteen classes.

Although I refer to the Online Appendix C for further details, the computation of class-level positional income change using EU-SILC data can be succinctly summarized in three steps: (1) estimating per-class average absolute income levels (based on information on real household equivalized yearly disposable income), (2) converting absolute levels into positional levels, (3) computing changes over time. Regarding the last point, I opt for a five-year time span in my main analysis, and try out different choices in the robustness checks. The Online Appendix C also provides descriptive statistics of my measure.

### 4.4 Model

My main analysis is based on the following logistic regression model with robust standard errors:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{logit} [\Pr (PRRvote_i = 1)] = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 \Delta PosInc_i + \\ & \beta_2 \Delta AbsInc_i + \beta_3 \Delta AbsInc_i^2 + \beta_4 AbsInc_i + \beta_5 AbsInc_i^2 + \\ & \beta_6 \mathbf{Class}_i + \beta_7 \mathbf{X}_i + \beta_8 \mathbf{Cntry}_i + \beta_9 \mathbf{Round}_i \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

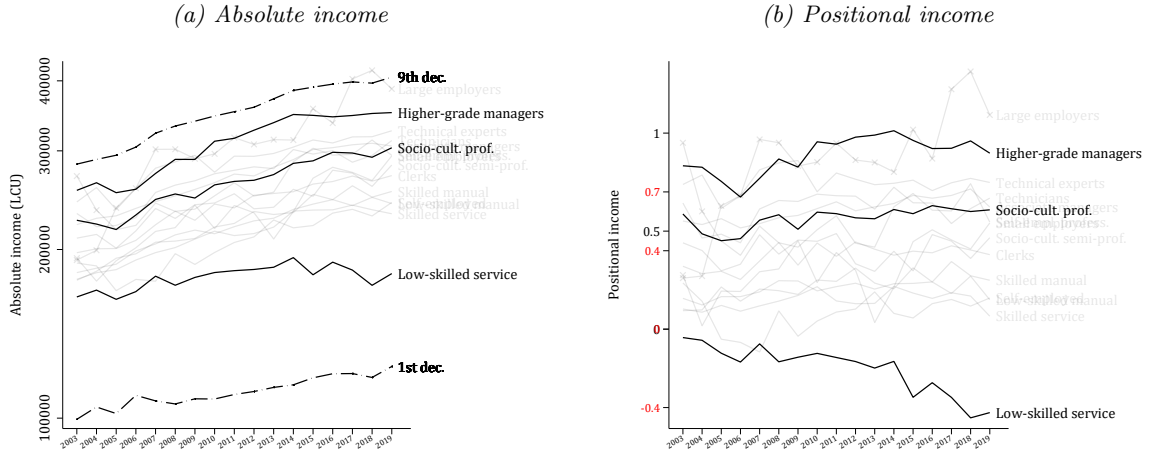
The dependent variable ( $PRRvote_i$ ) is a dummy identifying whether the respondent ( $i$ ) has voted for a PRR party – classified as above – rather than any other party in the last election. My chief independent variable is positional income change ( $\Delta PosInc_i$ ). Because this variable correlates with absolute income change ( $\Delta AbsInc_i$ ) by construction, I control for the latter (see also the Online Appendix C on this matter). The same goes for class-specific absolute income level ( $AbsInc_i$ ), expressed in logged purchasing power parities. For both variables, the model includes both a linear and a quadratic term. It includes social class fixed effects ( $\mathbf{Class}_i$ ) – operationalized as above – to control for stable voting patterns by class, as well as a set of individual-level characteristics ( $\mathbf{X}_i$ ): age, gender, education, and migration background. The model additionally includes country and survey round effects ( $\mathbf{Cntry}_i$  and  $\mathbf{Round}_i$ ). I apply survey weights. Further details on variables operationalization are reported in the Online Appendix D. I test the sensitivity of my strategy by performing a series of robustness checks I present later.

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indicates that the ratio of one’s distance from the poor to her distance to the rich has increased by 5% ( $e^{0.05} \simeq 1.05$ ).



