

Institute of Political Studies in Paris

Political science

Final Dissertation of the Discipline

"Populism and Democracy-
The advent of illiberal politics in the democratic world
and the hypothesis of an authoritarian transition"

**Theme: The middle class vote for populist candidates
far-right**

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1- Introduction

Malleable, blurry, a thick fog. An ideology which takes different forms depending on the objective of its transmitter, and which can be understood quite differently by its receivers. Populism, in its etymology, refers to the people, but its essence alludes to an antagonism intrinsic to society: that between the base and the elite. With its appeal to citizens, it would make sense that this movement is “neither left nor right”, once criticism of “old politics” and traditional parties is a strong characteristic in its speech, yet it There are not only these two sides, but also its extremes. For those trying to understand this phenomenon, its flexibility can almost be blinding, yet for those who use it, it is the lack of clarity that keeps them moving forward. It is everywhere, from history books to social media, but especially present in today's political situation.

According to the ideational definition of Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (Oxford, 2017), populism is a “finely centered” ideology, which means that it often comes attached to another ideology, and which sees society divided between a pure people and a corrupt elite. Politics, in his opinion, must represent the general will of the people, and it is to them that the candidates appeal with their speech, a word full of symbolism that generates identification, mobilization, and therefore, support. But how does a citizen situate himself between these two extremes and identify himself in order to defend one side or the other? If we also consider the left-right opposition in politics, which leads in its principles rather contrary propositions, the elements to be considered increase radically.

Since 2016, with the Trump and Brexit phenomena, a growing wave of the far right has been found in the world, calling into question the very decadence of the democratic system. The problem is not belonging to the right, but threatening with one's speech and actions the very mechanism that represents the popular voice, such as the assault on the Capitol in January 2021. Justifying deplorable management, a speech full of racism, misogyny and xenophobia, may seem difficult to those who understand politics, or at least pay attention to the socio-economic situation of their country, so how to legitimize the support of 46.9% of the votes for Trump in the 2020 presidential elections ? Who, and why, votes for the far right?

The key lies in a social class that defines itself in symbolic rather than economic terms, and which sees populist politicians as the solution to its discontent: the middle class. It is by focusing on the case of this group whose concept is also vague and whose electoral behavior has taken the path of the right in the last decade that this text attempts to answer the question: *how the performative discourse of far-right populist candidates attracts middle-class support?*

1- "Them and Us": demarcating social boundaries

The determination of belonging to a social class objectively takes into consideration the socio-professional category and economic income as the most common indicators. On the other hand, an individual can "feel" part of a social group different from that indicated by their financial situation, taking into account several symbolic factors which give them a certain status. The simple feeling of belonging, without considering any class consciousness or even concrete data, is defined as subjective social class.

When asking someone "what social class do you belong to?", the highest probability is that the answer will be "middle class"; according to information published by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2019, approximately two thirds of the population identify as part of this social group. However, it is not possible that almost 70% of individuals are part of it. The question supposedly asked raises a few issues: (i) it assumes the existence of classes in society, and it assumes that the interviewee has the class consciousness (in the Marxist sense of the term) to properly classify themselves in this system ; (ii) to be open, it leaves it up to the interviewee to choose the options (in the 1971 research by Guy Michelat and Michel Simon some answers were "the poor", "the little ones", or even "those who are lost" , which does not provide objective research criteria).

We then have the situation of ambiguity between the objective and subjective social class when speaking of identification. Based on OECD data, an individual is objectively part of the middle class if their income is between 75% and 200% of the national average income, the group of which can even be divided between low-income- middle (75% to 100% of the national average), middle-middle income (100% to 150%), and high-middle income (150% to 200%). However, the *feeling* membership in this class does not correspond to the economic data of each citizen. Below, it is possible to note "self-identification" as middle class in some countries.

