

POPULISM AND THE WELFARE STATE

« Modernization loser » theory holds that citizens support populist-right-wing parties because they want to express discontent about severe social grievances they experience. It has never been confirmed, however, of what type such grievances are (are they economic? Cultural? Related to social status?) and how the grievance-mechanism of populist attitude formation relates to other mechanisms (such as racism or the defense of privilege). Therefore, this thesis asks: what's the problem, actually? – and explores « grievance experiences » of populist minded citizens by means of extensive interviewing and ethnography.

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Education

Visiting Research Student, University of California at Berkeley, Sociology Department

MA (Res) Social Sciences, specialisation: Comparative Study of Development
Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS)

MA International Political Economy
King's College, London

BA Transcultural Communication
University of Vienna &
Russian State University for the Humanities

Professional experiences

Paulus has completed internships in journalism (with the German public TV channel ZDF and the German daily newspaper DIE WELT), in diplomacy (at the Austrian Embassy Zagreb, Croatia) and in oil/gas industry (with the Austrian company OMV Gas & Power).

Welfare chauvinism, grievance theory, and social integration theory

« Welfare chauvinism » is the populist radical right's social policy program. It supports generous welfare benefits – yet only for a group of insiders, while excluding outsiders (such as notably, immigrants). Welfare chauvinist discourse builds on the claim that the « deserving » in-group would receive too little but never explains in detail in what respect this should be the case. This discourse notably functions as an electoral linkage between populist-minded manual workers and parties of the far-right. It represents a well-suited case to explore to what extent populist-right-wing attitudes are actually linked to grievances experienced by their proponents – or not; and if yes, what grievances these really are.

Results

- Using a mixed methodology, this thesis finds that in many cases, welfare chauvinist attitudes of manual workers are linked to experienced grievances, notably in two areas: firstly, at the workplace, namely in management-worker relations inside enterprises; and secondly, in the contact with institutions of the welfare state, namely with the public retirement insurance and the employment office. Both locus and nature of these grievance experiences are rather hidden from the instruments of survey research: they concern feedback mechanisms, problem solving, communication and recognition rather than economic numbers alone.

Social relations at the workplace and citizens' interactions with the welfare state are crucial sites of political preference formation

- The thesis further finds that many citizens seem to experience grievances – but only some form populist attitudes. What accounts for this is the availability of problem solving mechanisms. These exist there, where society is integrated to the degree that emerging problems in social relations can be talked about and dealt with. Where this is not the case, resentment and populist attitudes emerge. Furthermore, where ties in society rupture, unsolved grievances and populist attitudes cluster in some social groups rather than in others.

Not « problems » are the problem, but a lack of problem-recognition and problem-solving mechanisms

- This is why finally, this thesis formulates a « social integration theory » of the formation of populist attitudes. Social integration is when actors recognize each others' social roles (in an organization, in society), when they communicate and when collective problem-solving mechanisms are given. The opposite of this is « social rupture », which is a breeding ground for resentment and populist attitudes. Social rupture typically comes as a strong experience of *injustice* – which is precisely what tight-wing-populist parties mobilize on.

Social rupture produces grievance experiences, injustice perceptions, and a breeding ground for populism

Research design & methodology

This project is based on a mixed quantitative-qualitative methodology.

Case studies

Austria and East Germany have been studied as cases. This is a most-similar-systems design with two interesting differences: Austria has shown stable economic development in the recent decades, while the German East has experienced severe crises. This allows to control for global economic factors. Further, the Austrian far-right party has been weak during the main field research period, but the German far-right party at the height of its popularity.

Biographical interviews

150 interviews, partly biographical, partly issue-centred, have been realized in early 2020 in Austria and Germany. Half of the interviewees are manual workers (chosen according to Daniel Oesch's social class scheme). Interviews have focused on occupational biographies, experiences with welfare state institutions and programs, welfare policy preferences, and general political attitudes.

Survey data

Survey data is used to provide external validity to the structure of the intermediate-N sample of interviewees discussed above. It is also used to test and validate several of the hypotheses formulated based on the field research. Datasets used include the European Social Survey, the European Working Conditions Survey, the International Social Survey Program, and household panel surveys.