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**MERITOCRACY,
UNFAIRNESS, AND THE
DIRECTIONS OF ANGER:
EXPLAINING SUPPORT
FOR LEFT AND RIGHT-
WING POPULISM**

*MERITOCRACIA, INJUSTIÇA E AS
DIREÇÕES DA RAIVA: EXPLICANDO O
APOIO AO POPULISMO DE ESQUERDA E
DE DIREITA*

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ABSTRACT

Although researchers have focused on different aspects to explain the success of populist movements, perceptions of unfairness continue highly overlooked. Despite the difficulty in finding evidence, this paper elucidates the growing perceptions of unfairness, the anger it causes, and its impact on the electoral success of radical left and right movements by investigating the spread of the meritocracy discourse and the ideological repositioning of political parties. I argue that the collectivization of economic grievances directs the anger caused by perceptions of unfairness exclusively to the economic elite, allowing for bottom-up mobilization and greater support for left-wing populism. However, since the meritocratic mentality encourages the individualization of grievances and social competition, the anger that the perception of unfairness creates is directed towards those seen as unfairly rewarded regardless of their income group, which increases support for right-wing populism. As populists achieve electoral success, the consolidation of the discourse and its popular support starts to depend on the ability to reaffirm the identities of the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite”. The analyses of case studies in the Americas and Europe support the arguments.

Keywords: Populism; Unfairness; Economic Grievances; Identity; Meritocracy.

RESUMO

Embora pesquisadores tenham se concentrado em diferentes aspectos para explicar o sucesso dos movimentos populistas, as percepções de injustiça continuam altamente negligenciadas. Apesar da dificuldade em encontrar evidências, este artigo elucida as crescentes percepções de injustiça, a raiva que ela causa e o seu impacto no sucesso eleitoral de movimentos radicais de esquerda e direita, investigando a disseminação do discurso da meritocracia e o reposicionamento ideológico dos partidos políticos. Eu argumento que a coletivização de queixas econômicas direciona a raiva causada por percepções de injustiça exclusivamente para a elite econômica, permitindo uma mobilização de baixo para cima e maior apoio ao populismo de esquerda. No entanto, como a mentalidade meritocrática incentiva a individualização das queixas e a competição social, a raiva que a percepção de injustiça cria é direcionada àqueles vistos como injustamente recompensados, independentemente de sua faixa de renda, o que aumenta o apoio ao populismo de direita. À medida que os populistas alcançam o sucesso eleitoral, a consolidação do discurso e de seu apoio popular passa a depender da capacidade de reafirmar as identidades do “povo honesto” e da “elite corrupta”. As análises de estudos de caso nas Américas e na Europa apoiam os argumentos.

Palavras-chave: Populismo; Injustiça; Queixas Econômicas; Identidade; Meritocracia.

INTRODUCTION

Recent surveys have shown that anti-establishment perceptions have been strikingly high. Most people believe that their country is in decline, that traditional parties and politicians do not care about people like them, and that the country's economy is driven by the interests of the rich and powerful (IPSOS MORI, 2017). Consequently, people have been increasingly supporting populist movements. Although there have been different approaches to populism, scholars seem to agree that it originates from the idea that a powerful and corrupt elite has been ruling society and harming the morally superior and pure people, who have the right to put politics on the right track (MOFFITT, 2020; MUDDE and KALTWASSER, 2017). But where does this dissatisfaction come from? To explain support for different populist movements, various theories have emerged. Following political science tradition, the success of the radical left has been associated with economic grievances, which were boosted by the financial crisis. Meanwhile, the support for the radical right has been mainly associated with cultural anxieties, boosted by the migrant crisis. However, it has been argued for long that economic grievances might also act behind far-right preferences, including the rising of Nazi-fascism during the 1920s and 1930s in Europe, arguments confirmed by recent studies (GALOFRÉ-VILÀ *et al.*, 2021; KING *et al.*, 2008).

How economic grievances generate cultural anxieties has been the topic of vast debate. While some argue that people develop anti-immigration preferences because the migrants compete with the locals for scarce resources, such as job positions and welfare (RYDGREN and RUTH, 2011), others argue that globalization, trade exposure, and changes in manufacturing industries have created a significant number of anxious, dissatisfied workers who turn to radical conservatism (AUTOR *et al.*, 2020; AUTOR, DORN, and HANSON, 2013; COLANTONE and STANIG, 2018a, 2018b; GOOS, MANNING, and SALOMONS, 2014; MILNER, 2021). However, if even economic grievances create cultural anxieties and conservative preferences, one would imagine that people would prefer to solve the problem supporting the radical left and its redistributive policies first. In that sense, these studies usually do not say much about why some people choose to support the radical right and reaffirm cultural identities instead.

