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System Opposition in the Internet Age

Internet use amplifies the relationship between status deprivation and opposition towards the political system

Introduction

Much scholarly work claims that when citizens become dissatisfied with their place in society, they become opposed towards the political system (e.g., Rodrik 2021; Mutz 2018; Gidron and Hall 2017, 2019; Hochschild 2016; Bollwerk, et al. 2022; Filsinger 2023; Burgoon, et al. 2019; Petersen, et al. 2023). They lose trust in politicians, parties, and become dissatisfied with the way democracy works (Gidron and Hall 2019). They may protest or share misinformation (Petersen, et al. 2023), become more susceptible to populist messages and vote for populists (Mutz 2018, Bos, et al. 2020; Hochschild 2016), or even wish to 'burn down' institutions to start over (Petersen, et al. 2023). But *when* does discontent with your place in society lead to opposition towards the political system?

To get closer to an answer to this question, it's useful to take a step back and look at our basic social needs. Maintaining a positive self-image or identity is a central psychological task for individuals (Tajfel and Turner 1979). In this regard, we derive much of our identity from the groups we are part of (ibid), not least society (Ridgeway 2014, Ridgeway and Markus 2022; Ballard-Rosa, et al. 2021). This, we can refer to as our subjective social status – the esteem that we belief is accorded to us in society (Gidron and Hall 2017). When we feel that we lack status – that we are placed too low in the social hierarchy - a range of various strategies can be employed to lessen the psychological discomfort and (re)gain a positive self-image (Hogg 2011; Festinger 1962). These strategies range from seeking self-improvement such as getting a better job, blaming others (e.g., Bos, et al. 2020), or seeking tightknit local communities or distraction with non-political activities (Hochschild 2016; Baumeister, et al. 2007). Especially blaming is seen as a central strategy to protecting your self-image (e.g., Bos, et al. 2020, Reinemann 2020; Hochschild 2016; Snow and Soule 2009). While some individuals may blame themselves (Sharone 2013a, b), blaming others can be a strategy to lessen self-recrimination (Festinger 1962). The target of the blame can be other social groups, such as immigrants or the rich, or the political system spanning from (lack of) certain policies (e.g, hindering job creation) to the system as a whole.

While individuals feeling they lack social status may blame the political system for being malfunctioning and unresponsive to their needs, this is only one of the routes to lessen the psychological discomfort of status deprivation and protecting their sense of a positive self-image and self-esteem (Festinger 1962; Ridgeway 2014; Tajfel and Turner 1979). This raises the question: *when* should we expect that individuals feeling a lack of status turn against the political system?

To start answering this question, I begin by asking a more fundamental question: how universal should we expect the relationship between subjective social status and system opposition to be? In most societies, some people are at the bottom, while others are at the top. While many place themselves in the middle or slightly above middle to preserve a positive self-image, naturally not all members of society will be satisfied with their status. That is, some people will feel that the subjective social status they have is too little. The lower in the social status hierarchy, the more people should feel this way. Feeling status deprived threatens the individual's identity, prompting them to remove blame from themselves by blaming others such as the political system. Still, we don't know when lower subjective social status translates into more opposition against the political system. To get closer to answering this question, I start on the country level, examining which countries have the strongest or the weakest associations between subjective social status and system opposition. I do this on the basis that the relationship should be universal, but that many factors such as perceived corruption (e.g., Cordonier and Cafiero 2024; Hakhverdian and Mayne 2012), inequality (Engler and Weisstanner 2021) and others could affect which countries have the strongest and weakest relationships between subjective social status and system opposition.

To examine the country differences, I use rich cross-national data from the European Social Survey (ESS) and Internation Social Survey Programme (ISSP). I operationalize system opposition using six different outcomes, reflecting the least to most fundamental opposition to the political system. Starting with the least fundamental, these are views that government is unresponsive (external efficacy), politicians are selfish and not trustworthy and finally that elections are unfair and the votes are counted dishonestly as the most fundamental opposition to the political system. I find that subjective social status is nearly universally associated with system opposition in around 60 countries[1]. At the same time, I find substantial variation between countries in how strongly subjective social status relates to system opposition. This leads me to ask: which country-level factors could activate or direct status concerns against the political system?

While very few studies have attempted to uncover which country-level factors impact the relationship between subjective social status and system opposition, one study found that rising inequality increased the association between subjective social status and voting for populist or radical parties (Engler and Weisstanner 2021). From related literatures, one study found that especially in highly 'schooled' societies, those with low education felt undervalued and left out of society, resulting in lower trust in government and parliament, higher vote abstention and lower satisfaction with the way democracy works (van Noord, et al. 2023). Likewise, self-perceived economic hardship especially correlated with voting for radical right-wing parties, when economic and social conditions such as GDP, welfare spending, unemployment were good, and inequality was low (Rooduijn & Burgoon 2017). In sum, these highlight inequality, level of schooling and general social and economic conditions as important factors on the national level that may amplify or attenuate the consequences of status deprivation.

However, one factor that seems both intuitively appealing and that has often been argued to be especially impactful in our time is the internet. With the rise of the internet, information has become available like never before. The internet facilitates the spread of information and thus a supply of information that either criticizes the political system (e.g., illustrated by the spread of misinformation, Del Vicario, et al. 2016). Critiques of the political system range from moderate accusations of incompetence to anti-systemic or even conspiratorial critiques of a rotten, corrupt system (Holt 2018; Henriksen 2024; Schwarzenegger 2021). Individuals can also encounter content with more indirect effects, content that to the individual exposes the system as ill-intentioned, such as politicians signaling high status on a luxury holiday (Noordzij, et al. 2024). At the same time, the internet is a high-choice environment (Van Aelst, et al. 2017), where the individual can choose between much information to consume. This allows for a selective use of information that criticizes the political system (e.g., Hameleers, et al. 2018; Heiss and Matthes 2020), while individual can also encounter such content incidentally on social media (Fletcher and Nielsen 2017). Being exposed to content that portrays the political system negatively should assist the individual in directing blame for the status deprivation towards the political system that neither solves the issues underlying the status deprivation and may generally be seen as incompetent and ill-intentioned (Reinemann 2020; Hameleers, et al. 2017b; Hochschild 2016).

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[1] Exact number of countries varies slightly depending on the outcome (see figures 2 & 3). The number includes some countries that appear in both ISSP and ESS data.

To investigate whether the internet does amplify the relationship between subjective social status and system opposition, I test whether countries with more widespread internet use have a stronger relationship between subjective social status and system opposition. Further, I investigate whether internet use also likewise moderates the relationship on the individual level, using a subsample of 19 countries. I find that internet use on both the country-level and individual-level amplifies the relationship between subjective social status and system opposition considerably. At the same time, I find variation on the individual level, where the moderation depends on the country context.

Overall, this paper enhances our understanding of *when* citizens that are dissatisfied with their place in society turn against the political system. It makes three main contributions. First, it shows that subjective social status is associated with system opposition in nearly all sampled countries, but that the strength of the relationship varies substantially between countries. Second, the country-variation opens up for potential moderators, of which I provide evidence for internet use as a relatively strong moderator on both the country and individual level, depending on the country context. Third, I show that the moderation is relevant on opposition towards different parts of the political system, speaking to different literatures such as studies on trust (Citrin and Stoker 2018) and electoral fairness (Mauk and Grömping 2023; Norris 2019, 2023). Together, this paper equips literatures seeking to understand the relationship between status concerns, or similar experiences, and system opposition with a better understanding of the conditions that determine *when* social discontent is directed towards the political system.

Opposition to the political system

The stability and functioning of political systems has always concerned political thinkers, e.g., Hobbes (Lloyd and Sreedhar 2022). In his seminal work, Easton conceptualized the interplay between institutions and actors that constituted the political system (e.g., Easton 1957), and how it required a diffuse or general support of the voters (Easton 1975). This system support was constituted by trust and legitimacy as its main dimensions (ibid.). The main idea was that some system support is necessary for the political system to remain stable and functioning (ibid.). This work spurred a line of work with later scholars further developing the notion of support for the political system (Norris 2011, 2017; van der Meer 2017, Zmerli and van der Meer 2017)

Given the concept of system support, I define opposition to the political system as its negative pole. In this way, system opposition is a resentment towards the political system. With system support as the positive pole, where the system is trusted and seen as legitimate, the neutral point would be skepticism, consisting of mistrust and a lower legitimacy (van der Meer 2017). Following this, system opposition would be the negative pole, with distrust and illegitimacy as its main dimensions, embodied by the sense of a malfunctioning, corrupt and ill-intentioned system (see e.g., Bertsou 2019, Bertsou 2020; Ouattara and Van Der Meer 2023; Jennings, et al. 2021).

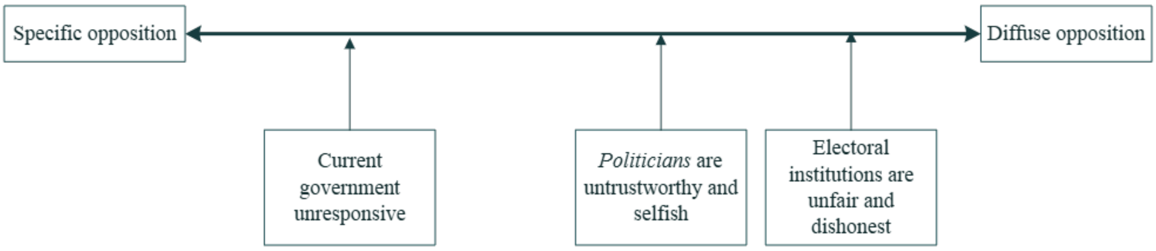
While some literature look at discontent towards the political system as votes for populists (e.g., Kurer 2020; Mutz 2018; Bos, et al. 2020), I opt for a more direct measurement of attitudes towards the political system. These views may then have downstream effects, such as vote abstention or voting for a populist, in political protests (Petersen, et al. 2023), reforms of the political system (Ouattara and Van Der Meer 2023), or even non-compliance with the law (eg.. Marien and Hooghe 2011; Muller, et al. 1982;).

