



# Diagnosing Discontent

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## **Abstract**

The paper argues for a broader approach to understanding the growth of political discontent. It deploys a market analogy to distinguish between demand-side factors (unwelcome economic and cultural change), supply-side factors (political strategies, including populism) and marketplace factors (digitalisation and fragmentation of media). The paper concludes that a defence of democratic processes and institutions will require policymakers and researchers to pay attention to all of these elements across the political market.

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# 1 Introduction

*“There is discontent in large parts of Europe about the direction in which we are heading. And there is considerable unease about the future.”*<sup>1</sup>.

The speech containing the above quote was delivered to the European Parliament following the publication of Draghi (2024, hereafter, the “Draghi report”). The former President of the European Central Bank had been tasked by the European Commission to prepare a report on the future of European competitiveness. The speech and the report itself placed this task firmly within a challenging political context. As stated in the report:

- “Europe’s fundamental values are prosperity, equity, freedom, peace and democracy in a sustainable environment. The EU exists to ensure that Europeans can always benefit from these fundamental rights. If Europe can no longer provide them to its people – or has to trade off one against the other – it will have lost its reason for being”.
- “The only way to meet this challenge is to grow and become more productive, preserving our values of equity and social inclusion. And the only way to become more productive is for Europe to radically change.” (Draghi report, p. 5).

The implication is clear. Europe’s treasured and hard-won political values are threatened and the way to counter this threat, indeed according to the text, the *only* way, is through improved economic productivity, coupled with inclusive distribution of the spoils.

This purpose of this paper is not to question these prescriptions for improving the European economy, or their importance, but to offer a broader consideration of the implied diagnosis of political discontent in Europe. Is the source of our modern-day discontent economic? Is an economic diagnosis and remedy sufficient? That is, even if these (or other) economic prescriptions succeed in raising European competitiveness and spreading the benefits equitably and inclusively, are there reasons to believe that we might still find ourselves surrounded by worrisome political discontent?

It is not hard to marshal troubling anecdotal evidence. America is an important comparator for the Draghi report, given the European Union’s low growth rate relative to the more innovative and dynamic US economy. Yet America is suffering from unprecedented post-war political turmoil. I live in Dublin, Ireland. Dublin is a prosperous capital region in an economy that enjoys enviable growth rates, full employment, declining inequality and a relatively generous welfare system (Roantree et al., 2021). Nevertheless, in 2024, Dublin’s central street’s exploded into a riot. Later in the year, Ireland held a general election that, for the first time, featured dozens of candidates expressing extreme views on issues such as immigration and vaccination. One election candidate in Dublin, who narrowly failed to be elected, was the head of a family involved in a murderous gangland feud. There are, of course, many other similar examples of the emergence of extreme politics across Europe and beyond, but Ireland is interesting because it is hard to construct a convincing explanation for these political events based on economic fortunes. Both the US and Ireland have had their share of economic turbulence and hardship over the eight post-war decades. Both have long-running issues of socio-economic inequality. But current expressions of political discontent are

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<sup>1</sup> Mario Draghi, Speech to the European Parliament, 17 September 2024<sup>ootnote text (please always insert <tab> at the beginning).</sup>

unparalleled. Other factors are surely driving this discontent, even if economic grievances play a role.

While anecdotal evidence suggesting that there is more to discontent than economics is easy to muster, persuasive evidence from the social sciences is much harder to deploy. This is not because there is not enough of it. Journals in political science, sociology, economics, psychology, behavioural science and communication studies are bursting with analyses of the definitions, causes and relative influences of populism, polarisation and misinformation, among other relevant concepts. The problem is to organise this blizzard of research papers in a meaningful and instrumental way. As well as the sheer volume of research output, a high proportion of both theoretical and empirical papers exist in disciplinary silos that, with some welcome exceptions, do not cross-reference each other. Meanwhile, most empirical papers demonstrate associations between explanatory variables and dependent variables designed to measure some aspect of discontent, but few indicate (or in many cases even consider) whether the explanatory variable is a necessary or sufficient condition for the outcome to occur. Moreover, and importantly, all of these social science disciplines are playing catch-up. While for each meaningful twist or turn of geopolitical history there will be individual scholars who claim, convincingly or otherwise, to have foreseen it, the truth is that the success of populist politics has researchers scrambling in its wake to explain what has just passed them by. I am merely one such researcher.