To elucidate this point, research has been done on people's reactions to economic grievances. For example, in a theoretical approach, Salmela (2019) argues that

precarity causes the feeling of shame in most people. Still, those who better accept their position of inferiority in the system tend to collectively share this shame and then support ideas more linked to the left-wing, while those who repress the negative feelings end up searching for solid identities that are still out of the scope of the market, and so, tend to support the radical right. Through a similar theoretical background, Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2021) approach the advent of the discourse of meritocracy by mainstream political parties. The authors argue that the failure on receiving the expected rewards creates perceptions of a declining status, especially among low-educated individuals, who turn to the radical right.

The perceived declining status is aligned with the arguments that the threat of a decline, rather than actual deprivation, encourages people to support the radical right (ENGLER and WEISSTANNER, 2020). Thus, radical right support would come from groups with middle and not low levels of income, who are more likely to support a leftist agenda. In that sense, it has been argued that while dissatisfaction regarding one's income in comparison to the rich leads to radical left support, dissatisfaction regarding one's income in comparison to the poor increases support for the radical right (BURGOON *et al.*, 2019). So, the anti-establishment feeling behind the support for populist parties would not be originated necessarily in inequality, but in unfairness instead, argument supported by Starmans, Sheskin, and Bloom (2017), who found that humans naturally favour fair inequality over unfair equality. Protzer (2021) well notices that unfairness has been highly overlooked in the literature on rising populism, arguing that people do not care about complex processes as inequality or culture, but instead care if economic outcomes are fair or not. However, to find evidence for his hypothesis, he focuses on low social mobility as an indicator of economic unfairness, which might not be a good approach because the social mobility of some individuals might be understood as unfair by others.

One reason unfairness is so overlooked in the literature might be the complexity of measuring and comparing perceptions of unfairness, which leaves such investigations mainly in the theoretical field. However, a qualitative approach and the analysis of case studies can help clarify this aspect. This paper aims to elucidate how differences in economic dissatisfactions lead people to support the radical left or the radical right and why the latter is becoming more successful. For that, I propose to investigate the long-term efforts of traditional parties to change the social mindset, which affects people's socioeconomic expectations and political preferences, generating strong anti-establishment sentiments. That

allows us to understand how people react to unfairness and direct their anger to different groups, explaining their support for different populist ideologies.

The anti-establishment that acts behind populist support may be originated in the core of the neoliberal paradigm, in the combination of its meritocratic promises and its economic asymmetries, which generates great sense of unfairness. When these grievances are associated with the perception of top-down exploitation, unfairness and inequality have similar meaning, and the radical left gains electoral success. However, the increasing social competition and expected fair meritocracy make the collectivization of economic grievances more difficult. Moreover, if meritocracy is perceived as unfair, the anger generated becomes increasingly directed towards the people who are perceived as being unfairly rewarded despite their income group, and so its relationship with inequality is more complex. When this occurs, traditional identities offer a source of regaining stability, pride, and possibility of mobilization, resulting in support for the radical right.

Following Mudde's (2019) categorization, centre-left and centre-right are defined as mainstream parties, those which support pluralism and liberal democracy. On the edges, far parties are divided into radical and extreme movements. While radical parties are populists and believe in illiberal forms of democracy, extreme parties are elitist and reject democratic values. While this article assumes a broad categorization, considering movements such as Venezuelan Bolivarianism as radical rather than extreme, this approach helps us differentiate populist movements from extremist movements such as neo-Nazism. Thus, the terms "radical" and "populist" are used interchangeably. Likewise, the expression "populist movements" is used for political parties, but also to include populist leaders who rise within mainstream parties.

THE MERITOCRATIC MINDSET

Neoliberalism is usually understood as a set of economic liberal policies that believe that to grow, the government should spend less, promoting privatization, austerity, lowering trade barriers, deregulating capital markets, eliminating price controls, and many other policies that see governmental control as the cause of every problem (HARVEY, 2005). Under this paradigm, individuality, competition, and meritocracy are promoted, while social dependence and state intervention are morally condemned. The idea is that by encouraging people to be entrepreneurs of

themselves, investing in their own education and professional training, a virtuous circle would be created: fewer people would need assistance, the government would spend less, there would be less free-riders, the economy would flourish, and the whole society would be more efficient, responsible, and free (DARDOT and LAVAL, 2013).

