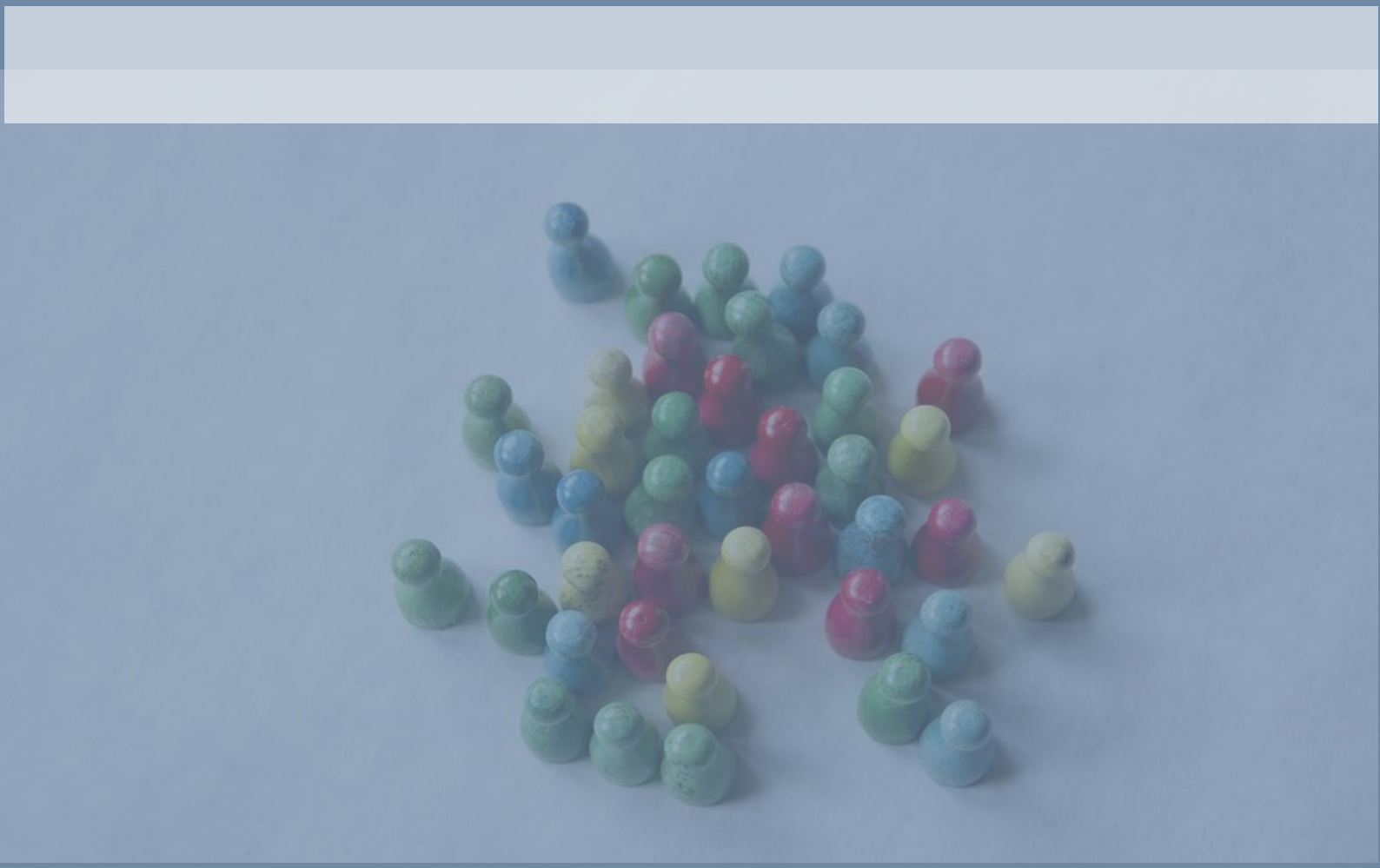
ISSN 2737-7504

School of Politics & International Relations
Working Paper Series: WP03/2018



Coping and the Political Behavior of Low Socio-economic Status Individuals

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Abstract

The rise of far right parties and the increase in inequality in recent decades make it particularly relevant to understand the political behavior of individuals with relatively low socioeconomic status (SES). This paper revisits the old puzzle that low SES individuals often do not base their vote on their material interests: Why are low SES individuals particularly likely to vote for far right parties, or to not participate politically at all; why do many of them vote for conservative parties while others vote for traditional left parties offering redistributive platforms? This paper provides a framework to study the political choices of low SES as the outcome of coping with the self-esteem and shame threats emerging from low status. The basis of the framework is recent evidence on the shame and self-esteem implications of low SES in everyday social encounters. Building on different strands of literature, I identify four stylized strategies to cope with these threats: "Problem-focused", "meaning-focused", "withdrawal", and "aggression" coping. I argue that these coping strategies can result in different political behaviors, namely left redistributive vote, non-class based vote, vote abstention and far-right vote, respectively, and review evidence from political science and social psychology supporting this connection. The framework can integrate several existing theories explaining different political choices of low SES individuals and provide new insights on the study of populism and political abstention. I tentatively consider potential factors that may lead individuals facing the same threat to adopt these different coping styles.

Keywords

Electoral behavior; Political psychology; Socioeconomic Status; Shame

Citation

This paper should be cited as Pellicer, Miquel (2018) Coping and the Political Behavior of Low Socioeconomic Status Individuals, SPIRe Working Paper WP03, School of Politics and International Relations, UCD, Ireland.

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[1]I would like to thank Eva Wegner, Harold Kincaid, Dennis Spies and Laura Taylor, and the participants of the Mair Library Group for very useful suggestions on previous version of this paper. All errors are mine.

1. Introduction

It is well known that individuals of low socioeconomic status (SES) often display electoral behaviors that appear at odds with their material interests. People of relatively low SES are more likely than high SES individuals to not vote at all, even if this reduces the likelihood that pro-poor policies get implemented (Gallego 2014). A substantial share of low SES individuals support conservative parties, even if these parties often defend material interests opposed to theirs (Frank 2007).

