



*\*THIS DRAFT DISCUSSION PAPER WAS PREPARED FOR THE MAY 11-12, 2021 SYMPOSIUM “REVITALIZING INDUSTRIAL REGIONS IN EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA: AN URGENT ITEM FOR THE TRANSATLANTIC AGENDA”*

## REGIONS AND POPULISM

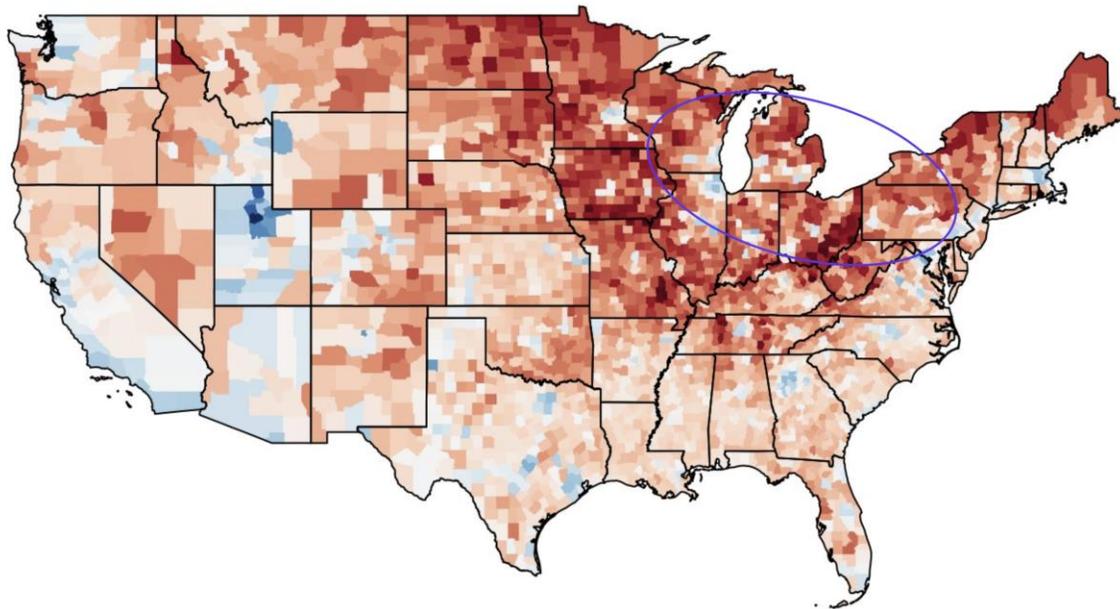
**Jeffrey Anderson**, Professor, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University

MAY 2021

The current populist moment in the United States and Europe is in some ways nothing new; in the past, parties and movements challenging the established order have emerged in the aftermath of sharp economic downturns (e.g., the OPEC shocks of the 1970s) or geopolitical upheavals (the Balkan civil wars of the 1990s). What sets apart the current episode is its geographical breadth and its societal depth, leading many to forecast that the populist challenge is here to stay. This should not come as a surprise, as the origins of our present situation reside in one of the most significant shocks to the global system since the Great Depression – the international financial crisis of 2008, which laid bare internal stresses and strains in liberal democratic capitalism that are still working themselves out down to the present day.

Around the world, industrial regions locked in a difficult and prolonged phase of economic restructuring are crucibles of neo-populism. Everywhere, these former industrial powerhouses have become fertile ground for anti-immigrant sentiment and ethno-nationalism, nostalgia for an economy and society of yesteryear, and retreat from the international order. As the following selection of electoral maps illustrate, rust belt regions are not the sum total of the geography of populism – rural areas are equally significant – but they represent a uniquely concentrated and intense manifestation of the problem. Nowhere is the impact of this toxic brew of populist resentments more pernicious than in the historical manufacturing centers of Europe and North America, helping to undermine from within support for democracy and by extension support for the Atlantic political order that has delivered decades of political stability, global security, and economic opportunity. In the United States, the fabled Rust Belt region tipped decisively for Donald Trump’s populist candidacy in the 2016 presidential election. In 2017, Marine Le Pen, leader of the right-wing populist National Front, scored decisive wins in the first round of the presidential election in France’s former industrial heartland of the north east. And in Germany, the 2017 parliamentary elections saw a surge for the populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the former industrial centers of the Ruhr Valley and eastern Germany.

