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# How local context affects populist radical right support: A cross-national investigation into mediated and moderated relationships

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## Abstract

Populist radical right (PRR) parties are often more successful in some regions of their countries than in others. However, previous research shows that the relationship between context and PRR support is not straightforward. We develop and test an expanded framework linking local conditions to PRR support through two causal mechanisms. First, we argue economic and cultural contextual factors can influence citizens by fostering a sense of perceived local decline, which in turn predicts both populist and nativist attitudes and, hence, PRR support (mediation). Second, we expect that citizens with fewer resources and stronger local embeddedness are more strongly influenced by the context in which they live (moderation). Combining geocoded survey data with contextual data from four countries (DE, FR, GB and NL), we show that the link between local context and PRR support is indeed mediated and moderated, providing a better understanding of the spatial distribution behind recent PRR success.

## Keywords

populist radical right; political geography; local decline; context effects; neighbourhoods

## Introduction

Populist radical right (PRR) parties are often more successful in some regions, municipalities, and neighbourhoods than in others, overperforming in, for example, rural and/or peripheral areas, in suburban towns, or working-class neighbourhoods in large cities. At the same time, there are many rural, peripheral, suburban and working-class areas where few people support PRR parties. The relationship between local context and PRR support is thus not straightforward. Scholars have sometimes found that economic and/or cultural contextual factors, such as economic decline or the presence of immigrants, matter for PRR support, but these relationships are often contingent (e.g. Bowyer 2008; Berning 2016; Savelkoul et al. 2017; De Blok and Van der Meer 2018; Dustmann et al. 2018; Dinas et al. 2019; Hangartner et al. 2019; Janssen et al. 2019).

In this paper, we argue that the role of contextual factors can well understood by assessing how their effects are both *mediated* and *moderated*. Instead of a one-size-fits all model, we argue that the relationship between context and political outcomes is more complex than sometimes assumes. First, different contextual factors - cultural and economic - can influence citizens through similar individual level mechanisms (*mediation*), producing populist and nativist attitudes and PRR voting. Second, some citizens are more strongly influenced by the context in which they live than others (*moderation*).

Regarding the former – *mediation* – we argue that we need to examine the causal mechanisms that link both economic and cultural contextual factors to PRR voting. We expect that different kinds of local experiences create similar sets of grievances towards both immigrants and elites (Harteveld et al. 2022). Hence, we hypothesize that three different contextual developments – immigration, economic hardship, and demographic decline – can contribute to a generalized sense of *local decline*, which will translate into populist and

nativist attitudes and hence PRR voting. For instance, PRR support rooted in a sense of nativism might emerge in areas that do or do not feature many citizens with an immigration background. Including perceived local decline as mediator in our models can explain why PRR voters have similar attitudes despite living in areas that experience different kinds of societal trends.

Regarding *moderation*, we expect contextual factors not to influence all residents of a given area to the same extent. It has been demonstrated that some citizens – especially the higher educated and those with their main ties outside their neighbourhood – are less likely to be affected by the context in which they live than others (Small and Feldman 2012; Fitzgerald 2018; Steenvoorden and Van der Meer 2021). The presence of immigrants, economic hardship, or demographic decline do not necessarily foster PRR support if citizens are ‘shielded’ from the impact of their environment. Hence, we hypothesize that citizens’ *resources* and their *embeddedness* function as key moderators of the relationship between contextual factors on the one hand, and perceived local decline, populist and nativist attitudes, and PRR voting, on the other hand. In other words, we expect that citizens with more resources and a weaker place-based identity are less likely to respond to the contextual features that, among those with less resources and a stronger place-based identity, would lead to PRR support.

To test these hypotheses, we use a unique dataset that combines fine-grained contextual and survey data from four West European countries: France, Germany, Great Britain and the Netherlands. In each of these countries we conducted geocoded surveys on large geo-stratified samples of around 20,000 respondents in the three larger countries and 8,000 respondents in the Netherlands. These unique data enable us to test the causal mechanisms linking local contexts to individual attitudes and political behaviour. Moreover, the data allow us to test our hypotheses based on contextual data at the local neighbourhood

level, rather than at the level of larger and/or geographical units, such as regions or provinces (e.g. Lubbers and Scheepers 2000; Kestila and Soderlund 2007) or municipalities (Coffé et al. 2007; Bowyer 2008; Rink et al. 2008; Berning 2016) that are normally analysed in comparative studies. We rely on considerably smaller areas with between 1,000 and 6,000 inhabitants. Although context effects may also play out at larger scales (Van Wijk et al. 2019), especially in more segregated areas a lower level of analysis is particularly fruitful (Biggs and Knauss 2012). We move the analyses closer to the so-called “locales” - our respondents’ immediate surroundings - that shape their everyday experiences and interactions (Johnston and Pattie 2006: 43-44).

We test our hypotheses using a harmonized design spanning four countries, rather than the single countries that previous studies on small geographical units (such as voting districts or neighbourhoods) have examined (e.g. Rydgren and Ruth 2013; Van Gent et al 2014; Savelkoul et al 2017; De Blok and Van der Meer 2018; Janssen et al 2019; Van Wijk et al 2019 Evans and Ivaldi 2021). The same survey items were fielded in all four countries, and contextual indicators were harmonized across these contexts. Our design allows us to test our theories in typical post-industrial Western European democracies that have seen a surge in PRR mobilization, but that vary considerably with respect to their electoral and party systems, migration patterns, and citizenship regimes. Our goal is to assess whether similar mechanisms nevertheless underlie PRR support across these contexts.

Our analyses confirm that perceived local decline mediates the effects of context on populist and nativist attitudes and PRR voting. They also demonstrate that, while immigrant presence is the most universal predictor of PRR support, its effect is moderated by education level. While citizens with lower levels of education are affected by the presence of immigrants, those of citizens with higher levels of education are not. This latter finding fits

with the broader literature on context effects, which shows that such effects are highly conditional.

By showing that the relationship between contextual factors and PRR support is both mediated and moderated, we make two main contributions to the literature on PRR success. First of all, our study shows that, to understand PRR support, we need to understand its equifinality: PRR parties can thrive in different contexts, because different contextual developments can generate the same types of grievances in the form of perceived local decline. As these contextual factors might be orthogonal, a focus on only one contextual indicator would paint a biased picture. Secondly, our model highlights that some areas are ‘immune’ to developing PRR support, even though the contextual conditions are conducive to it are present. If areas are populated by citizens with high levels of education, PRR parties are unlikely to flourish, even when conditions are favourable. Hence, when studying geographical patterns of PRR support, both composition and context effects should be taken into consideration.

## Theory

The role of context in fostering PRR support has been widely studied, but no consensus has been reached about whether or how contextual factors have an impact on the PRR vote. We briefly discuss the literature on context effects, followed by a discussion of the two inconsistencies that remain, and how we intend to shed light on these.

### **Contextual explanations for PRR support**

There is growing evidence that PRR support is fostered, under certain conditions, by the presence of immigrants and economic hardship (e.g. Golder 2003; Arzheimer 2009; Rydgren and Ruth 2013; Savelkoul et al. 2017; Dustmann et al. 2018; Dinas et al. 2019; Hangartner et al. 2019; Van Wijk et al. 2019). More recently, studies have suggested demographic decline might play a role too (Dijkstra et al. 2020; Hartevelt et al. 2022). The presence of immigrants is expected to increase PRR support by fostering nativism, while the latter two factors supposedly breed political discontent, which resonates with PRR parties' populist message. Below, we briefly discuss each contextual factor in turn.

The reasoning for why and how the presence of immigrants or other perceived ethnic or religious outgroups would matter for PRR support is straightforward. Generally, PRR support follows individual anti-immigrant sentiments, or nativism more broadly (e.g. Van der Brug et al. 2000; Lubbers et al. 2002; Rydgren 2007; Arzheimer 2018), which in turn can be expected to respond to actual patterns of immigration. Group threat theory suggests that migration leads to more perceived threat (Blalock 1967). In this perspective, the mere presence of migrants initiates anticipation of negative consequences for economic and social well-being of host society members (Quillian 1995; Scheepers et al. 2002). The contact theory contrasts this perspective: the presence of immigrants in a neighbourhood increases inter-ethnic contacts, which in turn might reduce prejudices and perceptions of ethnic threat (Pettigrew

and Tropp 2006). Regardless, studies tend to find a positive relationship between the presence of immigrants or ethnic minority members and nativism or, by extension, PRR support (for recent studies with strong inferential designs, see Dustmann et al. 2018; Dinas et al. 2019; Hangartner et al. 2019).

