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The Affective Gap in Economic Grievance Based Explanations of Right-Wing Populist Voting: A Literature Review

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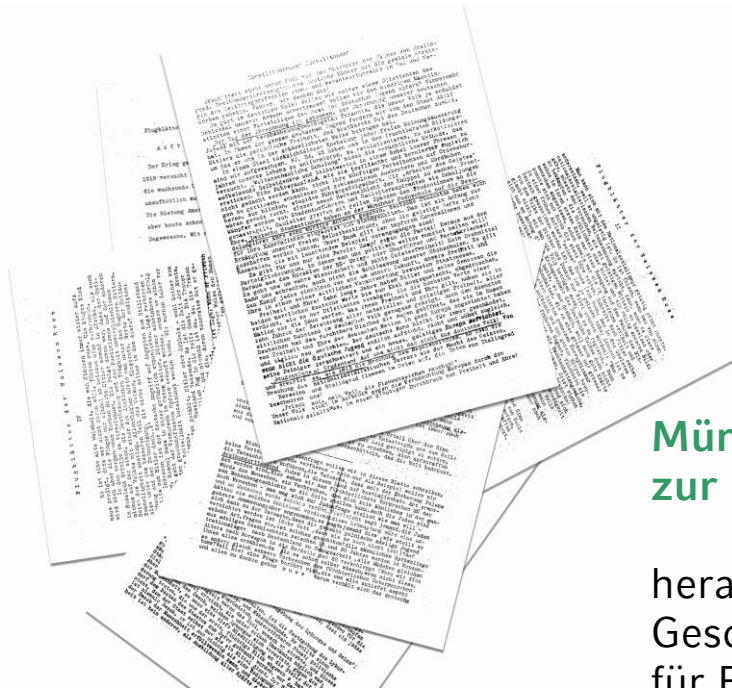
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Bachelorarbeit bei
Prof. Dr. Nicole Bolleyer
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List of Abbreviations

AIT	Affective Intelligence Theory
AfD	Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany)
BES	British Election Study
ESS	European Social Survey
GLES	German Longitudinal Election Study
JSTOR	Journal Storage Digital Library
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer+
U.S.	United States

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1 Introduction

Economic hardship does not lead to entirely predictable political outcomes. When a factory shuts down in a small town, some laid-off workers rally behind right-wing populist parties, blaming political elites or immigrants for their misfortune. Others, facing the same economic shock, remain loyal to mainstream parties or withdraw from political engagement entirely. Some small business owners coping with financial strain embrace right-wing exclusionary narratives, while others maintain their prior party preference. Rural farmers experiencing regional decline might adopt populist rhetoric centered on national betrayal, whereas their neighbors continue to support Christian conservative parties. Even among young families affected by welfare cuts, political responses vary widely. Some are drawn to the promises of protection offered by populist movements, while others continue to support progressive alternatives.

This variation in political behavior presents a central challenge for research on right-wing populist support. Scholars have long sought to understand why individuals exposed to similar economic pressures arrive at vastly different political conclusions. The urgency of this question has grown as radical right movements increasingly threaten Western democracies. Right-wing populist actors have repeatedly mobilized widespread economic and social discontent into electoral wins, often at the expense of liberal democratic norms and their institutions (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). These developments have not only intensified concern about democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016) but also led to an overall surge in academic interest. As a result, right-wing populist parties have become the most extensively studied party family (Mudde, 2016).

Within this broad research, economic grievance theories hold a prominent yet contested place among demand-side explanations, which focus on the characteristics and motivations of voters who support populist parties (Norris & Inglehart, 2016). These theories suggest that long-term structural changes in global labor markets and welfare systems have created identifiable „losers of modernization“, particularly among individuals with lower levels of education and limited economic mobility (Betz, 1994; Falter, 1994; Kriesi et al., 2006, 2008; Spier, 2007, 2011). These groups are often considered particularly vulnerable to anti-elite, nationalist, and exclusionary rhetoric (Mudde, 2007, 2019). More recent studies have expanded the framework by emphasizing not only objective material deprivation but also subjective perceptions of economic insecurity (Metten & Bayerlein, 2023; Sthamer, 2018). Despite this, economic grievance research still tends to rely on quantitative indicators

such as unemployment rates, income levels, and welfare dependency to identify correlations with support for right-wing populism. While these variables provide insight into structural vulnerabilities, they often fail to explain why individuals with similar economic conditions make different political choices. This persistent gap suggests that material factors alone cannot fully account for the appeal of right-wing populism. In response, scholars have turned to alternative explanations, particularly those emphasizing cultural concerns (Norris & Inglehart, 2016, 2019).

Political psychology and affective theories offer a complementary perspective on political behavior. Rather than framing it solely as a rational response to material conditions, these approaches emphasize the role of emotions such as fear, anger, resentment, and humiliation in shaping political judgment and decision-making. Theoretical models such as Affective Intelligence Theory (AIT) (Marcus et al., 2000, 2007) suggest that emotions influence how individuals process information and evaluate political alternatives. From this perspective, emotions function as central mechanisms through which perceived material insecurities are translated into political action.

Affective approaches have received only marginal attention in the broader literature on political behavior (Pliskin & Halperin, 2021). And their recognition and integration within quantitative research on right-wing populist support is even more limited. This thesis addresses that gap by examining how quantitative political science engages with the affective dimension of political behavior in the context of economic grievances and support for right-wing populism. This aim is articulated in the following guiding research question: ***How do quantitative studies on economic grievances and right-wing populist voting engage with the affective dimension of political behavior?***

To answer this question, the thesis combines a structured literature review with a reflexive thematic analysis of peer-reviewed quantitative studies published between 2015 and 2024. The analysis investigates whether, and in what ways, emotional factors are theorized and empirically incorporated in relation to economic conditions and support for right-wing populist parties. Rather than applying an affective framework to a single case, the thesis adopts a meta-analytical approach to examine how emotions are addressed across existing research on economic grievance explanations of right-wing populism. This approach allows for the identification of recurring methodological patterns and conceptual blind spots. The aim is not to reject or argue that economic explanations matter most but to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of populist support that considers both structural conditions and affective dynamics.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. The theoretical framework introduces key concepts in populism research, outlines works grounded in economic grievance theory, and situates emotion within the context of political behavior. The methodology chapter details the literature search strategy, inclusion criteria, and reflexive analytical process. The findings chapter identifies four dominant patterns in the treatment of emotion across the reviewed studies, along with their consequences. The discussion chapter reflects on the broader implications of these findings, addresses methodological limits, and offers suggestions for how future research might more systematically incorporate emotions into the study of radical right voting behavior. The thesis concludes by summarizing the main insights and their relevance for the future study of populist support.

2 Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework consists of three main parts: populism, economic grievance theories, and affect in political behavior. Each part contributes to the selection and evaluation of relevant literature. The first focuses on populism, drawing on Mudde and Kaltwasser's (2012, 2017) approach and Mudde's (2004) definition of populism as a thin-centered ideology that portrays politics as a struggle between a morally virtuous people and a corrupt elite. It also incorporates the concept of right-wing populism, following Mudde's (2007) argument that it combines populist ideas with nativist and authoritarian elements. The second part covers economic grievance theories, which offer demand-side explanations for the rise of right-wing populist parties by relating voter support to structural change and economic insecurity. Key contributions include Betz (1994), Falter (1994), Spier (2006, 2011), and Kriesi et al. (2006, 2008). Together, these two sections help determine the literature sample by clarifying which studies are most relevant to the research question. The third part examines how affect is connected to political behavior in existing research, particularly concerning emotional responses associated with support for the radical right (Nguyen et al., 2021; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). This final section is used to assess the extent to which the selected studies incorporate or overlook the emotional aspects of populist support.

2.1 The Concepts of Populism and Right-Wing Populism

2.1.1 Populism

Populism is a recurring theme across academic disciplines, yet its meaning remains deeply contested (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). This ambiguity arises from the term's application to

various political movements and national contexts, as well as the absence of a single, widely accepted definition (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Scholars have proposed several influential frameworks to conceptualize it. Priester (2011, p. 185) identifies three dominant perspectives in political science. The first views it as a political strategy to gain and maintain power (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011; Weyland, 2001, 2017). The second understands it as a discursive practice that constructs „the people“ in opposition to „the elite“ (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Laclau, 2005). The third defines populism as a thin-centered ideology, which presents society as split between a good and unified people and a corrupt elite (Canovan, 1981; Kriesi, 2014; Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2016; Taggart, 2000). Although interpreting populism as a strategy or discursive practice helps to explain its adaptability across diverse contexts, these perspectives struggle to differentiate explicitly populist movements from mainstream actors that also use populist tactics for political advantage (Roepert, 2022, pp. 23–24).

