



Editorial

Geography of discontent and beyond: Extreme voting, protestations, riots and violence, and their spatial content



From geography of discontent to public resentment

Research on the geography of discontent have become increasingly important in recent years, focusing on populations dissatisfied with their day-to-day life, who express their discontent through extreme or dissident votes (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; McCann, 2020). Over the past decade, this research agenda has evolved into one of the central pillars of contemporary Regional Science, because it offers a powerful lens through which scholars and policy makers interpret the political consequences of long-term territorial divergence. Stating how profound spatial inequalities fuel socio-political alienation, economic anxiety, and the rise of populist movements, they move beyond individual-level and traditional voting analyses to argue that place itself - defined by its economic structure, history, and opportunities - is a fundamental determinant of political behavior and social cohesion. This body of work redirects attention from the sole characteristics of individuals toward the trajectories of territories, their insertion into national and global production networks, and the institutional architectures that govern them. It insists on the cumulative interaction between material inequalities, perceived injustice and narratives that assign blame to specific territories, and that often portray them as obsolete, dependent or culturally backward. This complex phenomenon encompasses poverty, lack of infrastructures, but also a relative sense of decline, a perceived neglect by central or federal governments, and a loss of status and identity tied to locality. The geography of discontent therefore combines objective indicators of structural disadvantage with subjective experiences of humiliation, stigma and misrecognition, and it turns this combination into a fertile ground for new electoral cleavages and new forms of territorial conflict.

This social expression of disagreement is deeply rooted in the uneven impacts of globalization, deindustrialization, and technological change. The transition to a knowledge and service-based economy (Storper, 2018), operates on a logic of agglomeration, concentrating high-value jobs, innovation, and capital in superstar cities. This self-reinforcing cycle, where success induces further success in these hubs, while other regions face a parallel cycle of decline, conduct to a loss of young talent, productive capacity, and, ultimately, voice on the national stage. This has created a division between dynamic metropolitan hubs and what are often perceived as places that don't matter—peripheral or rural regions experiencing long-term economic stagnation and a sense of political abandonment (Iammarino et al., 2019). This economic hollowing-out diminishes local tax bases, reduces public service quality, and creates intergenerational cycles of limited opportunity, fostering a pervasive sense of grievance, reinforcing the status of being left behind (McCann,

2020) and to be stuck into development traps (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2024). Development traps, in this perspective, reflect combinations of low growth, weak employment prospects, institutional fragilities and limited adaptive capacity, which restrict the strategic options available to local actors and foster a perception of structural dead end.

In addition to these economic and social disparities, other parameters may explain the genesis of discontent. Decentralization, for example, has often strengthened some regions at the expense of others. This trend has frequently resulted in increased metropolisation, characterized by disproportionate investment in large urban centers, abandoning many peripheral territories (Torre and Bourdin, 2023). Place-based reforms that aimed at greater efficiency or competitiveness sometimes generated asymmetric gains, and thus widened intra-national gaps between powerful metropolitan cores and structurally weaker regions or small cities. This process can exacerbate regional inequalities and contribute to a sense of abandonment among people in deprived areas, fueling discontent and protest (Bourdin and Tai, 2022). In addition, the quality of institutions - at national, regional and local levels - is another major factor in dissatisfaction. Weak or ineffective institutions can create resentment among the population, generating political tensions (Rodríguez-Pose, 2020). Studies have shown that when citizens perceive their institutions to be corrupt, ineffective or indifferent to their needs, they are more likely to participate in protest movements. The geography of discontent therefore reflects an institutional as well as an economic divide: territories with limited access to impartial, capable and responsive institutions tend to accumulate frustration, distrust and anti-system preferences, even when average levels of income do not appear extremely low in comparative terms.

Furthermore, the geography of discontent is reinforced by profound social and cultural processes. Economic decline can erode community identity and social capital (Putnam, 2000). A perceived loss of status and way of life, particularly in formerly industrial or agricultural heartlands, fuels cultural resentment alongside economic anxiety. This is often exacerbated by stark spatial disparities in infrastructure investment, digital connectivity, and access to higher education, creating a feedback loop of disadvantage that solidifies a community's feeling of being forgotten. The feeling of being spatially trapped—lacking the resources to move to more prosperous areas—intensifies the sense of isolation and neglect (Carrascal-Incera et al., 2020). Discontent thus arises in part from the everyday experience of place: dilapidated public spaces, deteriorated transport connections, limited cultural offer and shrinking public services convey a message of territorial downgrading, which residents interpret as proof that their region counts less than others in the national project. Recent work also underlines the central role of

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rspp.2025.100272>

Available online 22 November 2025

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symbolic and media representations, with some territories portrayed as hopeless, dependent or dangerous, while others appear as spaces of innovation and success; this asymmetry contributes to a geography of recognition that overlaps, but does not coincide perfectly, with the geography of income and employment (De Ruyter et al., 2021).