To understand what exactly system opposition is targeted against, I follow Easton's conceptualization of the political system as containing different parts or objects that each may enjoy more or less support from an individual (Easton 1957). Actors such as politicians, processes such as law making as well as institutions such as elections are arguably the most important objects that voters may be opposed to (Easton 1975). Because the goal of this paper is to demonstrate the moderating effect of internet use on system opposition broadly, I choose three important but different objects to test the moderation on.

Specifically, I investigate attitudes towards government, politicians and elections. Firstly, I study whether the government is seen as unresponsive by not listening to the voter's concerns (external efficacy, Easton and Dennis 1967; Bienstman, et al. 2024). Secondly, I look at politicians in general. Are politicians as a general, vague group seen as trustworthy or intrinsically ill-intentioned and selfish, not working for the interests of the voters (Bertsou 2019; Ouattara, et al. 2023; Citrin and Stoker 2018)? Thirdly, I look at whether elections are perceived as fair and honest by voters (Norris 2019, 2023). As is likely clear, these different objects are not equally important or fundamental to a political system.

As is shown in figure 1, we can place these objects onto a scale from most specific, reflecting a volatile or superficial opposition, to the most diffuse, reflecting a more fundamental or ingrained opposition to the political system. As such, government, politicians and elections can be seen as samples of what an opposition towards the political system can target. But not all institutions or actors are equally important or fundamental to a political system (Easton 1975). For example, governments come and go as the ruling parties change. As such, being resentful towards a specific government may not be seen as a very deep resentment towards the political system[2], as the government might change as a consequence of the next election, potentially to the satisfaction of the voter (Devine and Valgarðsson 2023). In contrast, politicians as a vague group of people are not confined to current politicians in either government or parliament. Instead, it might extend to intrinsic characteristics of politicians as a social group. Finally, electoral institutions on the other hand are the arguably most fundamental institution of democracy, if you think of classical definitions of democracy (e.g., Dahl 1971). Being a very important set of institutions, if a voter finds current electoral rules and procedures to be unfair or even that votes are not counted correctly, that counts as a much deeper resentment towards the system than both the current government and politicians in general.

Figure 1: From specific to diffuse opposition


Specific opposition
Diffuse opposition
Current government unresponsive
Politicians are untrustworthy and selfish
Electoral institutions are unfair and dishonest

The figure should then show that beliefs of unfair elections is the most deep or fundamental opposition to the political system, more so than seeing politicians as selfish and ill-intentioned, which is turns signals a deeper or more diffuse resentment than perceiving government to not listen or care about your views. Vast literatures have already dealt with these objects individually (Citrin and Stoker 2018; Ouattara, et al. 2023; Norris 2019, 2023). My goal is simply to test whether internet use moderates the effect of subjective social status on different objects of system opposition. Therefore, I find it suitable to work across these literatures rather than isolated in one of them. Similarly, other works also deal with system opposition more generally, such as conspiracy beliefs about a shadow government directing politics from behind the scenes (Uscinski, et al. 2021), a desire to 'burn down' political and social structures (Arceneaux, et al. 2021), or social movements against the political system (Wallerstein 2016).

Subjective social status and opposition to the political system

One prominent explanation of opposition to the political system is status concerns (e.g., Gidron and Hall 2017, 2019; Kurer 2020; Kurer and Van Staalduinen 2022; Petersen, et al. 2023). This explanation rose out of globalization and modernization, i.e. technological development, studies (Kriesi, et al. 2006; Kübler and Kriesi 2017). In these studies, it was claimed that new cleavages had emerged between winners and losers of globalization so that the losers of globalization voted for populists and radical parties (ibid.).

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[2] Albeit *government* might also refer to a broader set of institutions, support in government is often taken to be more *superficial* or volatile, referring to that which might change following elections.

Following this, studies argued that events like globalization and cultural changes (such as change in values in society) matter politically, because they shift people's beliefs about their social standing in society (Rodrik 2021; Inglehart and Norris 2019, but see Schäfer 2022)[3]. Status concerns has been found to lead to e.g., lower political trust and more votes for radical parties (e.g., Gidron and Hall 2017, 2019; Rodrik 2021). With this research, the field largely shifted to studying individual level factors, such as subjective social status (Gidron & Hall 2017, 2019), relative deprivation (Elchardus and Spruyt 2016), and misrecognition (Steiner, et al. 2023, Steiner, et al. 2024; Bollwerk, et al. 2022).

Different types of status concerns have been explored by the literature across many different country contexts (eg., Gidron & Hall 2019; Engler and Weisstanner 2021). These include absolute levels of subjective social status (e.g., Gidron & Hall 2017, 2019), relative status decline (Kurer 2020), fear of status decline (Engler and Weisstanner 2021; Im, et al. 2023), disappointed status expectations (Kurer and Van Staalduinen 2022), status threat (Mutz 2018), and status loss (Petersen, et al. 2023).

In this article, I focus on subjective social status. This is a central part of how we relate to one another in society (Ridgeway and Markus 2022), and has been linked to a variety of political preferences (Brown-Iannuzzi, et al. 2014; Condon and Wichowsky 2019). It has also been shown to predict trust in politicians and parliaments, satisfaction with democracy and voting for radical parties across a wide range of western democracies (Gidron and Hall 2019). I define subjective social status as the 'level of social respect or esteem people believe is accorded them within the social order' (Gidron and Hall 2017: 61).

To understand why subjective social status matters for system opposition, it is useful to start by considering why we strive for social status. As social beings, a central psychological task is to maintain positive self-esteem. That is, to feel respected, valued and acknowledged (Tajfel and Turner 1979). As this is what social status is about, our subjective social status becomes an importance source of the respect and value that feeds into maintaining a positive identity (Ridgeway and Markus 2022). With social status as a source of self-esteem, we desire a comfortable level of social status (ibid.). The exact level of social status that we need to feel well-enough recognized in society is likely to vary from person to person - depending on individuals differences in predispositions like status entitlement and status-seeking (see e.g., Kurer and Van Staalduinen 2022; Petersen, et al. 2023), and cultural differences between countries. Meanwhile, the subjective social status distributions in figure 2 suggest that people seek to place themselves in the middle of the social hierarchy (see especially the US), and slightly above the middle in developed welfare states like The Netherlands or Denmark. This also means that the further down the status hierarchy we go, the more people should be dissatisfied with their perceived social status.

In order to assess our social status, and evaluate if it is good enough, we compare ourselves to others in a spontaneous, frequently occurring process (Fiske 2010; Wheeler and Miyake 1992). If we conclude that we have too little social status, we should feel dissatisfied or deprived of social status. That is, we do not feel respected and valued enough by others to maintain a positive identity, making our self-picture crackle. The further down the social status hierarchy, the more people should feel this way.

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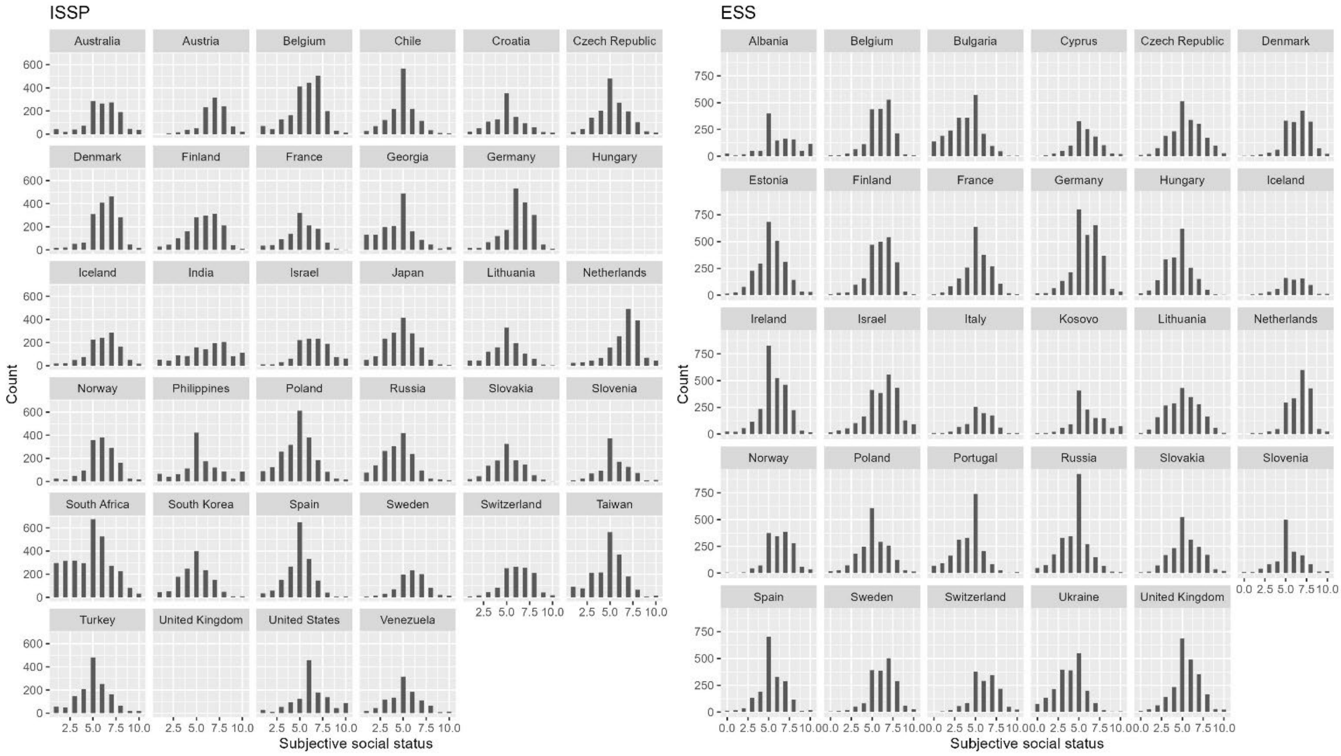
[3] Other research argues that macro events such as globalization do not matter as much as claimed because of overlap between winners and losers of globalization and preexisting class and education cleavages (Langsæther and Stubager 2019). Some research also nuance these claims by arguing that the voters reacting to globalization and modernization by voting for the radical right are not the losers of globalization but rather workers in relatively protected jobs - while the 'true' losers working in the service industry tend to abstain from voting (Häusermann 2020). Nonetheless, what remains central as an explanation is individuals' beliefs of their own position in society.