To address the conceptual vagueness surrounding the term populism, this thesis adopts the ideational approach developed by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012, 2017). This framework directly responds to two common critiques: that populism is merely a rhetorical instrument used to discredit opponents and that it lacks the clarity necessary for analytical use (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 1). By treating populism as an ideological phenomenon rather than a style or strategy, the ideational approach allows for more precise distinctions between populist and non-populist actors, even when their rhetoric overlaps (Roepert, 2022). This conceptual clarity makes it central for comparing studies and assessing how existing research engages with it.

At the center of this approach lies Mudde’s (2004, p. 543) widely cited definition of populism as: „an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.” This understanding rests on three core concepts: „the people“, „the elite“, and „the general will“, which together form the ideological foundation of the populist worldview (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 9). In addition, populism is understood as a thin-centered ideology characterized by limited ideological content and an inability to stand alone as a comprehensive belief system (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). This limited depth makes the concept highly adaptable, allowing it to align with more fully developed ideologies, such as nationalism or socialism, depending on the political and cultural context (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). Despite its ideological adaptability, populism consistently draws a sharp moral boundary between the virtuous, unified people and the corrupt, self-serving elite (Mudde 2004,

2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). This divide goes beyond ordinary political criticism and reflects a perspective that interprets social conflict in moral terms (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016; Müller, 2016). The people are seen as just and authentic, while the elite are depicted as corrupt and opposed to the general will of the nation (Mudde, 2004, pp. 546-547).

This moral framing of politics has made the ideational approach one of the most influential in contemporary political science (Roepert, 2022). Roepert (2022, pp. 24–25) emphasizes the importance of Mudde's (2004) contribution to current understandings of populism, particularly in debates about the rise of right-wing populist parties. At the same time, the author cautions that using populism as a broad umbrella term can blend important ideological differences (Roepert, 2022). A general definition risks overlooking the exclusionary elements that are central to its right-wing variant (Roepert, 2022, p. 20). In response to this concern, the following section provides a brief outline of Mudde's (2007) conceptualization of right-wing populism.

2.1.2 Right-Wing Populism

Mudde (2007) defines right-wing populism as a distinct ideological form that combines three elements: „nativism“, „authoritarianism“, and „populism“. Although not used as an analytical framework in this thesis, Mudde's (2007) concept remains relevant for understanding how right-wing populism is understood across the reviewed literature. As a widely accepted reference point, it clarifies how the phenomenon is approached in quantitative studies and helps in interpreting their findings on voter behavior. To maintain conceptual clarity, this thesis adopts Mudde's (2007, 2019) terminology, using the terms „right-wing populist parties“ and „populist radical right“ interchangeably to refer to the current wave of populist actors.

The first element, nativism, provides the central concept for understanding how right-wing populist actors define national identity and draw boundaries between insiders and outsiders (Mudde, 2007). Nativism refers to the belief that the state should protect and prioritize the interests of the native population, often at the expense of those considered outsiders (Mudde, 2007). According to Mudde (2007, p. 22), this manifests in the portrayal of immigrants and minority groups as threats to national identity and social cohesion, drawing on both nationalist and xenophobic ideas. When expressed through populist rhetoric, nativism adopts a moral dimension: society is framed as divided between a virtuous, unified people and a corrupt elite, while outsiders are depicted as disruptive (Mudde, 2007, p. 22). Authoritarianism further enables the ideological structure formed by nativism and

populism. While nativism defines who belongs, and populism claims to represent the will of that group, authoritarianism provides the tools to enforce this social order. It emphasizes discipline, obedience, and control, particularly in response to perceived threats to the nation (Mudde, 2007; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). This results in support for restrictive state measures that are framed as necessary to preserve national cohesion and public security (Mudde, 2007, p. 22; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Taken together, these three components form the ideological core of right-wing populist parties (Mudde, 2007). However, ideology alone offers only a partial explanation for their widespread resonance among voters. To understand the structural conditions under which radical right parties gain traction, it is necessary to examine the broader drivers of political behavior. Among demand-side explanations, economic grievance theories remain a central yet contested approach to understanding populist support (Norris & Inglehart, 2016). The following section begins by exploring how seminal works interpret various aspects of structural and material change as economic grievances. It ends by summarizing how current studies connect various economic indicators to the rise of right-wing populist parties.

2.2 Economic Grievance Theories

The modern political science notion that severe economic crises fuel authoritarian movements has its origins in classic sociological analyses (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). As a foundational contributor to modernization theory, Lipset (1959) argued that economic development supports democratic stability by strengthening political legitimacy and thereby reducing support for extremist alternatives.

Early applications of this framework to the second wave of right-wing mobilization were developed by Betz (1994) and Falter (1994). They argued that as societies underwent liberalization and technological change, certain groups, such as lower-skilled workers and those self-employed, faced either real or perceived declines in social status (Betz, 1994; Falter, 1994). As Betz (1994) and Falter (1994) argue, losers of modernization were more likely to be drawn to exclusionary political messages that promised to protect their social and economic position. The „modernization losers thesis“ became especially influential in the German social science discourse, where it provided a key explanatory theory for analyzing support for parties such as the Republikaner and later the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) (Roepert, 2022). Further developing the theory, Spier (2006, 2011) emphasized that payoffs of modernization are asymmetrically distributed. Actors who can upskill or influence the global reform agenda become winners, whereas those unable to adapt internalize a narrative of

decline (Spier, 2006, pp. 35-36).

During the 1980s and 1990s, globalization and neoliberal reform accelerated economic and social divide. Governments on both sides of the Atlantic embraced deregulation and trade liberalization, promising efficiency and growth (Hooghe & Marks, 2018, p. 114). However, the distributive fallout was uneven. De-industrialisation, weaker unions, and welfare cuts widened income gaps and eroded occupational security (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, pp. 136–139). In this context, Esping-Andersen (1990) observed the emergence of a marginalized class within advanced capitalist societies. The author refers to this group as „the precariat“, a social class marked by low educational attainment, persistent economic insecurity, minimal access to social protections, and declining wages (Esping-Andersen, 1990, p. 10). Additional structural changes in the global economy further reinforced the upward concentration of wealth. Contributors to this shift included rapid technological advancements, the outsourcing of many forms of manual and routine labor, the decline of progressive tax systems, and welfare austerity (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, pp. 136-139). These trends were further accelerated by the growth of transnational economic activity and increased levels of cross-border migration (Marks et al., 2021, p. 176).

Building on these developments, Kriesi et al. (2006, 2008) introduced the influential „losers of globalization“ model. Their framework argues that large-scale economic and cultural integration has created a new socio-political cleavage. On one side are the so-called „winners“ of globalization: individuals who are cosmopolitan, highly educated, and able to take advantage of international opportunities (Kriesi et al., 2006, pp. 921-923). On the other side are the „losers“, typically lower-skilled and economically insecure individuals who face both material disadvantage and a perceived decline in social status (Kriesi et al., 2006, pp. 921-923). According to this model, those who feel left behind by globalization are more likely to support parties that promise national protection, stricter immigration policies, and a return to economic justice and cultural recognition (Kriesi et al., 2006, p. 922).

While economic grievance theories provide important insights into the structural drivers of populist support, they face several limitations when assessed from institutional and cultural perspectives. Institutionally, they often neglect how party systems and non-government organizations mediate the translation of discontent into political behavior. Strong welfare systems and robust civil society networks can channel grievances in less polarizing ways, thereby reducing the appeal of populist movements (Akkerman, 2016; Pedahzur & Weinber, 2016). From a cultural perspective, economic models risk misidentifying the root cause of disaffection. Norris and Inglehart (2016, 2019) argue that cultural attitudes are

stronger and more consistent predictors of support for right-wing populism than material insecurity.¹

Nevertheless, economic grievance theories provide a central framework for explaining the relationship between economic marginalization and political behavior.² Studies grounded in those theories generally operationalize grievances using a range of structural and subjective indicators. Commonly used variables include individual level unemployment status, long-term unemployment, income level, income loss, type of employment contract, educational attainment, social class, and welfare dependence (Spier, 2010, pp. 71-96). At the macro level, studies frequently use local unemployment rates, industrial decline, welfare cuts, economic stagnation, income inequality, and GDP to measure structural exposure to economic insecurity (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In some cases, subjective indicators such as perceived economic insecurity, perceived unfairness, expectations of future financial decline, and economic anxiety are used to predict the personal experience of grievance. However, by focusing

¹ Norris and Inglehart (2019) present the „cultural backlash thesis“, which challenges the view that economic hardship is the primary driver behind the rise of right-wing populist parties. Instead of emphasizing financial insecurity, they argue that support for populist movements, particularly on the right, is better understood as a reaction to rapid cultural change. According to their findings, older, white, male, and less-educated citizens in Western democracies often feel left behind by societal developments such as expanded rights for women, LGBTQ+ communities, and ethnic minorities (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, pp. 15-16). These groups perceive a loss of cultural dominance, which grows resentment and a desire to return to traditional social norms (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 16). This reaction fuels support for what they term „authoritarian populist parties“ (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, pp. 15-24). They describe this process as a „cultural backlash“, drawing on Inglehart’s (1971) earlier concept of the „silent revolution“. While economic concerns are not entirely dismissed, Norris and Inglehart (2019) emphasize that cultural factors offer a stronger and more consistent explanation for the rise of populism across different national contexts.