Figure 2: Income dynamics in Sweden (2003-2019)



Notes: Panel a shows class-level averages of yearly equivalized household disposable income estimates, as well as the first and last decile of the entire distribution. Real income estimates are in constant 2010 local currency unit (Swedish krona). Values are log-transformed, but the axis is labeled in natural units. Panel b shows class-level positional income estimates. Red-colored figures on the vertical axis are substantively meaningful values (see the Online Appendix C). In both panels, figures from samples of 20-49 observations are flagged with a cross to comply with Eurostat data confidentiality policy.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Economic status loss: descriptive evidence

To begin with, I briefly present an overview of my data on income dynamics in Europe from the early 2000s onward. Figure 2 panel a tracks the yearly evolution of average income levels by each social class in Sweden – see the Online Appendix C for data from the other countries. It also plots estimates of the first and the last decile of the overall income distribution. These represent the financial welfare of – respectively – the poorest and the richest in Swedish society. Drawing on such information, I compute positional income estimates, which I plot in panel b.

In panel a, we observe that all Swedish social classes have experienced a visible increase in income levels until at least 2014. Such a pattern is particularly pronounced among higher grade managers (+37%) and socio-cultural professionals (+26%), though the low-skilled service working class also enjoyed clear-cut growth (+18%).

Yet looking at income levels from a relative perspective provides a less cheerful picture. The up-trend experienced by low-skilled service workers is not so different from the one of the poorest in society (+15%). Yet it is far less than the wealthiest’s (+35%). Therefore, the low-skilled service working class improved their material conditions at the same pace as the poorest, thus keeping equidistance from them, but not as fast as the richest, resulting in a wider gap with respect to the latter. This trend is clearly reflected in figures on positional income (panel b), with a drop of 0.12 units.<sup>10</sup>

Conversely, the growth rate of socio-cultural professionals’ income (+26%) was comparatively closer to the richest’s (panel a). Higher-grade managers (+37%) even exceeded it, albeit slightly. Therefore, socio-cultural professionals managed to maintain equidistance from the top and the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy, which reflects in little change in positional income (panel b). They

<sup>10</sup>This implies that the ratio of this class’s distance from the poorest to its distance from the richest got 1.1 times lower ( $\simeq e^{0.12}$ ) in 2014 – when it was equal to 0.8 – compared to 2003 – when it was almost 1.

gained ground over the have-nots, though without bridging the gap with respect to the wealthier. Higher grade managers in turn managed to do both, with a change in positional income of 0.18 units.

To sum up, Swedish society has generally enjoyed increasing economic welfare at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but this has not meant a relative improvement for everyone. While some classes have gained on all counts, others have gained objectively while losing positionally. Interestingly, these dynamics are consistent with macroeconomic data based on aggregate measures like GDP and the Gini coefficient (OECD 2015). Sweden has experienced sustained economic growth, yet inequalities have expanded too. Hence, Swedish society has simultaneously become richer and more unequal. On this matter, my class-level data provide fine-grained information about who has gained and lost, which is critical to investigating individual voters' choices.

## 5.2 Main regression analysis

Regression results for the main model are shown in table 1. To ease interpretation, I compute the average marginal effect of my main independent variable, positional income change, on the probability of voting for the populist radical right. The effect is equal to  $-0.14$  ( $p < 0.01$ ), it is statistically significant and is in the expected direction.<sup>11</sup> A one-unit increase in positional income over time decreases the probability of voting for a PRR party by 14 pp, holding other variables constant.<sup>12</sup> Expressed in a different metric, a one-standard-deviation increase in positional income decreases the probability of far-right voting by 1.7 pp. For reference, this corresponds to slightly less than a half of the effect (3.9 pp) of a one-standard-deviation increase in education – a well-known predictor of our outcome of interest, capturing several factors such as schooling and marketable skills.<sup>13</sup> It is also four times the one observed in Burgoon et al. (2019) (0.4 pp for a one-standard-deviation increase).<sup>14</sup> On this point, one could speculate that the better performance of my predictor comes from the double advantage of adopting a more overarching measure of inequality and choosing social groups – that is, social class in this application – as the unit of analysis (see the Online Appendix C for a more thorough discussion on the matter). In short, PRR parties disproportionately gain voters among social classes facing economic status loss, that is, those who have moved farther away from the affluent than from the poor.

A graphical representation of these results is provided in figure 3, which shows the predicted probability of PRR voting at different levels of positional income change. The average change in positional income is close to zero. PRR parties score 14% among voters experiencing the most typical increase in positional income, while this figure drops to 11% among those experiencing the most typical decrease. The magnitude of these figures is nonnegligible, given the average level of PRR support (12%).

