

'They don't know what it's like for us': Why citizens with lower levels of education feel political discontent

Previous research suggests that citizens with lower levels of education are more likely to express dissatisfaction with politics. Drawing on new research in the Netherlands, Kjell Noordzij, Willem de Koster and Jeroen van der Waal explain why the distance these citizens feel from politicians fosters their discontent.

Citizens with lower and higher levels of education essentially exist within different "life-worlds". They hold different political stances and preferences, for instance on law and order or cultural diversity, but they also engage in different leisure activities, exhibit distinct consumption practices, and have differing levels of familiarity with institutional conventions.

Recent research has highlighted how this cleavage gives rise to recognition gaps, [defined](#) by sociologist Michèle Lamont as "disparities in worth and cultural membership between groups in a society". Citizens with lower levels of education may perceive their own life-worlds as holding lower status within society than those of more-educated citizens. Moreover, as citizens with higher levels of education tend to dominate fields such as [politics](#), other citizens may perceive politicians to be distant from their way of life.

Tellingly, many (populist) politicians have capitalised on this perception of distance between politicians and a substantial portion of the electorate. A powerful example emerged during the 2016 US presidential election when Hillary Clinton [referred](#) to Donald Trump's supporters as "deplorables", prompting Trump [to state](#) that this revealed Clinton "to be a person who looks down on the proud citizens of our country". Various studies have hinted at how the perception that politicians do not share the lived experiences of ordinary citizens can feed into resentment among groups such as [rural residents](#), [working-class white citizens](#) and [Brexit supporters](#). Yet we still require a better understanding of *how* this perception plays a role in their political discontent, and that of lower-educated citizens in particular.

Evidence from the Netherlands

To shed light on this question, we held in-depth group interviews with 26 politically discontented citizens with lower levels of education in the Netherlands, a country [characterised](#) by an exceptionally wide education gap in political trust. Because we wanted to establish safe and familiar interview contexts in which people would feel free to speak their minds, we conducted the interviews in settings and groups chosen and assembled by participants themselves. While all participants were discontented with politics, they came from multiple regions, and differed substantially in political orientation and levels of political interest and participation.

Our interviews revealed a deeply-felt perception that many politicians – "they" – were far removed from "common" people, or "us". While our interviewees did not specify which groups constituted the "common" people, the concept was frequently articulated in relation to politicians who were seen as distant from them. This perceived distance consisted of three aspects, each in its own way associated with political discontent.

First, our interviewees perceived many politicians to be insensitive to the lived experiences of the "common" people, which was often attributed to politicians' higher levels of education or different lifestyles. One interviewee said that many politicians "travel in different circles, they're confronted with different things, and so they have different interests... and that's why they don't know what it's like for us". Following this perception of insensitivity to their lived experiences, our interviewees believed that many politicians did not represent them and that their policies did not match their interests. This was reflected in a comment in one of our interviews that politicians, "after having followed a couple of studies", "suddenly go into politics and tell everybody here how they should do things".

Second, our interviewees observed that many politicians "beat about the bush", while "common" people would be "straightforward, without limits" and "upfront". This observation mattered greatly for evaluating such politicians: their communication styles were perceived as signalling indecisiveness and a lack of integrity. Such politicians are "always whining", which "doesn't achieve anything", and use "double-talking" strategies.

Last, many politicians were blamed for signalling superiority and looking down on the “common” people because of the political views the latter hold (which they experience as being denounced as “racist”), their social position (“deplorable”), or limited political knowledge (“simple souls”). This perception strongly contributed to our interviewees feeling misrecognised and perceived as incompetent in the political domain. However, it also activated a reaction in which many of our interviewees felt the need to stress their pre-eminence compared to politicians.

Tellingly, politicians that were believed to share lived experiences with our interviewees were evaluated positively. One emphasised that when politicians “speak from the perspective of the people”, they “speak for me”. Similarly, those politicians that would speak “just normal” were associated with greater decisiveness and integrity than those who would “beat about the bush”. In addition, politicians who signalled they were on the same “level” as the “common” people were appreciated: a politician who “just pulls on a pair of jeans” would show that he “isn’t worth more than normal Dutch citizens”.

Our findings have implications for contemporary politics. Most importantly, they show that the overrepresentation of citizens with higher levels of education in political institutions, also [termed](#) “diploma democracy”, is of greater significance than is commonly recognised. This overrepresentation not only results in citizens with lower levels of education feeling underrepresented when it comes to their policy preferences, but also makes these citizens feel misunderstood by politicians with respect to their lived experiences.

In essence, they feel that politicians look down upon them. The dominant communication style used in the political domain can also make lower educated citizens question the integrity and decisiveness of politicians. As such, the impact of a diploma democracy on levels of political discontent is more encompassing than previous research would suggest. Those aiming to reduce this discontent thus face an even greater challenge.

For more information, see the authors’ accompanying paper (open access) in the [British Journal of Sociology](#)

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