² Economic grievance theories and the studies grounded in them argue that the rise of right-wing populism is primarily driven by economic hardship and the consequences of neoliberal globalization. As Roepert (2022, p. 47) explains, although different versions of this theory emphasize different factors, they share the core assumption that economic concerns are central to both the messaging of right-wing populist parties and the motivations of their supporters. The author offers a detailed critique of this perspective, arguing that it often overlooks or downplays the cultural, racist, and sexist dimensions that are fundamental to right-wing populist discourse (Roepert, 2022, pp. 47–56). Themes such as anti-feminism, anti-immigration, and hostility toward LGBTQ+ rights are frequently ignored or treated merely as indirect expressions of economic frustration (Roepert, 2022, p. 49). According to their critique, such an approach risks reducing complex social attitudes to little more than material grievances. Roepert (2022) emphasizes that these cultural narratives can operate independently of economic concerns and may even play a more decisive role in shaping political behavior. As a result, they call for a more integrated understanding of right-wing populism, one that accounts for both cultural and economic factors rather than treating them as mutually exclusive explanations (Roepert, 2022). Acknowledging these widely discussed limitations, the aim of this thesis is not to defend the primacy of economic grievance approaches, but to strengthen the perspective by advancing a revised understanding that better accounts for how individuals subjectively experience economic insecurity and politicize it.

primarily on structural indicators, these approaches, which concern themselves with the voters themselves, overlook the psychological processes that shape political behavior. Affective responses such as fear, anger, and perceived humiliation play a central role in how individuals interpret and politicize economic discontent (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). The next section examines how affect is addressed in the literature on political behavior, with particular attention to its less frequent application in studies of right-wing populist support.

2.3 Affect and Political Behavior

Economic explanations for the rise of radical right parties have consistently centered on objective material conditions, such as deindustrialization, precarious employment, and perceived economic insecurity. However, earlier scholarship, most notably Adorno et al.'s (1950, 1969) studies of authoritarianism, emphasized the psychological dimensions of political behavior, arguing for the central role of emotions in shaping authoritarian attitudes. As Marcus et al. (2007, pp. 8–9) state, over the following decades, this perspective was largely displaced by the rise of rational-choice models, which viewed voters as utility maximizers responding to structural incentives (Downs, 1957). This theoretical shift redirected scholarly attention away from affective motivations, focusing instead on economically grounded calculations of self-interest (Marcus et al., 2007).

Although this thesis does not operationalize affect directly, Scherer's (2005) widely cited definition is included to establish conceptual clarity around the often inconsistently applied concept of affect. Scherer (2005, p. 314) defines affect as: „an episode of massive synchronous recruitment of mental and somatic resources to adapt to and cope with a stimulus event that is subjectively appraised as being highly pertinent to needs, goals, and values of the individual.“ Given the abstract nature of this definition, it is helpful to restate it in simpler terms. Affect refers to a short but intense reaction in which both mind and body are mobilized in response to something that feels personally significant. Common examples include fear in response to perceived insecurity or anger triggered by a sense of injustice. These affective responses are not automatic but shaped by how individuals interpret events in terms of their values and experiences, a process central to appraisal theories of emotion (Roseman, 1984; Scherer, 1984; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). While psychology differentiates between affect and emotion, treating affect as broader and more short-term and emotion as more specific and conscious, these distinctions are not consistently applied in political science. Following Markus et al.'s (2007, p. 1) conceptualization, this thesis uses the terms interchangeably. The authors further summarize that the literature points to two key insights:

affect not only motivates and guides behavior but also interacts with cognition, sometimes facilitating and sometimes constraining deliberative processes (Marcus et al., 2007, p. 15).³

The idea that affect functions both as a motivator and a moderator of cognitive engagement aligns with AIT (Marcus et al., 2000). AIT provides a framework for analyzing how specific emotional responses shape political judgment and behavior by influencing attention, learning, and decision-making processes (Vasilopoulos, 2019). Notably, the theory distinguishes between two emotional systems that guide political engagement. The disposition system controls habitual political behavior, reinforcing existing loyalties through emotions such as enthusiasm or satisfaction (Marcus et al., 2000, pp. 9-10). In contrast, the surveillance system is activated in contexts of perceived threat or uncertainty, triggering anxiety and causing individuals to seek new information and reconsider prior political commitments (Marcus et al., 2000, pp. 10-11). As Nardulli and Kuklinski (2007, p. 319) concisely put it: „in the political context, anxious citizens begin to consider alternative political choices.“ This distinction enables AIT to consider not only political stability but also moments of change, emphasizing how affective responses influence deliberation in political decision-making.

This focus on perception rather than material reality aligns with Minkenberg's (2000) early critique of the modernization losers thesis. Minkenberg (2000, pp. 182-183) argued that radical right support often arises not from actual deprivation but from perceived social decline and feelings of marginalization. Both AIT and Minkenberg's (2000) perspectives point to the importance of underlying emotions in economic grievance explanations of right-wing populist support.

In this context, Salmela and von Scheve (2017) argue that in neoliberal societies, economic hardship is not purely material but also deeply emotional, as strong social norms around individual achievement and self-responsibility create pressure to meet high expectations. Failing to meet these demands often leads to shame and a sense of personal failure (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). Because shame is rarely expressed openly, it is often repressed and can transform into anger or resentment, which may then be projected onto perceived outgroups. According to Salmela and von Scheve (2017), this emotional redirection helps explain why individuals across different social groups may support right-wing populist parties.

Nguyen et al. (2021) apply this theoretical assumption to large-scale longitudinal survey data, showing that concerns about economic decline are closely tied to the

³ Cognition is defined as: „the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses“ (Cambridge Cognition, 2015).

development of political attitudes over time. Their findings suggest that future-oriented worry not only precedes support for populist parties but also contributes to the growing anger that follows. The authors argue that this feedback loop shows that emotional responses are not merely passive effects but actively shape and reinforce political alignments (Nguyen et al., 2021). Indicators like concern about economic decline can also be seen as expressions of deeper emotional states such as insecurity, fear, or frustration.

This thesis draws on the conceptualizations of emotion by Salmela and von Scheve (2017) and Nguyen et al. (2021) to examine how quantitative studies on economic grievances address the affective dimension of right-wing populist support. Their frameworks guide both the selection of the sample and the analysis of how emotions are treated within it. The focus lies on how explicitly emotional dynamics are addressed, particularly concerning emotions such as anger, resentment, sadness, fear, shame, and frustration.

3 Methodology

This bachelor's thesis investigates the following research question: How do quantitative studies on economic grievances and right-wing populist voting engage with the affective dimension of political behavior? To address this question, a structured literature review was conducted to build the sample, followed by a reflexive thematic analysis of 19 peer-reviewed studies using Braun and Clarke's (2012, 2022) approach. The reflexive analysis method, initially developed for analyzing qualitative data, is used here to examine academic publications as texts that not only present empirical findings but also influence how concepts are understood and how future studies are designed and conducted in political science. The goal is to identify patterns in how emotions are operationalized, indirectly referenced, or excluded in quantitative accounts of right-wing populist support. The methodology consists of three main parts. First, the search strategy describes how relevant studies were identified. Second, the screening and selection process outlines the inclusion and exclusion criteria used to build the final sample. Third, the thematic analysis explains how key patterns were identified across the selected texts.

3.1 Search Strategy

The search strategy was informed by Dundar and Fleeman's (2017b) chapter on systematically combining keywords using Boolean operators across conceptual categories. The literature search was conducted in May of 2025 using JSTOR and Google Scholar. These databases were selected for their disciplinary breadth and access to peer-reviewed research.

The economic category included terms such as „economic grievance“, „economic insecurity“, „material discontent“, and „precarity“. These are commonly used expressions in the literature to describe perceptions of economic marginalization. The affective category featured terms like „affect“, „emotion“, „sentiment“, „resentment“, „anger“, „sadness“, „shame“, „fear“, „frustration“, and „status threat“. Linking the third part of the theoretical framework to studies on economic hardship. Finally, the populist category used terms such as „right-wing populism“, „populist radical right“, and „authoritarian populism“, covering a range of labels commonly used in the research (Mudde, 2007, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

The core search string combined these categories as follows: („economic grievance“ OR „economic insecurity“ OR „material discontent“ OR „precarity“) AND („right-wing populism“ OR „populist radical right“ OR „authoritarian populism“) AND („affect“ OR „emotion“ OR „sentiment“ OR „resentment“ OR „anger“ OR „sadness“ OR „shame“ OR „fear“ OR „frustration“ OR „status threat“). This formulation includes studies that examine the economic drivers of right-wing populist voting, as well as those that investigate the emotional consequences of economic insecurity. By combining these strands, the search aimed to identify literature that explores the intersection of material conditions and emotional responses. The search was conducted iteratively. Preliminary results were reviewed to identify gaps and overlooked connections. Prompting the inclusion of additional terms such as „status threat“ and „precarity“. This reflexive process allowed the strategy to evolve in response to emerging insights.