Nevertheless, good remedies are more likely to emerge from good diagnoses. If discontent is a threat to fundamental European values, as the Draghi report states, then we need to strive to know what is causing it. This paper is not going to draw a conclusion about that; the task is far too great. Instead, the aim is to assemble possibilities for consideration, highlight where there might be a case to answer and, in doing so, hopefully encourage broader thinking about the potential causes of political discontent. The conclusion I do draw is that economic remedies are unlikely to be sufficient.

## **2 Is discontent a policy problem?**

A certain level of discontent will always be with us and is not, necessarily a policy problem. Reasonable people disagree about the fairest and most effective way to govern society; someone is always unhappy. Within a democracy, an amount of political disagreement and debate, even vigorous protest, is healthy. What is meant by discontent in the context of this paper is a deeper dissatisfaction with the way society is governed.

The distinction is illuminated by considering what is required for a successful, functioning democracy. In a prescient article, Zakaria (1997) contrasted fledgling democracies around the world with established liberal democracies in the US and Western Europe. He warned of a slide towards “illiberal democracies”, where free and fair elections were not balanced by checks on the power of governments, to defend individual rights to life, property and freedoms of speech and assembly. He lamented failure to understand that democracies require more than elections, they need systems and institutions that spread and limit power, such that power cannot be used to attack liberty, to stoke ethnic tensions, or as a vehicle for personal enrichment. At the time, Zakaria’s concern was spreading good models of liberal democracy, not defending the established ones. Times have changed.

Thus, there are points at which deep discontent can cross lines that separate a healthy from a dysfunctional democracy. This happens if voters begin to support political parties that attack or want to dismantle institutions or systems that distribute power within the democratic system itself, such as the legal system, independent scholarship or press freedom. It happens if political views become acceptable that flatly contradict liberal democratic principles, such as asserting superior status for certain ethnic groups or denying equality under the law. When these lines are crossed, discontent is a policy problem. The system needs to find ways to defend itself.

### 3 Evidence of growing discontent

Ultimately, deep political discontent is psychological. As such, it may surface in multiple ways and is not straightforward to measure. It may have cognitive components, via which citizens form a judgement that the political system does not work, at least not for people like them. There may also be emotional components, via which people feel betrayed or let down, or even that their identity is under threat. Survey measures of trust and confidence, constructs that capture both cognitive and emotional elements, are often used to measure discontent. Citizens may lose trust and confidence in different parts of the political system, including political institutions, parties and politicians, or policies.

There is good evidence for a decline in political trust across many developed democracies over recent decades. Citrin and Stoker (2018) review relevant survey evidence. Across 19 industrial democracies, mostly European, confidence in the legislature fell for the majority of them after the 1980s and 1990s. The US experienced an earlier sharp decline in trust in its government between the 1960s and 1980s, covering both the executive and congress, with fluctuations and a more modest decline since. In the large majority of EU states, between 2004 and 2018, the share of the population expressing distrust in the EU rose, with increases of greater than 20% in one third of states (Dijkstra et al., 2020). In the former communist countries of Eastern Europe, trust in national parliaments has fallen sharply since the 1990s (Závecz, 2017). Van der Meer and van Erkel (2024) record a mixed recovery in political trust in Europe generally following the Great Recession, which generally lowered trust. Bertou (2019) finds a similar fall and partial recovery among EU nations.

One possibility is that this decline in trust and confidence might apply across the political spectrum and, hence, have little bearing on voting patterns. An accompanying strain of research, however, indicates that the problem may indeed be more serious, because rather than applying across the spectrum, discontent appears to be changing the underlying psychology that has in the past sustained that spectrum. Political scientists have long differentiated between left and right or, more often in America, between liberal and conservative. Some scholars further differentiate two liberal-conservative dimensions – one economic and the other social (e.g. Schofield et al., 2003). One individual might be pro-market and socially permissive; another may advocate for greater economic intervention and traditional social restrictions. In recent times, empirical evidence has begun to support an alternative view of fundamental political psychology, based on a second axis of discontent with the political system. Santucci and Dyck (2022) measure this dimension of discontent through scaled responses to the following questions:

1. People like me don't have any say in what the government does;
2. Elites in this country don't understand the problems I am facing;
3. Elections today don't matter; things stay the same no matter who we vote in;
4. Elected officials would help the country more if they would stop talking and just take action on important problems;
5. Our government would run better if decisions were left up to nonelected, independent experts rather than politicians or the people;

with the first three items most strongly capturing the dimension. In combination with the more traditional liberal-conservative dimension, Santucci and Dyck find this dimension to be highly predictive of voting in US presidential and primary elections.