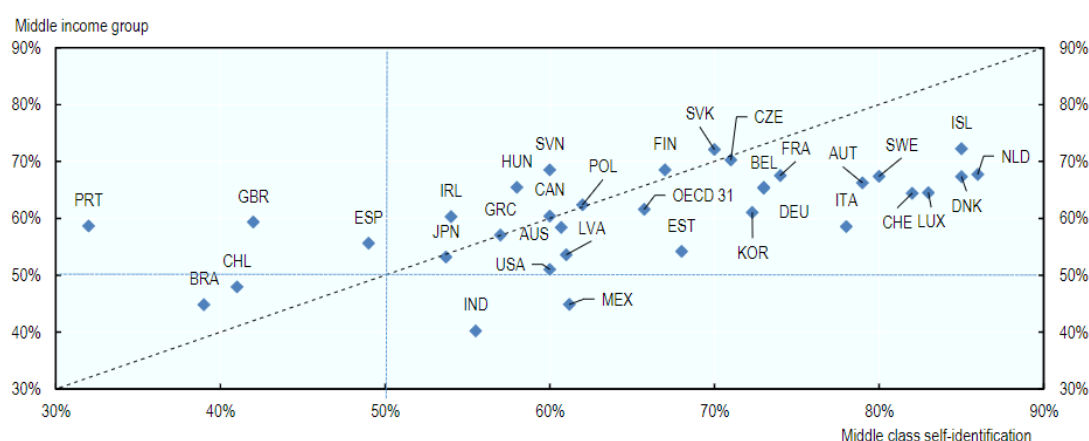


Figure 1.Part of the middle class population who consider themselves middle class in 2017.

Source: OECD 2019 "*Under Pressure: The Squeezed Middle Class*". OECD Publishing Paris

It is important to address a central concept when talking about the subjectivity of a social group: its symbolic sphere. Starting from the idea that society is divided into classes, each of them occupies a social space and carries its own culture: the symbols that make its members recognize themselves as part of it. If we start from the definition of the populist discourse on the opposition between the elite and the people, we must therefore classify the class system and the self-identification of citizens in this narrative.

According to Pierre Ostiguy, the mechanism adopted by populists is called “flaunting the sociocultural low” (Ostiguy, 2009); The “bottom” of society here is associated with informal, “crude” behavior, physical proximity and virile leaders who speak “from the gut.” Also called by Muddle and Kaltwasser (2017) “a folkloric political style”, politicians disrespect the dress code and language, but, instead of being seen as unprofessional, this discourse mobilizes the masses who see these candidates as being distant from the traditional political elite and closer to the “real people”. Simple acts, for example, choosing a meal, bring with them cultural capital that is often decisive for having the support of a social group.



Figure 2.Donald Trump eating KFC and McDonalds on board Air Force One
Source: <https://inews.co.uk/> 2019



Figure 3.Jair Bolsonaro eating “pão com leite condensado”, (bread with cream typical to be popular and cheap in Brazil) and coffee, during an official interview, in informal outfits.

Source: O Globo, 2019

2- The role of cultural capital: the populist repertoire in a period of economic crisis and disenchantment with traditional politics

"Because today we are not just transferring power from one administration to another, or from one party to another, but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C. and we are giving it back to you, the American people." In this extract from the speech of former President of the United States Donald Trump, the antagonism of the groups is clear: there is "them", the political, social and economic elite, corrupt and still in power; and "we", the pure people deserving of a renewal of these ancient practices. Ironically, Trump represented exactly this elite in every aspect, having a liquid wealth of \$2.5 billion (Forbes, 2021). How can the middle class identify with him especially in a period of economic crisis?

The financial crisis of 2008 affected most middle and lower class citizens of Western society, with consequences that have not yet been resolved. Today, the objective middle class is seen as a shrinking phenomenon: it has less economic power at a time when the cost of living (housing, transport, expenses, etc.) has increased considerably. Being part of the middle class, which means having an income between 75% and 200% of the national average, has become more difficult; social mobility, when someone changes class, then has a tendency to be downward. In other words, the population becomes poorer.