To ensure transparency, the search process was documented in a table that recorded conceptual categories, keyword combinations, and the number of results retrieved across both platforms (*see Appendix, Table 1*). For instance, combining economic and populist terms had approximately 1,775 results in JSTOR and over 18,000 in Google Scholar. Adding affective terms narrowed the results in JSTOR to around 236 while expanding those in Google Scholar to over 19,000.

3.2 Screening and Selection Process

Next, a two-stage screening process was implemented, guided by inclusion and exclusion criteria based on the approaches described by Cherry and Dickson (2017) and Dunder and Fleeman (2017a). In the first stage, titles and abstracts were assessed to identify quantitative studies examining the relationship between economic conditions and support for right-wing populist parties, either through structural explanations or emotional responses. Quantitative studies were exclusively included because they occupy a dominant position in political

science, particularly in research on voting behavior. This methodological focus reflects the field's reliance on statistical models to explain political outcomes, especially in large-scale, cross-national studies. By centering quantitative research, this thesis critically examines how emotional dynamics are treated within frameworks that prioritize generalizable relationships. This focus allows for a targeted assessment of whether and how emotions such as anger, resentment, or anxiety are integrated or overlooked in widely cited empirical accounts of right-wing populist support.

To reflect recent political developments, only peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2024 were included in this analysis. The review focused on Europe and North America, covering both established democracies and post-communist states. Many of the studies analyzed are based on cross-national survey data, with the European Social Survey (ESS) being particularly common. Only articles published in academic journals were considered. Non-peer-reviewed sources, including grey literature such as working papers and policy briefs, were excluded. Both English- and German-language publications were included. This provided additional insight into the case of the AfD, where economic grievances have been a recurring theme in scholarly debates.

After the initial screening, 89 studies were retained for full-text review. In the second stage, each publication was examined more closely to assess its overall contribution to the central research question. Particular attention was paid to how each study conceptualized affect. Furthermore, how these concepts were operationalized within a quantitative research design. The analysis focused on whether emotional responses were clearly defined within the theoretical framework, directly measured through specific variables, or omitted altogether. Studies were not required to prioritize affect as a central focus. They were included if their treatment of emotion provided analytical value for understanding how the affective dimension is engaged with or overlooked in explanations of right-wing populist support.

Of the over 19,000 initial results, 89 studies advanced to full-text review, and of these, 19 met the criteria for final inclusion. The final sample comprises a diverse range of studies that provide insight into how emotional factors are acknowledged in quantitative economic studies on support for right-wing populism.

3.3 Thematic Analysis

This part applies the six-phase approach to reflexive thematic analysis as developed by Braun and Clarke (2012, 2022). The goal is to examine how quantitative studies engage with the affective dimension in the context of economic grievances and support for right-wing populist

parties. The analysis is based on 19 selected studies and focuses on whether and how emotions are implied, conceptualized, measured, or excluded. In this context, reflexive thematic analysis offers a strong methodological fit because it enables the identification of recurring patterns and assumptions in how scholarly work frames emotional variables. Unlike systematic reviews or meta-analyses that aggregate findings, thematic analysis focuses on how meaning is constructed across texts. This is particularly important in political science, where definitions vary, operationalizations are inconsistent, and emotional factors are often implied. Thematic analysis enables the comparison of studies that differ in design, scope, or terminology, allowing for the identification of the underlying logics that shape their treatment of emotion. Furthermore, the reflexive element of this approach acknowledges that the process of identifying themes is shaped by interpretation. This is appropriate for a research question concerned not only with what is measured but also with what is left out. In the literature on populist support this method helps reveal disciplinary blind spots and conceptual gaps.

In the first phase, all studies were read closely to assess how political behavior is explained and whether affective concepts appear either directly or indirectly. Particular attention was given to the emotional vocabulary used in theoretical frameworks, model variables, and interpretive discussions. An early observation was the frequent omission of emotion as a topic for analysis.

The second phase involved systematic coding of the studies using a structured coding framework (see *Appendix, Table 2 and 3*). The framework distinguished between different affective categories, including general emotional terms („emotion“, „affect“, „sentiment“), negative emotions („anger“, „resentment“, „sadness“, „anxiety“, „fear“, „frustration“). Positive social emotions („pride“), and negative social emotions („shame“, „victimhood“, „status threat“, „status anxiety“). It also included categories for economic-affective terms („economic grievance“, „insecurity“ and „precarity“), as well as proxy language („left behind“, „ignored“), which imply emotional states without directly naming them. This categorization served a purely analytical purpose. In cognitive reality, many of these states intersect. However, this overlap was not directly relevant to the subsequent theme construction. Each study was coded based on whether emotional elements were present, how explicitly they were treated, and what role they played in the analysis. This included identifying direct measurement through survey items, the use of proxies, or the absence of emotional variables in otherwise relevant contexts. While keyword-based coding provided an initial guide for identifying affective engagement, all final classifications were made based on

close reading and contextual interpretation. In several cases, terms such as „fear“ or „shock“ appeared in the text but were not used to conceptualize emotional dynamics. For this reason, search terms were treated as indicators for further examination rather than as definitive evidence. Frequencies were recorded for each category (*see Appendix, Table 4*), showing which search codes were most commonly addressed across the sample.

Third, the coded studies were grouped into preliminary themes. These were developed based on shared patterns in how affect was used.

Fourth, they were refined through repeated comparison with the data. Overlapping or unclear groupings were revised or removed for improved clarity. The final themes reflect four distinct approaches to how affect is addressed in the literature (*see Appendix, Table 5*). The first theme, „Objective Indicator Models“, includes research that relies on quantifiable economic data, such as unemployment rates or income levels, and does not consider emotional factors in the analysis. The second theme, „Narrative Acknowledgment, Analytical Exclusion“, refers to studies that mention affective dynamics briefly in the introduction, discussion, or conclusion but do not incorporate them into the empirical design. The third theme, „Proxy-Based Inclusion of Affect“, encompasses studies that indirectly address emotional responses, often through constructs such as perceived economic threat or victimhood. The fourth theme, „Status Anxiety Frameworks“ consists of studies that explicitly link emotional reactions such as fear of status decline or resentment over lost privilege to support for right-wing populist parties.

The fifth phase established how each theme describes a distinct way in which affect is engaged, sidelined, or indirectly included in quantitative research.

And in the final phase, these themes were used to structure the findings chapter. Each theme is supported by examples from the selected studies and analyzed in relation to the research question. This enables a deeper understanding of how affective dimensions are addressed within quantitative political science, revealing patterns in the field's treatment of emotional factors in the context of economic grievance and populist voting.

4 Findings

The findings section examines how the sampled literature explains the relationship between economic grievances and support for radical right parties, with particular attention to the role of emotion. It is structured around four themes, each reflecting a different approach to emotions in existing research. The first theme focuses on objective indicator models that explain political behavior through measurable economic factors. The second theme examines

studies that employ emotional language but fail to integrate emotion into their analytical frameworks. The third theme includes research that indirectly incorporates emotion through attitudinal proxies. The fourth theme analyzes status anxiety frameworks that acknowledge emotional responses to social decline. Together, these four themes provide the basis for assessing how quantitative studies on economic grievances and right-wing populist voting engage with the affective dimension of political behavior.

4.1 Objective Indicator Models

This theme encompasses studies that explain support for radical-right parties primarily through economic factors such as unemployment, income loss, or labor market shifts (Patana, 2018; Stoetzer et al., 2023; Vlandas & Halikiopoulou, 2018). It also includes contributions from the German debate on economic grievance, where structural transformations linked to globalization and deindustrialization are seen as key drivers of right-wing populist support (Lengfeld, 2017; Lux, 2018; Tutic & Hermann, 2018). The studies included offer insights into the material conditions that shape political behavior (*see Appendix, Table 6*). However, they treat emotions as irrelevant or secondary. As a result, they fall short in explaining how individuals subjectively experience economic hardship and how such experiences translate into political choices.

4.1.1 Structural Models

Studies that explain radical-right support using objective indicators of economic hardship typically assume that material insecurity leads to political disaffection. They rely on variables such as unemployment rates, income loss, or regional economic decline to measure this relationship. These models often confirm a correlation between economic vulnerability and support for radical-right parties. Their strength lies in analytical clarity and their capacity for large-scale, cross-national comparisons. However, they overlook how individuals emotionally interpret and respond to these conditions. As a result, the affective processes that may mediate the political consequences of economic hardship remain unexamined.

