Multiple paths to the Populist Radical Right:

Voting for Populist Radical Right Parties in Cities and the Countryside

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Draft version

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Across Europe populist radical right parties are thriving. However, they are considerably more popular in some areas (neighborhoods, municipalities, regions) than others. Populist radical right parties perform well in some cities *and* in some rural areas. Hence, conventional explanations for geographical variations in the electoral support for the populist radical right – such as explanations focused on the presence of immigrants or the existence of feelings of 'rural resentment' – cannot account for the support of populist radical right parties in all areas.

In our paper we argue that patterns of populist radical right support can be explained by anxiety in the face of rapid social change. However, the way in which social change manifests itself differs significantly between areas. In urban areas the influx of migrants constitutes an important social change and thus an explanation for the support for the populist radical right. In rural areas change comes in the form of social decline (e.g. demographic decline and the disappearance of (public) services), developments that undermine prosperity, well-being and community coherence.

Using unique geo-referenced survey data from the Netherlands we analyze the support for populist radical right parties among 7,000 Dutch respondents. We distinguish between respondents living in urban or rural areas based on the population density of their (sub-municipal) district.

Our analyses demonstrate that that the presence of immigrants (and increases therein) can explain why populist radical right parties are more popular in some urban areas than in others, but that this explanation does not hold in rural areas. In these areas, social decline (as indicated by the exodus of young people and the decline in services) is an important driver of the success of populist radical right parties. Hence, to understand the support for the populist radical right the heterogeneity of its electorate should be recognized and the idea of equifinality should be embraced.

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Introduction

European populist radical right parties have been on the rise since the early 1980s. However, there is tremendous variation in support for these parties within European countries. They are much more successful in some regions (such as Eastern Germany or Northern France) than in others (such as Western Germany, South-Western France). The variation in support for the populist radical right is also large between municipalities and between neighborhoods within cities. Populist radical right parties receive for example high levels of support in large harbor cities, but score significantly lower in the capitals of European countries. So, in most European countries populist radical right parties succeed in some cities but not in others *and* in some rural areas but not in others. This "distinct geography" of support for the populist radical right (Rodriquez 2017) is not yet fully comprehended.

Existing studies have pointed at a number of explanatory factors for patterns of regional variation, suggesting that immigration figures and economic developments play a role. It has been claimed, for example, that populist radical right support is higher in areas with larger (or steeply increasing) numbers of immigrants or high levels of unemployment (Golder 2003; Van der Brug et al. 2005; Arzheimer 2009; Biggs and Knauss 2011; Rink et al. 2008; Rydgren and Ruth 2013; Savalkoul et al. 2017). However, this explanation does not account for the fact that "the most virulent negative attitudes and the most pronounced anti-diversity voting patterns are frequently found in places with few immigrants and low ethnoracial diversity" (Alba and Fonet 2017: 239). It has also been suggested that 'rural resentment' is a source of populist radical right success, arguing that it is rooted in a rural and small-town rebellion against urban elites (Rodriquez-Pose 2017). However, this explanation does not account for the fact that the populist radical right is also popular in certain (formerly 'working class') neighborhoods in the larger cities.

In this paper we argue that the variation in support for the populist radical right should be interpreted as context-specific manifestations of an overarching phenomenon: expression of anxiety in the face of rapid social change. The rise of the populist radical right can be seen as a counter-reaction to a broad set of developments associated with globalization and post-industrialization. These developments include cultural, demographic, economic and political changes (Kriesi 2008, Azmanova 2011; Kitschelt and Rehm 2016). Those particularly

affected by these changes are the citizens who are the least mobile and most attached to and embedded in their local area (Goodhart 2016).

Obviously, the way in which these changes manifest themselves to citizens differs between areas. Since immigration is a predominantly urban phenomenon in European countries (Alba and Fonet 2017), it is the most visible manifestation for city dwellers. In the countryside, however, citizens' sense of community is more likely to be affected by 'rural marginalization' (Bock 2016). This phenomenon includes a wide range of developments, including the disappearance of (public) services and the exodus of the young, highly educated and economically active. Hence, populist radical right parties are appealing to both groups of citizens, because these parties promise to restore the old social order and offer 'recognition' of their struggle (Gidron 2017). We therefore expect that populist radical right support will thrive in dissimilar regional contexts, even though such support is rooted in similar feelings of anxiety. We hypothesize that the presence of many immigrants will explain the success of the populist radical right in urban areas, while social decline will explain the success of these parties in rural areas. We also expect that economic hardship will play a role in in explaining the support for these parties in urban and rural areas. Thus, the aim of our paper is to demonstrate that by abandoning a "one size fits all" approach and acknowledging that some factors are more prevalent in cities and others in the countryside, we will improve our understanding of the individual level factors that drive support for the populist radical right, as well as the regional variations in support for such parties.

Our investigation relies on unique geo-referenced survey and census data collected in the Netherlands. While many previous studies relied on aggregate data, we study individuals in a large sample of 8,000 Dutch citizens stratified by region and urbanity. As a small, densely populated and highly centralized country without a historically strong urban-rural cleavage, we argue that the Netherlands is a *least likely* case to find markedly different explanations for populist radical right support in urban and rural areas.

Our findings indicate that immigration can explain why citizens are more open to anti-immigrant appeal in some urban districts than others, but that it is of little explanatory power in rural areas. They also show that social decline (as indicated by the exodus of young people, and in some instance by a decline in services) accounts for the support for the populist radical right in rural areas. Economic hardship is associated with populist radical right support in both cities and the countryside – but in the shape of low incomes in the former and unemployment in the latter. Given that we find different paths to the populist radical right in the Netherlands, it is highly likely that these paths also shape populist radical right support in

larger and geographically diverse countries. Hence, to understand the support for the populist radical right the heterogeneity of its electorate should be recognized and the idea of equifinality should be embraced.

Theory

Individual level models and the local context

Three theoretical models have been proposed in the relevant literature to explain individual level support for the populist radical right: the socio-structural model, the policy-voting model and the political discontent model, which is sometimes referred to as the protest vote model (Kitschelt, 1997; Lubbers et al., 2002; Söderlund & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2009).[1] Different variants of each of these models exist, and several scholars combine elements of these models, but as a general typology the distinction between these three is a useful starting point for our discussion. Socio-structural models explain the rise of populist radical right parties as a counter-reaction to a broad set of developments associated with globalization and post-industrialization, encompassing cultural, political, demographic and economic changes (Kriesi et al. 2008, Azmanova 2011; Kitschelt and Rehm 2016). The models point to specific groups of citizens who are most likely to be negatively affected by these changes, in particularly low skilled workers. They are depicted as the losers of globalization, because they are most negatively affected by the increasing competition for jobs that result from globalization of world markets, European unification and migration. While support for the populist radical right is certainly stronger among these groups of citizens, demographic characteristics do not explain the support for populist radical right parties very well.

Policy-voting models have been most successful in explaining support for the populist radical right. The policy-voting models perceive voters for the populist radical right as rational voters, who support these parties because they agree with the policies that these parties propose. Research shows that voters for the populist radical right are as much motivated by substantive policy preferences as voters for other parties (e.g., Van der Brug et al. 2000). Nativism and/or anti-immigration attitudes tend to be the strongest predictors of support for the populist radical right (Mughan & Paxton, 2006; Ivarsflaten 2008; Van der Brug & Fennema, 2009; Rooduijn 2017; Arzheimer 2018).

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[1] We will not use the term protest vote for voters who support populist radical right parties partially because they are politically discontented, because the term creates confusion. It is often conceptualized as a combination if a weak effect of policy preferences on the vote, in combination with a strong effect of political discontent (e.g., Van der Brug et al. 2000).

Political discontent has also been shown to be a strong predictor of support for the populist radical right (Kitschelt, 1997; Lubbers et al., 2002; Söderlund and Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2009). Populist radical right parties (or populist parties in general) tend to blame the political elite for the problems many citizens are faced with. So, it should come as no surprise that people who feel cynical towards politics are more likely to support these populist radical right parties. Recently, several scholars have worked on new indicators of what they frame as 'populist attitudes', and which tend to be more strongly correlated with populist radical right support than 'older' discontent measures, such as 'political cynicism' (e.g., Akkerman et al. 2014).