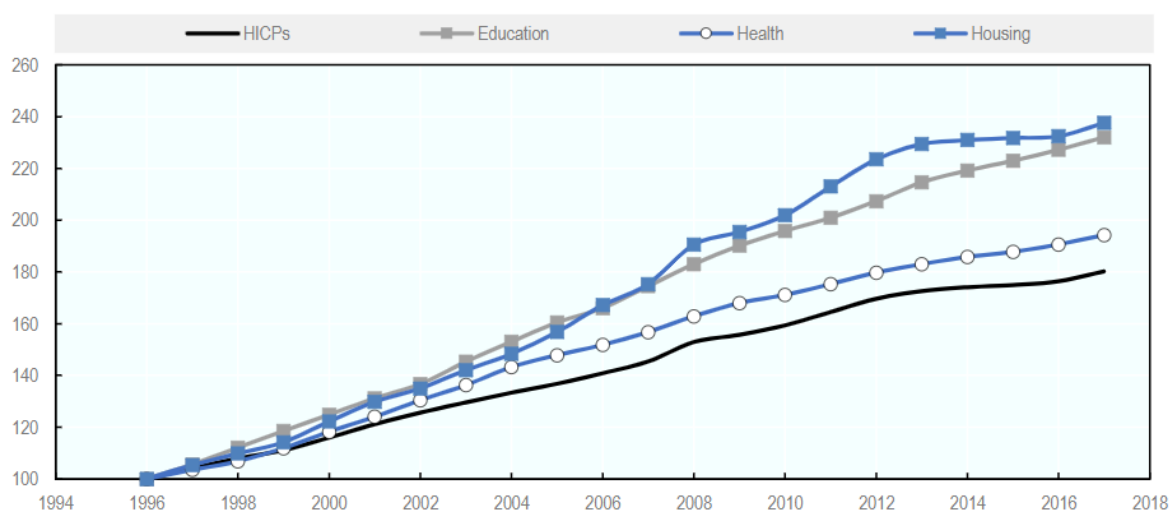


Figure 4. Prices for housing, education and health have risen faster than overall inflation.

Source: OECD data by COICOP division. 2019. Note:
HICPs: Harmonized Indices of Consumer Prices

¹ "Because today, we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another, or from one party to another – but we are transferring power from Washington, DC and giving it back to you, the American people." (own translation). Donald Trump's inauguration speech, Washington DC, United States, 2017.

The result is not only economic but social and political risk, once discontent grows among those who see its power in decline. Uncertainty in the face of social changes makes the middle class anxious and with a feeling of injustice in the socio-economic system, with the idea that their tax contributions are not sufficiently returned in the form of benefits. This is where performative populist discourse comes into action; it shifts the focus from economics to politics, creating symbolic relationships that generate popular identification. It is common to see generic sentences that appeal to “them” or “to the elite”, reinforcing the opposition between the traditional political class and candidates who apparently, without giving concrete solutions or tools to fight against the crisis, take a stand with the people to “change the situation”.

Below, an example of this situation in a speech by Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro on the increase in the cost of living due to the Covid-19 health crisis:

“We are going through a difficult time in the economy. I know the price of fuel, the price gas, food prices. [...] I tell you, when it comes to fuel, people complain and rightly so, but please, look who's putting their hand in your pocket. Whether it is the federal government or the states². It is not possible. [...] Fine words are not enough. I was not born to be an orator. The soldier knows it³. The soldier knows he must accomplish his mission. The one speaking is the Itamaraty staff⁴. After all, they are very well prepared here in Brazil. We must accomplish the mission.”⁵

The far right feeds on disenchantment with politics to fill the void in its discourse with conceptions linked to nationalism, xenophobia, and protectionism, where the guilt is always the other; if the political elite is not to blame then it is the fault of the migrants, for example. The difficulty of the middle class is to perceive itself as closer to the lower, working class, and distant from these candidates; in any case, she is still a *classdominated*, not *dominant*. According to Pierre Bourdieu's theory on the symbolic classifications of society (Bourdieu, 1985, 1987), there are markers of social status which, based on practices of distinction (symbols, culture), mark the place of everyone in the system. It is a question of cultural capital, not economic capital, that determines support for a populist candidate.