To achieve that, equal opportunities should be provided, and so, there is an effort to overcome injustices by fighting gender, racial and ethnic inequality. However, that ignores income inequality because it is believed that the outcomes of income are fair rewards for an individual's contributions to society. In this way, the economic disadvantaged are no longer seen through the lens of pity or misfortune but are portrayed as inept or lazy individuals who deserve their fate. Even so, greater equality of opportunity has not been created. The requirements to boost individual abilities and to access top education institutions demand economic power, causing merit to be passed down through generations, perpetuating the elites while blaming the underprivileged for their misfortune (BUKODI and GOLDTHORPE, 2021; ROBERTSON and NESTORE, 2022).

Another important aspect is that this marketization of social life extends the logic of capital to social relations and requires rational decisions in all spheres of life. However, because individuals expect to be rewarded adequately for their choices, they increase self-exploitation and expectations in a vicious cycle, and that can boost perceptions of unfairness and anger if the outcomes received do not match the expectations (DARDOT and LAVAL, 2013; HAN, 2017). Moreover, as in the market, the idea that the consumer is always right is expanded to other spheres of life, including elections. The association of consumer and voter emerged during the late 1970s, when the neoliberal rationality started to spread (NEWMAN, 1985). Yet, while the promises of meritocracy were first welcomed by many with enthusiasm, decades of increasing inequality and uncertainties resulted in many angry individuals demanding justice and willing to punish the establishment. In other words, under the assumption that the voter is always right, if individuals are not well rewarded for their contributions to society, they feel in their right to demand changes.

THE POLITICAL ESTABLISHMENT

Since industrialization, left-wing movements emerged to support and mobilize underprivileged workers against economic exploitation. With the consolidation of the middle-class, left-wing parties defended not only the interests of the poorest, but also of mid-income workers. However, at the end of the 1960s an important ideological shift within the left started to occur. The so-called “new left” emerged as a movement that intended to take distance from the Soviet authoritarianism and embrace equality through freedom and individual expression. Over time, centre-left parties changed their emphasis from materialism, supporting the underrepresented in the economic field, to self-expression, supporting the underrepresented in the cultural field. In other words, instead of focusing on challenging the faults of the capitalist system and helping the low-paid workers, leftist parties increasingly concentrated their agendas in promoting minority rights.

These changes well matched the ideas of freedom and individualism that sustained the neoliberal paradigm, allowing it to be promoted as a progressive apolitical solution to the authoritarianism of both extreme right and left. This pattern became clear in the post-Cold War era, when centre-left parties embraced freedom also in the economy, aligning with the centre-right in what became known as “the third way” (DARDOT and LAVAL, 2013). In the political scenario that emerged in the 1990s, the union of left and right pluralist centre parties represented the great victory of the liberal Western values, causing Fukuyama (1992) to declare the “end of history”.

At that time, most people, including lower classes, believed in the promises of common progress, and so accepted not only the development of a neoliberal international economic system, but also the increasing inequality that accompanies it, hoping that the gains would soon start to trickle down from upper to lower classes. Over time, however, the expansion of trade, the increasing flux of capital, and the inclusion of developing Asian countries in the global market arguably intensified the shocks in local Western economies (HARVEY, 2005; PIKETTY, 2014). Additionally, the increasing social competition caused by the flexibilization of labour laws and the reduction of the welfare state caused this optimism to decrease (CHOMSKY, 1999). The perception that the hard work would not be rewarded resulted in increasing political distrust and dissatisfaction (BUKODI and GOLDTHORPE, 2021; ROBERTSON and NESTORE, 2022). Moreover, the repositioning of the centre-left towards neoliberalism pleased the centre-right in the economic field, which welcomed the centre-left's focus on equality of identities as a great neoliberal ally. Consequently,

there was less variation of ideas among mainstream parties, which assumed that some political decisions were in fact ideologically neutral, placing policies above any debate and popular participation – what is called consensus politics. That also collaborated to build the image in the public imagination of a multiparty political establishment that does not care about the people, who end up distancing themselves from traditional parties (VAN BIEZEN and POGUNTKE, 2014).

In today's political spectrum, most of centre-left and -right parties continue to promote liberal values in all aspects, including economic meritocracy. Because individuals of different social classes believe they are not well rewarded for their contributions to society, mainstream parties of both ideologies are seen as the establishment to be punished, while new radical movements in both edges of the political spectrum have been formed. Evidently, some dissatisfied people are unaware of the changing mindset that occurred, and many times continue to support mainstream parties. However, until the rewards for the hard-working arrive, the economic grievances often turn into anger directed at those who are seen as the ones "stealing" the payoffs.

