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Cultural Threats Versus Economic Insecurities: A Role-Playing Experiment on Supporting Populist Radical Discourses

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Supplementary Materials: Data, Materials [see Index of Supplementary Materials]

Abstract

Although some scholars have associated cultural threats with radical right support and economic insecurities with radical left support, it has also been highlighted that economic insecurities might drive support for radical right movements. This has created a debate in the literature between cultural threats and economic insecurities as the main drivers of radical right support. To help advance the debate, this study conducts a role-playing experiment in the United States (n = 609), Brazil (n = 594), and Italy (n = 600), testing the effects of cultural threats, economic insecurities, or the combination of both in support for radical left and right discourses. The results suggest that while economic insecurities increase support for the Radical Left (especially in Brazil), cultural threats increase support for the Radical Right. However, the latter effect is mainly driven by the combination of cultural threats with economic insecurities. Comparatively, cultural threats alone increase support for centrist parties instead (especially in the U.S.). The findings challenge anti-immigration as a single explanation for the success of the Radical Right and suggest that radical parties may depend more on their ability to link economic and cultural grievances than on either factor alone.

Keywords

populism, inequality, immigration, radical right, radical left, anti-establishment

Non-Technical Summary

Background

Political dissatisfaction and anti-establishment sentiment are currently widespread across much of the world, particularly in the Western hemisphere. This discontent has been linked to rapid cultural change and increasing economic insecurity. At the same time, populist radical movements, particularly those on the radical right, have grown in popularity in many countries in recent years. Some researchers argue that people turn to radical right movements because they feel that their culture or way of life is under threat, for instance due to immigration or changing social norms. It has also been suggested that economic struggles, such as job insecurity and financial instability, push people towards the radical left. However, it has also been suggested that these economic struggles contribute to pushing people towards the radical right, too.

Why was this study done?

This study was conducted to investigate the impact of cultural threats and economic insecurities on support for radical left- and right-wing movements. Our aim was to establish whether it is one of these factors or a combination of both that plays

a greater role in pushing people towards the radical left or right. This could help explain why certain political groups gain support in the face of growing political dissatisfaction and inform policymakers on how to address societal divisions.

What did the researchers do and find?

We conducted a study involving over 1,800 participants in total across three countries: the United States, Brazil and Italy. Participants were placed in different scenarios in which they had to imagine facing cultural threats (e.g. concerns about immigration or cultural change), economic insecurities (e.g. increasing inequality and financial instability), or both. They were then asked about their support for radical left, radical right, or centrist political views. The key findings were that the radical left received greater support when there were economic insecurities, especially in Brazil, that centrist parties received greater support when there were cultural threats alone, particularly in the United States, and that the radical right received greater support only when there was a combination of cultural threats and economic insecurities. This suggests that radical right-wing movements succeed not just by opposing immigration or cultural change, but by linking these issues to economic hardship.

What do these findings mean?

These results challenge the common assumption that opposition to immigration alone explains the rise of the radical right. While radical left movements thrive when there are economic insecurities, the radical right thrives when economic insecurities coexist with cultural threats. Therefore, policymakers and political leaders should promote policies that tackle economic inequality in order to reduce popular support for both the radical left and right and, consequently, political polarisation. For the public, these findings emphasise the interaction between economic and cultural concerns in shaping political views. Recognising this connection can help people to better understand why certain political movements gain traction, and how different societal issues influence voting behaviour.

Political dissatisfaction and anti-establishment preferences are currently high across much of the world, particularly in the Western hemisphere (Ipsos, 2022). In response, radical parties have been employing populist rhetoric to mobilize dissatisfied voters according to their own explanations and proposed solutions for this dissatisfaction. This rhetoric may not only reflect existing dissatisfaction but also contribute to its intensification by blaming the political establishment for various problems. In this sense, populism has been defined as a thin-centred ideology that can combine with other ideologies, such as socialism on the left or nationalism on the right (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

Recently, we have seen the global financial crisis boosting populist radical left (PRL) movements in countries that suffered from austerity measures, such as Spain and Greece. Conversely, the refugee crisis a few years later facilitated the electoral success of many populist radical right (PRR) parties across Europe. A traditional understanding associates fighting inequality with the left, and ignoring, supporting, or justifying inequality with the right (Bobbio, 1997); so recent attempts to explain motivations behind the rise of radical movements proposed that economic insecurities lent support to the PRL (Beaudonnet & Gomez, 2017; Ramiro & Gomez, 2017), but cultural threats (e.g., fears of immigration) lent support to the PRR (Daenekindt et al., 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2018). However, studies also highlight that economic insecurities might be playing an important role behind radical right support too (Engler & Weisstanner, 2020; Han, 2016; Rodrik, 2018), initiating a debate in the literature between cultural threats and economic insecurities as the main cause of the rising PRR.

Although much research has been done to elucidate this debate, two main aspects have been overlooked. First, most research on the individual level of the demand side (i.e., reasons for people to support the PRR) used surveys like the European Social Survey or the Eurobarometer, which, despite their great contributions to the field, limit researchers to the questions included, in addition to geographical limitations. Similarly, although experiments have explored the interaction of immigration and redistributive preferences (Alesina et al., 2023; Magni, 2024), how media frames influence support for populist leaders (Hameleers et al., 2018; Rooduijn et al., 2021), and on individuals' perceptions of PRR parties (Harteveld et al., 2019), experimental research exploring individuals' political preferences as reactions to varying social realities could not be found by the authors.

A second gap is that although PRR parties have been achieving electoral success in Europe, North America, and Latin America, there is a lack of experimental cross-regional research on right-wing populism. Comparative studies

among the regions have been approaching populism as a whole (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020), usually linking conservative forms of populism to Europe and progressive forms to Latin America (Brown, 2020; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). Among recent exceptions, there are comparative case studies on the global resurgence of the right (Doval & Souroujon, 2021) and efforts to include the South American radical right in the main definitions of the field (Kestler, 2022). But comparisons between the drivers of support for the PRR discourse in regions with different social realities have been under-researched. Thus, this study helps advance the debate over the effects of cultural threats and economic insecurities on populist radical support by introducing an original experiment conducted in the U.S., Brazil, and Italy.

