

When white working-class men feel society no longer values them



The Brexit referendum exposed deep political divisions within British society, and more than a year after that vote, those divisions show no signs of disappearing. Although the Leave campaign was carried to victory on the back of a broad coalition, one of its striking features was high levels of support for Brexit among white working-class men without a college education – a group that is also especially likely to vote for right-populist candidates in other countries. Why is there such strong support for right-populist causes and candidates among the white working class?

In both the media and scholarly commentary, discussion of this issue has been dominated by a debate about whether rising support for right populism is rooted in economic or cultural developments. On the one hand, some interpret support for right-wing populism as a [rejection of multicultural discourse](#) and post-materialist values. On the other hand, other analysts emphasise the degree to which support for populism is linked with [economic distress](#) and [insecurity](#). With regard to Brexit, the former present evidence that those in the Leave camp were driven by [perceived cultural threats](#) to national identity, while the latter point out that regional [unemployment](#) was strongly associated with support for leaving the European Union.

However, we think that asking whether economic or cultural developments were more important to such outcomes is to ask the wrong question. There are good reasons for believing that economic and cultural developments have operated *together* to increase support for populism. The more important question, then, is not whether populism is driven by *either* economic *or* cultural factors — but rather how economic and cultural forces might *combine* to shape the populist politics of our time.

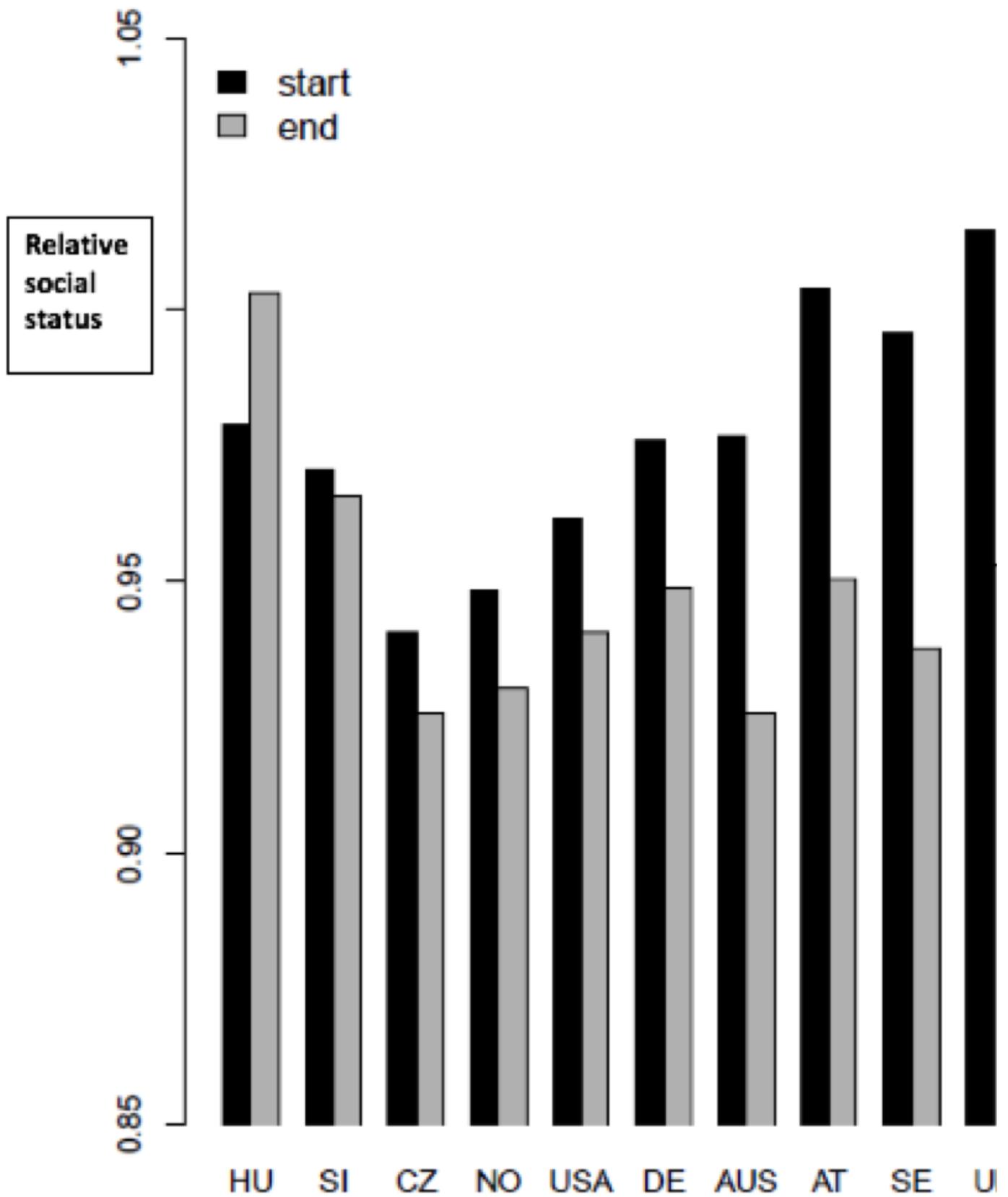
In a recent article published in the [British Journal of Sociology](#), we propose that one way to understand how economic and cultural factors interact is to see support for Brexit and right populism more generally among the white working class as a reflection of status anxiety rooted in broader processes of social marginalisation. We support this argument using survey data collected across Western democracies between 1987 and 2014 as part of the International Social Survey Programme.