Electoral Map of the United States, 2016 Presidential Election<sup>1</sup>

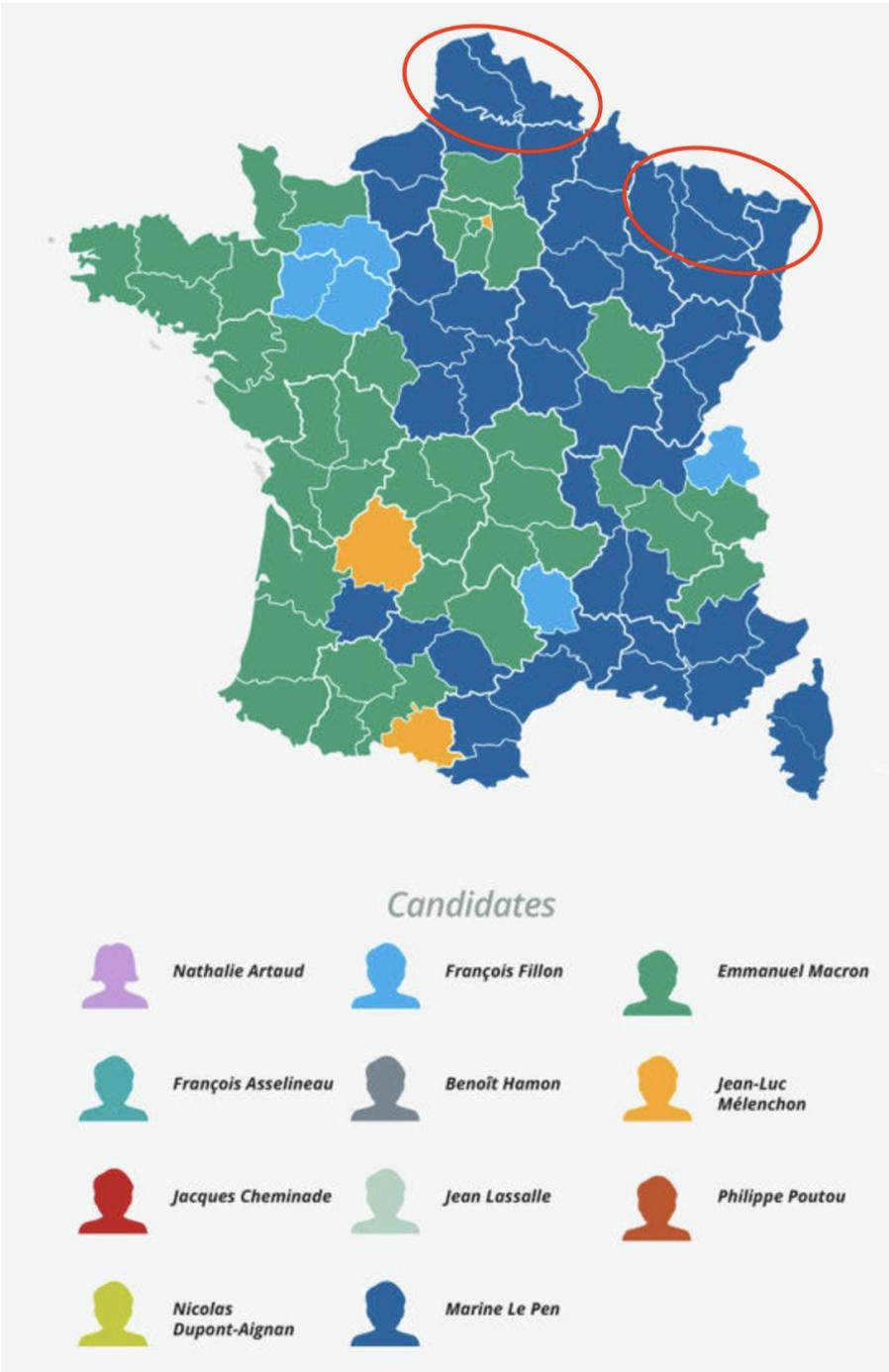


Shift in the Republican share of the 2-party vote from 2012 to 2016  
(%Trump - %Romney)



<sup>1</sup> Source: David Cottrell, Michael C. Herron, Sean J. Westwood, "An exploration of Donald Trump's allegations of massive voter fraud in the 2016 General Election," *Electoral Studies* 51:2018, pp. 123-142.

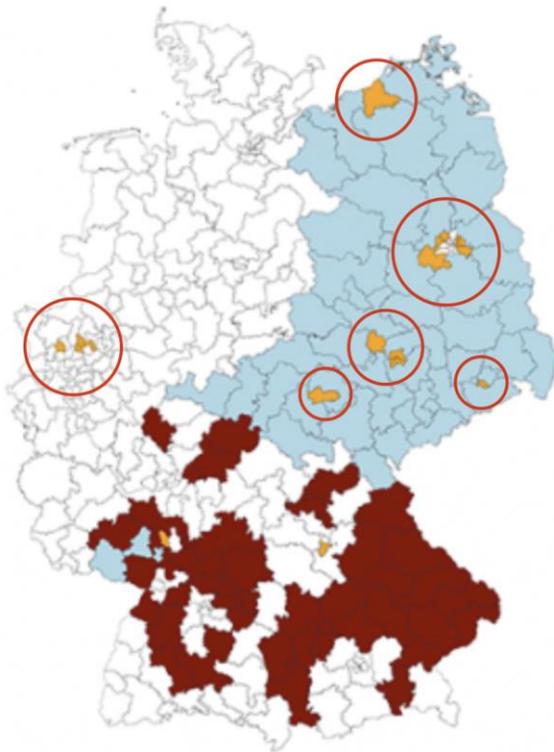
Electoral Map of France, 2017 Presidential Election (1<sup>st</sup> Round)<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup> Source: *The Daily Express* (UK), 2017.

Federal Republic of Germany, 2017 Parliamentary Elections (2<sup>nd</sup> Ballot)<sup>3</sup>

Electoral districts with above-average AfD results by cluster



What, if anything, can be done about it? In this paper, we make the case for a targeted, regional approach to the populist challenge in North America and Europe. The analysis is based on the fundamental distinction between the *supply* of populism, offered up by political entrepreneurs (individual leaders, political parties, etc.), and the *demand* for populism, emanating from ordinary men and women who are looking for a radical break with the status quo. Our focus is on the demand side, in as much as we believe that formulating policies that reduce the attractiveness of populist political alternatives, perhaps even channeling those former populist consumers back into mainstream politics, provide the best hope for reducing the overall threat posed by those who supply populist electoral choices in the hopes of overturning the current political system.