The Populist Radical Right and Left

Populists divide society into a morally superior *pure people* and a *corrupt elite*, rejecting concepts of liberal democracy in favour of direct forms of representation. In this way, they differ not only from elitist extreme movements that reject democracy entirely, but also from pluralist, centrist parties that view diversity as a strength (Moffitt, 2020; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Accordingly, research has found that individuals who endorse populist attitudes tend to believe the world is difficult to control and potentially unfair, leading them to embrace alternative solutions (Jami & Kemmelmeier, 2021). Cross-country analysis suggests that both economic distress and cultural backlash are good predictors of populist ideology (Manunta et al., 2025), while evidence suggests that those are mediated by status-based identity threat and feelings of social exclusion, respectively (Manunta et al., 2022).

Although it has been argued that in Western Europe populism has been associated mainly with the radical right (Mudde, 2007), Rooduijn and Akkerman (2017) have shown that populism is associated with both left and right radicalism, rather than left or right position. According to the authors, during the past decades, radical parties in both left- and right-wing have become people-centrist and anti-elitist, inclining themselves towards populism and differentiating themselves only in ideological terms. Defined by populism, authoritarianism, and nativism (a combination of nationalism and xenophobia), the PRR rallies against immigration and often accuses the perceived global elite of promoting "cultural Marxism" (Mudde, 2019). Conversely, the PRL is typically characterized by a critical view of capitalism, private property, and profit incentives (Fagerholm, 2017), as well as advocacy for environmental policies beyond that of social democratic or right-wing parties (Wang & Keith, 2020). Thus, it accuses banks, big corporations and other economically privileged actors of favouring their profit at the expense of workers and the environment.

While this study presents the populist content to reproduce realistic discourses, its main focus is on the ideological differences between radical left and radical right ideas. Throughout the research, we use the acronyms "PRR" (populist radical right) and "PRL" (populist radical left) when referring to the supply side - political actors and their discourses and platforms. Conversely, we maintain the terms "radical left" and "radical right" when discussing the demand side (i.e., support or supporters) or the underlying ideological concepts themselves.

Cultural Threats Versus Economic Insecurities

Cultural Threats

Mudde (2019) argues that because radical right voters share culturally conservative preferences while having different income levels, the success of these parties can be explained by dissatisfaction regarding the culture, not the economy. In the literature, this cultural approach is usually built around social identity theory, which highlights that people tend to associate with those with whom cultural traits are shared, in opposition to different *others* (Fearon, 1999).

Research has associated low openness to experience (Butler, 2000), lack of interpersonal trust (Heller et al., 2022), the belief that the characteristics of groups are unchangeable (Kahn et al., 2018) and preferences for tradition, order, and stability (Jost et al., 2008) with right-wing conservatism and authoritarianism. According to this point of view, the main explanation for the rise in support for the radical right is that since the 1970s, the world has undergone a silent revolution that has changed the way society is organized. This shift from materialist to post-materialist values is generated by different social factors such as generational replacement, access to higher education, urbanization,

growing gender equality, and greater ethnic diversity. In this understanding, support for PRR parties is primarily a cultural backlash from those who resist such changes (Norris & Inglehart, 2018).

Among the core aspects of the PRR, nativism is defined as the combination of nationalism and xenophobia (Mudde, 2019). In the face of broader cultural transformations, the notion that individuals must protect local identities and create secure, integrated communities can generate anxieties and fears of the *other* – those perceived as threatening the national culture, traditional lifestyles, and moral values that undergird society (Zaslove, 2004). Research has highlighted several key aspects of the radical right: they value and rally around the traditional family structure, which is often viewed through the lenses of class, race, and patriarchy, as a source of stability during uncertain times (Bjork-James, 2020); they present themselves as defenders of Christianity against a growing Muslim presence (Schwörer & Romero-Vidal, 2020); and their success can be explained by nationalist beliefs (Lubbers & Coenders, 2017).

Because expansive cultural changes in society unfold over the long term and are difficult to combat directly, many anxious individuals in developed countries turn against easy targets such as immigrants. Research has found that radical right support correlates more strongly with perceptions of immigration than with actual numbers of foreign-born citizens (Stockemer, 2016) and with perceived cultural threats than with perceived economic threats posed by immigrants (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012). Furthermore, evidence suggests that populist right parties perform better in elections when mobilizing grievances over immigration rather than over economic changes or political elitism and corruption (Ivarsflaten, 2008), especially when linking immigration to criminality and social unrest rather than competition for jobs and aid (Rydgren, 2008).

However, while anti-immigration represents just one type of cultural anxiety, the literature has largely overlooked the existence of PRR leaders who do not promote anti-immigration as a national issue. Although Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil has expressed support for Donald Trump's anti-immigration policies and argued that most immigrants do not have good intentions[1], he also highlighted that most refugees in Brazil are Venezuelans who are well received for being "escapees" from a "Communist dictatorship"[2]. Thus, because in Brazil anti-Communism has a much greater appeal than anti-immigration, Bolsonaro has chosen to focus on the former instead of the latter. Surely, the PRR in Brazil has a powerful cultural appeal, and its supporters clearly oppose identity politics and policies that favour minorities (Rennó, 2020), but immigration does not play a role in Brazilian PRR discourse or popular support.

Economic Insecurities

An alternative explanation for the radical right's support comes from the idea that changes in the social-economic structure of society are putting many people in a precarious situation, including a lack of predictability, security, and material or psychological well-being (Azmanova, 2020; Rodrik, 2018). According to this approach, instead of cultural threats, the success of the PRR is a backlash to the harmful effects that liberal economic policies and free trade have on local populations, creating "left behind", dissatisfied voters (Ford & Goodwin, 2014; Walter, 2021). This point of view is usually supported by relative deprivation theory, which argues that people tend to engage in political violence when there are psychological frustrations that originate within the gap (i.e., income, justice, status, or privilege) between what people believe they deserve and what they actually get (Gurr, 1970).

