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Who backs universities? Public attitudes and contemporary backlash

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether rising political critiques of higher education reflect a broader public backlash against universities in advanced democracies. Drawing on an original five-country survey – including observational and experimental components – it investigates three questions: who is more critical of universities, where are such divisions sharper, and why do citizens hold these views? The results show that while overall support for universities remains widespread there are emerging divides structured by cultural orientations. Socially conservative voters, particularly in the United States and United Kingdom, are more sceptical of universities' social and cultural roles, but they do not reject them wholesale. Experimental evidence reveals no generalised hostility: across contexts, most respondents respond more to positive over negative arguments about universities, although social conservatives adopt more selective, less 'bundled' positions than liberals. The findings suggest that ideological divides are real but asymmetrical, pointing to the critical role of different political contexts in shaping backlash.

KEYWORDS

Higher education; universities; political backlash; public attitudes

1. Introduction

Nowhere is the declining optimism that Seitzer and Besche-Truthe highlight in their introduction more palpable than around university education. In the 1990s and 2000s, international organisations such as UNESCO (2009) and the OECD (2008) championed expanding university access, and policymakers followed suit. Global tertiary enrolment nearly doubled during this period (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2024; Vincent-Lancrin 2017). Universities embodied both economic hopes, providing training skills for the knowledge economy, and cultural aspirations, projecting cosmopolitan values (Stichweh 2023).

In recent years, however, the tide has seemingly turned. Universities have become symbolic battlegrounds in a 'post-liberal' moment. In the United States, the second Trump administration has cut funding for science and higher education (Mallapaty

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2025). In the UK, multiple universities face deep financial precarity (Adams 2025). And even in continental Europe, where funding remains more stable, right-populist parties have become vocal critics of them (Berg, Jungblut, and Jupskås 2023). In October 2024, entrepreneur and influencer Elon Musk, himself a product of several global universities, took to his platform X to declare that 'college is overrated.' What remains unclear is whether this elite-driven critique reflects broader public opinion, and more generally, how citizens think about universities.

This paper addresses three interlinked questions: *who* is critical of universities, *where* is there more backlash, and *why* are some voters more sceptical? We know very little about the answers to these questions: there is little systematic cross-national data on different dimensions of attitudes to universities, and few studies that look to examine how people reason about them. This paper aims to make a descriptive contribution to the literature, tracing the nature and extent of backlash, but it also aims to put this descriptive contribution into a larger theoretical context.

Existing scholarship on public attitudes towards universities often emphasises a 'bottom up' material or cultural reasoning, arguing that individuals have different interests or values that shape how they think about them. Material perspectives highlight the distributive stakes of university-based education: universities deliver direct benefits to some voters, such as middle-class families, professionals, and students, while imposing costs on others through taxation (Ansell 2008). In this view, voters accept or reject universities based on their underlying interests, and backlash emerges among those who benefit less from universities, particularly when the returns to a degree decline or become more unequally distributed. Cultural perspectives, by contrast, stress symbolic conflict. As political competition has become more strongly associated with identities linked to the knowledge economy, which are themselves increasingly based around education, more conservative voters see universities as embodying the liberal, cosmopolitan values that they reject. Bornschier et al. (2024) show that these cleavages are emerging in most advanced democracies, but that their strength varies.

This paper draws on this work but advances a more 'top down' perspective. Building on neo-institutionalist work, I argue that current debates over universities reflect the erosion of an older, bundled liberal logic in which 'all good things go together.' Bundling implies that universities are simultaneously good for growth, social mobility, and cultural progress – these arguments covary. Instead, we may be seeing an erosion that is uneven, shaped both by national context and varied elite rhetoric. In line with more cultural interpretations, I expect voters with different ideological stances to adopt different positions towards universities, but that socially liberal voters possess a clearer normative and cultural script for evaluating universities than socially conservative voters. In the US, where the politicisation of universities has been most pronounced, and elite cues are stronger, I expect more symmetric polarisation.

To evaluate these arguments, I draw on an original five-country observational survey (US, UK, France, Germany, Sweden) that examines the correlates of varied preferences for universities and a four-country experimental design (US, UK, France, Germany) that treats respondents to statements that vary in valence (positive/negative) and rationale (material benefits, economic growth, cultural values, fairness).

The analysis yields three key findings that largely confirm my expectations, albeit not entirely. First, the observational analysis shows that respondents are divided in their

assessments of universities' economic, social, and cultural value. Material variables, and surprisingly, education itself exert a relatively modest influence. Instead, ideological orientation emerges as a stronger predictor: socially conservative respondents are indeed more sceptical, especially in the US, UK, and to a lesser extent Sweden.

Yet the experimental results complicate a simple 'cultural backlash' narrative. A second key result is that across countries, most respondents respond more to positive than negative rationales. Social conservatives are less convinced by arguments for expansion, but they are not uniformly hostile. In the European cases, they respond positively to fairness-based arguments about supporting young people.

Third, these patterns suggest that social conservatives are not the mirror image of social liberals: they often hold less bundled views of higher education's value, particularly outside the US. These findings suggest that broad coalitions for supporting universities remain viable in the current moment but depend on how elites articulate and construct their value.

2. A backlash against universities?

To date, most cross-national survey research shows widespread public support for government funding of universities (Busemeyer, Garritzmann, and Neimanns 2020). Multiple waves of the International Social Survey Project (1990–2016) demonstrate that voters across advanced democracies report high and stable support for public responsibility in student funding, with over 85% consistently affirming a government role in funding students.

