

# Law Abiding Citizens

## On Popular Support for the Illegal Killing of Wolves

*Olve Krange, Erica von Essen, and Ketil Skogen*



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**Abstract:** Conflicts over wolf management are a stable feature of Norwegian public debate. In some segments of the population, nature management, and especially predator management, have a very low legitimacy. A strong expression of these controversies is the illegal killing of wolves, a practice sufficiently extensive to impact wolf population size. In several studies, the killing of wolves is interpreted as politically motivated resistance/crime of dissent. This study contributes to the research field by examining the support for such illegal actions. We ask if the Norwegian public find such illegal actions to be acceptable or not. Analysis shows that acceptance joins a broader pattern of controversies, expressed by phenomena such as xenophobia, climate change denial, anti-elitism, and low confidence in institutions working to preserve nature.

**Keywords:** anti-elitism, crimes of dissent, illegal killing of wolves, legitimacy, nature management, resistance

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### Prologue—Outside the Courtroom

On an early April morning in 2014 Norwegian police arrested twelve hunters at several locations in the southeastern region of the country. More than seventy police officers participated in the carefully coordinated operation. The charges were serious: these hunters had, during a prolonged time period, participated in the illegal killing of wolves. Enforced in parallel, the statute on environmental crime (§152b) and the statute of organized crime (§60a), rarely used together, pointed to prison sentences of eleven years in total. During the course of the investigation, six of the twelve suspects were charged. The “organized crime” angle was dismissed by the Appeals Court, so even though five of the hunters were convicted, the most severe sentence was one year. The case took up significant time and attention in the judiciary, progressing from the District Court, through the Court of Appeal, and finally to the Supreme Court.

Two years after the first arrest (March 2016), the case was heard in the Eidsivating Court of Appeal. A number of people had shown



up to voice their support for the hunters, as well as their outrage over the investigation and its dramatic results. The media reported a tense atmosphere. One man had the following to say to NRK, the Norwegian public broadcaster:

I'm no supporter of illegal hunting, but we have to distinguish illegal hunting from the wolf hunting that has taken place. It's an outcome of the politics right now; it pushes people to break the law. They *become* criminals. It's pointless that it should have to be this way. The fact that politicians at Stortinget (parliament) haven't woken up yet and wised up to the fact that there are things happening in the countryside right now that shouldn't be happening—we can't live this way any longer. Now, this must surely be dawning on them. Either they must unleash this on all of Norway, so everyone comes to know and suffer this. That a few romantics like the idea of seeing wolf tracks, that's fine. That's totally fine, but then they should visit an animal park. Right now, our moose management is a big source of income for landowners. They are losing money. This isn't the end of it. No one believes that. Even if the government now uses a cannon to go after people and use this mafia legal statute, which murderers and others go under. People who are forced to shoot predators that are illegal, I mean, predators that have been forced upon us. No one has asked us whether we want these animals here.

The reporter then asked: "What's the atmosphere like in hunters' circles right now?" The man replied by painting himself in solidarity with the accused, and the hunting community more broadly: "It's very, very bad, to put it simply. We all feel like suspects."<sup>1</sup> The statement "we all feel like suspects" raises the questions: who is he referring to as "we all"? And who is it that suspects them? The latter does not appear to be the local community, as they are often grouped together with the suspected illegal killers (Tønnessen 2010). Nor does it appear to be as simple as the government or the media. Rather, what is alluded to is a nebulous constellation of powers that are seen to have it in for hunters and the countryside. They are the ones taking a sledgehammer to law enforcement and who use the "mafia statute" to pin down people who have acted in desperation. The people pointing fingers are supported by urban media and a powerful environmental lobby. In the cited interview, "these illegal killings that have taken place," moreover, seems to be separated conceptually and morally from other criminal activities. It is the law and politics that are to blame, not the people currently in handcuffs for these crimes. The accused wolf killers, according to the interviewed man, had been caught between a rock and a hard place through no fault of their own. Thus, wolf killings are really on the government's shoulders. The men charged with the crime, in fact, ultimately deserve the support of country people in these trying times.



Such support for illegal wolf hunters may appear curious, but it does not take place in a vacuum. The support is grounded in an adversarial context of “us versus them.” Specifically, court proceedings are framed as a conflict between various alliances that define themselves in relation to one another: a rural alliance of “underdogs,” suspected hunters and local residents, poised against an urban alliance—a powerful elite (von Essen and Allen 2017a). Importantly, this alleged elite is seen to be backed by, staffed by, and hand in glove with modern nature romantics, with the national news media being a prominent weapon in their arsenal, and a sizable arsenal of bureaucracy, judiciary, and money to enforce their agenda of disenfranchizing the countryside. Support for the crime described here is a microcosm of a broader conflict that has been outlined many times before, involving on one side segments of the rural population with roots in a traditional resource economy and/or economic interests in hunting or livestock production, and on the other an expanding middle class—predominantly more urban—without such ties (see, for example, Krange and Skogen 2011; Skogen et al. 2017). Our aim in this article is to investigate to what extent support for the illegal killing of wolves connects to what we might term “worldviews” (see Skogen and Krange 2020) and societal issues that reach beyond wildlife management.

