

As Voters Feel Left Behind, the Far-Right Becomes More Appealing

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The explosion in popularity of far-right parties in Europe and North America suggests that many people are unhappy with the status quo and are seeking political alternatives. But what causes people to feel so strongly that they are losing out and turn to more extreme political parties? Thomas Kurer and Briitta van Staalduin provide some [insight](#) into the cause.

In the years following World War Two, most people living in Europe and North America could expect to have higher income and education relative to their parents. However, that is no longer the case. Deindustrialization, multiple economic crises, and a stagnating job market have made it so that upward mobility is increasingly rare. People used to be able to expect that they would be better off than their parents, but that expectation no longer holds. To this end, Kurer and van Staalduin theorize that people who see themselves as losing out compared to their parents are much more likely to vote for extremist parties and to experience dissatisfaction with mainstream politics.

To capture this idea, Kurer and van Staalduin develop a concept they call status discordance. Status discordance means that people end up in economic situations that differ from the expectations they had set during their childhood. Status discordance can be positive or negative. For example, if someone's parents grew up middle class and then, owing to a challenging job market, that person found themselves unable to find a job that could sustain a middle-class lifestyle, that person would experience negative status discordance. The authors suggest that when people experience negative status discordance, or lower perceived status than they would have expected growing up, this heightens feelings that the system is no longer working. The promises they were given about what their lifestyle would be growing up remain unfulfilled. As such, these individuals are likely to be drawn to alternative political options.

To test these ideas, the authors needed to find a way to estimate perceptions of status loss. They developed a new way to predict status expectations drawing on data from



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German households coming from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP). The SOEP is particularly helpful for this endeavor because it contains a questionnaire with rich details about both respondents and their parents, which the authors were able to use to make predictions about a person's expected status based on a broad array of indicators capturing their father's socio-economic background (occupation, education, migration background, etc.). The authors then used these predictions to look at the difference between predicted and actual social status, which created a dataset they could use to analyze voting patterns based on these differences.

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The findings were striking. Individuals whose social status was lower than they might have expected based on their upbringing were much more likely to vote for extremist parties. In particular, men who experienced this form of negative status discordance voted for far-right parties at a much higher rate. In other words, men who were downwardly mobile make up the core constituency for far-right parties in Germany. This effect was not as strong among women however, which the authors suggest may be due to the fact that women's rights and economic opportunities have been expanded in recent decades. This makes women less susceptible to the feeling that the system is no longer working. Another notable finding is that education levels affect which side of the extreme political spectrum voters land on. German voters who were downwardly mobile, but college educated, were more likely to vote for radical left-wing parties, while those who were not college educated tended to vote for radical right-wing parties. Those who experienced positive status discordance were more likely to vote for mainstream right political parties.

This study provides a clearer mechanism for large scale shifts in voter behavior. Downwardly mobile, lower educated men feel that the system has failed them, and as such turn to political parties who promise to improve their status. Far right parties have successfully capitalized on feelings of disappointed expectations to greatly improve their position in government. People's feelings of status loss are an extremely powerful driver of their voting behavior.

KURER, THOMAS, and BRIITTA VAN STAALDUINEN. 2022. "Disappointed Expectations: Downward Mobility and Electoral Change." *American Political Science Review*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000077>



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