In the case of economic hardship, the causal mechanism is even more complex (Bowyer 2008; Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018). PRR parties do not generally mobilize on clear-cut socio-economic policies, nor do they have outspoken views on such issues, nor do they ‘own’ them (Mudde 2007). PRR parties regularly blame unemployment on immigrants and the elites who are allegedly responsible for their entry into the country. These parties amplify feelings of (fraternal) deprivation by pitting ‘deserving’ in-group members against alleged abuse of welfare arrangements by members of outgroups (Abts et al 2021). Even in areas with few immigrants, economic hardship can be expected to render voters susceptible to this specific appeal of PRR parties. It provides a clear explanation for the economic hardship that people experience and it provides an alternative. Also those who live in such areas who are still employed themselves can be more susceptible to the messages of PRR parties, because of the feelings of uncertainty caused by the economic hardship that they see around them. Indeed, there is evidence for a positive relationship between a range of indicators of economic hardship and PRR support (Lubbers and Scheepers 2000; Golder 2003; Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Van der Brug and Fennema 2009; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; De Blok and Van der Meer 2018; Colantone and Stanig 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Adler and Ansell 2020).

More recently, scholars have started to point at the role of *demographic decline* in fostering PRR support (Dijkstra et al. 2020; Hartevelde et al. 2022). This refers to the demographic exodus that threatens the livelihood of particular regions. While this can follow in the wake of economic hardship, it also affects moderately prosperous, but peripheral or

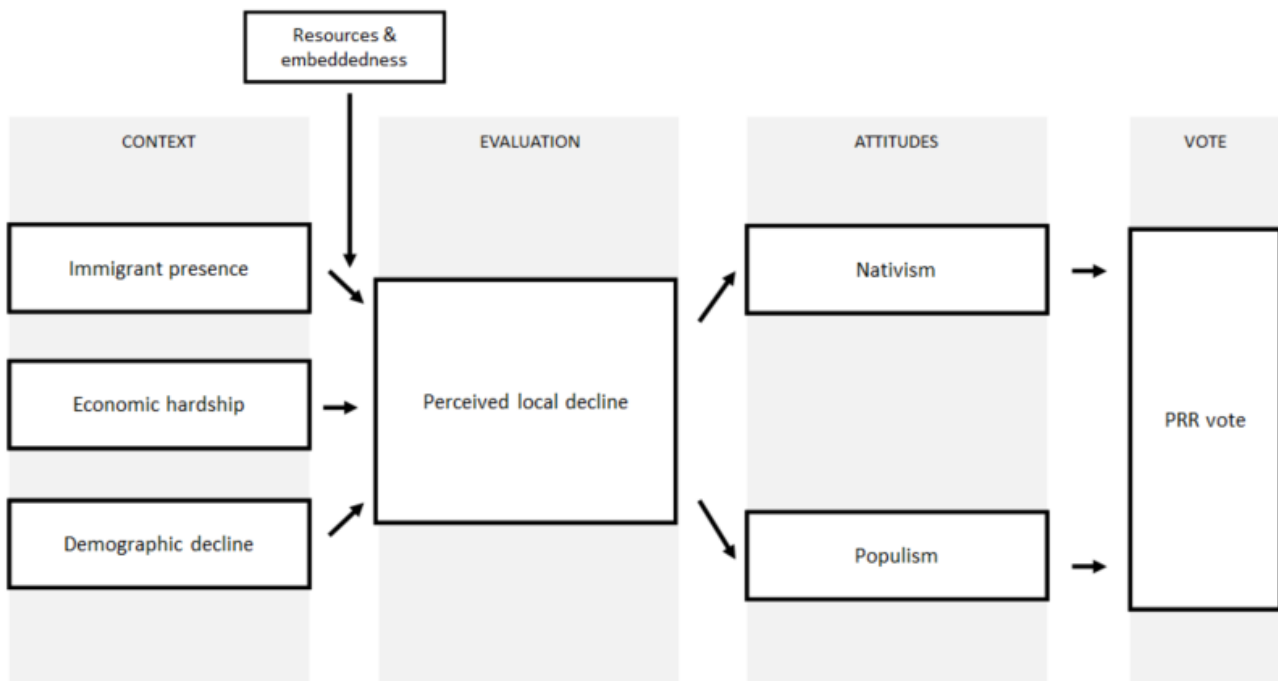


ageing regions. A decline in population, or of the share of the young, highly educated and economically active, threatens “not only economic prosperity but also potentially the reservoir of social and cultural capital” (Bock 2016: 557). This deteriorates “the carrying capacity of current models of business, public and private services” (Bock 2016: 556). The feeling that the community itself disappears has been suggested to foster political discontent (Woods et al. 2012; Cramer 2016; Guilluy 2019), in turn rendering PRR support more likely.

### **Expanding the model by introducing mediators and moderators**

All in all, there are good theoretical and empirical reasons to expect context to matter for PRR support by fostering either nativism (presence of immigrants) or anti-elite sentiments or populist attitudes (economic hardship and demographic decline). Still, two important inconsistencies remain. First, we can observe *similar outcomes in otherwise different contexts*. If nativism is often very prominent in both areas with and without immigrants, and populist attitudes in areas with and without economic hardship or demographic decline, how decisive are these local contexts? Second, a look at any electoral map reveals *different outcomes in otherwise similar contexts*. For any example of an ethnically diverse, economically struggling, or demographically declining area with strong PRR support, there is another that does not produce such support. The lack of PRR support in many large and diverse cities – such as London or Paris – seems to confirm the words of Alba and Foner (2017: 239), that “the regions and places with the largest immigrant populations are often those where the native majority holds the most positive attitudes toward diversity”. Again, the role of context appears to be complex.

FIGURE 1. THEORETICAL MODEL OF PRR VOTING



We argue that such complexities can be explained by taking two factors into account (summarized in Figure 1). First, that a crucial mediator – generalized feelings of local decline – can have diverse origins (immigration, economic hardship, or demographic decline), but always generates similar political attitudes (nativism and populist attitudes). Second, that context does not matter to the same extent for different people. We develop these two in turn below.

*Mediation: how different local contexts yield the same outcome*

In tracking the contextual origins of PRR views and support, we argue that feelings of local decline play a mediating role. Contextual theories about PRR support imply that citizens take cues from their immediate surroundings. If true, support should be rooted in certain ‘objective’ local conditions (i.e. conditions that are not merely perceptions endogenous to a pre-existing worldview) that are perceived, and reflected upon, by citizens. In itself, the very different contextual conditions discussed above do not automatically translate into PRR

support. We argue that a plausible intermediate step is that each of these factors fosters feelings of local decline, which in turn generates negative reactions towards *both* elites and immigrants.

Feelings of local decline imply that citizens perceive things in their immediate area to be going in the wrong direction. What this ‘immediate area’ entails will differ between individuals and contexts, and (as we will discuss below) not everybody is affected by local conditions to the same extent. Still, a growing body of work shows that localized concerns have substantive political implications (Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016; Fitzgerald 2018; Rodriguez-Pose 2018). Ziblatt et al. (2020: 5) argue that PRR support can be rooted in “a sense that a location and its way of life suffers some form of distributive injustice in terms of power, wealth, and prestige” and this in turn “[shapes] residents’ perception of themselves, elites, and outsiders”. This plausibly relates to all three context factors under study. For those susceptible to ethnic threat mechanisms, the presence of immigrants will be perceived (regardless of accuracy) as a form of local decline, in comparison to an earlier state when there were no immigrants. Similarly, economic and demographic decline appear to many as threats to the way of life of their immediate area. All of these phenomena have in common that they upset existing local social structures and hierarchies.

In contrast to concepts such as ‘place resentment’ (Munis 2020), ‘rural resentment’ (Cramer 2016) or ‘regional resentment’ (De Lange et al. 2022), perceived local decline does not in itself attribute any blame, nor does it point to geographically, ethnically, or socially defined culprits. It merely captures the perception that things are going in the wrong direction locally. In that sense feelings of local decline are a localized equivalent of pessimism regarding the direction the *nation* is going, which has been theorized (most famously in Taggart’s (2004) concept of the ‘heartland’) to be a core ‘linking’ feature in PRR ideology,

weaving its various ideological components in a compelling picture of the homogeneous and sovereign past slipping away (Steenvoorden and Harteveld 2018).