## The Illegal Killing Phenomenon

The illegal killing of wildlife has significant repercussions for global biodiversity conservation (Kurland et al. 2017). Not surprisingly, then, a preoccupation in the criminological literature on poaching has been the illegal wildlife trade and its usual suspects: its drivers, criminal profiles, and implications. Well-known examples include pangolin trafficking and poaching of elephants and rhinos. The green criminology literature estimates that wildlife crime is a highly lucrative illicit businesses (Nurse and Wyatt 2020; Sollund 2013). Many of these crimes are understood within economic rationality models and theories on organized crime, corruption, and individual utilitarian motives (Bennett 2014; Runhovde 2018). Recent research on poaching has also examined “VIP illegal hunting” by elite violators, as in Russia (Braden 2015), and the more straightforward taking of wildlife “for the pot” in remote rural areas (Eliason 2014).

However, the illegal killing of wolves in Scandinavia betrays an altogether different logic and, perhaps, mode of criminality. It was

estimated that about half of all wolf deaths were caused by illegal hunting from 1991 to 2006 (Liberg, Sand et al. 2011) and mortality from illegal killing is still very high (Liberg, Suutarinen et al. 2020). Poaching of wolves has pronounced social and cultural underpinnings (Pohja-Mykrä 2016). A crime of dissent, it often seems located in a broader context of opposition toward large carnivore conservation, a mistrust of the regulating authorities and a simmering sociopolitical conflict that rises to the surface in challenging times (von Essen et al. 2015). Viewed in this way, illegally killing wolves becomes a statement of simultaneous denunciation of and disengagement from wolf conservation policy, in which hunters take the law into their own hands in what has been called “the Italian model” of management (von Essen et al. 2018). They do so galvanized by a counterpublic raised in explicit opposition to what they view as the hegemony and injustice of current politics and management. It seems that illegal killing of wolves in many cases can be partly understood as an act of cultural and political resistance (Krange and Skogen 2011; Gangås, 2014).

In our previous research in areas with permanent large carnivore populations, we have often come across people who express, in some way, an acceptance for illegal killing of especially wolves (as in Skogen et al. 2017; and the Swedish hunters interviewed in von Essen et al. 2018 about drivers of illegal hunting). If the crimes committed against wolves are partly, or even largely, political, it follows that public support for such crimes may also be political in nature. As yet, however, we know very little about the conditions or caveats that underpin the public’s acceptance of illegal killing or the general sorts of beliefs that accompany such acceptance. How widespread is this acceptance? Such questions are covered as in a recent survey among hunters (Skogen and Krange 2020; Skogen et al. 2021), and to a larger extent in qualitative studies in rural communities perceived to be implicitly or tacitly approving illegal hunting, being connected to offenders through kinship or social ties (von Essen et al. 2018; Pohja-Mykrä and Kurki 2014). But what about the broader public? Kristin Gangås (2014) indicated that the elderly may be more likely to accept illegal killing of large carnivores than younger citizens and that men are more supportive of the practice than women. Beyond these straightforward demographic variables, however, are more pressing questions on the rationalities of people that express support. Is it connected, perhaps, to broader clusters of values and beliefs? Furthermore, given the political undertones of the crime, does acceptance correlate with skepticism toward authority more broadly?



## Wolf Conflicts

The wolf has made an uneasy return to Scandinavia since the 1980s, sometimes taking two steps forward and one step back in terms of population recovery and public support. In 2020, the Scandinavian wolf population was estimated to be 450 individuals. The Norwegian sub-population was estimated to be 83–86 (Svensson et al. 2021). Aiming for conflict reduction, large carnivore management has been delegated to a regional level through eight politically appointed boards managing areas that together cover the entire country. Wolves are managed jointly by two such boards. The relatively small Norwegian wolf population is only allowed to breed within a designated management zone along the Swedish border in southeast Norway. The zone covers about 5 percent of the total landmass, and it is not merely rural. Oslo and several smaller cities are within this zone.

Even if wolf conflicts reach far beyond an urban/rural divide, and numerous rural residents view wolves positively (Skogen et al. 2018; Krange et al. 2017), such conflicts are often found to be deeply rooted in urban–rural antagonisms over land use, environmental values and traditions. They primarily involve segments of the rural population who strongly identify with a harvesting ethos or whose economics interests are affected, and for these groups the wolf issue takes on a strong symbolic meaning (Bisi and Kurki 2008). Research has shown how human–wildlife conflicts can disconnect from a given species' physical impact and become cultural talking points (Treves and Karanth 2003; Peterson et al. 2010). The wolf, from this perspective, sometimes serves as an amplifier of existing tensions, an activator for grievances and a unifier for complaints (von Essen et al. 2015).