Yet more recent work questions how secure this seeming consensus is. In the US, polling by Pew Research shows that there is a growing partisan divide in the perceived economic and social value of higher education (Parker 2019), alongside a more general decline in confidence in universities (Brenan 2023). In the UK, confidence in universities remains relatively high, but in 2022 roughly one in five respondents said universities are a 'waste of time,' and concerns about free speech have grown (HEPI 2022). Across Europe, voters who support right-populist parties tend to be more sceptical about education generally, particularly universities (Rathgeb and Busemeyer 2022). Even in Germany, where public support for free tuition is high (Lergetporer, Werner, and Woessmann 2017), far-right voters, a growing electoral group, express greater scepticism toward universities (Busemeyer et al. 2022).

This work suggests the need to both unpack different dimensions of voters' preferences over universities and look at how different types of voters evaluate them. To this end, we need a model of *who, where* and *what reasons* are likely to motivate more or less support. Much existing research approaches these questions from the 'bottom up,' linking individual material or ideological correlates to varied rationales of support. By contrast, I argue for a partially 'top down' perspective: voters hold diverse beliefs about the benefits of universities that may be more or less bundled, meaning, (a) linked to their underlying interests or ideology and (b) covarying.

One cluster of approaches to understanding attitudes toward universities conceptualises demand for expansion or funding in terms of individuals' material interests, which largely follow from their relationship to the education system. Ansell (2008) argues that higher education spending functions as a future-oriented redistributive transfer. Where

access is limited, transfers are primarily intra-elite (from old to young); as access expands, funding increasingly benefits students from less-educated families, creating both intergenerational and cross-class transfers. Support should thus be higher among higher-income and higher-education groups, but this gradient should flatten as access expands. Systems with broader access, such as mass-education systems with tuition-free provision (e.g. France, Sweden), will likely sustain a wider base of support than systems where access is restricted by academic (Germany) or financial (US, UK) barriers.

This literature links the 'why' to the 'who,' and 'where': material rationales should follow from material interests, with fewer cultural divides, and individuals will respond primarily to positive or negative valence based on these interests.

> H1a (Who): Individuals with higher incomes and levels of education will be more positive towards universities, especially their economic role.
>
> H1b (Where): Income/education-based divisions in attitudes towards universities, especially their economic and equalizing role, will be higher in countries with less mass-access or tuition-dependent systems than in non-selective or low-tuition systems.
>
> H1c (Why): Individuals will be relatively more responsive to economic rationales, compared to cultural rationales, but should primarily respond to positive or negative valence based on their existing material interests.

A second cluster emphasises broader cultural divides in the knowledge economy, increasingly organised around values of 'universalism and particularism' (Bornschier et al. 2024). As the 'cultural backlash' identified by Norris and Inglehart (2019) has become associated with economic positions defined by education, universities have emerged as signifiers of particular group and cultural identities.

While recent US attacks on universities have centred on progressive student movements, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, and new pedagogies, Cramer (2016) documents a longer-standing resentment towards them rooted in a sense of exclusion based on local identities. Donald Trump, and others, have mobilised gendered, racialised, and class-based notions of the 'white working class' in opposition to both marginalised groups and college-educated elites (Lamont, Park, and Ayala-Hurtado 2017). Häusermann et al. (2022) show that this shift is not confined to the US: European survey data reveal a broader cultural realignment, with educated professionals increasingly embracing universalistic values aligned with future-oriented policies while working class voters adopt more particularistic preferences that include less relative support for education. Zollinger (2024) shows in her study of Swiss voters that 'university education' is part of a package of group identifiers that voters feel close or distant to depending on their general cultural orientation, something that Bornschier et al. (2024) demonstrate more generally across Europe. Cultural divides are crystallizing into group identities, and potentially even new social cleavages, with universities serving as markers of in-groups and out-groups.

While not directly hypothesising cross-national differences, Bornschier et al. (2024) show some variation in the strength of these divides across party systems, a finding that overlaps with the more 'top down' approach I advance below. They argue that cultural realignment is more pronounced in some countries, such as France, relative to Germany or the UK, with more mobilised party conflict around new cleavages.

This work argues that individuals' cultural values will shape their views about universities (net of their material interests). Differences should be strongest for beliefs about the cultural value of universities, but cultural values can also structure a range of beliefs. Hurst, Simon, and Ricks (2024), in the United States, for instance, find that partisan voters diverge sharply in their perceptions of the economic returns of higher education, with Republicans overestimating the economic costs and underestimating benefits of universities. Thus, we might expect voters to respond strongly to positive/negative valence based on their underlying ideology, but with some prioritisation of cultural rationales.

Both the material and cultural perspectives suggest that those with a university education should support universities, in part because their material interests intersect with their cultural values (Hooghe and Marks 2025, Garritzmann this special issue). While the material and cultural perspectives thus partly overlap in the 'who' question, they differ in how they understand the rationales that individuals draw on, the former emphasising personal or socio-economic benefits, and the latter cultural benefits, and the 'where' question, with the former suggesting more responsiveness to university institutions and labour markets and the latter the broader politicisation of cultural questions.

> H2a (Who): Individuals with more socially liberal attitudes will be more supportive of universities, particularly their cultural roles.
>
> H2b (Where): Cultural divisions in attitudes, especially on their cultural role, will be higher in countries with a longer history of mobilized far-right parties/movements.
>
> H2c (Why): Individuals will be relatively more responsive to cultural rationales, compared to economic rationales, but should primarily respond to positive or negative valence based on their existing cultural values.