Despite these trends in political psychology, there is less evidence that people have lost faith in specific democratic structures. Overall, satisfaction with democracy, as measured in the European Social Survey, remained stable between 2002 and 2020 (Vigna, 2024). Attitudes to the EU, including support for membership or further integration, also showed no marked decline over the same period that trust in politics was generally falling (Hobolt and de Vries, 2016). Walter (2021) documents a similar pattern in public opinion on issues linked to globalisation generally, including attitudes to international institutions and free trade, where strong and consistent trends over recent decades are not apparent.

There is also no guarantee that declining trust and confidence in the political system will result in people being drawn to extreme political viewpoints or forms of protest. Loss of trust can induce apathy as well as action. People may decide that voting is pointless and cease to take an interest in how their country is run. There is strong evidence of a substantial decline in news consumption in developed countries over at least the past decade, especially but not only among younger adults (Villi et al., 2022; Robertson, 2025). One could argue that this is not a symptom of meaningful or problematic discontent, but rather intolerance of politics, or even boredom with it. However, as described below, there are more serious interpretations.

What is undeniable is a shift in voting patterns. This is obvious in the electoral successes of populist politicians and parties in multiple countries in recent times, including in the UK's Brexit vote. In this context, "populist" implies a political standpoint based on failures of an alleged elite that controls traditional political parties and established political institutions, generally including international ones. Populist political movements typically advocate withdrawing from international institutions or radically reducing their powers, adopting a more economic nationalist or isolationist policies. While one can debate which specific political movements on the political right or left count as populist, the trend is clear. More formal analyses find increased vote shares for parties that articulate such nationalistic policies in Europe (Colantone and Stanig, 2018) and more broadly across OECD countries (Trubowitz and Burgoon, 2020).

The overall pattern of political discontent, therefore, is one of declining trust and confidence in politics that has fundamentally altered modern political psychology. Alongside loss of interest, these developments have led to increased voting for populist and nationalist political parties opposed to international institutions, including the EU. However, there is one somewhat paradoxical element to this pattern, which is that direct answers to relevant survey questions about satisfaction with democracy and support for international institutions, such as the EU, do not necessarily display a similar decline over time. Arguably, therefore, much of the political discontent is directed primarily at national politicians and parties holding liberal, multilateralist views about international issues, rather than at international institutions and structures themselves.

## 4 Sources of discontent

In political science, a standard way to conceive of electoral politics is by analogy to a marketplace. According to this perspective, voters are on the demand side and politicians and political movements on the supply side. Voters evaluate what they see around them and form political preferences. This demand is met by political actors seeking votes or other kinds of support who supply and sell messaging and policies. The analogy is a useful organising principle, as it allows for clear distinctions when considering potential determinants of changes and trends. Voters may experience developments in their personal circumstances or community that they evaluate positively or negatively and, as a consequence, be drawn towards certain political viewpoints. Such processes are on the demand side. Alternatively, a political leader may take a position that a particular policy generates a positive or negative outcome, leading to greater or lesser popularity. This kind of process is on the supply side. In considering sources of political discontent, this distinction is widely deployed to distinguish between the decisions and actions of different agents.