Subsequently, I aim to test whether my results are not driven by any of the two main competitors of the PRR: the left and the center-right (see the Online Appendix D for the operationalization). Doing so allows me to ensure that a drop in positional income influences voters to choose a far-right

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<sup>11</sup>For the sake of conciseness, I use the term *effect* when discussing results, while acknowledging the limits of the research design as regards causal estimation.

<sup>12</sup>For reference, a one-unit increase in my main predictor would imply that the ratio of one's distance from the poorest to her distance from the richest almost tripled ( $1 \simeq \ln(2.7)$ ).

<sup>13</sup>The effect of education is estimated while controlling for basic demographics (age, gender, migration background, class, income).

<sup>14</sup>In addition to the authors' main measure, named *mean positional deprivation*, my results are also greater than those observed for the other measures, which are: *fifth-decile positional deprivation* (four times), *tenth-decile positional deprivation* (nine times), and *first-decile positional deprivation* (twice). I replicate the models M1, M3, M5, and M7 reported in Burgoon et al. (2019, 72–75). To allow for comparability, I standardize the predictors and calculate their marginal effect on supporting the radical right rather than all other parties, as it is the case in my model.

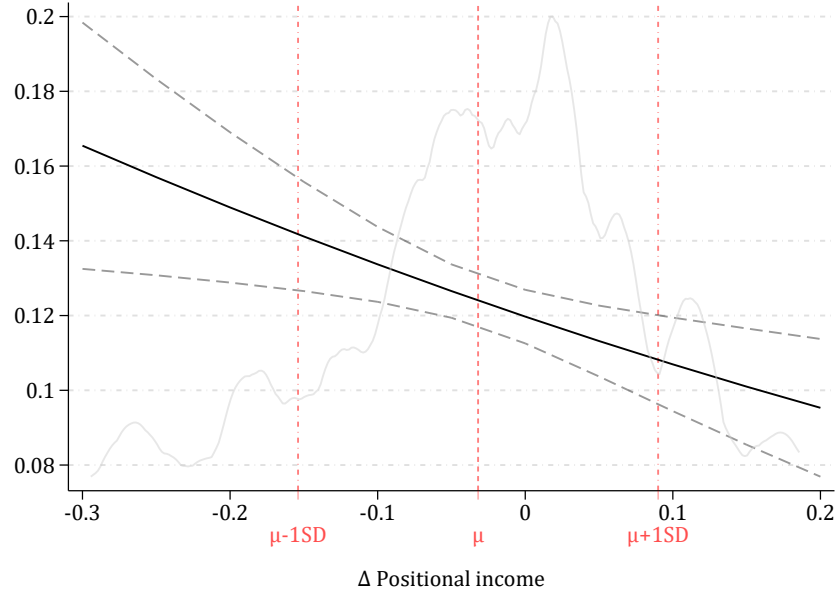
Table 1:  $\Delta$  Positional income and PRR voting (average marginal effect)

	(1) PRR voting
$\Delta$ Positional income	-0.14** (0.05)
Model	Logistic
SE	Robust
Country FE	✓
Survey round FE	✓
Indiv. controls	✓
Class FE	✓
Class controls:	
incl. Absolute income	✓
incl. $\Delta$ Absolute income	✓
Survey weights	✓
N	23598
Countries	11
Elections	23

Notes: Individual level controls are: age, gender, education, migration background. Standard errors in parentheses.

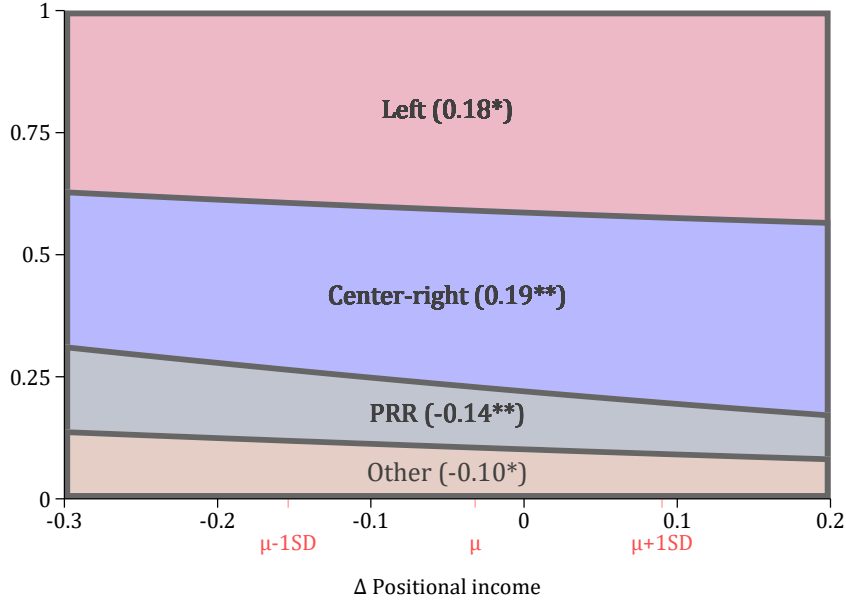
\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Figure 3:  $\Delta$  Positional income and PRR voting (predicted probabilities)