This pattern is evident in both cross-national and national studies. In the European context, Vlandas and Halikiopoulou (2018) find that the relationship between unemployment and far-right support varies depending on the strength of labor market protections. In Finland, Patana (2018) demonstrates that local economic decline is correlated with increased support for the radical right. Similarly, Stoetzer et al. (2023) examine income inequality and populist party support across Western Europe using multilevel and mediation models. Their findings

identify inequality as a structural driver of populist voting. Taken together, these studies emphasize structural conditions associated with radical-right support but offer little insight into the psychological mechanisms through which individuals process and politicize economic insecurity.

4.1.2 The German Debate on Economic Grievance

German research on support for the AfD remains divided in its conclusions and inconsistent in methodological approach. While scholars debate whether economic marginalization drives radical-right voting, most adopt a structural perspective that neglects emotional dynamics. For example, Lengfeld (2017) rejects the modernization losers thesis and identifies AfD voters as culturally conservative, middle-income men. However, their analysis relies on a narrow set of class indicators such as education, occupation, and income.⁴ While Lengfeld (2017) incorporates a single subjective deprivation item on perceived societal status, their conclusions primarily rely on objective indicators such as gender, age, income, education, and occupational status. The subjective measure is not deeply integrated into emotional processes, which justifies its inclusion in this theme.

In contrast, Tutic and Hermanni (2018) and Lux (2018) demonstrate that both objective and perceived socioeconomic deprivation are linked to support for the AfD. Their studies improve upon Lengfeld's (2017) study by broadening the operationalization to include more economic statuses in their samples, as well as self-perceived economic position. While this approach addresses the complexity surrounding structural disadvantage, affective dimensions remain unaddressed.

Despite reaching different conclusions, these studies share a core assumption that structural variables are sufficient to explain electoral support. This approach has furthered debates on class, inequality, and regional deprivation in Germany, but also exposes a key limitation. By asking whether economic conditions matter rather than how they are emotionally experienced, these studies overlook important details in voter motivation. Emotions like fear, frustration, and perceived humiliation are occasionally mentioned but rarely examined as active mechanisms that influence political behavior.

⁴ Due to the limited size of the sample, Lengfeld's (2017, p. 220) study entirely excludes unemployed respondents, even though this group is central to the modernization losers thesis and is typically considered a key demographic in structural explanations of radical-right support.

4.1.3 Consequences of the Theme

Studies that rely on objective indicator models provide important insights into the structural causes of radical-right support, but they leave key explanatory gaps. By focusing on measurable economic factors such as unemployment or regional decline, these models establish correlations between hardship and political preferences. However, their emphasis on structural clarity often comes at the cost of understanding how individuals interpret and react to those conditions. Without incorporating emotional mechanisms, these models risk presenting political behavior as a direct outcome of material exposure. This limits their ability to explain why individuals facing similar conditions make different political choices. In both cross-national research and the German context, affective responses are often mentioned but excluded from analysis. As a result, these studies may overstate the role of economic conditions and understate the psychological processes that influence political disaffection. This reduces the models' ability to account for variation within electorates and across cases.

4.2 Narrative Acknowledgement, Analytical Exclusion

A recurring pattern in the literature is the use of affective language without incorporating emotion into the analysis. Terms such as fear, grievance, or resentment are often mentioned in introductions or discussions but are not theorized or empirically measured (Ahlquist et al., 2020; Baccini & Sattler, 2024; Bolet, 2020; Dehdari, 2021). Most models rely on objective indicators to explain political behavior, including income, trade exposure, or job loss (*see Appendix, Table 7*). Emotion is often treated as a by-product of structural change rather than as a variable that should be examined. Researchers use affect to contextualize their work, but do not extend it to analyze its role in shaping voting behavior.

4.2.1 Studies on Economic Shock

Several studies acknowledge the emotional dimension of political disaffection but fail to integrate it into their analytical frameworks. Baccini and Sattler (2024) investigate the political consequences of fiscal austerity in Western Europe, focusing on how economically vulnerable voters respond to spending cuts. Their analysis spans district-level election outcomes and individual-level voting data across multiple countries. The authors describe austerity as producing „disenchantment“ and emphasize how voters infer a lack of government concern for their well-being. Moreover, it suggests that vulnerable citizens may perceive public policy as „incompatible with their needs and interests“. These

characterizations implicitly suggest emotional responses, such as resentment, distrust, or a perceived sense of abandonment. However, emotions remain at the narrative level. They help to set the context and political relevance of austerity, but they are not theorized or integrated into the causal analysis. Emotions are invoked to hint at political stakes but ultimately do no explanatory work within the study's framework.

A similar pattern is evident in Ahlquist et al. (2020), who studied the political effects of the 2015 Swiss franc revaluation in Poland. Their framing mentions populist appeals, foreign financial actors, and material exposure, but the study does not examine voters' emotional responses. Instead, it focuses on foreign-currency mortgage debt and its political consequences.

In both cases, emotion is used to frame the context but not investigated as something that shapes perception or behavior. Despite focusing on political reactions to large-scale economic disruption, both studies overlook the role of affect as a mediating variable during crises. Emotional responses influence how people assign blame and perceive policy alternatives, which are central concerns in both studies. Without considering how emotions filter information or trigger partisan alignment, the analyses risk overattributing behavior solely to material exposure.

Other studies engage more directly with emotional language but still exclude affect from the analytical framework. Bolet (2020) links radical-right support in rural France to local economic decline and labor market competition, particularly in areas with high shares of low-skilled natives and medium- or high-skilled immigrants. Concepts such as „fear“, „resentment“, and „insecurity“ are used in the broader narrative, but the empirical model is built on indicators such as employment structure, unemployment rates, and skill composition. Emotion remains unmeasured. The population is described as frustrated, but the intensity, trajectory, and political effects are left unexamined.

This is also evident in Dehdari (2021), who examines the political consequences of mass layoffs in Sweden. The study relates economic disruption to rising support for the Sweden Democrats, particularly among low-skilled native workers. The narrative attributes this shift to „economic anxieties“, implicitly recognizing the emotional burden of job loss. However, the analysis itself does not measure how individuals experience that disruption. Emotions such as „fear“, „insecurity“, and „humiliation“ are mentioned, but as in Bolet's (2020) study, they are acknowledged rhetorically but excluded from the analysis.

4.2.2 Consequences of the Theme

Many studies on the political effects of economic disruption focus on structural indicators such as layoffs, trade exposure, or austerity. This offers analytical clarity but overlooks how individuals emotionally experience economic hardship. Terms like fear, resentment, or anxiety may appear in the studies, yet they are not theorized or empirically measured. As a result, emotion is used to set the scene, but it does not inform the explanation of political behavior. This creates a disconnect between the narrative and analytical focus. While structural variables strengthen causal claims, they overlook the role of emotions in shaping how people perceive and respond to social or economic disruptions. Emotions influence how individuals assign blame and decide whether to support or oppose governments. These processes are central to understanding political behavior during times of crisis. By leaving out emotional mechanisms, these studies risk presenting political outcomes as direct responses to economic shocks. However, different people do not react to hardship in the same way. Similar disruptions may lead to different political choices depending on whether they are processed through anger, fear, or resignation. Without accounting for how emotion mediates structural exposure, explanations remain incomplete and potentially misleading.

4.3 Proxy-Based Inclusion of Affect

In this strand of the literature, economic grievance is assumed to trigger emotional reactions, yet these are neither directly measured nor theoretically explored. Instead, researchers rely on attitudinal proxies, such as perceived job insecurity or victimhood, difficulty in living on one's present income, or distrust of institutions (Hartmann et al., 2022; Im et al., 2019; Mancosu et al., 2024; Sipma et al., 2023; Zhirnov et al., 2024). These variables serve as stand-ins for emotional states and are widely used in comparative models to explain political behavior (*see Appendix, Table 8*). While effective in predicting voting patterns, this approach merges cognitive assessments with affective responses. The result is an implicit theory of affect, where emotion is presumed to play a causal role but remains absent from the analysis, lacking clarity in both conceptualization and empirical measurement.

4.3.1 Implicit Affect

Several cross-national studies, including those by Im et al. (2019), Sipma et al. (2023), and Zhirnov et al. (2024), use subjective indicators of economic insecurity, such as financial strain or fear of job loss to explain political disaffection. These variables are typically included in

statistical models based on the assumption that insecurity generates emotions like anxiety, fear, or resentment, which then influence political preferences. This approach is well-suited for broad comparisons and allows emotions to be included indirectly in large-scale quantitative research. However, the emotional content of these experiences remains unexamined in any direct or differentiated way. In these studies, insecurity is treated as a stable perception. As a result, underlying affect is acknowledged as present and relevant but remains conceptually vague and analytically secondary. Anxiety is not clearly distinguished from resentment, nor is fear from anger, which makes it impossible to link specific emotions to particular political responses. This same pattern is also observed in Hartmann et al. (2022), where perceived vulnerability and dissatisfaction with democracy are presented as cognitive assessments rather than affective states. Although emotions such as anger, fear, frustration, and resentment are associated with these attitudes, the studies do not differentiate among them in terms of intensity, meaning, or political implications. This shows that affect is consistently present in the background, implied through proxies and unexamined in depth.