The rise of far right parties and the continuous increase in inequality in recent decades makes this old puzzle particularly relevant at present. Far right parties have a strong appeal among low SES individuals (Arzheimer 2016; Golder 2016), even if these parties tend to appeal to identity rather than material issues (Mudde 2010). The increase in economic inequality of recent decades makes the puzzle more relevant because it implies that material distinctions in society are becoming more salient and that precariousness and insecurity are expanding (Kalleberg 2009). Moreover, the observed attitudinal reactions to this increase in inequality deepens the puzzle: Citizens do not seem to react to the increase in inequality by demanding more redistribution (McCall and Kenworthy 2009).

Why do low SES individuals undertake these types of political behavior? What motivates people with relatively low SES to vote for populist far right parties, for conservative parties, and to not vote at all, while yet others vote for left parties traditionally representing their material interests? This paper proposes a framework to study the political behavior of low SES individuals as the result of strategies to *cope with the consequences of low status on self-esteem and shame*.

The framework draws on recent literature on the psychology of status and on classical literature on coping, self-esteem and shame. Based on recent literature, I argue that the life experience of individuals of relatively low SES includes many social encounters with the potential to generate shame and self-esteem threat. This type of encounters are highly stressful. They are particularly threatening and frequent for people living in poverty, but apply more generally to people of relatively low SES. People are highly motivated to cope with the threat involved in these encounters and they do so in different manners. From classical literature on stress/ coping, on self-esteem, and on shame, I consolidate four major strategies to cope with shame and self-esteem threats: “problem-focused”, “meaning-focused”, “withdrawal” and “aggression” coping.

I argue that these stylized strategies, in turn, can encourage to the different types of political behavior that low SES individuals tend to undertake, namely: left vote, non-class vote, non-participation, and far-right vote, respectively. I discuss in some detail how coping strategies translate into political behavior, supporting the discussion with empirical evidence from studies in social psychology and political science. I tentatively discuss dispositional and situational factors that can explain why some people, facing similar self-esteem threats, adopt different coping styles. Finally, I discuss ways in which the framework can advance our understanding of the political behavior of low SES individuals.

2. Literature on the motives for the political choices of low SES indiviuals

There is an enormous literature that takes a a micro/ citizen perspective to study the political choices that low SES individuals undertake.[2] There are vast micro literatures on non-class vote, on political participation and a rapidly growing literature on support for far right and populist parties. However, there is scope for theoretical advancement by unifying aspects of the literature that remain overly separated; in particular in terms of topic and in terms of behavioral approaches. First, from a topic point of view, the micro literatures on non-class vote, on political participation and on far right/ populism support are to a certain extent proceeding separately from each other. This misses opportunities to better understand the political behavior of low SES individuals. An example of this is the focus on *relative deprivation* to explain far right support (Pettigrew et al. 2008). While this explanation is compelling, an exclusive focus on far right/ populism obscures the fact that other attitudes and political choices are more prevalent among the relatively deprived (Mols and Jetten 2017). A too strong focus on a single political choice can make it difficult to understand why people with similar levels of deprivation react to deprivation so differently in the electoral arena.

Second, the literature tends to consider separately different types of behavioral approaches and motivations for political behavior. In particular, the literature terns to focus either on the *material/ self-interest* dimension, or on the *identity/ psychological* dimension. In the far right literature, material-self interest explanations center on economic losses suffered by globalization or competition from low skilled immigrants (Betz 1994; Esses, Jackson, and Armstrong 1998). In the political participation literature, material explanations focus on the role of resources for political participation (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995). More recently, psychological or cultural types of explanations have become more prominent. In the far right literature, these center on threats to group identity (Inglehart and Norris 2016; Kitschelt and McGann 1995) or psychological predispositions against outgroups or towards authority such as having a "Social Dominance Orientation, or a "Right Wing Authoritarian" personality (see Pettigrew 2017 and references therein). The political participation literature has considered non-material factors such as civic duty (Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954) and social pressure (Gerber, Green, and Larimer 2008). Both literatures have considered the role of personality traits (see Gerber et al. 2011 nd Gallego and Pardos-Prado 2014). A substantial psychology-based literature in on non-class voting from a "motivated social cognition" point of view has also emerged (Jost et al. 2003).

As the focus on psychological processes increases, however, the focus on material issues tends to decrease. Survey articles on far right vote and turnout literature often organize their literature reviews by separating the role of "demographic" factors such as income, and the role of "psychological factors" or "attitudes" (Arzheimer 2016; Harder and Krosnick 2008). This is, of course, a convenient organizational choice, but it illustrates how material and psychological factors are often conceptually separated.

There have been several efforts to bridge the material vs. psychology divide in explaining political behavior. Traditionally, this has been done focusing on education and skills. Lack

[2]There is also a very large literature that takes a more macro perspective, seeking to explain why support for different types of party differs between countries and over time. This literature tends to focus on the role of institutional factors, party characteristics, or political cleavages for explaining this variation. This is an enormous literature; as examples, see Kriesi et al. (2012) and Mudde (2010).

of skills are often deemed responsible for political behaviors of low SES considered "puzzling" in terms of material self-interest, in terms of populist vote (Choma and Hanoch 2017), political participation (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995), and non-class voting (Frank 2007). Recently, however, there has been an increasing focus on other dimensions of material disadvantage relevant for psychological processes, notably social status and "relative deprivation" ((Pettigrew et al. 2008; Gest, Reny, and Mayer 2017; Gidron and Hall 2017). Material self-interest and identity motives have also been considered jointly to yield new insights on certain types of political behavior (Johnston, Lavine, and Federico 2017).

Most of this recent work tends to focus on dichotomous political preferences, such as for or against redistribution or populist vs. non-populist, but there are also relevant exceptions. Shayo (2009) and Mols and Jetten (2017) both build on Social Identity Theory to develop frameworks where there are different possible political responses to relative deprivation, such as demanding redistribution, or supporting nationalism/ outgroup hostility. Emmenegger, Marx, and Schraff (2015) also study different possible political reactions to disadvantage, considering vote abstention along with redistribution and protest vote. Contrary to Shayo (2009) and Mols and Jetten (2017), their hypotheses are built from separate arguments in political economy and sociology rather than from a unified behavioral framework.