According to the radical left discourse, which praises the efforts for greater equality in the cultural field, the blame lies with the economic elite, which continues to exploit the workers. But according to the radical right rhetoric, which associates the celebration of new identities to uncertainties and unfairness, the corrupts are also free-riders who are being unfairly rewarded. In this case, the outrage of radical right supporters only increases when the centre-left not only ignores their grievances but demonises them, accusing them of being racists, xenophobic and other terms that contribute to boost indignation and political polarization (BUKODI and GOLDTHORPE, 2021; EATWELL and GOODWIN, 2018; SCHWÖRER and FERNÁNDEZ-GARCÍA, 2021).

SHARED ECONOMIC GRIEVANCES: BOTTOM-UP ANGER

Although it is hard to find data on perceptions of unfairness towards different income groups, it seems to exist enough evidence that allows us to differentiate how people react to unfairness and end up supporting different populist movements. In many countries, the fact that mainstream parties are seen as responsible for peoples' dissatisfaction causes them to be associated with the populist concept of the corrupt elite that harms the pure people, and so populist movements are likely to achieve electoral success. However, the direction of these dissatisfactions seems to define the

populist ideology that people support. When economic dissatisfaction is strong and spread over society, groups with mid-levels of income share the grievances of the lower classes, forming an identity around the idea of deprivation in opposition to the economic elite. For those cases, the traditional idea of exploitation of the people by the rich becomes vivid, and the radical left can mobilise popular dissatisfaction, achieving electoral success. That is relatively easier to happen in developing countries, where inequality is traditionally high, because there is the spread idea that the economic elite exploits most people, but it also happens in developed countries, which get highly affected by economic crises and austerity measures.

The extension of the radical left electoral success can be associated with how deep the economic grievances are perceived, but it is also related to the ability and will of these movements to reaffirm the populist identities when they rise to power. In today's globalized world, it is increasingly difficult to fight the financial system and solve the economic issues unilaterally. Moreover, because it is very unlikely that once becoming incumbents, they will rapidly solve the economic issues, as time goes by, popular trust on radical left governments decreases and they lose support. Because once they are in power they cannot blame the local political elite anymore, the alternative they have is to reaffirm the populist identities by picturing the elite as foreign actors that exploit the country, justifying the necessity of continuing strong support in a long fight against the international economic system. Thus, if initially the radical left success depends on how strong the economic grievances are, as they rise to power, they face a dilemma. One option is to moderate their populist speech and negotiate economic deals with the elite, which usually causes them to lose popular support, but relatively eases the crisis. Alternatively, they can reinforce the populist speech and challenge the economic order, which usually causes them to maintain popular support in the short and medium term but runs the risk of economic isolation and aggravation of popular grievances.

In Spain, the financial crisis and the implementation of austerity measures were followed by eroding trust in institutions and traditional political parties, and emerging strong social movements. From this context of high economic grievances and anti-establishment feelings, the radical left party Podemos rapidly emerged and achieved electoral success. However, as the economy recovered and the party was unable to renew or create a new identity for the dissatisfied, they lost support. Currently, Podemos is in coalition with the centre-left, and former members decided to leave the party and join other movements (RAMA, CORDERO, and ZAGÓRSKI, 2021).

In Greece, probably the country that suffers the most from the financial crisis, the centre-left saw its electoral support erode. The economic grievances allowed the emergence of extreme right movements such as the Golden Dawn, but the economic dissatisfaction was so spread over society that a collective identity on economic terms emerged much stronger, and the radical left party Syriza gained incredibly fast support. By showing determination in defending the Greek sovereignty from the economic power of the European Union, Syriza momentarily restored the lost dignity and pride of the people. However, the difficulty of challenging the economic liberal order became clear through the inability of the party to deliver its own promises of reversing austerity policies and fulfilling popular decision on referendums (TSATSANIS and TEPEROGLOU, 2016). By showing commitment in leading the country off the crisis in a responsible way, Syriza was able to maintain electoral support for some time, but in the long-term the moderation of its policies directed the party towards the centre, and it seems to be replacing PASOK as the main centre-left party. Consequently, Syriza continued to lose support, and the centre-right has returned to the government.