Notes: Results refer to the logistic model shown in table 1. The central red line corresponds to the mean ( $\mu$ ), while the side ones are  $\mu \pm 1SD$ . The background line plots the distribution of  $\Delta$  Positional income.

Figure 4:  $\Delta$  Positional income and voting (average marginal effect and cumulative predicted probability)



Notes: The graph plots the predicted probability of voting for each party at different levels of positional income change estimated from a multinomial model. Values in parenthesis are the average marginal effect of positional income change on the probability of voting for a given party family based on a series of logistic regressions. The results of these are shown in table 1 for the PRR and table E.1 in the Online Appendix for the other options. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

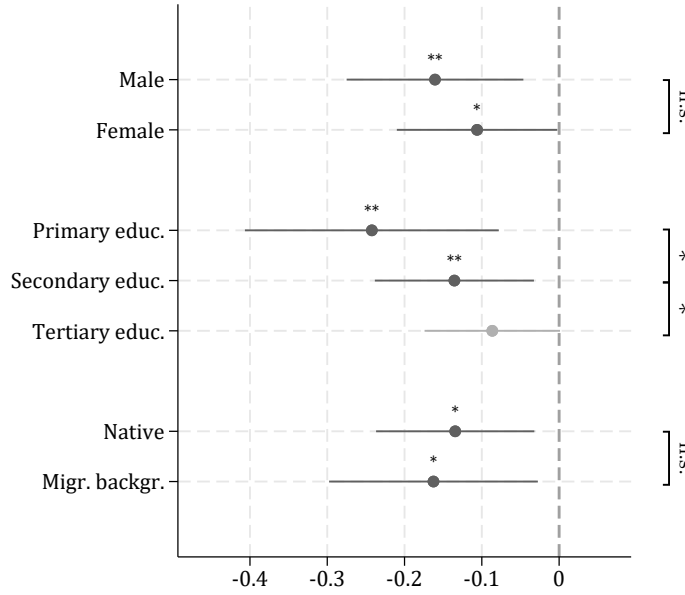
party over any alternative option. I perform this test by running a set of logistic regressions on the same sample and using the same predictors as the main model. Results from these regressions are reported in figure 4 as average marginal effects on the probability of voting for each different option. To ease the interpretation, the graph also plots the predicted vote share for each party family across different levels of the predictor.<sup>15</sup> As we can observe, both the left and the center-right perform worse among voters experiencing a drop in positional income. It follows that the overall effect observed in the main analysis is not driven by any specific competitor of the PRR.

This said, the reader may still wonder whether the observed effect of economic status loss on PRR voting might be rather due to an outflow of voters from the left or the center-right to abstention. This scenario is plausible in so far as economic status loss might hinder the credibility of these two parties without benefiting the PRR – possibly because of the stickiness of electoral preferences. If that were the case, the earlier results would be an artifact, that is, a product not of an electoral gain by the PRR but rather a loss by its competitors. To address this concern, I perform an additional logistic regression on electoral participation. This appears unaffected by positional income change (table E.2 in the Online Appendix). This result gives me confidence that the association between changes in economic status and voting choice is not driven by changes in turnout. In a nutshell, voters opt for voice rather than exit when facing loss, and they do so by supporting the PRR.

I check for potential heterogeneities in the observed effect of economic status loss on PRR voting (figure 5). I do not observe a remarkable gender-based difference: the coefficients of both men and women are statistically significant, and the difference between the two is virtually zero. The same goes

<sup>15</sup>I compute these vote shares based on a multinomial model estimated on the same sample and using the same predictors as the main model.

