

Macrodiscontent Across Countries

Abstract

Public discontent with the political system has become an increasingly salient concern in recent years, with the argument that it undermines democratic stability and effective governance. Nevertheless, the understanding of the nature, trends, and drivers of political discontent remains debated, largely reflecting the constraints from available survey data and items in the construction of measurement. This article takes advantage of the state-of-the-art latent-variable modeling to aggregate survey responses and a comprehensive collection of survey data to generate dynamic comparative estimates of public political discontent (PPD) for over a hundred countries and regions over the past four decades. These PPD scores are validated with responses to the individual source-data survey items that were used to generate them as well as the democratic evaluation survey item that was not used in our estimation. Next, a cross-national and longitudinal analysis of PPD in advanced democracies (i.e., OECD countries) highlights that public political discontent has been on a rising trend, rather than merely “trendless fluctuations” as Norris (2011) claimed. Our results reveal that these increased discontents are largely attributable to worsening economic conditions, including low average income, slow growth, and high unemployment rates.

Public discontent with political systems and institutions has become an increasingly salient concern in recent years, particularly as democracies worldwide face mounting challenges to their stability and effectiveness. Widespread political discontent—which undermines public confidence in the political process, erodes the legitimacy of governing institutions, and fuels the rise of populism that threatens liberal democracy (Mudde 2004; Miller 1974; Lipset 1959; Doyle 2011; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Urbinati 2019)—offers a critical lens for understanding and predicting the erosion of democracy and political conflicts. Nevertheless, the nature, extent, and drivers of political discontent remains debated, with some arguing that the level of political discontent is on a clear increasing trend while others claim that political discontent fluctuates without a clear sign of any trend (Jennings et al. 2017; Norris 2011; Foa and Mounk 2016, 2017).

This debate is largely attributable to differences in how political discontent is conceptualized and measured. For instance, some scholars define it as dissatisfaction with, or a lack of, diffuse support for the political system, while others frame it as perceptions of low responsiveness, democratic deficits, or dissatisfaction with the current government (Easton 1975; Muller and Jukam 1983; Norris 2011; Jennings, Stoker, and Twyman 2016). A more pressing issue concerns the incomparability and sparsity of survey data, which have prevented scholars from consistently measuring political discontent across countries and over time. As discussed by Jennings et al (2017), the fragmented and uneven availability of relevant data has led researchers to rely on different datasets, resulting in conflicting conclusions about the nature, extent, and causes of political discontent.

This paper aims to provide a framework of political discontent with clearer conceptualization and more rigorous measurement using survey data from a wide range of developed countries and regions over several decades. Drawing on David Easton’s (1965) classic distinction between diffuse and specific support for political systems, we define political discontent as dissatisfaction with or a lack of diffuse support for the political system as a whole, rather than disapproval of specific authorities or the incumbent government. The explicit distinction between diffuse and specific support is highly necessary because they have different levels of variation and different consequences for individuals’ political behavior and, in turn, the sustainability of the political system (Citrin 1974; Miller 1974; Craig and Maggiotto 1981; Muller and Jukam 1983). Our conceptualization of political discontent encompasses key components of system support, including perceptions of system responsiveness (external efficacy), trust in political institutions and processes, and perceptions of political corruption, all of which are interrelated and collectively contribute to the broader concept of political discontent.

To overcome issues of incomparability and sparseness that often plague survey-based measures of political discontent in previous studies, we employ the Dynamic Comparative Public Opinion (DCPO) model developed by Solt (2020) to estimate country-year panels of public political discontent around the globe. This approach allows us to combine information from a multitude of survey questions while accounting for differences in question contents and response options. As a result, we generate estimates of the macro-level public’s political discontent in all 3,362 country-years spanned by the source data, which we call Public Political Discontent (PPD) scores. Our PPD scores constitute the

largest and most temporally and spatially comprehensive dataset on the topic to date. Most importantly, with these PPD scores, researchers can meaningfully compare trends, determinants, and consequences of political discontent across 136 countries and regions over 56 years (1968–2023) in a conceptually consistent manner.

We further assess the convergent and construct validity of the PPD scores by examining their strong empirical correlations with three types of indicators: (1) the original individual-level survey items used to construct the scores, (2) independent survey items not included in the source data (e.g., evaluations of democratic performance), and (3) conceptually related variables, such as assessments of recent government policy performance. Across all tests, the PPD scores demonstrate robust validity, confirming their reliability for empirical analysis.