There are, however, meaningful differences between the popularity of political actors or ideas and purchasing of goods and services, especially regarding communication in the marketplace. Consumers of goods and services may find that marketing helps, or perhaps, persuades them to choose a particular product, but they then get to experience that product for themselves. By contrast, voters do not experience political offerings the way consumers experience products, as separate from the marketing that accompanies them. Having chosen who to support, whether in argument or the ballot box, the voter gets no independent experience of their choice. Rather, everyone gets to experience only the political offering that won the election, together with the societal outcomes that ensue. Meanwhile, political argument continues as to whether the outcomes are good or bad, what has actually caused them and whether the outcome would have been better or worse had an alternative option been chosen. In other words, the marketing continues, endlessly. This is important, because technology has radically altered marketing and communication. As described below, these technological developments may have had profound and unique impacts on political communication, such that some potential sources of discontent may be found neither on the demand side nor the supply side, but instead in the organisation and rules of the marketplace.

The remainder of this section considers different potential sources of discontent and makes extensive use of the market analogy as a way of emphasising the breadth of sources and different causal pathways entailed.

## 5 Economic decline

On the demand side, economic fortunes have long been understood to be one of the primary drivers of political opinion. Thus, it makes sense for researchers to consider the economic circumstances of the people and geographic areas that are expressing the most discontent. One strand of empirical research, broadly headlined “geographies of discontent”, focuses on the regional variation in discontent and aims to tease apart the multiple correlates of regions where discontent is high. While researchers may differ somewhat over the precise economic drivers (see Ejrnæs et al., 2024), a broad consensus has emerged that discontent is higher in regions that have experienced declines in growth, productivity and employment, or, more broadly, where inhabitants feel that they have been left behind.

Geographic areas with high discontent are often victims of the decline of one or more specific local industries and tend to be less urban and more rural in character, perhaps containing towns or small cities, where economic incomes have stagnated and job opportunities feel harder to come by. Such regions may be more likely to contain people who are older, people with lower educational attainment and people who are more likely to experience unemployment. Where economic decline in long-term, people may seek revenge against mainstream political parties through the ballot box and be drawn to more populist politics (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018), which lays the blame for their plight at the door of an aloof and distant elite. An interesting aspect of this thesis departs from the straightforward link between low income and discontent. At least for European data, once the long-term economic and industrial decline of regions is controlled for in the analysis, areas with higher per capita income are more likely to vote for Eurosceptic parties (Dijkstra et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, one of the difficulties in interpreting the data on geographies of discontent is the overlapping nature of the different explanatory economic variables that can be used to characterise a region. For instance, other researchers have associated high discontent with exposure to globalised markets, including specifically competition from Chinese imports or automation (Colantone & Stanig, 2019), to unemployment (Algan et al., 2017) or to more general economic insecurity (Guiso et al., 2017). Somewhat different results may also arise because some empirical models use regional vote shares while others use individual-level survey responses.

What these accounts of discontent share is a demand-side perspective that a root cause of discontent, perhaps even the root cause, is people’s experience of economic decline. Of course, researchers are aware that there are also supply-side factors involved in the rise of populist politics, but the thrust of the argument is that economic decline is what makes people susceptible to the overtures of populist politics.

It is important to note that other arguments can be constructed from observing the same data. For instance, a researcher who judges that the rise of discontent is primarily a supply-side phenomenon might argue that what has changed in recent decades is the strategies of more extreme political parties and/or behaviour of populist politicians, but that their success is moderated by the experience of long-term economic decline, generating an association between support for populists and decline. As with many markets, the causal pathways can be complicated and whether demand is leading supply, or supply generating its own demand, is not easily observed. There are other plausible interpretations too. An alternative, but distinct, argument might be that the findings are consistent with economic decline as a necessary but not sufficient factor behind political discontent – that other factors must co-exist in order for discontent to take hold.

While geographically defined economic decline appears to be an important piece in the puzzle, there are other reasons to continue to search for other pieces. While the link between decline and voting

patterns has solid empirical support, links to other aspects of discontent are not established. Reviewing the literature on backlash to globalisation, Walter (2021) concludes that the relationship between material economic outcomes and voting patterns is stronger at the regional level than it is at the individual level. Where European workers more exposed to off-shoring do not display an increased tendency to vote for populist parties relative to other low-skilled workers (Rommel and Walter, 2017). It is also not obvious without further elaboration why long-term economic decline would lead many people to switch off from the business of politics, yet as the above evidence shows, this is a growing response. Similarly, there have been protracted periods of economic decline in the past that have led to swings in political support from one side of the left-right political spectrum to the other, rather than the opening up of a new axis of political thinking. To explain this, some input from the political supply side is needed, such as the idea that mainstream political parties have converged in their offerings. Long-term economic decline in some regions is probably an important contributor to political discontent, but it is not a complete diagnosis.