The framework in the present paper complements these recent efforts. By centering on the experiences of low SES individuals, the framework addresses different types of political preferences and behaviors rather than focusing on only one. By applying the appraisal/ stress/ coping approach of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the framework integrates material/ self interest perspectives with psychological ones. And by deriving its implications from basic psychology research on shame, self- esteem, and coping, the framework has a unified foundation.

3. Social status, self-esteem, shame, and stress

3.1 Social status, self-esteem and shame

The points of departure of this framework are the related concepts of self-esteem and shame. Self-esteem is the evaluation on makes of one-self (Baumeister 2010). Shame is the emotion that emerges from a negative self-evaluation (M. Lewis 2000).

Self-esteem and shame can be considered internal measures *of social status*: i.e. of how much one is socially accepted and valued. This is because self-worth often derives from the perceived image that others have of us. Situations when one is socially devalued lead to shame and lowered self-esteem (Gruenewald et al. 2004). In fact, shame and pride may have evolved as a emotions in humans precisely to signal social status and rank (Tracy et al. 2013; Steckler and Tracy 2014; Gilbert 1997, 2016): Acquiring and communicating information on one's social rank is evolutionary adaptive because it can serve to manage costly conflicts. Body postures and non-verbal communication associated with shame and pride are very similar to those involving high and low status encounters, in adult humans, small children, and non-human primates (Gilbert 2016; Steckler and Tracy 2014). People from different cultural backgrounds display implicit associations between status concepts and pride non-verbal displays (Tracy et al. 2013).

Socioeconomic status/ social class is one of the key dimensions determining the experience of social status (Mattan, Kubota, and Cloutier 2017; Fiske 2010). Recent research argues that social class is, not only experienced in terms of rank, but leads to constant experiences of rank during everyday social encounters (Kraus, Tan, and Tannenbaum 2013). There is indeed evidence showing that social class rank is signaled frequently and rapidly and understood quite accurately (Kraus, Park, and Tan 2017). Moreover, SES is likely to be particularly relevant for shame. This is because, relative to other social ranking dimensions such as gender or race, SES is more easily changeable and thus can be attributed to one's fault (Fiske 2010).

The connection between low status and shame/ low self-esteem is not an abstract, but manifests in the actual *life experiences* of high vs. low status individuals. High SES individuals are more individuated and remembered (Fiske 2010; Mattan, Kubota, and Cloutier 2017), while paying less attention to others themselves (Kraus and Keltner 2009). Moreover, they are *presumed* more competent (efficacious, skilled, creative, confident, intelligent) by neutral observers (Fiske 2010). It is then not surprising that high SES is associated with higher reported self-esteem (Twenge and Campbell 2002). In contrast, low SES individuals are constantly exposed to relatively devaluing experiences, and are more likely than high SES to experience social anxiety (Kraus et al. 2013) and depression (Mossakowski 2015).

The connection between status and shame is particularly strong for the poor. Walker et al. (2013) study the experience of poverty in eight different countries with very different income levels, from Norway to Uganda. Even if the poor in these countries have access to vastly different material resources and standard of living, they all share a constant social devaluation and shame in a variety of domains. This leads the authors to conclude that shame is not only associated to poverty, but *defines* the experience of poverty.

3.2 Self-esteem and shame as motivators for action

Self-esteem and shame are powerful motivators for action. The pursuit of self-esteem is assumed to be so pervasive as to constitute a "fundamental human need" (Crocker and Park 2004). People often report preferring a self-esteem boost to other pleasant activities, such as a paycheck, their favorite food or their favorite sexual activity (Bushman, Moeller, and Crocker 2011). Shame is also believed to be a powerful motivator. Due to its target on the global self, shame is believed to be a very strong and painful emotion that people seek to avoid. Once shame is forthcoming, it is difficult to just accept it (Tracy and Robins 2004), leading people to "bypass" it (H. B. Lewis 1971); i.e. try to avoid actually feeling it in a variety of manners, as discussed below.

One reason why shame and self-esteem are powerful motivators for action is that negative stimuli that threaten shame and self-esteem loss generate unusually high levels of stress. Relative to other potential psychological stressors, those threatening the "social self" ("social value, esteem, and status") generate particularly strong and long lasting biological reactions (Dickerson and Kemeny 2004).

Therefore, low SES individuals do not simply and passively accept the self-esteem and shame threats they are exposed to. Walker et al. (2013), in their study of poverty and shame, report the myriad of ways in which the poor they interview attempt to respond to the diverse shaming situations they encounter. These active responses have also been

emphasized in the social psychology literature on stigma: stigmatized individuals "cope" with threats to their social identity by employing a variety of strategies to protect and maintain their self-esteem (Major and Townsend 2010; Major and O'brien 2005).

4. Coping

The basis for our coping framework is the transactional model of stress and coping by Richard Lazarus and colleagues. This model considers how an encounter with a stressor unfolds, emphasizing the manner in which the person *appraises* (i.e. cognitively evaluates) the encounter. The particular way a person appraises the encounter gives rise to a specific emotion. Coping then refers to the actions undertaken to deal with the situation, and may entail dealing with the emotion, or with the source of the stressful encounter.

There two main type of appraisals. *Primary appraisals* assess if the encounter is relevant for the self and whether it is potentially harmful or beneficial. Encounters appraised as relevant elicit emotions. *Secondary appraisals* then evaluate specific features of the encounter, and this leads to specific emotions. For instance, *anger* occurs when an encounter is deemed as potentially harmful for one's self-esteem (primary appraisal) and blamed on others (secondary appraisal).