The three models are certainly not inconsistent. In fact our model builds upon all three. We will argue that two types of political attitudes exert a direct effect on support for the populist radical right: nativism and political discontent. However, the specific socio-structural conditions in different areas of a country are expected to yield differences in the origins of these attitudes, as well as in the strength of these attitudes in the vote.
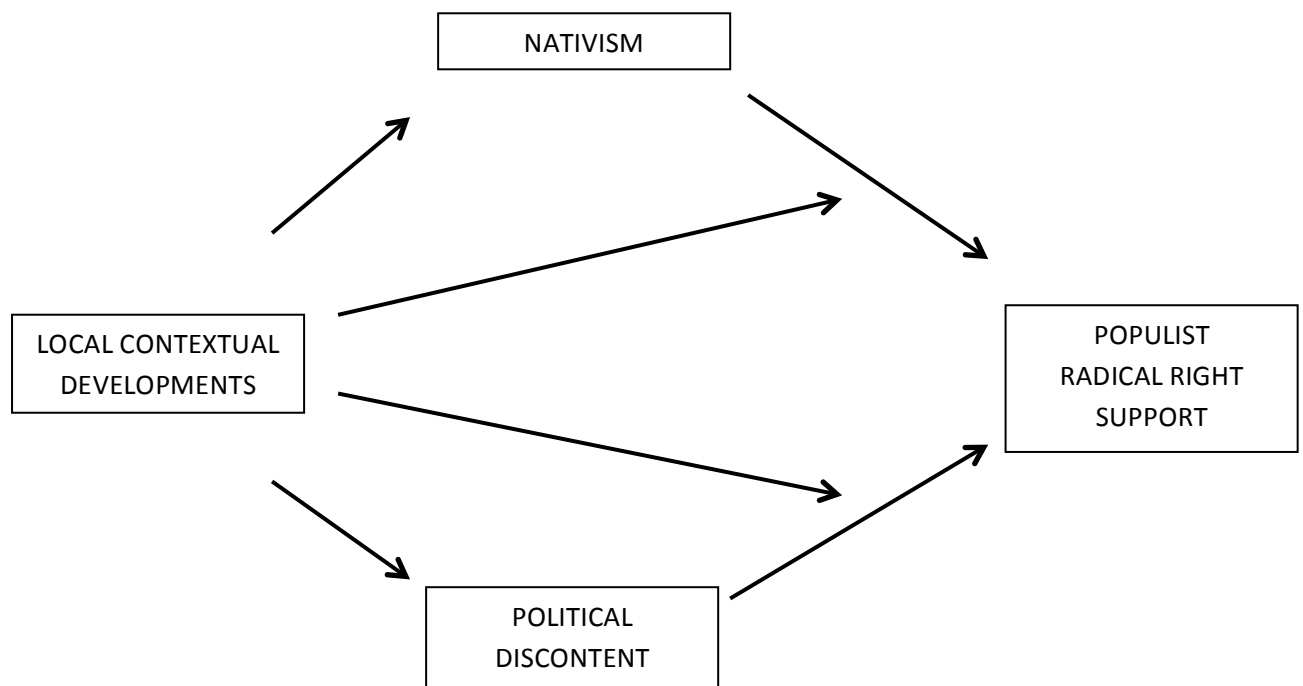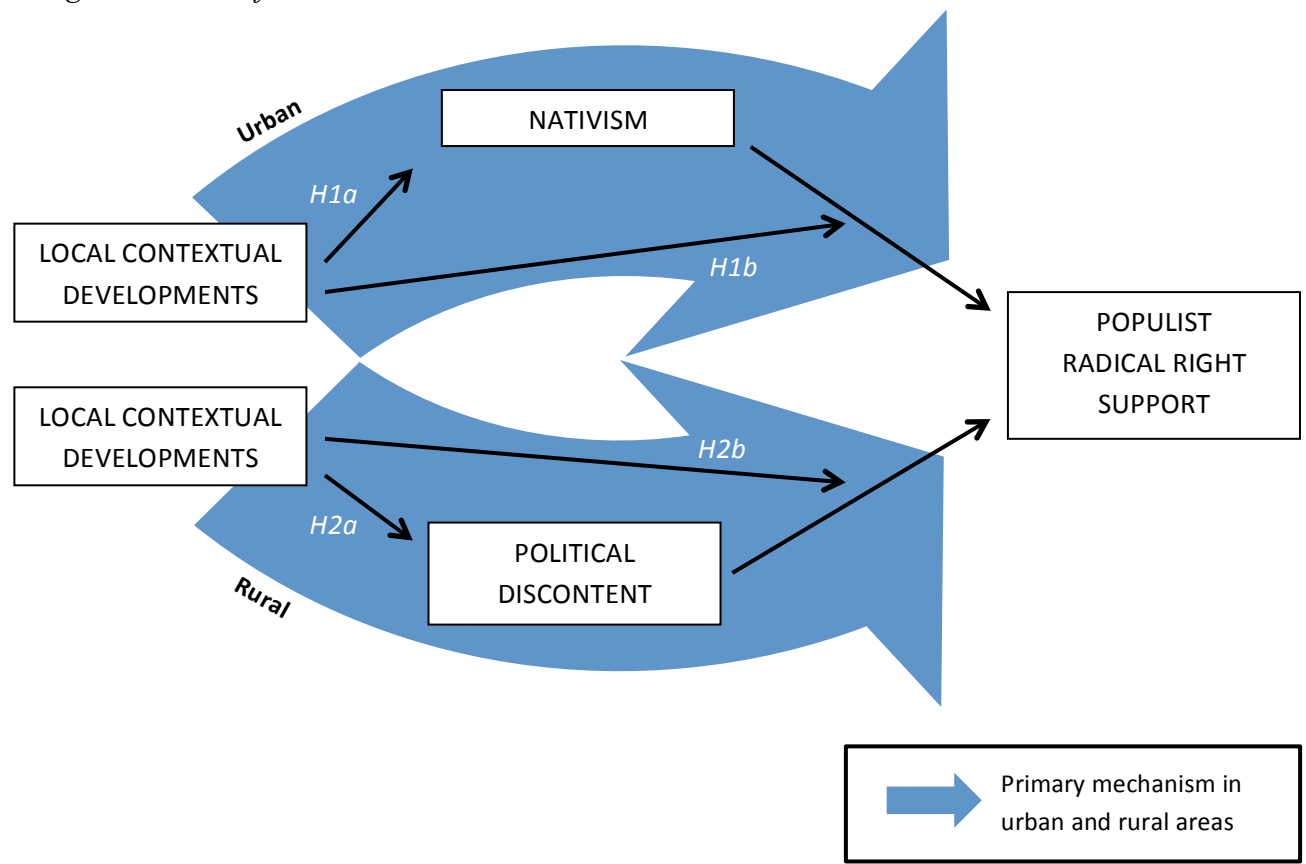
Figure 1a

The general model

Figure 1b

The general model for urban and rural areas

Our model is schematically outlined in Figure 1a, with the specific hypotheses spelled out in Figure 1b. Nativism and political discontent have been shown to be important drivers of individual level support for the populist radical right. However, some local conditions, such as the presence of large numbers of immigrants, may prime people to base their party choice strongly upon their nativist attitudes. Also, citizens living in such contexts may well become more nativist as a result. In other areas, other forms of rapid social changes, which people perceive as negative may boost political discontent, or may prime people to give more weight to political discontent when casting their vote. So, our model integrates the insights from all three models. At the individual level, the policy-voting model leads us to predict a strong effect of nativism on support for the populist radical right, while the discontent model leads us to predict a strong effect of political discontent on support for such parties. What we take from socio-structural models is that these attitudes originate in specific regional socio-structural conditions.

Which context?

We argue that support for the populist radical right is rooted in feelings of anxiety; feelings which are shaped by rapid social changes. It has been demonstrated that voters for populist radical right parties are very pessimistic about the *direction* in which society is developing (Steenvoorden and Harteveld, 2017). Most citizens care deeply about their local community: they live '*somewhere*' rather than '*anywhere*' (Goodhart 2016). So, when the local community changes rapidly, some people will resent these changes and feel that things used to be better in the past. How people experience these changes will differ at the individual level, but certainly at the regional level as well. Some cities, as well as some rural areas have in many ways improved over the past decades, while other areas have in several ways deteriorated. Particularly in these latter areas, we would expect relatively many voters to be prone to support the populist radical right. As argued by Rodriquez-Pose (2017: 200): "[t]he areas (…) that have seen better times and remember them with nostalgia, those that have been repeatedly told that the future lays elsewhere, have used the ballot box as their weapon."