4.3.2 Perceived Victimhood as a Proxy

Mancosu et al. (2024) provide an example of expanding the proxy-based approach by focusing on perceived collective victimhood as a driver of support for the radical right in Italy. This perspective emphasizes how individuals emotionally perceive and interpret perceived injustice. The concept links feelings of exclusion, resentment, and powerlessness to political preferences. By emphasizing how people make sense of their social position, the study moves closer to the emotional experience behind political behavior. However, the psychological complexity of perceived victimhood is reduced to a few survey items asking respondents questions about perceived threat.

Mancosu et al. (2024) present their framework as a strength, arguing that perceptions of victimhood may correlate directly with right-wing support without the need to draw analytical boundaries between cultural and economic explanations. However, their use of survey items limits insight into how these perceptions are shaped over time or influenced by political narratives and group identification beyond „the people“. Although the study shows a correlation between feelings of victimhood and support for the radical right, it does not explore the emotional processes that transform perceived injustice into political action. The study's framework encompasses emotions such as pride, resentment, and powerlessness. However, they are not clearly distinguished in terms of their political meaning or their role in shaping behavior. As a result, the concept of affect is acknowledged but remains conceptually

imprecise. The layered emotional structure of perceived victimhood, which may combine anger with pride or a sense of moral superiority, is not examined.

4.3.3 Consequences of the Theme

While this approach allows emotion to be included in large-scale models, it does so without directly engaging with it. Affect is treated as an implicit factor rather than a clearly examined aspect of political experience. As a result, the use of proxies to represent affect in research on the radical right has significant conceptual consequences. First, combining cognitive assessments with emotional responses blurs important distinctions. Indicators such as perceived job insecurity or dissatisfaction with democracy are used as if they reflect anxiety, fear, or resentment. However, these emotions are not examined on their own terms. This makes it difficult to explain how different emotions influence political behavior in specific ways. Second, these studies often simplify the emotional range of disaffection. Emotions such as anger, fear, pride, and resentment are referenced but not analyzed in terms of intensity or political relevance. Even expanded frameworks, reduce complex emotional experiences to single survey items. Without exploring how these emotions are formed and interpreted, the role of affect in political disaffection remains underdeveloped.

4.4 Status Anxiety Frameworks

This section examines how perceptions of declining social position, commonly referred to as status anxiety, are used to explain political disaffection. The literature often uses terms such as status anxiety, existential insecurity, or status threat to describe the emotional responses of individuals who perceive their social or political standing as eroding (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Metten & Bayerlein, 2023; Mutz, 2018; Sthamer, 2018). While these approaches acknowledge the relevance of emotion, they tend to focus on a narrow set of defensive reactions, particularly anxiety, frustration, and resentment (*see Appendix, Table 9*).

4.4.1 Symbolic Loss

Status anxiety research explains political disaffection primarily as a reaction to symbolic loss rather than material deprivation. Across studies, this sense of status loss is typically associated with dominant social groups, most notably white working-class men. Who perceive a weakening of their social or political position and recognition amid structural changes, such as economic liberalization or increasing social diversity. Emotional responses are generally

framed in narrow and reactive terms, focusing primarily on anxiety, frustration, and resentment as defensive responses to social decline.

In the U.S. context, Gidron and Hall (2017) point to perceived social decline as a key source of anxiety and disaffection, while Mutz (2018) identifies the role of threatened political recognition in producing similar emotional responses during the 2016 election. Despite their different emphases, both treat affect as a unidimensional and reactive response.⁵ Although the studies mention frustration, insecurity, and feelings of being ignored or left behind, their empirical analyses center on anxiety and resentment. This reveals a twofold gap: first, the emotional language used in the literature often lacks clarity about which emotions are encompassed by terms like feeling left behind. Second, the operationalization of emotions in status-anxiety studies tends to be methodologically limited.

A similar tendency appears in Metten and Bayerlein (2023), who associate right-wing populist support with existential anxiety and insecurity among lower-status, native-born Germans. Although emotions like anger and fear are mentioned, the study does not explore how these emotions differ in meaning or how they might lead to different forms of political engagement.

Across these studies, affect is generally treated as a passive signal of perceived status loss. Limited attention is given to how emotional responses might develop through social interaction or be shaped by political context and discourse.

4.4.2 Material Insecurity

A second strand of research reintroduces economic vulnerability into explanations of political disaffection. These studies show that feelings of being „left behind“ are not merely symbolic but also rooted in material concerns. For instance, Sthamer (2018) demonstrates that perceptions of relative deprivation, downward mobility, and economic exclusion are significantly correlated with AfD support in Germany. While their approach shifts attention back to economic conditions, emotions are often treated as a link between structural position and political outcomes. Although Sthamer (2018) refers to a broad range of emotional responses such as fear, frustration, shame, anger, and humiliation, they do not develop a more differentiated understanding of how these emotions function in political contexts. The focus remains on identifying affect as a general indicator of discontent rather than examining how

⁵ While these two studies do not explicitly adopt an economic grievance framework, they are included due to their focus on perceived social decline and status threat, concepts associated with economic insecurity and treated as extensions of grievance-based explanations (Spier, 2010).

particular emotions may appeal differently across groups or settings. How these emotional responses vary across social and cultural contexts also remains unaddressed. As a result, it is unclear how societal norms and shared expectations shape which emotions become politically meaningful. This limits the current understanding of the role that affect plays in mediating the relationship between material insecurity and political behavior. Emotions are often treated as passive indicators of socioeconomic distress, rather than examined for their active role in shaping identities, constructing meaning, or driving political mobilization.

4.4.3 Consequences of the Theme

Taken together, status anxiety studies reveal both the widespread application of the framework and its main limitations. Whether the focus is on symbolic decline or material insecurity, emotional responses are usually understood in narrow terms. This leads to two main consequences. First, emotions are often seen as fixed reactions to perceived decline rather than as active states that can help shape political identity or different forms of political action. Because of this, it does not clarify why similar experiences of insecurity can lead to vastly different political outcomes across different social groups and contexts. Second, emotional responses are often treated as if they are uniform for everyone, with little attention to how cultural norms, social expectations, or public discourse shape them. Overlooking how an individual's emotions are shaped by society and politics, current research often treats them as unidimensional reactions to hardship. Leaving important questions unanswered about how emotions are formed, expressed, and used in political life. A more integrated approach would view emotion not just as a sign of decline, but also as a means to help explain how people make sense of themselves and their position in society, and how that affects their engagement with politics.

5 Discussion

This thesis set out to examine how quantitative studies on economic grievances and right-wing populist voting engage with the affective dimension of political behavior. To explore this question, a structured literature review was conducted to construct a sample, followed by a reflexive thematic analysis of 19 peer-reviewed studies.

The analysis finds that emotions are vastly underexamined in this research area. Most studies rely on objective economic indicators such as income, unemployment, or regional decline, while incorporating only minimal subjective measures of perceived insecurity. Four recurring patterns were identified: the complete exclusion of emotion, rhetorical

acknowledgment without analytical inclusion, modeling through indirect proxies, and limited application within status anxiety frameworks. Taken together, these patterns suggest a broader reluctance to systematically engage with emotions as independent variables influencing support for the radical right. The findings also show that although many quantitative studies on economic grievances and right-wing populism acknowledge the political relevance of emotion, they rarely incorporate affective variables in a theoretically systematic way. Furthermore, emotional processes are often only indirectly represented through variables such as political disaffection, distrust, or financial strain. This suggests that while affect is implicitly recognized as relevant to right-wing populist support, it remains under-theorized and inconsistently operationalized in the current research.

These findings have important implications for how political science approaches the study of populist support. When emotions are not considered in analyses, it becomes challenging to explain why individuals exposed to similar economic conditions respond differently in political terms. Emotions such as anger, fear, and resentment influence how people assign political blame, evaluate perceived threats, and judge parties or leaders (Marcus et al., 2000, 2007). If these emotional processes are overlooked, political behavior may be incorrectly explained as a direct response to economic hardship alone. This issue is relevant in both situations of prolonged structural disruption and sudden crises. In addition, when concepts like perceived vulnerability or dissatisfaction with democracy are treated only as cognitive evaluations, the emotional aspects that shape them are left unexamined. Studies also often refer to vague emotional terms such as feeling left behind, but do not clarify which emotions underlie these perceptions. This overall lack of clarity limits the ability of existing models to fully explain why some individuals are more drawn to populist movements than others. As a result, research that relies mainly on structural factors and vague emotional concepts offers incomplete explanations for the support of the radical right.