Our focus is on subjective social status, namely, a person's sense that they are accorded the social respect or status associated with full membership in society. There are good reasons for thinking that economic and cultural developments have combined to depress the subjective social status of white working-class men. Since social status is typically conferred by levels of income and the quality of one's occupation, [shifting patterns of employment](#) that have eliminated well-paid, medium-skill jobs and forced many men into more precarious positions may well have undercut their own sense of where they stand in society. At the same time, shifts in cultural frameworks, marked by an increasing emphasis in mainstream discourse on racial and gender equality, may have threatened the subjective social status of any who may have relied on the [notion](#) that they were white or male to underpin their own sense of social standing.

Thus, economic and cultural developments happening independently of each other may have combined to have *additive* effects on the social status of some groups. But there may also be *interactive* effects at work here. For instance, movement toward a knowledge economy has increased the demand for highly-skilled workers and the wage premium to college degrees, putting people without such a degree at an economic disadvantage. But, as more people acquire such degrees, the social esteem accorded those who lack one may well have fallen. In this case, a particular set of economic developments sets in motion changes in cultural frameworks that multiply the effects.

If these conjectures are correct, we should expect to see some decline in the subjective social status of men without a college education over the past few decades, and that is what we find in this study of twelve developed democracies. We measured social status using a question that asked survey respondents to place themselves on a social ladder reflecting whether they were closer to the top or bottom of society. In almost every country within our sample, men without a college education reported lower levels of relative social status in 2014 than they did two or three decades before. These declines were modest but remarkably consistent.

Figure. The relative social status of men without a college education circa 1990 and 2014



Note: Start period for Germany, Sweden, Norway, the Czech Republic and Slovenia is 1992; end period for UK and Hungary is 2009. Otherwise start period is 1987 and end period is 2014. Source: ISSP Surveys; Gidron and Hall 2017.

Is this decline in subjective social status reflected in support for the populist right? We think there are good reasons to believe it is. [Previous work](#) in sociology has demonstrated that people care just as much about social status as they do about money. Thus, working-class voters who feel their social status is eroding may well turn against the mainstream parties who have presided over that; and they may well be inclined toward candidates who promise to restore that status, as many on the populist right do. Donald Trump [appealed directly](#) to such concerns, for instance, with language evident in this campaign speech:

While my opponent slanders you as deplorable and irredeemable, I call you hardworking American patriots who love your country and want a better future for all of our people. You are mothers and fathers, soldiers and sailors, carpenters and welders [...] You are Americans and you are entitled to leadership that honors you, cherishes you, and defends you. Every American is entitled to be treated with dignity and respect in our country.

In line with this, we find that, across the developed democracies, lower levels of subjective social status are strongly associated with voting for right-wing populist parties. Moreover, people who express lower levels of social standing also express higher levels of political alienation (reflected in the belief that one has to be corrupt in order to succeed in life) and deeper opposition to immigration – an attitude important to the populist right and the Leave campaign. We think there is real promise in approaching support for the populist right as a problem of social integration, born of economic and cultural developments that have led some groups of people to feel increasingly marginal to mainstream society.

These findings also carry implications for how the populist challenge can be addressed. Much of the current discussion is [focused](#) on providing better material compensation for the ‘losers’ of globalisation, often in the form of more generous programs of redistribution. Yet our research suggests that support for populism is not motivated primarily by demands for more redistribution but by more fundamental concerns about social recognition and respect. Since social recognition is closely-linked to having a decent job, addressing those concerns will require efforts to create such jobs and to make existing jobs more decent. But it will also require efforts on the symbolic plane of political discourse to ensure that people in all walks of life are recognised as valued members of society.



Notes:

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