

# *10th International Conference of Panel Data Users in Switzerland*

## *Workshop - Politics and attitudes*

### **When do negative life events push people to the populist right?**

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#### **Abstract**

##### *Research question and hypotheses*

Negative life events such as relationship dissolution, loss of a job, or a health crisis, have profound consequences in many life domains. They often are accompanied by a loss in resources, increased stress levels and may change future prospects and expectations. As a result, they may translate into changed views on society, with the potential to affect political party preferences.

Previous research has demonstrated that relationship dissolution indeed affects political party preference in Switzerland (Voorpostel, Coffé & Kuhn, 2018). Based on longitudinal data from the Swiss Household Panel, this study showed that following separation there was an increase in support for the populist right SVP party (Swiss People's Party). We argue that this result may be explained by increased vulnerability following negative life events, making individuals more likely to recognize themselves in the discourse of the SVP promoting an inward looking exclusionist view on society as well as a firm stance against immigration and European integration. In line with this, the literature on voting behaviour shows that economic losers of globalisation tend to vote for the populist right. It remains open, however, to what extent this result is a causal effect and if this relationship can be expanded to vulnerable groups in general.

This study aims to assess if and when the experience of a number of negative life events increase support for the SVP in Switzerland. We explore whether following relationship dissolution, job loss or a health crisis there is an increased support for radical right parties (SVP, MCG, Lega dei Ticinesi). We then assess whether changes in financial resources and in attitudes towards immigration, social spending and gender equality occur, and if these changes explain increased support for the SVP. Finally, we examine whether increased support for the SVP may be especially likely among those with lower income levels and those who already are close or in line with the views of these political parties prior to the event.

##### *Data and method*

We use data from all available waves of the SHP (1999-2017). We estimate fixed effects regression models to test our hypotheses. The dependent variable is vote intention for the SVP, MCG, or Lega dei Ticinesi. In a first step, we test to what extent negative life events increase the probability to support these parties. In a second step, we test whether income or attitude changes have mediating effects. If the regression coefficient of life events declines once income (or attitudes) are controlled in the model, we can conclude that income (or attitudes) are part of the mechanism linking negative life events and populist votes. In a third model, we interact the life events with income and attitudes to test for cumulative effects. We use the linear probability model to estimate fixed effects models, but check the robustness of finding using nonlinear logistic regression.

##### *Preliminary findings on relationship dissolution*

Preliminary findings on relationship dissolution (based on SHP data from 1999-2016) show that there is no mediating effect of income or attitudes on the relationship between separation and support for the SVP. Separation lowers income and increases support for cutting social expenses, but this does not decrease the effect of separation on a preference for the SVP. We find a number of significant interaction effects. The effect of separation on a preference for the SVP is stronger among those who fit the profile of the SVP electorate already:

lower income groups, against equal opportunities of Swiss and foreigners, and with traditional family values (child suffers with working mother, job is not important for independence, women are not penalised, not in favour of more gender-egalitarian values). A closer analysis shows that many of those who switch to the SVP following separation did not indicate a party preference before supporting SVP.

### *Conclusion*

The preliminary findings of this study indicate that it is not a decrease in income or change in views that accompany a separation that changes political party preference in favour of the SVP, but rather that groups with lower income levels and with views that are already in line with radical right parties prior to the event are more likely to turn to this party upon experiencing a separation. The addition of job loss and health crises in this paper will shed further light on the relationship between negative life events and political party preference.

Voorpostel M, Coffe H and Kuhn U. (2018) The link between separation and political party preference: selectivity or causal influence? *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*: 1-22.