Figure 2: Distribution of subjective social status



Feeling status deprived is an uncomfortable experience. This is due to the cognitive dissonance arising from the conflicting experiences of wanting to see yourself as someone who is well-recognized in society, while at the same time observing that others do not respect or value you to the degree that you feel a need to (Festinger 1962). The cognitive dissonance motivates individuals to reflect (Williams 2009), to search for explanations and tools that can help lessen it (ibid.; Festinger 1962), in turn protecting the individual's sense of having a positive identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Taber and Lodge 2006).

To resolve the dissonance a range of strategies can be applied. From trying to improve it's situation ('I just need to get a better job'), to justifying the current system ('Those who work hard have the highest status') (Kay and Jost 2003), to distract themselves with nonpolitical activities (e.g., local activities and communities such as sports clubs or finally blaming others (Kraus, et al. 2009). Especially the latter strategy, blaming, is likely to result in system opposition (see e.g., Reinemann 2020; Kraus, et al. 2009). While this blame might be directed towards other social groups such as the rich, older generations or immigrants (Bos, et al. 2020; Walsh 2012; Hochschild 2016), a variety of literature also find that blame is directed towards the political system (Ibid., Reinemann 2020; Hameleers, et al. 2017b;).

By blaming others, the individual can construct an explanation of the status deprivation that directs the blame of the status deprivation away from the individual. This minimizes the discomfort, by providing the individual with an explanation. Instead of blaming itself, it can assign responsibility to the political system for not solving or listening to the needs of the individual, thus feeding into the explanation that it's only because of the political system that the individual is status deprived (Hochschild 2016; Walsh 2012; Sharone 2013b). For example, it could be that an individual feels that the problem underlying its status deprivation is lacking a good job, ascribing this to the government's incompetence, corruption or ill intentions in its failure to provide good jobs. This blames the political system rather than e.g., the abilities of the individual (Sharone 2013a, b), in turn protecting the individual's positive self-image (Tajfel and Turner 1979).

Concluding that the political system is to blame for the status deprivation should lead the individual to become more opposed to the parts of the political system that are seen as responsible. For example, the government being unresponsive. But at the same time, it should make the individual less willing to justify the current system (Kay and Jost 2003; Valdes, et al. 2024), and to update their overall confidence in the political system (Tappin, et al. 2020). This should in turn motivate them to become open-minded towards other critiques of the political system that may have nothing to do with their own situation but align with their experiences of an incompetent and/or ill-intentioned system (Taber and Lodge 2006).

This argument is consistent with findings across European countries that lower subjective social status lead to lower trust in politicians, parliaments and lower satisfaction with democracy (Gidron and Hall 2017, 2019). As well as ethnographic fieldworks finding that individuals experiencing what can be characterized as status concerns sees the political system, including the bureaucracy, as something working against them, e.g., by preventing them from having good job opportunities (Hochschild 2016: Walsh 2012). Likewise, cross-national studies found that those higher in subjective status were more likely to justify the systems that they live in (Valdes, et al. 2024)

In sum, we should expect on average that the lower subjective status is, the more status deprivation, in turn leading individuals to blame the political system more. This should then make individuals more oppose system in general. Given that earlier findings are cross-national (especially Gidron & Hall 2019), and that social hierarchies are a relatively universal feature of societies, we should expect to see this in most countries even though strategies such as blaming might also differ between contexts (Sharone 2013a, b; Sagioglou and Hommerich 2024. Therefore, I propose that:

H1: Subjective social status is negatively associated with opposition to the political system in most countries

The internet: assisting individuals in attributing blame to the political system

While we might find a negative relationship between subjective social status and system opposition in most countries, we should also expect variation between countries. However, the literature does not yet have much to say about which factors amplify or attenuate the relationship between subjective social status and system opposition.

One study investigated how country-level factors impact the relationship between social status and voting for radical parties, finding that rising inequality lead high-status citizens to become more likely to vote for radical parties (Engler and Weisstanner 2021). A related finding suggest that the relationship should be stronger in highly educated societies, as lowly-educated citizens felt less valued in highly schooled societies and consequently trusted the political system less (van Noord, et al. 2023). Meanwhile, to the best of my knowledge, no studies test whether country-level factors moderate the association between subjective social status and attitudes towards the political system.

In addition to the inequality and general educational level in a country, many other things might vary between countries, potentially moderating the relationship between subjective social status and system opposition. Examples are perceived corruption (e.g., Droste 2021; Cordonier and Cafiero 2024), GDP, level of welfare spending and social security (Rooduijn and Burgoon 2017), immigration (Ivarsflaten 2008; Richards, et al. 2021), perceived lack of jobs (Hochschild 2016; Walsh 2012; Giustozzi and Gangl 2021), or finally internet use (Zhuravskaya, et al. 2020; e.g., Schumann, et al. 2021; Sabatini and Sarracino 2019; Müller and Schulz 2021; Muhsin and Stephan 2022; Leung and Lee 2014). These moderators should make it easier or harder for individuals to direct blame towards the political system rather than themselves (e.g., Sharone 2013a, b; Festinger 1962; Hochschild 2016). For example, in systems that are perceived as highly corrupt, the political system is problematized with clear and salient issues. This increases the supply of information that can be used to construct explanations where the political system blamed for the status deprivation and generally seen as incompetent and ill-intentioned (Reinemann 2020; Bos, et al. 2020).

Among these potential moderators, the internet has often been emphasized as one of the most defining features of our times, both argued to be important for and detrimental to democracy (e.g., Barberá, et al. 2015, Barberá 2020, Nyhan, et al. 2023; Zhuravskaya, et al. 2020; Lazer, et al. 2018; Karpf 2020; Leung and Lee 2014); . While we live in the internet age, existing studies focus on how explanations that blame the system arise in local communities (Walsh 2012; Hochschild 2016). However, it seems plausible that much information used to blame the political system can be accessed online. The internet is known for facilitating mass spread of information (cite). At the same time, it is a high-choice environment (Van Aelst, et al. 2017), where the individual can choose widely between different kinds of information. This information can then be used to satisfy the goals and needs that individuals have, such as blaming the political system.

When it comes to information that can be used to blame the political system, it may either be explicit criticisms of the political system or more indirectly, content that interpreted by the status deprived individual as evidence the individual that the political system is incompetent, ill-intentioned and/or corrupt and thus to blame (such as politicians living luxurious lives; Noordzij, et al. 2024).

The explicit criticisms that individuals can encounter online range from moderate critiques to radical antisystemic critiques. In the more moderate end, individuals may be exposed to claims of incompetence or corruption allegations on mainstream media. They might also encounter political actors using populist communication tactics, blaming 'the ill-intentioned political elite' for societal problems (Hameleers, et al. 2017b; Engesser, et al. 2017). Likewise, it might also be critiques of institutions such as the party system, electoral rules and the role of money in politics or gridlock in political processes (Mayer 2016; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). In the more extreme end is conspiracy theories such as a hidden elite ruling the system from behind the scenes and more radical antisystemic critiques of the system, arguing in favor of abandoning the current political system to get true democracy, e.g., by replacing current institutions with new more direct or participatory institutions (Uscinski, et al. 2021; Holt 2018; Wallerstein 2016). Consuming such information has been associated with opposition to the political system in previous studies (Einstein and Glick 2015, Schumann, et al. 2022; Schlipphak, et al. 2022; Reinemann 2020; Bos, et al. 2020; Hameleers, et al. 2017b; Strömbäck, et al. 2022; Müller and Bach 2023). I argue that this content should especially have an effect for status deprived individuals because of their openness towards criticizing the political system (Taber and Lodge 2006; Festinger 1962; Hameleers, et al. 2017b; Reinemann 2020). Other content doesn't explicitly criticize the political system but might make frustrations related to status deprivation more salient or help the individual interpret the intentions of e.g., politicians. For example, high-status signaling by politicians (Noordzij, et al. 2024) such as posting pictures on social media from an expensive holiday, luxury items or meetings famous and respected people.

Both moderate and radical criticisms can be found on mainstream news outlets and mainstream social media (e.g., Muhsin and Stephan 2022; Boberg, et al. 2020), as well as alternative news media (e.g., de León, et al. 2024; Brems 2023) and alternative social media (e.g., Parler, Rumble, BitChute)[4]. Likewise, the same content might also spread across different media, as e.g., alternative news sites post links to criticisms of the political system on social media (e.g., Müller and Bach 2023). However, alternative news outlets and alternative media are known for being particularly prone to criticisms of the political system and host of more radical critiques of the system (e.g., Brems 2023). Some of the more radical critiques are mainly found on alternative platforms but not necessarily, such as the QAnon movement and conspiracy theory starting on 4chan and later being spread on Twitter (Wendling 2021).

What sets the using the internet apart from the offline context is the large supply and availability of this content that can be used to criticize the political system, and thus the possibility for the individual to access it. This enables both heavy consumption of it and incidental exposure that wouldn't have happened offline. In other words, the information can be encountered either intentionally by self-selecting into (alternative) news sites, critical influencers' pages on social media or video streaming platforms such as Rumble. Or individuals can make contact with the content incidentally, as the individual e.g., scrolls through mainstream social media (Fletcher and Nielsen 2017)[5]. This potentially creates a spiral effect (Slater 2015, Heiss and Matthes 2020, Schumann, et al. 2022; Hameleers, et al. 2017a), as the individual might then start self-selecting into such content more afterwards, reinforcing the system opposition. Potentially this might also lead some users from more moderate criticisms to e.g, reading conspiracy theories, as it gradually becomes more plausible for them that there is something fundamentally wrong with the political system (Andersen, et al. 2023; Tappin, et al. 2020). One way this can happen is by being incidentally exposed to content on social media and following links to alternative news sites (Müller and Bach 2023)

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[4] See for example the 'conspiracy theory' section on Rumble. Likewise, alternative news sites may have dedicated sections criticizing those in power.

