

Welfare state policies and far right party support: moderating ‘insecurity effects’ among different social groups

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Abstract

This article examines the interplay between social risks, welfare state policies and far right voting. Distinguishing between compensatory and protective policies and using data from seven waves of the European Social Survey (ESS) and social policy datasets, the article tests a range of hypotheses about the extent to which welfare state policies moderate the insecurities that drive particular social groups to vote for the far right. Empirical findings confirm theoretical expectations that several welfare state policies reduce the likelihood of supporting the far right among individuals exposed to high risks including the unemployed, pensioners, low-income workers, employees on temporary contracts, individuals in large families, and individuals who are disabled/permanently sick. These findings suggest that in order to understand why some individuals vote for the far right, one should not only focus on their risk-driven grievances, but also on policies that may moderate these risks.

Keywords: welfare state policies, Western Europe, far right parties, economic insecurity.

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Introduction

Is insecurity associated with far right party support, and if so, in what ways? Literature examining the economic and welfare dimensions of far right voting is dominated by demand and supply-side perspectives, which focus on the anxieties that drive voting behaviour on the one hand, and the ways in which parties themselves capitalise on these anxieties on the other. On the demand side, a substantial body of work has shown both theoretically and empirically that ‘left behind’ voters who perceive themselves in an economically precarious position as well as relatively deprived voters who see themselves as comparatively disadvantaged are often likely far right supporters (Swank and Betz 2003; Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Kurer 2020). On the supply side, an expanding body of literature argues that far right parties are departing from the liberal ‘winning formula’ to adopt more protective welfare state policies (e.g. Afonso and Rennwald 2018).

These studies offer valuable insights into why societal risks create favourable conditions for radical voting, and when parties are likely to translate risks into political advantage. What they do not explain, however, is under what circumstances the societal insecurities that trigger far right party support may be contained or exacerbated. This points to the key, yet often overlooked, potential importance of an intermediate level of analysis, i.e. the policy level. While there is a wealth of studies focusing on the role of social policies in the political economy and welfare state literatures (e.g. Gingrich and Ansell 2012; Rueda 2007; Emmenegger et al. 2012), the role of social policies as potentially mediating the risks faced by certain social groups through compensation and protection is theoretically and empirically underdeveloped in the far right literature.

This article addresses this gap by investigating the relationship between social risks, welfare state policies and individual voting for far right parties. In line with a growing body of literature (Lucassen and Lubbers 2012; Mudde 2019; Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2020;

Stockemer *et al* 2020), we adopt the term ‘far right’ to classify parties on the basis of their authoritarianism, populism, and nationalism, while at the same time taking into account the differences between extreme and radical variants (Golder 2016). Our analysis relies on a series of multilevel random intercept logistic regressions using a dataset merging individual level from seven waves of the European Social Survey between 2002 and 2014 with national level data on social policies. We focus on the following high-risk groups: the unemployed, pensioners, low-income workers, employees on temporary contracts, individuals in large families, and individuals who are disabled or permanently sick.

Distinguishing between *compensatory* spending policies, such as unemployment and retirement benefits, and *protective* regulatory policies, i.e. minimum wage and Employment Protection Legislation (EPL), we theorise two distinct mechanisms behind the association between welfare state policies and far right party support. On the one hand, compensatory policies provide insurance by reducing the costs of a risk once it has been realised. On the other hand, protective policies reduce and/ or prevent the risk from occurring in the first place.

We develop and test a series of hypotheses on the extent to which these policies might affect the propensity of the above-mentioned insecure groups to vote for the far right by mediating the risks they face through compensation and protection mechanisms. Our empirical findings broadly confirm our theoretical expectations that compensatory and protective welfare state policies reduce the likelihood of supporting the far right among individuals exposed to high social or economic risks. Taken together our results demonstrate that in order to understand why some individuals vote for the far right, we should not only focus on their risk-driven grievances, but also on policies that may mediate these risks.

The article proceeds as follows. First we provide a brief theoretical overview of the relationship between insecurity, welfare state policies and voting behaviour. Next, we outline

our own hypotheses on the mediating role of compensatory and protective social policies. We proceed to describe our data and methods, carry out our empirical analysis and present our findings. The article concludes with avenues for future research.