These discontented geographies often become fertile ground for anti-establishment voting and populist rhetoric, which successfully channels frustrations by blaming distant elites and globalization (Dijkstra et al., 2020). They give rise to new political coalitions that oppose metropolitan winners to peripheral or intermediate places that perceive themselves as ignored, taxed without adequate returns, or sacrificed in the name of national competitiveness and global integration. This process appears worldwide, with famous examples like the Brexit or the Trump elections in the US, with a clear correlation between regions hit by economic decline and a higher extreme voting. But this is not a purely Anglo-American phenomenon; similar patterns have been observed across Europe, in Brazil, in Argentina, where populist parties gain traction in regions feeling abandoned by both market forces and political centers (Giovannini, 2020). These developments invite regional scientists to revisit classic debates on center–periphery relations, cumulative causation and uneven development, and to connect them with contemporary research on political behavior, democratic backsliding and trust in institutions. This political geography reflects a crisis of representation, where communities feel their interests are no longer advocated for within mainstream political discourse (MacKinnon et al., 2022). In that sense, the geography of discontent opens a bridge between regional development studies and democratic theory, and places questions of territorial justice at the core of the policy agenda.

However, voting is not the only expression of discontent, which can manifest in various ways and can often be more direct or even brutal, especially through street protests. Regions and cities that accumulate disadvantages or feelings of injustice often develop specific repertoires of contention, which include electoral protest, boycotts, street demonstrations, blockades of key infrastructures, and in some cases riots and violent confrontations. Protest movements, such as the Yellow Vests in France (Bourdin and Torre, 2023) or anti-austerity protests in Greece (Artelaris and Tsirbas, 2018), have taken a significant place in the contemporary global political landscape. These movements, which arise at the local, national and international levels, reflect deep political discontent, often rooted in economic, social and spatial disparities (Brenner et al., 2010; Eva et al., 2022). The recent riots in France may also be related to this family of movements of protestation. Research in political geography has shown that these movements are often linked to the perception of socio-spatial injustice (Soja, 2009). With this in mind, economic and social disparities at the local and regional levels are becoming focal points of tension (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). These movements can be understood as responses to socio-economic and political exclusion, alongside spatial marginalization (Marcuse, 2009). Thus, protest movements often serve as revelators of regional inequalities, highlighting gaps in local and regional public policies (Pike et al., 2017). They challenge traditional territorial governance frameworks and highlight the need for more inclusive approaches to regional and territorial development, addressing issues of conflict and local opposition (Torre, 2025). Episodes of violence and repression, in turn, display clear spatial patterns: they concentrate in specific neighborhoods, along strategic transport axes or at symbolic sites of power, and they reveal the unequal exposure of groups and territories to coercive state practices. The “beyond” in the title of this special issue therefore refers to this extension of the research agenda from electoral outcomes toward the full range of contentious practices and their spatial imprint.

The geography of discontent hence constitutes multi-dimensional research program. It combines analysis of structural inequalities, institutional quality, identity, recognition and conflict; it mobilizes a rich methodological toolbox that includes spatial econometrics, multilevel modelling, qualitative case studies and mixed methods; and it engages directly with major policy debates on regional development, cohesion,

levelling up and just transition. This special issue situates itself at the intersection of these debates. It addresses discontent as a territorial phenomenon that arises in specific places and circulates across scales, and it seeks to illuminate the links between extreme or dissident voting, protest movements, riots, violence and their spatial content.

This special issue of *Regional Science Policy and Practice* addresses both dimensions of discontent, based on a series of articles that address issues of geography of discontent, but also violent or public expressions of resentment. It contains a collection of eight articles. The contributions cover a wide spectrum of national contexts (Central and Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, the United Kingdom, Germany, France and the United States), and they mobilize a variety of methods that range from spatial econometrics to multilevel survey analysis, detailed case studies and innovative use of video data. These articles illustrate the richness of regional science approaches to political and social conflict, and they demonstrate the importance of spatial thinking for a better understanding of contemporary democratic tensions.