Last, we explore the extent and drivers of political discontent in advanced democracies as a demonstration of the utility of the PPD dataset. Our findings clearly suggest that political discontent has followed an upward trend over time in developed OECD countries, supporting Foa and Mounk’s (2016, 2017) thesis of democratic deconsolidation in developed democracies. Among the key factors theorized to influence political discontent—elections, political institutions, and economic conditions—we find that election years are associated with lower levels of discontent, suggesting that elections can provide an outlet for expressing dissatisfaction and seeking redress. Economic factors emerge as the strongest drivers of discontent, with higher levels of economic development and growth associated with lower discontent, and higher unemployment has the opposite effect. Additionally, increases in income inequality over time reduce discontent, in accordance with the predictions of system justification and relative power theories. However, power-sharing institutions, such as federalism or parliamentarism, appear to have little impact on discontent, yet countries with higher disproportionality do exhibit somewhat more discontent. These results suggest the greater importance of economic conditions in affecting discontent compared to institutional factors.

By offering a conceptually consistent framework of political discontent and a comprehensive dataset with maximum temporal and spatial comparability, this study contributes to ongoing debates about the trajectories of democratic dissatisfaction across countries and over time. More importantly, this study enriches the public opinion literature by providing a framework of political discontent with clearer conceptualization and

a thorough elaboration of its theoretical significance. To understand cross-national and temporal variations in individual political behavior, quality of governance, and state stability, scholars require more than the rich array of political attitude indicators developed in the literature—such as perceptions of incumbent performance, electoral integrity, or external efficacy. Equally critical is paying attention to a general disposition toward the political system that emerges from individuals’ attitudes toward its various components—an outlook we conceptualize as macro-level political discontent. As a form of political culture, this macrodiscontent interacts with other systemic conditions—such as economic performance and institutional contexts—to shape citizens’ political behaviors and state governance. Therefore, the concept of political discontent and the PPD scores developed in the article can offer a better analytical lens that enriches future discussions of public opinion, political representation, and effective governance and political legitimacy. From a methodological standpoint, this study also highlights the utility of latent variable modeling for harnessing the wealth of underutilized cross-national survey data that are often fragmented and incomparable.

Conceptualizing Political Discontent

Public political discontent is widely recognized as a critical factor affecting the stability of political systems. Lipset (1959) argues that public belief in a system’s legitimacy is essential for democratic survival. Similarly, Miller (1974) maintains that a democratic political system cannot endure without majority support, as increasing political discontent among the public raises the potential for revolutionary changes to their political and social system. Widespread political discontent also complicates effective governance, which in turn reinforces dissatisfaction and ultimately erodes public perceptions of the system’s legitimacy over time (Hetherington 1998). These concerns have driven extensive research on its contents, sources and implications. However, scholars have conceptualized political discontent in various ways, ranging from a lack of diffuse support for the political system to perceptions of low responsiveness, democratic deficits, political distrust, and dissatisfaction with the incumbent government (Easton 1975; Muller and Jukam 1983; Norris 2011; Jennings, Stoker, and Twyman 2016). These differences in conceptualization reflect varying analytical purposes, theoretical motivations, and the available opinion

survey items at the time.

This paper defines political discontent as dissatisfaction with, or the lack of, diffuse support for a political system, primarily drawing on Easton’s (1965) influential distinction between diffuse and specific political support. While specific support refers to satisfaction with incumbent performance, diffuse support concerns broader system legitimacy and serves as a ‘reservoir of favorable attitudes or goodwill’ toward a political system. The theoretical importance of this distinction is well noted in the literature. Scholars have found that low satisfaction with, or trust in, the incumbent government often fluctuates without a systematic pattern and does not necessarily translate into rejection of the regime itself (Citrin 1974; Miller 1974; Craig and Maggiotto 1981). Consequently, specific support is considered variable and less threatening to regime stability, as democratic institutions allow citizens to express dissatisfaction through elections and peacefully change political leadership (Muller and Jukam 1983). On the other hand, the erosion of diffuse support provides the public with a normative incentive to pursue radical change to the political system as a whole. In this regard, Jennings et al. (2017) emphasize that defining discontent in terms of diffuse support enables researchers to distinguish between temporary dissatisfaction and a sustained erosion of system-level legitimacy that could pose a systemic threat.

Diffuse political discontent comprises several related yet distinct components: external efficacy (evaluation of the responsiveness of political authorities in general), evaluation of the trustworthiness and integrity of political authorities, and perceptions of political corruption (Craig and Maggiotto 1981; Muller and Jukam 1983; Park 2011). External efficacy, as one of key driver of political discontent, is the belief that the system is unresponsive to the public and prioritizes its own or special interests, which increases the likelihood of the public participating in or endorsing regime-challenging activities that threaten the social and political order (Craig 1980; Jennings, Stoker, and Twyman 2016). Recent studies of populism also highlight that low external efficacy is a main source of anti-system sentiments among populist supporters (Mudde 2004). Political trust, often used as a measure of political discontent, is conceptually associated with external efficacy but operates on a different dimension. Specifically, while external efficacy concerns whether the political system functions according to public demands, political trust concerns whether political authorities act in the public interest regardless of public inputs

(Craig 1979). Yet, implications of political trust can vary depending on the specific referents of trust (Van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017). For instance, trust in political institutions as a system, such as the party system, politicians, or parliament in general, differs from trust in the incumbent government, as the latter reflects specific support, fluctuates with political cycles, and does not threaten systemic stability (Norris 1999).