While perceptions of local decline can originate in quite distinct local conditions, we expect that they will find a *common* political expression in a package of grievances about both elites and immigrants. First, perceptions of a decline are often accompanied by a strong feeling that out-groups are ‘skipping the queue’ (Gest 2016; Hochschild 2016). Secondly, anti-immigrant and anti-elite rhetoric have consistently been linked together on the supply side, especially by PRR actors themselves (e.g. Rydgren 2005; Mudde 2007). Indeed, Harteveld et al. (2022) show that contextual conditions can foster both types of attitudes, but do not test any mediating mechanisms. The co-emergences of these two attitudes due to perceived local decline might explain why citizens in different areas can have similar attitudes. We therefore hypothesize that:

*H1*: perceived local decline is rooted in three different context conditions:

(a) immigration, (b) economic hardship, and (c) demographic decline

*H2*: perceived local decline leads to both nativism and populist attitudes

By positing these hypotheses, we do not assume an uncomplicated causal cascade from context through perceptions to attitudes and finally vote choice. Of course, perceived local decline is to some extent endogenous to citizens’ broader political worldview. Voters pick up cues from their party, including the notion that many areas are in decline and that immigrants and elites are to blame. Nonetheless, we expect such perceptions to be at least partly rooted in *actual* experiences. And these experiences are relevant for our understanding of context effects, because they link variations in ‘objective’ context conditions to political outcomes.

While objective decline predicts perceptions and evaluations, subjective perceptions of decline were found to be more relevant to political behaviour (Michener 2013). That is, whether or not the perception of local decline and disorder is (fully) accurate, the perception is expected to lead to attitudinal or behavioural change. To the extent that objective context does matter, however, perceived decline is a likely mediator.

*Moderation: how people respond differently to the same local context*

If an area experiences one or more of the developments summarized above, not all of its residents are equally likely to translate these developments into feelings of local decline and, by extension, political grievances. In political geography more generally, it has long been known that neighbourhood effects are often heterogeneous across residents (Small and Feldman 2012), but this is rarely acknowledged in the empirical study of context effects on PRR support. Being sensitive to the conditionality of context effects helps to transcend the “dichotomous perspective” in which neighbourhood effects either exist or do not (Sharkey and Faber 2014: 560). The more pertinent question is therefore this: *who* are most likely to be affected by the conditions in their local area? We focus on two moderators that may help to address this question: *resources* and *embeddedness* (for a related argument in the context of political support, see Steenvoorden and Van der Meer 2021).

Our first potential moderator of context effects concerns the resources citizens have to remain unaffected by their local conditions. In particular, we study the role of education, which we consider to be a resource in several respects (e.g. transferable skills, human capital, cognitive capabilities). Although an extensive literature exists that documents the strong main effects of education on progressive and cosmopolitan attitudes and vote choices, either as a result of socialisation (e.g. Surridge 2016), or of selection (e.g. Lancee and Sarrasin 2015; Maxwell 2019), the role of education as a potential *moderator of contextual effects* is under-

theorised and under-researched. From the literature, a number of compatible and mutually reinforcing resource-based mechanisms for moderation through education suggest themselves.

First, voters with higher levels of education are less likely to be affected by their immediate surroundings: they are more mobile and their outlook is more cosmopolitan (Sobolewska and Ford 2020). They are also more politically sophisticated and more attuned to national discourses (Elvestad 2009), which reduces the value and importance of local information. Second, and more importantly, voters with higher levels of education will respond differently to local conditions. This is most obvious in the case of immigration. Highly educated voters are less likely to perceive immigrants as threatening (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007). Their cognitive resources and ideological leanings make it easier for them to navigate ethnic and cultural change (Stubager 2008), and they might even value the diversity that immigration brings (Maxwell 2019). Similarly, local unemployment is less impactful for those with higher levels of education, because they possess convertible skills that are less vulnerable to local economic downturns. With demographic decline, the situation is less clear-cut, but because the more educated are also less dependent on public infrastructure and resources, it is at least conceivable that its effect is moderated, too.

*H3a: contextual factors have a weaker effect on perceived local decline  
and PRR support among citizens with higher levels of education*

The second potential moderator is the extent to which voters identify with, care about, and spend time in their neighbourhood – which we denote here as embeddedness. Embeddedness comprises two (reinforcing) components. One is behavioural and is reflected in the spatial distribution of citizens' social networks, i.e. their strong and weak ties to other persons in the

local area.. The second component, on which our analyses focus, is attitudinal: citizens' affective identification with the area. If citizens have little interaction with others in their local area and do not feel attached to it, they are less likely to notice or care about local conditions enough to let it affect their political views. Conversely, context can be expected to shape feelings of local decline and PRR support more among those who are strongly attached to their area. Such 'place-based identities' are an importing component shaping how citizens react to their environment (Cramer 2016). We therefore hypothesize that:

*H3b*: contextual factors have a stronger effect on perceived local decline and PRR support among those strongly embedded in their neighbourhood

Taken together, these factors might explain why areas that are very *similar* in terms of contextual conditions – but not in terms of the levels of education and embeddedness of its residents – still vary widely in their support for PRR parties. For instance, the relatively high levels of education, and lower levels of local embeddedness, among residents of Central London or Berlin-Mitte might allow them to remain relatively unaffected by local conditions.

## **Design, data and methods**

In most research, PRR voting and context effects have been studied at the level of large subnational entities such as provinces or regions (e.g. Lubbers and Scheepers 2000; Kestilä and Söderlund 2007). A smaller number of studies have looked at context effects at the level of municipalities (Coffé et al. 2007; Bowyer 2008; Rink et al. 2009; Berning 2016), or – mostly in single-country studies – electoral wards or neighbourhoods (Savelkoul et al. 2017;

De Blok and Van der Meer 2018; Janssen et al. 2019; Van Wijk et al. 2019; Evans and Ivaldi 2021; Harteveld et al. 2022).

Given the theoretical mechanisms, which imply everyday contact with immigrants, personal experience of decline, and direct/or competition over resources (Oliver and Wong 2003; Hewstone 2015), large geographical units such as countries or even municipalities are not a priori the theoretically relevant scale to study the effects we are interested in. Of course, larger areas do shape citizens views, but there is evidence they do so in particular on smaller scales (Biggs and Knaus 2012; Van Wijk et al. 2020). More importantly, the mechanisms we are particularly interested in – those pertaining to perceived local decline and the way citizens relate to their immediate environment – play out locally. We therefore employ much finer spatial classifications, as we will discuss below.

## **Data**

To test our hypotheses, we conducted large- $N$  surveys in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the Netherlands and combined them with contextual data from national statistical offices. In order to have enough power to detect the effects of context on attitudes and behaviours, large samples of thousands of respondents are required. Given that our aim is to establish the effects of context conditions at the individual level, it is essential that the surveys cover a wide range of small-scale geographical areas in the four countries.<sup>1</sup> The effective sample size (i.e. the number of respondents that filled out the survey *and* that could be linked to ecological data) is around 20,000 in France, Germany and Great Britain and 8,000 in the Netherlands. The online panels through which these respondents were recruited used quota

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of our study, it is not crucial that the samples are randomly drawn from the target population, because we are not interested in describing population parameters.



samples crossed by region, as well as age, gender, and education.<sup>2</sup> Fieldwork for the surveys was carried out close to the first-order elections that took place in the four countries in 2017 (see Table 1).

The core questions asked in the surveys were identical across the four countries whenever possible. Exceptions to this rule are discussed below, when the operationalisations are presented. The ecological data on the areas in which the respondents live were derived from the main national statistics offices in the country, and when necessary, from other secondary socio-economic and demographic data sources in each country. These ecological data were linked to survey respondents on the basis of the geo-codes that have been assigned to respondents. In each of the countries, the geo-codes were developed in line with the way in which contextual data are measured by the national statistics office (for details of the geo-codes, see Table 1).

**TABLE 1.** INFORMATION ABOUT THE GEO-CODED SURVEYS AND CONTEXTUAL DATA

	<b>France</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>Netherlands</b>	<b>Great Britain</b>
Elections	President Parliament	Parliament	Parliament	Parliament
Election date(s)	23-04-2017 07-05-2017 11-06-2017 18-06-2017	24-09-2017	15-03-2017	08-06-2017
Period of survey	April-June 2017	July-September 2017	March-May 2017	March-June 2017
Survey company	BVA	Infratest dimap	GfK	ICM
Effective sample size	19,408	16,485	7,987	22,694
Geo-coded area	Composite areas based on longitude and latitude	2km by 2km raster grid coordinates	Statistical neighbourhoods	Statistical wards
Number of geo-coded areas	8,749	8,911	1,537	6,365
Main source for contextual data	National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE)	Federal Statistical Office (Destatis)	Statistics Netherlands (CBS)	Office for National Statistics (ONS)

<sup>2</sup> The quota sample in Great Britain was also crossed by neighborhood deprivation quintile.