Different strands of literature consider different possible strategies people may use when coping with harmful stimuli such as self-esteem threat. I consider four types of literature: on stress and coping generally (see Folkman and Moskowitz 2004); on reactions to self-esteem threat (Baumeister, Smart, and Boden 1996; vanDellen et al. 2011); on reactions to shame (Nathanson 1994; Elison, Lennon, and Pulos 2006), and on the development of coping during childhood (Zimmer-Gembeck and Skinner 2016). There is considerable overlap in the broad coping strategies considered in these different strands of literature, although the term coping is not explicitly used in all of them. The framework I propose consolidates these strategies focusing specifically on reactions to status-related self-esteem/ shame threats.

Figure 1 represents the framework. The left side of the figure depicts the stylized coping strategies I consider: *problem-focused*, *meaning-focused*, *withdrawal*, and *aggression*.

The original distinction made in Lazarus and Folkman 1984 was between problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping. *Problem-focused* coping refers to attempts to address the source of stress, while *emotion-focused* coping addresses the negative emotions generated by the stressful encounter. Following this distinction, I label the first coping strategy p*roblem-focused.* In the case of low SES induced self-esteem threats, the source of the problem is the lack of income and the differences in economic status in society. Thus, problem-focused coping implies seeking to improve one's economic standing and/ or to reduce income inequality. This corresponds most notably to the assumptions in standard rational choice models where the objective is to maximize consumption, and hence, income.

The broad alternative to problem-focused coping is emotion-focused coping, which addresses the negative emotions generated by the stressful encounter. There are several ways of doing this. One possibility is to use a cognitive strategy, and transform the *meaning* of a situation to render it less psychologically threatening. Recall that primary

appraisals determine whether the encounter is deemed relevant and this determines whether emotions are elicited or not. Revising primary appraisals (i.e. "reappraising" the encounter) can then be a successful coping strategy that palliates the negative emotions associated to it. This is the second coping strategy in the framework, which I denote as *meaning-focused* coping.[3] If successful, such coping strategy avoids the noxious nature of the threat and leads to no emotion. In the case of low SES self-esteem threats, meaning-focused coping entails interpreting encounters in ways that makes the low status less salient, or less relevant for one's self-esteem, or that somehow justifies differences in status as normal or fair.

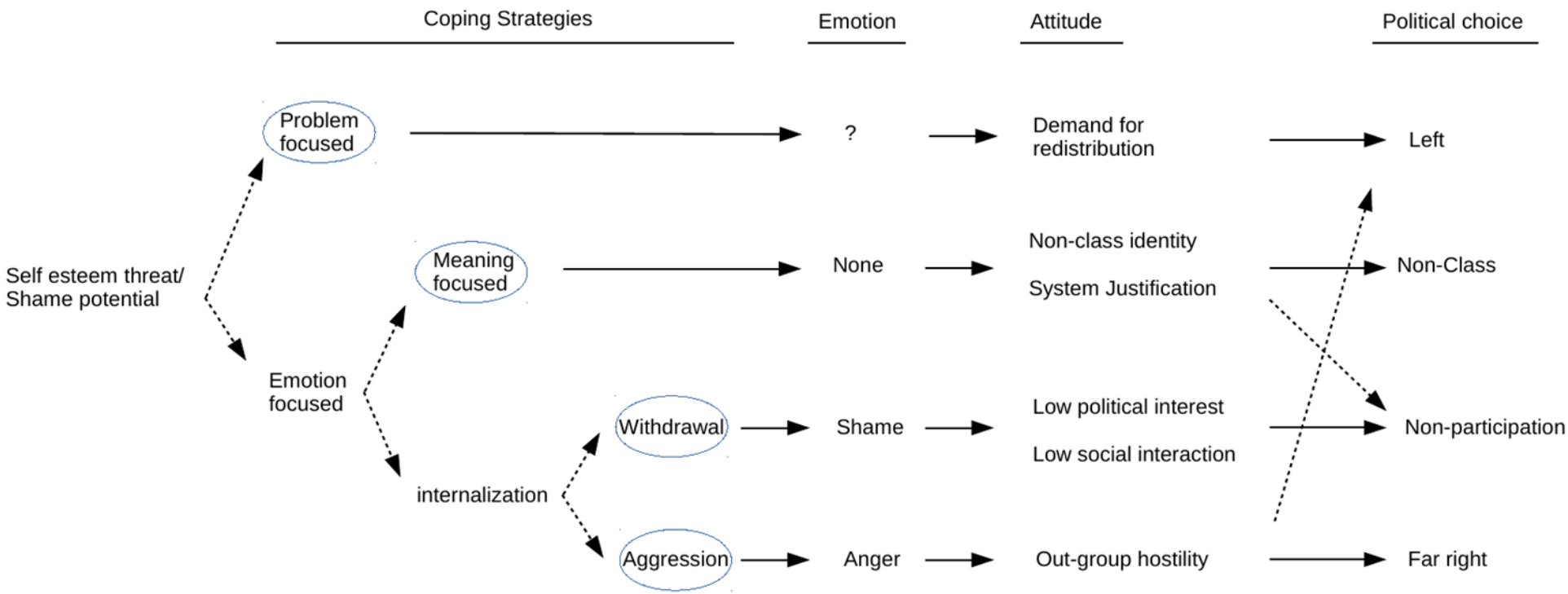
If meaning-focused coping is considered too difficult or is unsuccessful, the devaluing signal reaches the self. Then, negative emotions are elicited. Two coping strategies are then available: *withdrawal* or *aggression*. One may fully internalize the negative signal, fully experience the associated shame, and hide in order to protect the self-identity. Or one may seek to transform this shame into anger and shore up one's self-esteem by means of turning against someone else. These coping reactions emerge directly from the self-esteem, the shame, and the coping and child development literatures.[4] Withdrawal and aggression can also be derived using the coping framework of Lazarus and colleagues. If the primary reappraisal from meaning-focused coping does not neutralize the negative emotion, *secondary appraisals* evaluate who is to blame for the failure that has given rise to the negative signal. If blame is attributed to oneself, then shame is actually experienced and withdrawal is sought; if such failure is blamed on others, anger and aggression ensues.