Economic insecurities, political opportunities and welfare state policies

Economic insecurities are often associated with political behaviour (Chung and van Oorschot 2011; Emmenegger et al. 2012; Emmenegger *et al.* 2017; Marx and Picot 2013; Rueda 2007; Rodrik 2018; Lipset 1963; Kriesi 1998, 2006; Kitschelt and McGann 1995). On the demand-side, the argument is that some trigger factor such as economic crisis (Lipset 1963), globalization (Kriesi *et al.* 2006; Rodrik, 2018) or a rapid influx of immigrants (Inglehart and Norris 2016) impacts negatively on voters, who care about their welfare and are generally able to assess the insecurities and risks they face (cf. Rehm 2016, chapter 4). Even if they are not in a position to accurately predict which dimensions of economic developments will affect them in what ways, it is reasonable to assume that voters are able to assess whether they are worse off than in the past.

Both actual deteriorating economic performance and relative deprivation may have an impact on electoral choices (e.g. Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2012; Weschle 2014), translating into support for far right parties (Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Kitschelt 2007: 1181-884; Lipset 1963; Lubbers et al. 2002). The far right ‘normalisation’ strategy (Golder 2003) has allowed these parties to extend beyond their secure voting base and appeal more broadly to a range of insecure groups including less likely supporters such as more educated individuals that suffer from relative but not absolute deprivation (Kurer 2020). ‘Newer’ risks, such as those linked to automation, particularly affect those who are ‘coping or comfortable’ on present income (Anelli, Colantone and Stanig 2019; Imm *et al.* 2019), also indicating that there is a relative deprivation story behind the economic argument. In sum, not only the so-called ‘left-behind’,

but also those on more comfortable incomes (Kitschelt and McGann 1995) may be insecure, and are therefore potential far right voters.

The economic insecurity story extends beyond income. Deteriorating conditions and unsatisfied expectations resulting in far right party support can be associated with labour market competition with immigrants (e.g. Dancygier and Donnelly 2013; Scheve and Slaughter 2001; Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2020), loss of social status (Gidron and Hall 2017), housing (Adler and Ansell 2019), discontent with the establishment, social pessimism and nostalgia (Gest, Reny and Mayer 2017). There are therefore various mechanisms through which economic insecurity may translate into support for the far right.

There is also a supply-side dimension to how insecurity translates into far right party support. Political opportunities are associated with the ways in which parties themselves shape their programmatic agendas in order to capitalise on the economic insecurities that drive voters. In a nutshell, the far right increasingly proposes solutions that are distinct from its older more market liberal positions in the 1980s and early 1990s (Kitschelt and McGann 1995; de Lange 2007; Ivaldi 2015). This ‘welfarist turn’ in far right party manifestos and agendas (e.g. De Koster et al 2013; Afonso and Rennwald 2018; Ennser-Jedenastik 2018) makes these parties appear credible to deal with rising unemployment and economic hardship (Betz 2013). Economically insecure voters are in this view attracted to far right parties, neither because they become disinhibited, nor because they want to protest or become more anti-immigrant, but in the hope that far right parties will address their anxieties and concerns. The argument is, therefore, that supply complements demand by seizing the opportunities posed by societal challenges (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2018) and appearing legitimate to a broad range of insecure groups.

The demand- and supply-side perspectives are complementary. They capture the role of individual grievances stemming from the various social risks that voters face, and the ways in

which political actors capitalise upon these grievances and pledge to address them respectively. Recent literature increasingly focuses on policies, which can be seen as representing a third level of analysis between demand and supply. Most work to date examining the role of social policies within the context of insecurity and far right party support, however, focuses on political parties themselves, the social policies they adopt in their programmatic agendas (Afonso and Renwald 2018; Ketola and Nordensvard 2018; De Koster *et al.* 2013) and the policy preferences of insecure groups (Gingrich and Ansell 2012; Burgoon and Dekker 2010; Häusermann et al 2015; Iversen and Soskice 2001).

What has not received sustained attention, however, is the extent to which social policies can moderate the effects of insecurity on far right party support. While this may have a profound effect on voting behaviour, literature focusing on these issues is scarce and relatively recent (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2016; Gingrich 2019; Swank and Betz 2003; Hübscher *et al.* 2019). We know from these recent studies that patterns of protection and compensation affect party choices, yet there is still a gap in our knowledge concerning the impact of belonging to a specific insecure group, which groups are affected the most, and which policies have the greatest moderating effects.