The article of Stefan Rehak, and Dana Kubenkova, “Spatial Spillover Effects on the Support for Populist Radical Right Parties in Slovakia” (Rehak and Kubenkova, 2025, in this issue) deals with the fact that populist radical right parties known for populist, anti-immigrant, and Eurosceptic stances have gained varying electoral support in the European Union. Slovakia is no exception and this study investigates the determinants of support for populist radical right parties in Slovakia, focusing on spatial spillover effects and regional disparities. Using spatial econometric models and panel data from 79 Slovak districts across three election cycles (2016, 2020, 2023), the analysis identifies both contextual and compositional factors influencing PRRP support. By integrating advanced spatial econometric approaches, they reveal that variations in PRRP support arise not only from the characteristics of a specific region (direct effect) but also from the influence of neighboring regions’ characteristics (indirect effect), emphasizing the role of spatial interdependencies in shaping political preferences. The study highlights the need for regionally coordinated policies to address economic inequalities and foster social cohesion. Findings of this study contribute to the broader discourse on populism and regional development in CEE, underscoring the importance of targeted interventions in lagging regions to mitigate the spread of populist narratives and strengthen democratic resilience. The paper therefore offers a clear example of how the geography of discontent extends across administrative borders, and how regional science can capture this through explicit modelling of spatial spillovers.

The article of Moreno Mancosu and Giulia Sarcone “Immigration, place, and the right: Explaining support for the radical right in Italy during 2022 Italian National Elections” (Mancosu and Sarcone, 2025, this issue) examines the 2022 Italian National Elections to assess whether the presence of immigrants at municipal ($n = 7890$) and sub-municipal levels ($n = 7823$, across seven major cities) influences electoral support for PRRPs, through the analytical lens of threat and contact theories. Employing spatial autoregressive models (SARs), the analysis challenges the assumption that immigration necessarily boosts right-wing support. Findings reveal no significant association – or even negative correlations – between immigrant presence and support for the Lega and Fratelli d’Italia across most of the country, particularly in urban areas, where results align more closely with the expectations of contact theory. However, a notable exception emerges in Southern Italy, where higher shares of immigrants are positively associated with increased support for Fratelli d’Italia, suggesting the persistence of localized threat dynamics. The study also highlights the central role of socio-demographic variables – particularly education and employment – in shaping political preferences. This contribution refines our understanding of the interaction between migration, context and radical right voting, and it invites caution toward simplistic narratives that attribute discontent mechanically to immigrant presence without attention to territorial specificities.

The article of Sébastien Bourdin, Jérôme Picault, and Arnaud Simon,

“Housing lending, territorial reform, and the financing of central and peripheral regions: Towards a spatial-monetary regime shift?” (Bourdin et al., 2025, in this issue), reflects on the development of home ownership in the second half of the 20th century, perceived as an asset and a significant contributor to wealth accumulation. However, rising property prices and increasingly stringent mortgage lending criteria have placed this model under pressure, particularly for younger generations. Recent territorial reforms and expansionary monetary policies, such as the European Central Bank’s quantitative easing (QE) program, have produced asymmetric effects on regional housing markets. This study applies a spatial econometric model to French departments to investigate how these developments have disproportionately benefited departments located near new regional capitals, thereby exacerbating disparities between these centers and their peripheral territories. By incorporating a spatial perspective, this analysis enriches our understanding of the dynamics between housing finance and regional development while shedding light on the implications of these transformations for financial stability and regional planning policy. The article thus introduces a spatial-monetary dimension into debates on discontent, and shows how macro-financial instruments and territorial reforms combine to alter opportunities and constraints across the urban hierarchy.

The article of Tobias Johannes Hertrich and Thomas Brenner, “When the past becomes the future: The challenges of policies in ‘Left Behind’ places in East Germany – A case study from the Gera region”, (Hertrich and Brenner, 2025, this issue) encompasses different economic, demographic, infrastructural, social and political aspects of ‘left behind’ places, or different aspects or combinations of these. The theoretical model by Hertrich and Brenner (2025) assumes an interplay of many aspects that lead to the left behind feeling, but emphasizes the emerging dynamics of opinion. The purpose of this article is to analyze this interaction of individual factors in detail in a case study and thus gain a deeper understanding of the processes that presumably play a role in many other regions. Contrary to perception, the Labor market region (LMR) Gera is developing dynamically in many parameters. The authors find that although the reasons for the left behind feeling can be assigned to the pillars of the model, in most cases they relate to the past. They conclude that the political measures and developments in the LMR to date have not had an effect due to the strong formation of opinion based on historical events. In addition, the dynamics of opinion formation play a major role in left behind places, which has so far been neglected in politics. This contribution highlights the temporal dimension of discontent, and shows that the memory of earlier episodes of decline or injustice may dominate current objective indicators; it therefore opens a dialogue between regional science, political psychology and memory studies.