While the wolf is controversial, about 60 percent of Norwegians claim that they take a positive view of wolf presence in Norway (Krange et al. 2017; Krange and Skogen 2018). Wolves are admittedly less popular in rural areas (Skogen et al. 2018), and this has also been found in Sweden (Eriksson 2016b). Still, even rural residents are, on the whole, positive toward wolves (Krange et al. 2017). There is a stable negative correlation between direct experiences of wolves and acceptance. Living close to wolves is statistically associated with a stronger propensity toward negative attitudes (Karlsson et al. 2007; Krange et al. 2017). A study from Norway also showed that trust in government authorities and other organizations active in large carnivore management are key predictors of one's attitude toward wolves, one's interpretation of wolf-related incidents, one's view of the wolf as a dangerous animal,

and one's experiences of fear in encountering them (Skogen et al. 2018). Max Eriksson (2016a) found that political alienation is among the factors that most strongly influence attitudes toward wolves among rural communities in Sweden, but the degree of political alienation varies between rural areas. Overall, the urban–rural dimension of the wolf conflict is thorny and not easily resolved.

Rural wolf skeptics tend to associate the wolf with an urban academic middle class, detached from the real-life experience of living with wolves. Accusations abound that biologists and people in favor of conservation are “spectators” or “ivory tower” occupants (Buijs et al. 2014; von Essen 2015). As Alexandër Trajçe and colleagues (2019) contends, the conflict over wolves has gone from a dyadic one (wolves–rural residents) to a triadic one (wolves–conservationists–rural residents), in which the latter is perceived as two-against-one in the eyes of wolf skeptics.

Exacerbating and lending meaning to the wolf's impact on the countryside creates a wider array of stressors from modernization and socioeconomic changes that rural residents believe profoundly threaten their way of life (Sjölander-Lindqvist 2008). In response, many feel resigned, hopeless, persecuted, or disenfranchised by society at large and the state (von Essen and Allen 2017b). Some long for times past, which were characterized by greater equality and interdependence between the urban and rural, in what Glenn Albrecht and colleagues (2007) have termed “solastalgia”: a melancholic feeling of individual and collective impotence caused by rapid socio-environmental changes that are beyond the control of the affected subjects. Today, many struggle between modernization and traditional ways of life. Research shows that these many segments of agrarian-based or hunting-based communities question the abrupt breaks and speed with which new policies are enacted, showing little in the way of organic unity or respect for continuity in the countryside (von Essen and Allen 2017c). The result, they contend, is a “death of the rural” by modernization (Bell et al. 2010; Woods et al. 2012).

## A Broader Context

The opposition toward large carnivores has been partly explained in terms of a class dimension (Mischi 2013; von Essen and Allen 2017b; Krange and Skogen 2011). Studying the contours and drivers of wolf conflicts, draws strong parallels to studying class tensions in industrial or



post-industrial societies. General economic, social, and cultural changes transform life in modern societies and impart new practices, livelihoods and lifestyles at both the individual and collective levels. One of these is the influx of refugees and immigrants. Another is climate change—or, rather, the debate around human-induced climate change, its impact on social life, and the changes that traditional industries are expected to undertake to mitigate against climate change. Large carnivore conservation, immigration, and mitigation of climate change are, therefore, a cluster of topics that have received significant media and policy attention and parts of the public experience as stressors. The question then becomes: to what extent is this a cohesive cluster of concerns?

We situate such questions in a framework of populism. Natalia Mamonova and Jaume Franquesa (2020) note how populism is a vague and elastic term but conclude that its key features involve political mobilization against what is seen as an illegitimate elite. It is also inextricably connected to a collection of grievances that already typically stress the rural working class. These grievances are complex and wide-ranging and may be understood in different ways (Mamonova and Franquesa 2020). Nevertheless, the management or conservation of natural resources, including protected areas, land use for conservation or energy, nature as a recreational space for urbanites, or a dumping ground for environmental schemes including wildlife reintroductions, often form central and contentious themes (Mischi 2013; Epp and Whitson 2001).

At a fundamental level, the wolf conflict betrays some key populist characteristics by positioning the “pure people” against the “corrupt elite” (Akkerman et al. 2014) or, simplified, good versus evil, common sense versus abstract knowledge, or law abiding honest people versus bureaucracy (von Essen and Allen 2017b). Despite this, few clear ideological affinities exist. Populism simply defines itself as the mirror image of elitism, though importantly, it also appears to distance itself from the kind of pluralism that characterizes liberal democracies. As Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2016) observe, cosmopolitanism is eschewed in favor of nativism, tradition and “retro” policies. Beyond this, there are not usually many detailed grievances or diagnostics on what is substantively wrong with the elite. Instead, populism focuses its critique on painting the elite as a homogeneous and powerful group. In summary, the populists are more certain about what they do not want than what they do want:

Their concept of the future society is largely negatively defined. They know what they do not want, but they are unsure and inconsistent about what they want in operational detail. When they oppose modernity, they do not

advocate a return to an idealized version of traditional institutions such as the family, religious values, or the nation. They are clearly different from “reactionary” forms of social protest. (Handler 1992: 719)

Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Kaltwasser (2013) note that, whereas populism in Latin America has historically been left-oriented, it is typically of a right-wing brand in contemporary Europe and North America. Regardless of ideological affinities, the central thrust of populism in Europe is mistrust of and opposition toward the ruling elite, as the French yellow vests exemplify. In recent years, right-wing populism has gained ground. Brexit and the election of Donald Trump are well-known examples, and right-wing parties with populist rhetoric are making headway in other Western countries. They promulgate stronger restrictions for immigration and refugees and advocate a policy that downplays anthropogenic climate change. Alternative für Deutschland is one of several parties in Europe that explicitly denies the latter.<sup>2</sup> In countries where right-wing populist parties have consolidated power formally, such as Poland and Hungary, they follow extremely strict immigration policies and have scaled back climate change mitigation strategies (Lockwood 2018).

Research has, by now, documented a correlation between climate change skepticism and xenophobic sentiments (Forchtner and Kolvraa 2015; Lockwood 2018). Studies suggest that populist sentiments are affiliated with both immigration/integration policies and climate change mitigation strategies that affect parts of the population disproportionately (Krange et al. 2017). Hence, we are interested in following this relationship further, all the way toward potential support for the illegal killing of wolves, a potentially extreme manifestation of political disaffection toward policies perceived to stem from the elite in society (von Essen et al. 2015). Indeed, it is interesting to determine the extent to which this correlates with populist grievances and cultural resistance in light of other economic, social, and cultural stressors in society as part of modernization and globalization.

## Research Questions

In light of the broad context outlined above, we ask: what is the level and nature of support for the illegal killing of wolves in Norway? What demographic characteristics are typical of those who support such actions, and what other political views do they hold? This is understood in terms of populist attitudes, such as anti-elitism, xenophobia, climate change skepticism, and distrust of environmental institutions. In short, in





what cluster of the population, as regards political attitudes, can illegal hunters expect to find support for their crimes?

## Data and Analysis

We surveyed 7,704 individuals from GallupPanellet, a database that comprises more than 40,000 Norwegians who have volunteered to be surveyed regularly. The sample selection is representative of Norwegians over the age of 15. The data collection was conducted between December 2016 and March 2017. The aim was to acquire survey responses from 3,000 respondents. Following a reminder, a total of 3,032 persons completed the survey. The response rate was 39 percent. The net sample was compared to official statistics with regard to gender, age and geography (county of residence). The balance between men and women was good (W:50 percent, M:49 percent, Missing: 1 percent). The non-response rate was somewhat higher in the younger age bracket compared to the older one: the response rate among those aged 60 years or more was 52 percent, whereas only 28 percent among those aged 30 years or less submitted responses. The response rate also varied considerably between counties (*fylke*). Here, Sør- and Nord-Trøndelag formed the outliers, at 50 percent versus 34 percent, respectively. All analyses below are weighted in relation to gender, age, and geography (county of residence), according to official statistics.

### *The Variables*

Table 1 contains an overview of the variables included in the analyses. Our core query is to what extent the illegal killing of wolves has support among the Norwegian public. To ascertain this, we asked: “Researchers claim that a significant portion of wolves in Norway are illegally killed. To what extent do you feel that it is acceptable to illegally kill wolves?” Respondents were asked to select their answer from a Likert scale of 1 to 5, from 1 being “completely unacceptable” to 5 being “completely acceptable.”

One benefit to querying respondents from a database is that they all come with a bundle of background variables. Hence, we did not have to ask questions about gender, age, education and income. Education level was assessed from 1 to 5, where respondents were asked to mark their highest completed education: high school, higher education, vocational education, or university degree of less than four years or

**Table 1** ■ Coding mean and standard deviation for variables in the study

Variables	Coding	Mean	SD
Acceptance of killing wolves illegally	1 (completely unacceptable) to 5 (completely acceptable)	2.09	1.1
Gender	0 (female) 1 (male)	0.50	0.50
Age	18 to 80+ (number of actual years)	49.44	16.34
Level of education	1 (secondary school or less) to 5 (university 4 years+)	2.82	1.13
Personal income	1 (<200 000 NOK) to 9 (>1 000 000 NOK)	3.59	2.05
Place of residence (size)	1 (<200 inhabitants) to 7 (>300 000 inhabitants)	4.24	1.78
Wolves near place of residence	0 (all else) 1 (yes)	0.24	0.43
Hunter	0 (all else) 1 (yes)	0.11	0.31
We have enough immigrants	0 (totally disagree) to 4 (totally agree)	2.47	1.24
Global warming is a myth	0 (totally disagree) to 4 (totally agree)	1.16	1.17
Environmental institutions	0 (very low trust) to (very high trust)	2.38	0.80
Ecocentrism	0 (low) to 4 (high)	2.94	0.74

university degree exceeding four years. The variable “income” measures annual personal income, starting at 200,000 NOK or less, increasing by 100,000 for each level and stopping at 1,000,000 NOK or more.