How social policies moderate the insecurity effect

This article seeks to fill in this gap by investigating the extent to which a broad range of welfare state policies may affect far right party support at the individual level. We start from the rich literature on institutions and economic insecurity, which suggests that social policies shape and moderate the outcomes of both objective and subjective insecurity (e.g. Chung and Mau 2014; Chung and van Oorschot 2011; Muñoz de Bustillo and de Pedraza 2010). Historically, high-risk groups have pushed for policies that protect them (Flora and Heidenheimer 1981). For example, low-income workers are likely to favour welfare state

policies to redistribute resources from high-income earners. Equally, middle and high-income workers may still face risks that increase their support for social insurance and welfare state policies, despite not being in an economically precarious situation (Barr 2006, Rehm 2016). For instance, temporary workers may, regardless of their income, support redistribution and vote for new left parties (e.g. Marx 2013).

Indeed, literature shows that risk and socio-economic status are distinct, and not only working class and/or low-income individuals face economic insecurity. Even highly educated individuals may feel ‘cross-pressured’ if they occupy precarious jobs: while their education prompts them to oppose redistribution, the high labour market risks they face push in the opposite direction and the risk effect often dominates the education effect (Häusermann, Kurer and Schwander 2015: 254). Drawing on this literature, we might anticipate that the size of the risk that people experience is at least partly determined by the size of the cost that the *realisation* of this risk would entail for the concerned individuals (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2016).

In our argument, welfare state policies fulfil at least two functions⁴. First, they can compensate workers for the realisation of a particular set of risks (for instance losing one’s income through job loss) – henceforth *compensatory policies*. Second, they can protect workers from the risk being realised in the first place (for instance losing the job itself) – henceforth *protective policies*. We might therefore expect that welfare state policies are likely to lower both the costs and risks associated with belonging to a particular social group, thus containing those grievances that translate electorally into far right party support.

The degree to which particular social policies reduce the insecurity of specific individuals depends on the type of social risks these individuals face. For example, previous studies have

⁴ Note that a third effect is - by design - empirically unobservable: the existence of the welfare state also fundamentally reshapes the prevalence and extent of most social risks, but this effect can never be observed since it would require comparing the current risk distribution to a counterfactual reality without the welfare state, a well-known problem in studies on redistribution, disposable income inequality and market income inequality (Brandolini and Smeeding 2011).

found that job insecurity is linked to contract type: temporary workers experience higher levels of job insecurity than workers on permanent contracts, and only the latter are protected by Employment Protection Legislation targeting regular workers (e.g. De Cuyper and de Witte 2007). Drawing on this logic, we distinguish between distinct risk groups and identify the relevant policies in place that may protect or compensate individuals facing these risks. Different individuals in distinct social groups experience different problems in the labour market and are exposed to varying degree to economic risks.

We conceptualise different types of non-mutually exclusive risks that individuals may face depending on which ‘social risk group’ (henceforth referred to as ‘social group’) they belong to. We select these groups on the basis of their likely political importance, the existing literature discussing their role for far right party success, and the availability of data on the relevant social policies that may affect them. Specifically, we identify six social groups, each understood in a loose non-exclusive sense as being comprised of individuals who share a characteristic exposing them to a particular social risk, in line with public economics (see for instance Barr 2005). These include: (1) the unemployed; (2) pensioners; (3) those who are permanently sick or disabled; (4) low income workers; (5) workers in permanent contracts; and (6) people with children.

The way these different social groups facing distinct risks experience economic insecurity may depend on the degree to which they are compensated and/or protected by various welfare state policies in the country where they reside: the more generous the policies in place, the less economically insecure these groups may be. Thus, for instance, spending policies such as unemployment or pension benefits are in place to *compensate* individuals in circumstances where the risk has *already* been realised: unemployed people are already unemployed and pensioners are already retired. By contrast, regulatory protective policies such as EPL and minimum wages prevent and/or reduce the possibility of the risks materialising in the first place as illustrated by the case of employed people who *might* become unemployed, but are

less likely to do so if there is restrictive employment protection legislation preventing employers from dismissing them. Equally, low-income workers *might* have insufficient income, but are less likely to be in such a situation if minimum wage regulations are in place and effective.