[5] This is likely due to content criticizing the system often creating reactions such as outrage on e.g., Facebook, in turn leading the algorithm to boost its visibility in the feeds of social media (e.g., Munn 2020)

Exposed to information that indirectly or directly criticizes the political system should assist status deprived individuals in removing blame from themselves, directing it against the political system (Festinger 1962, Taber and Lodge 2006). That is, those with lower subjective status should be motivated to see the content as proof that the system is to blame and that is generally ill-intentioned and corrupt (Reinemann 2020). However, status deprived individuals who do not use the internet as much might find other strategies of protecting their identity more effective, thus leading them to use another remedy than blaming the political system (Hogg 2011; Snow and Soule 2009). Further, individuals with higher subjective social status should be less willing the oppose the current system, as they lack the motivation to blame it that status deprived individuals have, yet they may not ascribe their success to it but rather to their own merits (Larsen 2021). However, they should still update their support negatively towards the system when seeing e.g., corruption allegations that they regard as credible (Tappin, et al. 2020; van der Meer 2010).

Connecting this to country-level variation in internet use, we should expect that in countries where the internet is more widely used, information useful for blaming to political system should also be more widespread. This should in turn make it more salient and thus available for the individual to use as an explanation for the status deprivation. For example, national politicians from radical parties blaming the political establishment for societal problems may have an easier time creating a voice for themselves online (Engesser, et al. 2017). They may be boosted more by the algorithms if their posts on social media create engagement such as emoji reactions of outrage compared to other politicians (Munn 2020). Likewise, alternative news sites and system opposing influencers on social media are often aimed at national contexts (e.g., Brems 2023; Brems 2024). While a certain amount of internet use seems a prerequisite for this content to be supplied, even if assumed that this content existed regardless of how many used the internet to access it, the information should be much less widespread and top of mind for individuals if the internet is used less in a given country. In sum, the more people who use the internet in a country, the higher availability and saliency of information that can be used to blame and oppose the political system. Therefore, we should expect that:

H2a: Subjective social status is negatively associated with system opposition, especially in countries with higher internet usage

In addition to this, we should expect that individual differences in internet use matter, regardless of how much the internet is used on the country level. Parallel to above, individuals using the internet more should be more likely than other people to be exposed to information that explicitly criticizes the political system or indirectly interpreted to portray it as ill-intentioned towards people with lower status. This should make status deprived individuals more likely to blame the political system if they use the internet more. Even in an extreme example, where no nationally aimed content exists, individuals might incidentally or intentionally be exposed to e.g., English sites containing these types of information (e.g., Hameleers, et al. 2018; Fletcher and Nielsen 2017). This might be on e.g., Twitter or the alternative social media Rumble, where general, non-country specific system opposing and conspiratorial content can be accessed. Therefore, I expect that:

H2b: Subjective social status is negatively associated with system opposition, especially for individuals with higher internet usage

Methods: data, measurements and modeling

In this section of the paper, I elaborate on how I test the hypotheses. I start by describing the data used, proceed to the measurements of subjective social status and system opposition, before finally explaining the modeling used in the subsequent analyses.

I use two large datasets. Both datasets contain measure subjective social status and system opposition. The first dataset I use is round 6 of the European Social Survey (ESS) which contains 29 European countries sampled from August 2012 to December 2013, but mainly in 2013. I build my analyses on the study using this data by Gidron & Hall (2019). The second dataset I use is the Citizenship II module from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). This contains a global sample of 34 countries spanning Europe, North- and Latin America and East Asia. These countries were sampled from late 2013 to 2016, but with the vast majority sampled in 2014 and 2015. Specifically, the US data is from 2014. Some countries are sampled in both datasets, allowing comparisons between samples.

Since the ESS data was collected in mainly 2013 and the ISSP data mainly in 2014 and 2015, it can be argued that many things have changed since then. Since the data collection, new sources of political information such as (alternative) social media and news sites have come to exist, increasing the abundance of relevant information online. Examples of this include the explosion of misinformation and fake news related to the US presidential election in 2016 (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017),

While it seems fair to conclude that the internet is not the same as ten years ago, it might be more accurate to perceive the changes as a development or acceleration of existing trends rather than a fundamental change in quality in the way we engage with political information online. For an example, some of the most defining features of modern social media, such as the 'share-button' on Facebook and 'retweet' on Twitter were already in place (Haidt 2022), and YouTube was already a large video-sharing platform.

I believe the data is new enough to take account for the most defining features of the internet – such as the share button and major platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Haidt 2022). But the data might provide a harder test than newer data, since the supply of information criticizing the political system has undoubtedly only grown since then. Further, using data spanning the period from mainly 2013 to 2015 should make the conclusion more robust and less sensitive to specific events and developments compared to data from a single year, as the supply and saliency of information on the internet varies over time e.g, in response to political events such as elections[6].

Measurement of subjective social status

In both datasets, subjective social status and system opposition are measured. Firstly, subjective social status is the respondent's own self-placement on a scale from 0 to 10. The measure in ESS is as follows: "*There are people who tend to towards the top of our society and people who tend to be towards the bottom. On this card there is a scale that runs from top to bottom. Where would you place yourself on this scale nowadays?"*. The measurement in ISSP is as follows: "*In our society, there are groups which tend to be towards the top and groups which tend to be towards the bottom. Below is a scale that runs from the from top to the bottom. Where would you put yourself on this scale?*". While both measurements ask for *individual* placement of "yourself", the ESS measurement emphasizes "people", while ISSP asks for "groups" at the top or bottom of society. While this might in theory create slightly different references for the individual (Müller and Schulz 2021), the results in the analysis appear robust to such changes.

Operationalization of opposition to the political system

I now operationalize the dependent variable that subjective social status should affect. In the theory section, I divided system opposition into attitudes towards government as unresponsive, politicians as a generally trustworthy vs. ill-intentioned and selfish, and finally whether elections are seen as unfree or dishonest and unfair. I operationalize this as shown in table 1 below. To measure attitudes towards government, I use a widely used additive index of external efficacy from the ISSP dataset (see e.g., AES studies; Easton and Dennis 1967). This asks whether individuals feel that government doesn't care about their views and whether they feel that they have no say. It is used to measure whether government is seen as unresponsive. Attitudes towards politicians are measured as general trust towards politicians using ESS data. In ISSP, I measure a central component of trust - whether politicians are seen as selfish, only in politics for personal profit, in contrast to working for the voters' interests and what is best for the country (Ouattara, et al. 2023).

As for attitudes towards elections, the question in ESS asks whether elections are unfair and unfree vs. free and fair. The question in ISSP divided this into two questions, specifically honest vs. dishonest counting of votes in elections and fair vs. unfair opportunities for the different candidates and parties to campaign in elections. Opportunities to campaign is central to fair elections, and unfairness can reflect the idea that money from strong interests can essentially buy policy/politics by financing and thereby exerting a degree of control of candidates, a view frequently observed in a range of democracies including the US (Mayer 2016; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002, Pew 2023). For comparability, all dependent variables are rescaled to a range of 0-1 and some are reversed so that high values always indicate opposition to the political system.

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[6] It is important to note that the moderation of the internet on the individual level is investigated solely using the ISSP on the individual level due to data restraints, of which the data was collected mainly in 2014 and 2015.

Table 1: Measurement of system opposition

Measurement	ESS dataset	ISSP dataset
Unresponsive government		Additive index of: *"I don't think the government cares much what people like me think"* + *"People like me don't have any say about what the government does"* ("Strongly disagree" – "strongly disagree", reversed)
Mistrust in politicians and selfish politicians	Mistrust in politicians: "Please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. … politicians" ("Complete Trust" – "No trust at all", reversed)	Politicians are selfish "*To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Most politicians are in politics only for what they can get out of it personally*" ("Strongly disagree" - "Strongly agree", reversed)
Unfair elections	"National elections in [country] are free and Fair" (0 "Does not apply at all" -10 "Applies completely", reversed)	"*Thinking of the last national election in (COUNTRY), how fair was it regarding the opportunities of the candidates and parties to campaign?*" ("Very unfair" – "Very fair", reversed)
Dishonest elections		*"Thinking of the last national election in (COUNTRY), how honest was it regarding the counting and reporting of the votes?"* (1 "Very dishonest" – 5 "Very honest", reversed)

Measurement of internet use

To whether how much the internet is used, I measure it on both the country level and the individual level. On the country level, I measure the proportion of the population in a given country using the internet (World Bank)[7]. On the individual level, internet use is measured as the frequency of using the internet to get political information, specifically. The questions used is: *"On average, how often do you: Use the internet to get political news or information?" (*"never" (0) to "several times a day" (6)). This was an optional part of the ISSP data collection, which means the question was only in a subset of the countries[8].

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[7] As a robustness check, I use number of broadband subscriptions and number of secure internet servers relative to the size of the population as other indications of how developed or widespread internet use is in a given country (Appendix A)

Modelling

I now describe the models used to test my hypotheses. To test my first hypothesis, whether subjective social status is negatively related to system opposition is most countries, I use a multivariate OLS model. Because I'm interested in how the association looks in each country, I include an interaction between country and subjective social status in the model. This gives me an effect estimate for each country that I then plot. While including the country-term eliminates country-level confounders, I still need to account for potential confounders on the individual level. To do this, I include control variables in the main model.