In this context, globalization is seen as an uneven process, built on asymmetrical foundations, in which global trade agreements and regulations have been constructed according to the needs of capital so that investors receive immediate satisfaction while workers must wait for benefits to trickle down (Rodrik, 2018). Globalization has also intensified the shift from manufacturing to service sector jobs, increasing urbanization and the discrepancies between metropolises and the countryside, causing those who are being "left behind" to be more likely to support the PRR (Broz et al., 2021; Margalit, 2019).

Additionally, the neoliberal ideology of meritocracy plays an important role by promoting the notion that economic outcomes are inherently fair. This implies that any financial misfortune or need for assistance is due to individual failings, which can induce a sense of shame (Dardot & Laval, 2013). Consequently, individuals seek meaning and

1) Interview to Fox News in 2019.

2) Speech on the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2021.

self-esteem through identities that do not involve economic competition, such as nation, ethnicity, and religion. By repressing shame, the fear and insecurity stemming from economic hardship are transformed into anger, which is then directed towards perceived threats to these stable identities (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017).

Whereas the cultural threat approach emphasizes cultural threats as the primary driver of PRR support, the economic insecurities approach views cultural threats as a broader consequence. In the latter view, the root causes of PRR support stem more from the effects of rising inequality under neoliberal policies. In other words, while anxieties over cultural changes may play a role, the greater impetus for the PRR's success lies in the economic insecurities generated by increasing inequality and the failures of neoliberalism. Research has associated inequality with decreasing happiness and the feeling that society is fair (Oishi et al., 2011), decreasing confidence and sense of community in life (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009), and increasing anxieties in both the poor and the rich (Jetten et al., 2017). It is also found that in unequal countries, people tend to be more anxious over status and fearful about others' interest in their jobs (Layte & Whelan, 2014). Thus, rather than being entirely about people's own economic situation, inequality is a sociotropic issue, harming the community's wellbeing, and associated with the thesis of social breakdown and the need for a strong leader to promote order (Sprong et al., 2019).

There is no consensus on how inequality affects different income groups' support for PRR politics, but scholars seem to agree that inequality increases radical right support among some groups. Han (2016) has shown that income inequality encourages the poor while discouraging the rich from voting for the PRR. Engler and Weisstanner (2020) find that rising income inequality increases the likelihood of individuals with high subjective social status and lower-middle incomes supporting the PRR. And Burgoon et al. (2019) find that individuals who experience relatively lower income growth than the poorest tend to support the PRR.

The Combination of Cultural Threats and Economic Insecurities

A third group of researchers has argued that cultural threats or economic insecurities alone cannot explain the rise of the PRR, and only the combination of both is a reliable predictor of radical right support (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020). This approach originates from "producerist" ideology, which argues that the "hard-working" taxpayers need to be freed from the economic burdens imposed by self-serving "free-riders" (Rathgeb, 2021). Because the idea of free-riding carries moral weight, the radical right distinguishes the undeserving *others* from the authentic *people* by appealing to cultural differences within the population, defending the interests of the hardworking and not necessarily the interests of the undeserving poor (Stockemer et al., 2018). Thus, such approach is explained by the intergroup competition theory, which argues that when group distinctions become noticeable and collective social mobility is possible, individuals link material and identity needs. This connection leads to intergroup competition for material resources, subsequently generating prejudices (Allport, 1954).

In countries with higher levels of immigration, the undeserving free rider is commonly associated with immigrants. In such cases, the radical right has mobilised both cultural and economic dissatisfaction by accusing immigrants of not sharing the hard-working values of the locals and, therefore, being a burden to the country. In the literature, it has been highlighted that immigration is a multi-faceted issue, and opposition to immigration may also come from direct economic dissatisfactions that inspire nativist reactions from locals. This explanation posits that economic precarity makes people more anxious and competitive for resources and job opportunities, explaining aversion to the arrival of immigrants by the labour market competition hypothesis (Bolet, 2020). Because the arrival of immigrants and the consequent decreasing demand for labour causes unemployment and lower wages, a higher number of immigrants creates competition between locals and non-locals for jobs and social assistance, originating the ethnic competition theory as a specific kind of intergroup competition (Rydgren & Ruth, 2011). Evidence for the ethnic competition theory has indicated that in countries where natives are more qualified than immigrants, qualified individuals tend to support immigration, while they tend to be against it in countries where natives and immigrants have a similar level of professional qualifications (Mayda, 2006). Similarly, support for immigrants tends to be greater in periods of economic growth and in sectors that are on the rise, so the arrival of non-natives is interpreted as beneficial for production, in contrast to the low support among natives who are part of sectors that are in decline (Dancygier & Donnelly, 2013).

However, the combination of cultural threats and economic insecurities does not necessarily include immigration. Although the literature on the cultural threats behind radical right support has focused on anti-immigration sentiment,

this approach is challenged by the fact that the PRR has achieved success in countries where PRR leaders rarely if ever engage in anti-immigration appeals. In such countries, the undeserving "free rider" is linked to subsets of fellow nationals (e.g., the poor, melanated). In this sense, the idea that people in the south of Italy or in the northeast of Brazil are lazy goes along with the argument that it is unfair to relocate resources from more developed areas (from "hard-working people") to others with relatively lower social indicators (to "free-riders"). This is particularly the case in Brazil, where during a severe economic recession, Bolsonaro built his campaign against the internal enemy *vagabundo*, a term referring either to a person who does not work hard or to a criminal, and that he has also used to frame activists, feminists, LGBTQI+ people, and *others* (Pinheiro-Machado & Scalco, 2020). Accordingly, studies have shown that Bolsonaro supporters are more likely to oppose cash transfer programs and racial quotas (Rennó, 2020).

Thus, although the combination of economic and cultural dissatisfaction is usually presented through the competition between locals and immigrants, anti-immigration sentiment can be also explained by the perception that *the others* do not deserve to share the economic rewards of *the people*, and so this competition is not necessarily defined in ethnic terms. Thus, social assistance and good job positions should be only for those who really deserve it, who have been working and paying taxes for a long time, and who share the constructed identity of *the people* (Attewell, 2021; Hoggett et al., 2013). In other words, across many countries, radical right supporters oppose perceived free-riders more than they oppose immigrants *qua* immigrants; but in some countries (e.g., in North America and Western Europe), immigrants are seen as the most prominent group of perceived free-riders.