In order to illustrate concretely these coping strategies, I consider the hypothetical example of someone at the unemployment or social assistance office requesting benefits. This is threatening situation regarding shame and self-esteem (Walker 2013). Problem-focused coping would imply focusing on the objective of obtaining the sought benefits promptly and without hassle. This could involve for instance ignoring potential patronizing or hostile behavior of officials and possibly behaving in a friendly and humble way to secure their cooperation. Meaning-focused coping could imply justifying why the clerk may be behaving in a hostile way ("he/ she probably had a bad day"), or focusing on other aspects of the encounter unrelated to the status-loaded issue of benefits, (for instance starting a conversation asking where the clerk is from). Withdrawal coping would imply harboring thoughts of failure, experiencing humiliation, and seeking to leave the situation as soon as possible. This may even lead to avoiding the collection of benefits in the future, as reported for instance in the case study of Uganda in Walker et al. (2013). Aggression coping would imply harboring thoughts of the injustice of the situation and anger at the clerk and/ or the society that puts one in such terrible position. Aggression to the clerk may or may not materialize but might remain latent and become "displaced" towards other, weaker, targets.

[3]The term meaninig-focused coping comes from the coping literature (see Folkman and Moskowitz 2004). This type of strategy features as well in the self-esteem threat literature as "resisting" (Van Dallen et al. 2011), and in the shame literature as "avoidance" (Nathanson 1994).

[4]In the self-esteem threat literature, Baumeister et al. (1996) use the terms "withdrawal" and "aggression", while Van Dallen et al. (2011) use the "compensating" (similar to aggression) and "breaking" (similar to withdrawal). In the shame literature, the categories are "withdrawal" and "attack other" (Nathanson 1994). In the coping and child development literature these strategies are are denoted "internalizing" and "externalizing" behaviors and are considered as problematic childhood responses to stress (Eisenberg et al. 2001).

Figure 1: Mapping of Coping Strategies to Political Choices



As all theoretical constructs, these consolidated coping strategies are ideal types. In reality people are bound to react to self-esteem threat using a combination of these strategies, with possibly some degree of problem-focused, some degree of meaning-focused, etc. The point is that the distinction is useful, as I will argue below.

Nevertheless, there is one specific combination of strategies worth commenting because it emerges explicitly form the literature and is potentially useful for understanding political behavior: the combination of withdrawal and aggression coping. The child development literature and the shame literature suggests that they often coexist. There is evidence that some children have a tendency to display both internalizing an externalizing behaviors (Eisenberg et al. 2001) and that withdrawal and aggression ("attack others") strategies to cope with shame are correlated (Elison 2006). In the context of this framework this makes sense. Both aggression and withdrawal coping imply the inability to shake off the devaluing signal to the self and the consequent experience of negative affect. Some people may be particularly sensitive to social rejection (be high in "rejection sensitivity" see Downey and Feldman 1996) and may thus have a tendency to display withdrawal *and* aggression (Zimmer-Gembeck and Nesdale 2013).

5. Coping strategies and the political choices of low SES individuals

The key argument in this paper is that different types of political behaviors of the low SES individuals can be linked to different coping strategies. But before turning to specific coping strategies and political behaviors, it is important to consider how does a strategy to cope with self-esteem threat in a specific social encounter translate in a political behavior? The answer to this question has two steps. First, whereas anyone may cope with a particular self-esteem threat differently depending on the specifics of the situation, individuals tend to favor a particular form of coping; i.e. to develop a *coping style* (Nathanson 1994). This coping style would depend on personal dispositions as well as the basic characteristics of one's situation. In other words, it need not be constant over the life time, but may change together with important changes in circumstances. Second, given the ubiquity of SES rank-relevant social encounters, coping styles have implications for the type of political messages one seeks to embrace and avoid as well the type of social interactions one seeks or avoids. This in turn shapes political attitudes and thereby political behavior.

5.1 problem-focused coping and demand for redistribution

The first type of coping strategy, problem-focused, leads naturally to support for traditional left wing redistributive political platforms (see figure 1). Problem-focused coping implies maximizing income and reducing income inequality. In terms of political attitudes and behavior, for low SES individuals, this involves most clearly supporting progressive redistribution and the parties basing their platform on it, the traditional left parties. This is the result of standard rational choice models of demand for redistribution where political choices are based on income maximization (Meltzer and Richard 1981), and this result is

strengthened if people are considered to display inequality aversion (see Alesina and Giuliano 2009). There is abundant evidence that income is negatively associated with demand for redistribution (Alesina and Giuliano 2009) around the world. And it is unsurprisingly well established that people of relatively low socioeconomic status in Western countries are particularly prone to vote for redistributive leftist parties (Elff 2007).

An alternative income maximizing political choice for low SES individuals could be to vote for populist right parties for "material" reasons. Low skilled immigration and international trade may drive down wages for the low skilled in rich countries. Populist far right parties do mobilize around these topics so voting for these parties could make sense from an income maximizing perspective. While this may hold for some people, several pieces of evidence in the literature puts into doubt that a majority of low SES individuals ought to or actually do vote for populist far right parties for this reason. Existing evidence from labor economics actually suggests that immigration has little effect on native wages (Peri 2014). Anti-immigration attitudes and far right vote seem to be driven more by identity/ cultural/ ingroup considerations than by economic considerations (Mansfield and Mutz 2013; Card, Dustmann, and Preston 2012).[5] In the US, people do not seem to react to immigration-related messages that highlight economic threat when these messages are text-only (and thus "argumentative"), but do when messages emphasize cultural threat and are image-based (Schmuck and Matthes 2017).

Support for redistributive left platforms is thus probably the most natural income maximizing, problem-focused, behavior of those with low SES. However, the "maximization" of self-esteem may be pursued in other ways, namely via the other three forms of coping, each of which is naturally associated to a different type of political choice.

5.2 Meaning-focused coping and non-class-based party support

Meaning-focused coping is associated with a cognitive reappraisal of the stressful encounter in a way that shields self-esteem. In the case of low status based threats, this consists of transforming the meaning of one's fit in society away from being of "low status" towards something positive. This can be done in different ways, as argued in Social Identity Theory and other social psychology theories related to it. The resulting behaviors will primarily lead to support for non-class based parties, or to be more accurate, to political support based on non-class considerations (see figure 1).