In the main models using ISSP data, I control for age, sex and whether the respondent currently has, have had, or have never had paid work before (unemployment in ESS). I also control for residence in urban vs. rural areas (Walsh 2012), union membership and attendance of religious activities (church attendance in ESS). In addition to this, regressions on ESS data also include whether the respondent was born in a foreign country. In robustness checks I also examine whether ideology and check whether political preferences such as ideology and voting for the incumbents affect the estimates substantively (appendix A)

In contrast to some studies (Gidron and Hall 2019), I refrain from controlling for variables that usually central drivers of subjective social status, such as prestige from education, job and income. Controlling for these would remove a lot of the variance that likely make up social status and drive its relationship with system opposition. This would leave us with models that are questionable in their representation of the real world (Aronow and Samii 2016). Because this argument can also be extended to other variables such as being born abroad or living in a rural area vs. urban area that also shape your subjective social status, I also provide bivariate analyses without any controls in appendix A. Here I also include analyses with more control variables.

For the next hypothesis, 2a, I investigate whether citizens in countries with more widespread internet usage are more likely to become system-opposing the less subjective social status they have. To do this, I use a multilevel model. The multilevel model takes into account that individuals are not independent of the country that they live in. This means that the extent to which lower subjective status makes you oppose the system depends on characteristics of the country that you live in. Specifically, I use internet use on the national level as a moderator of the individual level relationship between subjective social status and system opposition. To account for different baselines of system opposition between countries, I vary the intercepts of the model by country.

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[8] The question was also asked in Czech Republic but due to a discrepancy in the answer categories compared to all the other countries, it is not included in the analysis.

However, varying across country also introduces potential country-level confounds. I use the same control variables on the individual level as before, but add country-level control variables to the model. Specifically, I add perceived corruption (Transparency International), GDP per capita, gini coefficients to account for inequality, proportion of population living in urban areas, and the same for part time employment, employment in service industry, how many have advanced degrees, proportion of refugees, world region and degree of ethnic fractionalization (World Bank ; Drazanova 2019). For robustness checks, I run the models with and without controls and also test whether results are similar using broadband subscriptions and stable internet servers (Appendix A).

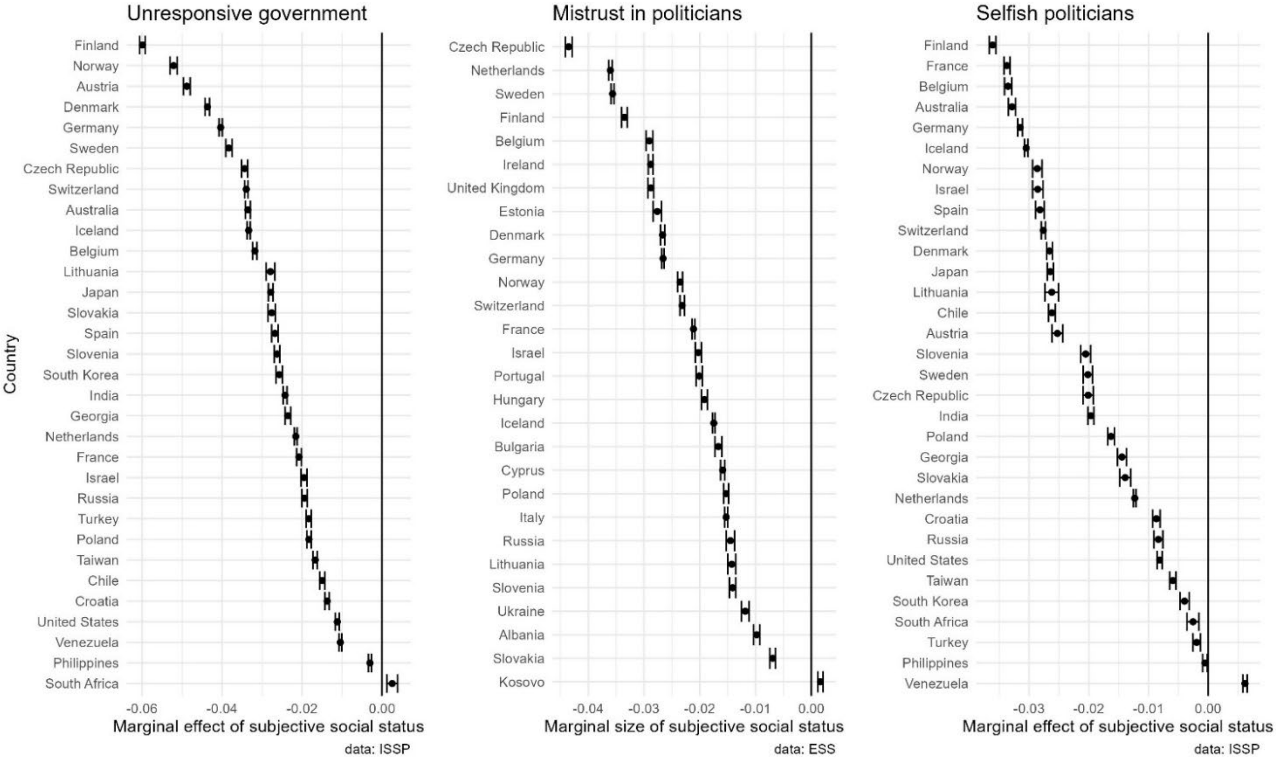
Finally, to test hypothesis 2b that individual differences in internet use moderate the relationship between subjective status and system opposition, I return to a regular OLS model, this time with country-fixed effects. This lets me control for the country a respondent lives in, while I introduce individual internet, interacting it with subjective social status. Holding country-level differences constant, I only need to control for individual-level covariates and use the same variables as previously. As before, I include robustness checks of the main model in appendix A. Because individual internet use was only measured in the ISSP dataset and on a subset of the countries, this analysis is confined to data from 19 countries: *Australia, Belgium, Chile, Finland, France, Georgia, Iceland, India, Japan, Lithuania, The Netherlands, The Philippines, Poland, Russia, South Korea, Spain, Switzerland, Taiwan and Turkey.*

Results

How does the relationship between subjective social status and system opposition vary between countries?

I start by testing hypothesis 1 that subjective social status is negatively associated with system opposition in most countries. Starting with attitudes towards government and politicians, figure 2 shows the statistical effect sizes, meaning the change in system opposition every time social subjective status changes by one point. It shows that in nearly all countries except for one in each panel, system opposition increases when subjective social status lowers. This is the case for when we look at whether government is seen as unresponsive or uncaring, general mistrust in politicians as well as seeing politicians as selfish or only in politics for what they can personally get out of it.

Figure 2: Relationship between subjective social status, governments and politicians



Note: outcomes are scaled 0-1, subjective social status is scaled 0-10.

At the same time, there is substantial variance in the size of the statistical effects between countries. Looking at the range in the countries with the expected negative effects, effects range from -6 %-points in Finland to -0.03%-points in Philippines in the unresponsive government panel (unresponsive government mean is 0.58). I refrain from reporting confidence intervals here as they essentially overlap with the estimates. For mistrust in politicians, the statistical effect ranges from -4.4%-points in The Czech Republic to 0.7%-points in Slovakia (mistrust mean 0.68). For selfish politicians (mean is 0.65), the statistical effect ranges from -3.6%-points in Finland to approximately a null-effect in the Philippines. Conversely, the relationship is reversed for Venezuela, where a one point increase in subjective social status increases beliefs in selfish politicians with 0.6%-points.

To assess the size of the statistical effects, a change of one standard deviation in social subjective status (approx. 1.9 points in both datasets, rounded to 2 points) leads anywhere between ≈0%-points to 12%-points change in finding the government unresponsive, up to 8.8%-points for mistrust in politicians, and 7.2%-points for selfish politicians. As an unresponsive government is the most specific of the outcomes, while attitudes towards politicians should reflect a more diffuse opposition, the differences in effect sizes is to be expected. These results are robust both when tested without and with other control variables (appendix A)

Figure 3: Relationship between subjective social status and attitudes towards elections