The idea that groups might experience different levels of insecurity, which feeds into their voting behaviour, is not controversial, yet it is rarely explored in the far right literature. Economic voting literature already documents that individuals in distinct social groups might react differently to economic shocks depending on their income, asset endowments or class (e.g. Hicks et al. 2016; Palmer and Whitten 2011; Bojar and Vlandas 2021). This underpins our overall expectation that the specific situation of distinct social groups will affect their voting behaviour. In turn, each social policy can be expected to reduce the overall likelihood of people to vote for the far right, especially if they belong to one or more of these at-risk groups.

Building on existing historical, political and economic welfare state literatures (Flora and Heidenheimer 1981; Bonoli 2005; Emmenegger *et al.* 2012; Rehm 2016), we identify one corresponding social policy for each social group. With respect to compensatory policies, unemployment benefits compensate people who have become unemployed, while pension benefits compensate the retired who have lost their income due to retirement. In addition, family policy provides financial and in-kind help to people with children, while disability policy compensates people who are too disabled or too sick to work. With respect to protective policies, EPL protects workers in permanent contracts from losing their jobs by making it more difficult for employers to dismiss these workers, and minimum income legislation creates a – more or less generous - minimum floor for low- income workers. The matching of each social group to a social policy is summarised in Table 1 and for each match we develop a specific hypothesis in the next paragraphs.

<Table 1 about here>

Compensatory policies first and foremost reduce the costs of a risk once it has been realised. Thus, they are directly relevant to those who belong to a high-risk group. While their insurance function could also in principle serve to protect those who are anxious about the risk occurring in the future, the policy effect is theoretically indeterminate as this is a very large and diverse population consisting of groups facing very different actual levels of risk. For instance, some employed people might face substantial unemployment risks, while for others unemployment may be highly unlikely. Similarly some individuals closer to retirement age may assess pension risks as much higher than those further away from it. An adequate assessment of the policy effect in each circumstance would require a precise identification and extensive analysis of the different magnitudes of the risks faced by distinct groups who have not experienced the realisation of the risk, which is outside the scope of this article. As such, we concentrate our attention on the high-risk groups, and derive the following hypotheses on the relationship between social groups, compensatory policies and far right party support:

H1(a) More generous unemployment benefits are associated with a lower likelihood to vote for the far right among unemployed individuals;

H1(b) More generous pension benefits are associated with a lower likelihood to vote for the far right among retired individuals;

H1(c) More generous disability benefits are associated with a lower likelihood to vote for the far right among disabled or permanently sick individuals;

H1(d) More generous childcare benefits are associated with a lower likelihood to vote for the far right among individuals with children.

By contrast to compensatory policies, protective policies reduce and/or prevent risks from occurring in the first place. With regards to EPL, a substantial body of literature argues that EPL protects permanent workers from the risk of dismissal, which allows them to negotiate better salaries and working conditions (Saint-Paul 2000, Rueda 2007, Emmenegger *et al.*

2012). It is less clear how EPL may affect those outside the specific high-risk group, as it is both plausible that they may reduce or exacerbate the risks other groups face. On the one hand, the insider-outsider and dualisation literatures (e.g. Rueda 2007, Emmenegger *et al.* 2012; Vlandas 2020) posit that it makes employers less willing to hire temporary and unemployed workers on permanent contracts, thereby making these individuals worse off. On the other hand, EPL could strengthen workers' bargaining powers with employers, thereby improving conditions of all workers (e.g. Tsakalatos 2004). Since the theoretical expectations are indeterminate, we focus our hypotheses on permanent contract employees who are directly affected by this policy:

H2. More protective EPL is associated with a lower likelihood to vote for the far right among individuals on a permanent contract

Second, with regards to minimum wages, their effect on overall and low skill employment is debated (Dolado *et al* 1996). While they tend to improve the wages of low- income workers (Card and Krueger 1995, Neumark and Wascher 2008), the direction and magnitude of their effect on other parts of the wage distribution is ambiguous. On the one hand, jobs on salary scales just above the minimum wages may also be paid more to retain the wage hierarchy among different workers (Flinn 2011). On the other hand, this effect is likely not large and hence minimum wage provisions tend to reduce inequality in the bottom part of the wage distribution (Manning and Smith 2016; DiNardo, Fortin and Lemieux 1996; Lee 1999). Since the effect of minimum wages on non-low income workers is indeterminate, we limit our theoretical predictions regarding minimum wage regulations to their impact on the propensity of low- income workers to vote for the far right:

H3. More generous minimum wages are associated with a lower likelihood to vote for the far right among low- income individuals.