Specifically, we make the following claims in this paper, and look to back them with reference to the established academic literatures. First – and again, focusing on the demand side of the equation – we argue that there are many sources of populism, and that public policy efforts to address the grievances and concerns of populist voters must take these varied origins into account. This section of the paper will take us into the academic debates about populism and its empirical manifestations, which have tended to revolve around the economics-culture dichotomy. We conclude that while there is a valid distinction between populism that springs from economic insecurity and populism that draws on

---

<sup>3</sup> Source: Martin Eiermann, “The Geography of German Populism: Reflections on the 2017 Bundestag Election,” Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2017.

cultural resentments, it is typically not a question of “either/or”, but rather “where” (place) and “when” (temporal causal sequences).

Second, we maintain that a significant source of populist demand in North America and Europe emanates from regions affected by the long-term decline of the traditional manufacturing base. Building on the discussion in the first section, we show that in what are often described as the “rust belts” of advanced industrial democratic world, populist support over the past decade has generally been well above average. In short, the former coal, steel, shipbuilding, and general manufacturing heartlands of the transatlantic space have been powerful drivers of the current populist moment. Again, deindustrialized regions are not the sole geographical source of populist demand – rural areas, for example, represent a significant contributing factor as well. But the rust belts represent a significant component of the overall populist challenge, both empirically and symbolically.

Third, we argue that even though the present-day populist sentiments in these former industrial powerhouses may not take overtly economic form, their roots reside in the broader economic context of their regions: lack of growth, dearth of job prospects, and a general culture of decline. In this manner, we seek to transcend the academic debate about the economic versus cultural drivers of populist sentiments. Drawing on a small but growing school of thought in the academic literature, we insist on the strong temporal and ultimately causal chains that connect deindustrialization as an economic and social process to the emergence of distinctive clusters of political attitudes. Specifically, we acknowledge that in declining industrial regions, the dominant form of populist expression may well be cultural – that is, expressed in terms of anti-immigration sentiments, racism, or other forms of cultural resentments. However, the form of expression has more to do with the cues given by the political entrepreneurs supplying the populism than the motive forces behind the source of demand.

Having made these arguments, we will then turn briefly to the remaining components of the larger project, which will be outlined in greater detail elsewhere. First, having established a relationship between regional economic decline and demand for populism, we intend to demonstrate that there is a link between subsequent economic recovery at the regional level and a declining attractiveness of populist political alternatives in the region, expressed primarily in terms of regional voting results. In short, we maintain that the connections between economic insecurity and cultural backlash are “reversible”. Second – and this stage represents a transition from empirical analysis to policy advocacy – instances of regional recovery are not random occurrences, but rather have followed from concerted efforts by local and regional actors, at times assisted by national (and in the case of Europe even supranational) policymakers to restructure and revitalize the regional economy. This suggests that such regional initiatives should become a standard instrument of the tool box of North American and European policymakers, and moreover that there are significant gains to be leveraged by bringing together regional experts across the Atlantic to engage in dialogue and policy transfer/learning.

#### *Working Definition of Populism*

What is populism? There is no consensus on a common definition of populism; the *Oxford Handbook of Populism* identifies three overarching categories of conceptual approaches – ideational, political-strategic, and sociocultural – with multiple definitions clustered under each heading.<sup>4</sup> Debates and disagreements over definitions are driven in large part by methodological concerns. Researchers are

---

<sup>4</sup> Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

intent on defining populism in ways that promote the ready identification of its appearance in the political wild, especially on the supply side – differentiating populist parties from mainstream parties is critical, for obvious reasons.

Although the definitional debates in the academic literature serve an important purpose, they need not concern us too much here. Our needs are very targeted. We want to be able to determine whether there is a causal relationship between the economic circumstances in transitioning industrial regions in Europe and North America on the one hand, and the political attitudes of the people who live in these regions on the other. Specifically, are the residents of these regions more open on average to the appeals of populist challengers? In short, populism for us is less about the leaders or parties who are selling the populist product, although that is by no means an insignificant matter, and more about the peoples and by extension communities that are open to the sale. Our premise is that regional clusters of support for populism come about systematically in a deindustrializing context, and moreover these clusters can be weakened by a concerted effort to target the economic sources of that support for populism.

Scholars of populism distinguish between the supply of populism and the demand for populism. The former focuses primarily on the elite level, and targets the political parties, organizations, and individual leaders who purvey populist nostrums to the public. The emphasis of the supply side perspective is on the techniques and strategies that elites use, employing rhetoric, organization, and ideological appeals to develop support for their agenda. On the demand side of the equation, researchers examine the individuals who are drawn to populist appeals, display populist beliefs and attitudes, and express their support for populism in various ways, most obviously at the ballot box.

Since we are interested in identifying the presence and impact of regional clusters of populist attitudes, invariably our work is located on the demand side of the equation. As such, the most useful conceptual approach to defining populism for us is ideational, as it taps into the beliefs and attitudes of citizens. Our working definition of populism is taken from Mudde: “populism [is] a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the ... general will of the people.”<sup>5</sup> In later co-authored work with Rovira-Kaltwasser, Mudde expands on his definition, arguing that populism is limited in its programmatic scope (or “thin-centered”), as compared to other ideologies like fascism or liberalism.<sup>6</sup> As such, its empirical manifestations are not necessarily consistent or identical from time to time or place to place, but rather are malleable and adapted to the prevailing circumstances.

