

► Project brief

Thünen Institute of Rural Studies

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Geography of discontent: Where social cohesion is under pressure

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- Political dissatisfaction is unevenly distributed geographically, but cannot be reduced to a simple “urban-rural” contrast
- It is more complex geographically and is exacerbated by regional inequalities
- Actual or feared economic decline, perceived backwardness, and poor access to public services are putting pressure on social cohesion

Background and objectives

Social polarization, loss of trust in politics and institutions, and the success of populist and extremist parties are often explained in spatial terms: structurally weak, peripheral, and rural regions are considered particularly susceptible to political discontent. In academia and the public sphere, this phenomenon is referred to as the “geography of discontent.” Against this backdrop, our project “Geography of Dissatisfaction – Threats to Social Cohesion in Rural Areas” has compiled the first systematic overview of international research on this topic. Our goal was to bundle and reliably compile international findings on

- how dissatisfaction is measured,
- where it occurs spatially, and
- which causes are considered particularly relevant in research.

With our findings, we want to provide a sound basis for political debates on rural areas, “left-behind regions,” and social cohesion.

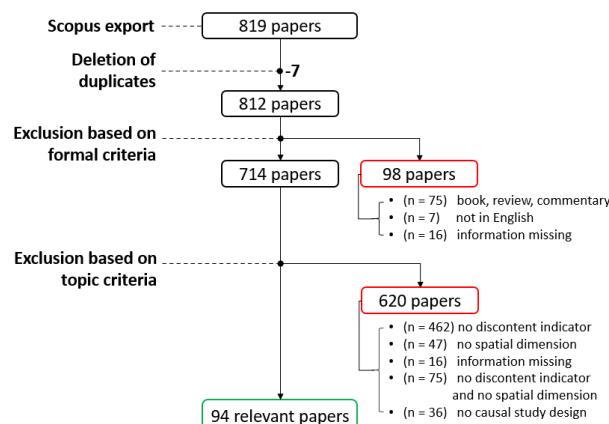


Figure 1: Selection process for specialist articles (source: scopus.com; own analysis and presentation).

Approach

In this project, we conducted a systematic, international literature review (scoping review). We searched the Scopus database, which contains abstracts and bibliographic information from scientific publications, for the terms “geography” and “discontent” and variants thereof in titles, abstracts, and keywords. We searched exclusively for English-language publications and initially identified 819 potentially relevant articles. After several quality and relevance checks, 94 studies were ultimately included in the in-depth analysis (see fig. 1).

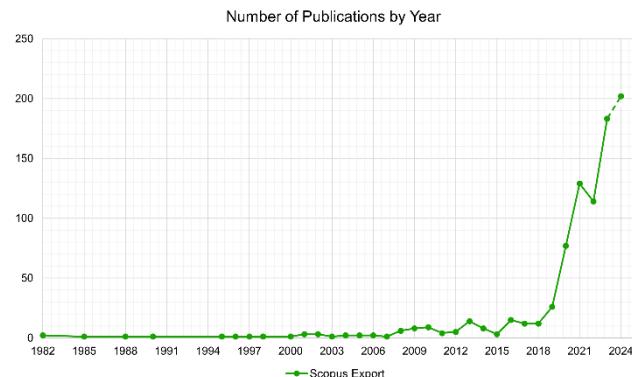


Figure 2: Number of publications on the geography of discontent over time using the search terms “geograph*” and “discontent” in titles, abstracts, and full text without formal and content relevance checks (source: scopus.com; own analysis and extrapolation for 2024).

Results

International research on the geography of dissatisfaction is a young, rapidly growing field that has gained significant importance, particularly since the mid-2010s (see fig. 2). Current research has clearly focused on Western Europe. Initial analyses that shaped the beginning of the debate referred to the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom (June 2016), but a relatively large number of studies can also be found for Italy and Sweden. Eastern Europe has been significantly underrepresented so far, even though political and economic upheavals there have been much more profound since the 1990s and regional disparities are

sometimes very pronounced. The lower presence of Eastern European case studies is likely to be due less to a lack of relevance than to data-related, methodological, and research-structural reasons.

In the studies, dissatisfaction is operationalized and measured both in terms of voting behavior (e.g., voting for populist parties) and individual attitudes (e.g., Eurosceptic attitudes) (see Tab. 1). It is thus a complex social phenomenon that is not expressed solely in voting behavior.

Table 1: Dimensions of dissatisfaction (source: own research and compilation).

Indicators	
Voting behavior	Voting for Eurosceptic parties
	Voting for anti-immigration parties
	Voting for right-wing and left-wing populist parties
	Not participating in elections
Individual attitudes	Eurosceptic attitudes
	Dissatisfaction with basic services
	Feelings of being left behind
	Sense of injustice in the face of decarbonization policies
	Negative perceptions of the future
	Lack of political effectiveness
	Lack of trust in institutions or politics
	Resentment toward one's own place of residence

One key finding is that the often-emphasized “urban-rural” divide falls short. Although people in rural areas tend to be more dissatisfied, inequalities between regions and within cities, for example between prosperous centers and peripheral neighborhoods, are more decisive. The link between (actual, perceived, or feared) economic decline and political dissatisfaction is particularly strong. Regions with job losses, stagnating incomes, and low economic momentum are more likely to experience frustration and protest behavior.

The decisive factor here is not so much the absolute income situation as the perceived decline compared to previous times or other regions, or fears of decline in the future.

Finally, research clearly shows that infrastructure, trust in government institutions and their visibility, and spatially sensitive policies also play an important role: poor accessibility, weak institutional quality, and perceived injustice, for example in the neglect of peripheral areas, go hand in hand with declining trust in politics.

Policy measures that aim to reduce political dissatisfaction and strengthen social cohesion should therefore address many issues. We have been able to identify some of these, but further research is needed. We are pursuing this in the DFG project “Social and Political Consequences of Spatial Inequalities: An East-Central European Case Study (SPC Spatial)”, which will run until 2026.

Conclusions

International research shows that political dissatisfaction is unevenly distributed geographically, but cannot be reduced to a simple “urban-rural” dichotomy. More decisive are inequalities between regions and within cities, especially between prosperous centers and peripheral areas. A stable finding is the connection between economic structural change, regional decline, and perceived backwardness. Overall, dissatisfaction arises from the interplay of economic, social, institutional, and spatial factors, the effects of which have only been partially researched systematically to date.

Further Information

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Publications

Klärner A (2024) In Krisenzeiten zusammenhalten. LandInForm (4): 12 – 13

Deppisch L, Klärner A (2025) Discontent in 'left-behind places'? How perception of space and local political climate matter for the success of right-wing populism in rural areas of Germany. Regional Studies 59(1):2587811

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