

ERSA conference 2026

Special Session Proposal

Geography and the determinants of political discontent

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Abstract

In the last decade, political parties associated with anti-system, nationalist and/or authoritarian views achieved unprecedented electoral success, bringing them from a marginal to a central political role. A burgeoning body of work has focused on the spatial concentration of the electoral support for these movements, identifying a clear “geography of discontent” (McCann, 2020). Drivers of such discontent include the individual dissatisfaction with one’s own life, territorial trends of relative stagnation and decline (Dijkstra et al., 2020), public spending cuts and decline in public service provision (Fetzer, 2019) and rapid social change (Margalit, 2019).

Despite the rising body of scholarship, the determinants and evolving patterns of the geography of political discontent are still not fully understood. Recent studies, for instance, pointed to a complex heterogeneity of political sentiments across settings of different types and unclear time patterns (Luca and Kenny, 2024). Other contributions highlighted the potential mismatches between political and life discontent, suggesting a complex interplay between the perception of one’s own life and the personal political behavior (Lenzi and Perucca, 2021).

Importantly, it remains unclear whether the geographies of political discontent follow the same spatial and temporal patterns everywhere, and the extent to which political discontent is driven by the ‘demand’ or ‘supply’ side of electoral politics, i.e. by

changing voters' preferences and/or changing salience of specific issues vs the transformation of what political parties 'offer' to voters (Rodrik, 2021).

Our special session aims at contributing to the discussion on these topics. More precisely, contributions focused on the following issues are welcome:

- How did the geography of political discontent evolve in recent years, and are trends similar everywhere? And what context-specific factors have mitigated political grievances?
- How urban and rural areas differ in terms of political discontent, and why? And how does political discontent along the urban-rural continuum intersect with other types of territorial divides (e.g. regional ones)?
- To what extent are political and life discontent overlapping?
- Did anti-system governments reduce political discontent?
- Are policy solutions addressing economic grievances enough to contain the rise of political discontent?
- What are the socioeconomic consequences of populist parties?

The multidisciplinary nature of the topic makes the ERSA conference an ideal forum in which to debate these issues. Economists, geographers, sociologists and political scientists are therefore invited to contribute to the special session.

References:

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