Radical left movements that decide to reinforce the anti-elite discourse while in power must continue to picture the elite as foreign countries and institutions that constantly harm the domestic economy. That is particularly easier to do in regions where the idea of long-term economic exploitation by foreign powers is well rooted in society, as in Latin America. The most notorious case is Venezuela, where Hugo Chavez, after surviving a coup attempt, increasingly presented himself as the representative of the Venezuelan people in opposition to a small elite who worked with foreign powers in imperialist projects of developed countries to exploit the local people. While taking many authoritarian measures, Chavez also invested a lot of public money in community councils and worker cooperatives that created the image that lower classes were included into decision making, providing some sense of empowerment and reinforcing the identity of the people (ELLNER, 2012). Although over the years the economic isolation and crisis reduced popular support for his government, his Bolivarian project still resists, even a decade after his death.

Similarly, Evo Morales in Bolivia mobilized the economic dissatisfied through a discourse on redistribution of resources and plans of nationalization of foreign industries. However, he also associated popular grievances with the long-term exploitation of the local indigenous people, constantly reinforcing his efforts for the “decolonization” of the country, which gives pride and voice to the previously marginalized people (HOWARD, 2010). After winning a controversial fourth mandate,

he was overthrown by a coup with the support of new radical right movements. However, the attempts of the radical right to associate the left with corruption, ambition, and people's economic grievances were not enough to beat the shared identity of the historically exploited natives, and Morales' party was elected once again.

INDIVIDUALIZED ECONOMIC GRIEVANCES: MULTI-DIRECTED ANGER

When inequality is relatively lower, social mobility is relative higher, and there is no severe economic crisis, it is very hard for radical left parties to mobilize people through the idea of top-down exploitation. However, it does not mean that many people do not have economic grievances and high perceptions of unfairness. The success of the radical left rhetoric has become, in fact, increasingly difficult because of the spread of the meritocratic discourse, which increases social competition. In this mindset, because people are promised to be rewarded for their contributions to society, the hopes for individual progress are greater than the shared identity of being exploited by an elite. So, the misfortune of the other is seen as being well deserved. Meritocracy can also be associated with the just-world hypothesis, a cognitive bias that makes us believe that people get what they deserve, which is more common in individuals with higher authoritarian and conservative preferences (LAMBERT, BURROUGHS, and NGUYEN, 1999).

As promises of meritocracy spread, more people compete for economic outcomes. But if the rewards do not come, perceptions of unfairness and anger increase. Moreover, if others are seen as being unfairly rewarded, those perceptions are boosted, particularly on those more likely to believe in the just-world hypothesis. Consequently, the anger created by the perception of unfairness loses its pure economic identity and gets redirected against those who are seen as overcompensated, despite their social position. Thus, those who are identified as receiving assistance and status without collaborating enough to society, which includes immigrants, refugees, and other minority groups, become the target of many dissatisfied people. That causes people from different levels of income to blame free-riders, making the emergence of a shared identity in the terms of top-down economic exploitation impossible.

Facing increasing precarity and no collective economic identity, many people individualize their economic dissatisfactions and look for other forms of identities that can increase the sense of stability and provide some pride. At the same time, new

identities are emerging and rapidly changing, being usually associated with minority groups that deserve compensation for historical exploitation. This compensation is seen by liberals as necessary exactly to create a fairer meritocratic order; that is, to achieve joint development, policies of inclusion must be promoted. However, as this idea pleases minorities, it also increases the perception of unfairness and anger on those who are part of cultural majority groups but have not enjoyed economic stability. This process has created a cleavage of dissatisfied conservative individuals that have seen in the authoritarian and nativist discourse of the radical right a source of stability and regain of pride. That happens mainly in developed countries with lower but increasing levels of inequality, but also in multicultural developing countries. For both cases, historically, the rejection of leftist policies, and corruption scandals seem to boost radical right support.

The relationship between people's economic dissatisfactions and the radical right economic policies is a dichotomy. Once individuals believe they should be better rewarded for their contributions to society, they welcome both direct economic help and increasing fairness in neoliberal meritocracy. As has been noted in the literature, the radical right party family does not always share similar platforms, differing particularly in their economic policies. As Mudde (2019) argues, while Western European far-right parties initially attracted members of the petite bourgeois and self-employed men who are dissatisfied with the mainstream right parties, their recent electoral success is a consequence of the "proletarianization" of their electorates, as a growing number of white workers increasingly felt abandoned and even betrayed by centre-left parties which embraced the market economy and promoted cosmopolitan values. Thus, it is not surprising that many radical right parties have adapted to the social demand for protection and redistribution (ENNSER-JEDENASTIK, 2018).