## Operationalization

The biggest challenge in a comparative study of contextual effects is the operationalization of key independent variables, especially at the contextual level. In this study, we have endeavoured to use common measures where possible. However, inevitably, there is some variation across some measures due to national specificities. Table A1 and A2 in the appendix therefore provide information about the exact measurements used in each country. We use static measures for both practical and theoretical reasons. Practically, studying change is hampered by data limitations in multiple of the studied countries (including changes in geographical boundaries). However, prior studies show a positive correlation between levels and change measures of macro indicators (Harteveld et al. 2022).

We measure the *presence of immigrants* by the percentage of first-generation immigrants (i.e. those foreign-born) in each area. In the Netherlands, we instead rely on the percentage of first- and second-generation immigrants, as this is the figure reported by Statistics Netherlands. While these are two different classifications, we assume that they correlate strongly on the contextual level. In addition, note that citizens' perceptions of who constitutes an 'immigrant' might differ from official classifications. If anything, this too would make any correlation we do find with attitudes conservative.

We measure *economic hardship* using the share of the total population that is unemployed (France, Germany), the share of the active population that is unemployed (GB), or the share of the total population receiving unemployment benefits (NL). Again, while these differences in operationalization produce different absolute levels, they should plausibly correlate to a similar degree with the dependent variables.

We measure *demographic decline* by the percentage of inhabitants of each area aged between 15 and 25 ("leaving the area age") and the percentage of inhabitants of each area

aged between 25 and 45 (“(not) returning to start families age”), interpreting lower numbers as a sign of demographic decline. The reason is straightforward: fewer young people indicates that a community sees many of its younger residents leave, or is not attractive for young people to settle. These are threats to the demographic, social and economic sustainability of communities and a predictor of PRR support (Harteveld et al. 2022).

We also control for *population density*, which we measure as the number of inhabitants per square kilometre of each area. To examine non-linear patterns, we divided each national sample into five groups of equal size based on population density, providing some cross-case equivalence.

In our study we use the following individual level variables. We measure *perceived local decline* using a single question that prompts respondents as follows: “In the past 5 years, has your neighbourhood...”, with the answer options being “Improved”, “Declined” and “Stayed the same”. We recoded perceived decline to 1 and all other answers to 0.

We measure (attitudinal) *embeddedness* using a single question that asks respondents “To what extent do you feel attached to your neighbourhood or town?” with the answer categories forming a 7-point rating scale ranging from “*Not attached at all*” to “*Strongly attached*”.

We measure *education* on a 4-point scale ranging from “low” to “high”, with Table 2 in the appendix summarizing the national categorizations of education used.

We measure *populist attitudes* using the average response to a scale based on the following four statements, which are derived from the Akkerman et al. (2014) battery of items: 1) “The politicians in Parliament need to follow the will of the people”; 2) “The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions”; 3) “The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among

the people”; and 4) “Elected officials talk too much and take too little action”. The answer options form a 7-point rating scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”.

We measure *nativism* through perceived ethnic threat, relying on a scale of four items from the European Social Survey that tap into cultural and economic fears. More specifically, we calculate the average answer measured on a 7-point rating scale to the following statements (recoded so that a higher value indicates a higher level of perceived ethnic threat):

1) Is it better for a country if almost everyone shares the same customs and traditions?; 2) Would you say that [country]’s cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by people coming to live here from other countries?; 3) Would you say it is generally bad or good for [country]’s economy that people come to live here from other countries?; 4) Now thinking about taxes and welfare, would you say that people who come to live here from other countries generally take out more than they put in, or put in more than they take out?.

We measure *PRR support* with a single item. The formulation of the item slightly varied between countries, taking into consideration differences in election timing and nature of the elections. In Germany and the Netherlands, respondents were asked: “If there were a general election in [country], which party would you vote for?”. In Great Britain and France, a vote recall question was used referring to the 2015 parliamentary elections (before the collapse of UKIP in 2017) and 2017 presidential election first round, respectively. We coded a vote intention or recall for the main PRR party in the country (i.e. the AfD in Germany, the FN/RN in France, the PVV in the Netherlands and UKIP in Great Britain) as one and vote intention for a different party as zero.

In our regression models, we include several socio-demographic variables that have been shown to predict PRR support at the individual level (e.g. Stockemer et al. 2018): age in

years, education measured as discussed above, and gender as a dummy with female as the reference category.<sup>3</sup>

## Methods

To test our expectations, we proceed in two steps. In the first step, we focus on *mediation* and employ multilevel Structural Equation Models (SEM). Doing path analysis through SEM allows us to estimate the various hypothesized paths simultaneously, and hence investigate whether our theoretical model - from context to perceived local decline, through nativism and populist attitudes, to PRR support - presents a plausible structure generating the correlations between variables. We model individuals to be nested in local areas, separately estimated for each country. Using this methodology generates more appropriate standard errors accounting for the nested data structure (Hox et al 2010). All SEM models were estimated in Mplus 8 using weighted least squares estimation with mean- and variance adjusted chi-square tests. After establishing the relationships between neighbourhood conditions, perception of local decline, and PRR support, we then use multilevel logistic regressions to assess the *moderating* role of individual levels of education and local embeddedness. These models also allow us to include control variables. In both methods, first- and second-generation immigrants were excluded from the sample to assure that the estimates for the effects of immigrant presence are not biased by composition effects (Arzheimer and Carter 2009).

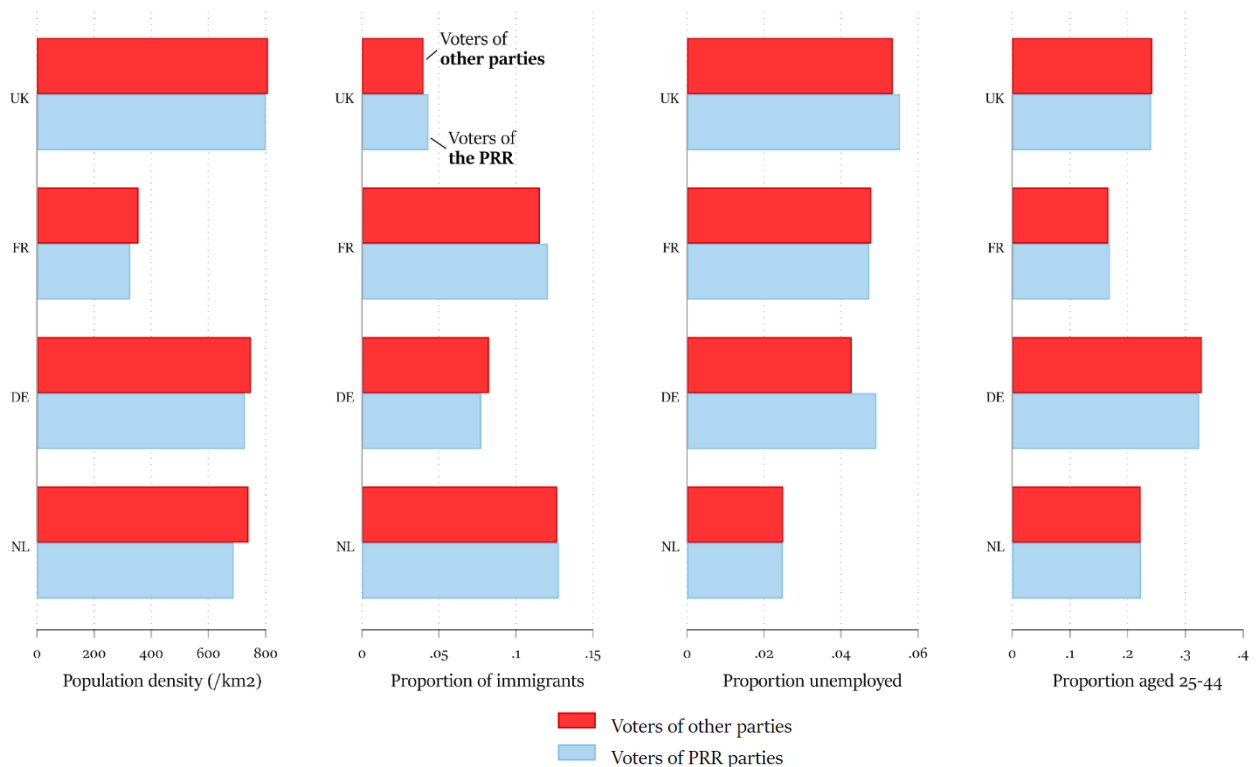
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<sup>3</sup> The difference between individual and contextual effects can be illustrated on the basis of age. Even if young people are more likely to vote for PRR parties (at the individual level), the *absence* of young people (on the aggregate level) might induce voters of all ages to perceive local decline and therefore support PRR parties.