These bottom-up approaches contrast with a more global sociological understanding of education. World-systems theorists argue that education policies are shaped by global economic structures, which for decades promoted the idea of 'human capital' as having open-ended transformative potential (Schofer and Meyer 2005). Countries converged on similar higher education policies, partly reflecting shared notions of modern, legitimate governance. This shift gave rise to a widely diffused 'social investment' narrative, which presented higher education as a path to growth, equity, and more cosmopolitan and tolerant societies (Garritzmann, Häusermann, and Palier 2022; Hemerijck 2015, 2018).

This logic links together both economic and cultural rationales, along with broader norms of social fairness. A large body of research demonstrates that beliefs about fairness are important predictors of attitudes toward the state (Cavaillé 2023). Voters with a university education tend to see education as a legitimate mechanism of social mobility, with education itself fostering more universalistic values, especially through exposure to humanistic subjects (Hooghe, Marks, and Kamphorst 2024), which closely associate it with norms about fair opportunities. Historically, political and educational elites bundled together these diverse rationales for supporting universities.

As Furuta, Meyer, and Bromley (2023) argue, however, there has been a backlash against this narrative, including challenges to core assumptions of liberal individualism, which question the cultural, economic and social value of universities. Unlike the shared and relatively uniform global norms promoting higher education, the supply of anti-university rhetoric is more fragmented, varied, and diffuse.

In Europe, far-right parties have historically taken diverse positions on education, including university education (Giudici 2020). In the contemporary moment, some far right parties, such as the PVV in the Netherlands, have supported restricting international student numbers and English-language instruction, as well as cutting subsidies for arts and culture (Matthews 2024). Many far-right parties have emphasised expanding vocational training and critiqued universities as bastions of liberal student culture and protest, but without necessarily opposing public funding for higher education itself (Berg, Jungblut, and Jupskås 2023; Dixon 2025). At the same time, challenges have also come from the political centre and left. For example, in Denmark, the 2022–2026 Social Democratic government pursued 'sector rightsizing' reforms, limiting university growth relative to vocational institutions, while maintaining support for public funding. These debates, however, are only part of the larger set of political discussions regarding universities, which in Europe, also continue to focus on questions of administrative centralisation, funding, support for students, and internationalisation (e.g. Jungblut and Dobbins 2023).

In the United States, while similar debates on governance exist, conservative movements have more extensively targeted both the cultural and economic roles of universities over the last decade. On the cultural side, critics frame universities as distant and hostile institutions (Grossmann and Hopkins 2024), with attacks directed at progressive student movements, DEI initiatives, and new pedagogical approaches (Shepherd 2023). On the economic side, they have questioned whether universities genuinely generate human capital. Libertarian economist Caplan (2019), for instance, in an influential book argues that higher education is largely 'a waste of time and money,' functioning more as credentialism than as skill formation.

These differences suggest that, especially outside of the US, the 'post-liberal' critique of universities is still emergent. Citizens in many European countries are exposed both to cultural arguments against universities and to protectionist claims, such as the need to shield domestic students from foreign competitors (Gift and Lastra 2023), but these critiques are less consistently articulated than in the US and less dominant in public debate.

Work on public opinion has long shown voters interpret information and make political judgements based in their party affiliation and the cues that parties provide (Bolsen, Druckman, and Cook 2014). This process means that both the 'bundling' of beliefs may be lower where elite cues are more divided. I conceptualise bunding as involving two components, (a) the connection between cultural identities and beliefs and (b) the interconnection of different positive or negative rationes – i.e. a spillover from cultural beliefs about universities to beliefs about their economic value. Both processes depend in part on how elite cues emerge.

Building on the cultural backlash framework (H2a), I hypothesise that ideology is likely to better predict attitudes toward higher education than material interests but that it operates in tandem with top-down cues. The above discussion suggests that ideological gaps should be largest in the United States, and more limited in Europe. In both cases, however, voters are not equally exposed to coherent positive and negative 'scripts'. Voters have access to longstanding arguments that bundle the social, economic and cultural value of universities together. Those that, for ideological reasons, are positive towards universities, are more likely to treat these rationales as part of a single positive argument. Conservative voters, by contrast, are more likely to take more differentiated

positions, supporting certain rationales for universities while rejecting others (e.g. cultural or cosmopolitan claims) and thus respond less uniformly to positive or negative claims.

H3a (Who): Individuals with more socially liberal attitudes will be more supportive of universities' economic, social, and cultural roles.

H3b (Where): The size and coherence of these divides will depend on the strength of post-liberal anti-university 'scripts' (i.e. more pronounced in the US).

H3c (Why): Conservative voters will exhibit more differentiated attitudes, endorsing some positive rationales for universities while rejecting others, whereas liberal voters will respond more uniformly to positive arguments.

3. Observational study

To investigate H1a – H3a and H1b – H3b, I fielded an original five-country observational survey (US, UK, Germany, France, Sweden) to assess the individual correlates of beliefs about universities across institutional and political contexts. To examine H3a – H3c, which concern how respondents think about universities, I implemented an experimental component (in US, UK, Germany, France) that manipulated both the *valence* (positive/negative) and *rationale* (material, economic, cultural, fairness) of arguments for university expansion.

In what follows, I discuss the observational study and its results, which address the 'who' and 'where' questions, before turning, in the penultimate section, to the experiment, and the 'why' question.