Figure 5:  $\Delta$  Positional income and PRR voting: heterogeneous effects (conditional marginal effect)



Notes: Representative values for education: 9, 13, and 17 years of education. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

for natives and non-natives. Interestingly, we do observe variability based on education. The main effect of my predictor is seemingly driven by voters with lower and medium levels of education, while voters with tertiary education may be immune to economic status loss. While being aware that this variable may partly capture more than just education (i.e., skills or values), I suggest two possible (non-mutually exclusive) interpretations. Firstly, because status has both an objective and a subjective component, meaning that it exists objectively but has to then be acknowledged by individuals, the latter component has to go through individual judgement, which is conditional on one's mindset, which in turn is a cause and a consequence of one's educational level. Thus, we may speculate that voters with different educational levels reach different subjective readings of their economic status. Secondly, it may be plausible that highly-educated voters are less concerned by economic status, since they can draw on other types of status, e.g., prestige. Either way, both interpretations further justify my endeavor to investigate the social meaning of economic resources beyond their absolute value for voters.

I additionally check for potential context-dependent heterogeneities (figure E.1 in the Online Appendix). Country-specific effects do not deviate significantly from the average one (panel a). Neither do survey-round-specific ones (panel b) – except for the 4<sup>th</sup> round, though this only includes one election, which is insufficient to infer heterogeneity.

In sum, I find that changes in class-level economic status, which I measure through positional income change, are negatively correlated with PRR voting. The magnitude of this relation is socially relevant. The result is not driven by either the left or the center-right taken individually: both are concerned. I find no influence on turnout. The main effect is further evident among voters with lower levels of education, while I find no gender-based heterogeneity.

My empirical strategy relies on class-level information, which might induce two concerns. To begin with, one might suspect the observed effect of class-level changes on voting to be a mere average of individual-level ones. If one had information on the latter, (s)he would observe a stronger effect of economic status loss on voting. Specularly, one might question the credibility of the observed findings, given that – as certain scholars claim – class structure no more reflects the allocation of economic

opportunities in society. Although the European Social Survey – like equivalent major cross-country surveys – does not contain detailed individual-level information on income, I can test nevertheless whether the observed effect depends on the diversity of income levels in each social class, that is, the within-class standard variation. This is not the case (figure E.2 panel a in the Online Appendix), which provides suggestive evidence that class-level dynamics are politically salient even when individual-level situation averagely tends to deviate from it. If anything, variation matters (moderately) only for the precision of the estimates (figure E.2 panel b), measured in terms of the standard error of the income averages; the effect approaches zero as the reliability of my survey-based estimates decreases, as is normal. These results come as no surprise, given the established economic importance of class – as explained earlier in the literature review. Based on my data from the EU-SILC, I estimate the level of income stratification (Zhou 2012) by social class in European societies to be 0.29. This implies that there are 65% chance that a randomly selected worker in a higher class will earn more than a randomly selected worker in a lower class. Income stratification by class is comparable to the one by education (0.34) and citizenship status (0.27), but it is clearly higher than the one by age (0.08), gender (0.03), region (0.17), or industrial sector (0.15).

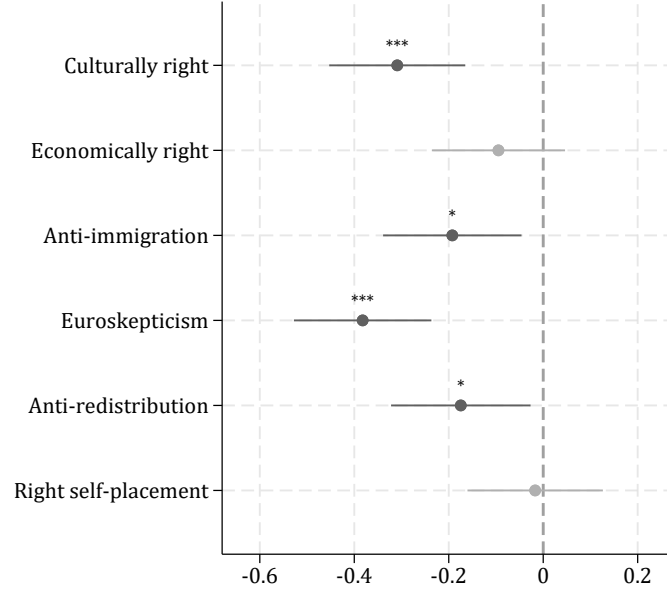
Finally, I report the results of several robustness tests in the Online Appendix E and briefly discuss the main findings here. First, my conclusions are robust to alternative model specifications: controlling for positional income instead of absolute income, not controlling for either of the two, not using survey weights, clustering standard errors either by social class or by country, performing a linear probability model, performing a multilevel model with class random effects, controlling for occupation rather than social class (table E.6). Second, I use alternative data manipulation strategies: not winsorizing income data, further addressing reliability for income estimates from small samples, splitting the class of clerks based on skills as in the original scheme, restricting the sample to adults aged at least 30 (table E.7). Third, I include four countries from Central and Eastern Europe: Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia (table E.8). All these tests yield comparable results. Fourth, I apply different thresholds to select elections with successful PRR parties and different time spans to compute the change in positional and absolute income: results remain significant provided that one can exploit enough cases (i.e., elections) and enough variation in the dependent variable (figure E.3). Incidentally, this allows me to extend my investigation to two additional countries: Denmark and Greece.