Hypotheses

Following the three main explanations for the recent electoral success of the PRR, if the social identity theory-based explanation is most accurate, support for PRR parties is mainly a cultural backlash from those who resist changes in the national culture, social values, religion, and ethnicity. In this case, radical parties mobilise dissatisfied voters according to their main discourse topic: the promotion of cultural identity on the right and the fight against inequality on the left. Then, cultural threats would cause higher support for PRR discourse, reflecting preferences for supporting traditional values and nativism. Accordingly, if cultural threats lead to increased support for the PRR because of the promotion of traditional values, then economic insecurities would lead to support for the PRL because of the promise of more redistributive preferences.

In countries where immigration is a widely debated issue, as in the U.S. and Italy, cultural threats are usually associated with the idea that immigrants and refugees are unwilling to assimilate into the local culture and so have been changing traditional values. In the case of Brazil, where immigration is not an issue, cultural threats are usually associated with moral relativism, minority rights, and political correctness, which also have been changing traditional values. Thus, the condition of cultural threats was adapted according to the countries. In the case of economic insecurities, which are usually associated with high economic inequality despite other geographic and social aspects, major adaptations for the three countries were not necessary.

> **H1:** (a) support for radical right discourse is higher with cultural threats than with only economic insecurities, while (b) support for radical left discourse is higher with economic insecurities than with only cultural threats.

Yet, if the relative deprivation theory is most accurate, and the support for PRR parties is mainly a backlash to the harmful effects that liberal economic policies, free trade, and the meritocratic discourse have on the local population, then the existence of economic insecurities would cause higher support for the PRR discourse compared to situations with no economic problems. In this case, in all three countries, income inequality would increase anxieties over status, social competition, and overall unhappiness. That would lead to increasing anti-establishment preferences, causing people to support PRR parties that promise to promote order and reestablish national control over the economy, providing a sense of identity and pride through traditional values. Solely cultural threats would then have little effect on support for PRR discourse.

> **H2:** support for radical right discourse is higher with economic insecurities, compared to only cultural threats.

Alternatively, it might be that the support for PRR parties is a combination of cultural threats and economic insecurities, which causes people to be more anxious and competitive for resources and job opportunities, and oppose those seen as undeserving of social assistance or good jobs. If that is the case, the combination of increasing cultural threats (immigration in the U.S. and Italy, and minority rights and politically correctness in Brazil) and increasing inequality would increase support for PRR parties compared to scenarios featuring only cultural threats or only economic insecurities.

In the case of Brazil, where immigration is not an issue, that is associated with the intergroup competition theory and the perception of the existence of lazy local free riders who are a burden to society. In this case, people would support PRR discourse due to its focus on meritocracy and fairness towards hard-working people. However, in countries where immigration is an issue, such as the U.S. and Italy, that can be specifically linked to the ethnic competition theory and the fear that immigrants will cause an even higher demand for labour, resulting in unemployment and decreasing wages. In this case, people would support a PRR discourse because of a combination of anti-immigration sentiment and economic nativism, protecting the locals against external economic shocks.

> **H3:** support for the radical right discourse is higher when there is a combination of cultural threats and economic insecurities, compared to only economic insecurities or only cultural threats.

Method

Case Selection

To test the three hypotheses, a role-playing experiment was conducted with respondents in the U.S., Brazil, and Italy. Although these three countries differ in their geographical location and systems of government (two-party presidential system, multi-party presidential system, and multi-party parliamentary system, respectively), the three countries have recently witnessed a surge in the popularity of anti-establishment discourses, with PRR leaders elected on a strong anti-left discourse. Economically, the US has twice the GDP per capita of Italy and eight times that of Brazil, but Italy is a more equal country compared to the US and especially Brazil[3]. Culturally, the US and Brazil are more multi-ethnic than Italy. However, anti-immigration sentiment is a prevalent political theme in both the U.S. and Italy, where immigrants comprise 15.28% and 10.56% of their populations, respectively. In contrast, Brazil, with just 0.51% of immigrants, experiences virtually no anti-immigration sentiment[4]. Thus, although the three countries have recently elected radical populist leaders, they vary in many social aspects.

Experiment Design

Role-playing experiments are defined as "a range of activities characterized by involving participants in 'as-if' or 'simulated' actions and circumstances" and have been "widely used within research and applied psychology" (Yardley-Matwiejczuk, 1997, p. 1). In the experiment, participants were asked to imagine themselves as citizens of a fictional country called *Arunia*. Although the choice of creating a fictional country instead of using the real nation of the participants may reduce emotional engagement, there are relevant advantages to this strategy. It potentially eliminates previous knowledge and biases about real countries, reducing country-specific contextual effects and allowing precise control over the specific treatments[5].

After a short introduction about the country, including a map and flag, the participants were randomly divided into three groups and given three treatments. In each group, *Arunia* was presented as facing rapid changes. For the first group, levels of immigration/cultural change were low, but income inequality was increasing fast, and the richest 1% owned 50% of the country's wealth, while many people were unemployed or receiving low wages. For the second group,

3) According to the World Bank, in 2023 the GDP per capita was US$81,695 in the U.S., US$37,373 in Italy and US$10,044 in Brazil, while Gini Index is 34.8 in Italy, 41.3 in the U.S., and 52 in Brazil.

4) According to the World Population Review, 2024.

5) See Supplementary Material – Study Material for more details about the role-playing method (Sudbrack & Beattie, 2025S-b).

the levels of income inequality were low, but culture was changing fast. To better fit the reality of each country where the experiment is made, the cultural treatment was adapted. For the experiment in the U.S. and Italy, participants were informed that immigration was increasing rapidly and 15% of the population was composed of immigrants and refugees who often struggled to adapt to the local language, religion, and overall culture. For Brazil, where immigration is not an issue or a topic often present in PRR discourse, participants were informed that local tradition is being questioned by social activism and cultural revisionism. Finally, for the third group of respondents, *Arunia* was facing a combination of both increasing cultural threats and inequality, having the combination of the descriptions of the first two treatments.