3.1. Approach

The survey was fielded by YouGov in late October 2024. The combined survey and experiment involved 2500–2,700 respondents aged 18 + in the US, UK, France, and Germany, and 1,500 respondents in Sweden. Yougov applied quotas for education, age, and gender, and the online appendix reports the sample composition. Respondents first answered background questions about their own educational experiences, parental background, and other demographics, followed by a battery of attitudinal items on education policy, including attitudes towards universities.

Although the number of country cases is insufficient for systematic cross-national comparison, I chose the five countries to capture meaningful institutional variation. The US and UK feature tuition-dependent financing and relatively high participation in universities. Sweden offers mass access without tuition fees. By contrast, Germany, continues to offer strong vocational pathways, with academic universities less massified. France combines elite institutions (Grandes Écoles) with a more massified university sector, both tuition free.

These countries also differ in their degree of cultural polarisation, with longer-standing far-right mobilisation in France (and arguably the US) than elsewhere in Europe, although in Sweden, Germany, and the UK far-right parties have gained support in recent years. Finally, as outlined above, they differ in the coherence of the critique to universities, with more legislative and public efforts targeting them in the United States than in the other countries.

To test the hypotheses, I conduct three descriptive analyses, examining: (1) mean attitudes toward universities, (2) the individual correlates of beliefs, and (3) the relative magnitude of income and culture-based effects across countries.

To measure beliefs about universities, half of respondents (and all Swedish respondents) were asked the following four items, allowing responses on 5-point agree/disagree scales:

- 'We should encourage more young people to pursue vocational education and training rather than university and academic higher education.'
- 'Spending on universities benefits [country] businesses.'
- 'Increasing access to universities will reduce inequality in [country].'
- 'Universities produce graduates whose values are out of touch with regular people.'

These items look to disaggregate different components of beliefs about universities – rather than just support for expansion – allowing me to more carefully assess the link between individual material or ideological considerations and outcomes (H1a-H1c).

To examine the material and cultural correlates of beliefs, I draw on a range of measures. To measure income, I convert total household income into nationally specific in-sample deciles. I measure a respondent's education in terms of whether they have attained college degree (or equivalent) using a binary indicator of completing an ISCED-6 qualification (3/4 year post-secondary academic or university level vocational programmes). I also include a dummy for parental education, using the education level of their highest educated parent.

To measure cultural values, I draw on two commonly used measures of ideology that tap into more socially conservative attitudes: beliefs about the death penalty and young people. I dichotomise both, scoring those who agree or strongly agree that: 'For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence' and 'Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional values' as socially conservative. The results are similar if I draw on a single item, attitudes towards the death penalty (and thus exclude attitudes to young people), or a broader measure that includes economic conservatism and attitudes towards immigration.

In each analysis, I include demographic controls (age, gender), full time employment status, and a dummy for whether the respondent is a parent to a child under 18. In the US I include a dummy for if the respondent is Black, in the UK for non-white ethnicity (BAME), and in Sweden and Germany for immigrant status. Racial background is not available in France. All variables are recoded to run from 0-1. I also include a measure of positive school experiences, which draws on an index of items capturing individuals' perceptions of their school environment at age 15.[1] The online appendix shows the distribution of voters on each of these variables across countries. All analyses use survey weights matched to population age, gender, and educational distributions provided by Yougov.

For each attitudinal item, I regress the binary attitudinal variables on these covariates using logistic regression models with robust standard errors, focusing on whether material correlates or cultural beliefs correlate with responses across items.

Three questions thus guide the analysis: are the material and cultural correlates statistically and substantively significant; do their effects vary across attitudinal items in

theoretically expected ways; and do the effects differ across countries? The goal is not to create a direct 'horse race,' but to examine whether the patterns are more or less consistent with those articulated by H1a – H1c. If we observe consistent divides by cultural values across multiple outcomes, even when controlling for material and experiential factors, this will support the interpretation of a more culturally driven approach to university attitudes, and vice versa.

I then look at the gaps across material/culturally defined groups across context, looking at whether they are consistent with the claims of H2a-H2c. If we observe bigger gaps across groups of voters in some contexts compared to others, this would speak to potential theoretical variation in the 'where' questions.

3.2. Results

I start with examining mean respondent attitudes across the four attitudinal items. Figure 1 shows the share of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with each item across country. As positive responses on the 'vocational training' and 'out of touch' items demonstrate more scepticism of universities, whereas positive responses on the 'business' and 'inequality' items demonstrate more positive beliefs about it, I rescale the 'vocational' and 'out of touch' items so all items run from less to more positive towards universities.

Figure 1 demonstrates that there is widespread agreement on the need to prioritise vocational over academic education in all countries. There is much less agreement on the other items, with respondents split or leaning towards more negative beliefs. Under half of respondents think that spending on education benefits domestic businesses