### 5.3 Additional regression analyses

To seek confirmation about the association between economic status loss and PRR voting, I complement the above analysis by investigating the impact of positional income change on political attitudes, positions, ideology, and preferences (see the Online Appendix D for the operationalization). Figure 6 shows the effect of a one-unit change in positional income change on a set of standardized variables. I observe that a drop in positional income is associated with further cultural conservatism. More precisely, it fuels hostile attitudes towards migrants as well as criticism towards the European Union. The magnitude of the coefficients is not impressive though relatively valuable: a one-standard-deviation increase in positional income change leads to a 0.04 standard deviation decrease in cultural conservatism (which corresponds to  $-0.4$  for a one-unit increase), and this is just short of one-fifth of the equivalent for education ( $-0.21$ ).

I cannot observe any association between positional income change and left-right self-placement. This could be easily explained by the fact that the median far-right voter tends to declare being centrist. Similarly, I find no association with right-leaning economic orientation. This is consistent with evidence that the so-called cultural dimension is the one which PRR parties compete on. Yet it should be noticed that economic status loss boosts opposition towards redistribution. A one-standard-

Figure 6:  $\Delta$  Positional income and political attitudes, positions, ideology, and preferences (average marginal effect)



Notes: Results refer to models reported in table E.3 in the Online Appendix. Dependent variables are standardized.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

deviation increase in positional income change is associated with a 0.02 standard deviation increase in anti-redistribution preferences, which is almost one-fourth of the equivalent for (class-level) absolute income (0.11). This is a novel important finding, as it provides further empirical evidence for the reason why voters experiencing economic status loss do not react by voting for left-wing parties – who champion redistributive policies – as voters experiencing material loss do.

On this matter, one might have doubts about the distinctive consequences of economic status loss compared to material deprivation. While previous studies have shown that the latter is not associated with PRR voting at the individual level, my data allow me to provide further confirmation from class-level information. As column 1 in table E.4 in the Online Appendix shows, absolute income change does not lead to a significant shift in PRR voting. Absolute income level does not either (column 2). Hence, we can conclude that – as expected – economic status loss, not a deterioration of material circumstances, explains class alignment to PRR parties.

Finally, the reader may wonder whether economic status loss might engender a generic populist and extremist reaction among voters, without any relation to right politics. I take this concern into consideration and perform the same analysis on different electoral outcomes (see the Online Appendix D for the operationalization) (table E.5). A drop in positional income does make populist voting more likely (column 1). Yet this outcome also includes PRR voting. In fact, when I test the same effect on populist left voting only, the coefficient turns out to be not significant (column 2). On top of that, radical left parties find lower support among voters facing economic status loss (column 3). These results come as no surprise. As mentioned earlier, the profound social change both the PRR and the radical left seek has opposite normative bases in the two cases, and material concerns, rather than status ones, have been shown to be salient to radical left voting.

## 6 Conclusion

Citizens’ resentment at losing out to the rest of society is commonly regarded as the foundation of the demand for the PRR. Yet whether PRR voters are objectively disadvantaged remains disputed, which raises doubts about the alleged economic basis for PRR support. Addressing this shortage is a key concern because both scholars and policymakers have an interest in clarifying the mechanism relating economic changes to voters’ preferences and choices. While extant research has chiefly focused on individual-level absolute disadvantage, the present paper investigates the role of collective economic status loss as a driver of PRR voting, as inquiries into voters’ perceptions and the political consequences of economic inequalities suggest.