For each treatment, participants were told that *Arunia* has been a peaceful and democratic country for over a century, but that life is becoming more unstable, and that increasing dissatisfaction has led to protests. The character also read in a newspaper about the specific problem the country is facing, causing them to remember recent experiences they had, of posts on social media, a discussion with their boss, and conversations with friends and family, all according to each treatment group (reinforcing increasing immigration/cultural change, inequality, or the combination of both)[6].

After reading the information provided, participants were asked to imagine receiving the political platforms of the three main political parties for an upcoming election. The platforms are associated with a PRL, PRR, or mainstream centrist discourse – representing the most common political narratives in the relevant national contexts. Additionally, the respondents were asked to choose one party to vote for: PRL, PRR, or a centrist party. This question uses a different method to measure political preferences by presenting specific proposals on various topics. Due to limitations in focus and size, this measurement and its associated results and discussion are not covered in depth in the main body of the manuscript, but are addressed in more detail in the Supplementary Materials (Sudbrack & Beattie, 2025S-b).

The study did not include manipulation checks to measure the specific level at which respondents developed anxieties or grievances. Instead, the research focused on the consequences of such perceived threats and insecurities on the participants' political preferences. Yet, an attention-check question was included to ensure that the respondents were participating seriously in the experiment[7]. Extremely fast responses (i.e., those who finished the experiment in less than 3 minutes), and straight-lining participants, who ostensibly did not pay enough attention to the material, were also excluded.

Dependent Variables Content

The PRL platform argues that the global economic system harms workers and the national economy, proposing to address this by taxing the ultra-wealthy and making large public investments in green energy – policy positions commonly associated with the PRL (Wang & Keith, 2020). Regarding the populist aspect, the platform contends that the ultra-wealthy have corrupted politics and the media, and thus the people must fight back against this elite class. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of international cooperation with other countries.

The PRR platform argues that a corrupt global elite has been harming the national economy and cultural identity. The proposed solution is to strictly enforce immigration laws and reduce ties with international institutions, renegotiating unfavourable trade deals. Regarding the populist aspect, the platform contends that this global elite controls traditional politicians and political parties, and thus the people demand strong leadership to restore national sovereignty. In contrast to the left-wing populist emphasis on international worker solidarity, the PRR platform adopts a nationalist orientation with greater appeal in the national context. For the Brazil-specific version of the PRR platform, immigration is not a central focus, as it is less of an issue in that country's context. Instead, it accuses the global elite of using topics like climate change to undermine national development, while also claiming that corrupt politicians deploy moral relativism and political correctness to attack free speech.

The presence of terms like "global elite" and "strong leadership" in the PRR platform, but not the PRL version, reflects real-world trends. In the literature, there is ongoing debate about the definition of PRL parties, as the anti-establishment aspect of radical left movements is often defined in economic rather than in moral terms, causing recent high-profile

6) See Supplementary Material – Study Material for complete treatment material in each country (Sudbrack & Beattie, 2025S-b).

7) A multiple-choice question was presented with aspects related to the experiment as alternatives (i.e., economy, culture, etc.) Then, in a long question statement, participants were asked to proceed without selecting any alternative. Participants who selected any alternative were excluded from the experiment.

PRL figures like Bernie Sanders and parties like *Podemos* and *Syriza* being questioned regarding their populist credentials (Bortun, 2023; Müller, 2017). While some PRL movements do fit the theoretical requirements, this research opted to soften the PRL discourse, reflecting the lack of such big "fully" PRL actors in the three countries analysed.

The centrist platform advocates reducing government regulations and taxes, arguing that free trade is the best policy for economic growth. The platform also addresses the issues raised by the PRL and PRR platforms. Regarding climate change, it defends market-based principles as the solution. On immigration, it offers a path to citizenship while enforcing existing laws (in the Brazil-specific version, it emphasizes fighting crime through responsible, dialogic approaches). Importantly, the centrist platform contends that radicalism on both the left and right wings poses a dangerous threat[8].

Measures

After reading the specific treatment material they received, including the upcoming election, the respondents were asked to rate the three different political platforms according to their opinion – PRL, PRR, and centre – on a scale from 0 (very bad) to 10 (very good). The final question analysing vote intention is a one-choice question with specific proposals and a party logo for each party. Additionally, our questionnaire included at the end of the experiment questions about the participants. Ideology is measured on a 5-point scale from "very left-wing/liberal", "left-wing/liberal", "moderate", "right-wing/conservative" and "very right-wing/conservative". Political media consumption is a 5-point scale from less than one hour a day to more than 6 hours reading, listening or watching political media. Gender is coded as 1 for male, 2 for female and 3 for others. The income scale is based on the reality of each country, rather than levelling income across countries. In the US it ranges from under $20,000 to over $200,000; in Brazil from under R$14,500 to over R$204,000, and in Italy from under €9,000 to over €72,000 per year. Education is measured on a seven-point scale from "no formal education" to "doctorate" – or the country's equivalent. The question about ethnicity included many options but is coded as 1 for white/Caucasian and 2 for others. And because research has pointed out an urban-rural divide in support for the populist radical right (Rickardsson, 2021), we included a question on area of residence. The five-point scale includes "rural", "small city", "medium city", "suburban", and "large city". The age of the respondents is also included.

Participants

Due to the lack of comparable research to provide a reliable expected effect size, we estimated an effect size of .25 for our analysis. To achieve a power of .95, a total of 400 participants was determined to be necessary using ANCOVA[9]. However, considering the potential variability of effect sizes across different countries, we collected data from 600 participants per country on average. The dataset is a convenience sample collected from a survey provider (Prodege), being composed of 1,803 participants, including 609 in the U.S., 594 in Brazil, and 600 in Italy. To avoid entrenched partisan views, this study examined respondents with low or moderate political interest, as highly engaged individuals tend to reinforce their beliefs through selective media exposure, while "swing voters" show greater flexibility (Schemer, 2012; Taber et al., 2008)[10].