Yet, the kind of social changes that some citizens resent, are very different in different areas. One of the most visible types of change is the fact that large groups of migrants have moved to many Western democracies. Yet, even though there are exceptions, these migrants tend to settle in urban areas, particularly in the larger cities where entire neighborhoods have radically changed in terms of their ethnic composition. Some rural areas have seen very different kinds of changes. The kind of changes that people resent is the disappearance of all kinds of services in rural areas, such as libraries, banks, and schools, all of which make people feel that things used to be better. Another element is decreasing economic opportunity, which leads to the exodus of young families, especially those with more economic opportunities. This gives people who 'stay behind' a sense of loss. In our study, we focus on these three conditions: *immigration, socio-demographic decline,* and *economic hardship.* All three are the result, in some specific areas, of post-industrialization and globalization of markets. Yet, they shape conditions differently in the cities as well as in the countryside.

Exposure to immigration - an urban phenomenon

The presence of immigrants has been identified as an important contextual factor that explains regional variation in support for the populist radical right. The term 'immigrant' is not easy to define and it is often used as somewhat imprecise shorthand for ethnic-religious outgroups in a broader sense. The general line of argument is as follows (Arzheimer 2009;

Bowyer 2008; Van der Brug et al. 2005; Coffé et al. 2008; Golder 2003; Rydgren and Ruth 2013; Savelkoul et al. 2017). According to ethnic threat theories, majority-group citizens who experience (steep increases in) immigration experience threat and subsequently support parties that propose to block further ethno-cultural change. At the same time, the presence of immigrants might theoretically also *alleviate* prejudice: contact theories propose that, under certain conditions, contact with immigrants increases understanding and tolerance (Kauffman 2017).

Empirically, anti-immigrant sentiment and populist radical right support are – in a small majority of the studies (Stockemer 2015) – positively correlated to measures of immigrant presence in subnational areas. However, research has provided important further nuances to our understanding. To instill feelings of threat, immigrants do not have to live directly in majority-group members' own neighborhood: they can also be encountered when travelling within the agglomeration, or in adjacent communities (Van Gent et al. 2014; Rydgren and Ruth 2013). Furthermore, the effect of immigrant presence appears not to be linear, reflecting the complex interplay of threat and contact. Tolsma et al. (2017) show that immigrant presence in neighborhoods only affects PVV support in the Netherlands if it exceeds 15%; Biggs and Knaus (2012) and Rink et al. (2009) also find such 'thresholds' in the UK and Belgium. Moreover, rather than stable levels of local immigrant presence, sudden *increases* in this number have been shown to induce a negative reaction among majority-group citizens (Olzak 1992; Savelkoul et al. 2017). Kauffman (2017) argues that finding oneself among consistent *levels* of immigrant presence invokes indifference ("commonplace diversity" in the words of Wessendorf 2014), while steep changes *do* induce feelings of threat.

Given the general direction – a positive relation between immigrant presence and anti-immigrant sentiment – of most aforementioned studies, we hypothesize that exposure to immigration (especially steep increases) foster nativism. At the same time, the abovementioned findings suggest that immigration is most likely to foster resentment in contexts with *high numbers* and *increases* in immigrant presence – both of which (in Western Europe) are more likely to occur in cities (Alba and Fonet 2017). To the extent that immigrants *are* present in rural areas, their number is unlikely to reach the type of thresholds found by Savelkoul (2017), Biggs and Knaus (2012) or Rink et al. (2009), or to increase in very steep ways such as happens in some city districts. While we acknowledge that a limited number of rural areas also experiences these conditions, we expect that immigration above all explains why populist radical right support in more popular in some urban districts than other.

> *H1a*　　In urban areas, levels of (and change in) immigrant presence increases nativism and by extension populist radical right support.

Priming theory tells us that people are more likely to evaluate a politician or party on the basis of those considerations that are most salient. So, if one lives in an area where many immigrants live or move to, attitudes towards these immigrants will become more salient and are therefore more likely to used when casting one's vote. So, we expect an interaction between the presences of immigrants in an area and the effect of nativism on the vote.

> *H1b*　　The effect of nativism on populist radical right support is especially strong in urban areas that experience high levels of (and change in) immigrant presence

Socio-demographic stagnation – a rural phenomenon

Fears of a disturbance to the social order affect rural areas as well, but – we argue – rooted in different conditions. Scholars have recently started to pay attention to a set of developments, for which we coin the term 'socio-demographic stagnation', as a source of resentment. This refers to factors other than immigration that *undermine citizens' sense of community*. It is important to distinguish this explanation from *sec* economic hardship (as discussed below). While economic hardship can be a cause or effect of socio-demographic stagnation, the anxiety it is theorized to arouse is rooted in different concerns. While the former is about insecurity about one's economic prospects, the latter is about fear that the old social balance disappears because communities have fewer opportunities to sustain itself.

While this can occur in cities (e.g., Gest 2016), we expect the feeling of loss of community due to socio-demographic decline to be a prominent phenomenon in rural areas. Bock (2016) argues some rural areas are 'marginalizing' due to growing mobility of capital and people, new waves of urbanization, and the rationalization of public services. This rural marginalization consists of reinforcing developments, in particular the exodus of the young, highly educated and economically active (which may even result in an overall population decline). This puts under stress "not only economic prosperity but also potentially the reservoir of social and cultural capital" (Bock 2016: 557). In turn, this worsens "the dependency rate and undermines the carrying capacity of current models of business, public and private services" (ibid: 556), creating a further spiral of outmigration and decline.

This links to the nature of grievances and populist support found in rural areas. Cramer (2016) shows that the lived experience in many rural areas involves an aversion of city elites and what they stand for, which makes them likely culprits. She describes the three elements of rural resentment she encountered: (1) "a belief that rural areas are ignored by decision makers, including policy makers", (2) "a perception that rural areas do not get their fair share of resources", and (3) "a sense that rural folks have fundamentally distinct values and lifestyles, which are misunderstood and disrespected by city folks" (Cramer 2016: 23). It is this particularly rural *perspective*, which leads Cramer's interviewees in rural Wisconsin to endorse an anti-system candidate. Hochschild (2016) notes a similar conflation of the city and the elite in rural Louisiana. Woods et al. (2012) discuss rural citizens who feel threatened in their "place-rooted way of life". All this is likely to be especially powerful contexts of socio-demographic stagnation.

Because, compared to the US, rural communities in densely populated countries such as the Netherlands have a different geography, history, and economic structure, the content of rural resentment does not have to be equally widespread or to exist of exactly the same grievances. However, we do think it is plausible to expect that related feelings link voters especially in socio-demographically stagnation areas. While we do not rule out some urban areas experience similar developments, we expect socio-demographic stagnation to be an important driver of political discontent in rural areas.

> *H2a*   In rural areas, levels of (and change in) socio-demographic stagnation increases political discontent, and by extension populist radical right support.

Moreover, to the extent that people in rural areas blame the political elite for stagnation, we expect a stronger effect of political discontent on support for the populist radical right in these particular areas, due to a priming effect.

> *H2b*   The effect of political discontent on populist radical right support is especially strong in rural areas that experience socio-demographic stagnation.

Economic hardship

Having discussed one context factor likely to especially at work in cities and one that is expected to explain variation on the countryside, we move to a third explanation that we expect to be at work in all areas, and possibly exacerbate that role of the other two (see

discussion in interactions below). Theories of economic hardship predict that economic uncertainty and competition over scarce resources increase discontent with immigrants and elites, and – as a consequence – support for populist radical right parties. As a result, populist radical right attitudes and support have been expected to be larger in subnational areas experiencing low economic performance or high unemployment (the usual indicator). As a *context* effect, this has to be distinguished from the *individual-level* effect that unemployment might have on populist radical right support. Rather, the experience of finding oneself amidst bad economic or labor market conditions is assumed to induce uncertainty and intensify competition over remaining resources, all of which is blamed on elites and – through either 'real competition' or merely 'scapegoating' – immigrants. Populist radical right parties in turn claim to offer a comprehensive solution that, by rejecting globalization, resolves both economic uncertainty (by getting jobs back or reclaiming the welfare state for natives) and promises to curtail immigrant competition.