This view is supported by scholars who argue that emotions play a central role in how people understand politics, form opinions, and make decisions (Marcus et al., 2000, 2007; Nguyen et al., 2021; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017; Valentino et al., 2011). While these works emphasize the lack of attention to affect in relation to political behavior, this thesis contributes to the literature on populist support by identifying specific patterns in how emotions are addressed across quantitative studies rooted in economic grievance approaches. The developed themes help to identify methodological and conceptual blind spots that remain in efforts to explain right-wing populist support. The findings show that emotion is not simply ignored but is often sidelined through vague conceptualizations and a dominant

research approach that favors structural and objective indicators. By connecting studies on right-wing populist support to insights from political psychology, this thesis offers a clearer understanding of how current research limits its ability to explain political behavior. It also calls for a broader reconsideration of how affect is conceptualized and analyzed in relation to populist support.

While the findings offer valuable insights into how emotions are addressed in the literature on economic insecurity and support for radical right parties, five key methodological limitations narrow the scope of the findings.

First, the thesis uses a small sample of 19 peer-reviewed quantitative journal articles. This narrow focus keeps the studies comparable, but it also tilts the evidence toward models that prioritize clean statistical models. Qualitative studies, mixed-methods research, and grey literature, such as working papers or policy briefs, are not included. These sources may introduce emerging case evidence and alternative measurement approaches that emphasize the role of affect. As a result, the findings do not encompass all suggestions from researchers on linking emotions to populist support.

Second, the review focuses solely on research that explains right-wing populism in terms of economic grievance. While this creates a clear thematic boundary, it excludes literature that explores the connection between emotion and cultural explanations. Studies based on the cultural backlash thesis focus on identity-related concerns, including immigration, race, gender, and national values. These studies conceptualize emotional dynamics differently from those in the economic grievance framework. By excluding this perspective, the sample overlooks research that links emotions to cultural sources of political behavior. This limits its ability to review the full range of emotional mechanisms discussed in the broader literature on populist support.

Third, the thesis focuses only on studies conducted on Europe and North America. This choice mimics the dominant regional focus in the existing literature. The way economic insecurity translates into political behavior can vary depending on a country's institutions. By excluding regions such as Latin America, Asia, and Africa, the review overlooks a range of cultural and political contexts where economic grievances may trigger distinct emotional responses and forms of political engagement. This restricts the broad applicability of the findings to research with a different geographic focus.

Fourth, the analytical approach introduces interpretive subjectivity. Since the thesis employs reflexive thematic analysis on published quantitative studies, its conclusions rely on the author's interpretation of the texts rather than direct access to data or interviews with the

researchers. This creates a risk of misinterpreting the reasoning behind variable choices or theoretical claims, especially in cases where the absence of emotion was a deliberate modeling decision rather than an oversight. This risk is particularly present in the themes of Objective Indicator Models, Narrative Acknowledgment, and Analytical Exclusion, which were not originally designed to measure emotional dimensions.

Lastly, the coding and theme development were conducted entirely by the author, utilizing keyword searches and multiple rounds of reflexive revision. The absence of intercoder reliability checks increases the risk of misinterpreting or missing emotion-related terms or subtle affective cues. The step from initial codes to final themes also depended on the author's judgment, which affected the transparency of the results. Based on the findings and limitations of this thesis, future research should explore several directions to better understand how emotions influence populist support.

A more theoretically grounded use of existing survey data that includes emotion-related measures. Large-scale datasets, such as the European Social Survey (ESS), the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), and the British Election Study (BES), contain items that determine voters' emotional responses to parties, political figures, and current events. Despite their availability, these variables remain underutilized in quantitative analyses of populist support. Moreover, existing items could be adapted to cover a broader spectrum of emotions beyond categories such as anger, fear, and enthusiasm. Longitudinal panel surveys provide opportunities to include dynamics of emotional change over time. For example, across electoral cycles or in response to political shocks.

Psychological theories of emotion should be more systematically integrated into political science models of voting behavior. For example, Lodge and Taber (2011) argue that emotions are involved in the formation and processing of political attitudes from the outset. Their „hot cognition theory“ (Lodge & Taber, 2011) emphasizes that emotions influence how individuals attend to, interpret, and recall political information. Incorporating such perspectives improves the theoretical understanding and conceptual clarity of affect.

Future quantitative research should more systematically account for cultural and individual-level variation in emotional responses. Emotional reactions vary across different contexts. The same emotion can produce different political outcomes depending on cultural norms, institutions, and social expectations. Gender is also a central factor that influences how emotions are experienced, expressed, and perceived. However, in many studies, gender is treated as a control variable rather than as an explanatory category that interacts with

emotional and political dynamics. Future studies should investigate how gender and cultural context influence affect.

In summary, future research should build on existing data and theories while also exploring new tools and interdisciplinary approaches. Doing so would help political scientists better understand how emotions influence voter behavior, particularly in the context of rising support for right-wing populist parties. It would also contribute toward detailed and context-aware models that more accurately predict how emotions function in real life.

6 Conclusion

This thesis examined how quantitative research on economic grievances and right-wing populist voting engages with the emotional dimension of political behavior. It focused on the guiding question: How do quantitative studies on economic grievances and right-wing populist voting engage with the affective dimension of political behavior? To answer this, a two-stage methodological approach was employed. First, a structured literature review identified relevant peer-reviewed quantitative studies published between 2015 and 2024 that addressed the relationship between economic conditions and support for right-wing populist parties. Specific inclusion criteria were applied to also capture studies referencing both economic grievances and affective concepts, resulting in a final sample of 19 studies. Second, a reflexive thematic analysis was conducted to examine how these studies conceptualized, measured, or excluded emotional variables.

The analysis identified four recurring themes in how affect is treated across the selected studies. First, a large portion of the literature omitted emotional variables entirely, focusing on objective indicators. Second, some studies referenced emotional language but did not incorporate these concepts into their empirical models. Third, several studies addressed affect by using proxies without explicitly theorizing or measuring emotions. Finally, a smaller subset engaged narrowly with affect through the concept of status anxiety.

These findings suggest that while emotional responses to economic insecurity are acknowledged as relevant to right-wing populist support, they are rarely considered core variables in quantitative research. As a result, existing studies offer limited explanations for why individuals facing similar economic conditions arrive at different political conclusions. Providing little insight into how people emotionally interpret economic hardship, how these interpretations are shaped by broader social contexts, and how they influence political preferences. This thesis primarily shows that the emotional dimension of political behavior is often overlooked and insufficiently integrated in quantitative analyses. It contributes to the

literature by identifying this gap and emphasizing the need for more comprehensive approaches that consider both structural and affective dynamics in the study of right-wing populist support.

Several directions for future research were mentioned. Scholars should more consistently integrate affective variables into quantitative models by using existing survey tools and interdisciplinary frameworks. Future works might also explore the roles of emotions across cultural contexts and social identities. Comparative research could further examine how institutional settings influence affect, economic insecurity, and support for populism.

Drawing on a reflexive engagement with the literature, this thesis argues for a more comprehensive framework that integrates affective dimensions into the analysis of right-wing populist support. While economic inequality and social instability provide context, they do not explain the emotional resonance that radical right parties generate. Far from being byproducts, emotions such as fear, anger, and resentment actively influence how individuals perceive their societal standing and engage with exclusionary political narratives. Incorporating emotional responses into economic grievance approaches enables a deeper understanding of how structural conditions are converted into political mobilization. Thus, explaining the persistence of right-wing populism in liberal democracies requires close attention to how affect reinforces its core ideological distinctions and channels perceptions of identity, belonging, and threat into stable political alignments.

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Appendix

Table 1: Search strategy

Concept Category	Keywords Used	Boolean Logic Applied	Database	Results	Notes
Economic	„economic grievance“, „economic insecurity“, „material discontent“, „precarity“	(„economic grievance“ OR „economic insecurity“ OR „material discontent“ OR „precarity“)	—	—	Used in combinations with affective and populist terms
Affective	„affect“, „emotion“, „sentiment“, „resentment“, „anger“, „sadness“, „shame“, „fear“, „frustration“ and „status threat“	(„affect“ OR „emotion“ OR „sentiment“ OR „resentment“ OR „anger“ OR „sadness“ OR „shame“ OR „fear“ OR „frustration“ OR „status threat“)	—	—	—
Populist	„right-wing populism“, „populist radical right“, „authoritarian populism“	(„right-wing populism“ OR „populist radical right“ OR „authoritarian populism“)	—	—	—
Combined Example 1	Economic AND Populist	(economic terms) AND (populist terms)	JSTOR	Approx. 1,775	Based on individual searches combining each economic term with each populist term. Minor variation in total results due to term frequency and database structure
Combined Example 2	Economic AND Populist	(economic terms) AND (populist terms)	Google Scholar	Approx. 18,100	
Combined Example 3	Economic AND Affective AND Populist	(economic terms) AND (affective terms) AND (populist terms)	JSTOR	Approx. 236	Builds on Example 1 and 2 by adding affective terms. Variability due to database coverage and keyword overlap
Combined Example 4	Economic AND Affective AND Populist	(economic terms) AND (affective terms) AND (populist terms)	Google Scholar	Approx. 19,000	

Source: Author's compilation based on the theoretical framework, sampled literature, and Dundar and Fleeman (2017b).