Results

Combined Analysis

Because there is no control condition, to investigate the effect of the treatments while controlling for ideology, exposure to political media, and demographic characteristics, three linear regressions were conducted, one for each political

8) See Supplementary Material – Study Material for political parties' platforms in each country (Sudbrack & Beattie, 2025S-b).

9) According to software G*Power.

10) For descriptive statistics and more information about the participants see Supplementary Material – Participant Profiles (Sudbrack & Beattie, 2025S-b).

discourse rating as a dependent variable (PRL, centre, and PRR). Although the choice to use a fictional country potentially reduces country effects, the social contexts in which respondents live and the adjustments made in the experiment are likely to affect responses, so country was added as a categorical variable. For the treatments, a scale was created coding the treatment with both cultural threats and economic insecurities as 1, only economic insecurities as 2 and only cultural threats as 3. By performing a linear regression with this treatment variable as categorical, we have the treatment with both cultural threats and economic insecurities as the base level for comparison. Thus, the results of having only economic insecurities should be interpreted in comparison to having both cultural threats and economic insecurities, i.e. the effect of removing cultural threats from the treatment with both conditions. Table 1 shows the full results of the regression analyses with standardized variables.

Table 1

Linear Regression on the Effect of Treatments in Support for Radical Left, Centre, and Radical Right Platforms

Variable	Radical Left	Centre	Radical Right
Cultural Threats and Economic Insecurities Combined	–	–	–
Only Cultural Threats	-0.072** (-2.73)	0.059* (2.21)	-0.042 (-1.62)
Only Economic Insecurities	-0.014 (-0.53)	-0.020 (-0.77)	-0.057* (-2.18)
Ideology (Left to Right)	-0.195*** (-8.37)	0.127*** (5.46)	0.247*** (10.76)
Political Media Consumption	-0.009 (-0.40)	0.038 (1.64)	0.066** (2.87)
Age	-0.014 (-0.58)	0.017 (0.71)	0.023 (0.95)
Gender (male or female)	0.006 (0.25)	-0.086*** (-3.74)	-0.037 (-1.66)
Income	0.057* (2.16)	0.085** (3.18)	0.049 (1.86)
Education Level	0.041 (1.49)	0.034 (1.25)	-0.077** (-2.82)
Ethnicity (white or not)	0.006 (0.24)	0.024 (0.97)	0.047 (1.89)
Area of Residence	0.009 (0.35)	0.035 (1.41)	0.049* (2.01)
US	–	–	–
Brazil	0.119*** (4.03)	0.109*** (3.69)	0.129*** (4.40)
Italy	0.173*** (6.18)	0.183*** (6.53)	0.174*** (6.28)
F	12.87	12.51	17.55
R^2	0.080	0.078	0.105
Adjusted R^2	0.073	0.071	0.099
N	1798	1798	1798

Note. Cultural threats and economic insecurities combined as references basis for treatment. U.S. as reference basis for country. t statistics in parentheses. Standardized variables.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

The results indicate that cultural threats alone have a significant effect on increasing support for the mainstream centre platform while reducing support for the PRL. From the opposite perspective, adding economic insecurities to cultural threats decreases support for the centrist and increases support for the PRL platform. Additionally, having only economic insecurities reduces support for PRR discourse. In other words, adding cultural threats to economic insecurities increases support for the PRR. The results give strength to H1 a and b while rejecting H2.

Investigating the effect of other variables, self-reported ideology is associated with higher support for the PRL and PRR platform, accordingly, with the centrist discourse also associated with more conservative beliefs. The association of political media consumption with higher support for the PRR discourse suggests that participants' media diets are dominated by conservative discourses and are likely to influence people to support right-wing ideas. Being male is associated with higher support for the centrist platform[11], while higher levels of income increase support for radical left

11) Because self-reported "others" constitute only 0.22% of the total sample, they are not included in the regressions and gender is treated as binary variable.

and centrist ideas and lower educational level increases support for the radical right. Curiously, living in bigger cities is associated with increasing support for the PRR.

Because this method does not allow comparisons between only economic insecurities and only cultural threats, an additional strategy was adopted. Linear regressions were also conducted with a dummy variable with the treatments of only economic insecurities and only cultural threats, not taking into consideration the combination of both. The results indicate that economic insecurities increase support for the PRL (β = .061, p = .030, 95% CI [0.03, 0.58]; model F(11, 1208) = 8.88, p < .001), cultural threats increase support for the centrist platform (β = -.087, p = .002, 95% CI [-0.66, -0.15]; model F(11, 1208) = 9.06, p < .001), and there is no increasing support for the PRR (β = -.018, p = .519, 95% CI [-0.41, 0.20]; model F(11, 1208) = 12.78, p < .001)[12]. Thus, the results suggest that the increasing support for the PRR is mainly driven by the combination of both cultural threats and economic insecurities (supporting H3). In other words, although there is a statistically significant effect when comparing only economic insecurities with both economic insecurities and cultural threats, the differences between only cultural threats and both cultural threats and economic insecurities are also relevant.