This is a key strength of the ideational approach – by defining populism as a protean ideology, it directs us to the key interaction between the supply and demand sides of the phenomenon. Suppliers or purveyors of populism look for especially potent ideological combinations – e.g. fascism, nativism, libertarianism – that can be used to develop “programmatic profiles that can be more or less attractive for large segments of the population in specific societies and time periods.”<sup>7</sup> One can think of these suppliers as entrepreneurs, who seek to assemble attractive appeals based on the core principle of

---

<sup>5</sup> Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39:4 (2004), 541-63; Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser 2013, pp. 149-50.

<sup>6</sup> Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser 2018, p. 1669.

<sup>7</sup> Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser 2018, p. 1670.

populism yet tailored to the specific desires and fears of the target electorate. The precise form of these appeals will differ – again, highlighting the quality of a thin-centered ideology – depending on factors such as time, place, and the structure of the political market.

What does the supply of populism tell us about demand for the product? Other than affinity for the populist appeal, not much. According to Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser, this underlines another strength of the ideational approach to populism: “it invites us to think about the reasons why there is demand for populism at the mass level, thereby permitting us to undertake survey research to detect the role of populist ideas in electoral behavior.”<sup>8</sup> The range of possible answers to this question takes us directly into the next section – the origins of the demand for populism.

### *The Sources of Populism*

The literature on demand-side populism tends to focus on the link between individual attitudes and the expression of support for populism, typically in the form of votes cast for populist parties or expressed affinity for such parties. The focus is very much on the immediate present – which attitudes are correlated with expressions of support for populist political alternatives? As we shall see, while useful, such studies cannot tell us very much about the deep origins of such attitudes, or whether and how such attitudes are distributed spatially in a political system. We contend that populism is often very much about “place”, and that the territorial distribution of populist attitudes matters.

Academic research has identified an array of explanations for the origins of populist demand, which fall into two broad categories: structural/economic sources of demand and cultural sources of demand.<sup>9</sup> For present purposes, it is useful to concentrate on two specific approaches – economic insecurity and cultural backlash – since these are often set up as competing claims in the literature. The weight of academic discourse appears to side with cultural backlash as an explanation of the origins of support for populist challengers. In this view, supporters of populism are directly motivated by appeals to their sense of nationalism, xenophobia, and/or racism, looking to blame immigrants (for example) and the political elites who made their presence possible. Economic loss or deprivation do not feature in these explanations or are of secondary consideration in making people available for populist recruiters.

Should cultural backlash be the primary force behind the demand for populism, this would undercut our claim that a targeted policy focus on revitalizing industrial regions holds at least one of the keys to turning back the populist tide. If economics either does not matter or matters much less, better to target scarce policy resources on non-economic or cultural determinants of populism.<sup>10</sup> As I outline below, we ultimately embrace the position supported in a strain of the literature that, when territory is introduced into the analysis, the evidence strongly supports the conclusion that economic insecurity and cultural backlash explanations of populism are actually complementary, not competing views. As such,

---

<sup>8</sup> Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser 2018, p. 1671.

<sup>9</sup> For a comprehensive and up-to-date overview and evaluation of the literature on populism, see Binio Binev, “The Populist Syndrome: Critical Junctures and Parallel Paths in Latin America and Post-communist Europe,” a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Georgetown University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Government, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> As an aside, it is not clear what such policies would actually look like, to say nothing of their likely efficacy. Countering widespread attitudes of racism and xenophobia might take the form of civics education campaigns in schools, but this would reach at best a fraction of the targeted population (most avid supporters of populist challengers are adults).

targeting industrial regions in North America and Europe with new and innovative policy instruments and approaches makes good sense.

#### *Explanations focusing on economic insecurity*

Some of the earliest contributions in the literature locate the sources of demand for populism in the disruption of the economy brought about by technological change, increasing international competition (globalization), and exogenous economic shocks. Individuals with steady, well-paying jobs and predictable economic prospects see their situations deteriorate dramatically, finding life in a post-industrial economy significantly less stable and significantly more precarious. Angered and unsettled by this drastic change in personal circumstances, they turn away from mainstream political parties, which are criticized for not only failing to stop the downward slide, but for aiding and abetting economic decline through their support for neoliberal economic policies and free trade.

In the context of personal economic distress, individuals become more amenable to the appeals of populist challengers. According to Inglehart and Norris, “This situation is believed to have made the less secure strata of society – low-waged unskilled workers, the long-term unemployed, households dependent on shrinking social benefits, residents of public housing, single-parent families, and poorer white populations living in inner-city areas with concentrations of immigrants-- susceptible to the anti-establishment, nativist, and xenophobic scare-mongering exploited of populist movements, parties, and leaders, blaming ‘Them’ for stripping prosperity, job opportunities, and public services from ‘Us’.”<sup>11</sup> Evidence to support the economic insecurity thesis would consist of high levels of support for populist parties among the unskilled, the unemployed, and those reporting feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and anger/unhappiness over their economic circumstances.

Explanations of populist demand anchored in a narrative of economic upheaval and resulting anxiety often conflate two perspectives that should be differentiated.<sup>12</sup> One, which is often described as the “losers of globalization” thesis, is a long-term structural explanation, pointing to the impact on individual political attitudes of processes of economic change and adjustment that go back a generation, to the early decades of the postwar era. The other is much more short-term in focus and orientation, and looks to specify the impact of exogenous shocks like the 2008 financial crisis on the economic circumstances of specific sectors of the economy and the people who work within them. These perspectives are clearly related empirically – short-term shocks occurring within a longer-term secular trend – but the distinction is relevant to our purposes here, as will be detailed below. As one moves to a regional frame on economic transformation and the rise of populism, the importance of long-term structural change in creating distinct spatial concentrations of demand for populism becomes clear.