Table 2: Inductive Coding

Category	Search Codes	Description
General Affect	Emotion, Affect, Sentiment	Broad references to emotional states
Negative Emotion	Anger, Resentment, Sadness, Anxiety, Fear, Frustration	Negative emotional reactions to grievances
Positive Social-Affect	Pride	Positive emotional reaction to group affirmation
Negative Social-Affect	Shame Victimhood, Status Threat, Status Anxiety	Emotions tied to social identity and recognition
Economic-Affect	Economic Grievance, Insecurity, Precarity	Emotional response to economic instability
Proxy Language	Left Behind, Ignored, Disrespected	Implied emotional response

Source: Author's compilation from the sampled literature.

Table 3: Overview of German Terms and Their Assignment to Affective Categories

German Term	Translation	Assigned Affective Category
Allgemeiner Affekt (Emotion, Affekt, Gefühl, Empfindung)	General Affect (Emotion, Affect, Feeling, Sentiment)	General Affect (Emotion, Affect, Feeling, Sentiment)
Wut, Ärger	Anger	Anger
Groll, Verbitterung	Resentment	Resentment
Traurigkeit	Sadness	Sadness
Angst, Furcht	Fear/Anxiety	Fear, Anxiety
Frustration	Frustration	Frustration
Stolz	Pride	Pride
Scham	Shame	Shame
Opfer, Opferrolle	Victim, Victimhood	Victim, Victimhood
Statusbedrohung, Bedrohung des sozialen Status, Sozialer Abstieg	Status Threat	Status Threat
Verlustangst	Fear of Loss	
Statusangst	Status Anxiety	Status Anxiety
Ökonomisch-affektive Dimension (Ökonomische Unsicherheit, Prekarität)	Economic Affective Dimension (Economic Insecurity, Precarity)	Economic Affective (Economic Grievance, Insecurity, Precarity)
Indirekte Sprache (Abgehängt Sein, Übersehen, Missachtet)	Proxy Language (Left Behind, Ignored, Disrespected)	Proxy Language (Left Behind, Ignored, Disrespected)

Source: Author's compilation from sampled literature, integrating affective terms from English and German studies.

Table 4: Distribution of Affective Categories in the Reviewed Studies

Affective Category/ Search Codes	Number of Mentions in the Sample	Percentage (%)
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General Affect (Emotion, Affect, Feeling, Sentiment)	7	33.3
Anger	3	14.3
Resentment	9	42.9
Sadness	0	0
Fear, Anxiety	16	76.2
Frustration	3	14.3
Pride	1	4.8
Shame	1	4.8
Victim, Victimhood	1	4.8
Status Threat	5	23.8
Status Anxiety	5	23.8
Economic Affective (Economic Grievance, Insecurity, Precarity)	11	52.4
Proxy Language (Left Behind, Ignored, Disrespected)	4	19.0

Source: Author's compilation. Affective categories mentioned in both English- and German-language studies.

Table 5: Themes Identified in the Sample

Theme	Description	Shared Underlying Logic
Objective Indicator Models	Studies rely on quantifiable economic variables to explain voter support	Voting behavior is treated as purely rational and economically motivated
Narrative Acknowledgment, Analytical Exclusion	Studies mention emotion but do not define or measure it in their empirical model	Affect is acknowledged rhetorically but excluded methodologically
Proxy Based Inclusion of Affect	Studies include affect indirectly through broader concepts	Emotions are recognized but implied using attitudinal proxies

Status Anxiety Frameworks	Studies center on emotional responses to perceived status decline explicitly measuring affect as causal	Affect is central to explaining political behavior, often tied to identity and relative deprivation
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Source: Author's compilation; examples are provided in the findings chapter.

Table 6: Studies Falling under the Objective Indicator Models Theme

Study	Topic/Focus	Search Codes	Actual Affective Measurement
Vlandas & Halikiopoulou (2018)	How unemployment affects far-right support in Europe	Fear, Insecurity	No Affective Measurement Far-right vote share, unemployment rate, benefit replacement rate
Stoetzer et al. (2023)	Impact of income inequality on far-right support in Western Europe	Fear, Insecurity	No Affective Measurement Multilevel and mediation analysis; populist support measured with vote recall
Patana (2018)	Impact of immigration, economic hardship, and EU subsidies on far-right support in Finland	Anxiety, Fear, Resentment, Insecurity	No Affective Measurement Municipal-level panel data (1995 – 2011); Finns Party vote share; key variables: foreign population share, unemployment, social assistance, EU farming subsidies
Lengfeld (2017)	Whether modernization losers were more likely to support the AfD in Germany's 2017 federal election	Fear	No Affective Measurement Survey data (Nov 2016) on vote intention; modernization loser status based on education, occupation, income, and perceived deprivation
Lux (2018)	Whether modernization losers are more likely to support the AfD in Germany	Status Threat	No Affective Measurement

			Modernization loser status based on education, employment, income, and perceived deprivation
Tutic & Hermann (2018)	How socioeconomic status relates to AfD support in Germany	None	No Affective Measurement AfD support via vote intention or party attachment; status measured by education, income, employment, occupation

Source: Author's compilation.

Table 7: Studies Falling under the Narrative Acknowledgment, Analytical Exclusion Theme

Study	Topic/Focus	Search Codes	Actual Affective Measurement
Baccini & Sattler (2024)	Impact of fiscal austerity on far-right support in Poland	Sentiment, Insecurity	No affective measurement Populist vote share at district/individual level, interacted with vulnerability (education, sector, automation)
Ahlquist et al. (2020)	Far-right support and external economic shock	Anxiety, Resentment	No affective measurement Survey on bailout preferences, vote intentions, and framing experiment on shock information
Bolet (2020)	Effect of local labor market competition between immigrants and natives on far-right support in France	Fear, Resentment, Insecurity	No affective measurement Municipal FN vote share linked to local native and immigrant skill levels and unemployment
Dehdari (2021)	Impact of economic layoffs on support for the Sweden	Sentiment, Anxiety,	No affective measurement

	Democrats	Fear, Insecurity	Precinct-level layoff notices and change in Sweden Democrats vote share; survey-based unemployment risk
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Source: Author's compilation.

Table 8: Studies Falling under the Proxy-Based Inclusion of Affect Theme

Study	Topic/Focus	Search Codes	Actual Affective Measurement
Im et al. (2019)	Threat of automation and influence on far-right support	Fear, Anxiety	Inferred automation anxiety and fear of status loss Interaction of objective automation risk and subjective coping
Sipma et al. (2023)	Perceived economic and cultural deprivation as predictors of far-right support	Sentiment, Fear, Insecurity	Inferred status threat Uses perceived cultural/economic deprivation as proxies for resentment/status threat
Zhirnov et al. (2024)	Subjective insecurity as a driver of far-right support	Fear, Resentment, Status Threat, Insecurity, Precarity, Left Behind	Inferred insecurity Subjective insecurity scale: job loss risk, financial strain, income adequacy, work volatility
Hartmann et al. (2022)	Relationship between income mobility and far-right support	Fear, Anger, Resentment, Frustration, Insecurity	Inferred economic vulnerability Income mobility: objective relative, objective absolute, and subjective income change
Mancosu et al. (2024)	Perceived (economic) victimhood and far-right support	Resentment, Pride, Victim, Victimhood	Survey items on perceived unfairness, relative deprivation, and disadvantage

Source: Author's compilation.

Table 9: Studies Falling under the Status Anxiety Theme

Study	Topic/Focus	Search Codes	Actual Affective Measurement
Gidron & Hall (2017)	Subjective social status decline and far-right support	Anxiety, Resentment, Status Threat, Left-Behind	Perceived marginalization, low subjective status, disaffection, and recognition loss
Mutz (2018)	Perceived status threat and far-right support	Anxiety, Fear, Resentment, Frustration, Status Threat, Insecurity, Left Behind, Ignored	Status threat, cultural displacement, group resentment
Metten & Bayerlein (2023)	Existential anxiety and far-right support	Sentiment Anger, Insecurity	Existential anxiety, fear of change, low trust, and safety/tradition preference
Sthamer (2018)	Perceived marginalization and far-right support	Emotion, Fear, Status Anxiety	Qualitative interviews on resentment, humiliation, and anger over status loss

Source: Author's compilation.