²Bolsonaro highlights the distance between federal power and that of the departments (“states”), to show that the situation is not “his fault”.

³“The soldier”=him.

⁴Itamaraty: Brazilian diplomatic center. He tries to show that he is not part of this traditional political elite responsible for speaking out, but he does not provide solutions for the crisis either.

⁵“We live at a difficult time in the economy. Do not preço dos fuels, do preço do gas, do preço dos alimentos. [...] Dizer a vocês, when it burns in combustion, that it is claimed and it is razed, but by favor, it is already met with my own hand. Se é o Governo Federal or estadual. Não é possível. [...] Não basta termos apenas bonitas palavras. Não naci para ser speaker. O militar sabe disso. O militar sabe que le tem que cumprir a missão. Quem dialoga, quem conversa, é o pessoal do Itamaraty. Final contas, muito bem preparados aqui no Brasil. We testify that we have missed it.” (clean translation from Portuguese). Presidential speech 10/21/2021. Source: <https://www.gov.br/>

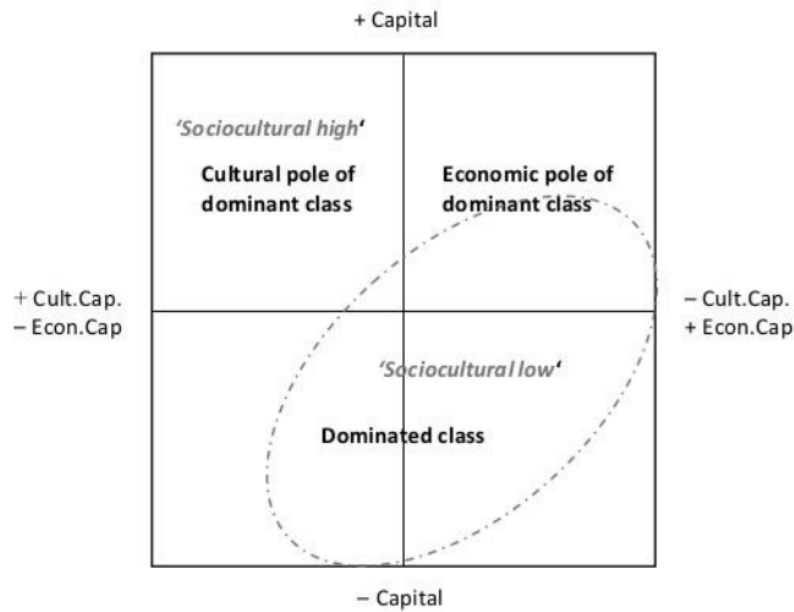


Figure 5. Social space model. Fractions of the dominant class, social location of the “socially high and low”. X: Composition of capital. Y: Volume of capital.

Source: Westheuser, 2020.

3- Conclusion

The far right carries with it a discourse full of nationalist characteristics, prejudices (racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, etc.), and protectionism. Linked to the populist ideal, candidates rely on symbols associated with the working classes to widen the gap between them and the “top” of society, the idea that over time the traditional economic and political elite has done nothing to change the social crisis situation in which the population finds itself.

Without having social consciousness in the Marxist sense of the term, in other words, without using the objective social class classification, those who identify themselves as part of the middle class, generally employees and the petty bourgeoisie, such as the small owners, see themselves distant from the dominated social group (the lowest in society), but not sufficiently close to the elite, seen as corrupt. A state of financial crisis makes the cost of living higher and higher while social mobility is in decline, and dissatisfaction with the lack of solutions affects the sphere of identification: a class that has difficulty classifying itself in a system that oppresses it also has difficulty understanding that populist speech is only a performance.

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