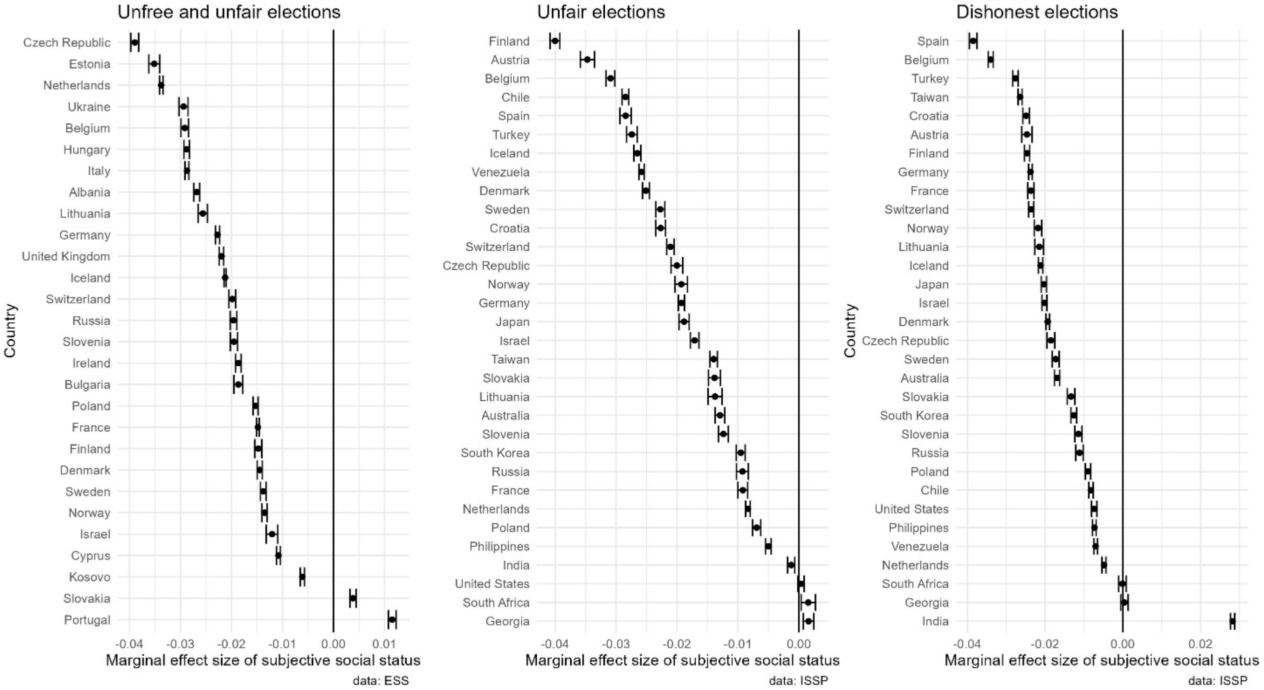


Figure 3 shows similar results for attitudes towards elections. Looking at the unfree and unfair elections from the ESS, statistical effects range from approx. -3.9%-points in The Czech Republic to -0.6%-point in Kosovo (overall mean 0.3). For the unfair elections outcome (ISSP data), it ranges from -4%-points in Finland to -0.2%-points in India (overall mean 0.38). In the reverse direction, Portugal has a moderate statistical effect of 1.1%-points, where it is those with the highest subjective social status who are the most critical of the elections. For dishonest elections, the statistical effect ranges from -3.8%-points in Spain to approx. 0.5%-point in the Netherlands. In contrast to the other countries, the relationship is reversed in India, where a one-point increase in subjective social status led to a 2.8%-point increase in the belief that votes are counted wrongly.

To gauge the effect sizes, when subjective social status decreases with 2 points, beliefs in unfree and unfair elections (ESS data) increase with 1.2%-point to 7.8 %-point. For the ISSP data, beliefs in unfair elections increase by 0.4%-points to 8%-points, where the question wording is specifically targeting opportunities for candidates to campaign, and approx. 1%-point to 6.9%-points increase for the dishonest elections.

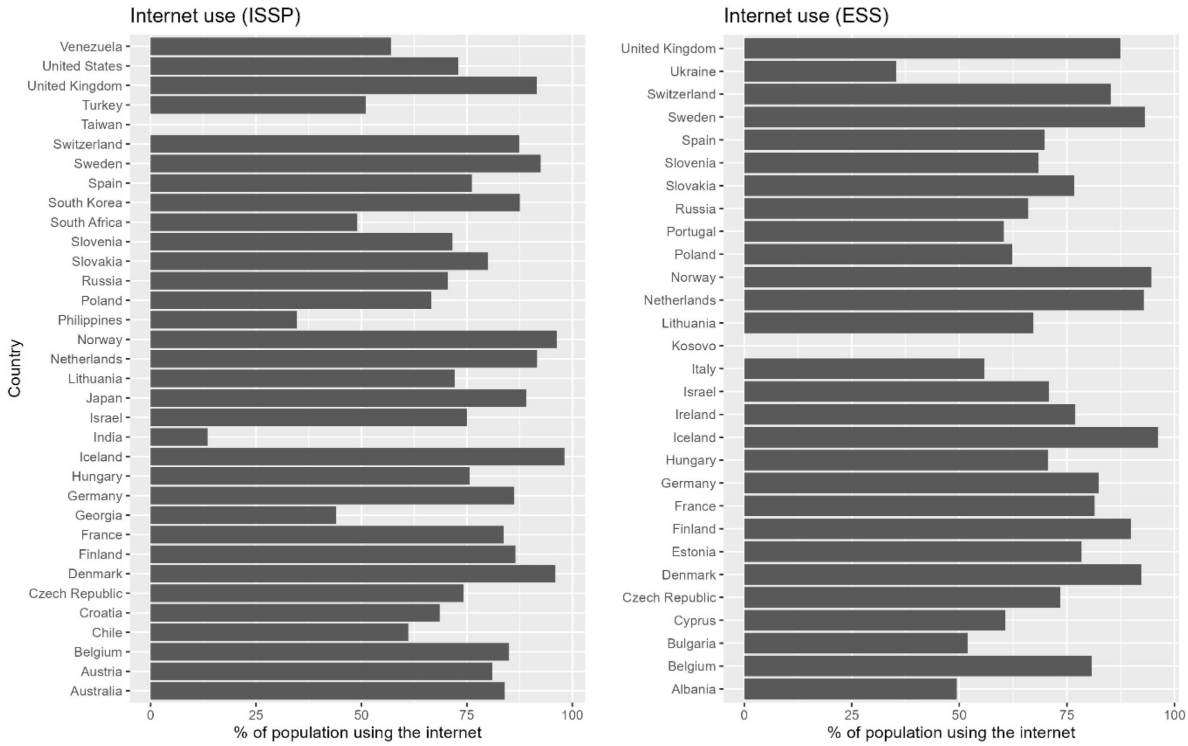
It is worth noting the variation between countries that occur in both datasets such as Finland and Denmark. While there is variation in the effect sizes, the effects remain relatively similar across samples from different times and with slightly different question wording. In addition to this, in all operationalizations of system opposition, the relationship is found across various regimes and degrees of liberal democracy. Both in democratic regimes as well as authoritarian regimes such as Russia, those with low subjective status are those most opposed to the political system. At the same time, we see that some of the countries with strong effects are western welfare states with relatively high levels of welfare spending such as Finland, Belgium and Norway, similar to findings in (Giustozzi and Gangl 2021; Rooduijn and Burgoon 2017).

In sum, I find support the hypothesis that we should see a negative association between subjective social status and system opposition in most countries. Even though the sampled countries are very different, we still see the expected relation in almost every country. At the same time, there is vast difference in how strong the relationship is. In terms of effect size, the relationships are moderately strong in many of the countries, negligible in some and relatively large in others such as Belgium.

Does internet use on the country-level amplify the statistical effect of subjective social status?

I now move to test hypothesis 2a - that higher internet use on the country-level amplifies the relationship between subjective social status and system opposition. Before testing the hypothesis, figure 4 shows a descriptive overview of how widespread internet use is in the different countries.

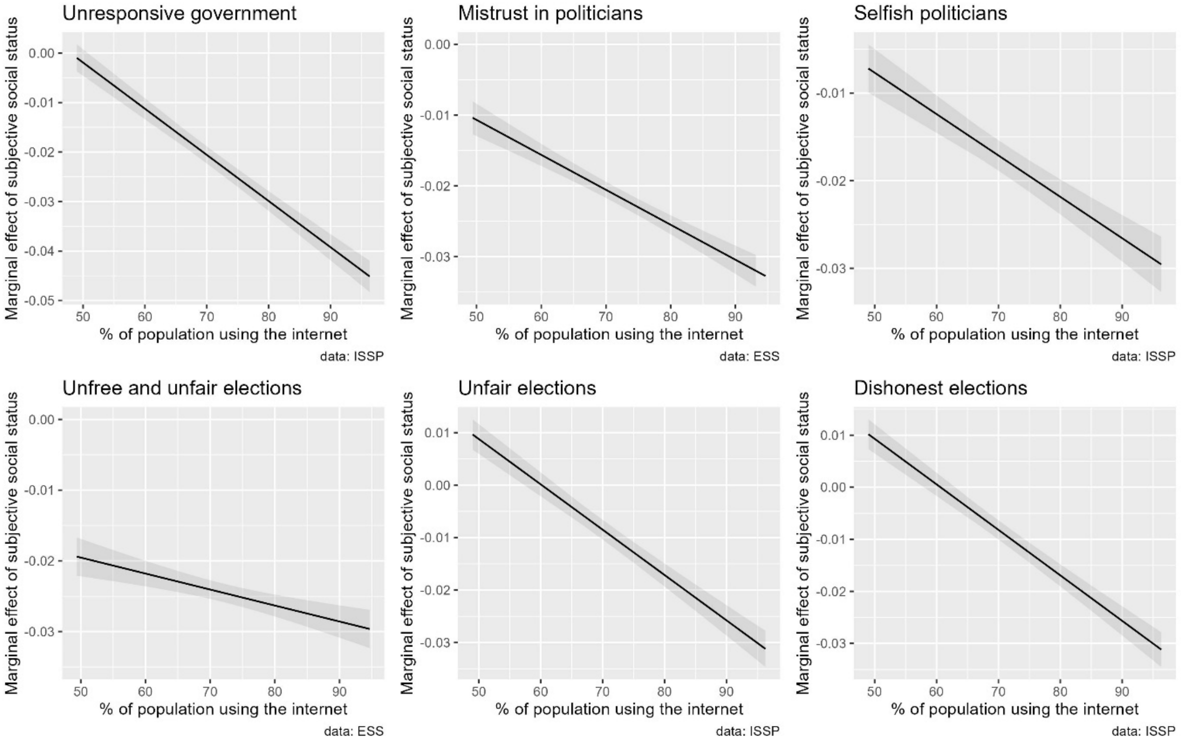
Figure 4: Distribution of internet use between countries



Unsurprisingly, internet use is very widespread in western, richer, more developed countries following the WEIRD-pattern. Some of the countries with the lowest internet usage are countries outside the western sphere such as India (14%), Venezuela (57%) or Georgia (44%) seen in the ISSP panel, and eastern European countries such as Albania (49%) in the ESS panel. Yet, there is also variation between western countries as illustrated by e.g., Italy (56%) and Norway (95%) in the ESS panel.

Moving to test whether this variation accounts for differences in the strength of the relationship between subjective social status and system opposition on the individual level, I look to figure 5. Figure 5 shows that countries with higher internet use tend to have a stronger relationship between subjective social status and system opposition.