## Findings

We start by describing PRR support, as well as in which contexts it can be found. Figure 2 shows that PRR voters generally live in somewhat less densely populated areas, although the differences are not substantial. Figure 2 also shows that PRR voters tend to live in areas with somewhat fewer, rather than more, immigrants. Levels of unemployment seem a little higher in areas inhabited by PRR supporters, while there is no discernible correlation with demographic decline.<sup>4</sup> All this resonates with the mixed or weak findings in earlier work. However, it is important to stress that it is likely that the effects of context become more clear-cut when we take into account that some citizens are more likely to be affected by context than others. We will explore this in the main analysis.

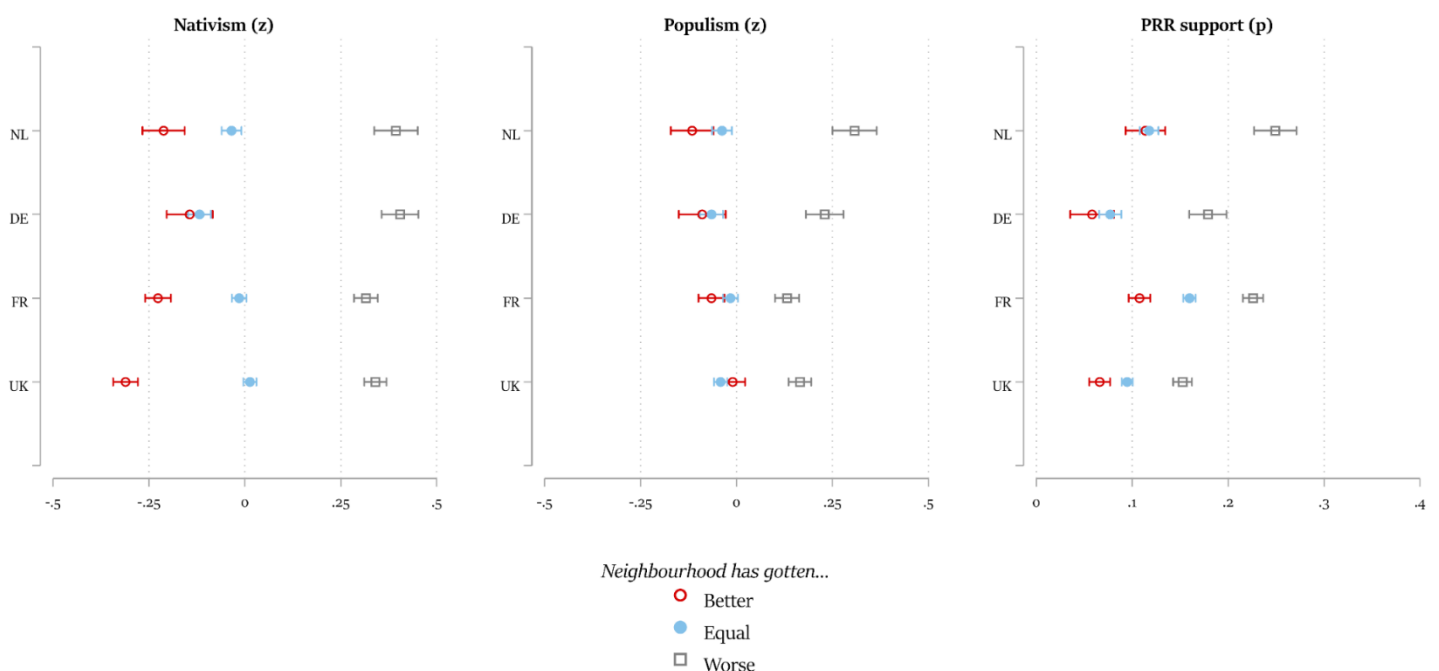
**FIGURE 2.** AVERAGE SCORES ON CONTEXT VARIABLES AMONG NON-PRR AND PRR VOTERS



<sup>4</sup> Recall that the level of unemployment is measured in the Netherlands as the number of people on unemployment benefits in the area, resulting in lower levels than in the other countries.

What is the role of the hypothesized mediator, perceived local decline? Figure 3 shows the average scores on (standardized) attitudinal variables, as well as the fraction that votes for the respective PRR party among those who perceive decline, improvement, or neither. We find that those who feel their area is declining have considerably different views compared to those who think it is improving. These differences exist across all countries and are of similar magnitude. Those who experience local decline score 0.5 to 0.7 standard deviations higher on the immigrant threat perception measure. On the populist attitudes measure, there is more variation between countries, but the differences are sizable everywhere, ranging from almost 0.2 in France to more than 0.4 standard deviations in the Netherlands. The association with vote choice is also very sizable. In all countries, support for the PRR party at least doubles among those who perceive local decline. Crucially, these correlations are not confounded by individual characteristics. The size of the effect remains virtually identical when controlling for age, level of education, gender, and left-right position.

**FIGURE 3.** NATIVISM, POPULIST ATTITUDES, AND PRR SUPPORT, BY PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE LOCAL AREA



### **Mediation (multilevel path model)**

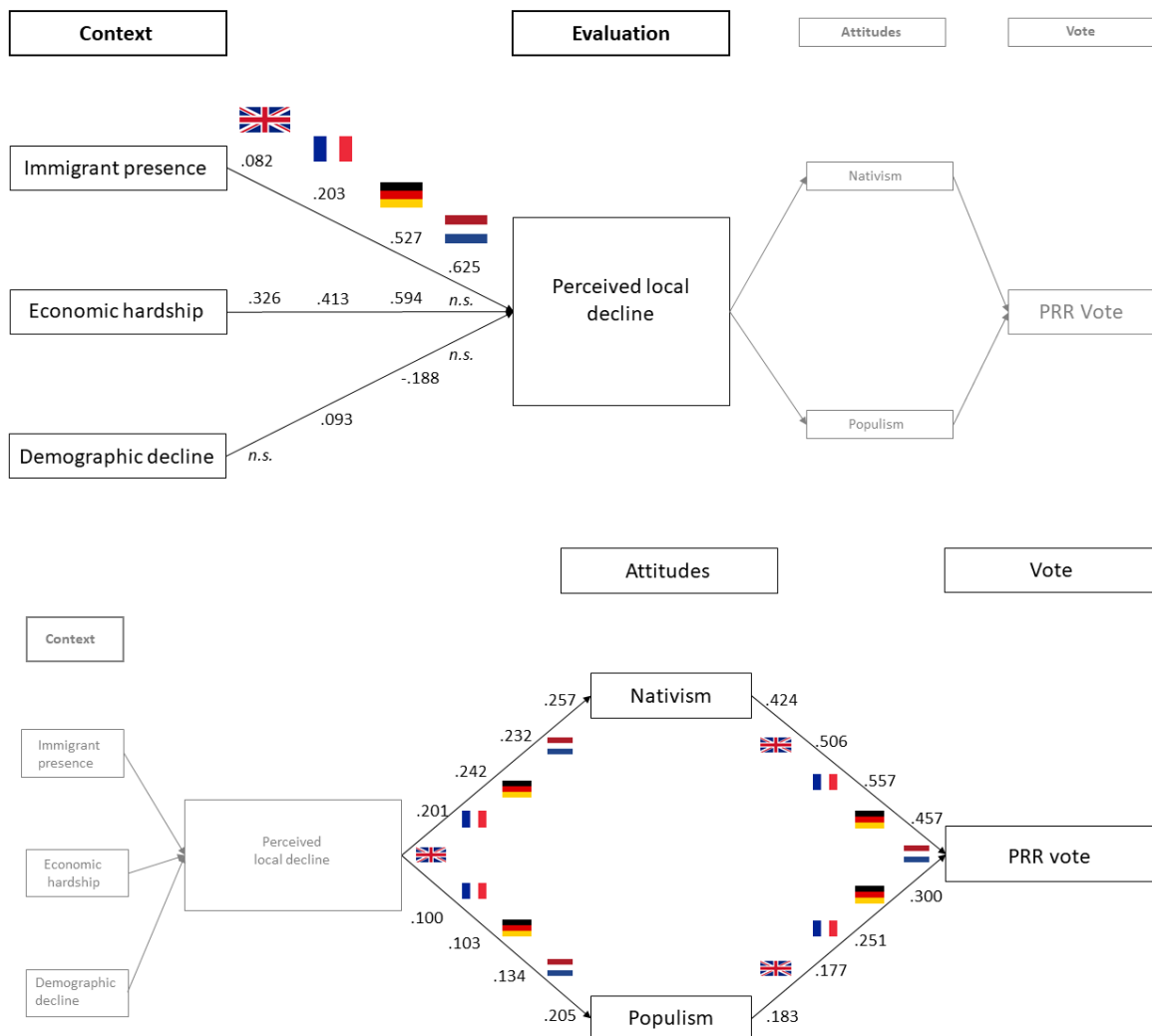
We start by mapping the hypothesized causal chains, as described in the theory section, using multilevel path models. The goal is to establish whether, first, the extent to which feelings of local decline mediate the context effects, and whether, secondly, such feelings result in a negative evaluation of both immigrants and politicians. We present the coefficients for all four countries below in Figure 4. For readability purposes, the first and second half of the causal path are visualized separately, even though they are modelled simultaneously. The numbers next to the arrows in the figure are the standardized effect coefficients, by country (as indicated by the flag).