Literature also emphasizes the perception of political corruption as an important factor for political discontent across political regimes and regions (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Elia and Schwindt-Bayer 2022; Ecker, Glinitzer, and Meyer 2016; Carothers 2023), as people perceive political authorities as working for their own interests over public interests (Park 2011; Busby et al. 2018; Hawkins, Kaltwasser, and Andreadis 2020). Resentment toward corruption fosters broader skepticism toward political institutions and the system, shaping electoral behavior—such as voting for populist elites who weaponize anti-corruption and anti-establishment narratives (Breitenstein and Hernández 2024; Daniele, Aassve, and Le Moglie 2023; Kolberg-Shah and Shin 2024). In authoritarian regimes, public anger over political corruption has often sparked public protests that led to regime collapse (Carothers 2023).

It is also worth discussing what is not considered a component of diffuse political discontent. Specifically, we exclude political trust in the incumbent government or apolitical institutions, as trust in the government is a type of specific support that fluctuates over time and does not pose a serious threat to the political system (Norris 1999). Additionally, unlike previous studies that use support for democracy in the abstract as a predictor for the survival of democratic regimes (Claassen 2020), we do not include it as a component of political discontent. This is because support for democracy in the abstract is too prevalent in every country to be a meaningful or analytically useful measure of political discontent (Dalton, Sin, and Jou 2007; Inglehart 2003). Lastly, we exclude satisfaction with democracy in the abstract because the literature shows that this measure functions more as a type of specific support. People tend to have much higher democratic satisfaction when their preferred politicians or parties win elections, while electoral losers tend to have lower democratic satisfaction (Van Egmond, Johns, and Brandenburg 2020; Singh and Mayne 2023). Moreover, Quaranta and Martini (2016) indicate that various economic indicators, such as the unemployment rate, GDP growth, inflation, or subjective economic evaluation, are strongly associated with the public’s satisfaction with

democracy, suggesting that it is a product of the government’s economic performance.

The conceptualization of political discontent as a lack of diffuse support for the political system carries important theoretical and empirical implications. By encompassing multiple dimensions of system-level evaluations, such as external political efficacy, trust in core political institutions, and perceptions of corruption, this definition offers a more accurate reflection of growing concerns about declining public confidence in democratic governance. Specifically, our conceptualization underscores the analytical value of political discontent as a comprehensive indicator of how citizens perceive the political system—as illegitimate, untrustworthy, or unresponsive. For these reasons, we argue that political discontent provides a more robust tool for assessing the erosion of confidence in democratic governance. This broader conceptualization also contributes meaningfully to ongoing debates about democratic backsliding. While recent studies offer mixed evidence regarding the role of public opinion in democratic erosion (Claassen 2020; Tai, Hu, and Solt 2024), many rely on measures of abstract support for democracy. However, such measures tend to be uniformly high and thus lack the discriminatory power to capture meaningful variation in citizens’ democratic commitment (Dalton, Sin, and Jou 2007; Inglehart 2003). In contrast, political discontent—defined as a multidimensional absence of diffuse system support—serves as a more nuanced and analytically useful indicator of public sentiment toward the political order. Given its close association with regime-challenging attitudes and behaviors, political discontent functions as a more direct signal of potential threats to democratic stability (Craig 1980).

Estimating Public Political Discontent

Questions tapping political discontent as conceived above are common in national and cross-national surveys conducted over the past four decades, but no single question is asked in all countries and years. The result is that the relevant data are incomparable, in that they are generated by many different questions, and sparse, in that for many countries and years no question on discontent is asked at all. We collected 388 different survey datasets with relevant questions, including a total of 111 survey items that were asked in no fewer than five country-years in countries surveyed at least three times (see online Appendix Section A1). These survey items were asked in 136 different countries

over the 56 years from 1968 to 2023 comprising 8,957 country-year-item observations altogether.