The first way in which low status people can positively reappraise their fit with society is by downplaying the social status (or class) dimension of identity, emphasizing instead other dimensions. This is one of the key tenets of social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979), a type of "social creativity", also emphasized in Mols and Jetten (2017) as a possible reaction to relative deprivation. Individuals choose the domains in which they will stake their self-esteem, and some are linked to socioeconomic achievement and some are not (Crocker and Park 2003). For instance, Crocker and Park (2003) find that some youth stake their self-

[5]For instance, these authors note that attitudes towards immigration and outsourcing tend to be more negative than attitudes towards trade, even if the wage consequences ought to be very similar.

esteem domains linked to socioeconomic status such as "outdoing others in competition" and "academic competency", while others do so in other type of domains such as "love and support from family", "virtue", and "God's love". Staking one's self-esteem in domains unrelated to standard spheres of socioeconomic success can shield one from the self-esteem threats associated with such status.

Some of the non-socioeconomic domains where one stakes self-esteem have the potential to be politicized, and this will typically lead to political choices based on dimensions other than class. For instance, *religion* is a commonly used coping strategy (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004), and has been politicized with particular relevance for the poor (De La O and Rodden 2008; Stegmueller 2013). Other politicized non-class dimensions of identity the poor may adopt to enhance self-esteem are *nationalism* (Shayo 2009*)* and *ethnicity* (Horowitz 1985).

Other non-socioeconomic identities are less straightforward to politicize, for instance "love and support from family" or domains that emphasize competition in non-socioeconomic domains (being a good sportsperson). In these cases, meaning-focused coping could lead to political abstention. This is shown in figure 1 as a secondary (dashed) line. I discuss this in more detail below.

The second general way low status individuals can transform the meaning of threatening encounters away from the lowness of their status is by reappraising the "system" as legitimate and focusing attention on the system as opposed to themselves or their group. This implies embracing ideologies that rationalize social inequality, as suggested by the theory of "System Justification" (Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004). System Justification theory argues that people have a fundamental need to legitimize the system in which they live. By redirecting attention from self and group to the system, the system justification motive can be activated, and a status-relevant encounter can be re-interpreted in a way that reduces the self-esteem threat.

In terms of political behavior, inequality legitimizing ideologies are also typically associated with non-class-based party support. Ideologies such as system justification have been linked notably to *conservatism* (Jost et al. 2003).

5.3 Withdrawal coping and non-participation

Withdrawal coping aims at avoiding the source of threat in order to reduce exposure and limit the damage to self-esteem. The archetype of the withdrawal coping person is someone who has internalized inferiority and actually experiences shame. Withdrawal thus implies avoidance of contact with social spheres where rank and status are salient. Extreme cases of withdrawal can be found in clinical depression, which is associated with social isolation (Ojeda 2015) and which can reach in severe cases situations where patients live "like hermits" to avoid any type of social interaction (Nathanson 1994).

Withdrawal coping maps very clearly into non-participation in politics. Since the rank aspect of SES is pervasive in social interaction, withdrawal implies avoidance of many facets of social life. This includes politics, where power and status are central. Withdrawal coping then decreases the *motivation* to participate politically (Harder and Krosnick 2008). This occurs

via *political disinterest* on the one hand, and *social isolation* on the other. Social isolation, in turn, curtails political information and reduces the social pressure to participate politically. Lack of political interest, and political information, and social pressure are key drivers of abstention from politics (Harder and Krosnick 2008; Gallego 2014; Blais and St-Vincent 2011).

There is also direct evidence that the type of people likely to adopt a withdrawal coping style are less likely to participate politically. Most of the evidence comes from a rapidly growing literature on *personality* and political participation. Withdrawal coping links quite straightforwardly to specific personality traits, namely as opposite of "openness to experience" and to "extraversion". These are the two traits that consistently appear positively related to political participation (Gerber et al. 2011; see also Mondak et al. 2010; Gallego and Oberski 2012). Another withdrawal type of personality trait, shyness, has also been associated to lack of political participation (Denny and Doyle 2008; Blais and St-Vincent 2011).[6] Furthermore, the link between withdrawal-type of personality traits and lack of political participation is thought to be *mediated* by variables such as political interest and the size of the social network, as hypothesized in our framework and depicted in figure 1 (Mondak et al. 2010; Gallego and Oberski 2012; Denny and Doyle 2008; Blais and St-Vincent 2011).

Another source of evidence that supports the link between withdrawal coping and non-participation is the literature that deals with the political consequences of *depression*. Depression is consistently found to be negatively linked to political participation, both as a personality facet (Gerber et al. 2011) as well as a *state*, i.e. being in a depressed "mood" (Ojeda 2015).

The consequences of material disadvantage on withdrawal and thereby political abstention is also stressed in the literature on the consequences of unemployment (see Marx and Nguyen 2016 for a recent discussion). Unemployment is often accompanied by self-esteem and shame costs that lead to social withdrawal (Price, Choi, and Vinokur 2002; Dieckhoff and Gash 2015). And unemployment is generally found to be negatively correlated with political participation (see Marx and Nguyen (2016) and the references therein).[7]

Withdrawal vs. meaning-focused based non-participation

Our framework predicts two different pathways to political abstention, via withdrawal and via meaning-focsued coping (figure 1). This implies two types of non-participant with different motivations and profiles. The withdrawal non-participant is someone who internalizes inferiority, experiences negative affect, and reduces contact with the social and political world. The meaning-focused non-participant successfully reappraises her situation

[6]Withdrawal-sociability at age 16 is not found to be related to vote by Denny and Doyle (2008). This could be because the authors control for civic duty in the regressions and this may to a certain extent neutralize the role of that personality trait.