Consistent across all four nations, we find a statistically significant positive relationship between the presence of immigrants and the perception that the neighbourhood is declining, as predicted by H1a. Furthermore, in all countries except the Netherlands, unemployment is associated with increased perceptions of local decline (H1b). Contrary to H1c, evidence for a link between demographic decline and perceived local decline is weaker, with a positive effect in France, a negative in Germany, and no significant relationship in the Netherlands and Great Britain.

Regarding the individual level paths, we find consistent positive relationships between perceived local decline and nativism, as well as between perceived local decline and populist attitudes. The fact that both attitudes are affected confirms H2. In all countries, the effect on nativism is stronger than on populist attitudes, but both are consistently affected. Both nativism and populist attitudes are, in turn, associated with support for PRR parties. These patterns can potentially account for the fact that anti-immigrant sentiment exists in areas without immigrants but with sizable unemployment, as well as the occurrence of political discontent in areas that experience little economic hardship but that feature many immigrants.



FIGURE 4. MULTILEVEL PATH MODEL



Tables A3 to A6 in the appendix present the results for all remaining paths per country. Besides the mechanisms discussed above, the contextual variables emanate a significant *direct* effect - i.e., without being mediated by any attitude - on PRR support in Germany, Great Britain, and (less robustly) in France. We believe that contextual influences should in fact be mediated by some attitudes, and that remaining direct effects can mostly be attributed to confounding variables, such as socio-demographics. There are also direct influences, of varying degrees, of contextual variables on nativism and populist attitudes. On the one hand,

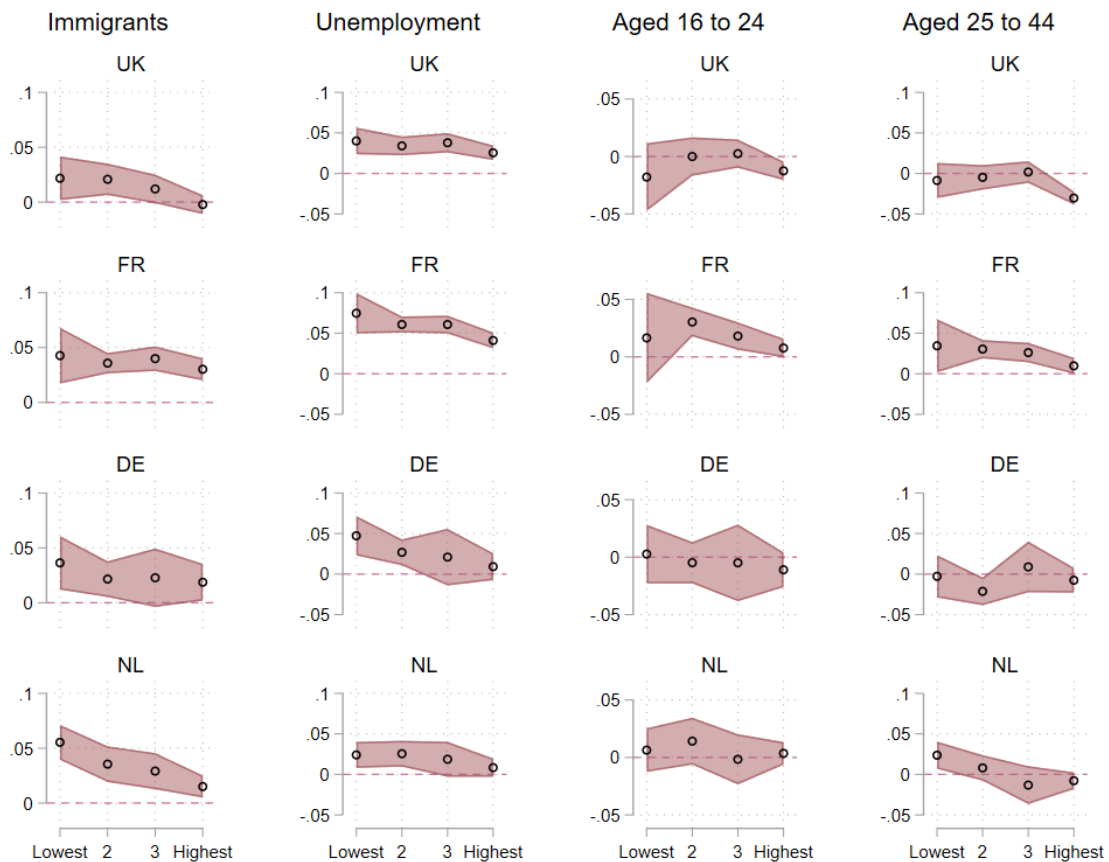
this confirms that contextual factors can affect attitudes even without explicit perceptions of local decline. On the other hand, this also reflects the fact that our measure does not capture such feelings perfectly, and that socio-demographics may (again) act as confounders. We aim to isolate the latter in our regression models with control variables below.

### **Moderation (multilevel regression)**

As discussed in the theory section, we expect context to have a stronger impact on perceived local decline among citizens with a lower level of education (H3a) or stronger attachment to their local area (H3b). Since perceived decline in turn predicts attitudes and PRR support, the same moderators can be expected to also determine the correlation between context and PRR support. We therefore present the results of models predicting feelings of local decline (directly moderated) here and report the same model predicting PRR support (indirectly moderated) in Figure A1 and A2 in the appendix.

We start with feelings of local decline. How are these affected by contextual conditions, depending on citizens' level of education and neighbourhood embeddedness? To start with the first moderator, Figure 5 below shows the marginal effects of the four context variables on feelings of local decline, split out by citizens' level of education. These average marginal effects are based on models that control for all other context characteristics, as well as age, and gender, but not for embeddedness, as this might (partly) mediate the effect of education. Positive values indicate that higher scores on the context variable increase the likelihood of perceiving local decline; negative values that higher scores decrease this likelihood. We opt for this manner of presentation, because we are particularly interested to learn among which of the educational subgroups the effects are significant.