Data and methods

In order to test these hypotheses, we merge data from seven waves (2002-2016) of the ESS with national level welfare state policy datasets. Given that little social policy data is available post-2016, the inclusion of the eighth wave (2018) would make no difference to our results. Using the last vote in national election variable in the ESS data we can identify far right voters.

Consistent with a growing body of literature that uses the ‘far right’ classification (see Lucassen and Lubbers 2012, Mudde 2019; Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2020; Stockemer et al 2020), we use this term to refer to parties that all adopt authoritarianism, populism and nationalism (Mudde 2007) in their programmatic agendas. All far right parties focus on the cohesion and homogeneity of the nation, and identify a conflict between in-groups and out-groups (Mudde 2007). Debates about entitlement to national membership speak directly to the immigration issue: far right parties frame immigrants as a threat to various dimensions of national cohesion (e.g. Lucassen and Lubbers 2012) and thus compete by emphasising extreme positions on immigration (Ivarsflaten 2008; Immerzeel et al. 2015). Their repeated emphasis on this issue over time has led to an established association of immigration with far right parties (van Spagne 2010).

Their ‘ownership’ of the immigration issue (Lucassen and Lubbers 2012; Van Spagne 2010; Van De Brug and Fennema 2007) is precisely what distinguishes far right parties from other party families. They offer nationalist solutions to *all* socio-economic problems (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2016), and share a common insistence that societal issues must be addressed by policies that prioritise the in-group over the out-group. They differ, however, in terms of their degree of extremism and the extent to which they adopt violence and espouse democratic principles (Mudde 2007; Golder 2016). The ‘far right’ umbrella term

allows us to group them together while at the same time taking into account these differences (Golder 2016). Our classification is also in line with research in the field that adopts different terminology- for example ‘radical right’- but examines a similar set of parties (for example, Immerzeel et al 2015 and Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018 use the term ‘radical right’ but incorporate both radical and extreme variants in their analysis, including for example the radical PVV and FPÖ as well as the more extreme BNP and NPD, as we do).

In terms of country coverage, we follow previous literature in including only Western European countries (Kriesi 1998) with adequate information on far- right-wing party preferences (Lucassen and Lubbers 2012) and non-zero support for far right parties (Arzheimer 2009) in our analysis. In total, our analysis includes 19 far right parties in 14 countries⁵. Our dependent variable is a dummy variable coded 1 for respondents who voted for a far right party at the last national election, and 0 otherwise.

Moreover, we want to identify key characteristics of individuals that could expose them to different forms of insecurity and as a result affect their voting behaviour. Following our theoretical discussion above, we create a series of individual level identifiers. Specifically, we create dummy variables that respectively take value 1 if the respondent is unemployed, a pensioner (retired), on a low income, permanently sick or disabled, has children living at home, or is on permanent contract; and 0 otherwise.

Next, we merge this individual level data with a range of national level welfare state policies at the country-wave level that could moderate the impact of social group insecurity on far right party support. Specifically, we include variables that capture unemployment, pension and sickness benefit replacement rates, respectively, spending on family benefits as percentage of GDP, and the presence and level of minimum wage regulation. Each social policy observation is matched to the time of the last election in which the respondent voted.

⁵ See section A.1 in appendix for a list of parties and countries and the distribution of far right party support in our sample.

Precise definitions, sources and descriptive statistics are presented in appendix A1. We use multilevel random intercepts logistic regressions to estimate the impact of belonging to a particular risk group on far right voting, *conditional* on the generosity of the welfare state policy targeting that particular group. The probability of the occurrence of a response (voting for a far right party) is predicted via a logit link function by a set of variables that vary across individuals.