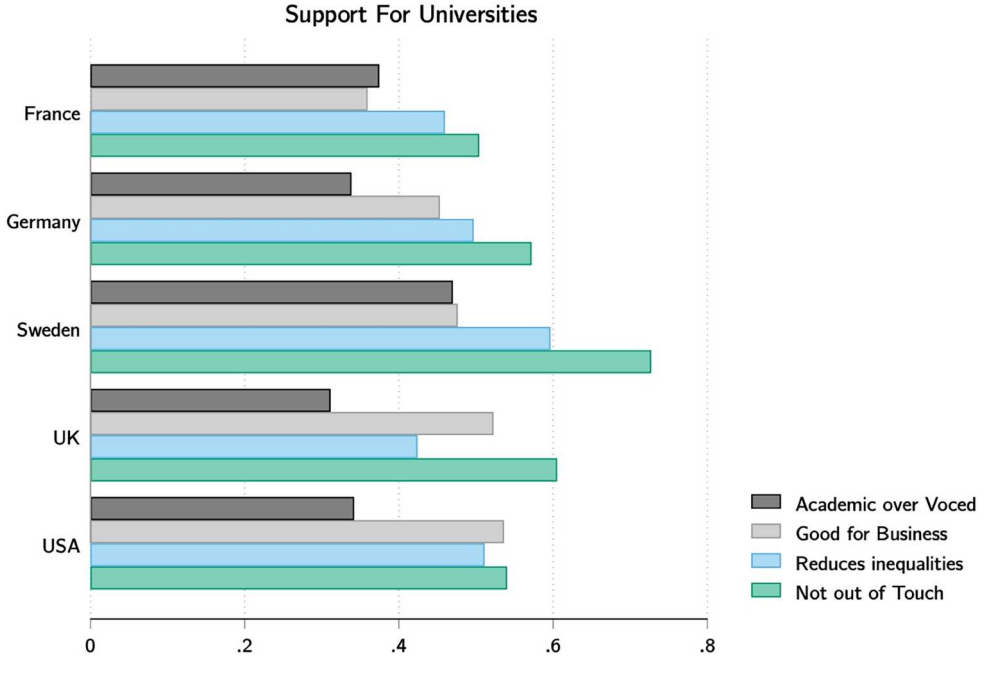

Figure 1. Share of respondents adopting a positive position towards universities.

or improves inequality. However, the majority of respondents also reject the idea that university graduates are out of touch, although around 40% do agree with this item in the US, France, Germany and UK. These results suggest less enthusiasm and more scepticism overall about the benefits of universities than demonstrated in earlier cross-national work, but do not show a uniform backlash against them.

Who is taking more or less positive positions on these items? I now turn to examining the individual correlates of attitudes. I again recode the vocational and 'out of touch' items so that all variables run from less to more supportive of universities. The online appendix includes the full regression results by country for each item, as well as the results from the pooled model.

To simplify, in Figure 2 I report the marginal effect of the three variables of interest, income, education and cultural values on predicted positive support for each item. If a material logic were dominant, we would expect income (and education) to be strong predictors of attitudes, particularly for beliefs about business and inequality that are linked to the distributive structure of education. If cultural values are more dominant, we would expect socially conservative ideology to be a strong predictor, especially for beliefs about universities being out of touch.

The evidence for the material logic, H1a, is largely in line with expectations, but relatively weak. When we pool across countries income predicts less relative support for academic training (over vocational), but as Figure 2 shows, income is only statistically significant in US and France. The same is true with beliefs about business. In Germany, Sweden and the UK income predicts beliefs that universities are good for business. In the pooled model, moving from the poorest to the richest respondent, controlling for all other covariates, increases beliefs that universities benefit business by about .1 (or

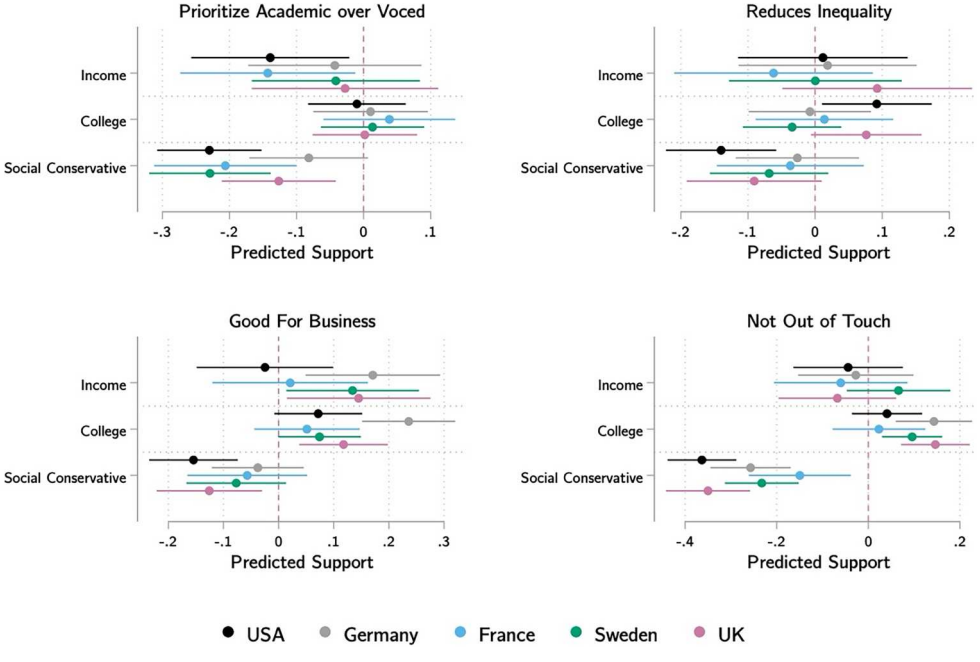

Figure 2. Individual correlates of attitudes.

1/5 of a standard deviation). Contra expectations, income does not have a consistent effect on attitudes towards inequality. As anticipated by the material logic then, those with a higher income are somewhat more likely to believe in the positive economic effects of universities, but they are not more likely to support them over vocational training or hold strong beliefs about inequality. We see some evidence for a material logic in shaping preferences, but the effects are relatively weak.