## 6 Inequality

The apparent shrinkage of the traditional left-right political dimension is perhaps relevant to a related contender as a demand-side source of discontent: growing inequality. In the past, the priority that government gives to inequality was a primary political battleground between left and right, with each typically adopting a different stance on the need for distribution. Globalisation has, however, changed the nature of the political debate about inequality (Rodrik, 2018).

This has happened in several ways. Firstly, while the traditional politics of inequality centres on how far those in lower socio-economic groups are falling behind, recent decades has seen much greater inequality at the other end of the income distribution. Economic growth in the digital era has overwhelmingly benefitted the richer end of the income distribution, with median incomes often increasingly only slowly or remaining stagnant over many years. Secondly and relatedly, some focus has shifted to the incomes and behaviour of the very richest in society, including an even smaller global elite. Thirdly, the extent of this inequality is more salient for all to see. Images and videos displaying “how the other half live” are only a short scroll away, although the modern day version might perhaps be “how the 1% live”. Lastly, in the globalised economy, politicians on both the left and right appear paralysed to do much about the resulting unfairness. Seeking a greater contribution to society through taxation from the rich and, especially, the super-rich, risks pushing away investment and, with it, the jobs of ordinary people.

Inequality and unfairness do not necessarily overlap, and people instinctively respond much more strongly to the latter (Starmans et al., 2017). Riches gained by moving production to more advantageous regimes and availing of international accounting practices are likely to be viewed very differently from riches gained by producing a product that sells while providing local employment. A recent global survey of 60 countries found that two-thirds of respondents presently view inequality as unfair and an even greater proportion want the government to do something about it (Almås et al., 2025). The upshot is a globalised economic regime that many are likely to view as profoundly unfair.

This source of discontent is consistent with the withdrawal of support for mainstream political parties, who seem impotent to do anything about it, coupled with some increase in support for left-wing populists and protest movements, including in the area of climate, where the inability of government to face up to large corporations is also a factor. Arguably, it is also perhaps easier to link this source to growing apathy about politics, since many of the people who are concerned about inequality are not directly threatened economically. However, while the rhetoric of right-wing populists frequently lays the blame for all economic ills at the door of an elite, reducing inequality is rarely a feature. Inequality may play a part in discontent, but only a part.

## 7 Cultural backlash

An alternative source of discontent stems not from economic, but cultural change. A theory of “cultural backlash” linked to authoritarian populism is laid out in detail by Norris and Inglehart (2019). The argument focuses on developed Western nations, where it is claimed that society went through multiple linked stages. The story begins with slow structural changes to society over the postwar decades, with greater security and freedom offered to successive generations, producing a steady and silent revolution in cultural values. The direction of travel was consistently in a socially liberal direction, with changes to gender roles and acceptance of greater cultural and ethnic diversity. Eventually, the argument goes, this revolution was bound to produce a conservative backlash, as people with more traditional values began to feel estranged and left behind in their own countries. The thesis is consistent with data showing the expansion of social liberal values and the shrinking over socially conservative ones over successive cohorts. It is also consistent with the sociodemographic make-up of support for populist parties, which typically attract older, more male, less educated and more working class followers.

Other researchers have offered and sought to test somewhat different accounts of cultural backlash. For instance, Mutz (2018) offers an account based more specifically on the threat to the status of traditionally high-status groups, especially whites, Christians and men. Based on American survey data, Mutz seeks to pit a cultural explanation of Donald Trump’s electoral success against an explanation based on economic factors, reporting statistical models more supporting of the former.

Given the multiple possible causal connections between economic and cultural explanatory variables, it is perhaps wise to be cautious about strong inferences concerning the relative merits of economic and cultural factors in explaining the demand side of political discontent. Nevertheless, the consistency of cultural variables with timescales and voting patterns, coupled with the prominence of cultural messaging on the supply side of populist politics would seem to indicate that these factors have a role to play, perhaps alongside economic factors.