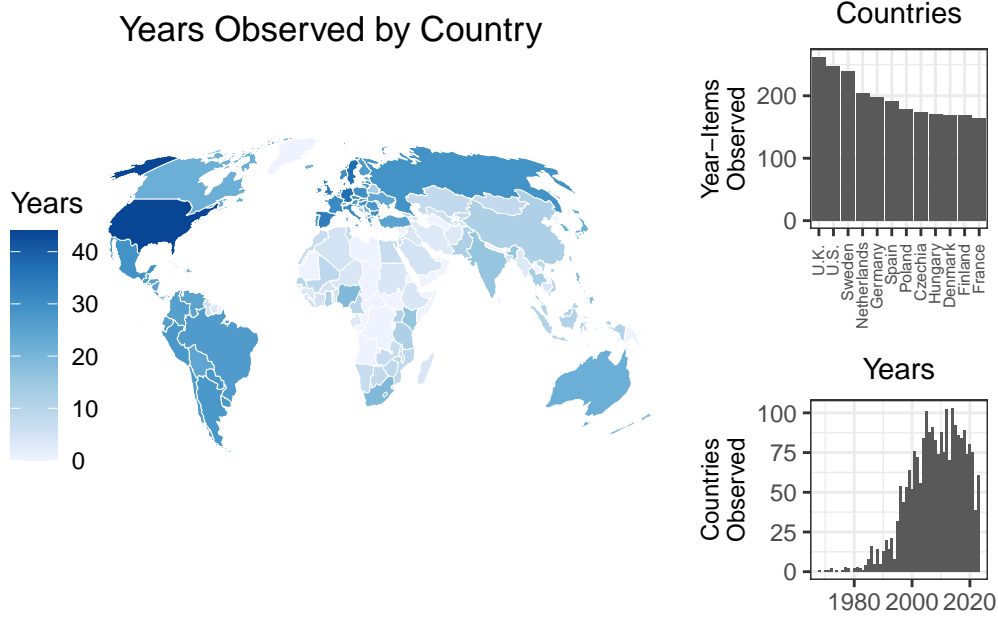


Figure 1: Countries and Years with the Most Observations in the Source Data

To make this multiplicity of different survey items useful, we estimate a latent variable model of the aggregated survey responses using the Dynamic Comparative Public Opinion (DCPO) model. The DCPO model is a state-of-the-art population-level two-parameter ordinal logistic item response theory model with country-specific item-bias terms; it has previously been used to generate comparable estimates across countries and time of such attitudes as gender egalitarianism (Woo, Allemang, and Solt 2023).¹

The underlying logic of the DCPO model is that the probability that an individual responds affirmatively to a survey question is a function of the respondent’s score on the latent trait, i.g., political discontent. In this function, specifically, two parameters that characterize each question, along with country-specific bias parameters, are used to address the issue incomparability of different survey questions across different survey projects and rounds.

First, the *difficulty* parameter accounts the level of the latent trait (i.e., how much political discontent) needed for a respondent to endorse a particular response option of a survey question. That each response evinces varying level of political discontent is most easily seen with regard to the ordinal responses to the same survey item. For

¹A comprehensive description of the DCPO model is presented in Appendix Section A2.

example, responding “strongly agree” to the statement “people like me don’t have any say about what the government does” exhibits more political discontent than choosing “agree,” which is a more discontented response than “disagree,” which in turn is more discontented than “strongly disagree.” Moreover, and more importantly, the difficulty parameter varies across different survey items to reflect that a respondent may need to feel greater discontent to endorse a specific response option for one question compared to endorsing the same level of response for another question. For example, strongly agreeing that “there is widespread corruption among those who govern the country” likely expresses even more political discontent than strongly agreeing that “people like me can probably vote, but we cannot do anything else to influence politics.”

Second, the *dispersion* parameter accounts for the noisiness (measurement error) in a survey question with respect to the latent trait. A survey question may confuse some respondents or may not align cleanly with the concept of political discontent, reflecting a larger dispersion. If such a question is nevertheless used as an indicator of political discontent, it will exhibit high dispersion. On the contrary, the lower the dispersion, the better that changes in responses to the question map onto changes in political discontent.

Third, to provide for the possibility that translation issues or cultural differences result in the same question being interpreted differently in different countries, the model estimates *country-specific bias* parameters that shift the difficulty of all responses for a particular question in a particular country. Together, the model’s difficulty, dispersion, and country-specific bias parameters work to generate comparable estimates of the latent variable of political discontent from the available but incomparable source data.

To address sparsity in the source data—unpolled or thinly surveyed years in each country and region—DCPO uses simple local-level dynamic linear models, i.e., random-walk priors, for each country and region. That is, within each country and region, each year’s value of public political discontent is modeled as the previous year’s estimate plus a random shock. These dynamic models smooth the estimates of public political discontent over time and allow estimation even in years for which little or no survey data is available, albeit at the expense of greater measurement uncertainty. Using the `DCPOtools` package for R, we generated estimates of the public’s political discontent in all 3,362 country-years spanned by the source data, which we call Public Political Discontent (PPD) scores.