[7]Recent research has found that the negative effect of unemployment on political interest is particularly strong for youth (Emmenegger, Marx, and Schraff 2017). This could be due to life-cycle patterns of socialization, but also could reflect a higher vulnerability of youth to self-esteem threats (McFadyen 1995).

in the world and does not need to eschew social participation. This distinction can contribute to recent literature acknowledging the "different faces" of non-participation (Amnå and Ekman 2014).

5.4 Aggression coping and support for far right parties

Internalized shame can lead to aggression to transform the experience of shame and shore up one's self-esteem. This is done by blaming others to replace shame by anger. This maps well onto ideologies that are based on group antagonism such as far right ideology (or populism in general, as will be argued below). The common denominator of far right support is the negative attitudes towards out-groups, notably immigrants and foreigners (Lucassen and Lubbers 2012; Ivarsflaten 2008).

The link between frustration/ aggression and negative attitudes towards minorities has a long history in social psychology (Dollard et al. 1939). Currently, these ideas find expression in the theory of "Relative Deprivation". Relative deprivation involves a "judgment that one is worse off compared to some standard accompanied by feelings of anger and resentment" (Smith et al. 2012). Individuals feeling "deprived" relative to other groups become frustrated and this may lead to negative attitudes towards vulnerable out-groups (Pettigrew et al. 2008), and support for the far right (Arzheimer 2016).

There is surprisingly little comprehensive evidence on the role of aggression for far right support (although see Pettigrew et al. 2008). Most studies have focused on the role of *frustration* (Poutvaara and Steinhardt 2015; Mols and Jetten 2017; Gest, Reny, and Mayer 2017). But the evidence on the role of *aggression* and anger is still quite limited (for a recent exception, see Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza (2017), discussed below).

One reason for this may be that the exact psychological channel through which frustration-aggression leads to far right support is often not considered. An examination of the links in this channel provides additional support for the role of aggression for far right attitudes. The key is the notion of *displaced aggression*: Sometimes aggression is directed towards targets other than the one generating frustration (see Berkowitz 1989). The phenomenon of displaced aggression is empirically established (Marcus-Newhall et al. 2000). The rationale for such behavior may be that displaced aggression restores a sense of control and self-efficacy (Leander and Chartrand 2017). Aggressing an innocent (weak) target can restore a sense of control after a frustration threatens the self.[8] There is evidence that anger and aggression is "displaced" towards groups with which there is potential competition, such as ethnic outgroups: Experimentally inducing anger leads to derogation of these types of out-groups (Dasgupta et al. 2009; Kuppens et al. 2012).

The perspective of far right support in terms of aggression coping can help address two puzzles in the empirical literature on far right support. First, one of the most robust demographic predictors of far right support is gender. Men are more likely to vote for the far

[8]This argument relates to another aspect of Social Creativity as proposed in Tajfel and Turner (1979): the self-esteem of low status groups can be shored up by targeting social comparisons towards groups of even lower status.

right, and this difference is "huge" (around 40%). While some explanations have been provided, this stylized fact remains an important puzzle, particularly because differences remain even after controlling for attitudes (Arzheimer 2016). The aggression coping perspective of far right support can help shedding light on this puzzle. First, the male breadwinner model implies that the shame associated to socioeconomic failure falls particularly on men. Second, even given the same shame and self-esteem threat, there is ample evidence of a gender gap in aggression. For given provocation, men tend to react aggressively much more frequently than women (Archer 2004). In fact, the effect of anger on ethnic derogation mentioned above is present only for men, not for women Kuppens et al. (2012).

A second puzzle where the aggression coping perspective on far right support can be useful is on the role of personality differences. Empirical studies have investigated the correlation between the "big 5" personality traits and attitudes towards immigration/ far right support. A*greeableness* (positively) and *neuroticism* (negatively) are commonly found as relevant, sometimes as the most relevant traits (Gallego and Pardos-Prado 2014; Schoen and Schumann 2007; Zandonella, and Zeglovits 2012, Dinesen, Klemmensen, and Nørgaard 2016, although the latter only for agreeableness). Aggression coping, and in particular the notion of displaced aggression can explain this. *Neuroticism and agreableness* are thought to be predictors of displaced aggression (Miller et al. 2003); *neuroticism* because of its link with hostility, and (low) *agreableness* because of its link with antagonism.

Aggression coping and populist left support

Immigrants are not the only potential targets of aggression coping. Aggression can also be targeted towards other outgroups and in particular, high status groups, characterized as the "elite" or the "rich". In this way, aggression coping can also lead to support for redistributive left parties. This is represented in figure 1 as an arrow from aggression coping to left redistributive vote. In effect, this essentially equates aggression coping with "populism". Populism is linked with anger and antagonism (Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza 2017) but does not have an automatic left-right placement (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017).

Aggression is typically displaced towards weak or vulnerable groups (Fournier, Moskowitz, and Zuroff 2002). What is then the social psychology rationale for directing aggression towards high status groups instead? The Stereotype Content Theory (Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2008) provides a possible answer. There are two "universal" dimensions of group evaluation: *competence* and on *warmth*. The warmth dimension determines whether a given group is attributed positive or negative intentions towards the self or the ingroup. Groups stereotyped as "not warm" elicit *active harm and aggression*. Both the rich and immigrants are considered as "not warm" (Fiske 2015). Therefore, stereotypes of "non-warmth" could form the basis for populist attitudes from an aggression coping point of view.

This line of argument can also give insights into the different behavioral motivations for right vs. left populism. The second dimension of group evaluation, "competence", distinguishes rich and immigrants (the rich are stereotyped as competent and most immigrants as non-compentent). According to the Stereotype Content Theory, groups stereotyped as competent

elicit different emotions and different "passive reactions" than those stereotyped as non-competent. A group stereotyped as non-warm *and* non-competent elicits disgust, but a group considered non-warm but competent groups elicit the desire to be (passively) associated to them (Fiske 2015). Therefore, for the rich, aggressive inclinations are tempered by the desire of positive association. This may imply that, whereas immigrants are a more constant target of aggression in the political arena, aggression towards the rich may surface particularly in moments of "social breakdown". Applying this line of research to the study of populism could prove useful.