Country Analysis

Because the treatments were adapted according to each country's social reality, especially in the case of Brazil, the same models were replicated for each country separately[13]. The pattern of economic insecurities suggesting increasing support for the PRL and cultural threats suggesting increasing support for the PRR is consistent across countries, but our studies may have been underpowered to detect all the effects individually. The effects of economic insecurities are particularly high and significant in increasing support for the PRL in Brazil (β = .111, p = .019, 95% CI [-1.11, -0.10]; model F(9, 390) = 3.98, p < .001). In other words, having only cultural threats reduces support for the PRL. Similarly, the effect of having only cultural threats in increasing support for the centrist platform is statistically significant in the U.S. (β = .126, p = .007, 95% CI [0.17, 1.06]; model F(9, 397) = 3.05, p = .001). In other words, the presence of economic insecurities reduces support for the centre. Additionally, lower levels of education are associated with higher support for the PRR in Brazil (β = .146, p = .001, 95% CI [-0.60, -0.15]; model F(9, 390) = 4.29, p < .001) and in the U.S (β = .173, p < .001, 95% CI [-0.66, -0.22]; model F(9, 397) = 8.25, p < .001). In Brazil, men rate the centrist discourse higher (β = .088, p = .034, 95% CI [-0.81, -0.32]; model F(9, 390) = 1.73, p = .081), while being a woman is associated with higher support for the PRL (β = .101, p = .013, 95% CI [0.11, 0.95]). In Italy, higher levels of education increase support for centrist ideas (β = .115, p = .022, 95% CI [0.03, 0.39]; model F(9, 403) = 5.34, p < .001), while curiously, higher income is associated with increasing support for all three political discourses: PRL (β = .114, p = .022, 95% CI [0.02, 0.27]; model F(9, 403) = 3.44, p < .001), centrist (β = .156, p = .001, 95% CI [0.08, 0.32]), and PRR (β = .223, p < .001, 95% CI [0.20, 0.50]; model F(9, 403) = 9.27, p < .001). Finally, the additional analysis comparing only economic insecurities and only cultural threats shows that the statistical significance of the former increasing support for the PRL and the latter for the centrist platform is found only in the U.S. (β = .117, p = .016, 95% CI [0.12, 1.11]; model F(9, 397) = 4.45, p < .001 and β = -.111, p = .024, 95% CI [-0.94, -0.07]; model F(9, 397) = 3.05, p = .001, respectively)[14]. To better observe the results, Figure 1 presents the level of support for the three political platforms in each treatment according to the margins obtained from the complete regressions in each country. Although more respondents declared themselves to be conservative/right rather than liberal/left, the results show that the PRL platform has relatively higher ratings in all countries. Surprisingly, although PRR parties have been achieving electoral success in the three countries recently, the PRR platform received relatively lower support in the experiment.

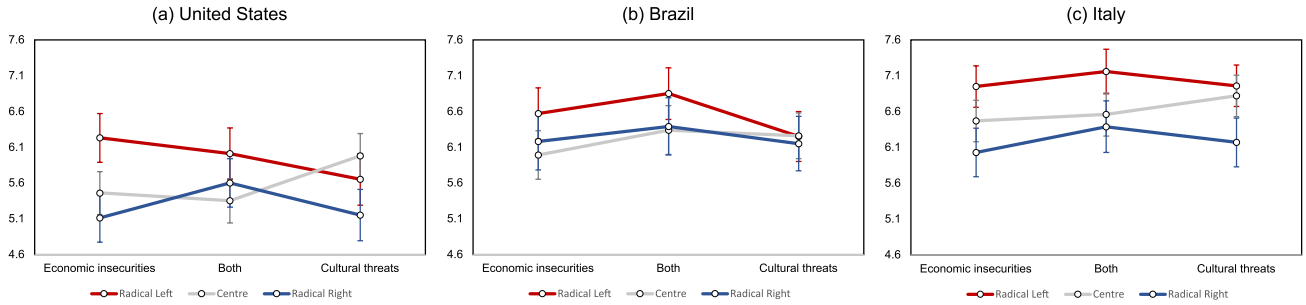
12) See Supplementary Material – Additional Regression Tables for full regressions (Sudbrack & Beattie, 2025S-b).

13) See Supplementary Material – Additional Regression Tables for full regressions (Sudbrack & Beattie, 2025S-b).

14) See Supplementary Material – Additional Regression Tables for full regression by country (Sudbrack & Beattie, 2025S-b).

Figure 1

Means of Support for Radical Left, Centrist, and Radical Right Discourses in the Three Countries



Note. Error bars representing 95% confidence level (for interpretation of confidence intervals, see Afshartous & Preston, 2010; Belia et al., 2005).

Finally, analyses were also conducted comparing support for each political narrative and the voting intention question, which included specific policy proposals. The results indicate that while they are well aligned in the U.S. and Italy, this is not the case in Brazil, suggesting that there are important differences between issue and party voting in this case[15].

Discussion

PRL Platform

The higher support for the PRL platform in both treatments with economic insecurities in Brazil and the treatment with only economic insecurities in the U.S. indicates that increasing levels of income inequality boost support for radical left ideas, consistent with the argument that economic insecurities lend support to the PRL (Beaudonnet & Gomez, 2017; Ramiro & Gomez, 2017). In this sense, the treatments involving economic insecurities may have boosted bottom-up dissatisfaction, which is in line with literature suggesting that relative deprivation compared to the wealthiest increases support for the radical left (Burgoon et al., 2019). The fact that in real life the PRL has not been receiving much support, even in countries where there are high levels of economic insecurities, highlights the importance of other factors in shaping individual political decisions. One possibility is that PRL discourse is not as widely available in society and media systems as other discourses are. PRR discourse evinced greater penetration in our samples, as seen in the relationship between media exposure and support for the PRR discourse. Additionally, even for those able to access radical left ideas in their media system, the greater availability or presence of right-wing discourse demonizing leftist ideas may convince many of the economically dissatisfied to support the PRR, especially by focusing on cultural threats as a cause of economic pain, creating a persuasive combination of cultural threats and economic insecurities, which also leads to support for the PRR.

PRR Platform

The results presented in Table 1 indicate that support for the PRR is mainly driven by cultural threats. However, analyses comparing the treatments of only economic insecurities and only cultural threats suggest that the increased support for radical right ideas is mainly due to the combination of cultural threats and economic insecurities, and not cultural threats alone. This suggests that if the economy were healthy, with low inequality, and people were economically satisfied, increasing levels of immigration and cultural change would limit the increase in support for a

15) See Supplementary Material – Vote Intentions for more details of the material, methods, analysis and discussion of vote intention (Sudbrack & Beattie, 2025S-b).

PRR platform. This contradicts one of the main branches of the literature, which often uses the social identity theory to argue that radical right support is primarily a backlash from those who resist changes in the national culture, social values, religion, and ethnicity (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Norris & Inglehart, 2018). However, it also indicates the importance of the cultural aspect in the PRR narrative for mobilising the economically dissatisfied voters (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020). In other words, while the condition of economic insecurities increases support for the PRL, cultural threats coexisting with such economic insecurities also co-opt dissatisfied people to the PRR, usually through the idea that culturally different individuals increase competition for jobs and resources and are a burden on society (Rathgeb, 2021; Rydgren & Ruth, 2011).