When we turn to the effects of having a university degree, we see that it is not a consistent predictor across all the items. In the pooled model, having a degree predicts more belief that universities reduce inequality and have positive effects for business, as well as less belief that graduates are out of touch. But these results are not consistently significant across countries and substantively not large. Given the attention to educational polarisation in the literature, these results are somewhat surprising. However, as each model controls for both income and ideological/cultural preferences (as well as parental background and school experiences), much of the education effect is being absorbed by its upstream or downstream correlates.

The evidence for H1b and H1c is stronger. Socially conservative voters prioritise vocational training and hold negative beliefs about the value of higher education for business in the pooled models, but the latter effects are not significant in France or Germany. Social conservatives generally are less likely to believe that increasing access to universities will reduce inequality, although again, these differences are also not significant in France and Germany. When we turn to cultural beliefs about higher education, we see, as expected, that socially conservative ideology is a strong and consistent predictor of beliefs that university graduates are 'out of touch.' Moving from the least to the most culturally conservative position reduces beliefs that university graduates are not out of touch (the reverse coded variable in Figure 2) by .27, or about half a standard deviation.

The appendix analysis shows that these differences map onto basic differences across partisan voters – with Trump voters in the US, Reform UK voters in the UK, Zemmour (but surprisingly, not Le Pen) voters in France, AfD voters in Germany and Sweden Democrat voters in Sweden – the more right-populist voters in our sample – taking more consistently sceptical views on all dimensions.

What do these results add up to? Generally, we see more evidence for strong cultural correlates of attitudes towards universities, social conservatism is a consistent predictor on each item in the pooled models and in many individual countries.

Figure 3 turns to investigating cross-national differences. It visualises the predicted response from the above analyses, this time interacting the countries with the social conservatism and income variables. This approach allows me to look at both the levels and gaps in support across groups, to see if differences track expectations of H2a-Hc.

The material logic (H1a) would predict lower support and bigger income gaps in the UK and US (and possibly Germany) given differences in anticipated material differences across groups in these contexts. The cultural perspective (H2b) would predict bigger gaps between conservative and liberal voters in France and the US, given the longer history of polarisation. While the 'top down' approach (H3b) would predict that the US should stand out in terms of cultural polarisation.

In looking at Figure 3, several points are striking. First, in nearly all country cases there are large gaps between voters based on cultural values, and smaller gaps based on income. This reaffirms the analysis from Figure 2, that, although not a direct horse race,

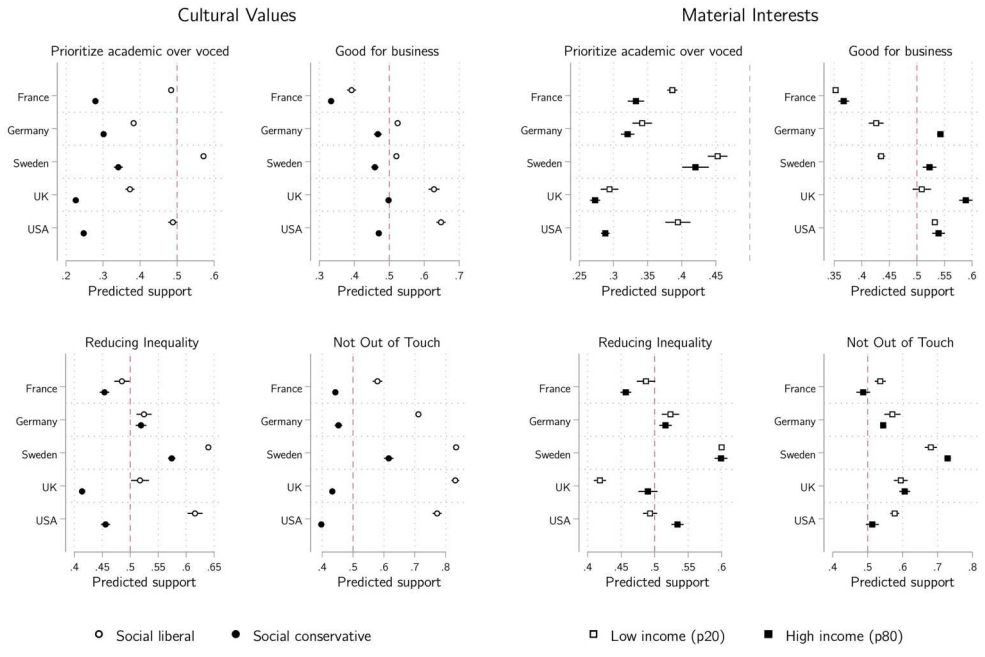

Figure 3. Individual correlates of attitudes by country.

cultural divisions in attitudes do appear to be stronger predictors than material ones in shaping views about universities.

Second, socially conservative voters are negative on average to universities, but except for the 'out of touch' item, they are also a heterogeneous group. This group often splits 50–50 on agree/disagree with the benefits of higher education, suggesting that while cultural divisions are on aggregate important, there is substantial variation in the way that culturally conservative (and liberal) voters interpret universities.

Third, these gaps among socially conservative and liberal voters are generally larger in the US and UK, particularly on the business and inequality items, and smaller in France and Germany. This finding is not in line with H2b, given France has the longest history of far-right mobilisation in the sample. Whether these differences reflect more recent trends in the other countries or an alternative logic is hard to tell with this cross-sectional analysis.

The results are more consistent with H3b, pointing to US exceptionalism, but not entirely so. The gaps between cultural liberals and conservatives are indeed largest in the US across all the items (with a significant interaction effect) suggesting a more general and coherent cultural polarisation in this case; but they are also large in the UK, and on some items, in Sweden.