Research into this direction (on either the national or subnational level) has been extensive (Lubbers and Scheepers 2000; Golder 2003; Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Van der Brug and Fennema 2008; Inglehart and Norris 2016). However, most studies failed to find conclusive evidence for it (see Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). Nevertheless, given the central (if declining) role of this theory, we hypothesize economic hardship to affect both populist radical right attitudes. Because economic hardship can affect both urban and rural areas, we have no reason to expect it plays a more important role in either of the two areas.

> *H3*   Levels of (and change in) economic hardship in an area increases nativism and
>   populism, and by extension populist radical right support

DESIGN, DATA, AND METHOD

The Dutch case

The Netherlands is a least-likely case to find clear rural-urban differences in patterns of support for populist radical right parties. Unlike many other countries, the Netherlands – which since the Early Modern period has had a high population density and high levels of urbanization – has no tradition of a long-standing urban-rural cleavage. Furthermore, election campaigns and party systems are highly centralized because the country consists of a single constituency. If we find that different forces shape populist radical right support in urban and rural areas in the Netherlands, this is likely to apply to other contexts, too.

On the individual level, our data consists of a survey collected for the purpose of studying subnational variation in populist radical right support. The data was collected during two weeks in early May 2018 (shortly after the national elections on March 15th). The respondents were sampled from the standing panel of the survey company *GfK* to be representative of the population in socio-demographic and geographic terms. The sample was stratified by age, education, ethnicity, urbanity, and province. The latter two stratification factors ensure a balanced distribution of respondents in all parts of the country. The net response rate was 67.1%, resulting in 8,133 respondents.[2]

On the context level, data is derived from *Statistics Netherlands*. Most data is available on three levels: neighborhoods ('buurten'; average population: 1,379), districts ('wijken'; average population: 5,998) and municipalities ('gemeenten', average population: 43,004). Values are not always available on the lowest level of neighborhood. All indicators are therefore measured at the level of districts ('wijken'), unless stated otherwise. The indicators are from the closest available year before the survey, usually 2016 or 2015 (for some variables 2014). Change in indicators is measured over a 10-year period, i.e. mostly 2006 or 2005.

Operationalization

Dependent variable. Support for populist radical right parties is measured using the following two indicators:

- Propensity to vote PVV: "How likely is that you would ever vote for the following parties?" on a scale from 0 ("Not at all likely") to 10 ("Very likely") (*PTV PVV*)
- Intention to vote PVV "if elections were held today, which party would you vote for"; PVV is 1, other parties 0 (*PVV vote*)

Attitudes. The two key predictors of PVV support are expected to be:

- *Nativism*, measured using a scale of questions about immigrants' effect on the economy, culture, and the country in general.
- *Populism*, our indicator of political discontent, is measured using the Akkerman et al. (2014) populism scale.

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[2] 10 days after the original invitation, which was sent to 10,000 respondents, a further 2,500 respondents were invited, this time focusing especially on underrepresented cells of the stratification matrix.

<u>Context variables</u>: Following recent studies (Savelkoul et al. 2017; Kauffman 2017) we measure *exposure to immigration* by both its level and changes, both measured at the level of municipality:

- Share of citizens who immigrated from, or whose parents immigrated from, a non-Western country (*Immigrant level*)
- Change in the last 10 years in the share of citizens who immigrated from, or whose parents immigrated from, a non-Western country (*Immigrant change*)

We measure *economic hardship* using the following indicators.

- Average income (*Income*)
- Share of citizens with unemployment benefits (*Unempl*)

Note: change in these economic indicators is available from 2009 onwards; this data is currently being compiled, but not yet included in this draft, in which we only test the effect of *levels* of economic hardship.

We measure *social decline* on the district level based on the following factors, measured at the level of district:

- *Demographic change and exodus of young adults:* change in the last 10 years in the number of people aged 15 to 25 (*Young outflow*)
- Change in the last 10 years in the *distance to services and community life*: general practitioner (GP), elementary schools, secondary schools, supermarket, shops, library, bar (*Service decline*)

Only respondents without a (first or second generation) immigration background are included in the analysis. This ensures that their share does not, for reasons of composition rather than context effects, negatively predict support for PVV (which obtains lower support among the immigration background population).

For the ease of comparison, all variables are standardized. For some of our models and graphs, it is more convenient to summarize explanatory models using a single variable. For each set of explanations, we therefore also create an indicator consisting of the average of the z-scores of the individual variables (rescaled in such a way that higher scores are hypothesized to predict populist radical right support). However, because level and change of % immigrants have theoretically different effect signs (Kaufmann 2017), we only use *change* when summarizing this model by a single indicator.

Urbanity and rurality: Whether a given area is "urban" or "rural" is not self-evident. In the theory section, these terms were used as shorthand for ideal types. In reality, urbanity obviously exists along a continuum. Furthermore, not only the density, but also the *location* of a community's location – is it close to economic centers or at a peripheral location? – might be relevant. At first sight, rural marginalization is more likely to happen in border areas or areas distant to urban centers. However, Bock (2016: xx) notes that "whereas in the past, the main cause was ascribed to geography, this has changed in the sense that the lack of access to resources is now explained as resulting from a lack of socioeconomic and political connections ('connectivity') and, hence, of relational 'remoteness' that is not necessarily bounded to geographical location." As a result, "[g]eographical remoteness, as such, […] does not cause marginalisation, nor does a central location promise prosperity."

The urbanity of districts is therefore measured based on density, using a *continuous* measure of population density per km^2 in the district. For ease of presentation and to highlight (possibly non-linear) differences between the most urban and rural areas, we furthermore sometimes employ a 3-fold *ordinal* classification based on *Statistics Netherlands'* 5-fold classification, consisting of "Rural" (cat. 1-2), "Semi-urban" (cat. 3-4) and "Urban" (cat. 5).

Spatial distribution of variables: Appendix A shows the maps of all variables under consideration in this paper (at the level of municipalities). The first map shows the areas that have the strongest average support for PVV.[3] This distribution closely mirrors that of the distribution of the attitudes of *nativism* and *populism*. This is unsurprising, given that these attitudes have been identified as the core predictors of populist radical right support. PVV support does not perfectly mirror, however, the distribution of exposure to immigration: this is heavily concentrated in the urbanized West of the country (Randstad) and scattered urban areas outside it. Social decline is concentrated in quite different areas, most of which are rural. This already makes it plausible that these two variables play a very different role in different parts of the country. The main divide seems to be urban versus rural rather than Randstad versus the rest.

Method

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[3] The geographical distribution of the PVV vote has been described in more detail elsewhere, e.g. Van Gent et al. (2014)

First, we take descriptive look at the distribution of the dependent and independent variables over urban and rural areas. We then investigate the hypothesized causal paths using multilevel structural equation models, which is a suitable method to model indirect effects. Subsequently we test our hypotheses more formally using multilevel regression models.


Multiple paths to the populist radical right

How are immigrant presence, economic hardship, and socio-demographic stagnation distributed over urban and rural areas, and how do they relate to populist radical right support? First of all, Figure 2 shows that PVV support is *not substantially higher either in urban, semi-urban or rural areas*; while rural areas dominate slightly, levels of support are generally very comparable in each of these. At the same time, Figure 3 shows that the conditions encountered in these types of areas do differ. It shows how the context variables are distributed in rural (green) and urban (red) areas, and how they relate linearly (bivariately) with propensity to vote PVV (black dashed line).