FIGURE 5. MARGINAL EFFECTS OF CONTEXT ON PERCEIVED LOCAL DECLINE, BY COUNTRY AND LEVEL OF EDUCATION



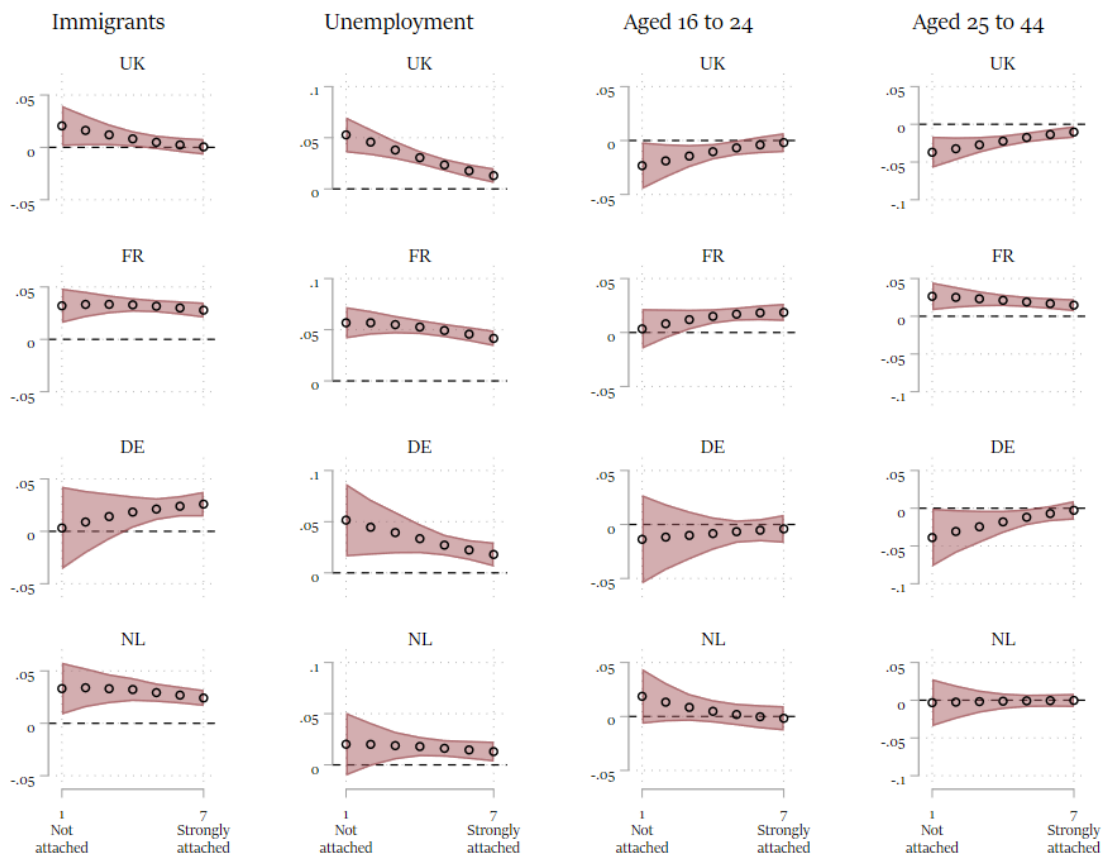
The *presence of immigrants* in a local area increases feelings of local decline in all countries. In line with the hypotheses, this effect is more pronounced among respondents with a lower level of education, except for France. In NL the effect is halved for respondents with the highest level of education compared to those with the lowest. In Great Britain and Germany, the effect is not significantly different from zero for respondents with high or even medium levels of education.

Higher levels of *unemployment* are also associated with perceptions of local decline in all countries (including, this time, the Netherlands). Again, the effect appears moderated by education. In terms of effect size, unemployment has the largest overall effect on perceived local decline.

Conversely, the effects of *demographic decline* are weak and inconsistent. We would expect the presence of more young people to be associated with *less* PRR support (even while controlling for the age of the respondent), but we find mostly null results or even positive effects. Overall, we find evidence for H3a: to the extent that context matters, it does mostly do so among those with lower levels of education.

The second mechanism we investigate is moderation by level of neighbourhood embeddedness. Figure 6 shows the marginal effects for different levels of embeddedness. Contrary to our expectations formulated in H3b, it does not suggest that immigration, unemployment, or demographic composition matters most for those with the strongest place-based identities. The effects are either similar across levels of attachment or sometimes even stronger for weak identifiers. We conclude that context effects depend much more consistently on people's education (and thus their cognitive, economic, and cultural resources) than their attachment.

FIGURE 6. MARGINAL EFFECTS OF CONTEXT ON PERCEIVED LOCAL DECLINE, BY COUNTRY AND EMBEDDEDNESS



Of course, our ultimate outcome of interest is PRR support. Because local decline increases such support (as the SEM model confirmed), it would follow that our context variables matter for this particular outcome too, especially among the lower educated. At the same time, the patterns should be weaker, as more considerations go into the ultimate vote choice than perceived local decline. This is indeed what we find in our analyses. Figure A1 and A2 in the appendix shows the marginal effects of the context variables on PRR support across the levels of the two moderators. The patterns are often (but not always) similar but weaker.

In particular, we find that (again) immigration matters only for voters with lower levels of education in France and the Netherlands. The effects of unemployment are less robust, and only appear (somewhat) moderated by education in Germany and the Netherlands. One of the most striking differences is the negative effect of immigration in

Great Britain. Further analysis shows that this negative relationship is driven by respondents from the London area, which suggests the most pro-immigrant (and UKIP-averse) Londoners are also most likely to live among immigrants.<sup>5</sup> At any rate, the demographic composition is not a consistent predictor. We conclude that immigration and unemployment shape feelings of local decline, especially among those with few resources; and that this in turn matters downstream for patterns of PRR support in very similar ways in all four countries.

## Conclusions

In this article, we investigate the geographical patterns of PRR support using unique geo-referenced data collected in France, Germany, Great Britain, and the Netherlands. We contribute to the literature by studying the role of *local* conditions - measured at the neighbourhood level - in a comparative way, and by theorizing *how* contextual conditions influence PRR support in four different countries. We propose that local conditions affect PRR support through the perceptions of local decline. Moreover, we test to what extent individual resources or embeddedness moderate this influence.

Our results confirm that feelings of local decline mediate the impact of ‘objective’ contextual features on attitudes and PRR support. We show that immigrant presence positively affects the perception of local decline across all four countries. High levels of unemployment also increase the view that the local area is worse off than it was before (except for the Netherlands). By contrast, demographic decline, measured as a low percentage of youth in the neighbourhood, is not consistently linked to perceptions of local

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<sup>5</sup> See Maxwell (2019) for a similar finding about self-selection.

decline. We note that some recent case studies operationalized the erosion of community life (which speaks to the same mechanisms) more directly (e.g. in disappearing services such as pubs; Hartevelde et al. 2022; Bolet 2021), and did find a relation with PRR support. Hence, we argue more research is needed to assess the role played by such mechanisms, and how to best operationalize these. We also find that perceived local decline is associated with increased nativism *and* populist attitudes, both of which in turn consistently predict PRR vote intention. Our findings further show that the contextual effects, with some exceptions, tend to be moderated by education. That is, citizens with higher levels of education do not link immigrant presence and economic hardship to perceived local decline, whereas citizens with lower levels of education do make this connection. Indirectly, this then translates into PRR support.

Our findings have important implications for our understanding of the PRR and the geographical distribution of its support, but at the same time point to some unanswered questions. First, our findings confirm that PRR support is indeed affected by local conditions. While many previous studies have uncovered correlations between context and right-wing attitudes or PRR vote choice, the mechanisms involved have not been investigated explicitly. Our study finds that these effects are indeed, at least partly, due to explicit perceptions of local circumstances. Concerns over local decline in turn translate in a package of grievances towards both political elites and immigrants, which fuels PRR support. It seems plausible that this ‘package deal’ emerges because of elite cues, but further research is needed to understand exactly how citizens attribute ‘blame’ in the face of (perceived) local decline.

Second, our study confirms that context does not shape PRR support to the same extent for everyone. While almost self-evident, this has hardly ever been modelled explicitly in studies of context and political behaviour. We find that the higher educated are more likely to remain unaffected by contextual conditions, which we attribute to their various resources

that allow them to escape, ignore, or embrace immigration, economic hardship, or demographic decline. Contrary to expectations, we did not find that those most embedded in their local environment were impacted most strongly by it. Perhaps behavioural measures of networks and social capital could provide a more ‘objective’ measure of embeddedness that does moderate the effect of context (e.g. Fitzgerald and Lawrence 2011; Fitzgerald 2018). At any rate, future studies of context and political behaviour should be sensitive to the possible potential moderation, because failing to do so can lead to a substantial underestimation of the role played by context. It also means that a glance at election outcome maps is not enough to understand the role of context, because these do not convey which proportion of citizens is ‘at risk’.

Taken together, these implications complicate, but also enrich, our understanding of what PRR ‘strongholds’ are. Rather than inhabiting a single ‘heartland’, PRR support is geographically fragmented, drawing supporters in different types of areas for different reasons. At the same time, it is important not to overstate the role of context. Citizens’ views of the world are shaped by a multitude of factors, many of which are not specific to the local context, such as the (national) political debate and media environment. Where one lives does not completely determine one’s political views. Still, the PRR is more popular in some areas than others, and this cannot be fully understood without being sensitive to the interplay between characteristics of individuals and their context. Future work should expand and refine which interactions are important in this respect.

Of course, our study has some limitations. While the country-comparative element and the finer spatial scale provide unique insights that were not available to previous studies, it also limits the availability of context indicators to common denominators. Country case studies could pick up the thread and study micro-macro interactions and the role of perceived local decline on a small scale using a broader set of ecological data. Furthermore, our case



selection was restricted to four relatively urbanized Western European countries with a long history of immigration. It is likely that other factors play a role in countries with, for instance, lower population density and less immigration.