4. Experimental results

The observational survey findings show that respondents' attitudes toward universities are shaped less by education level or income than by ideology, with notable cross-national differences in the degree of cultural polarisation. Yet these results alone

cannot reveal whether individuals evaluate different rationales for universities in distinct ways, or whether their views are bundled together in line with broader ideological scripts. We now know *who* is more supportive and *where* support is higher, but not *why* people are evaluating universities in varied ways. This latter question is both theoretically significant, because it speaks to competing models of preference formation, and substantively important, as it highlights the potential for building either broader or narrower coalitions around universities.

To probe this question, I embedded an experimental component in the above survey for four countries (US, UK, France, Germany). Half of respondents in these samples were routed to the following experiment, rather than the observational questions outlined above.

Respondents in the experimental arm of the survey were exposed to two arguments, which vary in valence (positive or negative) and rationale. Respondents were then asked to select which response they found the most convincing (or if they were equally convincing). This approach resembles a classic paired choice experiment, and respondents completed four rounds of it. Table 1 outlines the pairs of arguments.

These arguments were randomised, meaning that a respondent could be exposed to two positive or negative arguments, but there was a block on two arguments with similar wording in the same pairing group. The rationales varied on four dimensions, material benefits, economic growth, cultural values, and fairness. This design allows me to test a) whether individuals reason in a 'bundled' manner, uniformly accepting or rejecting positive/negative rationales, or whether they differentiate across types of arguments, and b) whether different groups of respondents were more or less responsive to varied rationales.

The logic for this design stems directly from the paper's top-down framing. If elite discourse has fractured the older liberal consensus, where universities were simultaneously justified on economic, fairness, and cultural grounds, we should expect citizens' responses to be uneven. Socially liberal voters, who have access to a coherent pro-university script,

Table 1. Pairs of arguments.

Group 1
<1> Attending university increases the wages and salaries of graduates relative to others, and expanding university funding is a good idea because it creates new opportunities for graduates.
<2> Attending university increases the wages and salaries of graduates relative to others, and expanding university funding is a bad idea because it limits new opportunities only to graduates.
Group 2
<3> Universities are part of the transition to a knowledge-based economy, and extending support for universities is a bad idea because there are better ways to secure economic growth.
<4> Universities are part of the transition to a knowledge-based economy, and extending support for universities is a good idea because it is the best way to secure economic growth.
Group 3
<5> Universities teach students new values and ways of thinking, and extending support for universities is a good because it devotes resources to teaching skills key for democratic citizenship.
<6> Universities teach students new values and ways of thinking, and extending support for universities is a bad idea because it devotes resources to teaching which is out of touch with how regular people think.
Group 4
<7> Most people believe that it is fair to provide free education to children aged 5–18, but extending more support for universities is a bad idea because young adults should be responsible for themselves.
<8> Most people believe that it is fair to provide free education to children aged 5–18, and extending support for universities is a good idea because young adults should receive the same support.

are likely to evaluate most positive arguments as convincing and reject most negative ones. By contrast, socially conservative voters, who lack a coherent alternative script may treat rationales more selectively. I thus am looking for relative responsiveness to a) valence and b) selectivity across rationales across ideological groups, as well as c) whether these patterns vary across countries.

I analyze the data using a conditional logit model, which amounts to dropping the 'equally convincing' responses – about half of all response options. A conditional logit compares the probability of selecting a given argument comparing withing paired groups. Each estimation is grouped by respondent, with clustered standard errors. Using a multinomial logit model that retains the three-level outcome structures, comparing the probability of selection (relative to non-selection) with the equal responses includes, produces relatively similar results (see appendix).

Figure 4 shows the results, with the material positive argument as the baseline category. It demonstrates that across all four countries, respondents were more likely to select positive over negative arguments. This reinforces the survey finding that there is no generalised 'backlash' against universities: negative cues are less persuasive than positive ones. Indeed, despite being more sceptical of universities in the observational analysis, nowhere do socially conservative voters display a clear preference for negative frames over positive ones. Their stance may be better characterised as selective or indifferent rather than hostile.

Overall, we see that in every country except Germany the interaction between positive valence and cultural liberalism is positive and significant (see online appendix): these