The article of Camilla Lenzi and Giovanni Perucca, “Unravelling the geography and spatial mismatch of individual and political discontent in the UK” (Lenzi and Perucca, 2025, in this issue), studies the association between life and political discontent in the regions (NUTS2) of the United Kingdom in the Brexit period (2015–2016). Previous literature suggested that political discontent is propelled by the unhappiness experienced by people suffering from the economic decline of their community. This paper provides a first attempt to test empirically this hypothesis by mapping the geography of life and political discontent, by identifying alternative regional discontent typologies and by profiling them according to their socioeconomic characteristics. Results suggest that the link between regional economic decline and political discontent via life dissatisfaction accounts for a partial variation in political discontent outcome. Regional demography and cultural values are also important co-determinants of political discontent. The article thereby clarifies the extent to which subjective well-being indicators act as mediators between structural territorial inequalities and political outcomes, and it underlines the necessity of multi-dimensional approaches that combine economic, social and cultural variables.

The article of Adolfo Maza and Maria Hierro, “The emergence of the

radical right on the Spanish political scene: Towards a spatial perspective” (Maza and Hierro, 2025, this issue), unveils the reasons behind the irruption of the radical right-wing populist party VOX in the region of Andalusia, breaking the immunity to that political trend in Spain. The empirical analysis is based on data from the 2018 Regional Election at municipal level (778 municipalities), revealing that geographical location matters from two perspectives: because VOX outcome in a municipality is closely related to that in its neighbors (spatial dependence) and since the influence of the main explanatory factors varies between municipalities (spatial non-stationarity). Furthermore, it uncovers that the share of votes won in the previous regional election by the most important right-wing party (namely PP) is the most decisive factor explaining the new support for VOX, closely followed by the percentage of the foreign population. Other important explanatory variables are age, income and size. Finally, the results reveal the existence of some geographical clusters characterized by different spatial patterns. Through its explicit treatment of spatial dependence and non-stationarity, this paper further consolidates the contribution of regional science to the study of radical right success, and shows how local political genealogies and demographic profiles condition the geography of discontent.

The article of Luise Koeppen, Dimitris Ballas, Arjen Edzes and Sierdjan Koster, “Angry together or agitated alone? The role of social capital in the geographies of discontent” (Koeppen et al., 2025, in this issue), applies the perspective of left behind places to the German case, and examines the spatial distribution of ‘populist’ and ‘anti-establishment’ voting. Using micro-data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) and official regional statistics at NUTS 3 level, the authors construct a multilevel model to investigate the roles of socio-economic and demographic contextual and individual level determinants with the intention to vote for AfD, die Linke, and radical right or ‘anti-establishment’ parties in general in the 2017 federal election. Specifically, they explore how social capital – encompassing interpersonal relations and civic engagement – affects the likelihood of voting for these parties. Although social capital is commonly thought of as a shielding effect against ‘populist’ and ‘anti-establishment’ voting and strengthening political representation, its influence on anti-establishment voting remains vague. Based on original survey data from 2017, the results show that indicators of interpersonal relations and civic engagement in networks of civil society, specific forms of social capital, seem to play an important role in affecting voting behavior, revealing that civically involved individuals are more likely to support established democratic parties, rather than voting for a ‘populist’ or ‘anti-establishment’ party. This contribution deepens the analysis of social foundations of discontent, and demonstrates that the same structural conditions may lead to very different political outcomes depending on the density and orientation of local civic networks.