#### *Explanations focusing on “cultural backlash”*

Explanations of populist support that focus on cultural backlash, like those concerned with economic insecurity, also center on grievance and dissatisfaction. In contrast, though, such accounts of populism center on grievances stemming not from unemployment or a deterioration in personal economic

---

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, “Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism,” Paper for the roundtable on “Rage against the Machine: Populist Politics in the U.S., Europe and Latin America”, 2 September 2016, annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia.

<sup>12</sup> Binev, “The Populist Syndrome: Critical Junctures and Parallel Paths in Latin America and Post-communist Europe,” Chapter 4.

circumstances, but from long-term structural changes in values and social composition, sometimes characterized as the post-materialist revolution. Recalling Mudde's definition, populism-as-cultural-backlash pits "Us", the native "pure people", who stand for heterosexual union, the traditional family, patriotism, and (White) homogeneity against "Them" – i.e., corrupt elites and alien newcomers who represent LGBTQ identity, cosmopolitanism, immigrants, and multiculturalism.<sup>13</sup>

According to cultural theories of populism, supporters feel threatened by the changes they observe in social composition and dominant values, and blame elites for supporting and even accelerating these dramatic shifts. This translates into profound mistrust of the cultural and political establishment, as well as immigrants and other social minorities whose newfound presence and perceived status in societal threaten their sense of the established and legitimate order. By supporting populist challengers, these individuals are looking for a speedy restoration of what they believe was a better, brighter, and traditional past. The specific form that this cultural backlash takes will vary from place to place; for example, in the United States, racism directed against Blacks is a much more prominent feature of populist appeals and support than it is in many parts of Europe, where general anti-foreigner and anti-immigrant attitudes are more prominent.

In the quest for evidence that would confirm the cultural backlash thesis, researchers look for the presence of coherent value clusters that are connected with support for populist parties and candidates: xenophobia, racism, anti-immigrant sentiments, and so on. Where such survey data are not available, the typical research approach is to look for correlations between support for populist candidates/parties and demographic characteristics that are known from other studies to correlate with such attitudes— i.e., older, male, less educated, etc.

### *Synthesis*

In the literature that poses a straightforward dichotomy between the economic insecurity and cultural backlash explanations of populism, the consensus is that the evidence tilts decidedly in favor of the latter. The reasons for this are varied. Attitudinal studies generally find stronger relationships between cultural value clusters and populist support. And there is considerable countervailing evidence on the economic side – not only are the unemployed and the low-skilled less likely to vote at all, but populism is at the same time a strong phenomenon among the middle and upper-middle class segments of society in many countries. As Inglehart and Norris conclude, "We should look skeptically upon the idea that the radical right is purely a phenomenon of the politics of resentment among the 'new social cleavage' of low-skilled and low-qualified workers in inner-city areas, or that their rise can be attributed in any mechanical fashion to growing levels of unemployment and job security..."<sup>14</sup> Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser echo this point, arguing that "even studies of the stereotypical 'losers of globalization'... show that they are more motivated by 'questions of community and identity' than by economic grievances."<sup>15</sup>

Stepping back from the debate, how should we interpret this consensus? There are three possible explanations. The first and most obvious is that the cultural sources of populist demand are in fact pervasive and dominant, telling us everything pertinent we need to know about the political

---

<sup>13</sup> Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser 2018, 1677.

<sup>14</sup> Inglehart and Norris 2016, p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> Mudde and Rovira-Kaltwasser 2018, p. 1677.

phenomenon (and presumably, how to address it as a political challenge). There are two other ways of looking at this, however, that must be seriously entertained. One involves conceptualizing the populism demand space as inhabited by multiple and not necessarily competing causal dynamics, of which cultural backlash \*and\* economic insecurity are two prominent examples. The other is that there is that economic insecurity and cultural backlash are bound up with each other causally, both over time and in geographical space. We'll take up both of these alternative views in sequence.

The notion that there are multiple and distinct sources of the demand for populism should not be received with surprise.<sup>16</sup> This in fact should be a common starting point for research into the intersection of context – attitudes – behavior. Take for example voting. There are multiple models of voting behavior outlined in the academic literature – prospective, retrospective, etc. The notion that in a political system containing tens of millions of eligible voters, there is a single, solitary voting calculus employed by people as they formulate and express their electoral preferences is, or should be, dismissed out of hand. It is of course quite possible that certain models are more widespread, or even dominant. But that should not obscure the empirical reality of a multiplicity of approaches to voting in a modern democratic society.

This same logic applies to the demand for populism. Indeed, given its protean manifestations on the supply side of the equation, it should be self-evident that the causes of demand for populism are likely manifold. It may well be the case that the dominant sources are cultural. Yet it would not necessarily follow that sources emanating from economic insecurity and grievance are of trivial importance. Indeed, in a world in which there are multiple sources of populism, it is likely that the apparent coherence and uniformity of populism's public manifestation – cultural backlash – is more a function of the shaping effects of populist suppliers (who have every incentive to package their appeals to voters in terms that are accessible, easily understood, and motivating) than it is an accurate reflection of the origins of that interest.