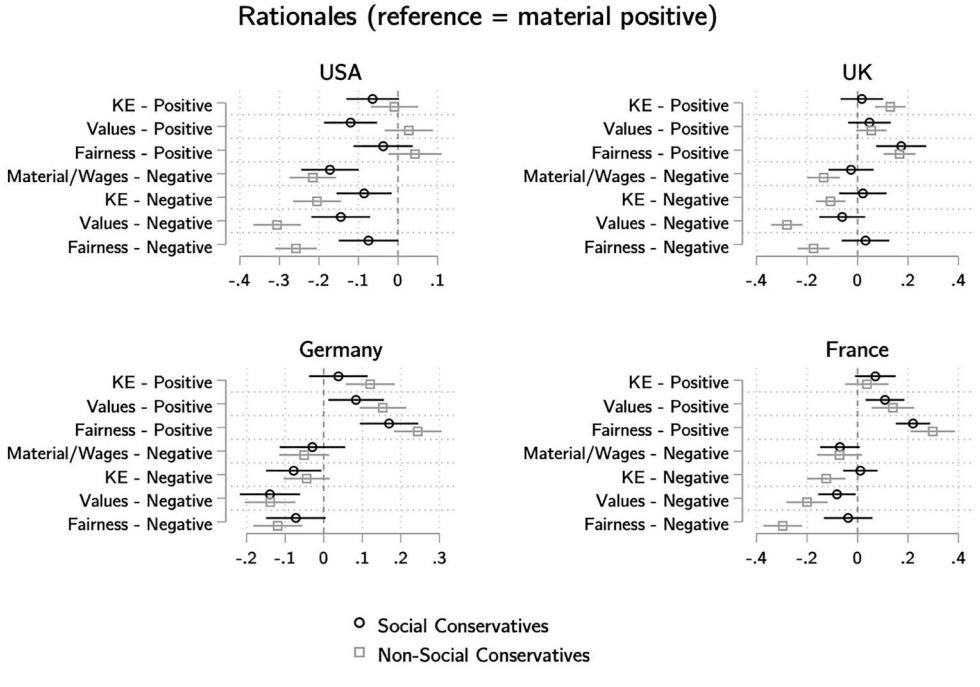

Figure 4. Probability of selecting option by attribute. Positive material rationales are the reference group.

results reinforce the central claim of H3c that conservatives are not simply the mirror image of liberals. However, there are some critical differences.

In the US, non-social conservatives respond almost exclusively to valence: any positive argument is convincing, any negative one rejected. Conservatives, however, do distinguish among rationales. They are more responsive to material arguments about wages and opportunities than to cultural or knowledge-economy arguments. This differentiated pattern is more in line with H3c than the alternatives, conservatives' views are shaped more by the type of argument than by whether it is positive or negative.

The results point in similar directions in the other countries, albeit less sharply so. In both France and Germany, conservatives and non-conservatives alike respond strongly to fairness-based arguments about supporting young people, often preferring them to material wage frames. French conservatives that express a preference are somewhat more open than liberals to negative arguments but still show a clear responsiveness to positive fairness-based rationales. German respondents, regardless of ideology, respond most to positive fairness rationales, again suggesting that the argument itself, rather than simple valence, shapes responses. These results do show more heterogeneity among non-conservative voters than H3c would anticipate.

The UK falls in between. Conservatives are less swayed by valence than non-conservatives, but like their continental counterparts are persuaded by fairness-based rationales.

Collectively, the results of this design remain preliminary, nonetheless, they are suggestive non social-conservatives in some contexts (particularly the US and UK) treat universities as a bundled, positive script, accepting nearly all positive rationales, while conservatives adopt more differentiated, unbundled positions. They are open to certain rationales, particularly fairness-based ones, even while rejecting cultural or cosmopolitan appeals. These differences are bigger outside the US, as anticipated, but even in the US, conservatives display more ambivalence about universities than liberals.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper set out to examine whether new elite critiques of universities reflect broader public opinion, asking three linked questions: who is sceptical of universities, in which contexts, and why. The aim was primarily descriptive. There are few cross-national surveys of multiple dimensions of attitudes towards universities, meaning that we simply do not know a great deal about how people reason about them. But there was also a larger theoretical aim to place debates about public attitudes towards universities in a broader dialogue with debates about the changing nature of political mobilisation.

The findings show that while ideological divides are real, and socially conservative voters express greater scepticism of universities than social liberals, the results do not point to a uniform cultural backlash. Across countries, most respondents remain more responsive to positive than negative rationales for universities.

These results suggest that the cultural divide around universities is asymmetrical. Socially liberal voters generally hold more bundled, uniformly positive attitudes that connect universities to economic, social, and cultural benefits. By contrast, socially conservative voters adopt more differentiated, or in some cases, indifferent positions. They are less persuaded by expansionary arguments overall but do respond positively to fairness-

based arguments, particularly in the European cases. This asymmetry complicates the notion of a straightforward 'cultural backlash.' It suggests that as global shared norms at the elite level about higher education are beginning to erode, voters are receiving uneven and varied cues about them, leaving them less certain.

The cross-national comparison further demonstrates that these divisions are likely conditioned by the political context. The sharper divides in the US and UK may reflect the stronger politicisation of universities in partisan debate. In contrast, the broader coalitions evident in Sweden, France, and Germany reflect more diffuse elite cues and ongoing support for more accessible education systems. While the paper cannot directly test these contextual correlates, the variation here suggests that public opinion is not simply a bottom-up reflection of interests and values but is also shaped by the extent to which elites articulate coherent narratives for or against universities.

Theoretically, these findings contribute in two ways. First, they show that the erosion of the older, bundled 'all good things go together' logic of higher education has not translated into generalised hostility – yet. Instead, public opinion is fragmented but still malleable, with scope for elites to frame universities in ways that sustain broad support. Second, they complicate existing accounts of ideological polarisation by showing that conservatives are not simply the mirror image of liberals: they often hold less bundled views, with important implications for coalition-building in education politics. These questions speak to the critical theme of this special issue, looking at changing global narratives around education.

Future research should extend this work by examining how elite cues and media narratives shape the 'bundling' of attitudes over time, and whether growing partisan contestation can harden the currently more nuanced positions of conservative voters. Cross-time studies will be particularly critical for understanding whether voters' views about universities will harden into more positive/negative stances as university-sceptical far-right parties gain in political strength.

Note

1. Respondents assess the extent to which they agree on a 5-point scale with the following regarding their school experiences (anchored at age 15): a) I felt physically safe from bullying and intimidation; b) The teachers and adults in the school treated me with respect c) I found lessons interesting and engaging d) I experienced racial or ethnic prejudice (reverse coded) e) My peers expected me to succeed.

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Data availability

Full replication data in Harvard Dataverse (DOI or replication /Users/janegingrich/Library/CloudStorage/OneDrive-Nexus365/Bremen/1_Final/Replication/).

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