Before moving on from cultural theories on the demand side, there is a prominent microcosm of the debate between cultural and economic factors in explaining discontent, namely immigration. Competing theories of anti-immigrant sentiment centre on either perceptions of economic insecurity (Arzheimer, 2018), most commonly with respect to competition for jobs, housing or state supports, or on rejection of a multicultural view of society, either as part of a broader cultural backlash like that envisaged by Norris and Inglehart (2019), or a narrower response specific to increases in immigration (Kaufmann, 2014). Yet it is important not to assume that increases in vote shares of political parties that use anti-immigrant rhetoric or push more radical curbs on immigration necessarily reflect more widespread anti-immigrant attitudes. Dennison and Geddes (2019) find no evidence for increases in anti-immigrant attitudes across EU states, either in European Social Survey data from 2004-2016 or Eurobarometer data from 2014-2017, despite the contemporaneous electoral successes of anti-immigrant political parties. Rodon and Kent (2023) shed some light on the dynamics of this relationship, providing evidence that levels of immigration and attitudes to it, by region, are positively associated but mediated by segregation – there is no positive effect where immigrant communities are segregated. Instead of positive or negative attitudes to immigration, vote shares for anti-immigrant parties appear to be linked to the salience of the issue – how important it is perceived to be among other political issues (Dennison and Geddes, 2019). That is, the increased prominence of immigration as a political issue has led some people to act on latent attitudes that are largely unchanged.

## 8 Populism as method

We turn now to consider the supply side which, at its most simple, raises the question of whether and how either populism, or some modern variant of it, is a reflection of political discontent or a cause of it. Populism is not new, but has instead afflicted politics in waves over a period of 150 years or more (von Beyme, 1985). A reasonable question to ask, therefore, is whether, in its modern incarnation, it has somehow made itself more effective.

The essential component of populism is how politicians change the central issue of politics from one of what needs to be done to one of who should be doing it. The rhetoric creates an in-group, which consist of the ordinary people, and one or more out-groups, most notably a self-serving and incompetent elite that is (or has been) running the show (Oliver and Rahn, 2016). In short, instead of talking about issues and policies, populists talk about people and groups. The political style is unashamedly “us and them”, talking about the elite in conspiratorial terms, often deploying abrasive personal attacks and generalisations (Block and Negrine, 2017).

One of the benefits of this political approach is that the ruling elite outgroup can be adapted and expanded to discredit almost anyone in a professional or influential role. This includes not only mainstream politicians, but civil servants, the media, scientists, international organisations, or critics in medicine, law or academia. All of these groups can be bundled, as required, into the elite out-group whose interests are not aligned with “the people” who, for their part, apparently only the populist can represent. At times, the fact that ordinary people manage to identify with populist politicians can seem bizarre – most notably perhaps when the politician hails from a highly privileged upbringing, rarely interacts with anyone who is not privileged, is a multi-millionaire, and so on. However, the modern political climate is one in which politics has become more professionalised and where those who have turned their back on politics have partly done so because they feel that no one represents them (Frieden, 2017). The upshot may be that even though the populist politician is nothing like them, he or she is at least seeming to address their concerns.

De Vries and Hobolt (2020) identify anti-establishment rhetoric as one of the two advantages enjoyed by political parties that have challenged the mainstream parties of Western Europe in recent decades. They note that the modern success of “challenger parties” began in the 1980s and that support for traditional mainstream parties has, with some fluctuations, been broadly eroded since. The second advantage of challenger parties is the ability to develop and own policy innovations that correspond to wedge issues within mainstream parties. This makes issues such as the European Union and immigration attractive areas for challenger parties, since opinion on these issues does not simply follow the left-right divide that has long been central to traditional party identity. Thus, the successful populist primarily concentrates on the failures of the elite, personalising politics as much as possible, but when needing to discuss issues, makes use of these wedges.

Is this approach an inevitable response to demand-side discontent, or a supply-side strategy that has helped to generate and spread discontent? Wedge issues like European integration and immigration are notable in that attitudes to them do not appear to have not been subject to pronounced trends in recent times and they are not strongly related to the economic grounds for political discontent discussed above, at least relative to domestic economic policies, such as levels of taxation and public investment. Rather, populist politicians are inclined to point to the EU and immigrants as scapegoats. The implication would seem to be that political strategy, i.e. supply side effects, matter too. Reviewing the literature on the globalisation backlash, Walter (2021) reaches a

similar conclusion, arguing that the backlash has been influenced not only by exposure to economic and cultural impacts, but to how the issue has been politicised and made salient. Put simply, the growing number of international issues that do not fall neatly on the left-right divide constitute fertile political ground for populists to grow some discontent.