The third scenario is that economic insecurity and cultural backlash are causally linked. This connection has increasingly been noted in the literature. For example, Gest, Reny, and Mayer argue that support for the radical right is the product of “nostalgic deprivation”, a latent psychological phenomenon that turns on the discrepancy between individuals' understandings of their current status and their perceptions about their past. To the extent the past is remembered as one of economic prosperity, growth, and opportunity and contrasts with perceptions of a very different set of economic circumstances in the present, individuals grow more amenable to calls to place blame on elites, minorities, foreigners and others for their decline in status.<sup>17</sup> In short, the economic sets the table for the cultural.

This connection between economic circumstances (past and present) and political attitudes expressed in cultural terms is worth delving into for several reasons. One, it introduces a temporal dimension into the analysis, one linking the economic to the cultural, that is missing in many studies of the origins of populist demand. These studies are looking for something that may in fact not exist or be particularly prevalent – present-day circumstances of economic deprivation coupled with present-day attitudes of economic grievance, both of which are tied to expressions of support for populist candidates. In fact, the

---

<sup>16</sup> Yotam Margalit, “Economic Insecurity and the Causes of Populism, Reconsidered,” *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33:4(Fall 2019), pp. 152-170 at p. 159.

<sup>17</sup> Justin Gest, Tyler Reny, and Jeremy Mayer, “Roots of the Radical Right: Nostalgic Deprivation in the United States and Britain,” *Comparative Political Studies* 51:13 (2017), pp. 1694-1719.

context of economic deprivation may have been developing over years or even decades, and yet still shape attitudes in the present that, while not expressed in economic terms, are very much tied to support for populism. The precarity caused by economic decline may manifest itself politically in bitter cultural terms, especially if those terms are being supplied in sophisticated ways by political entrepreneurs.

The other reason it is worth delving into this temporal link between economic decline/deprivation and cultural backlash is that there is good reason to believe that there is a spatial clustering component to this causal relationship. Stated clearly and bluntly, populist supporters exhibiting “nostalgic deprivation” are not likely to be randomly distributed through the political space. And here we return to an element of the “losers of globalization” thesis. These losers were and are concentrated in certain regions of any country – rural inhabitants to be sure, but also centers of extractive and manufacturing industry hard hit by decades of trade liberalization, weakening unionization, deregulation, and ultimately deindustrialization. As such, it is precisely in these regions suffering from long-term decline and adjustment that we are likely to find a coherent populist demand syndrome – nostalgic deprivation with its roots in economic decline, manifesting itself political primarily in terms of cultural backlash. It is to this literature that we now turn.

### *The Territorial Dimension of Populism*

Researchers who have examined the origins of populism from a territorial perspective offer a causal narrative that neatly bridges the divide between those who focus on economic insecurity and grievance and those who emphasize cultural backlash in providing the political momentum behind the challenge. Characterized variously as “populism in place”<sup>18</sup> and “the geography of discontent”<sup>19</sup>, the territorial perspective on populism moves away from the dominant methodological perspective in the literature, which focuses on individual traits and interpersonal differences/inequalities, and instead places individuals within their local contexts. The territorial approach locates individuals in their geographical surroundings – localities, communities, regions – and develops and tests causal narratives that provide openings for spatial context to shape both political attitudes and behavior over the long-term and in the short term. In this manner, these explanations establish the political salience of regions in addressing the populist challenge. In this section, I will review three prominent arguments of this approach in the literature.

#### 1. Rodríguez-Pose and “The revenge of the places that don’t matter”

Andrés Rodríguez-Pose establishes that populist supporters in countries around the world are not randomly distributed geographically, but instead have been and are clustered in regions that have experienced long-term economic decline. These “places that don’t matter”, as he sardonically describes them, have suffered over the decades from long-term underdevelopment – the case of lagging rural regions – or have gone from prosperity to penury with the shuttering of enterprises and the loss of high-paying manufacturing jobs, bringing with it long-term unemployment, outmigration of the young and ambitious, and the inevitable ripple effects on public and social services, home prices, and social cohesion. The great irony, Rodríguez-Pose argues, is that the people who live in “the places that don’t matter” end up mattering very much – retaliating for their neglect by elites, they turn to the ballot box,

---

<sup>18</sup> Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Andrés Rodríguez-Pose 2018.

exacting revenge by voting for populist challengers to the status quo. “The areas left behind, those having witnessed long periods of decline, migration, and brain drain, those that have seen better times and remember them with nostalgia, those that have been repeatedly told that the future lies elsewhere, have used the ballot box as their weapon.”<sup>20</sup> Rodríguez-Pose points out that these electoral responses are not idle tantrums, but could eventually undermine the economic prosperity and prospects of the central regions that do matter.

Rodríguez-Pose’s argument is compelling, and provides an explanation for a counterintuitive finding in the broader literature on populism that is often used to discount the importance of economic insecurity in fueling support for populism. He states, “Populism took hold not among the poorest of the poor, but in a combination of poor regions and areas that had suffered long periods of decline. It has been thus the places that don’t matter, not the “people that don’t matter”, that have reacted. In these areas it has been very often the relatively well-off, those in well-paid jobs or with pensions that heeded the call of populism.”<sup>21</sup> This telling insight underscores the importance of the regional perspective on populism – the poorest of the poor may not turn to populist challengers, just as the relatively well-off may not stick with the mainstream political alternatives. It depends very much on where they live.<sup>22</sup>