A recurring motif in large carnivore conservation is an urban–rural gradient: wolves have friends everywhere, but larger parts of the urban population are in favor of wolf conservation compared to rural residents (Krange et al. 2017). We include three variables with affiliation to this dimension: the size of the respondents’ place of residence, ranging from 200 inhabitants or less to 300,000 or more; whether respondents perceive that there are wolves in the area where they live; and finally, given that wolves may interfere with hunters’ interests in several ways, whether the respondent had been hunting in the last five years.

We have hypothesized that acceptance of the illegal killing of wolves will correlate with several key conflicts that manifest in Norwegian society. Our empirical goal is to investigate to what extent, if at all, such support correlates with anti-immigrant stances, climate change skepticism, mistrust of environmental authorities, and the rejection of ecocentric views on nature. These are all aspects that characterize current Western right-wing populism. The information available on the background variables of our respondents includes their attitudes, spe-



cifically their skepticism, toward immigrants. Respondents were asked to grade their agreement/disagreement regarding the statement: “We have enough immigrants and asylum seekers in this country.” Another statement was “global warming is a myth.” We used this variable as a proxy for what is often called climate change skepticism. For both statements, answers were given on a five-point scale varying from totally disagree to totally agree. To measure the level of trust in what we term “environmental institutions,” we asked: “How high is your trust in the following actors?” Respondents graded their trust in the national ranger service (SNO), climate scientists, biologists, the Norwegian Environment Agency, the Ministry of Climate and Environment, and The Norwegian Society for the Conservation of Nature. These are all actors and organizations that, to varying degrees, seek and exert influence over large carnivore policies and management. From this data, we constructed an index that reached Cronbach’s alpha 0.87 and can be implemented as a proxy of opposition toward the environmental elites in Norway often associated with the protection of wolves (Krange and Skogen 2018).

The questionnaire also contains statements meant to capture respondents’ general views on nature. We selected three statements to which they could grade their agreement/disagreement: “the balance of nature is delicate and can easily be disrupted by human activities” (e.g., Arts et al. 2012), “I believe the inherent value of nature should be the point of departure for the protection of nature in Norway,” and “the idea that nature has its own rights is naïve and incorrect.” From this, we constructed an index that we term “ecocentrism,” which varies from 0 to 4, and reached a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.66.

## ***Analyses***

All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS version 27. We used stepwise linear regression (OLS) to test four models with acceptance of killing wolves illegally as the dependent variable in all four. The independent variables listed above were inserted into the analyses by steps, grouped by topic (for detailed description, see below). For each variable the beta quotient ( $\beta$ ), statistical significance and standard error is reported. Our full model (model 4) specification can be written as:

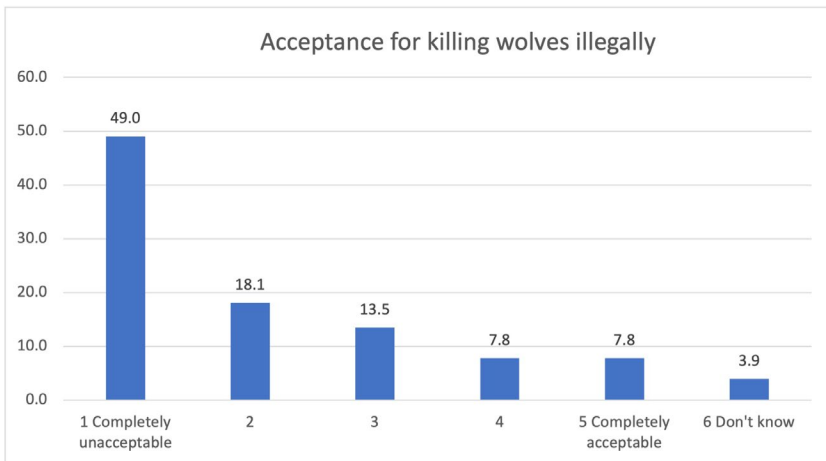
$$\text{Acceptance for killing wolves illegally} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Gender} + \beta_2 \text{Age} + \beta_3 \text{Level of education} + \beta_4 \text{Personal income} + \beta_5 \text{Place of residence} + \beta_6 \text{Wolves near place of residence} + \beta_7 \text{Hunter} + \beta_8 \text{We have enough immigrants} + \beta_9 \text{Global warming is a myth} + \beta_{10} \text{Environmental institutions} + \beta_{11} \text{Ecocentrism}$$

The variance inflation factor (VIF) values varied from 1.1 to 2.1 and indicated that there were no multicollinearity problems in the four models (O'Brien 2007).

## Results and Basic Interpretations

So, what do people in Norway think about shooting wolves illegally? Figure 1 shows the distribution of different levels of acceptance of the illegal killing of wolves. “Completely unacceptable” is by far the most prevalent answer. Almost 50 percent stated that it is totally unacceptable to shoot wolves illegally. If we merge values 1 and 2 and interpret both as expressions of the opinion that the illegal killing of wolves is unacceptable, we see that a clear majority (67 percent) shared this view. Taking values 4 and 5 as expressions of acceptance, we find that 16 percent to a greater or lesser extent find it acceptable that wolves are being shot illegally.