However, part of the radical right has maintained its traditional economic liberalism and continues to advocate for less taxes and interventionism. Although it seems contradictory at first glance, these parties have been able to justify economic liberalism through associating it to individual freedom and true meritocracy. According to this discourse, mainstream parties do not care about the people and waste public money in assistance for free riders or spend with themselves. Moreover, if the true hard-working people are being forgotten, cutting taxes is a fast way to increase the rewards for those who really contribute to society because it leaves people with more money. Similarly, tax cuts for companies are welcome for both

entrepreneurs and workers who expect that if companies pay less taxes, they will be able to hire more employees.

Yet, once radical right parties achieve electoral success, they also face the same populist dilemma that the radical left does. They cannot continue to blame the local political elite for popular dissatisfaction. On the one hand, because the focus of the radical right is on the cultural field, and so their promises are many times relatively more symbolic than the radical left's promises of fighting the financial system, they do not have many incentives to moderate their discourse. On the other hand, while for the radical left it is relatively easy to picture the elite as foreign powers who exploit the country, for the radical right it is more difficult to consolidate the idea that foreign actors undermine domestic political decision, causing these allegations to often become conspiracy theories.

That was particularly the case of Donald Trump. The United States has a strong culture of economic liberalism and meritocratic speech. Many Democrats, as Barak Obama, constantly reinforce that, in their country, anyone who tries can achieve success (BUKODI and GOLDTHORPE, 2021). However, inequality has been now increasing for decades, and evidence has been indicating that long-term economic and social decline, decreasing manufacturing employment, increasing trade exposure, and discrepancies between rural and urban spaces have been essential to Trump's election (AUTOR *et al.*, 2020; BROZ, FRIEDEN, and WEYMOUTH, 2021; RODRÍGUEZ-POSE, LEE, and LIPP, 2021).

As unfairness and social competition are high, Trump was elected by promoting a common identity for the economic dissatisfied, by blaming illegal immigrants for bringing crimes, China for cheating on trade, and international agreements for favouring foreign countries. In all these cases, the economic grievances of the hard-working American people were associated with the fact that others were being unfairly rewarded. To promote fairness, Trump promised not only to fight illegal immigration, be tough on China and renegotiate trade deals, but he also stated that after decreasing the top corporate tax rate, jobs would reappear, wages would go up, and the biggest winners would be the American workers¹. However, while during his government the economy growth rate was relatively high, the outcomes did not trickle down fast enough. Although few studies have been published on the causes of Trump's loss, it has been argued that he made exaggerated use of abstract and

¹ Speech in Indianapolis, Sep. 2017.

unprovable conspiracies to answer to popular worries regarding health and jobs (HART, 2022). Thus, while Trump discourse continues to mobilise millions of people through boosting nativism and promising economic results, his inability in providing the latter caused many people to change their vote and support the Democrats instead, causing him to lose the re-election.

Additionally, corruption can play an important role in justifying the economic liberalism of the radical right. After all, more taxes mean more money for the government to be wasted or stolen by the corrupt elite. This was an important factor for the election of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Previously, the centre-left Worker's Party won four consecutive presidential elections combining a series of social programs and developmentalist policies, which resulted in poverty reduction and economic growth. However, implemented initiatives such as racial quotas for college entrance and civil service exams always faced resistance from part of the middle and upper classes, who saw these policies as unfair. In the case of cash transfer programs to the poor, the fact that the Worker's Party have higher support in regions where higher percentage of people receive this aid contributed to spreading the idea that such policies were demagoguery or disguised vote buying. When the economy stagnated and a series of corruption scandals broke out, the trust on the establishment vanished. In 2017, incredible 97,5% of Brazilians believed that the country was governed by powerful groups for their own interest (LATINOBARÓMETRO, 2017). However, the economic grievances were not collectively shared, and the establishment to be punished became associated with the left. While the support for the Worker's Party continued to be higher among lower income groups, perceptions of unfairness and outrage spread through the middle class.

Despite being previously elected for the Congress for many years, Bolsonaro was able to present himself as the outsider who would restore economic growth by removing the corrupt leftists from the government. Because immigration in Brazil is low and the concept of nativism is unclear, being usually associated with the indigenous, the identity of the people was shaped around moral values, hard-work, and patriotism. Oppositely, the elite was framed as the corrupt red leftists who waste people's money in expensive restaurants, "buy" votes through cash transfer programs, and "defend" criminals. However, like Trump, Bolsonaro included in his agenda economic liberal policies that would boost the economy and leave more money to the hard-working people. His promised economic growth did not come, his controversial economic policy that favoured deforestation isolated him internationally, and he lost support. While Bolsonaro's conservatism and economic liberalism continue to attract the

upper class, his most fanatic supporters are mid-lower income groups who see themselves as deserving better economic rewards, as can be observed in the truckers' protests and Congress attack. Like Trump, while mid-lower income groups continue to support him, many people turned their vote back to the Workers' Party.