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## Appendix

**TABLE A1.** VARIATIONS IN MEASUREMENT OF CONTEXTUAL VARIABLES ACROSS COUNTRIES

	<b>France</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>Netherlands</b>	<b>Great Britain</b>
Immigration	% foreign born	% immigrant families	% first or second generation immigrant	% foreign born
Unemployment	% of population unemployed	% of population unemployed	% of population claiming unemployment benefit	% of unemployed in active population
Age groups	% below 44 / % below 25			

**TABLE A2.** VARIATIONS IN MEASUREMENT OF EDUCATION LEVEL

	<b>Great Britain</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>The Netherlands</b>	<b>France</b>
Low education	Technical, no formal qualifications	Keinen Schulabschluss / Volks- oder Hauptschulabschluss	Basisschool / VMBO	Below BEPC
2	GCSE or equivalent	Mittlere Reife / Realschulabschluss	MBO 1-3	CAP-BEP, BEPC
3	A-level or equivalent	Fachhochschulreife	MBO 4-plus	Baccalauréat
High education	University degree equivalent or higher	Allgemeine Hochschulreife)	HBO / WHO	Diplôme d'études supérieurs

TABLE A3. MULTILEVEL PATH MODEL RESULTS GREAT BRITAIN

	PRR		Threat		Populist attitudes		Decline	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
<i>Within</i>								
Male	.027*	.011	-.018*	.008	-.034***	.008	-.027*	.012
Age	-.147***	.013	.047***	.008	.079***	.008	.037**	.012
Low education	<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>	
Med education	.078***	.013	.073***	.008	.109***	.008	.014	.013
High education	.144***	.013	.165***	.008	.180***	.008	.015	.013
<i>Between</i>								
Migration	.176***	.034	.095*	.040	.328***	.085	.210***	.028
Unemployment	-.257***	.038	-.288***	.050	-.193**	.067	.409***	.033
Youth	-.073*	.032	-.076*	.036	.017	.049	.093***	.026
RMSEA	.017							
CFI	.993							
TLI	.947							
Chi <sup>2</sup> /df	30.122/5							

Note: \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \* =  $p < .05$ . All coefficients are standardized.

TABLE A4. MULTILEVEL PATH MODEL RESULTS FRANCE

	PRR		Threat		Populist attitudes		Decline	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
<i>Within</i>								
Male	.075***	.012	-.018**	.007	-.060***	.007	-.027**	.010
Age	.101***	.014	.196***	.007	.022**	.008	.115	.011
Low education	<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>	
Med education	.010	.013	.038***	.007	.017*	.007	.028**	.011
High education	.014	.012	.147***	.007	.058***	.007	.047***	.010
<i>Between</i>								
Migration	-.188***	.032	-.351***	.025	-.170***	.027	.076**	.028
Unemployment	.154***	.031	.277***	.027	.489***	.033	.335***	.030
Youth	.004	.036	-.036	.029	-.008	.032	.042	.035
RMSEA	.022							
CFI	.992							
TLI	.939							
Chi <sup>2</sup> /df	55.337/5							

Note: \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \* =  $p < .05$ . All coefficients are standardized.

TABLE A5. MULTILEVEL PATH MODEL RESULTS THE NETHERLANDS

	PRR		Threat		Populist attitudes		Decline	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
<i>Within</i>								
Male	.115***	.019	.063***	.013	-.019	.012	-.013	.021
Age	-.103***	.019	-.016	.014	.041**	.013	-.036	.023
Low education	<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>	
Med education	-.088***	.021	-.152***	.016	-.171***	.015	-.029	.025
High education	-.145***	.025	-.290***	.016	-.397***	.016	-.155***	.027
<i>Between</i>								
Migration	.042	.087	-.283***	.069	-.060	.088	.625***	.093
Unemployment	.048	.116	.011	.083	.367**	.139	.175	.098
Youth	-.223*	.112	-.114	.075	-.298*	.120	-.113	.090
RMSEA	.023							
CFI	.997							
TLI	.974							
Chi <sup>2</sup> /df	21.898/5							

Note: \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \* =  $p < .05$ . All coefficients are standardized.

TABLE A6. MULTILEVEL PATH MODEL RESULTS GERMANY

	PRR		Threat		Populist attitudes		Decline	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
<i>Within</i>								
Male	.111***	.013	-.009	.008	.042***	.008	-.024*	.011
Age	-.100***	.014	-.090***	.008	.123***	.008	.019	.011
Low education	<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>		<i>Ref.</i>	
Med education	.019	.013	.103***	.008	.116***	.008	.032**	.012
High education	-.023	.014	.003	.008	.032***	.008	.021	.012
<i>Between</i>								
Migration	-.197**	.070	-.231***	.046	-.211***	.057	.530**	.162
Unemployment	.252***	.067	.195***	.044	.304***	.058	.573**	.173
Youth	-.261**	.081	-.093	.051	-.066	.058	-.158	.099
RMSEA	.016							
CFI	.997							
TLI	.975							
Chi <sup>2</sup> /df	25.510/5							

Note: \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \* =  $p < .05$ . All coefficients are standardized.

FIGURE A1. MARGINAL EFFECTS OF CONTEXT ON FEELINGS OF PRR SUPPORT,  
BY COUNTRY AND LEVEL OF EDUCATION

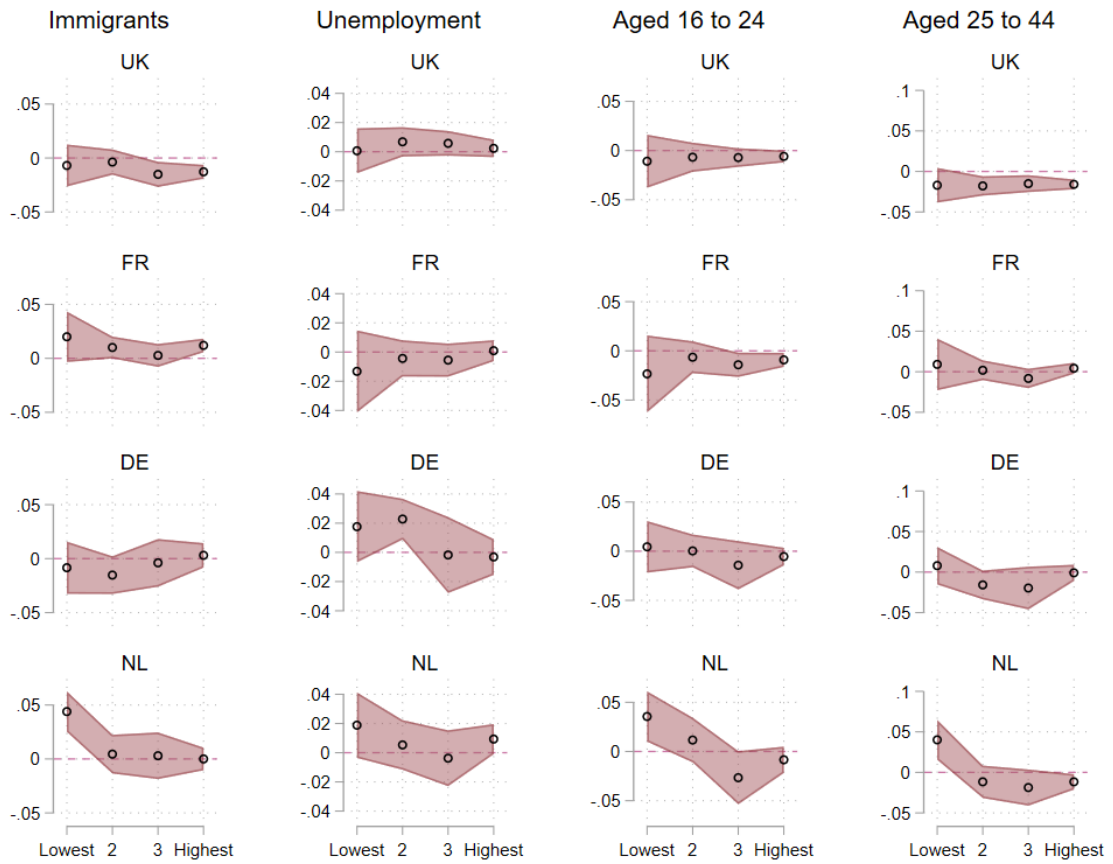


FIGURE A2. MARGINAL EFFECTS OF CONTEXT ON LOCAL DECLINE, BY COUNTRY AND EMBEDDEDNESS