Validation of novel latent variables, as with any new measure, is crucial. To this end,

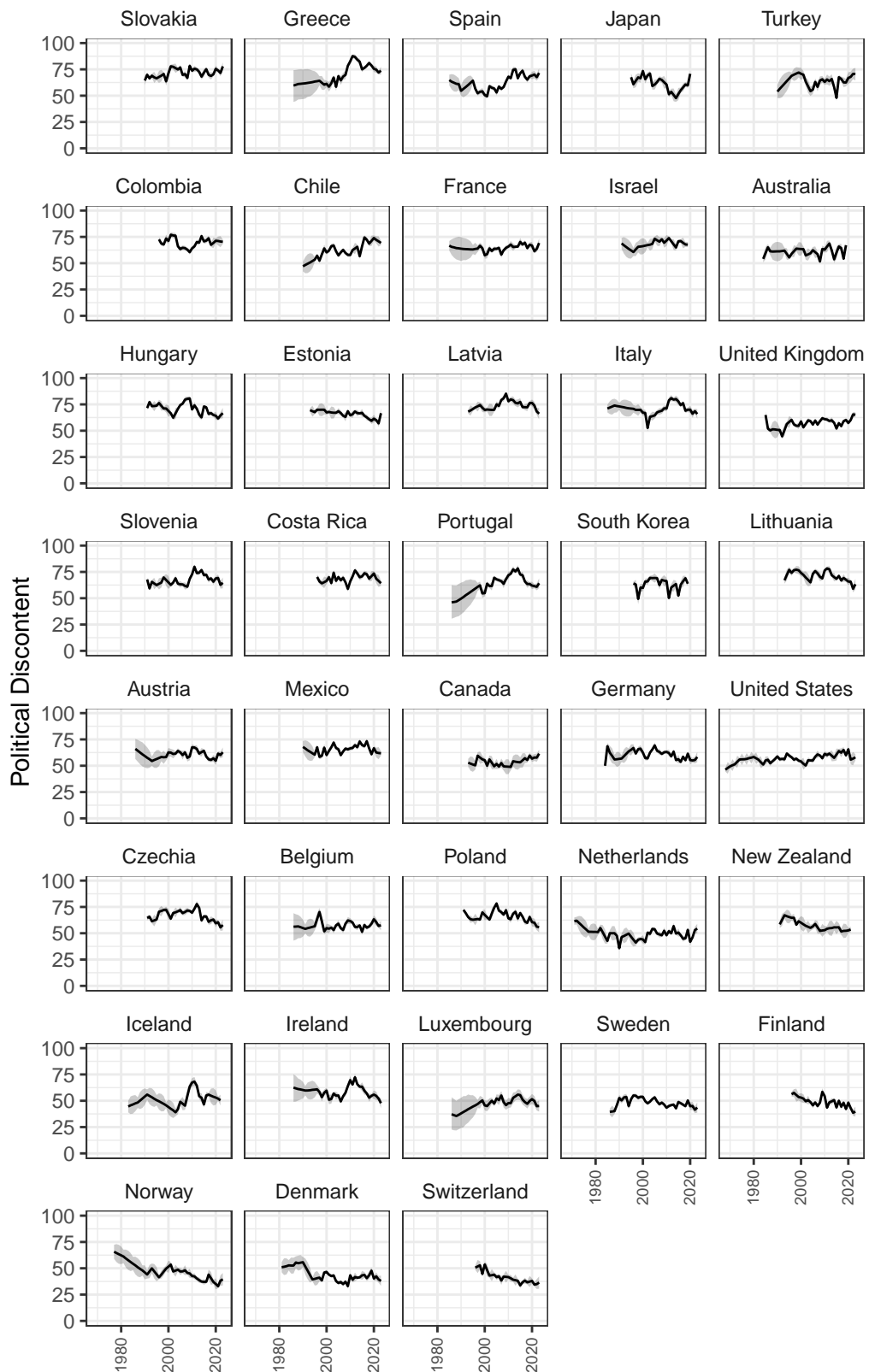
we conduct a series of measurement validity tests to validate our PPD scores. We start with the tests of convergent validation, which refers to whether a measure is empirically associated with alternative indicators of the same concept (Adcock and Collier 2001, 540). Specifically, we first perform tests of *internal convergent validity*, that is, whether the country-year PPD scores align with a few key individual-level survey items used to generate them. Then, we test our measure’s *external convergent validity* by comparing the PPD scores with three individual-level survey items that asked respondents to evaluate “democracy” in their countries and regions - these items were not used in constructing our measure but provide good alternate indicators of the extent of political discontent. Last, we turn to *construct validity*, which refers to demonstrating that the tested measure is empirically associated with measures of other concepts believed causally related to the concept the measure seeks to represent (Adcock and Collier 2001, 542). Discontent with the political system should be closely tied to evaluations of recent government policy performance.