For both Trump and Bolsonaro, the idea that a foreign corrupt elite was acting against their governments was hard to be consolidated. In the case of Trump, the fact that the economy was growing made it difficult to blame China or international institutions for the fact that common people were struggling, and so his arguments sounded like conspiracies, and backfired. At the same time, Bolsonaro's conservatism, many times closer to Trump and the United States, made it difficult for him to argue that Brazil was being exploited by developed countries.

In Europe, however, two aspects facilitate the radical right rhetoric. First, the existence of the European Union allows the construction of the idea that an external elite is harming a country's sovereignty. Second, since the number of immigrants and refugees from culturally diverse places have been increasing, the local lower classes have also developed the idea that others are being unfairly rewarded. By promoting the idea that those migrants do not deserve to be there, radical right leaders increase their political base of support. This has a special appeal in the Central-East because of its relatively higher authoritarian preferences and greater rejection of leftist parties caused by its Communist past. If the exaggerated use of conspiracies seemed to be a problem for the re-election of Trump, the same has not happened with Viktor Orbán in Hungary. Although the country has low levels of immigration, he has been linking the entrance of immigrants and high costs of energy bills to malign plans of George Soros and of European bureaucrats to destroy Hungary. Yet, while greater economic results have not come yet, the efforts for the restructuration of the economy have given the perception of recovering the country's sovereignty and improving its meritocracy. As Sebók and Simons (2022) argue, the re-nationalization and then re-privatization of major banks create a new elite of national capitalists that allows Hungary to gain autonomy within a liberal European context. At the same time, the transition from welfare to workfare, along with pronatalist family policies, have bolstered the idea that the government helps those who are really deserving (SCHEIRING and SZOMBATI, 2020). Consequently, although Orbán's speech carries a strong nationalistic and anti-immigration appeal, Euroscepticism or anti-immigration attitudes seem not to explain the support for the FIDESZ party. Instead, economic satisfaction is a much better predictor for the radical right vote in Hungary (SCOGGINS, 2022).

Recently, however, there is a tendency for radical right parties to propose a ‘nativist’ response to economic grievances both in terms of welfare chauvinism and economic protectionism (OTJES *et al.*, 2018). In Poland, the Law and Justice party has promoted welfare policies and social spendings that have been an essential financial help to many low-income native families (SZCZERBIAK, 2019). More important, however, is that the social programs created have a symbolic effect: in face of the great frustration emerged from the post-communist economic transformations, Law and Justice was the first party to give clear financial help in large scale. Studies have also found that prior to Law and Justice’s election in 2015, individuals who got exposed to external economic shocks were more likely to demand social assistance, oppose the centre-right government, and support the opposition, which was able to properly organize these dissatisfied voters (AHLQUIST, COPELOVITCH, and WALTER, 2020). In this matter, Law and Justice increasingly radicalized, mobilizing its supporters mainly through a strong nationalist and religious discourse. Yet, their electoral success was boosted by corruption allegations and a scandal involving disgusting behaviours of the centre-right party Civic Platform politicians. That also helped Law and Justice to promote conspiracy theories about the plane crash that killed the former president Lech Kaczyński and other members of the government at the occasion. Once back to the government with a radical right discourse, Law and Justice promoted a series of authoritarian measures, such as interfering in the Judiciary Power, that have been criticized by the European Union. But this criticism is partially beneficial because it helps reinforce the idea of the existence of a foreign elite that acts against the country.