The article of Alexei Anis, “Comparing situational dynamics of repression in the Black Lives Matter and Yellow Vest protests” (Anis, 2025, in this issue), addresses the issue of these two major protests in recent French and American history. This study traces different situational dynamics during clashes between activists and authorities including 11 variables on strategic fraternization attempts, repressive responses, and geospatial characteristics. Using Video Data Analysis (VDA), 165 cases are statistically analyzed. Results reveal that both movements encountered a repressive response to a similar extent, however, the Yellow Vests were more successful in establishing a positive dialogue with authorities. A much larger proportion of interactions in the YV protest also occurred in public squares which suggests that geospatial conditions, combined with activist strategies, may provide protesters with an advantage to potentially reduce the likelihood of experiencing state repression. These findings advance knowledge on protest behavior in contemporary urbanized contexts and reveal the necessity of considering strategic deliberations of activists analogous to urban layouts and spatial characteristics. The paper therefore exemplifies the “beyond” dimension of the special issue, because it shows how

spatial configurations of protest sites and policing strategies influence the escalation or de-escalation of contention, and how this interaction varies across national contexts.

Finally, the article of Tania Fernández García, André Torre and Fernando Rubiera Morollón, “We’ll always have Paris? Spatial inequalities and the rise of political discontent in the metropolitan region of Paris” (Fernández García et al., 2025, in this issue) is related to the contributions in the literature on the geography of discontent which note how the concentration of growth and prosperity in large metropolitan areas explains the rise of anti-system, anti-European political options. The paper focuses on the case of Paris and its surrounding region, Île-de-France, using the results of the last French presidential election in April 2022. Two candidates, one who embodied the Europeanist and pro-establishment option (Macron) and the populist option (Le Pen), faced each other in the second round of the election. This situation, combined with the high level of spatial disaggregation of socioeconomic information within the French statistical system, makes it possible to study the relationship between spatial inequalities and political discontent at the local level and analyze intra-metropolitan patterns. Inequalities at this scale explain a large part of the anti-establishment vote: the most prosperous areas tend to vote for the pro-establishment option, whereas populism becomes strong in the less favored areas. Stagnating areas also have a greater propensity to support the populist candidate, which confirms the relevance of intra-metropolitan divides and the role of localized development traps within even the most prosperous regions.

Overall, the contributions gathered in this special issue encourage regional science to widen the analysis of the geography of discontent in three main directions. First, they draw a clear connection between structural inequalities, perceived injustice, collective memory, and identity. They show that territorial trajectories and local narratives shape the effects of shocks and public policies. These contributions invite a move away from simple correlations between regional indicators and electoral outcomes toward causal narratives that explain how territories experience and interpret change. They suggest that economic and institutional variables acquire meaning within historically anchored stories that residents tell about decline, neglect, or revival. In doing so, they bring regional science closer to debates on territorial justice, recognition and dignity, and they show that a rigorous understanding of discontent requires attention to symbolic hierarchies between places as well as to measurable gaps in income, employment or access to services.

Second, they broaden the empirical scope beyond electoral outcomes to encompass the full spectrum of contentious politics, such as protests, repression, and violent confrontations. These practices follow a distinct spatial logic that reflects entrenched territorial divides. The papers reveal that streets, squares, roundabouts, peripheral housing estates and iconic metropolitan sites act as specific stages for contestation, each with its own choreography of actors, claims and forms of control. This research agenda calls for a systematic integration of political geography, urban studies and regional science, with a renewed focus on the ways power circulates across scales and through space during moments of unrest. It also highlights the need for fine-grained data on the time dimension, location and intensity of contentious episodes, so that the territorial dynamics of escalation and de-escalation become visible and analytically tractable.

Third, they offer concrete lessons for regional and urban policy, cohesion strategies, and democratic renewal. Any attempt to address discontent requires attention to territorial specificities, stronger institutions and civic infrastructures in disadvantaged areas, and credible prospects of economic security and political voice for local residents. The special issue shows that generic compensation schemes or narrowly designed sectoral programmes rarely address the roots of territorial frustration. It points instead toward policy mixes that combine material investment, institutional reform and participatory arrangements tailored to the histories, capacities and expectations of particular

regions. It also raises fundamental questions for the future of cohesion policy and place-based development: how to prioritize territories trapped in long-run decline, how to design instruments that rebuild trust in public action, and how to create conditions for a fair distribution of recognition between central and peripheral places.

We hope that this special issue will encourage further comparative work across regions and countries and will support a more territorially sensitive understanding of the challenges that liberal democracies face in a period marked by persistent inequalities and polarization. In this perspective, the volume aspires to consolidate the geography of discontent as a central field within regional science, open to dialogue with political science, sociology and economic geography, and able to inform debates on the future of democratic institutions in an era of deep spatial divides.

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