## 9 Digital and Social Media

Thus far, we have considered discontent from the demand and supply side. But what about the marketplace itself? Digital media, and especially social media, has radically altered communication between political actors and voters in a relatively short period of time. While it is important to note that the start of the rise of modern populism predates social media (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020), a reasonable question to ask is whether it boosts political discontent, or makes it easier for populists seeking to generate or exploit discontent.

Communication scholars and psychologists have identified multiple channels through which this might occur. Lewandowsky et al. (2020) highlight four “pressure points”. First, direct communication via digital media allows political actors to gain attention and “microtarget” messages, without oversight or accountability. Second, if digital platforms design online choice architectures to maximise engagement, they may do so in ways that do not expose users to challenging perspectives or, worse, push extreme or polarising political material. Third, lack of content oversight entails a proliferation of misinformation and disinformation, which often goes unchallenged. Fourth, online fora provide an opportunity for those holding extreme views to organise and persuade in relative seclusion. The take-home message, in the context of this chapter, is that digital and social media have changed communication in the political marketplace in ways that are likely to alter the balance between supply and demand.

Of these pressure points, arguably the second and third have been subject to the majority of empirical research, largely because of the difficulty of gaining access to online content that political actors would rather keep concealed. This is potentially an important omission, because the possibilities for direct, exclusive and short communication with voters is arguably more useful for populists seeking to sell a simple narrative account of society’s ills than it is for politicians who are genuinely trying to grapple with the complexities and intricacies of policy.

Two concepts related to choice architectures have received much research attention: echo chambers and filter bubbles. The concept of an echo chamber invokes an online experience where platform users choose or are directed to make connections and view material that they are more likely to agree with and insulating them from challenges to their beliefs and views (Jamieson and Capella, 2008). A filter bubble is a more passive notion, that envisages digital users receiving ranked search results and news feeds curated for their personal political tastes and comfort (Pariser, 2011).

The evidence for the existence of filter bubbles is less strong than that for echo chambers and both may be somewhat less prevalent than some had feared (Lewandowsky et al., 2020), with survey estimates of online news consumption suggesting that the proportion of voters existing in online echo chambers is typically below 10% (e.g. Fletcher et al., 2021). Other evidence suggests that online conflict may be as much a driver of polarised political opinion as cosy online congeniality (Buder et al., 2023). However, there appears to be a political asymmetry, with echo chambers being more common on the right than the left (Barberá et al., 2015; Ross Arguedas et al., 2024). Furthermore, at least with respect to interactions on Twitter, evidence suggests different political interactions associated with the ends of the political spectrum, with communication between those classified as far-right and the centre-right and centre-left being more common than between those classified as far-right and the centre-right, or those classified as far-left and the centre-left (Bright, 2018). This pattern corresponds with the notion that while voters may be similar on the left-right dimension, they may be separated by distance on the discontent axis (Santucci and Dyck, 2022).

The extent and effects of exposure to misinformation has generated a lively online debate among researchers between those drawing attention to its dangers for democracy (e.g. Ecker et al., 2024),

and those seeking to correct what they believe to be common but exaggerated narratives about its ubiquity and corrosive impact (e.g. Budak et al., 2024). A recent review of this literature (Gawronski et al., 2024) drew three conclusions that perhaps run counter to the prevailing narrative. First, people are generally not bad at distinguishing true from false information online. Second, and less optimistically, they do so with strong partisan biases. Third, scepticism of true information is much stronger than gullibility to false information, in keeping with the broader loss of political trust.

Overall, there is evidence that digital and social media have altered political communication channels in ways that are likely to make the supply of political discontent a more powerful force. While most the research described above is designed to illustrate areas of concern, Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2022) undertook a systematic review of almost 500 international research articles examining digital device use and political outcomes. On the positive side, digital device use was linked to greater political participation and engagement with information in autocracies and emerging democracies. However, in established democracies, it was linked to declining political trust, increasing populism and growing polarization. It seems likely digitalisation has changed the political marketplace in ways that foment discontent.