Immigration (levels and inflow) is a predominantly urban phenomenon, whereas high average service distance (and a strong increase in such distance) is concentrated in the most rural areas. Areas with few young people are more often rural; areas with many young people almost always urban. Change in the number of young people can be observed in both rural and urban areas.
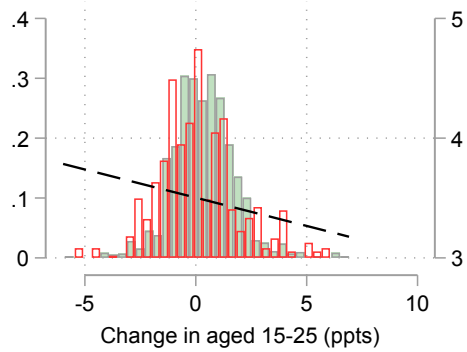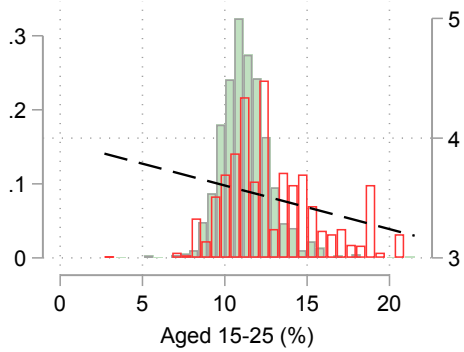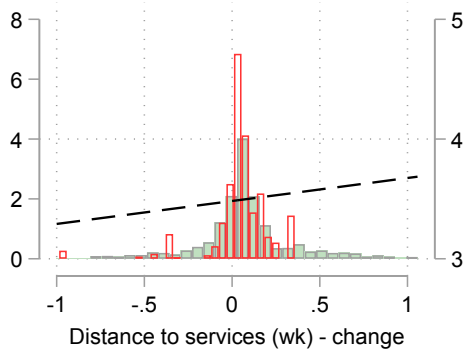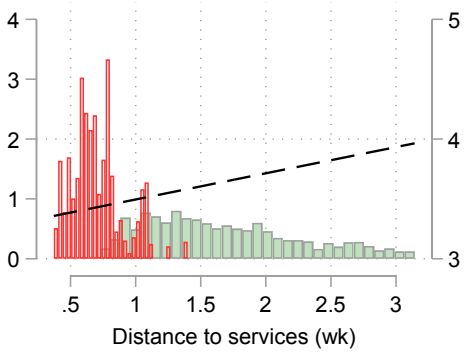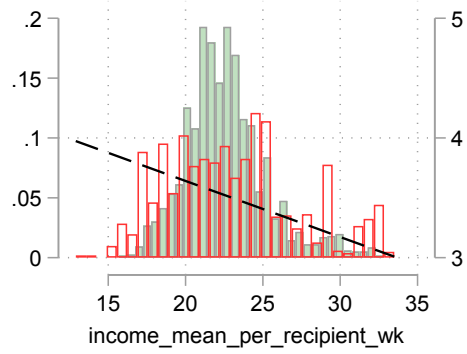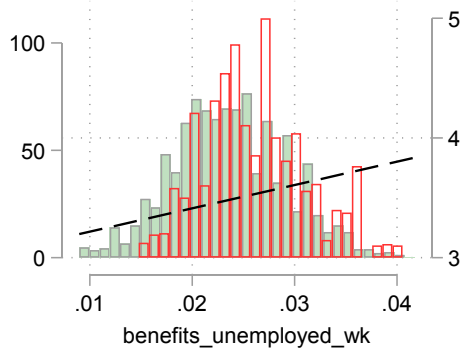

Figure 2

PVV support by urbanity
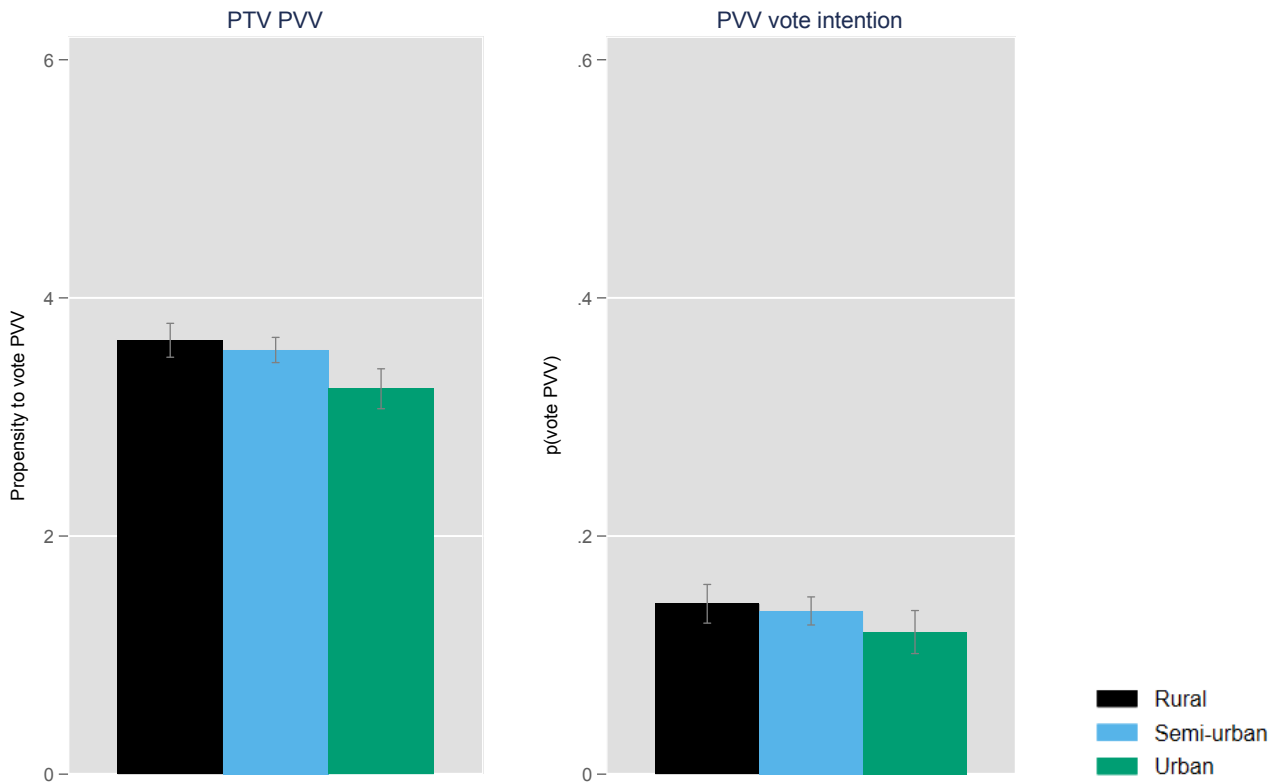
Combined with the linearly predicted levels of propensities to vote PVV (black dashed line), this provides some interesting preliminary insights. An increase in the number of non-Western immigrants is associated with more support for PVV. At the same time, virtually all areas with substantive increases are urban. A low number of young people is associated with PVV support; urban areas more often have a very *high* number of young people. Both high unemployment benefits and low-income levels are associated with PVV support; but benefits are slightly more common in urban areas, while low incomes more often in rural areas. All in all, this is broadly in line with our expectations. However, for a stronger test, we need to look at a broader picture. We turn to that task now.

Figure 3

Distribution (density, left axis) of variables in rural (green) and urban (red) areas, with fitted linear relation with propensity to vote PVV (black line, right axis)

Figure showing eight histograms with overlaid dashed trend lines. Top row: "1st/2nd gen. non-Western immigrants (%)" and "Change in 1st/2nd gen. non-W. immigr. (ppts)". Second row: "benefits_unemployed_wk" and "income_mean_per_recipient_wk". Third row: "Distance to services (wk)" and "Distance to services (wk) - change". Bottom row: "Aged 15-25 (%)" and "Change in aged 15-25 (ppts)".
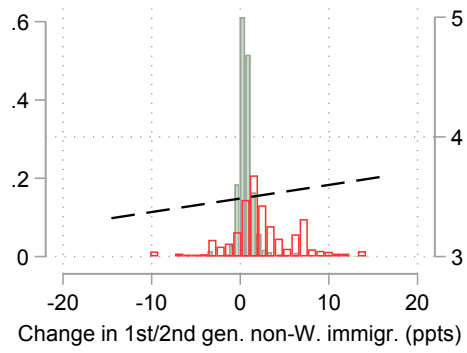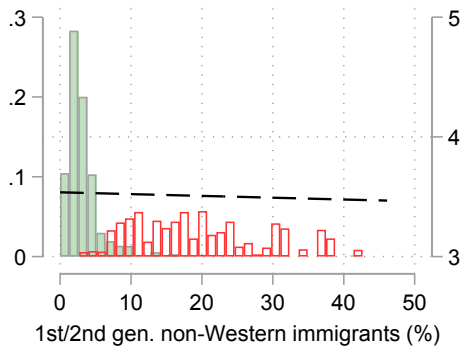
Structural equation models

We first model the hypothesized causal pattern – from context condition, through attitudes, to PVV support – using structural equation models (SEM), which is a good starting point to investigate patterns. Figure 4 presents SEM models with a random intercept for districts (estimated in Stata using GSEM), modelling the summary context scales as exogenous variables. These models are repeated for the three levels of urbanity. The dependent variable is propensity to vote (PTV) PVV. For the ease of interpretation, only significant paths are shown. All variables are standardized to allow a comparison within and across models. The three context variables and the two attitudes are allowed to correlate. Standard goodness-of-fit indices such as RMSEA are not available for SEM models with a random intercept; we will apply and discuss alternative model fits indicators in a later version. For now we note that all models without random intercepts have good RMSEA scores (< 0.01).