Figure 5: Internet use amplifies the statistical effect of subjective social status on system opposition



Looking at the unresponsive government panel, when going from low-use countries where 50% of the population use the internet to high-use countries where 90% of the population uses the internet, the marginal effect size is amplified from ≈ 0 in the low-use countries - to -4%-points [95% CI: -4.2%-points; -3.7%-points] in high-use countries. As for mistrust in politicians, the statistical effect of subjective social status triples from 1%-point [95% CI: -1.3%-points; - 0.8%-points] to 3%-points [95% CI: -3.2%-points; -2.8%-points] when going from 50% to 90% internet use. Likewise for selfish politicians, the statistical effect more than triples from -0.8%-points [95% CI: -1%-point; -0.5%-point] to 2.7%-points [95% CI: 3%-points; 2.5%-points]. Together, this shows a strong moderation. While there is a moderate or weak association in countries with low internet use, it is substantially higher in countries with countries with high internet use.

Looking at the second row of figure 5, we see a similar picture for attitudes towards elections. When it comes to unfair elections, the ISSP data show a similar and strong moderation where the marginal effect even goes from being a positive, weak-to-moderate effect of 0.9%-points [95% CI: 0.6%-points; 1%-point] to a relatively strong effect of 2.5%-points [95% CI: -2.8%-points; -2.2%-points]. Likewise, the statistical effect goes from 1%-point [95% CI: to -2.7%-points [95% CI: -3%-points; -2.4%-points] when going from 50% internet usage to 90% internet usage. Rather than a null effect for countries with relatively low internet use, individuals living in such countries actually find elections to be more fair and honest, the lower status they have, while individuals who rate their own status as high are more critical of elections in those counties. This is in part similar to the results for India in figure 3. On the other hand, for the most countries, lower subjective social status is associated with more critical views towards elections, but much more strongly so when internet use is high.

For unfair and unfree elections in the ESS dataset, the marginal effect increases by 45% from approx. -2%-points [95% CI: -2.2%-points; - 1.7%-points] to -2.9%-points [95% CI: -3.2%-points; -2.8%-points]. While this moderation is still substantial, it is lower than the moderation in the ISSP data. This likely due to the sampled countries being generally more developed democratically but especially because the question wording in ESS provides a harder test, focusing not just on fairness of elections but also asking whether elections are free or not – it seems much harder to argue that elections unfree rather than unfair, especially in countries such as Norway, Spain or Switzerland that influences the ESS data.

In sum, I find strong support for hypothesis 2a, as countries with more widespread internet use also have stronger associations between subjective social status and system opposition. This goes for both more specific opposition such as feeling the government is unresponsive, to more diffuse opposition, finding politicians to be untrustworthy and selfish and even to affecting views of unfair and dishonest elections. Overall, the figure shows the expected moderation on all outcomes, supporting the hypothesis that individual differences in internet use moderates the extent to which decreases in subjective social status increases system opposition.

Do individual differences in internet usage moderate the relationship between subjective social status and system opposition?

In the final test I examine whether we also find that internet use moderates relationship on the individual level (hypothesis 2b). But first I present the distribution of internet use on the individual level in each country.

Figure 6: Internet use on the individual level

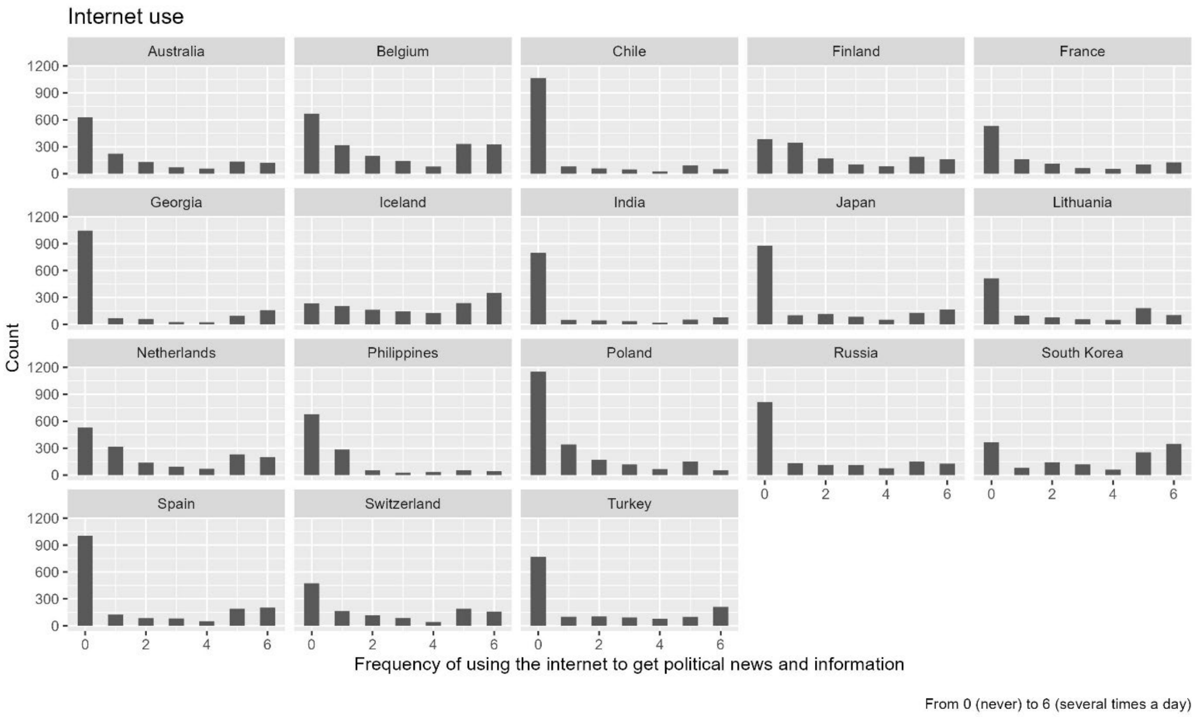


Figure 6 shows how much people use the internet to access political information and news, specifically. We see that across countries, there is wide variation in how much individuals use the internet. Firstly, many do not use the internet to get political news and information. Also, mirroring the distribution of internet use on the country level in figure 4, many people in low internet-usage countries logically also not use internet very often to get political information. Like we saw in a country like India where only 14% used the internet at all, most people never use the internet to the get political information either.

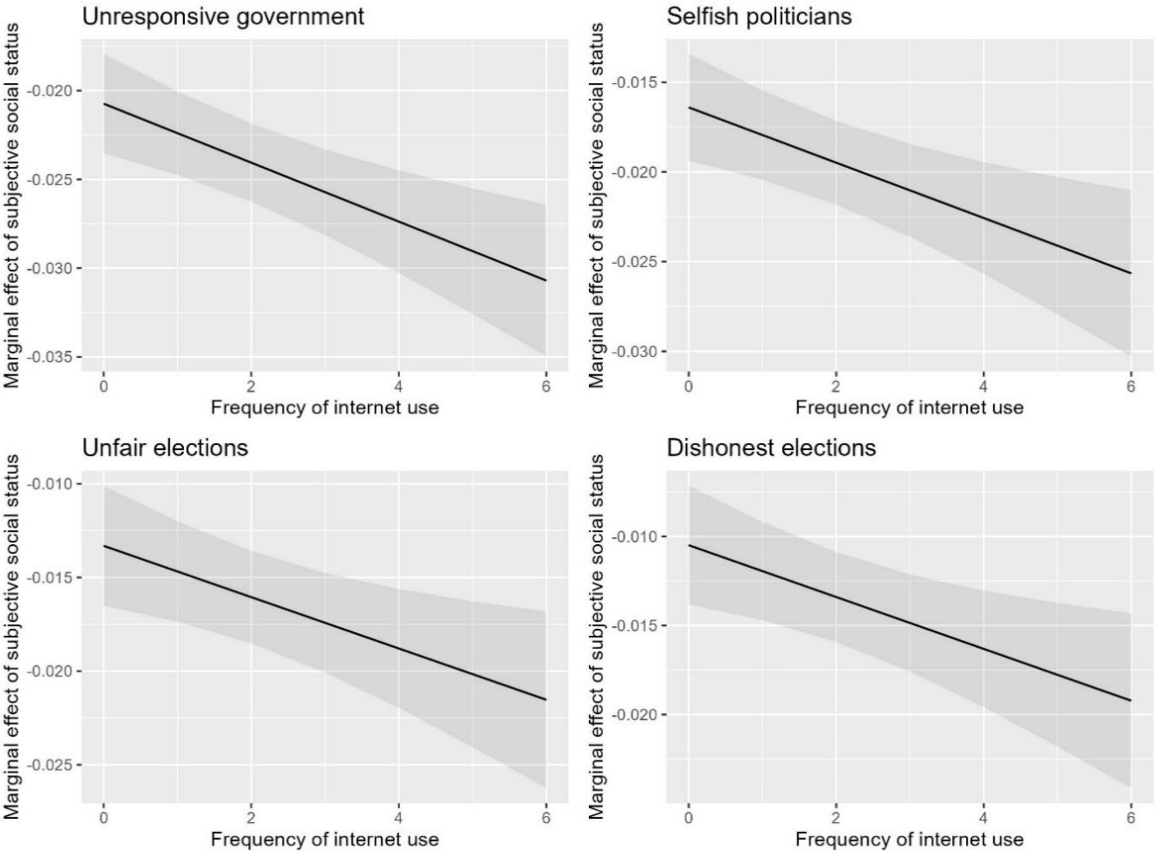
At the same time, many people also use the internet to get political news or information. Across countries, 52% use the internet at least weekly to get political news or information. In a high-use country like Belgium, 68% use the internet at least weekly for political purposes. Also in Belgium, 32% use it daily (scoring 5 or 6 on the scale). As such, while figure 4 and figure 6 shows substantial variation between countries, figure 6 highlights that there is also variation in internet use within countries.

Worth noting is that many of the respondents may be using the internet more often to communicate with others on social media or simply access entertainment, rather than use the internet for political purposes – echoing the literature on citizen competence that many citizens are simply not that interested in politics (cite Converse, never literature). Given this, the consumption of political news and information across countries may even be a bit surprising, looking at countries like South Korea or

Iceland, where in the latter, the most frequent option is to use the internet several times a day to consume political content.