## 10 Media fragmentation

While attention continues to be drawn to the effects of digital and, particularly, social media, there is perhaps a danger that too little attention remains on our more traditional forms of political communication. As described above, the beginning of the trends of declining political trust and loss of vote share for mainstream parties largely pre-date the digital revolution. The same is true for polarisation (Boxell et al., 2017). Of course, some of these pre-cursors to present-day discontent may be down to one or more of the many supply-side and demand-side factors cited above, including economic stagnation. However, other research indicates that media coverage and, in particular, fragmented media coverage, may be a factor.

Consistent with the findings of Gawronski et al. (2024) on scepticism of truth, cited above, Bennet and Livingstone (2024) make the case that the fragmentation of the media landscape means that there is no longer any such thing as authoritative information. The logic here is not only that the “gatekeeping” role of the media has weakened with the proliferation of channels and sources, but also that the segmentation of the media audience alters coverage. When national media networks are compelled to appeal to viewers and readers across the political spectrum, they are accountable to their audience (and more broadly) for the fairness and balance within their coverage. This requirement for broad appeal does not only imply gatekeeping of authoritative information, but also the refereeing of disputes.

Even before the advent of online news, the fragmentation inherent in multichannel broadcasting changed incentives towards greater market segmentation in news coverage. Based on US data, Muise et al. (2022) find that a higher proportion of citizens are segregated in their television news consumption than in their online news consumption, that the pattern in television news watching is more stable over time, and that the share of watching partisan channels is continuing to grow. America was quick to embrace multichannel broadcasting, but has now long been standard across the developed world. Partisan television, and radio, does not only filter information for its viewers and listeners, it displays its colours through who it chooses to interview, which of its interviewees it truly challenges, the tone it strikes, the use of innuendos and implications, and more. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the trend towards American political polarisation began shortly after the advent of cable news (Boxell et al., 2017), albeit an impossible hypothesis to test.

Lastly, while the withdrawal of many, especially younger, people from news media altogether (Robertson, 2025) may be taken merely as sign of reduced political engagement, it may also represent a hostage to fortune. Withdrawal has been linked to both emotional and cognitive reasons, including distress and negativity associated with news (Newman et al., 2019), lack of relevance (Lee and Chyi, 2014) and increased competition from entertainment content (Villi et al., 2022). It is hard to view these developments as positive for contentment with democracy (Skovsgaard and Andersen, 2020).

## 11 Conclusion

Returning to the purpose of this paper, are there reasons to believe that even if Europe enjoys a period of higher economic growth, coupled with appropriate redistribution of the proceeds, we might still find ourselves surrounded by worrisome political discontent? As is clear from the arguments above, the answer to this question is straightforward: yes. Higher growth, improved regional policy and other policies to reduce inequality are likely to dampen the demand-side drivers of political discontent. But there are many other candidate sources, including not only cultural backlash, but developments on the supply side of politics and technological changes that have altered the political marketplace.

My purpose here is to try to broaden understanding of the range of possible sources of discontent. In doing so, it is helpful to get beyond disciplinary and theoretical boundaries. Several researchers have called previously for a broader approach to the debate about whether discontent is mainly an economic or cultural phenomenon, since it could be both, or an interaction of the two (Noury and Roland, 2020; Schmidt, 2022). This paper indicates that there is a case for going broader still, for integrating ideas from other disciplines, including communication studies, psychology and behavioural science, as each is making a contribution to understanding a piece of the collective puzzle.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the potential remedies that might match the various diagnoses of discontent, but clear that policymakers may need to reach for multiple sections of the policy toolbox, in addition to the many tools of economic policy. It is still early in the life of the EU Digital Services Act, which places greater responsibilities on online platforms to regulate content, including disinformation. The regulatory flexibility within the act may determine the practical impacts of enforcement on disinformation and other aspects of political communication. More broadly, however, there is a case to be made for a more proactive approach in the face of current threats (Abels et al., 2024). A broader consideration of sources of discontent implies a broader canvass for creative ideas in defence of democracy.

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