Results

Before presenting and discussing our results on the interaction effects between social groups and social policies, we first present results with individual level controls, and show how these change when inserting a measure of generosity for one policy at a time in the regression (Figure 1, for specific results see section A2.1 in appendix). In line with previous literature, we find that young, male respondents with low education and in low skill occupations (clerk, service and elementary workers) are more likely to vote for the far right. The effects of being on a low income or being unemployed are positive, but statistically significant only in certain specifications, consistent with our argument that these are conditional on policies.

With respect to welfare state policies, we find that unemployment benefits, EPL, sickness and family benefits are all negatively associated with support for the far right, while pension benefits and minimum wage regulations are not statistically significant. This average statistically significant effect is consistent with the notion that these policies compensate and protect at least certain social groups in the electorate, without making other social groups more likely to vote for the far right. This makes sense for compensation policies since they provide compensation for people where the risk has been realised (e.g. they are unemployed) and social insurance against the risk being realised to others (e.g. insurance against becoming

unemployed). For protective regulatory EPL, the overall negative effect suggests that EPL protects permanent workers but does not harm temporary workers. We empirically unpack, and discuss the group specific effects of social policies in the next paragraphs.

We now discuss our empirical results concerning the mediating role of welfare state policies⁶ on how different social groups vote for the far right, separating our discussion between compensatory and protective policies. All models control for same variables as before and the results concerning interaction effects are broadly consistent with our expectations.⁷

<Figure 1 about here>

Compensation policies

First, in support of H1(a), the unemployed are less likely to vote for far right parties when unemployment benefit replacement rates are generous, and we note that this effect is much stronger than for the employed (Figure 2a). At the lowest level of unemployment benefits in the sample the predicted probability of an unemployed respondent voting for the far right is almost 25%, while it is below 15% for the employed. At the highest level, the probability of being unemployed and employed become indistinguishable. Plotting the marginal effect of being unemployed conditional on the level of unemployment benefits confirms that the average marginal effect of being unemployed is positive and significant below a certain threshold but becomes insignificant beyond a certain point (see section A4.1 in appendix).

One problem with the replacement rate is that it does not capture how many people are actually covered by unemployment benefits. If we reproduce the analysis with a variable that combines the replacement rate with the coverage rate, the results are even clearer and hold at the 5% level. Restricting the analysis to individuals who hold anti-immigration attitudes

⁶ See section A1.4 in appendix for histograms of these variables.

⁷ The full results for all variables are shown in section A3 of the appendix – but note that the interaction effects can only be interpreted from the interaction plots shown in section A4.

reveals a similar picture but with both unemployed and employed expressing higher support for far right parties (section A4.2 in appendix).

Reproducing the analysis for the case of individuals who have in the past been unemployed for more than 3 months yields crisper results (Figure 2b). The marginal effects also now have smaller confidence intervals, and consistent with our expectations this effect also falls with the generosity of unemployment benefits (section A4.3 in appendix), regardless of whether the sample has pro-immigration or anti-immigration attitudes and whether we incorporate the coverage rate (sections A4.4 and A4.5 in appendix). This individual level finding is consistent with previous research, which has shown that the impact of unemployment on national votes for far right parties in both European and national-level elections is conditional on the level of unemployment benefits (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas, 2016, 2018).

Second, the interaction between social risk groups and social policies in the case of pensioners is consistent with our expectations, confirming H1(b): more generous standard pension replacement rates reduce the predicted probability of voting for the far right among retired individuals (Figure 2c). At the lowest level of replacement rate, the probabilities for both retired and non-retired individuals are very similar: about 27% for a retired individual and 25% for a non-retired individual. When pensions are very generous, the probability falls for pensioners but remains stable for non-retired individuals. In fact, the probability is then lower for retired individuals consistent with the notion that when they have generous pensions, most retired people experience low levels of insecurity as many of them have accumulated assets of various kinds (cf. Vlandas 2018).

However, the difference between the two groups is not large and it is only statistically different at high levels of generosity, where pensioners become less likely to vote for far right than workers (section A4.6 in appendix). Note that excluding Scandinavian countries from

the sample and accounting for coverage of pension policies does not change these results (section A4.7).