What predicts PVV support? Under *H1b*, we expected that nativism would be an especially salient reason behind the PVV vote in urban areas with many immigrants. *H2b* predicted that populism plays this primary role in rural areas with strong social decline. Figure 4 shows that both nativism and populism predict PVV support equally well in rural, semi-urban and urban areas. Citizens throughout the country translate both nativism and (slightly less) populism into PVV support. So far, this provides little evidence for different patterns in cities and the countryside. However, it might still be the case that in urban areas *with many immigrants* nativism is a more important predictor of PVV support, or that in rural areas *with strong social decline* populism predicts PVV support better. We investigate this in the multilevel regression in the next section.

What predicts nativism and populism? Under *H1a* and *H2a*, we expected that nativism would be predicted by exposure to immigration, while populism should be predicted by social decline. Furthermore, we expected the former to be most relevant in cities, and the latter in rural areas. Indeed, Figure 4 confirms this pattern. *In rural districts, populism is explained by the economic hardship and social decline variables*; *in urban districts, nativism is explained by exposure to immigration*. This confirms H1a and H2a. At the same time, we see that exposure to immigration also predicts populism in urban areas, while social decline also predicts nativism in rural areas. As we will discuss in the conclusion, this likely reflects the fact that immigrant and elite critique have consistently been politicized together. All in all, we conclude that exposure to immigration is a better predictor of variation in *populist radical right attitudes* between urban areas, while social decline plays this role in rural areas.

Figure 4

Structural Equation Models (only significant paths [p<0.05] shown)

<u>*a. Rural areas*</u>
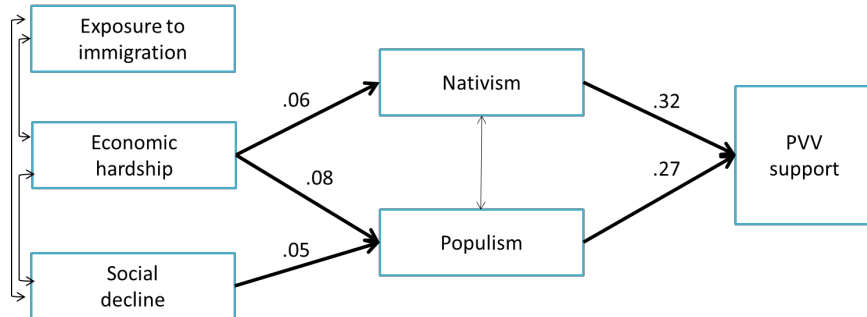
<u>*b. Semi-urban areas*</u>
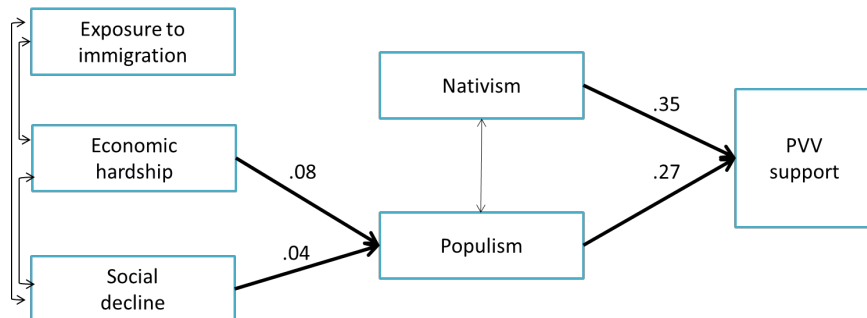
<u>*c. Urban areas*</u>
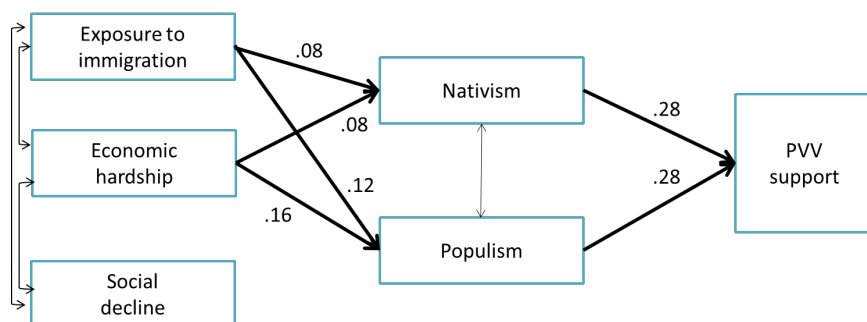
Multilevel regression

The SEM models suggested that populist radical right support is rooted in the same attitudes throughout the country, but that these attitudes are in turn rooted in different context conditions in urban and rural areas. We put this to a more formal test using multilevel regression models containing interaction effects. This tests whether (a) attitudes predict PVV

support better in some contexts than others, and (2) context variables predict attitudes better in some contexts than others. This technique also allows us to control for employment status, level of education, age, and gender.

Predicting PVV support. The SEM model suggested that populism and nativism are equally relevant determinants of PVV support in urban and rural areas. Is nativism a more important predictor of PVV support in urban areas with many immigrants, as predicted by *H1b*? And is populism a more important predictor in rural areas with strong social decline, as predicted by *H2b*? Figure 5 presents the relation between nativism and PVV support in urban districts experiencing either low or high immigrant increase, and rural areas with either low or high social decline. Both attitudes are a significant predictor of the propensity to vote PVV, but their effects are not significantly different in districts with a large increase in the number of immigrants (in cities) or strong social decline (in rural areas). This remains true under alternative specifications. This refutes *H1b* and *H2b*: these conditions do not appear to prime either nativism or populism to become a more salient ingredient in the vote calculation.

Figure 5

Effects of nativism and populism (both standardized) on PTV PVV, by exposure to immigration in cities (left) and social decline in rural areas (right)
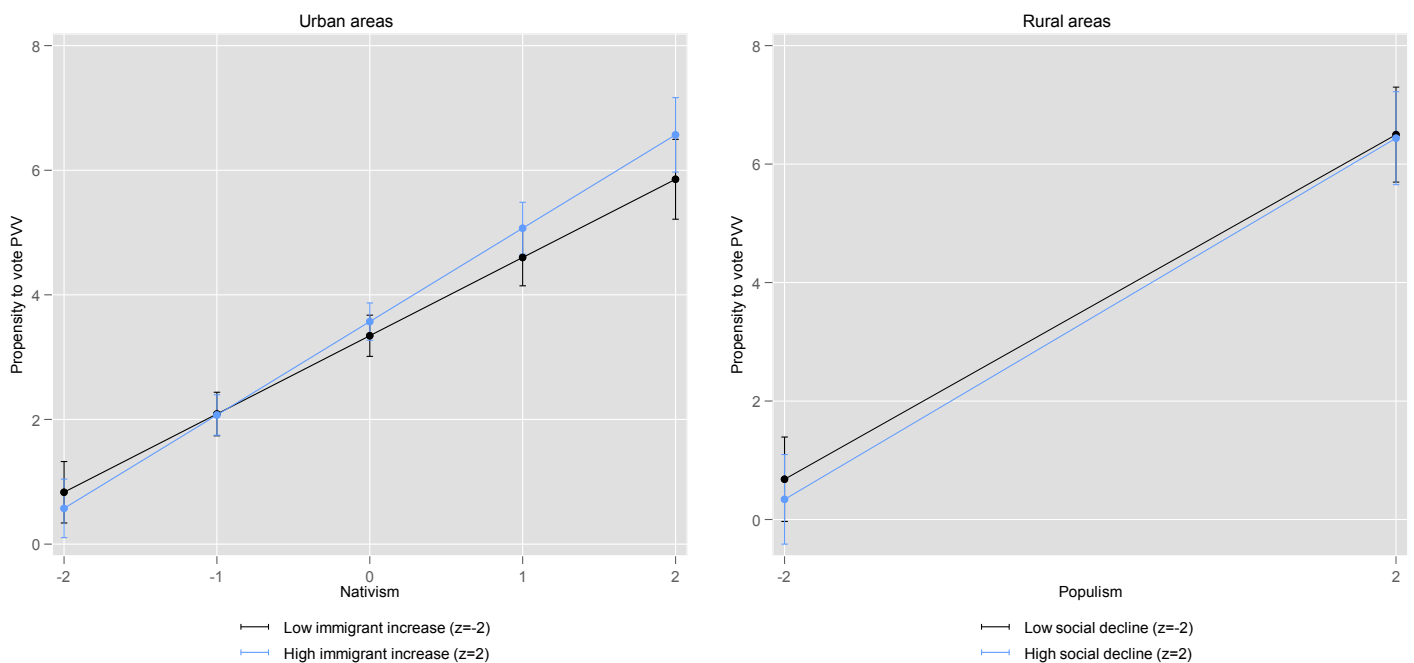
Predicting nativism and populism. To investigate which context factors predict levels of nativism and populism, Table 1 presents an overview of the effects of various context variables on the two attitudes, separated by rural and urban areas (categories 1 and 3). These marginal effects are more immediately informative than effect sizes and interactions, which are reported in Appendix B.