The methods and results of these tests are presented in full in online Appendix Section A3. In summary, the PPD scores perform very robustly across all validation tests, providing evidence that they are appropriate estimates of the political discontent concept we theorize and thus suitable to be used in analysis.

Explaining Political Dissatisfaction

In Figure 2, we present the evolution of PPD scores over time for a group of countries where discontent has attracted particular public and scholarly concern: the advanced democracies of the OECD. How to explain these differences in public political discontent across countries? What are the drivers of the changes over years? The literature presents various perspectives on how political and economic contexts may affect public political discontent.

The first argument deals with the role of elections. Elections provide an opportunity for people to turning their dissatisfaction into ballots for candidates or parties that promise changes in the system. Discontented citizens, as a result, gain political fulfillment through voting for a party that voices their discontent (Van der Brug 2003; Rooduijn, Van Der Brug, and De Lange 2016). From this perspective, public political discontent should be



Note: Countries are ordered by their most recent political discontent score; gray shading represents 80% credible intervals.

Figure 2: Political Discontent Scores Over Time Within OECD Democracies

expected to be lower in years of national elections, in which some of the existing discontent could be ameliorated. However, existing studies also suggest that the effect of election time on public political discontent could be the opposite. Campaigns expose citizens to more political messages, a significant proportion of which criticize the elites and the system (Lau, Sigelman, and Rovner 2007; López-García and Pavía 2019). Particularly, many advanced democracies are experiencing increased levels of false information during elections, which has become a clear danger to the integrity of political process (Bennett and Livingston 2018). If so, public political discontent may be expected to be higher at election times.

A second potential source of public political discontent is the distribution of power created by political institutions. According to prominent democratic theories (Norris 2008; Lijphart 1999; Powell 2000), power-sharing systems—parliamentarism, federalism, and proportional electoral rules—aim to generate governments that facilitate broad inclusion and participation, while power-concentrating systems prioritize efficient and accountable majority rule. Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer (2010a) argues that power-sharing systems not only encourage actual political participation, but also send symbolic signals of inclusiveness to citizens. If so, the publics in countries with parliamentary systems, federalism, and proportional electoral rules should be more likely to perceive themselves as being included and represented in the system and so feel less discontent.

Lastly, economic conditions are argued to be salient sources of political discontent (Quaranta and Martini 2016). For one thing, unfavorable economic conditions fuel social discontent and anxiety about the future among the public, which can easily evolve into anti-establishment sentiment (Kinnvall and Svensson 2022). For another, economic indicators are usually used by people to evaluate the performance of the system or government policies (Becher and Donnelly 2013). Hence, poor economic conditions, such as low average incomes, slow growth, and high unemployment are likely to hurt perceptions of institutional quality and so increase public political discontent. Income inequality may work similarly, but such arguments as system justification theory, which contends that greater inequality triggers in the disadvantaged a psychological need to accept and defend the existing system (see, e.g., Jost 2019), and relative power theory (see, e.g., Solt 2008), which instead sees more inequality as increasing the influence of the rich over the attitudes of the poor, suggest that worsening inequality may actually *reduce* discontent.

The data we use to test these hypotheses are as follows. The Democratic Electoral Systems (DES) dataset updated in Bormann and Golder (2022) provides information about the timing of elections, yielding a dichotomous variable coded one in election years and zero when no election was held. We measure three institutional variables in the same fashion as Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer (2010b). Parliamentarism is coded dichotomously, coded one in pure parliamentary systems and zero otherwise, and is sourced from the DES. The federalism variable is also dichotomous: countries with strong federal systems (see Lijphart 1999) are coded one and all others coded zero. The Gallagher least-squares index of disproportionality, which measures the disparity between parties' vote shares and their seat shares (Gallagher 1991, 40–41; 2023), provides our measure of the proportionality of the electoral system. We draw data on economic conditions from two sources. GDP per capita, national GDP growth, and unemployment are from OECD.Stat (OECD 2024). The Gini index of disposable income inequality comes from the Standardized World Income Inequality Database.

The resulting dataset comprises all thirty-eight OECD countries and a total of 1217 country-years. The number of country-years observed per country ranges from sixteen (Turkey) to forty-three (the United States) consecutive years (mean: 32 years, median: 31 years). The advantage in data availability over pooling the responses to a single question is clear: even among these relatively data-rich countries, the two richest single items available—the Eurobarometer's questions on trust in national ts and in political parties—each provide only fewer than half as many country-years for analysis, 582 observations, and these Eurobarometer data naturally entirely exclude the nine OECD members outside Europe.

Pooled time series like these, Shor et al. (2007) demonstrates, are most appropriately analysed using Bayesian multilevel models with varying intercepts for countries and years. Varying intercepts for each country account for the heteroskedasticity across our spatial units that is generated by omitted variable bias and other sources while also permitting us to include predictors like parliamentarism and federalism that do not vary over time. Varying intercepts for each year take into account 'time shocks' that operate on all of our countries simultaneously (Shor et al. 2007, 171–72).