Moving on to test hypothesis 2b - whether internet use moderates the relationship between subjective social status and system opposition on the individual level - regressions show that the interactions are statistically significant on all four outcomes (appendix A)[9]. For unresponsive government p > 0.1%, for selfish politicians p = 0.2%, for unfair elections p > 1% and for dishonest elections p = 0.7%. Below, figure 7 displays the moderation across countries on the different system opposition outcomes.

Figure 7: Internet use amplifies the relationship between subjective social status and system opposition



Internet use to get political news or information. From 0 (never) to 6 (several times a day)

Figure 7 shows a moderately strong interaction for each of the four outcomes. For beliefs about unresponsive governments, the marginal effect increases from -2%-points (95% CI: -2.4%-points; -1.8%-points) to -3%-points (95% CI: -3.5%-points; -2.6%-points), making for a 50% increase in the statistical effect of a one point change in subjective social status when an individual uses the internet to get political news or information several times daily in contrast to never doing so. This amounts to a typical effect of 6%-points change in system opposition instead of 4%-points, when subjective social status changes by two points.

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[9] Robustness tests show that also when using country-clustered standard errors, the moderations are significant: p = 1.8% for unresponsive government, p = 0.3% for selfish politicians, p = 4% for unfair elections and p = 1% for dishonest elections.

As for selfish politicians, the marginal effect increases from -1.6% (95% CI: -1.9%-points; -1.3%-points) to -2.6%-points (95% CI: -3%-points; -2%-points), which amounts to a 63% increase. This increases the statistical effect from moderately low to a medium effect size. Continuing to the unfair elections outcome, the marginal effect increase from -1.3%-points (95% CI: -1.6%-points; -1 %-points) to -2.2%-points (95% CI: -2.6%-points; -1.61%-points), amounting to a 69% increase. Finally, for dishonest elections the marginal effect increases from -1%-points (95% CI: -1.35%-points; -0.7%-points) to -1.9%-points (95% CI: -2.4%-points; -1.4%-points), which is nearly a doubling of the statistical effect size. In sum, internet use appears to be a relatively strong moderator on the individual level, amplifying effect ranging from moderately low or moderate to become moderately high. These results are robust when testing models without control and when using more control variables (Appendix A)

The confidence intervals reflect that there is variation in the role that internet use plays across countries. Similarly, studies of populism finding that effect may vary largely between countries, due to the different contexts (Andreadis, et al. 2019; Reinemann 2020: 227). This is to be expected, because the impact fo the internet depends on e.g., what content is supplied and what content consumed by citizens in different countries. That is, how prevalent different types of critiques of the political system is, such as prevalence of corruption allegations vs. conspiracy theories as well as how often internationally aimed content such as conspiracy theories are accessed in a given country context.

Addressing the heterogeneity between countries, the tendency for the moderation regarding unresponsive government is supported by the data from 11 of the countries (*Australia, Belgium, France, Georgia, Iceland, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, South Korea, Switzerland and Taiwan*). For selfish politicians, it is 10 countries (*Australia, Chile, Georgia, Iceland, Japan, Lithuania, South Korea, Spain, Switzerland, Taiwan*). For unfair elections, it is 11 countries (*Australia, Finland, France, Iceland, Japan, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Poland, South Korea, Spain and Turkey*). For dishonest elections, it is 7 of the countries (*Australia, Japan, The Netherlands, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan and Turkey*)[10]. These results may reflect that in the countries listed here, critiques of the political system are more prevalent online compared to the other countries. E.g., critiques that elections are unfair because some candidates are funded by interest groups or unjust election rules or critiques of how honestly votes are counted. In some countries, internet use also has the reverse impact, attenuating the relationship between subjective social status and system-opposition. This could be due to those using the internet often becoming more informed about the system or socialized to become sympathetic towards it by following public debates in liberal democracies.

In sum, I find support for the hypothesis that internet use on the individual level amplifies the relationship between subjective social status and system opposition. While I find that in the overall model, the moderation is moderately strong, I also find heterogeneity underlying the model, which is to be expected as internet use does not determine exposure to the same content across contexts. I find the strongest support for the moderation on unresponsive government, unfair elections and selfish politicians, followed by dishonest elections which should arguably also be the hardest test, since it concerns factual beliefs about something as fundamental to the system as the counting of votes.

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[10] For the full overview of country-specific tendencies, see appendix A

Discussion

This paper finds that there is substantial variation in how strongly subjective social status is related to system opposition. To account for this variation, internet use is examined as a moderator. I find that internet use amplifies the statistical effect of subjective social status on a range of outcomes that measure opposition to the political system. Overall, the moderation is found to be moderately strong on both more volatile or specific opposition to the political system such as governments and more fundamental opposition such as attitudes towards elections. At the same time, it is dependent on the country-context investigated (Andreadis, et al. 2019). In the following, I discuss some caveats and implications of the results.

First, I find the relationship between subjective social status and system opposition in both autocracies and democracies of varying character. Yet, accessing the internet in autocracy might mean something very different than accessing it in a democracy. The internet may contribute to destabilization of both autocracies and democracies. For example, the internet may be used in autocracies to spread critiques of the regime and mobilize opposition to it (Tucker, et al. 2017). In democracies, it may also be used to expose corruption such as in developing democracies in Eastern Europe or even in old democracies like the US (e.g., recent Adams and Menendez cases in the US). For example, this might be why using the internet especially amplified the relationship in e.g., Turkey that experienced an authoritarian turn (Kirişci and Sloat 2019), or South Korea that has experienced scandals such as secret service meddling in elections (e.g., Sang-Hun 2013). At the same time, the internet may also be used to spread e.g., false conspiracy theories that delegitimize democratic systems by accusing them of being run by hidden elites (Uscinski, et al. 2021).

It has been argued that citizens aren't and shouldn't be blindly trusting of the political system (Warren 2018; Carstens 2023), but rather be critical and respond to e.g., scandals with lowering their political trust (van der Meer 2010). These result suggest that using the internet assists individuals who are dissatisfied with their position in society to become opposed to the political system, regardless of whether the critiques are unfounded or not. The internet also may assist individuals in transcending into distrusting rather than skeptical citizens, holding views such as that elections are unfair or votes aren't counted properly, even when they may not be. At the same time, we should expect that the role of the internet in motivated reasoning should depend on the amount of ambiguity at play (Larsen 2021). For the reason, it makes sense that the internet, assumingly by providing information or deliberation, according to my results, play a larger role as a moderator when it comes to views of unresponsive governments and unfair elections than whether votes are counted correctly, since the latter is of a more factual character. However, as illustrated by the American elections in 2020 and some of the countries in the data: under the right conditions, online spread of (mis)information may also play a role in terms of how honest the counting of votes is seen (Norris 2023).

Second, the relationship between subjective social status and system opposition appears strong in highly developed welfare states such as Belgium, Sweden, Finland and Norway, where citizens generally experience less material hardship compared to many other countries. This mirrors results of previous studies in that it is especially uncomfortable to feel that you lack status when the average citizen seem to be doing very well (e.g., Rooduijn and Burgoon 2017; van Noord, et al. 2023; Giustozzi and Gangl 2021). Likewise, these states are also relatively egalitarian, further highlighting that the relationship is not just something we should expect in highly unequal societies.

Third, the fact that the results are found across a range of outcomes that reflect an opposition to the political system may indicate that what we are observing are anti-system attitudes, often thought of as an (in some cases extreme) opposition to the political system as a whole. Or a vague resentment that is not limited to certain institutions or actors but spill over onto the whole system (e.g., Petersen, et al. 2023; Bartusevičius, et al. 2021). This is supported by supplementary analyses showing that those with lower subjective social status are more opposed to a wide range of actors and institutions, spanning judiciary institutions, the police, public servants as corrupt, satisfaction with the way democracy works, and whether the system is seen as democratic or not (Appendix A; see also Gidron & Hall 2019). Future studies should explore this further, examining why individuals who are dissatisfied with their place in society, oppose so many aspects of the political system. This may have downstream consequences for voting behavior, in addition to other behaviors such as non-compliance with laws (Muller, et al. 1982), or buying a gun (Lacombe, et al. 2022)

Whether we are observing anti-system sentiments or not, becoming more opposed to the political system is likely to have important consequences (Marien and Hooghe 2011; Dancey 2012). This data shows that those lower in subjective social status also abstain more from voting (see appendix A), possibly because they see parties as not providing them any real policy choices and finding elections to be unfair (appendix A). While it is up to future studies to explore this further, the question is whether using the internet to access content that criticizes the political system may also lead status deprived individuals to refrain from voting at all – rather than turning to populist or radical parties (van Noord, et al. 2023).

Fourth, an important limitation to the conclusions drawn from this paper is that it is based on observational data. While the findings are based on many countries across different time points and with some countries sampled multiple times, the results do not warrant causal claims. In addition, internet use is a very wide variable that encompasses many behaviors. While this makes for a harder test, it is not a perfect measure of accessing content that either explicitly criticizes the political system or implicitly portrays it as ill-intentioned (such as through pictures of politicians on luxury holidays). Some citizens might be using the internet to read political news without any substantial exposure to criticisms of the political system. Future studies should find causal leverage or use experiments to focus on the content or the communities that internet use is ultimately a proxy for exposure to (Noordzij, et al. 2024; Bos, et al. 2020; Reinemann 2020).

In sum, this paper provides some of the first evidence of country-level factors that account for *when* status deprivation translates into opposition towards the system. Furthermore, internet use is also found to matter on the individual level. Across a variety of outcomes measuring system opposition, the results provide evidence that internet use plays an important role in the motivated thinking of individuals who experience dissatisfaction with their place in society. At the same time, it emphasizes the different role that the internet might play in different country contexts (De Bruycker and Rooduijn 2021; Andreadis, et al. 2019).

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