By drawing on individual-level data from ESS and EU-SILC from 23 elections across 11 Western European countries, I demonstrate that PRR parties are most successful among social classes facing a decrease in economic status, meaning a deterioration of their economic position within the social hierarchy. The magnitude of the association is substantial. My data also evidence that the left and the center-right are likewise harmed, to the benefit of the PRR, with no change in turnout.

Additional analyses reveal that economic status loss boosts culturally conservative stances. Interestingly enough, it also boosts anti-redistribution preferences. This is a novel insight, as the opposite is true for financial loss – which extant research has focused on. I suggest this may be because, when economic resources are portrayed as a zero-sum game, those facing relative loss would be further harmed by governments bringing relief to the have-nots. Accordingly, this would shift the balance in favor of the latter, further exacerbating voters’ fear of ending up in last place (Kuziemko et al. 2014).

To sum up, my research empirically corroborates the widespread (though poorly proved) argument that the inequality trends observed in post-industrial economies do foster disadvantage thereby creating a breeding ground for PRR support. Nonetheless, it also clarifies that such disadvantage is not merely financial in nature, as previous studies suspected. On the contrary, PRR parties enjoy broader support among voters suffering from a collective downgrade of their relative economic standing. On the whole, my work lends support to previous warnings that relative deprivation, not economic hardship, motivates PRR voting. Hence it complements well similar research explaining the resurgence of far-right populism in terms of wage stagnation or the hollowing of the middle class (Chauvel 2020; Kurer 2020; Kurer and Palier 2019; Nolan and Weisstanner 2020; Antonucci et al. 2017).

The present study advances two theoretical contributions. Firstly, it expands our knowledge of the nature of the demand-side explanations of PRR support. We can claim that extant evidence of no effect of material disadvantage is not indicative of the irrelevance of economic motives. Yet I join other social scientists in considering that the dispute in scholarly and public debate around whether far-right voters are motivated more by cultural or economic reasons is a flawed one. This is because, so to say, voters give a *cultural reading* to *economic phenomena*, namely those they experience firsthand. In the case considered here, they interpret their material circumstances through the lens of status, thus beyond absolute rationality. This translates into voting for parties that mainly campaign on cultural issues – rather than economic ones – as well as into a right shift on the cultural dimension. The observed education-based effect heterogeneity additionally yields suggestive evidence that voters internalize material economic facts and construct a subjective “cultural” interpretation – which may thus vary depending on one’s interpretative tools.

Secondly, this study provides an insight into the political consequences of economic inequalities. Its conclusions are consistent with recent accounts about the relevance of widening within-country economic gaps for electoral politics. Yet it takes a step forward in establishing a more plausible link between aggregate phenomena and individual experience. It does so by adopting a meso-level approach, quantifying the extent to which specific social groups in each national context have been



gaining or losing ground compared to the rest of society, and studying these groups' voting behavior. Additionally, acknowledging citizens' status reading of economic resources allows us to better understand why, contrarily to rational expectation (Meltzer and Richard 1981), left parties do not systematically benefit from increasing inequalities (Lupu and Pontusson 2011; Pontusson and Rueda 2010). Voters facing status loss do not demand more redistribution (which the left champions) – rather the opposite.

In conclusion, my study confirms that competition for economic resources is not over. Contrarily, because it has been transforming into a quest for recognition and identity, it latently fuels the second dimension of politics. This also comes with a conundrum that parties competing with the PRR face, namely the left. On the one hand, they may want to reverse the widespread rising trend in income inequality. Based on my research as well as others', it is against their interests that a significant share of ordinary citizens does not get to enjoy the benefits of economic growth. On the other, progressively redistributive policies may not represent an adequate solution. This is because status politics is not about material hardship, but also because voters facing status loss demand the very opposite, as my analysis has empirically demonstrated. A workaround might be to create further high-quality jobs, or at least to ensure their creation. Yet because policymakers have limited control over this (Baccaro and Pontusson 2016; Hassel and Palier 2021), the above contradiction is not easily solvable, and economic inequalities are likely to keep on fueling PRR parties' success.

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## Data Availability Statement

The code utilized to produce the results will be available after publication. Data from the European Social Survey are publicly available on the study website upon registration. Eurostat does not allow the dissemination of the micro-data from the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions.

## Supplementary Material

See the Online Appendix.

## Competing Interests

None.

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