It is not surprising that the majority look upon the illegal killing of wolves to be unacceptable. However, given the relative seriousness of the crime, neither 49 nor 67 percent is necessarily a high proportion. The finding implies that, on the whole, opinions differ considerably. Relatively few respondents indicated that they regard the action as “completely acceptable” (8 percent). A sizable group of 43 percent have ticked one of the options between the two extremes. One possible in-



**Figure 1** ■ To what extent do you feel that it is acceptable to illegally kill wolves? (percent)



terpretation for this is that these are respondents who feel that whether the offense is acceptable or not is dependent on the circumstances.

Table 2 shows how the respondents' views on the illegal killing of wolves are statistically associated with the independent variables. Results from four multivariate regression models are presented. Model 1 consists of standard sociological variables: gender, age, income, and education. The data revealed no significant statistical association between the acceptance of illegal wolf hunting and gender or personal income. Acceptance increases with age and decreases with years of education.

In model 2, we include variables we can call "the usual suspects" when it comes to opinions and attitudes toward wolves: place of residence (size), wolves near the place of residence, and whether the respondent is a hunter (Dressel et al. 2015; Krange et al. 2017). It may appear counterintuitive that not having wolves near one's own place

**Table 2** ■ Acceptance of killing wolves illegally. Stepwise multiple regressions (OLS). (N=3032)

Independent variables	Model 1 β/Sig./Std.E	Model 2 β/Sig./Std.E	Model 3 β/Sig./Std.E	Model 4 β/Sig./Std.E
Gender	.087ns (.050)	.053ns (.050)	-.005ns (.049)	-.091ns (.047)
Age	.014*** (.001)	.013*** (.001)	.010*** (.001)	.010*** (.001)
Level of education	-.107*** (.022)	-.096*** (.022)	-.035ns (.022)	.009ns (.021)
Personal income	-.013ns (.013)	-.015ns (.013)	-.023ns (.013)	-.022ns (.012)
Place of residence (size)		-.072*** (.014)	-.054*** (.013)	-.043*** (.013)
Wolves near place of residence		-.007ns (.055)	-.002ns (.053)	-.008ns (.050)
Hunter		.129ns (.078)	.101ns (.021)	.058ns (.072)
We have enough immigrants			.126*** (.021)	.066** (.021)
Global warming is a myth			.196*** (.021)	.001ns (.023)
Environmental institutions				-.299*** (.034)
Ecocentrism				-.448*** (.036)
Constant	1.72	2.06	1.44	3.72
R2	.040	.051	.100	.194
R2 Change		.011	.050	.094

\* p<0.05. \*\* p<0.01. \*\*\* p<0.001

of residence or being a hunter have no statistical impact. However, on closer reflection, this is not at all surprising. There are more than 500,000 registered hunters in Norway (about 10 percent of the population). Among them, a clear majority are men, but otherwise, hunters are a non-uniform group recruited from all social strata and across the urban–rural divide. Moreover, a recent study has shown that experiences with wolves are perceived as both positive and negative and the stories people tell about such experiences are often colored by the opinion one has about wolves, rather than opinions being formed by experiences (Skogen et al. 2018).

Forest areas in the vicinity of Oslo, and within the municipality borders, have had wolves since 2012. A study of Norwegians' attitudes toward wolves from 2018 shows that about half of the population that live close to them appreciate them (Krange et al. 2017). In other words, it is far from obvious that variables “hunter” and “wolf near the place of residence” should affect the likelihood of accepting illegal wolf hunting. The proportion who do accept illegal wolf hunting, on the other hand, is reduced by the size of the place where they live. The same applies to the level of educational attainment, also seen in model 2. In this model, acceptance still increases with age.

In model 3, we add two variables affiliated with resistance and protest against dominant discourses: anthropogenic climate change skepticism and anti-foreign sentiment. Differences between rural and urban respondents, and between the oldest and the youngest in the likelihood of accepting the illegal killing of wolves, are still significant. Skepticism toward immigrants and the global warming discourse come out with clear impacts, showing that the acceptance of the illegal killing of wolves is associated with these other conflict dimensions. Furthermore, the effect of educational attainment is no longer significant in this model. Both forms of skepticism are likely to be less prevalent among people who have graduated at university and college levels.

Finally, we controlled for “trust in environmental institutions” and “ecocentric view of nature” (model 4). Both low levels of trust and rejection of ecocentrism appear as strong predictors of acceptance for the illegal killing of wolves. The effect of immigrant skepticism is reduced considerably. Skepticism of global warming no longer had an independent impact. Hence, the difference between model 3 and model 4 reveals that the two forms of skepticism are closely connected to lack of trust and rejection of ecocentrism. Moreover, we observed a reduction in the effect of place of residence (size) for each new step, proving that the opinion measures introduced in models 3 and 4 are all more



widespread in rural areas compared to urban areas. However, we also observed a strong independent effect, even in the full model, implying that the urban–rural axis does matter regardless of the standpoint people take on immigration and global warming. Age seems to have an effect that is rather independent of the attitude measures, as it has about the same significant statistical impact in all four models.