## 2. Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2020, “Populism in Place”

In a forthcoming article in *International Organization*, Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth set out a convincing case for the need to take account of place (or community) when searching for the sources of demand for populist challengers. In a sense, they set out a more sophisticated version of the “losers of globalization” thesis, one that knits together the impact of long-term regional economic decline, the short-term economic shocks delivered by the 2008 financial crisis, and the resulting economic, social, and political implications for people who live in these hard-hit regions. In making a strong claim for a territorial perspective, the authors argue that the impact of the forces we typically associate with the term globalization – open trade, growing international economic integration, the rapid spread or diffusion of technological change – are best conceived “as affecting geographically specific *areas* rather than individuals.”<sup>23</sup>

The impact sketches a similar picture – one mediated by place – to the one described by Rodríguez-Pose. International trade competition, outsourcing, and labor-saving technological changes put pressure on manufacturing firms or clusters, bringing about the eventual and painful unwinding of the regional economy. “The initial direct economic impact of industrial decline puts downward pressure on wages and employment. This then leads to broader and more indirect effects: labor force participation declines, young people leave, property values decline, local tax revenue falls, and local public services

---

<sup>20</sup> Andrés Rodríguez-Pose 2018, p. 200.

<sup>21</sup> Andrés Rodríguez-Pose 2018, p. 201. This finding is supported by other academic studies. For example, Dijkstra et al. argue, “Corroborating the theory of the ‘places that don’t matter’, the long-term decline of areas that saw better times, that often had a grander industrial past, together with the economic stagnation of places hitting a middle-income trap, provide fertile breeding grounds for the brewing of anti-system and anti-European integration sentiments.” Dijkstra et al. 2020, p. 750.

<sup>22</sup> As we’ll see, in the United States it also depends on their race. In the transitioning industrial regions of the U.S., many working-class and middle/upper-middle class Whites turned to Donald Trump and the Republican Party in 2016, whereas Black voters in these same regions either voted for Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party or stayed home.

<sup>23</sup> Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2020, p. 9.

deteriorate... After a couple of decades, the city, town, or neighborhood is reeling from waves of economic and social shocks, affecting everything from school quality to opioid addiction..."<sup>24</sup>

The long-term, inexorable deterioration of the community leaves its inhabitants more open to populist appeals, a situation exacerbated by the sharp, dramatic economic downturn ushered in by the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>25</sup> For residents of these regions in both the United States and Europe, the double-barreled impacts of long-term economic decline and short-term crisis translated into an even greater propensity to vote for political parties and candidates "hostile to globalization or European integration."<sup>26</sup> The overt manifestation of their frustrations was often, even predominantly, cast in terms of cultural resentments, racism, and anti-immigrant xenophobia, but this does not take away from the regionally-specific economic underpinnings of these sentiments. As the authors conclude, "the appropriate unit of analysis to study populism is the community, not the individual. This is because economic shocks have strong local spillovers."<sup>27</sup>

### 3. Revenge of the Rust Belt in 2016

Studies of the populist backlash in the 2016 U.S. presidential election have focused on the Rust Belt region. Four states – Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin – tipped decisively for Donald Trump, handing him victory over Democratic standard bearer Hillary Clinton. Two studies in particular deserve mention here, in distinctive ways targeting the intersection of economic decline and crisis, the political impact on the working class, and race. The key take-away from these studies is that regionally circumscribed economic insecurity goes hand-in-glove with a powerful cultural backlash, fueled by White working-class resentments, against the established political order.

In "The Revolt of the Rust Belt,"<sup>28</sup> political sociologist Michael McQuarrie presents a long-term view of the 2016 election outcome in the Rust Belt, which saw a significant number of White working-class voters who had either previously voted for Obama in 2012 or had not voted at all switch their votes to Trump. At the same time, significant numbers of Black working-class voters in the region, historically aligned with the Democratic Party, sat the election out. The combination of the two voting block shifts played a telling role in the eventual election outcome.

The origins of this regional realignment reside in the long-term economic collapse of the region's industrial core. What is novel and significant about McQuarrie's argument is that structural change ushered in a more recent "collapse of the institutions that had been built to incorporate industrial workers and their communities into the mainstream political life of the country, including governance arrangements, work and consumption arrangements, civic associations, social policies, party organizations, and labor unions... It is this collapse that disconnected Rust Belt communities from the Democratic Party."<sup>29</sup> McQuarrie describes the outcome as a political reaction to the economic, cultural, and political marginalization of the region, with White and Black working-class voters taking distinctive but equally impactful courses of action to express their reactions. The most significant effects are to be

---

<sup>24</sup> Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2020, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2020, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2020, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2020, p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> McQuarrie 2017.

<sup>29</sup> McQuarrie 2017, p. 122.

found in White working-class communities, where “many white voters have implausibly come to interpret their plight as an effect of government policy that privileges people of color and their communities.”<sup>30</sup> The link between declining economic status and harsh cultural response is clear in McQuarrie’s narrative.

In a recent article focusing on 2016 electoral outcomes in the U.S. Rust Belt regions, Leonardo Baccini and Stephen Weymouth find a strong regional contextual effect on White voters. In a region shaped by decades of deindustrialization and the short-term blow of the post-2008 financial crisis, White voters perceive “a politically salient status threat” and as a result gravitated to Donald Trump.<sup>31</sup> Once again, the tight casual connection between economic decline, its far-reaching impact on the region, and the resulting political attitudes and behaviors is clear.