Exposure to immigration: As predicted by *H1a*, nativism is systematically higher if the inflow of immigrants is larger – but this holds only in urban areas. The *level* of immigrants, if anything, decreases nativism in urban areas.[4] Again, populism, too, is boosted by increasing immigration in urban areas. Exposure to immigration is a more important source of nativism and populism in urban areas than in rural ones.

Economic hardship: Higher rates of unemployment benefits are associated with more nativism and populism in rural areas. Lower levels of income are associated with populism and (less reliably) nativism in urban areas. In line with *H3*, economic hardship thus predicts both nativism and populism, and it does so mostly everywhere. At the same time, the relevant shape this hardship takes is low incomes in urban areas and high unemployment levels in rural areas. All in all, the economic variables predict populism better than nativism, suggesting they directly foster anti-elite critique rather than immigrant scapegoating.

Demographic stagnation: The change in the share of young people is a predictor of populism, but only significantly so in rural (and semi-urban) areas. This is in line with our expectation H2a. At the same time, additional analyses show that the difference in its effect between regions is not *very* large. It might be safe to conclude that social decline in general fosters populist attitudes, and most robustly so outsides the biggest cities. A decline in services, by contrast, is not a significant predictor in any of these models.[5]

Table 1

Effects on nativism and populism

		Rural (1)		Urban (3)	
		Nativism	Populism	Nativism	Populism
Immigration	Immigrants (level)			(-)	
	Immigrants (change)			+	+
Economy	Income			(-)	-
	Unemployment	+	+		

---

[4] This is in line with the "commonplace diversity" arguments.
[5] Additional analyses show that a decline in services *does* predict populism in combination with a low mean income in an area. This and other interactions between context variables, as well as interactions between context variables and individual characteristics, will be explored further in a future version of this paper.

Stagnation	Young outflow	(+)	+	(+)
	Service decline			

+	Positive effect at a=5%
-	Negative effect at a=5%
(+)	Positive effect at a=10%
(-)	Negative effect at a=10%
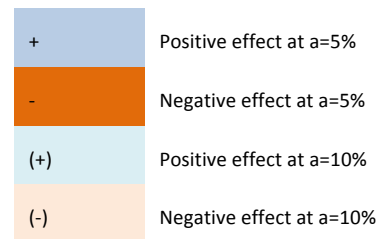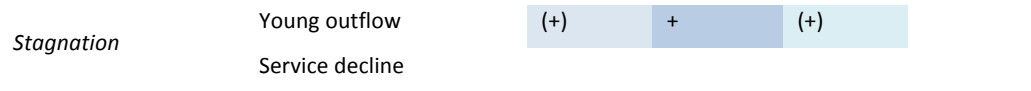
Conclusion and discussion

Some have described the rise of populist parties and candidates as a rural revolution against the cosmopolitan elite (Rodriquez-Pose 2017); to others, a backlash in the urban theater of ethno-cultural tensions. We argued that populist radical right support is rooted in context-specific manifestations of social change that induces anxiety. We expected migration and nativist attitudes to drive support for populist radical right parties in the larger cities. We also expected social decline and populist (anti-elite) sentiments to be the drivers of such support in rural areas. Our hypotheses were only partially supported. Contrary to our expectation, we find that nativism and populism predict PVV support equally well in urban and rural areas. However, *whether* citizens are highly nativist or populist has different roots in urban and rural areas.

Steep increases in immigrant presences are much more common in urban areas. Nativism and PVV support are systematically higher in those urban areas in which this is the case than in areas not experiencing such an increase. This is especially true in areas also experiencing low incomes. Importantly, in the absence of strong increases, levels of nativism are relatively low in immigrant-rich areas. Cities are thus the arena of *both* successful native-immigrant interaction *and* strong anti-immigrant sentiment (Alba and Fonet 2017). This might explain why immigration levels are inconsistently associated with populist radical right support in previous studies.

Across rural areas, populist attitudes are stronger if the area is experiencing socio-demographic decline; especially a low share – and the outflow of – young people. Low service availability, in combination with low incomes, predicts PVV support, too. The number of immigrants, or increase thereof, does not explain variation in PVV support in rural or semi-urban areas.

We expected that socio-demographic decline would lead to populism, while exposure to immigration would increase nativism. In fact, our models suggest that these area-specific context conditions usually foster *both* attitudes. We explain the fact that nativist and populist attitudes often go together as the target of resentment with two related reasons. First, as Hochschild (2017) and Gest (2017) discuss, acute perceptions of relative status decline are often experienced most starkly by contrasting it to alleged "cue skipping" by ethnoracial others, even if none are present. Second, anti-immigration sentiment and elite critique have become intertwined because they have been consistently politicized together.

At this point it is important to repeat that we do not aim to downplay the importance of immigration (or nativist attitudes) for populist radical right support. By contrast, we show that exposure to immigration actually matters more robustly than previously uncovered, but primarily so in urban areas that actually experience large-scale increases in ethnic diversity. In rural areas, too, populist radical right support is (also) rooted in concerns about immigration – nativism is an important predictor in all areas. After all, immigration is a core theme of public and societal debate, widely covered by the media and increasingly central to vote choices. However, to answer the question why some rural areas are populist radical right strongholds, while others are not, immigrant numbers will not be of much help. Rather, this variation is rooted in economic and demographic conditions.

This has two implications. First, the success of populist radical right actors is rightly described as a reflection of anxiety in the face of rapid social change. However, this change has a different face depending on context. As a result, populist radical right support cannot be reduced to an economic *or* cultural backlash (Inglehart and Norris 2016). Second, studies of subnational variation in populist radical right support (or other electoral outcomes) need to theorize and model how different factors are at work in different contexts, rather than a "one size fits all" approach.