We also use the 'within-between random effects' specification (see Bell and Jones 2015). This specification involves decomposing each of our time-varying predictors into its coun-

try mean and the difference between each country-year value and the country mean. The time-varying difference variables capture the short-term effects of the predictors, while the time-invariant country-mean variables reflect their long-run, “historical” effects (Bell and Jones 2015, 137). As Bell and Jones (2015) shows, this is a better approach for addressing omitted variable bias and endogeneity than fixed effects and other commonly used TSCS specifications.

Finally, we use a Bayesian analysis that allows us to directly incorporate into our model the quantified measurement uncertainty in the data for political discontent and for income inequality, with the estimated values of these two variables treated as random draws from distributions with unknown true means but known standard deviations (McElreath 2016, 425–31; see also Kurz 2023, 15.1.2). We estimate the model using the `brms` R package (Bürkner 2017).

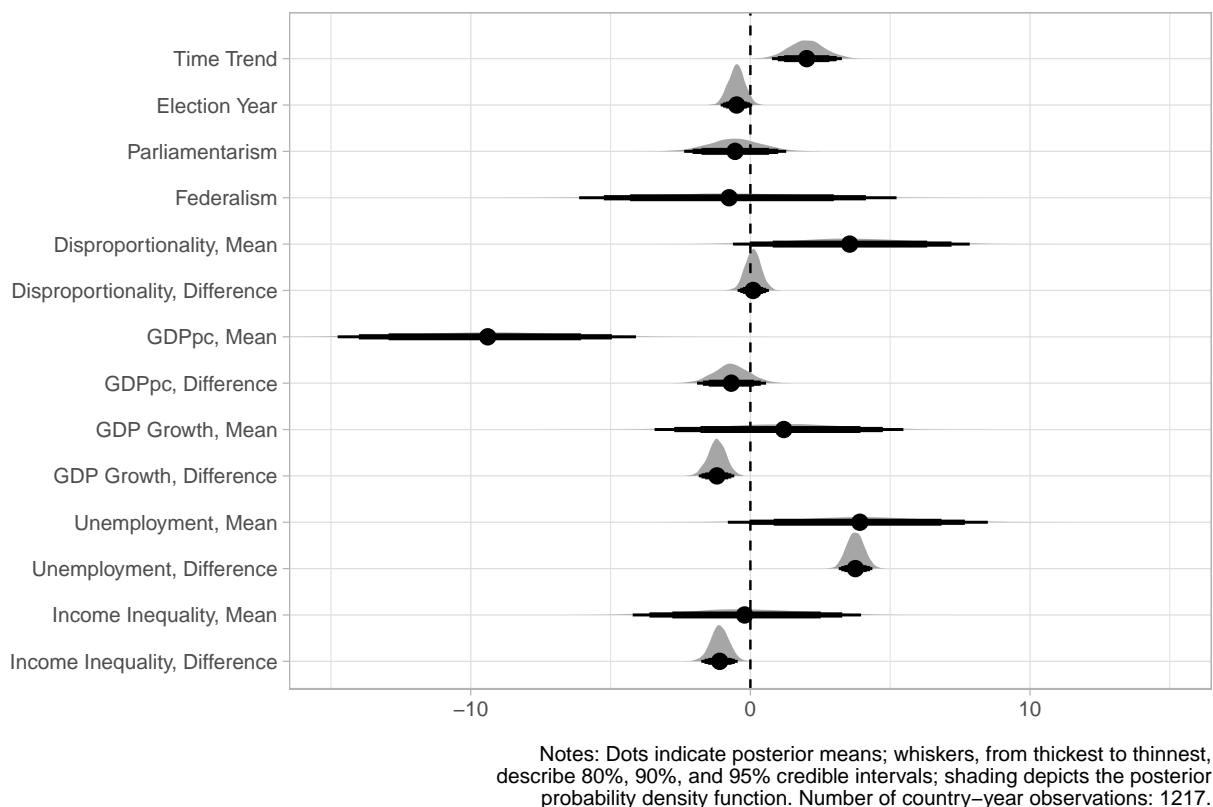


Figure 3: Predicting Public Political Discontent in OECD Countries

The results of this analysis are displayed in Figure 3.² Narratives of increasing political discontent over recent decades find support in these results. The time trend indicates that discontent has been, on average and net of the other included variables, rising over

²Table A3 in online Appendix Section A4, provides a tabular version.

time in the OECD countries by 0.1 points (95% credible interval: 0.04 to 0.16 points) per year. By this evidence, election years appear to diffuse rather than exacerbate discontent: PPD scores are estimated to be 0.5 points lower in years with elections, with 95.6% of the posterior distribution less than zero.