A final implication of considering aggression coping also towards the rich is that there are now two pathways towards left redistributive parties: via problem-focused coping and via aggression coping (see figure 1). This point is similar to the argument made in Emmenegger, Marx, and Schraff (2015) regarding the complementarity of redistributive and protest motives for left vote. In the case of problem-focused coping, support is based on "rational" calculations that emphasize the achievement of redistribution. In the second case, support is based on anger towards elites, with actual redistribution being secondary. This distinction could be useful for the *demand for accountability*. Support for redistribution based on problem-focused coping will be associated with high levels of demand for accountability. Failure to deliver will be punished. In contrast, in aggression coping, accountability is less relevant. Policies inconsistent with redistribution may be forgiven to the extent that the anti-elitist message continues to be delivered effectively.

Rejection sensitivity, withdrawal and aggression

As mentioned above, withdrawal and aggression coping are linked. People with particularly high level of "rejection sensitivity" may be particularly prone to pursue both of these strategies. In terms of political behavior, this suggests a behavioral link between non-participation and support for populism: withdrawal non-participants are particularly likely to be sensitive to populist messages. There is some evidence that this is the case from Netherlands (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014) and from Spain (Ramiro and Gomez 2017).

6. On the determinants of coping style

What determines whether people of similar SES opt for one coping style as opposed to another? Potentially, different types of factors can matter: *dispositional factors* that are rather fixed for an individual, *situational factors* that can vary over the life course, and *macro contextual factors*. I provide an illustration of each of these drawing on the literature.

Coping style may be partly determined by *dispositional* factors, such as *narcissism* and the stability of self-esteem. The literature investigating the link between self-esteem and aggression argue that *traits* such as unstable self-esteem and narcissism makes one more likely to react to self-esteem *threats* with aggression (Bushman et al. 2009; Twenge and Campbell 2003)). Narcissism regarding the ingroup (what has been coined "collective narcissism", has been found to correlate with hostile outgroup attitudes (de Zavala et al. 2009).

At the *situational* level, different literatures emphasize the potential role of *perceptions of power/ efficacy*; i.e. the degree to which one believes that one can affect one's environment. A sense of powerlessness affects two trade-offs, between problem-focused vs. meaning-focused coping, and between aggression vs. withdrawal coping. Powerlessness makes problem-focused coping more difficult and directs attention towards meaning-focused coping (Smith and Lazarus 1990). There is some experimental evidence in support of this from the US (Toorn et al. 2015), and from South Africa (Pellicer, Piraino, and Wegner 2018). Consistently with this idea, historical moments where low SES people felt particularly powerful, such as after the Industrial Revolution in Europe, or after major wars such as WWI and WWII, class-based voting was at its heyday and we observe marked increases in redistribution (Scheve and Stasavage 2016). Powerlessness also matters for coping via aggression vs. withdrawal. Aggression is more likely when one perceives oneself powerful enough. Individuals with power but low status tend to act in a most aggressive and demeaning way (Fast, Halevy, and Galinsky 2012). At the other end, a sense of powerlessness is thought to be at the root of depression, the most extreme case of withdrawal (Gilbert 2016).

At the *macro-contextual* level, the level of economic and social inequality may matter for coping styles. Wilkinson and Pickett (2017) argue that inequality affects "status anxiety". In more unequal countries, the stress and self-esteem consequences of low status are greater and this, they argue, can lead to reactions related to withdrawal and aggression. Consistent with this, they provide evidence on the positive correlation between income inequality and measures of depression and "self-enhancement" across countries.

7. Concluding remarks

I believe that the framework provided in this paper has the potential to advance our understanding of the political behavior of low SES individuals. The framework delivers several useful insights. First, it integrates different approaches and explanations provided in the literature on the political behavior of low SES under a unified and coherent structure. It integrates the standard rational choice approaches of demand for redistribution as problem-focused coping; theories of "motivated social cognition" such as the theory of System Justification, as types of meaning-focused coping; and the "Frustration-Aggression" hypothesis as aggression coping.

Second, the framework heeds to the criticism made by some in the populism literature towards psychological explanations of far right support. Mudde 2010 argues that psychological explanations such as "Right Wing Authoritarianism" often portray support for these parties as "pathological" whereas the associated opinions and values are actual quite common and "normal" in Europe. This type of argument has been influential in directing the populism literature towards supply side issues. The framework in this paper addresses this criticism while preserving an eminently psychological demand-based approach. The key is that aggression coping reactions to self-esteem threat are not "pathological" but "normal". They are just one of the standard coping reactions to a self-esteem/ shame threat that is ubiquitous in normal social interactions for individuals with low SES. At the same time, the

adoption of such coping style is not automatic, and depends on features of the individual, of the situation, and of broader contextual factors.

Third, this framework can generate specific insights useful for the current literature on political behavior. For instance, a coping framework can provide a theoretical basis for the growing literature on personality traits and political behavior. This literature has provided a wealth of new empirical findings but has arguably been lacking a theoretical basis. The framework in this paper can generate specific hypothesis for why different personalities ought to be associated to different attitudes and political behaviors and explain findings such as the role of neuroticism for far right support.

Fourth, the framework generates dual pathways from coping strategies to political behaviors that could be further investigated in future research. Meaning-focused coping and withdrawal coping both can lead to political abstention, but of a different nature; withdrawal abstentionists may be more sensitive to populist mobilization. problem-focused coping and aggression coping can both lead to left redistributive support, but again of a different nature, with problem-focused copers being more concerned about accountability. Aggression coping can be directed towards the elite or towards immigrant groups, and these types of aggression may involve different types of emotions and stereotypes useful to distinguish between left and right populism.

This paper represents the first step in the development of a coping framework of political behavior. Further research could assess empirically the hypothesized channels linking coping styles to political behavior. In addition, correlations between coping styles and political choices could be investigated using the shame coping scales developed in (Elison, Lennon, and Pulos 2006). It could also be valuable to estimate the share of supporters of different parties following a problem-focused coping style as opposed to other coping styles (most notably aggression coping). This would yield insights on the demand for accountability underlying the support for different parties.

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