Third, disabled and permanently sick respondents are indeed more likely to vote for the far right and the results concerning the effect of policies are consistent with our expectations (H1(c)). We also find that as sickness replacement rates increase, the difference in the predicted probability of support between disabled and/or permanently sick individuals on the one hand, and non-disabled and non-sick individuals on the other hand, shrinks and eventually becomes substantively indistinguishable (Figure 2d). This effect remains statistically significant throughout at both 10% and 5% significance level, and as with the case of unemployment benefits, we can combine the replacement rate with the coverage rate and the results remain the same (section A4.11 in appendix). Equally, restricting the sample to those with anti-immigration attitudes does not change the results (section A4.12 in appendix).

Fourth, our results confirm H1(d). Individuals with children are more likely to vote for far right parties when spending on families is below a certain threshold (about 0.8% of GDP), while beyond that level they become less likely to vote for these parties than individuals with no children (Figure 2e). We note however that the differences between individuals with and without children are small, especially in light of the overall strong reducing effect of family policies. The average marginal effect of having children is positive, but not statistically significant below a certain threshold, and then actually becomes negative and statistically significant above that threshold. One possible interpretation of this result is that in countries with extensive family policies, having children may be capturing the fact that the most socially excluded individuals may not have children. If we capture the ‘need’ for policies by weighing the spending on family policies by the percentage of the population with children in that country, the results become more encouraging: the effect of having children is positive

and significant at the 10% level but becomes negative beyond a certain level (section A4.13 in appendix).

<Figure 2 about here>

Protective policies

First, consistent with H2(a), we find that permanent workers are less likely to vote for far right parties when EPL is more protective and reduces their (perceived) sense of the risk of losing their job. Recall that we had indeterminate expectations concerning the effect of EPL on temporary workers because while some literature argues that EPL protects all workers (e.g. Tsakalatos 2004), others have argued that this hurts temporary workers (see Emmenegger et al 2012 for a summary of these debates). We nevertheless explore this question empirically. Our results support the former contention since stricter EPL is also associated with lower support for far right among temporary workers (Figure 3a). Surprisingly, when EPL is not strict, permanent workers are more likely to vote for the far right and it is only beyond a certain level of EPL that they become less likely than temporary workers to support the far right. This effect remains when excluding Scandinavian countries that have strong unions who protect workers even if EPL might be low and when distinguishing between permanent, temporary and no contracts.

Second, consistent with H3(a) the probability of voting for the far right is lower for low income individuals in countries with minimum wage provisions (Figure 3b). Recall that the effect on workers in other parts of the income distribution was indeterminate but we nevertheless subject this question to empirical exploration: if employers are less able to pay other workers more as a result of minimum wage regulations then other workers will support the far right more; but if high minimum wages ‘trickle up’ then their presence will be associated with lower far right party support across all parts of the income distribution. We

find evidence in support of the latter scenario since the probability of voting for the far right falls also for non-low income workers when minimum wages are regulated.

When plotting the marginal effect of being on a low income conditional on minimum income provisions, it is noteworthy however, that we do not find statistically significant differences between low and non-low income workers in the full sample. Our results are similar if we use minimum wage levels rather than the presence of the binary variable capturing the presence of minimum wages (section A4.8 in appendix). When excluding Scandinavian countries, which often have no statutory minimum wages but have strong unions enforcing protective wage agreements, we do find that when minimum wages regulations are absent or their levels are low, then low income workers are more likely to vote for the far right than workers in the rest of the income distribution (section A4.9 in appendix). The results are similar if we include all countries but restrict the analysis to individuals with anti-immigration attitudes (section A4.10 in appendix).

<Figure 3 about here>

Overall, our results confirm that welfare state policies play an important role in moderating the insecurities that trigger far right party support among different social groups. As such, they echo previous findings in the few studies that have considered the role of welfare state policies (Swank and Betz 2003, Arzheimer 2009: 28, Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2016; Vlandas and Halikiopoulou 2018). Our argument is also consistent with a slowly emerging literature on the impact of austerity on dissatisfaction and political behaviour (e.g. Hubscher, Sattler and Wagner 2019).