The hypothesis that power-sharing institutions reduce discontent with politics, on the other hand, finds little support. Countries with parliamentary or federal systems do not exhibit less political discontent than those without, and short-run changes in disproportionality do not trigger declines in PPD scores either. Countries with higher mean disproportionality did exhibit more discontent than those with lower mean values: a two-standard-deviation higher mean Gallagher index was associated with 3.5515 points more political discontent; 94.9% of the posterior distribution of this parameter was positive.

The evidence of the importance of economic conditions is, however, strong. Even among these advanced economies, countries with greater mean per capita GDP have lower levels of political discontent: a country one standard deviation above the mean is estimated to have a PPD score 9.4 (95% c.i.: 14.8 to 4.1) points lower than a country one standard deviation below the mean. In the short run, increases in per capita GDP also appear to reduce discontent, with a two-standard-deviation increase associated with 0.7 (95% c.i.: 1.9 to 0.6) points less political discontent (85.6% of the posterior distribution of this parameter was negative). Although mean GDP growth exhibits no evidence of a long-term influence of growth on discontent, in the short run, discontent moves sharply in the opposite direction as growth: a two-standard-deviation increase in growth yields -1.2 (95% c.i.: -1.8 to -0.6) points less political discontent. Unemployment has major effects on discontent in this analysis. The estimate for the long-term, historical effect of unemployment on political discontent as evidenced by differences in mean levels across countries is 3.9 (95% c.i.: -0.8 to 8.5) points. Year-to-year differences in unemployment work similarly: a two-standard-deviation increase in unemployment has an immediate effect of increasing discontent by 3.8 (95% c.i.: 3.2 to 4.4) points. And, although cross-country mean differences show little impact, increases in income inequality over time work to reduce discontent in accordance with the predictions of system justification and relative power theories, with a two-standard-deviation rise prompting a 1.1 (95% c.i.: 1.8 to 0.5) point fall in PPD scores.

Conclusions

The research on public political discontent has witnessed many inconsistent findings regarding its temporal trends, causes, and consequences. This inconsistency largely reflects conceptual inconsistencies and the constraints from available survey data and items in the construction of measurement. To address these limitations, this article offers a clearer conceptualization of political discontent as the lack of Easton’s (1965) diffuse support, explicitly defining what is—and is not—considered part of the concept. Moreover, using a state-of-the-art latent-variable model, we construct a dynamic comparative measure of public political discontent in OECD countries. The result shows a clear rising trend of political discontent across OECD countries, challenging Norris (2011)’s claim that the changes in political discontent are merely “trendless fluctuations.” Our analysis clearly reveals the rise of political discontent in the public is driven by worsening economic conditions, including low income, slow growth, and high unemployment. Unlike prior research that relies on single-country evidence (Jennings et al. 2017), our findings are built upon a measure that draws on the most available information across countries/regions and over time. Therefore, it appears that our findings provide sounder conclusions with firmer evidence—at least so far—to the ongoing debates on the trajectories and sources of political discontent.

In addition to our innovative data and empirical findings, this study also contributes to the public opinion literature by offering a clearer conceptualization of political discontent. Although the phenomenon of political discontent has attracted extensive studies, there lacks a concept of political discontent that is distinctive from related concepts—such as (the lack of) political trust and (dis)satisfaction with democracy—and gains widespread use in the research field. As a result, the various conceptualizations of political discontent, despite serving varying analytical purposes and data availability, lead to seemingly conflicting findings and thus impede further research. In this article, we explicitly theorize political discontent as the lack of Easton’s (1965) diffuse support and spell out what are and are not considered components of the concept. Our conceptualization provides researchers in the field with references about the possible scope when concerning political discontent.

The time-series cross-national Public Political Discontent (PPD) dataset we have presented in this article, which is available on the Harvard Dataverse, has broad implica-

tions for future study. The growing phenomenon of democratic backsliding across diverse regions has spurred extensive scholarly inquiry into its underlying causes, with public support for democracy often positioned as a central factor. However, findings on the role of public democracy support remain mixed, raising questions about its significance. Public political discontent can offer a better analytical lens to democratic backsliding as rising political discontent has sparked concerns that it fosters public support for populism—frequently a threat to liberal democracy (Mudde 2004; Urbinati 2019)—and undermines effective governance and political legitimacy (Hetherington 1998; Miller 1974; Lipset 1959). With the PPD dataset, researchers can explore how political discontent shapes public political engagement and influences democratic consolidation and backsliding. Moreover, as the dataset encompasses most countries and regions worldwide, including non-democracies, it enables the examination of the potentially varying causes and consequences of political discontent across different regime types.

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