Localized manufacturing job losses appear to invoke concerns among white voters about American economic decline and the current course of the country. Job losses also appear to lead whites to question the prospects of upward mobility at the individual level, for the “average” American. These results suggest that localized manufacturing decline heightens economic anxiety among whites in particular. In conjunction with the voting results indicating a strong preference for Trump among white voters in localities with higher manufacturing job losses, one possible interpretation of the survey analysis is that some whites perceive deindustrialization as a status threat.<sup>32</sup>

These recent studies on the Rust Belt dovetail in terms of their conceptualization of the causal dynamics at play and the observed outcomes. They underscore the findings of the more general literature on populism and place, which as a body of research poses a powerful corrective to the reigning debates about the origins of demand for populism. As a “thin-centered ideology” that manifests itself politically in protean ways, populism has many sources, some of which are distinct and some of which are causally linked. The populism that now pervades the former industrial centers of North America and Europe is quite possibly of a distinct variety, one of several that have emerged in these countries. Nevertheless, it is an observable phenomenon, one that carries an inner logic in terms of the interweaving of economic and cultural components. And it has had, and will continue to have, a marked political significance given the way in which these countries have constructed their political systems. All the more reason to identify and evaluate this variety of populism, and to consider what might be done to ameliorate its impact.

#### *Conclusions, Take-aways, and the Way Forward*

The previous sections have established that populism, for all its sources and manifestations, is (or can be) a distinctly regional phenomenon. Specifically, critical sources of demand for populist political alternatives originate in declining or deindustrializing regions of North America and Europe. In other words, these distinct manifestations of populism arise on both sides of the Atlantic, and as such constitute a problem worthy of attention and solution for the transatlantic partners, acting on their own but also in concert.

---

<sup>30</sup> McQuarrie 2017, p. 131.

<sup>31</sup> Baccini and Weymouth 2021, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Baccini and Weymouth 2021, p. 12. In contrast to Whites, Black voters in the region were more likely to support the Democratic candidate, underscoring that different voter blocks respond to similar contexts of economic hardship in different ways.

In the second of three concept papers drafted for the May symposium, John Austin and Alexander Hitch survey the accumulating evidence for the case that the “populism in place” syndrome is reversible. What do we mean by that? Long-term deindustrialization in a region sets off a chain of economic and social effects that lead to the unwinding of community ties and to the spread of political attitudes fueled by resentment and grievance. In these circumstances, populism, particularly strains based on cultural backlash, flourishes. The question then arises: is this causal chain reversible? That is, where struggling regional economies have turned around and reversed their fortunes, either on their own or thanks to targeted policy reform efforts, does one observe the decline in appeal of populism among their inhabitants? The short answer, according to Austin and Hitch, is yes. In the United States and Europe, recovering cities and sub-regions in traditional (and otherwise still struggling) industrial areas have been able to resist the populist tide and, in many instances, even reverse gains made by populist parties in previous election cycles. Although the evidence is mostly anecdotal at this point, given the paucity of election cycles in most of these countries since the beginning of the financial crisis, the evidence is encouraging. Additional research needs to be carried out on reversibility.

The third concept paper builds on the second by bringing together a collection of successful regional economic regeneration initiatives. By examining these initiatives in more detail, the goal is to begin creating a foundation for the development of a more systematic approach to unwinding populism in place, one that expressly builds in the opportunity to engage in transatlantic policy learning and diffusion. It is our intention as organizers of this symposium to create transatlantic channels of information exchange and network interactions to facilitate this process. As we move into this proximate phase of the project, we must keep the following in mind:

- Policy initiatives designed to reverse the economic fortunes of a regional economy must embrace a “place-sensitive” approach to the challenge.<sup>33</sup> Traditional top-down regional policies, such as growth-pole strategies built around large investment projects (so-called “white elephants”) as well as welfare-transfer policies focused on individuals residing in these regions, must give way to innovative policies built from the ground up that take into account both the on-site potential \*and\* constraints within the targeted regions.
- Policy initiatives designed to reverse the economic fortunes of a regional economy must be premised on the long-term. The forces that brought these regions to their current condition unfolded over decades, rendering them vulnerable to the inevitable short-term economic shocks that have buffeted these areas in recent years. As such, the economic, social, and political circumstances that prevail in these regions are rooted in complex, entrenched processes. Winding back up what has been unwound over such a long period will take time, resources, and patience. Reversals of fortune will not happen overnight, or even within the frame of a typical election cycle of four to five years. Sustained effort from all levels of the polity will be required.
- Finally, policy initiatives designed to reverse the economic fortunes of a regional economy must be premised on intensive engagement with a broad range of actors within the region, including elected politicians, administrators, corporate and business interests, labor, institutions of higher learning, and community groups. This is essential if “place-sensitive” policies are to accurately

---

<sup>33</sup> This point is emphasized in Rodríguez-Pose 2018 and Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2020.

reflect the potential and limitations of development in the region. It is also essential if the dangers of intra-regional competitiveness and lack of coordination are to be minimized.

In all of these areas, the transatlantic partners have much to learn from each other. In Europe, where sustained, long-term initiatives embracing the local, regional, national, and European levels are the order of the day, deep experience with policy experience \*and\* failure has been generated over the years which is of great use and interest to U.S. counterparts, who work within a radically different constitutional environment that is at the same time benefitted and plagued by similar policy dynamics. The goal of bringing together local, regional, and national/supranational actors from both sides of the Atlantic to share both the positive and the negative in their parallel yet in many ways common experiences will help facilitate the exchange of best practice.

**Project Partners:**



Walsh School *of* Foreign Service  
BMW Center for German and European Studies



Consulate General  
of the Federal Republic of Germany  
Chicago



**MEC**  
MICHIGAN ECONOMIC CENTER



The University of Manchester