The model that we tested assumes that the attitudes of citizens are partially rooted in regional conditions. While we found support for this idea, our model does not account for the role of other actors, such as the media and political parties in shaping these attitudes. The fact that nativism has a strong effect on support for the PVV even in rural areas where few migrants live, may well reflect how the PVV influences the attitudes of their own supporters (see e.g., Rooduijn et al. 2016). It would require panel survey over a long period of time to tease out further how exactly specific conditions shape attitudes. However, our unique geo-coded data provided the opportunity to take a first step in establishing this link.
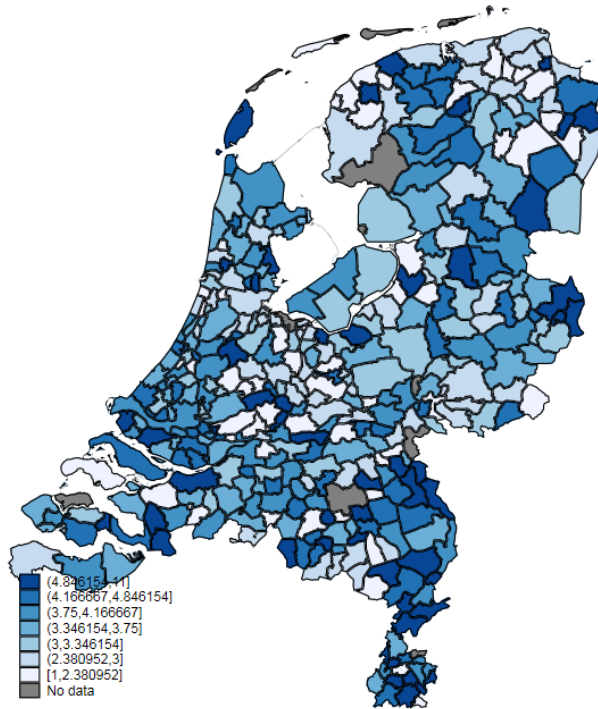
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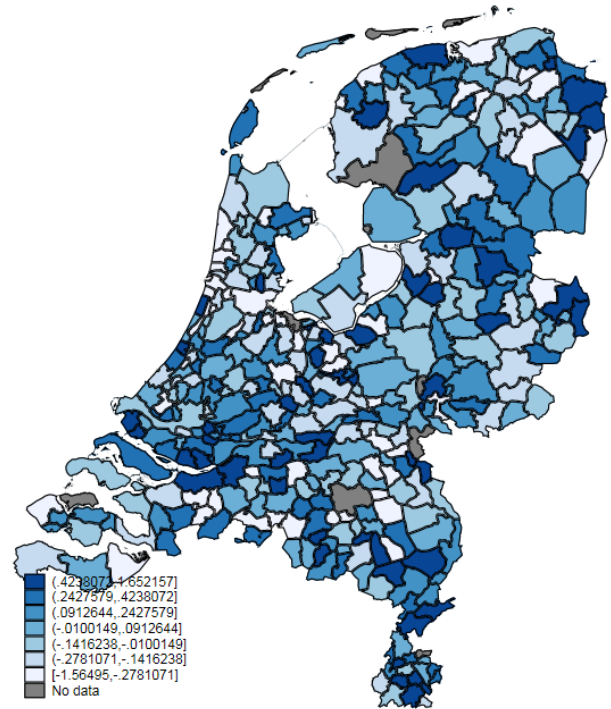
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Appendix A – *Geographical distribution of independent and dependent variables*

Support for PVV (PTV)

Nativism

(*continues on next page*)

Populism

	(.3983331,1.277212]
	(.2346805,.3983337]
	(.1117243,.2346805]
	(.005456,.1117243]
	(-.1220659,.005456]
	(-.2987075,-.1220659]
	[-2.026157,-.2987075]
	No data

Immigrants(increase)

	(.2433966,4.467969]
	(-.1474126,.2433966]
	(-.3232513,-.1474126]
	(-.5176945,-.3232513]
	(-.6865612,-.5176945]
	(-.9137539,-.6865612]
	[-5.580761,-.9137539]
	No data

Decline

	(10.35931,16.93248]
	(10.06802,10.35931]
	(9.822844,10.06802]
	(9.5308,9.822844]
	(9.240902,9.5308]
	(8.750451,9.240902]
	[.8269951,8.750451]
	No data

Density

	(1776,5969]
	(1395,1776]
	(1044,1395]
	(748,1044]
	(600,748]
	(427,600]
	[129,427]
	No data

Appendix B – *Regression tables*

Table B.1 *Multilevel model; dependent variable is populism scale*

	model1 Exposure to immigration b/se	model2 Economic hardship b/se	model3 Demographic stagnation b/se
Immigrant increase	-0.016		
	0.036		
Rural (ref)	0.000	0.000	0.000
	.	.	.
Semi-urban	-0.066	-0.109***	-0.096***
	0.041	0.025	0.027
Urban	-0.194***	-0.217***	-0.196***
	0.056	0.034	0.038
Rural # Immigrant increase (ref)	0.000		
	.		
Semi-urban # Immigrant increase	-0.010		
	0.042		
Urban # Immigrant increase	0.075		
	0.044		
Immigrant level	-0.009		
	0.052		
Rural # Immigrant level (ref)	0.000		
	.		
Semi-urban # Immigrant level	0.030		
	0.058		
Urban # Immigrant level	-0.004		
	0.061		
activity==Job	-0.191***	-0.189***	-0.183***
	0.046	0.044	0.048
activity==In educa~n	-0.396***	-0.383***	-0.389***
	0.096	0.092	0.103
activity==Unemployed	0.026	0.021	0.010
	0.060	0.059	0.064
activity==Cannot w~k	0.207***	0.195***	0.210***
	0.055	0.053	0.058
activity==Pensioner	-0.037	-0.031	-0.020
	0.050	0.048	0.054
activity==Household (ref)	0.000	0.000	0.000
	.	.	.
age	0.008***	0.009***	0.008***
	0.001	0.001	0.001
Education (years)	-0.031***	-0.029***	-0.030***
	0.002	0.002	0.002
Male	0.006	0.019	0.009
	0.023	0.023	0.025
Mean income		0.004	
		0.020	
Rural # Mean income (ref)		0.000	
		.	
Semi-urban # Mean income		-0.070*	
		0.029	
Urban # Mean income		-0.130***	
		0.030	
Unemployment benefits		0.063***	
		0.018	
Rural # Unemployment benefits (ref)		0.000	
		.	
Semi-urban # Unemployment benefits		-0.035	

		0.025	
Urban # Unemployment benefits		-0.031	
		0.038	
Inflow of young			-0.072**
			0.028
Rural # Inflow of young (ref)			0.000
			.
Semi-urban # Inflow of young			0.027
			0.033
Urban # Inflow of young			0.061
			0.035
Service decline			0.017
			0.013
Rural # Service decline (ref)			0.000
			.
Semi-urban # Service decline			-0.006
			0.018
Urban # Service decline			-0.004
			0.049
Intercept	3.675***	3.662***	3.705***
	0.101	0.094	0.101
Level-2 intercept	-1.860***	-2.063***	-1.812***
	0.124	0.172	0.119

Table A.2 *Multilevel model; dependent variable is nativism scale*

	model1 Exposure to immigration	model2 Economic hardship	model3 Demographic stagnation
	b/se	b/se	b/se
Immigrant increase	-0.046		
	0.056		
Rural (ref)	0.000	0.000	0.000
	.	.	.
Semi-urban	-0.128	-0.109***	-0.096***
	0.070	0.025	0.027
Urban	-0.294***	-0.217***	-0.196***
	0.087	0.034	0.038
Rural # Immigrant increase (ref)	0.000		
	.		
Semi-urban # Immigrant increase	0.030		
	0.067		
Urban # Immigrant increase	0.147*		
	0.075		
Immigrant level	0.003		
	0.087		
Rural # Immigrant level (ref)	0.000		
	.		
Semi-urban # Immigrant level	-0.061		
	0.101		
Urban # Immigrant level	-0.143		
	0.100		
activity==Job	-0.292***	-0.189***	-0.183***
	0.076	0.044	0.048
activity==In educa~n	-0.805***	-0.383***	-0.389***
	0.153	0.092	0.103
activity==Unemployed	-0.333**	0.021	0.010
	0.105	0.059	0.064
activity==Cannot w~k	0.078	0.195***	0.210***

	0.094	0.053	0.058
activity==Pensioner	-0.122	-0.031	-0.020
	0.087	0.048	0.054
activity==Household (ref)	0.000	0.000	0.000
	.	.	.
age	0.001	0.009***	0.008***
	0.002	0.001	0.001
Education (years)	-0.038***	-0.029***	-0.030***
	0.003	0.002	0.002
Male	-0.127***	0.019	0.009
	0.037	0.023	0.025
Mean income		0.004	
		0.020	
Rural # Mean income (ref)		0.000	
		.	
Semi-urban # Mean income		-0.070*	
		0.029	
Urban # Mean income		-0.130***	
		0.030	
Unemployment benefits		0.063***	
		0.018	
Rural # Unemployment benefits (ref)		0.000	
		.	
Semi-urban # Unemployment benefits		-0.035	
		0.025	
Urban # Unemployment benefits		-0.031	
		0.038	
Inflow of young			-0.072**
			0.028
Rural # Inflow of young (ref)			0.000
			.
Semi-urban # Inflow of young			0.027
			0.033
Urban # Inflow of young			0.061
			0.035
Service decline			0.017
			0.013
Rural # Service decline (ref)			0.000
			.
Semi-urban # Service decline			-0.006
			0.018
Urban # Service decline			-0.004
			0.049
Intercept	6.698***	3.662***	3.705***
	0.165	0.094	0.101
Level-2 intercept	-1.396***	-2.063***	-1.812***
	0.141	0.172	0.119