In short, the acceptance of illegal wolf hunting is related to age, size of the place of residence, skepticism toward immigrants and the global warming discourse, low trust in environmental institutions, and a rejection of the ecocentric view of nature. We may conclude that acceptance of the illegal killing of wolves is woven into the fabric of a broader pattern of resistance that is more appealing to old people in rural areas than to young city dwellers and that the perception of what nature is and should be is part of this general oppositional sentiment.

## Further Discussion—More Context

Our study contributes to the growing literature on wildlife crime, and we fully acknowledge that such crime is not “victimless.” Individual animals as well as animal populations suffer from such activities. However, our concern in this study has been the social climate in which illegal killing takes place, and the amount of support that the perpetrators actually enjoy. A deeper understanding of these contextual factors, which could be seen as drivers of wildlife crime, are essential in order to come to grips with practices that obfuscate wildlife management and cause animal suffering.

Thus, the ambition of this study was to ascertain support for the illegal killing of wolves among the Norwegian public. We further considered whether the acceptance of illegal killings correlated at all with broader, multidimensional political orientations and tensions in contemporary Norwegian society—was such an attitude part of a homogeneous cultural cluster (Inglehart and Baker 2000)? Our results indicate that such correlations exist.

Our results suggest that, on the whole, the illegal killing of wolves has fairly low support and thereby low legitimacy as an extra-legal act. This correlates with previous research (Gangås et al. 2013). Although only 49 percent of respondents in our study felt that such actions are completely unacceptable, much fewer (7.8 percent) felt that the illegal killing of wolves is completely acceptable. Nevertheless, there exists support for this crime, and, as revealed in model 3 and 4, it is more

prevalent among people who in various ways oppose hegemonic political discourses, who have low trust in environmental agencies, and who contest ecocentrism. Following several scholars' interpretations of illegal wolf killings as partly political in nature (Pohja-Mykrä 2016; von Essen et al. 2015; Skogen and Krange 2020), it follows that support for this crime also has political undertones. We suggest that it is the presence of this political counterpublic that legitimizes the illegal actions for some people.

Several studies have shown that large carnivore management suffers from a low legitimacy among people who dislike the presence of wolves in Norway (Tangeland et al. 2010). The importance of this lack of legitimacy can hardly be overstated. Distrust in the authorities and a denunciation of government policies make people less adherent to laws, less likely to comply and more ready to act on their own accord—both as a means of protest and as a straightforward way of enacting desired results. It seems likely that we are now facing a situation in which low trust in the authorities and of the dominant paradigm on environmental issues, such as large carnivore conservation, are some of the reasons why certain segments of the population can accept quite serious crimes or extra-legal remedies to wolf management. Furthermore, when someone trusts someone else, or an authority, they also affirm the legitimacy and influence of this person or authority through social validity (Weinberger 1999). Trust is, therefore, central to the exercise of legitimate power or authority. Authority in this regard becomes a matter of the power-wielder's ability to ensure compliance without meeting resistance, because the authority has the public's trust. However, in a situation where trust is eroded, as in "withdrawal of trust by many persons at once—a contradiction of trust—sharply reduces the potential for action of those who had been trusted" (Coleman 1990: 195). Hence, when trust is weakened the capacity for authorities to act is diminished.

In the context of large carnivore conservation, authorities find themselves in a situation where they face resistance through illegal actions, which in turn undermines their legitimacy, and they have a problem with wolf populations that are randomly harvested. Indeed, when the already small wolf population in Norway is further reduced by illegal outtakes, management becomes extremely difficult.

As to avenues to resolving this, there is currently much debate on the relationship between illegal and legal killing of large carnivores. Research indicates that if the state offers licenses for wolf culls, this may be "deflating ill will" with hunters (Stöhr and Coimbra 2013: 7) and by activating hunters into stewards with a concrete responsibility. This is





based on the idea that part of their grievance is that wolf protection placed them in the passive position of merely having to “accept” and “tolerate” wolves (Bruskotter and Fulton 2012; Linnell et al. 2017). On the other hand, other research theorizes that legal culls can increase illegal kills because it sends positive signals about wolf killing to society (Chapron and Treves 2016; Suutarinen and Kojola 2018).

To be sure, one avenue open to the authorities is to simply exercise coercive power—that is, power that will meet with resistance. This is an untenable situation involving conflict and high stakes, and the further erosion of legitimacy. Yet, this is what we see in Scandinavia today: increased deterrence and stricter punishments for poachers and more confrontational police procedures coupled with high-tech surveillance and investigation. In this way, illegal killing of wolves becomes a way of asserting opposition to what is seen as increasingly illegitimate, coercive power. Authorities within environmental and wildlife management lose legitimacy in parts of the public, and reconciliation and recovery of trust become further displaced beyond the horizon of possibility (Cinque 2015). While only a few people cross the line of operationalizing this mistrust and committing crimes, it is clear that others support or accept these actions. As we have previously argued (von Essen et al. 2018), the attitudinal climate or vocal counterpublic around actual illegal hunters is instrumental in triggering action, even if vocal opponents are not usually the same as the “silent types” that undertake illegal killings in practice. Nonetheless, they form an important background of grievances. Aside from the police and judiciary, society has little in the way of methods for dealing with these extra-level forms of resistance and, even less, the tacit support that continues to empower or rationalize these actions.

