

On the mismatch between life and political discontent

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Ten years ago, the result of the Brexit referendum represented one of the first sensational and unexpected electoral outcomes explicitly against the political and economic *status quo*. In the last decade, it was followed by the rapid increase of the support for radical parties in most developed countries.

The literature on this phenomenon highlighted the peculiar geography of protest voting, recurrently overlapping with the spatial distribution of economic and social decline (Dijkstra et al., 2020; Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018). This empirical association supported the idea that the lack of occupational and economic opportunities fuelled life discontent that, in turn, translated into extreme voting (McCann, 2020). In this perspective, the persistent economic stagnation of marginalized areas triggered what Rodríguez-Pose (2018) termed the “revenge of places that don’t matter”.

While a broad literature provided evidence supporting this interpretation, some recent studies pointed to the occurrence of some mismatches between the geographies of life dissatisfaction and political discontent. Lenzi and Perucca (2025) suggested that the reasons of such mismatch are related to two understudied determinants of political discontent. The first one concerns the rise of inequality across different social groups and territories. In an era of increasing wealth polarization (Piketty and Saez, 2003), more unequal local communities are likely to foster individual discontent, through mechanisms of comparison and benchmarking. The second factor involves the heterogeneous role of some non-economic factors in shaping individual voting behaviour. A long line of research has shown how group influences individuals’ preferences and behaviours toward in- and out-group members (Shayo, 2020). The political mobilization of identities to provoke place-based resentment (Bornschier et al., 2021) remains unexplored, especially in its regional dimension, which includes identifying local behavioural patterns and social beliefs that may either reinforce or mitigate such mechanisms.

This paper focuses on the relationship between life and political discontent, and on the way in which inequalities and individual and collective cultural features mediate this association. Making use of individual survey data on the preferences for Brexit and other individual characteristics (among which personal life dissatisfaction), this study provides new evidence in the literature on the geography of discontent.

References

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