Centrist Platform

Unexpectedly, cultural threats alone did not increase support for the radical right, but for the centrist discourse instead. Literature on the radical right in Europe has highlighted that non-incumbent centre-right parties that have emphasised immigration have performed better in elections than radical right parties (Downes & Loveless, 2018). Thus, the fact that the centrist discourse proposed better enforcement of immigration laws may help to explain the results. Additionally, the fact that the results are only statistically significant in the U.S. suggests that in the absence of economic insecurities, the centrist approach to immigration is persuasive for many U.S. citizens. The U.S. results are consistent with the strategic incentives of a two-party system, where radical ideas often flourish in primaries but are moderated in general elections to appeal to centrist voters. This echoes our finding that cultural threats alone boosted support for the centrist platform – not the radical right – suggesting that, in the absence of combined economic-cultural appeals, U.S. voters prefer issue-based compromises (e.g. "better enforcement of immigration laws" + free trade, as presented in the centrist platform) to partisan radicalism (e.g. "immigrants harm our economy and way of life", as in the PRR platform). In contrast, Trump's success depended on bundling cultural threats with economic insecurities, a tactic that resonates with voters but fails when either threat is isolated. This highlights an important distinction: while PRR support requires partisan alignment with combined threats, centrist gains reflect issue-based voting, in which voters prioritize pragmatic solutions.

Limitations

This study analyses the effect of cultural threats and economic insecurities in support of radical left and right discourses. Because currently radical parties are people-centrist and anti-elitist, populist concepts were added to the treatments. However, the study does not distinguish populism as a thin ideology from radicalism. It is also worth mentioning that online experiments contain inherent limitations such as uncertainties of the precise identity and level of engagement of the participants. As previously mentioned, presenting a fictional country instead of the real nation of the respondents has advantages but also limitations. Because the method simulates real-life experiences by focusing on specific aspects, it consequently reduces other real-life aspects beyond the treatments, which may reduce ecological validity. Similarly, this method may reduce emotional engagement. In this regard, the experiment did not test the emotional response of the participants and so it may be that some participants may have developed more grievances or anxieties than others. The fact that the experiment does not have a control group also limit the interpretations of the effect of each treatment compared to having no issue at all, which could help in the analyses.

It is also worth pointing out that, although our analysis controlled for country, the fact that the discourses were adapted to each country's reality may mean that the results are not perfectly comparable, especially when compared to Brazil, where immigration is not an issue. Additionally, because economic insecurities appear to be more widespread than cultural threats, with even rich individuals feeling anxious about status and money (Paskov et al., 2013), it could be argued that economic insecurities are easier for the respondents to engage with than cultural threats in a role-play society. However, if this were a matter of cultural threats being harder to role-play than economic insecurities, the cultural threats treatment would show no or minimal effects, contrary to the results. Another possible limitation is that the political platforms of the experiment tried to condense discourses into a short paragraph, so they may not match real-world political discourse in terms of focus and argumentation. Thus, our PRR discourse was designed to cover the main points of PRR as elaborated in the literature; whereas, without a similarly deep literature on PRL, our PRL

discourse treatment was designed to summarize and condense real-world PRL political discourse. As a result, our PRL discourse may have seemed more organic and natural to participants, while the PRR discourse may have seemed too academic or formal compared to real-world PRR discourse.

Conclusion

A role-playing experiment in the U.S., Brazil, and Italy examined how cultural threats and economic insecurities influence support for the PRL and the PRR. Results showed that PRL ideas (e.g., reducing inequality, green energy) gained more support under high inequality, especially in the U.S. and Brazil, suggesting PRL parties could succeed by framing their policies as solutions to economic struggles. In contrast, cultural threats alone didn't boost PRR support (e.g., nationalism, strict immigration). PRR ideas only gained traction when cultural and economic fears overlapped, supporting ethnic competition theory over social identity theory. This is concerning since PRR policies don't address inequality, potentially worsening it. Additionally, in the U.S., cultural threats alone increased backing for centrist policies, indicating trust in establishment solutions for immigration but not economic issues.

Future research is needed to replicate similar role-play experiments in other countries, ideally with large sample sizes, and focusing on how specific cultural threats (e.g., anti-immigration) interact with economic insecurities by boosting radical right support. Further experiments are also needed in Italy to clarify the effect of social processes in supporting radical discourses, as this experiment could not observe statistical significance of the treatments when analysing the country alone. Additionally, investigating anti-immigration sentiments in countries with low levels of immigration would provide a valuable contribution. It is expected that the findings can help to understand not only what drives people to support the PRR today, but also the potential support for political parties that promise to fight inequality and invest in green energy.

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Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Data Availability: The data collected during the experiment and used for the analysis is publicly available at the OSF (see Sudbrack & Beattie, 2025S-a).

Supplementary Materials

The Supplementary Materials contain the following items:

- Research data (Sudbrack & Beattie, 2025S-a)
- Additional information (Sudbrack & Beattie, 2025S-b). The materials are divided into four main sections:
  - *Study material*, including information about the role-playing method, treatment materials and political platforms;
  - *Participant profiles*, including descriptive statistics and further information about the participants;
  - *Additional regression tables* with alternative methods of analysis, both with countries combined and separately;
  - *Vote intention material*, analysis and discussion, serving as an extension and complementation of the main study.

Index of Supplementary Materials

Sudbrack, L., & Beattie, P. (2025S-a). *Cultural threats versus economic insecurities: A role-playing experiment on supporting populist radical discourses* [Research data]. OSF. https://osf.io/edcp3/

Sudbrack, L., & Beattie, P. (2025S-b). *Supplementary materials to "Cultural threats versus economic insecurities: A role-playing experiment on supporting populist radical discourses"* [Additional information]. PsychOpen GOLD. https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.21180

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