We noted in the introduction how wolf opposition is most prevalent in groups that in various ways remain connected to traditional land use. It is also in these milieus that acceptance for illegal killing is most pronounced (Krange et al. 2017). For these people, the wolf becomes an activator of a wide body of interconnected grievances. In Table 2 it was shown that the relative effect of a “populist opposition” was reduced when trust in environmental institutions and ecocentrism were introduced in model 4. This means that there are statistical associations between the values introduced in model 3 and 4 respectively (“global warming is myth” is no longer significant and the anti-immigration effect ( $\beta$ ) is reduced from .126 to .066), in addition to clear correlations for both of them in the support for illegal killing (see the  $\beta$ s in model 4). There may be an additional common denominator here that we have

not addressed: both measures carry elements of nostalgia or a longing for the “good old days” when wolves were not protected (von Essen and Allen 2017c). This has sometimes been resolved as “collective memories” of the countryside or “generational amnesia”—the tendency to romanticize bygone days (Inglehart and Baker 2000; Miller 2006). The particular brand of right-wing populism encountered here exhibits a selection of common traits in Western countries. Populists contest the authority of the elite, and they appeal to common sense or the “good sense” of people, and they often oppose cultural diversity, cosmopolitanism, and rapid change in favor of cultural homogeneity, nativism, and continuity (von Essen and Allen 2017c).

Hans Georg Betz and Carol Johnson (2004) argue that the long-term goals of populism are to stop or reverse the social erosion that its adherents experience take place in liberal democracies—at heart a nostalgic political ambition. Similar observations have been made for Sweden (Elgenius and Rydgren 2019) and have been identified as key tenets of Brexit and Trumpism in the United States (Gest et al. 2018). In Edmund Burke’s philosophy on conservatism and skepticism toward progress, it is noted that populist social clusters perhaps do not always have an intention of stopping change altogether but, rather, to slow it down and adopt it prudently and in a way that shows organic unity with previous states of being. Roland Clement (1993) terms this adaptation to modernity in an “orderly fashion.”

## **Epilogue: Champions of Anti-Elitism**

Government agencies are generally staffed by people with higher education who live in cities, where these jobs are located. They represent the power that many identify and interpret as an urban elite. While our context here has been Norway, the broader contours of this conflict around wolves, the urban elite, and populist counterpublics are recognizable in several industrial and post-industrial countries. Perhaps one of the best-known parallels to the wolf conflict in Scandinavia is in France. In the spring of 2016, rural residents took to the streets in what began as an uprising against increased gas prices, but which was soon revealed to be a multifaceted pot of grievances. At the core of this uprising was a populist distrust and condemnation of the elite of the country, perhaps even urban elites, whom they saw as the winners of modern capitalism. These “yellow vests” originated from groups of people who expressly lacked faith in the ability of the elite to govern



the country—they included miners, manual labor workers, and other vocational demographics that have lost out to international competition (Kinniburgh 2019). While these arenas are different, we do not believe it unreasonable to declare that similar populist patterns of resistance can be found in Norway. The illegal killing of wolves does not have significant public acceptance broadly speaking, but its acceptance is more prevalent among people who, in other ways, experience disenfranchisement at the hands of the elite and their dominant paradigm, among the champions of anti-elitism.

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**Olve Krange** is a sociologist and a senior research fellow at the Norwegian institute for nature research. He has studied conflicts related to land use and conservation for several decades. He has emphasized the interconnectedness of such conflicts and more general patterns of sociocultural and sociopolitical cleavage, not least related to contemporary social change in rural areas. Lately he has brought these perspectives into the study of climate change skepticism and denial. Email: olve.krange@nina.no.

**Erica von Essen** is an associate professor of Environmental Communication. She works with human-animal relations, particularly problematic or conflictful ones that include wild animals, at Stockholm University's Department of Social Anthropology. Von Essen regularly engages with questions of crime, ethics, aesthetics, resistance, and representations when it comes to human interactions with wildlife. Her current three projects, "License to Cull," "Challenges Facing Modern Hunting Ethics," and "Pig non Grata" all deal with aspects of accommodating—or rejecting—animals that are deemed out of place in society, often from the perspective of hunters. Email: erica.von.essen@socant.su.se.

**Ketil Skogen** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute for Nature Research NINA. He is a sociologist and has studied conflicts related to land use and conservation for several decades. He has emphasized the interconnectedness of such conflicts and more general patterns of sociocultural cleavage, not least related to contemporary social change in rural areas. Skogen has published widely and has collaborated extensively in interdisciplinary projects with ecologists. Email: ketil.skogen@nina.no.



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