Discussion and conclusion

This article has emphasised the importance of the complex interplay between the various social risks that individuals face, the generosity of welfare state policies in place to address these risks, and voting behaviour. Using a combination of a large cross-national survey dataset and data on welfare state policies, we have carried out a series of multilevel logistic regressions to test a range of hypotheses about the extent to which welfare state policies moderate the insecurities that drive particular social groups to vote for the far right. Our empirical findings suggest that social policies reduce support for the far right among individuals exposed to high social risks including the unemployed, pensioners, low-income workers, employees on temporary contracts, individuals in large families and individuals who are disabled/ permanently sick.

Our findings speak to the debate on whether, and if so how, socio-economic risks matter for explaining the success of far right parties. By integrating the literatures on the political relevance of social policies and far right voting we provide an innovative perspective which suggests that support for the far right among several 'at risk' groups is conditioned by the generosity of the policies that address their needs. Specifically, our contribution is twofold.

First, we broaden the conceptualisation of what it means to face economic and social risks beyond the traditional focus on unemployment. Complementing literature, which suggests that social policy preferences cut across income distribution lines, we show that economic insecurity is a matter of relative, rather than absolute deprivation. Indeed, not only low-income and/ or working class individuals are economically insecure. This is consistent with the finding that perceptions of relative economic decline, rather than absolute impoverishment, drive support for the far right (Kurer 2020). Welfare state policies may serve as an effective remedy for far right party support precisely because they deter not only the most vulnerable, but a broad range of distinct social groups thus preventing the far right from forging voter alliances and extending support beyond its secure voting base.

Second, we consider the importance of an intermediate level of analysis that complements demand and supply-side perspectives by focusing on the ways in which compensation and protection mechanisms may serve to shape voting behaviour. By showing that economically 'at risk' voters do not always vote for the far right, but rather whether they do depends on the generosity of relevant social policies, we provide an important comparative perspective on the debate on the economic drivers of far right voting. One important implication of our argument is that societal anxieties in themselves are not enough to explain under what circumstances insecure people are more or less likely to vote for far right parties. If we are right, the answer also lies in institutions. Governments can play a significant role in shaping political outcomes based on the policies that they implement.

This also raises new questions that should be addressed in future research. More work is needed on the interplay between secure and insecure groups and the policies that target them in different countries and regions. Other groups such as those affected by automation (see e.g. Gingrich 2019) and/or climate change can also be expected to be insecure and more work is needed to explore which, if any, policies can mitigate this insecurity and hence affect their support for far right parties.

Moreover, our analysis has theorised, and empirically substantiated, the importance of compensatory social policies in reducing costs for the directly affected group once the risk has been realised. However, in this article we have not theorised the effect of these policies on other (lower) risk groups and only provided a cursory empirical examination for these lower risk groups. Future research could expand on our study by formulating hypotheses about indirectly affected groups- for example the effect of unemployment benefits on working class individuals who fear losing the job, or those close to retirement age who are most concerned about their future pension income.

Future research should also address the potential unintended consequences of social policies,

and by extension their differentiated effect on the voting behaviour of distinct social groups. This is consistent with research that has shown that individuals tend to be unfavourable to policies from which they do not benefit themselves (Busemeyer and Neumanns 2017). For instance, funding policies through taxation could negatively affect higher income individuals and/or regulations might negatively affect small employers who therefore may be averse to such policies. The effect may be particularly pronounced within the context of the so-called ‘deservingness’ or ‘selective solidarity’ debate: national insiders often oppose non-native access to welfare policies. Individuals with stronger anti-immigrant attitudes (Arndt and Thomsen 2019), or those exposed to inequality (Magni 2020) tend to be supportive of redistribution only when it benefits native-born citizens and as such prefer dualistic over universal welfare states. These complex effects may impact on the voting behaviour of different groups differently: it is possible that while social policies reduce the likelihood of some insecure groups to vote for the far right, they may increase this likelihood among other groups.

Finally, what about insecure groups that vote for populist, or niche parties located on the left of the political spectrum? This alludes to the broader puzzle of why some insecure groups opt for the far right while others opt for the far left. Future work is needed to disentangle these distinct channels and identify whether specific social policies have a similar or different effect when it comes to voting for left-wing parties. While our article has highlighted the importance of compensation and protection in mediating the far right vote, it is important to develop a bigger picture that explains the link between social policies and voting patterns for various anti-establishment or niche parties, especially at a time of heightened economic insecurity and political upheaval.

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