Although in Western European countries the population share stronger liberal and self-expression values, and so the opposition to conservative authoritarianism tends to be strong enough to limit their electoral success, radical right parties have been able to gain support through the same perception of unfairness of economic outcomes. Traditionally, economic grievances are associated with the far-left, but post-materialist preferences such as concerns regarding the environment and sustainable development have been playing a key role on far-left support and have been increasingly clashing with low-wage workers’ demands (VASILOPOULOS, BEAUDONNET, and CAUTRÈS, 2015). In France, when the yellow vests protests emerged against the liberal policies of Emmanuel Macron, who benefited from the polarization and mutual rejection of the far-left and -right, the protesters were denounced by many leftists as anti-environmentalists because of their demands for a lower fuel tax. Sharing great economic grievances but receiving criticism instead of

empathy, their unfairness became outrage, and many yellow vests decided to declare support for Marine Le Pen, who has become increasingly economically protective of low-wage workers (JETTEN, MOLS, and SELVANATHAN, 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

Although it has been hard to find evidence on the changing mindset of individuals, studies have been done approaching the psychology of the neoliberal paradigm and its consequences. In political science, it has been also possible to identify the ideological repositioning of political parties, especially the centre-left, which proportionated greater convergence on discourses and decisions, contributing to the growing perception of a political establishment that ignores popular preferences.

The discourse on meritocracy, with the promises of rewards for those who work hard, is especially important to the increasing popular dissatisfaction, but it divides the economic dissatisfied people if some are seen as unfairly being rewarded. Only when there is a spread idea that people are being collectively exploited is that the anger is directed exclusively towards the elite. Then, this one-way bottom-up dissatisfaction increases the perception of a collective identity of the exploited which can be more easily mobilised by the radical left, as in Greece and in many countries in Latin America, or they can even organize themselves to create new radical left movements, as in Spain.

However, while many people are struggling to improve their socio-economic situation, and as meritocratic promises and social competition increases, people see many others unfairly progressing. Thus, anger is propelled towards different directions, increasing anxieties. While the dissatisfaction towards elites is high, they also oppose lower income groups that receive special assistance or opportunities without deserving it. Although the final outcomes are perceived in economic aspects, this assistance from the government many times comes in cultural terms, as helping refugees and poor immigrants in Europe, or establishing racial quotas in employment and education in Latin America. This boosts the responses of the dissatisfied in traditional cultural terms. Afterall, because an identity on economic terms becomes unlikely to arise, the dissatisfied find pride and stability only in solid traditional identities, which the radical right promotes. In this sense, I argue that low social mobility might not be a good indicator of unfairness, because unfairness might increase exactly because of the perception that people from the bottom of society are moving up. Thus, the fact that social mobility is relatively high might contribute for

awakening perceptions of unfairness in many people, increasing the support for the radical right.

The fact that many times those who are seen as unfairly progressing in society are also seen in cultural terms, causes many analysts to overlook the psychological and economic trends that act behind this process. Indeed, because the social focus on the identities of minority groups is something relatively recent, the celebration of these new identities sometimes carries a sense of revenge for having been for long suppressed. Consequently, the reaction of those who identify themselves with traditional identities but are struggling to get their social rewards is often full of indignation and anger. After all, hard-working is usually associated with traditional values and so their whole way of life is perceived as being under threat.

In any case, as either radical left or right gain electoral support, they face the same dilemma. The increasing economic interdependence makes it almost impossible to fight the financial system and solve the economic issues, so they are unlikely to keep popular support through material results. To overcome this problem, many populists opt for reaffirming the populist concepts by blaming a foreign elite for the country's situation. That has been common for both radical left and right. Yet, because this strategy can be interpreted as a conspiracy theory, it is usually risky. To overcome this problem and maintain popular support, populists have opted for providing direct financial help to people. While this is a practice more traditionally related to the left, radical right parties have been increasingly in favour of assisting those in need. However, to meet the popular expectations and avoid being associated with unfairness, radical right leaders have been aiding mainly or only natives, whose deservedness can be related to cultural values as tradition and patriotism. While this turn towards assisting the natives makes more sense in European countries, the radical right in culturally diverse countries such as Brazil and the United States continue to promote economic liberal policies. Whether and how they can propose and associate welfare policies with their concept of people in the future remains unclear.

Although the arguments made in this paper are mainly theoretical, the case studies brought well exemplify the patterns and trends. The fact that the analyses are expanded to different parts of the West increases the relevance and applicability of the model, especially when the literature is highly focused on the European context. However, it also increases the complexity of the arguments, leaving short space for deeper analyses of each case and resulting in some simplifications. In any case,

further studies approaching perceptions of unfairness might elucidate the details of people's reaction to it and the consequences for rising populist parties.

I hope that this study can serve as a model for future research in the area, testing the arguments in more specific situations. Although the statements suggest how populists might be able to mobilize discontent, extending and consolidating their support, it can also be used by mainstream parties and other political actors to alleviate populist electoral success. While economic grievances are unlikely to be solved in the short or middle term, the increasing debate and awareness of the process have the potential to mitigate political fanaticism and polarization.

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